

Yves Mühlematter and Helmut Zander, eds. *Occult Roots of Religious Studies: On the Influence of Non-Hegemonic Currents in Academia around 1900*. Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2021. xi + 283 pp. ISBN: 9783110664270. Open Access.

Scholars from a number of fields have illustrated the role and relevance of occultism on essentially all aspects of modernity, including its cultural, colonial, political, and religious landscapes. The project of modernity partly involved the development of various academic societies, fields of research, and disciplines. Several scholars have traced and analyzed how the processes of demarcation and the boundary-work between the emerging categories of “religion” and “science” played out during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with some works highlighting the role of occultism and esotericism in creating those very categories.<sup>1</sup> Seeking to further uncover connections between esotericism and modernity, Yves Mühlematter and Helmut Zander’s (eds) *Occult Roots of Religious Studies*, which brings into focus the nascent study of religion during modernity, is quite timely.

The book constitutes volume four of De Gruyter’s *Okkulte Moderne*, a book series that explores the relationships between “non-hegemonic” and “hegemonic” strands of knowledge and helps to establish a solid center for esotericism research in the Germanic world.<sup>2</sup> *Occult Roots of Religious Studies* is the series’s first English-language (and thus internationally geared) title, and the editors have solicited chapters from a mixture of recognized esotericism scholars such as Boaz Huss, Julian Strube, Jens Schlieter, Daniel Cyranka, and additional researchers focusing on a broad range of subjects, including museology (Sabine Böhme), folklore studies (Marco Frenschkowski), and “neo-Hinduism” (Léo Bernard).

The volume under review is based on the international conference “Birth of the Science of Religion: Out of the Spirit of Occultism,” held at the University

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1. See, for instance, Stuckrad, *The Scientification of Religion*; Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*; and Bergunder, “‘Religion’ and ‘Science’.”

2. Sziede and Zander, *Von der Dämonologie*, xxi–xxii.

of Freiburg in 2018. As the conference name and the book title suggest, the book's central thesis holds that "religious studies have little-known and sometimes repressed origins which lie in the field of esotericism" (1). The occult influences present in the field of religious studies functions as an example of why esotericism should be understood as "an intrinsic part of hegemonic cultures" (1). These ambitious proposals place the volume in dialogue with an expansive, international field of research and opens up a much-needed dialogue between the wider study of religion and the field of esotericism, the latter of which has been criticized for its insular tendencies.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from Zander's chapter, which historicizes the study of esotericism as well as argues for how its subject matter can be conceptualized, *Occult Roots of Religious Studies* concerns the period between the early 1800s and the mid-1950s, with each chapter serving as a case study that illustrates the relationship between occultism and the study of religion. Leaving the notion of what constitutes "religious studies" and "occultism" open for each contributor to define, the chapters provide an array of accounts on how these two areas can be understood, and how they relate to one another.

While Frenschkowski's contribution centers on pioneers in the study of religion, including Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900), Andrew Lang (1844–1912), James G. Frazer (1854–1941), and Edward Burnett Tylor (1883–1917), the chapters by Cyranka, Bernard, and Böhme provide historical accounts of individuals who are less commonly associated with the formation of the study of religion: botanist and natural philosopher Christian Gottfried Daniel Nees von Esenbeck (1776–1858); Orientalist and comparative philosopher Paul Masson-Oursel (1882–1956); and, archaeologist and museum curator Walter Andrae (1875–1956). The three remaining chapters, authored by Strube, Schlieter, and Huss, cover specific religious currents and movements such as Tantra, Tibetan Buddhism, and Kabbalah. These chapters constitute the most illuminating and convincing parts of the book, with

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3. Asprem and Strube, *New Approaches*, 8.

each author clearly demonstrating specific instances where the boundaries between the occultist and the academic study of religion have been porous.

When considering the complex interplay between the academic study of religion and occultism, one must also consider the artificial boundaries between other aspects of modernity, namely the one concerning “the West” and “the East.” As Strube expertly shows in his chapter, the academic study of Tantra was founded through complex exchanges between British Orientalist and occultist John Woodroffe (1865–1936) and a number of occultist Bengali intellectuals, such as Jnanendralal Majumdar and Baradakanta Majumdar. Tantra was not merely imagined as occult through the writings of Woodroffe, but was in fact inspired by Bengali religio-nationalist scholarship which held that Tantra was not only the “true, esoteric core of Hindu religion” but also a form of experimental and rational science (136).

Another strong case for the volume’s central thesis, and a solid example of a historical scholar-practitioner, is presented in Schlieter’s chapter on Walter Y. Evans-Wentz (1878–1965), Theosophist, pioneer in the academic study of Tibetan Buddhism and more broadly a scholar of comparative religion. Clearly building on Theosophist Alfred P. Sinnett’s (1840–1921) canonical work *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), Evans-Wentz uses *Tibetan Book of the Dead* as a mouthpiece for various Theosophical beliefs when he argues that he has found parallels to “Western” occult and esoteric traditions in Tibetan Buddhism. Just as Evans-Wentz held that he had discovered evidence for the perennial truths of Theosophy in ancient Tibetan Buddhism, later Theosophists have found remarkable Theosophical insights in *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, “proving ... the transcultural prevalence of certain experiences of the disembodied soul in the after-death realms, but also the principle teachings of the founding fathers and mothers of Theosophy” (183).

One of the central questions of the book concerns the relationship between occultism and the academic study of religion. While both Tantra and Tibetan studies were clearly influenced by occultist ideas and perspectives, the situation

looks a little different when turning to the study of Kabbalah, which is discussed by Huss. The academic study of Kabbalah, associated with scholars such as Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), held ambivalent or out-right dismissive views regarding occultist approaches to Kabbalah. Despite some polemics against Theosophical Kabbalah, Huss maintains that the academic study of Kabbalah shared some important genealogies and notions with both Theosophy and occultism more broadly, both prior to and during Scholem’s time. The chapter gives a nuanced picture of the intricate history of Kabbalah and offers multiple future research desiderata for scholars of esotericism.

While the three chapters just touched on greatly add to our understanding of *whether* and *how* occultism and the academic study of religion have interacted historically, not all chapters address these questions, perhaps because they were written before the book was finalized and the thesis for the book was set. One example is Frenschkowski’s chapter, which reads more explorative and preliminary than substantive. Focusing on the relationships between the Victorian and Edwardian science(s) of religion and occultism, the author identifies anthropologist Andrew Lang as a scholar who straddled the academic and occult milieu with his ventures in psychical research running parallel to his contributions to the early study of anthropology. The example of Lang certainly adds to our understanding of the permeable boundaries between occultism and the emerging sciences, and aids in the undoing of the oft-imagined binary between researcher and practitioner. While insightful and compelling, the case of Lang is not engaged with or analyzed any further, which is unfortunate.

Edited volumes, as is well known, run the risk of appearing haphazard and disjointed with chapters that vary in quality, style, and relevance. Despite the clear and highly relevant aim as well as the inclusion of potent contributions, the volume under review unfortunately checks some of those boxes. As a whole, the book would have greatly benefited from stronger cohesion, organization, sequencing, and flow. Some elements which could have elevated the volume

include an integrative and cogently written introduction (and perhaps even a prologue) to help tie loose ends together as well as clear and transparent editorial choices (regarding how the chapters fit together, how the book's overall theses were formed and to what extent the chapters provide data that support them).

One key area in which the volume could have been improved is through dialogue with the fields that the book aims to add to. Amidst recent debates regarding the very production of the category of “religions,” plenty of scholars have done extensive work in tracing the lineages of the various forms of study of religion including the Victorian science of religion, the early comparative study of religion, the history of religions school, and so forth. While earlier studies have centered on the vast impact of liberal Protestant theology and colonial imaginaries on the creation of “world religions,”<sup>4</sup> an increasing number of historians have pointed to the roles of colonial occultists and global occultism in co-producing these categories.<sup>5</sup> While the editors take as their point of departure the ostensibly “hegemonic” status of religious studies as fully divorced from theology and understanding itself as engaged in secular, rational, and objective approaches to the study of religion, this view is an oversimplification. Religious studies scholars and theologians are still in hot debates regarding the relationship between the two disciplines, and the nature of their respective forms of study, with great variations between different institutional and national contexts.

The end of the book features a section of short biographies of individuals that are relevant to the book's theme and that deserve future research. While it is definitely a praiseworthy contribution to offer such a wealth of recommendations for future research paths, unfortunately some biographies are not quite up to date. While the inclusion of the Theosophist and amateur scholar G.R.S. Mead in this section is relevant, there are a number of researchers (myself included) who have done work on this interesting scholar-practitioner, despite the claim

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4. E.g., Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, as well as Cotter and Robertson, *After World Religions*.

5. See, for instance, Asprem and Strube, *New Approaches*; Pokorny and Winter, *The Occult Nineteenth Century*; Krämer and Strube, *Theosophy across Boundaries*; Strube, *Global Tantra*.

that “there are no studies on the academic reception of his works” (253).<sup>6</sup> Aside from this, this section of the book is certainly most welcome.

The editors of the present volume highlight connections between esoteric practice and the academic study of esotericism by pointing to specific scholars and their backgrounds in esoteric publishing. The choice to include this in the book is quite surprising given how many autobiographical accounts of the early study of esotericism have covered this, and how scholars have taken instrumental efforts to divorce the discipline, not least nominally, from its earlier “religionist” tendencies.<sup>7</sup> While the reviewer agrees that the impact of esotericist self-understandings on academic scholarship (and vice versa!) is relevant and worth investigating further, the use of individual scholars’ personal backgrounds as measurements of the quality of their professional academic work seems a bit inappropriate seeing as both historical and contemporary scholars of religion, not least of esotericism, sometimes have unproblematic private interests in the objects of their study.

Despite some of these weaker points, *Occult Roots of Religious Studies* is definitely a worthwhile contribution to the field of esotericism and to religious studies more broadly. The choice to make the book open access is admirable and especially helpful to junior scholars and individuals without institutional access, for whom academic literature can be difficult to access. The book might be of interest especially to historians who are working with the modern period, as well as scholars interested in the emergence and constitution of the various religious studies projects, but any scholar with interest in occultism and esotericism will likely find valuable parts in this title.

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6. Recent scholarship on Mead can be found in Winter, “Studying the ‘Gnostic Bible’”; Burns, “Weren’t the Christians”; Gruffman, “The Quest for Gnosis”; and Robertson, *Gnosticism and the History of Religions*.

7. See especially McCalla, “Antoine Faivre and the Study of Esotericism,” as well as Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 334–54.

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