

Anne Kreps: The Essenes in Southern Oregon

Brother David “Day” Nazariah, claiming direct apostolic lineage to the ancient Essenes, invites his readers to “get naked with God and die.” His community in Elmira, Oregon, blends elements of Sufi dancing, mantra meditation, environmentalism, yoga, and Kabbalistic cosmic speculation. Along the way, Day Nazariah writes polemics against New Age movements – many of which share elements of his doctrine and practice.

Day’s Essene Church of Christ claims authenticity and connection to the ancient Essenes through reference and original interpretations of ancient texts, and by claiming possession of secret ancient texts. They claim to be keepers of the esoteric teachings of an underground church predating the first Christians. The church explains its origins and practices through a synthetic reading of Philo, Josephus and Pliny’s accounts of the ancient Essenes. It differentiates itself from the communities of the Dead Sea Scrolls in Qumran by identifying with a movement of “Mount Carmel Essenes,” who permitted marriage and the participation of women in liturgy.

This paper studies the written record of this modern Essene movement for its unusual merging of New Age practice with Christian fundamentalism. While the movement emphasizes a spirituality rooted in the works of Edgar Casey and Edmund Bordeaux Szekely, the Essene Church of Christ reaches for ancient sources and scholarship to support its doctrine. By harkening back to the mystical religions of the ancient Mediterranean, the modern Essenes are able to engage in syncretistic practices and claim the authority usually given to traditional religions.

This community’s focus on modern scholarship about ancient Essenes prompts us to consider the role of academic research in manufacturing the allure of ancient Mediterranean religions. The team which originally edited the Dead Sea Scrolls justified the secrecy of their project in order to fend off groups like the Essene Church of Christ. Ironically, this secrecy spurred the modern mystical fascination with the ancient Essenes. This paper examines how these modern Essenes read scholarship to legitimize their own practices and theology, and, conversely, considers how scholarship has renewed interest in ancient esoteric movements and driven their revitalization as New “Antique” Religious Movements.

Keywords:

[Christianity](#), [Essenes](#), [New Age Religion](#), [North America](#)

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