

Gnosticism and Esotericism

An Example from Russian New Religiosity

The Terms of Gnosticism and Esotericism

Time and again, the terms gnosticism and esotericism appear in connection with one another. Most esoteric teachings, for example, draw on the higher knowledge of the secrets of nature or deity. In the twentieth century, gnosticism even became, according to Wouter Hanegraaff, 'a standard ingredient of esoteric religiosity' (Hanegraaff 2006: 796).

The terms esoteric and esotericism even surface in connection with antique gnosticism—and this is not a rare occurrence. Just think of the famous definition of *gnosis* suggested by leading scholars in the field in Messina in 1966. According to this definition, *gnosis* is the 'knowledge of divine mysteries, which is reserved for the elite' (Markschies 2001: 22; Bianchi 1967). And just as Christian apologists saw *gnosis* as the source of all heresy, so today it is viewed as the source of all esotericism—at least from a theological point of view. In spite of the fact that this thesis is not historically tenable, given that western esotericism did not start until the time of the Renaissance, one cannot ignore the fact that *gnosis* and esotericism are multiply interwoven with each other.

Since there are no clear and consistent definitions of the terms 'gnosticism' and 'esotericism', one encounters major difficulties in trying to distinguish precisely between the two terms. Matters are further complicated by the fact that the terms are not used by the individual religious movements themselves. Rather, they are social constructs which serve either as discursive weapons or as scientific classifications (Stuckrad 2004: 20). This leads Michael Allen Williams, in his widely received book *Rethinking Gnosticism*, to call for 'the dismantling gnosticism as a dubious category' (Williams 1996).

Williams and other critics of the term gnosticism (e.g. King 2003) have a point, in so far as a definitions such as the one offered by the Messina colloquium—*gnosis* defined as 'knowledge of the divine mys-

teries'—are applicable to nearly every religious context. The same holds as well, however, for those definitions which see esotericism as hidden knowledge (cf. Hanegraaff 2005: 337).

The terms 'gnosticism' and 'esotericism'—even the term 'religion' itself—are deceptive, not least because they create the impression that they refer to some concrete historical tradition. In order to avoid such confusion, the use of the term 'the esoterical' (*das Esoterische*) rather than esotericism is suggested (Stuckrad 2004: 20–1). This, however, would also have to apply to the term gnosis and just possibly to such terms as religion as well; thus one would talk about 'the gnostic', 'the religious', and so forth (Stuckrad 2004: 244). Yet it must be noted that this terminology must also be subject to a certain amount of defining clarity.

As of late, debates about the very definability of these two terms have led to a near-complete abandonment of attempts to define what is meant by them. This path, however, merely leads to a cumulative definition of gnosticism as a group of certain (neo-)religious movements of late antiquity. Similarly, esotericism is seen as referring to a cluster of historically related currents of occidental cultural history, such as Hermetic Philosophy, so-called occultism, and Freemasonry, to name but a few (Hanegraaff 2005: 328).

Yet there is another way, albeit a less popular one these days, to mitigate the substantialism which the terms gnosis and esotericism carry with them. One could acknowledge the terms' constructed character by viewing them as 'forms of thought' or 'models of thought'. Authors such as Antoine Faivre within esotericism studies or, for example, Michael Pauen (1994) with regard to the presentness of gnosticism have chosen to do so.

In my opinion, we should not disregard these attempts. They may be applicable, even fruitful, for the analysis of the cognitive systems of the religious movements to be studied, such as their belief systems. It has to be admitted, though, that an analysis which is based single-mindedly on the components of forms of thought is not sufficient. Such an analysis must be accompanied by studies of the symbolic expressions and the lived praxes of the movements which are studied.¹

Using the term gnosticism in the sense of a model of thought, as an ideal type assemblage of various components, a well-known typologic-

1 I am drawing on the cultural-philosophical considerations of Ernst Cassirer (1925).

al model suggests itself that primarily postulates the content-based integrity of the phenomenon. As I mentioned earlier, there is no consistent rendering of the phenomenon 'gnosticism', yet the following model can be seen as a certain critical consensus. In the following, I draw on the work of Christoph Marksches, who includes those movements in his definition of gnosticism, whose texts usually are marked by the following assemblage of ideas or motives: (1) The experience of a completely transcendent, other-worldly and superior god. (2) The consequent introduction of further divine figures, or the splitting of the existing figures, into figures which are closer to the people than the ulterior, highest god. (3) An understanding of the world and all things material as evil creations and, thus, the experience of the gnostics' alienation in the world. (4) The introduction of a special creator-god or assistant: following the Platonic tradition, he is called a 'craftsman' or, Greek: *demiurgos* (demiurge). He is mostly depicted as being ignorant, at times even as evil. (5) The explanation of the baleful state of the world by way of a mythological drama in which a divine element falls out of its own sphere into an evil world. This element dwells as a divine spark within people of a particular class and needs be liberated. (6) A knowledge (*gnosis*) of this state, which however can only be gained through an other-worldly redeemer figure who descends from an upper sphere and then ascends again. (7) Salvation through the insight that 'God (or the spark) is within' and, finally, (8) a more or less pronounced tendency toward dualism, which may surface in the concept of God, in the confrontation of spirit and matter, or in anthropological concepts. (Cf. Marksches 2001: 25–6.)

In contrast to Marksches, however, I would refer to this last feature of gnosticism rather as 'monodualism' since in gnostic mythologies there is always only the one Good at the beginning of creation which evil splits off from in the course of history.²

As far as esotericism's model of thought is concerned, I believe I do not have to go to great lengths. What I am referring to is Antoine Faivre's widely received understanding of esotericism. As is well known, Faivre mentioned four intrinsic and two secondary components of esotericism. The simultaneous occurrence of the four basic elements is a sufficient precondition for the inclusion of the object of study into the field of esotericism. These four are: (1) the idea of correspondences, (2) the conception of a living nature, (3) imagination and meditation as ways of

2 An exception is arguably only the teaching of Markion.

accessing higher knowledge, and (4) the experience of transmutation. In addition to these intrinsic features there are two further elements which often, though not of necessity, correlate, namely the praxis of (5) concordance and (6) transmission (Faivre 2001: 24–34).

I will now turn to briefly juxtapose the two models of thought I am discussing here—gnosticism and esotericism. Upon closer examination, these two apparently quite different schemes show a fair number of similarities. In my opinion, three of the four basic features of esotericism can also be found in gnosticism. (1) The idea of correspondences, thus, has its parallel in the gnostic idea that every planetary orbit corresponds to one ruler of the world (archons) and at the same time to one of the many human bodies, referred to in some gnostic texts as clothes which ascending souls shed in the corresponding area of universe. (2) The importance of the imagination, and thus of symbolic representation and myth, is so obvious that I will not go into further details here. (3) The experience of the transmutation of the Gnostics' souls is also known from certain Gnostic texts. By way of an example, think of the 'Hymn of the Pearl' from the 'Acts of Thomas'.

In esotericism, just as in gnosis, spiritual entities play a role in the mediation and transportation of knowledge to the people. Also, the concept of redemptive knowledge (*gnosis*) is no stranger to esotericism. Furthermore, a monodualistic worldview is characteristic for both models of thought.

As far as differences between the two are concerned, I would like to focus only on one. In contrast to gnosis, esotericism does not have a concept of evil matter or of the unknowing, let alone evil, creator of the world. On the other hand, one has to say that gnosis—its antique background notwithstanding—only has a marginal, if any, understanding of nature as a living being.

In my opinion, this central difference loses something of its acuity when one considers the historical differences between the role of the world (*cosmos*) in antiquity compared to that of modern times. Antiquity's cosmocentrism was replaced by theocentrism in the Middle Ages, and the early modern period began, as well known, with the anthropocentric views of Pico della Mirandola.

Things get even more complicated when one adds the revolutionizing, even extremist countenance of the Gnostics to the mode of thought 'gnosticism', introduced above. The extremity of this position is explained by its declaration that classical antiquity's holy cosmos is evil and because it trounces the Jews' and the Christians' holiest image of God by turning him into an evil demiurge. Taking all this into account,

the religious studies scholar is faced with an intriguing question: If there were modern Gnostics, what would they, with all their radicalism, deny first and foremost? It would be neither the world, nor nature, nor god. Rather, I dare say, they would mock humanity or society itself.

This theoretical discussion could be easily followed further, but I will cut it short here and cut to the example announced in the title of my paper. In the following, I will roughly sketch the dogmatics and the history of a new religious movement which created quite a furore in the Ukraine and Russia during the first half of the 1990s. On the basis of this sketch of the 'Great White Brotherhood Usmalos', I will then try to apply the terms gnosticism and esotericism to this example. Proceeding this way, I try to shed light on both the level of its mode of thought as well as its form of life.

The Doctrine of Great White Brotherhood

I think one of the most interesting questions in this context is whether the teaching of the Great White Brotherhood can be designated as a gnostic (or perhaps as a neognostic) or simply as an esoteric teaching. In order to answer such a question, a short excursus to the teachings and history of this religious movement is necessary. The Doctrine of the Great White Brotherhood can be outlined as follows.

In the very beginning there is the pre-eternal State of the World, prior to all being, the structure-less Unity of all in all. The quasi-dogmatic text of this movement, 'The Science of Light and its transformation' argues that 'the Absolute in its pre-eternal state is the absolute unity of spirit and matter' (cf. МДХ³ 2003b: 194).

The Absolute, which is also referred to as the united reason or the spirit, resides in eternal sleep until 'a thought ripens'. Then the Absolute becomes apparent and develops itself. (Cf. МДХ 2003b: 194.)

The ensuing procedure can be imagined as a self-differentiation of the Absolute, which is itself feminine by nature and is also referred to as the 'eternal feminine' or 'primal feminine'. At first, the eternal feminine engenders the 'eternal masculine' or the 'Logos'—her son and divine spouse in one person. The Absolute 'has quasi separated itself in two

3 Maria Devi Christos (Rus. Мария Дзви Христос)—female leader of the Great White Brotherhood and the author of the 'dogmatic' texts of this new religious movement.

. . . , parcelling out its two ingredients: the God-Mother and the God-Father. . . ' (MДX 2003b: 172.)

The 'White Brotherhood' trinity is constituted of the Absolute, the God-Father and God-Mother. By means of the unification of these two first principles (of Father and Mother) ensues the *theokosmogensis*; that is the creation as a begetting, that can be imagined as the outflow of divine light from the mother's womb. The light is the essence of the deity, its blood as well as the material for its creative activities. Thus the World Mother has created the world from her blood, which is divine light by alienating herself from her divinity.

Following this, the first beings to be created were the seven higher spirits, with whom the World Mother 'created all things in the universe' (MДX 2003b: 172). These altogether ten higher entities are referred as 'monads'. They constitute a unity, and thus a pattern for future Creation. Creation in turn reflects the nature of the creator like a mirror. The ten first eternal entities constitute the sun, moon, earth and the seven planets of the solar system, that is, the whole divine universe revealed.

The process of creation by the deity is described as its reflection or the reflection of its light in physical matter on the one hand, and as 'a descent of light to physical matter' on the other hand. As the light moves away from its source, a deformation and thickening occurs to the point of state of 'rough matter'.

What is interesting in this context is the continuous emphasis on the structural parallelism between divine and material worlds, between the whole and its parts, or in other words between macro- and microcosm, as well as the accompanying metaphor of mirroring (cf. MДX 2003b: 150). This metaphor implies, however, that the material world as a reflection of the higher worlds is not endowed with any kind of autonomous substance as an independent basis of being.

According to the teachings of the Great White Brotherhood, the universe consists of three hierarchically related realms: the realm of divinity, the realm of Logos (also referred as the realm of archetypes) and the realm of physical matter. In addition, there is the so-called 'World of the Antigod', which also bears a threefold structure. This realm represents an evil and failed imitation of the divine world system. The 'World of Antigod' comes into contact with the divine world in the realm of material word. Evidently the Antigod, also known as Lucifer, has such a considerable influence over his world that he is also designated 'the Demiurge of the material world' (MДX 2003b: 251).

The origin of Antigod finds itself in mythology. Lucifer was the first of the 'seven higher spirits', also known as the 'divinely created

monads'. He is thus the first among the eternal divine entities, who are emanations of supreme God. Unlike the other spirits, Lucifer didn't want to continue passing on the divine light, but instead kept it for himself alone. This then led to Lucifer becoming a barrier or obstruction in the way of divine emanations. So the World Mother threw him into the deepest depths. She declared him as 'the most fallen being of all beings' (MĐX 2003b: 173) and as 'the embodiment of World Evil' (MĐX 2003b: 188).

It is very interesting how the World Mother tries to explain—one could even say justify—Lucifer's fall. She argues that he, like the other spiritual beings, was imperfect because of a lack of experience of physical matter (MĐX 2000: 611). Hence it is possible to comprehend the fall of Lucifer as a kind of tragic mistake which led to the appearance of Evil in the world.

The material world indeed is the creation of God: although it stands under the baleful demiurgical influence of the Antigod, it is also the abode of mankind. The first human, according to the teaching of White Brotherhood was a 'feminine spirit' also referred to as 'heavenly androgynous being' or 'God-Man' or, in the terminology of Kabbalah, as 'Adam-Kadmon' (MĐX 2003b: 172). 'He was let down into the material world in order to gain worldly experiences and to increase mankind' (MĐX 2003b: 50). Basically, this first human being is nothing other than one of the manifestations of the deity, one of its emanations. The first androgynous human being split itself in two other human beings: Adam and Eve and that marked the beginning of mankind.

Mankind is thus nothing other than a deity on a study trip to acquire knowledge about physical matter. Hence mankind is inherently divine. It is also referred to in the texts of the White Brotherhood as 'Godmankind'.

However, the activity of the Antigod makes life difficult for Godmankind. Humans have forgotten their divine origin because the anti-divine forces keep them in the sleep of ignorance (cf. MĐX 2004: 81). Therefore, Godmankind—or more precisely, 144,000 chosen souls—is in need of salvation. This salvation comes in form of divine knowledge, namely the 'Science of Light and its transformation', thus the name of the quasi-dogmatic part of the teaching that the World Mother reveals.

The salvation of men, who are particles of the divine light, will occur in the form of a Transmutation of the chosen souls and with them of the whole planet. The 'Science of Light' displays this as the restitution of the original order on the one hand and as a transition into a new stage of evolution on the other hand.

The correspondence of the teachings of the Great White Brotherhood I just sketched with the model of Gnosticism is striking. One can find here the idea of the absolute otherworldly deity, as well as its expansion into a number of other spiritual entities that act as mediators between the higher God and the world. This constellation can be thought of as the Gnostic Plerom. On the one hand, one can observe the differently pronounced dualism (God/Antigod, spirit/matter, world/anti-world), on the other hand, there is also the notion of extreme monism. Such a combination, I would say, can be described adequately with the term monodualism, which is also characteristic of ancient Gnosticism.

Like the ancient gnostic mythologies, the doctrine of the White Brotherhood explains the regrettable state of the world by means of a mythological drama of the fall of a higher spiritual being from the divine whole. Like the antique Gnostics, adherents of the White Brotherhood are convinced of their divine origin. They carry the divine light in their souls. Furthermore, their teaching emphasizes the soteriological power of knowledge (i.e. *gnosis*), which is revealed by the messengers of the higher realms.

However, variations from the model of gnosticism are equally noticeable. Contrary to ancient Gnosticism, the doctrine of the White Brotherhood does not teach enmity towards the world of matter. In the last instance, the world is a good creation. It has merely degenerated as a result of the *ur*-cosmic drama and needs to be saved from this baleful state. It is not the world that is evil, but a mankind that has given itself up to Lucifer. However, if the anthropocentric turn mentioned above is considered, then this difference appears far less fundamental.

The evaluation of the doctrine of the White Brotherhood as an esoteric teaching is in my view even more unequivocal. All four intrinsic characteristics and one of the secondary features of esotericism according to Antoine Faivre's model are present in this teaching. I hope that my explanations have made this clear, and will not go into any further detail here.

So we return once more to the question posed above: Can the teachings of the Great White Brotherhood be designated as *gnostic* (or perhaps as a *neognostic*) or simply as *esoteric*? In order to come to an answer I will now briefly sketch out the history of this religious movement.

The Brief History of Great White Brotherhood

The history of the Great White Brotherhood (below: *GWB*) can be divided into two parts. The first extends from the founding of the movement in the year 1990 to the imprisonment of its leaders in 1993. The second starts in 1993 and lasts to the present day.

One of the founders and leaders of the *GWB* in the first three years was Yuri Krivonogov (b. 1941), candidate in Technical Science.⁴ Prior to the founding of his own religion, Krivonogov was actively involved in occultism, psychology and various religious and esoteric teachings: including theosophy, yoga, the teachings of Nikolai and Helena Roerisch and others. For a certain period of time he was a supporter of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (cf. Шипков 1998: 162–3). In February 1990, he founded the so called ‘Center for Self-Awareness and Highest Yoga “Atma”’. In the spring of 1990, he became acquainted with Marina Tsvigun (b. 1960), who then became his spiritual companion and wife. Tsvigun, who later came to be known as ‘World-Mother’ was a journalist and had worked for a newspaper agency and a radio station.

At first, the future founders of the *GWB* were committed to the progress of the already mentioned institution with the promising name of ‘Atma’. However, shortly afterwards they founded a new ‘religion’. Yuri Krivonogov adopted the ritual name Yuoann Swami and Maria Krivonogova henceforth called herself Maria Devi. A little later, she extended her title to the one that is still in use: ‘Worldmother Maria Devi Christos’. Yuri Krivonogov turned himself into the ‘divine husband of Maria Devi’ and thereafter called himself Joseph and God-Father, in alternation. Their work received the name of *Usmalos* (Rus. Юсмалос), which according to the claim at that time, was understood as an abbreviation expressing the Trinity of the *GWB*: *USMA* ([Y]Uoann Swami and Maria) and—*LOS* (*LOGoS*).⁵ The complete self-attributed title at that time was ‘The universal Church of the White Brotherhood *Usmalos*’s

4 Equivalent to a Doctorate in Technical Science.

5 After the end of her relationship with Krivonogov, Maria Devi explained the term *Usmalos*, which was still understood as an abbreviation in different ways. For instance as an abbreviation of the Trinity ‘Jesus-Maria-Logos’ or as a ‘cipher for the names of the planets which are of apocalyptic relevance for humankind: Ю–Jupiter, С–Saturn, МА–Mars, Л–Луна (Eng. Moon), О–Orion, С–Sirius’ and others (*Юсмалос*).

As founding date of the movement we can assume the first of June 1990, since on that day 'the divine program of the salvation of the planet Earth', i.e. 'Program Usmalos', was begun (cf. МДХ 2000: 213).

According to their 1260-day program (cf. МДХ 2000: 191), the supporters of the movement were to preach the Usmalos-teachings, call to penance and call on everybody to accept Maria Devi as 'living Goddess' within this period. After the expiry of this period, on the 33rd birthday of Maria Devi, which was in the autumn of 1993, the end of the world was expected to come. According to the prophecies of the founders, 'Yoann Swami and Maria Devi were going to be killed, and then rise from the dead after three days to call for the Last Judgment' (Щипков 1998: 164). In her epistles of 1993, Maria Devi announced that she was willing to sacrifice herself, that through her self-sacrifice, the rise of the just and the fall of the sinners was going to start (МДХ 2000: 192–3), and that 'the time of apocalyptic agonies for the sinful humankind had come' (МДХ 2000: 213).

According to Maria Devi, her church had been persecuted by the 'anathema of the Ukrainian patriarch Filaret' since the end of 1991. In 1992, criminal proceedings were opened against her, and the mass media continuously spread negative news about the GWB. Its supporters were charged with zombification, human sacrifice, suicide and similar felonies. Faced with the danger of getting arrested, the Krivonogovs fled into foreign exile. They spent two years traveling (1992–3), maintaining steady correspondence with their supporters. Within these two years of travel, Maria Devi visited Israel, India and Egypt. (Cf. МДХ 2000: 198–9.)

The key events of the early history of the GWB occurred within the first ten days of November 1993, when its supporters started to meet daily in front of the Saint Sophia Cathedral in Kiev in order to preach the teachings of Usmalos and do penance. The local authorities, however, suspected that the supporters were going to commit mass suicide. Task forces of the Ukrainian militia imprisoned a large number of 'White Brothers' (about 600 persons). On November 10th Maria Devi and one of her closest confidants, the third person in the hierarchy of the GWB—the 'pope of the living church Ioann Petr II' (Vitalij Kovaltchuk)—were arrested inside Saint Sophia Cathedral, which they were intending to occupy, according to the militia. The majority of the supporters of the new religion, however, were released after a short term in prison. The process against the GWB lasted over two years. In 1996, Yuri Krivonogov was finally sentenced to seven years, Marina Krivonogova to four years, and Vitalij Kovaltchuk to six years in prison (Щипков 1998: 164). According

to the court documents, they were charged with the following: occupation of public buildings, agitation of the masses, battery, and attacks on the health of the citizens under the disguise of religious practice (Мурашов 2003).

During the legal process, the founders of the movement split up due to their inability to decide on how to react to the official charges, which finally led to a religious schism (Балагушкин 1999: 116). After that Krivonogov disassociated himself from the movement. In the letters to her supporters, Maria Devi calls her former husband and companion nothing less than Judas and Cain. She claims he had always distorted her 'divine thoughts and prophecies': 'Krivonogov distorted my light, which he reflected through his Cain-prism' (МДХ 2000: 566). The elaboration of the said program is thus solely ascribed to Yuri Krivonogov, who had allegedly secretly organized the incidents of Autumn 1993 without any permission from the World-Mother, in order to 'lead [Maria Devi] to the shambles'—just in the same fashion as Judas had done with Christ. According to her claims, she herself had never prophesied the end of the world. In 2003, she said the following in an interview with the journal *Религия и право* ('Religion and Law'):

When it comes to the associations with the end of the world, which many people have as soon as the Great White Brotherhood is mentioned, it has to be kept in mind that it is nothing else but a campaign aiming at discrediting and libeling through negative stereotypes, which the mass media artificially created in the early 1990s. Yuri Krivonogov's wrong prophecy of the 'Last Judgment' had a certain influence on the emergence of these stereotypes. Although this person has taken back all of his words and 'prophecies', journalists do not get tired of hyping the inventions of their loved idol, who had never had anything to do with the teachings of Maria Devi Christos. (МДХ 2003a: 30.)

On August 13th 1997, the female leader of the GWB was released from prison.

In the ten years since the reunion of the 'Worldmother' with her believers, the movement has gained considerable momentum and has become firmly established in many cities of the former Soviet Union. Today the 'White Brothers' are very cautious in their public relations. There is no large-scale advertising or propaganda for the teachings of the GWB. The exact number of supporters of the movement is unknown due to this low-key, in fact almost conspiratorial character. However,

time and again supporters of the group can be seen on the streets, even if they do not wear white chitons any more.⁶ For the most part they are young women, singing spiritual songs with muted voices, spreading GWB literature and begging.

Even if the GWB no longer has any substantial public presence today, its information basis has grown considerably: for instance, a comprehensive and professionally run website has been installed (www.usmalos.com),⁷ the Last Testament—a complete edition of all of Mari Devi's writings up to the year 2000—has been published, and the journals *KultUra* and *Usmalos* are regularly published.

Conclusion

It can be stated that, since entering the second stage of its history, the Great White Brotherhood has lost its original revolutionary, if not extremist, character. The *eschaton* was deferred into the future. The movement enjoys the uncomplicated life of a religious minority and contributes to the Russian and Ukrainian esoteric scene.

The example of this new religious movement, which in its teachings includes gnostic as well as esoteric elements, displays a general development. To formulate this provocatively, one might want to say that this development moves from gnosticism to esotericism. Whereas gnostic teachings basically persevere, the revolutionary attitude of gnosticism is all but relinquished.

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6 Cf. e.g. 'Белое Братство' возвращается в Орел. Online in Internet: <http://www.religare.ru/article3999.htm> (accessed 30 December 2007).

7 At present time 'under construction' (1 January 2008).

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