

Western Esotericism

from the 18th to the 20th century

Dr. Marco Pasi

BA-Program, 2nd semester 2017-2018

Tuesday 15:00-17:45

Location: OMHP E0.13

Study guide

Code: RS7138

Credits: 12 ECTS

Form: hoorcollege/werkgroep. In the first part of the class, the lecturer will introduce the topic of the day, presenting the background and the main issues related to it. In the second part of the class, students will deliver a presentation based on the material from the syllabus, followed by a discussion. The class will be concluded by a reading of primary sources related to the topic.

Conditions of admission (ingangseisen): An academic 'propedeuse' (first year). For exchange students: an equivalent level of the 'propedeuse' (i.e. 60 EC in courses on first year level).

Teaching goals: At the conclusion of this course, the student will possess a good knowledge of the main currents, trends and authors of western esotericism between the 18th and the 20th century. He will be familiar not only with reliable secondary literature on the subject, but will also be able to process relevant primary sources. He will learn how to deal with both primary and secondary sources with a critical mind, with an attentive eye to both content and contextualization.

Content: This module offers a broad chronological overview of the history of modern Western esotericism (from the middle of the 18th century up to our days), focusing on its main trends, movements, and authors. This will include an analysis of currents and phenomena such as Illuminism and the birth of Mesmerism, romanticism, spiritualism, occultism, traditionalism, and the New Age. Both primary sources and secondary literature will be used as reading material. The main focus of the course is on the processes that have led to important transformations in esoteric discourses after the Enlightenment. Both continuities and ruptures with previous esoteric thought will be assessed. A visit to the library of the Theosophical Society in Amsterdam will be organised towards the end of the course.

Test procedure: The course will have three different sources of evaluation. They consist in: 1) Oral presentations based on the reading material during classes; 2) A mid-term take-home test; and 3) A final take-home test.

- 1) *Oral presentations.* Presentations will bear on the reading material for the class, which may consist mostly in secondary literature. Each presentation should last around 20 minutes. It should contain the following elements: some information about the author and the background of the text (when was it produced?, in which cultural climate and/or historical context?); a short and clear overview of the structure and content of the text (is it divided in parts? what are the main arguments? what is the line of reasoning followed by the author?); a couple of significant quotations taken from the text, that the student considers particularly representative of the main arguments or ideas present in the text; a critical assessment (this assessment should be an evaluation of the text on the basis of the claims it makes or the arguments on which it is based: are they convincing and/or consistent? Do they show weaknesses? In what ways do they help us understand the topic that is being discussed?). Students are encouraged to make use of PowerPoint for their presentations. In case they choose not to use PowerPoint, they will prepare printed handouts and distribute them before their presentations. Each student will have to deliver at least one presentation during the course. Some students may have to deliver two presentations. Oral presentations will make for 30% of the final grade.
- 2) *Mid-term test.* Halfway through the course, during the break between the first and the second *blok*, an examination will take place. This will consist in a take-home, open-question test. The questions will bear upon the material examined so far and on the discussions held during classes. Students will have one week to submit their answers. The mid-term test will make for 20% of the final grade.
- 3) *Final test.* The final exam will consist in a take-home test with open questions, bearing on the whole of the material examined during the course. Students will have one week at their disposal to answer the questions and submit them. The final test will make for 50% of the final grade.

Resits: It is not possible to resit for an insufficient oral presentation, or for the mid-term test. The final test, if insufficient, can be repeated during the herkansingsperiode (normally three weeks after the end of the course).

Practical information:

The course is mainly in the form of a seminar. Therefore, even apart from the oral presentations, all students are expected to read the material for every class and to participate actively in the discussions. Students are free to choose between either English or Dutch for their tests.

Students are advised that attendance is a requisite for a successful completion of the course, and that consequently it will be checked. No more than three classes can be missed. Students who miss more than three classes will not be able to obtain the credit points at the end of the course and will be obliged to repeat it in the following year.

Students from exchange programs and students who have not taken the course ‘Westerse esoterie en Religieus Pluralisme’ before are also requested to read one of the two following books:

N. Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, Oxford UP 2008.

A. Faivre, *Western Esotericism. A Concise History*, SUNY Press 2010.

W.J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism. A Guide for the Perplexed*, Bloomsbury 2013.

The books can be easily ordered through Amazon.com or at the bookshop Kirchner, Leliegracht 32 (not far from the PC Hoofthuis), see <http://www.boekhandelkirchner.com/>.

NB: This is a preliminary version of the program. The final version will be available after the first class, when a schedule for the presentations will be made.

For all further information, you can contact the lecturer directly at: m.pasi@uva.nl.

Schedule

6 February 1. Introduction

General introduction, discussion of themes, and attribution of the material from the reading list to be presented by the students.

13 February 2. The New Christianity of Emanuel Swedenborg

Richard SMOLEY, "The Inner Journey of Emanuel Swedenborg", in: Jonathan S. Rose, Stuart Shotwell, and Mary Lou Bertucci (eds.), *Scribe of Heaven. Swedenborg's Life, Work, and Impact*, West Chester, Swedenborg Foundation, 2005, 3-49*

- Emanuel SWEDENBORG, *Secrets of Heaven*, vol. I, West Chester, Swedenborg Foundation, 2008, 145-151.
- Emanuel SWEDENBORG, *Life on Other Planets*, West Chester - London, Swedenborg Foundation - Swedenborg Society, 2006, 3-30.

20 February 3. The birth of a new tradition: F.A. Mesmer and animal magnetism

Alfred J. GABAY, *The Covert Enlightenment*, West Chester, Swedenborg Foundation Publishers, 2005, 17-41; 70-79.*

- Franz Anton MESMER, "Discourse by Mesmer on Magnetism" and "Dissertation on the Discovery of Animal Magnetism" in: George Bloch (ed.), *Mesmerism: A Translation of the Original Scientific and Medical Writings of F.A. Mesmer*, Los Altos, William Kaufmann, 1980, 31-39; 43-70.

27 February 4. Spiritualism

Ernest ISAACS, "The Fox Sisters and American Spiritualism", in: Howard KERR and Charles L. CROW (eds.), *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, Urbana - Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 79-110.*

- Evidence of D. D. Home, letters from W. Howitt and Lord Lytton, and communications from C. Flammarion, in: *Report on Spiritualism of the Committee of the London Dialectical Society*, London, Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1871, 187-194; 235-242; 349-354.

6 March 5. The birth of occultism and its developments in France

Jean-Pierre LAURANT, "The Primitive Characteristics of Nineteenth-Century Esotericism", in: Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (eds.), *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, New York, Crossroad, 1992, 277-287.

David Allen HARVEY, *Beyond Enlightenment. Occultism and Politics in Modern France*, DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 2005, 185-212.*

Marco PASI, "Occultism", in: Kocku von Stuckrad (ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, Leiden - Boston, Brill, 2005, vol. III, p. 1364-1368.

Jean-Pierre LAURANT, "Lévi, Eliphas," in: Wouter J. HANEGRAAFF et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, Leiden - Boston, E. J. Brill, 2005, 689-692.

- Eliphas LÉVI, *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual*, York Beach, Samuel Weiser, 1972, 1-24.

13 March 6. The Theosophical Movement and other occultist organizations

Joscelyn GODWIN, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994, 277-306; 333-346.*

Robert A. GILBERT, "Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn," in: Wouter J. HANEGRAAFF et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, Leiden - Boston, E. J. Brill, 2005, 544-550.

- Helena Petrovna BLAVATSKY, "A Few Questions to 'Hiraf'," in: Ead., *Collected Writings: 1874-1878*, Madras - London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1988, 101-119.

20 March 7. Aleister Crowley and later occultism

Richard KACZYNSKI, "Continuing Knowledge from Generation to Generation. The Social and Literary Background of Aleister Crowley's Magick", in: Henrik Bogdan and Martin Starr (eds.), *Aleister Crowley. An Anthology of Essays*, Oxford - New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 141-179.

Marco PASI, "Varieties of Magical Experience: Aleister Crowley's Views on Occult Practice", *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft*, 6.2 (2011), 123-162.*

Israel REGARDIE, *The Middle Pillar: A Co-Relation of the Principles of Analytical Psychology and the Elementary Techniques of Magic*, Saint Paul, Llewellyn, 1970, i-ix, 13-43.

27 March No class: mid-term test. The questions will be made available on 26 March, the answers should be sent to the lecturer on or before 1st April, 24:00.

3 April 8. Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy

Robert A. MCDERMOTT, "Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy", in: Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (eds.), *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, New York, Crossroad, 1992, 288-310.

Geoffrey AHERN, *Sun at Midnight: The Rudolf Steiner Movement and the Western Esoteric Tradition*, Cambridge, James Clarke & Co, 2009, 86-104.*

Peter STAUDENMAIER, "Race and Redemption: Racial and Ethnic Evolution in Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy", *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 11: 3 (Feb. 2008), pp. 4-36.*

- Rudolf STEINER, "Experiences of Initiation in the Northern Mysteries", in: Edward A. Tiryakian (ed.), *On the Margin of the Visible: Sociology, the Esoteric, and the Occult*, London - Sydney - Toronto, John Wiley & Sons, 1974, 153-163.

10 April

9. George I. Gurdjieff

Andrew RAWLINSON, "Gurdjieff", and "The Gurdjieff Legacy", in: Id., *The Book of Enlightened Masters*, Chicago - La Salle, Open Court, 1997, 282-298.

James WEBB, *The Harmonious Circle*, New York, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980, 232-264.*

- George I. GURDJIEFF, *Views from the Real World*, New York et al., Penguin Compass, 1984, 41-59; 75-81.

17 April

No class

24 April

10. Traditionalism

Jean BORELLA, *René Guénon and the Traditionalist School*, in: Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman (eds.), *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, New York, Crossroad, 1992, 330-358.*

Robin WATERFIELD, *René Guénon and the Future of the West*, n.p., Crucible, 1987, 13-68.

- René GUÉNON, *East and West*, London, Luzac, 1941, 9-46, 214-239.

1 May

11. Neopaganism and the New Age

Joanne E. PEARSON, "Neopaganism", in: Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, Brill Online, 2013.

Judy HARROW, "The Contemporary Neo-Pagan Revival", in: James R. Lewis (ed.): *Magical Religion and Modern Witchcraft*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1996, 9-24.*

Joanne PEARSON, "Assumed Affinities: Wicca and the New Age", in: Joanne Pearson, Richard H. Roberts and Geoffrey Samuel (eds.): *Nature Religion Today*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998, 45-56.*

- Frederic LAMOND, *Religion without Beliefs: Essays in Pantheist Theology*, Comparative Religion and Ethics, London, Janus Publishing Company, 1997, 1-38.

8 May

12. Visit to the Library of the Theosophical Society in Amsterdam

We will visit together the library of the Theosophical Society and we will meet some members, with whom we will talk about the history and the present situation of the Theosophical Society, both in the Netherlands and abroad. After that, we will have a drink in a nearby café and have a final discussion about the course as a whole.

– Final test –

The questions will be made available on 14 May; the answers should be sent to the lecturer on or before 18 May, 24:00.