

Syllabus - Esotericism and Contemporary Antisemitism (DRAFT)

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Course description: Our debates about the sources and dynamics of antisemitic conspiracy myths often tend to miss their quasi-religious, esoteric nature. This course aims to change that. By using approach of religious studies, it will systematically navigate the students through the history and thought of contemporary esoteric Western religiosity with special focus on the role and origins of antisemitic conspiracy theories as part of wider esoteric beliefs and their closeness to totalitarian mindsets. The course is structured both chronologically and geographically in order to allow the student to understand both the local and the transnational context of this phenomenon.

Target audience: BA and MA students of religious studies, political science, history or cultural anthropology.

Organization: Eleven lectures or seminars are planned, with recommended reading for each. Four-page essay and students's presentations are expected. Suggestions for thematical past-time activities are also provided for those, who are interested.

Grading:

- Written exam to test the knowledge of basic dates, places and terminology (30 % of final grade)
- Essay or project, in which pairs of students play ethnologist, who explore the roots and transformations of selected conspiracy myths. The purpose of this exercize is to introduce students into various tools and resources that can be used to trace or „factcheck“ conspiracy myths as well as to cooperate with a colleague and present conclusions as a team (50 % of final grade)
- Student activity in-class – each student is expected to collect at least five points for small in-class activities, such as participating in group conversation, asking well-structured question or manifesting good knowledge of related issues beyond the scope of the course (each point equals 4 % = 20 % total).

Essay requirement:

Students are expected to work in pairs and to write a short essay about the selected myth, its origins, cultural or religious roots. They will attempt to estimate its possible impact or popularity and its role in contemporary antisemitism or religious and political extremism in general. The essay should be no shorter than four standard pages of text. Each pair of students will present their conclusions at the last seminar.

Seminar topics:

Introduction, Definitions of key terms (Esotericism, Occultism, Mysticism, Religious Syncretism etc.). Contemporary approaches to esotericism in anthropology, political and religious sciences.

Recommended reading:

- Hanegraaf, Wouter J. *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge In Western Culture* (Cambridge University Press 2014).

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- Tarant, Zbyněk. “Esotericism and Antisemitism. Why Should We Care?” *Kantor Center Position Papers* (N. 2: 22 June 2020), available at: https://en-humanities.tau.ac.il/sites/humanities_en.tau.ac.il/files/media_server/humanities/kantor/PP_ZT_220620.pdf

Origins and roots of modern Western esotericism (Christian mysticism, Kabbalah, theosophy, gnosticism).

Recommended reading:

- Faivre, Antoine. *Western Esotericism: A Concise History* (Suny Press 2010).
- Scholem, Gershom Gerhard. *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton University Press 1991)

19th century encounters between esotericism and authoritarianism/totalitarianism (Tzarist Russia, Revolutionary France, Bavaria).

Recommended reading:

- Cohn, Norman: *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World-Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Serif Publishing 1998).

Leisure reading:

- Ecco, Umberto. *The Prague Cemetery* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 1991)
 - *comment: Umberto Ecco's semi-fictional book attempts to imagine the life and work of the forger, who compiled the text of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion.*
- Joly, Maurice. *The Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu: Humanitarian Despotism and the Conditions of Modern Tyranny* (Lexington Books 2003)
 - *comment: This 19th century satirical pamphlet became a source for the forgery later known as The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. This should not, however, devalue the original text, which is a sophisticated liberal criticism of authoritarian and totalitarian practices.*

Occultism in the Nazi ideology (Völkish, Arisophism). The controversy and legacy of Rudolf Steiner.

Recommended reading:

- Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke. *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology* (New York: NYU Press 1993).

Soviet Russia (Conflict between Esotericism and Socialist Materialism, Occultist tendencies of the Soviet Communist leadership (*vierkhuska*). Russian invention of „psychotronics“.

Recommended reading:

- Rosenthal, Bernice Glatzer (ed.). *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Cornell University Press 1997).

The two great scares in the North America - Illuminati and Satanism. Conflation of illuminati and antisemitic conspiracy myths. How securitization of Satanism led to its creation as established religion.

Recommended reading:

- Frank P. Mintz, *The Liberty Lobby and the American Right – Race, Conspiracy, and Culture* (Westport: Greenwood 1985).
- Ellis, Bill. *Rising the Devil: Satanism, New Religions, and the Media*. (University Press of Kentucky: Kentucky 2000)

Leisure reading:

- Shea, Robert – Anton Wilson, Robert. *The Illuminatus! Trilogy: The Eye in the Pyramid, The Golden Apple, Leviathan* (Dell 1983)
 - *comment: the book is a satirical sci-fi/fantasy based in the contraculture of Discordianism, which attempted to parodize many of esoteric conspiracy myths, but inadvertently helped to popularize them. Series of successful theatre inscenations were also staged under the same title around the world throughout the 1970s.*

New Age esotericism and antisemitism. Alice Bailey and the „Jewish Force“.

Recommended reading:

- Levy, Richard S. (ed.): *Antisemitism - A Historical Encyclopedia of Prejudice and Persecution*. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc. 2005), Band 1, see the entries: „Aquarius, Age of“ (p. 30), „Invocation, The Great“ (p. 351-352), „Jewish Force“ (p. 375).

Recommended viewing:

- *Hair* (1979) – directed by Miloš Forman.
 - *comment – this Oscar-winning anti-war movie by a Czech director helps to shape the popular image of Hippies, while also containing many esoteric references. Compare the peaceful message of this movie with the thoughts of Alice Bailey.*

Esotericism in the contemporary Russian political discourse (Alexander Dugin, Anton Vaino, Nikolai Levashov etc.)

Recommended reading:

- Marlene Laruelle: *Eurasianism and the European Far Right: Reshaping the Europe–Russia Relationship* (Lexington Books, 2015)
- Jafe, Arnold. “Alexander Dugin and Western Esotericism: The Challenge of the Language of Tradition.” *MONDI: Movimenti simbolici e sociali dell’uomo* 2 (2019), pp. 33-70

Esotericism in the contemporary Western Discourse (Alex Jones, David Icke etc.). Affinity between Esotericism, Conspiracism and Populism.

- Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Close Companions? Esotericism and Conspiracy Theories” in Asbjørn Dyrendal, David Robertson, Egil Asprem, eds., *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), p. 207-33.

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- Jacob Senholt, “Radical Politics and Political Esotericism: The Adaptation of Esoteric Discourse within the Radical Right” in Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, eds., *Contemporary Esotericism* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), p. 244-64.
- Gardner, Mark. „David Icke’s ages old New Age antisemitism.“ *Community Security Trust*, available at: <https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2017/01/05/david-ickes-ages-old-new-age-antisemitism>

Case study of the Czech Republic (or wider Central European Region).

- Tarant, Zbyněk. “Antisemitism in the Czech Republic: Understanding Current Trends.” *Antisemitism Studies*, vol. 4 no. 1, 2020, p. 108-142, available at: <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/753342>.

Student’s presentations - pick one conspiracy myth and attempt to track its possible sources and origins. Combine secondary literature with tools for internet research.

Students’ presentation. Each pair of student is given 10-15 minutes to present their findings on the conspiracy myths, they have chosen for analysis.