

H.E.R.M.E.S.

Vernal Equinox 2010



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H.E.R.M.E.S.' PURPOSE:

§ 1: To advance and balance the Academic Study of Esotericism.

§ 2: To establish and maintain an international and interdisciplinary Academic Research Society in the field of Esotericism in relation to Religion, Philosophy, Science and Art.



CONFERENCES

The Esoteric Crossroads: Intercultural Patterns in Early Modern Esotericism

Date: 7th April 2010

Location: Villa San Michele, Isle of Capri, Italy

The conference focuses on cross-cultural exchange between Northern and Southern Europe in the fields of Western Esotericism. This is a small-scale, informal, inter-disciplinary conference with limited places for twenty participants.

This is the first step toward future projects that aim to foster the exchange of philosophical, scientific, religious and esoteric ideas between Northern and Southern Europe in general, and Sweden and Italy in particular.

The conference is being held at the legendary Villa San Michele, built by the Swedish physician Axel Munthe. San Michele is a Swedish cultural institution on the beautiful island of Capri in Italy.

On the day after the conference, the participants are invited to a guided tour of Capri's Philosophical Park by its founder, Professor Gunnar Adler-Karlsson.



Astrologies

Dates: Saturday July 24th - Sunday July 25th 2010

Location: [Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institute](#)

16-19 Queen Square, Bath BA1 2HN, UK

Sponsoring Organization: [Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture](#)

[Department of Archaeology, History and Anthropology,](#)

[University of Wales, Lampeter](#)

Conference Theme:

Astrology is 'the practice of relating the heavenly bodies to lives and events on earth, and the tradition that has thus been generated' (Patrick Curry). It is a part of modern culture which arouses powerful feelings from loyal devotion to passionate hostility. It is feared by evangelical Christians and despised by sceptical scientists, yet is an unquestioned feature of the popular media. It is described as magic or psychology, and as a path to spiritual understanding or scientific truth. It is mentioned in passing in books on the sociology of religion yet is almost completely ignored in the literature on popular culture. Where academic studies do exist, they are largely sociological or psychological investigations designed to solve the problem of why belief in astrology persists in the modern world.

This conference will, for the first time, bring together academics to investigate the theory and practice of astrology in the modern world, from roughly 1800 to the present day.

The conference will be held in the gracious surroundings of the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institute, one of the most elegant buildings in eighteenth-century Bath. Bath itself is a UNESCO World Heritage site, one of the most beautiful cities in the world.



IAHR Quinquennial World Congress

"Religion: A Human Phenomenon"

Panel: "Western esotericism and its boundaries: Between discourses of identity and difference"

Convenors: Allison Coudert (University of California at Davis), Cathy Gutierrez (Sweet Briar College), Marco Pasi (Universiteit van Amsterdam)

Host Organization: International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR)

Location: Toronto, Canada

Dates: August 15-21, 2010

Call for Papers Deadline: 31 March 2010

In the last twenty years it has become customary for specialists to define esotericism as "western." This has a series of implications that are usually left in the background and not addressed explicitly. The purpose of the panel is to discuss precisely these aspects, namely: Why should esotericism be defined as western in the first place? Where do we want to draw the boundaries of the "West"? Are Jewish and Islamic forms of esotericism to be included in "western" esotericism, and if not, why? Finally, if we want to reject the tag "western," what are the possible alternatives? In what way could we open up the study of esotericism to multiculturalism? Could we do this by studying possible historical influences or rather by using a comparative approach that focuses on possible common patterns and analogies?

We welcome papers that address the use of esotericism as a theoretical designation in the construction of identity and difference while negotiating geographical and ideological boundaries. Proposals for papers on specific historical strains of esoteric thinking are also welcome, particularly those that address the formation of discourses of difference.

Proposals, together with a brief curriculum, should be sent to Cathy Gutierrez

(cgutierrez@sbcc.edu) and/or Marco Pasi (m.pasi@uva.nl).

For more information on the congress and registration procedure, see:

<http://www.religion.utoronto.ca/resources/iahr/Home.htm>

For more information on the academic study of esotericism, see:

www.aseweb.org

www.esswe.org

www.amsterdamhermetica.nl

Panel: Seduced by Science: The culture of religion and science in the early 20th century

Convenors: Egil Asprem and Tessel M. Bauduin (both: Centre for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands)

Location: Toronto, Canada

Dates: August 15th – 21st, 2010

Call for Papers Deadline: April 15th, 2010

The first half of the 20th century saw a radical transformation and fierce expansion of the sciences in western society. Both developments have had considerable impact on the conceptualization and experience of religion in the modern world. The success and prestige of the modern sciences have not only changed the way we think about religion, magic, and humanity's place within the natural world, but it has also reformed the referential 'common ground' of religionists, non-, and anti-religionists alike. This has had a large range of different and sometimes mutually exclusive implications, roughly following geographic as well as social and cultural boundaries: the perception of science and its relation to religion and religious meaning differed both from country to country, and between socio-cultural strata.

In some quarters, the 19th century 'conflict between science and religion' continued as before, over the age of rocks and the origin of species. But in light of new scientific breakthroughs, old questions could also be asked in new ways. For

example, controversies over vitalism, organicism and indeterminism provided fuel for intellectual as well as artistic, literary and even political re-appraisals of religion and spirituality. A blossoming of esoteric, occult and spiritualist notions sought alignment with recent scientific developments in the fields of biology, physics, chemistry, and psychology, while some scientists in these disciplines looked to esoteric subjects for metaphorical and conceptual resources.

Meanwhile the discipline of parapsychology sought professional recognition, while offering itself as a scientific battle station against atheism and philosophical materialism. All these developments fostered an anticipation that science might lead to a new enchantment of the world. The impact can, in various ways, still be felt in the contemporary religious landscape.

The panel seeks contributions from interdisciplinary scholars of religious studies whose work intersect with the history of ideas, science, literature, art and the broader cultural history of the early 20th century. The starting point is that the cultural history of science and religion in the modern world is complex, multi-layered, dynamic and many-faceted, displaying the whole range of relations from polemical hostility on the one hand, to mutual fascination and forging of alliances on the other. Science and religion is furthermore seen to engage in reciprocal relations of exchange, not only of esthetics and rhetoric, but of semantics as well. The panel welcomes papers that look at specific case studies of the early 20th century culture of science and religion and its reflections in e.g. art, literature, academia, and popular culture, as well as papers on theoretical and methodological problems. 'Early 20th century' is taken in an extended sense to cover roughly the period of scientific and religious change from 1880-1945. Exploring methodology and research questions from disciplines not commonly incorporated in the field of religious studies is encouraged.

Suggested research topics include but are certainly not limited to:

Metaphysical philosophy (e.g. Bergson and many others);

Reactions to (perceived) mechanism and causality;
Intuition, inspiration, the Eureka moment and the cult of the scientific genius;
Parapsychology and the university/scientific establishment;
Science, science-fiction and religion;
Science mysticism;
Science and the Occult Revival;
Scientific discourses of Theosophy, Anthroposophy or New Age-movements;
Wave and radiation phenomena in the cultural discourse;
Religious responses to quantum mechanics and the theories of relativity;
The discourses of electric fluids, unified fields and the universal ether.

Procedure

Proposals of maximum 400 words, together with a brief curriculum, should be send to Egil Asprem (e.asprem@uva.nl) or Tessel Bauduin (t.m.bauduin@uva.nl) before April 15th 2010. At the conference, participants will be allotted 20 minutes to present their paper.

In addition to the abstracts, participants will be requested to submit their full paper before July 1st. The papers will be sent to all participants; at the panel session all participants are expected to have read each other's papers and to be able to comment upon their own paper in relation to the other papers. Pending the quality of the submitted full papers we may investigate the possibilities of publication afterward.

For more information on the congress and registration procedure, see:

<http://www.religion.utoronto.ca/resources/iahr/Home.htm>



Magic: Sign, Sounds, Emanations: Western Esotericism and the Arts

Date: Saturday, October 2nd, 2010

Location: Wolfson Court, Cambridge, UK

Host Organization: Cambridge Centre for the Study of Western Esotericism; 4th annual conference

Call for Papers Deadline: May 2010

Suggested Themes: popular culture, theosophy, the Victorian Occult Revival, oral traditions, hypnotism, Mesmerism, the Enlightenment, the Renaissance I relation to architecture, film, music, painting, photography, theatre or writing.

Please send a short abstract in the body of the email to:

Dr Sophia Wellbeloved

s.wellbeloved@gmail.com

For updates see www.ccwe.wordpress.com



Alchemy, Hermeticism, and Islamic and Jewish Mysticism Around the Time of Chrétien de Troyes

Date: Friday, October 15th - Sunday, October 17th, 2010

Location: Eagle Hill Foundation, Steuben, Maine, USA

Host Organization: Eagle Hill Foundation

This symposium will have a dual thematic focus on (1) major esoteric and mystical movements of the fascinatingly rich intellectual and religious cultures of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, namely, alchemy, hermeticism, and Islamic and Jewish mysticism; and (2) the works of Chrétien de Troyes, whose Arthurian romances seem to suggest an awareness of some aspects of these movements. Recent scholarship has suggested that there was not only a higher degree of intercultural and interreligious permeability during this time period-especially between Spain and France-than previously suspected, but that important channels of transmission of ideas, treatises, and texts have been overlooked. The symposium is intended to foster an exchange of ideas among participants, whose areas of expertise are generally considered to be distinct from one another. This confluence of otherwise diverse academic perspectives will provide a comparative framework to explore the broad range of cultural resources accessible to writers and intellectual communities during the time of Chrétien de Troyes. Call for Abstracts, the published proceedings, and the new scholarly journal, Arcanum, available from the contact below .

We welcome your interest in the symposium! Inquiries are welcome!

Contact:

Dr. Ingrid E. Lotze

office@eaglehill.us; 207-546-2821

Eagle Hill Foundation, PO Box 9, Steuben, Maine, USA www.eaglehill.us



The Seventh International Conference on the Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena (INSAP VII)

Dates: Monday, October 25th – Friday, October 29th, 2010

Location: Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institute, Bath, England

Sponsoring Organization: Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in
Culture, University of Wales, Lampeter; www.lamp.ac.uk/sophia

Call for Papers: Deadline is 28 February 2010 <http://www.insapvii.org>

Keynote Speakers:

- Michael Hoskin, Editor, *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, 'William Herschel'
- Michael Rowan-Robinson, past President, Royal Astronomical Society.
- Arnold Wolfendale, former Astronomer Royal, 'The Inter-Relation of the Visual Arts and Science in Particular and Astronomy in Particular'
- Pre-conference reception on Sunday 24 October in Herschel House, William Herschel's former home in Bath.
- Conference dinner in the Assembly Rooms, the elegant centre of 18th century Bath's social elite
- Optional visit to Wells Cathedral, home of the famous 14th century astronomical clock

This interdisciplinary conference will explore humanity's fascination with the sky, a strong and sometimes dominant element in human culture. Scholars from a variety of disciplines, from the humanities and sciences, as well as artists, are invited to present and discuss their work on the cultural impact and inspiration

of astronomical phenomena, from a historical or contemporary perspective. The list of topics discussed at previous INSAP conferences is available at the INSAP web site, <http://www.insap.org/insap/>.

Attendance is limited to 100 participants.

Conference payment will be open when we have arranged the provisional programme.

Please note that if you apply to display a poster or art-work, we will provide you with a short speaking slot to briefly introduce your work to the conference.

The Conference will be held in the elegant surroundings of the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institute, one of the most beautiful public buildings in Georgian Bath (<http://www.brlsi.org/>). Bath itself is a world heritage city, famous for its grand 18th century terraces, its historic centre and its Roman Baths.

TIME TABLE

28 February 2010: deadline for submission of abstracts.

1 April 2010: the provisional programme will be announced.

1 April 2010: conference payment open

30 April 2010: deadline for revision of abstracts

Conference fee: £260 pounds sterling (payment before 1 July) £310 (payment after 1 July), including at least two lunches and a conference dinner, as well as the pre-conference reception.

Full information on the programme, venue, and transport, is posted on the Conference website <http://www.insapvii.org>

The previous INSAP conferences took place at a retreat at Rocca di Papa in Italy, near the Vatican Observatory (1994), at the International Office of the University

of Malta (1999), the Palermo Observatory (2001), Oxford University (2003), the Adler Planetarium and Astronomy Museum, Chicago (2005) and at Palazzo Franchetti in Venice, Italy, part of the Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti (2009). Details about these conferences are available at <http://www.insap.org>

INTERNATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE:

Francesco Bertola (ISVLA, Venezia, Italy),
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David Pankenier (Lehigh University, Bethlehem, USA),
Richard Poss (University of Arizona, Tucson, USA),
Valerie Shrimplin (Independent Art Historian, London, UK),
Rolf M. Sinclair, (Centro de Estudios Cientificos, Valdivia, Chile),
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On behalf of the Local Organising Committee and the International Executive Committee
Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture,
Department of Archaeology, History and Anthropology
University of Wales, Lampeter



CONFERENCE REPORT

AAR Conference: November 7-10th, 2009 in Montréal, Canada by Cecile Wilson

The American Academy of Religion celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2009. Originally begun as an organization supporting ‘scholarship and teaching in religion’, its focus was on biblical studies and was officially known by the lengthy title of the Association of Biblical Instructors in American Colleges and Secondary Schools. After going through a name change to the National Association of Biblical Instructors late in 1922, the organization again changed its name in 1963 to its current title, reflecting the broadened scope of its interests.

The AAR’s current membership numbers more than 10,000 and is composed mostly of faculty and graduate students. Although the majority of the membership lives in North America, an increasing number come from colleges and universities throughout the world.

An organization the size of the AAR is able to offer a range of programs that are both broad in scope and intensely focused in subject. Just a few of the groups that presented papers or panels were: Contemporary Pagan Studies, Critical Theory and Discourses on Religion, Cultural History of the Study of Religion, Indigenous Religious Traditions, Islamic Mysticism, Religion, Media, and Culture; and Ritual Studies. Two groups that I attended were Western Esotericism and Platonism and Neoplatonism.

The Western Esotericism Group, chaired by Allison Coudert (University of California, Davis) and Cathy Gutierrez (Sweet Briar College), presented two sessions, one of which was held in concert with the Religion and Popular Culture Group. The following synopses of the presentations I attended are based on my notes. I am entirely responsible for any errors or omissions contained in these reports.

Western Esotericism Group: ‘Intersections of Science and Esotericism’

Speaking first, **Benjamin Brochstein** (Rice University) spoke on ‘**Viewing Healing Miracles through an Alchemical Lens**’. Noting that Principe has argued that chemistry and alchemy were synonymous until the last two decades of the 17th century, he stated that we should consider Boyle’s law as much an alchemical law as a chemical law. Boyle endorsed the well-known Irish healer, Valentine Greatrakes, and apparently even collaborated with him.

The topic of the second speaker, **Melvyn Draper** (UC, Davis) was ‘**Vibratory Force and the Occult Science of Ernest Loomis**’. Loomis was active in the Order of the Magi in Chicago near the end of the 19th century and was influenced by Willis Whitehead, who in turn was a devotee of the writings of Agrippa. Loomis was interested in the earth’s magnetic field and vibrations and wrote a book called *The Power of Vibration*, which propounded the ability of the occultist to use vibrations to achieve practical results. Loomis’s teachings were ‘pragmatic’, and consisted of ‘exercises’ and meditations, forming what Draper called ‘scientist occultism’. Furthermore, Loomis developed his own set of lessons, complete with exoteric and esoteric ‘degrees’, for instruction in his brand of occultism. Draper also mentioned a connection between Loomis and a Rosicrucian organization.

Egil Asprem of the University of Amsterdam followed with a discourse entitled ‘**Unity of Knowledge? Theoretical Reflections on the Study of Esotericism and Science in the Modern Period**’. The key point of Asprem’s presentation was that the flow of ideas does not move exclusively from science to esotericism, but that esoteric models also have contributions to make to scientific understanding. He began by delineating two different approaches for dealing with the topic of esotericism: as a historical phenomenon or as a typological construct. He then defined science in three terms: as a natural philosophy, as a profession of specialists, and as a method. The interaction of science and esotericism can be examined, he continued, within the framework of three different models: continuity models, conflict models or exchange models. Continuity models focus on content and ideas and view esotericism as a ‘proto-science’. Conflict models set esotericism and science in opposition to each other; they are a ‘clash of epistemes’, pitting rationality and gnosis at opposite ends of a spectrum. Personal experience vies with experiment for truth. Exchange models, in contrast to other two models, concern themselves with ‘transfers across boundaries’.

Next up was **John Zandler** (University of California, Davis). Zandler’s topic was ‘**Chaos Magic: Science and Sorcery on the Frontier of Contemporary Esotericism**’. He referred to chaos magic as a ‘secularized esotericism’, in which beliefs are viewed as ‘tools’ or ‘changeable commodities’. The adoption of these changeable beliefs permits the chaos magician to freely shift his framework for viewing reality, ‘transcend[ing] the restrictions of scientific skepticism.’ These paradigm shifts are equally likely to be based on fictional concepts, as on accepted ‘scientific’ ideas. Peter Carroll, often considered one of the founders of chaos magic, says that scientific systems are more effective because they are more easily believed by modern skeptics. This does not, however, disqualify the chaos magician from adopting older paradigms of reality, such as those of Kabbala or Neoplatonism. In summation, chaos magic is a ‘highly individualized magic’ which emphasizes practicality and ‘embraces illusion and falsehood, as well as truth, which distinguishes it from religion.’

The final speaker of the session was **George Young** (University of New England). Young spoke on ‘**Thaumaturgy in Russian Cosmism**’. Russian Cosmism was a

philosophical movement that looked to science for solutions to the problem of spiritual evolution. It was spearheaded by Nikolai Fedorov (1853-1903), a Moscow librarian, whose ultimate goal was the literal ‘restoration of paradise’, as well as the ‘physical resurrection of the dead.’ Fedorov referred to our planet as ‘spaceship earth’ in the 1860s! He also considered human beings ‘cannibals’, because they live on the products produced by their ancestors. Accordingly, the ultimate goal of the human race should be to live on sun and air. Despite his unconventional ideas, Fedorov had a significant influence on the intellectuals of the early twentieth century. Young presented brief sketches of a number Russian Cosmists, spanning a time frame from the mid-19th century up to the present day. He also pointed out the need for researchers interested in this subject.

Western Esotericism Group and Religion and Popular Culture Group: ‘From Esoteric to Exoteric: Supernatural and Demonic Manifestations in Popular Culture’

With subjects covering the use of supposed Voodoo incantations, vampires, and television’s presentation the supernatural and esoteric, this group drew a standing room only crowd. **Stephen Wehmeyer** (Champlain College) opened up the proceedings with ‘**“Three Dead Men and a Gangster’s Shoe”**: Ethnicity, Ritual, and **“Cell-Block Sorcery” in the American Popular Press.**’ Presenting in fascinating detail the case of a Mafia crime boss who was found with a spell hidden inside one of his shoes, Wehmeyer demonstrated that the popular press ignored the more pedestrian source text for the incantation in favour of a more lurid explanation pointing to Voodoo.

Next up was **Titus Hjelm** (University College, London), chair of the University College of London’s Vampire Studies Group, addressing the topic ‘**From Demonic to Genetic: The Rise and Fall of Religion in Vampire Film.**’ Hjelm posited that the recent fascination with vampires is not symptomatic of a mystic or esoteric revival, but rather part of an enchantment with science. This is a major paradigmatic shift compared with early vampire films. In the old movies, such as those by Hammer Studios, the nature of the vampire was demonic; he was motivated by malevolence and desire, and conquered by faith and ‘mysticism’. In the newer paradigm, the vampire is at the mercy of genetics and is motivated by the need to survive and the desire for power. The modern vampire is

defeated by technology and is the object of ridicule. Religious symbolism has declined in potency. Crosses, for example, no longer serve as the means to destroy vampires. In fact, one female vampire in *Blade III* wears a cross necklace. ‘The enchantment remains’, says Hjelm, ‘but the enchantment is with science.’

Co-chair of the Western Esotericism Group, **Cathy Gutierrez** (Sweet Briar College), looked at various conceptions of spiritualism on American television in her presentation: **‘Muscle Cars and Holy Water: Portraying the Supernatural in Prime Time.’** She arrived at the conclusion that a show concerned with the existence of the devil and evil ‘affirms the existence of good and God’ just as much as do shows concerned with helping both departed souls and those still on earth. Gutierrez compared three series in particular: *Ghost Whisperer*, *Medium* and *Supernatural*. While the first two shows adopt an essentially Neoplatonic outlook – that the dead need to progress to a certain level of evolution before they can rest – the third show, *Supernatural*, focuses on the evil that exists. Gutierrez pointed out that in this series ‘there is no salvation until season four, when angels appear.’ But even then, the angels ‘do not care for the humans and [...] say there is no God.’ While Gutierrez commented that television ‘records [...] the chatter of a culture’, the opposing views presented these shows make it difficult to arrive at a consistent interpretation of the way in which supernatural is portrayed in that medium (no pun intended!).

Geoffrey McVey (University of Miami) also turned to the small screen for the subject of his presentation, **‘Televised Esotericism, Esoteric Television.’** McVey discerned two contrasting approaches to the ‘mythic landscape’: a familiar landscape with a demonic underbelly (typified by Sunnydale in the *Buffy the Vampire* series); and ‘regular’ America, i.e. a landscape containing nothing remarkable (for example, Chicago in *Night Stalker*). In both cases, ‘America is the place where myths come to die’, as the landscapes are ‘purged’ of their demonic inhabitants. Ritual is particularly efficacious in this respect, and Roman Catholic rites and the use of Latin are the methods of choice. While magic is an indication of a ‘return of the repressed’ or a means for revenge, anyone can invoke magical effects – even accidentally – just by saying something in Latin. Thus, words and

ritual and their accompanying results do not rely on the ‘intent or the preparation of the practitioner.’

Platonism and Neoplatonism Group: ‘*Phantasia* and *Aesthesis*’

Gregory Shaw (Stonehill College) opened the session with a discourse on ‘**The Role of *Aesthesis* in Theurgy**’. He drew a parallel between Porphyry and the modern scholar because of his preoccupation with discursive analysis. For Porphyry, ritual was ‘unworthy’ of a Greek philosopher. Iamblichus, on the other hand, considered sacrifice and ritual important because they allow us to relocate our awareness from our physical body to the subtle body. In *On the Mysteries*, Iamblichus says ‘the purpose of living is not to become good human beings, but to become God.’ It is a key point that this assumption of Godhood is accomplished through the descent of the Gods, rather than the ascent of the soul. Material existence permits us to use our ‘demiurgic power’, which is accomplished through the tool of theurgy. Furthermore, material existence is ‘part of an essential dyad that permits procession, multiplicity, and the inversion of the Gods.’ Iamblichus emphasizes that ‘our orientation toward the image is more significant than the image itself.’ The meeting of the senses and the divine take place through the agency of imagination.

Natalie Carnes (Duke University) examined the role of *phantasia* and *aesthesis* in a Christian context in her paper, **A Body like Christ’s and Eyes Like God’s: The Role of *Phantasia* and *Aesthesis* in Constructing a Christian Mimesis in Vita Antonii**. Carnes pointed out that the difficulty for Christians lay in taking Greek terms and applying them to a Christian context in a specifically Christian way. Thus, *phantasia* usually applies to the perception of demons, in contrast to another Greek word used for the appearance or perception of an angel. A demon is a being that has ‘existence without reality, therefore smoke is a suitable metaphor or analogy for a demon.’ Smoke is considered the ‘essential nature’ of a demon. *Mimesis* hides the true nature of a being or person. In the case of Anthony, the purity of his spirituality is not in the eyes of the perceiver, but in Anthony’s actuality.

Kathleen Gibbons (University of Toronto) examined the perception of **Evagrius on *Phantasia***. She defined *phantasia* as ‘the place where the struggle between demons and the monk’s desire for purity takes place.’ Because monks were typically free of the encumbrance of material possessions, the battles between monks and demons took place in the monks’ thoughts. Evagrius observed that it was both ‘easier to sin in thought than in action; and harder to battle temptation in thought than in action. For Evagrius, the ‘formulation of images’ was ‘an indication of ill health’ and a body ‘free of images’ during sleep revealed a ‘healthy’ soul.

Platonism and Neoplatonism Group: Sacrificial Theories in Later Platonism

This session began with a paper by **Todd Krulak** (University of Tennessee) on **Sacrificial Theory from Iamblichus to the Fifth Century Athenian Academy**. Krulak proposed that rituals are ‘malleable’ in the work of later Neoplatonists. Sacrifices encompass both inanimate and organic substances and animal sacrifices, with material fires purifying material substances and spiritual fires purifying spiritual substances. The ‘perfect combination’, therefore, works on all levels and consists of both prayer and sacrifice, permitting ‘*henosis* with the divine.’ Krulak pointed out that in Iamblichus, there is no reference to the life force of the victim affecting the efficacy of the prayer accompanying the sacrifice. According to Julian, the Gods were not in need of anything; thus, sacrifices were offered to material representations of the Gods and not the Gods themselves. This was perhaps a reflection of the fact that Julian lived in a time ‘rehabilitation’ of sacrificial practices, whereas Iamblichus lived in an age where animal sacrifice was ‘an integral part of daily life.’ The fifth century Athenian school shows no evidence of the use of sacrifice, a situation which Krulak finds ‘curious’.

Heidi Marx-Wolf (University of Manitoba) addressed **Porphyry’s Demonization of Animal Sacrifice: Echos of Galenic Humoral Theory and the Platonic Tripartite Soul**. Porphyry opposed the consumption of meat for those who wanted to live a ‘philosophical life’. He argued that there were good demons and evil demons. The evil demons ‘fed their evil nature through smoke and blood.’ For Porphyry, blood was associated with the lowest part of the soul. In Galen’s humour theory, when humans ate

food, it turned into blood in the liver. Blood was, therefore, intimately connected with material existence. Since killing living beings ‘deprive[d] them of their rational soul’, the philosopher could not participate in blood sacrifices. Porphyry seemed to be of the opinion, however, that most ordinary would have another opportunity to live a ‘less polluted and therefore a more philosophical life.

Shannon Grimes (Meredith College) delved into **Late Ancient Philosophies of Sacrifice in the Alchemical Visions of Zosimus of Panopolis**. Zosimus, who lived c. 300 C.E., was influenced by Christian gnosticism and Jewish texts. In his work, *On Excellence*, he portrays alchemy as a ‘sacrificial rite.’ His images are violent, paralleling animal sacrifice. For example, Zosimus makes reference to being dismembered by a sword in one of his alchemical dreams. But the alchemy of Zosimus is a spiritual, as well as a physical, exercise and ‘the transmutation of the metals parallels the transmutations of the alchemist.’ This shift from material to immaterial sacrifice reflected a progression occurring ‘in the general milieu of the time.’ Zosimus emphasizes the meditative practice, recognizing that all things are connected.



ARTICLES

Some problems with the construction of Kabbalah as 'Jewish mysticism'

By Tim Rudbøg (c)

This short article will discuss some of the reasons as to why Kabbalah¹ has been constructed as 'Jewish mysticism' as well as point out some of the problems involved with this particular theoretical framework².

Gershom Scholem generally constructed Kabbalah as 'Jewish mysticism' with the result that everywhere one now turns in Kabbalah scholarship one will still encounter the term 'Jewish mysticism' as the overall classificatory and explanatory framework for Kabbalah. It is, however, to be noted that the term 'mysticism' (originally a Greek term) does not exist in Hebrew. The closest terms in Hebrew are *sod* (secret), *hokhmah nistarah* (hidden wisdom) and *Kabbalah* (tradition).

The term 'Jewish mysticism' has caused some classificatory problems in relation to the academic study of mysticism. Almost everyone in the entire scholarly tradition in the field of mysticism, from Underhill, Stace and Zaehner to Katz, has classified religious mysticism in terms of experience or union with the divine³; what still needs to be clarified in this field is whether or not mysticism or mystical experience is dependent upon language and contexts⁴. A more fundamental problem with regard to Kabbalah in relation

¹ For the sake of clarity it is to be noted that the word 'Kabbalah' is here used as a reference to 'texts'. Scholem on the other hand often used the word to refer to a 'concept' which was based on theosophical doctrines and Gnostic myths constituting a specific form of 'Jewish mysticism' appearing in the 12th century.

² For substantiation of the discussion presented in this article see: Rudbøg, Tim; *Constructing Kabbalah from Mysticism to Western Esotericism*, 2007 (found on the H.E.R.M.E.S. website).

³ There are of course notable exceptions, such as Sells (1994) *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, who has chosen to focus on the discursive use of language instead.

⁴ See: Underhill (1930) *Mysticism* pp. 95-148. Zaehner (1957) *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane*, Introduction. Stace (1960) *Mysticism and Philosophy* pp. 14-133 and (1960) *The Teachings of the Mystics* pp. 9-15. Katz (1983) 'The 'Conservative' Character of Mysticism' p. 51.

to the construct 'Jewish mysticism' - which Scholem himself somewhat pointed out - is that most Kabbalah texts do not primarily consist of mystical experience(s).

The problem with the defining element of mysticism – *unio mystica* - in relation to Kabbalah and 'Jewish mysticism' is that the theology of Judaism does not traditionally allow a complete union with the transcendent God. The way Scholem worked his way around this problem was to define 'Jewish mysticism' and thereby Kabbalah as something specific or distinct from other forms of mysticism. Scholem wrote in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*:

...the Jewish mystic almost invariably retains a sense of the distance between the Creator and His creature. The latter is joined to the former, and the point where the two meet is of the greatest interest to the mystic, but he does not regard it as constituting anything so extravagant as identity of Creator and creature. Nothing seems to express better this sense of the distance between God and man, than the Hebrew term which in our literature is generally used for what is otherwise called *unio mystica*. I mean the word *devekuth*, which signifies "adhesion," or "being joined," viz., to God. This is regarded as the ultimate goal of religious perfection⁵.

This *communion* - instead of *union* – is, to Scholem, one of the characteristics, which distinguishes 'Jewish mysticism' from other forms of mysticism. In German Hasidim we find *communion* with God. In Merkavah mysticism we find *visions* of God. Kabbalah as a form of 'Jewish mysticism' is, however, a little more complicated for Scholem because it is more concerned with *theosophic speculations* on the divine and a vivid use of mythic and symbolic imagery defined as Gnostic – anyhow, Kabbalah was constructed as a form of 'Jewish mysticism'.

This portrayal of 'Jewish mysticism' has, however, as mentioned created classificatory problems in the field of mysticism and even in Kabbalah scholarship itself⁶. Zaehner, the

⁵ Scholem (1941) *Major Trends* p. 123.

⁶ See: Gruenwald (1993) 'Reflections on the Nature and Origins of Jewish Mysticism' pp. 25-48.

influential scholar of mysticism, for example questioned whether or not so called ‘Jewish mysticism’ is mysticism at all:

Of all the great religions of the world it is Judaism alone that fights shy of mysticism. What is called Jewish mysticism is rather visionary experience or gnostic speculations as in the Kabbalah and Isaac Luria. It is certainly not the integration of the personality around its immortal core ... nor is it union with God⁷.

This classificatory problem was based directly on readings of Scholem’s works which is clearly seen from the following: ‘... Jewish mysticism, as Professor Scholem has so admirably portrayed it ... would not appear to be mysticism at all’⁸.

Things have changed slightly, since Zaehner and Scholem, with Moshe Idel who correctly has pointed out on several occasions in his extensive studies of Kabbalah that actual mystical union is described and does exist in Kabbalah texts, as in the case of Abraham Abulafia, the 13th century Jewish Kabbalist, and in many other still unpublished texts⁹. But even though mystical experience – as in *unio mystica* - exists in Kabbalah, it does not account for the fact that Kabbalah is much more than *mystical* experience. Scholem himself was well aware of the fact that what he chose to construct as ‘Jewish mysticism’ was much more than what mysticism usually entails. It must, therefore, be questioned what made Scholem construct Kabbalah as ‘Jewish mysticism’? One significant cause for Scholem’s construction of Kabbalah as ‘Jewish mysticism’ is to be found in 19th century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* which termed Kabbalah ‘mysticism’ viewed through the eyes of rationalism and thereby equalling mysticism to irrationalism. As has been shown, Kabbalah as irrationalism/mysticism was to the *Wissenschaft* scholars not a fundamental part of Judaism but simply a reaction to philosophical rationalism in Judaism¹⁰. Scholem was not fundamentally in disagreement with the fact that Kabbalah largely is irrationalism. But to Scholem the irrational element,

⁷ Zaehner (1970) *Concordant Discord* pp. 323-324.

⁸ Zaehner (1958) *At Sundry Times* p. 171.

⁹ In relation to this discussion see: Idel (1993) ‘The Contribution of Abraham Abulafia’s Kabbalah to the Understanding of Jewish Mysticism’ pp. 117-143.

¹⁰ Biale (1979) *Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah and Counter-History* p. 140.

which constitutes Kabbalah, was not a new bi-product of rationalism, neither only a spontaneous reaction to rationalism. To Scholem Kabbalah was a socially vital inner elite philosophical tradition, which early in Jewish history had incorporated irrational elements - such as the use of myths, symbols and theosophical speculations, derived from ancient Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism - into its mode of thought.

In relation to Scholem's reconfiguration of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*' stance on Kabbalah he was inspired by theories about the irrational and the rational, which in his time were deep and important topics discussed by contemporary psychologists such as Freud and Jung and philosophers such as Cassirer and Walter Benjamin¹¹. Inspired by such theories Scholem constructed a historical notion and function of the irrational, which could serve his "Zionist" historical research - in direct contrast to *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Scholem thus constructed Kabbalah/irrationalism/mysticism as the vital oppositional force, in the historical unfolding of Judaism, in dialectical interplay with rationalism and Rabbinic Judaism¹².

Related to the Jewish nationalist romanticism of the 19th–20th century, another interrelated cause for Scholem's construction of Kabbalah as 'Jewish mysticism' was Martin Buber. Martin Buber's construction presented, in his introduction to *Die Geschichten der Rabbi Nachman* (1906), a definition of 'Jewish mysticism' as an autonomous, vital force in Judaism. A definition which Scholem, as Ron Margolin recently has argued and convincingly shown, used extensively to the degree that it actually was the underlying current in his presentation of 'Jewish mysticism' in his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*¹³.

To understand the subtle implications of Martin Buber's concept of 'Jewish mysticism' borrowed by Scholem, we briefly have to place it in its wider context. Boaz Huss has

¹¹ Biale (1979) *Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah and Counter-History* pp. 144-145.

¹² Biale (1979) *Gershom Scholem, Kabbalah and Counter-History* pp. 204-205.

¹³ Margolin (2005) *The Human Temple* [Hebrew]. It is to be noted that Scholem as is well known differed on many points from Buber's work.

shown in his genealogy of the term 'Jewish mysticism' that it first appeared during German Romanticism as a particular part of what was perceived to be 'universal mysticism' - the inner core of religion. The designation entered Jewish scholarship with Adolph Jellinek in 1853. Jellinek viewed mysticism as an essential stage in the development of humanity to be found in every religion¹⁴. But it was still not the commonly used designation, AD. Franck for example used the term *La Kabbale, ou la philosophie religieuse des Hébreux* (1843). At the end of the late 19th and early 20th century the term 'Jewish mysticism' was, however, picked up by Jewish nationalists and was widely used 'as a national expression of a universal spiritual phenomena ... in the context of the New Romanticism, fin de siècle Orientalism, and emerging Jewish Nationalism and Zionism'¹⁵.

From the above, it follows that Scholem's construction of Kabbalah as 'Jewish mysticism' on the one hand has caused problems within the domain of 'mysticism' because to Scholem, Kabbalah was not primarily mystical union, it was rather communion and theosophy - and on the other hand that the construct of 'Jewish mysticism', in part, was borrowed from Martin Buber's nationalist notion of an autonomous but vital movement within Judaism and, in part, constructed in contrast to the '*Wissenschaft des Judentums*' anti-irrationalism, yet still maintaining the *historical force* of irrationalism. The construct 'Jewish mysticism' thus includes underlying nationalist assumptions of an autonomous irrational tradition, vital for the inner development of Judaism, mainly concerned with theosophical speculations and Gnostic myths¹⁶. This theoretical framework, with all its hidden assumptions, still largely discursively determines the academic study of Kabbalah today - including how to classify and read the texts.

¹⁴ Jellinek (1853) *Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik* p. 3-4. It is to be noted that Scholem also used a similar universalist historical scheme of mysticism.

¹⁵ Huss (2007) [e-article] 'Martin Buber's Introduction to *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* and the Early 20th Century Construction of Jewish Mysticism' p. 3.

¹⁶ Biale (1979) *Gershom Scholem Kabbalah and Counter-History* pp. 113-127.

Huss is one of the very few Kabbalah scholars who has expressed dissatisfaction with this construct and calls for a new framework, while others habitually keep on using the old construction:

The different cultural framework from which we operate today enables – and calls for - a critical examination not only of the texts and practices we refer to as part of ‘Jewish Mysticism’ but also of the very notion of ‘Jewish Mysticism’ and the assumptions and discursive practices this term entails¹⁷.

For Scholem Kabbalah did not primarily entail mystical union but rather theosophy or speculations on the structure of the divine being. By basing the concept Kabbalah, as a specific form of ‘Jewish mysticism’, on a specific set of doctrines the whole history of Kabbalah, or the categorization and historical arrangement of texts, becomes structured and limited according that. As this form of ‘Jewish mysticism’ or theosophical speculations primarily appeared in the 11th–13th century, this period has been constructed as the beginning of Kabbalah. The text Bahir then is the first actual Kabbalah text and Sefer Yetzirah is not a Kabbalah text.

Furthermore, the assumption that Kabbalah was an autonomous tradition within Judaism has, from within the domain of ‘Jewish mysticism’, recently been challenged by scholars such as Moshe Idel, Wolfson and Liebes. Idel for example argues contrary to Scholem that Kabbalah was not an independent movement within Judaism but grew organically from within Rabbinic Judaism itself and that Kabbalah of the Middle Ages therefore in some sense was an authentic oral tradition extending far back in Jewish history. Idel argues that, as a Kabbalah researcher, it is not required to believe in the testimony of great Kabbalists – yet, there is no need to directly ignore it either. He argues that men like Avraham Ibn Daud (Raavad), the Ramban (Nahmanides), Rabbi Yosef Karo and the Vilna Gaon all conceived Kabbalah to be a true interpretation of Judaism and a tradition

¹⁷ Huss (2007) [e-article] ‘Martin Buber’s Introduction to *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman* and the Early 20th Century Construction of Jewish Mysticism’ p. 5.

consonant with Talmud and Midrash – and that if Kabbalah were against the Rabbinic tradition, would they not have detected that¹⁸?

Idel's observation that Kabbalah was not an opposition to Rabbinic Judaism, as Scholem's construct assumed and that it, in part, extends far back in Jewish history is however still an observation undertaken from a perspective relating primarily to the 'inner history of Judaism' - here meaning *from within Judaism itself*¹⁹.

Hames, in a similar strand of thought, has expressed the problem as follows:

... paradoxically, the enormous body of Kabbalah scholarship has been written from within the field with a clear conception of historical development and progression, but viewed from a broader perspective, as almost totally ahistorical. There has been little or no attempt to investigate the beginnings of Kabbalah within the broader historical context of the world in which it developed²⁰.

In relation to the above, it is not only the designation 'mysticism', which is problematic but also the designation 'Jewish', in so far as Kabbalah solely is studied from the perspective of the internal development of Judaism itself - as largely has been the case - because such studies, which primarily read Kabbalah in relation to the context of Judaism itself, both limit the contents of the texts and culturally separate Kabbalah from the rest of Western culture and thus also from 'Western esotericism'.

Recent constructionist views of *history as pluralism* have for example argued that it is no longer possible to view history, including the history of religions, as a set of isolated cultural departments or isolated religions developing autonomously. Jewish, Muslim and Christian worlds and the historical presence of paganism in the West have all developed and structured their own identities in constant interactions and negotiations with each other - an important point Kocku von Stuckrad has done much to emphasise in the development of his discursive model for the study of Western esotericism²¹. Kabbalah is

¹⁸ See: Idel (1991) 'Rabbinism Versus Kabbalism'.

¹⁹ See: Hames (2000) *The Art of Conversion* p. 24 n79 for further references to this problem.

²⁰ Hames (2000) *The Art of Conversion* p. 25. see his footnote 80 for references to the problem.

²¹ Stuckrad (2005) 'Western Esotericism: Towards an integrative model of interpretation' p. 86.

without doubt primarily Jewish, but it consumed much of Neo-Platonism and it was influenced by religious ideas, tensions and changes in Christian Europe and the Muslim world, because it was a part of the same-shared field of discourse²². The Christian world has equally incorporated much of Jewish Kabbalah into what is now termed Christian Kabbalah. Thus even though each tradition has a self-defining structure, those structures are constantly intermixed in cultural processes and discursive exchanges with each other. In short, Kabbalah texts can perhaps, with greater fairness to the texts themselves, be contextually analysed and constructed as part of ‘Western esotericism’ and thereby Western culture, because their production have often been interconnected with many ”Western” ideas through historical and discursive interchanges. Such a broader historical construction of Kabbalah as a part of ‘Western esotericism’ can also help deconstruct the assumptions inherent in the construct ‘Jewish mysticism’ and remove the conceptual fragmentation of the history of what here is proposed to be termed ‘Jewish esotericism’²³ i.e. the Jewish part of the larger framework ‘Western esotericism’.

The notion that Kabbalah largely is irrationalism also has to be deconstructed and challenged due to its problematic nature. Scholem of course had to construct Kabbalah as an autonomous movement of irrationalism, for it to serve as a dynamic and socially revitalising “other” in the development of Judaism, in his quest for Jewish self/national identity but this construct not only assumes a meta-historical dialectical view of history of Hegelian proportions but also a binary relationship between rationalism vs. irrationalism.

Kabbalah has thus been constructed against rationalism in a counter-historical scheme - but one of the things scholars in the new academic field of ‘Western esotericism’ have sought to deconstruct is exactly the notion that historical currents similar to Kabbalah, such as Neo-Platonism, Christian theosophy, Christian Kabbalah, Rosicrucianism,

²² Stuckrad (2005) ‘Western Esotericism: Towards an integrative model of interpretation’ pp. 86-87.

²³ The term ‘Jewish esotericism’ is used here as a container reference to the entirety of oral and textual expressions of esotericism, loosely defined as secret experiential knowledge and practices within the Jewish tradition/religion. The term could be used as a substitute for the loaded construct ‘Jewish mysticism’. Kabbalah can in a broad sense as ‘tradition’ or ‘Jewish esoteric tradition’ be correlated with ‘Jewish esotericism’.

Hermeticism, and magical traditions, or what generally has been termed the occult represent irrationalism²⁴.

To construct these historical currents, as irrationalism, is a product of an old binary way of thinking, to use Derrida's terminology, which places rationalism in the centre as the most important element and then irrationalism at the circumference, not treating it as something in its own right. Scholem might have turned the binary relation around by placing Kabbalah/irrationalism in the centre of Judaism but, what is now constructed as 'Western esotericism' - whether regarded as discourse, a mode of thought, secret Gnosis or a dimension of Western culture - has played an influential role in Western culture in its own right - not only as an opposition to an other. Kabbalah constructed as a specific form of theosophical irrational reinterpretation of Judaism in the late Middle Ages opposed to Rabbinic Judaism might have constituted an important part of Scholem's historical project but - in light of the above, the texts, recent Kabbalah research and the new academic field of 'Western esotericism' - such a loaded construction of the Jewish part of 'Western esotericism' cannot be maintained in its present form. In light of new academic developments it is now deemed possible to construct a more qualified and less problematic theoretical framework, for Kabbalah, in the form of 'Western esotericism'. In sum the theoretical framework 'Jewish mysticism' entails many problems and assumptions, such as: 1. classificatory problems in relation to the field of mysticism, because Kabbalah is more than mysticism; 2. an assumption of irrationality and dialectic history; 3. an assumption of Kabbalah as an autonomous counter current to Rabbinic Judaism; 4. an assumption of Kabbalah as theosophy, which has produced an unnecessary fragmentation in the history of 'Jewish esotericism' and finally 5. the habitual academic study of Kabbalah in relation to the 'inner development of Judaism' adapted from nationalist romanticism, which has separated Kabbalah from the dynamics of the rest of Western culture.

²⁴ See: Hanegraaff (1998) *New Age Religion and Western Culture* pp. 407-408.

In contrast to these problems we must expect, from a possible new theoretical framework: that it is free from nationalist and meta-historical assumptions; that the separation of Kabbalah from the rest of Western culture can be avoided and that more facets of the Kabbalah texts, than mystical union and theosophy, can be encompassed.

Finally it is, however, to be noted that while the above could be read as a critique of the entirety of Scholem's work, this is in no way indented. A short article as the present one, even a whole treatise, focusing on a single aspect of Scholem's comprehensive work could never do full justice to his lifelong studies. The above discussion is therefore rather to be viewed as an attempt to indicate the significant problems inherent in the construct 'Jewish mysticism' - partly caused by the time in which it was constructed - by pointing to a new theoretical framework based on recent developments in the new academic field of Western esotericism.

