India in a Mind’s Eye: Travels and Ruminations of an Ambivalent Pilgrim
India in a Mind’s Eye: Travels and Ruminations of an Ambivalent Pilgrim by Steven J. Gelberg
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issue with the author’s discussion of the “African American Church.” Many scholars of African American religious history have been moving away from discussing the influence of the so-called “Black Church” in an attempt to more fully appreciate and represent the diversity of African Americans’ religious lives. This shift is not only worth mentioning because of Hackett’s approach, but it is also noteworthy because it has led to a dramatic increase in works focusing on African American gnostic and esoteric traditions. These emerging areas of study seem ideal for understanding Freemasonry, and yet a discussion of these religious influences is not included in this collection.

This book will be of most interest to scholars of Freemasonry in the United States. It certainly provides new and important information about various Masonic communities and deepens our understanding African American Masons’ relationships to broader communities. It does not, however, seem particularly relevant to the study of newer religious movements. Although Hackett’s chapter focuses on religion, he discusses the relationship between Masonry and mainline Protestantism and does not discuss the kinds of religious influences that are likely to be of interest to scholars concerned with new religions.

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Author Steven J. Gelberg was a member of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) from 1970 to 1987. During that time he worked as ISKCON’s liaison with academics and academic communities. These activities resulted in his 1983 publication _Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna: Five Distinguished Scholars on the Krishna Movement in the West_, in which Gelberg interviewed Harvey Cox, Larry Shinn, Thomas J. Hopkins, A.L. Basham, and Shrivasta Goswami. The present volume, says Gelberg, “is based on a detailed journal I kept during a six-week stay in India in 1986” (xv). The journal recounts the experiences of Gelberg as a young ISKCON devotee accompanied by his wife, and their travels to Delhi, Hardwar, Vrindavan, Calcutta, Mayapur, and Mumbai. Throughout this journey, Gelberg meets numerous Western devotees and Indians sympathetic to ISKCON, providing the reader with a commentary on the state of the movement in India at the time, as well as a budding skeptic’s questions about doctrinaire beliefs and unexamined practices. In 1986, ISKCON was still reeling from the 1977 death of their founder, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, also known as Srila Prabhupada. In the aftermath of his death, the movement was splintered among several
of Prabhupada’s closest disciples, most claiming Prabhupada’s mantle of leadership and creating their own followings within ISKCON. Gelberg has the perspective and temperament of a scholar who appreciates his in-group but is increasingly impatient with that group’s divisions and dictates. He is especially drawn to women devotees who display typically mystical qualities in their demeanor, conversation, and lifestyles. Gelberg doesn’t state this outright, but perhaps he was drawn to these women because they pointed to a purer and cleaner way of devotion that the international movement had seemingly lost sight of during the internecine conflicts among competing gurus. Shortly after his return to the United States, Gelberg enrolled in a masters degree program at the Harvard Divinity School. Although he intended to go from there into a PhD program in religious studies, he eventually pursued creative writing and fine art photography, where he can be found today.

Two specific chapters stand out in this book. One, “Confession of a Hin-Jew”, was written at the request of world-famous Jewish author Elie Wiesel. Gelberg became acquainted with and studied under Wiesel while the former lived in Boston. In this chapter, Gelberg recounts the relatively easy transition he made from Judaism to Hinduism. He notes that his upbringing in Jewish culture was undemanding. That is, Jewishness simply didn’t take with Gelberg. When he was presented with Hindu practice and culture through ISKCON, there was relatively little in Gelberg’s Judaism to jettison. The other noteworthy chapter bears the title of the book. It is an eloquent reflection on the India that Westerners want to see versus the India that is available to the Western gaze. “Initially,” says Gelberg, “I came to India not with open senses, but in an air-conditioned bus with tinted windows and a company guide reading from a script.” This ISKCON-controlled view of India, “the fairy-tale India of pseudo-antiquity: the India of golden palaces, godly kings, talking animals and flying yogis” is contrasted with “the India of many sects, the India of religious multiplicity and ambiguity” (184). Gelberg speaks for thousands, perhaps millions, of Westerners who travel to India in hopes of finding a paradise of ultimate truths. Hopefully, they dissolve their fantasies in an alchemical process of both reality appreciation and renewed appropriation of the best wisdom that India’s multiple religious traditions can offer.

This book, then, will be useful not only to scholars interested in the history of ISKCON, and in many respects the history of newer religious movements in the West, but also to readers who have caught the India bug. With a foreword by pioneering scholar of new religions Robert Ellwood, this volume makes a valuable contribution to both the scholarship of new religions and the ongoing dialogue between the culturally constructed “East” and “West” of western civilization. Unfortunately, this book is difficult to actually obtain. At this time of this review it was no longer available on its original distribution platforms of Amazon.
Kindle or Apple’s iBooks, but is exclusively sold on the independent publishing website blurb.com.

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The academic study of Western esotericism has blossomed over the past two decades, having grown into a full-fledged independent field of research. However, scholarship in this area has focused largely on Western Europe and the United States, thus neglecting the role of esoteric movements elsewhere. *Occultism in a Global Perspective* seeks to correct this omission, having been assembled by two well-known scholars in the field, the University of Gothenburg’s Henrik Bogdan and Simon Fraser University’s Gordan Djurdjevic. Rather than dealing with all of Western esotericism, they have chosen to focus specifically on “occultism”, a problematic and contested term which they use in reference to a group of “modernised” forms of esoteric thought which include new religious movements like Theosophy, Thelema, and Wicca (1). In their words, “the basic aim of this anthology is to understand how occultism changes when it “spreads to new environments” (5), proceeding to do so through providing an array of disparate case studies rather than developing a singular theoretical model.

Aptly opening the volume is the ever thought-provoking Kennet Granholm with a chapter in which he argues that scholars should drop the “Western” from “Western esotericism”. As part of this, he offers a discussion of the concept of “the West” and its connections with modernity and globalism. Hans Thomas Hakl follows with an overview of German magical lodge, the Fraternitas Saturni, from its origins in the 1920s to the present day, while Per Faxneld then discusses the life and work of pioneering Danish Satanist Ben Kadosh (1872–1936). Djurdjevic takes us to the Balkans to provide an overview of two examples of occultism in the former Yugoslavia: the eclectic Serbian esotericist Živorad Mihajlović Slavinski (b.1937), and the Yugoslav Thelemite movement. Crossing the border to Italy, Francesco Baroni details the ritual and magical dimensions of the Christian esotericism propounded by Tommaso Palamidessi (1915–1983).

Taking us out of Europe is Arthur Versluis with a discussion of the life and thought of Chilean occultist Miguel Serrano (1917–2009), an advocate of Savitri Devi’s Esoteric Hitlerism, a spiritual movement that identifies Hitler as a divine avatar. This is followed by PierLuigi Zoccatelli’s analysis of how the Colombian Gnostic Samael Aun Weor (1917–1977) made use of the sex magical teachings of Armenian