

MA: Islamic Esotericism from Sufism to the New Age

Teacher: Dr. Liana Saif (l.w.i.saif2@uva.nl)

Second semester, first block

Teaching weeks: 14 February – 23 March 2022

Hours and location: Mondays: 13:00 – 15:00 at [OIH E0.14B](#); Wednesdays: 13:00 – 15:00 at [OIH E0.14B](#).

Objectives: This course takes a comprehensive look at the development of Islamic esoteric currents from the medieval period to the modern day, including and beyond Sufism. Special focus is given to the transference of Islamic esoteric practices, concepts, and structures to Europe and their co-opting and refashioning.

- 1) Students will become acquainted with the history of the conceptualisation of esotericism (*bāṭiniyya*) in Islam and the different religious, cultural discourses within which Islamic esotericism was/is negotiated and circumscribed, including within the contexts of colonialism, the construction of Modernity and globalisation.
- 2) Students will be able to perceive moments in the entanglement of Islamic esotericism, and Sufism especially, with the Traditionalist School and the New Age movement and their strategies of perennialization.
- 3) Students will be able to critically engage with the ways in which the study of Islam and Islamic esotericism have been positioned by scholars, such as Henry Corbin, whose approaches and assumptions have a continuing influence on narratives about Islamic esotericism: a living and thriving tradition.
- 4) Students will be able to identify the major transformation of Islamic esotericism caused by commercialisation of spirituality and its inherent orientalism.

Content: Themes are given to every two sessions:

Theme 1: Bāṭin and ḡāhir (Esoteric and Exoteric)

Theme 2: Sufism

Theme 3: al-Andalus

Theme 4: Islamic esotericism and the "Orient"

Theme 5: Islamic esotericism in the New Age

Theme 6: European esoteric currents in the Islamic World

Excerpts from primary sources are chosen that present: a) the authors' reflections on the nature of esoteric knowledge, b) integration of ancient knowledge, c) concern with humans' relationship to the Divine, d) the paths of attaining spiritual knowledge. We will read Arabic and Persian texts in English translations; and from the "European" context we will read Traditionalist and New Age texts available in English. The course takes advantage of historical and biographical surveys but also theoretical discussions that illuminate the different approaches adopted for the study of esotericism. The class will benefit from an array of multimedia resources from short documentaries,

music, and performances that bring to life a vibrant tradition. Teacher will get in touch with students to provide access for the reading material.

Recommended prior knowledge: None

Teaching method and contact hours: Each session comprises a lecture, student-led discussion, and sometimes watching videos and listening to music that complement the reading material and discussion.

Student Obligations:

- 1) Close reading of assigned texts under each section. Further readings are not compulsory, although they would be very helpful for an engaging in-class discussion.
- 2) Prepare an approximately 200-word statement regarding the reading material to launch discussions. The statement should be centred on the “Provocations” for each session.
- 3) Attendance is a prerequisite for passing the course.
- 4) Bring your assigned reading printed out or a digital copy. We might use them in class.
- 5) Self-guided preparation particularly of new and unfamiliar ideas and terms encountered in weekly readings using the internet, libraries, or any accessible resources.

Evaluation: Students will be evaluated on the basis of 1) discussion moderation, 2) final essay, and 3) Participation

- 1) *In-class discussion moderation:* Each class, a student or two (depending on the size of the course) will be responsible for leading a 30-minute discussion based on the required student statements (see above under ‘Student Obligations’). They are expected to start with their own statements and then elicit responses from fellow students and moderate the conversation. (30 % of the final grade)
- 2) *Final essay:* A final 3500-word essay needs to be submitted by 30/April/2021. The essay is meant to showcase a student’s grasp of the major themes and concepts presented in the course. The evaluation will consider the clarity of research question, argument, structure, handling and integrating primary and secondary sources, and proper citational practice. (60% of the final grade).

Essays must have:

- ✓ A clear structure (introduction, discussion, conclusion).
- ✓ A concise introduction which states the research question, explains the structure of the argument, and anticipates the answers the presentation provides or takes us closer towards an answer.
- ✓ The discussion that follows the introduction expands the argument for the answers the presentation provides. It should be clear, focussed, and well-structured.
- ✓ A brief conclusion is for reminding the audience of the research question and summarises arguments (concise). It is also an opportunity to tell the audience what different directions the subject-matter can be further investigated for future research.
- ✓ Use of quotations is expected.

- ✓ Consistent citation style: You can pick any recognised style, it just needs to be applied consistently; Chicago Style is preferred:
https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html

3) *Participation and Attendance*: A maximum of three meetings can be missed though regular attendance is expected. Active participation means that you have read the materials for each week and take part in the discussions. Be prepared for the class. (10 % of the final grade)

Plagiarism.

The University of Amsterdam Fraud and Plagiarism regulations apply to the assessment of this course. These regulations can be consulted at <https://student.uva.nl/en/content/az/plagiarism-and-fraud/plagiarism-and-fraud.html>

For all further information, you can contact the lecturer directly at: l.w.i.saif2@uva.nl

The Syllabus

Week 1

Session 1: *Introductions and Course Orientation*

Theme 1: *Bāṭin and zāhir*

Session 2

Liana Saif, "What is Islamic esotericism?", *Correspondences*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2019), pp. 18-25, pp. 33-48. (19 pages)

The Brethren of Purity, *On God and the World: An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistles 49-51*, ed. and trans. by Wilferd Madelung & Cyril V. Uy II; Carmela Baffioni; Nuha Alshaar (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2019), pp. 90-94, pp. 103-104, 108-114-pp. 116-118. (18 pages)

Provocation: Where would you place the Brethren of Purity on the diagram you find in Saif, "What is Islamic Esotericism?", p. 47. Consider the orientations and paradigms that the article describes.

Week 2

Session 3

al-Qushayrī, Epistle on Sufism, trans. Alexander Knysh (Reading and Lebanon: Garnet Publishing, 2007), pp. 319-325. (6 pages).

Norman Calder, Javid Mojaddedi, and Andrew Rippin, *Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature*, 228-232. (4 pages).

Provocation: How would you describe the difference between "learning" and "tasting"?

Further readings:

Secondary: Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam* (Albany: State University of New York, 1994), pp. 5 – 13 “The Super-Existence of the Imam”, pp. 29-43.

Primary: David Hollenberg, “Interpretation after the End of Days: The Fāṭimid-Ismaʿīlī Taʿwīl (Interpretation) of Jaʿfar ibn Maṣūʿ al-Yaman (D. Ca. 960)”, Doctoral Thesis, University of Pennsylvania (2006), pp. 115-143.

Theme 2: Sufism

Session 4:

al-Qushayrī, Epistle on Sufism, trans. Alexander Knysh (Reading and Lebanon: Garnet Publishing, 2007), pp. 325-338 (Love/mahabba); p. 77 (maqam), p. 78 (State), p. 89 (annihilation), p. 96 (concealment), pp. 105-8. (17 pages)

Ahmet T. Karamustafa, Sufism: The Formative Period (Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 114-27 (13 pages)

Provocation: Love, Gnosis, Witnessing... lovely ideas, how were they instrumentalised in the creation of practicing communities? Can we think of these ideas without social hierarchies and without Islamic Law (*sharīʿa*)?

Week 3

Session 5:

Oludamnini Ogunnaike, “A Treatise on Practical and Theoretical Sufism in the Sokoto Caliphate *Shaykh Dan Tafa’s* Exposition of Devotions (*Bayān al-Taʿabbudāt*)”, *Journal of Sufi Studies* 10 (20 21) pp. 152–173 (pp. 153-156, pp. 163-173). (13 pages)

Keith Cantú, “Islamic Esotericism in the Bengali Bāul Songs of Lālan Fakir”, *Correspondences* 7, no. 1 (2019): pp. 109–165 (pp. 109-119, pp. 134-44). (20 pages)

Provocation: Sufism first developed in what we would refer to as the Middle East. What happens when we observe its development beyond the Arab-speaking world?

Further reading:

Andrea Brigaglia, “Eu-RAP-IA: Rap, Sufism and the Arab Qasida in Europe”, in *Global Sufism: Boundaries, Narratives, and Practices*, eds. Mark Sedgwick & Francesco Piraino (London: C. Hurst, 2019) pp. 93-114. (21 pages)

Ron Geaves, “Sufism in the UK”, in *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London and New York: Routledge, 2021) pp. 449-458. (9 pages)

Theme 3: al-Andalus

Session 6:

Sarah Stroumsa and Sara Sviri, "The Beginnings of Mystical Philosophy in al-Andalus: Ibn Masarra and his Epistle on Contemplation", *JSAI* 36 (2009), pp. 201-253 (pp. 201-4, pp. 216-225). (15 pages)

P. Henry and H.R. Schwyzer, *Plotini Opera, Tomus II (1959)*, English translation by G. Lewis of the *Theology of Aristotle*, pp. 219-231 (4-6 PDF page numbers), pp. 135-139 (40-42 PDF page numbers). (11 pages)

Provocation: How Neoplatonic is Ibn Masarra? What about Neoplatonism (especially its emanationism) that works for Ibn Masarra's idea of contemplation?

Week 4

Session 7:

Jawad Anwar Qureshi, "Ibn 'Arabī and the Akbarī Tradition", in *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London and New York: Routledge, 2021) pp. 89-102 (pp. 89-95). (7 pages)

William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabī's Cosmology* (New York: State University of New York, 1998), pp. xxvii-xxxii. (5 pages)

Hülya Küçük & Stephen Hirtenstein, "Ibn 'Arabī's *Kitāb al-Bā'*. The Truth through which the heavens and the earth were created", *Journal of Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society*, volume 65 (2019), pp. 127 (pp. 7-13). (13 pages)

Provocation: What makes Ibn 'Arabī's esotericism Islamic?

Further readings:

Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, trans. John D. Jones (Wisconsin: The Marquette University Press, 1999), 107-117.

Shaykh Mohamed Faouzi al-Karkari, *A Contemporary Sufi Treatise on the Secrets of the Divine Names*, trans. Yousef Casewit & Khalid Williams (Brussels: Les 7 Lectures, 2021), pp. 29-33.

Theme: Islamic esotericism and the "Orient"

Session 8

Liana Saif, "What is Islamic esotericism?", *Correspondences*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2019), pp. 25-33 (9 pages).

René Guénon, "Islamic Esoterism", in *Insight into Islamic Esoterism and Taosim*, trans. by Henry F. Fohr, ed. by Samuel D. Fohr (New York: Sophia Perennis, 1973), pp. 1-8. (8 pages)

Frithjof Schuon, *Sufism: Veil and Quintessence: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, ed. by James S. Cutsinger (World Wisdom, 2006), pp. 19-27, pp. 38-41. (13 pages)

Provocation: How do Guénon and Schuon understand "tolerance" and what does it mean to esotericism?

Week 5

Session 9

Henry Corbin, *Inside Iranian Islam: Spiritual and Philosophical Aspects, Volume II*, English translation, pp. 27-40. (14 pages).

Suhrawardī, *The Philosophy of Illumination*, trans. by John Walbridge & Hossein Ziai (Utah: Brigham Young University, 199), pp. 77-78, pp. 148-150, pp. 162-163. (7 pages)

Provocation: What is the “mystical” objective of the Philosophy of Illumination according to Corbin and according to Suhrawardī?

Further reading:

Henry Corbin, “The Situation of Esotericism”, in *Alone with the Alone: Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 77-86. (The phenomenology of Sufism). (10 pages)

Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 39-55.

Erik S. Ohlander, *Sufism in an age of transition: Umar al-Suhrawardi and the Rise of the Islamic Mystical Brotherhoods* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 187-197.

Theme: Islamic esotericism in the New Age

Session 10

Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), “Sufism meets the New Age”, pp. 222-235 (13 pages).

Wouter Hanegraaff, “Conclusions: The New Age Movement and the Nature of New Age Religion”, in pp. 514- 522. (9 pages).

Provocation: What can make Sufism Western?

Further readings:

Marcia Hermansen, “Literary Productions of Western Sufi Movements”, in *Sufism in the West*, eds. Jamal Malik & John Hinnells (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 28-44.

Week 6

Session 11

Sophia Rose Arjana, *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi: Orientalism and the Mystical Marketplace* (London: One World Academic, 2020), PDF page range 171-77, 185-193. (15 pages)

Rumi, *The Masnavi: Book One*, trans. Jawid Mojaddedi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), False Sufi Masters (The deception of needy disciples) pp. 140-141; “On the Nature of the Sufi Guide”, pp. 180-181; “Kings seat Sufis”, pp. 193-194; “The first person to apply analogical reasoning to revelation was Satan”, pp. 208-209. (6 pages)

Elif Shafak, *The Forty Rules of Love* (London: Penguin, 2010), pp. 149-157, pp. 165-166, pp. 180-183. (15 pages)

Provocation: How did orientalism, capitalism, and colonialism de-Islamise Islamic esotericism and Sufism especially?

Further readings

Ibrahim Gamard, "Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī and His Place in the History of Sufism", in *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 103-117.

"Secular Acts of Faith: Russell Brand & Elif Shafak" Russell Brand Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDVxJ2JVpiw>

<https://zirrarr.com/reading-rumi-the-erasure-of-islam-from-rumi/>

<https://zirrarr.com/reading-rumi-in-the-west-the-burden-of-coleman-barks/>

Theme: European esoteric currents in the Islamic World

Session 12:

Alireza Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 105-122. (18 pages)

Özgür Türesay, "Between Science and Religion: Spiritism in the Ottoman Empire (1850s-1910s)", *Studia Islamica* 113 (2018), pp. 166-200 (pp. 175-89). (15 pages)

Provocation: How did modernity and scientism contribute to the development of an esotericism that contrasts with the "traditional" occult sciences and "traditional" esotericism?

Further readings: For understanding what spiritism and spiritualism are.

John Warne Monroe, *Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 67-72, pp. 95-139