



CAS-E

Alternative Rationalities and
Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective

LECTURE SERIES WINTER SEMESTER 2025/26

Tuesdays | 6.15–7.45 pm

Seminar room, Hartmannstr. 14, Building D1, Erlangen

Link for virtual attendance: <https://fau.zoom-x.de/j/62556506187>



**OCTOBER 14,
2025**

Dr. Philine Lewek

‘Esotericism’ and ‘Christianity’ within the New Right in Germany and Austria

In public discourse in Germany and Austria, “esotericism” is repeatedly linked with neo-Nazism, right-wing extremism, and hostility toward democracy. In several instances, reports from the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution warn of “brown esotericism” and describe a milieu that has increasingly acted in anti-democratic ways since the coronavirus pandemic. In academic discourse, recent publications have criticized the collaboration between research on “Western Esotericism” and New Right circles, arguing that such cooperation forms part of a New Right strategy to rebrand far-right thinkers like Julius Evola as merely “conservative,” without critically engaging with his fascist positions and political activities. This lecture will take a closer look at these ongoing debates. Drawing on my own research into the publication networks of the New Right in Germany and Austria, I will argue that the reception of “Traditionalism” and “Neo-Paganism” within these networks serves both ideological formation and mutual self-assurance. This runs alongside a more recent “claim to Christianity” in New Right publications, in which the political category of a “strong Christianity” emerges—marking New Right political positions as “Christian” in order to enhance their public acceptance.

**OCTOBER
21, 2025**

Dr. Eszter Spät

Frauds, Subaltern Rebels, or Sources of Batinî Knowledge: Yezidi Seers in Post-Saddam Iraq

After decades of decline, the Iraqi Yezidi community has experienced a veritable renaissance of seers since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime. Kocheks, or seers, are individuals who possess—or are possessed by—a delil, a spiritual guide from the batinî or the heavenly, “hidden” world. Acting through their delils, seers channel esoteric knowledge. They offer moral exhortations, provide divinations for everyday concerns, and deliver prophetic revelations. The activities of seers, as well as the discourse surrounding their “authenticity,” shed light not only on the shifting concerns of a community undergoing transformation, but also on power struggles within Yezidi society—reflecting internal rivalries over both spiritual and material resources. Occupying a grey zone between central and peripheral possession, Yezidi seers are regarded by some as upholders of traditional morality, while others see them as morally transgressive. Following a brief introduction to the institution of seers, their typical “career” trajectory, and their role in contemporary Yezidi life, this talk analyzes perceptions of seers through the lens of the tension between “routinized” and “acquired” charisma. It also explores how becoming a seer can function as a means of agency for those traditionally marginalized—commoners, the poor, and women, or various intersections thereof.

**OCTOBER
28, 2025**

Dr. Jeremy Stollow

Picturing Aura: A Visual Biography

Picturing Aura offers a historical, anthropological, and philosophical study of modern efforts to visualize that hidden radiant force encompassing the living body known as our aura. This book chronicles the rise and global spread of modern instruments and techniques of picturing aura, from the late nineteenth century to the present day, exploring how its images are put to work in the diverse realms of psychical research, esotericism, art photography, popular culture, and the New Age alternative medical and spiritual marketplace. These sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting histories – shaped by exchanges among professionals and amateurs, scientists and occultists, countercultural artists and entrepreneurs, metropolitans and hinterland figures – show how the aura operates as a boundary object: something ontologically plural and somehow serviceable to the varying tasks of making art, healing bodies, and mapping a hidden cosmos. My presentation will introduce a few of the book’s remarkable protagonists, technologies, and image migrations, while also reflecting on the very enterprise of picturing aura and the challenges it poses to settled assumptions about religion, science, and art.





CAS-E

Alternative Rationalities and
Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective

LECTURE SERIES WINTER SEMESTER 2025/26

NOVEMBER
04, 2025

Dr. Knut Graw

Ritual Praxis Inside Out: Tracing Emic-etic continuities in Mandinka divination

Divinatory practices in Senegal and the Gambia are highly diverse and require diviners to manage different techniques and skills. Despite the diversity of practices, diviners apply technical notions that reflect both a common structure underlying these practices as well as an emic theory of divinatory praxis. This lecture focuses on several of these underlying notions and the question of how they can be translated into a theory of divination that bridges the seeming divide between emic and etic perspectives. By tracing emic-etic resonances in Mandinka divination, the lecture highlights the importance of paying particular attention to the often highly complex conceptual landscapes of esoteric ritual practices in Africa and beyond. In a second analytical move, the lecture interrogates the consequences of possible emic-etic resonances for the question of insider and outsider perspectives in the study of religious and ritual practices.

NOVEMBER 11, **Dr. Nestor Manichkin**
2025

Collective Memory and the Tradition of Sacred Pilgrimages in the Shamanic Environment of Modern Kyrgyzstan

This lecture will focus on the tradition of ziyarət kaluu—sacred pilgrimages to holy places known as mazar—as practiced in Kyrgyzstan among followers of syncretic shamanistic and neo-shamanistic movements, as well as among the general population. These practices blend elements of folk Islam, Sufism, and pre-Islamic traditions such as shamanism, animism, and magic. The introductory part of the lecture will be devoted to the core concepts of the Kyrgyzchilik tradition (the spiritual heritage of the Kyrgyz), including key terms and characteristics associated with the roles of male shamans (bakshy), female shamans (byby), and mystic wanderers (dubana). The speaker will then present photographs and video footage from his fieldwork, conducted since 2011, and will focus in particular on the Ata-Beyit memorial in the Chui region—the burial site of victims of Stalin’s repressions. In recent years, this site has become a space for neo-shamanic and spiritual practices. The lecture will explore the connections between ritual practice, the visions of mediums from the Talas region, historical memory, and current political realities. To analyze the pilgrimage tradition, the speaker draws on the concepts of liminality and collective memory, presenting ziyarət kaluu as a key mechanism for preserving oral history and transmitting knowledge through ritual performance.

NOVEMBER
18, 2025

Prof. Robert André Lafleur

Mountains of Discourse: History, Ethnography, and the Cosmology of China’s Sacred Mountains

For three thousand years, China’s five sacred mountains have sparked debates about their purposes, histories, and even locations. Today, they attract thousands of visitors daily—some seeking personal insight or fulfilling family traditions, others ticking off a “bucket list.” I’ve spent 1,200 days doing fieldwork on and around the mountains and far more time studying inscriptions, texts, religious treatises, and artwork linked to them. My research aims to explain a distinct approach to sacred mountain study. At its center is ethnography, which unites diverse themes across disciplines. This study goes beyond literary analysis. It attempts to build what I call “the ethnography of a concept.” Like storytelling, mountain travel traditionally follows a cosmologically prescribed order. Yet in Chinese cosmology—especially yin-yang and five-phase theory—the five mountains form a unified system. The tension between treating the mountains as distinct versus unified is not just semantic. Centuries of imperial practice reveal its depth. Ethnography offers a way to explore, if not resolve, these tensions. Its descriptive detail allows links between disciplines and offers insights into how a longstanding tradition connects the high and the low, the near and far—for all who have climbed these peaks across time





CAS-E

Alternative Rationalities and
Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective

LECTURE SERIES

WINTER SEMESTER 2025/26

NOVEMBER
25, 2025

Dr. Alexander Stark

Numbers and Healing: Exploring the Minangkabau Traditional Medical System

Numbers hold significant meaning in many cultures. This presentation outlines the traditional Minangkabau healing system and explores the role that numbers play within it. The Minangkabau are one of the largest matrilineal societies in the world. Surprisingly, however, their traditional healing practices have received little scholarly attention. Some areas of research have highlighted the central role of numbers in Indonesian culture—for example, the 4-5 scheme of the Leiden School of Structuralism, or the adat (customary law) framework emphasized by local scholars. Other researchers have noted that the numbers three and four carry particular cultural significance within Minangkabau society. This presentation examines that claim, focusing on its implications in the context of traditional medicine. The Minangkabau healing system incorporates elements of both folk religion and Islamic belief. One notable intersection of these traditions is found in the use of the four medicinal plants known as Tawa nan ampek, which are employed across all local healing traditions. Additional examples further demonstrate how the numbers three and four play a central role in Minangkabau medical practices. For instance, the treatment of 'supernatural' illnesses may require more intensive forms of intervention. Typically, there are three levels of treatment for such disorders. Throughout the presentation, various examples will illustrate how traditional Minangkabau medicine is deeply rooted in local philosophy—and how numerology shapes its methods and meanings

DECEMBER
02, 2025

Prof. Jens Schlieter

Panpsychism and the Power of the Mind: Esoteric Views of Consciousness and Reality in Mahāyāna Buddhism and the West

Since its origins, Buddhism has maintained that certain individuals can develop extraordinary mental abilities (abhijñā)—described as higher knowledge or psychic powers arising through meditative practice. These include psychic powers (ṛddhi), mind-reading or telepathy, recollection of past lives, and clairvoyance (perceiving karmic destinies). How do Buddhist practitioners and philosophers, both historical and contemporary, explain the existence of these powers? Indian Yogācāra philosophers such as Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, along with their Tibetan and East Asian successors, endorsed a trans-individual “consciousness-only” view (citta-mātra, vijñapti-mātra). This school holds that what we experience as external reality—including its apparent boundaries and limitations—is actually a projection of consciousness itself. While consciousness ordinarily creates subject-object duality, advanced practitioners can recognize and transcend these constructed limitations. This presentation explores how the Yogācāra perspective differs from contemporary Western debates on “panpsychism”—the philosophical thesis that consciousness or some form of mentality is a fundamental and ubiquitous feature of reality, present at all levels of physical organization. Also addressed are current discussions concerning “extended minds” and the possibility that consciousness operates beyond individual brains. Finally, I examine how these philosophical views relate to the Western concept of “esotericism” and what insights a comparison of these perspectives might offer for discussions of alternative rationalities.



Friedrich-Alexander-Universität
Erlangen-Nürnberg

Funded by



Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft
German Research Foundation





CAS-E

Alternative Rationalities and
Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective

LECTURE SERIES

WINTER SEMESTER 2025/26

DECEMBER
09, 2025

Dr. Mike Cifone

Elusive Remainder: Jacques Vallée and the UFO Enigma

Jacques Vallée's ufology career charts a unique path from scientific inquiry to a speculative, esoteric framework. Prompted by a 1950s UFO sighting and Aimé Michel's influence, Vallée initially approached the phenomenon scientifically. His work in the 1960s adopted an empirical, data-driven perspective, framing UFOs within astronomy and computer science. By the late 1960s, Vallée shifted to comparative folklore, finding parallels between entity encounters (e.g., fairies) and modern UFO reports. The 1970s saw his framework expand to paranormal and psychical research, hypothesizing an unidentified intelligence manifesting in culturally contingent forms. His "control system" theory suggested that these manifestations regulate human perception and access, operating cognitively and culturally. This lecture traces Vallée's intellectual evolution, contextualizing his work historically and disciplinarily. It examines how his synthesis of scientific methodology, comparative mythology, and speculative metaphysics aligns with modern esotericism, challenging conventional science-occult demarcations. It will also address the epistemological tensions in Vallée's oeuvre: for example, the interplay between empirical investigation and interpretive speculation. Finally, the lecture considers Vallée's relevance to contemporary UFO/UAP studies, which increasingly embrace interdisciplinary, non-positivist approaches to the subject. By examining Vallée as scientist and esoteric thinker, we offer a critical perspective on the negotiation between rational inquiry and visionary speculation in the study of anomalous phenomena.

DECEMBER
16, 2025

Dr. Dominique Hertzner

The Book of Changes (Yijing) in Chinese Medicine: Exploring "Pluralist Rationalities" of Divination and Chinese Medicine

The deep connection between the Yijing and Chinese Medicine (CM) dates back to the historical origins of the Yijing. In the Shuogua (Explaining the Trigrams) commentary, trigrams are linked to specific body parts, and the hexagram and line texts reference the head, neck, arms, back, abdomen, and legs. Focusing on yin and yang transformations, the Yijing is foundational to understanding CM – both belonging to traditional Chinese knowledge systems. Historically, a dialectical relationship has existed between medical and divinatory explanation: accurate prognosis stems from precise diagnosis, ideally enabling prevention. From this shared basis, various methods integrating the Yijing into CM have developed and persist today. This leads to an intriguing question: why do CM and the Yijing remain vital and widely practiced despite a century of modernization and scientification in China? The introduction of Western Medicine (WM) triggered extensive discourse on how both systems might coexist. China has since developed a unique model: the "Integration of Western and Chinese Medicine." Does this reflect official legitimization, or distinct rationalities? How do these rationalities interact? What does this mean for the Yijing's role in CM?

JANUARY
13, 2026

Prof. Birgit Menzel

Healing in Soviet-American New Age Diplomacy: A TTouch Method

The Canadian horse therapist Linda Tellington-Jones (*1937) has developed a psychically-informed method of animal healing known as TTouch, which was inspired by another holistic method developed by Israeli engineer—and later alternative movement therapist—Moshé Feldenkrais (1904–1984). In the mid-1980s, Tellington-Jones traveled extensively throughout the Soviet Union as a citizen-diplomat of the Western New Age movement, inspired by and collaborating with Human Potential activists from the Californian Esalen Institute. Intuition, understood as a divine manifestation, became her spiritual path to expanded consciousness and guided her healing work with humans and animals of all species. In the USSR, she established connections from Kiev to Lake Baikal in Siberia, where she found herself on an esoteric mission. She met and trained a wide range of practitioners—from veterinarians and jockeys at the Olympic Center Bitsa in Moscow to members of the semi-official club "Healthy Family," a hub where many unconventional concepts and practices of holistic and psychic healing were thriving. As a practitioner of interspecies communication, she introduced the idea of the "animal ambassador" to Russia. The patented TTouch method continues to be practiced on animals and humans in Russia and around the world, and has recently gained a degree of legitimacy through collaboration with controversial American scientists such as Bruce Lipton and Gregg Braden.





CAS-E

Alternative Rationalities and
Esoteric Practices from a Global Perspective

LECTURE SERIES

WINTER SEMESTER 2025/26

JANUARY
20, 2026

Prof. Carole Cusack

Bodily Sensation and Esoteric Transformation: Praxis in the Gurdjieff Work

G. I. Gurdjieff's (c. 1877–1949) teaching, known as the Work or the Fourth Way, posits three centres in humans: the intellectual (associated with Gurdjieff's writings as a teaching technique), the emotional or feeling (associated with the Gurdjieff–de Hartmann music as a teaching tool), and the sensory or bodily centre (associated with the Movements as a teaching method). The contemplative exercises that Gurdjieff taught later in life explicitly addressed esoteric transformation—namely, the development of the astral or kesdjan body—and reflect his Orthodox Christian background, in which the concept of theosis (humans participating in God's divine nature and becoming like God) is prominent. This presentation addresses the centrality of the body and physical activity in the Work, arguing that bodily sensation—as experienced in the Movements and contemplative exercises (and in other self-transformative activities, including hard labour)—is the key site of spiritual development. It also emphasizes that self-observation and self-remembering—the mental, mindfulness-like state of awareness cultivated by Gurdjieff's pupils—combine with the body in the Work to foster the growth of a soul

JANUARY
27, 2026

Paul Johnson

Art, Presence, Sacrifice: The Death and Rebirth of the Cleveland "Thinker"

The esoteric "religious" powers of figurative sculpture appear most vividly in iconoclastic acts of destruction taken against them. Such acts reveal an ambivalence in iconoclasts' relationships with these artworks, a simultaneous attraction to their nearhuman quality, which allows sculptures to serve as ritual substitutes for live persons, as scapegoats, and a repulsion to them that motivates the attack. Paradoxically, iconoclastic attacks help to produce artworks as sacred—as incarnational, presence-bearing forms. To show this, I consider the case of the 1970 bombing of Rodin's "Thinker" in Cleveland as an act of ritual sacrifice; a sculpture "killed" as though it were a condemned person. Instead of destroying it, though, the iconoclasts animated it. The cast of the Cleveland Museum of Art's Thinker now pulses with life in a way unlike any other version. Damaged by the blast, wrenched apart, its base a jagged plume, the Thinker's ripped legs and hollowed torso open now to a distinct kind of nearhuman agency, as martyr.

FEBRUARY
03, 2026

Dr. Monika Hirmer

Kuṇḍalinī in Cross-Cultural Context: Transmissions from South Asia to the West

With the broader interest in South Asian spiritual traditions, which has driven the proliferation of yoga studios, tantra festivals and workshops in Western contexts since the 1970s, Kuṇḍalinī has also become increasingly popular with Western practitioners. A female serpent energy, Kuṇḍalinī rests in Mūlādhāra cakra, the energy knot located at the bottom of the spinal column, and underpins soteriological narratives among Western and South Asian practitioners alike: through her ascent, she unlocks the cakras along the spinal column and allows for divine energy to flow through the bodies of practitioners. When travelling from South Asian to Western contexts, Kuṇḍalinī encounters different epistemic-ontological configurations and interacts with context-specific cosmological backgrounds and notions of beingness—such as body, gender, humanness and divinity. Based on my anthropological fieldwork with tantric practitioners in South India and in Western contexts, in this talk I analyze Kuṇḍalinī from a cross-cultural comparative perspective. The experiences that South Asian and Western(ized) practitioners relay broadly suggest that, when Kuṇḍalinī operates within a mainly positivistic epistemic-ontological framework, she tends to manifest in rather striking and unsettling ways, whereas when she operates within epistemic-ontological contexts that are largely informed by Devī and her retinue, she is often experienced in more seamless and gentle ways. While the intense nature of Kuṇḍalinī awakenings among many Western(ized) practitioners may, at first, appear counterintuitive when compared to the smoother Kuṇḍalinī experiences shared by most South Asian practitioners, I propose that such discrepancies are not only organic but necessary when Kuṇḍalinī operates upon the distinct existential coordinates that practitioners present cross-culturally

