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The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Secrecy

Edited by Hugh B. Urban and
Paul Christopher Johnson

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF RELIGION AND SECRECY

Secrecy is a central and integral component of all religious traditions. Not limited simply to religious groups that engage in clandestine activities such as hidden rites of initiation or terrorism, secrecy is inherent in the very fabric of religion itself. Its importance has perhaps never been more acutely relevant than in our own historical moment. In the wake of 9/11 and other acts of religious violence, we see the rise of invasive national security states that target religious minorities and pose profound challenges to the ideals of privacy and religious freedom, accompanied by the resistance by many communities to such efforts. As such, questions of secrecy, privacy, surveillance, and security are among the most central and contested issues of twenty-first century religious life.

The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Secrecy is the definitive reference source for the key topics, problems, and debates in this crucial field and is the first collection of its kind. Comprising twenty-nine chapters by a team of international contributors, the Handbook is divided into five parts:

- Configurations of Religious Secrecy: Conceptual and Comparative Frameworks
- Secrecy as Religious Practice
- Secrecy and the Politics of the Present
- Secrecy and Social Resistance
- Secrecy, Terrorism, and Surveillance.

This cutting-edge volume discusses secrecy in relation to major categories of religious experience and individual religious practices while also examining the transformations of secrecy in the modern period, including the rise of fraternal orders, the ongoing wars on terror, the rise of far-right white supremacist groups, increasing concerns over religious freedom and privacy, the role of the internet in the spread and surveillance of such groups, and the resistance to surveillance by many indigenous and diasporic communities.

The Routledge Handbook of Religion and Secrecy is essential reading for students and researchers in religious studies, comparative religion, new religious movements, and religion and politics. It will be equally central to debates in the related disciplines of sociology, anthropology, political science, security studies and cultural studies.

Hugh B. Urban is Distinguished Professor of Comparative Studies at the Ohio State University, USA. He is the author of numerous books, including *Secrecy* (2021), *The Church of Scientology* (2010), *Magia Sexualis* (2005), and *Tantra* (2003).

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THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF RELIGION AND SECRECY

Edited by

Hugh B. Urban and Paul Christopher Johnson

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	viii
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	ix
 Introduction: From the Social Lives of Secrecy to the Secret Lives of the Social: Notes on Religion, Power, and the Public <i>Paul Christopher Johnson and Hugh B. Urban</i>	 1
 PART I Configurations of Religious Secrecy: Conceptual and Comparative Frameworks	 15
1 Mysticism and Secrecy <i>Arthur Versluis</i>	17
2 Esotericism and Secrecy <i>Kennet Granholm</i>	26
3 Gender, Sexuality, and Secrecy <i>Hugh B. Urban</i>	45
4 Psychedelica Sub Rosa: The Eleusinian Mysteries and the Psychedelic Imagination <i>Christopher Partridge</i>	57
5 Architectures of Secrecy <i>Paul Christopher Johnson</i>	71
6 Secret Lives of the Superpowers: Secrecy, the Paranormal, and the Remote Viewing Literature <i>Jeffrey J. Kripal and Christopher Senn</i>	85

PART II	
Secrecy as Religious Practice	103
7 Secrecy in Islam, Sufism, and Shi'ism	105
<i>Mark Sedgwick</i>	
8 Concealing the Concealment: Towards a Politics of Kabbalistic Esotericism	120
<i>Elliot R. Wolfson</i>	
9 Keeping Secrets: The Social Practice of Gnostic Secrecy	131
<i>April D. DeConick</i>	
10 Secrecy's Situational Ironies: Hiding and Its Consequences for Covert Buddhists in Japan	151
<i>Clark Chilson</i>	
11 Notions of Secrecy and the Unknown/Hidden in Chinese Culture	163
<i>Barend ter Haar</i>	
12 Secrecy in South Asian Hindu Traditions: "The Gods Love What Is Occult"	174
<i>Gordan Djurdjevic</i>	
13 Reflections on Secrecy in Yolngu Religion	187
<i>Ian Keen</i>	
14 AWO – The Nature and Essence of Secrecy in Yorùbá Religious Traditions: Conversations with <i>Ifá</i> Diviners	199
<i>Jacob K. Olupona</i>	
PART III	
Secrecy and the Politics of the Present	211
15 Secrecy and Freemasonry	213
<i>Henrik Bogdan</i>	
16 The Sacred, the "Secret," and the Sinister in the Latter-Day Saint Tradition	228
<i>Christopher James Blythe</i>	
17 The High Magic of Jesus Christ: Materializing Secrets in Brazil's Valley of the Dawn	243
<i>Kelly E. Hayes</i>	
18 Secrecy, Sex Abuse, and the Practice of Priesthood	258
<i>John C. Seitz</i>	
19 From Resistance to Terror: The Open Secret of Jonestown	275
<i>Rebecca Moore</i>	

PART IV	
Secrecy and Social Resistance	287
20 “Crypto-Paganism” in the Late Antique World: Models of Religious Concealment in a Christian Empire, Fourth to Sixth Century CE	289
<i>David Frankfurter</i>	
21 Hopi Knowledge and the Ethnographic Allure of Secrets	306
<i>Adam Fulton Johnson</i>	
22 Secrecy, Spirit Work, and Women’s Fugitive Speech in the Creolophone Caribbean	320
<i>Elizabeth McAlister</i>	
23 Lifting the Eucharistic <i>Veil</i> —Allan Rohan Crite as Afro-Anglican <i>Mystagogue</i>	329
<i>Hugh R. Page, Jr. and Stephen C. Finley</i>	
PART V	
Secrecy, Terrorism, and Surveillance	341
24 Weaponizing Secrecy: The FBI’s War on Black Radical Religion	343
<i>Sylvester Johnson</i>	
25 Varieties of Religion and Secrecy in American White Power Movements	355
<i>Damon T. Berry</i>	
26 The Islamic State and the Management of Secrecy	370
<i>Haroro J. Ingram and Craig Whiteside</i>	
27 Conspiracy Theories about Secret Religions: Imagining the Other	380
<i>David G. Robertson</i>	
28 Xenophobia and Conspiracism after 9/11	391
<i>Michael Barkun</i>	
29 Imagining Secret Wars	400
<i>Mark Juergensmeyer</i>	
<i>Index</i>	409

FIGURES

5.1	The Hilma af Klint Foundation, HaK 1047. Courtesy of Moderna Museet, Stockholm. From her notebook of 1930–31, pp. 52–53	77
5.2	Goetheanum under construction, 1 April 1914	79
5.3	First Goetheanum, 1914–22, Dornach, Switzerland	79
5.4	Andrea Chan’s winning design, “A Temple for Hilma”	80
5.5	312 Azusa Street, Los Angeles, 1906. Source: Wikicommons	81
17.1	Armas, Photo by Márcia Alves	248
17.2	Uniform, Photo by Márcia Alves	249
17.3	Indumentária, Photo by Márcia Alves	250
17.4	Indumentária, male and female, Photo by Márcia Alves	250
17.5	Radar de Centúria	251
17.6	Centurion Medium	252
23.1	Crite, illustration from All Glory	334
23.2	Crite, illustration from All Glory	335
23.3	Crite, illustration from All Glory	336
23.4	Crite, illustration from All Glory	337

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INTRODUCTION

From the Social Lives of Secrecy to the Secret Lives of the Social: Notes on Religion, Power, and the Public

Paul Christopher Johnson and Hugh B. Urban

We all guard secrets. The process of filtering, deciding which words to share with others and which to temper or leave unsaid, is basic to all of social life. Secrecy is likewise fundamental to the enterprise of religion, a quest to commune with sources of power that only sometimes reveal themselves. Religious people seek to learn mysteries that remain hidden to most. As part and parcel of religion, secrecy has to do with sources of power that are elusive, only sometimes open to humans, and never knowable in full. Divine sources of power always recede just out of reach or sight. From this point of view, religion is a set of traditions and techniques granting periodic human access to extraordinary powers that generally remain concealed.¹ Without secrets and the estrangement and bafflement they seed, religion would be unnecessary. All would already be clear, and the need for religion would disappear.² For as long as our present condition of limited knowledge persists—and it is hard to imagine that condition changing—secrecy is, and will remain, an enduring feature of religious practice.

A secret is something valuable but concealed, and often valuable *because* it is concealed. A piece of knowledge that seems to exist but is locked away, masked, or obscured is joined to a belief that its very elusiveness is a problem to be solved, but also something to be protected. To hide and to unveil, to contain and reveal—this is the rhythm of secrecy, and also of religion (Wolfson 1999; Johnson 2005). Following Bruce Lincoln, we define religion as “a discourse whose concerns transcend the human, temporal, and contingent, and that claims for itself a similarly transcendent status,” plus the practices, communities, and institutions that maintain and fortify that discourse (Lincoln 2003: 6–7). A particular religious tradition, then, consists of a group of people who share certain discourses about transcendent, mostly concealed knowledge, and a set of practices or technologies directed toward its revelation. And yet, while all religions seek human relations with generally mysterious powers that are revealed only in moments breaking into everyday experience, not all religions embrace secrecy to the same degree, nor do all historical contexts equally evoke secrecy as a defense against outside intrusion. The comparative unevenness of religious secrecy is an issue this *Handbook* unpacks. Since their discourses and techniques are elaborated and revised over time, their unfolding metamorphosis means that religions are living, changing things.

Sometimes religion has been castigated as uniquely or especially secretive in comparison with other arts and technologies. From Enlightenment philosophes to the most recent generation of atheists and other “nones,” religion is imagined, from this point of view, in the form of cryptic texts, hidden sancta, smoke and hooded robes, and in that caricature juxtaposed with images of light, transparency, and

public visibility. In the crafting of this invidious profile of religion, the language of optics and seeing is often applied (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003: 292). Here is Diderot writing in 1770: “Lost in the darkness of an immense forest with only a small flickering light to guide me, an unknown person arrives and says: ‘My friend, blow out your candle to better find your path.’ That man is a theologian” (1821: 246). Light and dark, the open and the opaque, oligarchy versus democracy.

The authors here pull no punches in the critique of religious secrecy and its risks, yet they also insist, against a perspective like Diderot’s, that religion is not *uniquely* sinister. Rather than setting “religion” apart as a pernicious domain, the study of secrecy brings religion into conversation with other domains of social life. Religious secrecy is, we suggest, best seen as a subgenre of the social lives of secrecy broadly cast. It is, however, an important subgenre. For, if religious secrecy pervades the practice of local congregations, its force also scales up, reaching into national and international governance.

Secrets, the Public, and the Private

Secrecy is standard in the procedures of diplomacy, including in relation to issues of human rights, weapons inspections, peace negotiations, commerce, industry, medicine and, increasingly, digital cybercraft on the deep web. If secrecy is mostly standard procedure, “transparency” is often the preferred argot. The discourse of transparency, though, far from signaling trust or open communication, assures us of its lack. Its special invocation guarantees that at most times and in most places, we should expect none. No surprise, then, that calls to transparency and the wild proliferation of conspiracy theories have together produced complicated social networks that thoroughly blur the lines of religion, science, and politics—as if they were ever discreet domains to begin with. How do transparency and secrecy walk hand in hand with such easy insouciance (Sanders and West 2003)? Several authors of this handbook interrogate the interstitial spaces of secrecy and the public, especially in relation to police forces and the state, and how claims of transparency serve to disguise and obscure extralegal actions and states of exception. Yet since secrecy is often defined in relation to the public and the private, we must also establish a working definition for the latter terms.

Different analytical constructions of the public include the liberal-economistic model, where “public” denotes the domain of influence of the nation-state; the classical model of the “public” as a political community of citizens, distinct from both the market and the nation-state; the “public” as a general sphere of face-to-face interactions and social intercourse, such as in a café, a bar, a train-station, or the street; and the “public” as the market economy (Weintraub 1997).

Chapters in this Handbook draw from classical ideas of the public to frame the concept of the public as a broad realm of human sociability and symbolic exchange, including virtual, but they are especially concerned with defining “the public” in relation to transparency, and how transparency works as a religious problematic. We approach “the public,” then, as an empirical problem rather than an assertion, one articulated, at least in part, through its contraries: blockage, obfuscation, dissimulation, legerdemain, camouflage, and strategic concealment. “Public,” from this point of view, is an ongoing contest and fight. There are often good reasons for religious traditions to resist transparency to the public. Public transparency, after all, indicates a physical or semi-otic space where one can neither choose who will be encountered or what will be exchanged, nor can one control the consequences and risks of the revelation. In an ideal scenario like that imagined in Habermas’ (1994) formulation of a public sphere that mediates between the state and the masses, which, in cafés, salons and newspapers generates “public opinion” and the possibility of critique through the development of reasoned communication, there would be little to fear from becoming public. We are less sanguine than Habermas about the so-called public sphere at the present historical juncture.

In the twenty-first century, reasoned, literate communication may be less important in creating the public sphere than factors like the control of mass media systems. And it may be too restricted also to account for the peculiar “public space” of venues like cyberspace. When religions are composed of partly national or global media circulations, they become available for use and appropriation by groups far removed from a given tradition’s geographic center. New media generate new publics (e.g., Meyer and Moors 2006). As they become public, they move from restricted circulation, the key to secrecy, into open circulation. Georg Simmel already noted the risk at the outset of the twentieth century: becoming public entails an objectification of protected knowledge, and may cause a breach in the boundary of a secret society. That is why many traditions carefully constrain representations and their circulation, and why initiations into secret societies carefully control the transmission of information, and the mode of presentation.

To *become* public, then, is the moment of a religious tradition’s detachment from restricted use into general visibility. Its signs and symbols are no longer protected. Rather, they may be appropriated by distant audiences that did not produce them. Multiple publics and “counterpublics,” to take Michael Warner’s term, may emerge around the same set of symbols, discourses and practices. Warner asks,

What determines whether one belongs to a public or not? Space and physical presence do not make much difference; a public is understood to be different from a crowd, an audience, or any other group that requires co-presence. Personal identity does not in itself make one part of a public. Publics differ from nations, races, professions, or any other groups that, though not requiring co-presence, saturate identity. Belonging to a public seems to require at least minimal participation, even if it is patient or notional, rather than a permanent state of being. Merely paying attention can be enough to make you a member.

(Warner 2002: 53).

Warner’s idea helps open classical notions of the public to the pressing issue of cyberspace and transparency. For our purposes in this Handbook, the key point is the historical and anthropological question of how and why secrets *become* public, or vice versa, and with what risks.

The other key term with which secrecy is typically contrasted is privacy. Various authors have defined these terms in different ways, and understandings of both privacy and secrecy have changed significantly over time (see Igo 2018; Weintraub 1997; Manderson, Davis, Colwell, and Ahlin 2015). However, one of the most useful distinctions is suggested by Warren and Laslett (1977), who argue that “privacy is consensual, where secrecy is not.” In other words, privacy involves a voluntary decision not to disclose certain information, whereas secrecy tends to be surrounded by sanctions for the disclosure of information. For example, one’s beliefs and practices as a Muslim citizen in the U.S. might be private, but initiation into many esoteric groups—such as most forms of Freemasonry and related fraternal orders—requires vows of secrecy. Moreover, privacy generally refers to information and acts that are considered to be morally and legally neutral, whereas secrecy often refers to information or acts that are perceived to be morally or legally suspect. For example, involvement in a group that is labeled a terrorist organization would largely be secret rather than simply private (see also Urban 2021).

In the twenty-first century, amidst new wars on terror and ever expanding networks of surveillance, the relationship between secrecy, privacy, and the public has grown even more complex and contested. As Hugh Urban recently argued, the very notion of the public is at risk, since the present is characterized by an increasing loss of personal privacy alongside a constant expansion of government secrecy (Urban 2021; see Zuboff 2019). The so-called public sphere is now a dark web of shadows, to continue with the optics metaphor, even as everything about private individuals’ life

is widely visible online. The very saturation of the public sphere with secrets can even be seen as a new modality of concealment. The constant barrage of deception ensures that no verification or truth-telling can ever really occur, since there is always new doubt in play about source and author of any given claim, always a new dissimulation to track. We are all exhausted, perhaps not unlike “the public” as a term of hope or aspiration for some shared, consensual idea of the real.

Secrecy as Social Capital

Secrecy brokers all communication, from the micro-scale to the macro, from your private psychic life to the global economy and the shifting plates of the political order (Bok 1983; Barbour 2017). As Gabriel García Márquez remarked to his biographer, Gerald Martin, when asked about his 1956 Paris affair with Tachia Quintana, “everyone has three lives: a public life, a private life, and a secret life” (Martin 2008: 205). The public was already known or in circulation. The private could be discovered through research. The secret would never be shared, or at least never declared or conceded; at best it might appear, in code, somewhere in Márquez’s books.

Indeed, most of the world remains opaque to any one of us. But despite Márquez’s protest against his biographer’s question, secrecy is a thoroughly *social* affair. After all, the story that he refused to impart was eagerly shared by Quintana herself, who found prestige through its telling. Secrecy is a block in the circulation of information that restricts it from some while enabling its access by others. Its value depends first and foremost on a difference in status, for without this inequality, secrets hold no power. Even non-human animals respect this economy. A squirrel gives care to not call attention to the tree where food is cached to carry it through winter; a dog shows off a bone with pride, but then buries it so that only she knows where to find it again. Non-human animals show the obvious advantages of secrets. Those advantages include not only the enhanced odds of survival, but also the power to share the valued information, retract it, or exchange it for something else (Canetti 1984: 290). Not only are we all keeping secrets, then, we are also always trading them, and trading on them. But the more we shift our gaze to the study of willfully manufacturing and maintaining secrecy, the more we move toward a peculiarly human propensity. Whatever the role of secrets in the social lives of non-human animals, the capacity of *strategizing* to keep secrets or not, and strategizing about their value, seems a uniquely human vice. Strategic secrecy seems a distinctly human game, one we play to puzzle, please, and control each other. In this game, we are at once the tormented souls and the devils that do the tormenting.³

All social relations involve degrees of secrecy, and so also calculation. As the word calculation suggests, secrets comprise a form of economy, an economy which itself must remain secret (Jütte 2015). Take a simple example: A stock trader shares inside information with a friend. This person may tell another friend or, on the other hand, report the inside trader. She holds secrets within secrets. The insider-trading tip is one restricted secret, and the fact that it was illegally passed on to another now makes two. It is not difficult to see how secrets multiply and become difficult to track, even for those trading them. Indeed, the challenge of keeping track of the secrets of business transactions gave birth to a specific guild, a cabal of trusted scribes called “secretaries.” Their title announced their purpose, as the record-keepers of private affairs and discrete transactions. Secrets are intrinsic to economic competition, but they are expressed in the titles of political guilds too, from the “Sekretariat” of the Commission of the U.S.S.R. formed in 1926, to the roving bands draped in QAnon shirts in the present-day United States; the “Q,” or so we are told, making reference to a level of security clearance at the U.S. Department of Energy. But who can be sure? As in the political sphere, titans of arts, industry, and commerce labor to protect secrets from what they may perceive as an over-hungry public sphere, populated by journalists, lawyers, bloggers, photographers, hackers and more, an endless battle of information and dissimulation.

Secrecy's uses to advance and secure power by national security agencies, policing, and terror are notorious, and not a few thinkers have noted the ways certain religious movements and totalitarian politics are linked in their uses of, and valuation of, secrecy.⁴

Secrecy as Control, Secrecy as Resistance

Equally vivid in the crises of the present, on the other hand, is the terror of total surveillance; no privacy allowed, a scenario expressed as vividly in George Orwell's *1984* as in Foucault's history of surveillance and the birth of the carceral regime.⁵ No one knows the protective value of secrets better than the one falsely accused or imprisoned, the migrant worker constantly under threat of deportation, or the former criminal deprived of the right to vote, all in the name of the law and transparency. There is no clear line, either historically or theoretically, from transparency to democracy and participatory politics, or from secrecy to violence and oppression. The question, including for religious communities and traditions, is how the values and practices devoted to privacy (in its positive framing) and concealment (in its negative one) versus revelation and transparency should best be balanced.

We should remember, too, that secrecy has been as important to resistance movements and to the marginalized as to the enforcers. As a kind of "hidden transcript," secrecy can also serve as an effective "art of resistance" or "weapon of the weak" wielded by dissident, deviant, or disenfranchised social groups (Scott 1992).⁶ "At the core" of Afroamerican rituals convened under slavery were places called hush harbors, hidden glades to gather under cover of darkness, chosen and arranged for the protection they gave (Raboteau 1978: 219). The Haitian Revolution launched by enslaved Africans and creoles against French overlords was begun, according to oral history, in a clandestine Vodou ritual convened in August 1791, in Bois Caiman, the Alligator Woods, after participants took a blood oath of silence about the imminent revolt. Native American sun dances held on the North American plains each summer are never announced publicly or open to strangers, in part because they were outlawed by the U.S. government from 1883–1934, and forced to perform the rituals clandestinely (Brown 2011; Jorgensen 1986; Walker 1980).⁷ The point is that secrecy is complicit in violence and also in the resistance to it, offering subtle resources of strength. Secrets do not have to be as dramatic as the launch of a revolution to count as resistance. Barbara Myerhoff described the joy of Huichol peyote pilgrims dining, upon their return, under the disapproving gaze of white Mexican restaurant owners: the Huichol were "unspeakably happy—sharing a precious secret, giddy with our invisible treasure, realizing that no outsider could tell that we had been transformed..." (1976: 167). The story points to the subaltern force of secrecy, its capacity to bond a group together and hold it tight even under the censorious gaze of the white and the wealthy.

The issues of power and resistance are important, but there is a risk that secrecy-as-authority and secrecy-as-resistance can become too rigid of an opposition. The forms of secrecy are constantly changing with the historical moment, as the chapters in the Handbook show. Key is to recognize the ways that secrecy modulates the movement of a given religious tradition from "outsider" status to the mainstream, or vice versa. There are historical conditions under which secrecy is activated, particularly in the face of the perceived threat, and other conditions under which secrecy retreats and becomes less important. Secrecy mediates between historical moments of a given religion's status as persecuted, prohibited or marginalized from a dominant cultural center and that same religion's becoming a public or well-known religion that is accepted and legally protected; or the inverse transition, from public valorization to exclusion, even the loss of being considered a legally bona fide "religion" at all. Secrecy in this sense offers what Georg Simmel called an "intermediate station for progressing and decaying powers" (1906: 472).

Material and Bodily Modes of Secrecy

In this Handbook, the authors examine religious secrecy not only in terms of language and silencing, but also in terms of things, senses, and bodies. Perhaps masks are the most obvious material form of religious secrecy. Used by too many societies to name here, masks fulfill two roles at once, blocking the actual human face of the dancing god or spirit and, second, presenting an alternative face, that of a metahuman being who is usually *not* present or invisible, but who has suddenly appeared. In this way, the mask both hides and announces (Nooter 1993). But there are many other material forms of secrets to be explored in the chapters to come. Georg Simmel, to wit, saw money as not only an intermediary that facilitated secrecy—since one could now conduct land transactions nearly invisibly—but even *as* a material secret. With money, one could hide riches in pockets or billfolds; it could be publicly demonstrated, or held close to the vest. Secrecy can also take the form of social bodies. One example is in the form of a crowd, as Walter Benjamin described. The urban bohemian can only be at home in a city and in a crowd, where she can remain invisible, as a member of what Benjamin called the city's secret societies (1999: 895).

Secrets can take the form of individual bodies too. Simmel invoked the unspoken codes of proper corporeal distance (“spiritual private property”) and the risk of “coming too near” (1906: 453–454). The notion here is that the body itself enacts codes of concealment and revelation, beyond or outside of words; secrecy, then, as bodily practice or a habitus that should not be invaded or encroached upon. Then, too, Simmel invoked the pedagogy of secrecy, an “art of silence” that could be demonstrated and taught through bodily imitation (1906: 474). Consider, on this score, the way that secrecy in Afro-Brazilian Candomblé is produced and performed in initiations that generate a “closed body” (*corpo fechado*), a body made into a physical container of power (*axé*) and protected against harmful intrusions (Johnson 2005: 108–126).

If secrecy is a discourse, then, it is also a physical text, a way of marking presence and absence in body, sound, and ink. Toni Morrison's book *Sula* (1974), for example, includes a character named as a secret, a person called “Private.” Private wonders why he was given the name. The attribution begins to work on him, occupying his thoughts, becoming part of his corporeal identity. Being named as a kind of living secret, Private's moniker begins to work recursively on him, shaping how he thinks, speaks, and acts. In similar fashion, the phrase *Top Secret*, when stamped on a folder, gives the dossier an allure at the same time as it emplots it in a story, a network of rules, procedures, material structures and laws related to security, and a series of sanctions when they are breached. Naming something “secret” is a material act with secondary effects and consequences. An entire material apparatus is brought to life by the invocation of the terms of secrecy in certain contexts—say, company secrets in the context of transnational hacking or corporate raiding. As we draft this Introduction, hundreds of pharmaceutical corporations are racing to find, make, and test a vaccine for COVID-19, alongside nation-state laboratories. Three have already succeeded at the time of this writing, and these winners will reap unthinkable profits and prestige. Only imagine the security protocols and secrecy surrounding the research and the labs where it is being done.

Secrets include ideas, words, and acts, then, but also to materials and institutions: walls, locks, borders, guards, weapons, commissions, and protocols. In terms of religion, architecture is often a materialization of secrecy, with protected rooms, special doors and thresholds, and choices of color and sound that generate at the same time secrecy and a sensory experience of the sacred (Gell 1998). Materials like texts, clothing, buildings, or money take part in secrecy as a presentation, in the sense of Ervin Goffman's attention to the components of successful performances; successful, that is, in their ability to sustain the “expressive coherence of the reality that is dramatized,” in this case that of being in the presence of a secret (1959: 141). In this Handbook, we raise the material problem of how secrets are rendered present or, put otherwise, how absence and silence are made materially perceptible to the senses.

Theories of Secrecy

There is now a large body of fine scholarship on religious secrecy from many disciplinary approaches. There is the work of comparative scholars of religion such as Kees Bolle, Hans Kippenberg, Guy Stroumsa, Jeffrey Kripal, and Elliot Wolfson; the sociological work of scholars such as Stanton Tefft; anthropological and ethnographic studies of secrecy in specific cultural contexts such as Ian Keen's work on Australian aboriginal traditions, Andrew Apter's work on Yoruba religion, Andrew Lattas writing on Melanesian cargo cults, and Timothy Landry's work on Vodún; as well as the emerging field of Western esotericism pioneered by Antoine Faivre, Wouter Hanegraaff, and others.⁸ However, for the sake of our brief introduction to this volume, we want to highlight just a few of the most important approaches that will also be most relevant for the chapters that follow.

The cornerstone text for theorizing secrecy remains Georg Simmel's celebrated 1906 essay, "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies." For Simmel, secrecy is bound up with everyday social forms like friendships and marriages, where it has effects on practices, sentiments, and the imagination. All of social life requires wagers of faith about mostly unverifiable qualities of others, a wager made manifest in "intensities," degrees and ratios of the known to the unknown (1906: 446). While secrecy wends through all social life, Simmel pushes us to recognize the links between secrecy and power. For two or more persons to be bound together in the possession of secret knowledge requires the exclusion of others—the desiring third (1906: 457). Moreover, the bond shared by secret-holders rests as much on the simple consciousness of *having* a secret as it does on any specific content, since it confers status, at least to the desiring third party. Thus, it frequently happens that someone will publicize the very fact of having a secret, leading to discourse about having secrets (*Geheimnistuererei*) quite apart from the fact of having a secret or not, or of what it might consist of (1906: 486). Paul C. Johnson translated Simmel's neologism, *Geheimnistuererei*, as "secretism," and used it as a key analytic in his work on Brazilian Candomblé, a tradition in which the discourse about foundational secret knowledge (*fundamentos*) and who can legitimately claim to have it, and initiate others into it, versus who is accused of mere invention or fakery, is central to the internal dynamics of ritual life. While there are general valences to the kinds of information that constitute such foundational secrets, and durable patterns of the ritual performance of gaining "it," the specific content of that information is also always in flux. Thus, as scholars from Simmel to Michael Taussig (1999; 1998) argue, there is no necessary, absolutely specific content to religious secrecy, notwithstanding claims to the contrary. Rather, secrecy is a revolving door of information that keeps some information, and some people, "in," and others, "out." The paradox of secrecy is that its power only exists in relation to its possible revelation—power is only fully realized in the moment of a secret's telling, much like money's power is most densely felt in the moment of its consumption (1906: 465).⁹ This places secret societies in a position of risk. The stakes and the "intensities" of mutual confidence are raised by the chronic prospect of the alliance's destruction (1906: 491).

Simmel was uncannily prescient in certain ways. For example, by noting the ways money facilitates secret power through its compact invisibility, its abstract immaterial character, and its capacity to extend transactions to far-flung geographical regions, he anticipated contemporary uses of secrecy in money-laundering, offshore untraceable accounts, and tax evasion, not to mention the buying and selling of political influence.¹⁰ In this respect and others, secrecy is viewed as the enemy of democracy, which tends to elevate transparency and publicity as its virtues. Noteworthy is that even in 1906, Simmel observed a striking lack of transparency in the transactions of the U.S. Congress, and how it produced a "super-individual" authority with a corresponding lack of accountability (1906: 496).

In terms of secrecy and religion, Simmel claimed that the respective confidence games of religious faith and social faith have nothing to do with each other. But in fact he showed the

opposite: that religious faith and social life rest on very similar metaphysics of hiddenness and revelation (1906: 450).

Tanya Luhrmann, working on witchcraft movements in Britain, develops several key themes beyond their appearance in Simmel's text (1989: 149–160). One is the *experience* of secrecy for the individual, including enjoyment, pleasure, and the healing power conveyed by the sensation of having secret knowledge. A second issue she attends to is how the experience of secrecy is mediated by symbolic images, creating a kind of private enclave of double secrecy, bounded in one sense as that which you keep hidden from others, and in a second sense because the experiences are not in any case communicable to others. Third and even more important, is the therapeutic value of participating in secret societies. Against arguments that secrecy arises from deprivation or the desire for power, secret magic is ultimately about the attempt to gain control over one's own life and circumstances. Whether secret practices are effective or not is ultimately unimportant in comparison with the fact that the actor *feels* that they have gained control over, or insight into, their fate. By identifying one's experience with, in, and through powerful secret symbols and narratives, the unknown or unsayable becomes legible: "Therapy seems to work when someone externalizes, or labels, some internal feeling and then is able to transform it." But along with imagination and symbols, the masked quality of secrecy is crucial to the healing. Even as the participant gains self-knowledge, that knowledge arrives only in oblique, indirect ways that make it tolerable to awareness in ways that more direct, unmediated forms of knowing might not be. The secret-sharers together build a protected world, a zone of trust in which to experiment with new, redescribed versions of themselves. Members of secret societies, Luhrmann claims in a way reminiscent of William James' notion of "healthy-minded" religion, are happier people. Or so Luhrmann claims. Several of the chapters in this volume may persuade you otherwise.

Michael Taussig drew on a different thread from Simmel's and Elias Canetti's contributions, namely the way that secrecy continues even when secrets are revealed, such that the phenomenon seems un beholden to any particular content: "There is no such thing as a secret. It is an invention that comes out of the public secret" (1999: 7). The public secret is that which is generally known but cannot be articulated. It is the obvious thing that one dare not say. Often the public secret is about state violence, about those disappeared by clandestine police, who remain unnamed even though everyone knows their fate. Much like a monument that becomes more conspicuous through its destruction or defacement; or sound that only in its announcement which, a moment after its blast, disappears; or money that exerts maximum force at the moment of its waste, as Simmel wrote; or, as Bataille argued, human life at the moment of its execution or sacrifice; a secret's unmasking only adds to its power. Taussig argues that secrecy—public secrecy—is a social contract more than a bit of special knowledge. Masked rituals among the Selk'nam or the Poro are not abandoned when participants realize that the spirits are in fact elder males (1999: 125). Subcomandante Marcos did not lose his followers when he was identified by the Mexican government; quite the opposite, his fame grew exponentially (1999: 260). None of the tawdry secrets released about former President Donald Trump lessened his power, at least to his devoted following. To the contrary, they only amplified his stardom, perhaps signaling power exactly by virtue of *having* compromising secrets and, nevertheless, remaining in charge. What is the purpose of the public secret, if everyone knows it exists? Its purpose is to mark and magnify power, to make certain versions of power sacred by setting them apart as an agreed upon thing that should not be said. And yet, like a monument invites the desire to deface it, or purity that invites desecration, the secret seems to demand its own disfiguring, precisely by virtue of its sacralization.

While Luhrmann emphasizes the in-gathering therapeutic force of secrets and secret society, Taussig accentuates the movement outward. Together, they reinforce the two-part movement of secrecy that we also emphasize in this volume. Again, to view religion in relation to secrecy requires paying

attention to two distinct movements. The first is that of hiding, the act of classification that removes something or someone from sight. The second is that of release, the revelation of secrets, a return to circulation. The return may not be of secrets as substantive information. Instead the revelation may be *about* the secret, in the mode of secretism, words and acts hinting that a secret exists and is near, in spite of its invisibility—"that which is not said even though it gets around" (Baudrillard 1990: 79).

While Luhmann and Taussig discuss the effects of keeping and revealing secrets, the anthropologist Gilbert Herdt looks more broadly at the power of secrecy to construct an entire sort of "cultural reality"—and specifically, the cultural reality of gender. In his complex study of men's societies among the Sambia of Papua New Guinea, Herdt argues that secrecy is not necessarily at odds with the dominant culture or with normative gender roles. On the contrary, secrecy may in fact be *essential* to the construction of gender roles and to the normative understanding of masculinity and femininity in a given society. Through an elaborate series of initiations and secret rites in the Sambia men's houses, boys are progressively transferred from the feminine world of mothers and sisters and reborn into the masculine world of fathers and elder males. "Ritual secrecy," Herdt concludes, "...was an epic project of gender politics, a kind of endless reclamation of the male body with a utopian goal: reclassifying boys as men and transferring their subjectivities from the women's house to the men's house" (2003: xv).

In Herdt's view, secrecy as a form of gender construction often plays an especially important role in societies that face major disruptions such as violence, war, and rapid cultural change, offering "a means of establishing trust and interdependence in times of social and political instability" (2003: xi). This power of secrecy to construct masculinity and homosocial bonding amidst unstable social circumstances is not limited to remote cases such as Papua New Guinea but can also be seen in many other contexts ranging from ancient Greece to Victorian England and America (2003: xiv; see Dover 1978; Carnes 1991).

Lastly, one of the editors of this volume, Hugh B. Urban (2021), suggests a multi-dimensional approach to religious secrecy that brings together many of the theoretical approaches discussed so far, while also looking closely at issues of racism, terrorism, and surveillance. Following Foucault, Urban examines the complex relationships between secrecy, knowledge, and power; indeed, if Foucault is correct that knowledge and power are intimately related (1980), then secrecy—as the calculated control of information—lies at the nexus of the "power/knowledge" conjunction. The sort of power involved here, however, is not primarily material power, but rather the more diffuse and unseen sort that Bourdieu calls "symbolic power," which takes the form of non-material resources such as authority and prestige (1984, 1986).

Secrecy, Urban argues, is by no means a singular or monolithic phenomena; rather, it is best understood as a kind of knot, node or "lynchpin"—to use Foucault's term—in the social fabric, which can be deployed for a wide array of different uses (Foucault 1990: 103). These include: (1) the role of secrecy as an "adorning" possession that enhances one's status by virtue of what it conceals; (2) the "advertisement of the secret" or the ways in which the claim to secret knowledge is often announced publicly as a source of symbolic power; (3) the "seduction of the secret," or the often erotic play of veiling and unveiling that lies at the heart of secrecy's allure; (4) secrecy as "social resistance," or the role of secrecy as means of challenging, denying, and subverting the dominant social-political order; (5) the "terror of secrecy," or the role of secrecy as a tactic of religious violence, racism, and terrorism; and (6) secrecy as a "historical process," or the changing role of secrecy in relation to shifting social and historical contexts.

Finally, Urban argues that the power of secrecy has by no means waned in the contemporary world but has in many ways grown even more intense in age of religious violence, terrorism, and ever increasing government surveillance. Whereas the power of secrecy had once been held primarily in the hands of religious institutions—the church, the lodge, the secret society—that

power has been increasingly transferred to secular entities such as the NSA, the CIA, and (more recently) private corporations such as Google and Facebook. The all-seeing eye in the pyramid that once embodied “One Nation Under God” has today become the all-seeing eye of the NSA and other agencies that command what some have called our “One Nation Under Surveillance” (Chesterman 2013). Meanwhile, the rights to privacy on the part of ordinary citizens and religious communities—particularly marginal religious groups—has shrunk dramatically, almost to the point of non-existence.

Methodologies and Challenges in the Study of Secrecy

In addition to complex theoretical questions, the study of religious secrecy also poses some deeply tangled and difficult methodological problems. Among others, it raises the basic questions of how one can—and indeed, whether one *should*—attempt to study a tradition that is secret and by definition off-limits to non-members of a particular religious community. There is a fundamental sort of epistemological and ethical “double-bind” inherent in the study of secrets: namely, how can one ever really know with certainty that one has penetrated the true “inner secret” of an esoteric tradition? And, supposing that one could, how could one then in good conscience reveal that to a non-initiated audience of outsiders (see Urban 1998; Apter 2007)? Or is the very attempt to do so a kind of violence or theft of another culture’s valued knowledge and symbolic resources? After all, the history of European colonialism in India, Africa, and the Americas is filled with examples of scholars who have invaded the esoteric traditions of other cultures, often working hand-in-hand with European imperial powers who pillaged the material resources of those same cultures (see Clifford 1988; Urban 1998).

To make matters still more complicated, there is also a certain unevenness in the question of which groups should be “exposed” and which should be “protected.” There is a difference, it would seem, between revealing the secret knowledge of a religious group that has already been subjected to political and material domination—such as Native Americans, indigenous African communities, Australian aboriginals, or others who have been conquered and colonized—as opposed to a group that has enjoyed tremendous political and material power—such as the Afrikaaner Broederbond in South Africa or the many secret white supremacist groups in the contemporary United States (Tefft 1992; Berry 2017). In some circumstances, one could make a compelling argument that *protecting the secrets* of a marginalized community is a moral imperative, but in others, one could argue that *revealing the secrets* of a violent, oppressive, racist, or terrorist group might be an equal if not more compelling moral imperative (see Mitchell 1993; Urban 2021).

There is surely no easy or singular answer to this complex problem of the study of others’ secrets. Each of the chapters in this volume, moreover, will offer a different sort of response to the ethical and epistemological double bind inherent in religious secrecy. Some approach it in largely textual and historical terms, focusing on the more visible record of what has been recorded publicly about religious secrets; others approach it in more intimately ethnographic ways, exploring the lives and experiences of members of esoteric communities; and still others discuss the paradoxical hidden-yet-visible nature of religious secrecy itself, which is always partially revealed and partially concealed, always “advertised” even as it is mostly kept out of public view. Our aim in this volume is not to resolve this tension but rather to highlight it and to explore a wide variety of different methodological approaches to the study of religious secrecy.

Outline of the Handbook

This handbook is organized in five main sections, which cover a wide range of individual religious traditions as well as a number of larger theoretical and comparative themes. The chapters include

both narrowly-focused studies of specific historical examples and broader theoretical reflections on secrecy as a cross-cultural category, with material drawn from antiquity to the present.

Part I, “Configurations of Religious Secrecy,” explores the larger theoretical dimensions of secrecy and its relations to other religious phenomena, ranging from mystical experience to drug use. The chapters in this section examine the topic of secrecy in a broad, cross-cultural context, discussing general aspects of secrecy as they have been expressed in a number of different religious and historical examples. The “configurations” of secrecy here include: mysticism, esotericism, sexuality, architecture, the paranormal, and psychedelics.

Part II, “Secrecy as Religious Practice” then examines the role of concealment in a series of specific religious traditions and historical case studies. Chapters in this section include more focused studies of particular geographic regions—such as West Africa, Australia, South Asia, Japan, and China—as well as analyses of specific esoteric religious traditions—such as Shin Buddhism, Gnosticism, Jewish mysticism, and Islam. Secrecy, in turns out, is by no means unusual within or marginal to “mainstream” religious practice but on the contrary runs through the very fabric of most traditions as the discourse of the unseen and the transaction with hidden power that is arguably the very stuff of religion itself.

Part III, “Secrecy and the Politics of the Present,” explores a series of modern examples, discussing the complex role of secrecy in contemporary history, politics, culture, and social change. The chapters in this section range from studies of European Freemasonry to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, and from esoteric movements in Brazil to mystical themes in African-American art. Far from an anachronistic leftover from the “pre-modern,” secrecy continues to pervade a wide array of contemporary religious movements and cultural phenomena.

Part IV, “Secrecy and Social Resistance,” examines the role of secrecy as a means of challenging, critiquing, and/or subverting the dominant social and religious order. If secrecy can be deployed as a powerful weapon of the state or of ruling institutions, it can also be used by marginal or persecuted minority groups as a kind of “weapon of the weak” in order to bypass, elude, or undermine those institutions. The chapters in this section explore an array of examples of this sort of social resistance, such as the continuation and concealment of pagan religious practices under a Christian empire, indigenous religious practices in Hawai’i and the American Southwest, and the complex, often dissident and subversive role of secrecy in Haiti.

Finally, **Part V**, “Secrecy, Terrorism, and Surveillance,” discusses the complex and changing role of secrecy in the context of religious extremism, global violence, and new concerns over security, information technologies, and privacy. The chapters in this section examine several forms of religious extremism—such as the Islamic State (aka ISIS, ISIL or Da’esh) and American white power movements—as well as the ways in which various states and government agencies—such as the FBI, CIA, and NSA—have responded to extremists with ever more powerful and invasive technologies of surveillance. Finally, this section also examines the deep and increasingly pervasive role of conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking, which seems in many ways an inescapable counterpart to the growing power of state secrecy and surveillance.

Conclusion

Few issues so evidently link media technologies; interpersonal relations; politics, religion, and violence; not to mention contemporary debates on surveillance and privacy (Chesterman 2013; Igo 2018; Zuboff 2019). All are in significant respects structured around the question of what kind of information is or should be secret, how said secrets are defined, bounded, and circumscribed, and the nature of the borders separating gnostic from public or mundane knowledge. Secrecy brokers and mediates how authority works in religion, but, even more, secrecy is constitutive of the very notion of religion, as a special form of technique, skill, knowledge, and power that only appears

under special circumstances, in certain places, with certain people; only in relation to certain texts or objects, and never as a permanent state, which is why it must be continually pursued. “Doing religion,” in whatever local terms it is cast, is never complete. It is always a process that must be revisited, reworked, rethought, and redone. Re-, re-, re-. Always again, the need to discover or discern the secret, the saving thing that is mostly, usually, not visible.

We leverage theories of secrecy to bring new perspectives to bear on the interpretation of the comparative history of religions. But this Handbook also brings these theoretical frames to the politics of the present, as well as to vivid descriptions of both mainstream and little-understood religious movements that remain on the edge of the public sphere (as secret movements) but nevertheless exerted, and continue to exert, considerable influence in the world that we share, however obscured and disguised it seems to any single one of us.

Notes

- 1 On this point, see Otto (1958), Bok (1983), Johnson (2005), Urban (2021). As Bok put it, “The sacred and the secret have been linked from earliest times. Both elicit feelings of...the ‘numinous consciousness’ that combines the daunting and fascinating, dread and allure. Both are defined as being apart and seen as needing protection” (6).
- 2 Wrote Bruce Lincoln, “religion thus flourishes in the in-between world that we all inhabit, where the sense of alienation is part of the normal existential state, but something which may still be overcome—occasionally, partially, and temporarily...” (1994: 1).
- 3 We take this formulation from Schopenhauer. The full sentence reads: “For the world is Hell, and men are on the one hand the tormented souls and on the other the devils in it” (1973: 48). See also Simmel (1906: 445).
- 4 Here we think of Adorno, among others, who saw the esotericism of U.S. astrology and its formulaic decrees of individual fates “in the stars,” as part and parcel of that nation-state’s politics (Adorno 1994).
- 5 Wrote Foucault, “The transition from the public execution, with its spectacular rituals...to the penalties of prisons buried in architectural masses and guarded by the secrecy of administrations...is the transition from one art of punishing to another, no less skillful one” (1995: 257).
- 6 As Foucault put it, “silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its hold and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance” (1990: 101).
- 7 In addition to the “external” secrecy leveraged by the Lakota and other Plains tribes in relation to the U.S. government and the public, there were and are many “internal” uses of secrecy within religious practice: the secret language of shamans, or the secrets told by spirits to individual persons, for example. See Walker (1980: 181, 204, 208). The same dynamic is reported in many other Native American traditions. On the Zuni, see for example, the pioneering work of Frank H. Cushing (1981).
- 8 See the bibliography at the end of this chapter for a more complete list of references on religious secrecy. For a very useful bibliographic essay on religion and secrecy, see Duncan (2006). Key works in this area include: Tefft 1980; Bellman (1984); Bolle (1987); Lindstrom 1990; Tefft (1992); Faivre (1994); Kippenberg and Stroumsa (1995); Keen (1998); Urban (1998); Lattas 1998; Wolfson (1999); Johnson (2005); Scheid and Teeuwen (2006); Barkun (2006); Apter (2007); Chilson (2014); Hanegraaff (2014); Jütte (2015); DeConick (2016); Von Stuckrad 2016; Kripal (2017); Landry (2018); Urban (2021).
- 9 This point anticipated in key respects the argument George Batailles would make about “the sacred” which, he argued, was perceived in the frenzy of waste—sacrifice, carnival—because only then are we removed from the rational economy of efficiency. See Bataille (1991); Yelle (2018).
- 10 Though he misjudged the degree to which a modern credit-economy would remove the uses of secrecy (Simmel 1906: 446).

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PART I

Configurations of Religious Secrecy: Conceptual and Comparative Frameworks



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1

MYSTICISM AND SECRECY

Arthur Versluis

The term “mysticism” is used in a wide variety of ways in the contemporary world; it may be taken to mean visionary experiences, or “the irrational,” or any number of things. Thus it is useful to look at its origins. The word “mysticism” derives from the Greek *mystikos* (μυστικός) meaning secret or esoteric path of the mysteries, and derives from *mystes* (μύστης), meaning an initiate into the mysteries, or more literally, one who has seen directly for himself or herself into the mysteries. Given its accumulated meanings over millennia, the word “mysticism” may be understood as referring to gnosis, meaning the direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object.

Defining mysticism in terms of gnosis, meaning “direct cognition of a transcendent reality beyond the division of subject and object,” has numerous advantages, not least because it makes clear that mysticism is a type of cognition. It also recognizes that this kind of cognition is beyond instrumentalizing discursive consciousness, but is understood as direct cognition of a “transcendent reality,” not limiting the term here except to say that it is “beyond the division of subject and object.” Additionally, this definition is broad enough to include both apophatic and visionary mysticism. The transcendence of subject and object can be understood as taking place on a continuum. The heart of this transcendence is known as *via negativa*, or apophatic experience, meaning the fundamental or primordial reality beyond any conceptual and sensory representation. But the same definition also holds for *via positiva* or cataphatic visionary experiences in which the observing subject is not separate from the revealing object, but rather where the divine “other” reveals itself to “me” (Versluis 2017: 3–4).

Mysticism here is understood as deriving from the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition, which flowed from pagan antiquity into Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, that is, in the main monotheisms. The term “mysticism” here is not applied to Asian or other religious traditions, including indigenous ones, even though the definition and the resulting model is internally consistent and could be applicable to, for instance, most forms of Buddhism or Hinduism. The reason is that the term “mysticism” has a long history specifically in the monotheistic traditions, and further, is specifically implicated in the monotheistic dynamics of esoteric/exoteric or mysticism/confessionalism.

Mysticism and Secrecy in Christianity

During its formative period, early Christianity included a range of figures and groups that could be described as mystical, but in contemporary scholarship largely are grouped under the term

“Gnostic.” Of course, the category “Gnostic” has itself been subject to critique (Williams 1996) as “dubious.” If instead we view figures like Valentinus or Basilides or Nag Hammadi texts like the Gospel of Thomas in terms of mysticism, with variants of gnosis as a defining aspect, we can see significant continuity from early Christianity into later forms of Christian mysticism. Apocryphal sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas like [77] can be understood as referring to gnosis as union of subject and object: “Jesus said, ‘I am the light that is over all things. I am all: from me all came forth, and to me all attained. Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.’” Likewise, the mystery of the bridal chamber in the Gospel of Philip (Robinson 1977: 150–151), or the series of paradoxes of The Thunder, Perfect Mind, or The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth, all can be understood as expressions of an initiate’s movement from dualistic to non-dualistic consciousness, also termed gnosis.

One also finds in early Christianity among the Ante-Nicene Fathers a consistent denigration of mysticism and gnosis from a confessional perspective. Thus, authors like Tertullian and Irenaeus were unsparing in their ridicule and rejection of paganism, ancient Mystery traditions, and various figures today designated as Gnostic, but who might also be termed mystics. Of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, Clement of Alexandria was the most open to the idea of an authentic Christian gnosis, but even in his case, the notion of an authentic Christian gnosis is predicated on inauthentic or false gnosis. The dynamic established by the Ante-Nicene Fathers of extolling confessional Christianity and denigrating mysticism was to continue, in various forms and degrees, through subsequent millennia, particularly in Western European forms of Christianity. This dynamic ensured that mysticism remained largely self-secret, that is, visible only to those who found their way to it.

April DeConick (2006) makes the point that in some scholarship concerning this early period, hermeneutics and religious experience are opposed to one another, whereas it is more useful to see these as complementary. The experience of the sacred was supported by and to some extent transmitted via new revealed texts or apocalyptic literature that conveyed gnosis or the “mysteries” within early Christian and Jewish traditions. This literature sometimes involved “counter-cultural” or “counter-readings” of more canonical texts, and the counter-readings are what ensure its secrecy vis-à-vis more canonical traditions (DeConick 2016).

It is true that Christian mysticism, to the extent that it periodically emerged, owed much to the treatises under the name “Dionysius the Areopagite,” sometimes termed “Pseudo-Dionysius,” who probably lived in the fifth century A.D. Dionysius is a major point of contact between Platonism and Christianity. It is possible that Dionysius was a Platonist who translated Platonism into a Christian context when it became clear that pagan Platonism was not long to survive. Christian mysticism throughout its subsequent history only can be fully understood with reference to the seminal figure of Dionysius the Areopagite.

Essential to understanding this frame is the concept of *via positiva*. Dionysius discusses the *via positiva*, or way of images, in his *Celestial Hierarchy*. There, he discusses both how celestial beings can be described in material terms, and how images of beauty can draw us upward toward the archetypal or eternal being that they manifest to us (1987: 145–191). Through sacred symbols and images we can ascend in contemplation to the divine archetypes, and this ascent through images is sometimes termed “cataphatic mysticism.” The word “cataphatic” derives from the Greek *cata-* [to descend, or downward movement] and *phanai*, meaning to speak, or to reveal. Effectively, the cataphatic or *via positiva* forms of mysticism are *affirmative* in the sense that they offer an ascent through images, symbols, and words/conceptual analogies that “descend” from “above.” Visionary mysticism belongs in this category. The visionary, by seeing, also becomes that which he or she sees.

Likewise, Dionysius introduces the *via negativa*, or apophatic way of negation, observing in *Mystical Theology* that the mystic enters into the “darkness of unknowing,” whence all perfection

of understanding is excluded, and the mystic is enwrapped in that which is altogether intangible, wholly absorbed in it that is beyond all; and going beyond reason, is united by his highest faculty to it that is wholly unknowable; thus by knowing nothing he knows that which is beyond his knowledge (1987: 133–142). Apophatic mysticism is not-seeing; it is the sheer transcendence of all dualities and concepts.

We do not have space here to discuss the full range of the Christian mystical tradition, but can point out that the Dionysian apophatic tradition is dominant in medieval figures like Meister Eckhart or Johannes Tauler, who assert the sheer transcendence of divine knowledge or gnosis. It is also visible in the English mystical tradition, most notably *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which is directly indebted to the Dionysian texts. It is not that these works or their authors were always under attack from confessional perspectives, though that was sometimes the case, as when Meister Eckhart was investigated for heresy; and certainly was the case with a great female apophatic mystic, Marguerite Porete (1993), author of *Mirror of Simple Souls*, who was burned at the stake for her perspective. It is rather that from the time of early Christianity onward, mysticism was always in tension with and subordinated by confessional and doctrinal forms of Christianity, and this dynamic meant that mysticism and mystical texts, whether anonymous or not, remained secret, that is, invisible (if not anathema) to the great majority of religious believers.

When we get to the early modern period, and the ascent of Protestantism, we find precisely the same dynamic, but as it were amplified. Thus the greatest of the early Protestant mystics, Jacob Boehme and John Pordage, were both subjected to censure by ecclesiastical authorities. Boehme, whose work includes both *via positiva* (cosmological) and *via negativa* (metaphysical) dimensions, was famously forbidden from publishing by his Lutheran pastor, and Pordage (himself a clergyman) was brought up on spurious charges in England (Versluis 1999).

From his first book, *Aurora*, onwards, Boehme warned the reader that “as a preface to this great Mystery, if he does not understand it, and yet longs for the meaning, or understanding of it, he should pray for enlightenment from the Holy Spirit from God.” For “without the illumination thereof, you will not understand this Mystery; for there is a strong lock and bar before it in the spirit of man that must first be unlocked and opened; and that, no one can do, for the Holy Spirit is the only key to it” (1986 [1612]: XIII.31). In other words, the Mystery (gnosis) is self-secret, meaning that while you can read the words, the hidden meaning remains elusive without its illuminative key that provides a different epistemological access than discursive consciousness.

In the works of these theosophic authors—beginning with Boehme, whose school is broadly termed “Christian theosophy,” and includes figures like Franz von Baader and numerous others—all of the themes we have discussed come together. There are two aspects to secrecy regarding their work, both essentially self-secret: first, that one cannot understand it rightly without the hidden key of the Holy Spirit; and second, that as a result their works as a whole remain even today self-secret. Their work is visible if one looks for it, but broadly speaking, it is invisible from the perspectives of all confessional forms of Protestantism and Catholicism, and often not even visible to most scholars of religion.

In the late twentieth century, some scholars advanced constructivist interpretations of Christian mysticism, arguing that mystical experience is socially determined and by extension, that gnosis as defined here (transcendence of subject and object) effectively does not exist. Examples include Grace Jantzen’s feminist and deconstructionist critique of Christian mysticism (1995), while others, for instance Richard Jones (2016), argue that recognizing social contexts of mystics does not require one to reject the transcendental or gnostic experiential accounts of the mystics themselves. From such a perspective, constructivist denigration of perennialism is based on a false dichotomy. Many of these scholarly arguments are centered in Christian mysticism, though some extend into mysticism more broadly.

Mysticism and Secrecy in Judaism

The circumstances of mysticism in Judaism, while still participating in the exoteric/esoteric tension visible in Christian forms of monotheism, are somewhat different. As Moshe Idel discusses at length, Jewish mysticism derives from a tradition of textual interpretation of exoteric texts, which are reinterpreted as containing layers of semi-secret or secret meanings (Idel 1995). In this regard, Jewish mysticism emerges from and is itself a highly discursive tradition, built around not only esoteric interpretations of exoteric texts, but also esoteric texts such as the Zohar. An example of the latter is the work of the medieval figure Abraham Abulafia, whose mystical practice was to attain mystical transport through permutations of letters and words. Idel puts it this way: “in its Biblical forms, Judaism is a rather exoteric and popular type of religiosity,” whereas “the religious esotericism in Rabbinic texts, and in those formulated in its immediate vicinity, or within some of its circles, like the *Heikhalot* literature, rotates around the transmission of secrets believed to be within texts” (Idel 1995: 312).

Of course, Platonism and Neoplatonism did influence Jewish mysticism, as Gershom Scholem and Moshe Idel pointed out, and as discussed at length in works such as *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought* (Goodman 1992). Kabbalists developed various forms of speculative mysticism, some of which (for instance, Sabbatai Sevi) were regarded as apostatic or heretical. In some of those cases, arguably Kabbalah is subject to an orthodox/heterodox tension at least somewhat analogous to what we see with Catholic mysticism as regarded by the Inquisition and to some extent with Protestant mysticism as regarded by confessional or literalist anti-gnostic critics. But overall, the dynamics of Jewish esoteric traditions within the larger context of exoteric Judaism(s) seem distinctively different from what we see in the broader sweep of Western European Christianity. Mystical texts and teachings, however rich, varied, complex, and speculative, are largely circumscribed by Jewish linguistic mysticism in ways that one does not find in the Christian figures and texts discussed above. As a result, its internal dynamics, including those of secrecy and disclosure, also seem significantly different from those in Christianity.

Nonetheless, in *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, Moshe Idel, while recognizing that the term *devekut* in Hebrew has a range of meanings that include exoteric ones, argues for a mystical interpretation of the term as meaning mystical union, and further elaborates that this is true across a range of influences upon Kabbalah, including Aristotelian, Neoplatonic, and Hermetic currents (all of which emphasize cognitive subject-object union). In the act of intellection, he continues, the “knower and the known, or the intellect and the intelligible, are one...[and thus] the act of intellection wherein God is the object of the human intellect amounts to what is known as mystical union” (1988: 39). He continues that along with Islamic and Christian mysticism, “Kabbalah shares with these mystical systems a deep interest in Neoplatonism” (1988: 40). Finally, Idel includes Hermetic tradition, magic, and theurgy as a primary stream contributing to the development of Kabbalah, and remarks that figures like Abulafia or R. Moses Cordovero, as well as Hasidic mysticism more generally, were influenced by “the interplay of [these] three major terminologies throughout Jewish mystical material” (1988: 41). Idel also discusses related themes in later works (Idel 1993 and Idel 1995).

At the same time, as is well known, Gershom Scholem stated categorically that “it is only in extremely rare cases that ecstasy [in Judaism] signifies actual union with God in which the human individuality abandons itself to the rapture of complete submersion in the divine stream. Even in this ecstatic frame of mind, the Jewish mystic almost invariably retains a sense of the distance between the Creator and his creature” (1961: 122–123). Idel, reacting to these remarks, demonstrates the prevalence of the language of mystical union in Kabbalistic tradition (1988: 59–73). But that language, as discussed at length in Idel’s study, is not apophatic

like that of Dionysius the Areopagite or Eckhart in Christian tradition; it is still by and large a language of Creator and creation, and of union (*devekut*). Thus, the secret in this case is union, or degree of union.

Prolific scholar Elliot Wolfson takes a different approach, focusing on philosophical and linguistic dimensions of Jewish mysticism. In a recent work (2019), Wolfson explores the parallels between Heideggerian thought and Kabbalah, drawing on linguistic-philosophical ways of understanding mysticism like “apophatic occlusion” in the context of *poiesis* or creative linguistic disclosure of other/not-other dichotomies and transcendence both in Heideggerian and Kabbalistic thought. Linguistic and philosophical sophistication is itself a kind of secrecy, of course.

And creative, linguistically and philosophically sophisticated interpretations of subject-object transcendence do exist in a larger context: in Judaism, as in Christianity, the fundamental theological problem that mysticism poses is how transcendence can take place in a monotheistic context of a fundamental God/creation dualism. The degree of secrecy corresponds to the degree of union; the more complete the union, the more secret, that is, esoteric, and in some cases, the more scandalous or heretical the mysticism or mystic. And the same prevails in Islam, as we shall see.

Mysticism and Secrecy in Islam

In terms of historiography, the origins of Sufism as mysticism within Islam, and in particular, exactly to what degree and how Neoplatonism and Platonism more generally played a role in the origins and lineages of Sufism, is not entirely settled. “By a process not yet convincingly mapped in detail, there arose in the mid-ninth century a mystical trend, identified in Iraq with persons called Sufis,” Christopher Melchert writes (Ridgeon 2015: 3). Many questions linger. For one, to what extent, if at all, did the Platonic Academy take root in Persia after its dissolution under the advent of Christian imperial power? The influence of Platonism on Islamic intellectual currents more broadly has been discussed for quite some time, and is analogous in some ways to the other traditions, but when it comes more specifically to the history of mysticism and in particular to dynamics regarding exoteric/esoteric or confessional/mystical oppositions, the dynamics in the Muslim sphere again are somewhat different from those in the Jewish or Christian spheres with regard to what we are describing as Platonic mysticism (Peters 1979).

What Alexander Knysh calls “the vexed issue of the origins” of Sufism is a considerable challenge for contemporary scholarship, but in brief, scholars have recognized several familiar sets of dynamics at play (Knysh 2017: 20). The first is the polemical dynamic between anti-mystical and mystical exponents, a dynamic visible of course in early Christianity, appearing again in early Islam. It is a puzzle, Melchert remarks, that the mystical tradition within Christianity did not appear to contribute to the development of an Islamic mysticism for several centuries, whereas “only the anti-mystical strand” of early Christianity “seems to have impressed the early Muslims” (Ridgeon 2015: 15). In fact, early Islam gave rise to anti-mystical inquisitions like that of Ghulam Khalil in 888, who “procured the indictment of seventy-odd Sufis for allegedly saying they no longer feared God but rather, loved him” (Ridgeon 2015: 16). In fact, it was some decades later (922) when the well-known Sufi al-Hallaj was killed for his mysticism.

One of the more influential mystics in the Sufi tradition was Shihab al-Din Abu al-Futuh al-Suhrawardi, born 1154 CE in Persia. Suhrawardi became the founder of what is known as the Illuminationist school, and wrote a series of mystical treatises from a Platonic perspective. Suhrawardi distinguished between discursive and intuitive philosophy, which he saw as

complementary, for instance in his *The Philosophy of Illumination* [*Hikmat al-ishraq*]. Suhrawardi's epistemology "stressed that all knowledge involves some sort of direct, unmediated confrontation of the knower and the known" and that higher knowledge of supersensible realities or beings also can be known through intuitional knowledge, that is, through union of subject and object (Walbridge and Ziai 1999: xx). It is worth noting that the extraordinary philosophical genius Suhrawardi was killed in Syria (after criticism of him by exoterically inclined clergy) at a tragically young age on orders of the famous Muslim ruler Saladin in 1191.

Related to the anti-mystical/mystical dynamic within Islam is the development of secrecy with regard not only to esoteric knowledge but even to one's own identity as a mystical practitioner. Thus one sees the development of the *malamatiyya*, or "people of blame," who hid the true heights of their spiritual life under the appearance of bad or blameful conduct (Schimmel 1987: 82; Knysh 2000: 94–95). But one also sees the development of Sufi esoteric orders or *tariqa*, which developed initiatic lineages around master-disciple relationships and the development of lineages. The historical and geographical proliferation of these orders, which include the Qadiriyya, the Suhrawardiyya, the Shadhiliyya, the Naqshbandiyya, and many others, is sketched for example by Knysh (2000: 169–244), and it is worth noting the important role of secrecy in these initiatic traditions more broadly (Schimmel 1987; Pinto 2019).

The second primary set of dynamics within Islamic mysticism is in the influence of Christian and Christian Platonic/Neoplatonic and possibly Hermetic perspectives, as major Sufi authors began to develop speculative cosmological and metaphysical treatises. As Knysh points out, a major influential figure here is Plotinus, but Plato himself as well as other figures like Proclus were drawn upon (2017: 125–128) by many Sufi mystics, for instance, Suhrawardi and the Illuminist school (Aminrazavi, 1997). Interestingly, the *via negativa* of Dionysius the Areopagite, so influential in the history of Christian mysticism, also has some striking parallels in Islamic mysticism, for instance, when Ibn al-Arabi observes that the pinnacle of mysticism is "finding and knowing God and ... not-finding and not-knowing Him at the same time" (Knysh 2017: 132). But the influences of Christian asceticism and mysticism on early Islam, and the influences of Platonic or even Hermetic traditions, provoke an anti-mystical counter-assertion within the Islamic tradition among those who regard all such influences or predecessors as external to Islam and as heretical. And in fact there were more or less flamboyantly antinomian Sufi individuals and groups or orders (Ridgeon 2015: 101–124).

Thus, even though the development of Islamic mysticism, the expansion of Sufi esoteric orders, and the enormous range of mystical literature that developed in the Muslim world are significantly different than what one finds in either Christian mysticism or Kabbalah, the fundamental tensions between exoteric and esoteric do present parallels, especially between the Christian and Islamic worlds. That is, on the one hand, there are those who emphasize the esoteric discourses of inner transformation, of love for the divine, and of gnosis, and on the other hand, there are those who emphasize social order, doctrinal certitudes, and the primacy of confessional statements and juridical processes. Of course there are some in the middle, and some at the extremes of each spectrum. But there remain some common characteristics and dynamics for mysticism in the monotheistic worlds, and it is to those that we now turn.

Secrecy in Mysticism

In Tibetan Buddhist tradition, prohibitions and textual warnings against disclosure to the uninitiated or unprepared are widespread, both in Tantric and in Atiyoga [Dzogchen] traditions. Typically, esoteric teachings are restricted for those who are prepared for them. In these traditions, it is not

uncommon to find explicit statements that what follows is “restricted,” and access requires prior initiation and/or the specific permission of a recognized teacher in the tradition, and in some cases categories of teachings are “secret” or “exceedingly secret.”

But in the monotheistic traditions, mysticism is not typically so self-described, nor are such explicit textual disclosure prohibitions widespread, even if there might be an example here and there. This is not to say there were no historical barriers to access to mystical treatises or perspectives in the Christian, Jewish, or Muslim worlds. In fact, there were limits for written esoteric texts that required not only literacy in the particular sacred language, but also access to what might well be hidden away, not to mention other socio-cultural boundaries and proscriptions.

However, beyond those natural boundaries is the boundary between those traditions based on exoteric subject-object dualism, that is, a separate God of whom we should be fearful, and those esoteric texts or traditions implicitly or explicitly based in the transcendence of dualism. Crossing the boundary between these may mean giving up many doctrinal or confessional preconceptions or assumptions and entering into new ways of understanding one’s own tradition. Not so many are willing to do that—hence we use the term “self-secret” to describe mystical texts or traditions in monotheistic contexts.

One reason mystical texts may be termed “self-secret” is that they are often circumscribed by orthodoxy-heterodoxy tensions, wherein mystical treatises or perspectives may be anathematized as heterodox or heretical from an orthodox perspective, particularly in Christianity and Islam, making what in fact is part of a long tradition nonetheless “heretical” in a new formulation and thus proscribed. Hence, even if the “Mystical Theology” of Dionysius the Areopagite became more or less part of the tradition, later Meister Eckhart’s new formulation of a similarly apophatic perspective becomes the subject of investigation for heresy. The orthodoxy-heterodoxy tension endemic to monotheism (in addition to all the other barriers to access) means that mystical texts in monotheistic contexts are broadly speaking historically, for the few, not for the many, and exist in tension with the confessional or doctrinal traditions.

The Platonic tradition influences mysticism in the major monotheistic traditions, to a greater or lesser degree as the case may be, because it articulates models of cosmology and metaphysics relatively compatible with monotheistic dualisms, but also allows movement from the exoteric and confessional to the esoteric understood in the context of what may be expressed as mystical union or as the transcendence of linguistic and conceptual limitations. Whether understood in terms of visionary experiences, mystical union, or annihilation, mysticism here, as in the work of Plotinus, is understood as movement from outer to inner, from separation toward union, and from confessional to gnostic, and thus is fundamentally experiential.

This brings us to a final aspect of mysticism: its experiential emphasis. That is, mysticism refers to a transmutational cognitive process moving from dualistic to non-dualistic consciousness, or gnosis. It is inherently experiential, and as a result, requires a fundamentally different epistemological basis than that provided by what we may variously term according to different aspects, ratiocinative or materialistic perspectives (Hutto 2000). It is not necessarily in conflict with rationality—it is not irrational—but because its epistemological basis is different, it is often expressed symbolically or in visionary, paradoxical, or apophatic terms.

Sociological aspects of secrecy, when it comes to mysticism as discussed here, are sometimes the result of exoteric censure of mysticism’s esoteric, experiential dimensions. Orthodox proscriptions of “heretical” gnosis have social consequences, of course—all the way to burning at the stake of “heretics” like Marguerite of Porete. But mysticism as subject-object transcendence in the *via negativa* tradition does not result from suppression, even though it can provoke it.

The various monotheisms, particularly in their scriptural, orthodox theological, and confessional forms, include forms of mysticism inflected by Platonism but those are not generally acknowledged to be at the center of the exoteric traditions, especially not in those modern fundamentalist developments such as Protestant fundamentalism, Wahhabism, or Salafism that emphasize belief and imposition of external or social forms of religion. Thus mysticism, even though it is prevalent in some religious communities, for instance, those where Sufism is widespread, is often understood as irrelevant, if not outright heretical.

An analogous epistemological gap exists in much of modern science, where ratiocinative analysis and materialist premises dominate, even in the wake of the discoveries of quantum physics, and as a result, scientific study of mysticism, to the degree it exists, largely focuses on the physical or neurological processes of the brain, on the assumption that the mind is a product of brain function (Wallace 2006; Versluis and Nicolescu 2018). As B. Alan Wallace has pointed out, it is important in understanding the mind, particularly with regard to gnosis, to recognize that there is a huge body of literature in Buddhism and other contemplative traditions focused on the nature of cognition that developed from fundamentally different epistemological premises (Wallace 2018: 11–28).

There have been some works published by other authors recognizing what we may term the “epistemological gap” in premises for understanding the non-physicalist understanding of the nature of the mind, and mysticism in particular. The works of B. Alan Wallace, Edward F. and Emily Kelly (Kelly 2009, Kelly 2015), or Imants Baruss and Julia Mossbridge (*Transcendent Mind*) and others represent the recognition that understanding mysticism and mystical experiences require a fundamentally different set of epistemological premises—a recognition that while discursive knowledge is of course enormously valuable, it may not provide means of understanding what we may term self-transcendent cognitive processes and results.

It is in this context most of all that mysticism remains self-secret, meaning that to understand more deeply mysticism and gnosis may require cognitive participation through direct contemplative observation. Baruss and Mossbridge quote William James that “introspective observation is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always. *The word introspection need hardly be defined—it means, of course, the looking into our own minds and reporting what we there discover*” (Baruss and Mossbridge 2017: 145). Baruss and Mossbridge write this in their conclusion: “We think consciousness has an aspect that is a deep reality that we might only be able to partially know conceptually... Self-development is necessary to deepen one’s understanding of the nature of consciousness and reality” (2017: 195).

These authors’ works suggest that behind the tensions within the monotheistic traditions between anti-gnostics and gnostics, orthodox and heretics, those asserting confessional or belief systems over and against the claims of mystics, is a deeper opposition between epistemological modes, or kinds of knowledge. It may be then, that what is secret in mystical traditions is ultimately secret because it emerges from different and deeper cognitive bases. This is a different way of expressing “self-secret.” It requires cognitive participation and transmutation on its own premises. Of course, it may be that these ideas remain as radical in the contemporary scientific, religious, or academic worlds as heresy was in earlier historical periods.

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2

ESOTERICISM AND SECRECY

Kennet Granholm

What is esotericism? And how is it related to the study of religious secrecy? While we may recognize various phenomena, practices, and beliefs as belonging to “esotericism,” “the occult,” or “mysticism” when we come across them, we have difficulties when trying to explain what the core characteristics of this larger category are and what in specific qualifies phenomena for inclusion in it. The domain of the esoteric is vague, amorphous, “fuzzy,” and perplexing – sometimes, though not always, productively so – not least because many of the phenomena that it houses have for a very long time been deemed unworthy of serious scholarly or theological attention. It is not surprising, then, that when scholars have finally come around to studying “esotericism,” there are no definitions, demarcations, or descriptions that are undisputedly agreed upon.¹ Instead, there are a multitude of different and sometimes conflicting approaches and perspectives, each shedding light on different but equally important aspects. Nonetheless, there are phenomena, groups, and philosophies – such as “the occult sciences” (commonly magic, alchemy, and astrology), German *naturphilosophie* and Christian Theosophy, initiatory societies, and nineteenth-century occultism – that more or less all scholars agree belong within esotericism. The situation is complicated considerably, however, when contemporary phenomena are discussed.

Secrecy is clearly an integral part of esotericism, though not in the sense of esoteric teachings or groups being secret in any conventional way. Rather, esoteric discourse revolves around the interplay of the hidden and the revealed, with the revelation of hidden knowledge being of central importance. Esotericism is commonly understood as linked to secret or obscured knowledge. For example, sociologists of esotericism in the 1970s defined esoteric knowledge as “secret knowledge of the reality of things... to a relatively small number of persons,” clarifying that “[a]t the heart of esoteric knowledge, is its concealment from public dissemination, from the gaze of the profane or uninitiated.” Consequently, “esoteric knowledge” is contrasted to the “exoteric knowledge” available to the uninitiated (Tiryakian 1974: 265–267). However, historically the phenomena that are today studied under the rubric “esotericism” were not “concealed from public dissemination,” and for that reason historians of Western esotericism do not generally consider secrecy to be a core element. Moreover, scholars of Western esotericism commonly recognize that the idea of esoteric knowledge having an “exoteric” counterpart is an element of emic discourse rather than a sustainable scholarly perspective. That said, secrecy in a non-literal sense is central in concepts of esotericism. Esoteric knowledge is of an experiential sort, and the “secrets” of, say, Masonic initiation lie not in some secret and inaccessible Masonic documents – which

have in fact been published numerous times and are readily available to the public – but in the very process of initiation. The “dialectic of the hidden and revealed,” or the *rhetoric* of secrecy, is important in much esoteric discourse, but it can be claimed that the *revelation* of purported secrets, the unveiling of “hidden knowledge,” is much more essential than keeping them (von Stuckrad 2005b: 10, italics removed).

In this chapter, I will briefly deal with some of the various ways in which esotericism has been conceptualized, before moving on to discuss esotericism in late modernity, a number of modern esoteric currents, and esotericism in relation to society at large.

Esotericism and the “Inner Tradition”

Among self-avowed occultists, in much non-specialist scholarship, and in some older specialist research, esotericism is presented as a more or less self-contained and homogenous tradition. Frequently, particularly among more ideologically minded commentators, it is regarded as an enduring counter-tradition that has been persecuted throughout history. Though it might seem counterintuitive, this view often goes hand in hand with the rhetoric that esotericism constitutes the common inner core of many or all religions. Rather than regarding it as a valid scholarly perspective, most specialists of Western esotericism recognize this notion as a key feature of esoteric discourse that can be traced back to the Renaissance notions of *prisca theologia* (ancient theology) and *philosophia perennis* (eternal philosophy). The former perspective holds that while ancient wisdom may have left traces in contemporary religion and philosophy, it has for the most part been lost over time. It thus needs to be rediscovered and reawakened, suggesting that radical reform is necessary. In the latter perspective, ancient wisdom is viewed as still present, and contemporary religion is in fact the ideal expression of it.

The Esoteric Worldview

The modern study of (Western) esotericism got its start in the early 1990s when Antoine Faivre formulated a model in which Western esotericism was conceived of as “an ensemble of spiritual currents in modern and contemporary Western history which share a certain *air de famille*, as well as the form of thought which is its common denominator” (1998: 2). This “form of thought” is identified by four key notions: everything in existence is linked through a series of invisible correspondences; nature is animated by divine forces, and the “book of nature” can therefore be read for meaning just as the holy scriptures; higher knowledge can be accessed through intermediary beings and the faculty of imagination, which as an “organ of the soul” (Hanegraaff 1996: 398) provides more reliable information than the senses; and practices of transmutation through which a person can purify and perfect his/her essence so that it can ascend to the divine plane. In addition, Faivre suggested that esotericism often operates with the idea that different religious and philosophical traditions share a common inner core and that esoteric wisdom needed to be transmitted through proper channels, often via a succession of initiations (1994: 14–15).

While Faivre’s model made it possible for scholars to collaborate within a common framework, there are a number of serious problems with it. First, Faivre is primarily concerned with Christian Europe, seeing “some Jewish, Islamic, or even far-Eastern religious traditions” as mere “visitors” in the West (Faivre 1992, quoted in Pasi 2010). Second, the rather inflexible model is based on a predetermined set of primarily Renaissance and Early Modern materials and does therefore not acknowledge the transformation of esotericism over time. Consequently, later (and earlier) phenomena are rendered “less esoteric” than their Renaissance counterparts. Third, the model imposes an intellectualist slant which results in practices being an ancillary

concern, the elite culture of literati being favored while folk and popular expressions are all but neglected and makes it legitimate to distinguish between “true” and “simulacrum” esotericism. Finally, Faivre’s model has frequently been misunderstood and erroneously used as a “check-list” to determine whether or not a specific phenomenon is esoteric. The model actually describes common elements in a predetermined material and should thus not be employed in such a manner.

Marginalized Knowledge and Esotericism

Both before and after Faivre, esotericism has been conceived of as a category of deviant or rejected knowledge. Deviance was highlighted as a core defining feature in the “sociology of esotericism” of the 1970s, expressed particularly clearly in Marcello Truzzi’s description of occultism as a “wastebasket, for knowledge claims that are deviant in some way,” comprised of knowledge not accepted in mainstream religion, science, or culture (1974: 245). Such an approach positions esotericism as little more than a vague residual category, being both overly reliant on other more established categories and on historical and cultural preferences. For example, the theory of evolution would be as occult in fundamentalist Christian contexts as creationism in atheistic contexts, a heliocentric model of the solar system as occult in pre-Copernican Europe as a geocentric model today, and monotheism as occult in a Hindu context as polytheism in a Jewish, Muslim, or Christian.

While Wouter Hanegraaff’s more recent work on esotericism as a category of rejected knowledge may appear similar to Truzzi’s “wastebasket-approach,” there are significant differences. Hanegraaff focuses on specific historical *processes* whereby a set of mostly unrelated and previously accepted practices and beliefs were cast as deviant and lumped together, thereby creating the category which we today study under the rubric “esotericism.” In particular, these processes of exclusion are linked to the Reformation – where both Protestants and Catholics accused each other having tainted true Christianity by incorporating “pagan philosophy” and heretic elements such as alchemy, astrology, and magic – and the Enlightenment – where chemistry and astronomy were somewhat arbitrarily distinguished from alchemy and astrology in the boundary work of the scientific revolution. It was only when this category had been brought into existence that it was possible to see these distinct and in many cases previously unrelated phenomena as representing a single “tradition,” which some then came to positively appraise as a counter-tradition that had been marginalized and unduly persecuted throughout the history of Christianity. Understanding this dynamic adds depth and perspective to discussions about the popularization of esotericism in late modernity.

Esotericism as a Specific Genre of Knowledge

Esotericism has also been conceived of as dealing with distinct types of knowledge claims. In an adaptation of Gilles Quispel’s work, Wouter Hanegraaff presents three ideal typical modes of knowledge in Western cultural history. Reason, faith, and gnosis can be distinguished by how the knowledge claimed can be communicated to and verified by others. Reason-based knowledge, common in modern science, is fully communicable and the validity of it can be checked by anyone with sufficient skills in the relevant discipline. Faith-based knowledge, such as claims regarding religious prophecy, is communicable but not verifiable. Gnosis-based knowledge, however, is both incommunicable and unverifiable. Such knowledge can only be accessed by experiencing it, often by entering “altered states of consciousness,” and any discussion of it can only be in metaphors (Hanegraaff 2008: 138–141).

Kocku von Stuckrad regards the esoteric as an “element of discourse” that consists of “*claims* to ‘real’ or absolute knowledge and the *means* of making this knowledge available.” Von Stuckrad further contends that while the specific means of making esoteric knowledge available may vary considerably, ideas of knowledge mediated by “higher” beings or gained through personal experience are common (2005a: 91–93). As Hanegraaff notes, however, commonly esoteric discourse is focused on the *pursuit* of higher knowledge rather than the claim to possess it (2013).

Approaches focused on esotericism as a specific type of knowledge are useful in demonstrating that esoteric discourse is present not only in religion but also in fields such as art, science, and politics. For example, reason-, faith-, and gnosis-based knowledge claims are not limited to the fields that they are most common in, nor are they isolated from each other. Gnosis-based claims can also be found in religion, faith-based claims in science, and reason-based claims in occult doctrines.

“Western” Esotericism

In contrast to most non-specialist approaches, specialist scholarship presents esotericism as a distinctly *Western* phenomenon. Partly, the vocality of asserting the Westernness of esotericism derives from the fact that esoteric phenomena were for a very long time regarded as unworthy of scholarly attention, with the consequence that their study was left in the hands of amateur scholars who often held overly pro- or anti-esoteric sentiments. Many commentators in the field bought wholeheartedly into the discourse of esotericism as the perennial inner tradition at the core of widely diverse religions from the different corners of the world. In order to professionalize and legitimize the study of esotericism in the eyes of the scholarly community, steps were taken to distinguish the new scholarly approaches from the amateur scholarship that had preceded it. Mainly, though, the historians who pioneered the study of Western esotericism were interested in detailing specific historical developments rather than projecting a universally applicable analytical category that could be used in cross-cultural comparisons. However, the qualifier “Western” is problematic as it has received almost no scholarly explication. Many scholars have chosen to exclude Jewish and Islamic (not to mention European pre-Christian) sources and phenomena, other than as potential inspirations, and it might in these cases be more proper to talk of Christian esotericism. The problems gather when it comes to a modernity characterized by globalization and transnational connections, where European and North American esotericism is both influenced by and influences developments in other parts of the world.

If there is a distinctly Western esotericism, though, could it then be legitimate to talk of an “Eastern esotericism”? And if so, could cross-cultural comparative studies be possible? The answer depends on which scholarly approach one takes. While it is certainly of interest to study unrelated phenomena that share structural similarities, for the sake of clarity, it seems best to use a term other than “esotericism” for historically unrelated non-European/-North American phenomena and developments.

Esotericism and the Occult

The terms esotericism and occultism are often used interchangeably by non-experts. In the sociology of esotericism in the 1970s, Edward Tiryakian made attempts to distinguish the two by applying a theory-practice divide. Esotericism stood for the theory; occultism for the practice. However, in recognizing the difficulties in separating esoteric theory from occult practice, as esoteric knowledge is at its foundation “of a participatory sort,” Tiryakian himself demonstrated the futility of such a division (1974: 265–266).

In the study of Western esotericism, the two terms are distinguished along different lines. Esotericism is the parent category and occultism a particular development within it. Wouter Hanegraaff uses “occultism” as an analytical category “which comprises all attempts by esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted world or, alternatively, by people in general to make sense of esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world” (1996: 422, italics removed). Other scholars prefer to use the term “occultism” in a more restricted sense to refer to a specific esoteric current that emerged in the mid nineteenth century and was closely connected to ritual magic and initiatory societies (Faivre 1994: 88–90; Pasi 2007). In both cases, the primary ingredients are an emergent discourse on occultism as a semi-independent tradition and the adaptation to the modern secular worldview accompanied by a preference for science-like explanatory models.

The distinction also relates to two opposing perspectives on what esotericism is, “early modern enchantment” or “the (post)modern occult” (Hanegraaff 2013: 5–10). The former is the perspective advocated by Antoine Faivre, and subsequently by many other historians of Western esotericism, and the latter by many sociologists and scholars of new religions. To be sure, both perspectives have their merits, but neither conveys the whole picture.

Esoteric Flows as Discursive Complexes

As the domain of esotericism is both broad and amorphous, there is considerable need to systematize the study of it by dividing it into smaller and more manageable segments. I have chosen to do so by looking at esoteric currents as discursive complexes. Discourse here refers to communicated ways of interpreting the world or aspects thereof, and a complex collection of interdependent discourses in a specific combination. For example, in this framework, the “neopagan current” is built on discourses advocating “the primacy of nature” and expressing “a longing for a pre-Christian past.” As another example, the “Left-Hand Path current” is formed by discourses on “the ideology of individualism,” “the goal of self-deification,” and “antinomianism.” In both cases, the discourses are intrinsically linked. In neopaganism, pre-Christian religion is regarded as nature-oriented, and nature is then regarded as important for those more interested in pre-Christian religion and pre-Christian religion more appealing for those who are primarily nature-oriented. Similarly, within the Left-Hand Path, apotheosis is a concern for the individual, godhood can only be achieved by becoming a fully autonomous individual, and antinomian violations of personal (and sometimes cultural) taboos are both necessary on the path to apotheosis and something that is a natural outcome of increased individual autonomy.

This framework is useful in examining the interaction between different esoteric expressions. Like all human communication, discourses are fluid and variable, taking different forms among different groups and individuals. Two currents can draw closer to each other when a group or an individual finds both appealing, and they can then assert influence on each other to the degree where they merge to form a hybrid current. With time, some discursive components may become less influential and a new current that is distinct from its parents is formed.

The framework also recognizes the influence of “ancillary” discourses, that is, discourses that have cultural influence but do not directly form constituting elements of any particular esoteric current. To take one example, since the late 1960s many forms of neopaganism have been strongly influenced by feminist discourses. In some cases, such as in Goddess Worship and Dianic Wicca, feminism has come to exert such a strong influence that it has become an integral part of the current.

Esotericism and Modernity

Western modernity in general is characterized by differentiation, separation, and bureaucratization of social spheres, institutions, and functions, the rise of secularism as a hegemonic discourse, and individualization. Late, or liquid, modernity, then, rather than representing a break entails a radicalization of these modern developments, often with seemingly counterintuitive repercussions. Differentiation has progressed to the degree of fragmentation, leading to a de-differentiation wherever the smaller fragments flow into each other and form new and often temporary constellations. The result is that a multitude of different explanatory models are available for each occasion, leading to a relative destabilization of modern institutional expert systems. This is further reinforced by the intensification of an individualist discourse that posits the discrete, autonomous individual as the ultimate authority in all matters pertaining to his/her life. Clearly this has significant transformatory consequences for esotericism.

Entrenched in the hegemony of secularism, many early sociologists prophesized the eventual demise of religion (Weber 1963 [1922]). Against that monolithic assumption, however, actual theories on secularization are complex, multiple, and deal with the consequences of a number of distinct processes of societal change (see Habermas 2008). Such theories do not deal with the secularization of *religion* per se, and the notion of “secularized religion” is, in fact, an oxymoron. One of the themes that has dominated theories on secularization concerns processes of social differentiation where religion is isolated in its own institution and separated from educational, political, economic, etc. institutions. As a consequence, religious actors run the risk of losing much of their earlier societal influence. This “decline of religion” is primarily a “de-Christianization,” affecting mainly traditional Christian institutions and interpretations, and esotericism in general is not directly affected. Yet indirectly the weakening of traditional Christianity leads to increased pluralism by providing space for both non-Christian expressions and unorthodox Christian interpretations, which directly benefits esotericism (see Asprem 2016, 2013, Hanegraaff 2003). Esoteric actors were increasingly prone to draw inspiration from non-European religions, a development that was both influenced by and itself influenced the emergent study of religion in the late nineteenth century. This “easternization” has continued uninhibited into late modernity, where the amplification of individualist discourse propels the formation of increasingly eclectic mixes.

We should remember, however, that esotericism does not solely reside in the sphere of religion – in fact, during the Reformation, it for the most part ceased to be an active ingredient in mainline religion – and secularization may thus affect certain aspects of it negatively and others positively. To take just one example, the hegemony of secularism made it compelling for esotericists to formulate a scientific rather than a religious rationale for their practices. This is particularly evident in “the occult revival” of the nineteenth century where magic was framed as a technology, spiritual progressed was envisioned along evolutionary lines, mechanistic-causal explanations for correspondences were introduced, and a science-like vocabulary and rhetoric was employed. An occult social sphere in the form of initiatory societies that identified with “the occult tradition” rather than with (institutional) Christianity emerged, and in the twentieth century, metaphysical realities were increasingly being cast as psychological realities. At the same time as they denounced traditional religion, however, this new breed of occultists also criticized what they saw as an overly materialistic science. In late modernity, “post-secular” discourses that are critical of secularism yet dependent on the awareness of the earlier hegemonic status of it drive processes of “re-enchantment” in which spirituality-based explanatory models gain new currency. The scientific and the openly religious now combine in ways which were unforeseen in the earlier phase of modernity. Post-secular re-enchanted esotericism does not represent a