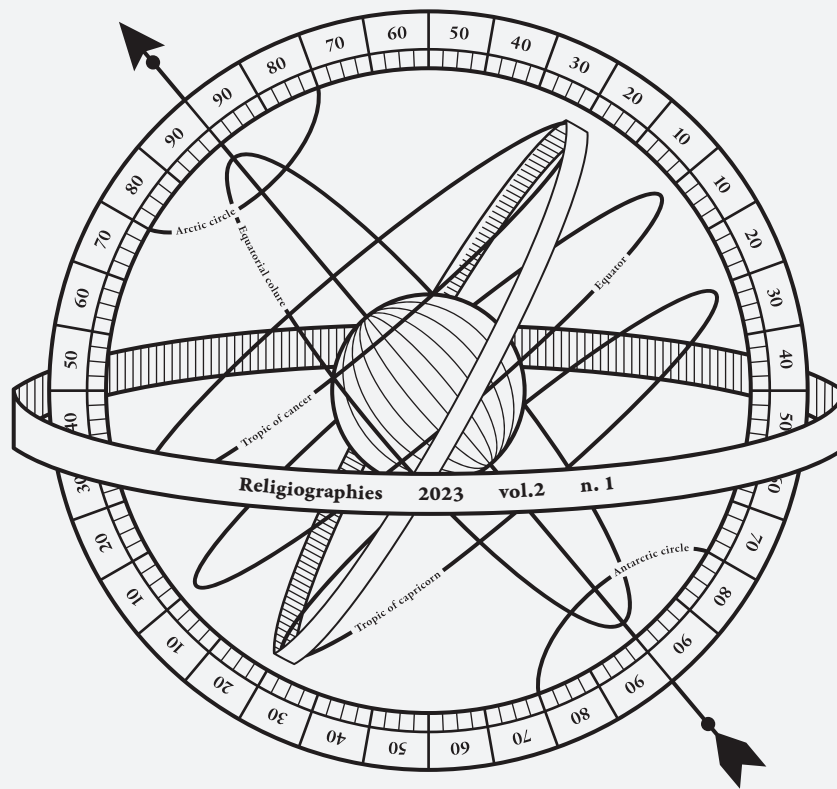


Religiographies



Special Issue
“Hans Thomas Hakl and His Library”
edited by
Marco Pasi

Editorial:

Introducing Hans Thomas Hakl and His Library

Francesco Piraino



CENTRO STUDI
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ
COMPARATE

fondazione
GIORGIO CINI ONLUS

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1

Egil Asprem, review of *Esotericism, Religion, and Politics*, ed. Arthur Versluis, Lee Irwin, and Melinda Phillips, *Aries* 14, no. 2 (2014): 247–52.

2

Horst Junginger, *The Study of Religion under the Impact of Fascism*, vol. 117 (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

3

Hans Thomas Hakl, "Die Integrale Tradition," *Sezession* 11 (October 2005), 20–26.



Fig. 1. Hans Thomas Hakl. Photograph © Hildegard Frietsch.

Hans Thomas Hakl, born in Graz (Austria) in 1947, is a lawyer, businessman, and independent scholar in the fields of history of religion, spirituality, magic, and esotericism (Fig. 1). Hakl has presented many papers on these topics in important academic venues and has published several articles and books in prestigious scientific journals and publishing houses. Despite his lack of training in the social and human sciences, Hakl's research has been generally well-received. Other scholars have criticized Hakl's shortcomings,¹ possible religionist leaning regarding Eranos, and claimed that he implicitly whitewashes the extreme right intellectual Julius Evola.² Hakl distanced himself from traditionalist politics as destined to "nasty totalitarianism"³ but at the same time the question about how to discuss problematic authors, such as Evola, remains open (see Marco Pasi's Introduction in this special issue).

Hakl is a bibliophile and book collector who founded an impressive library called "Octagon" (Fig. 2, Fig. 3), composed of 50,000 books, plus his vast archives with notes, letters, and documents originally belonging to the protagonists of the intellectual, religious, and political history of the twentieth century.

In 2017, I met Hakl at an ESSWE conference in Erfurt. Hakl was looking for an institution willing to provide a home for his library, open it to the public, and promote scientific research. In 2019, thanks to the mediation of Prof. Marco Pasi (the guest editor of this special issue), Hakl donated his library to the Giorgio Cini Foundation, to be transferred after his death. Cini decided to invest in Hakl's library because this collection resonates with its other collections, such as Alain Danielou's library and archives ([Institute for Comparative Music](#)), Nino Rota's archives ([Institute for Music](#)), and Tiziano Terzani's library and archives ([Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities](#)). Hakl's collection will become part of Cini's library, which already includes almost 50,000 books on comparative religions and spiritualities. Finally, Hakl's spiritual quest resonates with Cini's mission to promote spiritual humanism and dialogue among different civilisations and religions.

This special issue is dedicated to Hakl and his collection. We consider this publication a starting point for further exploration of Hakl's library and archives. The first article by Bernd-Christian Otto describes Hakl's



Fig. 2. Octagon Library. Photograph © Hildegard Frietsch.



Fig. 3. Octagon Library. Photograph © Hildegard Frietsch.



Fig. 4. Julius Evola. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 5. Mircea Eliade. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 6. Giuseppe Tucci. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

multifaceted biography by focusing on the personal, financial, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of his life. Otto narrates Hakl's "success story," the story of a brilliant student, a lawyer, and a wealthy businessman. Nevertheless, Otto also describes his less successful metaphysical quest. Hakl's initiatic search for magic and the absolute resulted in many disappointing experiences. He failed to find a master, a discipline, or a body of knowledge capable of satisfying his thirst for the absolute. His "metaphysical disappointment" was thus transformed into an academic endeavour. The love for esotericism became the love for books on esotericism, and, later, for the history of esotericism.

In the second article, Francesco Baroni describes Hakl's research and his connections with the Italian esoteric milieu, analysing in particular his relations with the Italian esotericist and extreme right intellectual Julius Evola (1898–1974) (Fig. 4). Baroni explains how Hakl's research focused on Evola's interest in Orientalism, spirituality, and magic, whereas he is mostly known for his racist and political theories. This new focus was understandably considered suspect by many scholars and intellectuals, as it was perceived as a legitimisation strategy or a sort of "spiritual-washing." By contrast, Baroni shows how Hakl not only identified some key elements of Evola's spirituality, but can be credited with highlighting the intellectual connections between Evola and the academic milieu, especially with Mircea Eliade (Fig. 5), Giuseppe Tucci (Fig. 6), and Ernst Jünger (Fig. 7), thus showing the resonance of his thought and playing a significant role in establishing Evola as an object of academic study.

In the third article, Wouter Hanegraaff focuses on Hakl's research on the Eranos Colloquia. Hakl published a ground-breaking book on Eranos's history,⁴ which challenged many stereotypes about the intellectual history of crucial intellectuals such as Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), Henry Corbin (1903–1978), Martin Buber (1878–1965), etc. By highlighting both the merits and shortcomings of Hakl's understanding of Eranos, Hanegraaff addresses an

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Hans Thomas Hakl, *Eranos: An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).



Fig. 7. Ernst Jünger. Photograph courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

imperative epistemological knot at the heart of the social sciences, which goes well beyond Hahl, Eranos, and this special issue. Through his elaboration on Ricoeur's categories of hermeneutics,⁵ Hanegraaff questions the two main hermeneutical perspectives in studying religious phenomena: first, the "hermeneutics of faith," which reproduces the religious emic perspective, and second, the "hermeneutics of suspicion," which focuses on power, domination, and economic dimensions, exposing hidden religious and cultural structures. Hanegraaff draws on Ricoeur to propose an intermediary third option: a "hermeneutics of generosity" that makes it possible to consider the social construction of reality and its material dimensions, without denying the value of ethical, spiritual, and metaphysical dimensions. From such a perspective, the task of scholars should not be reduced to either "unveiling" esoteric truths or to "unmasking" them as delusions, but involves an open-ended and therefore never-ending quest for deeper understanding.⁶ Hanegraaff argues that despite some shortcomings, due his lack of training in history and the social sciences, Hahl can be credited with offering an alternative reading of the Eranos Colloquia that exemplifies this hermeneutics of "generosity."

In the first heterography, Joscelyn Godwin describes his own personal reminiscences of Hans Thomas Hahl, which helps us in retracing not only Hahl's life and passions, but also the recent constitution of the scientific field of the study of esotericism.

In the third heterography, we have the honour of featuring the work of David B. (Fig. 8), one of the foremost comic artists, who has contributed to establishing the field of graphic novels. His works are not just comic strips, but novels with images—*littérature dessinée* in French. In his rich artistic production, David B. explores his biographical dramas, dreams, desires, nightmares, and fears by using esoteric and mystical symbols and narratives. As many surrealist artists before him (André Breton, Leonora Carrington, and Max Ernst, to name just a few), David B. moves between different worlds, challenging the boundaries of the secular and the religious, of reality and dreams. In the heterography he created for our journal,



Fig. 8. David B., *L'ascension du Haut Mal*, detail.

David B. narrates the library of his parents, which held a wealth of esoteric books. The teenager David B. found in these “bizarre” texts a mysterious and fascinating world, often puzzling and sometimes frightening. In addition, David B. portrays his father’s spiritual quest through his silences and empty spaces. Both David B. and Hakl discovered their passion for esotericism in their youth, exploring alternative worlds, rationalities, and desires. This heterography depicts the emotional and wonderous dimension of spiritual quests.

The third heterography is written by Wu Ming 1, who is a member of the artistic collective based in Bologna called Wu Ming (previously known as Luther Blissett). This group has authored several important novels, translated into many languages, such as *Q, 54*, *Manituana*, *The Army of Sleepwalkers*, etc. (Fig. 9). Wu Ming novels are not only masterpieces, historically informed and craftily written; they also represent historical and sociological research using other (artistic) means, as witnessed by the many collaborations between these artists and academia (e.g., Carlo Ginzburg, Adriano Prosperi,⁷ and the Nicoletta Bourbaki collective⁸). A good example of this artistic research is Wu Ming 1’s latest book, *Q di complotto* (Fig. 10) (reviewed by Massimo Introvigne in this special issue), where the author not only reconstructs the genesis of the QAnon movement, using Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* as a research instrument; he also masterfully connects QAnon with other conspiracy theories and moral panic phenomena. Finally, Wu Ming 1 was able to describe conspiracists’ emotions and “guts,” which are rarely considered by scholars of conspiracy theories.

Wu Ming 1 follows in the footsteps of Umberto Eco and Carlo Ginzburg, and before them Antonio Gramsci, in proposing a Marxist reading of society that “takes religion seriously.” Far from superficial Marxist readings which reduce cultural and religious phenomena to false consciousness—a superstructure concealing power relations—these authors describe popular religion, esotericism, and spiritual movements in the dialectic between hegemonic and subaltern narratives and struggles. In his heterography, Wu Ming 1 discusses the complex relationship between esotericism and politics, revealing different political dimensions of modern and contemporary esotericism.

This special issue also highlights the scientific, cultural, and political relevance of alternative spiritualities, a field that has grown steadily in the last twenty years with the creation of research centres (e.g., the Centre for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents based in Amsterdam and the recently founded [Centre for Advanced Studies “Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective”](#) at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg), journals (e.g., [Aries](#), [Correspondences](#), and [Nova Religio](#)), and book series (e.g., the [Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism](#), the [SUNY series in Western Esoteric Traditions](#), and the [Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities](#)). Finally, the field of the study of spiritualities and esotericisms is opening towards social sciences, engaging with postcolonial, feminist, LGBTQ literatures and overcoming Western centrism.⁹

Far from marginal topics destined to be eliminated by the supposed secularisation process, religious and spiritual phenomena are crucial to understanding social, cultural, and political changes in contemporary society. See, for example, the impact of spirituality and esotericism in contemporary art (e.g., the last [Venice Biennale](#) and the [Guggenheim exhibition](#)



Fig. 9. Cover of *Q*, Luther Blissett, 1999.

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<https://archive.org/details/radiogiap-b27>.

8

<https://nicolettabourbaki.medium.com>.

9

Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism* (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2020).



Fig. 10. Cover of *La Q di Qomplotto*, Wu Ming 1, 2021.

Francesco Piraino, Marco Pasi, and Egil Aspre, eds., *Religious Dimensions of Conspiracy Theories Comparing and Connecting Old and New Trends* (London–New York: Routledge, 2022).

Christopher Partridge, “Occulture Is Ordinary,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Aspre and Kennet Granholm (London–New York: Routledge, 2014), 123–43.

[on magic and surrealism](#)), in contemporary politics (e.g., the political and media success of Alexander Dugin, Steve Bannon, and Olavo de Carvalho), and in cultural changes (e.g., the dissemination of conspiracy theories¹⁰ and the occulture in pop culture¹¹).

Once we acknowledge the importance of this field, we have to face the question of how to study these complex phenomena. As explained in the first editorial of *Religiographies*, we do not propose a manifesto, a univocal method, or a meta-language capable of synthesis. On the contrary, we believe we need an infra-language capable of connecting different methodologies and approaches, such as philology, history, anthropology, sociology, and comparative literature. For us, it is vital to study the agency, values, and practices of our subjects, acknowledging the material dimensions (economics, psychology, and power) but without limiting ourselves to them, and overcoming the intertwined biases of the “hermeneutics of faith” and the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Finally, we value the study of alternative and/or marginalised rationalities, religions, cultures, and politics, which does not mean simply to “tolerate otherness,” but to describe subaltern discourses, ideas, and practices, which of course change according to each socio-historical context.

This opening to otherness is reflected in our activities and publications. In line with the Cini Foundation, our Centre is a place of dialogue among different and often opposing perspectives. We welcome different voices coming from different religious, secular, liberal, conservative, post-colonial, feminist, and Marxist milieus. The only voice excluded from this dialogue is the supremacist voice (in all its forms), which attempts to create hierarchies among ethnicities, religions, cultures, genders, and sexual orientations. This preamble is necessary to dispel any possible misunderstandings, in particular, in acquiring archives on Evola and extreme right movements, which represent a small portion of Hakl’s library dedicated to religions, spiritualities, and esotericisms. In an historical period of political and epistemological tensions, we prefer to state the obvious rather than to run the risk of misunderstandings; holding and studying books and documents on extreme right movements does not legitimise these political currents. On the contrary, a better understanding of past political ideas and practices is crucial to understanding new forms of discrimination and political struggle.