

Vocabulary for the Study of Religion

Volume 1

A–E

Edited by

Robert A. Segal
Kocku von Stuckrad



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That the study of asceticism continues to be attractive and rewarding is partly due to the fact that the term refers to both a bodily practice and an ideology. Sometimes prescriptive and theological ascetic texts do not reflect actual practice, and sometimes actual practitioners are more interested in doing than in explaining and reflecting. Ascetic ideology and practice, as well as their relationship to each other, are rich fields for scholarly inquiry. Asceticism is an appealing object of study also because it polarizes religious adherents, especially in its more extreme forms. Ascetics have been glorified, venerated as saints and holy persons, and worshipped as models of an ideal life. But they have also been criticized, even by followers of the same religious tradition, for pursuing and propagating a false, counter-reproductive way of life. Furthermore, insights from the study of asceticism help scholars analyze the relation of religion, culture, and the human body. While the metaphors of “encoding” or “inscribing the body” may not always be sufficient for the analysis of concrete historical cases, they reflect the scholarly fascination with ascetic ideology. The counter-intuitive idea that a mode of life that demands disciplining one’s own body, up to the point of physical harm and excruciating pain, is associated with the highest virtue and merit reflects deep religious and cultural values, the analysis of which is a prime task for the academic study of religion.

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OLIVER FREIBERGER

Astrology

Speaking very generally, *astrology* (Gk. “the study of the stars”) asks questions about the connection between heavenly phenomena and events on earth. For more than three thousand years, and far into the eighteenth century, research into such

connections had not been separated from that of the mathematical study of the stars—what today we call astronomy—even though in antiquity people already agreed that astronomy and astrology described two different ways of looking at heavenly phenomena (see Hübner 1989). These ways of looking were not conceptually differentiated, however, and authors often simply referred to “mathematics” (Latin *ars mathematica*) or “astronomy” (Latin *astronomia*) when they actually meant astrology. The mathematical study of the stars provided the tools for gathering the data for interpretive astrology.

Since astrology asks about the *meaning* of heavenly phenomena for the earthly sphere, it is particularly interested in the quality of time (that is, how a specific point in time “feels” or which “energy” is attached to it), as opposed to the pure quantity of time (that is, the measurement of duration and the calculation of planetary points of reference). In order to investigate the meaning of astral events, astrology postulates correspondences between planetary levels and earthly levels, correspondences that are basically established through symbolic analogies. *How* the correspondences came to exist—whether there is a secret synchronicity, a net of correspondences of everything that exists, or whether the stars have causal impact on the earth—was not uniformly assessed by astrologers. But even those astrologers who assumed causal links usually developed their analysis on the basis of symbolic interpretations and thus in a framework of correspondences.

Astrology and Academic Prejudices

The definitions given above seem to be straightforward and easy to understand. But the study of astrology as a cultural phenomenon with a long history is fraught with misunderstandings and biases. Indeed, if we want to understand the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of knowledge, as well as the impact of this dynamic in academic discourse, astrology can serve as a prom-

inent example. Since the late seventeenth century, there has been a polemical process of disjunction in Europe, which structurally separated astrology from astronomy; in “modern” understanding in “the West,” only astronomy is a rational and scientific interpretation of the cosmos, while astrology is a discarded system of knowledge, associated with myth and pre-modern “magical” belief. (One of many examples is Bock 1993, a study that was seriously defended at the University of Bremen; on the complexity of the underlying process, see von Stuckrad 2014: 25–55; see also the editors’ introduction to Oestmann, Rutkin, and von Stuckrad 2005.) It seems that astrology is a major identity marker when it comes to determining what “modernity” and “rationality” are; this discourse often takes the form of tacit knowledge (in the Foucauldian sense), which means that people do not have to know anything about astrology in order to have strong convictions regarding astrology’s status as non-scientific and non-rational. It also means that scholars who take seriously the knowledge system that constitutes astrology and attempt to understand the system from “inside” are easily ridiculed and hindered in their academic careers.

Scientific Myths

The hubris of “modern science” and its discursive implications were famously addressed by Paul Feyerabend. In his attack on the “Statement of 186 Leading Scientists” condemning astrology, published in *The Humanist* of September/October 1975, he asked what was the added value of the signatures of 186 scientists, among them Nobel Prize laureates, if they could not provide a single argument. Feyerabend was critical of contemporary astrologers, as well. “It is interesting,” he noted, “to see how closely both parties approach each other in ignorance, conceit and the wish for easy power over minds” (Feyerabend 1978: 96). The problem, as Feyerabend explains in *Against Method*, is not that astrological systems of knowl-

edge lack rationality, but that value judgments prevent scientists from even seeing the theoretical and rational nature of astrology.

Most research into Egyptian, Babylonian, and Ancient Greek astronomy proceeds in exactly the same way. It is interested only in those fragments of the older ideas which conform to the ideology of modern science. It disregards the older cosmologies and the older aims that united them and other fragments in a most impressive way. Small wonder the results look incoherent and “irrational.” (Feyerabend 1975: 208 n. 75)

Although there are certainly exceptions to this historical imagination (Feyerabend 1975 mentions van der Waerden 1968; other examples would include Neugebauer 1951 and, more recently, North 1994, Barton 1994, and Holden 1996), the problem that one cosmology is evaluated by means of another cosmology is still present in theoretical debates about astrology today. We can call this the *problem of incommensurability*. If astrology and contemporary science are incommensurable, it will not be possible to translate the vocabulary and knowledge claims of one system into the other, or to test one system with the methods of the other one. For instance, if astrology is a hermeneutical discipline that operates with hundreds of variables based on individual horoscopes, it is impossible in principle to quantify the results of this interpretation or to test them empirically; every empirical test is a necessary reduction of complexity and thus a test of something other than claims based on astrological systems of knowledge (see von Stuckrad 2007: 357–368). Roy Willis and Patrick Curry explain the problem of testing astrological theories as follows:

Such “testing” or “research” is never itself unproblematic; astrology—albeit in good company in this respect—is, and always has been, particularly unsuitable to such a pro-

cess; and astrology does not in any case need such dubious “validation,” especially as its “success” would spell the end of its chief value. (Willis and Curry 2004: 90)

Theological Myths

In addition to the myths that modern science has built around astrology, this discipline has also been a major topic in the identity work of theologians and theologically inclined historians, which subsequently has influenced the study of religion in general. This is particularly relevant when it comes to the place of astrology in Jewish and Christian traditions. While Babylonian and Greek astrology has been described in some detail in twentieth-century scholarship, Jewish and Christian involvement in this system of knowledge—if recognized at all—has been played down. With regard to Judaism, we may quote David Flusser: “The Jewish people in Palestine and elsewhere had become completely immune to the attractions of the paganism against which the prophets [had spoken]” (quoted in Charlesworth 1987: 945 n. 65). On Christianity, Gundel’s comment is representative of a common opinion among historians: “Right from the beginning Christianity refuted astrology’s axioms and radically fought against them” (Gundel and Gundel 1966: 332, author’s translation).

There are three biases in particular that have hindered a serious analysis of astrology in monotheistic environments (for a critical assessment of these, and other, biases, see von Stuckrad 2000). First, it is assumed that astrology necessarily leads to polytheism, with the planets being the material representations of the gods, or even the gods themselves; second, scholars presupposed that astrology implies the tendency to worship astral entities and thus leads to a star cult, which is thought to be incompatible with monotheistic theology; finally, astrology is supposed to be connected with fatalism and deterministic worldviews, again philosophical traditions that are often

deemed incompatible with Jewish and Christian theology, which is supposedly based on free will. These binary constructions often lead to the distinction between pagan astrological “magic” and Jewish and Christian “prayer,” even though this means neglecting the many sources that reveal the creative mixing of those practices.

These usually unquestioned theological axioms have important consequences. For instance, documents that do not fit the narrow perspective of modern scholarship have simply been ignored (for instance, some of the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Greek Magical Papyri). But in some cases the astrological connotations were too strong to be ignored entirely, such as the pavements of the Palestinian synagogues with their zodiacal depiction or—on the Christian side—the elaborated astrological ingredients in Gnostic writings. As a response, scholars tend to claim that those developments were only able to emerge outside “orthodox” or “normative” Judaism and Christianity. For such scholarly practices we can refer to Jonathan Z. Smith’s observation: “This is exorcism or purgation, not scholarship” (1990: 143; see also von Stuckrad 2000: 534–542).

In Search of a New Vocabulary

What does all of this mean for the academic study of astrology? If scholars of religion and culture want to arrive at a more balanced understanding of the place of astrology in the social, philosophical, religious, and scientific histories of Europe and “the West,” they will have to take into account how European culture during the past three hundred years has formed a binary discourse that underlies both popular and academic knowledge. A critical reconstruction of the genealogy of our knowledge about astrology must be an integral part of any scholarly analysis of astrology. The value of alternative, even if incommensurable, systems of knowledge needs to be accepted as an equally valid expression of the human mind. This should lead to a new vocabulary to describe the many aspects of the “science of the stars,” with its

philosophical, scientific, religious, and cultural ingredients. Simple binary constructions will not do the trick anymore.

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KOCKU VON STUCKRAD