

Spirituality Check:

Esotericism and Pseudo-Esotericism

E. W. Harnack

*In a society in which large ecclesiastical institutions, endowed with the power to dictate a layperson's beliefs, do not control religious practice any more, diversity can become a problem. Who is not an expert, often needs qualified guides in order to distinguish sincere spirituality from misleading ways. An objective appraisal what can be a sincere form of spirituality and what not is difficult to find because most experts advance their own worldview. With this series of articles, called **The Spirituality Check**, we want to illustrate from the perspective of a transcendental science of religions what distinguishes sincere from dubious uses of spiritual terms. Therefore, a concept will be presented with its etymology, its theoretical provenience, its practical application, and its occurrence today, and will be discussed with regard to its serious applicability.*

Esotericism in the past...

It is an odd thing that a term which refers to the most hidden secrets of the cosmos, to the deepest layers of the knowledge of the mysteries of our existence, can become synonymous with superficiality, deceit and mental confusion? And whose fault is it that this beautiful concept of the 19th century, the word "esotericism", today was so deranged that it actually circulates as a swear word? But what exactly is meant by the term, of which I have just said that it was made up in the 19th century? This claim is based on the fact that the first verifiable record of that term in this or a similar substantive form emerged in some writings of the 19th century. In a strange paper written in "epistles", a professor of mathematics and physics in the then already provincial university town of Frankfurt (Oder) in 1817 used the term as a substantive in the title: "Esoterika oder Ansichten der Verhältnisse des Menschen zu Gott" (Esoterika or views of the relations of man to God) by Christian Ernst Wünsch. Already Wünsch's use of the term refers to three of its essential components: First, the stated intention of the author was that the content "not everyone ... needs to know and should read". Esotericism thus is secret knowledge, accessible and intended not for everyone. Secondly, professor Wünsch is interested in spiritual knowledge, which in time and content is placed before any religion. Esotericism is thus knowledge of the divine mystery in the depths and the origin, beyond any single

religion. Third, Wünsch refers back to classical antiquity, to the ancient knowledge containing the secrets of the divine, which is assumed the ancient world possessed. All three conceptual components are indicative of what we now call esotericism.

For an esotericism in antiquity existed indeed, though not under that name. As "esoteric" writings some early authors referred to writings of Aristotle he had not written for the general public, but only for the academic world, like professor Wünsch wished for his own writings. It probably was not an "esoteric," not a spiritual teaching of Aristotle remaining hidden for the mass among its readers, but what was simply meant, was a knowledge reserved for the specialist. *Esoterikós* (ἑσωτερικός), the late ancient Greek adjective from which "esotericism" was later derived and which was first used in a spiritual sense by the Neoplatonists, just means the "inner". The Neoplatonists, like Hippolytus of Rome, characterized with it the then already ancient mystery cults - such as the Orphic, and especially the Pythagoreans - that protected its lessons by transferring them only to the initiated from spreading among the common people - so effectively that we are not well informed today about many of their views and practices. Also the Roman cult of Mithras, which is similar to the early Christian cult and has had an enormous influence on this, was a kind of mystery religion of Roman Age.

Unlike the cult of Christ with its monotheistic claim of universal validity, the esoteric mysteries coexisted peacefully with the Roman state cult that was totally "exoteric" and therefore accessible for the public. Thus Caesar finds the esotericism of another culture, namely the Celtic, certainly in need of explanation: There, the Druids refused to write down their teachings, because - so assumes Caesar - "they do not want that the teaching is spread among the people, nor that those who learn, trusting in the letters so much, struggle less to remember" (De bello Gallico, VI, 14, my translation). A large part of what is now regarded as an esoteric knowledge of the West is based not on our scanty knowledge of Greek and Roman cults, neither on the secret knowledge of the Druids, but refers to Egypt, which already in ancient times (as of Herodotus) was claimed to be the Mediterranean cradle of all religions. Especially the Hermetic writings, written or compiled in about the 2nd century, in later times were seen as evidence of the spiritual superiority of Egypt. Hermes Trismegistos, the Egyptian-Greek god Hermes-Thoth, had revealed them himself. In the 15th century, they were rediscovered and by the research of Marsilio Ficino and his patron, Cosimo di Medici, became a popular reference point, of the Renaissance Age, later named accordingly hermeticism (Faivre 1992). The science called itself often magic - in a broader sense of the term than at present describing that secret science of the spiritual laws of the cosmos, which we now call esotericism. So the golden age of esotericism in Western thought was not in the Middle Ages, but in the Renaissance (cf. Faivre 1992; Hanegraaf 1998). The revival of the magical-hermetic tradition occurred as a countermovement to the then impending separation of religion and science, and as a longing for the return of a *unus mundus*, that is one spiritual and material, interwoven cosmos, which the medieval man had to leave at the start of the modern age.

Finally, the noun esotericism as a word creation can be found not before the 19th century. While professor Wünsch uses the form *Esoterika* (meaning esoteric thoughts or writings), publications in religious studies now use the word itself, first in French (*ésotérisme*) in the *Histoire de Gnosticism* (1828) of Jaques Matter (Faivre 1992); later it appears in the writings of renowned historians of religion such as Paul Deussen, the occultist Eliphas Levi, or the Theosophical Society. Together with the then fashionable spiritualism and the American New Thought movement, the theosophy of the late 19th century is the beginning of what can be described as a modern esotericism. Now the term has completely gained the importance of the spiritual secret knowledge of the inner core of religion. The mystery, therefore, has become one with what previously was called hermetic or magic. Although the word usage was not very common, a substantial part of the scientific debate of the early 20th century was about the point that there is a common spiritual core of all religious traditions, which lies hidden in them and can only be experienced in mystical experience. The idea of a hidden original form of religion is an omnipresent issue in the writings of Rudolf Otto (*The Holy*, 1927) (*Transcendental De l'unité of religions*, 1948) and Frithjof Schuon. Esotericism then means two things (see Dinzelbacher 1989, 151): First, that this primordial core lies not open just based on the externalities of the religions, so it would suffice to summarize their obvious similarities in order to speak of a spiritual unity of religions, but that this unity opens up only to deepened research and thinking. And secondly, that the recognition of this unity can not be gained by research and thinking only, but will be revealed only to someone, who is able to reproduce the spiritual depth of these central tenets within himself. Therefore, esotericism, like the ancient mystery cult, consists of gradual initiations, appropriate to the progress of the adept, into knowledge, which remains inaccessible to the most. Freemasonry and occult schools of its kindred of the 17th to 20th century (the Rosicrucians, the Illuminati at the time of Goethe, the Order of the Golden Dawn) are prime examples of such inauguration systems.

One may wonder whether secrecy and initiation ceremonies do not just incapacitate today's self-reliant seekers as well as the objective critic and whether they are in fact are only meant to feed the myth of especial depth, while after closer examination, there is nothing behind it (but then it is too late for the indoctrinated mind to criticize the practice followed for years). The secrecy, however, results from the special, double responsibility of the holder of such knowledge: first, to the student, who could be plunged in confusion and disbelief, finally into madness when confronted too early with lessons that go beyond the usual world views; and on the other hand from the responsibility to the deep spiritual knowledge which could be desecrated, sullied and ridiculed by those who are not able to catch it. But we live in a time when freedom of information of the mentally emancipated subject outweighs these responsibilities, so that now once secret rituals and teachings are widespread in bookshops and the Internet.

... and esotericism today

Esotericism nowadays has become a very problematic concept in many respects. As we have seen, *esoterikós* is the knowledge reserved for an *inner circle*. But what is the relation between this inwardness to and the assumption of an *innermost core* of all religions, i.e., an interior in the sense of a deep structure hidden beneath the surface of the expressed. And is this in turn identical with the inwardness of meditative contemplation in the sense of an *inner experience*? Is with the esoteric thus also meant an interior source of knowledge? And can in that innermost core of all religions or ones own innermost the occult, the divination practice, the hermetic laws be found, or are they a totally different way to talk of esotericism? These difficulties were solved by the researcher of exoerism, Antoine Faivre, by characterizing esotericism as a form of thinking, for which four elements are typical: correspondence between spheres (for example, "As above so below") as a law; nature as a living cosmos; imagination and mediation (emblematic instead of direct experience of the Divine) as realization method; and "transmutation", that is the transformation of man to a higher level as a target. According to Faivre, it is this way of thinking that runs through all esotericism until today.

Historically, the new esotericism of our time arose from the opening of the society of the late 1960s and the interest of the hippie movement in new forms of spirituality. Old traditions of indigenous cultures, Asian religions, and other secret teachings were open to the public now. As a consequence esotericism was "globalized" and became much more a phenomenon of different cultural origins than a mere continuation of the Hermetic tradition. The trend continues to this day: Esotericism is still gaining ground (see Knoblauch 2009), not in terms of an expanding subculture, but in the sense that this subculture has entered the mainstream and begun to penetrate all sectors of society. Today's esotericism is secret knowledge in a democratized form. However, there is still that form of esoteric secret knowledge that is accessible only after having worked hard for it. Some practices of Tibetan and Indian Tantra, yoga or Qigong are still taught only on the condition that the student does not pass it on, and also the Western esoteric schools still exist. But with the globalization and popularization of the secret knowledge of various traditions, today's esotericism is not just identical with the spiritual essence of one religion or another, it is becoming a metareligion. Therefore, esoteric knowledge today is often considered as a contradiction to religion by the established religions, rather than their mysterious core. In particular, Christianity has allied itself with post-Enlightenment science and ejected the hermetical-magical knowledge kept once in her lap as incompatible with religion.

Esotericism is thus at least the core of that syncretistic religion of New Age (see Hanegraaf 1998), which is opposed to the particularism of individual religions and replaces the priestly principle, i.e., that your faith is determined by somebody else, with an individual spirituality. For esotericism as the core of New Age is thus also characterized by individualization. Although there was some kind of individualism in esotericism already before: the alchemists, magicians of the Renaissance, which learned from the

books of ancient knowledge or the book of nature. But in general, spiritual secret teachings in the west and the east were transmitted in teacher-student relationships or religious communities watching over the right interpretation and application of the teachings. Today, everyone is responsible for his own use of magical practices presented in Internet forums or with which shaman she goes into altered states of consciousness. For individualization, along with globalization means that the individual can choose not only from the local, but from all spiritual traditions of mankind and compile it into a unique form of spirituality.

The religion of New Age is creating new, non-hierarchical and non-institutionalized traditions of knowledge, in which gifted individuals act as teachers without the authority of a community and thus bear the whole responsibility. Such democratization of religion can be a blessing, as long as it is not accompanied by vulgarization, i.e., that its contents are publicly accessible, but not simultaneously flattened and distorted. This requires that the individual can deal with the contents and make sensible use of it. Often, however, neither seems the individual's orientation sufficient to use spiritual knowledge without a teacher nor can it escape vulgarization. For most people esoteric knowledge is difficult to comprehend and even harder to implement. Therefore, either they respond with frank rejection or they feel somehow attracted by its subtle verity and with enthusiasm get into something they do not understand. In order to capitalize this enthusiasm, it is necessary to simplify real secret knowledge by flattening and distorting it, in such a way that at best it is not spiritually dangerous, because it is ineffective, but so easily to catch and digest that the consuming mass is able to consume it quickly. Body and health cult, self-centered happiness and commercial success trainings ("Success is no name of God" - Martin Buber) then become supposed partners of spirituality.

Pseudo-esotericism, should probably be the appropriate term of what today is called esotericism. Pseudo-esotericism shows how effectively materialism and consumerism work, hence incorporating all ideologies in their own machinery and transforming them beyond recognition. The "spiritual materialism" (Chogyam Trungpa) of pseudo-esotericism turns the search for transcendence into the consumption of something totally worldly. Esoteric speculation misunderstood by the uninitiated, will eventually become materialistic and anti-religious propaganda - and as if Christian Ernst Wünsch was proved right with his warning that no ignoramus should get his hands on his book, the text of the physicist of 1817 is an example for this: His theory (probably from earlier source) declaring the Nativity as a mythologizing of astronomical events is used today in the speculative documentary "Zeitgeist" to explain that Jesus of Nazareth himself was an invention and religion should be considered purely scientific.

Help for differentiation: Esotericism and pseudo-esotericism

Behind the individualization, globalization and popularization of once secret knowledge we can and should not go back if we want the human of this new century indeed to be a

mystic, like the theologian Karl Rahner already claimed. Now, it is important to use them in a responsible way and to discern the spirits: for pseudo-esotericism in contrast, is characterized by vulgarization, commercialization, and fiction. This is to say that original esoteric knowledge is simplified and in accordance to the consumption needs of the masses changed so much that it will sell well (vulgarization). Spiritual knowledge is thus just any commercial value, aimed to make money or win fame (commercialization). The laws of the market thus dictate the proclamation of teachings, not the old traditions that are distorted and invented completely new (fiction) without the slightest qualm. The following criteria should help to distinguish esotericism from pseudo-esotericism:

1) The origins of knowledge:

If it is knowledge within an established esoteric tradition, that speaks in favour for genuine esotericism. Prophets and mystics who found esoteric routes without having a spiritual training have always existed (such as Jacob Boehme). But usually individual revelations not being in accordance with existing traditions tend to be pseudoesoteric because by traditions a comparison of various such revelations is possible, they have passed a long testing phase and have been discussed with other experts.

Esoteric traditions, which can look back on a long history and are present today, for example are:

- the mystical traditions of the Western religions: Christianity (including the Eastern church and the desert fathers), Islam (Sufism), Judaism (Kabbalah and Hasidism)
- the esoteric teachings of Eastern religions: Buddhism (e.g., Tibetan Tantra), Hinduism (and some Indian Tantra Yoga teachings) and the Chinese religion
- in part, the esoteric schools of the West: Rosicrucian, some parts of Freemasonry etc.
- the occult knowledge of the West and East: Alchemy (as a spiritual practice), astrology, divination (Tarot, I Ching, etc.), magic, spiritualism, etc.
- the teachings of traditional cultures, shamanism, traditional demonology etc.

However, we now know far too little in what Celts or Egyptian priests, the legendary Knights of the Round Table (as guardians of the Holy Grail) or the Templars were involved. The literature on runes oracle, gemmology and the knowledge of witchcraft is normally of present origin, even if it relies on the few reports from the past. Although the collective superconscious may reveal itself newly in all these, such as in "re-discovered knowledge of Atlantis", and therefore may for some people exhibit positive development chances, but it should be clear that this knowledge has not been established by tradition and discourse, and, equivalent to a car without vehicle inspection, there is a real danger of not arriving at the destination or to cause serious accidents.

2) *The use of traditional knowledge:*

Whether a person interprets the esoteric tradition free or passes it exactly is another possible way of discrimination between esoteric knowledge and pseudo-esotericism. We may find this seemingly old knowledge especially in the new creation of pseudoesoteric teachings, which are in fact anything but old. Anyone interested in a new esoteric field of knowledge should, therefore, first of all acquire serious knowledge of the traditional method of interpretation of this area before he or she appropriates free interpretations in seminars and books. Serious reference books or the books of a definite professional publishing company provide documented information.

3) *The spiritual depth of the person who proclaims the knowledge*

People proclaiming spiritual knowledge should be measured by different standards than scientific lecturers and business trainers. Spiritual teachers should also impress with their integrity, especially when there is no spiritual tradition confirming their knowledge. This is even more true where the suspicion of financial or narcissistic interests (such as abuse of power) cannot be denied. As any spiritual teacher is a human, however, the benchmarks should not be exaggerated so far into idealization that only persons that seem superhuman are accepted as spiritual teachers and admired by their followers.

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About the author:

E. W. Harnack holds a University degree in psychology and works as a licensed psychotherapist, certified clinical supervisor and independent scholar in Berlin, Germany.

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