

<b>Author:</b>	Hammer, Olaf
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**Review:** The Swedish historian of religions Olav Hammer's doctoral dissertation on the epistemological strategies of the current European esoteric traditions is a remarkable contribution to the understanding of the historical continuum ranging from traditional Theosophy to New Age religion. Hammer's book brings together a number of different and relevant themes by discussing highly differentiated empirical material in the shape of religious texts. The main question, which the book seeks to explain, is how various religious phenomena are adapted to the conditions of the modern world? In order to answer the question, Hammer examines three discursive themes which are fundamental to the esotericism of Theosophy and subsequently New Age religion. These themes are: "Tradition", "Scientism", and "Experience". The basic assumption is that the esoteric traditions are employing very similar strategies in order to legitimise themselves towards the larger social environment in which they exist, and that those strategies are of direct relevance for our understanding of deviant religious groups. Hammer, consequently, sets out to demonstrate how a certain set of religious notions and values have been articulated and propagated in so called pre-modern, modern and even post-modern cultural contexts. The book falls into three major parts. Chapters 1. ("Introduction") and 2. ("Some Theoretical Preliminaries") present the book's intention and offers a theoretical and empirical demarcation. It is emphasised that religious texts rather than personal narratives or sociological perspectives are in focus. What interests is "...how movement texts claim to present authoritative knowledge" (p. 33). This is done by presenting a number of examples or cases from Theosophy, Anthroposophy and New Age religion in its variety. As a supplement to the bibliography all the sources are operationalized in a special appendix (p. 509). In the following chapters (4, 5, and 6) the three discursive strategies are discussed with reference to specific sources. On this basis Hammer concludes that important points in the esoteric texts appear as the result of ongoing de- and recontextualizations that allow new synthesis between different notions to take place. It is also argued that the esoteric traditions have substituted traditional religious concepts of "belief" with claims of "well documented facts". Hammer identifies the epistemological roots of the esoteric traditions as lying in the Enlightenment, but the very same traditions also disregard another important aspect of Enlightenment philosophy; its critical

rationalism. Referring to Wouter Hanegraaff's well known study of the New Age movement, Hammer shows that New Age religion expresses a kind of cultural critique against modernism, even if it is expressed in the style and strategy of modernism itself. Hammer also point to the fact that the three discursive strategies he has focused on are the results of and a reaction against the Enlightenment project, and he states that the esoteric tradition's conceptualisations of "tradition", "science", and "experience" coincide with those of Romanticism. In that perspective the modern New Age movement becomes the latest phase in a line of "reactionary" religious positions throughout the past 200 years. By focusing on the strategic positions of the textual sources it becomes possible to identify the connections between the thematically related, but historically separated, religious traditions that make up the so called "esoteric tradition". As far as I can see, this way of defining things, in this connection, is new and original. Thus Hammer's new book is impressive and marks a new milestone in the study of esotericism, Theosophy, and New Age religion. An in-depth study of religious texts, hand in hand with a detailed knowledge of the different historical contexts, makes Hammer one of our leading scholars in this particular field, and no future work on these matters will, I suspect, be able to deny the conclusions which he reaches. The book changes from lengthy examples to brief digressions, from monographical parts to comparative chapters. Hence the reader becomes acquainted with a long series of religious groups and individuals, while the reading never gets tiresome. Hammer's English is admirable and his arguments are well put. The book, however, also has some shortcomings. Not in the sense that conclusions are weak or argumentations dubious. They are not. But explicit theory is missing and the reader never really gets a grip of Hammer's basic theoretical assumptions. The thesis has certain forms of religious argumentation, certain discourses and their strategic applications as its central theme. Unfortunately the author does not elaborate on the concept of discourse, and the reader will look in vain for a more thorough theoretical basis for the analysis. Another important theoretical concept is syncretism, but this important issue is also not dealt with in theoretical detail, even if the references point to relevant works. Furthermore, notwithstanding the great value of the textual analysis, Hammer could have taken the discussion further by expanding his points of reference. Ritual studies, for instance, would add to the total picture as would more sociological perspectives. However the book is very bulky as it is, and the patient reader probably sends the author many kind thoughts because he decided to stay with the texts as his empirical foundation. Thoughts of another kind probably reach the publisher: like Brill's books in general, it is very expensive and therefore not likely to find its way to the larger, interested audience among, for instance, university students.

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