

jobs, relationships, and social status—all of which tend to slowly bleed the soul and cause our egoic mind to make rash, limiting decisions. When it comes to finding gnosis, finding ways to pay the rent every month can be almost as oppressive as medieval heresy hunters. Lachman goes into detail about his many challenges in fitting into a “proper world,” whether as a rock star, science writer, or even husband.

I recommend Lachman’s story. Yet I have a feeling that, as a bonus, you will find *your* story. You may not be named the New Age Pope, but you’ll realize that the quest for gnosis makes life all the more interesting, as it has done for Lachman.

Miguel Conner

Miguel Conner’s book *The Occult Elvis* was reviewed in *Quest*, summer 2025.

Mysticism

SIMON CRITCHLEY

New York: New York Review of Books, 2024. 325 pp., paperback, \$18.95.

William James corralled and classified it. Evelyn Underhill admired and recommended it. Aldous Huxley curated it. Many earnest souls have tried to explain it. The fourteenth century’s Julian of Norwich, along with a generous cohort of spiritual virtuosos throughout history, lived it and personified it.

The “it” is mysticism. Simon Critchley’s uninhibited hymn to this often elusive reality reminds us that mysticism, manifested both inside and outside humanity’s vast family of religions, is far more than a shapeless state of mind or an equivocal psychic phenomenon. Nor is it necessarily out of the reach of the ordinary person.

Despite its elitist veneer, Critchley’s mysticism leans toward the egalitarian, the vernacular, even the therapeutic. The shadow of his book, and its reason for being, is the global Covid experience. Survivors of the pandemic, he says, have lost an appetite for ecstasy, which, as the etymology of the



term suggests, means getting outside ourselves. For Critchley, mystical ecstasy, in varying grades of intensity, can and ought to be a natural part of the fully human life.

Well known for his publications on sport, music, literature, and death, Critchley has helped to establish the profile of the postmodern philosopher as an edgy and intellectually nomadic public intellectual. He has done so with an atheism and a death-of-God cool that avoids the amateur’s soapbox and the professional skeptic’s secular pulpit while allowing for lavish appreciation of the religious imagination in its many incarnations.

This is not to say that Critchley is averse to picking sides. He is not shy about communicating his affinities, nor has he recanted his signature concept of “religious disappointment.” His mystics are mainly European, Catholic, and medieval, each experiencing his or her ecstasy a safe distance from any actual church or coven sharing the zip code of New York’s New School for Social Research. His contemporary conversation partners exhibit family resemblances that readers of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida might recognize and sanction. Luther and Kant, who, he asserts, divorced spiritual experience from material culture and tried to defuse the mystique

of mysticism, appear (along with a premodern inquisitor or two), as the villains in his version of the drama of Western mysticism.

Critchley describes his book as a journey. “Romp” might be more accurate. He appreciates James’s “large acquaintance with particulars,” even recommending the phrase as the text for the reader’s next tattoo. Johan Huizinga’s classic *Homo Ludens* greets us in his bibliography, one signal among many that this seemingly impulsive tour through centuries, disciplines, and perspectives is as much play as it is scholarly query or spiritual quest. Sleep, sex, food, clothing, politics, theater, visual art, and particularly music (the punker the better) keep the book safely away from unearthly abstractions and pious creeds, ecclesiastical or academic.

Critchley is especially entranced by numbers: sixteen mystics, five points about mysticism, seven adverbs “that God loveth,” three graces (from Julian), and four hallmarks of mysticism (from James). In his idiosyncratic mathematical universe, they add up to the “fiery core and beating heart” of religion—or, more properly, the living core of one person’s religion—or, even more properly, the center of one person’s writing about religious experience.

For Critchley, mysticism is inherently literary and inescapably individual. Mystics are engaged in a weird dance of self-assertion and self-annihilation not unfamiliar to anyone who has spent time on the psychoanalytic couch. Whether it is Julian or Meister Eckhart or Marguerite Porete, or Anne Carson or Annie Dillard, the mystic’s act of self-inscription is the rich matrix from which the soaring “I” in Western culture springs. Critchley’s book is a deliberate if not desperate attempt to rehabilitate this creative and joyous “I” in post-pandemic life.

A little Critchley goes a long way. Some readers prefer writers, even first-person writers, who stay at least partly behind the curtain, whose fingers we never mistake for the luminous celestial

bodies they point to. Sometimes the spell of a book completely wipes away the awareness of the author-editor-publisher-market scaffolding behind it and allows us to see the book itself as our “thou” for the moment. *Mysticism* lacks this power, but despite his bravado, Critchley never claims outright omniscience.

The book’s one-word title may beguile (or mislead) the novice. *Mysticism* is no introduction, survey, or guide. It is not argument or analysis. As the author warns, it is a record of a voyage where travel and travail and unexpected bliss may meet if the right stars and risky make-believe align. We have a capacity, Critchley says, for an “opening onto the alien, the remote, the strange, the uncanny.” His work is an invitation to the surprising world of everyday ecstasy.

Peter A. Huff

The reviewer, author or editor of seven books, teaches religious history at Benedictine University. His article “The Current State of Unbelief” appeared in *Quest*, spring 2022.

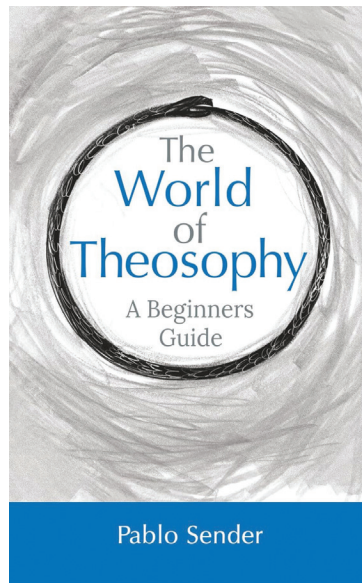
The World of Theosophy: A Beginners Guide

PABLO SENDER

Ojai, Calif.: Fohat Productions, 2025. 82 pp., paper, \$8.95.

The *World of Theosophy* offers a clear and accessible introduction to Theosophical thought, guiding newcomers into its core ideas without requiring prior knowledge. It is well suited for individuals as well as study groups in lodges and study centers. It will appeal to those who are curious about Theosophy but hesitant to begin with more demanding classical texts. As such, the book functions not only as an introduction but as an open threshold, inviting readers into further study, reflection, and conscious participation in a wiser and more compassionate world.

The book’s eight chapters each open with a quote from a well-known



Theosophist, accompanied by a brief identification of that individual’s role within the movement. The quotations introduce each chapter’s theme, and the material is presented in a dialogue format, which is an effective approach for beginners. Pablo Sender unfolds ideas gradually, favoring inquiry over doctrinal exposition, an approach that reflects the Theosophical emphasis on self-discovery rather than belief.

The early chapters focus on foundational questions about Theosophy, while the later chapters move toward broader themes such as practical application, the nature of God, the origin of the cosmos, and humanity’s evolutionary journey toward enlightenment. This progression allows readers to build understanding and move from orientation to deeper contemplation.

Writing a beginner’s guide, the author prioritizes clarity over completeness. The language is clear, nontechnical, and inviting, helping newcomers feel welcomed rather than tested. At the same time, the presentation remains faithful to the depth and integrity of the teachings.

The book concludes on a hopeful note, emphasizing the cosmos as the manifestation of a divine mind embodying harmony, goodness, and love. From this perspective, Theosophy

provides an essentially optimistic worldview, affirming meaning, purpose, and spiritual evolution while encouraging individual responsibility and inner growth.

Susanne Hoepfl-Wellenhofer

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Christianity and the Qur’an: The Rise of Islam in Christian Arabia

GABRIEL SAID REYNOLDS

New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2025. xi + 271 pp., hardcover, \$30.

It is widely accepted that when the prophet Muhammad preached the suras (verses) that later became the Qur’an, he was addressing an audience of polytheistic Arabs.

This view has been challenged of late. Much current scholarship indicates that the prophet was addressing a largely Christian population, which would explain the many references to Jesus and Mary in the Qur’an.

Gabriel Said Reynolds’ *Christianity and the Qur’an* is the latest entry into this field. His numerous citations of other scholars show that he is not the first to have come up with this hypothesis, but this volume provides a strong and convincing argument in its favor.

Muhammad preached in the Hijaz (west-central Arabia) in the early seventh century AD. Evidence strongly suggests that at that time, Christianity was common if not dominant in northern Arabia, largely because of the influence of the Syrian church. It was also prevalent in southern Arabia, which had been conquered by Abraha, the king of the neighboring Christian kingdom of Axum in Ethiopia. (One Muslim tradition says that Abraha attacked Mecca in the year of Muhammad’s birth, c.AD 570.)

Evidence from archaeology and epigraphy for the presence of Christianity in the Hijaz, where Islam arose, is more scarce. But Reynolds argues that it was indeed present there.