Christopher Partridge (ed.)


_The Occult World_ is a welcome addition to the corpus of reference literature that focuses on what the academic scholarship, until relatively recently, treated as a domain of rejected knowledge. With its seventy-three chapters (plus introduction and index) composed by forty-nine contributors, this is a truly encyclopedic work that will be of great value to scholars and students working in the field, as well as to the interested readership in general. In its historical scope, it is intentionally more exclusive than (what may be considered its “sister volume”) the _Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism_ (2006), since its aim is to provide a treatment of the thematic and historical currents since the occult revival of the nineteenth century (Partridge, ‘Introduction’, p. 1).

Given such scope and orientation of the book, it is somewhat unclear why the first three (out of eight) parts of _The Occult World_, comprising one full quarter of the text, treat the pre-nineteenth century developments (i.e., ancient and medieval sources, the renaissance, and the seventeenth and eighteenth century). Another immediate questioning response to the volume concerns the issue of its terminological preference (not universally shared by all the contributors) for the “occult” over and against the currently more customary “Western esotericism”. The reason apparently lies in the long history of usage of the term “occult” (and its derivatives) by its adherents. As the editor of the volume clarifies:

Not only does it have an interesting history stretching back to the medieval reception of Aristotelian natural philosophy, but it has been, certainly since the publication of the first volume of Agrippa’s _De Occulta
Philosophia in 1531, the preferred terminology of many of the principal architects of occult thought.

Partridge, ‘Introduction’, p. 3

In other words, the suggestion is that the emic category of the “occult” appears more authentic and is as such preferable to the etic (academic) category of “Western esotericism”. This, in itself and at face value, is a valid terminological choice, and it is especially laudable that it aims to restore the dignity and seriousness to a somewhat disparaged notion (although one wonders how comfortable with the term would be a person such as René Guénon, the subject of a chapter in the volume, otherwise known as a critic of the occult, which he would no doubt consider antithetical to his intellectual and spiritual orientation).

More problematic, at least in the opinion of the present writer, is the conflation between the occult “world” of the volume’s title and the “Western” world of its content and, by the same token, the simultaneous exclusion from its consideration of the other cultures’ responses to, and the constructions of what, they consider the hidden and secret aspects of reality (including also the inner properties and powers of the human mind and body). There is no denying that the Western constructions of the occult have their own specific characteristics, but a simple bracketing of the scope of the volume that would clarify the intentional focus on this (Western) regional variety of an arguably global phenomenon would have been welcome. Instead, the comparable spiritual traditions of other cultures (in particular India’s, the subject of otherwise excellent and erudite chapters on ‘Theosophy’ and ‘Orientalism and the Occult’) are here treated only as influences on Western occultism. The implication, undoubtedly not intended by either the editor or the contributors to the volume, is that the West is either exceptional or normative. But if that is the case, what are we to make of the elephant in the room: the rich traditions of (for example, but not exclusively) Asian texts, ideas, and practices of alchemy, magic, astrology, and divination (otherwise assumed to be the typical branches of the occult)? It would appear that they were excluded from consideration simply because their proponents did not employ the term “occult” and its derivatives. By that logic, the Chinese never venerated the Buddha, since they pronounce his name as Fó.

The question of the relationship between the Western occult and its relationship (and potential similarity) with some Eastern traditions is taken up by Erik Davis, who, in the context of describing the countercultural mélange of the 1960s, writes: