

Call for papers for the conference on
"The Birth of the Science of Religion: Out of the Spirit of Occultism"
(Die Geburt der Religionswissenschaft aus dem Geiste des Okkultismus)

2018, February 14th-16th

at the Université de Fribourg (CH)

In the conference we want to shed light on the history of the „science of religion“ - as scholars like Friedrich Max Müller started to call the emerging discipline – by taking into account the role of non-hegemonic, especially theosophical actors in its formation. The aim is to trace exchanges of materials as well as epistemologies between early scholars of the science of religion and non-hegemonic researchers/activists and groups, like the Theosophical Society(s) or the Society for Psychical Research.

One highly important element provided by non-hegemonic groups were translations of texts that brought new dimensions of knowledge, especially from Buddhist and Hindu traditions, to Europe. Non-hegemonic currents thereby served as cultural brokers influencing the „western“ reception of „eastern“ thought.

The question of epistemology was a central point of argument for the early science of religion. Non-hegemonic as well as hegemonic currents dealt with the question how (religious) knowledge was to be secured. While some argued that truth could be obtained by means of a „higher“ perception, others opted for religious knowledge through reason and still others for empirical experiments. The conference is interested in the interferences between religious and scientific ways to obtain knowledge like in spiritualism, clairvoyance or psychical experiments.

Possible papers may concern

- the role of theosophical translations of religious texts like those of Helena Blavatsky's secretary Robert Stow Mead or of Californian Theosophist Walter Evans-Wentz for the study of religion;
- the connections of early scholars of religion like William Robertson Smith, Friedrich Max Müller or Gershom Scholem to non-hegemonic currents;
- the connections of experimental scientists and early psychologists like William James or Theodore Flournoy to Theosophy or the Society of Psychical Research;
- the influence of theosophy on members of the Eranos circle (e.g. Mircea Eliade).

The chair for the history of religions and inter-religious dialogue at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland is holding the conference from Feb. 14th to Feb.16th 2018. Please send your abstracts (no more than 300 words) to Judith Bodendoerfer (judith.bodendoerfer@unifr.ch) and cc Yves Mühlematter (yves.muehlematter@unifr.ch). The deadline for submissions is Sept. 15th 2017. Letters of acceptance will be sent not later than by Oct. 15th. All Participants will be invited to meals and the conference dinner. Unfortunately we can't cover travel expenses or costs of accommodation.