Mysticism and Esotericism in Pluralistic Perspective

Conflicting Claims of Knowledge and the Power of Individualism

29 June - 5 July 2014
Groningen, the Netherlands
It is often assumed that mysticism and esotericism are rather isolated strands in the history of religion, in particular in the history of religion in Europe. One reason for this assumption is the fact that scholars are used to prioritize large ‘traditions,’ framed in container terms such as ‘Christianity,’ ‘Islam,’ or ‘Buddhism’; in such a perspective, mysticism and esotericism appear as second-order phenomena, attesting to internal religious pluralism or deviance only. As a consequence, the impact of traditions that are associated with mysticism and esotericism have also been underestimated in recent discussions regarding ‘spiritualities’ or ‘the religion of Nones.’ It is time to reframe the analytical perspective. A focus on individual agency and knowledge (two different yet supplementary rather than mutually exclusive concepts) can help to provide a better understanding of the important role that mysticism and esotericism have played in the pluralistic history of religion, philosophy, science, and culture. It turns out that esoteric and mystical discourses frequently cross the borders of the usual container concepts of ‘religions,’ as well as the line between religion and non-religion.

The summer school, co-organized by the Universities of Groningen, Erfurt (Germany), Aarhus (Denmark), as well as Rice University (USA), will address fundamental questions of concepts and approaches. It will introduce phenomena from various perspectives and cultural locations to comparative analyses. A framework for the discussion will be provided by lectures by invited speakers, as well as by preparatory reading. Participants will be asked to contribute expositions of their own research.

Applicants are asked to fill out the online application form and upload other required documents. Applications will be reviewed on a first-come, first-served basis.