This is a discursive history of the soul—not what the soul is, but how the soul is defined, categorized, and related to other orders of knowledge within language and its disciplining social institutions, a kind of soul-making spread out over three centuries. The discursive fields, knots, negotiations, and formations treated here are simply vast: German natural philosophy (Naturphilosophie), experimental psychology, evolutionary biology, occultism, parapsychology, and nationalism, modern spiritualities, counterculture, transpersonal psychology, quantum physics, film and literature, and ecology. The book is easily one of the finest modern histories of the soul we have now in English. One important conclusion is that there really is no final distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘science’ in Euro-American culture, regardless of what people who do not know this discursive history want to think or imagine (in their own discursive disciplings, of course). Hence, von Stuckrad can write of what he calls the ‘scientification of religion’ and the manner in which something like the Epic of Evolution is functioning today as a new mythology or mythopoetic science.

It can also be observed that, perhaps, this book participates in that which it is about. There is a certain renaissance of thought and intellectual imagination happening in many academic places these days, particularly around occult, esoteric, paranormal, and ecological phenomena, all of which are historically tied together and so related by von Stuckrad in a book that furthers the very soul-making it traces and treats.

The first half of A Cultural History of the Soul is heavily focused on German and, to a lesser extent, Dutch historical contexts and ideas. This is most welcome and helpful, since we generally lack such a focused treatment in English. So much of the scholarly literature is focused on the French and especially the British contexts (and we still lack full treatments of the Italian, Spanish, or Russian histories). Now this particular error is corrected. Now we have this book, which includes memorable historical German genealogies of occultism, secret science (late 1890s in German, particularly in the figure of Karl Kiesewetter), and parapsychology (late 1880s in Max Dessoir), to name a few.

The general structure of the work moves from Germany in the first half of the book to North America in the second half, arguing that the disasters of German National Socialism or Nazi ideology, which linked the soul to the nation-state and its unthinkable violence, effectively suppressed the development of psychology and discourses on the soul in post-war Germany (for who could speak of a soul after such a hateful Seele?). The same events, of course, also exiled a number of
important German intellectuals, including to the U.S. The book powerfully demonstrates just how deep the discursive connections are between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of German intellectual life and the second half of the twentieth century of North America.

Personally speaking, I have written a history of some of the spiritual currents of the American counterculture (Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion), which, in many ways, begins with just such an exiled German intellectual, Frederic Spiegelberg, a scholar of comparative religion who mentored both founders of what became the Esalen Institute (Michael Murphy and Richard Price). I am also an active intellectual and spiritual participant in this social history, including at Esalen. I observe this to point out that I know, quite intimately, many of the people von Stuckrad treats in his discourse analysis, and that I have read, and much admired, the present book in this lived context.

Von Stuckrad gets things right, including the various forces of twentieth-century American psychology: from the First Force of Wilhelm Wundt’s empirical psychology (which became positivism and behaviorism in the U.S.); to the Second Force of Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis; to the Third Force of Roberto Assagioli and Abraham Maslow and what became humanistic or transpersonal psychology (which, interestingly, von Stuckrad informs us, was originally thought of in the States as a transhumanistic approach, predating our present transhumanism by decades); to what Maslow in particular saw as a cosmos-centered future Fourth Force, which, as von Stuckrad points out again, presciently predicts and looks forward to the animistic, ecological, and object-oriented ontologies of today.

Von Stuckrad’s careful readings of the quantum mysticisms, the big bang cosmologies, various iterations (and no doubt experiences) of cosmic consciousness, deep ecology, kabbalistic, Hegelian, and scientific evolutionary epics (‘that God comes to full realization only in the human being’ [p. 221]), and various modern animistic, pagan, shamanic, and magical worldviews as different expressions of a renewed natural philosophy—a kind of super naturalism, as I have framed them—are especially important and correct. As are the author’s various comments on the mystical sensibilities of a figure like Rudolf Otto, or the ways that the comparative study of religion (in individuals as diverse as Max Müller, E.B. Tylor, James George Frazer, and William James) contributed actively and positively to new (comparative) forms of occultism, magic, and mysticism. Modernity is positively haunted.

The roles of persecuted or exiled Jewish families in this bigger story (the families or persons of Freud, Assagioli, and Maslow in particular) are also keys. The fascist horrors of World War II, it turns out, played a central role in the development of key intellectuals, like Spiegelberg, Assagioli, Maslow, and Aldous Huxley (an outspoken pacifist whose ‘perennial philosophy’ was also a post-World War II phenomenon aimed at the gut of religious exclusivisms of all kinds). People forget the obvious ways that these intellectuals countered the anti-Semitisms of cultures like Germany, Russia, and Italy.

The genre of the book review, at its best anyway, is supposed to have at least one reservation or criticism. I certainly harbor my own convictions, but I want to own these as my own. It is never fair to criticize a book for what one wanted it to do, and von Stuckrad is perfectly clear about his own discursive methodology (dedicated to Michel Foucault and his work on the imbrications of power and knowledge). The author does exactly what he says he will do. I have no criticisms in
his own terms.

Outside this book, however, I do think that Foucault is very much a part of the problem von Stuckrad is addressing. His philosophy in effect locks us down to a kind of two-dimensional Flatland of discourse analysis, power politics, and social life. The human is basically a dying social political animal here; inevitably, moreover, an animal with bad politics and even worse moralities. It’s never good. The history of religions, however, often possesses a third transcendent dimension, an ‘up’ that can never be seriously addressed in this strictly social and finally depressing two-dimensional discourse.

But that is my own deep reservation about the humanities or human sciences as they have been institutionalized and practiced in the present academy. We are making a soul, I suppose, or denying there is one at all. This is not a criticism of Kocku von Stuckrad, who handles his discourse analyses with nuance, sophistication, and, I dare say, a most welcome and surprising optimism. I should finally add that such a reservation about our present order of knowledge supports and furthers the very discursive methods that it criticizes, participates in them again. It wants to use Foucault to move beyond Foucault. It wants to know what the soul is (or is not) and not only how it has been talked about, imagined, and thought in the history of Euro-American culture, science, and religion. It wants a new discursive formation, a set of conditions that can make what is presently impossible possible.

Jeffrey Kripal
Rice University
jjkripal@rice.edu