Correspondences 14, no. 1 (2026): 125–130

Mike A. Zuber. *Spiritual Alchemy: From Jacob Boehme to Mary Anne Atwood*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. xiii + 269 pp. ISBN: 978-0190073046. $94.00 / £74.00

A distillation of his 2017 PhD dissertation, *Spiritual Alchemy* is Mike A. Zuber's contribution to the historiography of alchemy. The book contains ten chapters, sixty-six pages of notes, a works cited section, and a very useful general index.

The introduction provides a clear summation of popular ideas about alchemy, and how historians have studied it. It begins by tracing the initial modern approaches to studying Early Modern alchemy, first by the eighteenth-century "Enlightenment polemicists," who broadly denounced the art of the philosopher's stone as "utterly misguided and fraudulent" (2). This view persisted as late as 2002, when *ISIS*, the leading journal for the history of science, classified research into alchemy under the header of "pseudo-science." However, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, a contrasting and much more flattering view of alchemy emerged, which viewed adepts as engaging "not primarily with material substances but with their inner selves" (2).

Though Zuber does not follow through with the reception and development of spiritual alchemy (henceforth "SA") after Mary Anne South's (later Atwood's) *A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery*, he does include in the introduction some brief mention of later developments, such as (A) the American Major General Ethan Allen Hitchcock's moral approach to alchemy, (B) Viennese psychoanalyst Herbert Silberer's mystical and psychological approach, (C) Romanian-American historian of religions Mircea Eliade's approach, most widely known in *The Forge and the Crucible* (1962), and (D) the most prominent exponent of a psychological conception of the royal art, C. G. Jung. Hereward Tilton's 2003 monograph on Michael Maier, *The Quest for the Phoenix*, however, which includes its own approach and is partly dedicated to spiritual alchemy, is not mentioned.

© 2026 Corey Andrews.
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
Published by *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism.*

Zuber also traces the overturning of the Jungian approach, first by Swiss art historian Barbara Obrist, and later expanded and further refined by two historians of science, William R. Newman and Lawrence M. Principe — the latter providing one of the three praising blurbs on the back cover of Zuber's book. Through a series of studies, Newman and Principe replaced Jung's approach with a new paradigm known as the "New Historiography of Alchemy," which has since firmly integrated alchemy into the history of science (4). However, with a quite voluminous footnote attached, Zuber asserts that the "New Historiography" is not without its critics. From various perspectives, critics agree that the "New Historiography" implies "an overly restrictive view of its subject and downplays important aspects in favor of chemical content and experimental technique," within which "lies the danger of a latent essentialism," which in some cases "has led to an implicit view of alchemy as 'really' science (and not religion)" (5).

Zuber states that his book is not intended to continue this "long-standing tug of war," instead advocating for the perspective of "an impartial observer" (6). Nevertheless, he does state explicitly that the book addresses a critique by Principe and Newman, namely the claim that all declarations of continuity regarding spiritual alchemy are mere "conjecture" and without "clear historical evidence." This book, Zuber states, marshals forth the "hitherto elusive evidence," found in obscure manuscript sources (12).

The first chapter contextualizes the origins of spiritual alchemy (SA) within broader Reformation-era developments, which provided the soil from which the tradition blossomed. Firstly, the Paracelsian alchemists Gerard Dorn, Heinrich Khunrath, and Oswald Croll are acknowledged for the extent to which "religious concerns shaped their alchemical works" (18). Khunrath even explicitly posited a "linkage between the Incarnation of Christ, . . . the philosopher's stone, and the rebirth of the individual believer" (18). However, Zuber argues that the tradition of SA does not begin with Heinrich Khunrath but instead originates in "pseudepigraphic texts attributed to Valentin Weigel." The reason for this is

© 2026 Corey Andrews.
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
Published by *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism.*

due to Khunrath's insufficient fixation on "the mystical identification of Christ and the believer" (18), which is of primary import for Zuber's criteriology for inclusion in the SA tradition throughout the book.

The pseudo-Weigelian texts Zuber identifies are *Azoth et Ignis* (Azoth and Fire), composed in the late sixteenth century, and *Ad dialogum de morte* (Concerning the Dialogue on Death), published in 1614. The former combined "Weigelian spiritualism with alchemical terminology and apocalyptic speculation," and "was very likely the first text to draw an analogy between laboratory alchemy and spiritual rebirth while emphasizing the mystical identification of Christ and the believer" (25). The latter text emphasized similar themes, with more focus on the death and resurrection of Christ, the *unio mystica* being the most important recurring motif. The reception of pseudo-Weigelian SA is detected first in a work by Nuremberg chymist Johann Siebmacher titled *Wasserstein der Weysen* (Water-Stone of the Wise, 1619), the only alchemical work to which Jacob Boehme referred by its title (30), and secondly in *Introductio Hominis* (1607), within which Siebmacher "revealed his familiarity with *Azoth et Ignis*" (32).

Chapter Three is dedicated to the mature writings of Boehme, which deal with the SA of rebirth he developed in works composed from 1619 to 1622. Attention is first paid to *Signatura rerum* (*The Signatures of Things*, 1622), which contains extensive discussion based on the "three-way *lapis-Christus in nobis* analogy [and] Christ's incarnation — [where it is presented] as an alchemical process" (48). An original contribution of high value, Zuber is the first to posit this "in nobis" as the third component within SA, which was lacking in Khunrath, who tended to be binary with "Christus" and "Lapis." Zuber then focuses on chapter twenty-two of Boehme's *Aurora* (1612), titled "Concerning the metals in the earth," where Boehme described "the purification of gold in seven stages" (49) and used alchemical terminology such as *multiplicatio* to describe spiritual rebirth accompanied by a physically tangible transformation. As Zuber emphasizes, "To Boehme . . . this was not to be understood in a purely religious or metaphorical

© 2026 Corey Andrews.
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
Published by *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism.*

way . . . . It was something that happened literally and physically" (55). The remainder of the book is devoted to "how Boehme's readers — from Franckenberg to Atwood two centuries later — rediscovered, adapted, and transmitted SA" (68).

Chapter Four is concerned with the Silesian mystic Abraham von Franckenberg (1593–1652), who developed his own SA of rebirth in *Theophrastia Valentiniana*, itself ostensibly a discussion of the teachings of second-century Gnostic Valentinus. Typically remembered for his most famous work, *Raphael* (*The Healing Angel*), Zuber asserts that *Theophrastia Valentiniana* is "the most comprehensive statement of his SA" (94). Adding alchemical symbols in the margins of the text, Franckenberg "described Valentinus' rebirth as a process of tincturation and fixation" (75). In addition to indicating the presence of the "mystical identification with Christ" motif, Zuber also draws attention to an important difference between Boehme and Franckenberg's SA: "Whereas the theosopher's [Boehme's] lead of fallen humanity would appear wholly passive, Franckenberg argued that all human beings still carried within themselves some of the paradisiacal earth from which they were first created [before] the Fall" (78). Differences notwithstanding, Zuber shows how Boehme's SA played a significant role in shaping Franckenberg's. Zuber concludes the chapter by emphasizing the continuity of the *unio mystica* motif "pioneered by Boehme and refined by Franckenberg" (86).

Chapter Five is devoted to Franckenberg's "spiritual and philosophical son," Georg Lorenz Seidenbecher, mostly remembered for his millenarianism. Zuber first discusses accusations of heresy which Seidenbecher was embroiled in, being accused of being a "heretical millenarian and Rosicrucian sympathizer," before focusing on how Franckenberg "initiated his pupil into the mysteries of SA" (88). The most notable texts by Seidenbecher that bear the influence of Franckenberg's SA are *The Journey of Friedrich Gallus* (1648) and *Kabbalistic Regimen* (date not provided), the latter of which Zuber describes as "a veritable recipe book for the aspiring spiritual alchemist" (105).

Chapter Six concerns a friend of Seidenbecher's, Friedrich Breckling, a Danish pastor and author who shared Seidenbecher's millenarian convictions and whose

© 2026 Corey Andrews.
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
Published by *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism.*

SA is contained in two works: *Christus mysticus, sol et sal sapientiae* (*The Mystical Christ, sun and salt of wisdom*) and *Pseudosophia mundi* (*The Fake Wisdom of the World*), both published in 1682. These works, and Breckling's general SA project, were inspired by the first complete edition of Boehme's works, printed in the early 1680s. Much attention is paid in this chapter to the aforementioned "Boehme Edition" and who was involved in its production. While it is commonly assumed that Johann Georg Gichtel more or less "singlehandedly saw [it] through the press," Zuber argues that Gichtel being "solely responsible" is "highly unlikely" (110).

This discussion, while important, takes the reader a bit far afield from the primary concern of SA and more into the historiography of the printing of Boehme's works. Perhaps this reflects a difficulty in distilling a doctoral dissertation into a book: namely the focus sometimes drifts from the expressed thematic concern to scholarly historiographical digressions, which may come off to the more casual reader as dry or distant.

Concern for printing history over content is also extant in Chapter Seven, which explores how Breckling's SA was transmitted through contributions he made to works by the little-known sixteenth-century author Bartholomaeus Sclei. Intriguingly, Zuber shows how Breckling made acquaintance with laboratory practitioners in his last years, demonstrating an important overlap of "alchemies" in the period. Those responsible for the 1682 Boehme edition, particularly Gichtel, attracted Dionysius Andreas Freher of Nuremberg to Amsterdam in 1685.

Freher, "Boehme's apostle to the English," is the subject of Chapter Eight. Freher is remembered for fascinating images he made exploring Boehme's alchemical-theosophic worldview, and the chapter focuses on a section from his *Fundamenta mystica* (date not provided) titled "Process in the Philosophical Work," which Zuber argues "guarantees the continuity of SA from Boehme to Atwood" (159). Freher's Boehmistic and SA writings were received in the nineteenth century by the collector Christopher Walton and Thomas South, the father of Mary Anne South. Chapter Nine discusses how they all shared

© 2026 Corey Andrews.
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
Published by *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism.*

an interest in Boehme through letter correspondence while Mary Anne was composing her *Suggestive Inquiry*. Disagreements emerged between the parties due to Walton's preference for bookish mysticism, whereas the Souths' primary interest lay in Mesmerism (animal magnetism).

Zuber convincingly shows in these last chapters how the Souths saw alchemy as "similar but superior to Mesmerism." Importantly, the final chapter also discusses Isabelle de Steiger, Atwood's closest confidante and correspondent, who, in addition to reissuing her *Suggestive Inquiry*, wrote a study of alchemy and mysticism titled *On a Gold Basis: A Treatise on Mysticism,* published in 1907. The chapter further considers how the various approaches to SA of the period encountered, integrated, or contrasted with emerging discussions of biological evolution in the wake of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. For example, whereas De Steiger criticized Darwinian theory, A. E. Waite embraced it.

One may wonder whether the contents of Zuber's book indeed exhaustively address the entire SA tradition or just the particular stream running from Boehme to Atwood. The eighteenth-century manifestation of the Orden des Gold- und Rosenkreutz and the *Geheime figuren der Rosenkreuzer* documents, for example, with its diagrams featuring symbols of alchemical substances not always intended for laboratory use, seems to also fit within the SA tradition, but receives no attention in the book. These minor gaps notwithstanding, in sum, Zuber's book represents an essential contribution to the historiography of alchemy in general, and the spiritual tradition within alchemy in particular — a tradition spanning (at least) three hundred years, from Boehme through to Atwood.

Corey Andrews
c.d.andrews@uva.nl

© 2026 Corey Andrews.
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.
Published by *Correspondences: Journal for the Study of Esotericism.*