



ESSWE

European Society for the Study
of Western Esotericism

Newsletter



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Words from the Editor

Chloë Sugden

Welcome to the latest edition of the ESSWE Newsletter. After several pandemic setbacks, there is an exciting event to look forward to this summer, with the ESSWE 8 Conference taking place July 5-7 at the University College, Cork, Ireland. Many thanks to Dr. Jenny Butler for organising what will doubtless be a delightful and thought-provoking event on the topic of Western esotericism in relation to art and creative performance.

This edition of the newsletter features recent publications in the field, and Jonas Stähelin (ETH Zürich) interviews Dr. Efram Sera-Shriar on the special *Aries* issue, 'Spiritualism and Science Studies for the Twenty-First Century' (2021). Dr. Massimo Introvigne (Managing Director, CESNUR - Center for Studies on New Religions), and Andrea Franchetto (Stockholm University) detail their research interests and experiences, and Marleen Thaler (University of Vienna) and Dr. Angela Puca (Leeds Trinity University) outline their PhD projects.

Further, Dr. Egil Asprem (Stockholm University) interviews Dr. Bernd-Christian Otto on a landmark Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) research grant for the project, 'Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective' at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Erlangen (CAS-E), Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

Dr. Karolina Maria Hess (Jagiellonian University) covers the fourth conference of CEENASWE (Central and Eastern European Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism), 'Occultism and Politics in East-Central Europe' (September 27-29, 2021). In addition, Yulia Sergievskaya (Secretary of ASEM - the Association for the Study of Esotericism and Mysticism) and Sergey Pakhomov (Chair of ASEM) review the 12th ASEM International Conference, 'Mystical and Esoteric Teachings in Theory and Practice: Esotericism in Philosophy, Literature and Art' (February 3-5, 2022).

This Newsletter is edited by Chloë Sugden, PhD candidate, Chair for Literature and Cultural Studies, ETH Zürich, Switzerland (csugden@ethz.ch)

In memoriam Antoine Faivre 1934-2021

Henrik Bogdan, Secretary ESSWE

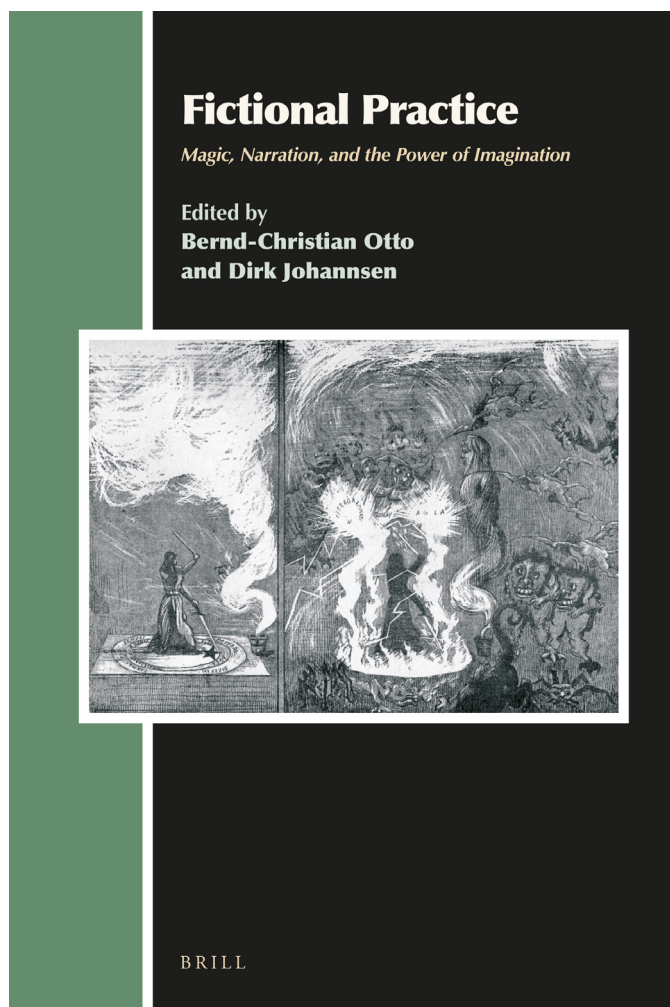
Antoine Faivre, founding and honorary member of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism, died on Sunday, December 19, 2021, at 4:35 pm, in Paris. He was 87 years old. Born on June 5, 1934 in Reims, Faivre embarked on a life-long career in academia, with doctoral degrees in Religious Studies (1965) and Germanic Studies (1969). From 1979 to his retirement in 2002, he held the chair for 'History of Esoteric and Mystical Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe' at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris. Faivre was in many ways instrumental in establishing the study of Western esotericism as a respected and integrated field of research in the Humanities, and many of us see him as the founding father of our field. From 1985 to 1999, Faivre was the co-editor of the first scholarly journal devoted to Western esotericism, *ARIES* (Association pour la Recherche et l'Information sur l'Esotérisme), from 2001 re-launched by Brill Academic Publishers as a new series *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*, and the official journal of the ESSWE since its founding in 2005. During the late 1990s, Faivre also played a decisive part in creating the chair and program for 'History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents' at the University of Amsterdam.

While Faivre published numerous important works, such as *Kirchberger et l'Illuminisme du dix-huitième siècle* (1966), *Eckartshausen et la théosophie chrétienne* (1969), *L'ésotérisme au XVIIIe siècle en France et en Allemagne* (1973), *Philosophie de la nature: Physique sacrée et théosophie XVIIIe-XIXe siècle* (1996) and *De Londres à Saint-Pétersbourg: Carl Friedrich Tieman (1743-1802) aux carrefours des courants illuministes et maçonniques* (2018), he is perhaps best remembered outside of the fields of eighteenth-century Illuminism and Christian Theosophy for his introductory book *Access to Western Esotericism* (first published in English in 1994), in which he famously defined Western esotericism as a form of thought, characterized by six constitutive components. Although Faivre's definition to a large extent has been superseded by other theoretical approaches to esotericism, the impact of his definition should not be underestimated: not only were many scholars in the 1990s and early 2000s working in the then-nascent field of Western esotericism influenced by Faivre, but his definition also helped to present esotericism as a defined and understandable subject to non-specialists and to readers outside of academia. For the members of ESSWE, Antoine Faivre will be remembered as one of our most dedicated and supportive members (he served as an ESSWE board member 2005-11), and I think it is fair to say that without him the field of esotericism in general, and the work of ESSWE in particular, would not be what it is today. He will be sorely missed.

A memorial service was held for Antoine Faivre on December 28, 2021 at l'église Notre-Dame de l'Assomption, and he is now resting at the Meudon Cemetery.



New Publications from ESSWE Members



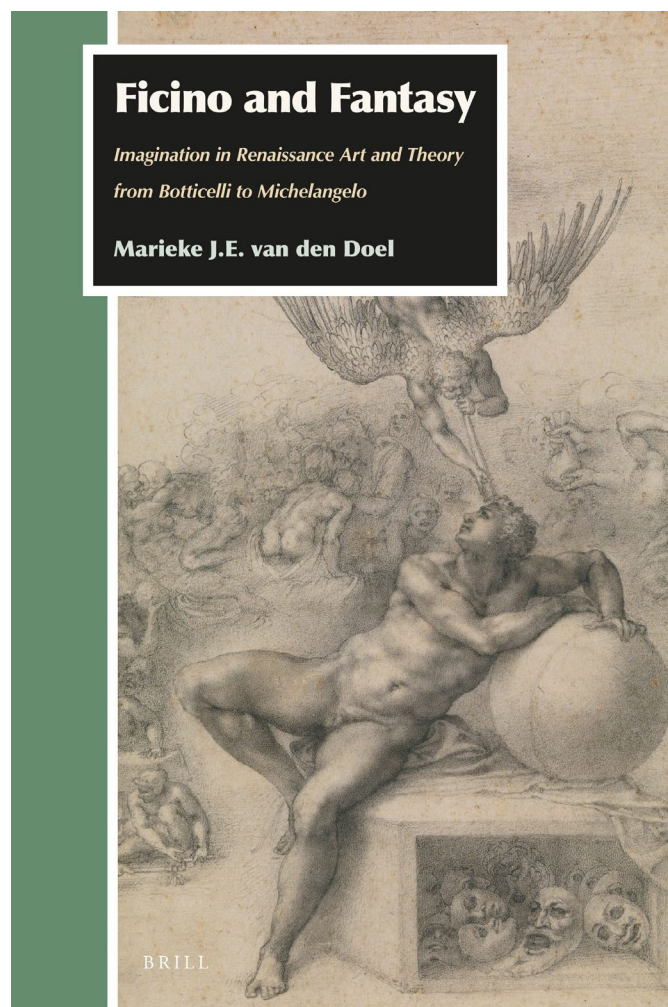
Otto, Bernd-Christian and Dirk Johannsen, eds.
Fictional Practice: Magic, Narration, and the Power of Imagination
Leiden: Brill, 2021

To what extent were practitioners of magic inspired by fictional accounts of their art? In how far did the daunting narratives surrounding legendary magicians such as Theophilus of Adana, Cyprianus of Antioch, Johann Georg Faust or Agrippa of Nettesheim rely on real-world events or practices? Fourteen original case studies present material from late antiquity to the twenty-first century and explore these questions in a systematic manner. By coining the notion of ‘fictional practice’, the editors discuss the emergence of novel, imaginative types of magic from the nineteenth century onwards, when fiction and practice came to be more and more intertwined or even fully amalgamated. This is the first comparative study that systematically relates fiction and practice in the history of magic.

Van den Doel, Marieke J.E.
Ficino and Fantasy: Imagination in Renaissance Art Theory from Botticelli to Michelangelo
Leiden: Brill, 2022

Did the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) influence the art of his time? Art historians have been fiercely debating this question for decades. This book starts with Ficino’s views on the imagination as a faculty of the soul, and shows how these ideas were part of a long

philosophical tradition and inspired fresh insights. This approach, combined with little known historical material, offers a new understanding of whether, how and why Ficino’s Platonic conceptions of the imagination may have been received in the art of the Italian Renaissance. The discussion explores Ficino’s possible influence on the work



of Botticelli and Michelangelo, and examines the appropriation of Ficino’s ideas by early modern art theorists.

De Vries, Lyke.
Reformation, Revolution, Renovation : The Roots and Reception of the Rosicrucian Call for General Reform
Leiden: Brill, 2022

At the centre of the Rosicrucian manifestos was a call for ‘general reformation’. In *Reformation, Revolution, Renovation*, the first book-length study of this topic, Lyke de Vries demonstrates the unique position of the Rosicrucian call for reform in the transformative context of the early seventeenth century. The manifestos, commonly interpreted as either Lutheran or esoteric, are here portrayed as revolutionary mission statements which broke dramatically with Luther’s reform ideals. Their call for reform instead resembles a variety of late medieval and early modern dissenting traditions as well as the heterodox movement of Paracelsianism. Emphasising the universal character of the Rosicrucian proposal for change, this new genealogy of the core idea sheds fresh light on the vexed question of the manifestos’ authorship and helps explain their tumultuous reception by both those who welcomed and those who deplored them.



UNIVERSAL REFORM
Studies in Intellectual History, 1550–1700

REFORMATION, REVOLUTION, RENOVATION

The Roots and Reception of the
Rosicrucian Call for General Reform

LYKE DE VRIES

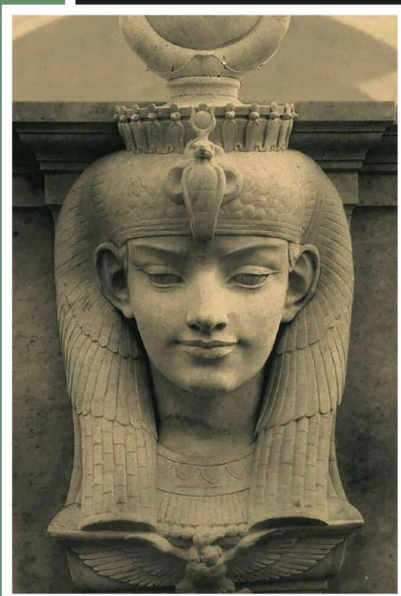


BRILL

Rider Haggard and the Imperial Occult

Hermetic Discourse and Romantic Contiguity

Simon Magus



BRILL

Magus, Simon

*Rider Haggard and the Imperial Occult: Hermetic Discourse
and Romantic Contiguity*

Leiden: Brill, 2022

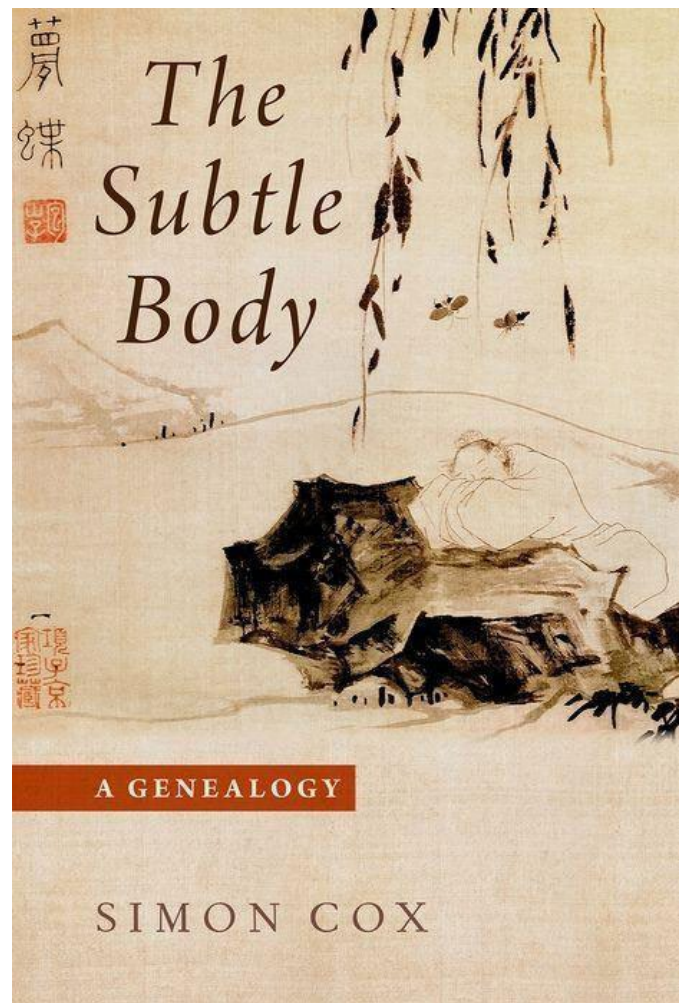
In *Rider Haggard and the Imperial Occult*, Simon Magus offers the first academic monograph on the world of occult thought which lies behind and beneath the fictional writing of H. Rider Haggard. It engages with a broad scope of religious, philosophical and anthropological ideas. Many of these were involved in debates within the controversies of the Anglican Church, which occurred in the face of Darwinism, and the criticism of the Bible.

The book follows three main intellectual currents involved in the promulgation of these ideas, namely the reception of ancient Egypt, the resurgence of Romanticism and the ideas of the Theosophical Society, all couched within the context of Empire.

Cox, Simon

The Subtle Body: A Genealogy

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022



How does the soul relate to the body? Through the ages, innumerable religious and intellectual movements have proposed answers to this question. Many have gravitated to the notion of the 'subtle body', positing some sort of subtle entity that is neither soul nor body, but some mixture of the two. Simon Cox traces the history of this idea from the late Roman Empire to the present day, touching on how philosophers, wizards, scholars, occultists, psychologists, and mystics have engaged with the idea over the past two thousand years.

This study is an intellectual history of the subtle body concept from its origins in late antiquity, through the Renaissance into the

Euro-American counterculture of the 1960's and 70's. It begins with a prehistory of the idea, rooted as it is in third-century Neoplatonism. It then proceeds to the signifier 'subtle body' in its earliest English uses amongst the Cambridge Platonists. After that, it looks forward to those Orientalist fathers of Indology, who in their earliest translations of Sanskrit philosophy, relied heavily on the Cambridge Platonist lexicon, and thereby brought Indian philosophy into what had hitherto been a distinctly platonic discourse. At this point, the story takes a reflexive stroll into the source of the author's own interest in this strange concept, looking at Helena Blavatsky and the Theosophical import, expression, and popularization of the concept. Cox then zeroes in on Aleister Crowley, focusing on the subtle body in fin de siècle occultism. Finally, he turns to Carl Jung, his colleague Frederic Spiegelberg, and the popularization of the idea of the subtle body in the Euro-American counterculture. This book is for anyone interested in yogic, somatic, or energetic practices, and will be very useful to scholars and area specialists who rely on this term in dealing with Hindu, Daoist, and Buddhist texts.

Zuber, Mike A.

Spiritual Alchemy: From Jacob Boehme to Mary Anne Atwood
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022



Most professional historians see the relationship between pre-modern and modern alchemy as one of discontinuity and contrast. Mike A. Zuber challenges this dominant understanding and explores aspects of alchemy that have been neglected by recent work in the history of science. The predominant focus on the scientific aspect of alchemy, such as laboratory experiment, practical techniques, and material ingredients, argues Zuber, marginalizes the things that render alchemy so fascinating: its rich and vivid imagery, reliance on the medium of manuscript, and complicated relationship with religion.

Spiritual Alchemy traces the early-modern antecedents of modern

alchemy through generations of followers of Jacob Boehme, the cobbler and theosopher of Görlitz. As Boehme's disciples down the generations — including the Silesian nobleman Abraham von Franckenberg, and the London-based German immigrant Dionysius Andreas Freher, among others — studied his writings, they drew on his spiritual alchemy, adapted it, and communicated it to their contemporaries. Spiritual alchemy combines traditional elements of alchemical literature with Christian mysticism. Defying the boundaries between science and religion, this combination was transmitted from Görlitz ultimately to England. In 1850, it inspired a young woman, later known as Mary Anne Atwood, to write her *Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery*, usually seen as the first modern interpretation of alchemy. Drawing extensively on manuscript or otherwise obscure sources, Zuber documents continuity between pre-modern and modern forms of alchemy while exploring this hybrid phenomenon.

Editor Interview

Interview on Ferguson, Christine, and Efram Sera-Shriar, eds. *Special Issue: Spiritualism and Science Studies for the Twenty-First Century. Aries — Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*
Leiden: Brill, 2021

JONAS STÄHELIN SPEAKS WITH DR. EFRAM SERA-SHRIAR

Published in late 2021, this special issue of *Aries* takes inspiration from and responds to the increasingly complex historiography of spiritualism and science, noting its gains and addressing its challenges. Jonas Stähelin (ETH Zürich), a PhD candidate working on occult and scientific epistemologies of the invisible in the nineteenth century, interviews co-editor Dr. Efram Sera-Shriar on the issue and his research interests.

Efram, how did you come to study the relationship between Victorian Spiritualism and Science?

Since my childhood, I've been fascinated by Victorian spiritualism. Though I am not a believer, I was raised in a spiritualist household and participated in spiritualist activities throughout my youth. However, my interest in spiritualism's intersection with science arose after watching *Ghostbusters* for the first time in the early 1980s. I remember asking my parents whether one could have a career as a 'ghost investigator' and my father jokingly responded, 'not if you want to make money'. Throughout university, I continued to read about spiritualism, but it was not until I became a permanent lecturer at Leeds Trinity University, that I finally found the time to start developing my own book about it, *Psychic Investigators*, which is coming out in June 2022 with the University of Pittsburgh Press. My upbringing in a spiritualist household has been really important to my work, and a key reason for my more sensitive portrayal of spiritualists. Far too often, spiritualist ideas and perspectives are marginalised in the secondary literature. Many accounts tend to treat spiritualism as credulous superstition, and there is little attempt to provide a more balanced narrative. However, by giving more agency to spiritualists, there is an opportunity to create a nuanced historical story that avoids the risk of replicating the problematic divide between the supposed empowered and enlightened 'scientific observer', and the subjugated and superstitious 'observed other'. Spiritualists, after all, were not passive agents in these investigations, but actively contributed to the construction of knowledge about their culture. This is reflected in the way Victorian investigators often relied on spiritualists for important insights into the movement.

Your remark on agency and the need to question the clear-cut distinction between 'scientific observer' and the 'observed other' resonates with debates in anthropology on the role of so called 'go-betweens'. The way I also understand your argument, you urge us to consider the relation between spiritualism and science, not solely in terms of conflict and a supposed clash of cultures, but rather through the prism of intermediation, constructed connections, and transformations. You have also written extensively on the history of British anthropology in the 19th century. How has that background shaped your approach to the study of spiritualism?

To a certain extent, I approach all of my historical research as an anthropologist. My aim is to always try to understand my actors on their

own terms and not to prejudice them. I want to know how Victorian spiritualists saw their own values, customs, and beliefs, and not have others speak for them. It is all about giving agency to a group that is so often silenced in the historiography. There have been several works since the 1980s that portray a fairly whiggish narrative of the history of modern spiritualism and its relationship to science. These studies tend to begin with seemingly sensible and intelligent scientific figures being fooled into accepting the veracity of the spirit hypothesis, followed by a period of intense scrutiny and intellectual debate, before eventually arriving at a point where science pushes spiritualism and telepathy to the margins of society. Those narratives are built on a false premise. Investigations of extraordinary phenomena such as spiritual forces tested the boundaries and authorities of the sciences, forcing researchers to reassess and strengthen their theories and practices. The story of psychical research's supposed emergence and collapse is not a teleological narrative, but something far more complicated. I think that there is much to be gained by borrowing some of the arguments from the historiography on science and religion, which tend to mainly focus on Abrahamic religions. Science is not always in conflict with belief. Yes, there are examples where a scientist is trying to disprove the existence of spirits and psychics. E. Ray Lankester's exposure of the medium Henry Slade in 1876 is a good example. But there are also examples where scientists are trying to harmonize their scientific research with spiritualism and psychism. Wallace's 'theory of spiritualism' is a good example. You can also find examples where the conflict is not between a scientist and a spiritualist, but two scientists or two spiritualists. The medium Daniel Dunglas Home, for example, wrote all about fake mediumship in his book *Lights and Shadows of Spiritualism*. Instead of continuing to think about science and religion using a 'conflict model', there really needs to be more emphasis on a 'complexity model' that explores a much more diverse range of perspectives.

In the article you wrote for the special issue, you talk about the scientific naturalist John Tyndall's famous séance experience. You argue that we should not read this episode as a typical instance of a skeptical scientist debunking false spiritualist claims. Can you briefly explain why, particularly in light of what you just said about the necessary shift from from 'conflict model' to a 'complexity model'?

A re-examination of Tyndall's investigation of séance phenomena in the late 1850s helps us to challenge the triumphant and positivistic narrative in the scholarship on science and spiritualism that emerged during the 1960s, and gained momentum during the 1980s and 1990s, where scientific naturalism supposedly pushed occultic belief to the margins of Victorian society. Tyndall's investigation exposes a much more complicated interaction between these two entities. In many respects, his investigation reaffirms larger discussions on the 'complexity thesis' in science and religion, and the critique of the 'disenchantment thesis' in esotericism studies. Tyndall's story may have generated some doubt regarding the legitimacy of the so-called spirit hypothesis, but it did not produce an indisputable refutation of the existence of spirits and psychics. Much of his 'findings' were based on probable causes, as opposed to definite ones. For example, Tyndall may have believed that the knocks and raps heard during the séance were likely produced by one of the sitters at the table, but he failed to expose a culprit. What he presented was suggestive evidence only, and his account is a classic example of what the historian Peter Lamont has defined as 'the crisis of evidence' in spirit investigations.

Scholar Interviews

Dr. Massimo Introvigne
Managing Director, CESNUR (Center for Studies on New Religions)

How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

I was interested in exotic forms of spirituality since I was a teenager, for different reasons. One was novels featuring magic, and comics, for which I have maintained an interest to this date. I remember, for instance, Marvel Comics' *Dr. Strange*, but magic popped up often in comics of all sorts. Another was that my father, a banker, was an art collector. Although he didn't dig very deeply into it, he was aware of some references to non-traditional spirituality in modern artists he collected, such as Roberto Matta and Wilfredo Lam. I heard from him for the first time a reference to Theosophy in connection with artists. Later, I graduated with a dissertation on American philosopher John Rawls, and its preparation led me to spend time in the United States, and to go from an interest in the influence of religion on U.S. politics to the idea of mapping religious pluralism in Italy, covering particularly the lesser known or 'new' religions. This eventually led to the foundation of CESNUR in 1988, and to the publication of a thick book in Italian called *The New Religions* in 1989. It was a 400-page book, and to keep it within reasonable limits, I decided to leave out what I proposed to call 'new magical movements', i.e., groups that were structured somewhat like new religious movements but taught Spiritualism, occultism, Satanism, and other esoteric systems. These groups went into another volume nearing 500 pages, *Il cappello del mago (The Magician's Hat)*. This encyclopaedical survey of esoteric organizations was very well received. For example, Umberto Eco asked to meet me, which I took as a great honour for a young scholar, and it was through Eco that I was introduced to Antoine Faivre, starting a lifelong friendship.



What do you feel are the major challenges for our field at present and in the future?

The academic study of Western esotericism may become a victim of its own success. For several decades, it had to struggle to assert its legitimacy in an academic milieu where studying esotericism was regarded as somewhat strange. Then, it started being widely, if not generally, recognized. There was an acceleration in the 21st century, particularly when scholars of a different field, art history, realized that without esotericism there would not be modern art as we know it, and started interacting with us. The art connection had a crucial role in putting the academic study of Western esotericism on the map, and the 'Enchanted Modernities' conferences, the first of which was organized at the University of Amsterdam in 2013, will be remembered as a turning point. One of the by-products of success, however, was that as the need to unite against external critics appeared less pressing, scholars of esotericism started quarrelling between themselves on issues such as whether the adjective 'Western' should be dropped from the name of the ESSWE, chairs, and journals. Debate is always welcome but there are limits beyond which controversy may be destructive.

What projects are you currently working on?

One of the reasons my *Il cappello del mago* sold well for decades was that it discussed what was then called 'sex magic' (now 'sacred eroticism' is regarded as more respectful), which readers found somewhat

titillating. My new book is called *Sacred Eroticism: Tantra and Eros in the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute (MISA)*, published in English by the Italian publisher Mimesis International. MISA is headquartered in Romania and is the largest movement today in the sacred eroticism tradition. Its leader is a fugitive from justice, as he is wanted by Finnish authorities for sexual abuse (he claims he is innocent), but still teaches via Web from an unknown location. My book is the first based both on internal material of MISA no scholar has studied before, and extensive interviews with members.

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?

My field is alternative spirituality and religions, which I always believed consisted of the twin fields of new religious movements (NRM) and esotericism. So, I also write on new religious movements, of which some date back to the 19th century and some to the 20th and even 21st. Before the book on MISA, I published two books with Oxford University Press, one on the Plymouth Brethren, a movement established in the 19th century, and the second on The Church of Almighty God, a Chinese NRM founded in 1991. The subtitle of the latter book is *The most persecuted religious movement in China*, and indeed one of my main interests is state regulation and persecution of certain forms of religion—and of esotericism as well. From 2018, I am the editor of a daily online magazine on the subject called *Bitter Winter*, which has achieved a success that astonished even myself, and is often quoted in official governmental reports about freedom of religion.

What is the worst thing about having this as your specialty?

I used to believe it was contentiousness. But then my other field, NRM is even more contentious, and a friend in Dante studies was there when the police had to be called after scholars started hitting each other with chairs over the interpretation of Dante's *Comedy*. All fields are contentious. Esotericism has another annoying problem, particularly for a sociologist like me studying mostly contemporary rather than historical groups, namely that too many practitioners insist that their material is secret, and you should engage in endless negotiations, which may prove ultimately unsuccessful, to access it. But sometimes negotiations are successful, as my MISA book demonstrates.

What is the best thing about having this as your specialty?

It is the fact that scholars of Western esotericism have a lot of fun. External observers who happen casually into one of our conferences immediately notice this. We are (more often than not) friends and we enjoy doing what we do. This does not necessarily happen, or not in the same way, in other fields and may be related to the very nature of our specialty.



Dr. Massimo Introvigne with Dr. Antoine Faivre.

How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

I have always been fascinated by the mysterious and the occult, as many kids are. During high school, my Latin professor assigned us Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* as summer reading. While reading it, I found myself struck by the aesthetics of Lucius' initiatory journey, in particular the detailed descriptions of the Hellenistic ceremonies and gods, and the mystery cults.



As my final project, I therefore decided to write an essay on esotericism in late antiquity. At the time I was seventeen years old, and I would have never expected that those teenage interests would become a career in academia ten years later. Indeed, after high school, I studied architecture and worked for a little while in the field.

Nevertheless, I was never entirely satisfied. The study of sacred spaces and architecture brought me back to my early interests, because I started to see the potential connections between spatiality and magic. For this reason, a few months later I applied to the Amsterdam program (HHP). The research MA in Western esotericism gave me the chance to apply both historical and methodological approaches to the field of magic. My newly acquired knowledge and my background met in my final thesis on the Operation of Abramelin, allowing me to explore the construction of sacred space in modern ceremonial magic. Two years after my MA dissertation, I ventured into a Ph.D. on learned magic at Stockholm University.

What do you feel are the major challenges for our field at present and in the future?

In my opinion, the major and most fascinating challenge regards the fruitful development of interdisciplinary methodologies. From what I can see, the synergetic use of digital humanities, material and spatial approaches, and cognitive sciences could/can lead us towards unexplored research paths, while also stimulating new questions. Difficulties lie, however, in making all of these different expertise transferrable from one disciplinary domain to another. This would require a great array of interdisciplinary forums, and departments where well-structured research groups should learn how to harmonize the production of knowledge, bringing together humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

What current projects are you working on?

My current project concerns the conceptualizations and constructions of ritual space in medieval ritual magic. I am particularly interested in the instruction for arranging the ritual space attested in the European grimoire tradition. I am dealing with a vast corpus of sources from the 13th to 15th century, developing a spatial approach to ritual texts. Therefore, my current research relates to my previous MA project, but it situates the study in a different historical context; a crucial period for the history of magic, the late Middle Ages. In fact, late medieval grimoires were foundational in instating later transformations. This project is a first step towards a bigger project on the transmission of spatial practices in ritual magic.

In terms of methodologies, I am exploring what the cognitive sciences

and architectural theory can provide in understanding textual ritual practices. What I find most fascinating is that my sources are primarily textual and visual. This provides new insights on the role of imagination in the transmission of powerful ritual spaces.

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?

As I mentioned before, architecture has been a formative discipline for me and it is still a great passion. I am particularly interested in radical architecture and design for its visionary and utopic landscapes.

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

To reply to the last two questions, I will make use of the same answer: the surprise in the eyes of those asking me 'what do you do for a living?', when they learn that I work with magic. The astonishment that the words 'magic' and 'work' in the same sentence arouses in people shows that there is a general curiosity, and sometimes interest, in our topics. This curiosity, however, is kept private, because magic, sacral-ity, religion even, are thought to be somehow deviant interests for a researcher. Explaining that you can actually dig into this matter scientifically leaves people amazed.

PhD Project Features

Marleen Thaler
Department of Religious Studies
University of Vienna, Austria

Kuṇḍalinī Re-Imagined: The Metamorphosis of a Tantric Concept within Alternative Religion and Transpersonal Psychology

As part of the FWF-funded project 'Imagining Energy: The Practice of Energy Healing between Sense-Experience and Sense-Making' (2019–2022), I am working on my PhD thesis, which concerns modern appropriations, interpretations, and applications of the Tantric energy concept known as kuṇḍalinī śakti.



The medieval Śaiva Tantra corpus operates as the earliest source that discusses the kuṇḍalinī śakti as an integral tenet of ontological and soteriological speculations within the frame of subtle body theories. Throughout several centuries, the concept was largely neglected and surpassed by other components of subtle physiology, such as cakras or prāṇa. Therefore, when Sir John Woodroffe drafted his book *The Serpent Power* (1919), the Anglo-American world was for the most part still ignorant of the kuṇḍalinī śakti. Yet in the course of time and enhanced transcultural exchange, this crucial notion within South Asian subtle body theories experienced further dissemination and reinterpretation. Non-Indian alternative religious milieus developed an ensuing discourse on kuṇḍalinī, which was supported by first-hand reports, such as Gopi Krishna's *Kundalini. The Evolutionary Energy in Man* (1970), and by general assumptions on the spiritual superiority of South Asia along the lines of the Orientalist dichotomy between 'East' and 'West'. The concept of the coiled and dormant kuṇḍalinī has fascinated a broad scope of believers, winding through subcultural milieus associated with the Theosophical Society, New Age Movement, the Human Potential Movement, and modern occulture.

The regional focus of my study targets the United States (and crucially California) as the centre of kuṇḍalinī discourse in the second half of the twentieth century. To some extent, British expressions of alternative religion also contributed to the discourse, e.g., through British occultists such as Aleister Crowley or Dion Fortune. The role of the US was nonetheless paramount. Regarding the time frame, I concentrate on the heyday of the modern kuṇḍalinī discourse from the 1960s until the 1980s – a period generally characterized by the reinvention of religious worldviews through the implementation of various subcultural, alternative religious, as well as Asian elements. This spatio-temporal focus, however, will be supported by the presentation of its historical background, starting in the 1880s in South Asia, and its aftermath within contemporary global discourses on energy healing.

Historical perspectives on the global transfer of knowledge and culture are preliminary points of departure for analysing kuṇḍalinī's modern re-interpretation. The emerging US-American discourse on kuṇḍalinī was a result of 'global cultural flows' (Appadurai 1990) and can hence be seen as an expression of the entangled history (*histoire croisée*) of modern yoga and alternative religion. The critical employment of certain key terms is vital for my study. Of foremost importance is the term 'Tantra', which was greatly misinterpreted by early American and European missionaries and Orientalists in the nineteenth century. Its limitation to sexual aspects and its employment as a 'countercultural' other in opposition to conventional religion, was as widespread as

wrong, when compared to the initial understanding of Tantra in its South Asian context. Against the backdrop of entangled transcultural and transnational dynamics of the discourse in question, I further try to avoid the terms 'East' and 'West,' unless used by protagonists or when referring to historical perceptions.

Considerable research has been conducted on the origins of the kuṇḍalinī śakti in medieval Śaiva Tantra and on its psychological and soteriological metaphors as expressed by non-Indian protagonists. However, no previous study has explored the history and premises of the dissemination of the body of kuṇḍalinī-related theories, practises, and scriptures, which circulated among non-Indian believers. The main aim of my doctoral thesis is therefore to provide a comprehensive historical documentation of divergent, yet entangled discursive traditions within the key fields of alternative religion and transpersonal psychology. Each field shall be examined historically by presenting its foremost representatives associated with kuṇḍalinī, and systematically by linking the fields to the entangled concepts of spiritual emergency and spiritual evolution. As I aim to show in my thesis, these concepts play a vital role in the analysis of alternative religious and transpersonal interpretations of kuṇḍalinī. The theory of spiritual emergency traces back to Christina and Stanislav Grof. The Grofs described non-ordinary states of consciousness that are accompanied by psychosomatic crises as spiritual emergencies or transpersonal crises, rather than mental diseases. The unprepared activation of kuṇḍalinī represented for them a paradigmatic example of this model.

Theories on spiritual evolution, on the other hand, have been commonly promoted by alternative religious players, such as Swami Vivekananda, Madame Blavatsky, and Ken Wilber. Against this backdrop, kuṇḍalinī was imagined as liberating force. These categories partly overlap, which underlines the ambivalent approaches towards kuṇḍalinī. Therefore, I am especially interested in the relationship between these concepts and the understanding of kuṇḍalinī through the lenses of spiritual evolution and spiritual emergency. The discursive traditions in question may be subsumed under the designations of religio-therapeutic and spiritual-soteriological discourse. The former refers to transpersonal psychological and the latter to the spectrum of esoteric and occult examinations of kuṇḍalinī at the intersection of spiritual emergency and spiritual evolution. I thus aim to unravel how the religio-therapeutic, as well as the spiritual-soteriological discourse, triggered the dissemination of distinctive ontological views of kuṇḍalinī in alternative religious and transpersonal psychological fields. Through my research, I hope to elaborate on the modern metamorphosis of kuṇḍalinī, contributing to the growing scholarship on modern yoga.

Recently Completed PhD Project

Dr. Angela Puca
Leeds Trinity University
Leeds, United Kingdom

Indigenous and Trans-Cultural Shamanism in Italy (2021)

Shamanism is a growing religious movement in Italy, manifesting itself in two main forms. The first is trans-cultural shamanism, a cross-cultural set of practices inspired by one or multiple indigenous traditions, which get 'translated' when imported into Western cultural discourse. Second, are the practices that might constitute an indigenous Italian shamanism, native of the land.



My doctoral research aimed at filling an ethnographical gap on trans-cultural forms of shamanism in Italy, and the relation between contemporary forms of folk magic and shamanism. The selection of participants for both trans-cultural shamanism and folk magic traditions was on the basis of networking derived from fieldwork and online engagement with practitioners.

In employing the label 'shaman', I acknowledged that the term has always worked by superimposition over local identifiers, and as a Western scholarly category of the nineteenth century, retains a degree of exoticism in its semantics. These traits are also found in the Italian context, as every region names their vernacular healers with a term sourced from the local dialect or parlance. It is also easier for trans-cultural practitioners to identify foreign practices as shamanistic, than acknowledge that the town healer's practice may fall under the same category. This, I argued, may be due to the absence of romantic exoticism embodied by the 'nextdoor neighbour'. When the label 'shamanism' is employed spontaneously by *Segnatori* (folk magic practitioners), it is reportedly the result of the person moving from regions in the South to the North of Italy, creating an 'exoticising' distance.

My PhD began by looking exclusively at forms of trans-cultural shamanism, with the premise that the types of shamanism present in Italy are either imported and readapted traditions (e.g. Andean, Siberian), or 'Westernised' forms inspired by indigenous traditions (e.g. Core Shamanism, Tensegrity, psychologised shamanisms). The intent was to map all the traditions in Italy, discern their traits, and deduce what the common features are, gaining a comprehensive portrait of contemporary Italian shamanism. The last and most challenging step would have been to compare and contrast contemporary and traditional shamanisms, analysing whether the contemporary mode encompasses enough elements to be defined a form of Shamanism. Contemporary forms, however, appeared more numerous, eclectic, and intertwined with other non-shamanic traditions than I anticipated, making it difficult to address them all rigorously. At the same time, a tradition that claimed to be autochthonous/indigenous surfaced, hinting at further types of traditions to be evaluated as forms of Italian shamanism.

This resulted in a change of direction, as for my study to include both autochthonous and trans-cultural forms, I focused ethnographic fieldtrips on one form of 'imported' shamanism, researching the Tradition of *Segnatori* as a possible form of Italian shamanism. The imported form of Shamanism that I chose to focus on is 'Core Shamanism', a Western tradition founded by Michael Harner, and defined by its founder and practitioners as 'trans-cultural' shamanism to indicate that it is not linked to one specific culture or place, transversal to them all.

The only ethnographic map of Italy was provided by CESNUR (Center for the Study of New Religions), showing that less than ten groups in Italy share a common pattern, based on eclectic practices imported and reinterpreted from non-Western traditions. The most widespread group was formed by the Core Shamanism tradition, alongside solitary practitioners predominantly inspired by its teachings, and using an eclectic approach. In addition, there were several Castaneda-inspired traditions (Tensegrity and Arte de Vivir a Propósito), and Andean-inspired traditions (Tawantin and Fratellanza Solare degli Intic Churincuna), one Siberian-inspired tradition (Where the Eagles Fly), and two that combine shamanism and psychology to different degrees (Biotransenergetica and Deer Tribe Metis Medicine Society). (By 'inspired', I mean that these groups are inspired by a primary author or tradition, but maintain some form of eclecticism and do not appear to be strict reconstructionisms.)

During the first two months of fieldwork, the map of the ethnographic field was reshaped. Four of the groups previously noted by CESNUR were inactive, and many others emerged. The more I contacted solitary practitioners, the more groups I discovered, facing the difficulty of how to define or discount each as 'shamanism'. One aspect that emerged was a strong eclecticism within the community, and how they

perceived shamanism as a non-exclusive religious practice combinable with other New Age practices.

In November 2016, I created a Facebook group 'Praticanti di sciamanesimo in Italia' (Practitioners of Shamanism in Italy), aiming to gather practitioners from different groups or traditions, and optimistically, to engage with the Italian shamanic community. This Facebook experiment proved decisive to my research for data collection resulting from polls, comments, posts, and discussions held within the group, and for networking. One member informed me of the book, *Il cerimoniale iniziatico: nello sciamanesimo italiano* ('The Ceremony of Initiation in the Italian shamanism') by Tatiana Longoni (2016), through which I discovered a tradition in Italy that claimed to be native to the place — not imported from another country or culture, but 'legitimately Italian'. I contacted Longoni, who suggested I spoke directly to the primary holder of that tradition, Michela Chiarelli. Chiarelli defines herself as 'the last Italian Shaman of a hereditary tradition' ('L'ultima sciamana italiana di tradizione ereditaria').

In May 2017, after collecting ten hours of interviews with Chiarelli, the core traits and features of her tradition were clearly identifiable with most aspects similar to other centuries-old autochthonous traditions in Italy, falling under the umbrella of folk vernacular magic. Chiarelli stated that the only difference is that her tradition remains 'pure and unadulterated', whereas all other forms of Italian folk magic are characterised by a syncretism with Catholicism.

This opened a new inquiry into the role that folk magic plays in relation to shamanism. New research questions arose, such as whether folk magic may be seen as a form of shamanism, considering interweaving and contrasting points between the two. After further research on folk magic in Italy, I systematised the regional variations of these vernacular practices under the Tradition of *Segnature*, identifying the signs and gestures performed throughout the country (Segnature) — the unifying trans-regional core of this tradition. I argued that that this can be deemed a form of Indigenous shamanism, first problematising both concepts. Shamanism, I argued, needs to be understood in a non Western-centric and 'exoticising' perspective. Whenever there is difficulty in defining shamanism, a useful methodology is to combine discourse analysis with a context-sensitive approach to the term. As for the matter of indigeneity, I argued for a distinction between indigenous people and indigenous religions. I questioned whether a religion, to be deemed indigenous, needs to be practised by indigenous people, concluding that this is not necessarily the case. 'Indigenous people' is a political category, while 'indigenous religion' is a religious studies concept. Disentangling these terms yields a more nuanced understanding of both.

Concluding my project, I suggested that the Tradition of Segnature can indeed be considered a form of Italian indigenous shamanism, and that adopting this definition will benefit the community of practitioners, as well as the scholarly investigation around indigeneity in a religious context and shamanism.

News on Funding in the Field

Dr. Egil Asprem interviews Dr. Bernd-Christian Otto on a landmark Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) research grant for the project, 'Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective' at the Center for Advanced Studies in Erlangen (CAS-E), Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany.

EA: You were recently awarded a huge grant from the DFG – ca. € 9.2 million – to start a new research group at the University of Erlangen. Congratulations!

Thanks, Egil! We have received funding of ca. 4.6 million Euros for the first funding period of four years (2022-2026), but the amount will indeed double to ca. 9.2 million in the case we are granted a second funding period (2026-2030), depending on an intermediate assessment by the German research foundation.



EA: Can you tell us a bit about the project? What is the main focus, and how are you planning to spend that big bag of money?

BCO: The project is a so-called 'Kollegforschungsgruppe', translated as 'Center for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences and the Humanities' (see <https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/projekt/491072807?language=en>). In a nutshell, 'Kollegforschungsgruppen' are interdisciplinary research groups with exceptional funding conditions and an outstanding international reputation. They combine an international fellowship programme with local high-profile research, whereby a large number of leading experts have the possibility to convene and explore an innovative research topic over a fairly long period of time (4-8 years). With a local staff of more than 10 employees (3 professors, 3 post-doc coordinators, 3 administrative staff, up to 5 student helpers), and available funding for up to 7 full fellowships per year (3 senior, 3 junior, plus 1 special fellowship that we call 'permanent fellow'), the center will host one of the biggest esotericism-focused research projects in the world.

The project title is 'Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective'. The center's main goal is to compare the interpretation, rationalisation and legitimisation strategies of esoteric practices from a global perspective, and to carve out why they are successful in different cultural and regional contexts. Particular attention is given to their apparent 'resilience' vis-à-vis globally dominant discourses of science and technology. A mid-term goal is the development of a cultural theory of esoteric practices, which seeks to explain this resilience, their typological similarities across a large number of cases, and their different, culture-bound evaluations. The project is situated at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (Press release: <https://www.fau.eu/2021/09/30/news/research/dfg-awards-funding-to-centre-for-advanced-studies-in-humanities-and-social-sciences-at-fau/>). I have applied for the project with three colleagues from FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg: Michael Lackner, who is a leading sinologist; Andreas Nehring, whose area is religious studies with a focus on India; and Dominik Müller, who is a political anthropologist with Southeast Asia focus.

EA: 'Esoteric practice' is a key concept in the project. How do you define it?

BCO: The center will adopt a heuristic working definition of 'esoteric practices', based on four criteria: (1) a focus on contingency management, (2) specialisation and the formation of expertism (which includes strategies of secrecy), (3) the reliance on opaque efficacy as well as (4) social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. As the project has a decidedly global focus, we decided to apply a polythetic second-order definition of 'esoteric practices' that, so we hope, can be fruitfully applied from a transcultural perspective, thus transcending 'Western' definitions and perspectives. Of course, our definition is neither bullet-proof nor the final word on the matter, but we do hope that it can work as a heuristic starting point for the collection of relevant data; as it is a 'working' definition in the true sense of the word, we intend to continually modify it over the course of the project, in an open-minded exchange with research partners and practitioners from multiple cultural environments.

Note that the project has a decidedly contemporary focus, hence one of its leading disciplines is cultural and social anthropology, and we hope to attract a large number of anthropologists who work on contemporary esoteric practices across the globe. Furthermore, the project has a praxeological focus, meaning that we are not so much interested in ideas, dogmas, or theories, but rather in practices which, of course, always include underlying rationales or rationalities. We have already developed a typological matrix with some 30 questions for the comparative assessment of such practices. Finally, we intend to focus on experts and specialists who underwent lengthy training, education or initiation, rather than self-taught everyday 'lay' practitioners, thus demarcating our field from the wide areas of lived, 'folk' or 'popular' religion.

EA: The global scope is striking, especially in view of ongoing debates about the delimitation of 'western' esotericism. Your praxeologically based definition seems to seek a more generic and comparative concept of esotericism, which contrasts with notions of esotericism as historically contingent. How do you view your project in light of these discussions? Do you consider esotericism as a cross-cultural comparative term? And what does that imply for organizations such as ESSWE?

BCO: While writing the proposal, we were of course aware of the ongoing discussions in the study of Western esotericism with regard to the validity of the adjective 'Western', and we heard the calls to discard the latter. However, as three (out of four) of us are specialised in Asian cultures, we did not feel bound to debates in the study of Western esotericism in the first place. What we did feel was that we are in need of a more general approach for our project; an approach that 'provincialises' Western esotericism on the one hand (acknowledging its historical specifics), while indeed conceptualising 'esoteric practices' as a cross-cultural comparative term on the other. In particular, the 'rejected knowledge' narrative appeared to us as a pattern that is certainly prevalent in the 'West' (however its alleged boundaries are precisely demarcated), but that is not generalisable from a transcultural perspective. If one adopts the latter perspective, a large number of cases come to view that point to high degrees of acceptance or even institutionalisation of esoteric practices in different parts of the world. To name just two out of many examples, in the Fu-Jen-University in Taipei (Taiwan), there is currently an official master's curriculum in the art of conjuring spirits and various related disciplines. In some parts of India, practitioners of *vastu* (an Indian equivalent of Chinese feng shui) have learned their art in universities, they get PhDs, dress up in business attire, and are treated respectfully. Out of precisely those observations, our four-fold definition of esoteric practices emerged, as it allows for applying its criteria independently of one another and then, in a second step, to relate them in a given cultural scenario. While doing so, it appears that 'similar' practices, (their degree of 'similarity' of course needs to be specified through acknowledging culture-bound differences), may be subject to different cultural embeddings and

social evaluations in different parts of the world. Practices for the fabrication of numerological talismans, for instance, may be forbidden and criminalised in certain contexts (e.g., in Saudi Arabia or Brunei), whereas they function as an integral part of mainstream religious practice in others (e.g., in certain regions of Tibet). The degree of ‘deviance’ is indeed something that is of great interests to us: what are the cultural conditions and driving forces that lead to ostracisation and devaluation of certain esoteric practices in one cultural setting, and to their acceptance and institutionalisation in another? Finding explanations for such culture-bound evaluative processes from a global perspective will also help to identify the ‘resilience strategies’ that inhere in many esoteric practices.

A second observation that guided our application process was that the debate on discarding the adjective ‘Western’ in the study of Western esotericism mainly led to one particular methodological extension, namely, to include the method of entangled history (*histoire croisée*) in the study of Western esotericism. To us, this appears of course as a totally valid research strategy, but we wanted to go at least one step further. Historical entanglements are only one side of the matter, as they can only be made relevant to material that is in fact historically related or dependent. Yet we also wanted to be able to compare the practices of contemporary Chinese *feng shui* masters with those of Israeli experts in practical kabbalah, Indian vastu-offerors, an Egyptian *sahir*, Caribbean *brujas*, West African *vodun* practitioners, or Malayan *bomoh* exorcists – i.e., to practitioners that appear to be historically and conceptually detached. Of course, in the 21st century there are historical entanglements and connections all over the place, not least due to the internet, but there still remains plenty of data that is largely unconnected – and we wanted to analyse and compare this material under one umbrella term. To allude to the terminology in one of your articles, our main focus lies indeed on analogous-synchronic comparison, not on homologous-synchronic or homologous-diachronic comparison. Even though comparative work of this kind (analogous-synchronic) has received much headwind in the humanities over the past decades (especially in anthropology and religious studies), we decided to distance ourselves from this – in our view exaggerated – critique and to engage instead with full force in a large-scale interdisciplinary and comparative research project of global scope.

EA: I'm struck by how some aspects of your definition – contingency management, causal opacity – resemble typical features of ‘magic’, and not only of the ‘learned’ kind. Care to comment?

BCO: Well, you got me there. The driving force behind the definition was, however, not my particular take on the matter, but the necessity to demarcate the new project from the existing one in Erlangen. Not all readers of this newsletter may know that at FAU Erlangen-Nuremberg, a large collaborative research project on divination has been underway since 2009, the so-called ‘International Consortium for Research in the Humanities “Fate, Freedom and Prognostication: Strategies for coping with the future in East Asia and Europe”’, funded by the BMBF (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung). For over a decade, this project compared texts, techniques and theories of divination in Chinese and European medieval history, with impressive results (it attracted almost 200 visiting scholars and led to more than 350 publications). The new project was designed to build on the fruits of the existing one – hence we still include divination in our definition –, but it should also move beyond the former in many respects: hence its global, contemporary and largely praxeological focus. As esoteric practices usually stress the manipulative aspect, rather than merely striving to ‘save the soul’, the definition indeed resembles typical features of magic. Yet we wanted to avoid the latter term, also for political and monetary reasons, (well, the chancellor explicitly said that he would not accept a new ‘Hogwarts’ at Erlangen), and ‘esoteric’ – after long discussions! – seemed the most reasonable semantic marker, as it brings context, expertism, secrecy, and deviance into the picture. And indeed, we are also keen on assessing oral ritual traditions – e.g., in contemporary African contexts –, hence the ‘learned’ aspect may not be relevant in the sense that the practices need to be written down, but we do expect that oral traditions can be utterly complex and therefore

remain ‘learned’ in a somewhat different sense.

EA: How has the project evolved so far, and what are its next steps?

BCO: The project formally began its work on April 1, 2022. We faced formal difficulties in the beginning, especially due to an initial lack of office space at FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg, but have in the meantime hired basic staff and published our first call for applications for junior and senior fellowships. This first cohort of fellows will be invited from October 2022 onwards. I look forward to inspiring applications from ESSWE members and hope for a great ride with this project in the years to come.

Event Reviews

'Occultism and Politics in East-Central Europe'
The 4th Conference of CEENASWE
September 27-29, 2021
Prague, Czech Republic

Karolina Maria Hess, Jagiellonian University

Since the nineteenth century, East-Central Europe has experienced rapid social, political, and economic changes, which caused transformation and upheavals in local societies. Rising nationalism culminating in the Revolutionary year 1848, echoes of the Romantic movement, ongoing industrialisation, First World War, the emergence of national states and disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, later followed by World War Two and the establishment of the socialist regimes represent some of the key milestones the region went through. New sciences emerged, and local intellectuals also tried to cope with the impetus of new discoveries in the Orient. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the rise of occultism and its further spread throughout Europe represented a peculiar reaction to some mentioned milestones. Local states dealt with these occult and esoteric movements differently, from suppression to silent support, and the movements themselves had various ideas about the meaning and aims of nations. Through the conference, we wished to investigate the links between state, power, and occult and esoteric ideas, movements, and key figures more closely.

After a long break in on-site academic events, and the resulting changes to the conference plans, the 4th Colloquium of the Central and Eastern European Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism, a regional subgroup of ESSWE, took place in Prague. The event, held at Vila Lanna from 27-29 September, 2021, was organized by Dr. Pavel Horak (Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences) and Dr. Karolina Maria Hess (Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations, Jagiellonian University, Poland). It was sponsored by the Czech Academy of Sciences through the Strategy AV21 Programme, 'Europe and the State Between Civilisation and Barbarism' <http://stat-av21.cz>, and it was organized in collaboration with the Czech Association for Social Anthropology, Anthropology of Religion, Magic and Supernatural Network and under the auspices of ESSWE.

The focus of the conference was relations between politics and occultism in East-Central Europe in various historical and local contexts. Because of the ongoing situation, the conference, although planned onsite, was held in hybrid format for those who couldn't take part in person. On the day of the participants' arrival, an informal meeting took place in the 'old-fashioned' Prague pub, Na Slavníku.

The main part of the event was opened on September 28 with a keynote by Marco Pasi (University of Amsterdam), entitled 'Esoteric Forms of Nationalism: From the Margins to the Core'. Defining nationalism as both an ideology and a variety of concrete political movements, understood as one of the major forces influencing the cultural, social, and political landscape of Europe in the last two centuries, Professor Pasi discussed phenomena from various timelines and areas. As he noted, 'several theories have been elaborated by scholars to interpret this



From left: Marco Pasi, Gyorgy Szonyi, Vladimir Kiseljov, and Jan Miklas-Frankowski.

phenomenon, which remains one of the most interesting but also complex ones in modern politics. However, despite the growing amount of literature devoted to the subject, not enough attention has been given to the ways in which the history of nationalism has been interlocked with particular aspects of religion, such as alternative spirituality and western esotericism.' Professor Pasi focused on those examples where nationalist authors had esoteric or mystical leanings, and discussed the relationship that seems to exist between three spheres of phenomena: European nationalism, religious individualisation, and Western esotericism. As case studies, he focused on four significant figures of European cultural history: the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798-



Conference dinner at Vila Lanna, Prague.

1855), the Italian political activist Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872), the Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), and the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935). As Pasi noted, all of them played a significant role in the nationalist discourses of their respective countries, producing highly sophisticated oeuvres, which in the case of the three poets at least, were also of extraordinary literary significance. Furthermore, apart from their involvement as intellectuals in the production of nationalist ideology, they were also subjected, especially after their deaths, to a process of iconisation, which turned them into fetishised symbols of national identity.



Kalač, Petr, Pavel Langer, and Bohumil Vurm. *Lexicon of the Czech Tarot*. Vladimír Kvasnička: nakladatelství Vodnář, 2020.

as the CEE region is – for many reasons – less known and analysed than Western Europe. The connotations of national identity, forms of cooperation, outcomes of the relationship between political and esoteric ideas, the political spectrum of the esoteric views, and many other topics were quite surprising for the audience. And of course, the situation of post-war USSR countries and their entanglement with occultism, so rarely mentioned at general conferences devoted to esotericism, became a topic of lively discussion, and further comparative research ideas and plans. The full conference program, accompanied by abstracts can be found here: <https://ceenaswe.wordpress.com/2021/09/23/the-4th-ceenaswe-conference-occultism-and-politics-in-east-central-europe/>.

Undoubtedly, the presentations on local esoteric phenomena – Czech Hermeticism and esoterically inspired Art – enriched the conference. Conference participants saw examples of publications from book collections of the Documentation Center of the Czech Hermeticism prepared by Petr Kalač, preceded by research papers introducing the



Conference location at Vila Lanna, Prague.

Czech Hermetic scene. Vladimír Kisel'jov's presentation on his paintings focused on esoteric symbolism in art was also illuminating.

The main part of the conference was supplemented by the network's Central Committee meeting, resulting in a broadening of the group, (consisting so far of Professors György E. Szönyi, Rafał Prinke, Nemanja Radulović, and Dr. Karolina Maria Hess), by the admission of two new scholars – Dr. Júlia Gyimesi and Dr. Pavel Horák. (See the details at the CEENASWE link above.)

During the conference dinner and many other informal meetings, further plans for the network were discussed: an online database for academic esoteric-related bibliography from the region, a CEE regional dictionary focused on Western Esotericism in Brill's reference series, and further publications and research projects. However, the conference didn't end with this; on the last day, the participants went out on a trip – an organized walk around Prague, concentrated on its most interesting spots related to alchemy, magic and Western esotericism. The plan and introduction was offered by Vladimír Kisel'jov from Janáček Academy of Arts in Prague, and additionally enriched with the comments and anecdotes of participants whose research was often intertwined with the fate of this magical city. The next CEENASWE Conference is planned to be held in Poland in 2023. For the photo gallery of the participants, conference venue, and the trip around Prague, many thanks to György E. Szönyi.

'Mystical and Esoteric Teachings in Theory and Practice: Esotericism in Philosophy, Literature and Art'
12th International Conference of ASEM (the Association for the Study of Esotericism and Mysticism)
February 3-5, 2022
Moscow, online

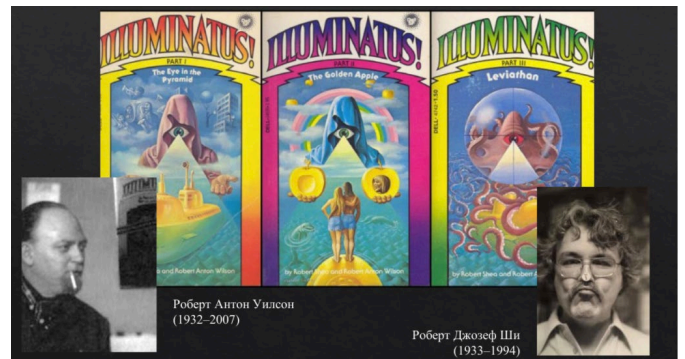
Yulia Sergievskaya, ASEM Secretary
Sergey Pakhomov, ASEM Chair

The twelfth International Conference 'Mystical and Esoteric Teachings in Theory and Practice: Esotericism in Philosophy, Literature and Art', organized by the ASEM together with the Russian Institute of Theater Arts (GITIS) was held on February 3-5, 2022. The languages of the conference were Russian and English.



The conference was held online, and this situation made it possible to expand the geography of participants widely: in addition to the traditionally active Moscow and St. Petersburg, other cities and states were in touch, i. e. Krasnoyarsk, Stavropol, Nizhny Novgorod, Kazan, Jerusalem, Minsk, Gdansk, Krakow, and Columbia (Missouri). During the conference, 49 lectures were given across several sessions, such as: 'Philosophy, Methodology, Religion and Esotericism'; 'Esoteric Images and Plots in Literature and Culture'; 'Esotericism in Music'; 'Esotericism in Art and Architecture'; 'Esotericism in Theater'; 'Esotericism in Cinema'; and 'Esoteric Culture in the Eastern Countries'.

The goal of the conference was to explain mystical and esoteric elements in literature and art, to reflect on previously neglected new aspects in the history of 'secret knowledge,' to discuss possible implications of the study of esotericism to art history and literary history, and to analyze social and psychological reasons for the popularity of movies, TV-shows, and literature about witches, vampires, magicians, and so on. All presentations were prepared with a strong scientific approach. Below are reviews of a selection of the many highly engaging lectures.



Slide from the presentation by Kuzmishin E., 'Transmutation of the Illuminate: From the margins to the center'.

The first session, 'Philosophy, Methodology, Religion and Esotericism' included Eugeni Kuzmishin (Cand. of Sciences, Moscow), with the lecture 'Transmutation of the Illuminate: from the margins to the center'. A small provincial paramasonic order of the 18th century underwent a series of radical changes in order to become a world center of behind-the-scenes power, extending its reach equally to believers and non-believers. No other organization in human history has been characterized by such a contrast between its real properties, and its image in world fiction and art. If it were not for the 'Order of the Illuminati', it is possible that an important and complex sphere of world culture – *conspirology* – would not have developed to the widespread extent that we are accustomed to today.

Pavel Nosachev (Dr. of Sciences, Professor, Higher School of Economics, Orthodox Svyato-Tikhonovsky University of Humanities, Moscow) addressed a modern theme, with his lecture 'The image of the exorcist in modern media culture' ('Esoteric images and plots in literature and culture' session). According to many researchers, exorcism is now experiencing a second 'golden age'. In his presentation, Dr. Nosachev addressed three aspects of this: its genesis in the occult environment of the early 20 cent.; the development during the overlap of classical Christian, esoteric and media discourses; and the current state as a complex bricolage construct.

Monika Rzczycka (Dr. Hab., Professor, Gdansk University, Poland), and Agata Świerżowska (Dr. Hab., Professor, Jagiellonian university, Krakow, Poland) presented in the same session on Polish esoteric literature at the beginning of the 20th century, in their lecture 'On a publishing imaginative experiment of a Polish esotericist in 1921'. The authors of the paper proposed an interpretation of the most important motifs of *Na skrzydłach szatu* by Jerzy Znamierowski, an experimental text in the perspective of the messianic historiosophy typical for Polish esotericism in the first decades of the 20th century.

Alexander Kolesnikov (Dr. of Sciences, Leading Member of the Scientific Department, GITIS, Moscow), and Lola Kochetkova (Postgraduate candidate, Moscow and USA) participated in the session 'Esotericism in music' with the paper 'Mystical motives of the ballet by Yu. N. Grigorovich on the music of S. S. Prokofiev "Ivan the Terrible"'. The lecture was composed of the ballet influenced interpretation of the images of the Russian Middle Ages, and the central hero, Ivan IV from the perspective of the active presence in the libretto, and in the scenic reality of mystical and otherworldly motives.

Karolina Hess (Ph. D, Assistant Professor, Jagiellonian university, rakow, Poland) and Małgorzata Biały (Jagiellonian University alumni) presented in the session 'Esotericism in art and architecture', with an interesting report 'Sówka: Sacrum, Sexuality, and Silesia'. Erwin Sówka was a Polish painter, born and raised in Silesia. In his paintings, the native landscape interweaves with esoteric and mythological inspirations and motifs. One of the central themes of Sówka's art is women's bodies and sexuality.

Another lecture of note in the session was 'The architectural code of political astrology: Castle Eggenberg in Graz' by Karine Dilanyan (Researcher, Institute for the Study of Astronomy in History, Philosophy and Culture, Moscow). Dilanyan's paper examined the concept of cosmic harmony, the relationship between the Universe and man, expressed through the ideas of natural philosophy and magic, and their embodiment in the architecture of Eggenberg Castle, Graz.

Elena Shakhmatova (Dr. of Sciences, Associate Professor, Head of the Scientific Department, GITIS, Moscow) presented the paper 'The Fleeing Atalanta as an alchemical synthesis of eras in the metaphysical promenade from Maxim Didenko' in the 'Esotericism in Theater' session, speaking on a new art form that takes the medieval alchemical treatise as its basis. During the pandemic, Maxim Didenko and his digital team proposed to create a metaphysical promenade through Kitai-Gorod (Moscow) with a deep immersion in augmented reality that combines different eras.



Slide from the presentation by Khuziakmetova I., 'The mystery of Chartres Cathedral: The history of the labyrinth image, symbols and meanings'.

One particularly engrossing lecture in the session 'Esotericism in cinema' was 'Pneumatic Film d'Art: The Occult Blueprint of German Expressionist Cinema' by Colton Ochsner (MA in Modern German History, PhD Candidate / Fulbright scholar, University of Missouri, USA). Over the past century, the cinematic legacy of German Expressionism has inspired filmmakers and scholars alike with its special effects, visceral characters, and fantastic plotlines. Ochsner presented detailed research material to set forth the argument that the subtlety, the shrewdness, and the subliminality of occult ideography in German Expressionism has been ignored and neglected in most film and historical scholarship.

Ekaterina Morozova (Cand. of Sciences, Senior Researcher, State Institute for Art Studies, Moscow) lectured on the concept of the mirror as a symbol of the sun goddess Amaterasu in Japanese culture since ancient times, in 'What is reflected in the mirror?: Mirror and reflection as notions of mystery of knowledge in Japanese theatre tradition'. The

key argument was that the use and symbolism of the mirror in Japanese theatrical culture shapes and alters not only the physical work of the actor, but their personal search for a deeper, hidden intellectual and emotional essence through their craft. This report was presented in the 'Esoteric culture in the Eastern countries' session.

The caliber of research of the participants, and the wide range of topics reflected in the presentations showed an impressive level of scientific training. After lectures, audience members posed engaging questions, and lively discussions continued afterwards. The conference received overwhelmingly positive feedback from both presenters and attendees. All conference materials will be published in 2022, and the next ASEM Conference will be held in autumn 2023.

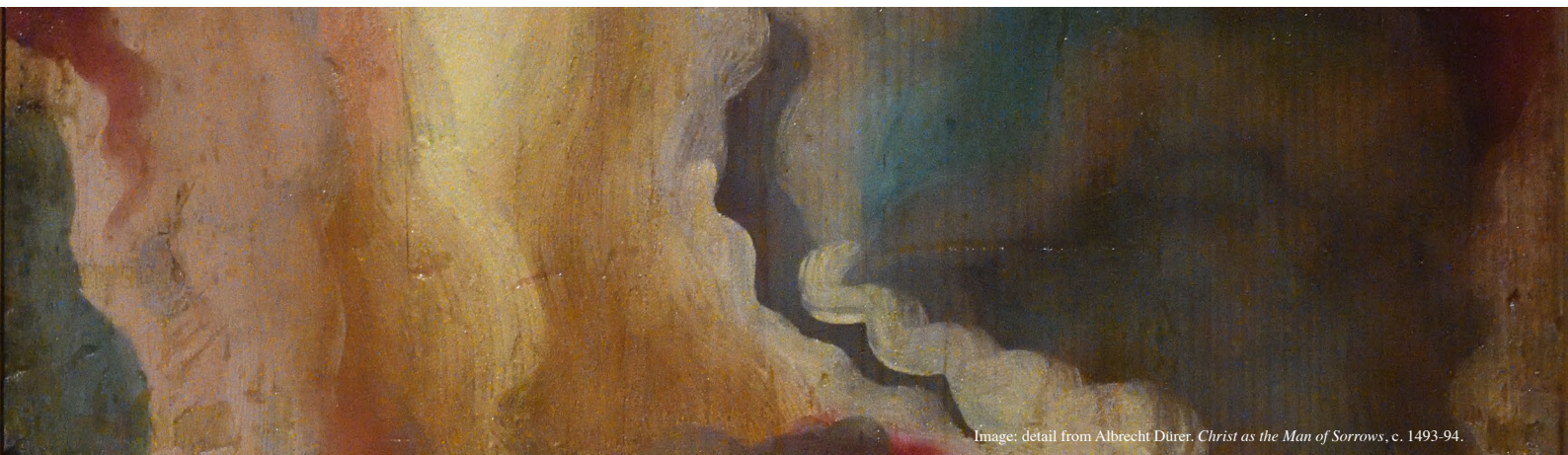


Image: detail from Albrecht Dürer. *Christ as the Man of Sorrows*, c. 1493-94.

Upcoming Events

'The Art of Deception'
Trans- States Conference
September 9-10, 2022
University of Northampton, United Kingdom

An unabashed play on words, a 'trans- state' is, among other things, a coincidentia oppositorum. An alchemical wedding that defines the fixed place, where boundaries are actively transgressed.

Trans- States conferences are each themed upon a Major Arcana Tarot card. The first was The Hanged Man and focused on boundary-crossing, liminality, and the queering of normativity. The second was The Tower, which broadened its scope to include the shock and awe of revelatory and paradigm-shifting occultural experiences, the impact and implications of anti-structure, of alterations in consciousness, and of the revolutionary aspects of paranormality.

The theme of this conference is The Magician card. The contemporary Tarot Magus is an adept of the mystical arts, but the forebearers of this image are even more firmly rooted in the mercurial archetype of the Trickster. Master of stage(d) magic, sleight of hand, spectacle, and misdirection; everything they do is for show—The Magician is nothing without their spellbound audience. Juggler, gamester, huckster, provocateur, and virtuoso performer, The Magician occupies the streets and avenues, the highways and byways, the thoroughfares and village squares. Places of commerce and community, of trade and treachery, of discovery and deception. Quick-witted, unfathomably dexterous and expertly skilled, The Magician appears to perform the impossible and produce the hitherto unimaginable: making space for the virtual to emerge within the bustling midst of the everyday.

The Art of Deception is the art of technē. It is the art, skill, craft, and means by which practice brings about accomplishments that are quite simply—beyond belief.

This transdisciplinary conference and art exhibition will explore the complex interrelationships between contemporary occulture, deception, persuasion, trickery, manipulation, communication, mastery, craftiness, sleight of hand, commerce, technē, technology, and technosis.

KEYNOTES

Erik Davis, PhD – Underground icon, independent scholar, author, award-winning journalist, sometimes podcaster, and popular speaker.

Christine Ferguson, PhD – Professor in English Studies in the Division of Literature and Languages at the University of Stirling

Lionel Snell – Contemporary English magician, publisher and author on magic and philosophy, who publishes under many aliases including, famously, Ramsey Dukes.

Register and purchase tickets via [Trans-States.org](https://trans-states.org).

'Amsterdam as Haven for Religious Refugees in the Early Modern Period'
Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Ritman Research Institute
November 11-12, 2022
Amsterdam, Netherlands
Onsite and online

In the 17th century, Amsterdam became a hotbed of religious exchange, as religious exiles from all over the continent flocked to the Netherlands, and especially its capital city because of relatively lax laws on religious expression and publishing. One center of such exchange was the so-called House with the Heads on Keizersgracht, the home of Louis de Gheer and later his son Laurens. Both men acted as patrons to a variety of religious free thinkers and reformers. Figures such as Jan Comenius, Friedrich Breckling and Christian Hoburg gathered in the de Gheer home to discuss their ideas. Today, the House with the Heads is home to the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica and its associated museum, the Embassy of the Free Mind. In the Autumn of 2022, the Embassy of the Free Mind will present an exhibition on the history of the House with the Heads (October 1, 2022 -January, 1, 2023). In conjunction with this exhibition, we are hosting a conference from November 11-12, 2022 on the role of Amsterdam as a haven for religious refugees. Visit <https://embassyofthefreemind.com/en/library>.

'The Eranos Experience - Spirituality and the Arts from a Comparative Perspective'
Fondazione Giorgio Cini
November 17-19, 2022
Venice, Italy

The Eranos circle originated from the meetings organized by Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (1881-1962) on Lake Maggiore in Ascona, Switzerland, from 1933 onwards. These meetings focused on spirituality, mysticism, myth, and symbolism, bringing together some of the greatest scholars of the time. The influence of Eranos has been pervasive on twentieth-century culture, moving beyond the boundaries of academic scholarship in a strict sense. This conference has two main purposes. The first is to understand how the legacy of Eranos has had an impact on the humanities and the social sciences: we will discuss the question of universals in religious phenomena, the value and usefulness of comparative approaches, the importance given to myths and symbols, the role of historicism, and the similarities between Eranos and contemporary developments, such as the ontological turn in anthropology. The

second goal is to explore the influence, or the echoes of Eranos on the performing and figurative arts, in particular on music, dance, theatre, and painting.

Detailed information: <https://www.cini.it/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CfP-Eranos3.pdf>

Website: <https://www.cini.it/en/events/conference-the-eranos-experience-spirituality-and-the-arts-from-a-comparative-perspective-call-for-papers>

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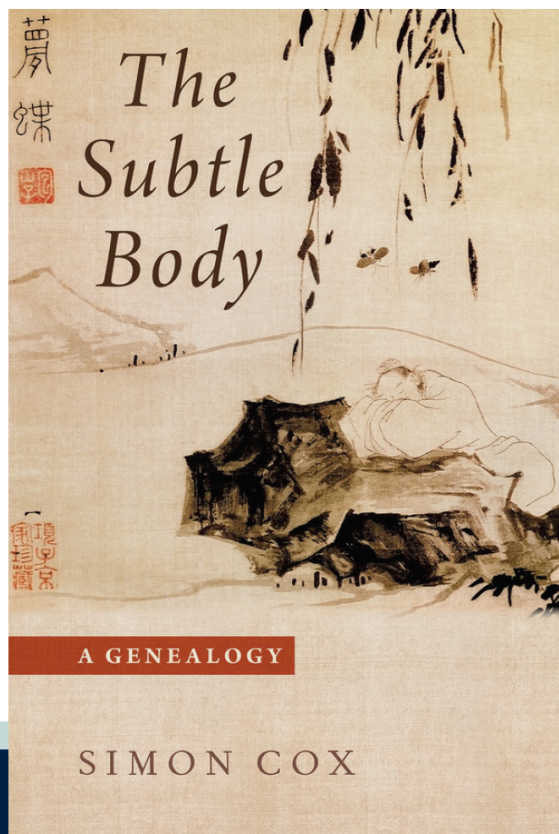
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Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism: The Subtle Body

A Genealogy

Simon Cox



December 2021

Hardcover

9780197581032

248 pages

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How does the soul relate to the body? Through the ages, innumerable religious and intellectual movements have proposed answers to this question. Many have gravitated to the notion of the "subtle body," positing some sort of subtle entity that is neither soul nor body, but some mixture of the two.

Features

- The first history of a concept that is employed in every area of the study of Asian religions
- Synthesizes data from disparate traditions and languages
- Surveys different instantiations or manifestations of the idea of the subtle body

THE AUTHOR: Simon Cox

Simon Paul Cox, PhD, is an independent scholar and translator who works primarily in Chinese, Tibetan, and Greek.

THE SERIES EDITOR: Henrik Bogdan

Henrik Bogdan is a Professor at the University of Gothenburg

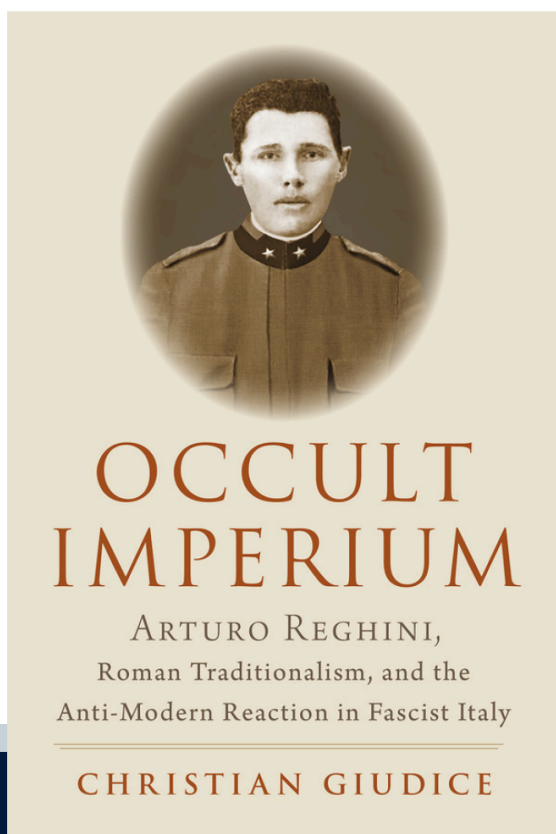
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Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism: Occult Imperium

Arturo Reghini, Roman Traditionalism, and the Anti-Modern Reaction in Fascist Italy

Christian Giudice



Christian Giudice's *Occult Imperium* explores Italian national forms of Occultism, chiefly analyzing Arturo Reghini (1878-1946), his copious writings, and Roman Traditionalism. Trained as a mathematician at the prestigious University of Pisa, Reghini was one of the three giants of occult and esoteric thought in Italy, alongside his colleagues Julius Evola (1898-1974) and Giulian Kremmerz (1861-1930)

Features

- Demonstrates an alternative interpretation of Occultism as anti-modern and anti-progressive
- Provides the first comprehensive overview of the Italian esoteric milieu, from the Risorgimento, to the Great War, to Mussolini's regime, ending with the WWII period
- Includes previously unavailable English translations of works by Reghini, Armentano, Evola, Parise, Guénon, and many others

THE AUTHOR: Christian Giudice

Christian Giudice is an independent scholar

THE SERIES EDITOR: Henrik Bogdan

Henrik Bogdan is a Professor at the University of Gothenburg

February 2022

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Call for applications

The newly established DFG-funded Centre for Advanced Studies (Kollegforschungsgruppe) 'Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective' at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU) is seeking to appoint several

Junior and Senior Fellowships.

The preferred starting date is 1 October 2022.

Project description

The main goal of the Centre for Advanced Studies (CAS) is to compare the interpretation, rationalisation and legitimisation strategies of esoteric practices and their practitioners from a global perspective, and to carve out why and in which ways they are successful, resilient and creative in different cultural and regional contexts. A mid-term goal is the development of a cultural theory of esoteric practices, which seeks to explain their resilience, their typological family resemblances across a large number of cases, and their different culture-bound and politically shaped evaluations. The Centre has a decidedly global and contemporary research focus and adopts a broad heuristic working definition of 'esoteric practices' which includes a variety of aspects such as contingency management, specialisation and the formation of expert systems, secrecy, the reliance on opaque efficacy as well as social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. Simultaneously, the Centre also comparatively investigates creative reinventions of traditional 'esoteric practices' that acquire new hybridising forms in fields of tension with competing cultural registers (e.g. science, new technologies/media, political regimes, religious orthodoxies) which may contribute to their (re-)legitimation.

DFG-funded Centres for Advanced Studies are interdisciplinary research groups with exceptional funding conditions and an outstanding international reputation. They have an initial funding period of four years, with the possibility of prolongation for a second funding period, and combine an international fellowship programme with local high-profile research, whereby a large number of leading experts have the possibility to convene and explore an innovative research topic over a long period of time.

FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg is seeking to appoint its first cohort of several Junior and Senior Research Fellows for the academic year 2022-2023, i.e., for the period from October 2022 to September 2023. Fellowships are awarded for 6-12 months, depending on the scope and duration of the proposed research project (in exceptional cases, shorter stays of at least 2 months are possible). We offer a competitive monthly stipend ranging from €3.000 to €6.000, depending on the scholar's status and experience level, as well as travel costs to and from Erlangen at the beginning and end of the fellowship. Fellows are expected to engage in their individual research on 'alternative rationalities and esoteric practices from a global perspective,' and to actively participate in the centre's weekly activities (lectures series, colloquia, workshops, etc.). Fellows are required to engage with the centre's research agenda, to probe its methodological tools (e.g., a question matrix), and to be amenable to interdisciplinary and transcultural comparisons, in preparation for joint publications

(e.g., collective papers).

Requirements

- Applicants should have a degree and a PhD in **Cultural or Social Anthropology, Religious Studies, Theology, Sociology of Religion, (cross-)regional /-cultural Studies** or in a related interdisciplinary field
- The Centre has a decidedly contemporary research focus, hence applicants are required to pursue a project on **present-day esoteric practices**, based on appropriate research methodologies (e.g., fieldwork, interviews, participant observation)
- The Centre also invites **historically oriented projects that touch upon contemporary esoteric practices** (e.g., by focusing on transfer or entangled history), yet going back to no more than the 19th century
- The Centre has a decidedly global research focus, hence fellowship proposals may focus on **esoteric practices from all world regions and cultural or religious contexts**

The working language of the Centre is English, therefore excellent spoken and written English is required. Furthermore, regular presence at the Centre is required.

The Centre promotes and offers

- Participation in an interdisciplinary, innovative und prestigious DFG-funded joint research project
- Access to extensive international networks of high-profile researchers in the social sciences and humanities
- An open-minded, cooperative team
- Flexible working hours and family-friendly working time schemes
- Professional support with travel, visa, and accommodation arrangements

Applications

Applications should include:

- Cover letter describing the applicant's career path and current research interests
- CV including list of publications
- Outline of the planned research project and how it relates to the agenda of the Centre (max. 5 pages)
- Work sample
- Names and contact details of two potential referees

The latest submission date for applications is **June 30, 2022**. The preferred starting date is 1 October 2022.

In its pursuit of academic excellence, FAU is committed to equality of opportunity and to a proactive and inclusive approach, which supports and encourages all under-represented groups, promotes an inclusive culture and values diversity. FAU is a family-friendly employer and is also responsive to the needs of dual career couples.

Please note that costs arising in connection with your application (travel expenses, etc.) cannot be reimbursed.

For further details about the position, please contact Dr. Bernd-Christian Otto:

bernd.otto1@gmail.com

Applications must be sent in one PDF file to Sandra Losch (administrative manager):

sandra.losch@fau.de