

Alternative Christs. Edited by OLAV HAMMER. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 305 pp. ISBN 978-0521889025.

The book “Alternative Christs” collects 14 contributions, covering a wide range of conceptions of Jesus and/or Christ: from the Antiquity (Gnosis, apocryphal literature, Manichaeism) over non-Christian notions (Islam, Hinduism) to Christian positions in Early Modern and Modern Europe (alchemists, Christian cabalists, Swedenborg, Mormonism, Theosophy, Ariosophy, Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness, Aetherius Society). The articles, mostly written by experts in the respective fields, provide reliable information on often difficult subjects. In terms of the status of historical questions in the field of religion, this collection indicates a shift in religious studies, where scholars are analyzing more and more the European Christian Tradition, formerly being a dominion of Christian theology.

With regard to overall concept, the book is less convincing. The title “Alternative Christs” suggests the existence of a non-alternative conception of Christ, but there is no account given of the normative suppositions which qualify an “alternative” or a “non-alternative” position. Non-alternative might be a synonym for an “orthodox” Christology, but even the “orthodox” dogmata were always imbedded in a field of highly controversial debates. These disputes concerning alternatives within “non-alternative” Christian traditions are mostly missing in this book: e.g. the Oriental churches in late antiquity are not even mentioned, the debates in the western churches (e.g. on Arianism) are only hinted at in the introduction. In medieval and early modern western history, the situation is a similar one. Debates between these so-called alternative groups and the mainline churches or within the latter (e.g. Trinitarian debates) are absent. In my opinion, in religious studies we should not isolate — and thus: create — “alternative” positions, and we should connect more closely the (historical) subjects of theology.

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