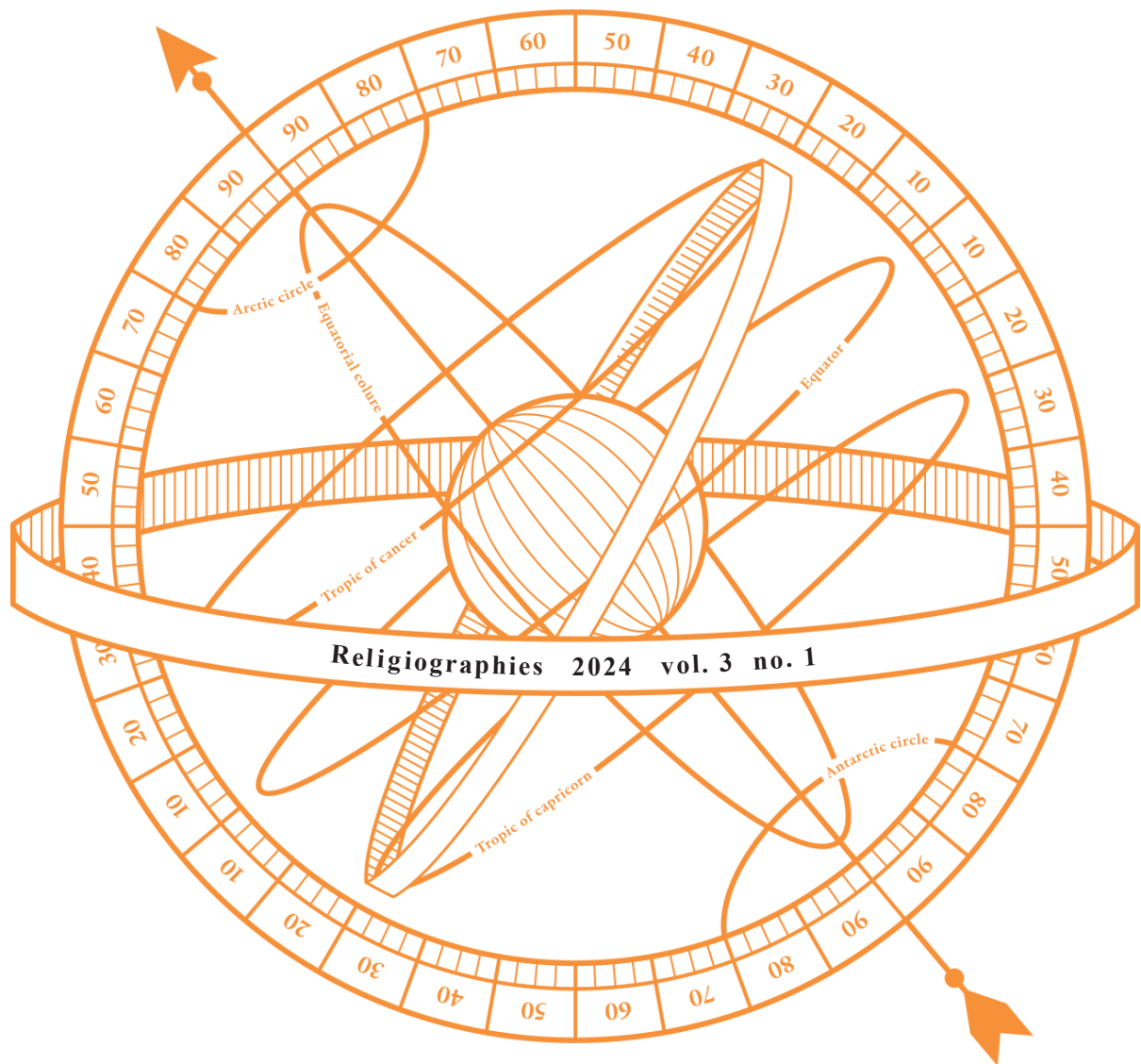


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# *Exploring Zoroastrianism and Esotericism in the Context of Global Religious History*

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### *Abstract*

The study of esotericism has, since the 1990s, seen lively debates on how to define its subject and how to demarcate the limits of its field. Most recently, approaches oriented toward postcolonialism and global history have challenged the dominant understanding, brought forward by Wouter F. Hanegraaff, of esotericism as a predominantly European phenomenon, denoting a tradition of “rejected knowledge.” At the same time, poststructuralist critique has questioned the employability of the term “esotericism” as a scientific category before the nineteenth century. In response to this, the article explores two possible points of contact between the study of esotericism and the study of Zoroastrianism: first, the adoption of concepts developed in one field and their further development in the application to the respective other material—here using the example of the revelatory knowledge claims found in Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts. Second, the role Zoroastrianism plays in modern esoteric discourse will be examined.



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## Introduction

The present article argues for caution in applying the concept of esotericism to Zoroastrianism throughout its history and instead proposes two alternative research routes. In a first step, a survey of influential research conducted by scholars in the study of Zoroastrianism on its esoteric qualities will show the inherent problems older research had in applying the concept meaningfully. In a second step, this will be linked to a survey of wider debates in the study of esotericism, which will further our understanding of the theoretical problems related to the concept. After that, two alternative routes of research will be proposed: Firstly, the alternative concept of revelatory knowledge claims, inspired by an approach from the study of esotericism, will be introduced as a category that will allow us to take a comparative look at traditions of such claims in the first millennium. The second route will explore Zoroastrianism as a topic of esoteric discourse. Specifically, it will examine the work of René Guénon and Julius Evola, two founding figures of the school of so-called traditionalism.

### *The Study of Zoroastrian Esotericism: The Last Fifty-Five Years*

In recent decades, researchers who specifically focused on the history of Zoroastrianism have not often considered the existence of Zoroastrian esotericism. Still, two influential articles have prominently dealt with the topic, while coming to wildly different conclusions. In 1969, Shaul Shaked published “Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism.”<sup>1</sup> It is probably no coincidence that it was published just five years after Yates’s study of the connection between Giordano Bruno and hermeticism,<sup>2</sup> which—as will be discussed later on—helped spread interest in esotericism in academia. At the time, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin popularized the use of the esoteric vs. exoteric binary in religious studies, too. Shaked’s use of the term “esoteric” does not seem to hold much conceptual value for him. He limits his study, in his own words, to evidence for “a secret element in the Zoroastrian religion of the Sasanian period.”<sup>3</sup> Still, he seems aware of the more significant implications of the title of his article, contextualizing his research as a middle ground between research on the Iranian influence on Gnosticism, shamanistic, and mystic elements in Zoroastrianism, and a total denial of any esoteric elements.<sup>4</sup> Through this analysis, Shaked concludes that there is evidence to support the existence of a distinction between “folk religion” and more intellectual and inwardly oriented forms of Zoroastrianism, particularly as presented in certain sections of Middle Persian literature such as *Dēnkard* Book VI.<sup>5</sup>

While Shaked’s judgment is very cautious, James R. Russell’s “On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians” (1993)<sup>6</sup> arrives at much more far-reaching conclusions. His study is more a-historical, employing sources from the Avesta to Armenian, Roman, and Islamic authors, and even further to Ilme Kşnum, a modern Parsi religious movement that developed in a complex dialogue between Persianate and Western traditions.<sup>7</sup>

Russell’s definition of Zoroastrian mysticism—a term he uses interchangeably with esotericism—then appears more in the style of religionist perspectives, looking for phenomena *sui generis*.<sup>8</sup> He seems

1

Shaul Shaked, “Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism,” *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 3, no. 7 (1969).

2

Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964).

3

Shaked, “Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism,” 176.

4

Shaked, “Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism,” 175–76. Later the existence of “esoteric teachings” was also denied in a misguided critique of Shaked by Bailey, cf. Harold W. Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books: Ratanbai Katrak Lectures*, reprint (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 29. On this passage cf. James R. Russell, “On Mysticism and Esotericism Among the Zoroastrians,” *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 1–2 (1993): 73n2.

5

Shaked, “Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism,” 200.

6

James R. Russell, “On Mysticism and Esotericism Among the Zoroastrians,” *Iranian Studies* 26, 1–2 (1993).

7

The most recent contribution tracing the influences of the movement is that of Mariano Errichiello, “Beyond the Theosophical Paradigm: Ilme Kşnum and the Entangled History of Modern Parsis,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* (2024).

8

Russell, “On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians,” 75. He actually asserts that—

to understand esotericism as an aspect of Zoroastrianism that does not correspond to the modern, Western understanding of religion, such as ritual intoxication,<sup>9</sup> but a clear definition is lacking. Interestingly, this is at odds with the understanding of esotericism prevalent in the modern Study of Western Esotericism, too, as we will see below.

In both cases, it seems questionable whether there is any heuristic benefit in using the term “esotericism”—as mentioned above; Shaked himself postulates instead a differentiation between folk religion and a more intellectual tradition.<sup>10</sup> So, where does this leave us? The existence of the journal at hand speaks to the interest in possible applications, but we should also proceed with caution. How can we move beyond anachronisms, and how can we analyze more recent interconnections? Here, we should look to the modern study of esotericism.

*The History of the Study of Western Esotericism: Lessons to be Learned*

Broader agendas often influence the study of Zoroastrianism and esotericism, and scholars in these fields have complex relationships with their subjects. One could think of extreme examples such as Martin Haug’s research on the Gāthās in the nineteenth century and Davoud Monchi-Zadeh’s association with National Socialism.<sup>11</sup> The study of esotericism has been dramatically influenced by the ideological interests and esoteric inclinations of scholars, too. As in the case of the study of Zoroastrianism, this has also shaped the study of esotericism as we know it today. Therefore, a short overview of its history is necessary to better understand the current debates in the field.

Wouter F. Hanegraaff has identified three key developments that led to the establishment of the field. First, the Eranos meetings played a crucial role, involving influential participants like Carl Gustav Jung, Henry Corbin, and Mircea Eliade.<sup>12</sup> Second, an independent scholarly engagement with Renaissance hermeticism was fueled by Frances Yates’s 1964 publication of *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*; and third, it became popular in the counterculture of the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> Note that Shaked’s article falls within this period.

Institutionalization was a slow process. The first chair for the study of esotericism was created in Paris in 1964—under the influence of Henry Corbin and initially with a focus on Christian esotericism. Its most prominent holder was Antoine Faivre, who himself had esoteric affinities.<sup>14</sup> Faivre developed a typology of esoteric thinking, attempting to encompass the subject’s timeless essence. However, he later shifted towards a more historical approach.<sup>15</sup> Although such work focused on European or Western esotericism, people were always operating with a more phenomenological, ahistoric understanding of esotericism. “[They] were interested not so much in hermeticism specifically, as in esotericism generally [. . .]. According to this “traditionalist” understanding (which turns out to be implicitly assumed in many religionist studies of ‘esotericism’ as well), the esoteric means the ‘inner’ dimension or universal essence of religion *per se*.”<sup>16</sup>

In 1999, the second chair was established in Amsterdam to which Wouter F. Hanegraaff was appointed. With it the first department dedicated to the study of esotericism was created, producing a new

while always taking a new form—“each religion has a mysticism of its own,” Russell, “On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians,” 73.

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Russell, “On Mysticism and Esotericism among the Zoroastrians,” 74.

10

Shaked, “Esoteric Trends in Zoroastrianism,” 199–200.

11

On Haug’s work in India, see Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras: Geschichte—Gegenwart—Rituale*, Band 2 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 99–103. On Monchi-Zadeh’s Nazism, see Siamak Adhami, “Monchi-Zadeh, Davoud,” *Encyclopædia Iranica* (website), online edition, 2018, accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/monchi-zadeh-davoud>.

12

Cf. Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: Nabel der Welt—Glied der goldenen Kette—die alternative Geistesgeschichte*, 2. und wesentlich erw. Aufl. (Gaggenau: Scientia Nova, 2015).

13

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Beyond the Yates Paradigm: The Study of Western Esotericism between Counterculture and New Complexity,” *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 1, no. 1 (2001): 7–21.

14

Hanegraaff, “Beyond the Yates Paradigm,” 22–23.

15

Antoine Faivre, *Accès de l’ésotérisme occidental* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986). Michael Bergunder, “What Is Esotericism? Cultural Studies Approaches and the Problems of Definition in Religious Studies,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 22, no. 1 (2010): 14–16.

16

Hanegraaff, “Beyond the Yates Paradigm,” 26.

generation of scholars focusing on Western esotericism. Through Hanegraaff's relentless work and the founding of linked institutions, this new Amsterdam school gained a hegemonic position in the field. Among the new institutions emerging in this process, we find the journal *Aries*, the *European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism*, and a publishing cooperation with *Brill*, cementing the influence of the "Amsterdam school."<sup>17</sup> Although recent discussions in the field have attempted to move beyond Hanegraaff's work, it remains the primary point of reference.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to become familiar with his arguments.

The boundaries of what was studied were initially a result of the field's genesis, but it gradually gained programmatic significance, particularly in the work of Hanegraaff. Hanegraaff's approach to defining esotericism evolved over time. Initially, he aimed to provide positive definitions but later looked at esotericism as a category of exclusion in European intellectual history. This shift responded to earlier researchers' essentialist and universalist tendencies.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, it led to a departure from positive determinations of the subject in much of the field, aligning with a broader skepticism towards such definitions in religious studies.<sup>20</sup>

As shown by Egil Asprem, two versions of this exclusion-narrative exist: first, what Asprem calls the "strict version," which can be found in its most developed form in *Esotericism and the academy* (2012).<sup>21</sup> Here, Hanegraaff tells how, beginning in the seventeenth century, primarily protestant scholars started a discourse of exclusion, which fostered connections between intellectual currents like Hermeticism, alchemy, and astrology. While not necessarily marginalized in their historical context, they finally became excluded from academic discourse during the Enlightenment period. In other publications, Hanegraaff softened this strictly historiographic perspective. Asprem calls this the "inflated version." It claims the existence of a structural continuity in Western history from ancient anti-pagan polemics to the exclusion of esoteric thinking in the Enlightenment.<sup>22</sup>

Michael Bergunder and his students, foremost Julian Strube, have forwarded an even more radical approach. This school focuses on the formation of esotericism as a global identity marker from the nineteenth century onwards. Bergunder opted for an approach informed by discourse theory, primarily through readings of Derrida and the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, which traces its "subject, esotericism . . . through an unbroken line of reception and tradition."<sup>23</sup>

In both these approaches—although for different reasons—there is limited to no space for "Zoroastrian esotericism," particularly in the pre-modern period. If we do not want to fall behind the historicist turn the study of esotericism has made in the last two decades, we should take these perspectives seriously. Still, in the following, two ways will be shown in which the study of Zoroastrianism and esotericism can benefit from each other. In the first case, the further development of concepts from the study of esotericism using Middle Persian examples will lead to the development of a possible new research perspective, while in the second case, the complex links between esoteric, scientific, political, and religious discourses in the global history of religions will be demonstrated using a concrete case study.

17

Cf. Michael Stausberg, "What Is It All About? Some Reflections on Wouter Hanegraaff's Esotericism and the Academy," *Religion* 43, no. 2 (2013): 219–20.

18

E.g., Moritz Maurer, review of *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, *Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol. 17, *ARGOS* 1, (2022).

19

Cf. Julian Strube, "Towards the Study of Esotericism Without the 'Western': Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History," *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, *Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, vol. 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 48. It should be noted that Hanegraaff by now looks to rehabilitate the religionist school, although more for political reasons. Cf. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Rejected Knowledge . . . So You Mean That Esotericists Are the Losers of History?," in *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions About Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Peter Forshaw, and Marco Pasi (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 147–48. Contrary to the claims of Hanegraaff, Georg Lukács was not one of the founding fathers of the Frankfurt School. For an introduction to the relationship between Lukács and Adorno see Hans-Ernst Schiller, "Tod und Utopie: Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács," in *Adorno-Handbuch: Leben—Werk—Wirkung*, ed. Richard Klein, Johann Kreuzer, and Stefan Müller-Doohm (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 2019), 41–44. As to the question of whether Adorno and Horkheimer are the source of anti-esoteric identity politics in academia, there seems to be a lack of source references in Hanegraaff. He just quotes the whole of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*—which deals with a wide range of topics—and Adorno's minor reflections on the topic, the infamous "Theses against Occultism," a chapter of the *Minima Moralia*, while e.g., ignoring the treatment of belief in esotericism in the studies on the *Authoritarian Personality*.

20

For different reasons, Michael Bergunder reached similar conclusions around the same time but opted for an even more radical solution, a genealogy of the term "esotericism" as the appropriate subject of study; see Bergunder, "What Is Esotericism?"

21

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

22

Cf. Egil Asprem, "Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered: Some Methodological Notes on Esotericism and Marginality," in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 129–32. Hanegraaff makes these wider claims, e.g., in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Forbidden Knowledge: Anti-Esoteric Polemics and Academic Research," *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 5 (2005).

### Revelatory Knowledge Claims

Beyond the early criticism against *Esotericism and the Academy*, the question of how non-European, pre-modern traditions can be the subject of research on Esotericism has sparked new controversies in the field. Liana Saif remarks on the problem of the study of Islamic esotericism: “It seems, then, that an academic global study of Islamic esotericism is caught between a pestle and a mortar, religionism and non-existence.”<sup>24</sup> This seems to hold for pre-modern Zoroastrian esotericism, too. Saif tries to develop a heuristic under which it is still possible to speak of Islamic esotericism. She focuses on the concept *bāṭiniyya*, which she translates as esotericism, and creates a framework based on the axes of intellectual and revelatory approaches to hidden phenomena centered around Qur’anic exegesis, in the tenth to thirteenth centuries, influenced by the Neoplatonised-Aristotelianism of the ninth and tenth centuries and the rise of Sufism; while also highlighting the significance of the reception of Islamic esotericism in the early to mid-twentieth century in the Traditionalist milieu.<sup>25</sup> Based on an overview of historical sources, she excludes certain elements that seem central to most understandings of “Western” esotericism, like a “discreet social presence and the occult sciences.”<sup>26</sup> An obvious question arising is: what heuristic benefit do we get out of such an identification? Instead, we should use her focus on heuristics as a foundation for exploring new avenues of inquiry.

In this context, referring to Gregor Ahn’s article on the formation of concepts in religious studies might be beneficial. Ahn discusses the need to critically examine and reevaluate our conceptual frameworks, reflecting on culture-specific preconceptions. The result should be new heuristics “that are not based on a replacement by improved equivalent terms, but operate with substitute terms that presuppose a fundamentally changed structure of the conceptual field and the object of investigation implied by it.”<sup>27</sup> The objective is not to completely eliminate culturally specific preconceptions but rather to aim for a more accurate and “factually appropriate” description.<sup>28</sup>

The starting point for the present investigation is a concept that Dylan Burns has explored in the context of ancient Mediterranean texts: claims of revelatory knowledge e.g., based on ritualistic attainment of “higher knowledge,” which he envisions as a bridge between the study of different gnostic and apocalyptic traditions of the ancient Mediterranean.<sup>29</sup> Such claims have often been included in definitions of esotericism.<sup>30</sup> We will follow this route, focusing on a specific set of such claims in the Middle Persian Zoroastrian material, more or less elaborate narratives centered on the attainment of revelatory knowledge through rituals. Thus, a research framework from the Study of Esotericism will be the starting point—but, following Ahn’s call for a reorientation of the conceptual field, it will make more sense to resituate it within the framework of other discourses found in the Zoroastrian material, namely debates surrounding mediality, especially the use of writing, which became ever more prominent in Late Antiquity.

The oldest dateable account of the use of ritual to reveal religious truths is found in the inscriptions of Kerdīr, the most prominent Zoroastrian priestly dignitary of the early Sasanian period.<sup>31</sup> In a somewhat obscure passage, he describes his use of young boys to obtain a vision

23

Bergunder, “What Is Esotericism?,” 28.

24

Liana Saif, “What Is Islamic Esotericism?,” *Correspondences* 7, no. 1 (2019): 5.

25

Saif, “What Is Islamic Esotericism?,” 2.

26

Saif, “What Is Islamic Esotericism?,” 46.

27

“[. . .] Beispiele für den Umgang mit Eurozentrismen [. . .] die nicht auf einer Ersetzung durch verbesserte Äquivalenzbegriffe basieren, sondern mit Ersatzbegriffen operieren, die eine grundsätzlich veränderte Struktur des Begriffsfeldes und des damit implizierten Untersuchungsgegenstands voraussetzen.” Gregor Ahn, “Eurozentrismen als Erkenntnisbarrieren in der Religionswissenschaft,” *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 5, no. 1 (1997): 48.

28

“sachangemessener,” see Ahn, “Eurozentrismen als Erkenntnisbarrieren in der Religionswissenschaft,” 48.

29

Dylan Burns, “Receptions of Revelations: A Future for the Study of Esotericism and Antiquity,” in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 35–36.

30

See the references in *ibid.* and e.g., on the importance of revelatory knowledge in his approach to esotericism in Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 56–59.

31

A general survey on him is found in Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “Kartir,” accessed January 19, 2017, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kartir>.

that reveals specific details about the soul's fate in the afterlife.<sup>32</sup> The exact method is debated; Martin Schwartz argues for the use of a reflective surface based on a proposed correction to older readings of the inscription.<sup>33</sup> The later accounts of comparable practices are found in the priestly literature but resist such a relatively straightforward dating.

The exact chronology of most of the Book Pahlavi literature remains a mystery; however, it is indisputable that all the following examples, as they exist in their present form, were written several centuries after the era of Kerdīr. The first example comes from the *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag* (AWN), *Book of the righteous Wīrāz*,<sup>34</sup> probably the most well-known example of a Zoroastrian text containing a description of the afterlife. It describes the drinking of a vision-inducing liquid by Wīrāz. Still, it is embedded in a story about writing and is—another feature appearing in all the following examples—set in the distant past, its current redaction most likely composed in the Islamic period.<sup>35</sup> The reason for performing the ritual is the doubt into which the religion fell after the invasion of Alexander of Macedon. The first misdeed ascribed to the Macedonian conqueror is (most likely anachronistically) the destruction of a written version of the Avesta—seemingly the only copy, causing great calamity (AWN 1.5-6).<sup>36</sup> A minor but telling difference between Kerdīr's inscription and the *Ardā Wīrāz Nāmag* is the fact that after the performance of the appropriate rituals, the text explicitly mentions that a *dibīr ī dānāg ī frazānag*,<sup>37</sup> “a wise and intelligent scribe,” is called to record the vision (AWN 3.12-13). The text continues: *ud harw čē Wīrāz guft drust rōšn ud gōwizār nibišt*,<sup>38</sup> “and everything that Wīrāz said was written down rightly, clearly and in detail” (AWN 3.14). The section describing the vision even starts with the phrase *u-š ēdōn framūd nibištān*,<sup>39</sup> “and he ordered him to write” (AWN 4.1). While referencing a visionary experience, the text stresses that it was put into writing.

A similar observation can be made in the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* (ZWY).<sup>40</sup> It depicts events unfolding during the *frašgird*, the Zoroastrian end times. While the exact age of the text remains uncertain, its surviving form appears to have undergone a complex editing process, with the current form of the text dating from Islamic times.<sup>41</sup> In the narrative, Zardušt (Zarathustra) tries to attain immortality, which Ohrmazd is unwilling to bestow on him. Instead, he grants him clairvoyance of the future through a drink of his wisdom in the form of water (ZWY 3,5-8). The whole narrative—as can be seen from the title and the beginning of the chapters—claims to be taken from the *Zand*, the translation with commentary of the Avesta. Chapter 3 starts e.g., with the expression *pad zand wahman yasn paydāg . . .*<sup>42</sup> “it is revealed in the *Zand* of the Wahman Yasn . . .” before recounting further parts of the vision. As the history behind the text already implies, this seems highly unlikely.<sup>43</sup> Still, it seems necessary for the text to provide a link to an older tradition and not solely rely on the claim to knowledge attained through rituals, presenting itself as a retelling of a preexisting text (although of unknown mediality).

One last example is found in the *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg* (AY), *The memoir of Jamasp*.<sup>44</sup> Once again, we encounter a text with a remarkably intricate history of transmission. It is evident that this text has undergone numerous changes and revisions throughout its existence.<sup>45</sup>

32

The latest transcription and translation of the relevant passages can be found in Frantz Grenet, “Pour une nouvelle Visite à la ‘Vision de Kerdīr,’” *Studia Asiatica* 3 (2002): 9–13.

33

Martin Schwartz, “Kerdīr's Clairvoyants: Extra-Iranian and Gathic Perspectives,” in *Iranian Languages and Texts from Iran and Turan: Ronald E. Emmerick Memorial Volume*, ed. Maria Macuch, Mauro Maggi, and Werner Sundermann, Iranica 13 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007). It is worthy of note, that divination using children or teenagers as intermediaries is unknown in the later Book Pahlavi material, see Schwartz, “Kerdīr's Clairvoyants,” 372–73.

34

The following references refer to the publication and translation of the text by Gignoux, see Philippe Gignoux, *Le livre d'Ardā Wīrāz: Translittération, transcription et traduction du texte pehlevi*, Recherche sur les civilisations. Cahier 14 (Paris: Ed. Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1984).

35

Philippe Gignoux, “Ardā Wīrāz,” in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, accessed February 7, 2017, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/arda-wiraz-wiraz>. This article is available in print in vol. 2, fasc. 4.

36

For parallels to an account in Dēnkard III, cf. Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras: Geschichte—Gegenwart—Rituale*, Band 1 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002), 78.

37

Following Gignoux, *Le livre d'Ardā Wīrāz*, 47.

38

Following Gignoux, 47.

39

Following Gignoux, 47.

40

For an edition and translation, see Carlo G. Cereti, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn: A Zoroastrian Apocalypse*, Serie Orientale Roma 75 (Roma: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1995).

41

A detailed discussion and presentation of the debate is provided by Cereti, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, 15–27. For a recent but more concise overview of the discussion, see Philip G. Kreyenbroek, “Millennialism and Eschatology in the Zoroastrian Tradition,” in *Teachers and Teachings in the Good Religion: Opera Minora on Zoroastrianism*, ed. Kianoosh Rezaia, Göttinger Orientalforschungen Reihe 3, Iranica Neue Folge 10 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013), 171–72.

42

Cereti, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, 134.

Given that the Middle Persian version of much of the text is lost, our understanding relies heavily on the later renditions of Pāzand, i.e., Middle Persian written in Avestan script, and of Pārsī, i.e., a transcription in Arabic. In it, Jamasp, who became leader of the religion after Zarathustra's death, answers questions posed to him by King Wištāsp, a legendary ruler and contemporary of Zarathustra.<sup>46</sup> In contrast to the other examples, Jamasp does not achieve his visions through a ritual, but his knowledge was bestowed on him by Zarathustra himself (AY 1.5). Agostini speculates that this gave the figure a special role in the aftermath of the Islamic conquest.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, in AY 1.3, the text also proclaims that it was written down in the time of Wištāsp, thereby dating its creation to a mythical past long before the reader's present.

What can we gather from these examples? Although our sample is limited, I propose some observations that prompt a broader perspective on claims of revelatory knowledge attained through rituals in the Zoroastrian Middle Persian material. After Kerdīr, no priest or other individual claims to possess such revelatory knowledge. Instead, we encounter claims projecting this knowledge to the distant past. This contrasts sharply with Kerdīr's account of his ritual accomplishments. However, it is overly simplistic to categorize these examples as mere pseudepigrapha. Instead, they all engage, to some extent, in a discourse on literacy and intertextuality, referring to a written transmission or source material incorporated into the work. Claims of revelatory knowledge appear intertwined with these claims of knowledge transmission. This is distinct from the directness found in Kerdīr's inscription.

While this shift is hard to explain, it should alert us to the possibility of a change in perceptions of mediality separating the two. Furthermore, this insistence on writing stands in some contrast—at first glance—to the only open discussion of orality and literacy that we can find in Middle Persian Zoroastrian literature, a passage in the fifth book of the *Dēnkard*. After discussing the connection between Avestan and the spiritual world, we can read the following in Dk. 5.24.13:<sup>48</sup>

“And he [i.e., Ohrmazd] commanded the *dēn* and the ritual formula and all that is written with the tongue to be written down from the beginning. Now most of it has been preserved in writing, as is well known among the knowing. Nevertheless, it is of great benefit to memorise, and one advantage of this is to inform the common people about the rituals and worship. Another is to gain knowledge of things. Because it allows words of such depth to be transmitted and these in truthfulness and unadulterated, the correctness of the spoken word is much greater than that of the written word and for these and many other reasons the living and spoken word should be sensibly regarded as more important than the written word.”<sup>49</sup>

It is noteworthy that the debate is between the high priest and a Christian convert in an Islamic context. Insisting on the superiority of orality could be a means of identitarian demarcation. Still, the passage—while proclaiming the superiority of orality—attributes the writing down of the tradition to Ohrmazd himself, although how this took

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On the dating, cf. Carlo G. Cereti, “On the Date of the Zand ī Wahman Yasn,” in *K. R. Cama Oriental Institute Second International Congress Proceedings*, ed. K. R. Cama Oriental Institute (Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1996). On the debate surrounding this text, cf. Cereti, *The Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, 15–27.

44

Edition and translation see Domenico Agostini, *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg: Un texte eschatologique zoroastrien*, *Biblica et orientalia* 50 (Roma: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2013).

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Agostini, *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg*, 14–18.

46

His role as a wise seer is also referred to in other Middle Persian texts, e.g., Dk. 5.4.3, see Jaleh Amouzgar and Ahmad Tafazzoli, *Le cinquième livre du dēnkard*, *Studia Iranica Cahiers* 23 (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 2000), 32–33.

47

Agostini, *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg*, 119.

48

“ud ēn dēn ud mānsr ud hamāg ī uzwānīg nibištān ōwōn framūd ō bunīg nibištāg ud nūn-iz frāhist pad-iz nibēgīhā pad ēstēd čiyōn andar āgāhān paydāg bē warm kardan sūd was uš hūdagīh ī pad ēzišn ud stāyišn āgāhēnišn ī ō ramān ēk wēš dānistan ī čisān aziš ōh-iz ān ōwōn zofīrhā saxwan ud ēk rāstīhā ud a-wašt-rangīhā abespārdan šāyistan dādestānīgīh ī wāz-gōwišnīh frāy az ān ī nibēsišnīg wasīhā ud pad-iz abārīg was čim zīndag ud gōwišnīg saxwan az ān ī pad nibišt mādagwar-tar hangārdan čimīg,” in Amouzgar and Tafazzoli, *Le cinquième livre du dēnkard*, 82–84.

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Cf. the French translation in Amouzgar and Tafazzoli, *Le cinquième livre du dēnkard*, 83–85. A recent English translation can be found in Prods Oktor Skjærvø, *The Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, The sacred literature series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 250–51.



place remains unclear.

What becomes clear is that research on claims of revelatory knowledge in Middle Persian Zoroastrian sources must consider wider discourses on mediality in the sources at hand. Therefore, it might make more sense to speak of *ritualistic knowledge claims*—which by the time of our sources seem to be in need of authoritarian support through references to tradition and writing. In Ahn’s terms, such a readjustment of our research focus can help us overcome culture-specific preconceptions. This reorientation can be the starting point of a reorientation of research into the wider field of such claims in the Mediterranean area, too.

### *The Modern Period: The Case of Traditionalism*

The preceding subchapter has proven that an engagement between debates in the study of esotericism and Zoroastrianism can be a fruitful endeavor for both sides. Exploring pre-modern examples through a concept linked to the formation of Western esotericism has helped to reframe it and possibly open up new lines of research into the wider world of Late Antique revelatory literature. But even when focusing on Middle Persian material, it became clear that a strictly historical approach is necessary, as evidenced by the differences between Kerdīr and the later texts.

The qualifier “Western,” as we have seen, was meant to demarcate such a new, historicist approach in contrast to religionist approaches. Still, for several reasons, its validity has been questioned.<sup>50</sup> Post-structuralist and postcolonial perspectives, among others, are, as noted above, employed to challenge the validity of the qualifier. One argument in its problematization is that esotericism as a self-designation became prominent only in the nineteenth century, shaped by global exchange processes, emphasizing the dynamic and relational nature of its development, pushing the date of its employability even closer to the present.<sup>51</sup> Parsis, the Zoroastrian community of modern-day India, actively participated in these global discourses, with Theosophy being one of the most prominent examples, where members of the community rose to prominent positions.<sup>52</sup> Some studies have examined what could be described as such global entanglements, notably the work of Anna Tessmann on Russian forms of Zoroastrianism, which emerged at the intersections between scientific and esoteric discourses.<sup>53</sup> Scholars have also turned their attention to movements that claim a Zoroastrian identity, most notably Mazdaznan.<sup>54</sup> Beyond that, various esoteric traditions partook in discourses surrounding Zoroastrianism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Still, this has received little attention in the scholarly literature, especially in the study of Zoroastrianism. Symptomatically, the articles gathered in *Part V. Intersections of the Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism* examine classical religious traditions but not modern esotericism.<sup>55</sup> This is reminiscent of the stigmatization of the study of esotericism in academia attested to by Hanegraaff, even as a subject and not as a theoretical perspective.<sup>56</sup>

However, examining the discourse surrounding Zoroaster and Zoroastrianism within a particular esoteric tradition can offer valuable

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A collection of it is found in Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 3 (2015).

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See the two important studies by Julian Strube, “Occultist Identity Formations Between Theosophy and Socialism in Fin-De-Siècle France,” *Numen* 64, no. 5–6 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685276-12341481>; Strube, “Towards the Study of Esotericism without the “Western”: Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History.”

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Cf. Sarah B. Motlagh, “Zoroastrianism in the Light of Theosophy (1898): On the Encounter between Theosophy and Zoroastrianism in the Early History of the Theosophical Society” (master’s thesis, Department of History, European Studies and Religious Studies, University of Amsterdam, 2021), <https://scripties.uba.uva.nl/download?fid=c4811146>; Michael Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras*, 2:112–18.

53

Cf. Anna Tessmann, *On the Good Faith: A Four-fold Discursive Construction of Zoroastrianism in Contemporary Russia*, Södertörn doctoral dissertations 68 (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2012).

54

On Mazdaznan, cf. Ulrich Linse, “Mazdaznan - Die Rassenreligion vom arischen Friedensreich,” in *Völkische Religion und Krisen der Moderne: Entwürfe “arteigener” Glaubenssysteme seit der Jahrhundertwende*, ed. Stefanie von Schnurbein and Justus H. Ulbricht (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2001); Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathushtras*, 2:378–400. A short survey of twentieth century examples can be found in Tessmann, *On the Good Faith*, 8–9. Michael Stausberg deals with a variety of examples in “Para-Zoroastrianisms: Memetic Transmission and Appropriations,” in *Parsis in India and the Diaspora*, ed. John R. Hinnells and Alan V. Williams, Routledge South Asian religion series 2 (London: Routledge, 2007).

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insights into the interplay between different discourses and shed light on the representation of Zoroastrianism in these contexts. The example taken here is that of Traditionalism, especially that of its founding figure, René Guénon (1886–1951). While Traditionalism has predominantly been associated with the fringes of right-wing extremism for many years, it has gained some visibility in recent times. Notably, its influence on the Russian conspiratorialist Alexander Dugin has attracted attention, with Western media occasionally portraying him as a shadowy figure influencing Vladimir Putin’s imperial ambitions.<sup>57</sup> Beyond that, as the already quoted Liana Saif has remarked, among many others, it played a major role in the modern perception of Islamic esotericism in the West—and, especially through Mircea Eliade, it was a major influence on Religious Studies in the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>58</sup>

Guénon was a former French occultist who, for a short while, hoped to pursue a career in academia. He firmly believed the Western world was facing an imminent collapse primarily caused by its disconnection from Tradition, a transcendental framework of spiritual values. According to Guénon, the only remaining hope for Western individuals lay in reestablishing a connection to Tradition through initiation into a traditional religious system—which, according to him, was to be found in the East, in “Oriental metaphysics.” While Guénon focused his writings primarily on Hinduism, he embraced Islam and lived as a practicing Muslim in Cairo for the last two decades of his life.<sup>59</sup>

While Guénon’s work may contain limited references to Zoroastrianism, these references hold significant implications within the broader context of Traditionalism. To analyze these references, we will begin with his initial monograph and explore his writings’ key themes associated with Zoroastrianism. In doing so, we will discover a distinct and original portrayal of the religion that sharply contrasts with prevailing depictions in the European esoteric tradition.

In *Introduction générale à l’étude des doctrines hindoues* (1921), which Guénon submitted as a dissertation to the French Indologist Sylvain Lévi, he mentions Zoroastrianism and the culture of pre-Islamic Persia on several occasions, although mostly in passing. As summarized by Mark Sedgwick, the thesis was rejected by Lévi because of its scientific shortcomings, its sole focus on Vedanta as the supposed essence of Hinduism, and its perennialism—these characteristics (and arguably the unscientific treatment of his source material) being central to Guénon’s subsequent works as well.<sup>60</sup> Guénon emphasizes the influence of Persian culture on classical Greek civilization, which he already saw as a deviation from Tradition.<sup>61</sup> This perspective stands in stark contrast to his views on the interconnections among Traditional religions, i.e., religions that are still in contact with these metaphysical values. For example, in *Le roi du monde* (1927), Guénon expresses reluctance to perceive their relationship solely within the framework of influences, although he does not entirely dismiss their possibility. Rather, they supposedly show their own expressions of the perennial Tradition, which can serve as an explanation for similarities.<sup>62</sup> This perspective shapes his treatment of Zoroastrianism, too, e.g., in his discussion of Avestan *haoma* and Vedic *soma*.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, he treats

vaina, eds., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2015).

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E.g., Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Imagining the Future Study of Religion and Spirituality,” *Religion* 50, no. 1 (2020).

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A cautious assessment of Dugin and his influence can be found in Marlene Laruelle, “Alexander Dugin and Eurasianism,” in *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right*, ed. Mark Sedgwick (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019). A more journalistic account of the (possible) influences of Traditionalism, among others on the Alt Right in the USA, is to be found in Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, *War for Eternity: The Return of Traditionalism and the Rise of the Populist Right* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021).

58

Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 109–17.

59

A summary of the history of Traditionalism in the 20th century with a special focus on the life of Guénon is Mark J. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), esp. 21–80. In 2023, Sedgwick published a less academic overview of Traditionalist teachings, Mark Sedgwick, *Traditionalism: The Radical Project for Restoring Sacred Order* (London: Pelican, 2023).

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See Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 22–23.

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E.g., René Guénon, *Introduction générale à l’étude des doctrines hindoues*, *Systèmes et faits sociaux* (Paris: Rivière, 1921), 16–17, 32–33.

62

See René Guénon, *Le roi du monde*, *Tradition* 9 (1927; repr., Paris: Gallimard, 1958), 27–28.

63

He takes this up on several occasions, e.g., in Guénon, *Le Roi du Monde*, 36, n. 56. In the same year he makes the connection in an article in the Catholic periodical *Regnabit*, reprinted in René Guénon, “Le Sacré-Coeur et la légende du Saint Graal,” in *Aperçus sur l’ésotérisme chrétien* (Paris: Les Éditions traditionnelles, 1954), 104.

the Avestan *Vohu Mana* as a manifestation of the *Homme Universel*.<sup>64</sup>

This theoretical outlook might also explain a difference between him and most other authors dealing with the history of religions in the widest sense at the time: While e.g., the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* focused on contacts and exchanges between religious traditions, Guénon is more than reluctant to give them a place in history. Particularly in his later writings, Guénon emphatically denies any influence of Zoroastrianism on the development of Iranian forms of Islam. Instead, he places significant emphasis on the Arab character of Islam and highlights the Islamic nature of modern Persia:

“On the other hand, Persia should belong, ethnically and even geographically, to what we have called the Middle East; if we don’t include it, it’s because its current population is entirely Muslim. One is that of India, and the other that of the ancient Persians; but today, the latter is represented only by the Parsis, who form small and scattered groups, some in India, mainly in Bombay, others in the Caucasus . . .”<sup>65</sup>

Noteworthy is the depiction of Zoroastrianism as existing only in insignificant remnants, replaced by Islam. Nevertheless, in a review published in 1923, Guénon remained open to the possibility of Zoroastrian influence on Persian culture in the wider sense, although not on Islam as a (Traditional) religion. Writing for the Catholic *Revue de philosophie*, Guénon stresses the importance of Zoroastrianism’s influence on the sciences in Iran.<sup>66</sup> This kind of influence is inconceivable regarding a Traditional religion in his specific kind of perennialism, as here, and as pointed out above, similarities are not proof of exchange but rather evidence of the shared genesis. In 1936—six years after moving to Cairo—he writes to Patrice Genty, a former Martinist who by then had become a Traditionalist, too:<sup>67</sup>

“I don’t see that there’s any Manichaeism in Persian Sufism, or Mazdeism for that matter, as some Westerners have also claimed; it’s always the mania for looking for ‘fingerprints’; in reality, Sufism, both Persian and Arabic, is purely Islamic and has never been anything else.”<sup>68</sup>

Zoroastrianism and its relationship to Islam is taken up by Guénon in reference to Henry Corbin, too. Corbin, whose influence still looms over the academic study of Islamic esotericism, identified it mainly with Shi’ite Sufism and here, especially with the figure of Suhrawardī.<sup>69</sup> In contrast to Guénon, Corbin—whose academic career spanned roughly five decades—stressed the importance of Zoroastrianism for the development of Islam and especially the Islamic culture of Iran.<sup>70</sup> In a critical review of Corbin’s *Suhrawardī d’Alep, fondateur de la doctrine illuminative (ishrâq)* for *Études traditionnelles*, the only reference to Corbin in the works of Guénon, he rejects the notion of influence again.<sup>71</sup>

Returning to the *Introduction*, another passage illuminates Guénon’s conception of Zoroastrianism. In the broader context of the history of traditional religions, Guénon integrates Zoroastrianism as

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See René Guénon, *Le symbolisme de la croix*, 3e éd. (Paris: Les éd. Vêga, 1957), 74n54. Similarly, he references Zoroastrianism, respectively ancient Persian culture, in the discussion of world ages, e.g., in Guénon, *Le symbolisme de la croix*, 87, and of the world egg, see René Guénon, *L’homme et son devenir selon le Védānta* (Paris: Les Éditions traditionnelles, 1925), 112n123.

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Translated from Guénon, *Introduction générale à l’étude des doctrines hindoues*, 59. The idea of Zoroastrians in the Caucasus might be a misunderstanding of some ideas voiced in Helena P. Blavatsky, “Persian Zoroastrianism and Russian Vandalism,” *The Theosophist* 1 (October 1879), accessed April 24, 2023, <https://universalthosophy.com/hpb/persian-zoroastrianism-and-russian-vandalism/>. I thank Anna Tessmann for this reference. On Guénon’s relationship with Theosophy, see the following.

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Similarly, in a 1929 review of a new edition of *Les religions et les philosophies dans l’Asie centrale* by Arthur de Gobineau, see René Guénon, review of *Les penseurs de l’Islam*, by Baron Carra De Vaux, vol. 1, *Les souverains, l’histoire et la philosophie politique*, vol. 2, *Les géographes, les sciences mathématiques et naturelles*, in *Recueil*, ed. Gauthier Pierozak, 1re éd. (Toronto: Rose-Cross Books, 2013). On his relationship with this journal, see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 24, 30. Guénon seems to use Iran and Persia interchangeably. He makes a similar argument in a 1929 review of a new edition of *Les religions et les philosophies dans l’Asie centrale* by Arthur de Gobineau, see René Guénon, “Les religions et les philosophies dans l’Asie centrale,” in *Études sur l’hindouisme*, Nouvelle édition (Paris: Éditions Traditionnelles, 1989).

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On Genty cf. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 50, 56, 68.

68

Translated from René Guénon, “Letter to Patrice Genty, 10.02.1936,” accessed April 24, 2023, [http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access\\_book.php?sigle=C-PaGe&page=81](http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-PaGe&page=81). He repeats his opinion in a following letter, see René Guénon, “Letter to Patrice Genty, 1.12.1936,” accessed April 24, 2023, [http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access\\_book.php?sigle=C-PaGe&page=92](http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-PaGe&page=92). A later example explicitly mentioning Sufism is found in an article for *Études traditionnelles*, his own journal, see René Guénon, “Les Revues,” *Études traditionnelles* 273 (1949): 48.

69

Cf. Liana Saif, “‘That I Did Love the Moor to Live with Him’: Islam In/and the Study of ‘Western Esotericism,’” in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, 74–78.

70

Already in 1946 Corbin published a monograph on

a phenomenon that initially deviates from the Traditional path before undergoing a process of return to it—an ambiguity found in some of his other treatments of Zoroastrianism, too:

“[T]his same tradition was . . . (Indo-Iranian), . . . simply to mark that it was later to give rise to the two Hindu and Persian civilizations, distinct and even opposed in some respects. At some point, therefore, a split must have occurred, rather like that which later occurred in Buddhism in India; and the separate branch, deviating from the primordial tradition, was then what we call ‘Iranism,’ i.e., what was to become the Persian tradition, still called ‘Mazdeism.’ We have already pointed out this tendency, general in the East, for doctrines that were initially anti-traditional to set themselves up as independent traditions; the one in question had undoubtedly taken on this character long before being codified in the Avesta under the name of Zarathustra or Zoroaster, in which we should see, moreover, not the designation of a man, but rather that of a group, as often happens in such cases . . . On the other hand, a very clear trace of the deviation remained in the Persian language itself, where certain words had a meaning directly opposite to that which they had originally and which they retained in Sanskrit . . .”<sup>72</sup>

Guénon’s sources have been a subject of debate, with critics highlighting that he often drew upon materials that did not meet academic standards. Guénon’s proposition that Zarathustra was a title rather than a historical figure is of particular interest in this regard. By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea that Zarathustra not only existed but had actually composed parts of the Avesta had become entrenched in scholarship on Zoroastrianism.<sup>73</sup> Where did Guénon come up with the idea that it was a title attached to several individuals? The answer seems to lie in Guénon’s biography: 1921 saw not only the publication of Guénon’s work on Hinduism but also his *Le Théosophisme: Histoire d’une pseudo-religion*, a reckoning with Theosophy, and two years later, in 1923, he published *L’erreur spirite*, in which he attacked his former spiritual master, Gérard Anacleto Vincent Encausse, better known under his pseudonym Papus. The Martinist movement, which Papus initiated and Guénon criticized, started as a breakaway from the Theosophical Society under Papus in late nineteenth-century France, but soon developed an international following of its own. Among its followers, at least for some time, was Guénon.<sup>74</sup> At the time of the publication of the *Introduction*, he had broken with Martinism, but up to the time of his death in Egypt thirty years later, he kept—among other esoteric works—books from the movement in his private library.<sup>75</sup> While already obsolete in nineteenth-century academic discussions, the idea of several Zarathustras has still found some support in later esoteric writings, although mostly focusing on two separate Zoroasters.<sup>76</sup> Although early theosophical publications echo traditional Zoroaster discourses in European occultism,<sup>77</sup> Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) mentions the idea that the name “Zarathustra” must have been a title used by several different people, e.g., in *Isis Unveiled* (1877), and this seems to have found at least some acceptance even among Theo-

the topic, Henry Corbin, *Les motifs zoroastriens dans la philosophie de Sohrawardī*, Publications de la Société d’Iranologie 3 (Teheran: Editions du Courier, 1946).

71

See René Guénon, review of *Suhrawardī d’Alep, fondateur de la doctrine illuminative (Isshrâq)*, by Henry Corbin, *Études traditionnelles* 258 (1947). He made a similar point in reference to Yezidi angelology in René Guénon, review of *Aventures en Arabie*, by W. B. Seabrook, *Études traditionnelles* 181 (1935).

72

Translated from Guénon, *Introduction générale à l’étude des doctrines hindoues*, 167–68.

73

See Prods Oktor Skjærvø, “The State of Old Avestan Scholarship,” review of *Les Textes Vieil-Avestiques, vol. 2: Répertoires Grammaticaux et Lexique, vol. 3: Commentaire*, by Jean Kellens and Eric Pirart, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no. 1 (1997), 104–5.

74

On Guénon’s engagement with these movements, see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 39–50.

75

Igor Volkoff, “Voyage à travers la bibliothèque de René Guénon,” in *L’ermite de Duqqi: René Guénon en marge des milieux francophones égyptiens*, ed. Xavier Accart, *Archives* 6 (Milano: Archè, 2001).

76

Cf. Michael Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, 1:328–35.

77

An overview of the material in Helena Blavatsky’s publications can be found in Motlagh, “Zoroastrianism in the Light of Theosophy (1898),” 26–30. While dealing with the material, she leaves out the passages in *Isis Unveiled* dealing with the question of the multiple Zarathustras.

sophical Parsis.<sup>78</sup> It is unclear where Guénon exactly encountered the idea as it seems to have had some presence in Martinist circles, too. Papus seems to endorse it when he writes of the “premier Zoroastre” in his *Traité élémentaire de science occulte* (1889).<sup>79</sup> This seems to allude more to the idea of a series of Zarathustras in line with Blavatsky and in opposition to the work of e.g., the famous French occultist Eliphas Lévi, who distinguishes between a *true* and a *false* Zarathustra.<sup>80</sup> Guénon keeps with the idea in his later work, too. For example, in his most famous book, *La crise du monde moderne* (1927), he dates the “last Zarathustra” (“dernier Zoroastre”) to the sixth century BCE.<sup>81</sup>

As shown above, Zoroastrianism plays a role for Guénon only in so far as it once was—at least for some time—a force of Tradition that has now been replaced by Islam in its heartland. He spelled out in several letters his view of Zoroastrianism as a schismatic sect that branched off from Vedic religion, which he perceives to be closest to the primordial religion. In his views, Guénon seems to give an esoteric echo and reformulation of views common . . .

The harshest judgement is found in a letter to Julius Evola (1898–1974). Evola had discovered Traditionalism in the mid-1920s. A staunch antisemite and right-wing elitist critic of fascism, he tried to gain influence on the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* in Italy as well as on the *Nationalsozialistische deutsche Arbeiterpartei* in Germany—with only limited success.<sup>82</sup> In what seems to be corrections to drafts for Evola’s book *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, Guénon writes:

“Another point of difference concerns Mazdeism (p. 269), the result of a very ancient schism, and certainly further from the principle than the Hindu tradition: one of the proofs of this is the inversion of the meaning of the word ‘dêva,’ which originally expressed the idea of ‘luminosity’; others of the same kind could be found, for example the transformation of Indra into a demon; and there is also, in Mazdeism, a certain ‘moralism’ which is the incontestable sign of a degeneration.”<sup>83</sup>

Following the passage from the *Introduction* quoted above, Guénon had already spoken of the Zoroastrian “deviation” regarding the change of e.g., the role of Indra in the two traditions. In the letter, he speaks of “l’inversion,” a central term in Guénon’s work, denoting a twisting of right and wrong in antitraditional societies—most notably in the modern Western World. Nevertheless, he writes in a following letter that this antitraditional schism might have been corrected over time, echoing the ideas encountered previously.<sup>84</sup> It is worthwhile to contrast Evola’s perspective on Zoroastrianism with that of Guénon to give some perspective on the breadth of Traditionalist engagements with the religion and the relationship between the two authors.

In one of his corrections, Guénon brings up the idea of Zarathustra being a title borne by different people in different times, too,<sup>85</sup> which is taken up by Evola and linked to the thesis of the origin of the Aryans from an Arctic, i.e., hyperborean, homeland, the putative original homeland in the final version of *Rivolta*. In a specific interpretation of his own, he links it to the Hindu concept of avatar.<sup>86</sup> However, although he formulates this idea in a footnote, it plays practically no

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Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: Theology, Cambridge library collection. Spiritualism and Esoteric Knowledge* (1877; repr., Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 141. In the later work, *The Secret Doctrine*, she names an early modern Persian work called *Dabestan* as her source, see Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 2, *Anthropogenesis* (London: Theosophical Publ. Co, 1888), 6n1. There is no indication that Guénon knew the work. Blavatsky’s etymological speculations did not receive any echo or source in the academic discussions of the time, cf. Friedrich Max Müller, *Zendstudien I* (Wien: In Komm. bei Karl Gerolds Sohn, 1863), 1–7; Abraham V. Williams Jackson, *Zoroaster: The Prophet of Ancient Iran* (London: Macmillan, 1899), 147–49. Jackson discusses the question of the existence of two Zarathustras in relation to a passage in Pliny but the second one would have flourished much later than the Theosophist’s Zarathustra, see Jackson, *Zoroaster*, 153. In *Zoroastrianism in the light of theosophy*, Henry Steel Olcott, one of the founding figures of the *Theosophical Society*, gives in a footnote a lengthy explanation of the theory, see Henry S. Olcott, “The Spirit of the Zoroastrian Religion,” in *Zoroastrianism in the Light of Theosophy*, ed. Nasarvanji F. Bilimoria (Bombay: “Blavatsky Lodge” Theosophical Society, 1898), 3–4n. The volume was published by a prominent Parsi member of the Theosophical Society.

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See Papus, *Traité élémentaire de science occulte* (Paris: G. Carré, 1888), 114.

80

Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra*, 1:563–65.

81

René Guénon, *La crise du monde moderne*, Tradition 3, 7e éd. (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 22. Another example can be found in René Guénon, “Letter to Vasile Lovinescu, 19.5.1935,” accessed April 27, 2023, [http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access\\_book.php?sigle=C-VLov&page=6](http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-VLov&page=6); René Guénon, “Letter to Patrice Genty, 16.04.1935,” accessed April 7, 2023, [http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access\\_book.php?sigle=C-PaGe&page=68](http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-PaGe&page=68).

82

There exists no academic biography of Evola. For his activities during the fascist era, see Peter Staudenmaier, “Racial Ideology Between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Julius Evola and the Aryan Myth, 1933–43,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 55, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009419855428>; Peter Staudenmaier, “Julius Evola and the ‘Jewish Problem’ in Axis Europe: Race, Religion and Antisemitism,” in *Religion, Ethnonationalism, and Antisemitism in the Era of the Two World Wars*, ed. Kevin P. Spicer and Rebecca Carter-Chand, McGill-Queen’s Studies in the History of Religion (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022). On his involvement with Traditionalism and its interplay with fascism see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 98–109. Evola has gained some popularity in modern right-wing discourse on the internet, see

role in his conception of Zarathustra. Guénon had also pointed him to new sources on Hyperborea, recommending *Tilak's Arctic Home of the Veda* over Alfred Rosenberg, who seems to have been referenced in Evola's first draft.<sup>87</sup> In his conception, Zarathustra appears as a restorer of the traditional cult, which was in danger of degenerating, thereby defusing the conflict between Hinduism and Zoroastrianism as painted by Guénon.<sup>88</sup> Evola adopts some more points of Guénon's criticism, too, while ignoring others, e.g., he briefly mentions the moralizing element in Zoroastrianism that Guénon pointed out, but does not incorporate the note concerning the etymology of Skt. *asura* and Av. *ahura* proposed by Guénon.<sup>89</sup>

Evola and Guénon approach different aspects of Zoroastrianism as having varying significance. For Evola, Zoroastrianism is a Traditional Aryan warrior cult. He refers to it as "il dualismo guerriero mazdeo."<sup>90</sup> His interpretation of Franz Cumont's work on Roman Mithraism may have influenced this perspective, which holds a significant role in *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*. Unlike Guénon, Evola references a wide range of academic sources, although he does not consistently quote them when referring to primary sources.<sup>91</sup> Often, he mentions concepts such as av. *xʷarənah-* "the glory of the kings," and the Av. *fravašis*, whom he thinks of as warrior spirits. They hold a specific importance in his later publications on the topic.<sup>92</sup> In Evola's perspective, this martial Zoroastrianism becomes a significant testimony to his conception of the Western path of traditional societies. According to Evola, this path is characterized by an active and warrior-like spirit, which he believed to be more suited to Europeans. In contrast, Evola associated contemplation with the East, an implicit criticism of Guénon's engagement with and views on Hinduism and especially Islam, highlighting their very different views on initiation into Tradition.<sup>93</sup>

Two of Evola's German publications from the Third Reich use Zoroastrianism as a key witness to argue for the spiritual importance of war in the traditional life of the Aryan race: an article written for *Geist und Zeit* published in October 1939 and the print version of a lecture steeped in it, which Evola had delivered at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Rome in 1940.<sup>94</sup> They both expand on material already found in the chapter on "holy war" in *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, which delves into the concept of Jihad in Islam.<sup>95</sup> However, in the later publications, Evola speaks of the "Aryan origin"<sup>96</sup> of the concept. This view contrasts sharply with Guénon's conception of the relationship between Islam and Zoroastrianism and his evaluation of Zoroastrianism in general. It is indeed notable that the works "Über die alt-arische Auffassung des Sieges und des 'Heiligen Kampfes' " ("On the Ancient Aryan Notion of Victory and the 'Holy Battle' ") and *Die arische Lehre von Kampf und Sieg (The Aryan Doctrine of Struggle and Victory)* were intended for German audiences and exhibit a more racially-charged line of argumentation compared to Evola's earlier publication. These works coincide with a period when he actively sought to reach a German readership and aimed to influence the Italian and German regimes' racial policies.<sup>97</sup>

Among other factors, Guénon's perception of Zoroastrianism as a relic of the past appears to influence his depiction of the contemporary

Moritz Maurer, "Conspiratoriality and Meme Culture: Transgressive Dynamics in Right-Wing Esoteric Social Media Discourse," *Religion*, preprint (2024): 7–8.

83

Translated from René Guénon, "Letter to Julius Evola, 21.10.1933," accessed April 10, 2023, [http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access\\_book.php?sigle=C-JuEvo&page=3](http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-JuEvo&page=3).

84

René Guénon, "Letter to Julius Evola, 21.11.1933," accessed April 8, 2023, [http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access\\_book.php?sigle=C-JuEvo&page=4](http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-JuEvo&page=4); René Guénon, "Letter to Patrice Genty, 12.02.1935," accessed April 7, 2023, [http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access\\_book.php?sigle=C-PaGe&page=67](http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-PaGe&page=67).

85

Guénon, "Letter to Julius Evola, 21.10.1933."

86

Julius Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno* (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1934), 325n49.

87

See René Guénon, "Letter to Julius Evola, 14.10.1933," accessed April 7, 2023, [http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access\\_book.php?sigle=C-JuEvo&page=2](http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-JuEvo&page=2). On Guénon's reliance on this rather questionable author cf. Alain Daniélou, "René Guénon et la tradition hindoue," in *René Guénon*, ed. Pierre-Marie Sigaud, Les dossiers H (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1984), 137.

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Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 247, 324.

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Cf. Guénon, "Letter to Julius Evola, 21.10.1933."

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Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 170.

91

E.g., it seems most likely that for his translations of the *Yāts* he relies on the *Avesta*-volume by James Darmesteter from the *Sacred Books of the East*, for which, see Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 180n28. Evola's absorption of the current literature of the 1920s and 1930s is already noted in Melchionda's rather hagiographic article on the various editions of the work, see Roberto Melchionda, "Le tre edizioni di *Rivolta*," in *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, by Julius Evola (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2007), 458–60. He chooses to exclude mentions of Evola's references to, e.g., H. F. K. Günther, a German race scientist, also known as "Rasse-Günther," who is mentioned four times in the German edition from 1935 but only two times in the fourth edition, in which his publications from the Third Reich were deleted, cf. the references given in Julius Evola, *Erhebung wider die moderne Welt* (Stuttgart, Berlin: Dt. Verlags-Anstalt, 1935), 489; Julius Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, (Roma: Edizioni Mediterranee, 2007), 469.

Parsi community as well. While in his published works, he mostly mentions them in passing as a minority in India, there are some more extensive passages in his correspondence. In a letter written in Cairo in 1935, he seems to answer a catalogue of questions by Genty, among them a couple dealing with Zoroastrianism. Besides mentioning the idea of several Zarathustras, he further remarks: “[Q]uant à l’Avesta, on n’en connaît que ce qu’ont conservé les Parsis de l’Inde, et qui est très incomplet.”<sup>98</sup> While the remark is factually correct, Guénon might have more in mind, as a loss of Tradition in his system is exactly what dooms Western culture. This is spelled out in two letters to Vasile Lovinescu, written in the following year. Lovinescu was at this time the leading figure of Romanian Traditionalism and in close contact with the antisemitic *Legion of the Archangel Michael*. He was in search of a way to be initiated in a Traditional religious movement and Guénon seems to react—among other things—to questions in this regard; interestingly, he tries to dissuade Lovinescu from involvement with the *Legion*.<sup>99</sup> In the first of the two letters, dating to August 1936, he remarks:

“The 7th traditional form to be added to those you list is Mazdeism; but I must say that this does not refer to the Parsis, who have only preserved more or less incoherent fragments, although this is all that is usually known as Mazdeism.”<sup>100</sup>

It seems like Lovinescu kept asking about the topic. In a letter dated to November of the same year, Guénon reaffirms the point:

“True Mazdeism now exists only in Turkestan; it has no relation with the Parsis of India, who have preserved only a few fragments of their tradition (that’s all we know of them in Europe), and who are generally very ignorant and very ‘modernized.’ It also appears that there are still Mazdeans in Persia itself, in certain inaccessible parts of the Mazanderan province . . .”<sup>101</sup>

Here, the perspective that was already laid out in the previous letters is explicated. Guénon disregards the modern Parsi community as cut off from tradition and too modernized to be a valid source of genuine initiation. A similar point is made in a letter to Evola written in 1949:

“I don’t know if he [Meher Baba] was ever attached to any regular initiatic organization, but it seems doubtful to me because he is a Parsi, as there seems to be nothing of the sort among the Parsis of India, who have only preserved very incomplete fragments of their tradition (I say the Parsis of India, because those of Central Asia have quite different knowledge, although they keep it very hidden).”<sup>102</sup>

Interestingly, a view similar to this is also found in Theosophical publications on Zoroastrianism. Henry Steel-Olcott (1832–1907), one of the founding figures of the Theosophical Society, complains of the materialism of large parts of the Parsi community. In the introduction to the collected volume *Zoroastrianism in the Light of Theosophy*, he

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The former, e.g., in Julius Evola, *Sintesi di dottrina della razza* (1941; repr., Padova: Edizioni di Ar, 1978), 201. On the *fravašis* see below.

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Cf. Paul Furlong, *Social and Political Thought of Julius Evola*, Extremism and democracy 13 (London: Taylor & Francis, 2013), 41–45.

94

Julius Evola, “Über die alt-arische Auffassung des Sieges und des ‘Heiligen Kampfes,’ ” *Geist der Zeit*, Oktober (1939); Julius Evola, *Die arische Lehre von Kampf und Sieg*, Veröffentlichungen der Abteilung für Kulturwissenschaft Reihe 1, Bibliotheca Hertziana 28 (Wien: Schroll, 1941).

95

Evola, *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno*, 158–73.

96

“Arische Herkunft,” Evola, “Über die alt-arische Auffassung des Sieges und des ‘Heiligen Kampfes,’ ” 700 Cf. the similar passage in Evola, *Die arische Lehre von Kampf und Sieg*, 8.

97

Staudenmaier, “Racial Ideology between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany: Julius Evola and the Aryan Myth, 1933–43,” 480–81.

98

See Guénon, “Letter to Patrice Genty, 16.04.1935.”

99

On Lovinescu cf. Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 110–16.

100

Translated from René Guénon, “Letter to Vasile Lovinescu, 28.08.1936,” accessed April 28, 2023, [http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access\\_book.php?sigle=C-VLov&page=24](http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-VLov&page=24).

101

Translated from René Guénon, “Letter to Vasile Lovinescu, 10.11.1936,” accessed April 28, 2023, [http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access\\_book.php?sigle=C-VLov&page=25](http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-VLov&page=25).

102

René Guénon, “Letter to Julius Evola, 29.10.1949,” [http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access\\_book.php?sigle=C-JuEvo&page=13](http://www.index-rene-guenon.org/Access_book.php?sigle=C-JuEvo&page=13). While it is unclear how he formed the theory of more knowledgeable Zoroastrians living in Central Asia, an article published in *La Gnose* in 1910 already seems to hint at his belief in the existence of a hidden ancient civilization there, for which, cf. René Guénon, “À propos d’une mission dans l’Asie centrale,” in *Mélanges*, Les Essais 194 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). Interestingly, this article is a response to the presentation of the results of Paul Pelliot’s expedition to Chinese Turkestan. A similar view as to the existence of decidedly Zoroastrian texts to be recovered archaeologically from there is also held by the Theosophist Henry Steel-Olcott, see Olcott, introduction to *Zoroastrianism in the Light of The-*

writes:

“Of all the grand old religions, Zoroastrianism, or Mazdanism, is until now in worst case. To this deplorable fact various causes have contributed. Among these, the destruction of the Persian Empire and the upheaval of its social order by military conquerors . . . the ruthless destruction of temples, religious books and libraries . . . and the deadening effect on the exiles of a policy of eager money-getting, with neglect of spiritual teachers and teachings . . . and the placing of worldly success and worldly honours above all other subjects of endeavour, are to be borne in mind . . . [A]t the same time, it rejoices my heart to see as any one may in the essays which comprise the present volume that some of the best Parsi thinkers have begun to apply to their religion the key of Theosophy, and found that it lets them into various obscure chambers of their temple.”<sup>103</sup>

We see a very similar perspective to Guénon’s—with one difference. While in Guénon’s system, a religion that has lost its connection to Tradition is lost, i.e., an invalid source of initiation, in the Theosophical system, there is rescue, of course: Theosophy itself, as the key to lost religious truths to be found in scriptures and rituals.

This short survey shows that Traditionalist perceptions of Zoroastrianism differ significantly from more classical conceptions found in the history of esotericism. Remarkably, neither Evola nor Guénon seem to show much interest in the figure of Zarathustra. Still, we see a surprising amount of talking points in Guénon, most likely derived from Theosophy and through Guénon’s influence also in the works of Evola, who especially reacted to and incorporated academic publications in his writings. Comparing the thoughts of these two Traditionalists shows how the role of Zoroastrianism shifts according to the importance of racial doctrine and its perceived role in the history of Traditional religion. From here, further investigations could focus on the influence Traditionalism had on depictions of Zoroastrianism in scientific works; for instance, those of Mircea Eliade, who was in correspondence with Evola and Guénon,<sup>104</sup> and who picks up, e.g., the conception of the Alborz Mountain as a mystical center of the world, which Guénon had already discussed in *Le roi du monde*.<sup>105</sup>

### *Concluding Remarks*

The study of Zoroastrianism stands to gain significant insights from engagement with the study of esotericism. This includes the lessons to be learned from its historical development as an academic discipline. As we have seen, it is crucial to exercise caution when employing the term “esotericism” as an analytical concept without due reflection. Although scholarly debates on this matter persist, it is ill-advised to reintroduce the concept within a typological or religionist framework, as the limitations and challenges associated with such an approach have become evident in the analysis of Shaked’s and Russell’s influential articles.

Nevertheless, engaging with research focused on premodern

*osophy*. Also compare his previous remarks on Zoroastrians in the Caucasus.

103

Olcott, introduction to *Zoroastrianism in the Light*, iii–iv.

104

On the early contacts between Eliade and Traditionalism, see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 109–14.

105

See Guénon, *Le Roi du Monde*, 58, 61, 73. Eliade uses it, e.g., in Mircea Eliade, *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase*, 2e éd., rev. et augmentée, Bibliothèque scientifique (Paris: Payot, 1968), 217.



materials can provide valuable tools for formulating novel heuristic approaches to the study of Zoroastrianism, thereby opening fresh perspectives. The investigation of revelatory knowledge claims, particularly those linked to divinatory rituals, has broadened the horizons of inquiry through the recognition of their interconnectedness with questions concerning mediality. There seems to be no exoteric/esoteric binary at play but rather a complex relationship with other knowledge claims and mediality. As a result, it seems more appropriate to speak here of ritual knowledge claims in order to differentiate the concept from the term “revelatory knowledge claims,” which is very much tied to the esoteric discourse.

By expanding our examination to encompass the global history of esotericism, commencing from the nineteenth century, we can explore the intermingling of discourses and uncover intriguing correlations between diverse discursive fields. Through this, we can enhance our comprehension of how images of Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism are constructed and appropriated across different esoteric currents and how modern Zoroastrians engaged in the global exchanges, shaping the emergence of esotericism in the nineteenth century. In this chronological framework, Zoroastrian esotericism is clearly a tangible concept, e.g., in its connection to Theosophy or, as Mariano Errichiello was able to show, its own esoteric movements.

The case of Traditionalism is an illustrative example, demonstrating how conceptions of history, race, and spiritual practice in the twentieth century influenced discourses surrounding Zoroastrianism. Hereby it became evident how Guénon, who had publicly positioned himself as an aggressive opponent of the Theosophical Society, nonetheless displayed a strong reliance on Theosophical discourses.

By embracing this multidisciplinary approach and engaging with a wide range of scholarly perspectives and diverse sources, we can illuminate new dimensions of Zoroastrianism that transcend conventional disciplinary boundaries. While speaking of pre-modern Zoroastrian esotericism seems—from the perspective taken here—of somewhat questionable heuristic use, engaging with concepts from the study of esotericism can open new perspectives on well-known material. Beyond that, the engagement between Zoroastrianism and esotericism from the nineteenth century onwards in all its complexity still holds a lot of potential for further research. In continuing this line of inquiry, we deepen our understanding of the intricate complexities inherent within Zoroastrianism and the multifaceted pictures of it found in diverse global discourses, situating it within a broader cultural and historical context.

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