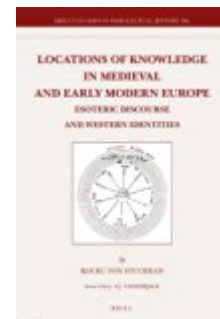


Kocku von Stuckrad. *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe.* Leiden: Brill, 2010. xiii + 240 pp. \$141.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-18422-0.



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The field of “Western esotericism” has attracted increased scholarly attention over the past three or four decades. The arcane and diverse literature associated with Hermeticism, alchemy, Pythagoreanism, Neoplatonism, Kabbalah (both Jewish and Christian), magic, astrology and other “secret” disciplines has emerged from the shadowy world of counter-establishment true believers into the critical light of scholarship, leading to a number of important advances in how we understand the intellectual and religious history of Western society. Far from being a monolithic and “Christian” phenomenon, the many overlapping and competing ideologies, worldviews, and identities that have given shape to Western culture can only be appreciated by giving serious consideration to the role that esoteric discourse has played in the history of the West. In his engaging and methodologically sophisticated new monograph, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities*, Kocku von Stuckrad makes an invaluable contribution to this growing field of research.

Drawing upon material from the temporal range of 1200 to 1800, and giving commendable attention to the Islamic and Jewish materials that are often overlooked in the study of Western esoteric traditions, Stuckrad presents an important new model for how to conceptualize the field as an area of academic inquiry, and thereby appreciate the connections between medieval esoteric discourses and the emergence of modernity.

Stuckrad presents his project in ten chapters divided into three sections. The first section addresses methodological issues that have long plagued the field, and presents a useful model for the study of Western esoteric discourse that illuminates the complexity and diversity of the history of European religious identities. The second section considers the “shared passions” of astrology, theurgy, and theosophy that Jews, Christians and Muslims pursued in a wide range of esoteric literatures. The third section considers the early modern reverberations of these ideas in the scientific, artistic, and political realms, arguing that the “polarization of alternatives” at play in the early

modern European context brought on by the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment does not signal the irrelevance of esoteric discourses. Rather, Stuckrad argues that “even in modernity they have been transformed into dialectic processes, despite—or rather, just because of—the disjunctive strategies of post-Enlightenment Europe” (p. xi). By considering the ways disciplines such as astrology, alchemy, and magic “function as a ‘significant Other’ of post-Enlightenment Western identities” (p. 200), Stuckrad provides a framework for examining the role of such esoteric discourses in the ongoing competition of claims of authority and formation of the self through the negotiation of competing and contested alternatives.

By conceptualizing the study of Western esotericism as the study of a kind of discourse, Stuckrad helps to focus our attention on an analysis of the role of esoteric truth claims in relation to other competing models of knowledge. Drawing upon the work of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Richard Rorty, among others, Stuckrad notes that “[d]iscursive relations are power relations, which means that the term ‘discourse’ refers not only to contents of frameworks of meaning, but also to instruments of power” (p. 5). With this observation in mind, Stuckrad builds a compelling case for a significant revision of standard intellectual and religious histories of the West. All too often, the study of religions in Europe “ultimately leads to a church history with some sort of appendix that considers the minor traditions, which have existed more or less in the shadow of mainstream Christian religion” (p. 19). Such histories lead to an uncritical embrace of canonized historical narratives reflective of Christian power, without considering the processes whereby such historical truths and worldviews came to be accepted as authoritative. Through an appreciation of the power relations at play between competing discourses and the centrality of such competition in the production of much of what we understand to be the West, Stuckrad

brings the marginalized discourses into central focus and provides a tool for understanding their place in the complex and pluralistic history of the West that “church histories” tend to obscure. This is not to say that a “Christian Europe” is an illusion, or that the presence of “competing ways of attaining knowledge of the world” (p. 23) leads to the conclusion the Europe should be regarded as simply less Christian. Rather, Stuckrad’s argument is that “Christianity in Europe has always been diverse and comprised many forms of beliefs and practices that populated the minds of believers (and non-believers)” (p. 14), and thus any appreciation of religion, including Christianity, in Europe must grapple with the reality that “[r]eligious identities are shaped through communicative processes. They are not found, but negotiated” (p. 16).

Stuckrad’s analysis thus brings the marginalized voices of alchemists, astrologers, theosophists, magicians, and others into view by exploring the ways that “the presence of alternatives has shaped Western culture” (p. 19). In the process, Stuckrad advances a shift in the way that minority religious traditions, namely Judaism and Islam, are to be understood in the West. Rather than present them as marginalia in the grand narrative of the Christian West, Stuckrad provides a sustained analysis of the role of Jewish Kabbalah and Islamic Neoplatonism and astrology in the formation of the Western identities and the emergence of modernity in Europe. In an important corrective to more homogeneous conceptions of European religious history, Stuckrad demonstrates through his study of esoterica the central role that Jewish and Muslim discourses have played, given that “it is the tension between actual alternatives and attempts at normalization and control that created the dynamics of religious development in Europe” (p. 19). European intellectual and religious history is therefore one that is shaped by a form of pluralism that “denotes the *organization of difference*. Religious options alternative to one’s own are known, are a matter of negotiation, and constitute an element of one’s own

identity In constructing the other, both parties form a discursive unit” (p. 19).

This volume will be of benefit to scholars interested in European religious and intellectual history, especially those focusing on esoteric traditions. For students of Jewish intellectual history, this study presents an engaging model for examining the “discursive unit” that Jews helped create through their direct and indirect engagement with the Christian majority. Stuckrad’s work demonstrates that Jewish texts and ideas are essential components of the discursive matrix of the West, and thus assume a central rather than marginal role in the study of European intellectual history. The comprehensive bibliography and index, as well as the rich footnotes, further enhance the value of Stuckrad’s contribution.

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