

Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany: State University of New York, 2007). xii + 235 pp., \$66 (cloth), \$21.95 (paperback).

Henrik Bogdan argues that Masonic rituals of initiation form a discrete and coherent phenomenon within Western esotericism that transcends their origins within seventeenth-century European Freemasonry. He pursues the phenomenon from its sources and precursors in Renaissance esotericism through the multiple Craft and High Degree rites of eighteenth-century Freemasonry, its dissemination through the late nineteenth-century Golden Dawn, and finally its transformation through the new religious movement of Wicca. Bogdan's book offers a useful brief primer on the history of Freemasonry and scholarship on Western esotericism, presenting considerable bibliographic information for interested scholars new to the fields. For that alone its value is assured. But Bogdan's work also illustrates important tensions within the study of Western esotericism and the connected field of Pagan Studies.

As with terms like magic, religion, and Paganism, esotericism has proven difficult for scholars to define. Among the leading attempts is that of Antoine Faivre who identifies four main elements (a system of correspondences, belief in a living nature, emphasis on imagination and mediation, pursuit of experiences of transmutation) sometimes accompanied by two additional characteristics (a practice of concordance, transmission via a lineage of masters and disciples). Although Faivre himself rejects essentialist interpretations, his description of esotericism as a "form of thought," linking a variety of "notions" and "currents" strike some readers as hinting of some sort of platonic idealism. But Bogdan's discussion of these concerns remains caught up in those very tensions even as he tries to further distance Faivre's approach, and his own, from essentialist interpretations. However, his careful attention to changes in the notion of ritual initiation as it runs through these currents shows how it is possible, in practice, to minimize essentialist implications that are difficult to avoid in purely theoretical discussions.

Bogdan's work is also noteworthy for another methodological choice. Bogdan confines his sources to published texts, defending that choice by noting the origin of the term "ritual" as a reference to scripts for religious behavior rather than the behavior itself. This may not be controversial to a historian used to dealing almost exclusively with documentary evidence, but it is a departure from those examples of ritual studies that emphasize performative and ethnographic approaches to ritual. It further shows how historians can make use of such anthropological approaches in their own, more textually oriented scholarship.

Furthermore, Bogdan admits to experience with ritual initiation as both an initiate and an initiator. His choice thus protects his work from criticism on two possible fronts. Emphasizing both the exclusively textual nature of his evidence and the importance of experience to esoteric initiations gives him a measure of protection from scholars who might question his objectivity as well as fellow initiates who might fear betrayal of their secrets.

Bogdan's subject is a type of ritual initiation with a very specific form that emerges by the middle of the eighteenth century and that he claims can still be seen in subsequent developments both in and out of the context of Freemasonry. Abbreviating greatly, these rituals open with the admission of a candidate to an already opened lodge of initiates. The would-be initiate undergoes an ordeal symbolized by circumambulations through the lodge and is charged with maintaining the lodge's secrets. Once the obligation is accepted, the initiate is entered into their new initiatory degree and instructed in the appropriate secrets, often by the last such initiate. They are then given some tokens of membership and the lodge is closed. Such rituals are typically undergirded by an orienting myth in which a foundational figure acquires the esoteric knowledge that the lodge transmits through its system of degrees.

The blueprint for this conception of the lodge is the idea of a secret brotherhood described in the Rosicrucian manifestoes and in Johann Valentin Andreae's *Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*. Fueled by the effervescence of hope for spiritual, physical, and social transformation spread through Renaissance Europe in the writings of esotericists including Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Henry Cornelius Agrippa, Giordano Bruno, and John Dee, the Rosicrucian furor set off a wave of imitators. Bogdan places the earliest Masonic groups among them, as well as, much later, the Golden Dawn and Gerald Gardner. Linked to the Golden Dawn, and particularly to Aleister Crowley, Gardner adopted the Masonic three degree structure and tied it to an orienting myth of a primal fertility religion with precedents in the controversial scholarship of Margaret Murray. Gardner's great innovation was to introduce sexual contact into the rites of the third-degree initiation, but the most lasting effect may have occurred after his death. As others have discussed, Gardner's influence went far beyond his own lodge-inspired modern coven as Wicca developed into a new religious movement with an initiatory orientation.

Freemasonry is an important field within contemporary scholarship on esotericism because it shows one way in which esotericism has had a wider influence on Western thought, culture, history, and of course, religion. Though Francis Yates' claims about the centrality of Hermeticism

to the scientific revolution are no longer widely accepted, her scholarship as well as the debate that ensued helped to show the importance of esotericism as one important influence on modernity. The popularity and spread of Masonic lodges in the eighteenth century and beyond suggests an even wider sphere of influence for esoteric ideas and practices and a means by which that influence was transmitted. Bogdan's work hints at that wider influence and begins to detail the mechanisms of transmission in these rituals and the groups that formed around them. It also exposes real early modern roots for contemporary Pagan movements. Bogdan's work leaves this reader eager for more work along these lines.

John Sewell

University of California, Davis.

Paul Reid-Bowen, *Goddess As Nature: Towards a Philosophical Thealogy* (Burlington, Vt. : Ashgate, 2007), 208 pp., \$99.95 (cloth), \$89.96 (online).

In recent years, those who have been calling for extended theological investigation in Pagan Studies have been answered with a flurry of scholarly texts. Aiming at various aspects of Goddess and polytheist religions, Carol Christ, Michael York, Jordan Paper, Anna Primavesi and John Michael Greer have all contributed a great deal to this area of religious development. Paul Reid-Bowen's *Goddess As Nature* is a work of second-generation scholarship that seeks to systematize much of the thought of earlier Goddess theologians. Reid-Bowen, a doctoral protégé of influential Goddess theologian Melissa Raphael and the late Christian feminist theologian Grace Jantzen, reaches back to explore Goddess scholarship of the late 1970s and 1980s. While he defines his task as demonstrating and defending the need for systemic precision in Goddess thealogy, he also defends theological poetics from what he sees as misguided criticisms by secular feminists and others. This aspect of Pagan studies is already highly politicized, with some critical scholars either dismissing religious Paganism or summoning others to this task for fear of being dismissed as scholars of an illegitimate religious option.

In his introduction, Reid-Bowen frames his work in ambitious Kantian terms by suggesting that *Goddess as Nature* forms a "prolegomena" for future Goddess theologies. While perhaps a bit ambitious, this is an appropriate characterization of the work. Bowen, who previously edited the volume *Themes and Issues In Hinduism*, (Cassell, 1998) stands out as a major contributor to Goddess theological discourse, charting sets of questions and relationships of which future scholars must take note.