

Empirical method in the study of esotericism¹

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Abstract

The debate initiated by Segal's "defense of reductionism" has produced a polarization between the theoretical positions of reductionism and religionism, suggesting that no alternative exists. This is unfortunate, for empirical research is neither reductionist nor religionist. The article discusses this neglected empirical option. Empirical research must be based on methodological agnosticism with regard to religious and philosophical "first principles", and must fully recognise the historicity of religious phenomena. This empirical perspective is applied to the newly emerging academic field of esotericism. Antoine Faivre's definition of esotericism as a historically recognisable "form of thought" leads to a discussion of the empirical status of the history of (religious) ideas, especially in the tradition of Arthur O. Lovejoy. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of empirical method for the diachronic and the synchronic study of esotericism. It is argued that the latter pursuit entails a fundamental questioning of conventional distinctions, particularly between "gnosticism" and "mysticism".

1. Introduction

The debate over reductionism vs. religionism is principally concerned with defining the proper method for the academic study of religion conceived as an autonomous or semi-autonomous discipline. In its most recent episode, initiated by Robert Segal's "defense of reductionism" via his attack on Mircea Eliade (Segal 1983; 1989a; Pals 1986; Idinopulos - Yonan 1994), one misses the realization that, whatever methodology one may consider appropriate for *Religionswissenschaft*, it does not follow automatically that this methodology [100] will be appropriate equally and in precisely the same way for all more specialized fields of study. Furthermore, the possibility cannot be ruled out beforehand that the preference of certain authors for certain general methodological principles may be largely determined by the specific requirements of the *particular* field(s) of study in which they happen to specialize. In order to stimulate creative progress in the debate - to move it beyond the essentially static situation of battle cries exchanged from entrenched positions (Elzey 1994: 82)² - I suggest it might be wise temporarily to depart from the focus on "religion" as such and the way to study "it", and focus on specific areas and the appropriate methods for studying them. At first sight such a strategy may seem to ignore what is arguably the very *raison d'etre* of the debate, i.e., the wish to define the status of *Religionswissenschaft* within academic institutions. However, if there are signs - as I believe is the case - that the apparently straight road actually moves in circles, a seeming detour may prove the quicker way to the goal.

In this article I will concentrate on some methodological problems proper to the academic study of esotericism, a newly emerging field³ still very much in the process of self-reflection regarding its own definition and proper methodology. The study of esotericism has been dominated by religionist and, to a somewhat smaller extent, reductionist approaches. My main argument implies that this dominance (not necessarily the research itself!) has hindered

rather than stimulated the progress of understanding. I argue that a third, empirical alternative opens as yet largely unexplored perspectives. I will identify some central problem areas in the systematic study of esotericism in relation to which an empirical perspective is likely to prove fruitful. In that connection I suggest that a preference for certain empirical approaches over others may often result not from general theoretical considerations, or from the biases of individual scholars, but simply from the specific requirements of particular areas of study.

2. *Tertium datur*: The reductionism debate and the empirical option

One of the most surprising facts about the current "reductionism debate" is the almost total neglect of the empirical alternative to theological/religionist⁴ [101] and reductionist approaches. Reading the material, one is tempted to conclude that this is not just the result of a reasoned rejection of empiricism, but of a profoundly nonempirical attitude on the part of the main protagonists. This suspicion arises because even a cursory examination of the actual state of research furnishes abundant evidence that, to paraphrase the title of one of Segal's articles, "historians of religion are *not* necessarily believers" (Segal 1989c).⁵ And since Segal regards "historians" as concerned with other pursuits than the explanatory reductionism which he believes to be the distinguishing mark of the social scientific alternative, it is obvious that many historians cannot be accommodated in his either/or framework. Of course, one might object that Segal's dichotomy is analytic rather than descriptive; but then the fact that he applies it exclusively to Eliade, whose representativity as an "historian" of religion is doubtful to say the very least (Rudolph 1989), leaves his case unsubstantiated.

The basic perspective of empirical research, as distinguished from "positivist-reductionist" and "religionist" pursuits, has recently been reformulated by Jan Platvoet (1990). Believers always see religion, analytically speaking, from the perspective of what Platvoet calls a "multiple tier cosmology". This means that their world-view encompasses an empirically perceptible *and* one or more meta-empirical realms (or, it might be added, experiential dimensions). In studying religion, scholars are dependent on believers expressing their awareness of a meta-empirical reality in empirically perceptible ways (words, images, behaviour etc.) but, *qua* scholars, they do not themselves have direct access to the meta-empirical. Because they can thus neither verify nor falsify its existence, or any claims made about it, methodological agnosticism is the only proper attitude. To the empirical/meta-empirical distinction Platvoet adds a further, and crucial, one: both "cosmologies" may be held either axiomatically or nonaxiomatically. Religionists sometimes mistake empirical researchers for positivist reductionists because they misconstrue this distinction.⁶ Actually, empirical researchers do not limit themselves to the empirical because they wish to claim that it is the only reality (privately [102] they may believe the opposite), but simply because it is the only one accessible to them for investigation. They hold to their "one tier cosmology" *nonaxiomatically*, while positivist-reductionists hold to it *axiomatically*, i.e., as an ideology (Platvoet 1990: 186). I would argue that from an empirical perspective this reductionist ideology must be dismissed as unscientific because it claims more than it can prove without self-contradiction: it treats the meta-empirical as if its existence has been falsified, while in fact such falsification would require the meta-empirical to be empirical. Religionism - which *axiomatically* holds to a plural tier world-view - is properly criticized not for claiming more than it can prove⁷ but for blurring the distinction between empirical and nonempirical knowledge, incorrectly claiming "scientific" validity for the latter. It is clear, therefore, that empirical research cannot accept *any* axiomatic beliefs about the ultimate nature of reality.

This formulation suggests a further corollary, which is not mentioned by Platvoet and has perhaps received too little attention generally. Empiricism, I would argue, cannot afford to take sides in the philosophical debate over what may broadly be called idealism vs. materialism. I will take this debate to encompass all questions of whether the purportedly "higher" causes (determines, produces, conditions) the "lower" or the reverse, and submit that the dimension most relevant for the study of religion is the relation between human consciousness and society. Implicit or explicit philosophical presuppositions in this domain inevitably exert a decisive influence on any interpretation, let alone explanation, of religious phenomena.⁸ One only has to read an introduction to the anthropology of religion such as Brian Morris' brilliant *Anthropological Studies of Religion* (1987), to realize how strongly [103] research may be dependent on a philosophical *a priori*. Morris makes his *Vorverstandnis* very clear: "The essential Marxist premise, Levi-Strauss remarked, is that 'the way people live conditions the way they think'. This issue is perhaps the only guiding thread of the present study ..." (Morris 1987: 3). The important thing to notice is that this philosophical position, although its influence indeed pervades the book, is nowhere defended or accounted for. It is presented axiomatically, as self-evident and not in need of proof.⁹ Actually, however, empirical evidence suggests only that ideas and social circumstances (such as matter and consciousness) are intimately interwoven in ways that are as yet insufficiently clear. It is true that the idealist view (which, in stronger versions, apparently conceives of ideas as abstract entities capable somehow to exist "apart" from their manifestation in social contexts) is even totally unsupported by empirical evidence, but the conclusion that this proves the truth of materialism is an obvious *non sequitur*.¹⁰ The primary empirical fact is that ideas and society seem to influence each other mutually. To decide whether one direction of influence may be eliminated as illusory or peripheral requires an axiomatically held philosophical position. Perhaps (I would say, probably) the question is entirely unsolvable on non-axiomatic, empirical grounds. To conclude from this that it is legitimate to [104] make an arbitrary-choice betrays, however, a "failure of nerve" vis-a-vis the perplexities of human knowledge.¹¹

Both corollaries of empirical research (methodological agnosticism with respect to the "meta-empirical" and with respect to the idealism-materialism debate) do not yet amount to more than an indirect definition: empirical research is characterized by the *rejection* of metaphysical axioms (either in the religious or the philosophical sense) as a valid foundation of scientific knowledge. It implies a "criticism of ideologies" which severely limits the domain in which science may legitimately speak with authority. A third and final corollary adds a *positive* qualification: empirical research of religions must recognize that we only have access to religions as human events in space and, most importantly, in *time*. The historical character of religious phenomena is what is empirically given; any "transhistorical" or otherwise unchanging dimension it may possess constitutes a secondary interpretation. Although empirical research may (or may not) come to interpret some elements of religions as universal through time, it does not permit such a conclusion to be the starting point of investigation. This historical orientation constitutes a further *prima facie* criticism of both religionism and reductionism. *Both* have shown a characteristic tendency to impose on their material "immutable" laws and principles, often at the expense of historical contingency (which is feared by both for its relativistic implications).¹² Eliade's "terror of history" is the most obvious religionistic example.¹³ As for social-scientific reductionism I can do no better than quote the lines of Dan Merkur:

Social scientific explanations are regularly synchronic, when reality - like history - is diachronic. Just as, in the life sciences, a variety of synchronic modes of analysis (organic chemistry, ecology, etc.) are ultimately subservient to the diachronic framework provided by evolutionary theory; so in the study of religion, social scientific explanations can never be more than partial contributions to historical explanations; for the phenomena of religion are inherently and inalienably diachronic. Accordingly, [105] *social scientific explanations of religion are rightly criticized negatively for being "reductive", to the extent that they usurp the place of historiography.* (Merkur 1994:227)¹⁴

It should be superfluous to add that this in no way implies rejection of social scientific methodologies as such. Cross-fertilization between the social sciences and historical research has proved to be a significant enrichment for both,¹⁵ and nothing which is said here should be misunderstood as suggesting an anti-social science bias.

To finish this brief sketch I must mention three criticisms which, if accepted, would undercut my claim that empiricism is a valid and autonomous option: the religionist claim that empiricism is in fact reductionist; the reductionist claim that it is in fact religionist; and the general claim that it is not scientific at all. The religionist complaint was mentioned already. I argued that it is based on a confusion between axiomatic and nonaxiomatic research strategies. However, this will probably not dispel religionist objections altogether, and for good reasons too. Admittedly the historical orientation of empirical research, which is naturally interested in the historical "genesis" of religious convictions, may have profoundly reductionistic implications. Although historians should avoid the "genetic fallacy" of assuming that to point out the (in this case historical) origin of a certain conviction *proves* that the conviction cannot be true, the net effect of a genetic approach nevertheless may be to "demythologize" certain convictions and render them highly, even intolerably improbable.¹⁶ If religionists reject empiricism for this reason, then so be it. The alternative is a fatal confusion between mythography and historiography.

As for criticism from reductionist perspectives, I already pointed out that Segal gives neither evidence nor arguments for his statement that "historians of religions are necessarily believers". A more explicit discussion is found in the work of Don Wiebe, who argues that the appeal to *epoche* is "yet heavily influenced by a religious/theological commitment" (Wiebe 1984: 409). This is of course correct if taken as an observation about the way in which "bracketing" has actually functioned in old-style phenomenology and continues [106] to function in various contemporary religionist approaches. However, I do not see that methodological agnosticism *implies* religionism (cf. Wiebe 1983: 288).¹⁷ Wiebe argues that *epoche* implies the "descriptivist doctrine" and must therefore reject all attempts at explanation. I quote Wiebe (1984: 409-410):

'To explain' is 'to explain away' and that, it appears, must be avoided at all costs. But to avoid that possibility altogether is to assume that it can never be 'explained' away'. That a priori exclusion, I suggest however, indicates a religious/theological bias, for it presumes an ontic reality for religion that it may not really have.

It seems to me that Wiebe here confuses the (religionist) statement that a reductionist explanation is *wrong* with the (empirical) statement that such an explanation *cannot be demonstrated* to be true. The latter may be hard to accept for reductionists, but I cannot see how they can prove their case without having access to *a priori* metaphysical assumptions themselves.

Finally, both religionists and reductionists regularly claim that empirical research simply does not qualify as science. If this claim were true, Segal's either/or framework could perhaps be saved. A *prima facie* objection to Segal would be that if this is the reason for ignoring the empirical option, then the fact that he does not accept religionism either as

science makes it difficult to understand why he argues against it at all. If, on the other hand, he considers it worthwhile to argue with unscientific parties, the purportedly nonscientific character of empiricism would be no reason to ignore it. Whatever may be the case, it seems that both religionists and reductionists reject empiricism as nonscientific because its methodological restrictions preclude the possibility of *really* understanding what religion is all about. This is probably true, but I doubt whether it is an argument for disqualifying empiricism as scientific. Religionists argue that empiricists cut themselves off from appreciating precisely what is most essential about religion, namely its *sui generis* character. Empiricists are bound to reply that if this is true then it only illustrates that *scientific* research has its limits. A "higher science" based on religious insights may be a wonderful ideal, but one which will create not a scientific but a *religious* world-view, i.e., acceptable only by prior acceptance of a meta-empirical reality. Science is bound, for better or worse, to the empirical. If religionists claim that science should be meta-empirical, then it is clear that both parties are operating with mutually exclusive definitions and are not, in fact, talking about the same thing.

[107] As for the reductionist alternative, the main argument here is that empirical research is bound to a pure "descriptivism" which rejects attempts at explanation. Because explanation is the essence of the scientific enterprise, or so it is argued, mere descriptivism is not scientific (Wiebe 1975: 33; 1983: 295; 1984: 409). Of course, however, description and interpretation are intimately interwoven and the boundary between "interpretation" and "explanation" is notoriously vague (cf. Clarke - Byrne 1993: 29-32). Therefore, historians can - and frequently do - claim to give explanations at least in some senses of the word. They certainly offer interpretations, and charging them with "pure descriptivism" (or, for that matter, with a naive belief in pure objectivity) may be dismissed in most cases as attacking caricatures. The real issue is over the status of *radical* explanation, i.e., explanation which uncovers the *real* foundation of religion (Clarke - Byrne 1993: vii-ix, 28-75). The main argument against radical explanation is the one already formulated above. Such an explanation may or may not be true, but its truth cannot be *demonstrated* without having recourse to axiomatic metaphysical assumptions. If this argument is accepted, the logical corollary is obvious: if it is still to be claimed that (radical) explanation alone defines "science", then it follows that science is and should be based on an axiomatically-held metaphysical ideology. Its possible conclusions will then be conditioned prior to all empirical investigations by the requirements of that ideology; empirical disconfirmation of the latter is excluded a priori.¹⁸ However, to accept this argument means undercutting the very foundation of the scientific enterprise, because it makes science a matter not of empirical demonstration but of adherence to and promotion of metaphysical beliefs. We can only conclude that, in this sense, "reductionists are necessarily believers".

We end up, then, with several mutually exclusive ideas about what it means to be "scientific". If the empirical perspective rejects both the religionistic project of a "higher science" and the reductionist vision of radical explanation, it might itself be suspected of espousing "naive realism". However, empiricism certainly does not imply the simple belief that "things are just as they seem". I would argue that it suggests something far less comfortable: that, if we are radically honest, we must admit that none of us has a clue about what is *really* going on around us (and especially *how*, and for what reasons, it is going on). More precisely, the clues we have managed to invent over time all fail to produce a picture that is radically convincing, complete, and irrefutable. If they did, the debate would have ended long ago. If empiricism has any "hidden premise", I suggest it is that to admit the grave [108] inadequacies in our knowledge and understanding of "reality" is more scientific than to fool

ourselves about them. Neither need empiricism be naive in the sense of ignoring the many practical and theoretical problems related to investigating "the evidence". The hermeneutical problematic, in particular, arises as an obvious product of all serious empirical research. Far from being an argument against empiricism, it is something to be recognized and dealt with as adequately as possible. The problem, of course, is that nobody can be completely certain about what is to count as "adequate". This, in and by itself, is sufficient to conclude that empirical research is extremely unlikely ever to give us "the truth about religion(s)". Instead, we may expect it to produce a many-voiced and probably endless debate, in which the dialectics of *emic* evidence and *etic* scholarly discourse may nevertheless produce valid knowledge. If any rule of thumb exists to judge that validity, I would suggest it will have a lot to do with the willingness of its author(s) to recognize it as *provisory*.

3. The study of esotericism

The problems of defining "esotericism" are similar to the well-known problems of defining "religion". In both cases the term is vague and ambiguous in ordinary usage, has emerged in a western context and gone through shifts in meaning during its history, and has frequently been used to serve the particular purposes and prejudices of individual scholars.¹⁹ The *prima facie* reason for attempting to define "esotericism" as a separate field is the impression that there exist certain religious phenomena which have something in common, and that this communality is sufficiently characteristic to speak of a distinct complex or field. This impression is liable to criticism for reasons similar to the case of "religion": attempts to construe "esotericism" as a *sui generis* phenomenon may be inspired by apologetic considerations, operational definitions may rely on questionable premises and fail to account for all members of the purported class, and so on. In seeking to defend its relative autonomy, then, the study of esotericism obviously faces similar problems as the study of religion generally. Recognizing this, I will for the moment not attempt to defend more than an essentially pragmatic approach: *currently accepted fields of study have failed to accommodate certain western traditions, and still tend either to exclude these from study altogether or reduce them to already existing but inappropriate categories. "Esotericism" is an appropriate label for characterising these traditions and making them available for [109] research.* The first concern of the study of esotericism is with the syncretistic "hermeticism" of the Renaissance, and the various traditions which emerged from that synthesis, such as rosicrucianism, Christian theosophy, nineteenth-century occultism, and so on. By extension, students of "esotericism" may include as part of their field the older historical phases of those currents which were assimilated into the Renaissance compound, currents such as astrology, alchemy, *magia*, kabbalah, etc. This last tradition entered Renaissance hermeticism in Christianized shape, but to mention it means to recognize a further legitimate extension which would encompass parallel "esotericisms" belonging to the worlds of Judaism and Islam.²⁰ Recognition of these parallels, finally, inevitably evokes questions about how to conceive of the relation between esotericism on the one hand, and mysticism and gnosticism on the other.

The above suggests that at least three theoretical problems should stand high on the agenda of a systematic study of "esotericism". The most ambitious but (as we will see) problematic concern would be with a synchronic, comparative study of esotericism(s) within the scriptural religions.²¹ More modest, and of more immediate importance, is the diachronic study of historical development within single esoteric traditions. Both kinds of study presuppose a clear position on a third count, i.e., an operational definition of esotericism which takes into account the complicated relation with such bordering domains as

"mysticism" and "gnosticism" (both synchronically and diachronically). I will concentrate on this last question first and make some suggestions about the two others later.

The dominance of religionist presuppositions in the study of esotericism has not been congenial to the critical enterprise of definition and classification theory. The reason is simply that "esoteric religionists", like religionists generally, have a natural tendency to emphasize transhistorical unity over historical difference. The perception of differences, however, is what necessitates the enterprise of definition in the first place; whoever wishes to demonstrate the unity of esotericism should explicitly *account for* those differences rather than start from the comfortable assumption that they are "secondary". This orientation toward unity is closely related to the preference of religionists for "essence vs. manifestation" schemes which, while allowing for the essence to clothe itself in contingent cultural shapes, presuppose that the former somehow transcends the latter and remains uniquely *sui generis*. In the case of esotericism, the essence is called "esoteric" and its manifestation "exoteric". As for the nature of that esoteric essence itself, esoteric religionists will usually [110] defend a variation on Rudolf Otto's well-known position vis-à-vis the numinous: you need some kind of intuitive access to it in order to understand it, because without such privileged understanding your research will be fatally inadequate. All these assumptions are carried to an extreme in the so-called "perennialist" school (Ananda Coomaraswamy, Rene Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, and their followers), which has largely been ignored in academic circles,²² but enjoys considerable support among students of esotericism. This support, I would argue, is extremely unfortunate. Even leaving aside the question whether perennialism is a scholarly methodology at all (which I would contest),²³ it is obvious that its idea of "esoterism"²⁴ has no clear connection to whatever can be regarded as "esotericism" in an empirical/historical sense. The first is a metaphysical concept referring to the supposed "transcendent unity" of all great religious traditions; the second refers to quite specific historical currents in western traditions. Most significantly, the founders of the perennialist perspective have themselves largely ignored the latter.²⁵ Therefore a first necessary step towards establishing the study of esotericism as a serious academic pursuit would be to demarcate it clearly from the perennialist perspective. This still leaves room for free competition and discussion between (other kinds of) religionists, reductionists and empiricists. My present [111] contribution to such a discussion is to defend the merits of the empirical option.

The most authoritative proposal for a definition of "esotericism" has been formulated by the French scholar Antoine Faivre (1992a: 3-32).²⁶ Faivre correctly points out that, from an empirical/historical perspective, there can be no question of discussing the nature of esotericism *an sich*.²⁷ Accordingly, he is critical of that kind of religious universalism which discerns "esotericism" in all religious traditions of the world (Faivre 1992a: 7).²⁸ To the historian, the term refers to a western phenomenon, which has ancient roots (Faivre 1992c), but becomes visible as a relatively autonomous phenomenon only in the modern period (since the end of the fifteenth century). Faivre describes esotericism as an identifiable "form of thought" or "ensemble of tendencies" (Faivre 1992a: 5, 7, 12) on the basis of six characteristics. The first four are intrinsic to the definition of esotericism; they are more or less inseparable, but should be distinguished for analytical purposes. The two last ones are called relative or nonintrinsic; they are frequently present but need not be. I will outline these characteristics very briefly, referring the reader to Faivre for a more extended discussion.

(1) *Correspondences*. Correspondences, symbolic or real, are believed to exist between all parts of the visible and invisible universe. "These correspondences are considered more or less veiled at first glance, and they are therefore meant to be read, to be decoded. The entire universe is a great theater of mirrors, a set of hieroglyphs to decipher; everything is a

sign, everything harbours and manifests mystery" (Faivre 1992b: xv). A distinction may be made between correspondences between visible and invisible levels of nature, and between nature (the cosmos) and history as exemplified in revealed texts. (2) *Living nature*. The vision of a complex, plural, hierarchical nature permeated by spiritual force(s) is exemplified most clearly in the Renaissance understanding of *magia*. The perception of nature as a living *milieu* - a dynamic network of sympathies and antipathies - furnishes [112] a theoretical foundation for concrete implementation: various kinds of magical practice, "occult" medicine, theosophical soteriologies based on the framework of alchemy, and so on. (3) *Imagination and mediations*. The idea of correspondences implies the possibility of mediation between the higher and lower worlds, by way of rituals, symbols, intermediate spirits, etc. The imagination, far from being mere fantasy, is regarded as an "organ of the soul" by means of which a person can establish cognitive and visionary rapport with an intermediary world, with a mesocosm" (Faivre 1992b: xvii), or *mundus imaginalis*. *Imaginatio* is the main instrument for attaining *gnosis*; it is "a tool for the knowledge of the self, of the world, of myth; it is the eye of fire penetrating the surface of appearances in order to make meanings, "connections", burst forth, to render the invisible visible ..." (Faivre 1992b: xvii-xviii). (4) *Experience of transmutation*. This alchemical terminology is perhaps most appropriate to define the concept of an "initiatic path of development". The esotericist gains insight into the hidden mysteries of cosmos, self and God, and undergoes a process of purification on all levels of his being. (5) *The practice of concordance*. The practice of concordance involves "a marked tendency to seek to establish commonalities between two or more different traditions, sometimes even between all traditions, with a view to gaining illumination, a gnosis of superior quality" (Faivre 1992b: xix). (6) *Transmission*. Transmission refers to the flow of esoteric teachings "from master to disciple following a channel already dug, abiding by a course already charted" (Faivre 1992b: xix). This element involves both the idea of an historical filiation of "authentic" spiritual knowledge (a "tradition" of esoteric truth), and of esoteric initiations in which a spiritual master imparts his knowledge to a disciple.

Faivre emphasizes that these characteristics do not refer to doctrinal content but serve rather "as receptacles within which we can organize different kinds of experiences or imaginings" (Faivre 1992b: xx). As such, they serve to demarcate a distinctive "form of thought", the historical manifestations of which may be widely divergent.

Faivre's definition was developed against the background of detailed historical research into specific movements and persons. Given his undisputed expertise in these generally under-researched areas, critics are unlikely to challenge the validity of Faivre's characteristics as adequate generalizations about the phenomena in question. They might, however, question his conception of esotericism as a "*form of thought*", particularly if the latter is used to legitimate the view of esotericism as a religious *tradition*. The combination of both implies that the study of esotericism focuses on the historical emergence and subsequent development of a specific mode of thinking. This, of course, makes the study of esotericism into a subfield of what is usually referred to as the history of ideas. It follows that we can accept Faivre's definition [113] as a starting point for an empirical study of esotericism if, and only if, we accept the history of (religious) ideas as a legitimate part of the empirical study of religion. This legitimacy, however, is not undisputed. In the next section I will argue against the not uncommon suspicion that the history of ideas rests on presuppositions that are *a priori* incompatible with empirical research. If accepted, my argument will imply not only that the study of esotericism is a valid field within the academic study of religions (because it has an identifiable object connected with a valid methodology), but will also serve to illustrate my suggestion at the very beginning of this article, the suggestion that specialized fields may

require specific methodologies in order to be adequately studied or even to become visible as a "field" at all. What goes for one such field of inquiry does not necessarily go for another, let alone for the study of religions as a whole.

4. An empirical history of ideas

I intend to discuss the history of ideas not as it has often been practised, but only as it *could* be practised. Surely it would be pointless to discuss the subject in the abstract; too many different approaches claim to study the "history of ideas" in some sense. I will therefore take as my point of reference one prominent example, the methodology proposed by Arthur O. Lovejoy (1873-1962).²⁹ This seems an appropriate choice for several reasons. Lovejoy is unquestionably among the most influential proponents of the history of ideas, and his methodological proposals have remained the subject of vigorous debate until the present day.³⁰ Nevertheless, it seems to me that the full potential of his theoretical vision has not been explored as thoroughly as it would deserve.

Most of the criticism that has been leveled at Lovejoy's methodology concerns his concept of *unit-ideas*. His suggestion that complex systems of thought may be analyzed into their basic elements by a procedure similar to analytic chemistry (Lovejoy 1964b: 3), is problematic for several reasons (Mandelbaum 1983: 199-205; Mink 1968-1969a: 9-13; Wiener 1968-1969; [114] Mink 1968-1969b; Skinner 1969: 10-12; Bredsdorff 1975; Kvastad 1978; Gram - Martin 1980; Wilson 1990: 167-177). For our present purposes this discussion, although important in itself, can be disregarded. I will simply accept as valid Daniel J. Wilson's conclusion, based on a thorough discussion of the debate, that the unfortunate term "unit-idea" can be successfully reformulated in terms of Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblance: "It is the term 'unit-idea' which needs to be abandoned, not the methodology of identifying families of closely related key ideas in western thought and analyzing the continuation or recurrence of those ideas with a heightened sensitivity to the multifarious influences on the expression of the idea in a particular context by a particular thinker." (Wilson 1990: 176)

I would suggest, with Louis O. Mink, that the lasting importance of Lovejoy approach lies not in his "doctrine of elements" (i.e., the notion of unit-ideas) but in his "doctrine of forces" (i.e., his perspective on the dynamics of intellectual change [Mink 1968-1969a: 9; cf. Bredsdorff 1975: 16]). These can be brought under two heads. First, Lovejoy emphasizes "the logical 'pressure' of ideas, by which logical implications tend to be expressly drawn by someone as inferences" (Mink 1968-1969a: 14). Accordingly, the historian's task involves more than just description; (s)he needs "a certain aptitude for the discrimination and analysis of concepts, and an eye for not immediately obvious logical relations or quasilogical affinities between ideas" (Lovejoy 1940: 4). In particular, the historian should attempt to uncover the ambiguities implicit in particular ideas, which explain how one basic idea may be developed into very different and often logically contradictory directions. This characterizes the history of ideas as a combined enterprise of empirical description *and* conceptual analysis. Analyzing the logical structure of ideas provides a theoretical framework which is essential for understanding their explicit, historical development. Second, Lovejoy has emphasized the paramount importance of nonlogical factors in the development of ideas. Chief among these are, in his words: "implicit or incompletely explicit *assumptions*, or more or less *unconscious mental habits* ... which are so much a matter of course that they are rather tacitly presupposed than formally expressed and argued for" (Lovejoy 1964b: 7); characteristic *dialectical motives*, such as the almost instinctive predilection of certain individuals or schools for "one

or another turn of reasoning, trick of logic, methodological assumption, which if explicit would amount to a large and important and perhaps highly debatable proposition in logic or metaphysics" (Lovejoy 1964b: 10); and, perhaps most important, susceptibilities to diverse kinds of *metaphysical pathos*, a term newly invented by Lovejoy and referring to "any description of the nature of things, any characterization of the world to which one belongs, in terms which, like the words of a poem, awaken through their associations, and through a sort of empathy which they engender, a congenial [115] mood or tone of feeling ..." (Lovejoy 1964b: 11). One example is "the eternalistic pathos the aesthetic pleasure which the bare abstract idea of immutability gives us" (Lovejoy 1964b: 12). Another is the "monistic pathos", exemplified for instance in the observation that "when a monistic philosophy declares, or suggests, that one is oneself a part of the universal Oneness, a whole complex of obscure emotional responses is released" (Lovejoy 1964b: 13). The point is that the actual content and precise meaning of ideas is only one factor among several responsible for their appeal and historical influence (or, we might add, the lack thereof).

Now, the importance of this last category, in particular, has not been recognized as widely as one would perhaps expect.³¹ Undoubtedly this has a lot to do with a traditional tendency of historians to focus on "official" philosophy, treating it as an autonomous intellectual tradition motivated and steered by the demands of reason only. Lovejoy's approach is incompatible with this naive but persistent view. First, as he repeats on several occasions, conventional distinctions between "major" and "minor" thinkers are irrelevant to the study of the history of ideas. This broadens the field of inquiry to the products of human thought in the widest sense, including religious thought (Lovejoy 1964b: 1920; 1938: 8). Similarly, one of Lovejoy's central concerns is with the "migration of ideas" between widely different contexts such as philosophy, science, literature, religion, art, or politics. This interdisciplinary focus makes "official" philosophy into just one category of the history of ideas, albeit a relatively important one. Finally, Lovejoy's approach inevitably results in a rather sobering picture of the philosophical enterprise: "The susceptibility to different sorts of metaphysical pathos plays ... a great part, both in the formation of philosophical systems by subtly guiding many a philosopher's logic, and in partially causing the vogue and influence of different philosophies among groups or generations which they have affected" (Lovejoy 1964b: 1314). It is important to add that these observations, with their obvious relativistic implications for the rational authority of both philosophy and science, come from a scholar whose *oeuvre* is motivated by an overriding wish for rational understanding (Wilson 1980). Several commentators have observed that it was precisely Lovejoy's lifelong "quest for (rational) intelligibility" which made him expose mercilessly the essentially nonrational *ideological mechanism* (Bredsdorff 1975)³² of human thought. It has been [116] suggested that the very absence of ideological components in Lovejoy's approach (i.e., its empiricism) may be a chief reason why his influence on twentieth-century philosophy has remained small (Feuer 1963: 505).³³

We are now in a position to decide whether a history of ideas on (neo) Lovejovian principles qualifies as a valid empirical methodology within the academic study of religions (and thus, by extension, as a valid approach to the study of esotericism). As regards attitudes towards the specifically *religious*, the issue is unproblematic. There is no reason to suppose that a "(neo)Lovejovian" approach would be incompatible with methodological agnosticism vis-a-vis the meta-empirical or, for that matter, that statements (religionist or reductionist) about the "real nature" of the meta-empirical would add something methodologically relevant.

As for the question of *philosophical* metaphysics, nothing in Lovejoy's methodology implies a doctrine involving the causal primacy of either ideas/consciousness or society. On

the contrary, the defense of "epistemological dualism" in his philosophical *oeuvre* is based precisely on his rejection of both idealism and its opposite (discussed by Lovejoy under the heading "absolute realism" [Lovejoy 1930; 1962]).³⁴ Consequently, Lovejoy explicitly demarcates his approach from those "histories of ideas" of which the *definiens* turns out to be not the subject matter (ideas), but some doctrine of causation (Bredsdorff 1975: 2). It cannot be the business of the historian of ideas, *qua* historian, to demonstrate or suggest the causal primacy of either ideas or society (Bredsdorff 1975: 23, 1415). Lovejoy thus excludes from his methodology "external" theories of causation (sociological, economic, psychoanalytic, etc.), *not* for idealistic reasons (contra Bredsdorff 1975: 17), but because such theories rest on metaphysical presuppositions which his methodology must regard as objects of, rather than tools for, empirical research.³⁵ In several places, it should be added, Lovejoy suggests that [117] socialscientific methods (as long as they are not dogmatically reductionist [Lovejoy 1940: 16; Wiener 1990: 88]) and the history of ideas are complementary pursuits.³⁶ The primary task of the historian of ideas is simply to study ideas, as it is of the social historian to study social history. No conflict needs to exist, and much may be gained from mutual interaction, unless of course one party wishes to monopolize the research of the other.

Finally, the historical focus of empirical research finds in Lovejoy one of its most outspoken defenders. Basic to his philosophy of "temporalistic realism" is the emphasis on "the most indubitable fact of our experience, namely, that experience itself is temporal" (Lovejoy 1962: 87). Accordingly, a precise and detailed *genetic* method of analysis is essential to the history of ideas (Lovejoy 1944: 59; Wiener 1963: 481; Duffin 1990: 157). Remarkably, it is precisely temporality (the "first and fundamental *empirical* truth of which philosophical speculation must take account" [Lovejoy 1962: 88]) which has again and again been qualified or flatly denied in favour of some eternal reality. This peculiar tendency of human beings to circumvent what would seem to be obvious empirical facts is among the most fascinating phenomena for the historian of ideas. As, indeed, it should be for the historian of religions.

5. Diachronic study of esotericism

From a (neo-)Lovejovian perspective we may interpret Faivre's definition of esotericism as referring to an "idea complex", in the sense of a cluster of related ideas recognizable over time by virtue of family resemblance.³⁷

An esoteric *tradition*, on this foundation, may be defined as a historical continuity in which individuals and/or groups are demonstrably influenced in [118] their life and thinking by the esoteric ideas formulated earlier, which they use and develop according to the specific demands and cultural context of their own period. A diachronic study of such an esoteric tradition, recognizing the irreversibility of historical time, must be *genetic*. It traces the filiation of ideas over time *not* with the prior intention of demonstrating their trans- or metahistorical similarity or unity,³⁸ even less with the intention to demonstrate historical "anticipations" of cherished ideas,³⁹ but with the intention of clarifying the complex ways in which people process - absorb, (re) interpret, (re)construct, etc. - the ideas of the past accessible to them. Such a genetic approach nevertheless leaves room for the recognition of relatively constant factors such as certain types of religious experience, certain inferences which are likely to be drawn from such experiences, the "logical pressure" of ideas and basic assumptions, and various prerational factors proposed by Lovejoy. The identification of constants may give rise to theoretical typologies whose adequacy depends on the extent to

which they are able to "organize" historical materials in such a way as to help explain and render intelligible the "life of ideas".⁴⁰

But, obviously, even if - by definition - ideas "live" in the minds of individuals, their *survival* over time requires that they be "embodied" in social contexts. Certainly, it is on the basis of its *ideas* that esotericism becomes visible to the historian as a separate field of study, and it is their development over time which enables the historian to speak of a "tradition" of esotericism. But this in no way implies that the study of esotericism should restrict itself to the study of esoteric ideas. Once properly defined, and made empirically available as a tradition, esotericism appears to display all the dimensions of religion as distinguished, for instance, by Ninian Smart in his well-known exposition (1973): social, ritual, experiential, doctrinal, mythic, ethical, and symbolic. Like in other religious traditions, then, any of these dimensions may be singled out for special investigation, and various methodological approaches [119] may be brought to bear on them. Accordingly, the social dimensions of esotericism are likely to be studied by sociologists or social historians, the ritual dimensions by anthropologists, and so on. Furthermore, the "migration" of esoteric ideas to such areas as art, literature, music, science, etc. may be studied by specialists in those fields. None of this is incompatible with an empirical approach, as long as reductionism and religionism are avoided and the primacy of the historical framework is respected.

But, of course, such is often not the case. Perhaps the most important example of reductionism in the study of esotericism is the so-called "sociology of the occult". A few words must be said about the contrast of this academic pursuit with the approach defended here. In a well-known and influential volume edited by Edward A. Tiryakian (1974a), Marcello Truzzi discusses "the occult" (or "occultism") as an area for sociological research. The gist of his proposal is that occultism is characterized by its interest in "things anomalous to our generally accepted cultural-storehouse of 'truths'". Accordingly, the term occultism refers to all those movements and tendencies which are based on the "contradiction of accepted beliefs" in general, and particularly on a rejection of modern rationality and science (Truzzi 1974: 245-246). Similarly Tiryakian himself, in the same volume, defines esotericism and occultism entirely in terms of scientifically unverified/unverifiable beliefs, and practices based on those beliefs (Tiryakian 1974b: 265).⁴¹ Both approaches therefore define "the occult" indirectly, i.e., as deviations from a given norm defined in terms of modern scientific rationalism.⁴²

That there is obviously a strong tension between occultistic and scientific world-views is not the issue here. The point is that a "sociology of the occult" on these (widely accepted) premises is unhistorical, and therefore incompatible with a diachronic study of esotericism. First, it simply ignores the abundant historical evidence that occultism is not a reaction to modernity but a modern continuation of traditions which far predate the formulation of a modernist world-view. Second, assuming an artificial duality between "science" and "the irrational" it is bound to ignore the complicated process by which hermeticism has actually contributed historically to the formulation of that same world-view (Yates 1967; Righini Bonelli - Shea 1975; Merkel - Debus 1988). Finally, to approach occultism only negatively and indirectly (in terms of its contrast to "the" scientific and rational world-view) precludes [120] any possibility of understanding it in its own terms and on its own premises. Implicit in this is the barely hidden assumption that such an attempt at understanding is futile. To define occultism as irrational and unscientific is, given the general perspective of Truzzi *et al.*, simply another way of saying that its beliefs are nonsense. Why should one seriously study beliefs that will undoubtedly turn out to be, so to speak, "all sound and fury, signifying nothing"? These comments add up to a perhaps surprising conclusion: a sociological study of

occultism on the above premises - without interest either in its beliefs or in its history - is not, properly spoken, a study of occultism at all. James Beckford has explained why when he argued that, actually, most sociologists are interested in the occult only as a convenient illustration of reductionist theories pertaining to *deviance* or the *sociology of error*:

the notion of *deviance*, *deviance-amplification* and *labeling* already constituted a ready-made conceptual and theoretical framework in which [occultistic groups] were readily reduced to a matter of personal or social problems. It is as if these movements simply flew into a very sticky spider's web of concepts and assumptions which immediately reduced their significance to an expression of alienation, anomie, relative deprivation or 'the flight from reason'. (Beckford 1984: 260)⁴³

A diachronic study of occultism on historical-genetic premises must proceed very differently. It should notice, first, that the term "occultism" is a nineteenth-century neologism, while the adjective "occult" can be traced at least as far back as H. C. Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia*, published in 1533 (Secret 1974; Blum 1989). There is therefore no *prima facie* reason to speak of "occultism" prior to the nineteenth century,⁴⁴ but it is very reasonable to explore its connections with those traditions traditionally known as the "occult sciences" (i.e., primarily alchemy, astrology, and *magia*). A detailed analysis of occultist belief systems makes it possible to trace the filiation of its core ideas backwards through history, though *not*, to be sure, by merely recognizing that some ideas are "similar" to some earlier ones, but by identifying precisely which sources (books, authors, organized groups, etc.) have served as mediating links, and why, how and under what circumstances they have influenced others. For such research, an operational definition of esotericism like Faivre's is extremely useful as a heuristic tool. Again, a serious diachronic study would *not* mean simply scanning occultistic movements in order to find Faivre's four (or six) characteristics and, in case of success, concluding [121] that therefore occultism and esotericism have the same world-view. To be satisfied with such conclusions is the mark of pseudo-histories of ideas. On the contrary, by virtue of being a theoretical *generalization* about concrete historical ideas (not an attempt at hypostatizing "esotericism") Faivre's characteristics beg the question of *difference* and historical change. Applied to occultism, the crucial task would be to demonstrate how the original contents and associations of an idea complex that originated in the Renaissance are *changed* under the broad cultural impact of Enlightenment values and the rise of mechanistic science. Such an approach is incompatible with Truzzi's; it cannot conceive of occultism as the waste product of a rational and scientific world-view, but must interpret it as the product of attempts (successful or not) to adapt a premodern world-view to the modern world (Faivre 1992a: 88).⁴⁵

The case of occultism has exemplary value. A diachronic study of esotericism would have to consider *any* of its historical manifestations not in terms of continuation but in terms of *reinterpretation*. As any interpretation necessarily presupposes a context, a detailed analysis of that context - in all its dimensions: intellectual, religious, social, political, etc. - is essential. There is no reason why any aspect of esotericism, or any approach to its study, should be exempted from these requirements.

6. Synchronic study of esotericism?

It may come as a surprise to some that the merits of an empirical, *diachronic* study of esotericism have in fact been demonstrated by a famous scholarly *oeuvre*. I am referring to the studies of Gershom Scholem. The title of his best-known work (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*) appears to be [122] somewhat misleading, considering that in his Hebrew

publications Scholem preferred to speak not of mystics but of *ba'aley sod* ['esoterics'] (Dan 1993:62-63). It should also be remembered that Scholem interpreted Merkabah "mysticism" as a species of Jewish *gnosticism* and that, in discussing the Zohar, he preferred the term "theosophy" over mysticism. Finally, he commented repeatedly on the striking similarity between Zoharic speculation and the Christian theosophy of Jacob Boehme (Scholem 1970: 255-256; 1984:15). Similarly Annemarie Schimmel, although she discusses Islamic Sufism as "mysticism", specifies that much of it is in fact a "mysticism of the gnostic type" (Schimmel 1975: 6) and mentions the prominence in Sufism of alchemy and theosophical speculation. The French scholar Henry Corbin - inspired, to be sure, by a religionist perspective bordering on apologetics - seems to parallel Scholem's Hebrew terminology in referring to medieval Sufism as Islamic esoterism (Corbin 1969: 77-101). All this suggests strongly that the study of esotericism may legitimately be extended, as a further step, to the domain of all three great scriptural traditions. This, however, has far-reaching implications.

It is clear that if we consider the possibility of esotericism as a domain of study within all three great scriptural traditions, Faivre's definition of "esotericism" - a theoretical generalization about *Christian* traditions of a particular period - is no longer fully applicable. We would have to look for a more general definition of esotericism, which should be able to incorporate Faivre's definition as referring to a specific, historically and culturally demarcated subdomain. But if we do this, it is no longer immediately clear that the term "esotericism" should have preference over such rival candidates as "gnosis" or "mysticism". I recall that my original motivation for defining an area called "esotericism" was to recover a neglected area of study. If we extend the field beyond the sphere of Christianity, however, we find that in Judaism and Islam the scholarly neglect of corresponding phenomena is somewhat less serious, but that this fact is obscured because they are referred to by other names. This realization produces serious questions about the ideological functioning of scholarly "labeling". Traditional distinctions between "gnosticism", "mysticism", and "esotericism", as well as the tendency of scholarship to concentrate largely on the first two while ignoring the third, evidently have weak foundations in reality. Actually, I suspect that they amount to little more than Christian polemics in a secularized garb.⁴⁶ Ultimately, then, the [123] study of "esotericism" as understood in this article will have to be regarded as part of a larger, more complicated domain which includes so-called "esotericism" together with so-called "gnosticism" and so-called "mysticism". By what name we should refer to this general domain remains a matter of debate. All the existing labels - gnosis/gnosticism, mysticism, esotericism - are probably too much burdened by traditional associations. Furthermore, instead of arbitrarily picking one of them to serve for the whole field and discarding the others, it may be more useful to retain all of them but use them as ideal types.⁴⁷

Corbin, among others, believed that the recognition of similarities between the scriptural traditions called for a discipline of "comparative esotericism". Whether or not "esotericism" would be the preferable term, this proposal seems reasonable enough in principle. However, we should beware of the extent to which an automatic preference for a comparative instead of a genetic approach may betray questionable religionistic presuppositions about the "universality" of esotericism. An empirical approach to the study of esotericism has no reason to exclude the possibility of "independent invention", but I suggest that it should consider this option only when the alternative of historical-genetic *diffusion* has been tried first, and failed. In this respect, as in many others, I suggest that researchers should take very seriously the recommendations made by Joseph Dan in a recent, landmark article about the definition of "mysticism". Being a specialist of Jewish "mysticism", his observations turn out to be equally relevant to the study of esotericism. His "contingental"

approach (according closely with the empirical approach defended here) rejects comparative approaches which start from the assumption of mystical universalism:

The key to a contingent approach to the study of mysticism is the concept of beginning. The mystical unifying attitude denies this concept: mystical truth must be universal and comprehensive in the same way throughout history; it is beyond the concept of time, and therefore of history. The very quest for a beginning indicates the concept of change, and therefore of the contingencies of time and place, of historical development, and almost always also those of controversy, schism and differences. The quest for the beginning of a religious or mystical phenomenon characterizes the contingent, historical and philological approach, which seeks the creative and the individual aspects, as opposed to the eternity of absolute, unchanging truth, which [124] negates all possibility of creativity and annihilates the position of the mystic as a unique contributor, as an individual, to the history of human spirituality. (Dan 1993:89)

Dan defines "mysticism" as "the negation of the veracity of communicative language, and the belief in a noncommunicative truth lying in a symbolical fashion deep within revealed divine language" (Dan 1993: 79-80).⁴⁸ I would suggest that this approach suggests two possible alternatives to a crypto-religionist comparativism. First, it is quite possible that the "esoteric" traditions within the Jewish-Christian-Islamic domain *as a whole*, considering the coexistence of these traditions for long periods in roughly the same geographical area, may be explained by genetic diffusion based on inter-religious contact. Second, it would be fruitful to explore the option of (relatively) independent invention, based not on a universal mysticism but on the *logic(s) of monotheism and scripturalism*. A Lovejovian approach would be particularly suitable to explore the possibility that the normative absoluteness of monotheism and scripturalism would sooner or later lead - in certain individuals or groups, probably influenced by certain "temperamental inclinations", and under certain social circumstances - to the emergence of structurally similar speculations. Exploring such options first would avoid the risk of putting the cart (of similarity) before the horse (of influence).

7. Conclusion

The above was meant to demonstrate two things, and at least suggest two others. I hope to have demonstrated, first, that "esotericism" is a serious and important field of study, which will likely lead to fresh perspectives on several adjacent areas and, second, that the emancipation of the study of esotericism into an accepted part of the academic study of religion requires serious reflection on methodology. In addition, my discussion of esotericism suggests that the general methodological debate in the academic study of religion is very relevant to sub-areas of that study, but that the specific methodology appropriate to such subareas is at least as relevant to the general debate. This last point, it seems to me, is too often ignored. Finally, although I cannot possibly hope to have demonstrated the superiority of an empirical approach, I believe at least to have suggested strongly both its theoretical possibility and its intrinsic merits. I look forward to a lively and stimulating debate [125] between students of esotericism about the presuppositions informing their research into some fascinating chapters in the human search for meaning.

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Footnotes

1. The research for this article was supported by the Foundation for Theology and Religious Studies in the Netherlands (STEGON), founded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research.
2. See also the exchange between Donald Wiebe - Luther H. Martin - Ursula King - Ninian Smart in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 5 (1993: 47-61).
3. In recognition of this development, the next International Association for the History of Religions congress (Mexico City, 1995) will devote a special symposium to "Western esotericism and the science of religions".
4. I will disregard the problem whether this first group is in fact a compound. It could be argued that "theological reductionism" based on religious exclusivism should be distinguished from "religionism" proper, which is concerned with an inclusive "new humanism" (Platvoet 1994: 29). Wiebe's recent distinction between "theology" and "religious thought", if accepted, further complicates the issue (Wiebe 1991).
5. Eliade, of course, is discussed as *pars pro toto* in this article. Segal legitimizes his provocative title only by the gratuitous remark, "What is true of Eliade is, I believe, true of other historians of religions as well". He fails (1) to give reasons for this belief; (2) to make clear whether he means "some" or "all" other historians; (3) to attempt any proof of the radical claim implied by the word "necessarily".
6. For instance, Karen Voss, in a stimulating review of Eliade's *oeuvre*, seems to interpret J. Zwi Werblowski's empiricist program as a defense of positivist reductionism (Voss 1985). These confusions are all the more natural because empiricists themselves may use the term "positivist" in a limited and technical sense, while still rejecting positivist-*reductionism* (likewise in Platvoet 1990: 186-187). Given the fact that for most religionists the very term "positivism" (like "reductionism") is an obvious "boo-word", such uses only add to the confusion. A similar effect is created by Wiebe's characterization of Werblowski's program as a "positivist-sounding statement" (1984: 407 n. 32).
7. A believer may be perfectly able to verify the reality of meta-empirical realities by nonempirical means (for instance by employing spiritual techniques). To deny that possibility is to impute to him/her "irrationality" in the sense of acting and believing without sufficient reasons even according to his/her own *emic* presuppositions. Platvoet unfortunately fails to allow for this in his final definition of "religions": "Religions consist of notions, attitudes and emotions, behaviour and social organization in respect of beings and/or a reality, the existence and activity of which can neither be verified nor falsified but which the faithful believe to exist and to be active in their lives and/or to determine their future destinies." (1990: 196) The failure to add the words "by empirical means" after the word "falsified" unfortunately suggests (undoubtedly contrary to Platvoet's intention) that the believers themselves do not know what they are doing and why.
8. It might be argued that many religionists (in contrast to confessional theologians) are actually concerned less with defending a "meta-empirical" domain in Platvoet's terms than with defending the integrity of "mind" against the modernist tendency to reduce it to the status of an epiphenomenon.
9. For instance, we read about Fustel de Coulanges' idealist conviction that "ideas ... are the cause of social changes and the primary factor of social phenomena". (Morris 1987:112) Morris adds that "the reverse is true", but gives no reasons why this is so. Discussing Durkheim, Moms contends (1987: 119) that "few theories have been greeted with such widespread criticism, or, indeed, scorn. ... Yet few texts have had such a profound influence ...". Instead of arguing why he believes that Durkheim was right and his critics were wrong, Morris seems to assume that Durkheim's success proves that he was right: "Who nowadays would quibble with Durkheim's contention that "religion is something eminently social and that conceptions of divinity have a social origin?" I would. The first of these last two contentions is certainly true for large parts of the field but would lead to exclusion of some phenomena usually regarded as "religious". The second is simply a reductionistic axiom; it is not, and cannot be, a conclusion from research. Moms (1987: 319)

criticizes Geertz for never fully exploring "the social forces that *produced* the religious beliefs and practices" (my emphasis). In these and many other cases Needham's criticism of Durkheim/Mauss (quoted by Moms [1987: 135]) seems correct: "they assume what ought to be proved by subsequent analysis, namely the primacy of the social".

10. It might be argued that as long as the case is undecided, scholars are free to opt for the more likely position. However, this warrants at most a provisory "if ... then" mode of reasoning. My point is not that such an approach is undefendable, but that it has the logical status of a provisory *thought experiment*. "Experimental reductionism", in this sense, seems a valid research strategy, but the extent to which it "works" does not logically prove the extent to which it is true in an absolute sense. A program based on the structure "*if* we assume that X, let us see what happens" may yield important results not obtainable otherwise. X may stand for any metaphysical assumption, but ultimately the question must also be asked, "*if* we now discard the assumption that X, what happens to our results"?
11. Wiebe, at least in his earlier work, realizes the problem but concludes that philosophy must therefore play a constitutive role in the study of religion (Wiebe 1975: 47; 1983: 304-305). In support of this, Wiebe quotes Brakenfield's criteria for an acceptable theory of religion, the first of which states that such a theory should "build upon an acceptable general philosophical view". I do not see how this could possibly provide a "neutral ground" for discussion (Wiebe 1983: 305), because it is not explained by what criteria the "acceptability" of such a philosophical view could be decided upon without resorting to tautological arguments (i.e., accepting the philosophy on the basis of its own premises). In the practice of research, "acceptable" means simply that some scholars happen to like it.
12. For reductionists and religionists alike, relativism functions like a "boo-word", for moral and pragmatic rather than scientific reasons. For a brilliant critique of the "anti-relativistic" sentiment, see Geertz (1984).
13. See Rudolph (1989: 7-8) on Eliade's "aversion to history, especially to 'historicism'", which Rudolph calls remarkable for a man who would be understood as a "historian" of religions.
14. Emphasis in the original. Merkur adds that the same argument applies to "most metaphysics and theologies".
15. Cf. the issue "Anthropology and History in the 1980's" in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 12 (1981) (contributions by Bernard S. Cohn, John W. Adams, Natalie Z. Davis and Carlo Ginzburg). A prominent example of such cross-fertilization with obvious relevance for the study of esotericism is Thomas (1971). Carlo Ginzburg, in an equally imposing example of "anthropological history", criticizes Thomas for his functionalist bias which ignores the symbolic dimension beliefs (see Ginzburg 1991: 4-6).
16. Cf. Segal (1989d: 75-86). For the study of esotericism, a very good example is De Camp (1970).
17. It may be true that attacks upon reductionism may often be difficult to distinguish from "apologies for transcendence", and there is no doubt that in launching such attacks religionists may often pose as empirical historians (either for strategic reasons or because they do not see a difference themselves). However, such *empirical* observations about the debate obviously do not prove anything about the *theoretical* possibility of making the distinction.
18. It is not difficult to demonstrate that such a desire to defend metaphysical axioms, rather than to understand religion, is the real motivation behind all influential attempts to formulate radical explanatory theories. Clarke - Byrne (1993) amounts to such a demonstration.
19. These "sources of doubt" about the possibility of a satisfactory operational definition of religion appear in Clarke - Byrne (1993: 4-6).
20. For reasons that cannot be discussed here, an extension beyond the sphere of the monotheistic traditions is far more questionable.
21. I will follow Joseph Dan's suggestion (1993: 67) that "scriptural religions" is more accurate and expressive of the nature of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam than "monotheistic religions".
22. See Nasr (1986: 4, 17). The neglect is not surprising, given the wholesale rejection by the founders of the perennialist perspective of modernity in all its forms, including the academic study of

religion which is scorned for promoting the evils of relativism, reductionism, and historicism (Nasr 1986: 3-4, 10, 17).

23. The fact that perennialism considers its own metaphysical framework to be the absolute truth about the nature of religion logically precludes the possibility of discovering anything new or unexpected. Taking "the truth of religion" as the starting point of "investigation" reduces the latter to mere illustration. The implications of perennialism have been outlined with particular clarity by Len Bowman. Any criticism of perennialist beliefs is stopped dead in its tracks by a "no-win logic": "if you understood, you would agree; if you disagree, obviously you don't understand" (Bowman 1990: 12). Demonstrations that perennialists emphasize unity at the expense of differences fare no better: "the perception of differences, you see, belongs to the lower, theological/philosophical or exoteric level, whereas the recognition of unity is metaphysical and esoteric. Evidently, the person raising the criticism ... is operating on that lower level" (Bowman 1990: 11).
24. Perennialists usually speak of "esoterism" rather than "esotericism". It seems useful to take advantage of this in order to distinguish between the perennialist view on the one hand, and the strongly different empirical view defended here. Unfortunately however, the distinction is difficult to maintain in translations.
25. Guenon considered his beliefs to be embodied most completely in Hinduism. He was not particularly interested in the western hermeticist tradition and seems to have known little about it. Positive mention of Christian theosophy is limited to only a few lines in his whole voluminous oeuvre (Faivre 1993: 27). Similarly, Schuon writes a lot about "esoterism" in the great religious traditions but almost completely neglects esotericism as understood here (cf. Nasr 1986: 19-20, 233-261).
26. Parts of this French publication are translated in Faivre (1992b). A complete version has appeared in Faivre 1994.
27. "Sans doute n'existe-t-il rien de tel" ['undoubtedly, no such thing exists'] (Faivre 1992a: 4).
28. "Certes, il existe ailleurs qu'en Occident des mots que l'on a voulu faire correspondre plus ou moins a celui-la; mais il sent charges de connotations differentes, ils renvoient a des sens trop divers, conceptuellement trop restreints ou anthropologiquement trop vastes, pour s'appliquer au champ qui nous occupe ici. ... Disons-le plus nettement encore: l'auteur de ces lignes n'a toujours pas compris ce que serait un 'esoterisme universel'." ['Certainly, outside the West there exist words which one would have wanted to make more or less correspond with it [i.e., esotericism]; but they are laden with different connotations, they refer to meanings which are too diverse, too conceptually restricted or too anthropologically broad, to apply to the field which concerns us here. ... Let us say it even more clearly: the author of these lines has never understood what could be meant by a "universal esotericism".] (Faivre 1992a: 7)
29. The most complete discussions can be found in Lovejoy (1964b) and, applied to the study of Romanticism, in Lovejoy (1941). Less complete expositions appear in Lovejoy (1938; 1940; 1948b).
30. For a very useful overview (based on articles that appeared in the *Journal of the History of Ideas* between 1940 and 1987), consult Kelley (1990). Other important contributions about Lovejoy's methodology and its philosophical presuppositions are Baumer (1949); Lovejoy (1962); Randall (1963); Wiener (1963); Feuer (1963); McGill (1963); Baylis (1963); Mandelbaum (1983); Mink (1966; 1968-1969a; 1968-1969b); Wiener (1968-1969); Skinner (1969); Tobey (1975); Bredsdorff (1975); Kvastad (1978); Wilson (1980); Gram - Martin (1980); Oakley (1984).
31. On the other hand, a methodology based on the same principles but - surprisingly - without explicit reference to Lovejoy may be found in Jones (1973).
32. Note, in this connection, Bredsdorff's very interesting suggestion about Lovejoy's conception of "ideas": "... in the definition of idea as used by Lovejoy, there is included ... an extra criterion which has never been spelt out in the official declarations of principle. In order to qualify as an idea for a Lovejovian *a notion must also be purportedly descriptive though in reality normative*. The more diverse the emotions carried and prompted by the normative use of the notion ... and the

- more deceptive the descriptive disguise of it, the greater its chance of yielding results when subjected to a Lovejoyian study" (1975: 6). Accordingly, Lovejoyian history of ideas is "the history of how descriptions are used for persuasion" (1975: 12).
33. "The language of philosophy is logical, but its content is ideological".
 34. According to Lovejoy, the belief that there is a physical, external world *and* that we entertain ideas (which are not physical and external) belongs to "the natural and spontaneous epistemological creed of mankind". Like the supposedly "mysterious" but actually commonplace notion of intentionality, it is "obviously entertained by the plain man and by most philosophers in their normal moments". Actually, Lovejoy suggests, the persistent attempts by philosophers to deny their own and others' normal human experience betrays the presence of prerational motivations: it is not reason but emotional susceptibility to the "monistic pathos" which is the motor of such speculation.
 35. Of course, there have been several attempts to apply Lovejoy's method to his own *oeuvre* (Mink 1968-1969a; Bredsdorff 1975; Duffin 1990). These analyses have significantly clarified the personal motivations behind his own thinking but, as far as I can see, they leave the essentially non-ideological character of his approach unaffected. Of course, "epistemological dualism" is technically speaking a metaphysical position, but Lovejoy's opinion that the burden of proof is on those metaphysicians who wish to *deny* this "critical commonsensist" perspective (Feuer 1963: 494) seems completely valid.
 36. Implicitly for instance in Lovejoy (1964b: 20; the history of ideas can give only one contribution among many). More explicitly in Lovejoy (1940: 19: "The history of philosophy assuredly is not ... an exclusively logical process ... ; its course is shaped and diverted by the intrusion of many factors which belong to the domain of the psychologist or the sociologist. ... But since this aspect of the matter is now in so little danger of being disregarded, it is more to the purpose to dwell upon the residuum of truth in the older view."). Cf. finally Lovejoy (1941: 270-271; 277-278).
 37. However, it would be important to reflect further on the question whether Faivre's definition concerns an idea complex, or a theoretical *generalization about certain idea complexes*. This question is important in relation to Lovejoy's methodology generally; arguably, a refinement of the latter should accommodate the *emic/etic* distinction as used within the science of religions.
 38. Cf. Lovejoy's warning that the history of ideas has "its own characteristic excess ... it may easily degenerate into a species of merely imaginative historical generalization" (1964b: 21; cf. Oakley 1984: 32-33). Such generalizations are congenial to the religionist tendency to stress transhistorical unity. The combination of both in the study of esotericism has produced not a few popular expositions which perceive "the universal gnosis" within the most diverse contexts.
 39. Cf. Skinner (1969: 11). In the study of esotericism, one instructive example is Jacob Boehme, a major figure in western esotericism, who has been misinterpreted for generations as a kind of prefiguration of Hegel (see the refutation of this perspective by Deghaye [1985: 19-20; 1992: 239-240]).
 40. I have attempted such a typology elsewhere (Hanegraaff 1992a). Important in this typology are the identification of a "latent gnostic disposition" (similar to Lovejoy's prerational factors) and a logical-conceptual analysis of the ways in which certain kinds of religious experience give rise to particular ideological structures (Hanegraaff 1992a: 9).
 41. See the criticism of both Truzzi and Tiryakian in Galbreath (1983).
 42. It should be noted that Truzzi speaks of "anomalies" in relation to generally accepted scientific *and* religious knowledge (1974: 246). This is not surprising: doing otherwise would lead to the absurd result that large parts of modern Christianity have to be called "occult"! In practice, however, Truzzi concentrates entirely on the contrast between occultism and modern science (see his discussion of "the authority of occult claims" [1974: 249-250, and the closing paragraph]).
 43. For the sake of argument I have replaced "NRMs" by "occultistic groups". Beckford's comment applies equally to the sociology of both domains, which (in the western context) are usually treated as largely overlapping if not nearly synonymous. Cf. also Beckford (1985:73),

44. I do not claim that such a use should be avoided in all cases; the term "esotericism", after all, emerged around the same time as "occultism".
45. "Généralement les occultistes ne condamnent pas le progrès scientifique ou la modernité, qu'ils cherchent plutôt à intégrer dans une vision globale propre à faire apparaître la vacuité du matérialisme." [Generally, occultists do not condemn scientific progress or modernity. Rather, they seek to integrate it within a global vision suitable for demonstrating the emptiness of materialism.] (Faivre 1992a: 88) A logical analysis along Lovejovian lines would, I believe, suggest that this original occultist project was bound to fail intellectually (but not necessarily practically) because it attempted to combine inherently incompatible world-views. Following the historical thread into the twentieth century, one would have to take account of new developments - particularly the impact of Freudian and Jungian psychology on occultism - which may perhaps solve some of these incompatibilities (cf. Hanegraaff 1992b: 17-19). Such differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultism are yet another argument against a sociology which dogmatically assumes the existence of some vague and amorphous entity called "the occult". This mainly suggestive term, loaded as it is with obscure affective connotations, should better be discarded from scholarly debate altogether, in favour of the far more concrete terms "occult sciences" and "occultism" (Hanegraaff 1992b: 12).
46. I mean that the terms of the debate have an apologetic background. Crudely put: gnosticism is bad, mysticism is OK. The neglect of esotericism as defined by Faivre is probably due to the fact that it emerged too late to become a separate issue in the theological debate. When attacked or defended by theologians, it was either interpreted as "mystical" or "gnostic". For the rest, Christian theologians were more than occupied with reacting to the new rational spirit. When the latter had finally prevailed, modern historians perceived the past in terms of another two-sided polemic: the one between religion and reason. Conceptualized primarily as the process of science progressively emancipating itself from churchly authority, this polemic could conveniently ignore the complicating (because ambiguous) factor of esotericism. The recent academic rediscovery of the latter cannot be separated from the increasing need for new and more sophisticated interpretations of the genesis of modernity.
47. See, for instance, my ideal-typical distinction between gnosis and mysticism (Hanegraaff 1992a: 17) or Faivre's distinction between esotericism and mysticism (1992b: xvii).
48. Compare my typological approach based on the concept of "gnosis" as the assertion of ineffable, nondiscursive "truth" (Hanegraaff 1992a). Whether Dan's definition would hold outside the context of the scriptural religions seems somewhat questionable, but does not have to concern us here.

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Other articles of related interest

Closely related to the subject matter of the above article is Hanegraaff's "Some Remarks on the Study of Western Esotericism" published in *Theosophical History* VII/6 (April 1999): 223-232. Its publisher, James Santucci, thinks that both articles would give "the most complete explanation of the academic approach to this area of study" and should be read by anyone venturing into this discipline. An article reflecting on these methodological issues, and taking its cue from Hanegraaff, is K. Paul Johnson's "Historian as Heretic: Conflicting Perspectives on Theosophical History," which is a thoughtful assessment of his own experiences in investigating theosophy.

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Footnotes in the original were changed into endnotes. Original pagination in square brackets. Other articles, Biographical Note, Contact Information and Source were added.