

MA Cultural Astronomy and Astrology

Astrology, History, Spirit and Soul

Week 8:

Weekly Description: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

Nick Campion

Purpose of this Class

The purpose this week is to develop a critical awareness of astrology in 17th century Europe, especially of its reform and 'decline'

Tasks this Week

- Continue to consider likely topics for your essays.
- Search online for additional scholarly material.
- Gather additional primary sources.

Weekly Description

This class will deal with the theory and practice of astrology in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, issues arising from the astronomical revolution and attempts to reform astrology, and the decline of astrology. This was a period of exploration, discovery and fragmentation. The most important development for astrology's public reputation was the beginning of the distinction between astrology and astronomy as completely different disciplines. The development of Neoplatonic and Hermetic trends in astrology continued with such figures as Jacob Boehme and Robert Fludd, and historians such as Gustav Faivre regard this as a seminal period in the development of the 'western esoteric tradition' and theosophy. Johannes Kepler became the most important of all astrological reformers. His rejection of almost the entire fabric of horoscopic astrology had little immediate effect but did encourage the streamlining of astrology evident in the work of Morinus, but only truly evident in the 20th century, in the work of such astrologers as the John Addey in the UK, the Hamburg School in Germany and Dane Rudhyar in the USA. His new aspects, though, were incorporated into mainstream astrology by astrologers such as William Lilly, even though their theoretical basis was entirely different to classical and medieval aspects. Kepler's insistence that astrology should be based on empirical data was taken up by a number of astrologers, such as John Goad, but was ignored by the majority, and was not seriously pursued until the

20th century. At the same time Jacob Boehme and Robert Fludd were taking Neoplatonic astrology in ever more mystical directions and laying the foundations for European theosophy.

It was during the 17th century that astrology experienced its major decline in Europe. Some historians have argued that it died out. Curry argued effectively that his 'high' (philosophical) and 'middling' (horoscope casting) astrology died out, or almost died out, but that 'low' (as in almanacs) astrology continued unaffected. I have suggested the 'high' astrology did not die out but was disguised within esoteric and occult currents within Freemasonry. The reason for the decline is not clear. Often the emergence of heliocentric astronomy is cited, on the grounds that astrology depended on a geocentric framework. The arrival of the telescope, and consequent changes in the way the sky was seen, might also be pertinent. Broader context is also suggested by some historians in the onset of 'modernity' and 'disenchantment'.

The soul

The debates, issues and questions concerning soul, character and astrology remained very much the same as we set out last week. The most significant and substantial work on astronomy, astrology and the soul since Plato was compiled by Johannes Kepler who combined his understanding of Pythagoras, his reading of Plato and many other writers, with practical astrology and observational astronomy. Kepler proposed a complete model of the operation of the world based on geometry, formulated the three laws of planetary and proposed a reformed astrology based on empirical observation. All this was encompassed within Kepler's devout Christianity and theory of soul.

Thought for the Week: Did astrology decline in 17th century Europe?