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## Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Estoericism (review)

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# Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esotericism (review)

## Abstract

The field of Western esoteric studies, Arthur Versluis declares in this brief survey, is still in its infancy. One of the central scholarly tasks is to define what constitutes esotericism, and to ascertain how various often seemingly disparate activities or movements might be meaningfully gathered under this rubric. Versluis's approach is, in his own description, historicist, tracing various esoteric traditions through time from antiquity to the twenty-first century. This is not, however, strictly speaking a historical study of esoteric movements. Relatively little effort is made to situate subjects in their particular periods and to relate them to the larger social and cultural context of those times. Instead, the main goal of the book is to describe the beliefs and, to a much lesser extent, the practices of various groups and individuals, and to clarify how they might be categorized as esoteric. Thus the overall approach is quite different from most recent studies of magic, which have eschewed generalized definitions and looked instead to see how magic was defined, either by its practitioners or, more often, by its opponents in particular periods. The scholar of esotericism must proceed differently, however, because until very recently "esoteric" was never a category used by practitioners to self-identify, nor was it ever a primary category through which authorities classified or condemned.

## Disciplines

Cultural History | European History | History of Religion | Other History

## Comments

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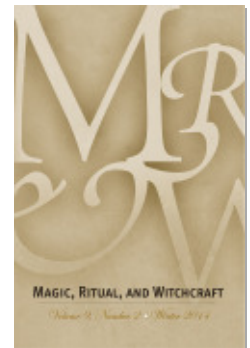
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## **Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esotericism (review)**

Michael D. Bailey

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ARTHUR VERSLUIS. *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esotericism*. Lanham, Md.: Roman and Littlefield, 2007. Pp. vii + 179.

The field of Western esoteric studies, Arthur Versluis declares in this brief survey, is still in its infancy. One of the central scholarly tasks is to define what constitutes esotericism, and to ascertain how various often seemingly disparate activities or movements might be meaningfully gathered under this rubric. Versluis's approach is, in his own description, historicist, tracing various esoteric traditions through time from antiquity to the twenty-first century. This is not, however, strictly speaking a historical study of esoteric movements. Relatively little effort is made to situate subjects in their particular periods and to relate them to the larger social and cultural context of those times. Instead, the main goal of the book is to describe the beliefs and, to a much lesser extent, the practices of various groups and individuals, and to clarify how they might be categorized as esoteric. Thus the overall approach is quite different from most recent studies of magic, which have eschewed generalized definitions and looked instead to see how magic was defined, either by its practitioners or, more often, by its opponents in particular periods. The scholar of esotericism must proceed differently, however, because until very recently "esoteric" was never a category used by practitioners to self-identify, nor was it ever a primary category through which authorities classified or condemned.

Given that "esoteric" is more or less an exclusively academic category, it is obviously incumbent on scholars to define what the category entails and explain why certain subjects fit within it. Versluis is clear and systematic on these points. He defines esotericism as pertaining broadly to inner or spiritual knowledge held by a limited group. He establishes a structure in which this knowledge can be either cosmological, concerning secrets about the nature of the universe, or metaphysical, pertaining to human being, knowledge, or identity, most often in relation to some sort of divine. This gnosis can be attained in two ways, either by a *via positiva* in which the practitioner utilizes systems of external rituals, symbols, and signs to obtain and understand secret knowledge, or a *via negativa* of internal contemplation based on the negation of external concepts and perceptions. The cosmological goal of esotericism Versluis associates with magic, insofar as practitioners of magic seek to attain secret knowledge of the universe and its operations, typically in order to be able to manipulate or control them in some way. The metaphysical goal he associates with mysticism. These categories also overlap; given that most esoteric traditions see the macrocosm and microcosm reflecting one another,

there are areas in which cosmological “magical” practices can provide inner illumination and vice versa.

An immediate question raised by this system is whether all magical and all mystical practices are automatically esoteric, that is, premised on the attainment of some secret knowledge limited to a few. Versluis implies this is so. Certainly mysticism has never been a widespread or particularly mainstream aspect of Western religions, and many mystics have written of attaining a type of knowledge of the divine that would be unacceptable for the masses. Yet there are mystics who stress that whatever knowledge they attain via their mystical experiences conforms entirely to revealed truth, available and accessible to all believers. Notions of gnosis in magic apply very well to elite forms of learned magic, practitioners of which definitely see themselves as part of a closed tradition possessing knowledge that must be kept out of common circulation. Yet Versluis also includes in his discussions common magical practices, or “folk magic” as he typically terms it, whether in the Middle Ages or modern times. Such practices can, certainly, entail secret knowledge known only to a few, probably more so in the modern period, when many folkways are preserved only by small segments within various communities. But in the premodern period, when belief in and recourse to magic was much more widespread, was someone who used a common charm known to their entire village to ward off the evil eye really engaging in an esoteric practice? Do I engage in an esoteric practice today if I read a horoscope printed in a newspaper, or knock on wood to ward off bad luck?

Such questions do not undermine the utility of Versluis’s categories; they simply point to the problematic issue of how far these categories should be extended, where boundaries are to be drawn, and on what grounds. They raise another question, too, which I found to haunt Versluis’s book, although he never directly engaged with it. What, if anything, differentiates the “esoteric” quality of beliefs or practices that are not mainstream by deliberate intention of their practitioners, and those that are simply *de facto* so. For example, when surveying antiquity, Versluis declares the Eleusinian mysteries, deliberately restricted to initiates of the cult, as esoteric, and sensibly so. He also categorizes Platonic philosophy as in some way esoteric, because it asserts that true knowledge is attained only by a few philosophers through deep contemplation while most people are deceived by the shadowy illusions of the physical world. There is some sense here too, but Platonic philosophy does not, at least in theory, prevent anyone from trying to attain this knowledge.

This problem becomes more vexing when Versluis labels medieval heretical groups as esoteric. In one sense, this is absolutely true. Heretics were, by

definition, members of groups that adhered to certain forms of knowledge different from that adhered to by the social mainstream of their times. Yet very few heretical groups wanted to be marginal. Rather they sought, at least in theory, to win converts and become mainstream. Both Catharism and Waldensianism began as preaching movements. There is, of course, no reason that some sets of beliefs or practices cannot be esoteric because the group adhering to them deliberately seeks to preserve a certain exclusivity of knowledge, while other sets of beliefs or practices will be esoteric simply because large numbers in a society happen not to adhere to them. But interesting questions arise. By this logic, self-evidently every new religion that arises is esoteric before it becomes mainstream. When did Lutheranism attain enough adherence to cease being esoteric, for example? When did Christianity as a whole?

Versluis might respond that all these groups demonstrate aspects of esotericism, as do many mainstream beliefs and practices. This would, in fact, be part of the significance of esotericism, especially in what he labels the “dualist” culture that has dominated in the West since antiquity, where first Christianity and then scientific rationalism have laid claim to all legitimate knowledge and forced other systems into marginalized esoteric status. Yet this book also reveals that the label “esoteric” really works best when that marginalized status is accepted and, indeed, valorized by those to whom it is applied. Versluis notes a self-referential culture of esotericism developing since the Renaissance. Then, certain elite magicians endeavored to recreate what they supposed to be ancient systems of knowledge. Their writings inspired other early modern esoteric traditions, and eventually alchemy, Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, kabbalistic mysticism, theosophy, and Freemasonry all began drawing from and blending with one another. A profoundly bookish tradition of ceremonial magic culminated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with figures such as Eliphas Lévi and groups like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. More mystical forms of esotericism manifested in Madame Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society and then the great swell of New Age spiritual movements in the later twentieth century.

While some of these groups were and are deliberately restrictive, with formal initiation rites to keep outsiders out, many have no formal boundaries. They could, in theory, become mainstream, if only enough people accepted their forms of knowledge. Yet a very important part of the identity that these groups/movements confer on their adherents is a certain treasured outsider status. They allow their members to regard themselves as critiquing whatever are perceived to be the evils of mainstream modern culture—patriarchal reli-

gion, sterile scientific rationalism, mass consumer culture, and so forth. Esoteric studies must account for the fact that, while some people and some forms of knowing are driven to the margins, others seek out such status.

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ROBIN WOUFFITT. *The Language of Mediums and Psychics: The Social Organization of Everyday Miracles*. Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2006.

John Edward, the most famous practicing medium in the United States, began his career as a television personality in 1998, with an appearance on CNN's *Larry King Live*, during which he contacted spirits for callers. The sociologist Robin Wooffitt reproduces an excerpt from one of these exchanges in his intriguing book, *The Language of Mediums and Psychics*; viewers of Edward's own television shows will recognize it as fairly typical. The caller, Kathy, has asked Edward to contact her mother.

Edward: OK. Did they have to make it—was there—this is strange—did they have to make a split decision at the end, whether or not to treat her—or something?

Caller: Yes.

Edward: OK. She's telling me that.

For Wooffitt, this brief exchange reveals an element crucial to understanding how consultations between mediums and their clients function. Edward's conversation with Kathy involved three "turns," two by the medium, one by the sitter. In the first turn, Edward posed a question tentatively suggesting a specific detail about the sitter's mother, the spirit he had been asked to contact. In this question, Edward gave no indication of the source of his knowledge; it could have been an intuitive impression, or a guess of his own. The sitter's reply was a clear, simple "yes." Edward quickly followed up her assent with a statement attributing the earlier piece of information to the spirit of Kathy's mother. A three-part pattern of this type, question followed by brief affirmation, followed by "attribution of the information implied by the question/statement to a paranormal source," Wooffitt argues, is a leitmotif in interactions between sitters and all sorts of "psychic practitioners," including mediums, psychics, and fortune-tellers. He bases this assertion on an analysis of twenty-five hours of audio and video recordings of practitioners