

2 The Problem of the “Western” in “Western Esotericism” and in Research on the Theosophical Society

Most of the research that has so far been carried out on the Theosophical Society acknowledges the central position it had within 19th century “esotericism.”⁶ There have been a number of detailed studies on the “Western” influences on Theosophy, the most notable of which is Godwin’s groundbreaking work, *Theosophical Enlightenment*. Up until very recently, scholars have identified Theosophy as a specifically “Western” current and “non-Western” influences have often been marginalized. Hence research on Theosophy has often tended towards the Eurocentric. In addition, “Theosophy” is often equated with Helena Blavatsky’s writings, leading to the heterogeneity of the current frequently being neglected and, thus, to essentializing tendencies in research on this topic. This is not a result of the lack of primary sources but rather of the overwhelmingly large corpuses of primary material that have survived. There were and still are numerous monthly, weekly, and even daily Theosophical journals and newspapers, as well as numerous monographs and anthologies in many different editions and languages. A major problem for scholars working in the area is that there are no critical editions, not even of Blavatsky’s work, no scholarly or complete bibliographies of the primary sources,⁷ and only partial searchable indices of Theosophical journals.⁸ Another major problem is the availability of the sources, especially those published in small

6 For a critique of the term “esotericism” in general and its “Western,” see Chapter 2.1.

7 Although Kurt Leland’s “Annie Besant Shrine” is an important source for scholars working on Annie Besant, including myself, it does not meet scholarly standards. In addition, as is already clear from the title, Leland is a practitioner and an admirer of Annie Besant. This does not diminish his effort in compiling the only comprehensive bibliography of Annie Besant’s oeuvre (cf. Kurt Leland, “Annie Besant Shrine – Kurt Leland’s Spiritual Orienteering,” accessed December 17, 2019, <https://www.kurtleland.com/annie-besant-shrine-m>). There are similar issues with the Blavatsky archives (cf. “Blavatsky Study Center: Website on H.P. Blavatsky & Theosophy Including Blavatsky Archives,” accessed December 17, 2019, <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com>). Similar bibliographies are missing for almost all other Theosophists.

8 The Campbell Theosophical Research Library’s website is the foremost tool for searching for articles within Theosophical journals (cf. “Campbell Theosophical Research Library – Search Index of Theosophical Periodicals,” accessed December 17, 2019, <http://www.austheos.org.au/csearch/ui-search.htm>). Many important Theosophical journals, such as *New India* and *The Central Hindu College Magazine*, are, however, not (yet) included in the search engine.

Theosophical journals or in journals in foreign languages.⁹ Often these are only available, if at all, in India, at the Adyar Library and Research Centre of the headquarters of the Theosophical Society. As a result, scholars have often based their research on one or two major publications, mostly late editions of *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*. Although it has not been possible in writing the present book to carry out foundational research concerning editions, publishing houses, or questions of authorship, I have tried to base my accounts on a representative corpus of publications.¹⁰ In the following, I will discuss in more detail a wide range of publications on “Western esotericism” in general and Theosophy in particular. In the field of “the study of the Theosophical Society” – often viewed as a subfield of the study of (“Western”) esotericism – two major approaches exist, although one currently seems to be losing ground to the other. The former, increasingly challenged, approach claims that “modern Theosophy” is a purely, or at least largely, “Western” construct; the latter, increasingly dominant, contests this notion.

2.1 The Problem of “Western Esotericism”

Wouter Hanegraaff is one of the most eminent scholars in the field of “Western esotericism.” His chair in the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam is one of the most important positions in the field, while the institute in which he holds his position is the only institution to provide a complete course in “Western Esotericism” from the B.A. level through to the Ph.D.¹¹ Hanegraaff conceptualizes “Western esotericism” as a wide range of currents which belong to what he calls “‘rejected knowledge’ since the age of Enlightenment.”¹² These currents include highly diverse traditions, ranging from Hermetism,

⁹ The most important source for scans of some of the major and smaller Theosophical journals is the website of the International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals (cf. “International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals,” accessed December 17, 2019, <http://www.iapsop.com/>).

¹⁰ This is certainly true for Annie Besant’s writings in her early Theosophical period and also for T. Subba Row’s and Manilal Dvivedi’s oeuvre. I do not refer to a large corpus of Blavatsky’s writings because I am particularly interested in *The Voice of the Silence* as a book of initiation and I do not want to perpetuate the narrative that Theosophy equals Blavatsky.

¹¹ Amsterdamhermetica.nl, “About HHP – Western Esotericism in Amsterdam,” accessed September 30, 2019, <https://www.amsterdamhermetica.nl/esotericism-in-the-academy/esotericism-in-amsterdam>.

¹² Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), vii.

Neo-Platonism, and classic Christian theosophy,¹³ through to New Age thought, Ufology, and many others. Hanegraaff maintains that “‘Western esotericism’ is not a natural term but an artificial category, applied retrospectively to a range of currents and ideas that were known by other names at least prior to the end of the eighteenth century.”¹⁴ For him, the adjective “Western” is “meant to highlight the *specificity* of esotericism understood as an inherently Western domain of research, in contrast to globalizing or universalizing understandings of the term.”¹⁵ Although Hanegraaff clarifies that he accepts that some “non-Western” influences and several different traditions, such as “Jewish and Islamic ‘mysticism’,” have merged in the field of esotericism, he nevertheless maintains that “Jewish and Islamic forms of ‘esotericism’ have emerged and developed as largely self-contained and relatively autonomous traditions [. . .] The simple reason is, again, that they required fluency in the relevant languages and deep familiarity with their respective holy scriptures.”¹⁶ The “again” here refers back to his broader conviction that the language “barrier” and the cultural “barrier” stand as good reasons for scholars of “Western esotericism” not to engage with these traditions. He is aware of the difficulties of the term and affirms that “it remains true that the very term ‘Western esotericism’ could be seen as reflecting an unfortunate hegemonizing perspective.”¹⁷ In his view, this is however “precisely the point.” Declaring “esotericism” as “Western” shows that it belongs to “Western” culture and that it is “rejected knowledge” that emerged “as a singularizing and hegemonizing construct – directed, however, against ‘paganism’ rather than against Judaism or Islam – in the context of specifically Christian apologetic and polemical debates.”¹⁸ In *Esotericism and the Academy*, Hanegraaff traces existing narratives about “Western esotericism” through scholarly accounts. He explains that these narratives “do not mirror something that is historically given, but construct it.”¹⁹ At the same time, he argues that such narratives refer “to real historical currents and ideas that are grouped under a label such as ‘esotericism’ *not* just arbitrarily, but for specific reasons that have as much to do with their own nature and intellectual content as with the discourse

13 Other than the name, there is only a loose connection between Christian theosophy and the Theosophy of the Theosophical Society. For an overview of Christian Theosophy, see Antoine Faivre, “Christian Theosophy,” in Hanegraaff, *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*.

14 Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 3.

15 Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 15.

16 Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 16.

17 Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 17.

18 Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 17.

19 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 368–69.

that constructs them as such. There is something ‘out there’ after all.”²⁰ He attempts to salvage the “real” facts from the dust of historiography, claiming that historiography “tries to describe what actually happened in the past” and that what he terms “mnemohistoriography” “tries to describe the genesis and historical development of what a given culture *imagines*” depicts as having happened. He identifies “Western esotericism” as “an imaginative construct in the minds of intellectuals and the wider public”²¹ and a “waste-basket category of rejected knowledge.”²² There are several difficulties in Hanegraaff’s account, but perhaps the most problematic is his setting up of a dichotomy between the “images” and that which “really is.” This not only presupposes a hierarchization into “correct” and “false” understandings but also implies that *he* knows what is “real.” Consequently, he does not consider that he himself “constructs” a narrative about what is “esotericism.” In taking such an approach, he perpetuates typological ideas about esotericism of the kind advanced by Faivre.²³ In addition, he conceptualizes “European culture” as distinctively different from other “cultures” and provides support for the idea of a European *Sonderweg* while at the same time marginalizing other traditions.

Every set of terminology comes with its own inherited baggage, but the designation “Western” seems to be especially problematic. As will be argued in this book, there are no such things as stable “cultures,” and a consequence of this is that the category “Western” becomes untenable. This would imply an idea of some “original” “Western” culture. The idea of the “original” is likewise untenable because it only becomes constituted in fundamental “processes of hybridization” which constantly form and re-form “cultures,” “concepts,” and, hence, “esotericism” (for a thorough elaboration of these notions, see Chapters 3 and 4). These difficulties have long been recognized and there has been a lively discussion in the field of “Western esotericism” about its “Western” component. This discussion is ongoing – and might never be resolved – as the ESSWE (European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism) conference, held in Amsterdam in July 2019, illustrated. Besides panels on Islam, Judaism, South Asian religions, and many other topics, there was one session, featuring some of the most eminent scholars in the field, reserved in particular for the question of whether “Western esotericism” should be labeled as “Western” or

²⁰ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 369.

²¹ Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 377.

²² Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 374.

²³ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994).

not.²⁴ Of course, no consensus emerged and ESSWE remains ESSWE despite many voices criticizing the inclusion of “Western” in its name. Yet while no broadly accepted conclusion was reached, the liveliness of the discussion was enough to show the relevance of the question. The session was a direct reaction to a tendency in the pages of *Correspondences*, the online journal for (Western) esotericism, to distance itself from the “Western” in “Western esotericism.” The editors of *Correspondences* announced on April 27 2018 that the journal did indeed intend to drop the term “Western.”²⁵ Roukema and Kilner-Johnson, the editors of *Correspondences*, felt the need to “defend” their decision in more detail so set out their reasoning in the editorial of the second volume of the journal that year.²⁶ Their main point was that the terminology was problematic because it tended to perpetuate ideas of “the West and the Rest” – to borrow Stuart Hall’s notion. The use of the term would thus prevent the field from advancing in a theoretically sophisticated manner, because, they claimed, “we do not think that ‘Western’ traditions, currents, events, figures, and concepts can be separated from whatever is perceived to be the non-Western Other against which the identity of these phenomena is clarified.”²⁷ While acknowledging that the initial intention of scholars such as Faivre and Hanegraaff was to establish “Western esotericism” as a non-essentialist field of study, pointing to its specificity²⁸ in contrast to “esotericism” as a universalist phenomenon, Roukema and Kilner-Johnson were nevertheless convinced that research in this area no longer benefitted from this limiting specification.²⁹ A fundamental difficulty lies at the root of this controversy. To what extent is it possible to apply a term such as “esotericism” to other “cultures,” and would doing so fall into the trap of creating a new form of orientalism?

The discussion at the ESSWE conference and the dropping of “Western” from the subtitle of *Correspondences* are some results in an ongoing discussion that is concerned not only with the meaningfulness of the “Western” in “Western esotericism,” but with that of the concept of “esotericism” as well. One result of this discussion has been a trend in the last decade or so which,

24 Amsterdamhermetica.nl, “Programme – History of Hermetic Philosophy,” accessed September 30, 2019, <https://www.amsterdamhermetica.nl/esswe-2-4-july-2019/programme>.

25 Allan Johnson, “Change Is in the Air!,” accessed September 30, 2019, <http://correspondencesjournal.com/2018/04/27/change-is-in-the-air>.

26 Aren Roukema and Allan Kilner-Johnson, “Editorial: Time to Drop the ‘Western’,” *Correspondences* 6, no. 2 (2018).

27 Roukema and Kilner-Johnson, “Editorial,” 109.

28 See also Egil Asprem, “Beyond the West: Towards a Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism,” *Correspondences* 2.1 (2014): 8.

29 Roukema and Kilner-Johnson, “Editorial,” 111–15.

after gathering pace during the last five or so years, has now finally found its way into active research on Theosophy, as will be discussed below. One may wish to identify other “starting points” for this discussion, such as von Stuckrad, for example, or the Hanegraaff-Bochinger debate on “New Age,” but in my view the turning point that elevated these discussions to a new level was Bergunder’s introduction of poststructuralist and postcolonial considerations into the mix, starting with his *What is Esotericism?*, published in 2010.³⁰ Following Laclau, Bergunder argues that “esotericism” is an “empty signifier.” By this he means that, if the discourse is understood as a process of attributing meaning by establishing differences, in the sense of defining meaning as “not-this”/“not-that,” then a “logic of equality” is established in a system of difference.³¹ This logic of equality is then repeated in “chains of equality” which are “held together by signifiers, which have been emptied of their differentiality, and have been designated by Laclau as ‘empty signifiers.’ ‘Nodal points’ or, in the sense suggested here, identity markings, are thus formed by means of empty signifiers.”³² Against this background, Bergunder suggests that we should analyze “esotericism” by tracing processes of reception backwards in history by radically historicizing and indicating continuities and discontinuities between synchronic and anachronic discursive networks. The notion of the discursive network is of great importance for the discussion of the “Western” in “esotericism.” If we maintain, following Bergunder, that “a synchronous network can only be meaningfully described when it is registered in the totality of social discourses, that is, fields of discourse of its time,”³³ then it becomes impossible to conceptualize “esotericism” as a “Western” phenomenon. This holds true at least for the 19th century, when colonial discourses became increasingly interwoven through an increase of mobility and means of communication.³⁴ This point will be reflected below

30 This article is a translation of Michael Bergunder, “Was ist Esoterik? Religionswissenschaftliche Überlegungen zum Gegenstand der Esoterikforschung,” in *Aufklärung und Esoterik: Rezeption – Integration – Konfrontation*, ed. Monika Neugebauer-Wölk (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2008).

31 Michael Bergunder, “What Is Esotericism? Cultural Studies Approaches and the Problems of Definition in Religious Studies,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 (2010): 23–24.

32 Bergunder, “What is Esotericism?,” 22.

33 Bergunder, “What is Esotericism?,” 27.

34 The establishment of global networks is described in general by Osterhammel. It is not only the case that the means for communication and mobility became increasingly available during the 19th century, but also that this period, especially the years between 1860 and the First World War, experienced an unprecedented wave of intercontinental migration and the expansion of empires which went along with an enormous increase in communication and mobility infrastructure (cf. Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt: Eine Geschichte*

in the idea of the “global colonial discursive continuum.” To give just one example of the many that will be considered in this book, the Theosophical idea of evolution cannot be understood without looking at the discourse about evolutionism in Europe and the reception of this discourse in India (see Chapter 6). The question that remains is to what extent these discursive fields were connected.

I have identified Bergunder as “the starting point” of what I have termed “an ongoing process,” “a major trend,” or the problem of the “Western” in “Western esotericism.” I have then gone on to identify the session at the ESSWE conference and the dropping of the “Western” in the subtitle of *Correspondences* as “symptoms” of this process. I will now draw attention to a 2021 article, again entitled *What is Esotericism?*,³⁵ that may serve as a temporary “end-point” for this process. The article in question evolved as a result of thinking about the discussions held at several recent conferences on “esotericism”: a conference in Fribourg on “the birth of the study of religion from occultism,” another in Venice on “Islam and esotericism,” and the ESSWE conference in Amsterdam that has already been mentioned. Zander’s considerations oscillate between the two poles of “esotericism” as a discursive category, as advanced by Kocku von Stuckrad,³⁶ and the content-based definitions pioneered by Antoine Faivre.³⁷ Zander attempts to mediate between these two poles and advocates “An Open Concept of ‘Esotericism’.”³⁸ He begins by arguing that research on “esotericism” has an inherent problem because there is almost no communication between the field of “Western esotericism” and other fields which are concerned with “esotericism.” He maintains that, as a result of this disconnect, important theoretical and methodological debates are not taken up and applied by scholars working on “Western esotericism.” Secondly, he argues that the discursive approaches have blurred the initial definitions of “esotericism.” This was to the benefit of the field, Zander explains, because it helped to widen the scope of research and led to

des 19. Jahrhunderts, Historische Bibliothek der Gerda Henkel Stiftung (München: C. H. Beck, 2011), 1010–29). Bergunder, in particular, has shown in his analyses of the uptake of the *Bhagavadgītā* that the global discourses became interwoven, especially in the Theosophical Society. See Michael Bergunder, “Die Bhagavadgita im 19. Jahrhundert: Hinduismus, Esoterik und Kolonialismus,” in *Westliche Formen des Hinduismus in Deutschland: Eine Übersicht*, ed. Michael Bergunder (Halle: Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen, 2006).

³⁵ Helmut Zander, “What is ‘Esotericism’? Does it Exist? How Can it be Understood?,” in Mühlematter; Zander, *Occult Roots of Religious Studies*.

³⁶ Kocku von Stuckrad, *Was ist Esoterik? Kleine Geschichte des geheimen Wissens* (München: Beck, 2004), 20–25.

³⁷ Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*.

³⁸ Zander, “What is ‘Esotericism’?,” 34.

the consideration of many different topics. But “one problem is evident: everyone can understand, by means of discursive justification, nearly anything he or she wants about esotericism – including retreats to Faivre’s proposal.” In conclusion, he holds that the content-based definitions are too narrow and the discursive too open.

A major problem Zander identifies in this debate is the lack of the application of theory. Reflecting on post-Said discussions, Zander claims that “methodical questions concerning entanglement, comparatistics and the transferability of terms and concepts” are broadly neglected in the research on “esotericism.” However, Zander’s interest is not in the question of whether “esotericism” “exists” in a given culture or not, but rather in raising awareness of problems of comparison which are at stake when “esotericism” is compared with concepts such as *batin/ghayab*, two terms put forward at the conference in Venice as equivalents for “esotericism” in Islam. The core of Zander’s essay is his proposal of “An Open Concept of ‘Esotericism’.” Zander claims that “such a definition does not lead to an idealistic or fundamental definition, because it depends on the pragmatic use of terms and on discursive decisions made by scholars.”³⁹ This includes the idea that such a “definition” would always be temporary and dependent on its context.⁴⁰ Finally, he argues that this kind of reflection can profit from the insights of comparatistics. As Zander explains, comparatistics show that “commonalities (genera proxima) and differences (differentiae specifica) with regard to a point of comparison (tertium comparationis) [. . . are] not neutral, but the result of normative determinations.”⁴¹ This ultimately means that “scholars involved in this process determine their object from a hegemonic position.”⁴²

Zander concludes that such an open definition would then prove its applicability in the process of its incorporation and its discussion within the scientific community. He thus encourages “an ongoing debate on the possibility of using the term esotericism – keeping in mind that any definition, like any scientific statement, is relative and time bound, and that its meaning changes when it is transferred into another culture, another language or another system of symbolic forms.”⁴³ He claims that this proposal for an open concept of

39 Zander, “What is ‘Esotericism’?,” 35.

40 Zander explains that “In Sedgwick’s eyes, ‘the main difference’ on the conceptual level is that *batin* refers to ‘realities’ while *ghayb* refers to ‘meanings and ideas’; thus, these two concepts can be related to content objects (*batin*) and to discursive concepts (*ghayb*).” Zander, “What is ‘Esotericism’?,” 29.

41 Zander, “What is ‘Esotericism’?,” 36.

42 Zander, “What is ‘Esotericism’?,” 36.

43 Zander, “What is ‘Esotericism’?,” 39.

esotericism, “would allow us to identify and discuss the problems openly, leaving us no longer faced with the aporia of a purely discursive or purely content-related definition of esotericism.”⁴⁴

Zander’s article is paradigmatic of the whole debate because it oscillates between discursive approaches and content-based approaches in attempting to define “esotericism.” His practical approach is most welcome because philosophical and historical arguments should not be separated. The use of philosophical arguments in historical analyses is fruitless unless they can contribute to the provision of plausible explanations for historical events. However, these “events” are always “constructed” and Zander’s plea for a “back and forth game between the field of study and the development of the theory” thus aims in exactly the right direction. For research into Theosophy, I argue that using “esotericism” as a second order term makes no sense, at least insofar as it retains its “Western” connotation. The Theosophical Society is the paradigmatic example of a dynamic of “hybridization” “in-between” “East” and “West.” If “esotericism” is understood as a decisively “Western” phenomenon, then “modern” Theosophy does not fall under its purview, as the current book will show. I will return to this point in the conclusion (see Chapter 14). I do not use the term “esotericism” or any of its derivatives as an “analytic” category, not only on account of its “Western” bias but also because it is often used in my sources as a first order term. In these contexts, it refers to a given writer’s specific understanding of the “religion” and its “esoteric” core, an understanding which belongs to the category of “Ancient Wisdom Religion.”

2.2 The History of the Theosophical Society: A History without Indian Theosophists?

I will start this survey of the current state of the research into this question by considering two general entries on Theosophy in overviews of “Esotericism” and one in an overview of “Hinduism.” I begin with Olav Hammer’s entry in Christopher Patridge’s *The Occult World*, before turning to James Santucci’s entry in the *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, and then Gauri Viswanathan’s article in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*.

In his introduction, Olav Hammer writes that the Theosophical Society “functioned as the vehicle for the dissemination of a religio-philosophical message that drew on a vast fund of Western esoteric sources, and was presented as a third option besides dogmatic religion and materialistic science, able to

⁴⁴ Zander, “What is ‘Esotericism’?,” 39.

transcend the differences between the two.”⁴⁵ This statement is symptomatic of research on Theosophy, in that it highlights the influence of “Western esotericism” and downplays the influence of “non-Western” thought. Throughout his very concise and well-written entry, Hammer presents the Theosophical Society as a purely “Western” endeavor. Not a single Indian Theosophist is mentioned and the influence of the Theosophical Society on later currents is restricted to “Western” currents such as Anthroposophy and New Age thought in general. Along these lines, Hammer writes: “If, as Alfred North Whitehead famously claimed, philosophy consists of a series of footnotes to Plato, it is equally fair to say that esoteric cosmologies largely consist of a series of footnotes to Neo-Platonism.”⁴⁶ I do not deny the plausibility of Hammer’s account, and it is common knowledge among scholars of Theosophy that Theosophy was rooted in “Western esotericism,” but the neglect of the Indian influence leads to the drawing of an excessively Eurocentric picture. This has a double-sided effect: On the one hand, this sort of presentation implicitly denies that the Theosophists were capable of learning about “non-Western” concepts and of understanding (at least in part) Indian thought. On the other hand, it denies the agency of all those Indian Theosophists who took part in the colonial-era discourse. The Theosophical Society is presented *in toto* by Hammer as a monolithic entity, but a close look at the sources shows that there were in fact many shifts in the doctrines of the Society, some of them closely linked to the uptake of Indian thought.

Santucci’s account is the most detailed of the three general presentations of the Theosophical Society considered here. He unfolds the history of the Theosophical Society as a history of schisms in an account that focuses more on the exact chronology of the history of the Society than on in-depth theoretical analyses. As in the article mentioned above, the Indian Theosophists are almost entirely absent from Santucci’s outline, with the exception of some short references to Damodar K. Mavalankar and Subba Row (the former is mentioned in connection with the Hodgson report and the latter in connection with challenges to Blavatsky’s doctrine), which are not elaborated upon any further.⁴⁷ Santucci’s entry shows a profound knowledge of the Society’s history and offers a wide-ranging overview that takes in several of the subgroups of Theosophy, as well as briefly discussing its later development. However, it does not do much more than

⁴⁵ Olav Hammer, “Theosophy,” in *The Occult World*, ed. Christopher Patridge (New York: Routledge, 2015), 250.

⁴⁶ Hammer, “Theosophy,” 253.

⁴⁷ James A. Santucci, “Theosophical Society,” in Hanegraaff, *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, 1117–21.

present a chronology. Of course, an entry in a dictionary is not the place to enter into in-depth discussions about theoretical arguments. Nevertheless, the chronological focus perpetuates the narrative of an almost purely “Western” endeavor and fails to show the important role that Indian Theosophists played in Adyar Theosophy, at the very least.

Viswanathan takes a very different approach in her entry in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. Here we find almost no dates and only a very small number of references to Theosophists other than Helena Blavatsky. Viswanathan shows almost no sensibility for the heterogeneity of either the Theosophical teachings or the members of the various branches. She calls the Theosophical Society a “carnavalesque [rather] than carmelite”⁴⁸ association, and explains that the “colorful founding figures of the Theosophical Society concentrated their energies on securing the blessing and wisdom of elusive masters from the inner Tibetan reaches, in order to help them build an institution consecrated to the preservation of Eastern mysteries.”⁴⁹ However, such an account has no analytical value whatsoever with regard to heterogeneity and the negotiations of orthodoxy and heterodoxy within institutions. Viswanathan stresses the influence of the masters and their binary transmission of occult knowledge through astral projection and bureaucracy. Her analysis of the relationship between Blavatsky and the masters, and of the process of the institutionalization of occult knowledge that led to the “routinizing [of] occultism as professional knowledge”⁵⁰ has considerable depth. This is, as she herself acknowledges with a reference to Max Weber, not an entirely new finding. Her argument transcends these starting points – and this is the real merit of her article – when she explains that, “what signals a new note is that the bureaucratization of occultism is never far from its simultaneous deployment as an anticolonial move.”⁵¹ Viswanathan interprets the approach of the masters to the institutionalization of occultism and the framing of the institution in a legal character as the creation of “a public space of autonomous existence.”⁵² For Viswanathan, the adaption of Indian terminology was a strategy for Blavatsky to use in order to “claim the validity of a monistic conception of life and nature premised in biological claims, while simultaneously locating it in an ontological reality removed from the contingencies of historical and evolutionary development”⁵³ and to “create an

48 Gauri Viswanathan, “Theosophical Society,” in Jacobsen et al., *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism Online*.

49 Viswanathan, “Theosophical Society.”

50 Viswanathan, “Theosophical Society.”

51 Viswanathan, “Theosophical Society.”

52 Viswanathan, “Theosophical Society.”

53 Viswanathan, “Theosophical Society.”

alternative frame of reference.”⁵⁴ Viswanathan holds that this kind of “crisscrossing of ideas” is much closer to “the hybrid nature of early religious formations.”⁵⁵ Indeed, it is hard to understand why this particular article was chosen to represent Theosophy in *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, since it highlights only a very small part of Theosophical history and renarrates the colonial narrative of Indian passivity in colonial knowledge production.

I now turn to a second category of articles and discuss several pieces that appear in the *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*. The handbook is a most welcome tool for acquiring a quick overview of numerous important topics in the research on Theosophy. However, as Zander indicates, it is rather unbalanced by its primary focus on Blavatsky and, besides a small quantity of German sources, it includes almost no non-English literature.⁵⁶

In his article, *Blavatsky and the First Generation of Theosophy*, Godwin writes that the early history of Theosophy is “a complex story, involving many nations and characters, but they all revolve around Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), the prime mover of the Society and one of the most influential women of all time.”⁵⁷ Godwin goes on to present a very detailed but concise account of the early history of the Theosophical Society. He also provides some insight into the American context of spiritism in the years preceding the foundation of the society. He identifies numerous actors and their most important publications, and also discusses some of the problems of authorship connected with Blavatsky’s work and the Mahatma letters. Unfortunately, he does not take the opportunity to discuss any Theosophical concepts in significant detail, but it becomes clear from what he does have to say that Godwin understands the Theosophical Society as almost exclusively rooted in “Western” thought. As a result, he does not credit Indian Theosophists with much agency, mentioning T. Subba Row only briefly. Although he presents Row – as the general narrative goes – as Blavatsky’s only peer, he does not discuss his influence on her beyond this.⁵⁸ Godwin’s article provides a well-written “history” of the early Theo-

⁵⁴ Viswanathan, “Theosophical Society.”

⁵⁵ Viswanathan, “Theosophical Society”.

⁵⁶ Helmut Zander, “Rezension Zu: Hammer, Olav; Rothstein, Mikael (Hrsg.): *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*. Leiden 2013.” news release, November 15, 2013, <https://www.hsozkult.de/publicationreview/id/reb-19893>.

⁵⁷ Godwin, “Blavatsky and the First Generation of Theosophy,” 15.

⁵⁸ Godwin, “Blavatsky and the First Generation of Theosophy,” 15–26.

sophical Society, but his account suffers from being for the most part uncritical towards his sources⁵⁹ and the current emic narratives.

Wessinger’s article on the second generation of Theosophists is largely framed by her concept of “progressive millennialism.”⁶⁰ Wessinger explains that “progressive millennialism” is “the expectation of an imminent transition to a collective salvation accomplished by humans working according to the plan of superhuman agents.”⁶¹ This characteristic is, she claims, distinctive of the second generation of Theosophists, namely Besant and Leadbeater, while the first generation believed rather in the “progressive evolution” taught by Blavatsky. Further, she has it that while “Blavatsky had taught that the ‘Root Races’ of humanity took extremely long periods to evolve, Besant’s progressive millennialism accelerated the anticipated evolutionary process.”⁶² Wessinger identifies a complete discontinuity in the concepts of the two generations. However, it will be shown below that, rather than being a new departure, the later view should be seen instead as a logical consequence of Blavatsky’s thinking and its “hybridization” in the process of the uptake of Indian ideas (see Chapters 8–12), which started as early as the 1880s. In addition, Wessinger describes a double-sided process by which authority was claimed in the Theosophical Society. This was rooted, on the one hand, in the claim to have contact with the masters and, on the other, in the institutional office. In Wessinger’s words, drawing here on Max Weber’s concepts of “authority,” this is the difference between “charismatic authority” and “rational-legal authority.” She explains that the second generation of Theosophists shifted their claim to authority from the former to the latter, with “rational-legal authority” consequently becoming the more important source of the two. As will be seen below, this is only partially accurate. Indeed, with reference to the clairvoyant investigations of Besant and Leadbeater in *Occult Chemistry* and *Thought-Forms*, one might well argue the opposite. I will seek to show in this book that the concept of yogic powers, the so-called *siddhis*, played an important role in the negotiation of power within the Theosophical Society.⁶³ Wessinger’s explanations tend to present the uptake of Indian concepts as a deliberate instrumentalization of these ideas, and she also

59 He relies to a great extent on Ransom, Gomez, and Greenwalt, who are all Theosophists. At least in the case of Ransom it is for the most part impossible to verify her sources.

60 Catherine Wessinger Lowman, “The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar),” in Hammer; Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 33.

61 Wessinger Lowman, “The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar),” 33.

62 Wessinger Lowman, “The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar),” 39.

63 I have discussed elsewhere other important skills in claiming authority in the Theosophical Society, especially the knowledge of Sanskrit; cf. Yves Mühlematter, “Philology as an Epistemological Strategy to Claim Higher Knowledge: Translational Endeavors Within the Theosophical Society,” (forthcoming).

interprets Besant's and Leadbeater's search for the world-teacher in the same light.⁶⁴ However, her approach here will be contested in this book as it seems that Indian concepts were rather received in the Theosophical Society through meshing processes of "hybridization" that involved both Indian and non-Indian agents.

In his well-documented and masterly article, Goodrick-Clarke advances what he takes to be an alternative perspective to the current view that "Modern Theosophy is frequently associated today with Oriental religion."⁶⁵ He convincingly shows the great indebtedness of Blavatsky to the "Western esoteric" traditions, including Hermetism, Mesmerism, Alchemy, Freemasonry, and many others.⁶⁶ When Goodrick-Clarke claims that "modern Theosophy" was simply "Western esotericism" in disguise, he overlooks entirely the influence of Indian actors. For example, he does not discuss the influence of T. Subba Row and his work on *The Secret Doctrine*, and nor does he discuss the importance of Advaita Vedānta concepts for Blavatsky's own ideas on initiation (see Chapter 9.4). As for Besant, he seems to neglect almost every adaption of Hindu concepts in her writings in favor of focusing on her uptake of Christian ideas. This is perhaps unsurprising, since Goodrick-Clarke bases his judgement on just one of Besant's texts, *Esoteric Christianity, or: The Lesser Mysteries*. In addition, he – in common with many other scholars writing on Theosophy – does not differentiate between Leadbeater and Besant, nor between Besant's earlier and later Theosophical thought.

The main argument of Patridge's article, based on his reading of Said's *Orientalism*, is that Blavatsky's interest in "the Orient" – primarily Egypt and Tibet – was colonial in nature.⁶⁷ He explains that her quest for the ancient wisdom of the "East" was very much in line with contemporary orientalist endeavors, especially the romantic orientalism of the German tradition championed by Schlegel and Herder.⁶⁸ Although Patridge's claims are highly plausible and well-documented in the case of Blavatsky, his account, like that of Goodrick-Clarke, remains one dimensional in the sense that he, following Said, conceptualizes a passive "East" which was constructed by an all-powerful "West." This becomes clear, for example, when he writes that "Hindu reformers" "were not

⁶⁴ Wessinger Lowman, "The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar)," 33–40.

⁶⁵ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, "Western Esoteric Traditions and Theosophy," in Hammer; Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 261.

⁶⁶ Goodrick-Clarke, "Western Esoteric Traditions and Theosophy," 303.

⁶⁷ Christopher Patridge, "Lost Horizon: H.P. Blavatsky and Theosophical Orientalism," in Hammer; Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 329.

⁶⁸ Patridge, "Lost Horizon," 326.

immune to Orientalist influence under the British Raj.”⁶⁹ This draws a picture of the “Hindu reformers” as, on the one hand, a homogenous group and, on the other, simply echoing orientalist claims. He further claims that “Theosophy is very much a view *from* the ‘Christian West,’ an Orientalist gaze, critical of the home culture, seeking guidance from the ‘other,’” and that “Blavatsky never managed to remove the Western lens [. . .] it would be naïve to expect anything more of her – even if she was herself sensitive to colonialism and opposed to Christian mission and Western culture.”⁷⁰ Patridge presents “the Theosophical Society” here as a homogeneous body with one single doctrine, which was never challenged from within. If we look at such Theosophists as Subba Row, and especially his conflict with Blavatsky (for more on which, see Chapter 12.9), we see that the Theosophical Society was never a homogeneous body.

Patridge has it that “Blavatsky never managed to remove the Western lens,”⁷¹ but this statement is problematic on a number of levels. First, it is not entirely clear what “Western” signifies in this statement. Is there in fact any such thing as a “Western” culture and, if there is, would Blavatsky indeed have belonged to it? If so, what would be seen through its lens? Oneself? The “Other”? Patridge’s metaphor implies that “something” must be observed through the “lens.” This lens could then be defined as “European culture” in Patridge’s understanding. The problem is that neither of these premises are clear-cut. The “Other” necessarily implies and provides demarcations from “the self,” and in doing so also inscribes itself *in* “the self.” It would thus be “naïve to expect”⁷² that “self” (Blavatsky), “not-other” (“European culture”), and “other” (the “Orient”) could be distinguished in any way from each other. A consequence of this is that, in the case of the Theosophical Society, “East” and “West” could not be sharply distinguished from each other. This line of argument will be more closely conceptualized in the following chapters.

Following Said’s underlying idea that “the Orient” was a mere projection of “Western” scholars, Lubelsky advances the idea of a “celestial India.” In the first two chapters of his *Celestial India*, which deal with the early orientalists (Chapter 1) and Max Müller (Chapter 2), Lubelsky develops the idea of an imaginary space of “dreams about the glorious past [of India] and ‘historical’ echoes arising from her ancient literature.”⁷³ For Lubelsky, there is no room for any

⁶⁹ Patridge, “Lost Horizon,” 328.

⁷⁰ Patridge, “Lost Horizon,” 328–29.

⁷¹ Patridge, “Lost Horizon,” 329.

⁷² Patridge, “Lost Horizon,” 329.

⁷³ Isaac Lubelsky, *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of Indian Nationalism* (Sheffield, UK, Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2012), 75.

“connection between that imaginary country – which I suggest to refer to as ‘Celestial India’ – and the actual geopolitical entity.”⁷⁴ He concluded that this “celestial India” was the

imaginary concept which animated Max Muller [!] when he urged modern man to change his attitude towards that wretched India which was suddenly shown in glorious raiment as the homeland of the Aryan race. Similarly, the proposed alternative for the future of humanity – the synthesis between East and West with India as the purest marvel and the land in which true knowledge is preserved in its chastest form – arose in his mind in an abstract fashion, almost without any connection to the physical reality of India, which in any event he only knew from secondary sources, certainly not from first-hand experience.⁷⁵

Lubelsky thus denies (“almost”) any agency to either the texts or the people who formed the basis of Müller’s conception of India. I do not intend to claim that Müller represented anything like a “true” picture of India, but I would strongly argue against the notion that such a picture only arose “in his mind in an abstract fashion.”⁷⁶ What Müller wrote about India was a “hybrid” account arising from a long-lasting engagement with sources of Indian provenance. In addition, when Lubelsky writes that “Celestial India [. . .] began to take shape in the collective minds of Indians, English people and Europeans in general, who regarded the earthly India as a place in which the marvel might be re-discovered, here and now, even in the modern age,”⁷⁷ he oversimplifies the discursive dynamics of negotiation and “hybridization” within the global colonial discursive continuum. In doing so, he also denies any sort of agency to Indian actors and overestimates Müller’s role within this discursive continuum. In the same line of argumentation, Lubelsky interprets the aspirations of the Theosophical Society as being shaped by Müller’s idea of “celestial India” because they promoted India’s superiority over “Western” materialism. “Thus,” Lubelsky writes, “the Theosophical Society became the foremost instrument implementing the ideas promoted by Max Müller from 1856, when he published his article ‘Comparative Mythology’, to his dying day.”⁷⁸ In this, Lubelsky perceives little in the way of dynamic development. Discussing the relationship between the Arya Samaj and the Theosophical Society, and the eventual disagreement which led to their split, he claims that,

⁷⁴ Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, 76.

⁷⁵ Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, 76.

⁷⁶ Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, 76.

⁷⁷ Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, 76.

⁷⁸ Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, 94.

the essentially-Western interpretation which Blavatsky put on Dayananda Saraswati's writing stemmed from her perception of the Hindu scriptures as belonging to the same tradition as Western esoteric writings. Blavatsky and Olcott (and later Besant) viewed the Hindu scriptures as ancient Gnostic writings, which gave rise to the subsequent Hermetic philosophy.⁷⁹

Lubelsky may be correct that some of the ideas of Blavatsky and Olcott resonated badly with those of Saraswati, but this was not just because of the former pair's “Western” view. Rather, another important contributing factor was that Saraswati proved to be more than a blank canvas on which their ideas could be projected. This is another instance of Lubelsky's one dimensional conception of the negotiation of concepts which took place within the global colonial discursive continuum.

In Chapter 4, Lubelsky discusses the Theosophical doctrine, although I will not address the details of his account of Blavatsky's doctrine here. In this account, Blavatsky's writings are treated as if they are the sum total of Theosophy. However, Lubelsky does discuss the work of Besant and Leadbeater in more detail, on the grounds that Besant developed the Theosophical doctrine and

popularized the Theosophical esoteria by presenting its principal ideas in an ordered and straightforward manner, in contrast to the disorder and excess which characterized Blavatsky's presentation. Secondly, she helped to further develop the idea of the World Teacher, which from the second decade of the twentieth century became a paramount one for the Theosophists.⁸⁰

Although Lubelsky is surely right to highlight Besant's significant alteration of the Theosophical doctrine, it seems out of place to suggest that Besant's “first important book [was] *Esoteric Christianity*.”⁸¹ In making this claim, he neglects a decade of Besant's earlier Theosophical writings, including a number of particularly important books: *In the Outer Court*, 1895; *The Path of Discipleship*, 1896; *The Ancient Wisdom*, 1897; *Avatâras*, 1900; and several others. Had he considered them, Lubelsky would have found that *The Ancient Wisdom* can be read as strongly supporting his first point, and *Avatâras* his second. *The Path of Discipleship* and *In the Outer Court* – as will be argued in this book – provide the explanations for Besant's engagement in the promotion of the idea of the world-teacher.

In Chapter 5, Lubelsky discusses “The Sources of the Theosophical Doctrine.” He names “Hermeticism,” “Orders,” “Fraternities,” “Magicians,” “Early

⁷⁹ Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, 99.

⁸⁰ Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, 132.

⁸¹ Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, 132–73.

Theosophy,” “The History of Gnosticism,” “The History of Magic,” “Edward Bulwer-Lytton and the Esoteric Novel,” “A Religious History of India,” “American Transcendentalism,” “Early Attempts at a Synthesis of an Occult Doctrine,” “The Myth of Atlantis,”⁸² as well as an incredible number of individuals and single books. I do not want to contest the notion that this list comprises a seemingly exhaustive catalogue of sources for explaining the “whole” Theosophical doctrine, but the picture is rather more complex. First, it must be questioned what exactly is meant by “the theosophical doctrine”; as always, Lubelsky conceptualizes “the theosophical doctrine” as little more than is found in *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*. Although these works surely form the nucleus of the canon⁸³ of this doctrine, they certainly do not exhaust it, and perhaps are not even representative. As will be seen later, Besant, for example, referred to Blavatsky’s writings frequently in her early publications but less often in her later writings, in which they are interpreted much more openly (see Chapter 8).

As pointed out above, if one considers writings such as Besant’s *Esoteric Christianity*, which programmatically deals with Christianity, one finds that the overwhelming majority of external references are to “Western” traditions. As I argue below, if we look at other writings in Besant’s voluminous corpus, references to Indian sources are frequently included. Lubelsky nonetheless draws some important conclusions. He maintains that “the Theosophical interpretation of the Hindu scriptures was cast in a Western light and in fact forced those texts to conform to an esoteric Western doctrine.”⁸⁴ However, this is only half of the story. Although the main trajectory of the Theosophical doctrine followed typical nineteenth-century colonialist-evolutionist master narratives, it was nonetheless more invested in Indian thought – this is certainly true for Besant, but also, to a lesser extent, for Blavatsky and Olcott as well (see Chapter 9 and 10) – than Lubelsky claims. It is, then, necessary to contest, or to nuance, at the

⁸² Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, 146–87.

⁸³ I derive the idea of a “canonical nucleus” from Malinar (Angelika Malinar, “Vom „Kanon-Fundus“ zum „variablen“ Kanon: Über den Status religiöser Texte im Hinduismus,” in *Kanonisierung und Kanonbildung in der asiatischen Religionsgeschichte*, ed. Max Deeg, Oliver Freiberger and Christoph Kleine, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Sitzungsberichte 820 (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2011)). She discusses the question of whether there is a “canon” in “Hinduism.” She maintains that the question about canonical texts and the uncertainty concerning which texts would belong to that “canon” belong to the orientalist debate of the 19th century, but that “Hinduism” knew (and knows) “canonical” texts. She introduces the ideas of a “Kanon-Fundus” which provides a “variablen Kanon” while maintaining some sort of “canonical nucleus.” I would argue that this idea could also be used to analyze the Theosophical “canon.”

⁸⁴ Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, 188.

very least, his conclusion that “the thinking that animated the Society was largely Western, and so it remained for many years, at least until Besant’s death in 1933.”⁸⁵ Lubelsky’s strong views about the Theosophical Society’s endeavors are highly problematic. They stand as, he claims, “another illustration of the Orientalist fantasy which animated many Westerners who came in contact with India and her civilization beginning with Sir William Jones and ending with Max Müller.”⁸⁶ This is not only an oversimplification of a complex matter, but it also renders Indians as passive subjects who have no agency at all. Analyses of this sort reproduce colonial claims and overlook the historical evidence for a much more complex history.

I turn now to consider Baier’s *Theosophical Orientalism* and Bergunder’s *Experiments with Theosophical Truth*. The latter can be understood as the starting point for the current trend in research on Theosophy of reflecting on the agency and the agendas of the Indian members of the organization. The former sets the trend for future work in this area.

Bergunder’s article aims to provide a “proper historical grounding”⁸⁷ for Gandhi’s views on “religion” in general and on “Hinduism” in particular. Bergunder identifies two major strands of explanation in “current” research approaches (his point of reference for being current is 2014, the year his article was published). One strand of explanation sees it as intrinsically “Hindu” to be tolerant and to understand all religions as equal. As such, to adopt such views would simply be to follow a “Hindu instinct,”⁸⁸ as Gandhi himself maintained. The other line of thought notes that Gandhi’s views were indebted to nineteenth-century esoteric currents, namely those centered around the Theosophical Society and the Esoteric Christian Union. It is notable that Gandhi’s interest in the *Bhagavadgītā* and some of his ideas on religion, especially his notion of “Hinduism” as Advaita Vedānta and his conception of Christianity, were mediated through the Theosophical Society and the Esoteric Christian Union respectively. However, what is more important for the current book are the methodological consequences Bergunder draws from his global history approach. Contesting Hanegraaff’s concept of “Western esotericism,” Bergunder maintains that the Theosophical Society “provides an outstanding example of the complex entanglements of the global religious history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”⁸⁹ He goes

⁸⁵ Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, 189.

⁸⁶ Lubelsky, *Celestial India*, 319–20.

⁸⁷ Michael Bergunder, “Experiments with Theosophical Truth: Gandhi, Esotericism, and Global Religious History,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 2 (2014): 400.

⁸⁸ Gandhi as cited in Bergunder, “Experiments with Theosophical Truth,” 399.

⁸⁹ Bergunder, “Experiments with Theosophical Truth,” 404.

on to explain that Theosophy provided an “entry point into the orientalist discourse on Hinduism. The anticolonial stance of the Theosophical Society also provided a means for an antiwestern resignification of Hinduism.”⁹⁰ This was true for many Indian Theosophists, and certainly for Gandhi, as Bergunder illustrates. However, the Theosophical Society was not alone in providing this sort of entry point. Learned societies such as the Asiatic Society also provided similar pathways into the discourse, as the example of Rajendralal Mitra shows (see Chapter 10.2). One of the strengths of Bergunder’s article is that he manages to draw a more complex, and therefore probably more accurate, picture by discussing influences from the “West” as well as those from the “East.” He concludes that “it needs to be acknowledged that esotericism played an important role in the global religious history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the current academic paradigm of a purely ‘Western Esotericism’ requires revision.”⁹¹ Despite its strengths, there are also a number of difficulties in Bergunder’s article. 1) To begin with, Bergunder seems to conceptualize “the Theosophical Society” as an almost monolithic organization, effectively equating the Society with Blavatsky and almost completely neglecting any other currents. Although Kingsford and Maitland play important roles in his presentation of the issues, he does not further discuss the “entanglements” between the various Theosophical currents or their wider “entanglements” outside Theosophy. Of course, one can never know enough to describe every aspect of every current in an adequate manner – to paraphrase Osterhammel⁹² – and one would, in any case, never have sufficient time and space to set out such an exhaustive account. Nevertheless, if one were to follow Bergunder’s approach to the fullest, this would be the ultimate consequence. 2) Secondly, there are many other dimensions of Gandhi’s life and education that Bergunder does not discuss. For example, we read nothing about Gandhi’s training as a lawyer, which might be a subject of some importance since much of Indology developed out of an interest in establishing a legal system in colonial India, and most of the pioneers in this area of study were lawyers, as can be seen in the case of individuals such as William Jones. 3) Bergunder seems to repeat himself somewhat as this article

⁹⁰ Bergunder, “Experiments with Theosophical Truth,” 408.

⁹¹ Bergunder, “Experiments with Theosophical Truth,” 420.

⁹² “Niemand verfügt über genügend Kenntnisse, um die Korrektheit jedes Details zu gewährleisten, allen Regionen der Welt die gleiche Gerechtigkeit widerfahren zu lassen und aus jedem von zahllosen Forschungsständen den jeweils bestmöglichen zusammenfassenden Schluss zu ziehen.” Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt*, 15.

is very similar to another that he published in 2005,⁹³ and to which he does not refer anywhere in the 2014 version. Be this as it may – and in my opinion, this last point is not very important when it comes to evaluating Bergunder’s contribution to the subject – Bergunder’s 2014 article sets the tone for a major new trend in research on Theosophy which is only now beginning to gather momentum as more and more publications and discussions take up the point that “esotericism” was (probably) never a purely “Western” endeavor.

Baier takes a rather different approach, applying Gerd Baumann’s theory of Orientalism to reveal some of the dynamics underlying the understanding of the “East” shared by Blavatsky and Olcott with respect to their taking up of the concept of *cakras*. Although this appropriation is another important part of the early Theosophists’ reception of “Hindu” thought, it will not be discussed in detail here. More important for the present study is Baier’s multifaceted description of “theosophical orientalism.” He maintains that the orientalism of the early Theosophists comprised “not only elements that were common within nineteenth-century Orientalism; it was also shaped by their occult worldview.”⁹⁴ Most importantly, he explains that “Theosophy understood itself to be ‘the Easternized Other’ within Western culture. The Theosophical rediscovery of the wisdom religion was seen as the intercultural beginning for a post-materialistic and post-Christian global culture.”⁹⁵ This point is of crucial importance if we are to understand the wider dynamics of the “hybridization processes” in the Theosophical Society. Although “Western” Theosophists might appear to stand in a hegemonic relationship with their Indian counterparts – an appearance that only partially represents the interdependent reality of the situation – they were surely not in any sort of hegemonic position in relation to British academia or government, or to most other parts of global society. Baier further explains that “Theosophy as the ‘orientalized Other’ within Western culture found an ally in the ‘scientific Other’ at the edge of Western science.”⁹⁶ This is another instance of the complex global colonial discursive continuum in which several poles of hegemony were at play. To make the picture even more complex, Baier is one of the rare scholars who acknowledges the agency of the Indian Theosophists and points out the willingness of “Western”

93 Michael Bergunder, “Gandhi, Esoterik und das Christentum,” in *Esoterik und Christentum: Religionsgeschichtliche und theologische Perspektiven*, ed. Michael Bergunder and Daniel Cyranka (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2005).

94 Karl Baier, “Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer: Annotations on the Appropriation of the *Cakras* in Early Theosophy,” in Chajes (née Hall); Huss, *Theosophical Appropriations*, 319.

95 Baier, “Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer,” 322.

96 Baier, “Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer,” 323.

Theosophists to learn from them. His article successfully brings out the complex entanglements of the global colonial discursive continuum and is therefore an important contribution to the field. His ideas on cultures, however, are peppered with notions of stable entities in which a “foreign element” can be transferred from one to another. Although he claims that “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,”⁹⁷ cultures as such are conceptualized as relatively stable entities. Despite this quibble, Baier’s work sets the standard for future research.

Some years prior to the works of Bergunder and Baier discussed above, Goodrick-Clarke published an account of the Orientalism of the Theosophical Society, and there is a sense in which this should be taken as the “real” starting point for the trend indicated above, even if only in a nascent form. In this article, Goodrick-Clarke explains that the relocation of the Theosophical Society from New York to India “signaled a major shift in the Society’s self-understanding and its sources of inspiration.”⁹⁸ Mentioning the Mahatmas, the *Stanzas of Dzyan*, *Esoteric Buddhism*, and other such inspirations, Goodrick-Clarke maintains that “all conferred an expressly Oriental aura upon Theosophy in the 1880s.”⁹⁹ He goes on to consider the “the Indian and Buddhist influences on this evident change in the direction of Theosophy and its relationship to the wider context of European culture and scholarship (Orientalism).”¹⁰⁰ In doing so, Goodrick-Clarke outlines many possible linages of reception, including both “Western” sources (Paolos Metamon, Allen Kardec, American spiritualism, Rosicrucianism, Kabbalah, evolutionist theories, Neo-Platonism, and several other currents) and sources from the “East” (Orientalism mediated through nineteenth-century Orientalist sources, the Arya Samaj, several Ceylonese Theravada Buddhists, the early writings in *The Theosophist* from Indian and Ceylonese contributors, as well as Vedānta, Theravada Buddhism, and Mahayana Buddhism in general, including some hints towards particular concrete scriptures). Among the concepts that were important in Blavatsky’s formation of Theosophy, Goodrick-Clarke identifies: Spiritualist conceptions of spirits, mostly as a counter foil to “real” occultism;

⁹⁷ Baier, “Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer,” 317.

⁹⁸ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, “The Theosophical Society, Orientalism, and the ‘Mystic East’: Western Esotericism and Eastern Religion in Theosophy,” *Theosophical History* XIII, 3–28 (2007): 3.

⁹⁹ Goodrick-Clarke, “The Theosophical Society, Orientalism, and the ‘Mystic East,’” 3.

¹⁰⁰ Goodrick-Clarke, “The Theosophical Society, Orientalism, and the ‘Mystic East,’” 3.

reincarnation; yogic powers; Vedānta ideas of “a monist, non-theistic, impersonal absolute”;¹⁰¹ and the “notion of the Way and the progression of Bodhisattvas in salvation,”¹⁰² which “provided the evolutionary elements of Theosophy,”¹⁰³ to name just a few. He maps out in his article an incredible wealth of ideas, concepts, and influences in Blavatsky’s (and Olcott’s) oeuvre which provide a mass of possible entry points for future research. However, due to its broad range his accounts inevitably remain rather superficial, and this is intensified by a lack of sophisticated theoretical conceptualization. In this sense, Goodrick-Clarke’s article resembles a map so densely packed with information that at the scale it is presented it becomes hard to decipher.

In her pioneering dissertation, Moritz discusses three Theosophists from India and Ceylon: B. P. Wadia, Dharmapala, and Krishnamurti. She describes the Theosophical Society as “a ‘cosmopolitan thought zone’ – a zone of non-governmental encounter ‘between highly different and politically unequal social communities in order to work towards a perceived good.’”¹⁰⁴ Her dissertation accounts for the diversity of interactions between “Western” and “Eastern” Theosophists, a diversity which might seem obvious but has not yet been properly recognized in research on the Theosophical Society. She concludes that, in the Theosophical Society, the “South Asians [. . .] had lasting effects on all sides,”¹⁰⁵ because they “were neither at the receiving end of theosophical instruction nor did Euro-American theosophists remain untouched by their encounter with South Asian theosophists and spiritual gurus.”¹⁰⁶ Consequently, Moritz maintains, the “theosophical ‘cosmopolitan thought zone’ [. . .] emerged as a product of complex interferences between colonial patterns and local struggles against the backdrop of globalizing forces, between secular paradigms and spiritual visions negotiated on a global scale.”¹⁰⁷ In this respect, Moritz’ dissertation shares several assumptions and findings with the present study (see Conclusion), but her focus lies firmly on the political dimensions of the interactions and she employs a range of sociological concepts in her analyses, leading to a meso view which for the most part neglects the more subtle dynamics of the microlevel. She deduces agency from actual “acts,” such as resignation from the society, rather than from the

101 Goodrick-Clarke, “The Theosophical Society, Orientalism, and the ‘Mystic East’,” 18.

102 Goodrick-Clarke, “The Theosophical Society, Orientalism, and the ‘Mystic East’,” 22.

103 Goodrick-Clarke, “The Theosophical Society, Orientalism, and the ‘Mystic East’,” 22.

104 Maria-Sofia Moritz, “Globalizing ‘sacred Knowledge’: South Asians and the Theosophical Society, 1879–1930” (PhD Dissertation, Jacobs University, April, 2017), 243.

105 Moritz, “Globalizing ‘sacred Knowledge’,” 252.

106 Moritz, “Globalizing ‘sacred Knowledge’,” 252.

107 Moritz, “Globalizing ‘sacred Knowledge’,” 252.

intellectual exchange which I take to be just as important, if not more so for a milieu which defined itself largely by reference to written outputs and related conventions of knowledge transfer (much as the academic milieu continues to do).

Chajes' work on Blavatsky's ideas on "rebirth" shows convincingly that Blavatsky maintained and communicated ideas of rebirth throughout her oeuvre. She also demonstrates that Blavatsky's ideas shifted from an idea of "metempsychosis" in *Isis Unveiled* to "re-incarnation" in *The Secret Doctrine*. Chajes discusses four sources of influence that impacted Blavatsky's ideas – Spiritualism, science, Platonism, and Orientalism – and seeks to show "how Blavatsky's interpretations of each had a formative influence on her rebirth doctrines."¹⁰⁸ The influence in each case is established through a close discussion and contextualization of Blavatsky's ideas. Chajes argues that "Theosophical principles have usually been treated quite briefly in academic studies to date"¹⁰⁹ and that "the ideas themselves must be understood clearly before they can be situated in the intellectual, social, religious, and political concerns of the times."¹¹⁰ While I agree with Chajes on this point and believe that she succeeds in her goal of showing Blavatsky's indebtedness to "Spiritualism, science, [and] Platonism,"¹¹¹ her account of "Orientalism" nevertheless follows in the tracks of the current tendencies in the research into Theosophy. In addition, while she points towards important sources for Blavatsky's uptake of "Hinduism" and "Buddhism," her analysis of these influences remains circumstantial at best. Moreover, detailed theoretical considerations are almost entirely absent in Chajes' book. She refers to studies which go "beyond Edward Said's by now well-known notion of Orientalism as a master-narrative of Western imperialism that constructs and controls its subjugated 'Other',"¹¹² and also briefly mentions Baier's *Theosophical Orientalism* and Bergunder's *Experiments with Theosophical Truth* in maintaining that Indian Theosophists followed their own agendas and influenced the Theosophical uptake of "Hinduism" and "Buddhism." But this is the extent of her theoretical reflection. As a result, her argument lacks any critical engagement with the literature mentioned or, more problematically, with the origin of that literature, the broad field of "postcolonial studies."

¹⁰⁸ Julie Chajes (née Hall), *Recycled Lives: A History of Reincarnation in Blavatsky's Theosophy*, Oxford Studies in Western Esotericism, edited by Henrik Bogdan (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6.

¹⁰⁹ Chajes (née Hall), *Recycled Lives*, 12.

¹¹⁰ Chajes (née Hall), *Recycled Lives*, 13.

¹¹¹ Chajes (née Hall), *Recycled Lives*, 6.

¹¹² Chajes (née Hall), *Recycled Lives*, 168.

Chapter 7 of Chajes’ book is concerned with “Hindu and Buddhist Thought.” Here, she discusses at length the well-established problematics of the “invention” of “Hinduism” and “Buddhism.” Discussing Mohini Mohun Chatterji, she explains that a “major source in Blavatsky’s understanding of *Vedanta* seems to have been a serialized translation of Shankara’s *Viveka Chudamani* published in *The Theosophist* between 1885 and 1886 under the title ‘The Crest Jewel of Wisdom’.”¹¹³ Although this is very plausible, Chajes does not move beyond descriptive observations such as “Mohini’s translation referred to the Sanskrit names of the seven human principles used by Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine*.”¹¹⁴ This description lacks a detailed examination of the passages in question and there is also no further consideration of the agency of these Indians who supposedly followed their own agendas. In the same vein, Chajes discusses the influence of Subba Row, Herbert Spencer (why under Orientalism?), Wilson’s translation of *The Vishnu Purana*, and the concept of Adi Buddha. She then concludes that “despite the undeniable influence of Western theories of rebirth on Blavatsky’s perspectives, it seems plausible that conversations between Blavatsky, Dayananda, and other Indian and Ceylonese contacts contributed, at least in part, to her shift from metempsychosis to re-incarnation around 1882.”¹¹⁵

This is all highly plausible and will find further support in the arguments presented in this book. However, in Chajes’ book these “findings” are not backed by thorough analyses of the sources. They remain on the level of (plausible) claims but claims that require further unpacking. Another convincing claim is that “Blavatsky’s theories demonstrate that it is impossible to understand any one of her constructions without reference to the others; her definitions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and science, as well as Platonism and Spiritualism, were all interdependent.”¹¹⁶ In her conclusion, Chajes explains Blavatsky’s uptake of Indian thought, and karma in particular, in a functionalist fashion, maintaining that “the one need Blavatsky was compelled to address was the necessity to explain the apparent injustices of life. Karma solved this problem nicely.”¹¹⁷ She further points to a proposed gap in Blavatsky’s doctrine on karma, evolution, and reincarnation: “Was it all about the impersonal ‘tides’ of the cosmos, the great ‘inbreaths’ and ‘outbreaths’ of Brahma to which Blavatsky referred, or was humanity capable of affecting the progress of evolution with its choices? It

113 Chajes (née Hall), *Recycled Lives*, 175.

114 Chajes (née Hall), *Recycled Lives*, 176.

115 Chajes (née Hall), *Recycled Lives*, 183.

116 Chajes (née Hall), *Recycled Lives*, 186–87.

117 Chajes (née Hall), *Recycled Lives*, 188.

wasn't always clear."¹¹⁸ In my opinion, the answer is very clear. According to Theosophy, Humanity is capable of affecting this evolution, and this view is expressed in *The Voice of the Silence* (see Chapter 9), by occult training and by initiation into the higher knowledge, a point that has thus far been completely overlooked in the research on Theosophy, despite it being a core doctrine of Theosophical thought. As we shall see, this position becomes especially prominent in Annie Besant's writings (see Chapter 8.2).

2.3 Conclusion

This necessarily incomplete survey of the current state of research on Theosophy identifies the front line between two approaches to Theosophy. The first insists that the Theosophical Society was "Western" and remained "Western" even when exposed to Indian thought. By contrast, the second, which is still a minority view, maintains that the Theosophical Society has "Western" roots but that the South Asian Theosophists "Easternized" Theosophy. As a result of the historical predominance of the first approach, "Western" influences on Theosophy have been well researched, although detailed studies of many important actors, such as Mabel Collins and Charles Johnston, among others, are still lacking. With studies of the sort offered by Moritz, Baier, and Bergunder, research into Theosophy has made a great leap forward towards the acknowledgment of the agency of South Asian Theosophists. However, what is still missing are detailed studies of the intellectual exchange and "hybridization process" between "Western" and "Eastern" Theosophists. This book seeks to move the discussion forward in this direction by analyzing Annie Besant's ideas about the "Quickening of Evolution" in the context of the uptake of "Hinduism," mediated, as this uptake was, by South Asian Theosophists.

118 Chajes (née Hall), *Recycled Lives*, 188.

