

ESOTERIC CULTURES OF SCRIPTURE

17–18 DECEMBER, 2019

The Institute of Ismaili Studies

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Convenor: Toby Mayer





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The focus of the research and publications of the Qur’anic Studies Unit at The Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), London, has hitherto been on scriptural exegesis within Islam, including interpretations which may be termed, for lack of a better word, esoteric. The current workshop and projected volume involve a much wider lens, extending from esoteric interpretation in Islam to many other religious traditions. In this sense, the workshop is the first of its kind convened at the IIS.

The aim of this two-day workshop, which brings together some of the foremost scholars in their fields, is not to align itself with any given school or approach, but to investigate the complex interplay of scriptures and the esoteric intellectual cultures and spiritualities that they shape. The very definition of what ‘esoteric’ refers to, or should refer to, is disputed in scholarship; it may also be used differently in different disciplines and across the diverse traditions. Hence ‘esoteric’ is used here pragmatically and heuristically.

If scriptural authority has, *prima facie*, shaped the variety of esoteric cultures in question, those cultures in turn have *also* in some sense formed their scriptures by a process that can be described as disinterring meanings implicit within them, or as bearing out the semantic potentialities of sacred texts. This disinterring of meanings can be highly ingenious and even constitute a re-description that has sometimes been designated ‘radical interpretation’, in the sense of a deep transference of signification.

Whereas it may be argued that exoteric interpretation in principle aims to engage with such texts in a task of faithful elucidation, commentary and historical contextualisation, esoteric interpretation digests and reconfigures them in the light of doctrines that are initiatory, or in the light of the consciousness and selfhood of the individual esotericist or mystic, who is, in turn, entextualised. It is arguable that methods such as eisegesis and allegoresis need re-assessment and to be given a positive connotation, in contrast with their disparagement in certain modern scholarly discourses.

The seven panels in this workshop are not arranged chronologically or by tradition, but are grouped thematically. The event invites speakers and audience to apply a multifocal perspective to some of the ‘radical’ hermeneutical approaches to scripture across historical traditions – Abrahamic, Gnostic, Indo-Iranian – to scrutinise specific examples, juxtapose them and, ultimately, to explore correlations where possible.



Day one: Tuesday 17 December

09:00 Registration

09:30 Welcome Address
Omar Alí-de-Unzaga and Toby Mayer (IIS)

10:00–11:30 I. NEO-GNOSTIC HERMENEUTICS

Chair: Toby Mayer (IIS)

10:00 *The Revitalization of Early Shi‘i Esoteric Qur‘an Interpretation
in Yemenite Ṭayyibism: Its ‘Gnostic’ background*
Daniel De Smet (CNRS / KU Leuven)

10:45 *Parascripturalism and Esoteric Scriptural Exegesis in Medieval
Christian Dualism*
Yuri Stoyanov (SOAS)

11:30 **Break**

12:30–13:30 II. GRAPHEMES AND GRAPHICS

Chair: David Hollenberg (Oregon)

12:00 *Calligraphic Spaces and Qur‘anic Dimensionality in Sa‘d al-Dīn
Ḥamūyeh’s Kitāb al-Maḥbūb*
Elizabeth Alexandrin (Manitoba)

12:45 *Jung and the Kabbalah*
Pinchas Giller (American Jewish University)

13:30 **Lunch**



14:30–16:00 III. SOMATIC APPROACHES

Chair: David B. Gray (Santa Clara University, CA)

14:30 *Physical Yoga in Texts and Practice*
James Mallinson (SOAS)

15:15 *Platonic Tantra: The Theurgists of Late Antiquity*
Gregory Shaw (Stonehill College, MA)

16:00 Coffee Break

16:30–18:00 IV. LETTRIC DIMENSIONS

Chair: Orkhan Mir-Kasimov (IIS)

16:30 *Four Strategies of Esoteric Interpretations in Jewish Mysticism*
Moshe Idel (Hebrew University)

17:15 *Nuṣayrī Views of Scripture and its Interpretation*
David Hollenberg (Oregon)

18:30 Participants' Dinner



Day two: Wednesday 18 December

09:30–11:00 V. SCRIPTURAL ADAPTION IN TRADITIONS OF TRANSFORMATION

Chair: James Mallinson (SOAS)

09:30 *Alchemical Tafsīr: Qur'anic Hermeneutics in the Shudhūr al-Dhahab and its Commentaries*
Richard Todd (Birmingham)

10:15 *Unending Revelations: Commentary as a Creative Force in Esoteric Traditions*
David B. Gray (Santa Clara University, CA)

11:00 **Break**

11:30–13:00 VI. ALLEGORY AND ALLEGORESIS

Chair: Elizabeth Alexandrin (Manitoba)

11:30 *The Hermeneutic of Parables and Symbols in Shahrastānī's Keys to the Arcana*
Toby Mayer (IIS)

12:15 *Esoteric Interpretations of Scripture in Philo and Hellenistic Judaism, Clement and Origen*
Ilaria Ramelli (Angelicum University)

13:00 **Lunch**



14:00–15:30 VII. ONTOLOGICAL AND UNITIVE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

Chair: Richard Todd (Birmingham)

14:00 *Early Modern Shi‘i-Sufi Exegesis and the Akbarian Legacy: Waḥdat al-Wujūd and Exegesis as Spiritual Practice in Sulṭān ‘Alī Shāh’s Qur’anic Commentary*
Alessandro Cancian (IIS)

14:45 *How Meister Eckhart Rewrites the Bible*
Bernard McGinn (Chicago)

15:30 Break

16:00–17:00 VIII. ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Chair: Toby Mayer (IIS)

17:00 Closing Remarks



ABSTRACTS AND BIOGRAPHIES

ELIZABETH ALEXANDRIN

Calligraphic Spaces and Qur'anic Dimensionality in Sa'd al-Dīn Ḥamūyeh's *Kitāb al-Maḥbūb*

This paper outlines some circular and sequenced readings of two diagrams from Sa'd al-Dīn Ḥamūyeh's *Kitāb al-Maḥbūb*. As examples of calligraphic spaces, employing frames of Qur'anic passages, in both reading and recitation, these two schemata give form to one of Ḥamūyeh's central questions on the rising to visibility of the beloved (*maḥbūb*) as the friend of God (*walī Allāh*). In the *Kitāb al-Maḥbūb*, the *Bismillāh* with the Qur'anic touchstone, 'Indeed I am Allāh' (*innī anā Allāh*, Q. 20:14), holds a central place in his mystical commentaries, since it is composed of three *alif* and two *nūn*. In two halves, side by side, or it could be said, doubled, the two *nūn* and three *alif* of Q. 20:14 parallel the three parts and syllables of *Bismillāh*. In this respect, some of Ḥamūyeh's other unedited works, such as the *Baḥr al-ma'ānī* and *Sajanjal al-arwāḥ*, can be treated as separate case studies in order to situate Ḥamūyeh's conceptions of hidden knowledge, which suggest Qur'anic dimensionality through diagrammatic schema. Even though there are other levels of discourse and discussion as well as other diagrams in the *Kitāb al-Maḥbūb*, as well as in his short treatises, what follows in this study gives preference to the schemata framed by the Qur'anic verses Q. 20:14 and Q. 2:255.

Elizabeth Alexandrin is an Associate Professor of Islamic Studies in the Department of Religion and Senior Fellow at St. John's College, University of Manitoba (Canada). Her first monograph is *Walāyah in the Fāṭimid Ismā'īlī Tradition* (2017). With Paul Ballanfat (co-investigator, Galatasaray University/Université Jean Moulin Lyon 3) and the support of a SSHRC Insight Development Grant, she is co-editing Sa'd al-Dīn Ḥamūyeh's *Kitāb al-Maḥbūb*. Her current book project focuses on dreaming and sleeping in thirteenth–fourteenth-century Muslim societies, with a particular focus on Kubravī Sufī texts and treatises.

ALESSANDRO CANSIAN

Early Modern Shi'i-Sufi Exegesis and the Akbarian Legacy: *Waḥdat al-wujūd* and Exegesis as Spiritual Practice in Sulṭān 'Alī Shāh's Qur'anic Commentary

Written and published in the last years of the nineteenth century, the hitherto understudied Qur'anic commentary *Bayān al-sa'āda fī maqāmāt al-'ibāda* is a central work in the early modern intellectual and religious history of Iran and Shi'i Islam. This *tafsīr* is crucial in two respects: because of the influence (often hidden) it exerted on subsequent Qur'anic exegesis in Iran, coinciding with a revival in *tafsīr* writing among Twelver Shi'i authors; and because it represents tangible evidence of the Ni'matullāhī order's attempt to claim a legitimate place for Sufism



within Twelver Shi‘i orthodoxy and simultaneously constitutes a vocal testimony of the birth (or reshaping) of a Shi‘i Sufi *ṭarīqa* with all the features of an organised order as well of Twelver Shi‘i doctrine.

Sultān ‘Alī Shāh was a man of many talents. Eponym of the Gunābādī branch of the Ni‘matullāhī order, he was an authorised *mujtahid* trained at the hands of some of the most authoritative Shi‘i ‘*ulamā*’ of his time, a philosopher in the Akbarian/Sadrian tradition who studied with the superstar Qājar philosopher Mullā Hādī Sabzawārī (d. 1873) and a master of mysticism who drew abundantly from the classical tradition of Persian and Persianate Sufism. All these streams of inspiration are evident in his Qur’anic commentary. In this presentation, I will focus on those aspects of his exegetical work that reveal his connection with the intellectual tradition established by Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) and spearheaded by his direct and indirect disciples, with specific reference to those passages in the *tafsīr* that refer or allude to the notion of ‘unity of the existent’ (*waḥdat al-wujūd*).

Alessandro Cancian is Senior Research Associate at the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London, where he works on Shi‘i Sufism, Qur’anic Exegesis and the intellectual and religious history of pre-modern Iran. A historian of religions and anthropologist by formation, he has published books and articles on religious education in Shi‘i Islam, Shi‘i Sufism and Qur’anic exegesis. He edited *Approaches to the Qur’an in Contemporary Iran* (2019) and his monograph on early modern Shi‘i Sufi Qur’anic exegesis is due to be published in 2020. He is an amateur perfumer and he is translating a nineteenth-century treatise on perfume-making written by an Iranian Shaykhī master.

DANIEL DE SMET

The Revitalization of Early Shi‘i Esoteric Qur’an interpretation in Yemenite Ṭayyibism: Its ‘Gnostic’ Background

In order to legitimize their doctrines about cosmology, imamology and eschatology, Ṭayyibī authors often quote esoteric interpretations of Qur’anic verses attributed to the first Shi‘i Imams by their ‘radical’ followers, such as al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ju‘fi or Muḥammad b. Sinān. These readings of the Qur’an are influenced by ‘heterodox’ interpretations of previous scriptures, as found in Gnostic and Manichaean sources. My aim is to present, as a case study, some samples of this type of *ta’wīl* taken from the works of Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī, Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Ḥārithī and Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn.

Daniel De Smet is Directeur de recherche at the French National Centre of Scientific Research (CNRS), leads the research unit ‘Livres sacrés: Canons et hétérodoxies’ at the Laboratoire d’Études sur les Monothéismes (LEM, UMR 8584) in Villejuif, near Paris. He also teaches Arabic philosophy at the University of Leuven (KUL), Belgium. His main fields of interest are Shi‘i Islam (in particular Ismailism), Arabic Neoplatonism and Islamic philosophy. He is the author of *La Quiétude de l’Intellect: Néoplatonisme et gnose ismaélienne dans l’œuvre de Ḥamīd ad-Dīn al-Kirmānī (Xe/XIe s.)* ((1995); *Empedocles Arabus: Une lecture néoplatonicienne tardive* (1998); *Les Épîtres sacrées des Druzes:*



Rasā'il al-Hikma, Volumes 1 et 2, Introduction, édition critique et traduction annotée des traités attribués à Hamza b. 'Alī et à Ismā'il at-Tamīmī (2007); *La philosophie ismaélienne: Un ésotérisme chiite entre néoplatonisme et gnose* (2012); and co-editor of *Controverses sur les écritures canoniques de l'islam* (2014) (with Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi); *L'ésotérisme shi'ite, ses racines et ses prolongements* (2016) (with Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, et al.).

PINCHAS GILLER

Jung and the Kabbalah

The connection between Jung's archetypes of the collective unconscious and the classical theosophical kabbalah of the Zohar and the fifteenth-century Tsfat kabbalists lies in the role of the symbol. In this way, Kabbalah is analogous to Tantra, Alchemy and Catholicism as a source of esoteric vocabulary. Classical Kabbalah made use of symbolism as part of its spiritual programme: the spiritual contemplation of the overlapping symbols of the phenomenal world. This paper will address the emergence of mandala symbolism in the manuscript meditation prayer books of eighteenth-century Poland. The second area of interest will be the occurrence of the feminine archetype in the theosophical Kabbalah of the twelfth–seventeenth centuries, as it appears in the lexicon tradition that emerged in that time period. This pattern of occurrence will be compared to the Mother Archetype as portrayed by Jung's student, Erich Neumann, among others.

Pinchas Giller is chairman of the Jewish Studies department of the American Jewish University, Los Angeles. He was brought up in Cocoa Beach, Florida. Rabbi Giller was ordained at Yeshiva University and received his doctorate at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley. He has written extensively on Judaism and his field of expertise, Jewish Mysticism or Kabbalah. He has written four books, *The Enlightened Will Shine: Symbolism and Theurgy in the Later Strata of the Zohar* (1993), *Reading the Zohar* (2000), *Shalom Shar'abi and the Kabbalists of Beit El* (2000) and *Kabbalah: A Guide for the Perplexed* (forthcoming). He has also edited a nineteenth-century Bible commentary, *Be'er Moshe al ha-Torah*, by R. Moshe ha-Cohen Reicherson (2015).

DAVID B. GRAY

Unending Revelations: Commentary as a Creative Force in Esoteric Traditions

Commentary is an unavoidable requisite in any esoteric tradition, namely a tradition that claims to preserve secrets concerning ultimate matters. These secrets may be partially disclosed in scriptures preserved by the tradition and may also be the subject of carefully preserved traditions of secret oral or written instructions. However they may be preserved, these cryptic instructions require explanation by a master to his or her disciples to be properly understood. Commentary is thus an important way in which key teachings are transmitted from one generation to the next. And since these secret teachings are also important markers of identity for these traditions, this commentary provides



traditions with an important means of establishing and maintaining their identities over time. They also provide a way for traditions to adapt to changing conditions. Since the secret teachings about ultimate things can never be fully and openly disclosed, their revelation is an ongoing, organic process. This continuing revelation provides traditions with the means of adapting to new circumstances by reinterpreting their tradition's teachings accordingly. This gives esoteric traditions tremendous flexibility, provided that the living exegetical tradition is maintained. To argue this, I will explore the creative power of commentary, focusing on the Buddhist esoteric tradition focusing on the Cakrasaṃvara Tantra, with particular reference to how commentary was an essential tool in the transmission of this tradition from India to Tibet.

David B. Gray is the Bernard J. Hanley Professor of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University, CA, where he teaches a wide range of Asian religions courses. His research explores the development of tantric Buddhist traditions in South Asia and their dissemination in Tibet and East Asia, with a focus on the Yoginītantras, a genre of Buddhist tantric literature that focused on female deities and yogic practices involving the subtle body. His publications include numerous journal articles and book chapters, an edited volume, as well as *The Cakrasaṃvara Tantra: A Study and Annotated Translation* (2007), *The Cakrasaṃvara Tantra: Editions of the Sanskrit and Tibetan Texts Translation* (2012), *Illumination of the Hidden Meaning (Chapters 1–24): Maṇḍala, Mantra and the Cult of the Yoginīs* (2017) and *Illumination of the Hidden Meaning, Part II: Chapters 25–51, Yogic Vows, Conduct and Ritual Practice* (2019).

DAVID HOLLENBERG

Nuṣayrī Views of Scripture and its Interpretation

This paper explores some ways early Nuṣayrī savants discussed, invoked and interpreted scripture. Despite maintaining doctrines far afield from other Shi‘i groups, Nuṣayrī savants adduce the Qur’an frequently and apply to it typological and allegorical interpretations in a manner similar to that of Imami and Ismaili authors. However, such similarities belie discussions of revelation (*waḥy*) and scripture (*kitāb*) in purely metaphysical sections of these same sources. There, Nuṣayrī savants debated precisely how scripture reflected personal and alphabetic manifestations of the godhead. Investigating *al-Risāla al-Rastbāshiyya* by Ibn Ḥamdān al-Khaṣībī (fl. tenth century), *Kitāb ḥāwī al-asrār* by Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Jillī (fl. late tenth century) and *Manhaj al-‘ilm wa’l-bayān wa nuzhat al-samā’ wa’l-‘iyān* by Muḥammad b. ‘Alī (‘Ismat al-Dawla; fl. eleventh century), this paper situates the Nuṣayrī practice of Qur’an exegesis within other streams of Shi‘i interpretation, but locates different Nuṣayrī theories of revelation within the broader metaphysical debates that characterized tenth- and eleventh-century Nuṣayrism.

David Hollenberg is Associate Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Oregon. His book *Beyond the Qur’an: Ismā‘īlī Ta’wīl and the Secrets of the Prophets* (2016) offered the first monograph on the esoteric hermeneutical literature, *ta’wīl*. With co-director Mushegh Asatryan, he



recently received a three-year National Endowment for the Humanities Scholarly Editions and Translations grant to produce an edition and translation of 'Ismat al-Dawla's (d. 1058) *Manhaj al-'ilm wa'l-bayān wa nuzhat al-samā' wa'l-'iyān* (The Method of Knowledge and Clarification and the Pleasure of Auditing and Witnessing), an important unpublished Nuṣayrī doctrinal source.

MOSHE IDEL

Four Strategies of Esoteric Interpretations in Jewish Mysticism

During the 13th century, a variety of treatises where elaborate descriptions of exegetical techniques, in Jewish literature in Europe, many of them unknown earlier, intended to extract esoteric meanings in the Hebrew Bible, a phenomenon I designate as arcanizations of Judaism. The most important of them are [a] allegorical interpretations, based on Neoaristotelian and Neoplatonic philosophies: [b] symbolic interpretations grounded in various theosophical systems [c] combinatory techniques, dealing with permutations of letters and [d] mathematical calculations of valences of letters of a certain words, especially gematria. In my lecture I shall analyze the reasons for the concomitant emergence of those techniques. Furthermore, I shall discuss the impact of an Ismaili simile for the need of both exoteric and esoteric interpretation – as two eyes – on a Kabbalistic treatise, found mainly in a manuscript.

Moshe Idel is Max Cooper Professor in Jewish Thought, Emeritus, Department of Jewish Thought, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and Senior Researcher at the Shalom Hartman Institute. Born in 1947 in Romania, he arrived in 1963 to Israel and lectured since 1975 at the Hebrew University. He received the Israel Prize for Jewish Thought in 1999, the Emmet Prize in 2002 and is member of the Israeli Academy since 2006. Served as visiting Professor at the JTS of America in New York, UCLA, Yale, Harvard, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania and College de France. Among his publications are *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (1988), *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (2002) and *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (2007).

JAMES MALLINSON

Physical Yoga in Texts and Practice

Indian religions are avowedly religions of the book(s). Study of India's yoga-practising traditions, however, forces us to reappraise this. For at least 1,500 years, the physical practices undertaken by yogis, rigorous methods of self-mortification, were not written down but passed on orally. About a thousand years ago new practices which cultivated the body in order to use it for magical and soteriological ends were introduced and these were codified in Sanskrit texts. These early physical texts present coherent yoga methods, but from the fifteenth-century Sanskrit yoga texts became increasingly derivative, scholastic and, with some exceptions, divorced from practice, while the practising yogi traditions continued to express themselves in orally transmitted vernacular compositions. This paper will use two examples of practices first taught in texts of the early



Sanskrit corpus to show how the later scholastic tradition misunderstood earlier teachings while vernacular texts preserved them, albeit changing their esoteric metaphors to suit new audiences.

James Mallinson is Reader in Indology and Yoga Studies at SOAS, University of London. His research focuses on the history and current traditional practice of yoga and his primary methods are philology, ethnography and art history. Dr Mallinson is currently leading a five-year six-person project on the history of haṭhayoga funded by the European Research Council. The project's core outputs will be ten critical editions of Sanskrit texts on physical yoga and four monographs on its history and current practice. Dr Mallinson's publications include *Roots of Yoga* (2017), co-authored with Mark Singleton and *The Khecarīvidyā of Ādinātha, a Critical Edition and Annotated Translation of an Early Text on Haṭhayoga* (2007).

TOBY MAYER

The Hermeneutic of Parables and Symbols in Shahrastānī's *Keys to the Arcana*

Widely known for his great doxography, *The Book of Religions and Sects* and for his treatise on Ash'arite theology, *The Furthest Steps in the Discipline of Kalām*, the higher thought of Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153) is now taken as evidence that he was crypto-Ismaili. It is his esoteric, Ismaili-influenced teachings which are to the fore in his incomplete Qur'an commentary, particularly in the sections on scriptural arcana (*asrār al-āyāt*). The paper will discuss examples of Shahrastānī's treatment of Qur'anic allegories, depictions of the afterlife and his parallelism-based hermeneutic of Qur'anic episodes concerning the ancient Israelites. What emerges from such examples is that his trend is to read these aspects of scripture in terms of a transposed literalism and not simply allegorically.

Toby Mayer is currently a Senior Research Associate at the Institute of Ismaili Studies. He gained his doctorate at the University of Oxford on commentaries on Avicenna's *Allusions (al-Ishārāt)* and went on to teach courses on medieval Muslim philosophy and mysticism at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, and subsequently in the graduate programme at the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London. His publications include *Keys to the Arcana: Shahrastānī's Esoteric Commentary on the Qur'an* (2009) and two books co-authored with Wilferd Madelung: *Struggling with the Philosopher: A Refutation of Avicenna's Metaphysics* (2001) and *Avicenna's Allegory on the Soul: An Ismaili Interpretation* (2016).

BERNARD MCGINN

How Meister Eckhart Rewrites the Bible

Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1328) was one of the most original and challenging exegetes in the history of Christianity. Eckhart's mystical thinking (some aspects of which were condemned by papal bull in 1329) had an exegetical basis in the interpretation of the Bible found in both his Latin and German works. Eckhart,



however, ‘re-wrote’ the Bible from within, that is, on the basis of his claim to deep union with the divine author. Using select examples from the Latin commentaries and the German sermons, this talk will explore how Eckhart ‘rewrote’ the Bible to convey his mystical message.

Bernard McGinn is the Naomi Shenstone Donnelley Professor Emeritus at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, where he taught for thirty-four years before retiring in 2003. A scholar of patristic and medieval Christian theology, McGinn has been particularly interested in apocalyptic traditions and the history of mysticism.

ILARIA RAMELLI

Esoteric Interpretations of Scripture in Philo and Hellenistic Judaism, Clement and Origen

I shall investigate some important examples of esoteric interpretation of Scripture in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity: Philo, Essenes and Therapeutae, Clement and Origen. I shall point out both Philo’s historical and allegorical reading of the Bible, his criticism of exclusively allegorical readings of Scripture by Hellenistic Jewish exegetes and his own possible esoteric anthropological thought based on the Bible. I shall discuss recent scholarship concerning the Qumran group, Essenes and Therapeutae as societies based on esoteric reading of Scripture and esoteric practices; I shall link this characterisation to their asceticism and pursuit of justice. I shall investigate Clement’s use of allegoresis in the interpretation of Scripture, the ‘secrecy’ motivation he offers for this kind of reading, his use of mystery terminology and the link with apophaticism and the *vexata quaestio* of his (?) *Letter to Theodore* on the Secret/Mystical Gospel of Mark. I shall examine Origen’s apophaticism, his allegorical/noetic/spiritual interpretation of Scripture and his valuing of both the myths of Plato and the myths of Scripture qua esoteric and his stance towards the doctrine of metempsychosis, first accepted as a working hypothesis, but later rejected firmly in favour of his Christian doctrine of ensoulment.

Illaria Ramelli FRHistS, PhD, Dr h.c., Dr.habil.mult., is full Professor of Theology and K.Britt endowed Chair (Angelicum University), Senior Research Fellow at Durham University and Humboldt-Forschungspreis Senior Fellow at Erfurt University, MWK. She has been Professor of Roman History, Fellow in Ancient Philosophy (Catholic University, 2003–present), Senior Visiting Professor of Greek Thought at Harvard, Senior Fellow at Corpus Christi, University of Oxford, at Princeton University and for earlier fellowships at Durham, Erfurt, etc., and Fowler Hamilton Fellow at Christ Church, University of Oxford. She has given invited lectures and seminars, main and public lectures and organised advanced seminars, conferences and workshops, in many universities in the UK, Europe, North America and Israel. She serves on directive, editorial and advisory boards of major academic series and journals and has never interrupted intense academic research on ancient and patristic philosophy and theology for twenty-five years.



GREGORY SHAW

Platonic Tantra: The Theurgists of Late Antiquity

Scholarship on Iamblichean theurgy has changed profoundly in the last thirty years. No longer dismissed as an aberration of Platonic philosophy, theurgy is now recognized by most scholars as a complement to – even culmination of – the disciplines of Platonism. Yet resistance to recognizing the implications of living in a theurgic cosmos continues. Despite the fact that the gods of theurgy were understood to penetrate the material realm and theurgists embodied these gods in ritual, we continue to imagine the goal of theurgy as escaping from matter and ascending to noetic fire. An unconscious dualism influences our thinking. Theurgists were athletes of divine fire, but their fire is here, on earth, and the gods are revealed, Iamblichus says, ‘through our physical eyes’. Iamblichean theurgy represents a radically non-dual orientation that incorporates the body into divine experience. In this sense, theurgy closely resembles the tantric non-dualism of South Asian yoga traditions. I will explore the consequences of living in a non-dual cosmos and present Platonic theurgy as the Tantra of the West.

Gregory Shaw is Professor of Religious Studies at Stonehill College, MA. He is the author of *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (1995) and a number of articles on the later Neoplatonists and on Iamblichus in particular. He is currently working on a manuscript that explores the embodied aspects of later Platonic philosophy and its similarity to the tantric traditions of South Asia.

YURI STOYANOV

Parascripturalism and Esoteric Scriptural Exegesis in Medieval Christian Dualism

The study of the use and exegesis of scriptural and parascriptural material in medieval Christian dualism (namely, Paulicianism, Bogomilism and related groups in the Eastern Christendom, as well as Catharism in Western Christendom) was initiated in earnest with the publication of important source material, demonstrating Eastern Christian dualism’s complex intertextual relationships with diverse and widely disseminated Slavo-Byzantine pseudepigraphic literature. The role and importance of various earlier pseudepigraphic and parabiblical traditions in the formation and elaboration of some of Eastern Christian dualism’s principal cosmological, diabolical, Christological and eschatological narratives and notions also crucially influenced the types of hermeneutics medieval dualist heretics applied to scriptural and parascriptural texts to authenticate and illustrate their belief systems. The appropriation of such borrowed pseudepigraphic material could be combined with creative exegesis of the New Testament and largely determined Christian dualist theological and exegetical stances towards the Old Testament. The influx of parascriptural narratives in medieval Christian dualism stimulated the emergence of a kind of



theological elite among the highest sectarian class of the *perfecti* in which such traditions could be reworked and even secreted as arcane teachings for a select use, forming the core of advanced theological teachings, a dualist *historia arcana*, comprising a system of allegorical scriptural interpretation. There are also indications that the dualist *perfecti/teleoi* engaged in and cultivated practices of visionary mysticism and heavenly ascent related to their exegetical reading of scriptural and parascriptural narratives. Such interdependencies between sectarian exegesis (revealing higher and hidden meanings) and ritual/liturgy highlight again the need to explore in greater depth the evolving interrelations between medieval biblical interpretative strategies and pseudepigraphy as well as the consequent transformations of heavenly ascent apocalypticism and visionary and experiential mysticism in medieval heterodox settings.

Yuri Stoyanov (PhD, Warburg Institute, University of London) is based at SOAS, University of London, and is a Senior Fellow at the Albright Institute, Jerusalem. His past assignments include Oxford, British Academy and Wingate fellowships and Directorship of the British Academy's Kenyon Institute in Jerusalem. He has published on interactions between Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam and has acted as a visiting lecturer and professor at several universities in Europe and Asia. His publications include English-language books such as *The Hidden Tradition in Europe* (1994), *The Other God* (2000), *Defenders and Enemies of the True Cross* (2011) and edited volumes.

RICHARD TODD

Alchemical *Tafsīr*: Qur'anic hermeneutics in the *Shudhūr al-Dhahab* and its Commentaries

Alongside the codenames and esoteric symbols inherited from Graeco-Egyptian antiquity, the later Arabic alchemical tradition adopted Qur'anic motifs too: from the blessed olive tree of the famous Light verse to the burning bush and Moses' staff. This interweaving of scripture and alchemical theory is especially noticeable in one of the major works in the post-Jābirian corpus, the *Shudhūr al-dhahab* (*Shards of Gold*) by the Moroccan poet Ibn Arfa' Ra's (d. 593/1197), as well as in the body of commentaries to which it gave rise.

But was this simply an artificial device or did Ibn Arfa' Ra's and his commentators envisage an intrinsic connection between the Qur'anic text and the art of transmutation? Focusing on this unexplored strand of the Islamic exegetical tradition, this paper examines the premises put forward by Muslim alchemists in support of an alchemical reading of scripture.

Richard Todd has taught classical Arabic literature and Islamic cultural history at Durham University, the American University of Sharjah and the University of Edinburgh, since completing his PhD at the University of Oxford. In 2017, he joined the School of Philosophy, Theology and Religion at the University of Birmingham, where he teaches Islamic philosophy. He is the author of *The Sufi Doctrine of Man: Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī's Metaphysical Anthropology* (2014) and co-edits the Taylor & Francis journal *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. His current publication projects include the forthcoming monographs, *Sufism and Philosophy: Historical Interactions and Crosspollinations* and *A History of Arabic Alchemy*.



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