

# Kabbalah and Modernity

Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations

*Edited by*

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# ORIENTAL KABBALAH AND THE PARTING OF EAST AND WEST IN THE EARLY THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

Marco Pasi

## 1. THE PROBLEM OF “WESTERN” ESOTERICISM

One of the most interesting aspects of the academic study of Western esotericism, as it has developed in the last twenty years, is precisely the qualification of this phenomenon as “Western”, on which there seems to be general agreement among the specialists working in the field. It is in fact with the name “Western esotericism” that the field has developed and has gained increasing recognition within and without academic institutions. To give only a couple of significant examples, the most important reference work in this field bears the title *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, and the name of one of the two international scholarly associations devoted to it is “European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism” (ESSWE).<sup>1</sup> But what does “Western” mean in this context? And, most importantly, why should esotericism be necessarily qualified as Western in the first place?

An answer to the first question came in 1992 from Antoine Faivre, one of the authors who have done the most for the academic recognition of the field. In his introduction to what can be considered as the first serious handbook for the study of Western esotericism, *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* (1992), he defined the “Westernness” of esotericism as follows: ‘By the term “West” we mean the vast Greco-Roman whole within which Judaism and Christianity have always cohabited with one another, joined by Islam for several centuries’.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of this definition alone, one could have assumed that “Western esotericism” included most forms of esotericism that had developed in

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<sup>1</sup> The other, American-based, association is the Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE). Both associations organize biannual conferences in alternate years.

<sup>2</sup> Faivre, ‘Introduction I’, xiii. In an article published in 1995 together with Karen Voss, Faivre gave a slightly different formulation of the same concept: ‘The term “Western” here refers to the medieval and modern Greco-Latin world in which the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity have coexisted for centuries, periodically coming into contact with those of Islam’ (Faivre & Voss, ‘Western Esotericism’, 50).

the three Abrahamic religions. But this was not the case. In fact, in enumerating the actual currents that compose the historical landscape of Western esotericism, Jewish kabbalah was mentioned by Faivre only in so far as it had ‘penetrated into the Christian milieu, especially after 1492, and celebrated an unexpected wedding with neo-Alexandrian Hermeticism’.<sup>3</sup> The use of a notion of the “West” that excludes Jewish and Islamic forms of esotericism is confirmed not only by Faivre’s work in general, where actual research on these currents is absent, but also more explicitly by a later formulation, where he gives a slightly different definition of the “Westernness” of esotericism:

“Western” indicates here a West “visited” by some Jewish, Islamic, or even far-Eastern religious traditions, with which it has coexisted but does not mingle; for instance, Jewish kabbalah is not part of this “Western esotericism” understood in such a way, whereas the so-called Christian kabbalah belongs to it.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, Jewish kabbalah here for Faivre becomes the paradigmatic example of what should *not* be included in Western esotericism.

The answer to the second question is also not so difficult to find. The reason why scholars like Faivre insisted on the importance of qualifying esotericism as “Western” is that they wanted to avoid universalist concepts of esotericism, which were widespread enough when the field emerged. We should not forget that, when esotericism began to be studied in an academic context in France, the influence of René Guénon’s works and of traditionalism was particularly strong. In traditionalism the idea of a universal esotericism is a necessary consequence of the doctrine of primordial tradition, of *philosophia perennis*. Because this primordial wisdom is at the origin of all true religious traditions and represents their inner core or essence, it cannot be limited to a single geographical or cultural area. In this perspective, esotericism has always existed, and traces of it can be found in all cultures around the world. Outside of France, other universalist understandings of eso-

<sup>3</sup> Faivre, ‘Introduction I’, xiii.

<sup>4</sup> “Occidental” désigne ici un Occident “visité” par des traditions religieuses juives, musulmanes, voire extrême-orientales avec lesquelles il a cohabité mais qui ne se confondent pas avec lui; par exemple la Kabbale juive ne ressortit pas à cet “ésotérisme occidental” ainsi compris, alors que la Kabbale dite chrétienne, elle, en fait partie.’ (Faivre, *L’ésotérisme*, 8). I quote here from the latest edition of Faivre’s famous introductory monograph on the study of western esotericism. In previous editions his definition of the West was slightly different, being very similar to the one I have quoted from his introduction to *Western Esoteric Spirituality*.

tericism could be favored by the influence of the ideas of Carl Gustav Jung, especially of his psychological interpretation of alchemy. The empirical-historical approach advocated by scholars such as Faivre and Wouter J. Hanegraaff rejected the universalist assumptions of these religionist approaches and, as a consequence, made the reference to a specific cultural framework (i.e., the “West”) inevitable.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted, however, that this ended up in a sort of paradox. In fact, if esotericism is not a universal phenomenon, but is specifically rooted in, and limited to, Western culture, then it should not be necessary to qualify it as “Western”. The very moment it is labeled as “Western”, it becomes also possible to conceive that other, “non-Western” forms of esotericism exist, including—predictably—an “Eastern” one. The conceptual subtlety of this paradox has perhaps eluded those who have first created and promoted the concept of “Western esotericism” in a scholarly discourse, but it is significant, because it shows at least the difficulties with which this relatively young field is still struggling. This becomes even more problematic when one realizes that the study of esotericism is probably the only field within religious studies that defines its identity by using the tag “Western”.<sup>6</sup> However, the objections derived from this paradox—justified as they may be from a theoretical point of view—appear in the end to be not as strong as the necessity to emphasize—even rhetorically—the idea that esotericism belongs to a specific cultural area.

Faivre’s definition of Western esotericism has until recently dominated this field of research and has influenced its institutional development. It has become, to use the term suggested by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, a ‘paradigm’.<sup>7</sup> When a new chair for the study of esotericism was created at the University of Amsterdam in 1999, the Western connotation was not neglected, even if it was less explicit than in Paris. The chair was called in fact “History of Hermetic philosophy and related currents”, which becomes particularly significant when one keeps in mind that the tag “Hermetic” was used by occultist authors in the last

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<sup>5</sup> See Faivre, *Accès*, 32–41; Hanegraaff, ‘On the Construction’, 19–28. Faivre has also reiterated the Western character of esotericism by questioning Henry Corbin’s idea of a comparative study of esotericism in the three Abrahamic religions: see Faivre, ‘La question d’un ésotérisme comparé’.

<sup>6</sup> For a recent, judicious overview of the methodological problems raised by labels such as “Western” and “Oriental” in the specific context of religious studies see Casadio, ‘Studying Religious Traditions’.

<sup>7</sup> Hanegraaff, ‘The Study of Western Esotericism’, 507–508.

quarter of the nineteenth century precisely to identify a specifically Western esoteric tradition, as opposed to an “Oriental” one.<sup>8</sup> The other new chair for the study of esotericism, created at the University of Exeter in 2006, also carries the qualification “Western” explicitly.<sup>9</sup>

It is only recently that Faivre’s occidental paradigm has been questioned by Kocku von Stuckrad.<sup>10</sup> Apart from the specifics of his criticism, on which I am not going to dwell here,<sup>11</sup> von Stuckrad does not seem to contest the ‘Western’ connotation of esotericism in itself (after all, esotericism is defined as ‘Western’ in the very title of his monograph devoted to the subject).<sup>12</sup> It is more the scope of this connotation that von Stuckrad finds problematic. In his opinion, Faivre’s categories give an image of esotericism that is too limited and does not include the presence and the importance of non-Christian forms of esotericism, such as Jewish and Islamic esotericisms.<sup>13</sup> The implication is obvious: if the West cannot be identified only with Christianity, then it is not possible to include in “Western” esotericism only currents that have taken shape within Christianity or that have a Christian identity. The question that remains open is how the “West” should be defined, and where we want to set its boundaries. This concerns, most of all, the role of Jewish, but also of Islamic, religious traditions in the development of what we call “Western esotericism”.

I will return to these methodological discussion and the problems it raises at the end of this chapter. What interests me more at this point

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<sup>8</sup> See Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, esp. 333–379.

<sup>9</sup> The formal title of the chair holder (currently Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke) is ‘Professor of Western Esotericism’. See <http://huss.exeter.ac.uk/research/exeseso/staff.php> (retrieved 19 April 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, 3–5. See also von Stuckrad, ‘Western Esotericism’, 82–83.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed, critical discussion, see Pasi, ‘Il problema della definizione’.

<sup>12</sup> Von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*. See also the preface of the book, where von Stuckrad points out that the book discusses ‘Western esotericism’ in the context of the ‘religious pluralism’ of ‘Western culture’ and focuses on ‘the role of esotericism in Western discourse’ (von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, xi). More recently, von Stuckrad has come to the conclusion that “esoteric discourse in Western culture” would be a better term for the object under study than “Western esotericism”. He will elaborate on this in his forthcoming book, *Locations of Knowledge* (personal email, 31 May 2009). The introduction of this new term however does not affect my argument here. It is not so significant that von Stuckrad’s definition of both esotericism and its western identity is radically different from that of Faivre (or even of other authors). What is significant is that both, in defining esotericism, feel the necessity to qualify it by referring to the cultural area of the “West”.

<sup>13</sup> Von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, 5.

is the fact that the relevance of the idea of “Western” esotericism seems to persist even in von Stuckrad’s critical position, and can be assumed to be a largely shared opinion among specialists in the field. This leads me to the main object of this paper, which is the way in which the idea of Western esotericism has originally taken shape. It appears in fact that this concept, as is often the case, did not originate in a scholarly discourse, but in a religionist one. More precisely, this happened within occultism during the second half of the nineteenth century. It is in this context that a sharp distinction began to be made between a “Western” and an “Eastern” esoteric tradition. In the rest of this chapter I would like therefore to focus on one of the crucial moments of this story, when the idea of a Western tradition of esotericism took shape, and to question in particular the role of kabbalah in it.

## 2. THE ROLE OF KABBALAH IN THE THEOSOPHICAL WRITINGS OF H.P. BLAVATSKY

Before the nineteenth century, esotericism in Europe was pursued both within and without the dominant religious tradition of Christianity. Therefore, for esoterically inclined authors no opposition seemed to be necessary between different sources of esoteric wisdom. This would have been incompatible with the notion of *philosophia perennis*, which was central in early modern esotericism. For many Renaissance authors, the Hermetic texts (the so-called *Corpus Hermeticum*) had their origin in Egypt, but expressed a revelation that was quite compatible with Christianity, and had in fact even anticipated and announced it. The same went for kabbalah when it was adopted and adapted in new Christian frameworks. It would appear then that an explicit opposition between a Western and an Eastern esoteric tradition did not exist before the nineteenth century, and is much more recent than one would be inclined to think. But this should not necessarily come as a surprise. It is in fact between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries that the very notion of the specific identity of the “West” takes definite shape, where the West is seen as a distinct civilization that has its own specific features and is not necessarily related to one single religious denomination.<sup>14</sup> This takes place in the

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<sup>14</sup> On the historical development of the idea of the West, see Bonnett, *Idea of the West*; Corm, *Orient-Occident*; Gress, *From Plato to NATO*.

context of the spreading of Enlightenment ideas and of the influence of secularization, but it can also be seen as one of the consequences, by way of reaction, of that “Oriental Renaissance” famously described by Raymond Schwab.<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to see that we find a similar development taking place in the origin of the idea of “Western esotericism”. It is therefore mostly as the reaction to an idea of “Eastern esotericism” that the idea of “Western esotericism” could develop. Now, it is interesting to see that in the creation of these new boundaries and identities, the concept of kabbalah played a significant role—a role, on the other hand, which was not necessarily related to the content of the tradition it expressed, but rather to its origins. Where did kabbalah come from?

The turning point in this story is the foundation of the Theosophical Society in 1875 by H.P. Blavatsky. It was Blavatsky who developed a model of Eastern esoteric tradition that had a tremendous influence on esoteric authors coming after her. It has been emphasized again and again that she was instrumental in importing certain religious and philosophical ideas from the East into the West,<sup>16</sup> and some scholars have spoken of “syncretism” to describe her movement and ideas.<sup>17</sup> But what has not been emphasized enough perhaps is the way in which she constructed her own image of the “Orient”. What were her motives in the cultural context in which she operated? What were the boundaries she set between East and West and why? Was it a fixed image or did it evolve with time?

The first important thing to say is that, unlike many of her contemporaries, for Blavatsky the East, whatever she chose to include in this concept, possessed an undisputable superiority over the West. The West was identified for her mainly with Christian dogmatism and modern scientific materialism. Both phenomena were representative of the degeneration which in her opinion affected Western civilization, a kind of degeneration from which the “East”, in particular the Middle East and India, had been more or less spared. It would be interesting to consider Blavatsky’s attitude towards the East in the perspective of

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<sup>15</sup> Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance*.

<sup>16</sup> Bevir, ‘The West Turns Eastward’; Neufeldt, ‘In Search of Utopia’; Choné, ‘Discours ésotériques’.

<sup>17</sup> Kraft, “To Mix or not to Mix”.



Edward Said's concept of Orientalism.<sup>18</sup> Surely Blavatsky had a positive image of the East, and she seems to be distant from the mostly negative examples offered by Said in his famous book. In this sense, she might join the British Orientalists of the *Asiatic Researches* that David Kopf took as counter-examples in his criticism of Said's book,<sup>19</sup> and be considered as an early protagonist of what Colin Campbell has called the "Easternization of the West".<sup>20</sup> However, it would be fair to say that—positive as her appreciation may be—she still had an extremely essentialist, idealized vision of the East, which on the one hand praised the old traditional wisdom of the Easterners, but on the other placed her in a position of superiority with respect to the actual people living in Eastern countries.<sup>21</sup> It is a kind of Orientalism that perhaps bears a distant relationship with what Boaz Huss has identified in describing Gershom Scholem's position about kabbalah.<sup>22</sup>

An interest for kabbalah was present in the Theosophical Society from the very beginning. Some of the early members were particularly attracted to this topic. One of them was Seth Pancoast, who was also Mme. Blavatsky's personal physician in New York. In 1883 he published a whole book on kabbalah: *The Kabbala: or, The True Science of Light*. It is a very curious book, in which speculations about the divine and cosmic light are intermingled with considerations based on the latest scientific discoveries, while it seems to ignore any original source of Jewish kabbalah.

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<sup>18</sup> Said, *Orientalism*. For a discussion of the early Theosophical Society and Blavatsky in relation to Orientalism, see Goodrick-Clarke, 'The Theosophical Society'; and Marra, 'Un *Altrove* come specchio'.

<sup>19</sup> Kopf, 'Hermeneutics versus History'.

<sup>20</sup> Campbell, *The Easternization of the West*.

<sup>21</sup> This point has been made clear and argued convincingly by S. Prothero in his biography of Blavatsky's associate in the leadership of the Theosophical Society, Henry S. Olcott. See Prothero, *White Buddhist*, 1–13, 62–84.

<sup>22</sup> Huss, 'Ask No Questions'. Lately, there has been a lively debate among kabbalah specialists concerning the Orientalist attitude that some of them are supposed to show in their approach to the subject. Apart from B. Huss' considerations concerning Scholem in the quoted article, one of the most significant episodes in this debate has been the publication of an article by G. Anidjar, where "Jewish Orientalism" is used as a polemical key to interpret the work of some of the most prominent kabbalah specialists, including G. Scholem and M. Idel. The latter has responded by vigorously rejecting Anidjar's interpretation. See Anidjar, 'Jewish Mysticism'; and Idel, 'Orienting, Orientalizing or Disorienting'. On this debate, see Schäfer, 'Jewish Mysticism', 16–18.

It is interesting to see that kabbalah is more or less related also to the very foundation of Blavatsky's organization. In fact, on the evening of 7 September 1875 in a private apartment in New York City, the ex-army officer and inventor George H. Felt gave a lecture on "Egyptian Kaballah", which for him was somehow connected to the 'lost canon of proportion of the Egyptians' and therefore mostly related to art and architecture.<sup>23</sup> This must have impressed the small audience, which included not only Blavatsky and his future collaborator Colonel Olcott, but also Pancoast, and such a prominent figure of Anglo-American spiritualism as Emma Hardinge-Britten. The day after, the group convened again and decided to create the famous society. The interesting aspect is that Felt's role at the beginning was prominent enough, because the Society seemed originally to lay a certain emphasis on experimental and practical work. Felt had promised to show his abilities as a practical kabbalist, by evoking elementals and other entities at will. This shows one of the most important aspects of the reception of kabbalah in an occultist context, that is its strong identification with magical practices.<sup>24</sup> However, Felt seems to have had some trouble in fulfilling his promises, because there is no record of any attempted evocation in front of the other members of the newly formed society. He probably disappeared, and was never heard of again.<sup>25</sup>

Let us now give a closer look at Blavatsky's attitude towards kabbalah, and in particular towards the problem of its "geo-spiritual" identity. I would like to focus here on an article that is the very first occultist text written and published by Blavatsky.<sup>26</sup> The title is 'A Few Questions to "Hiraf"', and it was published in the *Spiritual Scientist*, an American spiritualist journal, on 15 and 22 July 1875, that is several months before the actual foundation of the Society. The article is a sort of response to another article published in the same paper under the peculiar pseudonym of 'Hiraf' by a group of persons who

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<sup>23</sup> Santucci, 'George Henry Felt', 255–256. The "lost canon of proportion" seems to be one of the recurrent themes associated to kabbalah in the occultist discourse. See for instance also Stirling, *Canon*.

<sup>24</sup> More generally about the uses and interpretations of kabbalah in English occultism, see Aspren, 'Reception and Adaptation'.

<sup>25</sup> Santucci, 'George Henry Felt', 256.

<sup>26</sup> This text is also important because it is probably the place where the term 'occultism' made its first appearance in the English language.

were acquainted with Blavatsky.<sup>27</sup> It is possible that the whole thing was orchestrated in order for Mme. Blavatsky to have a convenient occasion for publishing her own article. Be that as it may, the authors of the article to which Blavatsky responds had expressed some skepticism as to the present existence of Rosicrucianism, which they claimed had completely disappeared. To this, Blavatsky retorts that ‘colleges’ where students can learn the Secret Science of Occultism do still exist. They may have declined and disappeared in the West, but they are still to be found in the East, that is to say ‘in India, Asia Minor, and other countries’.<sup>28</sup> Rosicrucianism represents here a sort of Western occultism, or Western cabala. But then there is also an Eastern occultism, which Mme. Blavatsky calls ‘the primitive Oriental Cabala’,<sup>29</sup> and which is much older and more authentic than the other one. The Oriental Cabala still possesses in fact all the ‘primitive secret powers of the ancient Chaldaeans’.<sup>30</sup> For centuries the

mysterious doctrines had come down in an unbroken line of merely oral traditions as far back as man could trace himself on earth. They were scrupulously and jealously guarded by the Wise Men of Chaldea, India, Persia and Egypt, and passed from one initiate to another in the same purity of form as when handed down to the first man by the angels.<sup>31</sup>

But then, a series of alterations began, at first due to human ambition, and later on due to the desire to commit the oral doctrines on paper. Moses seems to be the first one to be responsible for this alteration because of the ambition Blavatsky attributes to him. Then Blavatsky mentions Shimon Ben Yochai and the supposed origins of the *Zohar* from his teachings. Ironically, in this perspective, the Jews are seen not as the originators and authors of Cabala, but as merely responsible for the alteration of its primordial purity: ‘While the Oriental Cabala remained in its pure primitive shape, the Mosaic or Jewish one was full of drawbacks, and the keys to many of his secrets— forbidden by the Mosaic law—purposely misinterpreted’.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Hiraf, ‘Rosicrucianism’. For the background to the writing of the article and the group hiding under this pseudonym, see de Zirkoff, ‘The “Hiraf” Club and its Historical Background’.

<sup>28</sup> Blavatsky, ‘A Few Questions’, 103.

<sup>29</sup> Blavatsky, ‘A Few Questions’, 104.

<sup>30</sup> Blavatsky, ‘A Few Questions’, 107.

<sup>31</sup> Blavatsky, ‘A Few Questions’, 110.

<sup>32</sup> Blavatsky, ‘A Few Questions’, 111.

The status of Jewish kabbalah in this first article by Mme. Blavatsky remains slightly ambiguous. On the one hand it is not identified with the 'Oriental Cabala', which is supposed to represent a purer form of esoteric wisdom. On the other hand, it is not identified with Rosicrucianism either, which would represent Western esotericism. It seems, therefore, to fall somewhere between two stools: it is not really "Eastern" (it is in fact distinct from the real, i.e. "Oriental" kabbalah, and therefore does not deserve special praise), but it is not fully "Western" either, in so far as Rosicrucianism is taken as representative of Western esotericism. The problem, however, is that she does not explain precisely what she means by "Oriental Cabala", what are the contents of its teachings or who are the wise persons responsible for it. Later on, in her subsequent publications, this aspect will become clearer, and it will be evident that this wisdom of the East is composed mainly of those religious traditions that have originated in India, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism.

In *Isis Unveiled*, her first major work, published in two volumes in 1877, Blavatsky devotes an entire chapter to kabbalah (vol. II, chap. 5). In the book there are again references to an 'Oriental Kabala' supposedly much older and original than the Jewish one.<sup>33</sup> However, in the chapter itself things are less ambiguous, because this time it is explicitly Jewish kabbalah that is the object of the discussion, or at least Blavatsky's understanding of it. The image one can derive from this discussion is particularly garbled. Blavatsky focuses particularly on the structure of the sefirot and on the concept of Shekhinah, but there are some other aspects that should retain our attention. Blavatsky's major source for this chapter is certainly Adolphe Franck's book on kabbalah and surely also Eliphas Lévi.<sup>34</sup> In particular she seems to like the idea that kabbalah has its origins in Zoroastrianism, because this confirms her idea that Jewish kabbalah is a later derivation from a much older Oriental kabbalah. This is further confirmed by all the analogies that she is able to find between Jewish kabbalistic concepts and ideas taken from Hinduism. In the end, the opinion Blavatsky seems to have of Jewish kabbalah, despite the priority of another tradition, is positive.

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<sup>33</sup> Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> On these two authors and kabbalah, see Hanegraaff's chapter in the present book.

The chapter ends in the same way as the Hiras article, that is to say, with an attack on Christianity and particularly against the priests.

This element leads me to conclude that one of the most interesting aspects of Blavatsky's attitude about kabbalah is the reversal that she operates to the traditional attitude of Christian kabbalah. Whereas Christian kabbalists saw kabbalah as a means to prove Christian truths by using the esoteric wisdom of the Jews (which is, by the way, a model that can still be acceptable for someone like Eliphas Lévi), Blavatsky does the opposite. She uses kabbalah in order to disprove the truths of Christianity, especially in its dogmatic and institutional forms. In fact it is evident that for her kabbalah stems directly from the Eastern sources of primordial wisdom, and has therefore nothing to do with the ways in which Christianity has developed in the West. Or, more correctly, almost nothing, because as a side effect of this reversal, Christian kabbalists now become witnesses not of the truths of Christianity through the use of the kabbalah, but of the truths of the kabbalah despite Christianity.

This becomes almost ironical in a later article, where Blavatsky writes that, through figures such as Pico della Mirandola, the 'Church' has proclaimed in the past the traditional wisdom of the kabbalah. Blavatsky, however, does not seem to be aware of the far from easy relationship that Pico had with the ecclesiastical institution.<sup>35</sup> This article, titled 'The Kabalah and the Kabalists', was published in 1892, after Blavatsky's death, but was probably written around 1886, not long before the publication of her other major work, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). In this article Jewish kabbalah is no longer contrasted with an Oriental kabbalah, but more logically with what she calls 'Eastern Occultism'.<sup>36</sup> The whole article is an attempt at demonstrating the inferiority of Jewish kabbalah, by hinting at the alteration done to it by Christian authors. It concludes on a pessimistic note as to the viability of Jewish kabbalah as a means to obtain esoteric wisdom:

What, then, is the Kabalah, in reality, and does it afford a revelation of such higher spiritual mysteries? The writer answers most emphatically NO. What the Kabalistic keys and methods were, in the origin of the *Pentateuch* and other sacred scrolls and documents of the Jews now no longer extant, is one thing; what they are now is quite another.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Blavatsky, 'Kabalah and Kabalists', 252.

<sup>36</sup> Blavatsky, 'Kabalah and Kabalists', 253.

<sup>37</sup> Blavatsky, 'The Kabalah and the Kabalists', 267.

The emphasis on the superiority of Eastern—particularly Indian—doctrines will be further accentuated in *The Secret Doctrine*. This, as Joscelyn Godwin has shown, was not without consequences and stimulated a reaction aimed at a better appreciation of what was considered to be the Western esoteric tradition, of which Jewish kabbalah was considered to be a part.<sup>38</sup> As it is known, this was started from within the Theosophical Society itself by Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland with the creation of a short-lived Hermetic Society and the publication of *The Perfect Way* (1882). It is in this context that we should place MacGregor Mathers' translation of the *Kabbalah Denudata*, which was to become the major reference for all subsequent occultist works on kabbalah, and one of the foundational texts of the most famous occultist group in the English-speaking area, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.<sup>39</sup> With the "Hermetic reaction" that develops in occultism as a response to Blavatsky's emphasis on the "Eastern" sources of esoteric wisdom, the idea of a specifically "Western" esoteric tradition takes shape. Jewish kabbalah plays a crucial role in this process. Whereas Mme. Blavatsky tends to devalue Jewish kabbalah by considering it an inferior form of older "Oriental" traditions (which she calls alternatively "Oriental Kabbalah" or "Oriental Occultism"), later "Hermetic" occultists come to perceive it as one of the pillars of a distinctly "Western" esoteric tradition, together with phenomena such as Rosicrucianism, alchemy, and the tarot.

### 3. CONCLUSION

My intention here was to cast some light on the moment at which the idea of different esoteric traditions, one specifically Western and the other Eastern, take shape, and to emphasize the importance that Jewish kabbalah plays in this story. For both Blavatsky and the "Hermetic" occultists Jewish kabbalah is understood as belonging more to the "West" than to the "East". What changes is the preference for one of these two cultural identities over the other. For Blavatsky, however, the status of Jewish kabbalah maintains also a certain degree of ambiguity, because of the presence of a broader and older kabbalah firmly

<sup>38</sup> See above, n. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Mathers, *Kabbala Denudata*. On this text, and its context, see Kilcher, 'Verhüllung und Enthüllung'.

posed in the “East”, from which Jewish kabbalah is supposed to have originated.

Recently, there has been an increasing interest in the ways in which Orientalism has interacted with the development of Jewish identity between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> P. Mendes-Flohr has emphasized how, in this context, the “Oriental” character of Jewish culture, which had been and was still used in anti-Semitic discourse as basis for polemical characterization, could be perceived by some Jews as a source of ethnic pride: “The presentation of Judaism as a form of Oriental wisdom served to help Jews of this period to reaffirm their ancestral identity. [...] Now with the positive evaluation of the Orient, Jews given to the Romantic mood of the *fin-de-siècle* could point with pride to their Asiatic provenance’.<sup>41</sup> What is interesting however is that scholars who have focused on this interesting development *within* Jewish culture have generally neglected the intersection of Orientalism and kabbalah *outside of* it, of which Mme. Blavatsky’s speculations on Oriental vs. Jewish kabbalah offer a striking example. Given the pervasiveness of the ideas spread by the Theosophical Society at the turn of the twentieth century, it might turn out that further study on Blavatsky’s particular form of Orientalism could help understanding the broader context in which those Jewish intellectuals referred to by Mendes-Flohr were moving.

I can now turn to some conclusive remarks on the contemporary development of the study of “Western” esotericism. It is perhaps significant that in the occultism of the “Hermetic reaction” Jewish kabbalah is considered as being central, whereas in contemporary, scholarly definitions of “Western esotericism” the same element is left out. As we have seen, this has found sometimes a justification in the “pragmatic reasons” advocated by the main editor of the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, which made it unpractical to include Islamic and Jewish mysticism in its pages.<sup>42</sup> But pragmatic reasons, understandable as they may be, are often unsatisfactory from a theoretical point of view, and make one wonder whether there is a full awareness of the conceptual problems they leave unsolved.

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<sup>40</sup> Mendes-Flohr, ‘Fin-de-Siècle Orientalism’; Peleg, *Orientalism*; Davidson Kalmar and Penslar (eds.), *Orientalism and the Jews*.

<sup>41</sup> Mendes-Flohr, ‘Fin-de-Siècle Orientalism’, vii.

<sup>42</sup> Hanegraaff, ‘Introduction’, xii.

I have mentioned at the beginning von Stuckrad's criticism of Faivre's definition of Western esotericism. Faivre has responded to this criticism, by insisting on the need to avoid too broad definitions of esotericism.<sup>43</sup> This response as well, however, is only partly satisfactory, because it eludes the central problem: is it legitimate to talk about "Western" esotericism when in fact what one is talking about is only Christian and post-Christian forms of it? Eventually, one cannot help wondering if it would not be more consistent to use the latter label instead of "Western".

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<sup>43</sup> Faivre, 'Kocku von Stuckrad', 207–209.



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