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Non-Mainstream Knowledge. Catholicism and Theosophy in Avantgarde Art

Abstract: Die Nachkriegsforschung zum Verhältnis von Avantgarde-Kunst und westlicher Esoterik untersucht, welche esoterischen Strömungen maßgeblich an der Entwicklung der Veränderungen in der Ikonographie, insbesondere in der abstrakten Kunst, beteiligt waren.

Avantgarde-Künstler hatten einen sehr unterschiedlichen religiösen Hintergrund, sei es protestantisch, katholisch, östlich-orthodox oder eine andere Religion. Neue Strömungen innerhalb der westlichen Esoterik ab der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts regten Künstler dazu an, die Gültigkeit ihrer Mainstream-Religion und ihrer Ikonographie in Frage zu stellen und eine neue, an die Moderne angepasste Ikonographie zu entwickeln.

In diesem Essay werden drei Beispiele diskutiert, in denen die Beziehung zwischen dem Katholizismus als Mainstream-Religion und der Theosophie als „alternative Weltanschauung einer kognitiven Minderheit“ oder „nicht standardmäßigem Wissen“ eine überraschende und entscheidende Rolle bei der Entstehung moderner Kunst gespielt hat. In den Niederlanden wurden traditionelle katholische Designprinzipien in die Theosophie integriert und spielten eine entscheidende Rolle bei der Entwicklung des niederländischen Jugendstils. In Frankreich bildete der durch den Okkultismus verstärkte Katholizismus die Grundlage des französischen Symbolismus. In Schweden diente der Katholizismus als inspirierende Grundlage für die moderne Ikonographie, die von der Gruppe De Fem entwickelt wurde. Ihr (halb-)abstraktes Werk wurde von der wikingerkatholischen Kultur und der mittelalterlichen katholischen Mystik inspiriert, was sie dazu anregte, eine neue Ikonographie für den modernen schwedischen Protestantismus zu entwickeln.

1 Introduction

Postwar research on the relationship between avantgarde art and Western Esotericism tries to elucidate which esoteric currents have been instrumental in the development of the changes in iconography, especially in abstract art. The focus on the description and explanation of Western Esoteric iconographical elements tends to disregard the context in which an artist chose to incorporate these elements, even though an artist, as every person, is the product of his social back-

ground. Therefore, the analysis of art requires, or should require, a highly interdisciplinary approach, in which this biographical background is taken into account. Also, Western Esotericism is regarded as the result of what has been called the “anti-apologetic” tradition in Protestant theology founded by the Lutheran historian of philosophy Jacob Thomasius (1622–1682), who regarded Catholicism as a perversion of the biblical faith, because it was infused with paganism, and thus was regarded as “apologetic” by not ridding Christianity from these influences. Because of this development Western Esotericism is still, generally, discussed or viewed within the framework of Protestant culture and discourse. Avantgarde artists, however, came from very different religious backgrounds, be it Protestant, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or any other religion. During their lifetime, i.e. the era before secularization set in, every member of society was raised within the framework of one of the mainstream religions. New currents within Western Esotericism from the second half of the 19th century stimulated artists to question the validity of their mainstream religion and their iconography, and to develop a new iconography adapted to the modern times.

This essay will discuss three examples in which the relationship between Catholicism, as mainstream religion, and Theosophy, as an “alternative worldview of a cognitive minority” or “deviant knowledge,” has played a surprising and decisive role in the emergence of modern art. In the Netherlands, traditional Catholic design principles were incorporated into Theosophy and became instrumental in the development of Dutch Art Nouveau. In France, Catholicism, enhanced by Occultism, formed the basis of French Symbolism. In Sweden, Catholicism served as the inspirational basis of the modern iconography developed by the group *De Fem*. Their (semi-) abstract work was inspired by Viking-Catholic culture and Medieval Catholic mysticism, which inspired them to develop a new iconography for modern Swedish Protestantism.

2 Post-War Reception of the Avantgarde

Post-war scholarly research on the influence of Western Esotericism on modern art took a flight in the 1960s. The Second World War had created a schism across European society, effectively dividing the twentieth century into “before the war” and “after the war.” Although such a dichotomy in reality was not as absolute – in war-time ideas and convictions can survive, even if they are stifled by the circumstances – the trauma of the antipropaganda of the Fascists against Jewish culture and Occult and socialist/communist (“Bolshevist”) ideologies had been so effective that the pre-war era had become an ideologically distant and hostile past. The post-war

reorganization of the Academy according to Anglo-Saxon research paradigms, closely aligned with the liberators of Europe, resulted in the abandonment of the pre-war, predominantly German hermeneutic views of scientific practice which, incorrectly, had become associated with Fascist ideology.

This shift from hermeneutic *Verstehen* to “objective”, “ideologically neutral” *Erklären* added to the schism between pre-war and post-war eras in research on the relationship between Western Esotericism and art. In the post-war art world the emphasis shifted to purely formal interpretation of the visual elements. Examples of post-war art devoid of ideological content – at least it was propagated as such – were American movements as Abstract Expressionism, Action Painting and Colorfield Painting. Essentially however these were rooted in mixtures of the pre-war ideology-rich, “hermeneutical” art of, among others, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Surrealism, Cubism and De Stijl.

It is the historical reality that Western Esotericism was closely associated with the birth of modern art and vice versa. The birth of modern art – especially modern abstract, non-representational art – was closely intertwined with, and much the result of, inspiration fueled by modern Western Esoteric currents at the end of the nineteenth century. Until the Second World War this almost symbiotic relationship was common knowledge among artists as well as the public, and it was regarded as an asset. It was understood as part of the modernist, early twentieth century interpretation of the adage of the Impressionist painters several decades before: “Il faut être de son temps”.

The book published in 1970 by the Finnish art historian Sixten Ringbom on the early work of Wassily Kandinsky, *The sounding cosmos. A study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, kicked off a new scholarly interest in the relationship between modern pre-war art and Western Esoteric currents.¹ But even then art historians often ran into post-war hypersensitivity for “false” ideologies. For instance, for many years the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus in Munich, which possesses Kandinsky’s early work and which formed the basis of Ringbom’s studies, refused scholars the access to the collection as a result of his book.² The American blockbuster exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting*

1 The book elaborated on Ringbom’s essay of 1966: Ringbom, Sixten: *Art in the Epoch of the Great Spiritual. Occult Elements in the Early Theory of Abstract Painting*, in: *The Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29/1966, 386–416. As an introduction to the exhibition of his work in the Oldenzaal Gallery in Rotterdam in 1912, Kandinsky wrote an essay with a clear reference to hermeneutics: Kandinsky, Wassily: *Über Kunstverstehen* (dated München, September 1912), in: *De Kunst* V/1912–1913, 9.11.1912.

2 Bax, Marty: Nawoord [Postscript], in: Wassily Kandinsky. *Het geestelijke in de kunst*, transl. Hans Driessen, Nijmegen: Vantilt 2017, 137–150.

1890–1985 (1986/87), a compendium of numerous currents in modern art deeply influenced by Western Esoteric currents, marked the definitive breakthrough. Shortly after it was followed by the equally comprehensive, but historically more narrowly conceived, exhibition *Okkultismus und Avantgarde. Von Munch bis Mondrian 1900–1915* in Frankfurt am Main in 1995. The stage was set for a new, comprehensive analysis of the relationship between art and Western Esotericism. It is now a flourishing field of study. But the interpretation of the relationship between art and modern Theosophy, subject of this essay, is extremely complex.³ It is necessary to define why.

3 The Multidimensionality of Modern Theosophy

Many problems arise from modern Theosophy itself, as well as the context in which interpretations of the theory of this movement came into being. In sociological terms, Theosophy can be characterized as a “worldview of a cognitive minority,” as “non-mainstream knowledge” seen from the viewpoint of mainstream culture.⁴ Also, historically, the nineteenth century characteristically is the age of both “the invention of tradition” and “eclecticism” in which long-gone traditions

3 Modern Theosophy is a late 19th century current in Western Esotericism and as such distinct from “classical” Christian Theosophy of Jakob Böhme (1575–1624), although modern Theosophy incorporates many of his ideas.

4 I use the less normative word “non-mainstream” where usually is used “deviant” as in the following explanation by the sociologist Peter Berger, in: Kalnitsky, Arnold: *The Theosophical Movement of the Nineteenth Century. The legitimization of the disputable and the entrenchment of the disreputable*, Pretoria: University of South Africa 2009 [<http://hdl.handle.net/10500/2108> (11.05.2024)] writes: “The analysis of Peter Berger is useful in helping characterise what a secondary or alternative worldview is. Berger uses the terms “cognitive minority,” and “deviant knowledge” to describe the status of such minority ideational orientations. ‘By a cognitive minority I mean a group of people whose view of the world differs significantly from the one generally taken for granted in their society. Put differently, a cognitive minority is a group formed around a body of deviant “knowledge.” . . . The term “knowledge” . . . always refers to what is taken to be or believed as “knowledge.” In other words, the use of the term is strictly neutral on whether or not the socially held “knowledge” is finally true or false . . . The status of a cognitive minority is thus invariably an uncomfortable one—not necessarily because the majority is repressive or intolerant, but simply because it refuses to accept the minority’s definition of reality as “knowledge.” At best, a minority’s viewpoint is forced to be defensive. At worst, it ceases to be plausible to anyone.” Berger, Peter L.: *A Rumor of Angels*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books 1970², 6–7.

were revived and combined into new frames of reference.⁵ Modern Theosophy as a multifaceted theory about correspondences between religions throughout the ages is a typically nineteenth century eclectic creation of the myth of a “mother religion” out of which all world religions have evolved.

Modern Theosophy – *passim*: Theosophy – is closely interrelated with the personal life experiences of the main theorist and co-founder of the Society in 1875, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891). Many aspects of her life leading up to the founding of the Society remain undetermined, but that corresponds with the mythical constructs of the theory itself. Blavatsky was born in Dnipro (formerly called Yekaterinoslav, now central Ukraine) of noble Russian-German descent and hence was Lutheran by religion.⁶ Her youth was vagabond-like, traveling through different parts of Imperial Russia due to her father’s military and civil career and other family circumstances. Her early criticism of the rigidity and hollow ritualism of elite Lutheranism was fueled by her acquaintance with Freemasonry through the library of her maternal grandfather, with Eastern Orthodox Christianity – which contains pagan practices such as animal offerings – and all kinds of non-Christian religions practiced by population groups within Imperial Russia, such as Shamanism, or the Kalmyks in Astrakhan, practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism. She also claimed to have visions and astral experiences. When she eloped from her marriage in 1849 she again became a vagabond, travelling through the Middle East (notably Egypt), the Far East and the Americas. In Paris she became acquainted with Mesmerism and Spiritualism. In 1879 she moved to India due to acquaintance with the Hindu reform movement Arya Samaj, and eventually settled in Chennai in 1882, where the headquarters of the Theosophical Society were founded.

All these influences form the basis of her seminal books *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), the “Bibles” of the Theosophical Society.⁷ These books are a compilation of ideas and fragments derived from all world religions through the ages, reflected in the first “Statute” of the Theosophical Society: the comparative study of all world religions, emanating from a universal religion.

5 The Invention of Tradition, ed. Eric Hobsbawm / Terence Ranger, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983, esp. chapter 7.

6 Meade, Marion: *Madame Blavatsky: The Woman Behind the Myth*, New York: Putnam 1980; Cranston, Sylvia: *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement*, London: G.P. Putnam’s Sons 1983; Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas: *Helena Blavatsky*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books 2004.

7 Blavatsky, Helena P.: *Isis Unveiled. A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*. 2 Vols., New York: J. W. Bouton 1877; Blavatsky, Helena P.: *The Secret Doctrine: the Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*. 2 vols., London: The Theosophical Publishing Company 1888.

This religion was said to have been known to both Plato and the ancient Hindu sages, and is the same as Hermetic philosophy, “the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology”.⁸ Every religion is based on the same truth or “secret doctrine,” which contains “the alpha and omega of universal science”.⁹ This “Theosophy” will become the religion of the future.¹⁰

The Theosophical Society actively welcomed individual interpretations, as they all could contribute to the understanding of the essence of Theosophy, as said itself being heterogeneous in character. Interpretations became to be dependent on national differences in cultures and religions, on groups of different socioeconomic status, and on individuals within these cultures. Nationalist tendencies in society, mainstream religious dominance and its stance against other religious models, socioeconomic contexts and sociological mechanisms between groups have led to a multidimensional interpretation of Theosophy over time. All of these different contexts matter highly in the interpretations of art.

Art history, however, has mainly focused on the relationship between Theosophy (and concurring Western Esoteric currents) and art *per se*. Generally, analyses have focused on how Western Esoteric inspirational sources influenced changes in iconography, and how individual artists or groups gained access to these sources. Hardly ever a relationship is proposed between the artist and his/her mainstream religious background, whether and how exactly the transition to an esoteric philosophy of life took shape – if this at all happened. In some cases resistance against the interpretation of an artist as “esoteric” has been the result of post-war continuation of Fascist anti-propaganda. The Nazis regarded modern art as *entartet* (degenerate), inspired by “Bolshevist” and “Jewish” ideas. The art of “socialist-utopian” movement De Stijl for instance, including Mondrian, certainly belonged to the first category. The effectivity of the Nazi anti-occult propaganda may have been a reason why after the war, and until this day, art historians downplay(ed) both Theosophical elements in Mondrian’s work as well as his Theosophical worldview. Instead, his linear geometrical compositions were and are preferably associated with the “rigidity” of his Dutch Reformed upbringing, although there is no proof whatsoever. In fact, Mondrian was one of the most steadfast of all Theosophical painters.

Generally, in art history Western Esoteric influences on avantgarde art are still regarded as a phenomenon from outside mainstream society, as an extraordinary and peripheral manifestation that, contrarywise, rapidly came to fundamen-

⁸ Blavatsky, Helena P.: *Isis Unveiled. A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*. Vol. I: Science, New York: J.W. Bouton 1877, vii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 511.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 613.

tally influence and change mainstream artistic tradition. Nevertheless, the exclusive focus on the esoteric elements, as exemplified by many exhibitions on the relationship between art and Western Esotericism, disregards an important element of society at the time: the indisputable fact that every member of society at the time was a member of a mainstream Church. Therefore any analysis should also pose the question: from which mainstream religious context did an artist get involved in Western Esoteric thought, and did this color the way in which the Western Esoteric elements were incorporated in art? Should an analysis not start from the opposite end: from mainstream religion? For instance: the Ukrainian artist Casimir Malevich has been positioned as an avantgarde abstract artist deeply influenced by Western Esotericism. However, Malevich grew up in a mixed Polish Catholic and Ukrainian Orthodox family – he also emphasized that he was not *Russian* Orthodox – and remained deeply religious throughout his life. Although his indebtedness to Orthodox icon art has been noted, his art has not been regarded primarily as an attempt to revive traditional Ukrainian religious iconography by means of Theosophy and modern art theory.

4 Pre-War Popularity of Western Esotericism in Relation to Mainstream Religion

The leaders of the Society never actively encouraged members to leave their traditional Church for the Theosophical Society, nor did members leave the Church in droves, although in line with *The Secret Doctrine*, the Society did criticize the spiritual hollowness of Christianity – mainly Protestant/Lutheran Christianity – from an early date. From circa 1895 the leaders of the Society actively propagated theories about a more true “esoteric Christianity.”¹¹ Christianity and Theosophy were not considered as mutually exclusive. When the official shift from Church to membership of the Theosophical Society did occur, it was mainly after 1900 on an individual basis and only when secularization of society was well underway. The Theosophical Society, with its focus on “non-mainstream” knowledge, contributed to this development.

There is factual evidence for this observation, demonstrated by a prosopographical study of the members of the Theosophical Society in Amsterdam, the Netherlands [Fig. 1]. This study comprised roughly half of all Dutch members in

¹¹ Besant, Annie: *Esoteric Christianity or The Lesser Mysteries*, Midhurst: Canon Gate Books 1901.

Denomination of TS members as mentioned in the Civil Registry of Amsterdam, and the changes over time			
	1890-1900	1900-1910	1910-1920
Roman-Catholic	8	14	10
Old-Catholic	--	1	--
Anglican Church	--	--	1
Free Catholic Church (branch of the T. Society)	--	--	14
Mennonite	3	13	13
Protestant, incl. Evang. Lutheran, Remonstrant, Ref. Lutheran, Walloon Church, Dutch Reformed Jewish	97	147	164
	5	20	24
Vrije Gemeente (Free Church)		3	
Theosophical Society	3	--	--
No religion & just a few Islam, Sufi, Mormon, Christian Science	43	119	172
Switch of mainstream religion	21	29	24
Switch from 'none' back to mainstream religion	--	5	5
Total members Amsterdam	180	351	427
% NO (mainstream) religion	23,9%	33,9%	41,5%
Total of members TS in NL	356	1040	1408

Fig. 1: Prosopographic analysis of the members of the Theosophical Society in Amsterdam 1890–1920. Bax 2006.

the period 1890–1900 and a third of all members in the next decades, thus may be viewed as highly representative of the Dutch Theosophical Society as a whole. The headquarters were located in Amsterdam and was the impetus behind the popularization of Theosophy throughout the country.¹²

This chart clearly shows that Protestants were in the absolute majority, albeit split into many factions. For the Netherlands, dominance of Protestantism is only natural. Since 1580 the Catholics in the then Republic of Holland were not allowed to publicly practice their religion, to fulfill public positions or to buy land. They held their services in “shelter churches” hidden behind ordinary city facades. Catholics among the members of the Theosophical Society formed an absolute minority. Notable is the amount of members who switched between mainstream religions, for the greater part between strict and more liberal Protestant denominations, but to Catholicism. The statistic also shows which percentage of members declared themselves as “without a church membership,” and how this percentage grew over time. These percentages are relatively very high; it shows that the Theosophical Society may have played a role in the secularization process of soci-

¹² Bax, Marty: *Het web der schepping. Theosofie en kunst in Nederland van Lauweriks tot Mondriaan* [The web of creation. Theosophy and art in the Netherlands from Lauweriks to Mondrian], Amsterdam: Sun Uitgeverij 2006, Appendix III.

How often were the following Western Esoteric currents mentioned in the main Dutch newspapers?

[source: Delpher.nl = Royal (=National) Library]

	1890-1899	1900-1909	1910-1919	1920-1929	1930-1939	1940-1949
Theosof(ph)ie	551	2220	2808	4218	3600	508
Ant(h)roposof(ph)ie			4	615	754	64
Spiritism	1639	10	8	18	18	2
Spiritualism	416	645	525	558	567	131
Freemasonry	3846	3262	3588	5841	6952	3483

Fig. 2: Western Esoteric currents mentioned in Dutch newspapers 1890–1949. Source: <https://www.delpher.nl/>.

ety.¹³ In comparison: the census records of all Amsterdam citizens show that in 1889 1.7 % were registered as “without a church membership”; in 1899 that had grown to 5.9%, in 1909 to 11.8% and in 1920 to 21.2%. These percentages show the process over the years, and also how the gap between the Theosophists and the general population became smaller.¹⁴

Most remarkable is the very small amount of members, namely only *three*, who had themselves officially registered as a Theosophist. Equally remarkable is the fact that this pertains to the early years, whereas no member is mentioned in later years. This is contrary to the exploding *public* popularity of Theosophy over time.

¹³ “Secularization” in the English language does not discriminate between secession from the Church and the civil process in which organized religion loses its grip on society. Although the first may form part of the second, it doesn’t necessarily coincide with it.

¹⁴ Around 1900 until 1930 the censuses were performed in the usual manner, by civil servants visiting all houses and noting down who was living at a certain address, and religious denomination was noted down. At the Civil Registry civilians themselves were obliged to inform the office of any change in civil status or address. At that moment also a possible change in religion was noted down. However, censuses were held every ten years. The Dutch Civil Registry is more detailed, as a person was obliged to report any change of data also within these 10 years. Thus, this source – the Dutch Civil Registry of the 19th-20th century is perhaps the most accurate in the world – provides a more detailed picture of someone’s change in religious orientation. Some Theosophists could change their religion several times, from e.g. Protestant to Remonstrant, then to “none”, or Theosophist, and then to Catholicism. The data from the Civil Registry have been used in the statistics presented.

This discrepancy can be illustrated by an overview of various Western Esoteric movements mentioned in the major Dutch newspapers between 1890 and the Second World War [Fig. 2].

Theosophy clearly was most popular during the 1920s. This undoubtedly was the result of the popularity of Jiddu Krishnamurti and the Star Camps organised around him, until he seceded in 1929. Spiritism was more popular than Theosophy in the 1890s, which is to be expected as the Theosophical Society in Holland was only officially founded in 1897, but it literally imploded when Theosophy surged. Conversely, the numbers on *Spiritualism* remain quite constant. Spiritualism in the Netherlands was more closely linked to both mainstream (Protestant) religion and scholarly research, and hence was regarded as a “serious” topic, whereas Spiritism was linked to theories on reincarnation and therefore over time usurped by Theosophy. Interest in Freemasonry remained quite stable. Remarkable however is the surge in the 1930s, which most likely is a direct effect of the anti-Masonic propaganda of the rising German National-Socialist Party. Even more remarkable is the large number during the war, as in 1940 all lodges were systematically raided, looted and closed. This illustrates the intense, continuing anti-propaganda of the Nazis.

5 From Catholicism to Nieuwe Kunst – the Role of the Vahâna Lodge

Within the Dutch Theosophical Society, Catholics constituted an absolute minority. Ironically, these few Catholics were the “inventors” of Dutch modern art, specifically the geometric variant of the international movement Art Nouveau/Jugendstil, the *Nieuwe Kunst* (“New Art”). The influence of the *Nieuwe Kunst* can be traced fairly directly from these Theosophical artists to the pioneer of geometric abstraction, Piet Mondrian, the De Stijl movement of the 1910s and finally to the Bauhaus in the 1920s. This raises the fundamental question if *Catholicism*, not dominant Protestantism, played a major part in the development of the new Dutch design systems spurned by Theosophy, and in what way? In other words, and most contrary to public opinion about Dutch art, should the *Nieuwe Kunst* be regarded as a synthesis of *Catholicism* and Western Esotericism? Are there more examples in art in other countries, where Catholicism appeared as the source of adaptations of visual imagery stimulated by the acquaintance with Theosophy? Or, even in more generalized terms, how did mainstream religion, of whatever denomination, relate to Theosophical art? As Helmut Zander once postulated specifically in relation to art:

But at the same time, theosophy is, in terms of its clientele, a phenomenon that is strongly embedded in Protestant milieu, so that distinct cross-connections can be assumed here (and can also be proven for Germany). The osmotic relationships between Protestantism, Catholicism and theosophical art have barely been researched.¹⁵

In 1853 the episcopal hierarchy was re-established in the Netherlands under the new Constitution. This led to a boom in Catholic church architecture and applied arts. Chief architect was the Neo-Gothic Catholic architect Pierre Cuypers (1827–1921), son of a church decorator from Roermond in the Catholic South of the Netherlands. Cuypers not only designed and restored numerous Catholic churches, he also got prestigious state commissions as the builder of the Rijksmuseum and the Amsterdam Central Station. Attached to the Rijksmuseum was a construction studio where lower-class apprentices made the decorations for the museum. In 1879 this studio evolved into the separate Kunst-Nijverheid-Teekenschool “Quellinus” (Art-Applied Arts-Drawing School “Quellinus”; in short: Quellinusschool, from which the current Rietveld Academy evolved), co-founded by Cuypers and modelled after the guilds and building sheds of the Gothic cathedrals in the Middle Ages.

Three of Cuypers’ pupils are important here, all Catholics: Mathieu Lauweriks (1864–1932), Karel de Bazel (1869–1923) and Herman Walenkamp (1871–1933). Lauweriks was the youngest son of the head of Cuypers’ workshop in Roermond; when Lauweriks’ father died in 1869, Mathieu was taken into the Cuypers family. When Cuypers returned to Roermond after the completion of his Amsterdam projects, his students stayed behind in Amsterdam. De Bazel, the most talented student, was appointed by Cuypers as supervisor and later *chef de bureau* in Amsterdam.

Undoubtedly it was Cuypers’ intention to install them as the avantgarde of a new generation of Catholic designers in the Netherlands. However, while Cuypers was absent, the three pupils first developed into propagators of anarchism, and in 1894 Lauweriks and De Bazel became members of the Theosophical Society (Walenkamp followed in 1897, as he was jailed for two years for being an anarchist). From 1893 they published essays about harmony and construction in architecture, leaning heavily on their Catholic education, but they carefully eradicated every reference to Catholicism from translations of seminal texts of the main

15 “Aber zugleich ist die Theosophie von ihrer Klientel her ein stark im protestantischen Bereich angesiedeltes Phänomen, so dass hier auch besondere Querverbindungen anzunehmen (und für Deutschland auch belegbar) sind. Die osmotischen Beziehungen zwischen Protestantismus, Katholizismus und theosophischer Kunst sind noch kaum erforscht“. Zander, Helmut, Rezension von Bax, Marty: *Het web van der Schepping*, in: *Journal für Kunstgeschichte* 10/2006, 397 note 3.

inspirational source of Cuypers, the French architect and theorist Eugène Viollet-le-Duc.

In 1894 the young architects went a step further. They published an essay of the Belgian Symbolist writer and philosopher August Vermeijlen, not specifically about architecture or art, but about the idea that art and society were permeated with an immanent god not at the mercy of a transcendent Christian God:

God has become the Immanent Necessity, the animating force that destroys and creates in eternal motions, eternal growth, the highest mystery: the Life, which, both in the cell and in the universe of revolving worlds, is an arrangement of the elements, a form of organization; and the principle of that organization, which we do not know, is the Rhythm of Life, God. We are, everything is a function of the Rhythm.¹⁶

As soon as Lauweriks and De Bazel had become Theosophists they lectured on purely Theosophical concepts. Lauweriks described Brâhma as the source of beauty and art, referring to *The Secret Doctrine*, and described art as light and vibration, with the ultimate goal of harmony between the arts, in analogy to the Brotherhood of Man.¹⁷ When in 1895 Cuypers discovered that his pupils and employees, out of his sight and command in Amsterdam, had become freethinkers, anarchists and subsequently Theosophists, he exploded in anger. In 1895 he wrote his son Joseph that he was enraged by Lauweriks' crazy and profane ideas that the truth of God could only be expressed symbolically. He severed ties with his pupils, and Lauweriks and De Bazel started their own design bureau.

In 1896 Lauweriks and De Bazel were the founders of a new Lodge of the Theosophical Society, the Vahâna Lodge (the Sanskrit word *Vahâna* means "vehicle"). Members of this lodge were exclusively artists and their close family [Fig. 3]. The lodge organized design courses for young aspiring artists, based on Theosophical principles [Fig. 4]. Many young designers, also non-Theosophists, took one or more courses. In this way, the design principles became fundamental for the development and visual appearance of Dutch modern art, the *Nieuwe Kunst*.

¹⁶ "God is de immanente noodzakelijkheid geworden, de bezielende kracht die vernielt en schept in eeuwige bewegingen, eeuwigen groei, de hoogste geheimenis: het Leven, dat, zoowel in de cel als in het heelal der wentelende werelden, een schikking is der elementen, een vorm van organisatie; en het principie van die organisatie, wat we niet kennen, is de Rythmus van 't Leven, God. Wij zijn, alles is een functie van den Rythmus." Vermeijlen, Albert: *De kunst in de Vrije Gemeenschap*, in: *Van Nu en Straks* 1/1894 no. 6/7, 52–56; 1/1894 no. 8/10, 2–9; also published in: *Architectura* 2/1894, 229–230; 3/1895, 6–8.

¹⁷ The lecture was based on lectures by the English artist Reginald Machell. See Bax: *Het web der schepping*, 339.



Fig. 3: Vahâna Lodge, Amsterdam, 1904. Mathieu Lauweriks in the center sitting on the right hand side of Henry Olcott. Collection author.

During the first years the Vahâna lodge design principles were based on the triangle [Fig. 5]. This was in fact a continuation of what Cuypers had taught his pupils [Fig. 6]. Cuypers' design methods were based "on the rigid rules of geometry, on the whole of creation."¹⁸ He based his ideas on two ideologists: his brother-in-law Alberdingk Thijm, and the already mentioned French Catholic architect Viollet-le-Duc. Both persons believed that the basis of modern architecture was to be found in the Middle Ages, namely in the designs for Gothic cathedrals, and that in these churches both the structure and the materials used were "employed rationally." Alberdingk Thijm wrote in 1858 that Gothic architecture was the epitome of harmony expressed in the synthesis of the square and the triangle. The square as symbol of Matter, of earth and the Temple of God, and the equilateral triangle as the symbol of the Holy Trinity.

¹⁸ "op de vaste regelen der geometrie, op de heele schepping". Broeke, Leonardus van den (L.v.d.B.): Bij dr P.J.H. Cuypers, in: *De Tijd, Godsdienstig-Staatkundig Dagblad*, 15.5.1917.



Fig. 4: Cover of the magazine *Theosophia*, 1896, designed by K.P.C. de Bazel. Collection author.

In 1864 Viollet-le-Duc had published his *Dictionnaire raisonné de l'architecture* with elaborate design and construction models. He had become famous for his “modernized restoration” of buildings and cities. Viollet-le-Duc stated that:

To restore a building is not to preserve it, to repair, or rebuild it; it is to reinstate it in a condition of completeness which could never have existed at any given time.¹⁹

Thus on the one hand Viollet-le-Duc regarded the design system as a rational construction method and became the true founder of the modern axiom “form fol-

¹⁹ “Restaurer un édifice, ce n’est pas l’entretenir, le réparer ou le refaire, c’est le rétablir dans un état complet qui peut n’avoir jamais existé à un moment donné.” Viollet-le-Duc, Eugène-Emmanuel: *Restauration*, in: *Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture française du XI^e au XVI^e siècle*, Paris: B. Bance 1866, tome VIII, 14.



Fig. 5: J.H. & J.M. de Groot, *Driehoeken bij ontwerpen van ornament* (1896). Photo author.

lows function,” the adage of functionalist architecture, but on the other hand Viollet-le-Duc’s goal was to reach his *ideal* of what Gothic architecture was, regardless of whether the building had ever looked that way. The most famous examples are the Notre Dame in Paris (restored 1845–1870) and the village of Carcassonne (restored 1853–1879).

De Bazel, Lauweriks and Walenkamp did nothing but continue this “modern” Catholic design practice, but they changed the context, the origin and the ideal. Within the context of Theosophy they projected the origin of the triangle, be it the equilateral triangle or the Egyptian (Pythagorean) triangle, back in history, as part of the ancient Egyptian and Eastern cultures. The triangle was now interpreted as a symbol of cosmic forces, as the foundation of the hidden structure of



Fig. 6: P.J.H. Cuypers, Template with geometric and organic forms. <https://www.cuypershuisroermond.nl/collectie/5748-sjabloon-met-bloem-en-bladmotieven>.

the cosmos. In 1896 the Theosophists published parts of Viollet-le-Duc's *Entretiens sur l'architecture* (1872–1873) on the use of triangles in Gothic architecture. Lauweriks postulated that even his master Cuypers had used the triangulation of Viollet-le-Duc in an “esoteric” way, thus essentially claiming that Cuypers was “one of them . . .”²⁰

From circa 1898 the Vahâna Lodge incorporated the “quadrature” or “spheres system” into its courses. In part this design system was based on the Egyptian pyramid, which combines the square (as symbol of matter) with the triangle (as symbol of spirit). Another part of the theory of the quadrature was based on the writings of the Roman architect and engineer Vitruvius (Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, c. 90 – c. 20 BCE). Vitruvius should be regarded as the founding father of “rationalist” architecture in which construction, arrangements of spaces and aesthetics were determined by use. In the 1920s this was summarized in the functionalist motto “form follows function.”

²⁰ Lauweriks, Mathieu L.M.: De laatste wandschildering van A.J. Derkinderen voor het Bossche Raadhuis in verband met de kunst van het bouwen, in: *De Opmerker* 31/1896, 299–301; L.[ambeek], J.: Onderhoudingen in de bouwkunst, door Viollet-le-Duc, in: *Architectura* 4/1896, 111–113, 127–29, 132–138, 151–152, 157–158, 160–161, 167–169, 204–206, 209–210; L.[ambeek], J.: Onderhoudingen in de bouwkunst, door Viollet-le-Duc, in: *Architectura* 5/1897: 7–8, 11–12, 14–15, 24–25, 43, 55, 68–69, 90–91, 99–100, 110–112, 113–115.

Vitruvius also postulated that a timeless notion of beauty could be learnt from the “truth of nature”: nature’s designs were based on universal laws of proportion and symmetry. Leonardo da Vinci’s Renaissance drawing of a male figure inscribed in a circle and square (the quadrature), known as the “Vitruvian Man,” is the most famous illustration of Vitruvius’ concept of a divine connection between human form and the universe. The Theosophists in their turn coined the quadrature as the “spheres system” in analogy with both the idea of correspondence between micro- and macrocosm and the levels of consciousness and spiritual enlightening as described by Blavatsky. The Vahâna lodge artists most likely drew their direct inspiration from the works of the Catholic artist/architect and Benedictine monk Desiderius Lenz (Peter Lenz, 1832–1928), leader of the Beuron School in Beuron (Baden-Württemberg), who postulated that the works of the early Christian and Byzantine artists, as well as those of Giotto, had taught him that geometry and division are the principle factors in the execution of art, but Lenz found this influence was lacking in contemporary art. It was necessary to return to the knowledge of those ancient Christian and Byzantine craftsmen. The squaring of the circle could be traced back to Adam, who had received the knowledge directly from God.²¹

No wonder Cuypers was enraged when he got the wind of the activities of his former pupils. As a Catholic he did not oppose the use of the geometric systems as such, but he rejected this “godless” Theosophical interpretation. It is therefore quite ironic that in 1900 De Bazel became a design teacher at Cuypers’ Quellinusschool, and that in 1918 Lauweriks was appointed director of the same school. It illustrates how accepted the design principles of the Theosophists, born out of

²¹ Lenz, Peter (Monastic name: Desiderius Lenz): *Zur Ästhetik der Beuron School*, Wien: Braumüller 1897. In 1894 the Mennonite Dutch Symbolist painter Jan Verkade, member of the group Nabis in France (see the section on French Symbolism) became a monk at the Beuron abbey. Verkade, W.[jillbrord]: *Van ongebondenheid en heilige banden: herinneringen van een schildermonnik*, 's Hertogenbosch: Teulings Uitgeversmaatschappij 1919; P. Willibrord Jan Verkade. *Künstler und Mönch*, ed. Adolf Smitmans, Beuron: Beuron Kunstverlag 2007. Lauweriks’ knowledge of Lenz’ theories influenced Peter Behrens, director of the Kunstgewerbeschule Düsseldorf and who appointed Lauweriks in 1904, in his belief in the circle and the square. See Moeller, Gisela: *Peter Behrens in Düsseldorf: die Jahre von 1903 bis 1907*, Weinheim: VCH, *Acta Humaniora* 1991, 61. Behrens, German pioneer of rationalist architecture, deeply influenced Bauhaus building theory through his pupils Walter Gropius (the first director of the Bauhaus) and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (the last director). Gropius was in the possession of the original architectural notes of Lauweriks’ teachings written down by his pupil Adolf Meyer (who would be appointed at Gropius’ studio), but when he moved to America, they “were lost.” See Polster, Bernd: *Walter Gropius. Der Architekt seines Ruhms*, München: Hansen 2019.

Catholic culture, had become and that Theosophical design principles had become part of mainstream art.

It should also be noted that in 1918 Lauweriks returned to Catholicism. He became bishop, until his death in 1932, of a spin-off of the Theosophical Society, the Free or Liberal Catholic Church. This church was founded by the Theosophical leader Charles Leadbeater in 1916. The church adopted rituals and sacraments from the old Catholic faith practice, while also appealing to pre-Christian, Hermetic mystery schools. The liturgy and its rituals incorporate belief in reincarnation, karma, cosmic energy and the action of angels. A core principle of Christianity, grace, is interpreted by the Liberal Catholics not as Christian, but as Gnostic within an esoteric context.

6 French Symbolism: Theosophy in the Service of Catholicism

For a large part the roots of modern painting are to be found in France. In Paris, the Theosophical Society acted as an early catalyst in the spread of Occultism: predominantly Édouard Schuré, Papus, and Stanislas de Guaita, all three members of the Theosophical Society, and Sâr Merodack Péladan, son of a journalist who wrote on prophecies and who professed a philosophical-occult Catholicism. Already in the second half of the 1880s they wrote and read numerous texts from which the Symbolist artists drew their inspiration.²² They also founded various organizations in which artists became closely involved, such as the *Ordre Martiniste*, the *Groupe Indépendante des Etudes Esotériques*, the *Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose+Croix* and the *Rose+Croix Catholique du Temple et du Graal*. In all these organizations official (former) members of the Theosophical Society played a more or less important role.

This circle of artists and theorists was relatively small.²³ But the exchange of ideas was intense and fanatic. These artists, as befits real bohemians, met in the

²² The library catalog of Stanislas de Guaita provides a good overview of the publications between 1880 and 1890. *Catalogue de la bibliothèque occulte* [. . .] de Stanislas de Guaita. Facs. of the catalogue, ed. René Philippon, Paris: Librairie Dorbon 1899. The catalogue describes 2,227 books, but not all of them had belonged to de Guaita. Full (long) title of the catalogue is mentioned in the encyclopedia of the Theosophist Albert Caillet: Caillet, Albert L.: *Manuel bibliographique des sciences psychiques ou occultes*, 3 Vols., Paris: Lucien Dorbon, libraire 1912.

²³ The *Statistique générale de la France* of 1891 counted 22,976 artists who were not also registered as teachers at the same time. The total number of artists must therefore have been much

café and the bookshop of Edmond Bailly (pen name of Henry Edmond Limé), who eventually himself became a Theosophist in 1894. Here, among others, the Belgian *peintre maudit* Félicien Rops and the visionary painter Odilon Redon met, the composers Eric Satie – he became court composer of Péladan's Ordre de la Rose+Croix Catholique in 1892 – and Claude Debussy, the writers Stéphane Mallarmé, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Victor-Emile Michelet and Louis Ménard, as well as the astrologer of dubious reputation, Ely (Brâhman) Star (pseudonym of the Theosophist Eugène Jacob). Bailly was also the owner of the publishing house Librairie de l'Art Indépendant, which published (art) books by the new esoterically inspired artists.

Between 1888 and 1890 a group of former students of the Académie Julian and the Lycée Condorcet in Paris defined what would become the essential characteristics of modern painting. The epicentre lay in their retreat in Brittany, in the village of Pont-Aven and vicinities, which already was an artist colony popular with notably American painters. The newly settled group called themselves the Nabis, a word derived from the Hebrew word *na'vi* (or *nebeim*) referring to the prophets of the Old Testament who could utter their prophecies in a state of ecstasy.²⁴ The artists would periodically meet in the atelier of Paul Ranson, “the temple,” where they would read literature and experiment with ritual practices. In rural Brittany, the Nabis thought to find “the real” Christianity, including its social structure and mentality, in its most unspoilt, “primitive” form – implying that Christianity in Brittany would still be genuine and “esoteric.”

The well-off Paul Gauguin, self-professed leader of the pack, read the books by Stanislas de Guaita and Edouard Schuré at a very early date. His grandmother was a friend of the influential Occult writer Eliphas Levi. Gauguin had spent his early childhood with his strict Catholic family in Peru and was then placed in a Jesuit seminary at the age of eleven in France. This educational cocktail of Catholicism, his interest in the “primitive” culture of Peru, and his Jesuit aversion to hypocrisy and “sham virtue” made Gauguin receptive to alternative religion.²⁵

larger. Measured in absolute numbers, the few dozen Symbolist artists – of whom the “esoteric” artists are again only a part – are completely insignificant. Herbert, Eugenia W.: *The Artist and Social Reform. France and Belgium 1885–1898*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1961, 40.

24 A more or less contemporary analysis by a Jewish scholar: Kaplan, Jacob Hijman: *Psychology of Prophecy. A Study of the Prophetic Mind as Manifested by the Ancient Hebrew Prophets*, Philadelphia: J. H. Greenstone 1908; Humbert, Agnes: *Les nabis et leur époque, 1888–1900*, Genève: Pierre Cailler 1954. There is so much literature on the Symbolists that I will not mention this here, unless I refer to specific sources.

25 Still the best analysis: Amishai-Maisels, Ziva: *Gauguin's Religious Themes*, New York/London: Garland 1985, here especially chapters 1 and 8.

In Brittany the Nabis developed their Symbolist axioms. They consisted of several overlapping definitions: Cloisonnism, Synthetism, Symbolism and Neo-Traditionalism.

Symbolism as a concept was introduced in 1885 in literature by the poet Jean Moréas and published by him in his Symbolist manifesto in the newspaper *Le Figaro* on 18 September 1886, shortly followed by the founding of the periodical *Le Symboliste*.

[Symbolism] seeks to clothe the Idea in a tangible form, which would nonetheless not be an end in itself, but which would remain subject to the Idea, while serving to express it. In its turn, the Idea must in no way allow itself to be deprived of the sumptuous robes of external analogies; for the essential characteristic of Symbolist art resides in never going as far as to reproduce the Idea in itself. So, in this art form, scenes of nature, human actions, all concrete phenomena, will not be depicted as such: they are tangible forms, whose purpose is to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial Ideas.²⁶

Thus perception and manipulation of these elements were subjective by definition and closely related to the personal constitution and life experiences of the artist.

Cloisonnism was coined by the critic Emile Dujardin at the Salon des Indépendants in March 1888, with reference to the Medieval decoration technique *cloisonné*. It is not exactly clear what he meant by that. It may have been a reference to Christian Byzantine culture or to the stained glass windows of Gothic cathedrals. In any case, the effect of both art forms is flat and two-dimensional, as in opposition to prevailing Realism and Impressionism.

Synthetism was introduced in 1889 when Paul Gauguin and his Catholic-Theosophical friend Émile Schuffenecker organized the *Exposition de peintures du groupe impressioniste et synthétiste* in the Café Volpini at the Exposition Universelle in Paris and coined Synthetism as the polar opposite of Impressionism. It aimed to synthesize three painterly aspects: the outward appearance of natural forms; the artist's feelings about their subject; and the purity of the aesthetic considerations of line, colour and form, expressed in two-dimensional flat patterns. This became the axiom of modern painting.

26 “... cherche à vêtir l’Idée d’une forme sensible qui, néanmoins, ne serait pas son but à elle-même, mais qui, tout en servant à exprimer l’Idée, demeurerait sujette. L’Idée, à son tour, ne doit point se laisser voir privée des somptueuses simarres des analogies extérieures; car le caractère essentiel de l’art symbolique consiste à ne jamais aller jusqu’à la concentration de l’Idée en soi. Ainsi, dans cet art, les tableaux de la nature, les actions des humains, tous les phénomènes concrets ne sauraient se manifester eux-mêmes; ce sont là des apparences sensibles destinées à représenter leurs affinités ésotériques avec des Idées primordiales.” Moréas, Jean: *Le Symbolisme*. *Le Figaro*, 18 September 1886, Supplément littéraire, 1–2.

Neo-traditionalism was the term Maurice Denis used to describe the art of the Nabis group. In his essay “Définition de néo-traditionnisme,” published in *Art et critique* in August 1890 he wrote:

Neo-traditionalism cannot waste its time on learned and feverish psychologies, literary sentimentality requiring an explanation of the subject matter, all those things which have nothing to do with its own emotional domain.

It has reached the stage at which definitive syntheses are possible. Everything is contained within the beauty of the work.²⁷

Art is the sanctification of nature, of that nature which throughout whole world is content just to live its own life! The great art, called decorative, of the Hindus, the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, the art of the Middle Ages and of the Renaissance, and those works of modern art that are decidedly superior, what are they but the transformation of common sensations – natural objects – into sacred icons, hermetic, imposing.²⁸

Blavatsky's books and other contemporary literature on “alternative religions” merged with, or were influential on, the development of the paradigms of modern art. This development is the key theme in the current study of the relationship between art and Western Esotericism. But where is the analysis of the osmotic relationship between Protestantism, Catholicism and Theosophical art? Within the Nabis group, *all* artists, including the above-mentioned Jan Verkade, were raised as Catholics – except for the Dutch-Jewish painter Meijer de Haan.²⁹ Contrary to the Netherlands, in France Catholicism was the “state religion” and Protestantism had been suppressed from 1580 onward. Catholicism was bred in the bones of the Nabis, and thus the logical reference point and starting point for any discussion about reli-

27 “Le néo-traditionnisme ne peut s'attarder aux psychologies savantes et fébriles, aux sentimentalités littéraires, appelant la légende, toutes choses qui ne sont point de son domaine émotionnel. Il arrive aux synthèses définitives. En la beauté de l'œuvre, tout est contenu.” Denis, Maurice: Notes d'Art. Définition du Néo-Traditionnisme, in : *Art et critique*, 23 and 30 August 1890, XXIV. Reprint in Denis, Maurice: *Théorie* (1890–1910), Paris: L. Rouart et J. Watelin Éditeurs 1920, 1–13 (chapters I–XXIII).

28 “L'Art est la sanctification de la nature, de cette nature de tout le monde, qui se contente de vivre! Le grand art, qu'on appelle décoratif, des Indous, des Assyriens, des Égyptiens, des Grecs, l'art du Moyen-Age et de la Renaissance, et les œuvres décidément supérieures de l'Art moderne, qu'est-ce? sinon le travestissement des sensations vulgaires — des objets naturels, — en icônes sacrées, hermétiques, imposantes.” Denis 1920, 12 (chapter XXII).

29 In art history Meijer Isaac de Haan (1852–1895), “le Nabis hollandais,” is generally erroneously called Jacob Meijer de Haan even in renowned exhibitions, e.g. Kröger, Jelka at al.: *Le maître caché, Meijer de Haan*, Paris: Hazan 2010. Meijer de Haan was an influential artist within the Nabis, as he was knowledgeable on Kabbala and “sang the words of the Nabis on primitive rhythms,” Paul Sérusier wrote in 1889. See: Humbert, Agnès: *Les Nabis et leur époque 1888–1900*. Genève: Pierre Cailler 1954. Gauguin was fascinated by him.

gion and possible relationships with Occultism. The painters sometimes scoffed at the rural population in Brittany for their peculiar “primitive” Catholic habits and inclinations to supernaturalism, but it made the painters aware of other interpretations of their traditional belief, stimulated the interest on alternative interpretations of Catholicism, and they subsequently used these elements in their art.

Almost all of the paintings of the Nabis are based on and rooted in Catholicism. Maurice Denis, Emile Bernard, Paul Sérusier, Charles Filiger remained avowed Catholics and expressed that throughout their art and life. Emile Bernard signed his letters in “primitive” French with: “Vostre frère en J.[ésus] Christ.” Denis, nicknamed the “Nabi of the beautiful icons,” never diverged from what he had written when he was 15 years old:

Yes, I have to be a Christian painter, I have to celebrate all these miracles of Christianity, I feel I have to.³⁰

How almost identical a “Catholic” to an “Occult” iconography could be, can be illustrated by two works by “the Occultist” Paul Gauguin and “the Catholic” Maurice Denis [Figs 7, 8]. Both works were inspired by the same sculpture: the crucifix in the chapel at Trémalo, which hangs in the nave of the church until this date [Fig. 9]. In these paintings realism is transformed into variants of pre-abstraction.

Bernard, as well as Sérusier and Filiger, broke with Gauguin in 1891 and went on to exhibit at the Salon de La Rose+Croix of Joseph Péladan. Péladan’s aim was to re-sacralise art and life, and to transfer religion to the arts. Art exhibited at the salons had to comply with his ideological program: “. . . the Catholic ideal, mysticism, legend, myth, allegory, the dream, the paraphrase of great poetry and finally all lyricism.” Péladan stated:

There is no other reality than God, there is no other truth than God, there is no other beauty than God.³¹

Péladan’s artistic beliefs were equally firmly rooted in Catholicism. In a partial reconstruction of the Salons at the Guggenheim Museum this religious aspect was only fleetingly mentioned as “traditional religion”, which is in concordance with mainstream scholarly research: the Rosicrucian Order of Péladan has mostly been treated as a variant of Occult currents prevalent at the time. But Péladan, his salons and the Symbolist artist themselves have actually been extremely im-

30 “Oui, il faut que je sois peintre chrétien, que je célèbre tous ces miracles du Christianisme, je sens qu’il le faut.” Denis, Maurice: *Journal*, tome I (1884–1904), Paris: La Colombe 1957, 59 (22.5.1885).

31 “Il n’y a pas d’autre réalité que Dieu, il n’y a pas d’autre vérité que Dieu, il n’y a pas d’autre beauté que Dieu,” in: Péladan, Joséphin: *L’Ordre de la Rose+Croix du Temple et du Graal et ses Salons*, in: *L’Artiste*, 7/1894, 242.

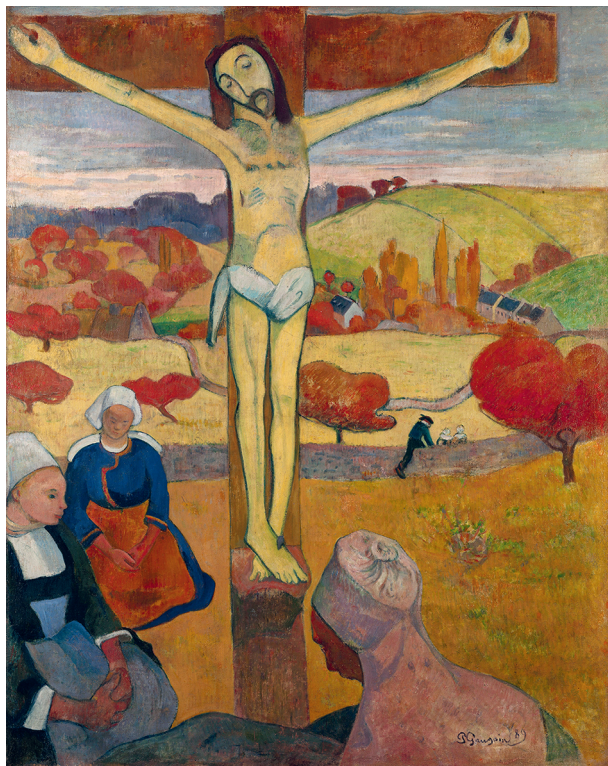


Fig. 7: Paul Gauguin, *Le Christ jaune*, 1889. Wiki Commons.

portant in disseminating “Catholic Symbolism” within the context of “il faut être de son temps.” The Nabis were both helped by, and were and actors themselves, in the nineteenth century process of “invention of tradition,” which had spawned a range of Occult movements, and which had positioned Christianity as merely one variant of the world history of religion. Occultism functioned merely as a means to expand and deepen the understanding of Catholicism.³²

³² Even Vincent van Gogh, the proverbial strict Protestant, adapted rural Catholic symbology into his paintings through his Nabis friends. His famous painting *La Berceuse*, for which the post-man’s wife in Arles had modeled, was meant to be a consolatory votive illustration for seafaring people: Mother Mary cradling her child by pulling a rope attached to the crib. Van Gogh regarded Madame Roulin “as a modern equivalent of early Christian saints and holy women.” Two paintings of sunflowers were projected to flank Mary on the sides to form a triptych. A triptych is definitely a Catholic assemblage. The sunflowers were meant to represent thankfulness, and the glowing colors were inspired by stained glass windows. See the excellent book on the religious

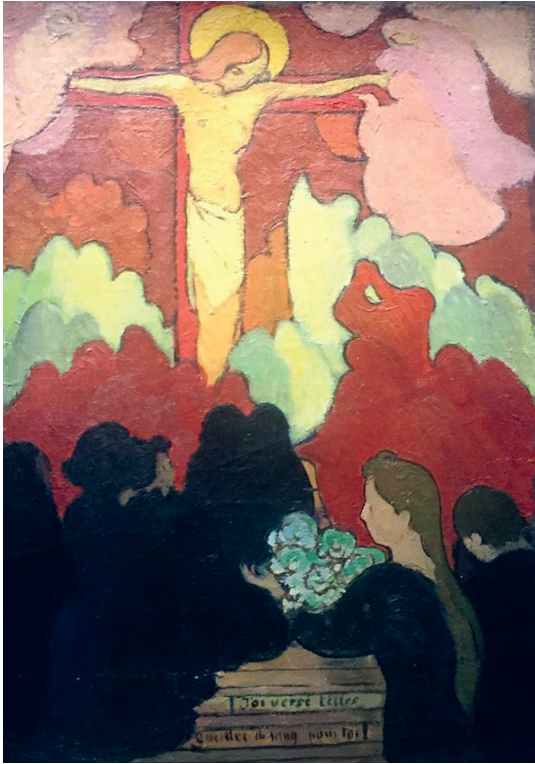


Fig. 8: Maurice Denis, *Offrande au Calvaire*, 1890. <http://ninideslaux.over-blog.com/2019/05/le-talisman-au-musee-d-orsay-i-maurice-denis-le-mystique.html>.

It would therefore be historically more appropriate to analyze the works of the Nabis with Catholicism as the key starting point, and identify the Occult elements as the point where and how “modern Symbolist” Catholic iconography has diverged from the traditional. There is also a more fundamental issue in the interpretation of Symbolism as the breeding bed of modern abstract art: one needs to realize that its adagio, namely that the act of painting essentially consists of the search for the hidden expressive power of line, form and color, emanated from Catholic culture.

clashes between Van Gogh and Gauguin: Silverman, Debora: *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2000.

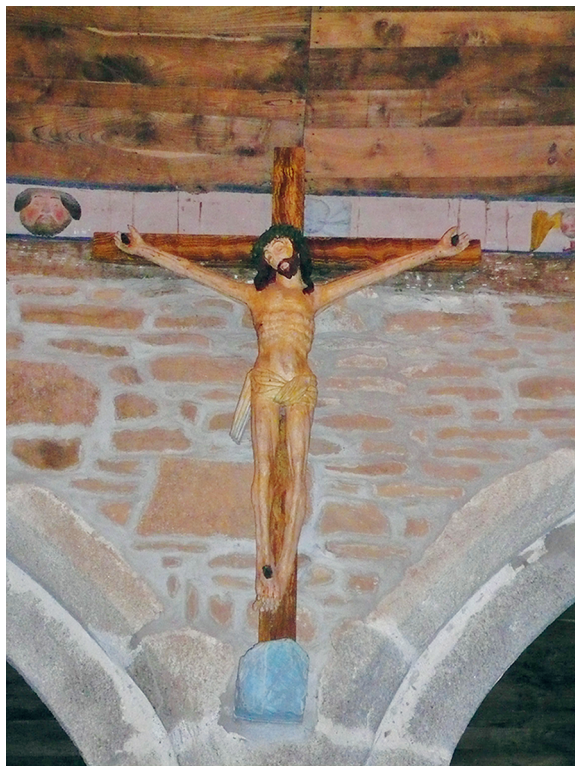


Fig. 9: Le Christ jaune in the nave of the church of Trémalo. Wiki Commons, photo Yann Gwilhoù.

7 Hilma af Klint, Anna Cassel, *De Fem*: Catholicism as Emancipation from Stifled Lutheranism

The “rose and the cross” also figured prominently in the work of the Swedish group of women, *De Fem* (the Five), of which Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) has become well-known. Her work was exhibited at *The Spiritual in Art* for the first time. Since then, af Klint has been catapulted into fame as the first – moreover female – Swedish painter of abstract art, as more or less equal to the pioneers Malevich, Kandinsky and Mondrian. Hilma unmistakably was a confessed Theosophist and later Anthroposophist. She left a large pile of notebooks that attest to that. So, consequently, all of her art has been labeled as Occult. However, the factual historical situation is more complex.

The Swedish culture is fundamentally Lutheran. The group *De Fem* strove for a “modern” and more liberal and spiritual interpretation of Swedish Lutheranism. The group was formed as a satellite of its mother society, the *Edelweissförbundet* (Edelweiss Society), to develop designs for a “temple.” The Edelweiss Society was founded in 1890 by a small group of predominantly upper-class Lutheran women and developed out of several overlapping movements: Spiritism, Christian Spiritualism and Theosophy. The forerunner of the society was the *Klöfverbladet* society, which name refers to the clover leaf as symbol of the Christian Trinity.

The position and purpose of the *Edelweissförbundet* should be viewed within the Pietist revival in 19th century Sweden.³³ Swedish Pietism is based on the personal, “layman” spiritual experience of Christianity in contrast with the scholastic Lutheranism of the State Church. The need for a more personal experience of religion arose not only from criticism of the rigidity of the Church but also from the rising Swedish nationalist identity, the upper-class desire for spiritual education and economical support of the poor in an era of rapid industrialization, and the interest in “primitive” cultures as the Lappish and the Vikings, people who had retained the direct spiritual connection between nature and god.

Creativity was a major point of focus within the group. Co-founder Bertha Valerius was not only the medium of the group; in daily life she belonged to a very creative family, she was a landscape painter herself and was the prominent portrait photographer for high society and the court. Co-founder Hulda Beamish defined the spiritual aims of the group as explicitly Spiritualist, not Spiritist. Co-founder Carl von Bergen described it as:

Here, because of the scarcity of space, it can only be said that she [Beamish], sharply distinguishing between a higher, more spiritual view, to which she gives the term spiritualism, and the, in her opinion, lower, earthly so-called Spiritism, appears as a “devout and believing spiritualist.”³⁴

33 Oka, K.: Scandinavian Piety. The Study on the Spiritual Context of Pietism Revival in 19th Century Mainly in Sweden, Thesis Kobe University 2017. See for Edelweiss and Radical Pietism, Bax, Marty: Anna Cassel & Hilma af Klint. The 1913 Stockholm exhibition. The consequences, Amsterdam: Bax Books 2020, 45–48.

34 Co-founder Hulda Beamish defined the spiritual aims of the group as explicitly Spiritualist, not Spiritist. Co-founder Carl von Bergen described it as: ‘Here, because of the scarcity of space, it can only be said that she [Beamish], sharply distinguishing between a higher, more spiritual view, to which she gives the term spiritualism, and the, in her opinion, lower, earthly so-called Spiritism, appears as a “devout and believing spiritualist”. [Här kan—på grund af utrymmets knapphet—blott sägas det, att hon, skarpt särskiljande mellan et thögre, andligare åskådnings-sätt, åt hvilket hon ger benämningen spiritualism, och den, enligt hennes mening, lägre, jordbundna s.k. Spiritismen, fram-träder såsom en » öfveitygad och troende spiritualist«]. Bergen, Carl von: Huldine Beamish född Mosander (“Edelweiss”), in: Idun 6/1893 nr. 3, 17–19, citation 18.

The *Edelweissförbundet* developed a cult of the Medieval Catholic saint Catherine of Siena (1347–1380). Co-founder Hulda Beamish was more or less considered Catherine's reincarnation. Saint Catherine had dedicated herself to Christ when she was very young, had mystical experiences and believed in the "mystical marriage," in which virgin saints went through a mystical marriage wedding ceremony with Christ, in the presence of the Virgin Mary, and thus consecrated themselves and their virginity to him. The Medieval Christian mystical marriage drew influence from non-Christian philosophies as Neo-Platonism, Hermeticism and other ancient schools of thought that had existed long before Christianity was created. Séances by the *Edelweissförbundet* were thus held to evoke the Catholic mystical experience of Universal Love for and of God, the *Unio Mystica*. Nearly all of the spirits who guided the women were saints from the earliest centuries of Christianity.



Fig. 10: Detail of the altar of De Fem, Vallhallavägen 35, Stockholm 1906. With five roses – symbol of each member – around the cross.

De Fem documented their spiritual aspirations in notebooks. A separate series exists of Hilma af Klint and her lifelong friend and co-artist Anna Cassel. Of the creative process between 1906 and 1908 leading to a series "for the temple" five notebooks were made during séance sessions of the Edelweiss Society as a whole, while two other notebooks document the process of af Klint and Cassel. These notebooks show how Anna Cassel through séances received the spiritual and artistic task to develop the iconography of the series [Fig. 10].³⁵ This series was

³⁵ These are not the original notebooks. In 1927, when Hilma had become a staunch Anthroposophist, she had extracted the original series of 28 books into two and had destroyed the original

based on the Catholic concept of “the Rose and the Cross.” Already in 1898 she had been told to base her program on the concept of “The saga of the rose and the cross” and that she had to draw inspiration from bygone cultures:

You shall read the saga’s – not written by human hand but carved into the finest matter of human life. For this you must know: for he who [has] eyes to see with, there is a living writing in space, a diary of the changing destinies of the world, of the many lives of the individual and a glimpse of this writing you shall see.³⁶

The “creed” of *De Fem* expresses the deeply spiritual nature of the group, symbolized by the rose (Mary) and the cross (Christ).³⁷ In the notebooks it reads:

On the steps leading to the altar the steps at the bottom are words, on the steps that follow are thoughts, on the top was a wreath of roses.

- 1) 3-month novice period: Words (Seriousness, Reliability, Kindness)
- 2) “[3-month novice period]”: Thoughts (Discipline, Truth, Love)
- 3) :Rosary³⁸

Before séances the group prayed before their altar in the shape of a cross on a base of three steps. The center of the cross contains a glass casket, in which the 5-lobbed “Tudor Rose” was mounted. This rose evolved out of the medieval Christian devotion to Mary in the 12th century. The medieval rose, symbol of love and sacrifice, became incorporated into the building of Gothic churches in the form of rose windows, and from the thirteenth century the rosary (Latin: *rosarium*) appeared, prayer beads in the form of a garland of roses. Cassel must have drawn her inspiration from her youth: her church at the small village of Haraker houses

ones. About the problematic interpretations of these notebooks and the way af Klint claimed artistic genius and bended the historical events to her own Occult worldview, see Bax, Marty: Anna Cassel & Hilma af Klint. Childhood 1907. Vision of a new Swedish Christian identity, Amsterdam: Bax Books 2021, 10–17.

36 Martin, Hedvig: Hilma af Klint och De Fem Förberedelsetiden 1896–1907. Unpublished thesis. Södertörn: Södertörn Högskola 2018, 67. Original text: “Du skall läsa urkunderna - ej skrifna af menniskohand men ristade in i den finaste materia af menniskolif. Ty detta må du veta: för den som [har] ögon att se med, finnes en lefvande skrift i rymden, en dagbok öfver verldars skiftande öden, öfver individens många lif och en glimt af denna skrift skall du skåda.”

37 On the Radical Pietist basis of *De Fem* see Bax: Anna Cassel & Hilma af Klint. The 1913 Stockholm exhibition.

38 Ahlén, Hedvig: Hilma af Klint och De Fem. Förberedelsetiden 1896–1907. Master’s thesis Södertörns Högskola 2018, 54. Original text: *På de trenne till altaret ledande stegen stodo på det nedersta ord, på det därefter tankar, på det öfversta låg en krans af rosor.*

- 1) 3 månaders novistid: Ord (Allvar, pålitlighet, vänlighet)
- 2) “: Tankar (Tukt, sanning, kärlek)
- 3) :Rosenkransen.



Fig. 11: The madonna with the roses in the Harakers Kyrka, Haraker. Wiki commons.

a unique fifteenth century sculpture of the virgin Mary surrounded by a garland of roses. These roses are organized as a rosary: the sections are divided by the hands and feet of Christ [Fig. 11].

The creative work between 1906 and 1908 culminated in the series *The Ten Largest*. In art history the series is regarded as a representation of the evolution of man – which fits into the Occult-Theosophical reception history of Hilma af Klint – but in reality the series is a symbolic representation of the roots of Swedish religious culture in pre-Protestant Sweden [Fig. 12]. The Ten greatest symbolize the “saga” of Swedish Christianity, “not written but literally carved into matter,” and the birth of a new Christianity in the new Swedish state, which was founded in 1905, a year before the series of paintings was conceived. The main iconographical elements are determined by “the rose,” agnostic folk culture, the national colors of Sweden (blue and yellow) and by Viking script from the 8th-12th century, the era in which Viking culture was gradually replaced by Catholicism [Fig. 13].

All of the women of the Fem had become member of the Theosophical Society before 1905. They occasionally read *The Secret Doctrine* before they commenced their séances, but in almost all cases it was the Bible. That begs to wonder to what extent Occultism – Theosophy and later Anthroposophy – effectively played a role in the development of the iconography of *De Fem*. Theosophy rather fulfilled



Fig. 12: Anna Cassel & Hilma af Klint, first painting of *The Ten Largest*, 1907. Wiki Commons.



Fig. 13: Runestone U 871 from Ölsta, Uppland, since 1896 at the Skansen open air Museum in Stockholm, which was frequented by Cassel and af Klint. Wiki Commons. Photo Bengt A Lundberg.

a need to delve deeper and wider in the history of Swedish Christianity. Since the early 1890s Christianity in Sweden was actively discussed as an esoteric religion in which intuition, vision and spirituality were integral elements. Theosophy merely served to become aware of the limitations of the hegemonial Swedish Lutheran doctrine and praxis and to find inspiration in the spiritual, visionary pre-history of Protestantism: in the Catholic era.

8 Conclusion

The relationship between art and Western Esotericism is a very complex one. Since the 1970s some collective scholarly understanding has grown about the research methods and starting points. In analyses the biographical background of an artist definitely is a point of reference in order to be able to determine when an artist got involved in Western Esoteric thought. However, any artist is embedded in his or her social context and the broader cultural context. This also includes mainstream religion. This aspect has not been researched on the same equal level as Western Esotericism. Starting an analysis from the basis of traditional, mainstream religion may lead to better understanding why a specific artist felt more affinity with specific currents within Western Esotericism. These three examples show how (groups of) artists have explicitly drawn inspiration of their specific mainstream religious backgrounds in order to change the traditional iconography into one that would fittingly express the modern “spirit of the times.”

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