COURSE DESCRIPTION
Central European University / Departments of History and Medieval Studies

INTRODUCTION TO WESTERN ESOTERICISM
MA course in Interdisciplinary Historical and Religious Studies
(Tuesdays, 15:30–17:10)
György E. Szönyi
Office hours after the class + appointment
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COURSE DESCRIPTION
The course introduces the basic concepts of Western esotericism, preceded by modern psychological and cognitive theories of magic that also try to explain the persistence of the magical way of seeing the world, in fact, the inseparability of this world view from human nature. The second part of the course offers a diachronic overview of the study of Western esotericism as it emerged in the 19th century from anthropology, developed in science history, and recently occupied a place within religious studies and became a discipline in its own right. The third part of the course gives an overview of the main trends of Western esotericism from Late Antiquity to the Modern Period; also according to their subfields, such as astrology, alchemy, the different types of magic, and witchcraft. A special emphasis will be put on how the Classical, Eastern, and medieval traditions amalgamated into a syncretic system of the "great Renaissance magi": Ficino, Pico, Trithemius, Agrippa, Paracelsus, Dee, Bruno, Fludd, and others. Texts will also be used from Greco-Egyptian mythology, Hellenistic Neoplatonism, medieval angelology, Jewish cabala and the sources of ceremonial magic. The conclusion of the course will point toward the modern period (post-17th century to the present), which will be extensively discussed in a second course, to be developed later. The sequel of the present course will examine the rise of the alternative occult thinking in the time of the Enlightenment, reaching as far as the contemporary pertinence of the esoteric today.

The goal of the course is to make students aware of an intellectual tradition which reached from Antiquity through the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and has been one of the stimulating forces behind the so called "Western ideology". This tradition has not died out, it is still active in modern Western Esoterism and New Age ideology, except that since the 17th century it has become rather a counterculture than a dominating intellectual and cultural trend.

The learning outcomes will consist of 1/ an accumulation of historical knowledge in a specific and relevant field of intellectual/cultural history; 2/ an awareness of the interconnectedness of pre-modern ideas and recent intellectual/ideological developments; 3/ the enhancement of methodological equipment with which students can handle and interpret intellectual and cultural history with ample expertise. The learning outcomes will be assessed through class participation, a presentation, and an exam test (alternatively an essay).

ASSIGNMENTS, GRADING
– Participation in classes (25%)
– Presentation (25%)
– Exam test (50%; if an essay: 8-10 pages, min. 8 items of references, 35% contents, 15% format/language).
TOPICS AND READINGS

   **Zero-week lecture – Definitions: The Occult World Picture.** Magical thinking today and in
   the premodern world – The Great Chain of Being – correspondences – macrocosm/microcosm
   – mysticism-esotericism-magic – a typology of magical practices.
   *Text:* The Occult World Picture illustrations (reader); Godwin, *The Golden Thread*, Preface by
   Richard Smoley + Preface + Ch 1 (reader)

2. September 17.
   **The Occult/magical Thinking – From the viewpoint of modern neuro sciences.**
   *Text:* Subbotsky, *Magic and the Mind*, ix-xiv; 170-75 (reader); Alcock, "The Propensity to
   Believe," 64-78 (reader). *Presentation:* Magic from the viewpoint of science.

   **The Western Esoteric Traditions – A Historical Introduction.** Definitions of the esoteric and
   the historiography of the research of Western esotericism – the Warburg school, Henry Corbin,
   Antoine Faivre, etc.
   *Reference:* Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (reader); Versluis, *Methods in the Study of
   Western Esotericism* (reader); Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, Ch 1.

4. October 1.
   **The Study of Western Esotericism.** From the Hermetic Tradition to Western Esotericism.
   *Text:* Coudert, "From the Hermetic tradition to Western Esotericism" (reader); Hanegraaff,
   "Forbidden Knowledge..." (reader). *Presentation:* Frances Yates.

5. October 8.
   **The Renaissance Revival of Magic.** The Renaissance Discovery of the Hermetic Tradition and
   the Christianization of the Kabbalah. – Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola.
   *Text:* Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate / On the Dignity of Man* (reader). *Presentation:

6. October 15. [class exceptionally in late afternoon!!!]
   **The Hermetica in the Context of Ancient Magic.** Platonism – Philosophical Hermeticism –
   the "technical" hermetica – neoplatonic esotericism.
   *Text:* Wind, "The Language of Mysteries..." (reader); Plato, "Symposium" (reader); *Corpus
   hermeticum* IV, XIII, Aselepius (Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, reader). *Presentation:* The
   story of the Corpus hermetica.
   *Reference:* Copenhaver, *Corpus hermeticum*, "Introduction"; Szönyi, *John Dee*, Ch 3; Yates,
   *Bruno*, Ch 1-3.
7. October 22.
**Medieval Esotericism (magia naturalis, Pseudo-Dionysius, Lullus, Picatrix, Jewish mysticism, Ceremonial/Solomonic magic).** Angelology as the basis of later magical theories – A variety of medieval magical theories and practices.


8. October 29.
**Renaissance Magic.** Image magic (Ficino) – Magical synthesis (Agrippa) – Experiments with *exaltatio* (John Dee).


**Magic and Science I: Copernicus, Paracelsus, Servet, della Porta.** Magia naturalis – hermetic considerations about the new astronomy – the status of alchemy and astrology in the early modern period.


**Magic as Alternative Universalism: Guillaume Postel, John Dee, and the Rosicrucians.** Early modern universalist concepts: interconfessionalism, general reformation, philosophia perennis, pansophia.


**The Sociology of Magic.** From the medieval 'clerical underworld' through humanist subversion to witchcraft.


*Reference:* Bever, *The Realities of Witchcraft*; Klaniczay–Pócs, *Demons, Spirits...*

**Western Esotericism Becomes Counterculture.**

*Text:* Péter, "Unio Mystica..." (reader) *Presentation:* The rise of Freemasonry.

*Reference:* Clarke, "Swedenborg...";

**The Shadows of the Enlightenment and the Magical Revival in Romanticism.**

*Text:* Salap, *Disenchantment and Re-enchantment...* *Presentation:* Max Weber's disenchantment theory.


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**REFERENCES, BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Primary Sources**


Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni. "The Dignity of Man".


**Secondary Sources**


Coudert, Alison. "From the Hermetic Tradition to Western esotericism." In Wouter J. Hanegraaff and Joyce Pijnenburg ed. *Hermes in the Academy: Ten Years’ Study of Western Esotericism at the University of Amsterdam*. Amsterdam University Press, 2009, 117-22. (reader)


—. "Studying Western Esotericism." (manuscript, reader)


Western esotericism, also known as esotericism, esoterism, and sometimes the Western mystery tradition, is a term under which scholars have categorised a wide range of loosely related ideas and movements which have developed within Western society. These ideas and currents are united by the fact that they are largely distinct both from orthodox Judeo-Christian religion and from Enlightenment rationalism. Esotericism has pervaded various forms of Western philosophy, religion, pseudoscience, art The academic study of western esotericism is one of those new developments in the study of religions which may strike the casual observer as having appeared almost overnight, due to the fact that its gradual development over the past decades is easily overlooked.[1] Like any newcomer, the discipline tends to evoke curiosity as well as suspicion; and such reactions are all the.Â In this article, I intend to provide a brief introduction to the current state of "the study of esotericism"; and to give special attention to why it is important for students in this field - even those whose approach is strictly historical/descriptive - to consider issues of a methodological and theoretical nature.