

***Secrecy: Silence, Power, and Religion.* By Hugh Urban. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 264 pages. \$30.00 (paperback). ISBN: 978-0-226-74664-7.**

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Hugh Urban's book *Secrecy: Silence, Power, and Religion* examines the meanings of "secrecy" in six "esoteric movements" in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Engaging esoteric movements in the US and Europe, Urban analyzes the ways secrecy can be used to accomplish different individual, cultural, and structural aims. Urban argues that secrecy is not a *part of* religion, but *central to* its operations. If "secrecy" was ever conceptualized as a unitary term with a singular meaning, Urban's analysis complicates these assumptions by offering what he describes as the model of "secrecy" as a "linchpin." Secrecy is something that holds together several strategies for maintaining and proliferating power between subjects and within institutions and broader culture.

Central to *Secrecy* is Urban's argument that "secrecy...is intimately tied to symbolic power" (p. 10). Here Urban draws from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of "symbolic power," which Urban defines as a "power to impose one's view of the world and to define the taken-for-granted understanding of reality, not through physical force but through the status and authority with which one is *vested* by others" (p. 10). Secrecy is a manifestation of symbolic power because "secrecy at once *enhances* the status and authority of the one who possesses the secret, even as it *conceals* or *obscures* their full identity" (p. 10). Ultimately, Urban argues that this ability to entice practitioners through obscuring and concealing secrets is central to the operations of power in esoteric movements.

Urban's book contains an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. What exactly are the ways that secrecy is exercised, according to Urban? And perhaps equally significant, what might these modes

of secrecy have to do with our world today and the contemporary responsibilities of the religious studies scholar? The answers are varied and multi-layered. Urban begins his text by analyzing the more well-known material *Morals and Dogma* by Albert Pike (chapter 1). Here, he analyzes adornment, white superiority, and secrecy in Pike's Scottish Rite Freemasonry Movement. He then offers close readings of more obscure memoirs, manifestos, and related texts. Chapter 2 engages Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's *The Secret*, contemplating Blavatsky, esotericism, Orientalism, and the Theosophical Society. Chapter 3 analyzes Maria de Naglowska's *Magia Sexualis*, thinking through sexual magic and the erotics of secrecy. Chapter 4 turns to Noble Drew Ali's *Circle 7 Koran*, considering "The Five Percenters," social resistance to white supremacy, and dynamics of gender. Chapter 5 uncovers the *Turner Diaries* and *The Road Back: A Plan for the Restoration of Freedom When Our Country Has Been Taken Over By Its Enemies*, analyzing the secrecy of violence within the white supremacist movement *Brüder Schweigen* in the United States. Lastly, chapter 6 contemplates the "Third Wall of Fire: OT VIII Text," theorizing secrecy as a tool of power and embarrassment in the Church of Scientology.

While taking on six different esoteric movements grounded in diverse philosophical frameworks, Urban describes his work as a "modest" approach. The modesty comes from his "ground up" (p. 19) methodology. Urban explains, "One does not begin with grand universal archetypes but with a set of specific historical examples and their concrete contexts before generating broader comparative connections" (p. 19). In reading each of these texts from a "ground up" methodology, Urban sees himself accomplishing the work of a "historian of religion" (p. 4). Drawing from history of religions scholar Bruce Lincoln, Urban believes that he can foster a "critical history of religions" that "always pays close attention to the human, situated, interested, temporal, and material dimensions of discourses that claim to be supra-human or transcendent" (p. 190). Urban works to understand the specific geo-historical, embodied, and political dynamics that inform the workings of "secrecy" within specific communities. If secrecy can be practiced in different ways, including to obscure, reveal, conceal, punish, or lure, then we must come to understand the exact socio-cultural-religious relations that create different meanings of secrecy within varied esoteric contexts.

A scholar of comparative studies, Urban certainly does not shy away from the method of comparative thought. For the most part, such comparison works. By turning to six different cases, Urban allows his reader to think across traditions, seeing how remnants of Orientalism and racism, for instance, carry across nation-state lines and through history. Urban is aware of the limitations of comparative scholarship, recognizing that

comparison as a method in the study of religion has often gone tragically astray, leading to all manner of problematic generalizations and oversimplifications. It has often, at best, fostered a kind of facile, naïve perennialism that sees all religions as reflections of some grand universal Truth; and, at worst, it has helped pave the way for imperialism and the colonization of other cultures within the all-consuming eye of Western scholarship. (p. 18)

Knowing these dangers, Urban believes that not only are such comparative works unavoidable but they can actively help to “re-describe” (p. 19) or re-conceptualize secrecy across time and space. Urban’s book is the project of tracing the nuanced relationship between secrecy, power, and knowledge within religious thought.

Chapter 1, entitled “The Adornment of Silence: Secrecy and Symbolic Power in American Freemasonry,” is one of Urban’s most successful and multi-layered chapters. In this chapter, Urban analyzes the Scottish Rite, an esoteric and elaborate branch of the Freemasonry Movement. Urban compellingly argues that the Scottish Rite is an example of secrecy as “adornment.” Scottish Rite Freemasonry exemplifies the status of secrecy as “an ‘adorning possession,’ which paradoxically enhances one’s status by virtue of what it conceals” (p. 24). With 29 levels to ascend, each grade increases not only in secrecy but adornment, with clothing, flags, and other symbols illustrating that one has achieved a new level of power within the organization. This “material esotericism,” as Urban puts it, has several important functions. On the one hand, this organizational structure works to consistently draw members deeper into the movement. With 29 levels, each with their own paraphernalia and guarded philosophies, this adornment of silence “helps transform an otherwise unremarkable body of teachings into rare, scarce, highly valued pieces of knowledge. It creates a body of precious resources, a kind of esoteric currency, which in turn grows in value as one advances in the lodge” (p. 35). In tandem with this desire for religious knowledge is racialized power. In response

to the post-Civil War context in which the social order of racial and gender formations was changing, wealthy white men felt threatened by a perceived egalitarian landscape. While the Scottish Rite promoted themselves as “egalitarian,” the internal order was anything but; with expensive fees and active associations with white supremacist organizations, the leader of the Scottish Rite, Albert Pike, helped to form an esoteric community with an internal order. This internal order allowed white, non-working-class men to feel in control of their own specific location by specifically excluding Black members. Chapter 1 is a strong representation of the ways secrecy and adornment can function as tools of racialized, classed, and gendered power, specifically in the service of white male, upper-class hegemony and anti-Blackness and misogyny.

In many of the movements Urban analyzes, secrecy operates through the mysteries surrounding the core teachings of an esoteric order. Part of the lure of secrecy, Urban contends, is the ways organizational leaders have access to a certain kind of secret *history*, including access to hidden historical figures, people in their travels, or connections to the divine. This secrecy around sources can lead members to become transfixed on the leaders’ knowledge, luring them in as they search for the knowledge only the leader of the organization can help expose. Scholars interested in Buddhism, Hinduism, and studies of Orientalism will be compelled by Urban’s text, as Urban illustrates the ways many of these movements draw from Eastern philosophies and historical subjects to create their European and North American esoteric movements. The focus of chapter 2, entitled “The Secret Doctrine: The Advertisement of the Secret in the Theosophical Society and the Esoteric Section,” on Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society demonstrates how many of Blavatsky’s writings are grounded in a romanticization of India and Tibet. Indeed, Blavatsky “romanticized Tibet as the ultimate source of esoteric wisdom, the most ancient, remote, and exotic realm where pure access to the innermost recesses of spiritual knowledge is still available in the modern world” (p. 54). Urban’s text is a central piece of scholarship for scholars interested in the Orientalism, fetishization, and colonialization of contemporary new religious movements, for his examples “might help...to shed light on the ‘seductive’ power of secrecy” (p. 188) in various contemporary domains, whether in Hindu or Buddhist tantras, Jewish mysticism, or Bikram Yoga.

While there are several strengths to Urban's comparative methodology, I believe his methodological choices, citational practices, and analytical insights could, at times, be more engaged. For example, it is not always clear what role Urban plays in his analysis. Certainly, Urban provides innovative analysis that captures the workings of white supremacy, sexism, classism, and Orientalism, but sometimes he stops short by only *naming* rather than more deeply *questioning* the operations of power at play. In chapter 3, "The Seduction of the Secret: Eros and Magic in Twentieth-Century Europe," Urban analyzes the work *Magia Sexualis*, which is Maria de Naglowska's work on sexual magic. In performing an analysis of an advertisement for her book, Urban notes that Naglowska focuses on the subject of the "mysterious mulatto' from America" (p. 88). Urban states, "Just as Randolph has ascribed the origins of his sexual magic to exotic sages in the Orient, so too, Naglowska has ascribed her secrets of sexual magic to the mulatto in America. In both cases, the dark and sensual power of magic is seen as coming from a distant, mysterious—and racialized—source" (p. 88). Here, while Urban certainly accounts for the presence of race in the conceptualizing of sexual magic, this is the end of his discussion on race and its imbrications with Naglowska's orientation toward secrecy and sexual magic. The introduction of this quote begs the question: beyond the workings of gender and femininity, which Urban well establishes in this case, does race more heavily inform the frame Naglowska brings forward? In my eyes, a more serious and full reckoning with the meaning of race and how it informed her views and philosophies, at least in this specific context, might have been in order.

There is also the question of sourcing and the theorists with whom Urban chooses to be in conversation. While Urban draws heavily from theorists like Bourdieu and Lincoln, his work might have been strengthened by an engagement with Black feminist thought. This point specifically applies to Urban's fourth chapter, "Secrecy and Social Resistance: The Five Percenters and the Arts of Subversive Bricolage." This chapter, as the title indicates, is committed to understanding the ways that secrecy can allow for social resistance to white hegemony, white power, and US surveillance. Paying close attention to "The Five Percenters," an offshoot of the Nation of Islam that posits that "the true God or Allah is none other than every black man" (p. 104), Urban highlights how power and capital operate to form a "black market form of capital" (p. 105) in which coded language and alphabets were

used to communicate subversive ways of knowing. These alternative languages, which helped establish an internal way of understanding Black men's power and dynamics of racial ontology and oppression, worked to create "a powerful, valuable but largely underground and subversive kind of esoteric currency exchanged outside of or beneath the mainstream symbolic economy" (p. 120). While Urban does well to establish the ways that such alternative economies lead to empowerment for Black men, he does little to address the workings of gender and the place of Black women in these orders. While Urban momentarily acknowledges the philosophical and adorning place of Black women in this movement, a more in-depth engagement with Black feminist thought and the workings of gender might have enhanced his analysis and complicated the ways "social resistance" can sometimes intersect with other modalities of power in formative, and not tangential, ways.

If Urban somewhat fails to account for the ways masculinity sculpts the Five Percenters in chapter 4, then he recovers his analysis of gender, and specifically white masculinity, in chapter 5. Titled "The Terror of Secrecy: Racism, Masculinity, and Violence in the *Brüder Schweigen*," chapter 5 examines Robert Jay Mathews' "Order," an organization otherwise known as the Silent Brotherhood. Urban illustrates how white supremacist organizations like *Brüder Schweigen* turn to such texts as *The Turner Diaries* and *The Road Back: A Plan for the Restoration of Freedom When Our Country Has Been Taken Over By Its Enemies* to support their white terrorist violence. Considered a "blueprint" (p. 143) for white supremacy and a "Bible of the racist right" (p. 143), *The Turner Diaries* depicts white men and the white male race to be under attack by Black people, Jews, and an increasingly feminized masculinity. The Order exists as a counter to these perceived threats against white masculinity, using secrecy and the power of an esoteric order to launch their war on non-white-masculine bodies. Secrecy is used as a means of power, and this white power is meant to terrify (p. 151). Similar to chapter 1, Urban illustrates how these white men of the *Brüder Schweigen* perceived themselves to "be a *persecuted minority*, marginalized and driven underground by a government run by blacks, Jews, immigrants, and women" (p. 160). Yet while they imagined themselves as a perceived minority, they also imagined themselves to be part of the "noble few *remasculinized* warriors who are now working secretly to save the white race" (p. 160). Tying such movements to the contemporary moment of far-right leadership in the United States,

Urban well establishes the need to conceptualize and understand how secrecy is used to uphold white male supremacist power.

Secrecy is not only a source of strength, but something that can make religious institutions vulnerable. This is one of the main points of Urban's chapter on Scientology, titled "The Third Wall of Fire: Scientology and the Study of Secrecy as an Historical Process." This chapter's focus is "OT VIII, the last and highest of the Thetan levels released by the current church" (p. 166). In this chapter, Urban makes two main interventions. First, he argues that studying religious secrets creates "methodological problems" (p. 166), problems which result in ethical conundrums for the religious studies scholar. Not all secrets are made visible through ethical means; some secrets are stolen in the process of ethnographic work. In the case of Scientology, as Urban puts forward, some secrets are made public through legal processes, making documents then part of the public domain (p. 172). Still, this case raises questions about how religious studies scholars address secrets, especially when religious organizations wish to keep such secrets secret. Here, Urban argues that one way around or through this ethical encounter is to focus on the *form* of secrets rather than their content. In doing this, we can understand the strategies by which religious institutions make use of, and find meaning through, the secrets they yearn to contain. Most strikingly, this chapter illustrates that secrets are not a stable and unchanging category. As the case of the Church of Scientology captures, there are times when secrets bolster the status of an organization; yet, there are significant moments when secrets are cause of embarrassment. These secrets need to remain secret not as a point of strength, but as a point of protection. The public can easily mock and embarrass your order if these secrets, in their content, are deeply outside of the public view of reality. In the case of Scientology, "the secret itself has largely receded from public view" (p. 183) as the instrumentalization of these secrets no longer exists as a point of pride, allure, or wealth, but one signifying embarrassment and loss of status.

Secrecy is an important text for scholars of religion. Historical, analytical, and innovative, Urban does the tremendous work of thinking across different esoteric movements to conceptualize the varied, and sometimes overlapping, workings of power and secrecy within these movements. Urban's text leaves us pondering formative and critical methodological questions. Especially when studying esoteric knowledges, such as those drawn from Tibetan and Hindu tantras and communities, how do we remain self-reflexive and not engage in acts of

epistemological violence? Urban's fundamental move in this text is to shift his orientation from the *content* of the secret to the *operations* and *forms* that secrets take. As he writes, "I suggest that we shift our gaze from the ever-elusive 'hidden content' of secrecy to the more visible *forms* through which secrets are concealed, revealed, or exchanged" (p. 16). As I believe this review illustrates, there are significant potentials to this method, as we are able to grasp the covert mechanisms of control—legal, cultural, textual—that are exerted and practiced in different esoteric movements. At the same time, there are some limitations to this method, including ethical and methodological limitations to which Urban admits. For example, this method does not analyze the content of certain secrets. Sometimes the content of secrets, especially where sexual violence exists within religious institutions, is as important as the forms of secrecy themselves. Here, scholars of religious studies may build on Urban's work to explore the ways secrecy exists in content and form, whether expressed through sexual abuse, anti-Blackness, or transphobia within American religious institutions and communities.

Urban argues that the mobilization of secrecy is not ending but changing and expanding into a widespread threat, especially to those groups and bodies that "stray outside the margins of 'legitimate' religiosity (particularly Muslims, people of color, new or alternative religious movements, and those who express dissident political views)" (p. 205). The expansion of surveillance within the national, corporate, and religious spheres is clearly articulated in Urban's conclusion, entitled "The Science of the Hidden: Secrecy and the Critical Study of Religion in an Age of Surveillance." In this final chapter, Urban contends that governmental agencies and corporate entities in the private sector are deeply intertwined, engaging in decentralized efforts to surveil consumers using surveillance technologies. As religiously and racially marginalized people are increasingly surveilled, Urban argues we must come to understand the ways surveillance operates to monitor and police individuals and classes of persons. Ultimately, Urban's text allows us to begin to conceptualize the covert, specific, as well as widespread strategies of secrecy and power. As scholars of religion, we can and must continue to analyze the workings of secrecy and the ways it veils, conceals, and sometimes overtly weaponizes, violence and power within religious traditions and esoteric movements.