

## THE SOPHIA CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF COSMOLOGY IN CULTURE

### Cosmology, Planet, Culture

The Sophia Centre was established at Bath Spa University in 2002 and moved to the University of Wales, Lampeter, now the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, in 2007.

The Sophia Centre's academic goals are

- 'to pursue research, scholarship and teaching in the relationship between astrological, astronomical and cosmological beliefs and theories, and society, politics, religion and the arts, past and present' and
- 'to undertake the academic and critical examination of astrology and its practice'.

The Centre's wider goal is stated in its title – to 'study cosmology in culture'. This enables us to tackle a wide range of topics, from Egyptian sky religion and Babylonian astrology, to astronomy in surrealist painting, astrology in contemporary culture, UFO abduction and the politics of the space race.

We take our inspiration from such figures as Gavin Pretor-Pinney, founder of the Cloud Appreciation Society, who said 'We don't live beneath the sky. We live within it'.<sup>1</sup> And from the poet Muriel Rukeyser, who wrote that 'The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.'<sup>2</sup> Or from the singer Tom Waits, who said 'When we're lost, what do we do? We look up to the night sky'.<sup>3</sup>

### Why Sophia?

In his great work *Nicomachean Ethics* the classical philosopher Aristotle listed five kind of knowledge. These are art (*technē*), knowledge (*epistēmē*), practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), philosophic wisdom (*sophia*), and comprehension (*nous*).<sup>4</sup> We pursue art, knowledge, practical wisdom and comprehension, but above all we encourage wisdom through critical thinking skills and academic perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Gavin Pretor-Pinney, 'Cloudy with a Chance of Joy', TED talk, June 2013,

[https://www.ted.com/talks/gavin\\_pretor\\_pinney\\_cloudy\\_with\\_a\\_chance\\_of\\_joy?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/gavin_pretor_pinney_cloudy_with_a_chance_of_joy?language=en)

See transcript at

[https://www.ted.com/talks/gavin\\_pretor\\_pinney\\_cloudy\\_with\\_a\\_chance\\_of\\_joy/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/gavin_pretor_pinney_cloudy_with_a_chance_of_joy/transcript?language=en)

<sup>2</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, "The Speed of Darkness" IX, from *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*. 2006, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/56287>,

<sup>3</sup> Tom Waits press conference in 'Tom Waits: Tales from a Cracked Jukebox', BBC 4 9 pm, 19 Feb 2017

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI 1139b15 – 1139b17. Translation by W. D. Ross in Jonathan Barnes (ed.), *The Complete Works of Aristotle Volume Two* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) p. 1799.

The Centre promotes research in the subject area, holds seminars and conferences, is associated with Sophia Centre Press and the publication *Culture and Cosmos*, and supervises PhD students.

### **Astronomy, Astrology and Cosmology in Culture**

Cultural Astronomy is the study of astronomy through its cultural applications in the arts, sacred architecture, religion, mythology, literature, history and politics. It extends from the study of ancient sites to the study of modern space exploration. Astrology itself is 'the practice of relating the heavenly bodies to lives and events on earth, and the tradition that has thus been generated'.<sup>5</sup>

As our first goal states, we examine the relationship between astrological, astronomical and cosmological beliefs and practices, and society, politics, religion and the arts, past and present. This is very broad, and the crucial word is 'practices'. Hence if you wanted to examine your own practice then we would give you the scholarly tools to do so and guide you through it.

We take our cue from Michael Hoskin, editor of the *Journal on the History of Astronomy*, who posed the question, 'what astronomy is not an astronomy in culture?'<sup>6</sup> We are heavily influenced by recent trends in anthropology, which means that modern western culture can be subject to the same academic scrutiny as pre-modern or non-western cultures, and by questions such as the requirement for the scholar or researcher to engage *in* practice as part of their study of practice.

We may also consider 'sky' in culture as a fourth area, along with 'cosmology', 'astronomy' and 'astrology' in culture. The Greek word 'ourania' is translated either as 'sky' or 'heaven', so can have either secular or spiritual connotations.

Cultural astronomy is an emerging discipline attracting an increasing number of scholars who are aware of the sky's importance to humanity. The importance of astrology in the history of ideas was established by Lynn Thorndike in 1905 in 'The Place of Magic in the Intellectual History of Europe'. Astrology's role in contemporary culture tends to be mentioned briefly by sociologists, often in a New Age context, but is rarely investigated in detail.

The words astronomy and astrology have distinct meanings in modern English. Astrology is more akin to a study of the psychic universe. The split between the two, though, is a feature of modern western thought. Both words are of Greek origin: astronomy means the 'law' of the stars, while astrology is best translated as the 'word', or 'reason', of the stars, so in the classical world their meanings overlapped. To the Greek scholar Claudius Ptolemy, writing in the second century CE, there were two forms of astronomy; one dealt with the movements of the stars, the other (which we would call astrology) with their effects or significance. From then until the seventeenth century, the two words were interchangeable. In 'King Lear', Shakespeare had Edgar refer to his brother Edmund, who had been posing as an astrologer, as a 'sectary

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<sup>5</sup> Patrick Curry, 'Astrology', in Kelly Boyd (ed.) *The Encyclopaedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, 2 Vols. London: Fitzroy Dearborn 1999, Vol. 1, pp 55-7 (p. 55).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Hoskin, review of *Astronomies and Cultures*, ed. Clive L. N. Ruggles and Nicholas J. Saunders (University of Colorado Press, Niwot, Col., 1993), *Archaeoastronomy*, number 21, supplement to the *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, vol. 27, 1996, p 885-7.

astronomical'. Other terms Shakespeare might have used included mathematician (the astronomer Johannes Kepler studied astrology as part of his duties as 'Imperial Mathematician') or Chaldean (both astrology and astronomy were commonly traced to Chaldea, another term for Mesopotamia).

A European astronomer prior to the seventeenth century could include amongst their tasks the interpretation of signs from God, the analysis of planetary influences on weather, the diagnosis and treatment of disease, the calculation of auspicious times to launch new enterprises, and the prediction of individual destinies.

Most (if not all) non-western cultures do not employ different words to distinguish traditional astronomy from astrology. In India both are *jyotish*, the 'science of light'. In Japan they are *onmyōdō*, the 'yin-yang way'. Historically speaking, in China, the observation and measurement of celestial phenomena were inseparable from their application to the application and understanding of the human experience including in being and relating to the environment. This practice was divided into two *li*, or *li fa*, calendar systems, and *tian wen*, or sky patterns. In Arabic astrology was known as *Ahkam al-Nudium*, literally, 'the decrees of the stars'. The title of the MA, whose subject matter includes the beliefs and practices of pre-modern and non-western cultures, as well as contemporary worlds, is therefore necessarily 'Cultural Astronomy AND Astrology'.

The Centre's purpose is to understand the cultural role and function of behaviour, practices, ideas and beliefs relating to the sky, rather than mathematical astronomy or technical astrology. We work from a humanities/social science perspective and encompass research styles and methodologies from anthropology, history, philosophy, religious studies and sociology. The focus is on astronomy and astrology as systems of story-telling about the cosmos, or as ways of locating meaning in the heavens.

A central feature of the Sophia Centre's work is the study of those traditional cosmologies in which the world is considered as a single whole, and there is no distinction between soul and body, mind and matter, science and spirituality. Modern cosmology also comes with an array of spiritual and religious positions, all of which we can also study.

Part of our work is academic in a conventional sense, and we study, analyse and critique texts. But a part of our work is also experiential. We believe it is important to understand how we feel when we experience a bright sunrise, the first appearance of the crescent new moon, or a brilliant dark sky, packed with stars, or even the strange and wonderful patterns made by clouds. It is in such experiences that the origin of the human fascination with the sky and the Cosmos lies.

Neither should we forget our earth is also a planet. We also look at what it means to live in the here and now, how we exist in the places we inhabit and move through, and how we judge them to be special or sacred. And at the heart of such study lies our care for the planet. As Carl Sagan wrote:

We have grown distant from the Cosmos. It has seemed remote and irrelevant to everyday concerns, but science has found not only that the universe has a reeling and ecstatic grandeur, not only that it is accessible to human understanding, but also that we are, in a very real and profound sense, a part of that Cosmos, born from it, our fate

deeply connected with it. The most basic human events and the most trivial trace back to the universe and its origins.<sup>7</sup>

And as Marcus Manilius asked in the 1<sup>st</sup> century:

Why wonder that men can comprehend heaven, when heaven exists in their very beings and each one is in a smaller likeness the image of God himself?<sup>8</sup>

These days, of course, we would talk about people rather than 'man'. But Manilius's sentiments hold true. And as Richard Wilhelm wrote of Taoist cosmology.

It is built on the premise that the cosmos and man, in the last analysis, obey the same law; that man is a microcosm and is not separated from the macrocosm by any fixed barriers. The very same laws rule for the one as for the other, and from the one a way leads into the other. The psyche and the cosmos are to each other like the inner world and the outer world. Therefore, man participates by nature in all cosmic events, and is inwardly as well as outwardly interwoven with them.<sup>9</sup>

Wilhelm's words could equally apply to other perspectives, including Indian philosophies, by Buddhist, classical Stoics and indigenous worldviews.

Above all, the Sophia Centre adheres to academic methods, to the principles of evidence-based critical thought and free debate.

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<sup>7</sup> Carl Sagan, *Cosmos: the Story of Cosmic Evolution, Science and Civilisation*, London: Warner Books 1994, p. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Manilius, *Astronomica*, trans. G. P. Goold (London: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp.293-295.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Wilhelm, *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life* (London: Arkana, 1931), p.11.