

Global Esotericism: Spirits, Cults, and a History of Magic

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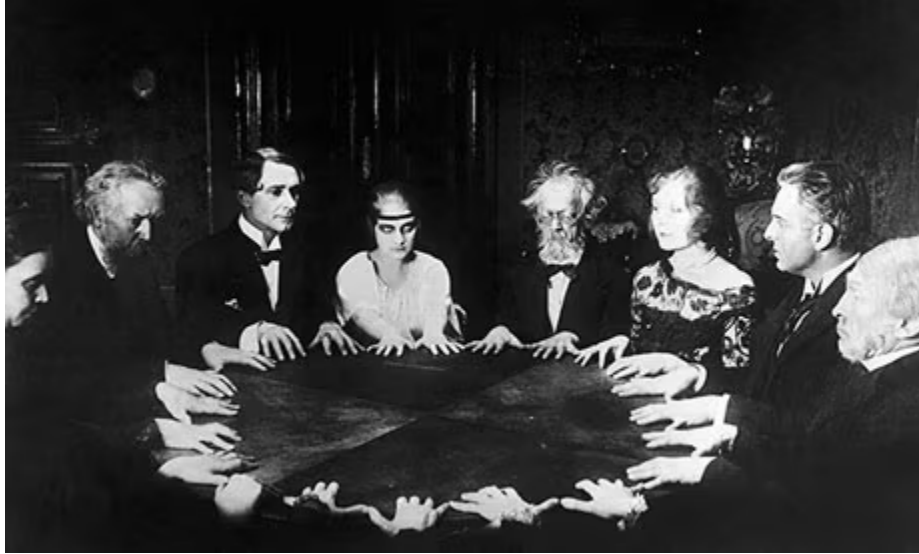
Course Description

What if magic never really disappeared? What if our modern world, with all its science, technology, and rationality, is still haunted by the occult, the mystical, and the unseen? In this experimental history seminar, we'll travel across Europe, North America, the Arab world, and Asia to explore how esoteric currents shaped the 19th and 20th centuries. From séances in American parlors to tantric practices in India, to spiritist societies in Egypt's 52 republic, we'll rethink the history of modernity through the lens of re-enchantment, and trace why the haunting and the "spooky" has always caught our imagination.

This is a course about "weird" things, but also about how we make sense of science, belief, and the boundaries of truth.

Engagement and Encouragement

This course invites you to think differently, read deeply into primary sources, and question what you thought you knew about religion, history, and modern life. No single background is expected or required; artists, skeptics, mystics, scientists, and everyone in between is more than welcome.



Course Learning Plan

Presentations

Each student will be asked to lead the discussion (based on the assigned reading of the week) to open the space up for class discussion. This will also aid students during in-class collective readings of primary sources selected by the instructor. A collective reading and engagement with primary sources in class trains students to analyze and read different historical documents as well as situate them in contemporary discussions about politics, gender, history, etc.

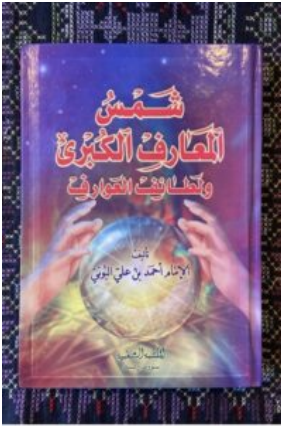


Presentations Rubric

- Clarity of secondary source's argument
- Background and contextualization

- Engagement with assigned primary source of the week
- Overall effort and presentation

Weekly Reflections



The instructor will set up a forum for weekly reflection. At the end of each week, each student is expected to write their main takeaway from the week’s discussion, and their reflection on the primary and secondary sources. You can respond to others, comment on a local or global event (past or present), or draw parallels between what we tackled in class and personal anecdotes. Think of this as a space in which you “write in order to think”. You don’t always have to present something polished to be read, sometimes you need to write to think through what you take in around you. It can be as short or as long as you want; it simply has to be thought-provoking.

Weekly Reflections Rubric

- Promptness of uploading the reflection
- Engagement with class discussion
- Clear attempt at thinking through primary and secondary sources
- Drawing connections between inside and outside of the classroom



Final Project

For your final project, you will explore a theme, movement, or idea from the course through one of the following formats. Your project should demonstrate thoughtful engagement with course materials and critical thinking, but you're encouraged to be experimental, reflective, or creative in approach. Options include:

- A research project using primary and secondary sources on an esoteric topic of your choice.
- A fictitious historical narrative exploring an imagined esoteric encounter or society.
- A personal reflection that ties in experiences with esoteric, spiritual, or occult traditions to course themes.
- A visual or mapping project tracing the networks or symbolism of an esoteric tradition.
- A digital exhibit or video essay explaining a concept, group, or figure in global esotericism.

All formats require a 500-word reflection explaining your process, use of sources, and relation to course themes.

***Note:* Projects will be presented during the final week of class.**

Final Project Rubric

- Engagement with course themes and materials:
- Creativity and originality
- Clarity and coherence
- Reflective analysis (500-word statement)

Overall effort and presentation



Weekly Schedule and Readings

All readings and media links will be posted in the shared drive folder

Week One: Have we always been enchanted? Introduction to global esotericism

Secondary source: Jason Ananda Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Introduction).

Primary source: James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* [1890] (Selections).

Media: *Forbidden Histories* Podcast, “Magic and the Human Sciences: The Myth of Disenchantment” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMv45EDkWml>

Week Two: The Origins of the Occult

Secondary source: Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Introduction and selections from Chapter 1).

Primary Source: Helena Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* [1880] (Selections).

Media: *The Religious Studies Project* Podcast, “Wouter Hanegraaff on Western Esotericism” <https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/wouter-hanegraaff-on-western-esotericism/>

Week Three: The Fox Sisters and Modern Spiritualism in North America: Between Spectacle and Hoax?

Secondary source: Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Career of the Fox Sisters” in *The History of Spiritualism* (Chapter 5).

Primary source: Report on the Fox Sisters’ Incident [1888] (selections)
<https://www.loc.gov/item/10034905/>

Media: “The Ghost Hoax that Fooled America” Youtube video essay,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ZtXv2YDudg&pp=ygUndGhllGZveCBzaXN0ZXJzIGFuZCBtb2Rlcm4gc3Bpcml0dWFsaXNt>

Week Four: French Spiritism and Allan Kardec: Esotericism as Self-Help Books?

Secondary source: John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith* (Introduction and Selections).

Primary source: Allan Kardec, *The Spirits Books* [1857] (Selections).

Media: *Mysteries of Paris: French Spiritism and Allan Kardec* (Documentary)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXmYSbO14JA&pp=ygUfdG91cm5leyB0YWJsZXMGZnJlbnNoIHNwaXJpdGlzbQ%3D%3D>

Week Five: Esotericism and Empire

Secondary sources:

- Julian Strube, “Theosophy, Race, and the Study of Esotericism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, pp. 1180–1189, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfab109>
- Chris Goto-Jones, Chapter 3: “Orientalist Magic” in *Conjuring Asia*.

Week Six: Esotericism and the Arab World I

Secondary source: Liana Saif, *The Arabic Influences on Early Modern Occult Philosophy*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015 (Selections)

Primary source: Excerpts from *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* (Epistle on Magic) and *Shams al-Maʿārif* (focus on cosmology and talismanic logic).

Media: “Islamic Occultic Sciences and the Picatrix” Let’s Talk Religion, Interview with Liana Saif
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTpzLqoO6yM&pp=ygUuTGllhbmEgc2FpZiBhcmFiaWMgaW5mbHVlbnNIIG9uIG9jY3VsdCBzY2llbnNlcw%3D%3D>

Week Seven: Esotericism and the Arab World II

Secondary sources:

- Mark Sedgwick, "Is There Such a Thing as Islamic Esotericism?," in *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions about Western Esotericism*, ed. Marco Pasi, Peter Forshaw, and Wouter Hanegraaff (Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 216–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048542857.026>.
- Liana Saif, "What Is Islamic Esotericism?," *Correspondences* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1–59.

Primary source: Muhammad Farid Wajdi, 'Ala atlal al-madhhab al-madi [On the Ruins of Materialism, 1921] (Selections).

Media: "Fakir and Holy Men," Interview with Raphael Cormack for his book *Holy Men of the Electromagnetic Age* [2025].

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2wZt25vcnM&pp=ygUvcmFwaGFlbCBjb3JtYWNRlGhvbHkgbWVuIG9mIHRoZSBlbGVjdHJvbWFnbmV0aWM%3D>

Week Eight: Tantra, Global Esotericism, and Sexuality

Secondary source: Julian Strube, *Global Tantra* (Selections)

Primary source: Arthur Avalon, *The Serpent Power* [1919] (introduction)

Media: <https://newbooksnetwork.com/global-tantra>

Week Nine: Esotericism and Gender

Secondary source: Lucia Re, "Valentine de Saint-Point, Ricciotto Canudo, F. T. Marinetti: Eroticism, Violence and Feminism from Prewar Paris to Colonial Cairo," *Quaderni d'italianistica* 24, no. 2 (August 28, 2023): 37–69, <https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v24i2.9220>.

Primary source: Translation of "al-kontessa Valentine de Saint-Point" in al-Risala journal: https://ar.wikisource.org/wiki/%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%AF_283/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B3_%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%86_%D8%AF%D9%8A_%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86_%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%A7

Week Ten: Postwar Esotericism, Decadence of the West, and Rise of the East

Secondary source: Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century*, Oxford UP, 2004 (selections).

Primary source: René Guénon, *The Crisis of the Modern World* [1927] (selections).

Media: Clips from the Egyptian TV series *Al-'Arif Bi-Allah* Abdel Halim Mahmud

Week Eleven: Esotericism and the Nation State

Secondary sources: Heo, Angie. "The Virgin Made Visible: Intercessory Images of Church Territory in Egypt." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 2 (2012): 361–91.

Primary sources:

- Muhammad Hasanin Haykal's article in *Ahram* on unveiling the spiritist circle in Nasser's confidants.
- Ali 'Abd al-Jalil's '*Asharat asqida*'. (Selections)

Week Twelve and Thirteen: Conclusions and Final Project Presentations