

Dis/enchantment: Locating Modernity Between Secularism and “The Sacred”

Alex Owen's *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004

Jeffrey John Kripal's *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010

Megan Goodwin

In her 2004 *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, Alex Owen notes that “the evocative term *enchantment* neatly captures the sense of the magical, the numinous, and a state of mind seemingly at odds with the modern outlook” (12; emphasis added). Owen attempts to unsettle the implied antagonism between magic and modernity in this rich contribution to modern British intellectual historiography. Indeed, *The Place of Enchantment* insists that fin de siècle occultism was a constitutive element—or at least symptomatic—of modern British culture (8).

Owen offers a nuanced account of occultism from 1880 until 1914, in which she centralizes ritual magic and magicians in historical accounts of British modernity. She observes that late Victorian and Edwardian England’s “occult preoccupation” constituted “one of the most remarked trends” of the period, as many educated, middle-class white women and men “became absorbed by metaphysical quests, heterodox spiritual encounters, and occult experimentation” (4, 7). Marked interest in medieval and Renaissance Christian mysticism, “heterodox inspirational neo-Christianity,” and nondenominational and/or non-Christian esoteric philosophy characterized this new “spiritual movement of the age” (4). *The Place of Enchantment* addresses a scholarly lacuna and what Owens terms an “almost willful” scholarly amnesia regarding “the hugely popular occult movement of the turn of the century” (5).

But Owen’s contribution does more than merely correct the occlusion

of the occult from fin de siècle British historiography; rather, the author confronts prevalent scholarly understandings of modernity as necessarily and exclusively secular. *The Place of Enchantment* is by turns a cultural history of the occult and ceremonial magicians, an intellectual history of “occult subjectivity,” and a theoretical complication of Weber’s *Entzauberung*: that is, the disenchantment of the world as a necessary condition of modernity (Weber et al. 2004, 13). Owen ascribes modernity to fin de siècle occultism because of occultists’ preoccupation with the “elaboration and full comprehension of the self”; she presents the notorious magician Aleister Crowley as an extreme instantiation of such self-exploration (2004, 13). Owen thus understands enchantment as a necessarily modern mode of spirituality.

The survey of occultism’s “Sexual Politics” will be of particular interest to gender scholars, though Owen’s attention to female occultists is by no means limited to her fourth chapter.¹ *The Place of Enchantment* profiles several female ritual magicians of note and offers a cursory explanation for occultism’s appeal to women as a “unique sociospiritual environment offering personal validation and an intellectual rapport” (90). Owen emphasizes shifting gender roles in fin de siècle Britain and presents modern occultism as profoundly ambivalent with regard to “the problem of women” (85). This mode of spirituality, Owen proposes, facilitated women’s authority and “offered a ‘new’ religiosity capable of outstripping the conventional Victorian association of femininity with a domesticated spirituality,” in keeping with feminist aspirations toward social change. As a spiritual movement, however, modern occultism did not substantially disrupt women’s roles in the moral or temporal “order of things” (87). Thus occultism could be seen to support both traditional and progressive positions on the “woman question” (87). While turn-of-the-century ceremonial magicians did recognize, and to some extent participate, in a renegotiation of gender identities, Owen maintains that occultists ultimately aspired to spiritual androgyny—and that negotiating gender was merely “a single element in magicians’ broader quest for self-knowledge” (113).

The Place of Enchantment makes a thorough and convincing case for ceremonial magic as a quintessentially modern practice, if we accept the will to know oneself as the paradigmatic goal of modernity (257).² Owen is perhaps less successful in realizing her second objective: mobilizing occultism (and spirituality writ large) as a disruption of the presumed secularism of modernity.

The Place of Enchantment attempts to unsettle the notion of modern secularism as an absence of religion, and secularization as the inevitability of religious decline.³ Owen contests both the “traditional understanding of modern culture as characterized by a strictly secular-scientific outlook, and of occultism as necessarily opposed to the dictates of rationalism and out of synch with reality” (12). She theorizes occultism as a kind of secularized religious experience: religious impulses indulged outside established traditions (4, 10, 11–13).⁴ She acknowledges that both post-Enlightenment religion and faith have often been aligned with superstition and irrationality (1). Rather than object to the elision of faith and “unreason,” Owen proposes that fin de siècle occultism—as spirituality, rather than religion—at once rationalized religious impulses and deprioritized rationality (7, 11–12, 256–57).⁵

Place of Enchantment thus constitutes a challenge to Weber’s disenchantment thesis. In “Science as a Vocation,” Weber insists that modernization requires disenchantment: in the wake of post-Enlightenment intellectualization and rationalization, moderns will no longer be ruled by “mysterious, unpredictable forces”; we have no further recourse to magic to control or propitiate the “the spirits” (Weber et al. 2004, 13). In *Place of Enchantment*, Owen at once offers occultism as evidence of incomplete disenchantment—since fin de siècle occultism manifests as ceremonial magic—and as new technology. This accounts for much of the unresolved tension in Owen’s more theoretical efforts: occultism, she suggests, is a disenchanted enchantment, a secular spirituality (257). Late nineteenth-century British occultism proves Weberian disenchantment incomplete or unstable at best.

However, Owen fails to note the religious assumptions embedded in secularism and the secularization thesis. Weber himself demonstrated the persistence of religiosity in his iconic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, illustrating the “religious architecture of both the secular state and the free market” (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004, 33). Weber read the Reformation not as the elimination but the diffusion of religious influence over all aspects of public and private life (Weber and Parsons 2003, 36).

The fragmentation of religion—its multiplicity, its resistance to definitions and locations—does not denote absence. As theorists of religion Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini note in their 2004 *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*, the shift of social control from Church to state, “of which the [Protestant] Reformation was the

beginning and which is the motor of the secularization story,” has extended religious assumptions and ethics far beyond reach of previous ecclesiastical authority (33). “Thus even at its moment of institution the secular is not necessarily ‘free’ from the religious” (33).

Owen is right to suggest that occultism demonstrates a shift in religio-spiritual practice in late Victorian and Edwardian England. However, reducing religion to bland “spirituality” and offering a forgotten (if significant) sect as evidence of ongoing religiosity *marginalizes* religion in modernity. Modern religiosity does not merely lurk in darkened rooms and ceremonial circles: it informs the assumptions of secularism, which in turn influence domestic jurisprudence and international policy.⁶ While she correctly offers ceremonial magic as evidence of spirituality’s continued presence in fin de siècle Britain, Owen fails to account for the specter of Protestantism haunting a presumably secular modernity.

Jeffrey Kripal’s 2010 *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred* issues a more belligerent challenge to Weberian disenchantment. Building on earlier arguments for a re-enchanted understanding of the world, Kripal profiles four “authors of the impossible:” psychical researcher Frederic William Henry Myers; writer and humorist Charles Fort; astronomer, computer scientist, and ufologist Jacques Vallee; and philosopher and sociologist Bertrand Méheus.⁷ Kripal contends that these men have been silenced and excluded from the history of religion for “unfettered freedom of speculative thought” in daring to “write about seemingly impossible things . . . giv[ing] us plausible reasons to consider the impossible possible” (6, 25).⁸ These “authors of the impossible,” Kripal implies, are casualties in the academic study of religion’s abhorrence for the paranormal.⁹

Kripal encountered Myers, Fort, Vallee, and Méheus while researching *Mutants and Mystics: Science Fiction, Superhero Comics, and the Paranormal* (2011), which explores “the sacred” in the mythos of speculative fiction and serial art. He finds in each impossible author’s work an attempt to understand “the sacred,” a category that Kripal contends the field of religious studies has largely disregarded to its detriment. Insisting that scholarly explorations of psychic phenomena—UFOs, telepathy, teleportation, and the like—provide crucial insight into the connections between culture and consciousness, “the sacred” and the scientific, this is an urgent, irreverent, and extremely ambitious book.

Authors of the Impossible is also a deeply problematic work. Kripal,

like Owen, fails to fully theorize secularism, understanding it as a mere absence of religion.¹⁰ More troubling, however, is Kripal's appropriation of an agenda that fuels much feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial work—that is, recovering marginalized histories and silenced voices—while belittling the theoretical significance of considering power and privilege. Scholars of gender might applaud Kripal's attempt to recover the previously muted voices of his authors of impossibility. It is difficult nevertheless to reconcile Kripal's dismissal of attention to systemic inequalities as materialist with his attempt to recover the voices of four affluent, well-educated western white men.

This critique is neither to dismiss as out of hand the possibility or the significance of the paranormal, nor to suggest that those methodologies Kripal derides as materialist are the sole or necessarily best ways to approach such phenomena. Rather, I take issue with the assertion that the academic study of religion should primarily concern itself with the experience or interpretation of “the sacred” in essentialist, ahistorical, universalist terms.¹¹ Recovering occluded genealogies need not come at the expense of disregarding gender, race, or class; neither must it belittle or ignore the political ramifications of religion or the scholarship thereof. Unless we can say with certainty that some things (objects, states of mind, places, experiences) are essentially religious/sacred—and by saying so, posit an essential category of religion, one unique unto itself (*sui generis*)—surely the responsibility of the religious studies scholar lies more with engaging those experiences *deemed* religious or sacred by our interlocutors.

Though Owen and Kripal both plumb occluded histories, their work also demonstrates misconceptions common to theorizations of religion-as-enchantment: understanding secularism as the mere absence of religion; and the reduction of religious studies to considerations of the numinous. The fault might lie with the term “enchantment” itself, which invokes concepts like mysticism and transcendence; defining religion-as-enchantment emphasizes belief, privacy, sacred texts, and disembodied intellectual exercises (such as the astral travel of Owen's interlocutors). But religiosity—or even the spiritual—cannot be reduced to any of these: religion is not enchantment. Even a disenchanted world is not one absent of religion—it is one in which religious assumptions, ethics, and aesthetics have become so normalized as to conceal their own Protestant origins (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004, 107, 119).¹² A disappearing act, if you will.

Problematizing enchantment does not require scholars to ignore

or dismiss unusual or troubling phenomena, though we ought to resist theorizations of the paranormal that require essentialized, ahistorical, or universalist definitions of religion or “the sacred.” The academic study of religion needs neither to abject the extra-ordinary nor to preclude the possibility of divine presence.¹³ And perhaps engaging enchantment provides just such an opportunity: to locate religion in modernity beyond dark corners and magic circles, while not dismissing those shadowy figures and solemn ceremonies as unworthy of scholarly attention.

Megan Goodwin is the 2011–2012 Human Rights Campaign Faith and Religion Dissertation Fellow and a doctoral candidate in the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill’s religion and culture concentration. Her research focuses on critical theories of religion, embodiment, and language in contemporary American culture. Her recent publications explore the relevance of queer theory to the study of North American religions, rhetorics of sexual intolerance among North American new religious movements, and religious language in graphic novels; her article on gendered magical practices among medieval Scandinavian and contemporary American Norse religious communities is forthcoming.

Notes

1. Owen focused specifically on the role of women in modern occultism’s predecessor, Spiritualism, in her excellent *The Darkened Room* (1989).
2. Thomas Laqueur and others have contested the desire for self-knowledge as the defining characteristic of European modernity (2006, 124). Randall Styers’ insightful *Making Magic*: (2004) moreover argues that modernity in fact established itself by *making* magic—that is, constructing magic as a foil for appropriate religious piety and legitimate scientific rationality in a western post-Enlightenment context.
3. Theories of British secularization also merit critical interrogation. As religious historian Ann Braude insists in her 1997 “Women’s History Is American Religious History,” scholarly narratives often gauge religious declension in terms of dwindling white male Protestant church attendance, while women’s church attendance held steady or actually increased. More importantly: religion, religiosity, religious sentiment and/or affiliation are not reducible to whites, men, Protestants, or churches.
4. In this assertion, Owen seems to posit an inherently religious human quality—which implies a phenomenological understanding of religion. See also Owen’s definition of occultism as a “desire for unorthodox numinous experience,” reminiscent of phenomenologist of religion Rudolph Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (Owen 2004, 11). Much of Owen’s rhetoric surrounding the spiri-

- tuality of occultism echoes more recent identity claims of being “spiritual but not religious.” On this point, see Bender 2010.
5. For scholarly perspectives that resist the elision of faith and irrationality, see Smith 1988, Chidester 2003, and Barker 1993.
 6. On the material consequences of the Protestant ethics embedded in universalized secularism, see Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008, Mahmood 2005, Asad 2003, Fessenden 2007, and Sullivan 2007.
 7. Regarding contemporary arguments for re-enchantment, see also Partridge 2006 and Hume and McPhillips 2006.
 8. The “history of religion” as it exists in the academy largely focuses on a western genealogy of the academic study of religion. Kripal does little to disrupt this western-centric approach, which is somewhat surprising given his earlier award-winning work on Indian religions. See, for example, Kripal 1995.
 9. This argument, of course, echoes Owen’s observation regarding academia’s “seemingly willful” amnesia about occultism’s popularity and significance in fin de siècle Britain.
 10. See, for example: “We cannot, as a species, ‘outgrow’ the sense of the sacred and become purely secular” (255).
 11. On the importance of attention to religion’s imbrication with power, see King 1999 and Asad 1993, among a number of others. It is worth noting that Kripal does acknowledge historical/cultural specificity, but this acknowledgment is rendered unconvincing by his emphatic insistence on a universal, sui generis category of “the sacred.”
 12. On the normalization of Protestant ethics as secular values, see Fessenden 2007, Sullivan 2007, and Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004 and 2008, as well as Orsi 2005 and Modern 2011.
 13. On this point, see Orsi 2005, 192.

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