

The Newsletter of the
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Words from the President of the ESSWE

The Epistemic and the Systematic, or: What does it mean to do *Research* in Esotericism?

—Andreas Kilcher

The fundamental purpose of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism is to promote the investigation of esotericism with the means and methods of scholarly research. But what does it exactly mean to research esotericism in academic terms? Is this a matter of course? Or of mere pragmatism? Or is this a doubtful undertaking, much like what Thomas Mann in his novel *Doktor Faustus* said of “liberal theology”: a “wooden iron”, a *contradictio in adjecto*? I cannot go deep into this matter here, but nevertheless hope it will be worthwhile to contribute some general thoughts on this central question of our work. It needs to be discussed basically on two levels: on an epistemic and on a systematic one.

The **epistemic level** is guided by the fundamental difference between subject and object of knowledge. Scholarly research is based on precisely this enabling difference: it allows us to choose any matter as the object of empirical, logical, historical and theoretical research, be it phenomena of physics and life or knowledge and

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belief systems (like esotericism). This enabling difference leaves the means and methods of research independently up to scholarship, applying them to any object in a non-apologetic way. However, if this epistemic difference is given up, scholarly means and methods are replaced by the intrinsic categories of the objects of research. Critical, historical, and theoretical distance from the matter of research is eliminated, object and subject of knowledge coincide, and research becomes apologetic and dependent on its object. It would be as if practitioners in esotericism (like kabbalists, alchemists, and theosophists) wrote their own history, or as if historians of knowledge and religion thought in the categories of esotericism and themselves became practitioners. Precisely this is beyond scholarly research in esotericism. I do not say that it does not exist, but

it is definitely the moment when research risks going beyond its realm.

The **systematic level**, in turn, is guided by the relationship between esotericism and scholarship itself. Here also there are two possible options: the thesis of incompatibility and the thesis of proximity. But while on the epistemic level I argue the case for difference, on the systematic level I argue the case for proximity. The theses of the incompatibility of esotericism and knowledge, of occultism and scholarship/science, assumes that there are two ways of thinking: scholarship and science on the one hand being based on reason, experiment, analytical thinking, critique, demystification, historicisation, etc., while occultism and esotericism by contrast are based on irrationality, mystification, analogic thinking, ahistorical association and allusion, etc. Esotericism thus seems to be anti-science, or pseudo-science where it claims knowledge. This thesis has been formulated among others in the essay "Analogy versus identity: the rejection of occult symbolism, 1580-1680" (1984) by Brian Vickers, where he aims to show "that the occult and the experimental scientific traditions can be differentiated in several ways: in terms of goals, methods, and assumptions".

Yet even though esotericism and science need to be differentiated, there are no absolute or universally valid criteria to substantiate a systematic difference between the two of them. Rather, there exists a set of dynamic and processual relative differences. This entails that



the ultimate goal must be to specify the relation of esotericism and science according to the historical, social, cultural, academic, religious etc. contexts. Indeed, in specific contexts, esotericism may be compatible with relatively valid scientific parameters, or certain esoteric systems may claim knowledge, e.g. in the esoteric idea of absolute and universal knowledge. Especially in early modernity, esoteric paradigms were far from being only contrary to science, instead being simultaneously part of scientific projects, and even promoting their goals, methods and assumptions.

Since the 18th and 19th centuries, however, esotericism stands in a much more tension-filled relation with science, for the latter rejected esotericism, while esotericism itself sided with criticism of modern (positivist) science. Esotericism became rejected knowledge. But just this proves that even here we cannot speak of a general systematic difference between esotericism and science, as esotericism still maintains its claims of knowledge. Modern occultism, for example, is guided by strong claims of being able to

explain supernatural phenomena – with the very means and methods of modern science.

In conclusion, then, whereas on the epistemic level I strongly advocate preserving the fundamental difference between subject and object, I argue on the systematic level that we have to assume a complex contiguity between esotericism and science that itself needs to be made the object of future research. ♦

Book from ESSWE 2 published

–Jean-Pierre Brach

Under the title *Capitales de l'ésotérisme européen et dialogue des cultures* (Capitals of European Esotericism and Transcultural Dialogue), the Proceedings of the 2nd International ESSWE Conference (held in Strasbourg, 2–4 July 2009) have recently been published (Paris, Orizons, coll. Universités).

Written by an array of specialists belonging to different academic disciplines (philosophy, German studies, cultural and religious history), the book aims at taking a new look at cultural history, by considering the impact of both the "spatial turn" and the existence of alternative, esoteric currents on the modern European cultural landscape. Accordingly, the present volume constitutes an attempt at delineating an esoteric topology of European Capitals, which combines – through a set of examples – the history of cultural exchanges with the underlying geography (both real and imaginary) of cultural productions, contacts, and influences pertaining to esoteric materials.

These studies eventually provide us with a new understanding of the different types of networks elaborated in modern European intellectual centers, which have contributed to the emergence and cultural identity of esoteric currents as such. ♦



From the Board

–Mark Sedgwick



The Board met the day before the Riga conference, and considered the regular series of reports on issues such as finances and membership, the bursary scheme and prizes, and publications: of proceedings of prior conferences, in *Aries* and in the *Aries* Book series. The Board also discussed the new website, which everyone thought looks great, but will of course experience some teething problems. Members who do experience problems with the new website should contact Pete Forshaw, the webmaster. Pete asked members to remember to send him agenda items. It was decided that some languages other than English will be incorporated into the website, as will a virtual esoteric library.

During a brainstorming session, it was decided to set up a list of mentors who volunteer to help other members, and to add Professional

Development sessions to the next MA thesis workshop, which will be held in 2016. A proposal to hold the ESSWE 6 conference in 2017 was accepted, and Wouter Hanegraaff will organize an ESSWE session for the AAR in 2016.

A proposal for CESNUR to become an affiliated network was approved, as was a proposal to establish a student network. It was also decided to set up a European Network for the Study of Islam and Esotericism (ENSIE). Anyone interested should contact Mark Sedgwick.

A sponsorship program for independent scholarly initiatives will now be started. Anyone interested should contact Egil Aspren.

Finally, members are requested to write conference reports for the Newsletter, after first proposing them to Per Faxneld to avoid duplication. ♦

From the Student Representative on the Board

Board Approves Creation of Student Network and Professional Development for Student Members

–Lori Lee Oates

Student issues came to the forefront this year at the annual board meeting and conference in Riga, Latvia. At the annual board meeting in April, the board approved my proposal for the creation of a student network. The board also approved the addition of a professional development component to the bi-annual thesis workshop.

The web-based student network will be designed to facilitate the building of relationships between student members on an international level. It will enhance professional development opportunities and provide students with mentoring from senior scholars. The primary goal will be to provide networking opportunities by facilitating the organization of student activities, including the biennial thesis workshop and other workshops or seminars, as deemed appropriate by the board. The board's student representative will be the coordinator for the network.

As student representative, I also made a proposal to the board for an increased professional development program. The program could cover topics such as applying for academic positions, crafting a CV, getting articles published, developing an online presence, and publishing your first book. Board members

felt this training should be targeted specifically at helping graduate students pursue Western Esotericism positions and publishing as this best suits our mandate. At present, the plan is to include a professional development component in the bi-annual thesis workshop. As well, there is a plan to develop a list of successful recent graduates of Western Esotericism programs and degrees so that they can share their tips and advice with current graduate students.

The issue of student voting was also raised in Riga during the annual general meeting. As student representative, I agreed to undertake an analysis of best practices with other academic organizations to determine how they handle student membership fees and voting.

Overall, as student representative I have found ESSWE to be an organization that is very concerned with the views of students and very interested in facilitating student development. There is strong recognition that student development is key to the future of the discipline. As such, if you have issues or concerns in relation to your membership, please feel free to contact me as your student representative. Your board wants to hear from you. ♦

ESSWE6 in Erfurt, Germany

–Bernd-Christian Otto



The next conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE6) will take place from **June 2-4, 2017**, in Erfurt, Germany. The conference will be hosted by the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies, which is part of the University of Erfurt (for further details see <https://www.uni-erfurt.de/index.php?id=91&L=1>).

The conference location will be the St Augustine's Monastery, located in the beautiful old town of Erfurt (see photo; for

further details see

<http://www.augustinerkloster.de/>).

ESSWE6 will be organized by Dr. Bernd-Christian Otto, who is research associate at the Max Weber Kolleg and part of the research group "Religiöse Individualisierung in historischer Perspektive" ('Religious individualization in historical perspective'). The conference theme will be '**Western Esotericism and deviance**'. A call for papers will be published in due course.

ESSWE Network Reports

Scandinavian Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism (SNASWE)

–Jesper Aagaard Petersen,

For SNASWE, 2014 was a quiet year after the success of ESSWE4 in Gothenburg in 2013. The most important activities for the past year include a change of director from founder Henrik Bogdan, University of Gothenburg, to Jesper Aagaard Petersen, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, and moving all activity and communication to the Facebook page. With regards to publication, SNASWE members are involved in editing the conference volume on *Esotericism and Health* with contributions from ESSWE4, and the Brill volume on *Esotericism in Scandinavia* is both edited by and includes contributions from a large number of SNASWE members. Planned activities for 2015 and beyond are restructuring and re-applying for funding to establish SNASWE as a functional network with a clearer structure and role. This would include

establishing a proper board to discuss activities for the future. SNASWE intends to play an active role in conference arrangement and publication in the coming years. ♦

Network for the Study of Esotericism in Antiquity (NSEA)

–Dylan M. Burns

In 2014–15, Sarah Veale and I both focused our energy on continuing to develop and update the NSEA website, ancientesotericism.org. Traffic and subscriptions increased significantly in the past year. The site has also begun to be used by members outside of the ESSWE and has garnered mention in the ancient religious blogosphere more widely, which means that it is succeeding in fulfilling its purpose as a bridge between scholars working in the nascent discipline of Western Esotericism and the various subdisciplines involved in the study of ancient Mediterranean religion. ♦

Conference Report

ESSWE 5 – “Western Esotericism and the East”, University of Latvia, Riga, April 16-18, 2015

–George Sieg

As the easternmost of all ESSWE conference locations so far, the city of Riga was beautiful and fitting as the site for inquiring into “Western Esotericism and the East.” While mingling the aesthetics of the Eastern Orthodox and post-Soviet world with those of Northern Europe, and crossing eras and styles as distinct and as Art Deco and Art Nouveau with the heroic grandeur of Romantic and Neo-Classical monuments, the city’s diversity was perfectly chosen as an apt

background for the most thematically bold ESSWE conference yet.

The keynote presentations, uniformly held at the beginning of each conference day at the university’s “Small Hall,” established a challenging and ambitious tone that was lent an ambience of tradition and formality due to the ornate décor of the hall. The entirety of the experience evoked even more than the usual focused concentration. President Andreas Kilcher’s opening remarks

cogently raised questions which would be addressed in a variety of contexts throughout the conference, recalling constructions of both Orientalism and Occidentalism and their relevance to the construction and development of esotericism. Wouter Hanegraaff followed with the conference's first keynote, which presented the

conference contextualized its theme not only as an opportunity for comparativism but also as a vital inquiry into the origins and interdependent process which have given rise to the concepts of Esotericism – and “Western” Esotericism – in the first place, ultimately implying the necessity of questioning the application of “esotericism” in



“globalization of esotericism” as the world-wide diffusion of a category originally meaningful mainly in the context of its development in reference to Western conceptions of otherness – such as Orientalism, along with related “Grand Narratives” ultimately played out in colonial expansion. This reflective opening to the

historical circumstances quite different from those which generated the movements and traditions much later defined as such.

With this provocative start, the conference proceeded into elegantly arranged threefold parallel sessions, combining the expected wide diversity of topics suggested by “the East” with

consistent and coherent panel themes. The effectiveness of panel structure, order, and parallel scheduling was noteworthy, as were the fascinating papers and informative subsequent question-and-answer sessions. In addition, the general aesthetics of the university building that housed the upper and lower panel rooms was impressive. Notwithstanding, the logistical highlight of the conference was panel series "Varieties of Movements" held in the "Library Hall" at a separate building a few blocks away, humorously dubbed "Moonbase One" by one of its panelists, Christian Greer, due to the outlying location. Attendees making the trek, however, were rewarded with Christian's engaging presentation on the heretical reception of heterodox Islam by the "Moorish Orthodox Church," as well as Shai Ferraro presenting developing research on Caananite reconstructionist religion in Israel, and a paper by Maria Liberg examining contemporary East-West syncretism in the Voudon Gnostic Society.

While space prohibits comments of praise that are deserved by every paper, as all panels were both significant and engaging, some highlights include Thierry Zarcone's examination of esoteric interactions between Freemasonry and Sufism in Turkey, and their reception by figures such as Rudolf von Sebottendorf, as well as Christian Giudice's inquiry into the reception of Eastern ideas in the work of Julius Evola and his contemporary Arturo Reghini. Discussion of other exponents of Tradition was continued throughout the panel "Encountering Islam," which aptly continued themes introduced in Mark Sedgwick's ESSWE 4 Keynote, and included a paper by Sedgwick himself focusing on the very Western character of Idries Shah's Neo-Sufism, along with an intriguing consideration of Russian influences on Henri Corbin by Hadi Fakhoury of McGill University.

Of the numerous well-integrated panels, the most notable was entirely composed of scholars from the University of Heidelberg, which ran in the final parallel session, entitled "Genealogical Approaches to a Global History of Esoteric Identities", applying similar techniques of research and analysis to a diverse array of

esoteric worldviews and their formation. In addition, the panel addressing the significant role of Theosophical reception of purportedly Eastern esoteric material was also an excellent companion to one of the highlights of the conference, EXESES graduate Tim Rudbø's absorbing and engaging lecture based on his prize-winning thesis, *H.P. Blavatsky's Theosophy in context: The construction of Meaning in Modern Western Esotericism*.

Returning to the other conference highlights: Keynote speaker Charles Burnett masterfully presented the three-fold categorical division of magic in Arabic sources with such combination of detail and concision that even non-specialists in Islamic material found the content immediately informative, useful, and relevant, as well as fascinating. Further, as the final keynote speaker, Allison Coudert's commanding presentation situated early modern Western esotericism in the wider context of the scientific revolution and the interaction of Orientalism with actual eastern influences on the western intellectual, scholarly, and cultural landscape.

The conference concluded with an unusual contemporary artistic experience: Local artist Mikelis Fisers presented his paintings, which are informed by his entheogenic shamanic experiences and combine themes of UFO conspiracism with contemporary esoteric motifs, such as the bizarre survival of the Ahnenerbe-SS at the South Pole and Reticulan grey aliens in such death-defying Terran adventures as mammoth-abduction.

The good fortune of conference attendees also included social experiences enhanced by the charm and charisma of the city. The fine conference dinner was greatly enjoyed at the beautiful historic Europa Royale Hotel Riga, and there were continued comments appreciative of the diverse and delicious local cuisine. Many enjoyed a special black balsam cocktail at the most esoteric drinking spot of the conference, the "Black Magic" chocolate shop, which even featured an inscription of what appeared to be the Gnostic Leontophidian on the wall. In keeping with the spirit of ESSWE, "Western Esotericism and the East" opened many new

areas of inquiry within our increasingly conceptually and methodologically diverse field, while thoroughly addressing its very cogent theme. It did so with memorable style in an ideal local setting, and thoughts of returning to Riga one

day are now combined with eager anticipation for ESSWE 6. The ESSWE tradition of constant improvement and development was exemplified by the outstanding success of ESSWE 5. ♦

Tim Rudbøg wins the 2015 ESSWE Thesis Prize

At the ESSWE 5 Conference, Dr. Tim Rudbøg (photo, with Professor Birgit Menzel) was awarded the 2015 ESSWE Thesis Prize. Below is a presentation of the thesis, written by Dr Rudbøg.

H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy in Context: The Construction of Meaning in Modern Western Esotericism (PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2013), 701 pages.

H. P. Blavatsky's (1831-1891) Theosophy has been a significant and influential part of modern Western spirituality and esotericism, yet up to this date no major study has systematically mapped and critically analysed the major themes of Blavatsky's writings, nor Blavatsky's sources, or how Blavatsky herself applied the pivotal concept 'Theosophy' or to what extent she was engaged with the



intellectual contexts of her time. Because of this major gap in research too much has consequently been left to the imagination regarding Blavatsky and Theosophy. The purpose of this thesis is thus to fill this gap and thereby reconnect a major part of modern Western esotericism, in the case of Blavatsky's Theosophy, with the broader currents of intellectual history.

The proposed and applied theoretical framework for this venture is based on the centrality of language in the production of intellectual products, such as texts, but contrary to the hitherto dominant focus on strategies, rhetoric and power—which basically can be used to study and analyse any religion, any time, independent of history thereby neglecting thorough textual and historical contexts—this thesis focuses on the

construction of meaning coupled with a carefully selected set of methodological tools based on both close contextual analysis, genealogies of meaning formation as well as intellectual history, and intertextuality.

In addition to an overview of Blavatsky research and two major bibliographies of all the sources used by her in *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) this thesis inductively

maps and critically-historically analyses Blavatsky's use of the concept 'Theosophy' as well as Blavatsky's primary discourses, identified as: (1) discourse for ancient knowledge, (2) discourse against Christian dogmatism, (3) discourse against the modern natural sciences and materialism, (4) discourse against modern spiritualism, (5) discourse for system and (7) discourse for universal brotherhood.

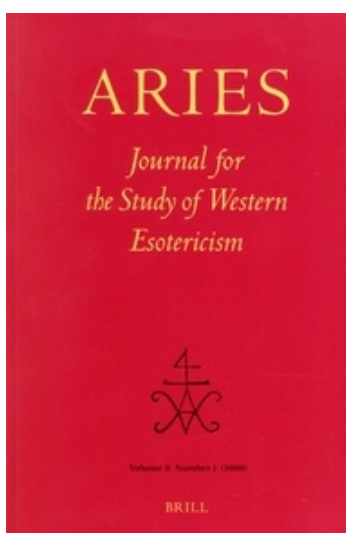
In mapping, analysing and thus recontextualising these discourses, it was found that her construction of meaning was significantly interconnected with broader intellectual contexts, such as 'modern historical consciousness', 'critical enlightenment ideas', studies in religion, studies in mythology, the modern sciences, spiritualism, systemic philosophy, reform movements and practical ethics. It, for example, becomes clear that Blavatsky's search for an ancient 'Wisdom Religion' was actually her contribution to the participation in a common intellectual occupation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

and that her critique of the Christian dogmas was equally a common intellectual trend. To read Blavatsky's discourses as the idiosyncratic strategies of a so called "esotericist" isolated from their larger contexts or only engaged with them in order to legitimise minority views would therefore largely fail to account for many of the results of this thesis that, for example, in historical actuality they were a part of the larger cultural web of meaning and results of the broader philosophical, religious and social problems of the time.

Having firmly grounded Blavatsky's Theosophy in relation to her historical contexts and mapped her textual sources, it is hoped that a new chapter posing greater precision concerning the meaning and significance of Theosophy and modern Western esotericism in relation to intellectual history and the history of religions at large is dawning and that the present thesis will serve as a useful contribution to our fruitful area of research. ♦

Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism

Published by Brill Academic Publishers under the auspices of the ESSWE, *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* is a scholarly journal devoted to the study of Western Esotericism. *Aries* accepts articles written in English, German, French, and Italian. ESSWE members receive a 15% discount on private subscriptions. To receive your discount please mention with your order the special code, which can be found on the 'Members only' part of the ESSWE website.

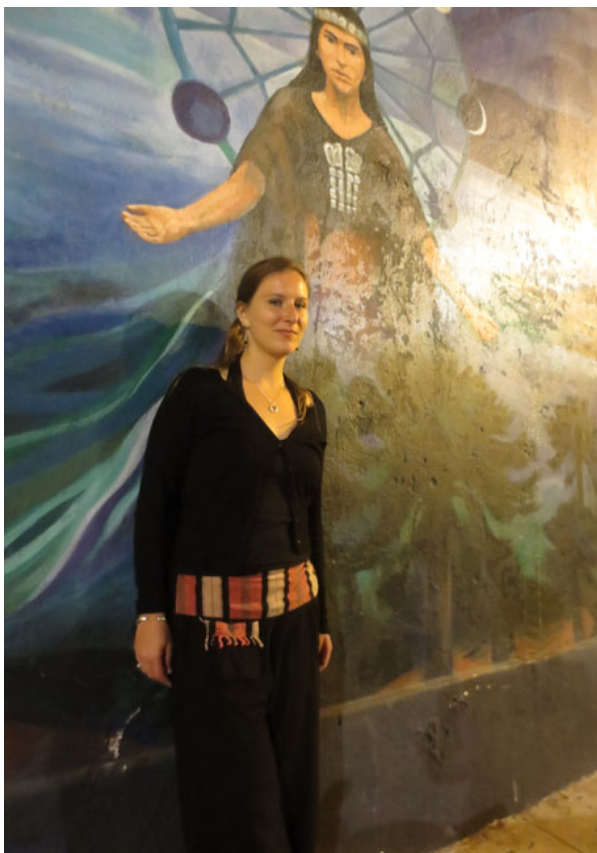


Scholar interviews

–Per Faxneld

In every issue of the Newsletter one junior and one senior scholar of Western esotericism are interviewed. They are both asked the same questions.

Sandra Rudman, PhD Candidate, Cultural Theory and Methodology, University of Constance, Germany.



How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

Already as a teenager I had a fascination for the mysterious and the dark, mainly in literature, music and the visual arts. Not until much later,

2009, I made the academic connection, instigated by the lectures of Demetrius Waarsenburg and Joyce Pijnenburg on Ancient Gnosticism, and the ones of Marco Pasi and Egil Asprem on Mesmerism at the UvA.

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

I see a major challenge in the interdisciplinarity of the field, and thus in its methodologies. As its topics often include affect-related phenomena in cultural practices, combining emic and etic approaches is challenging.

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

Combining traveling and research.

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?

Other research interests include francophone literature in the 19th century, the phantastic, memory studies and Latin-American studies.

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

Ah, well...

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

As it is with all studies of humanities: you gain insights in the world and in people. ♦

Marco Pasi, Associate professor, History of Hermetic philosophy and related currents, Amsterdam University, The Netherlands



How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?

It began quite early for me. I guess the main motivations were curiosity and dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction about the daily reality I experienced as a teenager and curiosity about whether something else could lie beyond it. It was all about the mystery of existence, and about how I could make sense of my place in a world that, at least at that time, looked less than friendly to me. I didn't have any input about this from my family or friends, none of whom was really interested in this kind of stuff. From what I can remember, I made all my intellectual discoveries on my own, and it is hard for me now to reconstruct where I was picking things up from. So when I was, say, 12 or 13 I begun reading books about near death experiences, life after death, paranormal powers, and so on. This is where I got started, even if I guess I got bored quickly enough with this. A little later there came readings on ceremonial magic and the "occult sciences". One of the first books I read in that area was Richard Cavendish's *Black*

Arts. In spite of the cheesy title, it was as good an introduction as I could get then on the various aspects of Western esotericism. This must also be where I first saw Aleister Crowley's name mentioned. Over the following years my interest became more and more sophisticated, as I was able to put things in a broader perspective, and to access the same kind of questions from different angles. I also became of course an avid reader of Gothic and occult fiction. So the interest that was sparked in me at such an early age never went away, even if it took quite some time before I realized that my intellectual curiosity could turn into an area of professional activity as an academic scholar.

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

Perhaps the biggest challenge that I see now is what to do with the feeling of optimism that was predominant some years ago in our field. I am talking about the early 2000s, especially after the foundation of the Amsterdam centre. There was the idea that, as a scholarly community, we would grow and spread fast, and that institutionalization would necessarily follow. To some extent expectations were fulfilled. We saw then the creation of the Exeter chair, the foundation of the ESSWE and of the ASE, and the publication of the Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism, all of which happened around the same time. So prospects looked good, and I think there was an idea that we would continue to grow with the same pace. Some ten years later, I think our optimism should be downsized to reality. While general interest in what we do remains high and we have surely gone a long way in securing acceptance and legitimacy within academia, it would be naïve not to see that we are not moving so fast as we thought we would. The Exeter chair doesn't exist anymore, and no new chairs or dedicated positions for the study of Western esotericism are in sight at this moment. The financial crisis and the current push towards a neoliberal restructuring of universities don't help, of course. This means

that our field remains extremely fragile. A very large share of the ESSWE's constituency is made of students. It is a hard, sad fact that very few of them will be able to secure academic positions where they can freely dedicate themselves as specialists to the study of Western esotericism.

Whether things are going to get better in the future, is anybody's guess. But we should perhaps not forget that, of all the academic positions for the study of Western esotericism that were ever created, only one came out of the autonomous choice of an academic institution and was funded with its regular budget. That was the Paris chair, created back in 1964. So it seems like even today, after all the work that has been done, it is not so evident that academic institutions are willing to use their own money for creating new positions in our field. If private money is forthcoming, then maybe they are willing to listen, but that is not even sure, and in any case this cannot happen all the time.

Another significant challenge that I see today is one that our field shares with most other fields in the humanities, i.e. how to "valorize" the results of our research. What is the relevance of the study of Western esotericism from a broader social and a cultural point of view? After all, Western esotericism is an historical phenomenon like many others, so we definitely need to avoid studying it as if it were insulated with bubble-wrap from the rest of the world. That is a potential danger of self-referential specialism in our field, and it is significant that some very interesting studies of modern esotericism, where critical perspectives were applied that related to issues such as politics, gender, or neocolonialism, have been done by scholars who haven't shown any interest in being part of the scholarly network of Western esotericism (think of Alex Owen, for instance).

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

Well, I have quite a few actually, and most of them date back to the time when I was a PhD student in Paris, with Antoine Faivre as supervisor. I think some people, especially young students, may have the idea that Faivre is an old-fashioned guy

who would consider late modern or contemporary developments in Western esotericism, and especially controversial authors such as Crowley, with a degree of suspicion. Nothing could be farther from the truth, and in fact when I first mentioned occultist magic to him as a possible subject for my PhD dissertation, he accepted it in the blink of an eye. So all was good for me on that side. But I vividly remember the first presentation I gave during one of his classes. Faivre's course for that year was the Holy Grail in modern Western esotericism, and so I suggested that my presentation might bear on the Grail in Crowley and the Ordo Templi Orientis. This was of course at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, which was then still in the old building of the Sorbonne. I don't think that occultist forms of sexual symbolism had ever been discussed in the wooden, cozy classrooms of the Ecole before. You had the impression that things had not changed so much, at least in terms of décor, since the times of Alfred Loisy and Marcel Mauss.

So there was I, talking about holy "spears" and "cups," and how they would translate into specific body parts and the activities thereof. But the best moment came when I discussed the possible sources of such symbolism in occultist literature, and I mentioned Hargrave Jennings's book *The Rosicrucians*. As you may know, it is quite a crazy book, with a lot of sex and, in spite of the title, very little Rosicrucianism in it. Definitely a fun read. So, talking about sexual symbolism, I quoted his interesting theory about the origins of the Order of the Garter. According to Jennings it was no garter that fell from the Countess of Salisbury's legs during a ball, but rather a tampon. So when King Edward III picked it up from the ground, what he said was not really "Honi soit qui mal y pense," as the obviously distorted tradition would have it, but rather "Yoni soit qui mal y pense!"

When I realized what I was actually saying, thinking that the same walls that had witnessed the lofty discussions of Claude Lévi-Strauss and the erudite investigations of Georges Dumézil were now listening to me talking about Hargrave Jennings's crackpot theories, I just had to burst out laughing. The people in the classroom

were a bit perplexed, and then I saw that Faivre, who was sitting right beside me, didn't seem to find the story so funny after all, and was apparently wondering what was wrong with me. So with some effort I pulled myself together, and went on with my presentation. It was a fun moment if I think about it, but I also took it as a great lesson, because it taught me that it is not important how crazy the things we study may appear, either to us or to anybody else, the important thing is to study them seriously, which means with a very alert critical sense, but also with respect. I think that in our field, this is a lesson that may be of value, considering the kind of stuff we sometimes happen to come across.

What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?

I am generally interested in whatever can make this weird experience we call life slightly more bearable. So, the usual things: literature, poetry, art, music. Not so much philosophy, nowadays. Then history in any form and on any subject, but that is predictable enough, I guess. I am probably the opposite of the desperate protagonist of Drieu La Rochelle's *Farewell to Gonzague*: not having vices I can afford to have passions, so my tastes are disparate and eclectic enough. As to more bodily pursuits, I have been practicing fencing since I was a teenager.

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

Perhaps the worst thing of all is having to go at insane lengths to explain what you do to

strangers. Sometimes even to well educated persons, if not colleagues from other fields. I think my family gave up long ago trying to understand what I was really up to. And in fact, when people ask me what is my field, if I feel lazy I just say "religious studies", so that I don't have to repeat the whole basic rigmarole one more time. Not such a smart move anyway, because in that case I will probably have to explain that no, I am not a theologian... But still better than having to say whether magic *really* exists.

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

I guess that after so many years, some of the enchantment of the beginnings has faded a little. Twenty years ago you had the feeling that the field was made of little more than a handful of very passionate scholars who thought they had important things to say. Now that the field has considerably grown, going through a significant process of academic institutionalization, the picture is much more varied and complex, and it is less easy to idealize what we do, at least for me. I need to have the impression that I am doing something new, something related to things that people, for whatever reason, have disregarded or neglected or forgotten. And I think that this is precisely what makes the study of Western esotericism so attractive. It really makes you feel that you are opening doors that have remained closed for a long time, and that you don't know what kind of room you're going to enter into next. ♦

UPCOMING CONFERENCES

Theosophy Across Boundaries

September 24–26, 2015, Heidelberg Center for American Studies, Curt und Heidemarie Engelhorn Palais, Hauptstraße 120, 69117 Heidelberg

From its inception throughout the period of its highest influence in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the theosophist movement has constantly transgressed boundaries. It has gone beyond geographical boundaries, from Europe to India and on to other Asian countries. It has blurred boundaries between religious traditions, mixing elements from various European and Asian traditions, also appealing to individuals from a variety of religious backgrounds. And it has transgressed the boundaries between categories such as religion, philosophy, politics, or science.

Dealing with theosophy may challenge our way of looking at things – such as the division of religion and science – because it challenged them. One challenge lies in recognizing theosophy as a crucial agent of global transfers of religion (somewhat ironically, because it wanted to transcend religion) and transfers of Western knowledge. Indeed, it is perhaps the most overlooked agent in this latter transfer. This is largely due to the fact that theosophy has so far mostly been studied within the disciplinary framework of Western Esotericism Studies. Yet, theosophy is not just a part of “Western esotericism,” i.e. the product of a purely western Orientalist imagination, in which Western audiences defined their own identity with implicit or explicit reference to the “Otherness” of the East. Instead, theosophy, in particular the Theosophical Society, was part of a truly global movement, thus providing an outstanding example of the complex entanglements of the

global religious history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For people in Asia, esotericism could function as an entry point into orientalist discourse and, at the same time, provide opportunities for a critical resignification of its contents, which in turn impacted on orientalist notions.

In order to acknowledge that esotericism played an important role in the global religious history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the current academic paradigm of a purely “Western Esotericism” requires revision. The conference will try to bring together Western Esotericism Studies and Asian Area Studies and, equally importantly, draw in contributions from other disciplines, especially History, Literary Studies, and Art History. By not just narrowly focusing on theosophy and the usual suspects thought to have been its main agents, the goal of the conference is to contextualize theosophy as a global movement, to take effects upon theosophy and effects of theosophy in unlikely places into account, and to go across (disciplinary) borders just as theosophy has also transgressed them historically.

The conference is open and free for everyone. A short and informal registration is requested at julian.strube@asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de, though.

You can find further information on the following website: <http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/research/conferences/theosophy-across-boundaries.html> ♦

ASEM Eighth International Conference: Mystic and Esoteric Movements in Theory and Practice, Mysticism and Esotericism in the World of Technologies

March 24-26, 2016, Saint Petersburg, Russia

The changes which took place due to technical progress always touched mystic and esoteric movements also on many levels. Using various methodologies, participants of the conference will try to understand the interaction of technologies and the mystic-esoteric movements, as observed in the past and in the present. Historians, researchers of culture and religion, philosophers, psychologists, literary scholars, the representatives of scientific knowledge, all those who involves the subject of esotericism and mysticism in their studies are invited to participate in the conference.

Approximate headings of topics:

1. the impact of technological progress on the teachings of esoteric groups;
2. the impact of mystic and esoteric teachings on the world of technologies;
3. the impact of technologies on the formation and modification of esoteric practices;
4. information technologies and new forms of communication in the esoteric community and in the representation of esoteric groups;
5. the impact of technology on the material culture of the mystic-esoteric movements;
6. the history of interaction of technologies and mystic-esoteric teachings;
7. mysticism and esotericism in the Internet;
8. general aspects of studies for transformations of esotericism and mysticism in the modern world.

Conference languages: Russian, English.

Applications for the conference are to be sent to the address of the organizing committee esoterra.asem@gmail.com by 10 January 2016. Please include: full name, date of birth, academic degree, home address, place of work/study, current affiliation, phone, e-mail, need of an official invitation to receive a private (humanitarian) Russian visa (yes/no), paper title and an abstract

(200-300 words). The applicant should enclose his/her photo.

The decision on the applications will be made within a week after the deadline via e-mail. The best papers will be published in the conference proceedings after the conference.

The conference fee is 60 € for non-residents of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) who need invitations for visas. The fee for those participants who plans to arrive in Russia with a tourist visa is 40 €. Corresponding fees for the ASEM members (non-residents of CIS) are 30 and 20 €. The fee is to be paid upon the registration (March 24, 2016).

Organized by Russian Christian Academy for Humanities (St. Petersburg), Association for the Study of Esotericism and Mysticism (ASEM), Research Centre for Mysticism and Esotericism (St. Petersburg) with the support of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE).

The Organizing Committee

Chairmen: Prof. Dr. Roman Svetlov (Saint Petersburg); Dr. Sergey Pakhomov (Saint Petersburg, Russia).

Members: Prof. Dr. Andreas Kilcher (Zurich, Switzerland); Prof. Dr. Mark Sedgwick (Aarhus, Denmark); Prof. Dr. Birgit Menzel (Mainz, Germany); Dr. Yuri Khalturin (Moscow, Russia); Dr. Yuri Rodichenkov (Vyazma, Russia); Dr. Alexei Rakhmanin (Saint-Petersburg, Russia); Stanislav Panin (Moscow, Russia).

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