



Trismegistus phs

Edited by
Wouter J. Hanegraaff,
Peter J. Forshaw and
Marco Pasi

Hermes Explains

Thirty
Questions
about Western
Esotericism

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Celebrating the 20th anniversary of the centre for History of Hermetic
Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam

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Introduction:

Thirty red pills from Hermes Trismegistus

Ten years ago the Centre for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (HHP) of the University of Amsterdam celebrated its first decennial anniversary by publishing a memorial volume. Paying playful homage to the legendary Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus, who stands at the origin and symbolic centre of the field of research nowadays known as “Western esotericism,” it was titled *Hermes in the Academy*.¹ Hermes had finally arrived! Never before, at any university worldwide, had there been a teaching program and a research group devoted specifically to the large and enormously complicated field of interrelated historical currents in Western culture known by such terms as hermetism, gnosticism, neoplatonic theurgy, astrology, alchemy, natural magic, kabbalah, rosicrucianism, Christian theosophy, illuminism, occultism, spiritualism, traditionalism, neopaganism, new age, and contemporary occulture.² Since the beginning of this century, scholars in the humanities have become used to an unprecedented flood of scholarly literature in these domains, and this makes it easy to forget how innovative and controversial it still was for academics to study such topics seriously at the time when HHP was created in 1999.

With hindsight it is evident that the Amsterdam Centre came exactly at the right moment. Riding a new wave of scholarship that had been gathering energy since the early 1990s, HHP was able to assume a leading position in establishing new paradigms for the study of Western esotericism in the academy and stimulating its professional development on an international scale. During the twenty years of its existence, new teaching programs have developed at various universities in Europe and the United States; a European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE) was established in 2005 and keeps generating new semi-autonomous networks focusing on specific regions and themes;³ alternating with its American counterpart,

1 Hanegraaff and Pijnenburg, *Hermes in the Academy* (now available as a free download through HHP's website www.amsterdamhermetica.nl).

2 For these historical currents and an overview of the field as a whole, see Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*.

3 See www.esswe.org. The ESSWE is now linked to semi-independent networks of Central and Eastern European, Israeli, Irish, Italian, and Scandinavian scholars that organise activities of their own; likewise there are thematic ESSWE networks focusing on esotericism in antiquity, contemporary esotericism, Islam and esotericism, and politics and esotericism.

the Association for the Study of Esotericism (ASE), the ESSWE has already organised seven international biannual conferences, of which the latest one (Amsterdam 2019) coincides with the twenty-year anniversary of HHP and the publication of this volume;⁴ two peer-reviewed academic journals have been running successfully since 2001 and 2013 respectively;⁵ various major academic publishers now have their own monograph series in the study of Western esotericism;⁶ and more generally, it is simply no longer possible for any scholar today to keep up with all the literature, all the conferences, and all the other academic initiatives that are devoted to this field and the various aspects of it.

It is therefore safe to conclude that the battle for academic legitimacy has been won, or at the very least that the Rubicon has been crossed. Nevertheless, while Hermes may have arrived, he still has a lot of explaining to do – hence the title of this second anniversary volume. Every specialist of Western esotericism knows from personal experience how difficult it can be to explain in casual or professional conversations with interested outsiders (friends, family members, colleagues, journalists) what the field is all about and why it is important. At almost every step, beginning with the very term “esotericism” itself, one has to count with deeply ingrained assumptions, misconceptions, and prejudices. Much of the elementary background knowledge that scholars of esotericism take for granted is by no means obvious to non-specialists and needs to be explained over and over again. This is why we have decided for the present volume to take thirty such typical “journalistic” questions as our point of departure. Some of them sound quite serious while others have a ring of naivety about them, but they

4 Conferences so far: ESSWE1 “Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism,” Tübingen 2007 (conference volume: Kilcher, *Constructing Tradition*); ESSWE2 “Capitals of European Esotericism and Transcultural Dialogue,” Strasbourg 2009 (conference volume: Brach, Choné and Maillard, *Capitales de l'ésotérisme européen*); ESSWE3 “Lux in Tenebris: The Visual and the Symbolic in Western Esotericism,” Szeged 2011 (conference volume: Forshaw, *Lux in Tenebris*); ESSWE4 “Western Esotericism and Health,” Gothenburg 2013 (conference volume: Henrik Bogdan, forthcoming); ESSWE5 “Western Esotericism and the East,” Riga 2015 (conference volume: Birgit Menzel and Anita Stasulane, forthcoming); ESSWE6 “Western Esotericism and Deviance,” Erfurt 2017 (conference volume: Bernd-Christian Otto and Marco Pasi, forthcoming); ESSWE7 “Western Esotericism and Consciousness,” Amsterdam 2019.

5 *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* (Brill, 2001-present), edited by Peter J. Forshaw; *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* (correspondencesjournal.com; 2013-present), edited by Allan Johnson, Aren Roukema and Jimmy Elwing.

6 Notably the “Aries Book Series: Texts and Studies in Western Esotericism” (Brill, 25 volumes, 2006-present), edited by Marco Pasi; “Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism” (Oxford University Press, 6 vols., 2017-present), edited by Henrik Bogdan. See also the much older “SUNY Series in Western Esotericism” (State University of New York Press), edited by David Appelbaum.

all provide scholars with an opportunity to take a deep breath and respond with some variation on “well... *actually*... it might be a bit different than you think, perhaps a bit more complicated too...” Explaining things that are less than perfectly understood is, of course, the quintessential task of the teacher. One could do worse than doing so under the auspices of Hermes Trismegistus, the ancient model teacher of esotericism par excellence who was once believed to have invented entire academic disciplines, such as arithmetic, geometry, or astronomy – not to mention the art of writing itself.

Readers of this volume will discover quickly that, paradoxical as it may sound, studying esotericism means much more than just studying esotericism. What makes this field so exciting is not just the fact that it broadens our horizons by introducing us to strange and unfamiliar ideas or traditions or practices – although that is certainly part of its appeal. Even more important are its deep implications for the humanities as a whole, deriving from the fact that (to put it mildly) these materials have not been integrated very well in standard textbook narratives about Western culture and its various dimensions, whether in the history of religion, philosophy, science, or the arts. This, of course, is the reason why journalists and the general public keep asking the kinds of questions that are central to the volume you are holding in your hands: none of us learns about these things at school! Studying esotericism means being introduced to new materials and new ideas from new theoretical perspectives that ultimately force us to rethink all the most central themes of “Western culture” (including even that very concept) in the broadest sense of the word.

The attentive reader will discover that this is no exaggeration. The effect of being introduced to Western esotericism can be somewhat similar to that of swallowing the famous “red pill” in the blockbuster movie *The Matrix*, which happened to be released in the very year when HHP was created: to put it in a nutshell, one wakes up to the fact that the dominant grand narratives on which we rely for making sense of our world cannot be trusted at face value. Formulated in the movie’s neo-gnostic language, many foundational stories that structure our taken-for-granted assumptions about the world turn out to be little more than elaborate mental illusions or delusions that prevent us from questioning the claims of dominant discourses and perceiving the realities of our world at a deeper level of complexity.⁷ Of course, to question widely accepted truths rather than just accept them at face value is what the

7 See the concept of fictional “imagined orders” central to human culture and civilisation, as described in Yuval Harari’s best-selling *Sapiens* (ch. 6). See also Hanegraaff, “Reconstructing ‘Religion’”; and idem “Religion and the Historical Imagination.”

search for knowledge is and should be all about, whether in the academy or anywhere else. In short, dear reader, you are kindly invited to swallow thirty red pills... While you may find some more potent than others, and none is exactly the same, each single one is a portal to new worlds of knowledge that might challenge much of what you hold to be true. We hope you will enjoy the experience!

As HHP gets ready to move into its third decade, and the study of esotericism continues to expand and develop in ever new directions, it is appropriate to look back and give thanks to those who made it all possible. Readers of our first anniversary volume can learn from it how Hermes arrived in the academy in 1999, thanks to the initiative and the efforts of a small but dedicated group of people around Rosalie Basten, who came up with the idea of founding an academic chair for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents and made its realisation possible.⁸ In her own words, one little stone thrown in a pond will produce a ripple effect that is potentially unlimited; and it is true that today, twenty years after that first plunge, the circles still keep extending further into the world and into the future. Without mentioning any further persons specifically by name – for one would not know where to begin or where to end –, as staff members of HHP we want to express our deep gratitude both to the founders of the program and to all members of the ever-expanding community of scholars who have made the study of Western esotericism into a continuing adventure.

The Editors

8 For the history of the creation of HHP, and the people involved in it, see van den Broek, "Birth of a Chair."