

The Ritual Dimension of Western Esotericism: the Rebirth Motif and the Transformation of Human Consciousness

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Academic recognition of Western Esotericism as an autonomous discipline within the History of Religions occurred in 1965,¹ with the establishment of the Chair in the History of Western Esotericism, at that stage Christian Esotericism, in the Religious Studies section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études at the Sorbonne.² Derived from the Greek word *esoterios*, the noun *esotericism* dates from the beginning of the nineteenth century.³ Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff define the subject matter of Western Esotericism as a ‘distinct form of thought perceptible in Western traditions since the Renaissance and characterized by four intrinsic and two extrinsic characteristics’.⁴ The four intrinsic characteristics are: the doctrine of universal correspondences, living nature, imagination/mediations, and transmutation. Two others are extrinsic because of their absence in some cases: the concordance of traditions, and the transmission of knowledge.⁵ While the identification of these intrinsic characteristics in Western traditions suggests a *doctrinal* unity in existence since the Renaissance, another approach based on the examination of ritual elements present in modern esoteric orders which contain this doctrinal unity, highlights a common initiatory ritual structure which facilitates the transmutation of human consciousness into the realization of its

¹ A. Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, Albany, NY, USA, 1994, p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, p. ix.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4; J-P Laurant, ‘Esotericism in Freemasonry: The Example of François-Nicolas Noel’s *Géométrie du Maçon* (1812)’, in A. Faivre and W. Hanegraaff (eds), *Western Esotericism and the Science of Religions*, Bondgenotenlaan, 1998, p. 194. Laurant states that Jacques Matter was the first person to use the word ‘esotericism’ in 1828, in his *Histoire critique du gnosticisme*, Paris.

⁴ W. Hanegraaff, ‘Introduction: the Birth of a Discipline’, in Faivre and Hanegraaff, *op. cit.*, p. viii.

⁵ A. Faivre, ‘Questions of Terminology Proper to the Study of Esoteric Currents in Modern and Contemporary Europe’, in Faivre and Hanegraaff, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

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own divine nature. This myth and ritual complex is to be found in extant orders such as Freemasonry and a Rosicrucian order, The Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis (AMORC), and in religious orders of antiquity such as Alexandrian Hermetism, which dates from the second and third centuries CE.¹ From this perspective, Western esotericism appears to originate in late Antiquity, rather than in the Renaissance.

The way that the term 'esotericism' is defined, and what it denotes, affects the theoretical and methodological approaches generated for the purpose of understanding its place in the history of Western religion and culture. As stated above, Faivre's approach is based on the identification of a doctrinal unity behind 'an ensemble of spiritual currents'. Faivre lists four distinct usages of the term esotericism as: the generalist view of the occult, paranormal, and exotic wisdom traditions; the attainment to a 'centre of being' by certain procedures, and to the procedures themselves; the creation of an esoteric/exoteric dichotomy; and the ensemble of spiritual currents that is the subject matter of formal research.² He maintains that esotericism in the fourth sense, the 'ensemble of spiritual currents', *viz.* the four intrinsic: the doctrine of universal correspondences, living nature, imagination/mediations, and transmutation; and the two extrinsic, the concordance of traditions, and the transmission of knowledge,³ is both a methodological tool responsive to the criteria of a historical-critical approach, and a form of thought based on the nature of the currents which exemplify it, its variable usages within diverse discourses, and on observable realities that the usages stem from.⁴ Accordingly, the set of defining criteria was developed with reference to one cultural/geographical area and limited to one historical period where an ideational and doctrinal unity was in evidence. Faivre considers that modern esotericism emerged at the end of the fifteenth century, and is a Western notion belonging to the entire period of modernity.⁵

1 A. Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes: From Greek God to Alchemical Magus*, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995, p. 55.

2 Faivre, 1998, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

3 *Loc. cit.*

4 Faivre, 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

5 Faivre, 1998, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3.

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By comparison Hugh Urban's approach is fundamentally sociological. He denotes esotericism as 'what is "inner" or hidden, what is known only to the initiated few, and closed to the majority of humankind in the exoteric world',¹ and maintains that the social and political implications of secrecy and esotericism are directly related to the esoteric/exoteric dichotomy,² the creation of an interior body of knowledge which confers special status upon the knower. From this, Urban believes, are created three strategies which esoteric traditions employ for their own maintenance: the creation of a new social space which promises equality and liberation for all social classes while concurrently constructing new and more rigid hierarchies; a hermeneutical strategy which appropriates the authority of traditional scriptures while concurrently asserting the superiority of esoteric exegesis; and a ritual strategy which links the initiate, the hierarchy of the cosmos and the hierarchy of the esoteric sect.³ For Urban, it is the ritual dimension working with the authority of scripture that creates and maintains the social space. While Faivre sees a doctrinal unity within an ensemble of spiritual currents, Urban perceives a social and spiritual hierarchy united by ritual action.

Both scholars highlight the centrality of the interior/exterior or exoteric/esoteric dichotomy in Western Esotericism. For Faivre, esotericism's automization was linked to the creation of an exterior and an interior with respect to a unified body of knowledge.⁴ Urban's approach, by incorporating two of the other uses of the term esotericism noted by Faivre, namely, the esoteric/exoteric dichotomy, and the 'attainment to a centre of being', facilitates a broader definition of esotericism and a broader field of investigation incorporating its ritual component. He maintains that the ritual strategy in esoteric traditions 'creates a homology between the body of the initiate, the hierarchy of the cosmos and the hierarchy of the esoteric sect, inscribing the individual into the body of the order, and inscribing the order onto the

¹ H. Urban, 'Elitism and Esotericism: Strategies of Secrecy and Power in South Indian Tantra and French Freemasonry', in *Numen*, Vol. 44, No. 1, pp. 1-37, 1997, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴ Faivre, 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

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human body'.¹ While it is understood that not all secret societies are esoteric, Simmel's comment that 'the role of the ritual in secret societies is sufficiently well known, from the religio-mystical orders of antiquity down to the eighteenth century Rosicrucians',² suggests a continuity of ritual function throughout this period. The remainder of this paper is devoted to demonstrating the centrality of the two notions, the attainment to a centre of being and the interior/exterior dichotomy, in unifying the ritual and doctrinal dimensions of Western Esotericism.

At this point it must be stated that Faivre's isolation, definition, and historical location of the currents of thought that operate as a unity has added legitimacy to an area of Western religious development that has been largely neglected. Faivre and Hanegraaff agree that scholars have marginalized esotericism and other domains of Western cultural history.³ Esotericism has faced theological and epistemological bias⁴ and is often labelled as an autonomous counter-tradition or alternative tradition.⁵ According to Hanegraaff, terms such as *theosophical* are often ill-defined as *occult*, and historical terms such as *Rosicrucian* still evoke 'sinister associations with secret societies'.⁶ Suspicion from mainstream society toward Freemasonry has been noted by Piatigorsky, who maintains that while it does not mediate between members and the outside world, it is often perceived publicly as being linked to society's politics, religion, and economics.⁷ Urban notes that the social, political and historical dimensions of esotericism have not been greatly explored.⁸ It may be the combination of this lack of socio-historical

1 Urban, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

2 G. Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated, edited, and introduced by Kurt H. Wolff, The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1950, pp. 358-59.

3 Faivre, 1994, *op. cit.*, p. ix; Hanegraaff, 1998a, *op. cit.*, p. x.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Hanegraaff, 1998a, *op. cit.*, p. xv. Conversely, Urban, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2, maintains that as a sociological phenomenon, esotericism is very often elitist, the province of highly educated, affluent, and powerful intellectuals, who seek either to reinforce existing social structures, or to bend and reshape them according to their own interests.

6 Hanegraaff, 1998a, *op. cit.*, p. xi.

7 A. Piatigorsky, *Freemasonry*, London, 1997, p. 352.

8 Urban, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

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investigation and the epistemological bias toward esotericism that has diverted serious scholarly attention from esoteric ritual until recently.

Although religious movements such as gnosticism and hermetism in antiquity have received academic attention and the centrality of astrology, magic, alchemy and Neoplatonic philosophy to the Renaissance worldview is understood,¹ according to Hanegraaff related phenomena of recent periods are still marginalized. Yates's demonstration in 1964 of the links between the Hermetic tradition and emerging scientific thought in the Renaissance revived interest in esotericism temporarily by its suggestion of the discovery of a lost heritage of Western culture, of hermetic spirituality, unitary and self-sufficient.² No lasting interest was generated because according to Hanegraaff, Yates had attempted to legitimate esotericism by wedding it to modernist narratives of secular and scientific progress, and Renaissance Hermeticism was shown to be not a unitary tradition, but an eclectic mixture of philosophical and religious traditions.³ Conversely, Faivre's approach marked the emergence of esotericism by the emergence of the will to bring together a variety of ancient materials, and the belief that they could constitute a homogeneous whole leading to the idea of the *philosophia perennis*, with a real or mythic link of influence and chain of authorities such as Moses, Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistos, Plato, Orpheus and others.⁴

According to Stevenson the urge 'for a rebirth based on ancient knowledge' alongside the progressive drive toward modernity often identified with the Renaissance,⁵ motivated the search for ancient wisdom among forms of Hellenistic religiosity: Stoicism, Gnosticism, Hermetism, and Neopythagoreanism.⁶ Modern scholars, notably Faivre and McIntosh, have identified Gnostic, Hermetic, Stoic, Neoplatonic, and Neo-Pythagorean strains from Antiquity in Western esotericism.⁷

¹ D. Stevenson, *The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland's Century, 1590-1710*, Cambridge, 1988, p. 77.

² Hanegraaff, 1998a, *op. cit.*, pp. xiii-iv.

³ *Ibid.*, p. xiii-xv.

⁴ Faivre, 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵ Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

⁶ Faivre, 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁷ A. Faivre, 'Ancient and Medieval Sources of Modern Esoteric Movements', in A. Faivre and J. Needleman (eds), *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, New York, 1992, pp.

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The formation of a 'referential esoteric corpus in the Renaissance' was also influenced by two historical events: the discovery of the Jewish *Kabbalah* after the diaspora of 1492, and the rediscovery of the *Corpus Hermeticum* brought to Florence in about 1460 after the taking of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453.¹ Modern scholars are careful to distinguish Alexandrian Hermetism from Renaissance and later Hermeticism. While the word *hermeticism* has a wider usage which covers many aspects of Western esotericism such as alchemy and astrological speculations, Faivre and van den Broek maintain that *Hermetism* refers to the Alexandrian texts written in Greek called the 'Hermetica', many of which are attributed to Hermes Trismegistos, and to the later literature directly inspired by them.² Faivre states that the Alexandrian Hermetica of the second and third centuries CE and earlier are the result of disparate philosophies, with little theoretical and doctrinal coherence apparent in the texts, but containing the same 'avid curiosity' that feeds upon diverse traditions as the sixteenth century hermeticists.³

Marsilio Ficino translated the *Corpus*, and published it in 1471.⁴ After 1492 the Jewish *Kabbalah* penetrated the Christian milieu,⁵ and Pico della Mirandola allied it with the *Corpus* through the basic theme of Creation through the word.⁶ In 1614 the Genevan Protestant Isaac Casaubon proved the texts of the *Corpus* to have been written no earlier than the first centuries of the Christian era, a fact which Faivre states was either largely ignored or unknown.⁷ From this it is evident that any

1-3; see also C. McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians: The History, Mythology and Rituals of an Occult Order*, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, 1987, p. 29.

1 Faivre, 1992, *op. cit.*, p. 1. Faivre states that the Middle Ages had not known of it, although they had the *Asclepius*.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 3. R. Van den Broek, *Studies in Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity*, Brill, Leiden, 1996, p. 8, lists them as: the seventeen treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the Latin *Asclepius*, the Armenian *Hermetic Definitions*, and the *Coptic Hermetica* found at Nag Hammadi (the 'Treatise on the Eighth and Ninth' being the most important).

3 Faivre, 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 98; McIntosh, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

5 Faivre, 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

6 Faivre, 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 186. He outlined his proof in his publication *De rebus sacris ecclesiasticis exercitationes XVI* published in London.

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chain of Hermetic authority could date back only as far as late antiquity, and with respect to doctrinal unity it may be that the will to create it carried more religious force than any direct historical continuity.

In the Renaissance and in Antiquity alike, it appears that the desire for access to a unified and esoteric body of wisdom virtually synthesized one from older material. Van den Broek maintains that the Hermetic teachings made use of many views developed by Greek philosophy and science, particularly Stoicism and Neoplatonism¹ while Faivre notes that intermediaries and gradations of Neo-Pythagoreanism prepared the way for Neoplatonism and Stoicism, the latter lasting for almost six centuries and impregnating the Gnostic and Hermetic currents with the emphasis on knowing the concrete universe by harmoniously combining wisdom and technique.² The Neoplatonic influence was also transmitted by the Alexandrian Jew Philo (20BC-54CE) who maintained that the transcendent God affected the world indirectly through intermediaries, by whose agency the soul reached him.³ The combination of the above influences can be seen to form a coherent belief system based on knowing God and the universe by developing wisdom and technique in order to ascend the scales of mediation of God's influence. According to Faivre, the idea of scales of mediation is characteristic of all esoteric thought.⁴

Van den Broek's method of distinguishing Hermetism from Gnosticism through the differences in their mythologies highlights the importance of both the notion of scales of mediation and the technique for ascending them, and of the ritualistic practices recorded in the Hermetic writings, for the development of the experiential emphasis in Western Esotericism. At the congress held at Messina, Italy in 1966, modern scholars made a distinction between *Gnosis* (the Greek word for knowledge, related to the English know, and the Sanskrit *jñāna*⁵)

¹ Van den Broek, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

² Faivre, 1992, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁵ H. Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, Boston 1963, p. 32; van den Broek, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

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and *Gnosticism*, one that was not made in antiquity.¹ Van den Broek outlines the expression of Gnosis in Gnosticism, Hermetism, and Platonism as a deep personal conviction of the fundamental identity between God and man's soul or mind.² The salvation of the soul consists in its deliverance from the bonds of the body and its return to its divine origin, an indispensable prerequisite for which was the understanding of the nature of man, of the cosmos, and of the divine world. Gnostic and Hermetic traditions both claimed to have received their knowledge of the divine world and the soul's fate from divine revelations.³

For Van den Broek, differences between Gnostic and Hermetic doctrines lie in three fundamental issues: the doctrines of God, the visible world, and man.⁴ For the Hermetists God is unknowable in his essence, but can be comprehended by the human mind through reasoning and contemplation of the cosmic order, whereas for the Gnostics the supreme god was simply inaccessible to the human mind.⁵ The negative Gnostic worldview: the world as anti-cosmic; the material world as the prison of the soul; and the planets and zodiac signs seen as evil powers' contrasts with the more positive Hermetic one.⁶ Further, these differences are clearly illustrated by differences in two essential mythologies: the place of the planets, and the myth of the heavenly man. In the *Apocryphon of John*, the Demiurge and his demons create a human being after they see a reflection of heavenly man's shape in the waters of chaos. In the *Poimandres*, divine man himself falls because of a narcissistic love for his own beautiful shape, which he sees reflected in the waters below. In Hermeticism the human body is not devised by an evil demiurge to incarcerate the soul but is simply the

¹ Van den Broek, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3. Van den Broek states that this was characteristic of Platonists from Plato to the late Neoplatonists of the fifth century CE.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵ *Loc. cit.* According to van den Broek, both systems begin from the classical notion that God is so transcendent he can be described only in terms of negative theology.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13. Van den Broek acknowledges that negative views are found in Hermetism, but nowhere in the hermetic texts is found the idea that the cosmos is bad, nor that it had been created by an evil demiurge.

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material part of man,¹ where the soul has succumbed to the passions of the body, resulting in a state of forgetfulness of its divine origin, but the mind could be raised above this state.²

With reference to the place of the planets, Gnosticism viewed them as evil powers, imparting to humanity negative characteristics in its descent to earth. In the *Poimandres* God is the supreme mind and light and from himself he engendered a second, demiurgic *nous* who made the seven rulers, the planets, and put them into an eternal rotation.³ The Hermetic text 'The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth' in both the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the Nag Hammadi Library, discusses the mind's ascent to the eighth and ninth spheres which surround the earth and designate the divine realm, the levels beyond the control of the seven lower powers.⁴ Van den Broek states that while the soul ascends to this level after death, it can also be experienced during earthly life, at the end of a process of hermetic instruction culminating in mystical initiation.⁵ Copenhaver describes 'The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth' as an initiatory Hermetic text concerned with the last steps the initiate takes to recognize his true nature.⁶ The text is in the form of a dialogue between a spiritual guide and an initiate who is being led to a mystical experience.⁷ Parrott states that the initiate enters the eighth by recognizing the presence of universal mind, and the ninth when he realizes his own unity with universal mind.⁸ Entry into the eighth is indicated by the words, 'I see another mind, the one that moves the soul! I have found the beginning of the power that is above all powers, the one that has no beginning!'⁹ Van den Broek considers the Hermetic emphasis on systematic instruction and initiation into the Hermetic

1 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 17-19.

4 D. Parrott, 'The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth', in J. Braschler, P. Dirkse, and D. M. Parrott (trans.), *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, pp. 321-27, Brill, Leiden, 1977, p. 321.

5 Van den Broek, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

6 B. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, p. xxxix.

7 Parrott, *op. cit.*, p. 321.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 322.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 324.

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mysteries, described as mystical experience, to be the defining characteristic of Hermetism.¹

The Hermetic literature is of one of the earliest examples of ritualistic ascension through scales of mediation, to attain to a centre of being (the ninth sphere, the Universal Mind, would qualify as a centre of being). This aspect of Hermetic philosophy, the partial accessibility of the supreme God to the human mind, distinguishes it from Gnosticism and also renders it capable of ritual enactment. Hermetism is also distinguished from the Ancient Mysteries in that, while a continuity of sociological function of initiatory ritual exists between them, a fundamental difference exists in the nature of the mystery revealed through initiation in both cases. Prior to this discussion, an overview of the political, social, and religious climate in which the Mysteries flourished provides a picture of the background in which the functional structure of initiatory ritual becomes apparent.

Faivre and van den Broek's list of the four new religions to have emerged between the second and fourth centuries, Hermetism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, and Christianity,² suggest late Antiquity to be a period of intense socio-religious transformation. Van den Broek considers that the relationships between these religions need to be understood in the broader context of the Greco-Roman world.³ According to Walter Burkert, evidence suggests the existence and practice of the mystery religions throughout this period, beginning in the sixth century BCE.⁴ Several mystery cults were known in the Greco-Roman world, such as the Egyptian cults of Osiris and Isis and the Persian Mithraic cult,⁵ but Burkert maintains that the Eleusinian mysteries, being more extensively documented than any other Greek cult, demonstrate this historical continuity. From the time of their

1 Van den Broek, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

2 Faivre, 1992, *op. cit.*, p. 3; Van den Broek, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

3 Van den Broek, *op. cit.*, p. vii. Van den Broek adds Judaism to this list. He also exemplifies his point by raising the connection between Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity, one that is hard to determine; some of the Nag Hammadi library is Alexandrian in origin.

4 W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1987, p. 11.

5 K. Friis Johansen, *A History of Ancient Philosophy: From the Beginnings to Augustine*, trans. Henrik Rosenmeier, Routledge, London 1998, p. 502.

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earliest testimony, the Eleusinian section of the 'Homeric Hymn to Demeter', to the cult's proscription by Theodosius and destruction of the sanctuary by the Goths in 400CE, was a period of a thousand years.¹ Burkert's examination of five mystery cults over this period led him to conclude that a constancy of initiatic form throughout social and political change reaffirmed a sense of group identity through cultic stability.²

Reasons for the historical stability of this initiatic form are suggested by Friis Johansen and Burkert. The period of the second to the fourth century CE was characterized by anxiety, pessimism, and a sense of alienation. Although the Roman Empire initially provided the basis for stability and prosperity, personal liberty was not allowed. As living conditions worsened people sought inner freedom as a substitute for the loss of external freedom. Because official religion was external and could not meet profound needs, many found their place in the oriental mystery cults, where 'all were equal before the divine and all could be united in their yearning for release and union with divinity.'³ Burkert states that while initiation was not prescribed by tribal or family adherence, social enticement may have existed in the form of access to knowledge or enhanced social status.⁴ These factors suggest a mutually reinforcing relationship between the initiatic structure and the fulfilment of religious and social needs.

Simmel's statement, that the secret society constitutes a 'transitional stage between being and not being'⁵ echoes theories of Van Gennep and Turner that deal with the capacity of initiatory ritual to facilitate individual and social transformation. Burkert holds that the mysteries arose from puberty initiations.⁶ Van Gennep's three-fold structure of all rites of passage: separation of the candidate from the group, transition or *limen*, and incorporation, is modelled on puberty

¹ W. Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical*, trans. John Raffan, Blackwell, Oxford, 1985, p. 285.

² Burkert, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³ Friis Johansen, *op. cit.*, p. 502. He states that these qualities characterize this age more than any other in Western history.

⁴ Burkert, 1987, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

⁵ Simmel, *op. cit.*, p. 347.

⁶ Burkert, 1985, *op. cit.*, pp. 260-61.

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rites in tribal societies.¹ In the *limen*, one is exposed to sacred symbols, rich in death and rebirth symbolism, and one ritually enacts death in one state and rebirth in another.² Pentikainen notes that this death and resurrection motif shows the importance of boundary changes; while the liminal stage in puberty rites is abnormal compared to everyday social reality, and that the high frequency of supra-normal experiences (such as sensing the presence of supernatural beings) during or around liminal periods is expected, this heightened activity belongs to the normal picture of the liminal phase, because from the community view the liminal stage must be safely passed through and normal life resumed.³

For Van Gennep, regeneration as a universal law of life expressed in the rites of death and rebirth are the method of regeneration in the social world.⁴ Added to which, Turner believed the liminal phase indicated a major 'transformative dimension of the social' and related to processes of social and individual change.⁵ Here it can be seen that liminality and the opportunity it provides to experience the sacred representations of one's worldview would both reinforce one's identity in a harsh and unstable environment, and provide the means to temporarily transcend these same conditions. Both Bleeker and Weckman summarize types of initiation into two main forms:⁶ either into the human condition such as in puberty rites, or into a level of

¹ A. Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1960, p. 10. Burkert, 1985, *op. cit.*, p. 260, agrees with Van Gennep's three-stage initiation model, and states that pubertal initiations of boys and girls are a well-known feature of primitive civilizations.

² Van Gennep, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

³ J. Pentikainen, 'Transition Rites', in Ugo Bianchi (ed.), *Transition Rites: Cosmic, Social, and Individual Order*, L'erma do Bretschneider, Rome, 1986, p. 10.

⁴ Kimball, in van Gennep, 1960, *op. cit.*, p. viii.

⁵ V. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1978, p. 2.

⁶ C. J. Bleeker, 'Some Introductory Remarks on the Significance of Initiation', in C. J. Bleeker (ed.), *Initiation: Contributions to the Theme of the Study-Conference of the International Association for the History of Religions Held at Strasburg, September 17th to 22nd 1964*, Brill, Leiden, 1965, pp. 18-9; A. Weckman, 'Understanding Initiation', in M. Eliade, J. Kitagawa, C. H. Long and J. Z. Smith (eds), *The History of Religions*, Vol. 10, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1972, p. 78.

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being which transcends the human condition such as initiation as a religious functionary, or into a group such as a utopian community whose status is transcendent.

Both the Mysteries and the Hermetic tradition can be considered transcendent because they existed alongside normal cults, and required special initiation.¹ Friis Johansen maintains that the mysteries contributed elements of mystical piety and mystical experience to Greek philosophy, especially Platonism:² the combination of the rational, the mystical, and a certain conduct of life in the Pythagorean school in the sixth century BCE was reminiscent of a mystery cult.³ Pythagoras' religious ideology contained a mixture of number symbolism, arithmetic, a dualist view of the relation between body and soul, the divinity of the soul, doctrines of immortality and the after-life, and rules for an ascetic life.⁴ However, a major difference between the Mysteries and the initiatic traditions such as Hermetism is that the Mysteries were based on a deity who represented the reproductive power of the natural and social worlds and on a fixed place. In both tribal and agrarian societies where a fixed physical location supported a relatively closed social environment, the significance of the parallels between cosmic/natural and human cycles would be evident, and would link the natural and social worlds. Both agrarian magic to ensure the fertility of the land, and the mysteries were practised in agricultural societies. In the Eleusinian Mysteries the ritual fixed the myth to a sacred place, the sanctuary of Demeter Eleusinia on a hillside outside Eleusis, about fourteen miles north-west of Athens.⁵ The latter

¹ Burkert, 1985, *op. cit.*, p. 276; Burkert, 1987, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-10.

² Friis Johansen, 1998, *op. cit.*, p. 502.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁴ Burkert, 1985, *op. cit.*, pp. 299-300; Friis Johansen, 1998, *op. cit.*, p. 38. Burkert states that the doctrine of transmigration presupposes that the living being possesses a constant something that preserves its identity by force of its own essence, independent of the body. This transformation of the concept of *psyche* or soul took place within Bacchic, Orphic, and Pythagorean circles.

⁵ F. Graf, 'Eleusinian Mysteries', in M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 5, Macmillan, New York 1987, p. 84. The 'Homeric Hymn to Demeter' composed between 650 and 550 BCE narrates the central myth. Demeter's daughter Kore (Persephone) was abducted by Hades. After an unsuccessful search for her, Demeter by stopping the growth of crops, blackmailed Zeus into restoring her daughter to her for half of every year; the other half Kore spent with Hades.

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focussed on systematic instruction on unity of the human soul with the divine, on the inner figure.

Traditions such as Pythagoreanism, Platonism, and Hermetism also mark the beginning of the idea of a sacred arithmetic. According to Stevenson, in Neoplatonic thought symbolism pervaded the universe, a symbolism that potentially both hid and revealed divine truths. Everything in nature had symbolic meaning through the hierarchies of correspondences that penetrated all parts and aspects of the universe, and therefore, if the symbols were read correctly the structure and forces controlling the universe would be revealed. He also maintains that the idea of the universe as a doctrine to be read has continued from antiquity through the Renaissance into the twentieth century.¹ Faivre notes that secrets within bodies of esoteric knowledge are generally open secrets in that their meaning: the understanding of a symbol, myth or reality, can be accessed by a personal effort of progressive elucidation through several successive levels, by a form of hermeneutics.² These traditions from antiquity and two extant esoteric organizations, Freemasonry and The Rosicrucian Order AMORC, all contain the notion of access to levels of knowledge through initiation, a notion embodied in the doctrinal and ritual dimensions of their structure.

Both organizations have a worldwide membership,³ a system of teachings on the transmutation of human personality, and a graded degree system of advancement. McIntosh considers AMORC to be the most influential of three influential modern Rosicrucian orders: Max Heindel's Rosicrucian Fellowship originating around 1907-1909,

Demeter then restored life to the crops and revealed the mysteries to the Eleusinian princes.

¹ Stevenson, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80. Stevenson, exploring the origins of Freemasonry, states that the symbolic outlook of Neoplatonism was linked with hieroglyphs of the Egyptians, who had concealed the same sacred wisdom in their hieroglyphs. The hieroglyphs had to be read, and from this concept grew the vast emblematic literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

² Faivre, 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³ W. Stemper, 'Freemasons', in M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 5, Macmillan, New York, 1987, p. 418. Freemasonry of approximately six million people. McIntosh, 1987, *op. cit.*, p. 140, refers to AMORC's vast organization and world-wide membership.

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Fraternitas Rosae Crucis, under the main guidance of R. Swinburne Clymer in the 1920s, and AMORC, founded by Harvey Spencer Lewis at around the same time.¹ McIntosh lists some of the subjects discussed in AMORC's introductory booklet, *Mastery of Life*: 'using mental powers at will, the mysteries of time and space, the human consciousness, drawing on inner forces, enquiry into the nature of the soul, and mystical laws and principles'.² Stemper describes Freemasonry as a system of moral and noetic teaching transposed upon a graded institutional structure that is also a set of fraternal organizations. The Masonic degrees themselves are related to 'the transformation of human personality from a state of primitive darkness to a higher level of consciousness'.³

While the place of ritual is significant for both organizations, it is more prominent in the Freemasonic structure. According to Piatigorsky initiatory ritual is the core of Masonry and generates all the levels of its functional existence, and all principal Masonic ideas and symbols are demonstrated by the ritual.⁴ While AMORC ritual also demonstrates its ideas, participation in initiation and other ritual is optional. All members are *Sanctum members*; they are affiliated with the Grand Lodge and receive a system of instruction by correspondence in the form of monographs. Members may undertake degree initiations at the temple lodges after reaching the requisite point in their correspondence studies.⁵

Virtually all Freemasonic lodges accept the three lower grades of apprentice, companion, and master, but in some orders there are progressively more secret degrees, for example the thirty three degrees of the Scottish Rite.⁶ Orders such as the Rectified Scottish Rite of French masonry grew out of the operative stonemason guilds in seventeenth century Europe; in the late eighteenth century speculative lodges began to incorporate symbolism from the *Kabbalah*,

1 McIntosh, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

3 Stemper, *op. cit.*, pp. 416-18.

4 Piatigorsky, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

5 H. Spencer Lewis, *Rosicrucian Manual*, San Jose, CA, 1978, p. 49.

6 Urban, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

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Hermeticism, Alchemy and Rosicrucianism.¹ Piatigorsky has observed the stability of the Masonic ritualistic tradition since its transmutation from the mediaeval guild system, and attributes it to the ritual development and diversity of the Masonry of the higher degrees.² However, some of the characteristics of modern Freemasonry can be seen in the mediaeval craft organizations or guilds. According to Stevenson their mythical histories stressed the antiquity and importance of their crafts, and exemplified religious and moral concepts. They also had secrets relating to techniques and working practices, and a ritual to mark the initiation of new members into the craft.³ The Regius manuscript of around 1390 contains specific moral responsibilities expected of apprentices, fellow-craftsmen, and master masons,⁴ and traces the legendary history of masonry back to the Flood, or to the building of the Egyptian Pyramids, or Solomon's temple.⁵

The Masonic legend is elaborated in the Rectified Scottish Rite, where the secret history is traced back to the Temple of Solomon and recounts its original construction by the architect Hiram in 960 BCE.⁶ In the ritual for the degree of Master Mason the legend of Hiram is symbolically re-enacted. Hiram is murdered for his knowledge of Solomon's Temple, and his murder, the search for him, the finding of his body, and his raising are enacted.⁷ In one part of the ritual the

1 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

2 Piatigorsky, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

3 Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

4 Stemper, *op. cit.*, p. 417. Stemper also believes that secrecy as a device for teaching and as a symbol dates from the late fourteenth century, when knowledge of the building techniques of individual master masons was restricted to guild members.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 417-18; Stevenson, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

6 Urban, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

7 J. Snoek, 'On the Creation of Masonic Degrees: A Method and Its Fruits', in Faivre and Hanegraaff, *op. cit.*, p. 151. Snoek refers to the first description of the ritual available, in *Pritchard's Masonry Dissected* of 1730, where the murder of Hiram, the search for him, the finding of his body and his raising, are described. For reasons of space, it was not considered necessary to elaborate on the ritual details beyond demonstrating the importance of the central symbol. For further reference, an outline and interpretation of the Third Degree ritual of the Master Mason is given in Piatigorsky, *op. cit.*, Chapter Ten, 'Ritual, Symbolism and Religion', pp. 233-66.

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initiate is locked in a coffin-shaped chamber representing Hiram's grave.¹ Snoek observes that the 'well known' initiation pattern where the candidate is identified with a hero, in turn identified with divinity. The hero Hiram Abiff turns out to be the Great Architect of the Universe. He is explicitly referred to as the architect of King Solomon's temple, and biblical references to God as the architect of Solomon's temple identify Hiram as God.² Also, Snoek suggests the murder and raising of Hiram were been modelled on a biblical story, such as the raising of Lazarus by Jesus, or the resurrection of Jesus himself.³

The mythological development of Renaissance alchemy shows a similar pattern to Freemasonry in that the central figure is associated with divinity and the death and rebirth motif. Eliade outlines some of its basic presuppositions which were carried over from the Middle Ages through to the Reformation: the growth of ores, the transmutation of metals, the Elixir, and the obligatory secrecy.⁴ However, under the impact of Neoplatonism and Hermetism in the Renaissance, traditional alchemy began to emphasize the role of spiritual intermediaries between man, the Cosmos, and the supreme Deity. Eliade states that the earlier conviction of the alchemist's collaboration with nature took on a mythological dimension when the alchemists came to believe that in the same way Christ redeemed man through his death and resurrection, the alchemical opus would redeem nature.⁵

In all of these examples there is a macrocosmic-microcosmic correspondence, and an association of the human with the divine, both combined in the redemptive work of mystical initiation. Urban states that initiation returns the adept to his original state of unity. More than this the esoteric initiate holds the secret key to the sacred tradition, the true meaning of the scriptures and to a new esoteric identity that lies hidden behind his social ego. As the initiate ascends the grades of knowledge, his exoteric self dies; symbolically his new spiritual body is

¹ Urban, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-5.

² Snoek, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁴ M. Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, trans. S. Corrin, 2nd ed., Chicago, IL, 1978, p. 226.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

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inscribed by the hierarchy of initiations and grades, and at the same time inscribed within the hierarchical structure of the esoteric society.¹ The idea that ritual unites the world, the initiate, and the esoteric community, is present in both Freemasonry and AMORC, where the membership body is called a Lodge.

With reference to the former, Piatigorsky notes that symbolically, the world is a cosmic Lodge, but man also is a Lodge.² Urban states that the strategy that inscribes both the initiate into the hierarchical order of the esoteric group and simultaneously this same hierarchy upon his own body and consciousness, interweaves all levels of reality: the Temple is the divine paradigm of the cosmos, the body, and Masonic Brotherhood alike. He states further,

The hierarchy of the universe is homologized with the hierarchy of wardens and masters in the lodge, and these are in turn homologized with the body, consciousness and the psycho-physical hierarchy of the initiate himself. According to the ritual of the Rectified Rite, the three primary levels of the Temple of Solomon are correlated with the body, soul, and spirit of the initiate; and these three parts of the human being are then identified respectively with the first three grades.³

This is comparable to a description of the Rosicrucian Convocation's symbolic representation of an individual life-cycle. The following is an excerpt from *The Convocation: A Ritualistic Drama*, by Louis Toussaint, Grand Councillor of AMORC at the time of his writing.

The Convocation is the heart of every Rosicrucian ritual and the loom upon which the fabric of every Rosicrucian subordinate body is woven ... Our temple with its stations and accoutrements is a symbol of the Universe. Man as the microcosm is also a symbol of the Universe. The temple is therefore a symbol of man. Our Convocation is a ritual drama portraying the sequence of events from the beginning to the end of one incarnation ... In my concept

1 Urban, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-8.

2 Piatigorsky, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

3 Urban, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

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of the temple representing the body of man, the existence of living things is depicted by the assembly of the members. The entrance of the ritualistic officers represents specialized groups of nerve cells, such as the organs and the senses. The Colombe represents consciousness, which, when activated by the Soul, will develop into the magnificence of the realization of Self. The odour of the incense permeating the entire area of the Temple represents the Cosmic mind, infusing every cell of our being. The entrance of the Master indicates the entrance of the Soul with the first breath, after all else is in readiness. It is this mystery of incarnation to which we are paying homage ... The Rose on the Cross in the East represents the contact between matter and the Cosmic.¹

The above two examples demonstrate the way in which the symbolism of ritual activity reinforces the identity between humanity as the microcosm and the cosmos as the macrocosm. It appears that this notion of identity with a higher reality was absent from the mediaeval Masonic and alchemical practices. However, during the Renaissance both absorbed the symbolism of a reborn divine figure who represented the ideal of what their craft was attempting to accomplish. Hiram Abiff was an architect, a creator, and Christ was a redeemer. When lines of traditional continuity are traced, it appears that Faivre's designation of the Western esoteric current to the period of modernity is validated. However, as stated above, as early as the second century CE Hermetic initiation placed emphasis on a central figure, in the form of mystagogue and initiate, who was reborn to a new consciousness. The commonality between Hermetism and Freemasonry is in a functional ritual structure wedded to the mythological motif of a figure who is both human and divine, and undergoes transformation in order for their true nature to be revealed.

A comparison of these initiatic systems and the Mysteries highlights the common function of the particular rebirth motif in facilitating a unity between the representational capacity of the core symbols of the tradition and the ritual function of status transformation.

¹ From *The Convocation: A Ritualistic Drama*, by Louis Toussaint, Grand Councillor of AMORC. This booklet has no imprint page or date of publication, but is available to AMORC members.

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In the Mysteries the rebirth motif facilitates the transition from one ontological and social status to another in the sense that the participant is now initiated into the mysteries of birth, death, and regeneration. The central figures, gods such as Demeter and Osiris, represent the generation and maintenance of the natural world which sustains the social world. In the Hermetic and later traditions, heavily influenced by the Greek philosophical notion of the essential divinity of humanity, the emphasis is on the regeneration of human consciousness. Both involve a transformation of identity, but while the former is social the latter is at once more self-referential and universal. This is shown by their differing notions of sacred space. Integral to the concept of liminality are the notions of sacred time, incorporating sacred history, and sacred space. Piatigorsky states that while a history may validate a ritual, a ritual nonetheless finds its reality in being performed. Here history loses its temporality and becomes part of the atemporal enactment of the ritual.¹ Likewise the initiate is incorporated into the atemporal narrative of the ritual. However, the difference between the two notions of sacred space is this. As stated above, the Mysteries are tied to a fixed place. In Hermetic, Freemasonic and Rosicrucian initiation, although a temple is used for ritual, the liminal space is interiorized: it is constituted through interior contact with another level of consciousness, such as the Hermetic *Universal Mind* of the ninth sphere.

While Faivre identifies the historical field belonging to Western esotericism as the Renaissance and later, an approach based on the ritual dimension of esotericism suggests an earlier point of emergence. In the attempt to capture an extant esoteric tradition at its point of emergence in imagery and discourse, and 'through the forms it could have taken on up to that point',² Faivre sees this emergence in the attempt to create a tradition of interior knowledge in the Renaissance. However, as discussed earlier, both Faivre and Urban note the creation of an interior/exterior dichotomy in relation to the origin of Esotericism although they attribute a doctrinal and a sociological significance to it respectively. Tracing the sociological function of initiatory ritual in

¹ Piatigorsky, *op. cit.*, p. 233. Added to which, Piatigorsky observes that within the ritual context it is infinitely repeated.

² Faivre, 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 7

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terms of its role in linking ‘the initiate, the hierarchy of the cosmos and the hierarchy of the esoteric sect’,¹ can place the beginning of Western Esotericism at least as far back as late antiquity, with the ritually expressed notion of scales of mediation between interior planes or spheres of consciousness in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. The *attainment to a centre of being* is the purpose of transcending the planes of consciousness and of Hermetic, Freemasonic and Rosicrucian initiation. It is in the manner and technique of attaining to this centre of being that Faivre’s four intrinsic characteristics that comprise Western esoteric doctrine, the doctrine of universal correspondences, living nature, imagination/mediations, and transmutation, are employed.

¹ Urban, *op. cit.*, p. 1