

The markets of popular esotery and reading

PhD THESES

I. The subject of the dissertation

Umberto Eco – perhaps at the time of writing his *Foucault-pendulum* – told about the following experience of his: „When walking through among the stands of the Buchmesse, it appears to me that – as an answer to the downfall of the big rational philosophies of history and the confidence crisis against technology and science - many of those regarding political and scientific actions in the past few decades as rational purposfulness with an intent to change the world, turn now towards sacredness and mistery. In the same bookstore windows, where you could see The disenthronement of the mind twenty years ago, now you can see instead of Lucas's book the works of philosophers from the East [...] and handbooks about alchemy, astrology, fortune telling and black magic. Has irrationalism arrived?" You do not have to visit your neighbours for some irrationalism, though, because at the end of the 80's, the Hungarian readers were faced with the same phenomenon in the Hungarian book market with some delay. Books and booklets about life, death, Eastern philosophies, meditation, magic, mystics, parapsychology, and magic, ancient things on the bookshelves and stands. The situation has been only „improving" since then: more and more publishers turned up and their books are appearing in larger and larger number of copies. Beside book publishing, other „sense-giving constructions", services, goods with esoteric approach have turned up in other areas of life, too – let it be meditative music, protective amulets, healing crystals, or illness-preventive techniques, alternative healing methods and tools, lifestyle management and education. Son we might be able to ask the questionnaire of *Johann Grolle* here in Hungary, too: „After finishing work, why does a company department leader go to a fortune-teller, or the human resource manager to a witchcraft ritual? Why does every third person believe in resurrection, and every second in protective angels?"

II. The questions of the dissertation

These tendencies imply the development or at least the possibility for the development of a new way of thinking and ethos. Whether this is only – using the expression of philosopher *Tatár György* – a „globalisation of stupidity", or the way leading to completeness, happiness, which has been finally found by the alienated and modern humanity – still creates different opinions. Some more serious sociological surveys (here in Hungary) would perhaps show what size and which part of the society is involved in esoteric issues more seriously, but it is

undoubtedly that they are present and have their effect in everyday life, only the reactions are different. In my thesis I not only looked at what esoterism is and, if taking the original meaning of the word, why the seemingly paradox complex expression „popular esoterism” can be created, but also looked at its history, since the present state cannot be understood without the past. Is it regarded as something new, and why is it needed? What questions does it attempt to answer and what needs does it satisfy? We needed an answer to the question, how popular esoterism defines itself beside and in opposition to the present systems for approaching reality and the ideologies – that is, the governing scientific-technological ethos and the disenthroned religious ethos. Furthermore, since it was obvious that the interaction of ideologies is a dynamic process, I had to put under examination the reactions of „Science” and „Religion” to „Esoterism”, too. I did not only attempt to discover how many people turn to esoteric books and with what motivation, but also how reading esoterism could be measured at all? Would esoterism have a place in the book statistic categorisations, can it be found in the hierarchic system of ETO? Finally, I wanted to find out how reading esoterism fits into reading habits in Hungary.

III. Breakdown, methodology and most important resource literature of the dissertation

In the chapter of the dissertation following the introduction (the second chapter) I developed a lexicon determining the most important concepts of esoterism, based on the lexicon of *Hans Biedermann* and the *New Age Encyclopedia*. After this, I deal with the history of esoterism in the chapter titled THE RELATION OF ESOTERISM, SCIENCE AND RELIGION IN THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF EUROPE. Since I, too, regard present as an ideologically transient, transforming age, I primarily emphasized similar transient ages from the past, too. However, since problems shall only be viewed from a larger perspective, these ages are not really historical, but „history-philosophical”. My historical categorisation is *retrospective*, that is, I only discuss what is important from viewing it today; as well as *chronological*, since European cultural history can only be discussed this way due to the nature of our subject. I regard it important to emphasize that I only discuss European history, this is why Hellenism, as the alembic/athanor of European culture gains an emphasised position in it. Therefore, in the section titled „The Later Hellenic Age - Rome (I.-III. A.D.)”, I discuss with special regard „Syncretism”, „Gnosis”, „Individualism”, „Mystery Religions” and the status fights of Christianity being born. I only deal with "Medieval Age" as a cross-over intellectual age, and this prepares the chapter titled "Renaissance and the early modern age (the middle of XV. – XVII.). In this section, I introduce the intellectual trend called „Hermetism”, and the features of the organic ethos, and the evolvement of the experimental, mechanistic science in the

modern sense („Strengthening of the mechanical ethos”). Following this, I discuss the incursion of scientism, the evolvment of positivism, but also with the existence of secret societies and the anti-scientific attitude of romantics. The scientific and religious ambitions of occultism appearing at the end of the XIX. century and the similar attempts of the synchretism of the „New Age” are also introduced. In this chapter, I mainly built on the religion history works of *Mircea Eliade* and the works of the most excellent of the experts of the history of magic in Hungary, *Szőnyi György Endre*, but I also took over important ideas from *Keith Thomas*’s opus titled *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, as well as some selected cultural history works of *Leszek Kolakowski*, and *Földényi F. László*.

After I introduce the latest period of popular esotery, in chapter four (WHAT IS POPULAR ESOTERY? – The self-portrait of popular esotery), I introduce the most important ideological findings of popular esotery, citing the most popular Hungarian and foreign esotery authors.

In chapter five (THE SYSTEM OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCIENCE AND ESOTERY) I examine the relationship between science and esotery. Since the ruling ethos of today is scientific, it reforms every other view, ideology to its own picture - therefore I put the biggest emphasis on this subject. I take the reflexions of science philosophy, the different science definitions, and the self-critical remarks of science, in order to be able to understand better the "scientific" and „scientific” nature of esotery. My approach in this chapter is primarily science philosophical and knowledge sociologic. I found support in selected texts from science philosophers *Thomas Kuhn*, *Paul Feyerabend*, *Mannheim Károly*, *Laki János* and *Fehér Márta*, from Hungarian nature scientists *Bencze Gyula* and *Csányi Vilmos*, and the researches done by two excellent cultural antropologists, *Farkas Attila Márton* and *Mund Katalin*.

In chapter six (THE SYSTEM OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION), I analyse the relations between religion and science, with old-fashioned concepts: „belief” and „mind”, introducing the four models of this relation existing today: the conflict-model, the model of living beside each other, the discussion model and the incorporation model. Into this discussion comes esotery, and is able to select from these models. The most important resources of this chapter are from religion sociologists *Malcolm B. Hamilton*, *Kamarás István* and *Tomka Miklós*.

In chapter seven (THE SYSTEM OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCIENCE AND POPULAR ESOTERY) I examine today's conflicts between religion and esotery. I find that while esotery is attempting to form its own self-portrait by appearing in the religion market and competing with traditional religions, and trying to offer a new identity to European people

still thirsty for the „ultimate questions”, it is forced, due to its syncretic nature to lend from the intellectual forms attacked by it. The findings of many sociologists, including *Max Weber* and *Christopher Lasch* are used in this chapter. Apart from them, I used the results of research conducted by *Kamarás István*, the duo *Farkas–Mund* already cited as well as *Ország Csilla*.

In chapter eight (POPULAR ESOTERY IN RELATION TO READING RESEARCH) I review the surveys reading esotery, conducted in Hungary. I confront the data of the Central Office for Statistics, the Sociology Institute and TÁRKI, as well as data collected by me (lending data of the Szabó Ervin City Library, survey results, interviews) with the findings of the previous chapters, and connect them to the reading trends found in Hungary, originating from the researches conducted by *Gereben Ferenc* and *Nagy Attila*.

In the final section of the dissertation (WHAT IS POPULAR ESOTERY?) I summarize the conclusions, I make suggestions for further research to be done, and I describe the phenomenon by making the expression „popular esotery” more exact.

IV. Theses of the dissertation

1. The historical-cultural roots of popular esotery date back to the late antique times, and it seems that it appears from time to time again, at times of intellectual-cultural depressions, as a new construction providing intellectual sense, demanding its „rights” on the stage of the ideologies existing at the time. I concentrated on the „pre-visions”, „intellectual models”, and the similar „transient ages” in the past. The separation of these history philosophical ages is only possible as a result of a concise structural examination, as a science sociological/knowledge-sociological pendant of the „long duree” of the Annales studies, its bigger social and economy-historical intervals.

2. In my historical way of discussion I regard „science”, „religion”, and „esotery” as dynamic constructions, that is, ways of approaching reality with different meaning contents in different ages, that usually pair up in two's and criticize the third one. Until the end of the XVII. century, „esotery” (magic) and „science” moved along together against „religion”, but by the next century, the new mechanistic „science” already teamed up with „religion” to make „esotery” unacceptable. Since this game has three players, it may be examined from three different viewpoints, and I did not intend to lock myself into any of the positions, I did not intend to make any of the language games exceptional. Thanks to this, the different discourses in the dissertation interlink.

3. From the dynamic relationship between religion, science and esoterism, the dominance of science has become the most significant by today. That is, with the birth of the civil society, science started to fill the role of humanity's absolutum: science is the fundament of our view of the world, the ethos of science is the dominant ethos today, that eliminates or reforms any other ethos, values, ideologies, methods of view to its own format. For a long time, the legitimacy of science was provided by its fit to the Christian ethos. With the secularisation in the modern age, it finally emancipated from religion to the extent that, today, any legitimation can be gained only by assimilating to the scientific-technical view of the world. In spite of the secularisation tendency, the demand for religiousness and spirituality has remained, and the reason for this would be mainly that science taking the place of religion in many aspects was not able to answer certain questions founding the mental-intellectual development of the individual.

4. Esoterism reacts to the new situation in different ways: it either utilizes the self-criticism of science, criticism of culture and modernity, as well as postmodern relativism against science (this way turning into „contra-science” radically), or it accepts certain criteria of the scientific approach, and tends to reform them to its own image (thereby defining science as an integrating viewpoint and itself as something „above science”), or simply attempts to gain respect by using an appearance of being scientific (thereby becoming „pseudo-scientific”). In the meanwhile, by looking after the mental afflictions of modern people, assumes the role of religion, too, with its openness towards transcendence.

5. Regarding the relationship of belief and common sense, that is, on one hand the belief in transcendent absoluteness and the unconditional commitment towards it, on the other hand, the unconditional trust in the ability of human sense being capable of cognize and learn, several large revolutions have occurred for Western culture in the past two and a half millennia. Belief and religion, during certain times of antiquity and in the medieval ages, were the prides of humanity, frameworks for its knowledge, its most private activities and trustees of dignity. From the perspective of the new form of knowledge appearing from the XVI–XVII. century, and the empiric science with a logic and scale of values different from religion, these earlier value foundations now turned doubtful. The laws and ethos of Newton became the foundations for a mechanistic view of the world, according to which the universe is a self-sustaining mechanism, that does not require the operation of God. From this time on, scientific knowledge took over the role of realizing, protecting and ensuring human dignity,

and religious ways of thinking and of living were regarded as having been replaced by their sensible and superior successors. Religion was forced into a certain kind of reflective movement: it had to process the experience of meeting with other confessions and religions; it had to accept the authority of sciences, that now owned the social monopoly of knowledge about the world; finally it had to adapt to the conditions set by a constitutional state. Into the discourse between science and religion comes esoterism, by using the armoury of religion against science, and that of science against religion.

6. The institutional backscattering of Christian religion, and the „individualisation” of religiousness allowed for new forms of experiencing spirituality. According to some, the future offers a diversity of possible lifestyles and forms of knowledge instead of traditional religions. This religious culture is best represented by occult and esoteric religion in many aspects. It can be practiced without getting into conflict with our roles in our everyday jobs, and its ecstatic and magic activity forms allow one to experience irrationality instead of everyday rationality. Esoterism, appearing in the religion market, is competing with traditional religions, and trying to form its own self-portrait, selling a certain kind of identity, however it is forced, due to its syncretic nature, to lend from the intellectual forms attacked by it. Esoterism puts immanency into the foreground instead of transcendency; it „individualises” religiousness, and makes it a consumer good: it grabs the acceptable elements from the original religious context, and builds a bricolage system of conceptions.

7. Based on the survey of the Sociology Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences conducted in 2005, 6% of adult readers read „books related to esoterism”. According to the estimation of *Nagy Attila* about 5-8 percent of the Hungarian book trading in 2004 was in the subject of esoterism. Real research more difficult, because the category of esoterism is not recognised either by UNESCO, or by library catalogues, but categorises it under philosophy, psychology, religion, science (medical sciences) and documentary, or sometimes under classic literature – according to individual judgement. This is, of course, also due to the nature of esoterism, that is, from the fact that esoterism is more a viewpoint than a self-standing subject. The questionnaires and interviews conducted by me – examining the viewpoints of readers/recipients – also point to the direction where esoterism is a way of viewing reality, similar to religion and science.

8. The national researches for reader sociology show that alongside the increasing popularity of readings with content of entertainment, easy, adventure, illusions and getaway reactions, there is also an increase in the popularity of the book type with documentary, scientific content and books intending to present facts and activities. But alongside the tendencies of commercialisation and practicalisation, a new phenomenon is turning up, not strongly, but noticeably: spiritualisation.

9. Spiritualisation occurs together with commercialisation and practicalisation, and this, to some extent, leads us back to the phenomenon of Americanism. The strong ties of the latter one is bound by the thin lines of the first. The projects of „How to be most successful in the world” and „How to get along fast, simple and without risks” are now complemented with the forever-existing wishes like „How do I feel myself best in my body” and „How do I get into harmony with myself”. Wealth demands wellness, too.