



The Goldstein-Goren International Center for Jewish Thought

Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah,  
and the Transformation of Traditions

edited by

Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss

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# Introduction

Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss

Appreciation of the historical importance of the Theosophical Society (henceforth, TS) and related movements is growing, and rightly so, yet the extent of theosophical influences can still be surprising, even to scholars in the field. The chapters of this volume contribute to our increasing recognition of the global impact of the TS and its ideas and illustrate lesser-known instances of theosophical appropriation around the world.

From its very beginning, the TS was an international movement. Its founders were an American lawyer and journalist, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), an Irish-American lawyer, William Quan Judge (1851-1896), and a Russian occultist writer and adventurer, Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891). Following its founding in New York in 1875, the TS soon became a worldwide organization. In 1879, its headquarters moved to India, first to Bombay, and later to Adyar, Madras. From the 1880's, theosophical lodges were established around the world: in America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia. Today, the movement has branches in about sixty countries. The first objective of the Society (as formulated in 1896) was "to form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or color," and it was open to members of diverse religious, national, and ethnic backgrounds. The universalistic nature of the TS was expressed in its interest in different religious and esoteric traditions: first, in Western esoteric, ancient Egyptian, and Kabbalistic doctrines, and later, in Hindu and Buddhist ones. As a movement, Theosophy encouraged the comparative study of religion and integrated into its teachings concepts and themes derived from a large variety of contexts. Unlike other esoteric movements, the TS included many non-Christian and non-Western members from the outset. These members participated in theosophical adaptations and interpretations of their traditions. Despite these

interpretations being offered by adherents of the traditions themselves, they were usually predicated on a modern esoteric perspective, within a Western discursive framework. Theosophical appropriations had a considerable impact on the way different religious traditions were perceived in modern Western culture. In particular, they had a decisive and significant impact on new developments in, and transformations of, modern Kabbalistic, Hindu, and Buddhist currents.

The chapters that follow are the product of an international workshop held at Ben-Gurion University in December 2013, funded by the Israel Science Foundation (ISF) and the Goldstein-Goren Center for Jewish Thought at Ben-Gurion University. Scholars attended the conference from Israel, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Greece, Italy, Holland, the United States, Japan, and Sri Lanka. The workshop was part of a four-year research project funded by the ISF (Grant 774/10) on Kabbalah and the Theosophical Society.

As part of that project, we studied Jewish involvement in the TS, the formation of Jewish theosophical groups, and the adaptation and interpretation of Kabbalah by Jewish and non-Jewish theosophists. These topics were also central to the workshop, a centrality reflected in this volume, with its section on Kabbalistic appropriations. The workshop considered Judaism's often-ambivalent placement between the categories of "East" and "West" and the TS's role in the construction of modern Jewish and non-Jewish identities in relation to those categories, *inter alia*. Since we believe questions relating to Jewish theosophists and the appropriations of Kabbalah in the TS should be understood in wider context, the workshop also examined theosophical adaptations in other cultures and traditions as well, especially within Anthroposophy, which emerged directly from the TS.

The chapters in the volume examine intersections between theosophical thought with areas as diverse as the arts, literature, and poetry, scholarship, modern interpretations of Judaism and of Kabbalah, Orientalism, and politics, especially nationalism. How may we explain the extent of these theosophical influences? Although they are very different from one another, these chapters join each other in pointing towards congruencies between theosophical ideas and the cultural logic of a wide range of contemporary currents. In other words, we suggest that Theosophy was exceptionally successful (and influential) because

it was a key expression of some of the central cultural, intellectual, and political developments of the period. Yet, for all these congruencies between theosophical, artistic, literary, political and scholarly themes, there were also important differences and tensions. Max Müller's negative stance towards his theosophical admirer, Madame Blavatsky, and Gandhi's ambivalent attitude towards the TS (even though it had influenced him) are just two of the examples discussed in the chapters that follow.

### Chapter Outlines

The present volume includes thirteen chapters, each of them a fascinating case study of a theosophical appropriation of a different type and in a different context. They are divided into three thematic sections: *Theosophical Transformations*, *Kabbalistic Appropriations*, and *Global Adaptations*. The first section, *Theosophical Transformations*, focuses on the appropriations that took place in the early TS, especially in the thought of Madame Blavatsky.

In the opening paper, Julie Chajes discusses two of Blavatsky's early works that refer to Kabbalah: "A Few Questions to Hiraḥ" (1875) and *Isis Unveiled* (1877). The chapter elucidates Blavatsky's doctrines of Kabbalah in those texts, each of which have distinct emphases. In "A Few Questions," Blavatsky emphasized Rosicrucianism and Spiritualism, identifying Kabbalah with the current doctrines of the Theosophical Society: conditional immortality and metempsychosis. Blavatsky abandoned these doctrines in her later works. In "A Few Questions," she alluded to three main types of Kabbalah: An original, Oriental Cabala, its Jewish derivation, and the Rosicrucian Cabala, which drew on the Oriental and Jewish varieties. Blavatsky was influenced in her understanding of the Jewish Cabala by the work of the Polish Jewish scholar, Christian David Ginsburg (1831-1914), and many of her ideas about the Rosicrucian Cabala came from the work of the freemasonic writer Hargrave Jennings (1817-1890). Blavatsky brought these two sources—the work of a professional scholar and that of an amateur historian—together in her narrative.

Two years later, in *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky postulated a Buddhist source for Kabbalah, a position unique to that work. The universalism

of her Kabbalah was now more pronounced, and her treatment of Kabbalistic doctrines much more detailed. In proposing a Buddhist source, she was influenced by C. W. King (1818-1888), an expert on gemstones who wrote a book about Gnosticism. Other sources cited in Blavatsky's discussions of Kabbalah include the early-modern Christian Hebraist and Kabbalist, Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636-1689), and the nineteenth-century French Jewish scholar, Adolphe Franck (1809-1893). Although Blavatsky does seem to have known Franck's renowned 1843 work on the Kabbalah in the original French, at least in part, her citations of Franck and of Knorr were derived largely second-hand through the works of the Boston lawyer, Samuel Fales Dunlap (1825-1905). One again, therefore, Blavatsky drew together an assortment of scholarly and non-scholarly influences.

In her narratives, Blavatsky drew on these diverse sources to affirm *Ain Soph* as the true source of the cosmos in explicit opposition to the idea that Jehovah was the creator. The true origin of the cosmos in *Ain Soph* was, Blavatsky claimed, attested in the Bible, and in philosophies and religions the world over from time immemorial, but only in their correct, Kabbalistic interpretations. Thus cast as the sole legitimate form of Biblical hermeneutics and as an ancient science, Kabbalah was used to attack the hegemony of the Catholic and Protestant Churches and the prepotence of "materialism," especially within the natural sciences. Kabbalah therefore empowered Blavatsky to pronounce boldly on the ongoing disputes arising from the baffling modern diversification of scientific and theological developments, attempting to lead all branches of human knowledge back to their claimed original integrity.

Blavatsky's Kabbalah, Chajes argues, was a modern form of Kabbalah. It incorporated numerous and diverse modern sources and it was related to modern discourses of religion, science, progression, and decline, and, importantly, to modernizing interpretations of Buddhism, Judaism, and Kabbalah. All of this was marshaled in the proposition of solutions to modern "problems" such as the "conflict" between religion and science and the perceived growth of nihilism. This discursive entanglement and integration of seemingly incongruous sources was of central importance to the shape modern (and post-modern) Kabbalah would come to take, both in subsequent theosophical literature and in

the myriad of theosophically influenced movements within New Age and alternative spirituality.

In the following chapter, Isaac Lubelsky charts the relationship between Madame Blavatsky and the renowned German-born Oxford Orientalist, Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900). Blavatsky's references to Müller are often mentioned in passing in accounts of her sources, but this is the first detailed exploration of this topic, looking at the relationship from both sides. For Blavatsky's part, she revered Müller as a scholar and quoted his works in corroboration of her theories both in *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*. Müller began with a curious and relatively friendly attitude towards the Theosophists but it cooled over time, ending in explicit dislike. In Lubelsky's account, other characters play minor but important roles in the ongoing drama of Blavatsky vs Müller: Henry Olcott, Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), Annie Besant (1847-1933), Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) and Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840-1921).

Considering Blavatsky's two major works alongside Müller's article "Comparative Mythology" (1856) and his 1892 *Gifford Lectures*, later published as *Theosophy or Psychological Religion* (1893), Lubelsky highlights the common ground, as well as the antagonism between the two authors. Commonalities include their related (yet differing) images of "Aryan" India as a land of pristine and ancient wisdom as well as the concrete political influence Müller and the Theosophists enjoyed on the subcontinent. In his documentation of this unique relationship between the philologist and the matriarch of the "New Age," Lubelsky deepens our understanding of intersections between scholarship and occultism in the nineteenth century as well as the reception of Theosophy among some of Blavatsky's contemporaries.

In the third chapter, John Patrick Deveney clarifies the nature of early Theosophy vis a vis what the Society became from the 1880's onwards, arguing that the differences between the two are so great that we are justified in speaking of two Theosophical Societies. Redressing an unfortunate under-acknowledgement of the nature of early Theosophy in the scholarly literature, Deveney analyses Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* as well as her early articles and letters. He also considers the writings of other central early theosophists, such as Damodar Mavalankar (b.

1857), William Quan Judge, Albert Rawson (1829-1902), and Colonel Olcott. These demonstrate, Deveney argues, that the Society as established in 1875 was devoted to practical occult work, and specifically to the development of the ability to project the astral double. This ability was considered an indication of the fusion of the student's "individuality" with their "divine spirit" to create an "individualized" entity capable of surviving death. The early theosophists attempted to prolong life long enough to achieve this goal and to that end they instituted a number of rules, including temperance, fasting, and some form of sexual abstinence. A system of three degrees was established to indicate the student's progress. From the 1880's, these practical, magical, and occult aims were downplayed, discouraged, and even condemned by the theosophical mahatmas as "selfish." Blavatsky began to describe the individual as the "false personality." Rather than teaching that this individual could become immortal, she now taught that after death it disintegrated and that the only human principles to survive (*atma*, *buddhi*, and part of *manas*) do not constitute the individual who desires immortality here and now, but rather are impersonal in character. The failure of the Theosophical Society to produce the practical occult instruction they had promised and the change in the Society's teachings prompted some theosophists to look elsewhere, for example to the occult movements the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor and the Golden Dawn. The Theosophical rejection of individual immortality was also one of the principle elements that led to the anti-Blavatskyan Christian Theosophical current.

Deveney's clarification of the Society's early teachings and change of doctrinal direction is important when considering the issue of theosophical appropriations because to a significant extent, the "two Societies" must be considered separately in terms of their influences and legacies. The first Society was the heir of ideas associated with the Rosicrucians and with Cagliostro (1743-1795), the Italian mage who spread a system of practical occultism across Europe. An heir of this early type of Theosophy was American New Thought. Like Cagliostro, New Thought teachers taught some form of occult sexual practice. This may have involved the retention or ingestion of semen, and was predicated on the idea that sexual energy made psychic and spiritual development possible. This idea was an open secret,

Deveney argues, known to all in the quarter century before World War I. Although Deveney does not attribute explicitly sexual practices to Blavatsky and her followers, the early theosophists were well aware of a connection between sexual energy and the achievement of conditional immortality. Whatever the details of the practical work they pursued, Deveney concludes, it is clear that there was such work, focused on lengthening life and developing an individualized monad capable of surviving death. This was later concealed and (almost) forgotten.

In Chapter Four, Tomer Persico argues that Krishnamurti's famous dissolution of the Order of the Star in 1929—including his abandonment of the role of messiah assigned to him by Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater (1854-1934)—did not represent his negation of religious tradition or the establishment of new one, but rather his embrace of an existing current: the "Tradition of No Tradition" with roots stretching back to Protestant Pietism and articulated most clearly by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882). In his writings, Emerson rejected ritual and tradition and articulated a perennialist view of religious truth, positions that are uncannily close to Krishnamurti's later statements. Persico considers the biography of Krishnamurti (1895-1986), including his native Brahmanism, his "discovery" by Leadbeater, his Theosophical training, and his brother's tragic and traumatizing death. Examining Krishnamurti's writings closely, Persico demonstrates a continuity in his thinking despite his apparent doctrinal *volta face*. Indeed, iconoclastic elements had always been present in Krishnamurti's thought to some extent, alongside a certain ambivalence towards Theosophical teachings. Persico highlights Krishnamurti's time in England and France, but especially in America, as formative in the development of his thought. It was after this period abroad that Krishnamurti's criticism of Theosophy intensified, his latent iconoclastic tendencies consolidated, and he fully and publicly turned away from Theosophy towards the position exemplified so eloquently by Emerson: the Tradition of No Tradition.

The second section of the volume, entitled *Kabbalistic Appropriations*, deals with various theosophical transformations of Kabbalah, a theme already introduced in Chajes's paper. As Boaz Huss explains in the first chapter of this section, many theosophists of Jewish origin studied Kabbalah, translated kabbalistic texts, and published articles and books about Kabbalah, in which they created

theosophically inspired modern forms of Kabbalah. Huss redresses a lack of academic research on these Jewish theosophists, and offers a preliminary survey of the biographies and literary contributions of key Jewish figures in theosophical centers around the world—Europe, America, the Middle East, China, India, and South Africa—from the foundation of the Society in 1875 into the third decade of the twentieth century. He considers the formation of Jewish theosophical groups, especially the Association of Hebrew Theosophists, founded in Adyar in 1925 following the Jubilee Congress of the Theosophical Society. He also tells the story of another (controversial) Jewish theosophical group, founded in 1926 in Basra, Iraq, by Kaduri Ani and his supporters, which included around 300 families. The members of this Jewish community were excommunicated because of involvement with Theosophy and they established their own congregation until the ban was finally lifted a decade later, when they were reabsorbed into the wider community.

Huss surveys the numerous books and articles of Jewish theosophists, demonstrating that overall, Jewish theosophists had greater access to primary texts of Kabbalah than did non-Jewish theosophists, and some even had enough knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic to prepare their own translations. Nevertheless, their knowledge of primary sources was limited and even those who did have some language skills largely based themselves on secondary literature, including Western esoteric, theosophical, and academic texts. Thus, the Jewish theosophists emphasized kabbalistic themes that were close to Theosophy (such as reincarnation and the divine origin of the human soul) but ignored Jewish kabbalistic notions that were incompatible with Theosophy (such as the theurgic import of the Jewish commandments and the unique status of Jewish souls). The Jewish theosophists believed Kabbalah reconciled Judaism and Theosophy, and saw themselves as having a double mission: to increase knowledge about Judaism, especially Kabbalah, amongst theosophists, and to help Jews to better understand Judaism, through Theosophy. Although influenced by Blavatsky, unlike her, they presented Kabbalah as unequivocally Jewish and as a force for the renewal of Judaism.

Huss situates these Jewish-theosophical interpretations of Kabbalah within a wider current of modern Jewish interest in Kabbalah,



demonstrating that some of the basic assumptions of the Jewish theosophists about the nature and significance of Kabbalah resemble the perceptions of modern scholars of Kabbalah. Their positive re-evaluation of Kabbalah took place within the framework of a neo-Romantic and Orientalist fascination with the “mystic East” that often intersected with Jewish nationalism and which portrayed Kabbalah as Jewish “mysticism.”

Developing the discussion of Kabbalah and Theosophy, Eugene Kuzmin’s chapter is the first academic study of the place of Kabbalah in the thought of the renowned Russian poet, literary critic, and painter, Maksimilian Voloshin (1877-1932). A polymath and highly original thinker whose life and work spanned the Silver Age through the Soviet Era, Voloshin’s poetry and prose contain numerous references to Kabbalistic works and principles, as well as to Voloshin’s wider occult and philosophical ideas. Kuzmin analyses several key texts (including poems and letters), identifying Kabbalistic references and themes, and exploring their sources in contemporaneous literature on the Kabbalah. Although Voloshin had an interest in Hebrew and Judaism, he was primarily influenced by the occultist versions of Kabbalah that have roots in the Christian Kabbalah of the early-modern period. In particular, Kuzmin explores the influence of Eliphaz Levi (1810-1875), Madame Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) and Antoine Fabre d’Olivet (1767-1825). He demonstrates how Voloshin’s texts contained elements drawn from these authors, but that Voloshin was guided in his interpretations by an ideologically based sense of freedom that was the outcome of his perspectives on the unique roles of the artist and the initiate. Kuzmin’s chapter provides a fascinating glimpse into some of the adaptations of Kabbalah by Russian intelligentsia, contributing to our understanding of some of the religious aspects of Silver Age, but especially Soviet culture, during which religion was officially repressed.

Andreas Kilcher’s chapter also discusses the thought of a Kabbalistically inspired intellectual, the Austrian Zionist, Ernst Müller (1880-1954), who, despite his participation in circles that included many well-known figures, is himself relatively obscure. Kilcher focuses on the alliance between Kabbalah and Anthroposophy as understood by Müller. In *A History of Jewish Mysticism* (1946), Müller’s conclusion was in sharp contradiction to Gershom Scholem’s, as published in

*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* just four years previously. Scholem (1897-1982) understood Kabbalah as essentially Jewish, whereas Müller saw it as universal, especially when interpreted through Theosophy and Anthroposophy. Müller was introduced to Rudolph Steiner around 1909, in Vienna. He considered Steiner's new vision of Theosophy (which would be institutionalized as Anthroposophy just three-four years later) as much closer to the Judeo-Christian tradition than the Eastern-oriented Theosophy of Blavatsky. Müller's perspective on Anthroposophy reflected Steiner's own assessment that Anthroposophy would recover the true, mystical, "old Hebrew" understanding of the scriptures. Although Steiner referred to Kabbalah relatively infrequently, Müller took Steiner's ideas and constructed a more elaborate alliance between Anthroposophy and Kabbalah (especially the *Zohar*). He was helped by his friend, Hugo Bergmann (1883-1975), who, like Müller, was a Zionist with anthroposophical leanings. Kilcher's chapter analyzes Müller's anthroposophical perspectives on Kabbalah, including how they were revealed in his studies and translations of the *Zohar*. He concludes with an analysis of Gershom Scholem's critique of Müller's attempted alliance, which Scholem saw as fragile.

In the final chapter of this section, Olav Hammer discusses theosophical appropriations of Kabbalah in the writings of the leader of The Summit Lighthouse, Elizabeth Clare Prophet (1939-2009). He demonstrates how information taken from a spectrum of sources (ranging from older and newer Kabbalah scholarship to occultist works) was adduced by Prophet as support for doctrines of a fundamentally theosophical nature. Beginning with an introduction to the establishment of the Summit Lighthouse Movement—one of the most controversial theosophically derived movements of the twentieth century—Hammer discusses some of Prophet's central doctrines and their Theosophical bases. Some of the Theosophical influences were direct but some were indirect, such as those mediated by another theosophically inspired religious leader: Alice Bailey (1880-1949). Summit Lighthouse teachings include such Theosophical staples as the chakras, karma, reincarnation, the Masters, and a septenary spiritual anthropology, as well as doctrines derived from Christianity and other sources. Elizabeth Clare Prophet combined all these elements in a perennialistic vision. Hammer focuses in detail on Prophet's book, *Kabbalah: Key to Your*

*Inner Power* (1997). He considers the place of distinctive Kabbalistic terminology such as *Ain Soph*, the *sephirot*, and the *shekhinah* as well as the importance of Kabbalah in Prophet's presentations of ethics, gender polarity, spiritual progress, and human occult physiology.

The third and final section of the volume, *Global Adaptations*, opens with Shimon Lev's chapter, which brings together a range of secondary and primary sources, to explore the relationships between Mohandas Gandhi (1883-1944) and his Jewish-theosophist supporters in South Africa. Lev begins with a biography of the main founder of the Johannesburg theosophical lodge, the English Jew Louis W. Ritch (1868- 1952), before focusing in greater depth on the lives and theosophical connections of three more English Jews: Henry Polak (1882-1959), Gabriel Isaac (1874-1914), and William M. Vogl, as well as the German Jew, Hermann Kallenbach (1871-1945). Lev discusses the political activism of these Jewish theosophists, their involvement in the *satyāgraha* struggle and their friendships with Gandhi, which were often very close. Lev highlights the tension between South-African Jewish identification with the ruling white elite and Jewish critique of that establishment, speculating about a self-perception shared between Jews and Indians as "Oriental" immigrants in South Africa. He notes the appeal of a Theosophical Society that enabled the exploration of unorthodox ideas but which, at the same time, did not require the abandonment of Jewish identity.

Gandhi's own involvement with Theosophy is also considered, especially his membership of the Esoteric Christian Union established by Anna Bonus Kingsford (1846-1888) and Edward Maitland (1824-1897). Lev notes Gandhi's selective intake of theosophical notions, his adoption of the ideas of brotherhood, universalism, and spiritual development (as representative of what he saw as "practical" Theosophy) but his rejection of what he deemed "formal" Theosophy, which he described as "humbug" involving an unfortunate search for occult powers. Although Gandhi discouraged his Jewish-theosophist friends from participating in the Society formally, it was the theosophical notion of brotherhood, Lev argues, that was a motivating factor in both his— and their— political activism in the context of South-African racial discrimination.

Moving from Africa to Europe, in her chapter on theosophical appropriations in early-twentieth-century Greek culture, Victoria Ferentinou argues for a greater appreciation of the importance of theosophical syncretism in the history of modern Greece. She focuses on five case studies of Greek intellectuals and artists who integrated theosophical themes into their work: the journalist, politician, and academic, Platon Drakoulis (1858-1934), the poets, Kostis Palamas (1859-1943) and Angelos Sikelianos (1884-1951), and the painters, Frixos Aristeus (1879-1951) and Konstantinos Parthenis (1878-1967). Ferentinou charts the gradual institutionalization of Theosophy in Greece, with the establishment of the first lodge in 1876 and the proliferation of Theosophy in the 1920's. As she argues, the early reception of Theosophy in Greece is a complicated and sensitive matter and must be framed in the interplay of nationalist politics, identitarian discourses, Greek Orthodoxy, and secularism during the early-twentieth century. Of central importance was the negotiation of Greece's unique identity vis a vis consolidation of its position as a progressive European nation, as well as its struggle to expand its borders, all the time subject to influences perceived as conflicting: West vs. East; secularism vs. Christianity; modernization vs. tradition. Within this context, there was considerable ambivalence towards Theosophy, which drew criticism from the Orthodox Church as well as the scientific community.

A central theme in Ferentinou's analysis is the notion of "occultist Orthodoxy," first coined by Palamas, and which was part of a wider Helleno-Christian synthesis central to nationalist narratives. This was expressed in art and ideology, especially in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Occultist Orthodoxy, Ferentinou argues, was neither homogeneous nor always religious, but chiefly cultural. It involved Greek intellectuals' adaptation and fusion of ideas drawn from occultism (including Theosophy) with their visions of Hellenism, Paganism, Christianity, and other elements. An understanding of the contours of occultist Orthodoxy and its place in the history of modern Greece can help explain the unique character of individual theosophical syntheses and their ambiguous relationships with wider European culture. Greek intellectuals often desired closer ties with modern Europe, but also had an attachment to Orthodoxy and the idea of "the East." The reassessment Ferentinou proposes as a basis for analyzing these writings and artworks

provides us with a more workable theoretical framework than those hitherto proposed by scholars of modern Greece. It illuminates identitarian and nationalist discourses and the interactions between heterodoxy and Christian Orthodoxy at the same time as it elucidates intersections between Theosophy and Greek modernity.

Moving now to Asia in our tour of global theosophical adaptations, Karl Baier's chapter reveals the Theosophical Society to have been a significant influence in the popularization of the *cakras* from the late-nineteenth century onwards. Baier considers the earliest and most intense period in the history of the appropriation of the *cakras* by the Society. He discusses pre-modern conceptualization of the *cakras*, demonstrating the differences between these complex and historically contingent Asian systems and the modern, recognizable depiction of the *cakras*, which derives largely from the *Ṣatcakranirūpaṇa* (Description of the Six Centers) by the sixteenth-century Bengali tantric, Pūrṇānanda, first published in Sanskrit and Bengali in 1858.

Baier then moves on to theoretical considerations, arguing that the history of Theosophy in South Asia is not one that documents the interactions of representatives of more-or-less well-defined traditions, but rather a history of complex reciprocal processes of transculturation involving protagonists of cultures-in-the-making. He outlines the processes involved in such transculturation, including what he terms "welcoming" and "releasing" structures. The welcoming structures involved in the theosophical appropriation of the *cakras* included Orientalist concepts of "selfness" and "otherness." Baier draws on Gerd Baumann's theorization of Orientalism as a grammar of identity/alterity based on "reversed mirroring," arguing that this paved the way for the theosophical reinterpretation of the *cakras* as part of the perennial ancient wisdom, confirmed by post-materialistic science.

A second welcoming structure was the result of previous Euro-American-Asian cultural transfers, in particular those involving Romantic-influenced images of the "mystic East" to be found in works such as Joseph Ennemoser's *Geschichte der Magie* (1819), Godfrey Higgins *Anacalypsis* (1833), Louis Jacolliot's *Le Spiritisme dans le monde, L'initiation et les sciences occultes dans l'Inde et chez tous les peuples de l'antiquité* (1875), and Hargrave Jennings's *Indian Religions*,

or *Results of the Mysterious Buddhism* (1858). As part of their assimilation of the *cakras*, the theosophists had to overcome the negative image of Tantra (to which the *cakras* are closely related) that was pervasive in the literature of Orientalism and Hindu reform movements (such as Dayānanda Sarasvatī's Arya Samaj). Baier highlights the important role of the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*, probably written in eighteenth-century Bengal, and which bridged the gap between tantrism and the Hindu Renaissance. Negative attitudes towards Tantra were reappraised in the Society following the publication of an article in *The Theosophist* by the anonymous "Truthseeker," initiating a series of contributions about tantrism and yoga practices written by South Asian members. "Vedantic Raj Yoga Philosophy" was written by Sabhapaty Swami, published as a booklet by the Society, and advertised in *The Theosophist*. It taught a modern hybrid form of *cakra* meditation different to that of Pūrṇānanda's influential *Ṣaṭcakranirūpaṇa*. The *Ṣaṭcakranirūpaṇa* itself was introduced to the theosophists in articles by the knowledgeable Bengali Baradā Kānta Majumdār, who later went on to assist Sir John Woodroffe (aka Arthur Avalon, 1865-1936), author of the highly influential work *The Serpent Power* (1918). Ultimately, pro-tantric theosophical figures such as Majumdār overcame the anti-tantric perspective of those such as Dayānanda Sarasvatī, convincing the leaders of the Theosophical Society of the value of Tantra. Nevertheless, Blavatsky accommodated both positive and negative views of Tantra by proposing the existence of both a "black" and a "white" Tantra, analogous to her dualism of black and white magic.

Another welcoming structure in the theosophical reception of the *cakras* involved perceived convergences between the *cakras* and pre-existing cultural elements, especially those deriving from Mesmerism, for example, the notion of the "solar plexus." Mesmeric images of the body were used for the interpretation of yogic practices, which facilitated the integration of the *cakras* and *kuṇḍalinī* into the evolving theosophical worldview. The final welcoming structure that Baier identifies is the enrichment that the theosophists expected from the appropriation

of the *cakras*. This enrichment involved the hope for a more detailed understanding of the subtle body, and for a more precise conceptualization of the theory and practice of astral projection, a point that ties in with Deveney's arguments in his chapter about the importance of such practices in the early TS.

Returning to the theme of theosophical nationalism discussed in Victoria Ferentinou's paper, but now in the context of twentieth-century Canada, Massimo Introvigne discusses the celebrated Canadian artist and theosophist, Lawren Harris (1885-1970). Introvigne charts Harris's life and relationships with numerous spiritually minded collaborators, his involvement with the Theosophical Society, and his ideas about "theosophical art." Introvigne focuses on the ways in which Harris's ideas about art and Theosophy converged with his Canadian nationalism, influenced by an existing tradition that drew on a Romantic valorization of the unique Canadian topography. Despite Blavatsky's teaching that a new sub-race would emerge in the US, Harris believed that Canada would be the true location, and he differentiated between the ethos of Canada (associated with its special natural environment, as well as art, and culture) and the ethos of the United States (associated with business and a lack of spirituality). Harris viewed his renowned depictions of the Canadian wilderness, and his work in general, as truly "theosophical art." He insisted that a work of theosophical art must not transport its audience outside of itself to the "subject" of the painting, but rather draw the audience into the art itself, to enjoy a unitive, spiritual experience. Harris described this process through reference to the theosophical concept of *buddhi*. Despite his explicit rejection of symbolism, Harris depicted *buddhi* as part of his painting representing the three theosophical principles, *atma*, *buddhi*, and *manas*. Nevertheless, Harris denied any attempt to depict Theosophical doctrines and refused to accept any symbolic interpretation of his work. Rather, in his elaborations of the meaning of theosophical art, he argued that his paintings were intended to provide a divine experience of beauty and of essential forms, which was an end in itself. Harris's perspective was part of his broader ascetic aestheticism, which included a sexually-abstinent marriage to his second wife, Bess, the attempt to eradicate all personality in art and an emphasis on impermanence that was

influenced by Buddhism, mediated by Theosophy. Harris's views, Introvigne argues, constitute just one interpretation among many of what it means to be a theosophist and produce "theosophical art." They demonstrate that Blavatsky's ideas about aesthetics and art were sufficiently equivocal to lead theosophist-artists in quite different philosophical and aesthetic directions, and that they could easily be combined with other discourses, such as nationalist ones.

Our final stop on the tour of global theosophical adaptations is Germany. In his chapter on the transformations of Anthroposophy from the death of Rudolph Steiner to the present day, Helmut Zander considers Steiner's life and legacy, focusing on the various practical applications of Anthroposophy that are popular in Germany as well as internationally: Waldorf schools, anthroposophical medicine, anthroposophical farming methods, and many more. Zander considers the various conflicts that have arisen within and in relation to the Anthroposophical Society, such as the "discovery" of Steiner's ideas on race and the challenges posed by increasing historical-critical enquiry into Steiner's life and works. Considering the internationalization of Anthroposophy, Zander discusses *Kfar Raphael* ["the village of the archangel Raphael"], an anthroposophical community in Beer Sheva, Israel, which provides a home and employment for adults with special needs. Zander concludes his chapter by considering the "self-defeating success" of the proliferation of the practical applications of Anthroposophy, exploring how the Society might respond to the numerous practical and intellectual challenges it faces in a twenty-first-century world marked by individualism and pluralization.

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Boaz Huss is professor of Jewish thought at Ben-Gurion University and vice-president of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism. His research interests include the history of Kabbalah, Western esotericism, New Age culture, and New Religious Movements. His recent works include “*The Question of the Existence of Jewish Mysticism: The Genealogy of Jewish Mysticism and the Theologies of Kabbalah Research*” (Van Leer Institute Press, 2016, in Hebrew) and *Zohar: Reception and Impact* (The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2016). He is the editor of *Kabbalah and Contemporary Spiritual Revival* (Ben-Gurion University Press, 2011).

Isaac Lubelsky (PhD 2005, School of History, Tel Aviv University) is the academic coordinator of Genocide Studies at the Open University of Israel. His recent book, *Celestial India* (Equinox, 2012) is a comprehensive study of the history of ideas that evolved as the consequence of East/West encounters during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and deals extensively with the history of the Theosophical Society and its contribution to the change of India’s image in Western eyes and to the birth of India’s nationalist movement.

John Patrick Deveney is a lawyer living in New York City. He has a long-standing interest in the history of Theosophy, especially in its early days, and is a regular contributor to the journal *Theosophical History*. He is actively involved in the efforts of The International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals

(iapsop) and the related Standard Spiritualist and Occult Corpus (ssoc), both available at [iapsop.com](http://iapsop.com), which gather, preserve, and provide free access to the literature of the international spiritualist, occultist, theosophical, and New Thought movements between the 1840's and the 1940's. The archive contains almost six thousand books and over five hundred periodicals (about 15,000 issues), about 20% of which are theosophical, and all of which are word-searchable online and downloadable. Iapsop also collects and makes available the ephemera and artifacts of these movements and invites contributions of all this material for inclusion in its online libraries. John Patrick Deveney can be reached at [pdeveney@cdlawllp.com](mailto:pdeveney@cdlawllp.com).

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Eugene Kuzmin is an independent researcher and the author of a number of articles on the history of science and the esoteric. He earned his MA from the State University of Odessa in 1997 and his doctorate from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2010. The revised text of his dissertation was published as *Alchemical Imagery in the Works of Quirinus Kuhlmann (1651-1689)* (Wilsonville, Oregon: Sirius Academic, 2013). Dr. Kuzmin combines his research activities with his work as a specialist in Eastern European geography at Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Memorial.

## Introduction

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Olav Hammer is Professor of the Study of Religions at the University of Southern Denmark. His main areas of research are new religious movements and other non-traditional religious currents in the post-Enlightenment West. His most recent publication is *Western Esotericism in Scandinavia* (Brill 2016; edited with Henrik Bogdan).

Dr. Shimon Lev is a researcher in Indian studies, artist, and curator, who has published widely and exhibited in numerous solo exhibitions and over 70 group exhibitions. He received his PhD from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (2016), entitled *Clear Are the Paths of India: The Cultural and Political Encounter Between Indians and Jews in the Context of the Growth of their Respective National Movements*. His publications include: *Soulmates: The Story of Mahatma Gandhi and Hermann Kallenbach* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan Publishing House, 2012), and *Vesheyodea Lishol* ("And He who Knows how to Ask," Tel Aviv: Xargol Publisher, 1998, in Hebrew). He was also the academic editor of the Hebrew edition of *M. K. Gandhi: Satyagraha in South Africa* (Tel Aviv: Babel, 2014) and *M. K. Gandhi: Hind Swaraj* (Tel Aviv: Adam Veolam, 2016).

Victoria Ferentinou is assistant professor at the University of Ioannina, Greece, where she teaches courses on art theory and history of art. She obtained an MA in Archaeology at the University of London and a MA in Modern Art and Theory at the University of Essex. She received her PhD in art history and theory from the University of Essex. Funded

by an AHRC Doctoral Award, the thesis explored the proto-feminist appropriation of occult tropes in the visual and verbal output of Ithell Colquhoun, Leonora Carrington, and Remedios Varo. Ferentinou's main research interests include surrealist art and its theory, feminist art and criticism, occultism, aesthetics, and the visual arts, and modern and contemporary art theory. She has lectured about and published articles on the above themes. She is currently working on symbolist aesthetics and on the legacies of surrealism in post-war Greece and most specifically the oeuvre of Nanos Valaoritis and Marie Wilson. She is also co-editing a collection of essays on surrealism, occultism and politics.

Karl Baier studied cultural anthropology, philosophy, and Catholic theology. He holds a doctorate in philosophy and works at the Department for the Study of Religions at Vienna University, Austria. He wrote a book on the history of the reception of yoga in the West and a two-volume study on meditation and modernity. His research interests include nineteenth and twentieth-century alternative religiosity, occultism, Modern Yoga research, and psychedelics.

Massimo Introvigne is professor of sociology of religions at Pontifical Salesian University in Torino, Italy, and founder and managing director of CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions. He is the author of some sixty books on new religious movements, sociology of religions, and esotericism.

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# Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer: Annotations on the Appropriation of the *Cakras* in Early Theosophy

Karl Baier

Today, the Sanskrit term *cakra* or “chakra” (literally, wheel or circle) is gaining ground all over the world. The seven energy centers placed along the central axis of the human body are images that almost everyone can relate to. As Olav Hammer observes: “Dozens of books and innumerable courses, services and products contribute to making the concept of the chakras familiar to the general public” (2004: 190). This chapter investigates the initial steps of transculturation that underlie the global dissemination of the *cakras*, namely their appropriation by Theosophy. The Theosophical Society played a predominant role in transforming the *cakras* from an aspect of South Asian traditions to an element of global popular culture. The chapter focuses on the very earliest stage in the theosophical reception of the *cakras*, which took place at the beginning of the 1880’s. This was a time of fruitful collaboration between Anglo-American theosophists and South Asian members of the Society.<sup>1</sup> Some historical details have already been

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1 During the 1880’s, the relationship between the Western and South Asian members became difficult (see Foray 2004). Cutting ties with Dayānanda Sarasvati was the first manifestation of tensions. Then followed the Coulomb Affair (Blavatsky was charged of fraud by Emma and Alexis Coulomb). Blavatsky departed from the subcontinent as a consequence. At this point, many South Asian members turned away from the Society. The loss of Damodar Mavalankar and Subba Row, both of whom belonged to Blavatsky’s inner circle, worsened the situation. William Q. Judge criticized the Brahmin members of the Indian Theosophical Society for their insufficient work and dogmatic beliefs. He supported the development of Theosophy as Indian-influenced movement, but one that pronounced Western Occultism. Blavatsky expressed her disappointment over the large number of Indian members who had lost their faith in the masters. In turn, theosophist Brahmins like Rai B. K. Laheri and Darbhagiri Nath accused Judge and Blavatsky of having

documented elsewhere (Baier 2009: 315-374; Baier 2012). The present chapter summarizes these, adds new material and approaches the topic in a more systematic way. It reflects on some of the frameworks that paved the way for the theosophical appropriation of elements taken from South Asian traditions, with a special focus on what Christopher Partridge has termed “theosophical Orientalism” (2013).

It is not simply an encounter between Western Theosophy and South Asian tradition that we are looking at here, but a complex reciprocal process of transculturation within the Theosophical Society itself.<sup>2</sup> The people involved were mainly theosophists of South Asian origin and those from Europe or the USA. Members of both groups were not representatives of more-or-less well-defined traditions, but rather, protagonists of cultures-in-the-making, who had undergone serious deculturation.<sup>3</sup> This brought a specific dynamic to the intercultural exchanges. On the one hand, there were anglicized high-caste Indians (mostly young male Brahmins) who tried to construct and renew their cultural heritage under the conditions of the Raj. Theosophy offered them a convenient space in which to mark out this trajectory. On the other hand, there were indophile theosophists who departed from their European and North American mainstream culture to create a defiant movement that blended elements from various sources such as Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, liberal Protestantism, Spiritism, Mesmerism, and modern magic. They wanted to learn more about India’s ancient wisdom from their indigenous brothers. As go-betweens, the members of both groups (and the Theosophical Society as a whole) created and inhabited a border/contact zone within the upper strata of

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misunderstood Indian philosophy and of publishing secret Indian teachings to instruct unworthy Western readers. These circumstances made the decline of the Society in South Asia inevitable. “In 1891, only 29 out of 135 lodges registered in India were considered to be active” (Foray 2004: 11). Under the presidency of Annie Besant (1907-1933) the tensions between South Asian and foreign members decreased. The history of the South Asian Theosophical Society and particularly that of its indigenous members remains to be written.

- 2 The term “transculturation” was coined by Fernando Ortiz in 1940 and gained wider recognition through Pratt (1992). Providing an alternative to the concept of mono-directional assimilation, the concept of “transculturation” emphasizes the multi-laterality of intercultural processes within colonial settings.
- 3 “Deculturation” refers to the loss or abandonment of culture mostly through contact with another culture.

South Asia's colonial society, where they functioned as promoters of transculturation.<sup>4</sup> Before we investigate the role the *cakras* played within this milieu, we will first look, briefly, at the pre-modern *cakra* systems. Secondly, basic structures of intercultural exchange will be introduced that will provide the categories for the analysis of theosophical primary sources that will follow.

### **The *Cakras* in South Asian Traditions**

The ahistorical way in which the *cakras* and related concepts are presented in contemporary popular culture has created the false impression that they are immutable and have, since time immemorial, formed part of South Asian religious thought.<sup>5</sup> In particular, they are associated with the yoga traditions.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the *cakras* appeared relatively late in the long history of pre-modern images of the body in South Asia (Cf. Wujastyk 2009). Between the eighth and twelfth centuries CE, a new mapping of the yogic body emerged within forms of yoga connected to the tantric current.<sup>7</sup> The human body was conceived as being animated by *prāṇa* (breath, life force) that moves through certain channels (*nāḍīs*) and activates vertically configured vital centers. Since the ninth to tenth centuries, these centers have usually been

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4 The importance of such go-betweens for transculturality is emphasized by Jobs and Mackenthun 2013.

5 For the history of the *cakras*, see White 2003: 144-150 and Samuel 2008: 278-290.

6 The old Sanskrit word, yoga, originally meant "yoke" or "yoking." In the course of history, the term had several meanings; some of them are still in use. Here, I just mention those that early Theosophy learnt from translations of Indian sources: a body of techniques to acquire paranormal powers (*siddhis*); physical and mental methods of meditation that are able to create and regulate altered states of mind; union with the divine; exercises to restrain passions and emotions; theories that explain and systematize all these topics.

7 Tantra is another "highly variable and shifting category" (Urban 2003: 7). The word is derived from the Sanskrit root *tan*, "to weave, or stretch." Commonly it is used to refer to a diverse body of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain scriptures that flourished from around the sixth until around the fourteenth century and reflect a widespread religious culture. A central concept of tantric religiosity is the divine female cosmogonic power (*śakti*) that permeates the whole universe and also resides in the human body. Tantric practices aim at awakening and channeling this divine energy through meditation and forms of ritual worship. The rituals may comprise transgressive acts that violate dominant social values (drinking alcohol, eating meat, sexual intercourse with women from lower castes etc.).



called *cakras* (or *padmas*, lotuses). The *cakra* systems are closely linked to the concept of *kuṇḍalinī* (lit. “the coiled one”). In tantric literature, the term *kuṇḍalinī* denotes the female divine energy (*śakti*) that sleeps coiled like a serpent at the bottom of the spine. Once awakened, she ascends from one *cakra* to the next until she reaches the top of the head where she unites herself with *śiva*, the masculine aspect of the divine. This new understanding of the human body was linked to practices involving consciously directing the flow of *prāṇa* through the body by means of meditation and bodily exercises (postures, muscle contractions, and breathing techniques). These procedures were aimed at improving health and lengthening life, sometimes with the hope of physical immortality, the development of paranormal powers, and union with the divine through the ascent of *kuṇḍalinī*.<sup>8</sup>

Traditionally, *cakras* were part of cultural and institutional matrices that consisted of oral and written traditions, teachers, initiation rites, the chanting of mantras, meditative visualizations, bodily exercises, and a lifestyle regulated by a specific code of behavior. Thus, they were embedded in what Thomas A. Forsthoefel (referring to a different topic) called “a complex set of socially established belief-forming mechanisms” (Forsthoefel 2005: 40). *Cakras* “in action” involved a bodily performance, by trained experts, associated with highly developed religious and philosophical worldviews. They corresponded to the cosmological levels that the practitioner crossed during his ascent to divine union, connected to different goddesses and gods. As Gavin Flood writes “Visualizing the body as being mapped with these subtle centres is clearly an entextualization of the body, a mapping of the cosmos and the journey of the self to its transcendent source in ways specified within the tradition” (2006: 162). In their South Asian settings,

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8 Very similar practices were known in China long before these developments took place in South Asia. It could well be that at least some of the new ideas and practices came from there. Intercultural exchanges had taken place along the trade routes between South Asia and China centuries before theories of the *cakras* emerged. But we will probably never be able to prove that Chinese concepts influenced South Asian practices of the subtle body as “from their earliest appearance in India, these practices were conceptualized (or reconceptualized) within a specifically Indic vocabulary” (Samuel 2008: 285).

the *cakra* systems, and their enactment through yogic meditation, were therefore inseparable from their attendant cosmologies and philosophies, and their specific historical and socio-cultural contexts.

The map of six (or six plus one) *cakras* (*ṣaṭcakra*) and the concept of three main *nāḍis* “had wide influence across all subsequent Indian religious traditions” (Wujastyk 2009: 199). Nevertheless, the structure of the tantric subtle body was never codified. In fact, as White explains, “there is no ‘standard’ system of the *cakras*. Every school, sometimes every teacher within each school, has had their own *cakra* system” (2003: 144). Accordingly, the material existence of the *cakras* and *nāḍis* is not a crucial point within traditional tantric practice. “The central issue for Tantric practitioners is how they use a particular system as a meditational device for personal transformation or other ritual ends” (Samuel 2013: 41).

The more-or-less standardized *cakra* system of today’s popular culture is mainly based on the *Ṣaṭcakraṅirūpaṇa* (Description of the Six Centers) written by the sixteenth-century Bengali tantric, Pūrṇānanda. The text originally formed the sixth chapter of a larger work. In a number of pre-modern commentaries on the *Ṣaṭcakraṅirūpaṇa* it was already extracted from its context within a larger work and treated as an independent, authoritative work on the *cakras*. The Sanskrit text was first published in 1858 together with a translation into Bengali (Blumhardt 1886: 85). Another Bengali translation and commentary was published in 1860, with a second edition printed in 1869. Therefore, the text must have been popular in Bengal before the Theosophical Society made it known to an international audience in 1880 (see below).

Later, Pūrṇānanda’s *cakra* system was popularized by the British judge and Orientalist, Sir John Woodroffe (1865-1936). Woodroffe, who lived in India from 1890 until he moved back to England in 1923, is considered “the father of the modern study of the Tantras” (Urban 2003: 136). He integrated a translation of the text with the commentary of Kālīcarana into his seminal study *The Serpent Power* (1918), “the book above all others which introduced *kuṇḍalinī yoga* to the Western world” (Taylor 2001: 134). Like Woodroffe’s other publications, *The Serpent Power* is difficult to read, yet it became popular among Western-educated Indians, who were, according to Taylor, Woodroffe’s “first

and most important readership” (2001: 129). It was also popular among scholars and interested non-academic audiences abroad. One reason for its success was Woodroffe’s comparison of *kuṇḍalinī* yoga with theosophical and other occultist theories, and with contemporary scientific concepts. His attempt to unite the tantric worldview with concepts taken from contemporary science looks like a “scholarly update” of the early theosophical reception of Asian thought. As we will see below, this is not an arbitrary similarity. Both are historically linked through the Bengali scholar of Tantrism, Baradā Kānta Majumdār, a member of the early Theosophical Society who later collaborated with Woodroffe. The beautiful images of the *cakras* in Woodroffe’s book were even more influential than his philosophical interpretations, and copies of them were published in many works. They shaped the modern iconography of the *cakras*, especially with regard to the number and the location of the *cakras* within the body. The symbolic meanings given to the *cakras* today, however, often have very little or nothing in common with the content of the *Ṣatcakranirūpaṇa* or with Woodroffe’s commentaries.

The transformation of the *cakras* performed within a traditional Asian setting into those used by, say, an energy healer working at the beginning of the twenty-first century, reflects a complex historical process. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century reinterpretations of the *cakras* indicate a transition from traditional South Asian forms of yoga to transnational modern yoga and the diffusion of the latter into a broader field of meditative and therapeutic practices. They also exemplify the theosophical realization of Occultism’s transcultural project through direct interaction with South Asian traditions and the Hindu Renaissance. Modern yoga and Theosophy became global movements that cannot be categorized as “Western” or “Eastern,” although this Orientalist polarity contributed to their development.<sup>9</sup> They decontextualized and recontextualized, and thereby changed elements from various cultures, among them the *cakras*. Let us now

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9 This insight implies that Theosophy is not simply part of so-called “Western Esotericism” but should be understood as a result of an “entangled history,” a history in which the involved parties are, at least in part, a product of their encounter. See Bergunder 2014.

look at some basic structures underlying the transfer processes of this transculturation.

**Qualified Openness: The Role of “Welcoming” and “Releasing” Structures in the Processes of Cultural Exchange**

Cultural transfers do not happen from nowhere. Why should one take something foreign and integrate it into one’s own worldview? An obvious answer to the question: “Why are cultural elements transferred?” would be that people simply take what they think they are lacking in their own culture from another culture that seems to possess it. Especially with regard to the transfer of religious concepts and practices from Asian to Euro-American cultures, this deficiency/completion model was—and still is—very influential. It often builds upon a perceived opposition between “Eastern spirituality” and “Western materialism,” seen as going hand in hand with dogmatic religion. Furthermore, the supposed Western deficiency is often interpreted as the loss of a non-dualistic worldview and its attendant mystical religiosity, which the West allegedly possessed in earlier times, and which is now being re-established through the implementation of Eastern practices. An elaborate version of this East/West stereotype underlies Colin Campbell’s controversial thesis of the “Easternization” of the West (Campbell 2007). It is deeply rooted in nineteenth-century Orientalism, to which we will return below, a crucial framework for the theosophical appropriation of South Asian culture.

The deficiency/completion model is not totally devoid of insight, especially when we consider that foreign cultural assets are chosen for appropriation because they have a special appeal and are considered to fulfill certain needs. At the very least, the appropriators expect the borrowed element to add something new, something that transcends the status quo of the receiving side and enriches it. The imported elements promise to be of good use, and to provide things that would otherwise be out of reach. But the reality of cultural-transfer processes is far more complex than this model might at first suggest.

Let’s have a closer look, starting with the notion of cultural deficiency. Deficiency is more than just absence. The mere absence of something in a certain culture is not sufficient cause for cultural transfer.

In a culture that uses cutlery, chopsticks may be absent. But are they therefore lacking? Not necessarily. Through intercultural encounter, chopsticks may become a tool that the members of a cutlery-culture know and wish to use (at least under certain circumstances) and so a process of implementation starts. The emergence of such a wish depends on several conditions. In our example, a wish may arise because the use of chopsticks is part of visits to restaurants, which do not simply sell food, but stage an “authentic” Asian dining experience—one that allows the guests to immerse themselves in a relaxing exotic atmosphere and forget about the daily troubles of their cutlery-culture. If the chopstick-culture was considered evil or hostile, or if the use of chopsticks was thought of as impure, an ugly and ridiculous custom of an inferior, not-fully-human culture, then the desire to use chopsticks would probably not become widespread. In this case, “authentic” Chinese restaurants would, at best, be visited by members of counter-cultural milieus who would use chopsticks to celebrate their own otherness. Obviously, the transfer or non-transfer of the use of chopsticks depends on how the receiving culture conceptualizes both the reference culture and itself. Furthermore, the transferred item is not completely new. Similar cultural techniques for producing bite-size portions of food and placing them in one’s mouth are known in both cultures. The use of chopsticks is thus a variation of a practice the members of the cutlery-culture are already familiar with.

Furthermore, cultural appropriations are consensual or non-consensual. If assets are taken without explicit consent or even despite opposition, members of the giving culture often perceive this as a kind of theft. A process of reception that is based on the consent of representatives of the reference culture, who are, in a way, responsible for the asset in question, is based on their economic, social, or religious interests, which create a willingness to share the transfer-item. These interests imply a certain understanding of oneself, one’s culture, and the transferred cultural asset, in relation to the receiving culture. If the use of chopsticks were strictly limited to members of the chopstick-culture who underwent a certain initiation ritual, then probably even clever restaurant owners would not wish for it to become widespread among foreigners.

This is not the place for further analysis, but this relatively simple example of inter-cultural transfer should have made it sufficiently clear that cultural reception processes are not based solely on the wish to overcome a deficiency but also depend on multiple cultural factors on both the giving and the receiving sides. Instead of a simple deficiency on the side of the receiving culture, it would be better to speak of a “qualified openness” towards the appropriation of foreign elements, which comprises openness towards the reference culture in general and the provision of meaningful places for the received goods within the world of the receiving culture.

There are certain cultural presuppositions and patterns of interpretation at work that, first and foremost, generate a positive attitude towards the foreign element and make the transfer seem desirable. Together, they form what could be called a “welcoming structure.”<sup>10</sup> On the side of the reference culture, an analogous structure of release exists, which enables the export of cultural items—a “releasing structure.” Like the cultures to which they belong, the welcoming and releasing structures—as well as the transferred assets—are far from being immutable. In its new cultural surroundings, the exchanged item often assumes another shape and meaning. The process of exchange and appropriation is usually accompanied by communication between the members of the cultures in question. This, and the experiences that are triggered by the transfer, change their horizons of understanding. Shifts with respect to the cultural identity of the involved persons are possible. Often, there is no consensus about the structures of reception and release among the members of the respective groups. Cultural exchanges and their structural presuppositions are subject to discussion and have to be constantly renegotiated.

The following sections of this chapter treat the welcoming structures at work in the theosophical appropriation of the *cakras* in the early

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10 The welcoming structure is not necessarily the only determinant of the qualified openness of certain individuals or groups. Often it is supplemented by structures that make the transfer more difficult and obstruct the process of reception. We will see that the theosophical appropriation of the *cakras* was impeded by the Orientalist interpretation of Tantrism.

1880's.<sup>11</sup> In this case, qualified openness consists of at least four components that usually trigger cultural exchange:

- \* Convenient concepts of “selfness” and “otherness” (and the relation between them) with reference to the involved cultures, as well as to the asset to be transferred.
- \* Previous participation in a history of reception. Interpretations of the cultural “other,” and borrowings from those cultures, were often influenced by comparable earlier attempts.
- \* Convergences. Phenomena in the receiving culture, which—rightly or wrongly—are seen as analogous to the received asset.
- \* Expected enrichment.

### **Conceptualization of Selfness and Otherness: The Reversed Mirroring of Theosophical Orientalism**

The most basic framework that structures the “selfing” and “othering” of Theosophy vis-à-vis South Asian traditions is the distinction between “the West” and “the East” postulated as unified cultural traditions and along the lines of nineteenth-century Orientalism.<sup>12</sup> Orientalism can be understood as an essentialist representation of the East as a stereotypical Other of the West through which the identities of both the West and the East are construed. As exemplified by the words of Madame Blavatsky: “The Eastern and the Western minds are as unlike as day and night” (Blavatsky 1967e: 406). Orientalist stereotypes emerged in connection with European colonial interests and were associated with the subordination and domination of the non-Western world. Nevertheless, in going beyond Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, postcolonial studies have made it clear that Orientalism is not a form of exclusively Western identity formation, but was instead appropriated

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11 The following analysis focuses on the Euro-American theosophists. To complete the picture it would be necessary to integrate a full consideration of the stance taken by the South Asian theosophists—and this is more than is possible in the present chapter. However, the stance of South Asians will be taken into account as much as is necessary in order to understand the main topic under discussion.

12 On Theosophy and Orientalism, see Goodrick-Clarke 2007; Trevithick 2008; Partridge 2013; and Granholm 2013.

by the colonized for their own purposes, especially for the goals of South Asian religious reform movements (See King 1999: 82-95).

According to Gerd Baumann's structural approach to the Orientalist grammar of identity/alterity (2006: 18-21), Orientalism is not built on a simple binary opposition of "us Westerners, who are good, superior, and advanced" and "those Orientals, who are bad, inferior, and backward." Rather, Orientalism combines a negative mirroring with its positive reversal: "what is good in us is [still] bad in them, but what got twisted in us [still] remains straight in them." This approach takes into account that the Oriental Other was not only denigrated by the Westerners but also functioned as an object of desire, a remnant of the lost golden childhood of mankind.<sup>13</sup> Within this logic of a reversed mirroring, different variations are possible, which emphasize either the positive or negative, but there is no need to postulate a "standard Orientalism" complemented by a "reversed," "affirmative" or "Romantic" Orientalism.

Blavatsky and Olcott's image of the East is a good example of an Orientalist reversed mirroring. Their Orientalism comprises not only elements that were common within nineteenth-century Orientalism; it was also shaped by their occult worldview. As we will see, theosophical Orientalism is of such fundamental importance that not only do the theosophical concepts of self and other depend on it, but so too were all the other components of the theosophical structure that welcomed and appropriated the *cakras*.

**Occident Positive**

Political and technological superiority.

Dynamic society

Occultism as a rational investigation of the archaic wisdom religion and paranormal powers

**South Asia Negative**

Underdevelopment

Stationary society: unjust and immobile

Caste system, fatalism

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13 I would like to thank Olav Hammer for recommending Baumann's theory to me.



Karl Baier

Nascent sciences that support and as well as oriental philosophy and psychology	Superstition of the exoteric Brahmanic schools and of the psychology masses. Negative importations from the West: Materialistic science and Christian missionaries
<b>Occident Negative</b>	<b>South Asia Positive</b>
Predominance of materialistic science	Most authentic tradition of wisdom religion
Wisdom religion long since declined and spoiled by the domination of exoteric Christianity	Living adepts able to initiate searchers into South Asian wisdom traditions
Inferior belief in a personal deity	Superior belief in an impersonal universal soul
Atheism	Reform movements that re-establish ancient religion under the conditions of modernity

As in other forms of Orientalism, in Theosophy, we find the stereotype of Western secularism versus Eastern spirituality. In accordance with a prevalent colonialist point of view, the Society emphasized religious traditions as India's most valuable asset. Blavatsky and Olcott were searching for India's esoteric heritage. Their main interest was finding the "sacred land of ancient Āryāvarta" (Sanskrit: "home of the Aryans" i.e., an idealized notion of "Old India"), or whatever had remained of it. They juxtaposed the glorious past of the East with its desolate present. "None is older than she in esoteric wisdom and civilization, however fallen may be her poor shadow—modern India" (Blavatsky 1967c: 99). The technical and political superiority of the West and its social mobility were seen as negatively mirrored by Eastern fatalism, social immobility, and injustice. Blavatsky and Olcott conceived British rule as being, for the most part, justified and as bringing progress to India. "India owes much and everything to the British Government, which protects its heathen subjects equally with those of English birth,

and would no more allow the one class to insult the other than it would revive the Inquisition. India owes to Great Britain its educational system, its slow but sure progress, and its security from the aggression of other nations” (Blavatsky 1967a: 26).

According to Blavatsky, contemporary Hindu society was split. “We find the latter comprises two distinct parties, one, that of the free-thinkers, *all*-denying, skeptical [sic], and wholly materialistic, whether of the Bradlaugh party, or the ‘modern school of thought;’ the other, orthodox, bigoted, full of the unreasoning superstitions of the Brahmanical schools, and believing in anything if it only tallies with one or the other of the *Puranas*” (Blavatsky 1967f: 455, emphasis original). This split parallels the Western situation with its atheism and dogmatic Christianity. In a text first published in a Russian newspaper, Blavatsky blamed British rule, stating that the Western educational system not only brought progress but also alienated the South Asian elites from their religious traditions. “Besides ruining themselves and the country, the Anglo-Indians commit the greatest blunders, at least in two points of their present Government system. These two points are: first, the Western education given to the higher classes; and, secondly, the protection and maintenance of the rights of idol-worship” (Blavatsky 1908: 203). Western education would spawn atheism among the young generation and the policy on religion would flatter the ignorant masses. Critical remarks like these are very rare in early theosophical publications. They are not anti-colonial but meant to encourage reform of British rule, especially by means of the Theosophical Society and the Hindu reform movements that presented themselves as an alternative to modern atheism and degenerated Hindu religion.<sup>14</sup>

What are the special elements of theosophical Orientalism that make it different from other Orientalisms? First, for Blavatsky and Olcott, the superiority of the East was based on the ancient wisdom religion, the esoteric core of all religions. They conceived the wisdom religion as a kind of initiatic religion led by enlightened adepts with

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14 Cf. Madhur Kishwar on Theosophy’s ally among the reform movements: “The Arya Samaj was not meant as a radical challenge to the existing structures of society. Even while it represented an assertion of indigenous culture, it picked up for reform precisely those issues which British rulers had pointed to as evidence of the degenerate state of Indian society” (Kishwar 2008: 201).

paranormal powers and the ability to experience mystical union with the supreme cause of all creation. Influenced by Enlightenment concepts of natural religion, this reflects the religiosity of Masonic and Rosicrucian currents that influenced Theosophy. Already in their New York years, the founders of the Theosophical Society called this hidden religion “Oriental Cabala,” “Eastern Magic,” or the “Occultism of the East” (Blavatsky 1966: 106, 109, 116; Olcott 1975: 206-250). They thought it had emerged in the Middle East, Egypt, and India and had been best preserved in these areas of the world, whereas the Western branches of it had soon degenerated and had largely fallen into oblivion. Around 1875, Blavatsky and Olcott had located the origin of the wisdom religion in Chaldea (Olcott 1975: 215, Blavatsky 1966: 104) but at least from *Isis Unveiled* onwards, India was held as the source of an older and superior wisdom. “A conclusive opinion is furnished by too many scholars to doubt the fact that India was the *Alma-Mater*, not only of civilization, arts, and sciences, but also of all the great religions of antiquity” (Blavatsky 1877 II: 30, emphasis original).

Blavatsky’s answer to the question why the wisdom religion survived more successfully in the East repeats another Orientalist stereotype. “The simple history of the Eastern people, their habits and customs, ought to be a sure guarantee that what they once knew they cannot have totally forgotten. While Europe has changed its appearance twenty times, and has been turned upside down by religious and political revolutions and social cataclysms, Asia has remained stationary. What was, two thousand years ago, exists now with very little variation” (Blavatsky 1966: 116).

A second element typical of theosophical Orientalism that cannot be found in other forms of Orientalist thought is its image of the West. Theosophy understood itself to be “the Easternized Other” within Western culture. The theosophical rediscovery of the wisdom religion was seen as the countercultural beginning for a post-materialistic and post-Christian global culture significantly marked by esoteric Asian religion and directed by spiritual masters from the East. The theosophists criticized the Westernization of the East and a dogmatic Brahmanism that, in their eyes, was as bad as Christianity. Within their Orientalism, a second-order orientalization took place in which the Easternized West was thought to mirror the Westernized East. Furthermore,

Theosophy as the “orientalized Other” within Western culture found an ally in the ‘scientific Other’ at the edge of Western science. Theosophists were convinced that the latest findings in the liminal areas of science (Mesmerism, psychical research, new physics etc.) were about to expand the frontiers of scientific knowledge to encompass formerly metaphysical realms and thus back the claims of Occultism. Sooner or later, with the help of these new scientific theories, it would be possible to prove, scientifically, the truth of the old Eastern philosophies and the efficiency of their practices. The science-religion debate would therefore come to an end and the dignity of ancient wisdom would be restored. From this perspective they criticized Orientalist views that constructed the East-West polarity simply as Western science and reason versus Eastern superstition, without recognizing that this is only half the story, since the esoteric currents of Eastern traditions converge with the forefront of scientific progress, post-materialistic Western science. In a lecture delivered in Madras in 1882, Olcott said: “We come not to pull down and destroy, but to rebuild the strong fabric of Asiatic religion. We ask you to help us to set it up again, not on the shifting and treacherous sands of blind faith, but on the rocky base of truth, and to cement its separate stones together with the strong cement of Modern Science. Hinduism proper *has nothing whatever to fear from the research of Science*” (Olcott 1975: 77, emphasis original).

Their Orientalism motivated the theosophists to gather information about South Asian philosophies eagerly, and to study translations of South Asian religious literature (or—as in the case of Indian theosophists—sometimes even the originals) in the hope of finding precious jewels of ancient wisdom. They reinterpreted these texts by comparing them with esoteric concepts and fringe science. Theosophical Orientalism was thus not based on a static juxtaposition of East and West but instead established a community of intercultural learners. Last but not least, it influenced the theosophical search for direct contact with yogis (practicing Eastern occultists) and manifestations of their occult powers. For the South Asian theosophists, theosophical Orientalism provided a worldview that allowed them to define their identity over and against the British rulers, indigenous reform movements, and South Asian traditionalism. Theosophy enabled them

to understand themselves as heirs to the most original tradition of wisdom religion and as participating in a scientifically advanced and international revivalist movement.

To summarize, theosophical Orientalism prepared for the reception of the *cakras* as part of the archaic wisdom religion that was substantiated by post-materialistic Western science. Theosophical Orientalism was the most basic component of the welcoming structure for the theosophical adaptation of elements from South Asian traditions. Its overall importance is underlined by the fact that topics from theosophical Orientalism reappear within the other welcoming structures that will be addressed in the remainder of this chapter.

### **Participation in a History of Reception**

The theosophical reception of South Asian religions drew on two earlier historical strands. On the one hand, there were Orientalist interpretations of South Asian culture in European languages. On the other, there were South Asian reform movements influenced by Enlightenment thought, Orientalism and Christian (Protestant) theology.

#### *Earlier Orientalist Views*

Theosophical Orientalism was not a completely new invention. It owed much to earlier attitudes, especially the Romantic era's praise of the "mystic East" and its view of India as the source of all civilizations. As Partridge states, "Put simply, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the Romantic fascination with Indian thought, which was typically Orientalist and essentialist, was an important moment in the West's reception of the East, and, as such, the soil in which Theosophy took root" (2013: 314). Blavatsky was familiar with Romantic Orientalism, e.g. through Joseph Ennemoser's *History of Magic*, a seminal work of Romantic Mesmerism, which was, according to William E. Coleman, the second most plagiarized source of *Isis Unveiled*. Ennemoser's *Geschichte der Magie* was first published in 1819. The English translation used by the theosophists was based on the second completely revised edition of 1844. Ennemoser exemplifies the reversed mirroring of Romantic Orientalism. For him, Asia was the cradle of magic in its original (positive) sense, a hotbed of somnambulist visions and mystical

experiences of the divine (1854: 2, 187, 204). He combined his fascination with Eastern mysticism with an image of the Eastern people as passive introverts uninterested in social and cultural change. “In the East,” Ennemoser wrote, “there is no creative spirit to break the inward light into various rays: and the characteristic features of the various nations are the same in all,—silent, stationary, and stereotyped” (1854: 172). Mirroring the active, “masculine” attitude of the West, the Eastern way of life was characterized by Ennemoser as sensitive. “An excitable temperament is universal—particularly in India—and associated with an almost feminine gentleness, inclining to repose and reflection” (1854: 187). Other main sources of Blavatsky’s view of the East and particularly of India were the books of Godfrey Higgins (1772-1833),<sup>15</sup> Hargrave Jennings (1817-1890),<sup>16</sup> and Louis-François Jacolliot (1837-1890).<sup>17</sup> There she could find interpretations of India as the homeland of ancient wisdom and occult sciences, influenced by Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry (Trompf 2013: 378-380).

#### *The Influence of the Hindu Renaissance*

The Theosophical Society sympathized, collaborated, and competed with South Asian religious reform movements. It shared their aims of renewing the religion of Āryāvarta in modernized South Asia and, in the process, of improving the status of the indigenous population under British rule. With respect to the appropriation of the *cakras*, the reform

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15 Higgins was an archaeologist, social reformer, and Freemason from England. In *Anacalypsis* (1833) and other works, he claimed that all religions derived from ancient India.

16 In his *Indian Religions, or Results of the Mysterious Buddhism* (1858) the British writer, Hargrave Jennings, argued that Indian Buddhism belongs to the primordial occult philosophy of mankind and is the basis of all East Asian religions. He saw a close affinity between Buddhism and the Templars, Hermes Trismegistos, the Paracelsists, and Rosicrucians. Among others, Jennings cited Ennemoser’s *History of Magic* and Higgins as sources.

17 Jacolliot was a French barrister who worked as a colonial judge in India between 1865 and 1868. He collected Sanskrit myths and translated the *Manusmṛti*. His *Le Spiritisme dans le monde, L’initiation et les sciences occultes dans l’Inde et chez tous les peuples de l’antiquité* (1875) treats the Indian roots of occult sciences and mystic initiations. Blavatsky owned and studied the collected works of Jacolliot. For his biography and Blavatsky’s ambivalent assessment of his writings see Caracostea 2003.

movements played an ambiguous role. As part of the tantric worldview, the *cakras* shared in the negative image of Tantra. The Hindu reformers assimilated the Orientalist narrative of Tantrism as the latest and most degenerate product of the progressive decline of Indian religion.

Following the lead of the Orientalists, the reformers looked back to the noble, rational religion of the Vedas as India's Golden Age, while they despaired of the modern "age of Kali," in which the perverse rites of the Tantras ran rampant. As such, Tantra was foremost among those elements of modern Hinduism that would have to be uprooted if Hindus were to recover an authentic spiritual and national identity (Urban 2003: 61, see also 59-60).

During its early Indian years, the Theosophical Society closely collaborated with the Arya Samaj reform movement. In the first part of his autobiography, published in *The Theosophist* in December 1879, Dayānanda Sarasvatī, the founder of the Arya Samaj, harshly criticized the tantric scriptures.<sup>18</sup> He stated that he had started to read them out of honest interest. "But no sooner I opened them, than my eye fell upon such an amount of incredible obscenities, mistranslations, misinterpretations of text and absurdity, that I felt perfectly horrified" (Sarasvatī 1879: 66).

Despite this widespread negative attitude, there exists at least one work that bridged the gap between the Hindu Renaissance and Tantrism: the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*. This truly exceptional work of Tantra was probably written in late-eighteenth-century Bengal as a kind of "Tantra light" acceptable both to literate Bengalis who favored Tantrism as

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18 The Society's journal, *The Theosophist*, was the most important medium for communication between South Asian and Western members within the early Theosophical Society. Blavatsky's editorial note in the first issue is titled after the customary Hindu greeting *Namaste* and lists the following causes for the foundation of the journal: "The rapid expansion of the Theosophical Society from America to various European and Asiatic countries; the increasing difficulty and expense in maintaining correspondence by letter with members so widely scattered; the necessity for an organ through which the native scholars of the East could communicate their learning to the Western world, and, especially, through which the sublimity of Aryan, Buddhistic, Parsi, and other religions might be expounded by their own priests or pundits, the only competent interpreters; and finally, to the need of a repository for the facts—especially such as relate to Occultism—gathered by the Society's Fellows among different nations" (Blavatsky 1967b: 84).

well as the British administration, “for the *Mahānirvāṇa*” Urban writes, “presents a Tantric doctrine that is not idolatrous or immoral but strongly monotheistic and really rather prudish” (2003: 69). It was first published in 1798 by the Hindu reform movement, the Adi Brahma Samaj, and gained popularity among the English-educated middle-class of Bengal. We will see that this “purified Tantra” later also influenced the theosophical reception of Tantrism. Sir John Woodroffe’s career as a legendary expert on Tantra began in 1913 with the publication of an English translation of this particular work of Tantra.

Nevertheless, it was not the *Mahānirvāṇa* that made the Theosophical Society abandon the well-trodden path of “Tantra-bashing.” Only one month after Dayānanda’s blow against tantric scriptures, in January 1880, an article titled “Yoga Philosophy” unintentionally triggered a pro-tantric shift. The author, an anonymous European theosophist who called himself “Truthseeker,” quoted from *The Dream of Ravan: A Mystery*, a work written by an anonymous author and published in a series of articles in the *Dublin University Magazine* between 1853 and 1854. Throughout *The Dream of Ravan* one can observe efforts to interpret South Asian healing methods and the occult powers of the Hindu ascetics according to “three analogies in the European sphere of thought and experience—namely magic, Mesmerism and electro-biology” ([n.a.] 1895: 119). *The Dream of Ravan* was one of the earliest, if not the first, English texts to refer to *kuṇḍalinī*. It contained a translation of parts of Jnānadeva’s *Jnāneshvarī* (a tantric commentary on the Bhagavadgītā written in Marathi and finished in 1290 CE) dealing with the awakening of the “power.” Quoting *The Dream of Ravan*, a footnote in Truthseeker’s article explained: “This extraordinary Power, who is termed elsewhere the ‘World Mother’—the ‘Casket of Supreme Spirit,’—is technically called Kundalini, which may be rendered serpentine, or annular. Some things related of it would make one imagine it to be electricity personified” ([n.a.] 1895: 190, quoted in Truthseeker 1880: 86) Here we can already observe a tendency to conceive of *kuṇḍalinī* as a sublime physical power belonging to the spheres of nature investigated by modern physics.

At the end of the article, Truthseeker addressed the Eastern members of the Theosophical Society, raising questions about the *Jnāneshvarī* and asking for more information about “the best modes of soul-



emancipation and will-culture” (Truthseeker 1880: 87). The editors of *The Theosophist* comment on this by remarking that the article “will be read with attention and interest by Hindu students of Yoga”—clearly appealing to the South Asian theosophists to provide answers. This was the beginning of a series of contributions to *The Theosophist* about Tantrism and yoga practices written by South Asian members of the Society.

In March 1880, an article about the life of Sabhapaty Swami, an English-speaking yogin from Madras, was published in *The Theosophist*, penned by “An Admirer.” Sabhapaty was another go-between with a biography that resembled those of several South Asian religious reformers in colonial times and protagonists of modern yoga. The Western-educated Brahmin had attended a Christian missionary school and afterwards worked as a civil servant. He studied Buddhism (in Burma where his father-in-law worked as businessman), Christianity, and Islam, before he returned to the Hindu traditions. In search of direct communion with God, he finally left his family to live as a disciple of a yogin in the Nilgiri Mountains. After nine years living the life of a hermit, his guru sent him back to the plains to teach the insights he had learnt to “householders.” He visited many holy shrines and ashrams on his pilgrimage through South Asia, published a book in Tamil, and lectured in different cities.<sup>19</sup>

The article from which the above data are extracted is a hagiography filled with so many miraculous events that even the editors of *The Theosophist* felt obliged to distance themselves from its content in an editorial note. The article advertised the Swami’s forthcoming English treatise on what he called “Vedantic Raj Yoga Philosophy,” a kind of neo-tantric yoga centered on *cakra* meditation.<sup>20</sup> According to an announcement in *The Theosophist* (April 1880) the treatise was published a month later, in Lahore, by the theosophist Babu Siris Chandra Basu.<sup>21</sup> As Basu’s biographer Phanindranath Bose pointed

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19 Probably inspired by the example of Theosophy, Sabhapaty later unsuccessfully tried to launch a worldwide Hindu movement with meditation centers in every major city (see Baier 2009: 368).

20 The title was intended as a signal that his form of yoga practice was “orthodox” and “clean”.

21 The announcement was published in *The Theosophist* 1(7) 1880: 190. The Sanskrit

out, *Vedantic Raj Yoga Philosophy* was based on lectures on yoga that Sabhapaty Swami delivered at Lahore in December 1879. The Swami's knowledge of English was very poor and so it was Basu who rewrote and edited the lectures in book form. It was also Basu who wrote the biographical sketch of the swami published in the *Theosophist* (Bose 1932: 86).<sup>22</sup> Olcott mentions that he met the swami personally and spoke with him about the meaning of the *cakras* and their function within meditation.<sup>23</sup> What concerns us here is the fact that the Swami taught a *cakra* system that was quite different from that of the *Ṣatcakranirūpaṇa* (that had, as mentioned above, been extracted from Pūrṇānanda's larger work, and which has been so influential in today's popular culture). Furthermore, he introduced new elements to the use of *cakras* within meditation rituals, thereby creating a modern form of *cakra* meditation.

In Sabhapaty's system, the *svādhiṣṭhānacakra* (usually located in the lower abdomen) is shifted up to the navel and therefore there is no center in the genital region. Four centers unknown to the *Ṣatcakranirūpaṇa* are placed in the upper region of the head. Additionally, he counts the tip of the nose and the center of the tongue as main *cakras*. The iconography of the *cakras* differs from the later two-dimensional standard model. It differentiates not only between bottom/top and left/right but integrates the dimension of front/back describing a circular movement within the body that not only moves up/down and left/right but also backwards/forwards. It was probably under the influence of Sabhapatti Swami that Blavatsky later taught a *cakra* system in the Esoteric Section that also placed several *cakras*

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scholar and writer Siris Chandra Basu was a key figure within the intellectual elite of South Asian Theosophy. He belonged to the Lahore Arya Samaj circle that brought him into contact with Theosophy (See Olcott's *Old Dairy Leaves* II, chapter XVII). According to Hume (1883: 140) and Bose (1932: 95-96) he was also a member of the Brahma Samaj and was not allowed to become a formal member of the Lahore Arya Samaj because he did not accept the Vedas as infallible revelation. In later years, several of his translations and articles contributed to the popularization of Tantra and *haṭha yoga*, including theories about the *cakras*.

22 I am most grateful to Kurt Leland for pointing out Bose's book to me and for providing me with a digital copy of it. I would also like to thank him for his constructive comments on the original draft.

23 Cf. Olcott's introduction to the first theosophical edition of the *Yogasūtra*, Tukārām Tātiā (1882: vi).

within the head (in her case, of course, seven), and she identified a circular movement that rises up the inner central channel and descends along the outer part of the body (See Blavatsky 1980: 619-620).

For Sabhapaty, the *cakras* represent faculties that emanate from the “active” or “second principle” of the divine spirit (i.e. *śakti*) as it descends through the different levels of creation, whereas the “first principle” (i.e. *śiva*) stays motionless and passive. He interpreted the ascent through the *cakras* that reverses this downward movement as a conquest, a subjugation of the different *cakras*, which he also called “kingdoms.” He advised the yoga practitioner to speak to the different faculties when concentrating on the respective *cakras*, convincing them, through argument, that they are not identical with the first principle of the divine spirit, but are only reflections of its second principle. This way, the faculties were to be silenced. After that, one should curse them by telling them not to appear before the practitioner any longer. They must also be blessed “to be absorbed in the Infinite Spirit” (Sabhapaty 1950: 45). The interpretation of ascent through the *cakras* as a kind of spiritual warfare, the integration of ritual dialogue as well as of curses and blessings are perhaps Christian- or Muslim-influenced innovations.

One of the most outstanding early South Asian theosophists—as far as knowledge of tantric literature was concerned—was the Bengali Baradā Kānta Majumdār. His first article was published in April 1880, a few months after Dayānanda’s attack on the tantric scriptures. In “Tantric Philosophy,” Majumdār regretted that the Tantras are associated with “all that is impure, ignoble and immoral.” He aimed to disabuse the “Tantra-haters” of their misconception of this “very instructive and interesting part of Hindu literature” and pointed to the affinities between Occultism and Tantrism. “The Tantras are an invaluable treasure, embracing, besides religion and theology, law and medicine, cosmology, yoga, spiritualism, rules regarding the elementaries and almost all branches of transcendental philosophy.”<sup>24</sup> The main section of the article was an introduction to the concept of the Deity in the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* and it considered how this Deity could be experienced through yoga practice. Majumdār developed the interpretation of *kuṇḍalinī* as

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24 “Elementaries” is a theosophical term for the astral remnants of the deceased.

a sublime natural force (in the sense of modern physics) that we already found in *The Dream of Ravan*. For him, she was “the grand pristine force which underlies organic and inorganic matter. Modern science also teaches us that heat, light, electricity, magnetism, &c., are but the modification of one great force” (Majumdār 1880: 173).

In July and October 1880, Majumdār’s two-part article “A Glimpse of Tantric Occultism” informed the readers of *The Theosophist* for the first time about the *cakra* system of the *Ṣatcakranirūpaṇa*, with translations of the crucial passages included. Majumdār claimed the tantric approach was superior to that of modern science. Modern experimental methods were limited to the investigation of matter and “certain modifications of some mysterious force” based on the perceptions of the outer senses. But there exist both a subtle matter and force, which are not perceivable by the senses but by the extra-sensory perception of the mind. “This clairvoyance of the mind was known to the ancients many thousand years ago. During their trance state (*samādhi*) the Yogis by means of inner vision could see the mysterious agencies of nature underlying the universe” (Majumdār 1880b: 244). He praised the “Tantrik author” Pūrṇānanda for being the first one to describe “the occult nerves and forces of the human body” at length. Majumdār regretted the figurative language of the work and gave an explanation of some of its “allegories.”

The six revolving wheels of force, mentioned in the sequel, are connected with one another and are further connected with the grand machinery of *Máyá* pervading the Universe. It is not to be supposed that there is in reality any wheel or lotus in the human body; the author means only to point out the active centres of certain forces (Majumdār 1880b: 244).

In a footnote, Olcott commented on Majumdār’s presentation of the *Ṣatcakranirūpaṇa*. He acknowledged that the tantric text contained “profound philosophy” and insights into “the hidden energies of nature.”

The significant feature of the present essay is that the Tantrik Yogi from whose work the extracts are translated, knew the great and mysterious law that there are within the human body a series of centres of force-evolution, the location of which becomes known to the ascetic in the course of his physical self-

development, as well as the means which must be resorted to to bring the activities of these centres under the control of the will. To employ the Oriental figurative method, these points are so many outworks to be captured in succession before the very citadel can be taken (Olcott 1880b: 244).

With this statement, Olcott strongly supported Majumdār's positive attitude towards Tantrism. His notion of ascent through the *cakras* as a kind of warfare evoked Sabhapaty Swami's view, which, at this point, was already known to Olcott. Continuing Majumdār's criticism of the language of the *Ṣatcakranirūpana*, Olcott introduced another Orientalist stereotype by contrasting the "Oriental habit of parable" and the Eastern ability to "read the meaning between the lines" with the habit of Westerners to cling to literal meanings (Olcott 1975: 215). This was, he explained, why the tantric doctrine may at first sight look like nonsense to readers of *The Theosophist*, and he legitimated his own allegorical reading of the text. His interpretation eliminated opaque details and extracted a kind of universal natural law of force-evolution that does not depend on special cultural conditions. As Majumdār had done in his text, Olcott also transformed the concept of the *cakras* into a kind of physics of the subtle body. With his footnote he officially integrated the *cakras* and their "scientific" explanation into the perennial truth of Occultism.

In the next issue of the monthly journal, another chapter of Dayānanda Sarasvatī's autobiography was published. In it, Dayānanda recounted that he had been skeptical about the descriptions of the *cakras* that he had found in *haṭha-yoga* scriptures. To verify them, he pulled a corpse out of the Ganges and dissected it to see whether the yogic descriptions of human anatomy and the nervous system were correct. "Finding they did not tally at all, I tore the books to pieces and threw them into the river after the corpse. From that time gradually I came to the conclusion that with the exception of the Vedas, Upanishads, Patanjali and Samkhya, all other works upon science and Yog were false" (Saraswati 1880: 25, emphasis original). Once again, the publishers of *The Theosophist* did not comment on this passage, nor did any theosophist support Dayānanda's criticism of the tantric image of the body in later issues of *The Theosophist*. Dayānanda's assumption that the *cakras* are either

organs of the gross body or do not exist at all must have struck the theosophists as being rather crude. They had already developed an allegorical reading of the tantric texts and conceived the *cakras* as centers of subtle cosmic energy hidden to ordinary sense perception. On this basis, they accepted the notion of them as being part of the ancient wisdom religion. For them, Dayānanda's criticism must have simply missed the point.

Majumdār's last article in *The Theosophist*, "The Occult Sciences," was not about Tantra in particular, but on Indian Occultism in the sense of yoga and the attainment of paranormal powers. He acknowledged that Mesmerism had thrown light on the old South Asian occult traditions, which, in return, should help this young science gain the position other sciences already occupy. The advantage of Indian Occultism over Mesmerism was that it is based on self-mesmerization. "In the one case the operator has to rely on the evidence of his patient, but in the other the self-mesmerized philosopher observes phenomena by the aid of himself alone, in an ordinary conscious state" (Majumdār 1880c: 53-54).

From a note in the *Supplement to The Theosophist* of February 1883, we learn that Majumdār had tried, at that time, to form a branch of the Theosophical Society in Jessore but did not succeed because of the death of his eldest son ([n.a.] 1883a). The *Supplement* of May 1883 quoted a letter of Majumdār and reported that he had opened a theosophical school in Naldanga and that he was a member of the branch of the Society located in that town ([n.a.] 1883b). We are also told that Olcott, who had school projects running in Bengal at that time, wanted Majumdār to write "an elementary textbook," a kind of "unsectarian Hindu Catechism" to instruct Hindu children, a Hindu counterpart of Olcott's *Buddhist Catechism* (1881). This was never realized, and Majumdār was never mentioned again in *The Theosophist*. It could well be that he left the Theosophical Society following the Coulomb Affair.

About thirty years later, he reappeared on the stage of the modern reception of Tantra as a collaborator of Sir John Woodroffe. He translated Sivacandra Vidyārṇava's *Tantratattva* for Woodroffe and contributed a long introduction to the second part of it in Arthur Avalon's [Sir

John Woodroffe's] *Principles of Tantra* (1914).<sup>25</sup> In the preface to the second part, Woodroffe pointed out the value of Majumdār's introduction, noting its intrinsic merits "as being the record of the views of an English-educated Hindu, who finds in the conclusions of recent Western science a corroboration of his ancient Eastern beliefs. Its author is now an old man, to whom the Tantra has been the subject of study for many years" (Woodroffe 1952: 539). In his introduction, Majumdār still argued in an occultist manner that the tantric worldview is a refined version of modern Western physics and physiology, a religion in the form of higher, post-materialistic science. With respect to the *cakras* and *kuṇḍalinī yoga* he now wrote: "The Padmas and their residing Gods are facts in nature, which a Sādhaka [practitioner] has the privilege to see and to call by whatever names he chooses. Hindus, Mohammedans, Christians, Parsees, Buddhists, nay, agnostics, if they choose, can enter this Yoga path without committing themselves to any particular form of religion" (Majumdār 1914: 672-673). Woodroffe was quite sympathetic towards this approach, and it appears as though Majumdār gave him the idea of a refined occultist interpretation of Tantrism.

One last important theosophical publication of the early 1880's referring to tantric concepts should be mentioned here. Pandit Rama Prasad Kasyapa's *Occult Science, the science of breath* was published in 1884 in Lahore. The book consists of what seems to be the translation of an original tantric text and commenting articles that treat the system of ontological categories called *tattvas* and also explain the *nāḍīs* and certain breathing techniques. Its revised second edition (1890) had considerable influence on *fin de siècle* Occultism. The review of Kasyapa's book in *The Theosophist* (Sarma: 1884) interprets the Tantric image of the body with mesmeric concepts. Compared with earlier texts from South Asian Theosophists, the review adopts a more distanced attitude towards Tantric concepts, especially with regard to meditation practice.

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25 Sivacandra Vidyarnava was Woodroffe's tantric guru (see Taylor 2001: 99-107). The *Tantratattva* defends Śākta Tantra against the criticism of orthodox Vedantins, Vishnuites and Brahma Samajis.

In a footnote to the article, “The Tantras,” on the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* written by an anonymous “T. S.” and published in *The Theosophist*, Blavatsky expressed her point of view on the question of Tantra:

For reasons of their own, the Aryas or the “reformers,” as they and the Brahmos call themselves, regard *all* the *Tantras* as the most abominable works on sorcery that inculcate immorality. Some of the Tantric works and commentaries are certainly prohibited on account of their dealing with *necromancy* (modern Spiritualism). But the meaning in the real old *Tantras* remaining a dead letter to the uninitiated Hindus, very few can appreciate their worth. Some of the “White” Tantras, especially the one treated upon in the present article, contain extremely important information for the Occultists (Blavatsky 1969: 534, emphasis original).

Adopting the already established pro-Tantra attitude of Theosophy to claim superiority over the Hindu-reform movements, Blavatsky argued that the reformers would not be able to understand the supreme insights of Tantra-initiated Hindus or Western occultists. In line with the well-known dualism of white and black magic, Blavatsky started to distinguish between white and black Tantra. This allowed her to accommodate the criticisms articulated by Orientalists and Hindu-reformers without entirely discarding Tantrism. One month later, in a footnote to a contribution on tantric rites and ceremonies, she presented a more elaborate distinction between “black” and “white Tantras.”

As there are both magic (pure psychic science) and sorcery (its impure counterpart) so there are what are known as the “White” and “Black” Tantras. The one is an exposition, very clear and exceedingly valuable, of occultism in its noblest features, the other a devil’s chap-book of wicked instructions to the would-be wizard and sorcerer (Blavatsky 1969: 615).

In another footnote from the same year, referring to an article on the mirror magic of Muslim magicians in South Asia, she introduced the term “left hand path” as a designation for the practices of a fraternity of Muslim magicians called “Wahabees,” who, according to Blavatsky,



learned their magical art from the Tantrikas of Eastern Bengal and Assam. “The knowledge they have acquired by the ‘left hand’ path is used for good or bad purposes according to the inclination of the practitioner” (Blavatsky 1975: 8). In *The Secret Doctrine* she identified “the *RIGHT*- and *LEFT*- hand paths of knowledge or of Vidya” with white and black magic without reference to Tantra (Blavatsky 1888 I: 192, emphases original) and spoke of the “*black Tantrik five ‘makaras’* or the five *m’s*” (Blavatsky 1888 II: 579, emphases original).<sup>26</sup>

It is important to recap that during this first and most intense period in the reception of the *cakras*, the theosophists became acquainted with two quite different models: Sabhapaty Swami’s modern hybrid, Vedantic Raj Yoga, and the *Ṣatcakranirūpana* via the writings of Majumdār. Thus, it is hardly surprising that early Theosophy knew about the variability of the *cakra* systems. According to Blavatsky, “no two authorities up to the present day agree as to the real location of the Chakras and Padmas in the body” (Blavatsky 1897: 509). As mentioned above, the global predominance of the seven *cakras* and their standardized localization only started as an effect of the popularity of Woodroffe’s *Serpent Power* that provided an annotated translation of the *Ṣatcakranirūpaṇa*.

To summarize, all of this paved the way for a positive reception of Tantrism: The reception of the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* (the “prudish” work popular in Bengal that was first published by the Adi Brahma Samaj and which Majumdār also discussed); the interpretation of Tantra as South Asian Occultism; and notions of the tantric body as consisting of subtle matter and energies, the *kuṇḍalinī* as a natural force, and the *cakras* as centers of “force evolution.” Most of these points referred to Mesmerism, another important component of the theosophical welcoming structure that merits closer scrutiny now. Mesmerism provided what Theosophy considered to be the most striking convergences with the tantric view of the body, and the Romantic mesmerists had already started to explain South Asian forms of meditation in the light of their own theories.

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26 As Kennet Granholm has emphasized, the division between two main tantric schools, the left hand and the right hand path, gained currency only after Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* and was inspired by this work (Cf. Granholm 2012: 502 and Granholm 2014: 61).

### Mesmeric Convergences

Blavatsky had become acquainted with Mesmerism by the 1850's, at the latest, when she was in contact with French mesmerists in Paris. During the same decade, Olcott participated in a spiritualist circle in Amherst, Ohio, in which healing by laying-on-of-hands was practiced. He discovered his own healing capacities, and, in search of an explanation, came across mesmeric literature. During the Romantic period, Mesmerism had been a hotly debated issue in literary works, philosophy, and medicine. It had been taught—at least in Germany—at several universities and was an acknowledged (albeit problematic) field of research. In the 1870's and 1880's, when the young Theosophical Society considered Mesmerism to be a powerful ally in the fight against materialistic science, it had already lost its academic credentials. Nevertheless, it was still practiced by many healers and was held in high esteem by occultists of all kinds.

In line with Romantic Mesmerism, Blavatsky and Olcott thought that among all the Western post-materialistic sciences it would be Mesmerism that would provide the major key to Indian philosophy and an understanding of yoga practices. Blavatsky's most important influence, Joseph Ennemoser, quoted the famous Romantic physician Johann Carl Passavant: "It would be impossible to appreciate the Indian philosophers without a knowledge of the phenomena of extacia [sic], and the various ecstatic states. Their philosophy is essentially an ecstatic clairvoyance" (Ennemoser 1854: 204). John C. Colquhoun (1803-1870), another mesmerist referred to in *Isis Unveiled*, was a Scottish lawyer and one of the pioneers of Mesmerism in the English-speaking world. He came into contact with German Romantic Mesmerism during his university studies in Göttingen. Colquhoun affirmed the view of Passavant and Ennemoser about the somnambulic character of South Asian thought: "English writers, in general, seem sadly puzzled with Indian philosophy, which they appear to regard altogether as a mere tissue of fantastic chimeras. The discovery of the magnetic Somnambulism and Ecstasy, however, in recent times, affords us the means of explaining many things which had been previously obscure and unintelligible" (Colquhoun 1851: 112). For Romantic mesmerists (as for Hegel), yoga was the core of all Indian thought. The ecstasies

of the Indian yogins were identified with the somnambulant states of magnetized persons deprived of all sensibility (e.g., Colquhoun 1851: 108). Olcott drew practical conclusions from this approach. “In attempting to teach our young Indian members the meaning of Indian philosophers, we have begun by showing theoretically and experimentally what Magnetism is” (Olcott 1880a: 116). Blavatsky was not involved in practical Mesmerism, as Olcott was, but she shared his conviction that Mesmerism was able to give a scientific explanation of paranormal phenomena and magic:

Mesmerism is the very key to the mystery of man’s interior nature; and enables one familiar with its laws to understand not only the phenomena of Western spiritualism, but also that vast subject [...] of Eastern Magic. The whole object of the Hindu *Yogi* is to bring into activity his interior power, to make himself the ruler over physical self and over everything else besides. [...] Mesmerism goes far towards teaching us how to read this occult secret (Blavatsky 1967d: 135, emphasis original).

Mesmeric theories and practices provided the necessary convergences for the integration of the *cakras* into the theosophical worldview and practice. According to Mesmerism, the human body is vitalized by a subtle fluid that also permeates the entire universe and ensures cosmic order. From Mesmer onwards, the abdomen—as a region with many nerve plexuses that conduct animal magnetism—was of special importance. Concentrating the *fluidum* there through certain strokes of the magnetizer’s hands was essential for any magnetic therapy. The Puységur school of animal magnetism and its further development in German Romantic Mesmerism postulated two main centers within the fluidal body that represented different psychic functions (Baier 2009: 184-191; Hanegraaff 2012: 262-265). The capacities of the conscious soul, such as ordinary perceptions of the senses, self-awareness, will, and rational thinking, were related to the brain and spinal marrow. The subconscious soul with its instincts, visionary capacities, and hidden resources of self-healing was located within the celiac plexus—also called solar plexus because of its radiating fibers—and the other nerve plexuses of the abdominal region. Through the famous physician and pioneer of psychiatry Johann Christian Reil (1759-1813), this doctrine

heavily influenced German medicine and anthropological thought during the Romantic era. By using certain strokes of the hands, mesmerists sought to direct the nervous fluid into the belly. The activation of the solar plexus and the other organs of the unconscious soul was believed to induce states of clairvoyance and was meant to enhance the self-healing capacities of the patient. Some of the clairvoyants reported that they were able to see the channels and centers of the vital fluid as especially bright regions or as rotating bodies connected by white strings (Kluge: 1815, 170-171).

This mesmeric image of the body was used for the interpretation of yogic practices. At that time, translations of tantric and Hatha yogic texts on the *cakras* were not available. Nonetheless, German mesmerists were familiar with precursors of the later *cakra* theories from translations of the *Upaniṣads* that they interpreted through the lens of their own concepts and experiences of magnetic cures (Baier 2009: 200-243). They drew parallels between yogic meditation, ancient Greek speculations about the seat of the soul, and concentration on the navel in medieval forms of Eastern Orthodox Christian prayer practiced by the hesychasts on Mount Athos.<sup>27</sup> The convergence between them and the role of the solar plexus within mesmeric theory and practice seemed to be obvious. Ennemoser, for example, claimed that Homer and the ancient Greeks in general believed that the divine soul is seated in the pit of the stomach. “It is remarkable that the poet-king speaks of the soul in the pit of the stomach; so that even in the earliest stages the transposition of the consciousness had been remarked, by which, as the Hindoos knew, the somnambulists see and hear through the pit of the stomach” (Ennemoser 1854: 143). Blavatsky and her New York circle came to know about such ideas via different mesmeric sources, first and foremost Ennemoser. Already in *Isis Unveiled*, and in line with Romantic Mesmerism, Blavatsky drew parallels between yoga

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27 Hesychasts are practitioners within a tradition of mystical prayer in the Eastern Orthodox Church called Hesychasm, from the Greek *hesychia* meaning “stillness, rest, divine silence.” On Hesychasm and yoga, see Ennemoser 1854: 87-88, 194. The first to compare yogins and hesychasts was the eighteenth-century historian, Edward Gibbon, in his famous *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Cf. Gibbon 1994: 783-784. In 1819, Christian Wolfart made Gibbon’s comparison known to Romantic German mesmerists. See Baier 2009: 214.

and Mesmerism. Like Ennemoser, she did not differentiate between the navel, the pit of the stomach, and the cavity of the heart; all these terms were said to signify the same center.

The modern fakirs, as well as the ancient gymnosophists, unite themselves with their Átman and the Deity by remaining motionless in contemplation and concentrating their whole thought on their navel. As in modern somnambulic phenomena, the navel was regarded as “the circle of the sun,” the seat of internal divine light. Is the fact that a number of modern somnambulists being enabled to read letters, hear, smell, and see, through that part of their body to be regarded again as a simple “coincidence,” or shall we admit at last that the old sages knew something more of physiological and psychological mysteries than our modern Academicians? (Blavatsky 1877 I: xxxix).

The quoted passage starts with a sentence that mixes two paraphrases of Ennemoser. One identifies the ecstatic experiences of Indian seers in ancient times with those of contemporary South Asian ascetics. The other one speaks of the unity of the soul (*ātman*) and the Deity (*brahman*) gained through meditating on the cavity of the heart (Ennemoser 1854: 205 et passim).<sup>28</sup> This is followed by an unattributed quote from Charles W. King’s *The Gnostics and Their Remains* (1864), another book that was often plagiarized in *Isis Unveiled*, on matters relating to the “navel as ‘circle of the sun’” (King 1864: 204-205).<sup>29</sup> The context of this passage in King’s book is an explanation of the use of a stone as an amulet placed on the navel. King referred to hesychastic prayer in

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28 Ennemoser 1854: 173: “As the visions and revelations of the ancient Brahmins were, so are at the present time those of the Indian hermits and fakirs” and Ennemoser 1854: 204-205: “Like the tortoise, man must withdraw every sense within himself; the heart must be guarded, and then Brahma will enter into him, like fire and lightning. In the great fire in the cavity of the heart a small flame will be lit up, and in its centre is Atma (the soul); and he who destroys all worldly desires and wisdom will be like a hawk which has broken through the meshes of the net, and will have become one with the great being.”

29 King’s book tried to show that Gnosticism was based on Eastern sources, namely Buddhist ones. Blavatsky quoted it several times in *Isis Unveiled* and, according to William Emmette Coleman, plagiarized 42 passages from it.

order to explain the symbolism of the navel.<sup>30</sup> The quoted text ends with a typical Blavatskyan polemic against conventional academic research and an affirmation of the superior knowledge of the “ancient sages.”

Here we can already see principles at work that later determined the theosophical interpretation of the *cakras*. The concentration on the navel is described as an ancient cross-cultural esoteric practice based on deep knowledge of the function of certain body regions with regard to the development of paranormal powers. This knowledge was thought to go beyond academic physiology and psychology, but the alternative scientific approach of Mesmerism was about to rediscover it.

### Expected Enrichment

The final crucial element of the welcoming structure that opened the door for the reception of the *cakras* was the expectation connected to their appropriation. Here, two major points are worth mentioning. First, before they discovered South Asian *cakra* doctrines, the theosophists already had, as we saw, some views about the significance of certain body centers for spiritual development. But their ideas were comparatively vague. As difficult as they were to understand, the South Asian *cakra* systems offered a much more detailed view. Against the backdrop of theosophical Orientalism, they were identified as the results of advanced occult research carried out by masters of the ancient wisdom religion.

Secondly, the notion of ascent through the *cakras* promised to solve a problem concerning occult practice. Since the earliest days of the Theosophical Society, astral projection was considered to be the most important technique in establishing contact with higher spheres, for developing paranormal powers, and experiencing union with the divine (Deveney 1997; 2016). Nevertheless, the methods for deliberately separating the astral body from the gross material body were primitive,

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30 King 1864: 153-154: “The ‘circle of the sun’ is the navel, [...] the navel being considered in the microcosm as corresponding to the sun in the universe—an idea more fully exemplified in the famous hallucination of the Greek anchorites touching the mystical Light of Tabor, which was revealed to the devotee after a fast of many days, all the time staring fixedly upon the region of the navel, whence at length this Light streamed as from a focus.”

and no clear concept of the process of separation existed. Their study of the South Asian *cakra* systems led Blavatsky and Olcott to the conclusion that successive concentration on the centers of the subtle body was the correct method for developing the ability to project astrally.

In the first volume of Olcott's *Old Diary Leaves*, a picture was reprinted that, according to Olcott, was miraculously materialized by Madame Blavatsky during her stay in New York (Olcott 2002: 363-365). It shows the spiritualist medium, William Stainton Moses (1839-1892), with his body shrouded in something resembling clouds and a sky-blue background. In the region of the head, the heart, and to a much lesser degree also in the upper belly region, radiating beams can be seen. The picture attempts to show what an astral body looks like in the eyes of a clairvoyant. The visionary perception does not seem to rely on a fixed cultural code. In retrospect, Olcott interprets it in light of the concept of the *cakras* that Theosophy only later borrowed from South Asian traditions. What in reality was a part of the welcoming structure for this cultural transfer—the body image of early Theosophy—he interprets as evidence of Blavatsky's knowledge of the *cakras* even before their journey to India. The concept of the *cakras* is presented as an ahistorical, culturally independent truth, albeit one that was discovered and handed down only within certain currents of the ancient wisdom religion.

At that stage of my occult education I had heard nothing about the six *chakrams*, or the psychical evolutionary centres in the human body, [...] but my later acquaintance with the subject gives this satin picture an enhanced value, as showing that the practical occultist who made it apparently knew that, in the process of disentangling the astral from the physical body, the will must be focused in succession at the several nerve-centres, and the disengagement completed at each in turn before moving on to the next centre in the order of sequence (Olcott 2002: 365, emphasis original).

Olcott explained the fact that the image depicts only three centers by referring to Stainton Moses's supposedly low level of spiritual development. From a historical point of view, it was the reception of the *cakras* that led Theosophy to a more differentiated conceptualization

of the astral body, and which contributed to the development of a more refined method of astral projection.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the history of the Theosophical Society in South Asia is an entangled one, not only with regard to the Society in its South Asian surroundings, but also within the Society itself. Theosophy functioned as a platform for transcultural processes in which South Asian and Anglo-American members were involved. The first section of the chapter outlined four basic features that enable processes of transculturation: theosophical Orientalism with its reverse mirroring; a (largely Romanticist) history of reception of Asian ideas; perceived convergences between notions of the *cakras* and existing theories; and an expected enrichment. The first section of the chapter also addressed the pre-modern conceptualization of the *cakras*. Against this background, the second section showed how these welcoming structures were at work in the theosophical appropriation of the *cakras* in the early 1880's. Following Baumann's theory of Orientalism as a grammar of identity/alterity based on reversed mirroring, we saw that theosophical Orientalism provided a concept of selfness and otherness that paved the way for a reception of the *cakras* as ancient esoteric wisdom, substantiated by the most recent scientific achievements. This theosophical Orientalism was built upon earlier interpretations of South Asia, namely Romantic Orientalism, and especially mesmeric versions of it, and authors whose approach to India was influenced by Masonic and Rosicrucian thought.

We further saw that the reception of the *cakras* was not only supported by these elements of the welcoming structure but was also affected by the negative image of Tantra within Orientalism and South Asian reform movements. Both pro- and anti-tantric forces were represented within the Society. Baradā Kānta Majumdār and the other South Asian theosophists with tantric leanings overcame Dayānanda Sarasvatī's rejection of Tantrism. Their interpretations convinced the leaders of the Theosophical Society that Tantra was a valuable occult philosophy and science. Earlier Mesmeric interpretations of yoga practices made it easy for Theosophy to integrate the *cakras* along with the notion of



*kuṇḍalinī* into their evolving worldview. Finally, the theosophical study and appropriation of *cakra* systems promised twofold enrichment: a better understanding of the subtle body, its anatomy, and physiology, and a more precise conceptualization of the theory and practice of astral projection.

The Theosophical Society continued contributing to the growing popularity of the *cakras* in the late-nineteenth century and throughout the first half of the twentieth, by publishing translations of relevant Sanskrit texts as well as via the writings of its members.<sup>31</sup> Blavatsky's late experiments with *cakras* in the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society helped to keep the topic on the theosophical agenda. Other prominent authors within the theosophical current who treated the *cakras* and the *kuṇḍalinī* were Subba Row, Charles W. Leadbeater, Annie Besant, Rudolf Steiner, Alice Bailey, and George Arundale, the author of the last innovative theosophical contribution to the topic (Arundale 1938). The theosophical notion of an objective and culturally independent existence of the *cakras* that could be proven by refined natural science was an agenda advanced by empirical yoga research (Cf. the early attempt of Rele 1927 with a foreword of Woodroffe) and later in New Age science (Motoyama 1978). Additionally, Leadbeater's theosophical classic, *The Chakras* (1927—with its synthesis of a *cakra* system and the concept of the human aura) is still influential today, for example, in Barbara Brennan's system of energetic healing (Brennan 1988).

A new wave of the popularization of the *cakras* and the *kuṇḍalinī* began on a global scale in the late 1960's, gaining momentum during the following decade. From this period onwards, theosophical writings were of marginal importance, but Theosophy's contributions to the modern conceptualization of the *cakras* have not been forgotten.<sup>32</sup> Gopi Krishna's widely read autobiography *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man* (1967), which was translated into several languages, may serve as a starting point for this development. His de-traditionalized

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31 For the history of the *cakras* in the West from Blavatsky until the present, see Leland 2016.

32 See the short excerpts from books of Alice Bailey and George Arundale republished in the representative reader, White 1979; the chapter on Leadbeater in Motoyama 2008: 190-209; and the chapter on "Theosophy and Tantra" in Scott 2006: 195-215.

approach does not refer to tantric sources. The book contains a commentary to Gopi Krishna's text by James Hillman, then director of the C. G. Jung institute in Zürich, which contributed significantly to the psychologization of the *cakras*. Moreover, Gopi Krishna was very interested in connecting the ascent of the *kuṇḍalinī* with evolutionary biology, an idea that also became quite influential.

The new era can be linked to the international yoga boom that also started in the 1960's. Since Swami Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga* (1893), the *cakras* and the *kuṇḍalinī* have formed an inherent part of many currents and schools of modern yoga. Interpretations of them have been influenced by Occultism but usually without direct reference to Theosophy. Another new source of knowledge about the *cakras* was the teaching activities of Tantra-based gurus like Amrit Desai, Yogi Bhajan, Swami Rama, and Swami Muktananda, who were connected to the modern yoga scene and attracted members of the counter culture (Singleton et al 2014: 171-233). C. G. Jung's psychological commentary on *kuṇḍalinī* yoga from the 1930's became known to a wider (psychotherapeutic) readership (Jung 1975; 1976). This, and the study of the so-called *kuṇḍalinī* phenomena (or *kuṇḍalinī* syndrome) by transpersonal psychologists (see the influential work, Sanella 1976, which drew on Gopi Krishna), increased the interest of psychiatrists, psychotherapists, meditation teachers, and spiritual guides of the Human Potential Movement. New Age scientists such as the above-mentioned Hiroshi Motoyama tried to connect *cakra* theories with physics and physiology, Psi-research, perennial mysticism and the evolution of mankind. Many of these attempts sound like a (more or less distant) echo of the original theosophical appropriation of the *cakras*. The connections between them deserve to be further explored.

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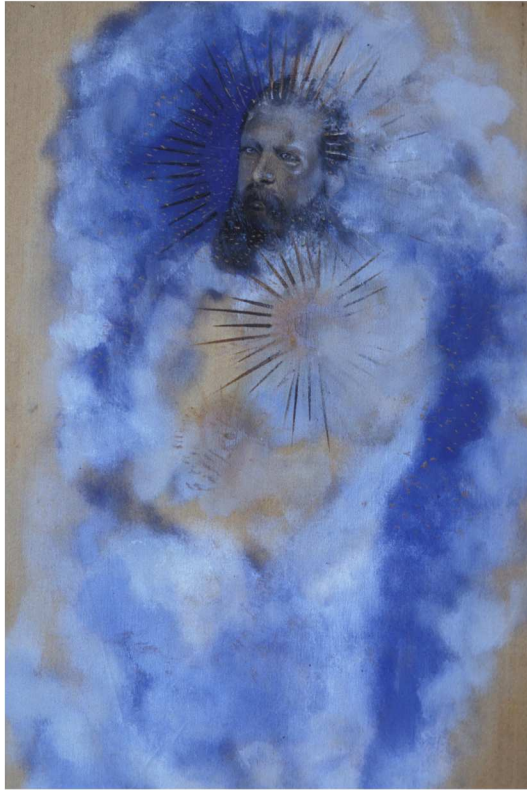
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Image of Sabhapaty Swami's *cakra* system from Olcott's personal copy of *Om: A Treatise on Vedantic Raj Yoga Philosophy* (1880), located at the Adyar Library. Courtesy of Richard Dvorak who photographed and digitally restored it.

Karl Baier



Photograph of Madame Blavatsky's precipitated painting of Stainton Moses (Adyar Archives, Chennai). Photograph by Michael Chapotin, Courtesy of the Theosophical Society in America.