The Theosophical Reception of Buddhism

Ulrich Harlass[1]

Abstract: When the Theosophical leaders developed the intricate 'esoteric doctrine', many aspects of Buddhist philosophy became prominent points of reference. Even though Buddhist teachings are commonly held to be a central aspect of Theosophy to the present day, it is not clear how exactly 'Western esotericism' became 'Orientalised'—and if at all. This paper reconsiders the connection between Theosophy and Buddhism that is predominantly depicted as an encounter of 'East and West', assuming two distinct spheres meeting in the course of the globalisation of 'Western esotericism'. Furthermore, H.P. Blavatsky commonly appears as the central agent who explored Buddhism and (Asian) Oriental thought while shaping her Theosophical doctrines, particularly during her years in India. Such viewpoint excludes important aspects as it is based on categories that are themselves products of this discourse. This article focuses on the historic (discursive) production of 'Buddhism' and 'Theosophy', as opposed to the 'West'. The analysis of the debates and disputes between Theosophists and a wide range of interlocutors will illuminate how and why Buddhism emerged as a central subject. These positions often defy clear cut categories (e. g., spiritualist, Christian, Theosophical) and I will demonstrate how much 'Buddhism' in its esoteric Theosophical reading depended upon the quarrels between the Theosophists in India and their opponents.

THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY, ITS GLOBALISATION, AND BUDDHISM

In recent years, academic perspectives on a globalised world have become increasingly convincing, recognising the importance of intercultural exchange and cross-cultural entanglement (Randeria & Römhild 2013), where previously there had been predominant assumptions of a global 'Westernisation' of the modern world (cf. Bayly 2004: 1–22 & 325–365). Research on esotericism and the Theosophical Society, however, has only slowly begun to consider such perspectives (cf. Rudbøg & Sand 2020; Chajes 2021b), with few notable exceptions that reflect a more theoretical approach (Bergunder

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2020; Krämer & Strube 2020; Maltese & Strube 2021). This is all the more remarkable given the fact that the Theosophical Society, with its Oriental, and more specifically Buddhist leanings and its wide transnational distribution, is considered instrumental for modern esotericism and the global context of its emergence—even when deemed 'Western esotericism' (cf. Hanegraaff 2015 & 2020; Forshaw et al. 2019; Partridge 2020). Recent perspectives on global entanglements based on poststructuralist epistemology enable us to approach the question of how Buddhism 'entered' Theosophical discourses in a different light. In the following article, I will critically discuss research perspectives on ('Western') esotericism, its globalisation, and Buddhism. From that, I will then deduce my thesis. Finally, I will examine one of the earliest historical debates that led to the inclusion of Buddhism in Theosophical doctrine, that is, 'esoteric Buddhism'.[2]

Numerous academic accounts on Theosophy share the narrative about the Society's affiliation with Buddhism, drawing on the idea of the globalisation of 'Western esotericism'. Broadly speaking, the Theosophical Society, as an esoteric organisation founded by members from the USA and Europe who drew on a range of so-called esoteric currents (cf. Hanegraaff 1996 & 2019; Hammer 2013), is considered a Western phenomenon. It then globalised and appropriated key concepts from the Orient simultaneously. Accordingly, Blavatsky's two-volume *Isis Unveiled* (1877) impressively illustrates this 'Western esoteric theme' (Goodrick-Clarke 2008: 215; cf. Hanegraaff 2020), but a crucial change towards systematic Theosophical doctrine occurred when members of the society shifted focus on Asia in the late 1870s. Subsequently, this narrative continues, they started referring to Oriental religions and literally globalised Western esotericism not only through establishing numerous branches abroad, but the founders even moved to India, bringing 'Western esotericism' to 'the East' (Stuckrad 2004: 122–132; cf. Partridge 2012; Goodrick-Clarke 2008). Even though alert to the problems of such perspective, Rudbøg summarises: 'In order to revive and expand the Theosophical

[2] In this article, I use the terms Orient, Oriental, Buddhism, Buddhist, etc. as quotations that arise from the historical debates I analyse. For example, 'Buddhism in theosophical doctrine' denotes claims and references in the historical debate that refer to what is called 'Buddhism' by the different speakers in this context. I do not imply that there is a phenomenological, primordial 'Orient', or 'Orientalist' or other 'Eastern' or 'Buddhist'- or Western-thought, tradition or, ultimately, essence.

Society, from 1879 onward India became central to the Society's new identity and resulted in the first phase of the globalization of Western esotericism' (2020: 254). Nevertheless, the currents bound together by the Theosophists originated from the geographical West and its history of *enlightenment* (cf. Hanegraaff 2012, 2016 & 2020). I will challenge this view after a closer look at how the relation between Buddhism and Theosophy is depicted in academic accounts.

Theosophy and Buddhism

'Western esotericism' as manifest in the Theosophical Society, however, is explained based on the assumption of its Orientalisation, including an adaptation of Buddhist thought. Therefore, Blavatsky refined her philosophy after *Isis Unveiled* and eventually presented her elaborate *Secret Doctrine* in 1888, which is considered—by Theosophists as well as many historians—to contain the Theosophical core-teachings, her 'mature Theosophy' (Goodrick-Clarke 2004: 14; cf. Hanegraaff 1996: 252–256), and hence a 'shift away from Spiritualism towards occultism and Orientalism' (Lavoie 2012: 212). This reorientation towards Oriental religions had a lasting impact. Through its '[Orientalisation], Theosophy became a force of religious innovation, […] integrating terms and concepts from Indian religions that had never been part of Western esotericism before' (Hanegraaff 2013: 130–131). For this 'Oriental shift', which includes teachings such as karma (Sanskrit: *karma*), reincarnation, nirvana (Sanskrit: *nirvāṇa*), or a specific sevenfold (or septenary) cosmology based on a Sanskrit nomenclature (Hall [Chajes] 2007), Buddhism apparently was pivotal (Godwin 2013; Santucci 2006; Chajes 2021).

Although Buddhism was mentioned previously (cf. Godwin 2006; Jackson 1981: 157–173), research basically agrees that Theosophical interest in Buddhism boosted after 1879. This connection and its public impression solidified in particular with the founders' formal commitment to Buddhism in Ceylon in May 1880 (cf. Prothero 1996; Hanegraaff 2020; Rudbøg & Sand 2020). Eventually, it was even customary for contemporaries of Blavatsky to identify Theosophy with (esoteric) Buddhism (Tweed 2000: 51; cf. Jackson 1981). As with the general connection between Theosophy and the Orient, many scholars are inconclusive regarding the link to Buddhism as well. Despite a vast amount of valuable research, this general inconclusiveness prevails—as I will

show in the next section. In one of the earliest academic accounts dealing with the historical link between Theosophy and the Orient, Carl T. Jackson maintains that the Theosophical Society was 'dominantly a Western spiritualist society' (Jackson 1981: 161). Yet, according to Jackson, Theosophy's doctrinal sourcebook, *The Secret Doctrine*, 'reflected much greater indebtedness to Oriental thought' (ibid.: 166) that was a result of the Theosophists' commitment to 'the promotion of Oriental ideas, particularly Hindu and Buddhist conceptions' (ibid.: 169). Joscelyn Godwin states similarly ambivalently that *The Secret Doctrine* is a form of 'modern Neo-gnosticism' (Godwin 1994: 377), and yet, Blavatsky advocated 'Eastern' thought and thus made Theosophy become 'the main vehicle for Hindu and Buddhist philosophies to enter the Western consciousness' (ibid.: 379). Similarly, Goodrick-Clarke maintains that Blavatsky 'assimilated Buddhist ideas into her eclectic Theosophy' (Goodrick-Clarke 2008: 219), and Prothero finds in *Isis Unveiled* 'a first step […] in the direction of Asia' (Prothero 1996: 59), with a mutual influence of everyone involved in the encounter. Furthermore, he assumes 'the Buddhisticization of America and the Americanization and Protestantism of Buddhism', but both entities persist as it 'is difficult to change one's deep-structure assumptions' (ibid.: 182).

The above-mentioned accounts on esotericism seem to have established a historical narrative that prevails to the present: in Theosophy and Buddhism there was an encounter between two cultural spheres, and even despite possible 'creolization' (ibid.: ix), Kipling's proverbial rhyme seems to apply that 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain should meet' (consciously omitting the poem's clue, of course; Kipling 1899: n. n.).

In more recent scholarship, the perspective shifted towards a focus on the globalisation of (Western) esotericism. Hanegraaff wishes to abandon a universal (ahistorical) category of esotericism (Hanegraaff 2016: 155–159), aiming at the study of the globalisation of Western esotericism. He recently clarified concerning the Theosophical Society that 'in their sincere efforts to give a voice to Buddhism, the founders ended up promoting what they believed Buddhism should be all about', i.e., *their* imagination of Buddhism (Hanegraaff 2020: 65). In this regard, numerous scholars provide similar arguments (cf. Hammer 2004 & 2015; Goodrick-Clarke 2008; Partridge 2013 & 2015; Chajes 2017, 2019 & 2021; Rudbøg 2013; Rudbøg & Sand 2020; Bester 2018). What these approaches

have in common, is that 'East' and 'West' are distinct categories that come into cross-cultural contact, nevertheless understanding Theosophy and the prototypical 'Western esotericism' of Theosophical doctrine via its Oriental shift. In principle, this type of narrative even remains persistent in otherwise thorough research on the problematic Orientalist representations of the Orient in the history of Theosophy (cf. Godwin 2006; Partridge 2015; Chajes 2019: 160–175; Mukhopadyay 2019). This is particularly striking as most researchers do acknow-ledge the shortcomings in the representation of 'Orient and Occident', or 'East and West', to the effect that the Hinduism or Buddhism of Western esotericists, is labelled 'imagination' (Lubelsky 2012: 81; Hanegraaff 2020: 46), 'invention' (Chajes 2019), or plain 'Orientalism' (cf. Godwin 2006; Partridge 2015).

The Global Production of Meaning

My main concern is to survey the emergence and signification(s) of 'Buddhism' in Theosophical discourse. However, I will not discuss the inherent problems with the term 'Western esotericism' in more detail (cf. Harlass 2020 & 2022; Strube 2020). The question remains, which 'Buddhism' did the Theosophists encounter in their search for the occult doctrines, and what meaning was produced of it, if Buddhism was not simply there as an historical entity?

Richard King observed what applies to the study of esotericism as well: '[t]he existence of a world religion known as "Buddhism" has been a largely unquestioned assumption both in academic scholarship and in popular conceptions of "religion"' (King 1999: 143). He then demonstrates 'Buddhism's' familiar development in the nineteenth century under the auspices of Orientalist scholarship with its central premises of a textual 'nostalgia for origins' (ibid.: 118, see also: 62–72; cf. Masuzawa 2005: 121–145). Consequently, these origins were sought after in the teachings of the historical Buddha as contained in the oldest, most 'authentic' Buddhist scriptures that could be deciphered exclusively by (European) Orientalist scholarship (King 1999: 145–147). Nevertheless, the context of the historical emergence of the general category of religion, as well as its derivatives (hence indispensable for the concept itself) such as Buddhism or Theosophy, was global (cf. Berkwitz 2006). Christopher Bayly has argued that the (re-)emergence of religion in the late nineteenth century needs to be interpreted along the lines of global

developments and that 'these changes [of religions] were cumulative and interrelated at a world level' (2004: 334). Similarly, for Sebastian Conrad, Theosophy and Buddhism are prime examples of the global entanglement of religion, where global and local developments are mutually imbricated (Conrad 2018: 582–660).

If we maintain that discourses on religion, Buddhism, Theosophy, etc., have emerged in a global context, the question remains how this affects our approach to the emergence of Buddhism in Theosophical doctrine. Postcolonial scholarship has offered insights for decades that, in my view, can be fruitfully adapted to the study of esotericism. Richard King indicates a further shift away from the common notion of a Western invention, stressing the necessity to put 'emphasis upon the interaction between Western Orientalists and the Asian subjects they are purporting to study' (King 1999: 149). Charles Hallisay, whom King refers to, concludes that nineteenth-century 'Buddhism' was a product of Orientalists and local agents equally: 'we will inevitably have to rethink our conceptualizations of Buddhism as a translocative tradition with a long and self-consciously distinct history but which is at the same time a tradition dependent on local conditions for the production of meaning' (Hallisay 1995: 51). Michael Bergunder has further elaborated on these insights and connected them with recent approaches of global history: Christianity, Buddhism, or esotericism 'were the products of multidirectional discourses and entangled relationships on a global scale' (Bergunder 2020a: 313; cf. Bergunder 2014b; Chajes 2021b). In other words, the meaning of Buddhism—and this holds true for Theosophy as well—was constantly negotiated before the backdrop of the global context that framed the emergence of such discourses in the nineteenth century. It is the historian's objective to expose this context's contingent historicity, its fragile 'sedimentation' that takes place through the continuous 'resignification' of meaning and make it thus available for understanding and critique (cf. Butler 1995). Consequently, my focus will rest on the negotiations about East and West, or, more specifically, on the significations of Buddhism and its varied representations in the context of Theosophy's Oriental shift (see also: Hall 1992; Harlass 2021; Randeria & Römhild 2013).

Therefore, as I will show below, it is doubtful to maintain that 'Western speakers'—mostly Blavatsky—almost exclusively 'discovered' (the cultural

entity) Buddhism on the grounds of Orientalist research and further popular readings. Instead, contemporary controversies and contentions serve as proper starting points to analyse the specific production of meaning(s). Accordingly, I will investigate pivotal contemporary debates and trace their mutual influences as they negotiate the relation of Theosophy and Buddhism. It can be expected that Asian Buddhists have also influenced the new teachings and thus became entangled with Theosophy and *vice versa*. But I will show that this has hardly been the case in those specific discussions. The examination of aforementioned historic source materials might be a first step in the necessary (and far expandable) endeavour that could be termed 'provincializing esotericism' (cf. Chakrabarty 2007).

Considering the Oriental shift and the Theosophical reception of Buddhism, I ought to put emphasis on the vivid debates in the periodicals of the time that mark a crucial place for the historical contentions (Morrison 2008; Oppenheim 1985: 44–49). In this, research on esotericism generally agrees with global history (cf. Bayly 2004: 456–459; cf. Hermann 2015). Contributions to the periodicals continually 'produced', challenged, changed, and temporarily fixated (or 'sedimented') the meaning of Theosophy and Buddhism, and they did so in the frames of global discourses. The pivotal publications comprise *The Theosophist*, the mouthpiece of the Theosophists in India with an international readership and correspondence, published in Bombay, and the two London-based papers *Light* and *The Spiritualist Newspaper* (henceforth *Spiritualist*).

First, I will delve briefly into A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* that constitutes the first Theosophical publication with explicit reference to Buddhism (as the *Buddhist Catechism* was meant for the consumption of Singhalese Buddhists). Furthermore, the book is often classified as the pivotal step in Theosophy's integration of Buddhism that paved the way for later Theosophical Oriental doctrine and key concepts in *The Secret Doctrine*. Secondly, after this general overview, I will deduce the central themes for the analysis of the debates in the periodicals that lead to the putatively Buddhist teachings in Sinnett's book. Finally, I will analyse those debates and their 'productions'.

THE 'DISCOVERY' OF BUDDHISM

Esoteric Buddhism

One of the key changes between Blavatsky's two major works involved the depiction of 'fundamental sets of ideas: evolution, man's septenary constitution, karma and reincarnation, and after-death states' (Goodrick-Clarke 2004: 14; cf. Hammer 2004: 253–55). Practically all of these teachings made their first literary appearance in *Esoteric Buddhism*—a strong focus on Blavatsky in scholarly accounts on Theosophy conceals this to an extent, but nevertheless is a well-established assessment among scholars (e. g., Godwin 2006; Rudbøg 2013 & 2020; Bester 2018; Chajes 2019). The book not only features Buddhism prominently for the first time in Theosophical theorising but is also considered the first systematic statement of 'mature Theosophy' that was fully represented in Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (cf. Bester 2018: 105; Lavoie 2012: 212–219).

Esoteric Buddhism contrasts considerably with Sinnett's former publication, *The Occult World*, for its systematic character, providing an in-depth description of occult teachings pointing explicitly to Buddhism. According to Sinnett, esoteric Buddhism originated at a significantly older stage than that of the (historic) Buddha, who merely modernized the occult science. On a functional level, esoteric Buddhism substituted the occult philosophy from *The Occult World*, where Buddhism stood next to further ancient traditions and their 'science of the magi' (Sinnett 1881: 3–6). Two years later, Buddhism became the frame of Theosophical occultism, and Sinnett highlighted his own occult source, the Tibetan (implicitly Buddhist) Mahatmas. He claimed to present what these adepts revealed to him—albeit considerable doubts were expressed at that time already and even by himself (cf. Santucci 2007; French 2000: 132–151; cf. Sinnett 1986: 16–24).

Sinnett now established Buddha's teaching as the exoteric tradition closest to the esoteric truth behind it, and later Buddha's tenets had a profound influence on all successive religions (Sinnett 1883a: viii). His coeval Orientalists accordingly treat but the surface of the Buddhist exoteric doctrine and are thus ostensibly eliminated as proper sources on Buddhism (ibid.: 3–7). Nevertheless, Orientalist works have indubitably been a crucial source for Sinnett, as for example the accounts of Herrmann Oldenberg, T. W. Rhys

Davids, and even the staunch Blavatsky-critic Arthur Lillie. Consequently, Sinnett adopts characterisations of Buddhism from several Orientalist works (for a good overview see Chajes 2019: 166–179). Even though reference to Buddhism is less frequent than one might expect, three topics stand out in *Esoteric Buddhism*: the historic Buddha, the doctrine of reincarnation and devachan, and the inherent science of Buddhist lore. As mentioned above, after the historic Buddha received his knowledge of perennial wisdom, he passed it on when he was reborn as the great eighth century Vedanta-philosopher Shankaracharya (Sanskrit: Śaṅkarācārya) (Sinnett 1883a: 140–159, here: 154). This argument substantiates the universality of Buddhist teachings, and also Oriental esoteric superiority in general by establishing a link to a most popular discourse on Hinduism at that time, i.e. Advaita Vedanta (King 1999; cf. Bergunder 2020a; Halbfass 1981; Mühlematter 2022).

According to Sinnett, Buddha taught the 'real' form of evolution that is material as well as spiritual. His antique occult teachings are state-of-the-art science, and indeed, reincarnation is exactly that: 'a sober scientific achievement' of evolution (Sinnett 1883a: 142). With these doctrines being both Buddhist (i.e. Oriental) and scientific, Sinnett shields occult philosophy against two objections, that is, against the impeachment of the validity or rationality of occultism, and furthermore against 'Western' criticism in general. I will show the emergence of these arguments in detail below. Sinnett's account provides a systematic theory of reincarnation, which was a big surprise for most, as Theosophy (and most prominently, Blavatsky) was considered dismissive of reincarnation (see below; cf. Zander 2006: 985–990; Chajes 2017).

In sum, *Esoteric Buddhism* is considered as the first account providing all the basic tenets to constitute the momentous change to what is otherwise seen as Blavatsky's systematic 'mature Theosophy'. Nevertheless, it remains unclear how the allegedly Oriental elements entered Theosophical theorising apart from a general late nineteenth-century 'vogue of Buddhism' (McMahan 2008) and the integration of Orientalist knowledge. Even when the roots of these teachings may be traced back to the Mahatma letters, which in turn are attributed to Blavatsky (cf. Bester 2018; Hammer 2015; Lavoie 2012), the circumstances of their origin are still at dispute.

Negotiating Buddhism and Theosophy against Christianity

In order to trace the Theosophical 'discovery' of Buddhism, it is necessary to consider the main debates the Theosophists were involved in—with Spiritualism and Christianity standing out most prominently. Whether the Oriental shift began with *Isis Unveiled* (cf. Blavatsky 1877a/b) or after the famous 'conversion' of the two Theosophical leaders to Buddhism, a constant of Blavatsky's main concerns was her criticism of Spiritualism (cf. Lavoie 2012: 35–44) and polemics against Christianity (Hanegraaff 1996: 450–451; cf. Rudbøg 2013: 206–250). In *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky openly highlights that 'this volume is particularly directed against theological Christianity, the chief opponent of free thought' (Blavatsky 1877b: iv), and she never abandoned this attitude (cf. Goodrick-Clarke 2004: 8–11).

Nevertheless, '[t]ensions within the Society around the issue of Christianity were evident from the outset, but they came to a head during the early 1880s' (Owen 2004: 40). In the *Theosophist's* first volume from October 1879 to October 1880, Buddhism was exposed by prominent speakers—among them Buddhists from Ceylon. The famous Singhalese monks Sumangala, Gunananda, and Terunnanse (cf. Bretfeld 2012) explained basic currents of Singhalese Buddhism (cf. Blavatsky 1880b; Gunananda 1880; Sumangala 1880a; 1880b; Terunnanse 1880). Nevertheless, the integration of and explicit reference to Buddhism in Theosophical reasoning occurred later—and with different interlocutors. One of the main Theosophical targets was Christianity.

In spring 1880, Olcott struggled to conceal his disdain for Christian interpretations of Theosophy as expressed by George Wyld, the then head of the Theosophical London Lodge. In his inaugural address in March 1880, Wyld emphasised the bond between Theosophy and Christianity. Against the growing interest in the Orient, South Asian Buddhism in particular, Wyld argued that Jesus Christ was the prototypical adept who 'attained the full spiritual condition' (Wyld quoted in: Olcott 1880: 143). Olcott's comment on this speech reveals his attitude towards Christianity and his growing focus towards the Asian East, even despite the inclusive wording. He reassured his readers that 'our Oriental friends will see practical evidence of the truly republican and cosmopolitan nature of the Theosophical Society', and voiced doubts as to whether Jesus was the son of God and even questioned his

existence as a whole. 'Nor do I see that the ideal character of Jesus is any better than that of Gautama, if so noble" (ibid.).

While the Theosophical connection to Buddhism intensified by Blavatsky and Olcott's 'conversion' to Buddhism in Ceylon in May 1880 and by Olcott's *Buddhist Catechism* (Olcott 1881), these events do not provide insight into the reception of 'Buddhist thought'. Hardly any Theosophical reasoning was related to these circumstances, much opposed to two years later, when *Esoteric Buddhism* bore the paradigmatic connection with Buddhism. Consequently, a considerable development must have taken place during that time. I will trace in the next section how Buddhism was increasingly considered to represent central aspects of occultism by Theosophists in India. These claims emerged due to intricate imbrications with and constant differentiation from competing positions which considerably influenced the emergence of Theosophical doctrine. And the debate was constituted by a global historical discourse on religion and Buddhism. I will limit this discussion to two topics, firstly, the introduction of karma, and secondly, its final consequence being nirvana.

Systematic depictions of occult philosophy that led to the prominent inclusion of the two concepts began in autumn 1880, when Allan Octavian Hume and Sinnett received the first letters from the Tibetan adepts Koot Hoomi and Morya. From October 1881 on, a series of articles was published that sought to explain the new adeptic insights. Hume in these "Fragments of Occult Truth" (henceforth "Fragments", cf. Hume 1882a) replied to letters of the W.H. Terry, an Australian Theosophist and Spiritualist who could effortlessly reconcile the two perspectives. Thus, Hume strived to convince him that occultism alone contained the proper theories about man and his destiny. Since October 1880, the debates on Theosophical (i.e. occult) doctrines had gained momentum, but the exploration of allegedly Buddhist concepts arose only slowly in various aspects. Belatedly, these debates and the Theosophical claims for occult teaching were systematically formulated, primarily from 1882 onwards, with particular attention to Spiritualism and Christianity. And not only Theosophists were attracted to Buddhism, but Spiritualists equally sought to clarify their relation towards Buddhism, too.

What is more, the disputes of the early 1880s predominantly subvert clear categorisations of Spiritualist, Christian, or Theosophical identities. The same applies to the self-designations of the historical discussants when they

contributed to the question, as Janet Oppenheim summarises, 'how to synthesize modern scientific knowledge and time-honored religious traditions concerning man, God, and the universe' (Oppenheim 1985: 59). Spiritualists, Christians, Theosophists, so-called 'esotericists' from Europe or South Asia thus reflected upon the 'Victorian crisis of faith' (cf. Franklin 2009; Owen 2004), and they negotiated different options in dealing with it. One of the main disputes concerned the relation of Spiritualism and Christianity which also included Buddhism.

Spiritualist Interest in Buddhism

Despite the diversity and fluidity of the different standpoints in these debates, three main assumptions about Buddhism prevailed: generally, Buddhism was an interesting yet ominous phenomenon that deserved serious consideration, which partly followed previous Transcendentalist narratives and drew on popular Orientalist knowledge (cf. Tweed 2000: 1–26; Jackson 1981: 45–84). Furthermore, Buddhism frequently appeared as the name of a religion based on the teachings of the historical Gautama Buddha, as was confirmed by the two above-mentioned Singhalese monks. And for the majority, it belonged to the same category and was thus comparable to both, Spiritualism and Christianity (cf. Jackson 1981: 48–77). The outcome of this comparison, however, could go either way, in favour or against Buddhism.

In early 1881, Stainton Moses, for example, reprinted a section from the *Religio-Philosophical Journal* which contrasted the religious leaders of the world, including Buddha and Jesus (Moses 1881a: 19). Later that year, he recommended Arthur Lillie's *Buddha and early Buddhism* (cf. Lillie 1881) to anyone interested in Chinese and Indian Spiritualism (!) or, the 'Spiritualism in Buddhism' (Moses 1881f: 308–309). Moses proclaimed remarkable similarities between Christ and Buddha, as previously observed by Lillie (Moses 1881e: 300).

In the *Spiritualist*, interest in Buddhism became equally apparent when it was compared with Spiritualism and the two were considered compatible. In December 1881, contrary to the Theosophists, some speculated that Chinese or Japanese Buddhists also believed in a lasting soul and thus worshipped 'the spirits of their ancestors', implicitly assuming the existence of East Asian (Buddhist) Spiritualism (cf. Scrutator 1881: 292). On the whole, Buddhism

was perceived to aim at 'universal improvement' (ibid.: 293) and thus provided reasonable means to become 'fit' for evolution. Furthermore, during his short visit to India, the famous medium (and exposed conjurer) William Eglinton (cf. Eek 1965: 199–201) held séances with allegedly Buddhist spirits, attempting to establish Spiritualism there (Harrison 1882a: 4–5). Some authors saw Buddha as a teacher for Buddhist 'adeptship' (Harrison 1882c: 20), perceived him as a master Spiritualist, or as proficient in Mesmerism (cf. A.J.C.: 1881: 50–52; Kohn 1881a: 20; Moses 1881e: 300). Consequently, the *Spiritualist's* editor Harrison correctly concluded in January 1882, that 'much has been brought forward of late by various writers in Spiritualist periodicals about Buddhism' (Harrison 1882b: 13).

More critical voices were raised when Buddhism was considered in connection to Theosophy around 1881—a relation primarily seen in light of Olcott's activities in Ceylon and his *Catechism*. One author of *The Spiritualist* quoted Olcott in December 1881 on the Singhalese connection of Theosophy to Buddhism—the latter being part of the universal esoteric tradition, as he saw in Theosophical teachings '[s]hades of Pythagoras, Sakya Muni, the great Buddha, Socrates, Plato, Virgil, Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius!' (Scrutator 1881: 292). Julius Kohn, the editor of the *Saturday Review* and frequent correspondent to Spiritualist journals, had mentioned the universalist outlook of Spiritualism earlier, including Buddhism as well (Kohn 1881b: 20–22). Moreover, the link between Theosophy and Buddhism was surprising to William Harrison, and he wondered about Olcott, 'formerly a spiritualist, afterwards a Theosophist, seems now to have turned Buddhist' (Harrison 1882b: 13). As many others, Harrison rather formulated a universalist agenda of Spiritualism 'to inquire, without prejudice, into the merits and demerits of all religious systems' (ibid.).

In sum, Buddhism and Spiritualism did not appear contradictory to Spiritualists at that time and it belonged to a vastly 'religious' category of comparison—as did Christianity, Spiritualism, or Theosophy. Whether the authors favoured or dismissed Buddhism, it was not automatically connected to Theosophy, or even a point of reference in this respect. In short: Buddhism constituted an interesting and exotic 'religion', but Spiritualists did not see any specific, let alone exclusive connection to Theosophy. And the Theosophists

gradually came to establish exactly that, an exclusive claim on the 'true', i.e., esoteric contents of Buddhism.

Theosophical Claims on Buddhism

Parallel to the rising Spiritualist interest in general Oriental teachings and their attempts to distinguish and establish occultism as the 'true' substitute for Spiritualism (and Christianity, of course), the Theosophists not only increasingly referred to Buddhism they even began to raise exclusive claims on it. When Spiritualist interest in Buddhism came to the fore, the Theosophists began to present enhanced reflections about occultism as connected to 'Eastern' (synonymously Oriental) concepts in general, after Hume's "Fragments" (Hume 1882a: 17–23). But neither the two Singhalese monks and former contributors to the *Theosophist* were addressed explicitly, nor did the Mahatma letters refer to Buddhism extensively in 1881, beginning with two remarkably unspecific mentions in July (cf. Barker 1923: 43; 48). At that time, Oriental and Buddhist could appear synonymously in Theosophical discourse. A clearer image evolved as Theosophists developed their teachings as opposed to Christians and Spiritualists.

Perhaps the most ground-breaking step in the Theosophical discovery of Eastern teachings and Buddhism is the emergence of the sevenfold or septenary constitution of man that replaced the tripartite scheme of body, soul, and spirit. Just like Spiritualists, and in part Christians, Theosophists applied the threefold scheme until it was substituted by the seven principles in the "Fragments". Accordingly, the septenary constitution was the occult, hence true understanding of man and the universe, and Spiritualist conceptions were void, with the séance phenomena, in the occultists' view, adjusted by their own, henceforth growingly Oriental doctrine.

This article does not provide space to delve into the intricate development of the seven principles and their Theosophical application in detail (cf. Chajes [Hall] 2007; Harlass 2022). Suffice it to say that the septenary constitution was a key feature in how the Theosophists claimed Oriental territory exclusively for occultism, in which 'Buddhist' as well as 'Brahmin' or 'Hindu' appeared interchangeably as witnesses of the ancient esoteric truth. This was a procedural and highly complex development—regarding the (Buddhist) signification of the principles, as well as the negotiations about karma

and nirvana that I will investigate in the following section. Hume invoked the seven principles as the 'subdivisions of the Occultists' (Hume 1882a: 18) against Terry's Spiritualist theories of disembodied spirits and séance phenomena, but he solely named three in Sanskrit (2. jiv-atma [*jīv-ātma*], 3. linga sharira [*liṅga śarīra*], 4. kama rupa [*kāma rūpa*]; ibid.). Consequently, the constitution of man revealed why Spiritualists err: the seven principles part at death, with only the lower ones, which do not relate to the actual personality remaining in the material world of the living to be meddled with at séances. Hence, Spiritualist phenomena are based on faulty perceptions of disembodied spirits. Since January 1882, comprehensive designations of the principles have emerged among the Theosophists in India that further illuminate the development which resulted in one of Theosophy's 'mature' core teachings, the septenary constitution.

Sinnett recorded private *Cosmological Notes* (presumably from lost Mahatma letters) with two nominal schemes for the seven principles, one for man and one for the universe (Barker 1973 [1925]: 376–386). The principles are given in Chinese or Tibetan, but the whole scheme never went public. At the same time, Subba Row had just begun to take the place of the allegedly 'authentic Oriental' erudite affirming Theosophical doctrine from a native Brahmin (in this case: Advaita) perspective. He maintained the accordance of the 'Aryan-Brahmin' and the 'Tibetan Buddhist' concepts of the sevenfold constitution (Row 1882a: 93–98), and he affirmed that 'the results arrived at (in the Buddhist doctrine) do not seem to differ much from the conclusions of our Aryan philosophy' (ibid.: 93). Blavatsky now also addressed the septenary constitution. However, she used different terms for the principles. Moreover, she emphasised the bond between Theosophy and Buddhism while simultaneously confirming Row, because his conclusion 'is also sound Buddhist philosophy' (ibid.: 96).

Stated briefly, Buddhism and Theosophy evolved as interrelated entities in Theosophical discourse from 1882 onwards, along with the emergence of a septenary constitution. Obviously, it was neither the naming of the seven principles, nor their (textual) origins that were pertinent to the discussions. Consequently, the question arises which debates and their main issues led to forming the seven principles and their purported connection to the Orient and Buddhism. As I shall show in the following, two prototypically 'Buddhist'

teachings come to the fore: karma and nirvana, that were connected to the wider disputes over reincarnation.

Karma and Reincarnation

One of the most popular and controversial debates among Spiritualists revolved around rebirth, or reincarnation, a 'hardy perennial of spiritualism' (Godwin 1994: 340), that burgeoned in the early 1880s with staunch defenders as well as fervent critics. In this context, the Theosophists established karma and nirvana—and the legitimation of both was embedded in the new (allegedly perennial) anthropological concept outlined above: the septenary constitution. A glimpse into this debate from mid-1881 shall suffice to illustrate the protracted dispute and its main characteristics.

George Wyld, the British Spiritualist and president of the British Theosophical Society from 1880–1882, and Francesca Arundale, a Spiritualist propagator and later Theosophist, quarrelled over reincarnation. In this, both combined Christian theosophy with their own Spiritualist convictions like so many others discussed above. Wyld, however, was a harsh critic of reincarnation, whereas Arundale emphatically promoted it (e.g., Wlyd 1881a: 95; 1881b: 109; Arundale 1881a: 109; 1881b: 230; cf. Burr 1881: 218). Consequently, Wyld habitually criticised Arundale for her misinterpretation of the Bible, which did not teach reincarnation in his view. He referred to Jesus or the Prophets and authors like Swedenborg, arriving at an unequivocal verdict: 'I conclude the doctrine of Re-Incarnation is a dream unsupported by one single fact, and it is contrary to the teachings of the apostles and prophets, and saints and seers, and in deadly opposition to the teachings both of the historic and the esoteric Christ' (Wyld 1881a: 95). Arundale rather concluded to the opposite that all Christian sources and even Swedenborg *did* in fact teach reincarnation. Many authors argued along a similar vein and sided with either Wyld or Arundale (e.g., D.J. 1881; S.C. 1881; Kohn 1881b; T.W.G. 1881). Clearly, reincarnation was indeed a popular and disputed issue among Spiritualists at that time.

Closely related was the question whether the human (i.e. the soul's) progress is achieved via rebirth or not. Julius Kohn accepted reincarnation as the progress of the soul on 'her' way to God, because 'by re-acquisition of her original purity, the Soul is once more in harmony with her Maker and returns

to the Divine source' (Kohn 1881b: 106). In contrast, S.C. Hall stated that the idea of reincarnation 'must be rejected by all Christians as an abomination' (Hall 1881: 107). Evidently, for all writers, the soul had to make its progress, which was often conflated with evolution (cf. Arundale 1881b: 230, Moses 1881b: 74–75; Paynter 1881). Nevertheless, it was heavily disputed how: whether by means of reincarnation, the individual responsibility in life for a consecutive divine judgement and its merits in eternity, or progress without the acceptance of a (Christian/Biblical) god (cf. Hammer 2004: 455–494; cf. Zander 1999). Apparently, the debate in *Light* overheated with a flood of correspondences and Stainton Moses had to announce its suspension by April 1882 (Moses 1882a and 1882b).

Generally, 'Oriental religions', or 'Buddhism' more specifically, were not particularly prominent, but they were mentioned, and they were occasionally connected with Theosophy. It is not surprising that Wyld rejected Olcott's *Buddhist Catechism*, for not only was there no personal god available in Buddhist doctrine, but it even appeared to teach reincarnation (Wyld 1882a: 6–8). And a proper catechism almost two and a half millennia after Buddha seemed to prove that 'Oriental apathy' held sway in Buddhism (ibid.: 6). Yet, Wyld accepted the *Buddhist Catechism* as a source of information about Buddhism, and surprisingly he did not rebuke Olcott or Blavatsky for proclaiming reincarnation, or for their Buddhist affiliations. Nevertheless, Spiritualists as well as various Theosophists were astounded when the Theosophists in India eventually seemed to embrace reincarnation.

One reader was struck with this finding in January 1882, and his corresponding letter was belatedly published in June together with Blavatsky's reply that she perceived no discrepancies between *Isis Unveiled* and recent theories in the "Fragments" (Blavatsky 1882: 225–226). While the correspondent focused on the 'occult' rejection of Spiritualist phenomena, Blavatsky, besides adjusting key concepts from *Isis Unveiled*, opened a Pandora's box: after death, she explained, the Ego was in a gestation state and underwent 'countless re-incarnations' afterwards (ibid.: 226). From this point onwards, the debate rocketed—and as a result, reincarnation was gradually included in Theosophical occult theories in a discursive process of critical scrutiny, criticism, and Theosophical response. Moreover, Blavatsky henceforth referred to Buddhist concepts, which gained increasing prominence in Theosophical theories.

A crucial step towards the Theosophists' acceptance of reincarnation occurred in autumn 1882: in a review of Kingsford and Maitland's *The Perfect Way* (Kingsford and Maitland 1882c), Sinnett rejected most of the book—with the exception of the concept of reincarnation (Sinnett 1882a). Consequently, he did not only oppose the authors' Christian focus and their claim that Christianity had influenced Buddhism, which they had adopted from Arthur Lillie and Edwin Arnold. The main deficiency, in Sinnett's view, was the authors' ignorance of the sevenfold constitution which, according to Sinnett, led to an inaccurate interpretation of reincarnation including the possibility of retrogression. Replying in September 1882, Kingsford and Maitland re-enforced the identity of esoteric Christianity with further religions of the world, in particular with the teachings of the 'arhat doctrine', i.e. with Buddhism (Kingsford and Maitland 1882b). Numerous readers were particularly puzzled by Sinnett's confirmation of reincarnation because they perceived that the Theosophists, and Blavatsky in particular, had been hostile towards it (Blavatsly 1882; Caledonian Theosophist 1882: 225; cf. Chajes 2017: 74–86). From this point onwards, the Theosophists further integrated reincarnation and focused on Buddhism, which they now signified as the only true approach to reincarnation's true esoteric understanding—now including karma and nirvana.

The term karma was familiar since at least the first instalment of the "Fragments". Moreover, from 1881 onwards, it functioned as a marker of the Oriental characterisation of occultism. However, karma was already an established concept and occasionally referred to in Spiritualist circles as well, even though it barely played a role for the Theosophical theories at first. In August 1881, Moses discussed an article by Massey from the *Psychological Review* (cf. Massey 1881: 66–75) and he included reflections upon 'the Hindu doctrine of karma', which Moses, in turn, declared relevant to 'the Western student of Buddhism' (Moses 1881d: 252). And like Massey, Moses expressed his doubts about the comprehensibility of the intricate thoughts of the 'Hindus' to a Western audience—'Buddhist' or 'Hindu' clearly did not make much of a difference for the authors.

Ironically, the reprinted article was a review of Moses' own book, *Higher Aspects of Spiritualism* (Moses 1880), which Massey interpreted in light of the recent Orientalist allure, even though neither Hindu nor Buddhist teachings were mentioned in the book. For Massey, karma seemed like a natural

law for Buddhists that not only explained the specifics of rebirth, but it was also the causa vera of morality, because 'Karma is the formative force of a new sentient being' (Massey 1881: 69). However, when he consulted the famous Orientalist T.W. Rhys Davids' *Buddhism* (cf. Rhys Davids 1880), he found many concepts that were ominous to him. In this, Massey appeared to stay true to the author's own reservations about Buddhism—with karma being one of the four 'mysteries' that, maintained Rhys Davids, 'is most certainly wrong' (cf. ibid.: 99–125, here: 101). Although Massey perceived Buddhist theories as 'philosophical curiosities' (Massey 1881: 73), he interpreted karma as a type of reward or acquittance for the deeds of life—which enabled him to connect karma to the wider Spiritualist debates and participate in the global discourse on Buddhism. Numerous Spiritualists sought to adhere to a modern way of 'proving once and for all the reality of life after death' (Oppenheim 1985: 67), which provided explanations accounting for the different circumstances in the lives of people and what they could expect from their fate, other than 'eternal damnation' or 'divine grace' (cf. ibid.: 92–96). It was this understanding were spiritualists connected karma and 'scientific' ideas of causality (cf. Lopez 2008: 146–152; Almond 1988: 84–90), and in the same manner, the Theosophists also referred to karma.

Hume, in the first "Fragments" in October 1881, argued against William Terry's defence of Spiritualism, that in each rebirth lies 'the fruits of the good deeds, its "Karma"' (Hume 1882a: 19). Nevertheless, merely implying reincarnation, Hume equivocally explained that karma 'invigorates' the *reliquiae*, the remains of the lower principles at séances (ibid.: 20). It is worth noting that Terry was an Australian Theosophist and editor of the Australian edition of the *Psychological Review*, the popular magazine where Massey reviewed Moses' book and introduced karma a few months before (cf. Eek 1965: 164–5; Linton & Hanson 1972: 344–45). One of the crucial questions concerned the 'incentive' of moral behaviour (D.N.K. 1882: 225), to which the scientific interpretation of karma was indubitably relevant. And yet, there was a certain unease among various Spiritualists about the possible absence of a personal god—be it owing to an atheistic interpretation of Buddhism or otherwise.

In August 1882, an anonymous author summarised 'the increasing prominence in the literature of Spiritualism of an opinion which is identical, as far as it goes, with the Buddhist doctrine of Karma' (Anonymous 1882: 454–456,

here: 454). But he found it impertinent, as Spiritualism had already 'developed [a] Western conception of Karma' (ibid.). He cited Fechner's *On life after Death* (Fechner 1882) as an example—which neither mentioned Buddhism, nor karma—concluding that 'death leaves the individual just what his past life has made him, and that his future condition is determined by that and not by a Divine judgment, [that] is a principle that is now established in Spiritual opinion' (Anonymous 1882: 454). At the same time, the Theosophists began to link karma to their own theories when they incorporated reincarnation.

In the closing months of 1882, the Theosophists in India adapted to the situation and integrated karma with reference to the Spiritualist discussions—and they began to claim exclusive access to Oriental and more specifically Buddhist lore. Since September 1882, Sinnett had continually referred to those afore-mentioned positions concerning karma and the contentions about the Theosophical discrepancies on reincarnation. Massey, in turn, reaffirmed his criticism, adding that to him the Theosophical explanations were unconvincing (Massey 1882: 323). Henceforth, Sinnett began to strengthen the theoretical ties to Buddhism (Sinnett 1882b) and maintained that karma was the occult explanation of how 'Nature rewards and punishes her children for the acts in this life' (ibid.: 294). Blavatsky added that karma is a natural law excluding impunity, because it constitutes 'the inexorable causal relation between action and result' (ibid.: 295, footnote). In addition, Hume and Sinnett further elaborated on karma, exposing it as moral impetus for good deeds (probably responsive of said need for a moral 'incentive') and covering ongoing disputes, ranging from the fate of suicides to deceased children. Furthermore, they now included their theorising on spiritualist séances, in which not only was it more probable to provide the lower principles of people with bad karma, but the attendants themselves accumulated malevolent karma, thus putting their next reincarnation, hence their own future at risk (cf. Sinnett 1882b; Hume 1882c & 1882d).

In the final parts of the "Fragments", after Hume had abandoned the occult project, Sinnett combined the manifold discussions, suggesting a Buddhist esoteric narrative and wrapped it in detailed 'occult' explanations of karma. Moreover, he elaborated on the evolution of man that resulted in the development of the seven root races (cf. Sinnett 1883d, 1883e), in contrast to the doctrines of allegedly 'illogical Western Theologians' (Sinnett 1883c:

47). In summary, karma was the (atheistic) law of cause and effect, guiding reincarnation, which was the means to progressive racial development, i.e. the evolution of man.

Nirvana

The issue of nirvana is more opaque than that of karma: while occasionally part of vivid discussions, the Theosophists integrated nirvana relatively late—particularly in the accounts directly preceding *Esoteric Buddhism*. However, if nirvana was not essential to the (Indian) Theosophists' reactions, why did they incorporate it anyways? The superficial explanation might be that nirvana was a familiar Buddhist concept (cf. Almond 1988: 102–110) and well-known through Orientalist literature. While this is a plausible argument, it neither explains the minor role of nirvana in these debates, nor its prominent feature in *Esoteric Buddhism*. Jeffrey Franklin even suggests that 'Theosophy almost entirely avoided several key Buddhist concepts, in particular, "nirvana"' (Franklin 2008: 83). Although this observation deserves reconsideration, Franklin adds the important remark that the Theosophists rather focused on 'the process of reincarnation and Devachan' (ibid.: 84).

While many Spiritualists apparently accepted reincarnation, its function and meaning remained in dispute. The Theosophists around Blavatsky in India contributed to these debates when they too began to incorporate reincarnation in the summer of 1882, and eventually wrap up the clustered topics, critiques, and theories. One of their novel concepts was devachan, a transitory place for the higher human principles after death and their separation in a sphere called kama loka (Sanskrit: *kāma loka*). Sinnett explained in spring 1883 that after a 'gestation' in devachan, the lower principles remained in the earthly spheres of kama loka, while the higher ones (the Ego) faced their rebirth (cf. Sinnett 1883d). Blavatsky initially characterised devachan (next to the one-time mention of 'Bardo') as the sphere where mediumistic insight was possible, but dangerous (Blavatsky 1882). With that, she referred to a previous argument made by Hume, who eventually adapted devachan in the third part of the "Fragments" (Hume 1882c).

However, the idea of a subjective intermediate state was neither innovative, nor originally introduced by the Theosophists (cf. Chajes 2012). Similar reflections took place in the Spiritualist press in the context of the debate on

reincarnation (cf. Moses 1881c; Wyld 1882b). For example, Kingsford and Maitland had already explained that parts of the deceased would experience a blissful phase when reaching the 'summerland' (Kingsford and Maitland 1882a), reminiscing Andrew Jackson Davis (cf. Lavoie 2012: 118–19). As a consequence, to further differentiate from such competitors, Hume concluded that solely occult knowledge about the seven principles of man—including devachan—explained the dangerous potential of the mediums' deception. This was exactly 'why we are strongly opposed to habitual mediumism' (Hume 1882c: 312). Unsurprisingly, the Theosophists in India claimed to correct, rather than to consent with the discussions they considered in the framing of devachan.

A close reading of the debates reveals that the Theosophical concepts clearly reflected the protracted disputes and statements of the Spiritualists. These viewpoints represented, to a considerable extent, Christian positions that called for a paradise or type of divine merit in the afterlife. Sinnett adopted various of the criticised ideas under Oriental auspices but openly admitted that devachan 'corresponds to the "Hereafter" or Heaven of vulgar Theology' (Sinnett 1883c: 48). Naturally, the conformity with Spiritualist and Christian concepts did not lie in the idea of divinely ruled eternity, which Sinnett continuously denounced as place where the deceased suffer as they 'survey the miseries of the earth' (Sinnett 1883d:). Instead, he described devachan as a state of 'true happiness' (ibid.: 133) according to the deeds in life. The central functions of 'heaven' were thus appreciated in the Oriental occult revelations about karma and devachan, which was now explicitly affiliated with Buddhism.

While the Theosophists' shaping of their systematic doctrines with reference to 'Buddhism' and Orient took shape from 1881 onwards, nirvana attracted their interest as late as spring 1883. Blavatsky contributed copious appendices to Sinnett's "Fragments" (Blavatsky 1883; Sinnett 1883d), and both concatenated the different currents of discussion under the header of Buddhism. In Blavatsky's view, the beginning and end of the whole karma-led spiritual journal was nirvana (Blavatsky 1883: 135). Accordingly, they depicted Buddhism (in its esoteric meaning) as comprising a sophisticated understanding of evolution operating through reincarnation. In consequence, reincarnation worked through the passage of the higher human principles

through devachan according to the Ego's 'moral and spiritual affinities' (ibid.). A further concession to the debates and criticism, avitchi (Sanskrit: *avīci*) was introduced as devachan's hell-like counterpart (ibid.: 136). In April 1883, Sinnett expounded the chain of planets and the development of the human race through evolutionary rounds—Buddha being the most advanced human, the sole 'sixth rounder' (Sinnett 1883e: 163), thus lending Buddha himself a final 'scientific' (evolutionary) christening.

At that time, Sinnett was already travelling to London to publish *Esoteric Buddhism* and engage in the London Lodge, which resulted in an infamous 'clash of egos' (Godwin 1994: 342) with Anna Kingsford. Not incidentally, in *Esoteric Buddhism*, he devoted a whole chapter to nirvana. The contours that Sinnett disclosed of it sound strikingly familiar when reading it in light of the previous debates: nirvana is the final stage of the full seven-round evolution of the cosmos, and although devachan and nirvana might not be compared (Sinnett 1883a: 161), the Ego's state in nirvana is 'the Devachan of its Devachanic states' (ibid.). As I have shown, the Theosophists in India combined the conclusions of Spiritualist and Christian and their own theorising that came to the fore in robust discussions with layers of 'Buddhism' and scientific entitlement to carve out an intricate Theosophical philosophy. The main strands of these developments would constitute fundamentals of Blavatsky's 'mature Theosophy'.

The Global Entanglement of Occult Buddhism and South Asian Contributors

While I have shown in detail, when, how, and why specific topics evolved to become Theosophical doctrine through an Oriental shift to 'Buddhism', one final point requires clarification: the contribution of South Asian perspectives and a supposed mutual influence, or entanglement, that influenced the emergence of the allegedly Buddhist occult theories. The topics that the Theosophists cumulatively appropriated were carved out in the course of contemporary contentions, which I followed through the main periodicals of that context. All the key topics were obviously debated among Spiritualists and Christians as well. But while many 'non-Europeans' (such as the Singhalese monks or the two Theosophists Subba Row, or Damodar Mavalankar [see below] and many others) contributed, particularly in the *Theosophist*, there

was little influence from further authors deemed Eastern, Oriental, or Buddhist themselves.

And even many key issues, like reincarnation, were not perceived to be particularly Oriental or Buddhist by the discussants. As I have shown, for various authors, reincarnation was not connected to 'Eastern religion', but rather to French Spiritism, if such connection was made at all (cf. Zander 1999: 472–485; Chajes 2019). In India, the Theosophists of Blavatsky's circle worked diligently to establish the Oriental foundation of their own adeptic occultism as best preserved in Buddhism. Moreover, their allegedly Oriental vocabulary clearly functioned as marker of Theosophical authority. This strategy may be paradigmatically illustrated by Sinnett explaining paradise and '[r]ejecting the unscientific name which has become encrusted with too many misconceptions to be convenient, let us keep the Oriental designation' (Sinnett 1883d: 132), i.e. devachan.

While nirvana was incorporated into the occult theories only after 1883, it was mentioned in this regard in two instances before. Damodar Mavalankar (1857–1885 [went missing]) and T. Subba Row (1856–1890) claimed their own Oriental space: the two Theosophists named nirvana in a dispute with William Oxley, defending the 'esoteric Buddhist and Brahmanical doctrines' against that 'Western' author (Mavalankar 1882: 62; cf. Row 1882b). Obviously, for the two, nirvana was part of esoteric Oriental Brahmanism and Buddhism, and thus applied to Theosophy as well (cf. Chajes 2019), making them 'authentic authorities' vowing for Theosophy's Oriental character.

Another instance of South Asian contributions is represented by articles from the Singhalese monks Sumangla and Gunananda. Sumangla explained that 'the Buddha rejects the doctrine of the existence of the soul' (Sumangala 1880b: 144) but assumed a composite of five aggregates (the skandhas [Sanskrit: *skandha*]) instead, which eventually dissolve. In September 1880, a paragraph from *The Pioneer* (where Sinnett was an editor until 1879) on the spread of Buddhism to the West and the uncertainty of Western observers concerning nirvana was presented in the *Theosophist*. Like other South Asians (cf. Blavatsky 1880a), the Singhalese monks were presented as the native references of 'the pure, unadulterated doctrine of Buddha' (cf. ibid.; Anonymous 1880; Sumangala 1880b). In descriptions of a controversy between Singhalese Buddhists (Anonymous 1880), the anonymous author

(possibly Blavatsky[3]) announces further explanations concerning nirvana from these monks. Nevertheless, the universalist conclusion of the article is revealing: 'Buddhistic philosophy in its refined esoteric aspect differs very little from the creed of the Vedanta school, and still less from the secret doctrine that can be read between the lines of the Veda' (ibid.).

In other words, while the Buddhist monks were not excluded from the debate in den periodicals, they predominantly fulfilled a role as legitimising authority for the Theosophists and their access to Oriental knowledge in general. Just like other Indian members (Row and Mavalankar in particular), the monks primarily served as 'authentic' witnesses and amplifiers, but they seem not to have directly influenced, nor were they referred to in the debates analysed above. This is not astounding considering the disagreement over the status and meaning of nirvana between Olcott and Sumangala. While Olcott needed Sumangala's approval of his *Catechism* (cf. Prothero 1993: 101–104) and apparently, the Buddhists served as stooges of Theosophy, the atmosphere became increasingly tense. Their relation turned sour over several doctrinal struggles and Sumangala eventually published a counter-catechism, the *Bauddha Prashnayak* (cf. Bretfeld 2012; Young and Sōmaratna 1996).

Nevertheless, the discourse named 'Buddhism' was at that time a global one. The variability of the terms in the Theosophical vocabulary displays a clear trend, reflecting the wider historical context of (academic) Orientalism. While their earlier theories and concepts primarily refer to Tibetan terms, there is an obvious preference for Sanskrit after 1882. Sinnett's "Cosmological Notes" provide a comparison of English, Tibetan, and Sanskrit designations for the constituents of man and cosmos (cf. Barker 1973: 378). Unfortunately, the source of these terms remains subject to speculation (cf. Reigle 1999 & 2013). With the substitution of Tibetan terms for Sanskrit, the Theosophists appear to have followed belatedly a general trend. In the second half of the nineteenth century, it became customary among scholars to focus on the origins and (scriptural) sources of Buddhism, which was now classified

[3] The unnamed notes and articles in the Theosophist were frequently written by Blavatsky, and a Theosophical Society's internet-site lists this article as Blavatsky's as well (<https://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/theosoph/theos12a.htm#spread>, Accessed: 13. September 2022).

as an originally Indian religion, hence Sanskrit and Pali were considered its authentic repository (cf. de Jong 1976; Lopez 2008: 1–28). The work of the famous Pali-scholar T. W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922) was substantial in this respect and his work provided a central source for Buddhism in the debates. While the exact wording concerning 'occult' Buddhist terminology was secondary, its shift away from Tibetan and Chinese to Sanskrit demonstrates the Theosophists' reliance on this Orientalist development.

A similar (textual) focus and simultaneously an explicit disqualification of South Asians can be found in the Theosophists' opponents, too, but with a cynical twist: James M. Peebles rejected Sumangala's statements, but not for the monk's 'authenticity', but rather for his putative Western contamination. For Peebles, agnostic Europeans have 'done what they could to make Atheists and Materialists of Buddhists' (Peebles 1882: 234)—consequently privileging (European) Orientalist texts over living Buddhists. In many accounts like Peebles', deliberately 'Western' authors explicitly excluded 'modern' or 'Westernised' Buddhists (cf. Kohn 1881b, 1882, Meyrick 1882; Wyld 1882a), favouring the 'original' scriptural sources. The demand for 'authentic Oriental' knowledge thus reiterated the imperial hegemony over South Asian discourses and even 'erased' the legitimacy of South Asian contributions.

Apparently, in spite of the Oriental claims of the Theosophists, their South Asian contacts and references to their own residing in India, direct Oriental or Buddhist contributions were scarce. This finding could seem to suggest that esoteric Buddhism was actually 'Western esotericism', as is commonly asserted, and its globalisation was an Orientalist colonial project in the Saidian sense. Yet, I argue differently: while Olcott and Blavatsky indubitably have come to Ceylon with prefigured images of Buddhism, these have been part of a global discourse already. Consecutive claims on East versus West took place in an unequal, yet globally entangled context, as two examples from the above-mentioned debates illustrate: between European Orientalists and Singhalese monks.

Firstly, the constitution of the Theosophists' sources of information: Rhys Davids' pivotal works on Buddhism were indebted to global entanglement and mutual exchange. When Rhys Davids began studying Pali, he relied on the help of Yatramulle Unnanse, an old Singhalese monk (Allen 2003: 239–241). To his initial displeasure, the old cleric not only taught him language,

but 'he was constantly turning away from questions of Pali to questions of Buddhism. (…) [there was] a high mindedness that filled me with reverence' (Rhys Davids quoted in: Allen 2003: 240). This experience shaped his ideas about Buddhism, and it was instrumental in Rhys Davids' subsequent career as an Orientalist. As Richard King notes: 'Buddhists have responded to the Orientalist gaze and thereby contributed to Orientalist representations of "Buddhism"' (King 1999: 149; cf. Berkwitz 2018).

Even Friedrich Max Müller, another main Orientalist source of the Theosophists, was also entangled in this global discourse, although he never even travelled to Asia himself. Müller's search for origins and the essence of religion was decisively shaped by Unitarian and Brahmo Samaj influence (cf. Strube 2021). Furthermore, Müller received considerable help from Japanese 'interlocutors' in his works about Buddhism (Krämer 2019), even though he clearly considered them his eager 'students' (and child-like friends). Nevertheless, Müller's growing appreciation 'marked the beginning of a new positive attitude towards Buddhism in the West', and in turn, it was Rhys Davids' *Buddhism* (1880) that was 'the main vehicle for this new thinking' (Allan 2003: 241)—a vehicle that indubitably served the Theosophists as well, even though the later debate between Blavatsky, Olcott, and Sinnett with Müller was conflictive (cf. Lopez 2008; Lubelsky 2016).

Secondly, in Ceylon, the Theosophists encountered Buddhists who already had experienced decades of clashing with Christian missionaries. Gunananda had skilfully countered missionary polemics and, most famously not only in his own view, had defeated Reverend Da Silva in the debate of Panadura (Tamil: *pārṇaturai*) in 1873. Challenging Da Silva too, Sumangala was instrumental establishing the image of Buddhism as compatible with modern science and, in turn, forced the missionaries to reconsider their own reasoning as well (Lopez 2008: 39–42). It was thus no mere 'appropriation' of Western ideas when Sumangala and Gunananda contributed to the *Theosophist* about Buddhism in ways that were comprehensible for the journal's readers—their mutual understanding already rested on a global discourse. And it was a report of their victorious debate that seems to have aroused Olcott's interest in Singhalese Buddhism after all (cf. Peebles 1873; Prothero 1996: 206) Thus, I certainly cannot agree that Theosophists were merely 'faithful heirs of nineteenth-century Orientalism and the Platonic Orientalist tradition

in Western esotericism' (Hanegraaff 2020: 39), or that a 'mutual fertilization' taking place only *after* the Theosophists' move to India in 1879 (ibid.: 48–49).

CONCLUSION

At the outset of this article, I identified inconsistencies arising from a common historical narrative about Theosophy, which tends to rest on essentialist distinctions between East and West. This narrative furthermore fails to inquire into the historical emergence of 'esoteric Buddhism'. The historicisation of central Theosophical doctrines that were shaped by the so-called 'Oriental shift' proved to be equally hazy. Consequently, I suggested a perspective based on postcolonial and global historical insights to broaden the scope, shifting focus to contemporary debates and historical contingency. Based on the assumption that the Oriental and Buddhist references in Theosophy are historical discursive products (as 'Oriental' or 'Buddhist') without essential or primordial significations, I examined popular contemporary periodicals where central disputes about Theosophy and Buddhism have taken place.

The analysis of this pragmatically restricted archive has shown that the reception and integration of 'Buddhist' topics was highly dynamic and gained momentum in the early 1880s. Rather than Blavatsky 'inventing' or 'discovering' an entity named 'Buddhism' mostly on her own, as is commonly described, we saw a far more intricate production of meaning. The Theosophists in India grouping around Blavatsky gradually applied different understandings of Buddhism (and the Orient) as their distinctive feature from 1881 onwards. They did so in the course of many disputes and their emerging concepts clearly show the traces of these controversies. Hence, they increasingly occluded putative Western positions, so as to identify allegedly Buddhist concepts as the sole path to the true esoteric meaning of all religions. The septenary constitution was explained as a—more sophisticated—replacement for the tripartite one, integrating all the major aspects that were debated at that time. Whether there was a direct influence in the expansion of the constituents is still unclear, but at least it was no hindrance to Theosophical reasoning that the Buddhist 'authority' Sumangala had expounded on the 'aggregates' of the world, of man and the composition (i.e. subdivision) of the soul in Buddhism in *The Theosophist* (Sumangala 1880b).

Despite their polemic disdain for Christianity, the Theosophists in India obviously considered and included main topics from their adversaries. However, part of the Theosophists' authority (and at the same time the problem of their credibility) not only issued from the backing of 'Oriental Mahatmas', but from the approval of South Asians as well. This enabled them to include familiar concepts and ideas, while simultaneously claiming them exclusively for occultism, most prominently reincarnation/rebirth, ideas of after-death states (heaven) or the constitution of man, that were supposed to wipe away Spiritualism and substitute it for occult science. And a science it was indeed, in their view, as Buddha taught evolution with his doctrine of karma that would eventually lead to nirvana. In their occult appearance, all these concepts bore remarkable resemblance to those developed in Spiritualist debates in response to urgent contemporary concerns. The 'Buddhism' Theosophists 'discovered' in the course of these disputes was thus a contemporary product, based on the global discourse of Orientalist representations, 'esoteric' discussions and the South Asian colonial context.

Further research is utterly needed to continue provincialising (Western) esotericism by scrutinising its historical contingency in the wake of what is termed 'mature' Theosophy and its Oriental shift. Even though South Asians (or any self-identification from a non-'Western' context) hardly voiced their concerns in the discussions analysed above, it can be expected that South Asian discourses have been more influential than commonly assumed. They defy notions like Eastern appropriations of Western concepts—which is nevertheless not ignorant of massive inequalities in power and status. Recent research has begun to analyse such entanglements for several related topics (cf. Mukhopadyay 2019; Strube 2022; Mühlematter 2022). 'Mutual imbrications' are likely to reach far beyond the debates with Sumangala and Gunananda, the contributions and then criticism of Subba Row—particularly after 1884 (cf. Eek 1964: 481–482; Chajes 2021: 32–42; Baier 2016)—and further significations of Buddhism, of East and West, or of esotericism.

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