

Anthony Aveni. *Behind the Crystal Ball: Magic, Science, and the Occult from Antiquity Through the New Age.* New York, N.Y.: Times Books, 1996. xvii + 406 pp. \$28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8129-2415-2.



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In *Behind the Crystal Ball*, Dr. Aveni, who is a professor of astronomy, attempts an overview of magical thinking in the Western world, from Babylon to modern times. His premise is that, despite the advances of science, magical thinking endures, changing its manifestations as it adapts to the world views of the larger society. Magic envisions a world in which seemingly unrelated items are connected, in which the human mind is not separate from or unable to affect the material world.

Aveni's survey concentrates on the Western world and is fairly comprehensive, from the ancient forms of divination such as hepatoscopy (reading livers of animal sacrifices) to astrology, palmistry and New Age channeling. Magical practices touched on include Kabbalah, alchemy, table rapping, witchcraft, and crystal healing. In addition, attention is given to tenuously related phenomenon: UFO sightings, meditation, alternative healing, and the personalities and accomplishments of escape artist Harry Houdini and Nobel winning physicist Richard Feynman. Aveni concludes that the methodological curves of science

and magic may be converging, as science takes on questions of ultimate meaning: the why as well as the how of the universe.

Behind the Crystal Ball contains a potpourri of interesting facts and ideas. For instance, readers may not realize that the sexual communalism of Oneida, the beginnings of the Mormon Church and the home of the Fox sisters, originators of modern spiritualism, were in close geographical proximity in upper New York state--an area often referred to as the "burned-over district" because of the many revivals that swept across the area during the Second Great Awakening of the 1820s.

Unfortunately, the value of tidbits of information is considerably lessened by the superficial, and sometimes inaccurate treatment of certain topics. For example, Aleister Crowley, a major figure in modern ceremonial magic, is described, tabloid style, as conjuring the Devil and as "hooked on [non-addictive] mescaline" (p. 210). His most famous statement is misquoted as "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law," omitting the next line, "Love is the law, love under will." Nor is his still thriving organization, the

Ordo Templi Orientis, mentioned. More to the point, Aveni does not even support his own premise concerning the adaptation of magical thinking to its surrounding culture by citing Crowley's stated intention of making magic a scientific enterprise.

Errors extend to less controversial areas. Aveni attributes the revival of homeopathic medicine to writer Norman Cousins' published account of his self-cure of a degenerative spinal disease with Vitamin C and humor (p. 276). Yet homeopathy has nothing to do with megavitamin therapy. Aveni is also careless in his use of numbers. The chapter on witchcraft cites 150,000 to 200,000 as the likely number executed in Europe (p. 136). Yet later he refers to millions persecuted. He also fails to recast statistical information into consistent form for better assimilation by the reader. So we learn that one in six Americans believe astrologers are magicians, while 20 percent believe in reincarnation (p. 247).

While *Behind the Crystal Ball* may be interesting for its point of view on the future of magic and for some enticing information, this reviewer does not find it a reliable guide to contemporary magical belief and practice and is therefore forced to doubt its reliability on more distant topics.

Those interested in contemporary attitudes may find David J. Hess's *Science in the New Age: the Paranormal, Its Defenders and Debunkers and American Culture*, a book which Aveni cites, to be a more focused work. Those interested in the inner workings of occult groups and the how and why of group recruitment might consult *Cult and Countercult* by sociologist Gini G. Scott and *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* by anthropologist Tanya M. Luhrmann.

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