

Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, eds. *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013. xii + 494 pp. ISBN: 978-90-04-23596-0. \$234

Within the history of Western esoteric currents and new religious movements (NRMs) in the nineteenth century and beyond, few organizations—whether in terms of historical impact, peak membership size, or subsequent discursive influence—tower as high as the Theosophical Society. As remarked by this present volume’s editors, “the formation of the Theosophical Society ... and the main events linked to the fate of this organization, its key figure Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), and her immediate successors belong to the short list of pivotal chapters of religious history in the West.”¹ At its absolute peak in 1928, the Theosophical Society was composed of 45098 due-paying members, spread throughout 1586 chartered lodges operating within the United States, India, England, and Australia.² From this membership, very respectable for an occultist group, emerged a vast corpus of literature which came to shape and define esoteric discourse throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Not only does the Theosophical current “and its multiple offshoots [stand] as one of the world’s most important religious traditions” in and of itself,³ but it is hard to locate a Western esoteric current alive today whose discourses are *not* genealogical relatives of or descendants from those discourses which constitute the Theosophical current, with Blavatsky herself essentially functioning as a discursive nodal point, setting the stage for the ways in which modern esoteric currents approach the relationships between religious and scientific discourses.⁴

Given the importance of both the Theosophical Society and the Theosophical current to the history of NRMs and esoteric currents in the West, it comes off as a surprise that both remain “vastly understudied religious manifestations” within present-day academia.⁵ While there do exist documentary studies of the original Theosophical Society, as well as biographical accounts of its founders,

¹ Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, “Introduction,” in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 1.

² Gregory John Tillett, *Charles Webster Leadbeater, 1854–1934: A Biographical Study* (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1986), 942–50.

³ Hammer and Rothstein, “Introduction,” 2.

⁴ Kocku von Stuckrad, *The Scientification of Religion: An Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800–2000* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2014), 98.

⁵ Hammer and Rothstein, “Introduction,” 2.

broad treatments of the Theosophical current itself and of the multitude of organizations birthed by the Theosophical Society are practically nonexistent. It is precisely this dearth in scholarship that Hammer and Rothstein seek to rectify with the *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*—with their stated ambition being to produce a volume which covers “a reasonable range of topics concerning the history and impact of Theosophy,” without purporting to be “a complete survey of a field of vast dimensions.”⁶ Towards this end, Hammer and Rothstein’s volume collects twenty chapters from an interdisciplinary cross-section of senior and junior scholars—all of whose prior works have contributed to the body of scholarship on the Theosophical current, and many of whom are recognized as leading experts on the subject. There are some conspicuous absences within this group of authors—most notably James A. Santucci, Robert S. Ellwood, James R. Lewis, and Wouter J. Hanegraaff—who might be expected as contributors to a volume covering this territory. However, these absences do not detract from the overall quality of the book’s contents.

The book is divided into three sections, each of which is tightly focused on a specific aspect of scholarly inquiry. The first section, “Theosophical Societies,” is composed of four chapters that chronologically set out the history of the subject in terms of the first, second, and third generations of Theosophy. Throughout these seventy-four pages, authors Jocelyn Godwin, Catherine Wessinger, Tim Rudbøg, and W. Michael Ashcraft collectively present what is perhaps the most complete history of the successive incarnations of the Theosophical Society, from the foundation of the original society in 1875 by Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907); through the second generation of leadership in Adyar with Annie Besant (1847–1933), Charles W. Leadbeater (1854–1934), and Katherine Tingley (1847–1929); to the third generation, spanning the Theosophical Society (both Adyar and Pasadena branches) and the United Lodge of Theosophists (Los Angeles) in the twentieth century and beyond. Each author in this section expertly treats their respective historical period, the result of which is an all but unrivaled chronological history of the Theosophical societies, over a period spanning two hundred years.

The second section, “Religious Currents in the Wake of Theosophy,” collects eight chapters that variously treat distinct currents, movements, and organizations which emerged out of the core Theosophical current or the Theosophical Society. As with the preceding section, the topics are handled with very high degrees of scholarly care, attention to proper documentation and critical reasoning. The resulting picture, while not encyclopedic in nature, presents a very broad

⁶ Hammer and Rothstein, “Introduction,” 4, 11.

picture of post-Theosophical currents—some of which are likely to be familiar to students of Western esotericism, but others of which may not be. This reviewer was quite pleased to see treatments of currents more traditionally linked with Theosophy—such as Katharina Brandt and Olav Hammer’s chapter on Rudolph Steiner’s Anthroposophy, Sean O’Callaghan’s chapter on Alice Bailey’s Theosophical Christology, or Hammer’s chapter, “Theosophical Elements in New Age Religion”—featured alongside those dealing with topics which have received much less scholarly attention—notably, Michael Abravanel’s work on the Summit Lighthouse group, Anita Stasulane’s chapter on Nicholas and Helena Roerich, and Mikael Rothstein’s “Mahatmas in Space: The Ufological Turn and Mythological Materiality of Post-World War II Theosophy.”

The third section, “Theosophy, Culture, and Society,” assembles eight chapters that deal with a broad variety of thematic topics, allowing in-depth discussions of key aspects of the Theosophical current. While less structured in terms of content than the preceding two sections, this collection of chapters coheres well in presenting a variety of topics that coalesce around the general subject of interactions between the Theosophical current and areas of Western culture and society outside of the current *sensu stricto*. The section begins with a chapter by the late Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, which masterfully situates the Theosophical current within the broader framework of the study of Western esotericism—charting the genealogy of the current as it relates to a wide variety of esoteric currents, such as 19th century Christian Theosophy, the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, and Freemasonry. Subsequent chapters deal with topics ranging from social issues such as orientalism (Christopher Partridge’s “Lost Horizon: H.P. Blavatsky and Theosophical Orientalism”), race (Isaac Lubelsky’s “Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy”), and gender (Siv Ellen Kraft’s “Theosophy, Gender and the ‘New Woman’”); to more intellectual problems (Garry W. Trompf’s discussion of macrohistorical discourses within the Theosophical current and Egil Asprem’s astute analysis of “Theosophical Attitudes towards Science”); to a pair of thematically linked chapters assessing Theosophy’s impact on visual art (Tessel M. Bauduin’s “Abstract Art as ‘By-Product of Astral Manifestation’: The Influence of Theosophy on Modern Art in Europe”), and the impact of popular fiction on Theosophical discourse and vice versa (Ingvild Sælid Gilhus and Lisbeth Mikaelson’s “Theosophy and Popular Fiction”). In each case, the chapters within this section make powerful contributions to the scholarly discussion of their respective topics as they relate to Theosophy.

As a whole, the *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* is a remarkably cohesive volume. Edited collections containing articles aimed at specialist audiences are often plagued by a lack of cohesion, with it often being hard to imagine a single specialist reader capable of critically evaluating and finding utility in the volume as a whole. Quite the opposite is true of Hammer and Rothstein's book. The handbook is a rare instance of an edited collection where the intended group of specialists should find each and every individual chapter both intelligible and utile. The fact of the book's cohesion, compounded with the remarkably high quality of the component essays, makes the *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* required reading for any scholar whose work touches at all on the Theosophical Society, its dominant current, or the myriad of related organizations and movements which emerged in its wake—in practical terms, this would include virtually all scholars dealing with Western esoteric currents and NRMs originating from the nineteenth century to the present. As is typical of books in the Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion series, the volume is handsomely produced, with high quality binding and paper, resulting in a book which should easily withstand either the rigors of library ownership, or the heavy reference use of an individual owner. Although the book's cost will likely preclude purchase by many individual readers, it is a volume which rightly belongs within any collection—institutional or personal—devoted in part to the Theosophical current.

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