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The Occult Roots of Religious Studies: An Introduction

Abstract: The first and primary thesis of this book is that religious studies have little-known and sometimes repressed origins which lie in the field of esotericism. The second thesis, which stems directly from this idea, holds that esotericism is an intrinsic part of hegemonic cultures and not a separate, small, “secret”, or “occult” field of minority groups. These two themes run through all the essays in this volume.

By adopting this perspective, we aim to shed new light on the history of the academic discipline of religious studies and esotericism.¹ In the historiographical narratives on the history of religious studies this dimension is usually completely absent,² even if the connections to other disciplines emerging in the 19th century (e.g. ethnology, cultural anthropology, geography of religion) are addressed or if the connection with ideological patterns of interpretation, e.g. evolutionary doctrines, which also play a central role in occultism, is present. One can read a lot about academisation, professionalisation and disciplinary differentiation, and, last but not least, about the dissociation from theology,³ but nearly nothing about the connections with esoteric currents. It is less surprising that such perspectives are missing in the research on institutional developments in the genesis of religious studies⁴— although Friedrich Max Müller, whose appointment to the chair for “Comparative Philology” in Oxford, established in 1868, and his Introduction to the Science of Religion (1873) are considered to be founding acts of religious

1 We thank Sylvia Paletschek sincerely for the very helpful hints she provided. Currently, the most important publication is Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

2 Hans Gerhard Kippenberg, *Die Entdeckung der Religionsgeschichte: Religionswissenschaft und Moderne* (München: Beck 1997); Axel Michaels, ed. *Klassiker der Religionswissenschaft: Von Friedrich Schleiermacher bis Mircea Eliade* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1997); Kurt Rudolph, *Die Religionsgeschichte an der Leipziger Universität und die Entwicklung der Religionswissenschaft: Ein Beitrag zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte und zum Problem der Religionswissenschaft* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962).

3 Arie L. Molendijk, *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands* (Leiden/Boston: Brill 2005); Sigurd Hjelde, *Die Religionswissenschaft und das Christentum: eine historische Untersuchung über das Verhältnis von Religionswissenschaft und Theologie* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

4 Rudolph, *Die Religionsgeschichte an der Leipziger Universität und die Entwicklung der Religionswissenschaft*.

studies, has intensively dealt with Blavatsky's Theosophy. Hardly any other picture emerges for the chairs with strong ties to religious studies around 1900, for example in Indology, where "esoteric" connections have also remained practically unnoticed. In this volume, Marco Frenschkowski uses the debates in Great Britain as an example in order to document how close the connections could actually be. Further research might reveal a broad panorama of relations in other regions and at other periods.

However, this history raises a much more fundamental question with regard to the logic of research carried out within strict disciplinary boundaries. Scientific subjects such as religious studies, theology, or the study of Western esotericism at universities have their origins in largely arbitrary demarcations. These boundaries are unlikely to be overcome, at least in the foreseeable future; there are simply too many pragmatic reasons for their existence. However, this volume seeks to at least promote the study of esotericism more as a cross-cutting, interdisciplinary topic than as a clearly demarcated field of research. Global history, postcolonial studies, or translation studies in the field of esotericism will not bear fruit without interdisciplinary cooperation.

1 Occultism and Religious Studies

The origins of religious studies lie not only in rational procedures, as academic auto-historiography would lead us to believe, which attempt to eliminate a "non-scientific" understanding of religion. This book deals with these roots, which are nearly always missing in books on the history of religious studies. In the search for neglected traditions we focus on a field that contemporaries at the end of the 19th century called "occultism" or (in all likelihood – more rarely) "esotericism". To be more specific, religious scholars wrote about the history of religious studies in the second half of the 19th century as the history of the implementation of scientific methods, first, as the implementation of philological, then ethnological standards, then, finally, in the 20th century by using the tools of empirical social science. The problem with this form of historiography is not the underpinnings of these methods, which, despite having been the subject of controversial debates, have been part of religious studies ever since its origins, but rather in the fact that it conceals the motives which led the early protagonists to pursue religious studies.

These repressed roots have often created path dependencies and partly shaped religious studies for a long time – and probably continue to do so to the present day. However, the only available examples concern the years around 1900. To start with one such example, at least some, if not many, of the early

representatives of Tibetology had close ties with Theosophy (as shown by the contributions of Julian Strube on John Woodroffe and Tantra and of Jens Schlieter on Walter Y. Evans-Wentz and the links he established between Tibetan Buddhism and Western traditions). However, no traces of this were found in their research or scholarly work and thus the the general course of the discipline remained unaffected. In individual cases, we can show that the consequences of this have shaped research on religious studies well into the 20th century, e.g. Boaz Huss in the case of the Jewish Kabbalah with a look at Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem or Léo Bernard on Paul Masson-Oursel. Of course, it is unlikely that such connections have disappeared at all. They still exist today, but often remain hidden from the public as very personal decisions; examples of disclosures exist, but often remain limited to individual cases. Two examples illustrate this point. First, Antoine Faivre, who can be regarded as the founding father of academic research on “Western esotericism”, was at times a scholarly follower of a form of “perennial philosophy” (cf. the short entry in the biograms in this volume). Secondly, Kocku von Stuckrad, who is the key figure in the shift to discursive analysis in esotericism, published in the field of esotericism before he began his scientific career.⁵ The fact that both are excellent scholars is beyond question in the scientific community. Only in rare cases do researchers openly speak of their proximity to esoteric ideas, such as that of Jeff Kripal, Professor of Philosophy and Religious Thought at Rice University in Houston, Texas, who does not conceal his path from a Catholic seminary to incorporating esoteric ideas.⁶

These consequences extend to the theoretical foundations of the discipline, insofar as central dimensions of occultist claims to knowledge – e.g. personal insight as a condition for research in religious studies – were problematised in this process of delimitation. In the background are quite fundamental debates in early religious studies, namely concerning the definition of religious studies as a cultural and/or natural science. Around 1900, religious studies often sought to reconcile “science” and “religion”.⁷ The question of how to conceptualise religious studies’ relationship with theology and whether religious studies should not strive to be an improved, more scientific form of theology was a recurring theme. All these problems can also be found in the debate surrounding the determination of the relationship of the emerging field of religious studies

5 Kocku von Stuckrad, *Lilith: Im Licht des schwarzen Mondes zur Kraft der Göttin* (Bielefeld: Aurum-Verlag, 2004).

6 Jeffrey John Kripal, *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 353–357.

7 Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse 1900–1939* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

to the less well-defined fields of “occultism” and “esotericism”. Ultimately, in the second half of the 20th century, religious studies distanced itself sharply from normative approaches. The most important case was most likely the rejection of an epistemology based on “experience” or “*Erleben*”, as Rudolf Otto demanded for phenomenology – a controversy that structurally addressed the same themes as the debate on esotericism, since esotericists often claimed to have experienced or attained religious “truth”.

Of course, there were also religious scholars who distanced themselves early on from esoteric traditions in a decisive way. One famous example is Friedrich Max Müller, who is one of the founders of religious studies and who found himself immersed in a kind of negative path dependency when he rejected Theosophy. However, the detrimental impact created by religious studies’ distancing from these esoteric traditions, which also places negative limitations on academic research, goes beyond the scope of this book.

Another common feature between occult and non-occult researchers is the comparison of religions. The comparative history of religions has roots in both milieus. Occultists, especially if they held perennialist ideas, often argued that a common core of all religions could be identified through comparison. Evidently this was a starting point for the later phenomenology of religion. Against this backdrop, we find the invention of the idea (and the noun) of universalism in early modern times in theology and philosophy, for example, in the concept of deism. In contrast to this focus on commonalities, there was an increasing tendency to consider differences between religions as the centre of scholarly research, along with the belief that this should be made possible by comparative methods. This second approach was widespread outside the occult milieu; in the second half of the 20th century it had a strong, perhaps even hegemonic influence on religious studies after it had distanced itself from the phenomenological concept of religion. Nevertheless, despite the divergent interests of both approaches, the methods were similar and could, for understandable reasons, strengthen the view of occultist researchers that comparative methods were a common platform of all scholarly work in the field of religious history. Therefore, theosophists created a parallel scientific universe, with their own conferences, journals and publishing houses. But the question of where and to what extent comparative research motivated by perennialism finally influenced religious studies in the 20th century has not yet been conclusively answered.

After all, nearly every author writing on the subject suggests that occultist themes or forms of esoteric thoughts still exist, albeit transformed and analysed from a critical perspective, to this day in “rational” religious studies, which eventually became the dominant form. During this process, “pseudo-scientific”, “para-scientific” procedures were systematically separated – and

finally excluded – from “scientific” religious research starting in the early 20th century.⁸ Ultimately, only the historical-empirical procedures of philology, sociology and ethnology were considered to be acceptable.

How should the “occultism” or “esotericism” from which the emerging field of religious studies has increasingly distanced itself since the end of the 19th century be defined? This is a more significant problem, since both the subject and the terminology used were part of the boundary work in academic discussions. Some fundamental considerations can be found in a separate compilation (cf. the contribution of Zander), but the central insight is evident: The clear distinction between occultism/esotericism on the one hand and science on the other did not bear fruit, because occultists and esotericists, like prominent scholars at that time, claimed to deliver empirical results that could be replicated and that were intersubjectively verifiable and thus close to the criteria that were used to define the concept of “objectivity”, as it was understood in the natural sciences in the 19th century.⁹

This field of occultism and esotericism was not an amorphous collection of ideas or individuals, but included a multitude of associations, societies and movements. Theosophy was probably the most important group – at least for the purposes of this book, but also presumably for the history of religious studies in general. Founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott and others in New York in 1875, this association set itself the goal of making the border between religion and science more permeable, if not abolishing it completely. They had adopted an anti-materialistic world view and developed practical applications for it, from school foundations to meditative paths to knowledge. Above all, Theosophists claimed to be superior to all other religions. For many exponents of the emerging field of religious studies, which at that time was still often designated comparative religious history, Theosophy became attractive not only because of its affinity to “rational” scholarly religious research,¹⁰ but also for other, much more concrete reasons: Theosophists claimed to work empirically and thus to have assimilated the precondition of rational scientific understanding; Furthermore, Theosophy became an important medium for the exchange of knowledge about other religions, often through personal contacts, though it made a particularly lasting impact through the (often popular) translations of

8 Helmut Zander, “Esoterische Wissenschaft um 1900: „Pseudowissenschaft“ als Ergebnis ehemals „hochkultureller“ Praxis,” in *Pseudowissenschaft: Konzeptionen von Nichtwissenschaftlichkeit in der Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, ed. Dirk Rupnow et al. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2008), 77–99.

9 Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Zone Books, 2015).

10 Wolfgang Eßbach, *Religionssoziologie: 1. Glaubenskrieg und Revolution als Wiege neuer Religionen* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014), cf. Rationalreligion, e.g. 156–166, 259–265, 309–316.

texts from non-European religions into Western languages. Religious studies has also benefited from this, as can again be demonstrated by the example of Tibetology and Indology.

2 University History

Against the backdrop of these unclear boundaries, the emerging field of religious studies began the process of differentiation between occultism and esotericism on the one hand and the increasingly hegemonic understanding of science that took hold in universities as part of a profound transformation in the second half of the 19th century. Universities at this time underwent significant structural changes compared to the universities and academies of early modern Europe. A central process for religious studies was the determination of the spectrum of disciplines to be included and the progression from the four traditional faculties of theology, philosophy, medicine and law to a multitude of new disciplines and sub-disciplines.¹¹ This is the context in which religious studies as we know it today has evolved since the 1860s. Its boundaries with other disciplines, however, remained fluid for decades, mainly due to the fact that at that time scholars from a large number of disciplines engaged in the study of religion (e.g. philologists such as Friedrich Max Müller, ethnologists such as James George Frazer or Bronisław Malinowski, or sociologists such as Emile Durkheim). The establishment of classical criteria for a university discipline – such as the existence of subject-related journals,¹² scientific associations, theses or habilitation theses¹³ (partial) denomination of chairs – was a slow process since the end of the 19th century, and even in the 20th century this process of stabilisation took decades. In this respect, the field of religious studies within universities appeared relatively late in the formation of academic disciplines.

11 Sylvia Paletschek, “Geisteswissenschaften in Freiburg im 19. Jahrhundert: Expansion, Verwissenschaftlichung und Ausdifferenzierung der Disziplinen,” in *550 Jahre Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg*, ed. Dieter Speck et al., vol. 3 (Freiburg i.Br.: Alber, 2007), 44–71; Rudolf Stichweh, *Zur Entstehung des modernen Systems wissenschaftlicher Disziplinen: Physik in Deutschland 1740–1890* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984); Rudolf Stichweh, *Wissenschaft, Universität, Professionen: Soziologische Analysen* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013).

12 The *Revue de l'histoire des religions* was founded in 1880, the *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* in 1898. Cf. Martina Dürkop, *Das Archiv für Religionswissenschaft in den Jahren 1919 bis 1939*, (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2013).

13 Qualification by means of a postdoctoral thesis for a senior position in a university department.

Finally, disciplines such as history, ethnology and sociology emerged alongside religious studies, which in turn created their own sub-disciplines (such as the sociology of religion, religious ethnology or the history of religion), which the field of religious studies was often paired with. Religious studies also existed within the fields of sociology, ethnology and historiography. As we show in this volume, however, the initial differentiation of disciplines at the end of the 19th century did not mean that the processes of exchange between different disciplines had come to a standstill. The cross-connections to Indology, Archaeology or Natural Science (as in Nees von Esenbeck, see Daniel Cyranka's contribution) are repeatedly visible in our book. In this respect, this volume documents not only one aspect of the emergence and demarcation of religious studies, but also the continuing effects of religious research on other fields of academic investigation. This is not really surprising, because this differentiation stemmed from a process of largely arbitrary demarcation, in which criteria based on internal policies within each discipline often took precedence over content-related criteria. The emerging field of religious studies had to position itself in this competition, not only against disciplines which later became established in academia, such as sociology, but also against occultism and esotericism. Occultism and esotericism finally drew the short straw despite their empirical-scientific claims and were excluded from scholarly research. In this context, the concept of "pseudoscience" became a sharp sword which made use of unclear criteria to discredit these fields to the benefit of hegemonic science.¹⁴ However, religious studies was not alone in this effort. The field of medicine sought to discredit quacks, astronomers fought against astrology and chemists fought against alchemy. All these efforts are structurally analogous processes of exclusion, probably following similar epistemological rules. However, this is not the subject of this book. The result was a radical and sometimes problematic separation between methods and topics which were considered to be "dignified" enough for research. The connection between normative and empirical research, whose existence was demonstrated in "esoteric" research, was no longer accepted. This was the case most recently after the crisis of phenomenology, when the ideal of strictly non-normative research in religious studies prevailed. As a consequence, not only methods, but entire areas of research were dropped. The fact that academic research on esotericism has only existed since the 1980s testifies to this state of affairs, which cannot be explained by scientific decisions concerning the selection of topics, but is mainly due to the history of the discipline.

¹⁴ Dirk Rupnow et al., ed., *Pseudowissenschaft: Konzeptionen von Nichtwissenschaftlichkeit in der Wissenschaftsgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008).

Religious studies self-image could not free itself from this historiographical zeitgeist either. In the standard historiography of the field, as already noted above, no mention is made of the field's occultist and esoteric roots.¹⁵ The process of exclusion of these traditions is not even discussed. In this volume we cannot systematically remedy this deficit, but we can provide material for a future revision of the historiography of religious studies. These new perspectives should not only include the continuities and ruptures, but also ask to what extent the criteria for addressing a subject were imposed by “opponents” of esotericism.

3 Biographies

The most blurred area of these demarcations were probably personal biographies. In virtually all the examples in this book, the biographical interests of researchers in the decades before and after 1900 play an important role in keeping the border open between occultism/esotericism and science (other researchers do draw sharp distinctions between them, but this book does not address these examples). While conducting research for this project, it became clear that we had completely underestimated the dimensions of this field. This gap could only be partially closed by indicating untreated areas. For this reason, a section of “biograms” is included (p.239 ff.), in which we show where further research is needed. Nevertheless, this collection of very short texts is probably only the tip of the iceberg.¹⁶

This is due to considerable practical research problems. In the history of science, especially in the German-speaking world, the link between the history of science and biographical histories was strong in the 19th century, but became weaker in the 20th century. This deficit also affects religious studies to an eminent

¹⁵ Rudolph, *Die Religionsgeschichte an der Leipziger Universität und die Entwicklung der Religionswissenschaft*; Kippenberg, *Die Entdeckung der Religionsgeschichte*; Molendijk, *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands*.

¹⁶ For example, the anthroposophical milieu has not been researched sufficiently. One could think of the anthroposophist Uno Donner, a Finnish industrialist, who donated a chair for religious and cultural history to the University of Turku/Åbo and also donated/held one of the largest book collections on religion in Northern Europe. Another would be the German Diether Lauenstein, priest of the Christian Community, who learned Sanskrit from the Marburg indologist Johannes Nobel, habilitated (presumably) in 1944 at the University of Greifswald, where he subsequently received a teaching assignment for Indo-European Studies and Sanskrit. He was involved in the founding of the Herdecke community hospital (a nucleus of the University of Witten-Herdecke) and died as a supporter of apartheid in South West Africa (modern-day Namibia). We thank Robin Schmidt for the clues.

degree. One reason is that the *forum internum* of a person with his or her religious beliefs is extremely difficult to grasp methodologically, if it is even possible at all. In addition, there are overlaps in biographies which contradict the “work of purification”¹⁷ of the hegemonic scientific dogmatism of the 19th century – scientists could be “rational” researchers at the professional level, all the while supposedly having “irrational” convictions of occult or esoteric origin at the biographical level, from an external perspective. That such hybridisations are normal was not clear in many 19th century discourses, which were probably often more focused on eliminating ambiguity than on polysemy; only in the context of the postcolonial revisions of the late 20th century did it become clear that biographical hybridisations are an appropriate way of interpreting life paths. In this book, we try to take a different course by constitutively linking the history of science and individual biographies.

However, this problem is not specific to representatives of the cultural sciences; rather, these blurred boundaries can also and especially be found in the “hard” natural sciences, where an even clearer distinction between science and pseudo-science, or religious studies, is often assumed. Such examples include Marie Curie, who not only stood in the laboratory, but also attended spiritual sances, or Albert Einstein, who was not only a theorist in the field of physics, but also read Blavatsky and attended lectures by Rudolf Steiner. Georg Cantor, the inventor of set theory in mathematics, who was interested in both Catholic theories of infinity and the existence of the “true” Rosicrucians, may be added to this group, along with the mathematician Jan Arnoldus Schouten, the explorer of differential geometry, who was also interested in Theosophy, or Thomas Alva Edison, who not only invented the light bulb and the two-way telegraph, but was also a temporary member of Theosophical Society Adyar (partly for economic reasons, e.g. to better sell his products in India?). The separation between the humanities and the natural sciences, which was established in university practice – though always criticised in theory of science – never disappeared on an individual level.

4 Goals and Contributions

It is against this background that we set the goals of this volume. Of course, on the material level, we aim to determine which institutions, stakeholders and programmes have existed that do not appear in the traditional historiography

¹⁷ Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes: Essai d'anthropologie symétrique* (Paris: Editions la Découverte, 1991).

of religious studies or are only briefly mentioned. This passion for discovering new narratives runs through this volume. The underlying questions are nevertheless more far-reaching: How did the hegemony of the approaches that dominate religious studies today become established and how did the pragmatically consensual or canonised research strategies, as was briefly mentioned above, become predominant? What foundational logic is the historiography of religious studies (and perhaps also its scientific understanding) subject to? Which esoteric traditions did it not fit into? To what extent does the projection of a later scientific understanding stem from the reconstruction of the history of the origin of religious studies, in which esotericism plays no role?

In light of these questions, a simple, classical principle of historiography comes to the fore in this volume: cultures must be understood (or at least an attempt at understanding must be made) in their respective contexts – which, as everyone knows, is always only possible asymptotically. This very attempt to understand history *sine ira et studio* is far too rare, if it is indeed done at all. Rather, every reconstruction of the past must carry out a self-critical reflection with regard to its construction from the normative preconditions of the present. This volume is thus concerned with depicting the rationality with which many contemporaries connected occultist and esoteric ideas with rational science as well as understanding the esoteric rationality from the horizon of the years around 1900 – even if we do not (or no longer) share these positions today, of course. Finally, as we indicated at the beginning, these perspectives should help to loosen the shackles that are placed on what we call academic disciplines. Religious studies and research on esotericism are indistinguishable fields of research par excellence.

The volume contains the following contributions:

- It opens with a proposal by **Helmut Zander** to define **esotericism** as a scholarly subject. He holds that different definitions of the esoteric will exist – and overlap. They will have family resemblances but never be identical.
- **Daniel Cyranka** opens the concrete historical considerations with a reflection on the natural scientist and German Catholic Christian Gottfried Daniel **Nees von Esenbeck** (1776–1858), who was a famous scientist in addition to being president of the Academy of the Natural Sciences Leopoldina, all the while holding magnetistic and spiritualistic interests throughout his life. He is a testimony to the fact that the distinction made between science and religion, including their so-called spiritualistic, spiritist or occult dimensions is ill-founded. Cyranka also raises the question of whether religious studies in this context hasn't outsourced the study of the genesis of non-rationalised religion to "exotic Oriental" settings like India.

- **Marco Frenschkowski** documents, for the years around 1900, the still extremely dense overlapping or linking or fusion (each of these metaphors draws only a selective and therefore problematic picture of the situation at that time) of “scientific” and “occult” fields in Great Britain. Biographies, ideas and social institutions did eben gerade nicht not exist separately.
- **Boaz Huss** shows that the early research of the **Kabbalah** in the decades around 1900 was, to an enormous extent, closely linked with positions that were (later) regarded as “perennialist” or “esoteric”. This includes famous representatives such as Martin Buber (1878–1965) or Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), who distanced himself from Theosophy while still sharing common interests with it.
- **Julian Strube** opens the reflections on the interrelation between Europe and Asia with an analysis of the background of **John Woodroffe** (1865–1936), one of the first explorers of Tantra. Strube can prove that the interpretation of Tantra by Woodroffe and his Indian informants was marked, not only by “esoteric” Western ideas but especially by the regional context of Bengal, which gave them a starting point for interpreting the Tantra as a universal tradition.
- **Jens Schlieter** attributes a profound Theosophical influence to **Walter Y. Evans-Wentz** (1878–1965), the famous translator of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which shaped scientific and popular reception of theoretical ideas for decades. Evans-Wentz was not only personally close to Theosophy, but also influenced the translation of the *Book of the Dead* with its ideas.
- **Léo Bernard** examines the ideas of the French scholar in religious studies **Paul Masson-Oursel** (1882–1956), who developed comparative religious research in which *philosophia perennis* played a central role. This leads to a field where it is extremely difficult to distinguish between esoteric and non-hegemonic motifs. In any case, it is clear that his position was accepted in the Theosophical milieu.
- **Sabine Böhme** concludes our volume with a contribution on **Walter Andrae** (1875–1956), one of the most famous German archaeologists of the early 20th century. She can prove that his arrangement of key Near Eastern works of art on Berlin’s Museumsinsel (including the Ishtar Gate and the Processional Street from Babylon) follows anthroposophical convictions.

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