**Occult Trajectories I:**

## Western Esotericism between East and West

# Dr. Marco Pasi

# Mriganka Mukhopadhyay, MA, MPhil

MA-Program, 2nd semester 2018-2019

Tuesday, 09:15-11:45

Location:

Bushuis F0.21

Study guide

*Code*: 153414032Y

*Credits*: 12 EC

*Form*: Seminar. Students will present the material from the reading list. Presentations will be followed by discussions led by the instructor(s).

*Description*: In the last twenty years it has become customary for specialists to define esotericism as “Western.” However, recent debates in the field have raised the question whether the history of esotericism could be better understood in a “global” context. The purpose of this course is to focus on the relationship that esoteric currents and authors since the Enlightenment have had on the one hand with the idea of the “East” in general, and on the other with spiritual traditions coming from non-European lands that were perceived as belonging to the “East.” It will give particular attention to the formation, towards the end of the 19th century, of the concept of “Western esotericism” as distinct from, and even opposed to, eastern forms of esoteric tradition. This process will be contrasted with the development of the Theosophical Society, which became a “global player” from an early point on. Students are expected to deliver presentations based on the reading material, to participate actively in the discussions, and to write a final paper.

*Teaching goals*: While focusing on a single aspect of modern western esotericism, the student will become familiar with the main lines of its historical development. Most of the main figures, currents and movements will be mentioned and discussed. The course will also instruct the student to approach the reading material with a critical eye and develop awareness of broader cultural problems related to its origins, transmission, and interpretation.

*Test procedure*: The course will have two different sources of evaluation, expressed in grades. They consist in: 1) Oral presentations of the reading material during classes; 2) A final paper.

1. Oral presentations. Students are expected to deliver at least one oral presentation during the course. The presentations will bear on the reading material for the given class, which may consist in either primary or secondary literature, or both. Presentations will be based on those texts followed by an asterisk in the syllabus. The presentation should last around 20 to 25 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 that the student considers particularly representative of the main arguments or ideas presented in the text; a critical assessment (this assessment will have different implications whether the text is a primary or a secondary source, but mainly what is required is an evaluation of the text on the basis of the claims it makes or the arguments on which it is based, be they religious or scholarly: are they convincing and/or consistent? do they show weak spots?). Students are strongly advised to use PowerPoint for their presentations. In case PowerPoint is not used, it is obligatory to prepare a handout to be distributed in class before the beginning of the presentation. Presentations will make for 40% of the final grade.
2. Final paper. The final paper will bear upon a subject chosen by the student and agreed upon by the lecturer. Students are advised to make an appointment with the lecturer in order to discuss possible subjects at an early stage of the course. The paper will consist of around 7000 words, excluding the bibliography. The deadline for the final paper will be 15 June. The final paper will make for 60% of the final grade. Students who will submit their paper after the deadline will have a reduction of one point in their grade for the paper. N.B.: submitted papers will not be heavier than 500 Kb (so, in case you intend to include images, please reduce them to a convenient size!). Papers exceeding this limit will be rejected until they conform to it.

*Test procedure*: The course will have two different sources of evaluation, expressed in grades. They consist in: 1) Oral presentations of the reading material during classes; 2) A final paper.

1. Oral presentations. Students are expected to deliver at least one oral presentation during the course. The presentations will bear on the reading material for the given class, which may consist in either primary or secondary literature, or both. Presentations will be based on those texts followed by an asterisk in the syllabus. The presentation should last around 20. 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 that the student considers particularly representative of the main arguments or ideas presented in the text; a critical assessment (this assessment will have different implications whether the text is a primary or a secondary source, but mainly what is required is an evaluation of the text on the basis of the claims it makes or the arguments on which it is based, be they religious or scholarly: are they convincing and/or consistent? do they show weak spots?). Presentations will make for 40% of the final grade.
2. Final paper. The final paper will bear upon a subject chosen by the student and agreed upon by the lecturer. Students are advised to make an appointment with the lecturer in order to discuss possible subjects at an early stage of the course. The paper will consist of around 5000 words, including references and bibliography. Students are encouraged to negotiate themes, literature, and the structure of the paper with the instructor as early as possible. They will have to submit a preliminary outline and bibliography for the paper by the 1st of April. The final version of the paper will have to be submitted by 31 May and will make for 60% of the final grade. Students who submit their paper after the deadline will have a reduction of one point in their grade for the paper for each week of delay after the deadline. N.B.: submitted papers will not be heavier than 500 Kb (so, in case you intend to include images, please reduce them to a convenient size!). Papers exceeding this limit will be rejected until they conform to it.

Apart from these two forms of assignment, each student will be required to prepare a written question based on the texts presented during the class. This will not apply to students presenting on that day. The questions will be used during the discussion following the presentations. The questions will have to be sent the day before the class to the lecturer. Failure to submit a question more than three times will result in a penalty of 0.5 points on the final grade.

For students who have never followed the BA courses Western culture and counterculture or Western Esotericism from the 18th century to the 20th century, the reading of one of the following books is also obligatory: Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994; or Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

*Resits*: In case the average of the grades for the presentations and other assignments is insufficient, it is possible to compensate it with an oral exam, which will bear upon the whole of the material read during the course, plus the chosen book for the students who have not followed Western culture and counterculture or Western Esotericism from the 18th century to the 20th century. The final paper cannot be repeated if insufficient.

*Practical information*: The course is 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.

Attendance is a requisite for a successful completion of the course, and 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.

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

For all further information, you can contact the lecturers directly at [m.pasi@uva.nl](mailto:m.pasi@uva.nl) and/or [M.Mukhopadhyay@uva.nl](mailto:M.Mukhopadhyay@uva.nl).

**Schedule**

5 February 1. Introduction

General introduction, discussion of themes and program, and distribution of articles from the reading list to be presented by the students.

12 February 2. Visit to the Library of the Theosophical Society in Amsterdam (Tolstraat 154)

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.

**i. east and west in contemporary culture:**

**general aspects and historical perceptions**

19 February 3. Current debates

Marco Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah and the Parting of East and West in the Early Theosophical Society”, in: B. Huss, M. Pasi, and K. von Stuckrad (eds.), *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, Brill: Boston – Leiden, 2010, 151-166.

Kennet Granholm, “Locating the West: Problematizing the ‘Western’ in Western Esotericism and Occultism,” in: Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (eds.), *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, London, Acumen Publishing, 2014, 17-36.

Michael Bergunder, “Experiments with Theosophical Truth: Gandhi, Esotericism, and Global Religious History”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82 (2014), 398-426.

Wouter Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism”, *Correspondences* 3:1 (2015), 55-91.

26 February 4. The problem of Orientalism

Richard King, “Orientalism and Indian Religions”, in: Id., *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and ‘The Mystic East’*, London, Routledge, 1999, 82-95.

David Kopf, “Hermeneutics versus History”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 39:3 (May 1980), 495-506.

J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment,* London and New York, Routledge, 1997, 1-36.

Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Books, 1995, 1-73.

* William Jones, “Indian Insights into Philosophy and Morality,” in: David A. Pailin (ed.): *Attitudes to Other Religions: Comparative Religion in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, 247-252.

5 March 5. Global entanglements: Esotericism, hegemony, and the voice of the subaltern

Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton - Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2000, 3-23.

Michael Bergunder, “’Religion’ and ‘Science’ Within a Global Religious History”, *Aries* 16:1 (2016), 86–141.

Gauri Viswanathan, “The Ordinary Business of Occultism”, Critical Inquiry 27:1 (2000), 1-20.

Julian Strube, “Transgressing Boundaries: Social Reform, Theology and the Demarcations between Science and Religion”, *Aries*, 16(2016), 1-11.

**ii. the east between romanticism and occultism**

12 March 6. Paganism and the religion of the others (with Pavel Horák)

Peter Harrison, *“Religion” and the Religions in the English Enlightenment*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 130-157.

* Edward Herbert of Cherbury, *Pagan Religion: A Translation of De Religione Gentilium*, transl. by John A. Butler, Ottawa - Binghamton, N.Y: Dovehouse Editions, 1996 [acc. to the first Latin version: Amsterdam,1663], pp. 51-67 and 339-352 (= chapters I, II and XVI).
* David Hume, “The Natural History of Religion”. In: *Four Dissertations*, London: A. Millar, 1757. Introduction + chap. I, II and V. Page numbers vary depending on the edition.

19 March 7. Romanticism and American Transcendentalism

Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, 190-221.

Wilhelm Halbfass, “India and the Romantic Critique of the Present”, in: Id., *India and Europe. An Essay in Understanding*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1988, 69-83.

Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism & Asian Religions*, New York - Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, 3-79.

* Friedrich Schlegel, “On the Language and Philosophy of the Indians”, chap. 2, in: Id., *The Aesthetic and Miscellaneous Works of Frederick von Schlegel*, London, Henry G. Bohn, 1849, 465-495.

— No class on 26 March —

**iii. the theosophical society and its influence**

2 April 8. The early period and Theosophy in India

Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “ Western esotericism and the Orient in the First Theosophical Society” (forthcoming).

Stephen Prothero, *The White Buddhist - The Asian Odyssey of Henry Steel Olcott*, Bloomington - Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1996, 1-13, 62-84.

Mark Bevir, ““The West Turns Eastward: Madame Blavatsky and the Transformation of the Occult Tradition”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, LXII, 3 (Fall 1994), 747-767.

Mriganka Mukhopadhyay, “Occult and the Orient: Theosophical Society and the Socio-Religious Space in Colonial India” , in: *Presidency Historical Review*, Vol.1, Issue 2, December 2015, 9-37.

* Henry Steel Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves, Second Series 1878-1883.* London and Madras, Theosophical Publishing House, 1900, 15-109.
* Annie Besant, *The Case for India,* Presidential address to the Indian National Congress at the Thirty-Second Annual Session, Calcutta, December 26, 1917. Krotona, Theosophical Publishing House, 1918.

**iv. the hermetic reaction**

9 April 9. The reaction

Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994, 333-362.

Geoffrey McVey, “Thebes, Luxor, and Loudsville, Georgia: The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor and the Landscapes of 19th-Century Occultisms”, in Cathy Gutierrez (ed.), *The Occult in Nineteenth-Century America*, Aurora, The Davies Group, Publishers, 2005, 153-181.

R. A. Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn and the Esoteric Section*, London, Theosophical History Centre, 1987.

* Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland (eds.), *The Virgin of the World of Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus*, London: George Redway, 1885, i-xxx.

16 April 10. The later period of the T.S. and the Anthroposophical movement

Brett Forray, “William Q. Judge’s and Annie Besant’s Views of Brahmin Theosophists,” *Theosophical History*, X, 1 (Jan. 2004), 5-34.

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 (2008), 4–36.

Peter Staudenmaier, “Steiner & Krishnamurti,” posted online to the “Waldorf Critics discussion list”, January 23, 2009. Available at:

<http://www.waldorfcritics.org/active/articles/Krishnamurti.html>.

Perry Myers, “Colonial Consciousness: Rudolf Steiner’s Orientalism and German Cultural Identity”, *Journal of European Studies*, 36:4 (2006), 389-417.

* Rudolf Steiner, lecture 10 from: *The Mission of Folk-Souls (in Connection with Germanic Scandinavian Mythology). A Course of Eleven Lectures*, London – New York, Anthroposophical Publishing Company – Anthroposophic Press, 1929. Online version at:

<http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA121/English/APC1929/19100616p01.html>

**v. entanglements**

23 April 11. Cross-cultural influences

Peter Heehs, “The Kabbalah, the Philosophie Cosmique and Integral Yoga: A Study in Cross-Cultural Influences”, *ARIES* 11.2(2011) 219-247.

Mishka Sinha, “Corrigibility, allegory, universality: a history of the gita’s transnational reception, 1785–1945”, *Modern Intellectual History*, 7:2, (2010), pp. 297-317.

Torkel Brekke, *Makers of Modern Indian Religion in the Late Nineteenth Century*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, 41-62, 86-118.

* Mohini Mohun Chatterji, *The Bhagavad Gita or the Lord’s Lay,* Boston, Ticknor, 1887, iii-ix, 1-18.
* Sri Aurobindo, “Our Demand and Need from the Gita”, *Essays on the Gita First Series,* Pondicherry, Shri Aurobindo Ashram, 1922, 1-11.

30 April 12. Receptions of Yoga and Tantra

Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patañjali and Western Esotericism*, London - New York, Continuum, 2004, 1-19, 36-90.

Mark Singleton, “Yoga, Eugenics, and Spiritual Darwinism in the Early Twentieth Century”, *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, 11 (2007), 125-146.

Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, Berkeley - Los Angeles - London, University of California Press, 2003, 203-263.

Karl Baier, “Yoga within Viennese Occultism: Carl Kellner and Co.”, in: Karl Baier, Philip A. Maas, and Karin Preisendanz (eds.), *Yoga in Transformation. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, Vienna, Vienna University Press, 2018, 389-438.

* Aleister Crowley, *Book Four*, London: Wieland & Co. [1912], the first part.
* Dion Fortune, *The Mystical Qabalah*, York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1989, 1-7.

7 May 13. René Guénon and Perennialism

Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World. Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, Oxford - New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, 39-80; 83-93; 119-131.

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