

## Western Esotericism from the 18th Century

BA course, part of the [Religiewetenschappen BA program](#) and of the [Western Esotericism minor](#)

Instructor: [Marco Pasi](#)

Class hours: Fridays 12:00-14:45

Location: Zoom

### Study guide

*Credits:* 12 ECTS

*Form:* lecture/seminar. 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 15 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 answers should have no more than 1500 words. The mid-term test will make for 20% of the final grade. For tests submitted after the deadline, half a point will be deducted from the grade for every day of delay.

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 answers should have no more than 2500 words. The final test will make for 50% of the final grade. For tests submitted after the deadline, half a point will be deducted from the grade for every day of delay.

*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).

The University of Amsterdam Fraud and Plagiarism regulations apply to the assessment of this course. These regulations can be consulted at [student.uva.nl/en/home](http://student.uva.nl/en/home) > [programme] > A-Z > Plagiarism and fraud.

*Practical information*: 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 'Western Culture and Counterculture' before are also requested to read one of the four following books:

W.J. Hanegraaff, P.J. Forshaw, and M. Pasi (eds.), *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions about Western Esotericism*, Amsterdam UP 2019.

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.

NB: The program will be constantly updated during the course and especially after the first class, when the schedule for the student presentations is set up. Please check this page regularly.

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

## Schedule of classes

### 12 February

#### *Class 1: Introduction to the course*

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

### 19 February

#### *Class 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, pp. 3-49.\*

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

### 26 February

#### *Class 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, pp. 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, pp. 31-39; 43-70.

### 5 March

#### *Class 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, 1983, pp. 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, pp. 187-194; 235-242; 349-354.

## 12 March

### *Class 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, pp. 277-287.

Julian STRUBE, "Socialist Religion and the Emergence of Occultism: A Genealogical Approach to Socialism and Secularization in 19th-century France", *Religion*, 46:3 (2016), pp. 359-388.

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

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

## 19 March

### *Class 6: The Theosophical Movement and other occultist organizations*

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

Joy DIXON, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*, Baltimore - London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, pp. 121-151.\*

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, pp. 544-550.

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

## 26 March

No class: mid-term test. The questions will be made available on 22 March, the answers should be sent to the lecturer before 29 March, 24:00.

## 2 April

No class: study week.

## 9 April

### *Class 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, pp. 141-179.

Marco PASI, "Varieties of Magical Experience: Aleister Crowley's Views on Occult Practice", *Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft*, 6.2 (2011), pp. 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, pp. i-ix, 13-43.

## 16 April

### *Class 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, pp. 288-310.

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

- 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, pp. 153-163.

## 23 April

### *Class 9: George I. Gurdjieff*

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

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

Jacob NEEDLEMAN, "Gurdjieff, or the Metaphysics of Energy", in: Jacob Needleman and George Baker (eds.), *Gurdjieff. Essays and Reflections on the Man and His Teaching*, New York, Continuum, 1996, pp. 70-85.

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

## 30 April

### *Class 10: Traditionalism*

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

Robin WATERFIELD, *René Guénon and the Future of the West*, n.p., Crucible, 1987, pp. 23-68.

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

## 7 May

### *Class 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, pp. 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, pp. 45-56.\*

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

— Final test —

The questions will be made available on 10 May; the answers should be sent to the lecturer before 17 May, 24:00.