

Contested Knowledge: Theories and Methods in the Study of Esotericism

Prof.dr. Wouter J. Hanegraaff

MA Program, 1st Semester, Block 1-2, 2018-2019

Tuesdays 15.00-18.00

Objectives

Students who have completed this course have acquired a solid understanding of current methods and theoretical perspectives in the study of Western esotericism. In particular, they are familiar with the differences between empirical/historical, religionist, and social-scientific approaches and their implications for the practice of research in this field.

Contents

The study of Western esotericism has been emerging as a new field in the Humanities since the 1990s, and this development is accompanied by a lively debate about questions of method and theory. In this module we will investigate the historical origins and intellectual backgrounds of esotericism research since the period of the Enlightenment, while concentrating on the theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches that have been advocated by its chief representatives after the period of World War II. Special attention will go to the relation between “religionist” scholarship and its implicit spiritual agendas, more sceptical “reductionist” types of research inspired by specific philosophical and social scientific theories, and the “historical/empirical” type of scholarship that has become dominant in recent decades and is central to the program of the University of Amsterdam. Special attention will go to current debates about the cultural/geographical and disciplinary boundaries of “esotericism” as a field of study that problematizes conventional boundaries between religion, philosophy, natural science, popular culture, and the arts.

Study materials

Course book: Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury 2013). A reading list and course program will be downloadable a few weeks before the start of the course, from <http://www.amsterdamhermetica.nl> and from the Blackboard page for this course.

Canvas

Please make sure that you are properly registered as student in this course on Canvas. This is crucial because study materials will be made available there, and emails with important information are sent only through this system.

Suggestions

On Tuesday mornings, 9.00-12.00, Prof. Hanegraaff teaches a lecture course “Western Culture and Counter Culture” in the Bachelor program. Master students in the program Western Esotericism or the Research Master Study of Religion are *very welcome* to attend this course as auditors, as it will provide them with a useful historical overview from antiquity to the present.

While not mandatory, it is *recommended* to combine the module “Contested Knowledge” with the 6-point module “Religionism and Historicism” (First semester, block 3), which forms a natural extension of it (resulting total: 18 pts).

Procedure

There are three requirements for successfully completing the course:

1. Presence and active participation

You are required to attend at least 80% of the seminar meetings, which means that a maximum of three meetings can be skipped. Failure to be present at more than three meetings results in a *judicium* “insufficient”. Active participation means that you have read the materials for each week and take part in the discussions. You will be asked questions about the texts, so be prepared!

2. Oral presentations

One or several primary or secondary sources are studied during each seminar meeting. Dependent on the number of participants, you are required to take responsibility for at least one seminar presentation (instructions for seminar presentations, see below). If the number of participants is relatively small, you may have to accept more than one presentation. A grade is awarded for each presentation, which you will be able to find on blackboard within a week after the presentation. In case of more than one presentation, the highest grade counts. This grade counts for 40% of the final grade.

Please note: not turning up when you are scheduled for a presentation is taken very seriously, because it means that you are letting down all your fellow students and are in effect sabotaging the entire meeting. Therefore in cases of “no-show”, 1.0 will be subtracted from the final grade. Exceptions will be made only if you can demonstrate that the absence was due to *force majeure* (serious illness, deaths in the family

etc.) and you did what you could to report the absence as early as possible (by means of email via blackboard, or if necessary by telephone).

3. Written Examination (“take-home”)

At the end of each of the two “blocks” there is a written examination. This takes the form of a small number of questions related to the materials that have been studied. You are asked to write down a clear argument that demonstrates your understanding of the issues that have been discussed and your ability to engage them in a critical manner. You will be invited to express your own scholarly opinion and back it up with well-informed arguments. Because this is a “take-home” examination, you will have ample opportunity to re-read the required texts and refer to them in your questions. Although it is not mandatory, you are invited to bring in other materials (primary or secondary sources) as well, so as to make your answers more solid and interesting. Each of the two examinations will count for 30% of the final grade.

Instructions for Seminar Presentations

A good presentation takes between 15 and 20 minutes and contains the following elements:

- It provides some background information about the author. Please do not just copy his/her CV from the internet, but tell us in your own words who the author is and what s/he has been doing.
- The presentation makes clear what the text is about (or claims to be about) and why the author seems to have written it.
- It contains a short reminder of the structure and the contents of the text, presented in such a way that someone who has not read the text would be able to follow it. NB: The term “reminder” is used deliberately: your audience has already read the text, so please do not get into pointless summaries of what everybody already knows (“he says this, then he says that, in the next section he says that” etc.).
- It contains two or three well-chosen quotations that clarify the author’s intentions and his/her argument.
- It contains an element of critical evaluation (for example: What to make of this text? How convincing do you find the author? Are there gaps or weaknesses in the argument? Can you find counterarguments against his/her claims? And so on). Don’t be afraid to also indicate your personal opinion: what did you think of the text, did you like it, or disliked it, and why? Please note “criticism” does not mean that you necessary have to criticize the text, although you’re welcome to; it means that you show that you have read it with a critical mind.

- Use of Powerpoint is not mandatory, but very welcome. However: use it wisely. It is never a good idea to put long stretches of text on BB because it will distract your audience's attention from what you are saying. Use text elements sparingly: not with the intention of providing information, but rather, with the intention of helping your audience follow the thread of the information provided in your spoken presentation. Likewise, images are welcome, but should be functional, not just recreational.
 - While all students following the course are expected to have read the texts under discussion, a good presenter (and recipient of a high grade) has taken the trouble of looking further. For example if the required reading consists of only a few sections of a longer chapter, the presenter will have read the entire chapter so as to be able to put the sections in context. He or she will also have taken the trouble to visit the library (the physical one: not just the internet!) and have a look at additional literature relevant to the text and the themes that are central in it. Therefore you need to plan your presentation well in advance.
 - Finally, please try not to use the above as a "checklist". It's not a question of ticking off these points one by one. There are many ways of giving a good shape to your presentation, so do feel free to experiment with what works best for you. Just make sure that the elements mentioned above are included somewhere.
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Program

1. Week 36 (4 September): Introducing the Field.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Esotericism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Esotericism," in: April DeConick (ed.), *Secret Religion*, MacMillan 2016, 155-170.

2. Week 37 (11 September): The Occult Revival of the Sixties and Seventies.

Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization," *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 5 (1972), 119-136; reprinted in Jeffrey Kaplan & Heléne Lööw (eds.), *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization*, Altamira: Walnut Creek 2002, 12-25.

James Webb, "The Struggle for the Irrational," in: *The Occult Establishment*, Open Court: La Salle, Ill. 1976, 7-20.

Robert Galbreath, "Explaining Modern Occultism," in: Howard Kerr & Charles L. Crow (eds.), *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, University of Illinois Press: Urbana / Chicago 1983, 11-37.

3. Week 38 (18 September): Hermeticism and Esotericism.

Guide for the Perplexed, Ch. 1-2.

Frances A. Yates, "The Hermetic Tradition in Renaissance Science," in: Ch. Singleton (ed.), *Art, Science and History in the Renaissance*, Baltimore 1967, 255-274.

Mircea Eliade, "The Occult in the Modern World," in: *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religions*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago 1976, 47-68.

Antoine Faivre, "Introduction I," in: Antoine Faivre & Jacob Needleman (eds.), *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, Crossroad: New York 1992, xi-xxii.

4. Week 39 (25 September): Polemics

Guide for the Perplexed, Ch. 3-4.

Theodor Adorno, "Theses against Occultism," in: *Minima Moralia* (Engl. ed. 1974), repr. in *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, Routledge: London / New York 1994, 172-80.

Elaine Fisher, "Fascist Scholars, Fascist Scholarship: The Quest for Ur-Fascism and the Study of Religion," in: Christian K. Wedemeyer & Wendy Doniger (eds.), *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions: The Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade*, Oxford University Press: Oxford 2010, 261-284.

Olav Hammer, "New Age Religion and the Skeptics," in: Daren Kemp & James R. Lewis (eds.), *Handbook of New Age*, Brill: Leiden / Boston 2007, 379-404.

5. Week 40 (2 October): Eranos Religionism

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Eranos and Religionism: Scholem, Corbin, Eliade," in: *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2012, 295-314.

Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis or the Imaginary and the Imaginal," *Spring* (1972).

Adriana Berger, "Cultural Hermeneutics: The Concept of Imagination in the Phenomenological Approaches of Henry Corbin and Mircea Eliade," *The Journal of Religion* 66 (1986), 141-156.

Kurt Rudolph, "Mircea Eliade and the 'History' of Religions," *Religion* 19 (1989), 101-127.

6. Week 41 (9 October): Antoine Faivre and Religionism

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Antoine Faivre and Western Esotericism," in: *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2012, 334-355.

Antoine Faivre, "Vis Imaginativa (A Study of Some Aspects of the Magical Imagination and Its Mythical Foundations)" (French orig. 1981), in: *Theosophy, Imagination, Tradition: Studies in Western Esotericism*, State University of New York Press: Albany 2000, 99-136.

Antoine Faivre, "The Children of Hermes and the Science of Man," in: Ingrid Merkel & Allen G. Debus (eds.), *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, Folger Books: Washington / London / Toronto 1988, 424-435.

7. Week 42 (16 October): The Empirical Turn

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Empirical Method in the Study of Esotericism," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 7:2 (1995), 99-129.

Arthur Versluis, "What is Esoteric? Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism" + "Mysticism and the Study of Esotericism: Methods in the Study of Esotericism, Part II," *Esoterica* 4 (2002), 1-15 + *Esoterica* 5 (2003), 1-26.

Kurt Rudolph, "We Learn What Religion Is From History: On the Relation between the Study of History and the Study of Religions," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 20:3 (1994), 357-376.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 'The Power of Ideas: Esotericism, Historicism, and the Limits of Discourse', *Religion* 43:2 (2013), 252-273.

[Week 43: NO CLASS]

8. Week 44 (30 October): Discursive Study of Esotericism

Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities*, Brill: Leiden / Boston 2010, 43-64, 195-204.

Kennet Granholm, "Esoteric Currents as Discursive Complexes," *Religion* 43:1 (2013), 46-69.

Michael Bergunder, "What is Esotericism? Cultural Studies Approaches and the Problems of Definition in Religious Studies," *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 (2010), 9-36.

9. Week 45 (6 November): Esotericism and the Arts

Guide for the Perplexed, ch. 8.

Marco Pasi, "Arthur Machen's Panic Fears: Western Esotericism and the Irruption of Negative Epistemology," *Aries* 7:1 (2007), 63-83.

Victoria Ferentinou, "Surrealism, Occulture and Gender: Women Artists, Power and Occultism," *Aries* 7:1 (2007), 103-130.

Marco Pasi, "Hilma af Klint, Western Esotericism and the Problem of Modern Artistic Creativity," in: Kurt Almquist & Louise Belfrage (eds.), *Hilma af Klint: The Art of Seeing the Invisible*, Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation: Stockholm 2015, 101-116.

10. Week 46 (13 November): Esoteric Praxis

Guide for the Perplexed, ch. 6.

Henrik Bogdan, "Ritual of Initiation, Secret Societies, and Masonic Initiatory Societies," in: *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*, State University of New York Press: Albany 2007, 27-52.

Tanya Luhrmann, "Summoning the Powers: The Experience of Involvement," in: *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. 1989, 175-263.

Kennet Granholm, "Ethnographies of Dark Magic," in: *Dark Enlightenment: The Historical, Sociological, and Discursive Contexts of Contemporary Esoteric Magic*, Brill: Leiden / Boston 2014, 100-128.

11. Week 47 (20 November): Esotericism, Consciousness, Cognition

Guide for the Perplexed, ch. 5

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "Entheogenic Esotericism," in: Egil Asprem & Kennet Granholm (eds.), *Contemporary Esotericism*, Equinox: Sheffield 2012, 392-409.

Karl Baier, "High Mysticism: On the Interplay between the Psychedelic Movement and the Academic Study of Mysticism," MS, forthcoming in: Annette Wilke (ed.), *Constructions of Mysticism as a Universal: Roots and Interactions across the Borders*, Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden 2016.

Egil Asprem, "Reverse-Engineering 'Esotericism': How to Prepare a Complex Cultural Concept for the Cognitive Science of Religion," *Religion* 46:2 (2016), 158-185.

12. Week 48 (27 November): Enchantment / Disenchantment / Re-Enchantment

Guide for the Perplexed, ch. 7.

J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," *The Tolkien Reader*, Ballantine Books: New York 1966.

Patrick Curry, "Enchantment and Modernity," *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 9 (2012), 76-89.

Egil Asprem, "From Process to Problem," in: *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900-1939*, Brill: Leiden / Boston 2014, 17-49.

13. Week 49 (4 December): Globalization

Kennet Granholm, "Locating the West: Problematizing the Western in Western Esotericism and Occultism," in: Henrik Bogdan & Gordan Djurdjevic (eds.), *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, Acumen: Durham 2013, 17-36.

Egil Asprem, "Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 2:1 (2014), 3-33.

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "The Globalization of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 3 (2015), 55-91.

Avery Morrow, "Boundary Work in Japanese Religious Studies: Anesaki Masaharu on Religious Freedom and Academic Concealment," *Correspondences* 6:2 (2018).

14. Week 50 (11 December): Popular Culture

Christopher Partridge, "Occulture is Ordinary," in: Egil Asprem & Kennet Granholm (eds.), *Contemporary Esotericism*, Equinox: Sheffield / Bristol 2013, 113-133.

Asbjorn Dyrendal, "Hidden Knowledge, Hidden Powers: Esotericism and Conspiracy Culture," in: Egil Asprem & Kennet Granholm (eds.), *Contemporary Esotericism*, Equinox: Sheffield / Bristol 2013, 200-225.

Jeff J. Kripal, "Orientation: From India to the Planet Mars & Alienation: Superman is a Crashed Alien" in: *Mutants & Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero*

Comcs, and the Paranormal, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago 2011, 31-120.