



Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm. *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2017. xiv + 411 pp. \$32.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-226-40336-6.

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Auguste Viatte, in his two-volume classic, *Les sources occultes du Romantisme* (1928), was perhaps the first modern scholar to emphasize the importance of occult, theosophical, and esoteric movements in Enlightenment thought. Paul Oskar Kristeller then expanded on Viatte's thesis by pointing out that Renaissance humanism was also permeated with elements from esoteric writings. "Western Esotericism," as it is now called by scholars, is a mixture of philosophy, religion, art, literature, music, and even science, whose representative figures sought to return to "ancient" foundational texts, "original" forms of religious practice, and a more "natural" religion. The academic study of Western Esotericism has become an important feature in modern religious studies. Scholars such as W. J. Hanegraaff, Kocku von Stuckrad, and Egil Asprem, to name only a few, all argue that this originalist attitude is a major undercurrent of modernity, a religious subculture abundantly present in mainstream theological, philosophical, and scientific discourse.

Jason Ā. Josephson-Storm, in his new book, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*, closely follows this scholarship in describing the continued vitality of esoteric, magical, and occult ideas in our allegedly disenchanted world. The notion of "disenchantment," supposedly first articulated

into a master-narrative by Max Weber (1864-1920), is the view that the road to modernity came through a conscious rejection of magical, numinous, and supernatural beliefs in favor of scientific explanations, thus transforming modern existence into "an iron cage of reason." Josephson-Storm, however, rejects this narrative. Paraphrasing Bruno Latour, he contends that "we have never been disenchanted" (p. 3). His unveiling of the occult aspects of modernity is not new among religious studies scholars. But what is unique about Josephson-Storm's book is his particular focus, cast of characters, and synthesis of previous scholarship. He argues, in short, that the human sciences were founded by scholars in the nineteenth century who not only were interested in the esoteric but also participated in spiritual séances, theosophical meetings, occult practice, and magic. The book has a broad historical scope, beginning in the early modern period and concluding around World War II. He begins his book with an account of Marie Curie (1867-1934) attending spiritualist séance led by Eusapia Palladino (1854-1918), a psychic with allegedly telekinetic powers. Josephson-Storm sees this event as a "problem" for theorists who argue that "one of the things that most makes the modern world modern is the rejection of animism—basically,

that we have eliminated ghosts, demons, and spirits from the contemporary worldview” (p. 1).

In providing a “philosophical archaeology” of the idea of disenchantment, Josephson-Storm argues that the theorists who formulated the “disenchantment myth” were surrounded by an enchanted world. He maintains that the human sciences “emerged as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century alongside flourishing theological and spiritualist movements.” Those early social theorists who proclaimed “the end of myth” were themselves “profoundly enmeshed in the occult milieu” (p. 6). By exploring “the haunting presence of magic in the very instances when disenchantment was itself being theorized,” Josephson-Storm argues that the very concept of “modernity” itself is a fable (p. 5). His project is thus destructive. He aims to “undermine the myth that what sets the modern world apart from the rest is that it has experienced disenchantment and a loss of myth” (p. 8). In other words, Josephson-Storm argues that one “myth” has merely replaced another.

The first half of *The Myth of Disenchantment* tries to reassess the canonical history of disenchantment, moving chronologically through early modern natural philosophy, Enlightenment rationalism, German romanticism, and Victorian anthropology, and crucially to the development of the discipline of religious studies. With each step, Josephson-Storm shows how these harbingers of disenchantment were themselves enchanted by the occult, ghosts, and magic. He begins with reminding us that Francis Bacon’s “idols of the mind” was not an attack on religion but “superstition,” a term often used to refer to Roman Catholicism. The “superstitions” emerging from the Roman tradition were thus obstacles not only to natural philosophy but also to the “true religion” that Bacon, Isaac Newton, and early modern natural philosophers hoped to restore.

Josephson-Storm then turns to the French philosophes, particularly Denis Diderot and Jean

le Rond d’Alembert, showing how these arch-rationalists of the Enlightenment were in fact influenced by esoteric, pagan ideas. This point is not new, of course, as Peter Gay and others have argued that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed a revival of paganism. But, in what becomes a pattern throughout the rest of the book, Josephson-Storm does not mention that the philosophes were also greatly influenced by the so-called English deists, who, despite their criticism of ecclesiastical authority, remained committed to Protestant ideals. Josephson-Storm ignores this connection, which is well known and should have taken center stage in the narrative he wishes to construct. While he does point out that the philosophes evoked “the Protestant debates about the cessation of the charismata,” his main point is to show that esoteric thought persisted among the lights of the French Enlightenment (p. 55).

Turning to eighteenth-century Germany, Josephson-Storm shows how a number of German idealists and romantics regarded ancient Greece as the ideal civilization, when men freely communed with nature and the gods, and likewise bemoaned the withdrawal of the gods with the rise of Christendom. In Josephson-Storm’s reading, the myth of disenchantment was perhaps most representative in Friedrich Schiller’s (1759-1805) “The Gods of Greece,” where he expressed a nostalgic longing for a prelapsarian time when primordial man lived in harmony with a natural world enchanted with spirits and demons. Schiller and later German Romantic writings exemplified a reaction against increasing German secular power, when “states appropriated property previously belonging to the Church” (p. 75). But Josephson-Storm neglects to emphasize, again, that these German states were largely Protestant in outlook, passing laws that required, for instance, all children to be raised as Protestants.

Subsequent German figures continued to “long for myth” (p. 63). But according to Josephson-Storm, this feeling of loss was ultimately

transformed into historiography, and the example he gives is Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-97), who produced the divisions in history that we continue to rehearse today. It was this feeling of loss, this longing for myth, writes Josephson-Storm, that inspired Burckhardt to portray the Renaissance as a singular period, which ultimately acted as a “prototype for a host of later narrative tropes we now associate with not just the Renaissance, but also classical Greece, the Enlightenment, the Protestant Reformation, and, of course, other vaguer descriptions of the birth of modernity” (p. 92).

Josephson-Storm then turns to the persistent debate between science and religion, arguing that this constant dialectic motivated the rise of spiritualism and occult movements rather than resulting in secularization. Unfortunately, he offers us an entirely conventional interpretation of John W. Draper (1811-82) and Andrew D. White (1832-1918) as perpetuating the notion of a “conflict between religion and science.” Neither Draper nor White posited an endemic conflict between “science and religion.” A more careful reading of their work would demonstrate that both viewed science as a reforming agent of knowledge, society, *and* religion. For Draper and White, the conflict was between contending theological traditions: a more progressive, liberal, and diffusive Protestant Christianity against a more traditional, conservative, and orthodox Christianity. Draper and White, as did many liberal Protestants of the mid-nineteenth century, followed two centuries of attempts to accommodate religion to rationality, trying to reconcile the concrete reality of religious belief (for example, experience, sentiment, intuition, and morality) while also reducing religion to its most common elements. Significantly, the traditions that Draper and White came from emphasized minimal doctrinal attachments. By perfunctorily repeating secondary literature on the topic, Josephson-Storm misunderstands Draper and White and ignores important ways liberal

Protestants attempted to reconcile modern thought with religious belief.

In the following chapters, Josephson-Storm turns to the rise of religious studies and anthropology as academic disciplines in the mid to late nineteenth century. In these chapters, he argues that the mourning for the loss of God motivated a secular, post-Protestant intelligentsia to locate an original, pristine natural religion of humanity. He contends, for instance, that Edward B. Tylor’s (1832-1917) anthropology of religion was guided by a kind of “rational religion” derived from his Quaker background (p. 99). For Tylor, ethnography was a reformer’s science, carrying on Protestantism’s battle against superstition. But rather than expanding on this point, Josephson-Storm again focuses on Tylor’s participation in spiritualist séances. Turning to Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), Josephson-Storm writes that his comparative theology was the “attempt to arrive at a common philosophy located behind the diversity of the world’s mythological systems” (p. 107). In other words, Josephson-Storm sees that Müller’s attempt to recover the lost wisdom of the East was a way of supplementing what was missing from the contemporary European world. Josephson-Storm also argues that comparative theology was a central element to the rise of late nineteenth-century theosophy and occult worship. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-91), for instance, was simultaneously one of the most important theosophists of the late nineteenth century and relied on Müller’s comparative method to uncover a primordial revelation or religion. Likewise, the rise of folklore studies began as a kind of salvage anthropology project, in that many of its early advocates sought to “preserve local cultures and traditions in danger of being lost by ‘modernization’” (p. 129). Perhaps better than anyone else, the folklorists knew that modernity was still haunted by “ghosts,” and the founders of folklore studies, including James Frazer (1854-1941), attempted to re-

construct primitive religion based on collected folktales.

But here again, I would argue that while it is certainly possible that occultists benefited from the work of early scholars of religion, the motivation for establishing the human sciences was guided by certain Protestant ideals. Müller, for example, confided in a November 1861 letter to Ernst Renan that he believed the Reformation would soon be finally completed. “The revival of learning in the fifteenth century,” he wrote, “was the dawn of Reformation, and I believe a similar era is approaching to fulfil what the Reformers intended, but which was frustrated by political events.” A month later, he again declared that “I cannot help believing that we are on the eve of great religious and philosophic struggles. There is a longing after true and primitive Christianity in the best spirits of England, France and Germany.”[1] For Müller, the new “science of religion” would prepare the way for this “New Reformation.” Indeed, in his famous *Chips from a German Workshop* (1870), Müller proclaimed that the science of religion would “give new life to Christianity itself.” And it must be noted that Frazer was raised, like many of the early scholars of religion, in a Protestant home. While he used anthropology to expose the rotten boroughs of religion, Frazer followed a long Protestant pedigree of condemning Catholic “pagano-papism” and religious “enthusiasts” alike. In his three-stage narrative of human progress, Frazer marked off *religion* as an outmoded way of thinking, not *magic*. In other words, ancient magic, which was on its way to becoming science, was corrupted by religion, and particularly Christianity. The move from magic to religion was a movement of corruption brought on by superstitious Catholics and Protestants alike.

In the second half of the book, Josephson-Storm turns to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, exploring several cases of “the magical foundations of critical theory”—the eso-

teric interests of foundational figures, including Sigmund Freud, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and especially Max Weber. Josephson-Storm’s comprehensive survey of German occult revivalism begins with Max Nordau’s (1849-1923) degeneration thesis, goes back to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) as “necromancer,” then to Arthur Schopenhauer’s (1788-1860) belief in the reality of “magic,” and finally to the mysticism of Carl Du Prel (1839-99), with whom Freud was apparently fascinated. While Freud seemingly repudiated the “black tide of occultism,” seeing it as the “ghost of religion in the modern era, the last gasp of dying faiths clinging to illusions,” he was also actively engaged in studying the occult (p. 196). Even the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle, such as Hans Hahn (1879-1934), Otto Neurath (1882-1945), and Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970), seem “profoundly entranced by the paranormal,” and Josephson-Storm catalogues their interests in “demonic possessions,” “poltergeist activities,” and “extrasensory perception.” He notes that, like their early modern counterparts, the logical positivists equated the scientific worldview with magical beliefs, albeit a purified version cleared of the “metaphysical and theological debris of millennia” (p. 254).

In his final case study, Josephson-Storm examines Weber, often recognized as one of the master theorists of modernity, who memorably conceived of modernization as *die Entzauberung der Welt*, the “de-magic-ing” of the world. Josephson-Storm focuses on Weber’s frequent vacations at the Monte Verita in Ascona, Switzerland, which served as the headquarters of the Hermetic Brotherhood of Light, a fraternity devoted to practical magic, clairvoyance, and astral projection. Weber, famed though he may be for his theory of disenchantment, was quite enchanted with Ascona. In a 1914 letter, for example, he called the commune his “home” and regarded it as “a sort of oasis of purity” that contrasted sharply with the “human world based on superficial sensations” (p. 277). Weber also seemed to have coveted a deep reli-

gious or mystical experience to better understand the “psychological states” of the historical figures he studied (p. 288).

Weber, of course, believed that the disenchantment of the world was carried out to its full conclusion in Protestantism. Unfortunately, instead of focusing on the clearly porous relationship between Protestantism and secularism, Josephson-Storm focuses on Weber’s association with the Hermetic Brotherhood of Light. Weber was raised by a religiously indifferent father and a moderate Lutheran mother, receiving from both parents a spirit of independence from institutional religion and dogmatic theology. While he eventually abandoned this diffusive Protestant upbringing, he retained its prophetic, rebellious ethic and Protestant conception of Christianity as a worldly force. Indeed, like many urban Protestants, Weber was particularly interested in the ethical force of religion. Weber’s wife claimed in her biography of her husband that he was concerned from an early age “with the question of the world-shaping significance of ideal forces. Perhaps this tendency of his quest for knowledge—a *permanent concern with religion*—was the form in which the genuine religiosity of his maternal family lived on in him.”[2] For Weber, religion was a robust reality and an effective force in history.

Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) was one of three volumes of his sociology of religion—the latter two being *The Religion of China* (1915) and *The Religion of India* (1916)—which, together, attempted to show how Protestantism shaped the world. Unlike the evolutionary anthropologists, trying to reclaim a primordial religion, Weber was interested in how secular institutions like the economy grew from religious ideals. Indeed, Weber’s narrative of disenchantment was infused with theology. Weber argued that the disenchantment of the world began with the Hebrew prophets and culminated in Protestant thought, particularly the Puritans, who

“rejected all signs of religious ceremony at the grave,” burying their “nearest and dearest without song or ritual in order that no superstition, no trust in the effects of magical and sacramental forces on salvation, should creep in” (p. 280). In Weber’s theory, the rise of capitalism was impeded by “traditionalism,” which was for him essentially the Roman Catholic Church. Traditionalism came tumbling down with the rise of Protestantism, which emphasized the notion of “calling,” an inner-worldly ascetic as opposed to traditionalism’s other-worldly ascetic. Thus like the phenomenologists, Weber discerned the importance of this-worldly religious experience in demolishing the old world of traditionalism. The new capitalist system (in other words, modernity) rested on nothing less than a new theology, where Protestants believed they were doing God’s will in denying themselves, working hard to attain future prosperity and wealth—both of which were seen as a sign of divine blessing and as belonging to God’s elect. But Protestantism itself had not broken sufficiently with traditionalism. Thus a new religion was beginning to emerge from Protestant ideals. Protestantism itself had not produced capitalism but rather the spirit of Protestantism. According to Weber, the world becomes “disenchanted” when things are stripped of inherent meaning and power, either by attributing all causality to a transcendent sovereign God or by comprehensive scientific explanations. Rooted in this Protestant ethos, modern society has alienated humanity from our basic life impulses. From Weber’s perspective, the rise of Western modernity was the logical conclusion of the Protestant Reformation as a whole.

In his concluding remarks, Josephson-Storm sardonically muses that those theorists of disenchantment were themselves “entangled” in enchantment (p. 304). Thus according to Josephson-Storm, both “modernity” and “postmodernity” are myths. Since we have never been modern, since “reason” has never ruled us, there has never been a postmodern age. Both are stories we tell our-

selves, and are therefore less descriptive than prescriptive.

While Josephson-Storm has clearly shown that disenchantment is a myth, he never really answers why the myth persists. I think he has even mistraced its origins and development. So one is forced to wonder what, in fact, has Josephson-Storm accomplished? Similar problems exist with those revisionist historians of science who argue that the “conflict thesis”—the idea that science and religion are irrevocably at odds—is a myth as well. If it is a fabricated story, why do so many people believe that both science and religion are indeed at war, despite decades of scholarship showing otherwise? Indeed, both “myths” have indelibly set the terms of the debate and continue to do so despite what scholars have contended. While specters, magicians, mermaids, mesmerists, and a mélange of marvels continue to haunt Europe and America, these phenomena take place within a context where many—if not most, including religious believers—maintain that wonders and marvels have been demystified by science. In other words, we still believe in disenchantment, wittingly or unwittingly. While Curie attended a séance, to use Josephson-Storm’s opening example, she did so not as a believer but as an investigator. In fact, most of the more modern figures and case studies Josephson-Storm brings up approached the paranormal in a similar way, not necessarily to participate but to investigate.

An example from American popular culture may be more helpful in elucidating what I mean here. When the film *Noah* (2014) came out, many evangelicals in the United States decried what they perceived as “mythical additions” to the biblical narrative. They were particularly incredulous toward director Darren Aronofsky’s depiction of the “watchers,” the fallen angels that assist Noah in constructing the Ark. However, Ridley Scott’s film *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) was reviewed much more favorably by evangelicals, who frequently cited how “realistic” it was. Scott

depicted Moses’s religious visions as nothing more than hallucinations after a precarious fall climbing a mountain—that is, as a natural result of a concussion. Unlike the events that take place in *Noah*, every miracle and plague in *Exodus* is explained naturalistically. Moses was cognitively impaired, and what he thought was God’s voice and intervention was merely illusory and coincidental. Yet many evangelical Christians praised *Exodus* over *Noah* because it depicts events more “realistically”—that is, a world essentially disenchanting.

The critical reception of both films among American Protestant evangelicals is noteworthy because it demonstrates that despite belief in God, most evangelicals no longer have a taste for the miraculous, for the enchanted world. The terms of the debate have long been set. And this is a crucial point missing from Josephson-Storm’s narrative. The disenchantment of the world is a Protestant narrative, and this is true whether or not Josephson-Storm’s historical figures associated with the esoteric. Indeed, most of those authors who promoted this undercurrent of esotericism in Western thought had either a Protestant upbringing or were influenced by elements of Protestant thought that deemphasized doctrinal statements, promoted the liberty of private judgment, and emphasized both reason and feeling in religion. Thus, it is still possible to trace the origins of disenchantment to the rise of Protestantism and its iconoclasm with erasing rituals and external sources of authority other than the written word or freedom of conscience. What needs to be emphasized here, and what Josephson-Storm unfortunately does not do, is that it was a particular kind of Protestantism that aligned religious faith with critical reason.

Central elements of the myth of modernity were constructed by Protestant rational theologians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The cultural trajectory of the past two centuries has not been “disenchantment” so much as “de-

Christianization.” English Protestants in particular constructed narratives of corruption of the Catholic Church, which typically relied on a rhetoric of rationality. This anti-Catholic rhetoric, however, was immediately turned into an intra-Protestant self-critique, between contesting theological traditions. By the end of the nineteenth century, freethinkers, secularists, and atheists used this Protestant historiography and rhetoric of rationality against all religious traditions. While Josephson-Storm tries to revise the narrative that the human sciences emerged out of Protestantism, suggesting instead that they were rooted in esoteric thought, this position is not entirely new, nor is it entirely accurate. We need to keep in mind that esotericism and theosophy emerged within a Protestant religious milieu, particularly among dissident intellectuals and liberal Protestant circles. The Protestant context thus remains vitally important. While Josephson-Storm does a fine job debunking certain myths of modernity, its origins and development will continue to be misunderstood until we get our story straight.

Notes

[1]. Friedrich Max Müller, *The Life and Letters of the Right Honourable Friedrich Max Müller* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), 1:254, 256.

[2]. Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: A Biography*, trans. H. Zohn (1975; repr., New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 335.

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