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Algunas observaciones sobre el estudio de la historia cultural del esoterismo occidental en América Latina

Some remarks on the study of the Cultural History of Western Esotericism in Latin America

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Palabras clave

Esoterismos; Latinoamérica; metodología; prevenciones.

Keywords

Esotericisms; Latin America; Methodology; Precautions

Resumen:

A comienzos de 1990, el esoterismo occidental emergió como objeto académico dentro de la Historia. Desde inicios del siglo XXI, gracias a un gran caudal de investigación, nuestro campo se desarrolló en dos aspectos: surgieron revistas especializadas y tres grandes redes de especialistas (la Association for the Study of Esotericism-ASE; el European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism-ESSWE; y, nuestro Centro de Estudios sobre el Esoterismo Occidental/UNASUR). Aunque la historia del esoterismo occidental en América Latina aún no se ha escrito, nos parece pertinente señalar algunas prevenciones metodológicas en el ámbito de este campo académico.

Abstract.

In the early 1990s, Western esotericism became an academic subject within the realm of history. Thanks to a plethora of research, our field has grown twofold via the emergence of a solid specialized journals; and of three large networks of specialists (the Association for the Study of Esotericism-ASE; the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism-ESSWE, and Centro de Estudios sobre el Esoterismo Occidental/UNASUR). Even though the history of western esotericism in Latin America has yet to be written, there are some methodological preventions to point out that every specialist in Esoterism should observe.

Introduction

In the early 1990s, Western *ésotérisme* started as an academic subject within the realm of history. With the advent of the 21st century, other than the great bibliographic wealth of research, our field was develop in two facets: a solid specialized journals emerged (*Esotérica Journal* –1999–2008; *Aries Journal* –2º epoch–, since 2001; *Correspondences Journal* –since 2013– and *Revista de Historia Melancolía* –since 2016); and three large networks of specialists (the North American *Association for the Study of Esotericism*–ASE, since 2002; the *European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism*–ESSWE, since 2005; and, since 2011, our Latin American *Centro de Estudios sobre el Esoterismo Occidental de la UNASUR*–CEEEO/UNASUR)¹.

Now, whether the methodological question was worked on with substantive progress by eminent scholars as we shall see, it deserves to be debated further.

Therefore, even though between 1999 and 2003, at the beginning of our research on the history of esotericism in Argentina from its diffusion from Europe² we approached this subject³ (our discipline was then novel in North America and Europe and unknown to Latin American scholars); two decades later we find it pertinent to point out methodological preventions that every specialist should observe within the realm of this academic subject.

Cultural History of Western Esotericism in Latin America. Academic background of our field: from Warburg–Yates to Faivre–Hanegraaff

The French historian Antoine Faivre (1934), as well as being the founder, is one of the great scholars in our field. But it is fair to go back further into the beginning of the 20th century and remember the historians who contributed to the precedents of what we now call the history of Western esotericism⁴.

Art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) with his famous lecture in Rome (1912) on the astrological frescoes of Ferrara’s *Palazzo Schifanoia*, was among the first to address a problem hitherto marginal

1 Since 2012, this development has taken on a dizzying and global scale: in the former USSR, the *Association for the Study of Esotericism and Mysticism* (ASEM) was created; in Central and Eastern Europe, the *Central and Eastern European Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism* (CEENASWE); in Ireland, the *Irish Network for the Study of Esotericism and Paganism* (INSEP) was established; in Israel, the *Israeli Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism* (INASWE); in Japan, the *Japanese Network for the Academic Study of Esotericism* (JNASE); in Italy, the *Italian Network for Western Esotericism’s Scientific Research* (NIRSEO). In parallel, networks of scholars have grouped on specific thematic axes: the *European Network for the Study of Islam and Esotericism* (ENSIE), the *Network for the Study of Esotericism in Antiquity* (NSEA) and the *Contemporary Esotericism Research Network* (CONTERN).

2 Juan Pablo Bubello, *Historia del Esoterismo en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2010). This book is the result of the research initiated after becoming a professor of history in the University of Buenos Aires (1999), which implied two stages: a master thesis in sociology of culture and cultural analysis developed in the National University of San Martín (2001-2003) and its deepening within the framework of my PhD thesis in history carried out in the University of Buenos Aires (2003-2008) –both under the supervision of the historian Dr. José E. Burucúa (to whom we will refer below).

3 Bubello, “El aporte de la historiografía francesa actual en torno al centenario debate sobre el concepto de *Magia*”, *Problemas de Historia Moderna. Cuestiones historiográficas, tendencias en la investigación*, ed. María Luz González (Mar del Plata: Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata, 2005), 73-104.

4 Marco Pasi, in his genealogy, he goes back to the learned people of the mid-seventeenth century. Ours, limited to professional historians within the framework of the emergence of social sciences and humanities, is at the beginning of the twentieth century –see: Marco Pasi, “Esotericism Emergent: The Beginning of the Study of Esotericism in the Academy”, in *Secret Religion: gnosticism, esotericism, and mysticism*, ed. April DeConick (Farmington Hills: Macmillan 2016), 143-154.

among his colleagues of that time: the history of magic and Renaissance astrology⁵. This German researcher also supported these studies academically, founding an Institute in Hamburg where he gathered his disciples, whom were, amongst others: Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001), Fritz Saxl (1890–1948), Raymond Klibansky (1905–2005); Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968), Edgar Wind (1900–1971) and Daniel P. Walker (1914–1985). When Warburg died, they published their works⁶, moved the institute to London⁷ and addressed the subject of *nachleben der Antike* in the Renaissance.

In that intellectual and institutional atmosphere, where the *history of magic* was beginning to be glimpsed as one of the topics of research (thanks to the production of D. P. Walker⁸), in 1937, an unknown Englishwoman interested in studying Giordano Bruno broached the subject⁹. In the following almost five decades, she became the most important *Warburgian* historian of magic in modern Europe: Frances Yates (1899–1981)¹⁰.

With her *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*¹¹, she placed herself at the centre of the debates on what was then called the *Scientific Revolution of the 17th century*¹², her originality being to associate “Renaissance magic” with “revolution”¹³.

It would be arduous to review the production which, with solid evidence, demolished the *Thesis Yates* of a *Hermetic Tradition* to its foundations based on the *nachleben* of the magic of the *ancient Hermes Trismegistus* in the Renaissance –which is not even our subject here¹⁴. But, regarding

5 To this end, he proposed revealing the predominant “psychological structure” and “mental states” of that period. Two concepts will be the backbone of his thought, relating to magic: *Pathosformel* and *Denkraum*. He called *Pathosformel* to all expressive formula that, organizing sensitive and significant forms (words, images, gestures and sounds), produce in the receiver an emotion and a meaning linking an idea and an intense feeling. The condition of their comprehension lies in the fact that transmitter and receiver share the same horizon of culture. For this reason, *Pathosformel* originated in a precise moment of history, has a birth in history and is transmitted through social memory in the civilizing process. The *Pathosformel* was related to the *Denkraum* and from there, the Warburgian theory of magic. The *Pathosformeln* were, together with scientific ideas, part of the instruments by which the societies weaved the civilization, with the object of producing a knowledge that allowed the men to increase their dominion in nature. *Denkraum* was the “space for reflection” that placed human beings further and further away from their instinctive reactions or their hominid ancestors. “Magic, Religion and Science” could thus be considered successive thresholds through which civilization had passed in a process of gradual increase of the *Denkraum -sine qua non* condition of representation –see: José E. Burucúa, “Reflexiones sobre la pintura de Guillermo Roux, la noción de *Pathosformel* y una explicación provisoria de la imposibilidad de representación de la Shoah”, *Ramona* 24 (2002): 11-12. Warburg broke with the Positivism prevailing until the Great War, since *Denkraum* could also be contracted (adopting a dual character manifest both in art and in man’s own life), as was observed for each case, in the superstitious form in which the constellations of the firmament were conceived in the Renaissance (not as orientation aids, but as hieroglyphs of prophecy) –see: Ernst Gombrich, “La ambivalencia de la tradición clásica: la psicología cultural de Aby Warburg (1866-1929)”, in *Tributos: versión cultural de nuestras tradiciones*, ed. Ernst Gombrich (Buenos Aires: FCE, 1991), 123-124.

6 Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften. Die Erneuerung der Heidenischen Antike* (Leipzig-Berlin: The Warburg Institute, 1932).

7 This was due to the rise of Nazism. It was under the auspices of the University of London in 1944.

8 Daniel P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic: From Ficino to Campanella* (London: University of London - The Warburg Institute, 1958).

9 Yates pointed out that the suggestion to visit the Warburg came from Dorothea Waley Singer, wife of the famous science historian, Charles Singer –see: Frances Yates, *Ensayos reunidos III. Ideas e ideales del Renacimiento en el norte de Europa* (Mexico DF: FCE, 1993), 462-464.

10 A few years ago, an excellent biography of Yates was published –see: Marjorie G. Jones, *Frances Yates and the Hermetic Tradition* (Lake Worth, FL: Ibis Press, 2008).

11 Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).

12 Yates, “La tradición hermética en la ciencia renacentista”, 333-365.

13 She stressed that the recovery by Renaissance learned people of the ancient Hermes Trismegistus promoted magic at the end of the 15th century, a process enhanced above all by the translation from Greek to Latin of the *Corpus Herméticum* by Marsilio Ficino. On this path, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola promoted a new type of magic different from the medieval one (by linking this hermetic tradition, the Christian Kabbalah, pagan Gnosticism and the appropriation of Jewish traditions), reformulating the position of man in the world (now understanding him as a potential magician who could act on the cosmos and nature). This had been the fundamental “psychological reorientation” of Renaissance magic, the excitement produced by the rediscovery of Hermes, one of the fundamental emotional sources of the “change of attitude” that led to the seventeenth-century science –see: Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 18-19, 40-42, 116.

14 Perhaps Brian Copenhaver was one of the first scholars to begin this task in a systemic way –see: Brian Copenhaver, “Hermes

Argentina, the *warburgian* school diffuser was the Argentinian philologist and classicist Héctor Ciocchini (1922-2005) –who visited the *Warburg* assiduously in the 1960's-¹⁵; and the promoter of the academic studies on the cultural history of magic was the Argentinian historian José E. Burucúa (1946) –his disciple, who, between the mid 1980's and 2004, was chair of *Modern History* at the University of Buenos Aires and taught the characteristics of the “magic in early-modern Europe”, addressing an aspect of this subject in a specific section of his –at present unavoidable– *Lambs and Elephants*¹⁶.

Burucúa, who translated that *Warburg lecture* in 1992¹⁷, exalted Warburg as the “...founder of all scientific studies... on the cultural and cognitive meaning of magic in European civilization...”¹⁸. And we agree.

Although the two most important intellectuals interested in the history of magic pertaining to the generation of scholars after Warburg were the German historian and folklorist Will E. Peuckert (1895-1969) and the North-american science historian Lynn Thorndike (1882-1965)¹⁹, the relative academic isolation in which they carried out their research made it impossible for them to disseminate their contributions (Peuckert remained unknown outside of Germany and Thorndike's meticulous studies were known when they became an authority quoted by Yates). However, the institutionalization of the *Warburg* and its circle of scholars, helped to give continuity, between 30' and 80' of last century, to the academic studies on the “history of magic”.

Thus, it is between those times of hegemony of the Warburg school and the current consolidation of our field that we situate the founding historical milestone of Faivre.

Yates passed away in 1981²⁰. But only two years earlier, in 1979, Faivre was awarded the *Histoire des courants esotériques dans l'Europe moderne et contemporaine* at the *École Pratique des Hautes Etudes -Sorbonne*²¹ (when the *Histoire de l'esotérisme chrétien*, which had been in the hands of

Trismegistus, Proclus, and the Question of a Philosophy of Magic in the Renaissance”, in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, eds. Ingrid Merkel and Allen Debus (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1988), 79-110; Brian Copenhaver, “Renaissance Magic and Neoplatonic Philosophy: 'Ennead' 4.3-5 in Ficino's 'D Vita Coelitus Comparanda'”, in *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone. Studi e documenti II*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Ed., 1986), 351-369.

- 15 Burucúa, *Historia, arte, cultura. De Aby Warburg a Carlo Ginzburg* (Buenos Aires: FCE, 2003), 103-105; Burucúa, “Repercusiones de Aby Warburg na América Latina”, *Concinnitas* 2, no. 21 (2012): 252-280.
- 16 Burucúa, *Corderos y elefantes. La sacralidad y la risa en la modernidad clásica –siglos XVI a XVII* (Buenos Aires: Miño y Dávila, 2001).
- 17 Aby Warburg, “Arte italiana y astrología internacional en el palacio Schifanoia de Ferrara”, in *Historia de las imágenes e historia de las ideas: La escuela de Aby Warburg*, trans. Burucúa (Buenos Aires: CEAL., 1992), 65-93.
- 18 Translation of “...fundador de todos los estudios científicos... sobre el significado cultural y cognoscitivo de la magia en la civilización europea...”. Burucúa, *Historia de las imágenes*, 13.
- 19 Lynn Thorndike, *The Place of Magic in the Intellectual History of Europe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1905); Thorndike, *A history of magic and experimental science* (1923) (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929); Will E. Peuckert, *Das Leben Jacob Böhm's* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1924); Peuckert, *Die Rosenkreutzer: Zur Geschichte der Reformation* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1928); Peuckert, *Pansophie: Ein Versuch zur Geschichte der weissen und schwarzen Magie* (1936) (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1956); Peuckert, *Theophrastus Paracelsus* (Stuttgart/Berlin: Kohlhammer, 1941); Peuckert, *Astrologie: Geschichte der Geheimwissenschaften Band I* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1960).
- 20 His intellectual heritage is unavoidable for those who are academically initiated in our subject and want to go through the classics. Among the translations into Spanish, see: Yates, *El Iluminismo Rosacruz* (Mexico DF: FCE, 1981); *La filosofía oculta en la época isabelina* (Mexico DF: FCE, 1992); *El Arte de la Memoria* (Madrid: Siruela, 2005); *Giordano Bruno y la Tradición Hermética* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1994). All her articles (from 1913 until her death) were published –see: *Collected Essays, I, II, III* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982-1984), with Spanish translation, *Ensayos Reunidos, I, II, III* (Mexico City: FCE, 1993-1996).
- 21 Antoine Faivre and Caren-Klaire Voss, “Western Esoterism and the Science of Religions”, *Numen* 42, no. 1 (1995): 59.

historian Francois Secret since 1965, was suppressed)²². Faivre remained at the *École Pratique des Hautes Etudes* until 2002, where he was succeeded by French historian Jean-Pierre Brach (1956)²³.

The particularity of this chair at the Sorbonne was –and is– its commitment to the teaching and research of a specific subject within history: Western esotericism.

Invited by his fellow French historians Pierre Nora (1931) and Jacques Le Goff (1924–2014) to write about his innovative proposal, Faivre published three successive books in 1986, 1992 –where he specified his idea and method– and 1994²⁴. Western esotericism ranged from the 15th–16th centuries to the present (although its roots could be traced back to the Greco–Roman world) and was made up of a set of currents which, without prejudice to the historical nuances, were linked to magic, astrology, Christian Kabbalah, alchemy, hermetic tradition, Rosicrucian movements, 18th century theosophists, occultism, Freemasonry, 19th century theosophy, Gnosticism and anthroposophy. In their “way of thinking”, they shared four elements that made them have an *air de famille*: a representation based on the intimate analogical linkage of all parts of a cosmos that was represented as interdependent and living, where the principles of correspondence and living nature operated, applicable from the attempt by esotericists to link the world with the hereafter; the practice of mediation and imagination in the relationship man/universe; and seeking the experience of transmutation (transformation) of the world (plus two elements not necessarily present): the erudite practice of finding a concordance between diverse religions and the initiatory transmission of knowledge ²⁵.

Since the mid-1990s, Faivre has been specifying the limits of his approach under the heat of understandable critiques (although they deserve more elaboration and, therefore, we will not enter here)²⁶.

22 Secret made a great contribution to the history of the Renaissance Kabbalah –among others, see: *Les Kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Dunod, 1964); *Guillaume Postel (1510-1581) et son interprétation du candélabre de Moïse en hébreu, latin, italien et français* (Nieukoop: De Graaf, 1966). There is a Spanish version: *La kabbala cristiana del Renacimiento* (Madrid: Taurus, 1979).

23 Brach is making fruitful contributions, publishing, among others: with Jérôme Rousse-Lacordaire (dirs.), *Études d'histoire de l'ésotérisme* (Paris: Cerf, 2007); “Son of the Son of God: the feminine Messiah and her progeny, according to Guillaume Postel (1510-1581)”, in *Alternative Christs*, ed. Olav Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 113-130; “Spiritual Authority and the Transmission of Knowledge in Christian Kabbalah: the Case of Guillaume Postel (1510-81)”, in *Constructing Tradition. Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism*, ed. A. Kilcher (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 303-321; “Guillaume Postel et la Sextessence”, in *Les Muses secrètes. Kabbale, alchimie et littérature à la Renaissance. Hommage à François Secret*, ed. R. Gorris Camos (Droz: Genève, 2013), 81-94; “Tradition primordiale et christianisme dans les articles rédigés par R. Guénon pour la revue catholique Regnabit (1925-27)”, in *René Guénon. L'appel de la sagesse primordiale*, ed. P. Faure (Paris: Cerf, 2015), 299-336; “Mathematical Esotericism”, in *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, dir. G. A. Magee (Cambridge: Cambridge, University Press, 2016), 404-416.

24 Faivre, “L'ésotérisme et la recherche universitaire”, in *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 13-42; Faivre, *L'ésotérisme* (Paris: PUF, 1992), 13-21; Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994). The book published in French in 1992 was published in English a decade ago –see: Faivre, *Western Esotericism. A concise history* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010).

25 In 1992, Faivre also published a book compiling articles –see: Faivre and Jacob Needleman (eds.), *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* (New York: The Crossroad Pub. Co., 1992). It was published in Spanish –see: *Espiritualidad de los movimientos esotéricos modernos* (Buenos Aires: Paidós Orientalia, 2000). Faivre approached esoteric movements –without the methodology he would propose in the 1990s– in the early 1970s, in his contribution to the book of Henri-Charles Puech, *Historie des Religions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972) –for Spanish version, see: “El esoterismo cristiano de los siglos XVI al XX”, in *Historia de las religiones. Las religiones constituidas en Occidente y sus contracorrientes*, dir. Henri-Charles Puech (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1981), 303-373.

26 We can understand esotericism as the result of a particular “great narrative” that in the West prohibited and rejected certain specific knowledge? We can add the question of the “secret” as a central element of Faivre’s model? How can we understand and define the expression “western” in western esotericism? Must we leave behind the very term “esotericism” and go in search of new terminologies and concepts? Is there an “Islamic esotericism”? –see: Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the mirror of secular culture* (Brill: Leiden, 1996), 396-401; Hanegraaff, “Forbidden Knowledge. Anti-Esoteric

But, as the Dutch historian Wouter Hanegraaff (1961) points out –who, at the *Universiteit van Amsterdam* in 1999 founded the chair *Geschiedenis van de hermetische filosofie en verwante stromingen* (“History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents”, second after the one created at the Sorbonne) and who was President of the ESSWE (2005–2013)– specialists have gone beyond the *Yates Thesis*²⁷.

Within this framework (post-yatesian and faivrano), dozens of specialists accumulated a large bibliographic wealth, contributing to the development of a discipline that, in 1998, was considered newborn²⁸. If the publication of the *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism* (nowadays a must)²⁹ was a great advance; as far as Argentina is concerned, since 2007 we have been giving uninterrupted seminars –undergraduate and postgraduate– on the “History of Western Esotericism in Modern Europe” at the University of Buenos Aires, we have founded the *Centro de Estudios sobre el Esoterismo Occidental* (2011) and the *Revista de Historia Melancolía* (2016), and published articles and books³⁰.

In synthesis, the Warburgian concept of magic, the pioneering institutionalization of studies at the *Warburg Institute* and the subsequent *boom* of academic research promoted by

Polemics and Academic Research”, *Aries* V, no. 2 (2005), 225-254; Kocku Von Stuckrad, “Western esotericism: towards and integrative model of interpretation”, *Religion* 35 (2005): 7-97; Faivre, “Kocku von Stuckrad et la notion d’ esoterisme”, *Aries* VI, no. 2 (2006): 205-214; Pier Luigi Zoccatelli, “Note per uno studio scientifico dell’ esoterismo”, in *Tra religione e spiritualità. Il rapporto con il sacro nell’ epoca del pluralism*, ed. G. Giordan (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2006), 222-234; Pasi, “Il problema della definizione dell’ esoterismo: analisi critica e proposte per la ricerca futura”, in *Forme e correnti dell’ esoterismo occidentale*, ed. A. Grossato (Milano: Edizioni Medusa, 2008), 205-228; Kennet Granholm, “Post-secular Esotericism? Some reflections on the transformation of Esotericism”, *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 20 (2008): 50-67; Olaf Hammer, “Deconstructing ‘Western Esotericism’: on Wouter Hanegraaff’s *Esotericism and the Academy*”, *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 241-251; Hanegraaff, “The notion of ‘Occult Sciences’ in the wake of Enlightenment”, in *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Wege in die Moderne*, eds. M. Neugebauer, R. G. Wolk y M. Meumann (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 1-24; Hanegraaff, “The power of ideas: esotericism, historicism, and the limits of discourse”, *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 252-273; Pasi, “The problems of rejected knowledge: thoughts on Wouter Hanegraaff’s *Esotericism and the Academy*”, *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 201-212; Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms: Sociological, Historical and Critical Approaches to the Invention of Tradition”, in *Cowntemporary esotericism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 25-48; Kennet Granholm, “Locating the west. Problematicizing the western in western esotericism and occultism”, in *Occultism in a global perspective*, eds. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (London: Acumen Publishing, 2013), 17-36; Egil Asprem, “Beyond the West: Towards a new comparativism in the Study of Western Esotericism”, *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014): 3-33; Kocku von Stuckrad, “Ancient Esotericism, Problematic Assumptions, and Conceptual Trouble”, *Aries* 15 (2015): 16-20; Kocku von Stuckrad, “Esoteric/Esotericism”, in *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*, eds. Kocku von Stuckrad and Robert Segal (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2015), 526-529; Kenneth Granholm, “Sociology and the occult”, en *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Partridge (London-New York, Routledge, 2015), 720-732; Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism”, *Correspondences* 3, no. 1 (2015): 55-91; Kocku von Stuckrad, “Esotericism Disputed: Major Debates in the Field”, in *Secret Religion gnosticism, esotericism, and mysticism*, 171-181; Hanegraaff, “Esotericism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Esotericism”, in *Secret Religion: gnosticism, esotericism, and mysticism*, 155-170; Aren Roukema and Allan Kilner-Johnson, “Time to Drop the ‘Western’”, *Correspondences* 6, no. 2 (2018): 109-115; Mark Sedgwick, “Is there such a thing as Islamic esotericism”, in *Hermes explains. Thirty questions about Western Esotericism*, ed. Hanegraaff, Forshaw, Pasi (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 216-225; Mark Sedgwick, “Islamic and Western Esotericism”, *Correspondences* 7, no. 1 (2019): 277-299.

27 We agree with his two central points: 1) even though Yates will always have the credit of opening the doors to the debate of an original subject in the academic world, he had established his thesis on “Renaissance magic” based on the idea of “secular progress” (where magic assumed a static character in the face of the disruption implied by the emergence of modern science); thus raising an association of the medieval centuries with the dark ages in the face of a progressive triumph of science that began, precisely, with the magic of the Renaissance; 2) if Yates’ subject was strictly confined to the past, that of Faivre is not (the “hermeticism” was placed in the XV-XVII centuries, the “western esotericism”, from the XV century to the present time - and with unavoidable modifications in function of the historical change –see: Hanegraaff, “Beyond the Yates Paradigm. The study of western esotericism between counterculture and new complexity”, *Aries* 1, no. 1 (2001): 5-37; Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 338.

28 Hanegraaff, “The birth of a discipline”, in *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion: Selected Papers presented at the 17th Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Mexico City 1995*, eds. Faivre y Hanegraaff (Louvain: Peeters, 1998), VII-XVII.

29 Hanegraaff, Faivre, Roelof, Van der Broek, Brach, *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*.

30 Bubello, *Historia del Esoterismo en la Argentina*; Bubello, Chaves and Mendonça Jr., *Estudios sobre la historia del Esoterismo Occidental en América Latina*.

the *Yates Thesis*, as well as the great historiographic renovation around *Western esotericism* promoted above all by Faivre, Hanegraaff and Brach from their university chairs³¹, have brought us here. The *Association for the Study of Esotericism*, the *European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism* and the *Centro de Estudios sobre el Esoterismo Occidental de la UNASUR* (as well as our activity in –and from– the University of Buenos Aires), are heirs of the hard work carried out by last century’s generations of scholars.

Cultural history of Western esotericism in Latin America: methodological precautions (from Faivre – Hanegraaff to Pasi – Asprem).

There is historical documentary evidence that demonstrates the very early dissemination to America –from Europe and by crossing the Ocean– of treaties and books whose practices and representations were linked to our subject. Here are two examples of this.

In a record of the books that the Sevillian Luis de Padilla sent from Spain to the *Indies* in 1603, we read:

...154r: Porta, fisionomia y de yerbas... 159r: los secretos de Leonardo Fierabante.... 8 rs., marsilio ficino de triplici vita,... 163r:... 12 rs, la practica medicinal de paracelso en latin..., 164r: poligrafia de juan tritemio... 165v: Theofastri Paraselsi Medicini compendium,... Juanes Piçi cabalistarum dosmata...³²

Texts by (or attributed to) alchemists Leonardo Fioravanti (1517-1588), Giovanni Battista della Porta (1515-1635) and Theophrastus Phillippus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim –*Paracelsus*– (1493-1541), the magicians Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516) and the Christian cabalist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) were exponents of what we call “western esotericism”.

In 1631, the young John Winthrop Jr. (1606-1676) –who became the first governor of Connecticut and later joined the *Royal Society*³³ – immigrated to the English colonial territories in North America. Interested in alchemy, he brought with him from England his magnificent library (which in the succeeding years became hundreds of volumes)³⁴. Among these we not only find –again–

31 In 2006, the University of Exeter founded a third chair at the behest of Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (1953–2012); but after his death, the academic authorities decided to close it down.

32 “...154r: Porta, fisionomia y de yerbas... 159r: los secretos de Leonardo Fierabante.... 8 rs., marsilio ficino de triplici vita,... 163r:... 12 rs, la practica medicinal de paracelso en latin..., 164r: poligrafia de juan tritemio... 165v: Theofastri Paraselsi Medicini compendium,... Juanes Piçi cabalistarum dosmata...” “Registro de Luis de Padilla, vecino de Sevilla que tiene cargado en la nao la Trinidad, para dar en el puerto de San Juan de Ulua a Martin de Ibarra y en su ausencia a Francisco de Lara” (AGI, *Contratación*, 1135, 153r-169v, Sevilla, 1603).

33 Arthur Versluis, *The Esoteric Origins of the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 31-33.

34 We follow the study of that library by the American science historian Ronald Wilkinson (1934-2009). See: Ronald S. Wilkinson, “The Alchemical Library of John Winthrop, Jr. (1606-1676) and His Descendants in Colonial America,” *Ambix* X (1963): 33-51, and *Ambix* XIII (1965-66): 129-138.

texts by Fioravanti³⁵ and Porta³⁶, but also, by the astrologer Gerolamo Cardano (1501-1576)³⁷, the magicians John Dee (1527-1609?)³⁸ and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535)³⁹ and seventeenth-century authors: Johann Andreas (1586-1654)⁴⁰, Michael Maier (1568-1622)⁴¹, and Elias Ashmole (1617-1692)⁴².

We have already pointed out that, from a geographical point of view, it is clear that “western esotericism” includes Europe, North America and, in its own right, the regions that make up what we call Latin America today⁴³. But, from a historical perspective, this documentary evidence allows us to observe the gradual diffusion of European esotericism towards American societies since the beginning of the colonial period (a process that continued in the following centuries, even during the period of independence)⁴⁴. At this point, recalling the pertinent observations of our Italian colleague Marco Pasi (1968) on the two ways in which to approach our subject historically (as a particular phenomenon of a specific period –which then spreads; or as a manifestation of an aspect of human behavior which is observed in diverse cultures within a broad temporal and geographical spectrum)⁴⁵; we think that in the practices and representations of the original populations of America before 1492 cannot be approached with Faivre’s academic construct⁴⁶.

Therefore, the “History of esotericism in America” and, in that framework, the “History of esotericism in Latin America”, are delineated as the specific academic subject of the “History of Western esotericism”⁴⁷.

- 35 Fioravanti, Leonardo. *Capricci Medicinali Di M. Leonardo Fioravanti Medico Bolognese, Divisi In Tre Libri. Nel Primo Insegna A Conoscere uarij, & diuersi Segni Naturali, con molti secreti mirabili nella medicina, & cirugia. Nel Secondo Dimostra Il Modo Di far uarij, & diuersi medicamenti. Nel Terzo Si Tratta Dell’ Alchimia dell’ huomo, & dell’ Alchimia minerale, materia molto vtilissima a ciascheduno. Col Privilegio. In Venetia, Appresso Lodouico Auanzo. MDLXI.*
- 36 Porta, Giambattista della. *Baptistae Portae Neapolitani, Magiae Natvralis Libri Viginti, In Qvibvs Scientiarvm Naturalium diuitiae, & deliciae demonstrantur. Iam De Novo, Ab Omnibvs mendis repurgati, in lucem prodierunt. Accessit Index, remomnem dilucide repraesentans, copiosissimus. Librorum ordinem, qui in hoc opere continentur, versa pagina indicabit. Hanoviae, Typis Wechelianis, impensis Danielis ac Davidis Aubriorum & Clementis Schleichii. MDCXIX.*
- 37 Cardano, Girolamo. *Tomvs II. Hieronymi Cardani Mediolanensis Civisque Bononiensis Medici. Dialectica. Hyperchen. De Socratis studio. Antigorgias dialogus seu directa uiuendiratione. De Aqua liber. De Aethere liber. De Cyna radice seu de decoctis magnis. Basileae [colophon:] Ex Officina Henrie Petrina, Mense Martio, An. MDLXVI. 8vo.*
- 38 Dee, John. *Monas Hieroglyphica Ioannis Dee, Londinensis, Ad Maximilianvm, Dei Gratia Romanorvm, Bohemiae et Hvngariae Regem Sapientissimum. Guliel. Silvius Typog. Regius, Excud. Antuerpiae, 1564.*
- 39 Agrippa, Heinrich Cornelius. *Three Books Of Occult Philosophy, Written By Henry Cornelius Agrippa, Of Nettesheim, Counsellor to Charles the Fifth, Emperor of Germany: and Iudge of the Prerogative Court. Translated out of the Latin into the English Tongue, by J. F. [J. French] London, Printed by R. W. for Gregory Moule, and are to be sold neer the West-end of Pauls. 1651.*
- 40 [Andrae, Johann Valentin]. *Chymische Hochzeit: Christiani Rosencreutz. Anno 1459. Arcana publicata vilescent: & gratiam prophanata amittunt. Ergo: ne Margaritas objice porcis, seu Asino subterne rosas. Strassburg, In Verlagung, Lazari Zetzners S. Erben. Anno MDCXVI. 8vo, 143.*
- 41 Maier, Michael. *Arcana Arcanissima Hoc Est Hieroglyphica Aegyptio-Graeca... Encyclopaediam errores sparsi clarissima veritate luce manifestantur, suaeq; tribui singula restituuntur, sex libris exposita Authore Michaelae Maiero Comite Palatii Caesarei, Eqvite Exemto, Phil: & Med: Doct: &c: Caesar: Mai: quondam Aulico. [Oppenheim, ca. 1614].*
- 42 Ashmole, Elias. *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum. Containing Severall Poeticall Pieces of our Famous English Philosophers, who have written the Hermetique Mysteries in their owne Ancient Language. Faithfully Collected into one Volume, with Annotations thereon, By Elias Ashmore, Esq. Qui est Mercuriophilus Anglicus. The First Part. London, Printed by J. Grismond for Nath: Brooke, at the Angel in Cornhill. MDCLII. 4to, [16], 486, [9].*
- 43 Bubello and Mendonça Jr., “Presentación: La institucionalización de los estudios académicos sobre la historia del esoterismo occidental en América del Sur: el Centro de Estudios sobre el Esoterismo Occidental de la UNASUR. Problemas y desafíos”, *Rey Desnudo IV* (2013): 154-159; Bubello, Chaves and Mendonça Jr., “Los estudios académicos sobre el Esoterismo Occidental” and *Estudios sobre la historia del Esoterismo Occidental en América Latina*, 9-24.
- 44 Bubello, “Difusión del esoterismo europeo-occidental en el Nuevo Continente (siglos XVI-XX): la conformación de un ‘campo esotérico’ en la Argentina del siglo XX”, in *Estudios sobre la historia del Esoterismo Occidental en América Latina: enfoques, aportes, problemas y debates*, 39-96.
- 45 Pasi, “Esotericism Emergent”, 143-154.
- 46 We will not address this problem here, although we have already flown over it synthetically –see: Bubello, *Historia del Esoterismo en Argentina*, 25-39.
- 47 We have already proposed a series of initial questions (which of course do not exhaust all the possible questions to be formulated

But what are the methodological preventions when we approach this subject?

In his founding texts, Faivre strictly defended the historical approach to sources. He specified that if *Western esotericism* was an academic object of research, it was so on condition of observing a strict secular attitude and a rigorous empirical method, circumscribing the inquiry to the development of human actions in history: that “methodological agnosticism”, without wondering about supposed subjects related to the *méta-empirique* was fundamental⁴⁸, the specialists having to: 1) taxatively separate the studies on esotericism from the esoteric praxis; 2), not to integrate into their analyses metaphysical questions that cannot be verified⁴⁹.

The one who took up the methodological contributions since the mid-1990s was the aforementioned Hanegraaff with three landmark texts.

In 1995, he stressed that, without prejudice to personal beliefs (or in their absence), of the “specialists in so far as they are specialists” of our area, the existence –or non-existence– of sacred, metaphysical or divine realities is beyond any empirical observation. Thus, studies should be limited to what can be historically verified (through the description, the analysis or explanation of esoteric beliefs, without assessing whether they are correct or wrong, real or not)⁵⁰. In 1998, he emphasized that the Faivre’s proposal was strictly a “scholarly construct” to avoid pro or anti esoteric visions; a perspective that, solidly grounded in empirical research, differed from the approaches that sought to include sources as a vehicle to express their own spiritual beliefs or supposed meta-historical truths⁵¹. In 1999, he specifically pointed out that our academic subject is not a “history of religion” –in the sense of the search for the sacred, since the latter is not supported by transhistorical categories⁵².

on the subject), in order to be precise future investigations. For example, can we distinguish culturally nurtured esotericism from Anglo-Holand-French colonization in North America, from esotericism based on the cultural patterns promoted by Spaniards and Portuguese in regions ranging from Mexico to Patagonia; that is, “Anglo-Saxon/Protestant” esotericism and “Latin/Catholic” esotericism, at least until the 18th century?; and if this initial differentiation were feasible, what would be the points of contact and differences between the two? What were the esoteric practices and representations in both cultural universes? What treatises, books or texts on esotericism were published in North America and from Mexico towards the south? Was there in this period circulation in both regions of esoteric texts published in Europe? and if so, what were those texts? How did they influence? How did they come to America? And we need a limit set in the eighteenth century because another problem linked to the history of esotericism in our American continent occurs from the nineteenth century and this leads us to another large group of questions. Beyond the process of secularization, modernization and the so-called “disenchantment of the world” that marked a new historical moment in the West –and in the very history of “western esotericism”, as far as America is concerned we know that millions of Europeans settled between circa 1870-1930 (mainly in the United States, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina). Thus, the esotericism in force until then necessarily transformed with the cultural changes introduced by this great wave of immigration. Much remains to be investigated: what were the characteristics assumed by esotericism in the countries of Latin America since the nineteenth century?; what was the incidence and how was that esotericism related to the current one in each of the cases?; who were the referents of this eventually new esotericism?; did they maintain their ties with the representatives of European esotericism and, if so, how did they do it?; what were the texts, books, treaties with which esotericists have produced, defended and disseminated their practices and representations in this concrete framework? –see: Bubello, Chaves and Mendonça Jr., “Los estudios académicos sobre el Esoterismo Occidental”, 1-6.

48 Faivre, “L’ésotérisme et la recherche universitaire”, 32-42.

49 Faivre and Voss, “Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions”, 48-77; Faivre, “Renaissance Hermeticism and the concept of Western Esotericism”, in *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, eds. van den Broek and Hanegraaff (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 109-123; Faivre, *L’ésotérisme* (Paris: PUF, 2007), 3-29.

50 Hanegraaff, “On the Construction of ‘Esoteric Traditions’”, in *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, 22-26.

51 Hanegraaff, “The birth of a discipline”, in *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion*, VII-XVII. He criticized the approach of the French philosopher Pierre Riffard, as universalist and transhistorical, in his *L’ésotérisme* (Paris: Laffont, 1990), because he associated esotericism to a category on a world scale, from prehistoric times to the present, and defended that the scholar should combine his historical analysis of sources with a “real understanding” that only emerged from being, himself, an esotericist. Hanegraaff, “On the Construction of ‘Esoteric Traditions’”, 22-26. Hanegraaff insisted that the Faivrian notion of Western esotericism should be understood exclusively as a modern academic construction: “‘Western esotericism’ is a modern scholarly construct, not an autonomous tradition that already existed out there and merely needed to be discovered by historians.” –see: Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism. A guide for the perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 3.

52 Hanegraaff, “Some remarks on the study of western esotericism”, *Esoterica* 1 (1999): 3-21.

Now, after those seminal contributions, in an article –published in two parts in 2002 and 2003– and in his book –of 2007–, the North American Arthur Versluis (1959) of Michigan State University and founder and the President of the afore mentioned ASE, he proposed a methodology defined as “sympathetic empiricism”.

Based on the knowledge that historiographic practice and the accumulation of historical information were not sufficient to understand the nature of “thought, traditions, and above all, esoteric experiences”, he proposed alternating *etic* approaches (based on the standards of scientific objectivity and the historical method) with *emic* approaches (anchored in “some degree of imaginative participation, from within”). This “sympathetic empiricism” then consisted of “going and going back” to the object of study, with the aim of avoiding both “reductionist ignorance” and “antiesoteric hostility” (which, he claimed, underlay the narrowly etic approaches) as well as the “apologetic” stance (which inevitably arose in the strictly *emic* perspective). He stressed that this was the position between historiographic objectivation and phenomenological subjectivation, since, in order to understand esotericism “completely”, the scholar had to analyze historical sources and experience by himself (“*undergo oneself*”) the esoteric experiences described in the texts. With that experience, one had to enter “those other dimensions of consciousness” that the mere erudite study of sources could not address⁵³.

Since 2012 Hanegraaff’s meticulous replicas of that method have emerged. He qualified as “occultist scholarship” the methodological proposal that combines personal beliefs with the historical approach to the sources, since it raises a priori the existence of “two parallel planes of reality” and assumes that the meaning of the term esotericism refers to an inner spiritual dimension hidden under exoteric traditions (thus placing itself between “esoteric religiosity” and “historical research”)⁵⁴. He critically reviewed the production of Carl Jung (1875-1961) and the referents of the “Circle of Éranos” (1933-1988)⁵⁵, labeling their methods of “religionism”, in the sense that their ultimate objectives (not always explicit) were to explore historical sources in search of what was presumed to be eternal and universal⁵⁶. He observed that they were presented as historical approaches, but the reference of the beliefs studied was not inscribed within the domain of human culture and society, but in the direct and immediate personal experience of the Divine⁵⁷. He especially criticized Eliade, Corbin and Sholem (who dealt with the magical and the hidden in some of his texts), to emphasize that, behind their historiographic projects, underlying a normative one, whose aim was to demonstrate that myth and mysticism were better than legalism

53 Arthur Versluis, “What is Esoteric? Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism”, *Esoterica* IV (2002): 1-15; “What is Esoteric? Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism”, *Esoterica* V (2003): 27-40. More precisely in 2007 he said: “What I am suggesting, in other words, is that in magic and mysticism we see *areas* of study that by their nature are not entirely reducible to objects of rationalist discourse and manipulation, but instead border on and open into dimensions of life than remain partially veiled to us unless we enter into them for ourselves. Better than alternative terms, the word gnosis helps convey some sense of these other dimensions of consciousness. Esotericism, in other words, borders on consciousness studies, and its experiential center also results in its inherent and definitive syncretism (mingling disparate religious beliefs) or syncretism (mingling practices)” –see: Arthur Versluis, *Magic and mysticism. An introduction to Western Esotericism* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Pub., 2007), 5.

54 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 251.

55 Among others, Hanegraaff included the mythologists Walter F. Otto (1874-1958) and Karl Kerényi (1887-1973), the pioneer of Jewish Kabbalah studies, Gershom Scholem (1897-1982); the islamist Henry Corbin (1903-1978); the historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907-1986); the historian of gnosticism Gilles Quispel (1916-2006); Antoine Faivre (1934-) in his initial text of the 70s; and the mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) –see: Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 278 y 308

56 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 296.

57 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 311.

and the doctrines of exoteric Jewish and Islamic religions⁵⁸. He emphasized that these normative judgments could not be based on historical evidence, since, in the sources, the historian does not discover any truth, but conflicting discourses on such truths. Therefore, when the scholar abandoned “methodological agnosticism” and adopted a position in favor of one of these discourses, it started from a philosophical or theological *a priori*⁵⁹, which implied an essentialist position (a belief, not a fact of history), replacing the historical approach with a metaphysical one. The study of esotericism thus became a crypto-theological activity that felt free to pass the limit of history in pursuit of a “superior knowledge” that would hide in the deep levels of the supposed reality⁶⁰. But since this metaphysical “truth” can never be found in history, it will never be discovered by the “historian as historian”⁶¹.

In 2013, Hanegraaff linked Versluis⁶² to that controversial method and, in 2016, emphasized that “religionism and historicism” were “in deep conflict”:

...religionism assigns only secondary importance to precisely those kinds of questions that are most central to the work of historians, such as how or why specific currents, ideas, or practices that we nowadays categorize as “esotericism” have emerged as new formations out of specific historical factors and backgrounds, or how they have developed or were transformed under ever-changing historical and social contexts and circumstances. Instead of focusing on creativity and innovation, religionism seeks to demonstrate the enduring presence, regardless of context, of one and the same universal worldview or spiritual reality ... In sharp contrast, a historicist perspective does not start from any presumed metaphysical reality “up there” but from the enormous variety of historical sources and observable realities that are empirically present in the world “down here.” Because its focus is on the unique and specific, its interest lies with studying processes of transformation and creative innovation in continuous historical and social flux... Religionism means that scholars are guided by assumptions that are ultimately grounded not in scholarly methods but in personal beliefs, experiences, hopes, or aspirations about the existence of an ultimate spiritual reality that remains forever true and valid regardless of historical change. By contrast, historicism means that one makes no assumptions at all about the existence or nonexistence of an ultimate spiritual reality, but simply concentrates on what one can know for certain: its focus is on the unquestionable empirical presence, in time and space, of a whole range of currents, practices, and ideas that (for historical and ideological reasons that might well be questioned) have been categorized and set apart by labels such as “esotericism,” “the occult,” and so on⁶³.

Now, despite Faivre and Hanegraaff’s contributions, some scholars still propose controversial research methods. This is the case of the vice-president of the ASE (and Director of the Department

58 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 308.

59 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 310.

60 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 311.

61 Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 297.

62 Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism. A guide for the perplexed*, 11. He pointed out: “He is... the most prominent American representative, in his generation, of a pure religionist approach to esotericism in the tradition of Eliade, Corbin or the younger Faivre” –see: Hanegraaff, “Textbooks and introductions to Western Esotericism”, *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 186.

63 Hanegraaff, “Esotericism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Esotericism”, in *Secret Religion gnosticism, esotericism, and mysticism*, 166, 167 and 169.

of Religious Studies of the College of Charleston –United States) Lee Irwin (1944?-). In 2017, He proposed to address:

...‘metaphysical’ contents... or thought worlds that references a variety of modes of knowing. Such knowing privileges mind (or perhaps consciousness) and includes intuition, extrasensory perceptions, altered states, and nonordinary experiences that reveal the correspondent links between material and spiritual worlds...⁶⁴.

And, to that end, he proposed searching for “evidence” in “fields of research, as well as a growing body of ethnographic and therapeutic accounts” that he affirmed “strongly supports a historical trajectory”⁶⁵.

He had already formulated this method before:

The panpsychic perspective on nature as ensouled reflects innumerable morphologies whose contributions to the whole of esotericism only enrich and deepen the potential “convergence of paradigms” that so often contributes to the multilayered nature of esoteric studies⁶⁶... As scholars, we can demonstrate that “esotericism” ... reflects the creative expression of human freedom in search of insight and spiritual development. As a field of study, esotericism has no boundaries by either discipline or methodology; in a global context, we have the freedom to consciously explore the morphologies of esotericism within whatever discipline best motivates our research or practice. Panpsychism simply reflects one such key idea; it articulates, in a rudimentary way, cross currents from philosophy, religion, ecology, biology, physics, alchemy, hermeticism, astrology, and magic. In the words of ecological philosopher Henryk Skolimowski, “connectedness and wholeness are essential features for reading the book of nature in a new way.” This applies, I believe, to the study of esotericism as well⁶⁷.

In 2016, he presented his Lecture “Cartographies of Soul in NDE.: Challenges to Esotericism”⁶⁸, where he pointed out his “increasing interest in the intersection of paranormal research, transpersonal theory, and esoteric studies liberated from a strictly historical framework”, proposing to “expand” the approach from history towards “contemporary disciplines” (“medicine, parapsychology, literary genres, philosophy, semantics, transpersonal studies, anthropology and comparative religions”) and rely on theories of “mind” and “consciousness”, “post-Darwinian biology” (which linked the “paranormal”) and “contemporary physics”, in order to access human “potentialities” (their “capacity for transformation and spiritual enlightenment”)⁶⁹.

64 Lee Irwin, *Reincarnation in America: An Esoteric History* (Lexington: Books, 2017), XXIII.

65 Lee, “Reincarnation in America: A Brief Historical Overview”, *Religions* 8 (2017): 222.

66 Irwin, “Panpsychism”, in *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, ed. G. A. Magee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 417-428.

67 Lee, “A World Full of Gods: Panpsychism and the Paradigms of Esotericism”, in *Esotericism, religion and nature*, eds. Arthur Versluis, Claire Fanger, Lee Irwin, Mellinda Phillips (North American Academic Press, 2010), 52.

68 In ASE-Sixth International Conference. The text, to date unpublished, has been made available by Irwin on his own webpage. He presented himself as: “... an interdisciplinary scholar with a wide range of interests, including Native American religions, parapsychology, transpersonal theory, comparative mysticism, and western esotericism. I am currently Vice President of the Association for the Study of Western Esotericism... I am also a Guiding Voice for the Seven Pillars House of Wisdom, a member of the The Inayati [Sufi] Order, and a member of AMORC.” –see: <https://cofc.academia.edu/Leelrwin>

69 “My own preference is to see esoteric studies as fully contemporary and not simply as a historical purview of past systems,

Irwin's personal (intimate) itinerary (and his longing for "spiritual growth" or "knowledge" along with a parallel intellectual approach to native North American religions, Asian and Siberian shamanism, Daoism, Islamic Sufism, and Gnostic or hermetic groups), are not to be criticized. But, in the academic world, historians critically and collectively produce knowledge about the past, based on a method of precise analysis that consists of rigorous, serious and thorough reading of the preserved documentary sources. And this historical knowledge, thus obtained, generally clashes with individual beliefs, personal opinion or faith: our Norwegian colleague Egil Asprem (1984) pointed out recently –and correctly– that, even, the conflict can come to deal with the same historical facts⁷⁰.

Conclusions

To research the cultural history of esotericism (Western, American or Latin American), we have our own approach, precisions and methodological suggestions developed by Faivre, Hanegraaff, Pasi and Asprem, and dissent *tout court* with Versluis and Irwin.

During the first decade of the 21st century, we emphasize that the discourse of the historians of esotericism must respect their object. This implies that they should not articulate statements with disqualifications such as those traditionally used by folklorists ("superstition" or "ignorance"); or to echo the psychological-psychiatric discourse which, in certain cases, places the magical and the esoteric among the psychological characteristics inherent to man's thought (inhibiting the possibility of explaining cultural changes in time or in chronologically contemporary socio-cultural systems) and, at worst, directly pathologizes it (of course, it is unthinkable to explain the esoteric in terms of demonologization or demonization, in the same way certain militant discourses from the Christian Churches have been doing for centuries). But, on the other hand, scholars cannot –nor should they– seek to understand or explain their subject in terms of efficacy

persons, or organizations. It seems natural that any new discipline would construct a viable and meaningful history of its areas of interest. Having done that, that is having constructed historical precedent and foundational texts, persons, and traditions, the next phase it seems to me is to expand our studies into the context of contemporary research in multiple disciplines... I have drawn upon several disciplines that I see as relevant to esoteric studies: medicine, parapsychology, literary genres, philosophy, semantics, transpersonal studies, anthropology, and comparative religions... I would argue that what makes esotericism interesting is not its historicity nor the fact that past human beings had unique, unusual, or nonordinary ideas or experiences, but rather that the gnosis evident in those traditions represents a fundamental human capacity for transformation and spiritual illumination. What makes esotericism meaningful is this capacity that we all have for greater awareness in an increasingly complex cosmos of material, energetic, subtle and psychic possibilities. The real esotericism is right here, right now, in the heart and minds of living human beings. And esoteric studies, as an interdisciplinary approach to human potential, need to embrace all disciplines that support the exploration of that potential. That is why esotericism does not have a home in any one discipline; we are multidisciplinary scholars and the context for research is as much in the present and future as in the past. This does not mean that historical studies are obviated, or ancillary, but foundational to continued research into new areas of study no longer restricted to past models. While historical studies of esotericism represent core traditions in multiple cultures, emergent studies in many fields are offering new models that require a reconstruction of esotericism linked to emergent human capacities that might resonate with older traditions but can now engage more current perspectives, theories, and methodologies. Transphysical theories of mind, consciousness, and post-Darwinian biology linked to paranormal research, process ontology, and contemporary physics can all contribute to our understanding of what constitutes esotericism as an interdisciplinary, humanistic field of study" (35-36).

70 "The origin of Rosicrucianism may stand as a clear example.... in contemporary esoteric orders which claim a Rosicrucian heritage, such as *Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis* (AMORC) or the *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*, one typically finds a literal belief that the Rosicrucian manifestos were in fact written by a preexisting secret society with roots in the Middle Ages or possibly even further back. In etic scholarship, however, doubts that the Rosicrucian order proclaimed by the manifestos was a fiction, which became a self-fulfilling prophecy, have long since faded." –see: Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, *Contemporary esotericism* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 31-32.

or truth. Historians must not be esotericists in the exercise of their profession and their research, since esotericism is their academic subject of study, not their dogma of faith⁷¹.

Now, within the framework of the debates indicated here, we consider that displacing (or extending or complementing) the interest of historians from the method of analysis of primary sources and understanding esotericism as historical-cultural phenomena constructed from an academic object, to the exploration of an esoteric-phenomenological experience (of the “personal”, the “spiritual”, the “psychic”, the “natural”, the “cosmic”, etc.), is an error that generates, at least, two immediate consequences: 1) it implies assuming an aprioristic, essentialist and dogmatic position in the reading of the documents to go in search of a (supposed) transhistorical or metaphysical truth or reality or a (supposed) superior (or “interior” or “deep”) knowledge of reality or of man or nature or the universe (unverifiable topics in the primary sources from which history is nourished and which constitute the raw material of historiographic practice); 2) also it inexorably leads scholars to confuse who they are with their subject of study, thus becoming an esoteric.

Independently of the existence (or not) of their personal beliefs, both in the discourse and in the historiographic praxis on our academic subject, historians must base their method on, strictly, reading sources analytically, elaborating discourses that allow for a later collective critical discussion among scholars in order to contribute to the general knowledge and the development of our field. Therefore, it must move away from any non-academic speculative contamination and be built on a permanent elucidation –in the sense of thinking what one does and knowing what one thinks– of one’s own professional activity. This critical and constant self-reflection will allow the elaboration of knowledge without losing the thoroughness that this passionate object of history demands.

Within the academic world, in synthesis:

1. *We are historians* and our reference point for study is only *the past*.
2. Our method is to read preserved documentary sources⁷² in order to achieve a rigorous and serious understanding, description, analysis and explanation of the enormous complexities of the universe of practices, representations, texts and agents related to the history of esotericism as it was shaped as an academic object –without losing sight of its links with other dimensions of history (economy, politics, society, culture, religion, etc.), attending to its transformations in time and avoiding arbitrary generalizations⁷³.
3. We are not esotericists and our study reference is not “truth”, nor “nature” or human “mind and consciousness” or “cosmos”.

71 Bubello, *Historia del Esoterismo en la Argentina*, 13-22.

72 From the cultural history, the sources are analyzed giving account of the double dimension of any cultural space, inasmuch as this is constituted by a vertical, diachronic edge (that establishes the relation of the source with previous and later epochs) and another horizontal, or synchronic edge (where it is related with other aspects of the culture in which it is installed at the same time) –see: Roger Chartier, *El mundo como representación. Estudios sobre historia cultural* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1992), 41.

73 In an excellent contribution, some of the conceptual tools offered by academic historiography to address, in the field of studies on the history of Western esotericism, the “western learned magic” –see: Bernd-Christian Otto, “Historicising ‘Western Learned Magic’. Preliminary Remarks”, *Aries* 16 (2016): 161-240.

4. Nor do we integrate our method with “personal experiences” to explore (supposed) “phenomenologies” of the “esoteric” in search of (conjectured) “truths” (or “realities” or “essences”), be they natural, psychic, trans-historical (or a-historical), cosmic, metaphysical, theological or spiritual.

Scholars who seek to travel these (presumed) paths will have merged with their object of study, thus ceasing to be historians of esotericism to become esotericists themselves. At that very moment, their discourses (written or oral) will constitute our new primary sources with which historians will eventually be able to study the edges of the history of contemporary esotericism.

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