

RELS 375 Western Esotericism

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Office Hours: Mon & Weds 3:00-5:00
(or by appointment)

Course Description:

This is an advanced survey course on Western Esotericism beginning with the Greco-Roman period and covering the following topics in a roughly historical order: Pythagoreanism, Hermeticism, Kabbalah, Grail, Alchemy, Rosicrucians & Masons, Esoteric Christianity, and contemporary, esoteric teachings. The learning-teaching strategy is to provide a general overview of each area and to show interconnections in a general pattern of historical development, including some of the problematic aspects of studying esotericism. The goal of the course is to provide students with an overview of the development and complexity of Western Esoteric traditions apart from mainstream religious teachings or institutions. We will not be studying normative Christianity, Judaism or Islam but esoteric traditions or schools that have developed in parallel to these mainstream traditions, often in circumstances of oppression or institutional persecution. We will examine why these traditions have been persecuted and why they often have secret rites and an underground history. At the end of the course, we will consider the increased popularity of esotericism and its impact on New Religious Movements.

Books:

- * *PP Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans* by Charles Kahn.
- * *GA The Weiser Concise Guide to Alchemy* by Brian Cotnoir.
- * *KV Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction* by Joseph Dan.
- * *RH The Rosicrucians: The History, Mythology, and Rituals* by Christopher McIntosh.
- * *WT The Work and Training of an Initiate* by Dion Fortune,
- * *LL Light is a Living Spirit* by Omraam Mikhaël Aïvanhov.
- * *WE Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* by Kocku von Stuckrad.

Requirements:

Students are expected to attend all classes and participate in class discussions, more than three cuts will lower your final grade. We will have three exams (each 20% = 60%), one research paper (5% + 15%), and an "esoteric notebook" (20%). Students **must take exams when scheduled, no makeups will be given** unless there is a valid excuse. Conflicting exams schedules, lack of preparation, misplaced books, oversleeping (and so on) are NOT acceptable reasons for missing tests. Students must make up any missed assignments (or receive an F); if there is a problem contact me by email or phone. If there is a student in this class who has a documented disability and has been approved to receive accommodations through SNAP Services, please feel free to come and discuss this with me during my office hours.

Honor Code: Lying, cheating, and plagiarism are violations of the Honor Code and are not permitted at the College. Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be reported directly to the Dean of Students. A student found responsible for academic dishonesty will receive a XF in the course, indicating failure of the course due to academic dishonesty.

Grading Scale:

Numerical and letter grades: [A+= 95] A = 92; A- = 91-89; B+ = 88-86; B = 85-82; B- = 81-79; C+ = 78-76; C = 75-72; C- = 71-69; D+ = 68-66; D = 65-63; D- = 62-60; F = 59 or lower.

Reading & Grade Assignments: Reading assignments must be done **BEFORE** the class for which they are assigned, not after; then you can follow the discussion, ask questions, and we can have an informed dialogue on the subject of the reading. **PLEASE BRING YOUR BOOK TO CLASS.**

I. week One: August 23, 25 Introduction to Western Esotericism

A. Reading Assignment: WE (Stuckrad) pp. 1-17.

II. Week Two: August 28, 30; September 1 Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans

A. Reading Assignment: PP (Kahn) pp. 1-62.

B. Abode of Message: **No class, Sept 1**

III. Week Three: September 4, 6, 8 Pythagoras and the Gnostics

A. Reading Assignment: WE (Stuckrad) pp. 18-30; PP (Kahn) pp. 63-138.

B. **Esoteric Notebook (1) Due, Sept 8**

IV. Week Four: September 11, 13, 15 Alchemy in Theory

A. Reading Assignment: GA (Cotnoir) pp. 1-57.

V. Week Five: September 18, 20, 22 Alchemy in Practice

A. Reading Assignment: GA (Cotnoir) pp. 60-103.

B. **EXAM ONE, SEPTEMBER 22**

VI. Week Six: September 25, 27, 29 Early and Medieval Jewish Kabbalah

A. Reading Assignment: KV (Dan) pp. 1-59.

VII. Week Seven: October 2, 4, 6 Christian and Late Jewish Kabbalah

A. Reading Assignment: KV (Dan) pp. 61-112.

B. **Esoteric Notebook (2) Due, October 6**

VIII. Week Eight: October 9, 11, 13 Renaissance Esotericism and Magic

A. Reading Assignment: WE (Stuckrad) pp. 31-61; PP (Kahn) pp. 139-153.

IX. Week Nine: October 16, 18, 20 Renaissance Esotericism and Magic

- A. Reading Assignment: WE (Stuckrad) pp. 62-98; PP (Kahn) pp. 153-172.
- B. **EXAM TWO, OCTOBER 20**

X. Week Ten: October 23, 25, 27 Esoteric Orders and the Rosicrucians

- A. Reading Assignment: RH (McIntosh) pp. 1- 61.

XI. Week Eleven: October 30; November 1, 3 Esoteric Orders and the Golden Dawn

- A. Reading Assignment: RH (McIntosh) pp. 63-106
- B. **Pass out Paper Guide, Nov 1**
- C. **Esoteric Notebook (3) Due, November 3**

XII. Week Twelve: November 8, 10 Theosophy & Theosophical Society

- A. SPRING BREAK: No Class November 6
- B. Reading Assignment: WE (Stuckrad) pp. 99-132; RH (Mcintosh) pp. 119-144.
- C. **Paper Proposal Due, November 10**

XIII. Week Thirteen: November 13, 15, 17 The Society of Inner Light

- A. Reading Assignment: WT (Fortune) pp. 1-56
- B. **EXAM THREE, NOVEMBER 17**

XIV. Week Fourteen: November 20 The Society of the Inner Light

- A. Reading Assignment: WT (Fortune) pp. 59-125.
- B. THANKSGIVING, No classes, November 22, 24

XV. Week Fifteen: November 27, 29; December 1 Esotericism and Modernity

- A. Reading Assignment: WE (Stuckrad) pp. 133- 146; LL (Aivanhov) pp. 1-70.
- B. **Esoteric Notebook (4) Due, December 1**

XVI. Week Sixteen: December 4 Esotericism and Modernity

- A. Reading Assignment: LL (Aivanhov) pp. 73-146.
- B. **FINAL PAPER DUE, DECEMBER 4**

