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Book Review: Spiritual Taxonomies and Ritual Authority: Platonists, Priests, and Gnostics in the Third Century C. E.

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the Eastern Orthodox influence and its demonization, and focuses instead on other kinds of practice occurring in the eastern parts of Finland (and even more widely). Especially the extensively discussed non-Christian practices and beliefs would have deserved a chapter of their own. Still, the topics discussed in this section are relevant indeed.

While excellent as a whole, some critical remarks can be noted as to details of the book. The first point may be a bit unfair since scholarly traditions are different, but the book could have benefited from a clearer structure where the author's theoretical viewpoints (and the dating of the early modern period in Finland) would have been made explicit in the beginning of the study instead of gradually within the text. Also, the fact that there are references in the concluding chapter is unusual to me. I noted a few cases where references to archaeological results were taken from secondary studies by non-archaeologists instead of the original study. Moreover, several typographical errors (and some redundancy) interfere with the flow of the text, so the book would have benefited from an extra proofreading before print.

Overall, *Faith and Magic in Early Modern Finland* is an enjoyable read which can be warmly recommended for anyone generally interested in the interrelationship of faith and magic or the situation in Finland more specifically. It makes clear that that people had a need to participate actively in religion and were not merely passive listeners and observers of rituals performed by priests. Thus it shows excellently how religion and its interpretation lived and changed together with other aspects of society.

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HEIDI MARX-WOLF. *Spiritual Taxonomies and Ritual Authority: Platonists, Priests, and Gnostics in the Third Century C.E.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. Pp. 216.

This academic, scholarly, and thoughtful book makes a positive contribution to a wide range of disciplines including philosophy, the history of religion (particularly late ancient religion), broad cultural history, esotericism, and mysticism. It is a well written, riveting, and fascinating book that many readers will be unable to put down, but it deserves careful reflection and even multiple readings.

The book focuses on how four third-century Platonic philosophers—namely, Plotinus, Origen, Porphyry, Iamblichus (POPI)—developed spiritual

taxonomies (including the ordering of the divine sacred realms of angelology, the lower realms of embodied demonology, the exemplary realms of heroes, the construction of theogonies, and the cosmic ordering of spirits), theurgic praxis, and soteriologies (doctrines of salvation) in a hierarchical, moral, and ontological manner.

In our myopic age of narrow academic specialization, it is refreshing to see that Marx-Wolf widens the scope of her analysis to include how the above four philosophers fit into a broader religious third-century Mediterranean historical context. She is to be applauded for her ambitious broad scope of evidence. She marshals not only the primary texts of POPI, but ups the ante by including certain Nag Hammadi texts and Greek and Coptic ritual magic papyri. Marx-Wolf thus insightfully reveals the connections between the above four philosophers and local Christians, pagan Neoplatonists, Egyptian ritual clerical experts, and Gnostic writers (particularly Sethian Gnostics)—all at a time when these groups' religious identities were still under construction. Marx-Wolf maps POPI's relationship to other competing groups of the time, and convincingly shows (as also noted by Heidi Wendt in the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, October 27, 2016) that Platonist philosophers, Christian and non-Christian priests, Hermeticists, and Gnostics were "far more interconnected socially, educationally, and intellectually" than previously recognized (3). Thus, POPI did not develop their spiritual taxonomies in isolation, or ex nihilo, but systematized the realm of spirits within a broader social context. POPI's esoteric knowledge was thus embedded and indeed entangled in a social web that Marx-Wolf attempts to trace across disciplinary and religious boundaries.

What emerges in Marx-Wolf's portrait of the Mediterranean in the third century is an intellectual climate that is quite vibrant, and more integrated than factional—far from the stereotypical characterization of much previous historiography on this period, which saw this century as marking the onset of "the dark ages." She thus joins a trend in recent scholarship that attempts to recast the third century not as a period of cultural decline, mayhem, and descent into superstition—a dark age between evanescent philosophic speculation and the triumphant rise of the Church—but of creative intellectual exchange and religious innovation. Marx-Wolf also lets us see the familiarity of POPI with the existing medical and religious literature and other domains of knowledge of their time. In reading Marx-Wolf's wonderful book, this reviewer was reminded of Nietzsche's remark that "Christianity is merely watered down Platonism."

The book is divided into four main chapters that bring together evidence ranging from the writings of Origen (including his Biblical homilies), to the

work of philosophers responsible for the transmission of Plotinus, Gnostic tractates, and magical handbooks. In keeping with her historicist method, Marx-Wolf begins with an engaging introduction that gives a survey of the recent scholarly literature on demonology and angelology, particularly as it pertains to the religious and historical contexts of late antiquity.

Chapter 1 is a tour de force that examines the ascetic impulse of third-century debates about animal sacrifice, particularly with respect to Porphyry's *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, as a vehicle for revealing Porphyry's understanding of the mechanism by which blood sacrifices fix or embody demonic forces in this world. Marx-Wolf sheds light on how Porphyry's ascetic impulse to control animal instincts like lust, craving, and desire shines through in his argument about reason's duty to prevent the soul from succumbing to demons that arise from the appetite and passions. While Porphyry's advocacy of ascetic vegetarianism may contradict the stance of his own teacher, Plotinus, Marx-Wolf helps the reader understand how Porphyry came to his understanding of the origin, nature, and generation of these demons despite the fact that there is no evidence Porphyry had knowledge of the biblical prohibition of blood consumption, "for the life of a creature is in the blood."[1]

In Chapter 2, Marx-Wolf illustrates how Origen, in *On First Principles,* worked through Plato's *Timaeus* and the biblical book of Genesis, among other texts, to construct a coherent cosmogony of the higher heavenly and lower demonic realms and the place of human souls and their paths to salvation therein. Marx-Wolf shows how Origen was compelled by non-Christian philosophers like Plotinus and Porphyry to devise his own understanding of the soul and its metamorphosis via reincarnation and ascent. Thus, an intellectual honesty is shown on Origen's part, as he did not let political matters influence his thinking about religious doctrine, but heeded the call of the *logoi* in search for *aletheia* by synthesizing the wisdom (Sophia/hokmah) of such diverse sources as ancient Jewish sacred texts, Egyptian magical papyri, Plato's philosophy of the soul in *Phaedrus*, the medical knowledge of Hippocrates and Galen, and a miscellany of oracles. This reviewer wonders if perhaps Marx-Wolf might have widened her scope further to consider Origen's familiarity with the rabbinic hermeneutical interpretation of the Witch of Endor's bringing up the spirit of Samuel from the underworld in constructing his understanding of the mechanism and dynamics of the spirit worlds and

1. Leviticus 17:11. See also Lev 3:7; Lev 17:10; Lev 17:4; Deut 12:23; Gen 9:4 which was addressed and ameliorated by the salting process (ba'Melach Timlach, Lev. 2:13) of the Rabbinical system of Kashrut.

metempsychosis. Such a widening of scope might add further interdisciplinary depth to her study. Marx-Wolf might also have considered some of the evidence adduced by Gershom Scholem in *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and the Talmudic Tradition.*[2]

Chapters 3 and 4 draw on the complex cosmologies of the Nag Hammadi codices that Marx-Wolf argues were a catalyst for the refinement of the spiritual taxonomies of POPI. Furthermore, Marx-Wolf argues that the fact that the Nag Hammadi and other Platonic texts demonstrate intellectual concern with questions of ontology, cosmology, and the soteriology of the spirit world is not accidental, for these texts also arose from the philosophical schools and circles in large urban centers like Alexandria and Rome that were preoccupied with questions about spiritual taxonomies. The four aforementioned Platonic philosophers' production of taxonomic spiritual discourses was thus not a mere academic exercise or language game. Rather, the salvation of the souls of these elite philosophers was at stake.

Marx-Wolf argues that POPI's formulation of spiritual taxonomies was in part a strategy to leverage various kinds of authority, or what Marxists call the stockpiling of social and intellectual capital, against the authority of other contemporary experts of their time. That is, these four Platonic philosophers self-consciously positioned themselves as the "high priests of the highest gods" by invoking their spiritual taxonomies as evidence of their expertise in sacred, ritual, doctrinal, and divine matters. Thus, POPI's taxonomic knowledge is seen in the context of rivalry and capitalistic (*avant la lettre*) competition in the production of a Derridean logo-centric hegemonic discourse set out to trump its competitors of common Christian, elite Platonist, or cryptic esoteric hermetic and Gnostic varieties. Marx-Wolf argues that POPI ventured into the area of theurgic practices to affect the divine worlds of spiritual taxonomies; by so doing, they asserted their Platonic knowledge as a form of priestly ritual, which effectively rendered the cosmos a manifestation of their divine authority. Thus as spiritual venture capitalists *avant la lettre*, POPI took on the personae of theurgic priests to widen their spiritual authority in the late antique landscape by diversifying their spiritual portfolio in the area of ritual expertise.

But is this thesis true to the Platonic dialogues' stated mission? Ralph McInerny distinguishes between Plato, Platonists, and the mere scholar or academic, all of which are far from being coterminous: the Platonist goes to school to discover the truth, while the academic goes to school to establish a

2. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1960.

career. While a Plato scholar can tell us a lot "about" Platonism and the history of Neo-Platonic influence, philosophers teach us in other ways; we learn from them, or as Leo Strauss notes, we sit at their feet and listen to their dialogues (in the case of Platonists), and their monologues (in the case of Aristotelians). The point is that if Marx-Wolf points the reader, as she convincingly does, to a rivalry and competition between competing claims for authority, then we are left with the Foucaldian conclusion that all histories and historians represent some form of a power-knowledge regime.

In summary, this book is highly recommended for philosophy students and professors, historians of religion, and scholars of the occult and cultural studies. My only real criticism is that Marx-Wolf might have widened her scope to include another active group that existed in this third-century Mediterranean context, namely the Jewish Gnostics, who are perhaps less well known to scholars of Christianity and Roman philosophy. Nonetheless, as an example of philosophic and historical scholarship on the history of early Christianity, Marx-Wolf's work is definitely deserving of attention.

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SIMONE NATALE. *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016. Pp. xi + 235, 31 ill.

Thirty years ago, scholarly study of spiritualism was decidedly marginal to Victorian studies, an area of eccentric belief and pseudoscience that was considered an embarrassment at best. Janet Oppenheim's breakthrough study *The Other World* (1985), which examined spiritualism, theosophy, and psychical research, remained symptomatic in beginning from the premise that it needed to be explained how substantial numbers of intelligent men and women came to believe in such self-evidently false beliefs. Oppenheim opened the field to more mainstream cultural historians. The next generation, though, did not prejudge these beliefs, but offered contextualization from religion, science, and culture, investigating how eminent men of science such as Alfred Russell Wallace could simultaneously sustain a rigorous materialism and an affirmation of the spirit world. New methods from the history of science that did not prejudge the truth and falsity of historical phases when multiple, competing theories circulated to explain anomalous