

be as dogmatic, intolerant, and potentially violent as any other religious believers. This, apparently, is a claim one must accept on faith.

Brian C. Wilson, Western Michigan University

*Imagining the East: The Early Theosophical Society*. Edited by Tim Rudbøg and Erik Reenberg Sand. Oxford University Press, 2020. x + 384 pages. \$99.00 cloth; ebook available.

University of Copenhagen professors Tim Rudbøg and Erik Reenberg Sand have edited a fine collection that sheds fresh light on the earliest years of the Theosophical movement. The choice of contributors balances older and younger scholars very nicely. But be forewarned: the contributors assume that their readers know the debates among historians on early Theosophical history. The contributors demonstrate the truth of this assertion in the way they arrange the information in their chapters.

Like their predecessors who wrote Theosophical history, many of this book's authors approach their task in the following manner: a controversy or lacuna is identified as posing a problem for interpretations of Theosophical history. Then the contributor explores various individuals who had some impact on Theosophical groups, usually recovering them through exhaustive research on their correspondence, but also reading numerous articles published in Theosophical periodicals since the early years of the movement. From this examination of the minutiae of the historical record, the contributor then arrives at a conclusion about the controversy or lacuna identified at the outset. Readers who enjoy wading through a barrage of information, often recounted in the style of he said/she said, will have a wonderful time. However, readers who want to understand larger cultural and social issues arising from examinations of historical details, will invariably become frustrated with both Theosophical history in general and many of the chapters in this book.

The book's title requires some explanation. The term East as used here refers to the symbols, languages, cultures, and religions found in Asian lands, especially India. This is a Western (primarily European) way of identifying India, which is considered to be Eastern because it lies east of those Western countries that conducted trade with India beginning in the Early Modern era of Western history. When the editors say that Theosophists imagined the East, they are relying on several decades of scholarship, beginning with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which is deeply indebted to disciplines like cultural studies and literary theory. The editors assert that imagination is "the human ability to produce images and concepts in the mind of past events and places we have not visited . . . when representatives from one culture meet another culture they often do so through a lens of preconceived ideas about

the other” (4). Westerners not only conjured images from their own culture to demystify the unknown East, they also asserted power over the East through commerce, military action, and cultural borrowing. This metanarrative about East and West is taken for granted by the editors. Their contribution to scholarship is to introduce Theosophists from the West, who have been unfairly omitted in previous scholarship. The purpose of the present volume is to correct this injustice.

The book is divided into three parts. The first contains two chapters that address the differences between Theosophical and Orientalist approaches to the East. Orientalist as used here points to study of the East from the perspective noted above—the reading of Eastern texts, people and cultures that attempts to make sense of the East according to Western categories of logic, philosophy, and theology. Orientalists tended to regard Eastern religious texts, for example, as portals into lost thought-worlds. They then recast those worlds into something familiar to them. The Orientalist treatment of the Buddha provides an excellent example. Western scholars who translated the Pali canon and Mahayana sutras came to think of the Buddha as a human being who arrived at insights about the human condition that anyone, in any time and place, could appreciate. The Buddha was, in a sense, a modern man for Victorian interpreters. Theosophists, however, understood the Buddha differently. They placed him within the pantheon of Masters whom they believed guided human civilizations. These Masters operated according to fixed laws in nature. Although the Theosophical cosmos resembled some Asian outlooks, and Theosophists insisted that their perspective and those of various Asian religions were fundamentally the same, in fact Theosophists were doing the same thing that other Western observers were doing—imagining the East according to their worldview, and then making different parts of Eastern thought fit into that worldview.

Part Two of the book contains seven chapters showing how Theosophists represented the East. By “representation,” the editors mean how Theosophists described aspects of Eastern religions, in the belief that they did so more accurately than did the devotees of those religions. Theosophists believed that they understood the real value of Buddhism and Hinduism. Tim Rudbøg notes, for instance, that Blavatsky and company believed that they had summarized who the Buddha really was in Esoteric Buddhism—an amalgam of Theosophical and Buddhist notions that mainstream scholars of Buddhism would never accept. In his highly detailed chapter on the Mahatma Letters, Jocelyn Godwin traces depictions of the East both implicitly and explicitly stated in those letters. Rudbøg and Erik Sand showed how Blavatsky initially interacted with the six traditional schools of Hindu philosophy, but over time came to discard all six in favor of Theosophy, which she claimed was a more accurate statement of the ancient wisdom than any Hindu school of thought.

In the third part of the book, contributors write about interactions between Theosophists and Indian intellectuals in the important years between the 1880s and India's independence in 1947. Various movements among Indian thinkers and activists fed into the stream of the greater independence movement. Michael Bergunder explores Mohandas Gandhi's relationship with Theosophists during his years in South Africa and in India until his death. Isaac Lubelsky considers the impact that Blavatsky had on Allan Octavian Hume, founder of the Indian National Congress. Sand traces the relationship between Theosophists and members of the Arya Samaj, a reform movement that promoted the Vedas as the basis for a renewed India. And K. Paul Johnson examines Theosophical figures involved in the Bengal Renaissance. This third part of the book contains persuasive arguments in favor of a new look at the role of Theosophists in the massive cultural and social changes leading up to Indian independence.

*Imagining the East* is a landmark collection. It could easily become one of the most important scholarly texts in the study of the Theosophical movement. Although its chronological scope does not extend past the first two decades of the twentieth century, the early years of the movement's history are still considered the most important era of Theosophical development. There are still many questions about that era that have not been answered satisfactorily. Hopefully this book will inspire scholars to take a fresh look at older issues and conflicts.

W. Michael Ashcraft, Truman State University

*Eco-Alchemy: Anthroposophy and the History and Future of Environmentalism.* By Dan McKanan. University of California Press, 2018. 312 pages. \$70.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper; ebook available.

This is an especially timely book. It was timely when published in 2018, and even more so in light of the challenges facing the world today in 2020: an ecological crisis that continues to worsen, a global pandemic that has stressed food and economic systems worldwide, and an industrial-technological culture that appears increasingly unstable and unsustainable. Since its origins in the early twentieth century, Rudolph Steiner's Anthroposophy has offered a stunning alternative to the worldview that has generated these challenges. Dan McKanan reminds us of the power of this alternative vision in *Eco-Alchemy: Anthroposophy and the History and Future of Environmentalism*, and he affirms that this vision is both relevant and inspiring today.

*Eco-Alchemy* is a valuable resource for students of new religions, environmentalism, agrarianism, organics, the western esoteric tradition, and, of course, Steiner's unique addition to the world's religious