

Book Reviews

Damon Zacharias Lycourinos, ed. *Occult Traditions*. Colac: Numen Books, 2012. 308 pp. ISBN: 978-0987158130. \$29.95.

To speak with Bruce Lincoln, studying religion means historicizing that which often poses as transcendent. The history of religions critically examines religious claims, seeking to uncover the historical and cultural circumstances through which they came to be regarded as timeless truths.¹ Thus, studying religion challenges the mechanisms through which these systems create meaning and gain legitimacy. Western esotericism often relies on notions of tradition or eternal wisdom passed down through the ages, its timeless essence unshaken by the mundanities of political struggle and sociocultural change. However, the ability to distinguish between truth claims and truth; to recognize how the historical, cultural, and political have fundamentally shaped that which masquerades as transcendent; in essence, to de-mystify the mystical, must be the starting point of all sound research on esotericism.

Naturally, this does not mean that practitioners cannot conduct sound research. Armed with an awareness of the potential pitfalls and the vital differences between emic and etic perspectives, it is undoubtedly possible to be an excellent scholar of one's own religion or spirituality. Failure in this regard results in speculative universalizations, anachronism, and occlusion of power relations. Sadly, *Occult Traditions*, described on the back cover as the collaborative endeavour of scholars and practitioners alike, provides abundant proof of this.

Occult Traditions covers a rich selection of topics. Three chapters – two by

¹ Bruce Lincoln, "Theses on Method," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 8, no. 3 (1996): 225–27.

editor Damon Lycourinos and one by Aaron Cheak – deal with the Greek Magical Papyri (PGM). Christopher A. Plaisance bridges the gap between antiquity and early modernity with chapters on the legacy of Neoplatonism in occult theology as well as medieval and renaissance angel magic. David Rankine, Ioannis Marathakis, and Christopher A. Smith address different aspects of early modern and modern magic books. The volume also treats modern occultism, in a chapter on Julius Evola by Lycourinos, and two chapters on Wicca by Sorita D’Este and Melissa Harrington respectively. Gwendolyn Toynton discusses divinatory practices and Thai Buddhism, respectively, in two chapters. In addition, the work includes chapters on ancient Egyptian religion, the use of incense, and a number of outlines for magical ritual, by Lycourinos, Matthew Levi Stephens, Companion Abraxas, and Tess Dawson.

Regrettably, the wide historical and geographical scope comes at the expense of context and coherence. The reader is not offered an intellectually satisfactory explanation as to how, for instance, the PGM, Icelandic magic, and Buddhism in Thailand fit together as part of an interconnected “occult tradition.” The selection appears arbitrary, and possibly based on what the editor and contributors personally find most appealing. Contrary to reigning academic standards, *Occult Traditions* does not treat esotericism or occultism as a group of genealogically linked systems, texts, or ideas, or as a discursive field produced through particular historical processes.² Instead, it appears to view its subject matter as a unified tradition based on a set of loosely defined criteria, supposedly constituting its perennial “essence.” This was a common view in the early years of esotericism research, inspired by the ideas of figures such as Mircea Eliade and partly due to the influence of Traditionalism. More recently, this approach has come under criticism as it downplays historical and cultural specificity in favour of an illusory trans-historical coherence.³ Moreover, it hides the role that scholars have played in constructing esotericism as an object, as well as the power relations inherent to this process.⁴

Occult Traditions draws on a romanticized view of a sort of spirituality of

² See e.g. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge* (London; Oakville: Equinox Publishing, 2005).

³ Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms: Sociological, Historical and Critical Approaches to the Invention of Tradition,” in *Contemporary Esotericism*, eds. Asprem and Granholm (Sheffield; Bristol: Equinox, 2013); Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*; see also Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) for a more recent example of this approach.

⁴ Asprem and Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms.”

subversion, manifesting throughout history and offering an alternative to hegemonic religious dogma to those brave and curious enough to explore it. In her foreword, Toynton waxes lyrical about a time when “both magic and religion worked together to contact the divine.” (11) In her view, the anthology shows occultism’s authenticity and ancient roots, clearly distinguishing it from the “rootless” New Age. Lycourinos in his introduction describes a succession of people throughout history embodying “a visible representation of spiritual virility ... aligning themselves purely with the laws of the pure forces of the cosmos.” (17) He proposes a definition of occultism as “the theory and practice of specific fields of discourse involving a particular human awareness and performance within a worldview characterized by a resistance to the dominance of either sterile logic or doctrinal faith.” (15)

Ahistorical concepts such as “spiritual virility” and “pure cosmic forces” do not explain how or why occultism has developed in such disparate ways over time. Moreover, it remains unclear why this supposedly perennial quest for hidden wisdom is often conspicuously influenced by contemporary discourses, power negotiations, and cultural exchanges. Historical reality also challenges the idea of a coherent, timeless tradition. Lycourinos and Cheak unconvincingly try to solve the problem posed by the syncretistic elements of their subject matter by attributing them to a “natural receptivity” in magic. As it is not made clear how this supposed receptivity differs from syncretism in actual practice, these statements appear to be part of a strategy to present particular beliefs or practices as more enlightened than others, by denigrating those that do not comply with a supposedly unified tradition.

Several of the authors base their distinctions on similarly emic notions. Smith, Rankine, Lycourinos, and Cheak regard magic aimed at fulfilling material needs as inferior and less worthy of study than more theurgically oriented practices. In his chapter on the Icelandic *Galdrabok*, Smith dismisses spells that involve elements of Judeo-Christian doctrine as not being examples of “real” magic. This conclusion seems mostly to be based on his personal preferences, as Judeo-Christian borrowings are more common than not in spellbooks from this time, and are indeed present in parts of the PGM as well as the entire grimoire genre. Toynton disparagingly distinguishes between omen divination and what she scathingly refers to as passive “superstition,” in contrast to the active seeking out of portents. Rankine refers to the Faustian devil pact detailed in a famous grimoire as something that “only a desperate man with no magical experience would consider.” (104) Again, this appears to be Rankine’s personal opinion as a magician rather than a scholarly assessment.

The supposed inferiority of magic aimed at personal gain has problematic political implications. In early modern Europe, alliances with the Devil were often sought by those with limited access to worldly power.⁵ The eclectic magic outlined in the grimoires can partly be seen as a spirituality of resistance through which people could articulate desires outside of the frameworks of church hegemony. Dismissing such practices simply because they are directed at material gain misses a crucial point about their subversive power.

While magic practitioners are entitled to their personal preferences, it is troublesome when arbitrary value judgments regarding what occultism “ought” to be are touted as scholarship. The dichotomies between “pure” religiosity and “syncretism,” “superstition,” or “popular belief” are artificial constructs, often invoked by those already in power to solidify religious hegemony. The constructed traditions are rarely as coherent, lofty, or pure as their advocates would have them, but often involve strong elements of syncretism and pragmatism based on subjective preference. This is clearly the case in *Occult Traditions*, many of whose contributors seem to base their ideas of what “true” occultism is on personal preferences. This strategy has frequently been employed by religious institutions, which establish artificial concepts of religious purity in order to suppress subaltern voices.⁶ One example of this is how the Catholic Church has contributed to the marginalisation of women, the working class, and LGBTQ people by labelling their beliefs and practices superstitious or even satanic, simultaneously promoting the viewpoints of its male, middle-class leadership as orthodox.⁷ Rather than reproduce such dichotomies, scholars should seek to understand the processes through which certain forms of religiosity are classified as purer or nobler than others. Several of the chapters in the anthology constitute fascinating source material for future studies in this area.

⁵ Soili-Maria Olli, *Visioner av världen: hädelse och djävulspakt i justitierevisionen 1680–1789* (Umeå: Institutionen för historiska studier, Umeå universitet, 2007); Mikael Häll, *Skogsrädet, näcken och djävulen: erotiska naturväsen och demonisk sexualitet i 1600- och 1700-talens Sverige* (Stockholm: Malört, 2013).

⁶ Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Lena Gemzöe, *Feminine Matters: Women's Religious Practices in a Portuguese Town* (Stockholm: Dept. of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University, 2000); Manon Hedenborg-White, “Death as a Woman: Santa Muerte and Religious ‘othering’ in Mexico,” in *Vile Women: Female Evil in Fact, Fiction and Mythology*, eds. Anthony Patterson & Marilena Zackheos (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014).

⁷ Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Gemzöe, *Feminine Matters*; McGuire, *Lived Religion*.

Deconstructing truth claims that masquerade as transcendent and apolitical is a vital step towards uncovering religious power relations. Failing to do so, one instead risks cementing existing hierarchies. A potent example of this is Lycourinos' chapter on radical-right thinker Julius Evola. Lycourinos writes that the popularization of sexual magic in the late 19th century is based on affirmations of the individual as an "ultimate force in the universe" and the tremendous power of free will (210). This description betrays an uncritical stance towards emic understandings of modern sexual magic, and disregards the power negotiations permeating its development. Lycourinos neglects to mention that Evola did not view all individuals as supreme universal forces. Evola believed women incapable of spiritual advancement in their own right, and saw women as mere helpers and tools for the male magician.⁸ Analysing Evola's work without taking his misogyny into account has problematic political implications, as it runs the considerable risk of normalising these ideas. Moreover, the idea of the sex magical discourse of the nineteenth and twentieth century being a manifestation of cosmic truth or eternal human urges is challenged by the fact that it is so clearly influenced by contemporary medical discourses on sexual difference, the emphasis on gender as complementary in society at large, and the elevation of a heterosexual "ideology of pleasure" in response to the perceived threats of homosexuality and promiscuity.⁹

Despite there being several scholars among its contributors, it is unclear whether *Occult Traditions* is intended to be an academic work. Most of the contributions betray a fundamental ignorance of the theoretical and methodological advances made in esotericism research in recent decades, and with the exception of Christopher A. Plaisance's contributions, the chapters are clearly coloured by the authors' spiritual convictions. Large parts of the book are marred by a blurring of emic and etic perspectives, producing a form of normative, occult theology that promotes the authors' religious views under the guise of scholarship. While this is unlikely to affect academic discourse on esotericism at large, scholarly examinations are highly valued in the esoteric milieu and are often cited (sometimes contrary to the intentions of the scholar)

⁸ Julius Evola, *Revolt Against the Modern World* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2001), 157–66.

⁹ Pia Laskar, *Ett bidrag till heterosexualitetens historia: kön, sexualitet och njutningsnormer i sexhandböcker 1800–1920* (Stockholm: Modernista, 2005); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990); Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

for purposes of legitimacy and authority.¹⁰ This can contribute to cementing existing power relations, especially when misogynist or racist views are normalized and treated as politically unproblematic. As the book presents an attractive range of topics, and some of the chapters are actually adequate introductions to their subject matter, the volume may also confuse students or scholars in other fields seeking to gain an understanding of what esotericism research is all about. Although the field has come far in recent years and can boast a number of world-class scholars, its position is still somewhat fragile in the broader context of academia. Thus, the discussions surrounding how to do research on Western esotericism beyond apologeticism and theology must continue.

Manon Hedenborg-White

manon.hedenborg-white@teol.uu.se

¹⁰ Asprem and Granholm, “Constructing Esotericisms.”