

Hugh B. Urban. *Secrecy: Silence, Power, and Religion*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021. vii + 264. ISBN: 978-0226746647. \$30.00.

Secrecy is elusive by nature. Hugh Urban stresses this point in his new book titled *Secrecy: Silence, Power, and Religion*, but proceeds to undertake a substantive historical study of the topic nonetheless. He is not new to secrecy, as he himself tells the reader in the preface of the book: “Indeed, it is perhaps the only consistent theme that runs through my otherwise eclectic body of work, from my research on Hindu Tantra in northeast India to my study of the Church of Scientology in Cold War America, from my work on sexual magic in modern esotericism to my attempts to understand the dual obsessions with religion and concealment in American politics” (vii). Urban is used to dealing with disparate research interests, and it shows in this new publication. In *Secrecy*, he draws from familiar territory in the case of sexual magic and Scientology, but for instance also analyses the political movement called the Five-Percenters, something he has not done before.

While the contexts he incorporates in the book are separated across temporal, cultural, and political divides, Urban finds a way to locate their common element in the concept of secrecy. He sees secrecy as a set of strategies employed in different situations and for different goals. Urban underscores this theoretical dialectic between particularity and similarity in the introduction: “Although religious secrecy might appear in tremendous diversity of forms, certain common strategies and tactics recur across cultures and throughout historical periods. And I understand these not as universal ‘archetypes’ in a sort of Eliade-an or Jungian sense but as cross-cultural patterns that tend to crop up in many different social and historical locations” (16).

Even though secrecy might come across as an abstract social phenomenon, Urban is very cognisant of its material aspect as well. For him, secrecy is not just ingrained in social relations, but expressed in the physical world through

things like clothing and jewelry. Analysing outward manifestations of secrecy in general is the most important heuristic Urban follows throughout his book. He views this as the best solution to the ethical and epistemological “double bind” he perceives in researching religious secrecy. This double bind postulates that on the one hand it is always uncertain whether the secret in question has been entirely understood, while one is also confronted with the moral ambiguity of publically revealing said secret in the first place. Looking at material culture is a viable way to circumvent this problem somewhat.

Every chapter of the book highlights different characteristics that secrecy can possess according to Urban. The first chapter deals with Scottish Rite Freemasonry in late nineteenth-century America. A central concept in this chapter is “adorning possession,” which entails the idea—taken from Georg Simmel—that the social standing of a person or group can be enhanced by what is concealed from the uninitiated. In this specific case study, Urban looks at how the waning status of white men during the post-Civil War era was intimately entangled with the internal dynamics of these orders. Aside from the social history and the symbolism involved here, Urban also analyses the attire involved in the different degrees of the Masonic orders discussed. Chapter two focuses on the paradox of secrecy and advertisement of the possession of secrets in the Theosophical Society. It discusses Helena Blavatsky as embedded in the broader social context of the organisation. The rapidly diversifying religious or spiritual marketplace of the late nineteenth century is relevant to understand how both the social dynamic and the publications of the Society simultaneously “conceal and reveal” to remain a relevant movement among similar upcoming organisations such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

The third chapter revolves around the erotic characteristic of secrecy through an analysis of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexual magic, especially the case of Maria de Naglowska and her Brotherhood of the Golden Arrow. Here, Urban shows the relevance of concealment, transgressive ideas

and visual elements to this form of secrecy. The fourth chapter turns the reader to secrecy as a form of political resistance, and how this can be instrumental in the subversion and critique of dominant political structures. Urban takes the Five-Percenter, a mobilised branch of the Nation of Islam, as his case study. He shows how secrecy both helped to protect marginalised groups and create symbolic capital outside of the dominant culture of 1960s-80s America. Through its influence on 80s and 90s hip hop, however, these ideas poured into mainstream culture. This did not come without its own contradictions, as Urban points out. The fifth chapter deals with secrecy and religious violence, analysing how this is embedded in white supremacist groups in late twentieth-century America. It looks at the interaction between race and masculinity, and how this feeds into the discourse of the “white man falling,” mainly through the case study of the *Brüder Schweigen* (“Silent Brotherhood”), an organisation of fascist terrorists active in the 80s. Chapter six looks at how the use of secrecy can transform over time through the case study of Scientology. Urban looks at how changing social, material and political conditions shape the strategies of secrecy employed by this organisation.

Finally, in his conclusion, Urban reflects on the analytical value of religious secrecy, and how its theoretical matrix could be used with other case studies as well. In his view, religion by default thrives on secrecy: “By this I mean not simply the idea of the sacred as a great numinous mystery but the claim to an unseen source of supra-human authority, which is invisible, largely unknowable, but still deeply compelling, serving as an ultimate source of motivation for billions of people around the globe” (189-90). He then widens the scope to look at aspects of secrecy in the current social and political climate of the West. In this last analysis of the book, his main point is how the power of secrecy was once the monopoly position of religious movements and secret orders, but is now increasingly wielded by secular organisations such as the CIA, and more recently by corporations like Facebook and Google. Secrecy might be decentralised, but it

is certainly not democratised. Urban shows how personal privacy is increasingly under threat, while governments and corporations become more and more hidden from the public eye. He convincingly postulates that it is the pressing task of the critical historian of religion to analyse these processes as well.

Secrecy is an impressive book. Writing historical research is a daunting task by itself, but arguing for typological categories, where the scholar draws theoretical connections between material from different historical contexts, adds another level of difficulty. Comparative analysis has not always been favoured in the study of religion (or esotericism, for that matter), but Urban is able to use it in an elegant and convincing way. This monograph in itself is proof that comparativism can be a fruitful endeavour when undergirded by sound theory. A possible criticism one could mount against *Secrecy* is that many other historical contexts could have been chosen for the categorical chapters. Nevertheless, Urban himself incentivises his colleagues to do just that. The premise and conclusion of the book are an invitation to partake in this comparative research program of secrecy.

The general emphasis in *Secrecy* is on American case studies—notable exceptions being the chapters on the Theosophical Society and sexual magic—so it would indeed be interesting to see how the theoretical framework Urban offers would work out when casting a wider, global net. Another feat of *Secrecy* is the versatility of its source material. Aside from the overarching social analysis integrated in every chapter, Urban researches anything ranging from Masonic regalia to hip hop lyrics, even finding common threads (both theoretical *and* empirical) among them. All in all, *Secrecy* is a very original work, bound to remain relevant for a long time, both for academic and societal reasons.

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