

The Esotericism of the Esoteric School of Quatuor Coronati Lodge

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It may be proper to premise that there was in existence amongst all the civilized nations of antiquity, an *exoteric* form of religion and an *esoteric* interpretation. The one constituted the religious belief of the vulgar, and the other the secret teachings of a philosophical association, to which none but candidates prepared in mind and body were admitted.

John Yarker,

Notes on the Scientific and Religious Mysteries of Antiquity (1872), 5.

THE NOTION OF AN ESOTERIC SCHOOL OF MASONIC RESEARCH WAS MADE popular through John Hamill's introductory book on the history of English Freemasonry, *The Craft*, published in 1986.¹ While discussing different interpretations of the origins of Freemasonry, Hamill argued that there are two main approaches to Masonic history, the authentic and the non-authentic. The first approach is supposedly based on

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verifiable facts and documentation, whereas the other seeks to place Freemasonry in the context of an esoteric tradition (the 'Mystery tradition').²

While the authentic approach antedates the founding of Quatuor Coronati Lodge in 1886, this scholarly methodology has come to represent the work of QC from its earliest days to the present. The formation of QC and its authentic or objective approach to Masonic history is to a large extent reflective of contemporary trends in late nineteenth-century academia, with its emphasis on a critical and text-oriented analysis of historical events and processes. More specifically, the early representatives of the authentic school concerned themselves primarily with two aspects of Masonic research: the question of origins and the access to source materials. The answer to the former was believed to lie in the transition from 'operative' to 'speculative' Masonry, while the latter concerned the identification and subsequent publication of early manuscripts and documents such as the Old Charges of Medieval Stone Masons. The quest for origins and the emphasis on the importance of source materials was not a unique feature for Masonic scholars, but was to be found in contemporary historical disciplines, such as the emergent study of comparative religion which was increasingly being emancipated from theology towards the end of the nineteenth century.

It is with the works of Masonic historians such as W. J. Hughan and the Revd A. F. A. Woodford that the authentic school can be considered as firmly established. Hughan and Woodford not only published critical editions of important historical documents, and thus inspired generations to come of Masonic authors to base their research on reliable sources, but they also collaborated with other Masonic authors on important historical works, such as R. F. Gould's highly influential *The History of Freemasonry* (1882–1887) which contributed to place Masonic research on a firm scholarly foundation. Significantly enough, it was this group of colleagues who in 1886 founded Quatuor Coronati Lodge.

The non-authentic school, on the other hand, is described by Hamill as divided into four categories which all share (what we might call) a 'perennial' understanding of Freemasonry – we shall return to perennialism and the 'ancient wisdom' narrative subsequently – and the incapability of separating subjective interpretations from objective facts.³ As

² 'Thus there are two main approaches to Masonic history: the *authentic* or *scientific* approach, in which theory is built upon or developed, out of verifiable facts and documentation; and the *non-authentic* approach in which attempts are made to place Freemasonry in the context of the Mystery tradition by a correlation of the teachings, allegory, and symbolism of the Craft with those of the various esoteric traditions.' J. M. Hamill, *The Craft: A History of English Freemasonry* (London: Crucible, 1986), 15.

³ 'The non-authentic school has four main approaches, which might be categorized as the *esoteric*, the *mystical*, the *symbolist*, and the *romantic*. All four approaches have two factors in common: a belief that Freemasonry has existed 'time immemorial' and an apparent inability to distinguish between historical fact and legend. The esoteric and mystical schools are in fact concerned with the transmission of ideas and esoteric traditions, in itself a valid line of research; but in doing so they convert similarities between groups widely separated in time into evidence of a continuing tradition handed down from one group to another, a sort of esoteric apostolic succession. They also tend to have unorthodox ideas on the nature and purpose of Freemasonry, endowing it with mystical, reli-

we shall see, the division of the non-authentic school into esoteric, mystical, symbolist, and romantic categories is problematic from the perspective of current scholarly definitions of Western esotericism, but for now it is worth noting that the esoteric school of Masonic research is, according to Hamill, not only characterized by a particular understanding of the origins, history, and purpose of Freemasonry, but that the research of this school is flawed from a methodological perspective – the ‘inability to distinguish between historical fact and legend.’ When discussing the esoteric school more specifically, Hamill described its methodology as being comparative in nature, with John Yarker (1833–1913) as the most representative example of this particular school:

Viewing Freemasonry in all its diverse branches as a coherent initiatory rite, which it is not, the esoteric school compares it with other initiatory rites, finds similarities, actual or imposed, and assumes an intercommunication. John Yarker is probably the major figure of this school. His *magnum opus*, *The Arcane Schools* (Belfast, 1909), is a monument to misapplied scholarship. It reveals not only the breadth of his reading but also his inability to digest, or in some cases understand, what he had read.⁴

Summarizing *The Arcane Schools* as ‘a monument to misapplied scholarship’ and dismissing researchers like Yarker for their ‘apparent inability to distinguish between historical fact and legend’ might be a bit too harsh, and in all fairness to Hamill it should be pointed out that he later seems to have softened his critical stance, at least in terms of Yarker. In his 1996 *AQC* paper ‘John Yarker: Masonic Charlatan?’, Hamill states that not only was Yarker’s ‘belief in the development from operative to speculative Freemasonry [. . .] in accord with the thinking of Masonic scholars of his day, earning him praise from W. J. Hughan’, but also that in ‘*The Arcane Schools* he did what we in this lodge would expect – provided references for every statement he made and was always careful to distinguish between evidence and his own speculations.’ His weakness as a scholar was that ‘like all self-educated men he had enormous but uncritical respect for the written and printed word.’⁵

The distinguishing feature, then, between the authentic and the esoteric schools of Masonic research in terms of methodology, is the emphasis by the esoteric school on a comparative study of Freemasonry with a wide range of non-Masonic traditions and currents, such as Kabbalah, Rosicrucianism, and alchemy. The basic premise for this comparative approach is the notion that similarities between two systems indicate some sort of historical link or a common pattern, and that it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of Freemasonry through a study of ‘kindred’ systems. The supposed benefits of this comparative approach to Freemasonry were spelled out by another shining light of

gious, and even occult implications which it has never possessed.’ Hamill, *The Craft*, 22.

⁴ Hamill, *The Craft*, 23.

⁵ J. M. Hamill, ‘John Yarker: Masonic Charlatan’, *AQC* 109 (1996), 198–99.

the esoteric school, William Wynn Westcott (1848–1925), in his 1893 Inaugural Address as Worshipful Master of Quatuor Coronati Lodge:

No one can for a moment fail to acknowledge the ardour with which the Lodge has carried on the historical branch of our studies, and I am quite prepared to grant that every line of history so gained has a definite and distinctive value in building up a complete fabric of the life history of Freemasonry. My only personal feeling is that a very hard and fast adherence to history, and a tendency to slur over the ‘hidden mysteries of nature and science’, which we are pledged to study, might possibly, if the policy became extreme, be worthy of criticism if not condemnation, from a Masonic point of view. [...] If I have any influence with this Lodge, and it can only be for a short time, it will be then in the direction of drawing your attention to the mystical rather than material; to the allegorical rather than the historic aspect. [...] My feelings then, brethren, only prompt me to encourage among you the tendency to greater study of symbolism and the analogies between each Masonic point and similar reference in other Arcane societies and institutions. [...] Or at least, my brethren, let us recognize that a complete thread of occult thought runs through our Rituals, and until they be emasculated from such positive evidences of mysticism, no Master can be wrong who encourages study and research into these most interesting side lights [of Freemasonry].⁶

In discussing Westcott’s comparative approach to Masonic research, R. A. Gilbert remarks in connection with Westcott’s 1894 paper ‘Rosicrucians, their History and Aim’,⁷ that Westcott ‘epitomises the approach of the Esoteric School, his contention being that in the absence of documentary evidence it is quite legitimate to draw historical conclusions from a textual analysis of Masonic ritual. If a symbol is present both in the Kabalah and in masonry, *ergo* there is a necessary connection between the two, and the earliest Speculative masons must also have been kabalists.’⁸

Westcott’s criticism in his Inaugural Address of a strictly historical study of Freemasonry was grounded in his belief that such a study would result in a disenchantment of Freemasonry as such: ‘After all, brethren, life is not all too rosy an existence, and we should try to avoid destroying the halo of romance and beauty which surrounds any branch of it. [...] To me it seems that outsiders come into our ranks [...] because our Order offers a vision of old world romance, a flavour of mysticism, a possibility of magic [...]. In short, it was more beneficent, according to Westcott, to study Freemasonry’s philosophy and ‘mystic shrine’, than its history and ‘the Charter Rolls of the country.’⁹ It is thus worth noting that Westcott in his Inaugural Address did not criticize the methodology of the scientific or historical researchers (the distinction between the authentic and non-authen-

⁶ W. W. Westcott, ‘Installation Address’, *AQC* 6 (1893), 204–05.

⁷ W. W. Westcott, ‘Rosicrucians, their Rites and Aims, With reference to the alleged connection between Rosicrucianism & Freemasonry’, *AQC* 7 (1894), 36–42.

⁸ R. A. Gilbert, ‘William Wynn Westcott and the Esoteric School of Masonic Research’, *AQC* 100 (1987), 16.

⁹ Westcott, ‘Installation Address’, 204–05.

tic schools had, of course, not been made yet), but rather the topics to be studied. Understanding the symbolism, philosophy, and rituals of Freemasonry was more important to Westcott than presenting mere historical facts. However, in emphasizing the importance of such subjects, he did not stand alone. In fact, in his Oration at the Consecration of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge, delivered on 12 January 1886, A. F. A. Woodford proclaimed:

For in truth, we may find ourselves in our needful researches, among primeval mysteries, we may have to go to far Aryan sources, we may navigate the mystic symbolism of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, we lose ourselves amid hieratic *papyri*, or we may sound as far as can the remains of the *aporreta* of Greece and Rome. Some of us have made our incursions into Scandinavian *sagas*, others have explored Teutonic mythology, and others have lingered amid the communities of Greece and the *collegia opificum* of Rome. Masonic Students have to consider in their survey of the Masonic Records of the past the accretions of early ages, and the peculiar aspect and colouring of mediæval tendencies. Hermeticism has an attraction for some, the usages and organization of the Craft Guilds affect others. In fact no one can successfully treat the diversified outcome of all these various lines of thought and study, of traditional witness, of masonic history, without paying attention to many apparently conflicting and yet probably coherent testimonies, all converging to one point, all witnessing to one true source of origin and development; if often contrasted, still ever parallel, co-existent, and synchronous.¹⁰

Considering that Woodford is usually regarded as one of the founders of the authentic school, the final point in the above quote is quite remarkable, i.e., the notion that there exists ‘one true source of origin and development’ to all those various ‘synchronous’ traditions that the ‘Masonic Students have to consider’. In fact, this very much sounds like one of the main characteristics of the esoteric school as described by Hamill.¹¹

What role did the esoteric approach to the study of Freemasonry play in the early days of Quatuor Coronati Lodge? Judging by Westcott’s critique in his Inaugural Address of the subject matters preferred by the adherents of what would become known as the authentic school, it is possible to surmise that the historical discourse dominated the work of the lodge, at least in the eyes of Westcott. Still, according to R. A. Gilbert up until 1916 a substantial number of papers were published in *AQC* that might be labelled as esoteric.¹² In fact, Antony R. Baker claims that almost 25% of all papers published in the period 1886–1900 can be labelled as ‘Symbolic or Interpretative’, which Baker argues represents the work of the esoteric school.¹³

¹⁰ A. F. A. Woodford, ‘Oration’, *AQC* 1 (1886–8), 5–6.

¹¹ “The esoteric and mystical schools are in fact concerned with the transmission of ideas and esoteric traditions, in itself a valid line of research; but in doing so they convert similarities between groups widely separated in time into evidence of a continuing tradition handed down from one group to another, a sort of apostolic succession”. Hamill, *The Craft*, 22.

¹² Gilbert, ‘William Wynn Westcott and the Esoteric School’, 17.

¹³ A. R. Baker, ‘The Road Less Travelled: The Authentic & Esoteric Schools – Time for a More Integrated Approach’, *AQC* 125 (2012), 6–7.

Before moving on to the next part of this paper, let us make a brief recap of the esoteric school of Masonic research thus far: 1. Hamill's claim that the esoteric school, as part of the non-authentic school, is characterized by an inability to separate fact from fiction, can be questioned. Authors such as Yarker and Westcott adhered to the same basic principles of scholarship as representatives of the authentic school, i.e., referencing and making use of prime sources. 2. The main difference between the two schools, in terms of methodology, was the comparative approach favoured by the esoteric school. 3. The comparative method was dependent on the belief that Freemasonry was either linked to or consisted of an ancient wisdom tradition that has taken many different forms throughout the ages. 4. The representatives of the esoteric school therefore favoured a different set of subjects for their research, e.g., the symbolism, rituals, and philosophy of Freemasonry and associated traditions. But in what way was this esoteric? Or phrased a bit differently, what was the esotericism of the esoteric school all about?

The Esotericism of the Esoteric School

In his description of the esoteric school John Hamill singled out John Yarker and his work, *The Arcane Schools*, as the main representative of this particular type of Masonic research. Although Yarker became a member of the Correspondence Circle of Quatuor Coronati Lodge as early as 1887, he never became a full member of the lodge. This did not stop him, however, from supporting and taking an active part in the lodge's work, and he published no less than twenty-six papers and extended notes in *AQC*, with his first contribution ('Unrecognised Lodges & Degrees of Freemasonry before & after 1717') appearing in the very first issue, and his last article ('The Charter of Larmenius') appearing only a year before he died in 1913.¹⁴ *The Arcane Schools* can be seen as the culmination of Yarker's life-long interest in the history of Freemasonry, but the basic premises for this work – that modern-day Freemasonry is the custodian and transmitter of an ancient wisdom tradition and that high grades of Freemasonry are as old as the Craft degrees – can already be found in his first book on the history of Freemasonry, *Notes on the Scientific and Religious Mysteries of Antiquity*, published almost forty years earlier in 1872.¹⁵ In this work Yarker argues that 'there was in existence amongst all the civilized nations of

¹⁴ John Yarker's published articles in *Ars Quatuor Coronatorum* include: 'Unrecognised Lodges & Degrees of Freemasonry before & after 1717', *AQC* 1 (1886–8); 'The Yezids', *AQC* 4 (1891); 'Brahminical Initiation', *AQC* 5 (1892); 'The Nimesian Theory and French Legend', *AQC* 6 (1893); 'Notes in reference to HAB', *AQC* 7 (1894); 'The Order of the Temple', *AQC* 11 (1898); 'The Old Swalwell Lodge and the Harodim', *AQC* 15 (1902); 'The Haughfoot Lodge', *AQC* 16 (1903); 'The Very Ancient Clermont Chapter', *AQC* 17 (1904); 'The High Grades in Bristol and Bath', *AQC* 17 (1904); 'The Carolus of Our Ancient MSS', *AQC* 19 (1906); 'Our Masonic History – Let Us Seek Truth', *AQC* 20 (1907); 'Two Ancient Legends Concerning the First Temple of King Solomon', *AQC* 21 (1908); 'The Charter of Larmenius', *AQC* 25 (1912).

¹⁵ J. Yarker, *Notes on the Scientific and Religious Mysteries of Antiquity; the Gnosis and the Secret Schools of the Middle Ages; Modern Rosicrucianism; and the Various Rites and Degrees of Free and Accepted Masonry* (London: John Hogg, 1872).

antiquity, an *exoteric* form of religion and an *esoteric* interpretation. The one constituted the religious belief of the vulgar, and the other the secret teachings of a philosophical association, to which none but candidates prepared in mind and body were admitted.' He continued to state that the 'most notable of these mysterious fraternities were those of Mithras in Persia, of Isis and Osiris in Egypt, of the Cabiri in Samothrace, of Brahm in India, of Bacchus or Dionysus in Syria, of Eleusis in Greece, of the Druids in Britain, of Balder in Scandinavia, of Vitzliputzli in America, &c., &c., &c.'¹⁶ The three etc. at the end of the quote cover a bewildering array of religious, mystical, and philosophical traditions, which Yarker claimed to share an esoteric understanding of the 'contest between good and evil' and the 'death and resurrection of some mythic personage'. As far as antiquity is concerned, Yarker states that it is 'to Egypt that we must look for the most complete development of every branch of this sublime and mysterious association.'¹⁷

It is perhaps telling that Yarker to a large extent focuses on the outer forms of the traditions that he discusses, such as the myths, rituals, and initiatory structures, rather than what is supposed to be their common doctrines or teachings. The main argument seems to be that all the various systems he discusses are mere manifestations of one and the same tradition.¹⁸ This underlying, ancient tradition has, furthermore, been kept alive throughout the ages and can be found in Freemasonry today: 'From all that has gone before, it will be seen that it is not alone an identity of ceremony, but also an identity of doctrine, which pervaded these esoteric schools – and the same has even been transmitted to our own times.'¹⁹

While the 'identity of doctrine' which Yarker sought to discover can be found, allegedly, across the globe, he paid special attention to what he termed 'Gnosticism in the Middle Ages', consisting primarily of alchemy, Kabbalah, and operative masonry, and to 'Modern Rosicrucianism', which covered seventeenth-century esotericism, especially its reception in England. Although Yarker went to great lengths in trying to show that this ancient doctrine had been transmitted to Freemasonry (especially the High degrees), he would later claim that Freemasonry is by no means the sole preserver of this ancient tradition, nor is it only to be found in the West. In a lecture, delivered at Grosvenor Hotel, Manchester in 1883 on the topic of 'Speculative Freemasonry' to a select audience of members of the Antient and Primitive Rite of Freemasonry, Yarker stated that the chief existing branches of to-day transmitted from ancient times are the African Mysteries; the

¹⁶ Yarker, *Notes on the Scientific and Religious Mysteries of Antiquity*, 5.

¹⁷ Yarker, *Notes on the Scientific and Religious Mysteries of Antiquity*, 8.

¹⁸ 'Sufficient we think has been said to shew the general nature of these mysteries, and it is therefore useless to follow their ceremonial coincidences further; they had all one origin and varied only in language, differing not further than do the modern rites of Freemasonry', Yarker, *Notes on the Scientific and Religious Mysteries of Antiquity*, 19.

¹⁹ Yarker, *Notes on the Scientific and Religious Mysteries of Antiquity*, 27.

Lebanon Druses and Ainsareeh; the Chinese Triad and the Japanese Celestial Brotherhood; the Hindu Temple Mysteries; and the Bektash, and other Dervish Sect Mysteries of Turkey, Persia, and Egypt.²⁰

For almost forty years Yarker relentlessly continued to argue for the existence of an ancient wisdom tradition and that Freemasonry was the custodian of this tradition, but his involvement with so-called irregular and fringe Masonic high grade rites, seems to have alienated him from main-stream Freemasons, and he was often met with criticism or silence. For instance, the great American Masonic authority at the time, Albert Pike (1809–91), dismissed him as an ‘inaccurate historian.’²¹ Judging by his preface to *The Arcane Schools*, by the end of his life Yarker had resigned himself to the fact that the more conservative strands of Freemasonry would not be convinced by his work:

Those who obstinately deny the existence of anything which is outside their own comprehension are fully as credulous as those who accept everything without discrimination. There are certain intellects which lack intuition and the ability to take in and assimilate abstruse truths, just as much as there are people who are colour-blind, or deaf to more delicate notes of music; this was well known to the ancient theologians and mystics, and the reasons which they assigned for the mental incapacity will appear in the following pages.²²

Two years after Yarker had published *The Arcane Schools*, the prolific and much more popular author A. E. Waite (1857–1942) published *The Secret Tradition in Freemasonry* (1911).²³ Hamill includes Waite in the non-authentic school, but places him in the ‘symbolist’ rather than the esoteric subcategory.²⁴ According to Hamill, the ‘symbolist school seeks the origins of Freemasonry in a comparison and correlation of symbolism and ritual language and tries to link in a lineal descent various religions, cults, mysteries, and societies with Freemasonry.’²⁵ It is a bit unclear, however, to what extent the two schools actually differ, since both share the same basic supposition that there is an ancient wisdom tradition underlying the majority of all initiatory traditions, including Freemasonry. This supposition is made clear in Waite’s massive history of – what he calls – the Secret Tradition. Waite differs, however, from Yarker in three significant ways. First, the scope

²⁰ J. Yarker, *Speculative Freemasonry. A Historical Lecture upon the Origin of Craft and High Grade Freemasonry, and Showing the Great Antiquity of the Combined System* (Liverpool: Joseph Hawkins, 1883), 8.

²¹ A. Pike, *John Yarker: An Inaccurate Historian* (N.p.: privately printed, 188-). The pamphlet caused Yarker to publish a lengthy reply in *The Freemasons Journal*, vol. vi, No. 1 (1890), 8.

²² J. Yarker, *The Arcane Schools; A Review of their Origin and Antiquity; with a General History of Freemasonry, and its Relation to the Theosophic, Scientific, and Philosophic Mysteries* (Belfast: William Tait, 1909), vi.

²³ A. E. Waite, *The Secret Tradition in Freemasonry, And an Analysis of the Inter-Relation Between the Craft and the High Grades in Respect of Their Term of Research, Expressed by the Way of Symbolism* (London: Rebman Limited, 1911), 2 volumes.

²⁴ On Waite, see R. A. Gilbert, *A. E. Waite: Magician of Many Parts* (London: Crucible, 1987); R. A. Gilbert, ‘The Masonic Career of A. E. Waite’, *AQC* 99 (1986).

²⁵ Hamill, *The Craft*, 24.

is much more limited in the terms of the traditions discussed. Whereas Yarker traces the wisdom tradition in a bewildering array of historical examples spanning vast geographical areas and historical periods, Waite focuses on an explicitly Western context. Waite does not deny the possibility of an Eastern reception of the Secret Tradition, stating that ‘it should be understood that there has been a great analogical transmission on the same subject through channels in the Eastern world’,²⁶ but the focus of The Secret Tradition in Freemasonry is to all intents and purposes Western. Second, whereas Yarker tends to be unclear about the nature of the ancient wisdom tradition he traces in his works, Waite is explicit about the nature of the Secret Tradition, which to him is an essentially Christian tradition grounded in ancient Judaism, concerned with the doctrine of ‘Mystical Death and Rebirth’. Or to quote Waite’s own definition of the Secret Tradition: ‘The Secret Tradition contains, firstly, the memorials of a loss which has befallen humanity; and, secondly, the records of a restitution in respect of that which was lost. For reasons which I do not propose to consider at the present stage, the keepers of the tradition perpetuated it in secret by means of Instituted Mysteries and cryptic literature.’²⁷ As I have discussed elsewhere,²⁸ Waite argued that this tradition is preserved in the legend of the Third Degree, and he believed that the loss of the Master’s Word was connected to the Zoharic quest for lost knowledge of how to pronounce the name of the Lord.²⁹ And this brings us to the third major difference between Yarker and Waite: Yarker increasingly emphasized the significance of the high degrees, whereas Waite considered the Third Degree to be the most important ritual of Freemasonry, and that the only possible worth of High Degrees was the extent to which they were linked to the Secret Tradition as expounded in the legend of Hiram Abiff.

Western Esotericism and the Ancient Wisdom Narrative

In order to understand fully the esoteric school of Masonic research we need to place it in its proper context, i.e., at the intersection between the comparative study of religion and *fin de siècle* occultism. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the emerging field of comparative religion was to a large extent concerned with the origins of religion. Influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution, scholars such as Max Müller (1823–1900) and Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) believed that religion had developed from earlier, ‘primitive’, forms of spirituality, such as animism, pre-animism, or magic. They

²⁶ Waite, *The Secret Tradition in Freemasonry*, Vol. 1, x.

²⁷ Waite, *The Secret Tradition in Freemasonry*, Vol. 1, ix.

²⁸ H. Bogdan, ‘Freemasonry and Western Esotericism’, in H. Bogdan and J. A. M. Snoek (eds.), *Handbook of Freemasonry* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2014), 297–301.

²⁹ ‘For myself I believe that the mystic hands which transformed Freemasonry were the hands of a Kabalistic section of Wardens of the Secret Tradition [and] that their work is especially traceable in the Craft Legend.’ Waite, *The Secret Tradition in Freemasonry*, Vol. 1, 39.

believed that in order to understand the function and purpose of religion, one has to study the earliest phases of religion. Furthermore, they favoured a comparative methodology through which they sought to discover patterns in religion that went beyond the confines of a single religious tradition. Pioneers of the comparative study of religion such as Max Müller, argued that ‘truth’ could be found in all great religions, if only one looked beyond the outer dogmas that are dependent on historical circumstances, and that it is by comparing religions that the eternal truths will be revealed.³⁰ This approach to religion can for analytical purposes be seen as an example of what historian of religions Ivan Strenski has identified as the quest for Natural Religion, which has its roots in the sixteenth century.³¹ According to Strenski the crisis of the Reformation, which led to Christians fighting against Christians, and thereby objectifying Protestants and Catholics, in combination with the crisis of the discovery of the New World (with the encounter of indigenous cultures and religions that differed radically from anything known in Europe), led intellectuals to reflect upon the possible truths underlying all known religious traditions, truths that went beyond the outward dogmas of revealed religion. Thinkers like Jean Bodin (1530–96) and Edward, Lord Herbert of Chester (1583–1648), believed that religion is an innate, built-in feature of being human. It is therefore ‘natural’ in the sense that it is a ‘normal’ part of being human. Natural religion was thus not only seen as that which unites all great religions, but also as a natural part of being human. Adherents of Natural Religion often argued that God manifests through the rational aspect in man, as well as in the laws of nature, as shown in particular by the eighteenth-century deists. Without going into the specific details here, Strenski argues that the quest for Natural Religion is the very foundation of nineteenth century comparative religion and the historical-critical study of the Bible, and that scholars such as Max Müller and William Robertson Smith in different ways sought to identify the ur-religion, or natural religion that dwells behind the world religions. Reading a book like Yarker’s *The Arcane Schools* in the light of contemporary studies of comparative religion, his emphasis on the earliest forms of ‘esoteric’ religion and the use of the comparative method becomes understandable. Also, the idea of finding an underlying truth or ancient wisdom tradition is to a certain extent in line with someone like Max Müller.

The quest for an ancient wisdom or secret tradition was not unique to the esoteric school, however. On the contrary, speculation about the possibility of discovering spiritual truths through a comparative study of religion flourished in the esoteric milieu, especially within Theosophical circles. According to Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–

³⁰ Müller’s ideas came to inspire Rudolf Otto’s arguments that religion emerges from the experience of the sacred, and thus also to Mircea Eliade’s phenomenology of religion with its emphasis on the study of hierophanies (manifestations of the sacred) as the basic patterns of religion. See R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923) and M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958).

³¹ I. Strenski, *Thinking About Religion* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

91), all exoteric religions are but different branches of the same tree, and the closer you come to its stem, the closer you will be to the eternal truths. Blavatsky's spiritual project, as laid down in *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) consisted of recreating the perennial tradition that she claimed was the origin of the world's religions. To Blavatsky, the closest one could come to this ancient tradition were the Eastern religious traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism, and it was therefore necessary to study these traditions in particular.

The work of authors like Blavatsky, Yarker, and Waite can be understood from the perspective of what Dutch historian of esotericism Wouter J. Hanegraaff has termed *ancient wisdom narratives*.³² Hanegraaff argues that from the Renaissance onwards – although examples can be found in late antiquity as well – esoteric discourses are often based on genealogies of revealed wisdom. Such genealogies are linked to the construct of tradition and they function as a link to history and thereby afford the present custodians or transmitters of the ancient wisdom with authority and legitimacy.³³ By the end of the fifteenth century intellectuals like Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola tried to correlate newly-discovered forms of ancient wisdom, such as the teachings of *Corpus Hermeticum*, with the Christian revelation. Hanegraaff divides the ancient wisdom narratives into three categories or ideal types that classified pagan wisdom as being either an ideal that contemporary Christianity should use as a model for reform (*prisca theologia*), an expression of universal truth (*philosophia perennis*), or an incomplete glimpse of the exceptional truth that would arrive with Christianity (*pia philosophia*).

Yarker's ancient wisdom tradition and Waite's secret tradition can thus be seen as expressions of a grand narrative of ancient wisdom deeply embedded in Western esotericism. Yarker's quest for the 'identity of doctrine' echoes the Renaissance *philosophia perennis* with its belief that there exists a universal and eternal wisdom beyond the outward manifestations of individual traditions, while Waite's 'Secret Tradition' seems to draw on both *philosophia perennis* and *pia philosophia* with his belief that the ancient Jewish search for the lost way of pronouncing the name of the Lord, is to be solved by *unio mystica* with Christ (which Waite believed was the esoteric message of the third degree legend).

Concluding remarks

What are we to make of the esoteric school? Should it be seen as a mere curious footnote to the history of Freemasonry, or is there perhaps something significant about it which deserves to be studied in more detail? I would argue that the esoteric school of Quatuor

³² W. J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 7–12.

³³ For a discussion on the construct of tradition in Freemasonry, see H. Bogdan, 'The Sociology of the Construct of Tradition and Import of Legitimacy in Freemasonry', in A. B. Kilcher (ed.) *Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2010), 217–38.

Coronati Lodge offers the scholar of Western esotericism an intriguing example of the crossover between esotericism and scholarship. As such, it is an important case study in the history of what eventually developed into the academic study of Western esotericism in the 1990s. When Antoine Faivre proposed his definition of Western esotericism as a form of thought in *Access to Western Esotericism* (1992), he did it in large measure as a response to scholars who tended to confuse the *study* of esotericism with the *propagation* of esotericism. These scholars often approached esotericism as a universal and trans-historical phenomenon, where the esoteric ‘truths’ or ‘essence’ remained the same throughout history and across the world.³⁴ Furthermore, esotericism was often understood as a distinct Tradition with a capital T, an unbroken tradition which has existed unchanged since times immemorial. On the continent this notion was often influenced, directly or indirectly, by the French anti-modernist thinker René Guénon (1886–1951).³⁵ As shown earlier, the esoteric school to all intents and purposes shared this understanding of esotericism as an unbroken and transhistorical tradition, and it can therefore be seen as an early example of ‘religionist’ or ‘traditionalist’ approaches to the study of esotericism, as opposed to the historical-critical approach favoured by scholars such as Faivre and Hanegraaff.

A second, and perhaps more important aspect of the esoteric school is the emphasis placed on ‘Western’ esotericism.³⁶ Although Yarker, and to a lesser extent Westcott, were interested in Eastern forms of esotericism, their main focus is unquestionably the West. This is even more true for someone like Waite, who almost exclusively focused on what he perceived as a distinctly Western Secret Tradition. The division of Eastern and Western forms of esotericism has been traced to late nineteenth-century emic constructs of esotericism, grounded in a reaction against the Eastern emphasis of the Theosophical Society. Occult and initiatory societies like the Hermetic Society, Societas Rosicruciana In Anglia, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn can be interpreted as manifestations of what historian of esotericism Joscelyn Godwin has called the Hermetic Reaction.³⁷ The important thing about the esoteric school in this context is that the construct of a Western form of esotericism was presented in a scholarly context, with the attempt to adhere to scholarly principles (i.e., referencing and making use of prime sources, and the use of

³⁴ W. J. Hanegraaff, ‘On the Construction of ‘Esoteric Traditions’, in A. Faivre & W. J. Hanegraaff (Eds.), *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religion* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 10–61.

³⁵ On the impact of Guénon and Traditionalism, see M. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁶ The ‘Western’ in the study of Western esotericism has been the topic for heated discussions for several years now. See e.g., K. Granholm, ‘Locating the West: Problematizing the *western* in western esotericism and occultism’, in H. Bogdan & G. Djurdjevic (Eds.), *Occultism in a Global Perspective* (London: Equinox, 2013); see also M. Pasi ‘Esotericism Emergent: The Beginning of the Study of Esotericism in the Academy’ in A. D. DeConick (Ed.), *Religion: Secret Religion* (Macmillan Reference, 2016), and K. von Stuckrad, ‘Esotericism Disputed: Major Debates in the Field’, in A. D. DeConick (Ed.), *Religion: Secret Religion* (Macmillan Reference, 2016).

³⁷ J. Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 333–80.

a comparative methodology). As such, the esoteric school can be seen as a forerunner of the study of Western esotericism as we know it today.



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