

Véronique Altglas. *From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics of Bricolage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 408 pages. \$31.50.

Sociologists of religion have often defined *bricolage* as the assemblage that results from crafting “religious life and identity by picking and mixing from a wide range of religious traditions” (2). In contrast, Véronique Altglas argues in *From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics of Bricolage* that this is an inadequate analysis of bricolage. Based on deep engagement with cultural/historical sources, as well as participant observation for two years in the Siddha Yoga and the Sivananda Centers in London and Paris, and for more than one year in the Kabbalah Center in Paris, London, Rio de Janeiro, and Tel Aviv, she rejects the idea that bricolage is an amateurish practice of religion that is highly individualistic. Altglas shows that the formation of bricolage is not as free, disorganized, or individualistic as had been previously suggested. Instead, postmodern, bricolage-style use of foreign religious resources is not free, but constrained by access and by local and national factors. As a practice, bricolage is not disorganized. Rather, it is organized around a persistent trajectory toward self-realization. It is not individualistic. Rather, it is structured by societal norms functioning within political, class- and gender-based systems. With great insight, she identifies a “logic” of bricolage that is an overarching organization system, which challenges the sociological idea of bricolage as a random assortment and instead poses bricolage as an enduring system (23).

Altglas goes on to argue that cultural and historical factors either limit or make available religious resources, such as yoga or Kabbalah. She shows how religious resources, appropriated in a bricolage-style religion, break with the constraints and meanings that are embedded within them by the originating religion so that the practice can contribute instead to a goal of self-realization. She further shows how resources are neutralized (from their particular functions) and psychologized. While yoga historically originates from Hinduism and Kabbalah from Judaism, Altglas convincingly shows how western usage shapes the practice before it is adopted. The practice is domesticated, universalized for its “ancient and primordial knowledge” (62), adjusted toward a therapeutic end, and appropriated for alternate use. She concludes that modern bricoleurs incorporate *exotic* (by which she means foreign) religious resources “despite” the religion from which they originated. “Their pragmatic quest for useful techniques and their belief that truth is beyond all religious particularisms also contribute to rendering the Hindu character of the neo-Hindu teaching they follow irrelevant” (64).

While Altglas is examining the religious life of those within “advanced industrial societies,” she does not address Christianity directly. In addition, the working understanding of “religion” is broad, often unrelated to notions of the divine. Within this book, religious orientation is focused toward self-fulfillment and self-realization. “Religious incursions in yoga, meditation, or Kabbalah often contribute to a quest . . . in which any teaching that promotes self-fulfillment is considered” (213). Foreign religious resources are borrowed, de-contextualized from their original meaning, and used toward this end. In fulfillment of her purposes in this book, Altglas reports what adherents say; however, her analysis stands in sharp contrast to discourse on practices, which would suggest that more may be happening than the adherents articulate. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre situates his work on practices in a much larger framework that also includes tradition and narrative, which is necessarily historically embedded. MacIntyre would question whether a practice, stripped of its tradition and narrative, is, anymore, the same practice.

Her identification of a “logic” of bricolage is brilliantly compelling; however, her conclusion could benefit from nuance. It is unlikely that all bricoleurs of exotic religious resources share one goal, which she identifies as actualizing the self. Even though she does not mean “inherently other” by “exotic” (3), one must wonder if, by the sheer force of colonialist history, she inadvertently participates in extending the long arm of colonialism.

Overall, Altglas’s book raises awareness that there are logics of bricolage at work all around us. On the one hand, her book can push us to ask what Christian bricolage may entail. On the other hand, it can compel us to become all the more articulate about why Christian proclamation is not generalizable to a domesticated wisdom tradition.

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