

Hermes Explains: Waking Up to Western Esotericism

Thirty Red Pills that Challenge the History of Western Culture



Based on the anthology edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Peter J. Forshaw, and Marco Pasi.

Swallow the Red Pill

ACCEPTED TRUTHS

- ❑ Rationality
- ❑ Secularism
- ❑ Linear Progress
- ❑ Disenchantment



THE HOOK: In 1999, *The Matrix* popularized the “Red Pill”—a choice to wake up from a comfortable illusion. The study of Western Esotericism offers the same choice regarding our history.

THE INSIGHT: The “Grand Narratives” of Western culture—that we are purely rational, scientific, and secular—are incomplete. To study esotericism is to access the “rejected knowledge” of the Academy.

“To question widely accepted truths rather than just accept them at face value is what the search for knowledge is and should be all about.” — Hanegraaff, Forshaw & Pasi

The Myth of a Disenchanted World



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:

“We live in a disenchanted world.”

Modernity (Industrialization, Bureaucracy, Science) has supposedly purged the world of magic, mystery, and spirits.

ESOTERIC REALITY:

“Modernity is deeply enchanted.”

Polls consistently show 40–50% of people in “rational” post-industrial societies believe in paranormal phenomena. Science and magic co-evolved: from Quantum Mysticism to Vitalism.



KEY TERM: Occulture — The hidden spiritual current pulsing through the heart of modern society.

Deconstructing Origins: Hermes & The Gnostics



The Projection



The Seekers
(Not a Church)

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:

Hermes was a pre-Christian prophet and Gnosticism was a rival religion.

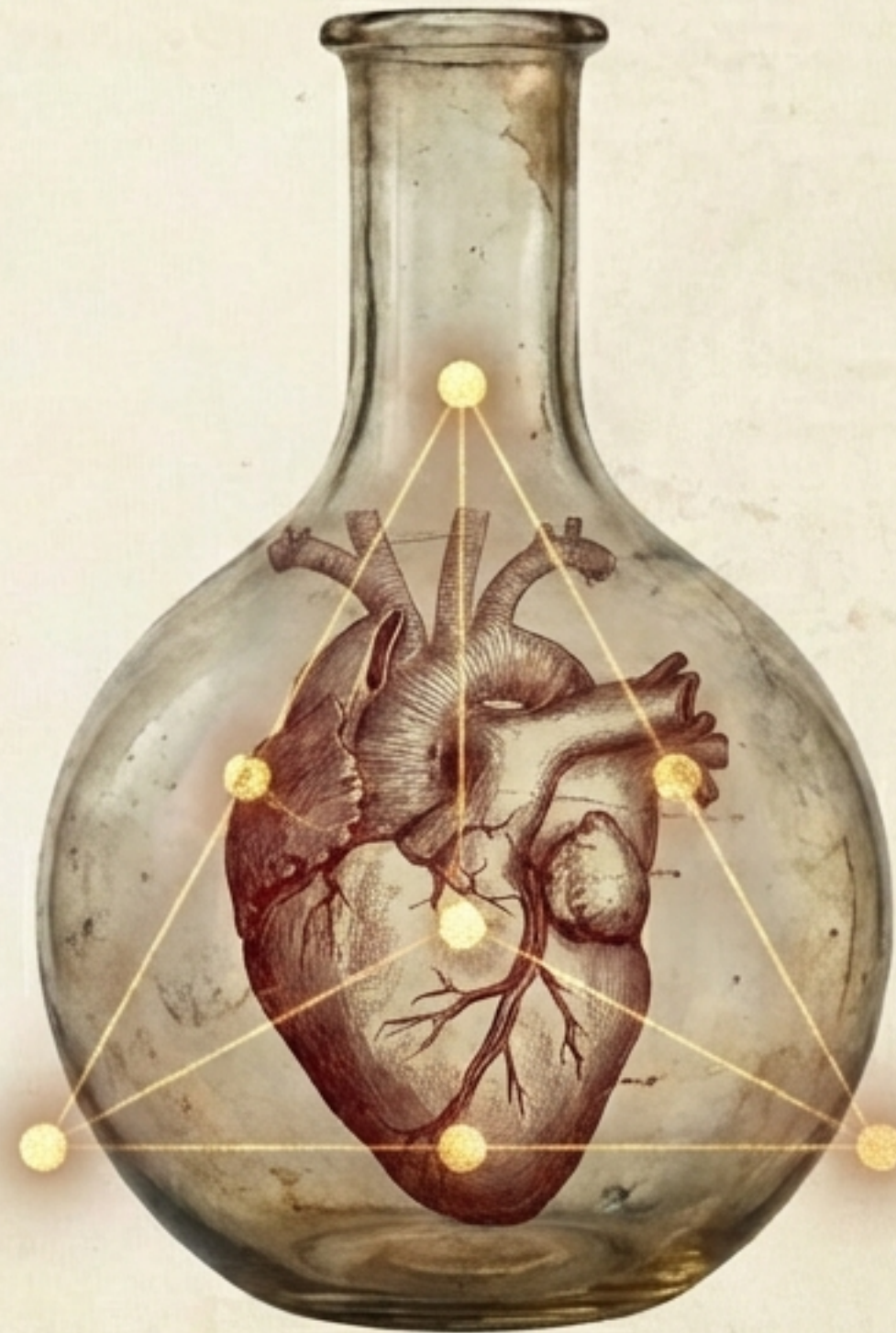
ESOTERIC REALITY: Authority is a construct.

1. Hermes Trismegistus never existed. He was a “mythical authority” constructed by the Late Pagan Mind to validate wisdom.
2. There was no “Gnostic Church.” Gnosticism is a modern category applied to a fluid spectrum of early Christian intellectuals seeking direct knowledge (gnosis).

The Science of the Soul (Alchemy & Numbers)

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:

Math is for counting
and Alchemy is just
failed chemistry.



ESOTERIC REALITY:

Science of the Soul.

NUMBERS: For pre-moderns like Pythagoras, numbers were living 'forms' that governed harmony and the soul. To calculate was to manipulate reality's fabric.

ALCHEMY: Not just gold-making. It was a spectrum. For Franciscans, alchemy was a way to distill the 'Quintessence' to survive the Antichrist. The "Great Work" mirrored the life of Christ applied to matter.

The Cognitive Tool: Imagination

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:

Imagination is just fantasy—it isn't real.

ESOTERIC REALITY:

Imagination is a creative power.



VIS IMAGINATIVA:

In esoteric tradition (Paracelsus, Boehme), imagination is a specific faculty used to access higher reality.

TRANSITIVE POWER:

It acts upon the world. Paracelsus called it a “Sun in man.” To imagine is to “impress” the spirit onto matter, changing reality itself.

Monastic Magic: The Paradox of Faith



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: Medieval monks were terrified of demons.

ESOTERIC REALITY: Monks were the experts in demon management.

THE PARADOX: Monasteries were hubs for necromancy because monks were the literate elite with access to the texts.

CASE STUDY: Hildegard of Bingen (12th Century) performed exorcisms where she debated theology with demons, using them as knowledgeable informants from the spirit world.

Agency & Identity: Women in Esotericism



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: Religion is patriarchal; there is no room for women.

ESOTERIC REALITY: The esoteric sphere empowered women.



THE FLIP: Women leveraged the Victorian trope of the “passive” female to claim superior spiritual access as mediums.

RESULT: Movements like Theosophy and the Golden Dawn rejected male priesthoods, validating authority through direct experience. Figures like Helena Blavatsky linked occultism directly to the Suffrage movement.

Agency & Identity: The Black Esoteric Milieu



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: Esotericism is for white folks.

ESOTERIC REALITY: A distinct Black Esoteric Milieu exists.

COUNTER-NARRATIVES: African Americans used esotericism to dismantle white supremacy. Figures like Sun Ra and the Nation of Islam combined Theosophy and Freemasonry to create new "religio-racial" identities.

THE STRATEGY: Claiming ancient, divine lineages (Egyptian, Moorish) to bypass the narrative of inferiority and offer spiritual liberation.

Politics & Power: Secret Societies

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM:
The Illuminati are controlling
the world.

ESOTERIC REALITY: Secrecy is a form
of social capital.

SYMBOLIC CAPITAL: Secret societies
like Freemasons don't hoard world-
ending secrets. They use secrecy to
create status and trust.

THE FACTS: The historical Illuminati
(1776) wanted moral reform, not world
domination. The panic was a "polemical
narrative" created by political
opponents.

Hidden in Plain Sight: Modern Art



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: Modern Art is secular and purely aesthetic.

ESOTERIC REALITY: Abstract Art is painted Theosophy.

THE ROOTS: You cannot understand the Avant-Garde (Mondrian, Kandinsky, af Klint) without Occultism. They were painting the “unseen geometries” revealed by Theosophy.

VISUAL CULTURE: Films like Richter’s “Ghosts Before Breakfast” drew on the visual language of séances—floating objects and mediumship.

The Pop Culture Vehicle: Fiction



CONVENTIONAL WISDOM: It's just a story.

ESOTERIC REALITY: Fiction is the Trojan Horse of the Occult.

PROPAGANDA: Occultists (Crowley, Fortune, Blavatsky) deliberately wrote novels to "ventilate their ideas" to the masses.

THE IMPACT: Fiction acts as the public heart and pulse, normalizing esoteric concepts like astral travel and secret histories for a global audience.

Summary: The Esoteric Engine



Esotericism is not a weird sideline of history. It is the engine room.

It drove the development of chemistry, medicine, abstract art, feminism, and political resistance. It is the 'Other' against which mainstream Western culture defines itself.

The Red Pill Swallowed



To study esotericism is to wake up to the fact that the dominant grand narratives of Reason, Science, and Religion cannot be trusted at face value.

We do not live in a disenchanted world.
We live in a world where the magic has been rewritten as art, science, and politics.

Further Reading & Credits

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alchemical list often it read away
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This presentation is based on the essays
collected in:

Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions about Western Esotericism

Edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Peter J.
Forshaw, and Marco Pasi.

Amsterdam University Press, 2019.

Presentation design for the curious mind.

For the first time, an alchemical
text is presented in a way that is
accessible to all. The book is
a masterpiece of design, with
beautiful illustrations and a
clear layout. It is a must-read
for anyone interested in the
history of esotericism.