

Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (eds.)

Occultism in a Global Perspective. Durham: Acumen Publishing Ltd., 2013. x + 258 pp. ISBN 9781844657162 (hbk.)

This is an important and timely volume. For some time now, the study of esotericism has shed the tendencies of an older generation towards disciplinary isolationism, emphasizing instead the fruitful lines of research that arise from situating the field as an integral part of a general history of religion and culture. *Occultism in a Global Perspective* is part of this trend, and speaks to two important aspects of it. First, there is a need to break away from the Eurocentrism that characterizes much research in this area; as Michael Bergunder recently argued, conceptualizing esotericism not as “western” but rather in terms of a global history approach opens new vistas, valuable also to the general history of religion (Bergunder 2014). Second, esotericism must be made available for the comparative enterprise that is so important for the religious studies discipline (Asprem 2014). The primary value of this book is that it brings full attention to a number of often overlooked case studies from a diverse array of geographical and cultural contexts.

One tricky issue that surfaces on the very first page of Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic’s introduction to the volume is how “occultism” is to be conceptualized in the first place. What is “occultism,” and what does it mean to take a global view of “it”? The editors find themselves in a bit of a dilemma here, for the existing scholarship on occultism is far from unified. Some indecisiveness shines through in the working definition that the editors provide. To begin with, Bogdan and Djurdjevic write that occultism is a “branch of human activity,” distinguishable for its “orientation towards hidden aspects of reality, those that are held to be commonly inaccessible to ordinary senses; an activity that simultaneously shares a certain similarity with both science and religion but cannot be reduced to either of them” (p. 1). This circumscription would enable a picture of occultism as a general feature of human activity, something that potentially can be found in any culture and thus properly constitute an object for comparative research. However, further down the page this view is dismissed:

[T]he present volume focus[es] on occultism as a form of theory and practice that assumed its distinctive form in mid-[nineteenth] century France and became widely popular through writings of Alphonse Louis Constant, better known as Éliphas Lévi (1810–75), and that subsequently found its most influential organizational paradigm... in the shape of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn towards the end of that same century. (p. 1)

Far from universal, occultism is understood as a very specific cultural formation originating in post-revolutionary France. What the book studies, then, is the various “migrations” of this particular cultural product throughout the world since the nineteenth century.

The selection of articles and the scope of the volume as a whole testify, for the most part, to this strictly historical conception. This is a volume not about occultism as a cross-cultural type, with comparative studies of, e.g., occult sciences, secret societies, or initiations across cultures and regions; rather, it is a collection of surveys that trace originally European occult movements into disparate national contexts. This is valuable in itself. The “global” in the volume’s title should best be understood as one of the dimensions in a process of *modernization* that specifically “Western” esotericism has undergone — which includes a response to secularization, disenchantment, and globalization in the wake of the Enlightenment, but increasingly through the age of imperialism and the phases of decolonialization and post-colonialism that followed in the twentieth century.

A result is that the scope of articles is not quite as global as the title suggests. Of eleven chapters, four focus on European countries, two focus on Latin American contexts, while currents and figures in Australia, India, Japan, and the Ottoman Empire all figure in one chapter each. Reflection on the local factors that are involved in shaping belief and practice is a major advantage of comparative studies in general, and one in which at least some of the papers in this collection engage. Djurdjevic’s contribution on Yugoslavian occultism does, for example, try to explain some trends by reference to the unique political tensions in the country’s history. Francesco Baroni discusses the case of a theurgical magical system emerging against the background of Italian Roman Catholicism mixed with pre-existing Italian esoteric movements that were of only limited influence outside the country. Bogdan calls attention to the appropriation of Aleister Crowley’s teachings in the context of the Indian Holy Order of Krishna, reflecting also on the global publishing networks of occultism emerging in the twentieth century.

Other chapters emphasize the global transfers that characterize post-war occultism in particular. PierLuigi Zoccatelli’s article on the influential (especially in the Latin American sphere) but equally under-studied “Gnostic movement” of the Columbian occultist Samael Aun Weor draws attention to the weaving together of a range of occult doctrines, from Gurdjieff’s already syncretic teachings to Rosicrucian currents and Western tantra. It also provides a number of intriguing clues for further comparative work, especially considering the observation that practices for spiritual development involving “sexual energies” constitute “a sort of ‘signature’ of a far greater number of modern

and contemporary esoteric and occult groups” (p. 149). Indeed, the centrality of this topos is underlined by two other articles that find sexual teachings and practices in a German context (Hakl on *Fraternitas Saturni*) and an Indo-English context (Bogdan on the Holy Order of Krishna), respectively. Arthur Versluis’ chapter on the emergence of “esoteric Hitlerism” in the works of the Greek-French Nazi and spiritual writer Savitri Devi and the Chilean diplomat Miguel Serrano similarly brings attention to a bizarre case of global mythmaking that weaves together elements lifted from Aryan mythology, Nazi survival myths, Theosophy, perennialist readings of the Tibetan Kalachakra tantra, UFO beliefs, and so on and so forth.

Two highlights of the collection are Kennet Granholm’s theoretical chapter on the problems in defining “the West,” and Thierry Zarcone’s contribution on esotericism in the Islamic context of the Ottoman Empire. Granholm’s contribution not only shows the conceptual fuzziness of “the West” due to its simultaneous construction along geographical, political, and cultural dimensions, but also how the concept has always been bound up with shifting geopolitical realities. The current notion is thus largely coextensive with the strategic military situation as defined by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization — which is hardly surprising, but seems a rather arbitrary starting point for defining the boundaries of a historical research program. Instead, Granholm calls for a focus on more locally grounded identities. Noting also that a positive view of “the East” has been so formatively influential in esoteric discourses — and not only in modern times, but all the way back to the “Platonic orientalism” of late antiquity — we are also invited to see that “esotericism” is one of those contexts in which the very construction of the distinction between “West” and “East” itself has been at stake.

Finally, Zarcone’s paper is perhaps the most conceptually stimulating contribution in this volume, as it outlines (not without its problems, to be sure) analogues of “esotericism” in the Islamic sphere, in addition to noting the reception of “Western” occult ideas and movements in these contexts. Zarcone identifies the long tradition, within both Sunni and (especially) Shia currents, of distinguishing between the outer (*zahir*) and the hidden (*batin*) meanings of the Qur’an, but also by extension of the world itself. These currents, which Zarcone demonstrates have important structural similarities in doctrine, practice, and organizational and didactic form to “Western” esotericism (following here, in broad strokes, Antoine Faivre’s definition), also share an origin in Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and other philosophical currents of late antiquity. Moreover, Zarcone shows how these currents (including some Sufi sects but, more importantly, currents of Ismailism, Batinism, Alevism, and even Yazidism) were reconceptualized and interpreted in light of occultist

movements such as mesmerism, Theosophy, and Martinism during the final decades of the Ottoman Empire. Slightly impressionistic in style — and unfortunately suffering from a lack of language editing (a more pervasive problem with the volume, but nowhere as frustrating as in this particular piece) — Zarcone's chapter nevertheless points out a wealth of extremely interesting connections, transfers, analogies and genealogical links that provide clues for very promising future research should more scholars pick up on them. It also comes with an extensive bibliography that brings attention to little-known Turkish sources on occultism, telepathy, Freemasonry, animal magnetism, etc.

The editors were well aware that their collection uncovers only the “tip of the iceberg,” constituting a stepping-stone for future research rather than a work with claim to completeness (p. 14). It would, however, have been nice to see a discussion precisely of the omissions, and what sort of directions future research should take. In a geographical sense at least, the most striking omissions are the entire African continent as well as the esoterically productive North American continent and the vast frontier that is Russia. With so much interesting new work these days on things like African-American esotericism (Finley, Guillory, and Page 2015) and esotericism in Russia and Eastern Europe (Menzel, Hagemeister, and Rosenthal 2012), we can only hope that more scholars will take up the ambitions that Bogdan and Djurdjevic have now boldly and productively placed on the agenda with this solid first step toward a global perspective on modern esotericism.

References

- Asprem, Egil. 2014. “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism.” *Correspondences* 2(1):1–33.
- Bergunder, Michael. 2014. “Experiments with Theosophical Truth: Gandhi, Esotericism, and Global Religious History.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82(2):398–426.
- Finley, Stephen C., Margarita Simon Guillory, and Hugh R. Page, Jr. (eds.). 2015. *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience*. Leiden: Brill.
- Menzel, Birgit, Michael Hagemeister, and Bernice Rosenthal (eds.). 2012. *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions*. Munich and Berlin: Verlag Otto Sagner.

Egil Asprem

University of California, Santa Barbara