

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

ESSWE Newsletter

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The first *ESSWE Newsletter* (volume 1, number 1) was published in 2006 as a PDF and sent to members of the ESSWE. The *Newsletter* then went online as a blog, at esswe.blogspot.com, from 2007 to 2010. The online *Newsletter* did not attract as many visitors or readers as hoped, however, and so in 2011 the *Newsletter* again reverted to its original PDF form (with volume 2, number 1), and the blog was closed.

This PDF *Newsletter*, prepared in 2011, contains a selection of postings from the blog, preserved for archival purposes before the closed blog was deleted. Most postings are conference reviews, but there are also some articles and reports on other topics.

Material from the blog that is not of lasting interest such as Calls for Papers or conference announcements has not been included. Given the archival function of this *Newsletter* compilation, articles are presented in chronological order. ♦

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Sentimental thoughts on Tübingen

Wouter Hanegraaff, University of Amsterdam

Wednesday, September 5, 2007

I remember very well how in the first half of the 1990s, Antoine Faivre and I were talking about the necessity of getting Western esotericism recognized as a field of research, and of the absence at the time of all those things that belong to an established field, such as academic chairs, teaching programs, peer-reviewed journals, monograph series, scholarly organizations on a national and international level, interdisciplinary exchange with other disciplines, and so on and so forth. At the time, there was nothing, or almost nothing.

That was no more than 15 years ago. And now I suddenly found myself standing on a podium in Tübingen looking at a crowded lecture room full of scholars, including many students and ph.d. students, from many countries, who all shared a real, serious and enthusiastic commitment to Western esotericism as a field of research, and for all or whom (at least, so I imagine) the question of its academic legitimacy is no longer an issue on which to waste one's time.

This is how far we have come in so short a period of time.

The presence of so many young people - students who had taken the trouble to travel all the way to an academic conference like this - was particularly inspiring: it means that Western esotericism is no longer a pursuit dominated by a relatively small circle of "usual suspects" belonging to the older and middle generations (although it was obviously fantastic that almost of them were there as well), but that it has taken root among those who will take the field into the future.

In short, it was a historical event indeed: the moment, as far as I'm concerned, when Western esotericism has definitively "come of age". ♦



Comment by Michael St., September 8, 2007

Yes, it was indeed a historical moment. And the study of Western esotericism may have come of age. It may be a telling sign, then, that the borders of the concept of WE seem to be more blurred than ever. Thus, it was quite interesting to note Antoine Faivre's frequent reminders that things that were being discussed do not really qualify as part of WE in his view. Apart from him, nobody else seemed to care much about that. Most people seemed to be quite happy and excited to have found a new platform, regardless of its conceptual stability. Interestingly, in his presentation Wouter, if I have understood him correctly, already seemed to pave the way for the scholarly deconstruction of the label that everybody seemed to so happy to subscribe to. So, it will be interesting to see what happens in another 15 years.

Conference review: Jubilee Symposium of the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, University of Amsterdam

Friday, November 9, 2007

While riding his bike over the Amsterdam canals in the autumn of 1957, 16-year old Joost R. Ritman conceived the idea of founding a library devoted to the Hermetic tradition. Fifty years later, on October 26, 2007, the now famous Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica celebrated its 50-year jubilee with a splendid exhibition, *Jacob Boehme's Way into the World*, preceded by a two-day conference for invited guests.

There was indeed much cause for celebration, for not only did the BPH survive a serious crisis during the 1990s when the invaluable collection of incunabula and other early prints risked being put up for auction, but it has emerged from those difficult years more strongly than ever before. The library staff was expanded, many new exhibition and research/publishing projects were initiated, and perhaps most spectacular of all, the BPH's founder recently acquired one of the most famous monumental buildings from the 17th century Dutch Golden Age: the "Huis met de Hoofden" (House with the Heads), located on one of the Amsterdam canals, which will become the library's future home.

The Huis met de Hoofden (image, right, courtesy of bmz.amsterdam.nl) carries special significance for the BPH both historically and symbolically. In 1634 it was acquired by the Dutch merchant Louis de Geer, whose collection of books on heterodox religious traditions showed many similarities with the present collection of the BPH. In the same house, de Geer offered hospitality to Jan Amos Comenius, whose beliefs and aspirations of spiritual reform strongly



resonate with those that inspired the present library's founder. It was therefore appropriate that the participants in the BPH's Jubilee Symposium were received on this historical spot.

Speakers at the symposium were:

- Roelof van den Broek (Professor emeritus, University of Utrecht)
- Antoine Faivre (EPHE, Paris)
- Katya Genieva (Library for Foreign Literature, Moscow)
- Carlos Gilly (Senior Researcher, Ritman Institute)
- Frans A. Janssen (former director of the BPH)
- Jean-Pierre Mahé (EPHE, Paris)
- Johannes van Oort (University of Nijmegen)
- Esther Oosterwijk-Ritman (Director/librarian of the BPH)
- A.W. Rosenberg (Librarian Ets Haim/Livraria Montezinos, Amsterdam)
- Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann (Freie Universität, Berlin)
- The BPH's founder Joost R. Ritman (honorary speaker).

The symposium was followed by the official opening of the exhibition on Jacob Boehme, with a presentation of the first copy of the exhibition catalogue to the Dutch minister of Education, Culture & Science, R.H.A. Plasterk. This catalogue is in fact much more than a catalogue: it is also an important collection of scholarly essays on the history of the transmission of Böhme's work and the crucial role that was played in this regard by the Dutch Abraham Willemsz van Beyerland.

The exhibition including a unique collection of Böhme manuscripts is open to visitors, and is warmly recommended to members of the ESSWE. Further information can be found at the BPH's website. ♦

Comment by Joyce Pijnenburg, November 11, 2007

As another visitor, I greatly enjoyed these two days and the atmosphere of enthusiasm it was set in.

The conference was held in the "Comenius hall" formerly "Big hall" of the Huis met de Hoofden. In her talk, Esther Oosterwijk presented the library's plans for the building. In the next few years, it is going to be thoroughly renovated and decorated in seventeenth century style, in order to restore it to its original glory, that of the Dutch Golden Age in the time of the de Geer family.

Once finished, they are planning to use it, more so than the building in the Bloemstraat where the library is housed now, as a platform for those interested, especially scholarly but also more generally, in Hermetic philosophy and related currents.

Conference review: Conference on Western Esotericism held in Åbo/Turku, Finland, August 15-17, 2007

Olav Hammer, University of Southern Denmark

Friday, November 23, 2007

A sure sign of the vitality of esotericism studies is the fact that it was possible to attract scholars to two separate conferences on this topic, held within three weeks of each other. Almost immediately after the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism had completed its first conference in Tübingen, the Donnerska Foundation hosted a conference on Western esotericism in Åbo/Turku, Finland (Åbo is the Swedish name, and Turku the Finnish name; the Donnerska Foundation uses Swedish).

The theme of the conference was linked to its geographical location. Besides accepting papers on any aspect of the study of Western esotericism (as exemplified by contributions on subjects as diverse as Christian theosophy, the legacy of Rudolf Steiner and new religious movements in Russia), the organizers particularly encouraged participants to present papers that dealt with esotericism in the Scandinavian countries. Papers on Freemasonry in Sweden and Finland, on symbolist art in Finland, on kabbalah in Sweden, on the theosophical movement in Denmark and on Swedish queen Christina's esoteric interests are just a few examples of the latter.

The geographical focus was particularly reflected in the choice of keynote addresses. Scandinavia has throughout the centuries been a recipient of esoteric currents coming from the European continent. In the early modern period, Hermetic and Paracelsian ideas and practices were highly influential in Scandinavian intellectual milieus. Jole Shakelford has for years been researching the influence of Paracelsian medicine in Denmark and Norway, and presented some of his findings in a paper entitled "Western Esotericism and the History of European Science and Medicine in the Early Modern Period".

The Scandinavian countries have also contributed original building blocks to the esoteric discursive repertoire. The best-known example is Emanuel Swedenborg, the topic of a paper by Jane Williams-Hogan entitled "The Place of Emanuel Swedenborg in the Spiritual Saga of Scandinavia". Other figures may be of lesser international fame, but have nevertheless decisively influenced the course of religious history in Europe. Mark Sedgwick's paper "Ivan Aguéli, Europe's first Sufi shaykh" introduced the arguably first neo-Sufi in European history, as well as one of the formative influences on René Guénon.

Paracelsian, mystic and neo-Sufi currents such as these constitute just some of the many alternative and partly marginalized aspects of the larger European religious landscape. This is an ecology of coexisting and competing voices which has traditionally but erroneously been

described as if one set of religious actors—mainstream, theological Christianities—had established an unquestioned hegemony. Kocku von Stuckrad's paper "Esoteric Discourse and the European History of Religion: The Emergence of a New Interpretational Framework" served as a topical reminder that Western esotericism inscribes itself in the broader field of a plural European history of religions.

The study of Western esotericism has in the last decades developed from a narrow field dominated by a handful of scholars, to being a major area of research. Esotericism outside the geographical and linguistic centre of Europe, however, still remains an understudied area. Olav Hammer's and Henrik Bogdan's paper "On the Current Status of Research into Western Esotericism in Scandinavia" surveyed the existing literature on esotericism in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, and pointed out some of the main lacunae in the field. One reason for the scarcity of research has to do with the concentration of research activities on a few historical currents and the almost complete neglect of others. Another reason is the fact that Scandinavian scholars have tended to publish their findings in local languages, making them virtually inaccessible to their colleagues in other countries.

Hammer and Bogdan, however, also presented two initiatives that will go a considerable way toward improving this situation.

- On the one hand, they have taken the initiative to edit a volume that will present state-of-the-art research on all major currents in the four Scandinavian countries, historically spanning from the late 16th century up to the present day.
- On the other hand, researchers involved in the study of Western esotericism will become more aware of each others' work and will be able to network more efficiently, thanks to a Scandinavian affiliate of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism, the Scandinavian Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism (SNASWE).

Olav Hammer's closing address noted that the study of esotericism over the last three decades has unearthed a mass of historical data, but that scholars have with few exceptions been much more reticent to place these data in broader theoretical frameworks. Even the nature and identity of the very label "esotericism" is far from settled. As this young field matures, the study of esotericism will no doubt continue to grapple with these and other truly fundamental theoretical issues. ♦

Conference review: Intellectual Stendhalism in Tübingen: A personal account of the Tübingen conference

Joyce Pijnenburg, University of Amsterdam

Tuesday, December 4, 2007

Together with a few fellow students of the MA in Mysticism and Western Esotericism, I arrived in Tübingen from Amsterdam by train. I had never been in the city before, and because I had been working so feverishly on my paper, I had not taken any time at all to dive into its rich history. I knew hardly more about it than its having been a centre of origin for Rosicrucianism, as well as of the scholarly tradition of the 'Tübinger Schule' (in-)famous in the world of classical philosophy for its Plato-interpretation. These facts, added to the fame and age of the city's university, would have been ample reason to hold the very first conference of the ESSWE in Tübingen. The first glances allowed to us of the city, during our walk from the station to the hotel, told me that it might be an even more fitting site for this event than I could have imagined. The park was quiet, the houses on our way up the hill were charming, and the streets full of students like ourselves. A sensation of scholarship dominated the atmosphere.

The conference started off with a lecture by the renowned Egyptologist Jan Assmann. Notwithstanding the evident relevance of his work for our field, I had not expected Assmann to expound on esotericism as such. But he did, in a clear and balanced elaboration on the Egyptian and also the Greek features of early esotericisms. Assmann was one of the few people to present on ancient esoteric discourses. This lecture was an appropriate start, not only because of the historical antecedence of its subject matter.

This was only the beginning of three inspiring days. Perhaps it was because this was the first get-together of so many scholars of esotericism in Europe for decades that, outside the keynote lectures, I myself, as well as almost everyone I met, seemed to have difficulties in choosing which presentations to attend. Yet we had to decide, and so, after having marked in my program the lectures I definitely did not want to miss, I sneaked in and out of halls, sometimes at the risk of disturbing a presentation. Luckily, this turned out to be possible, despite the squeaking floor of the middle room and notwithstanding the extremely tight conference schedule – or perhaps, rather, thanks to it.

Three days filled with lectures of generally high quality could not but lead to a form of intellectual Stendhalism: we learned very many, very interesting facts, in very little time. Let me freshen our memory in a brief overview of a number of presentations.

We were informed about the 'double bind of secrecy' in the construction of esoteric traditions; about the role the concept of mnemohistory might be able to play outside the history of Egypt; about young Pico's recognition of (non-traditional beauty) in discordia concors; about yet another inversion, the female side of Kabbalah as active principle; about the role of light and love in Ficino's cosmology, as well as the role of Orphism in his discussions of love; about the reception history of the Giants of Genesis; about Kabbalah as contemplation in Reuchlin; about the westernness or non-westernness of western Sufism; about dolphins and sexual practice of Kabbalah; about the way in which Blavatsky connected the future to the past; about the esotericism of Hermes Trismegistus; about the rationale behind the order of saints of the Crowleyan Ecclesia Gnostica Catholica. And we also learned that Islam means nine mountains and thus stands for Chechnya; that the scarab with the human head is the key to knowledge of the world; that the four stands for Christ and for materialization; that English myths serve the construction of tradition of the Dutch goddess movement; that the writings of the Dutch novelist Couperus are full of esotericism; that the hierarchy of the Left Hand Path is based on kabbalistic demonology; that Leadbeater possibly took his information from Bailey rather than from a hidden master; that the mysterious Konx Om Pax originally marked the end of a mystery ritual; that esoteric constructions of tradition, in their pointing beyond the present, can be understood as divination. Most of the time these presentations did not only provide information, but also much food for thought and stimulus for discussion.

These discussions went on, albeit in a more leisurely pace, in the Biergarten amongst crowds of Tübingen students. Happy about the success of the conference, our symptoms of Stendhalism decreased while we relaxed over some pints of home-brewn Weizen (the nectar of the Neckar) and a plate of Spätzle or Knödel. Until the early mornings, young and established scholars merged in the merry-making, while we animatedly reflected on the rapid development of the field, on our various study projects and on the future of publishing.

All in all, the conference was a splendid official start-off ceremony of our society. ♦

Conference review:

American Academy of Religion 2007

Cathy Gutierrez, Sweet Briar College, Virginia

Thursday, December 6, 2007

The Western Esotericism Group of the American Academy of Religion had its most successful year at the 2007 meeting in San Diego, California.

In two sessions, one focused on esotericism as an act of transgression and the other jointly sponsored with the New Religious Movements Group, well over 100 people were in attendance at panels over the weekend.

The first session, chaired by Allison Coudert, presented papers ranging from the early fourteenth-century writings of Marguerite Porete, condemned as heretical by the Catholic church and ultimately leading to her execution, to contemporary fieldwork in Oregon on an Ordo Templi Orientis lodge. The five papers presented were all well-received and developed themes related to the interplay of transgression and hegemony in the creation and growth of esoteric currents.

While each incorporated the theme of transgression differently, the creation of a different definition of correct practice while maintaining the necessity of some boundary was a common motif throughout the panel. White versus black magic, esoteric versus exoteric, and antinomian versus orthodox, were among the topics examined that reflected on the creation of alternative practices and beliefs. One scholar discussed the process by which an experimental or marginalized religious expression becomes mainstream in relation to the Swedenborgian church in nineteenth-century America. Another argued that the cultural shift from seeing mysticism pejoratively to viewing it as a normal if not normative form of religiosity should be replicated in esoteric studies. The benefits and desirability of bringing the marginalized to the center were explored, and some concluded that at least for the purposes of academic study, such a move would both expand the academy's field of vision and serve as a theoretical reflection on the function of boundaries in both lived experience and in scholarship. A lively discussion followed that touched on linguistic

differences in relation to the history of terms like "mysticism" and whether esotericism easily lent itself to binary formations like insider and outsider distinctions.

The session jointly sponsored with the New Religious Movements Group was also extremely successful, with over seventy attendees for the panel chaired by Sarah Pike. Focusing on "exchange and innovation" in new religions, the four papers presented ranged from the melding of Asian enlightenment traditions with American psychological discourse to the esoteric underpinnings of Fourierist socialism. Another discussed the creation of Halcyon, an intentional community in California in the early twentieth century that was based on Blavatsky's theosophical teachings in conjunction with speculation on the religious possibilities of electricity. Lastly, a paper was given on the suitability of the terms "outsider" or "visionary" art in relation to the work of Edith Tenbrink: the author argued that "initiatory" art was a more apt category and delineated what may usefully be considered initiatory in esoteric art forms.

The overwhelming success of all of the papers was the highlight of the AAR this year. The Western Esotericism Group had its first business meeting where the topic for next year and the length of terms for membership on the steering committee were discussed. The particular interest sparked by the discussion of esoteric art led the steering committee to dedicate its Western Esotericism session to the visual imagination and the call for papers for the 2008 meeting in Chicago has been submitted with this focus. Thanks to the quick diligence of Allison Coudert, several other groups have already expressed interest in jointly sponsoring an additional session at that meeting and at this writing the decision about which additional sessions will be offered has not yet been made. However, the success of this year's panels and the multiple groups that have expressed an interest in working with the Western Esotericism Group suggest that it will continue to thrive at the AAR for the immediate future. □

The Demarcation of Western Esotericism in Theory and Practice

Sara M. Thejls, University of Amsterdam

Thursday, December 6, 2007

When Western esotericism was established as an independent field of research it was necessarily much more clearly demarcated than is the case today. As a new field, it had to be positioned clearly in relation to other academic categories, so as to place the academic study of esotericism on solid foundations.

Since then the situation has gradually changed. More and more scholars have found a fruitful framework for their own studies in the concept of Western esotericism. One consequence of this is that the specific historical category that Western esotericism once was has been opened up. As Michael Stausberg noted in his response to Wouter Hanegraaff's posting on the Tübingen conference, the borders of the field of Western esotericism are increasingly blurred. The definition of the field has been contested both explicitly and implicitly--explicitly in the theoretical discussions flourishing within academia, and implicitly by the research carried out under the umbrella of Western esotericism.

It is evident when looking at the wide range of topics and approaches presented at the Tübingen conference that the classic definition of Western esotericism as suggested by Antoine Faivre is challenged by the actual research presently carried out in the field. Borders were crossed in time, in space, in approaches and concepts and thus in the subjects studied and presented at the conference under the term Western esotericism. These included such diverse themes as Sufism, ancient platonisms, ancient Jewish magic, Chechen traditionalism, kabbalah in various guises, neo-paganism and contemporary magical orders. Of course, more traditional topics of Western esotericism were also covered, including theosophy, Christian kabbalah, rosicrucianism and alchemy.

That the "fringe" topics were central is by no means a surprise considering the age of Western esotericism as a more or less accepted academic field of study. Now that the field has been quite solidly consolidated in academia, we, as the students and scholars of Western esotericism, have an opportunity to turn our focus inwards and look at the state of the field itself. As is also happening all the time with the broader concept of religion, the limits of the concept of Western esotericism are being explored and challenged. And it is not only the term "esotericism" which is being evaluated, stretched, deconstructed and reassembled. Just as important is the question of what the ambiguous concept of "Western" denotes. Is it a cultural category, a geographical? And what does it imply?

To me at least, it is obvious that we cannot uphold the earlier christocentric demarcation of Western esotericism. Definitional problems are an essential part of the evolution of

an academic field, without which a field would stagnate. Paradigms are there to be challenged in order to fruitfully develop and continually revisit the academic pursuit.

Viewed this way, the broadness of topics at Tübingen is indeed promising. It reflects the enthusiasm and curiosity which is necessary for a field to flourish. It is important, however, that we do not only challenge and explore the boundaries of our field in empirical research. We have to explicitly reconsider the premises for maintaining Western esotericism as a field in its own right. Whether one perceives Western esotericism as a historical or a typological category, the theoretical foundations should be considered and explicitly elaborated.

Retrospectively, it is difficult to see any obvious unifying factor for all the different papers presented at the conference. Then again, I am in no doubt that it all belongs to the field of Western esotericism. I wonder whether we are able to actually find a unifying definition, or whether the case is similar to that of the problem of defining religion--that either the definition is so broad that too much is included, or so narrow that borderline topics get excluded.

Nonetheless, the discussion itself is far more important than the eventual conclusions. Maybe it is possible to find some common denominator by considering the central topic of the conference: tradition and transmission. Can we trace a certain way of constructing tradition and transmitting knowledge which is different from religious movements in general? Revelation is too general a way of claiming religious authority to be of special significance for esotericism; initiation too. However, it seems there is a certain discourse involved in the transmission of knowledge--a dialectic of secrecy and revelation, and a claim to supremacy with regard to the knowledge transmitted. Though not necessarily elitist in the exact sense of the word, there is an air of elitism surrounding esoteric knowledge, making the possessor of knowledge feel privileged to have obtained that knowledge.

The special mode of transmission and the proclaimed secrecy and supremacy of esoteric knowledge is by no means enough for a proper definition of Western esotericism. For instance, it does not even address the problem of defining "Western." However, it might prove useful in the process. Furthermore, it is important that the concept of esotericism becomes more precise in the general study of religion, as in many instances it is used as a mere synonym for secrecy.

It is my hope that there will be many more discussions of this important issue and that our work contributes to the clarification of esotericism in general, and of Western esotericism in particular. ♦

The world of esotericism studies: News from Paris

Jean-Pierre Brach, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes

Monday, December 10, 2007

Three new theses were started at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Paris, Sorbonne) in 2006-07:

- B. Bérard, "Un philosophe et théologien occultisant au XIX^e siècle : l'abbé P.-F.-G. Lacuria (1806-90)."
- F. Buzzeta, "Aspects de la Magia naturalis et de la Cabala practica dans les premières œuvres de J. Pic de la Mirandole (avec éd. & trad. de sources hébraïques)" (co-directed with Professor G. Palumbo, University of Palermo).
- S. Salzani, "Histoire, thématiques et enjeux critiques d'une lecture « ésotérique » de Dante: l'œuvre de Luigi Valli (1878 -1931) et ses continuateurs " (co-directed with Professor A. Cavarero, University of Verona).

Five theses started between 2003 and 2005 are still in progress:

- F. Baroni, "Tommaso Palamidessi (1915-1983) et son école initiatique *archeosophica* : recherches sur l'ésotérisme chrétien dans l'Italie contemporaine (thématiques, sociabilité)."
- J.-C. Boucly, "Magnétisme, mystique et ésotérisme chrétiens chez quelques disciples de N.-A. Philippe (1849-1905)."
- D. Jardin, "La construction d'une "tradition" maçonnique au XVIII^e siècle : emprunts « opératifs », religieux et ésotériques dans les rituels et l'iconographie des

Tableaux de Loge des systèmes français à hauts-grades" (co-directed with Professor P.-Y. Beaurepaire, University of Nice).

- B. Barthet, "Les jésuites et les principaux courants ésotériques en France (1680-1750) : problématiques et enjeux."
- E. Kreis, "Occultisme, antijudaïsme et antimaçonnisme en France, 1864 -1939 : les enjeux d'un amalgame idéologique."

The following are preparing theses for the *diplôme* of the EPHE :

- B. Barret, « L. Lenain et sa *Science Cabalistique* (1823). Sa vie et son œuvre magique d'après des inédits ».
- D. Clairembault, « La correspondance de Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin et Nicolas-Antoine Kirchberger (éd. crit. d'après les ms.) - Ésotérisme et théosophie sous la Révolution ».
- J. Iozia, « C. Jinarajadasa : sa vie, son oeuvre au sein de la Société Théosophique (1902-1953).
- M. Kreçmar, « Edition et commentaire de la *Lettre hiéroglyphique* de F. Barent Coenders van Helpen (1683 ; ms. Lyon) ».

Appointments in research into Freemasonry

Monday, December 17, 2007

Andreas Önnarfors, Ph. D., has been appointed the new director of the **Centre for Research into Freemasonry** at the **University of Sheffield**. Önnarfors received his Ph.D. at Lund University, Sweden in 2003. The centre was established in 2000 as the first centre in a British university devoted to the study of Freemasonry. Önnarfors is succeeding Professor Andrew Prescott as the director of the centre.

Malcolm Davies, Ph.D., has been appointed as Professor of "Freemasonry as an intellectual current and a socio-cultural European phenomenon", Faculty of Theology (Godsdienstwetenschappen), University of Leiden, The Netherlands. Davies is succeeding Prof. Dr. Anton van de Sande in this post.

Recent volumes in the Aries Book Series

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, University of Amsterdam

Monday, December 17, 2007

The *Aries Book Series: Texts and Studies in Western Esotericism* was launched by Brill last year as a companion series to the journal *Aries*. The editor-in-chief is Wouter J. Hanegraaff, and the Editorial Board presently consists of Jean-Pierre Brach and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke.

Volumes in this series can be bought by members of ESSWE at a 25% discount.

Five volumes have been published so far:

1. Urszula Szulakowska, *The Sacrificial Body and the Day of Doom: Alchemy and Apocalyptic Discourse in the Protestant Reformation* (2006).

This study positions Paracelsian alchemy, medicine and medical physiology within the apocalyptic discourse of the Protestant Reformation, with special attention to the role of alchemical engravings notably in the work of Heinrich Khunrath, Stefan Michelspacher, Jacob Boehme, Abraham von Franckenberg and Robert Fludd.

2. Katherine Barnes, *The Higher Self in Christopher Brennan's Poems: Esotericism, Romanticism, Symbolism* (2006).

This is the first major study of the important Australian poet Christopher Brennan, whose *Poems* were published in 1914. This study shows how Brennan melded Western esoteric currents such as alchemy and rosicrucianism with Romantic literature and French Symbolist theory.

3. F.M. van Helmont, *The Alphabet of Nature* (annotated translation with annotations, Allison P. Coudert & Taylor Corse) (2007).

This volume contains the Latin text of Franciscus Mercurius van Helmont's *Alphabeti vere Naturalis Hebraici* (1667), with an annotated facing-page English translation. Van Helmont's *Alphabet of Nature* is an important text for the debate on natural versus artificial or conventional language in the early modern period.

4. Renko D. Geffarth, *Religion und arkane Hierarchie: Der Orden der Gold- und Rosenkreuzer als Geheime Kirche im 18. Jahrhundert* (2007).

This is the most comprehensive study so far of the 18th-century Order of the Gold and Rosy Cross. On the basis of extensive archival research, it traces the history of the Order, its hierarchical and initiatory system, and its relation to the churches in the era of the Enlightenment.

5. *Paracelsus, Essential Theoretical Writings* (edited & translated, with introduction and commentary, by Andrew Weeks) (forthcoming).

This is the first English translation of some of the major writings of Paracelsus, alongside a critical edition of the German originals according to the authoritative 1589 Huser edition. Almost one thousand pages long, it makes this central figure in the history of Western esotericism available to the anglophone world.

6. Olav Hammer & Kocku von Stuckrad (eds.), *Polemical Encounters: Esoteric Discourse and Its Others* (2007).

This volume engages the polemical structures that underlie both the identities within and the controversies about esoteric currents in Western history. Contributions by Konstantin Burmistrov, Dylan Burns, Renko Geffarth, Olav Hammer, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Titus Hjelm, Boaz Huss, Brannon Ingram, Hanns-Peter Neumann, Peter Hanns Reill, Kocku von Stuckrad, and Steven M. Wasserstrom.

Among planned forthcoming volumes are Brendan French's definitive study of the Theosophical Masters, and an updated edition of J.E. Fletcher's classic but so far unpublished dissertation on Athanasius Kircher. ♦

Dutch Masonic and Esoteric Archives

Andréa Kroon, OVN Foundation

Tuesday, January 29, 2008

The OVN, a Dutch foundation for the advancement of academic research into the history of freemasonry in the Netherlands, has published a guide to Masonic archives and documents in public collections in the Netherlands, *Archiefwijzer maçonnieke archieven. Overzicht van historische archieven van Nederlandse vrijmetselaarsorden in openbare collecties*, Den Haag 2007. ISBN 978-90-807778-4-2, 114 pages, 1st edition free while stocks last (stocks now exhausted); 2nd edition available March 2008, € 10,- excl. postage fees.

The presentation of this guide took place in the National Library at The Hague on Friday 25th January 2008. The presentation was accompanied by an afternoon of lectures on the theme 'Geheime kennis. The bijzondere archieven en bibliotheken van maçonnieke en esoterische organisaties' ('Secret knowledge: the unique archives and libraries of Masonic and esoteric organizations').

- Prof. Dr Ton van de Sande spoke about the history of the most important collection for the study of freemasonry: the historical archives, library and object collection of the Orde van Vrijmetselaren onder het Grootoosten der Nederlanden (Order of Freemasons under the Grand East of the Netherlands), located in the Cultureel Maçonniek Centrum 'Prins Frederic' in The Hague. The archive consists of the archives of the Grand Lodge from 1756 onwards, and the added archives of c. 50 lodges under its jurisdiction. The core of the library is the famous Kloss library, formed by George Burckhardt Kloss, a physician with a passion for the history of freemasonry. The Kloss Library was bought and donated to the order by former Grand Master Prince Frederik in the 19th century. The original collection was lost during the Second World War, but reformed and expanded through the efforts of curator Beij Croiset van Uchelen after 1945. It is now one of the most important collections for the study of freemasonry in the world.
- Prof. Dr Wouter Hanegraaff discussed the history and contents of the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica in Amsterdam. This private collection was formed in 1957 by Joost Ritman, whose interest in Hermetic philosophy and related subjects stems from his personal beliefs as a member of a Rosicrucian organization. The collection has been open to the public since 1984. In 1993 the collection was recognized as important national heritage under the Dutch Law for the Protection of Cultural Heritage, and in 2005 the core collection was acquired by the State. It is now one of the most important

collections for the study of western esotericism in the world. The library is expanding its academic and research activities, and will be relocating to the 'Huis met de Hoofden' a 17th century monumental building in the heart of Amsterdam.

- Drs Elly Verzaal, academic consultant for the collection on Esoteric Sciences of the National Library in The Hague, spoke about this collection. Although it is not yet widely known, it is of importance to students of western esotericism for its diversity. It contains pamphlets, written manuscripts and printed works on topics ranging from witchcraft, divination and superstition to 19th century occultism and current academic research on western esotericism. Especially relevant for those interested in the history of spiritism or spiritualism, for instance, is the subcollection on parapsychology, which contains the Zorab archive. A small but important collection on freemasonry was acquired from the legacy of Beij Croiset van Uchelen, former curator of the Cultureel Maçonniek Centrum. The collection on Theosophy was formed in cooperation with the Library of the Theosophical Society in Amsterdam.
- Drs Andréa Kroon, chairwoman on the OVN Foundation, discussed the results of the archive project which resulted in the publication of the *Archiefwijzer*. In 2006, the OVN approached all public archives in the Netherlands with a questionnaire. Based on the data received and on additional research, the OVN counted 57 relevant collections, containing the complete archives of 22 Dutch lodges and hundreds of documents from individual freemasons (both men and women), dated from the 18th to the 20th century. The *Archiefwijzer* also lists contact addresses of relevant private archives, specialized libraries and academic organizations, a total of 75 organizations. Thanks to the support of several cultural funds, the whole first edition can be distributed amongst students and scholars free of charge.

Drs Kroon also made a strong plea for stocktaking of the remaining archives of esoteric organizations in private ownership on a national level. Many (small) esoteric organizations find their historical collections a burden rather than a blessing. They are frequently contacted by students and scholars, as well as their own members, with requests for access to their archives. Although most organizations wish to allow such access, they are forced to refuse because they lack the means, experience and personnel to accommodate visitors. Lack of storage space, conservation issues, lack of professional heritage-management skills, a lack of

manpower and funds are some of the most frequently encountered problems. Donating an archive to a municipal archive can seem an ideal solution, but archives can then remain inaccessible for several years, as they await inventorying. And as the OVN project showed, there is so little knowledge of esoteric currents in the archive sector that simply identifying documents is a problem, let alone advising scholars.

This is why the OVN aims to coordinate a new project, aimed at preservation and accessibility of esoteric archives. Two mixed Masonic orders and one spiritualist organization

in the Netherlands have already agreed to actively participate. Other Dutch esoteric organizations who wish to join in are welcomed. But the problem is one of a national, if not international scale. This is why cooperation between academic, heritage and esoteric organizations is necessary, if we want to ensure the preservation of esoteric archives, libraries and object collections for future generations.

Orders and more information: OVN, PO Box 92004, 1090 AA Amsterdam, the Netherlands, info@stichtingovn.nl ♦



New MA at the University of Kent

Monday, March 24, 2008

New MA in the Cultural Study of Cosmology and Divination at the University of Kent

The study of contemporary astrology and the interpretation of astrological symbolism form a central part of this MA programme which involves taught and research elements, including four modules, a learning journal and a dissertation. It may be taken full-time (1 year) or part-time/modular (2+years).

Core modules on Thursdays, optionals Wednesdays or Fridays. Modules are:

- Interpreting the Heavens: theories and methods (core)
- The Imaginal Cosmos: interpreting symbolic texts & images (core)
- Cosmology and the Arts (optional)
- The Intelligible Cosmos (optional)
- Nature, Culture and Religion (optional)

Themes include Egypt & alchemy, I Ching & Chinese philosophy, Renaissance astrology & magic, literature, art, music & cosmos, enchantment, tarot and the divinatory narrative.

For further information, contact Dr Angela Voss (director).

Esoteric Migrations into the American Comparative Literature Association

Kathryn LaFevers Evans, independent scholar

Thursday, May 8, 2008

Esotericism has migrated—by invitation—from its erstwhile subterranean literary haunts into mainstream **Comparative Literature**, manifesting front-stage-and-center in two seminars at the ACLA 2008 Annual Meeting (Arrivals and Departures), Long Beach, California.

This well-established international conference took place last year in Puebla, Mexico, where an intriguing professor from UNAM in Mexico City, Harold Gabriel Weisz Carrington, organized a Seminar entitled, "Magia y Literatura."

The 2007 bilingual Seminar was devoured by attendees with an intellectual thirst for esoteric scholarship. Great interest was expressed amongst our Hispanic colleagues for continued dialogue, but from my own experience at least, channels of communication are inoperative. Undaunted, Carrington reports that, likewise this year, his "Magic Lands" seminar was well-received.

My own presentation on the role of the esoteric intellectual took place within the "Prophetic Migrations" seminar, organized by Walid A. El-Khachab of York University and co-chaired by Frank Runcie of Université de Montréal. The dynamic of this seminar, also bilingual, was

propelled by the participants having read each other's papers beforehand. Constructive comments after each presentation were focused, and helpful in formulating future presentations on esotericism. Again from an experiential perspective, the Seminar organizers and participants embodied a level of erudite presence that facilitated the exchange of scholarship on esoteric topics from Islam's Prophet the figure, to a practicing Sufi's architectural exploration entitled "Bridges and Channels: The Travels of Prophets," to the suggestion, by a Religious Studies émigré into Comp Lit, of a "traveling theory" continuum as framework for understanding ideas associated with prophetic migrations, migrants, message and messenger. Of particular resonance with my paper, Mathieu E. Courville spoke of "increasing the existential charge" of knowledge through "initiation or transmission" and of "taking ideas that pre-exist us and using them to further free us," to "take the resources and begin again from the ground level," rather than settle for Religion's normative model. Another presenter envisioned the Middle Eastern cosmology as the world of symbols and images—intermediary between East and West. ♦

Conference review:

Western Esotericism at the 2008 CESNUR Conference

Kennet Granholm, University of Amsterdam

Wednesday, May 14, 2008

On April 16-19, 2008, a conference entitled **Twenty Years and More: Research into Minority Religions, New Religious Movements and the New Spirituality** was held at the London School of Economics.

The conference was arranged by CESNUR (Centre for Studies on New Religions) in cooperation with INFORM (Information Network Focus on Religious Movements) and ISORECEA (International Study of Religion in Eastern and Central Europe Association), and signaled the twentieth anniversary of both CESNUR and INFORM. The conference was large, involving over 150 speakers (with some delivering more than one paper) and an even larger audience. The Centre for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, University of Amsterdam, was well represented, as were the Nordic countries. This increased interest in Esotericism in the Nordic countries is also reflected in the 2007 founding of the [Scandinavian Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism](#).

The prominence of esoteric subjects in the programme was a drastic change from the CESNUR/INFORM conference arranged in London in 2001.

- Of the 46 sessions at the conference (including three plenary sessions, a film screening and a discussion with a survivor of the 1993 Branch Davidian-tragedy) twelve dealt with matters related to Western Esotericism. This included sessions on neopaganism, 'New Age', Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism in general.
- The focus of the vast majority of the papers presented was on contemporary expressions of esoteric spirituality, interesting since the study of Western Esotericism has largely focused on historical manifestations of the phenomenon.
- Many papers introduced social scientific theory and methodology to the existing historical perspectives.

- The **concept** of Western Esotericism, as well as related theory and methodology, elicited substantial discussion.

The sessions with Esoteric subject matters were:

- From Witchcraft to Wicca
- 20 Years of Pagan Movements and Studies □ 1
- Western Esotericism and New Religiosity □ 1
- 20 Years of Pagan Movements and Studies □ 2
- Western Esotericism and New Religiosity □ 2
- 20 Years of Studies on Pagan and Entheogenic Movements
- 20 Years of Studies on Western Esotericism
- From Ancient Wisdom and Freemasonry to New Age
- 20 Years of Studies on Aleister Crowley
- 20 Years of Theosophical Studies
- 20 Years of Studies on the New Age and Spiritual Communities
- If Not New Age, Then What?

Although esoteric subject matter was the theme in over a fourth of the sessions, this was perhaps not fully acknowledged by the conference organizers. During the last plenary session, which had as its aim to conclude draw together central themes discussed, Esotericism was barely mentioned. None of the speakers chosen for the plenary panel were researchers with a specific interest in Western Esotericism. Although Western Esotericism has become an acknowledged discipline in its own right, and is increasingly popular amongst young scholars, it seems that there is still a long way to go before the discipline attains the official scholarly status of issues such as religion and law or religion and conflict.

Those interested in knowing more can visit the [homepage of CESNUR](#), where a large number of the papers presented are published in the cyberproceedings of the conference. ♦

New Religiosity; If Not New Age, Then What?

A report on three sessions at CESNUR 2008

Kennet Granholm, University of Amsterdam

Wednesday, May 14, 2008

Two sessions on "Western Esotericism and New Religiosity" at CESNUR 2008 included papers dealing with everything from contemporary Satanism to terrorism with New Age undertones in Chechnya.

A recurring theme was the critical assessment of different theories and perspectives on Western Esotericism, something included to some extent in almost all of the papers.

Of particular interest were

- "Openings for Power-Oriented Conceptualizations of Western Esotericism" by Nina Kokkinen (doctoral student, University of Turku, Finland). This drew on critical studies of religion where the understanding of religion as a demarcated social institution is strongly criticized, and endeavoured to employ similar mechanisms in conceptualizations of Western Esotericism. In short, Kokkinen suggested that Esotericism should not be construed as a strictly separated domain, but rather a human undertaking which has close connections to material, political and social dimensions of human life.
- "New Age Terrorists from Chechnya and Anthroposophist Presidents from Georgia: How 'Western' is Western Esotericism?" by Eduard ten Houten (University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands). This discussed the important issue of what "Western" means in conceptualizations of Western Esotericism. This is a question which too frequently remains overlooked, with the focus most often being on the second word of the concept, Esotericism.

Other interesting papers were

- Gordan Djurdjevic (University of British Columbia, Canada), "The mage Aleister Crowley and his Thelema as a postmodern religion."
- Fredrik Gregorius (University of Lund, Sweden), "The reawakened interest in 'tradition' as a legitimating tool in esoteric new religious movements."
- Thomas Karlsson (University of Stockholm, Sweden), "The political implications of the worldview of the Rune-Gild."
- Jesper Aagaard Petersen (Norwegian University of Science and Technology), "Contemporary Satanism

and the interplay between the secular and the esoteric."

In a session on "If Not New Age, Then What?" George D. Chrystides (University of Wolverhampton, United Kingdom), Steven Sutcliffe (Edinburgh Divinity School, United Kingdom), Liselotte Frisk (Dalarna University, Sweden) and I discussed the "to be or not to be" of the New Age concept.

- Whereas Chrystides defended the continuing use of the term, the rest of the speakers were more critical.
- In my own opinion, New Age is in essence a "non-category" which brings with it far more problems than it has any chance of ever resolving. One of the central problems with New Age is that scholars have been generally unsuccessful in defining it in any satisfactory manner. This, in turn, has often resulted in the creation of cumbersome and all too inclusive lists of "Wittgensteinian family resemblances," through which basically anything could be defined as being New Age. My suggestion for solving the problem is to forgo the term and concept altogether and instead shift the focus to the mass-popularization of esoteric discourse and themes. This shift of perspective to processes of religious change would provide many benefits, not least of which would be the discarding of the necessity to posit the coming into being of a "new" form of spirituality in the West.
- One of the points in Steven Sutcliffe's presentation was the critique of extensive, essentially normative, categories. For example, he discussed the problematic categories of "World Religions," and illustrated how they are the result of power relations where certain forms of religiosity are valued more highly than others. In addition, large categories such as these tend to have the effect of downplaying differences between phenomena while at the same time overstressing similarities (and at times even inventing non-existent similarities). Instead of being consumed by the allure of constructing categories we should focus on specific religious phenomena.

With the massive amount of papers on esoteric subject presented at the conference, it is impossible to provide even brief accounts of everything that was discussed. The above therefore focusses on three sessions that I convened. ♦

Conference review:

American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies

Kathryn LaFevers Evans, independent scholar

Sunday, July 6, 2008

During March 2008, in Portland Oregon, I participated in two Sessions on esoteric subjects at the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS), an interdisciplinary meeting of eighteenth-century scholars.

The first of the two esoteric sessions, "The Use of the Supernatural," included a paper by Kris Pangburn, recent doctoral recipient at UCLA, "The Science of the Supernatural: Late Enlightenment Vitalism and the True Appearance of Johann Karl Woetzel's Wife after her Death." This dealt with Woetzel's difficulties as a scholar of the supernatural within the Academy of his time. That marginalization demanded a good portion of Pangburn's scholarship in our time as well, which he utilized as an argument for parity in the current Academy. Pangburn captivated the audience when reporting the satirical rebuttals written in response to Woetzel's proof of his wife's supernatural presence after her death, describing how Enlightenment authors had rebutted Woetzel's claim with such satirical stories as, "The True Appearance of my Poodle after Death."

During questions, Pangburn answered that there is support for esoteric studies at UCLA, through his doctoral advisor Peter H. Reill and the UCLA Center for Seventeenth- & Eighteenth-Century Studies.

The other presenters had equally impressive impacts. I will mention Bruno Forment's (USC) paper, "Qual oracol tremendo! Operatic Responses to the Supernatural in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Berlin," was presented in no less than five languages: his native German, English, Latin, French, and Italian. Truly a Renaissance man in that regard, Bruno Forment demonstrated the depth of scholarship that esoteric studies requires.

UCLA professor Dr. Peter H. Reill commanded the greatest respect in a session on "Symbols and Signs: The World of the Occult in Early Modern Europe," presenting a paper on the Hermeticism of Johann Salomo Semler. Reill

explained that one purpose of Semler's Hermetic chemistry was to produce "air gold," specifying the belief that Hermetical science could not be taught publicly, instead requiring a certain type of person to practice a science that deals not with the corporeal but with the imperceptible; creates a universal solvent; and probes the depths of nature through personal involvement. Occult issues of the day included: toleration; nature and theology; invisible nature; God as Logos; God as Will; subtle matter and perceptible matter; primary matter throughout all matter; emerging outer form; and embryonic substances. Practitioners sought true toleration for their research into "private religion," versus joining organized religion.

Daniel Lupton, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, broke the spell of high seriousness with his animated delivery of "Wine, Women and Satan: Occult Rhetoric in Sir Francis Dashwood's Hell-Fire Club." This clandestine organization parodied religion through their satirical descriptions of sex, violence, baby-eating, and anti-Catholic erotica as allegedly found in Tantrism, Kabbalah, Paganism, and Magic. Lupton proposed the idea that perhaps the Hell-Fire Club was not merely a parody of religion, but instead we might wonder if its participants were indeed occultists.

Following this, my own performative reading of "Rabelais, Boehme, Rosicrucians, and Sterne: Hexagrams and Military Hobby Horses" was well-received. I closed with a food-for-thought comment that scholars of esotericism are choosing to utilize the term "esoteric" in Academia, rather than "supernatural" or "occult," in part because of the negative connotations those terms have accrued in past Academic paradigms. Current scholars of esotericism strive for balance between subjectivity and objectivity, considering satirical constructs such as the true apparition of the poodle after death, Dashwood's Hell-Fire Club, and Sterne's Demoniacs for what they are—the esoteric satire of learned wit, a subject of serious study. □

New discussion group on Facebook

Thursday, September 11, 2008

With the aim of promoting the study of Hermetism, Western Esotericism, and related currents, Iván Elvira has created a new discussion group on Facebook, called *Studia Hermetica* like the website www.revistaazogue.com/hermetica.

If you want to participate, you have to create a Facebook account, and send Iván Elvira a message with your request. The languages of this new discussion group are Spanish, English and French. The discussion group is aimed at students and enthusiasts of Hermetism and Esoteric thought. The questions that will be dealt with are wide, and nothing will be avoided. People who profess a Hermetic or Esoteric belief are welcome, but are warned that "Studia Hermetica" is an academic discussion group. Bibliographical references and a correct way of expression are obligatory.

Academic Society for Research into Freemasonry

Thursday, January 22, 2009

From the Newsletter of the Centre for Research into Freemasonry at the University of Sheffield:

Over the past few years discussions have taken place among scholars in the field concerning the need to establish an organisation for the advancement of academic research into freemasonry and related topics. This later broadening and opening towards a wider perspective, within which freemasonry can be contextualised, can be branded in different ways and we have not yet exactly agreed upon a final name and definition for the proposed society. However, we are proud to announce that under the working-title of ASRFF we have now taken steps to establish such a society. Membership is open to individuals within the academic community and will include a reduced subscription fee to *Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism*, the first edition of which will be published in May 2009. The draft constitution of the society and a subscription form can be downloaded from our website. At present the acting board members are: Prof. Dr. Malcolm Davies, Prof. Dr. Cécile Revauger, Dr. Henrik Bogdan and Dr. Andreas Önnersfors.

New Spanish online library of alchemical works

Friday, April 2, 2010

A major new online library of alchemical works in Spanish libraries (including the National Library and the library of the Complutense University of Madrid) has been established at <http://catalogochymico.icp.csic.es/>.

"Hundred of works are already available in full digitalized versions, and many other will be available in the near future. The site is continuously updated by adding new titles and completing the information on authors and works. Comments aiming to improve the content of the site would be very welcome."

New Journal: *Preternature*

Saturday, May 1, 2010

Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural is currently accepting manuscripts and book review requests/suggestions. *Preternature* is an interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed journal housed at The Pennsylvania State University, and published in Oxford, England.

Formerly known as the Journal for the Academic Study of Magic, *Preternature* publishes original scholarship and texts in edition/translation on magics, the occult, spiritualism, demonology, monstrophy, and the "preternatural" in all its cultural, historical, anthropological, artistic, literary, and folkloric iterations. Submissions pertaining to any time period and to any geographic area are welcome, though the language of publication is English.

Contributions should be roughly 8,000-12,000 words, including all documentation and critical apparatus. If accepted for publication, manuscripts will be required to adhere to the Chicago Manual of Style, 15th edition (style 1, employing footnotes).

For more information, consult www.preternature.org.

Queries about submissions, queries concerning books to be reviewed, or requests to review individual titles may be made to the Editors:

- Peter Dendle, Department of English, The Pennsylvania State University, Mont Alto, pid11@psu.edu,
- Kirsten C. Uszkalo, English and Digital Humanities, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, circe@ufies.org
- Richard Raiswell, Department of History, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada, rraiswell@upei.ca