

# The history of modern Western esotericism

## Individuals, ideas, practices

The study of Western esoteric traditions and practices has been a growing research field since the 1990s. This thematic issue aims at opening this field particularly in the context of Finnish cultural history, although the articles cover also other parts of the long tradition of Western esotericism in the history of Europe.

THIS THEMATIC ISSUE of *Approaching Religion* aims at presenting some of the current multidisciplinary research done in this field in Finland. The writers of the articles and the guest editors of the journal represent the fields of study of religion, cultural history, literary studies, history, art history, and history of ideas. Throughout the past decade the study in this area has grown also in Finland, and over the past couple of years several scholars have started to engage in more joint efforts in this area. The field is particularly strong in Turku, both at the University of Turku as well as at Åbo Akademi University, especially in the context of the Donner Institute. Thus it is highly relevant to publish this special volume precisely in this journal, *Approaching Religion*, which is published by the Donner Institute.

The first symposium on Western esotericism was organised by the Donner Institute in 2008. The papers presented in the symposium were published in *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* (vol. 20). But Western esotericism was taught, studied and researched even before that at Åbo Akademi University. The first course was held in 1995, focusing on Antoine Faivre's then newly-published book *Access to Western Esotericism*. The first dissertation in the field of Western esotericism was Kennet Granholm's *Embracing the Dark: The Magic Order of Dragon Rouge. Its Practice in Dark*

*Magic and Meaning Making* in 2005. Scholars at the University of Turku had also started to take an interest in and study Western esotericism, especially in relation to literature and art (see, e.g., Leskelä-Kärki 2006; Kokkinen 2008, 2011, 2013a, 2013b; Leskelä-Kärki and Harmainen 2017; Mahlamäki 2013, 2014; Mahlamäki and Mansikka 2010, 2013).

In 2015 scholars interested in esotericism in the Finnish context started a research network called 'Uuden etsijät. Esoteerisuus ja uskonnollisuuden murros modernisoituvassa Suomessa (1880–1940)' ('Seekers of the new: esotericism and the transformation of religiosity in modernising Finland, 1880–1940'). The network organised a seminar (2016) and several panels in national and international conferences (2015, 2016, 2017) and edited a special issue 'Modern Western Esotericism' in *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* (2017).

In December 2017 this research network succeeded in getting funding for a joint, multidisciplinary research project from the Kone Foundation. This project will be ongoing for the years 2018–20 and it will produce symposia, conferences, joint articles and exhibitions together with cultural historical museums, as well as a joint volume concerning the esoteric traditions in Finland between 1880–1940 particularly in the field of art, literature, music, and culture in general.

The aim of the project, led by the cultural historian Maarit Leskelä-Kärki, is to find a new perspective on the cultural history of modernising Finland, a perspective that has been somewhat occluded in previous history writing. The project explores the religious and ideological transformation that took place among the Finnish cultural intelligentsia around the turn of the twentieth century. Although we have

known already for a long time that many artists, intellectuals, and members of the so-called educated class were in many ways interested in the esoteric and occult movements such as theosophy, Spiritualism, anthroposophy, and Tolstoyanism, among others, a proper analytical and historical study has been lacking. The project aims at showing how this was not a marginal culture practised by the elite and the occasional eccentric person, but part of a wider international process which affected the perceptions of the 'new' or 'modern' in terms of science, religion, individuality, gender, and nationalism.

Most of the articles in this special issue are focusing on Finnish sources and people in the history of Finland, but at the same time, the European, and also transnational, nature of esotericism is at the very core of these studies. The most important focus of all these articles is their historical nature, as they all use historical source material and aim at seeing individuals, phenomena and ideas in a wider cultural, social and historical context.

All the articles in this current journal approach esotericism from the perspective of individual actors. Some of the articles are more biographical in their nature, and some concentrate on addressing a certain idea in one person's life or thoughts. The biographical approach points out the meaning of autobiographical material and personal archives in the study of esotericism. One important feature in many of the articles is the notion of how focusing on the esoteric can help to recognise and interpret an alternative narrative on something already familiar.

Antti Harmainen uses a biographical approach in analysing the book *Andens eller det rena förnuftets religion*, by General C. R. Sederholm, which was published in 1885 in Finland. He aims at correcting the biases and misrepresentations of previous studies as well as placing Sederholm in the context of his time, and traces his ideological, spiritual and scientific inspirations. Harmainen's article clarifies one of the most important aims of our ongoing research project: by looking at the geographical and cultural margins, such as Finland at the turn of the 1900s, we can find new connections and surprising transnational movements in the field of Western esotericism that have so far mostly been looked at from the perspective of Anglo-American or French/German surroundings.

Marjo Kaartinen's article shows how focusing on esotericism can lead to something new and previously untold. Kaartinen reads the letters of Vera

Hjelt, whose public work in parliament, legislation work and within industrial safety are well known, but whose private side as an enthusiastic theosophist and admirer of Annie Besant, and its effects on her public work, have remained totally unknown.

Kaartinen's work with the epistolary archive of Hjelt raises also ethical questions that are in many regards at the core of the research project as well. Does a historian have the right to reveal new aspects of historical individuals, even though this person would have wanted them to remain hidden? How do we treat people of the past in an ethically solid way, and how do we present them to the current academic and wider public without ridiculing them? Our belief is that ethically strong research can be done with careful work in the archival material and a thorough contextualisation. This helps in seeing these people as deeply connected to the vast currents of their times.

Marja Lahelma's contribution takes part in the recent growing interest in the esoteric in art history, where scholars aim at analysing the influence of the occult and esoteric in artistic theories and practices. She concentrates on the era of Symbolist aesthetics and takes examples from Scandinavian, and particularly Finnish, artists such as the canonised Magnus Enckell and Pekka Halonen, as well as the more marginal Beda Stjernschantz. With her detailed and rich contextualization Lahelma shows how the inward turn, the 'quest for the invisible and inexpressible', that has been seen as such an essential part of turn-of-the-century art, was importantly connected to a rising interest in occultism and esotericism. This influenced crucially the ways in which art was understood and perceived, but it had an important effect on the visual qualities of artwork as well.

Julia von Boguslawski and Jasmine Westerlund have written an article on Olly and Uno Donner who were first-generation anthroposophists, and knew Rudolf Steiner personally. They were important figures and actors within the sphere of the Anthroposophical Society of Finland and Sweden, and – posthumously – within the scientific study of religion via their donation to Åbo Akademi University (providing for the founding and maintenance of the Donner Institute and its library, research opportunities, symposia and publications such as *Approaching Religion*). This article is the first thorough description of their lives and the ways they practised anthroposophy based on careful work within different archives in different countries. The

article emphasises the meaning of art as a spiritual or religious task, and as a means of developing one's spirituality. It also shows the pioneering work of Olly and Uno Donner, who were the first to practise biodynamic agriculture and Waldorf pedagogy, as well as anthroposophically-based curative education for mentally-disabled children in Finland.

Tiina Mahlamäki's article sheds light on the life of Kersti Bergroth, a first-generation antroposophist and an author, nowadays known mainly for her popular books for girls and plays written in the Karelian dialect. Bergroth was, however, a diversifying author active in various literary fields. One important thread in her literary work was related to anthroposophy. Mahlamäki analyses one of her novels, and shows how the influence of both Emanuel Swedenborg and Rudolf Steiner can be found in a fictive text that does not openly declare or present an esoteric or anthroposophic worldview. The analysis places this Finnish author among the mainstream esoteric writers and thinkers of past centuries.

By contrast with the other contributions to this edition, Tomas Mansikka's article looks further back in history, to the early modern period when approaches now understood as esoteric were more or less commonplace and shared the methods of researchers and philosophers. Mansikka focuses on the philosopher René Descartes, whose name is seldom mentioned in textbooks of Western esotericism. Focusing on the concept of the poetic imagination – one of the main characteristics of Western esotericism defined by Antoine Faivre – and the ways René Descartes uses and understands it, Mansikka opens up a new way of interpreting and understanding his philosophy, and its meaning in the making of the modern understanding of science.

Both the history of Western esotericism and the academic study of Western esotericism have been dominated by male actors. One purpose of this issue is to balance the gender bias by introducing female actors both as researchers and as researched. The concepts of gender and class are of crucial importance in the field of study of esoteric movements. As the research tradition has for a long time focused only on the activities of men in the movements, and from a rather gender-neutral perspective, there is a need for a research that takes both women's agency in the movements more seriously as well as studies how esotericism, the diverse movements within it, and the practices, were gendered. Many of the articles present

women's activities in esoteric movements. Women like Vera Hjelt, Olly Donner or Kersti Bergroth open up new and quite neglected aspects of esoteric movements – or at least their contribution within this area of Finnish cultural history which has previously been marginalised.

It is as important to see how gender is not the only factor, but how class and social position plays an important part as well. As seen in this journal, we can conclude that esoteric movements were particularly well received among middle- and upper-class people, among the elite and the educated classes. For example, the transnational lifestyle of Uno and Olly Donner, about whom Julia von Boguslawski and Jasmine Westerlund write in this journal, would not have been possible without considerable wealth and elite status. Or in the case of Carl Gustaf Sederholm, whose esoteric ideas are in the focus of Antti Harmainen's article, who was a powerful member of the elite and also possessed the economic means to support theosophical circles in Finland before the official organisation of the movement.

Also the book reviews in this journal concentrate on literature concerning or relevant to the study of Western esotericism. The book reviews are written by younger scholars and postgraduate students from the Universities of Tampere, Turku, and Åbo Akademi University.

We hope that this thematic issue shows how rich and multidisciplinary the research field concerning the esoteric traditions in Finland is at the moment. The research done in Finland importantly contributes to this research field, particularly from the perspective of cultural periphery and margins, as well as from the perspective of biographical approaches with a gendered focus. ■

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Guest Editors

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ideas of Emanuel Swedenborg and themes associated with Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophical Society. Her biography of the author and anthroposophist Kersti Bergroth was published in 2017.

**Maarit Leskelä-Kärki**, PhD, is an Adjunct Professor and a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Cultural History at the University of Turku and a vice-director of SELMA: Centre for the Study of Storytelling, Experientiality and Memory. Her main research interests include cultural history of women's writing and literature, history and theory of biography and autobiographical sources as well as gender and religion. She is the leader of the research project *Uuden etsijät. Esoteerisuus ja uskonnollisuuden murros modernisoituvassa Suomessa 1880–1940*. Her most recent publications include a book on biographical writing *Toisten elämät. Kirjoitusta elämäkerroista* (Avain 2017) and a coedited volume, *Biography, Gender and History: Nordic Perspectives* (k&h-publishing, 2016).



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