

## Editorial

### Jimmy Elwing and Aren Roukema

Welcome to *Correspondences*, a new online journal devoted to the academic study of Western esotericism. Since this is the inaugural issue, let us introduce you to the history and purpose of our venture. The idea for this journal came in Autumn 2012, when we were both working with a student magazine devoted to Western esotericism at the University of Amsterdam. Although we both enjoyed this experience, we perceived a need for a wider forum in which scholars of all levels could publish high quality academic work, thus stimulating dialogue unfettered by the cost and delays of subscription based publishing options. We shared this idea with some scholars in the field and our initiative was pushed forward with enthusiasm. The result of this encouragement, plus months of hard work for ourselves, the peer reviewers, and all who submitted, sits before you on your desktop, or glimmers from the screen of your tablet or smartphone.

These days, it does not require much imagination to envision the swift decline of the printed journal. Some experts have even recommended that we take advantage of technological advances and software innovations to get rid of journals altogether.<sup>1</sup> However, technology alone will not revolutionise academic publishing—cultural and political change must also occur. Prestigious journals, relying on an “intrinsic hierarchy” existing in the eyes of researchers, continue to charge high subscription fees and maintain

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<sup>1</sup> Bjorn Brembs, Katherine Button, and Marcus Munafo, “Deep Impact: Unintended Consequences of Journal Rank,” arXiv preprint arXiv:1301.3748 (2013): 2.

closed access to their publications, despite the plethora of technological options available. This system has been shown to suppress interdisciplinary research,<sup>2</sup> and create barriers to the quick dissemination of research.<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps less of a problem in some areas of the humanities, but researches of contemporary phenomenon risk having their research become out of date before their article comes to print as much as any theoretical physicist. In all fields, the slowness of publication remains an impediment to fruitful discussion. Knowledge should not be stored in castles guarded by subscription fees, but should be easily accessible beyond the moats of institutional access and the drawbridges of delay.

*Correspondences* joins a growing movement of web-based journals that seek to transcend entrenched cultural, economic, and political barriers within academia through the flexibility and openness offered by cyber-communication. We join this new knowledge culture in the hope that we will be able to offer researchers a more flexible form of dialogue through publication. However, while we seek to promote open access as much as possible, we do not intend to go so far as to forfeit the rights of authors to control the distribution of their work.

Those familiar with Antoine Faivre's classic working definition of Western esotericism<sup>4</sup> will recognise a certain flirtatious banter in the name *Correspondences*, but the name's reference to communication is more important to our project. Our goal is to create a wide forum of discussion in the field of Western esotericism. We invite established academics, students of any level, and non-affiliated scholars to contribute to *Correspondences*. The only criteria for acceptance are quality research, clear expression of ideas, and an original contribution to knowledge. We encourage any and all to submit, regardless of personal background, but for our particular framework of discussion we require that articles take a sceptical approach driven by critical analysis of sources and data, rather than personal belief.

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<sup>2</sup> I. Rafols, et al., "How Journal Rankings Can Suppress Interdisciplinary Research: A Comparison Between Innovation Studies and Business & Management," *Research Policy* 41 (2011): 1262–82.

<sup>3</sup> Brems et al., 2.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 10–15.

In order to ensure a high level of quality we follow a double-blind peer-review process. We are fortunate to be supported in the peer-review process by an editorial board composed of some of the leading scholars in the field, whose primary role is to assist us in networking with the most experienced researchers in the areas pertinent to articles considered for publication. With this method we have been able to combat one of the most central difficulties facing a journal devoted to the study of Western esotericism, namely that a small group of researchers are dealing with a complex body of issues and currents that span millennia, cover the globe, and require specialised knowledge of diverse disciplines and philosophical contexts. As part of solving this problem, we have selected editorial board members from a variety of geographical and cultural milieux.

In the last two decades the academic study of Western esotericism has undergone a process of professionalisation and developed into a well-respected field of research. This professionalisation started with Antoine Faivre's work in the early 1990s, and was followed by an increased theoretical debate as to what exactly demarcated the field we commonly know as "Western esotericism."<sup>5</sup> In keeping with our goal of promoting open discussion, we have resisted joining this debate. Rather than take a particular position, *Correspondences* hopes to stimulate discussion on issues of boundary and definition, such as that found in this issue in Kennet Granholm's article, where, speaking of the difficulty of applying traditional models of Western esotericism to popular culture, he argues that no distinction should be made between authentic esoteric discourses and forms of popular culture that are seen to merely borrow from esoteric imagery or philosophy.<sup>6</sup> The field of research gathered beneath the umbrella term of

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of various discussions of the term see Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 6–20; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 2–17; Andreas B. Kilcher, "Seven Epistemological Theses on Esotericism: Upon the Occasion of the 10th Anniversary of the Amsterdam Chair," in *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years' Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*, ed. Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Joyce Pijnenburg (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2009), 143–48; Kocku von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation," *Religion* 35, no. 2 (2005): 88–92; Arthur Versluis, *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esotericism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 1–2.

<sup>6</sup> See Kennet Granholm, "Ritual Black Metal: Popular Music as Occult Meditation and Practice," *Correspondences* 1, no. 1 (2013): 7–9.

“Western esotericism” is unusually (almost cripplingly) broad. The temporal, geographical, and cultural diversity of the field requires different definitions for the field at different times. For example, while the component traditions studied by scholars of Western esotericism can often be related to each other because they have been rejected as valid forms of knowledge by the dominant knowledge forms in their particular time and place, early modern forms of these same traditions gained a high degree of acceptance in their own time.<sup>7</sup> The diversity of the field is very much displayed in this issue: we see Matthew Twigg’s article on antique gnosticism in the near east next to Ethan Doyle White’s discussion of modern witchcraft in England, and Kennet Granholm’s approach to contemporary ritual black metal in a Swedish context paired with Johan Nilsson’s view of the transformation of Chinese spiritual philosophy in the work of Aleister Crowley.

Regardless of creed or worldview, we hope that all readers will benefit from this journal and seek to contribute in some form to discussion surrounding the plethora of traditions and currents researched in Western Esotericism. We are excited with the quality of research in the articles of this first issue and hope to only increase this already high standard in further publications. We hope that you enjoy this issue of *Correspondences* and that it motivates you to join the discussion that is Western esotericism.

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<sup>7</sup> Kilcher, “Seven Epistemological Theses,” 147.