

Tim Rudbøg and Eric Reenberg Sand, eds. *Imagining the East: The Early Theosophical Society*. London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. x + 384 pp. ISBN: 9780190853884. \$99.00.

The academic study of Theosophy began to accelerate during the 1990s. Although, at that time, scholars felt its academic marginalisation keenly, today, Theosophy's historical and cultural importance can hardly be questioned. This acceptance is reflected in the five collections devoted specifically to Theosophy that have been published within the last decade.<sup>1</sup> What have been the main issues at stake in how Theosophy has been depicted over the last thirty years? A question that has particularly vexed researchers is the relation of Theosophy to Asian thought. Countering the simplistic identification of Theosophy with Hinduism or Buddhism that characterised the very earliest studies, scholars from the nineties onwards often drew on Edward Said in portrayals of Theosophy as involving an imaginative construction of India and a Westernisation of Oriental ideas. Important insights have been gained from analyses carried out within this framework, and they have raised crucial ethical questions regarding imperialist and colonialist abuses of power.

Challenges to this trend have emerged as part of what we might call a “transcultural turn” in the study of Theosophy. Drawing on perspectives influenced by post-colonial studies, these approaches do not deny the obvious Orientalism of the Theosophical Society, but emphasise—as constituent of that Orientalism—the contributions of subaltern Theosophists alongside processes of

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1. They are: a special edition of *Literature and Aesthetics* edited by Zoe Alderton and Johanna Petsche (2011); Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein's *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (2013); my own *Theosophical Appropriations* (2016), co-edited with Boaz Huss; Julian Strube and Hans-Martin Krämer's *Theosophy Across Boundaries* (2020), and the volume under review (2020).

“cultural entanglement.”<sup>2</sup> Although this tendency has been gaining momentum over the last few years, it is not exactly new, since already some two decades ago, Gauri Viswanathan (2000) and Joy Dixon (2001) commented on the cross-fertilisations that occurred in the context of colonial Theosophy.

As the title of the work under review suggests, its centre of gravity lies with the former approach. As the editors state, the volume is “primarily based on the premise that the Theosophical Society originated in the West and thereby approached the East from that point” (10). For all that, *Imagining the East* is not entirely univocal, and the editors conclude that “we hope and anticipate that the much-needed global history perspective will be brought more strongly into the study of Theosophy and thereby help provide a more nuanced perspective on how Theosophy has been perceived and applied around the world” (378). There is evidence of a transcultural perspective in several places throughout the volume, with the most explicit statement coming from Michael Bergunder, whose chapter functions as a sort of “how to” for what he calls the “global history approach.” Be that as it may, I am rather puzzled by the inclusion of a piece (as excellent as it is) that has already been in print for over six years.<sup>3</sup>

Another niggle is that I would have liked to have seen more diversity among the authors. Of the thirteen contributors, eight are full or emeritus professors. Two are independent scholars and four are lecturers or associate professors. Only one is a woman. It would also have been nice to have seen the work of graduate students and post-doctoral fellows represented, especially as many of them are producing some of the most cutting-edge research.

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2. Examples of recent studies that approach Theosophy from a transcultural perspective include Bergunder, “Experiments with Theosophical Truth” (2014); Mukhopadhyay, “The Occult and the Orient” (2015); Baier, “Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer” (2016); Mukhopadhyay, “A Short History of the Theosophical Movement in Colonial Bengal” (2016); and Mukhopadhyay, “Mohini” (2020). Several important contributions (including by Michael Bergunder, Wouter Hanegraaff, and Ulrich Harlass) have been published as part of a collected volume that emphasizes the transcultural perspective: *Theosophy Across Boundaries*.

3. See Bergunder, “Experiments with Theosophical Truth.”

The editors have taken care to cover a range of topics, which are treated in appropriate detail. The chapters also speak to, and develop, one another. For example, the importance of the idea of universal brotherhood, which is highlighted in Godwin's chapter, is later contextualised in contemporary Spiritualist ideas by Rudbøg. Unfortunately, the overlaps sometimes result in repetition. For example, A. O. Hume's biography is sketched twice. This is only an issue, though, if one reads the volume through from beginning to end and it is more likely that readers will dip in and out depending on their interests.

Since it would be impossible to discuss all thirteen chapters here, I will focus on four that particularly interested me. Joscelyn Godwin's chapter on the Mahatma Letters explores a variety of possibilities with regard to the letters' authorship, production, and inspiration. He provides lively and perceptive sketches of the two central recipients, A. P. Sinnett and A. O. Hume, discusses the letters' physical peculiarities, outlines the most important ideas contained in them, and gives an account of their afterlife. Since I am currently researching depictions of Mahatmas in Theosophical fiction, I particularly enjoyed Godwin's character sketches of the Mahatmas themselves. Clear and engaging, this chapter will prove indispensable to anyone starting out on a study of the Mahatma letters, as well as to those who are already familiar with them.

Patrick Bowen's chapter asserts that the instruction in yoga provided by the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor (H. B. of L.) from 1885 represents the earliest known example of the organized practice of yoga in the modern West. Drawing on a wealth of archival material, he argues that the endorsement of yoga by the Theosophical Society during the previous decade influenced the H. B. of L. Although Olcott and Blavatsky gradually turned away from yoga, Indian Theosophists continued to promote it, notably, the Arya Samaji R. C. Bary. It was largely due to Bary's efforts, claims Bowen, that yoga was incorporated into the teachings of the H. B. of L.

More research is needed on the legacy of this occultist promotion of yoga, and this means that some of Bowen's conclusions on this (relatively minor)

aspect of his chapter are necessarily speculative. For example, we know that some elements of Max Theon's Cosmic Philosophy found their way into the Integral yoga of Sri Aurobindo via Mirra Alfassa (later known as The Mother), and Bowen suggests that Max Theon "retained an interest in Indian religions that showed possible yoga roots" and that the influence of the Cosmic Movement on Sri Aurobindo "might therefore be an early instance of the global circulation of yoga from India to Europe and back" (171). Bowen is cautious here, and rightly so, for as yet there is no evidence that Theon's knowledge of Hindu thought was anything other than minimal.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Aurobindo certainly would not have needed Mirra's cosmic influences to steer him in the direction of yoga. None of this detracts, of course, from the veracity of Bowen's conclusion that the spread of occult-focused yoga involved "the complex interplay of modern forces" (173). Thanks to his excellent chapter, we now have a clearer picture of hitherto little-understood aspects of that complexity.

In a beautifully written chapter, David Weir demonstrates that Theosophy and modernism are parallel historical developments that share, as he puts it, "a sense of the erudite and recondite" (221). Weir takes the reader on a journey through the manifold Theosophical inflections to be found in the works of several proto-modernist and modernist authors: Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and James Joyce. He identifies a trajectory of growing scepticism about Theosophy as modernism proceeds, with attitudes towards Theosophy evolving from Yeats's positive perspective, through Pound, who embraces the idea of a secret tradition, to Eliot, for whom scepticism coexists with some measure of acceptance. Once we reach Joyce, however, we have arrived at a sceptical and critical outsider. Weir analyses the varied ways in which these authors engage with Theosophical ideas and themes, whether as a source of inspiration, as a foil, or indeed (perhaps most interestingly) as both.

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4. See Boaz Huss, "Cosmic Philosophy and the Kabbalah."

Paul Johnson's chapter, "Theosophy in the Bengal Renaissance," charts Blavatsky and Olcott's relationships with several Bengalis, arguing that the significance of the encounter between Theosophy and the Brahma Samaj has been underestimated. The mutual influence of Theosophy and the Bengal Renaissance reached its zenith, according to Johnson, during the "meteoric career of Mohini Chatterji" (244). Johnson argues that in his 1887 defection from Theosophy, Mohini wasn't so much rejecting Theosophy by embracing Christianity as "moving out of the orb of Blavatsky's influence by returning to the conciliatory and pro-Western stance of the early Brahma movement" (242). My own forthcoming work on Blavatsky's engagement with the work of Mohini (as well as another early Indian Theosophist, T. Subba Row) will develop these insights of Johnson's.<sup>5</sup>

In conclusion, *Imagining the East* provides a solid introduction to important figures, events, and texts in the history of Theosophical Orientalism, as well as several ground-breaking chapters that will be indispensable to future researchers. The volume will be of interest to students at the beginning of their studies and to scholars with more experience. General readers with an interest in the colonial-era occultism will also find something of interest.

Julie Chajes  
juliechajes@gmail.com

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5. Chajes, "Nothing Personal: Blavatsky and Her Indian Interlocutors" (forthcoming).

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