

## Scholar interviews

–Per Faxneld

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

**Kocku von Stuckrad,**  
**Professor of Religious Studies,**  
**University of Groningen,**  
**The Netherlands.**



*How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?*

When I studied Comparative Religion, Philosophy, and Jewish Studies at the Universities of Bonn and Cologne (1991–1995), I was lucky enough to be introduced to themes in Western esotericism, even though the term was not yet established then. Two professors in particular made a strong impression on me: Karl Hoheisel gave classes on topics such as “Magic in Monotheistic Context” or “History of Anthroposophy”; Johann Maier introduced me to “Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah,” as well as to the world of ancient Judaism and the Hekhalot literature. Both professors

supervised my Master thesis on astrology in the bible, Qumran, and early rabbinic literature. This was the beginning of my long-lasting fascination with the history of astrology and esoteric discourses from the ancient world through today.

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

The major challenge that I see is what you can call the discipline’s self-ostracizing. Presenting ourselves as those who study what others have thrown into the garbage can of history, or fashioning ourselves as advocates of the underdogs and the marginalized, is not very helpful. It is a kind of identity work that I perceive in the study of esotericism, but also in “pagan studies” and related fields of research. This identity work often leads to a neglect of critical methodological reflection, which I find problematic. What we need is an active collaboration with as many colleagues as possible, no matter whether or not we like their definitions of esotericism, in order to build up networks that can make research into these historical and cultural dynamics sustainable for the future. If we study these phenomena as part of the cultural history of Europe and North America, in an increasingly globalized perspective, we will be able to integrate the field of ‘Western esotericism’ in larger research structures and critical scholarship. This will also help students who enroll in our programs to find a job after their studies.

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

During my time in Amsterdam, I regularly taught classes together with Rob Pauls, who is one of the best teachers I’ve had the pleasure of working with so far. If you think that I am a constructionist, you haven’t met Rob: in almost every class he engaged in highly critical discussion with the students and with me as his co-teacher, which led to stimulating and extremely funny discussions. Nothing escaped Rob’s smart deconstruction! After class, we usually went on discussing the issues with the students over beer.

*What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?*

I love sports. When I lived in Germany, I did free climbing and whitewater canoeing. No chance to do this here in the Netherlands! So I turned to cycling. I also try to be in the gym four times a week to stay fit. In my free time I listen to music, particularly Jazz, Rock, Country, and some classical music. I also like vegetarian cooking and seeing friends.

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

The most difficult thing is that we have to explain a lot before people (hopefully) understand what we are actually studying. The prejudices can work against us when we apply for jobs or at other points in our career.

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

**Egil Asprem**  
**Doctoral research fellow,**  
**University of Amsterdam,**  
**The Netherlands**



*How did you come to be interested in Western esotericism?*

I am of a generation where you are likely to come across "esoteric" references through popular culture. I suppose my interest started as a vague fascination for magic and occultism sparked in particular by role-playing games. I recall having the feeling that there was "something more" behind the references, something "real" in a historical sense, and starting to look up things at the public library and on the internet. This was how I first came across John Dee's angel conversations, which of course were deeply fascinating to a 16-year-old role playing geek. They still are, although perhaps for different reasons. Around the same time I also remember coming across a group of contemporary alchemists and practicing spagyrist online, and soon found myself reading up on Fulcanelli. Gradually the plot thickened,

The nicest thing is that we continuously challenge assumptions and identities that constitute "Europé" or "the West." Hence, European culture becomes more complex, and studying esotericism is a good way of reminding us of the fact that there is no such thing as 'the history' of Europe but that the place of religion in European culture has always been contested, ambivalent, and tied to systems of philosophy, science, art, law, or politics.

of course, and by the age of 17 or 18 I had started collecting "weird" books from the local antiquaries, anything from the Gnostic gospels and apocrypha, to Cornelius Agrippa and John Dee, to Rudolf Steiner. Having grown up with lots of friends in Steiner schools, I was actually quite thrilled to find out that the whole thing was based on occultism. And nobody seemed to know what was going on! That was perhaps the best part.

These adolescent fascinations formed a good basis for a more thoroughly academic interest as I entered university, although I didn't really know that at first. I was doing classical languages and linguistics at first, before switching to religious studies and philosophy, then pondering to continue with philosophy, or even switch to archaeology. When I was given the opportunity to choose my own topic for a sociology of religion course, I decided to track down some ritual magicians. I ended up interviewing some local Thelemites about conjuring demons and elementals, and travelling on the astral plane. That paper eventually resulted in my first published article, and the interest that developed while working on it made me decide going to Amsterdam to pursue an MA in Western esotericism.

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

I see two major challenges that are perhaps hard to solve together, without one defeating the purpose of the other. On the one hand, you often hear that the field has now matured, but when you look for some of the signs that characterise a mature academic field it is hard to see them in practice. I am particularly thinking of the lack of agreement on fundamental issues, such as "what is it", "how do we study it", "what's its importance", and "how is it related to the broad spectrum of human activity". If you pick up the three most popular introduction books to the field, you'll find three very different ways of handling these fundamental questions. From the outside, I think that the persistence of this kind of disagreement is going to rise some – I have to say quite justified – scepticism. And sure, other fields and even whole disciplines have or have had similar problems (think about the constant problematics of defining "religion" in religious studies, not to say how to approach "it"). But that does not make it any less of a problem for esotericism scholars.

The second challenge I see concerns interdisciplinarity, and it stands in a somewhat difficult relation to the first challenge. I still think we need much more real interdisciplinary work, and especially in collaboration with the social sciences. While everybody seems to agree that interdisciplinarity is important, it is sometimes harder to see what that should entail in practice. Personally I think the only plausible way to start is by making direct attempts at reaching out to other disciplines, to invite them in, ask them

for their perspectives. This requires less protectionism and provincialism, in a sense, and means that we need to be open-minded about the exact boundaries, definitions, and delimitations of the field. Now you see the tension: to be taken seriously as a mature field, we need stricter delimitations; to reach out and invite in perspectives from other disciplines, we need a certain open-mindedness. Which place the field will have in the academy in 20 years depends on how we negotiate these concerns. The worst thing that could happen is an unholy alliance between protectionism and a refusal to deal with internal differences of theory and methodology.

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

I couldn't really point out a single memory, but there are plenty of them. You meet a lot of great people, lots of *strange* people, and have the most amazing conversations about topics that could hardly have taken place anywhere else. The best occasions for these kinds of memories have certainly been the conferences, particularly the ESSWE conferences. Or I should rather say, the "shadow conferences" that run on parallel days, but at night.

*What are your interests aside from Western esotericism?*

First of all I have lots of other *academic* interests, besides esotericism. Philosophy, psychology, sociology, anything that has to do with how people think, and why, how they construct their identities, how groups function, etc. And anything that deals with the intersection of politics, science, and religion. Esotericism is just one interesting way to have most of this at once. It touches on a lot of spheres that I am interested in. Outside of academic life, I have the usual interests. I try to go to the cinema at least once a week, and to keep playing music. At the moment I am involved with a micro-band project experimenting with some dark psychedelic folk.

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

Explaining to others what you do. No matter how well-educated the person you are talking with is, you will always have to guard heavily against misunderstandings. I have found that this requires adopting an "esoteric" strategy of communication, serving little lies towards the truth. A gradual unveiling of the secret, adjusted to the other's level of initiation...

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

It is a specialty that gives you the unique possibility of actually discovering something new and neglected – a rare prospect in the humanities. It also touches on a great many interesting and highly relevant processes in Western history and society. Finally, the social aspect of being in this field is great – you do meet a lot of interesting people, and you are unlikely to get bored. ♦

## News from the three major centres for the study of Western esotericism

**Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Section des Sciences religieuses, Sorbonne, Paris, France.**

<http://www.ephe.sorbonne.fr>

### Staff

♦Prof. Dr. Jean-Pierre Brach, Chair

### Programs:

Programme des Conférences/Conference  
Enseignements du Master SHPR/ HPRS Master's (MA)  
Programmes

**NB:** A Bachelor level programme is not being taught at the EPHE. Please also note that an MA programme entirely devoted to the History of Western Esotericism does not exist as such at the EPHE but that the research seminars given by the Chair may be included as a specific module within the more general framework of an EPHE Master's syllabus, which features a number of optional as well as mandatory modules, to be validated over a two-year period. During the same period of time, students are furthermore expected to complete a final *Mémoire de Master* (MA Dissertation), for which they may freely choose their topic and supervisor.

Topics of current seminars include the study of unpublished latin ms. by William Postel (1510-81) in which he advocates the use of Platonic and Kabbalistic materials, as well as mathematical symbolism, in order to establish a universal religious concord, based on the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. Independently, we have looked into the works of some French spiritualist Magnetizers (from the second half of the 19th century) who would transform Mesmerism into what they term *Magie Magnétique*, and their influence on certain later occultists.

### Completed MA theses

None in 2010–2012.

### Completed PhDs (2010-2012)

♦Francesco Baroni, "Tommaso Palamidessi (1915-1983) et l'"Archéosophie". Recherches sur l'ésotérisme chrétien dans l'Italie contemporaine" (2010)

♦Flavia Buzzetta, "Aspetti della *magia naturalis* e della *scientia cabalæ* nel pensiero di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1486-1487)" (2011; co-directed with Prof. P. Palumbo, University of Palermo)

♦Emmanuel Kreis, "*Quis ut Deus ?* Antijudéo-maçonnisme et occultisme en France sous la III<sup>e</sup> République" (2012)

♦Stefano Salzani, "Luigi Valli (1878-1931). Contributo alla storia delle interpretazioni esoteriche dell'opera di Dante" (2012; co-directed with Prof. A. Cavarero, University of Verona)