

# Contested Knowledge: Theories and Methods in the Study of Esotericism

MA Program, 1st Semester, Block 1-2, 2019-2020.

Monday: 9:00am-12:00pm, OMHP room C0.23.

J. Christian Greer  
[J.C.Greer@uva.nl](mailto:J.C.Greer@uva.nl)

Office Hours: TBA

Dr. Marco Pasi  
[M.Pasi@uva.nl](mailto:M.Pasi@uva.nl)

## Objectives

Students who have completed this course have acquired a solid understanding of current methods and theoretical perspectives in the study of 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

In the last thirty years, the study of esotericism has emerged as an exciting new field of research for scholars across disciplinary boundaries. The development of this field has been 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, while concentrating on the theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches that have been advocated by its chief representatives after the period of World War II. Instead of promoting any particular agenda, this course will critically examine the academic modalities that have shaped scholarship in the past, as well as the approaches that have superseded them.

As will become clear, the scientific study of esotericism was originally grounded in “religionist” scholarship, which was based on implicit spiritual agendas. Against this pioneering approach, there arose more skeptical “reductionist” types of research inspired by specific philosophical and social scientific theories. In recent decades, a more historically-grounded brand of scholarship has become dominant within the academy. Each of these approaches will be examined on their own empirical merits, and then analyzed with respect to current debates about the disciplinary boundaries of esotericism as a field of study. Special attention will be paid to the way in which that this field of study 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).

## **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 messages with important information are sent through this system.

## **Computer Policy**

The use of cell-phones and computers in class are strictly prohibited. Furthermore, there is to be absolutely no recording- audio or visual- at any time. Students that fail to comply with this policy will be penalized a full letter grade on their final marks.

## **Disability-Related Student Accommodations**

If you are in need of a disability-related accommodation, please be in contact with me as soon as possible. Like all of the faculty at University of Amsterdam, I am committed to making every reasonable effort to facilitate learning among students. If you should have any questions, do not hesitate to contact the [Resource Office on Disabilities](#). Needless to say, discussion of these matters will be totally confidential.

## **Procedure**

There are three requirements for successfully completing the course:

### *I. 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 judgement “insufficient”. Active participation means that you have read the materials for each week and take part in the discussions.

In addition to completing the reading each week, students will be required to submit a question based on the material to the lecturer the day before the class meets. The questions are intended to foster discussion, so be daring! The submission of these questions, along with active participation during the seminar, will make up for 10% of the final grade.

### *II. 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 Canvas 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 Canvas, or if necessary by telephone).

### III. *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. 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. The first examination will be distributed on Oct. 14<sup>th</sup> and must be submitted no later than Oct. 21<sup>st</sup>. The second examination will be distributed on Dec. 2<sup>nd</sup> and must be submitted no later than Dec. 9<sup>th</sup>. Extensions will not be approved except in extenuating circumstances. For each day the examination is overdue, ten points will be subtracted from the final grade.

#### **Viva Voce Sessions**

In addition to the seminar, students are invited to participate in the *Viva Voce Sessions* hosted on an irregular basis throughout the semester. During these gatherings, we will discuss the contents of the course in combination with a particular piece of media, such as film, an audio record, or graphic novel. These sessions are not mandatory. See syllabus for exact dates.

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#### *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 must 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 above are included somewhere.

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## ~Program~

Week 1 (2 September): **Introducing the Field.**

Week 2 (9 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 Löw (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.

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

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.

~ Viva Voce Session 1~  
[Time: 7:30pm / Date: Thurs. Sept 12 / Location: TBD]

### Week 3 (16 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.

### Week 4 (23 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.

### Week 5 (30 September): 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.

Week 6 (7 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.

Week 7 (14 October): **The Empirical Turn**

[~First Examination Distributed~]

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.

[Oct. 21: No Class]

[~First Examination Due~]

Week 8 (28 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.

## Week 9 (4 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.

Christian Greer, "Zines," in Egil Asprem (ed.), *Dictionary of Contemporary Esotericism*, Brill: Leiden / Boston (forthcoming).

~ Viva Voce Session 3~

[Time: 7:30pm / Date: Nov. 7 / Location: TBD

## Week 10 (11 November): Altered States of Consciousness

*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.

Theodore Roszak, "The Counterfeit Infinity," in: *Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. 155-177.

## Week 11 (18 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.

~ Viva Voce Session 4~

[Time: 7:30pm / Date: Thurs. Nov. 21 / Location: TBD

Week 12 (25 November): **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 Comes, and the Paranormal*, 31-120.

Week 13 (2 December): **Conclusion**

**[~Second Examination Distributed~]**

Review of the semester and discussion of the final.

**[Dec. 9: No Class]**

**[~Second Examination Due~]**