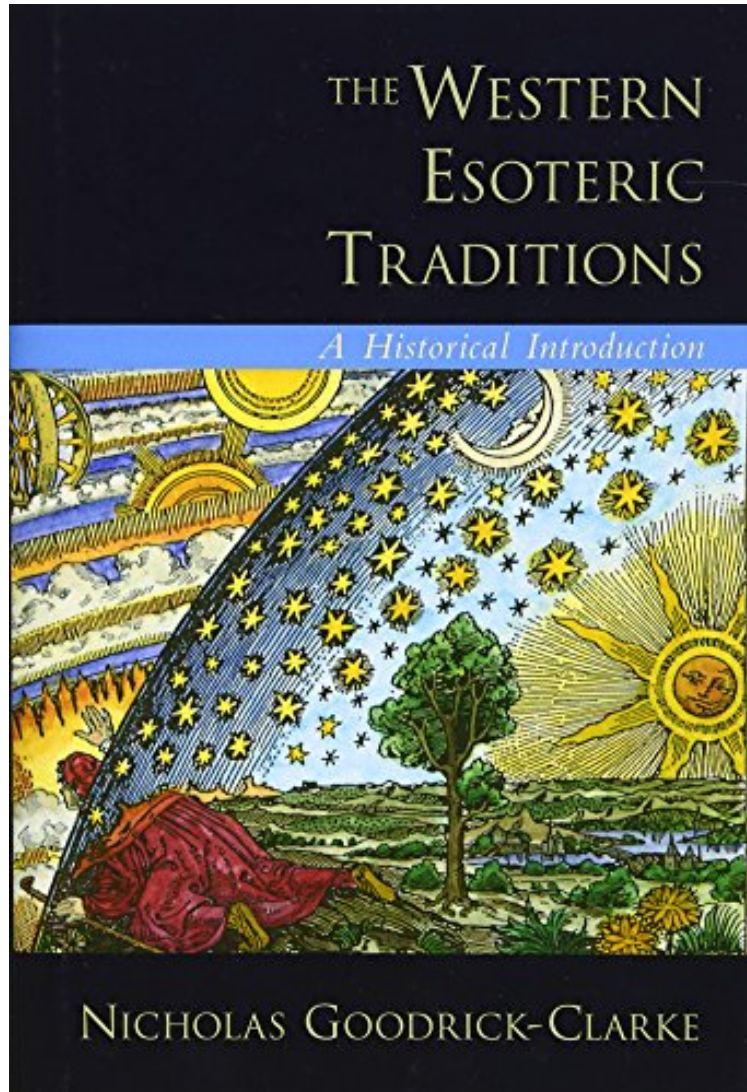


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The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction

Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke

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Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke : The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction:

41 of 42 people found the following review helpful. An Informative Introduction Based on Current Academic Studies of Western Esotericism By Thaumagnost This introductory text is the fruit of a fairly new field of recognized academic studies which developed as a result of the pioneering literary efforts of scholars such as D. P. Walker (1914 - 1985) and Frances A. Yates (1899 - 1981) who took the subject of Western esotericism seriously rather than denigrate it as an area filled with superstition and irrationalism as many earlier scholars in different specialized fields had done. Other

scholars of esotericism who have contributed to this growing field include but are not limited to Henry Corbin, Francois Secret, Antoine Faivre, Arthur Versluis, Joscelyn Godwin, and Wouter Hanegraaff, the last being the senior editor of the landmark *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* (2005), a collaborative effort by many scholars. Goodrick-Clarke is also a recognized scholar in this field and introduces it to the reader in his own introduction which also addresses the question of how esotericism is defined by those dedicated to studying it. As clarified in the introduction, Western esotericism is rooted in the Hellenistic philosophy of classical paganism as expressed in Alexandrian Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, and Gnosticism which have syncretized with the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, leaving vital traces within each. Through the Italian Renaissance, a Hermetic revival occurred as a result of the rediscovery of ancient texts which further resulted in the development of magic, astrology, alchemy, and Cabala through prominent individuals such as Marcilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Johannes Reuchlin, Johann Trithemius, Henry Cornelius Agrippa, John Dee, and Paracelsus, each given significant attention. The development of German Naturphilosophie, Christian theosophy through Jacob Boehme and his followers (such as Gichtel, Pordage and Law), and Pietism are also covered before thoroughly introducing us to Rosicrucianism in the early 17th century, high-grade Freemasonry and Illuminism in the 18th century, and the ideas and practices of Emanuel Swedenborg and Franz Anton Mesmer which significantly impacted esotericism. Within the context of Rosicrucianism, the content of the manifestos are discussed along with Johann Valentin Andreae and the Tubingen Circle; in England, Michael Maier, Robert Fludd, and Comenius and the Origins of the Royal Society are covered. The impact of Rosicrucianism and theosophy on Freemasonry are explored as well as the following types of Freemasonry: "Scottish" and Chivalric, German Templar, and Egyptian. Within the context of Freemasonry and Illuminism, the following are also discussed: Martines de Pasqually and the Elect Coens, Louis Claude de Saint-Martin, Martinesism, Martinism, Willermozism, The Illumines of Avignon, and Count Cagliostro. Not only are the ideas of Swedenborg and Mesmer presented but also how they contributed to spiritualism and healing movements in the 19th century, including the United States which birthed Andrew Jackson Davis as the main theologian for spiritualism; Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, Warren Felt Evans and others who developed the New Thought Movement; and Mary Baker Eddy who founded Christian Science. A separate chapter is dedicated to ritual magic from 1850 to the present. Within this chapter, one is introduced to Eliphas Levi and the French Occult Revival, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and its members, and special attention is given to the contributions of A. E. Waite, Aleister Crowley and Thelemic magick, and Dion Fortune and the Inner Light. I was, however, disappointed to see the section on Crowley end with the following: "Gerald Gardner (1884 - 1964), the founder of modern witchcraft, introduced Crowleyn magick into the neopagan Wiccan movement." For a better understanding of the influential role of Crowley and ritual magic, including the grimoires, on Wiccan practices, I recommend *Wicca: Magickal Beginnings* (2008) by Sorita d'Este and David Rankine. Helena Blavatsky and her Theosophical Society are given a separate chapter which expounds on her influences, travels, developing doctrines, and legacy. The last chapter titled "Modern Esotericism and New Paradigms" discusses theosophical heirs such as Annie Besant, Charles W. Leadbeater, and Rudolph Steiner (who developed his own religious system called "Anthroposophy"). It also has a section on Fourth Way Groups, introducing Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. Additionally, it covers the scientization of esotericism, New Age science, and Carl Jung's influence on esotericism. One individual I would have liked to see introduced within the context of Steiner is Valentin Tomberg who anonymously wrote *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism* which is recognized by some, including esoteric scholar Antoine Faivre, as a masterpiece of 20th century esoteric/mystical literature. Goodrick-Clarke's book not only includes valuable footnotes and recommendations for further reading for each chapter, but also includes a helpful index as well as over 30 illustrations comprised of portraits, diagrams, plates, charts and other relevant pictures to supplement the text. This historical introduction to Western esotericism deserves wide readership.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Serious[ly] By Gary A. H. This book is exactly what the title claims - a historical introduction. While although the author doesn't go into a great deal of depth, he more than makes up for it in breadth. The author starts with an attempt at defining what exactly esotericism is. After that, the book is arranged chronologically, starting with Hellenistic esotericism and proceeding through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and up to the present. Each chapter centers on an individual or group of individuals who were influential thinkers in their time and place. At the end of each chapter, there is a list of books for further study, much like a textbook. It is serious; it is scholarly. It is most definitely not silly. If you are at all interested in a "Third Way", which is neither mainstream religion nor strictly empirical "scientism", this may be a good jumping-off point for you, as it was for me.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A good overview By Joey This book covers just about all of the key aspects and people you will find in Western mysticism. It will not give you anything new if you are already steeped in esoteric lore, but it can be a good review. Although I wish the author would have given an example or two of certain vague concepts (such as "correspondences"). I also did not care about the last chapter: It could have had a bit more critical sense concerning the supposed "scientific" evidence for New Age theories. Also, the author soberly reports equally the various theories of so many esotericists without any criticism. That is okay, but I cringe a bit when I think of the sometimes less than honest behavior of some these gurus of mysticism.

Western esotericism has now emerged as an academic study in its own right, combining spirituality with an empirical observation of the natural world while also relating the humanity to the universe through a harmonious celestial order. This introduction to the Western esoteric traditions offers a concise overview of their historical development. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke explores these traditions, from their roots in Hermeticism, Neo-Platonism, and Gnosticism in the early Christian era up to their reverberations in today's scientific paradigms. While the study of Western esotericism is usually confined to the history of ideas, Goodrick-Clarke examines the phenomenon much more broadly. He demonstrates that, far from being a strictly intellectual movement, the spread of esotericism owes a great deal to geopolitics and globalization. In Hellenistic culture, for example, the empire of Alexander the Great, which stretched across Egypt and Western Asia to provinces in India, facilitated a mixing of Eastern and Western cultures. As the Greeks absorbed ideas from Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, and Persia, they gave rise to the first esoteric movements. From the late sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, post-Reformation spirituality found expression in theosophy, Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry. Similarly, in the modern era, dissatisfaction with the hegemony of science in Western culture and a lack of faith in traditional Christianity led thinkers like Madame Blavatsky to look East for spiritual inspiration. Goodrick-Clarke further examines Modern esoteric thought in the light of new scientific and medical paradigms along with the analytical psychology of Carl Gustav Jung. This book traces the complete history of these movements and is the definitive account of Western esotericism.

"A fine, concise summary of Western esoteric traditions from ancient Hellenic and Egyptian sources to the contemporary era. ...Excellent chapter-end bibliographies, detailed notes, and fine summaries make the key elements in this important but opaque tradition understandable to newcomers to the topic." --Choice
About the Author
Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke is Professor of Western Esotericism at the University of Exeter, and Director of its Centre for the Study of Esotericism (EXESESO).