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THE OCCULT UNDERGROUND: Strategies of Power and Antinomianism

Introduction

In a candlelit room covered with heavy incense, five persons sit cross-legged in a circle on the floor. They are dressed in flowing black robes and have their eyes closed, as if in meditation. After a few minutes one of them rises to his feet and moves into the centre of the circle, facing east. He draws a deep breath and then intones the names “Atay, Aiwass, Malkuth, Ve Gedulah, Ve Geburah, Le Olam, Amen”, while touching his forehead, chest, phallus, right shoulder, left shoulder, and finally clasping the hands. The intonation of the names is deep and powerful, and it feels as if the whole room is vibrating. He then proceeds to drawing a pentagram in the air at the four quarters of the compass with a wand, while intoning a name of God after the drawing of each pentagram: “Ye-ho-wau, Adónaí, Eheieh, and Agla”. Returning to the middle, he stands with his feet together and the arms outstretched in imitation of the slain Osiris, and calls out: “Before me Raphael, behind Gabriel, on my right hand Michael, on my left hand Auriel. For about me flames the Pentagram, and in the column stands the six-rayed star”. He then repeats the first part of the ritual and concludes with “Amen”. Silently, he resumes his seat on the floor, and a few minutes pass, before a second person lifts up a book, and starts to recite a poem by the occultist Aleister Crowley, called *Hymn to Pan*:

Thrill with lissome lust of the light,
O man! My man!
Come careering out of the night
Of Pan! Io Pan!
Io Pan! Io Pan! Come over the sea
From Sicily and from Arcady!
Roaming as Bacchus, with fauns and pards
And nymphs and satyrs for thy guards,
On a milk-white ass, come over the sea
To me, to me ...

The poem continues in a rhythmic and ecstatic fashion, culminating with the words:

I am Pan! Io Pan! Io Pan Pan! Pan!
I am thy mate, I am thy man,
Goat of thy flock, I am gold, I am god,

Flesh to thy bone, flower to thy rod.
With hoofs of steel I race on the rocks
Through solstice stubborn to equinox.
And I rave; and I rape and I rip and I rend
Everlasting, world without end,
Mannikin, maiden, mænad, man,
In the might of Pan.
Io Pan! Io Pan Pan! Pan! Io Pan!

A few minutes of silence follows, and then the same person slowly starts to chant the words “Io Pan, Io Pan Pan!” over and over again, and the other persons join in. The chanting becomes louder and faster and one person starts to beat on a drum in the same rhythm as the chanting. All present have their eyes closed and visualise the Greek fertility god Pan and projects this image on the person who recited the poem. The chanting goes faster and faster until it finally explodes into ecstasy and the leader screams out “lashtal”, while quickly taking hold of a goblet of wine and a plate with five small pieces of bread. Each member eats a piece of the bread and drinks wine from the goblet in silence. After a few more minutes the same person that performed the opening ritual stands up and performs the same ritual over again.

The ritual is called Mass of Pan and its purpose is to invoke the powers of that particular pagan god. It was performed in Gothenburg, Sweden by members of an international magical order called Ordo Templi Orientis, or Order of the Oriental Templars (OTO). The OTO is one of many occultist societies which are active in Western society, and it would be fairly safe to state that such organisations exist in virtually every major city in the West today, even though little research has been done to establish the exact numbers of practitioners of this particular form of Western spirituality. In his pioneering work *The Occult Underground* published in 1974 James Webb argued that there exists a dichotomy between the “Establishment” and the “Occult Underground”, a dichotomy essentially between reason and “rejected knowledge”.

But what is this all about? What is occultism? Does really an “occult underground” exist? This paper sets out to discuss these questions with the objectives to describe and discuss contemporary occultism and thus shed light on misconceptions and alternative understandings of a significant strand of contemporary religious belief. The article is divided into two parts. In the first (longer) part, occultism is placed within the broader context of Western esotericism, and it is discussed how historians of religions understand the term occultism. This paper also discusses what might be understood by an “occult underground” and what its relationship is with other forms of Western culture. The second (shorter) part illustrates a number of key elements of contemporary occultism, exemplified through the beliefs and practices of Dragon Rouge, the Swedish occultist movement.

PART ONE

Western esotericism

Occultism is frequently associated with sinister and evil practices in the public mind, and it is not uncommon to encounter the notion in popular media that occultism is merely another name for Satanism. This negative view is, however, often based on misconceptions of what occultism actually stands for and it often shows little or no knowledge of the scholarly approach to this particular current in Western spirituality. The majority of scholars who deal with occultism tend to use the term specifically in relation with 19th century developments within a broader field of research called Western esotericism.

In current scholarly usage, the term Western esotericism refers to a particular form of thought which has been present in Western culture at least since the Renaissance, with roots stretching back into late antiquity. Esotericism can be described as a form of spirituality which stresses the importance of the individual's quest for knowledge, or *gnosis*, of the divine aspect of existence. Furthermore, esotericism is characterised by a holistic world view in which everything is connected through so-called mystical links. Since man is seen as a microcosm of the macrocosm, increased knowledge about the natural world is considered to lead to increased self-knowledge. In the same manner, self-knowledge is seen as a corresponding knowledge of the divinely permeated natural world. The idea of mystical links is fundamental to the "Occult sciences" (a notion dating from the 16th century) such as astrology, magic and alchemy, in which the knowledge of and manipulation with the links form the basic *modus operandi* of these so-called sciences. For instance, in the case of alchemy the transmutation of base metals such as lead to gold was not merely interpreted from a chemical perspective, but also in a corresponding spiritual sense in which the transmutation was seen as a spiritual process of the alchemist him/herself leading from an un-enlightened soul (lead) to enlightenment (gold). In a similar way, magic and astrology presupposes the idea that outer phenomena such as planets and stars influence the human psyche, and through the manipulation of the mystical links it is believed that favourable influences can be attracted, while negative influences in their turn might be averted. This idea is illustrated by the example of the Renaissance philosopher and esotericist Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) who describes a magical working. According to Ficino, destructive forms of melancholia are often caused by an unsound influence of the negative aspects of the planet Saturn (which in astrology is seen as a melancholic planet), and in order to diminish these negative influences, the magician should attract the more benevolent and joyful influences from a planet such as Venus instead. The attraction of Venus' influence is achieved through the reciting of poems and hymns dedicated to the goddess Venus, through being surrounded by material objects corresponding to Venus (such as silver jewellery and statues and paintings of the goddess Venus), and through eating food which corresponds to Venus such as white meat from poultry and fish and sugar. According to esoteric theory, it is

through their capacity of being specially linked to the planet Venus – through the mystical links – that these particular items possess the ability to draw down the influence from that particular planet.

These ideas can be encountered already during late antiquity, if not earlier, in religious traditions such as Hermetism and Gnosticism, but it was not until the Renaissance that a wide range of traditions such as Christian mysticism, mediaeval magic, hermetism/hermeticism, neo-platonism, astrology, alchemy and Christian Kabbalah were seen as not only compatible with each other, but even as different branches of one and the same tree. This tree was seen as an ancient philosophy, *philosophia perennis*, which was believed to have survived from the remotest times of man's history.

Western esotericism should not, however, be understood as a single clearly identifiable tradition, but rather as a scholarly construct along the lines of Wittgenstein's family resemblance theory expressed through a wide range of currents such as Paracelsism, Naturphilosophie, Rosicrucianism and Theosophy. Modern examples of esoteric currents include occultism, neo-paganism and the New Age movement. According to the French scholar Antoine Faivre, the esoteric form of thought is characterised by six constitutive components: First, the idea of correspondences. These are symbolic and concrete correspondences between all the visible and invisible parts of the universe. Second, living nature: the entire universe is a living organism traversed by a network of sympathies or antipathies that link all natural things (usually described as mystical links). Third, imagination and mediations: to the esotericist the imaginative faculty of man is of incalculable importance as a tool for spiritual enlightenment. Connected to this is the importance attributed to rituals, symbolic images, and intermediary spirits between man and the Godhead. Fourth, the experience of transmutation: just as it is considered to be possible to transmute base metals into gold, so it is considered to be possible to refine the spiritual properties in man and to achieve enlightenment or *Unio Mystica* with the Godhead. Fifth, the praxis of the concordance: the syncretistic approach to two or more traditions that aims at obtaining superior illumination. Sixth, and last, transmission: the esoteric knowledge must be transmitted from a teacher to a pupil (Faivre 1994: 10–15). This last component includes the notion of initiation that became an important feature of Western esotericism from the eighteenth century onwards, especially in organisations such as the Order of Freemasons (1717) and later magical movements such as The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (1887).

Occultism as a secularised form of esotericism

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, the Dutch scholar, who tends to accentuate the importance of *Gnosis* or soteriological knowledge of esotericism, argues that Faivre's constitutive components are only valid for Renaissance esotericism, and that the later forms of esotericism change due to the impact of secularisation and the disenchantment of Western society. According to Hanegraaff, the

secularised forms of esotericism differ from the earlier forms in five aspects (Hanegraaff 2004: 489–516). First, due to the impact of scientific materialism and positivism, the understanding of the correspondences changed from a divinely permeated system linking together the micro- and macrocosm worlds, to a disenchanted world view ruled by impersonal laws of causality. Second, the traditionally Christian syncretism of esotericism was challenged by the influx of Eastern religiosity, most notably Hinduism and Buddhism. Third, the impact of the theories of evolution, which in esotericism assumed the form of a belief in not only the spiritual progress of the individual, but also in the belief of the spiritual evolution of mankind (a prime characteristic of the New Age-movement). Fourth, the influence of psychology, and in particular the psychology of Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). Concepts and beliefs that earlier were given religious meanings and explanations, became increasingly interpreted as aspects of man's psyche. Jung's theory of the anima and animus, the importance attributed to the unconscious, the process of individuation, and the theory of archetypes can, in more or less modified forms, be found in many forms of contemporary esotericism. Finally, the fifth aspect through which secularised forms of esotericism differ from Renaissance esotericism – the impact of capitalist market economy on the domain of spirituality. The perhaps clearest example of this impact is the New Age movement which can be seen as a spiritual supermarket (Hanegraaff 2004: 489–519). One might add the importance placed on personal religious experiences and the will of each individual to these five new characteristics. The latter is seen in many contemporary forms of esotericism as a divine or supernatural aspect of man (Bogdan 2007: 16–17).

One of the secularised forms of esotericism – and the one that concerns this essay – is occultism. The word *occultism* derives from the Latin *occultus* (“hidden, secret”, from *occulere*, “to cover over, hide, conceal”) and it tends to be used among scholars to denote specific developments within Western esotericism during the 19th and 20th centuries. According to Hanegraaff, the term can be used in two senses: a descriptive sense of occultism and an analytic and typological sense: “it is used as referring not only to these currents as such, but to the type of esotericism that they represent, and that is also characteristic of most other esoteric currents from about the mid-19th century onwards (such as spiritualism, modern Theosophy, or new magical currents in the lineage of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, up to and including such recent developments as the New Age movement)” (Hanegraaff 2005: 888). It is in this analytic and typological sense that occultism is being used in the present essay, with a focus on new magical currents.

Occultism, and in particular magical currents, represents a highly eclectic form of esotericism with a strong emphasis on the experiential or practical aspects of esotericism. This practical orientation is made evident through a wide range of techniques aimed at causing altered states of consciousness. These techniques, which often are of a highly ritualistic nature, include evocations and invocations of angels, demons and other entities, astral journeys, meditation on symbols such as tarot cards, sexual magic, and (to a lesser extent) the use of drugs for a spiritual purpose. Apart from these dominantly Western techniques, it is also common to encounter mystical techniques

of Eastern origin, such as various forms of Hindu and Buddhist yoga. What all these various techniques have in common is that they are *practical* as opposed to *theoretical*. In other words, occultism is often something which is *practiced*. The practical orientation of occultist forms of spirituality such as magical currents is often emphasised by the chief exponents of these particular currents. Not only do they emphasise the importance of putting the esoteric knowledge into practice in a general way throughout most of their published works, but it is also significant that *all* the major authorities of these magical currents have published handbooks on how magic should be performed. To a certain extent, the emphasis on the practical aspect of occultism stands in contrast with the more dogmatic emphasis which is to be encountered in many forms of traditional Christianity, especially Protestant forms with their notion of salvation through faith. However, when compared to other modern alternative forms of spirituality it becomes evident that the practical and experiential emphasis is not a unique feature to be encountered only in occultist forms of spirituality. On the contrary, this emphasis is common in most new religious movements with their focus on the individual, in particular from the 1960s onwards. As such, occultism can be seen as a good example of how contemporary forms of alternative spirituality mirror the general trends of modern and post-modern Western society with its shift from community oriented structures, towards individual oriented structures, and from religion to “spirituality”.

The occult underground

In the 1980s and early 1990s a so-called “satanic panic” spread across the United States and parts of Europe. Tales of organised satanic abuse alleged that there was a highly elaborate network of satanists, witches and occultists who indulged in secret rites which included human sacrifice, cannibalism, vampirism, perverse sexual orgies, the sexual abuse of children and the use of illegal drugs (Richardson, Best & Bromley 1991; La Fontaine 1998; Victor 1993). Books such as *Michelle Remembers* (1980) and *Satan’s Underground* (1988) claimed that there was a highly secretive occult underground, with far-reaching connections both into the realms of politics and law enforcement. These ideas were not only propagated by Christian fundamentalist groups and anti-cult groups (as it often is claimed), but also by social workers, the popular press and by secular non-denominational groups. Even though scholars have refuted the allegations and it has been proven without any doubts that no sinister and evil cabal of devil worshippers that systematically devote themselves to illegal activities exists, the negative view of occultism as something suspicious and “evil” still persists in the public mind. Scholars have proposed various explanations for the widespread acceptance of these allegations (despite the fact that the allegations were not based on any known or witnessed events, but on allegations that such events had happened). The most significant explanation – in the present context – is that the allegations in fact have very little to do with self-professed occultists, satanists and witches but instead are symptomatic of the perceived problems of Western society itself. In other words, the satanic panic of the 1980s illustrates the perceived

threat towards Western morals as a consequence of major changes in post-modern Western society. Or to put it in the words of La Fontaine:

Sociologists have explained the allegations, in both the United States and Britain, as a 'moral panic'. This is not, as some people seem to think, a way of talking about mass hysteria, but a technical term coined by sociologists to refer to social movements that define actions, groups or persons as threats to fundamental social values. A moral panic is the construction of a social problem as something more serious than a routine issue of social control (La Fontaine 1998: 19–20).

The "Satanist" can be seen as a scapegoat who personifies the fears of Western society, much in the same manner as the "Muslim fundamentalist" today embodies the perceived threat to Western culture in the public mind. Just as the public image of Muslims often rests upon prejudices and a striking lack of knowledge, so the understanding of the "Satanist" in the 80s and early 90s was characterised by a lack of differentiation and knowledge. "Satanist" could thus include anything from self-professed satanists to occultists and witches, even though these three categories might in fact have very little in common. The notion of a satanic or occult underground, as expressed by the believers of the "satanic panic", thus rested on beliefs which had very little to do with reality.

The very notion of an occult underground can thus be questioned – if understood as an organised cult of child molesters and cannibals. However, if occultism is used in the current scholarly fashion to denote secularised forms of esotericism then it is possible to actually consider occultists as forming an "underground" of their own. Indeed, the term "occult underground" was used at the title for James Webb's now classical study of various forms occultist currents published in 1974, in which he claimed that "the dichotomy of Underground and Establishment is one of the most important concepts to have emerged from recent social changes" (Webb 1974: 2). According to Webb the very essence of the occult underground is its opposition to the so-called establishment:

The occult is rejected knowledge: that is, and Underground whose basic unity is that of opposition to an Establishment of Powers That Are (Webb 1974: 192).

From this perspective, then, it is thus possible to view occultism as an underground, but in order to do this it is necessary to discuss what is actually meant by the term "underground" in more detail, and how it might be possible to use the term in connection with occultism. In popular parlance, the term underground – when used to designate a social group – often implies some sort of group of people who are considered to either be in opposition to mainstream society, or to exist as it were outside the bounds of the society. As such, a social underground might be interpreted in terms of a liminal community as understood by Victor Turner. According to Turner, phenomena which in one way or another fall outside the societal structure form the basis of an 'anti-structure'.

Turner enumerates such diverse phenomena as ‘subjugated autochthones, small nations, court jesters, holy mendicants, good Samaritans, millenarian movements, “dharma bums”, matrilinearity in patrilineal systems, patrilinearity in matrilineal systems, and monastic orders as examples of anti-structures (Turner 1991: 125). These liminal occurrences interested Turner from a sociological perspective, and despite their apparent differences they share three important characteristics:

Yet all have this common characteristic: they are persons or principles that (1) fall in the interstices of social structure, (2) are on its margins, or (3) occupy its lowest rungs (Turner 1991: 125).

According to Turner, the primary function of these liminal phenomena is to maintain and strengthen the social structure(s) by forming an anti-structure. The liminal persons or principles indirectly set the standards for the normal or structured society. That which is not liminal is normal, and therefore part of the structured sphere of society. If the idea of anti-structure is applied to the “occult underground”, it becomes clear that much of the criticism levelled against occultists in fact highlights what is considered to be normal in society: it is not “normal” to worship strange entities in our society; it is not “normal” to perform magical rituals; it is not “normal” to use sex for a spiritual purposes; and (in case of modern Satanism) it is not “normal” to worship Satan or to identify oneself with the evil side of the traditionally Christian dualistic worldview (not counting the fact that most satanists identify Satan as actually representing the good side, and not the other way round), and so on. Many of the prejudices levelled against occultists thus actually stem from a need to define how one *should* act and what one *should* believe in. At the same time, however, the anti-structure might work from the opposite direction in the sense that occultists themselves consciously choose to distance themselves from certain aspects of society and thereby construct new strategies of meaning and identity that are based on a rejection of what is seen as traditional values. This is, of course, not something that is unique to occultists but is also to be found in most so-called subcultures. Subcultures are often defined in opposition to other forms of culture, such as high, popular, mass, and/or folk culture. Even though the demarcation between such forms of culture can be criticised (when does one form end and the other begin?) the approach is nonetheless important as a tool for understanding contemporary Western society (Lynch 2005).

Understanding the “occult underground” as a subculture has the advantage of contrasting it with high culture and popular or mass culture. High culture is often understood as the culture of the ruling class that is based on classic literature, art, and philosophy (Lynch 2005: 6). From a religious perspective, I would argue that the religion of high culture is based on traditional Christian values as expressed through scholarly theology and the established Christian churches and denominations. There is a long tradition of animosity towards certain aspects of Western esotericism and occultism among representatives of high culture. For instance, the Catholic Church

has not only condemned the ideas of individual esotericists such as the Renaissance philosopher Giordano Bruno (burned at the stake by the Inquisition in 1600), but has also issued papal bulls against organisations such as the Order of Freemasons. Esoteric traditions were often interpreted as various forms of heresies by the Church, or sometimes even as “devil worship” and “Satanism”. Although Western esotericism from the Renaissance to the mid-19th century was set in an essentially Christian context, the esotericists posed a serious threat towards the Church in that the esotericist had no need for an intermediary link between man and God, i.e. the Church with its priests became superfluous as the esotericist (and the mystic) sought personal *Gnosis* and contact with the Godhead. From the mid-19th century and onwards, the criticism of the Church by occultists has many times been quite fierce.

In a similar manner, historians of science and philosophy generally maintained a negative attitude towards esotericism up till the appearance of the works of Frances Yates. Esoteric beliefs and practices were often considered to embody unreason and unscientific reasoning, and were thus held to be in opposition to the positivistic ideals of natural science. Yates, on the contrary, argued that the Hermetic Tradition (understood as esotericism) was not only congenial to modern science, but the causal factor of the emergence of modern science. This drastic reinterpretation of the emergence of modern science has been criticised, but Yates’ theories have nonetheless been instrumental in changing the attitude of historians of science and philosophy towards esotericism. Today, the categorical stance against everything connected with esotericism is not as prevalent as it used to be among scholars. Instead, esotericism is often seen as an important factor in the understanding of early modern science.

The relationship between popular culture and occultism is perhaps even more complicated than the relationship between high culture and occultism. Popular culture can be defined as the shared environment, practices and resources of everyday life (Lynch 2005: 15), which in practice means those forms of Western culture which most people encounter in their day-to-day life. On the one hand, popular culture is characterised by a general negative stance towards most forms of religion and spirituality. This negative stance is symptomatic of Western society as a secularised and post-modern society with its emphasis on natural science, as the way to truth. If something is scientifically “proven” it must be true. This negative stance can also be found in certain forms of popular culture when dealing with occultism. There appears to exist many misconceptions in the public mind regarding what occultist currents such as ritual magic, Wicca and Satanism actually consist of. Usually, these misconceptions centre on the basic premise that the various forms of occultist spirituality deal with some ill-defined form of devil worship. Furthermore, occultism is often reduced to some sort of youth revolt against the beliefs of adult society, and that occultism is something that mostly concerns teenagers. This negative understanding of occultists is often promoted by the popular press that tends to take a negative stance when reporting on occultist forms of spirituality.

On the other hand, there are other forms of popular culture in which it is possible to detect a much more positive attitude towards occultism. More specifically, it is in such forms of popular culture as literature, role-playing and computer games, comics, TV-series, movies and music that aspects of occultism are presented in more positive ways than when compared the way in which occultism is portrayed by the popular press. In these forms of popular culture, occultist practices such as ritual magic and the invocation of pagan gods are often presented as valid forms of spirituality which are no better or worse than other forms of spirituality. Expressions of popular culture such as the Harry Potter books and films, the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, musicians such as *Ozzy Osborne* and *David Bowie*, and comics such as *Prometheus* all include references to occultism in one form or another. At the same time, there are of course many examples where occultism is portrayed in a prejudiced manner, even in these forms of popular culture, but it is nevertheless possible to maintain the idea that notions pertaining to occultism tend to be presented in a positive way – and this at an increasingly scale.

But why is occultism increasingly being portrayed in a positive way in popular culture? There are a number of reasons for why certain aspects of spirituality are portrayed the way they are in popular culture, but in the case of occultism, one can discern a long tradition of presenting certain aspects of occultism in a positive way. For instance, astrology appears to be particularly congenial to the sentiments of the public, and consultation of horoscopes does not seem to have decreased with the impact of secularisation, but rather the opposite. This can be interpreted as a reaction against modernity and secularisation to a certain extent, as a form of re-enchantment of the world. However, I would argue that the increasingly positive depictions of occultism in popular culture should not be understood so much from what occultism stands for, but rather from an understanding of how popular culture often “takes over” subcultures and integrates them. This integration does not only concern subcultures such as the rave, reggae (Rastafarian), and punk cultures, but also such wide scale groups as the New Age movement. The comparison of how New Age ideals and practices have become an integrated part of popular culture is particularly relevant, since both occultism and New Age stem from Western esotericism. New Age, understood in *sensu lato*, originally began as a spiritual countercultural movement in the 1960s and was characterised by a criticism of Western society expressed through terms of secularised esotericism (Hanegraaff 1998). One of the aspects of Western society that the early New Age movement criticised was the capitalist market economy and its focus on materialism as opposed to spiritual values. By the late 70s and early 80s, however, the New Age movement had become what it originally had set out to criticise: a spiritual supermarket which had been integrated with popular culture. In the case of occultism, it is still too early to say whether or not it will become equally integrated, but it is nevertheless obvious that many of the prime characteristics of occultism seem to resonate with popular culture: the focus on the individual, resistance towards the established and institutionalised forms of religion, the focus on experiences, and the idea that there is more to existence than

mere materialism. The integration of aspects of the underground into the established society or overground is something which Webb calls “underground establishment”:

But even dissent can be institutionalized. The 19th century saw the growth of that body of recognized intellectual opposition to the Establishment which has since become so prominent a feature of Western society. It is perhaps confusing, after emphasizing so much the dichotomy between Establishment and Underground, to call this group an Underground Establishment - but this is precisely what it is (Webb 1974: 351).

Webb mentions vegetarianism, anti-vivisection, women’s rights and kindness to animals as examples of beliefs that were prominent in the occult underground at the end of the 19th century, and which became prominent aspects of modern society. At the turn of the 20th century we can observe a similar process whereby key notions of occultist spirituality has become mainstream in late modern society, such as the sacrality of the self, the belief in nature as something sacred, to name but two. This does not mean that the occult underground has changed Western society of course, but it shows that occultist spirituality is shaped by the society which it criticises and that it is symptomatic of values and beliefs associated with late modernity.

PART TWO

Antinomianism and the Occult

As already discussed, the occult underground can be seen as forming an anti-structure to Western society in the sense that it embodies fundamental aspects of Western society in an inverted form. But to what degree is it possible to talk about a conscious and deliberate effort to go against the accepted norms of Western society? In other words, to what extent is antinomianism part of occultism?

Antinomianism (from anti- & Gk. *nómos*, “law”) denotes the practice of going against the accepted norms and values of society. In the context of religion in the West, antinomianism would thus imply a conscious break with key notions of Christianity, such as the idea that mankind is born with sin as a result of the fall, the identification of sin with sexuality, the patriarchal nature of Christianity, and the belief in the Church as intermediary link between mankind and God – and it is in fact notions such as these that occultists tend to oppose.

Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) – one of the most important occultists of the twentieth century – serves as a good example of how antinomianism can function within occultist spirituality. Crowley was fiercely critical of the Christian church and even styled himself To Mega Therion, or the Great Beast 666, the anti-Christ of the Book of Revelations. To Crowley, Christianity represented an abrogate form of religion based upon the notion of “slave-gods” belonging to an

“old aeon”, but according to his own esoteric religion *Thelema* (Greek for Will) founded in 1904, the “new aeon” was to be characterised by freedom. The morals and ethics of Western society and Christianity were often regarded as restraints and restrictions imposed upon the individual, and in order to progress spiritually one had to break free from bonds of the “old” values. Often enough, the most explicit way of breaking free was to adopt a new antinomian sexual morality, based on Crowley’s holy text *The Book of the Law*, which encouraged people to have sex with whomever one wanted, provided that the other partner approved. Crowley’s view on sex differed considerably from the traditional Christian belief that sex is the cause of sin. On the contrary, Crowley regarded sex as a potent way to spiritual enlightenment, and on the basis of this assumption he developed a particular form of sexual magic that he taught the elite of his disciples. To Crowley and his followers, sex was interpreted as a way to challenge the morals of Western society and a means to break free from them (Bogdan 2006). The identification of the individual’s freedom with sexual liberty was, however, not unique to Crowley, but can be found in many other occultists forms of spirituality, and also in many new religious movements (especially from the 1960s and onwards). It is evident from Crowley’s lifestyle and writings that he deliberately sought to provoke and chock the public. For instance, in his magnum opus *Magick in Theory and Practice* (1930) Crowley blatantly stated in chapter XII “Of the Bloody Sacrifice: and Matters Cognate” that he had sacrificed “a male child of perfect innocence and high intelligence” no less than 150 times every year between 1912 and 1928, which would amount to the somewhat staggering amount of 2400 sacrificed children! (Crowley 1930: 95, note 4) It is quite clear from the context, however, that Crowley was not making a confession of literally sacrificing little babies, but made a tongue-in-cheek reference to sexual magic. The popular press did not interpret passages like this in a favourable way, though, and a fierce campaign was mounted against Crowley in the British yellow press during the 1920s. With headlines such as “The most wicked man in the world” and “A man we would like to hang” Crowley was denounced as a devil worshiper, a drug addict (which he in fact was) and a murderer. For instance, the Sunday Express reported on March 4, 1923:

This man Crowley is one of the most sinister figures of modern times. He is a drug fiend, an author of vile books, the spreader of obscene practices. Yet such is his intellectual attainment and mental fascination that he is able to secure reputable publishers for his works and attract to him men and women of means and position (*Sunday Express*, March 4, 1923).

It is significant to note that the charges levelled against Crowley during the 1920s are almost identical with the charges of the satanic panic during the 1980s. The image of Crowley in the popular press thus personified the perceived threat towards the norms and values of British society at the time, just as the “satanic underground” did sixty years later. Antinomianism continues to be an integrated part of contemporary occultism but the extent and purpose of the antinomianism varies from group to group.

In Sweden, Dragon Rouge (*Ordo Draconis et Atri Adamantis*) stands out as one of the most well-known occultist movements. Founded in 1989 by a group of teenagers in Stockholm it quickly caught the attention of the media by which it was labelled a satanic group. By the mid-90s, the movement had established itself throughout Sweden and its membership exceeded 500 people, which is a comparatively high number for a Swedish alternative spiritual organisation. During the second half of the 90s, Dragon Rouge became less visible in the mass media and its membership dwindled. However, this period was also characterised by increasing maturity of the organisation: stricter rules for local lodges were created, and a wealth of written material was produced for the members. Today, Dragon Rouge has established lodges in countries such as Germany, Poland and Italy and is thus the first Swedish occultist new religious movement to become an international movement (Granholm 2005). On their website Dragon Rouge is described in the following manner:

Dragon Rouge is a Nordic order with branches in many parts of the world. We study magic and occultism in both theory and practice. Dragon Rouge is one of few orders which focuses on the dark side of magic and the left hand path. We are exploring the night side tradition on many different levels. Dragon Rouge is mainly an order for magical initiation, but also for brother- and sisterhood. Our aim is to make education and development of the occult possible and to be a meeting point for knowledge and experiences. Dragon Rouge is a practical magical order in which the individual experience is pivotal. We are focusing on an empirical occultism and a knowledge about the unknown based on experience.

The method of spiritual development, which is to be encountered in Dragon Rouge, is inspired by the so-called Left Hand Path, or Vama Marg, with roots in the Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions. According to Tantric metaphysics the creation consists of two powers or principles called *sakti* and *shiva*. *Sakti* is the active feminine principle and is understood as the pure and uncontrolled force or energy that in the human anatomy rests at the base of the spine (the *Kundalini* Serpent). In Tantric theory it is possible to awaken the Kundalini serpent through yogic practices so that it rises along the spinal cord and thereby activate the *cakras* on its way. The goal is to unite the Kundalini with the pure consciousness, *shiva*, which is interpreted as the passive male principle.

The practical aspect of the left hand path is defined by Dragon Rouge as antinomianism. There is an idea within the movement that man is bound, and thereby restricted, by unconscious norms and values. In order to progress spiritually it is necessary to free oneself from these unconscious bonds, and create conscious norms and ideals instead. The antinomianism of Dragon Rouge can thus be interpreted as a way of becoming conscious of aspects that are buried in the unconscious. In practice, this is achieved through the use of symbols that are normally interpreted as evil or destructive. Again, this is something that is to be found in Tantra, in which a fundamental thesis is

that in order to reach *moksa* or liberation from *samsara*, the wheel of rebirth, one has to overcome the impure or dark aspects of existence. The Tantric practitioner criticises the traditional Hindu and Buddhist on account of their effort to suppress the impure tendencies in themselves, since this will not lead to being free from them, but on the contrary to become a slave under them. The Tantric thus use traditionally impure things such as meat, alcohol and sex (the so-called “five M-words”), in religious rites in order to break free from the material bonds of existence. In Dragon Rouge, the purpose of using “evil” gods such as Kali or Set in rituals, in fact is to overcome “evil” aspects in psyche such as anger, fear, hatred and jealousy. In an interview Thomas Karlsson, the founder and leader of the movement, commented on the use of antinomianism:

I believe that one should separate this form of antinomianism from the more vulgar interpretation that sometimes is expressed in certain forms of devil worship, which finds its expression in vandalism more or less. That this antinomianism must be interpreted on a religious or spiritual level. And then it is mostly about a way of approaching those symbols or those powers, if one should speak in those terms, which in religion or spirituality have been seen as harmful, or simply destructive in different ways. (...) So I believe that antinomianism should be interpreted foremost according to how one confronts the spiritual side. Instead of turning towards the good power, one turns towards the so-called evil power, the destructive principle (interview with Thomas Karlsson 3 November 2002).

The antinomianism of Dragon Rouge is thus something which is supposed to work primarily on a spiritual level, but according to Karlsson there is the possibility of extending the antinomianism to cover aspects which fall outside the traditional bounds of religion in order to question the norms and values of the secularised Western society.

I definitely believe so... I mean religion is never wholly separated from culture or society, or the world we live in. (...) That does not necessarily mean – and I think it is very important to stress this – that the antinomianism implies a complete rejection, but that it can be a means to become conscious of the values which exist in society or which exist in religion. By turning them upside down they become more clear, by confronting them through their opposites, unconscious, invisible values and notions that might exist in society become more distinct, and then it is possible to relate to them either by rejecting them, or as if this is something which I actually agree with. So there are many [members] that actually develop a form of stricter ethical or moral stance, than what is normal in society, because of the antinomianism (interview with Thomas Karlsson 3 November 2002).

The antinomianism as a means to freedom from unconscious norms and values which have been

imposed upon the individual by the society (e.g. through our upbringing, schooling, the media, the Church) is not unique to Dragon Rouge but appears to be a standard feature in 20th century occultism. As already mentioned, the psychologization of the occult is one of the ways in which occultism differs from classical forms of esotericism. The use of gods, angels, demons and other entities in occult rituals is in fact often seen as a means to explore the psyche, to penetrate into the deeper levels of the unconscious. The idea that man needs to explore his unconscious in order to be free from repressing norms and values is, however, not unique to occultism but is to be found in many new religious movements, of which the Church of Scientology is an illustrative example. Founded in 1954 by L. Ron Hubbard the Church of Scientology regards many of the social problems facing the West today to be caused by traumatic experiences (engrams) that are buried in the unconscious. Through their particular form of psychological healing (dianetics) it is claimed that the suppressed experiences can be brought up to consciousness, and thereby the individual can become emancipated and free from the traumas. Another aspect of the psychologization of the occult is the idea that man is only using a fraction of his true potentiality, and that latent powers of the mind might be activated through magic. Israel Regardie, the occultist and psychologist, commented on the relationship between psychology and magic in his book *The Middle Pillar* (1945):

Analytical Psychology and magic comprise in my estimation two halves or aspects of a single technical system. Just as the body and mind are not two separate units, but are simply the dual manifestation of an interior dynamic “something” so psychology and Magic comprise similarly a single system whose goal is the integration of the human personality. Its aim is to unify the different departments and functions of man’s being, to bring into operation those which previously for various reasons were latent (Regardie 1945: 16).

In the case of Dragon Rouge, the unconscious part of man’s psyche is seen as the dark side and is often linked to what they term “dark magic”. But as the Finnish scholar Kennet Granholm has pointed out in his thesis about the group *Embracing the Dark* (2005), the concept of “dark magic” should not be understood in a moral sense, but rather as pertaining to spiritual practices that explore the dark or hidden aspects of man’s psyche. On their website, Dragon Rouge explains how they understand the “dark side”:

The dark side can also be understood from the perspective of psychology. One of the main theses of Dragon Rouge is that man presently uses only a fraction of his total capacity. We are experiencing only an insignificant part of reality. The major part of man is hidden. Through the traditional thousand year old occult practices man can contact these hidden sides. To the hidden parts of man belongs the undeveloped and non-actualized sides of the psyche. These can be made conscious and become realised if we are entering the dark side of our psyche. We will then confront all dark and

repressed parts of the psyche like aggression, fears and basic instincts. C.G. Jung is the psychologist who is most important to Dragon Rouge. Jung said: "Illumination is not reached by visualizing the light but by exploring the darkness". From this perspective Dragon Rouge is working with the dark side.

The antinomianism of Dragon Rouge and other occultist movements is not, however, a goal in itself, it is merely the means by which they fulfil their spiritual quest. But what then is the goal of the magician? What is the purpose of occultism?

Power and Self-deification

The exact purpose of occultism and the performance of magical rituals differ from occultist to occultist, but the overall purpose can be described as a spiritual development which leads from an unenlightened state of being to enlightenment. This goal is already present in classical and renaissance esotericism, identified by Faivre as one of the constituting components of the esoteric form of thought; that is, the experience of transmutation. The notion of spiritual progress received a new impetus during the second half of the nineteenth century through the impact of the theories of evolution. As already discussed, Hanegraaff has recognized these theories as a significant factor in the secularisation of esotericism, in which evolution assumed the form of a belief in not only the spiritual progress of the individual, but also in the belief of the spiritual evolution of mankind. There is an elitist aspect of this goal in which the spiritual development sometimes is interpreted as setting the adept above his fellow men, a fact that is illustrated by the Adeptus Minor initiation ritual of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, wherein the candidate is obliged to state the following pertinent paragraph during the obligation:

I further promise and swear that with the Divine Permission I will, from this day forward, apply myself to the Great Work – which is, to purify and exalt my Spiritual Nature so that with the Divine Aid I may at length attain to be more than human, and thus gradually raise and unite myself to my higher and Divine Genius, and that in this event I will not abuse the great power entrusted to me. (Regardie 1938: 214)

The Divine Genius that the members of the Golden Dawn sought to unite with was referred to by different names, such as the Higher Self, the Daemon, but perhaps most commonly as the Holy Guardian Angel. Although occultists differ in how the Divine Genius is interpreted, the basic idea is that it constitutes a divine aspect in man that the profane or unenlightened person is not aware of. This idea originally derives from the Gnosticism of late antiquity, in which it was believed that man's soul was nothing but a spark of the divine Godhead, which had been entrapped in the material world through a primordial fall. The goal of the Gnostic was to free the divine aspect in man and to re-unite it with its divine source. In a similar manner the occultist sees the Divine Genius as the microcosmic counterpart of the macrocosmic Godhead, and the goal is to reach a

conscious awareness of, or union with, the Divine Genius. This union is often referred to as the Knowledge of and Conversation with the Holy Guardian Angel, and the similarities with the goal of Christian mysticism, that is *Unio Mystica*, are quite obvious (at least to a certain extent). With the psychologization of the occult (identified by Hanegraaff as part of the secularisation of Western esotericism) during the first half of the twentieth century, the Divine Genius or Holy Guardian Angel was increasingly seen as an aspect of man's psyche. To Crowley, the Holy Guardian Angel was nothing but the unconscious aspect of the mind, and consequently the object of his magical system was to become conscious of the unconscious. Furthermore, Crowley believed that the unconscious contained the very essence of each human being (which he called the True Will), and by discovering this essence one would find the answers to man's basic existential questions: Who am I, and what is the purpose of my life? Or to put it in the words of Crowley himself:

It should now be perfectly simple for everybody to understand the Message of the Master Therion [i.e. Crowley]. Thou must (1) Find out what is thy Will, (2) Do that Will with (a) one-pointedness, (b) detachment, (c) peace. Then, and then only, art thou in harmony with the Movement of Things, thy will part of, and therefore equal to, the Will of God. And since the will is but the dynamic aspect of the self, and since two different selves could not possess identical wills; then, if thy will be God's will, *Thou art That*. (Crowley 1919: 42)

The identification of the True Will with God's Will, or with the essence of each human being with the Godhead, shows that to Crowley the goal of magic is to become aware of the divine aspect in man. In fact, to Crowley "there is no God but Man" as he blatantly stated in *Liber Oz* published in 1944. This does not mean that Crowley was an atheist, but rather that he believed that God is Man, or *Deus est Homo* which is one of the mottos of Ordo Templi Orientis, an initiatic order that Crowley became the head of during the 1920s and which remains to this day one of the largest occultist orders in the West. The goal of occultist forms of spirituality differ to a certain extent from classical forms of Western esotericism in the sense that occultists do not strive to *unite* with God but rather to reach *self-deification*, or to become gods themselves. According to Granholm self-deification is specially linked to the so-called Left Hand Path in occultism, but I would argue, however, that the notion of self-deification is already present in *fin de siècle* occultism as exemplified by the Golden Dawn and Aleister Crowley. In fact, one of Crowley's disciples Charles Stansfeld Jones, identified for a number of years as Crowley's "magical child" commented on this very fact in a letter to Crowley written in 1916:

As far as I can see Everyone who attains in this Æon will remain as God on Earth, viz, this is the Positive side, whereas the Old Æon methods caused man to become absorbed in God (Jones, in press)

As stated in the previous part, the antinomianism of Dragon Rouge is the means to accomplish self-deification. According to Dragon Rouge, man is potentially divine, and it is only when he or she becomes divine that free will can be reached. Using this free will, it is believed that the adept is able to create his or her own universe, thereby becoming not only a god, but a god of creation or demiurge. The goal of the initiatory system of Dragon Rouge is thus not an end in itself (self-deification) but merely the beginning of new process of creation that takes place according to the will of the magician. In discussing the highest and final degree of the degree system of Dragon Rouge, Thomas Karlsson states:

Yes, even though we have turned this around a bit and say that the Right Hand Path leads to a clear goal, whereas the Left Hand Path leads to a new beginning. In other words, the final goal is when man has transformed him/herself, but the sefirotic structure has been dissolved and everything has been absorbed by a black hole, and there the human being suddenly appears as the new demiurge and creates a new sefirotic structure, formulated by the magician's – or then the god's – will (interview with Thomas Karlsson 021103).

The sefirotic structure referred to by Thomas Karlsson is a reference to the kabbalistic Tree of Life that contains ten spheres or sefira. The Tree of Life is a glyph or diagram of the created universe (but also of man's psyche) in which the lowest sphere Malkuth corresponds to the material world, and the highest sphere to Kether which is understood as the first manifested aspect of the Godhead stemming from the limitless divine light. The ten spheres are often used by initiatic orders, such as the Golden Dawn, as the basis for their initiatory structure with each degree corresponding to a particular sphere on the Tree. The initiatic journey from Malkuth, the lowest sphere, to Kether is interpreted as a spiritual journey leading from an unenlightened state of being to enlightenment, or self-deification. In Dragon Rouge, the initiatic structure is not based on the Tree of Life as such, but on its dark or reversed side, the Tree of Death. The ten spheres on this side of the Tree are seen as empty shells (klippoth) and they correspond to the night side or dark side of the universe and man's psyche – that is, to those aspects of the psyche that are normally repressed in society and religion. By dissolving the sefirotic structure and then reformulating it according to the will of the magician (now a god), a new universe is created out of the magician's innermost being, or self.

Occultism and modern spirituality

Focus on the self is not something peculiar to occultism, though. The self-centeredness of the occultist spirituality as exemplified by Aleister Crowley and Dragon Rouge reflects a larger preoccupation with the self that characterises Western spirituality in modern and post-modern Western society. This self-centeredness is, furthermore, not an expression of an ascetic form of spirituality

that encourages a withdrawal from active participation in society. On the contrary, occultism often maintains a positive, albeit critical, stance towards Western society. The use of magic is thus not only seen as a spiritual process but also as a means to influence the “mundane” plane of existence. In 1930 Aleister Crowley tried to define and explain magic (or Magick as he preferred to spell it) for the public:

Magick is the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will.

(Illustration: It is my Will to inform the World of certain facts within my knowledge. I therefore take “magical weapons”, pen, ink, and paper; I write “incantations – these sentences – in the “magical language” i.e. that which is understood by the people I wish to instruct; I call forth “spirits”, such as printers, publishers, booksellers, and so forth, and constrain them to convey my message to those people. The composition and distribution of this book is thus an act of **Magick** by which I cause change to take place in conformity with my Will) (Crowley 1930: XVII).

The definition stands in sharp contrast to the image of Crowley as the founder of modern Satanism and promoter of blasphemous rites, and instead reveals a rather “sober” approach to magic with a this-worldly purpose. As discussed in the first part of this essay, the depiction of Crowley and other occultists as opponents to the norms and values of Western society actually says more about the context in which the accusations are verbalised, than about the target of the accusations as such. In times of increased social and religious change, the norms and morals of society are challenged by new values and strategies of epistemology. The criticism levelled against occultist forms of spirituality, reaching its crescendo with the so-called satanic panic of the 1980s and early 1990s, identifies the fears of moral disintegration that was felt among certain groups in Western society. In that sense, the occult underground can be understood as an anti-structure in the Turnerian sense; that is, occultists were seen as embodying everything that was not normal and stood in contrast to Western society - and thereby defining what was perceived to be normal.

A closer look at occultism will show that it has little in common with the criticism directed against it. In fact, occultism (understood as a form of secularised esotericism) embodies many of the same characteristics that are to be found in modern and post-modern Western society: (a) Occultism is a self-centred form of spirituality which deals with the personal development of the practitioner; (b) Occultism is focused on religious experiences (altered states of consciousness), which in practice means that it is oriented towards the performance of rituals and meditations which sometimes include the use of sex and/or drugs; (c) Occultism tends to have a positive attitude towards material values and sexuality; (d) Occultism is an eclectic form of spirituality that is characterised by a positive attitude towards a wide range of practices and religious beliefs; (e) Occultism is not dogmatic in the sense that there is only one way to “truth”, and there is thereby an inherent criticism among occultists towards certain forms of organised religion (especially

towards what is perceived to be the “Christian church”); (f) Occultism is antinomian in the sense that occultists often *regard* themselves as challenging the religious values of Western society (even though it can be questioned if they actually *are* going against the norms of Western society). As mentioned, these characteristics are not unique to occultism, but can be seen as an intrinsic part of modern spirituality and the majority of new religious movements – and the occult underground can thus be seen as a reflection of modern Western society.

Occultism can thus be seen as a form of modern Western spirituality that to a large extent centres on a discourse of criticism towards “established” or mainstream Western society, or to use the imagery of overgrounds and undergrounds: occultism forms a spiritual underground that rejects the overground, but which from time to time surfaces as integrated parts of the overground. Therefore, the nature of occultist spirituality is paradoxical in that not only rejects and criticises aspects of modernity, but that it at the same time embodies key notions of modernity.

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