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REVIEWS

PRIKAZI

ON THE REJECTION OF REJECTED KNOWLEDGE

WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF, *ESOTERICISM IN WESTERN CULTURE: COUNTER-NORMATIVITY AND REJECTED KNOWLEDGE*, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC, LONDON, 2025.

Aleksandar Ostojić

“Is it possible that nothing true and important has been seen, recognized or said? ... Is it possible that the whole of world history has been misunderstood?... Is it possible that all those people have incredibly precise knowledge of a past that never existed?” The lines from Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, with which the book begins, from the very start present both the stakes, and the intention of Hanegraaff’s new work: the focus is not so much on esotericism as an object, but far more on what the study of culture systematically fails to see — and, more importantly still, on the mechanisms that make invisible remain invisible.

The title was carefully chosen. Not *Western Esotericism*, but *Esotericism in Western Culture* — a shift that, as we shall see, carries an entire research strategy with it. The subtitle, in turn, joins a term Hanegraaff’s readers already know well (*rejected knowledge*) to one introduced here for the first time, and which constitutes the book’s theoretical novelty: *counter-normativity*.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff is Professor of History of Hermetic Philosophy and

Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam, in a chair established in 1999 as the first of its kind (there are only two of them in Europe), and he is one of the few authors responsible for the institutional constitution of this field. Behind him lie *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1996), his editorial work on the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (2005), then *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (2012) and *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination* (2022). The book is dedicated to the memory of Antoine Faivre (1934–2021), the pioneer of the field, towards whose work the author adopts a inspiring and respectful stance, but also keeping critical distance.

One possible misunderstanding should be cleared up at once. Despite a subtitle that literally repeats the subtitle of the 2012 book, this is formally not a sequel to *Esotericism and the Academy*, but a completely rewritten and considerably expanded version of the modest textbook *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2013), which the author declares obsolete in

his introduction. In substance, however, the relation to the 2012 book is the key to assessing the present one — for what in 2012 was the subject of research running to more than four hundred pages is here compressed into a single chapter, and then transformed from a description into an instrument.

The book consists of nine chapters arranged, as the author himself puts it, into three triads. The first (chapters 1–3) introduces the field: “What Do We Mean by Esotericism?”, “A Short History of Rejected Knowledge” and “Internal Eurocentrism”. The second triad (4–6) moves from theoretical conceptualization to content: “Worldviews”, “Knowledge” and “Practice”. The third (7–9) treats dimensions not covered earlier: “Modernization”, “Esoteric Transdisciplinarity” and “The Global Importance of Esotericism”. To these are added an extensive apparatus of notes (pp. 209–259), a glossary of technical terms, a survey of sources and research resources, and a bibliography of more than forty pages. The division of labour between the main text and the notes is deliberate: the text is written for a broader educated readership, while the technical discussion with colleagues in the field takes place in the footnotes.

The methodological manner that characterizes Hanegraaff’s theoretical work is already visible in the first chapter. By refusing to pose the question “what is esotericism?”, Hanegraaff is in fact pointing out that such a formulation carries an essentialist suggestion: that something of the sort exists “out there”, waiting to be discovered. An essentialist definition is of course inapplicable in this case since, as Nietzsche says in the *Genealogy of Morals*, only something without history can be defined (Nietzsche, GM II 13) — whereas esotericism, on the contrary, has almost nothing but history. Therefore, Hanegraaff prefers to ask what the label of esotericism has referred to through

history, who used it, why, and why we have it at all. Drawing on Tanya Luhrmann and prototype theory, he shows that in practice scholars almost never reason by means of a list of criteria, but by comparison with a “best example” of the class that they already have in mind. From this follows the diagnosis of three dominant prototypes: esotericism as an enchanted pre-modern worldview (Faivre, Frances Yates), esotericism as the social phenomenon of the occult after the Enlightenment, and esotericism as a universal “inner” dimension of religion as such. None of them satisfies author, and his analysis of Faivre’s four “intrinsic” criteria (correspondences, living nature, imagination/mediations, transmutation) shows that they in fact read as a definition of enchantment set against the disenchanted worldviews of modern science (pp. 9–11).

The most useful conceptual move of this chapter is the terminological distinction Hanegraaff offers as a truce in his dispute with the “discursive turn” of Kocku von Stuckrad and Julian Strube. “Esotericism1” designates a collection of historical traditions, ideas, practices and social formations grouped under the assumption that they have something in common; “esotericism2” designates the dialectics of secrecy, that is, the social regulation of access to certain forms of knowledge (p. 19). These are two different projects that come into conflict only because they use the same term. The book is concerned with the first.

In relation to Hanegraaff’s earlier work, the extensive section on “the West” is new — though not in relation to the literature that has governed this question at least since Said, Hall and Mignolo, the last of whom Hanegraaff closely paraphrases on p. 200, as he himself acknowledges in a note. (p. 254) Instead of Western esotericism, Hanegraaff speaks of esotericism *in* Western culture, and redefines Western culture itself as the “Greater West”:

geographically, the entire Mediterranean basin during the first two thousand years; culturally, the dialectic between Hellenistic paganism and the three exclusive monotheisms; historically, a dynamic formation whose boundaries coincide with the reach of its foundational stories, and which in 1492 ceases to be a space on the map and becomes a space in the mind (pp. 26–27). The consequence is that Judaism and Islam enter this whole in their own right, and not as preparation or background — which is the reason for two entirely new sections in the second chapter, on Jewish (p. 40 ff.) and Islamic esotericism (p. 44 ff.).

For a reader coming from philosophy, the third chapter is the center of the book. It works with the distinction between history and mnemohistory: the former deals with what happened, the latter with the how what is said to have happened is remembered and imagined. Cornelius Agrippa is remembered as a black magician and a model of the Faustian figure, whereas reading his writings reveals an extremely devout Christian for whom faith in Christ is the only reliable foundation of knowledge (p. 80). Mnemohistorical narratives win out precisely because they are simple, because they distribute guilt clearly, as the product of as a product of post-judgment, and because they are easy to remember.

For Hanegraaff, the drama unfolds in three acts. In the first, early Christianity builds its identity against Judaism and paganism, whereby the apologetic line (Justin, Clement, Origen, Eusebius, Augustine) integrates “good” paganism by way of the doctrine that contemporary scholars call Platonic Orientalism, while the anti-heretical line makes use of genealogies of darkness in which all heresies spring from a single demonic root. The Renaissance revival of this apologetic tradition, in the form of *prisca theologia* and *philosophia perennis*, acquires revolutionary implications in Ficino and

markedly conservative ones in Steuco — a useful observation showing that the same conceptual material can serve opposing programmes (pp. 84–85).

The second act is Protestant. Here Hanegraaff reconstructs the line running from Jacob Thomasius and his *Schediasma historicum* (1665) — where all heresies are reduced to a single error, the belief in the eternity of the world — through Ehregott Daniel Colberg and his *Das Platonisch-Hermetisches Christenthum* (1690–91), which is in fact the first history of esotericism ever written, and written by its enemy. In parallel, the Pietist reaction of Gottfried Arnold turns the whole game around: the true heretics are the dogmatic theologians, and history should be a history of inner experience rather than of external events. Hanegraaff rightly recognizes in Arnold an ancestor of modern religionism and of the “inner traditions” model (pp. 88–92).

The third act is decisive, and it is the reason why this book ought to interest even those who have no opinion whatsoever about esotericism. Christian Thomasius frees the history of philosophy from theology and introduces eclecticism as a method: idea that the historian of philosophy should “separate the wheat from the chaff”. In the *Acta Philosophorum* (1715) Christoph August Heumann uses that method to declare the entire lineage of “ancient wisdom” to be foolishness, dispatching it with almost cheerful contempt into the “sea of oblivion”, with the remark that superstitious idiocies belong in no better library (pp. 93–94). In his *Historia critica philosophiae* (1742–44) Johann Jacob Brucker institutionalizes that division through the distinction between *philosophia eclectica* and *philosophia sectaria*, and his work becomes the standard reference all the way to Hegel, as well as the source from which the philosophical entries in Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* were to a large extent paraphrased (pp. 94–95).

The conclusion that follows from this is not a marginal detail from the history of the discipline, but a claim about its very foundation: the history of philosophy constituted itself as an academic discipline precisely through an act of exclusion, and the canon we inherit is not a neutral choice of what is best, but the sediment of a polemic. After Brucker, *philosophia sectaria* disappears from the textbooks, the field becomes “academically homeless”, and learned ignorance about it becomes a sign of seriousness.

The fifth chapter offers an analytical instrument which is, in my judgement, the most usable part of the book even beyond its immediate subject matter. Hanegraaff crosses two criteria — communicability and independent verifiability — and obtains a fourfold typology of knowledge claims: reason (communicable and verifiable), faith (communicable, unverifiable), experience (incommunicable, verifiable) and *gnōsis* (incommunicable and unverifiable), whereby the first two belong to propositional knowledge (*wissen/savoir*) and the latter two to knowledge by acquaintance (*kennen/connaître*) (pp. 118–120). The author explicitly stresses that this is an epistemological category and not a historical phenomenon, thereby distancing himself from Quispel’s thesis of gnosias as “the third component of Western culture”.

Up to the eighteenth century, Hanegraaff argues, *gnōsis* was not an alternative to reason and faith, but a level built *upon* them. Ficino, Pico, Agrippa, Bruno, Dee, Fludd, Khunrath and Swedenborg were erudits who had mastered the entire traditional philosophical curriculum, were deeply versed in the natural sciences of their time and were, as a rule, devout Christians; the idea that ultimate knowledge means abandoning Christian dogma would have struck them as dangerous nonsense (pp. 121–122). Only after the Enlightenment does

this fabric come apart: with Blavatsky and her successors *gnōsis* becomes a polemical alternative and, as Hanegraaff puts it, turns from the decoration on the cake into the whole cake. From this follows an ironic diagnosis of contemporary esotericism: reason is praised in theory but limited in practice, while faith is rejected in theory but practiced almost universally (p. 123).

The chapter is rounded off by a discussion of “knowing how” — hermetic skill, but also the practical art, to which Hanegraaff ascribes four features: an orientation towards identifying and influencing life events; the need for specialized knowledge and strategies of secrecy; reliance on ritual efficacy with causes that are “occult” in the sense of being hidden from the senses; and a permanently contested, precarious status owing to the absence of any generally accepted explanation of how such practices work (pp. 130–131). The claim that the structure of such knowledge does not differ essentially from that of an ophthalmologist or a brain surgeon is deliberately provocative, but it is precisely the kind of provocation that compels thought.

The last chapter reveals why everything previously was written. Hanegraaff distinguishes three levels of his project: the descriptive (attention to neglected material), the analytical (understanding and correcting the patterns of Internal Eurocentrism) and, most profoundly, the questioning of normativity as such. First, he shows, drawing on Urs App and Julian Strube, that Internal Eurocentrism has been externalized: the patterns by which Christians demonized pagan idolatry in their own backyard became the matrix for understanding Asian, African and Latin American religions. The Jesuit Joao Rodrigues, after sixty-five years of living in East Asia and with an impeccable command of Japanese and classical Chinese, saw in Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism

nothing but the standard types of pagan idolatry, all of them derived from the Chaldaean–Persian–Egyptian root of the “genealogy of darkness” (p. 193). The road from Heumann’s “sea of oblivion” to the missionary recommendation that idolatrous cults be exterminated rather than studied is shorter than we would wish; Hanegraaff follows it as far as Eduard von Hartmann and Herbert Spencer, in whom it turns into open justification of extermination (pp. 195–198).

On this basis the central concept is introduced. Following Canguilhem, according to whom “the normal” is the performance of the normative project, rather than its presupposition, and for whom every norm we take to be self-evident is actually a value disguised as a fact, Hanegraaff defines counter-normativity as the project of demonstrating that what we experience as normal may be the reflection of a hidden normative standard (p. 199). Alongside it goes *counter-normality* — the spectrum of phenomena that disturb the sense of the normal, from the paranormal in the strong sense (Kripal) to “ontological weirdness” (Erik Davis) and quite subtle experiences for which we simply “do not know where to put them” (p. 200).

Two qualifications are important and show the seriousness of the approach. First, counter-normativity is not anti-normativity: it is not a matter of tearing down norms in order to push one’s own, but of questioning the very dynamics of normalization, and above all in oneself. Second, in the distinction between “Enlightenment1” and “Enlightenment2” (pp. 205–206) — the former as respect for empirical evidence, the rejection of prejudice and unrestricted freedom of inquiry, the latter as a dogmatic ideology of reason and science that builds its identity on the rejection of rejected knowledge — Hanegraaff makes it clear that he conducts his critique *from within* the Enlightenment

and not against it. This is an important point that separates this book from Romantic and Traditionalist reversals of roles, in which monotheism and scientific rationality simply change places with the new heroes of the story.

In this regard, Hanegraaff formulates one of his more interesting conclusions, which also discloses an internal aporia of the research field: if esotericism as a field of research ever to become fully normal, a field recognizable as esotericism would cease to exist, because rejected knowledge would become acceptable knowledge (p. 208).

As for criticism, it might be directed at several points. The first is that the conceptual problems of gathering Jewish, Christian, Islamic, pagan and modern secular forms of esotericism under a single umbrella have not even been approached, let alone resolved (p. 27). The sections on Jewish and Islamic esotericism were, by the author’s own testimony, written with extensive corrections and advice from colleagues. They are accurate and informative, yet they remain summary in relation to the ambition of the programme.

The second point is the continuous tension between radical historicism and the emancipatory project. Hanegraaff insists throughout on a bottom-up empirical approach and on theories being means rather than drivers; yet the ninth chapter is a strongly normative appeal — the political marketization of the university and the duty of the humanities to fight back. The distinction between counter-normativity and anti-normativity has to carry that entire burden, and it is left to the reader to judge how far it succeeds. In the eighth chapter Hanegraaff uses, strikingly and very accessibly, the metaphors of the gardener and the biologist, comparing them to academic researchers — the first pulling up the “weeds” and cultivating the flowers in a garden of their own making, the second seeking to understand

the ecosystem in all its complexity. At this point Hanegraaff issues a clear value judgement in favour of the second approach, with which the author of this review fully agrees; but with it, the argument moves from historical structural analysis to a normativity of its own. Hanegraaff is, admittedly, aware of the move, and will place it within the account of situatedness and the hermeneutic circle.

The third is more of a warning about an elegance that sometimes makes matters easier than they really are. With the previously mentioned distinction between esotericism¹ and esotericism², a substantive dispute is resolved by terminological convention, effectively without any confrontation. Von Stuckrad and Strube do not merely use the same word for a different project; they contest whether a “collection of traditions grouped together because they have something in common” can be constituted at all without drawing in precisely the essentialism that Hanegraaff wishes to avoid. The peace treaty leaves the front line where it was.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, this is currently one of the best single-volume entry points into the field, and one that does not conceal its own theoretical commitments. We recommend it for several reasons. First, on account of a claim that far exceeds the boundaries of esotericism as a topic: the history of philosophy as a discipline came into being through a gesture of exclusion, so that the canon we teach and write is not

a neutral selection of what is best, but the sediment of a polemic whose protagonists had names, dates and very concrete theological motives. Anyone who reads this once will hardly be able to regard Brucker and Heumann again as mere bibliographical data. In addition, the epistemological typology from the fifth chapter is a portable instrument, usable in discussions that have nothing at all to do with esotericism, and may therefore be of interest to anyone concerned with science, culture and the ways in which knowledge is shaped. Third, on account of the periodization of the relation between *gnōsis*, reason and faith, which gives the researcher of Renaissance and early modern material a precise conceptual framework for what is encountered daily in the sources and almost never appears in standard accounts.

In our own context, where the study of esotericism has almost no institutional foothold and where “the occult” still functions primarily as a marker of ignorance, this book is valuable in more ways than one — for it opens the field to further inquiry in a scholarly manner, while also recalling a simple matter that is easily forgotten in research circles. Hanegraaff does not ask us to believe in the legitimacy of rejected knowledge; the radical agnosticism he espouses explicitly excludes any judgement on the truth of esoteric beliefs (he always asks after their influence). His demand involves a step back: that we notice how much of what we take to be the history of reason is in fact the canonical record of a particular idea of what “reason” decided not to look at.