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## Occultism: old and new notions

The term “occultism” has been burdened with ambiguity for more than a hundred years, while notions associated with it are often very distant from each other<sup>1</sup>. This undesirable situation has been slowly changing due to new research (historical, historico-literary, philosophical, theological, concerning cultural studies and religious studies), which has developed within the field defined in the 1990s as “Western esotericism” or “Western esoterism” (French: *l'esoterisme occidental*). They do not only lead to the specification of the terminology used in the humanities<sup>2</sup>, but also to discovering and understanding significant, previously almost unfamiliar trends in European culture<sup>3</sup>.

The term “occultism” is a contemporary product of the French language. It appeared at the end of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was explained in the “Dictionary of new words concerning the educational system, political, philosophical, moral and social thought” from 1842. It was entered as the sixth in the company of five related notions: *Occulticité, Occultisable, Occultisation, Occultisé, Occultiser, Occultisme*. Each of them was defined very briefly, while only three words were dedicated to the last one: *système occulte, d'occulticité*, which in English denote “a secret system, characterised by secrecy (or: assuming concealment)”<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Sieradzan, *W kręgu pojęć: ezoteryzm, okultyzm, satanizm*, in: *Ezoteryzm, okultyzm, satanizm w Polsce*, J. Pasek (ed.), Kraków 2005, pp. 219-253. The author draws up a list of a dozen or so dissimilar terms of occultism, present in the literature on the subject as well as equally divergent attempts to assign it to esotericism in this publication (ibid., pp. 228-236).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. W. J. Hanegraaff, *Occult/Occultism*, in: *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. W. J. Hanegraaff et al. Leiden–Boston 2006, pp. 884-889 (subsequently referred to as DGWE).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ch. McIntosh, *Éliphas Lévi and the French Occult Revival*, London 1972; A. Mercier, *Éliphas Lévi et la pensée magique au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 1974.

<sup>4</sup> J.-B. Richard, *Enrichissement de la langue française. Dictionnaire de mots nouveaux: système d'éducation, pensées politiques, philosophiques, morales et sociales*, Paris–Troyes 1842, p. 332.

The first, maximally general notion has no link with what is presented as part of the results of research on occultism, conducted in the field of Western esotericism. First of all, the entire secrecy underwent erosion, although it was mentioned as the key feature of *l'occultisme*. Nowadays, more clearly than ever, occultism is recognized as a spiritual offer for the modern man, based on human faith in magic, holistic (that is: "comprehensive") and polemicising with science, rejecting both the traditional religion and morality as well as the theoretical and practical materialism. Without the knowledge of occult ideas, the assumptions of the New Age<sup>5</sup> movement, which derive from them, will remain vague, as well as Carl Gustav Jung's (1875-1961)<sup>6</sup> psychology copying the structure of "occult science".

The aforementioned dictionary not so much introduced the term, as it suggested its introduction, inventing a neologism on the basis of the rules of the French word formation and explaining it briefly. It is worth mentioning that *l'occultisme* appeared there as an entry even before it was assigned meaning by 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century enthusiasts of arcane knowledge. In 1842 it was still an empty package, which in subsequent decades fell into the hands of those who filled it with their own ideas and in fact popularised this term, combining it with sometimes very diverse notions.

The first person to attach special significance to the term "occultism" was one of the greatest Masonic authorities of the times, Jean-Marie Ragon de Bettignies (1781-1866), born in Belgium. When studying the development of Freemasons' tradition, Ragon undertook the task to collect and accurately describe all ritual systems of initiations of Masonry. It was a peculiar – since referred to the contents interpreted from symbols and rituals – application of inductive reasoning: an attempt to describe the whole "Masonic world" in detail, the result of which would be a specific and reliable store of knowledge, to which all paths of the ritual initiation lead. He did not complete this task and after his death nobody else has made an attempt to do it<sup>7</sup>. However, during the search led by him, Ragon offered his confreres – full of energy and enthusiasm – the mission of searching for and finding a rational, scientific core in a wealth of secret knowledge accumulated for centuries. In his conception, shared by many of his contemporaries, the so-called secret sciences (alchemy, astrology, Christian Cabala, learned magic – i.e. based on books) were in its essence "applied sciences" (utilitarian sciences) – *les sciences utiles*. Everything secret and invisible belonged to the

<sup>5</sup> Cf. W. J. Hanegraaff, *New age religion and secularization*, "Numen", 2000, vol. 47, pp. 288-312.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. B. J. Gibbons, *Spirituality*, pp. 110-111; Ch. Maillard, *Jung, Carl Gustav*, in: DGWE, pp. 648-653.

<sup>7</sup> Ragon's passion was not shared by the authorities of the Grand Orient de France of the time – the substantial and accurate presentation of the ritual issues provided in writing was regarded as unacceptable. If anything was to remain secret in Masonry, it was the ritual itself. Ragon's *Fastes initiatiques* – a monumental work in seven volumes on the subject of the history of Masonry and its ritual systems – remains incomplete to this day. All the materials prepared by Ragon to write and compile them are still kept in the archives of the Grand Orient de France. Cf. J.-P. Laurant, *Ragon de Bettignies, Jean-Marie*, in: DGWE, p. 976.

order of this world, only waiting to be discovered, understood and utilised<sup>8</sup>. Ragon postulated the existence of *l'occultisme* as a system of scientific knowledge, verifiable and applied. Understanding and systematising this knowledge – was the real initiation to him, it was the aim to which all Masons should persistently aspire in order to subsequently initiate others into this knowledge: “In this era of doubt in *occultism* you, elite and educated Masons, reject Mason trifles, raise your spirit to the learned studies, indulge in meditation, which absorbed ancient wise men, instruct yourselves so that you could give instructions to your brothers and when the profound study of beneficial sciences will become the aim of your philosophical meetings, you will uncover the ancient mysteries and will be their interpreters, radiant with glory. I dare to show you the way: become the initiated!”<sup>9</sup>

The system, in the existence of which Ragon believed and postulated its discovery, was soon announced by Éliphas Lévi (born Alphonse-Louis Constant, 1810-1875). He assigned a new role to the term “occultism” and a lasting, wide publicity by printing an exposition on “high magic” or “high science” in numerous books – the allegedly pre-eternal knowledge, which is the key to all riddles, mysteries and secrets. This exposition was based on discreetly introduced pantheism as well as quasi-physical theory of “astral light” (*la lumière astrale*), which was supposed to be a universal magical agent (*le grand agent magique, l'agent magique universel*)<sup>10</sup>.

Not only did Lévi outline the theory, but he also provided practical guidelines, which would make it possible to use this universal agent, permeating the whole cosmos. According to the French occultist, it could take any form a human being thinks of and then demands it with his or her act of will by uttering the right words or expressing this thought in a gesture or a material sign. Thus, in his concept of magic *imagination* was crucial as it formed the specific cosmic agent, submitting to the human thought, *the will* revising the thought-out form as well as *words* and *signs* as tools applied in the whole process<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> J.-M. Ragon de Bettignies, *Maçonnerie occulte suivie de l'initiation Hermétique*, Paris 1853, pp. 53-54. Also other authors writing about secret sciences in this era presented similar views. Cf. E. Salverte, *Des sciences occultes ou essai sur la magie, les prodiges et les miracles*, Paris 1829, vol. 1-2; F. Denis, *Tableau historique, analytique et critique des sciences occultes*, Paris 1830.

<sup>9</sup> J.-M. Ragon de Bettignies, *Maçonnerie occulte*, op. cit., p. 173.

<sup>10</sup> É. Lévi, *Dogme et rituel de la haute Magie*, vol. 1: *Dogme*, [2<sup>nd</sup> edition], Paris–Londres–New York 1861, pp. 145, 152, 160, 171-176, 182-192, 204-209, as well as in several dozen of other places. Lévi's narration is chaotic, inconsistent and devoid of logical structure, which would put the reasoning in order in all his books published in his time. His reasoning, in turn, is full of digressions, surprising remarks, interjections and anecdotes, also autobiographical among which the French occultist – very casually – presents also the principles of his theory, at the same time often using comparisons, metaphors, allusions, irony and wit. Lévi wrote his books compulsively, not methodically.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 117-118, 174, 183-186, 191, 219, 264, 353. Much more on the subject in a detailed (though also chaotically constructed) exposition on the practical side of occultism: É. Lévi, *Dogme et rituel de la haute Magie*, t.2: *Rituel*, Paris–Londres–New York 1861, passim (the Polish version: *Dogmat i rytuał wysokiej magii*, Tom Drugi: *Rytuał*, translated by M. Skierkowski, Wrocław 2009). Lévi's third significant work was *Histoire de la*

Éliphas Lévi's exposition on occultism was correctly interpreted by the reading public interested in the subject as a complete and conclusive explanation of the rational core of secret sciences. However, it should be pointed out that Lévi was not a practitioner, but a self-appointed "professor of magic". His whole occult activity boiled down to expression (in graphic arts, poetry, prose and journalistic writing). For all his life, Lévi speculated on the subject of his own ideas and his own obsessive fascination with the world of symbols and analogy, thus fulfilling a *Renaissance* ideal rather than any other of the time<sup>12</sup>. However, at the same time on the other side of the Atlantic lived and was active somebody who defined the whole later sought after ideal and aim of occultism and adopted the motto "TRY!" for his life. He dedicated his whole life to activity contrary to Lévi's ambitions: it was hard practice and trying everything that could have any effect in the field of magic. He also experienced all the negative results of such an "operational" approach. It was Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825-1875)<sup>13</sup> who was this practical creator of occultism.

As the first man in history he developed and combined ideas which later became the basis of occultism:

1) There is a cosmic hierarchy of highly developed beings (human and inhuman), who watch over the advancement of mankind. Its representatives on Earth have been creating secret societies from the dawn of history. Their names vary in different eras, but the initiation granted into them is one and the same<sup>14</sup>.

2) This initiation does not consist in passing arcane knowledge (although it involves a lot of learning), but a practical training aimed at elevating a human being to the level of development where he or she would come into a conscious and direct contact with highly developed beings. The goal is practical: to enter the elite circle. Only there awaits the novice a true sea of knowledge and power inaccessible to the ordinary men. It is a transition from the level of a "neophyte" to the level of an "apprentice" – occult mastery. And it is not the end of the path of initiation, but quite the opposite: it is the true beginning. It is a transformation, a real initiation due to which a human being will begin a new existence and start to be on his or her way up in an infinite hierarchy of cosmic power<sup>15</sup>.

3) This aim can be achieved by developing your own intuitive abilities. The science of higher, true clairvoyance provides knowledge on the ways to develop these

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*magie* (1860), also translated into Polish (*Historia magii*, translated by J. Prokopiuk, Warszawa 2000). In his subsequent publications, Lévi began withdrawing from the position of a derisive pantheist, while his magical dogma lost its original, aggressive and mocking tone.

<sup>12</sup> A. Mercier, *Éliphas Lévi*, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> Until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century he was a completely forgotten figure. The first monograph concerning the life and works of P. B. Randolph was written under the supervision of Mircea Eliade by one of his American students, John Patrick Deveney: *Paschal Beverly Randolph. A Nineteenth-Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Sex Magician*, Albany 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 121-154.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 283-309.

abilities. Randolph announced this science to his contemporaries, posing as a genius who will change the fate of mankind. He also posed as an earthly representative of this ancient, "imperial order", which assigned him this mission to carry out<sup>16</sup>.

He offered the followers he attracted a whole range of practices and exercises concerning concentration and will. Randolph also recognised the existence of cosmic aether (*Æth*), being a substance of invisible layers of reality, to which humans get access via clairvoyant abilities. He used "magically charged" mirrors in his attempts, as well as he took drugs and taught sexual magic<sup>17</sup>. After his death he was quickly forgotten due to occultists themselves, who although building on the foundation of Randolph's ideas, left it unsaid from where they derived their knowledge or even slandered the source. "The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor" (HBL, 1885-1886) did just that, though established by the British followers of Randolph. It was an organisation consisting of almost all luminaries of occultism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>18</sup>.

Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891) did not belong to HBL, but she also did not hesitate to discredit Randolph, spreading rumours that this "nigger" was trying to murder her using magic from a distance<sup>19</sup>. Meanwhile, it was perfectly obvious that her first project of new, occult science (*Isis Unveiled*, 1877) was a blend of quotations from over 100 other authors, while the fundamental ideas – and generally her entire interest in occultism – were taken by Blavatsky straight from Randolph's works. She also presented her first project as a revelation coming from the "Masters", instructing her and watching over the world, with whom she maintained continual, conscious relations, posing as a person strictly fulfilling the ideal of an apprentice, the author of which had been Randolph<sup>20</sup>. Only in her second project (*The Secret Doctrine*, 1888) did Blavatsky give new meaning to the term "occultism", creating a comprehensive vision of the hierarchical universe and the evolution of a human being based on borrowings

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<sup>16</sup> He fulfilled it with the use of prose (*The Wonderful Story of Ravalette*, New York 1863), fictionalized reportage (*Dealings with the Dead. The Human Soul, its Migrations and Transmigrations*, Utica 1861-1862), guidebooks and textbooks (*The Guide to Clairvoyance, and Clairvoyant's Guide: a Practical Manual for Those Who Aim at Perfect Clear Seeing and Psychometry*, Boston 1867; *Seership! The Magnetic Mirror. A Practical Guide to Those Who Aspire to Clairvoyance-Absolute*, Boston 1870) as well as in the form of manifestos (*The Asiatic Mystery. The Fire Faith! – The Religion of Flame! – The Force of Love! – The Energos of Will! – The Magic of Polar Mentality! First Rosicrucian Manifesto to the World Outside the Order!*, Boston 1871).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. J. P. Deveney, *Paschal*, op. cit., pp. 217-224, as well as see the supplements placed by the author: P. B. Randolph, *The Ansairitic Mystery. A New Revelation Concerning Sex! A Private letter, printed, but not published; it being sacred and confidential* (ibid., pp. 311-326); P. B. Randolph, *The Mysteries of Eulis* (ibid., pp. 327-341) – these are Randolph's two instructional manuscripts published for the first time. In the Polish language see the following publications on the subject: M. B. Stepień, *Trzy światy Paschala Beverly Randolpha*, in: „*Wieczność, gdzie śmierci nie ma...*” *Dawne i współczesne eschatologie i wizje światów duchowych*, R. T. Ptaszek (ed.), Lublin 2015, pp. 159-190.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. J. P. Deveney, *Paschal*, pp. 246-248, 253-282; J. Godwin, J. P. Deveney, Ch. Chanel, *The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor: Initiatic and Historical Documents of an Order of Practical Occultism*, York Beach 1995, pp. 4-5, 7, 38-39, 44-45, 65-66.

<sup>19</sup> J. P. Deveney, *Paschal*, op. cit., pp. 253-257.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 260-263, 299-303; J. A. Santucci, *Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna*, in: DGWE, op. cit., p. 184.

from the religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent. It was supposed to be *Eastern Occultism*, competitive with the Western ideas, abandoning the elitism of the esoteric circles, rejecting secret hierarchies, rites and the control of the imparted knowledge, taught publicly as a new revelation, which was to lead to the common brotherhood of people of all nations, languages and religions<sup>21</sup>.

Each of the aforementioned originators of occultism presented their own version of it as a "system and science", thus representing a part of the first, dictionary definition of *l'occultisme*. It was completely fulfilled in Randolph's secret teachings and the activity of HBL, which was shrouded in mystery (at least at the time). However, this school of practical occultism quickly vanished from history involved in a scandal<sup>22</sup>. "The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn" (1888-1903) filled the void after it, where occultism was also regarded as science absolutely prohibited to the uninitiated, but then it was made part of a ritualised initiation system with a typical Masonic, theatrical style. This system promised the possibility to become an "adeptus" already in the middle of a 10-level hierarchical structure of initiation. At the same time, all "neophytes" entering the order were faced with literally gargantuan store of knowledge to be learnt by heart, a system of exams before reaching the subsequent levels was introduced, while the practice of magic itself was postponed from the candidates for the level of an "adeptus" for as long as possible. The Golden Dawn became a closed and secret school of ceremonial magic, whose creators – the British Masons: W. R. Woodman (1828-1891), W. W. Westcott (1848-1925) and S. L. Mathers (1854-1918) – confronted a dilemma concerning the issue of how to teach magic without any practical, verifiable or tangible results of any magical operation. The *psychologisation* of magic was the solution, preserving the ideal deriving from Randolph. The aim was still to achieve the status of an "adeptus" – a person freely and consciously establishing contact with the higher powers of the universe. However, the entire system of ritual magic, which the Golden Dawn started to teach, transported magic to the level of a game of imagination and feelings. The rituals consisted of plenty of words, gestures and signs, which captured the imagination due to knowledge acquired by the sweat of their brow, which concerned their contents, networks of references and multidimensional meanings of symbols. A magus knew "what was going on" during the magical ritual, but "what happened" as well as all results of it were completely empirically unavailable to him. A given aim of these rituals was decisive here: attaining inner, spiritual purification as well as introducing "the balance of elements" in the outside world, understood also as "spiritual" (not to say: notional). Any magic aiming at minor or major personal successes, entertainment or selfish, egotistical needs – that is all that could be connected with achieving a palpable result

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. M. B. Stępień, *Okultyzm*, pp. 444-461. Here the comparison of both, very different projects by Blavatsky can be found, together with indicating the third project, began but discontinued due to her death.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. J. Godwin, J. P. Deveney, Ch. Chanel, *Hermetic*, op. cit., pp. 343-375.

or a failure when trying to achieve it – was officially forbidden in the Golden Dawn. Magical operations, to which the members of the order prepared laboriously, were to concern only their personal, inner transformation and bring them closer to the moment when they would at last establish contact with immaterial powers of the higher level<sup>23</sup>: “Magical knowledge is not given unto thee to tickle thy vanity and conceit – instructed one of the manuscripts – but that by its means, thou mayest purify and equilibrate thy spiritual nature and honour the Vast and Concealed One”<sup>24</sup>.

The practice of magic in the Golden Dawn became a game of imagination, a quest for vision, ceremonial worship, an inward journey, inner experience – unverifiable and quite frequently unrepeatable. However, the psychologisation of magical practice was not the end of the evolution of occult ideas. Aleister Crowley (born Edward Alexander Crowley 1875-1947), who was one of the members of the Golden Dawn in his youth, treated his career of a magus and occultist very seriously, rejecting in the end the entire, quite impossibly developed initiation system of the order. Instead, he assumed that the basic tool of a magus was *his own body*, while the initiation rituals can be performed... in your mind. They can be simply *imagined*<sup>25</sup>. The magic, which at first was to be the art of controlling the cosmic fluid with the use of will (Lévi, Randolph) and which later underwent psychologisation (the Golden Dawn), was opened to *sexualisation* by Crowley, while the training itself and the occult initiation were completely subjectivised.

The idea ascribing magical power to sexual acts – approached carefully and without much publicity by Randolph HBL, while associated with fall, madness and pure evil by Lévi and Blavatsky – due to Crowley returned and settled for good in the field of occultism. Furthermore, his antinomianism, addiction to drugs, bisexuality and literary and artistic talents brought him incomparably greater fame after 1968 than all actual creators of occultism<sup>26</sup>. For a long time Crowley was one of the most recognisable representatives of this environment, although in fact he held a rather distant position in the development of occult ideas. The real creators of occultism as an original, new and thoroughly contemporary trend in esoteric traditions of the West were Randolph and Lévi as well as – later in opposition to this “Western fashion” – Helena Blavatsky.

The direct cause of the speeches by the first occultists were mediumistic experiences within spiritism (called “spiritualism” in the United States of America)<sup>27</sup> as

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. R. A. Gilbert, *Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*, DGWE, op. cit., pp. 544-550; A. Owen, *The Place*, op. cit., pp. 75-77.

<sup>24</sup> I. Regardie, *The Original Account of the Teachings, Rites and Ceremonies of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*, St. Paul, Minnesota [1987], p. 95.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. M. Pasi, *Crowley, Aleister*, in: DGWE, op. cit., p. 282.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. J. P. Deveney, *Spiritualism*, in: DGWE, op. cit., pp. 1074-1082; J. B. Buescher, *The Other Side of Salvation: Spiritualism and the Nineteenth-Century Religious Experience*, Boston 2004.

well as mesmerism in its later, hypnotic version initiated by the Marquis de Puységur (1751-1825)<sup>28</sup>. Opinions on the subject of the existence of invisible worlds, inhabited by spirits, or opinions on extraordinary abilities and powers of human beings not yet understood by science, together with the popular fashion for examining altered states of consciousness (whether in a hypnotic trance or after taking drugs), constituted the starting point for the activity of the first occultists. The access to hidden knowledge, imparted in a state of trance, the promise to solve the greatest mysteries and religious, philosophical, existential or even medical dilemmas – all this seemed to be within reach, now only separated by the person of a passive middleman and “transmitter” of these revelations – medium. Randolph, and Blavatsky with HBL after him, presented a new, *magical* version of spiritism, in order to remove the very middleman and once and for all end the “second-hand knowledge” to be able to personally, actively and intentionally get to know “higher worlds”, not to be subject to anybody’s control, but to consciously try to direct your magical power yourself. They meant advancing to the new level, taking a new step above and beyond mediumistic experiences: “The media are passive tools in someone else’s hands, whereas magicians use their own will and give orders to spirits!”<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, all of them called themselves earthly emissaries of powerful rulers and inhabitants of the “higher worlds” researched by them. Although Éliphas Lévi had his doubts about any contact with the invisible layer of reality, he also announced that in the light of his theory the riddles of spiritism and mesmerism will be explained adequately as the first ones<sup>30</sup>.

Occultism as a historical phenomenon has little in common with former “secret sciences” (*scientias occultas*) or “occult philosophy” (*philosophia occulta*). Both these terms directly derive from the Renaissance philosophy of nature – from the certainty of

<sup>28</sup> Cf. B. Meheust, *Animal Magnetism*, in: DGWE, op. cit., pp. 75-82; G. Flaherty, *The Non-Normal Sciences. Survival of Renaissance Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, in: *Inventing Human Science: Eighteenth-century domains*, Ch. Fox, R. Porter, R. Wokler (ed.), Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1995, pp. 271-291.

<sup>29</sup> J. P. Deveney, *Paschal*, op. cit., p. 526. This is a summary of the theses included in one of Blavatsky’s articles (*The Science of Magic, Proofs of its Existence, “Spiritual Scientist”*, 1875, vol. 3, 6, p. 64-65) as well as in *Isis Unveiled* (vol. 1, pp. 360-367, 487-488, 490). Deveney also turned our attention to the fact that point six of the “fundamental statements” compiled by Blavatsky (vol. 2, pp. 587-588) is the distinction between a “medium” and an “adept”.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. É. Lévi, *Dogme*, vol. 1, p. 273. In response to the revelation of spiritism included in *Le livre des esprits* (1857), written by Allan Kardec (born Denizard Hyppolyte Léon Rivail, 1804-1869), Lévi published his *La science des esprits* (1865), while his *The History of Magic* (1860) was also a polemical work. It is opposed to the histories of magic written by mesmerists of the time, for whom everything that was magical, was to be explained in the light of practices and hypnotic experiments. Lévi fought this, trying to raise the status of magical rituals and prevent replacing the terminology connected with magic with the jargon created by theoreticians of the animal magnetism. Cf. J. Ennemoser, *Geschichte der Magie*, Leipzig 1844 (in the second edition printed in the same year, the title was changed to *Geschichte der thierischer Magnetismus*); L. A. Cahagnet, *Magie magnétique, ou Traité historique et pratique de fascinations, de miroirs kabbalistiques, d’apports, de suspensions, de pactes, de charmes des vents, de convulsions, de possessions, d’envoûtement, de sortilèges, de magie de la parole, de correspondances sympathiques et de nécromancie*, Paris 1854.



the time as to the existence of hidden, mysterious connections between all that inhabits the universe as well as from the efforts exerted in that era to determine as extensive lists of these mysterious relationships as possible. For it was admitted that such connections – related to symbols, image, talismans, based on the world mystery, which is inner, spiritual, subject to God's will and godly life – are deeply hidden and a person examining nature gets to know them with difficulty, as if groping. It is due to this difficulty that since the 16<sup>th</sup>-century astrology, alchemy and learned magic have been called "secret sciences". This name did not require keeping those sciences secret from other people, but indicated first of all the mystery of the world, ruled in a way unknown to humans by Divine Providence. "Secret sciences" included knowledge, which did not seem to be "forbidden" back then, but only hidden in nature by God and also as yet unknown to humans. *Scientias occultas* were not *secret*. They were called like this because their subject was regarded as covered, hidden, concealed<sup>31</sup>.

Occultism, in turn, is a modern phenomenon: of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has a similar meaning to "secret knowledge" and "secret philosophy" only semantically, which maybe would be more clearly visible in Polish, if the French term *l'occultisme* was to be translated. Then it would become the Polish "tajemnicizm" – so a system, which in its name seems to indicate orderliness and rationalisation of this set of ideas and practices. However, there was no such development of terminology, while in the field of research, which revealed the presence of esotericism in culture, the term "okultyzm" was used in Polish first as a synonym for "ezoteryzm" (until the 1990s), while then the Edward Ashod Tiryakian's idea made its way to the Polish literature on the subject, as he proposed in his sociological perspective to use it with reference to the practical side of esotericism<sup>32</sup>. It was quite an attractive point of view, very clearly organising the terminology: according to it, esotericism was to denote a system of religious and philosophical beliefs, while occultism was to refer to all practices, techniques or procedures deriving from these beliefs. The semantic difference between esotericism and occultism was now defined by a simple analogy to the distinction between theory and practice. One of Mircea Eliade's essays mediated in conveying this perspective<sup>33</sup>. Although elegant, this point of view did not reflect facts. Occultism was not only rooted in intellectual speculations, but also aimed at achieving the status of the highest and ultimate discipline of knowledge. Indeed, it always assumed some *praxis*, but dealt with the notion, idea, theory, vision of God, the world and a human

<sup>31</sup> Cf. M. B. Stępień, *Okultyzm*, op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>32</sup> E. A. Tiryakian, *Toward the Sociology of Esoteric Culture*, "American Journal of Sociology", 1972, no. 78, pp. 491-512.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. M. Eliade, *Okultyzm, czary, mody kulturalne*, translated into Polish by I. Kania, Kraków 1992, p. 58. As early as 2000 the author of this article used a certain variant of such a differentiation, claiming that "occultism will denote each and every esoteric tradition, which urges us to acquire and practically use arcane knowledge" (M. B. Stępień, *Poszukiwacze prawdy: wolnomularstwo i jego tradycja*, Lublin 2000, p. 17).

being to a much greater extent. Generally, occultism worked on text, presentation, polemics and teaching<sup>34</sup>.

Another distinction was proposed from the theological perspective and concerned a pair of terms occultism-esotericism as mutually related, although not semantically identical. In this point of view, "occultism" was to concern the *object* (including both the knowledge and practice), whereas "esotericism" was to refer to the uniqueness and elitism of the *subjector* a closed group cultivating arcane knowledge. In this perspective both terms are used and explained as two aspects of one phenomenon, considered most often in the pastoral perspective<sup>35</sup>.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the circle of researchers on Western esotericism refers the term "occultism" to a special cultural innovation, which was born in close connection with experiments in the field of animal magnetism and spiritism. Occultism is a contemporary trend in esotericism, the main feature of which constitutes multiple reference to the new world at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the world marked by the development of exact sciences, implementation of the benefits of technology and materialism – the allegedly "disenchanted" world<sup>36</sup>. This reference had two basic directions: on the one hand it was a reaction to the new world from the point of view of esotericism, an attempt to introduce a specific adjustment of the outlook on life into it, but on the other hand – it was an attempted affirmation, comprehension and assimilation of esoteric contents from the viewpoint of the co-originator, representative or inhabitant of this new "disenchanted" world, an attempt to include, "draw" these contents into the contemporary culture and adjust them with what is inside it<sup>37</sup>. As a result, occultism presented a whole range of "radically innovative blends of ideas taken from esoteric traditions with ideas of contemporary rationalism and science"<sup>38</sup>. And this new quality arose not only as a

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. W. J. Hanegraaff, *Occult/Occultism*, in: DGWE, op. cit., p. 887.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. A. Posacki, *Okultyzm jako niewierność fundamentalna*, Kraków 1996; Idem, *Ezoteryzm*, in: Idem, *Encyklopedia zagrożeń duchowych*, Radom 2009, vol. 1, p. 192.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. W. J. Hanegraaff, *Occult/Occultism*, in: DGWE, op. cit., p. 888. The author of the entry uses the term "disenchanted world", referring to Max Weber's *Entzauberung*. Cf. W. J. Hanegraaff's, *How Magic Survived*, pp. 357-360 for information on the new perspective, in which Western esotericism includes statements on the subject of secularisation and the "disenchantment" of Western societies. It should also be pointed out that the contemporary development of occultism – "return" or rather "revival" of magic in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – completely blurred the intellectually trivial picture of the development of culture, formulated by James George Frazer (1854-1941): starting from magic, through religion, ending with science. Cf. M. Introvigne, *Powrót magii*, translated into Polish by A. Wałęcki, Kraków 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. W. J. Hanegraaff, *Occult/Occultism*, in: DGWE, op. cit., p. 887; A. Faivre, *Christian theosophy*, in: DGWE, op. cit., p. 266. The second article refers to occultism in the fourth part: *Effacement and Permanence (ca. 1850-2000)*.

<sup>38</sup> W. J. Hanegraaff, *New age religion*, op. cit., p. 294.

reaction to modernity, but it was a “modern continuation of traditions which far predate the formulation of a modernist worldview”<sup>39</sup>.

The godly, Renaissance vision of God the Creator, who rules over the natural processes (e.g. creating minerals inside the Earth) through angels, spirits and superior intelligence, ruling from His will over the whole network of secret connections between all levels of reality, was removed from the old esotericism, which occultists referred to in order to transform it and present its contents anew. Quasi-scientific notions of the universe, which is subject to impersonal laws of causality, replaced the notion of Christian God, whereas the same secret connections still remained in effect as the main cosmological assumption. On that account occultism was even referred to as “secularised esotericism”<sup>40</sup>. On the other hand, occultism included an attractive religious proposition. It was to be a comprehensive, final antidote to the religious crisis, which plagued modernity. On this account certainly the term “deChristianised esotericism” would be more appropriate. Apart from cases of stylised hostility (Blavatsky, Crowley), Christianity was in occultists’ teachings most often reduced to the level of one of many wisdom traditions – another form of distorting the eternal wisdom in the history of mankind, the representatives of which were to be occultists. The presentation of this final truth as a rule created an opportunity of deification for a “neophyte”, more or less clearly referring to the gnostic anthropology, and in the case of Blavatsky – to the concept of the eternal cycle of separation and re-unification with the impersonal Absolute. Therefore, a specific spirituality was on offer, which was to mean a return to the religion of ancient wise men and a revival of the power of mysteries from former days. The turn towards magic significant for this new spirituality was neither a return to folk traditions and superstitions, which were to be disposed of by science, nor the affirmation of religious traditions, abandoned in the name of materialism and rationalism. It was reaching outside the authority of science and the authority of churches for the promise of the ultimate spiritual experience, reserved for the learned elite. By rationalising the place of a human being in the universe, occultism put it into a broader perspective of new, magical spirituality. By accepting the idea of scientific argumentation and formulating pseudo-physical theories, it subordinated all this to spiritual aims, interpreted from the corpus of ancient, Renaissance and early modern written sources<sup>41</sup>.

Therefore, occultism is a modern, innovative continuation of old, esoteric traditions, enduring in the culture of the West. It is also a novelty in the religious dimension – a novelty in which on closer examination you might notice a real source of

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<sup>39</sup> J. A. Beckford, *Holistic Imagery and Ethics in New Religious and Healing Movements*, “Social Compass”, 1984, vol. 32, no. 2-3, p. 260. Op. cit.: W. J. Hanegraaff, *On the Construction of Esoteric Traditions*, in: *Western Esotericism and Science of Religion*, A. Faivre (ed.), W. J. Hanegraaff, Leuven 1998, p. 41.

<sup>40</sup> W. J. Hanegraaff, *New age religion*, op. cit., p. 294.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. A. Owen, *The Place*, op. cit., p. 8.

many contemporary phenomena, referred to and described as “new religious movements” or “new spirituality”.