Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (eds.)


In the introduction to his 2012 monograph *Arguing with Angels: Enochian Magic and Modern Occulture*, Egil Asprem positioned his reception history of John Dee’s Enochian magic squarely into the gap between the historical and the modern within esotericism scholarship. Renaissance historians could engage in detail with Dee and his magical system but could not carry it beyond the period. Those focused on the modern period could appreciate the important role played by Enochian magic while lacking the capacity to fully understand or critically examine it. Asprem described this gap as a systemic “division of labor” that had birthed “parallel scholarship” for both his particular chosen subject and the study of esotericism as a whole.

Along with his co-editor Kennet Granholm, Asprem has taken this up this larger concern of the left hand of esotericism scholarship not knowing what the right is doing in the present volume *Contemporary Esotericism*. While edited volumes often run the risk of becoming textual curiosity cabinets with little holding the chapters together beyond the binding, several clear themes and a strong sense of purpose run through the twenty chapters of *Contemporary Esotericism* and ensure that this is not the case, making it valuable both for its constituent parts and as a whole. In addition to their introduction, Asprem and Granholm also provide the first chapter titled ‘Constructing Esotericisms: Sociological, Historical and Critical Approaches to the Invention of Tradition’, and with a combined total of nearly fifty pages between the introduction and chapter, it is clear that their volume is foremost an intervention in the field and the many strong and engaging chapters included further support this intent.

Wouter Hanegraaff rightly noted almost fifteen years ago that the modern study of esotericism suffered for a lack of historicity. While not disagreeing with this assessment, Asprem and Granholm orient this volume towards complimentary problems: while helpful, the historical mode of scholarship in esotericism is not suitable for emerging and contemporary subjects, and a historical paradigm makes allowing the entry of ‘approaches and perspectives from the study of religion more broadly’ difficult (6). For these new subjects and new approaches, Asprem and Granholm have divided *Contemporary Esotericism* into four main sections: Tradition, Popular Culture and New Media, Esoteric Transfers, and Leaving the Margins.

The first section argues within its four chapters that instead of being a *prisca theologia* or *philosophia perennis*, tradition in modern esotericism is neither pure nor perennial, but a construction that often assumes a cloak of antiquity.
to legitimate itself, a unintentionally co-created product between practitioners and those from outside (be they scholars or popular culture), or even as Per Faxneld argues in his chapter on the Church of Satan, ‘mood-creating spectacle for purely instrumental purposes’ (90). The second section on “Popular Culture and New Media” finds the latter in two chapters about online esotericism by Jesper Aagaard Petersen and John L. Crow, and more significantly with three chapters on the former in which modern esotericism is brought into conversation with spheres much larger than it is usually juxtaposed with: conspiratorial culture, the climate of the Cold War, and how esotericism is not only growing in significance within modern spirituality in the West, but larger cultural shifts may in fact be supporting much wider acceptance of the esoteric.

The third and fourth sections of Contemporary Esotericism, “Esoteric Transfers” and “Leaving The Margins”, efface boundaries both within ideas of the esoteric as well as those that separate the esoteric from what it is presumably not or distinct from: including interesting work connecting the esoteric to ecology, radical politics, and children. In separate chapters, editors Granholm and Asprem respectively note the significant role played by the esoteric on secularity and belief among the scientifically educated. Likewise, Kocku von Stuckrad finds the esoteric within secular culture. Jay Johnston productively notes the reproduction of stereotypical notions of gender and gender roles within esotericism, as Wouter Hanegraaff notes the need to recognize and attend to the critically important role that psychoactive substances have played.

Asprem and Granholm mention in their introduction that despite the four formal sections of the volume, the various authors seem to speak to one another in conversations that cut across these sections in a number of minor sub-themes and unintentional correspondences. (The discourse is so interwoven and complementary that it would not be hard to imagine reorganizing the twenty chapters in a variety of different ways with alternate headings.) One of these underlying themes is a transnational approach to esotericism, most explicitly taken up in two fascinating articles by Fredrik Gregorius and Eduard ten Houten: the former tracing how an imagined ancient Africa combined with Theosophy and Freemasonry to influence Afrocentric cultural politics and spirituality in the United States, and the latter detailing the influence of the Brazilian New Age author Paulo Coelho on the Chechen jihadist Shamil Basayev. While not openly taken up by the volume as a major theme, a transnational approach would be fully aligned with the aims of Contemporary Esotericism as it not only expands and gives depth to the field and openings for collaboration, but questions assumptions no less than the “Western” within “Western Esotericism.”