

The Study of (Western) Esotericism



We live in the so called Information Age in which any kind of knowledge is at our fingertips. Topics which fall under the categories of 'esoteric', 'metaphysical' or 'occult' have never been easier to reach. Hundreds of research papers on these topics can be freely downloaded on various online platforms (e.g. www.academia.edu), while thousands of antique books with occult themes have been digitised and made available online. The publishing of 'mind, body, spirit' books have been booming for years and show no signs of slowing down. While a staggering amount of YouTube videos featuring so-called

We can see that there is no lack of interest in these topics, but despite this interest, the field of 'esoteric' studies is still at an embryonic stage and I believe that it will still take many years before it becomes part of our formal education. This is an emerging field which only recently has gained entry to academia. Let's now explore together some of its features and implications.

and it refers to anything that is *esoteric*. Esoteric ~~basics from the Greek~~ ~~is~~ ~~esotericism~~ ~~History of~~ first appeared in English in the 1701 *esoteric* "inner" (or "hidden"). The term first appeared around 1828. The words *esotericism*, ~~introduced by Thomas Séguy in~~ ~~The~~ ~~Philosophy~~ ~~esotericism,~~ ~~Western esotericism~~ have ~~after been~~ ~~used~~ interchangeably.

is a kind of artificial category which In the field of history of religions and spirituality, *esotericism* scholars have applied to a range of currents, movements and ideas that were known by other century. Among th names and developed within Western society at least before the end of the 18 these spiritual currents and traditions we find, Hermeticism, Gnosticism and Neoplatonism, to mention just a few.

Actually, there has never been a field of study or doctrine *per* that can be labelled se 'esotericism'. There is instead the study and practice of the 'inner' (and 'deeper') aspect of a religious/spiritual 'tradition'. Its aim is (or perhaps was) to redirect all the components of regeneration and ~~rehabilitation (emotional, mental, physical, etc.)~~ towards ~~rehabilitation~~ served as -the foundation to reach higher stages of spiritual realisation. These stages constituted the so *esotericism*. ~~One of the same esoteric practices of 'path of initiation'~~. But esotericism but not an

initiate!

(and its applications) has never reached great The reason why the study of *esotericism* popularity is due to many factors. In a general sense, we can say that a clear rejection of many when in Europe *Age of Enlightenment*, of these teachings took place before the advent of the there emerged a hostile (Counter-Reformation) critique towards various forms of Western *Age of Enlightenment* thought that had developed with the Renaissance. Later on, when the already in full swing, these teachings came to be regularly categorised under the labels of superstition", "magic" and "the" for instance, became 'stigmatised' and . The term *magicoccult*" relegated to everything that was not modern (i.e. scientific and rational). Modern academia, which was then in the process of developing, continued to reject and ignore topics that came within academia has persisted until *esotericism* under "the occult". This kind of prejudice towards now.

centuries, this situation was partly balanced by the appearance and and 18 thIn the 17th development of initiatory societies professing esoteric knowledge (such as Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry). Later on, Romanticism (which included philosophical

-movements like German Idealism) and historical figures like Max Weber contributed to the re-
century saw the *natural world*. The 19th century saw the rise of Western esotericism and the re-enchantment of the
rise of new trends of esoteric thought now known as *occultism*.

Prominent groups in this century

Theosophical Society and included the

the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

century by various The academic study of Western esotericism was pioneered in the early 20th
individuals who came especially from the field of history of religion. In the works of people like
Carl Gustav Jung (noted as a psychoanalyst), Mircea Eliade and others
of the study of

esotericism. Around this time, for instance, we find the Warburg Institute, an important centre of
such great studies with

like Frances Yates. In 1965, thanks to professor *Hermeticism*
in Paris established the world's first academic post *La Sorbonne* Henry Corbin, the university of
Antoine in the study of esotericism. And in 1979, also at the Sorbonne, the French scholar
Faivre developed
the study of Western esotericism into a formalised field.

Because scholars have brought their own philosophical approaches into this field we find
various definitions of the study of esotericism. Those belonging to the 'Perennial' school of
thought, for instance, have also seen esotericism as a 'Perennial' hidden tradition. This
approach views Western esotericism as just one form of a worldwide esotericism at the heart of
all world religions and cultures, reflecting a hidden esoteric 'Reality' or 'Universal Tradition'.
paradigm (1). This approach has been dominated by a predominantly *religionist*

Another perspective has seen the study of Western esotericism as a way for 're-enchanting'
the world by seeking to rebalance the positivistic, atheistic and over-scientific world views which
have come to dominate the Western world. The scholars who have embraced this perspective
have abandoned the religionist
and have emphasised more empirical, historical and paradigm
discursive approaches.

Finally we find those scholars who view esotericism as a category encompassing all of Western culture's 'rejected knowledge'. A kind of dustbin containing those theories, teachings and world views rejected by (2). This perspective has brought together interdisciplinary debate across the boundaries of the humanities.

From 1980 (with the formation of the *Hermetic*) onwards we have seen the birth of *Academy* various institutes and universities embracing the academic study of esotericism. We could mention the University (with a chair in the History of Hermetic Philosophy), the of Amsterdam Exeter Center for the Study of Esotericism (EXESES), the North American Association (ASE), and the for the Study of Esotericism (ESSWE).

To conclude, it is important to emphasise the potential that lies behind the study of esotericism. Many of those individuals who have engaged themselves fully into this field (and its applications) have become transformed in heart and mind. Their historical and religious horizons have broadened while the central themes of 'Western culture' have acquired new and deeper meaning.

1. Within the academic field of religious studies those who study different religions in search of an inner universal dimension to them all are termed religionists.
2. As quoted by Wouter J.Hanegraaff in *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

