

Introduction: Mysticism, the Esoteric Paradigm, and Oleg Maltsev

PierLuigi Zoccatelli
Pontifical Salesian University
pierluigi.zoccatelli@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: This issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* is devoted to a Ukrainian movement, the Applied Sciences Association, and its founder, Oleg Maltsev. Paradoxically, scholars of new religious movements became interested in the Association after anti-cultists started denouncing it as a “cult.” Having studied the Association, however, they concluded it was not a new religious movement but a group teaching psychology and martial arts with a scientific and technical rather than a religious approach. On the other hand, Maltsev sees a connection between both psychology and martial arts, and a notion of God and a view of history that include references to what he calls “European Mysticism.” This introduction refers to the notion of “esoteric paradigm,” which I have illustrated elsewhere with reference to the idea that “religion” and “magic” do not exhaust all possible human relations with the sacred or transcendence. It argues that, although Maltsev himself would deny that his teachings are part of “esotericism,” outside observers may have reasons to conclude that they are included in the larger notion of the “esoteric paradigm.”

KEYWORDS: Esoteric Paradigm, Western Esotericism, Oleg Maltsev, Applied Sciences Association, European Mysticism.

Introduction

In 2016, scholars of new religious movements became suddenly aware of the existence in Ukraine, and activities in several other countries, of a group whose name and beliefs were not clearly identified. All what was known was that the group had been founded by Oleg Maltsev, a Jewish-Ukrainian man with a military background who was at that time a doctoral candidate in psychology, and that it was targeted by Russian and Ukrainian anti-cultists as one of the most dangerous “cults” operating in their area (Fautré 2016; see also the article by Fautré in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). Belgian human right activist and scholar, Willy

Fautré, was the first Western expert to visit the group's headquarters in Odessa, but didn't solve the problem of its name. While anti-cultists called them "the Odessa Templars" (a name the group never used), Fautré initially believed that the group was called "Fate Analysis," after the deep psychology theory of Hungarian psychiatrist Léopold Szondi (1893–1986) they had adopted.

In fact, it came out that Maltsev had encountered the theories of Szondi only in 2014, although they had become an important part of his teachings. Maltsev, however, had started teaching selected group of students in 1998, at age 23, well before being introduced to the ideas of Szondi. But what, exactly, was Maltsev teaching? On the one hand, anti-cultists called its system a "pseudo-religion." On the other hand, Maltsev insisted his teachings had nothing to do with religion and were part of science. He prefers to be called a "scientist" rather than "spiritual master." In this article, I will argue that Maltsev's teachings are part of what I have proposed to call the "esoteric paradigm" (Zoccatelli 2006), and that the latter category is more appropriate for the Applied Sciences Institute that either "new religious movement" or "new magical movement," a notion introduced in 1990 by Massimo Introvigne (Introvigne 1990). I will also clarify that Maltsev himself would probably not agree with this conclusion, as he makes a distinction between "European mysticism," a field he actively researches, and "esotericism." After some further comments on Maltsev's activities in this introduction, I will explain what I mean for "esoteric paradigm," and compare this notion with the teachings of the Applied Sciences Institute.

Certainly, Maltsev has credentials in many fields. As detailed by Massimo Introvigne in his article in this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, Maltsev has a military studies background and studied in Moscow to become part of Russian elite corps under veterans of Soviet special forces, becoming proficient in the process in a variety of martial arts. But he also pursued a parallel career in law, and eventually was admitted to practice law first in Russia and then in Ukraine. Maltsev was interested in psychology for many years and would finally earn his Ph.D. degree in this discipline from Odessa State University, in 2017. He is currently working towards a second Ph.D. degree, in religious studies.

As this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR* demonstrates, Maltsev teaches at least in three different fields—but he insists they are connected. He is well-known as a teacher of martial arts and weapon handling, and provides lectures around the world on matters such as the use of the Venetian stiletto or a variety of knives.

This does not fall outside the field of controversies. Martial arts and the teaching of weapon handling techniques are highly competitive fields, and competitors have tried to use the accusation that Maltsev operates a “cult” in order to warn students from enrolling in his courses. Interminable quarrels about his credentials in the field of weapon handling followed, with some accusing him of being a parvenu without a credible pedigree, while luminaries in the field such as Jon Rister endorsed Maltsev and even co-authored books with him (Maltsev and Rister 2017).

The second field, on which Maltsev is a frequent speaker in seminars and courses is psychology. Historians of psychoanalysis agree on the importance of Szondi, but they also agree on the fact that, for a variety of reasons, his difficult system never became as popular as those of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), despite the fact that, while disagreeing with him on several issues, both Freud and Jung befriended Szondi and held him in high esteem (Hughes 1992). Maltsev found in Szondi confirmation of theories and approaches he had learned earlier from his mentor, Viktor Pavlovič Svetlov (1919–1998), and which had been originally developed by Soviet psychologists, primarily for military use (Introvigne, 2018). Szondi’s idea of an ancestral unconscious, i.e. that we carry in our unconscious a genetic presence of our ancestors largely determining our destiny, although this fate can be changed through appropriate techniques, is the basis of Fate Analysis. Maltsev applies Fate Analysis, perhaps well beyond Szondi, to an astonishing variety of subjects, one example being his recent documentary movie about the Sicilian bandit Salvatore Giuliano (1922–1950), analyzed in detail in this issue by Raffaella Di Marzio.

That there is a connection between martial arts and psychology is not a new theory. All masters in the field teach that winning a martial arts context is a question of psychology more than of physical strength. But what does all this have to do with spirituality and “cults”? Here, the third pillar of Maltsev’s system should be analyzed, as well as its sources and roots. One can argue that Maltsev likes the symbolism of number Three, and in fact he incorporated the Applied Sciences Institute as an umbrella organization for three different associations, also registered separately. One deals with martial arts (and the study of criminal underworlds in all continents, where Maltsev hopes to find several forms of hidden or secret knowledge that have disappeared elsewhere), and another with

Fate Analysis. The third is the Memory Institute. Since Szondi was deeply interested in memory, it may at first sight appear as just another psychological institution. But in fact it is something different. As Massimo Introvigne demonstrates in his article in this issue, memory in Maltsev's teachings is where we actually find God, or the one God among three (the divine number Three being at work again) who is present in each human's field since his or her birth, the other two Gods being subsequent human constructions. Maltsev believes that the knowledge of the three Gods, and of the superiority of the Memory God, is the most important secret in history. Knowing this secret offers the possibility of getting power. On this is based a complex view of history as a battlefield between three different traditions or systems. Only one of them, which Maltsev calls the Venetian system, knows the secret, and in a way it is assured of "victory." But it prefers not to proclaim its victory openly, and to operate in the shadow.

The Esoteric Paradigm

The notion of "esotericism" entered the academia only recently, and not without problems and oppositions (Hanegraaff 2012). Although there were precursors, such as Georg Simmel (1858–1918) with his study of secret societies, it was American sociologist Edward A. Tiryakian who, in August 1971, in a lecture presented at the annual convention of the American Sociological Association held in Denver, proposed "an initial formulation of the sociology of esoteric culture and its relation to the larger social context" (Tiryakian 1972, 1974).

Prior to Tiryakian, there had certainly been no lack of academics who had made fundamental contributions to the study of the vast and comparatively unexplored frontier territory of "Western esotericism," including François Secret (1911–2003), Daniel P. Walker (1914–1985), Frances A. Yates (1899–1981), Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), and others. However, it was Tiryakian who started a discussion about how to define esotericism as an academic field, and what method should be used to study it. The discussion involved Antoine Faivre, and later—building on the work of Faivre—Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Jean-Pierre Laurant, Marco Pasi, and many others, whose work led to the creation and consolidation of academic chairs consecrated to esotericism in leading universities (Zoccatelli 2006).

Moreover, the proposal formulated in 1971 by Tiryakian had the advantage, by introducing the category of a “sociology of esoteric culture,” to immediately put the sociology of esotericism in dialogue with the sociology of culture elaborated by Talcott Parsons (1902–1979). In his *Theories of Society*, Parsons had defined culture as an integral component of the systems of social action, which provides the fundamental symbolic grounds of expression to the existential problems of meaning inherent in social existence (Parsons et al. 1961).

As a culture, or a cultural style, esotericism began to appear with the Renaissance “epistemological shift,” which gradually led to the rise of the esoteric currents in the West (Faivre 1996). In this context, what was later called “esotericism” included a revival of hermetic science and the so-called “occult philosophy,” alchemy, Paracelsianism, Rosicrucianism, the Christian Kabbalah, and the theosophical and occultist currents, up to the more recent “perennialism” and beyond. All these areas developed in the Latin West from the end of the 15th century, and were “institutionalized” from the 19th century onwards. They are very diverse fields of study, albeit having the common factor of an esoteric “form of thought.” This supports the idea that there exists a whole category of spiritual currents, which cannot be reduced to specific inclusion in the field of religious studies, but which form part of a context that I identified in 2000 as the “esoteric paradigm” (Zoccatelli 2000).

Mostly for political reasons, i.e. because the opponents of the esoteric worldview were often also opponents of “cults,” a variety of esoteric groups has been studied from the 1970s onwards under the label of “new religious movements.” This is in itself a problematic category, which has received its share of criticism. If, keeping in mind that the boundaries of the category are difficult to assess, we would survey what groups have been discussed as “new religious movements,” we would find three main sections: new religious movements of Christian origin; new religious movements rooted in the philosophical-religious heritage of the East; and the so called area of the “new Gnosis,” a *tertium genus* that includes groups that cannot be traced back to the first two categories, and which, nevertheless, seems to be part of this phenomenon as a whole.

It is in the “new Gnosis” area that we find “new religious movements” whose main references are to esoteric traditions. In order to avoid possible misunderstandings, Italian historian of religions Giovanni Filoramo, who proposed this category, stated that

in this case, we are not normally dealing with ways of thinking directly linked to ancient traditions of Gnosticism (even if we could find some examples of this). Rather, there is an indirect renewal of esoteric traditions. From the perspective of comparing different phenomena, they have unexpected structural similarities, with the so called religions of the Self, as both deal with forms of self-redemption (Filoramo 1993, 234).

The “esoteric approach to the sacred” (another definition for the new Gnosis area) includes, but does not coincide with, the category originally suggested by Massimo Introvigne of the “new magical movements” (Introvigne 1990). Swiss historian of religions Jean-François Mayer introduced the concepts of “ways of knowledge” and “ways of power,” with the latter referring to magical, as opposed to religious, practices (Mayer 1999). This is not far away from Introvigne’s argument for distinguishing new “religious” from new “magical” movements:

Following Mircea Eliade and Julien Ries [1920–2013], one can argue that [...] religious experience is a hierophany, a manifestation of the sacred, while magical experience is rather a kratophany, a manifestation of power (Introvigne 1989, 9).

However, magical or “occult” experience is similar to, but not identical with, the experience that can be found in the various branches of esotericism. Explaining the comparatively recent origins of these words, Laurant identified “esotericism” and “occultism” as “false twins” (Laurant 1992, 19).

Gregory Bateson’s (1904–1980) ethno-anthropological model of the “dissolution of religion” may also be mentioned (Bateson and Bateson 1987, 56). French sociologist Françoise Champion approached this “return of magic” through the metaphor of a “mystical-esoterical nebula,” including beliefs, attitudes, and movements (Champion 1989, 1994). The “nebula” or “cluster,” however, can only be an *epistemological* category, perhaps identifying a habitat or segment of the “cultic milieu” as originally studied by Colin Campbell (Campbell 1972). Champion and Campbell included in this large milieu what was commonly called the New Age. But the relationship between esotericism and the New Age is very complicated (Hanegraaff 1996). New Age was certainly influenced by esotericism, but many who would regard themselves as part of traditional Western esotericism reject the New Age as superficial and spurious.

Building on Simmel, Hugh Urban sees secrecy as a core feature of esotericism (Urban 2001). He takes into account what Umberto Eco (1932–2016) called the “syndrome of the secret” (Eco 1988), without excluding from esotericism the deviate or pathological approaches to secrecy lampooned by Eco in his novel

Foucault's Pendulum. In this regard, Urban focuses on esotericism as a movement that holds secrets. He defines esotericism not for its content, but for its form as a symbolic economy: a “regime of secrets,” where secrets continuously refer to other secrets, until the content becomes irrelevant. We should, however, consider that in what remain the most famous definition of esotericism, Faivre regarded the transmission of secrets as one of the two “secondary” features of esotericism, together with the idea that in their inner or secret core all traditions and religions agree with each other. The four “primary” features included a theory of correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm, the idea of nature as a living being, imagination and mediation by entities and spirits, and the experience of a spiritual transformation or transmutation achieved by specific techniques (Faivre 1992). Of course, not everybody agrees with Faivre either.

My proposal of the “esoteric paradigm” was based on my persuasion that the distinction between religion and magic does not exhaust the whole field of human relations with transcendental dimensions. Magical experiences are not the only alternative to religion. They are rather a pars of a genus, which I suggested to call “esoteric paradigm.” The latter is broader than “esotericism” as defined by Faivre and can be divided into subgenres, families, currents: “new magical movements,” with all the subdivisions and classifications suggested by Introvigne; the “magick family” (but also the “ancient wisdom family,” considered as a broader category) as a subgroup of religions used by American scholars who follow the typology of J. Gordon Melton; the “ways of knowledge” and “ways of power” mentioned by Mayer (perhaps a two-faced Janus of the same reality), and so on. Urban’s “regime of secrets” is ubiquitous, and very important, in the esoteric paradigm, but it is not its only defining feature. In short, it seems to me that the esoteric paradigm, more than mere magic, is the real ideal-typical alternative to the basic religious paradigm.

Dr Maltsev, Mysticism, and Esotericism

Not all discourses *about* religions are religious. Maltsev’s teachings include a typology of the notions of God, but are not aimed at generating an original experience of God in his students and I would say that they fall outside the field of religion. As it is always the case, we should distinguish what scholars call the *etic* (not to be confused with “ethic”) and, respectively, the *emic* approach to a social

group (Pike 1999). The emic point of view of the members of the movement is different from the etic gaze of the scholar as outside observer. From the emic perspective of Maltsev's students, there is little doubt that what they are taught is science. They would describe Maltsev, *Doctor* Maltsev with his Ph.D. degree, as a "scientist," rather than as the leader of a spiritual movement. Emic points of view should never be dismissed lightly. Certainly, a great deal of the research and activities of Maltsev belong to science. Few would doubt that Szondi was a scientist and that Fate Analysis is a scientific theory, although perhaps not the most successful one, in the field of deep psychology. And his college training allows Maltsev to approach psychology, martial arts, the history of the criminal underworld, and other subjects with tools that are part of the scientific method.

This, however, is only part of the story. Readers of this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, which includes articles about the Applied Sciences Institute, would notice how Maltsev favors an interpretation of history dominated by the "regime of secret," or, as he would prefer to say, studied at a different information access level. Here, the Applied Sciences Institute parts company from "official" academic history. History is not what it seems. There are secret forces, secret struggles, secrets leading to other secrets. Some of these secrets are about God, not in the sense that they are "religious" but because knowledge of the complete typology of human approaches to God is a tool for acquiring power.

Some of Maltsev's references about a great Game going on under the surface of human history are to authors of the esoteric tradition, such as Papus (Gérard Encausse, 1865–1916: Maltsev 2016, 17–21). This would not be enough to include Maltsev within esotericism, however, as his references come from multiple sources, and most of them are not esoteric. As mentioned earlier, Maltsev himself prefers to describe one of his fields of study and teaching as "mysticism" rather than "esotericism." Interestingly, the *École pratique des hautes études* (EPHE) created in 1979 for Faivre a chair under the title of "History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe." As Faivre himself noted, the title of the chair conveniently avoided to define esotericism and mysticism and establish where the boundary between them lied, although when he left the EPHE in 2002, he persuaded the university to change the name into "History of Modern Western Esoteric Currents," because he believed that "mysticism" would suggest a direct connection with religion (Faivre 2004, 34). The incident confirms that "mysticism" and "esotericism" are

socially constructed and politically negotiated categories. Rather than “true” or “false,” their definitions are *tools* used to achieve certain results.

Maltsev argues that esotericism is only one part of mysticism, and not the largest one. He also believes that language is not neutral: the word “esotericism” has Greek roots, and would only fit the part of mysticism coming from a Greek tradition. Obviously, as there are competing definitions of esotericism, there are also different definitions of mysticism. Again, from the etic point of view of an outside observer, which may be very much different from his own, Maltsev’s teachings would fit Faivre’s definition of esotericism if it was not for one element. Surely, in his system, knowledge transforms human beings, the secret core of all religions hides the same truth, and the transmission of secrets through history is crucial. We can also find a theory of correspondences between microcosm and macrocosm, for example about the symbolism of number Three. We can also see Faivre’s “mediation” at work in history (Maltsev 2016). However, the idea of nature as a living being, one of Faivre’s four necessary features of esotericism, is not present. Nature, as far as Maltsev is interested in it, is a creation of the Memory God but should be studied with the tools of science.

The esoteric paradigm, on the other hand, is larger than esotericism as defined by Faivre. It makes room for original forms, where not all traditional elements scholars identified as typical of Western esotericism are present (but some or most are), and for innovation, new research, and creativity. In this sense, most readers of this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*, or at least those of them accepting my approach to esotericism, would likely come to the conclusion that the part of the research and teachings of Maltsev and the Applied Sciences Institute that deals with what he prefers to label “European mysticism” may be regarded as part of what I call the esoteric paradigm.

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