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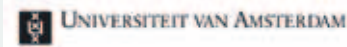
The Challenge of the Academic Soul

Promises and Risks in the Study of Western Esotericism



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In September 2013 he was the organizer of the conference *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, Modernism and the Arts, c. 1875-1960*, in Amsterdam.



The Theosofische Vereniging in Nederland invited me to participate in this symposium devoted to the "challenge of the soul".

It is for me an interesting situation to be involved in a conversation with persons whose primary goal is research, not of an academic, but rather of a spiritual kind. I did not hesitate to accept the invitation, but I knew from the start that the task would indeed be a tough challenge, if not for my soul, at least for my intellect. My concern was, and is: will my audience find a common ground of interests and preoccupations with me, over which to construct a fruitful conversation? In the end, I decided that it was worth taking the risk, and to see my participation here as an opportunity to share views and opinions with persons who are close to the same things I have been studying for a long time, only looking at them from a different perspective. But also, and more importantly, I decided to take this as an opportunity to question from a cultural point of view the value of the history of western esotericism as an academic enterprise, and consequently also my position in it. Good academic research should always imply some degree of self-reflexivity, and it is indeed

important to be aware of where we stand – as intellectuals and as academic professionals, but also more generally as social and cultural beings – with respect to what we study.

I am a member of that international community of scholars who have chosen to make the study of western esotericism the core of their professional activity, accepting all the risks and uncertainties that can result from that choice. Please do not regard this last remark as a concession to victimism: it is a simple statement of fact. The scholarly study of esotericism has certainly made great strides forward in recent years, but still remains today, especially for the many young people who wish to build an academic career over it, a professional choice to be made with great caution. Negative prejudice, even among scholars and highly educated persons, is still strong, if perhaps less explicit and visible today than it was in the past. And the problem is made even more acute by the current political climate, which seems less and less favourable to recognize the traditional role of the humanities as a crucial factor in promoting the moral and cultural progress of society. But there

is no point in whining and complaining. These may be hard times for those who believe in the values of humanism, but what we need, in order to go through the night and see the glimmer of a new day, is perhaps to reflect more deeply on what it is that we are doing as scholars in the humanities and why we are doing it. More specifically for me, and for the colleagues who share my field of research, the question is about the cultural significance of the historical study of western esotericism. There was a time perhaps when it was not so urgent to ask these questions. But this was because the significance of the humanities could be given for granted. Those times are gone. We have heard the knocks on our door. We now have to decide whether we want to open the door and let the stranger in.

One of the methodological problems most often debated in our field concerns the position of those who do not wish to adopt a "neutral" or "agnostic" stance in the study of esotericism, but rather let their judgment be coloured by their own spiritual or religious beliefs.



Anna Retable, Utrecht. Photograph by Gert Jan Kocken

This problem is of course anything but new: it has been the object of constant discussion and controversy within the scholarly study of religion. I have sometimes heard colleagues using a metaphor based on sport to describe the position of those – and I see myself as one of them – who consider esotericism as a purely historical and cultural phenomenon, rejecting in their approach both an apologetic perspective based on personal beliefs, and a reductionist perspective that sees esotericism simply as a form of superstition or as an unsavoury leftover from bygone times. The metaphor is tennis. Tennis must be played according to rules that are the same for all players all over the world, which only can make fair matches and tournaments possible. If one pretended to play tennis using a baseball glove instead of a racket, he would of course be immediately disqualified by the referee. Similarly, there are rules in the practice of science that scholars are expected to comply with. The upholding in a scholarly work of personal convictions based on faith, rather than on empirical evidence and sound arguments, goes against these rules, and those who do not accept this fact can run into a disqualification. Unfortunately, this metaphor works only if one forgets to consider its historical dimension. The rules of tennis, as those of any other sport, are not immutable, but are constantly adapted to changing times, on the basis of new circumstances and sensitivities. In fact, we do not play tennis today with exactly the same rules by which the game was played a hundred years ago. Similarly, the rules determining what is and what is not acceptable in the scholarly study of particular topics are subject to variations and changes depending on the cultural context, even if a clear awareness about the reasons that lead to certain choices instead of others is not necessarily present.

But there is another aspect that makes the metaphor less adequate than it appears at first sight. In the academic world there is no single, international governing body that determines the rules and enforces them, as with tennis. For this reason, the rules of good scientific practice in the humanities, as well as in other disciplines, are rather determined by the consensus of the scholarly community, which is sometimes formalized by institutions such as professional associations. If there can be a general agreement on some matters of principle (for example, the universal rejection of plagiarism as unethical practice), the situation remains open to nuances and differences of interpretation for a range of issues on which the consensus is not so clear, precisely because it depends on sensitivities that may change depending on the cultural context. In the study of religion this point emerges quite evidently from the difference of prevailing attitudes towards the issue of "religionism" between the United States and continental Europe. While in Europe the most important professional associations for the study of religion make a clear distinction between religious studies and theology, in the United States one can see both represented in a single large association, the American Academy of Religion (AAR).

It seems to me that the problem of the attitude of the scholar towards the object of his research can and indeed should be presented in other terms than the simple compliance with the rules of a game. In my opinion, a far more challenging and courageous perspective is required here. For years now, neoliberal ideologies, which have come to occupy the centre of the political scene in most western countries, have cast doubt on the value of the humanities. This value is increasingly perceived as problematic because it is

often impalpable, and can hardly show any evidence of immediate profit. It is clear that, if it is the basic value of the humanities for contemporary society that is being questioned, and if this leads in its turn to questioning the right of existence of the humanities in publicly funded institutions for higher education, then merely deciding what is the best approach to study the history of esotericism can easily become a moot point. So let us ask ourselves a much more important question: why should we engage in research in the humanities today in the first place? Who needs it? What is the purpose? The *homo oeconomicus*, whose life is based mostly on material and economic values, can happily live without history and the humanities. Indeed, it is quite likely that the kind of self-awareness induced by the practice of the humanities would be an obstacle to the full dominance of economic values on human society and culture. This perhaps may explain the current attempts at downsizing the role of the humanities at all levels of education. Therefore, to return to our basic questions: if this is the situation, what is the point of studying the history of esotericism at all? What is left of a convincing motivation if you neither are an enthusiastic apologist nor you believe that esotericism is socially dangerous and culturally insignificant?

An answer to these questions cannot be based on apodictic theorems, nor can we exhaust such a problem in all its complexity here.

But we can at least start reflecting on some crucial aspects. Perhaps one of the ideas that may help taking the first step is the concept of "critical ethnocentrism", first proposed by the Italian historian of religions Ernesto De Martino more than sixty years ago. Critical ethnocentrism gives great importance to historical self-awareness, which means being aware that we, like



Ernesto De Martino, 1956

to a particular historical context, which colours our thoughts and our work in a particular way. This awareness may begin with the observation that our singularity is just relative with respect to the singularity of all the other cultures that have existed historically before us or with whom we share our planet today. This awareness, however, can never result in absolute relativism, because it constantly requires us to make choices. These choices take on a meaning for us only when, with the help of our historical awareness, we critically examine their origin and development, and acknowledge their contingency and problematic nature. Now, it is precisely here that, in my opinion, we can situate the cultural and social value of the study of esotericism. Recent research has convincingly argued that studying esotericism means understanding how western culture has taken its particular form through strategies of exclusion and rejection. In many ways esotericism represents one of the most significant "Others" of western culture.

It has been used as a collector for ideas, practices, and beliefs that were perceived as illegitimate or threatening by mainstream culture. Studying the history of esotericism means therefore realizing to what extent the trajectory of our cultural development has been tortuous and full of difficult choices. It means acknowledging not only what has been gained through these choices, but also what may have been lost.

To use another metaphor, to study the history of esotericism means putting western culture in front of a mirror and ask her if she recognizes herself in the reflected image. Asking this question may give us a good indication about the actual, concrete value of our scholarly work. The force with which this question is asked will depend on our intellectual honesty. The choices we will be called to make in the future will depend on the answer we receive.



Buddha of Bamyan, Afghanistan, before destruction