

Detraditionalized Religion and Acculturation of Hinduism in Czech Occultism: Theoretical Considerations for the Study of New Religions¹

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Providing a working definition of detraditionalization Paul Heelas speaks of the “shift of authority: from without to within. It entails the decline of the belief in pre-given or natural order of things” (Heelas 1996: 2). The issue of authority is the subject to which, according to Mark Chaves (1994), an analyses of secularization should move to be able to grasp the process at all (Dobbelaere's) levels (societal, organizational, individual). The shift in maintaining and establishing authority, however, cannot be grasped properly without paying attention to the role of mediated communication. As I will show, and as John B. Thompson (1996, 2004) has repeatedly suggested, the study of media enables us to identify some of the principal factors operating in modernization on one hand, and helps us to clarify how traditions in the context of modernity are reinterpreted and re-moulded to suite new social conditions. In the following essay I will try to provide an analysis of the initial stages of acculturation of Hinduism in Czech occultism to explain how modern media re-configured modern religiosity and enabled active receptions of foreign traditions in European societies. Finally I will also draw some consequences for conceptualization of “new religions” in the study of religions.

The Indian notions and practices started to be acculturated among Czech occultists during the last decade of 19th century and became almost a mass issue during the 1920s when the occult literature flourished being published by growing number of publishing houses. There were various reasons why some of the elements of Hindu religions became interesting and useful for Czech occultists of the time. One of them was the need to search for “new” tradition capable of providing rational, yet ultimately grounded, means for orientation in the newly “fluid”² world, and to satisfy the romantic need for unity in the age of differentiation. Hinduism was capable of providing this because it was constructed by Indian neo-Hindus and Western scholars to suite their respective demands in the context of colonial subalternity and dominance.

Here, however, I am not interested in why Hinduism suited particular needs, but how occultists utilized it, since I need to identify some crucial features of occultism and establish their relation with the changes brought by new printed media. First of all I must therefore provide a short overview of acculturation of Hinduism in Czech occultism.

Acculturation of Hinduism in Czech occultism: An overview

Occultism utilized “Hindu traditions” very freely. Basically occultists interpreted Hinduism, particularly yoga, as a kind of “Oriental magic” or as an “Oriental mysticism”. In both cases the

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2 By the term “fluid” I am freely referring to Bauman's notion of “fluid modernity” (Bauman 2000).

understanding was largely shaped by theosophy of Madame Blavatsky but not exclusively. The most important occult societies which largely used Indian notions and symbols were Czech branches of the *Theosophical Society*, the *Liberal School of Hermetic Sciences*³ (henceforth LSHS, an imitation of Papus's *Ecole supérieure Libre des Sciences Hermétiques*) and the club *Psyche* (or *Czech school of Christian Mysticism*) led by Karel Weinfurter.

The Theosophical Society

The founder of organized theosophy in Czech was baron Adolf Leonhardi from Stráž nad Nežárkou (Stráž on river Nežárka). He founded the lodge called “By the Blue Star” in Prague in 1891. After a rupture and change of the membership the lodge re-emerged as *The Theosophical Club* in 1897 (with affiliation to F. Hartmann's TS in Leipzig), *The Czech Theosophical Society* in 1908 (with affiliation to the mother organization in Adyar) and the *The Society for Mystic Studies* in 1927 (without exclusive affiliation to another TS) (Emanuel z Lešehradu 1935: 199). The activity of *The Society for Mystic Studies* stopped during the time of real socialism in 1956. The *Psyche club* was dissolved already in 1951 as a “religious sect”, “which endangers the peoples' democratic regime” (Psyche, AHMP). The LSHS did not even recover after the World War II.

Since the time of *Theosophical Club* (1897) Czech theosophy had more Christian than Oriental orientation. In spite of this, an influence of advaita vedanta was clear since the beginning the movement, the doctrine of reincarnation was hardly opposed, later on Paul Brunton and his guru Ramana Maharishi, Vivekananda's *gurubhai* Abhedananda, Rabindranath Tagore and even Swami Shivananda were received well by theosophists in their quest for universal religion (TS, AHMP). Bhagavadgita played important role in theosophy and was published by theosophists in two Czech translations (Procházka 1900, Maternová 1921), both displaying characteristic theosophical tendencies to allegorical interpretations. One does not need to say, however, that Therese of Avila, John of the Cross, Thomas Kempis as well as Annie Besant, Ch. Leadbeater and others played also significant role in this religion which refused to limit its textual sources.

With reference to above mentioned division between “mystic” and “magic” interpretations of yoga, Czech theosophy had rather a mystical leanings, i.e. emphasised more the aspect of *unio mystica* than the search for occult powers, called often by Sanskrit term *sidhis*. These, nevertheless, could have been developed naturally as a consequence of spiritual progress of an individual. This attitude was shared by Karel Weinfurter and his school. The LSHS, in contrast, emphasised the development of *siddhis* as a central aim of yogic training.

In fact, Karel Weinfurter, the later founder of *Czech School of Christian Mysticism* and the most active mediator of yoga and the tradition of *Ramakrishna Mission* in Czech was the member of the above mentioned lodge *By the Blue Star*. The group of his friends headed by a banker and later

3 Svobodná škola věd hermetických.

writer Gustav Meyrink, many of whom were members of Besant's *Esoteric Section*, turned away from theosophy in 1894/95 and practised meditation according to Patanjali's *Yogasutras* and later also *Bhagavadgita*, and according to a book *Nature's Finer Forces* of Rama Prasad (1889) seemingly tantric (Weinfurter 1999: 73, 80), but of a theosophical origin, however referring to unspecified tantric scriptures.

The Psyche Club

The Psyche Club was established in 1929 but, as indicated above, its founder Karel Weinfurter was engaged in Czech occult movement since at least 1891. His first published book *Miracles and Magic of Indian Faquirs* (Divy a kouzla indických fakirů, 1913) was an exposition of Indian ascetism according to J. C. Oman's *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India* (1903), it retold some stories from Blavatsky's *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan* (1892), and it contained the story of Sri Ramakrishna and his sayings according to Max Müller's *Râmakrishna: His Life and Sayings* (1898). Original parts of Weinfurter's book explained teaching of yoga according to Patanjali, *Gherandasanhita*, *Shivasanhita*, *Hathayogapradipika*, *Yogasarasangraha* with minor dependence on Richard Schmidt's *Fakire un Fakirtum im alten un modernen Indien* (1907). Already here his teaching was strongly influenced by *Bhagavadgita*. *Hathayogapradipika* and *Bhagavadgita*, as well as Vivekanadas lectures on Rajayoga together with his translation and exposition of Patanjali Weinfurter later translated to Czech and provided with detailed commentaries.

Weinfurter got in touch with Vivekananda's *gurubhai* and missionary of Ramakrishna Mission Swami Abhedananda already before 1920. An influence of this tradition was mediated by Weinfurter's translations and finally again through two volume book *Master Ramakrishna and His Teaching* (*Mistr Ramakrišna a jeho učení*) in 1933. The important turn occurred during the half of 1930s. Weinfurter started to popularize yoga-vedanta of Paul Brunton and his guru Ramana Maharishi. The visit of Brunton in Prague, however, led to a split in the *Psyche Club* since some Weinfurter's followers moved from Weinfurter's *Christian mysticism* inspired by Eastern sources more strictly to Maharishian yoga-vedanta. At this point the foundations of particular tradition of Czech yoga have been laid down. This tradition started with Weinfurter's colleagues Arnošt Čapek and Josef Hoznourek etc., was carried on by photographer František Drtikol, through personalities like Květoslav Minařík, Jiří Vacek (still alive) and the Míla and Eduard Tomáš it silently passed through communist times to outburst during the 1990s in differentiated but strong movement with ability to mobilize thousands⁴.

Liberal School of Hermetic Sciences

⁴ This was true especially about the lectures of Eduard Tomáš. During last one and half decade of his life (†2002) he enjoyed great popularity and authority among people of all generations and the palace Lucerna in Prague used to be hopelessly filled up to the last meter of space on every occasion of his and his wife's lectures.

The founder of LSHS Otokar Griese in contrast to Weinfurter did not have mass appeal and his publishing enterprises repeatedly brought him into financial troubles. The reasons may have been (a) that he started his activities more than a decade sooner than this kind of magical occultism became popular in Czech, (b) that in spite of popularizing a kind of practical magic occultism, which later proved suitable for mass consumption, he clung on certain intellectual level of discussion and preferred publishing of older and newer classics like Papus, P. B. Randolph, Eliphas Lévi, Paul Sédir, even Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, *Sefer Yetzirah*, Patanjali's sutras (with the commentary of W. Q. Judge) or Frantz Hartmann's selection from advaita-vedantic *Vivekacudamani* instead of more simple popular handbooks.

Similarly as the H. B. of L., or even in a different way Weinfurter, LSHS emphasised practical occultism leading to the acquirement of occult powers over the seemingly helpless theosophical purification. Central to his occult-magic attitude to yoga was the idea of development of unlimited power of will. All the Indian techniques of meditation served in this context as a pattern for the development of various practices of mind control and strengthening of will power. The idea that the unconscious needs to be controlled because of its ambivalent (empowering and destructive) nature and the belief that through correctly directed thought energy one can attain more than by physical manipulation with matter was behind.

Scientific claims

Providing slightly different interpretations of "Hindu" material these movements shared certain common features. One of the most important was the presupposition that the world of spirit is governed by the unbreakable set of rules analogical to that which govern the nature, and can be hence scientifically explored and made accessible to everybody. As Joscelin Godwin (1994) emphasized occultism was greatly indebted to enlightenment. Hartmut Zinser (1994) has shown some reasons why occultists could successfully claim scientific legitimation for their teachings and enterprises. The clubs of occultists claimed to do in fact science, and the propagation of their attitudes they understood as the edifying activity. Certain connection with science was inherited from renaissance esotericism, which, as A. Faivre (1994: 8) shown, established itself on the discursive field between theology and new science with the aim to bridge the sharp divide between god and nature by studying nature in order to know God, its architect and life principle.

Occultism was based on experiment or direct experience and criticized Catholicism similarly as protestants and the enlightenment rationalists did. One of reasons why Indian Swami Vivekananda was able to touch the heart of American and European occultists and liberal Christians was that he interpreted Hinduism, or yoga-vedanta, as a universal teaching *without dogmas*, systematic method for attaining the repeatable experience of truth behind the constraints of time and space, scientific foundation of all religions (CWSV I: 16). Apart from being an expression of the will for scientific

religion this manifested clearly relocation of religious authority, which can be illustrated by the widespread notion of a guru. All these movements worked extensively with the notion of guru or mahatma, yet he was hardly a man in flesh and his instructions ought to come in the form of intuition (Hermes 1908: 86, Besant 1920: 213-214, 286 etc.). Especially Weinfurter repeatedly emphasized that a proper guru is rarely a person, and that the real, and the only necessary, guru dwells in our own hearts (Weinfurter 1927: 92).

Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1998: 407) pointed out that interpretation of esoteric cosmologies in terms of modern science operating with the principle of causality is a hallmark, which distinguishes occultism from older forms of esotericism based on exploring correspondences. Indeed while the renaissance esoteric tradition uses language infinitely playing with symbols uncovering new relations through uncovering still new meanings in words as well as in things, occultism is a clear expression of the view that the language can reflect the reality like a mirror. Indeed, Czech occultist did never use the symbolic language characteristic for esoteric tradition. Instead of that they were providing definite explanations of the meanings of esoteric texts and of the universe; allegory served as particularly useful means to this end.

Occultism furthermore shared particular modern concept of *religion* developed along similar lines in modern philosophies and protestant Christian traditions, and utilized in the Study of Religions and Orient. In this concept the aspect of systematized doctrine was greatly emphasised over the aspect of ritual practise. The essential part of religion seemed to be searchable in written documents. Hence occultism in its search for *philosophia perennis* resembled a kind of living history of cultures and religions.

Syncretic and scriptural nature of teachings

From the above remarks it is clear that notion of an authoritative canon was foreign to occultists, since *philosophia perennis* could have been manifested in various, even apparently contradictory teachings. The search for universal eternal teaching in the documents of various origins resulted in consciously syncretic systems, in which the elements from various religions and philosophies were arranged in some kind of order of hierarchies and analogies usually built upon the logic of one particular system which served as a key for composition/interpretation of the other elements. Indian notions, terms and practices were not used otherwise than more or less fundamental parts of such systems.

On organizational level this emphasis on doctrine and study of documents was expressed by the fact that occult clubs were a kind of communities of readers, who exchanged the information on literature, literature itself, and personal experiences with practical prescription found in literature. Even new genre of religious literature was born in this field - textbooks for self-studies and self-initiations. From this one understands why this was “the secrete religion of [*literary*] educated

classes”⁵ (Campbell 1978: 156).

Liberalism and humanism

Occultist shared in great deal the liberal political outlooks, particularly the notion that the people are born free, have the same rights and no body has right to impose any constraints on their liberty of thinking and expression. Restrictions on this right imposed by Catholic church they criticised continually.

Nationalism

In spite of sharing liberal ideas some traces of cultural nationalism can be found in works of Czech occultists. This cultural nationalism, however, was hardly conflicting with their universal humanism in their attempts to elevate the nation to higher level of civilization.

Considerations for the Concept of New Religions

From the presented overview it is clear that acculturation of Hinduism in Czech occultism was not a kind of conversion. It was a shift in thinking as a consequence of inner development of modern cultures. The crucial factor of this development, as I already indicated, was radical transformation of forms of communication and social interaction caused by the development of new media, especially the print. Printing press proved to be an effective means of subversion of traditional forms of authority already during the reformation period. During the turn of 19th and 20th centuries the amount of printed material as well as the number of intellectuals was growing significantly. The edifying literature was one of the most widespread kinds of printed documents, which undermined the authority of older intellectual classes (*priests*). Already in 1881 T. G. Masaryk (1926: 183-184) pointed out that it was the popular spread of science mediated by printed material what caused the erosion of traditional beliefs and lead to uncertainty typical for modern societies. Yet the ways of reconnecting the daily life with the general structure of meaning started to be searched on a more individual basis. In this search for new “traditions” occultist utilized the esoteric heritage, which contained the patterns of individual search through self study of religious and philosophical scriptures, and connected the study of nature with the study of divinity immanent in it. Than due to general dispersion of literary education, and of printed editions of esoteric as well as Orientalist literature the elitist esotericism could have been transformed into a relatively mass occultism at least among intellectual middle-classes.

But such a scriptural religion based on silent reading of printed books has many specific features. First of all, such a religion does not need locally based community. Its “community” is established by the shared reading preferences, and though the personal bonds also develop, they are

⁵ The clear figures provides an official report of *Theosophical society* in Prague dated 1929. From the total of 281 members 83 passed academic training, 70 were officials, 29 businessmen, 15 teachers, 9 students, 14 workers, 12 craftsmen, 4 peasants, 4 soldiers and 42 „private persons“ (TS, AHMP).

established on voluntary bases with no fatal implications for material and day to day life of an individual – in opposition to personal bonds in traditional locally based communities. In the urban environment these “communities” are more likely to spread and prosper than in the countryside.

The printed-scriptural character of this religiosity, nevertheless, affects not only their social organization. As Walter Ong pointed out the script as a kind of technology leads to internalization of a special kind of thinking. If the religion I spoke of strongly emphasised doctrinal aspect over the ritual, if it systematized teaching, searched for the essence in perennial philosophy, if it lead its proponents to think of *themselves* as having the godly nature and having in themselves the key to Truth and the source of authority, it is all thanks to fact that it was created by people used to silent reading. A person educated in oral culture, as Ong showed, does not use abstract concepts, does not produce doctrinal systems of thoughts, does not create coherent linear stories with exposition, collision, crisis, peripeteia, and catharsis, does not think of himself from distance in categories of moral conscience. His thinking about things is rather based on the logic of use and the psychology is conceived in terms of interpersonal relations and one's own doings (Ong 1991: 49-57).

Since emphasis on doctrine, moral coherence of a person and conscience, on personal study of religion, on personal psychological relation to divinity as well as the voluntary character of membership is not limited to occultism, but is rather typical for all forms of religiosity in modern societies, it is difficult to maintain the conceptual difference between “new” and “traditional” religions otherwise than on the level of difference between cultures in which these religions prosper. The old Christian churches have more in common with occultism or various phenomena termed as New Age than with the church of 15th century, because it is as much the product of culture shaped by new, especially printed, media.

There is, nevertheless, one difference between some “old” (and “new”) Christian churches, or, say, fundamentalist Islamic groups on one hand and occultism and New Age on the other. In case of the second group no canon of scriptures as well as of doctrines is binding, while such a constraint on one's personal creativity is imposed in the first group. This difference is very important since it has some other consequences. If the group indeed attempts to control the orthodoxy of its members in society with rich extra-group information networks, it needs to develop effective means of social control like intensive frequent face to face interaction and communication or the feeling of potential threat from the social environment. The group having strict canon - not in ideology but in practice - must tend to develop very closed organizational structure and the feeling of exclusivity and tension. This is one of reasons why such a general body like Catholic church cannot guarantee that the mass of its members will not practise some kind of a Christian New Age, and therefore, why from the theoretical standpoint it is useless to divide between groups with longer and shorter history. Maintaining such a distinction in the study of contemporary religiosity indicates that the discipline has not yet escaped the patterns of engaged discussion on one hand, and an obstacle to theoretically

relevant understanding of transformations in contemporary religiosity on the other. To accept the fact that the social and religious landscape is continually being restructured as a whole – comprising newer and older expressions alike – and that the media and information flows play crucial role in this restructuring represents the first step towards theoretically valid and useful study of the situation of religion in contemporary societies.

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