Occultism, Spiritualism, and Hermeticism

Sometimes called “hidden knowledge,” *occultism* refers to beliefs and practices concerning the intersection of the material and spiritual worlds, purportedly representing the most ancient religious knowledge, but mainly originating in Hellenistic and medieval times. The term carries with it nefarious overtones, often indicating evil works associated with black magic, though this veil obscures the ancient arts of spiritual understanding, manipulation, and evolution contained in the Western Esoteric Tradition. Many modernist artists devoted serious study to occult mysteries, which led Leon Surette to theorize that the interest of William Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot in occultism underlies the aesthetics of literary modernism (*Birth of Modernism*, 1994).

Occultism is a form of *spiritualism,* a general term referring to belief in a spiritual world, ranging from a duality characterized by complete separation of matter and spirit, as defined by Plato, to one married in divine purpose, as defined by St. Thomas Aquinas. Ideal spiritualism opposes materialism and denotes a world without matter, consisting solely of a mind or minds such as those described by Fichte and Berkeley. Spiritualism refers more specifically to a religion concerning the survival of the soul after death and communication between discarnate and incarnate beings through a human medium, begun in the early nineteenth century in Europe and the United States. The corresponding movement in continental Europe and Latin America, called *spiritism,* applies more specifically to the doctrine codified by French educator Allen Kardec (Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail) between 1857 and 1865. Kardec approaches spiritism as a philosophy and a science, dismissing materialism and emphasizing mutually beneficial communication between the spirit world and human beings.

While some aspects of spiritualism, such as necromancy, are categorized as occult, the religion itself is not part of the Western Esoteric Tradition, which arose earlier and is more popularly named *Hermeticism.* This body of magical knowledge comprises three strains: (a) principles of Gnosticism as developed in the second century; (b) the *Corpus Hermeticum*, or the dialogues on alchemy, astrology, Egyptian magic and related subjects attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, collected in the first and second centuries; and (c) works of Kabbala, that is, medieval Jewish mysticism, in the Books of *Yetzirah*, *Bahir* and *Zohar,* as well as earlier Rabbinic works, all of which provide mystical interpretations of the *Torah* and offer alternate understandings of creation and the divine. Renaissance magicians such as John Dee, seventeenth-century scientists such as Isaac Newton, and the Rosicrucian Brotherhood brought these three bodies of spiritual knowledge together in their practices, though they were not codified into a single body until the nineteenth century’s many hermetic orders did so in written volumes of lectures and practices. While Hermeticism includes knowledge of Kabbala, alchemy, astrology and magic, its main focus elevates the “Great Work” of evolving human consciousness into unity with the transcendent divine in which all beings and universes participate.

Bibliography: Kies, Cosette, N. *The Occult in the Western World. An Annotated Bibliography*. Hamden, CN: Library Professional Publications, 1986.

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