

ESSWE6 Conference theme: Western Esotericism and deviance

An often-read ‘master narrative’ in the Study of Western Esotericism is that esoteric ideas, authors and currents have, for the most part of Western history, been subject to processes of othering, marginalization, rejection or prohibition by dominant or mainstream cultural and religious discourses. For some scholars, this social aspect has been one of the main criteria for defining the very concept of ‘Western Esotericism’ (consider, for example, the frequently discussed notion of ‘secrecy’). However, recent approaches that have highlighted the entanglement of esoteric ideas and mainstream culture (e.g. ‘occulture’) point to the need of developing a more nuanced picture of the relationship between esoteric and mainstream (‘exoteric’?) discourse, both in pre-modern as well as contemporary times. The conference theme ‘Western Esotericism and deviance’ thus calls for a closer examination and, eventually, a revision of said master narrative by specifically addressing the social and cultural embeddedness of esoteric ideas, authors and currents in Western History. As a consequence, the notion of ‘deviance’ may be refined in the Study of Western Esotericism, for example by distinguishing insider and outsider perspectives, or different discursive formations, social domains or ‘cultic milieus’ which may (or may not) have been relevant to the issue of ‘deviance’.

Crucial questions to be addressed during the conference may be: Are polemics against esoteric ideas, authors or currents evidence for its marginal acceptance or rather its wide distribution and large appeal in a given historical context? Why do over 35 late medieval manuscripts of the peculiar ritual text *ars notoria* survive, whereas usually only a few manuscript copies of medieval theological classics have come down to us? Given the multitudinous reprints of early modern works on ‘Hermeticism’, ‘Natural Magic’, ‘Kabbalah’, or ‘Rosicrucianism’: should one interpret these as ‘mainstream’ works of early modernity? Put the other way round: were John Dee’s angel conversations really representative of late 16th century science? To what extent differ early modern polemics against ‘esoteric’ ideas and currents from othering strategies in 18th and 19th century Enlightenment discourse? Is the impression correct that ‘esoteric’ ideas and currents have gained wide societal acceptance throughout the 20th and 21st centuries? Put the other way round: is ‘occulture’ a phenomenon of the 20th and 21st centuries only? What are the motivations and strategies of ‘secrecy’ and ‘concealment’ in contemporary Esotericism?

A thorough examination of these (and related) questions goes beyond a mere calculation of the quantity of sympathizers and opponents of esoteric currents in a given historical context. In fact, a case-study approach might reveal nuanced findings with regard to the social perception and embeddedness of Western esotericism over longer periods of time and in different cultural and religious contexts or discourses. Participants may highlight micro-milieus or phases that attest different degrees of acceptance or neglect, or even engage in large-scale narratives of overall societal changes and fluctuations. They may distinguish different forms of ‘deviance’ depending on the (e.g. religious, scientific, literary) discursive or social context. ‘Deviance’ may be interpreted as the result of powerful societal dynamics or, in some cases, as a mere product of scholarly stereotypes and misconceptions.