

Academe and Esotericism: The Problem of Authority

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Since Davis is, as you know, the site of one of the most prestigious enology programs in the U.S., the following analogy suggests itself to me. Suppose that at some point in time the study of wine writing becomes a matter of academic interest. A large and flourishing specialty begins to arise that discusses writing about the subject from the days of Petronius to the latest issue of *Wine Spectator*. But there is one extremely peculiar feature of this field of inquiry. None of those who study this literature are allowed to taste wine. If anyone happens to have done so, he is immediately suspect because he is no longer an impartial scholar, but a participant with some vested interest in the discussion. Indeed the stricture goes still further: it is not permitted in this discipline even to admit that you believe in the existence of wine. It is a matter of strict policy to maintain a rigorous agnosticism about whether there is such a thing as wine or not. Not only the taste and smell of this elusive commodity, but even the question of its very existence, are to be kept at a remote distance. To do otherwise would, according to the arbiters of scholarly wisdom in this field, cast serious doubts upon one's intellectual integrity. There are in fact a few among these scholars who have tasted wine, but it would be lethal to their careers to admit that they have done so.

It must have dawned upon most or all of you by this point this analogy has a double significance, because wine is a longstanding metaphor for the spirit in a number of esoteric traditions. And it must also have dawned upon you that what I am drawing here is a caricature of the current state of academic inquiry into esotericism. Or is it a caricature?

From a personal point of view, I must say that I regard the interest shown by academe in the Western esoteric traditions with more than a little bit of ambivalence. To begin with, this is because the professors — if you will permit me to say such a thing in this august company — often seem to resemble Rappaccini's daughter in Hawthorne's story. As you may remember, Rappaccini is an eccentric Italian doctor who raises his daughter to have no contact with the outside world. Through some artifice, he's even managed to raise her so that she is immune to poison, but her own touch is poisonous. So has the touch of academic inquiry proved more than often.

In this regard I'm thinking of two disciplines that are fairly close to the field that is the subject of this conference: philosophy and theology. There was a time when both these disciplines sat at the pinnacle of intellectual effort. Theology, you may remember, was once known as "queen of the sciences." (In researching this article, I ran a Google search for the phrase "queen of the sciences": most of the results gave this honor now to mathematics.) And a contemporary reader who goes back to Plato and Aristotle and other ancient texts and discovers the reverence they felt for philosophy is apt to be somewhat puzzled. Philosophy giving actual guidance for life? Philosophy being the summit of intellectual inquiry? It has not held that position for centuries now.

What happened to these disciplines? To answer this question would take us far afield. Some contend that philosophy, like a good mother, gave birth to any number of other disciplines — remember science 200 years ago was known as "natural philosophy" — and, as it were, exhausted herself in so doing. But the answer may be simpler than that. All human activity, it seems, begins as play and ends as

work. Philosophy was at its most vital when it was the province of a bunch of Greeks wasting time in the marketplace; now with its chairs and associations and official journals, it looks rather moribund.

Theology, on the other hand, began to diminish when it became not only intellectually respectable to doubt the existence of God but intellectual disreputable to believe in him — a process that probably began with the Enlightenment but certainly has reached its culmination today. Scientistic thinkers — and by this I mean not scientists but those who hold up science as a kind of pseudoreligion — often make pronouncements about religious experience that are as ignorant and ill-informed as those of creationists are about biology. But the creationists are laughing-stocks while the advocates of scientistic materialism command the awe of mainstream intellectuals.

I could go on more about philosophy and theology, but my point here is really that I would personally prefer to see Western esotericism escape the fate of these two disciplines. That it has done so up to this point has largely been due to the ironic favor of contempt. By ignoring and dismissing esotericism, by excluding it from academic inquiry until extremely recently, the professors enabled the esoteric traditions to stay alive. They were pursued and studied only by those who felt them to be of personal and vital significance. I wonder if these traditions will be able to survive now that they have become, at least to some minor degree, intellectually respectable.

What, then, is the danger? At this point I need to bring up the distinction between what are called the *etic* and *emic* approaches to the study of religion.¹ The *emic* has to do with “the believer’s point of view.” Any study of a religion must at least take into account how it seems to those who practice it, rather than, say, denouncing it as devil-worship or primitive savagery or cultism or whatever you like.

The *etic*, by contrast, is the familiar scholarly approach. It is neutral, impartial, and at least to the degree possible in such areas, quasi-scientific. Wouter Hanegraaff, in his methodological discussion in his *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, says, “The final results of scholarly research should be expressed in etic language, and formulated in such a way as to permit criticism and falsification both by reference to the emic material and as regards their coherence and consistency in the context of the general etic discourse.”²

It is this “general etic discourse” that poses the problem. The general etic discourse, like it or not, presupposes scientific materialism and religious agnosticism. To espouse any other point of view can be, from a professional point of view, dangerous and possibly lethal.

Naturally, there is some need for falsifiability in academic discourse. A cult leader says that the Space Brothers will arrive June 6, 2006. When this does not happen, it leaves the leader open to some amount of criticism. If he is a prophet, his prophecy has failed, quite apart from how believers may justify this failure to themselves. This aspect of academic inquiry is, I trust, reasonably uncontroversial.

But what happens when one approaches esotericism? The very word comes from Greek roots meaning “further in,” and I would suggest that one dimension of the meaning of this term has to do with the need to go within oneself, through meditation or contemplation, to verify or refute these ideas. But this is precisely what the etic approach has put off-limits. Moreover, what are we to do with secret societies and oral traditions, for which the evidence may be — is likely to be — lacking?

Let me take a reasonably simple example. In an article on eighteenth-century Masonry, René Guénon comes up against the issue of whether there were in fact “Unknown Superiors” — whether in incarnate or disincarnate form. Guénon, of course, not being a conventional scholar, has no qualms about stating his own opinion: “All of this will no doubt seem fabulous to certain anti-Masons, those historians

¹ For this account I am relying on Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 6–7.

² *Ibid.*

scrupulously faithful to the ‘positivist method’ for whom the existence of Unknown Superiors is only a ‘false Masonic claim’; but we have our reasons for not subscribing to this too...definitive judgment, and we are not aware of having put forth here anything that is not rigorously exact; those who wish are free to refer to written documents alone and thereby guard all their ‘negative convictions!’”³

What’s the scholar to do? The existence of the Unknown Superiors might be a matter even of conventional historical interest; but as Guénon implies, there is none of the documentation that the historian relies on. And particularly if we are dealing with societies and individuals that were doing their best to keep their existence secret, the absence of evidence hardly constitutes evidence for the falsity of these claims.

Certainly the conventional scholar cannot, by the rules of his discipline, rely on hearsay or indirect evidence. There is probably no dealing with this issue from a purely conventional point of view. But to return to the perspective of the practicing esotericist, the scholar’s doubts should not have the final say in all cases.

To take another example: there is a famous story in the Talmud that speaks of four rabbis who made the ascent into Paradise. One died, one went mad, one became a heretic. Only one, the great sage Rabbi Akiva, “departed unhurt.” In advance he had warned the others, “When you arrive at the slabs of pure transparent marble, do not say: Water, Water! For it is said, ‘He that speaketh falsehood shall not be established before Mine eyes’ (Ps. 101:7).”⁴

What does this mean? Obviously this has to do with visionary experience, and please notice that this is *verifiable* visionary experience. That is to say, far from being subjective or imaginary, it is treated as real: one does certain practices and achieves certain predictable results, just as if one stays on the road to San Francisco, one will reach San Francisco. But what’s a conventional scholar to do with this? It would certainly not be difficult to go on and on about the story in the context of early *hekhalot* or *merkavah* mysticism, but what does the experience mean?

The scholar who wants to go past the mere letter has two choices. He or she can attempt this experience for himself or herself. This is not easy to do, if only because the actual practices of mystics in the time of Akiva are not well understood. Another, more feasible, approach might be to seek out a practicing Kabbalist for some illumination, but by and large the scholarship of esotericism has avoided this solution also, as if it were the lovely but toxic daughter of Rappaccini. Esoteric scholarship is, with some limited exceptions, the study of dead material — of Kabbalists, mystics, visionaries who have long gone to the grave. Their living counterparts are frequently treated as if they did not exist.

Gershom Scholem, one of the first and greatest scholars of esotericism, certainly seems to have suffered from this difficulty. His treatment of the Kabbalah is wide-ranging and comprehensive until we reach the modern era, where he has to pretend that Kabbalah no longer exists, that it ceased to be anything but the plaything of genteel occultists after, say, the eighteenth century. Here is the comment of an old Jerusalem rabbi on this kind of scholarship: “They are accountants. That is, like accountants, they know where the wealth is, its location and value. But it doesn’t belong to them. They cannot use it.”⁵

For my part, I have to say that I have practically never read anything by contemporary scholars of esotericism that suggested they knew what they were talking about from an experiential point of view. There are certainly exceptions, but remarkably few. I’m not, by the way, willing to draw the obvious conclusion from this: that there are no practitioners of the esoteric traditions among those with scholarly

³ René Guénon, “The Strict Observance and the Unknown Superiors,” in Guénon, *Studies in Freemasonry and the Compagnonnage*, trans. Henry Fohr et al. (Hillsdale, N.Y.: Sophia Perennis, 2004), 137.

⁴ Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Y.H. Rawnitzky, *Book of Legends/Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken, annotated edition, 1992), 235.

⁵ Herbert Weiner, *9 1/2 Mystics* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 62.

interests. In fact I suspect that there are a great many. But they frequently seem to feel the need to disguise their involvement. (Scholem, as a matter of fact, published an early text on the Kabbalah from a personal perspective, but later regretted the decision and bought up all the copies.)⁶ We go back to the strange little fable with which I began this talk: they're scholars of wine writing who can't admit that they've actually tasted wine.

One of the most nakedly honest descriptions of this issue comes in a book that's over fifteen years old: Tanya Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*. In this, what is for the most part a conventional anthropological study of contemporary witches and magicians in Britain published by a major university press, Luhrmann makes an interesting revelation. At one point she felt the need for a more "emic" approach, so she actually began to do the practices associated with these traditions (which may be loosely described as "Western ritual magic"). And, astonishingly, she began to experience results. "I woke early one morning to see six druids beckoning to me from the window. This was not a dream, but a hypnopompic vision. I saw the druids as clearly as I see my desk. And while the momentary vision frightened me, it also pleased me deeply, because it taught me experientially what I had learned intellectually: that when people said that they 'saw' Christ, or the Goddess, they were not necessarily speaking metaphorically."

Luhrmann goes on: "The only reason I continued to think of myself as an anthropologist rather than as a witch, was that I had a strong disincentive against asserting that rituals had an effect upon the material world....I stood to gain nothing by belief except power which I was told that I could exercise unconsciously even if I made no explicit acceptance, but I stood to lose credibility and career by adherence."⁷

This is a striking revelation. Indeed the book displays a strange tension throughout. Although Luhrmann concedes that magic often does seem to work, she still finds herself forced to explain why magicians believe in it when it *doesn't* work? Would Harvard University Press have published her book had she done otherwise? I don't think so.

All these considerations raise an interesting issue: to what extent do we believe — or disbelieve — as a result of external pressure? But that's a subject that's beyond the scope of this paper.

I don't mean to single out Luhrmann for criticism here. Indeed she is to be congratulated both for her willingness to explore and for her honesty in describing her own thought processes. They are extremely revealing. However unremunerative the academic life may seem as a career, it's probably going to be both more lucrative and more socially prestigious to be an anthropologist than a witch. It is also interesting to see, however, that Luhrmann reached a point where she would have to choose between one path or the other. To study esotericism academically, in whatever form, it would appear, one cannot actually *be* an esotericist. But then I suppose one can't be a Bushman in order to study Bushmen, and so on.

What methodological concerns am I raising here? Am I seriously suggesting that one has to be a magical adept in order to study esotericism? No. But it might be of use to have some experience of the inner worlds that are the chief concern of the field.

Indeed I don't have any real recommendations for the academic side of the subject. Professors will continue to study things as they will, and there is no reason to upset oneself about it. Moreover, scholarship, even of the conventional kind, can be extremely useful. It's valuable to know when so-and-so was born, whom he studied with, what books he read and what books he wrote. I have no quarrel with that aspect of the situation.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ T.M. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 319–21.

But, as I said earlier, I'm concerned about something else. Academic study can be — to use a rather loaded word — somewhat imperialistic in its approach. It has had a way, witting or unwitting, of pushing itself forward as the only legitimate approach to the study of a subject. And soon the entire topic is reduced to a kind of Flatland, where only one kind of knowing has any authority. This is certainly not my concern alone, nor is it a new one. Here are some words from the Indian scholar I.K. Taimni:

The perception of the deeper truths of life and the inner significance even of the ordinary facts with which we come in contact every day depends not upon reason or the exercise of the lower mind but upon the higher spiritual faculty which is called *buddhi* and which is vaguely referred to as intuition. The intellect may know all the facts but unless and until it is illuminated by *buddhi* it will fail to see their deeper significance. That is why the attitude of the philosophers who lecture every day on the deepest problems of life does not differ appreciably from the attitude of the man on the street. That is why the scientists who daily scan the skies and look into the farthest depths of this vast universe cannot see the insignificance of our human life from the purely physical point of view. That is why we find so many religious teachers preaching Vedanta to their followers and living their life as if this philosophy was a matter of pure academic interest.⁸

This funny word *buddhi* has resonances of its own. We may think of this term as something distinctly Indian, but I might suggest as an aside that it corresponds quite closely to what the medieval philosophers called *intellectus* and what the Hebrew Kabbalists called Binah or Understanding. I might go even further out on a limb and suggest that Plato's famed allegory of the cave is precisely about this contrast between the lower mind and the mind illuminated by *buddhi*. But that would take us too far afield.

In an ideal world — ideal at least from my point of view — the holders of the chairs in all subjects at the great universities of the world would be illumined by this *buddhi*. If it were so, I suspect, many of our civilization's problems that now seem so intractable might disappear, as if by magic. But that seems ridiculously utopian. Rather it's my concern — and it's the chief reason I've chosen to give this talk — that this lower mind against which Taimni warns and which seems so prevalent in academe does not, as it were, infect esotericism. Those who practice it have generally done so against considerable opposition — persecution in the old days, mockery and contempt in the present — but they managed to preserve it nonetheless. It now remains to be seen whether they will withstand the current danger.

What would this kind of, as it were, colonization of esotericism look like? Well, take for example Antoine Faivre's well-known characterizations of the chief features of esotericism. I won't go into them in great detail here, since I'm sure they're familiar to all of you, but they basically include doctrines of correspondence, living nature, imagination as higher faculty, transmutation, concordance, and transmission.⁹ I think these characterizations are extremely useful as heuristic tools, but I also think it would be dangerous to see them as *prescriptive* tools. That is to say, they're valuable in sketching out a general method of approach, but it would be wrong, I think, to rule out some practicing esotericist because he or she does not fit into these categories. A number of the esoteric traditions I'm familiar with have

⁸ I.K. Taimni, *Gayatri: The Daily Religious Practice of the Hindus*, reprint (Adyar, India: Theosophical Publishing House, 2003), 3–4.

⁹ See, e.g., Antoine Faivre, "Introduction I" in Faivre and Jacob Needleman, eds., *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

these characteristics only to a faint degree. And as Arthur Versluis pointed out in a recent paper, there are other characteristics that can arguably be included: the concept of gnosis, for example.¹⁰

I am not singling out any of the scholars I've mentioned here for reproach. In fact, I'd say that they've seemed exquisitely sensitive to these issues. But this may not remain the case if the study of esotericism takes hold in academe over generations to come. If this happens, I think practicing esotericists will have to be very careful about their attitude toward academic scholarship, and use it as only one means of approaching the truths of these traditions. They must also guard against a highly dangerous and also highly contagious tendency — to view reality *only* through the eyes of academic scholarship. To my mind, the ultimate authorities on the esoteric traditions are and must remain its practitioners. There will certainly be an overlap between the scholar and the practitioner, as there has always been. Nonetheless, it seems to me that if an authority is to wear two hats, regardless of what he may do in an academic context, it is that of the practitioner that he should use in defining and reformulating these traditions for current times. Wine writing, after all, is or should ultimately be about wine.

¹⁰ Arthur Versluis, "What Is Esoteric? Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism," *Esoterica* 4, 2002: <<http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeIV/Methods.htm>>; June 6, 2006.