

# Introduction

## *Theosophy: Across Boundaries*

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From its inception throughout the period of its highest influence toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the Theosophical Society has constantly transgressed boundaries. It has gone beyond geographical boundaries, from Europe to India and on to other Asian countries. It has blurred boundaries between religious traditions, mixing elements from various European and Asian traditions, appealing to individuals from a variety of religious backgrounds. And it has transgressed the boundaries between categories such as religion, philosophy, politics, and science.

Dealing with Theosophy may challenge our way of looking at things, such as the division of religion and science or the relationship between “East and West”—because they were challenged by Theosophy. A key to understanding the importance of Theosophy perhaps may lie in recognizing it as a crucial agent in historical debates about the very meaning of “religion” or “science.” These debates took place within a truly entangled global context, in which transfers of knowledge were not monodirectional but polyphonic and often ambiguous. Indeed, the Theosophical Society is perhaps the most overlooked agent in these transfers. Until recently, it has barely received any attention in the most widely read studies of global history, although a more extensive analysis from a global perspective was provided by Peter van der Veer, who highlighted the impact of Theosophy on Indian religions.<sup>1</sup>

Despite such acknowledgements, the global dimension of Theosophy remains largely neglected. The reason for this neglect is twofold: it can be traced to a lack of attention to religions other than Christianity in studies of global history, and the fact that Theosophy so far has been studied mostly within the disciplinary framework of “Western Esotericism.” When global history, which is often focused on economic exchanges and diplomacy, does take religion seriously, the focus is usually exclusively on the global spread of Christianity through newly invigorated missionary activities of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The other major movements that are acknowledged are the global spread of Islam, especially to Africa,<sup>3</sup> and that of the incursion of Asian “world religions” into Europe and North America, such as the interest in Hinduism or Buddhism as lived religions in the United States and Western Europe around the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> The focus on Christianity persists, although more recent studies have done a lot to counter it. In his magisterial account of “The Birth of the Modern World” in the long nineteenth century, Christopher Bayly has devoted a whole chapter to “Empires of Religion” that takes pains to go beyond a Eurocentric and Christian-centric account. Still, Bayly’s chapter is slanted toward his overarching thesis of nineteenth-century “uniformity,” which he also applies to religions. Hence, his observation that change in this period “tended toward greater uniformity both within and between religions” privileges the large “world religions” as the source of this trend toward uniformity.<sup>5</sup>

Sebastian Conrad, who also devotes a long chapter to “Religion in the Global World” within his more recent overview of “A Cultural History of Global Transformation,” implicitly rejects Bayly’s basic assumption when he argues that, in the course of the nineteenth century, religion was understood less as an expression of universal values; rather, it was an emphasis on the connection between religion and the nation that was typical of the late nineteenth century. This strategic move allows Conrad to consider new religious movements, almost completely overlooked by Bayly, more seriously and also to locate the Theosophical Society as “the prototype of a transnationally active religion, a typical product of the cultural globalization at the end of the nineteenth century.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet, while the impact of globalization on the Theosophical Society is duly noted, the importance of the Society for global history remains sketchy, as do its connections to other religious and nonreligious movements of the period under study. One can even go further and state that, with regard to global history, the neglect of Theosophy is not due merely

to the fact that scholars such as Bayly, Conrad, and Jürgen Osterhammel seem to be largely unaware of the study of esotericism.<sup>7</sup> Even if they were aware of it, they would find that scholars of Western Esotericism have traditionally concluded that the Theosophical Society was first and foremost responsible for “globalizing” entirely “Western” ideas—if the global dimension of its history has been discussed at all.<sup>8</sup> In this vein, the recent *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* focuses exclusively on European and North American contexts and the Western Theosophists who have traditionally received scholarly attention.<sup>9</sup>

Yet some scholars of Western Esotericism have engaged in a fruitful discussion of the notion of “the West” that seeks to problematize the label of the field. Kennet Granholm has discussed the geographical limitations of the field and described the separation between “the West” and “the non-West” as largely imaginary.<sup>10</sup> Egil Asprem called for a “new comparativism” in the study of esotericism and described the delimitations of “Western Esotericism” as a product of boundary-work.<sup>11</sup> Wouter Hanegraaff has stressed the need for more research into the “globalization of Western Esotericism,” but also suggested maintaining the category.<sup>12</sup> Michael Bergunder, on the other hand, has argued that the very emergence of “esotericism” per se can only be comprehended in the context of a global religious history.<sup>13</sup> This debate has considerably gained momentum in recent years. Julian Strube has argued that the study of esotericism would only benefit from an engagement with global and non-Eurocentric perspectives, for which Theosophy is an especially strong case in point. When seen in this light, the “Western” demarcation of the field of study that most extensively investigates Theosophy appears detrimental to an understanding of the subject, and the study of esotericism as a whole.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of one’s position on these theoretical and methodological reflections, the fact remains that only a few attempts have been made so far to do practical research about the global dimension of esotericism.<sup>15</sup> The Theosophical Society is perhaps the most relevant and instructive example that can serve as a starting point for such an endeavor. This is reflected in a growing interest that most recently manifested itself in *Theosophical Appropriations*, a volume edited by Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss, which allows for significant insights into Theosophy’s role for the transformation of traditions.<sup>16</sup>

There can be little doubt that the Theosophical Society was part of a truly global movement, thus providing an outstanding example of the complex entanglements of the global religious history of the nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries.<sup>17</sup> Theosophy should not be regarded simply as a part of a “Western esotericism,” that is, the product of a purely Orientalist imagination in which Western audiences defined their own identity with implicit or explicit reference to the “otherness” of the East.<sup>18</sup> Of course, its Western leaders were, certainly in the early phase of the Society, informed by Orientalist ideas of “the East.” However, because they engaged in complex exchanges with Indians and other “non-Westerners,” this relationship must not be seen one-dimensionally. An understanding of these exchanges requires an approach that leaves behind the classical notion of Edward Said’s famous *Orientalism*, implying the passivity of the colonized, and instead highlights the mutual influences among all involved actors, despite differences in power and position. The ambiguities and contradictions of the agency of the colonized in the light of Orientalist knowledge have long been the subject of post-colonial debates.<sup>19</sup> Taking them into account is crucial for understanding the relationships between the many different members of the Theosophical Society.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the dominance of Western knowledge within the colonial framework, this knowledge was by no means adopted passively. Colonial relations were highly unstable and dynamic; knowledge was not reproduced identically by the colonized but inherently contained the potential for transformation and the articulation of opposition.<sup>21</sup> While it might be questioned whether esotericism could reasonably be regarded as “rejected knowledge,” it certainly propagated an opposition to the hegemonic culture of what was perceived as the West.<sup>22</sup> In this light, the huge popularity of Theosophy and other esoteric currents underlines that “Western knowledge” was anything but monolithic: the colonized were not confronted by a homogenic Western understanding of religion or science, but they actively shaped the fragile meanings of these contested signifiers. The Theosophical Society offered them a unique platform for doing so. For people in Asia, esotericism could function as an entry point into Orientalist discourse and, at the same time, provide opportunities for a critical resignification of its contents, which in turn impacted Orientalist notions.

Much of this agency was derived from the Orientalist perception of Asia as the cradle of pristine wisdom, “spiritual” yet effeminate and otherworldly. It is thus important to be aware of the ambiguity of the Theosophical elevation of Asians, especially Indians. The glory of India was more often than not located in a distant past, and Theosophists such as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky tended to dismiss the real, living Indians as ignorants who had to be educated by the Western re-discoverers of

their lost wisdom. This more or less implicit reproduction of colonial and Orientalist racial and hierarchical modes within the Theosophical Society demands further attention.<sup>23</sup> It should also complicate the perception of Theosophical attitudes as a kind of “positive Orientalism.”<sup>24</sup> While it might very well be distinguished from more malicious attitudes—for instance, of the missionary variety that was denounced by Theosophists—it certainly is marked by an ambiguity that cannot simply be regarded as “positive.”

A better understanding of these dynamics is of crucial importance for an analysis of the extraordinary role the Theosophical Society played in modern Asian history. It is well known that Theosophists and their collaborators were a driving force behind the emergence of the modern Buddhist identity in Sri Lanka.<sup>25</sup> Annie Besant (1847–1933), who became president of the Theosophical Society in 1907, was elected president of the Indian National Congress in 1917.<sup>26</sup> And Theosophical ideas significantly informed the man who would soon eclipse Besant as a political leader, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1883–1944).<sup>27</sup> Farther to the East, the ideas of the Theosophical Society became a rallying point for Buddhist reformers in Japan. This movement culminated when Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) visited Japan in 1889 and was welcomed enthusiastically by Buddhists embracing inner-sectarian reform, although they soon became disillusioned about the potential of Theosophy for modern Buddhism.<sup>28</sup>

In the West, Theosophy was largely responsible for the wide-spread fascination with “Buddhism” or “Hinduism,” resulting in the practice of yoga, meditation, and alternative lifestyles that would prepare the ground for New Age culture, remaining influential up to the present day.<sup>29</sup> As these examples demonstrate, the interaction of Theosophy with highly diverse cultural contexts resulted in mutual influences, the study of which enables us to better understand historical processes that far exceed Theosophy. The different perspectives offered in the contributions to his volume allow for instructive insights into how the meaning of “it,” Theosophy, has been constructed in various cultural contexts, and how Theosophy could function as a nodal point for the emergence of new religious or political identities.

These discussions also allow for a better understanding of constructions of “the East” in contrast to “the West.” The Theosophical shift toward India, within the first years after its formation, not only caused fierce polemics among esotericists, but also raised pressing questions that are crucial for future research. Clearly, the notion and location, be it imaginary or physical, of “the East” were subject to radical change, and the demarcations between “East” and “West” were obviously contingent. While “the East”

was imagined as a pristine location since late antiquity, its exact position in the “esoteric landscape” was extremely fluid throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>30</sup> The “Orient” could comprise Egypt, Chaldea, India, and China. This vast conflation reflected typical Orientalist notions and thus broader historical trends, but the “wandering” of the East from Egypt to India within esoteric discourses is especially remarkable. In the process, certain notions such as the “Oriental Kabbalah” were transformed into a part of “Western esotericism,” and it is important to note that this was the outcome of polemical identity formations.<sup>31</sup> Whether one tends to subscribe to a demarcation between “Western” and “Eastern” esotericism in scholarship or not, there is little doubt that future approaches should be discussed against the background of global developments whose relevance extends well beyond the sphere of esotericism itself.

### A Brief History of the Theosophical Society

Despite its outstanding historical significance, no recent attempt has been made to write a comprehensive history of the Theosophical Society.<sup>32</sup> Only some of the Society’s leading figures have been studied in dedicated biographies—all of them Westerners.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, when it was formed in New York in 1875, the Theosophical Society was clearly situated against a Western Spiritualist and occultist background, although its name did not explicitly refer to the older notion of “theosophy.”<sup>34</sup> Its founding leaders were the illustrious Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Henry Steel Olcott.<sup>35</sup> The Society was marked by polemical identity formations, initially against Spiritualism and other esoteric groups, before it went through several schisms toward the end of the century and fractured into numerous offshoots. A central issue in this respect was the increasingly “Eastern” orientation of the Society.<sup>36</sup> This orientation became obvious in May 1878, when it was renamed “The Theosophical Society of the Arya Samaj of India.” This referred to the Indian reform movement Arya Samaj, which had recently been formed by Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883).<sup>37</sup> Since 1878, the Theosophists were in direct contact with its leader, although the links between the two organizations did not last for long. Nevertheless, after Blavatsky and Olcott reached Mumbai (then Bombay) for the first time on February 16, 1879, the Theosophical Society would firmly establish itself in the Asian landscape of religious and political reform movements.

An important platform of communication was the journal *The Theosophist*, which commenced publication in 1879 and gave a public voice to educated Indians who otherwise were disregarded by the colonial communities. The Western Theosophists would become a recognizable, and soon a highly influential, force in the struggle for native identities, openly adhering to Hinduism and Buddhism—and eventually contributing to the formation of these terms. Olcott proved to be especially active in touring the subcontinent and protesting colonial and missionary policies. His efforts in Sri Lanka, which have been mentioned above, were commemorated with an “Olcott Day” on February 17. The Theosophists had early allies in the colonial community, such as Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921), who edited the largest daily newspaper in India, *The Pioneer*. But they also developed close ties to learned Indians, such as Tallapragada Subba Row (1856–1890), whose activity as an advocate in Madras was one reason for the Society to move its headquarters to a nearby town, Adyar, in late 1882.

In the meantime, Theosophists such as Anna Kingsford (1846–1888) and Edward Maitland (1824–1897) began to voice their protest against the “Oriental” tendencies of the Society, which, among other internal and external quarrels, forced Blavatsky and Olcott to travel back to Europe in February 1884. One pressing issue revolved around the claim that Blavatsky received orders from unseen masters, the so-called Mahatmas, who were regarded as the guardians of supreme esoteric knowledge. The identity and influence of these masters became increasingly subject to scrutiny, which opened another front in India and forced Blavatsky and Olcott to return in October 1884 to face accusations of fraud. The affair took a devastating end when Richard Hodgson, a member of the Society for Psychical Research who was commissioned to write a report on the matter, concluded that the Mahatma letters, as well as the phenomena produced by Blavatsky, were forgeries. On March 31, 1885, Blavatsky left India forever, while Olcott remained as president of the Society.

In the following years, Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater (1847–1934), who allegedly received training from the Mahatmas and Subba Row, would establish themselves as the “second generation” leaders of the Society. While they and Olcott remained highly active in Asia and increased their activities to promote Hinduism, Buddhism, education, and political emancipation, other Theosophists would emphasize the “Western” and/or “Christian” character of Theosophy. In 1894, this resulted in a major

schism between the Theosophical Society of Adyar and the American branch under William Quan Judge (1851–1896), a founding member, and his successor, Katherine Tingley (1847–1929). Subsequently, a range of smaller schisms took place, notably the founding of the Anthroposophical Society by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) in 1912; again, at least partly due to Steiner's rejection of a more Asian inflection and his wish to pursue a path centered more on the European Christian heritage.<sup>38</sup> In 1907, Besant was elected president of the Theosophical Society (Adyar) and held that position until her death. Beginning in the late 1890s, she founded several boys' and girls' schools, focusing on education and social work, which finally resulted in her election as president of the Indian National Congress in 1917. During her office, the international membership of the Society grew from approximately 14,700 in 1907 to its peak in 1928 of 45,098 members.<sup>39</sup>

Since the 1930s, the majority of Theosophical groups have experienced a decline in membership and influence. In the case of Adyar, this was also due to the promotion by Besant and Leadbeater of a young boy, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986), as the “World Teacher”—a role that he eventually rejected, dissolving the Order of the Star in the East, which had been created for him and attracted around 30,000 members, in 1929. For these and other reasons, the multiple Theosophical Societies suffered heavy losses during the 1930s. The membership of Adyar reached a low of 18,216 in 1943 and has since ranged from about 20,000 to about 35,000.<sup>40</sup> Of course, Theosophical groups did not simply cease their activities after the 1930s, and Theosophical ideas would become enormously influential in new offshoots of the Societies and new religious movements well until the present day. While it is an important achievement of Hammer's *Handbook* to highlight this fact and give instructive insights into the more recent developments of Theosophy,<sup>41</sup> the present volume seeks to draw attention to the developments in non-Western contexts, focusing on the time around 1900 but allowing some glimpses into the second half of the twentieth century.

The volume does so by dividing its chapters into two parts, both following an innovative approach to Theosophy. The first part consists of seven perspectives on the activities of the Theosophical Society in very different regional contexts, ranging from India, Vietnam, China, and Japan to Victorian Britain and Israel/Palestine. Emphasis is thus placed on regional and historical contexts that have attracted little to no scholarly attention up to this day. This sheds new light on the entanglement of



“Western” and “Oriental” ideas around 1900, wherein the Theosophical Society played a crucial role.

In the second part, the point of view shifts from looking at Theosophy itself as the main object of inquiry to other contexts in which Theosophy played a formative role. The six chapters of the second part discuss specific cultural influences that Theosophy exerted in the spheres of literature, art, and politics. Again, the case studies selected cover a wide range not only of topics, but also of regional contexts, including Sri Lanka, Burma, India, Japan, Ireland, Germany, and Russia. The examples clearly show the international, global dimension of personal and institutional networks, highlighting the multifaceted and complex entanglement of cultural influences by and on the Theosophical Society and its affiliated actors.

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### Summary of Part One: New Perspectives on Theosophy

The first part of this volume can be regarded as a pioneering attempt to map the global landscape of Theosophy’s manifold and often ambiguous influences. By taking into account examples stretching from Europe to the Middle and Far East, it offers new perspectives on the development of a society whose doctrines have changed profoundly since the first years of its formation. This poses a number of challenges that are of consequence to many of the ongoing scholarly debates about the global role of Theosophy and by extension esotericism: how can we best historicize the fluid demarcations between “East” and “West”? And how can we approach the complex exchanges between actors from different parts of the world? How can we grasp the ever-changing, heterogeneous doctrines propagated by members of the Theosophical Society, and how were they transformed in a global context?

These issues are comprehensively addressed in the chapter by Wouter J. Hanegraaff, who discusses the changing notion of “the East” in the history of what he calls “the First Theosophical Society,” between 1875 and 1878. Before leading Theosophists traveled to India and established their headquarters there in 1879, their interest in India was largely informed by the “Ancient Wisdom Narrative,” which has thrived since the Renaissance and plays a crucial role for the concept of Western Esotericism. This so-called “positive orientalism” revolved around the notion of a “universal Kabbalah” with Oriental origins in Chaldea and Egypt. Although India did feature as a source of ancient wisdom from an early point on—a central example would be Blavatsky’s article “A Few Questions to ‘Hiraf’” from 1875—it was Egypt that stood at the center of Theosophical attention, while discussions of India relied on Western orientalist and popular literature. Hanegraaff makes an important point by highlighting the difference between the early Theosophical Society and its transformation after 1878, and it is crucial to keep this in mind when discussing later historical developments.

At the same time, our understanding of the global exchanges that underlie Theosophical identity formations is still limited, especially with regard to the role of “non-Western” actors. Michael Bergunder’s chapter demonstrates that the traditional neglect of Indian agency has led to significant historiographical distortions. His discussion of the reception of the *Bhagavad Gita* radically questions the idea that the popularity of this text in India was due to earlier European and American appreciations. Not only does Bergunder show that these appreciations were much more marginal than they are usually perceived to be, but he can also establish that the *Bhagavad Gita*’s present-day popularity is largely due to the engagement of Indian intellectuals with the Theosophical Society. This deconstruction of a supposed “pizza effect” is in itself a significant achievement that is highly valuable for a historical understanding of one of the most popular and influential Hindu texts. In addition, Bergunder’s argument emphasizes the urgent need to take into consideration the contributions of Indians, and other “non-Westerners,” to the development of Theosophical ideas—and, by extension, to the conceptual formation of modern Hinduism under colonialism.

The pioneering contribution by Jérémy Jammes allows for instructive insights into the development of the Theosophical Society in Vietnam. As elsewhere, its foundation coincided with the colonial period. Jammes establishes a fascinating connection between present-day Vietnamese Theosophists and their historical predecessors, focusing on the period between

1920 and 1975, when the Society was banned by the socialist regime. The first lodge of the *Hội giáo Thông thần học*, literally “religious association of studies on communication with spirits,” was founded in 1928 and was immersed in the atmosphere of contemporary reform Buddhism. Jammes discusses the Vietnamese Theosophists’ concern, not only with “cultural synthesis,” aestheticism, and religious comparativism, but first and foremost with social and political reform. This is especially instructive because it confirms the impression that Theosophy thrived especially in reformist contexts across Asia, and that local actors played a decisive role in its flourishing. Consequently, Jammes suggests a dynamic and trans-Asian reading of the “Vietnamese Orient” that interacts with philosophies and practices external to Vietnamese culture. The complex tangle of Western and Asian actors of different origin that becomes manifest in Jammes’s discussion of Vietnamese Theosophy makes this article a treasure trove for those interested in one of the neglected Asian contexts of Theosophical history.

Modern understandings of “Kabbalah” were central to Theosophical identity formations across the globe, but the role of Jews in this context is often neglected. Boaz Huss’s research on the Association of Hebrew Theosophists, founded in 1925, sheds light on the conflicted position in which Jewish Theosophists found themselves: on the one hand, they faced strong opposition from Jewish circles; on the other hand, they had to counter often blatantly anti-Semitic attitudes within the Theosophical Society. Given the outstanding role of Kabbalah in Theosophy, the latter circumstance seems to be bizarre at first. As indicated above, Blavatsky and other Theosophists had detached the Kabbalah from Judaism and established an antagonism between the (degenerated) Israelites and the Aryans. By contrast, Jewish Theosophists were arguing for the identity of modern Theosophy and ancient Jewish mysticism. This went hand in hand with a fierce critique of Jewish orthodoxy, which displayed typically “modern” reformist tendencies and often a strongly anti-rabbinic agenda. Yet at the same time, liberal Jewish trends were criticized as materialistic and lacking spirituality. Jewish Theosophists regarded Theosophy as a way of “spiritualizing unspiritual Judaism.” They strived for the creation of a “modern, westernized, universalistic form of Judaism that embraced Kabbalah, and presented Jewish mysticism as the central component of the Jewish tradition.” This tension between “modernity” and “tradition” is reminiscent of other local encounters with Theosophy, and it illustrates the great fluidity of central identity markers such as “Kabbalah,” which calls for constant historical contextualization.

Theosophical identity formations are also the subject of Ulrich Harlass's chapter, which focuses on the role of A. P. Sinnett and the Mahatma letters within the historiography of the Theosophical Society. Harlass addresses two lacunae or "absences" in the historiography of Theosophy, namely an exclusive focus on Blavatsky that blots out the influence of other authors, and a more or less implicit exclusion of "the East." Harlass argues that much of the scholarship on Theosophy assumed that "the 'East' is referred to as a façade, set up by Blavatsky to refurbish the stage on which her *Western* esoteric Theosophical play was carried out." This is demonstrated by an analysis of the debates surrounding the Mahatma letters, Sinnett's writings, and the provenance of the concept of the septenary constitution. Harlass stresses that the Anglo-Indian milieu and Indian Theosophists are practically excluded from the scholarly accounts of these contexts, with Blavatsky appearing as *fons et origo* of the doctrines in dispute. This is at least partially misleading, because Indian Theosophists, most notably T. Subba Row, played a crucial role in these debates and significantly contributed to the development of Theosophical doctrines. Harlass argues that the distinction between East and West was strategic in these debates, in which the doctrines of "Eastern adepts" were juxtaposed with those of inferior "Western spiritualists." The genealogical approach suggested by Harlass helps to problematize the influence that such polemical narratives are still exerting, not only self-referential Theosophical historiography, but also on scholarship.

Chuang Chienhui's chapter on the Theosophical Society in China is another account of the deep entanglement of Theosophy, political reform, educational modernization, and the formation of religious identities. Focusing on the Theosophical educational movement of the 1920s and 1930s, Chuang shows that the establishment of Theosophical schools was intended not only for the propagation of Theosophy, but also for supporting China as it faced Western and Japanese imperialism. In that regard, contemporary Chinese authors made explicit references to Theosophical efforts in India, which shows an awareness of Theosophy's sociopolitical role across Asia. Chuang also offers fascinating insights into the merging of Theosophical ideas with local traditions. Her primary example is the diplomat Wu Tingfang, who functioned as an important propagandist for Theosophy in China after the 1910s and combined Theosophy with Taoism. The struggles to relate these systems to each other become tangible in the changing ways of translating "Theosophy," which was at times translated

as *Tong shen* (“connected with God”), *Ming dao* (“to clarify the natural laws”), and *Ling hun xue shuo ming dao* (“to clarify the theories about the soul”). It becomes evident that Theosophy was widely regarded as a catalyst for the rethinking of religion and as mediator between Eastern and Western thought systems. In the turbulent years after the 1910s, Chinese intellectuals were striving to reconcile the “old” and the “new” to establish a national and “spiritual” identity. As elsewhere in Asia, Theosophy proved to be an attractive way of achieving this spiritual reconciliation and national renewal.

The chapter by Perry Myers takes another close look at the political ramifications of Theosophy in the Asian context—in his case, India—but at the same time juxtaposes it with developments in Germany. Despite a marked lack of direct interaction between German and Indian Theosophists, a comparison between German and Indian Theosophy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveals strong transnational affinities yet at the same time certain estrangements through their local applications. The affinities between Germany and Indian Theosophy are best visible in what made Theosophy attractive to the respective societies. Myers cites three factors: first, a criticism of empirical science’s predominant role as the exclusive source for determining human knowledge; second, a plea for the unification of modern science and spirituality; and, finally, the ideal of universality, that is, that all religions embody a core occult spiritual truth only accessible through Theosophy. These affinities were offset by estrangements most obviously visible in the field of socioeconomic ideals. German Theosophists, while criticizing materialism and capitalism, invoked a spirituality that would have preserved class status quo, viewing workers’ movements as a threat to the nation-state. In India, however, Theosophists saw workers as an essential force in fomenting national sentiment in support of overthrowing British colonial power. Myers also exposes the recourse of German Theosophists to ancient India as the source of German culture in an attempt to circumvent the Greek-Mediterranean heritage, which might at first glance appear to provide a point of affinity, as actually a factor of estrangement. This is because Indian Theosophists envisioned a renewed Indian spirituality that emerged together with the Theosophical reawakening of ancient Hindu wisdom and practice, and that informed their (anticolonial) political agenda. German Theosophists, by contrast, denounced their own Christian traditions and pursued innovative esoteric avenues for reconstituting spirituality in direct opposition to Christianity.

## Summary of Part Two: Theosophy in Literature, the Arts, and Politics

The importance of Theosophy, especially in Asian contexts, for society and politics has already been emphasized in several chapters of the first part. The contributions to the second part demonstrate that Theosophy was a key player in politics as well as other areas of human endeavor, such as literature and the arts, even when outright representatives or members of the Theosophical Society were not directly involved. Rather, in the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth centuries, Theosophy frequently had an indirect impact on these fields. This, however, has mostly been ignored by historical scholarship not concerned with esotericism, just as works on Theosophy have tended to neglect broader historical contexts. At the same time, recent years have witnessed a revived interest in the relationship between Theosophy and art in particular, although this interest is still centered on Western and especially North American actors.<sup>42</sup> For the most part, the following chapters follow less the concerns of Religious Studies or Western Esotericism, but seek to detect Theosophy as one among several factors within history, literature, or the arts beyond the West. It was not necessarily always those who remained within an organization who gave it significance, but also those who left it, or even those who were influenced by Theosophy without having ever been members.

A perfect example of this is presented by Laurence Cox and Alicia Turner in their chapter on the Burmese branches of the Maha-Bodhi Society. Founded in 1891 by Anagarika Dharmapala, the Maha-Bodhi Society was, like the Theosophical Society, an “international religious organization.” In fact, the authors argue that the Maha-Bodhi Society was “theosophical with a small t,” in that, like the Theosophical Society, it was a “borning organization,” which enabled the formation of new religious organizations in ways that could diverge significantly from their official organizational structures. In the history of global Buddhism, both the Theosophical Society and the Maha-Bodhi Society were thus crucial catalysts, although their original purpose had been different. This was because in the global spread of international religious organizations, local actors followed their own agendas, over which the central organizations could often exert little control. As a result, the conventional perspective focusing on founders, texts, and organizational history misses local agendas such as those articulated in the Burmese region of Arakan, where anticolonial,

pan-Theravada Buddhist networks soon declared their independence from larger international bodies such as the Maha-Bodhi Society.

Hans Martin Krämer introduces an individual who never was a member of the Theosophical Society—and indeed of no other international religious organization—but whose striking impact on Asia in the 1910s is difficult to conceive without the existence of Theosophy. The Frenchman Paul Richard had traveled the way from Protestant clergyman to adherent of esoteric practices in the early years of the twentieth century. He blended his religious or spiritual curiosity with a keen interest in progressive politics, leading him to India in 1910, where he met the revolutionary-turned-guru Aurobindo Ghose. Richard and his wife, Mirra, who was later to become the spiritual leader of the Aurobindo ashram, built extensive networks in India and Japan, where they lived for several years. Their activities were marked by the fusion of the politics of anticolonialism with a spiritual quest reaching out beyond Western materialism, bringing Richard into proximity with the budding pan-Asianist movement. While Theosophy played some part in the formation of Richard's thought and Theosophists were included in his personal networks, the greatest relevance of Theosophy for Richard lay in the opportunity structure it offered him. The fact that there was an eager audience for Richard's unique blend of religion and politics in Asia and Europe during the 1910s and 1920s was made possible in large part by Theosophy. Theosophists had done pioneering work in presenting a spiritual East as an alternative to the failed materialist civilizations of the West, at the same time embracing a political agenda of social reform and anticolonialism. Richard's existence as a public intellectual of his time—like that of his fellow traveler Rabindranath Tagore—was significantly enabled by Theosophy.

A similarly central figure connecting numerous strands of a sprawling network was the Irish poet James Cousins, who is the subject of the chapter by Hashimoto Yorimitsu. In fact, Cousins was close to Richard when their sojourns in Tokyo overlapped in 1919, but the networks highlighted by Hashimoto were primarily artistic, not political in nature. Cousins, himself a Theosophist, connected a surprising number of avant-garde painters, potters, composers, and writers from across Europe and Asia. While many of these had at most an indirect relationship to Theosophy, the direction their artistic work took was often influenced by their Theosophical acquaintances, an interest in Asian religions, a concern for Indian culture and politics, or other elements from Theosophical teachings

or symbolism. In reconstructing Cousins's network, Hashimoto shows connections that have previously not been seen, connections that were largely made possible in some way or another by Theosophy. Most relevant for the history of Theosophy in Asia is his observation that pan-Asianism was not just a political movement with religious or spiritual overtones, but also an idea that was propelled by artistic circles, a connection that was facilitated by Theosophy.

The relationship between the arts and Theosophy is more deeply investigated in the chapter by Helena Čapková. Annie Besant had drawn this connection explicitly, especially for the visual arts, in arguing that good mental vibrations materialize in specific shapes created by spiritual devotion and create a spiritually advanced society. This argument came to inspire artists worldwide, and Čapková describes one wide-reaching network of artists inspired by Theosophy working in Europe, India, and Japan. Her prime example is the architectural project of the Golconde dormitory in Puducherry, India. Although this building belonged to the Aurobindo ashram, which generally was not on good terms with the Theosophical Society, a team of Theosophists was commissioned with designing it. Čapková argues that it was the architects' commitment to new spirituality generally that created an avenue for mutual understanding between the ashram members and spiritually attuned designers. More broadly, Theosophy appealed to a global audience sympathetic to the idea of a "universal brotherhood": Theosophical texts emphasized the importance of supernatural powers in Eastern belief systems, thus supplying Western artists with exciting new material creating an appetite for the "Orient" and the "exotic." Concretely, for the two couples at the center of Čapková's analysis, the Czech-French Raymonds and the Polish Łubienskis, living in Asia helped them gain a unique insight into Japanese art and prompted their interest in folk objects. These inspirations later became central to their artistic work, fusing Japanese, Asian, and European views on design. The Theosophical networks surrounding these European travelers to Asia provided an unexpected impulse or a spark for creating the Golconde dormitory, recognized as one of the best architectural creations in twentieth-century India.

The final two chapters of the volume trace the story of Theosophy between Asia and Europe up to the present time. Yan Suarsana sets out from contemporary images of Bali as a repository of esoteric wisdom and spiritual paradise, which was popularized by hippies and other spiritual tourists in the 1970s. Yet why was such an image plausible in the first



place? Suarsana argues that this esoteric conception of Bali dates back to colonial times, when the island was forcefully opened to foreigners and the global discourses of religion and culture, including those initiated by Theosophists. Most saliently, Balinese religion came to be perceived as a part of global Hinduism. In India, Theosophists had been instrumental in establishing the “world religion” of Hinduism in the late nineteenth century. When the Dutch colonial administration started to (re)construct Balinese society as an essentially Indian culture, Balinese religion became a “legitimate part of the world religion of Hinduism.” The enthusiasm of Balinese Hindu reformists for Theosophical ideas can be understood by the fact that these organizations were in intense contact with representatives of Indian Neo-Hinduism, who shared the idea of Balinese religion as part of worldwide Hinduism and were themselves often deeply entangled with Theosophy. Furthermore, not only did the Neo-Hindu conceptualization of Balinese religion as part of the world religion of Hinduism represent the leading guideline for the colonial administration, but it also continued to be an important element of religious politics of the Republic of Indonesia from 1945 onward. In this context, for which Theosophy had been crucial, the postwar popularization of “Esoteric Bali” became plausible.

In the existing literature on the cultural history of modern Russia, Theosophy is certainly not prominent among the many intellectual forces that are seen to be at work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his chapter, Björn Seidel-Dreffke shows that Theosophy was indeed a crucial factor in the cultural production of modern Russia in a number of realms. As he argues, many Russian intellectuals throughout the course of their lives gravitated toward the three poles of the materialist worldview, the idealistic worldview, and the mystical occult worldview, and Theosophy played an important role in the latter. The search for “true spirituality” became a constitutive element in the lives of many intellectuals around 1900, resulting in a cultural boom affecting literature, art, music, theater, and philosophy. Blavatsky’s Theosophy was attractive at that time because it showed aspects of the search for the “new human,” which was prominent in turn-of-the-century Russia. Theosophy appealed to those Russians who held an interest in spirituality, but had turned their backs on official religion, and it was also a way for Russian intellectuals to express their wish to distance themselves from the “decadent” West. A number of Theosophical lodges were thus successfully established in Russia toward the end of the nineteenth century. The movement took a downturn upon

the split between Steiner and Besant in 1912, and shortly thereafter, all chapters of the Theosophical Society in Russia were shut down by the Bolsheviks in 1918. Since Perestroika, Theosophy has regained a footing in contemporary Russia, offering an alternative framework for interpreting the world in a society that hungers for innovations.

In sum, the chapters of this volume highlight not only the diversity and fluidity of Theosophy as a movement, but also the necessity to transgress geographical as well as disciplinary boundaries when investigating its rich history. When viewed from a global perspective, Theosophy offers far-reaching insights into the controversial negotiations of the meaning of science, religion, or art, and their complex relations to politics and social issues. Hopefully, this volume serves to stimulate scholarship in a similar vein and helps us understand the relevance of esotericism for some of the most significant historical developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## Notes

1. Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 55–82.

2. For instance, Judith Becker, ed. *European Missions in Contact Zones: Transformation through Interaction in a (Post-)Colonial World* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015) or the many recent titles dealing with “world Christianity.”

3. See Christopher A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 345–49.

4. See Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844–1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) or Volker Zotz, *Auf den glückseligen Inseln: Buddhismus in der deutschen Kultur* (Berlin: Theseus, 2000).

5. Bayly, *Birth*, 336.

6. Sebastian Conrad, “A Cultural History of Global Transformation,” in *A History of the World*, vol. 4: *An Emerging Modern World, 1750–1870*, ed. idem and Jürgen Osterhammel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 582.

7. Cf. the references in Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 813.

8. Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); James A. Santucci, “Theosophical Society,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions:*

*A Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Jeffrey D. Lavoie, *The Theosophical Society: The History of a Spiritualist Movement* (Boca Raton: BrownWalker Press, 2012). See the statement in Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, “Western Esoteric Traditions and Theosophy,” in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 303: “For all its Asian costume and fabulous intermediaries, modern Theosophy retains its Western Hermetic motive, logic, and end.”

9. Olav Hammer, ed., *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, Brill Handbooks on Contemporary Religion 7 (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

10. Kennet Granholm, “Locating the West: Problematizing the ‘Western’ in Western Esotericism and Occultism,” in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (London: Acumen Publishing, 2014).

11. Egil Asprem, “Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014).

12. Wouter Hanegraaff, “The Globalization of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 3, no. 1 (2015).

13. Michael Bergunder, “Experiments with Theosophical Truth: Gandhi, Esotericism, and Global Religious History,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82 (2014); “‘Religion’ and ‘Science’ Within a Global Religious History,” *Aries* 16, no. 1 (2016).

14. See the discussion in Julian Strube, “Towards the Study of Esotericism without the ‘Western’: Esotericism from the Perspective of a Global Religious History,” in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube (forthcoming).

15. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic, eds., *Occultism in a Global Perspective* (Durham: Acumen, 2013); Nile Green, “The Global Occult: An Introduction,” *History of Religions* 54, no. 4 (2015). For a first comprehensive attempt, see Julian Strube, *Tantra in the Context of a Global Religious History* (forthcoming).

16. Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss, eds., *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Traditions*, The Goldstein-Goren Library of Jewish Thought (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016), esp. part III about “Global Adaptations.”

17. Cf. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, “Introduction,” in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 4: “it was perhaps the first global post-Christian organization . . .”

18. For a recent volume centering on such Orientalist imaginations, see Tim Rudbøg and Erik Reenberg Sand, eds., *Imagining the East: The Early Theosophical Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

19. Milestones include Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “the Mystic East”* (London: Routledge, 1999); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

20. See Julian Strube, “Theosophy, Race, and the Study of Esotericism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (forthcoming).

21. This was famously expressed by the notion of hybridity, for instance, in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 22–26. See also the critical discussion of subaltern agency in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), esp. 71–73.

22. For a criticism of the conceptualization of esotericism as rejected knowledge, see Egil Asprem, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered: Some Methodological Notes on Esotericism and Marginality,” in *New Approaches to the Study of Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Julian Strube (forthcoming). Blavatsky’s oppositional strategy toward established forms of religion received recent scrutiny in by Gauri Viswanathan, “In Search of Madame Blavatsky: Reading the Exoteric, Retrieving the Esoteric,” *Representations* 141, no. 1 (2018).

23. This was most clearly highlighted by Gauri Viswanathan, “The Ordinary Business of Occultism,” *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (2000) and *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 177–207. Viswanathan’s focus on Western actors and anglophone sources, however, tends to eclipse the very agency of non-Western actors that she otherwise seeks to highlight.

24. Granholm, “Locating,” 24 and Christopher Partridge, “Lost Horizon: H.P. Blavatsky and Theosophical Orientalism,” in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 327. Although voicing important criticism of the notion of “positive orientalism,” Partridge also maintains a binary of colonizer and colonized that demands complication.

25. David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), cf. Osterhammel, *Transformation*, 900.

26. Catherine L. Wessinger, *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism*, *Studies in Women and Religion* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1988); Mark Bevir, “In Opposition to the Raj,” *History of Political Thought* 19 (1998). Cf. Isaac Lubelsky, *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of Indian Nationalism* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

27. Bergunder, “Experiments.”

28. Yoshinaga Shin’ichi, “After Olcott Left: Theosophy and ‘New Buddhists’ at the Turn of the Century,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 43, nos. 1–2 (2012).

29. See, for instance, the key studies by Elizabeth de Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism* (London: Continuum, 2004); Karl Baier, *Meditation und Moderne: Zur Genese eines Kernbereichs Moderner Spiritualität in der Wechselwirkung zwischen Westeuropa, Nordamerika und Asien* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009); and Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Also see Karl Baier, “Mesmeric Yoga and the Development of Meditation within