



# CAS-E

Alternative Rationalities and  
Esoteric Practices in a Global Perspective

## CAS-E Newsletter 04/2025

The Center for Advanced Studies [CAS-E](#) brings together researchers from all over the world to investigate practices aimed at predicting, influencing, and orchestrating contingent life events.

### Festive Greetings

Dear Friends,

As the year comes to an end, we wish you all a wonderful festive season and the very best for 2026!

We are thrilled that in 2026, having secured funding from the German Research Foundation (DFG) for four more years (2026–2030), CAS-E will enter into its [Phase II](#). This second phase, starting in April, will feature a reorientation that brings to the fore those practices and power dynamics that mark and/or (de-)legitimize phenomena as esoteric. In doing so, we will structure our research in three streams:

- 1) institutional-political and legal configurations
- 2) configurations of social and media representation
- 3) configurations of efficacy experience.

Among our aims in this phase is the establishment of a methodologically sharpened, empirically grounded, and internationally visible paradigm for analyzing alternative rationalities and esoteric practices as negotiation processes of epistemic orders in a global perspective. Find more details [here](#) and [here](#).

As usual, in this newsletter you will find information about our upcoming events, a retrospective on some of our workshops, media coverage and much more.

Warmest season's greetings and best wishes for a fulfilling and esoteric 2026.

Your CAS-E team 



Some CAS-E fellows and team members celebrating Christmas



## Events

The **CAS-E Lecture Series** will resume after the winter break on **January 13, 2026**. As usual, lectures take place on **Tuesdays** at **6.15pm CET** and are free and open to the public: join us in person in the **Big Seminar Room, Building D1, Hartmannstr. 14, Erlangen**, or via [Zoom](#). Below you can also find out about our workshops and other events. To participate, please follow the relevant accompanying information.

### **CAS-E Lecture Series Winter Semester 2025/26**



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# 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	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
OCTOBER 21, 2025	Dr. Ezster Spät Frauds, Subaltern Rebels, or Sources of Batinī Knowledge: Yezidi Seers in Post-Saddam Iraq	DECEMBER 09, 2025	Dr. Mike Cifone Elusive Remainder: Jacques Vallée and the UFO Enigma
OCTOBER 28, 2025	Dr. Jeremy Stolow Picturing Aura: A Visual Biography	DECEMBER 16, 2025	Dr. Dominique Hertzler The Book of Changes (Yijing) in Chinese Medicine: Exploring "Pluralist Rationalities" of Divination and Chinese Medicine
NOVEMBER 04, 2025	Dr. Knut Graw Ritual Praxis Inside Out: Tracing Emic-etic continuities in Mandinka divination	JANUARY 13, 2026	Prof. Birgit Menzel Healing in Soviet-American New Age Diplomacy: A TTouch Method
NOVEMBER 11, 2025	Dr. Nestor Manichkin Collective Memory and the Tradition of Sacred Pilgrimages in the Shamanic Environment of Modern Kyrgyzstan	JANUARY 20, 2026	Prof. Carole Cusack Bodily Sensation and Esoteric Transformation: Praxis in the Gurdjieff Work
NOVEMBER 18, 2025	Prof. Robert André Lafleur Mountains of Discourse: History, Ethnography, and the Cosmology of China's Sacred Mountains	JANUARY 27, 2026	Prof. Paul Johnson Art, Presence, Sacrifice: The Death and Rebirth of the Cleveland "Thinker"
NOVEMBER 25, 2025	Dr. Alexander Stark Numbers and Healing: Exploring the Minangkabau Traditional Medical System	FEBRUARY 03, 2026	Dr. Monika Hirmer Kundalinī in Cross-Cultural Context: Transmissions from South Asia to the West



Friedrich-Alexander-Universität  
Erlangen-Nürnberg



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German Research Foundation



Find the **extended program including abstracts** [here](#).

You can watch the **recordings of past lectures** on our [CAS-E YouTube channel](#).

[More on CAS-E Lecture Series](#)

Art as Modern Religion

In this workshop with Prof. Paul C. Johnson we will read and discuss about the triadic relationship between Rodin, Rilke, and Georg Simmel in the production of the early 20th-century idea of "art as modern religion." This idea included a form of esotericism: that true art carries within it hidden powers of transcendence that act on perceivers with or without their assent. The paper gives attention to both the growth and influence of the notion of art as modern religion, and also to its latent fractures and ultimate demise.

When: **January 28, 2026**

Where: **CAS-E**, Big Seminar Room in D1, Hartmannstr. 14, Erlangen

Language: **English**

For more information: [raquel.romberg@fau.de](mailto:raquel.romberg@fau.de)

Find the program [here](#).



Workshop

## Art as Modern Religion

**Paul C. Johnson (University of Michigan)**

In this workshop we will read and comment on a paper in preparation by Prof. Johnson about the triadic relationship between Rodin, Rilke, and Georg Simmel in the production of the early 20th-century idea of "art as modern religion." This idea included a form of esotericism: that true art carries within it hidden powers of transcendence that act on perceivers with or without their assent. The paper gives attention to both the growth and influence of the notion of art as modern religion, and also to its latent fractures and ultimate demise.

**Schedule**

10.00-12.30	<b>Introduction and discussion</b>
11.00-11.15	<b>Coffee break</b>
13.00-14.30	<b>Lunch</b>
14.30-16.30	<b>Discussion</b>
15.00-15.15	<b>Coffee break</b>

Paul Christopher Johnson is Professor of History, Afroamerican and African Studies, and the Doctoral Program in Anthropology and History at the University of Michigan. Working between historical and anthropological modes on issues from secrecy to diaspora to diversely mediated forms of agency, Johnson has done long-term fieldwork in Brazil and Honduras, and shorter-term fieldwork in the Bronx and Paris. He is the author of *Secrets, Gossip and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé* (Oxford, 2002), *Diaspora Conversations: Black Carib Religion and the Recovery of Africa* (California, 2007), *Ekklesia: Three Inquiries on Church and State* (Chicago, 2018), with Winnifred Fallers Sullivan and Pamela E. Klassen; and, most recently, *Automatic Religion: Nearhuman Agents of Brazil and France* (Chicago, 2021).

**January 28, 2026**

**10.00-12.30,  
14.30-16.30**

**Big Seminar Room  
Hartmannstr. 14,  
Building D1, Erlangen**

**FAU**  
Friedrich-Alexander-Universität  
Erlangen-Nürnberg

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**CAS-E**  
Center for Advanced Studies  
Mathematics and Social Sciences  
Alternative Rationalities and  
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## Esoteric Personal

One thing connects how both outsiders and insiders perceive the esoteric realm: the sense that esoteric practices draw upon ideas about reality that somehow differ from what we experience in daily life. Esoteric practices seem to stand apart from other, more mundane realities, regardless of how society embeds or excludes them from a given socio-cultural context or how individuals incorporate them into their lives. Because of this distinction, people find these practices fascinating or strange, attractive or worthy of resistance, seeing them as portraying important truths or dangerous illusions, depending on who observes them. What rarely occurs, however, is that people meet the realm of the esoteric with indifference. With this complex range of attitudes towards the esoteric in mind, our workshop invites humanities and social science researchers to reflect upon their own engagement in the study of esoteric practices. We welcome scholars regardless of whether the term “esoteric” is common in your field, or how others perceive the political, religious, or epistemological status of your research topic.

For more information: [knut.graw@fau.de](mailto:knut.graw@fau.de); [kelly.e.hayes@fau.de](mailto:kelly.e.hayes@fau.de)

We invite you to consider the following questions:

- What have you learned from studying esoteric practices, both professionally and personally?
- How has this research transformed your understanding of the social and cultural realities you initially set out to study?
- How has it changed your broader perception of sociocultural reality and academic inquiry?
- In what ways has it changed your relationship to your work, discipline, and vision for its future?
- What does it mean for you to study what you study and what personal meaning do you find in studying these subjects?
- Has researching esoteric practices changed you as a person, and if so, how?

[More on CAS-E Workshops](#)



## Retrospective

Below you can find out about workshops our team and fellows have organized and participated in during the past few months.

# Different Perspectives on the Yogic Body: Kundalini's Thousand Guises

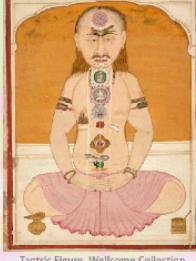
In this [workshop](#), Dr. Monika Hirmer and Dr. habil. Bernd-Christian Otto introduced different aspects of Kundalini yoga from their respective perspectives: Monika provided insights into Goddess worship as it is practiced among tantric practitioners in South India, while Bernd provided glimpses into his daily yogic practice in the lineage of Direndra Brahmachari and two disciples – Reinhard Gammenthaler and Yogi Bhajan – who developed and taught two very different styles of kundalini yoga.

## Different Perspectives on the Yogic Body: Kundalini's Thousand Guises



A workshop by  
**Dr. hab. Bernd-Christian Otto**  
Permanent Fellow, CAS-E  
and  
**Dr. Monika Hirmer**  
Postdoc Research Coordinator, CAS-E

In this workshop, Monika and Bernd introduce into different aspects of Kundalini yoga from their respective perspectives: Monika provides insights into Goddess worship as it is practiced among the tantric practitioners whom she lived with as a researcher initiated into the tradition during her fieldwork in South India, while Bernd provides glimpses into his daily yogic practice in the lineage of Direndra Brahmachari and two disciples - Reinhard Gammenthaler and Yogi Bhajan - who developed and taught two very different styles of kundalini yoga.  
The workshop is both theoretical and practical.  
Please wear something comfortable and bring a yoga mat if you have one!



Tantric Figure. Wellcome Collection.  
Creative Commons

**Date:**  
Tuesday - 2 December, 2025

**Time:**  
3:15 – 4:45pm CET

**Location:** Small Seminar room,  
Hartmannstr. 14, Building D1, Erlangen

Funded by  
**DFG** Deutsche  
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**CAS-E**  
Center for Advanced Studies - Religion  
Religions and Social Sciences  
Alternative Rationalities and  
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# Rethinking Methodology: Sensory Modalities in Ethnographic Research

One-day [workshop](#) on feeling, hearing, and seeing ethnography differently organized by Dr. Maryam Abbasi in collaboration with Prof. Dominik Müller.



## CAS-E Visits Fondation Alain Daniélou in Zagarolo, Italy

This is the second consecutive semester that a number of CAS-E team members, and visiting and permanent fellows were invited to participate in the [workshops](#) organized by Interstices: Center for Transversal Thinking (Freiburg, Germany) hosted at the Fondation Alain Daniélou (Zagarolo, Italy). On 23-25 May, 2025, the topic of the workshop was “Knowledge Transmission and Ways of Living”, and on November 14-16, 2025 the topic was “Pluriverse: An Ecosophic Diaspora in the Making?”





# Media

Through our media output, we wish to expand conversations on esoteric matters beyond CAS-E. Among our primary outlets feature the CAS-E Blog, YouTube Channel, and accounts on various social media platforms, which you can find and follow at the bottom of this newsletter.

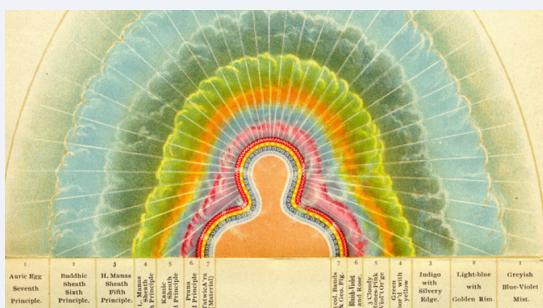
## CAS-E Blog

Our blog features short writings by the scholars who presented their work at the CAS-E lecture series. In their blog entries, scholars reflect on their research and address broader societal, political, cultural or religious questions in an essay format, making it attractive for academic and non-academic audiences alike.



### Yezidi Religious Oral Tradition, Divination, Seers and Amulets in Northern Iraq

By Eszter Spät  
Read the blog [here](#).



### Reflections on Picturing Aura

By Jeremy Stolow  
Read the blog [here](#).

[CAS-E Blog](#)

## CAS-E YouTube Channel

On the CAS-E YouTube channel you can re-watch the talks from our lecture series and catch up on the ones you missed. You will also find brief interviews where our fellows, alumni and team members introduce their respective research areas and interests. Don't forget to [subscribe](#) to the channel to keep up to date with the latest lectures!



## Picturing Aura: A Visual Biography

Jeremy Stolow

Watch it [here](#).



## Wittgenstein Among the Santeros

Stephan Palmié

Watch it [here](#).



## Buddhist Psychology as Esoteric Activism

Jessica Albrecht

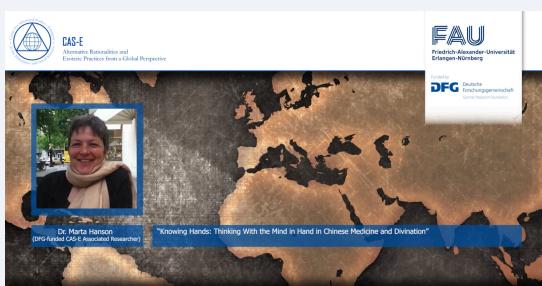
Watch it [here](#).



## Advertising As Integral Magic: An Afterlife

William Mazzarella

Watch it [here](#).

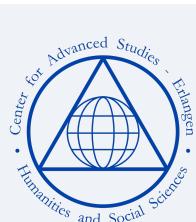


## Knowing Hands: Thinking With the Mind in Hand in Chinese Medicine

Marta Hanson

Watch it [here](#).

CAS-E YouTube



# Bulletin

In this section we update you on the latest news of CAS-E members, fellows, and alumni, media coverage, and associated projects.

# A New Perspective on Distant Rituals

"What do the terms 'esoteric' and 'alternative' mean? Who uses these terms to describe whom, and how does that affect politics and society? Giovanni Maltese and the CAS-E research group are investigating this".

Read the prestigious FAU Magazine [here](#) (or jump directly to pp. 54–57 to read the article on CAS-E)!



**A new perspective on distant rituals**

What do the terms "esoteric" and "alternative" mean? Who uses these terms to describe whom, and how does that affect politics and society? Giovanni Maltese and the CAS-E research group are investigating this.

**H**is office in the university is plain and unassuming. No cross or icon on the shelf suggests that a scholar of religion works here, and no Buddha on the desk hints that the researcher is engaged with "alternative rationalities and esoteric practices from a global perspective." But that's exactly Giovanni Maltese: Since April 2024, he has been Chair of Religious Studies and Cultural Anthropology at FAU, and from 2021 to 2023 he has been the first director of the research group known as CAS-E, which is funded by the German Research Foundation. His research interests are well-known: German media have reported extensively on spiritually inspired far-right groups, "Querdenker" and conspiracy narratives, says Maltese. "Often, the word 'esoteric' comes up in these discussions, but what does it mean? What are the worldviews or religions?" But what exactly do these terms mean, and what are the effects – for example, in society and in the media – when people use them? This is what Maltese is interested in: how discussions about religion and alternative worldviews influence social and political processes. In his research, he also examines evangelical and Pentecostal-charismatic as well as reformist Islamic and mystical movements, and he has conducted a lot of research in Southeast Asia, specifically the Philippines, for several years during his studies.

**Ritual masters from Taiwan in Erlangen**  
His findings were also of interest to sinologist Michael Lackner, scholar of religion Andreas

These three men in white robes are performing a traditional esoteric spiritual ceremony. The Taiwanese were a form of divination. The Taiwanese were from FAU in July.

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FAU Magazine 2025/2026

Moving Knowledge: FAU

## CAS-E Among Three Research Centers at FAU to Receive Funding from German Research Foundation (DFG)

The German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG) funds three research groups at the Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU).

Read the article (in German) [here](#).

# Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft fördert drei FAU-Forschungsgruppen



Bild: FAU / Anna Tiessen

## CAS-E Associated Project "Translating the Ineffable"

On October 20–22, the CAS-E associated project "[Translating the Ineffable](#)," led by Prof. Dr. Michael Lackner and Dr. habil. Tommaso Previato, was presented at the 7th workshop of the RedGold ANR Programme, "Religion and Spirituality in the Sacred Geography of the (Post-)Communist Worlds," held at the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art in Paris.

Tommaso Previato chaired a session on "Hagiography as Competition for Space" and delivered a paper titled "Lunar Asterism, Self-Purification, and Immortality in the Mystical Poetry of a Chinese Branch of Qadiri Sufism." More information is available [here](#). Completing the workshop participation, archive research was carried out at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), the Bibliothèque universitaire des langues et civilisations (BULAC), Françoise Aubin's collection and other private libraries on Chinese Islam.

Read more about the project [here](#).



[CAS-E Associated Projects](#)

DFG Kollegforschungsgruppe „Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices in a Global Perspective“  
Hartmannstr. 14, 91052 Erlangen



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