WESTERN ESOTERIC TRADITION

"Esoteric" (from Greek: *esòteros*) is a comparative term, meaning "more inward," in contrast to "exoteric" (from *exòteros*), which means "more outward." This usage, rooted in the terminology of Greek philosophy, presupposes a duality of insiders and outsiders. The defining characteristics of the esotericist are identification with the inside group, and consequent access to special or secret knowledge.

A prejudice in favor of classical Greece tends to date the Western esoteric tradition from Pythagoras (sixth century B.C.E.) and to root it in his travels in Egypt and Babylon. However, the legendary visit to Pythagoras of Abaris, a priest of Apollo from Hyperborea, points to an existing esoteric tradition in Northern Europe. The achievements in mathematics and astronomy of megalithic culture (fifth–second millennia B.C.E.) bear witness to a technically educated elite, and almost certainly to a concomitant spiritual science. A residue of this prehistoric tradition survives in Celtic and Germanic myth and legend, and in what little is known of the Druids and other pagan schools of the north.

The school of Pythagoras, which is much better documented, was divided into auditors *(akousmatikoi)* and students *(mathematikoi)*. The auditors, seated outside the veil that hid the master as he spoke, received unexplained, dogmatic precepts, while the students were initiated into the reasons and realities behind these teachings. As the Greek name for the esoteric group suggests, one of their chief disciplines was mathematics. The same was true of Plato's Academy (fourth century B.C.E.), whose portal bore the inscription "Let none ignorant of geometry enter."

Plato's teachings, following Pythagorean tradition, had an exterior side devoted to ethical questions and the education of the rational mind. That is their better-known aspect, immortalized in the Socratic dialogues. The esoteric side, in which Plato's debt to the earlier school is more evident, combined a science of number with a science of the soul. Platonic mathematics embodied insights, revolutionary for their time, into cosmology, harmony, and the invariable laws of the natural world. It is more difficult to reconstruct the Platonic science of the soul, because this was predicated on concepts and experiences that transcended verbal and logical expression. However, there is little doubt that the inmost circles of Pythagoreans and Platonists alike were concerned with matters classified today as mystical and occult. Their ultimate purpose was to prepare the student for death and its aftermath. In this respect they resembled the initiations of the Eleusinian and other mysteries, but with the difference that the philosophers sought not just a life-changing experience but also understanding.

The first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. saw an international revival of interest in Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy that left its mark in the writings of Cicero, Ovid, and Virgil. Some of the prime movers were Cicero's friend Nigidius Figulus, a Roman Neopythagorean; Philo of Alexandria, who tried to reconcile the Greek philosophies with his native Judaism; the traveling magus Apollonius of Tyana; and the scholarly Plutarch, a priest of Apollo at Delphi. Simultaneously there came the mystery religions from Egypt and the East, with their message of personal relationship with a savior god or goddess. The most widespread was Mithraism, which traveled with the Roman army to the outermost bounds of the empire. Mithraism as a whole was an esoteric cult that successfully guarded its secrets from outsiders. Within it, as in most esoteric groups, there was a further sifting of members as they progressed, through initiations, into ever more inward circles.

The philosophical revival, combined with the mysteries, was the soil out of which grew the great Neoplatonic movement of the third–sixth centuries C.E. with its centers in Alexandria (Ammonius Saccas, Plotinus), Syria (Porphyry, Iamblichus), Rome (the later Plotinus, Porphyry), Carthage (Apuleius), and Athens (Proclus, Damascius). This was also the time during which Christianity rose to become the official religion of the Roman Empire.

The Neoplatonists at first ignored Christianity, as they had ignored Judaism, as being irrelevant to their interests. The exoteric society of which they constituted, by their own reckoning, the esoteric elite, was one of tolerant polytheism. Given their philosophic keys, they could easily discover the metaphysical and cosmological realities concealed in the Greco-Roman mythology and in everyday religious practice. The Neoplatonists were thoroughly in favor of the latter, being well aware of how much the established temple cults contributed to private piety and public order. During the later period of the Roman Empire, they supported the convergence of cults toward a solar monotheism.

The new savior-religion of Christianity, originally an offshoot of Judaism, borrowed eclectically from the solar cult, from Gnosticism, and from the Egyptian and Mithraic mysteries. To an outsider, its most striking aspects were the solidarity of its followers, and their contempt for all other religions. Spreading at first among the lowest classes, then among patrician women, it became a political force in proportion to the weakening of the empire. In the process it discarded most of its founder's teachings, as being too unworldly and disruptive of the social fabric, and built a powerful hierarchy of its own. After it achieved primacy as the empire's official religion (325 C.E.), it set to work to liquidate its competitors. After the failure of Emperor Julian to reinstitute the worship of the old gods (360–363 C.E.), Greco-Roman paganism was doomed, along with its esoteric academies and mystery schools. The closing of the Athenian Academy in 529 C.E. marked the end of a millennium-long tradition.

Esotericism lived on despite Christianity, not because of it. Primitive Christianity was essentially a way of love and renunciation, indifferent to profane learning and the natural sciences, and suspicious of any attempt to find salvation outside the Church. The esoteric path, in contrast, is one of knowledge, or *gnosis*. Those for whom the science of the cosmos and the science of the soul were a consuming passion adapted the Christian framework for their own purposes. (The same happened with the Sufis in the Muslim world.) An example is the extraordinary figure known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (seventh century). His mapping of the angelic hierarchy and its earthly parallel in the hierarchy of the Church is a typically esoteric exercise, drawing on the doctrine of correspondences, in which heaven and earth reflect one another. His "negative theology," similar to the higher metaphysical flights of Plotinus, bypasses all the dogmatic assertions that the "positive" theologians argued over.

There is little doubt that Dionysius was also an accomplished mystic; but esotericism is not the same as mysticism. The mystic, driven by love and emotion, yearns for union with God—an experience, which, unexamined, can lead to delusion or fanaticism. The seeker after esoteric knowledge wants the transformative gnosis that reveals the true nature of himself, the world, and the divine. In a prescientific age, when illiteracy and superstition were the norm, this path of knowledge began with mathematics and natural science, logic, and the analysis of language. For this reason, Aristotle was nearly as important a contributor to it as Plato.

During the centuries after Dionysius, Neoplatonism continued to attract Christians unfulfilled by religious observance alone. The School of Chartres (eleventh to thirteenth centuries), inspired by Plato's Pythagorean dialogue *Timaeus* and by the encyclopedic work of Boethius, revived the sciences of number. Their lasting memorial is the Gothic cathedral, a triumph of geometry and the constructive imagination. The technical knowledge that went into this was

the jealously guarded property of the master-masons, who came in time to constitute an esoteric brotherhood of their own.

The pointed arch that is the basis of Gothic architecture had appeared long before in the Arab world, where, too, the works of Aristotle, the Platonists, and the Greek scientists were studied in translation. Among other ancient sciences that passed through the Arabs to Christian Europe was alchemy, or the "Hermetic art." For four centuries and more, alchemy served as the principal nexus of the Western esoteric tradition. It provided a cover under which one could pursue an esoteric path, in a more or less conscious way. There was nothing in it to disturb Christian orthodoxy: Even the ambition to make gold could be excused by a wish to help the poor. When practiced at the physical level, it gave a plenitude of insights into organic and inorganic nature. When the alchemist became more identified with the work, it began to operate its transmutations simultaneously on the human subject. In some cases, laboratory work was entirely omitted, and the alchemical processes were carried out through active imagination alone. Then Mercury, Sulphur, Salt, and so forth were allegories of states of mind and soul that were explored and manipulated in the canse of transformative knowledge.

The traditional secrecy of esotericism also applied to alchemy, in which the essential points were conveyed by word of mouth from master to pupil. For instance, no one ever stated outright what their First Matter was, or their Secret Fire. Moreover, just as Pythagorean cosmology included information such as heliocentrism, which remained unknown to the world in general for two thousand years, so alchemy probably included some secrets about the natural world that have yet to be rediscovered. In both cases, esotericists act as the scientific preceptors of humanity, but only when the time is ripe. Until then, their ideas would be met with mockery or suppression.

The science of the soul that is the other side of esoteric training was even more alien to the majority and to their exoteric guardians—in earlier times, the Church; in later ones, scientific materialism. For instance, all the Neoplatonists followed Pythagoras in embracing the doctrine of reincarnation. Exactly what they understood by that—what it is that they supposed to reincarnate—is a complex question. But certainly they did not envisage the after-death state of the soul as the Christians did: as an eternity of Heaven, or else of Hell. Nor could any philosophic mind take seriously the cult of relics, the trade in indulgences, the prayers to saints, and all the other apparatus that hinged on this belief concerning the afterlife. As for the idea of the New Testament, and even more the Old, as infallible works of divine inspiration, the Catholic Church did well to leave their improprieties and self-contradictions in the decent obscurity of Latin.

The existence of esoteric groups during the Middle Ages is beyond doubt, but largely beyond our historical grasp. Symptoms of their existence appear, as mentioned, in the masonic guilds; also in the Courts of Love in southern France; in the Sicilian court of Emperor Frederick II; in the Knights Templar; and in Dante. But it is in the nature of esotericism not to advertise itself, nor to admit potentially unworthy and indiscreet persons to its secrets. The science of "how man makes himself immortal" (Dante's words) was transmitted along the thinnest of threads.

During the fifteenth century, the rediscovery and translation of Greek texts, especially the Neoplatonists and the *Corpus Hermeticum*, led to a renaissance of classical pagan philosophy. The Byzantine philosopher George Gemistus Plethon planted the idea that divine wisdom was inherent in all religions, and that an "ancient theology" or a "perennial philosophy" had existed since the earliest ages, of which Christianity was the latest (if the most perfect) manifestation. The Roman Academy of Pomponio Leto went so far in its revival of antiquity that it was dissolved by papal order and its members imprisoned. Marsilio Ficino, head of the Flo-

rentine Academy, re-created the Orphic invocations and practiced astrological magic; his younger colleague Pico della Mirandola added Jewish kabbala to the mixture. Early in the sixteenth century, Henry Cornelius Agrippa compiled an encyclopedia of natural, astrological, and kabbalistic magic that has never been superseded. Neoplatonic ideas permeated the arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture with an alternative mythology to that of Christianity.

All of these developments hinted at the possibility of an initiatic path existing outside the Church, but they were soon extinguished. The climate of controversy and religious wars following the Reformation made it dangerous enough to be the wrong sort of Christian, let alone pagan. Alchemy alone survived as a visible and acceptable witness to an esoteric tradition.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the two components of traditional esotericism parted company. The science of the cosmos and of number became secularized in the Scientific Revolution, while the science of the soul found a new home in Protestant mysticism, invigorated by the example of Jacob Boehme (1575–1624). This "theosophy" took for granted the Christian revelation contained in the Bible, but, like alchemy, regarded the Book of Nature as a parallel revelation in which the divine mind could be penetrated. Leaning to piety and mysticism rather than to philosophy, the Boehmians (or Behmenists) were the chief if not the only esoteric tradition through the Age of Reason. Another candidate for the title is FREEMASONRY, especially in its more theosophical, magical, and alchemical offshoots. Although the majority of lodges were fraternal and political in intent, they offered a haven for discreet meetings and transmissions, while their symbolism had evident links with the ancient mysteries. Some of them, such as those frequented by the young Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), gave access to Jewish esoteric teachings, notably those on sexual magic. With good reason, the Church was suspicious of Freemasonry in all its varieties.

The Romantic era was a time of philosophical ferment comparable to the Roman Empire period and to the fifteenth century. Once again, European esoteric traditions (Boehmian theosophy, Freemasonry) met with extra-European influences, now coming from Persia, India, and China. Christianity, much weakened politically and discredited in the minds of many intellectuals, no longer served as the unquestioned substratum of belief. The first stages of esotericism became freely accessible: the opportunity to study and cultivate, not merely to save, one's own soul; the opening of the world of the imagination through poetry and music; communion with a living nature. However, no philosophical academies existed to carry the aspirant further, and the end-point was often a pantheistic mysticism.

The Romantic attitude also made itself felt as an alternative current in the natural sciences, deprecated today because of its unacceptable metaphysics (that is, because it is not based on the materialistic assumption). Some examples are the medical practices of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815); the theories of metamorphosis and of color espoused by Goethe (1749–1832); the homeopathy of Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843); the universal science based on the doctrine of correspondences of Lorenz Oken (1779–1851); and the experiments of the later Mesmerists with animal magnetism and altered states of consciousness. The connection of these with esoteric philosophy is obvious. Even more so is that of the Psychical Research Society, whose chief object was to settle the question of the soul's survival. Until World War I, some major figures in the natural sciences (for example, William Barrett, William Crookes, Oliver Lodge, Charles Richet, and Johann Zöllner) were dedicated to such research.

Both of these tendencies—the concordance of Western with Eastern traditions, and the pursuit of a nonmaterialistic science—met in the THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY (ADYAR). Founded in 1875 by Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Henry S. Olcott (1832–1907), with a large contribution from the medium Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–1899), the society was at first devoted to practical research into occultism. The 1880s saw the emergence of

a rival group, the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, largely based on the teachings of the American medium Pascal B. Randolph (1825–1875). Its influence was out of all proportion to its modest operation, which was not through personal contact or ritual but through a correspondence course in self-initiation. In the same decade the Theosophical Society founded an Esoteric Section, which still exists but whose activities have never been revealed. A little later, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn provided more glamorous opportunities for ceremonial magic and initiatic ritual. Its vocabulary was Hermetic, kabbalistic, Rosicrucian, and Enochian (that is, based on the "angelic conversations" of John Dee). Later offshoots of the Golden Dawn, notably those led by Dion Fortune (1891–1946) and Gareth Knight, were more Christocentric, as was the Anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925).

The Western attraction to Eastern philosophies and to practices such as meditation and yoga was the most visible esoteric phenomenon of the twentieth century, comparable again to the influx of the Oriental mystery-religions (including Christianity) into the Roman Empire. Buddhism, first in its Japanese (Zen) then in its Tibetan form, provided a popular alternative religion to many former Christians and Jews. Toward the end of the century, the residue of all these tendencies—alternative science, occultism, Orientalism—congealed in the NEW AGE MOVEMENT.

At this point it is impossible to define a single Western esoteric tradition. Some Christian esotericists imagine an initiatic lineage going back to the secret teachings of Jesus himself, but the evidence, to an outsider, is nonexistent. Rather, the repeated impulses toward a "more inward" path seem to have led outside the Christianity of the churches, and the more so when the goal is knowledge of self and cosmos rather than mystical union. The fundamental teaching of Christianity is love, and its basis in the Gospels is antihierarchical and anti-individualistic. If in practice it has consistently violated those principles, they still remain as a powerful personal and social ideal, with their own virtues and rewards. To choose the esoteric path is essentially to prefer self-perfection or self-realization to these ideals, which is why the Christian churches, unlike Hinduism, Buddhism, or Greco-Roman paganism, have never had a comfortable relationship with their Gnostic and esoteric members.

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