



Review—*Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, by Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein (eds.),

Leiden: Brill, 2013. xii + 494 pp., €168

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Twenty chapters on separate topics plus the editorial introduction are a significant and welcome contribution to the study of the Theosophical Society, its offshoots, and broader cultural influences. The fact that such a substantial text only scratches the surface of relevant studies in this area illustrates the scope of the task the editors and contributors have accomplished with a great level of success. Although the important role of the Theosophical Society in a broad range of areas is becoming more widely accepted, this is the first text to assemble a variety of research on this topic and, in its organisation and layout, demonstrate the extent of this importance. Hammer and Rothstein refer to the Theosophical Society and its influence as one of the “pivotal chapters of religious history in the West”(1) and its particular importance for the fields of Western esotericism and New Religious Movements.

After the introduction, the book proceeds in three parts. The first has four chapters dealing with Theosophical societies in a periodized and somewhat regionalized manner. The second comprises eight chapters concerning itself chiefly with groups and individuals whose work and activities were born out of the theosophical milieu. The eight chapters of the third part highlight the interactions between the theosophical milieu and broader socio-cultural themes and knowledge systems. The text as a whole addresses the major themes and important issues related to the study of theosophical currents including: charismatic authority versus rational legal authority and their interactions; the strategies of legitimisation employed including appeals to intermediaries and religious experiences, particularly during fragmentations of the society or succession of new leaders; social reform; orientalism; occult, cosmological and macro- history with regard to root races, evolution (spiritual and physical), reincarnation, ancient civilisations, and perennial wisdom; gender and the role of women; healing and health; sacred geography; science, art, and literature; and the dual role of Christianity as target of polemics and source of wisdom.

The first part provides a solid and clear foundation in the history of the Theosophical Society, its generations of leadership, and the early fragmentations. It begins with Joselyn Godwin’s chapter on Blavatsky and the first generation of Theosophy, the chapters by Catherine Wessinger and Tim Rudbøg elucidate the post-secession leadership on either side of the Atlantic of Annie Besant and Katherine Tingley respectively, and W. Michael Ashcraft’s chapter looks at the third generation including further fragmentations and the later attempts to reunify sections of the international society. This part organises what can be a confusing history of schism and

fragmentation into a coherent overview and is an excellent point of entry to the field for students and scholars. The second part investigates those individuals and groups who can be said to have a more or less direct influence from the Theosophical society and may have founded new groups with significant changes, individual success, or a claim to be a return to authentic Theosophy. Sean O’Callaghan examines Alice Bailey’s Christology, Katharina Brandt and Olav Hammer look at the career of Rudolph Steiner, Shannon Trosper Schorey focuses on Edgar Cayce, Tim Rudbøg analyses the I AM Activity, Michael Abravanel considers The Summit Lighthouse, and Anita Stasulane explores the lives of the Roerichs. The exceptions in this part being Olav Hammer’s chapter that delineates connections between the theosophical milieu and the broader, more contentious concept of the ‘New Age’ and Mikael Rothstein’s chapter that looks at the theosophical influences on the rise of UFO related movements and the ufological turn. The third part places Theosophy in a broader context and looks at how it interacted with other cultural knowledge systems and issues such as race and gender. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke’s chapter places the emphasis back on those elements of Theosophy that can be traced to a western conception of an ‘esoteric tradition’, Christopher Partridge addresses Theosophy in the context of orientalism, Isaac Lubelsky clarifies some of the issues regarding race in theosophical discourse, Siv Ellen Kraft examines the expanded role of women in the theosophical milieu, Garry Trompf analyses the complex cosmological macrohistory of theosophical literature, Egil Asprem shows the problems created by Theosophy both appealing to and attempting to subsume science, Tessel Bauduin traces the significant aspects of Theosophy in modern art, and Ingvild Sælid Gilhus and Lisbeth Mikaelson provide an overview of Theosophy and literary fiction.

As pointed out by the editors, and considering the breadth of material to be addressed, not everything could be included in the book and there is plenty of scope for further research. Many of the chapters, particularly in part three, map out the important factors to be considered for further research in the area, and with this mapping in mind, the addition of two more chapters would have been hugely beneficial. The text could have benefitted from a chapter dedicated to the political attitudes and activities of the various societies and their members with a focus on the role of individualism and the influence of socialism. This would have sat well beside the chapters in part three that look at interactions with broader cultural themes and knowledge systems. Although the text contains a chapter on the literary aspects of the theosophical milieu, a chapter dedicated to media, particularly the journals, magazines, and periodicals of the society, would illustrate one of the primary means of communication employed by the societies. Through these, a global network of opinion, literature, politics, and correspondence was facilitated, contributing greatly to the later more diffuse nature of theosophical influence. A regionalised approach to the study of the society and the activities of its members in different periods is a necessary next step for this research area.

One point of criticism concerns the east-west problem or how the society’s orientalism is discussed and contextualised. In a number of chapters, this topic is addressed but never fully clarified and a more coherent framework applied across the text would have been beneficial. From the point of view of the authors and the author’s subjects, more nuance could have been

shown when using this problematic divide, particularly with respect to figures like Blavatsky. At times, the 'Orient' is simply the non-Christian east and at others, it is the exotic, unknown, and hidden. This second 'Orient' is subject to de-orientalising as the 20th century progresses but the first is a broader problem in European identity politics concerning concepts like Christendom. Some further explanation of the dynamics at work in the central discourses concerning the east and west would have benefitted the overall coherence of the text and demonstrated the complexity and fluidity of the 'Orient' and orientalism. Finally, small errors are almost inescapable when compiling such a large and comprehensive volume. Godwin's chapter reverses the years of the events surrounding the society's meeting and subsequent collaboration with the Arja Samaj (21-22). Also, Kraft's chapter refers to a text of which the full details are not provided in the bibliography (364). This volume is a valuable contribution to the study of the Theosophical Society and its influence not only for its clear and organised presentation of existing research but the platform it creates for ongoing and future work in this large and complex area.