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Developing a Curriculum on the History of Esotericism and Magic in Colombia

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A little more than a year ago (August 2008), I received the first cohort of 36 students majoring in Humanities (mainly from the department of History, but also from Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology and even Social Work), who had decided to sign-in for the new elective course, “History of Esotericism and Magic in the Western World,” offered by the Department of History of the Universidad de Antioquia in Medellín, Colombia.

This course marks the first “esoterological” course at this 205-year-old University, and judging from my knowledge of what is going on in the academic Humanities in Colombia, it is highly probable that it is the first course of its type in the whole country. In the following few paragraphs I would like to report on how this came to be, and how the course is going so far.

After five years in England, four of which I dedicated to my PhD in *speculative music* (the technical name for what could otherwise be known as “esoteric” or even “esoterological musicology” – see a report on my dissertation in progress in issue 19 of this Newsletter), at the beginning of 2008 I returned to Colombia for family reasons. As it seemed clear I would have to stay here for a while, I embarked on an academic job search, and was fortunate enough to be offered a post at the Universidad de Antioquia, the Colombian university with the second highest research budget.

Curriculum cont'd

At first I was worried that my academic specialty, expertise and interest in esoterology would be disregarded in this Country, and I would have to resign myself to teaching basic music theory courses (like the ones which indeed had already been assigned to me in my first semester). But since this is the second most research-oriented university in the Country, on the week I was informed I had gotten the job, I was already contacting several research groups which might be interested in delving into this here-unheard-of academic specialty.

I was soon welcomed by one of them, the research group '*Religión, Cultura y Sociedad*' (Religion, Culture and Society) from the faculty of Humanities, where, after giving a presentation and attending several of their meetings, I was graciously allowed to open a new research route, in the academic study of esotericism, and become its head.

My first proposal in this research group was to make esoterology known to the academic community of our university, and eventually of the country in general. This was quickly taken in, and I was soon asked to give a talk on what is arguably my esoterological specialty – the history of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn – during the celebrations of the 20 years of the Research Group in August 2008.

Another of our strategies

was to build interest in the undergraduate students, with the aim of having possible candidates for future esoterological dissertations at the various Masters and Doctoral programs the University currently offers, or even in undergraduate theses. We hope this will eventually lead to enough postgraduate and faculty researchers being interested in this topic to grant the formation of a Colombian academic association dedicated to the study of esotericism.

With the first of these aims in mind, I designed an introductory course, with a strong historical slant, which would guide the students, during one full semester, through the development of the idea of the esoteric in the West. The director of the Research Group, Dr. Aida Galvez Abadía, from the start always keen and supportive of academic esoterology in her research group, the Faculty of Humanities and the University as a whole, acted as liaison with the Head of the History Department, and thus my proposal was accepted. I was promptly allowed to offer the course with the institutional support of the History Department.

Given the inter- and trans-disciplinary nature of esoterological studies, I suggested the course should be offered to all types of students in the Faculty of Humanities, not only to those majoring in History. Thanks to the supportive atmosphere that

my colleagues and academic superiors have so far shown towards the esoterological project of the *Religión, Cultura y Sociedad* Research Group, this suggestion was duly accepted.

As a result, I have already taught three groups (the course lasts 16 weeks), the first one with around 25 students, the second one with 12, and the third one with 22. About half of them come from the Department of History, and the other half major in Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology or Social Work. The course is based on an intensive reading program, in which we read the very few esoterological authors whose works are available in Spanish (since the students here are utterly monolingual and there are precious few available translations) – which amounts basically to Yates, Eliade, Scholem and some Godwin. We also concentrate on source readings from Plato, Iamblichus, Aquinas, Agrippa, Paracelsus and whatever else we can get a hold of in our university libraries. My guiding light in this course so far has been Versluis' excellent *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esotericism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), which I am hoping to translate in its entirety, if Dr. Versluis and his publishers agree, of course.

At the end of the semester the students are expected to prepare an essay and give a short talk on

Curriculum cont'd

any esoteric figure, movement or ideology that has caught their interest, whether treated in the course or not. Since the course is offered to advanced undergraduates, their intellectual maturity and scholarship is quite developed already, and the quality of the presentations I have seen up to now has been surprisingly good; some of them are of the standard of a congress, symposium or other academic gathering, and I have been toying with the idea of indeed organizing a symposium of students of esoterology which would include the best presentations I have seen in previous runs of the course. This would be part of our strategy of making the academic study of esotericism and magic known to the Colombian academic world.

Here is a sampling of the themes the students have tackled so far: Inquisitorial processes against witchcraft in colonial Colombia, Colombian neo-gnostic

movments (Samael Aun Weor), the influence of Spiritualism in the work of important turn-of-the-(XXth)-century Colombian artists, Mayan astrology, Urantia religion, Emmanuel Swedenborg, Ancient Mystery religions, Carlos Castañeda's studies on Yaqui shamanism, Ficino and the theory of humors and elements, and many others.

So far, these three cohorts of budding esoterologists in their twenties seem intellectually curious, motivated, and above all excited about being "allowed" legitimately to study these things in academia, with rigor, method and a critical mind, though not devoid of sympathy and respect for the characters and movements we study.

The greatest challenge though, is their utter monolinguisism, which prevents them from accessing the wealth of publications in English, French, German, Italian and other European languages. This is a

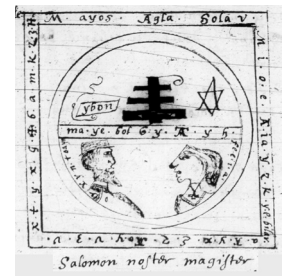
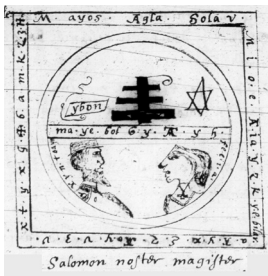
problem that needs to be tackled at a national and institutional level, and which will take a long time to solve, possibly a full generation or more (starting by planning and demanding foreign language training in secondary schools, for example) For now, it seems that the translation of some of the most important and ground breaking works on esoterology is a pressing necessity for the budding academic study of esotericism in Colombia. But alas, as an assistant professor in probation I am allowed precious little time to anything except teaching and academic administration!

For further information:
Website of Universidad de Antioquia:
www.udea.edu.co

Website of *Religión, Cultura y Sociedad* Research Group:
<http://200.25.59.34:8080/gruplac/jsp/visualiza/visualizagr.jsp?nro=0000000001604>

The Societas Magica invites proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter.

We are looking for short essays (1500-2500 words) announcing new developments deriving from research in the study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We would be especially interested to see lead articles on modern magic, or periods other than medieval. We are also looking for smaller pieces for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are all welcomed.



Please contact Kathryn Laity: laityk@mail.strose.edu

www.societasmagica.org

CALL FOR PAPERS

For a conference jointly sponsored by the Association for the Study of Esotericism, the Societas Magica, and JSR:
Journal for the Study of Radicalism

Esotericism, Magic, and Radicalism

to be held June 17-20, 2010 at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

The varied associations between esoteric religion, magic, and radical politics are all more urgently in need of study in an era of rapidly increasing globalization. However these associations are not new, and indeed have a long and complex history. The connections between esoteric religions and politics may be specular and fantastic (as in the accusations of conspiracy so often leveled at witches and heretics), or may be real (as with the movement led by the Franciscan Bernard Délicieux to suppress the inquisition against the Cathars in Southern France). From early Gnostic movements to Rosicrucianism to recent movements like Traditionalism and its offshoots, figures and groups within Western esotericism have been seen, variously, as progressive, conservative, or radical. Often, such figures, groups, or movements are much more complex in their political dimensions than it may at first appear.

Although we will consider paper and panel proposals on the whole gamut of themes and topics under the general rubric of esotericism and magic, we are particularly interested in providing a venue to explore the interconnections between esotericism and various political and social movements. What are the political associations of figures and groups within Western esotericism? What does it mean to say that a given figure or group within Western esotericism is “radical”?

How have charges of magical practice been allied with political accusations against minority groups, and in what ways?

There are multiple publishing opportunities associated with the conference, including the biannual volume in the ASE book series *Studies in Esotericism*. Some papers may also be accepted as articles in *JSR: Journal for the Study of Radicalism* or the journal *Magic, Ritual & Witchcraft* affiliated with the Societas Magica.

If you wish to submit a paper proposal for review and possible presentation at the conference, please send it by email to conference organizers at 2010ASE@gmail.com

No attachments, please: simply copy and paste your abstract into ordinary email. Please limit abstracts to one page or less, and include a short c.v. or biographical paragraph.

The deadline for paper proposals is **December 15, 2009**, but we would encourage that proposals be sent sooner rather than later. Each proposal will be reviewed by an academic committee and because of time constraints, we can only accept a limited number of papers. You should receive our response within four to six weeks.

For more information on the ASE and the conference, see <http://www.aseweb.org>

Notes and Queries

Two responses to Marco Pasi's article in SM Newsletter issue 20 *Theses de Magia*

Magic East and West: A Refutation of Pasi's Eighth Thesis

Michael Heyes

Pasi writes in the eighth thesis of his “Theses De Magia” that “studying magic in cultures that are not western means projecting a western concept on cultures that originally do not possess it.” While I agree that scholars have often

projected a western conception of magic onto their study of practices that they have dubbed “magic” in studying Asia, if one can abandon magic as an object (as Pasi suggests) and follow the presented social matrix there is no reason why forms of magic (as defined by Pasi) in Asia cannot be isolated and studied.

The problem with studying magic in Asia has primarily been the misconstrual of magic as object. By essentializing magic as an object of study, scholars have

assumed that those practices which are defined as magic by western scholarship must have similar analogues in Asia. Thus, scholars sought for practices in Asia which resembled practices in the West. However, a practice or text being defined as magic (as Pasi correctly points out) is primarily due to social phenomena (that is, an intersection of anti-magical polemic as stated in his fifth thesis and a positive/negative dialectic as stated in his sixth) rather than any inherent trait which necessarily makes the act or text magical. Thus, the practices identified as magic by Western scholars operating under the supposition that magic is a monolithic, cross-cultural phenomenon were not necessarily practices which would be typified as magic by Asian practitioners.

Nevertheless, it remains unclear why studying magic in cultures which are not western must result in projecting western concepts onto the culture in question (as per thesis 8). If one removes the requirement of a Western context from Pasi's social matrix, then one is left only to identify practices which accompany an anti-magical polemic and have a positive/negative dialectic. In fact, one might argue that the Japanese language already has such a dialectic and polemic built into it. While there are several words which are translated as "magic" in Japanese, it is instructive to look at two separate categories: those words which bear the kanji 魔 (pronounced: ma) and those which do not. "Ma" has English meanings associated with evil spirits, demons, and devils (of which it is a component part, e.g. 悪魔; akuma: demon, devil). One of the

most common kanji combinations using "ma" to describe magic is 魔法 (mahou; the second kanji means law, rule, or principle resulting in a rough understanding that "magic" branded as mahou is the principles of evil spirits or demons). In opposition to this is the common "magic" sold in shrines and other religious sites (gofu: 護符; the first kanji means to protect or safeguard, while the second indicates a mark, token, or sign) which are purported to have various effects (good grades, carrying babies to term, positive health benefits), or the mantras and hand formations used to exorcise offending spirits. While this is a vast oversimplification of the state of anti-magical polemic and dialectic in Japan¹ (let alone "the East"), the fact remains that the *concept* of magic as we view it in the "West" has correlates in the "East" even if the products of this concept are not the same (or even similar).

Certainly, Pasi is correct when he suggests that "it is not a single belief, idea, practice and/or behavior that makes magic specific to western culture, but the way in which all of those elements have been combined together in specific patterns, in order to fulfill a specific function." Nevertheless, the Theses allow for these specific patterns and elements to be isolated regardless of cultural context in such a way that, when one starts from the social matrix Pasi presents and avoids essentializing magic, magic can be studied in an Eastern context without projecting western conceptions upon the practices in question.

Endnotes

¹ For instance, there are many other

words which are translated as "magic" including madou (魔道; heresy, evil ways, magic), shikigami (式神、識神、職神; a type of divination), jyumon (呪文; a spell, charm, incantation), etc.

...And Gnosis for All

Claire Villarreal

As a Tibetanist-in-training, I read Marco Pasi's "Theses de magia" with particular interest in his eighth thesis: "Studying magic in cultures that are not western means projecting a western concept on cultures that originally do not possess it."¹ Although I essentially agree with his argument, I must express a reservation. Studying most patterns of behavior in another culture or distant time period opens the door to *potential* misreading. Whether in western or non-western cultures, though, "magic" is a socially constructed category taking a specific local manifestation which will only be understood through investigation of the local context. There seems to be no easy way around a thorough contextualization whenever the term is used, and the danger of using the term, it seems to me, lies as much with the potential for mis-framing "magic" in any given setting as with the historically problematic nature of the English term "magic" itself. In other words, scholars using the term "magic" as a comparative category to bring together western and non-western practices would have to treat the non-western context seriously in its own right and not simply as a foil or complement to their western

cont'd on page 6

Notes and Queries cont'd

research interests. Indeed, in the past several decades western scholars have become much more self-reflective and responsible about studying “magic” in other cultures. A statement like thesis eight, then, should not close the door on comparative scholarship.

But it seems to me that more is at stake here than whether or not the term “magic” can be applied cross-culturally. The real issue Pasi’s reflections raise is who—if anyone—now controls terminology across sub-disciplines. While scholars working with western subjects debate and nuance the use of terms like “magic” or “gnosis” in their field, Tibetanists like Matthew Kapstein and John Pettit are busy adapting them for use in the discourse on Tibetan texts and practices. “Gnosis” provides a particularly good example of this process. Kapstein, who also does comparative work and is surely aware of the problematics around the use of the term in western contexts, translates the Tibetan *ye shes* (Skt. *jñāna*) as “gnosis.”² (Clearly, rendering a Tibetan word into English as a Greek term is not optimal, but English has a limited vocabulary for expressing the various aspects of mental agency encountered in Tibetan phenomenology.) By equating gnosis with *ye shes*, Kapstein recontextualizes gnosis and thus creates a specific and limited arc of semantic possibilities for his audience, most of whom are presumably Tibetanists and some of whom may have little interest in the western history of the term. Kapstein’s gnosis simply means direct, unmediated, non-conceptual awareness of reality.

Pettit goes further down this track and creates text-specific “gnosis”-derived neologisms in his translation of Mipham Rinpoche’s *Beacon of Certainty* (*Nges shes rin po che’i sgron me*). Indeed, in a footnote to the first page of his introduction, Pettit defines his gnosis-derivatives thus:

I will use “gnoseology” and “gnoseological” if a conception of ultimate reality (*paramārthasatya* = *dam pa’i don*) figures as an object of knowledge or theoretical discussion. For the purposes of this study,gnoseological significance is understood to be three-dimensional: (i) objective, (ii) subjective, and (iii) both subjective and objective.... In Tibetan philosophy ultimate reality asgnosemic object (*artha*) is emptiness (*śūnyatā*), while ultimate subjectivity is typically gnosis (*jñāna*) (dimension (ii)).³

Pettit is using “gnosis” and its derivatives in novel ways as he constructs English equivalents for technical Dzog-chen (*rDzogs-chen*) terms. “Gnoseological” as a category stands side by side with epistemological, the former connoting, in dimension (i), an object apprehended through nonconceptual cognition, whereas epistemological objects would be apprehended through ordinary perception and cognition. Other authors and translators dealing with Buddhist subjects use the term “gnosis” as well, and their uses are typically similar to Kapstein’s and Pettit’s, referring to direct and non-conceptual experience of an object or a non-

dualistic state of awareness.

In the end, Pasi’s reflections bring together important points for the nascent field of western esotericism, but it may already be too late to consider terms used comparatively—like “magic” or “gnosis”—the domain of any one specialty.

Endnotes

¹ Marco Pasi, “Theses de magia.” *Societas Magica Newsletter*, issue 20 (fall, 2008). Online at www.societasmagica.org. Retrieved October 23, 2009.

² Matthew Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 8, 14, 97, etc. This is not an uncontested translation in the Tibetanist community, however, as Anne Klein has noted. (Class discussion, Oct. 15, 2009)

³ John W. Pettit, *Mipham’s Beacon of Certainty: Illuminating the View of Dzogchen, the Great Perfection* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 1999), pp. 461-462.

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