

Beyond the West Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esoteri- cism

Egil Asprem

E-mail: [easprem@gmail.com](mailto: easprem@gmail.com)

Abstract

This article has two main objectives: 1) to account for the relation between definitions, boundaries and comparison in the study of “esotericism” in a systematic manner; 2) to argue for an expansion of comparative research methods in this field. The argument proceeds in three steps. First it is argued that a process of academic boundary-work has been instrumental in delimiting esotericism as a historical category. Second, a Lakatosian “rational reconstruction” of competing “research programmes” is provided to clarify the relationship between views on definition, boundaries and comparison. Third, a typology of different comparative methods is constructed along two axes: a homological-analogical axis distinguishes between comparison based on shared genealogy (homology) versus purely structural or functional comparisons (analogy), while a synchronic-diachronic axis picks out a temporal dimension.

Historical research programmes have typically endorsed homological comparison, while analogical comparison has remained suspect. This limitation is shown to be entirely arbitrary from a methodological point of view. It is argued that a reconsideration of analogical comparison has the promise of shedding new light on fundamental problems and must be a part of the ongoing theoretical reorientations in the field.

Keywords

comparative method; homology and analogy; Imre Lakatos; research programmes; boundary-work

© 2014 Egil Asprem.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

Three problems: Boundaries, definitions, and comparison

The “Western” in “Western esotericism” has received increased critical attention in recent years. A growing number of studies critique the fluid boundaries of “the West” as a category, and bring attention to “esoteric” currents that seem to challenge such classification – typically focusing on Islamic, Jewish, or Eastern European cases.¹ The combined evidence provides a strong case for dismissing the categorisation of esotericism as intrinsically Western, on historical and terminological grounds.² There is, however, also another and rather different way to go about critiquing this classification. This second way proceeds by pointing to *structural similarities* with phenomena that originate in other historical, cultural and geographic contexts. Instead of asking where the boundaries of the West are drawn, or probing cultural transfers across European and near-Eastern territories, this strategy asks more fundamental questions: Why, despite evident structural similarities,

¹ Marco Pasi organised an important two-session panel at the Twentieth Quinquennial World Congress of the IAHR in Toronto (August 15–21, 2010) on “Western esotericism and its boundaries: Between discourses of identity and difference,” which included papers by, among others, Egil Asprem, Henrik Bogdan, Gordan Djurdjevic, Kennet Granholm, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Marco Pasi, and Steven Wasserstrom. The boundary of esotericism was also on the agenda of the ESSWE4 conference in Gothenburg, Sweden (26–29 June 2013), which featured panels on “Western Esotericism and Islam,” as well as a keynote by Mark Sedgwick on “Western Esotericism and Islamic Studies” that focused on ways to conceptualise esotericism in the Islamicate sphere. In published form, the question was at the heart of the exchange between Kocku von Stuckrad and Antoine Faivre in the mid-2000s: See, e.g., von Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation,” *Religion* 35 (2005): 83; Faivre, “Kocku von Stuckrad et la notion d’ésotérisme,” *Aries* 6, no. 2 (2006); von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 46–49. The problem of boundaries in the modern period is addressed in a recent collected volume, Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (eds.), *Occultism in a Global Perspective* (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013). The best systematic discussions of the problem are found in Kennet Granholm, “Locating the West: Problematizing the *Western* in Western Esotericism and Occultism,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, eds. Bogdan and Djurdjevic (Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013); Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah and the Parting of East and West in the Early Theosophical Society,” in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, eds. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

² Despite this development, it still remains the case that *every single one* of the existing introductory textbooks to the field employs the term “Western” in the title. Thus, the coming generation will have to deal with the very same problems over again, uninformed of the theoretical reorientations that are currently underway. This is even the case for the most recent textbook, published in 2013 by the field’s most prominent scholar: Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). For a review of the other relevant textbooks, see Hanegraaff, “Textbooks and Introductions to Western Esotericism,” *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013).

are Indian Tantric groups, yogic practice, Zen Buddhism, Taoist alchemy, Amerindian “shamanic” practices, or Melanesian initiatic societies automatically excluded from analysis in terms of “esotericism”? Why can we not have a comparative study of esotericism on a truly global rather than a narrowly conceived “Western” scale?³

These two lines of critique follow separate logics, going to the heart of the question of how to define “esotericism” to begin with. The first line sees “esotericism” as a *historical category* (a name for a class of historical phenomena), while the second understands it as a second-order *typological concept* (a type of practice, organisation, or discourse).⁴ These two separate scholarly intuitions about how to go about defining esotericism are related not only to the question of boundaries and delimitations of the scope of the field, but also to the question of *comparison*. While typological constructs are often produced precisely for the sake of doing useful comparative research, historicists have commonly viewed the comparative method with suspicion.⁵ The origin of this suspicion is obvious enough: it has been a reaction to the eclectic use of comparison in “religionist” scholarship that, under the influence of perennialism and Traditionalism, aimed at establishing cross-cultural similarities pointing to a universal “esoteric core” of all religions.⁶ While the

³ Arguments of this type have often been put forward against the research programme associated with Antoine Faivre and his famous six characteristics. Several examples are found in the now dormant journal *Esoterica*. See, e.g., Harry Oldmeadow, “The Quest for ‘Secret Tibet,’” *Esoterica* 3 (2001); Arthur Versluis, “What Is Esoteric? Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism,” *Esoterica* 4 (2002).

⁴ The central importance of this distinction was first discussed by Olav Hammer, “Esotericism in New Religious Movements,” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, ed. James R. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 445–46.

⁵ This has also been the case in religious studies and neighbouring fields such as anthropology, but the pathologies of the aversion have differed slightly from field to field. See, e.g., Robert A. Segal, “In Defense of the Comparative Method,” *Numen* 48, no. 3 (2001). Meanwhile, religious studies never lacked attempts to create new and methodologically improved forms of comparativism in light of the criticism. See, e.g., Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990); William E. Paden, “Elements of a New Comparativism,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8, no. 1 (1996); Jeppe Sindig Jensen, *The Study of Religion in a New Key: Theoretical and Methodological Soundings in the Comparative and General Study of Religion* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2003). For a sophisticated recent contribution, see Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 120–60.

⁶ This polemic is made clear in, e.g., Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Some Remarks on the Study of Western Esotericism,” *Esoterica* 1 (1999). For an assessment of the religionist research tradition in the study of esotericism, see especially Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 277–314. For useful discussions of the intellectual background, see Steven Wasserstrom, *Religion after*

rejection of these untenable projects was understandable, a regrettable long-term side effect has been a suspicion of *all* comparativist projects.⁷

The issues of definition, boundaries, and comparison are thus intimately interwoven; one cannot hope to address one without touching on the other two. The present article thus has two aims: first, to *clarify the conceptual relations* that are at play in discussions on this complicated definition-boundary-comparison nexus; second, to call for an *expansion of comparative research* in the study of esotericism.

I will proceed in three steps. First, I suggest that the characterisation of esotericism as “Western,” the rejection of typological approaches, and the scepticism towards comparison were the result of professional *boundary-work* within a contested discursive field. While this does not amount to an independent argument for a comparativist position, it does pose serious questions about the theoretical and methodological soundness of some of the delimitations that have been made.

Second, and turning to the positive project of this article, I suggest that Imre Lakatos’s concept of “research programmes” is useful for systematically mapping how perspectives on definitions, boundaries and comparison are bound up in different positions in the field.⁸ The advantage of a Lakatosian approach is that we can see how definitions, far from living in a theory-free void, are related to the key objectives, theoretical assumptions and methodological heuristics of a given research programme. Framing the study of esotericism in terms of *competing research programmes* offers a clearer picture of the sources of disagreement and the possibility of a more fruitful scholarly conversation.

The metatheoretical analysis of research programmes leads to the third and final point: that a mutually fruitful interaction between typological and historicist conceptualisations of esotericism depends on a better understanding of the *forms* and *functions* of comparative methodology. The final part of this article develops a typology of comparative approaches. Borrowing the

Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2012).

⁷ While there are undoubtedly still scholars who practice comparative research along religionist and perennialist lines, I will not discuss these in the present article. It is by now very marginal to professional research in this field and cannot any longer be considered a serious force that needs to be addressed. We have moved beyond, and should conserve our energy for discussing the challenges of the future rather than those of the past.

⁸ Imre Lakatos, “Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes,” in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, eds. Alan Musgrave and Imre Lakatos (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). Cf. Lakatos, “History of Science and Its Rational Reconstructions,” *Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association* (1970).

distinction between *analogical* and *homological* comparison from biology, and that between *synchronic* and *diachronic* from linguistics, I suggest a typology of four distinct forms of comparison. Discussing the uses of comparison in esotericism research by reference to these four types highlights an implicit separation of scholarly labour: while both historicists and typologists are engaged in synchronic and diachronic research, historicists are biased towards genealogical relationships (homological comparison) while typologists seek general features unrestrained by genealogy (analogical comparisons). Instead of seeing these as irreconcilable approaches, I suggest that an expansion of the comparative project of esotericism research to include both homological and analogical methodologies is paramount to the further theoretical development of the field.

Constructing Borders: The delimitations of “Western esotericism” as a product of boundary-work

The institutionalised form of esotericism research that is currently embodied in organisations such as the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE) and in a number of publication outlets⁹ arose from a contested discursive field. In this “discourse on the esoteric,”¹⁰ sociologists and historians of religion had to compete with practitioners, journalists, and the standard dictionary definitions for discursive control over the term. The conceptualisation of “esotericism” that emerged, and won out through institutionalisation (journals, societies, book series, conferences, university chairs) reflects this origin.

The main spokespersons advocating the professionalisation of esotericism research in the 1990s initially sought to emancipate the field from approaches singled out as “religionist.” This was a necessary step. But it was not religionists alone that were seen as the problem. It was, for example, argued that “reductionism” – associated with the social sciences, and seeking explanations of cultural and religious phenomena on broadly naturalistic grounds – was a threat as well.¹¹ While the main stratagem for keeping

⁹ E.g., the journal *Aries* and the *Aries* Book Series, along with the SUNY Press series on *Western Esoteric Traditions* in the United States, the *Gnostica* series on *Acumen*, etc. The current journal is a young member of the family.

¹⁰ I borrow the useful distinction between “esoteric discourse” and “discourse on the esoteric” from Kennet Granholm. Cf. Granholm, “Esoteric Currents as Discursive Complexes,” *Religion* 43, no. 1 (2013): 51.

¹¹ E.g. Hanegraaff, “Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7, no. 2 (1995). For an overview of the already long-winded “reduction-

reductionism at bay was to invoke a brand of “methodological agnosticism,” “reductionist” research was also problematic due to the *universalistic* tendency that its explanatory ambitions superficially shared with the religionists. Thus, in a move that resonated well with dominant trends in the humanities at the time, the twin dangers of religionism and reductionism could be fought with the same weapon: an emphasis on the particular, unique, situated, and contextual. This is the context in which emphasis was put on the qualifying term “Western.” The term stands in opposition not so much to “Eastern” (or “Northern” or “Southern”) esotericism as to *universal* esotericism. It functions as a marker of *specificity* rather than as a geographical index term.¹²

The giving of boundaries to “esotericism” as a historiographical category in this period parallels the attempt to create a *professional* boundary around a *field of study*.¹³ The ways that the term was defined entitled some types of experts to speak about it, while other types of expertise were excluded. Generally speaking, European and North American historians were in, while sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists of religion were out – along with the Indologists, Tibetologists, and Sinologists. Historians of Islam and Judaism might occasionally be hired as consultants, but they too would stand outside of the main action.¹⁴

The *political* ambition of defining the professional boundaries of a field of research was explicitly present in some of the programmatic texts on esotericism in this period. For example, in the context of presenting his own historical definition of esotericism, Antoine Faivre lamented the fact that expertise from other disciplines had access to relevant forums: “We now see appear, in impressive numbers, ... specialists of one discipline or another, who get involved speaking authoritatively on esotericism when they have no

ism controversy” that this article ended up elongating, see Thomas Indinopulos and Edward A. Yonan (eds.), *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

¹² It is on this background that some scholars have argued for finding alternatives that more effectively pick out the intended specificity. See, e.g., Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah and the Parting of East and West.” Cf. Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, “Esoterik und Christentum vor 1800: Prolegomena zu einer Bestimmung ihrer Differenz,” *Aries* 3, no. 2 (2003).

¹³ For the concept of boundary-work, see Thomas Gieryn, “Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists,” *American Sociological Review* 48 (1983). Cf. idem, *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ This division of labour is clearly reflected in the landmark *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, where Islamic esotericism primarily appears as the Arabic *transmission* of alchemical and hermetic texts, and Judaic esotericism is treated under separate entries on “Jewish influences.”

particular competence.”¹⁵ In a situation without a hegemonic class of experts, esotericism becomes a “choice prey for imperialist projects.”¹⁶ The result is that “today almost anybody thinks he has rights to esotericism; almost anybody speaks of almost anything with impunity, with the complicity of the editors and the public.”¹⁷ The implication is clear: the editors should police boundaries differently; the discourse should be restricted so that certain actors (European historians of “esotericism”) should be given priority over others (sociologists, anthropologists, amateurs).

The implicit “specialist-amateur” dichotomy and the attack on academic competitors are two classic characteristics of boundary-work. Through these social distinctions, writes Thomas Gieryn, “[r]eal science is demarcated from several categories of posers: pseudoscience, amateur science, deviant or fraudulent science, bad science, junk science, popular science.”¹⁸ Boundary-work typically occurs when “two or more rival epistemic authorities square off for jurisdictional control over a contested ontological domain.”¹⁹ If we substitute ontological domain for *discursive* domain, this is an entirely apt description of the condition in which Faivre was writing in the early 1990s. What we see is an attempt at establishing jurisdictional control over the academic discourse on the esoteric. While winning over the popular, practitioner, and religionist voices was important enough, it was even more important to challenge the jurisdiction of competing academic authorities who would employ the term in typological rather than historical senses.

It is notable that in the struggle to secure dominance of historical definitions, key argumentative strategies were unavailable to the historicists. The most effective strategies of definition were simply not viable:²⁰ etymology, common understandings and lexical definitions all pointed in an opposite direction. Meanwhile, the “historical object” imagined by historicists was far from tangible enough to provide an effective ostensive definition or an unambiguous appeal to prototype.²¹ One could not find grounding in actors’

¹⁵ Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science*, 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See, e.g., Anil Gupta, “Definitions,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2008), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/definitions/> (accessed August 13, 2013). The argument I am making here owes much to the discussion in Hammer, “Esotericism in New Religious Movements”, 445–49.

²¹ Nevertheless, an ostensive component is often added to the mix when esotericism is being introduced to new audiences, and often in revealingly long-winded terms. Thus, for example, from the description of the pioneering journal, *Aries*: “This field [Western esoteri-

categories either, since “esotericism” had only emerged as an emic term quite recently. You will not find it in the “referential corpus” delineated by Faivre as the historical wellspring of “Western esotericism.”²² Even the history of use provided obstacles: The first time the term was employed in a technical sense was in Jacques Matter’s *Histoire critique du gnosticisme* in 1828, and there it was concerned precisely with “secret teachings” and “higher knowledge” (*gnosis*).²³ Only when French occultists adopted the term did esotericism start to take on a historical, yet heavily perennialist, shape. It is only in the cauldron of 19th century occultism that “esotericism” is imagined as a historical phenomenon with an extension reminiscent of the later concept – but looking at the details, this was still only a distant cousin from the concept later projected backwards in history by the historicists.

These reflections do not serve to say that historicist delimitations and conceptualisations are *illegitimate*. That would be committing a genetic fallacy. However, they do remind us that the historical programme exists in a pluralistic academic landscape where competitors, defining the term along diverging lines, have at least *just as* legitimate a claim to “esotericism.” Indeed, typologists operationalising “esotericism” along the lines of “religious secrecy” have a stronger historical precedence for their choice: they can amass

cism] covers a variety of ‘alternative’ currents in western religious history, including the so-called ‘hermetic philosophy’ and related currents in the early modern period; alchemy, paracelsianism and rosicrucianism; christian kabbalah and its later developments; theosophical and illuminist currents; and various occultist and related developments during the 19th and 20th centuries, up to and including popular contemporary currents such as the New Age movement.” As for intuitive prototype definitions, the problem remains that there are diverging intuitions about what this term refers to. This even holds among those who *share* an intuition that esotericism is a historical phenomenon. As Hanegraaff pointed out in his recent introduction to the field, scholars appear to be working from at least three different historical “prototypes” of esotericism: as an early-modern “enchanted worldview,” as secret, “inner tradition,” and as modern, post-Enlightenment occultism. Cf. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 4–13. These, of course, are indicative of three radically different ways of conceptualising the historical object.

²² The first known use was in German in the late 18th century, with a more influential application being found in Jacques Matter’s *Histoire critique du gnosticisme et de son influence* in 1828, discussed below. For the earlier German reference, see Monika Neugebauer-Wölk, “Der Esoteriker und die Esoterik: Wie das Esoterische im 18. Jahrhundert zum Begriff wird und seinen Weg in die Moderne findet,” *Aries* 10, no. 2 (2010).

²³ See Hanegraaff, “The Birth of Esotericism from the Spirit of Protestantism,” *Aries* 10, no. 2 (2010): 202. We might also refer to the ongoing and groundbreaking genealogical research of Wouter J. Hanegraaff, which suggests that the reification of a cluster of intellectual currents into a semi-coherent whole, which today forms the starting point for historical esotericism, took place in the context of the Protestant polemical discourse sometimes known as “anti-apologetics,” in which one wished to purge Christianity of its claimed “pagan” corruptions. See Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

etymological arguments, refer to common understandings as fortified in lexical definitions, and even point to a history of use that massively predates the contemporary historicist understanding. Behind the boundary-work tactics and jurisdictional skirmishes we are left with a radically pluralistic academic field, and it behoves us to judge each option seriously on its own merits.

“Esotericism” between a Plurality of Research Programmes

The academic pluralism that currently exists in the study of esotericism may fruitfully be construed in terms of Imre Lakatos’s notion of competing “research programmes.”²⁴ Viewed this way, we should expect historical and typological programmes to ask different questions in the pursuit of separate theoretical goals. A Lakatosian perspective can give us a better overview of the key differences and overlaps between research programmes, and help resolve some of the controversies in the field. Most importantly, it can help us distinguish pseudo-debates from real conceptual disagreements within the field.

In Lakatos’s historically oriented philosophy of science, scientific research programmes revolve around a “hard core” of key theoretical propositions and philosophical assumptions, which together define the goals of each programme.²⁵ Out of this hard core springs a set of *positive* and *negative* heuristics, creating a “protective belt” of auxiliary hypotheses surrounding the programme. Positive heuristics consist of tacit or explicit guidelines that advise the researcher on how to gather and analyse data, form and test hypotheses, constitute and arrange “facts,” and generate new knowledge within the programme. Conversely, negative heuristics inform the researcher about which questions *not* to ask and which research methods to avoid. Above all, the function of negative heuristics is to direct any attempts at

²⁴ It should be noted that Lakatos had *natural* science in mind when he constructed this approach to the history of science. More particularly, the methodology of research programmes was designed to find a balance between the historicising (and relativising) approaches of Kuhn and Feyerabend on the one hand, and the austere logical but utterly ahistorical reconstructions resulting from Popper’s falsificationism on the other. It is thus not obvious that this approach should make a perfect fit when reconstructing theoretical constellations in a humanities discipline. Nevertheless, I maintain that the key framework introduced here *does* make sense, while the rest of Lakatos’s ambitions, notably to distinguish between progressing and degenerating programmes in terms of their heuristic power, is harder to transfer – if, indeed, they ever worked out for the natural sciences to begin with.

²⁵ Lakatos, “Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes,” 132–37.

falsification *away* from the hard core of the programme, leading them instead to the protective belt of auxiliary hypotheses.

The combination of protective belt and heuristics keep the hard core of the programme *unfalsifiable*. In other words, one cannot distinguish “good” from “bad” research programmes based on epistemological principles such as falsifiability alone. What matters is whether the total structure of a certain programme retains predictive power and is able to generate new hypotheses and produce new discoveries: what Lakatos calls “progressive problemshifts.” Thus one may distinguish between *progressive* and *stagnating* research programmes: stagnating programmes are characterised by an inflation in the protective belt: it does not produce novel hypotheses that generate new knowledge, but merely adjustments in the existing belt of hypotheses that serve to protect the hard core from falsification (i.e., *ad hoc* hypotheses). It does not produce any progressive problemshifts, but instead slips back to address the same basic problems.

I will briefly sketch a small variety of approaches that conceptualise esotericism in typological and historical senses. My purpose is to argue that one cannot expect any fundamental agreement on the *concept* of esotericism between these different programmes, since the word is defined and used to serve very different, yet equally legitimate purposes. This rational reconstruction can, however, help us free the discussion of “esotericism” from a tiresome quarrel over disconnected definitions, and turn fresh attention to its heuristic power (or lack thereof) within specific research programmes.

Historical research programmes

We may distinguish several slightly diverging historicist programmes in the study of esotericism. These programmes revolve around the same hard core: that *esotericism is a specific historical phenomenon, grounded in specific historical events and processes*. Despite a lively discussion about definitions among historicists, this assumption is not really a topic for argument; rather, it is the undisputed starting point. From this hard core spring positive heuristics that tell researchers how to go about building knowledge about “esotericism.” I will suggest that it is on this *heuristic* level, rather than on the core level of the historicity of esotericism, that historicist programmes tend to diverge.

This point may be illustrated by a simple reconstruction of some diverging historicist positions.²⁶ For example, we may construe the 4+2 character-

²⁶ I will only discuss a small selection of influential historicist programmes here. These have been selected primarily for their influence in the field as presently institutionalised, and

istics of the classic Faivrean programme as a *positive heuristic*: analysing (historically related) material in terms of these characteristics provides a way to generate new knowledge about “esotericism,” conceptualised as a historical object that can be described and traced by inductive historical methods. Through the 1990s, this research project led to some relevant problemshifts: the increased attention to esoteric dimensions in domains such as art, music, literature and ritual is a primary example.²⁷ Moreover, the *diachronic* study of characteristics led to the discovery that esoteric material was being reinterpreted and transformed in specific ways with the advent of modernity.²⁸ This, however, was a challenging find that led to a questioning of the heuristic itself and a call for new definitions and research procedures. A moderate solution adopted by some historians has been to redefine the 4+2 characteristics as a *polythetic family-resemblance relation* between historically related currents, rather than essential elements in a “form of thought.”²⁹ From a Lakatosian perspective, this manoeuvre could be interpreted as a sign of a *degenerating* problemshift. The programme does not easily accommodate new empirical developments, so changes in auxiliary hypotheses and positive heuristics are needed for its survival. We should however note that Lakatosian reconstruction does not provide reason to *reject* such efforts; indeed, “it occasionally happens that when a research programme gets into a

partly because they have been associated with theoretical and methodological reflection to a larger extent than their competitors. Among the programmes that will not be included, special mention should be made of Arthur Versluis’s work, which constitutes an independent and alternative way to conceptualise esotericism as a historical phenomenon in (predominantly) “Western” culture. See, e.g., Versluis, “What Is Esoteric?”; cf. Versluis, *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esoteric Traditions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007).

²⁷ Many examples are sketched in Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, e.g. 93–94, 105–108. For other examples, see, e.g., Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Romanticism and the Esoteric Connection,” in *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, eds. Roelof van den Broek and Hanegraaff (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998); Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007); Antoine Faivre, “Borrowings and Misreading: Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Mesmeric’ Tales and the Strange Case of their Reception,” *Aries* 7, no. 1 (2007). Nevertheless, the vast majority of innovative esotericism scholarship in this period proceeded *without* following the Faivrean programme, or indeed any significant theoretical orientation at all. Good examples of this trend are the works of central scholars such as Joscelyn Godwin and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke.

²⁸ This point was already present in Hanegraaff, “Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism.”

²⁹ For this strategy, see especially Marco Pasi, “Il problema della definizione dell’esoterismo: analisi critica e proposte per la ricerca futura,” in *Forme e correnti dell’esoterismo occidentale*, ed. Alessandro Grossato (Milan: Medusa, 2008).

degenerating phase, a little revolution or a *creative shift* in its positive heuristic may push it forward again.”³⁰

While “neo-Faivrean” approaches cannot thus be discounted out of hand, it is also quite natural that other historicists have left Faivre’s framework and gone on to proscribe entirely new heuristics (opting for “little revolutions” rather than “creative shifts”). As a key example, we may construe the programme articulated by Hanegraaff in a number of publications since 2001, as following a heuristic that emphasises a *genealogical* approach to key terms (e.g. “esotericism,” “magic,” “occult”) aimed at uncovering their shifting use in different historical contexts.³¹ This heuristic emphasises historical “epistemic” breaks and rupture, and seeks to locate the discursive construction of semantic fields related to “the esoteric.” Moreover, it is characterised by a suspicion of established secondary literatures, so it calls for a return to the diligent study of primary sources. This programme has already contributed to progressive problemshifts, taking the study of “esotericism” in new directions (e.g. polemical discourse, mnemohistorical shifts, paganism and heresiology, political dimensions, etc.).³²

We can also identify *negative* heuristics in the historicist programmes. As it happens, these appear intimately connected with the boundary-work discussed in the previous section. One explicit example is the insistence on “methodological agnosticism,” originally designed to discourage “religionist” and “reductionist” approaches. In practice, this heuristic discourages the use of metaphysical concepts related to the religionist school (such as Corbin’s *mundus imaginalis*, Jung’s “collective unconscious,” Eliade’s theologising

³⁰ Lakatos, “Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes,” 137.

³¹ See, e.g., Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Beyond the Yates Paradigm: The Study of Western Esotericism between Counterculture and New Complexity,” *Aries* 1, no. 1 (2001). For later examples, see, e.g., Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Forbidden Knowledge: Anti-Esoteric Polemics and Academic Research,” *Aries* 5, no. 2 (2005); “The Birth of Esotericism from the Spirit of Protestantism”; *Esotericism and the Academy*.

³² The main achievement of this programme is Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*. See also Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Trouble with Images: Anti-Image Polemics and Western Esotericism,” in *Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others*, eds. Olav Hammer and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2007). Other research building on it can be found in recent work such as Jacob Senholt Christensen, “Radical Politics and Political Esotericism: The Adaptation of Esoteric Discourse within the Radical Right,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Asprem and Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013); Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms: Sociological, Historical, and Critical Approaches to the Invention of Tradition,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2013); Asbjørn Dyrendal and Egil Asprem, “Sorte brorskap, mørke korrespondanser og frelsende avsløringer: Konspirasjonsteori som esoterisk diskurs,” *Din: Tidskrift for religion og kultur* 2 (2013); Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900 – 1939* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

“Sacred,” or post-psychedelic concepts of “transpersonal reality”), but it also bars the incorporation of genuinely *naturalistic* methods that would explain elements of “the esoteric” in terms of, for example, cognitive mechanisms, neurophysiology, economic or social factors.³³ More importantly for our present purposes, the qualifying adjective “Western” also functions as a negative heuristic device: it discourages attempts to find esotericism in contexts considered foreign to “the West.” Closely related to this, the suspicion against cross-cultural comparative research also serves as a negative heuristic, discouraging historians from developing and applying comparative methodologies.³⁴ The combined function of these negative heuristics is to save the historicist hard core by refusing to discuss empirical or theoretical challenges that would point to non-historical conceptualisations and modes of explanation (e.g. sociological, psychological, cognitive).

Typological research programmes

When we look to the programmes that employ esotericism in a *typological* sense, there is one crucial difference that must be noted with care. In these programmes, assumptions about “esotericism” are *not* part of the hard core. These programmes do not chiefly aim to study “it.” Instead, the concept is employed *heuristically* in the service of other goals. This is a very significant difference that merits closer attention. I will briefly discuss two different programmes of this type, namely the comparativist approach proposed by Hugh Urban, and the discursive model of Kocku von Stuckrad.³⁵

In a programmatic article from 1997, Urban suggested “a new approach to the phenomenon of esotericism by placing it within a cross-cultural framework, and by focusing specifically on its socio-political implications.”³⁶

³³ For a criticism of methodological agnosticism on these and related grounds, see Olav Hammer and Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Hvad kan man vide om religion? En kritik af den metodologiske agnosticisme,” in *At kortlægge religion: Grundlagsdiskussioner i religionsforskningen*, eds. Torben Hammersholt and Caroline Schaffalitsky (Højbjerg: Forlaget Univers, 2011). Unfortunately, this important article is currently only available in Danish.

³⁴ Clear formulations of these negative heuristics are found in Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 16–18.

³⁵ As with the historical programmes, other examples could easily be adduced. The two examples discussed here have been chosen because of the conceptual clarity with which they have been proposed. For a general defence of the value of typological conceptualisations of esotericism, see Hammer, “Esotericism in New Religious Movements.”

³⁶ Urban, “Elitism and Esotericism: Strategies of Secrecy and Power in South Indian Tantra and French Freemasonry,” *Numen* 44, no. 1 (1997): 2. Cf. Urban, “The Torment of

Urban's starting point was the recognition that analysis of the socio-political contexts of esotericism were lacking in the historical programmes that were practiced at the time, a neglect that could be remedied by a cross-cultural comparative approach. In the article, Urban went on to compare and analyse the structures of 18th century French Freemasonry with traditions of South-Indian Tantra – a comparison that would certainly fall outside the scope of the “Western”-delimited historicist programme.

Urban's approach is embedded in the wider programme of a sociologically oriented comparative history of religion. His research questions are not essentially linked to a certain intellectual current in “the West.” Instead, the questions are of *general* import: how is power constructed, distributed and enforced in religious systems? How do these systems interact with wider social processes? “Esotericism” is taken out of the hard core and plays a heuristic role in exploring such questions. Thus, the concept must also be defined in ways that break with historicist assumptions. Urban's definition is instead very close to the more common *lexical* meaning of the term: “[E]sotericism refers to what is ‘inner’ or hidden, what is known only to the initiated few, and closed to the majority of mankind in the exoteric world.”³⁷ This secrecy-oriented definition is theorised and worked into an operative analytical concept by being embedded in a “sociology of secrecy,” with Georg Simmel and Pierre Bourdieu as central points of reference.³⁸ “Esotericism” is thus *not* a historical phenomenon that can be compared to other historical phenomena with regards to some aspect of doctrine, practice or social organisation: instead, esotericism itself becomes a *tertium comparationis*, an analytic construct that enables a comparison of two (or more) historically and culturally unrelated forms of social organisation.³⁹ This is how Urban can compare French Freemasonry and Indian tantric groups *with regards to* their “esotericism” – not entailing thereby any shared connection to a “referential corpus” established in the European Renaissance.⁴⁰

Secrecy: Ethical and Epistemological Problems in the Study of Esoteric Traditions,” *History of Religions* 37, no. 3 (1998).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁸ See especially Urban, “The Torments of Secrecy.” Cf. Georg Simmel, “The Sociology of Secrecy and Secret Societies,” *American Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 4 (1906).

³⁹ Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 51.

⁴⁰ In later work, this sort of comparison of structural features connected to secrecy and concealment has been expanded to include e.g. secrecy in the Bush administration, and the Church of Scientology. See, e.g., Hugh Urban, “Religion and Secrecy in the Bush Administration: The Gentleman, the Prince, and the Simulacrum,” *Esoterica* 7 (2005); “The Secrets of Scientology: Concealment, Information Control, and Esoteric Knowledge in the World's Most Controversial New Religion,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013).

Something similar goes for von Stuckrad's discursive programme. His "integrative model of interpretation," initially proposed to contrast with the Faivrean approach,⁴¹ is inscribed in the "European history of religions" programme – the hard core of which revolves around a model of European history characterised by shifting and interlocking systems of pluralism.⁴² The programme is interested in understanding regimes of pluralism, identity constructions, and social and cultural negotiations of identity in European religious history. Thus, "the academic study of Western esotericism should be understood as part and parcel of a broader analysis of European history of religion, with all its complexities, polemics, diachronic developments, and pluralistic discourses."⁴³

While the programme *itself* is historically grounded, "esotericism" becomes a second-order analytical construct that is employed typologically (i.e., a type of discourse) as part of the heuristics of the programme. Esotericism becomes "esoteric discourse," defined in terms of claims to higher knowledge, and means of achieving it, and linked to a dialectic of the hidden and the revealed, claims to mediation, experiential gnosis, prophecy, and so on. Its function is to analyse certain types of knowledge claims that arise in the pluralistic competition of systems of (religious) knowledge.⁴⁴

As to the West/non-West divide, von Stuckrad's operationalisation of esoteric discourse is *in principle* open for application to any knowledge claim in any culture at any time in history. As we can read in von Stuckrad's introductory textbook to the field,

⁴¹ von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism," 81–83.

⁴² E.g. Kocku von Stuckrad, "Esoteric Discourse and the European History of Religion: In Search of a New Interpretational Framework," in *Western Esotericism: Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Western Esotericism, held at Åbo, Finland on 15-17 August 2007*, ed. Tore Ahlbäck (Åbo: Donne Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 2008); *Locations of Knowledge*. For general reference to the European History of Religion programme, see especially Hans Kippenberg, Jörg Rüpke and Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.), *Europäische Religionsgeschichte: Ein mehrfacher Pluralismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2009). Cf. Burkhard Gladigow, "Europäische Religionsgeschichte," in *Lokale Religionsgeschichte*, eds. Hans Kippenberg and B. Luchesi (Marburg: Diagonal, 1995).

⁴³ von Stuckrad, "Esoteric Discourse and the European History of Religion," 217.

⁴⁴ "On the most general level of analysis, we can describe esotericism as the claim of absolute knowledge. From a discursive point of view, it is not so much the *content* of these systems but the very fact that people *claim* a wisdom that is superior to other interpretations of cosmos and history. What is claimed here, is a totalizing vision of truth that cannot be subject to falsification, a master-key for answering all questions of humankind. Not surprisingly, the idea of absolute knowledge is closely linked to a discourse on *secrecy*, but not because esoteric truths are restricted to an "inner circle" of specialists or initiates, but because the dialectic of concealment and revelation is a structural element of secretive discourses." (Ibid., 230)

I do not doubt that large parts of what I understand by esotericism can also be found in other cultures, and that a transcultural and comparative approach can be most valuable for our understanding of esotericism. Nevertheless, I derive my account from European and American culture and therefore wish to apply my findings to this field only.⁴⁵

It is not the *concept itself* that limits the application of “esoteric discourse” to the West. It only happens to be employed in a research programme that has its particular focus on Europe (and North America). That is, while “esoteric discourse” becomes part of the positive heuristics for generating knowledge about competing knowledge claims, there is a *negative* heuristic at work in the *Europäische Religionsgeschichte* school similar to that of the historicist programmes of esotericism research: the scope is limited to Europe, with the occasional excursion to other territories of that ephemeral place, “the West.”⁴⁶

A Preliminary Conclusion: The looming danger of equivocation

This Lakatosian rational reconstruction of some research programmes that operationalise “esotericism,” “the esoteric,” or “esoteric discourse” in their work emphasises one key point: behind uses of the same *term* we find a range of dissimilar *concepts*, working on various theoretical and heuristic levels within their respective research programmes. This brings a considerable danger of equivocation fallacies.⁴⁷ Equivocation is a key cause of false agreement as well as false disagreement, and we find both in the academic discourse on the esoteric.

I suggest that an equivocation with regards to “esotericism” is the core reason for at least some of the apparent disagreements in print between Faivre, von Stuckrad, and Hanegraaff. Thus, von Stuckrad has criticised Faivre’s definition for being an inadequate *typology*, whereas Faivre’s concept really functions as an inductively based *description* of a (supposed) historical reality, which is then employed as a heuristic device.⁴⁸ Esotericism_{KVS} and

⁴⁵ von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (London: Equinox Publishing, 2005), xi–xii.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., contributions to the *Journal of Religion in Europe*, which inevitably have to touch on “non-European” developments as well – especially when discussing modern and contemporary religion.

⁴⁷ That is, the fallacy of using one word in two or more different senses within the same argument, without acknowledging the semantic shift.

⁴⁸ von Stuckrad, “Western Esotericism,” 83.

Esotericism_{AF} are *not* competing descriptions of the same scholarly object – they are entirely different concepts doing different work in their respective research programmes. Thus, Faivre only contributed to the conceptual morass by calling von Stuckrad’s discursive model “circular,” implicitly castigating it for not having emerged from the sources in an inductive fashion in the same way as his own definition was supposed to have done.⁴⁹ This completely misses the point about “esoteric discourse” working as a *deductively* based heuristic, rather than an *inductively* based description of a historical phenomenon. True – the two approaches differ and are irreconcilable, but that is not because one knows the “right” way to go about defining esotericism and the other does not. Rather, it is because the same term has been operationalised to do very different work within two divergent research programmes.

A similar confusion can be found in attempts to relate von Stuckrad and Hanegraaff’s later work. As Bernd-Christian Otto has pointed out, the dichotomy of Stuckradian “discourse theory” versus Hanegraaffian “historiography” is superficial and characterises the difference between these two approaches on false grounds.⁵⁰ They are in fact *both* working on broadly discursive grounds, but pursuing different theoretical goals. Again, the real difference appears to be what function the term “esotericism” is given within the broader (discursively oriented) research programme: is it an analytical heuristic tool *for doing* discursive analysis (Esotericism_{KVS}), or an object *to be* discursively analysed (Esotericism_{WJH})?

These pseudo-disagreements testify to the need for a clearer and better dialogue. Since issues such as universality/particularism and Western/global remain at the heart of these controversies, I suggest that a clearer understanding of the forms and functions of the *comparative method* is a crucial prerequisite for having a fruitful exchange between research programmes. In the following section, I will propose a fourfold typology of comparative approaches, and illustrate their import for the conceptualisation of esotericism. My primary goal is to identify the role of comparativism in the institutionalised historicist programmes, and provide suggestions for an *expansion* of this research. In practice, this will allow for a more inclusive attitude to disciplinary approaches that have commonly been neglected or outright rejected, including sociological, psychological, and cognitive approaches. These, I will suggest, can easily be incorporated in an expanded comparativist study of esotericism, without threatening the historical specificity of the

⁴⁹ Faivre, “Kocku von Stuckrad et la notion d’esoterisme,” 209.

⁵⁰ E.g. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 362–67. Otto, “Discourse Theory Trumps Discourse Theory: Wouter Hanegraaff’s *Esotericism and the Academy*,” *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013).

concept. However, it means that the negative heuristics of historicist research programmes will have to go. Since these heuristics were largely a result of boundary-work during the professionalisation process anyway, I say good riddance.

Comparing Comparativisms

On the surface, the study of esotericism appears to be divided on the issue of the comparative method: typologists are for it, historicists against it. However, this impression relies on a too narrowly conceived notion of comparison. When historicists discourage comparative research, what they really mean is *cross-cultural* comparison aimed at finding *similarities*. This is of course a very specific form of comparison, employed in the pursuit of very specific aims. It is not so much “*the* comparative method” that is at issue, but rather certain research programmes that have used such methods to establish and uphold a cross-cultural, cross-historical (and religionist) category of “esotericism.”

Under closer analysis, historicist and typological programmes are not divided over the comparative method *as such*, but rather over how, when, and why it should be applied.⁵¹ Understood in a wider sense, comparison is in fact essential to the very project of defining esotericism as a historical category to begin with. Consider the following passage from Faivre’s methodological discussion in *Access to Western Esotericism*. After denouncing universalising definitions that work deductively, Faivre writes that:

It appears more fruitful to start with its [i.e. esotericism’s] *variable usages within diverse discourses* and to query what observable realities these usages stem from; then to take as material for study, the appearances of fields that explicitly present themselves as esoteric as well as those discourses that may implicitly present themselves as esoteric.⁵²

What he describes is an inductive method that starts by *comparing particulars* (“variable usages”) and developing generalisations on the basis of these

⁵¹ The situation is, in other words, similar to the misguided anti-comparativism in religious studies in the 1990s. For an instructive assessment, see Robert Segal, “In Defense of the Comparative Method.”

⁵² Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 4. Emphasis added.

findings.⁵³ It is a (admittedly rather convoluted) prescription for comparative research.

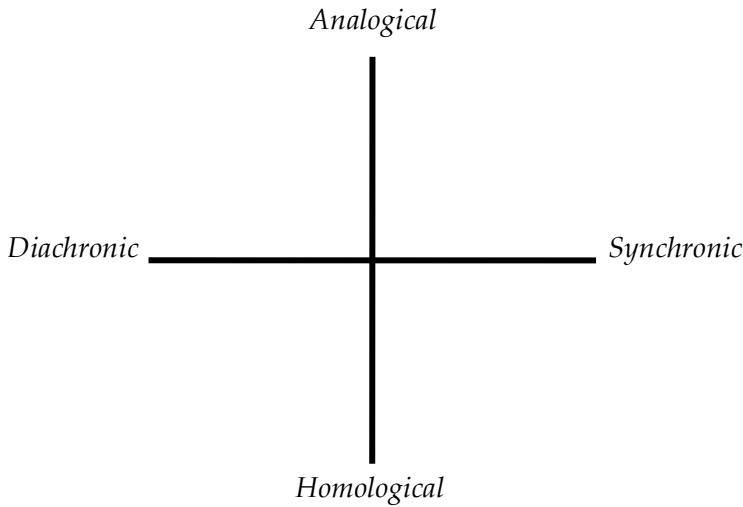
An understanding of comparative method is crucial not only for seeing the differences between historicist and typological approaches, but for analysing how comparison is *already* used within historical programmes. We may do this systematically by introducing a distinction between different types of comparison. For the present purposes I propose a fourfold typology, based on the combination of two sets of distinctions. Most importantly, I borrow the distinction between *analogical* and *homological* comparison from evolutionary biology. In biology, homological similarities between two species are due to the existence of a common ancestor (i.e., a genealogical constraint), while *analogical* similarities have emerged independently of common ancestry. Analogical similarities may nevertheless be explored in functional terms and explained as examples of “convergent evolution” – that is, adaptations to similar environments and selection pressures, yielding functionally similar designs.⁵⁴ The distinction between *synchronic* and *diachronic* comparison is borrowed from structural linguistics and is well known to scholars in the humanities.⁵⁵ While there are also other aspects to this distinction in the linguistic literature, here they will be employed simply to indicate a *temporal* dimension of comparative analyses: synchronic comparison looks at two or more phenomena *at the same time*, while diachronic analysis compares across historical periods. Thus, the analogical-homological axis picks out a *genealogical* dimension, while the synchronic-diachronic axis picks out a *temporal* dimension (see figure).⁵⁶

⁵³ There are, however, some intriguing problems with the procedure as presented. Since the term esotericism simply did not exist before the late-18th century, what would it mean to look at “variable usages” of “it” in the Renaissance? How to locate currents that “explicitly present themselves as esoteric” *before* a concept of esotericism has been established? And how to distinguish this “explicit” self-representation from the “implicitly esoteric” fields and discourses? It appears that such an inductivist procedure cannot possibly be undertaken on those terms: at the very least, one will need to generate a working definition in terms *other* than the native categories in order to pick out elements that can be compared in the process of making an inductively based generalisation.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., entries on “analogous,” “homologous,” and “convergent evolution” in R. J. Lincoln, G. A. Boxshall, and P. F. Clark, *A Dictionary of Ecology, Evolution and Systematics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁵⁵ The distinction originates with Ferdinand de Saussure. See, e.g., Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Reidlinger (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959 [1915 1st ed.]).

⁵⁶ Each of these distinctions have been imported to the study of religion before, but as far as I am aware, they have never previously been merged to create a typology. For a previous importation of the analogy-homology distinction, see J. Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 47.



Four general types of comparison result from these dimensions. Each type has a distinct logical structure. We may see this more clearly by formalising the four types of comparison as follows:

- C1) Analogical-Synchronic: $C(a, b)$ with respect to p
- C2) Analogical-Diachronic: $C(a, b)$, where b is later than a , with respect to p
- C3) Homological-Synchronic: $C(a, b)$, where $c \rightarrow a$ and $c \rightarrow b$, with respect to p
- C4) Homological-Diachronic: $C(a, b)$, where b is later than a and $a \rightarrow b$, with respect to p

The formalisation should be read as follows: Comparison (C) of two phenomena a and b , with respect to property p . In each type, p functions as *tertium comparationis*, while a and b refer to the particular phenomena that are being compared. In the homological-synchronic (C3) type, c stands for a common ancestor. The arrow sign is defined as a *genealogical implication*: $c \rightarrow a$ means that c is an ancestor of a .⁵⁷ Note that this relation differs from, and is stronger than, the purely temporal “later than”/“earlier than” relation. While the former signifies *genealogical* relation, the latter merely concerns temporal succession.

⁵⁷ This homological implication should thus *not* be confused with the operator for material conditionals or material implication in classical logic. That would have very different, teleological ramifications that are nowhere implied here.

We can find examples of all four types of comparison in scholarship on “esotericism.” Moreover, the use of different types is unevenly distributed among typological and historical programmes. Thus, historicist comparison is most often grounded in the two *homological* types, while analogical-synchronic comparison is found almost exclusively in connection with typological constructs. This indicates that, at least in terms of comparative methodologies, the analogy-homology distinction is a crucial fault line between different research programmes in the current academic discourse on esotericism. Let me illustrate this with reference to some examples.

The analogical types (C1 and C2)

The *analogical-synchronic* type (C1) could also be called “pure analogy.” It compares unrestrained by genealogy or historical succession, and thus includes the cross-cultural or “universalist” comparative projects that historicists have, traditionally, rejected as misguided. Urban’s comparison of Masons and Tantrics with regard to “esotericism” has this form. As noted before, esotericism stands in the *tertium comparationis* position and *not* as an object compared to other objects. While this typological sense happens to be the most common way to operationalise “esotericism” in C1-type comparisons, we should note that there is nothing *inherent* in that form of comparison that makes it necessary to put esotericism in the *tertium* position. That is, we could envision projects that would place a *historically* conceived “esotericism” in the position of variable *a* and compare it to a “non-esoteric” (or non-Western) phenomenon *b* with respect to some analytic construct or feature. For example, one might compare the modern Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn to the Vajradhatu movement of Tibetan Buddhism with regards to the legitimisation of authority. Such a comparison could find interesting similarities and differences concerning, for example, the routinisation of charisma in genealogically unrelated movements.

The *analogical-diachronic* type (C2) compares phenomena that are separated by historical periods, but without grounding the comparison in a genealogical link between them. This type of comparison is widely used by scholars working within an explicitly comparative history of religion (think, for example, of Jonathan Z. Smith’s comparisons of the Jonestown massacre with the Dionysian cults of the Hellenes).⁵⁸ We do also find examples of it among historians of esotericism, but for the most part, this use is implicit and not

⁵⁸ Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 102–20.

framed as part of a grand comparativist project. The main function of C2 comparison in historicist esotericism research is to shed light on historical examples by comparing them with contemporary ones, on the basis of which one might try to infer some knowledge that is not available from historical evidence alone. Thus, we find this method used quite frequently – although often implicitly – with regards to categories such as “experience.”⁵⁹ One might, for example, compare John Dee’s scryer, Edward Kelley, with contemporary psychiatric patients, with regard to exceptional experiential and behavioural categories (e.g. “visions” and “fits”).⁶⁰ Or, one may compare the reports of visual experiences in late antique theurgy or ecstatic kabbalah to those of the modern psychedelic and neoshamanic literatures, with regard to “altered states of consciousness.” This latter comparative project has recently been suggested by a new historiographical category, “entheogenic esotericism,” that would cover cases with evidence of dramatic manipulations of experience, whether through psychoactive substance use or by other means.⁶¹ These examples all have “esoteric currents” in one of the variable positions (*a*, *b*), and better-known contemporary material in another.

The homological types (C3 and C4)

While we do find some (mostly implicit) historical uses of C2, historical approaches to esotericism are grounded on the homological types of comparison. To begin with, the *homological-synchronic* type (C3) is crucial to all talk about esotericism as “related currents” classified under an “umbrella term.” Since such pragmatic definitions are extremely common, even in major authoritative works in the field such as the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, this is a significant point. By looking at how the concept of esotericism is employed within the formal structure of C3-type comparisons we can also highlight something important about the conceptualisation of esotericism and the boundaries drawn around it.

⁵⁹ On comparing experience, see the detailed methodological discussion in Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered*, 120–40. Taves develops methods for refining experiential categories (through a close dialogue with contemporary psychology and cognitive science) to do useful work as *tertium comparationis* – or what she calls “stipulated points of analogy” between the things being compared.

⁶⁰ See, e.g., James Justin Sledge, “Between Loagaeth and Cosening: Towards an Etiology of John Dee’s Spirit Diaries,” *Aries* 10, no. 1 (2010).

⁶¹ I.e. Hanegraaff, “Entheogenic Esotericism,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013).

The Anthroposophical Society and the Church of Satan are considered “related currents” within the historical class “esotericism,” *not* because they both possess some specified property *p*, but because they *share common ancestors*. Seeing that Anthroposophy leans mainly on Theosophical and neo-Theosophical currents, while modern Satanism builds on the ritual magical currents springing out of the Golden Dawn, we might have to go all the way back to Eliphas Lévi to find a clear “common ancestor.”⁶² Precisely how one draws up the genealogy is of lesser importance – the point is that a homological grounding in a shared cultural heritage *defines* the boundaries of the esoteric umbrella category.⁶³ Once heritage has been established, the currents may be compared with regard to a theoretically relevant *tertium comparationis*. In the Faivrean programme, this could be a characteristic such as “correspondences” or “living nature,” supplied by the heuristics of the programme; in more open-ended historical approaches it could be claims to higher knowledge, the role of initiation, or the functions of secrecy.

Finally, the *homological-diachronic* type of comparison (C4) has been much used in esotericism scholarship since the 1990s. It has been a central methodology for the scholarship that started questioning the static nature of Faivre’s original approach by uncovering the significant *discontinuities* in the historical development of “esoteric” subject matter. Hanegraaff’s thesis on the disenchantment of magic is about as clear an example as one can get.⁶⁴ He compared early modern magicians (Marsilio Ficino, Cornelius Agrippa) to their modern descendants (Israel Regardie, Golden Dawn), with respect to selected aspects of “theory,” “practice,” and “legitimation.” Based on this homological-diachronic approach Hanegraaff uncovered dissimilarities that seemed to make sense in terms of a theoretical framework involving the Weberian disenchantment thesis. The same comparative method was at work in Hanegraaff’s influential conceptualisation of occultism as “secularized esotericism.”⁶⁵

Considering historicist research in terms of homological comparison may also shed new light on some long-standing conceptual problems. To begin with a minor point: this typology provides a way to express the “check-list-approach” *misuse* of Faivre’s six characteristics, typically found among stu-

⁶² This is an idealised and simplified genealogy of both, but it serves to clarify the logic of comparison at work.

⁶³ Cf. the related point made by Hammer, “Esotericism in New Religious Movements,” 447–48.

⁶⁴ Hanegraaff, “How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World,” *Religion* 33 (2003).

⁶⁵ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

dents and in published research on the outskirts of the field.⁶⁶ The *correct* use⁶⁷ of this heuristic is as *tertium comparationis* for comparison between phenomena that share a common genealogy (i.e., that are grounded in homological comparison). By contrast, the common misuse results from employing the characteristics as necessary and sufficient criteria for use in *analogical* comparison, thus insinuating some cross-cultural and ahistorical *type* instead of a historically grounded “form of thought.”

A more important point concerns the open question of how far back homological relations go. What constitutes the beginnings of the “esoteric heritage”? Who is the first “esotericist”? Answers will differ significantly depending on how the historical category “esotericism” is defined. The conventional wisdom following Faivre has been that esotericism is grounded in a “referential corpus” created in the Renaissance. The rest is reception history, and can be reconstructed in homological fashion fairly easily. But many if not most historicists today *reject* the thesis of a referential corpus defining the core of historical esotericism. This presents some serious questions about the hard core of historicist programmes, for if esotericism is still to be conceived of as a historical object (and not a *typological* construct) it must have some sort of material extension.

One significant recent proposal is that the historiographic category first took shape as a *polemical* construct during the Reformation and the Enlightenment.⁶⁸ If we are to take this argument very seriously, candidates for “first esotericist” emerge a lot later than the Renaissance. Indeed, we may have to begin with the 19th century occultists. Before that time there would have been many alchemists, pietists, mystics, theurgists, hermeticists, Rosicrucians, kabbalists, Masons, astrologers, and ceremonial magicians – but no *esotericists*. Crucially, an aspect of cultural stigma stemming from a newly gained status

⁶⁶ Plucking a few random recent examples that tend in this direction, we find Faivre’s characteristics invoked to show “esoteric dimensions” of the Russian cosmist Nikolai Fedorov (despite the fact that Fedorov wanted nothing to do with the historically esoteric currents of his day); to establish relations with Chinese “alternative” healing practices; and to demonstrate that the contemporary Otherkin movement does *not* fit in the category of “esotericism” because it does not share all the characteristics. See George M. Young, *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 76–77; Ruth Barcan and Jay Johnston, “The Haunting: Cultural Studies, Religion and Alternative Therapies,” *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 7 (2005): 70–71; Danielle Kirby, “From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text: A Study of the Role of the Text in the Otherkin Community,” in *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age*, ed. Christopher Deacy and Elisabeth Arweck (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 143.

⁶⁷ I.e., one that is theoretically well conceived and follows the logic of Faivre’s strategy of definition.

⁶⁸ I.e., Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

of “rejected knowledge” was now bringing these currents together, but this status and stigma would not necessarily have been present in earlier periods. This puts a new limit on the application of homological-type comparison in historical research: while we can continue to compare “related currents” *after* the Enlightenment, homology is insufficient as a rationale for selecting and comparing material under this umbrella in the early-modern period and before. We are, perhaps, left with the possibility of applying a *retrospective* homological strategy (i.e., studying currents, texts, and persons that have *later* been reified as belonging to “esotericism”), but this is highly problematic. It is essentially a form of presentism that selects material of the past as relevant for study only insofar as it has later been constructed as “pointing towards” certain contemporary (or in this case, “modern”) phenomena. Ironically, it creates and reifies a canon in the same way as the “Whiggish” history of science created a canon of “scientists.” If we accept this new research programme, and we wish to avoid presentism (call it a negative heuristic), we are left with a new place for comparison in the programme’s positive heuristic. To go backwards in history, one cannot avoid the analogical types. This leaves the door wide open for other applications of analogical comparison as well.

On Wings and Bats: A Concluding Lesson from Evolutionary Biology

The above classification has revealed an uneven distribution of analogy-type and homology-type comparisons among historical and typological programmes in the study of esotericism. As I hope to have shown, there are no methodological reasons why this should be so – and the *strategic* reasons that have so far caused the selection are rapidly corroding as well. Historicists can perfectly well include analogy-type comparison as part of their methodological toolkit without threatening the homological basis of their research. I will suggest that an *expansion* of the scope of comparative research in the direction of the analogical types is crucial for meeting several of the big challenges that historicist programmes of esotericism research are currently facing. The West/non-West issue is an obvious case in point, but analogical comparisons that emphasise *explanation* are also crucial for shedding new light on the controversial question of definition, delimitation and origins. In these concluding paragraphs I will attempt to demonstrate this point by looking to the discipline from which the analogy-homology distinction has been borrowed in the first place: evolutionary biology.

The study of traits that are similar because they have their origin in common ancestors (homology) is as essential to evolutionary biology as it has been to the study of esotericism. This is, after all, how the phenotypical “tree of life” is constructed: the similarity between the arms and legs of *homo sapiens* and the four legs of reptiles is grounded in our common ancestors among the *tetrapodia*. The similarities between the brains of *homo sapiens* and those of chimpanzees and gorillas are grounded in a much closer common ancestor among the *Homininae*. However important this study of ancestry is, our understanding of evolution would be woefully incomplete if this was the end of the story. The study of *analogically* similar features is equally important for understanding the generation of nature’s “endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful.”⁶⁹ Not all similarities between organisms are due to a common ancestor; there is also “convergent evolution,” the emergence of similar traits through separate genealogical lines. These similarities are studied by analogical comparison, and the reasons for their similarity has to be sought not in genealogy, but in shared environmental constraints and selective pressures.

Consider the study of bats. Bats are fascinating creatures: with the possible exception of the Pegasus, they are the only mammalian species endowed with wings and capable of flying. Besides pure fascination, there are (at least) two different scientific reasons why a biologist would study the wings of bats. One would be to trace the evolution of wings in bats from their earlier mammalian ancestors, thus delineating the origins of the order of *chiroptera* from the class of mammals. This would make one a chiropterologist (a specialist of bats) or perhaps a mammalogist (a specialist of mammals), and the wings would be studied synchronically and diachronically as an important evolutionary trait of these particular beasts. However, one might also research the wings of bats as a generalist in evolutionary biology interested in convergent evolution. Wings are an example of a trait that has emerged more than once in evolutionary history: birds and bats, despite their similarity, do *not* share a common ancestor with wings. Why and how this happens is an important *explanandum* of evolutionary theory, and requires looking at and comparing all species where wings have independently evolved (including the flying insects).

In other words, we must distinguish between the *homological* study of winged mammals and the *analogical* study of wings as a feature of convergent evolution. However, *distinguishing* does not mean *separating* approaches. If a chiropterologist claimed the evolution of wings among the mammalia as the *only* proper way to study wings, that would not only enrage ornithologists

⁶⁹ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1909 [1859]), 529.

around the world, but also create an unreasonable impediment to the study of evolution in general. Moreover, a chiropterologist who is interested in the evolution of wings among mammals cannot afford to ignore the evidence gathered in the study of wings among other classes.

The parallel should be clear enough. If (historical) esotericism is a bat, the traits associated with it (secrecy, a form of thought, gnosis) are its wings. The historicist who discourages cross-cultural comparison and rejects looking at “esoteric features” beyond the West is doing the same thing as the chiropterologist who insists on only studying bats in relation to other mammals. That species of other classes, such as the *aves* (birds) have very similar traits is not important; they do not share a genealogical heritage, and so their study has nothing to do with the study of bats. The researcher taking this strategy may go quite far charting out the genealogy of bats by studying the fossil record and the variation among contemporary species. However, she will very likely fall short of making any sense of *why* certain traits emerged rather than others, at the times and places they did. She will remain unable to explain why some mammals started developing wings in the first place. Only a synchronic study of how certain traits emerge under certain environmental constraints and selection pressures could provide sufficient grounds for such explanations. Put shortly: the general study of wings is relevant for the particular study of bats.

The same point goes for historical esotericism and its related properties. Looking beyond the particular to see how similar “forms of thought,” secretive organisations, or claims to higher knowledge play out in contexts beyond the West (outside the class of mammalia, so to speak) can generate new insights into the general dynamics at play. It may even help uncover selection pressures and environmental factors that can help explaining the emergence of esotericism in “the West,” and formulate more precise and theoretically refined definitions. To give just a few examples: what can the sociology of secrecy tell us about the dynamic of esoteric movements basing themselves on secretive structures? What can the cognitive science of religion tell us about the generation and transmission of “forms of thought” or “cognitive styles” considered unique to Western esotericism? Is there a dynamic of “convergent cultural evolution” that sheds light on the formation of “esoteric-like” groups, movements, discourses, experiences, or idea-structures? Questions like these, and the analogy-type comparative methods required to explore them, have great potential to contribute fresh perspectives to fundamental debates in esotericism research.

Finally, it is worth noting that research in evolutionary biology frequently leads to classificatory changes in the tree of life. It was, for example, only in the 1980s that the chimpanzees and the gorillas joined our own species as

living members of the family *Homininae*.⁷⁰ Such drastic revisions to classification, rethinking the genealogy of various species, can only happen through the combination of analogical and homological comparison. This possibility might inspire historicists to look for surprising discoveries beyond the borders that have been constructed around the field. It is time to liberate comparison from pre-established genealogical relations, and explore the relation of known “esoteric” forms to the “endless forms” of human interaction and cultural production at large.

Bibliography

- Asprem, Egil. *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900 – 1939*. Leiden: Brill, 2014.
- Asprem, Egil and Kennet Granholm. “Constructing Esotericisms: Sociological, Historical, and Critical Approaches to the Invention of Tradition.” In *Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, 25–48. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013.
- Barcan, Ruth and Jay Johnston. “The Haunting: Cultural Studies, Religion and Alternative Therapies.” *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 7 (2005): 63–81.
- Bogdan, Henrik. *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007.
- Bogdan, Henrik and Gordan Djurdjevic, eds. *Occultism in a Global Perspective*. Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013.
- Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1909 (1st ed. 1859).
- Dyrendal, Asbjørn and Egil Asprem. “Sorte brorskap, mørke korrespondanser og frelsende avsløringer: Konspirasjonsteori som esoterisk diskurs,” *Din: Tidsskrift for religion og kultur* 2 (2013): 32–61.
- Faivre, Antoine. *Access to Western Esotericism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- . “Kocku von Stuckrad et la notion d’ésotérisme.” *Aries* 6, no. 2 (2006): 205–15.
- . “Borrowings and Misreading: Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Mesmeric’ Tales and the Strange Case of their Reception.” *Aries* 7, no. 1 (2007): 21–62.
- Gieryn, Thomas. “Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists.” *American Sociological Review* 48 (1983): 781–95.
- . *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999.
- Gladigow, Burkhard. “Europäische Religionsgeschichte.” In *Lokale Religionsgeschichte*, edited by Hans Kippenberg and B. Luchesi, 21–42. Marburg: Diagonal, 1995.
- Goodman, M. et al. “Primate evolution at the DNA level and a classification of hominoids.” *Journal of Molecular Evolution* 30, no. 3 (1990): 260–66.
- Granholm, Kennet. “Locating the West: Problematizing the *Western* in Western Esotericism and Occultism.” In *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, edited by Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic, 17–36. Durham: Acumen Publishing, 2013.

⁷⁰ Goodman et al., “Primate evolution at the DNA level and a classification of hominoids,” *Journal of Molecular Evolution* 30, no. 3 (1990).

- . “Esoteric Currents as Discursive Complexes.” *Religion* 43, no. 1 (2013): 46–69.
- Gupta, Anil. “Definitions.” In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2008). Online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/definitions/> (accessed August 13, 2013).
- Hakl, Hans Thomas. *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2012.
- Hammer, Olav. “Esotericism in New Religious Movements.” In *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements*, edited by James R. Lewis, 445–65. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Hammer, Olav and Asbjørn Dyrendal. “Hvad kan man vide om religion? En kritik af den metodologiske agnosticisme.” In *At kortlægge religion: Grundlagsdiskussioner i religionsforskningen*, edited by Torben Hammersholt and Caroline Schaffalitsky, 117–36. Højbjerg: Forlaget Univers, 2011.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J. “Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism.” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7, no. 2 (1995): 99–129.
- . *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Leiden: Brill, 1996.
- . “Romanticism and the Esoteric Connection.” In *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, edited by Roelof van den Broek and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 237–68. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- . “Some Remarks on the Study of Western Esotericism.” *Esoterica* I (1999): 3–19.
- . “Beyond the Yates Paradigm: The Study of Western Esotericism between Counterculture and New Complexity.” *Aries* 1, no. 1 (2001): 5–37.
- . “How Magic Survived the Disenchantment of the World.” *Religion* 33 (2003): 357–88.
- . “Forbidden Knowledge: Anti-Esoteric Polemics and Academic Research.” *Aries* 5, no. 2 (2005): 225–54.
- . “The Trouble with Images: Anti-Image Polemics and Western Esotericism.” In *Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others*, edited by Olav Hammer and Kocku von Stuckrad, 107–36. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- . “The Birth of Esotericism from the Spirit of Protestantism.” *Aries* 10, no. 2 (2010): 197–216.
- . *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- . “Entheogenic Esotericism.” In *Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, 392–409. Sheffield: Equinox, 2013.
- . *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- . “Textbooks and Introductions to Western Esotericism.” *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 178–200.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter, with Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek, and Jean-Pierre Brach (eds.). *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- Indinopulos, Thomas and Edward A. Yonan, eds. *Religion and Reductionism: Essays on Eliade, Segal, and the Challenge of the Social Sciences for the Study of Religion*. Leiden: Brill, 1994.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sindig. *The Study of Religion in a New Key: Theoretical and Methodological Soundings in the Comparative and General Study of Religion*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2003.
- Kippenberg, Hans, Jörg Rüpke and Kocku von Stuckrad, eds. *Europäische Religionsgeschichte: Ein mehrfacher Pluralismus*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2009.
- Kirby, Danielle. “From Pulp Fiction to Revealed Text: A Study of the Role of the Text in the Otherkin Community.” In *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age*, edited by Christopher Deacy and Elisabeth Arweck, 114–54. Farnham: Ashgate, 2009.

- Lakatos, Imre. "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes." In *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, edited by Alan Musgrave and Imre Lakatos, 91–197. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- . "History of Science and Its Rational Reconstructions." *Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association* (1970): 91–136.
- Lincoln, R. J., G. A. Boxshall, and P. F. Clark. *A Dictionary of Ecology, Evolution and Systematics*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Neugebauer-Wölk, Monika. "Esoterik und Christentum vor 1800: Prolegomena zu einer Bestimmung ihrer Differenz." *Aries* 3, no. 2 (2003): 127–65.
- . "Der Esoteriker und die Esoterik: Wie das Esoterische im 18. Jahrhundert zum Begriff wird und seinen Weg in die Moderne findet." *Aries* 10, no. 2 (2010): 217–31.
- Oldmeadow, Harry. "The Quest for 'Secret Tibet.'" *Esoterica* 3 (2001): 48–107.
- Otto, Bernd-Christian. "Discourse Theory Trumps Discourse Theory: Wouter Hanegraaff's *Esotericism and the Academy*." *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 231–40.
- Paden, William E. "Elements of a New Comparativism." *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 8, no. 1 (1996): 5–14.
- Pasi, Marco. "Il problema della definizione dell'esoterismo: analisi critica e proposte per la ricerca futura." In *Forme e correnti dell'esoterismo occidentale*, edited by Alessandro Grossato, 205–28. Milan: Medusa, 2008.
- . "Oriental Kabbalah and the Parting of East and West in the Early Theosophical Society." In *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, edited by Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, and Kocku von Stuckrad, 151–66. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Edited by Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Reidlinger. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959 (1915 1st ed.).
- Segal, Robert A. "In Defense of the Comparative Method." *Numen* 48, no. 3 (2001): 339–73.
- Senholt Christensen, Jacob. "Radical Politics and Political Esotericism: The Adaptation of Esoteric Discourse within the Radical Right." In *Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, 244–64. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013.
- Simmel, Georg. "The Sociology of Secrecy and Secret Societies." *American Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 4 (1906): 441–98.
- Sledge, James Justin. "Between Loagaeth and Cosening: Towards an Etiology of John Dee's Spirit Diaries." *Aries* 10, no. 1 (2010): 1–35.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- . *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990.
- Stuckrad, Kocku von. "Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation." *Religion* 35 (2005): 78–97.
- . *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*. London: Equinox Publishing, 2005.
- . "Esoteric Discourse and the European History of Religion: In Search of a New Interpretational Framework." In *Western Esotericism: Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Western Esotericism, held at Åbo, Finland on 15–17 August 2007*, edited by Tore Ahlbäck, 217–36. Åbo: Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History, 2008.
- . *Locations of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Taves, Ann. *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building-Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009.

- Urban, Hugh. “Elitism and Esotericism: Strategies of Secrecy and Power in South Indian Tantra and French Freemasonry.” *Numen* 44, no. 1 (1997): 1–38.
- . “The Torment of Secrecy: Ethical and Epistemological Problems in the Study of Esoteric Traditions.” *History of Religions* 37, no. 3 (1998): 209–48.
- . “Religion and Secrecy in the Bush Administration: The Gentleman, the Prince, and the Simulacrum,” *Esoterica* 7 (2005): 1–38.
- . “The Secrets of Scientology: Concealment, Information Control, and Esoteric Knowledge in the World’s Most Controversial New Religion.” In *Contemporary Esotericism*, edited by Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, 181–99. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2013.
- Versluis, Arthur. “What Is Esoteric? Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism.” *Esoterica* 4 (2002): 1–15.
- . *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esoteric Traditions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.
- Wasserstrom, Steven. *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Young, George M. *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.