DeConick, April D. (ed.), *Religion: Secret Religion*. Macmillan Reference USA, 2016. Pp. xxxviii, 419. ISBN 9780028663500 $179 hardcover.

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This reference volume containing twenty-four essays is part of the larger Macmillan series in religion. The book takes the initiative to bring together under the broad category and heading of "secret religion" three fields of study, gnosticism, esotericism, and mysticism, that have been the main topics of a series of international conferences, the first of which took place at Rice University in 2010 and resulted in the publication of a conference volume, *Histories of the Hidden God: Concealment and Revelation in Western Gnostic, Esoteric, and Mystical* Traditions (Acumen, 2013). That conference and its attendant publication have constituted something of a rallying cry for scholars of these fields to share their work and focus with one another, even though their fields have often led to isolation, with gnosticism scholars only talking to gnosticism scholars, mysticism scholars only talking to mysticism scholars, and esotericism scholars largely finding themselves intellectually homeless. The closing essay by Kocku von Stuckrad in *Histories of the Hidden God* with its talk of entangling discourses is a helpful corrective to this tendency and should be read alongside the present volume. The present work under review, *Religion: Secret Religion*, could best be thought of as a prolegomenon for students in this field, especially those students just starting out in the study of religion. It provides a readable and engaging survey of a variety of views on the history and interactions of those religious traditions which continue to capture the imagination, but which often fail to receive the same degree of professional attention as their exoteric counterparts.

Structure, Key Terms and Theoretical and Historical Positioning

One of the major strengths of the volume is in its comparison-driven structure. The book is divided into three major sections: Gnosticism, Esotericism, and Mysticism. Each of these sections in turn is divided into eight essays written by some of the top names in their respective fields. The eight essays in each section follow the same pattern. The first three essays of each section cover the emergence, major trends, and current disputes of each field. The following eight essays cover the major historical figures, textual traditions, typical beliefs, social communities, and ritual practices of practitioners of each of the three main categories of study. This structure permits easy comparison of both the disciplinary problems faced in each of the fields as well as their special thematic features.

As the introductory chapters to each section are quick to remind us, the definitions of the principle foci of this book are unstable and historically contingent. Those well read in these fields will be familiar with these arguments. For experienced researchers in the field, the chief value of this volume is the degree to which it brings together the variety of scholarly perspectives and thereby provides a platform for discussing the main point of commonality between these various traditions, namely how they deal with the dialectic of concealment and revelation at the textual and sociological levels. The essays showcase the values of historical deconstruction, where we can assert with von Stuckrad (171-182) and Williams (3-22) that the esoteric and the gnostic have historically been ad hoc categories for bodies of knowledge constructed out of a discourse that depends on the exclusionary practices in the categorization of knowledge, but other contributions, such as the introduction by DeConick (xv-xxxviii) and the psychological ruminations by Kripal (302-304, 309-311) and Calaway (284-285), encourage us to consider the possibility of universal human behaviors and attitudes toward secrecy, or deep cognitive processes that have motivated the apparently contingent terminology.

DeConick's opening essay defines the main terms of gnosticism, esotericism, and mysticism as broadly as possible. Gnosticism is for her an ancient religion that promised initiatory experiences to paying clients. Esotericism can be broadly defined as the belief in a mutual correspondence between macrocosm (universe) and microcosm (individual human), thereby permitting the manipulation of forces to cause change in the world (i.e. magic). Mysticism is the direct perception of a reality which is felt to underlie the phenomenal world (xviii). As a starting place, these definitions seem to be useful enough heuristics and DeConick should be commended for taking the bold step of making some declarative and definitional movements in a field that has typically been beset by vacillating uncertainties. At least now we have something to reflect our readings and interpretations against!

Content of the Main Chapters

In order to provide the reader of this review with a general understanding of the book, I will reserve my comments to a mere sentence or two per essay to give a notion of the overall content of each of the main sections.

Gnosticism – Readers familiar with the study of gnosticism will probably not find much here that they have not already read in other books and articles, but they will find the major arguments well organized and clearly described. Newcomers to the field will find a clear, engaging, and up to date description of both the state of the field and the content of the major varieties of Gnosticism (variously defined). Williams provides a genealogy of the term "gnosticism" and all the problems of use accompanying it. Dillon's essay continues the questions of definition, and adds questions about origins of the gnostics themselves, as well as their relationship to contemporary mainstream Christianity. Adamson repeats the same questions of definition, and adds the further question about the reliability of our sources, especially the anti-heretical writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian. Adamson also adds an interesting ethical point about the indirect role scholars play in the creation and maintenance of the antiquities black-market. Rasimus's chapter tries to extract the maximum amount of information about individual gnostics (such as Simon and his followers) and their historical reality as can be read from the heresiologists and the primary texts of the Nag Hammadi Library. In her chapter, Scopello discusses the social organization and demographics (learned, aristocratic) of the gnostics as can be gleaned from both heresiologists and primary texts. Van Os's contribution to the volume provides a useful summary of all texts labeled gnostic, especially the Nag Hammadi texts, and explores the possibility that gnosticism emerged from the practice of parascripture, but eventually evolved its own scriptural autonomy. He ends on a note, especially important considering the overall wrapping of the text as a volume on secrecy, that the gnostics would have understood their texts as a textual map for experiences, but they could never be a replacement for the actual experiential knowledge the gnostic claimed to possess and transmit. Turner and Corrigan provide a descriptive account of the major beliefs of the gnostics, the similarities of these beliefs with Platonism, and then passes through a description of the major mythemes and soteriological notions of the Sethians and Valentinians before offering an interpretation of gnostic rituals of baptism and ascent as a reenactment of the basic gnostic myth. The last chapter of the gnosticism section, authored by Turner alone, continues the last theme of the previous chapter and provides a typology of Sethian and Valentinian rituals, including baptism, enthronement and coronation, sacred meals, the *hieros gamos*, sexual sacraments, and contemplative practices.

Esotericism – Less has been written about the history of western esotericism defined for the most part in this volume as those traditions tied to late renaissance magi like Ficino and Mirandola. Marco Pasi's

opening chapter on the history of esotericism and its slow slouch into a “legitimate field of scholarly research” (153) was a rewarding read. Hanegraaff’s essay outlines three main ways of studying the field, including the religionist, the sociological, and the discursive. Von Stuckrad’s essay partially repeats the concerns of the previous two essays, but then turns to a more descriptive account of discourse analysis. Fanger’s essay situates the history of Western esotericism around a scholarly construct she calls the “referential corpus” and which she situates around the writings of the renaissance magi and kabbalists Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Reuchlin and Agrippa. With these authors forming a thematic kernel she can then go back in time to explore the seeds of their thought in Neoplatonism, gnosticism, and hermeticism, and then forward in time to their development in Theosophy and post-occultic new religious movements like Wicca. Fanger thus provides a survey of the major authors and traditions that can be considered part of the Western Esoteric tradition. Urban in his essay on the sociology of esotericism offers a history of the development of the groups practicing Freemasonry, Theosophy, Gardnerian witchcraft, and Scientology. He ends his chapter with a meditation on the role of cyberspace both as a place where new religious movements often congregate, but also as a place where secrets and secret religions are difficult to maintain. In the following chapter, Burns explores the topic of esoteric scripture in late antiquity, the medieval period medieval, and the twentieth century and outlines several recurring patterns of esoteric production (apocalypse, sacrality of individual elements of language like words and letters, and apophasis and allegory). He also traces shared themes and direct borrowings from these texts to less obvious modern movements like surrealism, Freudian analysis, Derridean deconstruction, and pop culture. Prophet’s chapter begins from the surprising point of departure of describing fan-based reimaginings of J. R. R. Tolkien’s fictive universe to an analysis of the way in which different esoteric communities could utilize historically questionable confabulations to construct and organize their traditions, as seems to be the case with the Rosicrucian order (real life versions of which were based on fraudulent claims to the existence of such an order) and theosophists. This essay takes an entirely different and welcome tack to the notion of “esotericism imagined.” Bogdan’s chapter offers a detailed account of the Freemasonic Entered Apprentice ritual and analyzes it through the lens of van Gennep’s notion of a rite of passage. He then explores the relationship between initiation in Freemasonry and late twentieth century understandings of magic, and notes how in the philosophy of Aleister Crowley, the highest goal of a magical act is psychological self-transformation.

Mysticism – Pevateaux’s discussion of the history of mysticism mirrors the previous essays of Williams (gnosticism) and Pasi (esotericism). Much import is laid on the attachment of the -ism suffix. Religious discourses of mysticism are given some space, as is James’s ideas and their latest manifestation in psychological theories of mystical experience. Calaway picks up from here and discusses the various ways mysticism is understood and the usefulness of the term per each conception. The more one conceives of mysticism as a contextualized event, the less useful it is as a general term. Kripal’s essay on the various arguments in the study of mysticism is by far the most provocative of the whole book insofar as it argues for the reality of mystical experiences and asks us if the academy is ready to accept such realities. Ogren’s contribution, which sets out the historical figures and movements of mysticism, concentrates predominantly on Judeo Christian mysticism and its ancestor, Neoplatonism. Sullivan’s chapter on mystical communities concentrates on the Essenes and the New Testament tradition. Rowland’s chapter on mystical texts focuses on biblical texts like Ezekiel and the writings of Paul, and then considers Christian monasticism and William Blake. Bautch explores the major ideas of mysticism, namely the notion of a transcendent other and the possibility of communion with that other. The last chapter by Davila explores the practices of the mystics and offers a comparison of Native American,

Jewish, and Renaissance and nineteenth century magical practices (as performed by the Golden Dawn). Davila points especially to the shared notions of communication with otherworldly spirits and travel to otherworldly realms as part of what he calls the shamanic complex.

Minor Problems

Some readers, and perhaps even some of the contributors, may have a problem with the degree to which "mysticism" has in the non-theoretical chapters of this book been largely considered through the lens of Judeo-Christian texts and traditional positions of authority. Esotericism in this book, while in the main considered an offshoot of Christian practice, is differentiated from Christianity on the basis of the former's more active or manipulative features. Consequently, mystical Christianity could be interpreted as being "purer" insofar as practitioners of Christian mysticism receive spontaneous revelations from orthodox deities. While the chapters that consider mysticism do occasionally draw on other traditions, they do so mainly as foils for explaining the Judeo-Christian perennial mystical event. As such, despite its best intentions, this volume runs the risk of reasserting some old and familiar boundaries.

Another minor issue worth considering is that of the title. With a title like *Secret Religion*, one would expect this book to be in dialogue with many varieties of secret religions. Indian Tantra, Vajrayana Buddhism, Native American traditions, and Yoruba religions do receive some minor attention, but they are never the focus of any of the chapters, and it is clear by the end of the introduction that "secret religion" means secret Western, Abrahamic religions and their offshoots. Gnosticism, esotericism and mysticism may have been a mouthful and "religion in the margins," the formula used by DeConick in her introduction, would have had the same problems of scope as "secret religions." Marginal Abrahamic Religions may have captured the theme better, but it would not have sold the book. When the chips are down, this problem of titles points exactly to the problem necessitated by the existence of such a book. How are we to demarcate the union of these discourses in a way that makes sense? The problem may be its own solution. It may end up that this book will contribute a new valence to the term "secret religion," or maybe we will begin to refer to GEM (Gnosticism, Esotericism, and Mysticism) studies in the same way as others now refer to STEM studies.

Closing Remarks

This book is a valuable survey of the leading theories and histories of the fields of gnosticism, Western esotericism, and Christian mysticism as well as an intriguing sample description of some of the "lived experience" of each of these traditions. It is extremely readable, has a good bibliography and index, contains references to pop-culture, and provides in the body of the text opportunities for relating the particulars explored in the text with broader questions in the study of religion. The book is well-edited. On my reading, I found only one repeated typo on page 365 (a mandala is called a maala). The steep price tag may prohibit its use as a textbook for an undergraduate level course. All major research libraries should own a copy. Newcomers to the field should buy or borrow a copy. Students and scholars with peripheral interests will be rewarded with even a survey of the contents.

Table of Contents

Preface, Jeffrey Kripal, xi-xiv
Introduction: Religion in the Margins, April D. DeConick, xv-xxxviii

GNOSTICISM.
1. Gnosticism Emergent: The Beginning of the Study of Gnosticism in the Academy, Michael A. Williams, 3 – 22.
2. Gnosticism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Gnosticism, Matthew J. Dillon, 23 – 38.
3. Gnosticism Disputed: Major Debates in the Field, Grant Adamson, 39 – 54.
4. Gnosticism Historicized: Historical Figures and Movements, Tuomas Rasimus, 55 – 72.
5. Gnosticism Socialized: Gnostic Communities, Madeleine Scopello, 73 – 88.
6. Gnosticism Recorded: Text, Scripture, and Parascripture, Bas van Os, 89 – 104.
7. Gnosticism Imagined: Major Ideas and Perspectives of Gnostics, John D. Turner and Kevin Corrigan, 105 – 122.
8. Gnosticism Practiced: Ritual and Performance, John D. Turner, 123 – 140.
ESOTERICISM.
9. Esotericism Emergent: The Beginning of the Study of Esotericism in the Academy, Marco Pasi, 143 – 154.
10. Esotericism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Esotericism, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 155 – 170.
11. Esotericism Disputed: Major Debates in the Field, Kocku von Stuckrad, 171 – 182.
12. Esotericism Historicized: Historical Figures and Movements, Claire Fanger, 183 – 198.
13. Esotericism Socialized: Esoteric Communities, Hugh B. Urban, 199 – 212.
14. Esotericism Recorded: Text, Scripture, and Parascripture, Dylan M. Burns, 213 – 230.
15. Esotericism Imagined: Major Ideas and Perspectives of Esotericists, Erin Prophet, 231 – 248.
16. Esotericism Practiced: Ritual and Performance, Henrik Bogdan, 249 – 262.
MYSTICISM.
17. Mysticism Emergent: The Beginning of the Study of Mysticism in the Academy, Chad J. Pevataux, 265 – 278.
18. Mysticism Theorized: Major Trends and Approaches to the Study of Mysticism, Jared C. Calaway, 279 – 294.
19. Mysticism Disputed: Major Debates in the Field, Jeffrey J. Kripal, 295 – 314.
20. Mysticism Historicized: Historical Figures and Movements, Brian Ogren, 315 – 330.
21. Mysticism Socialized: Mystic Communities, Kevin P. Sullivan, 331 – 346.
22. Mysticism Recorded: Text, Scripture, and Parascripture, Christopher Rowland, 347 – 360.
23. Mysticism Imagined: Major Ideas and Perspectives of Mystics, Kelley Coblentz Bautch, 361-376.
24. Mysticism Practiced: Ritual and Performance, James R. Davila, 377 – 392.
Glossary.
Index.