

Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), ISBN: 978-0-521-19621-5 57, £65.00.

In *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Wouter Hanegraaff presents a historiographical analysis of the study of esotericism, also known as the occult, magic, or witchcraft. The book is extremely comprehensive and engages with contemporary methodological debates related to this fast-growing field of academic enquiry. Hanegraaff presents the first historiography of the esoteric from the perspective of various thinkers and how they each would have imagined it in their own time. His analysis begins in antiquity and traces the path of the esoteric from Plato to the present day, including such well-known names as Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and encompassing more modern thinkers such as Carl Jung and Frances Yates. He also addresses a number of lesser-known thinkers including Jacob Thomasius, Ehregott Daniel Colberg, Gottfried Arnold, and Jacob Brucker. Hanegraaff makes the argument that historiographical methodology should be the mode of enquiry for the study of esotericism. He maintains that it should first and foremost be firmly grounded in: ‘a straightforward historiographical agenda’ (p.378) because it is empiricism that made it possible for Western Esotericism to be admitted to the academy (p.356).

The book first presents the concept of Platonic Orientalism (pp.12-17), or the idea that in the ancient world Platonism was understood as divine wisdom that was derived from the orient, as influenced by Pythagoras and Zoroaster. In this environment, philosophy was understood as the pursuit of divine wisdom and salvation of the soul (p.15), which would ultimately influence the development of later esotericisms. Furthermore, Hanegraaff argues that, during the Renaissance, ancient pagan knowledge was perfectly compatible with Christian belief, and indeed a necessary prerequisite for understanding the nature of Christianity (p.17). However, as others have argued before him, Hanegraaff maintains that all of this changed with the Reformation. Similar to

Weber's theory of the 'disenchantment of the world,' Hanegraaff holds that the Reformation was a turning point at which the pagan came to be reified as 'the other' in opposition to Christianity. He argues that this was a time when removing Platonism from the church was seen as the cure to its corruption (p.96).

Hanegraaff then discusses the Enlightenment paradigm in which reason becomes the universal yardstick for evaluating the truth or seriousness of any worldview. He argues that during this time period Platonism, Hermeticism, and Paganism are dismissed as being synonymous with irrationality (p.149-150). In line with the most recent literature on the topic, however, he also argues that the eighteenth century cannot be reduced to the Age of Reason (p.377). Most commentators, including Alex Owen, would agree that the Enlightenment can no longer be perceived as a straightforward march toward the rational, given the rise in occultism and spiritualism, and the continued intermingling of science and the esoteric that occurred during this period.

Hanegraaff maintains that a more neutral historical methodology is required to revisit the pagan influences on Western culture. He says that this will aid in: 'exploring the many blank spaces in our mental maps and filling them with colour and detail, so that they become integral parts of the wider landscape that we already knew' (p.378). In other words, historiographical methodology will enable us to rethink our history in a way that will facilitate the reintegration of this lost spiritual homeland of our pagan past.

Hanegraaff also maintains that much scholarship on esotericism has taken a religionist approach (p.370), or is pursued by people wishing to defend a particular set of religious views. He rejects this approach. Indeed, he notes that Antoine Faivre, one of the key founders of the discipline of Western Esotericism, was initiated as a Freemason in 1969 (p.340). Hanegraaff also

acknowledges that Faivre's religionist period has had considerable impact on how he developed his notion of Western Esotericism (p.341). This goes to the heart of the debate over whether practitioners of the esoteric arts can be scholars of Western Esotericism in an unbiased fashion. Hanegraaff also points out that around the time that Faivre moved into the Chair for History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe, his religionist methodology became less explicit (p.348). For Hanegraaff, it was the movement away from this religionist approach that made Western Esotericism more acceptable to the academy. He notes how scholars such as Christopher McIntosh, Ellic Howe, and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke emphasised its significance as a historical factor whose presence and influence could not be denied (p.355).

Hanegraaff also takes issue with Faivre's definition of Western Esotericism which he argues: 'originated as a Christian and religionist notion of "true" esotericism and retains its fundamental anti-doetic, anti-idealist, and anti-dualist perspective' (p.354). He notes that Faivre's definition likely excludes Swedenborg's theosophy, the idealism of Guénonian Traditionalism, and Gnostic/Cather dualism (p.354).

While Hanegraaff makes a persuasive argument for historiographical methodologies, the question must be asked: Why restrict ourselves to one methodology? Does the choice of methodology not go to the heart of a scholar's academic freedom? Is not the pursuit of truth best served by giving scholars the opportunity to move among multiple methodologies? Is it not our responsibility to ensure that the academy accepts all forms of scholarship on the esoteric? In the rediscovery of rejected knowledge in Western culture, of all things, there needs to be openness to many possibilities. Surely we can make room for the philosophers, phenomenologists, anthropologists, classicists, and scholars of visual culture and literature, in the study of heterodox religion. Surely they can do a great deal to inform the debate on these

important topics that have influenced so much of Western culture. In the same spirit of flexibility, the discipline would also benefit from an opening up of the definition to include more esotericisms than those originally outlined by Faivre. For if Western Esotericism is truly to have a place in the academy of the future, then we within the discipline would likely be served by remaining open to all perspectives.

Lori Lee Oates¹

University of Exeter

¹ Lori Lee Oates is a PhD. candidate in History at the University of Exeter, where she holds an international doctoral studentship. Her research interests include cultural history, growth in capitalism, globalization, and the impact of mass communications on esotericism in the late modern world. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science and Sociology, a Master of Arts degree in Political Science, and a Master of Philosophy (Humanities), all from Memorial University of Newfoundland.