

The Newsletter of the
European Society for
the Study of Western
Esotericism

ESSWE Newsletter

Summer & Winter 2019
Volume 10, Number 1-2

Words from the Editor

– *Chris Giudice*



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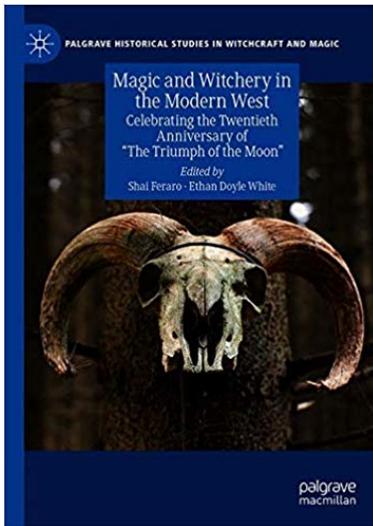
Welcome to the new issue of the ESSWE newsletter: this particular edition features coverage of two conferences, which took place in 2019. The first one, the 7th Biannual ESSWE Conference, was organized in Amsterdam in early July, while the second one, Trans-States: the Art of Revelation, was organized at the University of Northampton, and presented a successful mix of academic presentation and, performances and occult art exhibitions. The interviews, this time round, will be slightly different, with one of the two focusing on Wouter Hanegraaff and the 20th anniversary of the Center for Hermetic Studies and Related Currents.

The member's book showcase, in this issue, occupies more than the usual single page, a clear sign that the field of Western esotericism is expanding, and that more academic publishers are deciding to invest on a topic, which had previously been met by some reticence. More publications in the field also indicate a growing number of scholars devoting their research to the subjects, which can be found under the wide umbrella of the term Western esotericism. This can also be appreciated by the many upcoming conferences and call for papers devoted to the most disparate themes, the upcoming ASE conference being the highlight of 2020.♦

New publications by ESSWE members

Shai Feraro & Ethan Doyle White (Eds.)

Magic and Witchery in the Modern West Celebrating the Twentieth Anniversary of 'The Triumph of the Moon', Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic (London: Routledge, 2019)



This book marks twenty years since the publication of Professor Ronald Hutton's *The Triumph of the Moon*, a major contribution to the historical study of Wicca. Building on and celebrating Hutton's pioneering work, the chapters in this volume explore a range of modern magical, occult, and Pagan groups active in Western nations. Each contributor is a specialist in the study of modern Paganism and occultism, although differ

in their embrace of historical, anthropological, and psychological perspectives. Chapters examine not only the history of Wicca, the largest and best-known form of modern Paganism, but also modern Pagan environmentalist and anti-nuclear activism, the Pagan interpretation of fairy folklore, and the contemporary 'Traditional Witchcraft' phenomenon. ♦

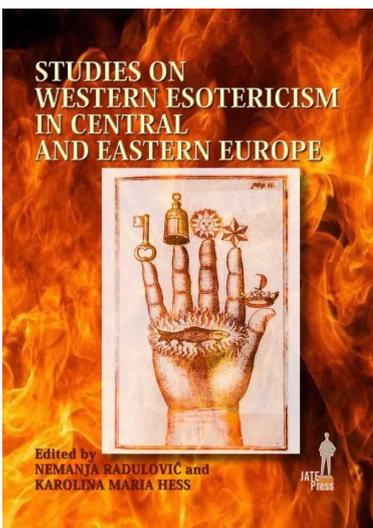
Nemanja Radulović and Karolina Hess (Eds.)

Studies in Western Esotericism in Central and Eastern Europe (Szeged: JATE Press, 2019)

The chapters of the monograph are, in most cases, the papers given at the founding meeting of the Central and Eastern European Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism that took

place at CEU, Budapest in 2014. Since then the network has operated within the ESSWE framework (with two other conferences held in Belgrade, 2016 and Szeged, 2018). Extended and revised, the papers have been published by the JATE Press as the first volume of the series in

Cultural Iconology, edited by G. Szönyi. The volume is not monothematic since the contributors aimed at presenting a wide



scope of esotericism in the region, from the early modern to the contemporary period, including new religious and magical movements, intellectual history, ethnology, literature and arts: witchcraft in the work of the humanist poet Conrad Celtis, Maria de Nagłowska in the context of Russian immigration, Theosophical and anthroposophical influence on the turn-of-the-century Greek art, national messianism in Polish Theosophy, a case study of a Polish 20th century visionary, the esoteric philosophy of the Hungarian author Bela Hamvas, occult themes in the contemporary art of South-East Europe, two papers on the contemporary Serbian scene (magic healing and Neoshamanism), and finally some papers about not specifically eastern European topics (Freemasonry and Kabbalah). ♦

Manon Hedenborg White

The Eloquent Blood: The Goddess Babalon and the Construction of Femininities in Western Esotericism, Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019)

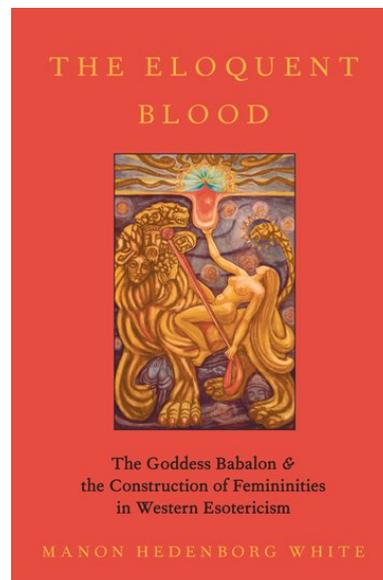
In the conventional dichotomy of chaste, pure Madonna and libidinous whore, the former has usually been viewed as the ideal form of femininity.

However, there is a modern religious movement in which the negative stereotype of the harlot is inverted and exalted. *The Eloquent Blood* focuses on the changing construction of femininity and feminine sexuality in interpretations of the goddess Babalon. A central deity in Thelema, the religion founded by the notorious British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875-1947), Babalon is based on Crowley's favorable reinterpretation of the biblical Whore of Babylon, and is associated with

liberated female sexuality and the spiritual ideal of passionate union with existence.

Analyzing historical and contemporary written sources, qualitative interviews, and ethnographic fieldwork in the Anglo-American esoteric milieu, the study traces interpretations of Babalon from the works of Crowley and some of his key disciples—including the rocket scientist John "Jack" Whiteside Parsons, and the enigmatic British occultist Kenneth Grant—until the present. From the 1990s onwards, this study shows, female and LGBTQ esotericists have challenged historical interpretations of Babalon, drawing on feminist and queer thought and conceptualizing femininity in new ways.

Tracing the trajectory of a particular gendered symbol from the fin-de-siècle until today, Manon Hedenborg White explores the changing role of women in Western esotericism, and shows how evolving constructions of gender have shaped the development of esotericism. Combining research on historical and contemporary

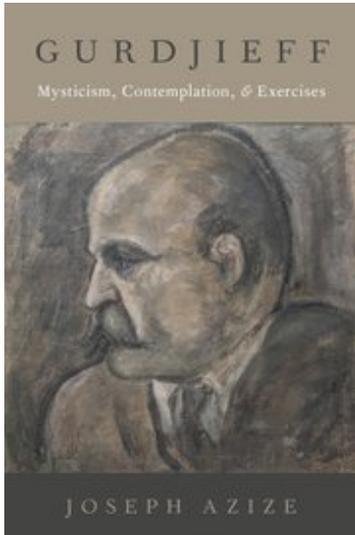


Western esotericism with feminist and queer theory, the book sheds new light on the ways in which esoteric movements and systems of thought have developed over time in relation to political movements. ♦

Josef Azize

Gurdjieff: Mysticism, Contemplation, and Exercises, Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019)

The Armenian-born mystic, philosopher, and spiritual teacher G.



I. Gurdjieff (c.1866-1949) is an enigmatic figure, the subject of a great deal of interest and speculation, but not easily fitting into any of the common categories of "esoteric," "occult," or "New Age." Scholars have for the most part passed over in silence the contemplative exercises presented in Gurdjieff's writings. Although Gurdjieff had intended them to be confidential, some of the most important exercises were published posthumously in 1950 and in 1975.

Arguing that an understanding of these exercises is necessary

to fully appreciate Gurdjieff's contribution to modern esotericism, Joseph Azize offers the first complete study of the exercises and their theoretical foundation. It shows the continuity in Gurdjieff's teaching, but also the development and change. His original contribution to Western Esotericism lay in his use of tasks, disciplines, and contemplation-like exercises to bring his pupils to a sense of their own presence which could to some extent be maintained in daily life in the social domain, and not only in the secluded conditions typical of meditation. Azize contends that Gurdjieff had initially intended not to use contemplation-like exercises, as he perceived dangers to be associated with these monastic methods, and the religious tradition to be in tension with the secular and supra-denominational guise in which he first couched his teaching. As Gurdjieff adapted the teaching he had found in Eastern monasteries to Western urban and post-religious culture, however, he found it necessary to introduce contemplation. ♦

Claudio Bonvecchio, Christian Giudice, Michele Olzi, Roberto Revello (Eds.)

La Rosa di Paracelso I:3 (Milano: Edizioni Mimesis, 2018)

The idea of gnosis and Gnosticism in authors of Western esotericism and Occultism and New Religious Movements in the XIX-XX-XXI centuries. Studies on the dynamics of Neo-gnostic groups or Neo-gnostic Churches (Église Gnostique, Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica, Ecclesia Gnostica Aeterna etc). Interactions between the arts and Occultism, Western esotericism and New Religious Movements, through cultural and sociological themes, references and mentions to gnosis (the Matrix Trilogy, Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian, Philip K. Dick's VALIS trilogy).

Gnosis and Gender in modern and contemporary Occultism and New Religious Movements. Detailed studies, historical/religious or historical/philosophical on the sexual aspect of gnosis, with particular attention to Gnostic and neo-Gnostic movements.

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Readings: Lorenzo Di Chiara, Review of *G. Meyrink, Alle frontiere dell'occulto – Scritti esoterici (1907-1952)*. ♦

Marco Respindi (Ed.)

The Journal of Cesnur III:6 (Nov.-Dec. 2019)



CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, was founded in 1988. In thirty years of activity, more than 1,000 scholarly papers have been presented at its international conferences and seminars.

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Tantric Traditions in the Spiritual Teaching of Guru Jára Pavel Hlavinka. ♦

Scholar Interviews

- *Chris Giudice*

In every issue of the *Newsletter* one junior and one senior scholar of Western esotericism are interviewed. Because of the 20th anniversary of the creation of the Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (HHP), I had the pleasure of interviewing Professor Wouter Hanegraaff.

Professor Wouter Hanegraaff, Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Can you talk about the founding of the Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam? What had you been working on before 1999 and what were the factors that brought about the creation of the Center?



Without any doubt, the Number One factor that made HHP possible was an individual person, Rosalie Basten. In 1997 she came up with the idea that a chair for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents should be create, and moreover, she had the financial means to make it possible. You can read the

whole story in our 10-year anniversary volume *Hermes in the Academy* (2009), which can be downloaded for free from our website www.amsterdamhermetica.nl Rosalie does not like to be in the spotlight, so many younger members of our Society may not even know who she is; but it is only fair to say that without her, most of us in the study of esotericism would almost certainly not be doing what we are doing today. Over the years, quite a number of scholars of all generations have had the privilege of participating in small scholarly meetings that she organized at her beautiful residence in southern France; and it is here that one of those groups decided to create the ESSWE in 2005. At the occasion of the 7th ESSWE conference in Amsterdam and the 20-year anniversary of HHP, I think this is the best possible moment to mention the enormous debt of gratitude that we all owe her.

Of course Rosalie Basten did not do it all just by herself. She was fortunate to find a group of enthusiastic professionals who understood her vision and were willing to collaborate with her to make it a reality. Here I need to mention the original members, next to Rosalie, of the board of the Foundation for the chair History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents: the solicitor and first chair of the Foundation Mr Willem Koudijs, the Treasurer Frans Tilman, the then President of the University of Amsterdam Sybolt Noorda, and the historian of Gnosticism and Hermetism Prof. Roelof van den Broek. In addition to these founding members, I should mention of the then Dean of the Faculty of Humanities Prof. Karel van der Toorn, who has been extremely supportive from the very beginning and up to the present (first as Dean, then as President of the University of Amsterdam, and finally as member of the board of the Foundation). Finally, this overview would not be complete without mentioning the name of Anne-Marie Nuss, who has been secretary of the board for the entire duration of its existence.

As for my own role, what can I say? I had finished my dissertation about the New Age movement in 1995, and had given much attention to the roots of New Age in Western esotericism. After that I got a postdoctoral position and was living in Paris while

working on a project about magic. It's impossible to say how my life and my career would have developed if Rosalie had not appeared on the scene in 1997. All I can say is that she did, and the rest is history. As she likes to say, by creating this chair she threw a small pebble in a large pond, and the ripples have kept extending ever since. I experienced it as a great privilege to be elected to the chair in 1999, but obviously it implied a heavy responsibility too, because I knew very well that it was up to me now to prove that the donation was well spent and this new field of study really did have potential. I was very much aware of how unique this opportunity was, so I can honestly say that I have been working like crazy to make good on the trust that was placed in me. Publishing the large *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* in 2005 felt like a milestone, because it established beyond further doubt that there *was* indeed such a field as "Western esotericism" and what it looked like – or at least, how we were looking at it at the time. Perhaps it's no coincidence that the ESSWE was founded that very same year – we were really riding a wave of great enthusiasm.

Within the field of Esotericism, the late Nineties were characterized by Antoine Faivre's seminal work Access to Western Esotericism and Professor Faivre's definition of Western esotericism as a form of thought. During the last twenty years, your theory viewing esotericism as 'the biggest blank spaces of neglected territories in the study of religion', as you put it, has gained more and more credit. Do you see novel ways of dealing with the vexata quaestio of defining esotericism today, in 2019?

Yes, Antoine Faivre's name must definitely be added to the list of crucial figures who were responsible for getting our program going. Of course, as holder of the only existing academic chair for esotericism (at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*, Sorbonne, Paris) and author of a great number of books and other publications, he was unquestionably the central scholar in the field of Western esotericism. His great intellectual authority has been very important in convincing scholars and university administrators about the validity and importance of the new program. Antoine and I met at a conference in 1992 and we got along very well from the very beginning. What I liked most about him was his great curiosity and intellectual openness, and his insistence on the value of critical debate. With Antoine it was never about ego, vanity, or power but always about honest discussion grounded in respect for power of arguments and

evidence. He vigorously defended his famous definition of esotericism as a form of thought characterized by four intrinsic characteristics; but if you disagreed with his position, he never made that personal. That's how it should be. Eventually, my own thinking led me into other directions that I was finally able to formulate in terms of "esotericism" as Western culture's accumulated treasury of discredited or rejected knowledge. Of course it's quite satisfying for me to see that this approach has had an impact (I must admit that while writing my 2012 book, I had my moments of wondering "what if nobody is interested?"); but I'm the kind of scholar who takes a greater interest in new ideas than in repeating old ones, so I'm basically just curious to see into what directions we'll be moving next. As for *definitions* of "esotericism," to be perfectly honest, I'm no longer so terribly interested in the question. To get the field established, we needed to be able to explain what we were talking about and why we considered it important. By now, we seem to have reached a point where the existence of the field and its relevance are widely taken for granted; and if outsiders still question its validity, we can direct them to lots of solid studies that are likely to make them change their views. In a way, this general development is captured by the titles of the two anniversary volumes we have published. The first one was called *Hermes in the Academy*, for in 2009 we were basically celebrating the fact that we had managed to arrive at all. The second volume that just got published is called *Hermes Explains*, for although we have arrived now, it's clear that we still have a lot of explaining to do. Of course the question of definition will keep coming up, and that's fine. But if you look for instance at the general study of religion, you see that debates over definition never end, but in the meantime a field can flourish while its scholars still quibble about what it's really all about. So I don't worry too much on that count.

Could you describe the evolution of the ideas championed by the Center in the twenty years since its inception? How important has the Amsterdam hub been in dispelling the previously established ideas of esotericism and occultism as 'the metaphysics of dunces' (Adorno) or as a 'collection of toxic irrationalist philosophies' (Webb)?

I think we're moving along nicely with the general waves of development in intellectual culture and academic debate. New challenges keep coming up as new questions come to the fore. When we started out, it seemed most important to focus on the difference between "empirical/historical" approaches and the

“religionist” perspective that was still quite dominant at that time, because they led to very different understandings of what esotericism was all about. Those perspectives associated with the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory seemed somewhat less pressing at the time, at least to me, because the whole point was that *we* were determined to take esotericism seriously as a historical and social phenomenon instead of dismissing it out of hand as a metaphysics of dunces or toxic irrationalities. It seems to me that much of our work over the last twenty years has had to do with revising outdated concepts of modernization or secularization such as those that were still very much taken for granted by authors like Lukacs, Adorno, or Horkheimer. To be perfectly honest, I could never bring myself to take those approaches associated with Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School as seriously as some others did, for two reasons. Firstly, it was perfectly evident that its adherents would push their own ideologies no matter what, and were quite willing to distort or ignore inconvenient evidence to suit their own agendas. I have little sympathy for dogmatism, ideologies, and orthodoxies, and so that attitude didn’t sit well with me. Secondly, if an author writes ugly and incomprehensible prose instead of making an effort to communicate with his readers and make himself understood, then why should I waste my time trying to decipher his writings? My default assumption is that such authors are either just trying to play some power game of intimidating their readers (“Look, I’m too smart for you to understand me”) or aren’t very clear themselves about what they really want to say but are trying to hide that fact behind obscure language. To mention the most obvious example, in my opinion Adorno’s famous “Theses against Occultism” (the topic of an excellent discussion by Andreas Kilcher in our anniversary volume) are little more than an arrogant and mediocre rant that hardly deserves its reputation. Rather than polemicizing directly against ideologues and other true believers, it has always seemed more useful to me to simply do our work as scholars and demonstrate through evidence and arguments what esotericism is really all about.

The concept of esotericism as Western has been a staple in the approach to the field in the past twenty to thirty years. Do you feel that the Center has contributed to a more nuanced approach to the currents that form the esoteric traditions outside of the Western canon? Can the term Western, in 2019, be dropped altogether, or does it still retain some validity and usefulness?

It’s difficult to answer that question without launching into a long scholarly argument for which an interview like this might not be

the best place. A technical question concerns the question of definition: what exactly is meant by “esoteric traditions outside the Western canon”? Here definition *is* important, because it’s about changing our current understanding of the field. Esoteric in what sense? In the sense of “secrecy and concealment”? In the sense of a Faivrean “form of thought”? In the sense of some other definition? If so, which one? In the proposals that I have seen so far, these questions of definition and demarcation seem to be mostly ignored; but if we cannot answer them, we simply do not know what we are talking about and what a non-Western “esotericism” is supposed to mean. Moreover, we’ll easily fall into the trap of a terminological imperialism or colonialism and end up imposing “our” pet concept of esotericism on the rest of the world. I don’t see what good purpose that would serve. So that’s a first point.

A second point has to do with our deeper motivations for questioning the “Western” adjective. As far as I can see, these have to do with a general intellectual trend of deconstructing the old-fashioned grand narratives of “Western culture” or “Western civilization” and their arrogant claims of superiority over other cultures or societies. I fully agree with those critiques (after all, my *Esotericism and the Academy* can be read as one big exposure of how the self-appointed ideologues of “Western culture” constructed their own grand narratives of superiority by rejecting, marginalizing, or ridiculing everything that we nowadays study under the label of “esotericism”), but they do not lead me to reject the adjective “Western,” on the contrary. In my opinion, now that we have deconstructed those old triumphalist narratives, I think it is time to start *building* again. That is to say, we need to start *reconstructing* “Western culture” on new and better foundations that “reject the previous rejection of rejected knowledge.” In other words, I’m convinced that we need a new grand narrative of “Western culture” that *includes* and *accepts* all those dimensions that used to be “othered,” discredited and rejected, and *integrates* them as legitimate and vital parts of what “the West” is really all about. Such a new narrative will include and integrate not only all the different forms of esotericism in Western Christianity, but also such enormous areas as Jewish, Islamic, or Byzantine culture, including of course their “esoteric” dimensions. Moreover, it will have to include and fully integrate the stories of traditionally marginalized groups such as women, non-dominant sexualities, or different races and ethnicities. This is obviously an enormous project, but I am convinced that it’s important to move beyond the negative enterprise of deconstructing “the West.” I hope we will

start building a positive new narrative of what “Western culture” is *really* all about, demonstrating its factual and intellectual superiority over the narrow Christianity- / Protestantism- / Enlightenment-centered and colonialist narratives that we know are no longer credible. I see no reason at all why such a new grand narrative of Western culture should imply claims of Western superiority over other great cultures of the world. On the contrary, it should pay thorough attention to the tragedies and horrors of suppression and the exclusion of “others” that are so evident throughout the history of the West; but on the other hand, it should pay equal attention to the great splendours and beauties of Western culture of which we have reason to be very proud. So in sum, the true history of Western culture as I see it will be a story of light and darkness, beauty and horror, glory and tragedy. In any case, it will be based on the re-inclusion of everything that used to be rejected and excluded.

The seventh ESSWE conference has marked an important milestone in the history of the Center in Amsterdam. What are other defining events that have contributed to the rich history of the Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents? What lies in the future of the Amsterdam hub of Western esotericism and what are your personal upcoming plans?

I think the most important milestones have already been mentioned. To be honest, ultimately the work of a center and program such as ours consists not primarily in eye-catching

milestones or highlights, but rather in the patient and not terribly spectacular day-to-day work of teaching, studying, and publishing. More important than anything else (and a source of enormous satisfaction for my colleagues and me) is that over the past twenty years we have been able to groom several new generations of young scholars, many of whom are now carrying the torch forward in academia and are taking our field into ever-new directions – some of which I could never have imagined when we started in the 1990s. I’ve always said that the greatest success we could possibly wish for would be to reach a point where our presence will no longer be indispensable, because our work will be carried on anyway in many places elsewhere. Because that’s the point: it’s not about us, it’s about the field. As for the “Amsterdam hub,” we are presently in the midst of an intense process of restructuring our general programs in the study of religion, which I hope will lead to a new and improved context for carrying out our work from 2020 on; but at present it’s just a bit early to say how exactly that will all work out. As for my own plans, at this moment I am working on a book about the Hermetica and their reception history from late antiquity to the present. In tone and approach it will be rather different from my previous books, and I’ll be advocating a new and very different approach to the topic. I think (and hope) that it will surprise some readers, so I’d rather not say too much about it for now... After I finish that one, my dream is to write a book for the general market that presents a positive and inspirational new narrative of Western culture along the lines I was referring to earlier in this interview. Wish me luck...! ♦

Keith Cantù, PhD Student, Department of Religious Studies, UC Santa Barbara, United States

How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

I was born into a Christian family. My dad was a pastor who worked as a Southern Baptist pastor before becoming disillusioned with the denomination's perceived lack of acceptance of the charismatic "gifts of the Holy Spirit," and he left to start his own small non-denominational church. My mother was also sympathetic to these ideas. As a result, I was brought up believing that angels, demons,

spirits, and divine power were completely and externally real. One day I even looked out the window out the school bus and wondered if it was possible to leave one's body and fly to other realms. I subsequently typed into Lycos something like "how to fly outside the body" and encountered a web of early 2000s metaphysical message boards that dealt with astral projection, cakras, Theosophy, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Franz Bardon, Aleister Crowley, and the Book of Abramelin. I had likewise always been interested in the obscure passages of the Bible that dealt with

mystical visions such as Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation, but after my father suddenly died when I was 15 years old this interest reached a fever pitch, and I began to also explore medieval grimoires. Although I temporarily set these interests aside in my undergraduate to pursue an interest in tantra and psychedelia as mediated by the works of John Woodroffe, my interest in graduate school was rekindled as I started to realize all the unexplored historical connections between these topics and Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic mystical literature, especially as these threads converged in the nineteenth century.

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



I would have to say that this memory happened fairly recently, at the University of Vienna last November at the Occult South Asia workshop. After presenting I was standing outside the conference hall enjoying a bidi or Indian cigarillo, and a burly man next to me was smoking a cigar. He looked at me very seriously, and simply said something like, "So it is interesting that Aleister Crowley never read the works of John Woodroffe, isn't it. Not even to criticize him." This stuck with me as a perfect anecdote to show that rigorous historical research can help sort out the nuances of what Karl Baier has called "intercultural transfers," in this case a distinction between the literary legacies of Crowley and Woodroffe, the latter of whom Julian Strube has been expertly researching in connection with Bengali Tantra and Western esotericism. The nights out in Vienna with many of the conference participants were, of course, also quite memorable to say the least.

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?

Some of my main interests include tantra, yoga, and alchemy in South Asia. My training for two MA degrees was in Bengali and Sanskrit, and since starting the PhD at UCSB I have pursued Tamil for dissertation research. While co-editing the volume of translations of Baul Fakiri songs by Carol Salomon entitled 'City of Mirrors: Songs of Lālan Sāi', I especially became aware of the rich application of music to esoteric hermeneutics in South Asia. As a result of this strong South Asia focus, sometimes I feel like a fish out of water in Western esotericism, but I am grateful to the efforts of Karl Baier and Mriganka Mukhopadhyay toward the Occult South Asia Network (OSAN) as well as Mark Sedgwick and Liana Saif toward the European Network for the Study of Islam and Esotericism (ENSIE), both of which invite cutting-edge research into historical and religious topics that clearly also inform the discourses of what constitutes Western esotericism, or even esotericism more generally.

What are the worst things about having this as your speciality?

I would say that the worst thing hands down is having to continually justify the social applicability of my research, especially in the context of academia in the United States. I think that whereas in many other established fields such as Classics, Comparative Literature, or even Linguistics the social dimensions of research are taken as a given within the delineated sphere of the field, in U.S. academia I feel that there is still a deep-seated and unhealthy fear of "going too deep in the woods," that is, a fear of simply accepting the obscurity of esoteric knowledge for what it is, despite its "rejected" nature, to borrow a page from Wouter Hanegraaff. This attitude is ironic since I have found in my experience that esoteric groups are often the most hypersensitive to changes in culture due to their need to survive on the margins, as evidenced for example by the pervasive spread of "occulture" in popular culture. If one digs deeper there is always a social, political, or economic argument to be made about such groups, and to be honest I think that cultural critiques in Europe are currently much more nuanced in their willingness to take the presence of such groups, often highly complex in their cultural formation, seriously.

What are the best things about having this as your speciality?

Honestly, I find that the people in this field are so incredibly amazing and supportive, and the general quirkiness is charming. In contrast to the personal tensions that I have seen arise in a field like,

say, Yoga Studies (although it fortunately seems to be getting better these days), I have found that the people deeply involved in Western esotericism have largely been able to transcend personal differences and academic affiliation in order to make meaningful, professional, and prolific (!) contributions to scholarship that continues to drive

research forward. I have further been honored to share meals and drinks late into the night with some brilliant theorists and historians, and the set and setting of many of the conferences in European towns that still reverberate with echoes of medieval life simply cannot be beat. ♦

New ESSWE Sub-Networks

Occult South Asia Network

During the 7th Biennial conference of the ESSWE (Amsterdam, 2019), the Occult South Asia Network (OSAN) was admitted as a thematic network within the ESSWE. The goals and rationale of this new network are as following:

In the academic study of esotericism and occultism, the theme “India” has remained a strong undercurrent since the early days. There have been discussions around the concept of the “Mystic East” or “the Magic East” and its influence towards Western esotericism from the very beginning. In recent times approaches that emphasise the interaction of South Asian and foreign occult cultures in colonial and postcolonial times are of increased importance. This network aims to contribute to a critical and nuanced understanding of:

1. Occult and esoteric currents and their practitioners in modern South Asia
2. The impact of South Asian ideas and practices on modern esoteric and occult currents on the global stage.
3. South Asia will thus be viewed as a theme as well as a site for the study of esotericism and occultism.

This network aims to provide a platform to the researchers interested in the mutual interaction and influences between the Western esoteric currents and Indian spirituality mainly in the modern times. The first endeavour on this direction was taken through the Occult South Asia workshop held at Vienna (November 2018), which marked the beginning of the book project on the same subject. During the ESSWE conference, OSAN organised two panels on Psychedelic South Asia. Besides, it also held a network meeting, which was attended by several members of the newly born network. As of today, OSAN has a mailing list, which already has 45 subscribers. It has also started a group blog (<https://occultsouthasia.wixsite.com/osangroupblog>) and a Facebook group (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/202460763972052/>) to provide online discussion fora to the OSAN members. The OSAN strives to continue through the various initiatives which will be conducted during the ESSWE7 conference. All the projects of the OSAN, taken together, contribute to the newly emerging field of Occult South Asian studies. The following scholars are involved in the ESSWE thematic network:

Network Conveners:

Karl Baier, University of Vienna

Mriganka Mukhopadhyay, University of Amsterdam

Network Members:

1. Henrik Bogdan, University of Gothenburg
2. Keith Cantu, University of California, Santa Barbara
3. Julie Chajes, Tel Aviv University
4. Matthew Clarke, SOAS University of London
5. Gordan Djurdjevic, Independent scholar
6. Mariano Errichiello, SOAS University of London
7. Magdalena Kraller, University of Vienna
8. Tim Rudbøg, University of Copenhagen
9. Julian Strube, University of Heidelberg/University of Munster
10. Marleen Thaler, University of Vienna. ♦

Esotericism, Gender, and Sexuality Network

The Esotericism, Gender, and Sexuality Network (EsoGen) is a thematic ESSWE network that aims to foster dialogue on the role of gender and sexuality in Western esotericism. From antiquity to the present, esoteric ideas have been used both to reaffirm and challenge traditional binaries of sex and gender. For instance, around the *fin-de-siècle*, many leading feminists were involved in esoteric movements such as Theosophy and Spiritualism. At the same time, several influential esoteric thinkers espoused hierarchical and complementary gender roles and opposed women’s emancipation. Thus, the history of Western esotericism overlaps continually with that of feminism (and opposition to feminism), eugenics, sexology, free love, celibacy, gay and lesbian liberation, polyamory, gender non-conformity, and other such currents. Despite these convergences, gender and sexuality have only recently emerged as key analytical categories within the field, and many of their implications for esotericism are yet to be explored and theorized. Since 2000, important initiatives in this direction have been forged by researchers both within and beyond esotericism studies, including scholars of religion, cultural studies, literature, art history, critical gender, sexuality, and queer theory. As of yet, however, scholars have lacked a platform through which to exchange their ideas and share their findings across disciplinary lines. EsoGen will provide a vital forum for such exchange, and will aim to host conference sessions, workshops, and conferences as well as promote high-quality publications and funding bids relevant to the study of esotericism, gender, and sexuality. Network chairs: Christine Ferguson (University of Stirling) and Manon Hedenborg White (Södertörn University). ♦

Conference Reports

Trans-States: The Art of Revelation

13-14 September 2019, Northampton University, UK

- *Cavan McLaughlin*

By popular demand, the Trans- States conference returned on Friday 13th September 2019 with its second instalment: The Art of Revelation. Still proudly affiliated with ESSWE, the conference sought not simply to replicate the successes of the first but to progress and improve. For example, the associated conference exhibition, under the skilled curation of Elizabeth Palmer, and the new spaces and conference layout within the Creative Hub on The University of Northampton's brand new campus were particularly noteworthy improvements, which garnered much praise.



In keeping with the transdisciplinary blended-content Trans- States is known for, the proceedings were opened with an entrancing Butoh performance from Alkistis Dimech and a stunning theurgic musical recital by Randall Hall. This bridged perfectly into the opening keynote by Wouter Hanegraaff on 'Musical Esotericism and Consciousness Change'. From then, the packed programme ran parallel sessions featuring artists, esoteric practitioners and scholars performing and presenting on topics as wide and varied as: psychedelics; psychoanalysis; occulture; storytelling and poetry; and, of course, esoteric art. The first day culminated with a second keynote address: an exclusive one-woman show from writer, actor and director artist, Daisy Campbell.



On day two the parallel sessions continued, examining: magic and radical politics; technologies of revelation; and, transformative and performative practice. Finally, the cohort reconvened for closing plenary sessions. Cavan McLaughlin chaired a discussion panel entitled 'The Lightning-Struck Ivory Tower', which developed into a lively open forum probing the legitimacy of enchantment, esotericism and embodied wonder in the academy. The conference closed with its third and final keynote, from Jeffery Kripal, 'The Flip: Recalibrating the Humanities and the Sciences around Extraordinary Experience'; a very worthy and engaging finale. Unquestionably successful once again, Trans- States: The Art of Revelation managed to offer a mix of high-quality scholarship, truly affective performance and multimedia art, and a space for experimentation and innovative approaches to the subject matter. The conference organisers have confirmed that Trans- States will continue as a regular conference series. Details of the next conference will be first announced at www.trans-states.org. ♦



The 7th International ESSWE Conference:

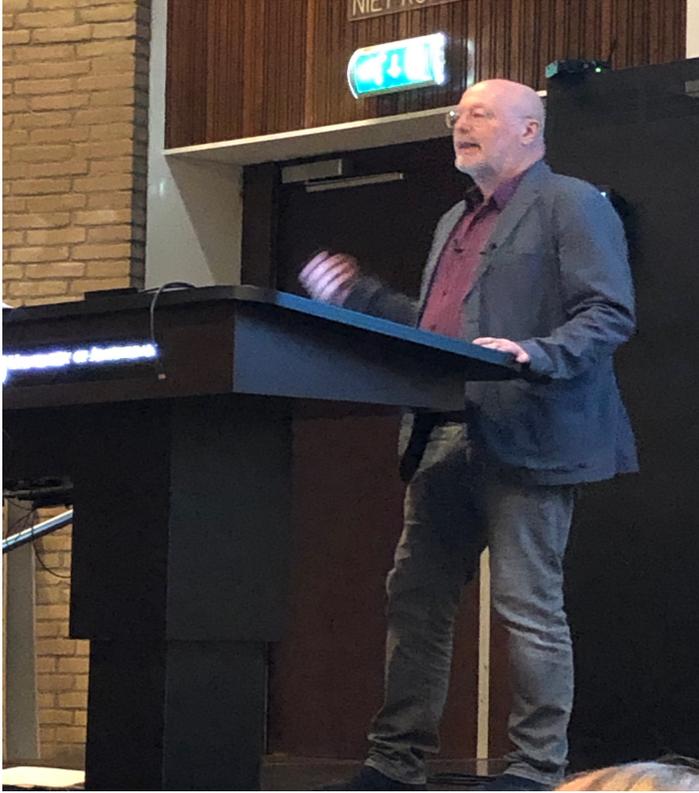
**Western Esotericism and Consciousness -
Visions, Voices, Altered States, 2-4 July 2019,**

University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

- *Christian Giudice and Michele Olzi*

During the three days spanning from the 2nd to the 4th of July, the 7th International Conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism took place at the University of Amsterdam. The broad theme of the biannual meeting was focused on Western esotericism and consciousness, the intent being that of exploring 'unusual and sometimes spectacular experiences that are claimed to convey higher, deeper, or even absolute knowledge about the true nature of reality. The sheer amount of papers presented during the three days was impressive and proved the interdisciplinary direction in which the research on subjects relating to Western esotericism is moving: from panels dedicated to entheogen studies to the discussion of the idea of consciousness in Film and Media, to vital and captivating forays into the world of late antiquity, the scholarly study of Western esotericism seems to have slowly, but steadily, expanded into a vast number of different disciplines, providing a variety of focus never experienced before. The perfect start to the

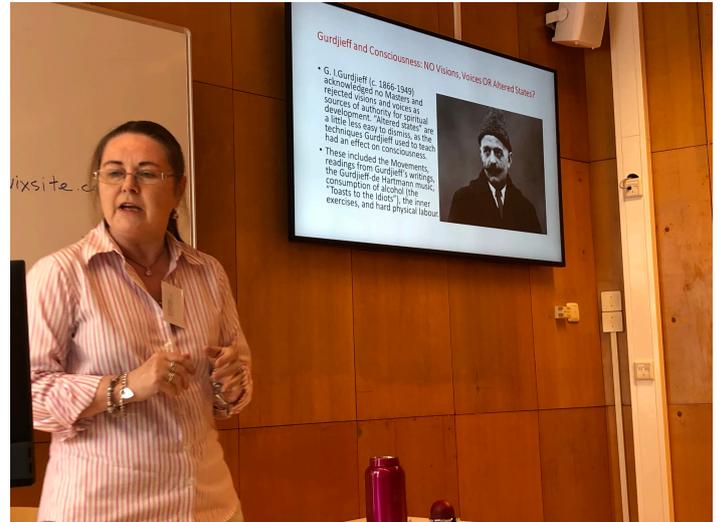
conference was provided by Professor Sonu Shamdasani: known for having edited the first edition of Carl Jung's *The Red Book*, Shamdasani's lecture was a perfect introduction to the intricate theme of the relationship between the idea of consciousness and the history of philosophy. A philosophical and intellectual framework was thus provided to the over 100 attendees of the conference that would provide useful in deciphering the role played by consciousness in the individual presentation sessions.



The second keynote dealt with a theme dear to the heart of this newsletter's editor, that of Western esoteric thought in antiquity: a lot has been done already, by networks such as The Network for the Study of Esotericism in Antiquity (NSEA), but having a keynote lecturer of the status of Yulia Ustinova provide her insight into the role of esoteric thought in antiquity was a treat: her talk 'Esoteric Wisdom in Ancient Greece' provided the audience with a veritable tour de force on the topic of altered states of consciousness and communication with the divine in Ancient Greek culture. From the oracular forms of *ekstasis* to the more domestic ways of interaction with the divine, from the accounts of Plato and Socrates to the mystery traditions, Professor Ustinova was able to concentrate over 500 years of interaction between the Greek man and the divine in a succinct, yet powerful way. The final keynote, delivered on the last day of the conference, was a selection of Professor Karl Baier's most recent findings in his research on Albert Hofmann, the use of psychedelics from the 1950s to the 1970s and his ties with esoterically inclined *sodales* and members of the German Conservative Revolution. The tie between the psychedelic culture, a right-wing Traditionalist background, and Eliade's religionist approach to religion were the main themes of the talk, which we feel will represent a milestone in the history of Western esoteric research, once published.

The over 100 papers presented during the three days really offered some interesting foray into altered states of consciousness for every taste: papers on 60s, 70s and 80s counterculture were especially enjoyable, such as those by scholar Christian Greer on the Lunatic Fringe of 1980s esotericism, or Nicholas Collins' and Luke Walker's takes on Allen Ginsberg and the esoteric; the

'heavy-weights' of 20th century occult thought, Aleister Crowley and G.I. Gurdjieff got their share of dedicated panels, with Henrik Bogdan's paper on Crowley's mind-altering initiation processes and Carole Cusack's presentation on physical labour, food and drink as methods of transcendence; a welcome note was also represented by a panel dedicated to female sexual mystics, offering insights into the work of Alice Bunker and Dion Fortune.



The conference came to a close with a plenary panel on the (for the past 15 years) problematic issue of 'Should we drop the "Western" from Western esotericism?', where Egil Asprem, Henrik Bogdan, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Marco Pasi, Liana Saif and Julian Strube were part of a sometimes heated debate on an important topic, which will probably still be discussed with the same passion in plenary panels in 15 years to come.



ESSWE 7 has showed that the scholarly field of Western esotericism has evolved greatly from the very first conferences, where the domain was, in a sense, isolated and still in need of strict boundaries and new definitions. Now the interaction of esotericism and a plethora of other fields has proven that interdisciplinarity was indeed the right way for this field to evolve, as proven by the incredible variety in the papers presented and the ever increasing affiliates of ESSWE from the most wide-ranging academic domains. An incredible success, which Professor Wouter J. Hanegraaff and the Center in Amsterdam wholeheartedly deserved to celebrate in their own city. ♦

Upcoming Conferences

Association for the Study of Esotericism Ninth Biannual Conference

The University of California at Davis, May 14-17, 2020

Call for Papers

Esotericism and the Scientific Imagination

Scientific ideas have not just fostered secularity and religious decline, as Max Weber famously argued, they have also been used to help people believe in the existence of unseen, heavenly realms and recover imaginative spaces for the supernatural. In a similar way, religious beliefs are not inevitably antagonistic to science, but have shaped scientific theories and practices as we can see in the case of astrology, alchemy, and the various strands of esoteric thought that have influenced natural philosophers and theologians across the ages and globe. This did not end with the birth of modern science. Einstein, along with quantum mechanics, showed, for example, that nature behaved in confounding ways: clocks ticked more slowly the faster they traveled; events that were simultaneous to one observer were not to another; gravity caused time to slow down; space could be bent and distorted by large objects; energy and mass were interchangeable; and, perhaps most bewilderingly of all, quantum mechanics couldn't be reconciled with General Relativity, which implied there were two sets of laws and mathematical equations, one for large and another for subatomic particles. Modern physics consequently brought back those "mysterious incalculable forces" Weber thought had been banished forever. This led to an explosion of popular metaphysical speculations dealing with free will, the mind/body problem, the mystery of consciousness, and the possibility of multiple coexisting universes in the work of many artists, writers, philosophers, and speculative scientists, not to mention sci-fi authors and devotees of New Age religions.

We invite papers and panel proposals dealing with the way esoteric ideas, theories, and practices have shaped the scientific imagination from the ancient to the modern world in both the East and West.

Our deadline for panel or paper proposal submission is 30 December, 2019.

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 email to

ASEDavis2020@gmail.com

No attachments, please: simply copy and paste your abstract into plain text email. Individual abstracts should be limited to one or two paragraphs, and must indicate academic affiliation and/or other academic qualifications. Independent scholars are welcome to submit proposals. Please note that our previous conferences were at maximum capacity, so it is best to submit your proposal

sooner rather than later. We hope to post a preliminary list of accepted proposals early in 2020.

For more information on the ASE, see our website at www.aseweb.org

For further information check the conference homepage at <http://www.aseweb.org/>

E-Mail: ASEDavis2020@gmail.com

Keynote speakers will include Cathy Gutierrez, author of *Plato's Ghost*, and *The Occult in Nineteenth-Century America*, Christopher McIntosh, author of *Beyond the North Wind*, and Peter Berbegal, author of *Strange Frequencies*. ♦

CESNUR Conference 2020 Université Laval, Québec City, Canada

CESNUR 2020 will be organized at Université Laval in Québec City. Participants to the conference are expected to arrive in Québec on June 17. Sessions will be on June 18, 19 and 20. A field trip on June 20 will explore the religious traditions of the Hurons-Wendats, a large First Nation Iroquoian-speaking population.

We welcome papers on this year's theme: "Religious Pluralism in an Era of Globalization." More specifically we welcome sessions and papers that examine perceptions and practices related to globalization, localization, and "glocalization," as well as orthodoxy, tradition, and innovation in religious movements. In addition, we welcome specific discussions of religious pluralism and new religious movements in Canada, although we plan to organize sessions on other countries and continents as well. We would also like to discuss new movements within mainline traditions, and the relations between esotericism, religion, globalization, orthodoxy, and innovation, as well as the multiple meanings of "tradition/s" in an age of globalization. We will accept papers and sessions both in English and French.

Papers and session proposals should be submitted by E-mail before the close of business of Monday, January 13, 2020 to cesnur_to@virgilio.it, accompanied by an abstract of no more than 300 words and a CV of no more than 200 words. PhD students should attach a letter of support from their advisor. ♦

Esoteric Music, Music Performance, & Music Research Symposium February 22 & 23, 2020 Nazareth College, 4245 East Avenue, Rochester NY 14618

This symposium seeks to bring together music scholars, performers, and teachers with a sincere interest in the intersection of music and

esoteric ideas and practices.

Topics touching upon, but not limited to, will be presented.

- Music & the Pythagorean Tradition (number, sacred geometry)
- Music & Esoteric Experience (spiritual/religious/mystical)
- Music & Cosmology
- Music & Contemplation
- Music & Esoteric Symbol (sound, text, image)
- Music & Esoteric Traditions (alchemy, astrology, Hermetism, Freemasonry)
- Music & Alternative Realities
- Esotericism & Music Pedagogy
- Esotericism in Music Performance and/or Composition
- The Harmony of the Spheres

Contacts

- Marjorie Roth, Nazareth College, Nazareth College, mroth1@naz.edu
- Justin Ray Glosson, Texas Tech University, Justin.Glosson@ttu.edu. ♦

The Department of Religious Studies of Masaryk University Brno, Czech Republic - 28. – 29. February 2020 Workshop on Entheogens and Religion

The purpose of this workshop is to explore the role of entheogens in its various religious and spiritual expressions: historically, culturally and finally from the methodological approach taken by various research fields. It will be moreover, directed at clarifying the purpose, importance and relevance that the various forms of entheogens and mind-altering substances cover for the individual mystical and religious traditions. Emphasis will also be placed on the combination with ritual, meditation and biofeedback. The workshop will moreover encourage the discussion, analysis and questioning of research methods and methodologies such as: The ethics of the researcher in connection to the use of substances as part of participatory observation. Enquiries into the analysis of ecstatic and religious states in cooperation and compared to the descriptions of laboratory tested altered states of consciousness. Comparative methodologies and cooperation in different fields of research are encouraged.

Contact: religion@phil.muni.cz. ♦

22nd Quinquennial World Congress of the IAHR Dunedin, New Zealand August 23-29, 2020

Abstracts will be reviewed on a rolling basis. We aim to give responses within four weeks of submission. **The final deadline for submissions is 31 December 2019.**

While welcoming contributions on any topic in the academic study of religion, this year's Congress will have the theme of Centres and Peripheries.

From its earliest moments, the academic study of religion has consistently placed certain traditions, peoples, geographies, concepts, and institutions at the centre of its analyses, while at the same time relegating others to the periphery. The 2020 Congress invites scholars to reflect on these dynamics, to historicize and critique them, and to reconsider how, why and with what effects scholars of religion have engaged in acts of normalization and marginalization. The setting of New Zealand, distant from the historical centres of religious studies in North America and Europe, provides a fitting location for this examination as well as for considerations of other related dynamics. These include patterns of dominance and subjugation, transformation and repositioning and, especially, migration and indigeneity. While we welcome interdisciplinary, multi-method and comparative research, we ask that scholars submit within one of seven themed areas.

Locality and movement: Studies that focus on the emplacement and migrations of people, texts and traditions over spaces and times. This includes themes of migration, colonization and diaspora. We especially welcome submissions examining the category of indigeneity and indigenous religions.

Regulating and Debating: Studies that consider religion in the context of debates over the proper ordering of human society and the regulating of human behaviour, especially as it relates to the intersections of religion with legal regimes and/or structures of political power.

Historicizing and embodying: Studies that focus largely on situating religious communities, persons, practices and/or institutions in their historical and cultural contexts. We especially welcome submissions examining religion in places, times and contexts that have been historically overlooked or marginalized in the study of religion.

Interpreting and comparing: Studies whose main focus is on interpreting, clarifying, comparing and/or analysing texts, rituals, stories, material culture, art or other elements of religion. This includes studies that examine the place of religion in material and textual artefacts not normally associated with religion.

Innovating and transforming: Studies that focus on the transformations of religion over time, with particular attention to recent transformations in technology, communication and social organisations. We especially welcome studies that reflect on the influence of new media on religion and religious studies. ♦