

Editorial Note

The topic for the eighteenth Symposium arranged by the Donner Institute for Research in Religious and Cultural History on 15–17 August 2007 in Turku, Finland was Western Esotericism. In our Call for Papers, we described the topic thus: ‘In the context of comparative religion, the concept of “esotericism” is usually connected with a specifically Western tradition (“Western esotericism”). In that, it is closely connected with “hermeticism” in the wide meaning of the word. As such, the concept of “esotericism” includes a multiplicity of traditions and lines of thought within Western culture, from antiquity and the renaissance up to modern times. The concept of esotericism is here used to signify hidden knowledge which is accessible only to those who have been initiated, i.e. so called privileged information. It is then a question of a kind of knowledge, and a way of accessing knowledge, in the sense of a questing for the essence or the shape of the world (gnosis, gnoseology) which is different from questions of the structure and functioning of the world (episteme, epistemology).”

The topic of Western Esotericism corresponds to the aim of the Donner Institute as defined by the donors Uno and Olly Donner, that is, the study of mysticism in religion, folk belief, occultism etc. When deciding to arrange a symposium on this topic, we were somewhat worried not to get enough papers—but we were mistaken, as is obvious for each reader of the present volume. We hope to be able to arrange a symposium in the not too distant future on Western Esotericism in the past and present in the Nordic countries, as interest in this theme has increased here, too, during recent years.

