Book Reviews


Kocku von Stuckrad has published extensively on the topic of Western esotericism in the last years: Apart from his books and articles on astrology, shamanism, and kabbalah, especially his Was ist Esoterik? Kleine Geschichte des geheimen Wissens (2004; translated in 2005 by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke as Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge) provides a well-arranged historical overview of historical currents associated with ‘esotericism’ in Western history. In his new book, Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities we are confronted with a somewhat different approach: Assembling, in part, already published (albeit revised) articles, as well as new findings and ideas, this book seems to represent a recapitulation and aggregation of von Stuckrad’s thinking on the subject over the last decade. In comparison with the historical orientation of the above-mentioned book, Locations of Knowledge is more theoretical and particularly focused on a substantial revision of the methodological and historiographical grounds of the study of Western esotericism itself. Hence, this book is no easy-to-read introduction to this increasingly popular research field. The reader must be familiar with its typical sources and recent scholarly positions in order to fully grasp the impact of von Stuckrad’s argument. Given this precondition, Locations of Knowledge seems to address other scholars in the field rather than students or non-academic readers.

The book is divided into three main parts labeled “Esoteric Discourse and the European History of Religion,” “Shared Passions,” and “Interferences”; each part is introduced and subdivided into three chapters. Together with a concluding chapter the book thus adds up to ten chapters, of which five (chapters 2, 3, 5, 6, and 8) are based on previously published texts. Part one (“Esoteric Discourse and the European History of Religion,” pp. 3–64) is a general and rather theoretical introduction to von Stuckrad’s idea of the problems, core concepts, and research goals in the study of Western esotericism—advocating, in essence, a discourse theoretical approach (based on Foucault and Bourdieu). Part two (“Shared Passions,” pp. 67–134) then aims at applying this methodological approach to specific historical sources and discourses, ranging from late antiquity to the early modern period.
Part three (“Interferences,” pp. 137–194) also discusses historical (especially early modern) source texts but seems to be focused more on problems of the scholarly debate and historiographical classification patterns in regard to these sources.

Chapter one (“Europe and the Christendom Narrative”) opts for abandoning two “master narratives” that, according to von Stuckrad, have “been a major obstacle in our understanding of European cultural history and the place of esotericism within it” (p. 4), namely the “secularization theory” (pp. 7ff.) and the “Christendom narrative” (pp. 13ff.). Instead of believing in these historiographical patterns, von Stuckrad advocates—in line with the recent approach of “Europäische Religionsgeschichte” in German Religionswissenschaft (see, e.g., Europäische Religionsgeschichte: ein mehrfacher Pluralismus, a volume edited in 2009 by Hans G. Kippenberg, Jörg Rüpke and Kocku von Stuckrad, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht)—the concept of a “two-fold pluralism” (pp. 18ff.), that is, of a plurality of “religious identities on the one hand, and [...] of various societal systems that interact with religious systems on the other” (book cover). Chapter two (“The Polemical Construction of Tradition”) opts for de-naturalizing the concept of ‘tradition,’ arguing that it “is a polemical term in the historical sources, which should be applied scholarly in a discursive way only, describing its varying uses, functions, and contexts” (p. 42).

After these deconstructionist maneuvers, chapter three aims at giving a coherent conceptualization of ‘esotericism.’ Here, von Stuckrad argues against Antoine Faivre’s typology of “intrinsic characteristics” of esotericism (pp. 46ff.), Monika Neugebauer-Wölk’s idea of “thematic fields” (pp. 49ff.), Wouter J. Hanegraaff’s reception of Jan Assmann’s “mnemohistory” (pp. 51ff.), and Michael Bergunder’s historicization of the very concept of ‘esotericism’ that would limit research to the nineteenth century onwards only (pp. 59ff.). Instead, von Stuckrad suggests a discourse theoretical approach that focuses on the interdependence of historical discourses and, in particular, on the polemical and often arbitrary construction of religious identities in Western cultural history. This approach is combined with two semantic notions that operate as a kind of substantialist backdrop of von Stuckrad’s argument: He states that esoteric discourses tend to address “claims of higher or perfect knowledge” (pp. 60–61) and that they are often accompanied by a “secretive dialectic of concealment and revelation” (67).

The three chapters of part two exemplify this approach by discussing a variety of historical sources and discourses. In chapter four (“The Secrets of Experience: Wisdom beyond Demonstration”), von Stuckrad discusses ancient and medieval textual descriptions of intense religious experiences that ostensibly provide humans with divine knowledge. Chapter five (“The Secrets of Texts: Esoteric Hermeneutics”) deals with “Europe’s obsession with words” (p. 89) and the long history of the idea of coding or encoding the world by means of letters and words—special attention is here given to medieval Jewish kabbalah and its reception in early modern Christian discourses. Chapter six (“The Secrets of Time: Astrology