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What about fields and cows? Theosophy, life reform and the concept of natural living

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Panel title: Ecology and Conceptualizations of Nature in Swedish Theosophy and Anthroposophy (a SNASWE panel (SNASWE is the Scandinavian Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism – a part of ESSWE))

Convener: Johan Nilsson, PhD, (Postdoctoral researcher, the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund university), johan.nilsson@ctr.lu.se

Panel abstract:

The belief that the natural world is living and sacred has been seen as a core component of esotericism, from Faivre's *living nature* to the *cosmotheism* adapted by Wouter Hanegraaff from the works of Jan Assman. Such notions are recognizable in movements like Theosophy where animals, plants and minerals are seen as living and partaking together in spiritual development. We know much less, however, of how particular instances of esoteric conceptualizations of nature have differed from each other and how they have interacted with other ways of understanding the natural world in specific contexts. Still, the beliefs about nature held by esoteric movements may have been significant for how these movements understood the societies in which they were active. Furthermore, such beliefs may have exerted an influence outside the movements where they developed. For example, some scholars and advocates of esoteric organizations have argued that a connection exists between esoteric conceptualizations of nature and engagement with environmental or ecological causes.

The panel will explore conceptualizations of nature within two esoteric movements in Sweden – Theosophy and Anthroposophy – and how these have related to engagement with environmental causes. Focusing on a limited geographical and cultural context will allow us to examine how broad and abstract ideas impacted local settings. The presentations investigate how conceptualizations of nature were used as arguments for political action and lifestyle choices by Theosophists and Anthroposophists and how they have functioned as motivating or deterring factors for engagement with ecological causes. The presentations explore how Swedish Theosophists during the early twentieth century understood the goal of natural living taken from the life reform movement; how Swedish Theosophist and prominent Social Democrat Nelly Thüring may have drawn influence from Theosophical writings in arguing for the use of solar power; how Anthroposophists in Sweden have presented biodynamic agriculture in relation to organic produce,

and, finally, how the Swedish Theosophical movement has shifted in its embrace of ecology and environmental causes during the twentieth century.

Paper 1

Universal Oneness with Nature? Processes of Change in the Views of Nature and Ecology among Swedish Theosophists

The first object of the Theosophical Society, the creation of a universal brotherhood of humanity, has long privileged human beings over nature in its cosmological scheme. If one looks to more recent Theosophical thought, however, questions of the importance of sustainability and environmental concerns are engaged with enthusiastically. Over the course of the past fifty years, Theosophists globally have increasingly turned to movements such as deep ecology, ecological spirituality and holism, developing new ways of understanding humanity's relationship with nature and materiality. This change in Theosophical interests might seem slightly perplexing if one looks to early Theosophical history, where the natural world was often viewed as an obstacle to be overcome for human development. Early nineteenth century Theosophists, such as the Swede Georg Ljungström, spoke of the physical world as encased in a 'material membrane' which held the world apart from its divine source. Some hundred years later, Theosophist Rudi Jansma describes nature as mankind's foremost teacher. How could such a drastic change in the view of humanity and its relation to nature take place within a new religious setting? This paper explores the changes pertaining to views of nature and ecology that have taken place within Theosophy in Sweden from its early days in the late nineteenth century until today, and seeks to better understand what happens to spiritual views in minority spiritual movements when dramatical political and cultural changes occur in the surrounding world. Through an analysis of Theosophical periodicals, published lectures, and other textual sources the paper will trace the changing views of nature, ecology and ethics within Theosophy in Sweden.

Paulina Gruffman is a PhD candidate at Centre for Theology and Religious Studies at Lund University. Her dissertation explores the intersection between early religious studies, occultism, and psychoanalysis through a case study of occultist scholar-practitioner G.R.S. Mead (1863–1933) and the reception of his works in the symposiums at Eranos in the middle of the twentieth century.

Paper 2

What about fields and cows? Theosophy, life reform and the concept of natural living

The late nineteenth century saw the global spread of the *life reform* (lebensreform) movement. Life reform – generally understood as an umbrella term for a wide variety of causes and movements ranging from vegetarianism to nudism – reached Sweden around the turn of the century. Running as a theme through much of the literature associated with this movement was the notion of living naturally. Natural living was conceived differently by proponents of the movements and could include anything from adopting a diet of fruits and nuts to engaging in programs of physical culture. Although conceptualized in varying ways, natural living was commonly seen as something increasingly being threatened and replaced by modernity in the form of urbanization and industrialization. In Sweden, as well as internationally, this way of thinking was explicitly intertwined with spiritual beliefs and religious rhetorical strategies. Among the strands of religious expressions most apparent here was that of Theosophy. Theosophy in Sweden was entangled with life reform to a surprising extent; its journals were rife with references to the causes of the movement and some Theosophists held influential positions in organizations promoting vegetarianism and temperance. This begs the question: Was there anything in the life reform movement that attracted Theosophists specifically, or is shared demography enough to explain the apparent intimacy of the two movements? The paper suggests that one critical point of commonality shared by the movements can be found in their understanding of nature as something to be preserved and defended, but also needs to be mastered and controlled. Looking at some of the most prominent actors in the crossroads of Theosophy and life reform – among them Halfdan Liander (1861–1938) – this paper will explore notions of nature and natural living within Theosophy and explore the clashes and harmonies between these concepts and the understanding of nature within Swedish life reform.

Johan Nilsson is a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies at Lund University. He is currently working on a research project about the reception of Buddhism in the Swedish Theosophical movement.

Paper 3

Nelly Thüring's advocacy of solar power and criticism of nuclear power

This paper builds on a biographical study about one of the first five female MPs in Sweden, Nelly Thüring (1875–1972), who was a member of Theosophical Society (Adyar) during her entire adult life. In conversation with previous research on the connections between theosophy and first-wave feminism, I argue that Thüring's positions as a suffragist, pacifist, vegetarian, and socialist cannot be separated from her spiritual life. In this presentation, I will focus on her argumentation in the late

1950s debate about whether Sweden should initiate a nuclear weapons program. She sided with Inga Thorsson, chair of the Swedish Social Democratic Women's Federation, and strongly opposed the use of nuclear energy for military purposes. In addition to her pacifist critique of proliferation, Thüring also argued against civilian uses of nuclear energy, stating that nuclear fission was against nature. This stance has previously been interpreted as an expression of a conservative view on nature. The aim of this paper is to explore whether Thüring's position in this debate could have been inspired by her lifelong interest in Theosophy. As several previous studies have shown, alchemical tropes were revived during the development of early atomic science. The leaders of the Theosophical Society, Charles W. Leadbeater and Annie Besant, conducted clairvoyant experiments into the nature of chemical elements, discussed in the different editions of their book *Occult Chemistry* (1908, 1919 and 1951). I will investigate to what extent these experiments were discussed in Swedish theosophical publications, and if the issue of nuclear energy was debated in Swedish theosophical circles in the early post World War II era. Furthermore, I will discuss Thüring's future-oriented advocacy for solar power in the light of theosophical views on the Sun, as expressed for example in the contemporary pamphlet "The Religions in the Nuclear Age" by T. H. Redfern.

Malin Arvidsson holds a PhD in History and is currently a senior lecturer in Child Studies at the Department of Thematic Studies, Linköping university.

Panel 4

Biodynamic agriculture: enchanted or enhanced nature? A study of Swedish informational and promotional materials

The Anthroposophical Society began its life as one of the many splinters of its parent organization, the Theosophical Society. Founded in 1912/1913 by the Austrian esotericist Rudolf Steiner, it has since its modest start, grown to be a thoroughly bureaucratized institution with a presence in over 50 countries around the world. The Anthroposophical Society took root in Sweden shortly after Steiner established the original movement in Germany. After a number of decades as a largely urban phenomenon, the Swedish branch of the organization relocated its headquarters to the countryside roughly 50 km outside of Stockholm to an area known as Järna, which has since that time become a center for a substantial number of Sweden's Anthroposophical enterprises.

Part of Anthroposophy's appeal is the many practical applications Steiner initiated with the help of his numerous collaborators, including a method of teaching, medical practices, therapeutic approaches, and a system of farming based on Anthroposophical ideas about nature and humankind's relationship to it, i.e.,

biodynamic agriculture. On a surface level, biodynamic farming resembles methods used for cultivating organic produce. The underlying principles, however, are quite distinct and rely upon an Anthroposophical view of an enchanted nature populated by elementals and suffused with invisible energies. Biodynamic methods thus are dependent upon the existence of astral forces and astrological influences and involve the ritualized production of substances deemed to enhance these forces as well as the crops produced in terms of their nutritional values, etc. This ambiguity between the two methods means that biodynamic products can be presented as radically distinct, similar but superior, or in no essential way different from organic products. This paper will explore how Swedish promotional materials and other source texts navigate and sometimes strategically use such various ways of presenting biodynamic principles and products.

Karen Swartz-Hammer, PhD, is a postdoctoral researcher in the study of religion at Åbo Akademi and a doctoral student in comparative literature at the University of Turku.

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