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Religion

Perspectives from
the Engelsberg seminar

2014

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MARCO PASI

Esoteric Experiences and Critical Ethnocentrism

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The study of Western esotericism has emerged in the last 20 years as a new field within religious studies. By Western esotericism, I mean here a certain number of religious and philosophical currents that have emerged in Western culture and which, for one reason or another, have been considered as heterodox or have been rejected by the religious, scientific and, more generally, cultural establishment. This emerging field of research has shown dynamism and adaptability and, considering its relatively small size, has made itself conspicuous enough through the creation of a solid structure of study programmes, scholarly associations, dedicated networks, scholarly journals and book series. For quite some time, optimism about its potential for growth has been widespread among specialists in the field, but looking at its present situation, one may wonder if such optimism was entirely justified. In terms of institutionalisation – the creation of dedicated positions in recognised academic institutions – things have not proceeded as quickly as some may have expected. At this moment, only two chairs specifically devoted to the study of Western esotericism exist in the world: one in Paris and the other in Amsterdam. A third one, which was created at the University of Exeter in 2005, was discontinued after the untimely death of its holder, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, in 2012. Of these three chairs, the one in Paris, at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, is the oldest, having been created as far back as 1964. The one in Amsterdam was created in 1999 and includes not only a full professorship, but also two associate professorships and

two PhD positions. It is interesting to note that the Paris chair is the only one that has emerged autonomously from within an academic institution. The other two chairs were created thanks to external funding provided by private foundations. It seems clear that these chairs would have never come into existence had such private money not been made available in the first place. It is also remarkable that the only chair that was created with public money, the one in Paris, was done so in the mid-1960s, when a field for the study of Western esotericism did not even exist, let alone become "fashionable".

The obvious conclusion one may draw from this situation is that, in spite of the perceived potential and of some clear signs of growth, academic institutions have not been so ready to recognise the relevance of such a field and have preferred to invest in other areas of study. It is, of course, the old story of the half-empty vs half-full glass. One may well be satisfied that academic institutions were not rejecting those offers of private money to create those positions, which indicates that the subject was considered acceptable enough to find a place among legitimated areas of study. But one may also be disappointed to realise that, had it not been for private money being offered, no dedicated position would have been created in the first place and the field today would still look more like an idiosyncratic curiosity for scholars working in other fields, or as a hobby for independent scholars, than as an acknowledged and respected area of academic research.

All of this has to be set against the backdrop of the financial crisis that has cast such a gloomy shadow over vast areas of the world, and especially Europe, since 2008. One of the effects of the crisis has been to accelerate a process that was already underway, namely the reconceptualisation of the traditional role of universities. Whereas the management of European universities is increasingly moving towards financialisation, marketisation and managerialisation, the traditional compromise between disinterested, curiosity-driven additions to validated knowledge and purely functional, practical and goal-oriented knowledge has been broken, with the latter increasingly occupying centre-stage and the former being forced into a small corner. It is clear, therefore, that such a new field as the study of Western esotericism has to fight against not one, but at least two serious disadvantages.

The first one has to do with the field's endemic fragility. This fragility derives from the difficulty of legitimising research on subjects that have

long been considered unworthy of scholarly interest and from the potential danger of stigmatisation for scholars who focus on these subjects as their main area of interest. Much work has been done in the past 20 years to spread correct information about the *raison d'être* of the field and, on the whole, this work seems to have achieved some degree of success, even if prejudice still persists in some quarters. Another reason for this fragility has to do with the relatively small size of the field. Specialists may be dedicated and enthusiastic, but when a field is composed of a mere handful of tenured scholars and, for the rest, mainly of scholars formally belonging to other areas of research, it would then be natural to think that a sufficient critical mass that can ensure a firm presence of this field on the virtual map of international academia is still lacking. The second disadvantage is exogenous and has to do with the present world crisis, which, in so far as it affects the traditional role of universities, is not just a financial crisis, but also a crisis of cultural and, I would say, even moral, values. The humanities are being hit the hardest in this context and, while questions about their relevance and significance are being raised, it is far from certain that answers, however well-argued or convincing, are going to be listened to. The two disadvantages combined may pose a serious threat to the study of Western esotericism as a field, because in a context where a whole dimension of learning and education such as the humanities is being questioned, it is clear that small, recent and controversial fields that belong to it may find it even harder to protect themselves from the rising tide of social and cultural delegitimation than more traditional and established ones. I am not going to enter here into the debate on the value of the humanities, on which there is an ever growing literature. The point to be kept in mind is that there are many reasons to believe that a society with the humanities would look very different from a society without the humanities and that it would incarnate very different anthropological, social and political models. Men can certainly live without history and philosophy (at least understood as educational and scholarly fields), but the question is what would their society look like if they did. The ambition, some would say the arrogance, of the humanities, lies in believing that their cultivation can help with the construction of a better society. A society that learns from the mistakes of the past understands the challenges of the present and is imaginative enough to envision solutions for the future. What is also crucial is that this should be a society in which these activities are sufficiently

transparent and collaborative, so that they are not the doing of unaccountable, untouchable elites, but the result of a shared, ever more inclusive effort towards improvement. This also happens to be the very essence of the scientific enterprise, and not just of the humanities, as it has been conceived in Western culture since its earliest formulations in the 17th century. If, and only if, any of this makes sense, can the humanities then also make sense. And only if the humanities make sense can the study of such a seemingly bizarre cultural phenomenon as Western esotericism also make sense. It is only once these dilemmas have been solved that we can start discussing the significance of this field and respond to that implicit call to justify the value of research on such a subject. This is what, in the business-like jargon that has become so pervasive in official documents produced by university managers, is sometimes referred to as “valorisation”, which, when it comes to the humanities, effectively means “tell us what you think you are doing, how you think that anybody else should be concerned about it and, especially, why on earth we should give you any money for it.” It may sometimes be hard to answer those questions for scholars in the humanities, even when the tone in which they are being asked is not so literally aggressive and the aggressiveness is more to be found between the lines. But I believe that, once it is generally accepted that the humanities do bring value to a society along the lines I have suggested above, it is also not too difficult to offer some arguments in favour of the study of esotericism as a field of academic research. Arguments, that is, that would be a bit stronger than the usual one, that esotericism has simply been neglected by previous scholars and needs to be put back on the historical map. Surely the past is full of such neglected facts, but what we need to know is why esotericism may be a case that needs special attention and also what its study could bring to us today in terms of a better understanding of broader social and cultural patterns. In other words, we need to know what “use” we can make of the knowledge we derive from the study of Western esotericism when we apply it to aspects of human activity that go beyond esotericism itself. It is indeed a compromise towards the demands of an increasingly profit-based understanding of academic research, but I do believe that it is also a useful intellectual exercise, which can perhaps bring some fuel to the burning furnace of “valorisation”, but is also worthwhile in itself for scholars who want to reflect on the broader implications of their research.

Before I mention some of the possible arguments in favour of this area of research, I would like to make a few remarks about its current position within academic institutions. Until now, the study of Western esotericism has mainly developed as a subfield within the institutional framework of religious studies. One may wonder why this is so and even whether it is a convenient situation. Clearly, Western esotericism has much to do with religion, as it has much to do with other concepts that have been traditionally associated (sometimes oppositionally) to religion, such as mysticism and magic. But it also has to do with other cultural forms, such as philosophy, literature, the arts, politics and so on. The inevitable conclusion seems to be that the study of esotericism is interdisciplinary by definition and that it is only due to immediate practical convenience that it has found a (perhaps temporary) home within the study of religion. As a response to this line of thinking, two points should be mentioned, which should be evident enough but are maybe not necessarily so. The first one is that, for a small, fragile field such as the study of Western esotericism, this practical convenience is something that should not be underestimated. The study of esotericism, interdisciplinary by vocation as it may be, will never be strong enough to become a discipline in itself and should rather be content to remain a subfield within a larger disciplinary framework. Arguing that it could just be anywhere within the various disciplines of the humanities, may easily lead to a situation where it can nowhere find its place. And this of course is precisely what the situation was like 30 years ago, before the field began to emerge. Secondly, those who think that religious studies would be too narrow to encompass all the various facets of Western esotericism as a social and cultural phenomenon very probably have too narrow a view of what the study of religion is in the first place. Leaving aside the specific problems of this academic discipline (that some, not unreasonably, do not even see as a coherent discipline at all), it is clear that, under that broad umbrella, a large number of scholarly approaches are included, such as historical, sociological, psychological and cognitive ones, to name but those that immediately come to mind. These approaches are of course applied to understand the presence of religion in a broad variety of contexts, which include, for instance, philosophy, literature, the arts and so on. In the 1990s, the British scholar of religion Ninian Smart summarised this very aptly by identifying seven areas, or "dimensions", in which religion could be found operating and could therefore be meaningfully

studied. These included practical, experiential, mythic, doctrinal, ethical, social and material dimensions. All of this can be easily applied, obviously on a proportionate scale, to the study of Western esotericism. If the study of religion is intrinsically interdisciplinary, then there is no reason to think that the study of Western esotericism could find a better (and safer) home than the one in which it comfortably dwells today. I don't see how this situation could possibly bring about limits to the scope or the ambitions of its research.

After these necessary remarks about the current situation in the field, I can now move to discuss the point on which I would like to focus more specifically here, which is how the role of "experience" in Western esotericism can help us understand better the cultural significance of research in this field. It may be useful to begin by mentioning one of the most significant problems that specialists in the study of Western esotericism have to face. This is the recurring stereotype that is often used to characterise Western esotericism and which very much resembles the typical *reductio ad Hitlerum*. Western esotericism has often been described as a negative, dangerous phenomenon by influential postwar intellectuals, who have argued that it has a close affinity to fascism. One of the first authors to make this claim was Theodor Adorno in his "Theses against Occultism", a text originally written in 1947 and included in his book *Minima Moralia*, published in 1950. Similar claims were made by Adorno in other texts he published in those years and then later also by other authors, both in Germany and elsewhere. Even today, this negative characterisation remains relatively influential in Europe, especially in certain European countries and among left-wing intellectual milieus.

One thing that is important to keep in mind is that Adorno was not particularly interested in the doctrinal or ideological contents of esotericism, but rather in psycho-sociological processes at the basis of a particular form of personality. This is what he referred to as the "authoritarian personality", a concept that was first elaborated by Erich Fromm in the early 1940s and later developed by Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School. According to Adorno, occultism (which we can take here as a synonym for esotericism) would make people more likely to accept political coercion without resistance, because it would impede the development of a critical consciousness. The reliance on occult factors in order to explain the functioning of reality would make people less keen on changing the same reality through concrete,

material, empirical means. Here is Adorno writing about astrology in his essay, "The Stars Down to Earth":

... by strengthening the sense of fatality, dependence and obedience, [astrology] paralyses the will to change objective conditions in any respect and relegates all worries to a private plane, promising a cure-all by the very same compliance which prevents a change of conditions. It can easily be seen how well this suits the overall purpose of the prevailing ideology of today's cultural industry; to reproduce the *status quo* within the mind of the people.¹

According to Adorno, occultism would induce a form of passivity that makes people functions of the social control exerted by authoritarian regimes. And not only by authoritarian regimes. It is clear, in fact, that Adorno's target was not just fascism, but also the functioning of supposedly more democratic political systems, where control of the masses is exerted less violently, but no less effectively, through the culture industry and other forms of social manipulation.

The problem with Adorno's idea is that it simply does not stand the test of historical evidence. In fact, as research has repeatedly shown in the last 20 years, there is a large number of cases where a deep personal involvement in esotericism, in one or other of its forms, has led to the development of a very critical attitude towards the values and norms imposed by the establishment, which seems to be very much at odds with the passive attitude described by Adorno. If one wants to focus only on the 19th and 20th centuries, one can find esotericism being associated with radicalism, revolutionary and progressive thought, anarchism, feminism, innovative and original artistic discourses and so on. The overall picture is therefore very different from the one that could be expected on the basis of Adorno's idea of the authoritarian personality. In fact, it is clearly the opposite of it. The question is why. Why would esotericism be so often associated with progressive radicalism? There is no easy answer to this question, but I think it is possible to start reflecting on the problem.

In my view, esoteric radicalism can, at least partly, be explained through the role that altered states of consciousness play in the history of Western esotericism, which we could generally label as "esoteric experiences". The fact that altered states of consciousness form a very significant part of the experiential dimension of Western esotericism is not in any doubt and has recently begun to be the focus of a growing

body of research. However, we still need to reflect upon the broad cultural significance of this historical fact. It is interesting to note that, in many cases, the altered states of consciousness that can be observed in the context of esotericism include experiences of dissociation, in which the self is perceived as being disintegrated or even annihilated, or in which a person claims to be in direct contact with spiritual entities and to receive messages from them. What is interesting is that these subjective experiences often lead, through complex psychological processes, to the production of a radically innovative and transgressive discourse. We find that in the context of esotericism this may lead to developments in various fields: in the visual arts, in literature, in politics, in metaphysical or theological doctrine, and in gender relations and sexuality.

For this reason, I have suggested elsewhere that two concepts might help us understand the mechanism that is at play here. I would call them "alienated agency" and "creative dissociation".

By alienated agency I mean that the ultimate authorship of a strongly innovative or radical discourse is attributed to entities that are subjectively independent from the author's self. Because of this perceived independence, alienated agency allows the esotericist to develop a certain freedom of expression from predominant conventions and norms, precisely because he does not believe that he is carrying responsibility for the particular aspects of his creation. It is not he who is challenging existing norms, it is the entity he is channelling that is doing it. It is interesting to note that sometimes this is also combined with a large spiritual agenda that transcends the esotericist as an individual. It is not just the fact that innovation is attributed to some external spiritual source, but also the fact that this is part of some cosmic plan, which gives the esotericist even more confidence in transgressing cultural or social boundaries.

The concept of creative dissociation has been developed by the American psychologist Michael Grosso. It is based on the idea that an experience of disintegration of the self may produce, through a subsequent process of reconstruction, exceptional outbursts of creativity, which may reflect itself in various fields of human activity. According to Grosso, "what looks like fragmentation or disconnectedness may in fact be a prelude to... higher integration. It may be... that before we can reassociate on a higher level we first have to dissociate from some aspects of ordinary reality."² Therefore, "creative dissociation may be thought of

as a phase of higher association. The ordinary self seems to lose its autonomy through [the control of a spiritual entity], but only in order to gain access to a hidden extraordinary self. Dissociation, *often patently maladaptive*, can also become a tool for creativity.”³ In other words, in particular psychological conditions, an experience of detachment from everyday reality may lead an artist to relativise norms and values that were perceived earlier as cogent and absolute and therefore to a radical change of perspective.

Alienated agency and creative dissociation are probably part of the same psychological complex and I would argue that this complex is crucial to understanding why esotericism finds itself associated more easily not with an authoritarian personality, as Adorno would have it, but rather with its contrary, that is antinomianism, progressive radicalism and cultural criticism. This is because esotericism seems to offer, among other things, a controlled and institutionalised space for practising creative dissociation and a convenient cultural framework for experiencing alienated agency.

One interesting question we may now ask is how this model challenges the Western paradigm of a regulated self. Modern Western culture has historically developed together with a particular model of the self that puts a strong emphasis on objectivity. This means setting tight boundaries to the individual self, both with respect to outer reality and with respect to other individual selves. Interaction of the self with outer reality and with other selves is understood as necessarily mediated by physical means. This is also the model that has made Western culture so successful from a practical and material point of view and which has found consistent expression in the rationalisation of resources that is typical of modernity. The setting of specific material goals, the elaboration of strategies, the calculation of risks, require the development of a strong, sound and tightly controlled reality principle. In this situation, the boundaries between self and non-self, reality and non-reality need to be constantly safeguarded. What is functional to this particular model of the self is a particular state of consciousness, which is our “normal” wakeful state, in which we are supposed to perceive reality clearly and without hesitations. Now, it is evident that this model is very different from the model we see emerging so often in esotericism (and in its cognate phenomenon of mysticism), a model that rejects many of the boundaries of the regulated self. Once we realise this, we should perhaps

begin reflecting on the respective cultural value of these different models and on the respective gains and losses that have taken place when Western culture has constructed its model of the regulated self. Something was clearly gained: a rationalised, objectified vision of reality that made the achievement of particular goals possible. But something was perhaps also lost: the ability to transcend the boundaries of the regulated self in order to produce significant social and cultural leaps forward.

Wouter Hanegraaff has recently interpreted Western esotericism as a form of rejected knowledge. According to him, the concept of Western esotericism had a specific function in Western culture as a negative collector of what has been perceived, in various periods and contexts, as unacceptable or illegitimate and had, as such, to be rejected. The conceptualisation of esotericism would have been constructed and used as a convenient "other", that is, as a tool in the process of identity-formation in Western culture, using here a typical post-structuralist approach. The question, however, is why this material, which of course includes the altered states of consciousness and the experiences of creative dissociation that I have just discussed, should have been rejected in the first place. In my view, the reason why these forms of experience were rejected had to do not so much with a clash between different religious doctrines, as Hanegraaff seems to suggest in his book and which he refers to as cosmotheism or pantheism, in opposition to creationism, but with a deeper epistemological level, ie with the construction of a particular model of the self and of reality.

This is where the concept of "critical ethnocentrism", elaborated by the Italian historian of religions, Ernesto de Martino, more than 60 years ago, may become useful. De Martino elaborated this concept while he was reflecting upon another crucial category of rejection and polemical stigmatisation in Western culture. This was the category of magic, which is strictly related to esotericism. According to de Martino, critical ethnocentrism is the approach that the ethnologist should adopt when analysing and describing other cultures. The idea is that in order to understand the culture of the other, an historical self-awareness of one's own culture is necessary. This means being aware that we, like the objects of our research, belong to a particular historical context, which colours the categories and concepts we are using in a particular way. This includes especially the categories and concepts that have been used polemically in our own culture, such as magic or Gnosticism. The resulting

critical awareness of the historical roots of the concepts we use, however, can never result in an absolute relativism, because it constantly requires us to make choices. These choices take on a meaning for us when, with the help of this historical awareness, we critically examine their origin and development, and acknowledge their contingency and problematic nature. But in spite of their contingency, they imply a sense of responsibility towards our history. Being critically "ethnocentric" means realising that some of the notions and the ideas elaborated by Western culture over the centuries have at least the potential of being used as a basis for dialogue with other cultures. It means believing, without arrogance or conceit, that some of these ideas can be used for mutual enrichment and improvement. It means trusting the values of humanism in their ability to transcend the culture in which they were born and to match similar or analogous values from other cultures.

I would argue that the cultural and social value of the study of esotericism can be better understood within the framework of critical ethnocentrism. If studying esotericism means understanding how Western culture has taken form through strategies of exclusion and rejection, then it means also realising to what extent the trajectory of our cultural development has been based on particular choices that were made. It means acknowledging not only what has been gained through these choices, but also what may have been lost. It may then make us beg the question: do we think that these choices were justified? Do we want to challenge them and invert the process that has led to what we are today? And if we want to do that, what kind of vision do we have in mind for a culture that can reintegrate what has been lost through the process of rejection? In other words, what we are asking is whether those experiences we have been referring to as "esoteric", which may involve states of consciousness that are very far from a traditional ideal of rationality and lucidity, can be reassessed, so that their potential for knowledge and for progress is explored scientifically without prejudice. This would not be done with the purpose of abdicating from Western culture as a whole and getting trapped in the much dreaded pitfall of "irrationalism", but rather with the much more modest intent of critically revising an old model of epistemology and cognition that has shown limits and inconsistencies. There is therefore much more interest in the possible expansion of the model rather than in its destruction. Whether this expansion would have not just cultural, but also practical (social, economic,

political) applications and could, therefore, produce a glimmer of interest in university managers and valorisation-mongers, I leave for others to assess. My guess – for what it's worth – is that it would and the only real question for me is how.

I am aware that the ideas and the suggestions outlined here go well beyond the usual scope of analysis of the historian and verge towards philosophical speculation. But if we want to go to the root of the problems posed by the presence of esotericism in Western culture and also by its academic study today, it is necessary to inform our perspective with a degree of philosophical reflection. After all, if Ernesto de Martino can be considered today as one of the most significant scholars of religion in the 20th century, it is because he could combine, among other things, his historical and anthropological analyses with an acute sensitivity towards contemporary philosophical questions. If his concept of critical ethnocentrism can be of any use today for the study of religion in general and more particularly for the study of Western esotericism, we need to retain at least some of the same sensitivity in order to understand it and to put it to work. We will then be better equipped to appreciate the gains and to repair the losses in what we do.

Notes and References

MARCO PASI

Esoteric Experiences and Critical Ethnocentrism

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