Studying Esoteric Practices: Towards a Praxeological Methodology[1]

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Abstract

This article argues that the study of esotericism has long been characterized by a structural overemphasis on texts, doctrines, and worldviews, accompanied by a relative neglect of practices and practice-induced experiences. While recent scholarship has increasingly acknowledged the importance of ritual, embodiment, and ethnographic methods, no coherent methodology for the systematic analysis of esoteric practices has yet been established. Addressing this lacuna, the article proposes a praxeological framework for the study of esoteric practices that integrates four analytical dimensions: descriptions, prescriptions, experience reports, and – where appropriate – scholar-practitionership. After outlining a pragmatic working definition of esoteric practices, the article demonstrates how each of these source types offers distinct yet partial perspectives on practice, and how their triangulation can generate more nuanced and reliable analyses. Drawing on the late medieval *Ars notoria* as a case study, it illustrates both the limitations of textual approaches and the analytical gains afforded by incorporating experience reports and first-person perspectives. The article further argues that methodologically reflexive scholar-practitionership, grounded in radical agnosticism and careful self-observation, can provide additional insights into the experiential domain without collapsing critical distance or endorsing emic truth claims. By foregrounding practice, experience, performance, and embodiment, the proposed framework seeks to complement existing text-centered approaches and to facilitate comparative analyses of esoteric practices across different historical, cultural, and religious contexts. More broadly, the article aims to contribute to an emerging methodological debate on how esoteric practices can be studied as dynamic, embodied, and experiential phenomena rather than purely textual or doctrinal reverberations.

Keywords

Esoteric practices; praxeology; experience reports; scholar-practitionership; predictive processing.

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1 Introduction

According to Wouter Hanegraaff's *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, the study of esotericism has been characterised by "a structural over-emphasis on doctrine and belief and a corresponding lack of attention to ritual and other forms of practice" (Hanegraaff 2013, 103; the formulation is preserved in Hanegraaff's second edition publ. in 2025). Since the publication of Hanegraaff's *Guide*, a fresh generation of scholars who focus on contemporary esotericism began to appropriate ethnographic (including autoethnographic) research methods into their work (see, e.g., Granholm 2014, Asprem/Granholm 2014, Crockford/Asprem 2018, Cejvan 2018, Lycourinos 2018, Hedenborg-White 2020, Crockford 2021, Cejvan 2023, and Legard 2024); an entire ESSWE conference was dedicated to the topic 'Western Esotericism and Practice' (ESSWE9, held in Malmö, 2023); a Center for Advanced Studies focusing on 'Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective' was launched at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (www.cas-e.de); and a charitable association named the 'Research Network for the Study of Esoteric Practices' emerged, dedicated to building bridges between scholars and practitioners (www.rensep.org). Despite all of these initiatives, I will argue, in this article, that the study of esoteric practices remains in its infancy. One of the main reasons for this critical diagnosis is the fact that no coherent methodology has yet been suggested for a proper conceptualization and analysis of esoteric practices. The present article addresses this lacuna and outlines the potential contours of such a methodology.[2]

The imbalance to which Hanegraaff alluded – the strategic choice or preference among the majority of esotericism scholars to study ideas, theories, histories, worldviews and so on, rather than practices – appears logical for various reasons, such as long-standing academic habits, preferences and prejudices; limited, obscure, incomplete or absent sources about practices; and the methodological challenges associated with adequately assessing, describing and analysing practices. However, this imbalance remains surprising. After all, there is good reason to argue that esotericism is not about holding some non-hegemonic belief as an 'end in itself' which, at most, allows for a different or somewhat 'deeper' grasp of reality. On the contrary, the vast majority of esoteric currents, groups or authors have been, and remain, deeply invested in practices. As a consequence, Hanegraaff's chapter on practices in his aforementioned *Guide* offers a *Who's Who* of 'Western' esotericism from antiquity up until today (see Hanegraaff 2013, 102-118).

But why are practices so important in the realm of esotericism? I think that the answer to this question is quite simple. In contrast to many other types of religious behaviour, esoteric practices tend to promise significant, potentially life-changing experiences and effects: intense encounters with spiritual worlds or entities; fundamental transformations of the practitioner's persona; or straightforward manipulations of outer-worldly events, including entire life paths.[3] Furthermore, esoteric practices do not only promise these experiences and effects, but practitioners frequently report them actually happening, thus continuously ascribing efficacy to these practices. Admittedly,

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[2] Disclaimer: This article primarily adresses scholars of esotericism who are familiar with the study of texts and the related methodological conventions. The situation may differ in other disciplines, especially anthropology, where fieldwork and participant observation have given rise to different methods and debates surrounding the assessment and interpretation of esoteric practices. I will touch upon this further below.

[3] Needless to say, such effects are also reported by practitioners who are located within many institutionalised or hegemonic religious traditions; for instance, within the field of Pentecostal Christianity. My argument that these effects are particularly relevant for the study of esoteric practices should be interpreted in light of a specific working definition, which is provided below.

the history of esotericism has also been affected by intense, extraordinary experiences which have not been practice-induced (consider, for instance, Helen Schucman's year-long, non-voluntary chanelling of the 'New Age Bible' *A Course in Miracles*: Taves 2017, 151f.). However, the relevance and impact of practices that supported esotericism's century-long resilience and proliferation is, in my view, pivotal and still not fully understood. I even feel convinced that a more thorough investigation of esoteric practices from a historical as well as contemporary angle would eventually make it necessary to recoin Hanegraaff's famous winged term – 'rejected knowledge' (e.g., Hanegraaff 2012a) – as 'rejected praxis-knowledge'.

However, practices need to be studied very differently from texts. After suggesting a working definition of esoteric practices for the purpose of this article, I will outline a fourfold methodology which combines a triangular analysis of descriptions, prescriptions, and experience reports, with additional insights gleaned from scholar-practitionership. This methodology seeks to benefit from the various textual approaches to esoteric practices (each with its respective limitations), but also includes a practice-oriented component.

2 Defining esoteric practices

The debate about how best to define esotericism remains heated and ongoing, and has recently been given a fresh impulse by Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner's article "(Re)defining *Esotericism*: Fluid Definitions, Property Clusters and the Cross-cultural Debate" (Engler/Gardiner 2024), and the corresponding *Aries* special issue which includes numerous response articles (*Aries* 24/2). Both Engler and Gardiner's article, as well as the responses to it, demonstrate that there exist multiple possible ways of defining esotericism, with the additional option of not defining this concept at all (see Hanegraaff 2024, and also Engler's contribution to the present volume). My position in such definitional debates has become increasingly pragmatic over the past decade (pragmatic in the sense of employing definitional strategies that *work* in a given context), yet I consider it nonetheless crucial to set reasonable conceptual boundaries and thus demarcate a field or object of research. 'Esoteric practices' clearly do not represent a self-evident category, hence I will suggest, for the purpose of this article, a working definition which provides such boundaries, inspired by and summarised from the version published on the RENSEP website.[4] This definition is as follows:

> "Esoteric practices are part and parcel of the history of religions, but there are four elements that help to demarcate these practices from other types of religious behavior, both within and beyond religious traditions and institutions: controllability; individualisation; self-empowerment; and experience. 1) Controllability: Esoteric practices are characterised by the idea that spiritual matters, processes, or encounters can be controlled, often through the performance of elaborate ritual techniques; 2) Individualisation: Esoteric practices focus on the individual's will, on self-development or -transformation, and on individualised forms of spiritual truth-seeking (see further, on the notion of individualisation, Otto 2017); 3) Self-empowerment: Esoteric practices ascribe power or ritual agency to the individual practitioner; 4) Experience: Esoteric practices stress the importance of personal experiences which may, over time, lead to the development of elaborate systems of experience-based praxis-knowledge, and strategies of secrecy due to the ineffable nature of these experiences."

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[4] See https://www.rensep.org/about/a-matrix-of-esoteric-practices/ (last accessed September 11, 2024).

This definition is, in the words of Engler/Gardiner (2024), 'elucidative', meaning that it is pliant and flexible, leaving some wiggle-room during its practical application (ibid., 6); it is 'anti-realist', in the sense that it is a second-order construct employed for analytical purposes alone (ibid., 3); and it is 'fluid', i.e. open-ended or "modifiable in response to changing discursive conditions" (ibid., 6). It provides, I hope, various analytical advantages for the study of esoteric practices.

First of all, the four characteristics mentioned above can be interpreted as spectra lying between two poles, whereby any given practice can be allocated to either side of the spectrum, including nuanced positionings between the two poles. The main idea is that esoteric practices can, through this definition, be demarcated from types of religious behavior that 1) consider spiritual matters, entities, or one's destiny to be largely uncontrollable; 2) focus on the collective, on religious communities or institutions, complying with their respective norms and truth claims; 3) ascribe agency to external actors, institutions, or entities, such as priests, churches, or ('unbribable') Gods; 4) are based on more or less unquestioned beliefs in the posited doctrines or truth claims of religious communities or leaders, devoid of any intense personal experiences or other attempts to 'test' these.

Note that the demarcative power of this definition works in both directions. On the one hand, there are manifold practices which are performed by individuals or groups typically deemed 'esoteric' but which belong to the non-esoteric poles of the spectra outlined above – for instance, when they fulfil purely symbolic, community-oriented functions rather than aiming to induce any experiences of self-empowerment or self-transformation whatsoever. On the other hand, manifold practices are performed within institutionalised religious traditions that fulfil the aforementioned criteria, and thus fall under this definition. As a consequence, the definition could also help to conceptualise the 'esoteric' dimensions of institutionalised religions from a more practical angle, for instance, in the ongoing debate about 'esoteric Buddhism' (e.g., Orzech et al. 2011), as it would highlight not only social strategies of secrecy, but also, as in this case, intense practice-induced experiences that trigger processes of self-transformation.

The definition furthermore allows for gradual, nuanced classifications of practices, depending on their positioning on the four polar spectra at any given time, thus reflecting the complexity, fluidity and changeability of esoteric practices. Furthermore, it does not essentialise the notion of 'esoteric practices', nor is it bound to disputed conceptualisations of 'Western esotericism', but instead makes it possible to grasp esoteric practices all across the globe, both within and beyond hegemonic religious traditions and institutions. Finally, even though the definition is an etic, abstract working tool, it has a 'built-in' emic quality, as all four characteristics reflect on how practitioners themselves actually perceive, interpret and experience their practices. This is, of course, a purely strategic choice and there may be other ways to define the notion of 'esoteric practices' which focus more on their socio-cultural contexts, evaluations and functions as well as other factors – consider, for instance, the initial working definition stipulated in the research application of the Center for Advanced Studies in Erlangen (CAS-E: see Otto 2024). However, one of the main take-aways of this article is that a thorough praxeological assessment of esoteric practices requires taking into account practitioner positions as much as possible, so adopting a working definition that reflects these perspectives may be a good way to embark on that endeavor.

3 Studying esoteric practices

Practices form a domain of their own, because they are *practiced*; that is, they are performed, embodied and experienced by practitioners. As a consequence, texts can only provide limited access

to practices (whereas, as we'll see later, practices may provide fresh insights regarding the meanings and functions of texts). I wish to illustrate this fundamental obstacle with a diagram that suggests possible grades of understanding that depend on different types of textual representations of practices. This diagram points to a general difficulty of understanding practices through text, yet the arrow indicates a potential knowledge increase from left to right. In what follows, I will discuss each item on the diagram, moving from left to right.
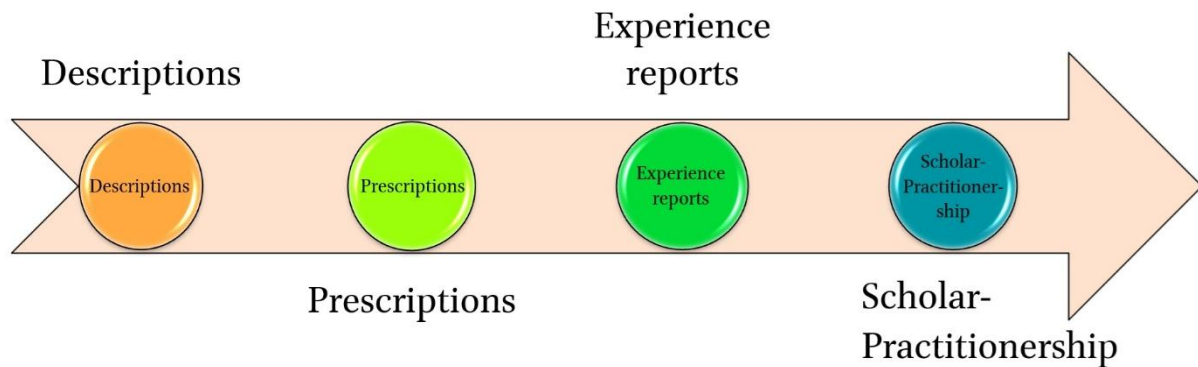
3.1 Descriptions

On the far left of the diagram, we find *descriptions* of esoteric practices, which are, more often than not, provided by external or 'outsider' observers. Let us consider a fairly typical premodern example of such a description; namely, Thomas of Aquinas' portrayal of the *Ars notoria*. The *Ars notoria* is a Latin script of 'learned magic' presumably composed around the late 12th or early 13th centuries, which outlines a complex set of practices for acquiring heightened intellectual capabilities – especially memory, eloquence, understanding (Lat. *intelligentia*), and perseverance – in order to 'learn' the seven liberal arts of the medieval university curriculum (the trivium: rhetoric, grammar and logic; and the quadrivium: astronomy, arithmetics, geometry and music) within only one or a few months. This is achieved, however, not by means of sincere intellectual study, but through performing a complex arrangement of practices, including considerations of astrological timeframes, fasting, chastity, fumigations, prayer and – the core practice – the recitation of lists of angel names while looking at peculiar images: the so-called *notae*.

Aquinas' description is found in in his *Summa Theologica*, which was written between 1265 and 1273, in the second part of the second part (*secunda secundae*), quaestio 96, 1, whose overall theme is "superstition in various practices". Thomas Aquinas herein writes about the *Ars notoria*:

> "The observances in the *ars notoria* [...] consist in certain fasts and prayers to God. Moreover, they are aimed at a good, namely at conclusive knowledge. [...] The observances of the *ars notoria* involve various fasts and abstinences. [...] This quest relies upon assistance from the demonic. Now through the common practices of the *ars notoria*, knowledge of the truth is sought through certain signs arranged by agreement with the demonic powers. [...] The *ars notoria* is wrong and ineffective. It is wrong because the means it uses are not capable of demonstrating genuine knowledge, for example, the close inspection of various configurations and the muttering of strange words, and so forth. It does not use these means as causes, but rather as signs. [...] Consequently they are useless as signs, and moreover imply agreements and pacts made with demonic powers [...]. And so the *ars notoria* is to be completely repudiated and

avoided by Christians, as are other arts involving useless and misleading practices. [...] Now assuredly people have had wisdom and knowledge shed on them by God, as is related of Solomon. [...] But this gift is not granted to everyone, or as attached to any special practice, but according to the will of the Holy Spirit. [...] Knowledge and wisdom are achieved by the enlightening of the intellect and never did anyone acquire knowledge by means of the demons. [...]" (O'Meara/Duffy 2006, 71-75).[5]

There is no room in this article to provide an in-depth analysis and historical contextualisation of Thomas Aquinas' peculiar description of the *Ars notoria*. I chose this example in order to illustrate that descriptions of esoteric practices, particularly historical ones, can be problematic for several reasons. Firstly, Thomas Aquinas' description is vague, superficial and incomplete: apart from alluding to fasting, abstinence, prayer, 'inspections of various configurations' and the 'muttering of strange words', the reader learns extremely little about the actual practices involved in the *Ars notoria*, the rationale behind these practices, or the manifold further instructions related to their performance (such as the astrological timeframes, the contents of the prayers, the lists of angel names, the depictions of the *notae*, etc.). Aquinas' description is, furthermore, tendentious and inaccurate: in stark contrast to the self-understanding of the *Ars notoria* – which is divinely ordained and angelological (see below) –, he claims that it would work exclusively with the aid of demons, or even strive to make a pact with the latter (this should be interpreted against the backdrop of Aquinas' radicalisation of Augustine's 'demon pact' theory: see Otto/Stausberg 2013, 48f.); he furthermore holds that its prayers are inevitably inefficacious, as they are based on 'useless' signs that are directed, not towards God, but towards demons who, on principle, cannot deliver such knowledge; and he calls into question the 'mechanical' approach of the *Ars notoria*, arguing that only the 'will of the Holy Spirit' has the power to grant inspired knowledge. Finally, Aquinas' description clearly does not seek to provide a neutral or abstract portrayal of the practice, but is highly judgmental and attempts to deter readers from engaging in it through fearmongering, distortive polemics, stereotypes and misinformation (or 'fake news', in modern parlance).

Cultural and literary history is imbued with a vast range of similarly vague, superficial, incomplete, inaccurate, tendentious and judgmental descriptions of practices deemed magical or esoteric. I argue elsewhere that such descriptions belong to a millenia-long, cross-cultural, trans-religious, anti-magical 'discourse of exclusion' (see Otto 2011, ch. 6-8). From an analytical perspective, descriptions that are related to this discourse should be treated with great caution, as "authors partaking in the 'discourse of exclusion' tend to simplify, distort, or – consciously or not – misunderstand the textual-ritual tradition of 'Western learned magic'" (Otto 2016, 177) to which the *Ars notoria* belongs. For esotericism scholars working with premodern descriptions of esoteric practices, this is a serious methodological obstacle. To give another example: it is difficult to say anything meaningful about the alleged practices of European witchcraft during the period of the early modern witch persecutions, as the vast majority of surviving sources on these practices are either entirely fictional, or superficial, inaccurate and judgmental descriptions offered by outsiders.[6]

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[5] I have modified a few aspects of O'Meara's and Duffy's partly misleading translation, as they have confused, for instance, Aquinas' reference to the *Ars notoria* with the general practice of magic.

[6] I of course distinguish between an early modern polemical discourse on witchcraft or the 'crime of magic' (*crimen magiae*: Otto 2012) on the one hand, and a partly identificatory, learned discourse about *magia naturalis* on the other (including intermediary zones: see, for some thoughts on the relationship and peculiar timely synchronicity between these two very different discourses, Otto 2011, 491f.). Whereas manifold textual descriptions and prescriptions by early

Hence, Thomas Aquinas' description of the *Ars notoria* was chosen as the main example in this article as it illustrates typical features of premodern descriptions of esoteric practices and, moreover – as a rare exception in the study of premodern esoteric practices – because it can be meaningfully compared with two further types of texts that deal with the identical practice, namely, contemporaneous *prescriptions* as well as *experience reports* (see below).

However, it is not my intention to argue that 'outsider' descriptions of esoteric practices are, in principle, superficial, inaccurate and judgmental. Manifold textual descriptions of esoteric practices authored by practitioners, sympathetic insiders or genuinely interested observers do exist, and these may be more neutral, accurate and coherent compared to Aquinas' polemical account. We might add to this list descriptions of esoteric practices authored by academic authors. However, everyone who has delved into academic discourses on magic during the past 150 years will confirm that scholars are not immune to authoring superficial, tendentious or judgmental descriptions.[7] A telling example is for instance Lynn Thorndike's otherwise pioneering *A History of Magic and Experimental Science* (Thorndike 1923), where he discusses the *Ars notoria* alongside Thomas Aquinas' account, adopting a markedly dismissive and polemical tone toward both the ritual practice itself and its scholastic theological framing.[8] What is more, descriptions of esoteric practices can typically only grasp a very limited amount of visible or otherwise sensorially accessible information (anyone who has tried to write a detailed description of an observed practice, for instance during fieldwork, will confirm this). Descriptions are, therefore, situated on the far left-hand side in the diagram above.

3.2 Prescriptions

Let us move on to the second category from the left; namely, *prescriptions* (or scripts, manuals). It is reasonable to assume that prescriptions tend to be written by practitioners themselves, that is, they represent an 'insider' perspective and typically provide manual-style instructions for other practitioners. Fortunately, we can 'change sides' with regard to the aforementioned example, as over 100 manuscript versions of the *Ars notoria* have survived from the 13th century onwards (see Véronèse 2012, 38; Skinner/Clark 2019, 71f.). It would make little sense for me to present simply another, inevitably superficial description. In the study of esoteric practices, *the script needs to speak for itself.* Let me therefore quote a few passages from the *Ars notoria* script, with a special focus on outweighing some of Thomas Aquinas' polemics. Due to its historical impact, I will use Robert Turner's 1657 English translation of the Latin version that was amended to Agrippa of Nettesheim's *Opera Omnia* from around 1620 onwards (as reprinted and re-arranged in Skinner/Clark 2019, 165-

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modern learned magicians have survived, I am aware of only very few contemporaneous sources that would represent the 'insider' perspectives of early modern 'witches'. The problem arising from misleading descriptions, as outlined here, thus grows even more severe in the case of early modern witchcraft, as they cannot be flanked with prescriptions or experience reports (see further below). This, however, does not preclude the existence of practices in early modern Europe that resemble some of the practices described in polemical witchcraft discourses, which may have been named differently and transmitted only orally (see Bever 2008).

[7] I argue elsewhere (Otto 2011, 617-39) that modern academic discourses on magic have largely been informed by premodern antimagical 'discourses of exclusion', and that the former have been coloured by the three main polemical stereotypes employed within the latter – namely, that magic is ineffective, anti-social and a-religious.

[8] See Thorndike 1923 II, 281–286, where the *Ars notoria* and related texts are described as "unmeaning jumbles of diagrams" filled with "strange words ... and other gibberish"; see further ibid., 604–605, for Thorndike's polemical discussion of Thomas Aquinas' treatment of the *Ars notoria* and his dismissive comments on scholastic demonology ("Dear demons! What a treasured legacy of theology from paganism!").

238), and which largely corresponds to the longer version B in Julien Véronèse's critical edition of the *Ars notoria* (2012, 135-293):

> "In the Name of the holy and undivided Trinity, beginneth this most holy Art of Knowledge, Revealed to SOLOMON, which the Most High Creator by his holy Angel ministred to SOLOMON upon the Altar of the Temple; that thereby in a short time he knew all Arts and Sciences, both Liberal and Mechanick, with all the Faculties and Properties thereof: He had suddenly infused into him, and also was filled with all wisdom, to utter the sacred mysteries of most holy words. [...] There is so great Vertue, Power and Efficacy in certain Names and Words of God, that when you reade those very Words, it shall immediately increase and help your Eloquence, so that you shall be made eloquent of speech by them, and at length attain to the Effects of the powerful Sacred Names of God: but from whence the power hereof doth proceed, shall be fully demonstrated to you in the following Chapters of Prayers [...] Neither think, that all words of the preceding Oration can be translated into the Latin Tongue: For some words of that Oration contain in themselves a greater Sense of Mystical Profundity, of the Authority of *Solomon*; and having reference to his Writings, we acknowledge, That these Orations cannot be expounded nor understood by humane sense: For it is necessary, That all Orations, and distinct particulars of Astronomy, Astrology, and the Notary Art, be spoken and pronounced in their due time and season; and the Operations of them to be made according to the disposition of the Times. [...] But know, that this Miracle proceeds not from your own Nature, but from the Nature and Vertue of the holy Angels; it being a part of their Office, wonderfully to reveal these things to you. [...] To recover intellectual wisdome. Oh Lord, I thy Servant confesse my self unto thee, before the Majesty of thy glory, in whose Spirit is all Magnificence and Sanctimony: I beseech thee according to thy unspeakeable Name, extend thy merciful Ears and Eyes to the office of my operation; and opening thy hand, I may be filled with the grace I desire, and satiated with charity and goodness; whereby thou hast founded Heaven and Earth, who livest, &c. Say these Orations from the first day of the month, to the fourth day: in the fourth day Alpha and Omega, and that following it, *viz. Helischemat azatan*; As it is in the beginning: afterwards say, Theos Megale patyr, ymas heth heldya, hebeath heleotezygel, Salatyel, Salus, Telli, Samel, Zadaziel, Zadan, Sadiz Leogio, Yemegas, Mengas, Omchon Myeroym, Ezel, Ezely, Yegrogamal, Sameldach, Somelta, Sanay, Geltonama, Hanns, [105] Simon Salte, Patyr, Osyon, Hate, Haylos, Amen" (Skinner/Clark 2019, 171-222).

This excerpt represents merely a tiny fraction of the whole script, which amounts, in Turner's translation, to more than 60 pages filled with instructions, explanations, religious digressions, prayers, and lists of 'angel names' (also called *voces magicae* or *verba ignota* – unknown words – in the research literature). Of the numerous prayers and angel lists provided in the script, I chose the one for achieving "intellectual wisdome" as it may function as a link to the experience report provided further below. Note that this prayer is only one of several dozens of prayers which are to be recited at specific times, either as a single practice, or while contemplating upon the respective *nota* ascribed to one of the liberal arts (see Skinner/Clark 2019, 387-93 for a tabular overview of the *notae*, and 396-404 for a tabular overview of all prayers).

While it is impossible to provide a thorough analysis of the *Ars notoria* script in this article,[9] my main point is that, in contrast to descriptions of practices, prescriptions are typically far more detailed and finely-grained, sometimes up to the point of becoming overly complex and hard to digest; in fact, the ability to read and apprehend a sophisticated script like the *Ars notoria* requires significant praxis-knowledge; the degree of detail contained in many prescriptions of esoteric practices also makes it challenging to re-narrate them without falling prey to the aforementioned tendency towards superficiality (a painful lesson that I learnt when attempting to write a history of learned magic based on surviving ritual scripts). What is also observable in the *Ars notoria* prescription, in contrast to Aquinas' description, is that scripts are typically more neutral and abstract in their technical portrayal of the actual practice, even if they are, of course, garnished with religious rhetoric that mirrors the historical context. In that case, then, do prescriptions come closer to what esoteric practices are all about?

The obvious 'yes' to this question must be accompanied by a huge 'but'. Prescriptions, too, can represent a problematic genre for a vast range of reasons, as we may observe again in the case of the *Ars notoria*. They may be distorted or flawed in manifold ways due to dynamic processes of transmission and translation (for instance, Turner's translation of the *Ars notoria* omitted various internal references to the *notae*, as well as mentions of the Catholic faith; above all, Turner omitted all of the *notae*, thus rendering the script practically useless).[10] Scripts are often preserved in multiple different versions and variations, thus evoking sincere bewilderment among practitioners who wish to understand the 'correct' way to practice (which *Ars notoria* version is the 'right' one?). They may be porous or otherwise incomplete, even deliberately so (a common trope in the history of learned magic is the need to protect the art from unripe readers,[11] so a true adept must fill in any gaps through acquired praxis-knowledge and/or additional oral prescriptions provided through direct teacher-disciple-relationships). Scripts are typically composed of multiple building blocks ('entangled rituals': see Otto 2023a) which may appear incoherent and unsystematic, thus leaving it up to the practitioner to 'reconstruct' the practice from the script during what becomes, ultimately, an individual, creative exercise.[12] They may include bold, overly optimistic or even grandiloquient claims with regard to the expected outcomes (consider the following: "Whosoever will pronounce these words [...] shall profit in all Sciences in one Moneth, and attain to them in an extraordinary wonderful manner": Skinner/Clark 2019, 179). Finally, and possibly most importantly, scripts only rarely provide information on the actual *experiences* that practitioners may (or may not)

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[9] I refer the reader to Skinner/Clark 2019, 117-26, for an interesting attempt to reconstruct the entire practice, based on the available manuscript evidence.

[10] See Skinner/Clark 2019, 35: "While the Turner edition gave us the text of the work, it is completely unusable due to its omission of the *notae*. In this respect it is like owning a nice car which lacks an engine: good to read (or sit in) but no use in practice, or to take you anywhere".

[11] The *Ars notoria* script indeed includes a relevant warning here: "For this Oration is such a mystery, as King *Solomon* himself witnesseth, that a Servant of his House having found this book by chance, and being too much overcome with Wine in the Company of a Woman, he presumptuously read it; but before he had finished a part thereof, he was stricken dumb, blind and lame, and his Memory taken from him; so he continued to the day of his death: and in the hour of his death, he spoke and said, that four Angels which he had offended in presumptuous reading so sacred a mystery, were the daily keepers and afflicters, one of his Memory, another of his speech, a third of his sight, and the fourth of his hearing" (Skinner/Clark 2017, 189).

[12] See Skinner/Clark 2019, 117: "*Ars Notoria* is however not systematically laid out. Even after Turner's text has been reorganised, there are still a number of gaps: some subjects, like philosophy, are supplied with prayers, invocations (the paragraphs of *verba ignota*) and six *notae*, while other subjects, like music, are hardly mentioned at all. It has to be admitted that this is not a beginner's book".

undergo upon practicing the script, and whether or not these experiences actually correspond to the script's own claims and promises.

3.3 Experience reports
This brings us to the third category illustrated in the diagram above; namely, *experience reports*. While scholars of magic and esotericism have invested considerable time and ink in analysing and contextualising textual descriptions and prescriptions of practices, experience reports have, until recently, been relatively ignored, with a very few exceptions (see Asprem 2017; Otto 2023b; Bogdan 2023; Hanegraaff 2023; Franchetto 2024).[13] In my view, the ongoing neglect of this important text genre indicates a general misapprehension of the enormous relevance of the experiential domain for the study of esotericism. There is good reason to argue that experience reports come closer to what esoteric practices are all about, as they touch upon the question of efficacy, thus shedding light on the specific reasons for why esoteric practitioners actually practice esoteric practices.

Fortunately, we may continue using the example of the *Ars notoria*, as an experience report of a contemporaneous (i.e., late medieval) practitioner has survived: namely, the prologue of the *Liber visionum*, which formed part of the extensive work titled *Liber florum celestis doctrine* (*Flowers of Heavenly Teaching*), written by the French Benedictine monk John of Morigny in the early 14th century. This represents a striking exception, as premodern ego-documents of magical practitioners are extremely rare. According to the autobiographical narrative published in that prologue (edited and translated by Watson/Fanger 2001), John had practiced the *Ars notoria* for several years, initially as an autodidact and solo practitioner, who strove to improve the technique through trial and error. As the practice seems to have worked for him, he went on to teach it to several other people in subsequent years, including his sister Bridget (Fanger 2021, 58-59). However, as John's narrative states, he abandoned his *Ars notoria* practice at some point, having gradually come to suspect that it was a demonic enterprise, and replaced it with yet another esoteric practice; namely, a series of related yet partly self-developed prayers and images focusing on God, Christ, angels and in particular the Virgin Mary, which he then documented in the *Liber florum*.[14]

Let us consider some of his experiences that he reported as having been sparked by his practice of the *Ars notoria*:

> "Well after I first got hold of the said book of the Ars Notoria and looked into it, I was deceived into believing that there was no evil in it. On a certain evening, one day after I had fasted, I uttered certain prayers from that book which is called Ars Notoria. And lo, in the night, placed as it were in an excess of mind, I saw the following vision. [...] When I had thought a bit about what I had seen I began to ask God in my heart to show me

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[13] See Otto 2023b, 70f.: "Premodern ritual texts, even though vivid and fascinating, thus appear 'dead' to the modern scholar. However, [...] it may be both worthwhile and interesting – from a historical as well as an analytical perspective – to tap into the experiences of contemporary practitioners of magic(k) who appropriate these texts. There is a wealth of hitherto neglected experience reports authored by modern practitioners of magic(k) who have – much like experimental archaeologists – given these texts a trial run and described how one might actually succeed in practicing a premodern ritual script such as the *Arbatel*".

[14] From the perspective of the above working definition, both the *Ars notoria* as well as John's *Liber florum* have a strong tendency towards the esoteric pole: like the *Ars notoria*, the *Liber florum* suggests a controllability of the process (spectrum 1); it focuses on individual truth-seeking (spectrum 2); it strives for intense experiences of encounter, especially with Mary (spectrum 4). Only spectrum 3 is triggered far less as John's *Liber florum*, similar to the *Ars notoria*, ascribes the efficacy of the practice largely to angels, and particularly to Mary.

what it was and what it meant, and I uttered a certain prayer for intelligence which is written in the same book, in order to know these things. [...] According to my intention, I brought my prayer to its effect. Well, after I had uttered the aforesaid prayer, turning onto my other side, I was immediately as though in an ecstasy, and I saw this vision (the Latin reads here: ...statim fui quasi in extasi et talem vidi visionem...) [...] After I had begun the work of this book, when I had already laboured in it all the way to the twenty-ninth lunation, the day the moon completes her course, in the night after twilight, after uttering a certain prayer from this book which is called the Signum Gracie, I immediately extinguished the candle and got into my bed, and when I was lying down I fell into an ecstasy. [...] As I was pursuing my work, before I had come to the end, it was twice revealed to me by all the angelic spirits that in this book's prayers in outlandish tongues there was an invocation of malign spirits hidden so subtly and ingeniously that nobody in the world, however subtle he be, would be able to perceive it. And after hearing these things, at that point I began to feel even more doubt about this science. [...] When I was working with the aforesaid science, I had many other wondrous visions which are not really relevant here, through which I learned necromancy in both kinds with the help of the Art of these books. Similarly geomancy, pyromancy, hydromancy, aeromancy, chiromancy, and geogonia, and almost all their subdivisions. How I learned these things would take too long to tell. [...] Many glorious and beautiful visions I saw which would be too long to narrate word for word. I saw a city set above the clouds, I saw heaven clear as crystal, and around the edges and within it, as if it had been an army pavilion, I saw the coming of the Antichrist, but the righteous paupers were naysaying him, just as this vision will appear later. [...] I said that prayer thrice, with tears, at a certain late hour. And when I was in my bed I fell into an ecstasy and heard a voice like the voice of many waters and like the voice of a trumpet saying to me, "John, don't you know that gold is tried in a furnace? Why therefore did you seek this?" And I woke up immediately with the voice still ringing in my ears and I knew that it was not possible to avoid the tribulation, but that I had to bear it patiently–wherefore that prayer became very commendable to me. And many other secrets I saw and heard and knew" (Watson/Fanger 2001, 175-191).

Again, these represent merely exemplary excerpts from a far more extensive narrative, and I have deliberately omitted the manifold visions that John reports, as these are context-sensitive to the specific setting and irrelevant to my overall argument. As with all premodern documents, especially ego-documents that were written in a cultural environment thus hostile towards esoteric practices, John's narrative may be flawed, purely instrumental, or even entirely fabricated (see Martin 2016 for further difficulties inherent in the genre of the experience report). In fact, John was confronted with ecclesiastic criticism from at least as early as 1315 onwards, and the *Liber florum* was burnt in Paris in 1323 as "sorcerous and heretical" (Fanger 2021, 65), which may cast doubt on his auto-biographical sketch: after all, it may represent a strategic attempt to cater to the ecclesiastic norms of the time (but see, for a more nuanced argument, ibid., 65f.). However, there are also various reasons to assume that John wrote what he considered to be a true story; its frankness, dynamics, as well as its richness of personal (and not always favorable) details seem to suggest this, and furthermore indicate John may well have held a journal during his years of *Ars notoria* practice, in which he would have noted down his manifold visionary experiences.

If we assume this to have been the case, we may learn from his report that the *Ars notoria* practice clearly worked for John in two distinct ways. Firstly, he claims to have developed mastery over the liberal arts through his practice of the *Ars notoria*. There is, of course, no way of verifying this, but it may be noted that John became Provost at the Abbey of Morigny in 1308, several years after he began practising, which is not only a title of honor but also of expertise. In other words, at least according to John's own narrative, the *Ars notoria* had delivered what it promised (we can deduce from the prologue that this took far longer than a month, though), wherefore he ascribed efficacy to the practice, despite deeming it demonic and illegitimate at a later stage. Secondly, the *Ars notoria* practice sparked a wide range of ecstatic states, visionary experiences, and intense, meaningful dream encounters, which John interpreted as immediate repercussions of his practices.

Let us interpret the latter observation through the lens of recent findings from the cognitive study of religion. First of all, both the *Ars notoria* as well as John's *Liber florum* stand in a tradition of so-called 'kataphatic' practices within and beyond the history of esotericism; namely, practices that ascribe spiritual value to experiencing inner, imaginary sensations.[15] Tanya Luhrmann in particular has, in various pivotal works on the topic, coined the notion of 'inner sense cultivation,'[16] stressing that the long-term training of such practices, including various types of prayer (which she considers a "metacognitive practice": Luhrmann 2020, 139f.), influences the practitioner's cognitive apparatus in various ways: it fundamentally alters one's attention and expectation management ('spiritual kindling'),[17] but also triggers the capacity – which Luhrmann also calls a talent – for 'absorption,'[18] which may lead to 'sensory over-rides'.[19] Frank Klaassen adds that the repeated recitation of the *verba ignota* may have played a prominent role in this process,[20] and John indeed claims repeatedly that

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[15] See Asprem 2016, 6/7: "Practices such as the medieval *ars notoria* and related operations focused on conversation with angels and attainment of divine knowledge, the Renaissance animation of statues, the 'enthusiasm' of Christian theosophy, or the 'clairvoyant' reading of the 'Akashic records' in modern occultism all stand in continuum with mainstream Christian practices focused on developing the 'inner senses'. From theurgy to past-life regression, accessing higher knowledge through internal mental imagery is everywhere in esoteric experiential practices"; see further Luhrmann 2012, chapter 6; Asprem 2024.

[16] See Luhrmann 2020, 72: "Inner sense cultivation is the deliberate, repeated use of inner visual representation and other inner sensory experience"; 73: "Inner sense cultivation often involves three features: interaction, interweaving, and sensory enhancement. By 'interaction,' I mean that the practitioner interacts with what she or he imagines. The person who prays imagines Jesus and talks with him. [...] By 'interweaving,' I mean that these practices commonly interlace scripted prayers (like the "Our Father") with private, personal reflection. [...] By 'sensory enhancement,' I mean that the practitioner uses many of his or her inner senses to engage with the story"; 74: "The practice of inner sense cultivation blurs the boundary between what is external and what is within. The mental muscles developed in prayer work on the boundary between thought and perception, between what is attributed to the mind – internal, self generated, private, and hidden from view – and what exists in the world"; see further Luhrmann 2012, chapters 6-7; Luhrmann/Morgain 2012.

[17] Luhrmann 2012, 112: "And so attention and expectation will change the nature of spiritual events. I am going to call this process 'spiritual kindling,' a specific instance of the more general process of the way kindling, through small acts of attention, shapes a person's unique experience of gods and spirits".

[18] See ibid., 58: "Some people are more willing to blur the line between inner mind and outer world, so that which must be inwardly imagined comes to feel more autonomous, more agentic, more given from without".

[19] See ibid., 69: "hallucination-like moments when someone hears a voice while alone, or sees something that isn't there, or feels, tastes, or smells something that is not materially pre sent, as if the inner world overrode sensory perception".

[20] See Klaassen 2012, 46-47: "Reading pages of verba ignota requires a tremendous level of attention and mental effort. Reading long passages of these on a daily basis over the course of a two-year ritual may well have served to develop capacities in their users related to reading, a skill central to intellectual pursuits. Modern exercises for speed reading and overcoming difficulties in tracking involve curiously similar sorts of techniques, which also claim not to depend on comprehension to achieve their effects. [...] One effect of this art probably resulted from its quasi-contemplative nature.

his visionary experiences were immediately sparked by his recitation of specific prayers offered by the *Ars notoria* script.

Recent research further suggests that such experiences not only depend on specific techniques and the amount of training, but also on the practitioner's own specific talents and personality traits – such as, apart from absorption, hypnotisability, fantasy proneness, positive schizotypy, gender as well as sense-types – which might even serve as "predictors of successful involvement with these practices" (Asprem 2017, 17).[21] Against this backdrop, John may have not only been a highly trained 'kataphatic' practitioner, but also talented in absorption and hypnotisability, as his visionary experiences appear to contain particularly rich visual and auditory content (manuscript notes show that varying levels of talent in visionary activities were recognized by Morigny's contemporaries, and that the *Ars notoria* was expected to evoke visionary experiences: see Fanger/Watson 2015, 403).[22] This is, in itself, an interesting characteristic that we may deduce from John's experience report, since it differs from the *Ars notoria* script, which neither prescribes nor outlines imaginative practices. While the goal of receiving passive visions is mentioned therein rarely and only in passing, the main exercise of consulting the *notae* (where these are provided by the script) while reciting the prescribed prayers does not make use of the practitioner's active imagination.[23]

In the words of the much-discussed predictive coding framework (PCF), kataphatic practices manipulate the relationship between bottom-up and top-down processing in the practitioner's cognitive apparatus, thus affecting one's attention – and thereby also expectation – management.[24] Clearly, John's manifold visions were driven by intense top-down processing and the simultaneous suppression of somatosensory 'error' signals, as it happens in any visionary or dream-like state. However, top-down processing taps onto the long-term memory and the predictive models of the world stored therein, which have been shaped by one's biographical and cultural learning. The predictive coding framework would ask whether John's gradual shift away from the original *Ars notoria* practice towards his 'purified', Mary-centered version, as outlined in the *Liber florum*, may have reflected his pre- or subconscious expectation that the *Ars notoria* is indeed demonical in nature, even if the script claims otherwise (eventually inspired by Thomas Aquinas' warnings on the matter, written some 30 years earlier, which may have provided a cognitive schema while experiencing his sensory 'over-rides'). In other words, John's creative development of the 'purified' *Liber florum* practice may have been sparked by his desire to continue his kataphatic practices despite the alleged demonic risks involved, but also influenced by his expectations of what a

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The positive effects of disciplined use of meditative exercises on cognitive functioning, particularly academic performance, is well attested. Numerous studies report significant increases in grades among university students who engage in regular meditative exercises. It is telling that practitioners of the Ars notoria are advised to continue with their studies while they perform its rituals, rituals that presumably are capable of infusing the knowledge in them without the need of any school work. It seems reasonable that practitioners of this art found that their academic performance improved significantly".

[21] See also ibid., 6: "research has also shown that these techniques do not have the same effect on everyone: Some people are kataphatic "naturals", while others never learn to see or feel much of the spiritual world. In particular, they found that people who scored highly on tests of the personality trait "absorption" were much more likely to get something out of kataphatic prayer techniques".

[22] I am grateful to Claire Fanger for alerting me to this observation.

[23] It appears reasonable to assume that, during earlier historical stages of the development of the *Ars notoria* practice, the *notae* may have been received by practitioners through passive imagination, and thereafter drawn, textually transmitted and codified; however, as a consequence of this textual transmission process, there exist significant differences in the *notae* across the surviving manuscript versions: Skinner/Clark 2019, 387-93.

[24] See especially Taves/Asprem 2015; Asprem 2017; Luhrmann 2020, chapter 5. Asprem 2024.

legitimate Christian practice actually entails. In a nutshell, the predictive coding framework suggests that one's expectations and experiences continuously shape and affect each another (through ongoing perceptual inference: see Clark 2013) which, notably, also applies to visionary and other types of extraordinary experiences, even if these possess an 'ego-dystonic' (Taves 2017, 261) quality in that they do not seem to emerge from one's own mind but rather from 'outside' (in this case, from Mary, the angels or God). This may explain, at least to a certain degree, the peculiar trajectory that is outlined in John's report.

I have discussed John of Morigny's experience report at some length in order to arrive at a more general argument. Should the study of esotericism wish to enrich its history-, worldview- and idea-centered focus by acknowledging and exploring the practical domain, experience reports should be studied far more systematically than has been done thus far. Doing so would facilitate triangular analyses which make use of descriptions (third-person), prescriptions (second-person) and experience reports (first-person) on equal terms, whereby each perspective can enrich the others, as demonstrated above.[25] Experience reports add a far more versatile, first-person perspective to the rigid, formalised structure of textual descriptions and prescriptions and can, furthermore, provide crucial, additional snippets of information. We may deduce at least four such snippets from John's report: firstly, regarding its practical application, the *Ars notoria* practice was not 'finished' after only a few months – as is claimed in the majority of the surviving scripts –, but may have been practiced for many years consecutively, even in group settings. Secondly, John points to manifold practice-induced visionary and other types of extraordinary (in his words 'ecstatic') experiences, which are rarely mentioned in the script. Thirdly, even highly formal prescriptions such as the *Ars notoria* are never fully self-explanatory, but require a complex adaptation process which can even lead to the creation of entirely new types of practices, as we have observed in John's development of the *Liber florum*.[26] Finally, John's 'transition' narrative shows that many premodern practitioners may have been significantly influenced by polemical stereotypes from the anti-magical 'discourse of exclusion', even though the scripts themselves tend either not to mention these stereotypes at all, or even to strive towards their fully-fledged reversal (on the strategy of 'stereotype reversal', see Otto 2023a, 8).

While experience reports enrich the triangular form of analysis suggested here, however, they also complicate the picture. As every practitioner knows, practice-induced experiences and effects are highly volatile, individualistic and thus unpredictable, depending on multiple known and unknown factors. John's 'successful' report notwithstanding, practice-induced experiences can differ significantly from the claims or expectations raised in prescriptions. In fact, they may even differ for every practitioner of any given practice at any given time. This is due to the simple fact that practice-induced esoteric experiences are *practitioner-bound*. It is the practitioner who provides the *context* for her or his experiences, wherefore a proper *contextualisation* of this experience requires not only an assessment of the historical, cultural and religious circumstances of the practice and the tradition to which it belongs (as in any historical contextualisation), but also a deep dive into the emic perspectives, or 'inner worlds', of the practitioner, possibly relating the experience to biographical trajectories, character traits as well as further individual factors.

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[25] Egil Asprem has argued on similar lines (Asprem 2017, 29): "*Patterned practices* can be traced through a combination of first and third-person descriptions in diaries or field notes, but it is crucial to correlate these with second person instruction material used by practitioners. Careful analysis of instruction material yields some of the most interesting insights, and can be triangulated with ethnographic and semi-experimental studies of contemporary practitioners".

[26] I make a similar argument in my analysis of Frater Acher's 'Arbatel experience': Otto 2023b.

To complicate the picture even further, practice-induced experiences may be disconnected not only from scriptural claims, but also from the convictions, expectations and beliefs of practitioners. According to Tanya Luhrmann's classical study *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (1989), rationalisations and other types of claimed beliefs tend to 'follow' the performance of esoteric practices rather than preceding or predetermining them, through a cognitive selection and attribution process that she has described as 'interpretive drift' (Luhrmann 1989, esp. 307-15; see further Asprem 2017, 4-7). The connection between practices, beliefs and experiences may, in fact, be somewhat loose. As Jason Josephson Storm argues, some practices may lack any underlying beliefs at all; practices may be continuously practised even if practitioners do not believe in their efficacy; and the beliefs themselves may be paradoxical, vague, half-cooked or riddled with doubts (Storm 2025, 326f.). Yet, belief nonetheless remains an important factor in the efficacy of practices as perceived by practitioners, wherefore Chaos magicians have suggested to interpret and instrumentalise (provisional forms of) belief as a powerful ritual tool, adapted to suit the respective situation, and interchanged when necessary.[27]

All of these considerations point to a mysterious three-fold nexus – let us call it the 'practice-practitioner-experience' nexus – which is highly individualistic and thus very difficult to grasp, even for practitioners themselves. I would argue that, based on the current state of research, this nexus comes close to *terra incognita*. We have little clue about which esoteric practice may yield which experience in which practitioner – hence, I noted at the start of this article that the study of esoteric practices remains in its infancy. One of the reasons for this unfortunate situation is that we have no systematic data – or at least no one has collected and computed the extant data on this topic (such as the vast corpus of ritual diaries written by 20th and 21st century practitioners of ritual magic)[28] – in the domain of practice-induced esoteric experiences and effects. If scholars of esotericism wish to gain a better understanding of esoteric practices, and why practitioners continue to practice these, I would suggest that we begin by collecting those data. To this end, the Research Network for the Study of Esoteric Practices recently launched a pilot survey[29] and plans to gradually build up an extensive database of such experience reports. The collected data will be interpreted with the aid of Ann Taves' recently published 'Inventory of Non-Ordinary Experiences' (INOE: Taves et al. 2023). I hope that

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[27] For instance, Peter Carroll, in his *Liber Null*, diversifies six 'random beliefs' (namely, paganism, monotheism, atheism, nihilism, chaoism and superstition), which should be adopted and adjusted by the practitioner depending on the requirements of each situation: 'Try each or any of them for a week, a month, or a year. This exercise may save one an unnecessary incarnation or two' (Carroll 1987, 73–7).

[28] I name only three examples of modern schools of ritual magic – Thelema, Wicca and Chaos magick – whose founders have urged their adherents to keep systematic ritual diaries. See Crowley 1909, 25: "It is absolutely necessary that all experiments should be recorded in detail during, or immediately after, their performance. It is highly important to note the physical and mental condition of the experimenter or experimenters. The time and place of all experiments must be noted; also the state of the weather, and generally all conditions which might conceivably have any result upon the experiment either as adjuvants to or causes of the result, or as inhibiting it, or as sources of error."; Gerald B. Gardner recommended that Wiccans should always maintain their own *Book of Shadows* (Gardner 1982 [repr. 1954], 51); Cunningham also called this the *Book of Mirrors* (*Cunningham* 2007, 85): "begin a 'mirror book.' This is a magical record of your progress in Wicca [...]. In it, record all thoughts and feelings about Wicca, the results of your readings, magical successes and failures, doubts and fears significant dreams". Carroll 1987, 13: "A magical diary is the magician's most essential and powerful tool. It should be large enough to allow a full page for each day. Students should record the time, duration and degree of success of any practice undertaken. They should make notes about environmental factors conducive (or otherwise) to the work".

[29] See https://www.rensep.org/submit-your-experience-report/ (last accessed October 4, 2024).

this article will inspire further scholars and research centers to begin exploring the fascinating, largely understudied domain of esoteric practice-induced experience reports.

3.4 Scholar-practitionership

On the far right of the above diagram I have placed *scholar-practitionership*. Being a scholar-practitioner myself, I would like to offer a few final arguments on why this type of research may bring us even closer to what esoteric practices are all about, and why I have therefore placed it on the far right-hand side in the above diagram.

Note that I distinguish in this article between scholar-practitionership and practitioner-scholarship. There is a difference whether someone has been trained and works at a university and decides at some point to include the practical and experiential domain within their own methodological portfolio to enrich the analysis through self-observation (scholar-practitionership) – or whether a long-standing practitioner decides at some point to add a scholarly lens to their practice by doing an MA or PhD (practitioner-scholarship). While there are of course multiple shades of grey between both types of researchers, I would like to stress that the following methodology is designed from my own angle – that of a scholar-practitioner –, and thus driven by my motivation to widen the methodological horizon of university-based research into esoteric practices. In contrast, practitioner-scholars may have different motivations, backgrounds and methodological approaches, which may be covered in a separate article.

I will begin by discussing some of the stereotypes and prejudices that esotericism scholars may hold regarding scholar-practitionership (again, whereas this article focuses on the study of esotericism, the situation may differ in related disciplines, such as religious studies or anthropology).[30] Despite – or possibly even due to – its poor reputation within academia, a well-articulated discourse on scholar-practitionership related to the study of esotericism has failed to emerge thus far. The matter is discussed, at best, in passing; for instance, in the following publications by Armin W. Geertz and Wouter J. Hanegraaff.

Armin W. Geertz, in an article that was published in 2009, evaluates various works on the cognitive study of religion and the emerging field of neurotheology, and criticises these for embracing numerous 'crypto-theological' assumptions and biases that cannot be verified by scholarly means. One of these works, a co-authored book entitled *Brain, Symbol and Experience: Toward a Neurophenomenology of Human Consciousness* (Laughlin et al. 1990), includes references to the researchers' own experiences, which, as Geertz concludes, led them to embrace unverifiable background assumptions and tendentious forms of argumentation. He particularly attacks the author's argument of a 'privileged access' of 'matured contemplatives',[31] claiming instead that legitimate scholarly works should solely include "the experiences of experimental subjects and not of the scientists conducting the experiments" (Geertz 2009, 320), quoting Bourdieu.[32] In a review

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[30] Yet, anthropology too has suffered from an overly critical debate concerning scholar-practitionership and ethnographers 'going native' over the past decades – see, for a fresh, inspiring take on this matter, Emily Pierini's work and her concept of 'ethnographic epiphanies' (Pierini et al. 2023 and therein Pierini 2023). Note that anthropologists may likewise be confronted with the three ways of assessing practices, outlined above – i.e. with descriptions, prescriptions and experience reports – even if these are provided only orally, such as during fieldwork.

[31] See Geertz 2009, 320: "The problem with privileged access arguments is that this methodology invites arguments and claims that cannot be submitted to replication by those supposedly without access".

[32] Bourdieu 2003, 281: "Scientific reflexivity stands opposed to the narcissistic reflexivity of postmodern anthropology as well as to the ecological reflexivity of phenomenology".

article (of Tanya Luhrmann's *How God Becomes Real*) published in 2022, Geertz continues to feel "uncomfortable when scholars of religion start talking about their anomalous experiences. It can lead to the misguided insider/outsider debate, as if one's own personal experience gives a person exclusive access and 'true understanding' of religious experiences" (Geertz 2022, 307-08).

Hanegraaff, in an article published in 2012, outlines his vision for what he calls 'Western Esotericism 3.0', which for him should be characterised by interdisciplinarity, sound historiographic methodologies, and an avoidance of "esotericist agendas" (Hanegraaff 2012b, 122-23). Regarding the latter, Hanegraaff argues that "too many scholars seem to be either incapable or unwilling to make a clear distinction between *personal and scholarly engagement*" (italics Hanegraaff) and suggests that "one cannot and should not try to wear the esoteric and the scholarly hat simultaneously" (ibid., 120). The key term here is 'simultaneously', as Hanegraaff adds that "it is obviously no problem if, next to their research, a scholar has some kind of personal investment" (ibid.), yet wearing both hats at the same time might intimate that one's "scholarly analyses are influenced by personal esoteric agendas" (ibid.). These statements are related to (yet differ from) Hanegraaff's critique of religionism in the works of 20th century scholars such as Gershom Scholem, Henry Corbin, Mircea Eliade and others who, according to Hanegraaff, stood in a centuries-long, perenialist tradition of 'histories of truth', driven by implicit or hidden esoteric agendas (see ibid., 120-21; Hanegraaff 2012a, 295f.). Note that religionism, for Hanegraaff, is a methodological bias that mainly affects historical research, where it can lead, among other things, to over-simplification, a tendentious selection of sources, and an overemphasis on continuity at the expense of change and innovation (see also Hanegraaff 2025, Appendix 1). Yet, his critique of religionism should not be equated with a 'reductionist' dismissal of practitioner positions or 'emic' perspectives on esoteric topics. In his recent monograph titled *Hermetic Spirituality and the Historical Imagination* (2023), Hanegraaff stresses the relevance of 'experiential practices' that would underlie crucial parts of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and suggests a range of hermeneutical strategies designed to "reconstruct a lost practice by interpreting textual sources" (Hanegraaff 2023, 132). If scholar-practitionership implies wearing "the esoteric and the scholarly hat simultaneously" (Hanegraaff 2012b, 120), Hanegraaff nonetheless appears to remain sceptical, employing the metaphor of one's inability to play "tennis and badminton" at the same time.[33]

We may conclude that these and similar critiques are frequently inspired by older methodological debates. Hanegraaff attempts to distance the modern study of esotericism (beginning with the foundation of the Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents in Amsterdam in the late 1990s) from older esotericism research that is deemed essentialist or religionist, arguing that practitionership and scholarship are two separate things which should not be performed simultaneously. Geertz attempts to distance the modern study of religion from older, phenomenological research that is deemed problematic due to its essentialising, decontextualising and dehistoricising tendencies (see, on these tendencies, also Stausberg 2011).

In my view, these critiques fail to do justice to scholar-practitionership and its analytic potential. Performed properly, scholar-practitionership allows us to *extend the critical methodologies that scholars have learnt through their academic training into the practical domain.* In other words, scholar-practitionership can be engaged in in such a way that it facilitates an exploration of practices

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[33] See Hanegraaff 2012a, 375, fn 19: "One and the same player can be a practitioner of both sports, but not at the same time: in order to play tennis he needs to accept its rules at least for the duration of the game, and the same goes for badminton".

and practice-induced experiences and effects *while at the same time applying the same methodological rigour, critical distance, and radical agnosticism that present-day humanities scholars have been trained to apply to the study of esoteric texts*. Engaging in scholar-practitionership in this way is neither impossible nor incredibly complex, as I hope to demonstrate in the following.

The issue boils down to the question of whether esotericism scholars should also explore esoteric practices through practicing and experiencing them, whether this yields analytical advantages compared to undertaking purely text-based research, and whether such scholars should – and herein lies the crux of the matter – thereafter be 'allowed' to include first-person (namely, their own personal) experience reports within their datapool and analyses. This would stand in contrast to the position of Geertz, who implies that only experience reports that have been narrated by external informants or experimental subjects should be granted this privilege. According to the stereotype, intense practice-induced esoteric experiences may entice scholars (as well as practitioners) naïvely to 'believe' in these experiences and their seemingly underlying ontologies and, in other words, to 'go native' and advocate the practices and traditions in question rather than exploring them in a critical and open-ended manner.

The problem with this stereotype is that it is not even applicable to the majority of present-day practitioners of ritual magic whom I have encountered during my research. Most of my informants are considerably sceptical; they are, for instance, well aware of the huge difficulty of verifying effects and actually engage in nuanced methods of evaluating their practices (see Otto 2019b, 206; see further Mayer 2008, 193-201). For scholars who have received training on systematic observation and critical thinking, it should be even easier to prevent the reactions suggested by the stereotype. Engaging in scholar-practitionership in a methodologically sound manner requires only a few basic rules:

> 1)   First of all, radical agnosticism can and should be extended into the domain of practice-induced experiences. Consider, for instance, the following: inspired by Stephen Skinner and Daniel Clark's practitioner-oriented edition of the *Ars notoria* (2019), one might decide to test out the script in practice, curious to find out whether it is possible to receive inspired knowledge through the 'angelic realms' mentioned in the text. Having completed the required practices and orations related to the procedure for receiving "intellectual wisdom" (on which, see above), one might suddenly undergo what John of Morigny terms an 'ecstatic' visionary experience: goosebumps might rise up all over one's arms and back, a sense of dizziness might blur one's vision, a weird smell might assault one's nostrils, and one might be struck by a sudden chill. At the same time, a 'presence' might seem to manifest itself, one might see shady figures through one's inner eye, and one might hear voices addressing one in incomprehensible words (this is merely a hypothetical selection of experiences that might occur).[34]

> 2)   Interpreting this from the perspective of radical agnosticism reinforces the view that one has no clue about what is going on here: whether it is an encounter with the angels of the *Ars notoria* or with any other spirit/s or God/s, a product of one's

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[34] My understanding of radical agnosticism naturally implies that the chain of events described here is purely exemplary and could unfold in manifold other ways, including an experience where 'nothing special' happens at all, despite the ritual procedure having been performed previously.

imagination or subconsciousness, a childhood memory, or simply a seemingly random, dreamlike firing of neurons, sparked by practices that somehow tweaked the 'predictive coding' mechanism of one's cognitive apparatus; from a radical agnostic scholar-practitionership perspective, there do not even exist any means for finding out the 'truth' regarding the origins of these sensations.[35]

3)   Scholar-practitionership cannot and should not be focused on determining that kind of truth. It should focus on exploring practices through practising them, undertaking systematic, nuanced and sense-oriented self-observation, and producing honest, fine-grained documentation and reports about experiences and effects. It should focus on observing *from a first-person perspective* what is actually happening during such an experience and then documenting what happened; accordingly, instead of "My *Ars notoria* practice apparently worked: angels did appear and spoke to me!", one might note down "sudden goosebumps on arms and back, dizziness and blurred sight, sensation of an undefinable smell, sudden feeling of coldness and then of a 'presence' in the room, shady figures on my inner eye, voices seemingly coming from these addressing me, which remain however incomprehensible"; the key here is honest, nuanced, fine-grained observation while focusing on small time units and carefully distinguishing between the various sensual components that constitute the overall experience.[36]

4)   Such rough notes may be jotted down shortly after the experience. I suggest that a more systematic, fully-fledged report should be compiled by applying recent approaches in autoethnography, eventually inspired by the recent work of Paul Stoller (2023, esp. part I: 27.94).[37] Stoller suggests that ethnographers might produce 'artful ethnography' – which he also terms 'sensuous writing' – by partly shifting their attention to the surrounding multi-sensual vision-, sound-, and smell-scapes, and then describing these in-depth in the autoethnographic narrative. Scholar-practitionership can benefit from this type of 'sensuous writing' in experience reports, particularly if the vision-, sound-, and smell-scapes of practice-induced experiences – for instance during the hypothetical '*Ars notoria* encounter' just described – are purely 'kataphatic'; i.e., imaginative and visionary in the sense that they lack a sensual correlate that outside observers could similarly witness.

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[35] I therefore resonate with Wouter Hanegraaff's usage of the term 'radical agnosticism' in his *Esotericism and Western Culture*: "Radical Agnosticism takes the philosophical (metaphysical) consequences of methodological agnosticism to its ultimate conclusion by acknowledging our incapacity as human beings to 'radically' (from radix, root, i.e. in terms of its ultimate roots or foundations) understand the ultimate nature of the reality in which we find ourselves" (Hanegraaff 2025, 260).

[36] The senses include all perceptual modalities (smell, hearing, touch, taste, and vision) as well as the interoceptive, vestibular, and proprioceptive "bodily senses"; namely, the sense of the body's autonomous systems, like one's heartbeat, respiration, digestive system (interoception), sense of balance (vestibular sense), and sense of body ownership (proprioception).

[37] For a classic reflection on the analytical value of first-person field notes in tension with formal ethnographic representation, see Taussig 2009.

5)   After the experience report has been written in this nuanced, sense-oriented manner, it can be added to the data pool and compared to the reports of other practitioners who share the same type of practice, group, or tradition. Note that this type of scholar-practitionership, like any other scholarly enterprise, constitutes a group endeavor; individual practice-induced experiences may have value in themselves (for instance, through their capacity to enhance one's understanding of specific aspects of the script, or through adding fresh perspectives to one's historical imagination of what a premodern practice – such as the *Ars notoria* – may actually have felt like); however, individual practice-induced experiences become much far meaningful through their systematic comparison, whereby practitionership becomes scholar-practitionership, connecting individual practice-induced esoteric experiences to an intersubjective or shared discourse about same-same-but-different experiences, with the goal of possibly heightening our understanding of the mysterious 'practice-practitioner-experience' nexus mentioned above.

6)   Scholar-practitioners who follow the methodology outlined herein should be aware that practice-induced experiences are highly individualistic and unpredictable, and so "may differ for every practitioner of any given practice at any given time" (see above); accordingly, scholar-practitioners neither generalise nor universalise their individual practice-induced experiences; they do not assume that they enjoy 'privileged access' to or a 'true understanding' of any ultimate reality or experience. Hence, they also avoid the risk of becoming overly apologetic of any esoteric practice or tradition, based on their own experiences.

These principles cannot be developed in greater detail within the scope of the present article, whose primary aim is to establish a methodological framework rather than to provide a concrete example. For an illustration of how such principles can be implemented in practice, I refer the reader to a methodological lecture on scholar-practitionership that I have given on several occasions,[38] in which I present a detailed first-person experience report based on my own fieldwork notes from the Sweet Medicine Sundance Path (Otto 2023c) – more extensive applications of this approach will be developed in future publications. The main point at this stage is that it is actually quite simple to apply these scholarly methodologies – radical agnosticism, careful self-observation, and sense-oriented autoethnography – while practicing esoteric practices.[39] In fact, it is not only simple but also beneficial for the study of esoteric practices. Let me therefore conclude by listing some of the main benefits that scholar-practitionership may bring to the study of esotericism.

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[38] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSEijXSrWeE (last acccessed October 21, 2024).

[39] I wish to add a further refinement here, which may support future and more thorough explorations and discussions of scholar-practitionership. In light of the claim by Chaos magicians that one's beliefs may affect the results of one's practices (see Otto 2019a, 769-71; Carroll 1987, 73–7), it might make a difference if a scholar-practitioner remains 'radically agnostic', or instead decides to explore an esoteric practice under a different mindset; for instance, through 'holding' variegated provisional beliefs, expectations or assumptions about the practices' potential implications and effects. Clearly, this approach would not be radically agnostic in the strict sense (although an agnostic position may still reside in the background), but rather seek to explore whether specific beliefs or expectations alter the perception of what happens during the practice, or, in more general terms, whether constructionist principles operate within the relationship between beliefs, practices and practice-induced experiences.

First of all, alluding to the aforementioned works of Tanya Luhrmann, scholar-practitioners may be inclined to engage in systematic 'inner sense cultivation' for extended periods – even as part of their daily scholarly work –, thus heightening the likeliness that intense, practice-induced experiences might arise. They may also cultivate a capacity to write nuanced, sense-oriented artful autoethnography, which will enable them to contribute experience reports to the scholarly data pool that are exceptionally accurate, nuanced, fine-grained and agnostic. If scholar-practitioners apply the aforementioned rule of radical honesty, the question of whether an experience report is exaggerated, staged or entirely fabricated vanishes. Being a scholar-practitioner simplifies fieldwork access to practitioner communities and significantly deepens the conversation with other practitioners, as one's research questions are grounded in experiential knowledge (as recently illustrated by Cejvan 2023). Scholar-practitionership can significantly deepen our understanding of experiences of 'evidence', thus adding fresh perspectives to the debate concerning why practitioners continue to ascribe efficacy to esoteric practices.[40] It may thereby also contribute to a potentially multi-factorial understanding of the variables that determine how practice-induced experiences are experienced by individual practitioners, acknowledging factors such as biographical backgrounds, types of practice, amount of training, personality-types, convictions, expectations, and so on (the 'practitioner-practice-experience nexus' referred to as *terra incognita* above). Finally, and maybe most importantly, adding scholar-practitionership into the methodological mix described in this article makes it possible to complement the study of texts (descriptions, prescriptions and experience reports) with an exploration of practices in the way they are actually practiced: through performance, embodiment, and experience.[41]

This may also include the careful practical engagement with premodern ritual scripts – such as the *Ars notoria* – not to "reconstruct" historical practice (which is not methodologically feasible), but to explore their ritual mechanics, performative constraints, textual lacunae, and potential practice-induced effects from a first-person perspective. While this necessarily requires sustained reflexivity regarding the differing epistemic and experiential horizons of premodern practitioners and one's own (or other contemporary practitioners') positionality, attending to these differences can enable particularly productive parallel analyses, as demonstrated in my 2023 study of Frater Acher's 'Arbatel Experience' (Otto 2023b).

I would not go so far as arguing that all esotericism scholars should transform into scholar-practitioners; nor do I buy into the even more radical argument that non-practitioners are necessarily in an inferior position with regard to understanding and writing about esoteric practices. It seems fair to say, however, that, similar to musicologists who have mastered an instrument, a basic understanding of the practical domain and its unforeseen intricacies is likely to enhance the quality of text-based research on esoteric practices (see also Legard 2024, 37f.). Hence it is important to call into question the aforementioned stereotypes that continue to misrepresent and suppress scholar-

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[40] For instance, I engaged in an 'ancestor speaking ceremony' in August 2019 while conducting fieldwork in the Sweet Medicine Sundance Path. It struck me how the 'deprivative' design of the ceremony (which combines food, sensory and movement deprivation), as well as the various senses involved, create a strong impression of the practice's efficacy (the experience is described at length at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSEijXSrWeE; last acccessed October 21, 2024). Another good example of an explanation of ritual efficacy based on scholar-practitionership and self-observation is Tanya Luhrmann's 'interpretive drift' theory, even though it may be criticised for various reasons (Luhrmann 1989, 318-21; see my critique in Otto 2019b, 204-06).

[41] The implementation of praxeological methods in the study of esotericism might also spark a debate about moving beyond the 'textocentrism' of academic knowledge production by employing multi-sensual media to present research findings, including podcasts or vodcasts (video podcasts), documentary films, or even live performances.

practitionership as a possible source of academic knowledge production, whereby ESSWE conferences (even those that choose 'practices' as their overarching theme) continue to be gatherings of a large number of 'elephants in the room'. The matter should be discussed openly and transparently, so that esotericism scholars with long-standing yet hidden practitioner-backgrounds may feel safe to come out of the closet and eventually inspire, through their acquired praxis-knowledge, an emerging and much-needed methodological debate about scholar-practitionership. Finally, there is another reason for initiating this debate: continuing to *not* speak about one's practitioner background while writing about esoteric topics may eventually prove more problematic than admitting it, pointing to intransparent research ethics and potentially unresolved conflicts of interest which might ultimately affect one's research and writing. In many scholarly disciplines, some even belonging to the wider field of religious studies (such as Buddhist studies, Jewish Studies, Islamic Studies, Theology, Yoga Studies, etc.), it would be considered absurd to argue that being a practitioner automatically reduces a researcher's capacity to speak reasonably about a scholarly subject. It is time to include the study of esotericism within this bouquet of disciplines, and a huge amount of inspiration might be gained from the debates on scholar-practitionership that have been happening for some considerable time already in related disciplines, such as martial arts studies (see, e.g., Farrer/Whalen-Bridge 2011), vispassana research (e.g., Pagis 2019), or even theology (especially pentecostal theology: see Maltese 2013). Two recent PhD theses indicate that the study of esotericism is on the verge of heading in this direction (Cejvan 2023; Legard 2024). Thereby, scholar-practitionership could be established as a fourth methodological pillar, which complements and enriches the triangular analysis of descriptions, prescriptions, and experience reports, as outlined above.

4 Concluding thoughts: global perspectives

The aim of this article has been to propose a fresh methodology for studying esoteric practices from a distinctly praxeological perspective, by combining analyses of descriptions, prescriptions, experience reports, and – where appropriate – insights derived from scholar-practitionership. One of the core implications of this approach is that analyses which integrate all four perspectives are likely to be richer, more accurate, and more nuanced than those relying exclusively on a single source type, such as descriptions or prescriptions alone. At the same time, it will not always be necessary – or even appropriate – to mobilise all three (or four) analytical dimensions to address specific research questions. If, for example, the aim is to understand how contemporary practitioners evaluate the efficacy of their practices, polemical accounts by media commentators or religious opponents will contribute little to such an inquiry. Conversely, if the focus lies on public discourses and stereotypes surrounding esoteric practices within a particular socio-cultural context, precisely such polemical sources will move to the centre of analysis.

This also has important historical implications. In premodern contexts, insider manuals (prescriptions) are often harder to locate than outsider polemics (descriptions), while ego-documents in the form of experience reports remain exceptionally rare. In contrast, contemporary digital cultures generate an abundance of practical manuals, experience reports, and online diaries – often to such an extent that the sheer volume of material becomes difficult to process systematically. The methodology proposed here is attentive to these historical asymmetries and shifting source constellations. By foregrounding both the strengths and the limitations of each source type, it seeks to facilitate more precise, balanced, and nuanced analyses of esoteric practices across different periods and contexts.

While the main example chosen to illustrate my argument – namely, the late medieval Latin ritual text *Ars notoria* – may appear 'provincial' at first glance, I would finally like to stress that the methodology outlined here does not necessarily need to be restricted to Europeanist cases but can be applied from a cross-cultural perspective, similar to the working definition stipulated at the outset of this article. Independent of where certain practices deemed 'esoteric' are located or performed – whether they be a contemporary *Ars notoria* practice in Europe (notably, Stephen Skinner plans to publish a book on his experiences with the *Ars notoria* in the future); a spirit consultation in the Valley of the Dawn in Brazil (Hayes 2024); cowrie mussel shell divination in Senegal (Graw 2005); a 'Solomonic' *Zar* exorcism in Iran (Abbasi 2020); practices for creating 'superbabies' inspired by the teachings of Igor Charkovsky in Russia (Ozhiganova 2021); Daoist internal alchemy in China (Mozias 2023); or Tantric Śrīvidyā practices in southern India (Hirmer 2021) –,[42] there will, in all likelihood, be descriptions, prescriptions, experience reports and, if one should so desire, possibly even the option of engaging in the very practices that one is studying. Even if such practices are encountered in non-scriptural fieldwork contexts, one may nonetheless be able to gather oral descriptions of these practices, eventually receive oral instructions (i.e., prescriptions), or collect oral testimonials of practitioners – hence the methodology outlined here may also be applied to anthropological research settings.

I thus believe that the four-fold methodology outlined in this article can be made relevant to the study of esoteric practices in manifold and diverse cultural and religious contexts. The only counter-examples I can think of are spontaneous, unscripted, or ad hoc practices, in which the second analytical domain discussed herein (namely, prescription) is clearly missing. However, although unscripted practices have played an important role in the history of various modern esoteric movements characterised by a high degree of spontaneity, creativity and innovation (consider, for instance, Chaos magick or some contemporary strands of the witchcraft movement), the methodology outlined herein may still prove useful, since it allows to juxtapose descriptions with experience reports (and there may also exist prescriptions for performing spontaneous ad hoc practices). Whether one finds all four dimensions in one's research topic or not, I believe that a systematic implementation of praxeological research methods represents a crucial step forward for the study of esotericism and will significantly improve our understanding of its practical and performative dimensions across diverse cultural and historical contexts.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

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[42] This list of topics is of course inspired by my ongoing work at the Center for Advanced Studies 'Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective' at FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg (CAS-E) – all cases mentioned have been studied at this Center over the past years.

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