

University of Groningen

New Antiquities: Transformations of Ancient Religion in the New Age and Beyond, by Dylan Michael Burns and Almut-Barbara Renger (eds.)

Kwiatkowski, Fryderyk

Published in:
Aries

DOI:
[10.1163/15700593-02002010](https://doi.org/10.1163/15700593-02002010)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Final author's version (accepted by publisher, after peer review)

Publication date:
2020

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kwiatkowski, F. (2020). New Antiquities: Transformations of Ancient Religion in the New Age and Beyond, by Dylan Michael Burns and Almut-Barbara Renger (eds.). *Aries*, 20(2), 277-280.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/15700593-02002010>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Kwiatkowski Fryderyk,

New Antiquities: Transformations of Ancient Religion in the New Age and Beyond. Edited by Dylan Michael Burns, Almut-Barbara Renger (book review), [in:] “Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism,” 2020, 2 (20), pp. 277-280.

Published version:

https://brill-com.proxy-ub.rug.nl/view/journals/arie/20/2/article-p277_6.xml

<https://doi:10.1163/15700593-02002010>.

Dylan Michael Burns and Almut-Barbara Renger (eds.) *New Antiquities: Transformations of Ancient Religion in the New Age and Beyond*, Sheffield, South Yorkshire, and Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2019. vii + 312 pp. ISBN 978-1-78179-504-0.

This collected volume contains eleven essays and an introduction resulting from the workshop “New Antiquities: Transformations of the Past in the New Age and Beyond” at the Institute for the Scientific Study of Religion of Freie Universität Berlin in 2014. The title reflects two central aims of the book: (1) to examine *how* various groups and individuals of the New Age reinvent, re-appropriate, and transform religious ideas of Mediterranean late antiquity to legitimize their beliefs and practices (pp. 2-3, 11); (2) to explore *what* new meanings and functions these elements acquire in the modern contexts of their reception (pp. 1-2, 11).

The book covers many topics of interest to scholars of Western esotericism, but it especially contributes to classical reception studies, which have been concentrated on mainstream Greco-Roman culture. The first five articles are devoted to various (Neo)pagan groups with particular focus on the Goddess Spirituality Movement. Drawing attention to the issue of gender, these essays investigate how examined individuals and groups re-appropriated and (re)interpreted ancient deities, forms of faith, and artefacts. Two papers explore the reception of Gnosticism in North America, and one in the discourse on “Bogomilism” and its appropriation by two (Neo)bogomil groups in the Balkans. Two essays examine how contemporary magicians (re)interpret Coptic Gnostic writings from the Askew and Bruce Codices. And one concentrates on the modern Essene Church of Christ. Instead of reviewing

all the chapters, I will share my reception of some of the key aspects of the book as a whole, and exemplify my points by referring to particular essays.

The volume's strongest aspect pertains to historiographical work drawing on methods from archaeology, philology, religious studies, and other disciplines. Most authors present a well-documented inquiry of sources and discursive streams through which modern religious groups and individuals accessed the world of late antiquity. A common thread running throughout the chapters concerns practitioners' multiple approaches to the scholarly and popular literature. Its impact not only on their perception of the past but also self-understanding as religious individuals is evident. A particularly good examination of this issue depicts Matthew Dillon's paper, in which he studies self-identified Gnostics from the Apostolic Johannite Church and Jeremy Puma, a former ecclesial Gnostic. Dillon presents different ways in which they responded to Gnostic studies scholarship either to legitimize, defend or reform their practices and beliefs. Worth highlighting is Anne Kreps' chapter as well. She shows that by appropriating ancient testimonies and scholarship about the sect, the Essene Church of Christ not only builds its identity partly on Jewish culture and religion (unlike other modern Essene revival movements) but also engages in various esoteric practices associated with the New Age to endorse their vision of the mystic Christian message. The chapters by Almut-Barbara Renger, Meret Fehlmann, Ethan Doyle White, Olav Hammer, and Franz Winter also navigate a similar terrain in a competent manner.

Equally interesting are studies which investigate how practitioners conflated and reproduced academic, esoteric, and popular discourses to suit their particular goals. In the opening chapter, Almut-Barbara Renger by analyzing Mary Elizabeth Wakefield's article on aesthetic facial acupuncture demonstrates that it draws from traditional Eastern medicine, modern psychology of Carl G. Jung, physiotherapeutic practices, and Helena P. Blavatsky's idea of perennial wisdom. Renger convincingly shows that Wakefield re-contextualized Taoist teachings from their original setting and conflated them with the ideals of beauty and self-improvement to address spiritual expectations of Western recipients by marketing them as "holistic" and "ancient." In the final part, she cogently argues that Wakefield's "utilitarian spirituality" should not be easily interpreted as an exploitation of the East to the advantage of the West. Rather, it exemplifies a complex dynamic of reciprocal entanglement in the era of globalization. Meret Fehlmann examines the reception of the image of the great goddess of ancient Crete and Greece in the work of Carol P. Christ. While showing how Christ has invented the religion based on the image of the goddess, Fehlmann explores its discursive origins in the

publications of classicists, mythographers, writers, and archaeologists. On that basis, Fehlmann argues that Christ reinforced many popular notions about ancient Cretan culture, as a matriarchal, peaceful, romantic utopia, which cannot be reconciled with the more recent archaeological findings. The closing chapter by Dylan M. Burns and Nemanja Radulović offers another fine study which disentangles various historico-religious discourses being at work in two (Neo)bogomil groups, Universal White Brotherhood in Bulgaria and Balkan Bogomil Center in Croatia. While showing that academic scholarship on Bogomilism and popular notions about Gnostics informed their beliefs and practice, the authors explore how they incorporated politics, ethnicity, race, and religion, into their narratives. In so doing, Burns and Radulović unveil the significance of these constructions for the development of southeastern European identities in the late nineteenth century and their continuous influence in contemporary discussions about Balkan identities. Worth mentioning is also Kathryn Rountree's essay in which she concentrates on Greek Hellenic reconstructionist movement, the Goddess Movement, and (Neo)pagans from Iberia, Italy and Malta. She persuasively argues that their (re)inventions of ancient Mediterranean deities suit their political and religious goals which are driven by particular historic and cultural factors, among which gender, politics, nationality, and ethnicity are of crucial importance.

Based on the current state of the art, the presented studies demonstrate *how* modern individuals (re)interpreted or (re)invented ideas associated with the late antique world. But the issue of *what* new meanings, forces and functions the transformed elements received in the context of their reception was not explored with the same level of dedication. For example, Caroline Tully meticulously demonstrates that the representations of Minoan Crete created by the Goddess Movement and the Minoan Brotherhood are historically inaccurate. However, her closing discussion of the religious and cultural functions of their activities as *heterochronies* is unsatisfactory, covering less than one paragraph. A similar problem appears in the essay by Franz Winter who concentrates on the life and legacy of Víctor Manuel Gómez Rodríguez's (aka. "Samael Aun Weor"), and his reception of the Gnostic document *Pistis Sophia*. The author provides a broad, well-documented historical background of the reception of this work that preceded Weor's interpretation. He demonstrates the importance of the theme of sexual magic in Weor's teachings and how he read it into the Gnostic text. However, Winter does not contextualize his findings apart from briefly commenting upon the significance of the text *as such* for other esoteric groups. While many authors provided a historico-cultural background in their research, more attention could have been paid to what possible meanings, functions, or

implications stem from their reception, and how it contributes to our understanding of contemporary religion.

Another problem concerns some of the key issues and concepts which were not problematized in the book. The editors rightly notice that classical reception studies have not been concerned with religion. But can we meaningfully speak about religion in antiquity? In recent years, scholars such as Steve Mason or Brent Nongbri have persuasively argued that the modern concept of religion, understood as a distinct sphere, does not have its equivalent in antiquity. The book would have certainly benefited by addressing this issue in order to clearly specify what does it mean to study the reception of ancient religion(s) among modern groups and individuals. The analytical usefulness of the concept of “New Age,” which has been contested in recent years, was also unaddressed. This is puzzling, since the authors who employed the term “Western esotericism” alluded in the footnotes to the relevant literature on its problematic nature and discussed available approaches.

I must confess that while reading the book I was asking myself the following question repeatedly: what legitimizes academic interpretation and how does it differ from the practitioners’ “creative misunderstandings” (p. 2)? Especially, if they are familiar with the literature, adapt to scholarly criticisms, obtain academic degrees, and teach at universities? Ethan Doyle White rightly observes that the reception studies allow researchers to view themselves as being “within” history (p. 143). This not only means that our interpretations are subjected to revision, but also that the ways in which we construct the notions of “authenticity,” “originality,” or “tradition” are historically conditioned. Many of us, similarly as (Neo)pagans, (Neo)Gnostics, or (Neo)Bogomils create persuasive narratives to achieve specific goals and rewrite history. On the one hand, the studies of reception pose a challenge to the scholarly methods by means of which we try to understand how and why people engage with the remnants of the past. On the other, they give us an opportunity to refine them and self-reflect on the significance of our enterprise. I hope that the prospective research on the reception of religion will engage more in a discussion with critically oriented studies to yield even more fruitful results than this fine edited volume has already collected.

In brief, this book should be recommended to scholars of Western esotericism and new religious movements who are interested in traditional historiography. It will open a new discussion in the classical reception studies, which up to this moment have not explored religion or esotericism in a comprehensive fashion.

POST-PRINT