

Reviews

J. JEFFREY FRANKLIN, *Spirit Matters: Occult Beliefs, Alternative Religions, and the Crisis of Faith in Victorian Britain*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. Pp. xxii + 264. \$49.95.

The so-called Victorian “crisis of faith” has been widely critiqued over the past few decades. No longer convinced that the forces of modernity inevitably lead to the demise of religion, scholars across the humanities and social sciences have begun to reexamine what we thought we knew about the place of religion in modernity. For Victorianists, this has meant reformulating the once-dominant narrative of the nineteenth century as a time of widespread religious decline and accounting for the plurality of religious practices and beliefs that coexisted throughout the century. J. Jeffrey Franklin’s *Spirit Matters: Occult Beliefs, Alternative Religions, and the Crisis of Faith in Victorian Britain* is a welcome contribution to the growing body of scholarship attesting to the diversification rather than decline of religion during this period.

Although Franklin does not engage directly with the influential work of Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, and others who have reframed the way we think about the relationship between religion and modernity, he is similarly committed to challenging the presumption that science, industrialization, individualism, and materialism ineluctably culminate in the collapse of religious faith. Franklin does not completely reject the characterization of the Victorian era as a time of crisis for religion; rather, his central argument is that the confrontation between the principles of materialism and orthodox Christianity generated a “proliferation of alternative religions” (p. 2) that positioned themselves in the liminal space between these two discourses. The territory that lies between orthodox Christianity (which Franklin defines as the “immensely complex, grossly generalized amalgamation of nineteenth-century British Christianities” [p. 6]) and materialism (“the disavowal of any transcendent being or realm that supersedes empirical reality or natural law” [p. x]) proves to be fertile ground for exploring the many and complex configurations of the

matter-spirit dichotomy that Franklin sees throughout Victorian literature and criticism. The interdisciplinary scope (which encompasses works of theology, Gothic romance, and travel writing) and geographical breadth (which moves beyond England to include colonial Egypt and Southeast Asia) of *Spirit Matters* attest to the widespread appeal of heterodox spirituality to citizens of nineteenth-century Britain.

After an illuminating introductory chapter, which sets out the parameters of the book (the central territory of heterodox or alternative religions, bordered by orthodox Christianity on one side and scientific materialism on the other), Part I of *Spirit Matters* explores three representative case studies of Victorian-era challenges to mainstream forms of Christianity: Edward Bulwer-Lytton's metaphysical novels *Zanoni* (1842) and *A Strange Story* (1862), Anthony Trollope's *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (1870), and Matthew Arnold's *Literature and Dogma* (1873). Franklin begins by situating Bulwer-Lytton's work within the context of nineteenth-century occultisms, namely Mesmerism, Spiritualism, and what Franklin calls "hybrid religions" (such as Theosophy and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn). He argues that Bulwer-Lytton was a pivotal figure in the formation of Victorian heterodox spiritualities in that he both "translat[ed] previous waves of occult spirituality and science" and "prepar[ed] the way for . . . the later hybrid religions" (p. 30).

The next chapter shifts its focus to the border area between what Franklin refers to as "orthodox" and "heterodox" Christianity. He places Trollope on the heterodox side because of the "dialectical balancing act" (p. 47) the author performs between High and Broad Church views, and between faith in a transcendent God and allegiance to a worldly form of ethics. This argument is not entirely convincing. While Franklin's reading of the narrative ambivalence toward "the relative heroism of characters representing different religious positions" (p. 54) in *The Vicar of Bullhampton* is subtle and compelling, his conclusion that this ambivalence situates Trollope "at the periphery of the center of nineteenth-century British religious discourse" (p. 65) is difficult to sustain in the face of Franklin's own admission, in the introduction, that orthodox Christianity at that time was by no means a homogeneous category (p. 6). In order to substantiate his claim about Trollope, Franklin would have needed to delve more extensively into the multifaceted and highly contested territory of "orthodoxy" in British Christianity than he does here. Franklin's discussion of Arnold in the final chapter of this section avoids making comparably questionable claims about

the “unorthodoxy” of Arnold’s latitudinarian views by focusing on the influence of Buddhism and the nascent field of comparative religious studies on Arnold’s biblical scholarship.

Chapters 5 and 6, which comprise Part II of *Spirit Matters*, build on Franklin’s previous work in *The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and the British Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2008) to trace the intermingling of Christianity and Buddhism that resulted from Britain’s imperial exploits. Franklin explores the colonial context of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in chapter 5 through a reading of William Knighton’s *Forest Life in Ceylon* (1854), which was “perhaps the first popular work in English to provide a relatively respectful and evenhanded portrayal of Buddhism” (p. 87). Knighton’s multifarious text, as Franklin shows, incorporates competing models for masculine colonial governance (eventually siding with “liberal-intellectual colonial masculinity” [p. 102]), Buddhist animal fables, and a remarkably impartial debate about the comparative merits of Christianity and Buddhism (which the Christian only “wins” by eschewing key doctrinal principles, such as the consequences of sin and the Last Judgment [p. 111]). In chapter 6, Franklin analyzes the generic interplay of travel writing, memoir, Gothic romance, and comparative religion in Anna Leonowens’s *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870). Despite the simplistic, melodramatic and historically inaccurate dichotomy established between the “evil” King Mongkut and the “good . . . British, Anglo-Saxon, and Christian” Anna (p. 124), Leonowens’s book is shown to utilize elements of comparative religion studies to present what is ultimately a more sympathetic portrayal of Buddhism than of Christianity.

In Part III, Franklin turns his attention to the rise of occultisms at the fin de siècle. Through a reading of H. Rider Haggard’s *Cleopatra* (1889) in chapter 7 and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) in chapter 8, Franklin demonstrates how the subgenre of Gothic romance served as the primary vehicle for representing the conflict between the truth claims of orthodox Christianity and scientific naturalism, which is said to have come to a head at the end of the nineteenth century. Haggard’s novel approaches this conflict by exploring the parallels between ancient Egyptian religion (whose secrets were being unearthed by British archaeologists and the new science of Egyptology) and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Stoker’s *Dracula* is said to exemplify the “demi-immortal Oriental,” a nineteenth-century character type who paradoxically posed “the most dire threat imaginable to Christian faith—namely, a type of eternal life in competition with the traditional Christian afterlife and the potential negation of the

human soul" (p. 164)—while simultaneously representing a heterodox means of salvaging spiritual faith from the rising tide of economic and scientific materialism. Finally, in Part IV, Franklin briefly traces the links between late-Victorian hybrid religions (for which H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy serves as the representative case study) and New Age spiritualities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The temporal, geographical, and disciplinary breadth of *Spirit Matters*, which accounts for the book's most compelling and original insights, also inevitably compromises the extent to which it is able to develop and unravel its many threads. Franklin himself acknowledges that he has "only brushed the surface" (p. xvi) of his subject matter, since there were quite literally "thousands of works . . . published in nineteenth-century Great Britain that were outside the domain proper of orthodox Christianity and represented spiritual positions defined between it and scientific naturalism or foreign faiths" (p. xvii). One is left wondering about the rationale behind the exclusion of a number of relevant texts, such as James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (1890), which receives not even a passing mention in *Spirit Matters* despite its formative influence on the poetry of W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Notwithstanding such omissions, *Spirit Matters* offers a fascinating look into the heterogeneous landscape of Victorian spirituality that will be of interest to a broad spectrum of readers and should inspire new avenues of research.

KATIE FRY
University of Toronto

THEO DAVIS, *Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xii + 245. \$65.

In *Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman*, Theo Davis deftly and passionately challenges influential, current critical approaches to literature. In the process, she advances an original, provocative approach to poetry. Her methodology and individual readings are refreshing, difficult, nuanced, and inspiring. This is a brilliant, contrarian, important book.

Counterintuitively, Davis claims that three nineteenth-century American writers—Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman, all of whom have been associated with stripping away the decorative in the service of valorizing less trivial pursuits—are