

МЕТОДОЛОГИЯ ИСЛЕДОВАНИЯ ЭЗОТЕРИЗМА

S. A. Panin

INSIDER AND THE ACADEMIA: THE PAST AND THE FUTURE OF “GOING NATIVE IN REVERSE” IN THE STUDY OF ESOTERICISM

To start an article dedicated to “going native in reverse” we should first answer the question: what does “going native in reverse” mean? The concept of “going native” came from anthropology and describes a situation when a researcher so to say turns into “aborigine” which means that his identity changes and the researcher adopts the worldview and lifestyle of the culture he studies. It is considered negatively in classic anthropology because through such transformation the scholar loses his objectivity, loses the distance needed for academic research. However, when we speak about an adaptation of anthropological principles to contemporary social reality, or, to put it in other words, when a researcher tries to study his own contemporaries in a setting of his native culture, the situation becomes completely different. Nobody can have a distance in such a situation, so we believe that it is a casual case when Christians study Christianity or Muslims study Islam. In democratic societies, where the freedom of religion and the freedom of ideas are fundamental components of human rights, all religious and non-religious worldviews should be considered equal in legal terms. Therefore, if it is acceptable for Christian scholars to study Christianity, it is only natural that those who participate in different esoteric groups can try to use their critical thinking and study the history of their groups as well. The same applies to a number of new religious movements like Wicca and Thelema. Nowadays more and more people involved in these groups participate in academic activities related to the study of religion in general and particularly in the study of their movements. This situation – when an insider receives higher education to become a scholar of his movement – is what is called “going native in reverse,” the concept, which was developed in J. Pearson’s article dedicated to this problem¹.

But why is this issue especially important in the context of the study of Western esotericism? Why it seems to be even more important here than in many other cases? The reason is simple: From the beginning of the 20th century, both science and humanities have had a strong influence on the development of both Western esotericism and modern Paganism. At least six areas of academic inquiry have influenced the development of Western esotericism in the 20th century: Egyptology and anthropology, physics and chemistry, psychiatry and psychology.

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¹ *Pearson J.* Going Native in Reverse: the Insider as Researcher in British Wicca // *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*. 2001. N. 5 (1). P. 52–63.

When we speak about Egyptology, we should keep in mind that such authors as Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers (1854–1918), one of the founders of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, studied almost everything related to the history of Egyptian religion that could be found. Moreover, we can see that some of the rites and doctrines of the Golden Dawn were based on information on ancient religions from academic sources like books by Wallis Budge¹ or Charles Wycliffe Goodwin². So, Mathers and other authors used historical theories, academic translations, revised the material, added their interpretations and even created new esoteric movements based on ideas about ancient religions that they had found in these works. At the same time Helen Blavatsky's first book was entitled "Isis Unveiled" (1877) which shows her interest in Egypt and Egyptology. Precisely the same situation we see when it comes to Gerald Gardner who created Wicca based on his interpretation of the history of witchcraft, which was prominently influenced by M. Murray's theory about medieval witches as European "pagan survivals." Murray began her academic career as an Egyptologist and only later decided to study the history of witchcraft. Therefore, it comes as no surprise when we find out that Gardner writes in his "Witchcraft Today" (1954) about Egyptian sources of European witchcraft. "At one time I believed, – Gardner writes, – the whole cult was directly descended from the Northern European culture of the Stone Age, uninfluenced by anything else; but I now think that it was influenced by the Greek and Roman mysteries which originally may have come from Egypt"³. And it was not only Murray's books, which influenced Gardner. In another passage, he writes: "I was much interested in Mr. Pennethorne Hughes's theory, vide page 23 of his book, that magic was evolved by the Egyptian priests, that one branch of this knowledge came to Europe, becoming witchcraft, the other going to West Africa and thence to America, becoming Voodoo. I know that Frazer and others have mentioned the resemblance between the African cults of the Divine King and Egyptian myths, and I had already noted the resemblance between certain Voodoo practices and European witchcraft; but it seemed to me that the proof of Mr. Hughes's theory must lie in West Africa. If the witches or witch doctors there had the knowledge, they might have passed it on to America"⁴. Reading Frazer, Hughes and Murray for most of us seems to be more appropriate for a scholar, not for a witch, and yet it was the basis for Gardner's teaching about the witchcraft.

It is not so obvious in sciences, such as physics and chemistry, but their influence on esoteric movements of that time was very prominent too. When Frederick Soddy together with Ernest Rutherford discovered in 1901 that radio-

¹ *Budge W.* The Book of the Dead. Later works of this author influenced Golden Dawn members too. London: Harrison and Sons, 1895.

² *Goodwin C. W.* Fragment of a Græco-Egyptian work upon magic from a papyrus in the British Museum. Deighton: Macmillan, 1852.

³ *Gardner G.* Koldovstvo segodnia. Gardnerianskaia kniga tenei (Witchcraft Today. Gardnerian Book of Shadows) (in Russian). P. 63.

⁴ *Ibid.* P. 189.

active thorium transforms into an inert gas, Soddy, as he recalled, compared this process with an alchemical transmutation. However, Rutherford answered him: “Don’t call it transmutation. They’ll have our heads off as alchemists”¹. Indeed, after the discovery of radiation in 1896, the science of radioactivity was often compared to alchemy, and by the 1920’s, radiochemistry and atomic physics were regularly called “modern alchemy” in the press. The transformation of radioactive elements, discovered by Rutherford and Soddy, was frequently named an “alchemical transmutation.” In this manner, new discoveries in physics and chemistry recalled the interest to alchemy, and it is not a coincidence that the French alchemist Eugène Canseliet met his teacher, Fulcanelli, the most famous alchemist of the 20th century, around 1915. At the same time, a prominent spiritualist, as was Sir William Crookes (1832–1919), worked in the field of radioactivity, too. And if we move to the Russian Empire of the late 19th century, it is interesting to mention that on the emblem of the D. Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology of Russia which was established in 1898 we can see a kabbalistic symbol – the Tree of Life (see Fig. 1).



Figure 1. The emblem of the D. Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology of Russia with the Tree of Life.

In the second half of the 19th century, many chemists were involved in esoteric activities in the Russian Empire. For instance, the famous Russian chemist Alexander Butlerov (1828–1886) was one of the most prominent adepts and popularizers of spiritualism in the Russian Empire, and Dmitri Mendeleev (1834–1907) himself visited séances, although he was rather critical of spiritualism.

On the other hand, there was the German chemist Wilhelm Ostwald, who achieved the Nobel Prize in 1909. His work was not connected to radioactivity, but at the turn of the 20th century he created an “energetics” doctrine of holistic physics and *Naturphilosophie*, abandoned by the academia but then influenced followers like the American psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, Sigmund Freud’s former protégé created his doctrine of “orgone energy.” In Reich’s theory, the

¹ *Morrison M. Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of Atomic Theory* [Kindle edition]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

idea of cosmic energy was mixed with the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud. It is interesting that psychoanalysis firstly closely related to Freud's atheism then became popular in esoteric circles and Freud's concept of "psychic energy" was equated with "energy" in holistic doctrines like Ostwald's and with "cosmic energy" of Western and Eastern mysticism.

In the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a number of people were interested in chemistry. One of them, the analytical chemist Alan Bennett, influenced the famous magician Aleister Crowley and developed the idea of chemical influence on the mind targeted to reach higher states of consciousness, which was adopted by Crowley. In his "Confession" Crowley mentioned that he discussed this idea with the pioneering British psychiatrist of that time Henry Maudsley. Indeed, Bennett's idea seems to be very close to those used in psychiatry: to control one's states of consciousness by chemical drugs. The target was different – while psychiatry intends to achieve a "normal" state, Bennett and Crowley looked for or "supernormal" state or Samadhi – but the way to achieve it was similar. Another important clue related to psychology is hypnosis. Although in the 19th century hypnosis had finally found its way to conventional medicine and was recognized as an acceptable method of treatment, thanks to such figures as Jean Charcot and Pierre Janet many occultists still took "hypnosis" or "mesmerism" as a sort of esoteric practice. For example, the famous French occultist Gérard d'Encausse known as Papus who was also a Doctor of Medicine that included a section on hypnosis in his book entitled "Practical Magic".

Therefore, we can see that different esotericists of the 20th century studied numerous academic books and papers looking for new insights on their occult path. That is why we should not be surprised when we find out that now their followers are searching for academic sources of their beliefs – and it is only natural for them to come to academia to find them.

Of course, this influence was not a one-way. When we think about scholars like Alexandra David-Néel, Carl Gustav Jung or Gershom Scholem, we can be sure that their work in the academia was influenced by their esoteric and religious interests. It is especially apparent in the case of Eranos – a circle of intellectuals, including Jung and Scholem, whose goal was to find "absolute, universal, unchanging spiritual truth within the framework of historical research"¹. Once again, like in the case of chemistry and alchemy, it was a truly esoteric goal that they tried to achieve by academic means. Esoteric ideas, transmitted through Jung's analytic psychology have also influenced the German physicist W. Pauli and inspired his pioneering ideas about quantum physics. Pauli himself said that the most part of contemporary physical theories

¹ *Hanegraaff W. J. Western Esotericism: The Next Generation // Mystic and Esoteric Movements in Theory and Practice. History and Discourse: Historical and Philosophical Aspects of the Study of Esotericism and Mysticism. Proceedings of the 5th International Conference (December 2–5, 2011, St. Petersburg) / Ed. by S. Pakhomov. St. Petersburg: Russian Christian Academy for Humanities, 2012. P. 113–129. About Eranos see also: Hakl H. Th. Der verborgene Geist von Eranos. Unbekannte Begegnungen von Wissenschaft und Esoterik, Bretten: Scientia Nova, 2001.*

can be symbolically represented as psychological processes. In one of his letters he wrote: “For the invisible reality, of which we have small pieces of evidence in both quantum physics and the psychology of the unconscious, a symbolic psychophysical unitary language must ultimately be adequate, and this is the far goal which I actually aspire. I am quite confident that the final objective is the same, independent of whether one starts from the psyche (ideas) or from physis (matter). Therefore, I consider the old distinction between materialism and idealism as obsolete”¹. Therefore, we can say that for Pauli his communication with Jung was highly productive and helped him to improve his work as a scientist. If esoteric influences were productive for the work of Pauli and Jung, David-Néel and Scholem, why should we suppose that the infusion of esoteric perspectives in future academia as an alternative to scientism and empiricism, which are popular now in the study of religion and esotericism, would not help us to achieve a new, better understanding of esoteric worldviews? After all, we should at least recognize that this choice is a matter of philosophical preferences of a researcher, it is not an “objective fact”.

In any case, we see that academia influenced the development of Western esotericism, and esoteric groups influenced academic research throughout the 20th century. However, what is the future of their interaction, if there is any future at all? I see the following four general tendencies related to this problem:

1. Integration of the members of esoteric groups into the academic field, i.e. the process of “going native in reverse”;
2. Rejection of works as “too esoteric” by a number of scholars and the growth of (neo)empiricism in their research;
3. Creation of “Esoteric Theology” as a new field;
4. Rejection of projects considered as “too scholarly” (in the form of either “esoteric studies” or “esoteric theology”) by those insiders who have an inimical attitude toward rationalism and the academia.

First, people with esoteric interests try to bring their perspectives and considerations about their movements into the academia. Maybe on this path they will be able to introduce new, unexpected perspectives to the study of religion and esotericism, some may be as radically as esoteric ideas did in the case of Eranos. However, conservative academics can reject such attempts and expel those who try to change the academia from academic institutions. In this case, those who were rejected have two options in the next decades. Either they form a marginal niche inside the traditional academic disciplines or they will try to found a new discipline, an “esoteric theology”, based on religious studies and philosophy of religion, that will fight for a place both in academia and in the esoteric community.

Today we can see attempts to conceptualize the study of some forms of esotericism from insiders’ perspective on the analogy of theology as “Pagan theology” or “Pagan divinity”. M. York has introduced the concept of “Pagan

¹ *Atmanspacher H., Primas H.* Pauli’s ideas on mind and matter in the context of contemporary science. P. 17.

theology” in his book “Pagan Theology: Paganism as a World Religion”, published in 2003, as an academic theory related to the understanding of the history of Paganism and its contemporary state. However, it was much more than just an academic theory – it was a program for a new approach or even a new discipline which is intended to study “Paganism” as a whole trying to select and systemize the most important components of “Pagan worldview”. The idea of “Pagan theology” was developed in a number of works more or less academic after this, such as C. Kraemer’s “Seeking the Mystery: An Introduction to Pagan Theologies” (2012). Nowadays proponents of “Pagan theology” go even further. So we can see attempts of its institutionalization, at least in the USA, where the Cherry Hill Seminary was registered in 2007 to provide an education leading to a Master’s degree in “Pagan theology”. This organization claims to be “the leading provider of education and practical training in leadership, ministry, and personal growth in Pagan and Nature-Based? nature-based spiritualities”¹, but, of course, both for them and for other organizations of this type there will be no easy way into the future. After all, it is obvious that “Pagan theology” is not as recognized as Christian theology or Christian philosophy of religion, but the first step to a legitimization of a discipline has been made, and if they succeed, we can assume that other organizations of this type will appear in the nearest future, not only “pagan”, but also with other predicates (“druid”, “celtic”, “esoteric”, and many others).

We should also keep in mind that, on the other hand, esoteric and pagan communities may abandon any attempts to use the analytical mind and the academic approach to esotericism because many followers of esoteric movements have an inimical attitude toward rationalism and to academia in general. After my report, related to the history of the academic study of esotericism in Russia, which was presented at one semi-academic conference dedicated to the study of esotericism, one woman said: “How dare you scientists? scholars use your poor rational mind to explore universal esoteric truth?! How can you understand with your rational mind super-rational reality?” This was not the only case when people reacted in such manner when they heard about the academic study of esotericism. Some of them write critical reviews in their blogs, in social networks, on different websites where they blame scholars for their approach too rational for the study of esotericism. Therefore, we should consider that it is a point of view of numerous people from different esoteric groups.

So, to conclude, let us answer the question I have asked above. Is there any option for a future which is equally positive for esoteric and pagan communities, for academia and for society in general? I believe there is because it is natural and important both for the academic disciplines and for pagan and esoteric groups. However, if the process of “going native in reverse” has any future, this future is strictly related to overcoming the mutual hostility between scholars and

¹ About Us // Cherry Hill Seminary // [URL]: <http://cherryhillseminary.org/about> (last accessed 26.11.2014).

magicians, and this may be the most positive impact of their interaction. As the famous follower of “Northern Tradition Paganism” Raven Kaldera wrote, scholars should “step ahead of themselves, their theses, their degrees, their short-term struggles, and even their lifetimes, and see the really important audience”, pertaining to esotericists who need all of this work and research¹. Such an approach will surely help those involved in esoteric groups to recognize within themselves the validity of a critical mind and therefore it will help insiders and scholars understand each other. Maybe this is the most important social mission of the academic study of Western esotericism: to understand “the other,” to begin a dialogue and even help seekers to find their place in society bridging the gap between “adepts” and “uninitiated” people.

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¹ *Kaldera R.* Shaman and Scholar // Northern Tradition Shamanism // [URL]: www.northernshamanism.org/general/shamanism/shaman-and-scholar.html/ (last accessed 20.11.2014).