

## REVIEWS

LUKAS POKORNY, FRANZ WINTER, EDS. *The Occult Nineteenth Century: Roots, Developments, and Impact on the Modern World*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. Pp. 442.

Recent years have seen a surge in scholarly monographs and edited volumes on the occult and broader esoteric topics, a clear indication of both growing interest in the field and expanding recognition of the continuing role these currents play in shaping modern societies and cultures around the world. Despite the relative newness of the academic study of Western esotericism, which is conventionally believed to have entered mainstream academic discourse with Antoine Faivre's (1934–2021) groundbreaking work *L'ésotérisme* (1992), the field has achieved impressive theoretical and methodological sophistication in the span of a mere four decades. The present volume, *The Occult Nineteenth Century: Roots, Developments, and Impact on the Modern World*, is an excellent example of the theoretical depth, interdisciplinary breadth, and topical variety characteristic of the field today, bringing together some of the biggest names and most innovative thinkers in the field of esoteric studies.

The editors of the volume, Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter, have accomplished a formidable task, masterfully combining seventeen chapters by well-established and up-and-coming scholars of esotericism into a multifaceted yet coherent collection celebrating the pioneering work of Karl Baier, Associate Professor Emeritus at the University of Vienna. Unfortunately, two groundbreaking works by Baier, often referenced by the contributors, *Yoga auf dem Weg nach Westen. Beiträge zur Rezeptionsgeschichte* (1998) (*Yoga on the Way to the West. Contributions to the History of Reception*) and *Meditation und Moderne: Zur Genese eines Kernbereichs moderner Spiritualität in der Wechselwirkung zwischen Westeuropa, Nordamerika und Asien* (2008) (*Meditation and Modernity: On the Genesis of a Core Area of Modern Spirituality in the Interaction between Western Europe, North America, and Asia*) are yet to be translated into English.

It is beyond doubt that this volume will be of great interest both to scholars of alternative spiritualities and to a wider audience of non-specialists who want to gain a broader understanding of various occult movements and their

mutual entanglements. As the editors establish in the introductory note, the point of departure for the volume is the “phenomenon of *mesmerism* as a highly influential but overall frequently neglected tradition, especially with a view to the formation of modern occultism” (2). Another understudied topic addressed in the volume is the existence of “close links between the mesmeric-occult traditions and modern yoga” (3), which has started to garner scholarly interest only within the past decade. The “triad of mesmerism, occultism, and yoga” (3) is presented in the context of ongoing debates around the problematic terms, “Eastern” and “Western” esotericism, which are ultimately shown to be part of the same continuum, rather than opposites. Comparative and interdisciplinary, the volume features a variety of methodological approaches and genres, from initial descriptive forays into understudied topics and biographical sketches of lesser-known occultists, to case studies of major occult trajectories in temporal perspective, generally from the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries.

The impressive diversity of topics and methodological approaches presented in this *Festschrift* must have posed an organizational challenge to the editors. The order of the articles is perhaps the only weakness of this volume. Instead of four clusters entitled “Mesmerism,” “Occultism in America and Europe,” “Occultism in Global Perspective,” and “Occultism and Modern Yoga,” the editors could have considered grouping the articles under “Mesmerism in Europe,” “Theosophical Currents,” “Spiritualist Appropriations,” and “Modern Yoga and the Occult,” or, alternatively, they could have clustered them under the rubrics “Personalities,” “Movements,” “Concepts,” and “Practices.” Nevertheless, the star-studded cast of contributors and the richness of material included in the book more than make up for organizational challenges.

The first section opens with a chapter by one of the founders of the field of Western Esotericism, Wouter Hanegraaff. “Carl August von Eschenmayer and the Somnambulant Soul” is a fascinating insight into the life and works of the German philosopher whose system was “an impressive product of speculative imagination” and a prime example of “rejected knowledge” (Hanegraaff 2012) (31). Eschenmayer’s belief that European culture, and particularly Christianity, were being destroyed by “the satanic forces of modernisation and extreme rationalism,” together with his increasing interest in mesmeric somnambulism and other “irrational” subjects, were ridiculed by his rationalist critics (29), leading to his professional ostracization.

Maren Sziede’s chapter on “Priest-Doctors and Magnetisers” echoes the themes of institutional acceptance or rejection of mesmeric practices, this time at the intersection of religion and healthcare in the work of Karl Joseph

Hieronymus Windischmann (1775–1839), a professor of philosophy at the University of Bonn and a “pioneer of a Catholic, *Naturphilosophically* based medicine” (45). Windischmann believed in “ecclesiastical performances as highly effective remedies, such as prayers, the various sacraments, or exorcist rites” (40) and considered illness a moral evil; therefore, only religious practices could truly heal.

John Patrick Deveney’s informative chapter on Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie’s techniques of sexual regeneration appears later in the volume, but deals with similar issues of the influence of esoteric practices on the human mind and body, with a potential for healing and spiritual progress. He argues that the teachings about sexual energy as the vital force that facilitates possible psychic “unfoldment,” spiritual progress, and the creation of a conscious individuality was an “open secret” of the 1890s, known to all, but rarely publicly discussed. The various practices were collectively called “regeneration,” as opposed to “generation” (procreation), and most commonly consisted of “retention of the sexual energy *combined with* some method or practice to draw up, store, and transmute what was retained” (179), promising practitioners both physical and spiritual attainments.

The influence of mesmerism on theories and practices in early psychology and psychotherapy is the topic of Júlia Gyimesi’s chapter “Animal Magnetism and Its Psychological Implications in Hungary.” Gyimesi argues that the discovery of magnetic somnambulism by one of Mesmer’s followers, Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825), led to Freud’s theorizing of double consciousness. The article places the development of magnetism in Hungary in the wider European context and foregrounds the conversation within Hungary among different esoteric, religious, and medical practitioners. One of the key mesmerists, Count Ferenc Szapáry (1804–1875), believed that anyone could magnetize, and no special ability was needed to practice this modality, which was a departure from the teachings of Mesmer and paved the way for many disciples in Hungary (70).

The concluding article in this section also focuses on a lesser-known individual who served as a conduit for the transmission of foreign spiritual and physical practices in their home country. Marlis Lami writes about the author of the first Polish-language yoga handbook, Wincenty Lutosławski, as a key disseminator of yoga in Poland in the early twentieth century. The manual was the result of Lutosławski’s desire to heal his own ailments, which led him to undertake an extensive study of yoga-related sources at the British Library. His knowledge about yoga was theoretical, and in his universalist conviction of yoga’s compatibility with Christianity, Lutosławski insisted that Christ was one of the teachers in his healing journey.

Dominic S. Zoehrer's chapter "From *Fluidum* to *Prāṇa*: Reading Mesmerism Through Orientalist Lenses" takes the readers beyond the confines of Europe and uncovers attempts by European Orientalists to prove that the concepts of mesmeric *fluidum* and *prāṇa* are the same. Like Karl Baier, Zoehrer argues that modern yoga and meditation movements were closely intertwined with mesmeric ideas and were rooted in a process of combining mesmeric elements with notions of the Indian traditions, which unfolded within both the Western and Eastern cultic milieus (88). Zoehrer traces the evolution of these concepts in the writings of the French orientalist Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805), the aforementioned Windischmann, Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891) and other Theosophists, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), Theodor Reuß (1855–1923), and Karl Kellner (1851–1905). "Mesmeric principles and techniques," he argues, "thus persist in transmuted shapes, that is, as transcultural products that were forged by Western and Indian authors alike" (108).

Similarly, the next chapter, Jens Schlieter's "Total Recall: The 'Panoramic Life Review' Near Death as Proof of the Soul's Timeless Self-Presence in Western Esotericism of the Nineteenth Century," focuses mainly on the emergence of another "transcultural product"—"panoramic life review"—in the Theosophical writings of Emma Hardinge Britten (1823–1899), Blavatsky, and Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921). Despite differences in these Theosophical writers' specific interpretations of the phenomenon, all three developed their vision in conversation with Buddhist thought. Zoehler's chapter dovetails nicely with Magdalena Kraler's piece "Tracing Vivekananda's *Prāṇa* and *Ākāśā*: The *Yogavāsiṣṭha* and Rama Prasad's Occult Science of Breath" at the end of the segment. Kraler's insightful inquiry elaborates on Vivekananda's theory of *prāṇa* as a healing agent not unlike mesmeric *fluidum*, which seems to echo the Theosophical interpretation, despite Vivekananda's disdain for the Theosophical Society and its founders.

Inevitably, Theosophical thinkers and their ideas loom large, not only in the articles mentioned above, but in many other chapters. In his fascinating exploration of mainstream and alternative linguistics, one of the preeminent scholars of Theosophy, Olav Hammer, sheds light on the understudied topic of occult linguistics. To him occult linguistics, unlike its mainstream counterpart, uses "the belief that clairvoyant investigation can uncover the truth about primeval speech" (143–44). To illustrate his argument, Hammer brings together Blavatsky's belief that Sanskrit was the closest descendant of Atlantean languages, Guido von List's (1848–1919) theory of Ario-Germanic Ur-language, which allegedly originated in Atlantis (152), and Rudolf

Steiner's Eurythmy, a system of movement that purported to translate vowels and consonants into motion (154).

Marco Pasi, a scholar famous for his exploration of the esoteric in art, writes about the phenomenon of "Esoteric Posthumousness," which he defines as "the inability or unwillingness to have one's [artistic] work promoted and recognised during one's life, which projects the work into a temporal limbo [of obscurity] that may last decades or even forever" (161). Pasi presents a comparative analysis of the work of three female esoteric artists, Georgiana Houghton (1814–1884), Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), and Emma Kunz (1892–1963), arguing that esoteric posthumousness usually stems from the artist's conviction that the world is unprepared for their sacred message, from the lack of interest in any material gain from their spiritual art, or from the instructions of their spiritual teacher or other authority (165).

Of course, many esoteric artists were eager to spread their message through art, often in hopes of uplifting their contemporaries and saving humanity. One such artist, writer, and teacher, Benjamin Creme (1922–2016) is the subject of Lukas Pokorny's article. Pokorny argues that Creme's unique system of millenarianism was inspired by the Buddhist concept of Maitreya and its Theosophical interpretations, including those of the Roerichs and Baileys. But Creme took it further and reinterpreted Maitreya in the context of global interest in UFOs and extraterrestrial civilizations. Pokorny's analysis of Creme's millenarian system helps us understand the broader mechanism of the emergence and formation of NRM theologies by revealing the interplay of ideological continuities and ruptures.

The reworking of a tradition in the teachings of another contemporary spiritual leader is the focus of Almut-Barbara Renger's chapter "Re-Imagining an Ancient Greek Philosopher: The Pythagorean Musings of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho)." A controversial philosopher and spiritual leader from India, Rajneesh (1931–1990) founded the psycho-religious movement, Neo-Sannyas International, in 1970 and gained notoriety in the United States in the 1980s, after establishing a community of his devotees in Oregon. Leaving related controversies outside of the scope of her article, Renger focuses instead on Rajneesh's strategies of self-legitimization. A philosopher by training, Rajneesh presented himself to his followers as a new Pythagoras and an embodiment of a particular form of "West-Eastern encounter and wisdom" (289). In Osho's eyes, Pythagoras was "the fountainhead, the source," and even the "father" of all "mysticism in the West" (299), and by arguing that he is an incarnation of the great teacher of antiquity, Rajneesh sought to legitimize his own authority as a spiritual teacher.

The discussion of the interplay among esoteric lineages and religious traditions comes to the fore in Franz Winter's chapter, "A Study into a Trans-religious Quest for the Ultimate Truth: Indian, Muslim, and European Interpretations of the Upanishads." The author performs textual analysis with a philological and historical focus in order to avoid "the pitfall of perennialism," which he sees as common within the Western esoteric tradition (248). Importantly, Winter provides historical background for the Upanishads' reception in Mughal India (1526–1857) and in early modern Europe, especially in France, thus contributing to our understanding of how the notion of India as a cradle of ancient wisdom came to be.

While Winter foregrounds the intricate fate of a sacred text, Mriganka Mukhopadhyay's chapter, "Occult's First Foot Soldier in Bengal: Peary Chand Mitra and the Early Theosophical Movement," focuses on the role of the individual in the "transcultural encounters in the entangled history of occultism." Mukhopadhyay argues that as a renowned spiritualist and the first Bengali Theosophist, Mitra (1814–1883) took on a crucial role in turning a Western occult movement, Theosophy, into a global player. Mitra's interest in mesmerism and his active participation in a transnational spiritualist network, prior to embracing Theosophy, was crucial to the success of the Theosophical Society in India. However, Mitra wasn't a "typical" Theosophist: Mukhopadhyay argues that Mitra's focus on the soul and the development of spiritual power indicates that his understanding of occultism and Theosophy was mainly based on his practice of spiritualism and yoga.

Keith Cantú's chapter "Sri Sabhapati Swami: The Forgotten Yogi of Western Esotericism" explores the role of the Tamil Sabhapati (c. 1828–1923/4) in the context of Theosophical and Thelemic engagement with South Asian yogic traditions (364). Importantly, Cantú invites his readers to depart from Edward Said's view of postcoloniality in favor of a "more nuanced examination of religious history during the colonial period" (350), exemplified in the works of Saree Makdisi. Cantú's groundbreaking project has now been published as a book by Oxford University Press.

Talking about the issues of spirituality in the "martial arts milieu" in Sweden, Per Faxneld addresses transcultural entanglements and hybridity and argues that practitioners of martial arts often navigate a complex "field of tension" between religiosity and secularity. Addressing issues of cultural hybridity, or entanglement, produced by the introduction of Eastern ideas into a Western cultural context, Faxneld maintains that this is a bidirectional phenomenon, in which the East equally borrowed from the West, a fact that the practitioners of martial arts often downplay. One would hope that this article would also grow into a book-length project.

Hans Gerald Hödl's chapter "African and Amerindian Spirits: A Note on the Influence of Nineteenth-Century Spiritism and Spiritualism on Afro- and African-American Religions" stands somewhat apart thematically from the rest of the contributions, but does illustrate the wide geographical span of transcultural occultism. Echoing discussion of healing aspects of mesmerism in the beginning of the volume, Hödl shows the popularity of Kardecian Spiritism in its religio-therapeutic dimension in Brazil, Cuba, and Puerto Rico (329), and, turning to Louisiana and its religious traditions, draws parallels between Latin American Spiritist currents and the spiritual milieu led by powerful female practitioners like "Voodoo Queen" Marie Laveau and Mother Leafy Anderson.

Organizational challenges notwithstanding, this is an outstanding volume that showcases some of the most innovative and creative research in the field.

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ÉVA PÓCS, BEA VIDACS, EDS. *Faith, Doubt and Knowledge in Religious Thinking*. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2020. Pp. 409.

This collection contains one of the most attention-grabbing chapter titles that I have read in a long time: "I was Angry with the Angels for F\*cking Me Over." Beyond mere shock value, the subtitle of that piece helps to give some sense of the range of religions and religious movements covered in the volume as a whole: "Angel-Cult and UFO-Religion in Hungary." Indeed, the volume ends with several chapters addressing present-day new religious movements, including those involving beliefs about angels and extraterrestrials (and angels as extraterrestrials), a fundamentalist Christian prophetic movement, and Hare Krishnas in Hungary. Yet the volume begins, chronologically, in Western antiquity, with chapters focusing on Greek philosophy and different miracle narratives in both pagan and early Christian texts. In between are chapters addressing, among other things, medieval stigmata, exorcism during the Enlightenment, Sami cultural practices in modern Scandinavia, and the interactions of different religious groups in war-torn northern Iraq.

Holding all this together is the central issue of doubt, but even that point of focus is broadly construed. In their short introduction, the editors, Pócs and Vidacs, make the case that religious doubt is "a notoriously complex topic" and "difficult to pin down" (8). Never is religious doubt simply the opposite of faith or the absence of belief. In this approach they, and the entire