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Innovation in Esotericism from the Renaissance to the Present

Edited by
Georgiana D. Hedesan
Tim Rudbøg

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Editors

Georgiana D. Hedesan
History Faculty
University of Oxford
Oxford, UK

Tim Rudbøg
Department of Cross-Cultural and
Regional Studies
University of Copenhagen
Copenhagen, Denmark

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*This book is dedicated in loving memory to
Professor Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke (1953–2012)*

FOREWORD

It was David Lorimer, founder of the Scientific and Medical Network, who introduced me to Nicholas and Clare in 1987, knowing that we shared many enthusiasms and scholarly interests. So we did for twenty-five years, as we dug in the same historical strata of Renaissance esotericism, polar mythology, Theosophy and early Romanticism. Nicholas's learning and insight invariably exceeded my own, and although he was younger by several years, I always looked up to him as a senior scholar. It took longer for the world to recognize this, until his knowledge and skills as a teacher were rewarded by academic appointments: first at the University of Lampeter, Wales (2002), then to a personal Chair at the University of Exeter (2005).

During the first years of our friendship, Nicholas was using quite different skills in Oxford University's worldwide fundraising campaign, to the great profit of the university. But this exhausting job left little time for his intellectual and creative life. Nicholas described the next period as "twelve years in an open-necked shirt," during which he and Clare worked at their IKON publishing business, editing and translating, contributing to an extra mural lecture series at Oxford and running a six-week seminar series on the *Corpus Hermeticum*. They moved from Oxford to a farmhouse near Wantage, and exulted in the country life. Like his admired writers Richard Jefferies and H. J. Massingham, Nicholas saw the landscape as an open book of history, poetry, and myth, and a bastion against the "progress" of the modern world. He was a superb writer in that vein, treating his fortunate friends to long handwritten letters. This is from one written

on December 21, 1997, enclosing a booklet of *Literary & Artistic Connections: Vale of the White Horse*:

This morning I rose as usual before six o'clock to make my round of farm jobs while it was still dusk. While I customarily take Pontiff either out along the causeway to the parish boundary (where we all walked when you, Janet & Ariel visited in the summer) or up to Hardy's "Brown House" for a brisk Ridgeway walk to Segsbury Castle, the solstice demanded a special celebration.

In thick mist, the air slowly growing lighter, we passed on down the Portway (do you remember those heavy flash-floods we encountered on our way in May 1993?) and ascended the Downs past the "Teapot" at Britchcombe Farm. The dim outlines of Dragon Hill, which still remains an enigma (glacial feature or Pendragon's burial mound), loomed up and we negotiated the winding aerial track into yet thicker fog. Eight o'clock and the dawning of a New Year, the mist ever lightening, a curious flock of sheep hurried over the slopes towards the mighty postern gate of Uffington Castle and, in complete silence and solitude, we followed. The fog made this highest point of Berkshire a secret, shrouded place—the Vale with its little villages and patchwork fields, the Great Western mainline, the views to Wyck Beacon above Stowe-on-the-Wold across Corallian Ridge and the Thames in the far distance could only be imagined. As Pontiff and I ran over the turf to the old water-wagon, visible from our farm five miles away on a summer's day, we seemed in a world of our own. The great white chalk figure lay at my feet, this angular head recalling ancient Wessex totem and myth, while a single eye gazed skywards ... out beyond the pall of mist and the thrall of this world.

I thought of all the times I have walked, talked, dreamt and hunted over these Downs, passed this very spot, looked out over the massive unpopulous tract towards Martinsell Hill and the Wansdyke beyond Marlborough in the far south, the smooth gallops down over Idlebush Barrow towards the Lambourn Valley in the foreground. Hot, baking summer, when the wheat waves hypnotically in an ocean of green and yellow; frostgirt, snowdusted plough when we tired hunters plod the rolling heavy mixed chalk and clay towards Kingham Hill ... and everywhere Wessex tumuli, Romano-British sites and even the transposed fairy-tale castle of the Winter Queen in the middle of Ashdown Forest. What a blessed landscape and a secret kingdom to which my father and

I first came, in search of Berkshire's answer to Sussex and the same aerial, uplifting scenes around my old school, in the summer of 1970. It has been the landscape of our marriage.

Pontiff and I looked across from the White Horse and his unmoving eye to the mulberry bush—a solitary tree which always reminds me of the Holy Thorn on Wearyall Hill above Glastonbury—and I heard Concorde high above the fog and winter clouds breaking the sound barrier. It was 0830 hours, an hour later than usual on Sundays, and my thoughts travelled westwards. Down the old Ridgeway, as in Neolithic times, when traders, farmers and journeymen marched the chalk scarpment from Norfolk all the way through Wessex to Lyme Bay and embarkation to the hinged worlds of Carnac, Iberia, Malta and Mycenae. As Edward Thomas once wrote, one always feels the Ridgeway carrying one westwards, that is the flow ...

This time my mind travelled out across the angry waves of the ocean, following in the wake of John Cabot's fragile little "Matthew", until a landfall off New England, and I saw you, Janet and Ariel in your warm timber-framed farmhouse amid the thick forests and rolling fields of upstate New York. I thought of you all preparing for Christmas and I wanted you to share my delight in this land of your nativity. Hence the enclosed small token gift which relates a few of the Vale's tales from Kelmscott to Roman Lowbury Castle, from Elizabeth's Ashdown to Godstow.

Nicholas and Clare were by now familiar figures at conferences and seminars in Britain, Europe, and the USA, at the Esoteric Quests of the New York Open Center, and at the gatherings in the Austrian Alps and in Provence where Western Esotericism was being honed into a viable academic discipline. The publication of *Hitler's Priestess* (1998) and *Black Sun* (2002) by New York University Press completed a trilogy begun long before with Nicholas's Oxford D.Phil. thesis, published in 1985 as *The Occult Roots of Nazism*. This and participation in several documentaries provided a counterbalance to the popular and sensational genre of "Nazi occultism." However, I sensed that after such immersion in the dark side of history, Nicholas preferred to be identified with brighter fields such as alchemy and the Paracelsians, German literature and *Naturphilosophie*, Christian esotericism, and the theosophical tradition from Boehme to Blavatsky.

The appointment at Exeter followed a prophetic move to the South Coast, where Nicholas and Clare lived in “Magnolia,” a Regency villa in Teignmouth, Devon. On June 15, 2003, Nicholas wrote a thank you letter for a book by John Michell in which he celebrates our mutual friend and the exploration of another mythic landscape:

Here is no desperate man among the ruins nor a lone soldier on a lost position but one who gaily asserts that the old story shall be retold among our heirs, that all remains, sleeping, waiting for its recovery... We often think of him in Avalon, younger, perhaps as Clare knew him as a budding Garnstone Press author, striding out to plot the St. Michael Line, scarf flying loose in the wind, or exploring lost tracks across the Moors Adventurous or the seven holy chapels. Over the past two years, given its proximity to Devon, we have taken time to explore this landscape, wading the mists of May, gazing over shimmering osier beds full of wild fowl in high summer, and driving over the flooded fields and causeways of the sunken winterland.

At Shapwick Station, alongside the old Somerset & Dorset Joint Railway tracks (long since gone) there rises a small replica Iron Age Lake village, where adobe & thatched round houses stand silent in the hot noontide sun. Inside the house a few logs glimmer and give off a curling trail of woodsmoke that has long blackened the thatched roof. Lying down on a scruffy old bedstead made of hazel & willow, Clare glimpses the animal totems on the rough lime walls, the rude wooden tools and has a profound sense of being at home. Outside the herons dive for elvers and in the distance rise mounds of “black erthe” suggestive of an alchemical industry. Nearby runs the Sweet Track, the oldest “catwalk” road across the swamp, which we trace under reed-filled peaty pools and through a primeval dense woodland lit by shafts of limelight.

It is a most legendary landscape where one can imagine Dion Fortune’s Atlantean longships docking beside the islands, King Arviragus welcoming Joseph of Arimathea and the youthful Jesus to his lakeland kingdom, even Perceval & Lancelot riding hard across the Moors Adventurous, though their flat, fenny character hardly resembles the thick medieval forests of French chivalric romances. Here came John Dee & Edward Kelley for “diggings,” Mrs Maltwood put Oxo money to good use in buying Chilton Priory & surveying the zodiac across the vale villages.

In offering these two excerpts by way of a Foreword, I have in mind a side of Nicholas that his friends knew well, but of which his readers may be unaware. Everywhere he went, whether it was Big Sur, Venice, Bad Teinach in the Black Forest or Lake Balaton in Hungary, he was alive to the *genius loci* and could supply a seemingly omniscient historical commentary. Naturally his deepest love was for England, and his sorrow was to see so much of it unloved, its ancient green roads built over, its myths and traditions discarded or misunderstood. His own reaction was not a blind conservatism, but the service of a cause above mere politics. When he announced the good news of his Exeter appointment, he wrote that “I hope that the coming years will see the emergence of a new generation of Hermetic explorers in the realm of the spirit and the arts.” The present volume shows the fulfillment of that hope.

Hamilton, NY

Joscelyn Godwin

PREFACE

The present volume, *Innovation in Esotericism from the Renaissance to the Present*, is a tribute to the work and legacy of the late Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Professor at the University of Exeter, Director of the Exeter Centre for the Study of Esotericism (EXESESO), co-founder of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE), and founder member of the Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE).

Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke was one of the foremost pioneering scholars of the academic study of Western Esotericism. His brilliant and innovative scholarship had an astounding range, addressing subjects as varied as the occult roots of Nazism, the history of esoteric traditions, the Theosophical Society and esoteric theories of electricity. His landmark book, *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (1985), shone scholarly light on an area all too often filled with rumor, hearsay, and conspiracy theories, and is still the foundational work on the subject. This was followed by *Hitler's Priestess* (1998) and *Black Sun* (2002), which offer insight into the ideological fantasies of Neo-Fascism. *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (2008) is an excellent introduction to the field of Western Esotericism and a textbook for the subject. Goodrick-Clarke was Editor of the Essential Readings series for The Aquarian Press and the Western Esoteric Masters series for North Atlantic Books. His own contributions include *Paracelsus* (1990), *Helena Blavatsky* (2004), and *G.R.S. Mead and the Gnostic Quest* (2005) (co-edited with Clare Goodrick-Clarke). His translations include Ernst Benz's *Emanuel Swedenborg: Visionary Savant in the Age of Reason* (2002) and Kocku von Stuckrad's *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (2005). In addition, he contributed many chapters to

scholarly volumes, as well as entries to *The Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (2005).

Goodrick-Clarke was wholeheartedly dedicated to the institutional and conceptual advancement of his field. The work he initiated at the University of Exeter continues to flourish in the writing and teaching of his colleagues and former students. After his death, Georgiana Hedesan and Tim Rudbøg, both former PhD students, together with his widow, Clare, discussed the idea of producing a book that would reflect Goodrick-Clarke's work. The aim was to demonstrate the high quality of teaching, research, and mentoring that was characteristic of EXESES0, and to show that Nicholas had succeeded in creating a lively community of committed scholars inspired by his eloquence, love of history, and attention to detail. We received many more submissions from former EXESES0 members than we could accommodate in one volume and had to make a rigorous selection. It is our hope that this book's variety of contributors, their subjects, and the periods covered will do justice to the academic community that Nicholas established and nurtured.

The contributors to this volume have all been a part of EXESES0 and have known Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke personally as mentor, supervisor, friend, and colleague. As this volume will show, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke succeeded in fostering a new generation of scholars of esotericism who owe him a great debt of gratitude.

Oxford, UK

Georgiana D. Hedesan

Copenhagen, Denmark

Tim Rudbøg

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Jonathan Barry is Professor of Early Modern History at the University of Exeter, where he has taught since 1985. He has published widely on urban society, culture, and politics in England c.1500–1800, notably on the South West, and he is co-editor of the Bristol Record Society and of two series, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic and Palgrave Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Medicine.

Jean-Pierre Brach is holding the Chair of “History of Esoteric Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe” at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Sorbonne, Paris), France. He has published on topics ranging from early modern Christian Kabbalah, magic, and alchemy to number symbolism, contemporary occultism, and Masonry. Co-editor of the peer-reviewed journal *Politica Hermetica*, his most recent publications include “Géopolitique et ésotérisme” (edited by J.-P. Brach and J.-P. Laurant), *Politica Hermetica* 33 (2019), and “Illicit Christianity: Guillaume Postel, Kabbalah and a ‘Transgender’ Messiah,” *Religio. Revue pro Religionistiku* 1 (2019): 3–16.

Julie Chajes is a lecturer at the University of Haifa, Israel, having acquired her PhD at University of Exeter. She is a historian of nineteenth-century Britain and America with particular interest in religious heterodoxy and its intersections with broad intellectual, literary, and religious trends. She is the author of *Recycled Lives: A History of Reincarnation in Blavatsky's Theosophy* (2019). Her articles have dealt with topics such as gender, Orientalism, emergent critical categories, and the appropriation of scientific and medical theories in modern forms of religion.

Antoine Faivre is Professor Emeritus of École Pratique des Hautes Études (Sorbonne), France. He was Attaché de Recherches C.N.R.S. (1965–1969), Professor of “Techniques d’Expression,” University of Paris XIII (1969–1972), Professor of Germanic Studies, University of Bordeaux, then of Rouen (1972–1991). In 1979, he was appointed to the chair (“Direction d’Études”) of “History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe,” École Pratique des Hautes Études (Department of “Sciences Religieuses,” Sorbonne). He had appointments as a visiting professor at University of Berkeley in the 1980s. He is author of a dozen of books and over one hundred articles.

Peter J. Forshaw is Associate Professor of History of Western Esotericism in the Early Modern Period at the University of Amsterdam’s Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy, the Netherlands. He specializes in the intellectual and cultural history of occult philosophy (particularly alchemy, magic, and Christian cabala). He is Head of the Ritman Research Institute at the Embassy of the Free Mind, Amsterdam. He was Editor-in-Chief of *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* (2010–2020). Forshaw has edited several scholarly volumes, and is author of the forthcoming Brill monograph *The Mage’s Images: Heinrich Khunrath in His Oratory and Laboratory*.

Joscelyn Godwin is Professor of Music Emeritus at Colgate University, USA. Educated at Cambridge and Cornell Universities, he has written books on speculative music (*Harmonies of Heaven and Earth, Music and the Occult, The Mystery of the Seven Vowels*), Robert Fludd, Athanasius Kircher, Mystery Religions, the history of Theosophy, Renaissance paganism, the Polar Myth, Atlantis, the eccentric spiritual movements of New York State, and its Masonic history, and co-authored two occult novels with Guido Mina di Sospiro. He has translated *The Chemical Wedding, Splendor Solis, Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, and books by Fabre d’Olivet, Guénon, Evola, Antoine Faivre, and Hans Kayser.

Georgiana D. Hedesan is Postdoctoral Associate at the University of Oxford, UK and a former PhD from Exeter, specializing in early modern intellectual history, as well as the history of alchemy and medicine. Her first book is *An Alchemical Quest for Universal Knowledge: The ‘Christian Philosophy’ of Jan Baptist Van Helmont (1579–1644)* (2016). She has held several fellowships, including a Wellcome Trust Research Postdoctoral Fellowship in Medical History and Humanities at the University of

Oxford (2013–2017), researching the topic of universal medicine and radical prolongation of life in early modern alchemy.

Jeffrey D. Lavoie is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Roxbury Community College in Boston, MA, USA and a former PhD from Exeter. His studies concentrate on modern religious movements, Victorian studies, and eastern philosophy (including their intersection with race, gender, and sexuality). He has published numerous articles and books on these subjects, including his most recent book entitled *George William Allen and Christian Socialism: A Study of the Christo-Theosophical Society* (2020).

Christopher McIntosh is a British-born writer, historian and DPhil from Oxford, who lives in Lower Saxony, Germany, and specializes in the esoteric traditions of the West. He has taught for several years at the Centre for the Study of Esotericism at University of Exeter, UK. His books include *The Astrologers and Their Creed* (1969); *Eliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival* (1972); *The Rosicrucians* (latest edition: Weiser, 1997); *The Rose Cross and the Age of Reason* (1992), based on his D.Phil. dissertation; *The Swan King: Ludwig II of Bavaria* (latest edition 2003); *Gardens of the Gods* (2005); and *Beyond the North Wind* (2019).

Tim Rudbøg is associate professor and director of The Copenhagen Center for the Study of Theosophy and Esotericism at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, and a former PhD from Exeter. As a trained historian of religions, Rudbøg's publications have particularly focused on the academic study of esotericism, hermeticism, modern religions, and in particular modern Theosophy. In relation to his focus on modern Theosophy, he has recently published a co-edited book entitled *Imagining the East: The Early Theosophical Society* (2020).

George J. Sieg teaches philosophy at the Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute (NM, USA), and is Area Chair of Esotericism, Occultism, and Magic for the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association. His PhD thesis at Exeter, supervised by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, developed his MA work at SOAS on dualism and demonization in Zoroastrian Iran into a full historical survey of the transmission of dualism into Western esotericism. The thesis is forthcoming from I.B. Tauris as *Iranian Dualism and Its Global Legacy: The Politics of Manichaeism and the Occult War*. He has published on political radicalism, extremism, and violence in esotericism and new/minority religious movements.

Angela Voss is a senior lecturer at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK, where she directed a Masters program in Myth, Cosmology, and the Sacred (2014–2020). Her passion for Renaissance music and culture led her to delve into the magical world of the fifteenth-century magus Marsilio Ficino, and from there to the Western esoteric traditions and the power of the symbolic to awaken the human soul. She has published extensively on Ficino's astrological music, on astrology and divination, Neoplatonism and magic, and more recently, on transformative learning. Her most recent book is *Re-enchanting the Academy* (edited with Simon Wilson, 2017).

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Reconceptualizing Innovation and Its Role in Esotericism

Georgiana D. Hedesan and Tim Rudbøg

This book started from a simple question: what, if any, is the relationship between innovation and esotericism?¹ Many esoteric currents would reject any connection between the two, insisting on the fundamentally unchanging nature of their beliefs and practices. Perhaps more surprisingly, some classical historians of religion would in principle have concurred with such universal and timeless conceptions.² Yet such perspectives do not

¹We are primarily using the designation “esotericism” rather than the classic scholarly designation “Western esotericism” in this book. The rationale for this is discussed in the section “Innovation and Cross-Cultural Exchanges” further in the introduction.

²For instance, Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, I: “Essays on the Science of Religion” (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1867), x–xi; Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and*

G. D. Hedesan (✉)

History Faculty, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

T. Rudbøg

Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

e-mail: timrudboeg@hum.ku.dk

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obviously account for the historical fact that new esoteric phenomena like the publication of the Rosicrucian manifestos in 1614, the “invention” of esoteric tarot in the 1780s France, or the foundation of the Theosophical Society in 1875 did occur in specific contexts of space and time. Contemporary scholarship has fundamentally challenged the premise of the static nature of esotericism, highlighting the role of polemics and discourse in producing change.³ This book intends to add a new theoretical instrument for understanding transformations in esotericism from the European Renaissance to the present: the notion of innovation. By reconceptualizing innovation, we further suggest that innovation can advance scholarly discussion of historical change not only in the field of esotericism but the humanities as a whole.

Any discussion of innovation in esotericism must begin by going to the core of esoteric claims of tradition and continuity.⁴ Certainly, the prevalence of beliefs in an ancient universal wisdom tradition cannot be underemphasized. Esoteric thought and related discourses often constructed elaborate genealogies of knowledge that stressed both *origin* and *continuity*.⁵ As Andreas Kilcher puts it, “Esoteric paradigms not only understand themselves... as bearers of ‘older,’ ‘hidden,’ ‘higher’ knowledge. They also claim their knowledge to be of a particular origin.”⁶ Some of these traditions were traced back to the Bible (Kabbalah, many forms of Gnosticism, Solomonic magic), others to mythical figures (Hermeticism, alchemy,

the Profane: The Nature of Religion (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), 8–18; Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 5–8, 12–13, 25–27, 31–32. More contemporary variants of this belief are analyzed further below.

³A good example is Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

⁴There is now a growing body of scholarship on the topic of tradition in esotericism and related currents. See Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms: Sociological, Historical and Critical Approaches to the Invention of Tradition,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield and Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2012), 24–48; Andreas Kilcher, ed., *Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer, eds., *The Invention of Sacred Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

⁵See Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, 7–42; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁶Andreas Kilcher, “Introduction: Constructing Tradition in Western Esotericism,” in Kilcher, *Constructing Tradition*, ix–xv.

Rosicrucianism), to esoteric thinkers or philosophers (Neoplatonism, Behmenist theosophy, Paracelsianism, Swedenborgianism), or to a combination of these (as in certain forms of *prisca theologia*, or *philosophia perennis*).⁷ These traditions also claimed that there was a chain of transmission that connected this origin to the present. This chain was not always seen as unbroken, but any “rediscovery” of the tradition essentially re-linked it back to the origin, ensuring an ahistorical continuity.

Many esoteric writers have in fact emphasized tradition so much that they downplayed their own thought and identity in favor of claiming to be part of a wisdom lineage. If we ask the question why this is so, several answers can be given. One reason is of course transmission, whereby a recipient actually wrote down or communicated something that they were handed down themselves through individuals that belonged to a specific tradition. Another reason is that being seen as part of a long wisdom tradition conferred legitimacy and force to one’s writings or sayings. A third reason relates to the adherence to a spiritual ideology and practice that downplayed the role of the personal ego. No matter the reason, we find many such examples in esotericism. For instance, there were writers of Hermetic, Kabbalistic, or alchemical texts who chose to remain anonymous and often used a common pseudonym such as Hermes Trismegistus, Ramón Llull (1232–1316), or Abraham. Similarly, the writings of the modern esotericist Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) emphasized the direct relation to an ancient secret doctrine and with Masters who were regarded as the living custodians of this tradition.

While esoteric practitioners have often perceived themselves as guardians, restorers, and correctors of an ancient wisdom, they tend to overlook the fact that new ideas and practices *were* historically produced within esoteric traditions. Indeed, the very existence of several, often coexisting traditions, such as alchemy, Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, natural magic, or demonic magic, are testimony to the existence of diverging ideas and practices, whether contemporary or of much older extract. The simultaneous existence of esoteric groups and societies that drew on the same or similar traditions is another testimony to the diversity of thought and practice in esotericism.

⁷ On these subjects, important for any discussion of the esoteric traditions, see D.P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Duckworth, 1975), Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia Perennis: Historical Outlines of Western Spirituality in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011); Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*.

The idea that esotericism is a highly pluralistic phenomenon belongs to a relatively recent way of thinking about the subject.⁸ Before the establishment of the academic field of “Western esotericism” (or, simply, “esotericism”), many scholars were of the opinion that esotericism (often described as “the occult” or “occultism”) is a specific form of thought that was almost static in nature and structurally opposed to, or different from, modernity. Brian Vickers, for example, argued that the occult was an unchanging system of thought that, rather than critically review itself in relation to new empirical observations, sought to fit everything into its already existing knowledge-structure.⁹ James Webb framed the occult as a collective form of human irrationality that erupted from the unconscious psyche in times of crises, thereby also outlining it as something that remained more or less the same.¹⁰ This is of course related to earlier notions of the “sacred,” the “numinous,” or the “infinite” as advocated by scholars of religion like Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Otto, and Max Müller.¹¹

Nevertheless, the past few decades of scholarship have exposed the problems associated with essentialism and “master narratives.” Contemporary scholars tend to agree that the traditions we classify as belonging to the category “esotericism” have undergone historical change just like any other ones. The notion of a static esoteric tradition has also been replaced by an awareness of the plurality of esotericisms.¹²

Since, as scholarship has rightfully noted, there is more to esoteric thought and practice than a sheer repetition of the past, it seems useful to consider new heuristic tools for analyzing such historical changes. This book introduces the notion of “innovation” in the study of the history and transformation of esotericism from the Renaissance to the present. Yet, in asking what role innovation has played in the history of esotericism, we should first consider how innovation can be defined in intellectual discourse, and how it is related to esotericism.¹³

⁸ See Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*.

⁹ Brian Vickers, “Introduction,” in *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*, ed. Brian Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 1–55.

¹⁰ James Webb, *The Flight from Reason* (London: Macdonald, 1971), 121.

¹¹ See note n. 2.

¹² On the construction of esoteric traditions, see note n. 4.

¹³ There has been no book-length treatment of innovation in esotericism. Gideon Bohak, Yuval Harari, and Shaul Shaked’s edited volume *Continuity and Innovation in the Magical Tradition* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011) deals with the topic of magic, focusing mainly on transmission of ideas in this context. Michael A. Williams, Collett Cox, and Martin Jaffee’s

INNOVATION AND IDEAS

The term “innovation” is trendy nowadays, with indices showing that it has become one of the most commonly used words in the English language.¹⁴ Yet the popularity of the term is particularly linked with technology, engineering, economics, and business.¹⁵ We may think of a new digital device or a certain management process as “innovative.” Still, the term does not exclusively belong to technology and business. Accepted definitions of the word tend to be much more neutral: the Merriam-Webster dictionary, for instance, describes “innovation” as “the introduction of something new” or “a new idea, method, or device; novelty.”¹⁶ Such definitions suggest that innovation is linked with change and discontinuity. Yet understanding the concept itself as an instrument of scholarly discourse requires further analysis.

Due to the vast scope of the subject, this introduction chiefly focuses on the relationship between ideas and innovation. The role of innovative ideas is already known, though perhaps not sufficiently emphasized. Although “design” or “methods” take center stage in the way we think about innovation, an idea or a concept often stands at the origin of innovation.

As might be expected, research on innovative ideas has almost exclusively focused on economic and social change.¹⁷ Such scholarship seems to

edited collection *Innovation in Religious Traditions* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 1992) discusses the topic of innovation in religion, but does not address esotericism, and its theoretical approach to the concept of innovation is limited.

¹⁴See, for instance, “Innovation” in the *Collins English Dictionary*, <https://www.collins-dictionary.com/dictionary/english/innovation> (accessed 20 July 2020), which rates the word frequency as “very common, innovation is one of the 4000 most commonly used words in the Collins dictionary.”

¹⁵A useful Google chart shows that the term’s usage in books between 1940 and 2008 has increased at least five times. “Innovation,” *Google Ngram Chart*, https://books.google.com/ngrams/interactive_chart?smoothing=7&direct_url=t4%3B%2Cinnovation%3B%2Cc0%3B%2Cs0%3B%3Binnovation%3B%2Cc0%3B%3BInnovation%3B%2Cc0&year_end=2008&corpus=15&case_insensitive=on&year_start=1800&content=innovation (accessed 20 July 2020).

¹⁶“Innovation,” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovation> (accessed 20 July 2020).

¹⁷As an example, Jan Fagerberg, David C. Mowery and Richard R. Nelson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) begins with the assumption that innovations worth mentioning are airplanes, automobiles, telecommunications, refrigerators, agriculture, the wheel, the alphabet, and so on.

be driven by the assumption that innovation can only be understood through a socio-economic framework. We can rightfully suspect that behind this perspective lies the prevalent view that innovation is about ideas that result in commercial products. The social consensus that knowledge must always have an economic value has, however, been criticized by Simon Robb and Elizabeth Bullen.¹⁸

Whether the consensus is valid or not, one can arguably question the soundness of the socio-economic argument in itself. Taking into account the complexity of human culture, the “material” outcome of an idea is sometimes so diffuse and unclear that a correlation between the idea and its “material” impact is sometimes difficult to make.¹⁹ The problem is similar to Edward Lorenz’s famous “butterfly effect,” which states that a tornado may paradoxically be caused by the flapping of the wings of a butterfly.²⁰ Consequently, it is difficult, if not impossible, to show that the tornado was caused by the flapping of the butterfly’s wings. If we consider that many high-level cognitive systems display complex nonlinear dynamics,²¹ we can conjecture that the reception of communicated ideas is not always clear or demonstrable. Yet, rather than being perceived as disturbing to scholars used to traditional chains of causality, nonlinearity could be viewed as opening up the field of scholarly inquiry. At the end of the day, any new idea can potentially play the role of Lorenz’s butterfly. Consequently, we suggest, all innovative ideas should be treated with interest by scholarship, especially when there is meaningful impact.

According to standard definitions, innovative ideas are essentially “new” ones. Yet the notion that ideas can be “new” is a more complicated matter than it might appear at first glance. The philosophical origins of the term *idea* come from ancient Greece, and particularly from Platonist speculation. Plato (428/27–348/47 BCE) believed that an idea (Greek

¹⁸ Simon Robb and Elizabeth Bullen, “A Provocation,” in *Innovation and Tradition: The Arts, Humanities and the Knowledge Economy*, eds. Jane Kenway, Elizabeth Bullen and Simon Robb (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 1–9.

¹⁹ Conversely, some ideas specifically geared toward a material outcome may fail to yield the socio-economic impact they were assumed to have, or may have unexpected results.

²⁰ Edward N. Lorenz, “Deterministic Nonperiodic Flow,” *Journal of Atmospheric Science* 20 (1963): 130–41.

²¹ See for instance Takahiro Ezaki et al., “Closer to Critical Resting-State Neural Dynamics in Individuals with Higher Fluid Intelligence,” *Communications Biology* 3 (2020), M. Rabinovich, A.N. Simmons and P. Varona, “Dynamical Bridge between Brain and Mind,” *Trends in Cognitive Science* 19 (2015): 453–61, R.F. Port and T. Van Gelder, eds., *Exploration in the Dynamics of Cognition: Mind as Motion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

εἶδος) is immutable, divine, and primordial to matter; this view implied that there could be no such thing as a “new” idea. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century formulations of intellectual history seemed at least partially tributary to this mode of thought, as they believed in an origin-idea that was subsequently modified throughout history. The famous scholar of the history of languages and religions Max Müller posited that new ideas are essentially variation of old ones, claiming that “it may be said that in [religion] everything new is old, and everything old is new, and that there has been no entirely new religion since the beginning of the world.”²² Similarly to Müller, Arthur O. Lovejoy established the field of “history of ideas” to study the original unit-ideas, as well as their development in and through subsequent texts and traditions.²³ The chronological sequencing of the unit-ideas in order to establish the original, the similar, and the new or deviant thus became central.

In the second half of the twentieth century, however, this approach became challenged by the concept of *discontinuity*. According to the chief proponent of this view, Michel Foucault, the quest for the original idea is impossible because meaning is established in relation to the historical context.²⁴ For example, the idea of soul in a specific nineteenth-century context has a different meaning than the idea of soul in another specific context (e.g., in the twenty-first century or in the first century), even though at first glance it seems to be the same idea. This is because the idea of soul is embedded in a specific context, and together they make up an entirely new framework, discourse, or *episteme*. By extension, all historical ideas are *new* ideas, as they arise in a specific circumstance.

The Foucauldian approach rightfully emphasizes context and its role in shaping the meaning of ideas. It is no less clear that human culture is beholden to traditions, and these are passed on through nurture and education. Older ideas are continuously received as part of this process, and, importantly, such ideas are recognized as being “old.” Still, ideas cannot survive their historicity; as their past meaning is no longer accessible to the present, they need to be “resuscitated” or transformed into new ideas to survive.

²² Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop*, x–xi.

²³ Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 3–23.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, “History, Discourse and Discontinuity,” trans. Anthony M. Nazzaro, *Salmagundi* 20, Special Issue “Psychological Man: Approaches to an Emergent Social Type” (1972): 225–48. See also Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), xii.

As such, we argue that, at any given historical moment, an idea is fundamentally the result of a negotiation between past and present, with each present formulation being a transformation of received (past) ideas. In other words, an idea is produced through a reassessment of tradition, and the result is an innovation upon it. Consequently, we affirm that innovation is a mechanism of negotiation whereby an idea is either produced against, or adapted from, an older set of concepts in order to respond to a present context.

This definition implies that an innovative idea does not have to be “new” in the pure sense of the word. Even when someone is repeating an older view of the soul, they are still innovating, because their formulation is the result of the negotiation of past and present, where the balance shifts toward the past. Such a repetition of the past may not be interesting, inspiring, or “useful,” but in certain circumstances it can be disruptive. For instance, an anti-modern stance in modernity is innovative even though it may not appear to bring anything “new” to the table. The result, paradoxically, can still be new and groundbreaking. In one of the chapters of this book, Jonathan Barry, for example, shows that the little-known John Henderson (1757–1788) held recognizably non-Enlightenment views; nevertheless, his anti-modern stance did not stop him from becoming a subject of fascination and influence to many contemporaries, including the early Romantics.

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE CHOICE IN INNOVATION

The role of individual choice in innovation is an important factor to be considered, as the individual is often contrasted with the collective and its control of tradition. In his groundbreaking study *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1968), Robert Merton, often considered one of the founding fathers of modern sociology, analyzed the dynamics between the individual and the collective structure of American society. He noted that, while all individuals seemed to share the generally-prescribed goal of achieving monetary success, not all had the same means of reaching this goal. Consequently, he defined the difference between the goal and the means as “anomie,” and observed that it led to strain for many individuals, causing them to develop coping strategies. Such strategies can be seen as ways in which individuals adapt to the pre-given collective structures of society and to the difficulty of achieving the commonly-accepted goal. Some individuals will follow the institutionalized means of reaching the

goal, others will simply reject it, while some will seek to find alternative means to achieve it. This last strategy Merton designates as innovation.²⁵

Anthony Giddens (1984) would later continue the exploration of individual choice in relation to the collective structures, and thereby nuance of the picture.²⁶ He showed that, while each individual action involved the exercise of free choice, this took place within parameters of constraint. In other words, individuals were neither merely conduits of tradition automatically reproducing it, nor solely autonomous agents pursuing self-benefit or novelty. In fact, to use and combine tradition with one's own creativity was part of ordinary human conduct. Creativity and innovation in this sense could be seen as the individual moving beyond the constraints of tradition, while at the same time responding to and participating in something beyond the individual (such as a tradition).

This view suggests that individuality exists in a natural tension with tradition. It may also be argued that each individual engages in *bricolage*. This concept, first introduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss, means the *fabrication* or creative use of the resources available, while disregarding their original purpose.²⁷ It is human to creatively compose a personal worldview from a great variety of heterogeneous ideas, which are unified in a way that is meaningful to the individual.

At the same time, the view of the individual as *bricoleur* must be weighed against the reality that most individuals create similar worldviews. This is because the individual impulse is colored and molded by the necessity of belonging and fitting to a wider group.²⁸ As such, solutions are often provided by a greater framework—the historical group or society the individual belongs to.

We tend to think that innovation belongs to the individual, while the tradition is given by community. This “heroic” view of the individual may not necessarily be true. Social changes cannot always be referred to individual thought or action, even when leaders can be identified. For

²⁵ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 193–203.

²⁶ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society, Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1984), xiii–40.

²⁷ See Paul-Francois Tremlett, *Levi-Strauss on Religion: The Structuring Mind* (London: Equinox, 2008), 73–77.

²⁸ Recent developmental psychology has emphasized the importance of the “alignment” of mental states in human communication; see for instance M. Tomasello, *Becoming Human: A Theory of Ontogeny* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).