

A New Teaching Centre in London

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Ever since the split between education and spirituality which began in the seventeenth century there have been attempts to reunite them. A number of schools, institutes and academies have been formed to cater to this aspiration but they have all operated outside the established educational framework: none could confer academically recognised degrees. A new initiative seeks to change this: a new educational charity has been founded in order to allow teaching within a spiritual and holistic context; and to do so within established education in the United Kingdom, conferring MA, MPhil and PhD degrees.

In November 1998, the "Canonbury Masonic Research Centre", (CMRC), was founded in the sixteenth Century Canonbury Tower, Islington; once the residence of Sir Francis Bacon. While the initial funding for the CMRC comes from within English Freemasonry (hence the name), it is an independent organisation. Its academic staff are not required to be Freemasons; neither are its students.

It is true that English Freemasonry suffers from a rather negative image at present - despite millions donated annually to charities. It is also true that this negative image is largely self-inflicted. Over the last half century Freemasonry has done little to combat a growing public perception of it being an organisation doggedly dedicated to anachronism, cronyism and irrelevance. But significant changes are underway; as part of these Freemasonry is applying considerable resources towards the advancement of education.

At its heart, Freemasonry concerns that which draws people together rather than that which drives them apart. While it is not a religion, its concerns are morality and spirituality. Freemasonry can be seen as a western symbolic expression of the sacred, a "Way of the Lost Word" - since the central dramatic theme of its ritual dramas concerns the seeking of this word, the gnostic Logos, the spark of spirituality within each and every one of us. It is fitting, therefore, that Freemasonry should involve itself in the foundation of an educational centre dedicated to the integration of learning and spirituality; to the study of the symbolic expression of the sacred in its infinite variety.

The CMRC is planning to begin its first academic course in October 2000: an MA degree in The Study of Mystical and Esoteric Traditions. For this, all students will be expected to attend a core course - of two ten-week modules and one twenty week module together with three further course modules chosen from a range of studies; and finally, to write a dissertation.

The first two core modules will concern "Mystical and esoteric traditions: themes and issues". This will firstly examine approaches to, and concepts of, mysticism, symbolism, ritual, revelation and the paranormal. A second ten-week module will study mystical experience, techniques of transformation, the spiritual and the psychological, consciousness studies and esoteric spirituality, symbolism and expression.

The third core module will concern texts from mystical traditions. It will teach the student to study a spiritual text without interpreting it; to engage with the text as a timeless expression of the sacred rather than to impose a meaning upon it or to understand it as an expression of some social or historical context.

There will be two further categories of course modules. In the first, students will be required to choose two modules from courses such as the following:

- The esoteric voices of ancient Egyptian tradition.
- The esoteric traditions of the Graeco-Roman world.
- Gnosticism.
- Ibn Arabi and the Sufi tradition.
- Marsilio Ficino and Renaissance platonism.
- The alchemical tradition in western thought.
- Freemasonry: its origins, history and purposes.
- The Kabbalah.
- Hesychasm: the mysticism of the Eastern Orthodox Church.
- Tibetan Buddhism.

The second category will concern contemporary themes and traditions. Students will choose one module from:

- The mystical and the paranormal
- Modern science and the rediscovery of the sacred.
- Jung and the transpersonal.
- Transcendental experience in modern culture.
- Figuring the sacred: mystical and esoteric themes in the arts.
- Mysticism and the esoteric in New Age movements.
- A fieldwork project relating to a contemporary movement or tradition.

As these courses are still in the process of construction there may be some alterations and additions but the accreditation schedule requires that they be established shortly in order to meet the planned beginning of the MA programme in October 2000.

Non-academic courses will begin much earlier: the Centre is planning public lectures, conferences, weekend workshops and, beginning October 1999, a series of public courses, taught as ten-week modules.

Important to the Centre is the creation of a comprehensive computer database together with a reading room containing all relevant contemporary journals - both academic and popular. A research student has been employed to begin this task. For traditional references, students will have access to established academic libraries in London together with the library of Freemasonry at Great Queen Street. The Centre's longer term aim is to publish a peer-reviewed journal and, when sufficient income is generated, to provide scholarships for the postgraduate degree courses. To ensure the academic independence of the CMRC none of the teachers on its academic board are Freemasons; and the board itself is divided equally between male and female members.

The formation of the CMRC is a venture which aims at breaking the normal paradigms which rule higher education and accordingly its Trustees, administrators and academics, do not expect the path forward to be at all easy. Nevertheless, the determination to succeed is there.

Details of courses are posted on the CMRC website at www.Canonbury.ac.uk or can be obtained from CMRC, Canonbury Tower, Canonbury Place, Islington, London, N1

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