

Editorial: Time to Drop the “Western”

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Alert readers will have noticed that we have dropped two words from our title: “online” and “Western.” We doubt the first will provoke much discussion—times have changed since the journal was founded in 2012. At that time open-access, online journals were becoming a popular and accepted mode of disseminating academic research, but we still felt the need to clearly illustrate our web-only format. *Correspondences* is now more widely known, and few authors or readers would automatically assume a journal to be print-based, so the clarification seems unnecessary. Even our last few sentences feel like an absolute waste of everyone’s time. Apologies.

Dropping the “Western,” however, seems less likely to achieve immediate consensus approval among our readers, and we would thus like to explain the rationale behind the change. The removal of “Western” from our title is by no means indicative of substantive changes in editorial outlook for *Correspondences*. Moreover, it is not our intention to speak out against its use: *Correspondences* will not dissuade researchers from using the term to clarify their research objects, and we encourage the submission of articles that either take a position in support of “Western esotericism” or investigate phenomena that substantiate the value of the term. However, we feel there is more to be gained than lost from de-emphasising the specific “Western” nature of esotericism. First, we do not think that “Western” traditions, currents, events, figures, and concepts can be separated from whatever is perceived to be the non-Western Other against which the identity of these phenomena is clarified. We find this to be difficult

across all periods of history, but particularly the present. Second, and related to this, the formation of “Western” identity has occurred in the context of political and ideological motivations which we see no reason to perpetuate. Third, while the addition of the “Western” to “esotericism” has been used to successfully clarify the academic methodologies of the field, we argue that as a maturing research field, the study of esoteric phenomena no longer requires an implicit connection between historicist methodology and the denominative “Western.”

We will shortly expand on these points, but first a brief review of the history of the term “Western esotericism” and the debate surrounding its usage. The adjectival Western was appended over the course of the 1990s as scholars attempted to establish a critical research field that eschewed essentialist approaches in which the specific and the particular are seen as mere adumbrations of perennial absolutes underlying existence, rather than historical, cultural, or sociological phenomena in their own right. As Wouter J. Hanegraaff recalls, the change was emblematised in the decision by the editors of *ARIES* to change the journal’s title from a journal of “*l’esoterisme*” to one of “Western esotericism” when relaunched by Brill in 2001.¹ “Western” thus became, as Egil Asprem notes, “a marker of *specificity* rather than...a geographical index term.”² This is not, of course, to say that the term did not have geographical and historical associations, and beginning in the late 2000s scholars including Kennet Granholm and Marco Pasi began to question the relationship between geo-specification and methodology, noting the complex global interrelationship of esoteric traditions, particularly in modernity.³

A full survey of the debate since that point is not practical for an editorial, but a quick review of the discussion that has taken place just in the pages of *Correspondences* is illustrative of remaining problems of definition and continuing lack of consensus in the field. In “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” Egil Asprem emphasises the importance of specific, cultural-historical research, but argues that similarities in how particular traditions have arisen in various geographical

¹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 3, no. 1 (2015): 56-57.

² Egil Asprem, “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 2, no. 2 (2014): 8.

³ Kennet Granholm, “Locating the West: Problematizing the Western in Western Esotericism and Occultism,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic, 17-36 (London: Acumen, 2013); Marco Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah and the Parting of East and West in the Early Theosophical Society,” in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, ed. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi and Kocku von Stuckrad, 152-66 (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

loci call for “a comparative study of esotericism on a truly global rather than a narrowly conceived ‘Western’ scale,” echoing Granholm’s 2010 call to dispense with the adjectival Western.⁴ Hanegraaff responds to this in the next issue in “The Globalization of Esotericism,” where he acknowledges the political and ideological problems that stem from the adjectival Western (63), and agrees that “Western esotericism” has become a phenomenon with global implications (86), but maintains the original motivation behind the term, arguing that the adjectival Western remains necessary for “not theoretical but *methodological*” reasons, helping to ensure specificity over essentialism (80–83). In their introduction to the recent special issue on “Ethnographies of the Esoteric,” Susannah Crockford and Asprem recognise the theoretical limitations faced by a field of academic study rooted principally, although by no means exclusively, in historiographic methods which have often privileged Eurocentric notions of “rationality.”⁵ That the modern academy itself found both its roots and its sustenance in the rationalist discourse of modernity suggests the possibility of a sort of ouroboros of deconstruction committed to its own deconstruction; however, as the articles in this special issue demonstrate, the expansion of the methodological palate (in this case, with the reflexive subject positioning offered by ethnography) has the ability to open up rather than close down productive lines of scholarly debate. Questions of both cultural and methodological boundaries similarly arise in the present issue. In his consideration of expressions of deification in the work of Julius Evola, Hans Thomas Hakl suggests that a historicist approach is not always able to highlight the most interesting questions raised by esoteric philosophy. Avery Morrow turns to Thomas Gieryn’s notion of “boundary-work” to point out that a culturally situated definition of “esotericism” is materially problematic in Japanese religious studies. A forthcoming special issue will continue to examine such questions through a focus on Islam and esotericism.

Even though work such as this has continued to investigate the boundaries of discipline, culture, and history, its very presence in the academic arena (not to mention the presence of *Correspondences*) is unquestionably dependent upon the hard-won credibility of the field known as “Western esotericism.”

⁴ Granholm, “Locating the West,” 31: “Until we can operationalize and qualify the term ‘Western’, and I do not believe that we ever will—nor should for that matter—we should forgo the use of it in the central role it has in the field today.”

⁵ Susannah Crockford and Egil Asprem, “Ethnographies of the Esoteric: Introducing Anthropological Methods and Theories to the Study of Contemporary Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 6, no. 1 (2018).

There is no denying that the field which this phrase describes offers a sound academic infrastructure to topics and contexts that would have, only a few decades ago, been treated with distrust or utter disregard. As José van Dijck explains in his preface to *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years' Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*,

By the end of the 1990s, that term [Western esotericism] still caused some eyebrows to be raised. It was not yet so clear to everybody that, far from being a synonym for New Age, the label 'Western esotericism' covered a wide range of important and influential currents in intellectual history from the Renaissance to the present, with roots in Late Antiquity.⁶

The “Westernisation” of Western esotericism has represented, perhaps, a process of what postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would call “strategic essentialism,” the manufacture of a collective subjectivity until such time as the individual voice has gained full recognition and expression. Foundational scholars including Antoine Faivre, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, and Hanegraaff defined a tradition of Western esoteric thought through a recombinatory lineage of heterodox perspectives. The denominative Western performs a useful function in delimiting the historical and conceptual bounds of a field of study that has indeed been focused largely on phenomena either produced or interpreted/adapted within a “Western” political and cultural sphere. Many of our current understandings are based on historical and discursive currents that took place within European or North American intellectual or religious history, currents that can certainly be called “Western.” This framing of Western esotericism as a panoply of nested traditions, influences, and forms which run alongside established historical lines has been key to its recognition and growth.

Yet, in denominating a specifically “Western” esotericism, we risk more being lost than gained. We have no wish to override the very real historical processes that have taken place in the West to develop our very categories of “esotericism” and “occultism”, as Hanegraaff has identified.⁷ However, designed to avoid essentialism, the “Western” often confronts researchers on the geographical and cultural margins with a constructed rigidity that creates

⁶ José van Dijck, Preface to *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years' Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff and Joyce Pijnenburg, 7-8 (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2009).

⁷ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For a quick summary see “Globalization of Esotericism,” 64-70.

problems of classification and comparison: How do we deal with phenomena that emerge outside of a geographically Western context, yet seem somehow related, whether analogically or because of actual cultural influence? Do we include or exclude religious movements and practices clearly influenced by groups/traditions we would otherwise include under the banner of Western esotericism? From the allegorical wanderings of Christian Rosenkreutz to the apocryphal journeys of G.I. Gurdjieff—not to mention the innumerable interfaces and exchanges that brought alchemy, astrology, and ceremonial magic into Europe—the very notion of “Western esotericism” has always implied the presence of its often Orientalised Other, and, in many cases, has depended upon that Other for both its substance and validation. In this regard, Western esotericism provides a curiously resonant counterpoint to contemporary postcolonial critical and cultural theory: here is a tradition that knowingly resists its own centre and frames itself as an outsider among outsiders. “Western” is an adjective that requires an opposite—Northern or Southern perhaps, but primarily “Eastern.” This requirement initially seems geographical, and the historicist current in the field of Western esotericism would have us believe that it is an extension of historical realities, but the requirement for opposition is almost entirely linguistic. The other, “Eastern” pole of this dichotomy is even more poorly conceptualised, constructed by largely polemical processes of Orientalisation, as Edward Said has famously shown. It is very difficult to conceptualise any consistent set of descriptors or criteria by which a person, place, or thing might be identified as Eastern, apart from, if one falls into a trap of denomination, everything that is “non-Western.” The West–East binary thus reflects a long history of xenophobia and exploitation that remains a catalyst for socio-political tensions today, which emerge from groups and discourses of which *Correspondences* wants no part. It is, moreover, poorly equipped to grapple with and contain the complex global interchange of ideas in the esoteric traditions, particularly in the last two hundred years.

The actuality of global integration and the problematic ideological associations of the term “Western” do not mean it should be ignored entirely. The West–East binary has important roots in the perception of self and society developed by Europeans and European-influenced colonial regions, and thus remains crucial to understanding the cultures of these regions. This opposition should, however, be a research object, not the justification for a methodology. The same holds true, as Granholm has argued, for the use of “Western” in esotericism. Granholm argues the opposite of the historicist justification for the adjectival Western. He notes that esoteric thinkers have

tended to “adopt romanticized views” of the “non-Western” other. “The prominence of this romanticizing tendency, combined with the near impossibility to demarcate ‘the West’ from the ‘non-West’ in any conclusive and satisfactory manner, suggests that ‘Western’ is best approached as an internal, emic, category in esoteric discourse.”⁸ Ceasing to delimit esotericism according to a Western pole of an artificial cultural structure would thus allow scholars of esotericism to come closer in perspective to their research subjects, many of whom see esoteric knowledge as perennial and universal and thus, by definition, global (if not inter-galactic).

Yet this, of course, is the very research perspective that the adjectival Western was introduced to prevent, as scholars like Hanegraaff and Faivre attempted, positively in our view, to disassociate the academic study of esotericism from religionist and essentialist approaches.⁹ *Correspondences* remains committed to the project inaugurated by these scholars. While we value the perennialist and religionist perspectives of practitioners of all sorts, we have dedicated this journal to skeptical, facts-based research that insists on drawing out historical, cultural, intellectual, conceptual, and sociological specificity as much as it values drawing comparisons between like and unlike traditions. We believe that quality, sustained research of any kind will expose as much difference as it will reveal similarity. We question, however, a key assumption which has been perpetuated by the historicist deployment of what Asprey calls the “negative heuristic” of the adjectival Western. Why must there be an essential relationship between locality and “religionist” or “essentialist” approaches to esoteric phenomena? Can we not resist such methodologies in our research processes without restricting ourselves via the constructed East-West binary? The adjectival Western may have served a purpose in the *historically situated* clash between essentialism and historical specificity, but we do not believe that it must *essentially* do so now. While we readily acknowledge that esotericism can be historically described as a largely Western (if we must use the term) phenomenon, we are not willing to close off opportunities for beneficial discoveries and discussion that may result from comparing traditions with different cultural and locational heritages.

Dropping the “Western” does not excise the Western. The name change is not meant to shift focus but to enlarge it where necessary, avoiding troubling discussions such as those surrounding whether Jewish and Islamic

⁸ Granholm, “Locating the West,” 17.

⁹ For Hanegraaff’s critique of such approaches, see *Esotericism and the Academy*, 277-314.

esotericisms are worthy of study using the paradigms, discursive strategies and methodologies that have been developed in the field. Our intention is to encourage more open, critically engaged research, *not* to create a free-for-all scenario in which research paradigms, methodologies, previously acquired knowledge, and previously achieved consensus are discarded. We hope that the less specific term will allow room for other esotericisms developed outside of, or alongside of, specific Western intellectual currents. This could include heterogeneous phenomena formed on the margins of what is considered Western, hybrid traditions developed in dialogue with Western culture, and yes, phenomena developed outside of the Western context that nevertheless have indicative analogical points of comparison that really can't be ignored. The title change aims to acknowledge the changing contours of the academic study of esotericism, thus fulfilling the mandate of an academic journal to record the state of the field rather than impose its own *Weltanschauung*.