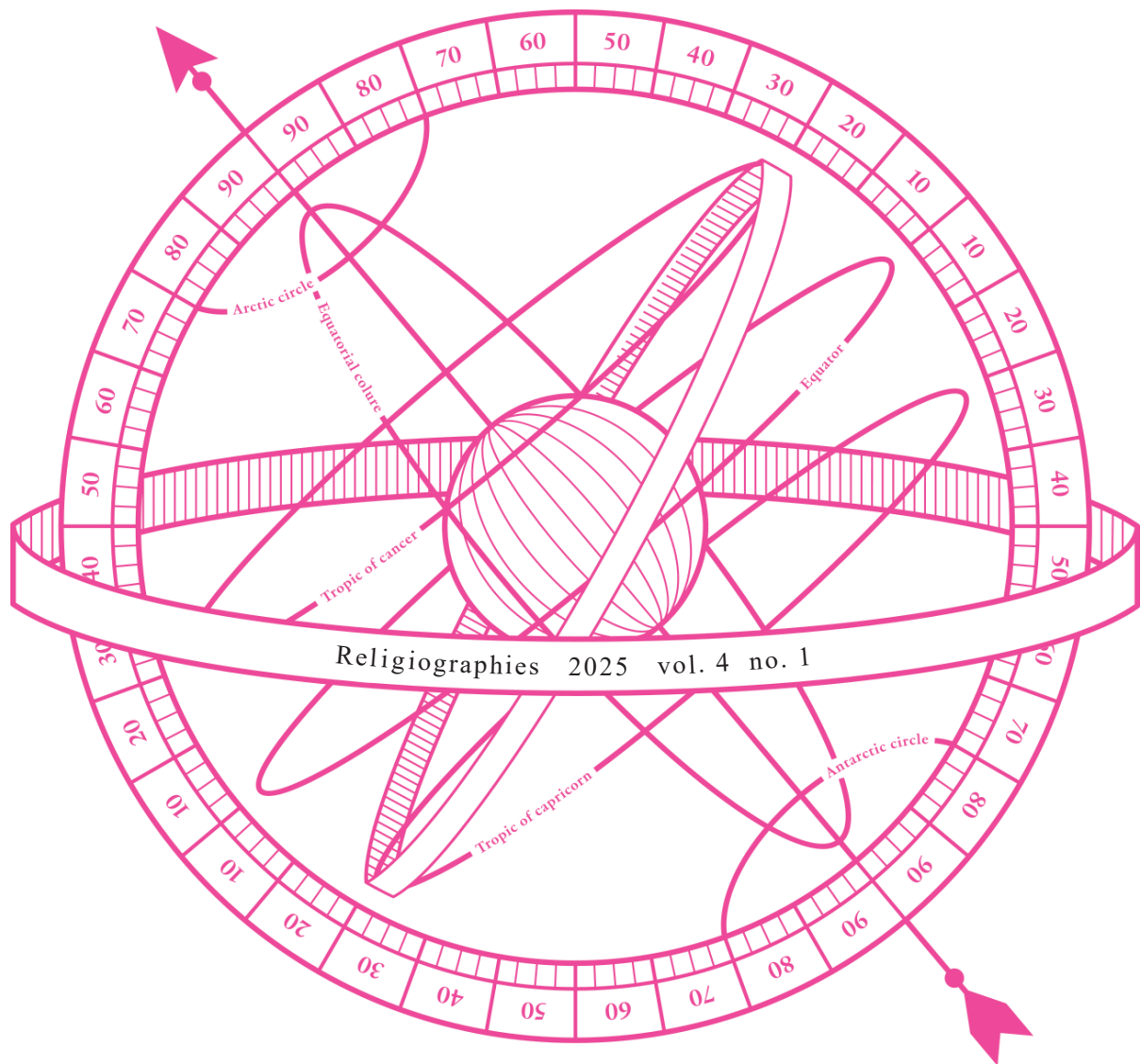


# *Religiographies*



Special Issue

“The Eranos Experience: Spirituality and the Arts  
in a Comparative Perspective”

edited by

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

# Editorial

## Eranos and the Arts

WOUTER J. HANEGRAAFF

**Author**

Wouter J. Hanegraaff  
University of Amsterdam  
[W.J.Hanegraaff@uva.nl](mailto:W.J.Hanegraaff@uva.nl)

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Perhaps we should start thinking about the “study of religion” not as a science but as an art. The foundations for such a distinction can be distilled from the opening pages of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s classic study of hermeneutics, *Wahrheit und Methode*:

The logical self-reflection that accompanied the development of the humanities in the nineteenth century is dominated entirely by the model of the natural sciences. Just a glance at the history of the word *Geisteswissenschaft* [literally: science of spirit] already makes this clear, insofar as only in its plural form does this word acquire the meaning familiar to us. The *Geisteswissenschaften* so clearly understand themselves by analogy to the natural sciences that the idealistic echo implicit in the concept of *Geist* [spirit] fades into the background . . . But the real problem that the *Geisteswissenschaften* pose for our thinking is that one does not adequately capture their nature if one measures them by the yardstick of a progressive knowledge of lawlike regularity [*Gesetzmäßigkeit*].<sup>1</sup>

As can be seen from this passage, the problematics of understanding and misunderstanding—the central topic of hermeneutics—already begins with the translation of key terminology into English. Our common term *humanities* (although it actually does not contain a reference to “sciences”) would have to be translated into German as *Menschwissenschaften*, whereas the formulation that is actually used (*Geisteswissenschaften*) would be rendered in English as “sciences of spirit.” But the entire point of Gadamer’s argument, as announced in the final sentence of the passage above, is precisely that the humanities should *not* be seen as “sciences”—with “explanation” as their objective—but rather as disciplines for cultivating the art of understanding.

If we look at Eranos from such a perspective, we can draw a rather straightforward conclusion. Those famous and less famous scholars who used to gather in Ascona, to discuss the meaning of religious or spiritual symbols and mythologies, should not actually be labeled “scientists.” In German (the predominant language at Eranos next to French), they would be called *Wissenschaftler*—a common term for covering practitioners of both the humanities *and* the natural sciences, but one that is actually quite hard to translate. *Wissenschaft* means literally the business of knowing (*wissen*) or, at least, of trying to know. Scholars of religion or spirituality in pursuit of such knowledge were cultivating the art of interpretation. The typical Eranos scholar was expected to provide learned exegetical *commentaries* on specific texts, symbolic systems, or mythological narratives. Those who achieved the greatest fame were precisely those who excelled most brilliantly in the skillful art of making their audiences feel that, behind the external surface of mere historical or cultural artefacts made by human beings, hints or fragments could be glimpsed of a deeper spiritual reality, suggestive of a *gnōsis* concerned with *ta onta*—“the things that really are,” often referred to as “the Sacred.” No one has expressed this point more eloquently than Gershom Scholem:

The wondrous concave mirror of philological criticism makes it possible for the people of today first and most purely to receive

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Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik I: Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1986), 9–10. My translation differs from the standard version by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed. (London: Continuum, 1989), 3–4.

a glimpse, in the legitimate orders of commentary, of that mystical totality of the system, whose existence, however, vanishes in the very act of being projected onto historical time.<sup>2</sup>

*Mutatis mutandis*, I would like to suggest that these lines also happen to capture what modernist art was largely all about. Perhaps its most central concern was to provide glimpses (through visual artefacts such as painting or sculpture, literary novels, poems, or music) of some enduring “mystical totality” that was believed to be hidden behind the fleeting surface of external events and the natural world. In the very earliest attempt at defining “modernity,” published in 1863, Charles Baudelaire defined its essence in terms of a deep tension between the “the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent” and “the eternal and the immovable.”<sup>3</sup> Today it seems perfectly evident that such a search for the spiritual in art (I’m obviously referring to Kandinsky’s famous treatise),<sup>4</sup> or perhaps for the spiritual perceived *through* art, goes to the heart of the modernist project in literature, music, or painting and sculpture. I want to suggest that this is not just true for artists such as Kandinsky or Mondriaan or Hilma af Klint, who were explicit about their debt to esotericism or occultism. It is even true for many others who did not look to such sources for inspiration—or did not mention them—but were still compelled into similar directions, simply in reaction to the course of modernization itself. Thus in a study of the modern novel, Joseph Bottum points to a development whose impact was felt not just by writers or poets but also, I want to suggest, by scholars connected to the Eranos meetings:

As modernity progressed . . . the thick inner world of the self increasingly came to seem ill-matched with the impoverished outer world, stripped of all the old enchantments that had made exterior objects seem meaningful and important, significant in themselves. This is what we mean by *the crisis of the self*: Why does anything matter, what could be important, if meaning is invented, coming *from* the self rather than *to* the self? The novel . . . was uniquely positioned as an art form to present a vivid picture of that crisis.<sup>5</sup>

If a sense of inherent enchantment seemed to be vanishing from the external world in an age of rapid acceleration driven by money and machines, then *meaning* would have to reside somehow in the internal world. The external world was now dominated by *science* and its search for technical explanations in terms of lawlike material regularities. Exploration of the internal world would therefore have to be based upon something entirely different—it required the skillful *art* of establishing contact with realities, or dimensions of reality (that is to say, of making their presence perceptible either directly or indirectly) that could not be explained in technical-materialist terms but that could nevertheless be understood by a sensitive audience. *Understanding* (again, as distinct from explanation) means the human act of interpretation by which a message is received or perceived *as* a message;<sup>6</sup> and any message, by definition, must have its source somewhere. Modernist art was based on the gamble that meaning is not just a strictly

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Gershom Scholem, “A Birthday Letter from Gershom Scholem to Zalman Schocken,” in David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 215–16 (my translation).

3

Charles Baudelaire, “Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne,” *Le Figaro* (november 26, 29, and december 3, 1863); repr. in Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, *L’art romantique* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1885). See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Protecting the Sacred after (Post)Modernity,” *Creative Reading* (blog), March 6, 2021, [www.wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.com](http://www.wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.com).

4

Wassily Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art* (New York City: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1946).

5

Joseph Bottum, *The Decline of the Novel* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2019), 12.

6

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Hermes, Hermeneutics & the Humanities: Listening to the Sources in Esotericism Research,” *Creative Reading* (blog), August 22, 2024, [www.wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.com](http://www.wouterjhanegraaff.blogspot.com).

human construct (as typically assumed by its “post”-modern successors in the age of popular mass culture) but resides in the human act of reconstructing a reality that, somehow, must be more than just human or other than human.<sup>7</sup>

Artists might speak here of “inspiration,” which means literally the reception of a spiritual influx from a source outside themselves that infuses their work with meaning and energy. The Eranos meetings, for their part, were famously concerned with *das Verlangen nach Ergriffenheit*, the longing to be “seized,” “grasped,” or “captured” (that is, indeed, “inspired”) by something from the other side of silence.<sup>8</sup> To be sure: from a hermeneutical perspective as defined by Gadamer (who, interestingly, never seems to have been considered as a speaker at Eranos) there could be no such thing as unfiltered or unmediated understanding. Even if the medium was not the message, still there could be no message without a medium, some type of mediation, whether it took the form of a poem, a piece of music, a painting, a novel, a symbol, a myth—or the lecture of a professor addressing his audience about such topics at the edge of a beautiful lake. Nevertheless, the *desire*, impossible as it might be, for some kind of “immediacy beyond interpretation”<sup>9</sup> (some kind of sign or message coming directly from the beyond) is certainly what animated famous speakers such as Eliade or Corbin and their audiences at Eranos. Even Scholem (who was far more of a historian and philologist than those two friends and colleagues of his) admitted that *all* his scholarly work, “from the first day to the present” was living ultimately from the hope, paradoxical as it might be, for “a true message from the Mountain—for that most trivial, tiniest shift of history that makes truth erupt from the illusion of ‘development.’”<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, and very importantly, the famous “spirit of Eranos” turned out to be perfectly resistant against the spiritual dogmatism of those who claimed to *know*. For several years prior to 1933, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn had been inviting modern occultists and theosophists such as Alice Bailey, who claimed to be in direct contact with an Ascended Master called “the Tibetan,” and who therefore believed she was in a position to explain with exact precision how everything worked at all visible and invisible levels of reality. If such forms of esoteric fundamentalism were eventually rejected, I suggest this was for a simple reason. Modern forms of occultism such as Theosophy or Anthroposophy are profoundly *explanatory* systems of thought that were trying actively to compete with secular science. By contrast, the classic Eranos approach was never explanatory but always profoundly hermeneutic. As I formulated previously in this journal, “whereas explanatory approaches are driven by a desire for ultimate epistemic closure, Eranos was motivated by hopes and experiences of *disclosure*.”<sup>11</sup>

This brings me back to the claim with which I began this short introduction. The typical Eranos professors, with all their learned discourses steeped in historical and philological scholarship, were actually not practicing a “science of religion.” Many of them could not even be described precisely as “historians of religion,” although that label would become popular in the wake of Eliade’s successful tenure at the University of Chicago.<sup>12</sup> But neither were they speaking as esoteric teachers who felt they were in a position to tell their audience or

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For this way of distinguishing between modernism and “post”-modernism, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Generous Hermeneutics: Hans Thomas Hakl and Eranos,” in “Hans Thomas Hakl and His Library,” ed. Marco Pasi, special issue, *Religiographies* 2, no. 1 (2023): 59–75; idem, “Protecting the Sacred”; and analogous argumentation in Bottum, *Decline of the Novel*.

8

See also Ricoeur’s “désir d’être interpellé” (discussion in Hanegraaff, “Generous Hermeneutics,” 60–64). As regards “silence,” my primary reference here is to the famous statement by Pascal (echoed in a less famous but impressive poem by Nietzsche), “. . . lost in the infinite immensity of those spaces that I do not know and that do not know me, I am afraid . . .” (*Pensées*, vol. 3 [Paris: Port-Royal, 1670], 205; cf. Hanegraaff, “Generous Hermeneutics,” 3 note 4).

9

Helmut Zander, “Die ‘Ergriffenen’ von Eascona: Wissenschaft und Spiritualität im Eranos-Kreis,” *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 271 (2001): 68.

10

Scholem, “A Birthday Letter,” 216.

11

Hanegraaff, “Generous Hermeneutics,” 73.

12

For this point, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chap. 4, esp. 277–314.



their readers what they were supposed to believe. Contrary to all these perspectives, their scholarly practice consisted in the hermeneutic *art* of finding meaning in the world and giving expression to it, or finding meaning in the world *by* giving expression to it. Their way of doing so consisted in learned exegetical commentaries on religious or spiritual texts that were held to have some mythical or symbolic dimension. This particular method was specific to their art, the art of Eranos scholarship. It required a mastery of specific techniques (such as philology or psychological analysis), quite similar to the technical methods used by painters or writers or composers. Although they certainly were trying to “explain” all kinds of things to their audience, like all teachers do, their concern was not with explanation in the more specific reductionist sense defined by Gadamer as central to what “science” is all about. Quite similar to visual artists, they were trying to *show* their audience or their readers what they had seen or how they saw it. They were trying to *share* what they had come to understand or how they understood it. They were *inviting* them into meaningful imaginal worlds that they had been exploring in their research and to which they were trying to give expression to the best of their abilities. Some were much better at this than others, for what they were doing required talent, just as with other kinds of artists. They were not teaching an alternative science but, rather, an alternative *to* science.

From this perspective, there is nothing surprising about the convergence between Eranos and the Arts that is the topic of this special issue, based on a conference organized by Francesco Piraino, Marco Pasi, and Andreas Kilcher at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice from November 17–19, 2022. At least since the publication of *The Red Book*, it has been evident that Carl Gustav Jung was not just a psychologist but a visual artist as well, as shown in this issue by Sébastien Mantegari Bertorelli. The founder and organizer of Eranos herself, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, was also a remarkably impressive visual artist. As shown by Riccardo Bernardini and Fabio Merlini, she produced a *Blue Book* of her own. As for the most frequent speaker at Eranos, Adolf Portmann (who spoke no fewer than thirty-six times), he was a biologist with a strong visual sense who managed to turn the study of living nature from a scientific enterprise into a profoundly hermeneutic art—at least, this is how I would read the contribution by Philipp Kuster. Arguably the most famous among all Eranos speakers, Mircea Eliade, was a writer of initiatic novels who discussed modern art as a possible vehicle for the experience of the sacred. De Maeyer discusses this engagement with special attention to surrealism. Finally, three contributions to this special issue are focused on literature. Agnès Parmentier provides a general and somewhat sobering discussion about all the writers who came to Eranos, whether as speakers or as members of the audience, in her examination of their ambiguous status in this particular context. Gísli Magnússon explores a deeply personal novel by Naja Marie Aidt against the background of Eranos. He shows how her personal process of grieving the death of her son consisted in a search for understanding that was sharply opposed to any esoteric or occultist attempt at “explanation.” Charles M. Stang uses concepts from Henry Corbin to interpret the “imaginal geography” of two recent novel trilogies by Philip Pullman, with special attention to the significance of the

North and the Orient. Finally, the Heterography by Martina Mazzotta focuses on two further artists important to Eranos, Luigi Pericle and Herbert Read. These eight contributions are no more than a small tip of the proverbial iceberg. They should be taken as an incentive for further and deeper explorations into the imaginal terrain where Eranos scholarship meets the arts.