

HOLMAN, JOHN. (2008). *The return of the perennial philosophy: The supreme vision of Western esotericism*. Foreword by Robert Ellwood. New York: Watkins. 170 pp. ISBN 9781905857586. Softbound. \$17.95. *Reviewed by Sean M. Saiter*.

For at a time when some scientists think they are close to a complete theory of everything, and the commodification of knowledge (and all else) continues apace, esotericism as a subject is not a religion, nor a mere point of debate, but is itself an admonition—a healthy slap in the face. (Holman 2008, p. xxii).

John Holman's aim in writing this book is to make sense of Western Esotericism's "omnidirectional metaphysical assertions and discourses" (p. 127) "giving a comprehensive and comprehensible picture of the esoteric worldview" (p. 127). I would add to this a quite necessary and useful attempt to give voice to Western esotericism (mainly Theosophy, but also principally Gnosticism, Hermeticism, and Kabbalism) in the context of transpersonal psychologies (namely Jung, Assagioli, and Wilber), mysticism, and philosophy.

Holman brings to the reader's attention the role of esotericism and theosophically-inspired cosmic initiatory realities of spiritual development. He provides an oft-unheard call for the veracity and integrity of Western esotericism in the context of transpersonal psychologies and Western mystical traditions, namely Kabbalism, Sufism, Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Theosophy, Neoplatonism, and Alchemy.

After reading *The Return of the Perennial Philosophy*, it is easy to get the sense that the varieties of spiritual paths he discusses are the only ways to spiritual realization though there is never any claim otherwise. The rather intentional lack of discussion about Eastern wisdom traditions and other spiritual paths not directly addressed certainly contributes to this feeling. Regardless, we should not hold this against Holman, for the aim is Western esotericism's contribution to the topics transpersonal psychologists find interesting, in this case—the root epistemology of the discipline.

Although Holman tempts to be somewhat comprehensive in his approach, the book is much easier to understand if taken as an introductory overview of Western esotericism in the context of contemporary spiritual issues.

Regardless of the book's scope, it is immediately apparent by the first page of the introduction that one of the main arguments is to stress the relationship between an understanding of the perennial philosophy from a perspective as an "outsider" versus the perspective and understanding of it as an "insider" or one who knows from living it:

The focus will be on the psychospiritual and cosmological aspects (the social, political, and cultural aspects being reserved for a later work), and,

whilst the author holds his hands up to the charge of syncretism, it is hoped that this picture would be one that is largely recognized by *practitioners*. A secondary aim is the illumination of modern theosophical teachings particularly concerning *initiatology*—a subject which, to date, has been little understood or at least explored in depth. (Holman, p. xv, italics in original)

The Return of the Perennial Philosophy is divided into distinct sections with short, concise, and well-referenced chapters. In section one are the chapters: 1: Early Esotericism, which includes historical overviews of Gnosticism, neoplatonism, and Hermeticism. Chapter 2: Traditionalism; 3: Theosophy, and Chapter 4: Some Other Esoteric Schools.

In part two he lays out in very clear language the main tenets of the individual spiritual path: Chapter 5: Spirituality and Cosmology; Chapter 6: The First Initiation; Chapter 7: The Second and Third Initiations; Chapter 8: The Fourth and Fifth Initiations; and Chapter 9: The Higher Initiations

In part three he takes the customary “collective” or “big picture” view and discusses worldviews and the psychologies of Jung, Assagioli, and Wilber—only pointing out where they converge with esotericism and transpersonal cosmologies of development: Chapter 10: Changing Worldviews; Chapter 11: Spiritual Psychology I: Carl Jung And Roberto Assagioli; Chapter 12: Spiritual Psychology II: Ken Wilber; and Chapter 13: Challenges of the Esoteric View.

In the final chapter—which I found to be one of the best—he challenges prevailing conceptions of the perennial philosophy that do not take into account its truly “timeless” and “lived” aspect. Here he reminds us that “any scheme which puts itself forward as *the* Grand Design, and which is attached to a quantitative or Character-science, *by* this attachment, can not be the big picture (even if it is an ‘improved’ picture).

The Return of the Perennial Philosophy is a very accessible read, especially compared to much of the literature on esotericism, even though the author does make some assumptive demands on the reader in terms of familiarity with theosophical cosmology. I would not recommend the book to someone who has no exposure to Theosophy (however, ironically, it is a good primer on Gnosticism, Kabbalah, and the other esoteric traditions covered). Beyond this, I found many nuggets of wisdom and fodder for thinking as a transpersonal or humanistic psychologist. I was especially enlightened by the works of G. de Purucker, who was one of the main—but less heard of—Theosophists of the previous century:

We are told with reiterated insistence that the grandest rule of life is to foster within one’s own being undying compassion for all that is, thus bringing about the winning of selflessness, which in turn enables the peregrinating monad ultimately to become the Self of the cosmic spirit without loss to the monad of its individuality. In the above lies the secret to progress: to be greater one must become greater, to become greater one must abandon the

less; *to encompass a solar system in one's understanding and life* one must give up, which means outgrow and surpass, the limits of the personality, of the mere human. (de Puruker, quoted in Holman, pp. 88–89, italics in original)

Overall, the writing is thoughtful and balanced. The book is clear and to the point but not overly simplistic. It is also well referenced so, in this sense, it is scholarly as well as accessible—all qualities that qualify the book as worthy of inclusion among faculty syllabi or as an inspirational primer into the Western tradition.

The emphasis on Theosophy is apparent, and though some might consider this a bias I found it quite appropriate and informative. I came to a deeper appreciation for the role that Theosophy has played in the history of transpersonal psychology and Western esotericism in general. Additionally, it was enlightening to read about the influence Theosophists have had in promulgating the perennial philosophy into the consciousness of the average person.

Holman is reminding us that the perennial philosophy is not a mundane philosophy. It is not a product of the endless circlings of the intellectual mind. It is a call to a reality that can only be understood through *gnosis*, an understanding that requires a move beyond conceptualization (or through) to comprehend. In the final section of the book, this import becomes the clearest:

... (T)o know the perennial philosophy *as* Divine Reality, one has to “go there” too. In the writings of many contemporary thinkers, the perennial philosophy is essentially the premodern worldview—a philosophical consensus of sorts, featuring a multi-levelled universe from matter, through living systems, mind and soul, to spirit/God. This gives us a perennial philosophy ‘map’ of sorts but, reminds esotericism, we are to remember that the map is not the terrain ... To know the perennial philosophy as Divine Reality requires engaging in the gnostic project, and there is perhaps evidence today that many philosophers are ‘fulfilling the necessary conditions’. (pp. 127–128)

The Author

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