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**Occult Roots of Religious Studies:
An Unexpected Connection between
Non-Hegemonic Currents and Academia¹**

Abstract. The collective monograph *Occult Roots of Religious Studies: On the Influence of Non-Hegemonic Currents*, edited by Yves Mühlematter and Helmut Zander, offers an unconventional perspective on the relationship between the study of religion and non-hegemonic currents (esoteric movements, new religious movements, etc.) in the early stages of religious studies. The authors trace the influence of non-hegemonic currents on the academic interests and methodological approaches of religion scholars from the late 19th to the first half of the 20th century. The central hypothesis of the volume, well-supported by the articles presented in it, asserts that esotericism significantly influenced the development of religious studies, as many scholars were either interested in this worldview or actively participated in esoteric organizations and movements.

The collective monograph *Occult Roots of Religious Studies: On the Influence of Non-Hegemonic Currents on Academia around 1900* was published by De Gruyter in 2021 (Mühlematter and Zander, 2021). This book presents a valuable subject for reflection to scholars in religious studies and historians of the field, even if they do not deal with esoteric subjects directly.

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The book is dedicated to an important and underexplored topic in the history of religious studies, which may even look somewhat scandalous at first glance, but on further reflection reveals itself as perfectly logical. *Occult Roots of Religious Studies* is a loud statement of the fact that the study of religions arose not only from the positivist or Christian paradigms, but was significantly influenced in its development by currents which the subtitle terms *non-hegemonic*. The editors – Yves Mühlematter and Helmut Zander – write about two key points that underlie the book: 1) the origins of religious studies can be found in the plane of esotericism; 2) esotericism is an integral part of the dominant culture rather than the sole property of marginalized and small closed groups. According to them, the influence of esotericism on the formation of religious studies is often ignored despite being easy to trace, and starting with such foundational figures as Max Müller, who was for a time deeply interested in theosophy.

Esoteric ideas impacted the interests of Tantra researcher John Woodroffe and Kabbalah researcher Gershom Sholem. Later, esotericism was studied by authors fascinated by the relevant ideas from the very beginning of their careers, such as Antoine Faivre and Kocku von Stuckrad. This trend persists today, although not many scholars speak openly about their esoteric background. It was not customary to write about this before as well, but some of the occult ideas of the nineteenth century influenced the religious studies of the first half of the twentieth century, for example, evolutionism, an attempt to combine science and religion, finding the common features in different religions. While the authors did not often mention their own esoteric or occult interests in the texts, their biographies are often more informative on this subject. Therefore, one of the book's final chapters is dedicated to the biographies of famous scholars interested in the occult, especially in the Theosophical or Anthroposophical societies and Freemasonry, Perennialism, Martinism, etc. In fact, this chapter is dedicated to biographical references, and it mentions not only those authors about whom there are separate book chapters but also other well-known scholars with an esoteric background.

The book begins with an article by Helmut Zander, one of the co-editors, outlining the boundaries of esotericism as a subject. According to Zander, numerous definitions of esotericism have appeared in the study of religions since the nineteenth century, and the term itself had been in use by practitioners of non-hegemonic spiritual trends even earlier. Moreover, parallel terms to “esotericism”, such as occultism or hermeticism, describe almost the same set of phenomena, which com-

plicates the search for a unified definition even further. “Occultism” is more often associated with modern esoteric movements that combine science and religion or spiritual practices, while “Hermeticism” refers primarily to a tradition that goes back to Neoplatonism. Esotericism itself, meanwhile, has no such distinguishing features, so it is a more voluminous and vague concept.

Modern scholars, Zander argues, can usually treat esotericism as a discursive or even empty concept (depending on the position of a particular adept or researcher). The situation is complicated by the fact that foundational studies in the field of Western esotericism are often significantly less popular outside of their original language environment. For example, the very name of A. Faivre is less known in German-speaking academia, while for the French-speaking audience, he is a paragon. Zander also dwells on the recent theoretical trend to reject the adjective “Western”, and to study esotericism as a universal category, not strictly associated with the Neoplatonic tradition or Western Europe. In rejecting “Western” as a descriptor, scholars have faced the problem of what the noun “esotericism” now means and how to impose it on various spiritual practices and traditions. Instead of trying to squeeze any manifestations of the esoteric from different traditions into a single definition, the author leaves the concept of “esoteric” open, so each researcher can define it in his or her specific way.

The following chapters are dedicated to various well-known scientists, starting with the director of the Academy of the Natural Sciences, Leopoldina – Christian Nees von Esenbeck, who was interested in magnetism and spiritualist exercises during his life. Sections are dedicated to such topics as the esoteric fascination of the translator of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Walter Evans-Wentz; one of the first researchers of Tantra, John Woodroffe, who was also interested in Indian esotericism as a practitioner; the famous Kabbalah researcher Gershom Sholem, who shared many theosophical views, although he dissociated himself from the Theosophical Society of Helena Blavatsky; Paul Masson-Oursel, a representative of comparative religious studies, who proceeded from the standpoint of Perennialism (recognition of the existence of single esoteric wisdom in different religions); and the famous archaeologist and anthroposophist Walter Andrae.

Other chapters are dedicated to a broader range of authors or issues, for example, in the section *The Science of Religion, Folklore Studies, and the Occult Field in Great Britain (1870–1914): Some Observations on Competition and Cain-Abel Conflicts* Marko Frenschkowski addresses British folklorists, ethnographers and theologians – Andrew

Lang, Edward Tylor, and others, who did not always agree with the esoteric ideas of the occultists of that time but at least discussed those ideas. The author cites the diary entries of Tylor for 1872, where he writes about visiting spiritualists' sessions and his interest in mental phenomena. Although it was not supported by sufficient evidence, Tylor could nonetheless believe in the effectiveness of spiritism as a practice. Similarly, esotericism (more precisely – magic) was one of the key subjects of interest of James Frazer, who even changed the title of his key work from *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (1890) in the second edition to *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1900).

The article *Academic Study of Kabbalah and Occultist Kabbalah* by Boaz Huss is dedicated to different approaches to studying Kabbalah – the academic and the occult respectively. The author focuses on Gershom Sholem, who, although negative about his contemporary occultist kabbalists, was nevertheless more loyal to the earlier Christian Kabbalah. On the other hand, it was the occultists' idea of Kabbalah as an eternal and universal wisdom, the same within esoteric teachings of various traditions, that influenced not only the New Age understanding of Kabbalah but also that of some modern Jewish neo-Kabbalistic movements. In addition to Gershom Sholem, the author also considers the work of Adolphe Franck–Sholem's brightest predecessor. Franck was also interested in other esoteric trends, wrote works on Paracelsus, Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, and Martinez de Pascualli, and widely quoted the periodical Theosophical and Martinist journals in his works.

Huss also mentions one of the few representatives of Eastern Europe named in the book: the Romanian researcher of Kabbalah and esotericism Moses Gaster. Gaster was, however, forced to leave his homeland and move to Britain in 1885 because of his active participation in the Zionist movement. In general, it should be noted that the lack of information about Eastern European scholars is one of the biggest shortcomings of the book: most of the authors mentioned here worked in the West, such as Anna Kamensky, who was born in the Russian Empire but did not live there from an early age and whose academic career was primarily associated with Switzerland. Even Mircea Eliade, perhaps the best-known Romanian scholar of religion, who, like A. Faivre, supported Perennialism and paid much attention to the study of esotericism, is mentioned only in passing. Well-known Russian-speaking authors, such as Buddhologists Isaac Schmidt and Fyodor Shcherbat-skoy, I-Ching translator Yulian Shchutsky, and Tibetologist Yuri Roerich (son of the famous spouses Nicholas and Helena Roerich), are not

mentioned, even though their interest in esotericism was as powerful—and as influential—as the interest of the numerous Western scholars presented in the book. Moreover, it should be noted that the academic study of esotericism in the post-Soviet countries began, to a large extent, as an initiative of Eastern studies scholars who worked in the academic schools founded by the aforementioned researchers, which ensured that post-Soviet researchers entirely avoided the current theoretical problems of globalization of esotericism and abandonment of the adjective “Western”, because they incorporated the study of esoteric currents from the very beginning.

In general, the book is outstanding, to the extent that we can conclude that the initiators of its publication have made a significant contribution to the history of religious studies and deserve a serious and prolonged discussion of their work. This is made much easier by the fact that the book is available for free on the publisher’s website, which is a very important step in the context of current prices for Western academic publications. Despite some shortcomings related to the uneven coverage of different regions and thematic fields (more attention in the book is dedicated to Western Europe and Theosophy, respectively), the monograph is significant and introduces little-known facts about the interest of famous scholars in the early twentieth century to esotericism and the impact of these interest on their research studies previously. Of course, this approach is helpful for a better understanding of the history of religious studies and can be applied to other studies of religion, particularly Ukrainian.

Посилання / References

Mühlematter, Y. and Zander, H., eds. (2021), *Occult Roots of Religious Studies: On the Influence of Non-Hegemonic Currents on Academia around 1900*, De Gruyter Oldenbourg, Berlin and Boston.