

Libertinism and Spirituality: Between Desire and Rebellion

Fondazione Giorgio Cini



Lust from the Tarot of Thoth by Lady Frieda Harris, 1943

Call for Papers

16 — 18 December 2025

The term *libertinism* commonly refers to licentiousness, particularly of a sensual nature. In reality, however, libertinism has a long philosophical history rooted in antiquity, where freedom is paramount and sexuality and sensuality are secondary. In this sense, libertinism indicates currents that theorize and practice freedom of thought in matters related to religion, social norms, and political authority. It has therefore often been associated with radicalism, skepticism, and atheism. Various forms of libertinism have historically clashed with religious dogmatism and more moderate strands of philosophical thought. Frequently persecuted, libertinism was often forced to disseminate its ideas through secret and clandestine channels. In these contexts, it is not uncommon to find intersections with alternative and esoteric forms of spirituality, an area that has yet to receive systematic scholarly attention. The conference will welcome contributions addressing the many facets of this long-standing and often still unexplored relationship. Marking the 300th anniversary of the birth of Giacomo Casanova, special attention will be given to the famous Venetian author, whose intellectual and sensual libertinism could be combined with an interest in the esoteric.

Some possible topics to be addressed by the papers include, but are not limited to:

- The material culture of libertinism (clandestine publications, specialized publishers, production and circulation of manuscripts, private collections)
- The high places of libertinism in Europe and beyond (Venice, Amsterdam, London, Paris, etc.)
- Libertinism and magical traditions
- Libertinism and institutional religions
- Esoteric dimensions of libertinism
- Libertinism and the radical Enlightenment
- Libertinism in Freemasonry and other occult, secret or clandestine organizations
- Historical roots of libertinism in Antiquity and the Middle Ages
- Continuities and ruptures between libertinism, anarchism and socialism
- Global dimensions of libertinism
- Casanova the libertine
- Libertinism in contemporary popular culture (films, literature, graphic novels, music)

Organizers

The conference is organized jointly by the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities (Cini Foundation), the Center for the Study of World Religions (Harvard Divinity School), and the Center for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam.

Abstracts and Texts

Abstracts up to 300 words, accompanied by a short bio, should be submitted in English by June 30, 2025, to civilta.compare@cini.it

Timetable

1. The call for papers opens on June 6th, 2025.
2. Abstracts(300 words) and short bios are to be received by June 30th, 2025.
3. Notifications of acceptance will be given by July 31st, 2025.
4. The conference will be held on December 16-18, 2025, in Venice (Italy).

Practicalities and Funding

The organizers will provide accommodation on San Giorgio Island, coffee breaks and lunches for all participants. Participants will arrange and pay for their own transportation. Extra funding may be available to cover the travel expenses of a limited number of scholars who cannot obtain funding from their own institutions. If extra funding is needed, please indicate this in the email with which you submit your abstract. The Library of the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilizations and Spiritualities would appreciate it if participants could bring and donate one book they authored or to which they have contributed.

Contacts

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