



# ASE

## NEWSLETTER

The Newsletter of the Association for the Study of Esotericism

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Dear Colleagues,

At our last ASE conference, we discussed having a new ASE newsletter, and here it is.

As you will see, it includes a short history of ASE by Arthur Versluis and reflections on the study of esotericism by both an established scholar in the field, Lee Irwin, and a relative newcomer, Della Champion, a first-year graduate student at UC Davis in The Study of Religion. We have also included the Call for Paper for the 2018 ASE conference, which will be held at Rice University from May 24-27, and a Call Papers for a conference on “Women and Esotericism” to be held at UC Davis from October 18-21, 2018. The newsletter concludes with a short list of useful websites that you might want to look at.

I would be happy to receive suggestions about other items we might include in future newsletters. Please send your suggestions to me at [apcoudert@ucdavis.edu](mailto:apcoudert@ucdavis.edu).

*Allison Coudert*



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## ASE: A Brief History and a Glance Ahead

*Arthur Versluis, President, Association for the Study of Esotericism; Professor and Chair, Department of Religious Studies, Michigan State University*

The Association for the Study of Esotericism had its origin in 2002, when a small group of us gathered at a bucolic corporate retreat facility owned, at the time, by Michigan State University. Among our merry band were Claire Fanger, Lee Irwin, John Richards, and Melinda

Weinstein, and at this first meeting, we created the basic thematic focus of the association, its operating structure, and terminology, with a working definition of “esotericism.” It was a warm and friendly gathering, as were all of the subsequent ASE conferences and events.

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I had been at a symposium in Europe the previous year, and when I'd mentioned that we planned to create a new scholarly association in the United States, the announcement drew a strong reaction from a well-known European scholar. Why? you might ask. As it turned out, the emergence of ASE, the first such scholarly association, was important not least because (as that scholar no doubt intuited already at that time) it represented in many respects openness to different approaches than those that came to predominate in Europe.

The Association for the Study of Esotericism is an international association, but it is American in its approach. While many in it prefer a historical approach, not all do, and the Association has maintained openness to a wide range of disciplines and fields as well as approaches, including ethnography. It also has included scholar-practitioners, and always has maintained a welcoming ambience, perhaps because it remains the only full conference venue in the United States devoted solely to esoteric literature, philosophy, art, and religion. Hence it has provided the transdisciplinary meeting point and home for those on the North American continent drawn to the study of the esoteric.

Of course, we now find ourselves in a new era for the humanities, one in which enrollments in humanities majors are in decline, and tenure-track positions have diminished in number as well. In such an era, it appears unlikely that there will be many if any American academic programs devoted specifically to anything like the study of esotericism. But what we have learned over the course of many conferences is that we are interested not so much in the artificial construct "esotericism" as in what is esoteric in a range of disciplines and areas of study. After all, many of us already are located in departments of literature, art history, religion, philosophy, and so forth. In fact, were those of us at that first meeting to go back and change anything, a number of us would have advocated removing the word "esotericism," which has lent itself to a projection of a separate, gerrymandered field that no one has been able to clearly define.

What does exist—and for which ASE provides a home—is the study of esoteric religion, literature, art, music and philosophy. The key term here is "esoteric," which is after all a modifier whose antonym is "exoteric." ASE is a home for scholars from many different fields and disciplines, whose interests intersect in the area of what is esoteric, that is, what was or is secret or encoded or intended for the few is made visible, contextualized, and clarified by scholars or scholar-practitioners. I do not think this will ever be an area of study for most—scholarship in this area, like its subject matter, is meant for the few. But at the same time, it continues to be the most interesting area of study for us, and we look forward to many more conferences, symposia, and other events and publications.

John D. Richards (1958-2008), one of the founders of ASE, and the one who registered its official 501(c)3 nonprofit status, often said that the study of esoteric art, literature, music, philosophy, and religion inevitably will become entwined with and illuminated by the study of consciousness. Given he was a specialist in Appalachian folk magic, perhaps this might seem a surprising expectation. But in fact, I think that time has borne out his insight, and that inevitably, as scholars continue to investigate esoteric literary, artistic, musical, religious, and philosophical works, distinguishing between what is exoteric and what is esoteric, we will continue to deepen our understanding not only of the outer aspects of our subjects, but also their inner significances. What makes a great work of art sublime? Surely the answer includes not only its context, or even its meanings, but beyond that, the sublimity it induces in us. To study that is, in fact, to study the nature of consciousness itself, as I discuss in my most recent book, *Platonic Mysticism: Contemplative Science, Philosophy, Literature, and Art* (SUNY: 2017). ASE has been about and will continue to be about shared enthusiasms, collegiality, and the exploration of new and fascinating areas of study. Long may it thrive.

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## American Esotericism: Reflections

*Lee Irwin, Professor, Religious Studies Department,  
College of Charleston*

The following dialogue is based on questions asked by the editor of this publication, on the significance of esoteric studies and my engagement with that topic over the last fifteen years.

### *How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?*

My interest in esotericism began with my study of Native American religions. In most native religious traditions, there is a recognition that certain individuals have exceptional abilities, some from childhood, and others through intensive rites based on seeking visionary guidance. This fact raised a question for me – did other traditions have individuals with similar abilities? Did those traditions value such abilities? I quickly discovered that while many religious traditions did have individuals with such abilities like shamans, for example mystics, visionaries, prophets and so on, in most traditions these abilities were either exceptional cases (prophet or messiah) or such cases were marginalized because they often resulted in experiential challenges to normative values within that tradition. In other words, there was something anomalous in these abilities that challenged mainstream beliefs or authority and resulted in a tendency to devalue such experiences. The exception was indigenous traditions in which such shamanic abilities were highly regarded.

However, there was a marginal tradition of “rejected knowledge” within the context of western religions – centered on a wide range of topical areas such as alchemy, magic, kabbalah, astrology, and various secret or initiatic societies. I knew very little about these organizations and that piqued my interest and led to about five intensive years of study on

that subject during which I read everything I could find on the various topics. During that period, I also realized that this was a growing area of independent scholarly research. I attended an AAR meeting in Chicago where I met Antoine Faivre and heard him talk on the topic of “western esotericism” confirming my view that this was an area that we needed to develop in the American context. At that same meeting, I met Arthur Versluis (with whom I had communicated for several years) and over a few beers in the hotel bar, we discussed the possibility of forming an American organization for the study of esotericism. Arthur organized a meeting at Michigan State University which a number of additional scholars attended, and from that meeting we formally established the ASE (in 2002).

### *What do you feel are the major challenges of the field?*

One of the primary challenges is defining “esotericism” beyond a description of its historical context. Faivre had published several works on the history of esotericism in the western context, as well as some basic theory on the constitution of the field more generally. But esotericism is illusive and like a magical entity, it is hard to pin down to any specific, objective definition. Scholars have tended to define the area historically, socially, phenomenologically, and conceptually with some emphasis on the gnostic aspects, referring to special knowledge or initiatic insights. However, a strictly western historical definition limits the field to a Eurocentric perspective and has led to a professionalization of the discipline as primarily a European tradition. From my perspective as an American scholar of esotericism, while I respect and appreciate the European content, my view is that “esotericism” more generally is

not restricted to a specific cultural history, but more an expression of unique human capacities that become enculturated in a wide variety of ways, far more complex than any given history of specific groups and movements.

To put it more directly, no one culture can claim an authoritative knowledge of esotericism in a broad, global sense. Asian traditions certainly have esoteric aspects, indigenous traditions equally so, African and Caribbean traditions and some New Religious Movements also have esoteric aspects. I am reminded of a saying among the Lakota: "ordinary people do not have the unique knowledge of medicine people." If we define esotericism in terms of special knowledge and unique abilities, then what is esoteric is more than its historical developments. This leads to an epistemological question that is also deeply ontological. Knowledge beyond the flatland of rational construction suggests that the contents of such knowledge require something more than reason and faith, it suggests a kind of knowing that epitomizes deeper human capacities for perception and participant encounters. And that perception is directed toward a "ground of being" awareness, a sense that human perceptions can be developed in non-ordinary ways that leads to a direct experiential encounter with Being, reflecting transpersonal capabilities. The major challenges in the field are situational, learning to take a stance epistemologically and ontologically with regard to the complexity of the subject. I see esotericism as primarily interdisciplinary, multicultural, and grounded in consciousness studies and the metaphysics of human evolution.

### ***What is your most memorable experience so far from your time in the field?***

While visiting Amsterdam to give a keynote address to the Association for the Study of Dreams, I was staying in a very nice hotel in the city. While there, I contacted Wouter Hanegraaff, a good friend, and we were sitting in the hotel bar and talking. He asked me what I was working on and I told him a new book on the history of reincarnation. He then asked, as a scholar of esotericism, if I knew of Helmut Zander's book on reincarnation, his history of the topic. My heart sank! Wait, there is already a book on the history of the subject!? Death of a creative idea. I had researched the topic extensively and could find no such history, but Wouter

pulled that out instantaneously. Is it in English? No, only in German. I may need to rethink my project; I'm not writing a book that someone else has already written. Bad news. After I got back to South Carolina, I suddenly had an idea. I emailed Wouter and asked him if anything in the book covered reincarnation in America? He looked it up in his copy of Zander, and no, there was nothing on America and the last third of the book was on Rudolf Steiner. OK! Rebirth! The book project came back to life as ***Reincarnation in America: An Esoteric History*** (subsequently written and published in August, 2017: <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781498554077/Reincarnation-in-America-An-Esoteric-History>)

This story illustrates a number of scholarly issues. First, it demonstrates the importance of colleague relationships, particularly intra-cultural relations. The field of esotericism is highly diverse and cuts across multiple cultures, so cultivating relationships with scholars in other cultural settings is an important way to enhance communication on specialized topics. Secondly, it reinforces the notion that scholarly writing projects must be adaptive, able to illustrate a niche as yet undeveloped. But adaptation means creative reflections in conversation with other authors and writers, a willingness to keep working on the fit between original ideas and the academic context – and in esotericism, there is much that needs to be written about, and not simply from an historicist perspective. And third, cordial relationships with other scholars help to support the field, even when there are critical disagreements or doubts about theory or academic standards. What really matters is staying in conversation and maintaining integrity of views and purpose.

### ***What are the worst things about having this as your specialty?***

The main difficulty is acquiring academic recognition for this area of special interest. The idea of "esotericism" when linked to special knowledge or abilities, does not sit well with scholars who take a positivist approach because much of the material of esotericism is subjective or intersubjective. The reason why the history of esotericism has become dominant is simply because it is the easiest path to objectivity (or at least demonstrable facticity). This same difficulty is found in other related disciplines, like consciousness studies, paranormal research, transpersonal

theory or any approach that places emphasis on “psychic” features of individuals or organizations. Is mediumship esoteric? Is telepathy or clairvoyance esoteric? I believe most paranormal capacities are an intrinsic feature of esoteric thought and belief.

Teaching people about “astral projection” as an esoteric practice in some groups, when compared to OBE and NDE science research, opens whole fields of inquiry. But that inquiry is not reducible to objective studies. That means that paradigms that dominate academic studies are inflated and biased toward reproducibility, public facts, and a tedious dependency on measurability, difficult to find in the esoteric context. And even more troubling is the rejection of actual science based empiricism in parapsychology and transpersonal studies – why? Because the cognitive capacities demonstrated simply do not conform to objectivists beliefs (I mean “beliefs” because there is no proof that objectivity is the only meaningful methodology). Scientism occludes positive research in areas that value subjective perceptions as meaningful occasions of genuine knowledge. The struggle in esoteric studies is to find legitimate ways to validate and appreciate the actual experiences that are foundational to the field without recourse to artificial methods that inevitably falsify the data because the method is not an effective way to understand the data.

### ***What are the best things about having this as your specialty?***

For me, the best thing is the open-ended, interdisciplinary nature of the overall subject. When we have held ASE meetings, it is clear that scholars from multiple disciplines contribute significantly to our shared discourses. I venture the observation that there is no one discipline in which esoteric studies is the natural home. It is true that Religious Studies has been a general context for such studies but overall, that is because the comparative study of religions is itself interdisciplinary and cross-cultural. However, other disciplines are certainly strong areas of related research – literature, anthropology, art history, folklore, film, psychology, history, material culture, and many others – contribute to the richness and diversity. Also, honestly, esoteric studies give me the opportunity to teach courses on a wide range of topics that are not usually offered in the academic context and there is a strong student interest in these topics!

### ***What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?***

I have many other interests, so another way of phrasing this inquiry would be – what interests have developed because of esoteric research and teaching? The answer for me is clear. Esoteric studies led me in the direction of transpersonal studies, paranormal phenomena, ASC, dream work and the general study of consciousness in the new transphysical models (as seen for example in Kelly et al, *Beyond Physicalism* or his other volume *Irreducible Mind*). These works and others provide new holistic models for the study of esotericism, far removed from the historicist approach. The issue is not how has esotericism formed itself as a human interest in the past (certainly a viable topic), but for me, more what is the present and future of esoteric studies beyond the somewhat traditionalized approach to the topic? My response is that esotericism in the American context specifically is about the emergence of “new metaphysicals” whose interests, writings, and organization area simply not reducible to past historical models.

These metaphysicals (as Courtney Bender has pointed out), are individuals who combine old and new with emergent and experimental. There are secular influences, science influences, speculative models from transpersonal studies and paranormal research which illustrate the complexity, richness, and subtlety of the phenomenon labeled “esoteric” in the past context. This is new wine in new bottles, mixed with some highly subtle, intensely powerful, and dramatically transformative effects that make esotericism a launching pad for entirely new models of consciousness and human self-becoming. This is true because the history of esotericism is primary about our capacities to become something more, more lucid, more aware, more responsible to the reality of our perceptions no longer constrained by an artificial constriction in the name of realism. The real is more real than most realists imagine – and there is the problem, the lack of imagination. Whatever the future of esotericism, it will be something far more sophisticated and far more informed than any imitation of the past. The past had great teachers, masters, and illumined exemplars – and so will the future, in new forms, new ideations, and new expressions of the impossible made possible by dedicated efforts and genuine transformations. So might it be, so it is.

# Interview with Della Champion

*PhD student in The Study of Religion at UC Davis*



***How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?***

It's been a natural progression that started with a childhood fascination with ghosts. I read everything I could on the subject and was particularly engaged with the exploits of Hans Holzer and Sybil Leek. By the time I was about 10 or 11, I was delighted to find a rather interesting book in the library stacks on the technical aspects of the manufacture and use of magical talismans, which I checked out immediately and still remember vividly. Having been raised in a strictly observant Roman Catholic family, such verboten reading held a particular interest! In fact, that may partially explain my early desire to explore the hidden and forbidden. Why was there such a divide? What was it in particular that made the esoteric so different from what was exoteric and permissible? Similar questions—around how power is produced—have led to my current interest in how new religious movements utilize rhetoric to create mythologies, acquire authority, and maintain power; both in their respective organizations, and externally.

***What do you feel are the major challenges?***

I definitely think that there is a lack of credibility and support for research in esotericism in academia. Resources such as the ASE and the ESSWE are critical for building community among scholars of esotericism. The conferences presented by these organizations are opportunities for networking, and are tremendously supportive environments in which to present new ideas and research.

***What is your most fun memory so far from your time in the field?***

Table-tipping in a 5-day workshop given by the medium Anne Gehman at Lily Dale, the Spiritualist Camp in upstate New York. Lily Dale is a fascinating community with a tremendous history of its own. I stayed there for a week, attending all the talks and “readings” I could. Lily Dale, and the greater story of the unique proliferation of new religious movements in upstate New York, definitely piqued my interest for studying the history of religion in North America more closely.

***What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?***

They are legion, and include; myriad creative endeavors, voracious consumption of film and fiction, leisurely weekend breakfasts, conversations with friends over any kind of beverage, chess, and travel. More recently I've discovered boxing, and my left hook!

***What are the worst things about having this as your specialty?***

The misconceptions, fears, and prejudices around what the study of esotericism is. For example, the research topic of my Master's study was Modern Satanism. Though I had started my Master's work on an entirely different subject, this focus developed early on when taking a class on the textual origins of the figure of Satan. Throughout that course, which was grounded in antiquity, I kept thinking about modern conceptions of the Satan figure. I wanted to know: what did Satanism look like as a religion

or practice in late modernity? Was it the same as popular stereotype, or did it differ (and if so, how)? What I found was fascinating and diverse: modern Satanism is not a single unified practice; it's many varied and autonomous systems containing some commonalities within a wide spectrum of experience and belief. This research topic also provided some wonderful research material through which to examine the intersection of religion, rhetoric, politics, and power dynamics. Not everyone shares my sense of enthusiasm in this regard, and there has been a fair share of polite eye-bulging when I mention the work I did in this area. But then I love information sharing, and it's great to see people's surprise when exposed to a little de-mystification on the topic.

### *What are the best things about having this as your specialty?*

The depth and breadth of what can be explored; "esotericism" covers quite a bit of ground through time, geographical locations, and major areas of study. One could study topics as diverse as Japanese komuso monks and the spies that impersonated them, the symbolism of devotional art in Catholic cults of saints, the sociological differences between urban vs. rural curandero practices, and the renaissance uses and political implications of astrology in European courts. Really, there is so much academic opportunity, here.

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# Call for Papers: *ASE* 2018

## *Eros, Sexuality, and Embodiment in Esoteric Traditions*

***The Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE) is seeking paper and panel proposals for its seventh International North American Conference on Esotericism to be held at Rice University, in Houston, Texas, May 24-27, 2018.***

We are seeking proposals for papers exploring the theme "Eros, Sexuality, and Embodiment in Esoteric Traditions." Esoteric writings offer a range of possibilities for investigating both literal and figurative erotic and sexual configurations, from the allegorical couplings of alchemy, to the practices of Valentinian Gnosticism, to descriptions of angelic sex in Ida Craddock. Connectedly, esoteric thinkers have described numerous unusual ways to embodiment, from phenomena of divine possession, to the making of magical children, to golems and animated statues.

We are also interested in papers on Western esoteric practices, including theories, representations and methods of practice viewed from cultural, practical, religious and aesthetic fields of inquiry. We encourage papers that address the conference theme in terms of diverse types of

representation, including arts and literature, as well as methods that reflect specific theories of esotericism, either historically or in a contemporary context. We invite proposals on magic, alchemy, astrology, ritual practice, mysticism, spiritualism, occultism, hermeticism, neo-paganism, contemporary esoteric movements and teachers, Asian influences on Western traditions, and other relevant topics. We are interested in panels specifically on mysticism, contemplative practice, and other topics related to the conference theme. ASE regards esotericism as an interdisciplinary field of research and we invite scholars from all disciplines to share their research and writings in support of a cross-fertilization of perspectives.

Our deadline for panel or paper proposal submission is December 15th, 2017.

If you wish to submit a paper proposal or a thematically focused panel proposal (with three presenters and short descriptions included) for review and possible presentation at the conference, please send it by email to [ASEconference@rice.edu](mailto:ASEconference@rice.edu)

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# Call for Papers: "Women and Esotericism"

*University of California at Davis, October 18-21, 2018*

The contribution of women to Western Esotericism has been underexplored and remains marginal within the wider field of the study of Western Esotericism. This conference seeks to redress this with a specific focus on the contributions of women to Western Esotericism and an exploration of ways in which we can work to make women's roles in Western Esotericism a more central part of the common historical and cultural narratives in the field.

Papers are invited on any aspect of women in the history and practice of Western Esotericism from any period, from the ancient world to the present. We welcome biographical studies and wider theoretical pieces, especially reconsiderations of broad periods or themes

within the study of Western Esotericism that reevaluate the participation or impact of women. We would also be interested in broader considerations of gender in the history and study of Western Esotericism. Especially welcome would be papers addressing issues of diversity and the intersections of Western esotericism with African, Latin and Asian diaspora cultures.

All papers accepted will be under consideration for publication in a collection on Women in Western Esotericism currently under discussion for Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism with Oxford University Press.

Please submit abstracts to [apcoudert@ucdavis.edu](mailto:apcoudert@ucdavis.edu) by June 15, 2018.

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## Useful Websites:

### *The Religious Studies Project*

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/>

This site has been producing regular podcasts with well-known, and lesser-known, scholars for a couple of years. The interview style is scholarly, yet casual. Additional information on the site includes some thoughtful blogposts in response to the interviews (many of which are commentaries by other scholars and researchers). Information is also available on upcoming conferences, as well as news of job opportunities.

**Pros:** Wide range of subjects—including esotericism—and some well-known academicians.

**Cons:** Occasional difficulties connecting with site. Note: many episodes are also available on Youtube, as well as some podcast applications.

### *The Pew Research Center ("Religion" tab)*

<http://www.pewforum.org/>

This site is full of topical information derived from polling data. Funded by the Pew Trust, they are a non-partisan think tank that provides social science-related information, demographics, and other polling data.

**Pros:** The site does not endorse particular positions. For each study there is an article that highlights the collected data, and a (free) downloadable pdf of the complete study.

**Cons:** More of a simple observation than a shortcoming, the site tends toward a sociological context for its religion studies.

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