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Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
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In this impressive and meticulously researched monograph, Wouter Hanegraaff utilizes the concept of “othering” to make a definitive and long-overdue case for Western esotericism as a defining aspect of Western history. Hanegraaff’s book is not a history of Western esotericism *per se*, but a history of the way scholars and intellectuals have imagined Western esotericism as the “other” against which they defined themselves. As he says, “We seldom realize it, but in trying to explain who “we” are and what we stand for, we have been at pains to point out that we are not like them. In fact, we still do” (3). Hanegraaff’s goal, and one he accomplishes with great style and erudition, is to show that the European past looks different once Western esotericism is recognized as an actual component of that past and a legitimate field of study in its own right. While Western esotericism evades definitive definition, the various currents that are covered by the term—alchemy, astrology, magic, divination, illumination, clairvoyance, symbolism, mythology, the occult—share certain commonalities that stand in sharp contrast to what scholars have construed as biblical monotheism and Greek rationality. Hanegraaff takes up and clarifies the distinction first made by Jan Assman between history, defined as what happened, and mnemohistory, defined as what a given culture imagines has happened to establish the crucial point that at the end of the seventeenth century and through much of the eighteenth Western esotericism became a casualty of mnemohistory: Protestant theologians and Enlightenment scholars joined hands to proclaim their own modern rationality while relegating esoteric currents of thought to the “waste-basket” of history (375). But, as Hanegraaff points out, the dichotomy that emerged between discredited esotericism, on the one hand, and science and rationality, on the other, was itself a cultural construct and an example of mnemohistory that obscured what was really at stake—the incompatibility between Christianity and the pagan philosophy it had absorbed.

Hanegraaff elaborates on the analysis of this incompatibility first made by Jacob Thomasius in the seventeenth century. Thomasius singled out two assumptions of paganism that could not be reconciled with Christianity: the idea that the world was coeternal with God, an assumption that categorically denied the Christian notion of “creation ex nihilo”; and the belief that humans could attain knowledge of their own divine nature through “gnosis,” a conviction rejected as “enthusiasm” by those Christians who insisted on the utter separation between man and God and who claimed that knowledge came to humans solely through divine revelation. The conflict essentially boils down to the incompatibility between cosmotheism and monotheism (371). While cosmotheism originated in the platonic and neoplatonic doctrine that both the cosmos and man emanated from and would return to their divine source, monotheism categorically denied both: man and nature were created by God and were utterly different from God.

These are the broad strokes outlined by Hanegraaff as he deftly sorts through the very complicated history of Western esotericism as the dialectical “other” to the various prevailing paradigms accepted by those in positions of power. But within these broad

strokes lie aspects of the history of Western esotericism that have been misunderstood or confused. Hanegraaff straightens out these confusions in the four substantial chapters and a conclusion.

In the first chapter, Hanegraaff discusses what he describes as “the history of truth” or “the recovery of ancient wisdom.” The history of thought began in the Renaissance (5), and this history was based on the assumption that there was one true and absolute wisdom that was summed up in Christianity. This was the basic assumption behind three similar sounding but, in fact, qualitatively different notions: *prisca theologia*, or first theology, *philosophia perennis*, or perennial philosophy, and *pia philosophia*, or pious philosophy. While these all stressed the existence of absolute truth, they differed in significant ways that have not been fully appreciated. The notion of a *prisca theologia* arose during the Renaissance and reflected the widespread recognition of the corruption in the Catholic Church and the hope that the Church could be reformed by returning to the earliest sources of divine revelation. The idea of a perennial philosophy was different in that it stressed the continuity and universal validity of knowledge without the notion of decline and loss implied in the idea of a *prisca theologia*. Finally, the idea of a pious philosophy, though less developed than the other two, argued that Christianity was the acme of pious philosophy but that all times and peoples had had glimpses of Christian truth. This narrative introduced the idea of progress and progressive revelation: “. . . whereas the *prisca theologia* combines a narrative of decline with hopes of imminent revival, and *philosophia perennis* emphasizes continuity, *pia philosophia* thinks in terms of growth and development, imagining a gradual ‘education of humanity’ to prepare for the final revelations” (10). By disentangling these three traditions Hanegraaff offers scholars a way to understand why esoteric thinkers from the Renaissance onwards appeared Janus-faced, looking back to the past to discover the *prisca theologia* but forward in the belief that pious philosophy evolved over time until perfected in Christianity. The idea of a perennial philosophy offered neither a vision of recovery nor development, both potentially revolutionary, even millenarian; it was essentially a static and conservative idea with the implication that Christianity had always existed and must be preserved, not reformed or changed in any way.

Drawing on his own work and that of John Wallbridge (*Wisdom of the Mystic East*), among others, Hanegraaff defines ancient wisdom as “Platonic Orientalism,” a rubric that allows him to show the family resemblance between the various descriptions of esoteric wisdom variously suggested by scholars from the Renaissance to the present, such as Occultism, Magic, Mythology, Symbolism, Zoroastrianism, Mosaic philosophy, Alchemy, Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, Hermetism, and Kabbalah. All these can be accommodated under the umbrella of “Platonic Orientalism,” and this designation enables us to understand the “discursive transfer” of ideas across the boundaries of the Abrahamic religions (33). Marsilio Ficino’s view of Plato provides an example of Oriental Platonism because he places Plato in a genealogy of *prisca theologians* that includes Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, and Pythagoras and embraces the disciplines of alchemy, astrology, theurgy, arithmology, and Kabbalah. The idea that ancient wisdom was “secret” or “hidden” emerged from Pico’s introduction of Kabbalah and number symbolism, and this idea had both positive and negative implications, positive for those who embraced it but

negative for those Christian apologists who rejected the notion of ancient wisdom as thoroughly pagan and inimical to Christianity (65).

The second chapter, entitled “The History of Error: Exorcizing Paganism,” deals with these Christians and their anti-platonic and anti-pagan polemic. Taking George of Trebizond, Savonarola, and Gianfrancesco Pico as representatives of anti-platonic, anti-pagan reaction to the ancient wisdom tradition, Hanegraaff provides the first example of a dialectic that will play out through the centuries as defenders of Christian orthodoxy battle to define themselves in opposition to esotericists. Hanegraaff point out that the great debate Pico della Mirandola envisioned for his 900 Theses was set for the same year the *Malleus Maleficarum* was published (1486), a fact that did not bode well for champions of ancient wisdom, who found themselves castigated as forerunners of the Anti-Christ and minions of the devil (83). Johannes Weyer, an apprentice to Cornelius Agrippa, was especially important in the rejection of the ancient wisdom. In his *De praestigiis daemonum* (1563), significantly published as the Council of Trent was coming to an end, he transformed the notion of a history of pagan error into one of demonic infiltration, an idea that exacerbated the witchcraze, which was gaining momentum at the time (85). Perhaps in deference to Agrippa, Weyer suggests that some acceptable form of natural magic and Kabbalah may exist, but these are so hopelessly mixed up with superstition, sorcery, and theurgy as to be useless. Weyer sets up a genealogy of demon-worshippers that includes Simon Magus, Porphyry, Plotinus, Proclus, Roger Bacon, Albertus Magnus, and the author of the *Picatrix*, a genealogy that is, as Hanegraaff points out, “a perfect example of Platonic Orientalism turned negative” (86). It didn’t take long for other anti-platonic authors like Jean Bodin and Martin del Rio to place Zoroaster at the head of this demonic genealogy and include Pico, Agrippa, Paracelsus, Ripley, Cardan, della Porta, and Pomponazzi. In this atmosphere of growing intolerance, anyone like Francesco Patrizi who continued to argue in favor of Platonic Orientalism found himself under intense scrutiny as a potential heretic. Patrizi’s grand synthesis of Platonic Orientalism, *Nova de universis philosophia* (1591), was placed on the Catholic Index and existing copies of the book were destroyed.

The Counter Reformation brought with it a full-scale and belligerent attack on the ancient wisdom tradition in the form of Battista Crispo’s *De Platone cuate legendo*. Hanegraaff stresses Crispo’s importance as a Catholic author who extended the critique of ancient wisdom to include the Church Fathers, who, Crispo claims, had allowed the enemy through the gate (91). Crispo did not envision the effect his criticism would have on the Catholic Church itself in its struggle with Protestantism. As Hanegraaff points out, Crispo opened up the way for Protestants to investigate, judge, and evaluate the writings of the Church Fathers, thus making them objects of history, not infallible guides to Christian truth. Hanegraaff sees this as the beginning of the move away from “the history of truth” to history proper (93), a move that would first undermine the legitimacy of the Catholicism and then Protestantism, opening the way for secularization and the Enlightenment.

The controversy over the Platonism of the Church Fathers has been referred to as the “Hellenization of Christianity,” a problematic term because it reifies both Hellenism and

Christianity, but still useful in charting the theological and philosophical controversies from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries over the charge that the Catholic Church had been perverted from its inception by platonic paganism. Although Catholics like Crispo started the debate, anti-platonic Protestants jumped on the bandwagon as they rejected the tradition of ancient wisdom and sought to recover uncontaminated apostolic Christianity (96). This attempt led to the first truly historical investigations of Church history in texts such as the *Magdeburg Centuries* (1559-1574), a 13 volume work that tried to distinguish between the “pure gospel” and the pagan and Jewish superstitions accepted by the Catholic church.

The culmination of Protestant anti-platonism appears in Jacob Thomasius’s (1622-1684) *Schediasma historicism*, which was itself a radical and systematic attempt to separate pagan philosophy from biblical religion. As mentioned at the beginning of this review, Thomasius was the critic who most clearly defined the incompatibility between Christianity and paganism in terms of their mutually exclusive notions of creation and salvation. Thomasius predicted that new forms of platonic spiritualism would arise as individuals embraced the platonic doctrine of emanation and auto-salvation. Thomasius’s treatise gave birth to what Hanegraaff identifies as the first actual study of Western esotericism, Ehrgott Daniel Colberg’s *Platonisch-Hermetisches Christenthum* (1690-91). Colberg’s book was an uncompromising attack on what he and many of his contemporaries described as the “fanatical” and “enthusiastic” theology typical of many forms of Reformation spiritualism, such as Paracelsianism, Weigelianism, Rosicrucianism, and the Christian Theosophy of Jakob Boehme. Colberg rejected all spiritual forms of Christianity that depended on a discourse of secrecy and adeptship. He thus laid the foundation for modern critical scholarship and Enlightenment thinking (114).

Colburg and his fellow, primarily Protestant, anti-platonists failed to triumph, however. This time the fifth column came from within Protestantism itself in the form of a Pietist reaction, which the anti-platonist Friedrich Christoph Bücher described as “Satan’s school of the Platonists and Kabbalists” (*Plato mysticus in Pietista redivus*, 1699). The upshot of these controversies was that the criticism of the Church Fathers as crypto Platonists, begun by Catholics but intensified by Protestants, cut off “the branch on which they [Christians] were themselves sitting” (122) by revealing how difficult, if not impossible, it was to separate Christianity from philosophy and build a theological system on the Bible alone (121). This, in turn, strengthened the Pietist conviction that the Bible was about piety, not doctrine, and confirmed their belief that salvation came through illumination and the heart, not through revelation and reason. This in Hanegraaff’s view led to the birth of “Religionism,” or the idea that religion is *sui generis* and comes from within, a view exemplified by Gottfried Arnold’s *Unpartyische Kirchen-und Ketzer-Historie* (1699-1700). Arnold had no interest in the relation between paganism and Christianity since he claimed they had nothing to do with each other. The mark of a Christian was humble faith and practical piety. If a person exhibited this, it mattered little if they had meddled with philosophy (123). True Christianity was “ineffable,” which meant that dogmatic quarreling was senseless.

The separation of philosophy and religion begun by Thomasius was carried further by Christoph August Heumann (1681-1764), generally considered the founder of the history of philosophy as a modern discipline that followed historical-critical methods (130). In his treatise *Von denen Kennenzeichen des falschen und unächten Philosophie*, Heumann identified six characteristics of “bogus” philosophy, all of which he laid at the feet of Platonic Orientalism: useless speculations; appeals to human authority rather than clear evidence; reliance on tradition rather than reason; syncretism of philosophy with superstition; obscure language and symbolism; the immorality arising from three errors of pagan philosophy, namely, that the world is co-eternal with God; the human soul is material; and that matter is capable of thinking and acting on its own (134). Unlike “bogus” philosophy, “real” philosophy develops in stages. Heumann set the parameters of what would become “The Enlightenment Paradigm,” and this marked the beginning of the eclipse of Western esotericism in modern intellectual discourse. The later histories of philosophy of Jacob Brucker and Johann Heinrich Zedler were derived from Heumann and carried on the disparagement of Western esotericism, which now became a source for the many histories of stupidity that appeared, delighting the public by regaling it with examples of the idiocy of magic, superstition, and the occult. A new dialectic appeared, which is still with us today, one that identified Magic, Superstition, and the Occult as “the other of science and rationality” (157).

In chapter 3 “The Error of History: Imagining the Occult” Hanegraaff describes how Western esotericism became “rejected knowledge.” Commenting on the work of Frazer, Tylor, Durkheim, and Mauss, Hanegraaff outlines the way the term magic became “tainted” and representative of everything that was not modern, i.e. scientific and rational. The same dichotomy was applied to the word “occult.” While in Aristotelian philosophy “occult qualities” were seen as real forces, though not directly observable—like magnetic forces or the curative powers of herbs and plants—starting in the Renaissance the word began to suggest some variety of secret wisdom hidden from the vulgar. The next step came when the notion of “occult sciences” arose to describe alchemy, astrology, magic, divination, etc., all of which were labeled by Enlightenment thinkers as anti-modern, anti-rational, and anti-scientific and rejected. By the nineteenth century the “occult sciences” had lost all academic respectability, becoming an intellectual wasteland inhabited by amateur scholars and writers of sensationalist fiction dealing with nefarious secret societies engaged in dubious, even demonic, science. Gothic fiction and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* come to mind here, but so too does Jacques Collin de Plancy’s *Dictionnaire infernal*, which in its final form as *Dictionnaire des sciences occultes* was published as volume 48 and 49 of Migne’s monumental *Encyclopédie* (1846-48) (233-34). This is not the end of the story, however, for as unexpected as it might seem, Western esotericism came back to life as a direct result of the apparent disenchantment of the world described by Max Weber and fostered by modernity.

This takes us to Hanegraaff’s last chapter “The Truth of History: entering the Academy.” Germany and German Romanticism was a key player in this return of repressed and moribund esotericism. Germany had not rejected religion or accepted the mechanical philosophy to the same extent as France. Vitalism continued to be a powerful force,

accentuated by Mesmer's theory of animal magnetism, which postulated a universal fluid or life-force permeating all organic life and acting as an intermediary between spirit and matter. German Mesmerism took a special turn in the work of Johann Christian Reil and Carl Alexander Ferdinand Kluge, who divided the human nervous system into two distinct parts, the cerebral and the *gaglion*. The first involved the rational faculties and discursive language; the second controlled the unconscious and realm of the soul, which was endowed with all kinds of occult psychic abilities that only manifested in states of trance or somnambulant sleep. Hanegraaff remarks that "In the German Romantic literature on somnambulism, the theory of two complementary nerve systems was developed into a full-blown counter-metaphysics directed wholesale against Enlightenment rationalism" (263). Justinus Kerner went as far as to claim that humans live in two worlds and that the "real" one inhabited by the soul only appears in sleep! What is of prime importance here is that German Romantic intellectuals were using science to defend their views. This was a turning point, for "anything that Enlightenment historiography had sought to consign to the waste-basket of history—magic, divination, clairvoyance, symbolism, the occult—now came to be perceived as manifestations of the soul and its hidden powers, and highlighted as central to the historical development of human culture!" (265) Gone was Platonic Orientalism; and in its place were Romantic and Mesmerist *Naturphilosophie* predicated on the assumptions that all organic life was alive and that human consciousness slowly evolved. Hanegraaff sees Joseph Ennemoster's (1787-1854) *Geschichte der Magie* as exemplary in this reversal because he "integrates the *philosophia perennis* in a novel framework of providentialist evolutionism" (272). The lineage of good magic begins here with Paracelsus and J. B. van Helmont and includes Boehme and others.

These developments legitimized the study of Western esotericism and led to further reevaluations of esotericism in the work of Carl Gustav Jung, Henri Corbin, Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Antoine Faivre, all of whom took part in the Eranos conferences held in Switzerland after World War II. Hanegraaff insightfully discusses the work of each of these scholars, but the main trajectory of his argument is to show how these thinkers accepted a Religionist position that sacrificed history in a quest for eternal and universal truths—Scholem, who flirted with Religionism, but not at the expense of historiography, being the exception. With the work of Will-Erich Peuchert (1895-1969), Lynn Thorndike (1882-1965), and Frances Yates (1899-1981), and the later work of Antoine Faivre the academic and historiographical study of Western esotericism began in earnest.

Since this part of the history of Western esotericism is more widely known than what came before, it is perhaps sufficient to say in what is already a long review that Hanegraaff acknowledges the important role played by Peuchert, Thorndike, and Yates in the resuscitation of Western esotericism as an important and legitimate field of academic research. He discusses the contributions as well as shortcomings of these scholars in light of the development of the field they helped to create. However much their particular interpretations of Western esotericism has been modified, what cannot be denied is that they recognized the historical importance of the various strands of Platonic Orientalism which coalesced in Western Esotericism and dared to suggest that these were important

not only for Western intellectual history but for the history of science as well, an idea previously ridiculed by mainstream historians of science. Hanegraaff concludes the chapter by noting how the definition of Western esotericism has broadened in recent years and how important methodological approaches to the subject have become. All this confirms the vibrancy of current scholarship in this relatively new field of academic scholarship.

Hanegraaf ends his fascinating account of the part Western esotericism has played in the construction of Western identity with a short conclusion that raises the question of how to write the history of Western esotericism. Is there actually such a thing, or have we simply created it? He concludes that we have done both, but creating the category was not done at random; Western esotericism does refer to a nexus of ideas and ways of thinking that must be studied if we are not to diminish the richness of history.

This book is an exceptional achievement. On the basis of his own scholarship and that of many others both dead and alive, Hanegraaf has excavated and reconstructed a virtually lost continent inhabited by fascinating personalities. His book brings to light in a clear and comprehensible way the other half of the dialectic that makes up Western history, and in so doing it shows how inextricably linked the West is to the East and the rational to the esoteric. In short, this book and the history it describes is essential for a more complete understanding of the Reformation, the witchcraze, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, the advent of modernity, and the effects of the disenchantment of the world, not to mention modern conspiracy theories. Such claims can be made for few other monographs.