
Reviewing Kocku von Stuckrad’s *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* is both a pleasure and a pain. It is a dense book for its 240 pages, utilizing a very broad set of material to argue its points. The author is also successful in his attempts to suggest some paradigmatic changes for both the study of esotericism and the study of European culture and religion more generally.

The book is divided into three parts; each has its specific theme and three individual chapters, with an introduction and a conclusion. Part one of the book presents the theoretical framework, both for this book in particular but also for the study of esoteric discourse and European history of religions in general. Chapter one argues that Europe, in both pre-modern and modern times, is more religiously diverse than it is usually presented as being. In a critical look at the notion of secularization and the “myth” of a Christian West, von Stuckrad tears down two singularizing discourses which have dominated perceptions of Europe. Religion is not disappearing in the West, nor was Europe ever as thoroughly Christianized as is often claimed. Similarly, while Christian visual and material culture has had a huge impact, Europe has always been characterized by a religious and cultural pluralism, with both a considerable internal Christian diversity and the presence of non-Christian alternatives. This “two-fold pluralism” has in fact been crucial for European identity-construction, so that “in considering other options, whether positively or negatively, persons come to form their own positions” (p. 16). The projection of a singular dominant Christian “tradition” is part of the standard narrative of European history. “Tradition,” in fact, should not be used as an analytical category, but instead the historian should investigate various constructions of tradition. To balance this standard narrative, von Stuckrad highlights a conjoined pair of alternative constructions of tradition: the notions of *prisca theologia* and *philosophia perennis* in which an ancient wisdom-tradition has been relayed by a lineage of pre-Christian enlightened philosophers. Based on a revival of Neoplatonic philosophy, these ancient wisdom-narratives had a great influence on Jewish, Muslim, and Christian actors and played an equally important role in interreligious debates and contacts.

In chapter three von Stuckrad moves on to discuss esotericism, a label which is notoriously slippery and often used inconsistently. From a critical assessment of some of the existing theories in the historical study of Western esotericism, with a focus on the approaches of Antoine Faivre, Monika Neugebauer-Wölk,
and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, the author goes on to present his discursive approach in which the focus lies not on currents but on claims to higher or perfect knowledge. Another important ingredient identified by von Stuckrad, one which is regarded as an elementary ingredient in most non-specialist discussions but downplayed by most other specialists of esotericism, is the notion of secrecy. Rather than regarding esotericism as “secret knowledge” per se, however, von Stuckrad emphasises the “dialectic of concealment and revelation,” in which secrecy becomes an important form of social capital.

Part two of the book deals with “shared passions,” that is to say, positions which are held in common by representatives of European religions across the board and which thus transgress the seemingly inviolable borders between different “religious traditions.” The three chapters deal with “the secrets of experience,” exploring narratives of personal experience projected as a primary mode of knowing; “the secrets of texts,” detailing “Europe’s obsession with words” and the rhetoric of coding and decoding; and “the secrets of time,” with a focus on astrology. Chapter four moves from Neoplatonism and theurgy in late Antiquity to the “illuminationist philosophy” of Shihāb al-Dīn Yahyā Suhrāwardī in the twelfth century, claiming narratives of direct experience as a common feature among representatives of ancient esotericism. While such representatives were not opposed to rationalism as such, they tended to regard it as a knowledge suited for the physical world; “knowledge of the gods required a different form of cognition” (p. 78).

In chapter five’s exploration of textual coding and decoding, the main examples are derived from Kabbalah, Renaissance hermeticism, and humanistic philology, but the chapter starts with a prelude in late-modern life sciences. In this way von Stuckrad demonstrates how deeply embedded the rhetoric of coding and decoding really is in Western culture. It is neither a modern development nor a relic of times past, instead it betrays a basic episteme in which “the human being is the agent of the divine, the creator” (p. 91). To include humanistic philology in the mix might seem slightly odd, considering how it is commonly regarded as having played a major role in the birth of an unbiased investigation of religion. However, many representatives of the discipline were in fact engaged in a search for the “original language” of humanity, which would in turn reveal still greater secrets.

Time has been subjected to deciphering in much the same way as texts have been, and astrology has “served as the major disciplinary tool” in this regard (p. 115). Christian, Jewish, and Muslim intellectuals alike engaged in astrological interpretation, and the practice was often linked to seemingly nonreligious cultural systems such as mathematics, medicine, and politics. All of the themes treated in part two demonstrate a thorough entanglement of Christian,