



## CHAPTER 1

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# Introductory Remarks

*Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter*

Contrary to past practices, scholars no longer see the nineteenth-century “occult” as a marginal phenomenon. In recent years, many studies have demonstrated that it had important repercussions, be they cultural, historical, political, religious, or aesthetic. This volume contributes to this growing recognition by bringing together 17 contributions dealing with a variety of topics and with American, European, Indian, and East Asian “occult” currents and their intersections with diverse facets of nineteenth-century culture, religion, and politics. Among other things, the volume treats *Naturphilosophie*, Romanticism, spiritualism, mesmerism, Theosophy, and occultism, alongside elements of Hindu, Buddhist, and Afro- and African-American thought. In particular, many of the contributions introduce hitherto barely known figures whose importance is highlighted and it includes case studies from a mix of countries that are often not well represented in the existing literature (Hungary, Poland, and Sweden).

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Consequently, the importance of this volume lies in the individual contributions that stand on their own. Yet, there is also an important general framework, which is the basis for the book's structure. This will be elucidated below alongside a succinct presentation of the contributions. The point of departure and one of the most significant aspects of this volume is the importance of *mesmerism* as a highly influential but overall frequently neglected tradition, especially with a view to the formation of modern occultism (but even beyond that, thereby clearly following the scholarship of Karl Baier; see, e.g., Baier 2009, 2015, 2020). Initially developed by the Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) in the eighteenth century, this very special system of “healing” influenced occultism and continued to be popular throughout the nineteenth century across the world, eventually contributing, among others, to the evolution of hypnotism (Baier 2019; Gripentrop 2015; Méheust 2006: 78–79). The impact of mesmerism should not be underestimated, for even key notions of the later occult tradition were coined, developed, or at least expanded within this particular strand for the first time (e.g., the notion of *fluidum*; see Baier 2016).

In addition to the close entanglement of mesmerism with occult concepts, contributions on the occult tradition itself are at the centre of this collection comprising two sections. These sections strikingly show how influential occult concepts were in the nineteenth century and also examine their interpretation in the subsequent centuries. Therefore, a key theme of this volume is the reverberations viz. the impact of the nineteenth-century occult in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and its influence on the culture of modernity. As major traits of the history and importance of occultism have been already examined on various levels, including the influence of occultism on literature, the arts, and politics (for specific examples and an overview, see, e.g., Bauduin and Johnsson 2018; Bauduin et al. 2018; Partridge 2015; Hanegraaff 2013: 146–156; Pasi 2013; Owen 2004), these contributions might serve as additional material enhancing our knowledge of particular areas and introducing new figures within this important strand.

The volume concludes with a section on modern yoga introducing important nineteenth-century exponents and their engagement with the occult. To a certain extent, this last section links directly to the first (i.e., on mesmerism) as the examples show the particular importance of patterns and tropes that emerged within the mesmerism-occultism cluster. What is commonly known as “yoga” today has become almost a

ubiquitous phenomenon, generally assumed to be an ancient Indian spiritual-physical practice. Although it has been documented by important recent studies (e.g., Baier 2013a, 2013b, 2016, 2018; Bogdan and Djurdjevic 2015; Djurdjevic 2014; de Michelis 2004), the close links between the mesmeric-occult traditions and modern yoga are not widely recognised.

Hence, the guiding theme of the volume is the triad of mesmerism, occultism, and yoga. It might be interpreted as a dense and closely interwoven system of patterns, references, and even practices that should not solely be studied on their own. Their globalised dimension will become more than evident in the subsequent description of the individual contributions. Indeed, this might be viewed as one major outcome of this collection as well as one of its key themes: taken together, the contributions show that it is impossible to talk of a “Western” occultism that is entirely distinct from “Eastern” or other forms. Hence, the close interrelation between the various strands and developments will also become rather apparent by the volume’s strong emphasis on examples from not only South Asia but also Latin America and East Asia. Accordingly, the four sections of the volume contribute to a more detailed understanding of the historical development and interweaving of these currents in modern times and in diverse international contexts. In addition to the value for a better historical understanding of the close entanglement of “East” and “West,” the contributions are also related to a rather recent trend in the study of occult and esoteric traditions: namely questioning the overall focus on the “Western” and seeking a new approach towards the relevant terms in a comparative perspective (e.g. Baier 2021; Aspren 2014 for general methodological considerations; Granholm 2014; also see the remarks in Hanegraaff 2015 on the recent discussion; Roukema and Kilner-Johnson 2018).

The contributions brought together in this volume are chiefly works of history, although some interdisciplinarity is easily discernible. There are contributions to the history of science and medicine, cultural history, South Asian studies, sociology, religious studies, theology, and philosophy. Regarding the order of the contributions in the four sections of the volume, we tried to follow, as far as this was possible, a chronological structure. In some cases, this is easier than in others as some of the contributions are dealing with individual protagonists, whereas others try to find larger trajectories within a much wider temporal frame.

The volume begins with the contributions on mesmerism in *Part One*. Notwithstanding its indubitable importance, this is a vastly understudied

area that requires a lot of scholarship that will have to deal with the various actors and their approaches. The contributions in this section can be interpreted as a starting point for precisely such an endeavour.

In the first contribution, *Wouter J. Hanegraaff* portrays Carl August von Eschenmayer (1768–1852), the important Souabian *Naturphilosoph*, pioneer of Romantic psychology, and advocate of magnetic somnambulism. The contribution, which is the first academic study on von Eschenmayer in English, gives a general overview of his life and oeuvre. In addition, a special focus is put upon von Eschenmayer's psychological theory, which he built on German idealist foundations and around the role of animal magnetism—and particularly somnambulant trance. The high importance of mesmeric tropes is evident throughout this contribution.

In the following contribution, *Maren Sziede* draws on two significant but lesser-known German figures whose works espouse mesmerist ideas: Karl Joseph Hieronymus Windischmann (1775–1839) and Johann Nepomuk Ringseis (1785–1880). Both perceived themselves as Roman Catholic authors who tried to devise an all-encompassing, conservative Catholic anthropology, thereby placing their efforts within the broader scope of the nineteenth-century *Naturphilosophical* and Romantic approaches. Their ideas did not only encompass mesmerism; they also aimed at providing a religious foundation of medicine in an environment where medical theories competed and were superseded in the course of a few decades. The result was a fascinating mix of concepts that sought to offer theoretical grounds for what they perceived as the ideal physician, described in terms of a priest—the “priest-doctor.”

*Júlia Gyimesi* continues with a portrait of the Hungarian magnetiser János Gárdos (1813–1893), who was greatly influential in his days. Gárdos identified magnetic phenomena as the result of the hitherto unknown capacities of the human psyche and promoted a systematic research in the field. However, his contemporary representatives of early hypnosis research rejected his theory and identified it as part of a magico-mystical, “superstitious” worldview. Gyimesi's contribution outlines Gárdos' life and work, illuminating his significance within and beyond the context of animal magnetism. It is a fine example of the vital presence and significance of mesmerist concepts in Central Europe.

In the concluding contribution of this section, *Dominic S. Zoehrer* addresses the close interrelation between specific mesmerist-derived European currents and the growing importance of Asian concepts at the

end of the nineteenth century, with the Theosophical current as the crucial mediator. He traces how the originally mesmerist idea of the so-called *fluidum* qua main transmitter of power between bodies became related to the Indian concept of *prāṇa*. Seminal interpreters include early Theosophical thinkers such as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), William Walker Atkinson (a.k.a. Ramacharaka; 1862–1932), and Annie Besant (1847–1933). Additionally, Zoehrer draws on the subsequent developments by referring to important figures of the twentieth century, such as the Chinese-Filipino spiritual entrepreneur Choa Kok Sui (Samson Lim Choachuy; 1952–2007) and his internationally successful Pranic Healing programme, which was clearly inspired by concepts purported by the aforementioned writers and deeply rooted in nineteenth-century occultism. Zoehrer’s study is a bridge to both the subsequent and the concluding sections of the volume, where many contributions follow the same pattern, namely searching for major trajectories within a larger temporal frame.

Selected specimens of occultism and the significance of occult currents and concepts in America and Europe make up *Part Two* of the volume, whereas *Part Three* addresses occultism in a larger global context.

The fascinating subject of the “near death experience” is the focus of the contribution by *Jens Schlieter*. An important aspect of the popular classic “near death experience” narrative was developed largely among various esoteric thinkers in the nineteenth century, namely the “panoramic life review”: that is, to recall or re-experience scenes, acts, and thoughts of one’s life in a highly condensed and accelerated form. For various discourses of the nineteenth century—including those of spiritualists, occultists, mesmerists, and transcendentalists—this aspect became extremely important. Purportedly it was a kind of key evidence of the soul’s ability to enter into a state of timeless self-presence and full awareness of everything following its separation from the body, including the current life and former ones. In this contribution, the development of this specific trope is placed within a larger framework of other crucial concepts, such as drug experience, “magnetic sleep,” new technologies of panoramic images and photography, and practices of autobiographical writing.

*Olav Hammer* follows with a perceptive contribution on a development referred to as “occult linguistics” that became important particularly within the Theosophical Society, starting already with Blavatsky herself. Hammer shows the close relation of these early endeavours with important developments in the academia of that time, which eventually led to the birth of the discipline of linguistics. The so-called “young

grammarians” devised basic rules for a comparative approach towards languages that were closely entangled with theories on the origin and the history of humankind. Although drawing on these early endeavours, Theosophical thinkers rejected major results and developed their own approach vis-à-vis this issue.

In a very innovative way, *Marco Pasi* is dealing with a far-ranging topic, that is not only relevant for the study of esotericism but also for literature and art history, namely “posthumousness” viz. “esoteric posthumousness.” This specific concept, defined as “the inability or unwillingness to have one’s work promoted and recognised during one’s life, which projects the work into a temporal limbo that may last decades or even forever,” is applied to the work of three women artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who were deeply inspired by esoteric ideas and practices. From various perspectives, the paintings of Georgiana Houghton (1814–1884), Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), and Emma Kunz (1892–1963) are characterised by an approach to “posthumousness” and its various ramifications within the history of esotericism.

Next, *John Patrick Deveney* draws on a delicate topic, which was nevertheless at the centre of attention for many occult writers in the nineteenth century: sexual energy as a vital force that helps humankind to unfold its hidden potential and transform the individual that might even survive death with the various techniques taught therein. The major figure portrayed is Kenneth Sylvan Launfal Guthrie (1871–1940), a classicist and known for his translation of the writings of Plotinus. Guthrie, however, was also a prolific occult thinker and writer who developed his own theory of “regeneration” through various sexual techniques that should bring humanity to the primordial state of Adam before the Fall.

*Lukas Pokorny* adds another crucial figure to this array of occult and esoteric writers who is highly understudied so far: the Scottish esotericist Benjamin Creme (1922–2016) who made a reputation as the most sedulous proclaimer of Maitreya’s imminent messianic coming. Creme averred to be the heir of Blavatsky and, in her succession, Helena Roerich (1879–1955) and Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949), heralding the soon-to-unfold Age of the Group. Following a brief introduction to Creme’s bio-/hagiography, Pokorny traces the Maitreya(-cum-World Teacher) narrative from its Buddhist inception across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Theosophical appropriations, culminating in Creme’s most vocal millenarian account. His millenarian programme is eventually assessed through a theoretical lens, adding important insights to the wider field of Millennial Studies.

In the concluding contribution, which also nicely leads to the following section, *Per Faxneld* provides intriguing insights into the close relationship between (mainly) East Asian martial arts and important occult currents in Sweden, both in regard to their history of Western reception and also their origin. He points out that some of the popular styles, such as Aikidō and Kyūdō, are heavily influenced by Western esoteric concepts, which made it easy to present them to the interested Western public after their invention in Asia. The “martial modernity” was closely linked to the notion of a “mystic east” as demonstrated by Faxneld who mainly examines the situation in twentieth-century Sweden.

*Part Three* places occultism in a wider international spectrum with a focus on the Indian as well as the Afro- and African-American contexts. It is thus in direct continuation with contributions of the preceding section and shows the various transformations taking place in new locations. So far scholarship in this particular field has mainly dealt with South Asia, but there are a couple of examples outside this cultural horizon.

The first contribution by *Franz Winter* is primarily concerned with the history of the first interpretation of the Indian Upanishads as proposed by the influential *Oupnek'hat* (published 1801–1802). It was composed by the French philologist and historian of religion Abraham H. Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) in regard to his predecessors to place its main patterns and interpretative frames in a transreligious context by expanding the models applied for the elaboration on “Western” esoteric concepts. As is shown by Winter, both Indian Advaita Vedānta traditions and the first Muslim interpretation of the Upanishads by the Mughal prince Dārā Shukūh (1615–1659) used parallel interpretative trajectories that became important for the nineteenth-century European reception. Consequently, the question whether the notion of “esotericism” has a transcultural and transreligious validity is addressed.

With the Upanishads and their first translation in the European context, we are already concerned with South Asia, an area of interest in the following contribution by *Mriganka Mukhopadhyay*, who introduces Peary Chand Mitra (1814–1833), considered to be one of the most eminent intellectuals of nineteenth-century Bengal. Mitra was celebrated for his social activism and his writings, both deeply influenced by several religious transformation processes throughout his life. Born and raised in an upper-caste Hindu Bengali family of Calcutta, he was an atheist in his early youth. He later joined the Brahma Samaj and became interested in spiritualist circles after his wife’s death in 1860. In 1877, he received the

diploma of the Theosophical Society making him the third Indian and the first Bengali to become a Theosophist. Mukhopadhyay sheds light on the close spiritualist and occult network that enabled this specific transformation process in nineteenth-century Calcutta, providing an example of the transcultural dimension of occultism at the time.

India remains vital in the next contribution as well. *Almut-Barbara Renger* expounds on the “Pythagorean” dimension of the well-known twentieth-century global “guru” Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (a.k.a. Osho; 1931–1990), and its early traces in the works of the French esoteric author Antoine Fabre d’Olivet (1768–1825). By styling himself as the “new” Pythagoras, Bhagwan clearly drew on concepts of a perennial philosophy, of which the Greek philosopher became one of its major representatives in the course of early modern European intellectual history. Bhagwan’s *Philosophia Perennis* (1978/1979) is basically a commentary on the *Golden Verses* published by d’Olivet with a specific interpretation. Once again, the transcultural context of esoteric currents is brought to the fore.

The last contribution in this section broadens the geographical and historical horizon by introducing aspects of the history of esotericism—particularly in the nineteenth century—in the context of African- and Afro-American religions. *Hans Gerald Hödl* walks hitherto untrodden paths when likening the impact of Kardecian spiritism on the religious landscapes of Brazil, Cuba, and Puerto Rico as well as of spiritualism in New Orleans based spiritual churches. He does so through the unified lens of Brazilian, Caribbean, and Americana (Louisiana) Studies. This is yet another instance which demonstrates the immense importance and the influence of nineteenth-century occult traditions on a global scale.

The volume is concluded with *Part Four*, which provides a transcultural bridge towards India and its rich religious tradition, thereby focusing on the history of modern yoga whose reception is clearly shaped by specific occult tropes. *Keith Edward Cantú* introduces the Tamil Śaivayogi Sri Sabhapati Swami (c. 1828–1923/4) who was highly influential in nineteenth- and twentieth-century South Asian and Western esoteric movements. As his work has not been studied thoroughly thus far, Cantú’s contribution introduces Sabhapati’s life with special reference to his specific fusion of yoga and Theosophy that resulted in a rather unique system. By identifying the various impacts on this concept, the global validity of specific esoteric tropes and trajectories carried by certain networks once again become clearly evident.



Another perspective on the importance of the *prāṇa* topic is provided in the contribution by *Magdalena Králer* by focusing on the highly influential work of Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902). As it is clearly shown, the way *prāṇa* and the closely intertwined term *ākāśa* are conceptualised in Vivekananda’s work is deeply shaped both by his specific reading of important Indian philosophical works as well as by Theosophical patterns of thought and interpretations of Indian philosophy and religion. Hence, the interconnectedness of Asian and Western esoteric concepts is demonstrated.

*Marlis Lami* calls attention to another (internationally) hardly known figure: the Polish philosopher, author, and socio-political activist Wincenty Lutosławski (1863–1954). Among his various works on different subjects, Lutosławski published the first handbook on yoga in the Polish language in 1909, entitled *Rozwój potęgi woli przez psychofizyczne ćwiczenia* (The Development of Will Power by Means of Psychophysical Exercises). It was meant as a therapeutic instruction book but clearly draws on several tropes of the early reception of yoga in the West. These tropes are notably mingled with a specific religious and nationalist agenda as initiated by the philosopher and religious activist Andrzej Towiański (1799–1882), who is considered to be one of the leading founders of Polish messianism and was himself seminal to Polish Romanticism.

With its diverse contributions, the volume provides glimpses of the multi-faceted gamut of the occult nineteenth century, its roots, and its echoing into the realms of religion, philosophy, culture, and politics. “Occultism” here serves as an umbrella term encompassing religious strands and their exponents, which were placed by the mainstream at the fringe of or even outwith the religious or spiritual panorama of its days. Notwithstanding this general perception and the concomitant negligence in academe, the occult tradition clearly shows a certain vigour and strength, which renders it an elementary component of modern religious history, both in Europe and worldwide. As the contributions in this volume demonstrate, the impressive global occurrence of major occult themes and tropes has a flexibility, which made and still make them easily applicable in non-European contexts, that is, South Asian, East Asian, Afro- and African-American. The whole process more often than not has a reciprocal effect on the reception of specifically Asian religious and cultural traditions that were perceived as directly compatible especially with European developments. This close and mutual relation of Asia and the West (to use highly generic terms) is also a vital sign for major trends and changes that

constitute the phenomenon often referred to as “globalisation.” One of the many implications of this term is the growing interconnectedness of former long-distant cultural, social, and religious contexts that literally “grew together” and consequently crave for a common ground of explanation. Taken from this angle, “occultism” for some of its proponents served as a kind of common bond and master interpretational key that inspired an impressive network of thinkers, activists, and authors.

In addition to this specific result of the contributions in this volume, there is another feature of the occult tradition that is being emphasised: mesmerism appears as a more or less integrating and foundational aspect of occultism in the nineteenth century. It will always be the invaluable legacy of Karl Baier—to whom this volume is dedicated—who has shown how crucial this vastly ignored strand (which was, if at all, ordinarily perceived as one of the many aberrations within the seemingly linear development to “modern” science and technology) is for understanding major developments within the religious history of not only Europe but also the world at large. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (viz. his librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte) mentions the *pietra mesmerica* (the “mesmeric stone”) in his famous opera *Così fan tutte* of 1790 in an obviously comical and ironic way, likely indicating its already then disputed reputation in society. Had he known the further development and the impact of the mesmeric tradition, he might have reconsidered this somewhat snide remark.

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