

BOOK REVIEW

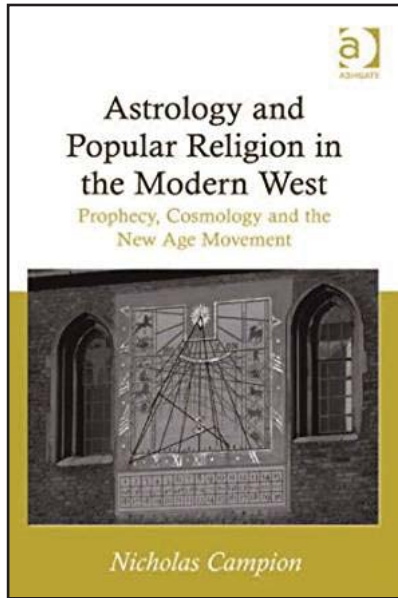
Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West: Prophecy, Cosmology, and the New Age Movement by Nicholas Campion. London/New York: Routledge, 2016. 254 pp. £34.99 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-138-26162-4.

The book under review is not a new publication. In its first edition, it was published as a hardcover book in 2012. However, it was subjected to the widespread pricing policy that firstly supplies libraries and scientific institutes with extremely high-priced editions, only to follow with a paperback edition at a significantly lower price a few years later; provided, of course, that the book received positive feedback, making such a new edition economically promising.

Thankfully, this seems to be the case with Nicholas Campion's *Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West*, because this book is now affordable for somewhat smaller budgets (even if it is not particularly cheap). This work is valuable for both scientists of religion and historians with an interest in the development of esoteric movements and 'New Age' as well as the recent history of astrology from the end of the 19th to the early 21st Century. It is also of interest to astrologers who want to look beyond the horizon of everyday practice, and would like to counter the partly ineffable polemics of ideological skeptics (pseudo skeptics) with substantiated arguments and facts.

Nicholas Campion is experienced in both astrological practice—he was president of the Astrological Lodge of London from 1985 to 1987 and of the Astrological Association of Great Britain from 1994 to 1999, and has written astrological texts for the *Daily Mail*—and science in the context of his role as senior lecturer at the School of Archaeology, History, and Anthropology of the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Furthermore, he is director of the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture, which offers an MA in astronomy and astrology. Campion is the author of several important monographs on astrology, including the *History of Western Astrology* in two volumes (Campion 2008, 2009).

With this book, he examines the connection among astrology, religion, esoteric doctrines, and New Age philosophy and spirituality. While reading this book, one very quickly learns that many of the opinions spread by the



public media, but also the familiar assessments made by scientists and skeptics, are badly informed, biased, or wrong because they are based on erroneous assumptions. This does not concern issues such as the notorious argument of equinoctial precession (“in reality, ‘Aries’ is not ‘Aries’ anymore”) but dealing in a methodologically questionable manner with the concepts of religion, beliefs, superstition, etc., as well as with statistical surveys and data. The book is worth reading for this reason alone. In addition, the author provides interesting and enlightening reconstructions from the perspective of the history of ideas; for instance, how the use of sun sign astrology in

magazines and tabloids began and became widespread, which is a thorn in the side of many astrologers today.

The volume is divided into 14 chapters, whereby the first (Introduction: A Million-Dollar Business?) and the last (Conclusion: Modernity and Normality) summarize the intention and results of the work; Chapters 2 through 7 deal with the issues of science of religion and history of ideas in a narrower sense; and Chapters 8 through 13 are primarily concerned with sociological, psychological, and sociology of science issues, and also present the results of surveys conducted by the author himself.

At the very beginning, Campion concisely states the purpose of the book:

My intention is to place the discussion of astrology's modern status in a context which is wide enough to allow a better understanding of the recent history and present status of esoteric ideas, occult practices, and alternative spiritualities, that potent cultural matrix which alarms evangelical Christians, disturbs skeptical scientists, and perplexes many sociologists. (p. 2)

In short: as a general assessment, he achieves his intention very well.

Campion asks four fundamental questions (p. 3), namely (a) is astrology a New Age discipline? (b) if this is the case, should it then “be seen as a rival to mainstream Christianity”? (c) can a quantification of belief in astrology “indicate the extent of that rivalry”? and (d) “does astrology’s continued

existence represent the anomalous survival of a pre-modern superstition in the modern world”? In Chapters 2 through 5, the author provides a historiographical outline of the millenarian concept of a New Age, of New Age thought, and the idea of the beginning of the Age of Aquarius. The two latter concepts are often used synonymously but are based on different principles. The beginning and duration of the Age of Aquarius is astronomically determined (more or less exactly) by the precession of the equinoxes through the zodiac, while the New Age “is always imminent, but never comes” (p. 21). Interestingly, the idea of historical periods being structured on the basis of astronomical criteria is a relatively recent idea, and can be traced back to a theory of history proposed by François-Henri-Stanislas Delaulnaye (1739–1830) that postulates “the foundation of religion in astral worship” (p. 22). It was included in 20th Century astrology and New Age philosophy via theosophy.

After a discussion of the New Age concept referring to Hanegraaff’s (1998:96–103) differentiation of New Age *sensu stricto* and *sensu lato*, i.e. in a narrow or broad sense (Chapter 4), and its relation to the concept of the Age of Aquarius (Chapter 5), Champion asks whether astrology is New Age or whether a New Age astrology can be found. As expected, the answer is complex. Astrology can certainly not be assigned to New Age with all its different varieties. However, the theosophically influenced approaches of esoteric astrology of Alan Leo and Dane Rudhyar, which were very important for development during the 20th Century, display typical characteristics of New Age philosophy. But even therein, Champion can differentiate between two forms: one more psychological and the other more theosophical–spiritual.

Chapter 7 is dedicated to the above-mentioned phenomenon of the ‘rising’ of sun-sign astrology that has strongly shaped the present public image of astrology in general. The reason for this can be found in the efforts of Leo and Rudhyar to make the discipline accessible for a broad public through simplification. This desire to get as many people as possible interested in astrology can probably be reduced not so much to economic considerations but to a theosophically influenced vision of astrology as a philosophy, or a spiritual path, furthering the progress of individuals as well as humanity as a whole, and leading them into a better future. Champion writes, quoting Carl Weschke:¹ “(S)un-sign astrology’s mass appeal ‘was all part of the adventure of self-knowledge. That is what was really new in the 20th century’” (p. 80).

In Chapters 8 through 11, issues of belief in astrology and the relationship between astrology and religion are examined. Although the question about belief in astrology is always asked in interviews and surveys,

this is considered absurd by most practitioners because, in their view, they deal with practical and evidential experience, and questions of belief are not relevant. Campion reflects on this question and criticizes its thoughtless use by many scientists and critics of astrology, such as Adorno, and many skeptics, for whom the survival of astrology in modern times must represent a paradox. They often refer to extrapolations of findings that were gained on a methodologically questionable basis, as the author is able to plausibly demonstrate, because different forms of astrology were not distinguished. He summarizes:

(T)he attempt to measure astrology's popularity, and assess whether it is increasing, stable, or declining, is afflicted by anachronistic historical models, simplistic models of nature of belief, and the naive use of data which is fluid, malleable, and unstable. (p. 142)

Campion himself has conducted interviews and surveys on this issue, at first among different demographic groups with relatively small samples, which, however, led to meaningful results following comparison of the groups. His two main conclusions are that the interest in astrology has been highly underestimated in previous surveys, and questions about belief in astrology can be strongly misleading, depending on wording.

He has also interviewed astrologers and has acquired a proper database from the responses to a total of 837 questionnaires. In Chapters 12 and 13, he presents the results of his quantitative studies as well as those of 39 extensive interviews. This enables him to develop a differentiated image of the attitudes of practitioners and—this is one of the most important aspects of the book for me—identify, at the same time, several methodological pitfalls and deficiencies of most of the previous surveys. With this, the book indeed reaches significantly beyond the topic of astrology, because similar problems exist with religious–sociological surveys on New Religion Movements as well as in the field of extraordinary experiences and anomalistics in general.

From my perspective, there is little to criticize about the volume. However, I have to add a 'disclaimer' because I am reviewing a work that is partly outside my academic field of expertise. Although I have looked into the history of astrology, I lack the sound knowledge of an historian of astrology or esoteric movements. Therefore, it is largely accidental finds that attract attention as minor inconsistencies. For instance, the statement: "UFOlogy, which is supposedly dominated by women and depends on personal revelation, is therefore, New Age" (p. 34) is irritating because the field of UFOlogy is normally thought of as a male domain. A look at the

quoted source in *Skeptical Inquirer* clarifies: In his paper, Sheaffer (2009) distinguishes ‘New Age’ from ‘Science Fiction’ UFOlogy, whereby the former is female-dominated and the latter male-dominated. However, this small misunderstanding is not of any importance for Champion’s argument because it is only used as an example to characterize New Age.

What is striking, but no surprise: Neither the historical representations nor the surveys consider the German situation. My regret does not reflect a nationalist-driven narcissistic wound at all. It is because there was a special development in Germany during the 20th Century that was important with regard to the relationship between astrology and science, and the ideological assessment of astrology in general (cf. Mayer 2018). It shows an alternative line of development to that dominating English-speaking areas, which led directly from the theosophical movement to psychological astrology in the sense of Carl Jung (via Leo and Rudhyar). The German astrological scene itself was also quite important, and might have enriched the image depicted by Champion if included. However, this criticism should not detract from the merit of this recommendable volume.

Note

¹ Carl Weschke (1930–2015) was a publisher of astrology books, among others (Llewellyn Publications).

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