

10 Years of Correspondences; or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Esotericism Studies

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This issue of *Correspondences* marks the journal's tenth year. We'd be lying if we said that we were certain we'd make it this far. Jimmy Elwing and Aren Roukema founded the journal in 2012 as a disruption to traditional fee-based publication models, which prevent widespread dissemination of esoteric research, and as a more accessible, global forum for researchers of various backgrounds. As Masters students at the University of Amsterdam, Elwing and Roukema were carried less by knowledge and experience than by hope, naive bravado, and an excellent editorial board. Many people joined us in official or unofficial capacities along the way, people like Egil Aspren, who founded and grew our Reviews section, Peter Forshaw and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, who fostered our success with advice and advocacy, and our once-and-former co-editors Allan Kilner-Johnson, Manon Hedenborg White, and Robyn Jakeman. Fifteen issues and hundreds of long evenings later, here we are, penning the 10th-anniversary editorial for a journal that has established itself, we like to think, as a uniquely valuable forum for accessible and transformative research of esoteric phenomena, and of the concept of esotericism itself.

The past ten years have also been marked, however, by doubt. Our editorial team has always been unapologetically secular and progressive (both weighted terms, we agree). As such, we haven't always been sure that we want to be involved with esotericism studies as the field struggles with problems like purported connections to fascism; research that advocates for particular religious movements (some of them socially harmful); and a blindness to the reproduction of researcher identities in research, a particularly pressing issue for white male scholars. More existentially, we haven't always been sure about the need for a(nother) journal for esotericism studies, or, indeed, the field of esotericism or the concept itself. Do we require the category of esotericism in order to study the phenomena we have gathered in and around it? Do we need the network of scholars, the canon of figures, groups, and currents they have categorized as esotericism, and the methods and theories they have advocated for esotericism studies?

The short answer is evidently no. Scholars from Dorothy Scarborough to Gershom Scholem to Edward Tiryakian were productively scouring the archives long before a field of “Western esotericism”—a more geo-culturally constrained version of what we call “esotericism studies”—clarified itself in the important historicist work of scholars like Antoine Faivre and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, and established itself in institutions like ESSWE and ASE, journals like *Aries* and *Correspondences*, and book series like *Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism* and Brill's *Aries Book Series*. Even today, after three decades of esotericism studies, leading scholars around the world research phenomena from magic to psychical research without reference to these networks or the concepts, knowledge, or approaches they have produced.

Even if scholars *are* aware of esotericism studies and its many important publications, provocations, and interventions, they may not refer to these priors and may also consciously avoid using the concept. A poignant example is a recent roundtable on *The Immanent Frame*, entitled “Out There: Perspectives on the Study of Black Metaphysical Religion.” Contributions discuss, among other things, the use of crystal balls and dream books, the appeal of Rosicrucian

texts for Black religious leaders, and other “esoteric, arcane and heterodox” ideas frequently “trivialized as fringe” or “repudiated as politically suspect.”¹ Although they clearly refer to the term esoteric, co-curators Matthew Harris and J.T. Roane opt for “Black metaphysical religion” as a unifying rubric. Why did they choose this term and not, for instance, “Africana esotericism,” which was introduced in the ground-breaking 2015 collection *Esotericism and African American Religious Experience* and which Harris and Roane explicitly identify as a precursor?² We can only guess, but part of the reason may lie in an awareness that, as Alexis Wells-Oghoghomeh phrases it in her contribution, “naming [is] a way of remapping and locating people within cultural genealogies and temporalities in historical time and academic methodologies.”³ The editors and some contributors of *Esotericism and African American Religious Experience* explicitly and critically position Africana esotericism in relation to “Western” esotericism, thus including it in Africana esotericism’s web of associations.⁴ Conversely, “Black metaphysical religion” may have been attractive because of the different conceptual and methodological associations this allows, which imply perhaps lighter epistemological baggage and more intellectual freedom. That said, for esotericism studies researchers, this forum is of immense importance: it forces us to rethink the canon and the extent to which it has been created by and limited to white people.

A second possibility, though Harris and Roane do not mention it, is that the various attempts to construct, maintain, and demarcate a united research subject—“esotericism”—frequently reflect post-Enlightenment epistemological power structures. Of course, classification, categorization, and boundary work involve, by necessity, processes of distinction and exclusion. Yet, in an effort

1. Harris and Roane, “Out There: Perspectives on the Study of Black Metaphysical Religion.”

2. Edited by Stephen Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory, and Hugh R. Page Jr.

3. Wells-Oghoghomeh, “Possibilities of a Black Religious Multiverse.”

4. Which is not to say, of course, that Africana esotericism is derivative of Western esotericism. As editors Finley and Page emphasize in an article co-written with Biko Gray, “Africana esotericism is distinct in origin and social phenomenology from Western esotericism” (“Africana Esotericism,” 164).

to construct something we call “esotericism” and use it as a rubric to analyze a particular set of phenomena, scholars have sometimes drawn boundaries that seem based on artificial if not ideologically informed distinctions. Indeed, as a newer field, and one that transcends any particular method, theory, or discipline, the boundaries of esotericism studies are largely determined (mostly unconsciously) by the research subjects chosen by a relatively small number of active researchers. It is unclear, for example, why Theosophy is a central research area for esotericism studies while UFO culture is not, or why psychedelics are of such interest while occult medicine continues to receive more attention from medical humanities scholars, Victorianists, and early modernists.⁵ The most likely answer is that scholars working in and around esotericism studies simply haven’t shown as much attention to UFOs and occult medicine, at least so far. At this time, then, esotericism studies might better be seen as a network or ongoing process of canonisation than a research field identifiable by long-established approaches, indispensable methodologies, or a communally agreed set of research subjects or knowledges. It is thus unclear whether (Western) esotericism needs to exist at all.

Canonization based on individual researcher activity is, of course, native to any field, but in the case of esotericism studies the field’s boundary work has problematically reflected the priorities and ideologies of its largely Euro-American base. Indeed, the field of study in which this journal was founded and to which it remains closely networked, has frequently defined itself as focused specifically on magical and occult practices, concepts, figures, and experiences in Western culture, where they are perceived to have acquired particular characteristics which demarcate them from similar phenomena around the world. Thus, in this view, Theosophy is an esoteric current because it is perceived as Western, while the Hindu and Buddhist ideas that shape and inform it are not. Spiritualism is relevant to the field, but forms of spirit possession and communication elaborated long before the Fox sisters and far away from Hydesville are not.

5. These are not, of course, exclusive.

However, “the West” is an unclear referent with shaky and shifting boundaries and is unsuitable as a geo-cultural demarcator. As Roukema and Kilner-Johnson argued in a past editorial where they explained *Correspondences*’ decision to “drop the Western” from our title, the term only acquires even the illusion of consistent meaning as an orientalist construct, an essentialized polarity in a West–East binary used to consolidate geo-political and global economic power imbalances.⁶ As such, “Western esotericism” is a useful term, as Kennet Granholm argues, to describe an object of study—Western essentialism in esoteric currents—but not an academic field.⁷ Indeed, it is impossible to locate esotericism solely in Europe and/or North America.⁸ As Julian Strube identifies in his contribution to *New Approaches in the Study of Esotericism* (2021), esotericism is a “globally entangled subject”⁹—both Spiritualism and Theosophy, to return to the examples mentioned above, emerged in a global religious context. Appropriately, scholars are increasingly expanding the regional contexts of their research: Japan has long been on the radar, but scholars are also looking to Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America.¹⁰ But there is perhaps no more pressing reason to move away from “Western esotericism” (without abandoning the recognition that there are specifically Western *instances* of esotericism) than the still improperly acknowledged relationship between “Western” and whiteness.¹¹ This has resulted in a focus on “white” movements, ideas, and peoples without

6. Roukema and Kilner-Johnson, “Time to Drop the Western,” 113.

7. Granholm, “Locating the West,” 17.

8. This “globalization” of esotericism has been a leading theme in *Correspondences*. See, among others, Hanegraaff, “Globalization of Esotericism”; Aspren, “Beyond the West”; Saif, “What is Islamic Esotericism?” 3–11.

9. Strube, “Towards the Study of Esotericism without the ‘Western,’” 45–66.

10. E.g. Rodríguez Cascante and Martínez Esquivel (eds.) *Subjetividades esotéricas: Estudios sobre masonería, espiritismo y teosofía en Costa Rica*, Podolecka and Nthoi, “Esotericism in Botswana”; Essays in Maltese and Strube (eds), *Special Issue: Global Religious History*; Doostdar, *Iranian Metaphysicals*.

11. On this relationship, see Bakker, “Hidden Presence”; Finley, Guillory, and Page, “Africana Esoteric Studies”; Finley, Gray, and Page, “Africana Esoteric Studies and Western Intellectual Hegemony.”

a pressingly necessary investigation of the nature of this whiteness and its exertions of epistemological and social power.¹²

Previous efforts to demarcate “esotericism” reflected other post-Enlightenment concerns as well. At the risk of oversimplification, we will briefly mention three of these—with the caveat that much recent research in the field already complicates, problematizes, or nuances such concerns. Firstly, and no doubt in part influenced by understandable fears that other scholars would deem all things esoteric absurd and objectionable, the field has often embraced the idea that good scholarship must be neutral and, to the degree that this is possible, “objective” (although this does not necessarily entail a naive objectivity¹³). However, scholars in feminist, Black, and postcolonial studies have shown that the “objective” standpoint of past research has implicitly reproduced the biases,

12. In “Hidden Presence,” Bakker argues that one—and indeed the only—reason to “keep” Western rather than “drop” it is to facilitate precisely this investigation. Notably, change is already afoot: during the upcoming 2023 ESSWE conference, at least three panels will be explicitly dedicated to investigating the relationship between whiteness and esotericism.

13. A recent article that commemorates Antoine Faivre, one of the founding figures of the field, is illustrative here. Wouter Hanegraaff, Jean-Pierre Brach, and Marco Pasi, also impactful leading scholars in esotericism studies, note that although Faivre’s scholarship between 1969 and 1979 was paralleled by a religionist activism that was anything but neutral and objective, he later began to develop a “new appreciation for his native French traditions of secular scholarship and religious neutrality known as *laïcité*” and to insist on a strict historical perspective. By “the second half of the 1990s,” they conclude, “Faivre had fully embraced the ‘empirical-historical turn’ that *made it possible for Western esotericism to get accepted and integrated in the academy as a normal field of scholarly research*” (“Antoine Faivre,” 192–93, our emphasis). The term “empirical-historical” is Hanegraaff’s. He first outlined this approach in an article from 1995, as an alternative to both “positivist-reductionist” and “religionist” enterprises. Hanegraaff makes clear here that his approach should not be mistaken for a “naive belief in pure objectivity” (“Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism,” 107). That said, his statement, in 2019, that we should “listen” to our sources rather than “impose” our own ideas on them (which he grounds in that same empirical-historical approach) does suggest room for more extensive reflection on the ways in which social location and individual standpoint shape research (Hanegraaff, “Rejected Knowledge,” 151). To be clear, we do not mean to argue that Hanegraaff is unique in this regard; rather, that all scholars in the field, including ourselves, can benefit from more consistent evaluation of the observer effect in our data gathering and analysis.

concerns, and perspectives of researchers, usually white and male.¹⁴ We can see this at work in the canonization process we described above: what is and is not considered esotericism is not only the result of arbitrary research interests, but also reflects ideological, social, cultural, or political presuppositions. Recognizing that objectivity is both impossible to achieve and an undesirable methodological starting point has other implications as well. It should inform, for instance, how we approach archives of esotericism. We know now that archives are constructed rather than found, which implies that archival processes and archival gaps are embedded in political, ideological, social, cultural, economic, and other structures.¹⁵ We know now, too, that researchers “influence” (or even help to construct) the field, which is to say that it matters with what questions, concerns, and ideas we initially approach our sources—and that we are aware of potential blind spots and biases.

Secondly, following conventions in religious studies, history, and anthropology, the field has constructed a rather strict binary between “insider” and “outsider,” shaped by the idea that good scholarship must not only be neutral and objective, but also analytical, disinterested, and detached.¹⁶ This binary is, again, fueled in part by fears that scholars outside of esotericism

14. Perhaps the most famous example of this argument can be found in Donna Haraway’s 1988 article “Situated Knowledges.” See also Sandra Harding’s plea for a “strong objectivity,” which wrestles objectivity loose from neutrality.

15. This argument is not new, of course. For two recent ground-breaking approaches to the problem of the archive (which engage with radically different subject matter), see Jenny Rice’s *Amfuf Archives* (on the archives of conspiratorial thinking) and Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (on the archives of Black social life). Bakker (“Hidden Presence,” 483n6) and, in particular, Finley, Gray, and Page (“Africana Esotericism,” 173–76) think about the problem of the archive in the context of Africana esotericism.

16. See, for instance, Kim Knott, “Insider/Outsider Perspectives.” See, for a generative analysis of how and why religious studies (in particular in the US) came to privilege studies that are critical, removed, analytical and objective also Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 176–204.

studies deem what we do illegitimate.¹⁷ Even as today’s scholarship continues to benefit from the descriptive research of “insiders” like Spiritualist Emma Hardinge Britten, occult mystic Arthur Edward Waite, and occultist Francis King, it fulminates a simultaneous separation narrative which rejects the critical viability of these sources. The field’s central self-sustaining narrative—the idea that esotericism is rejected knowledge—is thus recapitulated within the field itself. Even as esotericism studies scholars envision ourselves to be restoring the social, cultural, and intellectual centrality of epistemologically marginalized research subjects, we perpetuate said marginalization in order to validate our own research.

Some of the instincts that encourage insider/outsider dichotomies are valid—there is reason to remain cautious when scholarship doubles as religious advocacy. Yet, within the field of religious studies the binary is subject to much criticism.¹⁸ The study of esotericism is not reducible to religious studies, but these debates are very relevant to thinking about insider/outsider dichotomies in the field. One point of critique pertinent here is that scholars have observed that these dichotomies have been used to fuel racialized and gendered ideas about knowledge production. In her article “Confounded Identities,” Aisha Beliso-De Jesús demonstrates that Black and other female scholars of colour are, for instance, frequently deemed “practitioners” of whatever movement they are studying and forced to defend their theoretical and methodological frameworks as “proper” scholarship.¹⁹ And Christopher Driscoll and Monica

17. To illustrate: although Hanegraaff, Brach and Pasi note that Antoine Faivre felt most comfortable in a “middle ground” and argue that his life and work illustrate that the relation between insider and outsider perspectives is “far from simple and straightforward,” they also show that Faivre, towards the end of the 1980s and in the context of the strict “policing” of the boundary between belief and scholarship that fueled European and American academic networks, would become much more “discreet about his personal spiritual perspectives,” in public and private. Tellingly, they argue that this shift of emphasis would lay “the groundwork for his eventual rise to prominence as the leading historian of Western esotericism”; “Antoine Faivre,” 168–69, 191.

18. See, for instance, the recent volume *The Insider/Outsider Debate: New Perspectives on the Study of Religion*, edited by George Chryssides and Stephen Craig.

19. Beliso-De Jesús, “Confounded Identities,” 320.

Miller observe that whereas the overwhelming majority of religious studies scholarship deemed “critical” is written by white authors, scholars of colour are often construed as “confessional” or “phenomenological.”²⁰ Perceived racial identities thus seem to shape how one’s scholarship is categorized. Driscoll and Miller provide an explanation for this when they argue that the tradition of “manufacturing distance” in the study of religion has “roots dating back at least to colonial contact and to the safeguarding of *particular*, historically authorized, comparatively validated, ‘white’ European identity.”²¹ We can debate whether the very fact that a particular scholarly approach or methodology is ultimately grounded in a colonialist mindset is reason to completely abandon it (here, we must take into account that the overwhelming majority of religious studies has been shaped by colonial ways of thinking²²). Its continued implications are, however, sufficient reason to thoroughly problematize and question it.

Consider, finally, the widespread commitment to methodological agnosticism, which, although it is designed to *not* speak out about the ontological reality of certain phenomena, still runs the risk of explaining away things that are considered to lay outside of the realm of possibility and indeed visibility, as something inherently or essentially social, political, or cultural.²³ As Hussein Agrama, Greg Bishop and David Metcalfe note in the review essay of D.W. Pasulka’s *American Cosmic* in this issue of *Correspondences*, while such potentially social reductionist approaches may be legitimate and necessary at times, “what was initially an analytical strategy comes to be (mis)taken for a fundamental

20. Driscoll and Miller, *Method as Identity*, 21, 55.

21. Driscoll and Miller, *Method as Identity*, xxiii–xxiv. Emphasis in original.

22. This is why Malory Nye, in “Decolonizing the Study of Religion,” observes that “if the study of religion was effectively decolonized, then possibly there would be very little left standing of the current discipline” (2).

23. See, for a debate on different methodological approaches in religious studies—naturalism, supernaturalism, agnosticism—the contributions to a recent special in *NTT: Journal for the Study of Religion* on the future of the study of religion in the Netherlands. Access through: <https://www.aup-online.com/content/journals/25426583/74/3>.

reality.”²⁴ In so doing, we may risk a certain blindness to the potentially transformative nature of the alternative forms of worlding and meaning-making that are often our object of study.

Esotericism studies, like most fields, continues to wrestle with the question of how to value the knowledge and knowledge structures developed in colonialist and patriarchal contexts. Certainly there are many babies that should not be thrown out with the bathwater, but the field is also a long way from sufficiently grappling with newer ways of knowing and researching which acknowledge the impossibility of distance and objectivity and emphasize community and subjectivity. Though our objects of study are often social radicals and intellectual reformers, the bulk of esotericism research produced thus far paradoxically lacks a comparatively critical approach to the power dynamics and researcher identities that form and defend knowledge.

And yet.

And yet, despite these problems, we continue to believe in esotericism studies. We do not use “believe” lightly; it indicates, for us, that while there may not be existential need for the field, there are very good reasons to remain committed to what it has to offer. For one, as hinted at above, understandings of esotericism and academic approaches to it are rapidly, thoroughly changing. Precisely because there is a “field,” however defined, it enables the explicit and visible debates—around the Westernness of esotericism for instance—that make this change possible. Secondly, “esotericism” is not just constructed, maintained, and demarcated by a policing of boundaries—or by academic studies of boundary making. It also offers a unique forum in which to think about processes of marginality, heterodoxy, heresy, and otherness. Critics of the “rejected knowledge” model that has dominated esotericism studies in the work of Tiryakian, James Webb, and Hanegraaff (among others) have

24. Agrama, Bishop, and Metcalfe, “Knowing Others,” 387.

rightly warned against its over-extension,²⁵ and it is certainly not the case that a phenomenon can be identified as esoteric simply because it is, or has been, rejected by either mainstream Christian or post-Enlightenment rational discourses in the West. A focus on marginality obscures the ubiquitous presence of esotericisms: to borrow a particularly apt phrase of Harris and Roane, “the fringe is full.”²⁶ However, there can be no doubt that esoteric traditions often (though certainly not always) share a certain incompatibility with more “mainstream” intellectual and religious assumptions. This incompatibility is sometimes desired or constructed.²⁷ A marginalised, counter-cultural identity is not always troubling to adherents, and may even be attractive; in some forums there is a purposeful reiteration of rejection mechanisms that are no longer widely operative, as in popular culture, where the reproduction of marginality is necessary to achieve creative ends from exoticism to horror. The same can be said of academia, where the rediscovery of marginalised or forgotten knowledge remains a cynically successful strategy to justify grant applications and edited volumes.²⁸ Nevertheless, polemical rejections of knowledge and practice based on accusations of superstition, social danger, fraud, and onto-epistemological heresy *do* remain operative around the world. Whether desired or projected, marginality is unique to different ideas and currents in different contexts, and it comes about in very different ways that range from polemic to obsolescence.²⁹ Yet, from left-hand path magic to crystal healing there is a heterodoxy deserving of research and analysis, even if it is not as useful in terms of a field-defining characteristic or theoretical principle.

25. See, e.g., Asprem, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered”; Stausberg, “What Is *It* all about?”; Pasi, “Problems of Rejected Knowledge,” 210.

26. Harris and Roane, “Out There.”

27. Asprem, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered,” 140–41.

28. For a discussion of this phenomenon as it pertains to esotericism and literary studies see Ferguson, “Beyond Belief,” 3–7.

29. See Barkun, *Culture of Conspiracy*, 26–29; Asprem, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered,” 138.

Understanding epistemological and cultural processes of rejection through an esoteric lens can also contribute to analysis of the marginalization of ideas, individuals, and groups that has been so instrumental to Western aggrandizement.³⁰ Much caution is needed here. The individuals and groups frequently canonized as esoteric have not uniformly experienced marginalization and rejection, if at all. As Egil Asprem observes, this severely problematizes any comparison between the “rejected” knowledge and practices of the privileged esotericist (often white and male) and those of the subaltern within and without Euro-American societies.³¹ Even more problematically, esotericists have often participated in colonization and empire, have perpetuated or relied upon male dominance, and have not been consistently troubled by economic or class-based marginalization. Yet, the focus in esotericism studies on marginalization, the relationships between insider and outsider, and similar forms of othering, offers unique perspectives from which to question some of the principles that have upheld white Euro-American self-perceptions of intellectual, cultural, or even biological supremacy since the Enlightenment. What, for example, is the relationship between the heterodoxy applied to esoteric currents and colonial-era scientific labelling of subaltern thought as evolutionarily “primitive,” “barbarian,” or “savage”?³² We agree with Strube and Asprem that esotericism studies still has much to decolonize and much to gain from post-colonial approaches like global religious history and critical race theory.³³ It may also have irreplaceable methods, theories, and discoveries to offer these and other contemporary projects.

30. Hanegraaff, “Rejected Knowledge,” 149.

31. Asprem, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered,” 140.

32. For a famous example, see Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 410. In *The Myth of Disenchantment*, Jason Josephson-Storm begins to formulate an answer to this question when he writes that Tylor was “forced to complicate” his suggestion that magic would “fade with the coming of civilization” because of the widespread embrace of occult sciences and Spiritualism during his day. Tylor’s response was to construe Spiritualism as a “direct revival from the regions of savage philosophy and peasant folklore,” thereby dismissing Spiritualism’s much more recent origins (100–101).

33. “Afterword: Outlines of a New Roadmap,” 242.

This relates to a second advantage we see in esotericism studies: its “queer” nature, by which we mean the potential of the rebellious, heterodox, and marginal ideas and people we study under this rubric to push up against the normative. This is a problematic point, in at least two ways. First, to (over)use “queer” in this purely epistemological way risks lessening its socio-political power. Second, highlighting esotericism’s heterodox and rebellious potential continues to ignore the various but largely understudied ways in which esotericisms have produced, reinforced, or cemented normative notions of race, gender, sexuality, and class.³⁴ While we are aware of these risks,³⁵ we do think that there are elements in esotericisms that, if not inherently than definitely frequently, push up against whatever political, social, cultural, or religious discourses and praxes are the norm. Scholars of esotericism, in turn, could and should emulate this tendency to “queer” things by (and this returns us to our first point) problematizing dominant scholarly concepts, theories, methodologies, and modes of distinction and demarcation. A recent provocative example of this is Jeffrey J. Kripal’s *The Flip*, which locates in the study of esoteric phenomena an opportunity to rethink the nature of humanity and the universe.³⁶ But we may highlight here too, once more, Agrama, Bishop and Metcalfe’s conviction that Pasulka’s study demands that we rethink the relationship between “experiencer” and “researcher” when it comes to knowledge production.

Esotericism might also be said to have the capacity to “queer” disciplines, or, more aptly, to reveal the shared spaces between (and across) their artificial boundaries. Esotericism studies of the last thirty years has, again as a result of the specific interests of the individuals in its network, most prominently been pursued by historians. However, researchers from other disciplines have also

34. See, for instance, Hedenborg White, “Double Toil and Gender Trouble”; Cheadle, “Hybrid Masculinity and the H.B. of L.”

35. Indeed, as is hopefully evident from the above, we advocate much-needed critical interrogation of the foundational narrative of rejection. As with debates surrounding the use of the adjectival Western, the very existence of esotericism studies can facilitate such critical interrogation.

36. Kripal, *The Flip*.

participated, including anthropology, sociology, literature, music studies, art history, philosophy, and media studies. Esotericism studies researchers also tend to wield arrows from the methodological and theoretical quivers of diverse fields of study, including feminist studies, Black studies, queer theory, and the study of new religious movements. Esotericism studies offers seemingly unlimited transversals between fields and disciplines, transporting methods, theories, and insights from one to another with the potential to achieve transformative insights that may not otherwise have been possible. Esotericism studies is not the only field that can provide such disciplinary transmutation, but it may be unique in its variation of multi-disciplinary opportunities, and in the diverse professional backgrounds of the scholars who gather in its institutional spaces.

And then, whether the research in question is devoted to alchemy or otherkin, esotericism studies is ever in dialogue with the amorphous, culturally contingent discipline of religious studies. Here there are unique contributions that can be made, particularly for the study of contemporary religion. First, because many esoteric currents are canonised as anti-dogmatic and de-godded, even as they retain spiritual or supernaturalist aspects, esotericism studies has provided useful context for understanding secular (or post-secular) belief, particularly if secularism is understood to indicate religious change or fragmentation rather than eradication.³⁷ Second, esotericism studies has illustrated an unusually marked creative narrativity in its research subjects.³⁸ The tendency of esotericists to freely adapt prior stories and images for new intellectual, social, or religious purposes leads to easy overlap with fictional settings, which is perhaps the primary explanation for the ubiquity of esoteric motifs in popular culture. Indeed, esoteric practitioners have long been willing to fictionalise earnest belief and to earnestly believe fiction. This individual, syncretic, self-reflexive approach to belief

37. See Granholm, "Secular," 309–29; Partridge, *Re-Enchantment of the West*, 8–16; Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 8–10.

38. Kilcher, "7 Epistemological Theses," 147. Cf. Gunn, "Occult Poetics"; Roukema, *Esotericism and Narrative*.

construction has become increasingly common in post-modern religion, where the narrativity of the research subject calls for similarly narrative approaches. Esotericism studies scholars do not always acknowledge this call, but the field does offer previously developed understandings and conceptual frameworks—many of them derived from literary and cultural studies—with which the narrative fluidity and ironic creativity of (post-)secular religion can be assessed.

Though it is not a necessary field, esotericism studies is certainly a valuable one. It's also perhaps the best forum in which to solve its own problems; its potential for epistemological and disciplinary queerness and its long-standing concern with boundary formation provide excellent context and tools with which to assess the issues of identity, power, and association which bedevil it.

This conclusion helps answer our second doubt: why this journal? *Correspondences* is dedicated to facilitating research in a field that we believe offers combinations of perspective and method that can't currently be found anywhere else. We do this in a manner that also can't be found anywhere else. We are a volunteer-driven, grassroots entity and as such are able to provide access to impactful research in esotericism studies with no fees for readers and no costs or copyright restrictions for authors. We provide completely open access to cutting-edge research for a readership that is as global and diverse as the authors, editors, and guest editors who produce it. We are allied with institutions like the Directory of Open Access Journals and the Public Knowledge Project, which help make our publications easily accessible through libraries worldwide, and the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism, which has kindly funded our costs over the last six years. These relationships provide the stability enjoyed by journals owned by corporate publishing conglomerates, but without the limitations to publication length, subject matter, and research focus encountered by fee-based print journals. We also enjoy the ability to publish research by scholars of any professional level or, indeed, by non-affiliated scholars. Our rigorous peer-review process—kindly

assisted by experts in esotericism studies and adjacent fields—and our assertive in-house editing processes have successfully challenged and supported a number of junior researchers to improve their research and its communication. In the editorial for the first issue of *Correspondences*, Elwing and Roukema anticipated cultural, political, and technological change in academia, in which the open access model would trump the exploitative fee-based model of corporate publishers. Unfortunately, little substantive change has been achieved thus far. Yet, far from invalidating our original goal of participating in “the swift decline” of the fee-based journal,³⁹ the continued intellectual authority of corporate publishing only makes more visceral the need for the community-based project that is *Correspondences*.

With all this said, then, how do we envision the next ten years? For one, we hope to continue to push disciplinary boundaries. As noted above, in recent years the dominant historicist approach in the study of esotericism has been augmented by methods and theories drawn from a variety of disciplines, including literary studies, anthropology, critical theory, and many others. We heartily concur with Asprem and Strube’s conclusion to *New Approaches*, that “post-colonial, (global) historical, or critical-theoretical approaches are tools that will ultimately equip us to uncover sources, voices, historical relationships, and entanglements that we had ignored—not because they weren’t there, but because we were systematically looking the other way.”⁴⁰ We are proud to say that *Correspondences* has often functioned as a vehicle for efforts that seek to uncover new sources and voices, to look in new and better directions. Consider, for instance, the special issues on ethnography (2018, vol 6, no. 1) and Islamic esotericism (2019, vol 7, no. 1). This volume’s issue on esotericism and masculinities also aims to expand the field’s scope and purpose, as do planned issues on translation (2023), ecology (2024), and class (2025). In the future, we will take an even more active stance in this development by encouraging scholars not currently connected

39. Elwing and Roukema, “Editorial,” 1.

40. “Afterword: Outlines of a New Roadmap,” 242

to esotericism studies to contribute relevant articles to our journal. We hope that these and other publishing efforts will also foster further debate about the nature and boundaries of “esotericism” as an analytical category. We will also continue to encourage participation by scholars all over the globe; as part of this effort, we will soon be experimenting with publishing English translations of Russian-language scholarship on esotericism, spearheaded by Anna Milon and Birgit Menzel. In today’s political climate, such scholarship is increasingly more ostracized and ignored, but we think it remains important to know how esotericisms shape cultural, economic, and political discourse in Russia and *vice versa*. Lastly, we will continue to encourage correspondence across all levels of academia: in the past ten years, we have published the work of leading scholars and promising graduate students and will work hard to continue to do so in the future. We sincerely hope, in turn, that you will continue to engage with the ongoing discussion that is *Correspondences*.

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