

BOOK REVIEWS

Yves Mühlematter and Helmut Zander (eds), *Occult Roots of Religious Studies: On the Influence of Non-Hegemonic Currents on Academia around 1900* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021); xi, 283 pp.; ISBN: 978-3-11-066033-3; EPUB, Open Access.

This volume consists of an introductory chapter and eight case studies. In “The Occult Roots of Religious Studies: An Introduction” editors Yves Mühlematter and Helmut Zander posit that the early academic discipline of religious studies has strong connections to esotericism that have been neglected by scholars. A focus on the start of the twentieth century permits the analysis of links between Tibetology and Theosophy, and Kabbalah and the thought of Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem, for example, and reveals the somewhat arbitrary nature of disciplinary boundaries. Moreover, the separation of the “scientific” study of religion from theology is revealed to have concealed the relationship of esoteric currents to emergent religious studies. As religious studies was establishing itself, other disciplines including archaeology, anthropology and sociology were also forming, and many subdisciplines resulted. Finally, an important source of information re these currents is to consider the biographies of scholars, which often reveal occult or paranormal preoccupations. The first chapter is Helmut Zander’s “What is Esotericism? Does it Exist? How Can It be Understood?” which reviews the beginnings of esotericism in the academy with the work of the late Antoine Faivre (1934-2021), critiqued for being content dependent and also favorable to insider views. Von Stuckrad’s idea of esotericism as a discursive formation, taken further by Michael Bergunder who views the term as an “empty signifier” (p. 20), and Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s characterization of esotericism as “rejected knowledge” (p. 22) excluded from the academy, are examined and criticized. Interesting problems that arise from the separation of research *fields* and of research *practices* are canvassed and the current push toward global esotericism is outlined. Zander concludes that esotericism as an open concept is the best way forward.

The second case study, Marco Frenschkowski’s “The Science of Religion, Folklore Studies, and the Occult Field in Great Britain (1870-1914): Some Observations on Competition and Cain-Abel Conflicts,” covers early scholars of religion such as Friedrich Max Müller and Edward Burnett Tylor (who were not theologians), and Julius Wellhausen and William Robinson Smith (who had been but were kicked out on account of their “scientific” research methods and findings. The place of magic, spirits, and other “non-scientific” phenomena in the work of Tylor and James George Frazer (both sceptics) indicates the fascination rationalists felt for such things. Very different participant methods and beliefs are evidenced in the work of Charles Godfrey Leland, primarily a folklorist, and the more respectable Andrew Lang, a believer in “psychic phenomena” (p. 54). Lang’s biography is examined in detail to instructive ends; Frenschkowski concludes that recent surveys of the origin of Religious Studies have elided the links with esotericism to the impoverishment of our knowledge of the discipline. Daniel Cyranka’s “Magnetism, Spiritualism, and the Academy: The Case of Nees von Esenbeck, President of the Academy of the Natural Sciences Leopoldina (1818-1858)” takes the biographical approach to a figure this reviewer had not heard of, giving insights by comparing incidents and interests in his life to later flashpoints of the formation of Religious Studies, such as the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago in 1893.

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Boaz Huss's "Academic Study of Kabbalah and Occultist Kabbalah" is an elegantly written and persuasive study of the labyrinthine connections between academic research in Kabbalah and various esoteric practitioners of Kabbalah-influenced activities and disciplines. Jewish scholars were generally positively disposed to Kabbalah but not engaged with occult interpretations, and non-Jewish authors who were practically engaged were less informed and produced non-academic works. Among the former, Huss covers Gershom Scholem, Adolphe Franck, Moses Gaster, Joshua Abelson, and Ernst Müller. The next chapter is Julian Strube's "Tantra as Experimental Science in the Works of John Woodroffe." This is a study of a central figure (who also wrote as Arthur Avalon) in the formation of Tantra studies in the twentieth century, who merged Bengal perspectives with Western perspectives and spoke equally powerfully to academic and esoteric audiences. This is followed by Jens Schlieter's "A Common Core of Theosophy in Celtic Myth, Yoga, and Tibetan Buddhism: Walter Y. Evans-Wentz and the Comparative Study of Religion." Evans-Wentz, an American Theosophist, identified Fairyland as "a supernormal stat of consciousness" and asserted that the concept of rebirth was the "common core" of esoteric traditions (p. 161). Schlieter identifies Evans-Wentz as a neglected figure lacking an authoritative bibliography, and utilizes the biographical approach mentioned above. Evans-Wentz published a translation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, engaged with Native American spirituality, contributed to psychic research, and pioneered esoteric Celtic Studies.

The final chapters are Léo Bernard's "Paul Masson-Oursel (1882-1956): Inside and Outside the Academy" and Sabine Böhme's "The Ancient Processional Street of Babylon at the Pergamon Museum Berlin: Walter Andrae's Reconstruction and its Anthroposophical Background." The Indologist Masson-Oursel published in journals run by Julius Evola and Robert Linssen, an associate of Krishnamurti. Bernard traces his relationships with *René Guénon and the Traditionalists, the Ramakrishna Order, and Theosophy, among other groups*. Böhme's contribution is an analysis of the presentation of archaeological material to the public by Walter Andrae, a distinguished Near Eastern archaeologist and member of the Christian Community, a church that is part of Anthroposophy, founded by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), who had been head of the Theosophical Society in Germany, in 1912. As one who has been dazzled by the Ishtar Gate and the glorious antiquities held by the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, this fascinating excursion into how esoteric ideas influenced the curation of material culture is a highlight of the volume. After the chapters a selection of short biographies of relevant people from the period under review is provided by various authors.

This edited volume is methodologically interesting and makes an important contribution to the history of the disciplines of Religious Studies and Esoteric Studies (a term that is not generally used, but I think is more neutral than either Western Esotericism or (Global or any other) Esotericism. It will be of interest to scholars and students of Religious Studies in general as well as those in the field of Esotericism. The standard of the contributions is high, and the people and cultural trends discussed are both entertaining and relevant. I recommend it warmly to libraries and scholars alike, and congratulated De Gruyter on making it open access.

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Steven J. Sutcliffe and Carole M. Cusack (eds), *The Problem of Invented Religions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); ISBN 9781138099036; £42.99.

Within the context of religious studies more and more attention has been paid recently to alternative forms of spirituality which are rooted in pop culture. The volume *The Problem of Invented Religions* investigates the theoretical concept of invented religions proposed by Carole M. Cusack in her *Invented Religions. Imagination, Fiction and Faith* (Ashgate, 2010) and is located on the intellectual route which leads to *Fiction, Invention and Hyper-reality*, which she edited with Pavol Kosnáč in the *Routledge Inform Series on Minority Religions and Spiritual Movements* (2017).

This book is a republished special issue of the journal *Culture and Religion* (Vol. 14, Issue 4, 2013) so it is a miscellany of contributions by different authors, who try to expand the concept examining it from a range of perspectives.

The essay by Cusack proposes to link the theoretical framework of invention to Robert N. Bellah's studies on play "which features in language, art, myth [...] is crucial to the human experience of what Bellah calls unitive events" (p. 12), while Danielle Lee Kirby demonstrates how various groups (The Church of SubGenius, Jedism, and Sithism) develop relationships with the fictional texts in their manifold functions (catalyst, proof, reality, practice, and so on). Essi Mäkelä and Johanna Petsche connect "invented religions" to Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity" in an article on Discordianism, a parody religion dedicated to the worship of Eris, the goddess of discord; while Steven Sutcliffe rereads from an historical perspective the heritage of the Rosicrucian manifestos (1614-16) on the Rosicrucian Order, Crotona Fellowship (ROCF).

However, not every essay agrees positively on the validity of using the term "invented religions". The volume is constituted in part by critical contributions, as in the case of Markus Altena Davidsen, who offers a proposal to replace "invented religions" with the term "fiction-based religions". Paul-Francois Tremlett believes that the term "invention" brings an excessive concentration on texts, forgetting that religions are "a product of a specific kind of society and particular types of social relationships" (p. 116). In the last article, Teemu Taira similarly challenges the term, arguing that the invented status is only one of the many criteria to consider in terms of the idea of religion as a whole.

This collection of essays supplies the scholar, as well as the uninitiated student, fruitful insights in the general concept of "religion" and in what constitutes it, both in terms of belief and in practice.

Due to the clarity of presentation and the simple structure of the volume (helped by the introductions and conclusions to each chapter, reflecting their origin as journal articles) I would recommend it to undergraduate students and general readers interested in the significance of spirituality for contemporary human beings and the importance of cultures and religions beyond the Abrahamic and World Religions, as well as to scholarly researchers.

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***Solitary Pagans: Contemporary Witches, Wiccans & Others Who Practice Alone.* Helen A. Berger, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2019, 208 pages, ISBN: 978-1-64336-008-9 Hardcover, \$34.99.**

Contemporary Paganism is a religion which attracted much attention during the 1990s and 2000s after the unprecedented success of television series, e.g. the 'Charmed' (1998), related particularly to young witches. This has led to a number of publications focusing not only on witches but on other forms of contemporary Paganism as well, like heathens, druids, wiccans, etc. (York, 1995; Pike, 2001). This book focuses on those contemporary Pagans who mainly practice alone without belonging to a Pagan group and maintain few contacts and social bonds with other Pagans. It is the outcome of a large-scale worldwide survey about Paganism the author conducted together with J.R. Lewis (The Pagan Census Revisited, 2009-2010) as a follow-up of her previous survey (The Pagan Census). The author, Helen Berger is one of the most well-known scholars in the broader field of Paganism, who has been conducting both quantitative and qualitative research during the last decades (Berger, 1999; Berger and Douglas, 2007).

The book elaborates on survey data mainly from the United States, but it also includes comparative data from the United Kingdom and Australia. At the same time although the book basically deals with solitary pagans it makes stimulating comparisons with group practitioners as well and this is a value-added element of the analysis. The main themes the book presents and discusses relate to pagan practices (individual or group ones) (chapters 2 and 3), their spiritual practices (chapter 4) and their social and political engagement and disengagement (chapter 5). The author's main concern through this book is to explore which demographic groups practice alone and how being solitary influences their spiritual practice, interconnection with others and political commitments. Furthermore, through this book she contributes to the growing debate about whether or not the new metaphysicals (Bender, 2010) create a type of narcissism, which results in their social and political disengagement (pp. 19-20).

The author argues that solitary practitioners are not socially isolated, although they tend to have fewer contacts with other contemporary Pagans compared to those who are members of a community. However, it comes out that even solitary Pagans tend to be much more politically active than the average Americans and from this perspective contemporary Paganism provides a good case study of the intersection of religious individualism, social engagement and political activism (p. 2). This is illustrated by the data Berger provides with regard to contemporary Pagans' social and political engagement. Despite the fact that contemporary Pagans communicate primarily via the Internet and they construct their identity around significant publications by key-Pagan figures, this does not mean that they do not interact with others or that they are bowling alone according to Putnam's famous book (2001). In her effort to juxtapose Putnam's argument, Berger explicitly shows that what one means by socio-political disengagement should be carefully approached and defined and that solitary Pagans are far from this kind of isolation. On the debate about whether spiritual or religious isolation results in individuals becoming apolitical or that they move from emancipatory to lifestyle politics she argues that neither is correct. Although group practitioners are indeed more politically active, solitary ones are not withdrawn from political action (p. 154).