

BOOK REVIEW

The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction, by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke. Oxford University Press, hard cover 2008. 286 pp. \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-19-532099-2.

Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke is Professor of Western Esotericism at the University of Exeter and Director of EXESES0, the Exeter Centre for the Study of Esotericism. Those who are skeptical of such a university chair might be inclined to ask whether, like ABRACADABRA, the acronym EXESES0 may be a magic word. Images of Harry Potter thrusting forward his wand with the invocation “EXESES0!” come to mind. However, before Professor Goodrick-Clarke aims his wand at this reviewer, let me clarify. What he tellingly argues in this densely packed 286 page volume is that his subject matter, which has been thought of as constituting “survivals of superstition and irrationalism” and has been “kept in epistemological quarantine” (p. 4), actually represents an important body of work having an ongoing impact on the development of both culture and science. In Goodrick-Clarke’s view the historical systems under the rubric “esoteric” are uniquely important today as a spiritual counterpoise to the mechanistic view of nature.

If Goodrick-Clarke is right, the Western esoteric tradition should command scientific interest in the light of starkly contrary views such as those of Hawking and Mlodinow that we are nothing more than biological machines having no free will, and that there is no need for a deity to explain the creation of the universe. (Hawking and Mlodinow, 2010), or the fad in cognitive science identifying the mind with the brain, the brain with a computer, and the consequent denial of selfhood and with it of course the soul. (Cf. McDaniel 2010). Yet traditional (non-esoteric) religions already stand opposed to a scientific world view that eliminates soul, deity, and self. What does the esoteric perspective provide that non-esoteric spirituality cannot? How might science be transformed by a dose of esotericism? In his final chapter Goodrick-Clarke proposes that a “scientized” esotericism may bridge the gulf between spirituality and science.

The Historical Account

The main body of this book consists of a detailed history of systems loosely classified as esoteric, excluding related systems of far Eastern origin such as Vedic philosophy, Buddhism, Jainism, Yoga and so on, except as, in some cases, proselytizers have preempted such materials especially in the later works of individuals such as Blavatsky, Besant and Leadbeater. (Leadbeater 1968). Readers who have an interest in the subject from a purely historical viewpoint should find his account rewarding; but if one is drawn to the book out of a desire to deepen one’s understanding of esoteric materials from the point of view of personal transformation through specific practices, or of relevance to scientific methodology, the first chapters may seem pedantic as the author takes us through outlines of ancient sources of esotericism originating in the area of the eastern Mediterranean during the first centuries A.D. (p. 15), and subsequently through brief summaries of views promulgated by literally dozens of spiritual teachers and their derived systems over the course of the following centuries.

My experience in reading this volume is that during Goodrick-Clarke's account of this historical sequence, his position regarding the veracity of oftentimes outlandish claims is ambiguous. At times he seems the unbiased reporter, but at other times there appears to be an implication in his phraseology suggesting the role of an advocate. This ambiguity remains until we reach the final chapter, where it seems clear that he takes the perspective of an enthusiast.

In this review I do not intend to address in any detail the accounts he provides of the long trail of these seemingly self-multiplying systems, their historical interrelations, and their frequently colorful proselytizers (such as the flamboyant Count Cagliostro or the mysterious Madam Helena Blavatsky). Instead I wish to focus on the central character of what is called *esotericism*: what makes these systems "esoteric?" And why should they have any special impact upon either spirituality or science in the modern world.?

The Question of Origins

Uppermost in any account of Western Esotericism (WE) is the question of origins. This is especially the case because the claim to truth is regularly referred to the assumed veracity of "ancient wisdom" and divine communications. Goodrick-Clarke cites early sources as including Alexandrian Hermetism, the cult of Thoth in Egypt, the *Hermetica* or Hermetic texts from scattered sources (the chief of which is the Greek *Corpus Hermeticum* dating from the second and third centuries A.D.), Neoplatonism, Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, Chaldean Oracles, and Gnosticism. However he points out that these systems reflect Eastern influences dating from the time of Alexander and carried to the Mediterranean world through Egypt. (p. 16).

WE is therefore a hybrid set of ideas. Because of the author's focus on Western systems, certain factors having to do with this east-west juxtaposition appear to this reader to be insufficiently recognized. Aside from the Orient (near East), major religions of the far East such as Buddhism and Hinduism do not depend on a deity in the sense of a Christian God. WE systems, as they develop in the middle ages and later, very much adopt Christian or Judaic concepts. One can readily detect an overlay of Judeo-Christian thought on an underpinning of quite different ideas.

One notable omission in Goodrick-Clarke's account is the absence of significant reference to the goddesses of Egypt and the goddess-religions of the ancient Mediterranean such as the Greek or Pelasgian creation-goddess Eurynome and the Minoan Mother-goddess of Crete (Graves 1966, Cottrell 1962), whose origins are pre-Hellenic. There is no reference to "goddess" in the exceedingly elaborate index. Yet it is beyond imagination to think that this amalgam of ideas could have escaped the influence of the very ancient deified feminine creative principle.

Without blinking Goodrick-Clarke notes that Thoth (who in his later identification with Hermes becomes the chief figure and Psychopomp of Alchemy, Hermes Trismegistus) was "associated with the Moon" and was in fact a "Moon-God." Rather ironically he continues,

This identification of Thoth with the Moon was of immense practical importance to Egyptian culture for the Moon's phases governed the great rhythms of flood and drought across the Nile delta. It was from these rhythms that the Egyptians measured time and seasons and Thoth became associated with the governance of Time itself. (p. 17).

It cannot escape our attention that the monthly cycles, as well as all rhythmic cyclical order, have from time immemorial been associated with the feminine. The Egyptian goddess Maat is not only the overall creatrix of order in the universe, standing above even the sun-god Horus, but Thoth, the wellspring from whom the Hermetic tradition is said to come, is in fact her masculine counterpart who shares all of her attributes including those of Logos, Order and Truth. (Budge 1904 pp. 400-416, Hooker 1996). Thoth, by his connection with the Moon, is by inference an hermaphroditic god combining masculine and feminine creative power.

There is good reason to believe that it is the presence of the feminine in the esoteric tradition, largely veiled or as in Goodrick-Clarke's case ignored, that is the heart of what makes the tradition esoteric (occult or hidden). It is so because in the patriarchal fixation on a masculine God, the consequence of allowing the feminine archetype an equal place with the masculine is the foremost of heresies. The psychologist C. G. Jung felt that alchemy expressed an esoteric undercurrent within "official Christianity" due, among other factors, to the stress resulting from the absence of a feminine figure in the trinity. (Wehr 1987, p. 252). A supporter of the Christianized version of the esoteric tradition may find the equal presence of the feminine disconcerting. However, as I will suggest in the sequel, key defining characteristics of WE actually flow from the presence of the feminine principle in parallel with the masculine.¹



Figure 1. The feminine aspect delivers lifegiving energy from her breast to the Earth below. From an Alchemical engraving.

Hermes Trismegistus and the Question of Origins

The major source of Western Esotericism, we are told, is a corpus of writings termed the *Hermetica*, covering such topics as magic, alchemy, astrology and cosmology. (P. 17). In pointing out that the *Hermetica* is attributed to Hermes Trismegistus ("Thrice Great"), Goodrick-Clarke identifies this individual simply as an "Egyptian sage." A confusion is immediately introduced as Goodrick-Clarke proceeds in the following paragraphs to discourse on Thoth the Egyptian god, his attributes, and the Greek identification of Thoth with Hermes; but aside from one paragraph where he speaks of Hermes, Thoth, and the "Egyptian sage" together, he never indicates whether the latter is a real individual or the *god* Hermes-Thoth. (pp. 17-18).

Indeed there is no place in the entire volume where I have been able to find him taking up the question of the historicity of Hermes Trismegistus.² Instead, he frequently lumps Hermes Trismegistus with the names of various known historical figures such as Moses, Pythagoras, and Plato. (pp. 37, 45, 199). A clearer view is that provided by E. Wallis Budge: "Hermes Trismegistus...is the representation of the syncretic combination of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth." (Budge 1904, p. 415).

In other words, "Hermes Trismegistus" is not an historical figure chatting with Plato and the "High Priest of Hermetic Secrets" Marsilio Ficino, as shown in a fanciful floor intarsia at the west entrance to the Siena Cathedral (p. 38), but a mythical being, a god. The key writings of the *Hermetica* come to the mundane world from a divine source, Hermes-Thoth. This is the essential argument for the validity of the doctrine. There is an evident parallel here with the concept of the Bible having been written by God through human intermediaries, or the stone tablets conveyed by God to Moses. The Egyptian Book of the Dead describes the discovery of a mysterious stone slab

beneath the feet of a statue of a god, inlaid with letters of Lapis Lazuli and containing esoteric wisdom. It was “a thing of great mystery, [the like of] which had never [before] been seen or looked upon.” (Budge 1904).

I have belabored this point because of the question of origins and authenticity of doctrinal claims. As the book proceeds, there are numerous places where one or another practitioner’s personal representation of esoteric doctrine claims authority by means of a fanciful narrative tracing his or her knowledge back to mysterious sources in antiquity. To be fair, Goodrick-Clarke does seem to classify *some* of these claims as mythical, but even there he prefers the term “legendary.” He is not often willing to say openly that there may be deliberate fabrications. As one reads along, the line between myth, fancy and historical reality seems to become disturbingly ambiguous.

Idiosyncratic Esoteric Systems

The history of Western esotericism is constituted by the contributions of a series of doctrines, rituals and secret societies, all of which offer variations on the same general themes and are typically associated with one or another key individual. To establish authenticity a story is told, usually in the form of a quest by the practitioner to ancient sites, or receipt of wisdom from one or more sages or “Masters,” or by means of a vision or visitation. The individuals telling these authenticating stories frequently change their own names to lend themselves more prestige. Guiseppe Balsamo, a novice monk who was expelled from his seminary, became the flamboyant magician and seer “Count Cagliostro” (1743-1795). Samuel Liddell Mathers (1854-1918), associated with the Order of the Golden Dawn, “added MacGregor to his surname” to give himself a Celtic aura and used the title Comte de Glenstrae. (pp. 149, 198).

This charlatanesque and megalomaniacal syndrome is repeated over centuries. Yet Goodrick-Clarke does not, as far as I can tell, raise the issue of whether such individuals were charlatans or megalomaniacs seized by what Carl Jung referred to as psychological inflation brought on by the influence of archetypal imagery. From a Jungian point of view, the Hermetic/Alchemical symbolism is a potent cluster of archetypal materials which because of their numinosity can, in a susceptible individual, produce “An expansion of the personality beyond its proper limits by identification with...an archetype.” It produces “an exaggerated sense of one’s self-importance.” (Jung 1963).

Tellingly in this context, Jung says “it not infrequently happens that the archetype appears in the form of a *spirit* in dreams or fantasy products, or even comports itself like a ghost.” (Jung 1960, p. 205, Jung’s italics). One has only to think of the esotericist Madam Helena Blavatsky’s spirit friend, “John King,” who painted a portrait of himself almost certainly using the hands and eyes of Madam Blavatsky. (p. 215). Oddly, in the caption to a photo of the painting, Goodrick-Clarke simply states that John King himself painted the portrait. (p. 215).³

The Principle of Correspondence and Scientific Esotericism

The Jungian interpretation of alchemical symbolism argues that the imagery and concepts of the esoteric tradition constitute a psychoactive *Symbol* whose potency is capable of activating personal self-transformation toward enlightenment, or in Jung’s terminology individuation.⁴ This perspective is in contrast to the *metaphysical* interpretation of esoteric symbolism which argues for the cosmological reality of the hierarchy of levels, the interpretation of the soul as a kind of non-physical entity, the predominance of the godhead as the creator, backworlds, etheric bodies, and so

forth. The Jungian view is thoroughly spiritual as it places the divinity within the psyche, while the latter view is “spiritual” in a more obvious way in that it posits a progression of the soul toward divinity within a real, if metaphysical, cosmic milieu.

But the latter also includes an additional factor of promoting psychological inflation by leading the devotee to believe he or she will come to perceive, and to gain control over, higher levels of “reality” and potentially be capable of “magical operations.” The difference between the two is readily exemplified by the manner in which alchemical transformation of metals is understood. On the Jungian view this is entirely a metaphor for the spiritual transformation of the psyche (Wehr 1987, p. 246); From the metaphysical point of view operations on the physical world, including transmutation of metals, are potential psychic powers that can be conferred on the devotee as he or she advances through the various ranks of the hierarchies.

Masonic, Rosicrucian, and similar “orders” trade upon this metaphysicalization of the esoteric symbolism by establishing analogous hierarchical levels of achievement for their members. In the milieu of this interpretation, powers of clairvoyance, talking with spirits, contacts with secret Masters, and other such claims by one or another proponent of the various idiosyncratic systems are seen as proofs of the transcendent reality.

It appears evident as one reaches Goodrick-Clarke’s final chapter, that his interpretation of esotericism falls into the metaphysical category. This explains the ongoing ambiguity about authentication that is present throughout the text, as for example his uncritical report of how Christian Rosenkreutz, the originator of the Rosicrucian order, was “an adept in the transmutation of metals” who could have made a name for himself but instead chose to spend five years in quietude before founding his system. (p. 109). He also uncritically reports “Count Cagliostro” as “achieving alchemical transmutations.” (p. 147). Predictably, then, Goodrick-Clarke summarily dismisses the significance of the Jungian psychological interpretation except as Jung’s emphasis on archetypes has influenced “New Age Religions.” (p. 247). In his final chapter he seeks to show that esoteric concepts and procedures have entered the realm of scientific verification and stand poised to re-enchant science by infusing science with spirituality.

What, then, is the epistemological foundation for such a claim? The central concept behind the entire body of Western esoteric materials is the dictum referred to as the Maxim of Hermes Trismegistus, from *The Emerald Tablet*, said to be “one of the oldest surviving of all alchemical documents” and to be a “founding document” of renaissance esotericism following the fourteenth century. (p. 72). The Maxim reads (In my rough translation),

WHAT IS BELOW IS AS WHAT IS ABOVE,
AND WHAT IS ABOVE IS AS WHAT IS BELOW,
TO RENDER THE MIRACLE OF UNITY.

This rule or principle is intended to have cosmological significance.⁵ Esoteric systems argue for an hierarchy of Worlds, or planes, from the lowest material realms to the highest spiritual existence, including the Godhead itself. By this maxim, there is a continuity of relationship running across all levels. But here a distinct question of interpretation arises. Generally speaking esotericists interpret this maxim as asserting a principle of correspondence, according to which things in the world that are similar in just about any way imaginable may influence one another. By implication, the esoteric adept may learn to use this correspondence to control or predict physical events. In other words, the maxim is seized upon (incorrectly as I shall argue) as a basis for various forms of

sympathetic magic.

At this point we find Goodrick-Clarke's concept of "scientized esotericism" (p. 234). This refers to "empirical engagement of traditional esotericism with the natural world," i.e. to experiments carried out by esotericists which aim at proving empirically that such correspondences exist. He cites with enthusiasm, for example, alleged proofs of "nonlocal acausal" relations between planets and their "corresponding" metals (p. 238). According to Goodrick-Clarke, the German chemist Karl von Reichenbach (1788-1869) *showed that* "a new Odic force" was connected with water divination and other psychic phenomena. "Clairvoyant auras" discussed by esotericist C. W. Leadbeater were *empirically confirmed* as "magnetic radiations" (p. 241); and Homeopathic Medicine has offered *empirical proof* of its effectiveness (p. 242). With regard to the latter, Goodrick-Clarke makes the startling claim that "it posited a principle for which there is no tangible evidence, yet its effects could be demonstrated." (Apparently demonstration of a theory does not provide tangible evidence, or else there is no clear relation between the theory and the experimental results.)

It is not my place here to offer critiques of these sorts of claims. I leave it to the reader, if he or she so wishes, to follow out the various reports of proofs cited by Goodrick-Clarke. I would point out however that since concepts of "correspondence" as a means of understanding and controlling nature have been around for millenia, such as studying the entrails of animals for clues as to the weather or the result of a battle, or noting the flight of birds to tell the future, or wearing a certain crystal amulet to ward off disease, if these means were truly effective we would have known about it by now.

However in my opinion such "scientized" empirical "proofs" are based on a muddled, naive understanding of the notion of "correspondence" (bolstered by the desire for acquiring magical powers) and really have little or no relation to the substantive underlying significance of esoteric concepts. They are, rather, superficial metaphysicalizations of ideas that represent, in symbolic and often veiled form, one fundamental notion that can be exemplified by recalling our earlier discussion of the presence of the feminine in esoteric thought.

The principle of analogy, or the Hermetic maxim, is not in my view a license for concocting correspondence theories of all sorts and attempting to prove them empirically. This is because there is one single analogical relationship to which the maxim refers. Its esoteric expression lies in the "Law of the Tetragrammaton." This law, in a more contemporary expression, is the idea that the entirety of creation is based on a particular dynamic process: the *synthesis of opposites* by means of energy, resulting in a change of level. Insofar as the world may be constituted by an evolutionary hierarchy, levels of that hierarchy develop out of one another both ascending and descending, producing a thoroughgoing nondualistic universe by means of the analogy of synthesis.

In a quite detailed account of this principle, esotericist Mouni Sadhu (actually Mieczyslaw Demetriusz Sudowski) makes clear that symbolically the opposites to be brought into relation by synthesis are represented by male and female elements. (Sadhu 1962, pp. 15-18). It follows that it is the *exclusion of the feminine creative principle*, the goddess if you will, by the patriarchal world-view, that stands in the way of a truly enlightened cosmology. I wish to devote the remainder of this review to a necessarily brief discussion of this concept.

The "Law of the Tetragrammaton" or the Law of Four, is exemplified by the geometrical symbol of a triangle with a dot or an eye in its center. (Sadhu 1962 p. 19). Two apices of the triangle represent the opposites, and the third represents the reconciling factor, seen as a form of universal energy. The center dot, or the eye, indicates a change of level, something truly new, arising out of the process of synthesis. It is an image of creation. Figure 2 from an alchemical engraving illustrates

this in human terms, where the union of opposites is the sexual embrace. As such it bears, of course, a deep relationship to the fundamental imagery of Tantric Buddhism, as I have pointed out elsewhere (McDaniel 2010a).

In Figure 2 we have the copulating male-female principles (points 1 and 2 of the triangle of synthesis) in the “alchemical vessel” which itself has cosmological significance as representing a requirement for containment.⁶ The third factor, energy of synthesis, is the fire of the alchemist’s oven (not shown in this particular image but inferred) which brings about the transformation. Above the couple, moving upward, is the child, the fruit of their union, i.e. the fourth factor representing a change of level. This entire process is one of creation and movement “upward.” The final and most important message behind this symbol is that because of the possibility of creativity, freedom results. Freedom in the image is represented by the open mouth of the vessel showing seed-pods, living things, emerging upward. In other alchemical images these are replaced by birds whose winged flight can take them upward. Such birds, usually doves, represent the spirit or the soul. Significantly it is through the synthesis of opposites that soul emerges.



How does this concept, based on the Maxim of Hermes Trismegistus as the analogy giving continuity to all levels of existence (i.e. matter, life and mind), affect the science of cosmology? The fundamental dualistic schism is undoubtedly that of the brutal severance of consciousness from matter. What this principle indicates is that the universe cannot come into being, and cannot evolve, without the presence of both consciousness and matter at the turning-point of its origin. In other words, cognitive science can go nowhere as long as consciousness is thought either not to exist, or to exist only as a “supervening property” of matter when it reaches a certain stage of

complexity. Instead, complex forms cannot evolve from less complex forms without the operation of both consciousness and matter. Our “scientific” understanding of the world is incomplete. If, as philosopher Colin McGinn argues, physical limitations of our human brains will never allow us to integrate consciousness with matter, then indeed we are in a sad state with nowhere to go. But the message of esoteric philosophy is that the mouth of the vessel is open.

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ENDNOTES

1. Figure 1 is from an engraving attributed to M. Merian and is found in Johannes Fabricius' *Alchemy, The Medieval Alchemists and their Royal Art*, p. 161. (Texas Bookman paperback, 1996). Note that the ray of lifegiving energy emerges from the solar breast. The creatrix here combines male and female elements indicated by the sun-moon emblems at her breasts, even as does the pairing Thoth-Maat.
2. There has been considerable speculation as to the meaning of the name *Trismegistus*. What is seldom, if ever, mentioned is that the goddess of the ancient Mediterranean, like the goddesses such as Maya-Shakti in India, are forever depicted as *triple*. For example, the triple godhead Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva is complemented by the three consorts, Saraswati, Parvati and Lakshmi, called together the Trimurti. The "Triple Hermes" thus exhibits the threefold character of the goddess.
3. It is my speculation that the early impressions of the 10-year old later to become Madam Helena Blavatsky, who at that young age encountered a significant library of esoteric volumes in her home, overwhelmed her with a severe case of inflation which lasted her entire lifetime.
4. For Jung "Symbol" with a capital "S" is differentiated from arbitrary symbol due to the former's psychoactive property, which in turn is based on its capacity for activating the archetypal process of personal development.
5. I cannot resist the impulse here to cite one of the riddles in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. The riddle is "An eye in a blue face/saw an eye in a green face. That eye is like to this eye/But in a low place/Not in a high place." the answer to which is "Sun on the daisies." The image has a clear alchemical reference.
6. In McDaniel 2010a I suggest that gravitational force is the initial facilitator of the requirement for containment. Without the gravitational "container" forms are incapable of development.