Review of *The Path of the Serpent, Volume 1: Psychedelics and the Neuropsychology of Gnosis* by Hereward Tilton

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Reviewed by G. Clark, PhD.[1]

In the first volume of *The Path of the Serpent, Volume 1*: *Psychedelics and the Neuropsychology of Gnosis*, Hereward Tilton offers a bold, interdisciplinary account of the serpent archetype. Tilton's speciality is medieval occult and gnostic traditions, and he presents an erudite analysis of imagery from that period. Serpent imagery is frequently associated with the *axis mundi* of the cosmos, which, in medieval tradition, has its microcosmic equivalent within the human body. By ascending this axis, the adept crosses the threshold separating the corrupted world of matter and the realms of divide light above, thereby achieving a state of gnostic self-revelation.

Tilton explores this motif with deftness in Christian iconography, where Christ is often depicted on the cross entwined by a serpent, a symbol that he traces back to earlier Kabbalistic traditions. As we are told, the serpent and cross motif was also central to Jung's *Red Book*, where it is intimately related to his understanding of the Self and the individuation process.

Throughout the various sections of the book, Tilton explores how cutting-edge neuroscience can help explicate the neurobiological foundations of the serpent archetype. This alone makes the book essential reading for anyone interested in Jungian neuropsychology. But here we are offered much more than mere impersonal exposition with Tilton writing thoughtfully of his own experience of the serpent archetype.

In the opening chapter of the book Tilton details a vision of serpents that he experienced after having taken the psychedelic DMT. During that vision, serpents entered his heart as a "fecund radiance" that lit up the depths of his being. As he writes, "I felt reanimating warmth radiating outwards from my heart and coursing through my body. The overwhelming sensation of horror and creeping nausea I had felt was in fact ecstasy; the venom was in fact a healing elixir, and the spiralling serpents were agents of a supremely benevolent power" (11).

The following sections of the book focus on the possible neurobiological underpinnings of these altered states of consciousness. While such experiences have long been described in works on shamanism – Tilton reminds us of Eliade's classic study—it is only recently that neuroscientists have sought to understand their neurobiological substrates.

The burgeoning of study in this field in recent years has seen a revival of the psychedelic research and clinical practice of the 1950s and 60s—but this time using the most advanced techniques in neuroimaging. One of the most significant breakthroughs of

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the current "psychedelic renaissance" (Pollan 11) is the increased ability for scientists to study unconscious brain systems. In basing his theory on the findings of this emerging field, Tilton's book contributes to a growing literature that seeks to ground Jungian psychology in experimental neuroscience.

One of the most noteworthy findings of this research is the ability of psychedelic compounds to desegregate neural architecture. The human brain in its everyday waking state is segregated into discrete neural hubs. One of these hubs is the uniquely human default mode network that is associated with theory of mind, metacognition, and the human ego complex. These upper cortical regions of the brain appear to be segregated from more ancient subcortical neurological systems that tend to operate out of the range of focal awareness—brain systems that researchers have suggested may represent the unconscious mind studied by Freud and Jung.

The research team led by Robin Carhart Harris, Head of the Psychedelic Research Centre at Imperial College, has found that psychedelics can reliably induce the experience of ego dissolution. Significantly, the phenomenology of such experiences correlates with a phase transition from the recently evolved ego complex associated with the default mode network to more archaic primary process brain systems—that is, with the unconscious.

Tilton uses the findings of this research to interpret not only his personal experience using psychedelics but also the serpentine imagery that is so important to Jungian conceptions of cultural history and the psyche. As he writes:

> On an immediate neurobiological level, the serpent's malevolent aspect corresponds to the disintegration of large-scale neural networks associated with ego functioning and self-narrative, while its benevolent, healing dimension reflects the emergence of a novel neurobiological and psychological order. In the healing of trauma, this new order is founded upon the integration of an observing with an experiencing self in a state of lucidity; more broadly, we could follow Jung in speaking of the integration of the shadow, which involves the exposure and assimilation of previously unconscious complexes underlying dysfunctional ego configurations. (206–07)

In the final section of the book, Tilton highlights affinities between phase transitions in the human psyche and similar processes operating over evolutionary time and in the development of ecosystems. Such an approach situates human consciousness more firmly and meaningfully within a natural and more-than-human context. It also diagnoses a pervasive cultural malaise resulting from the absence of such a meaningful context for contemporary humans—a malaise, Tilton argues, that the therapeutic use of psychedelics may help to alleviate. And as the individual may experience a phase transition from ego consciousness to the destabilizing but ultimately redemptive chaos of the unconscious, social collectivities can experience a similar phase transition. As he avers, "while close proximity to the chaotic depths of the psyche is potentially destabilising to society, it may also serve a vital function in the creative restructuring of the collective in times of crisis" (73).

While Tilton's application of psychedelic neuroscience to Jungian psychology and serpent imagery is valuable, the book lacks a broader cross-cultural evolutionary perspective. The ethnographic record suggests that serpent imagery may have a much wider

cultural provenance than Tilton analyses in *The Path of the Serpent*. For example, in his essay "Rain Serpents in Northern Australia and Southern Africa: A Common Ancestry?" archaeologist Ian Watts compares serpent imagery from Africa and Australia, suggesting that such imagery may have been an important part of archaic human social life.

In both traditions, there is an association between serpent imagery, female fertility and menstrual blood, which is often symbolically represented in ritual life by the use of ochre. In Africa such rites and the associated mythic systems are part of a matrilineal sociological complex in which coalitions of women paint their bodies with ochre to symbolise menstrual blood as well as the blood of animals. In Australian traditions a similar association is evident between blood, ritual life, and serpent imagery; as Watts writes of the implications of this parallel, we "may conjecture that something like a Rainbow Serpent-type creature was also part of the symbolic template of early *Homo sapiens*, an elaboration of the logic informing the world's first metaphor—equating women's blood with the blood of game animals" (263).

While Watts does not adopt a Jungian approach, his observation of cross-cultural affinities in myth, ritual, and symbolism does lend itself to an archetypal analysis. Such an analysis is particularly relevant in the context of the wider cultural significance of serpent imagery. For example, Jung analyses the association between snakes and the anima archetype (200) with Neumann elaborating on snakes as the consort of The Great Mother (48–49). While there are differences between these accounts and those mentioned by Watts, we should also note the similarities and particularly the association between serpentine figures, fertility, and the feminine.

The situating of these insights in a broader evolutionary context is something I would like to see developed further by scholars such as Tilton who are formulating a cutting-edge Jungian neuropsychology. Such an approach would illuminate possible antecedents of occult and gnostic serpent imagery of the kind we find in the myth and rites mentioned by Watts. Significantly, Watts and colleagues have found evidence of ochre use as old as 300,000 years (Watts et al.). Additionally, evidence of supernatural snake imagery and possible ritual activity has been dated to between 60,000 and 100,000 years ago (Coulson et al.) This research suggests, as Jung argues, that archetypes may be the repository of very archaic aspects of human experience that still structure the unconscious brain systems of contemporary humans.

In my own research I have used work in psychedelic and evolutionary neuroscience to ground archetypal psychology in theories of matrilineal social organization of the kind developed by Watts and other theorists who seek to understand the ritual and symbolic life of extant hunter-gatherers in a broader evolutionary framework (Clark). I am grateful to Tilton for enriching our understanding of this important field of inquiry. His astute use of psychedelic neuroscience to illuminate the gnostic and occult traditions studied by Jung is an innovative example of synthetic and interdisciplinary scholarship. I intend to use his rich account of serpent imagery and its possible neurobiological underpinnings in my own future research. And I hope that this review may assist contextualizing the thesis of the book in a broader evolutionary and anthropological context.

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