

Words from the editor

Per Faxneld



Welcome to the second *Newsletter* of 2011. In the present issue, we have no “Welcome from the president of the ESSWE”, overview of recently published books or reports from the three major centres for the scholarly study of Western Esotericism. All these features will return in our next issue.

As usual, do not hesitate to contact me if you have ideas for the *Newsletter*, or think something should be changed. Would you perhaps like to present your Ph. D. project? Is there a particular scholar you would like to see an interview with? Should there be more of some type of content, or less? Praise and complaints are equally welcome.

Since Yuletide is upon us, I shall conclude this welcome with H P Lovecraft’s poem “Christmas” (1920):

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The cottage hearth beams warm and bright,

The candles gaily glow;

The stars emit a kinder light

Above the drifted snow.

Down from the sky a magic steals

To glad the passing year,

And belfries sing with joyous peals,

For Christmastide is here!



Daniel Juette wins ESSWE thesis prize



The winner of the biannual ESSWE PhD Thesis Prize for 2011 is Dr. Daniel Juette (then at the Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg, now at Harvard University), with his thesis entitled *Das Zeitalter des Geheimnisses: Juden, Christen und die Ökonomie des Geheimen (1400–1800)* (“The Age of Secrecy: Jews, Christians and the Economy of Secrets, 1400–1800”). The thesis has now been published as a book by Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. Jütte explores the idea of secrecy in early modern history and reconstructs the market for secrets. He shows that the Jewish minority played a major role in this field. The presumed competence of Jews in the world of the arcane extended to fields such as alchemy, magic, intelligence, and technology. But why were Jews considered the keepers of secrets and to which extent was this assumption justified? Jütte’s study of this previously quite neglected phenomenon in cultural history and history of science provides explanations as well as new perspectives on the history of secrecy.



Esotericism studies in South America



Inspired by the action of ASE and, mainly, ESSWE, in 2011 Professor Juan Pablo Bubello created the Centro de Estudios sobre el Esoterismo Occidental de la Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (Centre for Studies of Western Esotericism of the Union of South American Nations), in a pioneering effort to gather South American researchers on Western esotericism. CEEO-UNASUR was born as a gathering point for South American research concerning the exciting aspect of human life that is Western Esoterism, aiming to create conditions for sharing and discussion through the organization of events, magazines and other works of academic nature. Besides being a regional academic research centre, CEEO-UNASUR seeks to maintain connections with global discussions, aiming at integration with the latest Western esotericism research.

At present, CEEO-UNASUR has two work poles: one in Argentina, led by its director Professor Juan Pablo Bubello, and another in Brazil, led by its co-director Professor Francisco de Paula Souza de Mendonça Júnior. Members of CEEO-UNASUR have already taken part in some events, like the *XIII Jornada Interescuelas*, in Argentina, and the *Workshop Historia Medieval: Perspectivas de Estudo em História Medieval no Brasil*, in Brazil. CEEO-UNASUR is working on participating in other events, and also in the organization of a thematic dossier. The activities of CEEO-UNASUR may be followed at its blog (<http://ceeo-unasur.blogspot.com/>). CEEO-UNASUR invites all interested parties to join in the development of Western esotericism research in the South American academic universe.

Ph.D. projects of ESSWE members

Rider Haggard and the Imperial Occult: Esoteric Influences in his Life and Work

–Simon Magus, University of Exeter, UK.



Sir Henry Rider Haggard (1856-1925) was one of the most prolific and popular author-novelists of his age, although now remembered principally as the author of *She* and *King Solomon's Mines*. History has not been kind to Haggard: scholars of literature have frequently decried his clumsiness, solipsism, and lack of literary craft. Haggard scholarship has tended to follow two main trajectories, both of them polemical: the post-colonialist perspective seeing Haggard as an *éminence grise* and propagandist of Empire, and the feminist view of Haggard as an opponent of the emergent New Woman. This account endeavours to redress the balance by demonstrating that there are other equally important influences on Haggard's fiction, namely those of the ideas circulating within the nineteenth-century occult milieu.

The term 'Imperial Occult' will be of key importance, connoting that without the imperialist project, nineteenth-century occultism would not have had its peculiar quality of syncretism – or perhaps more accurately hybridity – contingent upon the British forays into Egypt, India and Tibet. Haggard was fascinated by Egypt in particular, and his Egyptosophical speculations echo the academic biases and political agendas of Victorian Egyptology in general, including the search for evidence of biblical narratives in Egypt in the face of the rise of Darwinian evolutionary theory. Haggard's novels are also dominated by the theme of reincarnation, valorising the Victorian reception and construction of Buddhism: a uniquely Victorian metempsychosis accompanied by a Lamarckian spiritual evolution, mirroring social progressivism. Haggard's romances present their equation and conflation of the moral economies of karma/reincarnation and sin/redemption.

Far from being a simple imperialist, this account

posits that Haggard – in foregrounding reincarnation, in describing the rise and fall of 'lost civilisations,' and the parallel cyclical systole and diastole of the cosmos – believed that the decadence of the British Empire was not merely possible but inevitable. In this, my dissertation attempts to demonstrate, he was at once Theosophical and neo-Hegelian.

Guillaume Postel's Latin Translation and Commentary of the Zohar (1547-1553)

–Judith Weiss, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel.



The Book of *Zohar*, which was written mostly in the Aramaic and is probably the most impressive and influential medieval kabbalistic corpus, has attracted the curiosity of many Christian kabbalists from the times of Pico della Mirandola to our days. This text was traditionally believed to be the work of the 2nd century tannaite sage *Shimon Bar Yochai*, and was regarded as encompassing ancient hidden truths, transmitted orally from the times of Moses. However, until the publication of *Kabbalah Denudata*, the popular translation of a few sections of the *Zohar* into accessible Latin in the 17th century, no comprehensive translation of this Aramaic text into any European language was at hand.

While there are a few exceptions to this rule, mostly fragmentary translations produced by Renaissance Christian Kabbalists such as Cardinal Egidio da Viterbo or Francesco Zorzi, the only comprehensive Latin translation which preceded *Kabbalah Denudata* was composed in the middle of the 16th century by Guillaume Postel (1510-1581). Nonetheless, Postel's translation has never been printed nor did it achieve any significant circulation among Christian Kabbalists. One of the main reasons for this is that Postel's translation cannot be seen as an actual presentation of the Zoharic text, as is, to those Christians interested in Jewish Kabbalah.

In my research I demonstrate, first, that the projective nature of Postel's reading of the Zoharic texts emanates from his conviction that the *Zohar* specifically predicts his own personal messianic role as well as his general theological concepts. Based on a close reading of

Postel's translation alongside his commentary of the *Zohar*, I exhibit the manner in which his middling proficiency in Aramaic together with his compelling conviction of the *Zohar*'s role as corroborating his own radical messianic concepts, led him to produce a Latin text which often only loosely conveys the original Zoharic intentions. Second, Postel is considered to be one of the most erudite Renaissance Christians when it comes to Jewish lore; be that as it may, in my research I have made use of his vast *Zohar* commentary in order to establish the extent of his actual acquaintance with rabbinic as well as both medieval and Renaissance kabbalistic lore. It is interesting to see that albeit his familiarity with many such sources, his *Zohar* commentary often reflects misreadings or disregard of cardinal rabbinic and kabbalistic treatises. In light of this, my aim is to present Postel's *Zohar* translation and commentary as an aperture to his own theological bearings in the middle of the 16th century.

New Master's Program in W.E. at the University of Groningen

It is my pleasure to announce that the Groningen Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies will launch a new Master program "Concealed Knowledge: Gnosticism, Esotericism, and Mysticism" (60 ECTS, entirely taught in the English language) as of the academic year 2012-13. The one-year program consist of 3 modules, 1 tutorial/internship/additional module, and a master thesis. The modules are:

- Knowledge, Secrecy, and Revelation in Antiquity
- Medieval Mysticism, Kabbalah, and Contemporary Culture
- Modern Esotericism between East and West

All modules are characterized by an approach that is well-established in Groningen: an awareness of (a) the historical dimension that reaches back to antiquity; (b) the fact that religion in the West is pluralistic (including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but also pagan and other religious options); and (c) that the notion of 'Western' must be critically engaged in terms of postcolonial debate and processes of globalization.

It is also possible to combine this program with a two-years Research Master. For details of the program, please see <http://www.rug.nl/ggw/onderwijs/maopleidingen/mastergem/index>

In the latest Elsevier ranking of Dutch university programs, students and professors ranked the Groningen BA and MA programs in religion as the best in the Netherlands. We are proud of this evaluation, and at the same time we are working hard to modernize the programs in order to respond to a changing professional and societal landscape. Hence, the program "Concealed Knowledge" is not the only one that will be launched next year. We have developed three more Master programs (60 ECTS each, all of them being taught in English). The new Master programs are:

- Religion, Conflict, and Globalization
- Religion in the Public Domain
- The Origins of Abrahamic Religions: Texts and Contexts

Modules of these Master programs can be combined with the program "Concealed Knowledge." For details, please see <http://www.rug.nl/ggw/onderwijs/maopleidingen/index>

We very much encourage international students to enroll in these programs. If you know students who might be interested in the programs offered by the University of Groningen, please forward this information to them.

—Professor Kocku von Stuckrad

Head of the Department of Comparative and Historical Study of Religion, University of Groningen

Two vacant Ph. D. positions in Amsterdam

The Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam has a vacancy for two PhD positions. Apart from the ESSWE site and the site of the Center (www.amsterdamhermetica.nl), please refer to the official advertisement on the website of the University of Amsterdam for further information:

<http://www.uva.nl/vacatures/vacatures.cfm/1E8EFF0C-AADC-4F25-91147D6929578E87>

ESSWE student representative elected



Julia Ninck Blok, who was recently elected student representative in the ESSWE, introduces herself:

I'm Julia Ninck Blok (29), a Master student of the Study of Western Mysticism and Esotericism in Amsterdam. Before this, I studied Fine Arts and Law. I like Pico della Mirandola and flowers.

As a student representative I want to do more than just inform the board about the students' interests. I want to make the students more visible and active within the ESSWE. For example I think attendance at the ESSWE conference is a very interesting and instructive experience and more students should go, see, learn and experience it. Therefore, I hope to promote the ESSWE conference of 2013 intensively among the students, so that more of them will come to attend the conference than the four that were present this summer.

I also believe it is important to make the ESSWE more visible for students. Hence, I want to explore the technical state of affairs on our Universities, because I think it would be nice to organize a few video guest-lectures for students. In this way they can get more familiar with the ESSWE, its members and networks.

56% of all the ESSWE students entitled to vote made a choice, and Julia collected 68% of the votes.

Conference Report: Satanism in the Modern World, Stockholm University, September 25– 26, 2011.

The beautiful 'naturens hus' ('house of nature') at the University of Stockholm seemed an unusual venue for a conference on such a dark subject as Satanism and its place in the modern world. A number of specialists on the subject were in attendance, including Kennet Granholm, Jesper Petersen and Asbjørn Dyrendal. Alongside these familiar names were newcomers to the field such as myself and literary Satanism scholars Natalia Kaloh Vid and Marta Ferrer Gomez.

The conference started in a suitably bloody vein with Per Faxneld's impromptu speech on the gory history of Black Metal (which replaced the presentation by Thomas Karlsson, who had been taken ill). Following this, Tommy Kuusela spoke on the influence of J. R. R. Tolkien on Black Metal musicians. Several others focused on the relationship between the arts and Satanism, such as Kaloh Vid and Gomez, who discussed classic works of world literature and their use of Satanic themes.

Broader themes within Satanism were then considered, in Faxneld's presentation on women and Satanism and George Sieg's paper on the Faustian and the Pact within the so-called Sinister Tradition. Carrying on with this theme—namely, the Sinister Tradition—yet in a more ethnographically focused manner, was the work done by myself on affiliation within the Order of the Nine Angles and Jacob Senholdt's work on the Nordic Sinister group, The Temple of the Black Light. A new dimension to the sociological study of Satanism was uncovered through James Lewis' presentation on his updated findings from his most recent Satan Census.

Work on the genealogy of modern Satanism, particularly focusing on the influence of the notorious figure Aleister Crowley, was undertaken by Dyrendal and Marco Pasi, within his keynote lecture. In a different vein, Rafal Smoczynski and Petersen approached modern Satanism using a more theoretical frame of reference, with Petersen considering pathways into a topography of modern Satanism.

The conference was felt by all to be a great success, with new ground being broken in the increasingly large and varied subject that is Satanism studies. This was the second international conference on the subject, and a third one will be held in Denmark in 2013.

—Hannah Lindsay



Photos from the Stockholm Satanism conference, by Erik Östling.



Photos from the Stockholm Satanism conference, by Erik Östling.

Conference report:

ESSWE 3, Lux in Tenebris: The Visual and the Symbolic in Western Esotericism

The third biannual international conference of the ESSWE was held this summer in Szeged, Hungary, on July 6-10. It was a great success; without devaluing the conferences of previous years (Tübingen 2007, Strasbourg 2009), it is not unlikely that Szeged 2011 will be remembered as one of the most successful conferences of the ESSWE's early history. The event was exceptionally well organised, with all panels and sessions running smoothly, and logistics carefully synchronised. Together with a team of hard-working, helpful, and not least friendly assistants, the responsible organiser, Professor György Szőnyi, did great work to make this conference a memorable one. With splendid weather in the south of Hungary (above 40 degrees centigrade at the warmest), and great facilities in the beautiful neoclassical city centre, one could hardly wish for a better frame.

The real test of a good conference is of course always in the substance and quality of papers and lectures. Here as well the organisers had done a great job, securing keynote lecturers of exceptional academic merit, and not least with a good variety of expertise, fitting well with an interdisciplinary field such as ours. The first keynote lecture was given by the distinguished Ficino scholar Michael Allen, flown in from California (UCLA). His talk on Ficino's metaphysics and psychology of light seemed perfectly appropriate as the sunset illuminated the magnificent om of the rector's office building at the end of the conference's first day. On the following days keynote lectures were given by Lina Bolzoni of the Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, on 'The Memory Theatre of Giulio Camillo: Alchemy, Rhetoric, and Deification in the Renaissance'; by the leading kabbalah scholar Moshe Idel (Hebrew University, Jerusalem), who lectured on the history of the symbolic Shield of David, from Jewish kabbalah to Western esotericism; and finally by Pia Brinzeu (University of the West, Timisoara), who spoke about Eliade and Brancusi, and their relation to Romania and India.

In addition to the keynote addresses, there were 25 paper sessions with more than 80 papers presented in total. The sessions covered pretty much the whole range of the field as it is currently understood, with themes ranging from Renaissance alchemy and magic, angelology and

demonology, through Rosicrucian literature and Swedenborgianism, to the occult revival, modern Theosophy, and New Age religion. A noticeable development from earlier conferences was the large number of papers, and even entire sessions, devoted to kabbalah: not only Christian and Western esoteric developments of kabbalah, but also Jewish kabbalah, especially in its Zoharic and Safedian forms. This is a welcome development. It also reflects the ESSWE's recent local outreach to Israeli scholars, through the Israeli Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism (INASWE) that was established by Boaz Huss in the spring of 2011. Seeing as the theme of the conference was 'The Visual and the Symbolic in Western Esotericism', a great number of papers interrogated the boundaries and overlaps between esotericism, art, and literature. There were papers on the representation of angels, witches, demons and magicians in early modern art and literature, on esoteric art in modernism (including links between spiritualism and early abstract art, and the occultural connections of surrealism), along with several papers on modern literature—from the esoteric writings of Fernando Pessoa and W. B. Yates to the more unlikely suspect of Virginia Woolf. Grappling with contemporary issues, there was also a paper on the horror fiction of Stephen King, and one on the recent fascination with vampires in film and television (appropriately, the latter was presented by two Romanian scholars). Finally, a number of theoretical papers found an opportunity to discuss issues of semiotics and hermeneutics related to studying the visual and the symbolic in the context of esoteric currents. All in all, ESSWE 3 presented a varied and stimulating academic programme.

In addition to the academic and organisational programme, the ESSWE 3 conference provided the opportunity to participate in several excursions and events. There was a tour of the Rare Book Collection of the Somogyi Library, featuring a nice exhibition of esoterica, and a refreshing conference dinner was arranged in the lush countryside on the outskirts of Szeged. On the last day, the organiser György Szőnyi even led a group of devoted conference participants to Budapest, where he gave a tour of the Buda castle area and the labyrinths concealed in the bowels of the Buda Hills. A revelation of the concealed, surely worthy of ending a conference on esotericism.

With fond memories from Szeged, we look forward with great anticipation to the fourth ESSWE conference in Gothenburg, in 2013.

—Egil Asprem, University of Amsterdam, Membership Secretary



Photos from the ESSWE conference in Szeged, by Rafal T. Prinke.



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Photos from the ESSWE conference in Szeged, by Per Faxneld.



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Report from the ESSWE board meeting

The Board of ESSWE meets every year. In 2011, it met in Szeged, immediately before the ESSWE conference there. The report below gives details of decisions taken at that meeting, and of related decisions made at the Meeting of Members that was also held in Szeged.

Board membership

Antoine Faivre, who had been one of the founding members of the ESSWE, left the Board. The Board unanimously appointed him honorary member of the ESSWE in recognition of his services to the field. Birgit Menzel (Mainz University) was subsequently elected at the Meeting of Members to fill the Board position that had fallen vacant. The Board will be extended by a non-voting student representative, to be elected by the society's MA students.

Coming conference and workshop

The Board accepted a proposal to hold the 2013 conference in Gothenburg, Sweden. The theme of this conference will be esotericism and health. Paid-up membership of the ESSWE will be required in order to present at that conference and at subsequent conferences (this was generally assumed in the past, but was not made explicit).

The Board also decided to hold a workshop aimed at students in Amsterdam in the early summer of 2012 in connection with the next Board Meeting. The theme and exact dates of the workshop will be fixed and announced later.

Website

The Board heard that there had been many technical difficulties in relation to the website, but that these had now been solved. It was decided to make a number of useful resources available on the website as soon as possible, namely an online virtual esoteric library, pdfs of the first series of *Aries*, a section on teaching programs, and a

section on esoteric cafés, museums and the like.

Thematic networks

The Board decided to ask for proposals for the establishment thematic networks.

Prizes and bursaries

Helmut Zander was appointed to chair the award committee for the 2013 ESSWE Thesis prize. Since no submissions for the Henny Homan Essay Prize were received, it was decided to consider in 2012 when to offer it again. Likewise, it was decided to defer until 2012 the decision on whether or not to offer travel bursaries in 2012-13.

Administrative matters

It being felt that the legal details associated with changing provisions in the ESSWE's constitution are excessively cumbersome, the Board appointed two members of the Board to look into ways of simplifying this, and to implement a simplification if possible.

The Board also decided to simplify a number of administrative matters by adjusting both the membership year and the financial year to coincide with the calendar year (subject to the simplification of the constitution to make the change in the calendar year possible). It was also decided that members who do not pay membership fees by PayPal or credit card will be responsible for paying associated transaction costs.

The Board passed a bye-law emphasizing that persons who do not have a current university affiliation normally become associate members of the ESSWE, except under the most exceptional circumstances.

A 1/3 reduction in the membership fee for Members from the former Eastern Bloc was subsequently confirmed at the Meeting of Members.

—Mark Sedgwick, Secretary

Scholar interviews

Per Faxneld

In every issue of the newsletter a senior and a junior scholar of Western Esotericism are interviewed. They are asked the same questions, and we will be able to partake in both their personal perspectives and insights gleaned from their up-and-coming or nestorial position in the field, respectively.

Antoine Faivre, **Professor Emeritus, Sorbonne, France.**



How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

I was always interested in transcultural currents, movements and traditions, and never really felt comfortable with academic specialities with strict limitations. So when I took up German Studies with a view to making it an academic career I looked for authors as research topics (for my MA, PhD, and so on) who were not necessarily endowed with “literary” qualities but whose output was primarily cross-cultural (in philosophy, art, and so on) and who had been more or less neglected in terms of “official” interest. I thus came across what we now call “esoteric currents”, which seemed to me to dovetail well with what I was looking for, and I chose some of their German-speaking representatives. Later, when I became professor of German Studies, some of my colleagues thought I busied myself too much with philosophy instead of devoting myself primarily to German literature proper – whereas some colleagues in philosophy said I dabbled in a field that was not officially mine. Indeed, that was not very comfortable, but after having been elected Directeur d’Études at the EPHE, in Religious Studies, I found I was allowed, as it were, to make forays into several domains—to feel all the more free to bring fields into convergence with other ones, Religious Studies being, indeed, a crosscultural discipline par excellence—let alone, within it, the speciality “History of Modern Western Esoteric Currents”...

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

After a long period of marginalization, our field is increasingly the subject of official recognition. However, several factors have delayed this recognition, and are still more or less continuing to slow its development.

The first one is the existence of approaches of a religionist/universalist character; now, within academia it is incumbent upon historians as such to distinguish themselves clearly from these. *The second one* is a widespread “confusionism” that consists in quick use of “esotericism” (a word that has a chameleon capacity to change meaning) as a portmanteau (or “blanket”) for a plethora of domains simultaneously, such as *Imaginaire*, initiatic or fantasy literature, religious symbolism, artistic works associated with some aura of mystery, magic, occult sciences, etc. This tendency is partly due to the more or less implicit adoption of a “received idea” that spread little by little in the West, especially since the nineteenth century, and which consists in wrongly positing the existence of a sort of counter-culture, on which the term “esotericism” is hastily and confusingly bestowed. *The third one* is the residual influence of theological models or presuppositions in the study of religions in general and of Christianity in particular. Indeed, even though the History of Religions began to emancipate itself from Christian theology in the nineteenth century, people nonetheless long continued to adopt insufficiently critical (mainly crypto-Catholic) views, considering esoteric currents as no more than marginal heresies or more or less “condemnable” superstitions – while in fact they generally appear to be much less “marginal” than “transversal”. Moreover, this idea of “counter-culture” sometimes takes on a distinctly negative connotation due to the appropriation of certain themes present in the literature of esoteric currents by movements of the far right. Now, if Nazi or near-Nazi theoreticians, for example, have made use of such themes, it was in a very limited manner and in distorting them; but this was sufficient to produce an amalgamation in many minds. And it bears repeating that in the nineteenth century, for example, many representatives of the esoteric currents were politically oriented in a very different direction – indeed, towards forms of socialism. *The fourth one*, finally, is connected with the very history of the academic specialities of which the discipline History of

Religions is composed. In fact, if this discipline had long accepted specialities such as the Gnosticism of Late Antiquity, Jewish theosophies (Jewish Kabbalah, notably) and Muslim theosophies, or again Christian mysticism, it is no less certain that the Western esoteric currents, in particular those of the modern period, have been greatly delayed in entering it fully. These currents long failed to be approached from the angle of their specificity, relegated as they were to the back shelves of historiography, because they came to disturb or complicate the idea that the history of scientific ideas is reducible to that of a science progressively emancipating itself from the “religious”.

These four factors are still significant, and hence the necessity for us to increasingly call attention to how the study of our field can throw new light on old questions, notably by revealing certain “missing links” that the traditional boundaries established between various other specialities may have eclipsed. We should revisit important aspects of the history of religions in the West according to new perspectives. Indeed, the History of Religions can now take advantage of these contributions even better as the general decline in the belief in the “grand narratives” of modernity goes hand in hand with interest in ways of thought that a normative conception of historiography had long discounted. Moreover, a “History of Western esoteric currents” can question a certain number of prejudices that are still current. Notably, in clarifying the emergence and the transformations of concepts like “magic” and “occult”, which, for better or for worse, were founding elements as much for the History of Religions as for Anthropology, to the point of becoming an integral part of our ways of thought. One should not forget that Westerners applied similar concepts, still often charged with negative implications, to non-European cultures only after applying them to themselves in a spirit directed, in fact, against their own “inner demons”. Part of the challenge is, therefore, to continue to re-interrogate these concepts by historicizing them, and by making subject to an ever-renewed problematization some of the “great paradigms” that continue to rule our understanding of history.

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

I don't know if it is the “most fun” one, but at least it is one of the most recent. While researching a figure of the 18th century to whom I had already devoted a short article a few years before, I came across a text recently written and circulating among the members of a secret esoteric society. Its author claimed to have discovered an important document that threw new light on that figure. No reference was given—the statement was wrapped in an atmosphere of mystery. This obviously triggered my curiosity, so I hunted for him, and having managed to get in touch with him I was flabbergasted when he confessed to me that the source he had put forward was nothing but... my short article written a few years before!

Although I was asked for just one “fun memory”, it seems fitting to mention another one, because it concerns a widespread phenomenon, plagiarism. I find this to be more funny than revolting when it is a matter of not just one or a few sentences, but of a very long text. Three years ago I discovered on a website an exact copy of a whole chapter of my book *Access to Western Esotericism* (SUNY Press). It was signed by a strange name and accompanied by an e-mail address for readers who would like to comment upon it... I sent a message to that address, not in aggressive but rather in jocular style, got no response, and the day after I saw that the name and the address had disappeared – but not the plagiarized text!

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?

Besides swimming, I spend much time reading in several languages—with a preference for classical literature, essays, and books on history of ideas—going to exhibitions of art, and not least watching movies (I have dabbled in the history of the seventh art, and still do).

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

In public interviews, debates, seminars, and so on, there is an ever recurring situation with which I find myself faced that makes it necessary to choose words well-fitted to forestall or dispel a misunderstanding. This latter comes in two forms. First, there are “esoterically oriented” people who interpret my presentations as predicated upon a kind of anti-esoteric agenda; and conversely, people of an “anti-esoteric” persuasion who interpret them as predicated upon a kind of crypto-esoteric message. In either case, despite my usual preliminary endeavours to state “whence I speak”, they don't understand that what I am talking about is predicated upon no ideological agenda at all. Second, it happens that even people who belong to neither of these two categories balk at the fact that I don't take any stand about my own philosophical, ideological, or religious positions—and each time I have to explain that I don't have any message to broadcast. The same problems frequently crop up when it comes to the reception of my scholarly writings. I am, of course, well aware of the fact that my colleagues in the speciality are regularly faced with the same situation.

Another unhappy experience, much worse than the former one, is that many scholars who have embarked on our speciality and have completed works of research (like the MA and PhD), however brilliant these latter may be, find no job in the academy. This is due to the fact that available academic positions in the speciality are extremely rare worldwide, especially in Religious Studies in Europe (contrary to the United States).

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

To begin with, it is appropriate to refer to the second “unhappy experience” mentioned above. Indeed, when it happens (luckily, it does happen) that a scholar having worked under our umbrella in the speciality lands a good academic position (in that speciality, or more generally in Religious Studies or Sociology), this may be hailed as an event all the more fortunate, since so many other scholars do not manage this.

As to other “best things”, some arise from my responses to questions 1 and 2. To question 1, because I have found the kind of academic position that was most

congenial to my preferences. To question 2, because I am happy to contribute and to be still contributing, albeit in a modest way, taking up the challenges listed in my response.

In like manner, practicing a speciality still in the process of development—of making its mark—encourages methodological exchanges. With this in mind, having never considered what I said or wrote as a kind of ultimate truth, I have always been expecting critical comments from colleagues in that scholarly community, and welcome them gratefully whenever tendered. Along with this, it is worth mentioning that my exchanges with these colleagues have always been not only stimulating, but also very gratifying in terms of personal relationships.

Dr. Dave Evans,
Independent Scholar, UK (in transit to
SouthEast Asia)



How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

It has been an interest since childhood, on a ‘fascination with the unknown’ level. I was taken to see the Tutankhamun exhibition when it came to London in the early 1970s (when I was nine or ten years old). I was wowed—in retrospect, having read the ‘right’ reference material and theories now, I can confidently say it was a Said-esque dose of Orientalism. I’ve been a practitioner of several strands of esotericism since the very early ‘80s. Academic interest in the subject came later, as I went to university as a mature student when I was in

my early 30s. I managed to squeeze in a magical element to the thesis for my undergraduate degree (which was psychology, at Bangor University, North Wales) and after that I changed streams and read for a Masters in the History and Literature of Witchcraft at Exeter University. During that time I met Professor Ronald Hutton at several conferences and was very easily encouraged to start talking about PhD proposals with him. I enrolled as one of his students at Bristol University in late 2001, submitting three years later a thesis on post-World War II occultism in Britain, with particular emphasis on the post-Crowleyan strands, which is the area of my practical interest too. That was published in 2007, to some rather mixed reception.

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

At present, like for all of academia, the biggest challenge is money, or rather the lack of it—how do we pay for the research that needs to be done, and how do we justify the research we’re doing when, to an extent, intellectual enquiry into religion (however much all we in ESSWE know how much it matters) is perceived as a luxury in a time that in retrospect might make the 1920s recession look like a picnic? There is a good chance that we are going to see a new Dark Ages created here, with STEM subjects (this is what we call it in the UK, the acronym stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) getting all the cash and Humanities simply dying. I fear that such a move would be catastrophic for education for a hugely long time. On a related matter, the destruction of libraries that is currently going on is simply scandalous, with huge public collections being broken up and sold as objects with no consideration of the intellectual value—several times I have been moved to simply say “this is becoming like Fahrenheit 451” out loud to people. Sadly it’s not a science fiction story. This is happening, and it’s real...

With some irony, the invitation to take part in this interview arrived just a few weeks before, after much consideration, massive soul-searching and even more job-hunting, I have decided to leave the UK, long-term, for the Far East to attempt to earn a living as an English Teacher, and I

will to a large extent step out of academia entirely. I shall be earning a local wage, and won't have Athens e-library access, so it will be very hard to keep up with developments or to buy any books, let alone attend European conferences. It is a decision made with a heavy heart so far as admitting that I'm at an age and a stage of career where economics indicate that I can't afford to wait for this recession to finish and for UK Humanities departments to be rebuilt. On the positive side, it is a fascinating chance to travel to see parts of the world where I have never been, and to immerse myself in a culture which has a huge ritual and religious input.

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

Ah, so very many to choose from.... as a historian, albeit a flexibly cross-disciplined one, the notion of fieldwork is a little odd, but since I was working to an extent with the memories of still-living people I was fortunate to undertake several visits to meet and talk with some quite astonishing people. It would be unfair to pick one that was the most fun, as very many of them were an absolute hoot—and there are some (mostly ritual events) that I simply cannot discuss, however on the basis of sheer number of trips it would have to be the Museum of Witchcraft in Cornwall, who repeatedly made this researcher very welcome over the course of five or six years, and were most generous with their time, their resources and their general good spirit.

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?

Outside academia I am very keen on travel and photography, which makes my S. E. Asia trip all the more exciting. I was for many years a very keen archer and rock climber, but a computer-use-related wrist injury and subsequent surgery for that a couple of years back has put an end to both of those. In a parallel universe I have a well-paid job as a senior researcher in a World War II-specialised history department. In this universe I merely do a little historical work as a volunteer on that subject with our declining numbers of veterans: please see www.normandyd-day.com for some of that. I have also made a few conference appearances in the Death Studies/Thanatology circuit, which is fascinating and an offshoot of some of what I worked on for the PhD.

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

People look at you as if you are from outer space. All the "Oh, just like in Harry Potter?" comments become galling the fifteenth time you hear them. Being a Doctor of Weird makes getting a job in 'straight' academia very hard, no matter how much you emphasise the research skills you have, ability to deal with 'difficult' subject areas and to overcome problematic ethical considerations etc. A freaky subject always seems to be a sticking point. I believe that parapsychologists find similar

trouble. I have only managed to work in a postdoctoral job for one year (a fixed-time contract) in the six years since gaining the PhD, and that was working in an area utterly unrelated to esotericism, or indeed History. The rest of that period has been spent making postdoc job applications while working in unrelated administrative jobs which required no academic credentials, which sucked hugely at the time. Many in academia are still afraid of our subjects and it is my hope that in a few decades time that attitude will have passed and the areas which ESSWE covers will form an integral part of a core world cultural curriculum, without prejudice. I shall be long retired and probably dead by then, of course, but I do hope it happens.

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

People look at you as if you are from outer space! It is never boring, and very seldom unsurprising. It is very rewarding to participate in debates on the email discussion group that I helped set up, way back, in 2002 I think it was, that is populated by a large number of practitioners and academics, worldwide, with (I think) some 15 disciplines represented. A wonderful resource and (usually) flame-war free. I must plug the list here—we always welcome new members, who need to subscribe to the ACADEMIC-STUDY-MAGIC list at www.Jiscmail.ac.uk. It's been a privilege to do this research as it is something I am passionate about, and I was blessed with having an internationally known figure (Ronald Hutton) as my thesis advisor. I count numerous past and present 'Huttonites' as my dear friends and there are several scholars beyond the immediate 'tribe' who I am very close friends with—we are a small bunch of students of the Weird, and the 'team ethos' is most rewarding—I guess to an extent if you take on a strange PhD subject you are likely to have a limited but fascinating circle of academic colleagues, and that is both the best and worst—the limited numbers are bad (often we are geographically distant, for example) but the depth of friendship and understanding is immense. We can all commiserate about the jobs issues (I personally know a simply terrifying number of un- or under-employed PhDs), and we all celebrate when one of us gets a publication (I wonder if this interview counts!).



Two new ESSWE networks

ESSWE Network for the Study of Esotericism in Antiquity

Coordinated by *Dylan Michael Burns*, Postdoc, University of Copenhagen

Despite the rapid growth of the field of Western Esotericism, one of its great weaknesses is a lack of engagement with specialists of antique thought, history, and literature. While the ancient sources (Gnostic, theurgic, Neoplatonic, Hermetic, etc.) possess enormous importance for the development of esoteric currents from the fourteenth century onwards, there remains only a minimum of interaction between the antiquity experts with their (proto)-modern colleagues. The ESSWE Network for the Study of Esotericism in Antiquity will serve as a platform for introducing scholarship on ancient Esotericism to the rest of ESSWE, ideally culminating in a panel or workshop on ancient Esotericism at the 2013 meeting of the ESSWE in Sweden. It will also provide a venue for the exchange of ideas, notes and references, outside of the other professional bodies which might not be concerned with Esotericism per se (SBL/AAR, ISNS, APA, ARCI, etc.). Initially, it will be relatively low-key, consisting of a mailing list and a future panel at ESSWE (and perhaps AAR), although an online forum may be put together should there be interested parties.

A brief note on the wording of the title of the group: Why "Esotericism in Antiquity"? Some might say that "esotericism" is a strictly Modern idea, and so that the idea of "esotericism in antiquity" is a misnomer. This viewpoint is worth contesting. In any case, even its adherents would not disagree that a particular body of ancient sources is central to the formation of Western Esotericism, and that the students of these sources are worth engaging. Secondly, why not "Western' Esotericism in Antiquity"? In the ancient and early medieval context, the question of what qualifies as "Western" is considerably complicated, given the predominance of a "Western" political power in areas considered (near)-"Eastern" as far as modern esotericism is concerned (Egypt, Israel-Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Armenia, Iran, etc.). The Middle East was central to both the formation of ancient esoteric texts as well as polemical discourse about them (i.e. ancient "Orientalism"). Moreover, these texts enjoyed a considerable (and under-studied) reception history in the medieval period under Islam prior to their revival in Europe. Therefore, the qualifier "Western" is also at least open to contestation with respect to "ancient esotericism."

ESSWE Contemporary Esotericism Research Network (ContERN)

Coordinated by *Egil Asprem*, PhD Research Fellow, Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, University of Amsterdam and *Kennet Granholm*, Docent/Assistant Professor, History of Religions, Stockholm University

The field of Western esotericism has had a predominant focus on the early modern period, with relatively little research having been conducted on twentieth- and twenty-first-century manifestations. This has led to a situation where much of what could fit within Western esotericism is being researched within other fields (e.g. the study of new religiosity and "spirituality", pagan studies), which seldom operate with a historical awareness comparable to the study of Western esotericism. Very few references to discussions, theories, and perspectives from the study of Western esotericism can be found within these fields. This, in turn, has had something of a marginalising effect for the field of Western esotericism. With this in mind, the mission of ContERN is multilayered:

- 1) The primary goal of ContERN is to produce and promote scholarship on contemporary esotericism in ways that are congruent with the larger field of Western esotericism. This will both help to expand the scope of the field itself, and increase its influence and impact in neighbouring disciplines and fields.
- 2) ContERN will make an active effort to encourage the integration of new theoretical and methodological approaches and perspectives, e.g. from the social sciences, while maintaining a strong emphasis on historical awareness. This will further promote and increase the relevance of scholarship on Western esotericism for a broader range of disciplines and fields.
- 3) In conjunction with point two, ContERN will actively encourage "generalist" approaches to contemporary esotericism by emphasising the development of new theory and method in the study of esotericism, in ways which have a broader relevance also beyond the boundaries of the field.

All this should help make the study of Western esotericism more relevant for disciplines investigating religious, cultural, and societal change, and enhance them by highlighting the importance of a solid historical grounding. The study of Western esotericism will benefit from the integration of approaches suited particularly well for looking at contemporary phenomena (e.g. field work methodologies), and it can be expected that scholars of earlier historical manifestations can benefit from the new perspectives offered.

The goals of ContERN are to

- Provide possibilities for networking and forums for scholarly discussion, e.g. conferences, conference panels, online presence, edited volumes
- Promote both the general study of esotericism and the study of contemporary esotericism in specific, particularly through interaction with other subdisciplines in religious studies and sociology
- As a long-term plan, institutional immersion; promoting the study of contemporary esotericism in teaching programmes in other fields.

ContERN will officially be launched at the 1st International Conference on Contemporary Esotericism, arranged at Stockholm University on August 27-29, 2012. See conference announcements for further information.

Upcoming conferences

Art, eros and esotericism

Wednesday April 11, 2012, Villa San Michele, Capri, Italy.

After two successful mini conferences we have decided to organize a third Esoteric Crossroads conference at Villa San Michele, Capri, Italy.

The preliminary theme this year is: Art, eros and esotericism, with great freedom to choose subjects, but preferably in line with the Dioscuri Institute's ambition to encourage exchanges of philosophical, cultural, scientific and esoteric ideas between Sweden and Italy in particular, and northern and southern Europe in general. The presentations will be around 30 minutes. Please send suggestions for presentations as soon as possible, or let us know if you are interested in participating and want to book a place. We have only 20 places to offer, so kindly let us know in good time.

This is a collegial, informal conference without any sponsor. The registration fee is €75 for speakers and audience members alike. Coffee and Capri cake will be served in the break on the panoramic terrace of the new Café Casa Oliv. After the conference spumante will be served on the big terrace of Villa San Michele.

For more information please e-mail: thomas.karlsson@rel.su.se

About Villa San Michele: <http://www.villasanmichele.eu/>

Science and the Occult - from Antiquity through the Early Modern Period: International Conference

April 20-21, 2012 (Friday-Saturday)

Hosted by the Department of History and supported by the Bilisland-Puskas Initiative endowment at Purdue University

Contact: Angela Catalina Ghionea at email: ghionea@purdue.edu

Keynote speakers:

Edward Bever Ph.D., Chair of History & Philosophy Department, SUNY-Old Westbury (State University of New York)

Nancy L. Turner, Ph.D., Chair of the Social Sciences Department and the History Program, University of Wisconsin-Platteville; Chair of Societas Alchimica

Abstract submission: 500 words

Deadlines:

Paper Proposals: October 1, 2011. Offers to preside for General Sessions: January 15, 2012

Topics considered (but not limited to): History of Magic, Alchemy, Witchcraft, Medicine, Herbalism, Kabala, Numerology, Sacred Geometry, Esoterism, Hermetism and Hermeticism, Divination, Tarot, Astrology, Tradition and Lore, Ciphers and Alphabets, Semiotics and Symbology.

The fascinating recurrence of alchemical symbols in European, American, and Islamic thought, as well as specific non-rational methods employed by many scientists to promote rational discoveries from Ancient times through the Early Modern Period, will be the focus of this conference. We anticipate the publication of an edited Volume II, after the event.

Contemporary Esotericism: International Conference

Stockholm University, Sweden, August 27-29, 2012

Keynote speakers

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, University of Amsterdam *Christopher Partridge*, Religious Studies, Lancaster University
Kocku von Stuckrad, Study of Religion, Groningen University

Deadline for Abstracts: March 30, 2012

Submit your abstract (approx. 200 words) along with a brief academic CV (approx. 1 page) to: ContEso2012@gmail.com

The academic study of Western esotericism has blossomed in recent years. University departments and MA programs have been established, book series and journals launched, academic societies founded, and several international conferences and panels are organized every year. There is, however, still a major gap in scholarship on esotericism: very little research exists on contemporary phenomena. While some present-day phenomena related to esotericism, such as 'New Age spiritualities' and (neo)paganism, have been the focus of scholars in other fields, scholars working in the field of esotericism have largely neglected such developments. With a focus on early modern phenomena, scholarship in the field of Western esotericism has been predominantly historical in its approach, with a common reluctance to incorporate social-scientific approaches. In recent years, however, serious attempts have been made to develop sociological approaches to the study of the esoteric/occult which are both compatible with historical approaches and forgo the biased presumptions of yesteryear. A fundamental challenge for the study of contemporary esoteric phenomena is that it is not sufficient to simply transpose theories, definitions and methodologies developed for the study of e.g. Renaissance magic to later manifestations of the esoteric. Studying contemporary phenomena poses intriguing possibilities, such as the opportunity to study esotericism in lived contexts, which unavoidably also introduce new problems. In general, several theoretical and methodological concerns need to be addressed if a proper study of contemporary esotericism is to succeed.

Suggested Topics

The primary aim of this conference is to place contemporary phenomena on the agenda of the study of esotericism. Thus we welcome papers dealing with contemporary and recent developments in "classic" esoteric currents – e.g. within Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, and ritual magical currents – as well as esoteric developments of particular relevance today – e.g. Chaos Magick, Satanism, and (neo)paganism. We also strongly encourage papers dealing with theoretical and methodological issues that are particularly pertinent to the study of contemporary esotericism, as well as papers dealing with the societal, cultural, political, religious etc. contexts of esotericism today.

... Cont.

This can include discussions on the role played by the esoteric in modern politics (e.g. the new right), grassroots activism (e.g. deep ecology and the animal rights movement), science (e.g. parapsychology, neurotheology, "New Age physics"), healthcare (e.g. alternative medicine), popular culture (both entertainment media and in broader contexts such as kitsch, consumer, and fan culture), and modern interactive communications media (e.g. mediatization and the effects of changing modes of mediation), as well as the simultaneous influence of these and other fields on esoteric notions, beliefs, and practices. General theoretical discussion on the potential usefulness of sociological terms and concepts such as globalization, secularization, and the post-secular in the study of contemporary esotericism is also encouraged. The conference should function as an interdisciplinary meeting place where scholars from a multitude of disciplines and with different approaches and perspectives can come together to learn from each other.

Additional information

The conference is arranged in conjunction with the 2012 EASR conference, also arranged in Stockholm, Sweden (at Södertörn University, August 23-26). Panels on esotericism, both historical and contemporary, are planned for the EASR as well, thus providing the opportunity to engage in extended discussion on these subjects, and of course lessening travel expenses.

More detailed information, including conference fee, will be made available at a later stage.

Conference organizers

Egil Asprem, PhD Research Fellow, Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, University of Amsterdam

Kennet Granholm, Assistant Professor, History of Religions, Stockholm University