

analyse processes of European cultural history (Stuckrad 2004a; 20, see also Hanegraaff 1998: 60-61).

Behind this statement stands the recent discussion in religious studies about how it is possible to keep religious implications and interests out of theory formation in religious studies (McCutcheon 1997; McCutcheon 2001; Wiebe 1999; Fitzgerald 2000). Every now and again a form of epistemological nominalism is proposed as a solution, which claims that the topics of academic research are created by academics and their naming is in certain ways arbitrary. However, the question as to how academics actually come to construct a specific research subject is mostly neglected. In the case of esotericism, this flaw is particularly obvious, because the definition of the subject is itself dispured in the scientific community. This became particularly clear in a controversy between Wouter Hanegraaff (1996) and Christoph Bochinger (1995; 1996; 1998) concerning New Age. Hanegraaff held the conviction that New Age is a movement of connected contents, which stands in a long, diachronic, coherent tradition understood as esotericism. This was disputed by Bochinger, who had examined New Age in the German speaking context and came to the conclusion that it stood for a general "collective term for a new religious scenery" (1995: 103, 515), which exhibits such a great plurality and heterogeneity that it could not be described meaningfully as a collective movement, either by synchronic or diachronic references. The discussion between Hanegraaff and Bochinger has unfortunately subsided, without their different positions being brought closer together (Hanegraaff 1996: 379; Hanegraaff 2000; Hanegraaff 2005a; Bochinger 2005). At any rate, the above discussion on New Age remains an important case study that the acceptance of esotericism as a research subject is in no way obligatory for religious studies.

This finding is particularly remarkable because the establishment of academic research into esotericism exhibits, on the one hand, direct references to esotericist self-representations and, on the other hand, the description of the subject's contents is close in part to religious phenomenological conceptions, which are under suspicion in religious studies of abetting religious interests. The nominalistic attempt to make a strict separation of esoteric self-conceptions from the academic definition of the subject comes up short therefore and must be broadened; at least by a comprehensive reflection on the esoteric references of the academic research, whilst defining the research subject. It is essential to differentiate between a subject definition and the religious studies concept of this subject. If this distinction is not made then the argumentation easily becomes precarious, because then there would be no more differentiation between the esoteric implications in the subject's definition and an esotericist agenda for the religious studies research.

What is Esotericism? Cultural Studies Approaches and the Problems of Definition in Religious Studies¹

Michael Bergunder

Universität Heidelberg

michael.bergunder@wts.uni-heidelberg.de

Abstract

There is an ongoing debate whether *esotericism* could be a meaningful subject for Religious Studies. The recent history of the academic research into esotericism will be presented and critically discussed, how it has tried to define its subject and how this discussions have reached an impasse. It is proposed that certain theoretical perspectives from cultural studies offer alternative ways in determining a research subject, especially one based on Ernesto Laclau's concept of "empty signifiers." This argument will be followed by a methodological application that translates the theoretical considerations into a concrete and specific research design of discursive networks.

Keywords

esotericism, empty signifiers, Gnosticism, Ernesto Laclau, cultural studies

In the last ten to fifteen years academic research into esotericism has become an established field in religious studies, and can point to some notable scholarly findings (Hanegraaff 2004; Neugebauer-Wölk 2006a, 2006c). It has, from the outset, engaged in a self-critical reflection over how the subject of academic research can be properly determined. The question as to how research into esotericism determines the character of its subject and its ontological status is still disputed. Particularly prominent at present are approaches that want to view esotericism as a purely heuristic construct that serves the formulation of specific research questions. Kocku von Stuckrad, for example, aims in this direction:

Esotericism as a subject does not exist. It exists only in the heads of academics, who order topics in a particular way that appears meaningful to them, in order to

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The following remarks are to be viewed as a contribution within this ongoing controversial debate whether esotericism could be a meaningful subject for Religious Studies. Firstly, the recent emergence of an academic research into esotericism and its complex enmeshment with esoteric agendas will be addressed. It will be shown how the academic research into esotericism has tackled the question of defining a research subject and how it tried to separate itself from any religious or esoteric involvements. However, it will be argued that the suggested approaches have not solved some inherent contradictions. It is then proposed that certain theoretical perspectives from the Cultural studies offer alternative ways in determining a research subject, and in the second part of this paper, this will be discussed in detail, based on the key concepts 'identity' and 'empty signifiers.' Out of a cultural studies perspective it is possible to consistently historicise the definition of esotericism. However, any theoretical perspective remains abstract as long as it does not offer a methodological implementation. Hence, the third part of this paper will suggest a methodological application that translates the theoretical considerations of the second part into a concrete and specific research design of discursive networks.

I. Academic Research into Esotericism

Academic research into esotericism owes its existence, first and foremost, to the institutional establishment of the subject at the universities of Paris and Amsterdam. It is a matter of common knowledge that esoteric concepts played a special role there (Hanegraaff 2001). In Paris, in 1964, a professorship in the 'History of Christian Esotericism' was established. This happened through the decisive initiative of Henry Corbin (Hanegraaff 2001: 22). Corbin was an academic in Islamic studies and researcher into Sufism who, in his academic writings, portrayed decidedly esoteric views and rejected 'orthodox' Christianity. He was an influential member of the Eranos circle and, among other things, also an admirer of Swedenborg (Corbin 1995; Wasserstrom 1999; Hakl 2001). The history of esotericism was for him 'hierohistory', that is, it is about discovering "the hidden esotericism under the phenomenon of the literal appearance... of the Holy Books" in order through this to acquire a spiritual awareness (Rousse-Lacordaire 2005: 271). In this sense, esotericism was for Corbin clearly a research topic worthy of its own professor's chair. The first person to hold the professorship was Francois Secret, a historian and specialist in Christian Kabbalah. He himself had no esoteric interests whatsoever and, significantly during his time, there does not appear to have been any attempts

at conceptualising esotericism as a subject of academic research. This changed in 1979 when Antoine Faivre succeeded him in the chair. Faivre came also from the Eranos circle, whose meetings he had regularly taken part in since 1975, and he had undoubted personal affinities with esotericism, even if these only rarely played a role in his academic writings (Wasserstrom 1999: 41-43; Hakl 2001: 346 n. 5; Hanegraaff 2001: 22-23; McCalla 2001a). The renaming of the professorship can be read as expressing its programme: 'History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe' (Hakl 2001: 346-349; Faivre & Neugebauer-Wölk 2006: 1-4). It is Faivre who, for the first time, conceptualised esotericism as a consistent phenomenon of European cultural and religious history since the 15th century.

In 1999, a further chair in esoteric research was established in Amsterdam. The chair was financed in part by an endowment from a patron with an obvious interest in 'hermetic philosophy,' Rosalie Basten from Antwerp,² together with the department of the University of Amsterdam. The designation of the chair met evidently with the concerns of the financial backer: 'The History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents.' The rationale behind the chair's institution in Amsterdam pointed explicitly, in addition, to the existence of the 'Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica.' This was founded in 1984 by the industrialist, Joost R. Ritman, as a private library open to the public with a linked research institute. It gathered literature primarily from the seventeenth century in the field of Rosicrucianism. Ritman is a member of the International Spiritual Directorate of the Lectorium Rosicrucianum (Lamprecht 2004: 257), an esoteric society that sees itself following in the traditions of the seventeenth century: Rosicrucians, the Cathars, and the adherents of the 'Egyptian Urganosis' of the Corpus Hermeticum. An institutional connection between the chair and the library however does not exist, and similarly the endowment of Rosalie Basten has no say whatsoever in the teaching and research affairs of the chair, which is the exclusive responsibility of the University of Amsterdam. It is obvious, nevertheless, that the financing and institution of the chair is due to the compatibility of the research topics with forms of esotericist self-representation. At the same time, it demands attention that

² "Being personally interested in hermetic philosophy and its historical development, during her own philosophy studies at the University of Amsterdam she had been disappointed to discover that no such subject was being taught. Given the existence in Amsterdam of the renowned Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, which contains the world's most complete collection of hermetic source materials and a wealth of related documents, the continuing lack of a teaching curriculum and academic research program in this field was all the more surprising. Mrs. Basten's motivation in making the donation was to make it possible for the University of Amsterdam to fill this hiatus." (http://www.amsterdamhermetica.nl/upload/annualreports/47_annua.doc, 1.6.2006).

the positive decision of the university reflects a social resonance to grant the research topic an academic home.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff was the first holder of the chair. Nothing is known of him having any esoteric inclinations and there is nothing to find of this in his writings, on the contrary he is eager to critically bring to light the esotericist references within esotericism research. It is however noteworthy, as already mentioned, that in his thesis where he takes over the concept of Faivre, he describes the New Age movement as a self-contained body standing in continuity with a clearly recordable western esotericism since the Renaissance. Although the term esotericism was not contained in the designation of Hanegraaff's chair, Ritman and Basten did not identify 'hermetic philosophy' simply with a current limited to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but rather with a continuous alternative tradition of European religious history. When, in the present, Hanegraaff consents to courses of study and research foci in Amsterdam to operate under the name of 'esotericism',³ it is not in opposition to this concept of 'hermetic philosophy', but establishes rather a conceptual common ground with the Paris chair of Faivre, which is then strengthened through joint publications (Faivre & Hanegraaff 1998), and both act along with Roland Edighoffer as publishers of the journal "Aries."

It can thus be stated that the establishment of academic research into esotericism in Europe is definitely associated with contemporary esotericist self-conceptions. It is therefore, in my opinion, meaningful that this association is considered explicitly in the academic definition of the topic. Therefore, it is necessary to start with a brief discussion of different theoretical approaches.

The problem of defining the subject should, furthermore, be clearly differentiated from the question as to what extent academic esotericism research is in any way esoteric in itself. Wouter J. Hanegraaff has already spoken on this repeatedly and, among other things, emphasised the incompatibility of an esotericist agenda with the "rules" of religious studies research (2001: 29–30; see also 1995; Faivre 2000: xiii–xxxv). It is the case that representatives of esotericism research, of whom it is well known they possess esotericist convictions or in the past held them—like for example Antoine Faivre or Kocku von Stuckrad (2004b)—, do consider themselves obligated to historical and philological methods in their academic work. With this in mind, to speak of an

³ Related subjects can also be assigned to 'esotericism' without giving rise to a continuous concept, and probably without pragmatic-tactical reasons playing a role. Only the Dutch Bachelor Minor is called "Western Esotericism," the Master's programme in contrast "Mysticism and Western Esotericism," while the encyclopaedia edited by Hanegraaff carried the title, "Gnosis and Western Esotericism," and only contains a comparatively very short article on the theme of mysticism (cf. Hanegraaff 2005b).

esoteric agenda within the academic study of esotericism would be inappropriate and diametrically opposed to the intention of these comments. It is to be once more emphasised that the concern here is with the definition of the subject alone.

The first comprehensive definition of esotericism as an academic subject stems, as is well-known, from Antoine Faivre, who brought together a historical and typological argument. At first he identified a series of historical currents between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries as constituting the core of esotericism: Hermeticism, the so called occult sciences (Magic, Astrology, and Alchemy), Christian Kabbalah, as well as Paracelsianism, Christian Theosophy, and Rosicrucianism (Neugebauer-Wölk 2006b). He described the extant writings of these named currents as the "esoteric corpus." Alongside the formal historical definition he assigns a typological description, because he sees within the esoteric corpus the existence of common basic ideas, which he characterised as esoteric forms of thinking, and typologically defined these by employing six criteria (correspondences, living nature, imagination, transmutation, as well as the optional: concordance form and transmission).

The method selected by Faivre is by no means unusual. It is known, for example, in the research of Gnosticism. Numerous researchers into Gnosticism appealed, in the 1966 paper of Messina, to define "by combined use of the historical and typological methods" "a certain group of systems of the second century A.D." as "Gnosticism." With this, a sharper historical description of the subject was sought, which marks itself off from a more general understanding of 'gnosis' as a "knowledge of divine mysteries reserved for an elite" (Markschies 2001: 22; see also Williams 1996: 27–28). This understanding of Gnosticism, though, meets with criticism in recent research, most sharply from Michael Allen Williams. He described Gnosticism as a "typological construct" of modern research in which the model of ancient Christian polemic continues to live on. There never was, according to him, a clearly identifiable religious current named gnosis or Gnosticism in the second century (Williams 1996). In connection with this, Christoph Markschies has likewise pointed out that you have to differentiate "between those phenomena which are associated through direct historical connections, those which are connected more indirectly through a common cultural climate, and those between which a typological connection can be made through agreements in content" (2001: 24. Cf. for the overall problem 1999). Faivre perhaps took his approach over from there. At any rate he follows the Messina distinction between gnosis and Gnosticism (1994: 19–23, 1998: 10).

In present research, it is not at all clear how closely the currents, which have been summarised by Faivre in the esoteric corpus, are actually historically con-

nected to each other (Neugebauer-Wölk 1999; Trepp & Lehmann 2001; Mulrow 2002; Ebeling 2005). On this point, Faivre's model would be open to historical examination and critique. The major problem of his approach relates to another point. In contrast to the definition of Gnosticism, where a historical corpus and typology are held close together, and which remains limited to a narrow historical period, Faivre opens up his understanding of esotericism and does not distinguish between the esoteric and esotericism. The key point in Faivre's definition is that esotericism survived the seventeenth century and continues to exist up until today. That is to say, he claimed a continuous *Wirkungsgeschichte* (history of influences and effects) into the twentieth century. A continuous line is drawn to Freemasonry and Mesmerism in the eighteenth century, and from there over the romantic philosophy of nature, spiritualism/occultism and modern Theosophy in the nineteenth century, up to contemporary esotericism in the twentieth century.

This expansion signifies an epistemological break in the argumentation. His typology is no longer only an attempt at classifying the contents of the esoteric corpus, but rather it marks at the same time a style of thought, which becomes the criterion for describing as esoteric a movement or current after the seventeenth century. With this, the esoteric types lose their historical-philological references and esotericism becomes an invariable, historically detached form of thought. This approach stands in near proximity to the phenomenological method, which has meanwhile met with sharp criticism in religious studies. Here the danger exists that concrete religious facts are taken as an expression of abstract, ahistorical and transcultural types; and these facts are only subsequently examined as to if and how they agree with the types, whose clarification criteria are not questioned (Becke 1999; Flood 1999). Furthermore, the history of religious studies has shown that the construction of such phenomenological typologies has often acted as an unregulated gateway for religious interests.

Although Faivre himself pointed out that the history of esotericism after the seventeenth century has been a history of 'discontinuities, repudiations and reinterpretations' (2000: xvii), it is precisely this possibility of a hybrid *Wirkungsgeschichte*, whose contents could change during its course, that he with his approach cannot adequately capture. This also applies to the irritating generalisations that are sometimes to be found with Faivre. He, for example, understands the effects of esoteric forms of thinking from the early modern age up until today as a critique and "counterpart to our scientific and secularised view of the world." From this he says that western ways of thinking consist of two poles: "rational thought," in the sense of Aristotle's logic, and "mythical thought," which finds its expression in esotericism (Faivre 2001: 20;

McCalla 2001). These are generalisations, which go in parallel with a modern esotericist self-understanding, but which can only with difficulty be rendered into a meaningful historical question.

The consequence of this approach, therefore, is that esotericism is presumed to be a research topic and cannot be questioned. Therefore, the danger exists that, already in the definition of the subject, an esotericist agenda is carried forward.

The way out of the dilemma appears complicated. Kocku von Stuckrad has tried in two of his recent publications to go beyond Faivre's approach (2004a; 2005). His fundamental criticism of Faivre is that the research field is narrowed in an unsatisfactory manner through making an esoteric corpus the basic reference point, and that he "extrapolates his typology from a specific part of modern religious history," with the effect that "areas of esotericism (research), crucial for an overall view, are excluded," particularly "antiquity, the Middle Ages, and above all modernity, content wise, Jewish and Muslim esotericism, and in modernity also Buddhism" (Stuckrad 2004a: 14). Stuckrad argues for a temporal expansion and, in addition, for no longer ignoring esotericism in the surrounding field of non-Christian religions.

Furthermore, Stuckrad criticises in principal that esotericism as a research subject cannot be defined by referring to specific historical "currents" who possess "certain similarities" in common and that stand in a historical relationship with each other (2005: 79; Stuckrad refers here to a formulation in Hanegraaff 2005c: 337). Such a subject definition is unsuitable in order to justify academic research, and he pleads instead for an "etic" concept of esotericism (Stuckrad 2004a: 80). Stuckrad does not explain in greater detail what he understands by "etic" although this concept is anything but clear (Hahn 2005; McCutcheon 1999; Headland et al. 1990). Obviously, he means by this a nominalistic academic understanding, mentioned at the beginning, which proceeds from the possibility of an autonomous definition of the subject through scholarship. His starting point, therefore, is that esotericism as understood by esotericists, the media, and the public, fundamentally differs from how "academic research" defines it (Stuckrad 2004a: 9).

With this understanding, he suggests that esotericism be understood as an "element of discourse" characterised by two features: 1. the "claim of higher knowledge," also called the claim of "secret or higher wisdom" (Stuckrad 2004a: 91); 2. the existence of a way to attain this higher knowledge. He supplements this with the observation that the claim of higher knowledge is based mostly on an "ontological monism." The two criteria, in contrast to Faivre's categories of thought, are held very generally and explicitly no longer tied to certain historical texts or an esoteric corpus. They are avowedly neither

historically, socially, nor culturally determined. Unfortunately Stuckrad has not supplied an adequate theoretical rationale for his use of the term "element of discourse," so that it remains vague as to what he actually understands by it (cf. 2004a: 240-241, notes 14-15; 2005: 84-85). Its two features bring at first to mind a typological definition. In any case, the central hermeneutical question of how the existence of both features of "higher knowledge" and "way" is transhistorically and transculturally determined in a meaningful way, are not focussed on and not perceived to be a problem. This is even more surprising, as he himself sees this problem in Faivre's work (Stuckrad 2005: 83 n. 13).

What is gained in the present discussion with such an approach? In it esotericism is defined as a subject without chronological and spatial boundaries, and clearly not understood as a historically connected movement. This approach is a step backwards in comparison with Faivre, who wanted to historicise and concretise esotericism in contrast to an esotericist understanding of it as an ahistorical perennial philosophy. Faivre, by the way, has himself accused Stuckrad of taking up *de facto* the programme of a "comparative esotericism of the book religions" in the same way as Henri Corbin (Faivre 2006: 214).

In particular, Stuckrad's approach has not contributed to the discussion relating to the connection of the subject of esotericism research with the public understanding of esotericism. He simply defined both sides as separate, although the examination of such interactions is characteristic for the cultural studies orientated field of religious studies, to which Stuckrad assigns himself (Kippenberg & Stuckrad 2003; Stuckrad 2003: 267). In contrast to a cultural studies approach, where the historicising of the subjects is a central concern of theoretical construction, we find the attempt to understand esotericism not as a historical phenomenon.

On the crucial question in current discussion, as to why the subject of esotericism study is at all meaningful, Stuckrad's approach provides no answer. To substantiate its characteristic attributes he refers to historical currents that "most academics" would understand as esoteric and states that his two criteria are applicable to all these movements (Stuckrad 2004a: 79, 88). Hence, Stuckrad's approach is based on the fact that he believes there is an academic consensus over the allocation of definite currents to esotericism. He seeks to formulate, broaden and newly define this consensus. With regard to the subject definition of esotericism, however, it is precisely this consensus that stands under debate.

More consistent are the attempts by Hanegraaff to overcome the weaknesses of Faivre's approach, which also for him was originally the starting point of his deliberations. Already in his dissertation from the middle of the

nineteen nineties he demanded a stronger historicising of the concept by suggesting a modified history of ideas approach, which stresses changes and transformations (Hanegraaff 1996: 401; see. also Hanegraaff 1995). He asserted, above all else, that there was a crucial change in the esoteric tradition in the eighteenth century, even though he does not go so far as to question the homogenous esoteric line of tradition altogether. In an article from the same period, he experimented for the first time with an alternative definition of the subject and understood esotericism research as a corrective of a one-sided study of the European history of religions:

currently, accepted fields of study have failed to accommodate certain western traditions, and still tend either to exclude these from study altogether or reduce them to already existing but inappropriate categories. 'Esotericism' is an appropriate label for characterizing these traditions and making them available for research (Hanegraaff 1995: 108-109, emphasis erased-M.B.).

He returned to this thought some years later, explaining esotericism now in broad terms as a "neglected dimension of the general culture" (Hanegraaff 2001: 30, emphasis erased-M.B.). In a later article, he carried this thought further, claiming that esotericism is simply the result of a polemical discourse of exclusion in the west, which is operated by the established religion, philosophy and academia. This discourse of exclusion was, according to Hanegraaff, at the same time the cornerstone of western identity formation, that is to say, indispensable for the great western narrative (2005a). Thus, Hanegraaff defines esotericism in similar breadth to Faivre, without though being dependent any longer on his typological forms of thought. At the same time, the institutional dimension in the academic understanding of esotericism is now more effectively explained:

by questioning a traditional historiography based on modernist ideologies, the study of western esotericism has the potential of revolutionizing our understanding of western religion and culture in general (Hanegraaff 2001: 31).

Nevertheless, the question remains whether much has been gained with such a definition. Esotericism becomes the counterpart to the dominant cultural self-understanding processes of western cultural and religious history, which thus has an essential dichotomy inscribed in it. Hanegraaff reaches back at the same time to the reflections of Jan Assmann who, in his theses on monotheism, spotted similar dichotomised structures in European religious history (Hanegraaff 2005a: 231-232; 2007b). The theoretical approach of Hanegraaff, though, eventually meets with the same criticism as that of Assmann: that such an abstract dichotomy hardly allows for a meaningful historical examination, and so becomes arbitrary (Bergunder 2006a).

II. Esotericism and the Cultural Studies Perspective

The proposed designation of the subject draws from a Cultural Studies perspective. In cultural studies orientated approaches the definition of a research subject takes place in the prevailing discursive practice of a society, because the topics of cultural studies research are no more than historical artefacts and historical patterns of behaviour and thought. Terry Eagleton has illustrated this approach well with his definition of "literature" as the subject of literary studies:

My own view is that it is most useful to see 'literature' as a name which people give from time to time for different reasons to certain kinds of writing within a whole field of what Michel Foucault has called 'discursive practices', and that if anything is to be an object of study it is this whole field of practices rather than just those sometimes rather obscurely labelled 'literature' (1983: 205).

In this sense, "esotericism" could also be regarded as a name, which the "people" (esotericists as well as esotericism researchers) give to a certain discourse related to religion and scholarship. A critical reflection on the connection between esotericism and research into esotericism would, in this case, be essential for a reconstruction of the subject and need no longer be ignored.

Starting with this connection, a further cultural studies assumption becomes important, that the perspective of the academic observer stands generally in an interrelationship with its subject. Academic and esoteric perspectives should not then be understood as totally separate. This being the case, and this has to be strongly stressed, the academic research into esotericism nevertheless does not become esotericism or religion; it is not about a relativism between academic and esoteric perspectives. However, it is obvious that the results of academic esotericism research have affected and continue to affect the esoteric discourse and, very importantly, the opposite is also true. For a cultural studies approach, it is exactly this interrelationship which is crucial, because with it the history of academic research into esotericism becomes a part of the history of esotericism itself. That western research into esotericism acts in no sense as an autonomous autocrat over its subject is already clear from what has been said above. It could be proven by numerous further examples, like for example through a closer look at the Eranos circle, or by looking at the bibliographical references of esoteric books, where religious studies research results are often cited (Wichmann 1990; Stuckrad 2004b).

Such a cultural studies definition of esotericism has moreover the advantages that it can act formally. Detailed theoretical attempts at providing a cultural studies rationale for research subjects are though, up till now, lacking. Therefore, in what follows an attempt is made to theoretically explicate such a

procedure, based on the key concept of "empty signifiers." A large part of the considerations is probably applicable also to other religious studies subject areas, which will however not be entered into.

III. Esoteric Identity and Empty Signifiers

In the area of cultural studies, questions of identity play a central role and these could be made fruitful for the conceptualisation of esotericism. With this in mind, esotericism could be understood as a form of identity marker. Stuart Hall describes identity as a fluid and hybrid matter that denotes the positioning of groups of people or in other words is used as an identity marker. At the same time, identities are disputed and the result of contested negotiations within a discourse of power. They are "unstable points of identification or suture, which are made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence, but a *positioning*" (Hall 1994: 395). Identities, as positionings within a social discourse, are above all relational and possess no autonomous essence. Diverse and to some extent even opposite identity positionings can be taken on. This means that the identification of individuals or groups of people as esotericists need not be the only possibility, but esotericists may position themselves at the same time as philosophers, atheists, humanists, Christians, Jews, Hindus etc. However, the possibilities of effective identity positionings are not arbitrary, but determined and limited by the dominant discourses.

If esotericism is an identity marker then it designates a general concept, which makes identification possible. In order to arrive at a clearer definition and characterisation of such general concepts of identification, some considerations from discourse theory may be helpful. Derrida has criticised the notion that our concepts are based on an actual invariant reference, on an actuality outside of the linguistic sign system in which they are expressed. By doing this, says Derrida, a "transcendental signifier" is ascribed to the concepts and a metaphysic assumed who's actual character of reference remains unclear and is merely asserted. The idealist-essentialist epistemology necessary for it is dubious and the complexity of the discursive concept production is neglected and underestimated. Derrida demands therefore that the notion of such a transcendental signifier, allegedly guaranteeing the meaning of the signified, should be given up. At the same time, however, from this it follows that "the domain and the play of signification endlessly" broadens out (Derrida 1972: 424). The meaning of linguistic signs comes no more from within themselves, but rather it occurs through the difference to other signs. This difference continues as an unending game, which is open and cannot form any firm differential relations,

since the signs possess no centre due to the differentiability of referring. However, it still remains unclear as to how certainties can at all be expressed in the face of the differentiation of signs, and at the same time there exists the logical problem that only from something specific can there be differentiation (Frank 1983). Ernest Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have employed this contradiction as the central starting point for their own ongoing reflections. For them the problem presents itself in such a way that, on the one side, a discourse remains indeed always incomplete but, on the other side, it cannot be described as a discourse without limits, because “the very possibility of signification is the system, and the very possibility of the system is the possibility of its limits” (Laclau 1994: 168). Out of this Laclau concludes that the inconcludable discourse strives always after its limits:

The impossibility of an ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there have to be partial fixations—otherwise, the very flow of differences would be impossible. Even in order to differ, to subvert meaning, there has to be a meaning. . . . Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 112).

Laclau and Mouffe base their considerations here on the insights of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and call a discourse without fixity of meaning a “discourse of the psychotic.” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 112). Following Lacan they speak of “nodal points” that effect a partial fixing of the discourse. These temporary fixations through nodal points appear as a good description for identity markings, as used by Stuart Hall. If this is the case, it could be more clearly described how such identity positionings form partial fixations and which special characteristics they must possess. Due to the inconcludable nature of a discourse, it cannot designate its own limits, and without transcendental signifiers there is also no possibility of demarcating limits by means of a discursive exterior (Laclau 1994: 168). Laclau represents therefore the thesis that these limits can show up only as an “interruption,” or “breakdown” of the signification processes.

Thus, we are left with the paradoxical situation that what constitutes the condition of possibility of a signifying system—its limits—is also what constitutes its condition of impossibility—a blockade of the continuous expansion of the process of signification (Laclau 1994: 168).

In order to be able to designate system limits in this sense, they must be antagonistic or exclusive; for a simple limit of difference that is formed through the differential relation of both its sides cannot place boundaries around a system of differences, because both sides beyond the boundaries would always still be a part of the same difference system. Contrary to the logic of difference, which

asserts signification, the “logic of the subversion of differences” is a “logic of equivalence” (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 128–129; Laclau 1994: 171). This logic of equivalence does not lead to a simple identity, because the signifiers, which are made equivalent, are different from each other. The equivalence is therefore only possible through the subversion of the differential character of the signifiers (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 129).

Within a system all differences become equivalent to each other in reference to the excluding limit of the system. To be more exact, the ability of the system to constitute a system arises only through this excluding limit, because it is “only that exclusion that grounds the system as such.” In order to stress that the produced equivalence within the exclusive system is not based on a common positive signifier of all the involved signifiers, Laclau speaks only of a “principle” of positivity or, probably in allusion to Hegel, of “pure being.” Precisely the same is what “is beyond the frontier of exclusion,” only “pure negativity,” because “in order to be the signifiers of the excluded . . . the various excluded categories have to cancel their differences through the formation of a chain of equivalences to that which the system demonises in order to signify itself” (Laclau 1994: 169–170). For the fixing of a discourse, positive and negative equivalence chains collapse and form constant oppositions so that the “production of meanings” take place over “opposition generating inclusion and exclusion mechanisms” (Nehring 2006: 820).

These equivalence chains are held together by signifiers, which have been emptied of their differentiability, and have been designated by Laclau as “empty signifiers.” “Nodal points” or, in the sense suggested here, identity markings, are thus formed by means of empty signifiers. The “emptiness” of the signifiers, however, implies that this will be “constitutively inadequate”; that is, its concrete formation in a certain form is not inevitably predetermined by the system, but it is theoretically first of all arbitrary and, above all, also temporary and fragmentary. Since each temporary fixing of a discourse is “the result . . . of the unstable compromise between equivalence and difference” (Laclau 1994: 171), this remains always also contested and contentious. The formation of empty signifiers is necessary for each discourse in which identities are negotiated, not however what signifier in a concrete context is emptied. The concept of the empty signifiers is first of all a formal one.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, the creation of empty signifiers is an expression of the development of political opinion and a result of the hegemonic action of those with political interests. Laclau and Mouffe, and in a certain sense also Stuart Hall, are mainly interested in the consequences and practical application of their reflections for political mobilisation strategies. This covers up to an extent the basic insights of a theoretical model that could

profit a cultural studies approach in general. For, in my opinion, there can be little opposition to drawing in general on this model of the empty signifiers for the analysis of general concepts, which facilitates identification for example of esotericism. The epistemological interest of cultural studies though does not directly seek guidance for political action, but is rather historical. It could be described along the lines of the late Foucault as a "permanent critique of our historical era" (1984: 42), and has been programmatically formulated by him in his historicising transformation of the three critical questions of Kant as follows:

How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions? (Foucault 1984: 49; see also Brieler 1998: 599-628; Hemminger 2004).

If we apply this concretely to the examination of general concepts, the main concern is to work out their historical genealogy and contingency, and to point to how they are imbedded in the respective dominant social discourse. The intrinsic ideological criticism of such historical research can of course, as a consequence, have political implications (Hemminger 2004: 176-184).

Empty signifiers, therefore, only point out in a very general way a particular but central moment of the discursive manufacture of meaning. They would not be restricted to the political in the narrow sense, but be a part of every discourse of identification about culture and society, and thereby imbedded in the dominant discourses of the time and its pervading power mechanisms.

This discussion about empty signifiers is immediately applicable to post-colonial concepts, which aim in a similar direction. Homi Bhabha speaks, for example, of the stereotype as "an arrested, fixated form of representation... denying the play of difference" (1994: 75), which comes very close to the concept of the empty signifiers. The reflections of Laclau and Mouffe on empty signifiers are, however, substantially more comprehensive and systematic than those of Bhabha on the stereotype. Yet there is also an inadequacy in the approach of Laclau and Mouffe. They only superficially tackle the issue of the contentiousness of the partial fixing, even if Laclau repeatedly claims that the logic of equivalence is time and again undermined by the logic of difference (1994: 162). Bhabha, and with him most post-colonial theoretical approaches, reveal right here their strength. They are particularly interested in the contested demarcations or nodal points of colonial rule discourses and work out their complex and hybrid forms (Williams & Chrisman 1994; Moore-Gilbert 1997; King 1999; Young 2001; Conrad & Randeria 2002). To this extent, post-colonial theories can be understood as an essential

continuation of the reflections of Laclau and Mouffe, in order that the empty signifiers are appropriately located in the complex dynamic of cultural negotiating processes.

In light of the mainly formal argument above, it is now legitimate to discuss the question, "which particular difference is going to become the locus of equivalential effects"; that is, how the "social production of empty signifiers" comes about in a concrete social context (Laclau 1994: 175-176). For this it is first necessary to point out that discourse is understood here as a social practice and thereby also has a material character. It should not be misinterpreted as something purely intellectual. An attempt is therefore made to overcome the up until now conventional but unsatisfactory dichotomisation into discursive and not discursive, thought and reality, or into foundation and superstructure, etc., in the concept of discourse. As noted initially with reference to Derrida, language cannot represent something that lies outside itself, from which of course it is not the consequence that a world outside of language is denied:

The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of 'natural phenomena' or 'expressions of the wrath of God,' depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside of any discursive condition of emergence (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 108; see also Sarasin 2003: 100-121).

Empty signifiers therefore mark a social practice. The fixation of a system of differences by means of an empty signifier is not a purely linguistic phenomenon; rather it permeates "the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive formation is structured" (Laclau & Mouffe 2001: 109).

IV. Methodological Application

Esotericism as a discursive nodal point represents thus a social practice. This theoretical assertion requires now a methodical application for the concrete empirical determination of the social meaning and range of esotericism. The production and reproduction of an empty signifier depend on the articulation of a discursive community, but this discourse community is not identical with

those that identify themselves with the empty signifier. In the case of esotericism the discourse community is therefore not identical with the esotericists, but embraces for example also those who oppose esotericism and also journalists who report on esotericism in the public media. In short, it embraces all those who participate in an articulation, who reproduce the corresponding equivalence chains that are produced through the empty signifier, and whereby each articulation can also include a variation and so at the same time can represent a negotiation of the understanding of esotericism. In order to better grasp this problem it has been repeatedly suggested, following Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field, to speak of "fields of discourse," in order to assign in this way to the theory of discourse a concept of social space as a place of discursive negotiating processes (Schiffauer 2000: 315-331; Schwab-Trapp 2001: 268-269). This serves to make clear that discourses are articulated in different places; they are connected and networked with each other, yet each possesses particular subjects, concepts, expressive modalities, and strategies. Thus, there are academic, journalistic, literary, religious and political fields of discourse etc., which can be differentiated. Surely nothing can be said against this proposal, so long as the field concept does not contain any hidden category of order that exhibit an outer discursive reference. Fields of discourse must themselves emerge in the discursive articulation.

Applying this to esotericism, it could be said that the reproduction of esotericism's empty signifier takes place through the articulation of a discursive community in different discourse fields. Esotericism as an identity positioning has its place in a religious discourse field. However, the articulation of equivalence chains and their reproduction takes place also in other discourse fields. The discourse community, though, does not separate itself necessarily according to the various discourse fields, because the same individuals can be active in several fields of discourse at the same time in an articulate way; academics can be esotericists or journalists can be anti-esotericists etc.

The talk of a discourse community and fields of discourse has the advantage of providing greater visual clarity and a formal proximity to sociological theory formations (Knoblauch 1995: 308-310; Schwab-Trapp 2001: 270-271). The fundamental epistemological differences between discourse theory and sociological approaches ought not though to be blurred, because otherwise a theoretical eclecticism threatens.

In connection with this, a partial inclusion of Hanegraff's considerations and observations would be possible. In the introduction to the "Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism," Hanegraff writes that the stereotyping of Hermeticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through its Protestant and Enlightenment-influenced critics, significantly influenced the

formation and self-understanding of esoteric currents of the same time. Esoteric identity positionings can therefore only be understood in connection with the dominant anti-hermetical discourse. While the dominant discourse described Hermeticism as a "coherent counterculture of superstition and unreason," the adherents of these traditions inverted this image through stylising themselves as a counter-cultural movement. Yet they reinterpreted their stigmas in terms of superiority by claiming to have "a superior worldview with ancient roots, and opposed to religious dogmatism and narrow-minded rationalism" (Hanegraff 2005b: x). The tracing of such complex connections is central to the approach suggested here and especially the subaltern inversions of dominant discursive stigmatisms that are frequently to be found (Bergunder 2004, 2006).

On the basis of the considerations so far, esotericism can be understood as a general term of identification in the form of an empty signifier, which is articulated and reproduced by means of a discourse community and in different fields of discourse. In this sense, esotericism is a historical phenomenon and is to be understood neither as nominalistic nor idealistic, but as a contingent nodal point or rather as the fixing of a contentious power discourse. It is in this sense that esotericism is defined here as the subject of esoteric research in religious studies.

In order to point out the value of such a subject definition for the actual work of religious studies, this approach must be further put into operation. This could possibly be done by conceptualising esotericism as a discursive network in which a discourse community and fields of discourse are connected together. The image of a network stands in near proximity to the notion of nodal points and is particularly graphic. From this result, in addition, methodological links can be found in the area of the currently popular network analysis (Loimeier 2000; Hollstein & Straus 2006). In order to be able to reconstruct esotericism as a historical subject of esoteric research, this discursive network requires having at its disposal diachronous and synchronous dimensions. Following a synchronous view, what counts as esotericism is that which has a share in one and the same discursive network simultaneously. Here it is crucial to note that the network model wants to be nothing more than a methodological application of the theoretical rationale of identity markings as empty signifiers. Obviously, it is presumed that within this network the power of representation is in no way uniformly distributed and, moreover, is disputed. The intensity of the relations within the synchronous network is likewise unequally distributed, so that esotericism turns into a fluid and opens parameter whose circumscription and limits are in no way clear, and which necessarily contains a great number of contentious borderline cases.

Furthermore, it is also the case that the esoteric network can comprise many clearly visible subdivisions (for example New Age, modern Rosicrucians, Neopaganism). Amongst the participants, constant negotiation processes around the limits of the network take place. Boehinger has for example pointed out that esotericists gladly differentiate between "true" and "false" esotericism, often with exclusive claims that to some extent exclude each other (1996: 242).

Furthermore, such a synchronous network can only be meaningfully described when it is registered in the totality of social discourses, that is, fields of discourse of its time. It can possibly then, in certain constellations, be a subsection of other discursive networks (e.g., anti-materialism, scientism, religion).

Apart from the synchronous, another criterion is necessary in order to be able to grasp esotericism as a historical research subject. This second, diachronic criterion demands that we can only speak of esotericism in history when the synchronous esoteric network stands in a diachronic, direct, continuous historical relationship to previous synchronous networks; that is, in a historically verifiable line of reception and tradition. Esotericism is thereby understood as a singular historical construction, and parallel phenomena that do not stand in any established historical relationship to it would be clearly distinguishable. Further, it is to be noted that the pronouncement as to whether certain currents or persons are to be set within or outside esotericism is always descriptive and only true for the time of observation. It is quite possible in the past to have belonged to it, or in the future (again or for the first time) to belong to it.

These practical reflections presented here on the definition of the subject do not claim in any way a special originality, but rather orient themselves consciously on general procedures of historical research. The rationale based on discourse theory that has been carried out, and with it the associated consistent historicization of the subject, stands however in contradiction to some initially described tendencies in esotericism research and could represent therefore an alternative worthy of consideration. Research understood in such a way would first need to qualify the content of its subject, with and by the reconstruction of the esoteric network. And this could do without the assumption of certain forms of thinking as well as, moreover, open up the subject definition for criticism and for a different interpretation of historical sources.

How could the reconstruction of such a network actually take place? To this, I would like to offer some general reflections. Of particular interest is the question about the point of entry with which the definition begins. This can only be, in our case, within the range that, as Eagleton says, "the people" of a

discursive practice give the name esotericism, and we should start where this has been the case for the last time in history, thus in the present. The concern is not about the nominal occurrence of the term esotericism, but rather is about esotericism as empty signifiers and in particular about the associated equivalence chains. The reconstruction of a synchronous esoteric network for the present time is not undisputed, as the mentioned New Age debate between Boehinger and Hanegraaff has shown. If one follows Hanegraaff, then it is possible to retrace contemporary modern esotericism through diachronic, interdependent, synchronous networks up until the second half of the nineteenth century (Hanegraaff 1996: 411-513; Stuckrad 2004a: 256-257 n. 23). We would then have a subject, esotericism, which can be convincingly traced back until then through an unbroken line of reception and tradition. In the second half of the nineteenth century, there is a close synchronous esoteric network between the Theosophical Society and related organisations as guiding authorities (Campbell 1980; Washington 1993; van der Veer 2001; Dixon 2001; Owen 2004). If one follows Boehinger, who contests the existence of New Age as an independent movement, one could come to the conclusion that there is today no such thing as a discursive network of esotericism, which can be separately reconstructed. In this case, an earlier point of entrance would have to be selected, possibly as early as in the second half of the nineteenth century, which would mean that for the time thereafter one could not speak meaningfully about esotericism. The decision between the two possibilities is however not left to the arbitrary decision of research, but rather is taken in reference to the concrete interpretation of the respective historical sources. This decision claims of course no realistic objectivity, nor does it remain on the level of description, rather it makes it possible to understand different conceptions as different weightings of the interpretations of sources, and not as irreconcilable, abrupt, coexisting, axiomatic positions. This is an important intention of the model suggested here, because the issue of weighting between continuity and discontinuity must remain always disputed, but it is fundamental as to if historical research can reconstruct a subject of "esotericism" or not. This, in itself not a particularly spectacular approach, differs clearly from the hitherto usual construction of a history of esotericism, which looks for its point of entry at the beginning of the alleged tradition, which it updates then into the present. Esotericism, in this case, always remains a "construct" and not a historical reconstruction as is proposed here. If esotericism is a mere construct of the esotericism researchers, then it has strictly speaking no historical existence, and gives rise to the already discussed question as to why such a subject should be at all constructed. Hanegraaff has shown that in most of the esotericist constructions of esotericism additional presumptions relating

to the ontological status of the specific construct are to be found, which indeed lends it an “existence” and which run quite often parallel to esotericist Perennialism (1998).

Nevertheless, the approach suggested here stands also in danger of privileging certain lines of reception from the outset, in order to secure an esoteric tradition. Here it is essential to remember that esotericism is understood simply as an identity marker. Thus esotericism was, for example, in the second half of the nineteenth century, merely one possible identity positioning of its participants, which was embedded in numerous others like for example Hinduism (Bergunder 2005a; Bergunder 2006b), Buddhism, Christianity (Cyranka 2005a), religious studies or natural science (Bergunder 2005b). From this, it appears that the esotericism, in the second half of the nineteenth century, had a significant influence in a global religious discourse, which goes beyond a synchronous esoteric network and points far beyond it. It is important to keep this in mind when it comes to the specific synchronous reconstruction of an esoteric network, so that the diachronous reconstruction based on it does not reify and privilege an esoteric tradition in an uncritical manner. One can see that the demand for a broad synchronous reconstruction is not concerned with hair splitting, from the fact that the past contributions of esoteric research hardly pay attention to this dimension. The relevant article concerning the Theosophical Society in the Dictionary of Gnosis and Esotericism is a good example of how real this problem is (Santucci 2005).

If we now try to go back in the reconstruction of an esoteric tradition to before the second half of the nineteenth century, then there arise at first some difficulties, because before this “the people” did not know of an explicit concept of “esotericism.” This is in itself no argument against a diachronous line of reception and tradition that goes back further. For it is conceivable that even before the second half of the nineteenth century synchronous networks existed which, without explicit self-representation as esotericism, exhibit so many similarities and historical connections with later esotericism that, in this way, they participate in this esotericism and, in this sense, can be assigned to it. In order to make a judgement on this matter, the immediate and direct predecessors of nineteenth century esotericism need to be accurately reconstructed, which up till now has not been done satisfactorily. If these are reconstructions, they must likewise be examined for potential synchronous connections. Evidence from present research suggests that the known immediate predecessors of esotericism, such as Spiritism/Spiritualism and French Occultism, stood equally in an internal synchronous connection to each other (Judah 1967; McIntosh 1972; Brandon 1983; Oppenheim 1985; Sawicki 2002). The reconstruction always remains an assessment. In as far as one can give good

reason here for the historical continuity, one could assign these forerunners in this special sense as esotericism. With every one of these steps in diachronous reconstruction, it is to be expected, however, that the self-understanding of the predecessors differ in many points from those of the successors. And it is to be expected that through accumulation of these differences, in a long term view, serious differences in content will arise, so that the reconstruction of an esoteric tradition need not be synonymous with the reconstruction of common key elements of content, but rather go together with the demonstration of conceptual transformation processes and fractures.

In this way, a history of reception and tradition could possibly be retraced as far as desired. It must however be precisely and accordingly weighed and discussed at every point. On each single point, reception, continuity, and fracture there needs to be a precise analysis. As this diachronous reconstruction takes the present as its starting point and goes back, a teleologising of the reconstruction is effectively prevented, and the “Chimera of the origin” is successfully “driven out” (Foucault 1987: 73).

If following this approach the attempt is made to retrace the line of reception and tradition, then this probably could be done up until the beginning of the nineteenth century, with some certainty to Romanticism and Mesmerism (Hanegraaff 1996: 411–513). It is striking that these esoteric currents, which can be retraced up until the beginning of the nineteenth century, also accommodate traditions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and in central places these are frequently the texts that come from what Faivre calls the “esoteric corpus.” To establish esotericism and the different currents, whose texts are summarised in the esoteric corpus, as a common research definition of ‘esotericism,’ would only be meaningful within the frame of the definition given here if a meaningful diachronous continuity over the entire eighteenth century back to these currents in the seventeenth century could be pursued. The question about synchronous “esoteric” discourses in the eighteenth century, and their forwards and backwards relationships, is a central theme of the Halle research group led by Neugebauer-Wölk, and has shown to be a very complex problem. This can be illustrated by the example of Swedenborg, in which for those involved it was mainly unexpectedly ascertained, that he himself was bound in his lifetime in no recognisable “esoteric” discourse whatsoever and only became involved through the reception after his death at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Stengel 2005 2008, Hanegraaff 2007). A further example would be the soul migration conceptions of Lessing from which the contemporary deistic-antideistic debates emanate and which likewise only experienced a positioning as esoteric in the nineteenth century (Cyranka 2005b). There is much evidence that the esoteric reception of Her-

meticism, occult arts, Christian Kabbalah, Paracelsianism, Christian theosophy, Rosicrucianism, etc. at the beginning of the nineteenth century, represented a new approach and was not mediated over a diachronous tangible esoteric network. If this should be the case, it would make more sense not to speak about esotericism before the nineteenth century. Indeed, numerous studies prefer the designation of Hermeticism for the corresponding phenomena before the nineteenth century and do without a continuative concept of esotericism (Trepp & Lehmann 2001; Mulsow 2002).

However, the question is anything but resolved, because we have also in the eighteenth century indications of synchronous networks that could be considered for the establishment of a diachronous connection. So wrote Friedrich Christoph Oetinger about his contact with Coppel Hecht, a Jewish Kabbalist friend from Frankfurt, in the year 1729:

I loved him ever more and inquired of him, what I had to do in order to understand the Kabbalist. He said, I should save myself this work, I would not be able to accomplish it; I should remain with the text of the holy scriptures. Concerning the Kabbalah, we Christians have a book that talks still more clearly of the Kabbalah than the Book Sohar. I asked: "Which?" He answered: "Jakob Böhme!" and showed me immediately the correspondence of his statements with the Kabbalist statements (Oetinger 1961: 52. Cf. also Weyer-Menkoff 1990: 53–54).

From this quotation it is clear that Oetinger acted at this time in Frankfurt in an environment in which Jewish and Christian Kabbalah and Christian Theosophy were widely read as belonging together. Oetinger was, as is generally known, recognised for his part in the esotericism of the early nineteenth century. A further case in point is of course the Scottish high degree Freemasonry from the middle of the eighteenth century, in which likewise numerous currents of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, like: Hermeticism, occultic arts, Kabbalah, Theosophy, Rosicrucianism etc., were read as belonging together (Neugebauer-Wölk 1997; Neugebauer-Wölk 2002). Freemasonry too has also been comprehensively accommodated by esotericism of the early nineteenth century. At present, we have to wait for the results of further research into esotericism in the eighteenth century before further conclusions can be drawn (Neugebauer-Wölk 2008).

V. Conclusion

The aim of these deliberations is to plea for a historicising, cultural studies definition of esotericism as the subject of the esotericism research community. Esotericism is to be understood as an identifying general term in the form of

an empty signifier which, through a discourse community and in different fields of discourse, is articulated and reproduced. Esotericism reveals itself as a subject in concrete historical research and its definition depends on whether certain lines of reception and tradition are evaluated as continuous or discontinuous.

The main advantage is the explicit theoretical foundation of this approach combined with a detailed and practical methodological application that can overcome the impasse that previous debates on the subject definition have exposed. The relationship between esotericism and the study of esotericism can be meaningfully and comprehensively discussed and it goes beyond a simple bifurcation of religious and scientific agendas. It is also possible to discuss the history of esotericism without reference to essentializing frameworks. Whether this approach could have further implication for the principal question of how to appropriately define research subjects in the field of religious studies might only to be seen in the future.

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