



Prof. Dr. Almut-Barbara Renger

Modern Esotericism between East and West

Second Semester 2012–2013

Course Manual

Time and place: Monday, 13.00–16.00 h, room 123

Language of Instruction: English

Course code: THMMEEWE10

Credit points: 10 ECTS

<i>Part of:</i> [Degree Program]	[Year]	[Term]	[Type]
RM Religion and culture	2	semester II	option group
MA Program Concealed Knowledge Gnosticism, Esotericism & Mysticism	4	semester II	compulsory

Course contents:

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, religious and cultural landscapes, not only in the so-called West, but also in other regions (for instance, in Asia) were transformed by migration and globalization processes, new forms both of group formation and communication (such as the internet), and related dynamics of change. These processes of change also had an effect on teachings and practices of what is called Western esotericism. In this course unit, students will be introduced to the major developments of esotericism since the Enlightenment, with special attention paid to (a) the impact of the Theosophical Society, (b) the widespread fascination with the phenomenon of the “master” resulting in the formation of coterie or circles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and (c) the 1960’s New Age movement, whose central precepts and practices were drawn from religious and philosophical traditions from both Asia and Europe. These dynamics and developments will be analyzed in the framework of theories by Max Weber and Joachim Wach as well as with reference to key concepts in postcolonial studies such as “secularization”, “globalization”, “Westernization” and (in regard to post-World War II developments) the term “Easternization” that has come to prominence since the mid-1990s. In the last block of the course, we will dedicate special attention to the *Star Wars* films that drew inspiration from both “Eastern” and “Western” traditions and have been interpreted from a wide range of perspectives, including Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu.

Literature:

A list of texts to be read in advance will be announced before the start of the seminar. A detailed syllabus with additional information about the exam format, program, and reading list is to be found below.

Learning goals:

In terms of content, the course unit will familiarize students with the major developments in the field of esotericism since the Enlightenment. Students will be able to analyze these developments within the critical methodological framework of “secularization”, “modernization”, “globalization”, and “postcolonialism”. With regard to academic skills, the course unit aims at improving the students’ ability to follow and analyze complex academic discussions and subsequently find their own position therein. This will lead to the writing of an academic paper as preparation for the MA thesis. Furthermore, presentation skills that are a crucial part of academic practice will be strengthened.

Format:

This course will have the format of both lecture and seminar, which means that active participation of students is essential. Students will introduce readings of the respective week and discuss and present their own ideas. In addition, a final paper has to be written.

Assignments and grade breakdown:

Preparation for and active participation in class is compulsory.

Workload: lectures/seminars: 14 x 2 hours = 28 hours; 2 presentations in class: 20 hours (2 x 20% of the final grade); book review (1000 words): 20 hours (20% of the final grade); writing of short academic paper (2,000-3,000 words): 40 hours (40% of the final grade); expected self-study: 200 hours.

A presentation by a student will take 15-25 minutes. Because all students will have read the preparatory literature, it is essential not just to repeat the content of the reading, but (a) to highlight the crucial argument/modes of narrative or discourse, (b) provide more information about the context (e.g., the author, the rest of the book, debates that underlie the text, reviews of the book/article, etc.), and (c) to extract a couple of questions or critical remarks that should be discussed in class. The use of handouts is required; Power-Point presentations including images are strongly encouraged. A book review has to be written. The presentations (even if in preliminary form) have to be sent to the instructor at least five days before the session, otherwise 1.0 will be subtracted from the grade for this assignment. Each student will be responsible for 2 presentations. These will make for 40% (2 x 20%) of the final grade.

In consultation with the instructor, students will write a book review of 1,000 words and short academic paper of 2,000–3,000 words. Papers should focus on a relevant academic question, make use of primary and secondary literature, and should employ standard rules of argumentation, citation systems, and bibliography. Term papers require an ability to critically engage with literature that lies outside the required readings. The instructor will comment on a preliminary version of the paper, if that is submitted before 24 May 2013. The final version is due 7 June 2013 and will make for 40% of the final grade.

Re-examination:

The weighed final grade has to be satisfactory (5.5). If the final grade is unsatisfactory, students can repeat one of the assignments that were unsatisfactory. All material has to be handed in by 7 June 2013.

Program

4 February 1. Lecture and Introduction

Lecture (“The ‘Master’ in Modern Esotericism: History and Implications”), explanation of assignments, distribution of presentations

11 February 2. Mesmerism, Romanticism, and the Theosophical Society: Claims to Secret Knowledge

Reading:

- Kocku von Stuckrad, “Esotericism, Enlightenment and Science,” in: von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*, London: Equinox, 2005, 99–112.
- Kocku von Stuckrad, “Institutionalised Esotericism: Secret Societies,” in: von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*, London: Equinox, 2005, 113–121.
- Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, “Introduction: H.P. Blavatsky and Theosophy,” in: Goodrick-Clarke (ed.), *Helena Blavatsky*, Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2004, 1–20.

Additional material:

- Joscelyn Godwin, “Wisdom of the East,” in: Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1994, 307–331.

Presentation:
3-4 students

18 February 3. Helena Blavatsky and the “Masters”

Reading:

- Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, “Helena Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society,” in: Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions. A Historical Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 211–228.
- Joachim Wach, “Master and Disciple. Two Religio-Sociological Studies,” in: *The Journal of Religion* 42,1 (1962), 1–21.

Presentation:
2 students

25 February 4. Masters East and West: Occult Knowledge and Charismatic Authority

Reading:

– Max Weber, “The Basis of Legitimacy,” “Charismatic Authority,” “The Routinization of Charisma,” “The Prophet,” in: Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. by Guenther Roth & Claus Wittich, Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 1978, 212–216, 241–245, 246–254, 439–451.

Additional material:

– Hans G. Kippenberg, “Joachim Wach Between the George Circle and Weber’s Typology of Religious Communities,” in: Christian Wedemeyer & Wendy Doniger (eds.), *Hermeneutics, Politics, and the History of Religions. The Contested Legacies of Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 3–20.

– Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age*, Boston, MA: Brill, 2003, 379–393.

Presentation:

2-3 students

11 March 5. “May the force be with you”: New Age Spirituality and Star Wars

Reading:

– James R. Lewis, “Approaches to the Study of the New Age Movement,” in: Lewis & J. Gordon Melton (eds.), *Perspectives on the New Age*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992, 1–12.

– Colin Campbell, “Negotiating Terms,” in: Campbell, *The Easternization of the West: a Thematic Account of Cultural Change in the Modern Era*, Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007, 3–17.

Presentation:

2-3 students

18 March 6. The Star Wars legacy: Secularization and Re-enchantment

Reading:

– Steve Bruce, “Secularization,” in: Robert A. Segal (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006, 413–429.

Presentation:
2-3 students

25 March 7. Modern Esotericism and Globalization

Reading:

– David Lehmann, “Religion and Globalization,” in: Linda Woodhead, Christopher Partridge & Hiroko Kawanami (eds.), *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, 407–428.

Presentation of students’ papers and concluding discussion.