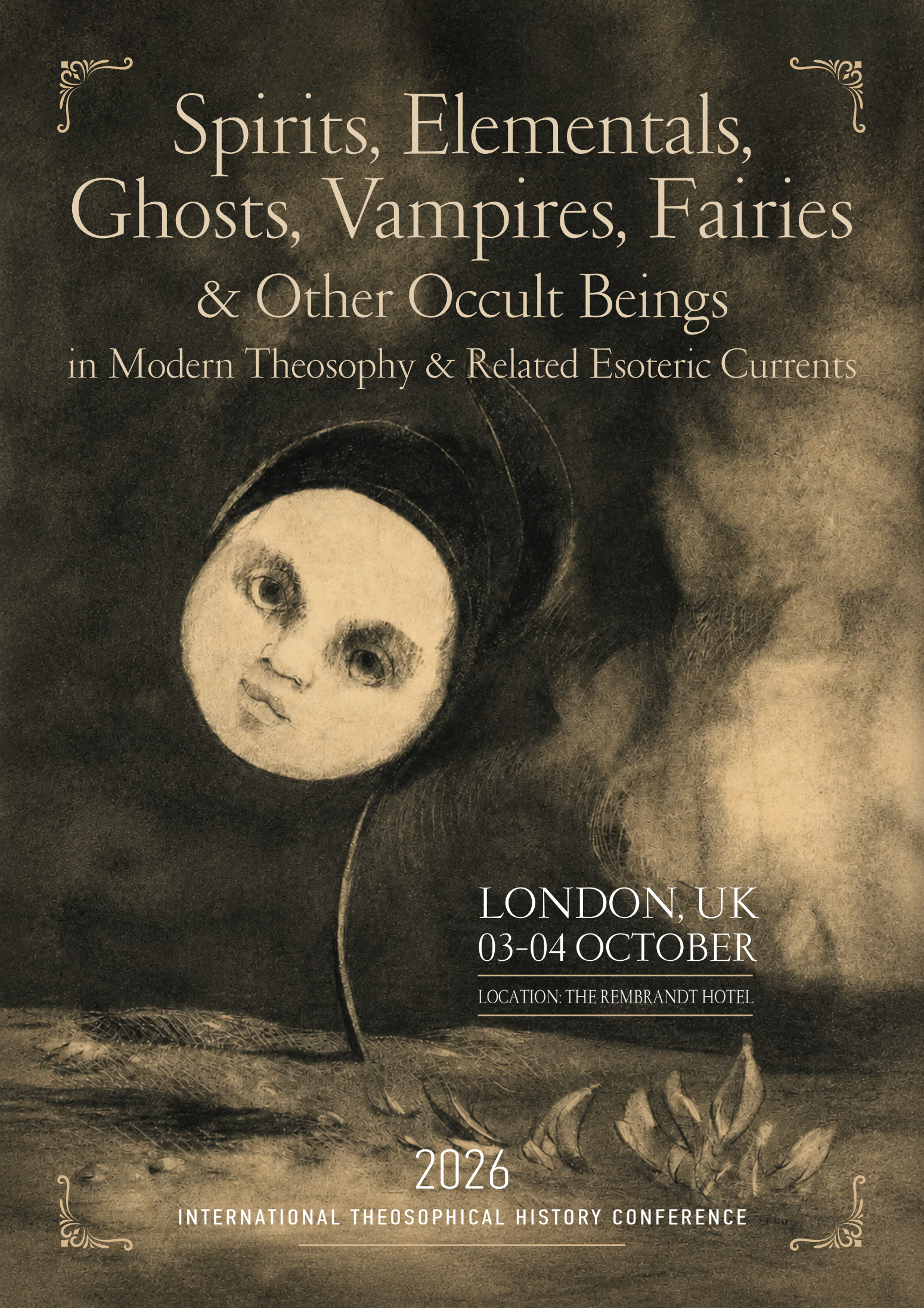




Spirits, Elementals, Ghosts, Vampires, Fairies & Other Occult Beings

in Modern Theosophy & Related Esoteric Currents

LONDON, UK
03-04 OCTOBER

LOCATION: THE REMBRANDT HOTEL

2026

INTERNATIONAL THEOSOPHICAL HISTORY CONFERENCE

Spirits, Elementals, Ghosts, Vampires, Fairies & Other Occult Beings in Modern Theosophy & Related Esoteric Currents

LONDON, UK
03-04 OCTOBER

This year, the ITHc will be hosted in London, United Kingdom, offering a unique forum for discussion and exchange of ideas on Theosophical history.

Keynote Speaker

- **Manon Hedenborg White, PhD** Associate Professor (History of Religions at Malmö University).

Conference Committee

- **Conference Chairs: Jenny Butler, PhD** and **Prof. Tim Rudbøg, PhD**

Jenny Butler, PhD - Lecturer in the Study of Religions at University College Cork and President of The Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions (ISASR).

Prof. Tim Rudbøg, PhD - Associate professor, Study of Religions, 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.
- **Olivia Cejvan, PhD** - Postdoctoral researcher at Malmö University, Sweden.
- **Bjarke Stanley Nielsen, PhD** - Denmark.
- **Ethan Doyle White, PhD** - Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark.
- **Erica Georgiades** - MRes Religious Experience, University of Wales Trinity Saint David.

Cover Image: *Strange Flower (Little Sister of the Poor) [Petite sœur des pauvres]*.
A lithograph created around 1880 by French Symbolist artist **Odilon Redon**.
The Art Institute of Chicago.

Brochure Layout and Design by George Georgiades

With the support of the Blavatsky Trust

DAY 1
SATURDAY
OCT 03

T I M E T A B L E

Welcome

09:00
- 09:10

Welcome by **Tim Rudbøg, PhD** and **Erica Georgiades, MRes**

Session I

Elementals, Fairies, Devas & Spirits of Nature

09:10
- 09:40

Blavatsky and the Fairies: Folkloric Supernatural Beings in the Early Theosophical Movement - **Ethan Doyle White, PhD**

09:40
- 10:10

Elemental Agency and Occult Mediation in H. P. Blavatsky's Nightmare Tales - **Tim Rudbøg, PhD**

10:10
- 10:40

Elemental Beings Between Personhood, Fiction and Force: On Contested Paracelsian Echoes Reverberating into Theosophical Discourse - **Tjalling Janssen, PhD (Cand.)**

10:40
- 11:00

COFFEE BREAK

11:00
- 11:30

Elementals, Elementaries, and Shells: A Corpus-Informed Study of Occult Beings in Early Theosophical Discourse - **Luiz Torres, MA (Cand.)**

11:30
- 12:00

Fairies and Elementals in the Art of Johfra and Ellen Lórien
Alexandra Nagel, MA

12:00
- 12:30

'Faeries, Come Take Me Out of This Dull World': The Influence of Theosophy on Ireland's Celtic Revival - **Jenny Butler, PhD**

12:30
- 13:00

In Dialogue with the Devas: Music Spirits, Clairaudience and the British Composers John Foulds, Maud MacCarthy, Cyril Scott and Nelsa Chaplain
Matthew Madeley, PhD (Cand.)

13:00
- 13:30

Spirits of nature in the world view of Tapio Kaitaharju (1923–2004)
Tiina Mahlamäki, PhD

13:30
- 14:30

LUNCH BREAK

Keynote Address

14:30
- 15:00

Mediums, Adepts, and Masters: The Gendering of Occult Communication in Spiritualism, Theosophy, and Thelema
Manon Hedenborg White, PhD

Session II

Adversarial Entities & the Dark Side of the Unseen

15:00
- 15:30

Adversarial entities: Catalysts of initiation in the Hermetic Order of Golden Dawn and beyond - **Olivia Cejvan, PhD**

15:30
- 16:00

False Gods: The Construction of Idolatry and Spiritual Authority in Anna Kingsford's Thought - **Camden Roy, PhD (Cand.)**

16:00
- 16:20

COFFEE BREAK

16:20
- 16:50

"Rightly, They Fear Draculitz": The Powers of Darkness and the Vampires of Occultism - **Johan Nilsson, PhD (Cand.)**

16:50
- 17:20

From Astral Shells to Psychic Deposits: Redefining the Anatomy of the Unseen in the Agni Yoga Teachings - **Audrius Beinorius, PhD**

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

T I M E T A B L E

Session III	Ghosts, Spirits & Survival After Death	
09:00 - 09:30	A Theosophical Perspective on Reframing the Dead: Spirits, Ghosts and After Death Presence in Modern Theosophy - Deepa Padhi, PhD	
09:30 - 10:00	Guests from the Unseen World: Duke Charles, Gustaf Björnram, and Spirit Communication at the Swedish Royal Court Henrik Bogdan, PhD	
10:00 - 10:30	From Proof to Presence: Ectoplasm and the Visual Epistemology of the Unseen - Jenny Zihan Zhou, PhD (Cand.)	
10:30 - 10:50	COFFEE BREAK	
Session IV	The Unborn, Collective Agencies & Communities	
10:50 - 11:20	The Unseen Unborn: Theosophy, Esotericism, and the History of Prenatal Culture - Nienke Groskamp, PhD (Cand.)	
11:20 - 11:50	From Watchers to Egregores: Collective Agency and the Transformation of Unseen Beings in Modern Esotericism Philip A. Quadrio, PhD	
11:50 - 12:20	The Theosophical History Journal and the International Theosophical History Conferences: Forty Years of Historical Scholarship Leslie Price	
12:20 - 12:50	The Imagined Communities of Theosophy Bjarke Stanley Nielsen, PhD	
12:50 - 13:20	From Etheric Beings to ETs: How the Elementals of Theosophy Contributed to Modern Ufology - Aaron French, PhD	
13:20 - 14:20	LUNCH BREAK	
Session V	Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Unseen	
14:20 - 14:50	Theosophy in Japan: Technologies of Translation, Legitimation, and Visualization of the Invisible - Selma Foss Hagerup, MA (Cand.)	
14:50 - 15:20	From Pairikā to Peri: Iranian Spirits and the Esoteric Reclassification of the Unseen - Pablo Vazquez, PhD (Cand.)	
15:20 - 15:50	From Western Esotericism to Mexican Indigenous Cosmologies: The Art of Leonora Carrington and Polyphasic Realism Rebecca Jackson MA	
15:50 - 16:10	COFFEE BREAK	
Session VI	Visualising the Unseen	
16:10 - 16:40	Visualising the Unseen: Photography as Haunted Medium in the Work of Agate Tūna - Tereza Jobová, PhD (Cand.)	
16:40 - 17:10	Visualising the Unseen: Illustration, Colour, and Architectural Imagination as Evidence of Invisible Beings in Theosophical Culture Xueqing Deng, PhD (Cand.)	



DAY 1
SATURDAY, 03 OCTOBER

SESSION

I

Elementals, Fairies,
Devas & Spirits of Nature

Image: **Redon, O.** (1886). *The Chimera Gazed at All Things with Fear* (*La Chimère regarda avec effroi toutes choses*). [Lithograph]. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago

DAY 1
SATURDAY
OCT 03

09:10
- 09:40

Blavatsky and the Fairies: Folkloric Supernatural Beings in the Early Theosophical Movement

Ethan Doyle White, PhD

Today, supernatural beings of folkloric origin can be found in the respective cosmologies of a wide range of esoteric currents, from Anthroposophy and New Age through to Wicca and Rodnovery. Repeatedly, these entities are explicitly identified as “nature spirits” and equated with the “elementals” deriving from the work of Paracelsus. Indeed, the terms “fairy,” “nature spirit,” and “elementals” have largely become synonymous in much modern discourse, even among those who are not themselves actively interested in esotericism. While this interpretation may now seem endemic, it nevertheless differs in important respects from the vernacular views that were prevalent across much of Europe prior to the late nineteenth century. In recorded folklore, entities like fairies and elves were not typically understood as “nature spirits” but were rooted in vernacular Christian worldviews, for instance being interpreted as former angels or the souls of unbaptised children.

So how did this modern interpretation of folkloric supernatural beings emerge and achieve cultural dominance? As is so often the case in modern Western esotericism, a pivotal influence in this historical trajectory was Theosophy, the tradition which provided much of the lexicon and conceptual understandings from which subsequent branches of occultism would draw. This paper offers a detailed historical analysis of how the early Theosophists, namely Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott, understood folkloric supernatural beings and utilised them in their writings. In doing so, it also considers the influence of noted nineteenth-century esoteric writers who influenced Blavatsky, namely Éliphas Lévi, Edward Bulwer Lytton, and Emma Hardinge Britten. It thus provides clarity as to the role of folkloric supernatural beings among the first generation of Theosophists, which is a pivotal step in understanding how these ideas were built upon both by Theosophy’s second generation and by the adherents of related occult movements – a process that resulted in the understanding of such entities that we all recognise today.

bio

Ethan Doyle White, PhD, is a historian and scholar of religion currently working as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Copenhagen. He was previously a visiting lecturer in folklore at the University of Hertfordshire and also teaches at City Lit, London. He is the author of five books and co-editor of two edited volumes.

DAY 1
SATURDAY
OCT 03

09:40
- 10:10

Elemental Agency and Occult Mediation in H. P. Blavatsky's *Nightmare Tales*

Tim Rudbøg, PhD

This paper examines the literary and esoteric function of elementals and spirit-beings in H. P. Blavatsky's *Nightmare Tales* (1892). It argues that Blavatsky deploys them as agents of occult mediation: they make hidden realities perceptible while exposing the ethical, cultural, and epistemic dangers of unregulated occult access. It analyses "A Bewitched Life," in which Daij-Dzins, explicitly identified as air elementals, facilitate the protagonist's "Long Vision" yet threaten to enslave an unpurified seer. Their agency frames occult perception as a problem of discipline, discrimination, and moral formation. The paper also considers related spirit agencies: the dervish-mediated vision of "The Luminous Shield," the juridical phantom of "The Cave of the Echoes," the enigmatic seer of "From the Polar Lands," and the gnomes and fiery spirits of "The Ensouled Violin." While these figures are not all elementals in Theosophical taxonomy, they collectively form a narrative ecology of invisible agency and occult mediation that connects local folklore, occult science, and Gothic affect.

The paper situates *Nightmare Tales* in a longer history of elemental lore, from Paracelsus and Le Comte de Gabalis to Éliphas Lévi and Theosophical debates over elementals and elementaries. This genealogy demonstrates how Blavatsky reworked inherited categories of invisible beings. I argue that she transformed the elemental archive into a distinctively Theosophical literary tool: spirits serve as mediators of knowledge, tests of initiatory preparedness, instruments of anti-materialist critique, and boundary markers separating disciplined occult practice from passive mediumship. The tales train readers in an occult hermeneutics requiring them to consider what kind of agency they encounter, how it operates, and what ethical conditions are required for engagement. The issue, then, is not simply entertainment or belief in spirits or the invisible. By foregrounding the taxonomy of agency, the paper recovers the *Nightmare Tales* as a literary laboratory for late nineteenth-century debates about esoteric knowledge, discipline, and authority.

bio

Tim Rudbøg, PhD, is Associate Professor and director of the Copenhagen Centre for the Study of Theosophy and Esotericism at the University of Copenhagen. Rudbøg is also the editor in chief of the *Theosophical History Journal* and has published extensively in the field of esotericism and the history of religions.

DAY 1
SATURDAY
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10:10
- 10:40

Elemental Beings Between Personhood, Fiction and Force: On Contested Paracelsian Echoes Reverberating into Theosophical Discourse

Tjalling Janssen, PhD (Cand.)

This presentation will have both a genealogical and a reception component. Taking Blavatsky as a pivot point, we look backward to early modernity, appraising the cumulative cultural construction of elemental beings through Paracelsus, Oswald Croll, Henri de Montfaucon de Villars and Georg von Welling, in order to understand the most important European sources available to members of the Theosophical Society in the late nineteenth century. Paracelsus ascribes personhood to elemental beings, and almost elevates them to the cosmological status of humans in some of his late works (after 1535). He subscribes to a strong ontological realism, in which these entities exist substantially. After Montfaucon de Villars's *Comte de Gabalis* (1670), the concept of elemental beings lost its unequivocal ontological realism, as this novel cast elemental beings in a fictional, satirical mould. Half a century later, Georg von Welling would interpret *Comte de Gabalis* as a veiled repository of Rosicrucian secrets in his *Opus mago-cabbalisticum* (1719/35), which Blavatsky would also do 150 years later, opening the door for the revival of ontological realism. Examining the reception of these worldviews—inflected through the modern lenses of Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Éliphas Lévi—especially in Blavatsky, we will also briefly compare this initial Theosophical configuration of “elementals” to the contributions of William Q. Judge, Franz Hartmann, Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater, and finally Alice Bailey. We will especially pay attention to the environmental-historical implications of these ontological arrangements, as elemental beings represented the natural world from the outset. The ontological shifts that “reverberate” into theosophical discourse, and the epistemic and material contexts in which this comes to pass, have an unmistakable ecological character.

bio

Tjalling Janssen is a PhD researcher at the Center for History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents (HHP), based at the University of Amsterdam. His research interests include intermediary beings, magic, alchemy and Paracelsianism, and the reception of these subjects in (early to late) modernity. He investigates these topics from an environmental perspective as well as through social categories like class. His doctoral project entails an environmental reception history of the concept of elemental beings from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century, through its manifestations in magic, alchemy, literature, mining and agriculture.

DAY 1
SATURDAY
OCT 03

11:00
- 11:30

Elementals, Elementaries, and Shells: A Corpus-Informed Study of Occult Beings in Early Theosophical Discourse

Luiz Torres, MA (Cand.)

How did early Theosophical discourse distinguish between occult beings that seemed, in late nineteenth-century Spiritualist and occult debates, to belong to the same invisible world? This paper examines the distinction between *elementals*, *elementaries*, and *shells* in H. P. Blavatsky's writings, The Mahatma Letters, and related early Theosophical material. Rather than treating these words as interchangeable labels for "spirits," it argues that they formed a technical yet unstable vocabulary for distinguishing non-human agencies of nature from post-mortem remnants of human personality, in relation to astral phenomena, mediumship, and *Kama-loka*.

The study adopts a corpus-informed historical approach designed to support, rather than replace, close textual interpretation. The corpus will be small and controlled, allowing quantitative patterns to be coordinated with close readings of passages. It will combine frequency counts, keyword-in-context (KWIC) analysis, identification of recurrent multi word expressions, and qualitative coding by semantic domain and historical-discursive function. Particular attention will be given to *elemental(s)*, *elementary/elementaries*, *elementary spirits*, *shell(s)*, *astral*, *Kama-loka*, *Kama-rupa*, *spirit(s)*, and *ghost(s)*. The purpose is not to reduce Theosophical doctrine to word counts, but to use corpus evidence to trace regularities in usage, contexts of opposition, boundary-work with Spiritualism, and moments of terminological instability.

Preliminary textual findings suggest that early Theosophy did more than reject or accept Spiritualist and folkloric categories of unseen beings. It reclassified them through a layered occult taxonomy: elementals were associated with nature and non-human forces, whereas *elementaries* and *shells* were linked, with overlap, to post-mortem residues, deception, and the dangers of mediumistic contact. The paper also considers how such residues could be described as apparently animated or made operative through external agencies, thereby complicating the category of "spirit" itself. By tracing these usages, it contributes to the historical study of Theosophical knowledge-making, spiritual authority, and the technical reorganisation of "spirits" within modern esoteric discourse.

bio

Luiz Torres is an MA student in Language Sciences at NOVA FCSH, researching corpus-linguistic approaches to Theosophical and esoteric discourse. He holds a degree in Philosophy from the Catholic University of Brasília and has training in specialised translation. His current work compares lexical patterns in Helena Blavatsky and Alice Bailey.

DAY 1
SATURDAY
OCT 03

11:30
- 12:00

Fairies and Elementals in the Art of Johfra and Ellen Lórien

Alexandra Nagel, MA

At the end of 1972, the art critic Hein Steehouwer (1919–1977) assigned the term ‘meta-realism’ to the works of a group of seven Dutch painters. According to Steehouwer, these men and women gave expression to the co-existence of the material world and the spiritual world. They depicted a dimension of reality that can be accessed through meditation, study, and intuition. Or, put differently, these painters tried to bridge the gap between material realism and spiritual vision with their art.

As a movement, meta-realism was short lived; it passed away with Steehouwer. Nowadays, the works of these individuals are characterized as either fantastic realism, or surrealism. However, another characterization is also possible for at least for two of the group. Johfra (Frans van den Berg, 1919–1998) and Ellen Lórien (Ellen de Jonge, 1924–2016), who had settled in France and portrayed a variety of fairies, nature spirits, mythical creatures, and deities related to nature, had been influenced by a multitude of sources: Rosicrucianism, astrology, kabbalah, Buddhism, alchemy, and private, visionary experiences with nature. As such, their art found its way in the New Age movement and became part of it. Hence, their works can be characterized as typically New Age art.

In this paper I will highlight the French book *Elfes, fées et gnomes* (1989) written and illustrated by Johfra, Ellen Lórien, and a third Dutch artist. The authors explain that the images of the nature spirits presented resonate with the existence of ‘ethereal beings’ that society has generally forgotten. They substantiate and elaborate on this claim with references to and quotations from the writings of Dorothy Maclean (one of the founders of the Findhorn Community; 1920–2020), Charles Leadbeater (1854–1934) and Geoffrey Hodson (1886–1983).

bio

Alexandra Nagel studied agricultural engineering (MA in 1989), and the history of western esotericism (MA in 2007). She wrote various papers on esotericism and nature inclined subjects. Publications include: ‘Back to the Roots of a Modern Oracle Deck: Mlle Le Normand and J.J. Grandville’, *The Playing Card* 32(4), 2004, 142–152.

DAY 1
SATURDAY
OCT 03

12:00
- 12:30

‘Faeries, Come Take Me Out of This Dull World’: The Influence of Theosophy on Ireland’s Celtic Revival

Jenny Butler, PhD

The theosophically inspired categorisation and nature of spiritual beings influenced the artistic community and esoteric milieu of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Irish Literary Revival or ‘Celtic Twilight’. Key figures of this period in Ireland, including Ella Young, Æ Russell, William Butler Yeats, Charles Johnston, and James and Margaret Cousins, were each influenced by theosophical ideas circulating about beings and realms. These ideas informed their understanding of fairies, angels and deities and in turn led to particularised interpretations of the nature of otherworldly beings and their role in human life. Irish mythology and folklore were reinterpreted through an esoteric philosophical lens and at times a nationalist impulse was enmeshed within such spiritually infused perspectives on the world. This paper explores expressions of conceptualisations of spiritual beings in the life and artistic works of Irish theosophists. Also examined is the unique intersection of esotericism and folklore during the Celtic Revival movement. Theosophy profoundly influenced how writers and intellectuals understood and presented folklore material to do with spiritual beings, mythological creatures and realms. This has broader implications in that such theosophical underpinnings impacted the presentation of Irish cultural materials that formed part of one of the most significant folklore collections in the country, the resonance of which can still be seen today in religious movements such as contemporary Paganism and in popular culture.

bio

Jenny Butler, PhD, is a Lecturer in the Study of Religions Department, University College Cork, where she teaches courses on esotericism and mythology. She is a Board Member of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism and founder of the ESSWE-affiliated Irish Network for the Study of Esotericism.

DAY 1
SATURDAY
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12:30
- 13:00

In Dialogue with the Devas: Music Spirits, Clairaudience and the British Composers John Foulds, Maud MacCarthy, Cyril Scott and Nelsa Chaplain

Matthew Madeley, PhD (Cand.)

The British composers John Foulds (1880-1939) and Cyril Scott (1879-1970) were both deeply interested in occult literature and theosophical spirituality. Members of the Theosophical Society in England, this spiritual interest had a strong influence on the musical and literary output of both composers. One commonality between them is a belief in the existence of music spirits, or *Gandharvas*. John Foulds and his wife, Indian musical specialist and protégé of Annie Besant Maud MacCarthy (1882-1967), claimed to possess clairaudient powers and the ability to hear the music of nature and higher planes. From 1915, Foulds began to 'hear' music from higher planes, when he clairaudiently 'heard' and wrote down his *Gandharva-Music*, Op.49. Cyril Scott, on the other hand, did not have clairaudient powers and could not directly observe higher planes. Instead, he relied on other who could, such as the psychic Nelsa Chaplain, through whom Scott contacted his occult master, Koot Hoomi (who he refers to as 'Master K.H.') an initiate of 'The Great White Brotherhood' and one of the two spiritual founders of Theosophy (alongside Master El Morya), in 1919. These moments initiated a period of intense focus on the occult and its relationship to music for both composers, culminating in the texts *Music: Its Secret Influence Throughout the Ages* (Scott, dedicated to Chaplain) and *Music To-Day*, Opus 92 (Foulds), written in 1933 and 1934 respectively.

In this paper I intend to elucidate the influence this belief in devas had on both composers. Both men wrote about a hierarchy of devas from the smallest nature-spirits (gnomes, fairies, nymphs and salamanders) to the loftiest archangels and together these spirits contribute to the great 'Cosmic Symphony' of nature which the trained clairaudient can 'hear'. Within this hierarchy exists the *Gandharvas*, or music spirits, whose very nature is music. In order to best represent this devic music in notation, both composers argued strongly for the need to develop new methods of compositions. I shall consider how these composers altered their compositional practices to better represent the music of the devas, the wider implications this has for our understanding of musical modernism in Britain (both composers being trailblazing modernists) and the impact the writings of these musicians has on our understanding of these occult beings.

bio

Matthew Madeley is a second-year PhD student at the University of Birmingham, funded by the AHRC Midlands 4 Cities Doctoral Training Partnership. He is researching the influence of esotericism on the musical life of Britain and Ireland (composition, performance and criticism) from 1900 to 1950.

DAY 1
SATURDAY
OCT 03

13:00
- 13:30

Spirits of Nature in the World View of Tapio Kaitaharju (1923–2004)

Tiina Mahlamäki, PhD

Tapio Kaitaharju, an independent seeker on the spiritual path, shared many beliefs with spiritualism, Theosophy, Rosicrucianism and Anthroposophy. To my knowledge, however, he was not a member of any spiritual movement. But he worked closely with the societies, and the members of the societies valued his views and spiritual depth. They regarded him as a sage, a person with experiential knowledge of the mysteries of life and death. Kaitaharju worked for the State Railways of Finland and fought in the Second World War from 1941 to 1944 against the Soviet Union. It was only in his 40s that he became acquainted with the spiritual world, awakening his extrasensory abilities. He practised touch healing, remote healing, and spiritual healing. In addition to healing, Kaitaharju was deeply attached to nature, and one of his special tasks was exploring the world of natural spirits, which he personally encountered. In my paper, I will focus particularly on two of his works: *Maaäidin kirja* (The Book of Mother Earth, 1979) and *Ystävien kesken* (Among Friends, 1981), as well as his posthumously published diaries *Näkijän päiväkirjasta* (From the Seer's Diary, 2022). These works represent Kaitaharju's spiritual worldview at its most original. I will examine how he describes the spirits of nature, drawing on his own personal experiences. In *Maaäidin kirja* he provides a detailed description of the spirits of the earth, sea and air. *Ystävien kesken* consists of stories in which elves, gnomes, fairies, and other nature spirits recounts their lives and missions on the etheric plane. *Näkijän päiväkirjasta* contains Kaitaharju's spiritual insights and notes on the relationships and interactions between humans and nature, the Earth, and the universe.

bio

Tiina Mahlamäki, PhD, is a university lecturer in the Study of Religions. Her research interests include gender, non-religion, paranormal, esotericism, and neo-spirituality in Finland. She is a member in research project Meaningful Margins: Christianity and Alternative Spiritual Meditation and Healing Practices at the Interface between Margins and Mainstreams (2025–2029).

DAY 1
SATURDAY
OCT 03

14:30
- 15:00

KEYNOTE

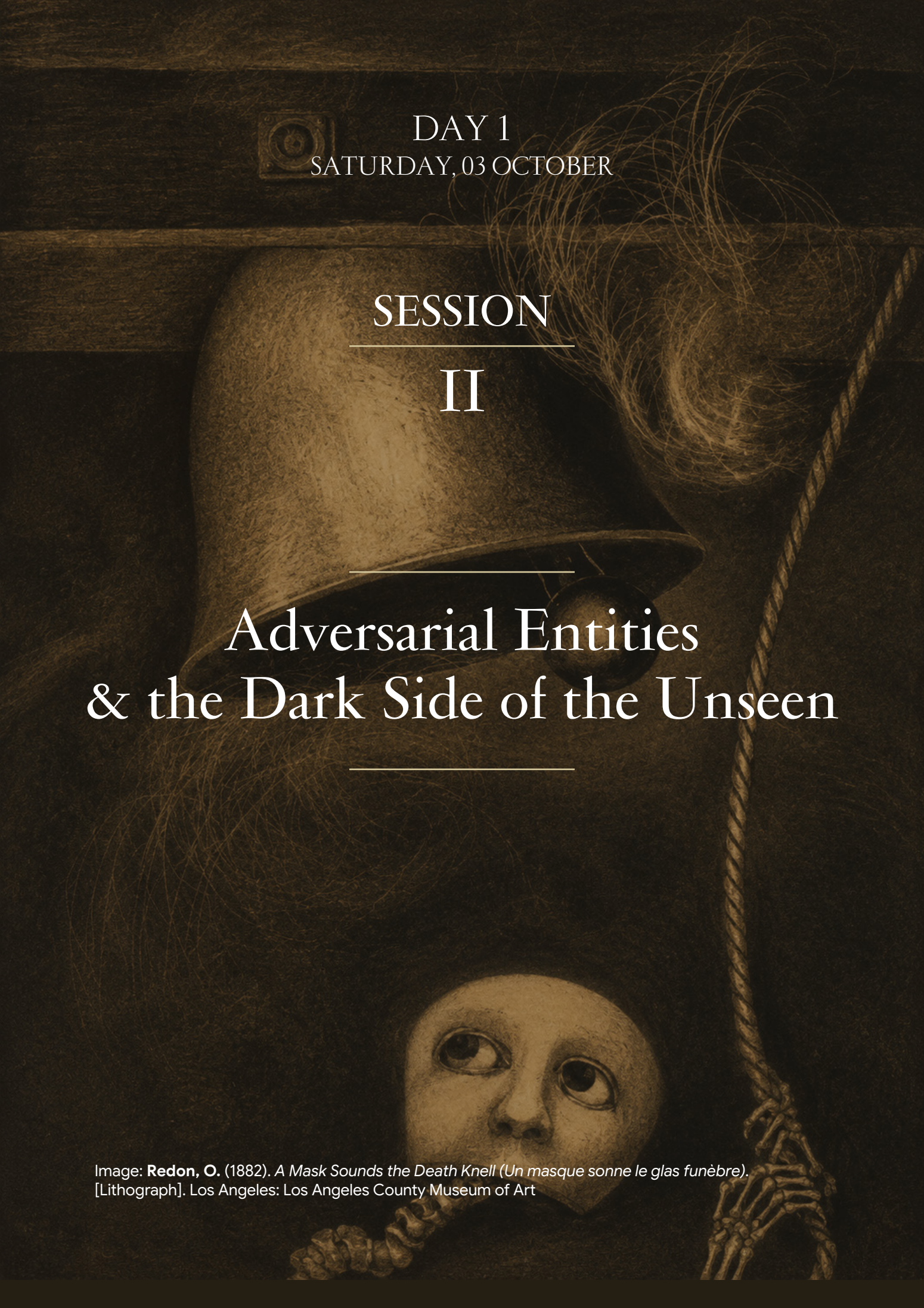
Mediums, Adepts, and Masters: The Gendering of Occult Communication in Spiritualism, Theosophy, and Thelema

Manon Hedenborg White, PhD

The nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of several occult movements that vested religious authority in claims to direct communication with spirits, deities, or hidden masters. In sociological terms, this can be regarded as a form of charismatic authority. While charismatic religious movements have frequently been seen as offering heightened opportunities for women's agency and leadership, an examination of occultist claims to preterhuman contact reveals complex and paradoxical gender logics. This talk will trace and compare how claims to communication with spirits or hidden masters were constructed, negotiated, and gendered in three historically linked occult movements in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century: Spiritualism, Theosophy, and Thelema. Firstly, I will explore how the ability to commune with preterhuman beings was understood in these movements, paying special attention to how boundaries between "good" and "bad" occult communication were constructed and gendered. I will highlight how Helena Blavatsky and Aleister Crowley repeatedly distanced themselves from the implicitly or explicitly feminized spirit medium – often associated with passivity, openness, and lack of skill – while simultaneously enacting religious authority on the basis of claims to contact with supernatural entities. Secondly, I will compare the relationships between differently gendered spirits, hidden masters, and their human interlocutors across all three movements. While Spiritualism, Theosophy, and Thelema offered heightened opportunities for women's religious leadership and agency, I will argue that claims to supernatural contact in these movements both reproduced and challenged gendered scripts of masculine willpower and feminine receptivity. In conclusion, I will briefly consider how the analysis of occultist claims to supernatural contact can advance our understanding of charisma and its relationship with gender.

bio

Manon Hedenborg White, PhD, is Associate Professor of History of Religions at Malmö University. Her research focuses on esotericism, occultism, and new religious movements, with a special interest in questions of gender, sexuality, and authority. Her notable publications include *The Eloquent Blood: The Goddess Babalon and the Construction of Femininities in Western Esotericism* (Oxford UP, 2020), *Esotericism and Deviance* (Brill, 2023), and *The Magical Diaries of Leah Hirsig, 1923–1925: Aleister Crowley, Magick, and the New Occult Woman* (Oxford UP, 2025). She serves as President of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism.



DAY 1
SATURDAY, 03 OCTOBER

SESSION

II

Adversarial Entities
& the Dark Side of the Unseen

Image: **Redon, O.** (1882). *A Mask Sounds the Death Knell (Un masque sonne le glas funèbre)*.
[Lithograph]. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art

DAY 1
SATURDAY
OCT 03

15:00
- 15:30

Adversarial entities: Catalysts of initiation in the Hermetic Order of Golden Dawn and beyond

Olivia Cejvan, PhD

This paper argues that the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn deploys adversarial and aspirational beings as a mutually constitutive architecture of transformation, influenced by the Order's Theosophical intellectual context. Notions such as The Evil Persona and the Holy Guardian Angel, beings that structure the Golden Dawn's initiatory grammar, are read here as the personifications of an encounter with what obstructs in order to produce what transcends.

The paper shows how and why the adversarial figure is understood as catalyst for the initiate's progress, where the adversary is an angel in disguise. This notion is traced to Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*, where the adversarial principle is defined as inverted divinity rather than evil proper—*Demon est Deus Inversus*: "Evil is but an antagonizing blind force in nature... the shadow of light, without which light could have no existence." (Vol. I, §XI) Mathers ritual and pedagogical writings for the Golden Dawn render this metaphysics operative in Qabalistic terms: the lower nature, structured as Nephesh and bound to the Qliphoth, is not to be destroyed but harnessed — "the evil persona can be rendered as a great and strong, yet trained, animal whereupon the man rideth" — in direct fulfilment of the Adeptus Minor ritual's own statement that "Evil helpeth forward the Good." Having established this initiatory dialectic in its formative Theosophical-Golden Dawn sources, the paper illustrates its continued use in lived practice through fieldwork materials gathered as an initiate in the *Sodalitas Rosae Crucis*, a contemporary Golden Dawn-derived order. These materials demonstrate how the adversarial entities identified in Blavatsky and Mathers echoes in the practice of initiation today.

bio

Olivia Cejvan, PhD, is a postdoctoral researcher in religious studies at Malmö University (Department of Society, Culture and Identity). Her work focuses on contemporary esotericism in the Nordic countries, with ethnographic attention to practice, pedagogy, and the cultivation of expertise in initiatory communities. She is co-editor of the forthcoming volume *Esotericism in Practice* and a co-founder of the ESSWE thematic network EsoDID (Esotericism & Didactics).

DAY 1
SATURDAY
OCT 03

15:30
- 16:00

False Gods: The Construction of Idolatry and Spiritual Authority in Anna Kingsford's Thought

Camden Roy, PhD (Cand.)

Anna Kingsford was president of the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society from 1883–1884 and founder of the Hermetic Society (London). As a Christo-centric and feminist thinker, she occupied a pivotal role in the early Theosophical milieu as a critic of developments within the early Society. This paper examines the construction of spiritual authority in Kingsford's works through an analysis of her critiques of perceived idolatry in Theosophical movements and her proposed alternative—visionary contact with the seven spirits of God.

This paper begins by analyzing Kingsford's usage of the concept of idolatry in her critique of Sinnett's formulation of Theosophy and George Wyld's Christo-Theosophy. In the first, I examine her critique of the Masters during her presidency of the London Lodge. Kingsford argues in her addresses to the Society and in private correspondence that tying the Society's teachings to the Masters will open it to the same historical critical critiques that undermined contemporary Christianity. Next, I turn to an extended debate with George Wyld regarding the role of the historical Jesus. Here, Kingsford argues that the authority of any singular human ethical model is untenable.

Next, the paper turns to an examination of the alternative authority structure that Kingsford develops. In Kingsford's view, authoritative knowledge comes from communion with the Seven Spirits of God which are variably represented as the Greek Gods or as the seven Archangels. Encounters with these spirits are usually prompted by the reading of texts (e.g., the Bible, Swedenborg, Lévi) and take place in dreams and waking visions. Each of these visions elucidates the spiritual meaning of scripture. I examine how Kingsford constructed a binary opposition between fallible historical human authority and infallible eternal spiritual authority throughout her works. This binary undergirds her opposition both to Sinnett's Theosophy and to George Wyld's Christo-Theosophy, as both the Theosophical Masters and Jesus were open to historical critique.

bio

Camden Roy is a PhD candidate in the Department of Religion at Rice University (Houston, Texas, USA). His dissertation analyzes the esoteric Christian movements that grew out of the early Theosophical Society. He is a book review editor at *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism* and a copyeditor at *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies*.

DAY 1
SATURDAY
OCT 03

16:20
- 16:50

“Rightly, They Fear Draculitz”: The Powers of Darkness and the Vampires of Occultism

Johan Nilsson, PhD (Cand.)

In 1899, a serialized novel bearing the title *The Powers of Darkness* (Mörkrets Makter) was published in the Swedish newspaper *Dagen*. The *Powers of Darkness* is an adaption of Bram Stoker’s classical novel *Dracula*, published two years earlier. The Swedish version, presented as the work of a translator referred to as “A-e,” deviates significantly from Stoker’s *Dracula*, however. Almost twice as long, *The Powers of Darkness* contains several scenes, characters and side plots that do not appear in the original. Most interestingly the character of Dracula himself has been changed into something quite different from the classical vampire of Stoker’s novel. Draculitz, the Swedish version of Dracula, although still a vampire, is also an adept of black magic and an ideological proponent of Social Darwinism plotting world domination. Although, the authorship of *The Powers of Darkness* is still in dispute, it has recently been argued that the pseudonym “A-e,” refers to none other than A.F. Åkerberg (1833–1901) and Victor Pfeiff (1829–1901), two of the main proponents of the early Theosophical movement in Sweden. In fact, Draculitz, described as a hunter, a predator, and a dark adept expounding cruel teachings based on a heartless interpretation of Darwinism, makes a perfect Theosophical villain.

Building on Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *monster theory*, the paper will investigate Draculitz and other vampires of late nineteenth and early twentieth century occultism. The interest in vampires in horror literature of the fin de siècle has often been interpreted as an expression of the anxieties of Victorian society. But what about the vampire’s appearance in the esoteric literature of the time? Approaching these figures as Cohenian monsters, the paper will explore what the vampires of Theosophy and similar movements can tell us about the fears, desires and values of the particular cultural moment that was early occultism.

bio

Johan Nilsson, PhD (Cand.) is a researcher at the Department of Society, Culture and Identity at Malmö University. Nilsson is currently involved in a research project studying conspiracies about Luciferians in Sweden at the turn of the twentieth century. Among his publications is *Satanism: A Reader* (Oxford University Press, 2023).

DAY 1
SATURDAY
OCT 03

16:50
- 17:20

From Astral Shells to Psychic Deposits: Redefining the Anatomy of the Unseen in the Agni Yoga Teachings

Audrius Beinorius, PhD

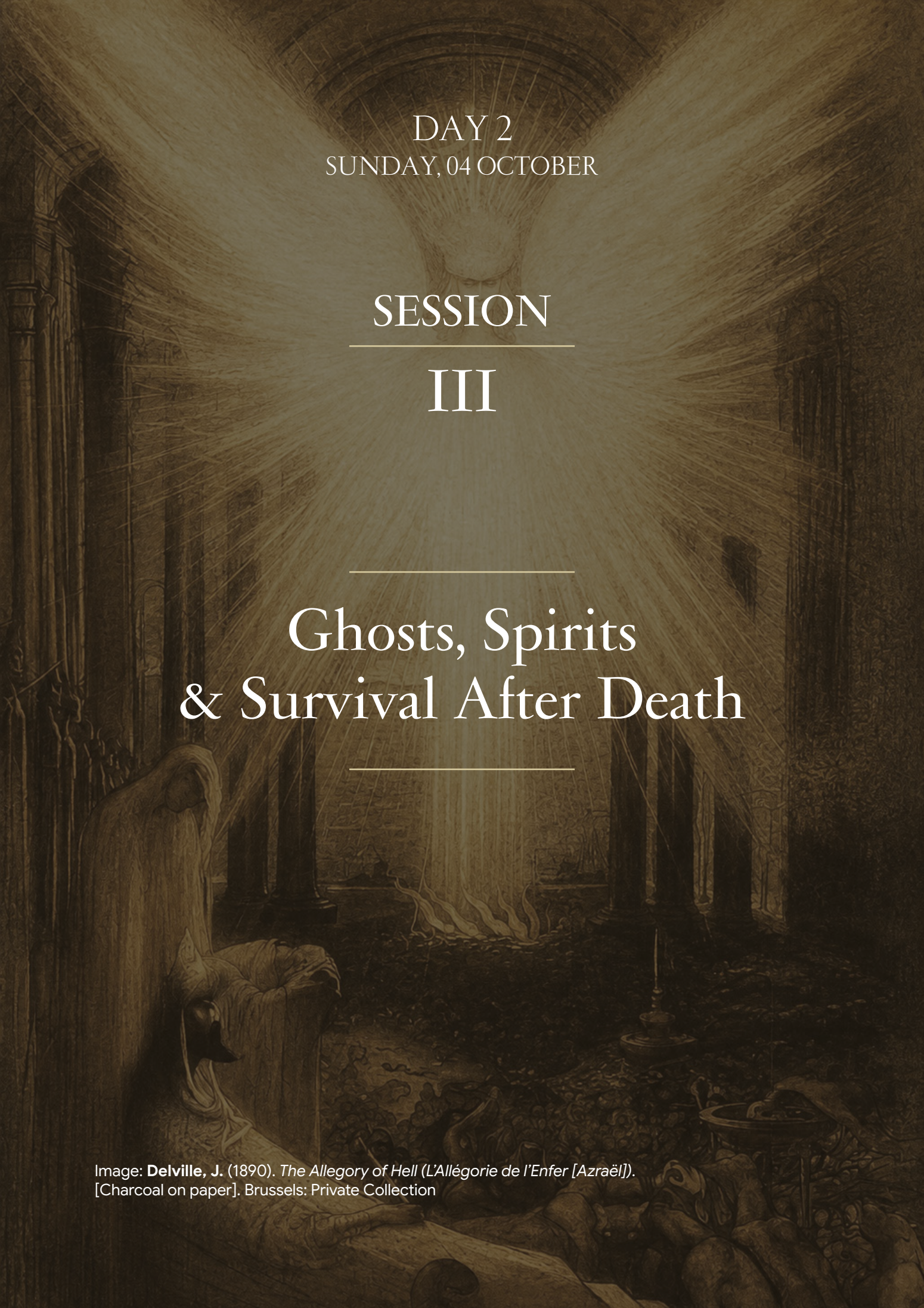
This paper examines the evolution of the “unseen world” as it transitioned from the elaborate Victorian classifications of early Blavatskian Theosophy into the streamlined, “cosmic” framework of *Agni Yoga*, as presented by Nicholas and Helena Roerich. While the early Theosophical Society focused heavily on the mechanics of *Kama-loka*—populating it with “astral shells,” “elementaries,” and the “shadows” of the deceased—the Roerichian corpus (1924–1938) reinterprets these entities through a more dynamic, energetic lens.

Central to this study is the Roerichs’ operationalization of “Psychic Energy” (*Psikhicheskaya energiya*) and the concept of “Thought-forms.” Although it is well known that the Roerich family actively practiced spiritualism, in the *Agni Yoga* series traditional “spirits” and “ghosts” are stripped of their folkloric and gothic associations. Instead, they are redefined as “spatial infections” or “coarse psychic deposits” created by human consciousness. This shift represents a significant move toward a “spiritual hygiene,” where the inhabitant of the subtle world is treated not as a superstitious specter, but as a quasi-material byproduct of ethical or unethical living.

The paper will analyze how this shift in terminology—from the vernacular and “miraculous” to the technical and “scientific”—reorganized the practitioner’s relationship with the unseen. By examining key texts of *Agni Yoga*, such as *Hierarchy*, *Infinity*, *Heart*, *AUM*, I will illustrate how the Roerichs utilized these beings as ethical boundary-markers. Ultimately, this presentation argues that the Roerichs played a pivotal role in the “modernization” of the occult world, bridging the gap between 19th-century spiritism and the 20th-century “New Age” focus on vibration, energy fields, and the “Subtle World” (*Tonkiy Mir*). It uses the specific publication dates of the *Agni Yoga* books to show a clear historical progression from the “occult revivalism” of the 1880s to the “Cosmic” focus of the 1930s.

bio

Audrius Beinorius - Habil. Dr. in Philosophy, Professor of Indian and Buddhist Studies at the Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies, Head of the India Research Center at Vilnius University, Lithuania. Academic interests include Indian philosophy and religion, esotericism studies, comparative religious studies, cultural psychology.



DAY 2
SUNDAY, 04 OCTOBER

SESSION

III

Ghosts, Spirits
& Survival After Death

Image: **Delville, J.** (1890). *The Allegory of Hell* (*L'Allégorie de l'Enfer [Azraël]*).
[Charcoal on paper]. Brussels: Private Collection

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

09:00
- 09:30

A Theosophical Perspective on Reframing the Dead: Spirits, Ghosts and After Death Presence in Modern Theosophy

Deepa Padhi, PhD

This paper examines the ways in which Modern Theosophy conceptualizes the dead, spirits, after-death presence beyond religious and materialistic frameworks. Based on the writings of H.P. Blavatsky, Annie Besant, C.W. Leadbeater, and later Theosophical thinkers, the paper examines how concepts such as the astral body, kama-loka, and post-mortem consciousness contributed to a distinctive understanding of the continuing relationship between the living and the dead.

Modern Theosophy sought to interpret ghosts, apparitions, and spirit encounters not merely as supernatural phenomena or irrational beliefs, but as experiences connected to subtle planes of existence and evolving states of consciousness. At the same time, Theosophical writing reveals an ambiguity regarding the nature of such encounters, particularly in distinguishing genuine spiritual presence from psychic projections shaped by memory, desire and emotion.

Through selected experiential narratives of author's own encounter with grief following the death of her 34 years old son, the paper investigates how personal experiences become sites for negotiating Theosophical understandings of survival after death.

Madam Blavatsky made it clear that spirits, ghosts, post-mortem presence are not the real persons who died but are the emotional remains or mental images or other subtle forms of his/her existence. Later Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater developed a complex framework of subtle bodies, astral planes, Kama-loka and evolving consciousness to explain such phenomena.

Modern Theosophy retains some ideas from Hinduism, Buddhism and Western esoteric traditions, but it interprets them through a universal and quasi-scientific theory of consciousness. Rather than seeing apparitions primarily as religious signs or divine interventions, Theosophy treats them as phenomena arising from different levels of human consciousness and subtle planes of existence.

The purpose of this paper is to show how Modern Theosophy has attempted to create a conceptual language through which such experiences could be interpreted without reducing them either to religious dogmas or to materialistic explanations.

bio

Deepa Padhi, PhD, is a retired Professor of Philosophy. As a member of the Theosophical Society since 1994, she has served the Society in different capacities at local, national and international levels. She served as International Vice-President of the Theosophical Society (Adyar) from April 2017 to March 2026.

She is actively associated with the Theosophical Order Of Service (TOS), serving as President of the Odisha Region, India and promoting initiatives in physical, mental and spiritual wellness.

She is the author of the book *Ethical Philosophy of The Bhagavad Gita* and editor of *Yes, She Can* and *Corona Pandemic: The Challenges and Lessons*. She has published number of articles on philosophy, ethics, spirituality, social issues and Theosophy.

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

09:30
- 10:00

Guests from the Unseen World: Duke Charles, Gustaf Björnram, and Spirit Communication at the Swedish Royal Court

Henrik Bogdan, PhD

On the night of 30–31 October 1782, Duke Charles of Sweden (1748–1818), the future King Charles XIII, participated in a séance in his private sanctuary at the Royal Palace in Stockholm together with the occult practitioner Gustaf Björnram (1745–1804) and a small circle of aristocratic companions. During the ritual, invisible “guests” manifested themselves through knocking sounds, luminous clouds, sparks of light, and sudden changes in temperature. Yet these entities were never clearly identified. Rather than representing distinct spirits, they emerged as unstable and negotiable presences whose existence depended upon ritual performance and the interpretative authority of the medium.

Drawing on archival sources, especially Gustaf Adolf Reuterholm’s detailed accounts of the séances, this paper examines how such spirit encounters functioned as practices of esoteric knowledge production within the Swedish royal court. Rather than treating these events as isolated expressions of occult curiosity, I analyse them as performative events through which invisible beings were rendered intelligible and spiritual authority was negotiated. I argue that the rituals did not merely attempt to communicate with invisible entities; they actively produced categories of otherworldly agency through a combination of ritual techniques, material objects, and expert mediation. Human bones, magical sigils, incense, biblical texts, and prescribed verbal formulas collectively established the conditions under which invisible entities could become perceptible and meaningful.

Particular attention will be paid to Björnram’s role as a specialist whose privileged access to the unseen world created distinctions between those capable of perceiving hidden realities and those dependent upon his interpretative expertise. In this sense, the séances may be understood as performative negotiations of spiritual authority and epistemic legitimacy.

By situating these practices within broader histories of (Western) esotericism, the paper argues that the Duke Charles–Björnram séances anticipate several features that would later become central to nineteenth-century Spiritualism. These include the emergence of the medium as an expert intermediary, the interpretation of knocks, lights, and temperature changes as evidence of non-human agency, and the development of procedures for validating communication with the unseen world. More broadly, the paper suggests that eighteenth-century Scandinavian court culture constituted an important, though often overlooked, precursor to modern attempts to classify, authenticate, and domesticate invisible beings.

bio

Henrik Bogdan, PhD, is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. His research focuses on esotericism, new religious movements, and Freemasonry. He is editor of the Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism book series and the Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities.

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

10:00
- 10:30

From Proof to Presence: Ectoplasm and the Visual Epistemology of the Unseen

Jenny Zihan Zhou, PhD (Cand.)

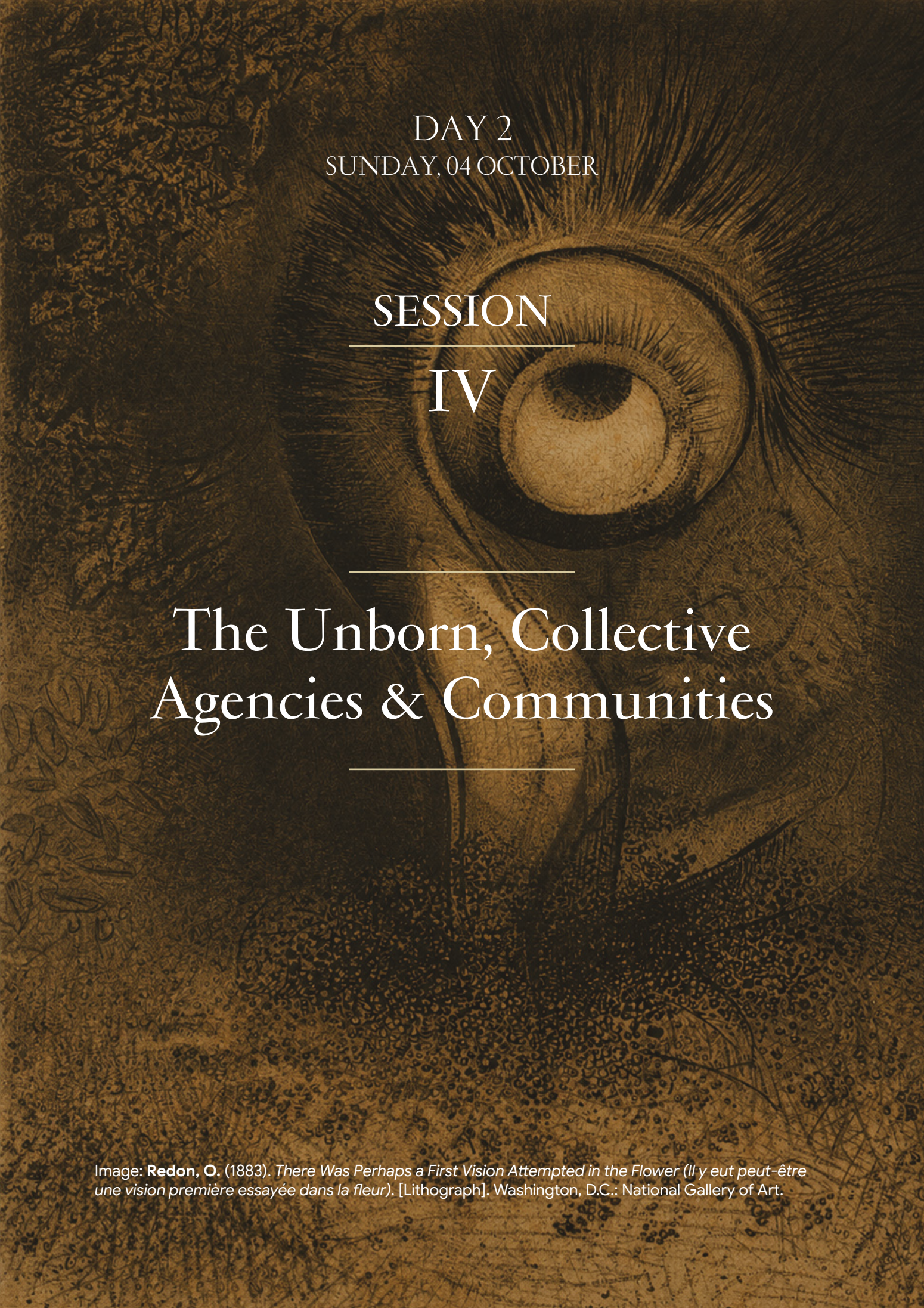
This paper examines the visual epistemology of unseen presence by tracing the historical development of ectoplasm in Spiritualism's visual culture and its contemporary reassessment in the photography of the American artist Shannon Taggart. Ectoplasm is described as a material substance extruded by mediums in séances, through which the invisible spirit or physical force is claimed to become visible. It was photographed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as evidence of psychic power. The visual epistemology here refers to how the unseen is visualised and recorded by photography as ectoplasm.

This paper combines historical contextualisation with close comparative analysis of historical and contemporary photographs. As a substantial section, it first situates ectoplasm in the historical visual culture of Spiritualism, where the visibility and credibility of this substance were constructed and contested through psychical research and photographic evidence. Following Egil Asprem's discussion of the *scientific sanitisation*, I suggest that historical ectoplasm photography demonstrates an endeavour to transform knowledge of the occult unseen into legitimate knowledge without being fully disenchanting.

I then examine how Taggart's photographic practice reassesses historical ectoplasm. Drawing on Roland Barthes' ontology of photography, particularly his description of the photograph as a form of 'ectoplasm,' a radiation of 'what-has-been,' I read Taggart's photography not as a direct record of an existing referent, but as a mediated process through which unseen presence is visualised through a series of conditions, such as darkness, movement, camera settings, and memory. In this way, Taggart's work disturbs the photographic referential force and the scientific-investigative knowledge, shifting the perception of ectoplasm from contested proof to uncertain, relational presence. Therefore, this paper argues that her work reassesses historical ectoplasm as an alternative, non-linear way of knowing the unseen, suggesting a contemporary re-enchantment of mechanical media.

bio

Jenny Zihan Zhou, is a doctoral researcher in art history and visual culture at Loughborough University. Her research focuses on modern and contemporary women artists engaging with occulture, examining how they use an occultism-informed approach to reimagine gender roles and femininity.



DAY 2
SUNDAY, 04 OCTOBER

SESSION

IV

The Unborn, Collective
Agencies & Communities

Image: Redon, O. (1883). *There Was Perhaps a First Vision Attempted in the Flower* (*Il y eut peut-être une vision première essayée dans la fleur*). [Lithograph]. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art.

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

10:50
- 11:20

The Unseen Unborn: Theosophy, Esotericism, and the History of Prenatal Culture

Nienke Groskamp, PhD (Cand.)

In 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago served as a global stage for debating the futures of industry, internationalism, and religion. At its historic World's Parliament of Religions, Theosophist Annie Besant lectured on "prenatal culture," advocating for "the right of a child to be well-born." By arguing that a mother's mental state directly shaped her offspring's moral and physical constitution, Besant echoed popular esoteric discourses of prenatal culture and voluntary motherhood. This talk demonstrates how Spiritualists, Theosophists, and New Thought authors leveraged the invisible dynamics of the womb to advocate for social change in the United States in the late nineteenth century. While earlier Spiritualists had been speculating amongst themselves about the possibility of spirit intervention in cultivating healthy embryos, this newer generation of esoteric authors focused on more practical advice for a wider audience. Beyond Besant, Chicago Spiritualists like Dr. Alice Bunker Stockham and Ida C. Craddock, who was famously married to an invisible spirit, battled federal censorship laws to distribute information on contraception and sexual pleasure, which they viewed as essential to human evolution. Operating through vast networks of printers, booksellers, and private marital counseling, these women shaped the broader history of reproductive medicine in ways that medical historians have missed. Their actionable program of human improvement translated earlier Spiritualist speculations into practical guidance for ordinary women seeking to regulate fertility and manage pregnancy and childbirth at home. Ultimately, this talk reveals the intricate, overlooked relationship between the histories of reproduction and Western esotericism.

bio

Nienke Groskamp is a PhD student in History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge. Her dissertation focuses on metaphysical religious movements and reproduction in the United States, c. 1850–1920.

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

11:20
- 11:50

From Watchers to Egregores: Collective Agency and the Transformation of Unseen Beings in Modern Esotericism

Philip A. Quadrio, PhD

The concept of the 'egregore' offers a way of approaching how unseen beings are classified and employed in modern esoteric traditions. Often described as a quasi-autonomous entity generated through shared ritual or group formation, the egregore is understood as emerging from the group while also acting back upon it. It occupies an ambiguous position between spirit-being, symbolic construct, and collective social agency. The central question, of this presentation, is how a term originally associated with intermediary beings came to designate a form of collective agency while retaining traces of its earlier status as an unseen being.

The modern egregore can be traced through a historical and conceptual development: the term derives from the Greek *egrēgoroi* ("Watchers"), referring to intermediary beings in the *Book of Enoch* associated with the transmission of knowledge between human and supra-human domains. This category reappears in nineteenth-century French literary and occult discourse, particularly in the work of Victor Hugo and Éliphas Lévi, where it moves beyond its original angelological context and is adapted into a more flexible occult concept. An explicit formulation appears in early twentieth-century esoteric practice, especially within the *Fraternitas Saturni* and the writings of Gregor A. Gregorius, where the egregore is treated as an entity mediating authority, initiation, and group identity.

Beyond this historical trajectory, the egregore will be situated within a nineteenth-century intellectual milieu shaped by German Idealist and Romantic concepts of spirit and organic unity, circulating alongside theosophical and esoteric currents. Without positing direct influence, these traditions helped make it possible to conceive collective agency as operative yet non-substantial and irreducible to its constituents. In this light, the egregore can be read as an esoteric articulation of a broader shift in how collective life is understood, through which unseen entities are reconfigured as mediating agents of practice, authority, and group formation.

bio

Dr Philip A. Quadrio is a philosopher specialising in philosophy of religion, German Idealism, and social theory. His work focuses on Hegel, Schelling, and concepts of collective agency and organic relations. He has published widely in philosophy and religion and has held teaching and research positions across several Australian universities.

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

11:50
- 12:20

The Theosophical History Journal and the International Theosophical History Conferences: Forty Years of Historical Scholarship

Leslie Price

This paper examines the origins and development of the Theosophical History movement, from the founding of *Theosophical History* journal in 1985 to the contemporary International Theosophical History Conferences. It argues that the emergence of an independent historiography of Theosophy was shaped not by institutional support, but by the tension between historical research and confessional narratives.

The immediate catalyst for the journal's creation was the controversial reception of Gregory Tillett's pioneering research on C. W. Leadbeater. The reluctance of parts of the Theosophical movement to acknowledge new historical evidence highlighted the need for an autonomous space where critical scholarship could flourish. Through the efforts of Leslie Price and a network of historians, librarians, donors and scholars, *Theosophical History* became both a journal and a community dedicated to the study of Theosophy and related currents of Western esotericism.

Drawing upon archival materials and personal recollections, this paper traces the establishment of the Theosophical History Centre, the crucial role played by James Santucci in preserving the journal, and the contributions of figures such as Ted Davy, Emmett Small, Robert Ellwood, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke and others. It highlights how these conferences fostered dialogue among scholars and members from different Theosophical traditions.

bio

Leslie Price was the founding editor of the quarterly journal "Theosophical History" in 1985 and secretary of the Theosophical History conferences held regularly in London since then. He was part of the group that re-examined the 1885 SPR report on Theosophical phenomena, culminating in Dr Vernon Harrison's SPR journal paper of April 1986, which cleared Madame Blavatsky of forging the Mahatma Letters; his own lecture to the S.P.R., "Madame Blavatsky Unveiled?" was published by the Theosophical History Centre in 1986. Leslie was the librarian of the College of Psychic Studies in London, founded under the name London Spiritualist Alliance by HPB's friend, the medium Stainton Moses, in 1884. Leslie was also the first editor of the online historical journal *Psypioneer* (2004-2016), now archived at: <http://www.iapsop.com/psypioneer>

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

12:20
- 12:50

The Imagined Communities of Theosophy

Bjarke Stanley Nielsen, PhD

Benedict Anderson famously argued that nation-states are “imagined communities”: large-scale social formations made possible by shared modes of communication and imagination. In Anderson’s account, the emergence of nationalism was closely connected to the declining ability of older religious frameworks to organize collective belonging. Subsequent scholarship, however, including the works of Philip Gorski and Adrian Hastings, has demonstrated the continued importance of religion in the formation of collective identities and communities in the modern period. Yet while scholars have highlighted the persistence and reformulation of religious communities, little attention has been paid to the role of occult imaginaries in the construction of collective belonging and community formation. Among the most influential of these religious reformulations was the Theosophical Society. Founded in 1875, the Society articulated a vision of humanity that transcended national, cultural, and religious boundaries.

This paper argues that ideas about Mahatmas, spirits, the Astral Light, and occult communication occupied a central position in the construction of a specifically theosophical imagined community. Geographical distance could be overcome, communication across vast spaces could be imagined, and dispersed individuals could conceive of themselves as participants in a shared spiritual framework. Drawing on Henry Steel Olcott’s *Old Diary Leaves*, the paper examines how narratives of occult communication, astral encounters, and invisible agencies contributed to the formation of a global imaginary. Rather than treating Mahatmas, spirits, and the Astral Light merely as objects of belief, the paper approaches them as elements within a broader imaginative framework through which theosophists could conceive of themselves as participants in a global spiritual community. In doing so, it suggests that occult imaginaries played a significant role in the formation of modern religious communities and demonstrates that imagined communities could also take religious forms beyond the national formations most commonly associated with Anderson’s concept. In fact, Theosophy demonstrates that religious ideas about occult communication, invisible agencies, and spiritual interconnectedness were not simply remnants of a declining religious worldview. Rather, they contributed to the construction of an imagined global community that offered an alternative to the nation-state as a model of collective belonging.

bio

Bjarke Stanley Nielsen, PhD, is a historian who has most recently taught the history of Christianity at the University of Copenhagen. He is a guest editor of a special issue of *Global Intellectual History*, where he has also published on Theosophical internationalism. His PhD on the Theosophical Society received the Donner Institute Research Prize in 2025.

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

12:50
- 13:20

From Etheric Beings to ETs: How the Elementals of Theosophy Contributed to Modern Ufology

Aaron French, PhD

This presentation traces how the concept of elemental beings and nature spirits in theosophy played a key role in early ufology through the work of Meade Layne (1882 – 1961), an American ufology researcher. Layne was deeply immersed in theosophy and occultism. A former college professor, he was the founder of the Borderland Sciences Research Foundation in 1945, one of the most important postwar UFO occult societies in the US, which blended theosophy, science fiction, Forteanism, and occultism. Layne was a psychic channel and claimed to receive messages from another race of beings hidden on planet Earth called the Etherians, beings made purely of etheric substance who flew around in etheric ships. When the flyer saucer craze took off in the early 1950s, Layne and his society were on the frontlines interpreting the sightings from the perspective of etheric beings. Later ufologists like Jacques Vallée and John Keel were in some ways influenced by the Borderland Sciences Research Foundation and went on to connect the etheric/elemental beings made popular by theosophy with modern ufology, especially in Vallée's book *Passport to Magonia*. Another important ufologist who worked for the government studying UFOs, J. Allen Hynek, was a follower of Rudolf Steiner and suggested privately to fellow ufologists that the ETs could be the elemental beings he had read about in Steiner's book *Theosophy*. Finally, one of the later members of the Borderland Sciences Research Foundation published a book in the 1970s again connecting UFO sightings with Steiner's "etheric science," arguing that the flying saucers were in fact another etheric lifeform living in the sky. The intersection of ufology and theosophy has received little attention. This presentation will investigate the connection through the idea of elemental and etheric beings, arguing that theosophy has had a direct influence on the development of modern ufology.

bio

Dr. Aaron French is currently a Postdoc researcher in the project "Twisting the Fabric of Space: On the Art and Politics of the Hidden" at the University of Copenhagen, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies. His first monograph *Max Weber, Rudolf Steiner, and Modern Western Esotericism: A Transcultural Approach* was published by Routledge in 2025. As part of this book project, Dr. French made extensive researches in the Max Weber Collection at the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Munich, as well as in the Rudolf Steiner Archive in Dornach, Switzerland.

DAY 2
SUNDAY, 04 OCTOBER

SESSION

V

Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Unseen

Image: **Redon, O.** (1882). *On the Horizon, the Angel of Certitude, and in the Dark Sky, a Questioning Glance* (À l'horizon, l'ange des certitudes, et dans le ciel sombre, un regard interrogateur). [Lithograph]. Rhode Island School of Design Museum, Providence, RI.

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

14:20
- 14:50

Theosophy in Japan: Technologies of Translation, Legitimation, and Visualization of the Invisible

Selma Foss Hagerup, MA (Cand.)

In the Meiji period (1868–1912), state efforts to suppress “superstition,” regulate folk religious practices, and marginalize Buddhism created an intellectual environment in which religious traditions and engagements with the invisible world required new forms of legitimation. Although the institutional presence of the Theosophical Society in Japan remained limited, the constellation of ideas associated with theosophy, spiritualism, and Western esotericism played a significant role in shaping how Japanese intellectuals reimagined the relationship between modernity and the invisible world. Practices such as telepathy, clairvoyance, and healing were reframed as compatible with modernity through their presentation as a synthesis of religion and science, while vernacular categories of spirits and deities were translated through universalized esoteric frameworks.

The paper argues that this process constituted a form of strategic occidentalism, whereby Japanese intellectuals appropriated Western esoteric practices and reinterpretations of Asian traditions in order to reconstruct their own religious heritage. This dynamic is traceable across a range of Meiji and Taishō figures. D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966) drew on theosophical and occult discourse for his global reinterpretation of Buddhism; Minakata Kumagusu (1867–1941) combined Buddhist cosmology, folklore, and Western esoteric ideas in his diagrams of the invisible dimensions inhabited by spirits and deities; other contemporaries drew upon comparable resources to validate spirit communication and cosmologies through alternative epistemological frameworks. Though their particular strategies diverged considerably, in each case esoteric influence transformed how existing spirits and deities were known more than which ones existed. Challenging narratives of modernization as rationalization and disenchantment, the paper traces how the invisible realm persisted by being reformulated rather than abandoned. In this context the lasting influence of theosophy and related currents lay not primarily in introducing new spiritual beings, but in providing methods for translating, mapping, and legitimizing the invisible world within modern Japanese society.

bio

Selma Foss Hagerup is an MA student in the Study of Religion at the University of Copenhagen with a minor in Japanese Studies. She has previously worked on global occultism, the Japanese reception of Western esotericism, Zen Buddhism, and women’s roles in the Japanese history of religion.

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

14:50
- 15:20

From Pairikā to Peri: Iranian Spirits and the Esoteric Reclassification of the Unseen

Pablo Vazquez, PhD (Cand.)

This paper examines the Theosophical reclassification of the Parī, asking how an Iranian spirit-being with Zoroastrian and Persianate histories became legible within modern Theosophical taxonomies of unseen life. In early Zoroastrian materials, the Pairikā appears as a dangerous liminal being associated with deception, spiritual peril, and the forces opposed to Asha. Across Persianate literary and religious traditions, however, this figure underwent a striking revaluation. The feared and morally suspect being became the beautiful and ambiguous Peri: an otherworldly presence poised between danger and blessing, enchantment and instruction, visionary allure and occult risk.

Rather than tracing the Parī across Western esotericism broadly or into contemporary popular culture, spaces in which they have experienced their own distinct transformations, this paper focuses specifically on its reception and reclassification within Theosophical thought. Theosophy translated such beings into a comparative occult vocabulary shaped by categories such as elementals, nature spirits, devas, astral entities, and inhabitants of subtle planes. This reclassification involved a translation of purpose and power that upheld Theosophical ontologies and provided further emic confirmation, in-being, of Theosophical spiritual historiographies. In this process, the Peri became part of a broader Theosophical effort to classify the unseen world, distinguish degrees of spiritual development, and organize nonhuman agencies according to their perceived moral, evolutionary, and cosmological status.

This paper thus argues that the Theosophical treatment of the Parī reveals a characteristic method of esoteric knowledge production. Vernacular beings are preserved only by being transformed and incorporated into universalizing systems of occult classification. The Parī, therefore, offer a focused case study in how Theosophy absorbed Zoroastrian and Persianate materials into its cosmology of subtle worlds. Attending to this reclassification clarifies how Theosophical authors negotiated spiritual authority, clairvoyant knowledge, comparative religion, and the populated architecture of the unseen in order not just to understand liminal beings but also to understand Theosophical cosmologies and their relation to other meaning-making systems.

bio

Pablo Vazquez is a PhD student in Historical and Cultural Studies of Religion at the Graduate Theological Union. Their work focuses on Zoroastrianism, Western esotericism, comparative theology, folklore, and occult reception history. Pablo is the author of *The Sacred Gathas of Zarathushtra* and *the Old Avestan Canon*.

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

15:20
- 15:50

From Western Esotericism to Mexican Indigenous Cosmologies: the Art of Leonora Carrington and Polyphasic Realism

Rebecca Jackson, MA

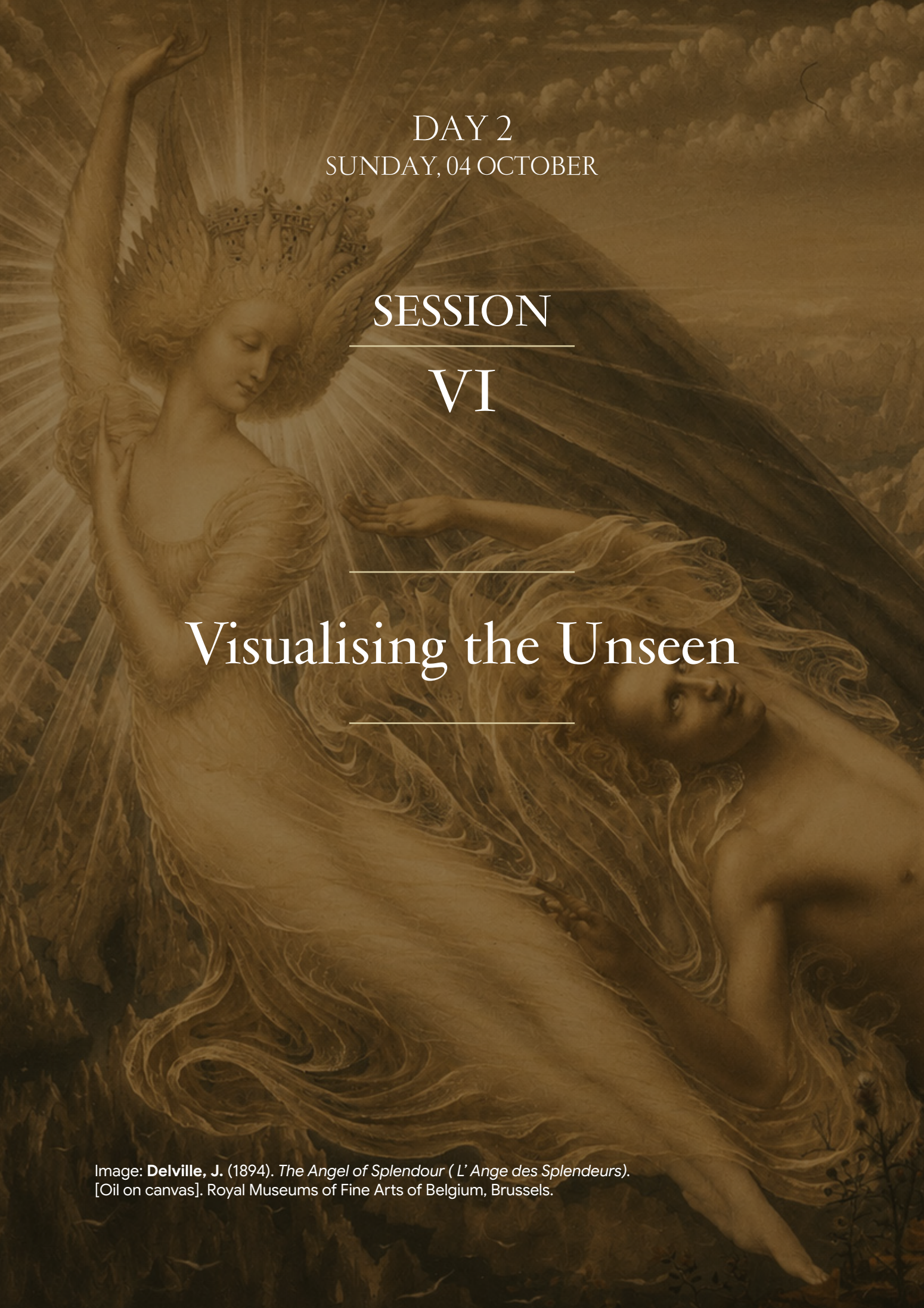
The British artist Leonora Carrington (1917–2011) was deeply immersed in the Theosophical and esoteric currents that informed twentieth-century occulture, drawing upon concepts of subtle planes, otherworldly agencies, and non-human intelligences throughout her career. Following her arrival in Mexico in 1942, she increasingly encountered alternative cosmological systems that conceptualised spirits, *naguals* and plant intelligences through markedly different ontological frameworks. This paper examines how Carrington's Mexican oeuvre mediates between two distinct traditions for understanding and classifying non-human entities: a Western occult framework inherited through Theosophy and related esoteric currents, and the Indigenous Mesoamerican cosmologies she encountered directly through extensive fieldwork.

This paper proposes an alternative framework for approaching Carrington's cosmologically plural works, entitled *polyphasic realism*. Understanding reality as accessible through multiple states of consciousness and inhabited by multiple forms of human and non-human personhood, this framework synthesises Charles D. Laughlin's account of polyphasic cultures, in which waking, dreaming, visionary, and altered states are equally legitimate modes of knowing, with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism, in which different bodies inhabit distinct worlds. Polyphasic realism thus approaches Carrington's works as visual propositions toward genuinely plural ontologies.

Through her encounters with Mesoamerican shamanic cultures, Carrington identified correspondences between Indigenous cosmology and esoteric concepts already familiar to her. Her works place these traditions into dialogue, suggesting a broader cosmological framework in which these diverse systems converge around shared assumptions regarding the animation of matter, the permeability of species boundaries, the reality of unseen intelligences, and the legitimacy of visionary states. Through an analysis of selected works produced in Mexico, this paper argues that Carrington expanded twentieth-century occult classifications of unseen beings and shapeshifting by identifying affinities with Mesoamerican conceptions of personhood, agency, and transformation, situating both within a more cosmologically plural vision of reality.

bio

Rebecca Jackson explores the intersections of art, anthropology, and the occult, and is a recent graduate of the History of Art MA at the Courtauld Institute of Art, where she specialised in Surrealism. Previously, she collaborated with scientists researching Amazonian plant medicines and their potential for inducing shared visionary experiences.

The background of the entire page is a sepia-toned reproduction of the painting 'The Angel of Splendour' (L'Ange des Splendeurs) by J. Delville. The painting depicts a winged angel with a crown, standing on the left and looking down at a reclining, nude female figure on the right. The angel's wings are large and feathered, and she wears a long, flowing, translucent robe. The reclining figure has long, wavy hair and is looking up at the angel. The scene is set against a backdrop of clouds and a landscape. The text is overlaid on the upper and middle portions of the image.

DAY 2
SUNDAY, 04 OCTOBER

SESSION

VI

Visualising the Unseen

Image: **Delville, J.** (1894). *The Angel of Splendour* (*L'Ange des Splendeurs*).
[Oil on canvas]. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

16:10
- 16:40

Visualising the Unseen: Photography as Haunted Medium in the Work of Agate Tūna

Tereza Jobová, PhD (Cand.)

This paper examines how contemporary analogue photography reinterprets historical esoteric strategies for visualising the invisible through a case study of the Latvian artist Agate Tūna. Rather than treating Theosophy merely as a point of comparison, the paper situates Tūna's artistic practice within the visual culture of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Theosophy and psychical research. It asks how historical attempts to render invisible realities visible continue to shape contemporary photographic practices and their engagement with immateriality, agency, and perception.

The paper first reconstructs the historical framework of Theosophical visual culture, focusing on the visual epistemology developed by Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater, together with the empirical ambitions of the Society for Psychical Research. Through clairvoyant illustrations, diagrams, and classificatory systems, these movements sought to make invisible phenomena—including thought-forms, elementals, and astral entities—available to observation and systematic knowledge. Rather than functioning as symbolic images, these visualisations claimed epistemic authority, presenting themselves as evidence of otherwise inaccessible realities. This historical context establishes the conceptual framework through which Tūna's artistic practice is examined.

Against this background, the paper offers a close analysis of selected analogue photographic works and series by Agate Tūna. Working with processes such as chemigrams, double exposure, and the physical manipulation of film, Tūna does not attempt to depict occult beings as stable visual forms. Instead, she transforms photography itself into a site where invisible agencies are materially negotiated. Her works foreground the unpredictable interactions between light, chemistry, gesture, chance, and technological mediation, allowing images to emerge as dynamic traces rather than transparent representations. Photography thus operates less as a recording device than as an active participant in the production of the unseen, redistributing agency across human and non-human actors. Through this case study, the paper argues that Tūna reformulates historical esoteric concerns within the material language of contemporary analogue photography.

The final section places this analysis within broader discussions of the invisible in modern and contemporary art. Drawing on media theory and Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, the paper considers photography as a haunted medium in which memory, absence, technological processes, and material residues coexist. Rather than reproducing Theosophical iconographies, Tūna reactivates the epistemological questions that underpinned them: how invisible realities become perceptible, how visual media negotiate belief and knowledge, and how photography mediates relationships between material and immaterial worlds. The paper argues that Tūna's work demonstrates how contemporary analogue photography both inherits and transforms historical esoteric models of visualising the unseen, revealing photography as a performative medium through which invisible realities remain open, unstable, and continually renegotiated.

bio

Tereza Jobová is a PhD candidate in Visual Communication at Jan Evangelista Purkyně University in Czech Republic. Her research examines contemporary spiritual art as a response to global crisis, focusing on women artists working with photography. She has presented at international conferences and seminars in Budapest, Stockholm, and Prague, and has organised the conference Phenomenon of Photography. Her work has been exhibited at institutions including Leica Gallery Prague, the Glasgow Gallery of Photography, and Gallery X in Dublin. She is a member of Sisters in Photography.

DAY 2
SUNDAY
OCT 04

16:40
- 17:10

Visualising the Unseen: Illustration, Colour, and Architectural Imagination as Evidence of Invisible Beings in Theosophical Culture

Xueqing Deng, PhD (Cand.)

This paper examines how illustration, colour theory, and architectural imagination functioned as forms of “evidence” for unseen beings in Theosophical culture. Rather than treating occult images simply as decorative supplements to esoteric doctrine, I argue that visual and spatial media played an epistemic role: they translated invisible entities into perceptible form and helped stabilize belief in subtle bodies, devas, thought-forms, and other non-ordinary beings.

The paper focuses on the aesthetic strategies through which the unseen was rendered credible. Illustration gave shape and contour to entities otherwise beyond sensory verification; colour theory linked spiritual hierarchy, vibration, and moral affect to visual codes; architectural and spatial imagination extended these ideas into immersive environments, suggesting that invisible realities could be not only pictured but also spatially organized. In this sense, media and aesthetics did not merely represent occult knowledge but actively produced its conditions of plausibility.

By analysing the visual epistemology of Theosophical culture, this paper contributes to broader discussions of how esoteric movements authorize knowledge. It asks how aesthetic form mediates between vision and belief, and how images, colours, and designed environments come to function as quasi-empirical proof of invisible worlds. More broadly, it argues that the history of Western esotericism cannot be understood only through texts and doctrines, but must also account for the aesthetic media through which unseen beings were made experientially and culturally real.

bio

Xueqing Deng is a PhD researcher in Environmental Science at the University of Antwerp. With academic training in architecture, landscape design, and urbanism, her work explores the intersections of environment, visual culture, and systems of knowledge. She is particularly interested in how aesthetic forms shape belief, perception, and cultural interpretations of invisible worlds.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

REGISTRATION

Deadline: 10 September 2026

- **STANDARD REGISTRATION:** 75 pounds per day (150 pounds for both days)
- **STUDENT REGISTRATION:** 50 pounds per day (100 pounds for both days)

The registration fee includes two coffee breaks, complimentary mineral water, and a self-service buffet lunch per day.

PAYMENT INFORMATION

- **Bank Transfer** - Please use the following bank details:
Account Beneficiary: European School of Theosophy A.M.K.E.
Bank Name: Piraeus Bank
IBAN: GR24 0172 1160 0051 1611 9697 171 • **SWIFT-BIC:** PIRBGRAA
- **PayPal** - Payments may also be made via PayPal to: eustconferences@gmail.com

Don't forget to send an email informing us about your payment in:
eusttheosophy@gmail.com

- **CONFERENCE DATES**

OPENING: Saturday, October 03, morning

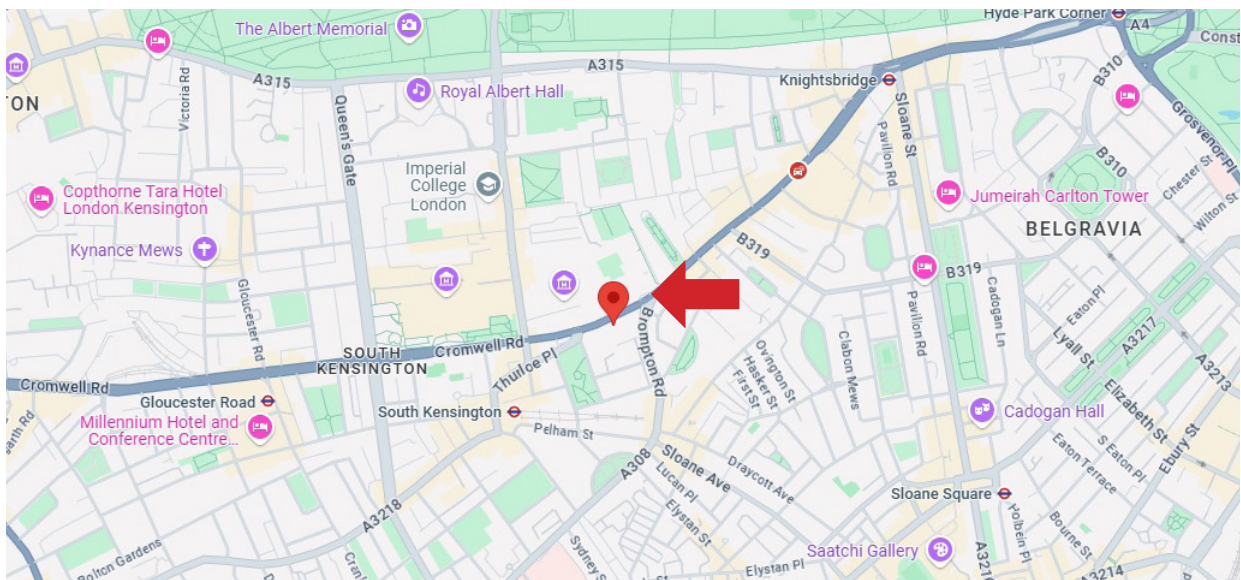
CLOSING: Sunday, October 04, afternoon.

- **VENUE**

THE REMBRANDT HOTEL IN LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM.

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- 5 minutes walking distance from South Kensington Tube Station.



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Since 1986, the International Theosophical History Conferences (ITHC) have been among the world's longest-running international academic conference series dedicated to the history of Theosophy. These gatherings bring together scholars from the Theosophical community and the wider academic world, offering an established international forum for presenting original research and exchanging ideas on Theosophical history. The conference also supports the *Theosophical History Journal*, an independent peer-reviewed publication.

For further Information, please contact:

E-mail: **eustheosophy@gmail.com**

Website: <https://theosophicalhistoryconference.eu>