Scholars have often argued that whereas mainstream religious traditions in Western culture are based upon doctrinal faith, and philosophy and science on rationality and empiricism, esotericism emphasizes the importance of personal experience of the divine and of one’s own inner self (“gnosis”). Yet, what is really meant by such experiential knowledge, and how it relates to e.g. esoteric beliefs and ritual practices, has remained remarkably unclear. In this course we will explore the nature and role of “gnosis” in Western esotericism on the basis of close textual study of primary sources concerned with reports about e.g. visions, angelic (or demonic) communications, experiences of mystical ecstasy, and so on. In doing so, we will seek to apply modern approaches to the phenomenology of “alterations of consciousness” in the domain of cognitive psychology and consciousness studies. Many traditional methods and techniques for altering consciousness - e.g. various kinds of meditation, music, rhythmic breathing, sensory deprivation or overload, fasting, ascetic as well as sexual practices, visualization, or use of psychoactive substances - play an important role in the history of esotericism, and in this course we will explore their importance to claims of “higher or absolute knowledge” in this domain.

Students who have completed this course have acquired a solid understanding of how, in the context of Western esotericism, individuals frequently claim to receive “direct knowledge” mediated by unusual states of consciousness. They have built up experience in close reading and analysis of relevant primary sources from different historical periods, and in interpreting such materials by using theoretical models and perspectives derived from such disciplines as cognitive psychology and consciousness studies.

Important

*Contested Knowledge I* is scheduled in Semester 1, blocks 1-2. It is strongly recommended to combine it with *Western Esotericism and its Scholars* in block 3 (January), resulting in a total of 18 ECT. If you plan to do so, you are advised to read the course book *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury: London 2013) already during blocks 1-2.
Procedure

There are four requirements for successfully completing the course:

1. Presence and active participation
   You are required to attend at least 80% of the seminar meetings, which means that a maximum of three meetings can be skipped. Failure to be present at more than three meetings results in a judicium “insufficient”. Active participation means that you have read the materials for each week and take part in the discussions. You will be asked questions about the texts, so be prepared!

2. Class presentations
   One or several primary or secondary sources are studied during each seminar meeting. Dependent on the number of participants, you are required to take responsibility for at least one seminar presentation (instructions for seminar presentations, see below). If the number of participants is relatively small, you are required to accept more than one presentation. A grade is awarded for each presentation, which you will be able to find on blackboard within a week after the presentation. In case of more than one presentation, the highest grade counts. This grade counts for 40% of the final grade.
   Please note: not turning up when you are scheduled for a presentation is taken very seriously, for it means that you are letting down all your fellow students and are in effect sabotaging the entire meeting. Therefore in cases of “no-show”, 1.0 will be subtracted from the final grade. Exceptions will be made only if you can demonstrate that the absence was due to force majeure (serious illness, deaths in the family etc.), and if the absence was reported as early as possible (by means of email via blackboard, or if necessary by telephone).

3. Written paper
   You are required to write a paper (min. 10-max. 15 pp., 1.5 line spacing) on a subject of your choice, relevant to the theme of the course, and selected in consultation with the instructor. Instructions for writing a paper are available on the Blackboard page for this course. Take care!
   The paper will be evaluated on the basis of its contents, but the grade will be negatively influenced by failure to respect basic style requirements as indicated in the instructions (i.e. rules for use of footnotes, literature references in footnotes, and presentation of the bibliography).
   A first version of the paper must be submitted as a Word document (attachment to w.j.hanegraaff@uva.nl), no later than 5 January 2015). Within two week (i.e. 19 January 2015) the paper will be returned with
critical comments and suggestions. The final revised version must be submitted within four more weeks (i.e. no later than 16 February 2015). If either the first or the final version of the paper is submitted too late, this results in a subtraction of 0.5 point for each week. The grade awarded to the paper counts for 60% of the final grade.

**Instructions for Seminar Presentations**

A good presentation takes between 15 and 20 minutes and contains the following elements:

- It provides some background information about the author. Please do not just copy his/her CV from the internet, but tell us in your own words who the author is and what s/he has been doing.
- The presentation makes clear what the text is about (or claims to be about) and why the author seems to have written it.
- It contains a short reminder of the structure and the contents of the text, presented in such a way that someone who has not read the text would be able to follow it. NB: The term “reminder” is used deliberately: your audience has already read the text, so please do not get into pointless summaries of what everybody already knows (“he says this, then he says that, in the next section he says that” etc.).
- It contains two or three well-chosen quotations that clarify the author’s intentions and his/her argument.
- It contains an element of critical evaluation (for example: What to make of this text? How convincing do you find the author? Are there gaps or weaknesses in the argument? Can you find counterarguments against his/her claims? And so on). Don’t be afraid to also indicate your personal opinion: what did you think of the text, did you like it, or disliked it, and why? Please note “criticism” does not mean that you necessary have to criticize the text, although you’re welcome to; it means that you show that you have read it with a critical mind.
- Use of Powerpoint is not mandatory, but very welcome. However: use it wisely. It is _never_ a good idea to put long stretches of text on BB because it will distract your audience’s attention from what you are saying. Use text elements sparingly: not with the intention of providing information, but rather, with the intention of helping your audience follow the thread of the information provided in your spoken presentation. Likewise, images are welcome, but should be functional, not just recreational.

While all students following the course are expected to have read the texts under discussion, a good presenter (and recipient of a high grade) has taken the trouble of looking further. For example if the required reading consists of only a few sections of a longer chapter, the presenter will have read the entire chapter so as to be able to put the sections in context. He or she will also have taken the trouble to visit the library (the physical one: not just the internet!)
and have a look at additional literature relevant to the text and the themes that are central in it. Therefore you need to plan your presentation well in advance.

**Program**

**Week 36**

1. **Introduction**

   [preparation: read the file with 3 fragments available on Blackboard]

**Week 37**

2. **Gnosis and Alterations of Consciousness**


**Week 38**

3. **Plato’s mania**


**Week 39**

4. **The Eleusinian Mysteries**


**Week 40**

5. Hermetic Gnosis


**Week 41**

6. Witchcraft and Ecstasy


**Week 42**

7. Kabbalah


**Week 43**

= NO CLASS =

**Week 44**

8. Emanuel Swedenborg


Week 45  

9. German Romantic Mesmerism


Week 46  

10. The Occult Revival

Anonymus / Emma Hardinge Britten, *Ghost Land, or Researches into the Mysteries of Occultism illustrated in a Series of Autobiographical Sketches*, orig. 1876, chs. I-III.


Week 47  

11. Jiddu Krishnamurti and Modern Theosophy


Week 48  

12. Aleister Crowley


Week 49  

13. Living in Two Worlds
Week 50

14. Entheogenic Esotericism


Consciousness is one of the forms in which objective reality is reflected in the human psyche. According to the cultural-historical approach, the characteristic feature of consciousness is that between objective reality and consciousness are elements of socio-historical practice, which allows to construct an objective (common) picture of the world. Creative (creative) component of the consciousness creates new images and concepts, which previously was not in it with the help of imagination, thinking and intuition. The establishment of a provisional picture of the world (memory stores the images of the past, the mind creates a model of the future). The words “conscious” and “consciousness” are umbrella terms that cover a wide variety of mental phenomena. Both are used with a diversity of meanings, and the adjective “conscious” is heterogeneous in its range, being applied both to whole organisms “creature consciousness” and to particular mental states and processes “state consciousness” (Rosenthal 1986, Gennaro 1995, Carruthers 2000). 2.1 Creature Consciousness. To have a conscious desire for a cup of coffee is to have such a desire and also to be simultaneously and directly aware that one has such a desire. Consciousness and personality. From the inevitably dead to the eternally Alive. (English Subtitles) This is an alive conversation with Igor Mikhailovich Danilov. It is the Knowledge lost in the centuries. The instruments with the help of which many people can gain real Freedom from the enslavement of the system which secretly acts through consciousness. It is a unique experience and practice of being in touch with the Spiritual World. It is an alive conversation for those who want to become a part of the Boundless World.