ES1: Esotericism: What is it?

By N. Kazanas - 11 October 2026

1. What is really "esotericism"?

All these people who write about, lecture on and study esotericism know (or should know) that the word comes from Greek **esō** meaning "in, within" and **esō-teriko,** adjective, meaning "inner, internal". So now, what is *esoteric* "inner, internal"? One can take it literally or metaphorically or both. Literally – when it is a practical teaching helping inner, psychological development, by gradually purifying and uplifting one's whole being and establishing the virtues of wisdom, unselfishness, sense of justice, honesty, fearlessness and the like; naturally only few would persist in such a course. Metaphorically (or theoretically) – when there is interest in this area, studying the theories, writing about them, discussing them with others and practicing perhaps superficial aspects of them – within a restricted, demarcated but not closed circle, like the scholarly one of the Middle Ages or the academic one of our times.

I take as a base for starting this investigation, though there are several others, the book *Western Esotericism: a guide for the perplexed* by W.J. Hanegraaf (2013) Bloomsbury, London, N.Y, N. Delhi, Sydney. Hanegraaf is a well-known Dutch scholar in this field with numerous publications. In his forward he writes that he will concentrate on *those world views, practices and ways of knowing that have not succeeded in becoming dominant and have therefore been marginalized as 'rejected knowledge' since the age of Enlightenment. Under the not entirely satisfactory label 'Western esotericism' – yes: many have complained about it, but nobody has come up with a better terminology – research in this domain has been developing quite rapidly since the 1990's.* (The phrase "rejected knowledge" has been used by earlier authors; I omit an obvious question: "knowledge rejected" by whom and with what criteria?)

All this is contained in my second meaning above: it is very theoretical – an examination and discussion of other people's notions, often very distant in time, often in unreliable or deficient sources, often entirely imaginary. It may have considerable value in academic discussions and writings but does not help anybody with the search for esoteric personal truth and actual experience

of it in reality. I should add that despite my occasional criticisms, I think Hanegraaf has done a truly enviable scholarly job in all his publications that I have read.

2. In the next paragraph Hanegraaf presents his book as a "guide into Western esotericism as a field of study" not only for specialists and teachers and students but also for "educated readers who are curious about these topics". The book "presents a deliberate agenda – a vision – of how the field should develop into the future." This development into the future concerns the author himself and academics mainly.

Then, he writes "the study of esotericism is never just about esotericism 'in itself' (whatever that may be)". This statement suggests to me that he is not really sure of what genuine "esotericism" is. As he writes, "it is always [?] about more general, larger, even universal problems and questions that should be of eminent interest to all educated persons". This statement is in a way very true but at the same time an arbitrary generalisation! It may be counterargued that, like many others in the past and the present, I too write about my own notion of "esotericism". Furthermore, on p 42 he mentions Gurdjieff and Ouspensky who used "*an independent and original esoteric system (….) for liberating the mind [from misconceptions and] social control [???] and attaining spiritual freedom (….) an important dimension of the post-1960 [- early 1930's, it should be] concern with self-realization*". Now this, Gurdjieff's and Ouspensky's system, is a very practical (= with good psychological exercises) and very true type of "esotericism" and much closer to an answer to my initial question.

But, to take the other point, why, now, should I, or any sensible, educated man or woman (let alone "all"!) have "eminent interest" in what fantasy-ridden alchemists, astrologists, gnostics, hermetists, magicians, otherworldly-spirit (= angels, demigods, daemons, fairies, gnomes, souls of the dead etc.) hunters, did in Hellenistic times and in the Middle Ages or do at present; in (19th cent.) Ficino's regarding Zoroaster as the first propounder of Wisdom; in |(19th cent.) Anna Kingsford's hermetic-theosophical visions and her dream that the Comte de Chambord was crowned King of France; in what (20th cent.) Dion Fortune wrote about heir (fictional) visions of Atlantis and Arthurian Glastonury; or in how Aleister Crowley and his Ordo Templi Orientis indulged in their multi-sexual practices and magic?

3. All academic studies of Esotericism, Western or otherwise, have little to do with genuine Esotericism because most of their subjects (alchemy, magic, union with the Devine etc.) were not kept, strictly speaking, in the inner circle of the chosen few, but circulated in manuscripts among those who were interested (and often not really interested) in the general populace: there was nothing truly "esoteric" or occult "hidden". Then, most of these concerns had little or nothing to do with the inner spiritual development of the human being which, if it is genuine, must face squarely and deal decisively with the ubiquitous and deep-rooted selfishness that delimits and debilitates humans in its various seductive and tormenting ways.

In his earlier *Esotericism and the Academy* (2012, CUP, UK) Hanegraaf examined in more detail the term (pp 334ff) and wrote: *"The adjective "esoteric" made its first appearance in Lucian of Samosata's satire Vitarum Rusti 26 (2nd century). It was picked up "by patristic and other authorities such as Clement of Alexandria [c.147 – c. 215 CE] (….) and generally came to refer to secret teachings reserved for a mystical elite as exemplified by the Pythagorean brotherhoods in particular."* He also gave further references in support. That may have been the intention but it was not the reality. One century after Pythagoras and his immediate milieu the sage himself and his teaching also became the subject of writing by followers who, however, may be describing not the genuine Pythagorean teaching but most probably Philolaus' and other Neo-pythagoreans' notions (see CH Khan and CA Huffman *A History of Pythagoreanism* 2014 (Cambridge UP).

Furthermore, many so-called esoteric teachings are not presented as an inner, psychological concern, **a way of life following certain principles and practices which restrain one's egoism, work to dissolve one's ignorance or misconception of oneself and thereby reaching a truer understanding of the ultimate nature of life, of the cosmos and of the reality of One-Self. This was and is the concern, indeed, of a small "esoteric" group of people (since most are not interested except in theoretical talking) for leading a way of life conducive to refining their being and consciousness and through the removal of selfishness and other impediments allowing the "self-realisation" or Self-knowledge to be. And this is why I focused on Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. Because they offered a teaching and practices that cover (imperfectly, no doubt) the course outlined above. Some**

Mahāyāna Buddhist or Zen and some Advaita- Vedānta organisations, well established in the West for many decades do offer such a teaching. (There may well be others like certain Sufi or Taoist schools, also, possibly, but I really do not know them).

And this is my answer to the initial question.

4. Undoubtedly, the meaning of "esotericism" given by Honegraaf is legitimate since it has been used by many writers before him (as I mention above) and many others in our days (autumn 2026) – and, in any case, anything goes these days. I shall return to an examination of Honegraaf's studies later, after I have examined several other researches in this field. There are, however, three points that should be cleared at the outset.

A) Although I found Honegraaf's study abundantly informative and such that serves well as a good initial "guide for the perplexed" in this field, yet I think it needs some improvement in several aspects. For instance, on p151 (bottom) he bundles off practitioners of various occult (apocryphal or esoteric) trends who have very little in common – except the fact that, as the current general and academic thinking goes, they are considered "esoteric": e.g. Anna Kingsford, interested in Buddhism and Hermeticism (having founded the Hermetic Society, 1884) but also an ardent theosophist, president of the London Lodge from 1883 till her early death in1888; CW Leadbeater, another theosophist, collaborator of Madame Blavatsky; PB Randolph who communicated with otherwordly spirits and promoted (healthy) "esoteric" sexuality; Aleister Crowley who was mentioned earlier in section §2, end; Dion Fortune who had visions of life in Atlantis and its priestesses and of Arthurian (Avalon/Glastonbury) spirituality; Raymond Abellio (= Georges Soulés), a French politician who travelled through the gamut of parties from far-left to far-right, collaborated during the German Occupation and later exhibited interests in Astrology and on the numerology of the Old and New Testaments. To this odd group were added Gurdjieff and Ouspensky who had a rather strict practical teaching for inner self-development and absolutely no interest in all the (non-)esoteric pursuits of all these others. Then, there is no bibliography in Hanegraaf at all for these two, though both (and their students) left a considerable number of publications. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous,* 1947/1950 etc., *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution,* 1945/1973 etc., are

essential reading. I find it very odd that these and similar publications are not mentioned!

B) There is enormous talk and writing from multifarious sources about Esoteric Christianity from the early centuries CE to modern times (e.g. Amis R. 2003 *A Different Christianity,* Praxis Institute Press) and Christian Theosophy (connected with Freemasonry etc.); also, Gnostic Christianity. I shall deal with Christianity in some future essay. Suffice it to say at present that, really, the only Esoteric (with my criteria) Christianity I have discovered is the Gnostic one, and only that which emerges from the purely Christian and not the Seth-ian or Jewish texts in the Nag Hammadi Library (*The gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Maria, Gospel of Truth, Gospel of Philip, Dialogue of the Saviour* – all in Robinson's 1986 translation or MW Meyer's later one, 2008). The teaching here is quite different from Christ's biographies in the Four Canonical Gospels (with all their terrible contradictions, inconsistencies and non-historical lapses which I will examine fully later) and the absurdities bequeathed by bishop Irinaeeus and many other propagandists of the Early Church – though there were Gnostic sects indulging in sexual orgies and other illicit practices throughout history.

C) Readers in general should be aided to distinguish between fantasies, however seductive, and genuine disciplines, teachings and practices that help the aspirant to face his ego and its weaknesses and difficulties, and, instead of nourishing them with imaginary attainments, to remove them. Let me expand this last point.

5. On p 114 (*Western Esotericism: A Guide*...) Hanegraaf cites a passage from the book *Ecstasy is a New Frequency*: *Teachings of the Light Institute* (Simon & Schuster, NY 1987|) by Chris Griscom in which the writer, like many others of our "New Age" as they call it, tells us that we live in multi-dimensional universe with unlimited forms of consciousness (a somewhat ambiguous expression): "*There are many levels of guides, entities, energies and being in every octave of the universe. There are those who are lords, just like there were Grecian lords on one octave of reality and ascended masters on another octave of reality. There are lords of the universe, galactic frequencies. They are all there to pick and choose from in relation to your own attraction/repulsion mechanisms.*

There is a lady here in Athens who for many years now (autumn 2026) teaches that one such Master is on the Moon and advises her regularly how humans should conduct their lives – and she has a sizeable following.

By far most of the supposed esoteric systems, teachings (like the ones just mentioned), and traditions, that we shall examine in subsequent essays, seem to me to belong unfortunately to the large categories of fantasy, hallucination or self-delusion and, not infrequently, to deliberate deception. Two examples should suffice for now.

One is Madame Blavatsky's clairvoyant, mediumistic writing, also according to her collaborator Colonel Olcott, of *Isis Unveiled* in the 1870's, when she drew her references "from the astral light". **But it was soon later shown that she plagiarized unashamedly from the English politician, occultist and novelist Bulwer Lytton, and many others, garbled versions of ancient traditions and their modern formulations. Moreover, on p. 114 in *A Short History of the Theosophical Society* (Adyar 1938) Josephine Ransome mentions a certain Charles Sothern who borrowed books and found quotations for Blavatsky while she was writing that book! (See James Webb, 1974, *The Occult Underground*, Open court, La Salle, Illinois, pp 83 and 107, note10.** Blavatsky and her theosophical concoctions are examined in the paper **Es3**.**)**

The second is earlier, the "haunted cottage" with its mysterious "rapping" in Hydesville, Arcadia, near New York. There in March 1848 Mrs Margaret Fox (who testified), her husband and their two girls heard the mysterious "rapping" of a spirit coming from tables and other furniture or the air, that sounded like snapping of fingers or clapping. *"I then asked it",* continued Mrs Fox*, "if it was a human being making the noise… to manifest it by the same noise. There was no noise. I then asked it if it was spirit… to manifest it by two sounds. I heard two sounds as soon as the words were spoken".* The Fox Girls discovered that they too were "mediums" and wherever they went the rappings broke out, while Mrs Fox gave seances. And so began to spread the epidemic of Spiritualism in the USA – and by 1851 there were 100 mediums in New York alone! **BUT later the girls admitted that they produced the noises by cracking their joints and eventually Mrs Fox too confessed and gave demonstrations before large audiences showing how the noises were produced! But despite the**

confessions and exposures, the faith of the believers in Spiritualism did not abate! (See Webb as above, pp 15 – 19.)

6. To do justice to Hanegraaf, he does mention (p110) the fact that "*modern and contemporary esotericists distinguish between fantasy and true imagination: the latter is then considered to be a faculty of perception through which one gains access to realities that are ontologically real* [i.e. genuine, true]*".*

Of course, here, as in so many other instances, we must have reliable criteria. How do we make sure of this? How do we judge? This now is a second question that needs to be answered. Because academics dealing with this often seem unable to distinguish between genuine teachings, or real experiences from mystics, adepts or teachers, and not real or genuine teachings and experiences. This too will be examined.

I would suggest that academics change their terminology leaving the terms "esoteric, esotericism, esotericist" for the genuine teachings and practices and, instead, adopt the terms "occult, occultism, occultist". Otherwise, how would anyone, except genuine esotericists, distinguish between fantasy and/or fraud and the true creativity of esotericism – as with Pythagoras, Parmenides and Plato in ancient times in the West and Lao Tzu (Taoism), Shankara (Advaita Vedānta) and Nagarjuna (Mahāyāna Buddhism) in the East.