

PART I

ESOTERICISM AND
THE EAST: INTRODUCTION

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The East-West dichotomy, around which research in philosophy, religious studies, literary theory, and cultural studies have rotated for centuries, is a construction that has divided the world into two parts: the West, meaning Europe, and America with their dominating Judeo-Christian tradition, and the East, which begins beyond the space of Judeo-Christian practices. The economic, social, and political reality of today's world provides evidence of the collapse or restructuring of this bipolar world. Current socio-political and cultural processes offer the opportunity to dispute nearly every major Eurocentric myth prevalent in mainstream economic history (Hobson 2004), and attempts to rescue the history of non-Western civilizations are continually increasing, emphasizing that "the Orient came first and the Occident was a latecomer" (Nederveen Pieterse 2006, 62). To overcome conventional Eurocentric approaches to history, but also due to the revolution in communication technologies, which has led to an almost instantaneous flow and exchange of information, many recent publications from the humanities and social sciences propose to take a global perspective on the human past (Conrad 2016). The constructed West-East dichotomy is currently being replaced by attempts at a new understanding of the complex structure of the world's cultural processes.

This recent trend toward global perspectives and postcolonial critiques of Eurocentric narratives in the humanities includes the academic study of esotericism, which has attempted to develop a globally applicable conceptual framework (Asprem and Strube 2020, 2021). The academic study of Western esotericism owes its establish-

ment, scientific consolidation, and flourishing to the French religious studies scholar Antoine Faivre (1934–2021) and the Dutch cultural historian Wouter Hanegraaff (Hanegraaff 2012).¹ While their academic contribution is beyond question, a current debate among scholars of Western esotericism has raised awareness of the problematic power dynamics inherent in the attribute “Western”. Questioning its usefulness, scholars suggested dropping the term altogether (Granholm 2013, 31) and focus on a comparative and global-scale study of esotericism (Asprem 2014, 5), including on the Jewish and Islamic esoteric traditions (von Stuckrad 2010, 49).

In his comments to various arguments by critics, Hanegraaff holds the opinion that the dual nature of the attribute “Western” defines both a geographical location and a cultural domain” (Hanegraaff 2015, 62). Esotericism as such, he explains, is only an expression of the Western culture, a form of thought of the Enlightenment that has become “rejected knowledge.” Hanegraaff continues to advocate the usage of the concept of “Western esotericism” as long as the historical method is applied (Ibid., 80–81). While denying the existence of some global esotericism, he encourages research on how Western esotericism is now being globalized (Ibid., 86). In contrast, younger scholars maintain that the concept of “Western esotericism” was developed as an explicit reaction to Eastern esotericism, which the influential Theosophical Society has promoted since the late nineteenth century (Strube and Krämer 2020, 1–29). Strube pointed out that the notion of “Western esotericism” is itself a polemical occultist construct of the late nineteenth century (Strube 2017), and Asprem and Strube recently stated that “the exclusively ‘Western’ identity of esotericism is an artefact of how the field has been theorized. It is a product of scholarly choices” (Asprem and Strube 2021, 3).

Despite these recent academic debates, the dichotomy between the East and the West still lives on in various ways shaping ideas of reality. For instance, what is still widely excluded from academic research on esotericism is the meta-geographical region of Eurasia, by political definition, comprising the land of the former Russian and Soviet Empires. Eurasia, under Western eyes, is still considered “Eastern”. Although geographically the largest continental space

¹ The concept “Western esotericism” was introduced by Antoine Faivre in his monograph “Accès de l’ésotérisme occidental” (1986), and “the use of the concept” was consolidated by the foundation of an academic society, the *European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism* (ESSWE) in 2005, as well as by the publication of the “Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism” (2006) edited by Wouter Hanegraaff.

on earth, it still appears to be much of a provincialized area (Turoma and Waldstein 2013). Eurasia not only shares in part the Western Judeo-Christian tradition but also significantly influenced and shaped Western movements and ideas. Its religious thought and esoteric conceptualizations are historically and substantially entwined with their European and American manifestations. Well aware of the semantic baggage of the biased terms “East” and “West”, the authors of this special issue refrain from using them as analytical concepts but employ them as historically contingent terms of self-description.

The study of esotericism beyond “Western” and within Eurasian confines, focusing on the Soviet and post-Soviet space, challenges the conventional spatial imaginings of the Western intellectual tradition and destabilizes colonialist ideas of Western pre-eminence. The cross-cultural encounters and interactions are critical to this special issue’s field of research as they reveal hitherto unseen or overlooked material and chains of transfer and explain how cultural networks have developed. From a cross-cultural perspective, esotericism can be viewed in a new light – as a suggestive cultural network dissolving the East-West dichotomy.

The “Journal of Comparative Studies” special issue has been compiled to provide insight into the questions discussed above and inspire further debate. Hopefully, this will allow us to look more widely at esotericism, breaching the currently dominating boundaries of understanding, which treats them as a European and North American phenomenon. By placing esotericism and the East in the centre of interest, it intends to bring a range of essential dimensions of esotericism to the attention of academic discussion. The issue contains articles by scholars from various disciplines: philosophy, history, religious studies, literary studies, cultural studies, oriental studies, translation studies and Slavic studies. Following different methodological approaches, the articles share the common focus of addressing general questions and those related to comparative aspects of esotericism in the West and the East.

In his article, “The Quest for Shangri-La”, Christopher McIntosh explores a literary adoption of the Buddhist paradisiacal legend of Shambhala in various Anglo-American adaptations in film and fiction. He places them into the historical and geopolitical context of the struggle between Russia, China, and Britain to control Central Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In Birgit Menzel’s article “Eurasia as A Spiritual Realm? Inquiries into an Imagined Continent”, Eurasia is understood as the territory of the former Russian/ Soviet Empire. It is discussed as a meta-geographical spiritual entity, an imagined continent. By applying a cultural

studies approach, various perspectives on spiritual Eurasia are presented as a mythologically, ideologically, and symbolically charged space, historical ethnographic descriptions, stories of various esoteric seekers of a re-enchanted spiritual landscape, academic experts in oriental studies as translators of spiritual ideas from the East to the West, as well as hybrid forms of religious revival among indigenous people in the post-Soviet present. Two examples are given to illustrate the post-Soviet invention of tradition in more detail: Arkaim as a Russian Stonehenge in the Urals and Eurasian spirituality as an instrument of political ideology.

“H. P. Blavatsky’s Later Reception of Hindu Philosophy” by Tim Rudbøg analyses Helena Blavatsky’s reception of classical Hindu philosophy to track the impact of Indian philosophy on western theosophy as the central concept of western esotericism. By juxtaposing ideas, sources, and quotes from Blavatsky’s main work, “The Secret Doctrine”, with basic terms and views from the six classical orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy, Rudbøg reveals how Blavatsky concocted various source texts from several translations into her argument, in which she drew ideas both from eastern Hindu and western philosophical texts, i.e., German *Naturphilosophie* [Nature Philosophy]. In “The Secret Doctrine”, Blavatsky blended it into what she considered the seventh school of ancient esoteric wisdom, her unified synthesis of all.

Whereas, in his article “Theosophical Anthropology or the Septenary Constitution of Man Reconsidered”, Ulrich Harlass provides a critical interpretation of the major “eastern” aspect in Blavatsky’s teaching: the genealogy of the so-called “septenary constitution” in her “secret doctrine”, i.e., man is constituted of seven principles corresponding to the cosmic structure of the universe. This geographical and doctrinal change in relation to her earlier work “Isis Unveiled” has been identified as the theosophical shift from Occident to Orient with sources from Indian wisdom assumed as inspiration. Instead of arguing for one of the positions theosophists have developed on this shift (seeing it either as an application of ancient Indian ideas or remodelling of old ideas in a new shape), Harlass describes the discourse in which this new doctrine emerged and tracks down Alfred Percy Sinnet’s “Esoteric Buddhism” as a western key-text in shaping it. By placing the teaching into the contemporary polemical debate between spiritualism and theosophy, he reveals various interests of Indian Hindu disciples and western occultists, demystifies some vague interpretations, and, at the same time, offers clarification about the historical-discursive context of Blavatsky’s ideas and teachings.

The East, analyzed by Konstantin Burmistrov in his article "Russian Esotericism of the Early Twentieth Century and Kabbalah" by focusing on the role of the Kabbalah in the popular occultist movement of the early twentieth century, is again situated in Russia. Burmistrov portrays the most influential figure in this movement, Georges Osipovich Moebes, the head of the Russian Martinist order, who gave several popular lecture series in St. Petersburg in the first two decades before he was arrested. Burmistrov reveals that these original lecture series are nothing less than an encyclopedia of esoteric knowledge in which the "occult Kabbalah" of the Tarot plays a crucial role. At the same time, rituals and magical actions were essential, and all lectures were aimed at the conversion and rebuilding of the personality. The ideas in Moebes' lectures were oriented toward transforming the self and the adept. Burmistrov offers a detailed explanation for the arcana which Moebes invented and developed. With the diligence of a detective, the author then follows the trail of reception of Moebes' lectures throughout the continent of Eurasia, both in remote publications, anonymous adaptations, and in the Russian underground. He argues convincingly that most of the contemporary knowledge about the Tarot was developed by Moebes, and its impact, barely known to most adepts, can be seen in the post-Soviet esoteric revival in Russia and other European countries.

In her article "Russia's Mystical Anarchism: The Case of Aleksei Solonovich (1887 –1937)", Romina Kaltenbach dwells upon the encounter of "mysticism" and "anarchism" in post-revolutionary Russia and analyzes the unacknowledged mastermind behind "mystical anarchism," the philosopher Solonovich's input in the intellectual movement of social protest which significantly contributed to the downfall of Russian anarchism.

Western culture and philosophy have been placed not only out of the Ancient Greek and Roman, as well as Christian values but also out of eastern codes, principles, and standards constituting the otherness and exoticness the West has always been searching for. This original distinction has been not only appealing to the western world but also deeply influential to the western "self". The western identity developed in permanent interchange with the East, a diverse and complex phenomenon with often contradictory attitudes that were either rejected or perceived with fascination and adopted. Therefore, constructing the East-West dichotomy, the relationships between philosophy, science, and religion have been deeply affected by the two spaces' geographical, mental, and spiritual bordering processes.

This “Journal of Comparative Studies” issue could encourage academic debate in three methodological aspects. Firstly, by facilitating intercultural comparison, we can consider the broad range and historical fluidity of the cultural models of esotericism. Secondly, it could be helpful to utilize the potential of a conceptual history approach, which would assist in clarifying the understanding of the concept of “esotericism” in different historical and cultural contexts. Thirdly, by overcoming Eurocentrism and developing a polycentric view of cultural history, the transformations that the concept has undergone during travel from one part of the world to another could be identified.

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