
ERANOS STRIKES BACK

ALTERNATIVES TO THE HANEGRAAFF'S

APPROACH IN THE STUDY OF ESOTERICISM

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Abstract

In this article, the author analyzes dominating contemporary approaches to the study of esotericism including those of W. Hanegraaff that is popular today among European scholars and its alternatives developing in the USA and the United Kingdom. The author argues that these methodologies should be understood as competitive 'research programmes' inside the complex field of the academic study of esotericism and can't be described in terms of 'old' and 'new' paradigms like Hanegraaff tends to do it.

Keywords: methodology, insider/outsider problem, emic, etic, sympathetic empiricism

1. Introduction

The problem of insider/outsider position is one of the most important methodological problems in the academic study of Western esotericism and new religions. Although J. Pearson writes that "the 'insider as researcher' position is becoming increasingly common and recognized by the academy" [1], for many people from the academic community in Russia, and even in Europe esotericism is still something strange and dangerous, a kind of irrational 'underground' and 'superstition' which should not be allowed in academia. European authorities, such as Wouter Hanegraaff emphasizes an importance of separation of insider and academic perspectives on esotericism. From his point of view, previous studies, like the works of Jung or Eliade (participated in the meetings of Eranos), were too close to esotericism and new researches in this field should be less esoteric and more academic [2].

What does Hanegraaff proposes for scholars of esotericism? We can describe the core of Hanegraaff's program as an emphasis on the strict distinction between the insider ('emic') and researcher ('etic') perspectives. "The principal theoretical tool to safeguard scientific legitimacy in this situation is the distinction between emic and etic," argues Hanegraaff [3] and criticizes

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those who “try to wear the esoteric and the scholarly hat simultaneously” [2]. His idea may seem to be very attractive for those who tends to understand the study of esotericism in a positivistic manner and pretends to achieve ‘objectivity’ in this field. However, can we really say that such an approach is doubtless?

2. Discussion

J. Pearson [1] and E. Puttick [4] have fairly criticized an idea of ‘objectivity’ in the study of modern religious and esoteric movements, arguing that objectivity here is ‘unobtainable’ because research is usually related to people who obviously exert influence on the researcher, and the researcher himself will filter his or her field experience through his or her ‘first principles’. We should also remember that Hanegraaff’s approach has its own first principles too and these first principles are not far from the positivistic approach of authors such as J. Webb whose idea of ‘occult underground’ influenced Hanegraaff’s understanding of esotericism as ‘rejected knowledge’. Webb himself defines the occult as ‘rejected knowledge’ in terms very similar to Hanegraaff’s definition of esotericism: “The occult is rejected knowledge: that is, an Underground whose basic unity is that of Opposition to an Establishment and Powers That Are” [5]. For Webb, esotericism was nothing more than “a wild return to archaic forms of belief” which was a reaction against the method of the Age of Reason [5]. Such understanding of esotericism has been criticized as reductionistic by Marco Pasi in his article, ‘The Modernity of Occultism: Reflections on Some Crucial Aspects’ [6]. However, the core Hanegraaff’s methodology is still too close to Webb’s approach because Hanegraaff assumes not only a distinction but also an opposition of emic and etic perspectives, and we should keep in mind that such idea is rather dubious.

2.1. Insider/researcher communication and interpenetration

We must remember that the study of esotericism is an unusual field of academics, where its object and subject can easily switch: those who yesterday were the object, today can write a critical review, and comment on your study from his or her insider's perspective. A good example of this is the criticism of Frances Yates’ works in the book of famous esotericist Israel Regardie ‘Ceremonial Magic’, where Regardie mentioned: “When discussing this recently with scholarly friend of mine, he remarked: “But the book is so well documented!” Documented indeed! So well documented that it reminded me of a fantastically amusing satire and parody of the well-documented book in one of Aleister Crowley’s earliest writings. It is entitled ‘The Excluded Middle: or, The Sceptic Refuted’ in Volume I of his Collected Works. It is a dialogue in which almost every word has a footnote demonstrating not merely the meaning of the word, but giving pseudo-literary authority for its usage. I think Crowley, in the first couple of years of this century, has made an excellent point that is as true today as it was then. Scholarship can be abused – and it is often abused.” [7]

We cannot ignore such an insider's opinion when the insider rates academic research, but rather, we should consult the insider's opinion and correct our researches accordingly, or at least reflect the insider's perspective in our works. We must also remember that for many esotericists, academic research is something that is too primitive and low when compared with esoteric truth, which is open to them. After my report, related to the history of the academic study of esotericism in Russia, was presented at one semi-academic conference dedicated to the study of esotericism, one woman said: "How dare you scientists are to use your poor rational mind to study universal esoteric truth?!" This is why I suggest that academic snobbery is not the best way to bridge the gap between researchers and esotericists, which is absolutely needed in fieldwork. As Raven Kaldera wrote in one of his articles, scholars should "step ahead of themselves, their theses, their degrees, their short-term struggles, and even their lifetimes, and see the really important audience" [R. Kaldera, *Shaman and Scholar*, www.northernshamanism.org/general/shamanism/shaman-and-scholar.html/, accessed 11.02.2014], pertaining to esotericists who need all of this work and research. This is why I completely agree with idea of J. Needleman, who wrote: "...scholars need to allow the seekers within themselves to exist; and seekers after esoteric knowledge must, for their part, allow within themselves the validity of the outward, analytical, or critical mind" [8]. From my point of view, communication and interpenetration of the academic and esoteric communities are extremely important for the future development of the academic study of esotericism, because it is the only way for our research to meet the object, becoming more exact and empirical.

Fortunately, nowadays, esotericists themselves often look for contacts with academia and I will use Russian experience to illustrate this idea. In modern Russia esotericists are the usual guests at academic conferences and lectures dedicated to the study of esotericism. Some of them are also academic researchers who look at esotericism from an ambivalent position: both as a researcher and as an object for such research. Of course, the Russian esoteric community has its own specific nature. The active and open development of esotericism here began in the 1980-s with the changes in politics and ideology (known as 'perestroika'). Until that time, there were no esoteric journals or conferences dedicated to the study of esotericism, although there were a number of esoteric groups that had formed a Soviet 'occult underground'. From the 1980's onward, both esotericism and its study in academia have demonstrated prominent growth, and many esotericists were involved in the academic study of esotericism. As an example of the involvement of the members of esoteric groups in the academic activities in contemporary Russia, I will use three conferences, which were more or less academic, and which took place in Moscow in 2013.

The first conference, which is called 'Ways of Gnosis: Mystical and Esoteric Traditions from Antiquity to the Present Time', was completely academic and was organized by the Association for Study of Esotericism and Mysticism (ASEM). A number of members of different esoteric groups (of

course, with proper academic degrees) presented their papers at this conference, and some visited this conference to hear some reports. Among these groups were the *Lectorium Rosicrucianum*, a number of masonic organizations and some others. Two other conferences were not so close to academia and were conducted by different esoteric groups. One of them, the so-called 'Castalia Club' (a group of Moscow esotericists whose interests are related to Crowley, Hesse and Jung), organized a conference dedicated to the meaning of different symbolic systems in history of esotericism. Although the leader of the Castalia, O. Thelemkii (from Thelema, the teaching created by A. Crowley), is not a professional academic researcher, he positions himself as a Jungian analytic and a researcher of Jung's legacy. Most of all, Castalia itself explicitly pretends to develop the study of esotericism in the paradigm of Eranos. The third conference was also performed by an esoteric group, Ordo Templi Orientis, and was called 'Initiatic Organizations, Esotericism and Magic in Contemporary Russia'. Conferences like these two had taken place in Moscow not only in 2013 but also in several previous years. Although the esoteric groups conducted these conferences, their organizers tended to invite researchers from academia and encourage a dialog between academic researchers and esotericists. Of course, not all reports presented at these conferences meet academic standards, but organizers usually select only a few papers for final publication so, finally, the proceedings look like the proceedings of an academic event.

We can see here a dual tendency related to the study of esotericism. On the one hand, esotericists have an interest in academic research dedicated to the study of esotericism, and this research can change esoteric community which tends to absorb its own image from academic works. On the other hand, esotericists themselves try to make their works more subtle and more rational, and advance them to meet academic standards. It is especially interesting in this sense that for those esotericists in contemporary Russia, the source of inspiration was found in the works of Eranos, a group of researchers that was so criticized by Wouter Hanegraaff for being 'outdated'.

Such conferences as those mentioned above obviously demonstrate an importance in communication between the scholars and esotericists in the academic study of esotericism. Esoteric semi-academic conferences dedicated to the study of esotericism have several important meanings. First of all, they provide a perfect opportunity to approbate any type of academic research, because a researcher can use the feedback of the esoteric community to gain a new perspective and update his or her research. In addition, during such conferences, researchers from academia have a good chance to obtain new information about the esoteric community from the primary source. It is also provides one more chance for communication within academia itself, a chance for new publications and for the development of this academic field. Finally, such conferences change the esoteric community, making it more subtle and reflective.

2.2. Contemporary alternatives to the Hanegraaff's approach

Integration of insider and researcher positions can be very productive both in study of esotericism and in study of religion. It is especially important when we speak about study of such secluded groups as some forms of Buddhism, Wicca or Freemasonry. For example, Alexandra David-Néel's works on Buddhism were very important for the development of studies in this field. Authors, such as A. Versluis [9] and J. Pearson [1] have earnestly shown in their publications that the collaboration of researchers and insiders is not only useful for the future development of academic studies in the field of esotericism and new religious movements, but is also necessary for effective and ethical work.

J. Pearson pointed in her article *'Going Native in Reverse': The Insider as Researcher in British Wicca* that nowadays insiders often work to develop their analytical and critical mind and learn academic methods to make their studies and understanding of esotericism deeper than before. For them, the academic study of esotericism is not just a way for legitimization, it is a path to obtain new insights about their school, current or tradition. Being involved in the academic study of esotericism, insiders can start 'going native in reverse' and become not only an object but also a subject of academic work. Pearson argues that "insider perspective is at least as valuable as that one of outsider" and combination of insider and outsider perspectives can "move us toward a study of religion which provides a depth of understanding which is both ethical and informative, and which denies the value of neither the religious community nor that of the academy" [1].

Arthur Versluis, from his side, emphasizes the importance of different perspectives produced by different points of view on esotericism. He also develops the concept of 'sympathetic empiricism' as a methodology for studies in the field of esotericism: "Here I'm arguing that in the study of esotericism more generally, and specifically in the field of mysticism, it is essential for scholars to engage at minimum in a process of imaginative participation. Sympathetic empiricism represents a middle ground between historiographic objectification on the one hand, and phenomenological subjectification on the other. Sympathetic empiricism means that one seeks, as much as possible, to enter into and understand the phenomenon one is studying from the inside out." [9]

We can see now that contemporary trends, at least in the UK and the USA, are closely related to recognizing the undoubted importance of insider perspective in the study of esotericism. This approach today has its own followers, and the idea that in modern society we cannot ignore an interpenetration of academia and esoteric groups looks very earnest, especially if we keep in mind that more and more members of esoteric groups are now training as academic scholars to 'go native in reverse'. I usually call this approach 'English and American approach' because most of the scholars defending it are from English speaking countries, especially from the USA, the United Kingdom and other English-speaking countries. This approach has its

roots in the works of authors such as W. James, L. Thorndike and F. Yates. It was also influenced by ideas of Eranos, especially by M. Eliade who had moved to the USA in 1956 and was one of the founders of so-called 'Chicago school'.

Let us try to go further and define the basic principles of this approach in the academic study of esotericism. These principles are as following:

- positive attitude of personal esoteric interests and spiritual experience of scholars;
- idea that personal experience can enrich one's research bringing deeper understanding and insider's perspective;
- integration of esotericists in academic community through 'going native in reverse' process;
- intention to integrate emic and etic perspectives to create a holistic image of the object;
- close communication with esoteric community that is often understood here as the most important consumer of research in the field of the esoteric studies;
- esotericism is described here as an important part of Western culture that influences its other spheres (Science, art, spirituality etc.);
- criticism of reductionism and 'hyperintellectual objectification' in the study of esotericism.

Followers of such approach usually are not afraid of being 'too esoteric' or 'wearing two hats in the same time'. Instead, they criticize researchers who tend to crucify esotericism as 'superstition' and try to describe it using reductionistic explanations. "The time for the kind of rationalist cataloguing of 'superstitious errors of the past' <...> is long past," argues Versluis [9]. From their point of view, integration of critical and analytical mind of researcher with personal experience and deep understanding of insider is the best way to create a holistic view of such complex phenomenon as esotericism, the view that will be useful not only in academia but also for those who are interested in esotericism because of their personal reasons.

Of course, we must admit that this approach has its problems too. The most important of them is the problem of subjectification that can lead a researcher from academic study to preaching his or her esoteric ideas. Nevertheless, from my point of view, this problem is highly overestimated. Of course, our goal is to meet the strict standards of academic research but after all it is not so big deal if some authors fall into 'phenomenological subjectification'. In any case, we can use their works as primary sources and these works will still reveal to us something new about esotericism. On the other hand, hypercritical, reductionistic or even 'overdocumented and hyperacademic' work is often based on completely wrong understanding of its subject, so nothing new can be found there at all. If we must choose one of these poles, we should better accept dangers of being 'too esoteric' than accept a production of vapid works leading readers to misunderstanding of esotericism.

3. Conclusions

In this article, two main contemporary approaches in the study of esotericism were described and analyzed. The first one is presented by authors such as Wouter Hanegraaff, whose methodology is based on the strict distinction and opposition of 'emic' and 'etic' perspectives. From this point of view, nowadays the most important problem in the esoteric studies is separation of insider and academic perspectives on esotericism. This separation is also understood here as the only way for the academic study of esotericism to be recognized in academia.

However, another approach is also widespread among scholars today. This alternative approach appeals to combination of 'emic' and 'etic' perspectives. Authorities such as A. Versluis and J. Pearson are the most famous of its advocates and their arguments should not be ignored. From their point of view, we should not say about an opposition of 'emic' and 'etic' perspectives but rather we should try to combine both of them. The same idea can be found in methodology that was used on meetings of Eranos circle and therefore we can describe it as the core of the 'Eranos paradigm' in the esoteric studies. But we should keep in mind that such approach is not just 'an outdated paradigm' (as Hanegraaff tends to criticize it), but rather, a 'research programme' that can be at least as useful for future development of the academic study of esotericism as any other.

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