

# Call for Papers

The International Theosophical History Conference 11-12 October

2025, Athens, Greece

## *Altered States of Consciousness in Theosophy and Related Esoteric Currents*

Perspectives on altered states of consciousness, also termed uncommon, anomalous, spiritual, higher, mystical, religious states, are a central part of Theosophy and many other esoteric currents. Indeed, people engaged with Theosophy and esotericism often consciously attempt to alter their consciousness through a wide array of practices, such as meditation, trance, and ritual.

Consciousness is not easy to define in singular terms. This is evinced from the fact that scholars from various disciplines continue to debate its characteristics and the states that deviate from the so-called "normal", such as deep sleep states, trance, ecstatic or states under the influence of psychoactive substances.

The study of religious experiences, mystical and altered states has a long research history, spanning from the time of psychical studies in the 19th century, William James' famous study from the early 20th century, the rise of the study of mysticism and parapsychology during the first half of the 20th century, and consciousness or transpersonal studies during the 1960s and 1970s, towards cognitive studies in the early 2000s. However, little research has been done on Theosophy and altered states, which signals the relevance of the conference theme.

Some of the most influential works of the Theosophical current have been written by authors who claim to have been in an uncommon or altered state. H.S. Olcott recounts how Blavatsky would change noticeably when writing *Isis Unveiled* (1877), often gazing into emptiness as though drawing inspiration from unseen sources. Helena P. Blavatsky, in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), describes perceiving palm leaves before her eyes and reading from them. She also said to have learned Senzar—the mysterious language serving as the primary source for *The Secret Doctrine*—through dreams. *Thought-Forms* by Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater draw inspiration from their claimed

observations under altered states, such as the clairvoyant exploration of the forms and colors generated by emotions and thoughts. Leadbeater, in particular, engaged in numerous altered state explorations, including his accounts of life on Mars and the narratives surrounding the lives of Alcyone. George Arundale, in his book *Nirvana*, wrote an account of his experiences of Nirvana. Annie Besant similarly engaged in clairvoyant exploration, particularly delving into the atomic structure of matter; Geoffrey Hodson explored devas, spirits of nature and music forms in altered states.

It is clear that the Theosophical current has published many books and articles that fall within the domain of altered states or uncommon experiences and impacted the development of a number of modern esoteric and spiritual practices in the 20th and 21st centuries, which tend to focus on the individual, human potential, spiritual development, consciousness, and healing. Consciousness is, in fact, a fundamental topic in modern Theosophy, but it often intersects with various philosophical, religious, and scientific discourses that can make it difficult to approach or disentangle.

Theosophy arose during a period of intense interest in spiritualism and psychical research, including a resurgence of interest in mystical traditions, Asian religions, and ancient esoteric knowledge. It incorporated perspectives and terminology from such varied sources and played a significant role in the occult revival, offering a synthesis of Asian and European, ancient and modern perspectives, including terminology from Hinduism, Buddhism, Platonism, and Christianity, alongside technical terms taken from modern science. This took place in the midst of the development of modern psychology as a discipline and Darwin's innovative views on biology and evolution. The Theosophical Society, however, firmly stated that it did not accept humanity as a purely biological phenomenon, nor the idea that the mind is simply the brain. In fact, in Theosophy, consciousness is not a purely human trait but exists in all the kingdoms of nature in various degrees—giving rise to an evolution of consciousness and different experiences or states of consciousness.

In its formulation of a vast spiritual cosmology that includes seven planes of consciousness with related spiritual states, Theosophy has attempted to systematize different experiences on the path of spiritual development and to offer a modern take on human evolution that is consciousness-based. In relation to this innovative idea, Theosophy posits that there is a universal consciousness that permeates all of existence, expands naturally, and suggests that all living beings are interconnected through a shared spiritual essence and cosmic process. There is a natural evolution of consciousness, both individually and collectively, that also accounts for all the various altered states in and out of the body, during life and after death, and at various levels of spiritual attainment. This evolution is

often seen as a journey towards greater spiritual awareness and enlightenment. A journey of development that spans multiple lifetimes, with each incarnation and reincarnation under the law of karma offering opportunities for growth and learning and gaining access to higher states of consciousness. In this sense, consciousness is natural, cosmological, expanding, and varied, and many of the altered states are purposeful—holding the potential for higher development.

The multiple planes of existence in Theosophy thus each correspond to different levels of consciousness and "altered" states, ranging from the physical world to the spiritual, from mineral to celestial consciousness, with the higher planes representing more refined and elevated states of being and reality. The concept of planes of existence is central to theosophical cosmology and provides a framework for understanding the progression of consciousness through altered states to an enlightened state. This has become an important feature of many modern spiritual and esoteric discourses and practices.

The conference thus opens up for an exploration of the multiple facets connected with how altered states are described and used in Theosophy and related esoteric and spiritual currents.

- Theosophy or esotericism and altered states, the seven planes, the human constitution
- Ethics, embodiment, pollution and purity, psychedelics, noetic quality, moral fruits, spiritual development and spiritual practice
- Initiation, conversion, ritual, music, intuition, dance, art, theatre, temples, sacred spaces
- Theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches to altered states
- The historical genealogies of concepts and practices related to altered states in esotericism
- Visions and experiences with otherworldly beings, fairies, spirits of nature, devas, angels.
- Experiences of enlightenment, awakening, *samādhi*, *nirvāṇa*, loss of sense of self, liberation and altered states in Theosophy and esoteric currents.
- Theosophy or esotericism, fiction, and altered states
- Chakras, kundalini, energetic centers.
- Near-death experiences.
- Psychic powers, clairvoyance, clairaudience, psychometry, telekinesis, siddhis.
- Thought forms, emotion forms, music forms
- Astral projection, astral traveling, astral encounters.

- Altered states involving ghosts, spirits of the dead, mediumship, trance, divination, automatic writing, revelations, insights.
- Memories of past lives, regression, hypnosis, exploring past lives in Theosophical and other esoteric currents literature.
- Meditation, contemplation, wellbeing, compassion and altered states.
- Theosophy or esotericism and modern psychology, including parapsychology

## Key-Note Speaker:

Associate Professor Tiina Mahlamäki

## Paper Proposals

To be considered as a presenter in the Conference, please submit an abstract of approx. 300 words with a 50-word biography to Erica Georgiades, via email (erica.georgiades@gmail.com). All proposals will be evaluated by the conference committee.

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THEOSOPHICAL HISTORY CONFERENCE AND THEOSOPHICAL HISTORY JOURNAL.

The purposes of holding the International Theosophical History Conferences are practical in nature: to maintain interest in the subject, to assess the status of research in the area, and finally to provide material for publication within *The Theosophical History journal*. If the presenter wishes to publish in the journal, we advise that the style of the final text and endnotes conform to Chicago Style and that a digital submission be sent for review to the editor (Tim Rudbøg [timrudboeg@hum.ku.dk](mailto:timrudboeg@hum.ku.dk)) in Word format no later than two months following the Conference. To visit the website of the *Theosophical History journal*, please <https://theohistory.org/>

## Presentations

Presentation time is max 20 minutes.

## Important Dates

Deadline for submission of a paper: 15 May 2025

Notification of acceptance: 23 May 2025

## Registration & Fees

Registration fee for students (includes four coffee breaks and two light lunches), per day 25.00 €

Registration Fee per day (includes four coffee breaks and two light lunches), 50.00 €

Registration to the 2025 ITHC will open after the programme is released.

## **LOCATION:**

Conference room of the Theosophical Society in Athens, Greece.

Address: 25 Voukourestiou St., 106 71. Athens

14 minutes distance from Acropolis and 3 minutes from the metro station Syntagma.

## **Conference Committee**

- Conference Chair: Prof. Tim Rudbørg, PhD (Associate professor, Science of Religion, chair and director of the Copenhagen Centre for the Study of Theosophy and Esotericism, University of Copenhagen)
- Prof. James Santucci, PhD (Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at California State University, Fullerton)
- Dr. Olivia Cejvan, PhD (Senior lecturer Linnæus University, Sweden)
- Bjarke Stanley Nielsen, PhD (Post Doc, University of Copenhagen, Denmark)
- Aaron French, PhD (Post Doc, University of Copenhagen)
- Erica Georgiades (MRes Religious Experience, University of Wales Trinity Saint).

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