

Towards the Comparative History of Esotericism: Tantrik States of Consciousness in the West

Olga Louchakova

olouchakova@itp.edu

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Through the analysis of the intercultural transmission of esoteric forms of perception, this article introduces the notion of comparative history of esotericism. Phenomenological analysis of perception and consciousness in the contemporary western spiritual awakening movement resembles the states of consciousness typical for the classic Indian Kundalini Tantra (Bhattacharyaa, 1996). Based on the observed similarity of the spontaneously emerging embodied spiritual experiences in westerners (a.k.a. "Kundalini rising") with the marker states of Tantrism, the author hypothesizes that the cross-cultural influences in esotericism can be mediated by transmission of the specific forms of spiritual perception.

Transmission of particular perception (initiation) is the key element in Tantrik sadhana. These body-related forms of awareness, unusual for the western culture, were reported by a significant amount of researchers in the middle of the XX century (Dawd, 1998; Shellenberg, 1998; Masluk, 1997; Waldman, 1997; Palmer, 1999).

Qualified later as "spiritual awakenings" or "Kundalini rising" (Greenwell, 1995), these states were initially pathologized by medicine. However, the emergence of these spiritual experiences lead to the formation of the esoteric groups known as satsangs, formation of the professional groups such as Kundalini Research Network and Spiritual Emergence Network, and acknowledgement of the normality of these experiences as a DSM-IV non-pathological V-code category of "religious or spiritual problem". The process by which these unusual forms of perception were incorporated into the fabric of one's mental and physical life received the name of "spiritual emergence" (Greenwell, 1996; Wall & Louchakova, 2002). This "leaking" of esoteric perception and insight into the secular western life, and incorporation of the esoteric phenomena into the life world and "naive" attitude of individuals, appears to be westbound penetration of Indian Tantrik influences.

This paper is based on the longitudinal study of the groups and individuals associated with the notions of spiritual awakening, such as satsangs, spiritual emergence groups, Kundalini research network conferences, therapists and students of higher education interested in concept of spiritual emergence, theological groups etc. It shows that the phenomenon of spiritual awakening in westerners is not limited to the Tantra-like changes in body-based perception, but incorporates reflective awareness and changes in the archetypal structure. However, the emergence of esoteric forms of perception is foundational to the process. Historical analysis and chronology of both the spiritual awakening movement and Tantrik influences in the western esotericism posits the

possibility of "parallel" history of religions – the legacy of the states of consciousness and the genealogy of the forms of perception.

The history of religions recognizes elements of human existence beyond the realm of rationality (Eliade, 1963; Kippenberg, 2002; Wasserstrom, 1999). Then esotericism, a quintessence of perceptual experience beyond rationality, is a sacred core of religious history. The attention to emergence and transmission of the esoteric insight shows that the spiritual forms of perception can be transmitted cross-culturally. Different from mythological consciousness, esoteric insight is associated with the specific body-related structures of awareness. The research of culture-specific forms of esoteric awareness suggests the new qualitative method useful for the study of esotericism - phenomenological hermeneutics of perception as different from the hermeneutics of ideas.