



## Note From the Editors:

We are delighted to welcome you to the ContERN newsletter, marking the beginning of an exciting new chapter for the network. Since its founding in 2012, ContERN has provided a vital platform for scholarship on contemporary esotericism. Now, following a period of relative dormancy, a new team of coordinators has taken the helm, and we are eager to reinvigorate the network and cultivate a vibrant community of researchers. We extend our sincere gratitude to our predecessors, Egil Asprem, Susannah Crockford, and Kennet Granholm, for their dedication to establishing and sustaining ContERN over many years, and for entrusting us with this initiative.

Dear Colleagues,

Welcome to Issue 0 of the ContERN Newsletter. As we launch this publication and begin a new chapter for the network, we would like to introduce the new ContERN team.

**Grace Conway** is a scholar of religion whose work examines pseudoscientific and occult receptions of the ancient past, from the nineteenth century to the present. Her research focuses on the historical relationship between esotericism and pseudoarchaeology, and the politics of claims to legitimate knowledge.

**Davide Marino** specialises in the reception of East Asian religions within European esotericism and non-mainstream contemporary spiritualities in the People's Republic of China. He is particularly invested in building bridges between European and East Asian (especially Chinese) scholarship.

**Milan Reith** is a historian interested in the relationship between religion and politics from the early twentieth century to the present. In particular, his research focuses on esotericism, the far right, and anti-masonic politics.

Together, we are committed to realising ContERN's potential as a scholarly community: not merely a network in name, but a living forum for collaboration and exchange among researchers working on contemporary esotericism. We believe that there is a real need for such a space within the field, one that enables emerging scholars to meet, exchange ideas, and build connections beyond the forums currently available to them.

To that end, we warmly invite you to get in touch. What would you like to see from ContERN? Whether you have ideas for events, publications, collaborative projects, or other initiatives, please do not hesitate to share them with us; no suggestion is too small or too ambitious!

This is a period of renewal, and we hope to use it not only to build on what already exists, but also to reflect on what the network might become and how best to serve its community of scholars. We are genuinely excited about ContERN's future and look forward to building it together with you.

The ContERN Coordinating Team

Grace Conway  
Davide Marino  
Milan Reith



# Programmatic Statement

ContERN is a scholarly network focused on the study of contemporary esotericism. This term, however, requires some qualification. By “contemporary” we refer to developments emerging from roughly 1950 to the present, while we use “esotericism” in a non-essentialist sense, as a set of historically situated and globally entangled ideas and practices that have been marked, classified, described, and (de-)legitimised as “esoteric”. From this perspective, the very definition of the field is open to enquiry, and the discursive, translingual, and marking processes through which “esoteric” and “esotericism” are constructed and stabilised are themselves taken as an important object of study. Our approach is guided by four core commitments:

**1. Global Orientation:** The network’s scope is not confined to any particular geographical or linguistic context; we actively encourage the participation of scholars and the study of materials outside the conventionally understood “West”. Most importantly, we do not understand the “global” merely as the inclusion of material from different geographical regions (an approach that often masks essentialist assumptions). Rather, we conceive of it as an opportunity for nuanced, context-sensitive analysis of how historical actors negotiated “esoteric(ism)” within globally entangled environments.

**2. Interdisciplinarity:** The consolidation of the study of esotericism as an autonomous field carries the risk of marginalisation and the development of a self-referential discourse detached from broader academic conversations. Accordingly, ContERN encourages research that engages with area studies, religious studies, sociology, history, political science, the study of new religious movements, and related disciplines, demonstrating how “esotericism” intersects with wider social processes and contributes to broader scholarly debates.

**3. Critical Scholarship:** In contrast to approaches that tend to blur the distinction between scholarly analysis and practitioners’ subjective experience, the network promotes self-reflexive and methodologically

sophisticated approaches to the study of esotericism. This entails careful attention to the researcher’s own positionality with respect to their object of study, avoiding both naïve notions of “scholarly objectivity” and the uncritical acceptance of subjective experience.

**4. Political Awareness:** ContERN promotes scholarship that is attentive to the significant political potential of esoteric tropes. This entails moving beyond esoteric and scholarly claims of “apoliticism” (or “apoliteia”, “metapolitics”, etc.) and rejecting any strict separation between political agendas and spiritual programmes. It also highlights the risks of constructing an idealised image of “esotericism” and its actors as a realm of “noble heretics” through uncritical celebrations of marginality and counter-canonical narratives.

As a thematic network affiliated with ESSWE, our goal is to open up space for new voices in the field. We are particularly interested in fostering a community of students, early-career scholars, and, more generally, academics who do not necessarily consider themselves specialists in “esotericism”, but who maintain a strong interest in contemporary “esoteric” phenomena. We encourage methodological plurality, ranging from historical and textual approaches to ethnographic, sociological, and theoretical perspectives.

ContERN is open to collaboration not on the basis of prior expertise in the field, but rather on a willingness to engage critically with the category of “esotericism” in the contemporary world. The network’s activities will begin in the second half of 2026 with a series of online events (TBA), with the goal of regularly organising in-person workshops and conferences. We will also organise panels at relevant conferences and are currently developing an editorial plan for future publication projects, with calls for contributions to follow in due course.



## Spotlight: CAS-E Phase II

*The Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences (CAS-E), “Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices in a Global Perspective,” based at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU), Germany, is one of the world’s leading research centres dedicated to the study of esoteric practices. Funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), CAS-E successfully completed its first funding phase (2022–2026) and recently secured an additional €4.7 million to launch its second phase (2026–2030). To discuss the achievements of the first phase and the new directions of the project, we interviewed one of the principal investigators and the research stream coordinators.*

**First of all, congratulations on the launch of CAS-E Phase II! Looking back at Phase I, what were the most important lessons you learned? In what ways does Phase II represent continuity with the original project, and where do you see significant departures or new directions?**

Thank you very much! It is indeed exciting to be at this juncture: while we have introduced a new, profoundly revised conceptual framework for CAS-E’s Phase II, we are also carrying the legacy of and building upon the important work that has been done in CAS-E’s Phase I. When looking back at Phase I, we have learnt that there is a plethora of practices that scholars applying for CAS-E fellowships classified as esoteric. This was partly attributable to the provisional definition of esotericism on which CAS-E I was based, which initially proposed a number of features intended to be non-exhaustive and open-ended. Some projects even seemed to apply esoteric to practices that others regarded as too counter-intuitive, depending on what they regarded as the basic reference point or prototype of esoteric practices. This has led to CAS-E collecting a vast array of case studies from all over the world and bringing together scholars who would usually not see their research related. It became evident that the use of the term esoteric varies substantially based on the positionality of both practitioners and researchers and, also, on the disciplinary and/or theoretical framework through which certain phenomena are observed. This, in turn,



**CAS-E**

Alternative Rationalities and  
Esoteric Practices in a Global Perspective

has made us aware that essentialist conceptualisations of the esoteric are either too broad or too narrow, while never completely arbitrary, since they must still relate to existing uses of the term. The same applies to polythetic definitions, which likewise take a prototype of esoteric practices as their point of departure and adjust it accordingly—a challenge that also arises with terms such as religion/religious, mysticism/mystic/mystical, etc. It became increasingly clear that the contestation over what counts as, and even more so what should be studied as, esoteric should not be viewed as a supplementary issue, but as a constitutive part of our research. It is closely tied to asymmetries, e.g. definitional or classificatory power, questions of (de-)legitimization, and, at times, repression by state authorities and legal institutions. This prompted us to develop a conceptual framework that systematically takes into account the processes through which practices are identified, negotiated, and classified as esoteric, including the tensions and resistances that such processes engender. Hence our focus on how practices are marked as esoteric through verbal and non-verbal means (while recognizing that such classifications must ultimately relate to broader usages of the terms employed in order to gain plausibility and sustain a research field). To establish such a framework is, in a nutshell, the mission of CAS-E’s Phase II. This is also where we see CAS-E’s contribution to the rapidly expanding field of esoteric studies in general and contemporary esotericism for years to come. Accordingly, exploring the links between esoteric practices and anti-democratic dynamics, together with the systematic integration of legal studies—especially human rights—constitutes a central pillar of CAS-E II.

**One of the most distinctive features of the new phase is the emphasis on the “Analytical Double Helix” framework. How do you expect it to contribute to future research on esotericism?**



## SPEAKING WITH...

**Prof. Giovanni Maltese**



*Principal Investigator,  
Chair of Religious Studies &  
Intercultural Theology, FAU*

**Dr. Jessica Albrecht**



*Research Stream Coordinator,  
co-director of ESOGEN*

**Dr. Monika Hirmer**



*Research Stream Coordinator*

The “Analytical Double Helix Framework”, or ADHF, is the overarching structure that we have developed to study esoteric practices while constitutively integrating the foregoing considerations. It consists of two distinct, yet intrinsically connected and co-constitutive dimensions: the heuristic dimension, inherited from CAS-E I, and the performative-theoretical dimension. Combining these two dimensions allows us to study esoteric practices in a way that does not privilege conceptual questions over solid empirically grounded studies or vice-versa. To reiterate, this approach brings to the fore the tensions that often underpin practices that are marked as esoteric entailing, among others, matters around their perceived (il)legitimacy. Central to the ADHF are questions such as “According to whom is a practice esoteric or alternative?”; “How do these marking practices relate to dominant understandings of the esoteric and the alternative?”; “In whose interest is a practice marked as esoteric?”; “What power effects ensue, and how, and in which sites, are epistemic orders negotiated?” In this sense, the ADHF provides a comprehensive approach to study how knowledge, validity, and truth are contested in different, yet globally entangled, contexts. Crucially, this allows us to move beyond essentialist definitions of the esoteric —also implicit in the distinction between esoteric and esotericism—and to view it as a

marker mobilized within negotiations of epistemic orders.

**The centre is called “Alternative Rationalities and Esoteric Practices in a Global Perspective”. Let us focus on the term “global” which seems to be increasingly popular (but not always analytically sharp) in academia. What does a “global perspective” mean in the context of CAS-E?**

When we speak of “global”, we do not refer to the geographic or spatial category of what could also be called “worldwide”. “Global” denotes neither a naturally given space nor a mere aggregation of regions or facts, but socially and epistemically produced entanglements shaped by power relations, research practices, and positionalities. Thus, we use it as a critical concept to challenge ethnocentric (especially eurocentric) asymmetries through systematic analysis of power and power dynamics—particularly those that are present in the study of esotericism. As such, this understanding of “global” is deeply intertwined with the ADHF and dependent on the positionality of the researcher as well as the centre itself. Consequently, we are moving beyond a mere regional dispersion of research projects and transnational connections to a systematic reflection of research within a globally uneven field of scholarly authority.

**Much recent scholarship has called for the decentring or**



**provincialisation of “Western esotericism”. How does CAS-E position itself within these debates, and do you think the category of “Western esotericism” still retains analytical value?**

Our understanding of “global” challenges the idea of the category of Western esotericism as an analytical tool. Rather, through our perspective, we want to examine how such a category, specifically one that draws powerful geographical/spatial boundaries, produces and strengthens epistemological structures—in this case the establishment of the study of esotericism in the academy.

**The study of esotericism has often focused on figures and movements portrayed as marginalised. Recently, scholars have increasingly reflected on the risk of overlooking the more problematic dimensions of “esoteric” ideas and practices, including their entanglements with political extremism and other various forms of social harm. How does CAS-E approach these issues?**

It is precisely this tension which can be made useful in CAS-E II as it showcases the uses of categories, political strategies, and infrastructures, including bureaucracy, law, institutional politics, and media that circulate unevenly across contexts. These issues are directly tackled through our first and second research streams, supplemented by the third which is looking at configurations of experiences of efficacy. As such, CAS-E can contribute to understanding how these formations and their categorisations (as “marginalised” or as “powerful”) interact with practices marked as esoteric.

**Looking ahead to the completion of Phase II, what would success look like for CAS-E? What impact would you hope the project will have on the wider study of esotericism?**

Given that we are just at the very beginning of CAS-E’s Phase II, we are *in primis* looking forward to a steep collective learning curve deriving from the exchange among scholars, coming from different regions and disciplines and studying a variety of diverse esoteric practices through different methodological lenses, that will take place at CAS-E over the next four years. We see this unique research environment profoundly impacting and ultimately shaping the field of esoteric studies, among others,

through the ADHF. Success for CAS-E would therefore mean widening the field of the study of esotericism through the ways in which case studies are carried out at CAS-E. It would also mean refining our proposed framework so that, by focusing on the practices that mark something, in particular certain practices, as esoteric and the power dynamics implied, it highlights how the study of esotericism is situated in the negotiation of epistemic orders and entrenched in questions of knowledge, validity, and truth.

**Finally, what advice would you give to graduate students and early-career researchers interested in working on contemporary esotericism?**

We would like to encourage graduate students and early-career researchers to remain open to different methodological and disciplinary approaches while critically reflecting on the categories they use and how they use them. Rather than assuming that “esotericism” is a stable object of study, it is important to ask how, by whom, and in which contexts certain practices are marked as esoteric, alternative, irrational, or dangerous. At the same time, scholars should be attentive to their own positionality and to the institutional and epistemic hierarchies that shape their research. Contemporary esotericism, in particular, directly influences the scholarly engagement therewith.



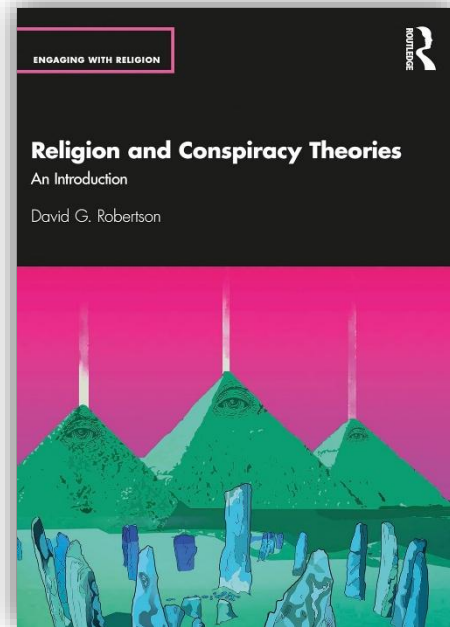
## What We Are Reading

*In this section, each of us highlights a book from our recent reading that has impressed us for one reason or another. We would also love to hear what the wider ContERN community is reading. Whether it's a recent publication, an old favourite, a thought-provoking article, a special issue, or even your own work, we warmly invite you to share your recommendations.*

***Religion and Conspiracy Theories: An Introduction.* By David G. Robertson. London: Routledge, 2024.**

*Religion and Conspiracy Theories: An Introduction* is less an introduction to its subject than a compelling argument for rethinking it. Though concise, David G. Robertson's book develops an ambitious theoretical framework that challenges many entrenched assumptions about conspiratorial belief, and the nature of its relationship to religion.

The book's opening move is to unsettle the presumed functional difference between religion and conspiracy theories. For Robertson, this opposition is not self-evident but produced through scholarly and cultural practices that elevate religion as a legitimate object of belief and meaning, while casting conspiracy theories as trivial, irrational, and unworthy of serious study. He situates this distinction historically, illustrating how "conspiracy theory" became a stigmatised category, before turning to critique the main disciplinary lenses through which it has previously been studied. Instead, he argues that conspiracy theories are best understood as part of a heterogeneous "milieu" of stigmatised knowledge, in which "discursive bridges" forge connections between otherwise unrelated narratives and facilitate the circulation of ideas. While not without limitations, *Religion and Conspiracy Theories* is impressive both in what it accomplishes and in the example it sets for future research. Rather than merely



cataloguing conspiratorial narratives and their religious dimensions, Robertson foregrounds the discursive structures that give them force. By asking not simply what people believe, but how particular forms of knowledge are authorised, marginalised, or rendered illegitimate, the book highlights questions too often sidelined or treated only superficially within the study of religion and adjacent fields.

In doing so, it exemplifies a form of scholarship that is theoretically ambitious, historically informed, and attentive to relations of power. Even where its scope occasionally exceeds its reach, the book demonstrates the value of moving beyond classificatory or descriptive approaches toward analyses that engage more directly with the political and epistemological stakes of knowledge production. In this respect, the book's most enduring contribution is methodological, offering tools for rethinking how religion, contemporary esotericism, and related domains are studied.

*Grace Conway*

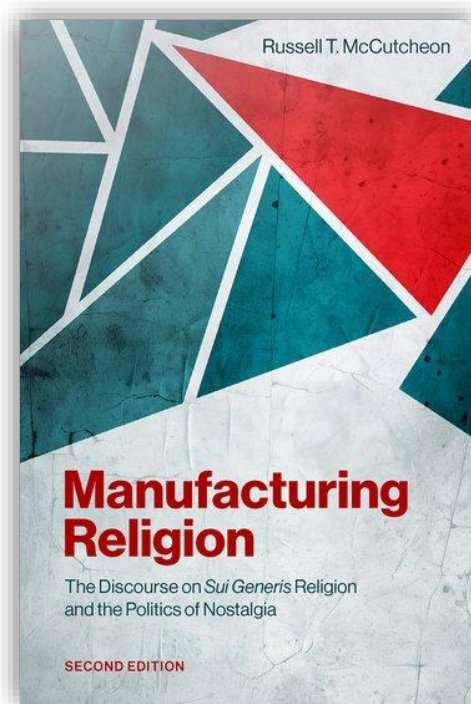


***Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia.* (2nd ed.) By Russell T. McCutcheon, New York: Oxford University Press, 2026.**

The “religionism debate” is often treated as a relic of Religious Studies’ past, a dispute largely confined to the 1980s and 1990s, fought in the long shadow cast by Mircea Eliade. Eliade’s *sui generis* approach held that religion constitutes a unique phenomenon, irreducible to other categories of human activity and therefore demanding its own special mode of study.

Drawing on Jonathan Z. Smith’s foundational critique, McCutcheon argued that religion is not unique, but a mundane label like any other, fully amenable to the same explanatory tools we would bring to any other social phenomenon. Where Smith’s intervention was largely epistemological and scientific, however, McCutcheon pushed further, asking what work the category of “religion” does functionally. Drawing on the critical work of Noam Chomsky on US foreign policy and Edward Said’s reflections on imperialism, he investigates how “religion” functions within the governance structures of liberal democracies, and whose interests it practically serves.

Nearly three decades on, the publication of a second edition (2026), with a new preface, introduction, afterword, appendix, and an additional chapter, brings this classic intervention into contemporary debates. Despite much current scholarship presenting itself as critical or postcolonial, while often avoiding the term “religion” altogether, McCutcheon argues that many studies still rest on the premise of a pre-discursive domain of deep and profound significance that demands a name and a privileged status of its own. He thus makes the provocative claim that critiques of *sui generis* approaches to religion have been successfully “appropriated by those who, while seeming to apply it, actually undermine it” (p. 2).



For those involved in the study of contemporary esotericism, the book offers a sharp and passionate plea to shift attention away from supposedly deep and meaningful expressions and towards the more mundane social, political, and institutional processes through which such categories are constructed, maintained, and mobilised.

*Milan Reith*

***Academic Advocacy for New Religious Movements: Of Apocalypse and Justice.* By Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, Palgrave Macmillan, 2025.**

Anyone working on new religious movements (NRMs) knows that a certain spectre haunts the field: the uneasy proximity between some scholars and the groups they study. It is a recurring subject of conference gossip and corridor conversations, yet one that is rarely confronted openly in print. Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, a veteran scholar with more than half a century of experience in the study of religion, does precisely that, offering an uncompromising examination of the entanglements between academic expertise and controversial religious movements.

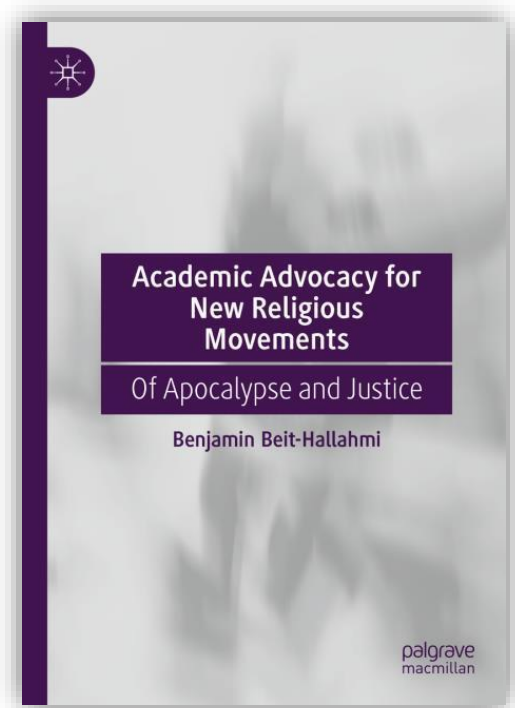


The central argument is straightforward. Over the past four decades, significant parts of NRM scholarship have operated according to what the author calls the “Automatic Innocence Axiom” and the “Automatic Defense Axiom”: the tendency to presume minority religions innocent by default and to regard criticism from former members, journalists, governments, or “anti-cult” organisations with systematic suspicion, coupled with an active commitment to defending such groups in public and institutional settings.

What makes the book remarkable is the extensive body of evidence assembled in support of its main thesis. Readers are confronted with a deeply unsettling archive of statements, expert testimonies, legal interventions, and scholarly writings surrounding some of the most controversial movements of the twentieth century. Rape, child abuse, coercion, financial exploitation, murder, and psychological manipulation all appear in these pages. Yet the most shocking aspect is often not the crimes themselves, which are by now well documented, but the extent to which scholars minimised, relativised, or openly dismissed them in the name of protecting religious minorities, opposing “anti-cultism”, or defending human rights.

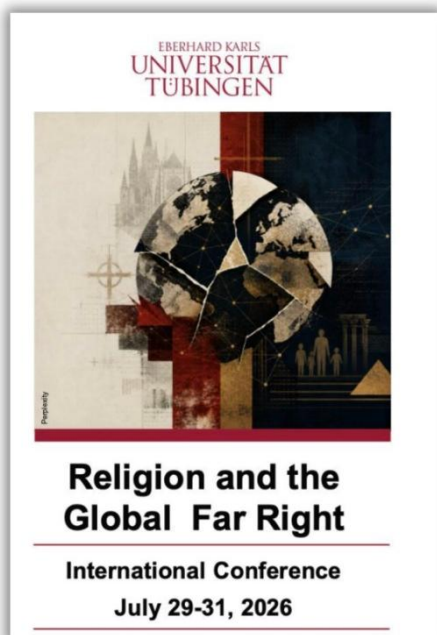
The author does not speak in generalities, but names names. Many of the figures discussed are not obscure historical actors but some of the most influential scholars in the field, individuals whose work continues to shape contemporary understandings of NRMs and related fields, including esotericism. Thus, the book forces readers to confront difficult questions: Where does scholarly empathy end and advocacy begin? What forms of proximity compromise critical distance? And how should researchers navigate their own moral and political commitments when studying groups accused of serious abuses? Whether one agrees with the author or not—and the book will surely spark controversy—it raises questions that the academic study of contemporary religion (“esotericism” included!) can no longer afford to avoid.

*Davide Marino*





## Announcements



### **International Conference: Religion and the Global Far Right, Tübingen, July 29–31, 2026**

The relationship between religion and the far right is widely recognised as important, yet it remains insufficiently explored. Against the backdrop of contemporary political developments, this conference examines how religion and far-right extremism intersect globally through processes of appropriation, identity formation, and competing claims to religious authenticity.

Particular attention will be given to contested religious fields, where meanings, boundaries, and forms of belonging are renegotiated. Christianity, for example, is frequently presented in trans-denominational ways by far-right actors and plays a significant role in collective identities and historical narratives. These dynamics are closely connected to attitudes toward Islam and Judaism, including conversions, collaborations, and the active participation of Islamic and Jewish actors in far-right contexts.

Conference panels will explore themes such as transnational networks, (supra-)nationalism, gender and sexuality, historical antimodernism, and political strategy. Roundtable discussions will bring together key insights and foster dialogue on developments of growing political and social significance.

Read more on the [conference website](#).

## Religions 360

### **ContERN panels at the 22nd Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions, Bucharest, September 20–25, 2026**

ContERN is organising two panels at the 22nd Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR). The conference, titled Religions360, will take place in Bucharest from 20–25 September 2026.

The first panel, “Esotericism, Science, and Knowledge Claims in the Twenty-first Century”, is chaired by Grace Conway. It explores the complex relationship between contemporary esotericism and scientific discourse. Through a range of case studies, the speakers examine how scientific authority, evidence, and legitimacy are negotiated in contemporary esoteric contexts, where different ways of knowing often intersect and coexist. Speakers include Adas Diržys, Karen Swartz-Hammer, Aaron French, and S. Brennan Kettelle.

The second panel, “Esotericism, Politics, and Social Imaginaries”, is chaired by Milan Reith. Focusing on contemporary case studies from Europe and South America, it examines the diverse ways esotericism and politics intersect and contribute to shaping social imaginaries today. Speakers include David Dijkman, Gregg Harmston, Matouš Mokřý, and Max Lokin.

We warmly invite conference participants interested in contemporary esotericism to attend the panels and join the discussions.

Read more about these upcoming panels on [this page](#).



## Open Calls



### **Call for Papers: Religion and Revolution: Alternative Religiosity and Radical Politics in the (Post-)Industrial Age (1800-2000), Göttingen, February 25–27, 2027**

This conference explores the intersections between left-wing and revolutionary politics and alternative religiosity over the past two centuries. While religion is often assumed to be at odds with socialist, anarchist, and communist traditions, alternative religious ideas and practices have frequently informed projects of social critique, political imagination, and revolutionary change.

Alongside anti-clerical and materialist currents, many movements and individuals have drawn on alternative religious traditions to deepen critiques of capitalism, the state, and established authority. Processes of religious pluralization and individualization have further expanded the possibilities for integrating religious ideas into radical political projects.

The conference welcomes contributions examining a wide range of historical and contemporary cases, from spiritualist involvement in nineteenth-century labour movements and the influence of Cosmism on the Russian Revolution to the role of alternative religiosity in utopian socialism and critical social theory. It also encourages attention to the global dimensions of these entanglements, including questions of colonialism, transnational exchange, and the circulation of religious and political ideas across regions.

Further information is available [here](#).



### **Call for Contributions: New Religiosity and the Digital Study of Eudaimonia**

ContERN is partnering with the John Templeton Foundation–funded project “New Religiosity and the Digital Study of Eudaimonia” (project #63357) to recruit contributors to the New Religiosity Poll (NRP), an extensive questionnaire-based research initiative aimed at mapping and describing new religious and esoteric movements globally.

We are currently recruiting contributors, including scholars and current or former members of esoteric movements (broadly defined). PhD candidates are also welcome, provided they can demonstrate substantial expertise, particularly through fieldwork, in the movement they intend to document. Contributors are expected to have significant ethnographic and/or historical knowledge of a movement in order to complete a detailed entry.

The NRP focuses on beliefs, gender roles, technology use, health and financial practices, and processes of affiliation and disaffiliation, among other related topics. Each entry will undergo double peer review, receive a DOI, and be published open access on the Database of Religious History (DRH) platform.

We estimate that completing an entry will take approximately 14 hours. Contributors are expected to submit their entries by 30 July 2026. As an honorarium, contributors will receive 300 Canadian dollars per completed entry.

If you are interested in contributing or would like further information, please contact the project PI at [stephen.christopher@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:stephen.christopher@kcl.ac.uk)



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## Get Involved

**ContERN** is a community-driven network, and the strength of its content depends on the engagement of its community. Therefore, we warmly encourage members to contribute to future newsletter issues and to share news, opportunities, events, and other content through our social media channels.

### We welcome contributions in a variety of forms, including:

- Announcements and calls for papers
- Conference reports and research updates
- Short interviews and opinion pieces
- Recommendations for books, articles, or special issues
- News of your recent publications
- Something else entirely? Pitch us.

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### Stay in touch

Website: [www.contern.org](http://www.contern.org)

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*We look forward to hearing from you!*