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This is the accepted version of a chapter published in *Contemporary Esotericism*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Frisk, L. (2013)

A Small Town Health Centre in Sweden: Perspectives on the Western Esotericism Debate

In: Aspren, Egil; Granholm, Kennet (ed.), *Contemporary Esotericism* London: Routledge

Gnostica: Texts and Interpretations

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315728650>

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:du-5393>

A Small Town Health Centre in Sweden: Perspectives on the Western Esotericism Debate

Liselotte Frisk

Introduction

In this article I intend to discuss some features prominent on the contemporary spiritual - or post-secular - scene in Sweden in the context of the Western esotericism debate, as well as to relate parts of the research on Western esotericism to selected research about new religious movements and contemporary expressions of religion.

The concept of Western esotericism has been used in a number of different ways. In several of these perspectives, however, the themes *dynamics of religious change*, the relationship between Western esotericism and *mainstream/established churches*, and *individual inner experience* are discussed (sometimes in relation to each other). These and related themes are also important in two theoretical perspectives about new religious movements and contemporary expressions of religion discussed in this chapter: Stark and Bainbridge's theory of religion and Riis and Woodhead's approach to the sociology of emotion. These themes form the centre of discussion in the present chapter.

The empirical material which is used for this study derives from a local mapping project of religion and worldviews that I have been conducting in Sweden since 2008.¹ Dalarna is a local area in Sweden, situated around 250 km northwest of Stockholm, with about 270.000 inhabitants. All groups with religious social activities or meetings with some kind of religious connotation in a broad sense (with two or more participants present) have been mapped, with special focus on activities outside traditional Christianity. In this study, a semi-structured interview with Anette Hansson, life yoga teacher and stress therapist, is used.

First, I will give a very short summary of the Western esotericism debate. After that, I will sum up the perspectives of Stark and Bainbridge and Riis and Woodhead. Then follows a description of the health centre in Dalarna, leading up to a discussion where the different perspectives are related to the contemporary situation, focusing on the three themes mentioned above.

Three main arguments will be advanced in the article: 1) that instead of contemporary spirituality being conceived of as a 'part of' Western esotericism, esotericism,

¹ I am conducting this study together with Peter Åkerbäck, Stockholm University, with financial support from The Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet).

in the historical sense, should be seen as one among several sources of influence on contemporary spirituality; 2) that the focus on *gnosis* and experience in attaining ‘higher knowledge’ in some of the typological and discursive approaches to esotericism should be linked to a broader discussion of ‘religious experience’ which is currently taking shape in the study of religion; and, 3) that a focus on deviance, margin-mainstream conflicts, and rejected knowledge as a structural feature in esotericism should be brought into a broader discussion of tension between religious groups and mainstream society, and, increasingly in the contemporary scene, should be questioned and nuanced. The final conclusion is that Western esotericism as a field of research could benefit from, and contribute to, select sociological research from other fields.

The Western Esotericism Debate

The recent debate about theory, definition, and delimitation in the study of esotericism has revealed that the term itself is being employed in a number of different and sometimes conflicting ways. Olav Hammer has noted that two usages of the concept of esotericism dominate in scholarly literature.² The first and most central one defines Western esotericism in historical and geographic terms as a specific set of historically related currents in the West. This usage originates with Antoine Faivre’s well-known definition of Western esotericism as a form of thought, identifiable by the presence of six fundamental characteristics or components. The first four are ‘intrinsic’, meaning that they must all be present for a given material to be classified under the rubric of esotericism. These are: correspondences, living nature, imagination and mediations, and experience of transmutation. To those characteristics two more components are added which are not seen as fundamental, but are nevertheless often present: ‘the praxis of the concordance’ and special forms of ‘transmission’.³

Faivre has been criticized for selecting his criteria on an arbitrary basis.⁴ Kocku von Stuckrad says that Faivre also includes currents not fitting all his characteristics, and excludes currents matching, but falling outside his scope of interest. He further claims that Faivre marginalizes Jewish, Muslim, and pagan identities, which all have influenced European esotericism, and concludes that Faivre’s approach may be best suited to Christian esotericism in the early modern period.⁵

² Hammer, ‘Esotericism in New Religious Movements’, 445-446.

³ Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 10-15.

⁴ Aspren, ‘På eplestang i kunnskapens tre’, 11.

⁵ von Stuckrad, ‘Western Esotericism’, 83.

Wouter Hanegraaff has expanded on several perspectives on esotericism, one of them being the historical definition. In his classic study of the New Age movement Hanegraaff observed that there is a historical continuity between Western esotericism and New Age, but that there is also a continually ongoing process of reinterpretation.⁶ Ideas change according to the cultural context in which they are located.⁷ While Western esotericism in the historical sense is clearly based on pre-Enlightenment worldviews, Hanegraaff considers the New Age movement to be a characteristically post-Enlightenment phenomenon, which at the same time rejects and is influenced by Enlightenment norms and values. Whenever New Age practitioners borrow ‘traditional’ esoteric concepts, they interpret them from a twentieth-century, secularized perspective. Hanegraaff calls this tendency ‘the secularization of Western esotericism’, and identifies five modern developmental traits which have been of crucial importance for the emergence of New Age reinterpretations of the esoteric: the emergence of *occultism* from the late eighteenth century, the importance of *Oriental influences*, the impact of *evolutionism*, a trend towards *psychologization*, and (increasingly in the late twentieth century) the influence of *the market economy*.⁸ These have all shaped the reception of historical esotericism, according to Hanegraaff, and I will return to them later.

A second usage of the concept of (Western) esotericism is typological, and is used to denote and analyze currents and religions that have certain structural features in common. This kind of usage describes esotericism in ahistorical and cross-cultural ways.⁹ It has often centred on the etymological meaning of the word, with ‘eso’ meaning ‘inner’ as contrasted with ‘exo’ meaning ‘outer’. In this sense, ‘esoteric’ implies teachings that are intended for, or understood by, only a chosen few, for example an inner group of disciples or initiates.¹⁰ By contrast, many of the teachings traditionally included in *historical* esotericism were never concealed in this sense.¹¹

⁶ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*. While ‘New Age’ and ‘New Age movement’ are problematic concepts, they will not be discussed here. For a further discussion, see e.g. Frisk, ‘Globalization’. The client cults at Hälsögränden, which are analysed below, could be classified as belonging to the New Age environment.

⁷ Hanegraaff, ‘The New Age Movement and Western Esotericism’, 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42-48.

⁹ Aspren, ‘På epleslang i kunskapens tre’, 7-8.

¹⁰ Hammer, ‘Esotericism in New Religious Movements’, 445-446.

¹¹ von Stuckrad, ‘Western Esotericism’, 81.

Other typologies also exist. Besides his historically oriented work, Hanegraaff has also elaborated on a typological model originally introduced by Gilles Quispel. Here he distinguishes between three basic types of knowledge, referred to as *reason*, *faith*, and *gnosis*.¹² This division is meant as an analytical tool that may help to distinguish different kinds of knowledge referred to by both esotericists and non-esotericists. Mainstream Christianity, as represented by the established churches, could, according to Hanegraaff, be seen as based for the most part on faith in divine revelation through scripture and/or tradition. ‘Reason’ is typified by the rational inquiry of ancient Greek philosophy, culminating in an intellectual tradition which supported the emergence of modern science. Lastly, ‘gnosis’ is characterized by valuing special, private experience (of God and the Self), over and beyond reason and faith.¹³ While all three kinds can be found in Christian churches, philosophy, science, and Western esotericism, the degree of emphasis on each type tends to differ between these systems. Thus Gnosis, or the (claim to) direct apprehension of ineffable metaphysical truth, is often preceded by philosophic teachings, the truth of which first has to be understood by reason and then accepted as true on the authority of the teacher. Hanegraaff says that special trance-like ‘altered states of consciousness’ could be involved, and calls for taking the experiential dimension seriously.¹⁴ Meanwhile, nothing is said about the *content* of such gnosis. He implies that the culture criticism of the New Age movement is based on gnosis, which has been rejected as unacceptable from the perspectives of faith and reason, and thus has become a reservoir for all ideas being incompatible with the dominant trends of Western culture.¹⁵

A third type of usage of the term ‘esotericism’ is classified by Egil Asprem as ‘discursive approaches’.¹⁶ While von Stuckrad has developed the most self-consciously discursive approach to esotericism, discussed below, Hanegraaff has lately developed a perspective that moves in this direction as well, claiming that what we call esotericism today is the result of a specific *polemical discourse*, spanning centuries of Western history. Esotericism, in this perspective, is an umbrella term for more or less all currents or

¹² Hanegraaff, ‘Reason, Faith, and Gnosis’, 138-141.

¹³ Hanegraaff ‘The New Age Movement and Western Esotericism’, 40-41.

¹⁴ Hanegraaff, ‘Reason, Faith, and Gnosis’, 138-141.

¹⁵ Hanegraaff ‘The New Age Movement and Western Esotericism’ 40-41.

¹⁶ Asprem, ‘På eplelang i kunnskapens tre’, 8. Asprem also notes that several authors are somewhat ambivalent in their reliance on the three approaches, and that some have relied on different approaches at different time (ibid., 13).

phenomena which have been seen as problematic (heretical, irrational, evil, ridiculous) from the perspectives of established religion and science. The concept of esotericism, while not necessarily picking out something tangible ‘out there’, has rather come to comprise a large variety of such ‘negative others’ internal to Western culture.¹⁷ It has become a polemically construed waste-basket of ‘rejected knowledge’.

A different discursive approach has been proposed by von Stuckrad, who wants to use ‘the esoteric’ as a discourse analytical instrument, a model to recognize and analyze esoteric discourses rather than focus strictly on a few specific historical currents.¹⁸ von Stuckrad wants to use the concept of the esoteric to gain insights into the dynamics of Western history.¹⁹ He identifies two dimensions of esoteric discourse: claims of higher knowledge and ways of accessing this truth. What is more important than the *content* is the *claim* to wisdom, or a vision of truth as a master key for answering all questions of humankind. Esoteric claims are, according to von Stuckrad, absolutist, and closely linked to a discourse of secrecy. Claims of this sort are present in many kinds of religion and philosophy, but also in science.²⁰ Although they can be part of established and well-accepted cultural domains, they at times challenge the truth claims of institutionalized religious traditions. As soon as a majority is established, various deviant minorities enter the stage, both through strategies of exclusion by the majority and through the conscious decision of spokespersons to espouse alternative systems of meaning. The minority’s claim to provide an individual way to true knowledge has further fuelled the underlying conflicts. Further, von Stuckrad identifies two typical ways to gain higher knowledge in esoteric discourse: *mediation* and *individual experience*. The mediators – gods, angels, spirits, and so on – are also present in mainstream Christianities, but their ability to provide deep metaphysical knowledge to the individual is usually constrained by theology. Similarly, individual experience as an important mode of gaining access to secret or higher knowledge can also be a threat to institutionalized forms of religion.

To these dimensions for gaining knowledge von Stuckrad adds certain world views that are typically found in esoteric discourses. The prime example is ontological monism – a necessary precondition for doctrines of correspondences and magical rituals or ideas about

¹⁷ Ibid., 15-16.

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁹ von Stuckrad, ‘Western Esotericism’, 80.

²⁰ Cf. von Stuckrad’s contribution to the present volume, where he analyzes an esoteric dimension of modern life sciences.

living nature – although esoteric discourses have often wrestled with the problem of dualism as well. While those currents that are usually addressed as esoteric show all these dimensions and world views, it is also possible to approach other currents or phenomena with this model of interpretation.²¹ von Stuckrad also refers to the notion that esotericism came to be understood as something different from Christianity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and was then seen as a subculture that had formulated alternatives to the Christian mainstream from the Renaissance onwards. Esoteric currents were regarded as having been suppressed as heretical by orthodox Christianity.²² von Stuckrad questions this understanding of esotericism, and calls for an emphasis on the internal *pluralism* of Christianity, and the need to pay attention to the neglect of non-Christian traditions in Western culture. He maintains that European history is characterized by transfers of meaning between different religious and other systems like philosophical, philological, and juridical systems, as well as art and literature. He says that identities, not only in the modern age, were constructed along the lines of fields of discourse, biographical narratives, and a tension between inner and outer perception, and that, for example, in early modern times many Christians could easily pick up pantheistic thoughts or practices that officially were regarded as heretical. In the history of Western esotericism we find many personalities that can be described as junctions for the transfer of religions and traditions.²³

Summarily, we might identify three themes which keep coming back in different kinds of perspectives on Western esotericism: *dynamics of religious change*, the relationship between Western esotericism and *mainstream/established churches* (or gnosis vs. reason and faith), and *inner experiences* as leading to gnosis or special esoteric knowledge (experience of transmutation, experience of God and self, trancelike altered states of consciousness, etc.). I will discuss these three themes further below, bringing them into discussion with perspectives on contemporary religion more broadly.

Stark and Bainbridge's Theory of Religion

Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge have presented their general theory of religion in several books and articles, the main ones being *The Future of Religion* (1985) and *A Theory of Religion* (1987). Their theory highlights some important issues concerning religion, religious

²¹ von Stuckrad, 'Western Esotericism', 88-93.

²² Ibid., 80.

²³ Ibid., 84-86.

change, and new religious movements. In line with the points raised concerning the esotericism debate above, I will especially focus on the parts of Stark and Bainbridge's theory that concern *dynamics of religious change* and *tension with mainstream society*. The third theme of this chapter, *inner experience leading to gnosis*, will be discussed in the next section, in relation to Riis and Woodhead's recent work on religion and emotion.

Stark and Bainbridge argue that secularization is a process found in parts of all societies, together with a countervailing *intensification* of religion. The dominant religious organizations in any society become progressively more 'worldly' or more secularized. Secularization is, however, only one of three fundamental and interrelated processes. One of the other two is religious *revival*, as a demand for less worldly religion produces breakaway sect movements. The second process is religious *innovation*, or the formation of new religious traditions.²⁴ Stark and Bainbridge call the schismatic movements, which result from revivals within established religious organizations, *sects*. The nonschismatic, deviant groups that represent either cultural *innovation* or cultural *importation* they call *cults*. In the case of imported cults, the group represents (or claims to represent) a well-established tradition from another culture.²⁵ But both sects and cults are deviant religious bodies – they are in a state of relatively high tension with their surrounding socio-cultural environment. Stark and Bainbridge define tension with the surrounding sociocultural environment as 'subcultural deviance', marked by difference, antagonism, and separation.²⁶

Cults are classified into three categories according to, among other criteria, their degree of tension with the surrounding socio-cultural environment.²⁷ The category of *client cult* is particularly relevant in connection to my case study, Hälsogränden in Hedemora, and is therefore the only one discussed in detail here.²⁸ As I intend to make clear, it is also relevant for certain developmental traits of contemporary esotericism. Client cults are, according to Stark and Bainbridge, characterized by 'therapist-patient' or 'consultant-client' relationships, in place of 'priest-congregation' or other types of social organization more typical of religion.

²⁴ Bainbridge & Stark, *The Future of Religion*, 2.

²⁵ The differentiation of sect and cult by Stark and Bainbridge has several differences compared to the most common ways to define these terms. See for example McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*.

²⁶ I do not go further into these concepts here, which, in the terminology of Stark and Bainbridge, basically deal with interpersonal competition for scarce rewards. See Bainbridge & Stark, *A Theory of Religion*, 139-142.

²⁷ Bainbridge & Stark, *The Future of Religion*, 24-25.

²⁸ The other two are 'audience cults' and 'cult movements'. The degree of organization and the degree of tension with society is seen as lower in the audience cult than in the client cult, and higher in the cult movement.

Client involvement is partial and non-exclusive: the clients often retain an active commitment to another religious movement or institution, or to other client cults.²⁹ Client cults often compete with medical and psychiatric services, and offer cures for specific physical and emotional problems.³⁰ Tension with the surrounding socio-cultural environment does not, according to Stark and Bainbridge, get really high until the engagement is more intense than it can be in a client cult. The more radical the movement, the more total the opposition.³¹

Stark and Bainbridge locate one possible reason for the innovation of cults in inner experiences or visions. However, they seem to consider all kinds of religious experiences as originating in psychopathology and being hallucinations produced by either a sick mind or drugs.³² In order to get a better view of the role of experience, I shall now turn to Riis and Woodhead's recent 'sociology of religious emotion'.

Riis and Woodhead's Sociology of Emotion

In a recent book, Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead propose a perspective of sociology of emotion.³³ Although the multidimensional nature of religion has often been noted,³⁴ Riis and Woodhead argue that there has nevertheless been an enduring bias towards the text- and belief-based approaches to religion. They observe that the neglect of the *emotional* dimension reflects class, ethnic, and gender biases, and note that emotional labour often lies in the hands of the least privileged in society.³⁵ Emotion may thus help to produce, resist, and reproduce inequalities of power and status.³⁶

Riis and Woodhead claim that there are significant variations in the degree to which different forms of religion are emotionally expressive,³⁷ and also which kinds of emotions are encouraged.³⁸ At one extreme there are those kinds of religion, including contemporary spirituality, that have as their aim emotional improvement and transformation. The teachings

²⁹ Bainbridge & Stark, *The Future of Religion*, 26-28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 209.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

³² *Ibid.*, 173-175.

³³ Riis & Woodhead, *A Sociology of Religious Emotion*.

³⁴ See e.g. Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred*.

³⁵ Riis & Woodhead. *A Sociology of Religious Emotion*, 3-4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

and rituals of these religious formations may be explicitly directed to specific emotional ends,³⁹ while they authorize and sacralize subjective life.⁴⁰ At the opposite extreme are forms of religion that make little reference to emotions, and that downplay emotional expression. Some of these may be strongly practice-based – what matters is doing rather than feeling – whereas others are more oriented to scholarly study and interpretation.⁴¹ For the contemporary religious landscape, Riis and Woodhead refer to several studies concluding that religious groups emphasizing emotions are the most popular ones.⁴² They observe a general trend whereby religion becomes more explicitly focused upon the emotional demands of its ‘users’, and takes steps to ensure that its emotional programme is appropriate to those it wishes to recruit or retain.⁴³ Religion in late modern society has a range of possibilities open with different emotional consequences. Denominations that have adapted to religious pluralism generally follow a strategy of offering those parts of the emotional scale for which there is a societal demand. Religious reform movements may in a more direct way confront the social and cultural sources of emotional dissonance, offer critique, and propose social reform. Alternative forms of spirituality often deal directly and explicitly with the emotional states and requirements of individuals, and may offer either more encompassing emotional regimes, or more limited therapeutic interventions. Some sects and minority religions may encapsulate themselves to provide an internally consistent and encompassing emotional regime that offers a sharp alternative to the emotional orderings of wider society.⁴⁴

Riis and Woodhead reject reducing emotions to something private, personal, and subjective, and instead favour an analysis of emotion as constructed in the interplay between social agents and structures. They argue that emotion is both personal and relational, private and social, biological and cultural, active and passive.⁴⁵ Emotions are shaped not just by interpersonal relations, but by relations with complexes of cultural symbols and material settings as well. Our emotional life is shaped by encounters not only with living beings, but also with imagined, transcendent, inanimate, and dead ones. The significance of culture, material objects, memories, places, and symbols has to be taken into account. Emotion is

³⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 162.

⁴¹ Ibid., 13.

⁴² Ibid., 1.

⁴³ Ibid., 203.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 205-206.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 5.

generated in these interactions between self and society, self and symbol, and symbol and society.⁴⁶ Religious emotion is further expressed through ritual, music, art, and architecture.⁴⁷ Riis and Woodhead also note the relation between emotion and charisma, in connection with Max Weber's notion of charismatic authority. They observe that the charismatic individual appears emotionally charged, catches the attention of his followers, and provokes strong feelings.⁴⁸ This point easily connects to the contemporary spiritual scene, where close relations between 'consultant' and 'client' are common. These connections will become clear in the following section, where we shall look at the case study of Hälsogränden in Hedemora.

Hälsogränden in Hedemora

Hälsogränden is a health centre situated in central Hedemora, a small Swedish town with medieval roots and around 7.300 inhabitants (2005). In November 2009 five different therapists shared premises at this health centre.⁴⁹ Anette Hansson, who is the initiator of Hälsogränden, conducts classes in 'life yoga', which is a local development of the kundalini yoga of Yogi Bhajan.⁵⁰ She is also a stress therapist.⁵¹ The second therapist at Hälsogränden works with mindfulness, light therapy, Rosen therapy, essential movement, and classic massage. She also sells African cotton clothes – produced in a small factory where the employees enjoy relatively fair wages, free health care, and certain other material advantages. Rosen therapy is a massage technique with mental and emotional connotations, aimed at contacting unconscious emotions and memories locked into the body. Essential movement is a body movement therapy, developed from Rosen therapy, where dance, music, and voice are

⁴⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 164.

⁴⁹ At the time of writing this article, in September 2010, some changes as to which therapists share the premises have occurred. It is still, however, a mixture of mainstream and alternative health care, as it was in November 2009. The spiritual scene is quite flexible, and such changes are common.

⁵⁰ The parent organization of Yogi Bhajan's kundalini yoga is 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization) which was founded in USA in 1969. This form of yoga was introduced to Sweden during the 1990s by Tomas Frankell, a well known profile in new religions and alternative spirituality. He has chosen to stay outside the organization of 3HO and has distanced himself from Yogi Bhajan, nowadays calling his approach 'life yoga', considering it as a Western adaptation of yoga. For further information, see Frisk, *Nyreligiositet i Sverige*; Livsyoga, 'Livsyogan'.

⁵¹ As a stress therapist, Anette Hansson works with breathing, relaxation, body awareness, thought awareness, affirmations, visualization, and dialogue/coaching (Hansson, Interview by Liselotte Frisk).

used to get in touch with one's own creativity, expressiveness, and inner confidence.⁵² Essential movement is also concerned with reconnecting with the body as a source of aliveness, creativity, and wisdom.⁵³ The third therapist at Hälsogränden is a dietician, works with physical exercise, and sells dietary supplements. The fourth one is a hair dresser, whose team, besides the ordinary hair dresser procedures, also does 'aura hair cuts', explained as a kind of 'hair balancing' where acupuncture energy is stimulated, the chakras are balanced, and support provided so that imbalances inside the body may be healed. The hair is seen as antennas, receiving energy from the aura.⁵⁴ The hairdresser team can also give reiki healing in connection with head massage. The fifth therapist works with psychotherapy on a psychodynamic basis.⁵⁵

According to Anette Hansson, the purpose of Hälsogränden is to be a kind of oasis, where people can freely select among different kinds of treatments. The therapists active at Hälsogränden often recommend each other to their customers, and Hansson thinks that there is something for everyone at the centre. She says that someone might come in for a simple hair cut, and eventually leave with a spiritual experience. Hansson feels that there is really not much difference between yoga and psychotherapy, and says that the psychotherapist at Hälsogränden also works with the inner part of the person exactly as in yoga.

The key concept of Hälsogränden is 'health',⁵⁶ which Anette Hansson interprets as having both an external and an internal meaning. Internal and external health are, according to her understanding, connected, and exist in a dialectal relationship. On the one hand, if you are in contact with your inner space, you will also want to take care of your external part. Hansson likes to conceive of the body as a temple to be taken care of like a holy space. On the other hand, when you feel better by taking care of your external part, you will also want to take care of your inside. Thus, health could well be connected to, for example, a hair cut, with the purpose of taking care of your body, but also to spirituality. For Hansson, spirituality is another term for internal health. She explains spirituality as making contact with your own inner space which, in turn, is in contact with a higher intelligence. According to Hansson, there is a great need in society for people to listen inwards and to be in touch with their feelings. Anette Hansson thinks that to practice spirituality means to be in contact with the

⁵² Hälsogränden, 'Hälsogränden'.

⁵³ Essential Motion, 'Essential Motion'.

⁵⁴ Hälsogränden, 'Hälsogränden'.

⁵⁵ Hansson, Interview by Liselotte Frisk.

⁵⁶ As indicated by the name: 'Hälso' means 'health', and 'gränden' means 'small street'.

internal space, to be love itself, to not judge, and to be in one's own heart. For her, yoga is the gateway to spirituality in this sense. When she started practicing yoga, she felt that the dimension of spirituality was present only during yoga passes – now, however, she says that this feeling has expanded to be present in her life all the time. Besides her ordinary yoga classes, Hansson also conducts one class a week in cooperation with the Swedish social insurance administration and the employment office, for people on long-term sick leave and long-term unemployment. She says that she experiences a big change in how spiritual teachings are perceived today compared to a few years ago: There is much more acceptance now than there used to be.⁵⁷

In my interview, Anette Hansson was asked if she recognizes the components of Faivre's concept of Western esotericism in life yoga. Although this approach could be taken to misrepresent Faivre's original intentions, as he suggested a historical perspective and not a typological definition of universal application, Hansson's answers to this question is still relevant in the context of this chapter as it illustrates the presence or absence of affinities with 'historical esotericism'.⁵⁸ Hansson says that the first criterion, 'correspondences', exists in traditional yoga, for example in the kind of numerology expressed by the habit of repeating a yogic body movement a certain number of times. Mudras, a group of physical practices with symbolic meaning, could traditionally be seen as linked to the planets, which also illustrates a doctrine of correspondences. However, although correspondences might be present in traditional yoga, Hansson says that it is not at all prominent in the life yoga that she practices. In her yoga classes she hardly uses them at all. The second component, 'living nature', is, however, important both in traditional yoga and in life yoga. Hansson says that she considers the world to be permeated by a spiritual force, and that yoga is a way to absorb *prana*: life force, or higher intelligence. As to imagination and mediations, Hansson recognizes visualization and mantra chanting as ways to contact one's own higher self or spiritual guide. The experience of transmutation, she says, is certainly the goal of yoga, to experience the contact with the higher self, intuition, or enlightenment. But Hansson wants to emphasize that this is only one part of the goal. We are also humans living in the ordinary world, with the need to see and understand our fears and patterns connected to this world. Furthermore,

⁵⁷ Hansson, Interview by Liselotte Frisk.

⁵⁸ As noted above, Faivre meant to describe certain European historical currents, from which yoga of course is excluded. As we saw, there has however been criticism expressed towards Faivre as these concepts seem arbitrarily chosen and may fit in other contexts as well. My motivation to ask these questions was to test these concepts in a different cultural context than that of Renaissance Europe.

Hansson believes that different religious traditions have the same essence, confirming what Faivre calls the ‘praxis of concordance’, or the tendency to establish common denominators between different or all traditions (e.g. assuming the existence of a *philosophia perennis*). There are, however, no transmissions from master to disciple in life yoga, and no initiations.⁵⁹ Still, Hansson considers ‘keeping the energy in the class’ to be her task as a teacher, as the function of the yoga teacher is to be an open channel through which higher intelligence can flow to the yoga students.⁶⁰ Furthermore, in terms of Stark and Bainbridge’s model of the client cult, one might theorize that consultant-client relations may in some cases be the contemporary counterpart of master-disciple relations. This sociological difference correlates with late modern implications, e.g. of buying and selling consultation services, an increased therapeutic orientation, and partial commitment, while the personal relationship remains very central and retains some elements of spiritual transmission albeit in new forms.

Discussion

Below I will first discuss the activities at Hälsogränden as a product of the dynamics of religious change, focusing on different ways to describe and interpret contemporary spirituality. Next, I will discuss the concept of mainstream/established religion, the role it occupies in the different theories of Western esotericism and theories of religious change, and the relevance for the contemporary situation. After that, individual experience and emotion is discussed, in relation to contemporary spirituality and the selected perspectives that have been introduced. Finally, Faivre’s six criteria are discussed in relation to the main activity at Hälsogränden, life yoga.

Hälsogränden as a Product of the Dynamics of Religious Change

Centres like Hälsogränden have become common in Sweden during the first decade of the twenty-first century. During our research in Dalarna, we have come across several such places, typically situated in small towns, being operated cooperatively by women, focusing on health and spirituality, and offering different kinds of activities, depending on the momentary orientations of the producers. Structurally, small businesses like this have been economically encouraged by the employment office in Sweden, as a way of getting people out of unemployment, which may also be one reason for the growth of such places.

⁵⁹ As is well known, however, there are initiations in many other yogic traditions.

⁶⁰ Hansson, Interview by Liselotte Frisk.

What are the historical backgrounds of the activities at Hälsogränden, and how could these activities be described from the perspective of dynamics of religious change? The first activity, life yoga, has a background in Indian culture, but has been locally adapted and changed according to Swedish circumstances by the founder Tomas Frankell. The yoga teacher Anette Hansson is also active as a stress therapist, which is an innovative title with no support in mainstream society through e.g. acknowledged educational programmes or certified titles. Also mindfulness, which is one of the activities of the second therapist at Hälsogränden, has a non-Western background. Originating as a Buddhist practice, mindfulness has during the last few years accumulated more psychological connotations in Western culture, becoming part of cognitive-behavioural therapy.⁶¹ Rosen therapy, essential movement, and massage originate in the American human potential movement of the 1960s, with roots in humanistic psychology.⁶² Important characteristics in the human potential movement, most of which are also prominent in Rosen therapy, essential movement, and massage, are the focus on inner human potential and on expressing emotions through body therapies, a focus on the here-and-now, or group therapy. A certain syncretism aiming at bridging the boundaries between East-West, inner-outer, and science-religion is also characteristic.⁶³ Concerning hair therapy, it is a bit more difficult to trace the historical roots, as it uses elements from a variety of sources. There is a degree of creativity or innovation, combined with possibly Theosophical elements (Theosophy in turn being subject to early inspiration from Indian religions) as the use of concepts such as ‘aura’ and ‘chakra’ suggests. Reiki healing originates in Japan, but is rather innovative also in Japanese culture, while different kinds of healing have older roots in Japanese religions. The hair dresser team also refers to acupuncture, originating in China, where it is a well established healing system. However, the concrete connection to acupuncture in hair therapy remains quite unclear. The mixture of elements from different sources, both imported and innovative, is characteristic of hair therapy, and a procedure which in itself is a form of innovation through synthesis.

Several of the authors discussed in previous sections aim to say something about the dynamics of religious change. Hanegraaff describes New Age as being in a historical

⁶¹ Frisk, ‘The Human Potential Movement’. For more information about the historical conditions that made an increasing assimilation of Buddhist ideas into Western psychology and psychotherapy possible, see Dryden & Still, *Historical Aspects of Mindfulness*.

⁶² Classical massage, as this therapist advertises, also originates in the Swedish health movement in the twentieth century.

⁶³ See also Anderson, *The Upstart Spring*.

continuity with Western esotericism, reinterpreted through the five developmental traits discussed earlier. His approach implies that cultural and structural changes in society are important factors influencing religious change. Hanegraaff also implies that the New Age movement emphasises ‘gnosis’, which is rejected as unacceptable from the more conventional perspectives of ‘faith’ and ‘reason’, and thus connected with a reservoir of ideas regarded incompatible with the dominant trends of Western culture. Thus a turn towards gnosis – or the individual experience of self or God – has, in the view of Hanegraaff, been an important feature in the dynamics of religious change.

Concerning the therapies at Hälsogränden, few of them have historical roots in what we could call historical or geographical esotericism. We find no astrology, no alchemy, no initiatory orders, and no magic (in the esoteric sense) in the activities of Hälsogränden. Only the hair dressing company, using concepts originating in the Theosophical tradition, could be seen as having some kind of direct connection to historical esotericism. The other activities at Hälsogränden could rather be said to have roots in the human potential movement, psychology and Eastern traditions. The only way to relate these phenomena to Western esotericism in a historical sense would be in terms of the reinterpretation in the modern context that Hanegraaff has suggested, and in a radical way. The question then arises if and why it is fruitful to use the label ‘Western esotericism’ for this contemporary environment. The historical roots of the specific orientations and practices lie mainly elsewhere. Regarding contemporary influences on the New Age environment, Hanegraaff is precisely to the point in formulating the five developmental traits discussed previously. However, I would suggest reconsidering the role of Western esotericism in this account of religious change. Rather than being a label for the whole field, a historical class to which ‘New Age’ belongs, it could be considered one of many historical preconditions for its formation. In short, taken in a historical sense Western esotericism could be added as a sixth trait, and seen as another important historical influence on contemporary spirituality.

If the role of historical esotericism can be reconsidered, so can the typological and discursive constructs. For example, several of the authors discussed agree that individual experience is crucial for religious change. Hanegraaff notes the connection between ‘gnosis’ and New Age religion, and von Stuckrad discusses experience as an epistemic dimension of esoteric discourse (although with a shift from private mental events to ‘discourse’). Stark and Bainbridge locate an important reason for the innovation of cults in inner experiences or visions, while Riis and Woodhead note the strong relation between emotion and charisma and point to different ways of handling emotion in religious organizations, some of them

intentionally aiming at religious and social change. Finally, in the empirical material a major focus in several if not all of the activities at Hälsogränden is precisely individual and emotional experience.

von Stuckrad calls attention to the presence of non-Christian traditions in Western culture, and transfers of meaning between different religious and non-religious systems. While this is fruitful for historical perspectives, it is also very relevant for analyzing contemporary spirituality. Migration (in several senses), cultural transfers, and individuals who function as junctions for the transfer of religions and traditions are all abundant today. Related to globalization they are crucial factors for the contemporary dynamics of religious change. Stark and Bainbridge's concepts of innovation and importation might prove analytically useful in this context, and could be fruitfully employed both for analyzing the historical developments of Western esotericism and for contemporary religion.⁶⁴ Individual experience is one of the crucial elements of religious change through *innovation*, while migration (of individuals or cultural products) is one of the crucial elements of religious change through *import*. Today, globalization has intensified the processes of migration and importation.⁶⁵ This is reflected at Hälsogränden, where a conglomerate of elements from different parts of the world is evident. The activities at Hälsogränden discussed so far also express the characteristics of the client cult in the sense of Stark and Bainbridge: partial involvement, consumer structure (influence of the market economy, in the scheme of Hanegraaff), and ambivalence between religion and therapy ('psychologization').

The Mainstream Perspective

There are, however, also other activities at Hälsogränden, which cannot be described as 'cultic' in the sense of Stark and Bainbridge, as they are part of the dominant socio-cultural environment rather than being in tension with it. This concerns the therapist working with dietary issues and physical exercise, the psychotherapist, and also the hair dressing team, who basically conduct ordinary hair procedures like haircuts and hair colouring, with healing procedures being merely optional.

⁶⁴ These concepts also need to be problematized, as is evident from the discussion of pluralism and the meaning of 'mainstream' below. For example, there are constant transfers between different environments, and the problems with defining the borders of a culture are notorious. There always be problems of this kind with ideal types, which, however, do not disqualify them as starting points for discussions.

⁶⁵ See Frisk, 'Globalization'.

The relationship between esoteric currents and the mainstream has been discussed by several authors in the Western esotericism debate. Esotericism has sometimes been understood as being different from Christianity, presenting alternatives to the mainstream. Most important in this context is Hanegraaff's model of the 'grand polemical narrative', where esotericism is understood as an umbrella term for currents or phenomena which have at some point been seen as problematic by established religion and cultural institutions.⁶⁶ Other authors, like von Stuckrad, point to a more ambiguous relationship between esotericism and the mainstream. While claims of higher knowledge may at times challenge the truth claims of institutionalized religious traditions, they may also be part of established and well-accepted cultural domains.

Focusing on discourses of gnosis or discourses of rejected knowledge has, in my opinion, the potential for interesting analyses, and may provide a bridge from the historical currents of Western esotericism to the contemporary environment of new religious movements and spirituality. The ambivalence to the mainstream noted by von Stuckrad also holds for the contemporary environment. Complicating the matter, there are several different kinds of religious phenomena with different kinds of relationships to the mainstream. The theory of Stark and Bainbridge may contribute to this discussion by its emphasis on the possibility for religious groups to be in different *degrees* of tension with the mainstream, and for different reasons. Thus the discussion of esotericism in terms of tension with the mainstream, including polemics, deviance, and opposition, could be inscribed in a larger scholarly discourse encompassing *all* kinds of religious and cultural systems with a problematic relationship to the mainstream.

The degree of tension with the surrounding socio-cultural environment is a crucial factor in the theory of Stark and Bainbridge.⁶⁷ Some phenomena are considered part of the dominant tradition, while other phenomena are in different degrees of tension with it. This holds true for other cultural sectors than religion as well. In the medical sector, conventional medicine would be seen as representing the dominant socio-cultural tradition, building its prestige largely on appeals to science and the results of clinical trials. The same is valid for the psychological branch of the health care sector, where, taking Hälsogränden in Hedemora

⁶⁶ Hanegraaff, 'Forbidden Knowledge'.

⁶⁷ Other interpretations of the definition of tension to society and the world at large exist. For a more detailed discussion, see Frisk, *Nya religiösa rörelser i Sverige*.

as an example, psychotherapy belongs to the tax subsidized mainstream of the Swedish health sector, while Rosen therapy does not.

This border between mainstream and ‘holistic’ therapies is not, however, cut in stone. Some therapies, which have at some point been in tension with the socio-cultural mainstream, could later move towards less tension with mainstream society, or even to full social acceptance. If a therapeutic practice is deemed effective through controlled scientific testing it becomes part of the mainstream.⁶⁸ One such example is acupuncture, which originally, in the terminology of Stark and Bainbridge, could be considered to be an imported client cult, building on supernatural and magical visions of energies in the physical body. In Sweden acupuncture for pain relief has received mainstream status in the ordinary health care since several years back. It is used in delivery work for pain relief, as well as in the ordinary health care clinics concerning other kinds of pain problems.⁶⁹

Recently, however, additional therapies from the holistic environment seem to be crossing the border to, or at least decreasing the tension with, the mainstream socio-cultural environment. The most evident example is mindfulness meditation, which is today routinely used in cognitive-behavioural therapy with, so it seems, good results.⁷⁰ In the Dalarna mapping project, we had examples of courses in mindfulness being conducted for people working in the mainstream health care, funded by the employer. Yoga also seems to be moving towards greater societal acceptance. Anette Hansson and her life yoga is an example of this, as she conducts yoga classes in cooperation with the Swedish social insurance administration and the employment office. Yoga is also used in other places in Dalarna for employees in mainstream health care. Hansson says that, in her experience, yoga is much more accepted today than it was only a few years ago.

Hälsogränden in Hedemora is thus an example of another trend in Swedish society as well: the increasingly blurred borders between the medical mainstream and complementary and alternative therapies. In the context of increased globalization and cultural pluralism, a concept such as the ‘dominant socio-cultural environment’ loses its meaning. Taking the religious sector as an example, Christianity was in many respects much more of a dominant religious tradition in Western societies as late as a few decades ago than it is today. In the

⁶⁸ For a further discussion on deviance and rejected knowledge as it applies to science, see e.g. Wallis, ed., *On the Margins of Science*.

⁶⁹ However, other uses of acupuncture would still be considered client cults, as they are not accepted in conventional medicine.

⁷⁰ Nilsson, *Mindfulness i hjärnan*.

1980s when Stark and Bainbridge developed their theory of religion it still made sense to keep the typologies of 'sect' and 'cult' based on tension with traditional mainstream religion, and explain phenomena outside it in terms of schisms, import, or innovation. Today, however, innovative and imported characteristics have intermingled and mixed with elements that earlier were considered traditional, creating new and changing traditions. Still, none of these are as dominant as the Christian culture used to be. With increased individualism, old boundaries have broken down and are today continually and habitually crossed over, creating and recreating new cultural phenomena. In this context, the notion of a tension with the socio-cultural environment becomes much more problematic. Which socio-cultural environment are we measuring against in a society increasingly marked by pluralism? At Hålsogränden, mainstream and complementary therapies exist side by side, and, as for the hair dressing company, as different possibilities within the same activity, as well as intermingled with mainstream institutions. For the individual who scouts between diet advices, hair cuts, yoga, and Rosen therapy, any kind of borders would probably be experienced as constructed and artificial.

Conclusions

Historical perspectives on Western esotericism have been useful and fruitful for the study of contemporary religiosity. There are historical connections and relations between different phenomena which ought to be acknowledged. However, I would call for a further discussion about different kinds of criteria which could be used in this context, and welcome a more inclusive dialogue with other approaches in religious studies. Thus, the possibility of combining research on 'esotericism', itself a scholarly construct which has been used and developed in several different and conflicting ways, with other theoretical perspectives about new religious movements and contemporary expressions of religion has been the main agenda of this chapter. By using relevant parts of the perspectives of Stark and Bainbridge and Riis and Woodhead, the themes of dynamics of religious change, relationships with the mainstream, and the place of individual inner experience, important in several of the perspectives on Western esotericism, could be developed further. This could lead to insights which would be especially useful and applicable in relation to the contemporary spiritual scene.

Structural, cultural, and individual factors all influence religious change. As Hanegraaff noted with regards to the reinterpretations of esotericism in New Age religion, the market economy, psychologization, and oriental influences are among the factors which shape

the contemporary spiritual environment. To these, I suggest, one might add Western esotericism in a historical and cultural sense, as one current among several others influencing and fueling the contemporary spiritual environment. An important aspect of this is that the general effects of migration and globalization may be re-construed so that they are not limited to influences from foreign cultures. Writing about Western esotericism, von Stuckrad has suggested that greater attention should be given to non-Christian traditions and alternatives *within* Western culture, and their importance for the dynamics of religion in Europe. Stark and Bainbridge's concepts of innovation and importation may prove useful in developing this point, and as a tool for understanding religious change both historically and in contemporary times.

The role of individual religious experience similarly seems a promising starting point for further research on the dynamics of religious change. The individual religious experience, conceptualized as *gnosis*, is essential in several of the scholarly conceptions of esotericism, but as we have seen its characteristics are not analyzed much further. The notion of *gnosis* in esotericism research has to be further discussed, problematized, and positioned against possible other kinds of religious experience. For this, further research on religious emotion as such in different contexts is needed, also with attention to, for example, symbols and artistic expressions. The approach of Riis and Woodhead to the sociology of religious emotion may start to show the way in this matter.

I have also argued that a focus on discourses of *gnosis* and discourses of 'rejected knowledge' has potential for interesting analyses and discussions. Stark and Bainbridge's perspective on different kinds of relationship to the mainstream and different degrees of tension with society may be helpful to develop the discussion further. From this perspective, both historical and contemporary phenomena outside the mainstream could be discussed. The discussion ought, however, to be conducted against the whole range of religious groups, including both sects and cults in the sense of Stark and Bainbridge. As was argued earlier, contemporary spirituality maintains a problematic and ambivalent relation to the mainstream – as has also been the case for esoteric currents in the historical sense – which may call for special attention to processes specific to contemporary society. The effects of globalization and individualization challenge all kinds of traditionally conceived borders. Imported and innovative features mix with traditional ones, creating new syntheses and traditions, both organizationally and individually. In an increasingly pluralistic society, it becomes more and more problematic to conceive of a dominant socio-cultural environment, and therefore also more problematic to discuss, for example, degrees of tension to 'it'. Hålsogränden in

Hedemora represents a new social space where these border transgressions are particularly clear. Mainstream and ‘holistic’ or complementary therapies are practiced on the same premises, with a focus on the concepts of internal and external health. The focus on health is also an expression of the contemporary trend towards individualism combined with the sometimes more or less religious overtones of self-sacralization. Also the border between the secular and sacred is blurred, as it is up to the individual to attribute ‘secular’ or ‘religious’ meanings to the activities they participate in at Hälsogränden. Tentative data from the study of Dalarna indicate that there is a great span as to how individuals think about their own engagement, if they conceptualize their engagement in any specific terms at all.

Concepts and definitions become what we make them; they do not possess an essential meaning cut in stone. My suggestion in this chapter has been that the different approaches that have been proposed to Western esotericism could be developed further by joining them with perspectives from other research areas, especially sociologically oriented research on religious change and the contemporary religious landscape.

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