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RELIGION, NATURE AND CULTURE*

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Special Issue
Inside the World of Contemporary Astrology

Guest Edited by
Darrellyn Gunzburg

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**Special Issue Introduction:
Inside the World of Contemporary Astrology**

Guest Editor: Darrelyn Gunzburg

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This special issue offers an insider's perspective on the practice of astrology in the contemporary world. It builds upon the second issue of the *JSRNC* published in 2007, which focused on astrology investigating the religion-nature nexus. Bron Taylor argued that the role of the journal was a scholarly commitment to 'a wide-ranging, interdisciplinary, taboo-free inquiry' (Taylor 2007: 5) and thus accepted that the consideration of the nature of astrology was a worthwhile academic endeavour. From this second issue a question arose. The editor Michael York asked, 'In terms of religion, nature and culture, the sociologist's concern is the wish to understand how astrology is used. How does it impact on religious perceptions, on cultural institutions and on how we picture the universe?' (York 2007: 146). This special issue of the *JSRNC* picks up on

York's question and offers an insight into astrology's culture-nature-religion link through the exploration of a community that incorporates an alternative epistemology.¹

From its origins in Mesopotamia, astrology has been a product of nature and its rhythms. The patterns in the sky were thought by the Assyrians of the seventh century BCE to be significant and to offer meaning to the repeating cycles of life on earth (Hunger 1992). The way these cycles are observed and understood has gone through many changes since those early Assyrian writings; however, the idea that the natural world of the dome of heavens is reflected in some way in the flow of life on terraforma, and that hence sky and earth are united, has persisted. Indeed, today's astrologers, in both the East and West, are part of this continuous living tradition. They believe that observation of the heavens leads to an understanding of life on earth. In this regard they watch the heavens, either by standing underneath the dome of the sky or by paying attention, using books, computers or the web, to planetary movement through the zodiac signs. As a group, astrologers are defined by this common belief in the heavens and they will, like amateur astronomers, have knowledge of the current phase of the moon, the current location of the planets, and an understanding of the rotation of the earth and how this constantly changes the environment of the sky. Where they differ from other star gazers, however, is that they can work with a special zodiac: the tropical zodiac. This zodiac, made up of sun signs, is pinned to the seasons of the earth, reset anew each year at the moment of the March equinox. In this way the rhythms of life on earth—the seasons—are bound to the cycles of the sky through the zodiac signs. Daryn Lehoux captured this view of the heavens when he considered the astrology of the first-century CE Roman poet, Marcus Manilius, who wrote that,

the constellations have shapes, and the constellations have powers. Their powers are related to their shapes because the universe is rational and ordered at every level. The powers and the pictures combine into what we might profitably treat as the natural history of each constellation. They have actions and abilities in the world, they have environments (geometrical), and they have characteristic interrelationships with us and each other. (2011: 55)

1. I would like to thank and acknowledge Michael York's work both early in the development of the *JSRNC* when he guest edited a 2007 issue on Astrology (*JSRNC* 1.2) and for providing his expertise, as part of our Editorial Board, in reviewing this special issue—Bron Taylor, Editor.

Little has changed in astrologers' beliefs since Manilius, as astrologers still view the heavens as vital and alive. Unlike many people in today's modern world, astrologers live a sky-filled life. Thus as a group they hold an innate love of the sky—caeolophilia—not so much for its beauty but for its animated nature. The sky, universe, cosmos or the heavens are, for astrologers, embodied and they believe that the sky provides their life with purpose and direction and as such needs to be honoured. As a group, they feel a sense of responsibility to maintain dark skies. These reasons may not be the same as other groups concerned with environmental issues; it is, however, fueled with a respect for the living heavens. Thus today's astrologers are a part of a continuous tradition in a culture whose members hold a personal spiritual philosophy which is tied to nature through the heavens.

Since the second half of the twentieth century there has been a growing body of literature concerning the role that astrology has played in Western culture. Otto Neugebauer (1945) first saw its place in mathematics, and then commented (1951: 111) that astrology was a conduit for cultural understanding, a cultural contributor that was as much shaped by the world in which it was held to be of value as it was a framework for understanding it. Since that time, the cultural influence of astrology has attracted various historians. Among those, Hilary Carey (2012) explored its role in the political history of Europe, Robert Hand (2014) examined its contribution to the nature of European warfare, while Tim Hegedus (2007) presented its influence on the religious discourses of early Europe. Others who have also revealed astrology's diverse cultural bases include Kristin Lippincott (1984, 1985, 1990) on its impact on art and Mark Harrison (2000) on medicine.

This growing recognition of astrology's historical role has, however, occurred in parallel to the rise in polemics against astrology's presence in the contemporary world. Arguing that astrology can condition a person to accept extreme authoritarian figures, Theodore Adorno (1994: 54) suggested that astrology's existence in popular culture served as a catalyst contributing to the rise of fascism in 1930's Germany. From that period onward, many polemics followed an ad hominem strategy, challenging the practitioner of astrology rather than the subject itself. For example, Richard Dawkins (1995) wrote that those who practiced astrology were maladjusted individuals who preyed upon marginalised people. Following Adorno's trajectory, Thomas Sutcliffe published in 1996 in *The Independent*, a mainstream British newspaper, that 'The habitat of the mind in which astrology and mediumship flourish is also a perfect breeding ground for intolerance and injustice—an ecology in which monsters can grow unresisted alongside those "harmless" freaks

and clowns' (Sutcliffe 1996, cited in Northcote 2007: 71). Such comments reveal how the individual astrologer in the late twentieth century could be publicly demonised and stereotyped because of his/her beliefs.

Such stereotyping, however, has not gone unchallenged. Slowly over recent years the exploration of astrology has moved from being a subject of historical interest to one of anthropological focus. Research by Alie Bird (2006) and Nicholas Campion (2012), for example, has revealed an astrology within contemporary Western culture that could be identified in everyday life, from the un-educated to the educated, from the rich to the poor, and from the marginalised to the privileged. These studies disclose a detailed view of the social settings, events, and beliefs of astrologers and place them in a contemporary rather than historical context. Employing an anthropological methodology, contemporary research observes the astrological community as populated by 'others' who hold seemingly irrational beliefs, while revealing that the 'other' could be the person next door.

Observation of a community is, however, different to dwelling. Tim Ingold commented that 'apprehending the world is not a matter of construction but of engagement, not of building but of dwelling, not of making a view of the world but of taking up a view in it' (2000: 42). It is this 'in it' approach with regard to astrology that Patrick Curry points to when he argued that

astrology too is a form of life, a way of being in the world. It is not a flawed or failed version of something else, but fully itself to the same extent, and ultimately in the same way, as being a historian, or scientist, or anything else: fully, in a word, human. (2005: 273)

It is precisely astrology as a form of lifestyle that this volume presents, taking up a view not of astrology but in astrology. Such a stance puts to the side the notion of so-called irrational beliefs and allows an exploration of living—or to use Ingold's words, dwelling—in those beliefs. To this end, this Special Issue has been written by those who teach or have graduated from the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture, Faculty of Humanities and Performing Arts, at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter, Wales. All our contributors are practicing astrologers as well as academics, and so they can present an insider view of how contemporary astrologers live within the practice of astrology.

This particular conversation is a welcome one. It has not long been possible to discuss astrology in the academy while taking it seriously, without reducing it to a futile version of something else, usually religion or science, or a mere effect of other more fundamental causes (cognitive, social, historical, and so on). Often the strategy employed was to confine

discussion of astrology to belief, which could then be 'objectively' evaluated, found erroneous, and explained away. It is therefore encouraging that this collection of articles exists at all and it escapes the curse of the epistemological correctness by including belief in its remit, but always as part of a practice, or set of practices, constituting an astrological way of life. In our view, a way of life cannot be evaluated or explained like an object. It must be understood as an experience or set of experiences, and the only way to do that is to participate in it, whether directly or vicariously and imaginatively. Each of these articles does so in its own way and in its own area.

Garry Phillipson's essay advances two central arguments. First, that contemporary astrology is widely treated as a modern heresy in a way that draws heavily on the Christian category, secularised by scientism, but largely unchanged in mode. That treatment involves systematic distortion of what astrologers actually do. Second, that scientism itself, despite loudly disavowing its religious provenance, is undistinguishable from the latter in practice.

Bernadette Brady's contribution throws valuable new light on what astrologers believe about fate, but also, still more importantly, what they do with it in practice. Despite fate being integral to astrology throughout its history, it seems that no one previously thought to ask astrologers what living a fate-filled life means to them. She also shows how differing understandings of fate have played out for both astrologers and their critics.

Darrellyn Gunzburg, too, focuses on what astrologers do, analysed in terms of a complex interplay between practices and beliefs. The practices center on the creation of a space or (better, perhaps) place within which the astrologer interprets a horoscope for a client. The beliefs comprise a set of concepts which overlap, but whose inflections also differ, with subtly different consequences: notably the divine, the sacred, and the supernatural. Her article adds significantly to our understanding of astrologers' working practices.

Liz Hathway takes up the venerable tradition of Saturn as a touchstone of astrological interpretation in all its major recent schools, such as traditional, psychological, or divinatory. Again we find a double movement. On the one hand, Hathway reveals the way ancient cultural memory, encoded and enacted mythically, remains present in astrologers' practices; its sheer durability is striking. On the other, her auto-ethnographic methodology also brings that tradition into the early twenty-first century. It also honours, as well as develops, the emphasis on participation that recent scholarly work on astrology has found to be necessary in order to understand it.

Frances Clynes takes on the challenge offered by the relatively new world of online astrology through the internet, cyberspace, and social media. Her study explores what is genuinely new in this context and what can best be understood as variations on some extremely old astrological experiences and themes.

Taken together the contributors to this special issue have provided thoughtful and well-researched contributions to the ongoing collective conversation about astrology and human cultural life.

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