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Cover: "The Solar Universe is Born" by James Perkins, President of the TS in America (1945–60) and Vice-President of the TS Adyar (1961–71). From his *Visual Meditations on the Universe*, TPH, Wheaton, Ill., 1984. (More on the symbology of this image by the artist on p. 28 of this issue.)

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The Seven Rays in Context

RAFAEL MARQUES DE ALBUQUERQUE

I HAPPENED to have contact with the concept of the seven rays before I had any notion of what Theosophy was. It is not surprising, since this idea became very popular amongst New Age groups that emerged in the 20th century, often placing the seven rays more in the spotlight than the Theosophical Society does. The concept sounds easy to understand: human beings — as well as other creatures — are divided into seven broad categories, with psychological and spiritual consequences. It helps spiritual seekers to understand themselves, and to construct a sense of diversity regarding spiritual approaches. However, since I first heard of it, I had a feeling of incompleteness. Something seemed to be missing in the explanations about the seven rays, and it made me intrigued.

After searching for a while, the famous book from Ernest Wood published in 1925, *The Seven Rays*,¹ came to my hands. It presented a version that was, to me, the most organized and intelligible system. Yet, the autobiography of the same author — entitled *Is This Theosophy?*² — confirmed my initial intuition that

there was more about the seven rays than its surface. The concept seems to hold considerable esoteric depth. In other words, its hidden meanings are vital. This conclusion motivated me to conduct some research on its history, seeking a wider perspective.

Blavatsky is the obvious author to understand the roots of the modern version of the seven rays. She affirms this concept is found in different religions, especially in their more esoteric traditions. She wrote, in the *Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888:³

There are seven chief groups of such Dhyāni-Chohans, which groups will be found and recognized in every religion, for they are the primeval SEVEN RAYS. Humanity, occultism teaches us, is divided into seven distinct groups and their subdivisions, mental, spiritual, and physical.
(p. 573)

Research on the history of the seven rays in the religious scriptures would be a different line of research. However, my interest in the last years and in this article was in the concept of the seven rays in

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the theosophical movement and in the New Age groups that emerged later. Thus, Blavatsky's writings are an obvious starting point. In one of her most explicit quotes in this behalf, she wrote:³

The star under which a human Entity is born, says the Occult teaching, will remain forever its star, throughout the whole cycle of its incarnations in one manvantara. *But this is not his astrological star.* The latter is concerned and connected with the *personality*, the former with the INDIVIDUALITY.

The "Angel" of that Star, or the Dhyāni-Buddha, will be either the guiding, or simply the presiding "Angel", so to say, in every new rebirth of the monad, *which is part of his own essence*, though his vehicle, man, may remain forever ignorant of this fact. The adepts have each their Dhyāni-Buddha, their elder "twin-Soul," and they know it, calling it "Father-Soul," and "Father-Fire." It is only at the last and supreme initiation, however, that they learn it when placed face to face with the bright "Image".
(p. 572–573)

From this quote and others, we can conclude the rays are related to our connection to one of the seven primeval spiritual ancestors, to whom we share some of our essence. She also suggests that it is common for people to remain ignorant of the identity of their rays, and that it is revealed in advanced stages of the spiritual path — in the supreme initiation of adepts. From this, we can infer the reason why Blavatsky did not elaborate this

topic in her writings. She did not explain which are the identities of each of one the seven rays, possibly because this kind of knowledge was secret and, perhaps, of little use, unless the disciple reaches advanced stages of spiritual growth.

She mentions the concept several times in her writings, using different words (angels, rays, stars, spirits, Dhyāni-Buddhas or Chohans, lamps of fire burning before the throne, and so on) to the point that sometimes it is difficult to be sure when she is talking about the seven rays or an analogous idea. Either way, she did not give us details about it, and it seems the topic remained clouded for some decades.

There is reason to believe, however, the seven rays remained as a significant teaching in the oral tradition of the advanced students of the Theosophical Society. We can find mentions of it, for instance, in the esoteric writings of T. Subba Row, an advanced disciple of the masters and contemporary to Blavatsky. Those writings were only published decades after his death. In fact, it supports the claim that the seven rays were kept only for advanced students, as he wrote:⁴

The Voice comes to you all of a sudden when you do not expect it, and gives you important directions. It is when a man is getting near Adeptship that it comes. It tells you the inmost nature of your own Logos, points out from what Ray you have sprung and tells you what Ray you are to proceed to.
(p. 534)

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Every Initiate must find out his own Ray. Up to the time of the sounding of the Voice the mode of procedure is common to all people. The special directions for each particular Ray are given by the Voice.

(p. 535)

From his description, we can associate other writings with the concept of the seven rays, such as *Light on the Path*⁵, published in 1885. In its 20th aphorism, it is said “seek it [the way] by making the profound obeisance of the soul to the dim star that burns within. Steadily, as you watch and worship, its light will grow stronger. Then you may know you have found the beginning of the way”; and in its comment: “When you have found the beginning of the way the star of your soul will show its light.”

Considering those explanations, it becomes clear why the teachings of the seven rays were not publicized. They become relevant in a specific moment in the spiritual journey, probably very far to reach for most of humanity. Besides, when it manifests, the disciple begins the stage in which directions come more clearly from within rather than from books — in a sense, elaborating the matter in books would be pointless. In my research so far, it seems the details of this matter remained occult from the public during the 19th century.

My assumption was that Ernest Wood’s book from 1925 was the first to explain the details of this matter, but I was mistaken. When I was the librarian of the English Section’s Nottingham Lodge,

I came across a curious book, *The Seven Rays of Development*⁶, by Arthur H. Ward, published in 1910 by the Theosophical Publishing Society in London. It is the first public writing I know of that explains one by one the seven rays, and it presents a version that reminds us of the descriptions that became popular a few decades later.

Respectively, the rays were named as those of (i) power, (ii) healing, (iii) action, (iv) devotion, (v) knowledge, (vi) imagination, and (vii) discipleship. The reader who is familiarized will recognize differences from what is widely known today, but the similarities are enough to perceive both versions are related. I have no clue of how much impact this concise book by Ward had in its time, and no theosophist I talked to seems to have ever heard of it, or its author. The most intriguing part of the book, however, is the description of how the author gained access to this knowledge. He said:

... several friends and myself, working independently, got into communication with the other side, and obtained some information of an interesting nature with regard to past births, after-death states, our different ways of growth, and such matters. Many of the ideas tentatively put forward in the following papers were arrived at in this way, and I have been told in the course of a communication that I “understand the question of the Rays of Development correctly”. (p. 7–8)

In other words, the author claims he got access by psychic means — each of

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his friends researching independently — later receiving a confirmation on whether the information obtained was correct. The disciple investigates a matter with her or his intuition, and the master confirms. This method of occult learning is not new in the Theosophical Society. A previous episode of the same method can be seen when one of the Masters wrote to A. P. Sinnett:⁷ “Though I am obliged to withhold information about many points, yet if you should work out any of the problems by yourself, it will be my duty to tell you so.” (ML, no. 14). In other words, once the seeker manages to sort out by herself some occult knowledge, the Master may manifest as to confirm her discovery. This detail from Ward’s introduction would go unnoticed, but it is noteworthy because a similar episode would be reported in another book, fifteen years later, in 1925.

There is, however, another book worth mentioning before 1925. The famous theosophist, Alice Bailey, published *Letters on Occult Meditation* in 1922.⁸ According to her, the Letters were received between 1919 and 1920, written by the mysterious Tibetan Master who is commonly identified as Djwal Khul. In his meditation instructions, the ray of each person should be taken into consideration in order to establish her practice. Although his descriptions of each ray in the letters are brief, we can find the definition that would later become popular; the rays were associated, respectively, to (i) power, (ii) love-wisdom, (iii) intelligent activity, or adaptability, (iv) harmony,

(v) concrete knowledge, (vi) devotion and (vii) ceremonial magic. Alice Bailey would write extensively about the same version of the seven rays in the 1930s and 1940s, probably becoming the most known reference regarding this theme.

The seven rays described by Bailey and her teacher are possibly the most known versions, today. They are iconic of a meaningful difference when compared to earlier writings. Although in the quotations of the seven rays from the 19th century they are secretive and reserved for a particular — and quite advanced — stage of the spiritual path, in the 20th century the rays became a more accessible concept. They were associated with temperaments and personality traits, becoming a tool for self-knowledge to regular seekers — both in a mundane perspective and in spiritual progression. It helps one to understand her own mission in this lifetime and so on.

Around the same time, interesting events were occurring in India and Australia. The precise year was not mentioned, but Charles W. Leadbeater described, in his 1925 book titled *The Masters and the Path*:⁹

Mr Cooper-Oakley and I and a Hindu brother were sitting talking on the roof at Adyar in the very early days, . . . and there came to us suddenly the Master Djwal Kul, who was at that time the chief pupil of the Master Koot Hoomi. . . . [T]hat day this question of the Rays came up. Mr Cooper-Oakley, in his characteristic way, said: “Oh, please, Master, will you tell us

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all about the Rays?" There was a twinkle in our Teacher's eye as he said: "Well, I cannot tell you all about them until you have reached a very high Initiation. Will you have what I can tell you, which will be partial and inevitably misleading, or will you wait until you can be told the whole thing?" . . . He said "I cannot tell you any more than that, for I am bound by certain pledges; but if your intuition can make out more I will tell you whether you are right." (p. 228–229)

According to him, the information given by the Master was the table he made available in his book, describing for each ray a general characteristic, a characteristic magic and the last religion. Leadbeater admits he could not fully understand the mysterious table, as the Master predicted. It is noteworthy the same pattern described by Ward regarding the method of occult learning based on intuition and confirmation of a master, as well as the indication of Master Djwal Kul as the source of the knowledge, converging to Bailey's claims.

The autobiography of Ernest Wood plays a key role in understanding this period. Wood was a dedicated theosophist, very close to Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater. He used to help them edit their books. During the writing of *The Masters and the Path*, Wood was in Australia helping Leadbeater, and he claims he wrote approximately half of the book himself. According to his autobiography, while they were writing the book, Leadbeater was surprised

by Wood's knowledge on the mysterious theme of the seven rays. Wood said: ²

He was much astonished and asked me where I got this knowledge of a rather obscure subject. I told him that before leaving India I had been now and then receiving what seemed to me like internal communications on this subject of the rays or types of men. Sometimes there had been a voice, but generally ideas had been, as it were, insinuated into my mind, quite distinctly with the feeling of the presence of an intelligence other than my own. In this way I had accumulated a quantity of notes on the subject. . . .

Late one night, as I was travelling along in an otherwise empty carriage on the elevated railway in Chicago . . . I saw, or thought I saw, the Master standing there; and he said "Do not be troubled about that information about the rays. It is quite correct. I gave it to you." When I had recounted this to Bishop Leadbeater, he said: "Well, we will not do any more of my work until you have written a book of your own on the seven rays." (p. 290-291)

If we consider, for the sake of this article's review, that Arthur Ward described the first detailed version of the seven rays accessible to the wide public, and Alice Bailey described the second, we could say Ernest Wood proposed the third. His exposition of the theme, strongly rooted in his knowledge on Hinduism, could be summarized by the main attribute and the work in the society for each ray, respectively: (i) freedom

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(government), (ii) union (philanthropy), (iii) comprehension (philosophy), (iv) harmony (interpretation), (v) truth (science), (vi) goodness (religion), and (vii) beauty (art). Personally, Wood's version has much of my appreciation. In fact, his version motivated me to undertake the research on the history of the seven rays, in order to formulate the lecture presented initially in Nottingham Lodge (UK) in 2014, and later in several cities in Brazil, as well as the writing of this article.

The concept of the seven rays described by the modern theosophical movement influenced various groups. During the 20th century, other writers described their own variations of the seven rays, in both the context of the Theosophical Society and others. With regard to the latter, there are authors such as Guy Ballard, leader of the "*I AM*" *Activity*, which emerged around the notion of the ascended masters during the 1930s. In the same line, Geraldine Innocence founded the *Bridge to Freedom* movement in 1951, and Mark and Elizabeth Prophet founded the *Summit Lighthouse* in 1958.

These are three examples of New Age movements that used the theosophical concept of the seven rays as a structuring foundation for their teachings. Typically, in addition to the psychological and spiritual dimensions, the teachings of those groups described many elevated spiritual beings, and the seven rays play a key role in organizing them in an ordered hierarchy. The colors of each ray — something Ernest Wood and earlier versions

ignored — became very relevant; even though the colors vary depending on the author. For the scope of this article, the descriptions of the rays in those and other New Age groups could be clustered as the fourth version of the seven rays.

One of the most relevant later writings associated with Theosophical Society on the matter was Geoffrey Hodson's book, *The Seven Human Temperaments*,¹⁰ published in 1952. His compact book makes the matter quite accessible, emphasizing the psychological implications of the rays rather than the esoteric tone we could find in the early writings.

He offers a very detailed table of correspondences, and from his writings one can tell he was also inspired by the table supposedly given to Leadbeater by Master Djwal Kul. This can be concluded by analyzing his correspondences between rays and religions, for instance.

However, it could be argued that his system as a whole looks more like Bailey's than Wood's. Curiously, Hodson vaguely mentions a few authors as the sources of the teachings he explains, including Blavatsky, Leadbeater, George Arundale, C. Jinarājādāsa and *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett*. However, he cites neither Ernest Wood nor Alice Bailey. Hypothetically, Hodson might have wanted to emphasize members who were more accepted in the Theosophical Society at that time. Alice Bailey created her own *Arcane School* and Ernest Wood became quite critical of the expectations created around J. Krishnamurti in the 1920s, and left the

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Theosophical Society after he lost the election for international president in 1934.

In this article I outlined my own historical research on the seven rays, and it is surely limited to the material I could find. Rather than assuming this is the complete history, the study should be understood as an invitation for the reader to reflect on the intriguing episodes around the concept, perhaps to encourage one to believe there are still occult layers in the seven rays concept, and to wonder

about the truth behind the words. Hopefully, my historical notes allowed the reader to see how the concept of the seven rays departed from a mysterious notion for advanced students in the 19th century to become a key concept in the Theosophical movement and New Age groups in the 20th century, with many implications, both psychological and in how we understand the hierarchies of beings. History, one could argue, is a powerful tool to develop discrimination. ✧

Endnotes

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2. Ernest Wood. *Is This Theosophy?* Kessinger Publishing's Rare Reprints, originally published in 1936.
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8. Alice Bailey. *Letters on Occult Meditation*. Lucis Publishing Company. Portuguese ed., Rio de Janeiro, 1970.
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**Shines the last age, the next with hope is seen,
To-day slinks poorly off unmarked between:
Future or Past no richer secret folds,
O friendless Present! than thy bosom holds.**

Ralph Waldo Emerson
"Heri, Cras, Hodie"