

THEOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, OR THE SEPTENARY CONSTITUTION OF MAN RECONSIDERED

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ABSTRACT

In "The Secret Doctrine" (1888), Helena P. Blavatsky declares to the astonishment of many readers that man is constituted by seven principles corresponding to the general "septenary" cosmic structure. This clearly represents a shift in comparison with her first major work "Isis Unveiled" (1877), where Blavatsky speaks of the "tripartite man". The change from three to seven principles was irritating not only to her contemporaries, but remained an enigma that evoked debates among later theosophists and their critics. In scholarly analyses, the sevenfold constitution marks the theosophical shift from occident to orient, which is not only geographical, but also doctrinal in nature. However, what has escaped scholarly analysis is the historization of this particular "shift" and its context that lead to the first theosophical book that introduces the sevenfold scheme—namely "Esoteric Buddhism" (1883). The paper shows that this septenary constitution was a result of the historical discursive context and developed in response to ongoing disputes. To this end, the paper will illustrate this concept's genealogy rather than its "sources". Theosophists in India and confidantes of Blavatsky both attempted to circumvent what they claimed to be the esoteric knowledge of occultism. In doing so they addressed and interpreted modern science and spiritualism in equal measure, rejected Christianity, integrated reincarnation and, despite the absence of explicit references, relativized the oriental traditions.

Keywords: Theosophical Society, Helena P. Blavatsky, postcolonialism, orientalism, theosophical anthropology, septenary constitution

INTRODUCTION

In her first two volumes of *"The Secret Doctrine"* (1888a/b), Helena P. Blavatsky holds that man is constituted by seven principles that correspond to the comprehensive outline of the whole cosmos (Blavatsky 1888a, e.g., xxxv ff., 12ff.). This sevenfold or "septenary" structure had gradually been introduced in *"The Theosophist"* from the autumn of 1881 onwards. Discussion in the papers that followed Blavatsky's original publication shows a tone of great astonishment. This sevenfold structure clearly marked a shift when compared to Blavatsky's *"Isis Unveiled"* (1877a/b) and theosophical theorizing of the following years, including the triple nature of man (Blavatsky 1877a, xvi ff., 49, and 67ff.). And the differences between the two books became a subject of irritation to more than her contemporaries, continuing to the present. In scholarly analyses this transformation has been aligned to the theosophical shift from the west to the east, or from occident to orient, because between *"Isis Unveiled"* and *"The Secret Doctrine"* there not only occurred the theosophists' relocation to India in 1879, but also a strong change of emphasis towards what appeared to be "eastern teachings". Indeed, the first theosophical publication introducing the sevenfold nature of man was *"Esoteric Buddhism"* (1883) by Alfred Percy Sinnett (cf. Sinnett 1986)¹. However, the history of this "oriental shift" and the context has hitherto not been analyzed.

Consequently, we will approach the septenary constitution from a different angle than before: this anthropological scheme should be seen as neither the remodeling of old ideas in new terms, nor as the application of an authentic and ancient Indian concept. By tracing the debates and arguments that evoked the emergence of the septenary constitution instead, it becomes clear that this

¹ Alfred P. Sinnett (1840–1921) had been in India since 1872 where he worked as the editor of the renowned colonial newspaper *"The Allahabad Pioneer"*, where he printed the first accounts on Theosophy. He made acquaintance with Blavatsky and Olcott soon after their arrival in India and became one of the leading figures of the early Theosophical Society afterwards. In India, he received the majority of "mahatma letters", which dealt as a foundation for his second book *"Esoteric Buddhism"* (1883). His relationship with Blavatsky was to turn sour after his return to London in 1883. See also Godwin 2013, 16–31.

concept increasingly functioned as a significant theosophical identity marker after October 1881. In the following tangles, different positions in the historic context were discussed, incorporated, meanings (re-)sedimented, and others excluded, and the emergence and transformations of the sevenfold constitution reveal its procedural character and its formative historical framing.

STATE OF RESEARCH

In scholarly accounts, the sevenfold constitution is frequently mentioned or alluded to as a pivotal theosophical doctrine. But it very rarely stands at the centre of focus or appears at least as an independent point of interest. Most scholars identify the sevenfold constitution of the cosmos as a main teaching of “The Secret Doctrine”, but do not delve any further into the topic. One reason for this seems to lie in the common notion that modern theosophy is a distinct expression of *western* esotericism that, despite its “oriental shift”, has a continuous history of *western* concepts or currents with only nominal transformation (in the literal sense) through the reception of oriental terms (Cf. Hanegraaff 1996).² Some scholars, however, attempt to identify the oriental sources of that shift.

Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke emphasizes that modern theosophy is based on Neo-Platonism and its conception of a threefold human being and that the theosophical notions are but clarifications: “*Isis Unveiled* upheld three principles; in later Theosophical texts seven principles” [original emphasis] (Goodrick-Clarke 2007, 9). Yet, in a concise overview of Western Esotericism, Goodrick-Clarke provides an interpretation regarding the history of this change.

The first formal statement of the sevenfold principle in humans was actually published in October 1881 by A. O. Hume [...]. By late 1882, Blavatsky had revised her view in the context of the septenary constitution of humans. (Goodrick-Clarke 2007, 220–221)³

² From a less systematic and more historiographical perspective, Hanegraaff has emphasized the need to maintain the concept of a particularly “western” esotericism (Hanegraaff 2015, 55–91); see further: Godwin 1994, specifically 379f.; Goodrick-Clarke 2008; von Stuckrad 2004; Santucci 2008, 37–63; Partridge 2013, 309–333; Bevir 1994, 747–767; Lubelsky 2012; French 2000.

³ See also: Rudbøg 2013.

This sums up the general tone of the scholarly debate, where the focus lays on the transformation of Blavatsky's thinking that witnessed a "shift of emphasis which divides her career into an early 'hermeticist' period (epitomized by *Isis Unveiled*) and a second *Oriental* one (the manifesto of which is *The Secret Doctrine*)" [original emphasis] (Hanegraaff 1996, 452). But, in this view, the shift is merely one of the terms rather than content: Hindu thought "influenced the Theosophical theory mainly by broadening the spectrum of its sources of reference" (Lubelsky 2012, 120). As we shall see in greater detail below, "*Isis Unveiled*" presents man as composed of three elements, while the later sevenfold scheme is consequently held to be indebted to the oriental shift. For Jeffrey Lavoie, this "would demarcate Theosophy from Spiritualism" (Lavoie 2012, 190) after the septenary constitution was firstly published in the article "Fragments of Occult Truth" (henceforth "Fragments"), and more systematically in "Esoteric Buddhism" (Cf. Lavoie 2012, 196–203). But on this view the demarcation was mostly rhetorical, and the early Theosophical Society "could in fact have been considered a Spiritualist organization" (Ibid. 363).⁴ What is more, the "Fragments" and "Esoteric Buddhism" represent, for Lavoie, Blavatsky's thinking while the roles of the actual authors are insignificant.

The sevenfold anthropology itself has received specific attention in only a few scholarly accounts. Jörg Wichmann is one exception to describe the theosophical anthropology regarding its oriental sources. Unfortunately, the author confines his article to later theosophical works and his interpretation of the orient falls prey to (Saidian) orientalism (Said 2003)⁵ and grants little insight into the historical debate (Wichmann 1983, 12–13). Julie Chajes (then Hall) takes an historical perspective and inquiries into the origin of the sevenfold constitution or *saptaparṇa* (Skt. *saptaparṇa*). She identifies a handful of different actors in the discourse about the septenary scheme, among whom Tallapragada Subba Row (1850–1890) holds a prominent position (Hall 2007, 19f.; Chajes 2019, 77–87). He occurs as a *vedānta* (Skt. *vedānta*) specialist in these discussions, who initially promoted

⁴ Rudbørg interprets theosophy directly opposed to Lavoie and takes a "longe durée" position in his argument: Blavatsky was concerned with so many topics and sources older than spiritualism that this "new occultism" cannot be seen as a variation of spiritualism (Rudbørg 2013, 357).

⁵ For an updated view on the debate with a specific focus on India see: King 1999; for a discussion of Said and his critics see: Young 2001, 383ff.; Conrad et al. 2013.

the sevenfold constitution, but eventually rejected the concept along with most of Blavatsky's theosophy after 1886 (Cf. Eek 1965, 665–667). Chajes concludes that the majority of Blavatsky's known sources – eastern as well as western – are based on the assumption of man as a triune being and consequently “it appears that the *saptaparna* originated with Theosophy despite its debt to Western esoteric and Eastern traditions” (Hall⁶ 2007, 21). Still, according to Chajes, Blavatsky integrated “Eastern religious Ideas” (which, unfortunately, remain unexplained in this account), and “her mature Theosophy as presented in her magnum opus *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) expanded it [the threefold constitution; UH] to seven” [original emphasis] (Hall 2007, 5). Moreover, James Santucci reaches at the heart of the matter in his editorial note in the “Theosophical History Journal” where Chajes' account is published, stating that even though the sevenfold constitution “may be considered the central teaching of theosophy [...] there is little certainty regarding the origins of this teaching” (Santucci 2007, 1). The reason for this, he explains, is owed in part to the unresolved question of the identity of the occult masters of Blavatsky, the *mahatmas*. They allegedly provided their knowledge to her and a small circle of confidantes through their letters and were most prominently received by Hume and Sinnett.

INTERIM CONCLUSION

The history of the Theosophical Society is frequently reconstructed along the following lines⁷: In the course of theosophy's “oriental shift”, Blavatsky transformed and expanded the threefold being of “Isis Unveiled” to a sevenfold one, which corresponds to the universal cosmic structure of sevens. Between “Isis Unveiled” and “The Secret Doctrine” there not only occurred the physical move to India, but a simultaneous turn to eastern or “Asian” teachings became apparent. In recent research, the septenary constitution is seen as a pivotal step in this “oriental shift” and is furthermore valued as a central theosophical doctrine. Owing to the terms used to name the principles and corresponding concepts which are predominantly taken

⁶ Now Chajes. The word *saptaparna* is given in “The Secret Doctrine”, but it does not seem to be used in the debates analysed in this paper.

⁷ There is an increasing number of notable exceptions, but they are not concerned with the septenary constitution so far (cf. Krämer and Strube 2020; Aspren and Strube 2021; Bergunder 2014, 398–426; Chajes 2021, 27–60; Harlass 2017, 164–186; Harlass 2020, 179–215).

from Sanskrit, it is plausible to assume that this shift refers to South Asian source material.

Two consequences arise from these assumptions: firstly, there must have been a reception of Indian scriptures that constituted the basis of the new teachings, most prominently the *saptaparna*. Secondly, these new teachings were expressions of Blavatsky's thinking which she "clothed" in oriental garments. Unfortunately, as of now, the obscurity of her sources persists and no Indian scriptures could be found containing anything close to the septenary constitution. What is more, it remains unclear how the concept of the sevenfold man and cosmic structure developed and what historical debates shaped, transformed, and caused it to "sediment" besides its first literary precipitation in "Esoteric Buddhism". What remains open is the question: Why did this shift occur? We will not be concerned with the source(s) of these teachings or the authors of the Mahatma Letters here. Instead, we will outline a portion of the *origin* (or *Entstehung*) of the septenary constitution and the prominent concept of reincarnation in the obvious phase of the shift, from the early 1880s until the publication of "Esoteric Buddhism" in 1883.

After a short glimpse into "Isis Unveiled", we will pursue the leads in the historic debate about the septenary constitution. Starting with its first occurrence, we will follow its development to its systematic description in "Esoteric Buddhism", concluding with a summary of the main discursive strands bound together in the book. In doing so, we hope to underline that an examination of the (empirical) historical discussion yields a better understanding of both, the conceptions of orient and occident, and the early history of the Theosophical Society with its central concepts. This is not to say that the analysis of possible source-materials does not grant important insights; on the contrary, this remains a central academic task nevertheless. Historicizing the debate shows that there has not been one single discrete set of doctrines which was gradually revealed to the public, and that, despite its explicitly oriental layout, the septenary constitution bears less of the oriental traits than one might expect. What rather comes to the fore is a process of negotiation of meaning(s). This process continued or, to put it more theoretically, reiterated and reshaped meanings that were already present in the discourse. Reconfigurations of known elements, by the very act of their reiteration, sedimented and thus constituted meaning. This process, at the same time, allowed for transformation, the appearance and the gradual sedimentation of new meanings (Cf. Butler 1995, 35–58; Sarasin 2003, 31ff.).

“ISIS UNVEILED” AND THE THREEFOLD MAN

Although a hard and ambivalent read, Blavatsky in “Isis Unveiled” generally accepts the threefold division of man. In formulating her critique of spiritualism, she rejects the possibility of materialization during séances, but otherwise accepts the spiritualist phenomena. These could be disembodied spirits, spirits of dead animals or *elementals* (e.g., Blavatsky 1877a, 69–70). Blavatsky deliberately emphasizes India’s importance for the universally accepted idea of the trinity of man with the Hindu *trimurti* (Skt. *trimūrti*) of *brahma*, which was fundamental for later traditions in other world regions. One of many examples, the *trimurti* was appropriated by Pythagoras in his famous triad and the concept prevails in humanity’s most ancient traditions (Blavatsky 1877a, xvi–xvii).

Reincarnation, understood as the “succession of physical human births upon this planet” (Ibid., 345), is a trickier case. This form of rebirth is declared almost impossible and unnatural. But it is hard to identify a coherent system as Blavatsky abruptly moves from one topic to another, and at times seems to accept reincarnation in the above sense when she talks about Buddha, the Dalai Lama and other reincarnated teachers (Ibid., 437–439). Still, the sections explicitly dealing with reincarnation are unmistakable: it *is* said to be possible in very few exceptional cases, and it only takes place on this planet. As soon as reason is developed in the newborn person, “there is no reincarnation on this earth, for the three parts of the triune man have been united together” (Ibid., 351, cf. 179; Blavatsky 1877b, 152). Furthermore, in “Isis Unveiled” there is no septenary principle to be found and like the above example, key sections rely on the threefold constitution. Nevertheless both, reincarnation and the threefold man, appeared to be contradicted in statements after 1880, evoking harsh criticism and disputes with their contemporaries for Blavatsky and her fellows.⁸ The sevenfold constitution was introduced and developed and the succeeding disputes and the view on reincarnation changed.

⁸ The meaning of reincarnation is ambiguous in “Isis Unveiled”, but the critical passages are unequivocal. Chajes closely examines this book and notes that, when read against the background of Blavatsky’s understanding of metempsychosis, the case becomes clearer. Blavatsky distinguishes metempsychosis, where the spiritual portion of man progresses through successive existences, and reincarnation, where man is reborn on earth again. Blavatsky

CONFUSION OVER “ISIS UNVEILED” – THEN AND NOW

Disagreement about the meaning of “Isis Unveiled” was frequent after its publication. Stainton Moses (1839–1892) thus welcomed “The Occult World” in order to provide necessary clarifications in 1881. He hoped for an exposition of the relation of theosophy and spiritualism, information about the mysterious adepts, and explanations about the phenomena. Moses, who was not only a theosophist, but also a famous London spiritualist medium and seer, and editor of the London spiritualist journal “Light”, assumed that with “The Occult World” “eventually evidence was gathered” (Moses 1881, 194). Disappointment soon followed, however, as Sinnett mostly describes Blavatsky’s feats with little formal argument in his book and relies on “Isis Unveiled” for explanations, including man as a threefold being (Cf. Sinnett 1881, 15ff.; 153ff.). In “The Occult World”, he ascribes the phenomena that were so famously featured in spiritualism to the agency of Blavatsky and the help of her Tibetan masters. Nevertheless, only little information is actually given on them in the book.

The debate about the phenomena, along with discussions over their character and value was common in contemporary papers and journals, particularly “Light” and the short lived “Spiritualist Newspaper” on the spiritualist side, and “The Theosophist” which addressed a more general, though mostly theosophical readership; in many cases both positions were inseparable (Oppenheim 1985, 42ff.).⁹ Moses had received messages from his *spirit guide* Imperator+ for years, which he published as “Spirit Identity” and “Spirit Teachings” and in a succession of letters in “Light” (Cf. Moses 1879; Moses 1894). He was one of the earliest theosophists and had known Olcott since 1875, trying to reconcile spiritualism and theosophy for years until he eventually withdrew his membership and turned away from the Society – mostly due to quarrels with Blavatsky and suspicions of fraud against her (Cf. Godwin 2013, 292ff.; Lavoie 2012, 77ff.).

was heavily criticized for these passages in the debate discussed below (see further: Chajes 2012, 128–150). More recently, Chajes also sees a deliberate change in Blavatsky’s attitude towards reincarnation – as we shall see below (Chajes 2017, 65–93; Chajes 2019; see also Blavatsky 1877a, 67ff.).

⁹ For the global scope of communication on the “occult” see: Green 2015, 383–393; Lavoie 2012.

Charles Carleton Massey (1838–1905), another of Olcott’s old friends and a fellow theosophist (Cf. Lavoie 2015), was interested in both movements as well, and in July 1881 called for moderation in the ongoing debate (Harrison 1881, 8). But the conflicts over the scope and value of the spiritualist explanations lay much deeper. As we have seen, “Isis Unveiled” aimed critically at spiritualism, and in the spiritualist papers theosophy and its concepts and theories were frequently discussed. Commonly the correspondents did not take issue with the combination of spiritualism and theosophy or occultism. But many wondered whether the notorious theosophical adepts were actually spirits themselves or rather mediums from the East. And not few thought of Blavatsky as a medium herself, although they often commented polemically on her abilities, which they perceived as “mere child’s play through her powerful mediumship” (Ibid., 14). Consequently, when systematic attempts emerged to explain spiritualist phenomena by means of the sevenfold constitution, the temperature of the debate ran high.

SPIRITUALISM AND THE OCCULT TEACHINGS

“The Theosophist’s” subtitle may be paradigmatic for its preoccupation with spiritualism, insofar as it names its concern with “Oriental Philosophy, Art, Literature, and Occultism: Embracing Mesmerism, Spiritualism, and other Secret Sciences” (Blavatsky 1880). Strikingly, the journal’s subtitle strengthened the connection with spiritualism and contemporary debates on the connection of religion and science (Cf. Bergunder 2016, 86–141). The British civil servant and theosophist Allan Octavian Hume (1829–1912) particularly related to spiritualism when he introduced the septenary constitution of man for the first time in his “Fragments of Occult Truth” (henceforth “Fragments”) in October 1881 (Blavatsky 1882, 17–22).

Hume, like Sinnett, was receiving letters, presumably from the Tibetan masters Koot Hoomi and Morya, who were both elaborating on the occult sciences. The two Englishmen, in turn, replied with manifold inquiries and criticism before they published condensed and restructured accounts of their correspondence in the “Fragments” and several other articles. Here, the two developed the occult teachings in response to ongoing disputes and they clearly addressed spiritualist positions. Thus, the “Fragments” constitute a nodal point in relating theosophy and spiritualism through the discussion of the sevenfold nature of man. Nevertheless, by the time “Esoteric Bud-

dhism" was published in 1883, there had arisen at least five systems of nomenclatures.

Hume depicted the sevenfold scheme in the first "Fragments" in order to explain the impossibility of human spirits' appearance at séances. With "The Theosophist's" wide readership and its spiritualist leanings in mind, Hume refers to previous correspondence of William H. Terry's (1836–1913), a spiritualist, member of the Theosophical Society and editor of the Australian "Harbinger of Light" (Eek 1965, 164–165).¹⁰ Terry argued that both the given facts and two decades of his own experience had proven to him that spiritualist phenomena were caused by disembodied spirits. Further evidence, in his view, recently came from India, which hinted at the reports of Blavatsky's abilities and "The Occult World" (Blavatsky 1882, 17). Hume responded that the spiritualist phenomena were caused by lifeless shells, lingering remains of the lower principles that were cast off after physical death. Only the lasting entity, the spiritual Ego, continued its progression through rebirth into a higher world (*Ibid.*, 18–19). Apparitions at séances were not dead persons, continued Hume against Terry's spiritualism, and their utterings were only remnants of the person's past existence and its volition. Consequently, the phenomena did not possess the "spirit identity" that the audiences perceived (*Ibid.*, 20), and Hume's wording clearly referred to the wider spiritualist discourse in contemporary papers (e.g., Moses 1881, 156). He even asserted that attempts to communicate with spirits were harmful and that the easier the contact – or *rapport* – could be established, the less pure or refined must have been their living predecessors.

With the "Fragments", the general tone and the theosophical narrative for the unfolding debate was set. Spiritualists, according to theosophical criticism, witnessed genuine phenomena, but their explanations were incorrect, while the occult theories of the Tibetan adepts provided the only correct elucidation. Occultism, then, substituted the seven principles for the trinity of man. Subba Row (1856–1890), Blavatsky's informant on the "esoteric Hindu teaching" (Godwin 1994, 329) argued in this vein as well when he denounced mediumism as "wicked sorcery". Here, the concept of the sevenfold constitution came as the property of Brahmanism and Buddhism (Blavatsky 1882, 93–98) – as we will see below. While many points

¹⁰ *The Harbinger of Light. A Monthly Journal Devoted to Zoistic Science, Free Thought, Spiritualism, and the Harmonial Philosophy.* Melbourne, 1870.

remained unclear to the readers, the idea of a larger number of principles extending the known tripartite division was tentatively accepted and some even easily integrated the new knowledge of man into their spiritualist concepts. A. F. Tindall assumed Blavatsky and her adepts might even help to “originate a better method of conducting our séances” (Moses 1881, 390).

In any case, there were several reasons for the general reluctance to accept the sevenfold scheme as a detailing of spiritualist theorizing. Theosophical rejection of disembodied spirits clearly posed a threat to spiritualist reasoning, while a long running debate on reincarnation (Cf. Godwin 1994, 340f.; Zander 1999, 472–498) and the strong theosophical condemnation of Christianity (Cf. Oppenheim 1985, 63–110; Owen 2004, 40–49) were ambiguously received at best, as was the new focus on the Orient. Although these aspects might have been embraced separately, the acceptance of the whole combination seems as exclusive to the theosophists in India as was their alleged contact with the Tibetan adepts. Moreover, their lack of credibility was common knowledge to virtually everyone outside of Blavatsky’s circle. Doubts about the existence of the *mahatmas*, the originality of Blavatsky’s powers, and often her credibility were challenged altogether (Cf. Lavoie 2012, 249–354). The theosophists did not temper their criticism either, and attempts to reconcile spiritualism and theosophy evoked even stronger defenses and fostered more detailed explanations of the mistakes of the former.

William Oxley (1823–1905) proclaimed his own combination of eastern and western wisdom in his adaption of the “Bhagavad Gita” (Skt. *bhagavad gītā*) in “The Philosophy of Spirit” (1881) (Cf. Oxley 1881; Bergunder 2006, 187–216). After a critical review in “The Theosophist” in December 1881 (Blavatsky 1882, 62–64), a dispute unfolded, particularly with Subba Row. Not only did Oxley maintain that his ideas and the occult teachings from the “Fragments” were “in perfect accord” (Ibid., 151), but he also referred to the seven principles of man and suggested that Indian scriptures ought to be interpreted and understood with Böhme and Swedenborg, which was an “absurd” suggestion in Blavatsky’s opinion (Ibid., 300). Row, in May 1882, retorted that Oxley had not understood the Indian traditions at all, particularly the idea of “seven entities in man” and denied Oxley the right to speak for the Indian tradition (and thus for esoteric knowledge as a whole) (Ibid., 192). Oxley then introduced the concept of hierosophy, rather than theosophy, as an approach to spiritual progress, for the latter’s requirements were “so hopelessly beyond attainment” (Ibid., 300). In hierosophy, the human being

was constituted by twelve envelopes in four degrees, rather than the sevenfold constitution.

Blavatsky's tone towards Oxley and the spiritualists in general was not least a factor in the growing wariness about theosophy too, as her often polemical remarks were widely noticed. William Harrison openly expressed his anger about theosophical attacks (Moses 1881, 194), as did eventually Stainton Moses. While in June 1881, he called his readers to be "tolerant with divergent opinions" (Harrison 1882, 4–5; Moses 1881) and to consider the theosophical theories in an impartial light, in the course of the year, he became increasingly skeptical as the harsh tone, the credibility of the theosophical explanations and the lack of evidence concerning the adepts seriously disturbed him. In late 1882, he appeared altogether disenchanted with occult reasoning, and drew a final conclusion: "I ceased to take any active part in the London Society [...] and have during this year resigned my membership" (Moses 1882, 537).

During the second half of 1882, the theosophists reacted with a deliberate change of theorizing – and defense. They struck a blow with a series of articles that touched directly upon the critique demonstrated above. These articles elaborated on "occult" teachings and endeavored to eliminate the vagueness of their theory by amassing further details of their doctrine. The authors aimed at theosophical debates too, frequently addressing spiritualist theosophists such as William Terry, George Wyld or Francesca Arundale, and, of course, Moses and Massey. Moreover, Subba Row kept fighting with Oxley and wrote a series of accounts on *vedanta* and "Aryan" esotericism. Around the same time, Hume published the third part of the "Fragments" and reinforced the rejection of disembodied spirits against the background of the sevenfold constitution, while also refuting Terry's insistence of his spiritualist convictions (Blavatsky 1882, 307–314), Sinnett referred to both, the accounts of Row and Hume, and proclaimed occultism "a higher sort of spiritualism" (Ibid., 293). Thus, for Sinnett too, the doctrines of the Tibetan adepts concerning the phenomena and spiritualism were reconcilable and "the only difference as regards this part of their science, between them and the best spiritual medium is that they know what they are about" (Ibid., 294). Nevertheless, the Indian theosophists claimed exclusive access to esoteric truth which was based on the septenary constitution of man. And more precisely, in spite of its universal reach, this truth came via the orient.

EAST AND WEST

The reports of Blavatsky and Olcott in India in 1879 attracted immediate attention and accounts of their travels were printed in papers of different genres in India and Europe. For the spiritualists, not only did the phenomena which Blavatsky claimed to bring about in her “Manifestations in the Far East” (Harrison 1881, 13–14) become an issue. Spiritualists also discussed the general value of eastern teachings for spiritualism, bearing a vast amount of orientalist undertones. On the one hand, distrust and rejection of the theosophical doctrines abounded, not least because “Hindoo mystification acting on Western credulity brought out the Theosophical Society. [But] from an inflated people comes no salvation” (Harrison 1881, 45). Similarly degrading attitudes occurred among authors who connected spiritualism with Christianity, opposing the “monstrous creations of Oriental mythology” (Moses 1881, 222). On the other hand, the possibility of access to “eastern” wisdom appeared attractive and tempting, as we have already seen in the quote from Tindall above. Bringing together spiritualism with “oriental” knowledge, an anonymous author suggested that the spiritualists should follow eastern sages, as “Fakirs, talapoins [Buddhist “clergy”; the author], lamas or Yogis [...] have passed the dangerous threshold of physical mediumship” (Ibid., 120). Imagining the orient in this context thus ranged from romanticization and exoticism to colonial or European hubris – in each case, the orient was represented as one’s mysterious other (Cf. van der Veer 2001, particularly chapters three and four, 55–105; King 1999).

Regarding the sevenfold constitution, the eastern focus is particularly pertinent, for its oriental affiliation was explicit. The given systems of nomenclature listed (mostly) Sanskrit vocabulary, explanations referred to Hindu or Buddhist teachings and the line between eastern and western lore was drawn in increasingly bold strokes. While Hume named only three out of seven principles in Sanskrit (second: *jīvatma* [Skt. *jīvātmā*], third: *linga sarīra* [*līṅga śarīra*], fourth: *kamarūpa* [*kāma rūpa*]) (Blavatsky 1882, 17–22), other designations emerged in Row and Blavatsky (Ibid., 292–294), and the first attempt of Sinnett to grasp the oriental designations in January 1882 shows an entirely different scheme with Tibetan wording (Barker 1973, 376–382).¹¹

¹¹ The historical contextualization of this case offers remarkable insights on the wider orientalist context, which I will have to postpone to elsewhere. Sinnett gave separate principles for man and the cosmos and relied on (unclear) Tibetan vocabulary in this early sketch from January 1882. In my view, one can see the theosophical reception of (early) orientalist works here.

In "Esoteric Buddhism", Sinnett finally names all the seven in Sanskrit and English, omitting the former Tibetan vocabulary (Sinnett 1883, 20f.). Obviously, the exact nomenclature or even the literary origin of these principles appeared secondary and the mere assertion of the seven principles as opposed to other systems must have been the dominant aim.

In this process the exclusivism of theosophical access to esoteric truth was further corroborated by the use of allegedly oriental terms and in contradistinction to the west. Hume introduced his response to Terry by underscoring the fact that his explanations were "almost wholly unknown to Western nations" (Blavatsky 1882, 18), something which he further emphasized in the second "Fragments", by holding that intellectually capable spiritualists "will accept the aid of that nobler illumination which the elevated genius and untiring exertion of Occult Sages of the East have provided" (Ibid., 160). Sinnett repeatedly rang the same bell and critically reviewed Kingsford and Maitland's "The Perfect Way" by preaching against the authors' (and readers') ignorance "for want of knowledge [...] of modern Western thinkers" (Ibid., 234). Nevertheless, in "Light" in August 1882, he omitted the degradation of the west or spiritualism when he mentioned "true science [...] the accumulated knowledge of a vast number of thinkers" (Moses 1882, 412).

By this time, however, the discussion had begun to turn against the Indian theosophists. Moses prefaced Sinnett's above mentioned letter considered "the evidence weak to the extreme" (Ibid.). Kingsford and Maitland, although in the midst of spiritualist critique too, gained popularity with similar claims concerning esotericism, but with greater openness towards Christianity. And a debate regarding *discrepancies* had flared up since June 1882 that had begun with a challenge of the inconsistencies between the affirmation of "disembodied spirits" in "Isis Unveiled" and their rejection in the "Fragments" (Blavatsky 1882, 225–226). Now, a pivotal facet of the contemporary discussions was included in the discord over the (septenary) constitution of man, one that has been regarded a central theme in the theosophical turn to the east: reincarnation.

REINCARNATION

As "the reincarnation debate was a hardy perennial of spiritualism, rising and falling every decade or so" (Godwin 1994, 340), it seems that it was only a matter of time until this would come up in the esoteric teachings of the theosophists in Indian. But the statements

concerning reincarnation are ambivalent, even contradictory in the eyes of the critics. Chajes has argued in favor of consistent theorizing of theosophical reincarnation. Theosophical implicitly meaning Blavatsky here, Chajes argues that the new theories that developed in and from the “Fragments” onwards were consistent with earlier statements of Blavatsky. Other interlocutors basically facilitated the transition between Blavatsky’s major works: “In short, the ideas Hume outlined had elements in common with those of both Blavatsky’s earlier and later periods” (Chajes 2019, 33). And this later period comprised the shift from the tripartite anthropology to the septenary one, and from metempsychosis to reincarnation. “Presumably, Blavatsky found her later doctrine of reincarnation more appealing than the metempsychosis theory she had discarded around 1882” (Ibid., 85). Around midyear 1882, contradictory theosophical statements appeared. Sinnett, reviewing “The Perfect Way”, maintained the rebirth of the spiritual Ego – the individuality – into a new *personality*, a new set of lower principles. He therefore stressed that “re-incarnation, in the next higher objective world, is one thing; re-incarnation on this earth is another. Even that takes place over and over again” (Blavatsky 1882, 234). As a result, many readers were left confused as Blavatsky had apparently rejected rebirth on earth in “Isis Unveiled”. In their replies Kingsford and Maitland declared to represent *esoteric* knowledge themselves, combining eastern and western knowledge, but arriving at a fourfold constitution of man (Ibid., 295–296; Moses 1882, 127–128, 168–170). Conversely, Blavatsky accused them of a lack of understanding of the sevenfold constitution, spawning the idea of “retrogression in rebirth” (Blavatsky 1883, 10–11). The intricate discussions about the exact place of rebirth, the relation of ascent and descent in reincarnation, and other aspects do not need to concern us here. What is crucial is the application of the sevenfold constitution as the foundation of the theosophical theories.

Turning against the alleged discrepancies, Blavatsky argued that reincarnation on earth is indeed possible and that there is no contradiction with former statements, which have been merely preliminary tasters of the teachings now made public. Even though she rejected again spirits understood as the souls of the dead, she explicitly adopted reincarnation of the upper principles (Blavatsky 1882, 225–226). The dispute continued well into the following year with the Indian theosophists gradually adjusting their position – which still did not satisfy their critics. Charles Massey sought to expose the ambiguities with minute inquiries (Moses 1882, 323) and after some to-and-froing austerely concludes a “desire to see it

cleared" (Ibid.). The theosophists even lost their prominent author Hume in September 1882, who had written extensively on the subject in the third installment of the "Fragments" (Blavatsky 1882, 307–314), but eventually became frustrated himself with the occult uncertainties. After a raging letter in "The Theosophist" he was dismissed from his theosophical duties (Ibid., 324–326).

Subba Row held the most prominent position for the "eastern" or explicitly "oriental" side, particularly as he could claim to represent the Indian position by virtue of his own background.¹² In February 1883, he again emphasized the impossibility of *western science* to gain a comprehensive understanding of the universe as it was unable to understand the relation of mind and matter, "[n]or is it likely to solve the mystery hereafter, unless it calls Eastern occult science to its aid" (Blavatsky 1883, 105). He held that the septenary constitution of the human being and the universe had already been recognized by the "great Adwaitee philosophers of ancient Aryavarta" (Ibid.; Blavatsky 1882, 94) even though he admitted differences as to the exact number of principles. Accordingly, all matter proved to be a mere illusion under the impressions of the only real entity – mind or *purush* (Skt. *puruṣa*), the *parabrahman* (Skt. *parabrahman*) in *advaita vedanta* (Blavatsky 1883, 105). On several occasions, Row elaborated on *advaita* and defended the seven principles in theosophical concepts, although he was to change his mind drastically by 1886 (Cf. Hall 2007, 19f.; Eek 1965, 661–673). But in the early 1880s, he fulfilled the role of the Indian advocate of occultism and Blavatsky knew "no better authority in INDIA in anything, concerning the esotericism of the Advaita philosophy" (Blavatsky 1883, 118).

As Sinnett replaced Hume as author of the "Fragments", he consequently elaborated on the septenary constitution, reincarnation, and the general outline of occult teachings. His statements considered virtually all the topics we have discussed here (Cf. particularly Blavatsky 1883, 132–37). Passages from these accounts would enter "Esoteric Buddhism" which he drafted on his way home to London, enabling him to respond to the disputes outlined above. The sevenfold nature of man now served as a legitimizing tool for the occult teachings of the Tibetan adepts. This focus was mainly directed against spiritualist theories about spirits, against their explanations of mediumism and the whole spiritualist endeavor. Further-

¹² For a brief introduction to Row and his conversations with Blavatsky and her later concept of the Divine see: Chajes 2021.

more, Christianity was addressed in several ways, predominantly in a polemical spirit.

Reincarnation, according to Sinnett's final explanations, meant rebirth on earth or higher spheres in a new personality, while the individuality or spiritual Ego persisted and continued its evolutionary course. The systematic depiction of the occult teachings was clearly a response to the controversy about theosophical *discrepancies* and the concepts of Kingsford and Maitland. In "Esoteric Buddhism", Sinnett would present the full designations of the principles he had introduced in the "Fragments" shortly before. In so doing, he further corroborated the exclusivity of occultism, excluding western knowledge and drawing upon an obscure (and fluid) nomenclature, a "Theosophical hybrid Sanskrit" (Hammer 2004, 123). And he presented a concept that came to be seen as a central teaching of theosophy to the present.

CONCLUSION

We have examined the emergence of the systematic sevenfold anthropology in theosophical theorizing. Departing from both the predominant focus on Blavatsky's "thinking" and the assumption that Sanskrit designations, concepts of reincarnation and so on are essentially eastern or oriental, we rather historicized the debates leading to the first systematic articulation of that concept in "Esoteric Buddhism". The historical debate suggests that the emergence of the sevenfold constitution of man was to a surprisingly small degree a reception of Asian scriptures, its religious thought or eastern wisdom (whatever that may be), but rather instead a reaction to and intervention into the historic debates and quarrels in the "esoteric" field of discourse. The ongoing rejection of spiritualism was obvious following the introduction of the septenary constitution, and after alleged discrepancies with "Isis Unveiled", it became the focal point in theosophical theorizing.

But it would be too simple to argue that these points were mostly directed against spiritualism on its own terms. A clear distinction between spiritualism and theosophy or, for that matter, occultism, cannot be drawn from the historical context. Blavatsky's camp, as it were, exuded a strenuous effort to defend and legitimize this specific distinction in a bid to undermine attempts to combine spiritualism and theosophy, and to mark out the latter by its establishment of both a specifically occult doctrine and an exclusivity of access to it through (the Tibetan adepts') eastern lore. The interchangeable

terms of the seven principles, the “hot topics” of the contentions, and not least the lack of extended engagement with discussants from India or Asian background at all, corroborate the conclusion that there was less “orient” in this debate than both the historical self-perception (and representation), as well as present day research, would suggest. Several questions remain to be addressed in future research. That is, for example, the emergence of the specific names of the seven principles, the controversial status of the *mahatmas*, and in particular further influences on and (local) interlocutors of the theosophists beyond those immediate debates we have attempted to elucidate above.

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