

# THE SACRED HISTORY

How Angels, Mystics and Higher  
Intelligence Made our World

JONATHAN BLACK

Author of the international bestseller *The Secret History of the World*







THE  
SACRED  
HISTORY

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Quercus



To Lorna Byrne



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# Preface

The stories retold in this book, taken together and told in sequence, represent a sort of folk history of the world.

But more than that, they work on many different levels. They are part of a mystical tradition.

Many describe dramatic events not in the physical world but in the realms of gods, angels and other spiritual beings. Many follow people who entertain gods and angels unawares, or travellers between the worlds who slip through into alternative realities. These stories may show what it feels like when the spiritual realm intrudes on the everyday, when spiritual beings break through, when we suddenly feel a presence, or when we, unwittingly perhaps, step through into a world that is different – upside down and inside out.

Many of these stories have long loomed large in the collective memory but can still quicken the blood today, because they represent great turning points in spiritual evolution – or, to put it in modern terms, turning points in the evolution of consciousness.

According to mystical tradition, this evolution is the unfolding of a divine plan. Great spiritual beings lead us era by era, stage by stage, drawing us out and helping us to evolve. When we fight, when we love, when we are tested to our limits and find a kind of victory in a kind of defeat, we are following in the footsteps of gods and angels, following patterns of meaning and behaviour that they have laid down for us.

But, as with all things mystical, this history is not simply linear. Because time does not operate in the same way in the spiritual worlds, there may be historical events which are in a sense still going on. Events in world history may also be recapitulated in all our individual lives, so that we must each endure an exile in the desert and go on a quest for the Holy Grail. Some events may have been re-enacted as part of

religious ceremony. For example, the story that has come down to us as *Cinderella* originated as the sacred drama of Isis, enacted in the temples of ancient Egypt. Some stories, including those of rebirth, may have been part of initiation rituals, where someone was ‘born again’ into a higher state of being or consciousness. And some of these rituals are still being re-enacted in secret today.

In the form that they have come down to us, these stories are meant to be wise. They are ‘teaching stories’, meant to work on us at what we today might call a subconscious level, but they are also intended to help us become more conscious of the shapes and mystical patterns of our lives. I will argue that this is one of the reasons why stories are important. Stories, I want to suggest, tend to show the immanence of the divine in human experience.

That is why great events in the unfolding of the spiritual history of the world can be seen in stories which might seem entirely fictional – in fairy stories, tales of the Arabian nights and folk tales of encounters with elemental beings and the spirits of the dead.

No great story is mere fantasy – and neither is fantasy.<sup>1</sup>

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These stories are arranged chronologically. In the early chapters I retell the great stories of human beginnings in order to show how epoch after epoch, stage by stage, the fundamentals of the human condition were put together.

Divine intervention and intelligent interaction with spiritual beings, spiritual guidance, spiritual testing – all of this is unquestioned in these early stories and writ large there. The tellers of these mythic tales were not interested in the material world in the way we have become interested in it since the scientific revolution. For them, the great miracle, the great wonder, was not so much the beauty and complexity of the outer world as the beauty and complexity of the *inner* world of subjective experience. They explained how we came to experience life as we do.<sup>2</sup>

So it was because of the passion of Venus for Adonis that desire can sometimes be destructive. It was because Loki, the Norse Lucifer, stole a magic ring forged by the dwarves that even the best of us can become acquisitive and narrowly selfish. Because of Odin and Mercury, we are

intellectually curious. Because of the Sun god, we are given the assurance that if we act wholeheartedly and risk everything, we can ultimately defeat the forces of darkness.

Later in the book we will see that because of Moses a passion for justice runs through us like a mighty river. Then because of the Buddha, we are capable of compassion for all living beings, and because of the great mystics of Arabia, we have learned the delights of falling in love.

The story of the medieval founders of Hatha yoga is tied up with the story of Christian Rosencreutz and the introduction of teaching regarding the chakras into the stream of Western mystical thought. We shall see that one of the two great scientists of the spiritual in modern times, Carl Gustav Jung, was advised by a disembodied guide, just as Socrates was guided by his daemon. The other great scientist of the spiritual in modern times, Rudolf Steiner, gave a detailed account of the journey of the spirit after death.

Some themes will recur, and so too will some characters, including the sometimes dangerous and disturbing figure of the Green One, who reappears in different forms and will appear finally to announce the end of the world as we know it.

In the case of some chapters I have unravelled commentaries out of the stories in order to make explicit the turning points in history that they dramatize. In other cases I have been shy of interposing myself.

I take it as axiomatic that, as Ibn Arabi, a Sufi mystic and guiding light in this book, said, 'No single religion can fully express the Reality of God.' Throughout I look at the work and teachings of schools including the Kabbalistic, Sufi, Hermetic, Rosicrucian, Masonic, Theosophical and Anthroposophical, as well as the work of individual mystics such as Plato, Plotinus, Paracelsus, Christian Rosencreutz, Jacob Boehme, Rudolf Steiner and Lorna Byrne, asking if their restatements of the wisdom of ancient times can help us find a language to talk about them in modern terms.

I look, too, at the work of the great storytellers of modern times, writers who ask if there is a mystical dimension to our lives, if the world is shot through with meanings we did not put there, if we really are engaged in interaction with unembodied intelligence. In the age of scientific materialism this is perhaps the greatest philosophical question, and novelists, from Dostoyevsky and George Eliot to David Foster

Wallace, have looked for mysterious patterns, mystic traces and otherworldly influences not in the epic lives of heroes, but in ordinary, everyday lives.

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I have written this book partly to ask an outrageous question: *what if the claims of world religions are true?* What would history look like then? Is it possible to give an account of creation which is creationist but cannot be instantly dismissed as absurd by scientists?

What if other large claims are true? What if Joan of Arc really was directed by angels when she defeated the English armies? What if Bernadette of Lourdes *was* visited by the Virgin Mary?

Of course it is not possible to prove these extraordinary events scientifically, but if you weave them together to form a historical narrative, does a coherent account of the world emerge that can be set against the conventional, scientifically correct one? Can a meaningful history be built out of stories of angelic intervention, mystic visions and otherworldly experiences – the rubble discarded by sensible historians?

Is it possible to trace the same patterns in the world today? Do great spiritual beings still intervene in the decisive way that they intervened in the lives of Moses and Joan of Arc? In the last third of the book there are stories of the disturbing experiences of an American president, of miracles witnessed by thousands in Spain, of angels who appeared to Jews persecuted by the Nazis in Hungary and to schoolchildren attacked by a rebel army in the Congo, as well as to people leading apparently ordinary urban lives. *The Sacred History* provides evidence of first-hand experience of the otherworldly across the ages, and I want to suggest that the sheer volume and consistency of this testimony is remarkable. <sup>3</sup>

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We live at the intersection between two planes, a mental plane and a physical plane, and we can hop from one to the other. Both planes stretch off into the distance and make us wonder about where we come from and where we are going.

Philosophers have always asked which plane came first and which



is more reliable, more knowable. Does one depend on the other for its existence? The philosophical question with the greatest implications for how we face the world is *which is more real – mind or matter?*

Leading on from this, are we here because the universe made us this way, or is the universe the way it is because its *purpose* is to create us? Is mind the primary constituent of the universe? Are value and meaning inherent in the universe? Are fundamental moral laws woven into the fabric of the universe? Or did we invent them?

Did we invent love?

Believing that mind came first and is in some sense more real is the religious or spiritual view of life – and is what nearly everyone believed for most of history.<sup>4</sup> Believing that matter came first is the materialistic and atheist view. It started to become popular with the advent of the scientific revolution and is now the prevailing view, at least among the educated élite. Today the intellectually dominant view asserts that mind or consciousness only came about as a chance fizzing together of certain chemicals.

The philosophical term for the ‘mind came first’ view is idealism. It’s a confusing term, because outside academia it is more often used to mean the pursuit of high ideals, while students of philosophy, at least those studying in the Anglo-American tradition, encounter it as a quaint theory of knowledge which no one really believes anymore and which was last seriously defended in the eighteenth century by Bishop Berkeley.

For most of history, though, idealism was a cosmology and an all-embracing heartfelt philosophy of life. Most people experienced the world in a way that accorded with it – what we might call ‘folk idealism’.<sup>5</sup> Most believed that ‘in the beginning’ there had been a great Cosmic Mind – ‘God’ in Western traditions. They believed this Cosmic Mind had created matter and meant it to be. They also experienced this Cosmic Mind rearranging the cosmos in response to prayer and their innermost hopes and fears, guiding them, and rewarding or punishing them for their actions. Sometimes they experienced a spiritual presence and sometimes what we might now call collective hallucinations.<sup>6</sup>

Today’s intellectual élite, squarely on the side of scientific materialism, tends to mock mystical and spiritual experience, to deride it as woo-woo. Rather than make any serious attempt to engage with the

data of spiritual experience, loud and insistent atheists talk as though the question had been settled. But we must not let ourselves be bounced into accepting this. For instance, when it comes to what happened ‘in the beginning’ there is no decisive evidence – in fact no evidence that is anywhere near decisive. There are only tiny scraps of evidence for the Big Bang and no evidence at all for what went before. When it comes to the beginning of creation, neither believers nor atheists have much to go on. Huge inverted pyramids of speculation are balanced on pinpricks of evidence.<sup>7</sup> In this area, as in many others, certainty is simply an inappropriate response to the nature and amount of evidence we have. In a recent book, the American philosopher Alvin Plantinga argued similarly that we can’t rule out that evolution has come about by design – but we can’t rule out the contrary either.<sup>8</sup>

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If the evidence from science is sparse, are there other sources of knowledge to draw on?

The word ‘mystic’ comes from *mystae*, from ancient Greece, where certain individuals were chosen for initiation in institutions called Mystery schools, which were attached to the great public temples. Everyone knew of the existence of these schools, but only a few were privileged to discover what was taught in them. In these highly secretive enclosures the *mystae* were educated and put through a series of extreme tests, which might involve long periods of fasting and sensory deprivation, spiritual exercises, sometimes even drugs. The process was designed to induce mystical experiences.

Mystics were enabled to pierce the veil that keeps spiritual beings inaccessible to most people. They were enabled to communicate directly and consciously with the constructive forces of the universe, the forces that according to idealism, control the greater part of ourselves and our environment.

We shall see later that at its core the arcane knowledge that the initiates gained was a practical knowledge of the manipulation of matter by the human mind that started with human physiology. Initiates were taught how to generate psychosomatic effects within the human body and then how to move matter outside the body by the power of mind alone. They were therefore able to work in the world in ways closed to

normal, everyday consciousness. They might become prophets or healers or demonstrate other extraordinary gifts. They might originate new ideas in the arts, in philosophy and in science. They knew the spiritual algorithms by which the Cosmic Mind shapes the world around us. Sometimes, as we shall see, they knew this with mathematical precision. Many of the greatest Greeks and Romans, including Socrates, Plato, Aeschylus, Pindar, Ovid, Vergil, Seneca and Cicero, were initiates of these schools.

Then as now, some mystics achieved these altered states and the other ways of knowing that come with them through these techniques of initiation, while other mystics were simply born with the capability. In *The Sacred History* we will learn from the testimony of both types of mystic. The history told here is the human story as related by people with this alternative or higher consciousness, these other ways of knowing. Drawing on the wisdom of mystics down the ages, including Ibn Arabi, Hildegard of Bingen, Rudolf Steiner and the remarkable modern mystic Lorna Byrne, I have tried to make clear what spiritual beings have intended by their interventions in human life.

This book is a visionary history and, as I say, I cannot prove any of it. That would of course be impossible. But it has long struck me that at the level of spiritual and mystical experience, all the great religious traditions merge. The experiences of a yogi in the forests of India, a dervish in the Arabian desert and Lorna Byrne on the outskirts of Dublin seem to be remarkably consistent. Sufi mystics talk about an Otherworld, a place with objective reality but accessed via the imagination. People can enter it through portals in many different parts of the globe, yet convene at the same place and meet the same spiritual beings.

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At the end of the book I want to propose what I call ‘the argument from direct personal experience’: if the universe has been created by a Cosmic Mind, our experience of it should be very different than if it has come about by accident.

How are we to assess our experience, how are we to test it in the light of this? Evidence in favour of a Cosmic Mind will tend to fall in the category of the mystical. But we find it hard to talk about mystical experience in the abstract. Apart from a few little-known mystics, few

people have tried to do this, with the result that we have no ready language to describe it. And finding it hard to talk – or think – about mystical experience, we are perhaps more likely to fail to recognize when we are having a mystical experience.

George Eliot wrote about this failure to recognize: ‘The golden moments in the course of life rush past us and we see nothing but sand; the angels come to visit us, and we only know them when they are gone.’<sup>9</sup>

So, lacking a conceptual framework, how can we consider such experiences – and the questions of life and destiny? I suggested that stories could be an arena for this . . .

Before the scientific revolution, human consciousness was focused on certain central facts of the human condition: that we have very little say in the great events of our lives, that the events with the greatest bearing on our happiness come at us unbidden, and that there is a controlling intelligence at work which is not our own. Ideas like these are not common currency these days, but the American novelist David Foster Wallace wrote about them in language which is fresh, contemporary and immediate:

Both destiny’s kisses and its dope-slaps illustrate an individual person’s basic personal powerlessness over the really meaningful events in his life: i.e. almost nothing important that ever happens to you happens because you engineer it. Destiny has no beeper; destiny always leans trenchcoated out of an alley with some sort of Psst that you usually can’t even hear because you’re in such a rush to or from something important you’ve tried to engineer.<sup>10</sup>

There is a very great and stark truth underlying all these considerations of meanings of life. Without a pre-existing Cosmic Mind to mean it, the cosmos, life itself, cannot by definition have *any* intrinsic meaning – only the temporary, partial meanings we may choose to project onto it. Without a pre-existing Cosmic Mind, notions of destiny make no sense.

Yet as David Foster Wallace and others have suggested, many of us do sometimes have intimations of higher and absolute meaning. The world is against us, we have a run of bad luck, we duck out of a test

and it comes round to meet us in another form, we experience premonitions, meaningful coincidences, dreams that are trying to tell us something, suddenly we understand with total clarity what someone else is thinking, we feel special connections with people we meet, we experience a moment of happiness then realize that everything in our lives has been leading up to it, we fall in love and feel sure it is meant to be . . .

Stories about otherworldly patterns and mystic traces can sensitize us to patterns like these in our own experience. They encourage attentiveness to complex, subtle, inner events which, if idealism provides an accurate picture of the world, are at the same time experiences of the inner workings of the world and evidence for the great forces that weave together to create, maintain and move it. The stories in this book have been chosen to help bring such patterns into focus.

When we read stories, we enter a mysterious place full of paradoxes and enigmas and puzzles, and we may well realize that *life is like that too*. Great fiction opens us up to our own depths and the depths of the world we live in. It can show us a world soaked through with intelligent energy, a world that means to communicate with us . . .

I hope you will enjoy these stories and read them in the spirit they were intended.





## Shakespeare and the Rosicrucians

In 1614 a pamphlet called the *Fama Fraternitatis* ('Rumour of the Brotherhood') announcing the existence of an underground fraternity called the Rosicrucians, was anonymously published in Kassel in Germany. The *Fama* claimed that the seven-sided sepulchre of the fraternity's founder, Christian Rosencreutz, had recently been discovered, that his body was perfectly preserved and that lying next to him were a copy of the Bible and works by Paracelsus. A year after that another pamphlet, called the *Confessio*, also mysteriously appeared. A year after that came Christian Rosencreutz's *Chemical Wedding*, and in 1623 posters appeared on the streets of Paris, causing a fever of excitement and speculation.

In science matter is just what it *is*. Look for definitions online and you will find lists of its constituents, which is like defining a house by saying it is made up of bricks, cement, glass, etc.

In idealism, on the other hand, there is a higher order definition of matter. It is 'what forms a barrier to spirit'. For example, it encloses the spirit of an individual human being so it is blocked off from God, angels and other spirits. This is what it is *for*.

When humans lived without interruption in the love of God, when they 'walked with God', when there was no barrier between them and they stood in the full flow of God's love, they were overwhelmed. Filled with the sublime and all-powerful thoughts of God, they were unable to think for themselves. Later, when matter hardened, they would have

to forge a new form of consciousness. They would develop a new way of thinking that focused on material things.

We have been following a change of consciousness, as humanity shifted from an ideas-based form of consciousness to an object-based form. In the seventeenth century this became a conscious project, culminating in the scientific method of Francis Bacon and the rationalism of Descartes. Humanity would have to get to grips with objects, understand them inside out and learn to manipulate them.

Underlying these schools of thought was the development of what we might call binary thinking – the assumption that something must be either true or false. Something cannot be the case and also not be the case. This is what logicians sometimes call ‘the law of excluded middle’. If we are to discover the truth about the world, it is surely crucial that we are quite clear whether something is true or not – and surely determining whether it is true or not is of the utmost importance?

That something is either true or false is, you might think, undeniably true. And it *is* true in that it works as a way for us to navigate our way through our lives . . .



Francis Bacon, Vicount St Alban  
(by William Marshall, after Simon de Passe,  
1640)

. . . up to a point.

At the very moment Francis Bacon was forging the scientific method, a man with whom he rubbed shoulders and shared many inspirations was importing the contrary impulse into the world.<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare had fairy blood. His plays turn on the supernatural, and the supernatural element in his writing still quickens our blood. He gives such vivid expression to the experience of the supernatural and such a compelling account of the way that it shapes our lives that it has illuminated the world through the darkest days of

materialism. The underground visions of Paracelsus, of Christian Rosencreutz, of Jacob Boehme, of the country folk who told each other fairy stories in the long winter evenings were brought up and out into the world in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *A Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. In the character of Ariel, a Paracelsian sylph speaks to us. *Macbeth* has an occult power that frightens actors today.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Titania says to Bottom:

'Sleep thou, and I will wind thee in my arms . . .

So doth the woodbines the sweet honeysuckles gently entwist, the female ivy so enrings the barked fingers of the elm.'

There are clues to a secret and sacred philosophy here. In ancient times an elm was sacred to the moon, and in Vergil's account of initiation an elm tree stands on the threshold of the otherworldly realm. The ivy was associated with Bacchus. Ivy is the emblem of passion unpruned: 'The predominant passion of the mind throws itself like the ivy round all human actions, entwines all our resolutions and perpetually adheres to, and mixes itself among, or even overtops them.'<sup>2</sup>

Bottom is being initiated according to rites that had been described in the second century by Apuleius. His sleep – 'more dead than common sleep' – is the trance of the candidate for initiation, induced while his material body is being refined and purified of its bestial appetites and while he is losing the asinine stupidity of the uninitiated. Titania says to Bottom, 'And I will purge thy mortal grossness so that thou shalt like an airy spirit go.' His spirit is to be freed like an initiate's to fly up through the spheres.

Afterwards, when Titania places roses on Bottom's head, he will be reborn and restored to waking consciousness. Coronets of roses were worn at Bacchanalian orgies, and in Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, it is roses that restore the ass to human shape. Rosicrucian spiritual practice symbolizes work on the chakras in the image of a garland of seven red roses on a cross. Seven roses also appear, of course, on the tomb of William Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's account of human history is a story of invisible events and improbable facts, but he is nevertheless asserting that this dimension is real and that his account of what happened there is accurate. In this

respect, his mystical thought is Sufi in flavour.

In his comedies, characters stray into the greenwood, where weird things begin to happen to them and their lives are transformed and put right. In Sufi terms, the greenwood is what has been called the *mundus imaginalis*.

Henry Corbin was a twentieth century French writer and philosopher responsible for explaining Sufi wisdom to a wider Western audience. He described the *mundus imaginalis* as a world between the worlds, a place that is ‘No place’. We should not try to find out where it is, he said, because ‘*Where is inside this realm.*’ For the most part we cannot perceive this world, because when we reach out to the physical world with our senses, we tuck away this other world with a will that lies far below the threshold of consciousness – what Corbin calls the ‘agnostic reflex’. In order to undo this and enter the *mundus imaginalis* we need to develop what Corbin calls the faculty of ‘active imagination’. By developing this faculty, adepts have perceived and even visited this realm. It has a consistent topography, including cities that all who enter may visit.

Because this realm lies in between the physical world and the world of the higher spiritual beings, if you can enter it and imagine what you desire with enough intensity, you can bring it to you in the material world.

Ibn Arabi advised on the development and practice of what today is sometimes called ‘lucid dreaming’. He wrote that if you discipline yourself to control your thoughts while dreaming, the alertness that this brings will enable you to become aware of the intermediate dimension, ‘which brings great benefits for everyone’.

*The Taming of the Shrew* is based on a Sufi parable about waking to higher states of consciousness. Katharina – the shrew – represents the unquiet part of ourselves that must be stilled before we can achieve higher consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Access to the higher states of consciousness is then achieved by developing the powers of the imagination that the Sufi’s described. A powerful imagination can effect changes in the material world. Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* talks of ‘the poet’s pen which turns the forms of things unknown . . . and gives to airy nothing a local habitation and name. Such tricks hath strong imagination.’ Prospero calls forth spirits to enact his ‘present fancies’.

Sufi wisdom offered practical methods for directing the power of mind over matter. *Himmah* is a concentrated spiritual energy that brings with it extraordinary power. A knower can affect any object by concentrating all their spiritual and imaginative energy in a certain definite direction. The highest knower can even bring physical objects into existence by exercising their *himmah*.

Symbols can play an important part in concentrating spiritual energy in Sufi teaching stories, in the Shakespeare's poetry and indeed in the stories in this book, devised by minds far greater than my own. Symbolism has a different function in idealism than it does in the world according to materialism, where symbols move only the mind. In the world according to idealism, you can, by contemplating symbols that strike a deep chord in the human psyche, send out vibrations that affect the very fabric of the material world.

It is of course widely speculated that Prospero in *The Tempest* is in part modelled on the famous Elizabethan magus Dr Dee. Many com-



Two rose images (from Harold Bayley's *The Lost Language of Symbolism*, 1912). Bayley says that the rose garden may represent either the enclosed garden in the Song of Solomon or the one in *The Romance of the Rose*. He associates roses with an awakening out of the forehead. The rose is the flower of love in Shakespeare, in *Romeo and Juliet* and the sonnets. It has come to seem a universal symbol of love and also very English, but in fact the glorious red roses referred to are probably Damask roses – from Damascus. Like the whole idea of falling in love, roses were a recent import from Arabia. I am indebted to my friend Roderick Brown for his original research into the importation of different types of roses. (See also Henry Nicholson Ellacombe, *The Plant-Lore and Garden-Craft of Shakespeare*, 1878, p.252.)

mentators have also noted that when a statue seems to come back to life at the end of *A Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare has clearly been influenced by Christian Rosencreutz's *Chymical Wedding*. *The Chymical Wedding* was published in 1616 and *A Winter's Tale* was produced 1609–10, but Rosencreutz's text was written and circulated privately before the writing of the play, and it's hard not to see the influence of Rosencreutz's imagery of the statues coming to life on Shakespeare's descriptions of Hermione coming back to life and the play's themes of magic, rebirth and transformation:

See, my lord, Would you not deem it breathed? and that those veins did verily bear blood? . . . The very life seems warm upon her lip . . . The fixtured of her eye has motion in't . . . There is an air comes from her: what fine chisel could ever yet cut breath? . . . the ruddiness upon her lip is wet . . . Shall I draw the curtain?

Hamlet stands at the dawn of the modern age and sees it going out of joint, going wrong, growing darker. Hamlet is learning how to live both in the newly dark material world and also in the giddy world opening up inside time. Earlier generations had almost no way of thinking about their internal life except using the narrow

language of the sermon. Every human being would now be able to develop a sense of an internal mental space that was as wide as the cosmos, and Shakespeare peopled that cosmos with a new race of characters – Lear, Falstaff, Romeo and Juliet, Puck, Prospero and Oberon.<sup>4</sup>

'There is more in heaven and earth than is dreamed of in your philosophy,' says Horatio. Our lives in the material world are relatively unreal and insubstantial. We are such stuff as dreams are made on. Our little life is bounded by a sleep. Shakespeare's great philosophical thrust and the great impulse behind the Rosicrucians were to show that the invisible and spiritual is



Ariel (by Robert Anning Bell).





The White Hart Inn, Scole, Norfolk, built 1655 (from C. J. Richardson, *Studies from Old English Mansions*, 1851). It is possible to catch in this old pub gateway the wild fairy riot of Shakespeare's England, brought back to life so beautifully and poignantly in Jez Butterworth's play *Jerusalem* (2009).

greater than the visible. To put it in Rosicrucian terms, Shakespeare gave shape, form and colour to God's great world-weaving thoughts, so that the human imagination could grasp them.<sup>5</sup>

*Hamlet* raises questions about different states of consciousness. Hamlet feigns madness, Ophelia goes mad, Hamlet may really be mad too. He suffers from the seventeenth century version of Plato's divine madness, famously depicted by Dürer in *Melencolia I* (1514) and called 'divine melancholia' or 'melancholic genius'.

This melancholia was said to afflict philosophers and writers of genius. Like them, Hamlet lives in an uncanny twilight, an alternative state of consciousness in which he sees great truths that the other characters in the play cannot see.<sup>6</sup>

Ted Hughes, the most prominent British poet of his generation, had a well-developed interest in esoteric and mystical thought. He wrote that in *Venus and Adonis* and then in *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare was describing a shift in society, a crisis caused by the rise of Puritanism. Shakespeare has Adonis shrinking from the goddess's desires. In

*Measure for Measure*, the Puritan Angelo is overcome by lust and tries to abuse his position to force Isabella to have sex with him, again with dire consequences. The Puritan is committing a crime against humanity, but this crime is not simply that he is repressing the sex drive, it's that he is repressing the sex drive as part of a drive to close down consciousness, to reduce it to a very narrow point of literal-mindedness, to materialism. What Shakespeare is depicting, then, is not just narrow attitudes to sex, but also narrow attitudes to consciousness.

Neither *Venus and Adonis* nor *Measure for Measure* are simply accounts of how a Puritanical attitude to sex causes problems in society,



In esoteric philosophy we are enabled to think because we direct life forces to power our thoughts. Thinking makes us a little less alive, leeches our life force – ‘the pale overcast hue of thought’ – and is in this sense a Saturnine process. (Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I*, 1514.)

because they work on many different levels. Some critics have tried to identify contemporaries of Shakespeare who might have been the model for Angelo, but Angelo's temptations are universal. We may all recognize the *Venus and Adonis* impulses working within us, and we may recognize Angelo and Isabella in ourselves too.

*Venus and Adonis* is historical in the sense that this story was enacted as sacred drama in the Mystery centres of the ancient world, and these dramas were reconstructed in the nineteenth and early twentieth century by scholars, including Sabine Baring-Gould and Sir James George Frazer. The story of Venus and Adonis depicts a religious ceremony which is a way of achieving higher states of consciousness. In this story Venus's interest in Adonis is not narrowly sexual. The mental *furor* she induces is a form of the divine madness.

Shakespeare writes with the multi-dimensional thinking characteristic of idealism. The truth of a line in Shakespeare cannot be determined by the law of excluded middle, a simple true or false test of the sort that binary thinking demands. It is true or false on many different levels, because it emanates from a consciousness that operates on many different levels.

So we should never say, 'I've discovered the real meaning of this story,' implying that it follows that previous accounts are false. According to Sufism's sophisticated ontologies, it is unwise to apply the law of the excluded middle to any sacred story. According to idealism, what we see with our senses is not reality but *virtuality*. What's important, valuable, meaningful and real lies somewhere else.

According to mystical teachings, we all have the potential for a multi-dimensional consciousness capable of these sorts of perceptions. Though we have forged a sense-oriented consciousness that is usually focused on the material world, our minds are still connected and in communication with the great Cosmic Mind with its limitless knowledge of past and future and other people's minds. According to Lorna Byrne, we are all capable of tuning into other dimensions, but habitually close our minds to them.

According to Ibn Arabi, our heart is continually changing, and this is because of the many different divine influences it feels. If we shut out the material world for a while and are attentive instead to the innermost part of ourselves, we may become aware of the changing





*The Soul of Shakespeare* (by George Romney).

It is thought that free access to the *mundus imaginalis* confers immense power – for good or evil. When David Bowie wrote ‘The Man Who Sold the World’ the occultist Aleister Crowley was much on his mind. Crowley had been called ‘the wickedest man in the world’ and was certainly very influential in the rise of the counterculture of the 1960s and also on the fashion for using occult lore for personal gain. David Bowie might also be said to have used his imagination to change the world. In the drab, recession-hit 1970s his musical landscapes and lyrics opened up other possible universes and ways of being.

and metamorphosing of forms there, and this is the beginning of a mystical view of life.

Shakespeare illuminated the ever-changing, infinitely various and beautiful inner life of humankind perhaps more than any other writer. His contemporary John Baptista von Helmont was likewise influenced by Sufism and intrigued by the Rosicrucians. Helmont wrote of the magic power that lies hidden in the inner life of humankind. For the most part, he wrote, it keeps sleeping, but it can be awakened either through divine illumination or by the spiritual exercises of the adept, who can awaken this power at will.

‘Such are called the makers of gold . . .’



The roof of Milan cathedral (engraving published in 1900). Churches have traditionally been oriented to planetary bodies. Robert Temple recently discovered that there is a lodestone built into the roof of Milan cathedral with no possible practical function. The metals of the planets are also involved in drawing down or warding off planetary influences.

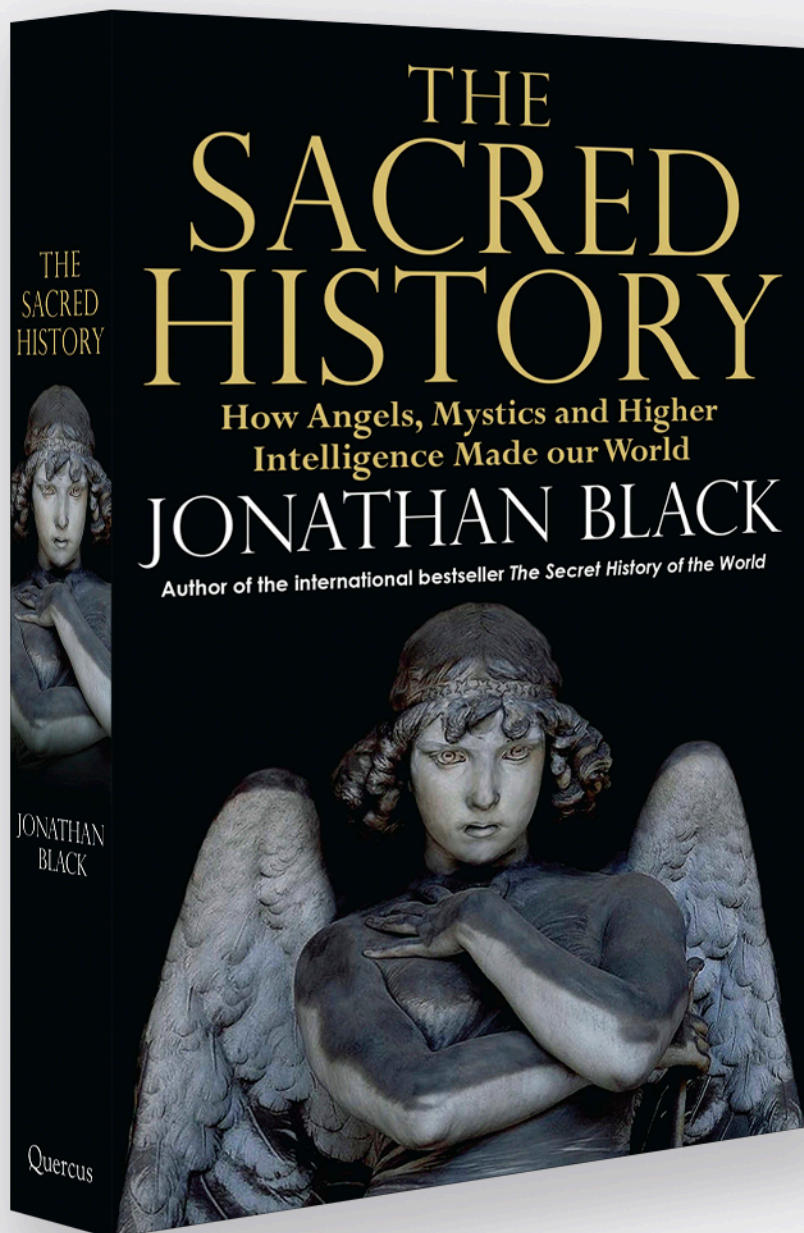


Altar of the chapel of St Ignatius Loyola, by Andrea Pozzo, in the church of the Gesù in Rome, the mother church of the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits. Pozzo's original statue of the saint in beatific vision was made of solid silver, but it was melted down to pay Napoleon. *The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola* (1548) were on one level the Catholic Church's response to the spiritual exercises taught by the Rosicrucians. Disciples of Ignatius Loyola, like Francis Xavier, were enabled to experience encounters with angels and other spiritual beings by the practice of these exercises.





*The Holy Family* (by Esteban Murillo, 1665–70). Mystical traditions around the world talk of a baby choosing to be born to its parents, in its particular body and situation. ‘A man is born into a world he has made,’ *Satapatha Brahmana* vi.2.2.2.27. ‘Entering into the state of existence the living being builds its own appropriate body,’ *Panchastikaya-sara* 136 *Treatise on Five Universal Components*, in the Jain scriptures. In Western art the esoteric symbol of this belief is the cherub.





**The history we were taught  
in school is secular history.**

**But what if the central claims  
of world religions are true?**

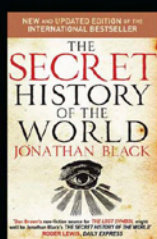
*The Sacred History* is the epic story of human interaction with angels and other forms of higher intelligence, from Creation through to the operations of the supernatural in the modern world.

What emerges is an alternative history of great men and women guided by angels or daemons, and the connection between modern day mystics and their ancient counterparts. A spellbinding historical narrative brings together Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Elijah, Mary and Jesus, Mohammed, Joan of Arc, Abraham Lincoln, the angels who helped Hungarian Jews persecuted by the Nazis and stories from African, Native American and Celtic traditions.

Woven into this is an amazing array of mystical connections, including the surprising roots not only of astrology and alternative medicine, but also important literary and artistic movements, aspects of mainstream science and religion, and a wide range of cultural references that takes in modern cinema, music and literature.

This is a book of true stories, but it is also a book *about* stories. It shows how they can tell us things about the deep structure of human experience that are sometimes forgotten, revealing mysterious patterns and mystic traces, and helping us to see the operation of the supernatural in our own lives.

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