Tracing Modern Roots of Esotericism: Discussing Limits of Disenchantment

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In his study Egil Asprem reconstructs the relationship between science and religion by adopting Weber's concept of disenchantment. Asprem proposes to understand the notion of disenchantment as a practice of modern natural sciences. The force behind disenchantment is a norm that derives from enlightenment and scientific naturalism. While Max Weber conceived of disenchantment as a religious force that made the great social orders of economy, politics, and law independent of inner-worldly expectations, Asprem studies it as an intellectual problem. The author proposes to

abandon the notion of disenchantment as a socio-historical process, and instead reconceptualise it as cluster of related intellectual problems, faced by historical actors (p. 4).

In my review I would like to address two issues. One concerns Asprem's attempt to disclose in ‘Scientific Naturalism’ (1900–1939) the limits to the concept of disenchantment and to trace the pertinent scholarly discussions. He looks for scientists and philosophers inside of the academic mainstream that find “alternative solutions to the problem of disenchantment” (p. 425). My second issue deals with Max Weber’s notion of ‘disenchantment’ as a religious category governing modern attitudes to the world.

1) Asprem examines the paradigm of ‘Scientific Naturalism.’ Scientists took it for granted when describing and explaining natural phenomena. What happened, Asprem asks, when scientists encountered in the world of transmitted knowledge notions not derived from empirical evidence, not verifiable/ falsifiable by observation, but nevertheless necessary to understand natural processes. His answer is as follows: “The processes of rationalisation have created the conditions for the problem of disenchantment to merge” (p. 6). The rational
approach generates an unreasonable, incalculable, irrational area distinct from the reasonable, calculable, rational realm which the scholar inhabits. As Kocku von Stuckrad has shown, this pattern had dominated since the very beginning of the scientification of religious history: the profane / rational vs. the sacred / irrational.1 Applying this distinction to natural data yields likewise an exclusion of non-empirical meta-physical meanings from the natural world.

Asprem investigates this process of exclusion in the fields of physics, biology, and psychology. He unearthed debates among well-known scientists revealing that they could not avoid concepts that elude the status of empirical observation but were necessary for understanding nature. One example is the concept of ‘holism’: analyzing natural processes requires a paradigm integrating matter and mind, as Gregory Bateson has argued (p. 58–60). ‘Holism’ or ‘system’ or ‘mind’ became watchwords for attempts to reintegrate immaterial elements in the observation of natural processes. According to Asprem, a field of natural theologies emerged:

Post-Enlightenment establishments may not have been all ‘that’ disenchanted... It was not only the attempt to get rid of cosmotheism that was unsuccessful; the attempt to create a stable disenchanted identity for the Western academy was not completed either (p. 424–425).

That field emerged not merely due to unsolved problems in the natural sciences but also through a transmitted Mediterranean religious worldview. ‘Cosmostheism’ or ‘panentheism’ celebrated the visible cosmos as a place where divine powers reveal themselves to the human mind (pp. 279–286). When the study of para-psychological phenomena was introduced at universities in the US, protagonists of the new subject tried to find a foundation for their analysis in the philosophy of ‘vitalism’ (in German Lebensphilosophie)—a philosophy rejecting mechanistic models in natural sciences. Asprem recognizes the natural sciences as the driving force behind the disenchantment of the human attitude to the natural world. But this force did not succeed fully. The rejected knowledge2 turned into a stable and enduring Western tradition, called esotericism (pp. 421–425).

2) Repeatedly Asprem emphasizes that his book aims at re-conceptualizing Max Weber’s notion of disenchantment. An additional reason for a critical