

Magia Sexualis:

Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism.

Hugh B. Urban. Berkley: University of California Press. 2006.

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Reviewed by Michael Storch.

Urban subtitles his preface to *Magia Sexualis*: “Writing about Sex Magic; or, How to Ruin Your Academic Career and Your Sex Life All in One Go”. This is a book about a topic which some find difficult to take seriously. Yet given both the incredible importance of sexuality in determining the (post) modern human subject, as well as the vast increase in interest and participation in New Religious Movements, this is a topic worthy of attention.

Urban’s book explores a number of questions. First, the rise of sex magic in the Christian West, a milieu which has always had a difficult, ambivalent, even contradictory relationship with sex. Western magic has traditionally had a sexual component, the male and female principles which combine in the “Chemical Wedding” of alchemy, or the bonds of Eros in the Hermetic, Renaissance magic of Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno are two examples. Still, the West did not produce magical rituals of any complexity which involved sexual acts. The opposite tended to be true: celibacy or abstinence was required for magical efficacy. What the West did develop is what Urban calls the “reoccurring nightmare” of the relationship between magic and sex. From the first few centuries of the Christian era onward, every unorthodox group; from the Gnostics, to the Bogomils, to the Templers, to witches, were closely associated with sexual deviance. Deviance being any non-heterosexual, non-procreative sex. What was established was a large mythology of what others were doing sexually, and it became a means of prosecution, persecution, and social control. The *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Witch’s Hammer) is one of the most infamous examples of this attitude.

And yet, the West began to develop a series of practices involving sex and magic over the course of the 19th and 20th century, but it could not do so from within its own occult tradition; it had to look elsewhere. This is the second current of Urban’s book. The West turned to the Tantric tradition of South Asia: but a uniquely skewed one. The 19th and 20th century were periods where sexual discourses exploded and proliferated, and as Urban explains, there was a great willingness to incorporate Tantric misreadings into this volatile reinvention of sexuality. Urban, who has also written about Tantric traditions, explores not only the conservative nature of Tantra but, more to the point, what small roll sex actually plays in it. Yet in the minds of 19th century orientalist missionaries and scholars, and their later interpreters, the misinterpreted of value and role of sex became both a paramount key and threat to

western liberation. As Urban notes, the West's understanding of Tantra, even today, owes far more to Aleister Crowley than to any original, eastern sources. Still, sexual magic became the model of rebellion, the path to a utopian society. As Urban states, "Crowley found in sex magic the most intense experience of transgression . . . to unleash ecstatic liberating power" (11).

This becomes the launch pad for the remainder of *Magia Sexualis*: how this misunderstanding and misappropriation of the Tantric tradition took root and flourished in the West. Urban is not disparaging of this movement, rather it is his intention to explore how this old seed would germinate in a new cultural climate, taking on the fears, aspirations and identity of the new culture. As mentioned sex magic was widely seen as revolutionary, liberating, utopian; it was invoked to bring crashing down an oppressive social order and usher in a new world. Liberating ourselves sexually was the most important step in liberating ourselves socially, politically, and religiously.

To this end, Urban profiles some of the major figures who attempted to create a sexual magic: Paschal Randolf, Theodor Ruess, Aleister Crowley, Austin Spare, and Anton LaVey of the Church of Satan, to name a few. All of these figures are famous, or infamous, for establishing programs encouraging and incorporating magical sexual practices, especially transgressive practices. For Crowley "the root idea is that any form of procreation other than normal is likely to produce results of a magical character" (4).

Urban also follows the parallel development of occult, social and philosophical trends and how they have incorporated sexuality into their belief systems and practices, from The Order of the Golden Dawn, to Wicca, feminism, the sexual revolution, Chaos and Cyber Magic. Magic is infinitely malleable and readily adapts to new environments. So, for example, there is a dramatic shift in the understanding and valuation of sex magic from older, male oriented, phallogocentric occult groups like the Golden Dawn, to feminist Wicca. Wicca operates with a binary of two equal principles, one female the other male, yet still focusing on a model of heterosexual procreation. More recently, Queer, Post-Gender, and Transgender theories have entered the arena again rewriting the rules of sexual magic. Technology, medicine, disease, and multiculturalism have all had a hand in shaping sexuality as well as sexual magic.

New Religious Movements are not, as a rule, reactionary groups rejecting modernity and longing to recapture a mythical past. Rather they powerfully affirm the principles and concerns of modernity: free will, individualism, technology, subjectivity and progress. What marks them as unique is their emphasis on re-enchancing the world. After the "Death of God", sex became one of the few places of intense and personal experiences of liberation beyond the limits of our finite self. As Jean-Francois Lyotard noted, post modernity is a kind of "paganism", rejecting

“metanarratives”, stressing play and spontaneity, subverting dominant institutional structures, and constantly creating new meaning (223): what could be more magical?

Magia Sexualis is a fascinating book which will appeal to those with interests such as the history of sexuality, new religious movements, occult traditions, and gender studies. It is a book, ultimately, about the struggle to rediscover the sacred in a thoroughly modern way.

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