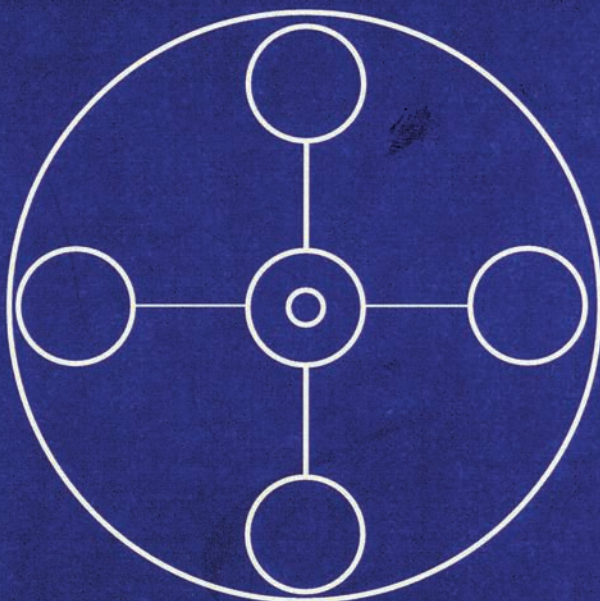


Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge

Sydney Studies in Religion 5

Edited by Edward F. Crangle



Department of Studies in Religion
The University of Sydney
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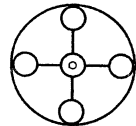
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Acknowledgements

The genesis of this collection of papers came about some years ago in the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney. Academic staff, graduate students of Studies in Religion, and others contributed, in this instance, on the theme of *Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge* to their Postgraduate Research Seminars, coordinated by Dr Edward F. Crangle.

Interest in the theme grew beyond the University of Sydney. This resulted in the offer of many more papers from other scholars, especially those of the Department of History and Religious Studies at LaTrobe University Bendigo.

A number of compelling and unavoidable reasons caused the production of this volume to have a long gestation. Its General Editor Professor Garry Trompf and all of its other contributors must be lauded for their outstanding patience and solid support to see the book to full-term, as they say.

The volume was refereed according to the rubrics laid down by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. The referees are thanked for their help in this regard.

With the support of the Departmental Board, funding was provided initially through the Scotow Bequest. Associate Professor Adrian Mitchell (Head of the School of English, Art History, Film and Media) generously provided necessary monetary assistance when it was desperately needed.

Dr Carole Cusack deserves particular thanks for generous editorial assistance and proofreading in her already busy life. Finally, Mr Drasko Mitrikeski earns warm appreciation for his additional editorial assistance and proofreading.

Series Editor's Preamble

Esoterists, or the generators of esoteric thought and practice, might not think they “control” knowledge—or wisdom. I suspect, rather, that they feel participants in, or recipients of, revelations from within the depths of their beings. But if the more ‘Faustian’ among them do admit to a sense of power, perhaps thaumaturgic mastery, they would not like the threat of an outside investigation of their arena. Yet esotericism, not just as ‘a field of interest,’ but as respectable branch of study within the discipline we variously call Comparative Religion, the History and Phenomenology of Religion, Studies in Religion and so forth, has come of age. Recent acts of analytic scholarship have brought on attempted definitions of the esoteric and esoter[ic]ism, and the systematic categorizing of their features, so as to demarcate a new, special agenda for religious research, if not a new sub-discipline. A solid body of critical scholars are now bent on unravelling the complex relationships between ‘gnostic,’ ‘hermetic,’ ‘esoteric,’ ‘pan- or theosophic’ and ‘occult[ic]’ currents, especially in Western thought. A cluster of doughty investigators forged the way. I name Wilhelm Bousset and his *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (1907), Auguste Viatte’s *Sources occultes du Romantisme* (1927), Carl Jung’s *Psychologie und Alchemie* (1944), Will-Erich Peuckert’s *Pansophie* (1958), and Frances Yates’ *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1966), just to introduce important pioneers and their best known books in this vast field. Pointing to the future institutionally was the post-War appointment of Antoine Faivre to a chair in the history of Esoteric and Mystical trends in modern and contemporary Europe, at the Sorbonne. An interesting *fin-de-siècle* Australian initiative was taken with the engagement of (the late) John Cooper to lecture in the Zoroastrian and Gnostic traditions at the University of Sydney (1996-8, with funding assistance from the Theosophical Society). Of great significance is the recent creation of a chair in Hermetic and related currents at the University of Amsterdam (2000), filled by Wouter Hanegraaff, already acclaimed as an authority on New Age religion. And just last year the University of Wales at Lampeter took the cue with the establishment of a Centre for Western Esotericism, under the direction of Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke.

Starting from Utrecht, with his *Het grote en het kleine werk* (1990), it has been Hanegraaff who has laboured most to put the study of esotericism on a (social) "scientific" basis. Although respectful, he sought to take the methodological agenda away from 'true believing' esoterists (perhaps Pierre Riffaud is the best of these writing today) or defensive 'neo-Gnosticizers' (such as the eminent Dutch church historian Gilles Quispel), and to categorize the propensities of esotericism 'etically' rather than 'emically.' Faivre has been more cautious, being used to 'having his feet in both the camps' of practitioners and objective researchers; but still, he is prepared to characterize an *aire de famille* about esoteric interests and working assumptions. Faivre's opus is the largest of them all, with studies impinging on Jacob Boehme (whom he takes as the founder of Western Christian esoterism), von Eckarhausen, and the Christian Kabbalists.

Even if the great body of relevant research has been on European insights, the wider study of the world's religions—especially those of the East—have long been drawn into esotericizing approaches to religion and eventually into scholarly esotericism. A venerable theology (or perennial philosophy) found outside the Bible was an object of attention in the early modern period, with Zoroaster, sometimes also the brahmins and Confucius, connected to it, and the mysteries of Jewish Kabbalism were of recurrent fascination. In the course of time, access to Indian scriptures from the end of the eighteenth century produced an "Oriental Renaissance"—as the title of Raymond Schwab's important book has it—with claims being made that the lost, previously veiled source of the world's spiritual wisdom lay with the ancient Aryans or Indo-Europeans of the Orient. This helps explain the pronounced Indological elements in the thought of the Theosophical Society, even in the speculations of renowned ex-Theosophist René Guénon. The approach of 'traditionalism,' associated with the work of Frithjof Schuon and Martin Lings, gave Sufism a high profile, and the Indologist Ananda Coomaraswamy was a significant member of the same 'camp.' However different the outcomes of their searches, Theosophists and Traditionalists share a common interest in an underlying esoterico-mystical foundation behind world religions. Buddhologist Edward Conze, himself a quiet Theosophist, was ready to call Buddhism a 'Gnosticism;' and Traditionalists would admit their

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penchant for (“lower case”) gnostical and theosophical currents in spiritual life.

Australian scholars are well known for their contributions to the study of the Theosophical movement and the Traditionalist orientation. John Cooper’s editing of the Helena Petrovna Blavatsky correspondence comes first to mind, along with Ian Hooker’s and Gregory Tillett’s studies of Charles Leadbeater, and Brendon French’s consideration of the “Masters” in Theosophical thought. Kenneth (“Harry”) Oldmeadow has produced the most significant introductory studies on Traditionalism. In all these achievements the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney has provided a solid base, as it did with the founding of the monograph series *Gnostica* (1996-), published out of Louvain, Belgium. Indeed, the first number of that series consisted of the published doctoral thesis of the late Robert Pretty, former Lecturer in Ecclesiastical History at Sydney, who translated and commented on a remarkable dialogue between five Gnostics and an orthodox Christian (ca. 290-300 CE). That will remind us that Sydney has a long tradition of research into antique mystery religions, gnosticism, and Manichaeism—from Samuel Angus, via Raoul Mortley, to Iain Gardner.

And now we have another Australian study on esoteric matters, this time edited by Indologist Edward Crangle, who has paid immense attention to the relation between esotericism and meditative practice. While two-thirds of this collection comprises historical, methodological and theoretical studies, the last section moves research innovatively towards less well traversed horizons. The gestation of this book, I should make clear, has been elephantine in the making. Some of us have become wiser in our evaluations of the esoteric tradition. Interactions with professors Faivre and Hanegraaff, for example, would now make me lay less stress on the secrecy motif than I have in my own contribution here, and yet perhaps the less temperate way I have put things will act as a foil to those wishing to read the secretive and occluded quite out of the picture. Whatever qualifications the earliest-producing contributors might latterly make to their chapters, however, the various explorations have been well worth the effort, and reveal the rich texture of the subject matter for what it is. The question of who controls knowledge, moreover, will not go away. Indeed, one is enticed

to ask, in the light of this collection, whether putative academic, religious or political control of knowledge is over sadly ephemeral bodies of information, learnt by populations who really yearn in their hearts for something much deeper and who want to be saved from repeating the same old mistakes. Is there a truer knowledge to be controlled, then, and who are worthy to be its mediators?

Garry W. Trompf

Professor in the History of Ideas, Studies in Religion, The University of Sydney

Co-founder, *Gnostica*

Editorial Board member and International Consultant for Australia and New Zealand, *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism*

Editor's Preface

One periodically overhears the statement that: 'The only thing worth talking about is "The Ineffible"'. Though they might seem trite, these words articulate, in their own fashion, a deep attraction, and probable need, to embrace a seemingly impossible task for whatever reason. At the very least, such efforts indicate a fascination with extending the boundary between the limited, knowable reality, and unlimited Ultimacy. Such, by its very nature, seems hidden from the structures of language and, it can be argued, the associated cognitive constructs of rationality. Nevertheless, esoteric realms can be revealed to ordinary people under extraordinary circumstances, as they may be revealed similarly to extraordinary people in perhaps ordinary circumstances.

Individuals come to gnosis by their peculiar paths. Furthermore, they deal with such extraordinary knowledge also in their singular ways, for whatever reason. The title of this collection of papers, *Esotericism and the Control of Knowledge*, was chosen deliberately for its ambiguity as well as to provoke our contributors to explore its possible implications in an open-ended creative fashion. That is, our authors were invited to interpret the topic from the perspective of their individual and peculiar appreciation of access to the esoteric.

Additional evaluation of the wide-ranging material that was selected for this volume revealed three more-or-less equal categories. Of thirteen articles, four are concerned with **Methodological Approaches** to esoteric knowledge, another four papers address **Esoteric Knowledge** itself, while the remaining five essays deal in their own ways with **Esoteric Practice**.

Victoria Barker opens the first section on **Methodological Approaches**. Her paper is a philosophical exercise that usefully examines the logic of esoteric thought. Garry Trompf's detailed essay follows by discussing some dynamics of transition between the esoteric and the exoteric, and *vice versa*, in the history of religion. The reader is led then to the position of faith *vis-à-vis* gnosis. Carole Cusack's work on *Esotericism, Irony and Paranoia* explores the tension between esotericism and rational forms of cognition. In doing so, she considers Umberto Eco's fascination, attraction to (and final rejection of) esotericism, for his preferred interpretation and commitment to

rationality and the scientific view. The first section on **Methodological Approaches** concludes with David Pecotic's *Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way*. In his concern with method, David provides a detailed exploration of the categories of western esotericism.

The second section on **Esoteric Knowledge** commences with *The Elect and the Predestination of Knowledge*. Here, Timothy Scott employs the work of Frithjof Schuon to enquire into the complementarity of esotericism to exotericism. A further examination of Frithjof Schuon follows. Harry Oldmeadow goes on to penetrate *The Heart of the Religio Perennis* in order to study the interdependence of esotericism and exotericism. Matthew del Nevo's article *On Spiritual Knowledge* deals briefly with direct experience and esotericism. It evaluates the necessary relationship between the quality of knowledge and intelligence. Andrew Itter ends section two with a consideration of the experiential side of abstract doctrine. His *Method and Doctrine* paper determines the need of access to the tradition, and its associated 'gatekeeper' to worthy knowledge.

The final section on **Esoteric Practice** begins with Glenys Eddy's *The Ritual Dimension of Western Esotericism*. This work bears on the manner of technique of attainment in the transformation of human consciousness. Al Gabby follows with a paper that aims to define the intellectual and cultural context wherein the Society for Psychical Researchers was established and sustained on both sides of the Atlantic. In doing so, his essay '*Very Slight Indications of a Revelation*' relates theory to praxis. Thereafter, *Vietnamese Esoterica and the Chinese Mystical Model* directs the reader to eastern esotericism. In this instance, Chris Hartney evaluates the esoteric and exoteric needs of Caodists, and the potential for one form of praxis to compliment the other. Paris Mawby, in his essay *The Worm in the Bud*, evaluates secrecy as a valuable practice in itself. Section three, and the volume itself, concludes with a paper entitled *Naşiruta: Deep Knowledge*. In this essay, Naşoraia Hathem Saed appraises the extraordinary skill of the Naşoraean, the enlightened gnostic of the Mandaean religion, in generating *Naşiruta*, profound spiritual knowledge, through the unique appreciation of a precious secret scroll. In some sense, mysterious knowledge is revealed here to those with purified vision.

Editor's Preface

As individual articles and as a collection, this volume represents outstanding value to both scholar and practitioner with the interest and need to understand and to appreciate the dynamics of esotericism.

Peace All Ways.

Edward F. Crangle

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Victoria Barker is a former Lecturer of the Department of Philosophy and of the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney. She holds a Ph.D. in the philosophy of language and is presently completing another, which concerns the value of negative theology to feminism. Her present research interests bear on the intersection between poststructural thought, feminism and theology. As of September 2004, she will be living and working in Frankfurt, Germany.

Edward Crangle is a Lecturer in Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney. Among other works, he is author of *The Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices* (Otto Harrassowitz, 1994). In January 2003, Edward was appointed the *Dhammakāya Foundation Inaugural Lecturer in Buddhist Studies and Research*. In the context of the present volume, his interest in esoteric practices of Buddhism leads to research collaboration with Naşoraia Hathem Saed. Their forthcoming work anticipates the cross-fertilisation of esoteric ideas and related practices of early Buddhism and Mandaicism. This work in progress is entitled *To Know the Great Mind: The Origin and Development of the Mandaean Means to Enlightenment*.

Carole M. Cusack is a Senior Lecturer in Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney. She is the author of *Conversion Among the Germanic Peoples* (Cassell 1998) and *The Essence of Buddhism* (Lansdowne 2001). She has co-edited two volumes of Sydney Studies in Religion with Peter Oldmeadow, *This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe* (1999) and *The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalization* (2001). Her research interests include new religious movements and New Age religion, medieval Christianity and European mythology.

Matthew del Nevo studied for a Bachelor of Applied Social Science. Thereafter, he was employed by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Jerusalem in Israel at the Four Homes of Mercy as an art therapist. He studied Creative Writing at the Bezalel Institute and Philosophy of Religion at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Coming to Australia in 1987, Matthew wrote his doctoral dissertation at the University of Sydney on Edmond Jabes' singular and unclassifiable writings, *Le Livre des questions* (7 volumes), *Le Livre des ressemblances* (3 volumes), *Le Livre des limites* (4 volumes). Matthew has lectured in Theology and Philosophy of Religion at the University of Sydney, the Catholic Theological Union and WEA. Currently, he is the Spirituality Coordinator of the Centre for Christian Spirituality in Randwick. Matthew is involved also in Philosophy in Schools. Further, he is now Dean of Studies at the Centre for Christian Spirituality, which is the theology college of Broken Bay Diocese, Sydney.

Glenys Eddy is a postgraduate and tutor in the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney. She is currently undertaking her PhD dissertation, examining the applicability of sociological approaches to the study of religious conversion, in the area of Western Buddhism. Her interests include religious conversion, new religious movements, meditation practices, Western Buddhism, and Western Esotericism.

Al Gabay received a B.A. in Philosophy from the University of California, and completed a Ph.D. in History and Religious Studies at LaTrobe University. His academic interests include the 'covert' Enlightenment, especially the influence of the ideas of F. A. Mesmer and Emanuel Swedenborg on the intellectual culture of the West in the late 18th and 19th centuries, and in particular on the worldwide Spiritualist movement. In 1988 he participated in a Symposium and contributed to a volume celebrating the Tricentenary of Swedenborg's birth. He has published widely in journals, including *Australian Historical Studies*, the *Journal of Religious History*, and *New Philosophy*. His other academic interests are Communitarianism and Australian Federation, and he has contributed to conferences of the *Communal Studies Association* and to a volume on the origins of

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Australian Federation, *Makers of Miracles*. Among Dr Gabay's other published books, *The Mystic Life of Alfred Deakin* examines the personal religion of Alfred Deakin; *Messages From Beyond* tells the story of the origins and influence of the Spiritualist movement in Australia. His latest book is entitled *The Covert Enlightenment: The Eighteenth-Century Counterculture and Its Aftermath*. Dr Gabay is currently Senior Lecturer in History and Religious Studies at the LaTrobe University Bendigo, where he teaches Buddhist studies along with courses in British, American and Australian History.

Christopher Hartney was awarded a doctorate on Caodaism and its Sydney Temple at the Department of Studies in Religion, University of Sydney. He has been examining the Caodaist faith and other new religious movements throughout the Australian and Asian region and has a particular fascination with the religious communities of Sydney. Chris is also hon. secretary of the Society for the Study of Religion, Literature and the Arts.

Andrew Itter has just completed his PhD at La Trobe University Bendigo. His thesis is a reconstruction of the esoteric teachings of the Christian Platonist, Clement of Alexandria. He has published numerous articles on Clement as well as on the Christian mystic, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Andrew's work is particularly drawn to the problems arising out of the collision between mystical experience and the development of doctrine, and with demonstrating the necessity of maintaining the contemplative, speculative, and metaphysical core of the Christian tradition.

Paris Mawby is a postgraduate candidate with the University of Sydney's Department of Studies in Religion. His current research concerns the religious turmoil of nineteenth century Britain and its relationship to the visual arts of the time, particularly with regard to notions of the sublime. His other interests include the dialogue between science and religion, the problem of religious pluralism, the sense of Self and Other as the basis for religious insight, ethical deism, and the History of Ideas as a discipline in its own right.

Harry Oldmeadow is the Coordinator of Philosophy and Religious Studies in the Department of Arts at La Trobe University Bendigo. His primary research interest is the traditionalist school of the perennial philosophy and its pre-eminent exponents, René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon. He is the author of *Traditionalism: Religion in the light of the Perennial Philosophy* (Colombo, 2000). His other interests include primal religions and mythology (especially of the Australian Aborigines and the Plains Indians of North America), critiques of scientism and environmentalism, and sacred art. He has published widely in journals such as *Asian Philosophy*, *Religious Traditions*, *Sophia* and *Sacred Web*. He has recently published *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Bloomington, 2004), and is editor of the forthcoming *The Betrayal of Tradition: Essays on the Spiritual Crisis of Modernity* (Bloomington, 2005).

David Pecotic is currently completing a doctoral dissertation in the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Sydney. The thesis focuses mainly on making explicit the fundamental role the body and embodiment play in the mysticism of G.I. Gurdjieff. During his postgraduate career, David has also published articles on the relationship between indigenous Australians and New Age religions and indigenous Australian shamanism, a book chapter on technology and New Age, and encyclopedia entries in the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Nature and Religion* on Gurdjieff and his most preeminent follower, the Russian thinker P.D. Ouspensky.

Rabbi Naşoraia Hathem Saed is president of the *International Mandaean Nasoraean Supreme Council*, the governing body in Mandaean religious and cultural affairs. He is the Worldwide Spiritual Leader of the Mandaean-Nasoraean. In addition, Naşoraia Said is honorary president of the *Ziwa Mandaean Association* and the *International Mandaean Youth Organization*, while acting as director and chief editor of *Brikha Nasoraia Publications*, and editor of both *Kushta* and *Mandaean Thinker* magazines. Also, he is Honorary Secretary of the *International Association of Mandaean Nasoraean Studies*.

List of Contributors

In addition, Naşoraia Saed completed the following academic programmes: M.A. (Semitic Studies), B.A. (Arabic), Diplomas in Fine Arts, Islamic Doctrine, Education, Psychology, and English. He has completed more than forty-eight publications including books, articles and numerous research projects in Mandaic, Arabic and English, in wide-ranging areas that include Semitic, Biblical, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies.

Among his many works, Naşoraia Saed is the author of: 'Christian and Mandaean Perspectives on Baptism', *ARAM* (2004) in press; *Mandaic Language*, 4 vols (2001-4); four articles in *Mandaean Studies* (2000): 'The Mandaean Ceremonies', 'Mandaicism and the Creation', 'The Creation of Human Being', 'The Preaching in Mandaicism'; *Qlasta – The Mandaean Liturgical Prayer Book*, 2 vols (1998); *Ginza Rabba – The Great Treasure*, (1998); *The Demonstrative Pronouns in Semitic Languages* (1994); *An Introduction to Mandaic Language* (1993); *The Semitic Languages* (1993); *The Complete Collection of Poems of Divine Abu Ishaq Al Sabie* (1985); *Al Batanie: The Great Astronomy Scientist* (1985); *The Mandaean Prayers* (1983), 3 vols. In collaboration with Dr Edward F. Crangle, he has work in progress entitled: *To Know the Great Mind: The Origin and Development of the Mandaean Means to Enlightenment*.

With judicious time management in his busy life, Naşoraia Saed is completing his doctoral dissertation in the School of Languages (Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish Studies) at the University of Sydney. His thesis is entitled: *A Critical Edition, with translation and analytical study of the Secret Scroll 'Diuan D-Qadaha Rba d-Dmuth Kuşta'* (The Great Creation of the Image/Likeness of Truth).

Timothy Scott was awarded his doctorate by La Trobe University, for his thesis, *Symbolism of the Ark*. He has contributed an essay to the Traditionalist anthology, *The Betrayal of Tradition*, edited by Harry Oldmeadow, and is a regular contributor to the Traditionalist journals, *Sacred Web* and *Sophia*. Dr. Scott also writes and publishes on literature and art. A keen hiker and mountain climber, Dr. Scott has travelled extensively around the world. He lives in the United Kingdom with his wife and family, where he teaches Religious Studies at Oxford High School (GDTS).

Garry W. Trompf is Professor in the History of Ideas at the University of Sydney. His best known books include *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought* and *Payback: The Logic of Retribution in Melanesian Religions*. He and Wouter Hanegraaff are the founding co-editors of *Gnostica*, a monograph devoted to studies in Gnostic, Hermetic and esoteric currents of Western Thought. Professor Trompf is the Australian/New Zealand representative on the Editorial Board of *Aries*.