

Theosis

VOLUME 3 | 2025–26

THE GOD IN THE MIRROR

Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm

A MEDIUM AT HARVARD

Shannon Taggart

STUDYING RUDOLF STEINER AT HARVARD

Dan McKanan

THOREAU'S DREAM MOUNTAIN

Charles M. Stang

A LIFE BETWEEN WORLDS

Interview with Cynthia Bourgeault

PRACTICING TRANSCENDENTALISM

Megan Marshall

LOANWORDS ALONG THE SILK ROAD

Adam Bremer-McCollum

PSYCHEDELIC FACILITATION TRAINING IN THE UNITED STATES



CENTER FOR THE STUDY
OF WORLD RELIGIONS

HARVARD DIVINITY SCHOOL

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AND JANE HIRSHFIELD'S READING COPY OF WOMEN IN PRAISE
OF THE SACRED: 43 CENTURIES OF SPIRITUAL POETRY BY
WOMEN (1994)

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR, Gosia Skłodowska

Theosis has always been more than an annual publication. It is, in a sense, a record of the Center itself: of its spirit, its evolving vision, its guiding questions, and the intellectual and imaginative life of the community gathered here. This year's issue feels especially meaningful in that regard. Like Elizabeth Peabody's *Record of a School*, it preserves something of what animated the Center this past year, what moved its scholars, students, artists, and collaborators, and what took shape through their work.

Over the past several years, the Center has benefited from generous gifts and grants that have allowed its programming, publications, and public presence to expand in remarkable ways. Under the broad banner of the Transcendence and Transformation Initiative, and across several dedicated lines of inquiry, including psychedelics and spirituality, Asian, Indigenous, African and African diaspora, and Jewish religious traditions, Gnoseologies, art and spirituality, Thinking with Plants and Fungi, and the Transcendence and Transformation database, the Center has continued to open new avenues of research and public engagement. This past year, many of these efforts deepened, matured, and demonstrated their potential for further growth, both within academia and beyond it. Together, they reveal the Center as a site where scholarship, artistic practice, and lived inquiry into religion actively co-create new forms of knowledge. *Theosis* offers one way to mark and celebrate those achievements.

Within these pages, we invite you to explore a selection of essays, interviews, news stories, and visual features that emerged from the vibrant work of the Center over the past year. The publication reflects our enduring commitment to making scholarly work available in forms that are intellectually rigorous while also inviting, accessible, and compelling. At the same time, *Theosis* remains only a snapshot of the many extraordinary programs and people behind this work. We hope it will lead readers outward, toward our website, digital platforms, recordings, podcasts, videocasts, and the many other publications through which this scholarship continues to circulate.

This year has also been enriched by an extraordinary cohort of visiting scholars, poets, and artists, whose presence has shaped the life of the Center in lasting ways. Through readings, workshops, performances, conversations, and informal exchanges, they have contributed not only to our public programming but also to the texture of our shared intellectual community. Their time at the Center has been mutually generative, offering space and support for writing and artistic creation while also fostering conversations and collaborations that will continue well beyond their residencies. This issue features several of them and their work, including Sarah Schorr, Jane Sheldon, Donna Torres, Marco Pasi, Barbara Philipp, Jane Hirshfield, Shannon Taggart, and Erik Davis, whose words and images appear throughout these pages.

We are also continuing and expanding last year's approach of interspersing *Theosis* with special features that foreground visual and digital work at the heart of the Center's research and programming. These include Sarah Schorr's new work from *Skywater*; Keith Cantú's "Yoga Diagrams," my own "Mystical Scriptures," an open-access digital platform exploring the many mystic and theosophic texts that shaped Transcendentalist thought and imagination; Osiris González Romero's "Sacred Plants and Fungi of the Americas," based on his digital platform and related publication; and, toward the close of this issue, Barbara Philipp's captivating artwork, which reflects the spirit of CSWR residential life and artistic exchange. By placing these visual and digital projects at the center of the publication, we hope to underscore their importance not as supplements to scholarship but as essential modes of inquiry and expression in their own right.

I am deeply grateful to Professor Charles Stang for fostering such an unusually supportive, generative, and collaborative environment. I also want to thank our researchers, collaborators, and our talented and dedicated administrative team, who have been central to our programming, residential life, and daily work.

Thank you for reading, and for being part of the extended CSWR community. We hope this year's *Theosis* invites reflection, sparks curiosity, and draws you more deeply into the spirit of inquiry that animates the Center.

Gosia Skłodowska
Executive Director, Center for the Study of World Religions

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“This year and especially next, the Center’s focus is the Transcendentalism Initiative, which explores American Transcendentalism as a local living tradition, one that continues to inspire us to innovate on our collective cultural inheritance.”

– Charles M. Stang

Director's Letter

Dear friends of the CSWR,

It has been another incredible year here at 42 Francis Avenue. This is my penultimate year as the Center's Faculty Director, and so I am looking back on eight years and ahead to one more. This past year we have brought to completion—and bidding farewell to—some important and longstanding programs. Matthew J. Dillon's digital resource, the "Archives of Mystical Experience" (AME) has just been released—future newsletters will continue to feature its incredible content. The AME will continue to evolve under Matt's leadership as he sets sail for new shores. Matt is also taking his wonderful and wildly popular podcast, "Pop Apocalypse," with him—see his interview with Cynthia Bourgeault on G.I. Gurdjieff for a taste of the wise and the weird. We're grateful for all that Matt has given this research community during his five years as a Research Associate.

Sadly, the Center's program on Psychedelics, Religion, and Spirituality is also coming to an end. It began five years ago under my supervision and has flourished in the past two under the leadership of Jeffrey Breau and Paul Gillis-Smith, to whom I am enormously grateful. Some of the program's fine work is featured in these pages, including a research reflection by Erik Davis, a feature on "Sacred Plants and Fungi of the Americas" from our former postdoctoral fellow Osiris González Romero, and three pieces under our "Programming Highlights," including one by Jeffrey and Paul on psychedelic facilitation training.

The Center's "Research Reflections" series continues to be very popular, and is an especially effective way for our affiliates to translate their scholarship into an accessible format and style. I wish to thank Aaron Ullrey for his expert editorial efforts on this series. We are proud to include six reflections in this issue of *Theosis*, highlighting the range of our affiliates' interests and expertise, from ancient Atlantis to modern Japan, from American mediums to Silk Road loanwords.

This year and especially next, the Center's focus is the Transcendentalism Initiative, which explores American Transcendentalism as a local *living* tradition, one that continues to inspire us to innovate on our collective cultural inheritance. Included in this issue are some of the first fruits of the Initiative: Jeffrey Blackwell's story on our inaugural September workshop; essays by Lawrence Buell, Megan Marshall, and our own Russell C. Powell; and my own on "Thoreau's Dream Mountain," which will eventually appear in longer form in Matt Dillon's edited volume, *The Varieties of Mystical Experience*; my essay is accompanied by artwork from our longstanding artist-in-residence Sarah Schorr, from our shared book project, *Skymater*.



PHOTO: JEFFREY BLACKWELL

Next year we will welcome nearly two dozen scholars and artists to the Center as residents, all of them working on the Transcendentalist tradition—past, present, and future. I expect the next issue of *Theosis* will include the voices of many of these gifted guests.

Finally, I wish to thank my colleague Gosia Skłodowska, who, in addition to serving as the Center's Executive Director, is also the Editor-in-Chief of *Theosis*. We have her to thank for this rich and lavishly designed annual publication from the Center!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "C. Stang".

Charles M. Stang
Director, Center for the Study of World Religions
Professor of Early Christian Thought, Harvard Divinity School

The Year at a Glance

“TRANSCENDENTALISM AS A LIVING TRADITION” WORKSHOP

Held in Concord, this summit convened over 20 scholars, writers, and cultural leaders to explore the ongoing relevance of Transcendentalist thought. The gathering helped establish a shared intellectual foundation for the Center’s emerging Transcendentalism Initiative.

THE PEARLSONG: PUBLICATION AND PERFORMANCE

The release of *The Pearlsong*, part of the Center’s Texts and Translations of Transcendence and Transformation series, was marked by a program that brought together scholarship and live performance. The event embodied the Center’s commitment to presenting texts not only as objects of study, but as living works.

ESOTERIC CURRENTS IN MODERN MEXICAN ART EXHIBITION

This major exhibition examined the role of esoteric traditions in shaping modern Mexican artistic expression, with particular attention to women artists. It extended the Center’s engagement with the relationship between spirituality and visual culture.

“PSYCHEDELIC INTERSECTIONS” CONFERENCE

Culminating five years of research and programming, this international gathering brought together scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to examine the intersections of psychedelics, religion, medicine, and culture. With more than 200 participants in person and hundreds more online, the conference marked a major milestone in the Center’s work on psychedelics and spiritual care.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU: FILM SCREENING AND CONVERSATION

A special event featuring a screening and discussion with filmmakers and leading scholars explored Thoreau’s enduring intellectual and cultural legacy. The program brought together perspectives from film, literary studies, and environmental thought.

AUGUST



PHOTO: JEFFREY BLACKWELL

The Center welcomed a new cohort of visiting scholars, artists, and researchers working across religious studies, anthropology, music, and the arts, setting the stage for a year of interdisciplinary exchange.

SEPTEMBER



PHOTO: ANDREA SÁNCHEZ CASTAÑEDA

Fall programming opened with the exhibition *Sacred Plants of the Muysca*, foregrounding Indigenous knowledge and relationships to land, plant life, and community.

The workshop “Tending to the Spiritual” brought clinicians and researchers together to explore the role of spiritual care in psychedelic-assisted therapy.

OCTOBER



PHOTO: JEFFREY BLACKWELL

Alongside the Concord gathering and *The Pearlsong* launch, reading groups on Transcendentalism, Western esotericism, and Psychedelics and Spirituality created shared spaces for sustained inquiry.

NOVEMBER



PHOTO: ANDREA SÁNCHEZ CASTAÑEDA

Artist Donna Torres led a hands-on workshop exploring plant-based artistic practices, inviting participants to engage the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of plant life.

In collaboration with Wonderstruck, the Center hosted a conversation with Mark Vernon on imagination and the “vertical dimension” of human experience in contemporary life.

DECEMBER



PHOTO: JEFFREY BLACKWELL

The *Gnoseologies* series featured conversations on esoteric knowledge, pedagogy, and identity, including a reconsideration of Helena P. Blavatsky’s philosophical contributions.

A second “Tending to the Spiritual” workshop extended earlier discussions into religious and personal-use contexts, broadening the scope of the Center’s work in this area.

JANUARY

Poet-in-residence Jane Hirshfield offered a widely attended public reading and workshop, engaging questions of ecology, justice, and the inner life.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF JANE HIRSHFIELD

FEBRUARY

The Center marked the publication of *Porphyry of Tyre on Theology and Theurgy*, the second volume in its Texts and Translations series, advancing its commitment to making foundational texts newly accessible.



PHOTO: BHASWAR KHAN

A three-part workshop, “Archival Methods: Finding the Sacred and the Profane in the Psychedelic Archive,” invited participants to the Ludlow-Santo Domingo Library, where the world’s largest collection of psychedelic literature is housed at Harvard.

MARCH



SALVATION, DAOZI (INK AND COLOR ON PAPER, 2016)

The Center hosted its annual distinguished lectures, bringing leading scholars into conversation with major questions in religion, modernity, and public life.

The month included the List Lecture for Jewish Studies, “Forging the Monotheistic Triangle: Jews, Arabs, Christians and the Promises of European Modernity,” with Prof. Susannah Heschel; the Gupta Hindu View of Life Lecture, “Recasting the Hindu Goddess in an American Landscape,” with Prof. Tracy Pinchman; and the Hackett Lecture in Global Christianity, in which Prof. Xi Lian examined the rise of public Christianity in contemporary China and its reshaping of the country’s cultural and political landscape.

APRIL

The spring exhibition “We Beat the Poison Clearing Drum” featured the work of Michael Prettyman, artist-in-residence, exploring the relationship between painting, perception, and the experience of the sacred.



FAMILY OF MOSES, MICHAEL PRETTYMAN

Prettyman’s special workshop “A Long Way Home” invited participants to explore mysticism as a recurring dimension of human experience, and to reflect on the resonance of deeply felt experiences across traditions.

MAY



Researchers released new episodes of their long-running podcasts “Pop Apocalypse” and “Om-Gnosis,” extending the Center’s engagement with contemporary scholarship on esotericism, religion, and alternative spiritualities.

5,421
in-person and online
participants

30,430
podcast listens

79,462
YouTube views

63
research reflections
and guest essays

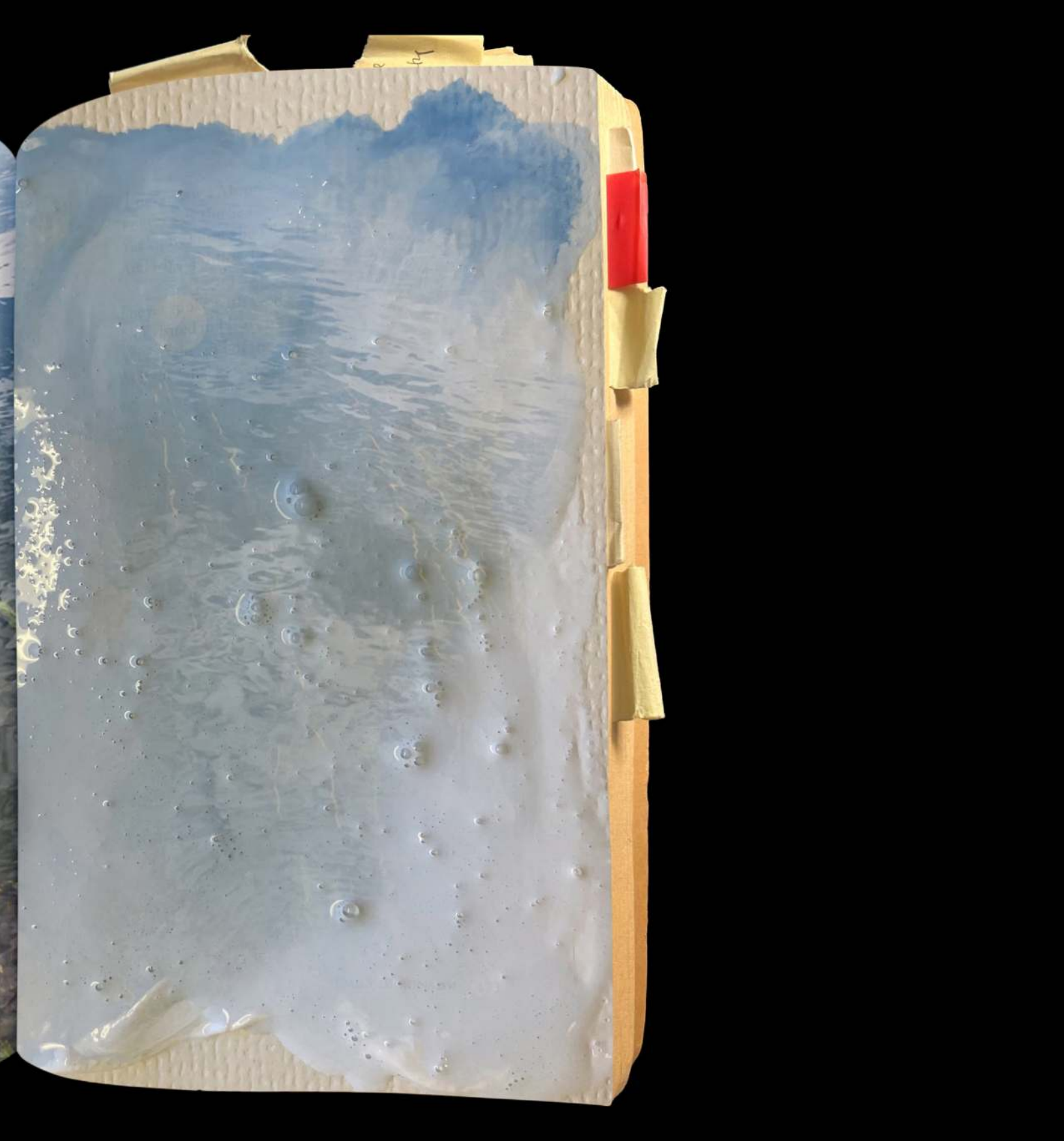
19
podcast episodes

98
public offerings

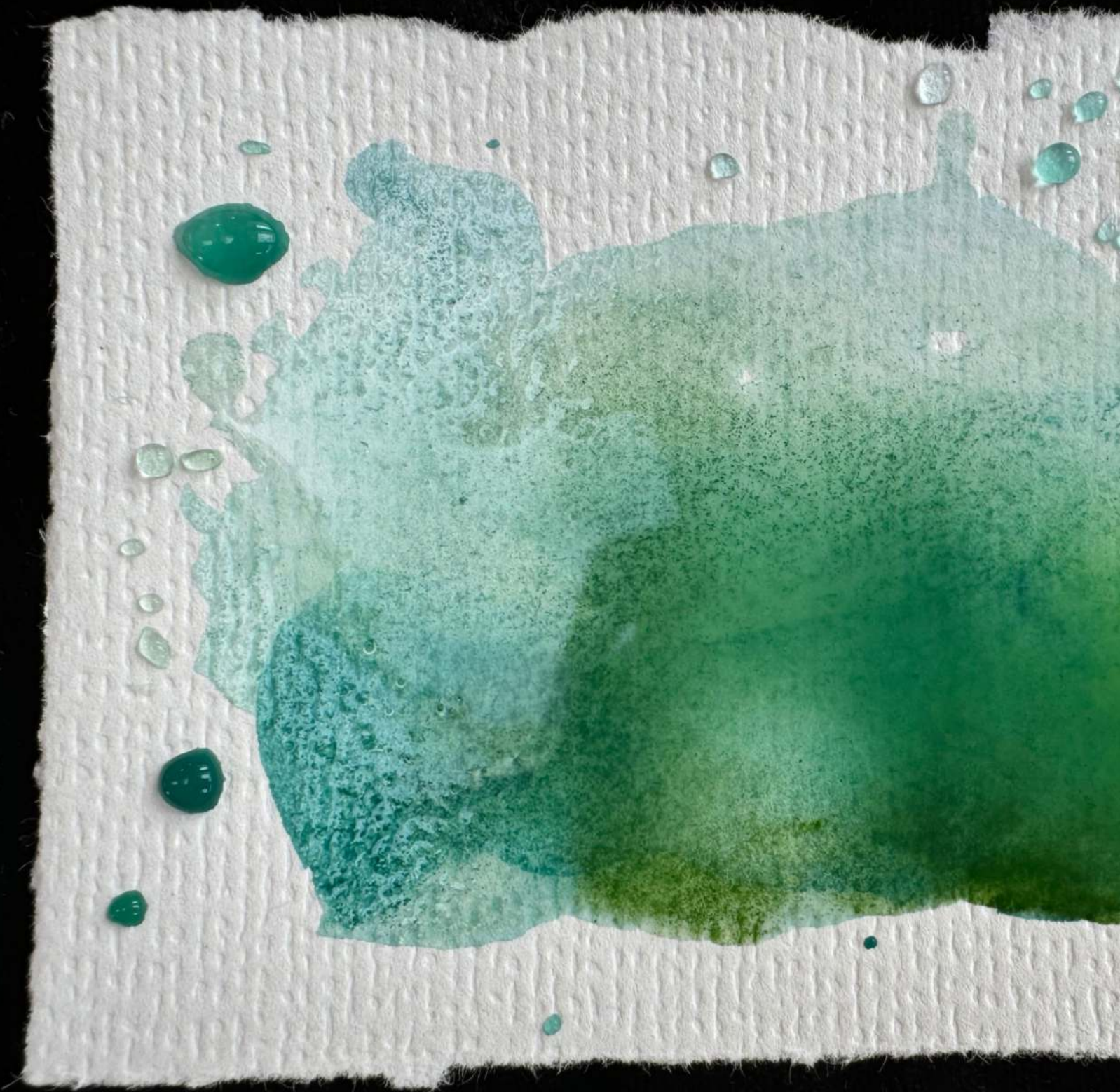
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SKYWATER



A collaborative book project between Charles M. Stang and artist Sarah Schorr, *Skywater* offers a philosophy of water in word and image. Taking inspiration from Henry David Thoreau's writings, from Walden Pond, and from the other ponds and rivers of Thoreau's native Concord, *Skywater* is the object of a shared contemplation—one that reflects on the relationship between sky and water, above and below, perception and reflection.



EARLIER PAGE: *ON TENDERNESS*, SARAH SCHORR 2026.

PHOTO COMPOSITE WITH SNOW, PAINT, AND JANE HIRSHFIELD'S READING COPY OF *WOMEN IN PRAISE OF THE SACRED: 43 CENTURIES OF SPIRITUAL POETRY BY WOMEN* (1994)

THIS PAGE: *EMERALD STUDIES*, SARAH SCHORR 2026.

PHOTO COMPOSITE WITH PAINT AND WATER FROM WALDEN POND. O'KEEFFE, GEORGIA. GEORGIA O'KEEFFE. NEW YORK: VIKING PRESS, (1976)



Thoreau's Dream Mountain

Charles M. Stang, Director of the
Center for the Study of World Religions

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) is often remembered today as a naturalist and nature writer. But he had a wider, and weirder, understanding of nature than did many of his, or our, contemporary naturalists. He once reported hearing a voice on the vibrating telegraph wire tell him, “Bear in mind, Child, and never for an instant forget, that there are higher planes, infinitely higher planes, of life than this thou art now traveling on.”[1] He understood many, if not all, of these higher planes of life not so much “supernatural” as, in Richard Higgins words, “*super* or intensely natural.”[2] We should not be surprised, then, that Thoreau was among the very few from his circle who embraced the label “Transcendentalist.”[3] He believed our present natural plane of life was transcended by other, higher planes, and that eventually even the whole of nature herself was transcended by spirit, which he also called God. In our dreams we regularly, nightly in fact, transcend our everyday perception of this plane of life, just as the circle dreamed of a sphere in Edwin A. Abbott’s 1884 novel, *Flatland*, and so escaped, however briefly, his two dimensions for three.[4]

In a journal entry dated October 29, 1857, Thoreau describes a dream in which he ascends and descends a mountain just to the east of Concord, “where no high hill actually is.”[5] Thoreau prefaces his dream-vision with reflections on how dreams relate to waking reality, and the “gradual transition” from one to the other. [6] Dreams, he says, are as real as the light of the stars and the moon. He locates the “early morning thoughts” he will record in his journal as lying between dreams and waking life: “They are a sort of permanent dream in my mind.”[7] In that liminal space, it is hard to follow his experience of time. It seems as if he might have only ascended this dream mountain “once or twice.”[8] But on that October morning, he recalls the ascent in a state of “permanent dream,” something he says he has experienced at least twenty times.[9] So, there is a distinction between the dream proper (once or twice), and his subsequent access to it in the early-morning state of permanent dream (more than twenty times). It seems that he is drawing on both when he describes the dream mountain in his journal. And when he puts pen to paper later in the day, he finds himself contemplating the dream-vision in his mind “as a familiar thought which I surely had for many years from time to time,” but doubts whether he has ever remembered it “in broad daylight.”[10]

In his dream-vision, he ascends the mountain, shuddering, passes through a dark wood, and then crosses “an imaginary line” which separates a hill from the mountain proper.[11] The mountain’s summit is otherworldly: “a superterranean grandeur and sublimity,” “unhandseled, awful, grand,” walking on “bare and pathless rock, as if it were solidified air and cloud,” “far more thrillingly awful and sublime than the center of a volcano spouting fire,” “as if you trod with awe the face of a god turned up.”[12] He wonders

whether there are other such dream mountains, east or west, from which you can look down from such a great height, on to Concord or indeed all the world. The dream mountain lays atop Concord's cemetery, the Burying-Hill, and Thoreau enters the dark wood and ascends the mountain through this cemetery gate. This recalls the ancient Greek template of the *katabasis* or underworld journey, where the hero descends in the realm of the dead only to discover there a sky, a sun, and other stars – in other words, that his descent (*katabasis*) is in fact an ascent (*anabasis*). In *Skywater*, the book I am writing with Sarah Schorr, we are exploring a similar paradox, how Thoreau contemplates in the waters' depths a night sky of stars, and so ascends by descending. Just as the ancient Greek philosopher Thales famously fell into a well while gazing at the stars, because, as his fellow philosopher and near contemporary Heraclitus put it so pithily, "The way up and way down are one and the same." [13]

Thoreau ascends the mountain through the dark wood, but descends by another way, along a sunny meadow. So, while "there is another way up," he can only find it going downhill. [14] The ascent is accompanied by a feeling of awe, and his "thoughts are purified and sublimed by it, as if I had been translated" – from Latin *translatus*, meaning "carried over" or "transported." [15] His dream report ends with a cryptic comment – "I see that men may be well-mannered or conventionally polite toward men, but skeptical toward God" – perhaps suggesting that his vision was a divine transportation and anticipating that others will be skeptical of his report. [16]

Thoreau's dream mountain exemplifies the distinction he often makes between the "actual" and the "ideal." [17] We are accustomed to thinking that an "actual" mountain is the "real" one, but Thoreau turns this upside down. For him, as for any Platonist, the ideal – what he will also call the "spiritual" – is *more* real than the actual. We often stand astride the two, and can see one or the other, or both: "On one side of man is the actual, and on the other the ideal." [18] But to see the ideal or spiritual dimension requires a paradoxically lazy effort, a kind of energetic rest: "We must look on the world with a drowsy and half-shut eye, that it may not be too much in our eye, and rather stand aloof from than within it. When we are awake to the real world, we are asleep to the actual." [19]

While there is no actual mountain next to Concord, the ideal one there sits at the borders of dreams and waking thoughts. This ideal landscape, and others like it, I have taken to calling "imaginal," a term I borrow from Henry Corbin, who uses it to describe a realm or realms that exceed our commonplace sense perception, very much like the "higher planes" of which the voice in the telegraph wire spoke to Thoreau. [20] According to Corbin, we gain access to these realms by using our faculty of imagination, which he insists is a veridical and visionary faculty of perception. In a letter to his friend Harrison Blake from September of 1852, Thoreau wrote of the imagination that it "is not foundationless, but most reasonable, and it alone uses all the knowledge of the intellect." [21] Likewise for Corbin, the imaginal realm, or *mundus imaginalis*, is decidedly *not* "imaginary"; like Thoreau's ideal landscape, Corbin's imaginal realm is more real "than this thou art now traveling on" – to quote the voice on the wire again. The imaginal realm is porous with our everyday world, and we can see it and its inhabitants if we can but learn how to recover the power of vision. "Why not see, – use our eyes?" Thoreau asks. [22] Throughout his writings, and especially in his journal, Thoreau reports moving in and out of what I, fol-

lowing Corbin, would call imaginal realms, both in dreams and in waking, and often somewhere in between. Just as Thoreau's nature includes the super natural and abuts spirit, so too his natural landscapes often include imaginal realms and abut other worlds. The genius of Thoreau is that his attention to the imaginal does not come at the cost of the actual world: he attends more carefully than nearly anyone to close, detailed observation of this plane of life, and often it seems as if his concentrated contemplation of what is before his eyes, the "here and now" (*hic et nunc*), is what opens a window or a portal to something, someone, or somewhere else. Thoreau's visionary practice, then, is to let actual landscapes become ideal, imaginal landscapes, and his writerly practice is to try to render that transformation into words. Anyone with eyes can see a mountaintop, or the view from a summit. But not everyone can let that actual summit shine with an imaginal or ideal light; not everyone can see it, nor put it in words. Or rather: perhaps everyone *can*, but they don't. This kind of vision is our common sense that has become sadly so uncommon.

NB: A longer version of this will appear in Matthew J. Dillon (ed), *The Varieties of Mystical Experience*, forthcoming from the Center for the Study of World Religions in 2026.

[1] Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, Sept. 12, 1851, II: 497. All references to Thoreau's writings are from the 1906 edition of *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, available at The Walden Woods Project: <https://www.walden.org/work/the-writings-of-henry-david-thoreau/>

[2] Richard Higgins, *Thoreau's God* (University of Chicago Press, 2024), 2.

[3] Lawrence Buell, *Henry David Thoreau: Thinking Disobediently* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 50–51.

[4] Edwin A. Abbott, *The Annotated Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, introduction and notes by Ian Stewart (Basic Books, 2008). See Charles M. Stang, "The Dream of the Sphere: A Dispatch from the Flatland," *Tank Magazine* 94 (Spring 2023).

[5] Thoreau, *Journal*, October 29, 1857, X: 141.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., X: 142.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Heraclitus, fragment 60 (my translation).

[14] Thoreau, *Journal*, October 29, 1857.

[15] Ibid., X: 144.

[16] Ibid.

[17] See Higgins, *Thoreau's God*, 53–54.

[18] Thoreau, *Journal*, April 3, 1842, I: 360.

[19] Thoreau, *Journal*, March 7–10, 1841, I: 229.

[20] Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis, or Imaginary and the Imaginal," www.amiscorbin.com.

[21] Henry David Thoreau, *Letters to a Spiritual Seeker* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 72.

[22] Ibid., 36.



*"Nothing so fair, so pure, and at the same time so large as a lake, perchance,
lies on the surface of the earth. Sky water."*

– Henry David Thoreau

In the Words of Our Affiliates



Marco Pasi
Visiting Scholar

It is hard to imagine a better environment for a scholar of religion than the CSWR. The leadership and the entire staff are there to make you feel at home, and the fact that I was living at the Center while spending my time there has made that experience even more meaningful. The sense of common purpose, amid the diversity of interests and backgrounds of the fellows, creates a space where scholarly creativity and intellectual rigor go hand in hand. And then of course if one also considers access to the extraordinary facilities of the Divinity School, with its beautiful library, it is easy to understand why my time at the Center was among the most rewarding of my academic life. Credit goes to all those who work hard at the Center to make the beautiful vision with which it was created many years ago a vibrant reality for today's scholars.



Jane Hirshfield
Poet-in-Residence

The eighteen days I spent at the CSWR in January feel, in retrospect, like a spiral-armed galaxy of conversations—within the Center, with visiting artist Sarah Schorr, Gosia Skłodowska, AmarAtma Singh Khalsa, Sherah Bloor, Charles Stang; beyond it, with Terry Tempest Williams, Marshall Ganz, Barry and Gretchen Mazur, three generous curators, even the genetic-engineering biologist who walked me on snow-covered paths to the Natural History Museum's front door. ... I've carried home seeing the Vantablack and Indian Yellow of the Fogg's Pigment Collection; the Houghton Library's first printed Galileo; the Woodberry Poetry Room's memorial to Fanny Howe; and a blizzard. While in residence, I gave a reading and hosted a discussion that could

have gone on hours longer. With Sarah, I circumambulated Walden Pond, frozen and silent in the day's last light; with Gosia and Sarah, visited Margaret Fuller's grave. I also found a way to set down at last some thoughts I'd wrestled with for months, on humility and its connection to both not-knowing and awe. The CSWR welcomed me into something thrilling and perfect: a life between monastery and agora. Those in residence may change year to year, but it must always be a place of magical feasting—a banquet of ideas and explorations, of actual meals and of intentions toward larger understanding and the larger good, a banquet that keeps refilling itself with new and astonishing courses.



Erik Davis
Visiting Scholar

There are certain advantages to working as an independent scholar, but one also finds oneself longing for certain features of academic life. These include: the glories of an excellent library; ready access to campus galleries and events; opportunities to meet and share your work with colleagues; dedicated research support; and especially the ability to meet younger scholars within one's fields of interest. While the sense of deep continuity that has traditionally been a feature of the university is currently under assault by many factors, there remains a deep current to institutions like the Harvard Divinity School that is noticeably absent from the fragmented milieu of public intellectual life and research. So I was very happy and honored to receive an invitation to participate as a visiting scholar at the CSWR in the fall of 2025. The invitation alone served as the sort of professional confirmation rarely bestowed on independent researchers (at least this one!).



Michael Prettyman
Artist-in-Residence

During my month as artist-in-residence at the Center for the Study of World Religions this April, I experienced a rare and meaningful convergence of art, scholarship, and spiritual inquiry. What made the residency so extraordinary was not only the freedom to continue my studio work, but the remarkable openness and support extended by the staff, visiting scholars, and students throughout the Center. There was a genuine willingness to engage the arts as a legitimate mode of inquiry, something many artists have been longing for, if impatiently.

CSWR is a kind of refuge. The support and intellectual generosity I encountered created an atmosphere where unexpected connections could emerge naturally, and I left with the strong feeling that many of the relationships formed there will continue well beyond the residency itself.



Jane Sheldon
Artist-in-Residence

I feel deep gratitude at having joined the diverse network of researchers and artists associated with the Center for the Study of World Religions. I've twice been a visitor at the Center, this last semester in residence for a month. On both occasions, I made some quite profound connections to other scholars there, deeply enriching my creative process and providing nourishment to various projects I continue to work on. It's a very special community of bold minds and generous hearts and I look forward to the ongoing fruits of our connection.

In the Words of Our Program Attendees

“TENDING THE SPIRITUAL” WORKSHOPS SEPTEMBER AND DECEMBER 2025

“ I learned how valuable conscientious and experienced facilitators are and how much knowledge they accumulate before they have the capability to hold space. In short, it reinforced my own cultural humility and deepened my commitment to support other people in their learning around psychedelics, keep an open mind, and listen carefully to others.

“ Such soulful connection, personally moving.... Helped lessen my isolation and think more broadly about how I work—spirituality is relational.

Belinda Eriacho is an elder who has such a facility for communicating complex systems in digestible ways. I found myself reflecting on my own approach to community, ownership, and respect for Indigenous wisdom in a new way.

POETRY READING WITH JANE HIRSHFIELD JANUARY 2026

“ I first encountered Jane Hirshfield years ago through an interview on NPR's *On Being*. She spoke about the fullness of things—how we are shaped by complementary and opposing forces, and how easily we overlook the insights they offer in the midst of daily life. My first reaction was simple: here is someone I want to return to and learn from.

During the Q&A following her reading at CSWR, she reflected on how thinking and feeling are not separate capacities, as we are often taught, but intertwined and interdependent—keys to living well and generously. This, as she has taught and so beautifully demonstrated, is the work of poetry.—James King, Ed.M '97

“ARCHIVAL METHODS: FINDING THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE IN THE PSYCHEDELIC ARCHIVE” WORKSHOP FEBRUARY–MARCH 2026

“ My interest is mainly in Jewish ethics and chaplaincy, but I spend a lot of time in archives. To get the chance to be here, and be in physical contact with some of the physical material at Harvard and with the scholars who know it best, it was a great place to do that.”—Maximus Levinsky, MDiv '27

I am working on issues around psychedelics and spirituality. It's been a fantastic experience. I learned not only about the archive itself, but about methods and approaches to do work in archives that is going to be invaluable, not only for this project, but for future projects. —Stuart Sarbacker, CSWR Visiting Scholar, Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Philosophy, Oregon State University

SELECT WORKS

Porphyry of Tyre on Theology and Theurgy

Texts and Translations of Transcendence and Transformation series

Fabien Muller



BOOK

Porphyry of Tyre (c. 234–305) was not only the biographer of his teacher Plotinus, and the editor of his *Enneads*, but an important Platonist philosopher in his own right. Presented here are two texts of Porphyry's, *Letter to Anebo* and *Philosophy from Oracles* in which he explores questions of reason, revelation, and ritual, of theology and theurgy, of how divination serves divinization.

Thinking with Plants and Fungi

Interdisciplinary Explorations of Ecology, Mind, and the More-than-Human World

Edited by: Rachael Petersen, Natalia Schvien Scott, Russell C. Powell



EDITED
VOLUME

Thinking with Plants and Fungi brings together leading voices from science, the humanities, and the arts to explore how vegetal and fungal life challenge dominant models of consciousness, community, and ecological care. Essays investigate topics including plant neurobiology, philosophy, decolonial botany, fungal ethics, and the poetics of sessility.

After Transformation

A Lyrical History of Christian Late Antiquity

Maia Kotrosits



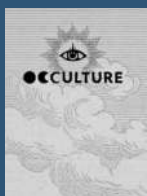
BOOK

In *After Transformation*, Maia Kotrosits offers a lyrical history of Christian late antiquity as it lives on in and with the present. Recasting the monumental changes that occurred between the second and fourth centuries, when Rome transitioned from pagan to Christian worship, Kotrosits presents a condensed and evocative meditation on the profound effects of Christian imperialism across time and geography.

Occulture

A Material Cartography of Contemporary Spirituality and the Arts

Francesco Piraino



ARTICLE

Francesco Piraino argues that occulture, the spread of esoteric, occult, and spiritual themes across media, popular culture, and the arts, should be understood through a broader and more integrated framework. Rather than treating mediatized spirituality and artists' spiritual seeking as separate phenomena, it maps the field through five key tensions, including sacred versus secular art and intention versus reception.

The Pearlsong

Texts and Translations of Transcendence and Transformation series

Adam Bremer-McCollum



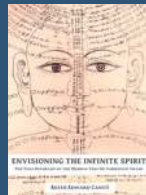
BOOK

A compelling spiritual narrative of late antiquity, *The Pearlsong* tells the story of a prince who forgets who he is and why he has come into the world. Preserved in Syriac and Greek, the poem's themes of exile, remembrance, awakening, and return have resonated across religious traditions. This new edition presents the surviving texts with facing English translation, introduction, commentary, and glossaries.

Depicting the Infinite Spirit

The Yoga Diagrams of the Madras Yogi Sri Sabhapati

Keith Cantú



BOOK

Depicting the Infinite Spirit examines a pivotal shift in South Asian yogic art from manuscript and sculptural traditions to printed diagrams in the late nineteenth century. Focusing on the work of Sri Sabhapati Swami, it highlights some of the earliest practitioner-produced visualizations of yoga, designed not as decoration but as instructional tools for spiritual practice.

AI, Hip-Hop, and the Digital Uncanny

A Talk with Paul Miller, aka "DJ Spooky"

Matthew Dillon



PODCAST

In this episode of "Pop Apocalypse," Paul Miller, widely known as DJ Spooky, reflected on the uncanny character of life in the digital age through the lens of music, art, film, and media theory. The conversation ranged across artificial intelligence, the creative and cultural role of the DJ, experimental performance traditions such as Butoh, and the influence of science fiction and figures like Einstein and Sun Ra on his work.

Psychedelic Intersections 2025

Between and Between Chaplaincy, Plant Medicine, and Aesthetics

Edited by: Jeffrey Breau and Paul Gillis-Smith



CONFERENCE
ANTHOLOGY

This volume brings together papers from the Psychedelic Intersections conference, offering an interdisciplinary exploration of psychedelics across fields such as religious studies, medicine, art, and policy. Framed through the idea of "intersections," it highlights the complex ways in which psychedelic experience engages both scientific and spiritual inquiry, individual and collective practice, and historical traditions alongside contemporary innovation.

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Studying Rudolf Steiner at Harvard

Dan McKanan, Ralph Waldo Emerson Unitarian Universalist Association Senior Lecturer in Divinity, HDS; Faculty Advisor, CSWR

In December 2025, as the Harvard Divinity School (HDS) campus was emptying out for the winter holiday, two hundred people gathered in person in Swartz Hall, along with hundreds more online, to mark the centennial of the death of spiritual teacher Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). This gathering, hosted by the Program for the Evolution of Spirituality (PES) with generous financial support from the Center for the Study of World Religions, was perhaps the only centennial event anywhere in the world that brought committed students of Steiner into deep dialogue with neutral and critical scholars from the academy. It came at a moment when the range of initiatives inspired by Steiner's teaching continues to expand, even as multiple aspects of Steiner's legacy provoke critical scrutiny in the academy and beyond.

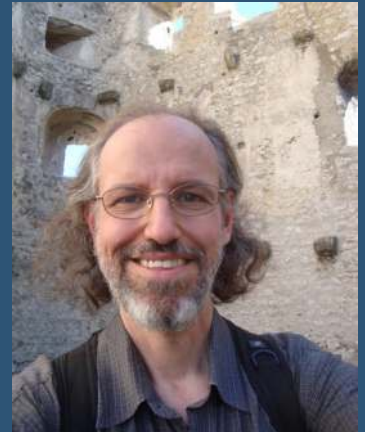
The conference was the brainchild of Steiner scholars Henry Holland and Aaron French, who approached me in 2024 with the idea of a conference. By that time, PES had already hosted a few conferences, so I knew we could accommodate a substantial conference with both in-person and Zoom-based participants. Since all previous PES conferences had engaged multiple traditions simultaneously, it took a little convincing for me to agree to devote an entire conference to Steiner's spiritual tradition, known as anthroposophy. However, I knew that the CSWR had had great success with a similar gathering devoted to the tradition of George Ivanovich Gurdjieff. The more I talked with Henry and Aaron, the more it became clear that HDS was uniquely situated to bring together people who don't always talk with one another.

My own longstanding interest in anthroposophy flows from its practical manifestations. What distinguishes anthroposophy from the other organizational descendants of the Theosophical Society is the fact that Rudolf Steiner gave many series of lectures applying spiritual insights to specific professional fields. The professionals who attended those lectures created global networks of Waldorf schools, biodynamic farms, medical practices, intentional communities supporting children and adults with disabilities, and much more. I have written extensively on the network of anthroposophical communities known as the Camphill movement. Nowadays, most Camphillers and other participants in anthroposophical "initiatives" do not practice anthroposophical spirituality, yet the rhythms of their lives are shaped by Steiner's ideas about the correspondences linking human bodies, souls, and spirits to the deep structures of the universe.

Hosting this conference was a delightful opportunity to practice the fine art of dialogue among people of diverse viewpoints. In selecting keynoters, we deliberately chose a scholar who has been critical of aspects of anthroposophy, Boaz Huss, alongside Martina Maria Sam, a scholar and editor who has held leadership positions in anthroposophy's School of Spiritual Science. We encouraged conference participants to engage Huss's and Sam's contributions with equal respect, and for their own parts Huss and Sam spoke in a dialogical spirit that made this easy to do.

Our conference program did not shy away from some of the most difficult topics facing academic communities today. Rudolf

Steiner, who built his movement in early twentieth-century Germany, died shortly before Adolf Hitler came to power. Some of his closest followers colluded with National Socialism in order to keep anthroposophy alive in the 1930s and 1940s, and some Nazi leaders were important patrons of biodynamic farms and other anthroposophical initiatives. Other anthroposophists, including many Jewish anthroposophists, were staunchly opposed to fascism. But even ethnically Jewish anthroposophists, such as Camphill founder Karl König, sometimes held negative views of Jewish religion. Our conference presenters did not merely acknowledge these realities, but challenged all of us to wrestle with their nuances. Peter Selg, an anthroposophical doctor who serves on the governing board of the General Anthroposophical Society, delineated the multiple shades of collaboration and resistance among those who practiced anthroposophical medicine under the Third Reich. Both Boaz Huss and Ron Eilon traced the complex pathways by which Jewish anthroposophists reinterpreted Steiner's critical comments about ethnic nationalism as they found a place for anthroposophical initiatives in the state of Israel.



We also created space for one of the most challenging debates currently unfolding within the community of committed anthroposophists. Rudolf Steiner, like his predecessors in the theosophical movement, affirmed the spiritual equality of all individuals while also ascribing spiritual significance to racial differences, teaching that each race makes a unique contribution to human evolution. He also occasionally used derogatory language for non-European racial groups. Some anthroposophists believe that Steiner's teachings about racial difference must be repudiated in order to allow his teaching about human equality to shine forth more clearly, and several anthroposophical initiatives have issued public statements to this effect. Other anthroposophists believe that Steiner's understanding of racial difference actually provides a better path to racial justice than models of critical race theory currently prominent in the academy. In our panels, scholars holding both these perspectives met face to face, wrestling with the details of one another's arguments.

Our conference also showcased the global reach of the anthroposophical movement today. Though in its origin anthroposophy was more Eurocentric than its theosophical cousins, the practicality of anthroposophical initiatives has proven to have cross-cultural appeal. Our program included especially strong contingents of Brazilians and Israelis, as well as individuals from Nigeria, India, Pakistan, China, Japan, Taiwan, and elsewhere. Two panels on Waldorf education, in particular, revealed a movement of educational renewal that is currently experiencing its greatest growth in places far from its point of origin.

For me, another highlight of the conference was the chance to see some of the Anthroposophical movement's most prominent leaders engaged in deep scholarly work. In many ways, anthroposophy is a spiritual movement with the soul of a university. Its global headquarters, the Goetheanum in Switzerland, is home to a School of Spiritual Science organized like a college faculty, with sections devoted to visual arts, literary arts, natural science, social science, mathematics and astronomy, medicine, pedagogy, performing arts, agriculture, youth, and inclusive social development. And yet many anthroposophists who have taught at mainstream universities have encountered so much ridicule or misunderstanding that they have chosen to bracket their spiritual commitments from their academic work. At our conference, by contrast, past and present leaders of half a dozen School of Spiritual Science sections offered rigorous, often archivally based presentations that were readily accessible to

neutral and critical scholars. These offerings meshed seamlessly with a similar number of presentations by current doctoral students, with diverse relationships to anthroposophy, who are studying at non-anthroposophical universities. I could feel the weight of many old walls coming down as participants listened and learned.

Most participants came away from our two days together eager for more dialogue. Many of the presentations are likely to appear in a volume that is currently being edited by Aaron French, Henry Holland, and Mary Graham, while others will appear in scholarly journals. As for the Program for the Evolution of Spirituality, we continue to welcome scholars and practitioners of all spiritualities to our conferences, working groups, and other activities that explore the ongoing transformation of spiritual practice in contemporary society.

“The free human being lives in confidence that the other free human being belongs to the same spiritual world and that they will meet one another in their intentions. The free human being demands no agreement from another, but expects it because it belongs to human nature.”

— *Rudolf Steiner, The Philosophy of Freedom (1894)*

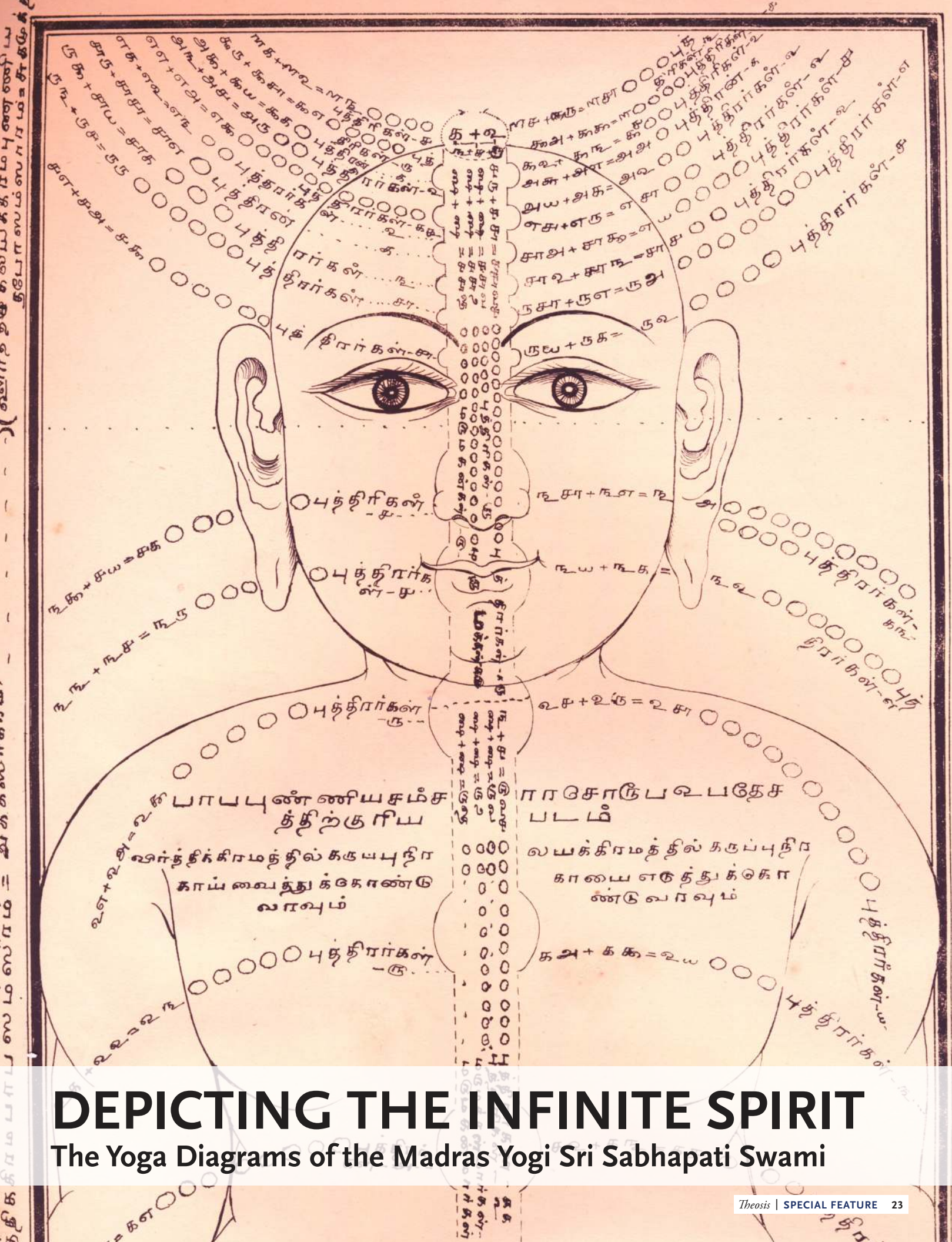
“The stars once spoke to man.
It is world-destiny that they are silent now.
To be aware of the silence
Can become pain for earthly man.

But in the deepening silence
There grows and ripens
What man speaks to the stars.
To become aware of this speaking
Can become strength for Spirit-Man.”

— *Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts (1924)*

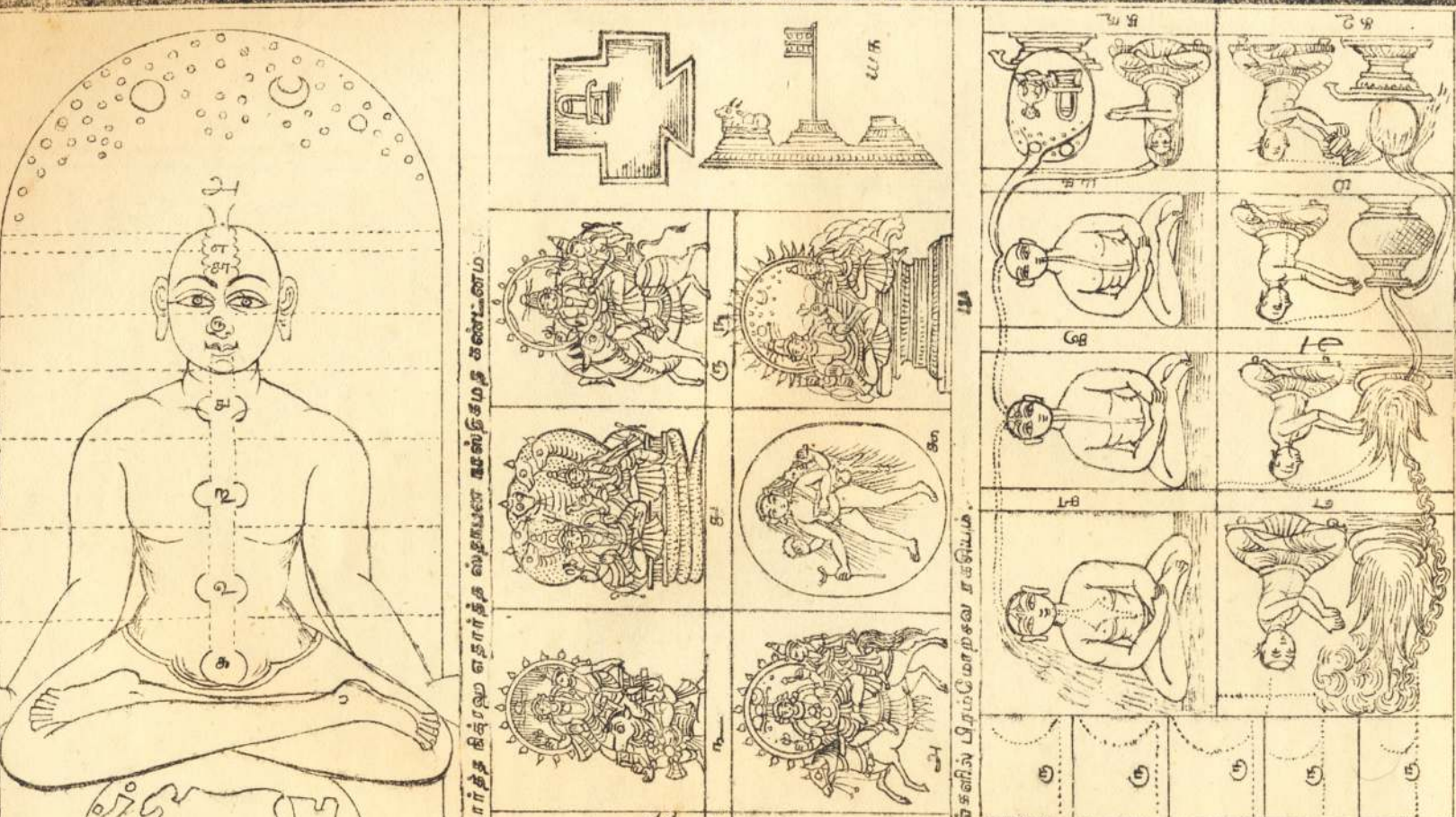
“There are those who believe that with the limits of knowledge derived from sense perception the limits of all insight are given. Yet if they would carefully observe how they become conscious of these limits, they would find in the very consciousness of the limits the faculties to transcend them. The fish swims up to the limits of the water; it must return because it lacks the physical organs to live outside this element. Man reaches the limits of knowledge attainable by sense perception; but he can recognise that on the way to this point powers of soul have arisen in him—powers whereby the soul can live in an element that goes beyond the horizon of the senses.”

— *Rudolf Steiner, Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts (1924)*



DEPICTING THE INFINITE SPIRIT

The Yoga Diagrams of the Madras Yogi Sri Sabhapati Swami



Keith Cantú, Research Affiliate, Asian Religious Traditions

The artistic record of South Asia is full of depictions of yoga and yogins, practitioners of yoga. Although such depictions are considerably fewer than sculptures and paintings of deities, heroes, or scenes from Sanskrit epics, they remain an important and vibrant section of Asian art. Among the most compelling are the visual diagrams found in the published literature of the so-called “Madras Yogi” Sri Sabhapati Swami (ca. 1828–1923/4), produced between 1880 and 1913. These diagrams belong to a critical transitional period that began around the end of the nineteenth century, when older traditions of painting and manuscript reproduction encountered the expanding world of print culture and printed books.

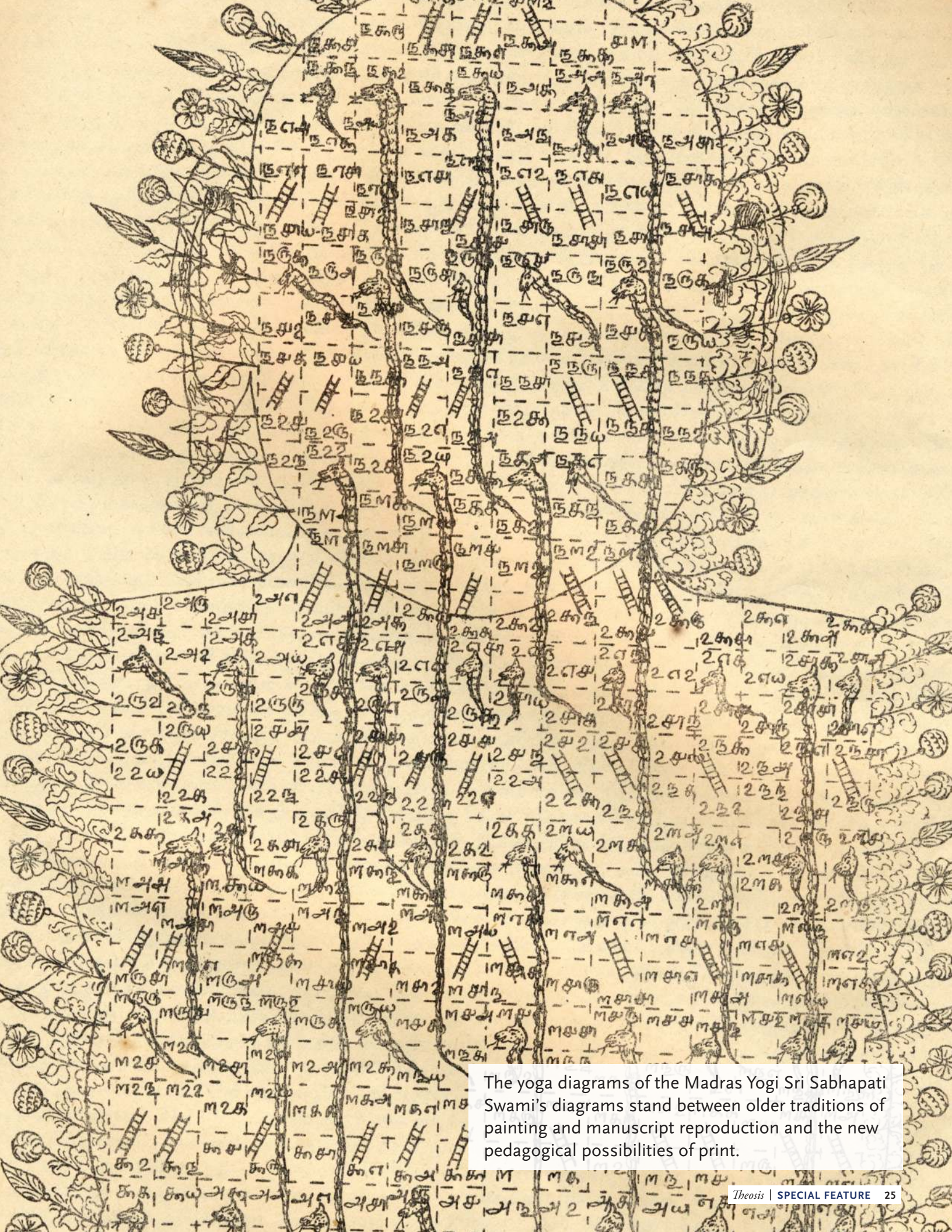
Rendered in a variety of artistic styles, Sabhapati’s diagrams range from simple to extremely detailed and complex. They precede the vast dissemination of calendar art in the twentieth century and represent an important transition period in which medieval and early modern art forms had not yet fully transformed through engagement with colonial and Romantic artistic forms. Some reflect Thanjavur Nayaka influence; others defy clear categorization into known Indian artistic styles and appear more minimalist, raw, and unpolished, even intense and provocative. Together, they preserve a visual world in motion.

Beyond their importance and diversity as an art form, Sabhapati’s diagrams are the earliest known printed diagrams on yoga from the perspective of a practitioner. Visual depictions of sadhus and yogins had appeared in colonial travelogues, often with a view to orienting an exotic “East,” but there is no evidence that Sabhapati had any interest in exhibiting yoga as fantastic or obscure.

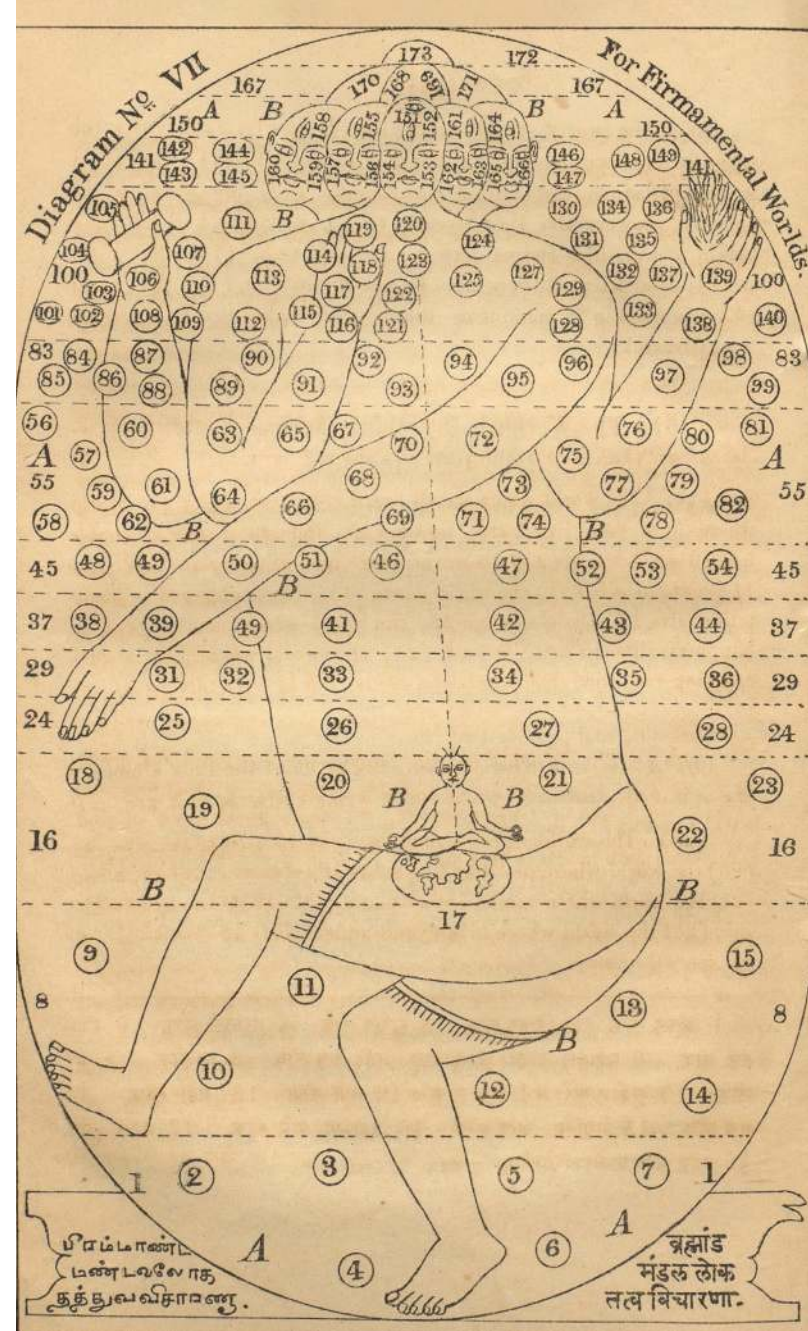
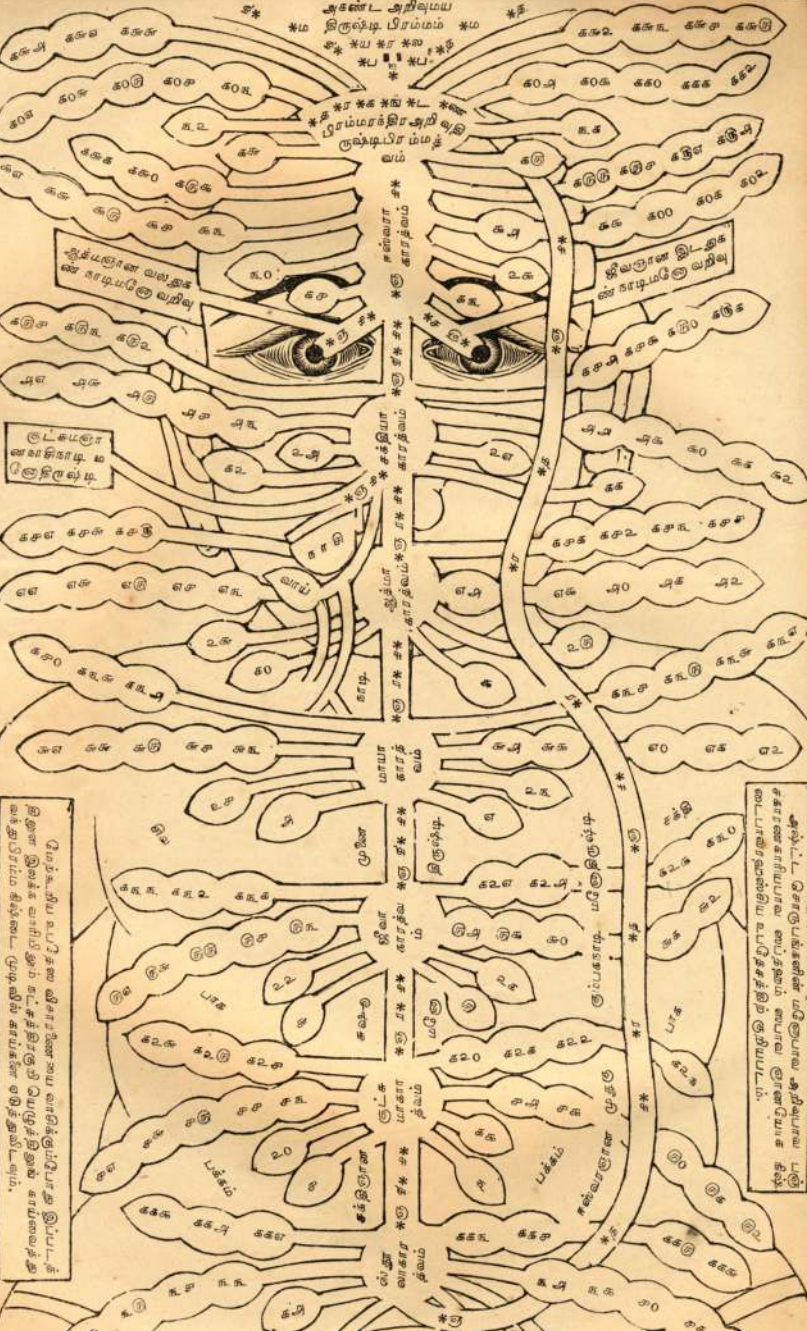
Instead, he went to great length to clarify and explain the minute details of each diagram. The technology of print enabled new pedagogical functions that could link visual depictions of yogic processes with literary content in a much more integrated way than had ever been possible. In Sabhapati’s works, the diagram is not simply illustrative: it is instructional.

These depictions cannot simply be taken as representing inaccessible or abstract divine objects or persons worthy of devotion, but rather as processes to be understood, envisioned, and acted upon. They map physiological and spiritual practices by which any human being can potentially become the so-called “Infinite Spirit,” Sabhapati’s own English translation for a universal circle that transcends both gender and form. For Sabhapati this was not a rigid or sectarian idea, but one correlated with Brahman, the Supreme Self, and the Supreme over Everything, while Viṣṇu, the Goddess, the God of Christians, and Allah of Muslims were all considered partial forms of the same absolute Spirit.

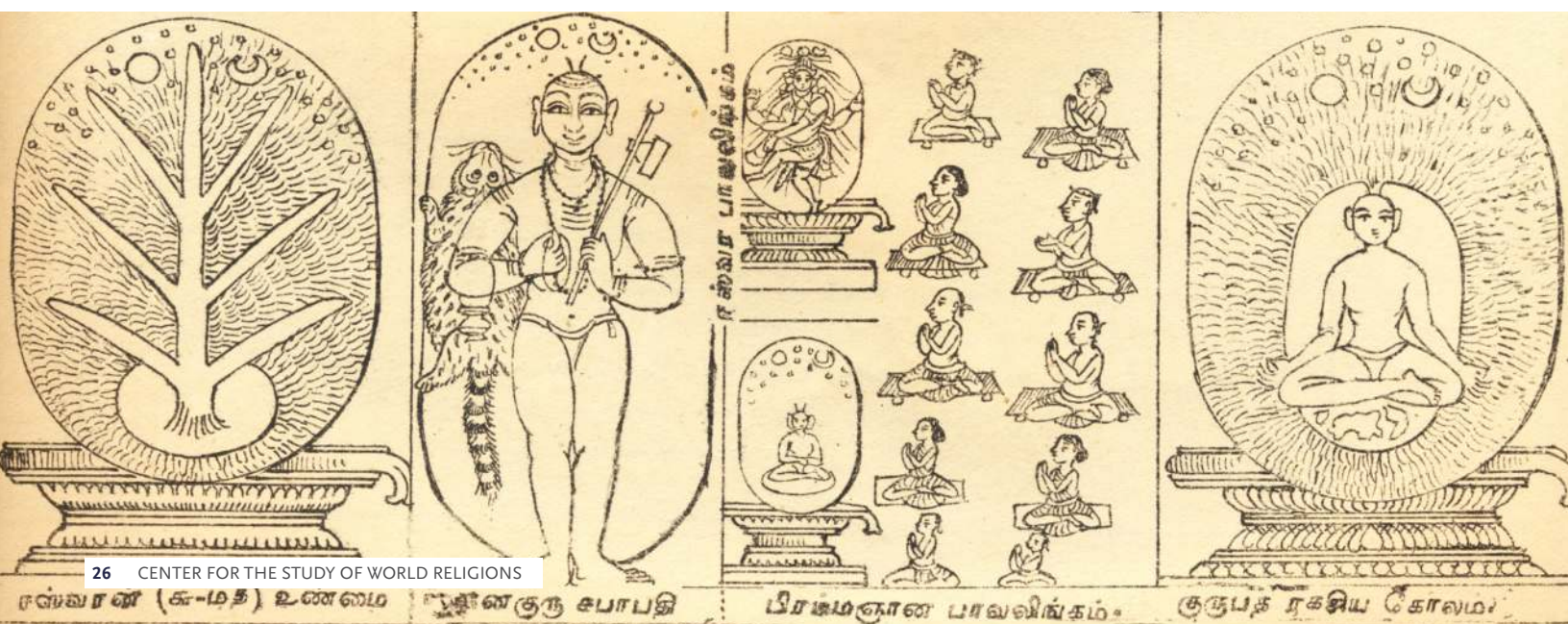
The range of subjects is remarkable: portraits of Sri Sabhapati Swami, Rāja Yoga and Samādhi, Spiritual Faculties, Meditation Halls, Haṭha Yoga and Prāṇāyāma, Dancing Śiva and Firmamental Worlds, Body as Temple and Śivaliṅga. One consistent feature across these publications is the use of numbers in almost every diagram, correlating parts of the image with the prose text in which it appears. The numbers are almost never merely descriptive or theoretical, but are meant to be practically engaged. Sabhapati’s diagrams thus show how print could make yoga newly visible while also making it newly teachable, giving visual form to processes meant not only to be seen, but to be practiced.



The yoga diagrams of the Madras Yogi Sri Sabhapati Swami's diagrams stand between older traditions of painting and manuscript reproduction and the new pedagogical possibilities of print.



These are not merely illustrations of yoga. They are numbered, explained, and designed to be studied and taught as practical guides that outline processes of meditation.

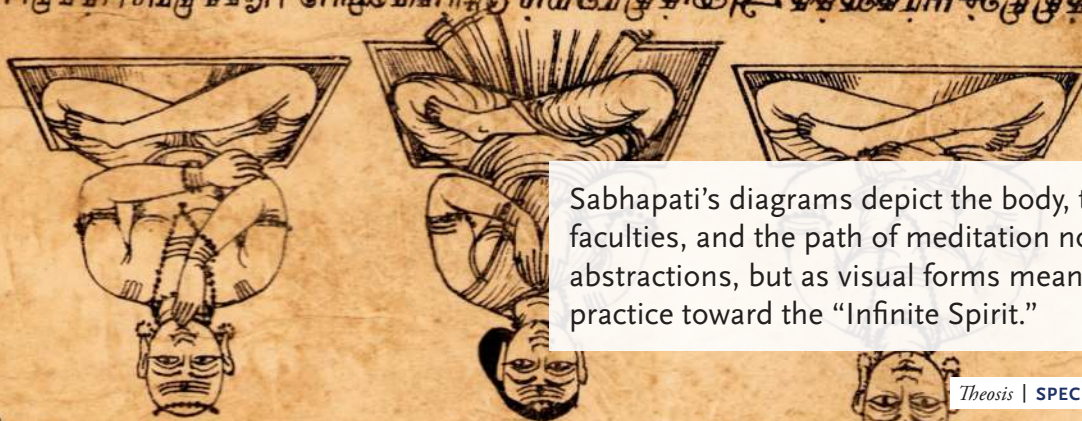




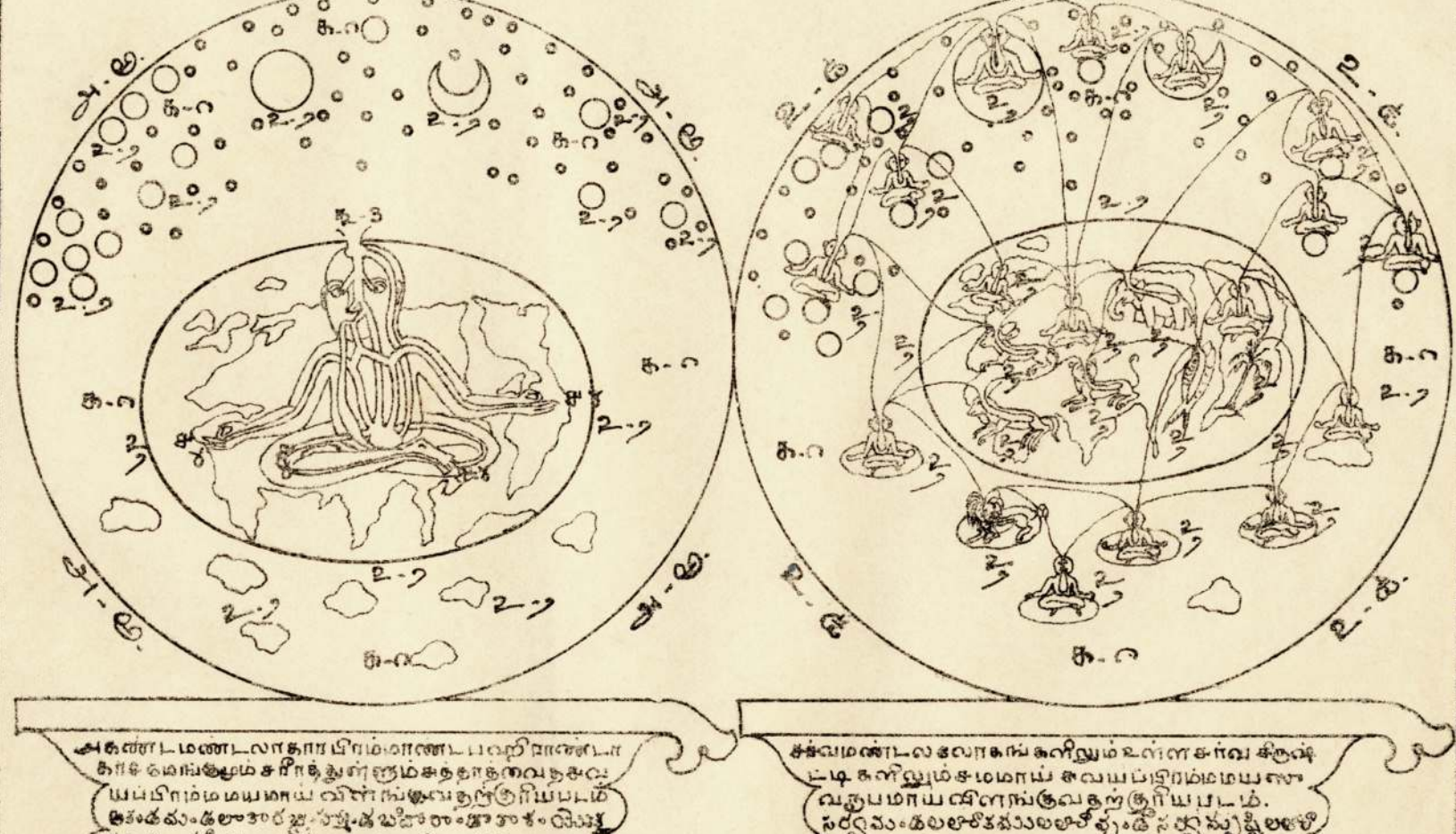
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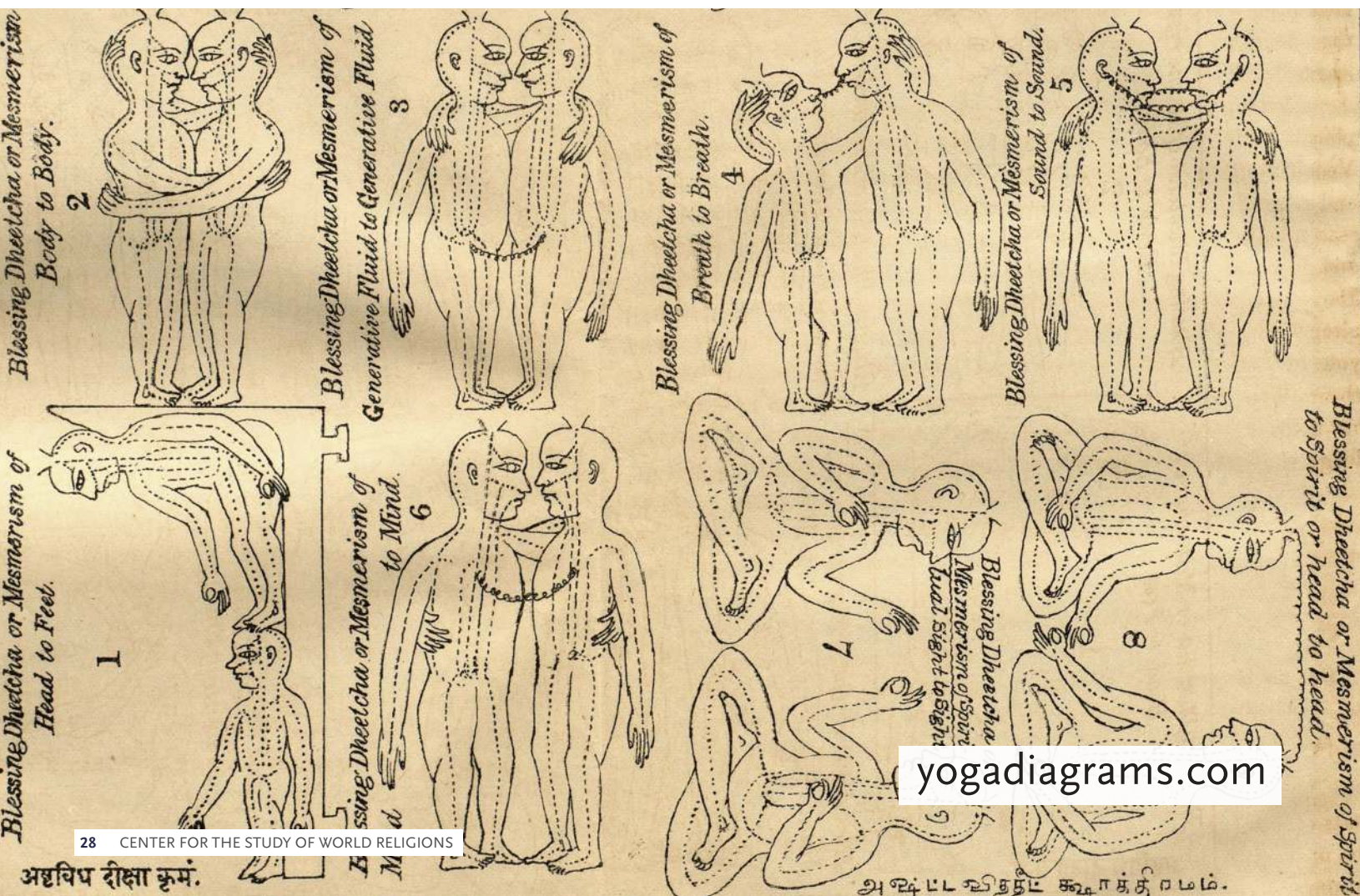
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Sabhapati's diagrams depict the body, the subtle faculties, and the path of meditation not as abstractions, but as visual forms meant to guide practice toward the "Infinite Spirit."



Sabhapati's diagrams of the cosmic body are especially striking in their treatment of the supreme form of Śiva as a universal reality beyond fixed gender, encompassing both masculine and feminine principles.



The God in the Mirror

Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm, Associate

Around 1797, Matsudaira Sadanobu (1759–1829), the feudal ruler of Shirakawa domain and senior advisor to the Japanese shogun, turned his gaze inward and declared himself a “god” (*kami*). He commissioned a wooden statue of himself and then installed it in a purpose-built Hall of Divine Resonance (*Kan’noden*). Confident that death would fully exalt him into a Nation Protecting Great God (*Shukoku Daimyōjin*), he conducted daily rites of veneration to this statue, as his own ritual proxy. This was no ordinary household altar, but a “living shrine” (*seishi*).

Matsudaira drew upon an audacious rationale: Through perfect devotion to oneself and relentless self-discipline, humans might become gods. He styled himself a practitioner of the “Divine Martial Way” (*Shinbu no michi*) and left behind an “Ascetic Record” (*Shugyō roku*) of the ever-increasing austerities intended to culminate in divinity.

Matsudaira is sometimes dismissed as a colorful eccentric, for scholars often assume that deification is a posthumous honor conferred by a community according to ritual traditions and the attestation of postmortem miracles. Yet, the idea that a living person might be a god was hardly Matsudaira’s own invention; it was the product of an evolving countertradition.

Beginning in the fifteenth century, a new grammar of apotheosis emerged in Japan, the subject of my upcoming entry “Apotheosis in Japan” for the “Archive of Mystical Experiences” project. At its center stood the Yoshida house, a cadet branch of a hereditary clan of diviners whose main clients were the imperial family. Sometime during the life of clan leader Yoshida Kanetomo (1435–1511), this influential family moved away from Buddhist funerary practices and began burying rather than cremating their departed, raising a small shrine over the grave and venerating their ancestors directly as a *kami*.

The Yoshidas’ innovative funeral rites were initially private, but feudal lords across

Japan eventually petitioned the Yoshidas to confer “divine titles” (*shingō*), sanctifying their deceased relatives as deities. In some cases, after the Yoshida granted posthumous titles, the new deity became the focus of popular worship. In others, the new title changed little, and veneration of the deity vanished as the memory of the deceased faded.



Matsudaira Sadanobu. SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Divine titles were not only bestowed on the departed. While alive, Yamazaki Ansai (1619–1682), a former Buddhist monk-turned-Confucian and the founder of a movement known as Suika Shintō, established a “living shrine” housing a mirror he claimed contained his own “mind-god” (*shinshin*), making him a living divinity. The choice of the mirror as “divine vessel” (*shintai*) was no accident, for mirrors had long been tied to Shinto sanctuaries. Playing on the phonetic overlap of *kagami*, meaning “mirror,” and *kami*, meaning deity, Yamazaki declared: “The heart of the divine is like a bright mirror without a single speck of cloudiness. As a metaphorical expression of this, the use of *kagami* arose. Then the middle *ga* was dropped, giving the form *kami*.” Through this folk etymology, he

cast the shrine’s mirror as the manifest reflection of his divine mind. This seems to have been convincing. In 1671, the head of the Yoshida family endorsed not only Yamazaki’s shrine but also publicly ratified his startling self-apotheosis by recognizing his divine name while still alive.

The Yoshida clan did not have a monopoly on deification. Sometimes an individual could effect auto-apotheosis without their stamp of approval. One famous example is the samurai Honda Tadatomo (1582–1615), who drunkenly failed in battle in 1614. The following year, he fought honorably and was mortally wounded in combat. On his deathbed, Honda swore to become a deity to aid anyone who wished to renounce drinking, effecting his self-apotheosis. He was enshrined at Osaka’s Ishin-ji, a Buddhist temple, and today he continues to be worshipped there as the God of Temperance (*Sake-fuji no Kami*), helping those struggling with alcoholism.

In addition to traditional grammars of Japanese deification, a distinctive formula of divinity through auto-apotheosis crystallized starting in the fifteenth century. The historian Katō Genchi compiled eighty-five Japanese self-divinized “living gods” between 1600 and 1934. Divine status was typically actualized by successors and legitimated by ritual authorities like the Yoshida, but it was no longer something only conferred from without. Now divinity could be apprehended from within, willed into being by the person who claimed it.

Auto-apotheosis asserts the sheer force of individual will over, and sometimes against, older economies of recognition. It stands as an alternative to longstanding modes of deification from external spiritual authorities. Divinity could now be seized before it was conferred. Matsudaira’s statue, Yamazaki’s mirror, and Honda’s deathbed oath took shape within a developing countertradition that treated transcendence as the hard-won product of self-directed ritual labor.

Loanwords along the Silk Road

Adam Bremer-McCollum, Research Associate

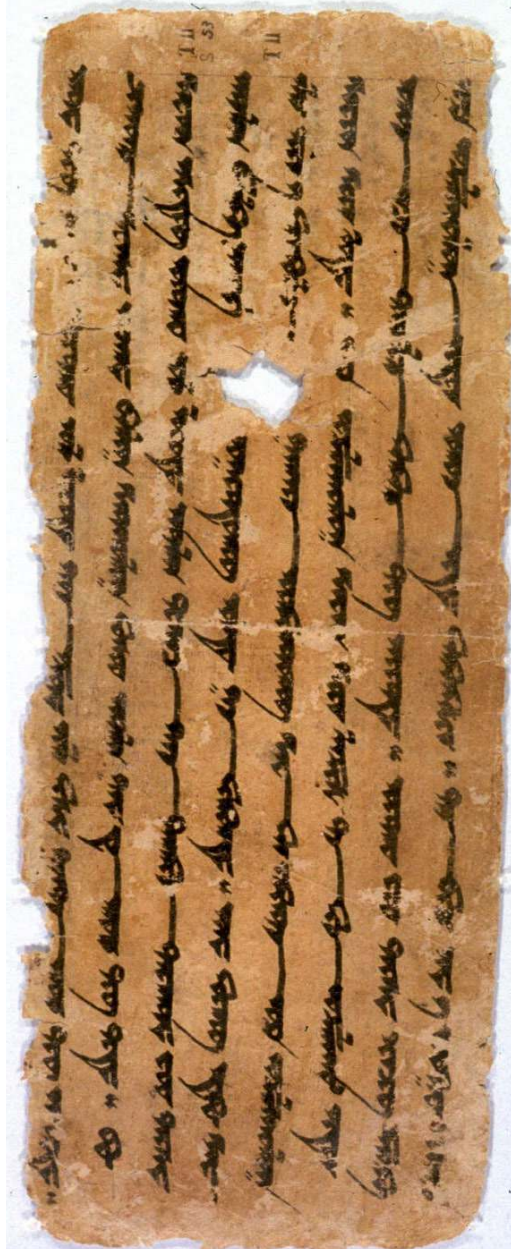
Lots of the words and phrases we use everyday are “loaned” or otherwise sourced from other languages. “Coffee,” for example, goes back to the Arabic word *qahwah*, a word of unknown origin that initially meant wine before it came to mean coffee. When speakers of two languages come into contact, their languages and the ways they use them rub off on each other, resulting in, among other effects, loanwords.

Loanwords, as linguists dub them, are words existing first in a donor language and adapted to a receiver language. Two examples from Arabic illustrate the long history that a single word can have. A “rudder” in Arabic is *sukkân*, akin to Syriac *sawkânâ*, which goes back millennia to the Akkadian word *sikkannu* and Sumerian *zigan*. The carpenter who is able to fashion that rudder is a *naggâr* in Arabic, and a *naggârâ* in Syriac, eventually reaching back to the Akkadian word *naggâru* and Sumerian *nagar*, all words for carpenters. Borrowing like this is a linguistic universal; no language is really homogeneous but rather reflects the histories of contacts with speakers and writers of other languages.

The histories of Buddhism, Christianity, and Manichaeism are partly told through loanwords. Arising in the third century CE, Manichaeism, an intentionally syncretistic religion based on a light-dark dualistic view of the world, eventually became one of the most widespread and linguistically diverse premodern religions, stretching from western North Africa into China. Manichaeism, Buddhism, and Christianity are text-friendly religions embracing translation—a site of language contact if ever there were one—and loanword dynamics are on full display in Central Asia and western China along the Silk Road(s), where texts from these religious communities survive in a bevy of languages: Chinese, Tangut, Old Uyghur, Sogdian, Middle Persian, Parthian, and more.

Let’s consider a few Indic loanwords in Chinese as found in a collection of Manichaean hymns called *Móníjiào xiàbùzàn*. In one hymn, the adepts chant, “All the past Buddhas and Arhants.” Here, as in Chinese Buddhist sources, the word for “Buddha” is *fó* (佛, earlier pronounced *but*), derived through an Iranian language

and tracing back to the Sanskrit term *buddha*. The word for “Arhant” in the hymn is *luóhàn* (羅漢), a clipped form comparable to Pali *arahant* and Sanskrit *arhat*—all meaning “Worthy One.” Earlier in the



Turfan, U 2973, side 1: The Diamond Sutra in Old Uyghur.
SOURCE TURFAN RESEARCH PROJECT

hymn collection, the adepts sing, “Its origin is a palace for demons (*mó*) and a kingdom for evil spirits (*luóchà*),” with two Indic Buddhist loanwords: *mó* from Sanskrit *māra* “demon,” and *luóchà* for Sanskrit *rākṣa* “demon, monster.”

Old Uyghur has a conspicuous share of Chinese loanwords, like *key* “wide” (< *guǎng* 廣); *kunčuy* “lady, queen” (< *gōngzhǔ* 公主); *buši* “alms, gifts” (< *bùshī* 布施); *kay* “street” (< *jiē* 街); and *fapši* “teacher” (< *fāshī* 法師). This last term often refers to a Buddhist teacher, but the Christian Xi’an Stele, composed mainly in Chinese, includes a marginal Syriac-language line where a Christian priest has as a title an iteration of this Chinese term: “The Teacher (*papši*) of China-stan.”

In Central Asian Buddhist texts written in Old Uyghur, “Buddha” is *burhan*, the first element of which is derived from Chinese *fó* (佛), mentioned above. In Old Uyghur Manichean texts, the word *burhan* refers to Mani (for whom Manichaeism is named). In a fragment of the Christian *Acts of Thekla* (originally in Greek), the plural of this word, *burhanlar*, refers to the prophets or apostles. This same text, more than once, uses the now familiar Buddhist term *arahant* for the apostle Paul.

An Old Uyghur Buddhist confession-text contains the following declarations: “We failed to see the Buddha. We failed to hear his true Dharma. We failed to meet together with the wise Sanghas. *Kleśas* held us in place and became a roadblock.” The Buddha, again, is called *burhan*; the Dharma is called *nom*, a Sogdian loanword going back to Greek; the Sangha is called *bursoṇ*, from Chinese *fóseṅ* (佛僧) through Sogdian; and the *kleśas*, “mental defections,” likewise bear a Sogdian name, *nizvani*.

Loanwords are everywhere, not just in old Central Asian texts. You don’t need to speak or read lots of languages to see them: You can do a lot worse than to indulge your curiosity and check a word’s etymology at Wiktionary. The shared vocabulary exemplified above demonstrates and reifies our shared nexus of human speech and experience.

Human languages are heterogeneous languages, and loanwords are the spoken, read, and written vestiges of language contact and, therefore, of human contact.

Esoteric Transgression in Modern and Contemporary Art

Marco Pasi, Visiting Scholar

In the last 20 years, the art world has shown a growing interest in esoteric and occult themes. Large exhibitions have demonstrated that the history of modern and contemporary art is far more metaphysically inclined than formalist perspectives would have us believe. However, what is not always adequately understood is the ways in which transgression connects art and esotericism. Some artists transgress artistic canons and conventions by claiming to take inspiration from higher spiritual beings to create innovative works. Other artists explicitly step over moral and societal norms by creating a radical aesthetic of transgression. Artists of both types draw upon esoteric themes and techniques.

Visionary artists such as Georgiana Houghton (1814–1884), active in England in the mid-Victorian period, and Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), active in Sweden in the first half of the twentieth century, produced art under the perceived influence of higher spiritual entities. Their esoteric practices—based on mediumship, automatism, and visualization of other dimensions of reality—enabled them to break away from predominant artistic norms. If they transgressed what they knew were the rules of a good artistic composition, it was because they believed higher spirits commanded them to do so. That transgression, instilled in them by the spirits, made them produce artwork that, while incommensurate with their own, irresistibly speaks to us today.

Houghton and af Klint died ignored by the art world, but they were rediscovered long after their deaths. Both continue to receive growing attention due to the uncanny modernity of their works, which seem to anticipate the turn towards abstraction in avant-garde art. It's not just critics and historians who are fascinated by their rediscovery, but also the broader public. Af Klint's 2019 exhibition at the Guggenheim in New York City was the most attended event in the history of the museum. The spirits enabled these artists to produce works that reveal to us the beauty transgression can take when transformed into art.

Until the mid-1980s, art criticism, with only a few exceptions, was relatively blind to the esoteric, mystical, spiritual, and irrational dimensions of twentieth-century art.

In 1986, Maurice Tuchman curated his groundbreaking exhibition, *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, at the



Georgiana Houghton, *The Risen Lord*, 1864 (recto).
SOURCE: © VICTORIAN SPIRITUALISTS' UNION, MELBOURNE

Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The exhibition showed how important these dimensions had been and still were in modern and contemporary art. Its oft-reprinted catalogue is a testimony to the vastness of long-neglected occult territories. Recent exhibitions, including *Traces du sacré* (Paris, 2008), *L'Europe des esprits* (Strasbourg, 2011–2012), *World Receivers* (Munich, 2018–2019), and *Black Light* (Barcelona, 2018), have displayed wide-ranging historical, modern, and contemporary art inspired by esoteric perspectives. Houghton and af Klint were far from being anomalous.

Transgression is not always a collateral aspect of art but can also be a deliberate choice of esotericism-inspired artists, especially in performance art. Hermann Nitsch (1938–2022) and Genesis P-Orridge (1950–2020) exemplify the intersection of transgression and esotericism, using extreme performances that involve bodily fluids, sex, and real or staged violence. In a recent work on Viennese Actionism, the artistic group in which Nitsch was involved in the 1960s and 1970s, Sólveig Guðmundsdóttir uses the terms

“subversive esotericism” and “aesthetic radicalism” to characterize the work of these artists. Nitsch, a painter and composer, may not have explicitly referred to esoteric literature, but he presents his performances as re-enactments of rituals from ancient mystery cults, such as Eleusis and the cult of Dionysus.

These kinds of references and re-enactments are a recurrent trope in modern esotericism. Genesis P-Orridge was an important performance artist and musician active in the 1970s and 1980s industrial music scene in Britain. Their art was full of references to notoriously transgressive occultists, such as Aleister Crowley and Austin Osman Spare, and their artistic performances as members of the COUM Transmissions group were magical rituals where sex, bodily fluids, self-mutilation, and even violence often played a crucial role.

Considering all of this, transgression appears to be a catalyst in creative processes and is an effective tool for artists who are interested in esoteric practices and ideas. It is not the only factor in the connection between art and esotericism, but it is certainly a very important one. However, transgression inevitably depends on social context. What was considered transgressive a hundred years ago may not be so challenging today. Hermann Nitsch was perceived as a dangerous subversive radical in his own country, Austria, in the 1960s, but he came to be recognized and even celebrated by mainstream cultural institutions in more recent years. He now has a museum entirely dedicated to his art in the small town of Mistelbach, Lower Austria. Similarly, Houghton and af Klint were viewed critically or just ignored in their lifetimes, but now they are prominently featured in large-scale exhibitions and art history books. In an increasingly globalized and fluid world, where all parts are peripheries of a center that does not hold, we should ask ourselves: where are the next frontiers of esoteric transgression in art?

Imagining Atlantis in the Americas

Mariano Villalba, Postdoctoral Fellow

Few myths have traveled as far or taken as many forms as the story of Atlantis. Since its appearance in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*, the legend of a vanished land has invited reflection on the beginnings and destinies of civilizations. In these dialogues, Plato presents both an allegory and a geographical description of a great island beyond the Pillars of Hercules, surrounded by smaller islands leading toward a vast continent hidden beyond. Over the centuries, antiquarians, explorers, and visionaries returned to this account to reinterpret human origins.

The endurance of the Atlantis story lies not in the search for a lost continent but in the imagination through which each age projected its anxieties and aspirations.

My forthcoming book, *Occult Mexico: The Imagination of Mexican Antiquity, from the Colonial Era to the Revolution* (Oxford University Press), examines how thinkers from colonial scholars to modern intellectuals used esoteric ideas to interpret the pre-Columbian past. These thinkers turned to the Atlantis story and its many esoteric interpretations to defend the humanity of peoples, to imagine the origins of political entities, and to express nineteenth-century scientific and national ideals.

When the Americas entered European consciousness in the sixteenth century, the Platonic tale was absorbed into debates about the nature and antiquity of the newly discovered lands. Missionaries and chroniclers seeking to situate the New World in biblical history used Atlantis to explain the origins of its civilizations. Bartolomé de las Casas, drawing on Marsilio Ficino's commentary on the *Timaeus*, treated Plato's story as authentic history. He identified the Americas with the "great continent" of the myth and the Antilles with the remnants of the sunken island, using this to argue for the antiquity and humanity of Indigenous peoples. Others, such as Agustín de Zárate and Francisco Cervantes de Salazar, read the account as a prophetic revelation of the Americas transmitted by ancient sages long before Christianity.

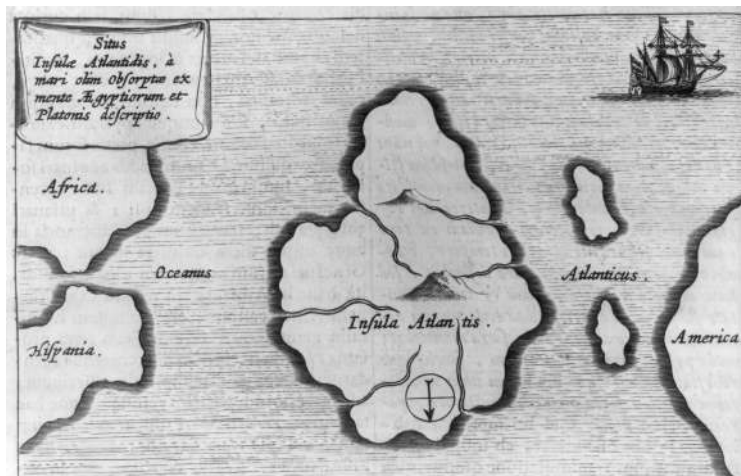
In the seventeenth century, Athanasius Kircher, synthesizing natural philosophy and comparative religion, gathered these interpretations in his *Mundus Subterraneus* (1665). He placed the lost island between Europe and the Americas and explained its submergence as the result of cataclysmic Earth transformations following the Flood. His engraved map of the sunken island, widely reproduced, reached New Spain and

Le Plongeon and his wife, the medium Alice Dixon, conducted excavations at Chichén Itzá and Uxmal. Combining archaeological documentation with early photography and Alice's trance visions, they claimed that the Maya were ancestors of Egyptian civilization, descended from Atlantean survivors. Although dismissed by professional archaeologists, their books circulated for decades and still appear in esoteric bookstores, shaping popular imagination.

As the wars of Independence from Spain unfolded, the Atlantean theme gained political resonance. Writers and scientists in Mexico and Latin America reinterpreted Atlantis in their search for national and intellectual sovereignty. The German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt mentioned Atlantis only as one among many conjectures about continental connections, favoring empirical comparison over speculation. In his *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain* (1808–1811) and *Kosmos* (1845–1862), he studied the Americas through observation and measurement,

situating them within the broader history of nature and civilization. His works offered an image of the continent grounded in rational knowledge that many viewed as intellectual validation for postcolonial nations.

The myth of Atlantis continued to evolve. Some writers treated it as a metaphor for the decline of Western civilization, while others saw it as a symbol of emerging nations and utopian hopes. In the twentieth century, it resurfaced in occult and New Age movements, from Edgar Cayce's readings on Atlantean migrations to James Churchward's theories of the lost continent of Mu, a Pacific civilization whose descendants he believed had founded cultures across Asia and the Americas. Atlantis persisted in pulp reprints and popular esoteric circles well into the 1970s. Revisiting the myth shows that the Americas have long served as a mirror for global reflections on history and civilization, a legacy that continues to inform debates about identity, science, and the uses of the past.



Map of Atlantis from Athanasius Kircher's *Mundus Subterraneus* (Amsterdam, 1665), depicting the island's position between Europe and the Americas.

SOURCE: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

inspired Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora. In the 1670s, Sigüenza, the first documented explorer of Teotihuacan northeast of Mexico City, interpreted its ruins through Kircher's theories, comparing them to those of Egypt and proposing that the Toltecs had migrated from the Old World through the Atlantean continent. For him, Mexico was not a barbarous land but heir to ancient civilizations, a center from which knowledge had once radiated toward the Old World.

The nineteenth century gave the myth new life as archaeology and geology developed alongside efforts to reconcile science and spirituality.

The American writer Ignatius Donnelly popularized the idea that all civilizations derived from Atlantis, which sank beneath the Atlantic after a cataclysm. *His Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* (1882) sought to give this theory scientific credibility, becoming a reference for spiritualist and Theosophical readings. Around the same time in Yucatán, Augustus

A Medium at Harvard

Shannon Taggart, Artist-in-Residence

Photos of the séance medium Mina Crandon (1888–1941), known publicly as Margery, are among the most shocking images in the history of photography. Restrained and half-dressed, she sits with legs spread as phantom forms emerge from nearly every orifice. It is difficult to tell whether these images, some captured at Harvard University, document a sideshow, a scientific trial, a crime scene, or a surrealist performance.

For over two decades, I have photographed mediums and séances, culminating in my book *Séance* (Fulgur Press, 2019) that examines this bizarre photographic lineage tracing back to Boston, where spirit photography first emerged in the 1860s. Long dismissed as absurd curiosities or fraudulent entertainments, séance photographs are more than failed or compromised evidence. They expose how the authority of the camera was forged and remains in tension with ritual, embodiment, and belief.

Margery's séances in Boston generated international controversy, drawing the attention of prominent figures such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, W. B. Yeats, and Harry Houdini. During two Harvard University investigations, multiple domains of knowledge converged upon Margery's body. In a windowless room on the third floor of Emerson Hall, scholars from English, mathematics, astronomy, biology, and psychology scrutinized the chthonic displays emerging from under her dress in the dark.

Eighty years earlier, William Mumler (1832–1884), the first recognized séance photographer, also residing in Boston, produced images showing the living posed alongside deceased relatives. To the skeptic, Mumler's images look like manipulated exposures. To the believer, they are spiritual revelations attesting to the fact that the living and the dead remain connected. The camera conjures what was not visibly present, revealing the unstable boundary between evidence and appearance—a paradox at the heart of photographic truth.

The primary force driving Margery and Mumler's visions was Spiritualism, an American-born religious movement grounded in the belief that the living can communicate

with the dead. Like other image-oriented ritual technologies—from cave paintings and ceremonial masks to the ancestral *moai* of Easter Island—séance photography makes matter a threshold through which presence becomes authored. Photographic emulsion joins pigment, wood, and stone as a material through which the unseen can take form.

Séances involving manifestations of ectoplasm are central to Spiritualist imagery.



Investigators fingerprint the ectoplasmic hand said to belong to the deceased brother of the medium Mina “Margery” Crandon, c. 1925. SOURCE: COURTESY OF THE COLLECTION OF TONY OURSLER.

A viscous, light-sensitive substance said to bridge life and death, witnesses describe ectoplasm emanating from mediums' bodies as an animated phenomenon, shape-shifting into luminous veils, floating faces, or disembodied limbs. Yet in photographs, ectoplasm suggests crude theatrics, appearing like paper-mâché dolls, cheesecloth constructions, or cut-up magazines.

Spiritualism's séance culture created a new iconography through séance photography.

This uncanny visual record circulated Spiritualist ideas and controversies across the Western World and eventually around the globe. Spiritualism and séance photography survive today, though on a far smaller scale. In the twenty-first century, mediums still claim to produce ectoplasm, and my work continues to document the phenomenon.

Margery was among the few women mediums from modest means who unsettled the greatest minds of their time. Her most notorious feat was materializing the ectoplasmic hand of her deceased brother. Emerging

from between her legs, the spectral appendage felt like an organic substance to the touch. From session to session, the hand shape-shifted from cool flesh with stubby fingers into cord-like strands or into the heel of a foot. Bursting forth in the dark, the hand touched séance participants and performed impossible acts, such as ringing a bell locked inside a box or levitating a six-pound weight five feet off the ground.

It reportedly smelled like liver and was suspected to be made of animal tissue. Researchers cast it in wax, fingerprinted it, and photographed it as evidence.

Religion, spectacle, and scientific inquiry collided around Margery. From that clash, a new science emerged. The scientist J. B. Rhine was so disturbed by Margery's displays that he set out, in his words, to “eliminate the shadows” from psychic experiments, abandoning séance fieldwork to study extrasensory perception in a laboratory setting at Duke University. Rhine replaced professional mediums with anonymous subjects and relied on card-guessing tests, random-number generators, and statistical analysis to generate data.

Rhine transformed nineteenth-century British psychical research into twentieth-century American parapsychology, but Rhine's shift to controlled abstraction was not solely for scientific progress. It was an empirical purification seeking to eliminate theatricality, embodiment, and ritual residue from psychic study. But what is lost when the shadows are removed?

Both the photographic medium and Spiritualist mediums blur boundaries between subjective experience and objective fact. Far from a neutral instrument of verification, photography emerges as a site where measurable proof and lived encounter intersect, where the unseen moves from a séance vision and onto the supposedly objective photographic image. In Margery's pictures, grief and ritual collide with strict procedures of scientific testing. Her displays of form carry meanings beyond explanation, reminding us that human experience surpasses what science can verify.

Superstar: The Psychedelic Jesus of the Counterculture

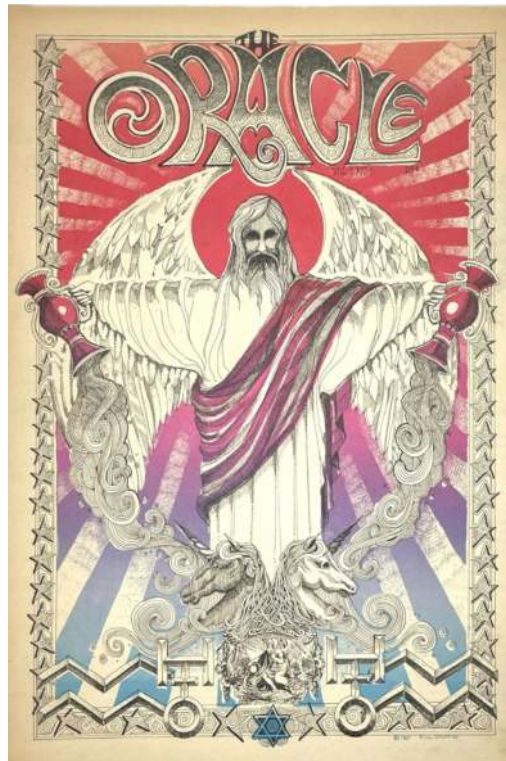
Erik Davis, Visiting Scholar

As the contemporary dialogue between religious leaders and the psychedelic world deepens, a new psychedelic Christianity is emerging. This development in turn resurrects a significant but understudied figure of the American religious imagination: the “psychedelic Jesus” associated with the spiritual counterculture in the late 1960s and 1970s. This psychedelic Jesus—to be distinguished from the mestizo or Indigenous Jesus of the peyote-using Native American Church or Maria Sabina’s mushroom *veladas*—is a “freak Jesus” who crops up in three overlapping domains: the broad “occultural” milieu of hippie spirituality, individual trip reports, and the collective imagination of the Jesus People, aka the Jesus freaks, a movement of fervent young Christians who grew out of the drug culture. Though the Jesus People rejected LSD and the grab-bag of occulture, I argue that many singular features of the revival are directly rooted in psychedelic spirituality—something that even *Time* magazine suspected when it named its important 1971 cover story on the Jesus People movement “The Alternative Jesus: Psychedelic Christ.”

The Jesus who appears within the broad patchwork of 1960s and 1970s occult culture is a wisdom figure.

He manifests as the crucified Christ, seeing through the leela of existence from the butcher-block pages of Ram Dass’s 1971 classic *Be Here Now*. Or he appears on the cover of the Haight Street underground newspaper *The Oracle* (1967), as an Aquarian-age prophet whose face recalls the Shroud of Turin. This psychedelic wisdom figure derives less from the canonical Jesus than from the esoteric Master who appears in “hidden teachings” like the *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* (1908), supposedly channeled from the Akashic records, or from the ecumenical yogi Jesus of Yogananda’s Self-Realization Fellowship. In the psychedelic 60s, this esoteric Jesus could grow intensely heretical. For the notorious Process Church of the Final Judgement, Jesus Christ is a god in balance with Jehovah, Lucifer, and especially Satan; Charles Manson, who came to personify psychedelic evil, also claimed identity with Jesus Christ.

The psychedelic Jesus also appears in the phenomenological weave of actual trips. Pioneering psychedelic psychiatrist Stan Grof (b. 1931) reported that Christian and Jewish elements were the most common religious material appearing in the LSD trips he supervised. Grof emphasized that many subjects identified their harrowing “ego death” experiences with Christ on the Cross. Acid



Cover of the *Oracle*, San Francisco, vol. 1, by Rick Griffin .
SOURCE: COURTESY OF ERIK DAVIS

trips also regularly feature in the conversion narratives of Jesus People. Some of these accounts emphasize the demonic or spiritually void nature of psychedelic journeys, but others—including narratives given by movement leaders like Lonnie Frisbee (1949–1993) and Oden Fong (b. 1950)—feature positive experiences that include millennialist revelations or transcendental encounters with Jesus. These drug experiences confirm the truth or attraction of Christianity within the trip itself. Because Jesus People would generally demonize drug culture, these “bridge experiences” remain fundamentally but productively ambivalent.

The third domain of the psychedelic Jesus lies in the discourse, imagery, and spiritual

experiences associated with the Jesus People. The first of these “street Christians” emerged from Christian coffee shops and communal homes in hippie California in the late 1960s, but quickly grew to national prominence. Scholars and journalists extensively covered the movement, emphasizing its stylistic and affective novelties as well as its often militant blend of hippie mores and fundamentalist beliefs about scriptural inerrancy and imminent Apocalypse. By the mid-1970s, the Jesus People movement had largely been assimilated into broadening nondenominational Christian currents, while changing those currents in some crucial ways.

While Jesus People rejected drug culture, I suggest that the modes of religious experience they favored owe a significant debt to the discourse and phenomenology of psychedelics. Examples include the experiential immediacy of their Jesus “encounters,” the transhistorical intensity of eschatological time, and the sometimes synchronistic operations of the divine in daily life. Other connections are more aesthetic. Jesus People music groups like Agape or Fraction played heavy acid rock, expressing an evangelical recoding of the purple haze and affective ferocity of psychedelic mysticism.

Popular imagery also illuminates the psychedelic Jesus. Rick Griffin (1944–1991) was a well-known Haight Street poster artist and underground cartoonist, and his powerful psychedelic work is informed by an esoteric if playful mysticism that includes arcane Christian references. In 1970, Griffin and his wife Ida became Jesus freaks, with Rick visually “working through” his conversion in his remarkable publication *The Man from Utopia* (1972). Tapping into the Jesus People spirit, Griffin went on to produce artwork associated with Calvary Chapel, a key Southern California point of contact between the Jesus movement and the evangelical Christian mainstream (Lonnie Frisbee preached there). In addition to Christian rock album covers, Griffin illustrated Calvary Chapel pastor Chuck Smith’s *Gospel of John* (1980) magazine. In these vibrant years, Griffin, who was a surfer, also produced an unforgettable image of a surfing Christ—a veritable icon of the psychedelic Jesus.

Tu quidem ingenii bone longe Deo prime
iuvencione virtutem & prudentia: ante flos
bene & sobria Merentium Testi pter as scripserat
De primis eius & ideo & bene & ideo: roppen
principis & maximo Celat & ascripta manu
ab ingenio fte Fanjem extulstis illustrado ficut
Caesar al. nec tantum ingenium atq; erit initio
nec fte & a mores erga celpratur fama: et
honore & te sempiterna celebrati & fama & te
sed & discentia celebrans per ennsque volente
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ISRAH. RHOL. TARVISANVS.
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ascriberit: Achaii quid fopos
Nouacheri pteibus fuerit, no
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Argydiorae. Quam Caueo quq; Latia artis
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te fte sit commoditae labore in decoa a noueri
oibatar fte: Troglis librum ante uo scriuerat
superiora: Ne tne ciara gengraino. clo reuerē
tata: quaedam genera: tace audg ea taceret



MYSTICAL SCRIPTURES

In April 1843, the Transcendentalists' periodical *The Dial* announced an unusual arrival: a traveling library of mystical and theosophic writings brought from England by Bronson Alcott and Charles Lane, and linked to the late English religious thinker James Pierrepont Greaves. In a brief prefatory note, *The Dial* framed the shipment as both a material and intellectual event, emphasizing its scale and rarity in the United States:

"MR. ALCOTT and MR. LANE have recently brought from England a small but valuable library, amounting to about a thousand volumes, containing undoubtedly a richer collection of mystical writers than any other library in this country.... We print this list... because the arrival of this cabinet of mystic and theosophic lore is a remarkable fact in our literary history."

The collection offered a distinctive window into the spiritual and philosophical sources that shaped New England Transcendentalism: not only as a record of earlier interests and affinities, but also as a set of books that moved—physically and intellectually—through conversation, reading, excerpting, editorial practice, and private shelves.

We invite you to open this cabinet with us and explore more than 200 titles that formed the Transcendentalists' thought and their comparative religious imagination.

Gosia Skłodowska, Executive Director



Jeanne Guyon (1648–1717)

French mystic imprisoned for her teaching of pure, contemplative love, whose writings on inward prayer became foundational reading for Fénelon and the Pietists,

Poésies et Cantiques spirituels

The Dial's edition: Paris, 1722

"Ah, may my soul be so lost that my senses cannot know what it has become; may even the mind be unable to behold it. [...]"

"And may I, unknown to the whole world, be known only to You."



Plotinus (c. 204–270 CE)

Founder of Neoplatonism, whose writings articulate a vision of reality grounded in the One and a path of inward ascent through contemplation.

Select Works by T. Taylor

The Dial's edition: London, 1817

"He, therefore, who perceives himself to associate with God, will have himself the similitude of Him. And if he passes from himself as an image to the archetype, he will then have the end of his progression."



Hermes Trismegistus

Legendary sage associated with the Hermetic corpus, whose writings shaped late antique thought and later Western mystical and esoteric traditions.

The Divine Pymander

The Dial's edition: London, 1650

"For the knowledge of it is a divine silence, and the rest of all the senses. For neither can he that understands that understand anything else [...] For it is possible for the soul to be deified while yet it lodgeth in the body of man, if it contemplates the beauty of the Good."



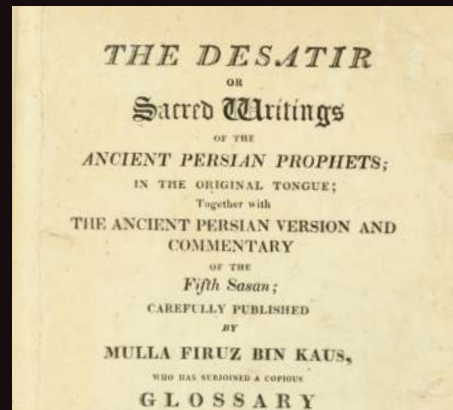
Confucius (551–479 BCE)

Founder of Chinese moral philosophy whose teachings on ethical cultivation, humility, and right conduct shaped East Asian thought for more than two millennia.

The Four Books

Excerpted by Thoreau in Ethnical Scriptures

"Coarse rice for food, water to drink, and the bended arm for a pillow, happiness may be enjoyed even in these. Without virtue, riches and honor seem to me like a passing cloud."



Mulla Firuz bin Kaus (c.1758–1830)

Parsi/Zoroastrian publisher or editor associated with printing the *Desatir* and related Iranian religious-literary materials in the nineteenth century.

The Desatir, Sacred Writings of the Ancient Persian Prophets.

The Dial's edition: Bombay, 1818

"Whatever is on earth is the resemblance and shadow of something that is in the sphere. While that resplendent thing remaineth in good condition, it is well also with its shadow [...] Look therefore to Mezdam, who causeth the shadow to fall."



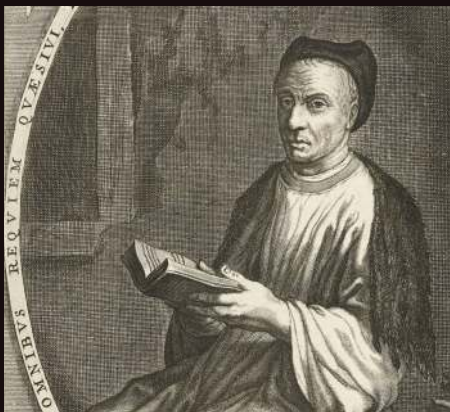
H.C. Agrippa (1486–1535)

Renaissance polymath whose synthesis of magic, Neoplatonism, and Christian theology helped define early modern esoteric philosophy.

Occult Philosophy

The Dial's edition: London, 1655

"A Magician is no other than a studious observer and expounder of divine things; and the Art itself is none other than the absolute perfection of Natural Philosophy."



Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380–1471)

Devotional writer of the Devotio Moderna movement, whose *Imitation of Christ* shaped late medieval spirituality through its emphasis on humility, inwardness, and the imitation of divine life.

The Imitation of Christ

The Dial's edition: London, 1759

"The kingdom of God is within you [...] turn yourself with your whole heart unto the Lord [...] and you shall find rest [...] for in Him is all peace, and without Him is nothing but trouble."



Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772)

Swedish scientist and visionary theologian who developed a doctrine of correspondences linking the spiritual and natural worlds, influencing Romanticism and later esoteric traditions.

Heaven and Hell

The Dial's edition: London, 1823

"The natural world exists from the spiritual world, and subsists by means of it [...] all things in nature are effects of spiritual things [...] all nature is a theatre representative of the Lord's kingdom."



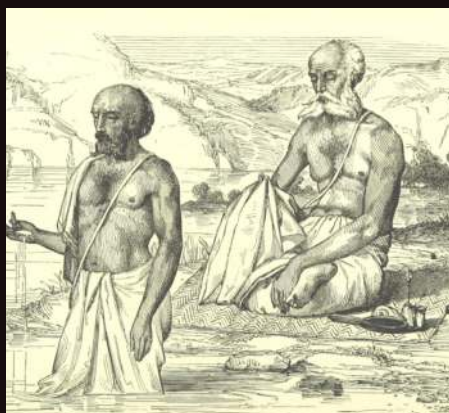
Julian of Norwich (c. 1343–c. 1416)

English anchoress and visionary, author of *Revelations of Divine Love*, whose theology centers on divine compassion and an enduring assurance of ultimate restoration.

Revelations of Divine Love

The Dial's edition: London, 1670

"And in this he showed a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand... I looked upon it and thought, 'What may this be?' And it was answered: 'It is all that is made.' [...] I marveled how it might last, for it seemed it might suddenly fall to nothing for littleness. And I was answered: 'It lasts, and ever shall, for God loves it.'"



Laws of Menu, trans. Sir William Jones

Foundational Sanskrit text on dharma, traditionally attributed to Manu, whose early English translation introduced Indian moral philosophy to Western audiences.

The Laws of Menu

The Dial's edition: unknown, *Excerpted by Thoreau in Ethnical Scriptures*

"O friend to virtue, that supreme Spirit, which thou believest one and the same with thyself, resides in thy bosom perpetually, and is an all-knowing inspector of thy goodness or of thy wickedness."



Marcus Aurelius (121–180)

Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher whose private reflections, written amid war and political strain, articulate a disciplined practice of self-examination, ethical action, and inward steadiness.

Meditations

The Dial's edition: London, 1634

"Look within. Within is the fountain of good, and it will ever bubble up, if thou wilt ever dig."

Confine thyself to the present [...] and do what nature now requires [...] with justice, sobriety, and sincerity [...]"



Jakob Böhme (1575–1624)

German shoemaker and visionary theosopher whose writings describe a dynamic, living cosmos born from divine tension and illumination.

The Way to Christ / Aurora

The Dial's edition: London, 1781

"The pure Deity is in all places and all corners, and present every where all over: the Birth of the holy Trinity in one Essence is every where: and the Angelical world reacheth to every part, wherever you can think, even in the midst of the Earth, Stones, and Rocks."

History of the Collection

1838–42: A Mystical Library Takes Shape at Alcott House, Surrey

The story of the library begins in an experimental educational and spiritual community outside London. Alcott House, established around 1838 on Ham Common in Surrey, grew around the English reformer James Pierpont Greaves, a follower of the educational philosopher Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. The name was not coincidental: its founders drew directly on Bronson Alcott's educational and spiritual experiments, which had circulated in Britain through accounts by Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Peabody's *Records of a School*, and Alcott's own published *Conversations on the Gospel*. Greaves and his circle cultivated a life of moral and intellectual self-culture, practicing vegetarianism, simplicity of living, and progressive education. At the heart of this community stood an unusual library of mystical, philosophical, and religious writings—works ranging from Christian mystics and Neoplatonists to Hermetic, theosophical, and Asian texts.

Winter 1842/1843: The Library Becomes the Spiritual Nucleus of Fruitlands

Soon after their arrival, the books became associated with Fruitlands, the utopian community founded by Alcott and Lane in Harvard, Massachusetts. Drawing on sources from Christian mysticism, Neoplatonism, Hermetic philosophy, and Asian traditions, the collection embodied a bold ideal: that wisdom might be sought across cultures and traditions in the search for moral and spiritual renewal.

Early 1842: Bronson Alcott Encounters a “Most Select and Rare Library”

When the American educator Bronson Alcott visited the community in early 1842, shortly after Greaves's death, he was astonished by the richness of its collection. In his letters, he described the library as

“the most select and rare library I have seen, including most of the books which we have sought with so ill success on the other side of the water.”

The discovery revealed a striking convergence between British spiritual reform movements and the emerging Transcendentalist circle in New England. Alcott soon persuaded Charles Lane, Greaves's devoted disciple, to join him in a new communal experiment in Massachusetts, the Fruitlands. Together they arranged to transport nearly one thousand volumes across the Atlantic.

April 1843: *The Dial* Opens the Cabinet of “Mystic and Theosophic Lore”

The wider public encountered the library when the Transcendentalists' journal *The Dial* published a catalogue of more than two hundred titles under the striking heading “A Cabinet of Mystic and Theosophic Lore.” Its editors, Emerson and Thoreau, described the collection as

“a richer collection of mystical writers than any other library in this country.”

The catalogue functioned as more than a simple list. It revealed the surprising breadth of the Transcendentalists' reading world, placing Christian mystics, Neoplatonists, Hermetic philosophers, and Asian scriptures within a shared constellation of texts concerned with the nature of the soul, the cosmos, and divine wisdom.

October 1842: A “Caballistic Collection” Arrives in Concord

The books arrived in Massachusetts in the autumn of 1842. Ralph Waldo Emerson himself helped shepherd the shipment through customs in Boston and enthusiastically reported the event to his brother William:

“They have brought out a thousand volumes, chiefly mystical & philosophical books. [...] Tonight this cabalistic collection arrives in Concord. We shall scarcely need the moon any longer o' nights.”

The remark captured the excitement surrounding the arrival of such a collection in New England, where many of these mystical and philosophical works were rare or difficult to obtain.

After June 1843 The Library Scatters, but Its Intellectual Life Continues

Fruitlands dissolved in the winter of 1844 after only a few months. Like many utopian libraries, the collection did not remain intact. The volumes passed into private hands as the community dispersed. Some entered Bronson Alcott's personal library, now preserved in part at Harvard's Houghton Library. Others became associated with Emerson's personal collection, now held at the Concord Free Public Library. Many more circulated quietly through private collections, their paths now difficult to trace.



PHOTO: JEFFREY BLACKWELL

Exploring the Living Legacy of Transcendentalism: Concord Summit Gathers Leaders in the Field

NEWS STORY by Jeffrey Blackwell

In the mid-1830s, a group of New England Unitarian ministers, writers, philosophers, and intellectuals, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, and Henry David Thoreau, along with other thought leaders of what eventually came to be known as the Transcendentalist movement, met sporadically in Concord, Massachusetts to discuss the society of their age.

The group was called the Transcendental Club or “the Brotherhood of the Like-Minded.” Although it lasted only a few years, through those meetings and the publication of a journal called *The Dial*, it provided a circle and platform for intellectual thought and discussion.

The CSWR organized a collaborative two-day workshop in October, examining the legacy and future of Transcendentalism in an open discussion reminiscent of those spirited meetings of the Transcendentalists nearly 200 years ago.

“In a lot of ways, the focus is not to have a focus. It’s for our conversations to provide the focus,” said Russell Powell, CSWR Research

Affiliate for the Transcendentalism Initiative. “We are trying to convene these conversations precisely so that the people most invested in Transcendentalism as a living legacy can help to set our bearings for what the study of Transcendentalism, today and in the future, can and should look like.”

Nearly 30 scholars, practitioners, artists, and others from across the United States, and as far as Sweden and Denmark, gathered at the Concord Museum in Concord, Massachusetts, where Thoreau’s desk and wooden flute are on display.

“We were trying to gather scholars of Transcendentalism who we suspected were also not just scholars of, but part of the tradition that we’re committed to carrying forward,” said Charles Stang, Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions, and Professor of Early Christian Thought at the Harvard Divinity School. “These people have skin in the game. They feel aligned and affiliated with the movement.”

The workshop format included short presentations (called “seed talks”), panels, small group discussions, and experiential opportunities

in and around Concord, all aimed at discovering a pathway from scholarship to the practical application of Transcendentalist philosophy. The seed talks were given by Powell, Rebecca Kneale Gould, a scholar of religion and Associate Professor of Environmental Studies at Middlebury College, in Vermont, and Jane Bennett, the Andrew Mellon Professor of Humanities at Johns Hopkins University.

John Kaag, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, asked during his seed talk what knowledge, ideas, and talents participants could share to advance the Transcendentalist ideas on self-reliance and humans' connection to the natural world.

"We are at a bonfire with things to share, and if we do not succeed tremendously, we will have failed terribly," he said. "What have we brought to share, what practicable, actionable talents do we have to offer each other? Figuring that out, right now...might be the most significant aspect of this conference."

The conference served as a starting point, according to participants. It was not designed to announce discoveries, uncover history, or break news in the biographies of nineteenth-century Transcendentalist thought leaders. It was a deep dive into the possibilities of bringing light to a historical, philosophical, and practical movement that could provide valuable insight in this challenging moment in history.

"The workshop's format is reminiscent of Margaret Fuller's 'Conversations' in Boston from 1839–1844, where, as a pioneering editor of *The Dial* and a member of the Transcendentalist Club, she fostered open, participatory discussions, or a 'nucleus of conversation,'" said CSWR Executive Director Gosia Sklodowska. "Embracing her democratic spirit, our workshop felt especially meaningful as we reflected on the legacy of Transcendentalist thought. Paraphrasing Ralph Waldo Emerson's words after his first meeting with Fuller, our conversations felt expansive, allowing us to stretch our limits and dilate to our utmost selves."

Gould, who grew up in Concord, said the value of the format was in the small group discussions prompted by lists of provided questions for each breakout session. The questions included, for example:

What of today's contexts, considerations, and crises (ecological, political, spiritual, epistemological, e.g.) make Transcendentalist thought urgent to return to—or not?

How do contemporary movements—environmentalism, decolonial thought, democratic theory, feminist philosophy, etc.—intersect with, or diverge from, historical Transcendentalist concerns?

What dangers are there in reviving Transcendentalism now?

"I think there's so much value in how they decided to structure this—to have a few people speak, and to have mostly discussion and probing questions. What we brought to the questions changed over time with new insights and new discussions," said Gould. "And the fact that Margaret Fuller had her conversation circles, that the Emersons had people in their home, that Thoreau had way more visitors [to his house at Walden Pond] than most people think. We were actually following the legacy of their structure of how they benefited from each other, agreeing, disagreeing, fighting, whatever."

The weekend workshop also took an experiential dive into local sites connected to the Transcendentalists, including tours of Walden

Pond, the Concord Museum, Ralph Waldo Emerson's home, October Farm Riverfront Trail, and Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

Nearly a dozen participated in the tour of Walden Pond, where Thoreau lived alone near the shore of the pond for two years. The experience formed the basis for his 1854 book *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*. The tour was led by Robert Thorson, a geologist and Professor of Earth Sciences at the University of Connecticut, who is interested in the intersections of landscape geology, archaeology, environmental history, and American literature, especially the work of Thoreau. Thorson wrote *The Guide to Walden Pond* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), the first guidebook to Thoreau's most defining place.

Much of the landscape surrounding Walden Pond has changed since Thoreau's time. A beach and parking lot were built to give the public access. A trail was cut around the pond and to the site of his home. But much of the geological terrain is unchanged, including the depressions left by the melting of glacier ice, which also helped create the pond. The area near the site of his one-room house is also relatively unchanged.

"He was there digging holes and climbing hills and swimming in the pond. He saw quite a bit of that northwest quadrant, like it is today," said Thorson. "I'm trying to get across to the group that the geology matters. It's called environmental determinism. It called to Thoreau in his writing and would have given rise to a different text if he had written it somewhere else."

Eastern Massachusetts is central to the landscapes of the Transcendentalist movement. Emerson and Thoreau were from Concord and both graduated from Harvard; the Transcendentalist Club sometimes met in Boston, and a group of them even started an experimental community in West Roxbury, Brook Farm.

Susan Shumaker, a producer and story developer with Florentine Films and Ewers Brothers Productions, recently completed a documentary about Henry David Thoreau with filmmakers Erik and Chris Ewers, executive produced by Ken Burns and Don Henley. She said she was drawn to the conference in part because of the scholars attending and the workshop's location in Concord.

"I have come to know much of this cast of characters over the last five years or maybe six years that I've been working on the film, and have just fallen in love with this community and with this study," she said. "I hope there is a way to bring people back into connection with self, with nature, with the world, with—dare I say—God. I am not thinking of a guy with a white beard in heaven, but rather of that connectivity that we feel in certain circumstances that somehow comes to us as a gift. For me, that's often in nature, but sometimes it's with family. It's that interconnection with people and places, the land, trees, and—from that connection—living justly on the land: caring for others, caring for our planet."

What happens after this two-day summit will be shaped by the participants through the new connections and networks developed in the heart of Transcendentalism's origin.

"This has been, I think, an unprecedented success for us, and I only hope that I feel that way a month from now, six months from now, eighteen months from now, some of the proof will be in the pudding," said Stang. "We'll see where this goes."

Charles Stang

Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions,
Professor of Early Christian Thought, Harvard Divinity School

"I never thought we were inventing the wheel at this gathering. But I didn't realize how many wheels are actually already turning. I believe part of the work now is figuring out what has already happened and maybe needs to be started again, or what has been tried and didn't work. We can learn in that way, and where there's the most interest, enthusiasm, and expertise, we can do this work powerfully."

Rebecca Kneale Gould

Religious Studies Scholar and Associate Professor of
Environmental Studies, Middlebury College

"If the goal of the weekend is to gather everybody together and support each other to have genuine, deep conversations with some obvious names of Transcendentalists working within that history of this land and these people, and to have honest, sometimes very nerdy, sometimes more from the heart conversations, that goal has been totally accomplished. I feel that in my own reading of Thoreau and Emerson, they're always dealing with the complex legacies of the American Revolution in their work. In other words, the American Revolution is still very much alive and with them. And in the same way, I think the Transcendentalists are still with us, so I don't feel like I even have to try to make them valid. I only wish that Thoreau had lived past the end of the Civil War. I really would have loved to hear how he would reflect on that horrible time, because I think we're still living the legacies of the Civil War now."

Robert Thornson

Professor of Earth Sciences, University of Connecticut

"Thoreau says, 'I am, it's Stony Shore.' And he says that the deepest resort of Walden, which is the bedrock bottom, is high in his thoughts. He's always thinking about landscape and depression. He's going down to fundamentals. He's going down to the landscape, he's going down to the woods. He's going down more than he's going up, because that's the reverential view for an artist, not the magisterial view of some hilltop. And I think he loved living where he did in the woods."

Susan Shumaker

Producer and Story Developer, Florentine Films (Ken Burns)
and Ewers Brothers Productions

"I think there's an opportunity to change the world. I also think there's great value in just looking at Thoreau, for instance, at his life and how he chose to live—not just the simplicity part, but also the connecting with community. He was a person, they say, who, if your shutters were broken, he was there to help. Didn't want payment. Maybe you gave him a pie. He was someone who spent time in nature, not just ambling around. He was studying in those last 15 years of his life. He was down there, really trying to make sense of things and of life. This gathering is a wellspring of ideas for considering this and then developing a plan. What I hope more than anything is that the seeds of a plan emerge that can then be built upon."



PHOTOS: JEFFREY BLACKWELL

Transcendentalism Then—And Now

Lawrence Buell, Powell M. Cabot Professor of American Literature, Harvard

I discovered Transcendentalism as a discontented adolescent, when struggling to counteract an overdose of internalized dutifulness that included redundant Bible-based Sunday school classes into my early teens. Emerson's core vision of Self-Reliance rang true: "the infinitude of the private man," as he once summed it up.[1] The valuation both Emerson and Thoreau, whom I encountered at the same time, attached to immersion in nature as a solace and impetus for self-transformation was another attraction for me, country boy that I was.

Susceptibility is one thing, careful study quite another. For some years, I pretty much just skimmed those writers for luminous aphorisms: "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string," "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes," and so forth.[2] Yet from my late 20s onward, Emerson, Thoreau, and indeed the whole Transcendentalist circle have remained central to my intellectual life and moral compass even as my knowledge of the movement has deepened and become more "critical" as it's been crystallized in articles and scholarly books. Often, scholarly analysis is a recipe for disenchantment, but in my case, fortunately not.

Does that mark me as a case of intellectual arrested development, inability to get past one's early enthusiasms? Some might contend that I should have outgrown Transcendentalism by age 30, rather than become increasingly fascinated. I would argue the opposite.

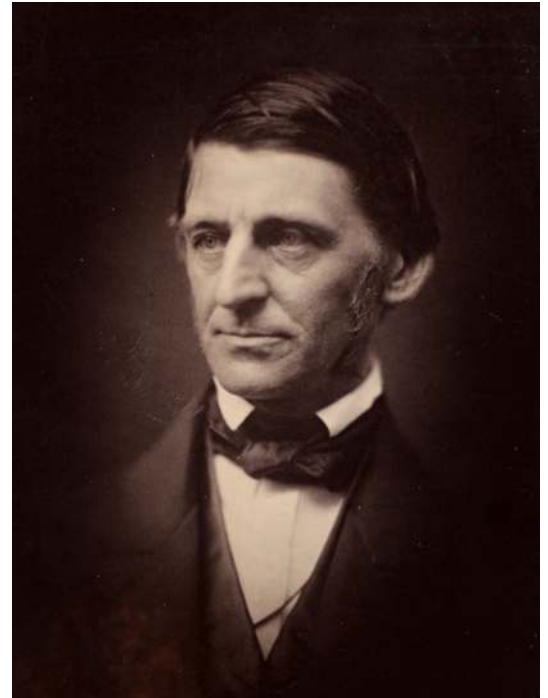
True, Transcendentalism has often been characterized, from its own time to the present, as a gospel geared for youth rather than grown-ups, and least of all the aged. And with some reason. Emerson's target audience was avowedly "young men." Conversely, when he began to take his so-called pragmatic turn at midlife and to distance himself from the movement's flakier extremes, his targets of satire tended to be callow young males like Antony the fictitious refusenik in his lecture on "The Transcendentalist." [3] After the Civil War, the surviving members of the original Transcendentalist circle and more conservative New England intellectuals alike tended to look back upon the hey-

day of the movement as a charmingly naïve effervescence of romantic idealism marking a bygone stage of regional and national history.

Yet Emerson's advice to the handful of young Harvard Divinity School graduates in his most incendiary address can apply to any stage of life or historical epoch: What another announces as truth, "I must find true in me, or wholly reject." [4] Indeed, the hazard of bondage to groupthink tends to grow stronger with the years. Many, if not most, mid-lifers and beyond look back to their youth as a time of greater resilience and fast-expanding horizons, a time when they were far more ready than they later became to resist the prudential admonitions of their elders and to work out their own destiny according to their best lights. As we ourselves become the elders, ten to one we become more cautious and set in our ways. Jumping the rails can happen, but it takes far more concerted effort.

That Emerson saw himself as speaking especially to young people was not only because he was well aware that youth would be his most receptive audience, but also for autobiographical reasons. He himself had been a prime case of belated intellectual emergence. He himself had dutifully tried to adapt to the constraints of the Protestant ministry, the family profession for Emerson males stretching six generations back almost to the dawn of Puritan settlement. He himself had been one of those "meek young men" who "grow up in libraries," as he wryly called them in "The American Scholar." [5]

Beyond that, however, he was convinced that his own generation, coming of age at a point in history when the nation's founding fathers were dying off and the United States seemed to be entering a distinctly post-heroic age marked by an upsurge of new historical societies and commemorative rituals, had been saddled with an unusually crippling case of filiopietism. "Our age is retrospective," he announces at the start of *Nature* (1836), the book that made him famous. "It builds the sepulchres of the fathers." Against this, he grandly retorts,



1857 Daguerreotype of Ralph Waldo Emerson
SOURCE: J.J. HAWES

"Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe?—a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history theirs?" [6]

The problem with these ringing assertions is not so much their rhetorical overstatement for the sake of emphasis as the understatement of how the call to extrication from uncritical deference to received wisdom can speak across age brackets and generations. The vehement specificity of *our* age belies the universality of the underlying point, which can hold for any stage of life or historical era. This includes, for example, both the younger me, restive with the consensus culture of the 1950s, and the older me, appalled at the revanchist dogmatism in today's public culture that threatens to reduce even principled progressives to glum silence.

The other common misimpression of Emersonian Self-Reliance, both then and now, is that it canonizes spontaneous impulse. "I would write on the lintels of the door-post *Whim*." Hmm. How easy to read past the hook in the breezy qualifier that follows: "I hope it is somewhat better than whim

at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation.”[7] To read Emerson aright, particularly his early work in *Essays, First Series* (1841), you need to perceive how his key concepts operate on two levels, often overlapping: self-reliance and Self-Reliance, instinct and Instinct, spontaneity and Spontaneity, nature and Nature, poetry and Poetry. To read Emerson and other Transcendentalists aright requires a kind of critical doublethink: awareness of an ideal or Platonic sense always lurking within or opposing itself to the commonsense level of the assertion. To perceive at once the chasm and the connection between what Emerson, recycling Kant, called the language of the Reason and the language of the Understanding. Upper vs. lowercase Whim vs. whim. Hence the logic of Emerson’s denial that “your rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standards” when you fall back on the “law of consciousness” to absolve yourself to yourself of fulfilment of conventional responsibilities. This applies only if you think Higher Consciousness or Conscience with a capital “C” rather than the stream of workaday consciousness. In other words, only if you hold yourself to the highest moral standards. And so the passage concludes: “If any one imagines that this law is lax, let him keep its commandments one day.”[8]

Emerson deliberately challenges his reader by refraining from supplying reading instructions as specific as I have just done. He proclaims rather than spells out the inner discipline required to rise to the heights of illumination, of self-transcendence, to which he accords such supreme value. One rare moment when he comes close to doing so, however, is this luminous passage from “Intellect,” another of the essays from his *First Series*, on the interrelation of discipline and spontaneity needed to propel a person to a higher state of perception:

What is the hardest task in the world? To think. I would put myself in the attitude to look in the eye an abstract truth, and I cannot. I blench and withdraw on this side and on that. I seem to know what he meant who said, No man can see God face to face and live. For example, a man explores the basis of civil government. Let him intend his mind without respite, without rest, in one direction. His best heed long time avails him nothing. Yet thoughts are flitting before him. We all but apprehend, we dimly forebode the truth. We say, I will walk abroad, and the truth will take form and clearness to me. We go forth, but cannot find it. It seems as if we needed only

the stillness and composed attitude of the library to seize the thought. But we come in, and are as far from it as at first. Then, in a moment, and unannounced, the truth appears. A certain wandering light appears, and is the distinction, the principle, we wanted. But the oracle comes because we had laid siege to the throne.[9]

Effort *may* count for nothing; inspiration always counts for everything. But inspiration is more than lowercase whim. It hinges on prior concentrated effort, even though there’s no guarantee that the severest discipline will deliver transformative results.

Such being the case, we do well, contends Emerson, to prize those moments where the mind rises above itself, or more precisely becomes suffused by epiphany, by what feels like a supernatural power of perception, by the sense of rising to a higher, more expansive aliveness. It may happen in the woods—as in the notorious “transparent eyeball” passage in *Nature*—or it may happen in the study.[10] Choose your preferred venue. Either way, from an Emersonian standpoint, these are the peak experiences during which one is most alive, not only from the epiphanic rush itself but, beyond that, because of their confirmation of the higher powers usually lying latent in humankind, their confirmation of what humanity can be.

This is an exciting way to think and be, but potentially a daunting one as well. If there is such a thing as a Transcendentalist tragedy, it’s the tragedy of not being able to live in the All most of the time. All leading Romantic thinkers expressed versions of this. One of Emerson’s go-to passages from the poet William Wordsworth was “’tis . . . the most difficult of tasks to *keep* /Heights which the soul is competent to gain.”[11] Hence, in part, Emerson’s great essay on “Experience,” the melancholy riposte to “Self-Reliance” and “The Oversoul.” So, in years after, the pragmatic Emerson moved to a less heady, more wary formulation of mental and moral life as an alternation between power and fate. And even from the first, a kind of stoic resignation is inherent in the “iron string” metaphor that Emerson uses to describe the inner call to Self-Reliance, as his next sentence makes clear: “Accept the place the divine Providence has found for you; the society of your contemporaries, the connexion of events.”[12]

To reduce Emerson to stoic resignation, however, is even more reductive than to reduce him to lower case whim. Transcen-

dentalism was well-named, even though the rubric was basically stuck on the movement by its detractors as a synonym for foreign nonsense. Transcendence, personal and social, was always the key project—to rise above the constraining level of the ordinary, which holds for any stage of life or history. “Without vision, the people perish,” Emerson’s “Method of Nature” warns, quoting Proverbs 29:18 and thereby exposing the tribalism of his movement’s origins, but in no way undermining its claim of universal pertinence, for individual souls and for societies both.[13]

[1] *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al, 16 vols (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1960-82), 7: 342. I discuss Emerson’s vision of human infinitude/Self-Reliance and its significance for Transcendentalism in more detail—and in some respects differently—in Chapter 2 of *Emerson* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) (“Emersonian Self-Reliance in Theory and Practice,” 59-106). For my overview definitions of what Transcendentalism was in historical context, see the editorial Introduction to *The American Transcendentalists: Essential Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), and Chapter 3 of *Henry David Thoreau: Thinking Disobediently* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023) (“Contexts: Antebellum America, Transcendentalism, Emerson,” 34-51). The best full-length account of the Transcendentalist movement is Barbara Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007) (orig. 1995). The best biography of Emerson is Robert Richardson, Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[2] Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” *Essays, First Series*, ed. Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 28; Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 8, 23.

[3] “The Transcendentalist,” *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 215; *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, 16: 21-22.

[4] *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, 80.

[5] *Ibid.*, 56.

[6] *Ibid.*, 7.

[7] *Essays, First Series*, 30.

[8] *Ibid.*, 42.

[9] *Ibid.*, 196-197.

[10] *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, 10.

[11] Wordsworth, *The Excursion, The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 2: 124.

[12] *Essays, First Series*, 28.

[13] *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, 120.



John Kaag

Professor of Philosophy at the University of Massachusetts Lowell

"We are at a bonfire with things to share, and if we do not succeed tremendously, we will have failed terribly. What have we brought to share, what practicable, actionable talents do we have to offer each other? Figuring that out, right now... might be the most significant aspect of this conference."



Rochelle Johnson

Bernie McCain Chair in the Humanities, The College of Idaho

"I felt totally stimulated by what my colleagues were saying, and I was struck by how our themes--grief, attentiveness, withdrawal, connection, meaning, authenticity--all seemed to be coalescing, maybe following Emerson's circle metaphor. Our themes are coming together and spiraling, but spiraling into a unity. I have no clue where all of this is going to end up, but it's simultaneously reassuring and exciting to witness."



Brett Grainger

Associate Professor of Theology and Religious Studies, Villanova University

"One thing I'm taking from the workshop is the sense that in a larger cultural context, we can do something with the living traditions available to us to offer an alternative to Americans that can hopefully tell a different kind of story, one that's honest and also inspiring, and that isn't easily pegged to the kinds of identities, the way that we are currently splitting up identities and tribes. And, that this could provide an alternative that might create a new kind of coalition, not just political, but also a cultural vision for this country."



Jane Bennett

Andrew Mellon Professor of the Humanities, Political Science and Comparative Thought & Literature, Johns Hopkins University

"One thing I will take away from these conversations is a shared sensibility—though we address the content of Transcendentalism from different angles, we do so with a shared sensibility of gentle persistence and civic interest. I'm very happy to be part of this group. I will also leave with the sense that New England Transcendentalism is still alive and well, and is morphing and changing, and will evolve as time goes on."

PHOTOS: JEFFREY BLACKWELL

Practicing Transcendentalism

Megan Marshall, Associate

On a recent Friday in late September, unseasonably warm as so many New England days are now, I drove up to Salem for the premiere of my friend Scott Wheeler's trio for violin, cello, and harp, *Insomnia Flowers*. [1] The music was glorious in Samuel McIntire's stately Hamilton Hall, reverberant in the audience members' collective body heat, sealed in as we were by storm windows already in place. Leery of an hour-long drive home in the dark, I stayed over in a hotel on the harbor and woke early the next day to walk Salem's streets before the pre-Halloween Saturday throngs of eerily clad revelers overtook them and the temperature began to rise again.

Inexorably, I was drawn to Howard Street Cemetery, hard by the Salem Jail, the oldest active penitentiary in the country at the time of its closing in 1991 after nearly 200 years. (The jail was reopened as luxury apartments in 2010.) Not for nothing had Nathaniel Hawthorne written in the opening pages of *The Scarlet Letter*, composed two blocks away in 1849: "The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another as the site of a prison." [2]

When I first visited Howard Street, there were still prisoners, by then protesting their crude living conditions, housed next door. I was hunting for the grave of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, known as Eliza, the mother of the three Peabody sisters whose lives I researched and wrote about from 1985 until the completion of my book in 2005. When Eliza died in 1853, I'd read in letters from the time, her surviving children planned to bury her at Harmony Grove, Salem's new garden cemetery overlooking the city, a fitting tribute for the matriarch who'd raised such influential daughters. By then, Sophia and Mary were married to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Horace Mann. Elizabeth, the eldest and her mother's namesake, was closing up her famous bookshop and "caravanserai" to the Transcendentalists at 13 West Street in Boston and contemplating her next moves. [3]

But there was no trace of Eliza in Harmony Grove's register. Salem's Town Records finally revealed that she'd been buried alongside

her youngest child, Catharine, dead at seven weeks in 1819, and two adult sons, Wellington and George (1837 and 1839), at Howard Street. Eliza's stone was the most worn of the three—Catharine had her own slate marker; the brothers shared a narrow marble slab—and even in the sparsely populated burial ground, it was difficult to find her. On that first visit, I felt sad that the sisters hadn't managed to raise the funds to honor their mother as they'd wished, and I imagined disappointment mingling with feelings of loss at the burial. But that, too, seemed fitting for the impecunious family. Even the celebrated husbands never earned much.

In September 2025, I approach the cemetery for the first time from Bridge Street, where to my surprise there's no chain link fence, like the one that stretches the length of Howard Street, to keep me from climbing a low hill leading up to the playing field-sized burial ground. The morning sun blazes over the rooftops of neighboring houses to the east and through the branches of a few tall trees that offer little shade. It's hardly 9 am, and I'm hot already in shorts and a T-shirt. The grass is patchy and sere, not because it's fall but because of drought and record-high temperatures through the summer.

I look toward the far end of the cemetery, where I know I'll hunt and nearly give up and then finally find the markers I'm searching for, and I'm in tears. What was the use? What was the use, on our burning planet, in our plundered democracy, of the sacrifice and struggle that brought three sisters into the world when the country was new, "who dared to say to one another," as Elizabeth Peabody wrote of the Transcendentalist coterie, "Why not begin to move the mountain of custom and convention?" [4] What use my labor in retelling their lives?

What use can we make of Transcendentalism now? Can reawakening their movement ease the despair we feel at having allowed the Transcendentalists' hopes for "a more interior revolution" that would "give life to... those forms of freedom that Washington & his friends left to us," as Peabody predicted in an 1829 letter to William Wordsworth, to go unfulfilled? [5] In our own lifetimes, we have given much. Yet, as Yale historian David Blight remarked in a recent Authors Guild program on the future of the historical profession in the United



Elizabeth Peabody SOURCE: WIKICOMMONS

States, the "explosion" of ground-breaking research and writing of the past fifty years, set off by the liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s, faces extinction: "We were not prepared to defend it." [6] We must prepare and defend. Above all, we must move forward with our work, shape it to the moment if we feel called to do so, despite intimidation and funding cuts and loss of employment, despite the rising tides of cruelty and Know-Nothingism into which we write.

I turn my thoughts away from the pressing issue of our scattered attention, addressed in different ways in earlier essays in this series by Russell Powell and Charles Stang, toward action. And I take my cue from the women of the movement. Not for them Emerson's question, invoked by Powell: "What is life but what a man is thinking all day?" [7] And not only because the question, as stated, explicitly excluded them. Transcendentalism's women were doers; their language called for action. Proposing her first series of Conversations for adult women in 1839, Margaret Fuller asked, instead: "Could a circle be assembled in earnest desirous to answer the great questions: What were we born to do? How shall we do it? which so few ever propose to themselves 'till their best years are gone by." Fuller would be the "moving spring" of her ambitious project [8]

The year before, while teaching history to a class of adult women in Salem, Elizabeth Peabody had resolved to "be myself and act." [9] In advance of Fuller, she led her students to discover the necessity of "*trying to do something ourselves*." Cultivating an "inward life"—thinking all day—wasn't enough:

“The measure of our Life is our Power.”[10] And she followed through on her vow. In 1840 Peabody opened the foreign language bookstore and subscription library on West Street, not only to engage in intellectual commerce, but also to establish a gathering place where she could “arrange all whom I know around me as my ‘leaves & fruit.’”[11] Fuller held classes there; Sophia and George Ripley’s Brook Farm communarians met there for planning sessions; Peabody’s Wednesday night open houses continued for years.

Elizabeth Peabody had been acting all along: teaching in an innovative, dialogic style from age seventeen in 1821; translating and publishing key texts (Degerando’s *Self-Education*, 1830; Oegger’s *The True Messiah*, not in print until 1842, but read for inspiration by Emerson in manuscript in 1835); writing up her own ideas and finding outlets for them. One of these was her proposal that, in a democracy, the federal government should fund creative artists, a policy finally adopted in 1965 with the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts and largely abandoned by the Trump administration in 2025.[12] Another was “the social principle,” originated by Peabody in an essay drafted in 1825, eventually published in *The Christian Examiner* in 1834, and the topic of Transcendental Club discussion in Peabody’s bookroom in September 1840.[13]

“The social principle” was Peabody’s Transcendentalism (a term she also put into writing in 1825, although *The Christian Examiner* refused to publish that essay in 1834).[14] It is “the very principle of our nature,” Peabody wrote: “that principle which is capable of being God within us.” All of us possess, she believed, “a spring of emotion deeper than the emotions of beauty and sublimity.” This innate “sympathy” impels us toward reciprocal care-giving, making our “social relations...a miniature of the spiritual universe.”[15] No wonder Peabody’s most significant contributions to *The Dial* as a writer were essays on Brook Farm and Fourierism; it was George Ripley who introduced the social principle into Transcendental Club discussion six months before he moved with his wife, Sophia Ripley, a member of Fuller’s Conversations class, to Brook Farm.

In 1835, the year Elizabeth Peabody published her transcriptions and commentary on Bronson Alcott’s Temple School dialogues, *Record of a School*, the first book-length exposition of Transcendentalist views, Elizabeth told her sister Mary, recently returned from sixteen months in Cuba as a governess, that she was “the only

practical transcendentalist there is.” Mary wasn’t “quite clear about the transcendental yet,” she wrote to Horace Mann, reporting the conversation, and Elizabeth’s claim to practicality didn’t help much.[16] But I suspect Elizabeth was referring to the social principle. “The recognition of our personal identity,” she’d written in her essay—the “self-reverence” we acquire once we understand ourselves to be creatures of a loving God and members of an interdependent social circle—enables “our power of choosing”: what to think, how to behave toward others, how to act.[17]

Peabody’s good works went beyond the West Street bookshop and stretched late into the century with the founding of kindergartens nationwide and her campaign alongside the Piute leader Sarah Winnemucca to establish a tribal school rather than consign Piute children to the U.S. government’s brutal and deracinating boarding schools. Margaret Fuller left Boston to become a pioneer of advocacy journalism in New York City, to join a revolution in Rome. Theirs was a practical—*practicing*—Transcendentalism from which we can take inspiration. Peabody and Fuller remind us to exercise “our power of choosing.”

What are we to do? How shall we do it? Each of us will have our own answers. The title of my friend’s trio, *Insomnia Flowers*, sums up his composition practice: musical themes come to him in the night and keep him awake until he can jot them down. In the morning, in revision, they flower. May the worries that disturb our sleep tonight take shape in action tomorrow.

In Salem, I dry my tears and contemplate the headstones of Eliza Peabody and the three children whose deaths she’d mourned. Here, at Howard Street, she is among souls she brought into the world and served, amid what her son-in-law called society’s “practical necessities”—the cemetery and prison. Better this than to have been laid to rest beyond the exigencies of family and community life in the upper reaches of Harmony Grove. The “Utopia of human virtue and happiness” is too far off.

Or is it? The poet Rosanna Warren, whose father’s classic novel, *All the King’s Men*, warns against demagoguery, wrote to me recently of her determination “to act freely in a time of unfreedom.”[18] Margaret Fuller envisioned her heavenly reward as “empowering me to incessant acts of vigorous beauty.”[19] If action is heaven, we can make heaven here on earth. What could be more transcendent?

[1] Scott Wheeler, *Insomnia Flowers*, commissioned by the Boston Artists Ensemble. Premiere: Hamilton Hall, Salem, September 26, 2025; Lucia Lin, violin; Lishan Tan, harp; Palmer Peabody to William Wordsworth: Eight Letters, 1825–1845,” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984), 190.

Jonathan Miller, cello.

[2] Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter and Other Writings* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2017), 35.

[3] Nathaniel Hawthorne letter to Sophia Hawthorne, December 2, 1844, *The Love Letters of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Chicago: Society of the Dofobs, 1907), 113.

[4] Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (EPP), “A Glimpse of Christ’s Idea of Society,” *The Dial*, vol. II, no. 2, October 1841, 222.

[5] Elizabeth Palmer Peabody letter to William Wordsworth, March 27, 1829, Margaret Neussendorfer, ed., “Elizabeth Palmer Peabody to William Wordsworth: Eight Letters, 1825–1845,” *Studies in the American Renaissance* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984), 190.

[6] David W. Blight and Deval Patrick in conversation with Imani Perry, “My Voice, My Pen, My Vote,” WIT25: Words, Ideas, and Thinkers Festival program, sponsored by the Authors Guild Foundation, September 28, 2025. [7] Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Natural History of Intellect,” in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 12 (Boston, Mass.: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1904), 10.

[8] Margaret Fuller letter to [Sophia Ripley?], August 27, 1839, Robert N. Hudspeth, ed., *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, vol. 2 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 87.

[9] Elizabeth Palmer Peabody letter to George Francis Peabody, Monday, August [6, 1838], Straker typescripts, Antiochiana Collection, Antioch College, 1297–98.

[10] Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, unpublished essay, “The measure of our Life is our Power,” Straker typescripts, Antiochiana Collection, Antioch College, 1293.

[11] Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, journal entry beginning Friday, [August 10, 1838], transcribed in Mary Van Wyck Church manuscript biography of Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, Massachusetts Historical Society, 388.

[12] Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, “Claims of the Beautiful Arts,” *Democratic Review*, November 1838, 253–68.

[13] Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, “Spirit of the Hebrew Scriptures.—No. 1. The Creation,” *Christian Examiner*, vol. 62, n.s. 32 (May 1834), 188.

[14] Megan Marshall, “Elizabeth Palmer Peabody: The First Transcendentalist?” *Massachusetts Historical Review*, vol. 8, 2006, 1–15.

[15] Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, “The Creation,” quoted in Marshall, “EPP: The First Transcendentalist?” 4–5.

[16] Mary Tyler Peabody letter to Horace Mann, May 30, 1835, Horace Mann Papers, Box 4, Massachusetts Historical Society.

[17] Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, “The Creation,” quoted in Marshall, “EPP: The First Transcendentalist?” 4–5.

[18] Rosanna Warren email to the author, September 30, 2025

[19] Margaret Fuller letter to William H. Channing [?], December 3, 1840, Robert N. Hudspeth, ed., *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, vol. 2 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 187.

Russell C. Powell

Research Associate, Transcendentalism Initiative,
Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School

“One is our aim to be continually convening and renewing this conversation about what Transcendentalism is, how it continues to matter to our changing historical moment, and how it needs to be continually translated in that moment. That’s a scholarly sort of track. The other is a conversation about how Transcendentalism continues being embodied today, this tradition which has done so much to enforce the importance of the life of the mind to American democratic and civic virtue. I think these sorts of things could really have a tangible impact on the world we share.”



Elizabeth Rovere

MA, MTS, PsyD, RYT-200, clinical psychologist, host of the Wonderstruck podcast, HDS Dean Council Member

“My question is from the discussions: why have we cut ourselves off from our connection to nature and each other? All we do is generate complete productivity, yet there’s this rush to be a certain way, which gets in our own way. Is there a way to bring some of the (Transcendentalist philosophy) back more peacefully and soothingly to our way of being in the world in a waking-up type of way?”



Nicholas Low

Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for the Study of World Religions,
Harvard Divinity School

“My own work is at most peripheral to the Transcendentalism movement. It’s not my specialty. So at this workshop, I’ve tried to be a sponge, trying to drink in as much as I can, and I’ve learned a lot. But I’ve also felt a sense of goodwill that really invited participation. People came with open minds, ready to discuss and really dig into the ideas. That’s made this experience, I think, genuinely unique. It’s been quite different from traditional conferences, where people often come to argue with each other, or grandstand and just pronounce their views. This feels like a much more productive and organic gathering, and it definitely created a richer exchange of ideas and more open conversation.”



Gosia Skłodowska

Executive Director, Center for the Study of World Religions,
Harvard Divinity School

“The workshop’s format is reminiscent of Margaret Fuller’s ‘Conversations’ in Boston from 1839–1844, where, as a pioneering editor of The Dial and a member of the Transcendentalist Club, she fostered open, participatory discussions, or a ‘nucleus of conversation. Embracing her democratic spirit, our workshop felt especially meaningful as we reflected on the legacy of Transcendentalist thought. Paraphrasing Ralph Waldo Emerson’s words after his first meeting with Fuller, our conversations felt expansive, allowing us to stretch our limits and dilate to our utmost selves.”



PHOTOS: JEFFREY BLACKWELL

Retrieving Transcendentalism amid the Crisis of Attention

Russell C. Powell, Research Associate

Why Transcendentalism? And why now?

The inauguration of our new research initiative on Transcendentalism at the Center for the Study of World Religions is an opportunity to reflect on the value of recovering the past to benefit the present. For such efforts are never neutral exercises in historical curiosity. They emerge, at least in part, from our discontent with where we find ourselves.

It's common to look to history for a way forward in fraught times. Alasdair MacIntyre famously called on the wisdom of St. Benedict to sustain the virtues through cultural decline. Hannah Arendt turned to the ancient Greek polis as a better model of freedom and public action than bureaucratic modernity. Charles Taylor finds in medieval Christianity elements of moral imagination that resist secular disenchantment.

All recovery projects, however, should aim to retrieve the past—as opposed to seeking to restore it. This distinction is the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's, which is instructive for our new research initiative's aims.

Amid the many grounds for feeling discontented in our own time, one that makes retrieving Transcendentalism—that mid-nineteenth-century American movement that arose among the circle of friends who gathered at Ralph Waldo Emerson's home in Concord, Massachusetts—especially urgent is the current crisis of attention.

Because of the superabundance of information today, attention is the engine of the new economic order. Yet that order fundamentally misunderstands what attention is, according to Chris Hayes (otherwise known as a primetime host on MSNBC), who examines the “attention economy” in his recent book, *The Sirens' Call: How Attention Became the World's Most Endangered Resource*. Rather than being reducible to its quantitative exchange value, attention, Hayes argues, is rather an “ineffable subjective experience” that is only valuable qualitatively.[1]

Technologies that capture and monetize our attention are like those mythical Sirens whose call seizes us against our wills, as in the case of Odysseus. As competition for our attention has increased, Hayes explains, competitors have been driven “toward

ever more insidious means of extracting [our] attention,” which exploit our faculties involuntarily.[2] The historian Graham Burnett uses the metaphor of “human fracking” to describe how digital platforms wrest our attention.[3] For Hayes, the metaphor of the Sirens' call similarly signals the loss of autonomy in the information age. Transcendentalism might be defined as a literary style, a philosophical movement, a religious experiment, but the throughline most pertinent to the crisis of attention is



Henry David Thoreau, *Walden Pond Manuscript Survey* SOURCE: CONCORD FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY

the priority Transcendentalism gives the self. Crucially, the self that Transcendentalism prioritizes isn't an atomized unit sealed off from the world, but the seat of discernment. Call it the locus of attention.

Emerson's clearest formulation of this idea is, of course, found in “Self-Reliance.” Too often dismissed as a paean to individualism, Emerson's essay is in fact a defense of the importance of maintaining sovereignty over our attention. “Nothing,” he insists, “is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world.”[4] In another essay, “Spiritual Laws,” Emerson eerily augurs the crisis Hayes describes: “A man's genius, the quality that differences him from every other, the susceptibility to one class of influences, the selection for what is fit for him, the rejection of what is unfit, determines for him the character of the universe.”[5]

Henry David Thoreau took Emerson's witness to attention's qualitative significance to heart by withdrawing to Walden Pond to test what could be seen, heard, and thought when life was pared to its essentials. Other

Transcendentalists like Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Peabody, and Bronson Alcott also committed themselves to the sovereignty of their attention, so determined the character of their respective universes.

What makes research on Transcendentalism exciting today is that it comes after a long period of initiating the twilight, if not the end, of the autonomous self. Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial perspectives have shown the modern subject to be interpellated by contingent systems of ideology and symbolic regulation. Ecocriticism has revealed the modern subject to be built on the erasure of ecological interdependence.

These critiques have been indispensable for illuminating the troublesome biases inflicted in modern subjectivity. Yet the fluid, entangled subject emerging from them is vulnerable to the buffeting winds of distraction in the attention economy.

“What is life but what a man is thinking all day?” Emerson asks in a late lecture. “This is his fate and his employer.”[6] To retrieve Transcendentalism is, coincidentally, to consider what it might require to be possessed of a freedom that issues from the discipline of what we—and we alone—choose to attend to; what we allow to claim us. This isn't the restoration of the modern subject, but a resistance to the lack of mental integrity we're learning spells our helplessness to pursue a fate, and indeed a world, we devise.

[1] Chris Hayes, *The Sirens' Call: How Attention Became the World's Most Endangered Resource* (New York: Random House, 2025), 195.

[2] Ibid.

[3] D. Graham Burnett and Justin Smith, “Introduction: Thinking Attention,” in *Scenes of Attention: Essays on Mind, Time, and the Senses*, eds. D. Graham Burnett and Justin Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), 7.

[4] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 261.

[5] Ibid. 311.

[6] Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Natural History of Intellect,” in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 12 (Boston, Mass.: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1904), 10.



THE WEIGHING

The heart's reasons
seen clearly,
even the hardest
will carry
its whip-marks and sadness
and must be forgiven.

As the drought-starved
eland forgives
the drought-starved lion
who finally takes her,
enters willingly then
the life she cannot refuse,
and is lion, is fed,
and does not remember the other.

So few grains of happiness
measured against all the dark
and still the scales balance.

The world asks of us
only the strength we have and we give it.
Then it asks more, and we give it.

JANE HIRSHFIELD



Artwork by Keri Eisenstein. Typeset and printed by Ayli Hamid & David Axelrod for Bent Sketch Press at the University of Missouri, September 2025. "The Weighing" © Jane Hirshfield from *The Aching: New & Selected Poems* (NY, Knopf, 2023). Used by permission of Jane Hirshfield, all rights reserved.

Singing *The Pearlsong Sung*

Jane Sheldon, Artist-in-Residence



PHOTO: JEFFREY BLACKWELL

The CSWR recently commissioned me to write a musical composition setting Adam Bremer-McCollum's *The Pearlsong* (Harvard University Press, 2025), a new translation from Syriac, made for the Center's new 4T series. I performed the new piece—*The Pearlsong Sung*—at the book's recent launch event. In his Foreword to *The Pearlsong*, Charles Stang points out that the ancient text is a case of Henry Corbin's "visionary recital," a narrative tale of visionary experience told in the first person. I'm trained as a recitalist of Western classical music. In that tradition, a recitalist performs music that is thematically very diverse, much of which is not sung in the first person. A recitalist in my tradition might also sing opera, as I do, embodying characters *in extremis*. Corbin's recitalist is different. With his term in view, *The Pearlsong Sung* seemed to require a mode of performance outside my usual ways of being on stage.

In performance, the recitalist in Corbin's visionary sense might be more like the storytellers of Iraq's al-Hakawati tradition, or of Hindu Harikatha, or perhaps like Diane Wolkstein, New York's official storyteller in the 1960s and 1970s, telling the story of Inanna in the first person with musical accompaniment. So I delivered *The Pearlsong Sung* with gently chanted text, preserving the nat-

ural rhythms of speech amid simple pianism to support the recognition of each recurring symbol in the story: no heightened states, no outsized gestures.

I sang a man's story in my feminine voice, opting against timbral changes when voicing the story's various speakers. In Tom Cheetham's definition, Corbin's visionary recital is "an initiation that can only be expressed in symbols and can only be told in the first person." I mapped each text symbol to a sonic symbol recognizable at each recurrence. The crucial symbol of the pearl was given sonic expression with gentle glissandi, a slide from one pitch to another, along the upper strings of the piano—close to the pegs, for pianists reading. Each time Bremer-McCollum's "breathy snake" appeared, I drew my fingers along the lowest strings, yielding a kind of growl. The only other piano sounds are occasional, brief sprays of pitches to surround fragments of melody.

I made the beautiful Mason and Hamlin piano in Williams Chapel drone beneath the vocal line by activating its strings with e-bows (magnets used by electric guitarists to elicit sustained vibration of a guitar string). These droning pitches, in combination with a field recording of a running creek, served as the landscape or backdrop for the story. I sang the piece standing so I

could reach into the piano and so that my voice would be thrown onto the strings, causing them to vibrate in sympathetic resonance, providing a kind of halo around my voice.

My performance and compositional decisions were influenced by George Crumb's *Ancient Voices of Children*, which I recently performed for the 21st Century Consort's 50th-anniversary concert in Washington, D.C. In this gorgeous piece from 1970, wild glossolalia is sung into the body of the piano, audibly activating the strings.

Ancient Voices of Children, which sets text by Federico García Lorca, is a dialogue between a woman and a child singer and can be interpreted as a mystical event in which the woman is in communication with her ancient self: I sang the child's part in 1998, when I was 15, and last month I sang the woman's role. This felt as if I was personally entering into the mystical event expressed in the piece itself. The most natural way to perform Crumb's *Ancient Voices* is to embody the mystical event as if it is happening in the present, like singing an opera role. *The Pearlsong Sung*, in contrast, relates events after the fact, so its speaker is performing an act of recollection in the text.

As I wrote *The Pearlsong Sung*, Corbin's term "visionary recital" brought to mind an encounter I had after singing a concert in a stone church in a valley somewhere outside Rouen, France. The audience was mostly local people, some of them members of the church's congregation. After the concert, a man came up to me. He was small, with a cowed sort of carriage, but he was quite electrified as he took my hands in his, saying with urgency, "*Vous croyez.*" You believe. He took the manner of my singing, and perhaps my sound itself, as an indication of faith. I was able to reply, "What I believe is that the music has great power."

Among several gifts granted to me during my month at the CSWR is this rich term, "visionary recital," and its offer of myriad ways to re-examine what it is that I do on stage and how it might be interpreted by the listener.

A Life Between Worlds

Matthew Dillon in Conversation with Cynthia Bourgeault

Cynthia Bourgeault is a theologian, Episcopal priest, and one of the most influential contemporary voices in Christian contemplative practice. Her work draws together the Christian mystical tradition, the teachings of G. I. Gurdjieff, and decades of lived experience in contemplative formation, including her leadership in founding Wisdom Schools.

In this conversation with Matthew Dillon, Research Associate and host of the Center for the Study of World Religions' "Pop Apocalypse" series, Bourgeault reflects on a life shaped by early encounters with silence, the tensions within modern Christianity, and the search for a path that unites attention, surrender, and embodied practice. What emerges is a vision of spiritual life lived, as she puts it, between worlds—grounded in tradition, yet oriented toward transformation.

What was your relationship to Christianity growing up? Did you always feel called in this direction, or was it more distant at that time?

I had a kind of interesting, challenging religious upbringing as a child. I grew up in southeastern Pennsylvania, in the heart of old Quaker country, and from my earliest elementary school days I was sent to a Quaker school where we had meeting for worship once a week.

Those of us between the ages of five and twelve would troop into this old meeting house and sit down on the old brown benches. The light filtered in, and it was the first time I was quite sure of a presence—a holy presence. I did not have much language for it then.

At the same time, we were not Quakers. My mother was a Christian Scientist, and I was absorbing very complex metaphysical premises. I could never quite bring the two together: on the one hand, God as an ultimate metaphysical principle, and on the other, simply feeling this presence in the meeting house.

I think the struggle between those two positions must have touched something in me that was already an early seeker. By the time I was seventeen, I knew my path was going to be deeply involved with these great spiritual questions.

You went into medieval studies. What drew you to sacred drama and music?

There were no departments of religious studies where I was studying, so I wound up in medieval literature. I had originally planned to work in modern poetry, but I gravitated toward the medieval. A manuscript of one of the English mystery plays had just appeared, and I began working on that.

At the same time, I was already involved in early music in a performance way. So I immediately perked up an ear and thought: why are we just studying these works? Why not perform them?

When I emerged from Penn with my PhD, the only job available was in Lubbock, Texas, and I was not about to go. Then I discovered an Episcopal seminary right near campus. I walked into the dean's



Cynthia Bourgeault

office and said, essentially, have I got a deal for you. They were not going to pay me, but I was allowed to take one theology course per semester. It was like falling into a trough of honey.

That was also the period when women's ordination was really gearing up in the Episcopal Church. Everything came together. My medieval background gave me a sense of liturgy and spirituality from a much wider perspective—the handing off between beauty as experienced in art and beauty as experienced in mystical theology.

Later, you encountered Gurdjieff's work. What drew you there?

One of the questions that tormented me was how a religion centered on the most radically inclusive, generous, compassionate teacher could so often express itself in rigid, polarizing, and exclusivizing ways. Where was the disconnect?

When I read Jacob Needleman's *Lost Christianity*, I realized he was circling that same question. He suggested that something was missing—what the Buddhists might call a middle way—and that it had to do with practice.

So I began looking for groups. But how do you find a Gurdjieff group? In the 1980s, it was virtually impossible. They hid. You

worked on becoming a more conscious person, but you never spoke of Gurdjieff. You expressed the teachings through secular modes, often in the arts.

At the same time, you were drawn toward Christian contemplative practice, especially centering prayer. What brought you there?

In a way, it brought me back to the quiet, light-filled presence I had known as a child. Through Needleman's book, I learned about Trappist monks experimenting with centering prayer, and eventually I found my way to a monastery in Snowmass, Colorado, where I took a ten-day immersion retreat.

It was like coming home again. Centering prayer is a simple practice for letting go of the thoughts that pull your attention outward and regrouping yourself inward, more down in your body. Every time a thought comes up, you let it go.

Thomas Keating used to say that for twenty minutes twice a day, you get to take a brief vacation from yourself.

Did Gurdjieff's work and centering prayer feel in tension?

For a long time, yes. One emphasizes attention and effort; the other emphasizes letting go. What really put it together was meeting a hermit monk, Raphael Robin, who had been a self-taught student of the Gurdjieff work for decades. He showed me how to put together the path of Christian mystical contemplation and Gurdjieffian mindfulness. At a certain point I asked myself: if my head says this is a tension, why isn't my body feeling it like a tension? That shifted things.

Gurdjieff has been the best counterbalance I have found for the tendency of the heart to dissolve into sentimentality. His work insists on three-centered awareness: the intelligence of the head, the emotional center, and the moving or kinesthetic center. But I also had to balance Gurdjieff with Thomas Keating.

You cannot do anything real in spiritual practice if you are dominated by anxiety. A lot of people in the Gurdjieff work begin with the sense that they have to improve themselves, become real, grow the second body. But fear is never a true motivator of wholeness.

One day I realized: what is so bad about being food for the moon? From centering prayer, I learned that the one freedom that always remains is the freedom to give it away. That took out the anxiety of having to reach some minimal baseline of achievement. I could be sincere out of love, not out of fear.

Your work often speaks about living between worlds—the finite and the imaginal. Can you say more about that?

Human beings stand with one foot in two worlds. We stand with one foot in the embodied, finite world, and one foot in what has come to be called the imaginal—the realm just beyond this one, more fluid and permeable.

The task is not to leave the finite behind. The finite is real, and the infinite is real. As long as we are in a body, we are responsible for holding that place of exchange.

In my relationship with Rafe, this became very real. After his death, I did not experience visions or messages, but a continuation of the same atmosphere, the same energy field that surrounded our encounters while he was still alive. It was a direct transmission of presence, a continuation of work between the worlds.

Your work also speaks often about the heart. What does it mean to put the mind in the heart?

At the most basic level, it means getting the mind out of the head. We spend too much time with our basic sense of identity buzzing around inside our heads, chasing its own tail with rumination, projection, and fantasy.

But the heart should not be isolated or romanticized. The danger is to make the heart do the whole job by itself. Then it can become overwhelmed—by sentimentality, by pain, by compassion that has no grounding.

What matters is the flow, the continuous inner circulation of the whole being. The heart is powerful, but it needs to be held within the larger integration of the body, the centers, and the whole energetic system.

How has silence or hermitage shaped your spiritual development?

Silence cuts through evasion. So much of our life—our busy work, materialism, intellectual projects, identity projects—is designed to keep us from having to feel directly: what is this?

Rafe used to speak of being called into the bare self. Everything in you wants to run from it, but you stay. The absence of God is the presence of God.

What silence teaches is not withdrawal as a lifestyle. Hermit isn't a lifestyle. Contemplative isn't a lifestyle. It's a full-on engagement, a way of being real in the life you're in. Once you've found that place and stabilized yourself in it, you can come back and do the work you have to do without being roped in by all the definitions, projects, and worthy activities that go flying by. You can live in the midst of chaos and brokenness and still find that point of orientation that comes from beyond the conditions of this world.

How do the Wisdom Schools respond to what people are seeking today?

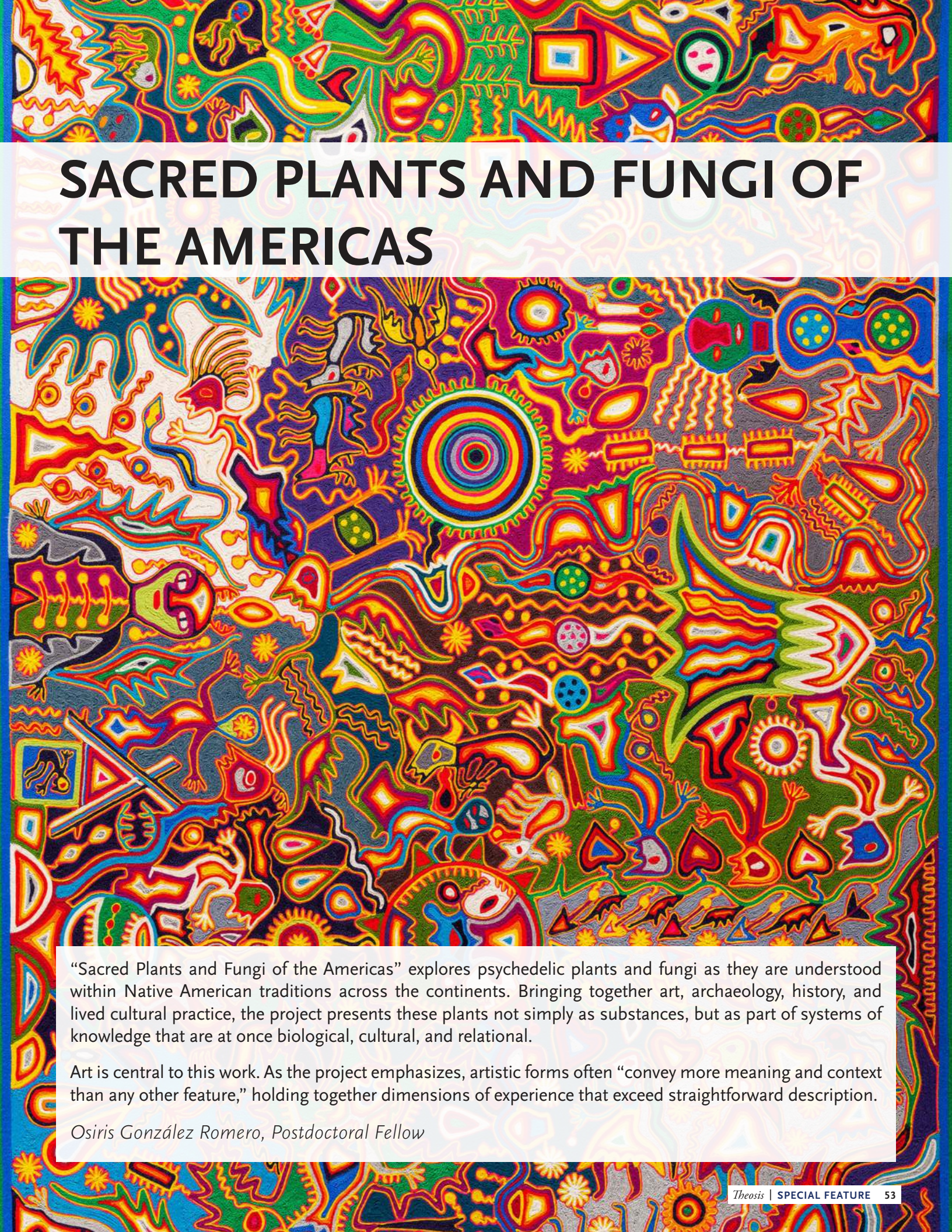
Many people come because something is missing. They sense the depth of Christianity, but not the way to embody it. In a sense, I am still responding to Jacob Needleman's challenge: Christianity needs a middle way that connects the loftiness of its aspiration with a real practice.

The Wisdom Schools are rooted in the Christian mystical tradition, but they draw on a broader contemplative understanding. I sometimes describe them as *St. Benedict meets Gurdjieff*. Building on St. Benedict's rhythm of *ora et labora*—prayer and work—the schools move through prayer and work, alone and together: prayer alone, prayer together, work alone, work together.

People learn to remain grounded in the classic Christian disciplines—contemplative prayer, *lectio divina*, common worship—but also to look carefully at the work of ordinary life: the crafts, study, and all the things people normally use to exercise their talents and assert their identity. The point is not to reject those things, but to become conscious within them.

The Wisdom School takes people on an orderly journey through those different modes of practice, allowing contemplation and action gradually to inform one another.

People practice this so that they can become more able to forgive their religion, to see it through different eyes, to grow into a more genuinely esoteric understanding of Christianity, and, essentially, to become better Christians.



SACRED PLANTS AND FUNGI OF THE AMERICAS

“Sacred Plants and Fungi of the Americas” explores psychedelic plants and fungi as they are understood within Native American traditions across the continents. Bringing together art, archaeology, history, and lived cultural practice, the project presents these plants not simply as substances, but as part of systems of knowledge that are at once biological, cultural, and relational.

Art is central to this work. As the project emphasizes, artistic forms often “convey more meaning and context than any other feature,” holding together dimensions of experience that exceed straightforward description.

Osiris González Romero, Postdoctoral Fellow



Kauyumarie's Nierika. José Benítez Sánchez. Yarn Painting, 1974. Plywood, beeswax, and wool yarn. 122x122cm. PHOTO: JUAN NEGRIN, SOURCE: WIXARIKA RESEARCH CENTER

Peyote, *Peyotl* or *Hikuri*, *Lophophora williamsii*

NAME

Known in English as peyote, the names of this sacred cactus, *peyotl*, *hikuri*, *jikuli*, or *jiculi*, come from languages belonging to the Uto-Aztecan language family, spoken throughout Aridoamerica, Mesoamerica, and the Western United States. The Nahuatl name *peyotl* can be translated as “silk cocoon,” while the Huichol name *hikuri* can be translated as “mirror” and “moon.”

ARTWORK

The visionary artist José Benítez Sánchez’s yarn painting *Kauyumarie*’s Nierika illustrates a Wixárika cosmogony tale in which sacred forces emerge from the underworld and come to the Earth. The radiant disk featured is a nierika, which is *peyotl* and also a mirror, a cactus, and a blue path of the sacred Kauyumarie deer. Beings come to life through the *nierika*.

GEOGRAPHY & CONTEXT

Peyotl grows mainly in Northern Mexico and Southern Texas desert regions in special ecological zones with the right soil for the cactuses to thrive. *Lophophora williamsii* is native to the high desert region of San Luis Potosí, which the Wixárika people call Wirikuta, and is also native to parts of Zacatecas, Coahuila, and the South Texas plains along the Lower Río Grande.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Archaeological evidence locates *peyotl* buttons in prehistoric sites throughout what is now Texas and Northern Mexico. Analysis of rock art, ceramic vessels, iconography, and colonial sources reveals a long history of *peyotl* use in the Americas. *The Florentine Codex*, written between 1545–1590 by Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún, describes how people assembled together, danced, sang all night and all day, and wept, saying that in this way “eyes were washed” and “thus they cleansed their eyes.”

INTERPRETATION

Considering the long history and wide array of Indigenous traditions, there is likely no single cult or homogenous ritual system for sacramental use of *peyotl*. Colonial sources show a clash of cultural paradigms between Native American cosmologies and the Catholic Church. In the nineteenth century, *peyotl* knowledge spread among Native American peoples in the Southwest United States and into the plains of Canada.

IMPLICATIONS

Peyotl is considered a medicine and a divine gift that provides counseling and strength to deal with colonial legacies of discrimination, lack of recognition, and lack of medical services. The Native American Church continues efforts to raise ecological awareness regarding peyote preservation, for *peyotl* is now a plant species under threat due to unsustainable consumption, agricultural competition, development, and border enforcement.



“Sacred plants and fungi are more than substances and more than drugs.”

“Psychedelics strengthen users’ visionary consciousness and cause significant and lasting transformations in thought and mood [...] but these experiences are not mere hallucinations.”

“The psychedelic experience in Native American cultures is a source of knowledge and is not falsehood or distortion.”

“Interpretations especially note these plants’ and fungi’s role in establishing and cultivating relationships with human and more-than-human agents. These agents are considered real entities in the cultures in question.”

“Context is key, and understanding the contexts and cultures that revere these plants and fungi prevents hasty judgments and cultural extraction.”

“Many of these substances and experiences are social and communal, and that aspect is understudied.”

“Plants and fungi with psychedelic properties can be used for purposes deemed sacramental but can also be used for purposes deemed therapeutic, philosophical, creative or aesthetic, social and political, hedonistic or for pleasure, and palliative.”

sacredplantsamericas.com



PHOTO: JEFFREY BLACKWELL

CSWR Brings Psychedelic Chaplaincy to the Forefront

NEWS STORY by Jeffrey Blackwell

A global resurgence of scientific, medical, and public interest in the therapeutic and transformational potential of psychedelic drugs, plants, and fungi is raising questions about the availability of spiritually responsive care, including the emerging field of psychedelic chaplaincy, in clinical and community settings where psychedelics are used.

Psychedelic journeys, in both clinical and non-clinical settings, often lead participants to profound spiritual, religious, and existential experiences. This raises a crucial question: what kinds of responsive care and support are needed to protect patients and enhance these experiences?

In the United States and around the world, a growing number of researchers are investigating the therapeutic potential of substances such as psilocybin, LSD, DMT, mescaline, ketamine, and MDMA to treat post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, addiction, and other mental health conditions. This “psychedelic renaissance” is also marked by a surge in psychedelic-based communities, churches, and underground practitioners who use these substances in religious ceremonies and for personal healing and growth.

“Is psychedelic chaplaincy, or spiritually attuned care, going to be something that’s necessary in the field?” said Jeffrey Breau, Program

Lead of Psychedelics and Spirituality at the Center for the Study of World Religions. “I think the answer is a resounding yes, just because patients are having these experiences, and if there is no awareness and specific training on the part of the clinicians or others who are supporting them, then patient outcomes can be harmed.”

Psychedelic chaplaincy is a developing field that holds promise for addressing the need for spiritually attuned care. In 2024, the Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) developed a multi-year plan to establish the intellectual and pedagogical foundations of psychedelic chaplaincy by examining the landscape of current practices, training programs, and support mechanisms across both clinical and community settings.

CSWR Executive Director Gosia Skłodowska said the program was developed after a visit to the Interventional Psychiatry Clinic at Brigham and Women’s Faulkner Hospital in Boston. The clinic uses ketamine and esketamine to treat patients with depression. Several Harvard Divinity School (HDS) students interested in psychedelic chaplaincy served internships at the clinic. During that visit, physicians, nurses, and hospital chaplains observed that only about half of

the patients receiving ketamine treatment connected with the HDS chaplaincy interns before or after treatment.

“Some patients were left trying to process their experiences entirely on their own—sometimes literally sitting outside afterward trying to make sense of what had happened,” said Skłodowska. “We saw how easily patients could be left alone with profound mind and life-altering moments. That’s when it became clear that spiritual care isn’t an add-on. It is essential to ethical psychedelic practice.”

The resulting program at the CSWR focused on the emerging field of psychedelic chaplaincy and care, including a comprehensive review of training programs nationwide. The study’s results were published in a white paper titled “Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy Training in the US: A Landscape Analysis” in June, identifying training gaps and opportunities for spiritually attuned care.

The study was conducted by leading experts Roman Palitsky, MDiv, PhD, of Emory Spiritual Health, Woodruff Health Sciences Center, and the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Emory University School of Medicine, and Caroline Peacock, LCSW, DMin, of Emory Spiritual Health and Winship Cancer Center Institute. It was based on interviews with representatives from 13 established and emerging psychedelic facilitation training programs.

The study found that representatives acknowledged the importance of spiritual, existential, religious, and theological considerations in psychedelic care, yet many did not provide dedicated training in these areas because of limited time, resources, and instructors’ expertise.

“Training competent psychedelic facilitators will be absolutely essential to any rollout of psychedelic care in the U.S. Right now, it is an important time for training programs to begin sharing the practices that work well, and to tackle the areas that need more work, to be able to meet the need for skilled facilitators,” said Palitsky, lead author and researcher at Emory’s Center for Psychedelics and Spirituality.

Breau and Paul Gillis-Smith are co-leads of the Psychedelics and Spirituality program at the CSWR. Both also served as interns at the Interventional Psychiatry Clinic at Brigham and Women’s Faulkner Hospital during their Master of Divinity studies at HDS.

“We were essentially trying to understand the perspectives of the leaders of these programs. We were particularly interested in how they address the spiritual, existential, religious, and theological concerns of participants in training,” said Gillis-Smith. “Many participants in these programs are interested in spirituality, but the programs themselves do not have enough time to fully develop spiritually attuned care or spiritual facilitation. The workshops are a direct response to this gap.”

This fall, the CSWR organized two spiritual care intensive workshops. The first, held in September, focused on therapists and medical professionals involved in psychedelic research and clinical treatments in medical settings. The second, held in December, centered on therapists, chaplains, and others interested in providing spiritual care in both religious and recreational contexts.

“I’m very proud that the CSWR is taking a lead in helping develop curricula and workshops for psychedelic chaplaincy, and piloting workshops that might be taught outside of Harvard, and scaled up to meet the growing need,” said Charles Stang, Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions and Professor of Early Christian Thought at the Harvard Divinity School.

In a conference room at the CSWR in December, about 20 people from diverse backgrounds sat in a circle, introducing themselves at the start of a three-day workshop. Participants included a doula and psychedelic facilitator from Arkansas; a clinical psychologist and psychedelic integration therapist from New York State; a PhD candidate at HDS; a social worker and therapist from New York City; and an attorney and leader with the Nashville Psychedelics Society.

These participants, along with others from across the United States and as far away as the Netherlands, were drawn to the workshop to explore spiritually responsive care in community-based settings, including psychedelic churches and groups, as well as therapists and facilitators.

Topics of discussion included the role of spiritual care in communal and plant medicine healing environments, new religious movements forming around psychedelic sacraments, navigating law and practice in psychedelic spiritual communities, and navigating spiritual differences in psychedelic experiences. Lecture sessions were followed by small-group conversations, giving participants opportunities to share experiences, challenges, and potential solutions.

“This training offers practitioners from various fields the chance to focus on important spiritual, existential, religious, and theological issues often found in psychedelic-assisted therapy,” said Peacock, co-author of the white paper and researcher specializing in spiritual care in psychedelic-assisted therapy. “We hope it helps practitioners with some knowledge and experience deepen their understanding and approach, ultimately providing more holistic care to those receiving facilitated psychedelic treatment.”

Ronald McNutt, a VA chaplain resident, retired attorney, and leader of the Nashville Psychedelic Society—an organization focused on drug policy reform and education—said he hoped to deepen his connection to the psychedelic community and learn more about chaplaincy.

“This is such an extremely important discussion, and it’s inspiring to be here with all these wonderful people,” he said. “I’m very interested in developing empathic skills and just skills relating to people to help them feel more at ease, and comfortable and supported.”

Elizabeth Arnold EDM ’91 is a clinical psychologist and psychedelic integration therapist from Upstate New York. Her specialty is working with people experiencing psychosomatic symptoms through talk therapy. Psychedelics have opened up a new avenue for her work.

“What stands out to me about this workshop is the love, the love among colleagues, the love among friends, the trust, and then the ability to create that in a group of previous strangers who are then going to go back out into our own communities and feel changed, and I think feel really anchored and grounded that there’s a starting point.”

Daan Keiman, a lecturer at the December workshop, is the Educational Lead of the OPEN Foundation, an organization that leads a comprehensive two-year training program for psychedelic-assisted therapists. He also has a private practice as a Buddhist and Psychedelic Chaplain in the Netherlands.

“One of the things that I’ve been advocating for, one of the things that Open Foundation does, is to emphasize that psychedelic care in general and psychedelic-assisted therapy, to be specific, requires

multidimensional care,” Keiman said. “When I put my spiritual caregiver hat on, it requires real skill to tend to these experiences, and that’s what this whole workshop was about.”

Laura Tuach, Assistant Dean for Ministry Studies and Field Education at HDS, said that the field of psychedelic chaplaincy is still in its infancy, and HDS and the CSWR are at the leading edge of its development. Requests for field internships began to trickle in from

HDS students before the COVID-19 pandemic, but have grown significantly since the University reopened in 2020.

“I feel the field will continue to grow because chaplains know the language of support, and can help patients with their spiritual and existential experiences,” said Tuach. “I feel that we are at the leading edge of this developing field.”



Psychedelic Facilitation Training in the United States: A Landscape Analysis

ROMAN PALITSKY, CAROLINE PEACOCK, JEFFREY A. BREAU, PAUL GILLIS-SMITH, GOSIA SKŁODOWSKA

As psychedelic care moves toward broader legalization in the United States, a rapidly expanding ecosystem of training programs has emerged to prepare facilitators to support individuals undergoing these experiences. Yet one central dimension of this work—how to respond to spiritual, existential, religious, and theological (SERT) aspects of psychedelic experience—remains unevenly defined.

To better understand this emerging field, the Center for the Study of World Religions (CSWR) engaged colleagues at Emory University’s Center for Psychedelics and Spirituality to conduct a landscape analysis of psychedelic facilitation training programs in the United States. The project used a quality improvement approach to identify common priorities, practices, and gaps in psychedelic facilitation training, drawing on interviews with representatives from thirteen established and emerging programs in the United States. These conversations were synthesized to map shared approaches to training—including curriculum design, SERT-related content, and teaching strategies—while also identifying key gaps, particularly in continuing education, professional parity, and the development of field standards.

The findings revealed both convergence and fragmentation. Across programs, there is broad agreement on the importance of preparing facilitators to engage the full range of experiences that may arise in psychedelic contexts, including those that are explicitly spiritual or existential in nature. Training curricula are typically organized around widely recognized phases of facilitation—screening, preparation, dosing, and integration—and emphasize practical competencies such as

safety, relational presence, and client-centered care, alongside foundational knowledge in ethics, history, and psychopharmacology.

At the same time, the study identified a significant gap in sustained education on SERT topics. In many programs, SERT-related content is addressed indirectly, often folded into broader categories such as cultural competence, therapeutic technique, or discussions of “spiritual emergence.” A perceived mismatch between the limited time available for instruction and the breadth of topics considered essential to facilitator training further contributes to this uneven coverage. Additional barriers include the need for specialized expertise among instructors and a lack of established standards for teaching in this domain.

The result is a field characterized by considerable variation in scope, structure, and emphasis. Training programs range from short, intensive modules to multi-year curricula that include supervised practice and ongoing mentorship. Cohorts vary widely in size, and programs are affiliated with a diverse set of institutions, including universities, clinical organizations, advocacy groups, and independent initiatives. While emerging regulatory frameworks in states such as Oregon and Colorado have begun to standardize certain aspects of training, competencies related to spiritual care remain largely underdeveloped within these guidelines.

Despite these differences, the study also pointed to important shared priorities. Programs consistently emphasize the ethical responsibility of facilitators, the cultivation of non-directive and relational

approaches to care, and the importance of supporting participants across the full arc of the psychedelic experience. These commonalities suggest a foundation upon which more coherent standards and collaborative practices might be built.

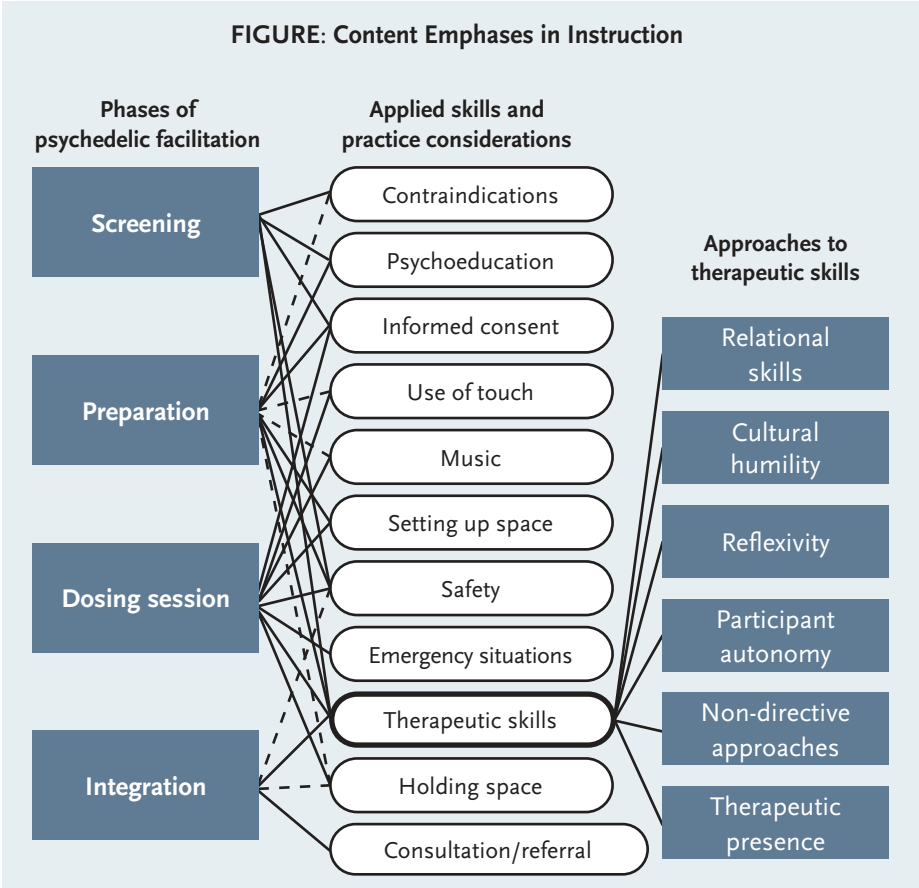
Psychedelic facilitation training is, in this sense, an evolving discipline—one shaped by shifting legal, clinical, and cultural contexts, as well as by ongoing dialogue among practitioners, researchers, and educators. The findings of this study underscored the need for continued exchange across programs, the development of clearer competencies, and the integration of insights from established fields such as clinical chaplaincy, the academic study of religion, and spiritually integrated psychotherapy.

At the CSWR, this research directly informed a series of workshops on “Tending the Spiritual in Psychedelic Care,” which brought together clinicians, chaplains, and scholars to explore how spiritually responsive approaches might be more fully integrated into training and practice. In doing so, the Center sought not only to analyze the current landscape, but also to help shape its ongoing development—contributing to a model of care that is both rigorously grounded and attentive to the depth and complexity of human experience.

TABLE: Summary Descriptions of Included Programs’ Characteristics

Length of training	Ranged between single-day immersive modules and multi-year programs that include mentored practica and ongoing supervision or consultation
Hours in training	12–185 (including ongoing supervision and practica)
Cohort Size	5–100+ trainees per cohort
Program History*	The youngest programs were mid-launch, while the oldest had training experience of over 10 years
Association with organizations and entities	Programs included: Independent, unaffiliated programs; programs affiliated with pharmaceutical organizations, programs affiliated with advocacy and scientific organizations, and university-affiliated programs

FIGURE: Content Emphases in Instruction



Supportive and background knowledge

History	Basic psychopharmacology
Research literacy	Ethics
Non-ordinary states	Safety
DEIJ	Reciprocity

NOTE: This figure represents content emphases described by psychedelic facilitation training programs. Headings at the top of the figure correspond to the content below each heading: The first represents in chronological order the phases of screening, preparation, dosing, and integration. Applied skills are illustrated in relation to the facilitation phases, with solid lines representing common, explicit references of a given skill to a given facilitation phase, while dashed lines represent occasional mentions. Approaches to therapeutic skills are all included within “therapeutic skills”, which are an applied skill in facilitation, but which were discussed with depth and emphasis that warranted expansion as a discrete topic. Supportive and background knowledge includes aspects of instruction that were not explicitly tied to any given procedure but were taught due to their generalized importance for psychedelic care

Botanical Journeys

Andrea Sánchez-Castañeda in Conversation with Donna Torres, Artist-in-Residence

Botanical Journeys brings into focus a mode of inquiry that is at once artistic, ecological, and philosophical—one that asks what it might mean to encounter plant life not as passive matter, but as a field of relation, intelligence, and presence. In this conversation, Andrea Sánchez-Castañeda, Postdoctoral Fellow, and artist Donna Torres reflect on practices that move across disciplines and traditions, engaging plants as collaborators, teachers, and interlocutors.

How did you start your career as a botanical artist? What are your influences?

This work began with a simple affinity: plants felt like a natural point of entry into painting, shaped by my experiences of nature in Miami and Colombia. Early on, I was drawn to shamanic traditions, and through travels with my husband, Constantino Manuel Torres, I began exploring plants used for medicinal and psychoactive purposes.

I gathered stories from both texts and lived encounters, aiming for a level of precision that would allow recognition—not only of the plant itself, but of the histories and meanings it carries. Botanical training at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden deepened this approach, grounding my practice in careful observation.

Over time, daily work in the garden, teaching, and sustained study expanded my medium and method. What began as representation gradually became something else: a way of entering into relation with plants as subjects of knowledge, memory, and transformation.

Why did you become interested in shamanic plants? Is there a set of plants you return to most often?

The interest is both personal and transformative. During travels in South America, I encountered San Pedro cactus, and that experience brought a clarity that was difficult to ignore—it gave direction to my life and work.

After that, the question was no longer whether to pursue art, but how seriously to commit to it. Returning to graduate school became a natural step. These plants are not just subjects; they mark moments of transition. They shape attention, and in doing so, they shape the work itself.



PHOTO: ANDREA SÁNCHEZ CASTAÑEDA

Do you have a special connection with particular plants?

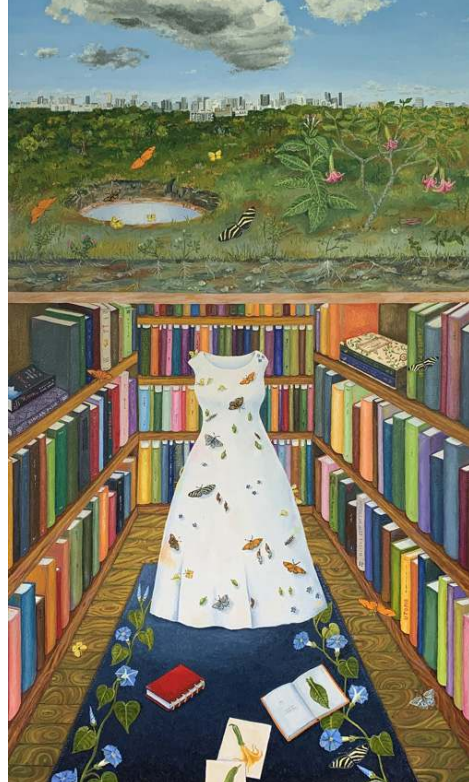
I'm drawn to Brugmansias—they carry a tension I find compelling, at once beautiful and dangerous. That duality opens a space for deeper inquiry.

What continues to hold my attention, though, are the stories that gather around plants. In some Indigenous communities in Colombia,

Brugmansias are planted at the corners of homes as forms of protection. Learning this changes how one sees the plant—not as ornament, but as participant in a lived environment. Each plant leads outward: into archives, into histories, into systems of meaning. The work becomes a form of research as much as image-making, shaped by what plants have been and continue to be in different worlds.



Brugmansia sanguinea, watercolor, DONNA TORRES



Chrysalis, oil on canvas, DONNA TORRES



Banisteriopsis caapi, watercolor, DONNA TORRES

You've collaborated with figures like Dennis McKenna and Jonathan Ott. What has collaboration meant within your practice?

Collaboration, for me, has always been a form of intellectual exchange. Early on, I worked with The Ethnopharmacologic Search for Psychoactive Drugs, using it as a foundational reference alongside my husband's research. It shaped how I approached plants not only visually, but conceptually.

Years later, being invited to contribute images to the revived ESPD conferences felt like a continuation of that dialogue. Similarly, my work with Jonathan Ott was deeply collaborative—each image accompanied by notes, symbols, and references, forming an ongoing conversation between visual and textual thinking.

These exchanges reinforced something essential: that knowledge does not reside in a single discipline. It emerges in the space between practices.

Your paintings feel like self-contained worlds. How does that process come together?

Each work begins with accumulation. I start with a list—often twenty or more elements—drawn from historical research, contemporary use, and personal experience. From there, I develop small compositional studies to determine how these elements might coexist.

I'm interested in interiors that open outward—spaces where the domestic and the exterior world remain in dialogue. Windows, artifacts, fragments of text, and plant forms all interact within the same field. What matters is not simply composition, but relation: how these elements hold together, and how they allow different temporalities and meanings to coexist within a single image.

Your work seems to move between domestic and political registers—especially in a piece like *Chrysalis*.

What's striking is that many viewers initially read these paintings as purely domestic—"pretty flowers," quiet interiors. But that surface is only one layer.

Chrysalis is about transformation—how ideas emerge, how we change through what we encounter. The image grew out of a dream: chrysalises attached to a white dress transforming into butterflies. That image stayed with me.

At the same time, I was thinking about knowledge—how it moves, how it survives. The idea of underground libraries in conflict zones resonated deeply. In the painting, a small opening becomes a passage into such a space. The butterflies move through it, carrying transformation outward.

What emerges is a convergence: personal vision, political reality, and the quiet, persistent

work of change. Transformation is never abstract—it is always situated.

Your current project focuses on female plant explorers. How did this begin?

The project began with Maria Sabina, whose language—poetic, visionary—opened a new way of thinking about plants and knowledge. From there, I moved toward historical figures like Maria Sibylla Merian, whose work bridged art and scientific observation in remarkable ways.

What draws me to these women is not only their work, but the conditions under which they pursued it—often against expectation, across geographies, and through forms of resilience that shaped their contributions.

My current focus is Ynez Mexia, whose life carries a similar force. She began her botanical career at 50, traveling extensively and collecting across the Americas. Encountering her materials—her tools, her notebooks—brings a different kind of proximity to her work.

This project has also prompted a shift in scale. I'm moving toward larger compositions, where these lives can be held within more expansive visual narratives. What interests me is not only documenting these figures, but creating a space in which their work—and the worlds they moved through—can be re-encountered.



BEHIND THE GREEN DOORS

Residential Life at the Center for the Study of World Religions



Fresh Box as a Gift with Dotno Pount, BARBARA PHILIPP

Since its founding, the Center for the Study of World Religions has been envisioned not only as a site of scholarship, but as an intentional residential community. Scholars from across disciplines, geographies, and religious and cultural traditions come together here to live as well as to work, creating a shared environment grounded in openness, intellectual exchange, and mutual understanding.

This vision continues to shape the life of the Center today. Behind each of the green doors that open onto the courtyard are distinct research projects, personal histories, and spiritual sensibilities. What emerges over time is something collective, a rhythm of encounters that extends beyond formal scholarship into the everyday gestures of living alongside one another.

Initial interactions often begin simply, through “the exchange of tools... or practical advice,” before gradually unfolding into shared meals, conversations, and forms of connection that linger well beyond a single stay. The residential experience at the Center is shaped by these small openings, moments that invite entry into another’s world and, in doing so, subtly transform one’s own.

Visual artist Barbara Philipp joined the Center's residential community in fall 2025. Living among fellows and their families, she turned her attention to the textures of daily life within this shared space: fleeting encounters, emerging relationships, and the quiet formation of community.

Her project, *Behind the Green Doors*, traces these moments not as documentation, but as impressions. Working from memory, Philipp captures what she describes as "the magical sensation of first encounters," allowing each drawing to hold the openness and indeterminacy of lived experience.



Breathtaking Synthesis with Keith Cantú, BARBARA PHILIPP



Pearlsong Sung with Jane Sheldon, BARBARA PHILIPP



Night Talks with Amy Langenberg, BARBARA PHILIPP



Glancing Through the Worlds with AmarAtma Singh Khalsa, BARBARA PHILIPP



The World Downsided Up with Therese Lautua, BARBARA PHILIPP



Allien Landing with Peter Skafish, BARBARA PHILIPP

The Center for the Study of World Religions is deeply grateful to its funders for their generous support and partnership in envisioning, launching, and sustaining innovative programs and research. Their trust and commitment to the Center's mission are integral to our work.

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