

Mac Gillavry, David

[Hanegraaff, Wouter J. Esotericism and the academy: rejected knowledge in western culture]

Religio. 2014, vol. 22, iss. 1, pp. 121-124

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/130362>

Access Date: 19. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

věké myslí (*Kultura středověké Evropy*, Praha: Vyšehrad 2005, 413). Rabi Moše ben Nachman konstruuje svůj hebrejský text jako takováto „utěšující“ autorita a ptá se, proč by měl Talmud učit křesťanství; cožpak rabíni, jeho autoři, nebyli právě těmi Židy, kteří křesťanství odmítli (s. 193-194)? Za rabi Nachmanidem stojí nejen jeho reputace velkého učence a jeho výjimečné rétorické schopnosti, ale i celá rabínská tradice: „Jestliže ho (tj. Ježíše) tedy neposlechli naši předkové, kteří jej znali a viděli na vlastní oči, jakpak můžeme uvěřit my a poslechnout krále, jenž o celé věci ví jen z doslechu od lidí, kteří (Ježíše) neznali ani nepocházeli z jeho země ...“ (s. 220).

MARKÉTA KABŮRKOVÁ

Wouter Hanegraaff, Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture,

**Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press 2012, x + 468 p.
ISBN 978-0-521-19621-5.**

In an article published in 2013, Wouter Hanegraaff states: “Stripped to its very core, my book tries to tell the story of how Christian intellectuals and their post-Enlightenment heirs have been trying to deal with a problem that could not be resolved and refused to go away” (Wouter Hanegraaff, “The Power of Ideas: Esotericism, Historicism and the Limits of Discourse”, *Religion* 43/2, 2013, 252-273: 256). The book Hanegraaff refers to is *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, published in the previous year. In it, Hanegraaff explores the history of how intellectuals have imagined “Western esotericism”.

Hanegraaff traces this history from the Renaissance through the Reformation, the Enlightenment and Romanticism up to our

own times and demonstrates that the long term unsustainability of certain philosophical or religious ideas does not prevent them from being incredibly powerful in the historical setting in which they were formulated. Relatively unknown thinkers such as Marsilio Ficino, Jacob Tomasius and Jacob Brucker, to name just a few, become central figures in a drama which is more concerned with historical context than modern historical models.

Already in the introduction Hanegraaff confronts the reader with the statement that: “What must be emphasized, however, is that our perceptions of ‘esotericism’ or ‘the occult’ are inextricably entwined with how we think about ourselves: although we are almost never conscious of the fact, our very identity as intellectuals or academics depends on an implicit rejection of that identity’s reverse mirror image” (p. 3). The inherent implication of this statement is that we, as intellectuals and/or academics, do not approach the field objectively and that, might we decide to do so, this reverse mirror image, and thus the image we have of ourselves, will inevitably change. Hanegraaff uses this history to provide a firm critique of the dominant approaches in the study of “Western esotericism” and puts forth an alternative which aims at the reintegration, into the historiography of western civilization, of the many different currents which we now view as esoteric.

The first chapter in Hanegraaff’s history takes us back to the Italian renaissance and the reaction of Christian intellectuals to texts of Platonic and Hermetic origins, which had recently been translated. These intellectuals discovered that many of the ideas which they uncovered in these newly translated works were also present in the works of the Church fathers and in the New Testament. In order to justify the study of their newly found sources of wisdom and learning they argued that all these sources were part of a long standing transmission of ideas which originated from a common source, often God or Moses, who in turn received this knowledge from God. Pagan philosophers such as Plato and Hermes Trismegistus, it was argued, must have derived their knowledge from Hebrew sources

es. As a result, there were traces of true knowledge to be found in these pagan philosophers. This line of thinking is referred to as "apologetic" by Hanegraaff who refers to it as an "ancient wisdom narrative" (p. 7-12). Although ancient wisdom narratives can be found in earlier sources, Hanegraaff calls the reader's attention to the two dominant versions which appeared during the Renaissance. The first, *prisca theologia*, was introduced by Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) and referred to ancient wisdom which became forgotten at a certain point in time and was rediscovered centuries later. The second version, *philosophia perennis*, came from the hand of Agostino Steuco (1497-1548) and referred to ancient wisdom which was not lost but has been handed down the generations up to the present day (p. 8).

Ancient wisdom narratives have always been accompanied by their negative counterparts. However, it was not until the Reformation that ideas opposing apologeticism gained momentum. "Anti-apologeticism", as the body of philosophy which opposed apologeticism is known, became part of the systematic attack on Catholicism and the attempt of restoring Christianity to its original state, before the pagan corruption which had, according to the protestant interpretations of history, infected the Church.

Hanegraaff argues that the birth of the study of Western esotericism took place as anti-apologetic thinkers started contemplating what constituted pagan influences and what did not (p. 101-107). In particular, Hanegraaff draws the reader's attention to Jacob Thomasius (1622-1684), the father of the more famous Christian Thomasius. Thomasius identified two heresies from which all others flow and which can, according to Hanegraaff, still prove useful to the study of western esotericism today (p. 150). The first of Thomasius's two heresies is the idea of an eternal world. This idea would imply no beginning and thus not require a god to create the world out of nothing. The second flows naturally from the first, for it implicates that the human soul is not created out of nothing but an offshoot of God's own being and this, in turn, opens the door to the idea of direct access to knowledge of God (p. 105). This knowledge, in

Thomasius's view, can only be granted by the son of God himself through revelation and cannot be successfully sought after.

The next stage in the development of the study of Western esotericism was rooted in anti-apologeticism and can be seen as anti-apologeticism taken to its natural extreme: "anti occult polemics of the enlightenment" (W. Hanegraaff, "The Power of Ideas...", 263). With the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment the rules of science and what was regarded as natural changed radically and as a result a large body of knowledge which constituted, before this time, of respected disciplines now became discarded as irrational. Hanegraaff argues that what we now call Western esotericism "consists precisely of this 'reservoir' of rejected knowledge, created by Enlightenment polemicism on the Protestant foundations according to an explicitly ideological eclectic historiography ..." (W. Hanegraaff, "The Power of Ideas...", 264). Hanegraaff's point becomes clear when one takes into account that modern science differs strongly from early modern and medieval science in the conviction that nothing in the natural world defies explanation for ever (p. 253-254). This, to a large extent, made the supernatural obsolete, and the occult sciences, which depend on hidden influences, an embarrassment to the history of science. The question no longer focussed on the philosophical possibility of success in occult ritual but on the outdated methods which the occultists sought to employ. Although, as Hanegraaff points out, this image has remained influential up till the present day, it does not depend upon empirical evidence but rather on a specific agenda which separates modern science from pre-modern pseudo-science.

The disenchantment brought about by the Enlightenment did however come with a price. To many people the world seemed empty and deprived of meaning without the supernatural. For the study of Western esotericism this meant first and foremost that the field was not seriously studied by academics until it caught the attention of psychologists and their newly found interest for the irrational. In addition, the First World War called into question much of what was

thought to be the rational Western identity, which paved the way for the study of Western esotericism to re-enter the intellectual stratosphere. This re-entry came in the form of a current in the study of religion which was pioneered by Carl Gustav Jung, within the framework of "Eranos", a foundation which has, since the 1930s, been hosting lectures on Western esotericism and supports academic research into it. This current in the study of religion, which is referred to by Hanegraaff as "religionism" (p. 296), aims at the search for universal constants amongst religions and is thus not so much concerned with historical setting or personal history of the authors which it studies.

Hanegraaff rejects both the post-Enlightenment stance, that the reservoir of rejected knowledge is composed of irrational pseudo-scientific ideas, and the religionist stance, which looks for similarities, because both approach the subject matter with an agenda. If on the other hand we would wish to study Western esotericism objectively, we should return to the sources and place them in their proper time frame. This means that, when studying a certain manuscript we should take into account the personal, social and historical setting in which its author produced it. In effect, in Hanegraaff's approach, the author and his world get prominence over generalizing models. Hanegraaff therefore favours the approach of the anti-apologetic Thomasius. Thomasius's two criteria can, he argues, provide us with a set of tools which enable us to study the field without having preconceptions get in the way. However, it must be said that Hanegraaff stresses that he does "... not mean to suggest that these two interrelated elements amount to a definition of Western esotericism, which would allow us to write 'its' history as a specific historical tradition or domain. What they do is define the theoretical limits within which 'esoteric' religiosity may develop while still remaining recognizable as such (not just in Christian and secular contexts but in Jewish and Islamic ones as well) ..." (p. 372-373).

The argument Hanegraaff makes in *Esotericism and the Academy* should however be seen as a continuation of the au-

thor's long-term research programme. Already in 1995 Hanegraaff published an article in which he questioned the dominant approaches in the study of esotericism (Wouter Hanegraaff, "Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism" *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 7/2, 1995, 99-129). A subsequent paper called for a re-orientation in the study of Western esotericism and, more specifically, for a return to the criteria which were first pioneered by Thomasius (Wouter Hanegraaff, "The Birth of Esotericism from the Spirit of Protestantism", *Aries* 10/2, 197-216). In this article Hanegraaff draws the reader's attention to the protestant struggle against pagan influences in Christianity and it is here that he, as far as I am aware, traces the birth of the study of Western esotericism back to Thomasius for the first time.

Throughout the book Hanegraaff builds up a very solid argument against religionism and the post-Enlightenment approach and I do agree with him that there is a definite need for an approach which is based on historical empiricism, and which places the author and his world centre stage. However, at times, Hanegraaff is overemphasising cultural and social influences as explanations for similarities between different authors. Consequently, he neglects the possibility of any other common grounds besides cultural diffusion. Although I do agree with Hanegraaff that the religionist stance, which seeks out similarities without paying much attention to historical context, is ultimately unsustainable, the possibility of causes other than cultural transmission should not be downplayed either.

In his 2013 article Hanegraaff states in passing that he "personally see[s] great potential in using knowledge about such fields as neurobiology and cognitive studies to make better sense of radical ecstatic or trance-like states related to the search for 'gnosis' that are reported so frequently in the context of Western esotericism" (W. Hanegraaff, "The Power of Ideas...", 267-268).

I would argue that these fields of research might yield significantly more interesting information when employed in identifying the causes for the many similarities

amongst occult writers. This is not to say that all commonalities are by definition the result of cognitive processes but simply that some of them might be. Knowing which, can give us a better insight into the cultures and times in which these ideas were developed and why certain ideas seem so resilient.

Overall Hanegraaff's book is an easy and interesting read which does, as he promises in the introduction, put into question our very identity as scholars. Hanegraaff succeeds in questioning the very basis on which research into Western esotericism is done and effectively demonstrates that the truth about all the different movements, philosophies and ideas which fall into this largely neglected category lies in the original sources and not in our modern academic theories. The uncharted continent of knowledge, which Hanegraaff set out to discover, might still largely be a mystery, but at least we are now better equipped than ever to set out on our own journey into the unknown.

DAVID MAC GILLAVRY

Hans Gerald Hödl – Lukas Pokorný (eds.), Religion in Austria I,

Vienna: Praesens 2012, 194 s.
ISBN 978-3-7069-0763-7.

V roce 2012 vydalo nakladatelství Praesens ve Vídni první svazek řady *Religion in Austria*, jehož editory jsou Hans Gerald Hödl z katedry religionistiky pod Vídeňskou univerzitou a Lukas Pokorný z katedry religionistiky na Aberdeenské univerzitě. Chystaná knižní řada je založena na snaze o religionistickou, neteologickou, reflexi náboženské situace v Rakousku a je výsledkem projektu „Mapping Religions in Vienna“. Editoři shledávají současný stav bádání o náboženství v Rakousku nedostačující (s. vii) a novou knižní řadou by rádi vyplnili mezery v tomto badatelském prostoru.

Cílem série jako celku je „vytvořit původní vědeckou práci s využitím rozličných metod sahajících od historického (např. archivního) až ke kvantitativnímu a širokému spektru kvalitativních výzkumů (např. řízené rozhovory a zúčastněná pozorování)“ (s. viii).

Svazek první, kterému se věnuje tato recenze, se zabývá pěti skupinami působícími na rakouské náboženské scéně – islámu, Církvi Ježíše Krista Svatých posledních dnů, Or Chadaš, Kofuku no Kagaku a Hnutí sjednocení. Jak naznačuje předmluva, chtějí jednotliví autoři na pozadí obsáhlého úvodu do historie působení jednotlivých náboženských skupin v Rakousku přispět také k některým významným teoretickým tématům současného religionistického bádání, přičemž hlavní rámec tvoří problém sociální exkluze či inkluze jednotlivých náboženských skupin v různých historických obdobích. Do svazku přispělo celkem sedm autorů, religionistů s přesahy do dalších odborných disciplín, pěti texty, z nichž každý se věnuje jedné z uvedených skupin.

V první kapitole s názvem „Rakouští reformovaní Židé: V pasti „autenticity““ (s. 1-29) se Angelika Rohrbacherová věnuje židovské liberální kongregaci s názvem Or Chadaš (Nové světlo). Na pozadí politického vývoje ukazuje problematické postavení této skupiny ve vztahu ke státu, ale také k oficiálně registrované židovské společnosti *Israelitische Kultusgemeinde*. Kriticky hodnotí dosavadní historiografické výzkumy v oblasti židovství v období po šoa a upozorňuje, že esencialistický přístup k výzkumu v této oblasti se dostává do pasti, když zdůrazňuje etnicitu a tradici (s. 3). Rohrbacherová, v opozici k esencialistickému diskursu, který předcházela „kulturnímu obratu“ v sociálních vědách, navrhuje vnímat judaismus jako abstraktní entitu, která v sobě zahrnuje „široké množství rozdílných náboženství, která formují vlastní příslušné profily prostřednictvím zvýznamňování jejich rozdílností v multináboženské skladbě jakéhokoliv státu či kultury“ (s. 5). Důsledkem dvou sociálních jevů – katolického monopolu v otázce definování náboženství v rakouské společnosti a uplatňování modelu „uniformní komunity“ (s. 15) v rámci židovské komunity samotné – je pak sociální