Global Approaches in the Study of Esotericism

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Hardly anyone would deny that esotericism is today a global subject. There is, however, disagreement about how to approach this circumstance historiographically, especially in light of the established geographical demarcation of the field of "Western esotericism." Was esotericism always global? If not, when did it become global, and how? What does "global" mean, in the first place? This entry will provide a brief overview of the debates revolving around this issue, which have until recently been troubled by a lack of engagement with those approaches that are most directly relevant for the discussion of the global dimensions of esotericism, namely, global history and postcolonial approaches. It will be demonstrated that such approaches hold great potential for the study of esotericism, not only for establishing the field's relevance for larger historical contexts, but also for interactions with other disciplines and fields of study.

The theoretical and methodological problems of the field's "Western" demarcation have been addressed repeatedly in recent years (Granholm 2013; Asprem 2014), and proposals have been made to introduce global perspectives to meet these challenges (e.g., Bergunder 2010; Bergunder 2016). Such impulses have been countered by Wouter Hanegraaff in an article about the "Globalization of Esotericism" with a diffusionist model claiming that "originally European esoteric or occultist ideas and practices have now spread all over the globe." Supposedly, there have then been "mutations" of those ideas that "traveled back to the West, only to be (mis)understood there as the 'authentic' voices of non-Western spiritualities." Consequently, Hanegraaff insists on an investigation of the "globalization of *Western* (!) esotericism" (Hanegraaff 2015, 86). From such a viewpoint, esotericism spread from Europe to the rest of the world. "Non-Western" reactions to European ideas appear as inauthentic "mutations" produced by "Westernized" individuals.

This "diffusionist reaction" underlines the need for scrutinizing the conceptualization of "Western esotericism" (Strube 2021; cf. Strube 2016b). It also highlights the urgency of

engaging with global and postcolonial approaches, which could help to shine light on the complexities of categories such as "West" or "East," and the historical debates that have shaped their contested meanings. This becomes evident in light of the history of the category "Western esotericism" itself. A solid theoretical toolset is not least necessary for its investigation because it emerged as a polemical identity marker employed by nineteenth-century occultists who rejected the "Eastern" orientation of the recently founded Theosophical Society in the 1880s (Strube 2017, 575-577, Strube 2016a, 590-618; cf. Pasi 2010; Partridge 2013). Historical sources show that the very notion of "Western esotericism" was shaped within a global context in which, contrary to arguments prevalent within the field, an "Eastern" esotericism was very explicitly articulated as the counterpart of a "Western" variety. That this notion is nowadays used as the demarcation of an academic field of study is not only problematic because it is a polemical "insider" concept, but also because the global dimension of its context of emergence is neglected.

This has concrete ramifications that can be exemplified by the scholarship on Theosophy produced within the field, which has almost exclusively focused on "Western" Theosophists, rather than on the many "non-Westerners" who joined, interacted with, and shaped the Society (e.g., Hanegraaff 1996, 455; Hammer and Rothstein 2013; Goodrick-Clarke 2013, 303; Chajes 2019; Rudbøg and Sand 2020; see however, Baier 2009; Baier 2016, 309-310; Mukhopadhyay 2020; Krämer and Strube 2020). While Hanegraaff has recently acknowledged that such "non-Western" actors should receive increased attention, he dismisses the perspective of global entanglement as a "fashionable notion" (Hanegraaff 2020, 49).

As indicated above, the approach of global religious history (*globale Religionsgeschichte*) is already on the table as a useful toolset that allows for a global study of esotericism (for a full monograph operationalizing it, see Strube forthcoming-a; cf. Maltese and Strube forthcoming). From this perspective, the first step must consist in bridging the gap between scholarship on esotericism and that on religion, science, and philosophy more broadly. Michael Bergunder has pointed out that esotericism had "a significant influence in a global religious discourse" that went "beyond a synchronous esoteric network and points far beyond it" (Bergunder 2010, 29). With a focus on the nineteenth century, he speaks of a "twin birth" of the modern meanings of esotericism and religion (Bergunder 2020b, 56). There is now a broad consensus that present-day understandings of religion were shaped especially during the second half of the nineteenth century (e.g., Kippenberg 2002; Krech 2002; Hermann 2015;

Masuzawa 2005; Josephson 2012; Krämer 2017). This was certainly not a unidirectional process diffused from the European center into a world of passive recipients. Therefore, scholars such as Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz have underlined the need for taking into account global historical perspectives to elaborate a decentralized historiography and engage in interregional and transcultural comparison (Kollmar-Paulenz 2010, 265-268; cf. Kollmar-Paulenz 2013, 185-191).

The notion of *science* was central to the formation of religious identities worldwide, including those Hindu reform movements that are particularly relevant to Theosophy. Definitions of Hinduism, as well as Buddhism, were marked by an insistence on their "scientific" character (Bergunder 2016, 110-112; Hatcher 2011; Hatcher 1999; for the case of Buddhism, see King 1999, 151-152, cf. 217). Esotericism played a major role in attempts to "transgress the boundaries" between religion and science (Bergunder 2016, 117-123). Or, more accurately: it was the dichotomization of religion and science that structured the emergence of esoteric movements in the first place (Bergunder 2020b, 103; Strube 2016a, 628-631). Moreover, the esoteric movements' concern for a synthesis of religion, science, and philosophy "was a global endeavour right from the start" and had a significant influence on understandings of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, or Christianity (Bergunder 2016, 123; cf. Green 2015, 386). From a different angle, this context is also highlighted by Nile Green: "The occult thus emerged at the auspicious conjunction of colonialism, technology, transportation, consumerism, and globalization." It ("the occult") must hence be viewed as "a characteristically modern religious form" (Green 2015, 385).

The centrality of esotericism for the controversial negotiations of the meanings of religion and science immediately links it to the question of *modernity* itself. Scholars of esotericism are habitually keen to point out its modernity (e.g., Pasi 2009), but then they also must acknowledge its relationship with the global contexts of colonialism. As will become clear in what follows, the very ramifications of colonialism condition the diffusionist model of "Western esotericism" itself: whereas Eurocentric, diffusionist models of modernity have been practically rejected after decades of scholarship in most other disciplines (e.g., Crossley 2008, 28-46, 106–108; Hermann 2015, 200; Bergunder 2016, 87; Conrad 2016, 3-4; Conrad and Randeria 2013, 35-36), they are still part and parcel of the conceptualization of the field of "Western esotericism". The repertoire of global history is useful for interrogating this situation, as it focuses "on the global conditions and interactions through which the modern world emerged" (Conrad 2016, 76). This allows for an understanding of how meanings of

both "the West" and "esotericism" have emerged in apparent contrast, but in actual entanglement with, "the rest."

What does it mean, then, to write a "global" history? How can boundaries between the local, the regional, and the global be drawn? When and where does history become global in terms of geographical and chronological dimensions? There are many ways to answer these questions. Some approaches focus on "the present-day process of globalization" (Mazlish 2006, 1, 7-22), although the relationship between "global" and "globalization" is anything but clear (Wenzlhuemer 2017, 25-29). Others follow longue durée approaches that often have a comparative thrust (Manning 2003; Crossley 2008). Most scholars have adopted an epistemic modesty and tolerance for different approaches, emphasizing the "necessary impossibility of defining global history" (Sachsenmaier 2011, 70-78), or its character as "a framework for disciplinary studies, parallel in a sense to the framework of area studies" (Manning 2003, 169). Roland Wenzlhuemer has suggested that global history "should not be viewed as a solution to fundamental challenges of historiography—its methods as well as its goals for knowledge production—but as a problematization and critical (self-)reflection that ideally provides partial solutions. It is hence primarily a *perspective*" (Wenzlhuemer 2017, 12-13). This openness underscores the great potential for collaboration, but it also accentuates the need to specify what an individual scholar's "global" approach is based on—or what a critic wishes to object to.

Arguably the central concern of global historical approaches is to overcome *Eurocentrism* and to tell "a story without a center" (Crossley 2008, 4, 102-121). This requires interdisciplinary work and the critical examination of established chronologies, textual traditions, and (for instance, national) historiographies (O'Brien 2006, 4). Such ambitions might appear so high that they can hardly be met (Wenzlhuemer 2017, 10; cf. Sachsenmaier 2007, passim), but they have produced a range of powerful instruments that are, as the issue of "Western esotericism" illustrates, still clearly needed. It is important to clarify that the implication of the term "global" in global religious history—as in most other global historical approaches—is *not* meant to signify "universal" or "planetary" (cf. Manning 2003, 270-272; Wenzlhuemer 2017, 79-84). Quite the contrary, it implies an awareness of global interconnections and structural conditions, focusing on interactions, mobility, and fluidity (Conrad 2016, 12, 64-65; cf. Moyn and Sartori 2013, 5-15).

Such global approaches are not about positing universal, perennial, never-changing essentialisms without historical context. Similarly, the notion of *entanglement* is backed up by

a complex body of theoretical and historical work. The notion of entanglement does not simply state that historical events can be connected, nor does it imply that "everything is connected," in the words of Sebastian Conrad, and neither to the same degree, in the same way, and at any time. The notion does not entail universalism, perennialism, or essentialism. *Entangled histories* tend to be fragmentary rather than holistic; they investigate concrete problems and connections instead of postulating world-historical totalities or attempting to write a history of planet Earth (Conrad and Randeria 2013, 40; cf. Veer 2001, 11; Ballantyne 2014, 17 Ballantyne 2012, passim). Consequently, the researcher must single out or follow specific connections in order to carry out a feasible analysis of a disorderly, often contradictory and ambiguous tangle.

As noted by Wenzlhuemer, the notion of *global connections* is now so widely in use that it has become a kind of "terminological passepartout" (Wenzlhuemer 2017, 14-23, 39-43). In practice, it is difficult if not impossible to clearly distinguish between regional, local, or global connections. Hence, the notion of global connections demands consistent contextualization within an ensemble of factors, even if it turns out that their role is marginal or null (Wenzlhuemer 2017, 23). Connections can generally be viewed as global when they can be discerned over long distances and across entirely different territorial, social, or cultural boundaries (Wenzlhuemer 2017, 29). It goes without saying that the history of esotericism abounds with such connections. They might be grasped through an analysis of a number of different aspects, among which *historical actors* and their *agency* might be singled out here. Historical actors can be understood as acting human beings who, in the sum of their actions, shape history. This is agency, which is governed by both capacities and boundaries (Wenzlhuemer 2017, 145). When viewed from this angle, global connections emerge out of the actions, or the potential for as well as the limitations to actions, of people. The sources left or shaped by those people are open to empirical study, giving substance to the abstract notion of global connections. In this way, the perspective functions as an analytical prism that makes visible the full spectrum of patterns of global connections and creates a sensibility for the many overlapping layers of meaning of the events and their contexts (Wenzlhuemer 2017, 148-149, 184-185).

Moreover, the notion of "global" encourages a combination of *micro- and macro-perspectives*. Global history is not an isolated field populated by macro-historians; rather, it depends on the expertise of "small-scale," regionally-focused scholarship (Wenzlhuemer 2017, 259-263; Fischer-Tiné 2018, 50-51, 67-74; Ghobrial 2019, 10-17). A "zooming in and

out" between macro and micro can lead to new insights into the relation between contexts that have previously been viewed in isolation. Rather than writing impossible histories spanning all regions across the globe, global historians might very well be concerned with studying regionally contingent worldviews within their respective context (Komlosy 2011, 14). Theosophy is a good example of how such a methodology can help to demonstrate the relevance of esotericism in different yet interconnected contexts, as well as within various fields of study focusing on diverse geographical regions. Anyone working within the field of "Western esotericism" can thus fruitfully engage with global scholarship without being forced to learn "non-European" languages or develop an expertise in "non-Western" subjects.

In other words, highlighting esotericism's global entanglements does not entail the dissolution of the field, nor a displacement of typically "Western" subjects within it. Quite the contrary, it would unveil its huge potential to larger fields of study (cf. Asprem and Strube 2021). Rather than taking the role as curatorial guardians of "rejected knowledge" (cf. the argument in Asprem 2021), scholars of esotericism could focus on highlighting the significance of their subjects to other disciplines. Global historians in particular could profit from considering its scholarship. For instance, the exceptional importance of Theosophy for nineteenth-century religious and global history is often acknowledged, but not discussed in detail, and not at all related to the study of esotericism (e.g., Bayly 2004, 365; Osterhammel 2014, 813; Conrad 2018, 582-584). Similar can be said about South Asian studies, where the relevance of Theosophy for "Hindu revivalism" and Indian culture is frequently addressed but rarely dwelt on (e.g., Raychaudhuri 1988, 10, 33; Sen 1993, 5; Bhatia 2017, 58-59, 127; see, however, Bhatia 2020).

A global study of esotericism requires balanced approaches to *colonial* power structures and the agency of colonized people, which demands a careful historical contextualization backed up by theoretical-methodological reflection. This also entails preventing an over-emphasis on the hegemonic role of European colonialism that eclipses the agency of colonized people. Global history has been an important corrective to this tendency among postcolonial approaches (Conrad 2016, 56-57; Moyn and Sartori 2013, 18-20; for the case of Hinduism, cf. Frykenberg 1993, 533-534; King 1999, 159). Indeed, "positive Western exceptionalism" sometimes found its mirror image in postcolonial notions of cultural imperialism that "are essentially diffusionist and take the European origins of modernity for granted" (Conrad 2016, 74-75). As argued by Harald Fischer-Tiné and Susanne Gehrmann, strict lines between colonizer and colonized only "hinder our ability to grasp both the specific agency of historical

actors as well as the heterogeneous and changing character of colonial cultures" (Fischer-Tiné and Gehrmann 2008, 4-5).

The many contradictions and ambiguities, and the challenges arising from them, become manifest in both the historical case of Theosophy and the scholarship dedicated to it. In contrast to most other "Westerners," Theosophists did indeed look up to India as the origin of ancient esoteric wisdom. At the same time, this admiration for "the East" was rooted in the orientalist ideas that operated within, and often served to legitimize, colonialism. Not rarely, such orientalist ideas were implicitly reproduced by Theosophists, leading to racially connoted conflicts within the Society (e.g., Forray 2004; Baier 2016, 309-310). Orientalist perceptions of "the East," as well as Theosophical assertions of authority through invocations of the so-called Mahatmas, are instructive cases in point. Yet, it would be too simplistic to reduce the exchanges between "Western" Theosophists and their Indian interlocutors to a form of colonialism (as argued by Partridge 2013, 327). While it is important to keep in mind the colonial context, its oppressive and exploitative structures, as well as its vastly asymmetric power relations, an exclusive focus on such structures tends to obscure the complexity of the relationship between Western and "non-Western" Theosophists in ways similar to its other extreme, the notion of "positive orientalism" that is quite popular within "Western esotericism" (for a detailed discussion, see Strube forthcoming-c; Strube forthcoming-d). In this sense, it would also be too simplistic to view, like Gauri Viswanathan does, the de-facto "ventriloquism" of Theosophists like Blavatsky (claiming to speak for the Mahatmas) as a mirror image of colonial administration (Viswanathan 2000; Viswanathan 1998, 177-207). This, too, overemphasizes the colonial-oppressive structures within Theosophy, while disregarding the agency that it offered to Indian members.

Significantly, Viswanathan's focus rests on "Western" Theosophists and Anglophone sources, the selection of which already limits the scope for an understanding of the dynamics in question. It is vital that future studies take into full account "non-Western" historical actors and the vast number of sources they left behind. This will help understand the ambiguities of Theosophical orientalism, which was, as Karl Baier has proposed, not based on a "static juxtaposition of East and West but instead established a community of intercultural learners" (Baier 2016, 323-324). Such Theosophical "welcome structures" had concrete and significant socio-political ramifications (e.g., Bevir 1998; Veer 2001, 57; Green 2015, 388-389). They were possible because the ideas of "Western" Theosophists and their interlocutors had already been shaped against a shared historical background, including "Western" orientalist studies,

social reform or alternative religious movements, and the *diachronic* dimensions of regional and local traditions predating the "modern" era (Strube forthcoming-a; Strube forthcoming-b; cf. Bergunder 2020a, 88-89).

The study of esotericism has much to gain from abandoning the idea of European diffusionism and (critically) engaging with global historical, postcolonial, and other perspectives relevant to a comprehensive understanding of esotericism. To be sure, the status quo is not the result of ill intent but, in the words of the postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, "of a much more complex theoretical condition under which historical knowledge is produced" (Chakrabarty 2000, 28-29; cf. Randeria and Römhild 2013, 15-17; Sachsenmaier 2011, 39-45). The idea "first in Europe, then elsewhere" is still widely implied, if not openly expressed in both scholarly and public discourse (Chakrabarty 2000, 7-8, 12-15; cf. Asad 2003, 13-14). Its spatial and regional logic still structures academic disciplines: for instance, sociology as the study of "Western" societies and anthropology as the study to "the rest." This circumstance calls for recognition as a historical construct and concomitant critical self-reflection (Duara 2013; Conrad and Randeria 2013, 33-34).

The *genealogical* approach of global religious history is able to avoid the ideological trappings of Eurocentric diffusionist models, as it always retains a focus on the researcher's positionality and functions, to lend an expression by Talal Asad, as "a way of working back from our present to the contingencies that have come together to give us our certainties" (Asad 2003, 16). By consistently departing from today's global use of esotericism, it prevents (crypto-)essentialist quarrels about origins and authenticity (Bergunder 2014, 275-279). This would help to put into perspective prevalent arguments about the "Western specificity" of esotericism (Hanegraaff 2015, 82), which are based on an insistence on its European origins and imply ownership, the prerequisite for export. By contrast, Chakrabarty has underlined that European knowledge is "now everybody's heritage" (Chakrabarty 2000, 16, 255). "It" was undeniably shaped through vastly asymmetric power relations (Eckert and Randeria 2009, 11), but it was never clearly defined, monolithic, and stable to begin with. At no point was it simply "Western," whatever that might mean. Most crucially, notions such as Western, esotericism, or religion were shaped at the same time and interdependently: it is crucial to acknowledge that the "twins" of religion and esotericism emerged during the period of colonialism, and hence inevitably within a global context.

This does not mean that "the West" as a historically contingent identity marker does not exist. Neither does it lead to the vilification or rejection of (supposedly) Western values, or to

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cultural relativism. Instead, the goal of postcolonial historiography is "to write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it" (Chakrabarty 2000, 42-43). Despite its power asymmetries, colonialism was not a unilateral process of appropriation or homogenization. European or Western identities, too, have formed through a complex dependency on, and interactions with, the perceived other (Conrad and Randeria 2013, 51-52; Veer 2001, 3-13; Fitzgerald 2007, 9; Chidester 1996, xiii). Against this background, "modernity" did not emerge in separation, but as part of an entangled, shared history (Randeria 1999, 87; Veer 2001, 7, 160). It is consequently unwarranted to worry that investigation of esotericism outside "the West" would constitute a "terminological imperialism if we now tried to project this terminology on to the rest of the world" (Hanegraaff 2015, 86). Rather than reproducing the strict binaries and claims of incommensurability between "East and West," the study of esotericism should complicate them from a non-Eurocentric perspective.

To this end, it is crucial that all participants on global exchanges are investigated in their own right. A genealogical perspective proves to be specifically valuable for such a goal: it is a historical fact that the language of esotericism *was and is* used globally. In order to contextualize its use and examine global connections as they become tangible in Theosophy, future collaboration is necessary with scholars who are able to work with non-Anglophone sources and put them in their local or regional contexts. A perspective such as that proposed by global religious history can avoid ahistorical (crypto-)essentialism, as it does not view the process of *translation* between different languages (and cultures) as the manifestation of a perennialist, universalist Truth. Following Lydia Liu, translation is not viewed as the production of equivalents in two different languages. Rather, the equivalence of two terms becomes possible and is, in fact, *produced* in a concrete historical context that determined the *conditions* for the possibility of translation (Liu 1995, xix, 2, 5-6, 10, 19; cf. Liu 1999a, 137). This pragmatic "translingual practice" is open for examination and becomes tangible through sources produced by historical actors who, despite the power asymmetries inherent to the colonial context, shaped the "global circulatory networks of translated knowledge" (Liu 1999a, 128; Liu 1999b, 5). Esotericism was shaped within these networks, and it is crucial to investigate them beyond the scope of "Western culture" and its linguistic repository.

By exploring the structures and conditions for the emergence of different understandings of esotericism, approaches such as global religious history help us shed light on developments that reach far beyond esotericism itself, thus demonstrating its broader historical significance.

Instead of perpetuating essentialist, universalist, or "religionist" perspectives on esotericism and religion, global approaches are well equipped to investigate—on the basis of theoretically substantiated work with historical source material and empirical data—how knowledge was produced and *constantly negotiated* through globally entangled exchanges. Not only does this allow for innovative and significant historical insights, but it bears great significance for present-day scholarly and public debates.

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