

J. Jeffrey Franklin. *Spirit Matters: Occult Beliefs, Alternative Religions, and the Crisis of Faith in Victorian Britain*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. xx + 264 pp. ISBN: 9781501715440. \$49.95/£38.00.

In his influential re-evaluation of the relationship between religion and modernity, philosopher Charles Taylor characterizes existing accounts of the secularization process as “subtraction stories.”¹ Such stories depict spiritual explanations of reality as superfluities that are “subtracted” or sloughed off as they jostle with nascent, usually scientific and rational, alternatives. One example is the Victorian “crisis of faith” purportedly triggered when the cultural supremacy of the Established Church was challenged by nineteenth-century forces of progress. Following correctives issued by Taylor and others, scholars have begun to reappraise the Victorian response as a religious diversification rather than decline. J. Jeffrey Franklin contributes to this effort with *Spirit Matters: Occult Beliefs, Alternative Religions, and the Crisis of Faith in Victorian Britain*, telling what perhaps may be called an “addition story.” He argues that, by incorporating elements from the materialist and imperial discourses with which it was buffeted, nineteenth-century Christianity prepared the way for “an unprecedented proliferation of new and often hybrid religions and spiritualities” (1).

Franklin reconstructs the vigour and complexity of religious debate in Britain between 1830 and 1920 with case studies drawn predominantly from literary fiction. Acknowledging that *Spirit Matters* has “only brushed the surface” of the religious implications of the “tremendous cultural and social upheaval” represented in this span (xvi, 18), he nonetheless justifies the book’s broad scope by deftly tracing connections among his examples that illustrate an evolution of spiritual syncretism across the century.

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 22.

The work opens by identifying three cultural strands that made it increasingly difficult for Victorians to define the boundary between orthodox Christianity and heterodoxy. Readings of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni* (1842) and *A Strange Story* (1862) demonstrate that scientific methods and scientifically inflected spirituality were often engaged to buttress Christian faith against the perceived threat of materialism. A chapter devoted to Anthony Trollope's Anglicanism and his novel *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (1870) emphasizes the variance in latitudinarianism among the factions that existed within British Protestantism and, more narrowly, within the Church of England. While some believers condoned doctrinal disparities in order to preserve the authority of a generalized Christianity, others branded rival denominations non-Christian, even pagan. Victorians' understanding of "orthodoxy" was also blurred as a result of increased exposure to what Franklin terms "world religions" (1). Noting the Buddhist influences in Matthew Arnold's efforts to revise and thus "save" modern Christianity (especially as expressed in *Literature and Dogma* [1873]), he suggests that the nineteenth-century development of comparative religious studies prompted a systematic reassessment of Christian tenets and values.

Further attention is paid to the ways in which Victorian faith was shaped by non-Western religions in the second section of *Spirit Matters*. Revisiting themes explored in his *The Lotus and the Lion* (2008), Franklin considers Christian responses to imperial encounters with Buddhism and its concepts of reincarnation and compassion. Here, he advances his argument with chapters analyzing the travelogue-novels *Forest Life of Ceylon* (1854) by William Knighton and *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870) by Anna Leonowens. In both works' evaluations of Buddhism, Franklin finds Christian doctrine to be represented in heterodox terms. Whereas Knighton modifies orthodox creeds to ensure Christianity compares favourably with Buddhism as an equivalently fair but less superstitious religion, Leonowens rejects the dogmatism typical of missionaries and instead emphasizes the similarities between Christianity and the Buddhism she deeply respected.

In the penultimate section, entitled “The Turn to Occultism,” Franklin’s focus is the intensification of religious debate in the fin de siècle. His claim that by the end of the nineteenth century “science had become only more authoritative . . . and institutional Christianity had become more embattled,” is evidenced with readings of two Gothic romances: H. Rider Haggard’s *Cleopatra* (1889) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) (142). With *Cleopatra*, Franklin discusses the conflicted responses to the developing science of Egyptology. Archaeological discoveries that seemed to corroborate biblical accounts of historical events were celebrated as vindications of Christian faith. However, those that revealed the pre-Christian monotheism of Akhenaten, for example, contradicted the understanding of God gleaned from scripture. *Dracula*, Franklin suggests, prompted a similarly ambivalent reaction insofar as it regards scientific and economic materialism as both advantageous and disadvantageous to Christian belief. The vampire, enacting an immortality and a pattern of consumption antithetical to Church doctrines, functioned simultaneously as a scapegoat for the century’s failing spirituality and a stimulant for the rehabilitation of enervated Christian faith.

Franklin’s work culminates in a discussion of the hybrid religions that developed out of the nineteenth-century ferment of spiritual, material, and imperial discourses. He unites the diverse examples of heterodox Christianity presented in earlier chapters by recognizing their influence on the formation of a “new occultism,” particularly in the self-consciously syncretic Theosophy designed and built by Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant (185). Combining emphasis on empirical epistemologies, Buddhist and ancient Egyptian beliefs, and evolutionary progression through spiritual states, they created what Franklin calls a “spiritual science” that succeeded in “dismantling the perennial Western dualism of spirit and matter, soul and body” (186). The effects of this dissolution are seen, he concludes, in the New Age spiritualities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Spirit Matters is a fascinating and original study of how Victorian efforts to reconcile an inherited Christianity with unprecedented cultural influences yielded

decidedly non-Christian “alternative religions.” Rather than valuably locating these positions on a continuum, however, Franklin insists on their disjunction, positioning his case studies as examples of “nonmainstream or heterodox religious and spiritual beliefs” distinct from the “orthodox Protestant Christianity, of which the large majority of British citizens would have claimed to be adherents” (xi). This interpretation is problematic for two reasons. First, the identification of heterodox Christianity with the “occult beliefs, alternative religions” of Franklin’s subtitle may confound readers expecting extended analysis of spiritualities more conventionally classified. Secondly, but more critically, “orthodox Protestant Christianity” is reduced to a cohesive and static set of doctrines impervious to materialist and imperial discourse. As Janet Oppenheim and Georgina Byrne have demonstrated, some quarters of the Church of England responded to the debates Franklin discusses by liberalizing their theology.² *Spirit Matters*, despite implying the possibility of a clear demarcation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, offers welcome insight into the evolution of Victorian Christianity – an area that, in comparison to more “alternative religions,” has suffered from recent scholarly neglect.

Jennifer Moriarty
j.moriarty@mail.bbk.ac.uk

2. Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Georgina Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism and the Church of England, 1850–1939* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2010).