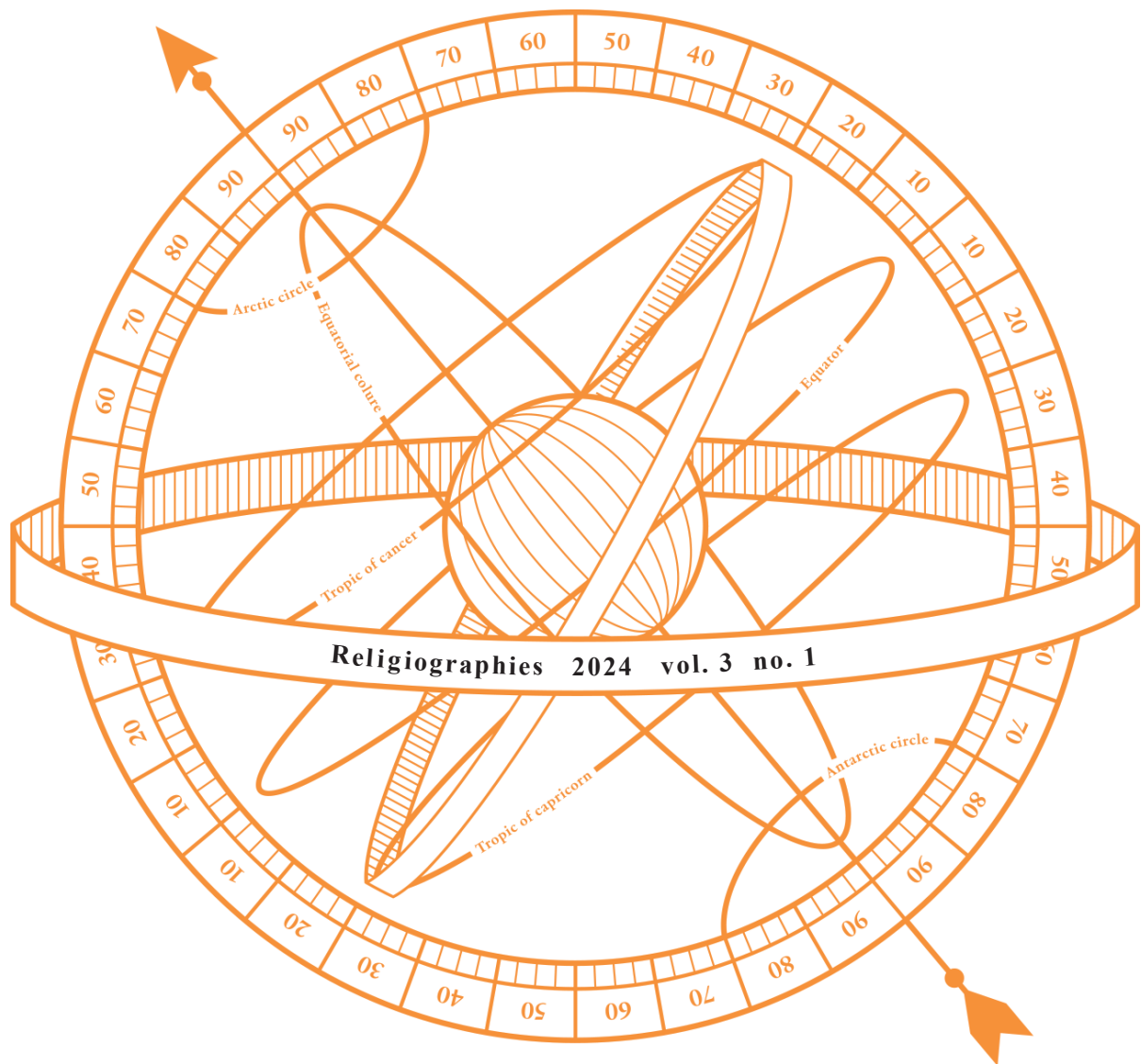


Religiographies



Special Issue

“Zoroastrian Esotericism”

edited by

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Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina

Editorial:

New Perspectives on the Study of Esotericism and Zoroastrianism

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This special issue contributes to expanding the study of esotericism and spirituality beyond the borders of the Western frame by examining the interplay between Zoroastrianism and esotericism. For many years, esotericism has been considered as a Western phenomenon diffused globally in the modern era.¹ In the last decade, this perspective has been challenged by global historical and postcolonial approaches² and by the growth of research on esotericism beyond the West: in the Afro-American,³ South American,⁴ South Asian,⁵ and Islamic contexts.⁶

This largely artificial separation was due to several factors. One was the lack of a global and postcolonial perspective in the study of esotericism which limited the focus to Europe, downplaying the crucial role of Non-Western actors in the development of their global interlocutors and counterparts as did the Theosophical Society and Aleister Crowley.⁷ Another reason was probably the construction of knowledge in area studies, such as Zoroastrian studies, mainly focused on religious institutions with a text-based approach, which might have backgrounded more porous and hybridised phenomena such as spirituality, esotericism, and mysticism.

With this special issue, we do not intend to offer definitive definitions of Zoroastrianism or esotericism, but to explore two intertwined readings. On the one hand, describing the cultural transfers between global esoteric actors and Zoroastrianism, our authors studied the negotiations and appropriations, but also re-imaginings (see the articles of Rose, Eckerström, and Tessmann, and the heterography).⁸ On the other hand, Zoroastrianism can be read through the lenses of esoteric studies (see the articles of Errichiello, Panaino, and Maurer). Both these readings imply a significant effort of transability among disciplines (philology, history, socio-anthropology) and among cultures and languages. This is important because it contributes to challenging our readymade narratives about modernity, society, East-West binaries, which limit our understandings of said phenomena.⁹ This epistemological and methodological dialogue is precisely at the heart of the Centre of Comparative Studies of Civilizations and Spiritualities and its journal *Religiographies*.

Is There a Zoroastrian Esotericism?

Can Zoroastrian esotericism exist as a field of research? This is the main question that has inspired the edition of this special issue. The works of scholars who have explored esotericism in the context of the Zoroastrian religion, from antiquity to modernity, are scant, and often rely on historiographical models that privilege Western diffusionism and monodirectional cultural transfers, tending to marginalise the agency of Zoroastrians in the making of esotericism.

Through philological analysis, Gherardo Gnoli, the doyen of Iranian studies in Italy, proposed to interpret the Avestan term *maga-* as a state of trance actively pursued by Zoroastrian priests in ritual performance. In this vein, Antonio Panaino has significantly contributed to research on ritual symbolism by studying its inherent cosmological correspondences and priestly initiation.¹⁰ Cogent publications by Panaino further advanced research on the esoteric aspects of the figures

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Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l'ésotérisme occidental* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Globalization of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 3, no. 1 (2015): 55–91.

2

Egil Asprem, "Beyond the West Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism," *Correspondances* 2, no.1 (2014): 3–33; Julian Strube, "Towards the Study of Esotericism without the 'Western': Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History," in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 45–66.

3

Stephen C. Finley, Margarita S. Guillory, and Hugh R. Page Jr., *The Continuing Quest to Map Secrecy, Concealment, and Revelatory Experiences in Africana Esoteric Discourse* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

4

Juan Pablo Bubello, *Historia del esoterismo en la Argentina: Prácticas, representaciones y persecuciones de curanderos, espiritistas, astrólogos y otros esoteristas* (Buenos Aires: Biblos Editorial, 2010).

5

Gordan Djurdjevic, *India and the Occult: The Influence of South Asian Spirituality on Modern Western Occultism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

6

Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Liana Saif, "What Is Islamic Esotericism?" *Correspondences* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–59; Francesco Piraino, *Le soufisme en Europe: Islam, ésotérisme et New Age* (Tunis: IRMC; Paris: Karthala, 2023).

7

Keith Edward Cantú, *Like a Tree Universally Spread: Sri Sabhapati Swami and Śivarājayoga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Keith Cantú, "'Don't Take Any Wooden Nickels': Western Esotericism, Yoga, and the Discourse of Authenticity," in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 109–26.

8

For a discussion on cultural transfers in esotericism, see Mark Sedgwick and Francesco Piraino, *Esoteric Transfers and Constructions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (London: Palgrave, 2021).

9

Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Jason Ananda Josephson Storm, *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021).

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Gnoli, Gherardo, "Lo stato di 'maga.'" *AION* 15 (1965): 105–17; Antonio Panaino, "Cosmologies

of the Magi and the Zoroastrian high priest of the third century, CE Kerdīr, and his heavenly journey.¹¹ Antonio Panaino and Simon Deschamps also shed light on the Parsis and their engagement with and support for Freemasonry.¹² Shaul Shaked and Joseph Naveh examined the presence of Zoroastrian elements in Aramaic magic amulets, bowls, and incantations from Late Antiquity.¹³ Henry Corbin's interpretation of the relationship between Zoroastrian thought and Islamic esotericism suggested a significant impact of the Persian religion on Islam.¹⁴

Corbin's contributions have been criticised for the emphatic representation of esotericism in Shi'ism without adequate consideration of the social context. The lack of attention paid to the wider social domain and the tendency to look at esotericism and Zoroastrianism in isolation from broader debates is also a characteristic of the scholarship we discuss here. Aside from some exceptions, philological approaches and concerns significantly inform the works on esotericism and Zoroastrianism cited above. While the related findings have allowed us to consolidate a valuable scholarly tradition centred on textual studies since the eighteenth century, this approach has also reinforced the boundaries of a form of production that often struggles to go beyond the text and the ritual space and engage with broader questions of social meaning and embeddedness.

The contributions that attempted to answer the question of esotericism in Zoroastrianism in a more direct way are those of Shaul Shaked and James R. Russell. Shaked examined the question of whether elements of secrecy were attested in Sasanian religious literature. Such a characteristic element of Zoroastrian scriptures of Late Antiquity has also been explored more recently by Arash Zeini, who suggested that priests strategically used secrecy to regulate the dissemination of religious knowledge.¹⁵ By contrast, Russell examined the presence of themes associated with non-ordinary experiences, acquisition of special knowledge, and emotional fulfilment.¹⁶ However, both Shaked and Russell perform a sort of assessment *vis-à-vis* an idea of esotericism informed by the way Western esotericism was and is still largely conceptualised. Recent contributions by John Hinnells, Philip Kreyenbroek, Jesse Palsetia, Michael Stausberg, and Anna Tessmann¹⁷ have advanced our understanding of esoteric currents in modern and contemporary Zoroastrianism.

In light of the academic landscape briefly summarised here, this special issue emphasises the way individuals understand, experience, celebrate, and make sense of esotericism in the context of Zoroastrianism.

Synopsis

The articles of this special issue span from ancient to contemporary times and engage with a multiplicity of sources through diverse methodological approaches. They contribute to the study of the textual, discursive, and social dimensions of Zoroastrianism, and propose novel and original perspectives to advance research on esotericism.

The first article of this special issue is a thorough survey of key esoteric themes in Zoroastrianism by Antonio Panaino. Through fo-

and Astrology," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Yuhán S.-D. Vevaina with Anna Tessmann (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 235–57; Antonio Panaino, "Iniziazione e dimensione esoterica nella tradizione mazdaica," in *Sulla soglia del sacro: Esoterismo e iniziazione nelle grandi religioni e nella tradizione massonica*, ed. Antonio Panaino (Milano: Mimesis, 2002), 105–22; Antonio Panaino, *Le collège sacerdotal avestique et ses dieux: Aux origines indo-iraniennes d'une tradition mimétique* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022); Antonio Panaino, "Aspects of the 'Interiorization' of the Sacrifice in the Zoroastrian Tradition," in *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context*, ed. Michael Stausberg (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 233–52; Antonio Panaino, "Magic i. Magical Elements in the Avesta and Nērang Literature," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 14, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York: Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University, 2008).

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Antonio Panaino, "The Esoteric Legacy of the Magi of Bethlehem in the Framework of the Iranian Speculations about Jesus, Zoroaster and His Posthumous Sons," in *Apocryphal and Esoteric Sources in the Development of Christianity and Judaism: The Eastern Mediterranean, the Near East and Beyond*, ed. Igor Dorfmann-Lazarev (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 368–82; Antonio Panaino, "The Ritual Drama of the High Priest Kirdēr," in *Afarin Nameh: Essays on the Archaeology of Iran in Honour of Mehdi Rahbar*, ed. Yousef Moradi (Tehran: The Research Institute of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, 2019), 179–88.

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Antonio Panaino, "Zoroastrians and Freemasonry," in *Freemasonry and Religion: Many Faiths, One Brotherhood*, ed. Trevor Stewart (London: The Canonbury Papers, 2006), 51–67; Simon Deschamps, "Freemasonry and the Indian Parsi Community: A Late Meeting on the Level," *Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism* 3, no. 1 (2012): 60–71.

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Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations in Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1985); Shaul Shaked, "Bagdāna, King of the Demons, and Other Iranian Terms in Babylonian Aramaic Magic," in *Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce*, ed. Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), 510–25.

14

Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1971–1973); Daryush Shayegan, "En Islam iranien: aspects spirituels et philosophiques," in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, vol. 8, no. 4, ed. Ehsan Yarshater (New York: Center for Iranian Studies, Columbia University, 1998), 422–24; Henry Corbin, *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardi* (Tehran: Editions du Courrier, 1946); Henry Corbin, "On the Meaning of Music in Persian Mysticism," *Temenos* 13 (1992): 49–52; Henry Corbin, *Corps spirituel et terre céleste: De l'Iran mazdéen*

cusing on the performative dimension of the Zoroastrian liturgy, he discusses the initiatory character of the knowledge acquired by Zoroastrian priests, who perform rituals to access the sacred and maintain the cosmic order (*aṣṣā*). Through the analysis of the liminal role assumed by ritual enactments and symbolism, Panaino sheds light on the liturgical correspondences between the material and the spiritual world, introducing the concept of “ritual mimesis” to describe the spiritual synthesis generated by the symbolic ascension of humans to the supramundane realm and the corresponding descent of divinities to this world. Observations on the spiritual vision of Kerdīr, historical remarks about the representation of the Magi in Western esotericism’s narratives, and reflections about Parsis and Freemasonry greatly enrich this contribution.

The first part of the article of Moritz Maurer examines Middle Persian narratives centred on the attainment of revelatory knowledge using ritual performance. The findings of the textual analysis and reflections on discourses of mediality lead the author to conceptualise “ritualistic knowledge claims” as a reconciliation between revelation and transmission of knowledge. The second part of the article delves into the references to Zoroastrianism in the development of Traditionalism and its heterogeneous esoteric discourses. Maurer’s engagement with the question of Zoroastrian esotericism through the analysis of pre-modern and modern sources suggests the fallibility of strictly formulating esotericism as a bounded category, a limitation to be overcome by looking at the historical complexity and the intertwining of discourses.

The contribution of Jenny Rose explores the image of Zarathustra as constructed by the members of the Transcendental Club in Massachusetts in the second half of the nineteenth century. The author scrutinises the way Ralph Waldo Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau appropriated the figure of the prophet of Zoroastrianism as a model of enlightened thought for their intellectual and spiritual endeavours. By examining the intellectual exchanges and the literary production of the American Transcendentalists, Rose shows how the reception, interpretation, and re-arrangement of the *ābādī* text known as the *Dasātīr* significantly participated in the romanticisation of the figure of Zarathustra. Such a teleological orientation of the American Transcendentalists is analysed by Rose in the light of Emerson’s broader understanding of humanity and Christianity.

The contribution of Mariano Errichiello (one of our co-editors) moves to modern India, where esotericism emerged in the context of Parsis’ politics of authenticity at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The author interweaves archival research and the voices of contemporary Parsis who actively participate in the activities of Freemasonry, the Theosophical Society, and the Parsi esoteric group known as *Ilme kṣnum*. The scrutiny of how these organisations developed in India, Parsis’ role in their formation and management, and the entanglements between the Western and Persianate worlds situates the Parsis’ construction of “modern” Zoroastrianism in global religious history. By adopting an interdisciplinary approach and singling out the meaning conferred by some research participants to the term “esotericism,” Errichiello advances a formulation of Parsi esotericism as an

à *l’Iran shī’ite* (Paris: Éditions Buchet-Chastel, 1979).

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Arash Zeini, “The King in the Mirror of the Zand: Secrecy in Sasanian Iran,” in *Sasanian Iran in the Context of Late Antiquity: The Bahari Lecture Series at the University of Oxford*, ed. Touraj Daryaei (Irvine: UCI Jordan Center for Persian Studies, 2018), 149–62.

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James Russell, “On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians,” *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1–2 (1993): 73–94; Shaul Shaked, “Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 3 (1969): 175–222.

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John R. Hinnells, “The Parsis,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Yuhan S.-D. Vevaina with Anna Tessmann (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 168–69; Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Shehnaaz N. Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis Speak about their Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 231–75; Jesse S. Palsetia, *The Parsis of India: Preservation of Identity in Bombay City* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 264; Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras: Geschichte, Gegenwart, Rituale*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 123; Michael Stausberg and Anna Tessmann, “The Appropriation of a Religion: The Case of Zoroastrianism in Contemporary Russia,” *Culture and Religion* 14, no. 4 (2013): 445–62; Anna Tessmann, *On the Good Faith: A Fourfold Discursive Construction of Zoroastrianism in Contemporary Russia* (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2012); Michael Stausberg, “Para-Zoroastrianisms: Memetic Transmissions and Appropriations,” in *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, ed. John R. Hinnells and Alan Williams (London: Routledge, 2007), 236–54.

expression of the hermeneutical polyphony that emerged in colonial times and reflects on its ontological implications.

Anna Tessmann combines anthropological methods and discourse analysis to examine Zoroastrian communities in the post-Soviet space. In particular, the author focuses on the community of St Petersburg. Tessmann proposes an overview of key themes and concepts in the study of esotericism and scrutinises the scholarly trajectory that characterises the study of Zoroastrianism. By holding esotericism as a discursive analytical unit, the author contextualises the emergence of post-Soviet Zoroastrian communities and places them in their socio-cultural milieu. Tessmann brings her research findings into dialogue with broader trends of alternative modernities, such as the New Age movement and the practice of astrology. The article concludes with a critical analysis of the possibility of establishing Zoroastrian esotericism as a field of research in its own right.

The article of Pasqualina Eckerström delves into music, esotericism, and politics. It looks at Zoroastrian esoteric elements as a source of inspiration for the composition of Black metal music by two Iranian refugees in Europe. This contribution examines how the combination of music and esotericism, together with a fascination for Zoroastrianism as a pre-Islamic religion, become an assertion of opposition to the social norms imposed by the Islamic Republic in Iran. Eckerström's methodology, based on narrative interviews, brings to light the emic perspective of two artists who hold Black metal as a sacred form of expression. By engaging with scholarship on esotericism, religion, and popular culture, the author shows how music revives spiritual heritage and grants individual agency in defiance of coercive societal normativity.

In the heterography section, dedicated to artists, we publish the visual experiment "Zoroaster Superstar" by the creative duo ARTOLDO (Sara Ferro & Chris Weil). This work is a virtual reality show, based on a jaunty representation of Zarathustra and his pop-cultural reincarnations, such as David Bowie, Freddy Mercury, and Casanova. This work is based on a stream of consciousness, braiding both historical and fictional Zoroastrian references in popular culture.

Reflections on Future Avenues of Inquiry

The editors realised that, through the contributions of these articles, the authors looked at Zoroastrian communities and esoteric elements of Zoroastrianism from different points of view, raising the question of what being a Zoroastrian means and what adhering to Zoroastrianism implies. Do the esoteric themes of the Zoroastrian liturgy examined by Panaino make sense for those diasporic communities that do not practise in fire temples? Does the astrology practised by post-Soviet Zoroastrians relate to the divinatory use Parsis made of the Zoroastrian text known as the *Jāmāspi*?¹⁸ To what extent does the romantic representation of Zoroastrianism advanced by the American Transcendentalists echo the revivalism of pre-Islamic Iran by Black metal musicians?

Although the articles published here show that the way individuals self-identify as Zoroastrians, understand Zoroastrianism, or practise or

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For further details on the *Jāmāspi* and its divinatory use, see Domenico Agostini, "Rediscovering the *Jāmāspi*: A Walk in Four Steps," *Iranian Studies* 45, no. 2 (2012): 169–80; Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, "Translation of a Passage in the *Jāmāspi* or *Jāmāsp-Nāmeḥ* Relating to Plague and Famine," in *The K. R. Cama Memorial Volume: Essays on Iranian Subjects Written by Various Scholars in Honour of Mr. Kharshedji Rustamji Cama*, ed. Jivanji Jamshedji Modi (Bombay: Fort Printing Press, 1900), 231–34.

celebrate their religion or heritage is context-bound, the forms of esotericism with which the authors engage retain some common traits, turning it into a floating¹⁹ concept. The use of the term “floating” is inspired by the work of the political theorist and philosopher Ernesto Laclau (1935–2014) who adopted it to qualify a signifier (i.e., a floating signifier) whose semiotic arrangement enables subjects to construct meaning by using a given concept in different contexts and, in this way, preserving its semantic function. Though inspired by it, our conceptualisation differs from Julian Strube’s classification of esotericism as an “empty signifier” inasmuch as we identified the presence of shared elements in the different articulations of Zoroastrian esotericism.²⁰ A floating signifier differs from an empty signifier since the conceptual boundaries and functions of the latter can vary according to the context, and its semantic value tends to dilute or be diluted. Such a heterogeneous landscape cautions us against conceptualising “Zoroastrian esotericism” as a fixed and bounded category that is universally applicable. However, the findings of this special issue do not impede the identification of those common characteristics that inform such a floatability of esotericism.

From an epistemological point of view, the articles of Panaino and Maurer bring to the fore the relational role that esotericism plays between the subject and the object of knowledge. The concepts of “ritual mimesis” and “revelatory knowledge claims” are informed by a characteristic liturgical and social intermediation. Instead, Rose and Eckerström look at esotericism as an enabler of representations of Zoroastrianism, at times romanticised, at times revivalist. In this vein, Errichiello holds Parsi esotericism as a hermeneutical enterprise where the same object of knowledge can be interpreted in a variety of forms by different subjects. Tessmann then reflects on esotericism as an element that mediates the formation of new identities in the post-Soviet era. It is thus evident that “mediality” intended as the condition of mediating between different meanings, disparate representations, and distinctive identities emerges as an epistemological constituent of all forms of esotericism discussed in this special issue.

Common to all the contributions of this special issue is the performativity of esotericism as a social practice. Esotericism sets the pace for identity transitions among post-Soviet Zoroastrians and informs beliefs, practices, and urbanisation of modern Parsis. It enables Middle Persian theologians, American Transcendentalists, and Traditionalists to gain spiritual legitimacy in their communities. Esotericism also allows Iranian refugees to articulate their political antinomy and Zoroastrian priests to (re-)establish societal order in line with their modernist understandings of pre-modern Zoroastrian cosmologies.

The findings of this publication encourage the editors to conceptualise esotericism as a floating heuristic characterised by epistemological mediality and social performativity. We find it useful to qualify a category such as “Zoroastrian” only when this category is contextualised. In fact, Zoroastrianism, like all religions, is subject to a plurality of interpretations and a high semantic variability according to period and geography. Further research on the variety of expressions of esotericism that can be qualified as “Zoroastrian” is called for in that it triggers reflections on the more fundamental question: What is Zoroastrianism?

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For further details, see Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

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See Julian Strube, “Towards the Study of Esotericism without the ‘Western’: Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History,” in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 45–66.