

The Resilience of Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective - Part 1

10:45 - 12:45 Thursday, 26th June, 2025

Room 207 (Universitätsstr. 9)

Bernd-Christian Otto

22 The resilience of esoteric practices from a global perspective

Chair

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155 Introduction: the resilience of esoteric practices from a global perspective

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Abstract

This paper outlines one of the main research questions of the Center for Advanced Studies 'Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective' at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (CAS-E), namely the question of the apparent resilience of esoteric practices against the backdrop of the global proliferation and hegemonic power of scientific and technological rationalities as well as the continued marginalisation and delegitimation of esoteric practices in discourses orchestrated by religious orthodoxies or political regimes. The paper introduces into the panel by outlining the rationale of a special issue on 'the resilience of esoteric practices from a global perspective', by presenting its main results, and by comparing the individual papers of the panel which focus on case studies from South America, Africa, Europe, the Near East, Russia and India.

164 SCIENCE AND SPIRIT: RATIONALIZATION AND LEGITIMIZATION STRATEGIES IN BRAZIL'S VALLEY OF THE DAWN

Kelly Hayes

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Abstract

This article examines how the Valley of the Dawn (Vale do Amanhecer) employs scientific language and rationalization strategies to legitimize practices that operate outside the realm of scientific verification. Founded in Brazil in the early 1960s and now an international movement, the Valley of the Dawn exemplifies a broader pattern scholars have identified in many new religious movements (NRMs): the strategic adaptation of scientific discourse to legitimize metaphysical practices and cosmological claims. Through its primary theologian Mário Sassi, the Valley developed a quasi-scientific framework describing spiritual forces as natural phenomena operating under universal laws. While incorporating Space Age imagery and technological metaphors, the movement simultaneously critiques modern science as spiritually impoverished, positioning their practitioners as "spiritual scientists" who

transcend the limitations of materialist science. The Valley proposes that "faith that negates science is as useless as science that negates faith," advocating for a synthesis where scientific and spiritual knowledge complement each other. Rather than simply rationalizing metaphysical practices, the movement creates an alternative form of re-enchantment through science. The Valley's bureaucratic structure exhibits systematization, with detailed protocols and precise procedures, yet their core claims about spiritual forces remain outside scientific verification. This study contributes to understanding how new religious movements navigate the cultural authority of science while maintaining their distinctive religious identity and offering a critique of scientific materialism.

40 ON RITUAL RESILIENCE: DIVINATORY PRACTICES AS TECHNOLOGIES OF HOPE

Knut Graw

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Abstract

In Senegal and the Gambia, divination forms a highly resilient ritual practice in a complex multi-ethnic and multi-lingual sociocultural environment. Drawing on extensive anthropological field research and the detailed documentation of individual divinatory consultations, this paper conceptualizes divination as a technology of hope, providing a unique cultural space for inquiring about and dealing with a wide range of existential concerns. Focusing on the existential and consultational value of divinatory practices rather than on their outward ritual properties, it becomes clear that the resilience of divination primarily lies not so much in its underlying ideas but in its ability to provide an understanding of and ways of ritually countering a wide range of socioeconomic situations experienced as being difficult to resolve by other means.

195 SOCIAL TENSIONS AS A REASON FOR THE RESILIENCE OF ANTHROPOSOPHY

Helmut Zander

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Abstract

Thesis: One of the central factors for the resilience of Anthroposophy is a maximum tension to the point of contradiction, concerning the interpretation of the : the work of Rudolf Steiner (1861-2025).

Topic: Tensions. Tensions arise in Anthroposophy when statements of Steiner are contradictory or difficult to harmonise, and when their interpretation remains irreconcilable. Such tensions are nearly always perceived by Anthroposophists as problems that need to be resolved, given that Steiner himself had claimed to replace disputed knowledge with 'objective', 'higher', 'supersensible' knowledge.

From a sociological perspective, a different thesis appears more convincing. The constant discussions, which in several (albeit relatively rare) cases lead to the expulsion of members, have strengthened Anthroposophy in the long run. These conflicts of

dealt with.

These tensions presuppose social factors, which I will only mention in key words: Institutionalisation, intellectual complexity, implementation in practice, relevance to contemporary problems. Within these conditions Steiner's work is the 'absolute' basis: a minimum consensus, the gravity of which tames most centrifugal forces and defines the social boundaries of quarrelles and thus of Anthroposophy. But within these negotiation processes, adjustments are made to changing problems or needs: e. g. the selection or suppression of statements by Steiner, the identification of new relevant topics, the revision of Anthroposophy's self-understanding.

Thus, tensions create productive adaptation processes to changing social situations. The significance of such tensions would become apparent in comparison with one-issue groups whose conceptual identity or practice hinges on a single theme and who therefore generally have too few discursive resources to adapt to altered challenges.