

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm

The academic study of Western esotericism is well into its second decade of professionalization and institutionalization. University departments and study programmes have been established, specialist book series and journals launched, academic societies founded, and several international conferences and panels are organized every year. In addition, scholars in other sub-disciplines of religious studies are starting to take notice of the scholarship produced within the field. However, the religious studies scholars who are most likely to take an interest will also notice a striking gap in scholarship on the esoteric: very little research exists on *contemporary* phenomena. Several contemporary currents that can be regarded as historically and/or typologically related to esotericism have been the focus of scholars in other branches of religious studies. For example, sociologists of new religious movements have debated “New Age spiritualities” for decades, and “pagan studies”¹ has in

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1. So-called “pagan studies” is a problematic field, which often seems more interested in developing (neo)pagan *theology* than conducting unbiased and critical scholarly investigation (for a critical review of the state of the field, see Davidsen, “What is Wrong with Pagan Studies?”). This links to choices of terminology regarding the subject matter. Whereas “neopaganism” is more common among North American scholars, signalling that it is a new religious movement, European scholars (predominately British) tend to prefer “paganism”, often in the plural, in order to show that there are many pagan traditions, and with historical qualifiers such as “modern” or “contemporary” (see Melissa Harrington, “Paganism and the New Age”, 437). In this volume we have made the editorial decision to use “neopaganism”, partly in order to distance ourselves from what we consider problematic aspects of pagan studies, and partly in order to make it clear that we are dealing with modern religions with no historically valid claim to continuity with their pre-Christian namesakes. It should be noted, however, that the use of “neo” has problems of its own, as it can be taken to imply that some form of semi-uniform “pagan tradition” existed in Europe before the introduction of Christianity, with various expressions simply demonstrating external variations to an essentially similar inner core. This is not the case, of course, and therefore

recent years emerged as its own religious studies sub-field. Meanwhile, scholars working in the field of esotericism have (with a few notable exceptions) neglected such developments.²

The neglect is largely due to the strong historiographical emphasis in previous research on Western esotericism. Although the professionalization of the field has largely come about within religious studies, major scholarly impulses have come from historians of ideas, historians of science, and historians of art – typically specializing in Renaissance and early modern European culture. Expertise in the field has clustered around these lines of historical inquiry, with the most influential definitions and delimitations of the field following suit with the interests of central researchers.³ In addition, despite an often-stated embrace of interdisciplinarity, an overall reluctance to incorporate social scientific approaches has characterized the field. This has certainly had some repercussions: a fundamental challenge for the study of the esoteric in the present day is that it is not sufficient to simply transpose theories, definitions and methodologies developed for the study of, say, Renaissance magic to analyse contemporary magical practices. In short, studying contemporary phenomena poses both new problems and intriguing possibilities, the challenge to incorporate social scientific theories and methodologies being a central one. It would seem that for a proper study of contemporary esotericism to succeed, several theoretical and methodological concerns need to be addressed.

Starting from these observations, the present volume brings into attention the multifaceted status of esoteric discourse in the contemporary West. The authors combine historical awareness and findings from the historical study of esoteric currents with new theory and methodology required for contemporary issues. The chapters deal with currents and issues of particular importance for understanding the place of the esoteric in today's world, and specifically discuss theoretical and methodological implications raised by the study of contemporary esotericism.

we use “pre-Christian religion(s)” when discussing various religious expressions present in Europe prior to the introduction of Christianity. In a few isolated cases “pagan” or “paganism” are used and the reference is then to emic discourse, either historical Christian polemical projections of “the Other”, or more current reversals of these polemics that project a non-Christian Self.

2. Examples include Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, and much of the work of Olav Hammer.
3. Here we are thinking especially of Antoine Faivre's influential historical definition, which has been criticized for lack of a clear analytic rationale while being conspicuously well suited to cover Faivre's own specific areas of interest. See Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 10–15; cf. von Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism”, 83.

UNRAVELLING PROBLEMS WITH THE STUDY OF ESOTERICISM

As already noted, the relative lack of research on contemporary esotericism from scholars in the field seems to be connected in part with a general reluctance to incorporate perspectives, theories, and methodology from the social sciences. In fact, it is commonplace within the field to encounter at least a mild form of hostility towards social science, although it is seldom developed into an explicit polemic. One resulting problem is that any introductory course on esotericism that aims to deal also with contemporary phenomena cannot rely solely on standard introductory volumes and reference works in the field. As none of these sufficiently address contemporary expressions and concerns, they must be complemented by scholarship from elsewhere, which most often needs to be “translated” to fit overall themes and approaches. Kocku von Stuckrad’s otherwise competent *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (2005) is, for example, rather thin on recent and contemporary developments, although it does end with a general discussion of “Esotericism and Modernity”.⁴ This is a result of the lack of scholarship in the field in this subject area, and von Stuckrad makes no claim to provide a detailed account here. However, the problem is more acute in Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke’s *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (2008), where something in the way of a claim to completeness is made. The book contains a chapter entitled “Ritual Magic from 1850 to the Present”;⁵ but curiously “the present” seems to end in the 1950s!

The neglect of contemporary phenomena can partly be attributed to the fact that most researchers in the field identify themselves as historians, and often regard the present as outside their area of interest and expertise. This, of course, is a limited view of “history”, which, after all, is constantly created. The realm of the historian thus includes the present and the recent past. Another related reason can be sought in the methodological familiarity and “comfort zone” of the strict historian. While historical material may appear “frozen in time”, and thus ordered and easier to subject to meticulous scrutiny, tracing lineages, historical relations and so forth, contemporary material will seem chaotic and ever-changing, and consequently more difficult to “catch” in the way one is used to from historical records. An investigation of such material can be frustrating, and can easily appear unorganized and “unscientific”.

This historical bias can be exemplified by way of an anecdote from a conference a few years back. A speaker who had presented an overview of Russian esotericism, neopaganism, secret societies-, and related publications up to the mid-twentieth century was asked the question: “What about expressions of these trends in contemporary Russia?” The response was simply, “I am a

4. von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, 133–46.

5. Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 191–209.

historian, not an anthropologist”, thus positioning the question as irrelevant in the context (which, of course, it was not). Whatever the reasons for exclusions of this kind, it seems clear that historical studies from the field of Western esotericism must be combined with scholarship from studies of new religions, “pagan studies” and so on if a more comprehensive picture is sought. In order to succeed, bridges must be constructed to overcome the incongruities in method, theory, and approaches that exist between the different segments of complementary scholarship.

The incongruities partly depend on differing disciplinary rationales, with most studies of contemporary “esotericism” being sociologically or sometimes anthropologically informed. The dislike of social scientific approaches in the study of esotericism was already noted. To the present authors, this aversion seems connected to similar biases in the history of religion, which followed the influence of Mircea Eliade. Eliade and the phenomenological school of “history of religion” associated with him tended to oppose sociology due to what was perceived as its inherent “reductionism”.⁶ In short, sociology was claimed to present the religious as not forming a phenomenon *sui generis*, but instead being an expression of broader social forces. In religious studies at large, this fear of reductionism was heavily discussed and criticised more than twenty years ago, and, despite the occasional local outbreak, aversions of this kind now seem rather dated.⁷ In current scholarship on esotericism, however, this “ghost of Eliade” may still be felt – as, for example, when Goodrick-Clarke dismisses “definitions of ‘the esoteric’ in terms of discourse, social constructions, and legitimacy” because they “lack a hermeneutic interpretation of spirit and spirituality as an independent ontological reality” – that is, refusing to describe “it” as something *sui generis* and irreducible, indeed as “an autonomous and essential aspect of the relationship between the mind and the cosmos”⁸.

There seems to be a fear that dealing with sociological issues will in some way diminish or infringe on the value of the subject. As many of the influences of Eliade have been purged – such as his problematic ahistorical approach to history – this simplistic paranoia about sociological reductionism should be discarded as well. Involving sociological perspectives, and looking at the role played by social factors in the formations of the esoteric, does *not* need to mean that one reduces one’s subject to these particular social factors. Nevertheless, the accusations of sociological approaches having been reductionist to the extreme are not entirely unprovoked. Looking at sociological studies of the

6. See Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion*, 6, 257n6.

7. For the “reductionism debate”, see e.g. Segal, “In Defense of Reductionism”; Indinopulos & Yonan, *Religion and Reductionism*.

8. Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 12, 13. Cf. our continued discussion in Chapter two of the present volume.

occult/esoteric we find a strong focus on its “deviance”,⁹ with Marcello Truzzi even calling it “a wastebasket, for knowledge claims that are deviant in some way”.¹⁰ While the notion of deviance, so popular in sociological research of the 1970s, has been largely left aside in specialist sociology on, for example, new religious movements, associated problems remain in sociological research more broadly. Here, for example, “the occult” often stands for little more than supernatural beliefs which are difficult to place into any other category.¹¹ This, of course, makes “esoteric”/“occult” utterly useless in any meaningful analytical capacity. As Hanegraaff argued over a decade ago, the main problem of these sociological constructs of “the occult” is precisely their neglect, and *preclusion*, of historicity.¹² Despite these obvious prior shortcomings, we stress that the historiographic study of the esoteric could still benefit from sociological perspectives, just as sociological studies need to be informed by the conceptual frameworks and historical awareness developed by historical research.

One aspect of the historiographic study of esotericism which becomes increasingly problematic when we move to contemporary expressions is a predominant focus on elite representatives. In a Faivrean approach, the “esoteric form of thought” is primarily expressed in the intellectual philosophies and theologies of men like Ficino, Pico, Paracelsus, Bruno, Dee, Khunrath, Maier, Fludd, and so on, whereas “lowbrow” folk expressions are typically neglected.¹³ This also involves the elevation of originally more popular material to “high culture” when the need arises; the origins of Rosicrucianism from a fictitious “*ludibrium*” (to paraphrase the statement of Johann Valentin Andreae, one of the masterminds behind the Rosicrucian manifestos) might already indicate this tension.¹⁴ Partly this might be due to fewer traces of “lowbrow culture” having survived in historical records, but the overall ethos nevertheless introduces major problems when examining contemporary esotericism. Pamphlets of “New Age spirituality” will undoubtedly compare unfavourably with the philosophy of Ficino, and online message board discussions between contemporary Satanists are less impressive than an arcane letter correspondence

9. See e.g. Colin Campbell, “The Cult, The Cultic Milieu and Secularization”; Tiryakian, “Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture”, 272.

10. Truzzi, “Definitions and Dimensions of the Occult”, 245. See the criticism of these approaches to “the occult” in Hanegraaff, “On the Construction of ‘Esoteric Traditions’”, 29–42.

11. See e.g. McGuire, *Religion*, 121–2; Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens*.

12. Hanegraaff, “On the Construction of ‘Esoteric Traditions’”, 41.

13. It is in fact quite noteworthy that there is not more collaboration and overlap between the scholarly communities studying esotericism, and those focusing on medieval and early modern magic and folk traditions – as expressed, e.g., by the journal *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* and the organisation *Societas Magica*. While the occasional researcher would contribute to both “fields”, a separation does seem to exist, and it seems to broadly follow social distinctions along the line of “elite” versus “folk”/“vernacular”.

14. See Chapter 2 of this volume for more discussion on this particular theme.

between alchemists in the early modern “republic of letters”.¹⁵ This does not, however, automatically imply that such materials are any less important for academic research, and scholars should in any case avoid such biases. As we will suggest, the elite bias becomes particularly problematic when recognizing that contemporary esotericism is intimately, and increasingly, connected with popular culture and new media.

In conclusion, then, the agenda of the present volume is twofold: first, to emphasize the need for expanding the field of Western esotericism to encompass contemporary issues; and second, in so doing, to integrate the study of esotericism firmly with approaches and perspectives from the study of religion more broadly. Not only do we believe that such integration is imperative in order to sufficiently explore contemporary esotericism, but it also seems desirable in order to prevent the field from falling into professional isolation. Avoiding that fate and instead inviting a constructive and integrative dialogue between esotericism research and other sub-disciplines of religious studies, especially the social scientific ones, has the promise of benefiting all parties. This volume offers an attempt to open up the field in these ways and provide mutual relevance. In so doing, it will be found to ask more new questions than it will answer.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The volume is divided into four parts, each with a specific focal point. These deal with issues of tradition in esotericism; with the impact of new media and popular culture on the esoteric today; with “esoteric transfers” (i.e. the influence of the esoteric on other social spheres that are traditionally thought of as “non-esoteric” and “non-religious”); and with the esoteric “leaving the margins” in a multitude of ways. While thematically separated, the sections are also tightly interwoven. As will become apparent in reading the book, chapters in one section frequently interact with the themes of other ones, and cross-references between chapters are frequent. Furthermore, there is a red thread running throughout the volume, which attempts to introduce a unity which is more common to monographs than to edited works. Thus, all chapters of the volume deal to some degree with issues of methodology and theory relevant particularly for the examination of *contemporary* esotericism, while at the same time engaging with associated issues in religious studies at large.

15. Cf. Olav Hammer’s assessment of the quality of “New Age” creativity, “whereas the Romantic conception was capable of producing works of the greatest beauty, the literary, musical and artistic products of the New Age are sometimes indistinguishable from religious kitsch” (Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 508). On using the new types of text emerging online in research, see Chapter 7 of this volume.

Tradition

The appeal to tradition, particularly connected to lost ancient wisdom, or perennial higher truth, is a central feature of much esoteric discourse, but so is the rhetoric of rationality and notions of progress and growth. Furthermore, claims to tradition are intrinsically linked to questions of identity and positioning in broader discursive fields, including politics and religion. The chapters of this section deal with the claims to, and constructions of, tradition in contemporary esoteric discourse, and elucidate the significance of tradition vis-à-vis conceptions of “modernity”.

In Chapter 2, the first chapter of Part I, Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm provide an introduction to the overall theme, discussing issues of general relevance to the construction of tradition and looking at these issues in the more focused context of the esoteric. Esotericism has historically been deeply connected to the concept of “tradition” in several ways, from a preoccupation with “perennial philosophy” and “ancient sages” on the emic level, to being itself often constructed as a neglected or subversive “esoteric” or “occult tradition” on the etic level. It should however be recognized that several different understandings of “tradition” are employed by scholars, and it is necessary to reflect on what is meant by the term before attempting an analysis. For example, anthropologically informed studies tend to use the term “traditional religion” to denote various forms of tribal religions unaffected by modernizing forces, and sociological studies similarly employ the term as a vague referent for “religion in the past”. Another general use is simply “tradition” as a synonym for “religion” (e.g. “the Christian tradition” signifying “Christianity”). A common problem is that of homogenization. In anthropological understandings all “tribal religion” can easily be perceived as sharing some essential similarity, whereas in sociological understandings a unified past is projected backward in order to reflect on the fragmentation of modernity.

In their chapter, Asprem and Granholm argue that it is more fruitful to focus on the construction or *invention* of tradition. In the sense of being the creation of human activities, all tradition – in whichever sense the term is used – is of course invented. Intriguingly, instead of existing as separate, autonomous, and independent institutions which scholars may study and leave unaffected, tradition has often been the outcome of processes of invention in which scholars have played pivotal roles. This has sometimes happened actively and intentionally, as in the nationalistically and religiously informed projection of shamanism as a “universal and archaic technique of ecstasy”, and at other times unwittingly, as when esotericists are informed by scholarly accounts of the esoteric and align their philosophies and practices accordingly. Today, the role of scholarship in conferring legitimacy on self-identified “esotericists” by providing frameworks for tradition is, perhaps, an inconvenient truth to many scholars in the field, but one that demands more attention. Additionally, when it comes to contemporary inventions of identity and tradition, fictitious

sources and popular cultural products are becoming increasingly influential. The inclusion of popular culture in the study of contemporary esotericism, and in particular connected to notions of tradition, furthermore brings old biases of historical research in the field into question.

The creation of religious fiction in constructing ethnic and religious identity is a central theme in Chapter 3. In “Inventing Africa”, Fredrik Gregorius deals with the creation of a “primordial African tradition” among African American esoteric spokespersons, a subject matter which has received very little attention from scholars of Western esotericism. Starting with Prince Hall Masonry in the late eighteenth century, Gregorius goes on to discuss Afrocentric developments in the mid-twentieth to the early twenty-first centuries. Particular attention is given to George G. M. James’s *Stolen Legacy* from the mid-1950s (and its own legacy in later Afrocentric thought), Maulana Karenga’s black nationalist ideas, and Molefi Kente Assante’s Afrocentrism. The chapter ends with a discussion of the esoteric notion on the magical qualities of the pigment melanin, based on the ideas of Frances Cress Welsing. A running theme, all the way from Prince Hall to the present day, is the role of Egypt. Gregorius shows how “ancient Egypt” has been a hotbed of racialist polemics, with African American esotericists providing a counterpoint to the common presentations of Egypt as a “white culture”. Egypt is presented as having continuity with the rest of “black Africa”, and as being the source from which all subsequent “higher wisdom” has been stolen. At times, Afrocentric discussions enter similar problematic fields as white supremacist ones. This is particularly evident in Welsing’s melanin theories, where the pigment not only provides superhuman powers, but also presents people of African heritage as “the master race” – infinitely superior not only to Caucasians, but all other “coloured races” as well.

As a point of comparison it is interesting to bring up the early constructions of neopaganism in Germany. Very similar racialist themes were present in the Ariosophic milieu of the early twentieth century (e.g. in the Thule society and the Guido von List-founded Hoher Armanen-Orden).¹⁶ Racialist issues have remained a topic of heated debate in heathen milieus even to the present day.¹⁷

If the creation of Afrocentric tradition is marked by seriousness, Anton Szandor LaVey’s creation of Satanist tradition contains a much more playful element. In “Secret Lineages and de Facto Satanists”, Per Faxneld notes the importance of fiction in the Church of Satan’s construction of tradition. We also find a dual, and seemingly conflicting, approach to “Satanic lineage”. On the one hand, LaVey promotes the newness of his organization and philosophy, essentially claiming it to be the first of its sort, and thus the start of Satanism proper. On the other hand, he also projects a lineage of de facto Satanists back

16. Gardell, *Gods of the Blood*, 25–6.

17. *Ibid.* For a discussion on the debate on racialism in contemporary heathenism, see also Asprem, “Heathens up North”; Granholm, “Esoteric Currents as Discursive Complexes”.

in history, with the Decadent poets of the late nineteenth century as good examples, and claims a continuity of ideology, philosophy and overall ethos. This apparent conflict is solved in LaVey's openly pragmatic approach to tradition: "you can *choose* your fiction to live by".¹⁸ While LaVey's honesty in this regard is interesting, it would appear that many of his followers have needed a more "traditional" understanding of tradition. The case is that many later self-avowed Satanists have taken LaVey's claims as fact, either intentionally disregarding or simply being unable to grasp the "Black Pope's" sense of irony and sarcasm. This is also true of contemporary competitors in the Satanic milieu, who criticize LaVey's fictional historiography while failing to acknowledge the author's disclaimers in this regard. We also find actors in the milieu who claim to represent "traditional Satanism", which, in an ironic turn of events, is actually a more recent development than LaVey's "modern Satanism". In any case, the pragmatic approach to tradition pioneered by LaVey has also become a mainstay for many in the milieu.

While not having the same type of trickster-like quality as Satanism, the dual appeal of innovation and tradition is arguably even more pronounced in Chaos Magick. In "Perennialism and Iconoclasm" (Chapter 5), Colin Duggan provides both a general historical overview of this relatively unexplored development of occultism, and a detailed discussion of the complex interplay between two seemingly contradicting strategies of legitimacy: on the one hand, Chaos Magicians make use of a fairly standard (at least as far as esotericism goes) perennialist notion of claiming an "age-old tradition", and on the other we find a more complex idea of progress within an "age-old tradition", with new developments superseding older ones. Thus, Chaos Magick can be presented by its practitioners both as being in line with an ancient tradition – with the universalized shaman often functioning as the exemplar – and as an essentially innovative current which still exists in a lineage of ancient truth. The combination of these legitimizing strategies places Chaos Magicians in a position where they can draw on the work of earlier occultists, but at the same time also criticize them for being stagnant, outdated and conservative.

Another interesting feature of Chaos Magick, and one which marks it out as an odd bird in the otherwise often conservative realm of ceremonial magic, is its openness to popular culture as a source of inspiration and an arena for magical practice. Perhaps the most obvious example of the latter is the Scottish comic book writer Grant Morrison. A practitioner of magic, having developed his own particular approach termed "Pop Magic!",¹⁹ Morrison has described his series *The Invisibles* as a "hypersigil".²⁰ That is, a grand-scale

18. LaVey, quoted in Barton, *The Church of Satan*, 96.

19. Morrison, "Pop Magic!". The exclamation mark is part of the name of the "school of magic" itself, with Morrison on his personal webpage (www.grantmorrison.com) spelling it "Pop Mag!c".

20. *Ibid.*, 21.

magical working that has the goal of transforming both the world and the magician. Thus, Chaos Magick already points towards the relevance of popular culture and new media for contemporary esotericism, which is the focus of the next part.

POPULAR CULTURE AND NEW MEDIA

The second part of the volume deals with how esoteric discourses and notions are created, shaped and propagated through late modern communication technologies and new media, and how they are transformed by new channels of mediation. The chapters deal with relations such as esotericism *in* new media (cyberspace), esotericists' *use of* such media, and the new conditions for interaction, innovation, and practice that new forms of communication and cultural consumption (i.e. popular culture) entail.

Popular culture plays a pivotal role in religious and cultural change today. However, the ways in which the term "popular culture" is understood vary. The approach favoured by many scholars of religion and popular culture in the last five to ten years puts the focus on the *lived, everyday* experiences of ordinary people.²¹ Popular culture is seen as "the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life in a given society".²² The approach also has the advantage of not regarding religion and popular culture, or religion and culture for that matter, as distinct and separate phenomena. One of the major contributions of the study of religion and popular culture is that it provides perspectives on how religiosity can function outside traditional institutional settings. This also highlights problems in earlier studies of the esoteric, particularly the focus on "serious" practitioners and the apparent distinction between "real" and "simulacrum" esotericism. Approaches focusing on the intellectual dimension, on an "esoteric form of thought", automatically seem to posit the necessity of "serious conviction" and intentional agency. An example of this seems present in Henrik Bogdan's idea of the "[m]igration of esoteric ideas into non-esoteric materials", where the presence of "symbols, ideas, or techniques that traditionally are connected to a certain esoteric tradition" in fantasy literature, for example, is not *really* esoteric, as the "esoteric form of thought is not present".²³ Even more explicitly, Antoine Faivre has created a typology of the degrees and extents to which a certain fictional work and its reception should be regarded as "esoteric", based on the intentions of the author and the reader

21. E.g. Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*; Gordon Lynch, "The Role of Popular Music in the Construction of Alternative Spiritual Identities and Ideologies"; Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens*; Lynn Schofield Clark, "Religion, Twice Removed".

22. Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 14.

23. Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*, 20.

respectively.²⁴ Whether or not a producer of popular culture has “authentic esoteric sentiments” is, however, largely irrelevant; the audience may still find inspiration in the material, which can have a causal influence on the development of ideas, mythologies, and practices. Furthermore, the increased use of esoteric themes and elements in popular cultural products suggests an increased general interest in the esoteric. By placing the focus on communication rather than on “intent” one avoids problematic issues such as this.

The popularization of the esoteric is at the centre of Chapter 6 of this volume. Here, Christopher Partridge elaborates on the concept of “occulture”, first introduced in his two-volume *The Re-enchantment of the West* (2004/5). While building on Colin Campbell’s notion of “the cultic milieu”, as well as later discussions on the theme by scholars such as Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööv, Partridge is critical of the focus on deviance and marginality that has been inherent in this concept. Instead, as the title of Partridge’s contribution suggests, “Occulture is Ordinary”. The author links this idea to late modern societal changes, such as “the turn to the self” and the rise of “post-material values”, and details how this all supports the popularization, as well as the increased respectability, of the esoteric. Popular culture plays a central role here, as occulture functions as “a reservoir that is constantly feeding and being fed by popular culture”. Thus, the study of the esoteric in the contemporary world must take into account popular culture, just as the study of contemporary religious change must take into account both the esoteric and popular culture. Occulture is, as Partridge suggests, fast becoming the primary mode of religiosity in the “post-Christian West”. Ending his chapter with a case study of musician, artist and magician Genesis P-Orridge – who first coined the term “occulture” – Partridge comments on an intriguing feature of the occulture as such: the sites of production and networks of distribution are organized in such a way as to give otherwise “marginal” subcultural figures an unprecedented influence on culture more broadly.

As for the other (but connected) main theme of Part II – new media – it is useful to discuss the concept of mediatization. This concept, which has become central to the study of religion and media in recent years, relates to “the process through which core elements of a social or cultural activity ... assume media form.”²⁵ This means that “the activity is, to a greater or lesser degree, performed through interaction with a medium, and the symbolic content and the structure of the social and cultural activity are influenced by media environments and media logic, upon which they gradually become more dependent.”²⁶ Scholars have distinguished “strong” (or direct) from “weak” (or indirect) mediatization, with the former referring to a situation

24. Faivre, “Borrowings and Misreadings”, 44–53. This article was part of a special issue of *Aries* on “Esotericism and Fiction” (vol. 7.1, 2007).

25. Hjarvard, “The Mediatization of Religion”, 13.

26. *Ibid.*, 13.

where a social or cultural activity becomes so bound to media that it cannot be performed outside of this realm, and the latter to a situation where the activity is not necessarily bound to media but still strongly influenced by it.²⁷ An example of direct mediatization in the esoteric milieu is online initiations, where an initiate must access the Internet in order to perform the activity. As for indirect mediatization, an example is situations where interpretations of specific esoteric activities are essentially bound in popular cultural readings. While theories of mediatization contain problems, such as the common sociological overemphasis on the novelty of certain phenomena and processes, they correctly point to the need for new perspectives and approaches in studying religion in the information age. This issue is addressed in the next two chapters of the section.

In “From Book to Bit”, Jesper Aagaard Petersen (Chapter 7) looks at the use of computer-relayed communication technology in the Satanic milieu, and demonstrates how one finds both continuity and innovation with regard to “offline” communication practices. Internet-based communication is in many ways a continuation of earlier esoteric networks in the forms of “books and periodicals ... suggested reading lists of occult groups; word-of-mouth and bulletin boards in occult shops; seminars, concerts, and fairs; and classified ads in magazines and newspapers”. However, it also brings into play factors that are novel, such as the potential to reach larger, transnational (or translocal), audiences, as well as providing potential for new forms and functions of interaction. A major point for the scholar is the potential of online research to provide access to “the previously hard-to-get and difficult-to-see” in ways never before encountered. After all, online communication and networking leave traces of a wholly different order than offline activities do. Petersen highlights the necessity to develop new methodology and approaches when it comes to do online research on these emerging sources. One of the avenues explored is a quantitative approach to online research, where examining the relative popularity of specific groups and tracing connections between distinct groups is made easier using Internet traffic tracking tools. In a more qualitative approach, Petersen also suggests that instead of simply looking at individual representations, researching online discussion forums provides the possibility to examine interaction in a new way, making it possible to look at how authority negotiations function both in real time and over an extended period.

Chapter 8 continues the discussion of new media and Internet-based communication technologies, but here John L. Crow ventures in a direction different from Petersen’s. Starting with a historical look at the occult notion of the “astral plane”, Crow moves to discuss emerging practices of “Accessing the Astral with a Monitor and a Mouse”. In doing this, a qualitative method along

27. See Hjarvard, “From Bricks to Bytes”, 48–9.

the lines of “virtual anthropology” is explored. Religion is furiously present online, and, as several scholars have noted, esotericists – particularly neopagans – “are more active on the Internet than any other religious group”. Not only does online communication provide the possibility for transnational community, the development and great evolution of online virtual environments in recent times provides the possibility to recast older esoteric notions in new ways. We can observe the creation of cybercovens, but also the meeting of practitioners in virtual worlds such as Second Life. Here, many practitioners have come to describe the cyber realm as analogous to the astral plane, and some even recast their computers as sacred magical objects – with a guaranteed place on their physical altars. We can also see a convergence where vocabulary from the computer world is transposed to the magical, and computer programming comes to be regarded as a magical activity in itself. There is an obvious generational shift here, with younger, computer-literate generations increasingly diverging from older generations of occultists in their approach to magical realities.

Continuing the discussion of the impact of new media, Hugh B. Urban looks at “The Secrets of Scientology” (Chapter 9). Urban has previously made important contributions to the understanding of esotericism in terms of secrecy, particularly from a sociological perspective. In his chapter, Urban extends such analyses by taking a close look at secrecy, information control, and their wider context in social and political struggles for power, in and surrounding the Church of Scientology. In a sociologically informed historical overview, Urban shows how the new forms of communication associated with the Internet has influenced the practice of secrecy in Scientology, particularly complicating its enforcements of information control. Analysing Scientology from the 1950s to the 1980s as a “Cold War religion”, preoccupied with, and implicated in, the anxieties and paranoid concerns concerning security, surveillance, and politically motivated deception that characterized the era, Urban pays attention to the espionage war which erupted between the Church and various US government agencies, including the FBI. In contemporary times Scientology has been involved in information wars and attempts at concealment and surveillance on the web, getting increasingly complicated and difficult for the secretive organization in the time of whistle-blowing websites such as Wikileaks and “hacktivist” groups such as Anonymous. Considering these material settings together with the secretive organizational and doctrinal profile of the movement, Urban suggests that the case of Scientology gives us profound insights not just into a controversial new religion but also into questions of religious secrecy and concealment in general. Scientology illustrates that religious secrecy is rarely simply a matter of esoteric gnosis transmitted through isolated groups of initiates far removed from messy social and political contingencies. It is, on the contrary, very often intimately entwined with larger cultural and historical forces, struggles over power, and concrete material interests. Above all, argues Urban, the case of Scientology highlights

what he calls (based on the sociologies of Georg Simmel and Pierre Bourdieu) “the dual nature of secrecy” – its double role as both a source of symbolic power and a potential liability for its owner.

Returning to popular culture and occulture, esoteric orders and occult currents are usual suspects in conspiracy theories, whether it be the witches’ Sabbath, the Bavarian Illuminati, or secret networks of “Satanic ritual abusers.” Online media outlets such as YouTube and specially created “news sites” and discussion forums are currently seething with conspiratorial ideas. In “Hidden Knowledge, Hidden Powers” (Chapter 10), Asbjørn Dyrendal considers multiple relations between esoteric discourse and conspiracy theory in contemporary occulture. While conspiracy theories *about* the esoteric are relatively well known, Dyrendal goes on to consider the considerably less researched area of conspiracy theories *in* esoteric movements, and discusses the possibility (and utility) of analysing conspiracy theory *as* esoteric discourse. The discussion follows three thematic axes, namely the role of *history*, *agency* and *knowledge* in conspiratorial and esoteric discourses. The role of *history* highlights conspiracy theories’ function as apocalyptic mythologies of evil, focusing on their construction of secret societies and hidden chains of power through history. Revealing secret history leads to a focus on the nature of *knowledge*, how it is constructed and what its function is in these mythologies. Hidden knowledge about secret agents (of formidable power) furthermore brings in the question of *agency*, particularly how the possession of secretive knowledge increases power. Dyrendal proposes that these topics are good starting points not only for considering conspiracy theories *about* and *in* esoteric movements, but also suggests that they provide questions for whether, and in what sense, it may be useful to view conspiracy theory *as* esoteric discourse. These discussions are carried out on the basis of a wealth of examples from sources as varied as Rudolf Steiner (and his later interpreters), Anton LaVey, Discordianism, and the explicit conspiracy theorists Jim Marrs and David Icke.

ESOTERIC TRANSFERS

Part III of the volume deals with the impact and influence of esoteric discourses, currents and notions on cultural and societal fields, which are commonly regarded as “non-esoteric.” One of the analytically most powerful capabilities of the concept of the esoteric is its ability to shine light on the “betwixt and between” (i.e. phenomena that transgress the seemingly impermeable border between the religious and the secular). That there has historically been a fluid area between these two fields is evident by such activities as alchemy and astrology, both of which have played important roles in religious fields as well as in “non-religious” ones such as experimental science, medicine, and politics. Isaac Newton (1643–1727), who was both an alchemist and the greatest physicist of his age, is an even more illuminating example of how

these fields can interconnect without, it should be noted, internal paradox. While the hegemonic understanding is that the modern era is characterized by such a decisive divide, even if the past was not, the chapters in this section suggest that this is not necessarily the case, or at the very least that it is a truth in serious need of modification.

In “Discursive Transfers and Reconfigurations” (Chapter 11), Kocku von Stuckrad continues his project of recasting the study of the esoteric from a specialist field to dealing with the European history of religion and culture in a more general sense. From discussing the contemporary erosion of the secularization paradigm, von Stuckrad moves on to consider four central transformations, or reconfigurations, of the “religious field of discourse”. These are:

- “Communitarization” – the emergence of new and diverse forms of community, and ideas of community, since the nineteenth century.
- “Scientification” – the professionalization of knowledge claims, as well as the overall hegemony of scientific (or scientificized) knowledge.
- “Aestheticization” – a redefinition of the religious in terms of, for example, emotion and experience as a response to Enlightenment rationalization, providing a new role for it.
- “Publicization” – the “emergence of a public space that is significantly different from earlier forms of public communication”, and the “re-entry” of the religious in the secular public arena.

All these developments are highly visible in, and strongly affect, scholarly discourse, rather than being “objectively separated” from it. Von Stuckrad demonstrates his perspective by looking at how esoteric discourse can be found in recent (seemingly) secular discussion. The example provided is the human genome project, which has been given an esoteric dimension by several commentators and participants, discussing genes as “code”, the revelation of which provides humanity with “the language of God”.

The theme of politics runs as a red thread through the contributions in this section. Von Stuckrad’s article deals with cultural politics reframing the societal role and location of the religious, but also with “politics of science” adapting to allow for religious vocabulary. The theme of politics is, however, more explicit in the rest of the chapters of the section.

“What do esoteric phenomena such as Chaos Magick, runic symbolism, Tantric yoga, and the mythical Atlantis have to do with radical right-wing politics?” With this question, Jacob Senholt opens Chapter 12, on “Radical Politics and Political Esotericism” (i.e. the transfers between esoteric discourse and the multifaceted milieus of contemporary right-wing ideological formations). After providing an overview of the many and well-documented historical links that exist between esotericism and right-wing politics up until the middle of the twentieth century, Senholt notes how special aesthetic and mythical connections were forged after World War II, fuelling popular culture and influencing

new political and esoteric formations. While the connections between esotericism and the right are relatively well known, Senholt attempts to provide some answers to a question that has remained surprisingly little discussed: *why* do we see this overlap? In order to address this question, Senholt focuses on three ideological formations in contemporary right-wing politics: the European New Right, Radical Traditionalism, and Eurasianism. Considering recent theories that connect esotericism to polemical discourse, counter-cultural movements, and particularly processes of exclusion and “Othering” grounded in European cultural history, Senholt finds a tentative answer in shared polemical constructions of history, and narratives of cultural decline and opposition. He suggests that what Wouter Hanegraaff once called the “Grand Polemical Narrative” (i.e. a process which has constructed and reified “esotericism” by a series of polemical exclusions grounded in the battle against “paganism”) simultaneously gave rise to counter-narratives, questioning Christian monotheism as well as the intellectual traditions of the Enlightenment. These counter-narratives create some striking affinities between the esoteric and the radical right, which may help account for the overlaps.

Moving from one form of radical politics to another, in Chapter 13 Eduard ten Houten examines the unlikely points of connection between “New Age Spirituality and Islamic Jihad”. The focus is on the curious story of how a popular “New Age” inspirational book became a handbook for revolutionary Islamists in the context of the second Chechen war. The *Manual of the Warrior of Light* (1997) was written by the best-selling author Paulo Coelho as a spiritual guide accompanying fictional works such as *The Alchemist*, *The Pilgrimage* and *The Valkyries*. It has been called a “key” to Coelho’s “ideological world”, and alleged to have “the same importance for him as the *Red Book* had for Mao or the *Green Book* for Gaddafi”. In the hands of Chechen freedom-fighter (or terrorist, depending on the perspective) Shamil Basayev, Coelho’s vague spiritual message to the affluent middle classes took on concrete meaning: the “New Age” manual became a call to arms against a physical oppressor – the Russians. Why would a Chechen *mujahid* be interested in the work of a Brazilian Catholic author of “spiritual” fiction? What is the link between the man best known for planning the Beslan school operation in North Ossetia in 2004 – taking 1100 hostages and ending in the deaths of 330 people, many of them children – and Coelho, who was appointed UN “Messenger of Peace” in 2007? Through comparison of the biographies of Coelho and Basayev, as well as the original *Manual* and Basayev’s modified “translation” from 2004, ten Houten shows how this at first sight surprising piece of reception history reveals ironic affinities which often remain hidden, but here are brought to the light of day.

Moving to more grassroots political philosophy, Joseph Christian Greer examines “Deep Ecology and the Study of Western Esotericism” (Chapter 14). Greer criticizes earlier scholars who have uncritically connected Deep Ecology with the esoteric, as they in the process singularize the former. Instead, Deep

Ecology, just as esotericism, is a “hotly debated discursive field”, in which many actors struggle to enforce their particular interpretation. In short, instead of a singular Deep Ecology we have a great number of competing, and at times contradicting, Deep Ecologies. Some of these are tied to the esoteric field of discourse more closely than others, but most engage with it in some ways due to polemics on both sides. Greer provides a detailed history of both the term and the “field”, including the complexities and polemics it contains, identifying key actors. Some of these, such as “New Age” spokespersons Fritjof Capra and Ken Wilber, Joanna Macy and John Seed’s Council of All Beings, and the Wiccan Gus diZerega, are intimately connected to the esoteric milieu. Furthermore, references to James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis and the physics of David Bohm, which are also often referenced in contemporary esotericism, are commonplace. A particularly interesting example is George Sessions, who while being hostile to notions of a connection between Deep Ecology and “New Age” still draws on Aldous Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy* and conceives of the former as “a contemporary manifestation of a primordial metaphysic”. Despite these affinities, Greer maintains that equating the two fields, or firmly placing one within the other, would be erroneous. Instead, a more sound approach is to regard Deep Ecology and the esoteric as two distinct fields of discourse that sometimes converge.

Together, the chapters in this third section point to interesting future avenues to which reconceptualizing notions of the esoteric, religious, and secular can take us. Furthermore, they demonstrate the utility that the study of the esoteric can have for religious studies more broadly, and beyond, by breaking up the borders between the scientific, political, cultural and religious.

LEAVING THE MARGINS

Whereas the chapters in Part III deal with esoteric transfers by discussing more marginal phenomena, the final part approaches partly the same theme by looking at something of a “de-marginalization” or “mainstreaming” of the esoteric. This “undeviating of the deviant” and “mainstreaming of the alternative” takes place in several different spheres and ways. As Christopher Partridge has noted, when considering the immense popularity of esoteric ideas, “alternative” may not be the most suitable term to describe it.²⁸ Furthermore, as Marion Bowman and Steven Sutcliffe note; “any talk of ‘alternative’ spirituality begs the question of normativity in contemporary religion.”²⁹ This final section of the volume aims to demonstrate that the presence of the esoteric needs to be addressed in these discussions.

28. Partridge, *The Re-enchantment of the West*, vol. 1, 85; see also Partridge’s Chapter 6 in the present volume. Cf. Znamenski, *Beauty of the Primitive*, xi.

29. Sutcliffe & Bowman, “Introduction”, 10–11.

In looking at “The Secular, the Post-Secular and the Esoteric in the Public Sphere”, Kennet Granholm (Chapter 15) examines processes by which the esoteric is leaving both academic and cultural margins. The concept of the post-secular has in recent years become central to sociological theorizing about religion in modern societies. Granholm discusses and evaluates at length the meaning and importance of this concept, its relation to the secularization paradigm and its (many) theories, as well as to the place of the esoteric in contemporary culture. Taking a discursive approach to secularization theory, Granholm suggests that the notion of secularization “can be regarded a post-Enlightenment hegemonic discourse – informed by the ideology of secularism” – which has helped to create the situation that it tries to describe. In relation to this understanding, he argues that the “post-secular” suggests not a straightforward “return of religion”, but rather an awareness of the continued relevance of religion in secular societies, as well as changing perceptions of what actually counts as religion, what functions it may have, and where it is located. Precisely with regard to these relocations and changing perceptions, as well as functions, of religion, Granholm finds that the place of the esoteric is also changing. As explored in some earlier contributions as well, the *mediatization* of the esoteric becomes particularly important as new forms of media are rapidly developed, and new uses and patterns of consumption of culture follow it. Granholm focuses on the increasing presence of the esoteric in popular culture. Analysing esoteric elements of the science fiction franchise *Stargate*, and the film *Avatar* (at the time of writing, the top-grossing movie of all time), also considering their reception, context, and spread, Granholm finds there is a strong case to be made that “the esoteric has entered the mainstream, and that esoteric notions resonate with large numbers of contemporary Westerners (and beyond)”. To fully appreciate this and other consequences of the post-secular condition on the esoteric might require scholars in the field to reconsider and extend their theoretical presuppositions and choice of methodology.

While paranormal beliefs are often regarded a matter for uneducated people, Egil Asprem shows in Chapter 16 that some of these are more properly characterized as the “Psychic Enchantments of the Educated Classes”. Asprem demonstrates by way of statistical data that some paranormal beliefs are actually more common among those with high education, including in the natural sciences. Even the influential “new atheist” spokesperson Sam Harris is seen to entertain an ambiguity towards “psychic phenomena”, suggesting that his opposition to religion rests on a very restricted understanding of that term. What is the reason for these initially surprising positive correlations between paranormal belief, high education and even claims to irreligion? Asprem seeks the answer in the emergence of modern parapsychology in the 1930s, which he links to the “intersection of two parallel processes”: the disenchantment of esoteric discourse, and attempts to re-enchant science. As a prospective scientific discipline, parapsychology provided a means of “scientific sanitization”

of certain occult beliefs, making them more acceptable to the educated public. The invention of new technical nomenclature to cover a number of “occult abilities” was important in this respect, even giving rise to the names of some paranormal phenomena which show up significantly in polls of beliefs: “telepathy” and “extra-sensory perception”. Furthermore, Aspren shows how the presence of parapsychological beliefs in academia cannot be seen solely as an “incurSION from the outside”; it is rather the result of developments occurring *within* academia itself, with relation to a broader esoteric, occultural milieu. While questioning the notion that science has enforced a “disenchantment of the world”, this simultaneously suggests that occulture, which is commonly seen as spreading on a “folk” or “popular” level, has important nerve centres inside academic (presumptively secular) “elite” culture as well.

The much neglected subject of children and concepts of childhood in esoteric discourse is the focus of Daniel Kline’s Chapter 17, on “The New Kids”. In the wake of the “New Age movement”, a peculiar discourse on gifted *Wunderkinder* with special needs and psychic powers emerged: the “Indigo children”. The notion of Indigo children can be traced to the self-proclaimed “synesthete” Nancy Ann Tappe. In *Understanding Your Life Thru Color* (1986), Tappe invented a typology of personality traits corresponding to colours which, it was claimed, could be clairvoyantly seen in peoples’ auras. She observed that children with previously unknown indigo auras had suddenly started to appear, “indicative of ‘a new breed of children’ whose ‘process is to show us tomorrow’”. Focusing on the Indigo Children (with mention of the “Crystalline Children”, “Star Kids”, “Earth Angels” and other later additions to this evolving discourse), Kline traces connections between modern esoteric thought and the history of childhood. The increased politicization of children and the commercialization of “New Age” discourse together appear as particularly important for understanding the discourse on Indigo Children. As the Indigos are usually considered a subset of the generation born in the late 1970s or later, Kline considers the notion that the Indigo discourse is “a manifestation of the failures of the ‘baby boomer’ countercultural generation of the 1960s and 1970s”, who failed to manifest their ideological aspirations and have since projected “their hopes for saving the world upon their children”. At the same time, the category of the Indigos has served a function of sacralizing “problem children” – particularly during the increase of attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and attention deficit disorder (ADD) diagnoses, but also with reference to diagnoses such as autism. Getting connected to the commercial aspects of contemporary “spiritual” and “alternative” culture, the Indigo counter-diagnosis has given rise to a host of special day-care offers, training programmes, toys and games, designed to facilitate these “misunderstood” children of presumptively messianic significance.

In Chapter 18, by drawing on empirical, localized field research on “A Small-Town Health Centre in Sweden”, Liselotte Frisk examines the usefulness of conceptualizations of the esoteric. Frisk pursues three main arguments

in her chapter. First, while contemporary spirituality and particularly “New Age” has been conceived of as a “part of” Western esotericism (i.e. as modern or contemporary esotericism), in the *historical* sense of the word, esotericism should rather be seen as one among several other sources of *influence on* contemporary spirituality. Second, the focus on *gnosis* and experience in attaining “higher knowledge”, common in some of the typological and discursive approaches to esotericism, should be linked to a broader discussion of “religious experience” and emotion, which is currently attracting new interest in the study of religion. Third, a focus on deviance, “margin–mainstream” conflicts and rejected knowledge, often discussed as a structural feature in esoteric discourse, should be brought into a broader discussion of tension between religious groups and mainstream society, and, increasingly in contemporary society, should be questioned and nuanced. The final conclusion of the chapter is that Western esotericism as a field of research could benefit from, and contribute to, ongoing discussions in religious studies by combining with select sociological research from other fields. Frisk calls for a further discussion about different kinds of criteria which could be used in this context, and welcomes a more inclusive dialogue with other approaches in religious studies.

In a programmatic article Wouter J. Hanegraaff in Chapter 19 calls for serious scholarly attention to what he calls “Entheogenic Esotericism”. Noting a striking neglect of studies on the use of psychoactive substances in religious movements generally, Hanegraaff argues that an important and analytically interesting field of religious practice and innovation has been precluded by generations of scholars due to biases based largely on political circumstances as well as crypto-Protestant stereotypes of what legitimately counts as “religion”. In his chapter, Hanegraaff tries to ameliorate the situation by suggesting the term “entheogenic religion”, which may be subdivided into a stricter and a wider sense: in the wide sense, religious practices concerned with generating a state of *ἐνθουσιασμός* (“enthusiasm”) are well known and common, utilizing a number of different techniques, including rhythmic drumming, ritual prayer and incantations, meditation, or breathing techniques. The ritual use of substances is only one such technique, and constitutes entheogenic religion in a stricter sense. Revising his own position on “New Age religion”, and supporting with cases taken from neoshamanism, Hanegraaff argues that there is much circumstantial evidence to suggest that entheogenic practices in the strict sense have continued to influence modern and contemporary esotericism after the “war on drugs” made explicit references to such practices hazardous. The conclusion is that “specialists in the field of contemporary religion should become aware of their inherited blind spots regarding the role that entheogens have been playing in these contexts for half a century”, and refine a hermeneutically suspicious attitude in order to study this much neglected aspect of the religious field.

Finally, in “A Deliciously Troubling Duo”, Jay Johnston (Chapter 20) deals with an issue of acute need of treatment in the study of esotericism: gender.

Despite acquiring very little attention from scholars, discourses of gender have been of a considerable significance for esotericism in general, and surface as particularly important in relation to much of what is covered by contemporary esotericism as well. As Johnston points out, the “masculinity = culture = rationality and femininity = nature = intuition” stereotypes have been common in much of esotericism – but can also be found in the trope, often reified by scholars, of men as “occult scientists” who actively control their world by the use of magic, and women as “intuitive witches” who are passively and emotively guided by their surroundings. As such, scholarly accounts here adhere to stereotypical representations of gender and gender roles. Johnston’s chapter delves into the deep (and, for many, unknown and seemingly dangerous) waters of feminist theory, dealing not only with how the approaches in question can be used to shed light on gender issues, but also how they may help in rethinking other aspects of esotericism. In terms of the field in general, Johnston notes how the common conduct of positioning the esoteric as the “other” of “the dominant discourse” both feminizes and sexualizes the discursive field of esotericism. In the end, Johnston proposes to “queer the esoteric”; by applying queer theory’s project of subverting problematic binary categories and dualistic logic to esotericism itself. The study of esotericism is already – at least purportedly – engaged in a project similar to queer theory, in terms of rethinking binaries in cultural and religious history. Johnston further argues that queering of the discipline might nevertheless be in order, particularly since “gender identity markers ... remain resolutely normative/deviant and fixed” in most scholarship on contemporary esotericism.

Together, the chapters in this fourth and final part highlight both processes of the esoteric leaving cultural and religious margins in the West, and the benefits perspectives from the study of the esoteric could offer religious studies in general by leaving the margins of academia: Granholm suggests that the development of the study of the esoteric, as well as the growing acceptance of and interest in esotericism by the general public, is an example of “post-secular” academic and societal trends; Asprem shows that parapsychology does not simply represent an “alien incursion” into science, but instead a development in “elite” scientific discourse, and that even radical atheist spokespersons such as Sam Harris can harbour interest in phenomena which could be termed esoteric; the Indigo Child discourse discussed by Kline has breached the mainstream and connects to broader “sacralizing” discourses of childhood; Frisk’s example of the health centre *Hälsogränd* shows that esoteric elements peacefully coexist with non-esoteric ones, and are growing in mainstream acceptance; Hanegraaff discusses how practices neglected by scholars have probably had an immensely larger impact on contemporary religion than acknowledged, and how scholarly perspectives need to be modified in order to address this; and Johnston proposes to interrogate the gender biases of esoteric discourse (and its attendant scholarship) to properly “queer the esoteric” and trouble the binary logic of deviancy connected to it.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While this volume covers much ground, the theme of contemporary esotericism is too broad to be treated in any sort of comprehensive manner in a single volume. With the main criterion being an interest for theoretical and methodological innovation and reflection we have tried to include as many relevant themes as possible, but the reader will undoubtedly notice omissions. We will briefly discuss some of the most glaring ones.

First, the reader will notice that the focus is still rather heavily biased in the direction of intellectualist approaches, while those focused on practice, and particularly anthropological perspectives, are, with only a couple of exceptions, missing. Here, luckily, a lot of material continues to be produced in other subfields of religious studies (again including “pagan studies”), and within anthropology. Nevertheless, a firmer integration of anthropological studies of, and approaches to, contemporary esotericism, should certainly be embraced by a future work in this field. It should also involve a critical and careful engagement with the theoretical and conceptual work which has been made in anthropology, including cognitive anthropology (and the cognitive study of religion more broadly), which often concern issues that seem to have relevance for the esoteric. This goes for mainstay notions in anthropological research, such as “magic” (and its many differentiations), “participation”, “ritual”, etc.

Second, a reader familiar with the field of Western esotericism in its historiographic form might notice the general lack of discussions of lineages, currents, historical relations, continuity, and so forth, which are otherwise common in the field. While authors do deal with historical issues, we have chosen to go for a more “externalist” approach. That is, instead of meticulously investigating specific, isolated phenomena that may have some claim to consistency, continuity and autonomy over time, we have instead encouraged looking at phenomena in their particular and broader cultural and societal contexts. This is not to preclude altogether the relevance and interest of “internalist” approaches focusing on specific “traditions” or “currents”. However, it seemed to us that a work of the present kind ought to be a priority, as internalist approaches to occultist, neopagan, or “spiritual” currents are hardly difficult to find elsewhere. Furthermore, our conviction is that the approach opted for will make the work – and in extension the study of Western esotericism as a field – more relevant for religious studies generally. In this way we also seek to continue the field’s genuine potential for interdisciplinary research, by bringing it up to date on contemporary contexts ranging from popular culture and religion, to science and politics.

Finally, the reader will notice that the concept of esotericism/esoteric is not defined conclusively anywhere between the two covers of this book. This is no accident, but instead a conscious choice. In most recent approaches, “the esoteric” is not regarded a coherent “tradition”, nor even a semi-coherent pseudo-tradition. Instead, most approaches have moved away from rigid and static

definitions – such as the one introduced by Antoine Faivre, which dominated the field in the 1990s – and instead adopted more inclusive perspectives. In this book we can see the coexistence of three main theoretical approaches that have all emerged during approximately the last half decade. Together they could be considered the ground work for something of a “new paradigm” in the study of the esoteric in Western culture. Ordered by the names of their main spokesperson, these are:

1. The von Stuckrad approach. Here the esoteric is used as an analytical tool, consciously constructed by the scholar to investigate processes of identity formation on the broader European religious and cultural field. “The esoteric” becomes an instrument by which one can avoid the largely untenable focus on more or less monolithic “traditions”, which seemingly overshadow smaller developments, and instead examine the inherent pluralism of European religious and cultural history. In von Stuckrad’s application, the esoteric is construed to focus on discourses concerned with the “secretive dialectic of concealment and revelation” and “perfect knowledge”,³⁰ regardless of which cultural fields these discourses might show up in.
2. The Hanegraaff approach. As above, the focus is not on the esoteric “in itself”. Instead of stipulating an analytical construct, the focus is on the complex historical processes which have themselves constructed and created the notion of “the esoteric” in Western culture. Important to this “constructionist” approach are certain polemical processes grounded in the Reformation and the Enlightenment projects, whereby certain phenomena have been marginalized as “rejected knowledge”, and thus become the source for later constructions of “esoteric” and “occult tradition”, and later for the study of esotericism itself. As with the von Stuckrad approach, this perspective can be used to shine light on the complexities of European cultural and religious history which have typically remained veiled in earlier approaches.
3. The Partridge approach. In this approach, the focus is on contemporary processes of cultural and religious change. Designed to analyse religious expression in the present day rather than in distant historical periods, the approach looks at how previously marginalized phenomena and notions get popularized, and how the esoteric functions as part of an occultural reservoir – operating mainly through popular culture – which is used to construct beliefs, practices, and identities. In this, the Partridge approach is strongly embedded in social scientific theory and method, whereas the previous ones are grounded in discourse theory and strict historiographical research respectively.

30. von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 67.

All three approaches derive from the mid-2000s. Von Stuckrad first presented his model in the article “Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation” in 2005.³¹ Hanegraaff presented his in the article “Forbidden Knowledge: Anti-Esoteric Polemics and Academic Research”, also in 2005, which was further developed in a couple of articles³² before finding full expression in the book *Esotericism and the Academy* (2012). And Partridge’s model is presented in his in the two-volume *The Re-enchantment of the West* in 2004/5.³³ All three explore novel theoretical and methodological avenues, opening up the study of the esoteric not only to religious studies, but also to other fields in the humanities and social sciences, thus providing, as the contributions in this volume demonstrate, broad analytical application. Furthermore, all three approaches steer away from providing a conventional substantial definition of the esoteric, instead going for more fluid and open-ended perspectives. This is also why the three approaches do not seem to clash, but rather complement one another, dealing with different areas and having different, though compatible, applications. It is in this “new paradigm”, polyvalent and open-ended, as demonstrated in this volume, that the study of the esoteric has its greatest potential of contributing to and combining with other broader fields of scholarly inquiry.

31. See also von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*; von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*.

32. See Hanegraaff, “The Trouble with Images”; Hanegraaff, “The Birth of Esotericism from the Spirit of Protestantism”.

33. See also Chapter 6 in the present volume.