

Hammer, Olav; Rothstein, Mikael (Hrsg.): *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2013. ISBN: 978-9-00423-596-0; 525 S.

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Theosophy was one of the global players in the field of (alternative) religiosity in the decades around 1900 – and remains to a great extent unexplored. The importance of Theosophists is rooted in their role as cultural brokers, for example with the discovery and collection of Buddhist and Hindu texts, which they made available to the Western world by editions and translations. Its attractiveness for many intellectuals stemmed not least from the idea that this historical material would not only threaten the Western world by revealing its cultural relativity, but that it could also serve as a starting point for a universal theory of religion: „No religion is higher than truth“ became the shibboleth of Theosophy. In combination with the promise to lead to an objective higher knowledge and to overcome the detested materialism, theosophy claimed to provide an antidote against the „threats“ of historicism and relativism around 1900. A list of (at least at one time) convinced theosophists looks like an extract of the Who is Who of Western intellectuals in these years: Ernst Bloch, Thomas A. Edison, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondriaan, Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, William Butler Yeats – just to mention a few.

But the scholarly research on the history of Theosophy is still at the beginning. The most important and still highly valuable book is an intellectual history by the American musicologist Joscelyn Godwin.<sup>1</sup> Apart from that, only some American groups and the Anthroposophical Society, an offspring of one of the theosophical societies (i.e. the one based in Adyar, India) established in Germany by Rudolf Steiner in 1912, have received any noteworthy scholarly work. Thus the present „handbook“ on Theosophy is highly welcome.

It encompasses mainly two dimensions: It presents basic historical material (parts I and

II) and cross-cutting issues (part III). In the first two parts major theosophists are presented: Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, being regarded as the „mother“ of theosophy and who founded the society in 1875 with Henry Steel Olcott, the first president. Further articles depict several leading figures of the second generation: Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater, Katherine Tingley, Alice Bailey and Rudolf Steiner. Other contributions present some theosophical movements such as the „I AM“ current and Theosophists engaged in ufolgy. Part III comprises thematic contributions such as on theosophical „orientalism“, on Theosophy and gender, and on its relation to science. All contributions capture, albeit with considerable differences in quality, the state of the art; ideological texts, which are quite common in the historiography of Theosophy, were not admitted.

I would like to highlight two contributions which open fresh perspectives on further research. Christopher Partridge, analyzing theosophical „orientalism“, reinterprets the inclination of theosophists to „ancient wisdom“ of Buddhism and Hinduism, which was not only an elitist esoteric search for „higher“ and „eternal“ knowledge, but also an „anti-imperialistic“ position in the heyday of the western colonial era. Another text, written by Olav Hammer, puts the unwritten religious history of the 20th century on the agenda of religious studies. He shows the importance of Theosophy for the „New Age“-movement in the second half of this century, giving an example for the diffusion of theosophical thought and of the sometime obvious, but far more often of the subcutaneous impact of Theosophy on western culture until today, a fact which merits further research.

A matter of critical discussion concerns the selection and the interpretation of the topics. Of course, it is unfair to criticize incompleteness: such a book cannot replace the missing research work of the last decades. Therefore I only mention three subjects for further research: the theosophists in India, the national differentiations of Theosophy, and the political impact of its activities. More wor-

<sup>1</sup>Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, New York 1994. Current research in: *Theosophical History*, Fullerton (Calif.) 1985ff.

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thy of critique however is the selection of topics. Madame Blavatsky, who was without any doubt important, is treated in four articles, which are devoted either wholly or mostly to her and her oeuvre (Godwin, Goodrick-Clarke, Lubelsky and Trompf). The articles partly repeat basic information, and partly give different interpretations of her life. The latter is not in itself problematic, since differences are unavoidable in scholarly work. However, the different perspectives are based on at times insufficient use of the historiographical tools; only Godwin discusses in some extent the extremely difficult historical problems of her biography and of her writings. Furthermore, Theosophists of the second generation are underrepresented. Especially Besant and Leadbeater, who were extremely important for the success of Theosophy in the first half of the 20th century, remain in the shadow of the great founder. Finally: A presentation of the sources and the tools for scholarly work is missing.

A second problem is a consequence of this traditional focus on the famous founding theosophists. A number of interesting or significant members (like Montessori or Edison) are not even mentioned. Surely, listing additional names is a knock-down argument against any kind of handbook. Nevertheless, by fully neglecting for example Franz Hartmann, a most important German theosophist, as well as the French theosophist Charles Blech, the Russian-Swiss Theosophist Margarete Kamensky or the Italian Anthroposophist Ettore Martinoli, the book exhibits a substantial structural imbalance. Moreover, this reflects a wider problem of current scholarly work in general, being overly concentrated on English language and literature. Most of the authors of this book obviously have not read (and failed to reference) non-English publications. Only some German works are taken into account, but French or Italian literature is missing almost entirely, not to mention smaller languages. Thus, the non-English speaking world of Theosophy and its research is underrepresented, which is a particularly serious problem for a publication treating a transnational phenomenon. Consequently, the authors should not have claimed to present a „handbook“:

this promise is simply too demanding in the current state of research. It is a collection of contributions which provide reliable information on important aspects of theosophy. In this perspective, the book is highly valuable and a starting point for every further research.

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