

Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, eds. *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021. viii + 255 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-44645-8. Open Access.

This edited volume is part of the Supplements to Method & Theory in the Study of Religion series issued by Brill in the Netherlands. It consists of an introductory chapter and an “Afterword” by the editors, Egil Asprem and Julian Strube, which frame the eleven chapters. In the introductory chapter titled “Esotericism’s Expanding Horizon: Why This Book Came to Be,” Asprem and Strube argue that they are applying “tough love” (2) to deconstruct or delegitimize the biases previously manifest in the field. There is some special pleading—I accept publication trajectories take time but there is an issue of *Correspondences* on Islamic Esotericism that is not mentioned—and the laborious deliberations around whiteness and colonialism (as a colonial I am acutely aware of that problem) are somewhat repetitive. The coverage of theological insiders, culture wars, slippery conceptual frameworks—rejected knowledge and self-marginalization of the field, secrecy, and hiddenness, for example—and the weakness of attempts to construct a meaningful lineage/genealogy of esotericism from antiquity to the present, are of greater interest.

The first chapter, following the introduction, is Dylan Burns’s “Receptions of Revelations: A Future for the Study of Esotericism and Antiquity,” which addresses the perceived exclusion of antiquity from the field of “Western Esotericism.” This is an ambitious essay that surveys vast topics such as Platonism, Gnosticism, the Apocrypha, and later medieval heretical tendencies that may or may not be related to these antique intellectual strands (the Theosophists and C. G. Jung also get mentions). The argument addresses issues of reception and interpretation, with a range of scholars being evoked as more or less helpful in disentangling these highly contested subject areas.

The second chapter, editor Strube’s “Towards the Study of Esotericism without the ‘Western’: Esotericism from the Perspective of Global Religious History,” is similarly wide-ranging and broadly conceived. Strube notes that Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s call for a “strictly historical” approach (46) necessitates a global model and that will inevitably lessen the dominance of Western forms. Strube advocates returning to the work of earlier scholars such as Marcello Truzzi, Frances Yates, and James Webb, who all believed that esotericism is genuinely deviant, opposed to the mainstream, and potentially revolutionary. The dominant models nowadays, such as Hanegraaff’s “rejected knowledge,” have neutralized esotericism, because “The statement that esotericism *as a historiographical category* emerged as rejected knowledge is, quite simply, a statement about how historians have treated certain historiographical phenomena” (129), not a statement about esotericism itself. Strube intriguingly touches on the aesthetic appeal of the margins, and advocates strongly for the global as opposed to the limitedly Western; the complication being mostly that it is Western scholars who are the authorities deferred to in the business of dismantling Western esotericism.

The third chapter is by Liana Saif, and is titled “‘That I Did Love the Moor to Live With Him’: Islam in/and the Study of ‘Western Esotericism’.” This research interrogates the East and West as oppositional constructs, and argues that both Orientalist and perennialist sources prevent productive collaborations around esotericism that include Islamic materials. Saif recommends: moving away from using the work of perennialist scholars like Henri Corbin; recognizing the colonialist context of much Orientalism; and adopting a global (not universal) scholarly approach. The next contribution, Mariano Villalba’s “The Occult among the Aborigines of South America? Some Remarks on Race, Coloniality, and the West in the Study of Esotericism,” is a fascinating exercise which posits that esotericism was in part the product of the colonization of the Americas, as indigenous discourses that developed to resist the European colonists were grounded in European intellectual traditions including Platonism. For this

reader, the argument reflects and is reinforced by much of the material found in *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* by David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021). Villalba makes serious points about the folly and danger of assuming a Western-centric perspective that privileges White Christian norms.

The focus shifts to “Eastern” sources in Keith Cantú’s “Don’t Take Any Wooden Nickels’: Western Esotericism, Yoga, and the Discourse of Authenticity.” This chapter is written in a conversational style that is unusual in academic publications; the author contrasts the attitudes of yoga practitioners and scholars with those of esoteric practitioners and scholars of esotericism, focusing on tensions between local/translocal and authentic/inauthentic discourses and practices. Cantú concludes that using “local” and “translocal” as modifiers for esotericism avoids the use of “Western” and is a practical step toward resolving the debates about authenticity in a field such as yoga as practiced by Westerners. Next is editor Asprem’s “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered: Some Methodological Notes on Esotericism and Marginality,” which reviews Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s “rejected knowledge” characterisation of esotericism, identifying a strict sense which is helpful, and an “inflated” model which “poses problems” (131). Asprem’s musings on elected marginality, the attractions of counter-canonical readings, and the socialisation of individuals into esoteric communities are interesting and thought-provoking.

Justine Bakker’s “Race and (the Study of) Esotericism” picks up threads from the preceding chapters, exploring the presence of Native American Black Hawk and President Abraham Lincoln at seances composed of people whose colour differed from their own (white and black respectively), as well as contemporary UFO abduction tales and studies. Bakker is concerned to make race a critical factor in the study of esotericism, which would additionally facilitate interactions with Black studies and critical race theory. The focus on race, and Black esotericism in particular, continues in Hugh R. Page Jr and Stephen C. Finley’s “What Can the Whole World Be Hiding?': Exploring *Africana* Esotericisms in

the American Blues-Soul Continuum,” that uses, among a range of sources, the scholarship of Jon Woodson, whose work is of great value in the academic study of G. I. Gurdjieff and the Fourth Way teaching lineages that developed in the United States. Woodson works on modernist literary texts; here the focus is on 1960s and 1970s music. The authors argue that a fuller picture of esotericism emerges when sources that are usually excluded from research in the field are consulted; in their case, song lyrics, and musical forms, that are constitutive of the Black experience in America.

The ninth chapter is “Double Toil and Gender Trouble? Performativity and Femininity in the Cauldron of Esoteric Research” by Manon Hedenborg White, who examines the Thelemic *Gnostic Mass* and the goddess Babalon through the lens of feminist theory. This essay is conspicuously successful in uniting theory and content, rather than providing expository sections on each (and failing to integrate the two), as is the case in some chapters. Hedenborg White’s descriptions of esoteric rituals to Babalon performed by women “as instances of performative gender” (194) and her insistence on the applicability of the feminist lens to the whole field are insightful and practical for future research. Susannah Crockford tackles late-capitalist economics in “What Do Jade Eggs Tell Us About the Category ‘Esotericism’? Spirituality, Neoliberalism, Secrecy and Commodities.” Crockford tackles wellness culture, zooming in on Gwyneth Paltrow’s brand Goop and her vaginal insertion jade eggs, which were purchased eagerly at substantial prices. She is scrupulous in not making overt fun of this risible phenomenon, but aware of the message it conveys, that it is “easier to see the elitism of esotericism in the exchange of commodities . . . It is also easier to see the emptiness of the secret” (213).

The last substantive chapter by Dimitry Okropiridze is titled “Interpretation Reconsidered: The Definitional Progression in the Study of Esotericism as a Case in Point for the Varifocal Theory of Interpretation.” Okropiridze moves through the definitional genealogy of Antoine Faivre, Hanegraaff, Michael

Bergunder, and Aspren, concluding that this seeming “dialectical movement” has “been unable to bring about a theoretical clarification and synthesis of interpretive approaches to esotericism” (237). In answer to this failure, a varifocal approach is proposed to avoid the desire to unify perspectives and rather accept approaches that generate different conclusions. Aspren and Strube’s “Afterword: Outlines of a New Roadmap” is an upbeat conclusion to the book, that is optimistic that “Western” before esotericism can be dropped, that global approaches will gain traction in the near future, and that existing approaches such as historicization and rejected knowledge can be refined and adapted in the service of bringing subaltern voices to equality in the field.

This edited volume is more unified in subject matter and methodological intent than many such scholarly outputs, and will be of interest to religious studies in general as well as those in the field of esotericism (Western or otherwise). The general standard of the chapters is consistent, and the materials discussed entertaining and relevant, with only a small feeling of repetition as authors link to touchstones throughout. It is recommended.

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