

Interview with Dr. Kennet Granholm

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Dr. Kennet Granholm, former Assistant Professor in History of Religions at Stockholm University and Docent in Comparative Religion at Åbo Akademi University, is one of the main figures in the comparatively new field of study of contemporary Western esotericism, especially of its darker forms. Under his academic contributions one can find the co-founding of *Contemporary Esotericism Research Network* (ContERN, operating under the *European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism – ESSWE*) and *Scandinavian Network for the Academic Study of Western Esotericism* (SNASWE, operating under the ESSWE), the co-organizing of the *1st International Conference on Contemporary Esotericism* (with Egil Asprem, 2012) and the co-editing of the books *Religion, Media and Social Change* (with Marcus Moberg and Sofia Sjö, 2015) and *Contemporary Esotericism* (with Egil Asprem, 2013). In his publications, Dr. Granholm mainly focuses on societal and discursive transformations of Western Esotericism in the secular and post-secular conditions of late modernity and has helped to introduce and consolidate a discursive-analytical and ethnographical approach (predominantly based on field-work in the Swedish magical order Dragon Rouge) in the study of Western esotericism (see esp. Granholm, 2013a; 2014a) where he is also known for developing the new analytical concepts of the Left-Hand Path and Post-Satanism (both designating forms of darker spirituality – see Granholm, 2013c). His research interests also include the interplay between Western esotericism and popular culture, mostly in the metal scene (e. g. Granholm, 2013b). Since the year 2015, however, he has been out of academia.

Matouš Mokrý: On your website I discovered that you began your university studies with English Language and Literature. How did you come to study religion and Western Esotericism in particular?

Kennet Granholm: I got into the study of religion and Western esotericism by pure accident, to be honest. I really only started studying English at the University because I couldn't figure out what I wanted to do with my life, and while I very much enjoyed the classes on poetry and literature I was woefully inadequate when it came to linguistics. After a year off I felt the need for a change of scenery so

¹ The interview was conducted via e-mail, the answers to the questions were received on 8th September 2019.

I transferred to another university, and another city. I took some random classes in comparative religion and found them to be far more compelling than my classes in comparative literature, and before I knew it I was working on my MA thesis in the discipline. Having been raised on fantasy, horror, role-playing games, and heavy metal I had always had an interest in mythology, mysticism, and magic so I guess my choice of field of study and eventual profession was only natural.



Img. 1. *Kennet Granholm.*

Matouš Mokrý: Given the preponderance of those who choose to study early modern elite literary works within Western esotericism studies, why exactly did you choose to study the darker forms of contemporary esotericism? What is so significant about this spiritual milieu; how can this field of study be useful to researchers with a different focus? And why did you start to research its connection to the extreme metal scene?

Kennet Granholm: Again, I blame my youthful obsession with fantasy, horror, role-playing games, and heavy metal. Magic and mysticism had always existed in the realm of the purely fictional for me, and in my studies in comparative religion I came across people for whom it was something very much more real. That fascinated me, as did particularly the darker forms of philosophy and practice,

and as very little scholarship existed on the subject I had no recourse but to do my own research if I wanted to find out more. I wouldn't necessarily call the Left-Hand Path (and dark esotericism in general) any more (or any less) significant than other spiritual milieus. However, it is certainly a milieu with significant associations with many forms of popular culture and thus one that many people, especially youth, come into contact with in one form or another. That makes it very dynamic, if nothing else. As for my research into esotericism and extreme metal, it naturally grew out of my studies of contemporary magical orders. I had noted the significance of popular culture for the milieu early on, and as many of the people I had gotten to know during my field research were metal musicians, and as I was a musician myself, it was really only a matter of time before I found myself engaged in research on that particular topic. Of course, the contacts from my previous research lent themselves perfectly to that particular avenue of research as well.

Matouš Mokřý: Your major work to a larger extent stems from your ethnographic field-work in the Left-Hand Path magical order Dragon Rouge, how did you get acquainted with the group? What was the biggest obstacle in your ethnographic research?

Kennet Granholm: I first learnt of the existence of Dragon Rouge in a very short overview in a book about new religious movements in Sweden. It was the only academic text written about the group and as I yearned to learn more I chose it as the topic of my MA thesis. Luckily it turned out to be quite unproblematic to get in touch with the group and gain access. I wrote my MA thesis based on what little material was publicly available, and sent the finished thesis along with a request to be allowed access to do a more in-depth study to the contact address on the order's webpage. Based on the thesis I was deemed to be a serious researcher and access was granted. My contacts within the order were very accommodating, both accepting my presence as an ethnographer at meetings and group workings and making themselves readily available for in-depth interviews. All in all I really had very few obstacles in my field research, although even the smoothest of ethnographic research always presents a number of issues and complications that need to be resolved.

Matouš Mokřý: In the chapter *Researching Esoteric Groups* (2014b), you wrote that you befriended some of the people you researched, now you are playing with a band (Saturnalia Temple) led by one of the most prominent Dragon Rouge members, Tommie Eriksson. How did this friendly connection affect your research? Were there any reactions to it from academia?

Kennet Granholm: The development of interpersonal relations of various sorts is one of particularities of ethnographic research and the problems and potentials of that is something I presented papers and published articles on already at an early stage in my career. While affinities with some people in the field arose early on, I was always careful to separate, and to closely indicate, my role as a researcher from other possible roles. In terms of my research on extreme metal the situation

was somewhat different, as I was very much personally involved in the very thing I was studying. However, that gave me a very unique access to the field I was studying, and by that time I was quite seasoned as a field researcher so I was positive that I could juggle those two separate roles simultaneously. It is not an approach I would necessarily recommend, however, as it does present plenty of problems and issues.

Matouš Mokrý: What are the specific difficulties associated with the ethnographic study of contemporary Western magic? What should the potential ethnographer be aware of? And what obstacles might one find when researching the metal scene(s) ethnographically?

Kennet Granholm: As with all ethnography, the difficulties greatly depend on the particular focus one chooses for one's research. One particular hurdle, one which I cannot claim to have overcome, is that much magical practice is of a solitary sort and simply not accessible to an ethnographer. The participant observation I did was primarily at group meetings and courses on particular thematic subjects, but much of the more advanced personal practice was not really accessible to me. One of the main obstacles when researching metal scenes is that of access. How is one to gain access to bands, particularly if they are somewhat popular? For my own part that was made possible by being involved in the scene as a musician myself.

Matouš Mokrý: Your academic studies are mostly based on esoteric phenomena present in Scandinavia, what is particular about esotericism in this region? On the other hand, how does Scandinavia reflect global tendencies in Western esotericism and general culture?

Kennet Granholm: Actually, while my initial studies involved an esoteric group originating in Sweden my focus was never on Sweden or the Nordic countries specifically. The Left-Hand Path milieu is fairly small and spread transnationally throughout mostly Western Europe and North America and I strove to keep a sort of general overview of it, and was specifically interested in the transnational and trans-local aspects of it as well. There are certainly particularities to esotericism in Scandinavia but I wouldn't want to generalize too much about them, particularly since it's been a number of years since I've done active research in the field.

Matouš Mokrý: Your concept of the Left-Hand Path is characterized by individualism, self-deification and antinomianism (Granholm, 2013c; 2014a: 60–61). There is no denying that transgression and antinomianism are important characteristics of dark esotericism. We see that discourse of antinomianism can influence such diverse behaviour as vegetarianism in *Dragon Rouge* and human sacrifice in *ONA*. Are there any limits in Left-Hand Path opposition and transgression? Besides characteristics given in your publications (i.e. transgression as a means of creating new, socially unconditioned beliefs and ethics), what is specific to this type of breaking of boundaries?

Kennet Granholm: Transgression of boundaries is by necessity bound to the norms and values of the society it is practiced in, and as such it is greatly influenced by varying societal trends. In my experience such transgressions are most often on a personal, individual level, and very rarely expressed in more spectacular and offensive outward displays of rebellion. As the goal is ultimately internal self-liberation, grandiose violations of collective norms, rules, or laws would, in point of fact, be counterproductive as they would run the risk of limiting one's personal liberties.

Matouš Mokrý: As you and others have described it, contemporary magic is becoming more and more individualistic due to the various processes of late modernity, with the need for institutional ties to practice magic becoming obsolete (e. g. Asprem, 2016; Granholm, 2014a). How do you see the role of magical orders and other types of esoteric organisations in the esoteric milieu now?

Kennet Granholm: The social context will always play a part in magical practice, even though the specifics of that social context are influenced and transformed in various ways under the impact of modern communication technologies. A dizzying and ever-growing multitude of magical source material is easily, and often freely, available online, but while that might make the entry into the realm of magical practice easier for beginners, it also makes it difficult to sift through all the information. The majority of people with a deep and serious interest are likely, at some point, to gravitate towards some type of organized group or another in order to receive more specific instruction, at least for a time. Of course, the Internet also makes it easier to find and get in touch with such a group, as well as largely negating the obstacle of physical distance. Of course, a visible online presence by no means guarantees quality.

Matouš Mokrý: You are also known for being one of the introducers of the post-secular framework into the study of Western esotericism. According to you, post-secular esotericism strives for a general re-enchantment which was then defined by you as “an active effort to acknowledge, embrace, and seek affective and analogical thinking, while at the same time underscoring the insufficiency of rationality” (Granholm, 2008: 63). How concretely then do post-secular discourses shape esotericism and the Left-Hand Path in particular?

Kennet Granholm: Due to not having been actively engaged in academia for some years and being somewhat out of date with the current state of research in general and the field of contemporary esotericism in particular, I therefore find that it is a bit difficult to say much in a specific way. My publications on the subject of “post-secular esotericism” were largely preliminary, and simplified matters to an extent, and further research would have refined my theorizing. Unfortunately, I never got the opportunity to do that, and I'm certain that there are current trends within contemporary esotericism that would further complicate my initial speculation.

Matouš Mokrý: Within the discussion on the post-secular condition, there is an assumption that contemporary esotericism is more informed by popular culture (and vice-versa) than in previous periods (e. g. Granholm, 2014a: 194–196). What major implications does this contact have for Western esotericism and its organizations?

Kennet Granholm: Again, I feel that my research into the subject is a bit too preliminary, and out of date by this point, to really say much.

Matouš Mokrý: The form and content of the artistic expression of one's spirituality can be to a large extent determined by the boundaries of a particular genre (e.g. black metal) and obviously, there are differences in interpretation between creators, performers, and recipients. What is the most suitable way to approach religious/spiritual motives in popular culture?

Kennet Granholm: There are numerous different ways to approach the subject and no single one is necessarily more suitable or better than another. It all depends on the particular field in question, one's avenues of accessing a given field, and the specific questions one seeks to answer. A thorough familiarity with the specific popular culture one is to study, its forms and conventions, etc., is an absolute necessity in order to do research of any competence, substance, and value, however.

Matouš Mokrý: Why is metal such a fitting genre for the esoteric that, in your words, “it simply is one of the main arenas through which people are introduced to esoteric subjects in contemporary times” (Granholm, 2011: 516)?

Kennet Granholm: Quite simply, metal has a built-in drive to be rebellious and the occult constitutes a perfect “taboo” subject to explore to that effect. This is simplifying matters greatly, of course, but it is nonetheless a key factor.

Matouš Mokrý: In “Sons of Northern Darkness: Heathen Influences in Black Metal and Neofolk Music” (Granholm, 2011), you proposed a slightly controversial interpretation according to which the second (“Norwegian”) wave of black metal was more connected to heathen discourses than satanic ones. Could you please elaborate on that?

Kennet Granholm: In short, when taking a close look at very early Norwegian Black Metal and assessing its overall themes and ethos, rather than focusing on specific keywords out of context, a distinctly heathen discourse is very prominent. We're talking about the very early years, though. An overtly Satanic shift takes place quite early on, but it does so under the impact of specific social processes greatly influenced by mass medial reinterpretation.

Matouš Mokrý: Within metal studies you have also coined the term “ritual black metal” (Granholm, 2013b) which describes a specific scene in extreme metal (especially black metal) that engages with the occult in a more systematic and

elaborated way. There is no doubt that in last five years ritual black metal has become one of the major trends in black metal. How do you see this development and what will its future be? Can it somehow change the existent scenic structures and drive more participants into the esoteric milieu?

Kennet Granholm: As bands and the scene itself grow in popularity the percentage of more “casual” scene participants also increases, that has been the case with every sub-genre of metal before and is undoubtedly the case with this scene as well. It is unlikely that the growth of the scene will lead to any significant mass-recruitment of new members into magic orders.

Matouš Mokřý: One of the features of ritual black metal is the framing of concerts as “rituals” and using music and its performance as a form of occult practice. Besides the obvious previous connection between heavy metal music and occulture (Partridge, 2004; 2005), what other factors have led to this ritual-cum-musical practice? Since dealing with alleged magical energies on stage might change the ways in which musicians approach their concerts, does ritual black metal performance somehow alter the relationship between performers and the audience that is common in black metal? Have you discerned any differences between “musical magic” and more usual forms of rituals in the way musicians/occultists reflect spiritual aspects of their magical workings?

Kennet Granholm: Magic and the occult have been popular topics in metal since the very start, infusing generation after generation of metal fans with an interest in the topic, and with the continuous drive to become more extreme and to find the next boundary to transgress, which is hardwired into metal music, it was only a matter of time before something such as what I call “ritual extreme metal” would emerge. It was bound to happen, really. I have certainly experienced artist-audience relationships that differ from what’s common in “normal” black metal. As I noted earlier, growth in popularity increases the percentage of more “casual” scene participants, and that is sure to limit the extent of such “special” artist-audience relationships. As to practice, the scene is highly individualism-oriented and there is thus a large variance in how people in it approach magic and the occult. For some, music is a, if not the, paramount expression of magic, whereas others strongly differentiate ritual magical practice and musical expressions thereof.

Matouš Mokřý: What will (and should) the future of Western esotericism studies look like in your opinion? And in a similar way, what will (and should) the future of metal studies be in your opinion?

Kennet Granholm: The great thing with both the study of metal and Western esotericism is that there is so much left to study, and so many possible ways to do it. One of my goals as a researcher was to put the study of contemporary esotericism, with theories and methods derived from e.g. anthropology and sociology, on the map, and it appears that I got what I wished for. I’m very happy for that. It is up to the next generation of scholars to explore yet other areas and approaches.

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Images:

Img. 1. *Kennet Granhholm*. Found [31.11.2019] on <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=14178333391&set=a.429522183391&type=3&theater>.