

ONE COULD ALMOST CALL IT HOLINESS...<sup>1</sup>

Pádraic E. Moore

Since the 1960s significant art historical research has revealed the extent to which many visual artists of the 20th century were influenced by esoteric philosophies. Some of these instances have brought to light the work of artists who were previously unknown. In recent years the paintings of Georgiana Houghton (1814-1884), Hilma af Klint (1862-1944) and Alfred Jensen (1903-1981) have gained considerable attention, while the research of individuals such as Sixten Ringbom has provided a different lens for interpreting the work of already known artists such as Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944).<sup>2</sup> The atmosphere of the early twentieth century was ripe for the emergence and embracement of new doctrines, many of which were founded upon elements of 19th century metaphysical movements such as Theosophy. One such doctrine was Mazdaznan, a particularly popular *Lebensreform* or 'life reform' movement of body consciousness, strict vegetarian diet and esoteric leanings. Mazdaznan had a significant, often misunderstood, impact upon the life and work of Johannes Itten (1888-1967) a key figure in the development of the Weimer Bauhaus.

Itten was a devout disciple of Mazdaznan and responsible for introducing it to students of the Bauhaus in the early 1920s. In its infancy the Bauhaus was an experimental centre of avant-garde activities in several disciplines very different from the later Bauhaus of industrial modernism that came to have a particular focus upon technical innovation in the realms of design and mass production. Itten and Mazdaznan brought to the early years of the Bauhaus a set of ideological tendencies and pedagogical techniques that can, from the perspective of today, seem simultaneously arcane, messianic, inspirational and morally repugnant.

Mazdaznan is a syncretic system founded in the U.S.A in the 1890s by Otto Hanisch (?–1936) who later became known as

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1 - Paul Citroen, *Mazdaznan at the Bauhaus* in Eckhard Neumann, *Bauhaus and Bauhaus People* (New York, Van Nostrand & Reinhold and London, Chapman Hall 1993) p47

2 - The work of Finnish art historian Sixten Ringbom (1935-1992) was pioneering in this field. His 1970 study *The Sounding Cosmos* claims that Theosophy had a decisive influence on Wassily Kandinsky and on the genesis of modern abstract art.



Portrait of Johannes Itten, 1923  
Photographer unknown  
Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin © DACS 2017

Dr. Otoman Zar-Adusht Ha'nish.<sup>3</sup> While it is confirmed that Ha'nish died in 1936, the date of his birth, like many other details of his life, are shrouded in mystery. The 'official' narrative, disseminated by those directly affiliated with the movement, claims Ha'nish was born in 1844 in Tehran where his father was a Russian diplomat. According to Mazdaznan disciples, Ha'nish was born with health problems and as a result was sent by his parents to live with mysterious Zoroastrian sect in a remote mountain monastery. There the initiates who were his guardians schooled him in breathing techniques and various forms of asceticism that ultimately enabled him to triumph over his potentially fatal illness. Other sources suggest that Ha'nish had been a typographer in Leipzig but relocated to Chicago and reinvented himself in a new guise as a spiritual guru. It was claimed by Upton Sinclair in his book *The Profits of Religion* that Ha'nish was merely a fraud. In Sinclair's scathing account of Mazdaznan he proposes the movement was founded with the sole intention of providing Ha'nish with a means of income, and that he was actually the son of a grocer from Illinois who had been involved with Mormons and various other Christian communities before establishing his own religious order or 'cult'.

What is known is that Ha'nish first began propagating Mazdaznan in the United States in the 1890s via public lectures, and a monthly magazine in which he presented some of the material that would eventually be published as *Mazdaznan Health & Breath Culture* and *Inner Studies*, both first published in Chicago in 1902. These publications underscore the extent to which Mazdaznan combines a diverse range of ideas regarding spiritual and physical wellbeing taken from numerous sources and presents them all within the frame of Zoroastrian mythology. Indeed, Ha'nish claimed Mazdaznan was in fact the modern inheritor of Zoroastrianism and that its connection to that ancient tradition was proof of its authenticity. In some ways, the movement might be considered as an emulation of its precursor, the Theosophical Society.

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3 - Ha'nish inserted Zar-Adusht into his name to elevate his status as a spiritual leader. The name has associations with Zoroaster and underscored his allegedly noble birth: the word *zar* means 'prince' in Arabic.  
 4 - Upton Sinclair, *The Profits of Religion* (Pasadena, self-published 1918) in the section *The Church of the Quacks* pg 251-254



Portrait of Dr. Otoman Zar Adusht Ha'nish used in Mazdaznan magazines and books from 1908 to 1940  
Photographer unknown

The establishment of the Theosophical Society in 1875 and its subsequent flourishing resulted in the surge of interest in esotericism and a fascination with various forms of Eastern thought. A spectrum of concepts taken from Hinduism (including reincarnation and karma) were introduced by figures associated with Theosophy and gained traction at this time. From Yoga, Theosophy took the concept that freedom of thought and spirit could be achieved through various bodily processes and exercises. The foundations, and the ultimate impact, of the Theosophical Society have more significance than Mazdaznan but both the movements share the characteristic of being an amalgamation of diverse elements from numerous sources.

Both Theosophy and Mazdaznan have been viewed as modern responses to the Western processes of rationalisation and secularisation, something Wouter Hanegraaff referred to as representing a decisive watershed in the history of western esotericism.<sup>5</sup> The initial success of both can be attributed in part to the fact that they both provided a means to counter the materialism of the late 19th and early 20th century. Perhaps another comparison to be made between Mazdaznan and Theosophy is the way in which the charismatic leaders of both movements are said to have acquired their wisdom. Ha'nish and Helena P. Blavatsky (the latter being one of the three founders of the Theosophical Society) claimed to have acquired vast swathes of knowledge via mysterious modes of communication with ascended masters and unseen intelligences. In *The Secret Doctrine* Blavatsky maintains that there were centres of esoteric learning and initiation in the East.<sup>6</sup> Blavatsky claimed to have read the stanzas of Dzyan in a Himalayan Lamasery and that there were many similar centres of esoteric learning and initiation elsewhere. According to Blavatsky there were magnificent libraries and fabulous monasteries in mountain caves and underground labyrinths throughout central Asia. Comparisons can be also be made between Ha'nish, Blavatsky and George Gurdjieff (?-1949)

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5 - Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (New York, State University of New York Press 1998) p406

6 - Helena P. Blavatsky, *Cosmogogenesis: The Secret Doctrine, the Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy* (London, Theosophical Publishing Company 1888)

the proponent of *The Fourth Way* whose early life is similarly shrouded in mystery. All were adept at self mythologising and purposefully generating enigma.

Much like Theosophy, which Blavatsky acknowledged was comprised of multiple spiritual paths, Mazdaznan combined numerous sources. However, a significant difference between the two is that while Blavatsky suggests that a certain divine wisdom unites all spiritual traditions Ha'nish makes the claim that it was Mazdaznan specifically that was the supreme source of occult knowledge and that it had been plagiarised for aggrandisement by (other) individuals and schools.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, according to Ha'nish there was almost no system of thought that had not benefited in some way from Mazdaznan and it was therefore the most worthy path to follow. Yet paradoxically, the aspects of Mazdaznan that pertain to spiritual doctrine are notably vague and disparate. The main emphasis of the movement seems to be upon a vegetarian dietary regime, breathing exercises, physical postures and other forms of body related therapeutics, particularly colonic flushing and intestinal care.

*Inner Studies* details the stringent hygiene and dietary routine that practitioners were expected to follow in order to ensure that they would attain both physical and spiritual purity. The focus on dietary discipline, frequent enemas and exercises, such as The Egyptian Postures depicted in this publication, has been succinctly described as *medical occultism* by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke.<sup>8</sup> Throughout *Inner Studies* Ha'nish claims that certain exercises and physical postures can 'stir negative forces' within the body and change currents into positive actions. The exercises are said to act particularly on the glands, stimulating the *epiphysis*, or *pineal gland*, *the spinal cord*, *the solar plexus* and *the sympathetic nerves*. Although Ha'nish always referred to himself as Dr. or M.D. this title seems to have been added at the same time, and in the same way, as the honorific Otoman Zar-Adusht. It is evident from Mazdaznan literature that Ha'nish seems to conflate bodily

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7 - Dr. O. Z. Ha'nish, *Health & Breath Culture* (Chicago, Mazdaznan Press 1914) p1

8 - Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany, 1890-1935* (New York University Press, 1992)

purification with states of spiritual transcendence. In *Health and Breath Culture* Ha'nish claims that:

*by controlling the flow of ether in the pituitary gland, one's perceptions expand and the liquid of the optic nerve increases its operations equal to the travels of the cosmic ray: disclosing the pathway revealing greater possibilities.*

There is a recurring preoccupation with purging the body in a variety of ways and this obsession was occasionally taken to extremes. Some branches of the group practiced dermal piercing, using needles to prick the skin and cause blisters that would erupt and 'release toxins' that had accumulated beneath the epidermis.<sup>9</sup>

As one might expect from a movement which advised abstinence from alcohol, tobacco and meat, Mazdaznan literature also suggests sexual abstinence outside marriage should be practiced. In *Inner Studies* sexual arousal and appetites are explained as the psychological symptoms of bowel problems which should be remedied with a particularly thorough enema. The importance of enemas to good health appears to be a central tenet of Mazdaznan culture. For those who chose to engage in sexual intercourse Ha'nish also provided instructions on how the body should be controlled. The retention of the seminal fluid by men is advised, the suggestion being that abstaining from ejaculation was the key to living for many hundreds of years. In *The Profits of Religion* Sinclair describes how Ha'nish regularly claimed to be thirty years older than he actually was, his wrinkle free face and youthful walk supposed evidence of the efficacy of his dietary and breathing habits.

While some aspects of Mazdaznan doctrine may today seem rather restrictive and disciplinarian, there were progressive facets to the movement. This is most apparent in the emphasis upon sex and sexual equality. In *Inner Studies* Ha'nish writes at length on the importance of the sexual satisfaction of women within marriage, which led to the book being declared obscene and

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9 - Mel Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin* (Los Angeles, Feral House 2000) p41





Ha'nish's arrest and brief imprisonment. Mazdaznan was equally strident about women's place within society:

*It is proper that man should understand woman as women understand men, for when the line between them can no longer exist and the barrier broken down the unveiled mystery conceived to keep mankind in a condition of deep ignorance will lose its charm...that woman will steadily come to the front and the day is not too far distant when she will. Man has nothing to fear. He should call this day welcome for through it salvation will come to him as well.<sup>10</sup>*

These progressive elements co-existed with a horror of miscegenation and other views influenced by one of the more abhorrent trends of the era; eugenics. As the history of the eugenics movement reveals, it flourished to an astounding degree in the early twentieth century. Early Mazdaznan literature has a preoccupation with race evolution, racial superiority and anti-Semitism, and propagates the idea that the earth should be ruled by the *true Aryan race*, a position that gained support a few decades later in the Third Reich. This aspect of the movement's philosophies garnered varying levels of popularity in different locations and appears to have been eliminated from the movement as it was modernised over the years. Indeed, a glance at contemporary Mazdaznan literature makes no reference to these elements that will be discussed in greater detail later.

The establishment of the German branch of the Theosophical Society in 1884 can be considered as constituting the dawn of an occult revival in Germany. This period was characterised by a sense of growing disillusionment with orthodox religion, hastened by the demystifying progress of science that left many suffering from a form of spiritual hunger. Ultimately, the zeitgeist was ripe for the flourishing of movements like Mazdaznan that appeared to offer an antidote to the spiritual bankruptcy of the era. In addition, the 'life reform' groups promoted an interest in body culture, advocating novel forms of physical exercises which they

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10 - Dr. O. Z. Ha'nish, *Inner Studies* (Chicago, Sun-Worshiper Publishing Company 1902) p104

claimed would restore 'well being' to those who practiced them.

Mazdaznan was introduced to Europe from America via Germany in 1907 by David Ammann (1855-1923) and subsequently popularised by Ha'nish himself in 1911 via a series of lectures. Mazdaznan proved particularly popular in Germany and Switzerland where it appealed predominantly to the burgeoning middle classes, many of whom viewed industrialisation and the expansion of urban living as destructive, and idealised the tenets of the back-to-nature trend. The movement spread quickly in its initial phase with Mazdaznan vegetarian restaurants established in Berlin, Leipzig, Weimar and other German cities. This success can be connected with the widespread adoption of *Lebensreform* that was manifest most visibly in the emergence of many alternative communities in rural areas. These groups sought to practice natural medicine, vegetarianism, nudism and other restorative pursuits believing this would aid them in their return to a pre-industrial idyll.<sup>11</sup>

Johannes Itten is thought to have become aware of Mazdaznan as early as 1912 in Bern and is known to have been a member of the Aryana Mazdaznan temple community that existed in Herrliberg by Lake Zurich. By 1918 Itten was a devotee and was producing work which displays a direct influence of the ideas and symbolism that are central to Mazdaznan.<sup>12</sup> The fact that Itten was deeply engaged with the organisation before joining the Bauhaus is an important detail, revealing the extent of his involvement with the esoteric organization. It also suggests that involvement in such organisations would not have been considered outlandish at this time. Indeed, Itten was recommended to the director of the Weimar Bauhaus, Walter Gropius (1883-1969), by his wife Alma Mahler who was then an ardent Theosophist. By the time Gropius encountered Itten he already had the reputation as a highly respected teacher. Having trained in Geneva and Stuttgart, Itten worked as a primary school teacher and received several degrees

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11 - It should be noted that this romantic idealisation of nature which distinguished the *Lebensreform* was never an ideal advocated at the Bauhaus. In fact Gropius opposed it.

12 - Christoph Wagner, *Bauhaus Before the Bauhaus - Johannes Itten's Painting The Encounter*  
[http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/2173/1/Wagner\\_Bauhaus\\_before\\_the\\_Bauhaus\\_2009.pdf](http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/2173/1/Wagner_Bauhaus_before_the_Bauhaus_2009.pdf)  
 (accessed August 2016)

before opening his own art school in Vienna where he was said to have been worshipped by his students. Ironically, while this popularity among students initially appealed to Gropius, it would eventually be one of the reasons for Itten's departure from the Bauhaus just a few years later.

Itten was appointed as one of the first masters of the Bauhaus in October 1919 and used his wealth of experience to develop the renowned Vorkurs, the primary course which was the fundamental foundation of learning at the school. The magnitude of this role cannot be over emphasised and gives some indication of Itten's influence as a pedagogue. Itten sought to foster an intuitive approach in each of his students and was significantly influenced by the theories of Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) a German educator who pioneered the integration of active play into the learning process. The preliminary course consisted of a six-month programme which was compulsory for Bauhaus students to attend. The idea was to provide a shared foundation and unburden or uncondition students of their preconceived knowledge and assumptions regarding artistic production. Students would explore the standard subjects of form and colour but Itten also introduced them to particular forms of exercise, meditation, breathing techniques and concentration methods, many of which were directly taken from Mazdaznan practices. Personal accounts from the time indicate that these additional elements were significantly influenced by Itten's desire to promulgate the ideas of Ha'nish to his own students. Itten later wrote:

*It is not only a religious custom to start instruction with a prayer or a song but it also serves to concentrate the students wandering thoughts. At the start of the morning I brought my classes to mental and physical readiness for intensive work through relaxing, breathing and concentration exercises. The training of the body as an instrument of the mind is of the greatest importance for creative man.<sup>13</sup>*

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13 - Johannes Itten, *Design and Form, the Basic Course at the Bauhaus* (London, Thames and Hudson 1964) p11



Oskar Schlemmer (links in Uniform) zu Besuch in Ittens Stuttgarter Atelier, 1915  
Foto Christoph Wagner, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2002

Initially, Itten's practices and zealous nature were tolerated at the Bauhaus and he converted many of his students to Mazdaznan. There was what Peter Staudenmaier refers to as a bewildering array of ideologies and esoteric paths available at that time, combinations of which would be viewed as incompatible today.<sup>14</sup> The desire to find new spiritual paths and modes of living was in no small way a manifestation of the aftermath of WW1. Itten's charisma and messianic approach must have seemed reassuring to those who sought some form of guidance. Writing in the early 1920s about how students responded to the regime he promoted, Itten acknowledges that while students would initially express a certain amount of resistance they would, after a few days, join in with enthusiasm. One can imagine a coterie of enthused students meeting for Mazdaznan meetings in Itten's studio, a studio appropriately located in a building that had formerly been used by Knights Templars as a lodge house.<sup>15</sup>

Itten's practices as a teacher were motivated by the aim of expanding his students' range of perception; to widen their awareness with a particular focus upon colour. In these efforts he recruited Gertrud Grunow (1870–1944). Grunow taught her course on the Theory of Harmony at the Bauhaus from 1919 to 1923 as part of the Vorkurs and claimed she was capable of using music and trance to harmonise the latent creative powers of students.<sup>16</sup> It is useful to read accounts of those who had direct experience of what it was like to work under Itten and Grunow. The reports of Paul Citroen (1896-1983) whose own work was significantly influenced by Itten are particularly insightful:

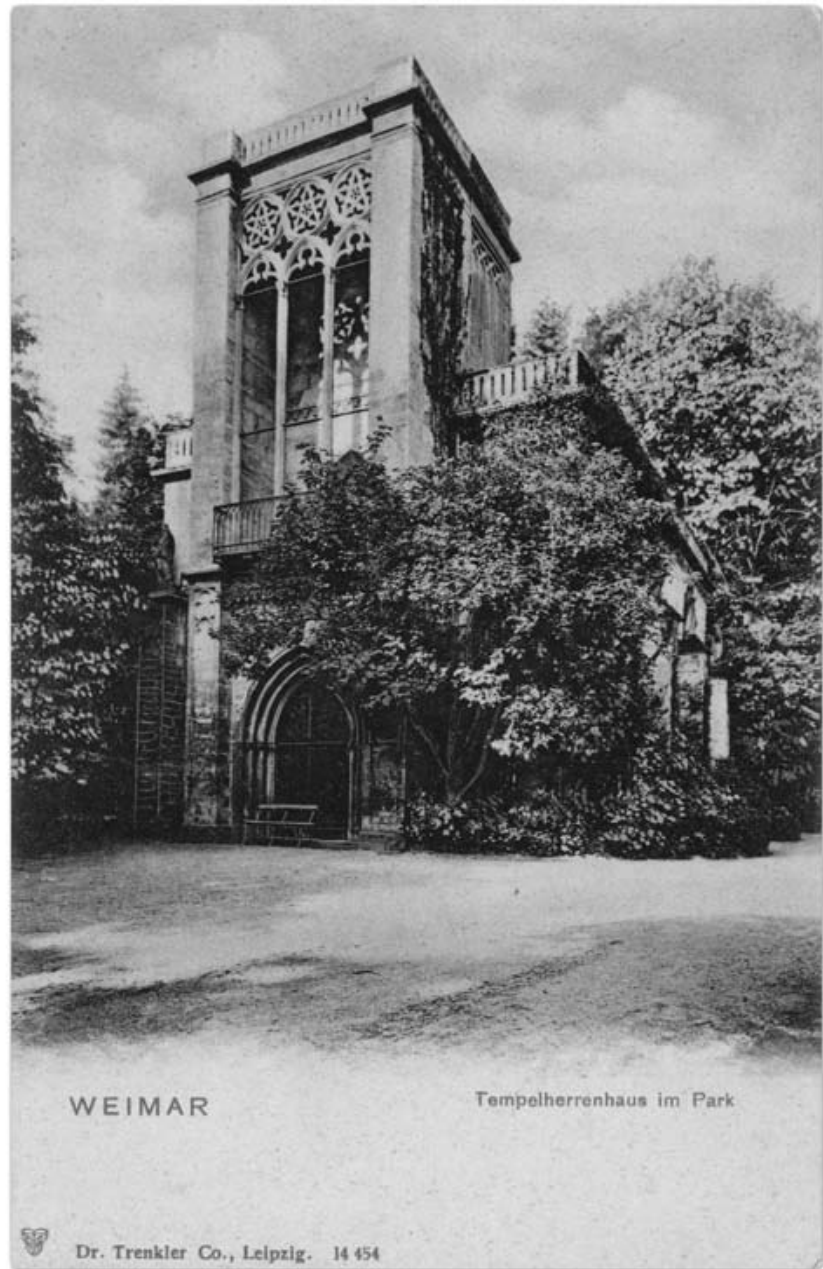
*I was, like all the new entrants, a pupil on the Vorkurs, which Itten taught. At that time Itten was so full of Mazdaznan, expected so much from a deep immersion in the teachings,*

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14 - Peter Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Fascism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race and Nation in Germany and Italy, 1900-1945* (Unpublished dissertation, Cornell University 2010) p80

15 - Appropriately, this building possessed several structural elements conceived by Goethe during his time in Weimar. The Templar House was almost completely destroyed by the bombing of Weimar in 1945 and is now a ruin. However, the pentagram windows and the sculptural figures of Knights Templars are still intact.

16 - From the early 1910s Grunow was exploring the fundamental relationships of sound, colour and movement. She continued her teaching activities from 1926 to 1934 in Hamburg and subsequently worked for several months in England and Switzerland before returning to Germany during the war. Gertrud Grunow died in Leverkusen in 1944.



Postcard showing Tempelherrenhaus, Weimar  
Circa 1935  
Photographer unknown

*that soon after the beginning of the course he took several months leave in order to be fully initiated into this doctrine at Herrilberg on Lake Zurich, the European seat at the centre of Mazdaznan...Itten knew how to inflame us, shake us up, break down all the dikes and plunge us into a veritable frenzy of production, and still become one of us. We had the greatest respect for him. There was something demonic about Itten. As a master he was either ardently admired or just as ardently as hated by his opponents, of whom there were many. At all events it was impossible to ignore him. For those of us who belonged to the Mazdaznan group - a unique community within the student body - Itten exuded a special radiance. One could almost call it holiness...Itten, entrusted with the mysteries of reincarnation and other secrets of doctrine by virtue of his weeks in Herrilberg, was our undisputed master and leader.<sup>17</sup>*

As the coterie around Itten became increasingly cultish and fanatical, the presence of Mazdaznan within the Bauhaus grew more divisive. Another account from Paul Citroen details how the Mazdaznan clique distanced themselves from other students. He and his fellow Mazdaznan disciples *practiced aloofness and eventually the clique began to consider themselves superior, the doctrine made us arrogant and despise the uninitiated.*<sup>18</sup> Eventually, Itten's methodology and mystical tendencies were viewed as incompatible with the direction the Bauhaus was being steered in by Gropius. In an attempt to lessen the dominance of Itten's influence, Oskar Schlemmer (1888-1943) and Paul Klee (1879-1940) were employed to assume some of Itten's responsibilities, therein reducing the extent of his leadership. Schlemmer describes how Itten and Gropius represented two opposing alternatives:

*...on the one hand the influence of oriental culture, the cult of India, a return to the Wandervogel movement...communes, vegetarianism, Tolstoyism, reaction against the war and on the other hand the American spirit, progress, the marvels*

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17 - Excerpted from Paul Citroen, *Mazdaznan at the Bauhaus* in Eckhard Neumann, *Bauhaus and Bauhaus People* (New York, Van Nostrand & Reinhold and London, Chapman Hall 1993) p44-50

18 - Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus, 1919-1933* (Berlin, Bauhaus-Archiv and London, Taschen 2002) p30



*of technology and invention, the urban environment...  
progress, expansion and self fulfilment.*<sup>19</sup>

In her study of the early years of the Bauhaus, Éva Forgács characterises the school as suffering from a type of schizophrenia and this is certainly represented by Gropius and Itten. However, the discord at the Bauhaus was not just a result of the differing dispositions between the rationally minded and the cosmically inclined. Personal letters from Itten at the time reveal that he viewed Gropius as a bureaucrat and that he wished to assume the role of director of the institution himself. So, one can view the rupture as resulting from Itten's aspirations for increased authority as much as ideological differences. Both students and colleagues alike had issues with Itten and accused him of splitting the Bauhaus into two camps. Indeed the fact that Itten was infringing upon the constitution of the Bauhaus by involving Mazdaznan in his teaching methods is confirmed by accounts of several students from this time. Students found it difficult to work with figures like Grunow, whose approaches were viewed not only as unorthodox but excessively bizarre. These tensions within the Bauhaus led to Itten's departure in 1923, an event that is a key turning point in the history of the school and precipitated a radical shift in its direction. In the same year, Gertrud Grunow also ceased teaching and Gropius dismissed Lothar Schreyer (1886-1966) who had been employed only two years previously to coordinate the Bauhaus theatre program.<sup>20</sup> Schreyer was a mystic, fascinated with archaic Christianity and was himself developing a group of followers around him. Presumably, Gropius was compelled to eliminate the risk of another fanatical cult emerging at the Bauhaus. Expelling individuals with esoteric tendencies was intended not only to maintain a sense of internal harmony but also to assuage citizens of Weimar, some of whom viewed the school with disdain and were outwardly critical of it as a suspect and wayward institution.<sup>21</sup>

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19 - Éva Forgács, *The Bauhaus Idea And Bauhaus Politics* (Oxford University Press 1995) p78

20 - Lothar Schreyer coordinated the Bauhaus theatre program from 1921 to 1923. Gropius initially regarded Schreyer as a prophet of performance art. Schreyer announced that expressionistic performance had *nothing to do with theatre but was a completely different stage artwork*.

21 - An article in *The Weimarische Zeitung* from June 1924 claimed that licentiousness was rife at the Bauhaus, that one student had become pregnant and another had had an affair with a master. It warned that people must be prevented from sending their sons and daughters there.

Whereas the beginnings of the Bauhaus in Weimar were shaped by an array of influences, of which Itten's esotericism was key, the elimination of these elements was an effort to steer the school into less controversial territories and increase its status as an organisation of practical and applicable artworks. By 1923 mystical modes of thought were replaced by a more outwardly rational and ultimately materialistic approach. It may have also been that Gropius had become uncomfortable with certain socio-political alignments within the wider movement. Perhaps he recognised that the racial mysticism and body culture promoted by Mazdaznan was strikingly similar to that being advocated by the early Nazi Party.

From its inception, Mazdaznan was distinguished by a recurring obsession with attempts to achieve physical and spiritual purity. Mazdaznan literature conflates theories gleaned from Theosophy regarding 'root races' with racist ideas concerning the racial superiority - and the spiritual advancement - of certain cultures.<sup>22</sup> Pseudo-scientific theories are endorsed regarding the relationship between ethnicity and notions of physical and spiritual purity. In the Mazdaznan system of evolution the soul progressed through a variety of stages and was at its most advanced when manifest in the Aryan race. The belief was that even this state was transitory and the physical body would itself eventually be completely jettisoned and the soul would continue its path toward a higher level of divine being and intelligence. The ultimate stage of this evolution was a being composed entirely of pure light.

Although Ha'nish was not personally affiliated with any fascist organisation his literature contains repeated references to a desire to maintain the inherent 'purity' of certain racial types. This is exemplified in several sections of *Inner Studies* and publications such as *Yehoshua* (1917) in which Ha'nish argues that Jesus could not have been a Jew because *...as a Jew He would have been compelled to parade tribal limitation*. Ha'nish's preoccupation

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22 - A number of scandals also led to the movement being represented in a negative light in the media. In 1912 Mazdaznan was the focus of a particularly high profile court case in the U.S.A which became known as the *Billy Lindsay Case*. It centred around a 12 year old heir who was 'rescued' from the 'immoral cult' by a concerned relative.



Postcard showing Dr. Otoman Zar Adusht Ha'nish  
Circa 1930  
Photographer unknown

with racial purity is also evident in passages such as: *Each race must keep itself free from intermixing with other races, that each may bring out the best so they won't interfere with each other. It is not a teaching of race hatred but a teaching of race respect.*<sup>23</sup>

The early 20th century was distinguished by extremes in socio-political and cultural spheres. The atmosphere was conducive to the emergence of organisations whose dogmas contained sets of ideas that can today appear contradictory. This is apparent in the convoluted alignments between esoteric organisations and right wing movements exemplified in Mazdaznan but to a much greater extent Armanism, Ariosophy and Theozology.<sup>24</sup> The existence of these movements and indeed the racial theories espoused by certain Theosophists and Anthroposophists underscore how widely racist ideas were integrated into spiritual movements in the interwar years. Historian Paul Staudenmaier notes that the support and involvement of several Nazi leaders meant that a number of esoteric organisations were not merely tolerated but were in fact initially embraced by the Third Reich.<sup>25</sup> Movements such as Mazdaznan cultivated pastoral ways of living which were compatible with certain Nazi visions of a 'modern' future. Staudenmaier suggests that the alignments that emerged during the European occult revival were the manifestations of pan-European forms of social modernism bent on resolving the spiritual crisis of the West created by materialism and rationalism.

In the post-war years there has been a retrospective attempt to revise and sanitise the repugnant aspects of Mazdaznan, and assessing Mazdaznan in its current attenuated form, one would never suspect it once advocated eugenics in the hope that the world might one day be ruled by an 'Aryan master race'. Today Mazdaznan appears to have been cleansed of its more sectarian elements and is claimed to be no more than a holistic health

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23 - Dr. O. Z. Ha'nish, *Yehoshua Nazir - The Life of Christ* (California, Mazdaznan Press 1917) p172

24 - Armanism, founded by Guido von List, and Ariosophy and Theozology, founded by Jörg Lanz von Liebenfels, were esoteric systems present in Austria between 1890 and 1930. They can be viewed as part of the occult revival which occurred in Austria and Germany in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, combining concepts of German romanticism with pseudoscientific ideas concerning the pre-eminence of the Aryan race.

25 - Peter Staudenmaier, *Between Occultism and Fascism: Anthroposophy and the Politics of Race and Nation in Germany and Italy, 1900-1945* (Unpublished dissertation, Cornell University 2010) p520

movement or a *life science of ancient Persian origin, similar to the training system of Indian Yoga or Ayurveda.*<sup>26</sup>

It should also be noted that the extent to which these racial aspects of the movement were embraced varied in different locations. Although some followers in America held racist and anti-Semitic principles it was in Germany and Switzerland where *völkisch* ideals proved particularly popular.<sup>27</sup> The literature produced by the movement in America and Britain is for the most part devoted to breath, diet and self-help and is devoid of overtly prejudicial material. The major exception is a passage in the Posture Lesson that follows the Introduction to The Egyptian Postures, and that appears at the beginning of this book. It is worth quoting this in full:

*The Ancients seemed to have understood the physiological modus operandi of heart and mind when they said: "From an impure heart flow evil thoughts." Father Ammann in "The Coming Race and Race Hygiene" gives to the scientific world the key to life when he says: "Blood is the original matter which influences all outer manifestations and formations and changes them in the course of development. Blood is the essential race builder. The consistency of the blood determines the infallible sign of racial relation. The purer the blood, the clearer the pigment. The darker the skin, the lower the race. Blood is not only the carrier of the inherited, but also the progenitor to all the attainable spiritual tendencies.*

It is interesting that Ha'nish attributes this most extreme and disturbing statement of racial superiority to his disciple based in Germany. While several books solely on Mazdaznan theories of race and eugenics were published in German by Ammann they seem to have no English equivalent.

The later alliance between esoteric organisations and the Nazi party should not be viewed as anything but tenuous and

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26 - Quote from a website of Mazdaznan movement: [http://mazdaznan.ca/history\\_of\\_mazdaznan.php](http://mazdaznan.ca/history_of_mazdaznan.php)

27 - Constantine Leon de Aryan (1886-1935) was a notorious right-wing anti-emite who championed Mazdaznan in the U.S.A and who stood for Mayor of San Deigo in 1932.

temporary. Despite contemporaneous reports of swastikas hanging in its Leipzig headquarters, Mazdaznan was one of many esoteric organisations banned by the Ministry of Interior in 1935, part of a purge of similar groups that resulted in an elimination of much occult activity in the Third Reich. The anti-Semitic magazine *Judenkenner* described Mazdaznan as a *mask for International Jewry* while an SS memo concluded that it *denies all Nazi principles. It must be destroyed.*<sup>28</sup>

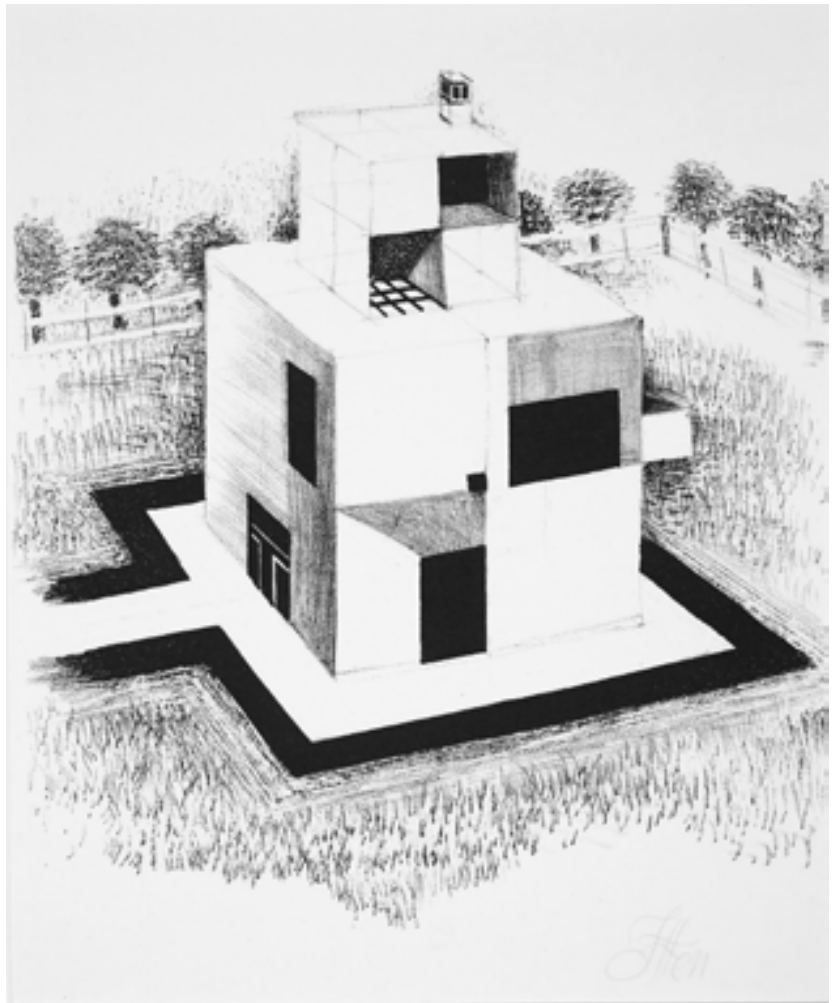
Itten was never affiliated directly with the Nazi party, unlike Lothar Schreyer who became involved with the party after his departure from the Bauhaus. The fact that the private art school which Itten established independently in Berlin after his departure from the Bauhaus was shut down by the party in 1935 might be seen as evidence that he did not subscribe to Nazi ideals. Indeed, that Itten's paintings were included in the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition of 1937 demonstrates that he and his work was viewed - or at least came to be viewed - as degenerate by the establishment. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Itten's lithograph *House of the White Man* from the first portfolio produced by the Bauhaus masters in 1921 not only represents one of the first depictions of an overtly modernist and constructivist building but also suggests that he openly subscribed to the religio-racist beliefs of Mazdaznan. Magdalena Droste describes how Itten made several contributions to art magazines at the time discussing theories of racial evolution and arguing that the 'white race' represented the highest form of civilisation.<sup>29</sup>

In the long term the presence of malevolent elements within Mazdaznan corrupted the movement and tainted some of those affiliated with it. However, in the early years Mazdaznan seems to have functioned as a revelation for some and, in the case of Itten, as a catalyst for the formation of a new aesthetics. This is exemplified in his *Tower of Fire*, the no longer extant abstract work that may have been a sculpture or perhaps a maquette for a prospective architectural structure. Much like *Monument to*

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28 - Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press 2004) p229

29 - Magdalena Droste, *Bauhaus, 1919-1933* (Berlin, Bauhaus-Archiv and London, Taschen 2002) p32



*House of the White Man (Haus des weißen Mannes)* from the portfolio *New European Graphics*, 1st Portfolio: *Masters of the State Bauhaus, Weimar, 1921* (*Neue europäische Graphik, 1. Mappe: Meister des Staatlichen Bauhauses in Weimar, 1921*)

Johannes Itten

Johannes-Itten-Stiftung, Kunstmuseum Bern © DAKS 2017

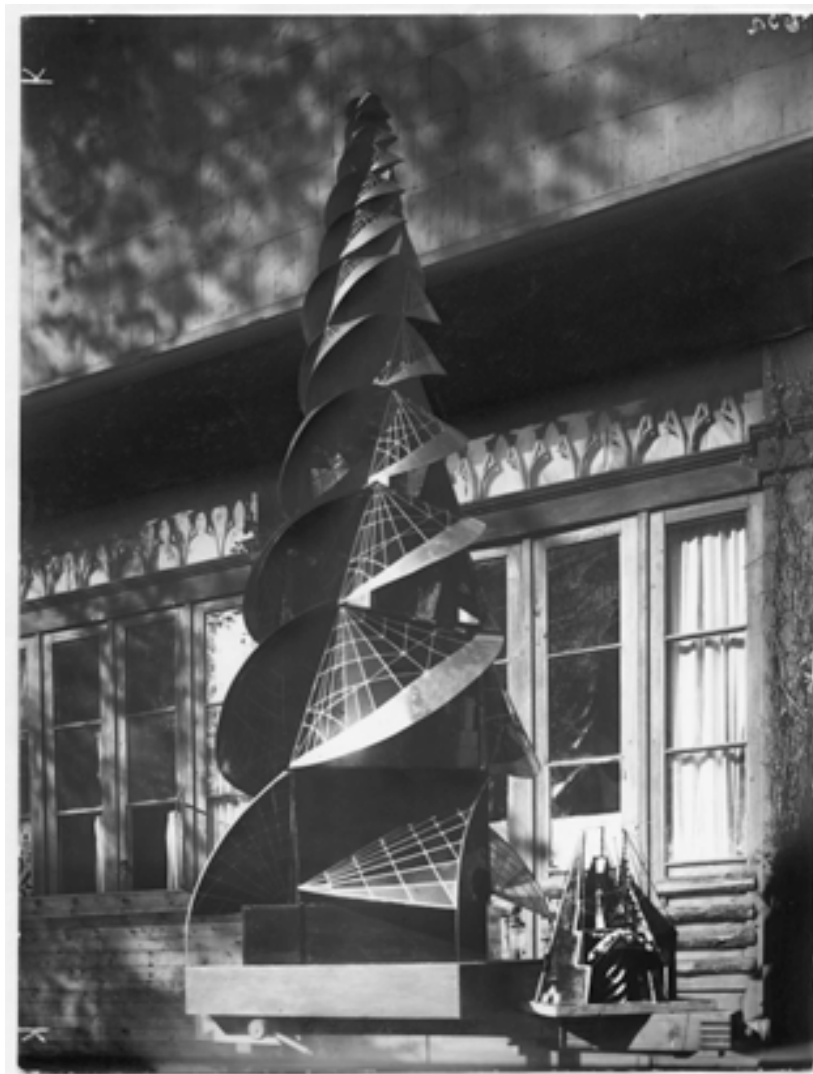
*the Third International* (1919–20) by Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953) Itten's *Tower of Fire* is known today only via photo documentation, sketches and later reconstructions.<sup>30</sup> The structural elements of Itten's tower can be read according to their formal and numeric symbolism. For example, the spiral that constitutes the backbone of the tower represents the possibility of achieving ascended states and spiritual evolution, aims that are central to Mazdaznan. The same symbolism is also seen in Itten's painting *Die Begegnung* (*The Encounter*) which dates from 1916 and can be viewed as a demonstration of the artist's exploration of colour theory and his experiments with colour rhythms and contrast. The structure is replete with numeric symbolism, the number twelve recurring throughout the tower in glass and metal forms. This connects with the diagrammatic star of twelve colours devised by Itten as a means of introducing his Bauhaus students to colour theory. This recurrence of the number twelve can be linked to Itten's preoccupation with the zodiac but is also related to the artist's investigations into twelve-tone music and harmonies at this time. Constructed from an array of multi-coloured glass panels, the tower tapered toward the top like a conical shell. Black and white images can offer only a limited idea of how striking this monumental prismatic minaret must have appeared. Moreover, since Itten envisaged the tower as a kinetic *gesamtkunstwerk* in which all art forms were unified it would have also emitted light and sound.

Of all the ways that Mazdaznan influenced Itten, the most positive and indeed the most historically significant was the way in which it informed his teaching techniques. Itten's development of a holistic educational programme that sought to activate the body and the mind of his student through physical and mental exercises was influenced directly by his desire to synthesise Mazdaznan into the curriculum. The fact that Itten's pedagogical system remained a key element of the Bauhaus syllabus after his departure and is still in use today is a testament to the affirmative elements of the ideas propagated by Dr. Otoman Zar-Adusht Ha'nish. Éva Forgács

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30 - It has been suggested by several art historians that *Tower of Fire* was in fact intended as an airport building for Weimar.





*Turm des Feuers, Aufnahme vor dem Tempelherrenhaus in Weimar (Tower of Fire photographed outside the Tempelherrenhaus in Weimar) 1920*  
Photo: Paula Stockmar  
Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin © DAKS 2017

argues that Mazdaznan was a readymade philosophy of life that students could passively adopt. She focuses upon the negative aspects of the movement, suggesting Itten used his esoteric system as a means of dominating his students and gaining the position of unofficial director at the Bauhaus. However, according to Itten, his incorporation of these elements into his teaching methods actually had the opposite effect upon his students and was intended to empower them by equipping them with physical and mental agency. Writing about his methods of teaching, Itten acknowledged that there was much that occurred between him and his students that could not be successfully described. He wrote:

*...the description of my teaching seems to me poor compared with what actually happened. The tone, the rhythm, the sequence of words, place and time, the mood of the students, and all the other circumstances which make for a vital atmosphere cannot be reproduced; yet it is the ineffable which helps form a climate of creativity. My teaching was intuitive finding. My own emotion gave me the power which produced the student's readiness to learn. To teach out of inner enthusiasm is the opposite of a mere pre-planned method of instruction.<sup>31</sup>*

Although Itten's unorthodox methods came under criticism in the interwar years the passing of time saw many of the ideas and exercises he applied being integrated into mainstream pedagogical practice. Several elements from Itten's Vorkurs programme remain integral to the foundations of teaching art and design. Itten's devotion to Mazdaznan as well as his own experience as a teacher instilled within him the desire and ability to enable his students to heighten their power of perception, intuition and bodily awareness. Itten used exercises outlined in Mazdaznan literature as a means of promoting a more holistic approach that integrates body, mind and spirit. There can be no doubt that his methodology was hugely successful in enabling

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31 - Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own - The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (Boston, Shambhala Inc 1988) p201

many of his students at the Bauhaus (and later at his own school in Berlin) to realise their creative potential and question preconceived notions regarding their artistic or technical skills. Under Itten's direction students were introduced to consciousness expanding ideas and possibilities a more conventional education would never have offered. The case of Josef Albers who began his dynamic career under Itten's tutelage exemplifies this.<sup>32</sup> Itten's declaration that *Color is life; for a world without color appears to us as dead. Colors are primordial ideas, the children of light...*<sup>33</sup> must have had an impact upon Albers who although first and foremost an artist might also be considered a scientist of the spectrum. Following his time working under Itten, Albers spent his entire career meditating upon the possibilities of colour.<sup>34</sup>

In 1926 Itten founded his own art private art school in Berlin. The iconic photograph included in this publication of him and his students practicing The Egyptian Postures was taken on the roof of this arts building in 1931. The school lasted until 1934 when it was shut down, viewed as symptomatic of 'Cultural Bolshevism' by an increasingly conservative state. Although Itten remained extremely active after this date and worked in a variety of capacities he has become a somewhat marginal figure.<sup>35</sup> While his books on colour theory are familiar to many, few people would be aware of the extent of his role in the early phase of the Bauhaus. Undoubtedly, this has much to do with the transformation of the Bauhaus in the years after Itten's departure. Inevitable changes occurred as the school evolved under new directors and adapted to an increasingly inhospitable political climate. There was a desire for the organisation to focus upon quantifiable research and industrial production and mystical or outré elements were eliminated. Unfortunately, a similar process occurred in the sphere of art history. The case of the Bauhaus exemplifies how

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32 - Albers would later go on to be a professor at the Bauhaus in 1925.

33 - Johannes Itten, *The Elements of Color* (New York, John Wiley and Sons 1970) p8

34 - Albers' commitment to investigating the properties of colour is exemplified in his *Homage to the Square* series which he began in 1949 and is comprised of over a thousand artworks, all of which are ultimately the components of a single prolonged investigation of colour interaction.

35 - In 1932 Itten became the director of the Textile Design School in Krefeld, Germany and held this post until 1938 before emigrating to the Netherlands. From 1949 Itten was involved in the creation of the Rietberg Museum in Zurich in which Asian, African, American and Oceanian art were displayed. In 1961 Itten published *Art and Color* and has been more known since then as an influential colour theorist.

contradictions and complications within historical narratives are often eliminated over time in order to form the canonical history that is written retrospectively and obscures particular details. It has only been in recent decades that the real impact - and indeed value of these artists' esoteric leanings - has begun to be acknowledged.

It seems possible that Itten himself may have contributed to the rewriting of history that has obscured the true nature of Mazdaznan at the Bauhaus. In his later autobiographical texts he also seeks to downplay the importance Mazdaznan held for him and for his students at the Bauhaus:

*The terrible events and shattering losses of the war had brought chaos and confusion in all fields. Among the students there were endless discussions and eager searching for a new mental attitude. My attention was drawn to Spengler's book, "The Decline of the West." I became conscious that our scientific-technical civilization had come to a critical point. The slogans "Back to Handicraft" or "Unity of Art and Technology" did not seem to me to solve the problems.*

*I studied oriental philosophy and concerned myself with Persian Mazdaism and Early Christianity. Thus I realized that our outward-directed scientific research and technology must be balanced by inward-directed thought and forces of the soul.*

*Georg Muche had come to similar conclusions through his war experiences, and we worked in friendly cooperation. We sought the foundations of a new way of life for ourselves and our work. At that time we were ridiculed because we did breathing and concentration exercises. Today the study of oriental philosophy is widespread and many people practice yoga.*

*These first Weimar years are wrongly described as the romantic period of the Bauhaus. In my opinion, these were*



Portrait of Johannes Itten in Bauhaus-Tracht, 1921  
Photo: Paula Stockmar  
Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin © DACS 2017

*the years of universal interests. Certainly mistakes were made in the exuberance of feverish search and practice. We all lacked a great teacher who could have guided us through the ebullient confusion.*<sup>36</sup>

Itten cannot bring himself even to correctly name Mazdaznan, and while the final line may refer to Gropius it also suggests that Itten came to feel that Ha'nish, who signed himself *Master*, was ultimately a false idol, far from the great teacher the world sought. Nevertheless it is inescapable that the esoteric systems that form a key aspect of Mazdaznan provided an impetus for Itten's pedagogical, aesthetic and psychological innovation and development. In this way the movement, or at least Itten's synthesis of it, shaped how art is still taught and learnt in the west and how modernism came into being.

Roger Lipsey writes, *it is a matter of lasting astonishment that the Bauhaus began with a medievalizing, romantic self-image and emerged in a few short years as the principal artisan of design principles that are the essence of 'modern' and the hallmark of the century.*<sup>37</sup> While this statement registers to some degree the diverse elements that made up the Bauhaus in its initial phase it also underscores how history has been streamlined. Both Itten's pedagogical approach and the abstract aesthetic that he developed were shaped directly by his engagement with esoteric doctrine. The complexities and the significance of those esoteric elements have thus far been neglected and relegated to little more than footnote.

From the perspective of the 21st century the objectionable aspects of Mazdaznan seem glaringly obvious. The anti-Semitic and Aryan supremacist elements that are present within Mazdaznan literature and advocated by prominent individuals have tainted the movement irrevocably and it now seems ideologically aligned with the forces that put an end to the Bauhaus in 1935. Indeed it seems probable these elements have contributed to Itten's key role

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36 - Johannes Itten, *Design and Form - The Basic Course at the Bauhaus* (New York, Reinhold 1964) p11-12  
37 - Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own - The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art* (Boston, Shambhala Inc 1988) p201

in the development of the Bauhaus being minimised. However the Bauhaus in its first phases, and the artworks which emerged from that context, cannot be properly understood without knowledge of the Mazdaznan movement.





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This book is set in Pabst Old Style, which approximates the fonts used for the first Bauhaus manifestos, and Futura, which can be seen as the logical outcome of the modernist and constructivist ideals of the later Bauhaus. The cover title font is Atkinson Eccentric and the cover design, and that of the inside pages, draws on a range of Mazdaznan publications from the late 1890s to the 1940s. The endpapers are reproduced from those of *Selbst-Diagnostik* by Dr. O. Z. Ha'nish, Frieda Ammann and Dr. Otto Rauth published by the Mazdaznan Press, Leipzig in 1933.

Instructions by Dr. Otoman Zar-Adusht Ha'nish  
Postures demonstrated by Ery Nzaramba  
Illustrated & edited by Ian Whittlesea  
Essay by Pádraic E. Moore

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Edited and illustrated by Ian Whittlesea with images of Ery Nzaramba demonstrating the postures and an essay by Pádraic E. Moore.

