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Energy Healing: A Historical Exposition of a Core Practice of the
Holistic Milieu

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“For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed;
neither hid, that shall not be known.”

—Lk 12:2 (KJV)

DISCLAIMER

This thesis presents a study on the history of energy healing. It is neither an affirmation of particular schools of energy healing nor a condemnation of any. Evidence supporting the effects of energy healing is largely anecdotal. Despite a growing number of small-scale trials that indicate tentative results, the evidence remains inconclusive. Energetic treatments are in no way a substitute for professional medical or psychotherapeutic diagnosis and treatment. My position on the subject of energy healing is not one of advocacy for its practice. Rather, I endorse its fair and informed evaluation, grounded in an understanding of its historical origins, development and critique.

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My interest in energy healing was first sparked when I encountered a practitioner at an ‘esoteric fair’ (*Esoterikmesse*) in Vienna. I visited the fair as part of a thought-provoking seminar themed “Basic Questions of Esoteric Research” held by Karl Baier in 2012. The middle-aged lady at the booth, Mrs. Jordan, claimed that she would transmit biophotons from her hands to improve her clients’ ailments. I was surprised that she mentioned biophotons, a notion that I was acquainted with from my undergraduate studies in physics. On several occasions, the physicist Karl Kratky had passionately presented the phenomenon, the history of its discovery, and the controversial debate regarding their interpretation. Although it soon became apparent that Mrs. Jordan’s reference to cutting-edge biophysics was more metaphorical than substantial, this short but intriguing encounter awoke my curiosity about the field. After all, energy healing seemed to be a highly ‘esoteric’ subject that was still heavily under-researched.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	7
1. A Sceptical Point of Departure.....	7
2. State of Research.....	14
2.1. Systematic Perspectives	14
2.2. Sociological Perspectives.....	16
2.3. Historical Perspectives	17
3. Energy: A Contested Term Between Science and ‘Esotericism’	19
4. Energy Medicine or Energy Healing?	26
5. Typologies.....	29
5.1. Forms of Mediating the Healing Energy	30
5.2. Major Historical Root	32
5.3. Strategy of Plausibilisation	33
5.4. Binary Poles of Spiritual and Secular	33
6. Aim and Research Questions	34
7. Methodology	36
7.1. A Problem-centred Analysis of Historical Discourses	36
7.2. Patterns of Plausibilisation.....	37
7.3. Linking History with the Contemporary Field: Expert Interviews	37
7.4. The Innovative Character of My Approach.....	38
I. Historical Preliminaries.....	40
1. Between Enlightenment and Romantic Reaction: The Mesmeric Roots of Energy Healing	40
2. Animal Magnetism and Vitalism.....	45
3. A Topos with a Thousand Faces: Synonyms for Subtle Energy <i>sensu</i> Life Force	53
II. Theoretical Preliminaries	68
1. Energy Healing as a Holistic Practice	68
1.1. The Holistic Milieu	68
1.2. The De-differentiation between Religion and Healing	76
1.3. Therapeutic Pluralism, Holistic Healing, and Religious-Therapeutic Practices	82
2. Energy Healing as Heterodox Discourse.....	87
2.1. The Cultic Milieu, Healing Cults, and Medical Heterodoxy.....	87
2.2. Modern Esotericism: A Spin-Off of Scientification	94
2.3. From Occultism to Occulture.....	111
3. Theorising Energy Healing	115
3.1. Placebo Effect or Mind-Body-Medicine?	115
3.2. Energy as a Therapeutic Medium.....	120
4. Two Emic Patterns of Plausibilisation	125

4.1. The Appeal to Science: Futuristic Retro-Medicine	125
4.2. The Appeal to a ‘Mystic East’: Occult Orientalism	148
III. Overview of Published Articles	151
1. The Contemporary Field of Energy Healing	151
1.1. Energy Healing as a Core Practice of the Holistic Milieu	151
1.2. The Professionalisation of Energy Healing between Spirituality and Medicalisation: Austria as a Case Study	152
2. Studying Subtle Energies as a Historical Subject: Approaches, Definition, Demarcations	152
3. Energy Healing as Futuristic Retro-Medicine	154
3.1. Historical Roots of Subtle Energies: Occult Physicalism	154
3.2. Futuristic Retro-Medicine: Alice Bailey’s <i>Esoteric Healing</i> and its Impact on Contemporary Energy Healing	156
4. Energy Healing as an Imagined Eastern Tradition	157
4.1. Historical Roots of Subtle Energies: Occult Orientalism	157
4.2. A Genealogy of Pranic Healing (1)	158
4.3. A Genealogy of Pranic Healing (2)	159
IV. Concluding Remarks	162
V. Bibliography	173
VI. Appendix: Overview of Published Articles	193

Published Articles

1. Das holistische Milieu – ein Gegenstand der künftigen Religionsbildung?	194
2. Between Spirituality and Medicalisation: The Professionalisation of Energy Healing in Austria	209
3. Introduction* [to the Volume <i>Subtle Energies in Therapy, Spirituality, Arts & Politics</i>]	266
4. Historical Roots of Subtle Energies: Occult Physicalism*	284
5. “Medical men in the new age”: Alice Bailey’s Impact on Contemporary Energy Healing	323
6. Historical Roots of Subtle Energies: Occult Orientalism*	362
7. From <i>Fluidum</i> to <i>Prāṇa</i> : Reading Mesmerism Through Orientalist Lenses	385
8. Pranic Healing: A Mesmerist Echo in the New “Holistic” Age	411

* Forthcoming (in production).

Abstract	472

Introduction

1. A Sceptical Point of Departure

Energy healing is a highly contested subject. A major reason for its controversial reputation is that modalities of energy healing did not emerge from within the medical sciences. As a growing segment of alternative medicine, energy healing has been receiving harsh condemnations over the past decades, particularly from the side of sceptics. Their critique may serve as an indication of the key themes that open the path to exploring the cultural history of this fascinating contemporary field.

An outspoken critic of energy healing is Edzard Ernst (b. 1948), one of the most-cited researchers on alternative medicine (cf. Ioannidis et al. 2019). In *Alternative Medicine: A Critical Assessment of 150 Modalities* (2019), the British-German physician set out to separate the wheat from the chaff. “There cannot be two kinds of medicine—conventional and alternative,” he quoted a now famous editorial written by Marcia Angell (b. 1939) and Jerome P. Kassirer (b. 1932) to the prestigious *New England Journal of Medicine*. “There is only medicine that has been adequately tested and medicine that has not, medicine that works and medicine that may or may not work” (Angell and Kassirer 1998: 841; cited in Ernst 2019: vii). Optimistically applying Aristotelean logic to a notoriously complex field, Ernst was determined to offer a “concise, evidence-based analysis” and “reliable data” so that consumers can make informed and rational choices regarding their own health (ibid.).

Ernst considers alternative medicine to be a matter of belief rather than science. This becomes particularly apparent in his description of a number of methods that he grouped under the category ‘energy healing.’ According to his definition, energy healing denotes an “umbrella term for a range of paranormal healing practices” whose common denominator is

the esoteric belief in some form of ‘energy’ which is distinct from the concept of energy understood in physics and refers to some life force such as chi in Traditional Chinese Medicine, or prana in Ayurvedic medicine. [...] Forms of energy healing have existed in many ancient cultures. The ‘New Age’ movement has brought about a revival of these ideas, and today energy healing systems are amongst the most popular alternative therapies in the US as well as in many other countries. [...] Some proponents employ terminology from quantum physics and other ‘cutting-edge’ science to give their treatments a scientific flair

which, upon closer scrutiny, turns out to be but a veneer of pseudo-science. (Ernst 2019: 269)

Apart from the decidedly normative framing, Ernst describes here the central narrative employed by energy healing advocates: The concept of healing energies, understood as synonymous with “life force,” is legitimised through the appeal to traditions of ancient, non-European provenance and reinforced by invoking physical theories—most notably “quantum physics”—as an authoritative point of reference.

As a sceptic, Ernst dismisses any allusion of practitioners to science as “pseudo-scientific” but seems to take no issue with the narrative of energy healing’s ancient or exotic origins. The assertion that energy healing is rooted in antiquity is taken for granted in the field of energy healing to such a degree that even sceptics appear to accept it at face value. Whereas practitioners perceive ancient provenance to be a hallmark of authenticity and quality, sceptics regard it a useful additional marker to denote the negative ‘other’ of science, next to ‘New Age’ and ‘esoteric.’¹ Having rubber-stamped energy healing as outside the domain science and, therefore, without medical value, the question whether the quasi-canonical account of energy healers is historically accurate is not even considered.

Ernst uses a classic binary scheme to contrast the dark realm of superstition and ignorance with the light of science and reason. He associates alternative medicine with “believer,” “religion,” and “anecdotes,” whereas scientific medicine is concerned with “facts” and “evidence” (Ernst 2019: vii). Ironically, Ernst pushes the envelope when he grounds medical decision-making not in persuasion, but in *trust*: “If (...) you are looking for the facts about alternative medicine, trust in science” (ibid.). The slogan ‘trust in science’ suggests the assumption that there exists only a single, monolithic scientific view of things and that ‘the’ science is the arbiter of medical truth.

Strictly following Ernst’s line of argumentation, not only the sympathy for alternative medicine but any preference for a particular medical system is ultimately a question of creed. Where evidence is ambiguous and where risk-benefit assessments depend to a large degree on personal values, the element of trust assumes a more crucial role. Rivalries between medical systems may then take on the character of interreligious strife and play out the dynamics that arise when a well-established orthodoxy struggles

¹ The ‘esoteric’ is a highly ambiguous term even within a scholarly context. Whereas the adjective and its corresponding noun ‘esotericism’ are becoming less common in self-descriptions, they continue to serve as *normative* labels to construct an irrational and unscientific ‘other.’ This particular topos of difference construction is in itself highly interesting from a cultural studies perspective. To offer a preliminary *descriptive* definition that will be further justified in section II.2.2, esotericism here denotes a broad historiographical category for modern cultural discourses that (1) elevate human subjective agency vis-à-vis a differentiated, scientised culture; (2) claim the influence of hidden principles, forces, or energies as the essential cause underlying phenomenal reality; (3) advocate for paths of knowing and mastering these supposed powers for the purpose of personal transformation or the attainment of this-worldly goals; (4) are disseminated (or ‘revealed’) through the public promotion of books, artwork, ritual practices, and services.

with heterodoxies for interpretational sovereignty. In short, medical pluralism turns into a compelling subject to explore from a cultural and religious studies perspective.

A closer look at Ernst's assessment of energy healing in fact reveals that he does not deny their possible therapeutic *effect* but their *plausibility*: "The 'energy' that energy healers refer to is not measurable and lacks biological plausibility" (Ernst 2019: 269). Even methodologically robust trials fail to prove that energy healing "generates effects beyond placebo" (ibid.), which by implication means that it is safe to assume at least some minor medical benefit. Ernst further assesses the modalities of energy healing to be "per se harmless" (ibid.). However, and accentuating the thrust of Ernst's crusade under the banner of medical orthodoxy, the "untold damage" inherent in energetic methods unfolds not on a medical but on a public level. A widespread acceptance of services offered by energy healers would normalise a climate that ultimately "undermines rational thought in our societies" (ibid.).

Ernst's treatment of concrete energy healing modalities exemplifies his performance of boundary work. "Pranic healing has ancient roots," postulates a non-physical subtle body, and includes invocation prayers to facilitate the "presence of divine energy" during healing rituals (Ernst 2019: 241). In Ernst's view, all this proves that the assumptions behind Pranic Healing are not "based on verifiable facts or good science; they are therefore not plausible" (ibid.). Although Ernst admitted that only few clinical trials had been conducted to test the effectiveness of Pranic Healing, he cited one trial that indicated some evidence that the method may ameliorate "mild and moderate depression" (Rajagopal et al. 2018). However, those results could not justify its recommendation.

Similarly, Reiki, a Japanese form of energy healing, claims to employ techniques that tap into a "universal life energy"—a concept that lacks scientific basis (Ernst 2019: 245). Clinical trials that examined the effectiveness of Reiki are "unfortunately" of poor methodological quality. Ernst cited one meta study that refers to Reiki as "a 2500 year old treatment described as a vibrational or subtle energy therapy" and concludes that the evidence for using Reiki to treat anxiety or depression was "insufficient" (Joyce and Herbison 2015).

Therapeutic Touch (TT) is an energetic variant of laying-on-of-hands that first gained popularity among American nurses and has spread globally over the course of the past five decades (Ernst 2019: 248). Ernst cited a literature review which reported "a majority of statistically significant positive results" for TT's ability to reduce pain (Monroe 2009). However, because this review and a plethora of similar studies were conducted by proponents of TT, Ernst concluded that they were "less than reliable" (Ernst 2019: 248). His more important argument is that TT should be rejected because its basic assumption of a "universal energy" is "not biologically plausible" and "like all forms of paranormal healing, [TT] undermines rational thinking" (ibid.). Ernst underpinned his view by referring to a pre-clinical study, co-designed by one of the authors' 9-year-old daughter, which concluded that "[t]wenty-one experienced

TT practitioners were unable to detect the investigator’s ‘energy field’” (Rosa et al. 1998). This result should have been reason enough to consider the claims of TT “groundless” and discontinue its “further professional use” (ibid.).

Ernst’s verdict on energy healing is clear: Although it may be a relatively safe application of the placebo effect, it should be rejected on grounds of its implausible and unscientific assumptions, which contradict a rational approach to medicine. Practitioners would likely object to the statement that the *efficacy* of energy healing is purely speculative. Even if their methods do not fit the prevailing biomedical paradigm, energy healers argue that they still merit consideration. Indeed, an immense body of clinical studies—reflecting the adaptation to a clinical style of knowledge production—appears to back this claim. For example, over 300 journal articles are listed on the reference management platform Zotero under the label “Subtle Energy and Biofield Healing” (N. A. 2025).² These articles examine the effects of medicalised (or psychologised) forms of energy healing including Reiki, and Therapeutic Touch, as well as other practices such as Brennan Healing Science, External Qi Therapy, Emotional Freedom Technique, or Thought Field Therapy. Moreover, over 500 scientific articles, clinical studies, meta-analyses were put together in a data base that is run by an organisation called World Reiki Research (formerly Swiss Reiki).³ The organisation’s declared mission is to advance the scientific recognition of Reiki on an international scale. Finally, around 800 research articles, literature reviews, theses, and other resources have been collected by the Therapeutic Touch International Association in a commentated online bibliography (est. in 1979 as Nurse Healers Professional Associates International, renamed as TTIA in 2008) (TTIA 2024; cf. Zoehrer 2024).

These studies seem to indicate that energetic interventions have potential benefits in ameliorating chronic pain, insomnia, stress, and anxiety. As a relatively cost-effective treatment that is associated with a low risk of adverse events, energy healing modalities are sought by (mostly middle-class) clients to promote relaxation and support overall well-being. However, due to varying standards in clinical studies, the typically low sample numbers, and—not least—vested interests, the reported results should not be taken at face value and much less as a verification of the theoretical models employed by energy healers. Nonetheless, even if the subject of energy healing is approached with the lowest theoretical resolution by declaring energy healing a ‘sham treatment,’ this proposition would hardly invalidate the practice’s efficacy in the eyes of practitioners and their respective clients. This would merely reinforce the view that energy healing can be regarded as a skilled use of the placebo effect—persuasive, at least for some individuals.

² I thank Sylvain Perriollat, a Belgian ‘magnétiseur, énergéticien, rebouteux’ (magnetiser, energy healer, bonesetter), for providing the corresponding link by email (November 6, 2024).

³ I thank the Swiss Reiki master René Vögli for this valuable reference.

However, the question whether energy healing is clinically efficient is largely irrelevant to this study—as it is to sceptics. At the core of their critique of alternative medicine at large and energy healing in particular is the dismissal of vitalism, “the now obsolete metaphysical concept that life depends on a force distinct from chemical, physical or other principles” (Ernst 2019: 312). Medical theories must be founded in Western-style science to meet the criterion of plausibility. The postulation of a ‘life force’ or ‘vital energy’ characterises the fundamental healing concept behind traditional and holistic approaches alike, thereby excluding them from the biomedical frame of thought:

Life force or vital force or vital energy are the terms used for the metaphysical concept of a power that allegedly animates all organisms. A disturbed life force is according to many proponents of alternative medicine, the reason why humans fall ill. Such concepts existed in many cultures and contexts: chi in China, prana in India, pneuma in ancient Greece, animal magnetism in Messmer’s hypnotherapy, the inert in chiropractic etc. (Ernst 2019: 309)

Victor J. Stenger (1935–2014), the American particle physicist and defender of philosophical naturalism, argued a quarter century ago that it was well past time to discard not only antiquated concepts of a ‘life force’ or ‘bioenergetic field’ but also related notions such as an autonomous realm of the soul or spirit:

The unifying principle behind almost all of alternative medicine is that some *élan vital* [sic] is responsible for infusing organisms with the property of life. In today’s fashion, this vital force is called the bioenergetic field and is confusingly associated with classical electromagnetic fields on the one hand, and quantum wave function fields on the other. (...) Belief in the existence of a living force is primeval and remains widespread. Called prana by the Hindus, ch’i by the Chinese, and ki by the Japanese, it is the source of life that is often associated with soul, spirit, and mind. In ancient times the soul was identified with breath, which the Hebrews called ruach, the Greeks psyche or pneuma (the breath of the gods), and the Romans spiritus. Obviously, the origin of words like “psychic” and “spirit” resides in what we now know is a completely material substance—the mixture of N₂, O₂, and other gases we call air. But bioenergetic fields are much thinner than air, so thin in fact that they cannot be distinguished from the void. (Stenger 1998)

The position that all biological processes are reducible to physical and chemical principles had already been the consensus in scientific medicine in the early twentieth century. Of this era, the American historian of medicine James C. Whorton (b. 1932) wrote:

Mainstream medicine was already well along the road of reductionism, the conviction that vital phenomena can be reduced entirely to mechanisms derived from the material sciences of chemistry and physics, and was automatically derisive of any theoretical position that

smacked of vitalism or forces that transcended the physico-chemical domain. (Whorton 2002: 224)

In light of the fact that orthodox medicine has long dismissed vitalism as obsolete, a pressing question emerges: how have healing practices that appear implausible, irrational, and unscientific managed to gain such broad popularity within a secularised, science-oriented society? What the scholar of religion Karl Baier observed for modern yoga perfectly applies just as well to the field of energy healing: scholars “begin to take interest in a phenomenon at the latest when it becomes noticeable as an economic and cultural factor” (Baier 2012: 2).

Energy healing represents one of the fastest-growing sectors in the market of holistic services (cf. Höllinger and Tripold 2012; Zoehrer 2020; Zoehrer 2024). This thesis critically investigates the historical foundations underlying the topos of vitalistic terms that frame energy healing in both futuristic and ancient terms. The appeal to cutting-edge science in claiming new, revolutionary healing systems—in fact often reiterating older ideas—will be shown to be an unresolved Enlightenment-era legacy. In the eighteenth century, mesmerism, a key precursor to contemporary energy healing modalities was officially discredited by scientific commissions, yet subsequently reabsorbed into academic discourse by German and French Romantic thinkers, and later transformed within the American religious-therapeutic milieu of the late nineteenth century. While the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of mesmerism is a well-established field of research, my innovative contribution is to examine how the concepts of ‘energy’ and *prāṇa* became linked to mesmeric practice, thus reconstructing two discursive trajectories that decisively shaped current practices. As I will demonstrate, the term energy, understood as a mesmeric-vitalistic healing agent, was not adopted to imitate scientific discourse but in fact predates the now established physical concept of energy. Transcultural exchange and anti-colonial critique further contributed to hybrid healing systems that allied with Western alternative therapies and employed analogous argumentation structures that defend inherently vitalist anthropologies. In this process of articulating and disseminating the paradigm of a subtle, vital energy, occult authors played a crucial role.⁴

Section 2 of the introductory remarks presents the state of research on energy healing in systematic, sociological, and historical perspective. The subsequent three sections seek to clarify the terms ‘subtle energy’ and ‘energy healing,’ and provide a heuristic typology of energy healing modalities. On this basis, I zoom in on the particular focus of my thesis and present the aims and research questions in Section

⁴ Building on a combination of the historiographical and typological definitions proposed by Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (2013:1–4), occultism may be described as a particular esoteric current of theories and practices that first emerged in Euro-American societies from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and expanded to a global, transcultural movement within several decades. Central substantive features of occult discourse are (1) the interpretation of the world in terms of correlations or a web of sympathies; (2) the belief in correspondences between gestures, symbols, or words and the recipients or targets thereof; and (3) the emphasis on intuition and imagination as paths to knowledge and mastery over hidden forces.

Six. Section 7 describes the methods that were applied to reconstruct major genealogical lines in the history of energy healing and how they impact the contemporary field.

2. State of Research

A number of scholarly contributions have shed light on individual aspects on energy healing. Although the theme has been examined from systematic, sociological, and historical angles, a review of the literature reveals substantial gaps in the scholarly mapping of the field. To date no comprehensive historiography of the idea of energy in the context of religious-therapeutic practices has been attempted.

2.1. Systematic Perspectives

Scholars have yet to reach a clear consensus on how to define and name the field. Subsumed under the category “Holistic Health” Wouter Hanegraaff’s superb monograph *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1996) lists a number of practices that could just as well be counted as energy healing. These include acupuncture, biofeedback, kinesiology, homeopathy, polarity massage, Therapeutic Touch, psychic healing, and healing by crystals, metals, music, or colours (Hanegraaff 1996: 54–55). During the mid-1990s, several umbrella terms were circulating to capture this plethora of approaches. ‘Energy medicine’ had already been in use as an emic category among protagonists of New Age culture (cf. Capra 1982).⁵ Catherine L. Albanese defined “subtle-energy healing” as methods whose aim it is “to alter and assist broken and disfigured auras” (Albanese 1999: 314; cf. Albanese 2000). As discussed by Johannes Endler (2020), the local Austrian interest group of energy healers omits any reference to ‘healing’ and denote their trade as ‘energy work’ (*Energiewerk*) in order to avoid conflict with the ‘law on doctors’ (*Ärztegesetz*).

In *Philosophie der Esoterik* (1996), the Austrian philosopher and Jesuit Edmund Runggaldier (b. 1946) examined key tenets shared by contemporary esoteric movements from the perspective of philosophical categories. This included a brief discussion of the concept of a universal agent or ‘energy’ imagined to constitute the essence behind the world of phenomena as a fundamental ontological principle. However, as Runggaldier’s choice of primary sources was rather limited, he claims the notion of energy to be an expression of a ‘monistic’ worldview. Hanegraaff’s above-mentioned work showed that monism is only one of several variants of holistic (and by implication energetic) worldviews.

Applying a somewhat more critical category than Hanegraaff’s ‘New Age science,’ Olav Hammer’s monograph *Claiming Knowledge* discussed the appearance of terms such as “energy,” “vibration,” and “frequency” in popular books as instances of scientism, i.e., the appeal to science as a “language of faith” (2001: 236–239). Hammer’s analysis, covering esoteric movements from Theosophy to the New Age, provides a highly valuable theoretical framework as he reconstructed three basic strategies of

⁵ Whereas ‘energy healing’ is still used synonymously with ‘energy medicine,’ I propose to restrict the latter term to conceptions that seek to explain subtle energies within a purely biophysical framework (see Introduction, Section 4).

plausibilisation chosen by esoteric actors who seek to challenge the hegemonial scientific view of nature in the late modern, globalising West. In addition to the appeal to science, Hammer examined how references to ancient wisdom and accounts of personal experience served to lend credibility to esoteric worldviews. All three pathways have been employed to legitimise energy healing.

Anne Koch and Stephan Binder (2013) further investigated the use of physicalist language in the holistic field. In their review of medical literature on ‘spiritual healing,’ which in this case largely overlaps with energy healing, Koch and Binder noticed that physicalist explanatory models are used to demarcate healing practices from explicitly religious language. Building on the work of Robert C. Fuller (1982; 1989), which demonstrated the historical influence of mesmerism on American alternative medicine and religion (see section I.1), they underscored three characteristic aspects in the theoretical foundations of spiritual healing. First, spiritual healing has been influenced by specific philosophical traditions (American Transcendentalism, empirical theology, German idealism, German Romanticism) that are incompatible with the mechanistic view of the human being that predominates in biomedicine. Second, as in the case of classical mesmerism, spiritual healing floats between the notion of a physicalist healing agent on the one hand and the employment of parapsychological phenomena (e.g., extra-sensory perception including clairvoyance and precognition) and altered states of consciousness on the other (see also Baier 2020a). Third, the boundary work between spiritual healing and the scientific community appears to be not one-sided but a process of *mutual* exclusion (a counter argument to the ‘rejected knowledge’ thesis in the study of esotericism, see section II.2.2.2). Despite appeals to physics and psychology—reflecting the influence of the dominant culture—spiritual healers refuse to fully scientise their systems and submit to a reductionist, biomedical framework. These three aspects—historical anti-mechanism, spiritualised versions of physicalism, and the boundary work vis-à-vis scientific medicine—are highly relevant to the study of energy healing. Koch and Binder’s reflections are thus a useful departure point for examining the crucial role of physicalism in the formation of the idea of ‘subtle energies’ (see Zoehrer 2025b).

A characteristic anthropological element in several energy healing modalities, particularly those that received significant input from the occult-orientalist discourse, is the notion of *cakras*. Hammer presented a concise overview of how *cakras* were decontextualised from the Tantric meditative praxis and creatively adapted in the subtle anatomy of New Age-authors, where *cakras* were reconstrued as “centers of vital force” (Hammer 2001: 185). Kurt Leland’s *Rainbow Body* (2016) offers a comprehensive chronology of the evolution of the *cakra* system through the course of the twentieth century and demonstrated how *cakras* gradually came to be associated with particular physical and mental functions, glands, colours, and levels of spiritual progress. Several of the authors mentioned by Leland also played a crucial role in the formation of energy healing systems, however, energy healing is only one of several other functions of the *cakra* system. Karl Baier (2016) closed the gap on the reception history of the *cakra* system between the twentieth and nineteenth centuries and shed light on

how South Asian conceptions of the *cakras* were appropriated through a creative exchange by early Theosophical authors. Closely related to the element of *cakras* is the older idea of subtle bodies, which was introduced into the discourse of energy healing through Theosophical texts. A number of publications released in recent years were dedicated to this theme (Samuel and Johnston 2013; Cox 2022).

2.2. Sociological Perspectives

The structure of the religious service market that has emerged in the Western middle-class since the beginning of the 1980s was examined in detail by the sociologist Markus Hero (Hero 2010). The direct reciprocity (*quid pro quo*) of provider-client-relationships differs from the more traditional communitarian ways of life, and is restricted in terms of material and personal investment. Hero argued that as the focus on personalised demand increases, the institutional frameworks that offer religious orientation have shifted towards networks and occupational groups of service providers in order to signal standards in training, ethics, and performance quality. Essential elements of these network-shaped markets are associations and centres (referred to as ‘schools’, ‘academies’, or ‘institutes’), personal service providers, sole traders, and the self-help book market. Their central themes encompass anthropocentrism, this-worldly concerns (health, wealth, relationships, etc.), and a focus on personal experience—all reflecting the characteristic features of popular spirituality (cf. Knoblauch 2009).

The religious service market intersects largely with what British sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead have coined the ‘holistic milieu,’ that is, the flourishing self-help market at the intersection of religiosity and therapy (Heelas et al. 2005). In contrast to role-centred membership in conventional religious groups, participants of the holistic milieu seek ‘subjective-life’ spirituality, that is, authentic and experience-oriented forms of self-actualisation. A comprehensive sociological study on the Austrian holistic milieu found that at least one third of the adult population occasionally makes use of holistic services (e.g., mind-body-exercises, dowsing, astrology, systemic family constellation, or shamanism) (Höllinger and Tripold 2012). Meanwhile, the vast majority of Austrian providers of holistic services are registered within the occupational group of ‘energy practioners’ (*Energetiker*). While Austrian energy healers are likely to have one of the strongest advocacy groups in Europe, it can be assumed that the proportion of energy healing in the holistic milieus of other Western societies is comparable. However, comparative sociological studies assessing the scope of energy healing practices across different countries have yet to be undertaken.

A central analytical category for investigating energy healing in its social and cultural context is gender. Several scholars have observed that the holistic milieu is dominated by female practitioners and clients (Woodhead 2007; Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2013). Ruth Barcan (2014: 33–54) took an empirical approach to investigate the dimensions of gender in the context of aromatherapy—a highly feminised

practice as are most other modalities of energy healing. Women have played a leading role in introducing energy healing to hospital settings, a subject that was examined with a focus on Reiki by Justin Stein (2024; cf. Stein 2021; 2025).

2.3. Historical Perspectives

It is widely recognised that a major strand of energy healing is rooted in animal magnetism, a healing system developed in the 1770s by the physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) (cf. Barkhoff 1995; Baier 2013; Hanegraaff 2013). Animal magnetism, also known as mesmerism, was essentially a secularised and physicalised form of exorcism that emerged in the context of Enlightenment-era medicine. Mesmer disregarded demons and Christ as health factors and instead postulated that an imponderable physical agent, a ‘universal fluid’ or ether, functioned as the healing principle of his approach, while maintaining practical elements of Roman-Catholic exorcism (Baier 2015). A core technique of mesmerism involved so-called ‘magnetic’ passes—hand movements performed on or near the patient’s body (cf. section I.1 for an overview of early mesmerism).

The academic rediscovery of mesmerism in the twentieth century first occurred in the historiography of psychiatry and medicine from the 1960s onwards. Henri Ellenberger’s *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (1970) attempted to rehabilitate Mesmer as a pioneer of depth psychology. Initiated by the medical historian Heinz Schott, a more comprehensive re-evaluation of mesmerism emerged in the 1980s, situated within the framework of the history of science and mentalities (Schott 1985). In the mid-1990s, the German culture historian Jürgen Barkhoff discussed the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of mesmerism in German Romantic literature and science around 1800 in terms of “niche formation” (*Nischenbildung*). Following the sociologist and political scientist Wolf Lepenies (b. 1941), Barkhoff defined niche formation as “the preservation and unfolding of an inferior and marginalised scientific current and its critical potential in the cultural sub-discourse, its ‘hibernation’ until its rediscovery” (Barkhoff 1995: xiii; cf. Lepenies 1989).⁶

In his concluding remarks, Barkhoff noticed a “return of mesmerism in the realm of [contemporary] esotericism” (*Wiederkehr des Mesmerismus im Bereich der Esoterik*), which he phenomenologically described as a market-shaped field that embraced psychotherapy, body experience, alternative medicine, and spirituality (Barkhoff 1995: 322). Barkhoff mentioned diverse “body therapeutic-spiritual services” (*körpertherapeutisch-spirituelle Angebote*) and “esoteric-energetic healing methods” (*esoterisch-energetische Heilverfahren*) that exhibit surprising similarities to animal magnetism in their explanatory models. His examples—“aura-massage, influencing the astral body, energy-work on the subtle body,

⁶ “die Bewahrung und Entfaltung einer unterlegenen und marginalisierten Wissenschaftsströmung und ihrer kritischen Potentiale im kulturellen Subdiskurs, ihr ‘Überwintem’ bis zur Wiederentdeckung.”

Polarity, acupressure, or Raiki [sic]” (ibid.)⁷—perfectly fit the category of energy healing as a central activity of the contemporary holistic milieu.

In the 2000s and 2010s, several major works illustrated the crucial impact of mesmerism on the late modern history of religion. In his two seminal volumes titled *Meditation und Moderne* (2009), Karl Baier elucidated the ways in which mesmeric thought and practice engaged in mutual exchange with Buddhist and Hindu contemplative traditions, and spawned new religious currents in the nineteenth-century including Christian Science, New Thought, and occultism. In a similar vein, Klaus Brand’s doctoral thesis *Wissenschaft und Religion in Mesmerismusdiskursen des 19. Jahrhunderts* (2014) continued where Barkhoff ended and demonstrated that mesmerism-inspired literature—marked by a de-differentiated fusion of science and religion—anticipated the emergence of twentieth-century discourses on “alternative” or “popular spirituality.” These works had no focus on the genesis of energy healing but explored the central ideological currents from which twentieth-century schools of energy healing would emerge.

Catherine L. Albanese (1999) explicitly analysed the notion of (healing) energy in New Age spirituality and its origins in the American ‘metaphysical’ movements of the nineteenth century (Transcendentalism, spiritualism, New Thought, and occultism). She marked two crucial influences on the metaphysical discourse of ‘flow’: First, the doctrine of divine *influx*, i.e., the source of vitality in humans, spirits, and angels, that was introduced by the scientist-turned-mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Second, the invisible *fluidum* (or tides) that Mesmer thought would pervade the universe and flow freely in healthy human bodies. In a second notable article, Albanese (2000) presented a collage of contemporary forms of energy healing, including Brennan’s School of Healing, Reiki, and Therapeutic Touch, and highlighted historical parallels between their central elements (laying-on-of-hands, subtle bodies, *cakras*, physicalism, and clairvoyance) and nineteenth-century actors of the religious-therapeutic discourse. In addition, she identified six points of discontinuities between the cultural context of “subtle-energy healers” and that of their forerunners: (1) cultural pluralisation, (2) scientification, (3) increased media presence, (4) technologisation and alienation, (5) the psychologisation of healing, and (6) the privatisation of religion. Albanese thus already sketched the contours of an idea history of energy healing and defined important thrusts for further research.

In recent years, scholars have begun to map out the histories of individual currents of energy healing. The perhaps best researched historiographies are on Therapeutic Touch (van Gelder and Chesley 2015) and Reiki (Beeler and Jonker 2020; Stein 2023), which underscore the origins and transcultural trajectories of the field’s trailblazers. However, the decisive role of important theorists such as William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932) and Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949) or prolific school founders such as

⁷ “Aura-Massage, Beeinflussung des Astralleibs, Energie-Arbeit am feinstofflichen Leib, Polarity, Akupressur oder Raiki”

Choa Kok Sui (Choa Kok Sui (né Samson Lim Choachuy, 1952–2007) received comparably limited scholarly attention thus far.

The field of energy healing has not yet been systematically explored against the background of the nineteenth-century vitalism controversy and the influence on vitalism on the principles of alternative medicine (cf. section I.2). A comprehensive study of the history of energy healing would need to take into account how the notion of subtle energy acquired its vitalistic connotation.

3. Energy: A Contested Term Between Science and ‘Esotericism’

“Those who cannot remember the past
are condemned to repeat it.”⁸

—George Santayana (1863–1952)

In the Quagmire of Boundary Work

In mainstream culture, the border lines between science, medicine, and psychology on the one hand, and the religious, magical, or mythical on the other hand are precisely regulated and monitored. Assuming that fields of knowledge are socially constructed and its borders subject to maintenance and restructuring (if deemed necessary by those who wield interpretative authority), the holistic field exemplifies how those boundaries are re-defined, intentionally blurred, and transgressed. As a form of ‘professionalising esotericists,’ energy healers claim to effectively improve their clients’ well-being by recourse to hidden powers. The field’s increasing market presence due to a growing demand has raised questions about established boundaries between health professions and health-related activities, thus triggering typical reactions of ‘boundary work.’

The term boundary work was first suggested by the American sociologist Thomas F. Gieryn (b. 1950). It refers to the problem of disciplinary demarcation, i.e., the question of rigorously discerning between ‘science’ and ‘non-science’. According to Gieryn, boundary work may be understood as a rhetorical feature of ‘public science,’ that is, the way scientists explain what constitutes their profession to the public and political decision makers (cf. Gieryn 1983). Scientific institutions are under pressure to defend their domain of professional autonomy and their authority over the interpretation of scientific knowledge. The scientists’ underlying motive is the hope of expanding their access to material or symbolic resources, and to preserve their area of professional autonomy. Gieryn thus interprets the problem of demarcation as an ideologically motivated effort on the side of scientists. Because scientific institutions profit from the immense cognitive authority of science, their representatives are under

⁸ Santayana 1906: 284.

pressure to publicly identify and map their domain of knowledge and rhetorically dismiss what is not science.

In the case of energy healing, the German physicist and sceptic Martin Lambeck (1934–2020) performed boundary-work when he strictly opposed the idea of ‘esoteric energy’ as energy per se. Lambeck disassociates the use of the term in alternative medical contexts from the well tested notion of energy developed in physics, while resorting to the placebo effect as an acknowledged explanation for spontaneous healings rather than assuming a non-physical agent operating in ways that are unknown to established science (Lambeck 2005). This stance vividly confirms Gieryn’s observation how professional scientists react to the pressure of having to defend their authority and control over public discourse while applying a policy of excluding potential rivals or emulators by denouncing them as deviant (Gieryn 1995; 1999).

As shown above, sceptics frame energy healing as a practice that is based on vitalism—that is, an obsolete scientific theory—and insist on terminological purity. The notion of energy as a physical system’s quantifiable capacity to perform work was formalised in the mid-nineteenth century. One of the most fundamental laws of physics, the “conservation of energy,” was articulated in its almost final form in the book *Über die Erhaltung der Kraft* (On the Conservation of Force, 1847) by the German physicist Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894).⁹ Rejecting all notions of a vital force, Helmholtz asserted that biological dynamics (e.g., muscle force) can be fully explained through purely physical and chemical laws (Smith 1998: 129–131). Building on Helmholtz’ work, William Thomson (1824–1907), the later Lord Kelvin, recognised the role of energy as a unifying principle and in his *Treatise on Natural Philosophy* (1867), co-written with the Scottish physicist Peter Guthrie Tait (1831–1901), demonstrated that all branches of physics could be expounded through the mechanics of energy (cf. Thomson and Tait 1867). Since living organisms can in principle be described in physical terms, sceptics argue, no energies except physical energy are required to fully explain the body’s functions. They thus preserve the scientific meaning of the word ‘energy’ and defend the notion against misrepresentations by representatives of non-scientific fields.

Engaging in boundary work is not only an activity pursued by orthodox scientists (and dedicated sceptics) but also functions in the opposite direction: The established borders of science can be challenged and sought to be expanded from a non-scientific angle (Hess 1993, 145–146). The sociologist Roy Wallis (1985) argued that practitioners of “pseudo-sciences” or the more notorious representatives of a given field whose claims are rejected by mainstream science, can attempt to win broader public support by practising “sanitisation.” This strategy aims at *imitating* institutions, formal aspects of citation and

⁹ Physicists later agreed on the term ‘energy’ rather than ‘force’ when the terminology and principles of thermodynamics were standardised and Helmholtz’ law was reformulated as the law of conservation of energy (Smith 1998: 127).

reference, or the methods of conventional science. In a similar fashion, historian of religion Olav Hammer used the term scientism to describe a characteristic discursive strategy pursued by New Age-authors. Hammer defined scientism as “the active positioning of one’s own claims in relation to the manifestations of any academic discipline” by incorporating scientific terminology, stylistic features, or the use of technical devices, *without* thoroughly applying the methods acknowledged by the scientific community (Hammer 2001: 205–206). Besides typical modes of scientism, such as the appeal to academic credentials or the use of technology that resembles science, Hammer also highlights the use of ideas and terms borrowed predominantly from the physical sciences. This ‘terminological scientism’ regularly employs notions such as ‘force,’ ‘frequencies,’ ‘vibration,’ ‘dimension,’ ‘energy,’ or ‘quantum physics’ and embeds them within comprehensive, synthetic worldviews. The number of scientistic attempts to legitimise alternative worldviews stretches from eighteenth century mesmerism and turn-of-the-century Theosophical Society to the various types of ‘New Age science’ in the later twentieth century, (Hanegraaff 1996; Hammer 2001: 236–239; cf. also my discussion of types of scientism in Zoehrer 2016: 9–10.¹⁰

Taking the notion of boundary work a step further, Ruth Barcan, an Australian scholar of Gender and Cultural Studies, examined the holistic field beyond the macro-level relationship between science and non-science. She delineates micro-level modes in which individual practitioners negotiate between their own rationality and their gift of healing (Barcan 2010: 139–146). Barcan’s approach provides a clearer picture of strategies taken ‘on the ground’ to manage socially established boundaries and attain a balance between the role of intuition, spirituality, and transcendence in daily practice on the one hand, and public norms of credibility and scientific validity on the other. It also specifies the function that terms such as ‘energy’ assume in the context of energy healing, where it is closely intertwined with ‘intuition,’ ‘consciousness,’ ‘information’ and subtle body concepts (*cakras*, aura, etc.) (Barcan 2011: 186). The language developed around energy healing thus employs metaphors of an “immaterial body” that cannot be reached by the methods of science, biomedicine, and (gross) technological apparatuses—underscoring the profoundly gendered nature of the boundary-work between medicine and energy healing, or science and the holistic milieu (*ibid.*).

As will be further discussed in section II.4.1, a significant number of providers of energy-based therapies indeed claim scientific validity for their practices. Yet their concepts draw from ontological and anthropological sources, values, and principles that have their roots far beyond what science can provide. Even scientistic models of holistic healing operate within religious (or sometimes explicitly esoteric) frameworks. Assuming that the thesis of the modern world’s disenchantment introduced by the German sociologist and economist Max Weber (1864–1920) was ever correct (see Asprem 2014b), this trend could be described as a case of ‘re-enchantment.’ Proponents of holistic science uphold a belief in *telos*,

¹⁰ On my differentiation between ‘pseudoscience,’ i.e., the imitation of science, and ‘scientism’ understood more broadly as a science-related worldview, see section II.2.2; Zoehrer 2025b.

vital forces, and the mystical interconnectedness of being, in opposition to a purely ‘reductionist’ or ‘materialist’ scientific view (Harrington 1996; Zoehrer 2016: 15–19). Central themes and aims of holistic thought thus exhibit clear parallels with Romantic philosophy, science, and medicine (Hammer 2001: 321–320; cf. Höllinger and Tripold 2012).

In short, the holistic milieu forms a discursive discourse where boundaries between strictly demarcated academic disciplines or cultural subfields are intentionally softened. This feature is particularly accentuated in the concept of subtle energies.

Avoiding Conflict and Defending Interests

Providers of holistic services are not left to themselves to resolve boundary issues themselves. Interest groups have found ways to explicitly distinguish themselves from biomedical approach due to the legal implications involved (i.e., accusations of quackery). Whereas professional standards in healthcare are predominantly defined by science-based theories and the clinical evidence of the methods employed, holistic practitioners face the challenge of having to work around their lack of institutional integration.

For example, Austrian energy healers downplay scientific evidence of their activities in order to ensure protection from any legislation related to the nominally science-based medical professions. Organised as an occupational group (*Berufsgruppe*), they are officially registered with the Austrian Chamber of Commerce (*Wirtschaftskammer*), an institution that represents the interests of specific businesses. The occupational profile (*Berufsbild*) of *Humanenergetiker*—i.e., energy workers focused on human beings in contrast to those who ‘energetically’ treat animals or living spaces—explicitly positions the trade *outside* any claims to scientific validity:

Human energetics deals with the human energy field, particularly with all forms of life energy. This life energy, inherent in all living beings, has been known since ancient times and is referred to—depending on the cultural context—as Chi, Qi, Ki, Prana, Orgone, Pneuma, Aven,¹¹ among others. This energy field is not integrated into the physical world view currently recognised by science and therefore *cannot be explained or proven*

¹¹ The mention of “Aven” is unusual in the list of life-force synonyms (cf. section I.3). The term is likely identical with “Awen,” which has gained prominence in modern Druidry. Here, Awen is understood to mean “the flowing spirit,” according to an interpretation of Greywolf (né Philip Shallcrass, b. 1953), the chief of the British Druid Order (The British Druid Order 2019).

scientifically yet. Accordingly, *Humanenergetik* makes no claim to scientific verifiability or provability at the present moment. (WKO 2020: 3; emphasis added)¹²

Scientific evidence of energy healing methods is thus not denied but suspended as a strategy to evade open conflict with the medical establishment and their legal access to patients (cf. Zoehrer 2024). The belief in subtle energies is here legitimised through the appeal to alleged ancient and non-European traditions (cf. section I.3).

Physics has no monopoly on the ideas associated with energy, which in contexts of everyday parlance adopts different meanings. The subjectively felt loss of one's personal energies require some process of 'recharging,' for example, by means of a relaxing summer holiday at the beach, a meditative walk in the forest, or a trekking tour through the mountains. In the context of energy healing, 'energy' is interlaced with notions such as 'lack,' 'vitality,' 'balance,' 'need,' and 'flow.' The term inevitably appears in yoga courses, self-help literature, and shops that sell gemstones, pendulums, and tarot cards. Despite its ubiquitous presence in the holistic milieu, the term 'energy' remains notoriously ill-defined. Practitioners seem to shrug their shoulders in response to sceptical critique. They adopt a pragmatic position when speaking of energies, expressed in the common holistic adage, "if it works, it is true" (cf. Hammer 2001: 507).

The semantic polyvalence of the term energy is a feature not a bug. It has a scientific, objective, and technological connotation that in the holistic context flexibly moves into the background as the focus shifts to subjective perceptions of the personal condition. Any historical investigation of energy healing must keep the semantic polyvalence of '(subtle) energy' in mind. Personal experience trumps what the scientific community currently regards evidence: the suffering client is not interested in being right but in being helped. As will be shown, energy is a key term at the basis of explicitly esoteric worldviews that still influence contemporary schools of energy healing (Zoehrer 2025d).

From 'Spirit' to 'Energy'

The problem of identifying unseen forces that are viewed as an inherent part of the human body or demarcated as external agents entering the body is "both ancient and (post)modern" (Bauer and Doole 2014: 433). In contrast to ideas of deities, demons, and spirits, the energies that holistic practitioners

¹² "Humanenergetik befasst sich mit dem Energiefeld des Menschen, insbesondere mit jeder Form von Lebensenergie. Diese allem Lebendigen innewohnende Lebensenergie ist seit alters her bekannt und wird – je nach Kulturkreis – beispielsweise als Chi, Qi, Ki, Prana, Orgon, Pneuma, Aven u.a. bezeichnet. Dieses Energiefeld ist nicht im derzeit wissenschaftlich-anerkannten physikalischen Weltbild integriert und dementsprechend momentan naturwissenschaftlich nicht erklärbar oder beweisbar. Dementsprechend wird zurzeit von der Humanenergetik kein Anspruch auf wissenschaftliche Nachweisbarkeit oder Beweisbarkeit erhoben."

refer to are generally conceptualised as impersonal forces. Some models present the healing energies as having divine origin and qualities, e.g., perfusing the cosmos and exhibiting an all-encompassing goodness. Others restrict themselves to a vital agent that is identical with the body's self-healing capacity. Yet as in the case of spiritual entities, exact demarcations between the immanent and transcendent are difficult to draw. As hidden potentials they occupy a position between the possible and the manifest (cf. Zoehrer 2025b).

The tension between the vagueness and anthropological relevance of the term 'energy' was noted by the German Protestant theologian Wolfgang Schoberth (b. 1958). What Schoberth observed fifteen years ago in alternative spirituality still applies to religious-therapeutic practices of the holistic milieu today:

The religious boom of the term 'energy' probably results from the fact that it is used to describe the reality of forces and powers experienced in life—here one needs to express oneself in a deliberately general and vague manner. From a physicist's point of view, it is easy to diagnose an inadmissible use of language but this defence would miss the point. It would be downright misleading to demand an exact scientific term: perhaps we can only become aware of the reality here at stake if we leave behind methodological certainty and precision and engage with a tentative and open perception. The vagueness in the use of language is to a certain extent characteristic of the matter itself, because we are talking about something that is difficult to grasp. The widespread criticism that no scientifically tenable concept of energy is being used in this context falls flat, because here we are looking at experiences that science neglects. What is to be named here does not take place in areas that could be approached with the use of scientific instruments. (Schoberth 2005: 253–254; my translation)¹³

The anthropological dimension of subtle energy conceptions make a cultural historical (*kulturwissenschaftlich*) perspective a necessity when attempting to approach the phenomenon of energy healing in any appropriate manner. My thesis aims to unearth genealogical lines that shed light on the beginnings of discourses centred on subtle energies and related concepts of a healing agent.

¹³ Original: "Die religiöse Konjunktur des Ausdrucks 'Energie' dürfte daraus resultieren, dass man damit die Wirklichkeit von Kräften und Mächten in den Erfahrungen des Lebens bezeichnen will—hier soll zunächst bewusst allgemein und unbestimmt formuliert werden. Man tut sich leicht, etwa vom Standpunkt des Physikers dabei einen unzulässigen Sprachgebrauch zu diagnostizieren, aber mit dieser Abwehr würde man die Sache verfehlen. Einen exakten wissenschaftlichen Begriff zu fordern, wäre dabei geradezu irreführend: Vielleicht wird man der Wirklichkeit, um die es hier geht, überhaupt nur ansichtig, wenn man die methodische Sicherheit und Enge hinter sich lässt und sich einlässt auf eine tastende und offene Wahrnehmung. Das Vage im Sprachgebrauch gehört in gewisser Weise zur Sache selbst, weil ja von etwas die Rede ist, was schwer greifbar ist. Die verbreitete Kritik, dass hier kein wissenschaftlich haltbarer Begriff von Energie benutzt werde, geht ins Leere, weil hier Erfahrungen im Blick sind, die die Wissenschaft vernachlässigt. Was hier benannt werden soll, spielt sich nicht in den Bereichen ab, der mit wissenschaftlichen Instrumenten bearbeitet werden könnte."

Unearthing the Roots of a Trend

When particular ideas become neglected by academia or explicitly fall out of fashion in scientific discourse, continuing popular interest may preserve a niche for them in the culture more broadly. From those popular cultural milieus these ‘rejected’ ideas can be reclaimed and integrated by later generations of scientists, physicians, or psychotherapists, for example, the belief in the existence of a human soul (von Stuckrad 2019). This dynamic has also been the case for animal magnetism, originally conceptualised as an Enlightenment-era cure based on Newtonian principles, Romanticised and widely popularised in the early nineteenth century in conjunction with spiritualism and occultism, and reframed as psychological intervention in the shape of hypnosis (Ellenberger 1970). Likewise, the teachings on the healing effects of positive thinking were first popularised by Christian Science and the mind-cure movement (aka New Thought) in the decades around 1900, recycled in the American self-help industry, and biomedically studied in terms of placebo effects and psychoneuroimmunology in the second half of the twentieth century (Harrington 2008: 248). Both mesmerism and New Thought were crucial ideological forebears to contemporary forms of energy healing, as will be demonstrated in this thesis.

Metaphorically speaking, contemporary souls seem to pant for the magical, the supernatural, and the otherworldly—as long as it has this-worldly value in terms of health, wealth, self-actualisation, and fulfilling relationships. It is this feature of the holistic milieu that reveals a striking similarity to the concerns of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century religious-therapeutic aims. The hunger of New Thought advocates and occultists for a postmaterialist *Weltanschauung* was essential to their popular appeal. As Corinna Treitel put it: “They aspired to use occult phenomena to establish new truths about the human soul and the world it inhabited, to construct on this basis a new worldview that would make materialism obsolete” (Treitel 2004: 16).

Whereas sceptics are free to call energy healing a form of pseudoscience and leave it at that, this thesis does not share the premise that the continued dissemination of energetic practices is a symbol of cultural decadence and a regression towards superstition, charlatanry, trickery, and a ruthless exploitation of the credulous. Rather, it rests on the assumption that its practitioners may have stumbled onto (or rather reinterpreted) a particular form of human experience that has a longer history deserving of serious investigation and that the global proliferation of energy healing beckons scholarly attention.

Religious studies (*Religionswissenschaft*) is ideally equipped with the methods and historical perspectives needed to deliver new insights on the history of energy healing. However, to be clear, this thesis does not pursue the aim of defending or endorsing energy healing. Consistently applying methodological agnosticism, I do not assume a general efficacy of energy healing methods (of which there are too many to dare blanket claims) beyond the much cited placebo effect. Even a hardcore sceptic

might agree that at least some energy healers skilfully employ the placebo effect and related psychoneuroimmunological principles. Far-reaching clinical, ethical, and legal questions are raised by the subject, which this thesis can only indicate but will not discuss in greater detail.

Subtle Energies: A Heuristic Definition

Although the notion of subtle energies is semantically too multilayered to be reduced to a single, unambiguous meaning, I propose the following heuristic, meta-level definition for subtle energies unless particular emic meanings are specified:

DEFINITION. “Subtle energies shall here refer to imagined agents that are claimed to work as an intermediary between physical and nonphysical (e.g., mental, psychic, subconscious, divine, etc.) levels of reality. Inaccessible to the five senses, these agents are yet expected to exert their influence by means of ritual and other techniques. Subtle energies thus serve as a resource that holds out the promise of vitalizing and healing or refining and perfecting the individual self” (Zoehrer et al. 2025a). Anthropological and cosmological discourses centring around the concept of a subtle energy are foundational to therapeutic practices that claim to tap into hidden human potentials of self-healing.

4. Energy Medicine or Energy Healing?

The terms ‘energy medicine’ and ‘energy healing’ are often used interchangeably among practitioners. I use the term energy healing throughout my thesis in order to underscore the broader idea of healing as an art rather than a rigorous science, which addresses not only the body but various anthropological levels (i.e., body, mind, and soul). This is to avoid the more value-laden implication that ‘energy medicine’ involves a scientific theory of (subtle) energies and related techniques as a potential subsystem of biomedicine. Creating such an impression is precisely the aim of the book *Energy Medicine: The Scientific Basis* (2000) authored by James L. Oschman (n.d.a.), an American biophysicist and advocate of alternative therapies.

Oschman’s interest focuses primarily on biophysical processes and indicates possible therapeutic applications from understanding the body as a physical energy system. He suggests a sternly physicalist model of energy medicine that is based on known physical principles, not hypothetical “undiscovered natural forces or ‘subtle energies’” (Oschman 2000: 223). Convinced that living organisms “comprise dynamic energy systems involving the same sorts of field phenomena that physicists have been studying for a long time,” he refutes that energy medicine has anything to do with “magic or superstition” (ibid.:

122; cf. Zoehrer 2025b). When Oschman speaks of energy he means physical energy—nothing more, nothing less. In the second edition of his book, he defined energy medicine accordingly as

the diagnostic and therapeutic use of energy, whether detected by or produced by a medical device or by the human body. Energy medicine recognizes that the human body utilizes various forms of energy for the internal communications that maintain and organize vital living systems and for powering processes such sensation, digestion, circulation and movement. Energy medicine involves the use energies of particular intensities and frequencies and other characteristics that stimulate the repair of one or more tissues, or that enable built-in healing mechanisms to operate more effectively. Such energies can come from the environment, from another human being or from a medical device. (Oschman 2016: 7–8)

Oschman’s focus on diagnosis and medical instruments clearly sets his concept of energy-based therapy apart from that of most energy healers, the vast majority of whom lack formal scientific or medical training. Nonetheless, while seeking to firmly ground energy medicine in a scientific theory, he recognises the merits of laying-on-of-hands over medical energy devices as safer and more effective: “No medical device, regardless of its sophistication, is likely to achieve the efficacy and safety obtainable by imposing a naturally generated signal to living tissue” (Oschman 2016: 254). Presupposing the net benefit of energy healing, Oschman’s agenda is to develop a scientifically plausible explanation.

Marco Bischof (b. 1947), a Swiss author on parascience and alternative medicine, places energy medicine more carefully within the holistic context, defining it as “a group of methods in complementary and alternative medicine that use energy fields” (Bischof 2009: vi). He envisioned energy medicine as a framework that could merge “Eastern” energy theories—for example, the notion of *qi* in Chinese medicine or the subtle physiologies of yoga and tantra—with “Western biophysical concepts and methods” (ibid.). In contrast to Oschman’s physicalist programme, Bischof not only insinuates a cultural and ethnomedical history of energy healing but also recognises its psychological dimension. He assumes that further potential reference points for explaining energy healing may be found in psychosomatics, transpersonal psychology, parapsychology, and research on biofeedback and meditation (ibid.).

A less physicalist or psychologising definition that is closer to the common self-understanding of holistic therapists is offered by Donna Eden (b. 1944), an American spokesperson for “energy medicine”. Eden describes energy medicine in her eponymous book functionally as

the art and science of fostering physical, psychological, and spiritual health and well-being. It combines a rational knowledge and intuitive understanding of the energies in the body and in the environment. Cultivating your capacity to weave these energies can make you a

more *conscious* and *sensitive* instrument of energy medicine than all the other technologies combined. By focusing on your body as a living system of energy, you begin to realize that powerful energy technologies are *already* inherent in your hands and in your being. (Eden 1999: 2; emphasis in the original)¹⁴

Whereas both Oschman and Eden regard the body as a “system of energy,” their associations with the term differ considerably. Oschman takes a technical and instrumental perspective, whereas Eden emphasises the practitioner’s role of consciousness and intuition. Eden further highlights two other central aspects of energy healing, namely, a multidimensional understanding of health and wellbeing, and the appreciation of individual autonomy.

A similar self-description was chosen by the Austrian trade group of human energy work (*Humanenergetik*)—one of the strongest advocates for energy healing in Europe. The group defines energy healing as practices that aim to enhance individual “self-healing powers” and improve “physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being” (Wirtschaftskammer Österreich 2020: 16).¹⁵ The idea of self-healing powers is closely related to the belief in the body’s and nature’s inherent intelligence. Eden expresses this widespread premise of a teleological dimension of energy healing by stating that “the body and its energies are intelligent, and that you can engage them in intelligent dialogue that fosters your health. This becomes quite apparent when you are working in a healing context and connect with the energies that flow through the human body. Often, when I am with a client, I feel directed by the energies themselves, as if an amazing intelligence has taken over the session. I can do nothing better than pay attention and follow” (Eden 1999: 16).

Energy healing here denotes a rapidly growing field at the intersection of therapy, spirituality, and commercial enterprise. Although biomedical validation remains contested, practitioners have secured a firm foothold in a demand-driven, marginally regulated market of holistic service providers and the popularity of these methods continues to rise globally. At the core of energy healing lies the concept of a subtle medium, regarded as life force and the fundamental agent of healing. Closely tied to this *leitmotif* are metaphors such as “flow,” the clearing of “blockages,” and vivid depictions of a subtle anatomy, including auras, centres (*cakras*), and channels.¹⁶

¹⁴ Bischof’s formulation “physical, psychological, and spiritual health and well-being” is highly reminiscent of the definition of health as stated in the constitution of the World Health Organisation (WHO). Ever since the inception of the WHO in 1948, politicians, religious groups, and medical professionals made efforts to include the notion of “spiritual health” into the WHO’s definition of health. However, the term remains contested (Peng-Keller and Winiger 2022).

¹⁵ Note again the inclusion of ‘spiritual well-being’ in what otherwise constitutes the WHO’s definition of health.

¹⁶ Throughout this thesis, I use the standard Sanskrit transliteration of a term (e.g., *cakra*, *prāṇa*, etc.) when discussing its wider conceptual history, and author-specific romanisations when referring to emic discourses (e.g., *chakra*, *prana*, etc.).

DEFINITION. Energy healing encompasses a diverse range of approaches, all of which purport to strengthen or release a vital agent believed to permeate and surround living bodies. Its aim is to restore the harmony of subjectively experienced bodily, mental, and social states—in short, ‘well-being’—by means of techniques that supposedly facilitate the vital agent’s smooth, uninterrupted ‘flow’ or function (cf. Zoehrer 2020; 2024b)

Understood in this broader sense, common applications of energy healing are not limited to physical ailments such as psychosomatic disorders, chronic fatigue, or sleep disturbances. Psychosocial issues—including low self-esteem, fear of loss or failure, interpersonal conflicts, and difficulties with decision-making—may likewise be addressed in energetic counselling or treatment.

5. Typologies

Various criteria have been proposed to systematise the field of energy healing. Energetic methods have been categorised, for example, by geographical, cultural, and/or chronological contexts (cf. Levin 2011), the distinction between instrumental and non-instrumental approaches (cf. Walach 2005a), and the production of detailed catalogues grouping modalities with similar techniques (WKO 2014).

A comprehensive, hierarchical systematisation has been developed by Johannes Endler (2020), who suggests four levels of differentiation. Firstly, ‘energy work’ (*Energiearbeit*) can be distinguished between *sensu stricto* and *sensu lato* forms. Energy work in the narrow sense is identical with energy healing, that is, practices that aim to improve a person’s wellbeing within a dyadic therapeutic relationship between practitioner and client. In a wider sense, energy work refers to practices that may invoke energies but where the manipulation of the human energy field is not central. This distinction draws from the observation that holistic service providers act as mediators of *energy* per se as well as mediators of *practices* that allow clients to manage and increase their own energy (Endler 2020: 115; cf. Höllinger and Tripold 2012: 242). Secondly, types of energy work are categorised according to the social or contextual situation, ranging from group rituals to the individual practitioner-client settings. Thirdly, practices of energy healing are categorised into instrumental (indirect) and non-instrumental (direct) methods of transmitting and balancing energy streams. And fourthly, the practices are subsumed under concrete ‘schools’ or clusters that are loosely classified according to family resemblances, e.g., ‘Asian systems’ (a vague and problematic category), systems with psychotherapeutic influences, or methods based on medical manual therapy. This last level may again, according to Endler, be subdivided between rather subtle approaches (e.g., Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, Cranio Sacral Therapy) and more body-oriented approaches (e.g., Shiatsu, Emotional Freedom Technique, various Western style massages).

Based on ideal types that may be developed from various conceptual criteria, I propose four typologies to structure the field of energy healing according to (1) the form of energy mediation, further developing Endler's proposed typology; (2) major historical roots; (3) basic strategies of plausibilisation; and (4) the binary poles of spiritual and secular. As the suggested categories are ideal types rather than taxonomical classes, the boundaries between them are not strict and eclectic forms that combine various types are in principle possible.

5.1. Forms of Mediating the Healing Energy

Building on Endler's work I propose a modified and extended classification scheme that organises major energy-based practices according to their ideological provenance and related methodological approach.

Modalities of energy healing can be broadly divided into two groups based on how the assumed healing agent is mediated, see Table 1. Practitioners may mobilise the healing energy either indirectly via some supportive material or instrument, or directly via interaction with the client's body or psychosomatic system.¹⁷ The former includes healing techniques that apply symbols, instruments (e.g., acupuncture needles), physical substrates (e.g., crystals, flower essences, colours), and machines (e.g., radionic devices, magnetic field generators, bioresonance appliances). The latter, by contrast, constitutes the majority of energy healing approaches and involves practitioners working on the clients' physical, subtle, or psychosomatic body.

Specific energy healing schools or currents are named for the purpose of illustrating characteristic types of energy healing, i.e., those influenced primarily by traditional ethno-medicine or local folk traditions; those rooted in occult transformations of mesmerism; approaches that are legitimised through New Age quantum metaphysics; and techniques derived from broader therapeutic currents (e.g., massage, manual therapies, body psychotherapy). Energetic psychotherapies are somewhat of an outlier in this overview as the practitioner is required to be more actively involved during the therapeutic setting compared to the more passive, body-centred approaches.

The schools and techniques here listed represent a cross-section of the more widely practiced approaches. However, as energy healing styles often depend on a charismatic founding figure, they tend to be short-lived, resulting in a highly fluctuating landscape. Furthermore, it should be noted that individual energy healing practitioners typically do not adhere to a single school. Instead, they often combine techniques from various traditions to create their own eclectic approaches.

¹⁷ For a more detailed discussion of therapeutic mediology, see section II.3.2.

Modalities of Energy Work <i>sensu strictu</i> (=Energy Healing in a Dyadic Therapeutic Relationship between Practitioner and Client)					
Mediation of Energy via Materials		Mediation of Energy via Interaction (utilising, e.g., instruments, manipulations, laying-on-of-hands, gestures, visualisation, contactless or distant ‘transmission’)			
<i>Physical Substrates</i>	<i>Machines</i>	<i>Traditional Medical Techniques</i>	<i>Syntheses influenced by Folk Practices and Shamanism</i>	<i>Occult-Mesmeric Approaches</i>	<i>Physicalist Approaches rooted in New Thought</i>
• Crystals • Flower essences • Bach flowers • Herbs • Essential oils • Aroma therapy • Colour therapy (e.g., Aura Soma) • Light therapy (e.g., LichtEnergetik) • Sound therapy (e.g., singing bowls, music kinesiology) • Homeopathy	• Radionics • Magnetic field therapy • Bioresonance • Holopathy • Biophoton Therapy	• Acupuncture • Acupressure • Bu Qi [?]	• Jinshinjutsu • Reiki • Hilot • Tsalung • Curanderismo • Shamanic Energy Medicine (Villoldo)	<i>Appeal to tradition:</i> • Pranic Healing • Reiki • External Qigong (wài qì gong) or External Qi Healing (wài qì zhì liáo) [?] <i>Appeal to science:</i> • Therapeutic Touch • Quantum Touch	• Psychic healing • Quantum Healing • Matrix Energetics • Quantum Entrainment • Dispenza
<i>Symbols</i>		<i>Energetic Massage Therapies</i>	<i>Energetic Manual Therapies</i>	<i>Post-Reichian Body Psychotherapy</i>	<i>Energetic Psychotherapy</i>
• Sacred geometry • Reiki symbols • BioGeometry • Körbler		• Tuí ná • Marma Chikitsa • Lomilomi • Anma / Shiatsu • Breuß • Dorn	• Craniosacral therapy • Polarity therapy • Quantum Touch • Structural Integration (Rolfing) • Applied Kinesiology • Touch for Health	• Bioenergetic analysis • Core energetics • Brennan Healing Science • Radix • Organismic Psychotherapy • Biosynthesis • Biodynamic Psychology • Holistic Pulsing • Jin Shin Do Bodymind Acupressure	• Thought Field Therapy • Emotional Freedom Technique • Energy Diagnostic & Treatment Method • Attractor Field Technique • Meridian Energy Therapies • Emotion Code • Body Code

Table 1: Contemporary modalities of energy healing, i.e., energy work *sensu strictu*. Double mentions indicate that the categories are understood to be typological rather than taxonomical. The bold frame indicates the subfield of energy healing on which my historical exposition primarily focuses.

Modalities of energy work *sensu lato* encompass mind-body exercises, group rituals, and techniques of diagnosing and harmonising living spaces, see Table 2 (cf. Endler 2020). References to subtle energies play a significant role in these practices, but are not directed from a healer to a client. (I excluded Endler’s mention of spontaneous, “empathetic touch without theoretical concept” and only included those practices that explicitly draw on concepts of subtle energy.)

Modalities of Energy Work <i>sensu lato</i>		
<i>Mind-body exercises practiced in individual or group settings</i>	<i>Group rituals</i>	<i>Spatial Diagnostics and Harmonisation</i>
Yoga, Pilates, <i>qìgōng</i> , <i>tàijíquán</i> , <i>aikidō</i> , expressionist dance, meditation	(Neo-)Shamanism, modern paganism, magic, charismatic healing services	Dowsing, radiesthesia, geomancy, <i>fēng shuǐ</i>

Table 2: Modalities of Energy Work *sensu lato*.

This thesis focuses on two forms of direct mediation: (1) Pranic Healing, a distinct occult-mesmeric approach of contactless manipulation that had immense influence on the development of other globally spread practices, such as Reiki, and (2) physicalist theories of energy healing that employ a concept of ‘energy’ as the central healing agent. These scientific discourses crucially informed quantum-metaphysical healing modalities where consciousness is emphasised as the master over physical reality.

5.2. Major Historical Root

Four major historical roots can be discerned that formed the ideological milieu for the twentieth-century global discourse on subtle energy and healing:

- (1) Occult reinterpretations of mesmerism that chiefly contributed to the development of Pranic Healing, Reiki, and Therapeutic Touch.
- (2) Futuristic retro-medicine such as metaphysical manual therapies (i.e., Osteopathy, Chiropractic, etc.), energy-based biophysical models, Bailey’s Esoteric Healing, and New Age quantum metaphysics (cf. section II.4.1; Folk 2017).
- (3) Psychologised notions of energy (e.g., Wilhelm Reich’s orgone, cf. section II.4.1), which significantly impacted bodywork and body psychotherapy.
- (4) Twentieth-century non-European therapeutic innovations rooted in longstanding medical traditions, particularly what is now known as Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Although

the term ‘TCM’ was only consolidated in the 1950s, its origins can be traced back to centuries before the Common Era (Unschuld 2018).

A more detailed discussion of these basic historical currents is laid out in Zoehrer 2024. My thesis zooms in on the first two of them, occult-mesmeric discourses and futuristic retro-medicine.

5.3. Strategy of Plausibilisation

Among the strategies of conceptual plausibilisation applied by practitioners of energy healing, four are outstanding:

- (1) Exoticisation and the appeal to traditions that hail from an ancient, ‘mystic East.’
- (2) Progressivism and the appeal to cutting-edge, paranormal, or futuristic science as the foundation of a practice.
- (3) Claims of presenting an improved variant within a contemporary therapeutic current, e.g., psychotherapy, body therapy, manual therapy, massage therapy.
- (4) Eclectic combinations of the above strategies.

My historical exposition particularly highlights the first two patterns of plausibilisation, as they are more deeply intertwined with the history of modern esotericism and thus represent tight nexus of religious and therapeutic aspects.

5.4. Binary Poles of Spiritual and Secular

Energy healers are not generally considered religious experts that serve a particular community, although they often and openly adopt elements from other healing practices with obvious religious connotations, e.g., folk traditions and (neo-)shamanism. The belief in subtle energies may point to a transpersonal, universal life principle that underlies a specific view of the human being and the world. This principle is then not limited to the physiological function of the body but is equal to or an aspect of a cosmic or divine ground of being. Though inherently intangible and transcendent, the practitioner knows the ritual means to invoke the energies of ultimate reality and guide their flow to effect the desired changes on the physical, psychological, and social levels.

Although energy healing cannot be automatically classified as religious practice, some schools and individual practitioners reveal a marked religious character. Due to the stigma that religion carries in secularised societies some contemporary energy healers deny that their practice has any spiritual dimension. Others may accentuate it by describing themselves as ‘spiritual, but not religious.’ Several

modalities of energy healing strive for recognition within the healthcare system and thus prefer a secular appearance despite the latent spiritual dimension in their work (cf. Zoehrer 2024).

Drawing on Karl Baier's typology of modern yoga (Baier 2012) and Justin Stein's classification of Reiki styles in clinical settings (Stein 2024), the broad range of energetic techniques can be positioned along a continuum between religious and secular orientations. Three ideal types can thus be distinguished:

- (1) 'Strongly spiritual': Religiously or spiritually oriented schools of energy healing may involve teachings that extend beyond healing itself and include rituals such as meditation and prayer, initiations, the reverence of a master or guru, and hierarchical teacher–student relationships. (e.g., traditional Reiki and Choa Kok Sui's Pranic Healing).
- (2) 'Softly spiritual': More secularised variants employ explanatory models and language drawn from popular holistic literature, where the boundaries between healing, popular science, and spirituality are fluid (e.g., Therapeutic Touch, Matrix Energetics, Emotion Code, Brennan Healing Science, Craniosacral therapy, Polarity therapy).
- (3) Secular or 'silently spiritual': Strongly medicalised or psychologised approaches include methods such as magnetic field therapies, bioresonance, body psychotherapy, and energetic psychotherapy.

This thesis examines the historical discourses that have most significantly influenced modalities with a pronounced spiritual dimension (types 1 and 2). In particular, it highlights the key roles played by authors from occult and adjacent milieus in shaping a holistic notion of energy—one that continues to inform the understanding of energy in contemporary religious-therapeutic practices.

6. Aim and Research Questions

The field of energy healing denotes a key practice in the contemporary holistic milieu, but the reconstruction of its genealogy remains a gaping lacuna. This cumulative thesis seeks to answer three fundamental questions, which relate to the systematic, historical, and sociological aspects of the field of energy healing:

- (1) What do energy healers mean when they speak of (subtle or vital) 'energy'?
- (2) How did meanings behind subtle energy and related healing agents emerge historically?
- (3) What approaches do energy healers employ in order to legitimise and professionalise their services?

Based on these central areas of investigation, this thesis aims to reconstruct the genesis of energy healing while considering the broader cultural contexts in which meanings of energy and approaches to healing have shifted and expanded. Related to the three research questions are the following sub-questions:

Ad (1):

- How do the dynamics of (academic) rejection and (popular) reception apply to contemporary energy healing?
- How do notions of subtle or vital energies shape holistic anthropologies, theories of healing, and corresponding rituals?
- What patterns of plausibilisation characterise the field of energy healing in contrast to the scientific and biomedical frame of thought ('boundary work')?

Ad (2):

- The entangled discourses that gave rise to energy healing are still little understood. What are the precursors of contemporary forms of energy healing in terms of theory and practice?
- To what extent is energy healing part of the meandering history of mesmerism?
- Are there demonstrable parallels, continuities and discontinuities between the historical discourse field of vitalism and the theories of energy healing?
- What was the role of esoteric (i.e., occult) currents in preserving and developing vitalist ideas?

Ad (3):

- How does the problem of professionalisation in the field reflect the boundary work between scientific and holistic interpretations of energy?
- How do contemporary energy healers navigate between healing as a spiritual path and therapy as a medical profession?

Whether there is at least some latent medical potential in energy healing (within reasonable confines), its efficacy, therapeutic benefits, and limitations is not the focus of this thesis. Rather, the aim is to highlight the historical strands that formed one of the most thriving practices within the contemporary holistic milieu. Such a genealogy will enable a more profound understanding of the ideas, protagonists, and movements in the contexts of the scientific, medical, and esoteric discourses that nurtured the emergence of specific energy healing modalities.

7. Methodology

7.1. A Problem-centred Analysis of Historical Discourses

This thesis employs historical discourse analysis as its primary methodological approach (cf. von Stuckrad 2019: 2–3; Nünning/Nünning 2010: 177–200; Hjelm 2011). From a cultural studies perspective, contemporary discourses are always historical artifacts and manifestations. The current synchronous cultic milieu serves as the departure point for the diachronic reconstruction of historical contexts and trajectories of reception (Bergunder 2008: 503–505; cf. Böhme et al. 2000). Adopting this general cultural studies framework to investigate the history of energy healing, the aim of this thesis is to trace contemporary energy healers' discourse of identity formation back to their major historical precursors. In the absence of a single authoritative source on the idea of 'subtle energies' and its application to healing, the idea's emergence and dissemination needs to be reconstructed by examining preceding discourses on subtle agents that demonstrably influenced the contemporary holistic field. In order not to overlook the nuances in the source material that shed light on the semantic evolution of the notion of energy, additional methods from content analysis (Nelson/Woods 2011) and hermeneutics (Gilhus 2011) will also be employed.

The history of energy healing provides a compelling case for the entanglements between science, medicine, vitalism, and esoteric (including occult) worldviews, I propose to approach the subject by building on Egil Asprem's reframing of the study of esotericism as *Problemgeschichte* (problem history). In *The Problem of Disenchantment* (2014), Asprem reconceptualised Weber's disenchantment thesis not as a linear socio-historical process, but as a cluster of interrelated intellectual problems. Hanegraaff (2013: 119–142) still maintained that the history of (Western) esotericism was closely linked to the exclusionary discourses of modernisation and the Weberian narratives of secularisation and disenchantment, hence deserving the label 'rejected knowledge.' In contrast, Asprem challenges this binary model of disenchanted science and theology versus esotericism by uncovering the complex trajectories connecting religious, scientific, and intellectual history (Asprem 2014b: 3–8). Applied to the historical study of energy healing, currents in intellectual history that lie outside the conventional canon of esoteric texts and their affirmative or critical influence on the emergence of alternative healing modalities will receive particular attention. Influential historical pathways are thus viewed together to offer a nuanced picture of overlapping and mutually reinforcing discourses. Lines of reception are analysed as close to the original sources as possible, focusing on continuities, reinterpretations, and ruptures between contemporary and earlier discursive fields.

7.2. Patterns of Plausibilisation

The American sociologist of religion Peter L. Berger (1929–2017) understood “plausibility structure” as the “social ‘base’” required for a worldview to continue as one that is objectively and subjectively “real to actual human beings” (Berger 1969: 45). In this thesis, I take a contrary approach and assume under plausibility structure primarily the *ideological* base that shapes group formation, specifically the social interaction of provider-client-relationships in the holistic market. Plausibilisation is here defined as the process of rendering a claim, idea, or belief reasonable or acceptable within a given discursive context.

Particularly within fields such as alternative spiritualities or medicine, whose social legitimacy is not endorsed by robust institutions or legal privilege, plausibility is achieved by means that are closer to myth-making than scientific theories. In *Claiming Knowledge* (2001), Olav Hammer examined three basic strategies that have been employed in modern ‘esoteric’ narratives: (1) scientism or ‘science as a language of faith’; (2) appeals to (imagined) traditions; and (3) accounts of personal experience. Hammer observed that a partial reason for the popularity of esoteric teachings is that “the cognitively grounded and socially reinforced predilections of the readers [of esoteric texts] are elevated to the status of ancient wisdom and scientific truth” (Hammer 2001: 505). The corresponding patterns of plausibilisation have played a crucial role in shaping the narratives that grant legitimacy to typical energy healing modalities.

With the aim of enabling a more focused comparison, I will delimit my study of the history of energy healing to these two forms of plausibilisation: (1) scientism and its articulation in iatrophysical conceptions of ‘futuristic retro-medicine,’ and (2) appeals to presumably Eastern traditions of healing knowledge (cf. section II.4). The appeal to personal experience will not be of central concern in my analysis, although this aspect of energy healing is important in its own right and may uncover additional key motives and persuasion techniques employed by school founders and practitioners.

7.3. Linking History with the Contemporary Field: Expert Interviews

To understand the contemporary field of energy healing, its actors, its systems of meanings, and its rules of discourse and interaction from within (Hopf 1993), qualitative sociological research will supplement my historical discourse analysis. Qualitative methods of social research are most appropriate in cases where the complexity of the research subject cannot be dismantled into single, isolable variables or artificial laboratory conditions. They are employed in situations where an exploratory approach—receptive to new and unexpected findings within the empirical material such as subjective perspectives, personal biographies, and cultural contexts—proves more valuable than the mere testing of predetermined hypotheses or theories (Flick 1995: 26; Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Expert knowledge refers not only to content-related or methodological knowledge, but is also includes insights into the operational and institutional dimension of the respective field. Energy practitioners who disseminate their practical knowledge through training courses possess interpretational authority within the field. Their active role as instructors thus endows them with the ability to assert influential viewpoints, behaviour patterns, and methods among the participants of the field at large. Expert interviews will be conducted in a semi-structured manner, beginning with a brief autobiographical narrative followed by open questions regarding their specific methodology, their anthropological view, experiences of efficacy, the meaning of ‘subtle energy,’ and the positioning of their practice towards conventional medicine and science. The objective of the interviews is to reconstruct the knowledge and experience of practitioners of energy healing methods (‘experts’), thus generating empirical data required for the development of more robust theoretical models of the field.

Four individual cases defined by local, temporal, and cultural bounds of contemporary Vienna were chosen for expert interviews (Zoehrer 2020; 2024b). Data from this instructive sample were collected through audio recordings and personal notes, followed by content analysis (cf. Merkmens 2000; Patton 2002). Representing diverse institutional contexts, plausibilisation patterns, and respective techniques, these case studies enable the exploration of common features and differences among the various types of energy healing.

7.4. The Innovative Character of My Approach

My approach to the subject matter of energy healing moves beyond existing research in several ways:

- A problem-historical approach to the field of energy healing, embedding the subject within the broader context of late modern religion and culture.
- In-depth analysis of the impact of the globalised *Wirkungsgeschichte* of mesmerism and other nineteenth-century discourses (Romanticism, New Thought, Theosophy, etc.) on specific theories and schools of energy healing.
- The reconstruction of fundamental plausibilisation patterns at the backdrop of boundary work between orthodox medicine and alternative healing modalities, thus contributing to the mapping of the holistic milieu’s mindscape and its genesis.

* * *

As this thesis follows a cumulative format, the next three chapters provide the historical and theoretical background to my published material related to energy healing. Chapter 1 highlights the pivotal role of mesmerism as a precursor to a major branch of energy healing practices. Furthermore, it examines mesmerism’s entanglement with early nineteenth-century vitalism and traces the emergence and

consolidation of life force-synonyms that include the mesmeric *fluidum*, (subtle) energy, and Asian concepts denoting vital powers. Chapter 2 develops a theoretical framework for approaching the field of energy healing, which can be understood either as the continued entanglement between religious and therapeutic discourses, or as a heterodox, counter-cultural responses to the modern, differentiated subsystems of science and medicine. Drawing on the principle of the placebo effect and insights from mind-body-medicine, this chapter formulates a basic theoretical model to analyse practices that use the concept of subtle energy as a therapeutic medium. It also outlines two fundamental patterns of plausibilisation within the field: the appeal to science and invocations of a ‘Mystic East.’ These theoretical reflections set the stage for investigating the two principal case studies selected for this thesis: Alice Bailey’s Esoteric Healing and Choa Kok Sui’s Pranic Healing. Both energy healing approaches are deeply rooted in occult discourses on healing around 1900 and illustrate how mesmerism was reinterpreted through scientific and orientalist lenses. Chapter 3 offers a synopsis of the published articles, which include terminological discussion, investigations of the sociological context of contemporary energy healing, and historical analyses of energy healing and its plausibilisation strategies. The concluding section synthesises the key findings of the study and outlines areas for further research.

I. Historical Preliminaries

1. Between Enlightenment and Romantic Reaction: The Mesmeric Roots of Energy Healing

Because Mesmer only has an inkling of the direction, he does not yet know the way. He feels he is on the right track, feels by chance that he is burning close to a secret, a great and fruitful secret, and yet he knows that he cannot solve it alone and fully unveil it. It is therefore unsettling to see how this man, who for a century had been discredited as a charlatan due to frivolous gossip, asks for support and help from the doctors, his comrades; just as Columbus travelled from court to court with his plan for the sea route to India before his departure, Mesmer turned from one academy to another and asked for interest and help for his idea.

As with his big explorer brother, he was also mistaken at the beginning of his journey, because Mesmer, still completely wrapped up in the medieval delusion of the arcana, thought he had found the panacea, the eternal India of ancient medicine, with his magnetic theory.

—Stefan Zweig (1881–1942); my translation¹⁸

“Multa renascentur, quae jam cecidere
cadentque quae nunc sunt in honore.”

—attributed to Horace (65–8 BCE)¹⁹

¹⁸ Zweig 1931: 36–37. Original text: “Denn nur die Richtung ahnt Mesmer, er weiß noch nicht den Weg. Er fühlt sich auf der rechten Spur, fühlt sich durch Zufall einem Geheimnis, einem großen und fruchtbaren Geheimnis brennend nah und weiß doch, er kann es nicht allein lösen und völlig entschleiern. Erschütternd darum, wie dieser Mann, den leichtfertige Nachrederei ein Jahrhundert lang als Scharlatan verrufen, gerade bei den Ärzten, seinen Kameraden, um Beistand und Hilfe bittet; nichtanders als Kolumbus vor seiner Ausfahrt mit seinem Plan des Seeweges nach Indien von Hof zu Hof irrt, so wendet sich Mesmer von einer Akademie an die andere und bittet um Interesse und Mithilfe für seine Idee. Auch bei ihm wie bei seinem großen Entdeckerbruder steht ein Irrtum am Anfang seiner Bahn, denn noch ganz eingesponnen in den mittelalterlichen Wahn des Arkanums, meint Mesmer mit seiner magnetischen Theorie das Allheilmittel, das ewige Indien der alten Arzneikunde, gefunden zu haben.”

¹⁹ “Much that has perished will be reborn, and that which now stands in honour will fall.” Mesmer used this paraphrase from Horatius’ *Ars Poetica* (lines 70 to 72) twice: once as an epigraph at the beginning of his doctoral thesis, and again as a motto in his last publication *Mesmerismus. Oder System der Wechselwirkungen* (1814). Therefore, as Karl Baier (2024) pointed out, this quotation frames Mesmer’s entire work.

Animal magnetism, the healing approach developed by the physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) from the mid-1770s onwards, has been recognised as a major source of American alternative medicine, alternative religion, and the late twentieth-century New Age movement (Fuller 1982; 1989; Hanegraaff 1996: 484–496). These discursive fields nourished many if not the majority of energy healing modalities. As several scholars have remarked, energy healing must have received decisive input from animal magnetism or mesmerism (cf. Barkhoff 1995; Baier 2013: 439; Hanegraaff 2013: 111). There are indeed strong analogies between the fundamental form of mesmerism and a significant contingent of energy healing—specifically the ‘classic’ styles of laying-on-of-hands, e.g., Pranic Healing, Reiki, and Therapeutic Touch (cf. Zoehrer 2020; 2021; 2024b). However, the exact manner how a diverse range of notions—stemming from markedly different ideological and cultural backgrounds—has come to be subsumed under the concept of ‘(vital) energy’ has not yet been examined in detail. Before untangling this discursive nexus, some introductory remarks on animal magnetism are warranted.

The Swiss-Canadian medical historian Henri Ellenberger (1905–1993)—widely considered to be the father of the historiography of psychiatry due to his monograph *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (1970)—summarised Mesmer’s theory in four basic principles (cf. Ellenberger 1970: 62):

- (1) The universe is filled by a subtle material fluid that functions as a medium connecting humans, the earth, and the celestial bodies.
- (2) The cause of disease lies in the unequal distribution of this fluid in the human body. To achieve recovery, its equilibrium must be restored.
- (3) By means of certain techniques this universal fluid can be drawn, stored, and transferred to other persons.
- (4) Through provoking a so-called crisis in the patient, diseases can be cured.

In contrast to Mesmer’s original method, most contemporary practitioners do not aim to effect a crisis or induce in their clients altered states of consciousness beyond a relaxing, dream-like state that is thought to be salutary. Nonetheless, ritual elements of classic mesmerism have survived in several energetic practices (e.g., Pranic Healing, Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, etc.), such as the characteristic ‘passes’ over or on the client’s body or certain protocols for maintaining energetic hygiene. One of the most central and controversial aspects of Mesmer’s healing conception is strikingly similar to the ‘subtle energies’ referred to by energy healers: the iatrophysical notion of a cosmic *fluidum*, whose flow or stagnation determines health or illness. As in the idea of subtle energies, Mesmer’s fluidum has an ambivalent character, being both a super-fine physical substance *and* an agent sensitive to human intention and will. However, analogy is not homology. This thesis will reconstruct demonstrable

historical continuities and breaks between mesmerism, its occult transformations, and the contemporary practices of energy healing.

Following a general education in Konstanz, Dillingen, and Ingolstadt, Mesmer obtained his medical doctorate at the University of Vienna in 1766. He first publicised his innovative healing system in 1775. Although his medical theory has often been associated with hermetic philosophy—e.g., the idea of *spiritus* emanating from the world-soul and perfusing the elements with its subtle power, as suggested by Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), or the *aether*, the quintessential element of the alchemists (cf. Barkhoff 1995: 43; von Stuckrad 2004: 167–168)—Mesmer’s writings indicate a primary indebtedness to the mechanical ether theories of René Descartes (1596–1650) and Isaac Newton (1642/43–1727) (Baier 2024). His self-understanding was that of a scientist: “Mesmer was fundamentally a representative of the Enlightenment. He believed himself to be a scientist who had taken over where Newton had left off” (Ellenberger 1970: 198–199). However, as Ellenberger accurately remarked, the Enlightenment was characterised by “both its rational and irrational aspects” (ibid.). Around 1800, even science-based medicine that saw itself in the Enlightenment tradition was no monolithic undertaking that endorsed a unified canon of theories and methods, but is better described as a “pluralistic art of healing” (*pluralistische Heilkunde*) (Schott 2006: 75).

Not unusual for a physician of his time, Mesmer’s thought was remarkably multi-layered (Baier 2024). In search of therapeutic evidence for his method he argued for an impartial, critical perusal of older medical teachings from the perspective of contemporaneous physics—that is, the classical mechanics developed by Descartes and Newton, and the philosophy of nature conceived by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) and Christian Wolff (1679–1754). However, as Karl Baier points out, Mesmer was only partially an iatrophysicist and also incorporated the less theory-oriented medical empiricism of the Hippocratic tradition that was disseminated through the work of the English physician Thomas Sydenham (1624–1689). Moreover, his personal account of wrestling with nature to unlock her secrets demonstrates the clear influence of ‘sentimental empiricism,’ a particular form of eighteenth-century empiricism that connects sense perception with emotional, moral, and religious dimensions of sensibility (ibid.).

In addition, there was a consistent musical element that provided Mesmer’s worldview with a fundamental, ‘holistic’ metaphor. Already in his doctoral thesis the notion of ‘harmony’ (*Harmonie*) was a core element and would remain so throughout Mesmer’s life work. This is expressed in (a) his reference to the ancient idea of the harmony of the spheres (revived by Johannes Kepler [1571–1610]) and the influence of the celestial bodies on human bodies according to their constitution; (b) the restoration of the “harmony of the nervous fluid” (*Harmonie des Nervenfluidums*) by inducing its regular flow in the patient’s body; and (c) not least, Mesmer’s *Société de l’Harmonie universel* that he founded

in pre-Revolutionary Paris in 1783 inspired by his vision to restore social harmony through the dissemination of his healing system (Baier 2024).

Two commissions set up by King Louis XVI in 1784 declared the hypothetical healing agent in animal magnetism non-existent, and its results as the outcome of imagination and imitation (cf. Riskin 2002; Hirschi 2013). After being expelled from the medical communities of first Vienna and then Paris, Mesmer travelled across Europe before settling in Switzerland and eventually in the town of Meersburg in southwestern Germany, where he continued to practice and write about his healing method until the year before his death in 1815 (Riskin 2009). Mesmer published his last work *Mesmerismus. Oder System der Wechselwirkungen* (1814) with the support of the physician Karl Christian Wolfart (1778–1832), who was a dedicated defender of mesmerism. Despite their efforts to adapt animal magnetism to the state of the art in physics and philosophy, Mesmer and Wolfart did not develop a lasting influence on German Romantic thought (Baier 2020a), where the reception history of mesmerism had developed its own dynamic.

The French royal commissions' findings had led to a split among Mesmer's followers in the mid-1780s. Some mesmerists continued to uphold a strictly physicalist interpretation that the mesmerist initiates the healing process by transmitting and/or manipulating an imponderable invisible subtle matter. The other significant interpretation drew its conclusions from the commissions' reports and attributed the effects of 'magnetising' to psychological rather than purely physical causes (although the hypothesis of a *fluidum* was not completely ruled out). This psychological point of view also marked the bifurcation from mesmerism of what would later be called hypnosis, and prepared the ground for the history of modern psychiatry as well as newly emerging approaches of 'religious psychology' (cf. Ellenberger 1970: 72; Zoehrer 2025b).

It could be argued that Mesmer's theory constituted a form of secularised *magia naturalis* where explicit references to a transcendent, spiritual being were omitted in favour of a purely physicalist model of the magnetic fluid based on matter and motion (cf. Podmore 1909: 39–40). In retrospect, animal magnetism appears more as a healing *art* rather than a scientific practice: Mesmer rejected detailed rules, believing that their strict observance would lead to prejudice and ultimately devolve into superstition or a rigid system characteristic of religious ceremonies. Instead, he promoted an intuitive therapeutic *performance*—an art that was nonetheless grounded in a scientific cosmology and rational medical principles (Baier 2020a: 42).

The early reception, brief rehabilitation, and further development of animal magnetism during the Romantic era highlighted the healing system's compatibility with a broad range of discourses that extended beyond the medical framework (Baier 2020a; Brand 2012). Jürgen Barkhoff (1994: 216–217) demonstrated that the literary genre of mesmeric case stories in the decades around 1800 was influenced

by a broad spectrum of discourses and knowledge forms. Apart from typical literary aspects, these included anthropology, medical science and folk medicine, psychology, and theology. Barkhoff argued that such an entanglement of discourses is a necessary feature when “scientifically talking about the ‘whole human,’” a mode of communication that heavily relies on narrative and metaphorical elements (ibid.). The observable phenomena and spectacular effects that Mesmer and his students could produce in magnetised subjects indicated that there was an empirical base to their beliefs. At the same time, mesmerism’s status within academia remained ambivalent (although not completely discarded until around 1850) and its Romantic reinterpretations adopted distinct religious overtones. Mesmer’s doctrine of a subtle invisible fluid permeating the living cosmos decisively prefigured nineteenth-century discourses on the belief in hidden, cosmic forces and became the prototype for projects of a “scientific religion” (e.g., Christian Science, Religious Science, New Thought, Theosophy) (Hanegraaff 1996: 430). In a similar vein, Klaus Brand has described mesmerism as a “religious science and scientific religion” that is deeply rooted in an Enlightenment worldview (Brand 2012: 169). This precarious position between science and religion is a feature that mesmerism not only shares analogously with late modern esotericism (including occultism), but one it has also reinforced through its significant influence on the broader discursive field of alternative religiosity.

In short, although the core of animal magnetism was iatrophysical, Mesmer’s general thought was characterised by sentimental, nature philosophical, and theological dimensions. His work aimed not only at healing the body but also at restoring social harmony. His theory of the magnetic *fluidum* did not meet the empirical standards of the community of European medical professionals that began to identify with the Enlightenment ideal of science. Nonetheless, it captured the imagination of Romantic physicians and philosophers and would form a paradigmatic element of occult anthropology and cosmology, where claims of a key to hidden powers were rooted in the presumption of a subtle agent encompassing the mirco- and macrocosm. Over the course of the twentieth century, Mesmer’s *fluidum* was eventually transformed into ‘subtle energies,’ giving rise to new therapeutic concepts and applications. This thesis aims to demonstrate how this process occurred. An important stage in the transition from animal magnetism to energy healing involved the identification of the mesmeric *fluidum* with the vital principle.

2. Animal Magnetism and Vitalism

“The whole study [of magnetism] is of vast importance in an age when methods are changing rapidly; and humanity is coming closer to the source of life.”

– Albert Webster Edgerly (1852–1926)²⁰

There are notable vitalist undertones in the field of energy healing. However, it remains unclear how the concept of ‘life force’ (*Lebenskraft, vis vitalis*) evolved into that of ‘vital energies.’ One way to approach this question is by investigating the field’s immediate precursor. The belief in a vital principle was indeed closely associated with a major progenitor of contemporary energy healing: animal magnetism. Franz Anton Mesmer conceptualised ‘animal magnetism’ (*thierischer Magnetismus*) as a natural force that resembles ‘mineral magnetism’ (*mineralischer Magnetismus*) and—to a lesser degree—other physical phenomena such as fire, light, and electricity. He regarded the substrate of animal magnetism as a cosmic *fluidum* that permeates the universe and that also functions as vitalising agent in biological organisms. A gifted healer would have a surplus of animal magnetism and could emit it for healing purposes. This section zooms in on the specific vitalism of Mesmer and Romantic mesmerists before discussing the still under-researched but significant role of vitalist thought in late modern religion.

Mesmer’s Vitalism

In his last work *Mesmerismus. Oder System der Wechselwirkungen* (1814), co-written with the Romantic physician Karl Christian Wolfart (1778–1832), Mesmer presented his healing system within a wider cosmological concept. He postulated two complementary principles: the “immobility” (*Ruhe*) or “solidity” (*Festigkeit*) of matter on the one hand, and its antagonist, the *fluidum* or the ever-active “vital fire” (*Lebensfeuer*) on the other hand. According to Mesmer, both principles interact harmoniously in a healthy human body. Over the course of a lifetime, their proportion naturally shifts until the principle of immobility prevails, the movement of the *fluidum* ceases, and the body dies. Therefore, illness is not considered the prevalence of immobility but the imbalance of both principles, i.e., restrictions in the *fluidum*’s proper flow (cf. Baier 2020a: 36–37).

In a somewhat earlier work, *Allgemeine Erläuterungen über den Magnetismus und den Somnambulismus* (1812), Mesmer defended himself against public ridicule and the accusation of

²⁰ Shaftesbury 1935: 392.

charlatanry. He maintained that “animal magnetism” was the discovery of “a hitherto unknown natural force, an agent immediately affecting the nerves,” promising a new avenue in the art of medicine (Mesmer 1812: 1). Mesmer identified this force with “the actual life principle” (*das eigentliche Lebensprinzip*) (Mesmer 1812: *ibid.*). His notion of life was highly physicalistic and, as Karl Baier noted, dissolved into a “total mechanisation of nature” (*vollständigen Mechanisierung der Natur*) (Baier 2024). However, by the early nineteenth-century, Mesmer’s definition of life as generalised motion stood in conflict with idealistic and Romantic thought, which preferred the metaphysical notions of ‘spirit’ (*Geist*) or ‘soul’ (*Seele*) to explain the phenomenon of life.

In *System der Wechselwirkungen*, Mesmer adopted elements of Romantic *Naturphilosophie* at the suggestion of Wolfart, who sought to not only respond to current debates around dynamistic physics but also to harmonise mesmerism with the *Naturphilosophie* of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854). Wolfart made the case that the two rivalling trends of contemporaneous physics, atomism and dynamism, were represented in Mesmer’s system through the notions of matter (*Stoff*) and motion (*Bewegung*)—the two polar expressions of the one principle of life (Wolfart 1815: 258; cf. Baier 2024).²¹ In keeping with contemporaneous philosophical debates on the idea of an ensouled cosmos, Wolfart softened Mesmer’s stark physicalism by reinterpreting the terms of *mécanisme* or *mécanique* in his French texts as expressions of the “organic.” Baier underscores this “vitalistic turn” (*vitalistische Wendung*) in Wolfart’s exposition of Mesmer’s system by pointing out that it was probably Wolfart who first suggested to replace the term ‘animal magnetism’ with ‘life magnetism’ (*Lebensmagnetism*) (*ibid.*). The inherent tension in Mesmer’s iatrophysical system—namely, the positing of a physical force as the essential principle of vital processes—finds an analogue in contemporary systems of energy healing that use the qualifier “life” to emphasise the vitalising function of the energies in question (see, for example, the notion of “universal life energy,” the healing agent that is invoked in Reiki, cf. Stein 2019; Zoehrer 2025b).

The entanglements between animal magnetism and vitalism were deeply embedded in the broader scientific discourse of the Enlightenment (roughly from the late seventeenth century to Kant’s death in 1804) and the Romantic period (c. 1790–1820).²² Eschewing the binary categorical division in matter and mind, the so-called imponderables—i.e., hypothetical, unweighable matter exerting physical effects—dominated the eighteenth-century discourses of physics, physiology, and anthropology. Neither

²¹ Mesmer’s deistic physics discerned between matter and motion as two created principles or “primary essences” (*Grundwesen*), and God as the “one uncreated primary essence” (*ein unerschaffenes Grundwesen*) (Mesmer 1814: 33). According to Kupsch (1984: 188), Mesmer could derive these principles from Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy (cf. Baier 2024). According to Mesmer, the harmony of these two principles constitutes nature itself: “The *harmony* of the interrelationship, by which matter persists and motions follow one another, is what must be understood by *nature*” (“Die *Harmonie* der Wechselverhältnisse, worin die Stoffe miteinander zusammen bestehen und die Bewegungen sich folgen, ist dasjenige, was man unter der *Natur* verstehen muß”) (Mesmer 1814: 33; emphasis in the original; cf. Mesmer 1812: 26).

²² The following discussion largely summarises the vitalistic conceptions of German mesmerists as outlined by Jürgen Barkhoff (1995).

physical forces such as electricity, magnetism, and gravity nor vitalistic substrates such as ‘nervous fluid’ (*Nervensaft*), ‘nervous spirit’ (*Nervengeist*), or ‘life force’ (*Lebenskraft*) could be definitely situated within the domain of either matter or mind but instead occupied an intermediary space between the two. Endowed with physical and mental qualities they could—depending on the theory—be assigned to either side (Barkhoff 1995: 41). In the aftermath of Descartes, this “dualism of flow” (*Dualismus des Fließens*) served to offer plausibility to monistic worldviews within a mechanical framework. Mesmer’s animal magnetism is a case in point. He conceived his cosmic *fluidum* as the “vital fire” (*Lebensfeuer*), the one fundamental substrate that allows all “interactions” (*Wechselwirkungen*) at cosmic and human scales (Barkhoff 1995: 38; cf. Wolfart 1814).

The parallels between Mesmer’s Enlightenment-style iatrophysics, on the one hand, and Neoplatonic, emanationist form of physics and the *magia naturalis* of Renaissance Hermeticists, on the other, are evident. The *spiritus mundi*’s movement—active on both macro- and micro-scales—reverberates in the mesmeric ‘vital fire’ that suffuses the universe. Both principles functioned as the medium of universal harmony between the heavenly bodies and the human body. The individual’s soul is influenced by the world soul just as the mesmerist perceives the *fluidum* through his empathic sensorium or ‘sixth sense’ (Barkhoff 1995: 38; Riskin 2009; cf. Zoehrer 2025d: 33 n. 45). A defining feature of *magia naturalis* was its connection of astrology with medicine. The Hermetic magus claimed knowledge of the *spiritus mundi* and of the correspondences between stellar constellations and the specific qualities of earthly things, including illnesses. He believes himself able to intervene in natural events and suggest a therapy by analysing the underlying cosmic influences and prescribing a sympathetic cure (Barkhoff 1995: *ibid.*).

Notwithstanding such similarities, Mesmer drew on the major theories of force of his day in order to construct his mechanistic cosmology. In his doctoral thesis, he referred to a hypothetical imponderable that exerted cosmic influences on the human organism as luminous matter (*materia luminosa*) and living gravity (*gravitas animale*), using terms that had already appeared in the works of Newton and Hermetic ether theorists. By 1783, he had grounded his theory in the imponderables of magnetism and electricity. In *System der Wechselwirkungen*, Mesmer relied on more physiological and vitalistic terms that had been coined by Romantic thinkers, including ‘vital fire’ and ‘nervous force’ (Barkhoff 1995: 42; cf. Feldt 1985). Barkhoff derived from this eclectic amalgam of concepts that the specific mode of Mesmer’s substrate—be it materialistic or vitalistic—was of secondary importance compared to its utility as an “antidualistic lubricant” (*antidualistisches Gleitmittel*) (*ibid.*: 42). Even a consistent materialist monism had to plausibly allow for explaining transitions between physical and psychological processes.

Mesmer’s mechanistic system was further characterised by a normative-ethical dimension which saved it from plunging into the nihilism that threatened Enlightenment models of materialism. He imagined cosmic space to be filled with the *fluidum*, which conveys a psychodynamic sense of protection and security, as is characteristic of ether theories in general (Barkhoff 1995: 42). The moral-teleological

implication is that fully immersing oneself in the harmony of nature's fluidal currents, that is, the good and proper life, is only possible if one acts in accordance with nature. This is the key idea in Mesmer's anthropology, presented under the title "morality" in the second part of his *System der Wechselwirkungen*.

German Romantic Vitalism

German Romantic physicians reshaped Mesmer's theory of a cosmic *fluidum* in vitalistic terms. Exemplary in this regard is the Southern German physician Eberhard Gmelin (1751–1809), an early, pre-Romantic theorist of mesmerism who published his empirical observations and reflections on the subject between 1787 and 1793. Gmelin interpreted the mesmeric agent variously as the 'ether streaming through our nerves' (*unsere Nerven durchströmende Äther*), an 'animating entity' (*belebende Wesen*), and 'life force' (*Lebenskraft*), which supposedly had a harmonising and invigorating effect when transmitted to a patient (Barkhoff 1995: 88). Other synonyms used by Gmelin encompass 'life spirit' (*Lebensgeist*) and 'vital fluid' (*Lebensflüssigkeit*), which he explicitly identified with the notion of 'nervous spirit' (*Nervengeist*). The latter notion was adopted into the medical anthropology of the German physician, physiologist, and philosopher Ernst Platner (1744–1818), who renewed the idea of a *spiritus animalis* as the intermediary agent between soul and body, introduced by the Stoics and readopted by Francis Bacon (1561–1626) und René Descartes (1596–1650) (cf. Cox 2022). Building on Mesmer, Gmelin expanded the anthropological concepts of life spirit or nervous spirit to function not only as the medium between 'animal matter' and the soul, but also as the element that enables sympathetic connection with the environment and other nervous spirits (Barkhoff 1995: 88–89).²³

Arnold Wienholt (1749–1804), a physician based in the northern German port town of Bremen, was introduced to animal magnetism in 1786 by the Swiss pastor and philosopher Johann Caspar Lavatar (1741–1801) (Focke 1897; on Lavater, see Baier 2019). Wienholt took recourse to Gmelin's writings and assumed a sensitive sphere around the body that functions as the mesmeric medium. He sought additional scientific backing for Gmelin's theory through the vitalism debate that was (re)triggered by the life-force theory introduced by Johann Christian Reil (1759–1813), the forerunner of German Romantic medicine, psychosomatic medicine, and modern psychiatry (Barkhoff 1995: 92; cf. Hufeland 1795).

Reil was, in fact, a prominent advocate of mesmerism himself. Together with his equally renowned colleague Christoph Wilhelm Hufeland (1762–1836) Reil advised the Prussian State Chancellor Karl August von Hardenberg (1750–1822; in office 1810–1822) to initiate a renewed investigation into mesmerism, which was granted in 1812 und commenced in Berlin under Hufeland's supervision (Haupt

²³ On the role of Gmelin as a central reference figure in German mesmerism, see Baier 2020a.

2015: 267; Artelt 1965: 28–42). Hufeland, for his part, strongly advocated a life-force theory, which he outlined in his monograph *Ideen über Pathogenie und Einfluß der Lebenskraft* (1795) (cf. Eckart 2005: 153–154, 158–161).²⁴ He regarded the organism's self-regulatory and self-healing capacities as expressions of a life force. Likewise, rather than viewing diseases as merely mechanical or chemical disturbances, Hufeland argued that they resulted from disruptions or imbalances in the vital agency. In living bodies, the operation of the life force counterbalances the chemical process of decomposition or putrefaction (*Fäulnis*). From this assumption, Hufeland derived the principle that

through anything that weakens the influence or the *energy* of this living organic force, the natural tendency of the animal body toward decay is also increased, and finally, through its complete destruction, total chemical decomposition can occur, because the body then becomes subject solely to chemical laws. Therefore, the degree of decay in the animal body must always stand in inverse relation to the degree of the life force [...]. (Hufeland 1795: 319; my emphasis)²⁵

The oppositional pair of 'living' and 'dead' natural forces in Hufeland's physiological theory has a striking similarity with the late Mesmer's physicalist interpretation of the balance of movement and stagnation required for vitality.²⁶ While Hufeland's mention of energy in connection with life force is noteworthy, he does not further conceptualise the term. Instead, he rather uses energy more casually to signify the meanings of effect, influence, or intensity in relation to physiological stimuli, bodily reactions, and will power (i.e., *Seelenkraft*, literally: 'soul force'; cf. Hufeland 1795: 135–137).

Over the course of his lifetime, Hufeland gravitated towards Romantic thought and gradually moderated his initially sceptical stance on mesmerism. His prolific writing career began with *Mesmer und sein Magnetismus* (1784), a polemical essay published in response to the verdict of the Paris commissions that investigated Mesmer's theory (Barkhoff 1995: 69–71). Proposing that all medical theory and practice be grounded in the agency of life force, which acts upon the organism and "the subordinate dead (chemical and mechanical) forces of nature" (*der ihr untergeordneten todten [chemischen und mechanischen] Naturkräfte*) (Hufeland 1795: v), Hufeland laid the conceptual foundation for

²⁴ That the notion of a life force was closely related to other physical imponderables, particularly electricity, seemed to be confirmed by the effects of galvanism. In a series of spectacular experiments, the Italian researcher Luigi Galvani (1737–1798) demonstrated how the legs of a dead frog could be made to twitch, indicating that the nervous system operated via electrical signals (cf. von Humboldt 1797).

²⁵ "durch alles, was den Einfluss oder die Energie dieser lebenden organischen Kraft schwächt, auch die natürliche Tendenz des animalischen Körpers zur Fäulnis vermehrt, und endlich durch ihre gänzliche Vernichtung völlige chemische Fäulnis hervorgebracht werden kann, weil nun der Körper blos dem chemischen Gesetze unterworfen wird. Der Grad der Fäulnis im animalischen Körper wird also immer mit dem Grade der Lebenskraft [...] im umgekehrten Verhältnisse stehen müssen."

²⁶ Hufeland's concept also pre-empted the concept of 'negative entropy' coined by the Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger (1887–1961). In his essay *What is Life?* (1944), Schrödinger defined negentropy as the characteristic feature of living organisms—to maintain highly ordered structures and thus resist the effects of the second law of thermodynamics, namely the tendency of closed systems towards increasing disorder (entropy). However, in contrast to Hufeland and other vitalists, Schrödinger did not posit a force operating outside the bounds of physics.

Naturheilkunde. This German precursor to ‘naturopathy’ advocated gentle treatments aimed at supporting nature’s inherent healing powers (cf. *ibid.*).²⁷

Romantic mesmerism was systematised by the Prussian physician and surgeon Carl Alexander Ferdinand Kluge (1782–1844). As a pragmatically and empirically oriented representative of medical mesmerism during the Romantic period, Kluge largely built his medical theory on the writings of Gmelin and Reil (Baier 2020a: 31–32). Influenced by Reil’s proposition that the abdomen plays a special role as a perception organ that could be activated through magnetisation, Kluge identified the ganglia system located at the solar plexus as the main source of the life force (Kluge 1811: 160; cf. Reil 1795).²⁸

Popularising Wolfart’s term “life magnetism” (*Lebensmagnetismus*), the theologically inclined physician Johann Carl Passavant (1790–1857) proposed a vitalist-mesmeric theory of clairvoyance in his book *Untersuchungen über den Lebensmagnetismus und das Hellsehen* (1821).²⁹ Passavant regarded the body’s organs as “conductors of the life force” (*Leiter der Lebenskraft*)—an agent that is subject to the mind and even capable of affecting objects *outside* the body (Barkhoff 1995: 115). Interpreting mesmerism in terms of both life force and supposedly magical effects, Passavant *de facto* developed a theory of suggestion (*ibid.*; cf. Baier 2020a: 29). Although the discursive entanglements of mesmerism and parapsychology warrant more detailed examination, this outline should suffice to underscore their significance in Romantic thought. Its central theme of vital force would exert a lasting influence on both alternative medicine and occultism.

Vitalism in a Broader Medical-Historical Context

Vitalism denotes the view that life processes cannot be sufficiently explained solely in terms of mechanistic or physico-chemical properties. Instead, an inherent lawfulness of living systems is assumed, which transcends the principles explored in the science of the inorganic (Lohff 2018b; cf. Lohff 2018a). As a general category, vitalism carried profound anthropological-cosmological implications, stimulating debate across a wide range of disciplines from biology and medicine to philosophy and theology. Since the first attempts to conceptualise a life principle in antiquity (notably, Aristotle’s concept of entelechy or Galen’s notion of *pneuma*), various theoretical models were

²⁷ The German-American promotor of alternative medicine Benedict Lust (1872–1945) was a major founding figure of naturopathy in the United States. Incorporating central elements of German *Naturheilkunde*, Lust’s American School of Naturopathy (est. 1901), magazines, and health resorts presented the America public with an eclectic system of hydrotherapy, homeopathy, dietary rules, and reflexology (cf. Whorton 2002: 191–217).

²⁸ On Kluge’s systematic exposition of mesmerism, see Baier 2020b. Mesmer himself had already noted the role of the hypochondrium, the region of the upper stomach, thus implicitly reformulating a crucial element in the medical thought of Paracelsus (né Theophrastus von Hohenheim, c. 1493–1541). Paracelsus thought that the hypochondrium was the dwelling place of the life-spirit (*spiritus vitae*), which he also called archeus or inner alchemist (*alchimia microcosmi*) (Schott 2001: A384).

²⁹ Literally: Investigations on Life Magnetism and Clairvoyance. Several anglophone authors adopted the term *Lebensmagnetismus* as “vital magnetism” (see, e.g., Pyne 1845).

developed to define the animating force believed to operate in biological organisms (the *spiritus animalis* of Thomas Aquinas [c. 1225–1274], Paracelsus’s *archaeus*, the soul doctrine of Jan Baptist van Helmont [1577–1644], etc.). In a narrower sense, the controversy over vitalism encompasses philosophical, biological, and medical debates from the late seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries that aimed at a rational justification of a life principle in opposition to mechanistic explanations (Lohff 2018b). A paradigmatic proponent of vitalism (*avant la lettre*) was the German alchemist and physician Georg Ernst Stahl (1659–1734), who advocated an animistic or “psychodynamistic” theory of life, conceiving the human body not as a Cartesian “machine” but as an ensouled “organism” (ibid.). The term vitalism itself was originally introduced by the French physicians Théophile de Bordeu (1722–1776) and Paul Joseph Barthez (1734–1806) to describe a medical doctrine grounded on Stahl’s animism.

As indicated above, intense debates over the concept of the life force took place in the formation phase of biology as an academic discipline during the Romantic period until 1830 (cf. Gambarotto 2018; Zammito 2018). Ultimately, experimental physiological research and a materialistic-mechanistic approach to describing living organisms prevailed over vitalism and Idealistic-Romantic *Naturphilosophie*. Neovitalism, founded by the German biologist and philosopher Hans Driesch (1867–1941), represents a significant endeavour by a renowned biologist to rescue vitalism within a teleological neo-Kantian framework (Lohff 2018a: 832, Lohff 2018b: 1450; cf. Aspren 2014b).

Darwin’s theory of evolution decisively reinforced the rejection of vitalist positions in biology, medicine, and philosophy. Nonetheless, several attempts were made throughout the twentieth century to reintegrate a teleological position—central to vitalist thought—into biology, particularly from philosophical and history-of-science perspectives (Engels 1982; Jonas 2004; Brenner 2009; Nagel 2012). These efforts underscore the ongoing theoretical challenges posed by a purely mechanistic conception of organic processes, despite its undisputed impact on the advancement of biology and medicine. Meanwhile, the idea of a life force or vital principle remained a major pillar in alternative medicine. This was especially evident in religious-therapeutic discourses of the decades around 1900, which contributed significantly to the gradual emergence of energy healing.

A Research Desideratum: Reconstructing the Discourse of Vitalism in Late Modern Religion

As Olav Hammer (2001: 324–325) indicated, the Romantic theme of an immaterial—partially supernatural and sacralised—life force has continued in the alternative religious, ‘esoteric’ field of discourse. Martin Konitzer (b. 1954), a German physician and researcher of complementary medicine undertook a more direct contextualisation of the *Naturphilosophie* of New Age authors within the intellectual-historical context of vitalism (1989: 33–58).³⁰ Drawing on the critique of mechanism and reductionism by the Austrian-American biochemist Erwin Chargaff, Konitzer defined vitalism as the

³⁰ A more detailed discussion on the role of *Naturphilosophie* in the context of the history of esotericism is offered in section II.2.2.

“intertwining of subject and object due to their commonality in the stream of life,” somewhat casually equating it with “alchemy” (ibid.: 37). Christoph Bochinger (1994: 63) commented that Konitzer’s concise typification of the philosophical core motif of New Age authors as a vitalistic-alchemical paradigm seemed only appropriate, as it can indeed be found in philosophical, scientific, and hermetic-esoteric conceptions. However, Bochinger noted that this approach still “needs to be elaborated in monographic form” (ibid.). This project does not aim to fully meet Bochinger’s desideratum for the entire field of late modern esotericism. However, it will be partially realised for the narrower domain of energy healing and related religious-therapeutic practices.

In his monograph *The Scientification of Religion*, Kocku von Stuckrad (2014: 64–70) provided an exploratory overview of vitalism as a discursive nexus of debates on life force, spirit, and matter. Over the past two hundred years, vitalism was closely intertwined with the strands of alchemy, Romantic natural philosophy, spirituality, monism, occultism, ether concepts, and natural science. Von Stuckrad’s approach is particularly fruitful for a deeper investigation of the role of vitalist beliefs in healing practices within the alternative religious milieu and its cultural environment.

As this thesis will prove, vitalism is indeed a recurrent theme in the writings of Theosophists (e.g., Blavatsky, Leadbeater, Bailey), German occultism (e.g., du Prel, Reuß), New Thought (e.g., Edgerly, Atkinson), and Bengali intellectuals such as Vivekananda. In their historically, geographically, and culturally distinct yet connected discourses, key notions connected with ‘life force’ or ‘vital energy’ were upheld and discussed, leaving their imprint on the contemporary field of energy healing in ways that are to be further explored.

3. A Topos with a Thousand Faces: Synonyms for Subtle Energy *sensu* Life Force

The semantic polyvalence of the term ‘energy’ lies at the core of the boundary work between holistic and conventional medicine. In science-based medicine, energy refers to a physical quantity denoting the capacity to produce change within a given system. In the holistic milieu, the meanings of energy are far more vague, standing in stark contrast to the term’s ubiquitous use. As the Italian physicist and “consciousness researcher,” Massimiliano Sassoli de Bianchi remarked on the notorious difficulty of defining ‘subtle energies’ in precise language,

I can say without hesitation that there are many confusions, both on the part of conventional researchers [i.e., scientists], about the nature of these ‘subtle energies,’ and on the part of the non-conventional self-researchers [i.e., practitioners], about a proper understanding of the basic concept of energy (...). (De Bianchi 2020b: 235)

Instead of providing a clear definition, practitioners typically describe energy in terms of a list of synonyms that has turned into an established narrative. A striking characteristic of the list is its amalgamation of two fundamentally different types of terms: on the one hand, notions with scientific (or para-scientific) connotations, on the other hand, concepts that claim to draw on South or East Asian traditions. Quasi-canonical notions of energy typically include *Od*, ether, orgone, quantum potential, and “prana”, “chi” or “ki.” The assertions that (1) energy is synonymous with life force, (2) energy healing is validated by (modern) physics, and (3) is simultaneously rooted in antiquity constitute the most pervasive topos in the holistic milieu.³¹ Where are the roots of this topos? And how has it become so widespread within emic discourses? This section explores these questions by sketching the development of this topos from mesmerism to the contemporary field of energy healing.

Subtle Agents from Romantic Mesmerism to 1970s “Future Science”

As indicated above, Mesmer already struggled to find a term for his therapeutic agent. In his writings, he referred at various points to gravity, light, heat (or fire), electricity, and magnetism—the known “imponderables” of his time—before he settled for ‘animal magnetism’ in demarcation from ‘mineral [i.e., the known physical] magnetism’ (Feldt 1985: 33; cf. van Rijn 2025). Initially dismissed by the medical establishments of his time, Mesmer’s theory and practice continued to attract substantial academic interest throughout the nineteenth century, especially during the Romantic era (Baier 2020a). Despite its conceptual vagueness, the *fluidum*’s supposed function of transmitting the effect of animal magnetism and producing trance states during somnambulatory séances had a notable impact on: (1)

³¹ Zoehrer 2025b and 2025c discuss in detail the two fundamental patterns of plausibilisation—appeal to science and appeal to (Eastern) tradition—in the occult discourse on energy.

Romantic-era philosophy, medicine, and religious thought (c. 1790–1820); (2) the emergence of hypnotherapy and psychotherapy (mid-nineteenth century); (3) the formation of nineteenth-century new religious movements such as spiritualism, New Thought, and Theosophy; and (4) early psychic research.

Psychic research drew substantial inspiration from mesmerism-inspired literature around 1800, which was perfused with the motifs of trance, presentiments, haunted houses, poltergeist phenomena, and apparitions of *Doppelgänger* or doubles (cf. Barkhoff 1995). A highly influential and sober account of such paranormal phenomena was provided by the English novelist and story writer Catherine Ann Crowe (née Stevens, 1803–1876). Crowe’s Victorian bestseller *The Night Side of Nature* (1848) was a vivid and imaginative piece of somnambulist, oneirological, and spiritualist discourse. Building on the “magnetic historiography” of the mesmerist physician Joseph Ennemoser (1787–1854) that interpreted magic and religion within a naturalistic framework (cf. Baier 2009: 258–260; Hanegraaff 2012: 260–277), Crowe delivers her own collection of anecdotes of mysterious phenomena. Referencing Ennemoser, Crowe described animal magnetism in terms of a vital healing agent that is yet to be recognised by scientific medicine:

Inseparable from life, although, like many other vital phenomena, so subtle in its influences, that only in abnormal cases it attracts attention, it has exhibited itself more or less in all ages, and in all countries. But its value as a medical agent is only now beginning to dawn on the civilized world, whilst its importance, in a higher point of view, is yet perceived but by few. (Crowe 1848: 39)

Without specifying non-European traditions, Crowe here indicates a perennial, transcultural belief in a subtle, vital substrate. German Romantic thinkers, whom Crowe avidly read, had already discussed terms of Asian provenience that were supposedly functionally equivalent or comparable to the mesmeric agent—a plausibilisation strategy that would be intensified by occult authors (Zoehrer 2020; 2021b).

Although it is still to be determined where blend of orientalist and scientific healing agents appears for the first time, the occult author and co-founder of the Theosophical Society Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) provides an early and striking example. In her 1883 article “The Power to Heal,” she described the therapeutic medium “*pran* [sic], od, aura, electro-magnetism, or whatever else you prefer to call it” (Blavatsky 1991 [1883]: 382–383; cf. Zoehrer 2021b). Notably, the notions of “energy” and “chi” (or “ki”) did not yet appear in Blavatsky’s list. It was only within the holistic discourse from the 1970s onwards that these terms became indispensable elements in the list of vitalistic synonyms.

“Prana” entered the American naturopathic discourse in the early 1900s, after the term had been popularised by Theosophists, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), and William Walker Atkinson (cf. Zoehrer 2020; 2021b). The term appears in a synonym list featured in *The Nature Cure Cook Book*

(1915). Written by the American naturopaths Anna and Henry Lindlahr, the *Cook Book* is exemplary for its blend of religious, scientific, and therapeutic language:

All forms of energy which manifest in the mineral, vegetable, animal and human entities are secondary energies, derived from the primary source of all forces, powers and energies in the sidereal universe, from that which we call God, Life, Oversoul, Universal Intelligence, Buddha, Prana, etc., each one according to his own highest conception and best understanding. This is the “Vis Vitae,” the “Animus Mundi,” ignored and denied by the speculative sophistries of materialistic science, but recognized and described by Swedenborg as the Heat of Divine Love and the Light of Divine Wisdom, radiating from the Great Central Sun of the Universe through all space and animating all things. (Lindlahr and Lindlahr 1915: 379; cf. Lindlahr 1913)³²

Alternative medicine established itself as a stable social movement in Western societies by the 1970s. As in the nineteenth century, alternative medicine was often entangled with occult thought and psychic research. A manifestation of this extended vitalistic-parascientific discourse was the publication of *Future Science: Life Energies and the Physics of Paranormal Phenomena* (1977). This 598-page volume was edited by John White (b. 1939), an American author and consciousness researcher, and Stanley Krippner (b. 1932), an American psychologist with a focus on parapsychology, transpersonal psychology and non-ordinary states of consciousness. Its thirty-four contributors included prominent spokespersons of the emerging New Age movement and the related scene of alternative spiritualities, for example, David Spangler, William A. Tiller, and Gopi Krishna.

Despite the volume’s size, one searches in vain for a clear-cut definition of what is referred to as “a new force in nature,” “bioplasma,” “neoenenergy,” “healing energies,” and “psychic energy.” The volume effectively presents the spectrum of ideas associated with the belief in subtle energies, which range from quasi-physical forces and a teleological life principle to psychological energies, paranormal agents, and divine entities (cf. Zoehrer 2025b). White and Krippner frame the volume’s subject in terms of parapsysics, which they understand to be “the investigation of the nature, and modes of action, of forms of energy not described in traditional Western physics” (White and Krippner 1977: 24–25; cf. appendix).

An appendix titled “The X Energy: A Universal Phenomenon” presents an impressive list of a total of ninety-four(!) terms assumed to denote “the energy underlying paranormal phenomena (White and Krippner 1977: 550). The editors classified the sources that document this energy into three roughly

³² On the Swedenborgian notion of the unity of all life and the divine influx in early New Thought literature, see Evans 1869: 74–77; Evans 1886: 94–96.

chronological categories titled “early sources”³³ (before 1500 BCE), “tribal sources,”³⁴ and “later sources”³⁵ (after 1500 CE). Despite the cacophony of names allegedly pointing to the same ethereal agent, three characteristic features of the holistic and parapsychological discourse on energy can be drawn from White and Krippner’s volume: (1) the belief in a group of special, hidden powers that are unknown to physics; (2) the tendency to conceptualise these powers as some form of energy; (3) the nature of this energy is often described by means of adjectives that range from the biological and therapeutic to the psychological, parapsychological, and cosmic. To give a few examples that can be found dispersed across the volume: ‘vital energy,’ ‘life energy,’ ‘bioenergy,’ ‘therapeutic energy,’ ‘odic energy,’ ‘auric energy,’ ‘orgone energy,’ ‘psychic energy,’ ‘emotional energy,’ ‘psychomagnetic flow of energy,’ ‘noetic energy,’ ‘nonphysical energy,’ ‘psi energy,’ ‘eloptic energy,’ ‘psychotronic energy,’ ‘paraphysical energy,’ ‘holographic energy,’ ‘X energy,’ ‘crystal energy,’ ‘etheric energy,’ ‘subtle energy,’ ‘elemental energy,’ ‘cosmic energy,’ and ‘cosmic life energy.’

Future Science indicates that, by the time of its publication, the practice of listing synonyms to argue for the existence of hidden forces had become firmly established. A contributor to the volume, the Indian yogi, mystic and writer Gopi Krishna (1903–1984), presented his list in an explicit attempt to revivify the discourse on vitalistic principles:

Modern scholars have omitted to take cognizance of the important fact that there must be a vital fuel to sustain the activity of life. All the billions of cells in the body of an animal or a plant are connected to each other and act in unison in the various organs and limbs towards a common end, always motivated by a common purpose. When disorganization occurs in this unity among the parts or tissues of an organism it ceases to exist. The vital force that keeps our body alive and whole is prana, life energy, bioplasma, orgone, or odic force—call it what you will—which is still unknown to science. (Krishna 1977: 90)

A shorter list is provided by the English author Walter Ernest Butler (1898–1978), who indicates the occult discourse on subtle forces:

It will have been noticed that we have used a special term “elemental energy” to describe this subtle force. This has been done for two reasons. It is the term used in the particular occult fraternity [The Society of the Inner Light, an occult fraternity founded by the British

³³ E.g., “Prana,” “Ch’i”/“Ki,” “Ruach,” “pneuma,” “Holy Spirit,” “Anima Mundi” and “Wodan” (White and Krippner 1977: 550–551).

³⁴ E.g., “Orenda,” “Manitu,” “Wakonda,” and other Native American as well as African and native Oceanic deities (White and Krippner 1977: 551–552). The editors notably name C. G. Jung as a main reference for these notions.

³⁵ E.g., rejected scientific terms including Mesmer’s “magnetic fluid;” the “Life Force” supposedly introduced by Luigi Galvani; the “Od” or “Odic Force” coined by Karl von Reichenbach; fictional occult forces such as “Vril,” a term coined by the British novelist and politician Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873); the “Astral Light” popularised by Helena P. Blavatsky; and explicitly vitalistic principles such as Henri Bergson’s “élan vital” and Hans Driesch’s “Entelechy” (White and Krippner 1977: 552–553).

occultist and writer Dion Fortune (1890–1946)] in which the present writer received much of his training, and by using the term one covers all the various names, magnetism, odic force, prana, etc. (Butler 1977: 99)

It is remarkable that *qì* is mentioned only rarely across the volume. Robert N. Miller, a former professor of chemical engineering refers to *qì* indirectly: “This primary energy is the ‘life force’ of the ancient Chinese, the prana of the yogis, the odic force of von Reichenbach, and the orgone energy of Wilhelm Reich” (Miller 1977: 443).

Energy in Wiccan Discourse

By the late 1970s, the alternative religious discourse on energy had entered the neopagan and Wiccan discourse. *Drawing Down the Moon*, a seminal introduction to neopaganism in America published in 1979 by the journalist Margot Susanna Adler (1946–2014), is deeply immersed in energy rhetoric. So is *The Spiral Dance*, the classic text of contemporary witchcraft, ecofeminism, and the Goddess movement that was published in the same year by the American feminist author Starhawk (née Miriam Simos, b. 1951). Starhawk’s concept of energy was essential to her magic, which she defined as the art of moving energy. Energy denoted a universal medium of connection: “Energy is love, and love is magic” (Starhawk 1979: 155). In her Wiccan anthropology, Starhawk drew on Theosophical and post-Theosophical terminology when suggesting three types of “subtle energy”: (1) elemental or etheric, i.e., the subtle force of the elements earth, air, water, and fire constituting the vitality that sustains the physical body, mediated by the “raith” or “etheric body”; (2) consciousness including dreams, fantasies, and astral energy; and (3) the “Deep Self, or the Gods,” which involves the finest, yet most powerful vibrations that are accessed in mystical ecstasy when the Goddess is invoked (ibid.: 161).

In *Dreaming the Dark* (1982), Starhawk addressed the difficulty of defining energy by alluding to the limits of language when speaking of mystical experiences:

This is where our language begins to break down—or maybe where all language breaks down. Even if we were to speak of *ch’i* or *ki* or *mana*, or *the force* beloved by the *Star Wars* generation, perhaps any name, any noun, would be a lie, because energy cannot be separated. If we say that energy runs through things, we imply that energy is separate from the things that it runs through. Perhaps this is where thought itself breaks down. (Starhawk 1988 [1982]: 29)

Magic, according to Starhawk, is the art of using thought, images, and metaphors to “shape the movements of energy,” that is, to change the patterns of probabilities underlying reality (ibid.). Invoking

a list of typical non-European terms for vital energy, she subtly underscores the claim of the idea's universal validity by stating that

no modern English word quite conveys the meaning of *energy* in the sense I'm using it here. The Chinese *ch'i*, the Hindu *prana*, and the Hawaiian *mana* are clearer terms for the idea of an underlying vital energy that infuses, creates, and sustains the physical body. (Starhawk 1997 [1982]: 51)

Synonyms for Vital Force in Energy Healing Discourse

In contrast to the highly imaginative, mythological, and fiction-oriented language used by Wiccans, the American energy healer, teacher, and entrepreneur Barbara Ann Brennan (1939–2022) took a more structured and rationalising approach. A physicist by training, Brennan introduces her healing system in *Hands of Light* (1988) with an overview to the history of the idea of a 'human energy field' that is more systematic than descriptions found in comparable energy healing manuals.

Similar to White and Krippner's volume (which she also refers to), Brennan divided subtle energy concepts in three chronological categories (Brennan 1988: 29–36). First, the "Spiritual Tradition" encompasses a "universal energy called *Prana*" by Indians, a "vital energy" known to the ancient Chinese as "Ch'i," and the "astral light" of the Kabbalists. The human energy field is allegedly described in "many esoteric teachings," among which Brennan counts Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Buddhism, and Native American shamanism (ibid.: 29). Then, the "Scientific Tradition" covers a history of ideas that stretches from late antiquity until the nineteenth century.³⁶ The third stage of subtle energy research was conducted by "20th Century Medical Doctors."³⁷ Although Brennan's overview only scratches the surface of the twentieth-century evolution of energy healing, it shows that the theme drew interest from both medical and psychiatric experts as well as esoteric authors (particularly Theosophists).

³⁶ Brennan rushes through the ideas of Pythagoreans, Paracelsus, Jan Baptista van Helmont (1579–1644), Leibnitz (1646–1716), and Mesmer. More attention is given to the German industrialist and chemist Karl Ludwig Freiherr von Reichenbach (1788–1869)—erroneously named "Count Wilhelm Von Reichenbach—and his theory of an "odic force" (Brennan 1988: 30; cf. Zoehrer 2025b).

³⁷ These so-called medical doctors included the British medical electrician and aura researcher William Kilner (1847–1920); two pioneers of radionics—the American chiropractor Ruth Drown (1891–1965) and the English engineer George De La Warr (1904–1969); and the Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957); the English Theosophist and psychiatrist Lawrence J. Bendit (1898–1974) and his clairvoyant wife, the psychotherapist and author Phoebe D. Bendit (née Payne, 1891–?); the Theosophist and psychic Dora Kunz (née Theodora Sophia van Gelder, 1904–1999)—not a physician, but a co-founder of Therapeutic Touch with the professor of nursing Dolores Krieger (1921–2019); the American physician and psychiatrist John Pierrakos (1921–2001) with whom Brennan had collaborated; the American physiologist Valorie Hunt (1914–2016); and a number of Japanese, Chinese, and Soviet researchers (Brennan 1988: 31–34).

A much less medicalised approach was taken by the Chinese-Filipino entrepreneur and esotericist Choa Kok Sui (né Samson Lim Choachuy, 1952–2007). In 1987, Choa Kok Sui founded the Institute for Inner Studies in Manila to spread Pranic Healing on a global scale (cf. Zoehrer 2020; 2021b). He outlined the foundations of his healing system in his book *The Ancient Science & Art of Pranic Healing* (1989). Representing a transcultural perspective, his choice of synonyms for the life force draws from tradition rather than from science:

Pranic healing is an ancient science and art of healing which utilizes *prana* or *ki* or *vital energy* to heal the whole physical body. It also involves the manipulation of ki and bioplasmic matter of the patient's body. It has also been invariably called psychic healing, magnetic healing, faith healing, ki healing, vitalic healing [sic]; and laying on of the hand. (...) Prana or ki is that *vital energy or life force which keeps the body alive and healthy*. In Greek it is called *pneuma*, in Polynesian – *mana*, and in Hebrew – *ruah*, which means “breath of life.” *The healer projects prana or vital energy or “The Breath of Life” to the patient; thereby, healing the patient*. It is through this process that this so called “miraculous healing” is accomplished. (Choa Kok Sui 1989: 2; emphases in the original)

Apart from “magnetic healing” (i.e., mesmerism), the only scientific term Choa Kok Sui lists is “bioplasmic matter,” which has been mentioned above in the context of White and Krippner's *Future Science*.³⁸ In his follow-up book *Advanced Pranic Healing* (1992), Choa Kok Sui further reduced his list of synonyms to non-scientific terms. It is part of the first of fourteen principles that form the basis of his healing method:

1. Principle of Life Force. For physical life to exist, it must have life force or vital energy. Life force is essential to physical life. It is also necessary for the existence of more subtle life forms. This life force has been called by various names: prana, ruah, chi, manna [sic], and many other names. Rapid healing is brought about by increasing the life force or pranic energy level of the affected part or the whole body. (Choa Kok Sui 2012 [1992]: 84)

The function of the life-force synonyms is thus to suggest cultural universality of “prana.” Even so, Choa Kok Sui's second principle—the “Principle of Pervasiveness”—reveals the mesmeric, fluidal metaphor underlying his interpretation of the life force, which surrounds us like “an ocean” and from which healers can draw without exhausting themselves (Choa Kok Sui 2012 [1992]: *ibid.*).

Diane Stein (b. 1948), an American Wiccan and author on energy healing, reiterated the assertion that belief in a life force was a universal cultural idea (with an additional ‘goddess’ aspect) and highlighted

³⁸ The credit for coining the term bioplasma likely belongs to the Russian researcher V. S. Grishchenko (n.d.a.) (Tompkins and Bird 1974: 183).

the micro- and macrocosmic dimension of energy. In *Psychic Healing with Spirit Guides and Angels* (1996), Stein explained that

Healing means working effectively with energy, the source substance of all life. (...) Like electricity, it can be used for both good and harm. This chapter is about understanding energy flows, protection, color, and healer's ethics for some of the possibilities of using energy and healing well. Energy is the cosmic glue of all matter and the body, as well as of molecules, the nonphysical bodies, and the planet. Every culture has a name for this. In India the term is 'prana,' it is 'Ki' or 'Ch'i' in Japan and China. Barbara Marciniak [an American trance medium and New Age author born in 1948] calls it 'light.' I usually call it energy, the Goddess' life force. To wilfully misuse it is to violate the Goddess and to use it ineffectively is to miss Her opportunities and gifts. (Stein 1996: 83)

The first chapter of Stein's book *Energy Medicine* is titled "Energy Is All There Is," a quasi-monistic principle that was formulated and popularised by Alice A. Bailey (Zoehrer 2025d). Eden expands the multi-cultural list with an assortment of words that supposedly denote subtle energies in mostly non-European traditions:

While our culture does little to help us look more closely, energy *really* is all there is. (...) Numerous cultures describe a matrix of subtle energies that support, shape, and animate the physical body, called *qi* or *chi* in China, *prana* in the yoga tradition of India and Tibet, *yesod* in the Jewish cabalistic tradition, *ki* in Japan, *baraha* by the Sufis, *wakan* by the Lakotas, *orenda* by the Iroquois, *rnegbe* by the Ituri Pygmies, and the *Holy Spirit* in Christian tradition. It is hardly a new idea to suggest that subtle energies operate in tandem with the denser, "congealed" energies of the material body. (Eden 1999: 15–16)

Therapeutic Touch (TT) is an energy healing method that was created by the Dora Kunz, a Theosophist and psychic healer, and Dolores Krieger, a professor at the New York University Division of Nursing, in the 1970s. A hallmark of TT is its highly medicalised language. Whereas their early publications on TT contained appeals to a mystic East as the source of knowledge, Kunz and Krieger recast TT within a scientific framework during the 1980s (Zoehrer 2024; Stein 2025). In *The Spiritual Dimension of Therapeutic Touch* (1999), Kunz and Krieger explicitly embraced the religious aspect of energy healing and included a whole chapter on communication with angels.

Notably, orientalist elements are almost non-existent in *The Spiritual Dimension*, although "prana" is mentioned once when the authors state that psychosomatic illness is interpreted in terms of "life energy—called *prana* in Sanskrit" (Kunz and Krieger 2004: 19). The "life energy" may be affected by negative emotion and thus lead to a disruption of the body's biochemistry, including hormones (ibid.). In contrast to the well-established topos, Krieger argued for the agency of life energy not by reference

to random non-Western cultures but by appealing to her own psychic ability to perceive it and by recourse to established metaphors of flow, vibration, and patterns:

I am able to see that there is a special life-energy associated with the physical body. This energy keeps the physical body alive. It surrounds all the organs and keeps moving through the body, somewhat like the circulation of blood, but at a finer, more subtle energy level related to person's physical well being. This energy flow is part of the constitution of the physical body and it dies with the body. If a person is ill, this energy only extends a little bit beyond the physical body, whereas in health, it is vibrant, and can extend perhaps six or eight inches. I call the subtle energy complex that is nearest the physical body and is the basis for its aliveness the vital-energy field. In this field I can see an outline of the energy patterns of the physical organs. (Kunz and Krieger 2004: 36).

The standard set of synonyms for the life force was creatively expanded by European authors. For example, Lucius Werthmüller (1958–2021), a Swiss researcher of parapsychology, claimed that all non-European and premodern cultures developed the idea of a cosmic, life-sustaining agent:

In nearly all cultures, we find the idea of a universal, all-pervading force that exists throughout the cosmos and sustains all living beings. In ancient Egypt, this energy was called *Ka*, in China *Chi*, in Japan *Ki*, among the ancient Jews *Cheim* [literally: life], in Oceanic cultures *Huna*, and in India *Prana*, to name just a few examples. This primordial energy, which is in part related to the notion of the divine, takes on various forms in the belief systems of most cultures. (Werthmüller 2005: 35, my translation)³⁹

As seen above, this quasi-divine, life-giving Ur-energy is again 'universal' in a dual sense. On the one hand, it permeates the cosmos and sustains all life; on the other hand, it has been recognised in virtually all cultures throughout history.

The proponent of alternative medicine Marco Bischof (b. 1947), another Swiss author, regarded roots of energy healing to lie not only in Asia but also in Greek antiquity. He stipulated that the Hippocratic school of medicine was based on "life energy-concepts such as the 'Chi' of Traditional Chinese Medicine [TCM] or the 'Prana' of Ayurveda" (Bischof 2009: vi; my translation). Bischof reinterpreted the four humours—blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm—in the theory of the Greek physician Hippocrates

³⁹ "In nahezu allen Kulturen finden wir die Vorstellung einer universellen, alles durchdringenden Kraft, die im ganzen Kosmos vorhanden ist und alle Lebewesen erhält. Im alten Ägypten wurde diese Energie *Ka* genannt, in China *Chi*, in Japan *Ki*, bei den Juden der Antike *Cheim*, in ozeanischen Kulturen *Huna* und in Indien *Prana*, um nur einige herauszugreifen. Diese Urenergie, die teilweise mit dem Gottesbegriff verwandt ist, nimmt in den Vorstellungen der meisten Kulturen verschiedene Erscheinungsformen an."

(c. 460–370 BCE) as “transitional forms” (*Wandlungsformen*) of the life energy rather than material fluids (cf. the so-called five ‘elements’ or ‘phases’ in TCM).

Jill Blakeway (n.d.a.), an American gynaecologist, obstetrician, and acupuncturist, emphasised once again the ancient origins of energy healing. In her story how she discovered “energy medicine,” she spoke of a journey “from hard science to the spiritual and back again” (Blakeway 2019: blurb):

The foundations of energy medicine are as ancient as history. In Egypt, a description of the laying on of hands, as a prompt to the body to relieve pain, was found in the Ebers Papyrus, one of the oldest preserved medical documents, dated 1550 BC. Pythagoras, the Greek philosopher and physician, considered healing his greatest calling and considered the *pneuma*, literally meaning “breath,” to be the spirit. In Ayurveda, a health system developed thousands of years ago in India, the life-giving force is referred to as “prana;” in Judeo-Christian belief systems, it is called the breath of life. And in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), which is what I have practiced for twenty years, the animating force that plays an essential role in maintaining and restoring health is called “qi.” In this way, spirituality, philosophy, and science were once intertwined, making up an essential part of our history, but we have since strayed considerably from this notion. I often wonder if one day we’ll look back on energy healing and shake our heads in disbelief, as we do with the story of Semmelweis [Ignaz, 1818–1865; the Hungarian-Austrian surgeon and obstetrician known for introducing antiseptic procedures in hospitals], wondering why any of us resisted an approach that offers such benefits simply because it didn’t fit into our prevailing medical model. (ibid.: x–xi)

The “ancient art of energy healing” is again a theme in the work of Bradley Nelson, an American holistic physician and developer of an energetic technique called Emotion Code. Nelson describes the psychosomatic correlation between physical organs and emotions in terms of culture and science:

Energy healing is one of the oldest practices known in the world today. Since 4000 BCE, healers have understood that our health greatly depends on the quality of energy that flows through and makes up our bodies. In Chinese medicine, that energy is called *qi* or *chi*. In Ancient Indian or Ayurvedic medicine, this energy is called *prana*. Imbalances in this energy may deeply affect our physical and mental health. We can compare this energy to electricity. We can’t see electricity, but we can feel it. Electricity is colorless and odorless. It is invisible, yet it certainly is real. If you’ve ever stuck your finger in a light socket or been shocked getting the toast out of a toaster, then you know what I mean. As human beings, we are used to perceiving things in a way that conforms to our belief systems. (...) We may like to think that the world around us is exactly as we are used to seeing it, but

Einstein, Tesla, and others have shown us that the universe is really much more complex and wonderful than we ever could have imagined. (Nelson 2019: 37)

In this striking encapsulation of the emic narrative of energy healing, Nelson forges a bridge from traditional healing knowledge to modern physics. Just as Mesmer appealed to Newton and Descartes as his patrons, so do contemporary energy healers invoke the names of Albert Einstein (1879–1955) and Nikolai Tesla (1856–1943). “Chi” and “prana” form the linchpin of orientalist life forces. A remarkable feature of the life force topos is that “chi” and “prana,” are treated as functional equivalents in Chinese medicine and Ayurveda respectively:

The existence of the “human energy field” has been a basic tenet of the healing arts for a very long time. The Hindus understood the vital, life-giving force that permeates and gives life to all things to be *prana*, an understanding going back five thousand years. The Chinese taught that this energy is called *chi*, and understood that if the *chi* is imbalanced within an individual, the result is poor health. (Ibid.: 72)

However, as this thesis will demonstrate, the interpretation of *prāṇa* as a central therapeutic tertium is of a far younger date and not derived from Ayurveda but from occult amalgamations of yoga and mesmerism. Nelson does not dwell in the past but declares an imminent medical paradigm shift:

Today we are at a turning point in medical history. With the discoveries of quantum physics proving the energetic nature of our reality, a door has been opened. Scientific research is constantly being conducted, and continually confirms over and over again that we are beings of energy, and that there is an intelligent force at work in the universe. Research will continue to push back the boundaries on what we know about the human energy field. As it does so, I am convinced that the energetic basis of human thought will become more clearly understood, and that the phenomenon of trapped emotions will eventually be recognized by the scientific community for the damage it causes. (Ibid.: 86)

In the same vein, the first edition of Nelson’s book *The Emotion Code* carried the subtitle *Future Medicine: How to Release Your Trapped Emotions for Abundant Health, Love and Happiness*, thus reiterating the well-established keywords of the New Thought movement with a scientific aura (cf. Zoehrer 2025b).

The American author Cyndi Dale (b. 1959) likewise invokes quantum physics, while also emphasising a clear-cut distinction between physical and subtle energies. In her book *Energy Healing for Trauma, Stress and Chronic Illness* (2020), she writes:

Energy is information that moves, and it comprises absolutely everything, including both the tangible and intangible aspects of ourselves. Energy underlies every life disrupter and resulting hardship—physical, psychological, and spiritual. It also underlies every good thing in life and the resulting joy and peace—physical, psychological, and spiritual. This means that powerful changes can occur if we work on an energetic level to fix them.

To understand how, you first need to know that there are two types of energy: physical and subtle. Most healing processes, such as the use of prescription medicine, specific diets, physical therapies, simple cognitive processes, and even the old adage “Time heals all wounds” are based on physical energy. The physical universe certainly counts when we’re working toward alleviating our adversities. In fact, there are biological reasons why our body requires (but also resists) healing, and there are physical energy modalities that support healing. The key to freedom, however, often lies in the other energetic domain—that of subtle energy.

Subtle energies—also called psychic, intuitive, and quantum[!] energies—are inseparable from the material self. They aren’t just some mystical phenomena that float around haphazardly. They actually underpin and organize physical reality, including your physical body. I propose that very specific subtle energies are the main causes of chronic illness and other intractable challenges. (Dale 2020: 9)

However, by subsuming quantum energies under subtle energies, Dale blurs the lines again. In contrast, the Brazilian-American electrical engineer and consciousness researcher Wagner Alegretti admits that the measurement of subtle energies remains ephemeral:

Having received several names over the centuries, such as prana (Yoga), chi/qi (Chinese medicine), orgone (Reich), magnetic fluid (Mesmer), vital fluid (Kardec), life force (Hahnemann), astral light (Blavatsky) and etheric force (dowsing), bioenergy, as it is called in this paper has eluded modern science not only with regard to its detection and measurement but also in respect to its theoretical conceptualization and modelization. (Alegretti 2020: 125)

The mention of Allan Kardec (né Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, 1804–1869) in Alegretti’s rather conventional orientalist-physicalist amalgam of subtle agents is a novum. Kardec was a French spiritualist whose teachings gained particular popularity in Brazil.

Olga Strashun (n.d.a.), a Russian immigrant to Canada, provides a dense list of subtle energy concepts, emphasising their universality—from East to West and from pre-scientific traditions to quantum physics:

Subtle Energy is not an easy subject to pin down. The name itself reflects the difficulties in the detection of this type of energy. No standardized vocabulary for it exists: many different names for it are used around the world. East Indians call it Prana, and the Chinese call it Chi. In Europe, it is called Bio-Energy and the Field of Information, in North America, Subtle Energy. Physicists variously refer to it as Unified Energy, Universal Energy Field, the Field of Quantum Potential, the Zero Point Field. Other people call it Supreme Consciousness, Divine Power, or God. But we are all talking about the same thing. (Strashun 2023: 18)

Whereas Strashun's description embraces the full range of physical, vital, mental, and transcendent semantics associated with 'subtle energy' it is remarkable that she omits any reference to outdated or fringe scientific theories—for example, *fluidum*, *Od*, ether, or Orgone—that typically make it into the list of physicalist terms for describing a subtle agent.

A purely physicalist and ahistorical approach was taken by Joe Dispenza. In his book *Becoming Supernatural* (2017), Dispenza advises to transcend three-dimensional reality by entering the dimension of "the quantum, the realm of infinite possibility" (Dispenza 2017: 61). Dispenza identified the "quantum (or unified) field as an invisible field of energy and information [...] that exists beyond space and time" and has the property of a "self-organizing intelligence" (ibid.). Practically pouring old wine into new wineskins and rehashing nineteenth-century New Thought discourse in terms of quantum metaphysics, Dispenza's energy work involves techniques such as meditation, affirmations, visualisation, and auto-suggestion.

The Myth of Energy

The religious-therapeutic discourse on energy and its description in terms of non-European synonyms is not restricted to energy healing but also impacted the fields of psychology and psychotherapy. In the aftermath of the nineteenth-century materialism of the *Deutsche Physikalische Gesellschaft* (German Physical Society, est. 1845), the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) sought to construct a mechanistic model of the human soul powered by *libido*. Freud's one time student, the Swiss psychiatrist and analytical psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), expanded the semantics of libido from sexual drive to a general vital force of the human psyche that expresses itself in the totality of its desires and motivations. A person's psychic energies could be excited through the archetypes encrypted in myths. In "Symbols and the Interpretation of Dreams" (1961), one of his last essays, Jung wrote that one "can perceive the specific energy of the archetypes when one experiences the peculiar feeling of numinosity that accompanies them—the fascination or spell that emanates from them" (Jung

1976 [1961]: 239). The hero myth is a case in point how archetypal energy can stir emotions and exalt listeners to identify with the “powerful man or god-man” (ibid.).

Drawing on Jungian thought, the American comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904–1987) further explored the power of myth in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell proposed that mythological figures were statements of perennial spiritual principles. As symbolic expressions of the unconscious they evolved together with the human nervous system. They “touch and bring into play the vital energies of the whole human psyche” (Campbell 1949: 256). Myths not only use the language of symbols to bring forth contents of the unconscious and open the door to the metaphysical realm. They provide metaphors and material for meditation that derive from and point to an ultimate source. This undifferentiated causal reality lies beyond the phenomenal world, forming its origin and final destiny. In Campbell’s psychological metaphysics, all things are thus manifested by means of the source’s “ubiquitous power” (ibid.: 257). This semi-transcendent source is supposedly

known to science as energy, to the Melanesians as *mana*, to the Sioux Indians as *wakonda*, the Hindus as *shakti*, and the Christians as the power of God. Its manifestation in the psyche is termed, by the psychoanalysts, *libido*. And its manifestation in the cosmos is the structure and flux of the universe itself. (Campbell 1949: 257)

However, Campbell’s attribution of energy to an ultimate being is not generalisable for the field of energy healing. As this theses demonstrates, those schools of energy healing that tend to be explicit about the divine origin of the singular healing agent have often emerged from occult discourse (Zoehrer 2020; 2021b; 2025d).

“... or whatever else you prefer to call it”: *From Terminological Pluralism to a Tertium Comparationis*

The pluralism of subtle energy theories outlined above has not evaded sceptics of alternative medicine. Robert T. Carroll highlighted the contrast between the alleged power of subtle energies and the difficulty to pin them down in *The Skeptic’s Dictionary*:

Powerful medicine, no? Yes, very powerful and not completely understood, though there are many theories being offered, the most common ones these days being couched in terms of chi or prana, meridians, auras, and chakras. Is there any evidence that there is a metaphysical life force (call it “energy” or “chi” or whatever you want) that determines health depending on whether it is blocked or flowing? If there is, I’d like to see evidence for it that’s not just post hoc reasoning and begging the question. (Carroll 2015)

It seems that since the days of Blavatsky, little has changed about the ‘whateverism’ surrounding vital energies. However, what may appear from a scientific point of view to be an acute weakness—namely, the lack of a precise definition—is perceived as a strength within the field: The terminological plurality that characterises subtle energies supports the claim of cultural universality. It is a proverbial feature, not a bug.

A comparably more cautious reflection on the lexical variability typical of vitalistic notions was provided by the Austrian-American physicist and holistic author Fritjof Capra (b. 1939). In the chapter “Wholeness and Health” of his book *The Turning Point* (1982), Capra stated that

when homeopaths speak about the “vital force,” or Reichian therapists about “bioenergy,” they use these terms in a sense that comes very close to the Chinese concept of *ch’i*. The three concepts are not identical, but they seem to refer to the same reality—a reality much more complex than any of them. The main purpose of these terminologies is to describe the patterns of flow and fluctuation in the human organism. It is also believed that “life energy” is exchanged between an organism and its environment, and many traditions hold that this energy can be transferred between human beings by the laying-on of hands and other techniques of “psychic” healing. [...] Concepts like “subtle bodies,” or “subtle energies” should not be taken to refer to underlying substances but as metaphors describing the dynamic patterns of self-organization. (Capra 1982: 339–340)

Capra’s comment indicates the utility of ‘life energy’ as a *tertium comparationis*. The concepts that may be subsumed under this category are not identical but similar. They capture the complexity of biological self-organisation including the process of healing in terms of vitality—a cross-culturally observed phenomenon. The historians’ task is this: Rather than repeating the exaggerated emic claims of semantic equivalence or prematurely dismissing the influential global discourse on subtle agents as humbug, they are to rigorously elucidate its genealogy across shifting cultural frameworks and to clarify the specific functions its major synonyms were designed to serve.

The above *tour d’énergie* has omitted a discussion of the specific meanings of the supposed synonyms for a subtle, vital agent within their respective historical and cultural context. Its aim was only to demonstrate the formation and evolution of a topos that can be traced back to nineteenth-century vitalist views within the orbit of Romantic mesmerism. The next chapter will examine energy healing from a broader level of analysis by juxtaposing its cultural continuity (as a religious-therapeutic practice) and alterity (as a medically heterodox practice) within the context of late modernity. After drawing on perspectives from medical anthropology and psychosomatics to develop a generalised theory of energy as a therapeutic medium, I will outline the two most common forms of plausibilisation of healing energies as indicated in the life-force synonyms.

II. Theoretical Preliminaries

1. Energy Healing as a Holistic Practice

1.1. The Holistic Milieu⁴⁰

Energy healing constitutes one of the largest segments within a dynamic, market-shaped social field. From the 1970s onwards, a confident therapeutic and spiritual ‘counterculture’ emerged in Euro-American societies, rejecting the mainline scientifically oriented worldview as ‘reductionist’ and ‘materialistic.’ This fundamental critique underpinned a wide range of ideas and practices that used to be labelled as ‘alternative’ or ‘heterodox’ but are nowadays presented with far less revolutionary rhetoric. Various sociological categories have been proposed to describe a field that operates largely independently from the official health system and conventional religious communities, most notably the ‘cultic milieu,’ ‘New Age movement,’ ‘de-churched spirituality,’ ‘neo-spiritual scenes,’ and the ‘holistic milieu.’ These labels refer to contemporary fields that, while not entirely identical, are closely intertwined through shared leitmotifs and practices.

The ‘holistic milieu’ denotes the flourishing self-help market at the intersection of religiosity and therapy (Heelas et al. 2005: 88–89). An important argument in favour of using this category in a religious studies context is that it matches the self-designation of most of its practitioners. ‘Holistic’ has become a far more common emic label than the millenarian notion of ‘New Age’ or the label ‘esoteric,’ often associated with obscure, secret societies (cf. Höllinger and Tripold 2012: 12). Offers of the holistic market typically encompass books, services, and courses that aim to promote health, personal development, success, and meaning.

Whereas the demarcation from purely secular alternatives is porous, holistic activities stand out for evading categorisations that match conventional academic disciplines such as theology, science, biomedicine, or psychotherapy. This dissolution of the disciplinary boundaries around holistic concepts reflects a multi-layered view of the human being (as mind, body, and spirit or soul), which seems to have become institutionally homeless due to the differentiation of the sciences. Furthermore, the fuzziness of holistic thought and its resistance to highly specialised expertise correspond to a popular-scientific style that, on the one hand, draws on academic knowledge (although often in a simplified or

⁴⁰ This section is essentially a summary of Zoehrer 2021a, an article published in German, with additional remarks on holism and energy healing as a core practice of the holistic milieu.

even distorted form, cf. Hammer, 2015) and, on the other hand, aims to reach a broad audience primarily interested in applicable knowledge and improving everyday life within a syncretic, ‘re-enchanted’ semantic framework. Holistic practitioners have thus tilled the ground of the unregulated no-man’s-land between academia, medicine, and hegemonic religion.

With the commercial breakthrough of religious-therapeutic ideas and practices, these have become an integral part of contemporary culture, in which the millenarian fervour characteristic of the New Age precursors of the 1970s and 1980s has been significantly tempered (Knoblauch 2009; Höllinger and Tripold 2012). The focus of the holistic milieu has shifted from the realisation of a counter-cultural vision to concrete, marketable applications for the enhancement and optimisation of everyday life. Alongside the book market and an equally extensive online bazaar—which play a key role in spreading holistic ideas—practice-oriented holistic service providers represent the main pillars of the milieu.

The holistic milieu acknowledges no binding canon nor a central authority that defines ‘orthodox’ holistic thought. Due to its heterogeneity, attempts to describe the field’s ideological dimension must avoid any claim to general authoritativeness or completeness. Whereas over-systematisation is inappropriate, typical areas of interest and identity markers for the field can still be identified. These themes include most prominently ‘healing,’ ‘health,’ ‘well-being,’ ‘nature,’ ‘energy,’ ‘relaxation,’ ‘consciousness,’ ‘potential,’ and ‘spirituality.’ None of these terms are narrowly defined, but they all suggest self-care, experience, personal development, and the pursuit of a more meaningful way of life.

Based on previous sociological and systematic studies, the ideological orientation of the holistic milieu can be outlined by the following seven fundamental motifs:

- (1) *The principle of holism.* Holism is “a talismanic word in contemporary religious discourse” (Sutcliffe 2003: 179). Derived from the Greek ὅλος (*hólos*) meaning “whole, entire, complete,” the South African statesman and philosopher Jan Smuts (1870–1950) coined the term through his book *Holism and Evolution* (1926). Smuts understood holism in evolutionary terms as “the making or creation of wholes in the universe” (Smuts 1926: 98) and recognised the human personality as the supreme holistic form, in which “matter, life and mind are inseparably blended” and surpassed (ibid.: 273). Although Smuts’ idea of evolution and human self-actualisation is rarely invoked as a reference point by contemporary representatives of the holistic milieu,⁴¹ the teleological outlook that was implicit in his work is also central in

⁴¹ Smuts formulated his own version of the Aristotelean dictum that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Drawing on the theories of Charles Darwin (1809–1882), Henri Bergson (1859–1941), and Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), Smuts’ holism was equally biological, ecological, and political. The core objective behind his thought was to solve the tension between national and ethnic struggles for self-determination on the one hand and the need of international institutions to guide a growing global interdependence on the other hand. Although Smuts must be credited for his contributions to the first drafts of the United Nations Charter, to which he added his holistic conception of the person, human dignity, and the mention of ‘human rights,’ his paradoxical advocacy of apartheid policies in South Africa significantly tarnished his stature (Peng-Keller et al. 2022: 18–19).

contemporary holistic approaches. This teleological position that puts meaning and purpose above empiricism is expressed, *inter alia*, in (1) an anthropology that rejects the biomechanical model as insufficient and endorses a tripartite image of body, mind, and soul;⁴² (2) the critique of social ills that result from an allegedly one-sided (i.e., ‘reductionist,’ ‘materialistic,’ and ‘mechanistic’) understanding of scientific and technological progress; (3) the interest in interdisciplinary approaches that strive to connect differentiated subsystems of modern life into an integrated, self-help-oriented synopsis; and (4) pre-scientific and pre-technological modes of ‘knowing’ (or rather interpreting) the world, including myths, visions and altered states of consciousness, divination and channelling, astrology, and radiesthesia. In short, while the terms ‘holism’ and ‘holistic’ have multi-layered meanings that depend on the specific context of their use, they often serve to offer an enchanted worldview that suggests wholeness, completeness, and purposes implicit in human life and the cosmos. This belief that all things are alive and form a succession of ever higher, organic wholenesses can be traced to Romantic vitalism (Höllinger and Tripold 2012; cf. Baier 2020: 57).

Holistic worldviews tend to oppose the theological dualisms of God/human, human/nature, and mind/body, as well as the reductionism and materialism of the natural sciences (Hanegraaff 1996: 119). It is somewhat easier to define what holism positions itself against than to delineate its positive characteristics. Among the latter is an open-ended anthropology aimed at capturing the ‘whole’ human being. The individual is to be understood and healed in their entanglement with body, psyche, mind, social behaviour, environment, and well-being. Holistic approaches do not limit themselves to one specific function of the human being or the body; rather, they claim to integrate intuition and reason, spirit and matter, humanity and cosmos. This striving for wholeness is accompanied by the valorisation of individual autonomy, which has arisen in response to the institutional differentiation of modern societies. The identity of the experiencing and acting individual subject is placed in opposition to the fragmented and objectified human being of science and medicine, as well as experiences of social repression by established churches (Knoblauch 2009: 127). Optionally, a unifying principle may be posited, one that links the material and immaterial levels of the universe. Depending on the model, this principle may refer to the concept of a ‘subtle,’ universal life energy, or on the assumption of an ultimate source underlying all being and consciousness (Hanegraaff 1996: 123).

In brief, the contemporary turn to holistic worldviews and practices seeks to restore the perceived lost harmony between mind and body, and between humanity and nature. It may

⁴² The unambiguity of the scientific view of man could only be achieved at the high cost of losing the wholeness of the human experience (cf. Frick 2020).

thus be understood as an “expression of suffering caused by the fragmentation of the human being at the onset of modernity” (Heller 2014: 62, my translation).

- (2) *The unfolding of personal potential.* Therapeutic activities for addressing bodily or mental issues as well as psychohygienic solutions to relationship problems may be interpreted as preparations for personal transformation, which involves forms of self-cultivation and the participation of the individual consciousness in a ‘higher reality.’ The re-evaluation of the psychological utility of religion and the description of the effects of religious practices in psychological terms—particularly under the influence of the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst C. G. Jung, the California-based Human Potential Movement, and transpersonal psychology—has been characterised as the ‘psychologisation of religion’ and the ‘sacralisation of psychology’ (cf. Hanegraaff 1996: 224–255, 482–513).
- (3) *A focus on embodied experience.* Not merely cognitive insight but the individual’s experience and embodiment of knowledge are critical in the holistic process of personal development. Body-centred practices—e.g., energetic or shamanic healing rituals, meditation exercises, breathwork, trance techniques, and fasting—are employed in order to generate intense somatic perceptions, relaxation, or extraordinary states of consciousness.
- (4) *Claiming knowledge by appealing to tradition.* The legitimacy and effectiveness of holistic methods is emphasised by recourse to (often imagined or adapted) traditional knowledge of pre- or non-European provenience. Practices that trace themselves to the culture of the Celts, Egypt, India, Tibet, China, Japan, Hawai‘i, or one of the diverse shamanic traditions suggest credibility to potential clients (Hammer 2001). Apart from references to particular cultural currents, a related and widely held assumption in the holistic milieu is that all religious and philosophical teachings are the expression of a universal, timeless wisdom (*philosophia perennis*) and that ultimately every cultural expression is based on the same fundamental experiences (ibid.; cf. Hanegraaff 1996).
- (5) *Claiming knowledge by appealing to science.* Other protagonists of the holistic milieu underscore the plausibility of their activities by asserting that they are consistent with or even confirmed by the findings of modern science. Olav Hammer described the strategy of using scientific rhetoric in the sense of a ‘language of faith’ as ‘scientism’ (Hammer, 2001). Outstanding examples of scientistic elements in holistic worldviews are the use of physical terms such as ‘force,’ ‘vibrations,’ ‘frequencies,’ ‘dimensions,’ ‘energy’ and ‘quantum entanglement.’ The interlacing of science and philosophy of nature (*Naturphilosophie*), a hallmark of ‘New Age science’ (Hanegraaff 1996; cf. Mutschler 1990), made it possible to legitimise religious worldviews within a seemingly secular framework. In a holistic cosmos,

religion and science can once again be thought of as two fundamental expressions of the one, universal truth.⁴³

- (6) *The relative autonomy of the individual.* Individual choice is of paramount importance in the holistic milieu. Experimenting with practices that promise relaxation, inner balance, or a deeper sense of purpose is structurally encouraged by the habitus of the field. Elements taken from traditional healing rituals or religious exercises for self-cultivation have been adapted to a secular, market setting. This process occurred by stripping those practices of their original ideological contexts and communal embeddings, and by reinterpreting them in the language of popular psychology, alternative medicine (largely independent of the biomedical healthcare system), or ‘spirituality’ (largely independent of traditional religious institutions, cf. Zoehrer 2024). The often-used metaphor of the religious ‘supermarket’ emphasises freedom of choice but must not overshadow the fact that choice depends on external factors. The media, marketing, and sales trends exert a highly significant influence on personal choices (Hammer 2010).
- (7) *Hybridity, syncretism, and de-differentiation.* Holistic approaches position themselves between the established institutional boundaries of established religious traditions on the one hand and science, medicine and psychology or psychotherapy on the other. The increase of institutional specialisation and the functional differentiation of society is a key feature of European modernity. It led to the development of independent forms of organisation in politics, science, economy, and the religious field (Luhmann 1977). Accordingly, conventional religious groups (i.e., the established Christian churches) largely fulfil their special function within their own assigned area. However, the holistic milieu implicitly questions the differentiation of society. Its loose market structure allows for dynamic syncretisms that mingle disparate ideas and approaches regardless of conventional academic and/or institutional boundaries. Importing doctrinal and ritual elements from existing social subsystems as well as non-European contexts, protagonists of the holistic milieu create new

⁴³ A seminal example for the explicit claim of a higher synthesis of religion (i.e., mysticism) and science is Capra’s New Age classic *The Tao of Physics* (1975). In the 1980s, Capra—a physicist by training—emerged as an enthusiastic spokesperson for the “unchurched part of the contemporary religious scene” (Bochinger 1994: 103). He not only contributed to the dissemination of popular and fringe scientific theories but also called for a fundamental transformation of society—a ‘paradigm shift’ heralding a new age. *The Tao of Physics* was followed by Capra’s second bestseller, *The Turning Point* (1982), which set the tone for the 1980s New Age optimism. His diagnosis of the contemporary major crises identified the dominant influence of the Cartesian view of humanity and Newtonian physics as the root cause of social and ecological decline. According to Capra, the “mechanistic and reductionist approach” must be overcome in favor of a “holistic worldview,” allegedly inspired by modern physics, which would counterbalance the rationalisation, technologisation, and economisation of society with intuition, wisdom, and spirituality (Capra 1982: 21–49). Based on a binary distinction between the old and new paradigms, Capra advocated a “new vision of reality” that would mark the beginning of a cultural renaissance (ibid.: 16–17). He reinforced his rhetoric of a programmatic social blueprint surveying existing alternative (or complementary) approaches in fields such as holistic health—including ‘energy medicine,’ psychology, economics, and ecology.

cultural hybrids. The strict professional separation between religion, (popular) philosophy, science, medicine, and psychotherapy is thus deliberately softened, that is, de-differentiated (see section II.1.2).

The specific practices of the holistic milieu may be heuristically categorised into three groups (cf. Höllinger and Tripold 2012): (1) complementary healing methods; (2) mind-body exercises (e.g., yoga, meditation, Feldenkrais, and *qìgōng*); and (3) other practices (e.g., psychotherapeutically oriented techniques for enhancing performance, radiesthesia, astrology, and card-based divination and other interpretations of oracles). Complementary healing methods constitute by far the most widespread practices in the field and include homeopathy, acupuncture and other elements of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), Ayurveda, alternative massages, and—most important for the present study—various forms of energy healing.

Energy healing provides a particularly vivid example of holistic activities and their underlying principles. This umbrella term covers a broad range of methods that aim to stimulate the ‘self-healing powers’ or improve personal well-being. Olav Hammer (2015: 375) highlighted three central features of ‘New Age’ healing modalities that in fact—given the examples that he mentions, i.e., Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, crystal healing, Aura-Soma therapy, Bach Flower Remedies, etc.—apply more accurately to the field of energy healing.

First, Hammer mentions the belief in subtle, vital forces called ‘energies’ that surround and/or perfuse the human body, and that practitioners are able to manipulate (cf. Endler 2020). However, while exterior intervention may function as a trigger for internal recuperation, the locus of healing is the client (cf. Sutcliffe 2003: 176).⁴⁴ Second, the body is conceptualised as a holistic system where the whole is reflected in the parts (e.g., feet, hands, ears, or eyes). Third, the human being is thought of as body *and* spirit/mind, that is, a psychosomatic whole. Treating the body affects the spirit and vice versa. An optional feature of the energetic anthropology is the idea of a hidden (or subtle) physiology including force centres called *cakras* (usually Romanised from the original Sanskrit as ‘chakras’) as well as channels (*nāḍī* in South Asia-derived body models, or ‘meridians’ in models drawing from Chinese medicine). That such notions of non-empirical physiologies cannot practically be falsified according to Popperian criteria emphasises their mythological or metaphysical nature (Hammer 2015: 375). They are anthropological elements embedded in a larger worldview or story of the world, emphasising their closeness to religious modes of thought.

Rather than continuing particular religious-therapeutic traditions, the holistic milieu has been significantly shaped by the forces of modern culture. The four “symptoms of modernity” that Hammer

⁴⁴ Whereas some schools of energy healing consider this vitalising and healing agent to be of divine origin (cf. Sutcliffe 2003: 179), this cannot be generalised. For example, practitioners of acupuncture, Applied Kinesiology, energetic psychology, or modalities of quantum healing usually do not refer to an ultimate being.

(2015: 179–180) identified in the New Age market characterise the holistic milieu in general and energy healing in particular—as this thesis will explore in detail: (1) globalisation (e.g., multicultural bricolage and the appeal to the exotic); (2) the appeal to scientific rationality (e.g., terminology borrowed from physics such as energy, vibration, or quantum; or simulacra of technological devices as ritual objects); (3) individualism (e.g., consumer choice and independence from external authorities); and (4) commodification (e.g., the ‘spiritual supermarket’).

As indicated above, the modern transformation of religion against the backdrop of an expanding service-based economy (Gladigow 1995) is reflected in the market character of the holistic milieu. In contrast to traditional religious communities, which are characterised by long-term commitments and regular financial obligations, the holistic milieu prioritises the commercialised form of the provider-client relationship. Networks of holistic services encompass individual practitioners, business enterprises, centres, and associations. Holistic contents are made available through private institutions such as yoga schools, meditation centres and alternative therapy facilities, as well as festivals, trade fairs, seminars, magazines and websites (Hero 2010; Lüddeckens 2010; Knoblauch 2010).

The holistic milieu is characterised by a fluid transition from the need of healing to the search for meaning and spirituality. While well-being, relaxation, crisis management, and personal development are the most important motivations for both holistic practitioners and their clients, ‘spiritual motives’ are more accentuated among the field’s protagonists (Höllinger and Tripold 2012: 131–134). In the holistic context, the term ‘therapeutic’ refers to various support services for health promotion (salutogenesis), which are generally seen as complementary to the services of medical professionals and counsellors (i.e., medical doctors, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, etc.). In a broader sense, going beyond physical and mental healthcare and prevention, ‘therapeutic’ may also refer to the propagation of a natural and ecological way of life, partially inspired by the life-reform movement (*Lebensreform*).

‘Spirituality’ often functions as a counter-concept to, on the one hand, ‘religion’ (meaning organised religion, Christian religion, and churchliness), and, on the other hand, a scientised worldview or ‘materialism.’ At the same time, spirituality may express the affirmation of a meaning dimension to life and the belief in transcendent entities. Transcendental ideas range from Jungian archetypes, tasks inherited from ‘previous’ lives, and making contact with nature spirits or the deceased through a shaman to the mobilisation of ‘subtle’ energies that affect the individual body and the planet. Holistic spirituality typically emphasises inclusivity rather than exclusivity, an orientation towards experience rather than dogmatism, and the adaptation of practices that fulfil individual needs rather than communal obligations (Knoblauch 2009: 17).

Criticism that is repeatedly raised against holistic activities concern the problem of quality control, lack of professional standards, and questions of ethical accountability. Holistic approaches claim to

complement conventional therapeutic interventions by considering the person in their entirety of body, mind, and soul (or spirit). However, due to the limited development of permanent institutions and the absence of obligatory training or qualification criteria among holistic service providers, it can be difficult to distinguish between reputable and dubious methods (Höllinger and Tripold 2012: 256). This aspect underscores the holistic milieu's market character between religious and therapeutic offers that eschew the standards of professionalised institutions.

Intersecting with contemporary religious culture, the holistic milieu can only be fully understood against the backdrop of the complex relationship between religion and modernity. Peter L. Berger highlighted the ambivalent impact of modernisation—characterised by subjectivisation and pluralism—on religious life. On the one hand, modernity entails liberation from the constraints of a religious tradition that many experienced as too restrictive and opened new spaces for exploration and experimentation. On the other hand, this liberation comes at the cost of alienation: detached from a value-based community and uncertain about inherited norms, the individual is left to independently choose their identity and orientation. A “heretical imperative” arises from the fact that social roles are no longer preordained by birth, and that secularisation (here understood as the decline of institutional religion) increases the range of available religious options (Berger 1979; cf. Kippenberg 1997: 265).

In response to Berger's somewhat dramatic formulation, Burkhard Gladigow noted in his essay *European History of Religion* (1995) that throughout the modern period in Europe, religion has also consistently been characterised as “informal, invisible, diffuse” (Gladigow 1995: 25). The possibility of choosing between systems of meaning, Gladigow argued, has existed at least since the Renaissance. A defining feature of European modernity, therefore, is that traditional religions represent only one element within a broader system of orientation—one in which philosophy, philology, literature, and the natural sciences also generate meaning and can function as its mediums. In the twentieth century, the popularisation of scientific findings in particular accelerated the reception of new worldviews (ibid.: 32–31). “Meaning-making [*Sinnstiftung*] through popularisation is an underexplored field in recent religious history—probably one of the most important” (ibid.: 36, my translation). The appeal to science is thus a central reference point in holistic religiosity. However, as Hammer (2001) underscored, ‘science as a language of faith’ may function as a secular garb for an essentially enchanted worldview. The relativised authority of science within the holistic context is nowhere as obvious as in the demarcation of holistic practices from science-based medicine.

1.2. The De-differentiation between Religion and Healing

Historically, religion and healing have always been closely intertwined (Bruchhausen 2011). Only in modern industrial societies have religion, aiming at ‘salvation,’ and medicine, aiming at ‘curing,’ diverged as (relatively) autonomous subsystems of society (Lüddeckens 2012: 283). The solidification of medicine as a differentiated social subsystem set apart from religion was a European anomaly that has its beginnings in the Enlightenment period. Instead of relying on religious ideas such as possession, demons, and Christ, medical theory, diagnosis and treatment exclusively took into account physical and physiological causes.⁴⁵ This process of ‘medicalisation’ was decisively enhanced by the orientation towards science as the epistemic foundation of medicine on the one hand, and the establishment of legal frameworks that privileged the medical profession vis-à-vis practitioners of rivaling therapeutic systems on the other hand (cf. Conrad 2007). Infertility, for example, came to be treated not as a religious but as a medical problem. Behavioural anomalies ceased to be viewed as cases of possession or bewitchment but rather as psychological disorders (Lüddeckens 2012: 284).⁴⁶ The globalisation and international hegemony of biomedicine—that is, medicine based on Western-style science—appeared to mark the final trajectory in the history of medicine(s), marginalising traditional healing practices, including their religious dimension.

The success of biomedicine over the last three hundred years is indeed unparalleled: A wide range of new methods for treating diseases by means of drugs, devices, vaccines, and sophisticated surgical techniques have been developed and disseminated on a worldwide scale. Public health measures have contributed to a higher quality of life and longer life expectancies. Today, the majority of patients relies on state-trained and legally sanctioned doctors to provide science-based and rational solutions to their health problems.

However, modernisation and secularisation are not a unilateral process, and medical pluralism and fluidity have in fact become the rule rather than the exception (cf. Tulaszewski et al. 2020). Where science and biomedicine came in contact with non-European traditional healing practices the encounter did not lead to the latter’s extinction but rather to its transformation. The politics of health in modern nation-states and the rise of modern economics has resulted in processes of adaptation and commodification of traditional practices. A collection of anthropological studies titled *Healing Powers and Modernity* (2001) edited by Linda H. Connor and Geoffrey Samuel underscored this point. The volume demonstrated how sophisticated medical traditions of Asian provenience, for example, Chinese Traditional Medicine, Tibetan medicine, or Ayurveda, have been refashioned as export products and find

⁴⁵ The Gaßner-Mesmer controversy is an illustrative case study for the emergence of Enlightenment medicine, see Baier 2015.

⁴⁶ That the phenomenon of spirit possession continues to be a vital element even to twenty-first-century cultures and may still serve as an interpretational framework in response to illness and suffering has been demonstrated by the volume *Ideas of Possession* (2024), edited by Nicole M. Bauer and J. Andrew Doole.

increasing popularity with Western patients (Connor and Samuel 2001). Attempts to denounce traditional approaches to healing as ‘superstition’ have proven futile.

Similar to traditional healing systems (and partially overlapping with them), ‘holistic’ therapies have resisted the hegemonial claim of biomedicine. Traditional and holistic therapies—here referred to under the fuzzy category of ‘alternative medicine’ to demarcate these approaches from biomedicine—have in common a focus on the situatedness of the human person within a broader social, symbolic, and/or spiritual framework. The principal difference between biomedicine and alternative medicine is commonly explained in terms of two types of therapeutic interventions discerned in medical anthropology: ‘curing’ and ‘healing.’ Curing refers to the eradication of a disease—i.e., a biomedically defined state of bodily dysfunction—by medical means, i.e., drugs, devices, surgery. Treating precisely defined symptoms, curing is an area that is legally preserved to the medical professions. By contrast, healing evades any concise definition but deals with the amelioration of illness, that is, a subjective experience of discomfort that crucially depends on a given worldview (Dieppe 2019: 158; Hammer 2015: 374).

The subjective character of healing—which can describe a state (adjective: I am *healed*), a process (intransitive/transitive verb: I am *healing*, I am *being* healed), or a practice (transitive verb: I am *healing another*)—generally eludes a fixation on quantifiable empirical data. ‘Healing’ carries the connotations ‘to save,’ ‘to make whole,’ to become ‘sound and well.’ It is noteworthy for the context of our discussion of healing and (holistic) religion that the English verb ‘to heal’ (from Old English *hælan*) and the adjective ‘holy’ (from Old English *hālig*) are etymologically related as they both derive from the Proto-Germanic word for ‘whole’ (**χailaz*) (cf. Hoad 1996).⁴⁷ Healing is an open-ended engagement with the illness of a person, that is, the experience of suffering and the absence of well-being. The amelioration or eradication of symptoms may accompany the process of alternative therapies but is not paramount. Emphasis is put on healing as a process of growth, coping, and discovering meaning behind an illness rather than recovery itself (Sutcliffe 2003: 176–177).

In this vein, Connor views “healing” as “therapeutic practices that are embedded in local social relations and forms of embodied experience” (Connor 2001: 3). The American sociologist Meredith McGuire emphasises likewise that healing outside biomedicine is not restricted to the physical level but encompasses much more when she stated that “illness is not a simple biophysical fact but—through symbolic interpretation—is shaped into a human experience” (quoted in Hanegraaff 1996: 43). In the context of alternative medicine, individual experience takes priority over statistical clinical knowledge and the specialised expertise of medical professionals.

⁴⁷ The same etymological connection also pertains to the German equivalents “heilen” and “heilig.”

The experience of illness may transcend the need for a cure and instead require the transformation of the whole person to cope with an existential crisis. This is why a therapeutic experience is often associated with the notion of spirituality. Wouter J. Hanegraaff defined spirituality as “types of religion that (1) are focused on the *individual* rather than the collective, (2) are concerned with the cultivation of *personal experience(s)* more than with legal or doctrinal matters, and (3) emphasize *praxis* over belief” (Hanegraaff 2020: 78; emphasis in the original). An individual person’s quest for healing can lead to the pursuit of a spiritual path (cf. Zoehrer 2024).

Whereas spirituality in the context of healing tends to be romanticised by holistic practitioners, its ambivalent connotations in the ongoing boundary work between religion and (bio)medicine must not be overlooked:

Religion and medicine are intersecting discourses through which particular modes of healing are framed as differently legitimate, powerful, and effective. Religion may be understood as ‘traditional’ or ‘authentic,’ as well as ‘spiritual’ or ‘holistic,’ sometimes in a way that makes space for spiritual practices within biomedical discourse—for example, in hospitals that offer acupuncture or spiritual care for end-of-life palliative medicine. Religion might also be a term by which biomedical systems dismiss specific healing modalities as ‘superstitious,’ ‘magical thinking,’ or ‘irrational.’ (Klassen et al. 2021: 2)

By the same token, the Enlightenment narrative construes modern biomedicine as being in line with a progressive history of science and reason, but equally serves as a negative point of reference for critics of biomedicine. Hyper-medicalisation has transformed doctor-patient relationships to fit technical and organisational rationalisations which aim to improve resource allocation and managerial efficiency. Critics bemoan that the overt focus on machines, pills, and protocols resulted in a perceived dehumanisation and loss of the ‘art of healing’ (e.g., Lown 1999).⁴⁸ The “homogenized regime of knowledge over the human body and its treatments” that biomedicine stands for—and the neglect of the somatic dimension in psychotherapy—have inadvertently opened new market opportunities for service providers that seek to meet a growing demand for person-centred, ‘holistic’ treatments (Klassen et al. 2021: 6). Holistic practitioners promote the complementarity of mental, bodily, and spiritual dimensions, and often pay attention to the biographies, experiences, and social context of their clients.

In industrial nations worldwide, interest in ‘alternative medicine’ has increased considerably since the 1970s, although with varying degrees of intensity. One crucial criterion that sets alternative therapies—

⁴⁸ One of the most poignant and radical critiques of the ‘medicalization of life’ was offered by the Austrian-American culture critic, theologian, and philosopher Ivan Illich (1926–2002). According to Illich (1975), the celebration of the medical doctor as a ‘culture hero,’ the abdication of personal responsibility in matters of health, and the increase of suffering due to ‘iatrogenic damage’ led to a medical system that generally did more harm than good (cf. Angell 2004).

including modalities of energy healing—apart from scientific medicine is the assumption of special, non-empirical agents, for example, gods, spirits, saints, or (impersonal) forces and energies (Lüddeckens 2012: 286). Practitioners refer to such healing powers in order to publicly legitimise alternative healing methods and make them plausible to potential clients. Notably, such pre- or parascientific terms are central issues of dispute in the boundary work between biomedicine and alternative medicine. The idea of ‘energy’ is a case in point (cf. Ritter and Wolf 2005). The German-Swiss scholar of religion Dorothea Lüddeckens stated that the notion of energy

originates from physics, is consciously used as an appeal to the natural sciences on the one hand, but also refers to anthropological ideas that go beyond physical contexts [...]: Energy can be transferred—from the cosmos to the individual, from the practitioner to the person being treated—without or with direct contact and is not restricted to physical, measurable values (Lüddeckens 2012: 286).⁴⁹

The appeal to science (and physics in particular) is a fundamental pattern of plausibilisation in the field of energy healing. However, as this thesis will demonstrate, the notion of energy in the sense of vital energy or life force is not derived from physics—as both practitioners and scholars have claimed—but *predated* the physical definition of energy. The quest for a physical theory of energy was in fact driven by the motive to *disprove* the existence of vitalistic agencies and ground physiology on a purely physical foundation (Zoehrer 2025b). The concept of energy illustrates semantic de-differentiation within the holistic milieu, where scientific and anthropological meanings converge in a single word.

Closely related to (subtle) energy are several other key terms that characterise the semantics of alternative medicine in contrast to biomedicine. These include references to a ‘holistic,’ non-mechanistic anthropology, claims of restoring ‘harmony’ or ‘order’ (e.g., of the relationship between micro- and macrocosm) as a way of healing, and the aforementioned role of ‘personal experience,’ which underscores the autonomy and authority of the individual (Lüddeckens 2012: 286–287).

In describing the ‘de-differentiation’ between religion and medicine, Lüddeckens discerned two basic directions (Lüddeckens 2012: 288–289). On the one hand, healing has emerged as a core issue within a number of religious groups over the past two centuries. Prominent examples for therapeutic religions include the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Christian Science and Anthroposophy. In the mid-twentieth century, Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) revived the interest in shamanism and its “archaic techniques of ecstasy” (Eliade 1951). From the 1960s onward, a number of predominantly Anglo-American

⁴⁹ Original: “Der aus der Physik stammende Energiebegriff wird einerseits bewusst in Anschluss an die Naturwissenschaften verwendet, andererseits aber auf anthropologische Vorstellungen bezogen, die über physikalische Zusammenhänge hinausgehen (...): Energie kann übertragen werden—vom Kosmos auf das Individuum, vom Behandelnden auf den/die Behandelte(n)—ohne und mit unmittelbarem Kontakt und bleibt nicht auf physikalische, messbare Werte beschränkt.“

anthropologists coined the term ‘neoshamanism’ and sought to combine indigenous healing techniques with transpersonal psychology and eco-spirituality (von Stuckrad 2003; 2005). Competing with new religious movements and sparked by charismatic revivals, the Roman-Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant churches have reintegrated ritual forms of healing from the 1980s onwards (cf. Lüddeckens: *ibid.*; Etzelmüller 2020: 140–143; Eibach 2011). As several articles of this thesis will demonstrate, the formation of energy healing drew significant impulses from New Thought, Theosophy, Post-Theosophy, and (to a lesser degree) neoshamanism (cf. Zoehrer 2020; Zoehrer 2024; Zoehrer 2025d).

On the other hand, de-differentiation occurs when therapeutic approaches are modelled after religious practices while retaining a secular framework. Whereas biomedicine takes science as its central point of reference, religious exercises are recognised as a key resource in alternative therapies and interventions even if they are applied in secular contexts. Illustrative cases of religion-in-therapy include mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and Naikan. The MBSR programme was introduced by the American psychologist Jon Kabat-Zinn (b. 1944) in 1979. Although MBSR has been described as a secular “consciousness technology” in therapeutic settings, a closer examination reveals that it bears both “salvative” (therapeutic) as well as “salvific” (liberating in the Buddhist sense) elements (Schlieter 2017; cf. Harrington 2008: 220–222). Naikan is a secularised method of introspection developed by Yoshimoto Ishin (1916–1988) that drew from the mindscape of Jōdo Shinshū (“True School of the Pure Land”), a major strand of Japanese Buddhism (Pokorny 2021). In a similar manner, techniques borrowed from positive thinking, Transcendental Meditation, shamanic drums, and Reiki have been partially secularised and biomedically reframed through studies on neuroplasticity and psychoneuroimmunology (Täuber 2020). The adaptation and integration of energy healing modalities into the healthcare sector—particularly postnatal care, nursing, and palliative care—demonstrate the process of secularising forms of healing that have their roots in religious practices (cf. Zoehrer 2024).

Alternative therapies not only have historical affinities to religion. They also resemble religious discourse in their style of legitimation. Plausibility is not primarily generated by experimental or clinical verification but depends on a therapeutic belief system’s ability to endow meaning and render a believer’s subjective experience coherent. References to tradition, that is, the authorised memory of such beliefs and experiences as well as claims of (an often imagined) continuity, add to a therapy’s perceived legitimacy (Lüddeckens 2012: 290–291; cf. Hervieu-Léger 2000).

Lüddeckens builds on an interpretation of de-differentiation that was put forth by the Armenian-American sociologist Edward A. Tiryakian (1929–2025). According to Tiryakian, de-differentiation describes not a pathological or devolutionary process as in earlier sociological models, but a necessary counterbalance to the differentiation of social subsystems that enables the active participation of society’s members (cf. Tiryakian 1992). Individual patients increasingly expect to be treated not generically based on statistical mean values but as unique persons. They preserve their right to make

their own informed decisions in response to a diagnosis. This habitus in clients of alternative medicine runs parallel to attitudes that are prevalent in popular religiosity: both medical doctors and priests are representatives of highly differentiated, hence hierarchical systems. By contrast, de-differentiated milieus are heavily fuelled by an anti-elitist critique of bearers of institutional power. They question medical and theological authority (perceived as paternalism) in the name of individual autonomy (Lüddeckens 2012: 292–293) and a do-it-yourself mentality.

This growing awareness of the individual as a “self-empowered subject” (*selbstermächtigtes Subjekt*) (Gebhardt et al. 2005) is a marked feature of the holistic milieu’s prioritisation of “subjective wellbeing” (Heelas et al. 2005: 86–90). Drawing on Charles Taylor’s (1990: 26) observation of “the massive subjective turn of modern culture,” the British sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead argued for a bold (and almost clichéd) distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality.’ The former endorses conformity to external authority and traditional roles (“life-as”), whereas the latter—similar to Hanegraaf’s aforementioned notion of spirituality—pursues an authentic, inner-directed, and experience-oriented life of self-actualisation (“subjective-life”) (Heelas et al. 2005: 2–5).⁵⁰ Worldly concerns such as fitness, health, and healing often serve as a gateway to more spiritual forms of holistic practice (ibid.: 88–91). In this vein, energy healing—a core holistic practice—functions as an optional form of therapy that in some modalities may open up a spiritual path to clients and practitioners (cf. Zoehrer 2024).

The “entanglement of religion and medicine in the twentieth century promises to be a broad and rich research field for future studies from a historical, anthropological, cultural, and/or religious studies perspective” (Rakow 2013: 492). Although all forms of subtle energy healing may be situated within the holistic milieu, not all can necessarily be classified as religious-therapeutic. Some terminological clarification is therefore in order.

⁵⁰ Similarly, Pamela E. Klassen et al. (2021: 4) noted on the intersection of medicine and healing that a “familiar distinction is that between religion as institutionalized, tradition-specific orthodoxy, on the one hand, and spirituality as something that is individualized, experiential, and universal on the other. Like the distinction of religious and secular, the binary of religion and spirituality is also historically constituted, with its own gendered, racialized, and Christian connotations” (cf. Bender 2010). The postulation of an ideal-typical distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ is of course a methodological caricature that radically simplifies the complex layers of the concept of spirituality and its relation to traditional religiosity (see Barker 2008). From an etic point of view, it is more reasonable to subsume ‘spirituality’ as a particular type of religion (cf. Hanegraaff 2020).

1.3. Therapeutic Pluralism, Holistic Healing, and Religious-Therapeutic Practices

“We thought we could cure everything,
but it turns out that we can only cure
a small amount of human suffering.
The rest of it needs to be healed,
and that’s different.”

—Rachel Naomi Remen (b. 1938)⁵¹

Therapeutic pluralism is an empirical fact encountered across all modern societies. In contrast to biomedicine, traditional and holistic approaches to healing have a latent religious dimension as specific practices are often grounded in broader anthropological and cosmological views. As a holistic method, energy healing may range from enhancing well-being to the salvific harmonisation of the individual and their relationship with the social and natural cosmos. Healing, comforting, coping, nursing, and curing have been first and foremost human needs that are deeply entangled with the *conditio humana*. The experience of mental and bodily suffering may call for whatever support and remedies are available including costly or risky ones. Desperate and dependent persons may become vulnerable to the financial, physical, and spiritual exploitation on the side of the self-declared ‘helper’ regardless of their education and expertise. Because of these enormous ethical implications, any ideological or structural monopoly on medical or therapeutic services is not only irresponsible as it radically reduces patients’ self-determination and choice, but antithetical to the complexity of human needs.

Nonetheless, specialisation is a key feature of modern medicine. It is *specific* diseases that require treatment with a high degree of expertise and corresponding technological equipment and pharmaceutical products. However, a significant proportion of health-related problems can be alleviated through lifestyle adjustments (e.g., food, sleep, exercise, mindset) that require a higher degree of engagement on the side of the patient rather than the physician and the healthcare system.

Acknowledging such degrees of specialisation, the American psychiatrist and medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman (b. 1941) discerned three main approaches to help alleviate health problems. First, the popular sector, which is characterised by no or minimal specialisation. This includes all forms of self-treatment that take into account common sense knowledge and advice from family and friends, or help from local inhabitants. Second, the folk sector, which is marked by a certain level of experience, routine,

⁵¹ Remen was a clinical professor of family and community medicine at the Osher Center of Integrative Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, and the director of the Institute for the Study of Health and Wellness, at Commonweal. She developed a course called “The Healer’s Art” for the curriculum of medical students in the United States. The rest of the quotation reads: “I think science defines life in its own way, but life is larger than science. Life is filled with mystery, courage, heroism, and love — all these things that we can witness but not measure or even understand, but they make our lives valuable anyway.” Quoted in Tippet 2005.

and tradition. Folk approaches to health include the services of local healers (e.g., shamans), treatments rooted in a religious practice (e.g., laying-on-of-hands), traditional forms of medicine of ethnic or cultural heritage (e.g., Aryurveda, TCM), and the whole spectrum of what is known as complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), such as homeopathy, kinesiology, aromatherapy, and the broader category of energy healing. Third, the professional sector, which is characterised by a pronounced functional differentiation and advanced specialisation across distinct subfields. It denotes the legally sanctioned medical practice in a country, which in Western or “Westernised” countries is identical with science-based medicine or biomedicine (Kleinman 1980; cf. Helman 2001; for an analysis of the relationship between the holistic milieu and the healthcare system, see Zoehrer 2024). Although several traditional and holistic practices (e.g., acupuncture or osteopathy) have been integrated in many Western healthcare systems, the major distinction between alternative and orthodox medicine is the rigid professional training and accreditation required by the latter.

Little has changed about the basic principles of holistic healing since the popularisation of holistic service market in Euro-American societies from the 1970s onward. One early attempt to articulate those principles is found in the volume *Dimensions in Wholistic Healing* (1979), edited by Herbert A. Otto and James W. Knight. Otto, an American psychologist and proponent of the human potential movement, and Knight, a California-based medical doctor, outlined eight general principles of what they termed ‘wholistic healing.’ These characteristic features are still compatible with contemporary holistic practices, and energy healing in particular. For the sake of coherence and clarity, Otto and Knight’s principles may be condensed to the following four:

First, (w)holistic practitioners recognise the personal inner resources that are crucial to mobilising the healing processes. Each individual is viewed as “an energy system” that can become a conduit of latent salutogenic, preventive, and therapeutic powers. The healer is thus understood to be a “facilitator of the healing process” who respects the arguably more crucial factor of the healee’s motivation, autonomy, and responsibility to attain well-being (Otto and Knight 1979: 8–11).

Second, the role of interpersonal relationship between practitioner and client is given high priority. The healer’s ability to create a “climate of healing” through empathy and care runs counter to the biomedical tendency to reduce the individual to their physical body (ibid.: 10–11).

Third, illnesses often trigger crises that hold the opportunity to gain a deeper self-understanding that may positively impact the healing process. Intricately connected to an increased awareness of one’s own mental and physical state is the realisation of the underlying cause or causes of a disease (ibid.: 9). These may have to do with a person’s lifestyle and the necessity to bring their values, aspirations, and relationships into greater harmony (ibid.: 12).

Fourth, in the pursuit of healing and harmony within oneself and with one's surroundings, a suffering person may tap into their religious (or spiritual) resources and explore their own belief system (ibid.: 12). Although this aspect is optional in holistic practices, religiosity is an important dimension that is actively involved in several forms of energy healing, e.g., Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, or Pranic Healing.

DEFINITION. The open emphasis of a religious/spiritual dimension as part of a healing journey is henceforth called 'religious-therapeutic practice' to denote this particular segment within holistic offers. Religious-therapeutic practices presuppose a complex anthropology that indicates the necessity of multiple strategies in dealing with disease and illness. This anthropology typically involves tripartite models of body, mind, and soul/spirit, or models that consist of more layers of the self, encompassing 'subtle bodies' and their corresponding physiological and psychological functions.

A case could be made to speak of 'spiritual-therapeutic' rather than 'religious-therapeutic' practices if 'spiritual' is understood to denote "privatized, experience-oriented religion" that focuses on individual experience and praxis (Hanegraaff 2020: 78). All of these attributes would be fully congruent with religious-therapeutic practices. However, one argument against the use of this term as an etic category is that 'spirituality' often serves as a valorising self-descriptor, implying a polemical dichotomy between a religiosity understood as personal and authentic, and one perceived as institutionalised and dogmatic. As a consequence of this normative framing, other dimensions of the religious such as doctrines, myths, authoritative figures, group settings, and traditions, which play a crucial role in inducing experiences and practice, tend to be overlooked. When employed as an adjective, 'spiritual' here primarily denotes the anthropological dimension of a person's basic existential attitude, which is closely related with other aspects such as intrinsic motivations, a sense of life purpose, personal insights, communal engagement, and ethical and ritual practices (cf. von Balthasar 1965; Baier et al. 2018: 42–47). While spirituality may thus be understood as denoting lived religiosity—individually and communally—religion (and its corresponding adjective) is used here as the broader conceptual framework.

Religious-therapeutic anthropologies claim to focus the attention on the human self as 'whole' unit, but particularly stress the inner, subjective experience. Illness and healing are experienced as qualities and cannot be reduced to the quantifiable and objectively measurable. Medical doctors, psychotherapists, and psychiatrists must methodically restrict their definition of restoring health to the treatment of a deficient state, usually referred to as 'disease' or 'disorder.' This negation of the negative, however, typically evades the question of what constitutes the ideal mental and physical state in positive terms. The state of a 'perfected person' cannot be articulated within a purely scientific epistemological framework without running into deep methodological or practical challenges. At this point, seeking more than the relief from suffering and actively pursuing a healthy or wholesome lifestyle, healing techniques potentially transition into religious self-cultivation practices where the whole of the person immerses itself in a particular discipline, embarks upon a spiritual path, and follows the examples embodied by

mythologised figures: shamans, sages, saints, and salvific founding figures (e.g., Christ, the Buddha, etc.).

Healing is a metaphor for salvation. Redemption of the sick body with the help of a skilled healer and his salutary powers becomes the epitome for the awakening and liberation of the guilt-ridden soul. Healing, or rather, the quest for healing, becomes the model for spiritual transformation, a process that involves a full bodily and mental engagement. However, it should be emphasised that the unfolding of a spiritual practice is not an essential but an optional aspect of holistic healing. Whereas the boundaries between healing and spirituality are particularly fluid in the holistic milieu, holistic practices are not necessarily *per se* 'spiritual.' Empirical surveys consistently indicate that solving health-related issues is a primary motive of clients seeking holistic services (Heelas et al. 2005: 91; cf. Höllinger and Tripold 2012).

In the history of religion, notions of salvation have recurrently been expressed by means of analogy with the act of healing. Religion has typically functioned as a response to the human experience of weakness, deficiency, and suffering, and claimed to offer remedies that restore strength, purity, and deliverance. However, healing in religious contexts is not only reduced to the level of metaphor as religious elements also play a crucial role in healing *per se* (Hanegraaff 1996: 44). The natural affinity between healing and religion becomes even clearer when *healing* is juxtaposed to *curing*: The physician trained in modern Western medicine is concerned with 'curing' a disease, that is, the body's suboptimal biophysical condition caused by some organic or physiological malfunction. The 'art of healing' (Lown 1996), on the other hand, aims to restore the condition of the ill person which may involve emotional, mental, social, environmental, and spiritual factors besides the discomfort of physical pains and restrictions. Illness refers to the subjectivity of personal experience, which again is considerably shaped by social values and expectations. Because the experience of illness transcends mere biophysical facts, it asks for an interpretation regarding its meaning (ibid.: 45). Questions such as 'why me?' or 'why now?' indicate the existential dimension that is undisclosed when the likelihood of an effective cure seems low, especially when a patient must deal with a potentially life-threatening situation.

Traditional healers (e.g., the shaman, priest, witch, sage) and their holistic counterparts converge in their opposition to orthodox Western medicine as their claimed aim is to heal "the whole person, rather than just curing the disease" (Hanegraaff 1996: 45). Wherever models of the human self are integrated within a broader cosmological context, and this is a central feature of holistic practices, the activity of healing blends into the domain of the religious. The traditional or holistic healer is not only concerned with fixing an isolated problem but considers his art of enhancing well-being as a way to restore harmony in the world, thus fulfilling a quasi-salvific function. From the perspective of modern biomedicine, the spiritual overtones of holistic healing approaches may seem anachronistic and superfluous. However,

from the perspective of religious history, it is modern biomedicine that appears as anomalous and “alternative” (cf. *ibid.*: 46; Bruchhausen 2011).

Despite the historical fluidity in the hierarchical classification of health professions, the ‘marginalised’ and ‘invisible’ practitioners of the holistic field are today positioned largely outside the healthcare system. The hegemonic framework of orthodox medicine in most Western societies consists of (a) the ‘dominant,’ state-endorsed (i.e., medical practitioners), (2) the ‘limited’ (i.e., specialists such as pharmacists, dentists, or opticians), and (3) ‘subordinated’ health professions (i.e., nurses, physiotherapists, or radiographers) (Barcan 2010: 139). Among religious-therapeutic practices, some therapies are more strongly oriented towards medical professions and have made efforts to medicalise their systems (e.g., chiropractic, cf. Folk 2017). In these cases, the latent religious element is more obvious in their historical genesis and individual application than in their official self-presentation.

Other practices tend to retain the spiritual doctrines underpinning their system and explicitly refer to transcendental beings or forces as the central healing agent (e.g., New Thought-derived approaches, Pranic Healing, and strands of Reiki). The ultimate objective of these currents is not only the restoration of well-being, but the transmission of a spiritual teaching. This thesis places a particular focus on the fraction of energy healing modalities that can be classified as religious-therapeutic and that have thus far resisted incorporation into the biomedical framework.

2. Energy Healing as Heterodox Discourse

2.1. The Cultic Milieu, Healing Cults, and Medical Heterodoxy

“Every one in the world knows that the soft
overcomes the hard, and the weak the strong,
but no one is able to carry it out in practice.”

– *Dàodéjīng*, 78⁵²

A useful heuristic for theorising the social conditions that have given rise to the phenomenon of the holistic milieu in general and energy healing in particular is provided by the notion of ‘cultic milieu.’ It was first introduced by the British sociologist Colin Campbell (b. 1940) through his seminal essay “The Cult, the Cultic Milieu and Secularization” (1972).

Building on the tripartite division of social forms of religion (church, sect, and mysticism) of the German theologian and cultural philosopher Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), Campbell suggested an ideal-typical model that draws a sharp distinction between “sect” and “cult”. Whereas the characteristic features of sects are *inter alia* collectivism, a high level of commitment, exclusivism and intolerance, and relative organisational stability, cults are marked by the opposite. Cults are individualistic, make few demands on their members, tend to be inclusivist and tolerant, and are loosely organised. Between the poles of sect and cult all kinds of varieties are possible. In fact, “the organizational form most typical of the cultic milieu is not the cult but the ‘society of seekers,’” which exemplify the tolerance and pluralism that prevail in the wider milieu (Campbell 1972: 127). Meanwhile, Campbell considered the “revelatory cults” (practically identical with ‘sects’), which centred on an exclusivist dogma, as deviations from the general character of the cultic milieu (ibid.). Thus, allowing for some leeway in the sect/cult dichotomy, the crucial point is that because cultic groups “have a tendency to be ephemeral and highly unstable,” Campbell suggested to focus sociological research on “the cultic milieu” in which those groups emerge, operate, and disappear again (Campbell 1972: 122). In contrast to the relatively short-lived individual groups it spawns, the cultic milieu itself is a constant factor of society (ibid.).

Presuming that all societies possess variant (and deviant) cultures besides a dominant one, Campbell suggests that although its particular contents are context-dependent, cultic milieus are universal structural phenomenon and function as a “societal cultural underground” (Campbell 1972: 130). He proposed the following seven hypotheses concerning the cultic milieu and its relation to the dominant

⁵² Legge 1891: 120.

culture, which provides a fertile basis for discussing energy healing if the holistic milieu is understood as a subfield of the cultic milieu:

1. That it is a major agency of cultural “diffusion” facilitating the accommodation of “alien” cultural items into a host culture.
2. That it is a major agency of cultural “innovation”, new items arising as a result of the processes of syncretization and “revelation”.
3. That it functions as a cultural “gene pool” for society, enhancing society’s potential for cultural adaptation by transmitting and creating numerous cultural “mutations”.
4. That it functions as a “negative reference group” for spokesmen of cultural orthodoxy, facilitating adherence to dominant scientific paradigms by practicing scientists and associated practitioners.
5. That the cultic milieu flourishes in relation to (a) the amount of “alien” culture contact and (b) the disintegration of dominant indigenous culture.
6. That the cultic milieu acts as a source of renewal for ailing orthodox belief systems
7. That cultic movements represent a general response to “psychic deprivation”.

(Campbell 1972: 129–130)

Campbell asked whether secularisation had been an advantage to the growth of the cultic milieu. One contributing factor of secularisation had been a loss of influence of the formerly dominant churches, fuelling an increase of cultural pluralism without the sanction of the former orthodox gatekeepers. However, as Campbell points out, there is

another strand of secularization theory, which would appear to argue against the increased accessibility of cultic culture. This is the identification of secularization as a cultural process (or processes) of rationalization stimulated and supported by the social institution of science and those that derive from it. From this standpoint, it could be argued that it is misleading to view the accessibility of cultic beliefs from the perspective of their relationship to religious orthodoxy since the religious worldview, orthodox and unorthodox, is itself being steadily displaced by a rational scientific *weltanschauung*. *Scientific orthodoxy and not religious orthodoxy* is thus the proper yardstick for the identification of cultural deviance, and judged by this standard such systems of belief and practice as the occult must be regarded as just as deviant as before, if not actually more so. Support for this argument is found in the fact that sectarian and cultic

movements find themselves sanctioned by the secular authorities if they attempt to implement deviant scientific theories even though their “religious” deviance goes unpunished. If, therefore, scientific orthodoxy has replaced religious orthodoxy as the dominant cultural tradition in society, one would expect the cultic to be no more “accessible” now than in former decades. (Campbell 1972: 131; emphasis added)

The scientification of culture has resulted in the rise of a secular orthodoxy. However, even if one assumes that science has superseded (Christian) religion as the dominant *Weltanschauung* of a society, its capability to act as a cultural sovereign remains limited. For in contrast to the churches, the scientific community is much less willing to enforce norms of scientific inquiry on those outside its circle (Campbell 1972: 133). Generally speaking (with the exception of popularisers of scientistic worldviews and sceptical activists), scientists are not primarily concerned “with the beliefs of non-scientists” and ousting the “heretic” for the sake of social conformity (ibid.). The shift from a hegemonial religious orthodoxy to a hegemonial scientific orthodoxy would not necessarily mean a greater restraint of heterodox beliefs (ibid.: 135).

While the sway of science over society’s beliefs is restricted, Campbell did notice that biomedicine is the institutional system most likely to attempt to define and suppress *therapeutic* heresies—although he was optimistic that tolerance would win the day:

It is only in fact the realm of applied science and particularly with regard to the practice of medicine that one finds a situation which in any way resembles the traditional manner in which the churches attempted to control the spread of heresies such as witchcraft. But even here secular sanctions against those who practice a “false” art or science of healing are not very severe or all-embracing and the trend is, if anything, toward greater tolerance of such heterodox systems as homeopathy, chiropractic and acupuncture. In sum, it does not appear as if science will necessarily be able to enforce any more cultural conformity upon society than the churches were able to do; indeed they could well be less effective. (Campbell 1972: 133).

Campbell thus argued that the ironic consequence of secularisation was an absence of “the most effective control over heretical religious beliefs,” which led to the flourishing of more persistent forms of religion and “pseudo-science” instead of a thoroughly “secular scientific society” (Campbell 1972: 135). Notably, Campbell (1972: 133) counted mainstays of alternative medicine—“homeopathy, chiropractic and acupuncture”—as integral part of the cultic milieu.

The notion of ‘healing cults’ had indeed entered the English language at least five decades prior, although a brief inquiry demonstrates that the terms ‘sect’ and ‘cult’ have been used interchangeably even in the critique of alternative medicine. For example, the American scholar of labour Louis S. Reed (1902–

1975) used both terms when he titled a report *The Healing Cults. A Study of Sectarian Medical Practice* (1932). Reed critically observed in the early 1930s that the United States had

7,650 osteopaths, 16,000 chiropractors, 2,500 naturopaths and allied practitioners, and 10,000 Christian Science and New Thought healers. Although these individuals treat the sick, they are not so well trained in the medical sciences as are doctors of medicine. Each year the public spends \$125,000,000 on these practitioners. (Read 1932: 1)

Fully engaged in boundary work on behalf of the medical establishment, Reed claimed that the “work of treating the sick” is solely the domain of the medical profession. He bemoaned that besides 142,000 “trained and licensed physicians, (...) no less than 36,000 other individuals” would offer their health services without any training in the medical sciences (Read 1932: 3). According to Reed, the common features of the ‘healing cults’ were “(1) their members hold themselves out to heal the sick, (2) they adhere to theories of disease not recognized by medical science, and (3) their medical training is either inferior to that of physicians or is entirely lacking” (ibid.).

By the 1930s, ‘healing cult’ was a common term used in the American public.⁵³ The first three decades of the twentieth century saw a particularly intense struggle in which science-based medicine fought to gain interpretational sovereignty. Using his *nom de plume* Yogi Ramacharaka, the inventor of ‘Pranic Healing’ and author of occult, mind-cure, and self-help themes William W. Atkinson picked up the polemical term ‘healing cults’ from the public debate and pointed out one of their key characteristics—the merging of therapeutic and religious discourses:

There has been a great tendency in the Western world to build up religious or semi-religious cults around the work of healing. Each cult or sect claims that its cures and healing is the result of some special creed or metaphysical belief, notwithstanding the fact that the other sects make cures in about the same proportion. (Ramacharaka 1906: 10).

James C. Whorton gave a more elaborate description of how practitioners of ‘scientific medicine’ discerned themselves from the ‘healing cults’ in the early twentieth century. Healing cults were criticised for (1) promoting a cult of personality around the charismatic founder of their particular “sect” (e.g., homeopathy, osteopathy, and chiropractic in the early phases of their development); (2) depending intellectually solely on the doctrine of the founding figure and being dogmatically exclusivist; (3) the lack of standardisation and cooperation among “irregular practitioners” resulting in infighting, chaos, and splinter denominations; (4) vitalistic beliefs in “one-theory, one-cure systems” that claimed the effects of “scientifically unexplainable powers in the human body;” (5) exaggerated claims about the

⁵³ A broader spectrum of American “healing cults” including those mentioned by Reed was delivered by Morris Fishbein in the same year (Fishbein 1932).

curative power of alternative methods; (6) rudimentary educational standards for practitioners in training; and (7) hiding financial greed behind a façade of philanthropy (Whorton 2002: 223–230; cf. Folk 2017).

As in the context of religious cults or sects, the labels are practically synonymous and both have acquired a pejorative connotation. When osteopaths, chiropractors, and naturopaths steadily improved their training standards and included basic science exams, and the polemics against cultists from the side of medical science tuned down. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, unconventional therapies succeeded in stabilising their niche market in Western countries and began to use the term ‘alternative medicine’ as a collective self-descriptor from the 1970s onwards (Whorton 2002: 221). Although the boundaries of alternative medicine are fuzzy, the preferred term for currents who did not choose the path of medicalisation, standardisation, and regularisation formed the cluster of ‘holistic healing.’ Typical practices of this category included methods in New Thought tradition, the varieties of energy healing (including kinesiology, Reiki, Polarity Therapy, Therapeutic Touch), acupuncture, bodywork (orgonomy, Feldenkrais, Rolfing), reflexology, iridology, psychic healing, reincarnation therapies, etc. The closely associated ‘human potential movement’ with strong roots in the 1960s counter-culture had a psychological rather than medical orientation. Developing “from a basically therapeutic movement to an increasingly religious one,” the proponents of the human potential movement primarily addressed the meaning crisis (Hanegraaff 1996: 49). Hanegraaff counted these healing approaches outside the regular healthcare system as integral part of the New Age movement, which he understood as “the cultic milieu having become conscious of itself as constituting a more or less unified ‘movement’” (ibid.: 17).

During the 1990s, scientific medicine was increasingly rebranding itself as ‘evidence-based medicine,’ with the aim of combining individual clinical expertise with the best evidence from systematic reviews, while respecting the patients’ needs and values (e.g., Sackett et al. 1996; cf. IQWiG 2024). Although overlaps with complementary and alternative medicine are in principle possible, evidence-based medicine stresses ‘orthodox’ scientific standards of empirical rigor and theoretical plausibility. The boundary work between scientific and non-scientific medicine thus continues to provide the template for the demarcation between orthodox and heterodox forms of treatment (cf. Angell and Kassirer 1998). When former ‘healing cults’ gradually found their place in the healthcare landscape by means of medicalisation (e.g., osteopathy), others tend to replace their role as a “negative reference group” (e.g., energy healers) in the eyes of the dominant medical system. The German historian of medicine Heinz G. Schott (b. 1946) remarked that

The opposing pair “orthodoxy/heterodoxy” suggests a clear dividing line between the two, as we are generally accustomed to: natural versus supernatural, scientific versus unscientific, rational versus irrational, professional versus charlatanesque, progressive versus occult, etc. We should be aware that such a clear front line only emerged in Western medicine in the second half of the 19th century, when scientific medicine, in the context of

the scientific-technological revolution and the accompanying medicalisation of society, gained interpretive dominance in the field of healthcare. (Schott 2018: 62–63)⁵⁴

In the mid-twentieth century, the influence of suggestion, imagination, and expectation—in short, the ‘placebo-effect’—advanced to become a standard argument of the representatives of biomedicine against ‘heterodox’ approaches to healing. Whereas the efficacy of alternative approaches cannot generally be denied, at least they could be discredited as being without empirical evidence, irrational, or pre-scientific (Schott 2018: 70). Schott noted critically that whenever experts held on to dogmatic teachings on medicine or clinical practice the results tended to be harmful for the patients. Ideological bias on the side of the ‘mainstream’ may wilfully ignore potentials within or outside the patient that could be harnessed as resources to enhance healing (ibid.).⁵⁵

From the 1990s onwards, alternative (including holistic) health services have become an increasingly normalised part of Western societies, although most practices are not integral part of the medical professions. Despite ongoing challenges, alternative therapies may endow both clients and practitioners with a sense of empowerment and autonomy over decisions that concern their health and well-being (cf. Lüddeckens 2012: 292–293; Heelas et al. 2005: 86–90). As a subgroup of cultic milieu, the field is not simply an oppositional force against the established medical system that demands for an ‘alternative.’ It is rather an optional space that allows individual health choices. Holistic services often compensate the lack of the relational dimension in the overwhelmed healthcare system. They suggest self-determination in the face of what may be perceived as the transgressive control over patients’ bodies in the name of science and medicine. Non-life threatening or acute problems such as chronic backpain, infertility, or digestion issues often have more than a ‘one size fits all’ approach. Holistic therapies are often chosen as less invasive alternatives or complementary interventions.

To keep its exclusive and privileged legal status, the medical profession must continuously engage in boundary work to demarcate itself from unprofessional and supposedly inefficient forms treatment. As a result, many critics, including health professionals, have expressed the fear that the biomedical system has morphed into a self-serving hierarchy, where medical doctors constitute an elite defending orthodoxy with an almost religious fervour. Paul Dieppe, a professor of medicine,⁵⁶ put it this way: “I am particularly concerned about those ‘modern’ hospitals, which have become the cathedrals of biomedical

⁵⁴ “Das Gegensatzpaar ‘Orthodoxie/Heterodoxie’ suggeriert eine klare Trennlinie zwischen beiden, wie wir sie im Allgemeinen gewöhnt sind: natürlich versus übernatürlich, wissenschaftlich versus unwissenschaftlich, rational versus irrational, kunstgerecht versus scharlatanesk, fortschrittlich versus okkult etc. Wir sollten uns bewusst sein, dass es in der westlichen Medizin zu dieser klaren Frontbildung erst in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts kam, als die naturwissenschaftliche Medizin im Kontext der wissenschaftlich-technologischen Revolution und der damit einhergehenden Medikalisierung der Gesellschaft die Deutungshoheit im Gesundheitswesen erlangte.”

⁵⁵ Schott’s critique does not serve to endorse alternative medicine but rather to explain its perseverance.

⁵⁶ To establish Dieppe’s credentials: He currently is emeritus professor of health and well-being at the University of Exeter Medical School in England. He was a professor of rheumatology in Bristol in 1987 and served as the Dean of the Bristol Faculty of Medicine between 1994 and 1997.

science practice, dominated by complex machines driven by ‘the white-coated priests of biomedicine’” (Dieppe 2019: 157). Although few would seriously deny the dramatic success of biomedicine, particularly in the field of emergency care, some issues keep evading its grasp. Examples are anxiety, chronic pain induced by stress, allergies, burnout, psychosomatic symptoms, emotional exhaustion, and depression (Kratky 2003). Whereas questions of evidence remain, holistic alternatives are increasingly available, reflecting a popular demand for ‘softer’ forms of treatment.

On an epistemic level, scientific credibility is the dividing line between medical orthodoxy and heterodoxy. On an experiential level, other criteria of plausibility come into play for individual patients. It may be a sense of personal care that they prefer over the anonymity that results from an overtly technologised, de-humanising medical system that focuses on organisms rather than people (Lown 1999). On an ethical level, the legally privileged position of the medical profession is no full guarantee against malpractice (Illich 1976), which may be a strong motive for choosing less invasive, more subtle therapeutic approaches.

Today’s ‘healing cults,’ if one may use the term descriptively, are far more restricted in their activities due to legal regulations than their predecessors. As their forebears, energy healing schools may be strongly shaped by a guru-like teacher-healer, e.g., Choa Kok Sui, the founder of Pranic Healing. As a consequence of their high degree of dependence on the founder’s charisma, most schools are short-lived (cf. Zoehrer 2021b). Even if a school manages to establish a ‘lineage,’ infighting, mutual excommunications, and divisions are a common aspect of a school’s history (e.g., for the illustrative case of Reiki, see Stein 2021). However, compared to Mesmer’s healing cult and those that emerged from its echoes in the nineteenth century, rather than claiming to possess a panacea, contemporary energy healers typically refrain from promising healing miracles. To protect their practice from litigation, energy healers employ disclaimers that reduce the scope of their methods to enhancing the well-being of their clients.

Without scientific endorsement, energy healers who offer their services in a secular, science-relying society are in precarious position. Two patterns of rendering their activities plausible to potential clients are of outstanding importance: the appeal to (physical) science and the claim of ancient Asian provenance. These legitimisation strategies are identical with those of modern esoteric texts that oppose the differentiation of science and religion, and propose a third path as a unified worldview that rejects both the reductionism and materialism of science, on the one hand, and the separation between God, humankind, and nature in Christian theology, on the other (Hanegraaff 1996).

2.2. Modern Esotericism: A Spin-Off of Scientification

As indicated above, there is a stark contrast between the proliferation of energy healing practices throughout the holistic milieu and its epistemologically precarious state. The lack of robust theoretical justification and corresponding anchorage in academic institutions is reflected in the legal and professional exclusion of energy healers from regular medical services. The public interpretative authority on matters dealing with ‘energy’ is perceived to be science, which relegates energy healing to the status of heterodox, hence ‘irregular’ practice. The energy healers’ view of and approach to the human body operates largely apart from the scientific method, that is, rigorous and repeatable experiments, mathematical theory-building, and their technological application.

From a purely formal perspective, a notable parallel can be observed between the habitus of contemporary holistic thought and late modern esoteric discourse, which likewise occupies an ambivalent position between scientific and religious orthodoxies. In both holistic and esoteric discourse, the function of science is that of an authoritative frame of reference but also a foil for constructing an oppositional, allegedly superior, or (in its less radical forms) a complementary form of knowledge. To better capture the historical context and semantic nuance of this ambivalence this section offers some reflections through using the prisms of pseudoscience, parascience, *Naturphilosophie*, and performance. On this basis, a notion of esotericism will be developed that serves as a conceptual frame of reference for the subsequent exposition of the genealogy of energy healing.

2.2.1. Some Preliminary Notes on Esotericism as a Scholarly Category

Esotericism is a problematic term. As my historical exposition demonstrates, only a minority of contemporary energy healers use the term as a self-descriptor and brand identity, whereas many refuse it adamantly as a pejorative term for the irrational ‘other’ (cf. Zoehrer 2024). Nonetheless, the field’s ideological foundation has been significantly shaped by the work of Alice A. Bailey (1880–1949), a largely overlooked post-Theosophical author who explicitly framed her utopian healing method as ‘esoteric’ (Zoehrer 2025d). As an etic category, esotericism is still highly contested among scholars and due to its semantic polyvalence it is unlikely that an ultimate scholarly consensus on its use will be found. Accordingly, characterising energy healing as ‘esoteric’ is by no means straightforward and requires a clarification of first, the type of esotericism in question, and second, the extent to which the term applies to the field.

Despite its semantic complexity, scholars of religion have employed the term ‘esotericism’ since 1965 as a descriptive category to investigate a sub-area of the alternative religious field that has notoriously

defined a substantial definition (Baier 2021: 229).⁵⁷ Wouter J. Hanegraaff underscored that ‘Western esotericism’ denotes ‘an imaginative construct in the minds of intellectuals and the wider public, not a straightforward historical reality ‘out there’” (Hanegraaff 2012: 377). In other words, there is considerable leeway in interpreting the term.

Understood as a historical umbrella term, esotericism does not denote a coherent or continuous tradition, but rather a complex network of diverse currents in the history of ideas and practices. These include reception lines reaching back to antiquity (e.g., Hermeticism, magic, astrology, Neoplatonism), as well as modern developments (e.g., Christian Theosophy, Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, Occultism, New Thought), which are interconnected but lack a continuous unifying thread. Given the multiple historical ties between the holistic milieu and this complex, it has been suggested to examine the field under the label “contemporary esotericism” (cf. Asprem and Granholm 2013; Hammer 2015: 377–379). However, caution is warranted when applying the term esotericism to contemporary practices, as it can carry pejorative connotations (i.e., esotericism as a catch-all term for heretical, irrational, or anti-scientific beliefs) or, in the context of marketing strategies, acquire a strongly positive and valorising meaning (i.e., esotericism as secret, higher knowledge as a sign of quality). Furthermore, it should be considered that public invocation of purportedly ‘secret’ knowledge—used, for example, as a rhetorical device in international self-help bestsellers (e.g., Byrne 2006)—and the doctrines and practices of discrete societies have little in common. Nonetheless, these phenomena constitute legitimate subjects of inquiry in the academic study of religion (Baier 2021: 232–233).

In short, esotericism can be understood as a now global phenomenon that by no means denotes a closed, continuous tradition, but rather a complex network of different currents of ideas and practices.

Esotericism as ‘inner knowledge’

Following its etymological meaning of ‘belonging to the inner circle,’ esotericism suggests a binary opposition between two—at times concurring—forms of knowledge. In a colloquial sense, ‘exoteric’ knowledge applies to the discourse of exact sciences with its method of theory-building based on repeatable experimentation and, hence, claims of generalisability and objectivity. In contrast, advocates of ‘esoteric’ knowledge claim to acknowledge wisdom traditions, revelation, and personal experience as epistemic sources.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Excellent summaries of the history of the study of esotericism in Europe are provided by Bergunder 2008; Stausberg 2013; and Hanegraaff 2015.

⁵⁸ Another level of complication may be added to the esoteric/exoteric-distinction. Strict demarcations between esotericism and science tend to be schematic and historical reality does not allow for simple dichotomies. For example, the Polish microbiologist Ludwik Fleck (1896–1961) argued that the distinction between ‘esoteric’ and

Understood as a major strand of modern alternative religiosity, esoteric discourse takes an ambiguous position towards science. Concomitant with the rising hegemony of the sciences, esoteric movements from the mid-nineteenth century onwards sought to critique scientific materialism and reductionism while claiming scientific authority for their own positions (Bergunder 2016: 118; cf. Hanegraaff 1996: 515–517). In the narrow context of the belief in subtle agents (*fluidum*, *Od*, ether, energy, etc.), esotericists have postulated them either by recourse to current scientific theories or by claims of a “hitherto unknown science” (du Prel 1899: 93; see section II.4.1). When discussing subtle energies under the category of esotericism, the intricate relationship between science and modern esotericism must therefore be kept in mind.

Esotericism as ‘rejected knowledge’

An early typological definition of esotericism was introduced by the French scholar Antoine Faivre (1934–2021). Faivre identified esotericism as a ‘form of thought,’ marked by the following six characteristics (the latter two constituting not essential but optional aspects): (1) the principle of correspondence; (2) belief in a living cosmos; (3) imagination and mediations as epistemic tools to access the essential realm of reality; (4) the aim of personal transmutation; (5) concordance or the distillation of a unifying principle from the world’s belief systems and practices; and (6) transmission (Faivre 1994: 10–15; cf. Asprem 2014a). In response to Faivre’s typology that was derived from the Renaissance currents of hermeticism, alchemy, magic, and gnosis, Hanegraaff proposed from the mid-1990s onwards to move away from a substantive notion of esotericism and apply it as a broader historiographical term that captures culturally marginalised forms of currents. This resulted in the thesis that ‘esotericism’ was born out of a polemical process of exclusion from the academia that has its roots in the seventeenth century. Hanegraaff thus understood ‘Western esotericism’ as “rejected knowledge,” that is, a waste basket category for “the academy’s radical ‘Other’” (Hanegraaff 2012: 221). “Rejected knowledge” serves as the central criterion in Hanegraaff’s historical-empiricist programme of reconstructing the genealogies of what he classifies as “Western esotericism” (ibid.: 366).

In a nutshell, Hanegraaff’s ‘dustbin’-definition describes “what we now call Western esotericism”

as the chief casualty of academic specialization after the eighteenth century. What initially sets it apart is its modern status as ‘rejected knowledge’: it contains precisely everything that has been consigned to the dustbin of history by Enlightenment ideologues and their intellectual heirs up to the present, because it is considered incompatible with normative

‘exoteric’ is applicable to the subsystems of science itself, which is divided into discourses that are only open to specialists of a discipline and those that are accessible to outsiders from researchers of a related discipline to laypersons (Fleck 1980[1935]: 138).

concepts of religion, rationality and science. Imagined as the radical counterpart of everything that educated people are expected to take seriously, the consensus among mainstream intellectuals after the eighteenth century was that this domain should better be avoided and ignored in academic discourse rather than being dignified by detailed study and analysis of its ideas and their development. (Hanegraaff 2013: 13)

The major problem with Hanegraaff's notion of 'rejected knowledge' is its extreme broadness. His central argument is that the Enlightenment developed its own identity by means of the construction of a counter-identity of rejected knowledge, that is, 'esotericism.' Describing esotericism in sweeping terms as "a convenient label for the various beliefs, practices, and traditions of knowledge that the Enlightenment has rejected in its own backyard, so to speak" (Hanegraaff 2015: 86), he effectively inflates the term. Hanegraaff's waste-basket metaphor leads to the complete deconstruction of 'esotericism,' which reduces the term's utility as an analytical category. The vast majority of ideas and practices—both within and without institutional science and academia is in fact cast away by the learned communities. Accordingly, the amount of rejected knowledge is growing exponentially. But surely not any type of rejected discourse could count as esotericism solely by virtue of its status as being dismissed by scientists and scholars.

In his critique of Hanegraaff's overarching umbrella term, Olav Hammer pointed out how little the groups that could be labelled as 'esoteric' have in common:

The set of present-day belief systems, religious movements, and currents that—at least to judge from the contents of the standard encyclopedia on this topic, the *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*—are part of 'esotericism' is a diverse lot indeed. A list would include the Swedenborgian Church, spiritualism, Jungian spirituality, the Theosophical Society, the Anthroposophical Society, Gurdjieff-inspired groups, the Church Universal and Triumphant, Wicca and a host of similar neo-Pagan currents, the New Age, several Rosicrucian orders, the Human Potential movement, occultist magic, various New Thought denominations, Satanism, several UFO religions, and Traditionalism. These are movements that do not share even a single ritual or doctrine, and that function in sociologically very diverse ways. (Hammer 2013: 243)

What is demarcated 'esotericism' thus depends on a "semi-arbitrary" convention, and is not the result of a theoretically reflected category (Hammer 2013: 244). In response to this critique, Hanegraaff somewhat counterbalanced his inflationary category by emphasising that 'rejection' is in fact not one-sided but mutual. In his book *Western Esotericism—A Guide to the Perplexed* (2013: 13–14), Hanegraaff denoted "Western esotericism" as a field that (1) "has been set apart by mainstream religious and

intellectual culture as the ‘other,’ and that (2) involves “a strong emphasis on specific worldviews and epistemologies at odds with normative post-Enlightenment intellectual culture.”

Egil Asprem (2014) sought to avoid the polemical polarisation between ‘disenchanted’ religious and scientific establishments and a kind of cultural underground of esotericism, as suggested by Hanegraaff, and instead aimed to present the problem of disenchantment in its historical complexity (Asprem 2014b: 8, 26, 425). Julian Strube (2016: 2) argued for rejecting Hanegraaff’s thesis of ‘rejected knowledge’ as the notion suggests an underlying assumption of a distinct and quasi-independent “esoteric tradition” while it ignores the historical contingency of how orthodox and heterodox scholarship is demarcated. However, this critique seems to distort Hanegraaff’s position as he does not claim a monolithic esoteric identity. Although the diversity of post-Enlightenment science and scholarship must be acknowledged, Hanegraaff’s term encompasses a broad nexus of heterodox religious currents and belief systems that are historically interrelated and continue to exert influence within the contemporary cultic milieu. Nonetheless, an argument could be made for returning to the etymological meaning of esotericism and define it more narrowly.

Esotericism as ‘secret knowledge’

Strube pointed out that the notion of ‘esoteric’ emerged as a *de facto* comparative category as early as the seventeenth century (Strube 2023a). Descriptors such as ‘esoteric,’ ‘gnosis,’ or ‘Cabala’ have been widely applied by theologians, philosophers, and orientalists to discuss currents ranging from the Arabic and Persian to the Indian and East Asian contexts.

If ‘esotericism’ is detached from its function as a conventional umbrella term for a set of ‘classic’ and historically related traditions (e.g., astrology, alchemy, magic, gnosis, Kabbalah, Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, etc.), it might readopt its etymological meaning signifying inner, secret, or hidden teachings (which largely overlaps with self-described ‘occult’ discourses). Strube makes the case that it could be an advantage to deemphasise(!) actual historical links when studying ‘esoteric’ material in order to create a sharper *tertium comparationis* that is semantically more narrow, yet transculturally applicable. Strube indeed demonstrated how ‘the esoteric’ can be employed as a comparative category based on a careful study of older sources that attempted to systematically grasp a wide array of particular currents. On this basis, Strube identified three hallmarks of what historiographers associated with the ‘esoteric’: (1) the belief in a primordial religion or wisdom transmitted through the ages; (2) secrecy and initiation; and (3) the assumption of special powers and practices that aim to attain those powers, for example, ‘magic,’ ‘yoga,’ or ‘Cabala’ (Strube 2023a: 383).

A similar definition of esotericism that highlights the aspect of secret, initiatory teachings is suggested by the scholars of East Asian religion Lukas K. Pokorny and Franz Winter. They describe esotericism concisely as

[...] an umbrella notion comprising largely non-hegemonic teachings and currents with shared structural features, foremostly centring on [1] the idea that higher or special (practical) knowledge [2] distilled from a discourse deemed secretive [3] can be (incrementally) utilized by its practitioners to salvific or otherwise self-cultivational ends, thereby uncovering ulterior dynamics of life, nature, and/or the cosmos at large'. (Pokorny and Winter 2024: 3)

In contrast to Hanegraaff's position, these semi-sociological, semi-substantial definitions shift the focus from esotericism as marginalised underdogs of history to discourses of (self-proclaimed or social) spiritual elites as well as currents that are non-mainstream and thus largely unnoticed in the popular perception.

However, the restricted focus on the purported secrecy of esoteric groups becomes apparent when we turn to the field of energy healing. Even among the religious types of energy healing, the criteria of reference to an ancient tradition and secret knowledge only match a small number of schools, most strikingly the classic strands of Reiki, where strong emphasis is put on lineage, the initiation of practitioners by a legitimate Reiki master, and secret symbols that are revealed in the course of initiation. Justin B. Stein demonstrated that early Reiki integrated elements of Japanese esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō*) and American occultism (Stein 2023: 65–69). Only the belief in 'special powers' or hidden forces underlying the operations of nature—along with corresponding rituals intended to mobilise them—can be regarded as a commonly shared feature across the spectrum of energy healing. Therefore, an analysis of energy healing as esotericism-*sensu*-secrecy would focus on rather few traditions.

Whereas transcultural comparisons between traditions with a marked emphasis on secrecy has methodological value for other research interests, the study of the history of energy healing requires a theoretical framework that takes into account the radical impact of scientification on modern societies.

2.2.2. Modern Esotericism in the Context of Scientification

From Esotericism to the Problem of Disenchantment

Kocku von Stuckrad introduced the concept of ‘esoteric discourse’ in order to connect various currents of thought including astrology, shamanism, and vitalism. Central elements of this discourse are claims of ‘higher knowledge’ and the dialectic of concealment and revelation (cf. von Stuckrad 2014). Building on von Stuckrad’s approach, Asprem methodically recast the category of esoteric discourse by adopting a problem-historical perspective that allows the development of a more cohesive framework for the synchronic and transcultural comparison of historical discourses. This framework is structured around three central problems that Asprem identified in Weber’s account of disenchantment (Asprem 2014b: 47). First, the *epistemological* problem refers to the persistent beliefs in an immeasurable vitalistic agent, an expression of unresolved relations between the opposite pairs of mechanism and teleology, the parts and the whole of an organism, and determination and freedom.⁵⁹ Second, the *metaphysical* problem that arises from the inherent limitations of rationality and empiricism, thus allowing space for metaphysical speculation. Third, the *axiological* problem results from the separation between facts and values, the modern fragmentation into value spheres, and the quest of finding meaning in nature (ibid.: 549–550).

Asprem’s modified version of ‘esoteric discourse’ opens up new perspectives to the history of religion—and in our case to the historiography of energy healing—by considering the immense influence of ideological and scientific currents on religious thought, thus enabling access to otherwise disregarded source material. A crucial example for such entanglements of science and religion in the case of energy healing is the vitalism controversy of the nineteenth century and its impact on religious-therapeutic innovations and their plausibilisation strategies.

Esotericism as a (Deficient?) Response to Scientification

The problem of “boundary crossings” (*Grenzüberschreitungen*) between science and religious interpretations of the world was also pointed out by the German philosopher Hans-Dieter Mutschler (b. 1946) in his study *Physik, Religion, New Age* (1990). Adopting a scientific framework for making religious claims has accompanied modern science since its rise around 1600. When Christianity retreated to introspection and the care of the soul, the interpretation of nature was left to the scientists and engineers (Mutschler 1990: 8). Against the backdrop of the “scientification” (*Verwissenschaftlichung*) of modern societies, the public “appetite” for a religious dimension, the reconciliation between human

⁵⁹ The epistemic dimension of energy healing could be further scrutinised by discussing the field against the background of the naturalism-supernaturalism continuum (cf. Asprem 2014b: 76–80).

beings and nature, or the bridging of subject and object was not met by religious experts but by scientists, in particular physicists (ibid.: 9–10).

In his discussion of scientification (or rather physicalisation), Mutschler proposed a compensation model: “Scientification has marginalised or completely derailed older, qualitative forms of human understandings of nature” (ibid.: 10).⁶⁰ Examples of outdated qualitative views of nature include Aristoteles’ teleology, the Stoic assumption that nature as a source of ethical norms, or the powerful symbolism of the Biblical creation story. Beliefs that nature was inherently meaningful were sacrificed for the sake of the calculability and predictability provided by the scientific model of nature. Science owes its success to its reductive approach. The public standing associated with science has led to the expectation that scientists are able to act as interpretational authorities who respond to ethical, religious, and philosophical questions—even if they completely lack corresponding competencies (ibid.: 13–17). In short, “Whereas the middle ages believed in the Bible, modernity believes in physics” (ibid.: 14).

Extrapolations from physics to a mystical or holistic worldview were the hallmark of New Age scientists Fritjof Capra, David Bohm, and Ilya Prigogine (ibid.: 10; cf. Hanegraaff 1996).⁶¹ Physicalism—i.e., the elevation of physics to a foundational worldview (cf. Zoehrer 2025b)—blurs the (supposedly) clear demarcations between science and religion. Physicalism is not only an ideological terrain popularised by scientists but an option taken in particular by holistic actors who consciously obscure established disciplinary boundaries as they sense “the meaning deficits of a scientised existence” (*die Sinndefizite der verwissenschaftlichten Existenz*) (Mutschler 1990: 23).

In New Age literature (in Mutschler’s view a contemporary manifestation of esotericism), the levels of scientific explanation and anthropocentric interpretation are intermingled (Mutschler 1990: 41). Physicalist confessions express the yearning to grasp the unity of the world. It claims scientific objectivity while also appealing to the truth of subjective experience. Mutschler casually (and normatively) applied the label “esotericist” (*Esoteriker*) to describe those who sought to bridge the gap between science and the quest for meaning although in an unreflective manner (Mutschler 1990: 23).⁶² This intermingling of levels occurs, for example, when the quantum physical ‘observer effect’ is taken

⁶⁰ Original: “Die Verwissenschaftlichung hat ältere, qualitative Formen des menschlichen Naturverständnisses an den Rand gedrängt oder vollständig außer Kurs gesetzt.”

⁶¹ The early Hanegraaff described the “New Age movement” as “a popular western culture criticism expressed in terms of a secularized esotericism,” that constitutes “a qualitatively new syncretism of esoteric and secular elements. Paradoxically, New Age criticism of modern western culture is expressed to a considerable extent on the premises of that same culture” (Hanegraaff 1996: 521).

⁶² Science gained its precision by ignoring practical, ethical, religious, and lifeworld perspectives (ibid.: 31). To avoid a totalising scientific tendency that considers scientific models as identical with nature and reality rather than a particular representation, Mutschler argued for a hermeneutic of nature: Science is interested in capturing the *grammar* of nature, that is, the rules by which it is structured. However, science does not ask about the *semantics* of nature, that is, its message, meaning, or purpose. The latter lies outside the domain of “hard science” and is the subject of either philosophical reflection (*Naturphilosophie*) or religious interpretation (Mutschler 1990: 26–32, 41, 95).

as proof for the mind-over-matter principle and when the primacy of the mind is argued by way of quantum mysticism.

Mutschler underscored that the way of viewing nature has direct anthropological ramifications. A narrow scientised approach not only affects human relations with nature but also the relation with humans themselves. If only scientific knowledge of the human self is regarded as valid, it can only be perceived as a body, that is, as a physical object. In consequence, this leads to a machine model of the human being and a “purely somatic medicine” that ignores psychological and social causes of illness (Mutschler 1990: 73). A diseased person is not treated any different from a machine that has gone defect and is in need of repair. This line of reasoning is also highly characteristic of holistic practitioners—including energy healers—when they promote a multilayered anthropology that includes mind, body, and “soul” or a subtle, ethereal physiology with its corresponding organic and psychological functions.

Esotericism: Pseudoscience or Parascience?

Fluid boundaries between science, metaphysics, and religion was characteristic of the New Age genre and continues to define holistic worldviews. Taking a similar approach as Mutschler, the German historians of culture Robert Matthias Erdbeer and Christina Wessely examined the impact of scientification and the decline of *Naturphilosophie* over the course of the nineteenth century. Both factors provided the condition for what they refer to as “popular” or “modern esotericism.”

In their analysis of the border area between (post-)Romantic *Naturphilosophie* and experimental research, Erdbeer and Wessely hesitate to dismiss *a priori* as ‘pseudoscientific’ what they prefer to label ‘esoteric’ discourses. The function of the term ‘pseudoscience’ is to domesticate, ridicule, and exclude certain knowledge claims in the name of an expert collective that represents scientific consensus. In contrast, the value-neutral term ‘parascience’ broadly describes a reciprocal relationship between research that has not (yet) received recognition from institutionalised science on the one hand and the application of rules and processes of established science on the other (Erdbeer and Wessely 2008: 128). Hence, parascience denotes not a forgery or fabrication consciously intended to imitate the language of science for the sake of prestige without adhering to its rules, but an engagement with science at its margin or—if necessary—outside academic institutions. Thus, viewing esotericism from a history of science perspective, Erdbeer and Wessely suggest to frame esotericism as parascience in a first heuristic step.

Four functions can be discerned wherever discourses are classified as parascience: First, to distinguish between low from high levels of formalised theories that manifest in the relative aversion of parascience to mathematical formalism. Second, to describe ‘popular science,’ which is not science proper but a

literary genre that stabilises the social conditions of science by disseminating its body of knowledge to a lay audience. Third, to designate approaches that aim at *correcting* science through deconstructing established theories, which in very few cases may pave the way to a paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense. Fourth, to pragmatically position systems of knowledge as autonomous substitutes or complements of regular scientific discourse (e.g., ‘alternative and complementary medicine’). In the process of science production, parascience thus plays an ambivalent role between threat and promise (cf. Erdbeer and Wessely 2008: 128).

All four functions of parascience can be found in the discourse of energy healing at least to some degree. First, theories of energy healing are by and large qualitative and omit the formulation of laws in mathematical language. This also applies to highly scientific forms of energy healing such as Gerber’s *Vibrational Medicine* (1988), Oschman’s *Energy Medicine* (2000), or Bartlett’s *Matrix Energetics* (2007). Second, while not belonging to the genre of popular science per se, authors of energy healing manuals draw on strands of popular science that have unfolded their own reception history within the twentieth-century cultic milieu, particularly elements of ‘New Age-science’ (Hanegraaff 1996) such as ‘morphogenetic fields,’ mystical interpretations of quantum physics, or subtle energies (cf. Brennan 1988, Bartlett 2007). Third, while energy healing may still be far from introducing a paradigm shift in biomedicine, the field has drawn considerable interest from the study of psychoneuroimmunology, which has also investigated the effects of comparable holistic practices including chanting, meditation, autosuggestion, and positive thinking in terms of a broader theory of the placebo effect (Harrington 2008; cf. Täubner 2020). Some clinical studies and meta-analyses indicate that energy healing modalities such as Reiki may be effective for stress reduction, the treatment of anxiety, and pain management (Thrane and Cohen 2014; McManus 2017; Dyer et al. 2019). Although the clinical evidence for energy healing is not conclusive, the point is that energy healing is already engaged with biomedical discourse, albeit at the margins. Fourth, as a key practice of the holistic milieu, energy healing intersects with the field of complementary medicine, where theoretical standards are far less rigorous than in biomedicine. This situation is reflected, for example, in textbooks on energetic practices produced by naturopathic publishing companies (e.g., Franke and Franke 2016 on psycho-energetic tapping therapies; Hosak 2021 on Reiki).

For our subject matter applying ‘parascience’ as an analytical category thus seems appropriate as it allows us to avoid two pitfalls, namely (a) the polemics, prejudice, and normative attitudes entrenched in the term ‘pseudoscience’ for the purpose of boundary work on the side of scientific experts who aim to demarcate their field from dilettantes, outsiders, and laypersons; and (b) the rhetoric of ‘rejected knowledge,’ which oversimplifies the historically complex relationship between scientific and religious orthodoxies, on the one hand, and esoteric currents on the other—thereby casting the latter in a light of unjust marginalisation and victimhood..

As Erdbeer and Wessely demonstrated, a specific style of parascience emerged under the cultural conditions of the nineteenth century that they denoted as ‘modern esotericism.’ The subsequent historical exposition of this thesis demonstrates that this particular discourse was a crucial precursor to the formation of contemporary schools of energy healing.

‘Secret Doctrine for All’: Modern Esotericism as Popular Parascience bent towards Naturphilosophie

‘Nature’ and its forces has not been the exclusive domain of science and was a central theme to a number of modern currents deemed in the literature as ‘esoteric’ (von Stuckrad 2004: 169). However, as Kocku von Stuckrad noted, the interconnection between scientific and esoteric discourses has differed over time, ranging from strong overlaps to fierce antagonism. A clear demarcation between *Naturphilosophie* and *Naturwissenschaft* (natural sciences or, more common in the Anglosphere, ‘science’) as understood today has only been completed by the mid-nineteenth century. In the decades around 1800, ‘scientists’—that is, *Naturforscher* (nature researchers) rather than *Naturwissenschaftler*—who dealt with the developments of the Enlightenment and industrialisation frequently integrated religious aspects in their thought. Stretching from nineteenth-century German *Naturphilosophie* to New Age “deep ecology” (a core element of ‘New Age science’), von Stuckrad highlighted major instances where “holistic,” pantheistic, animistic, and vitalistic conceptions of nature and the cosmos were championed at the intersection between science and ‘esotericism’ (ibid.: 169–182). It should be noted, however, that von Stuckrad here applies ‘esotericism’ (*Esoterik*) as a retrospective, etic label, which was not generally used as a self-description by the authors he discusses. These authors include, for example, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenburg, 1772–1801), Schelling, Lorenz Oken (1779–1851), and Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869).

Employing this historiographical category in a similar but tighter sense, Erdbeer and Wessely postulate that “modern esotericism” became tangible through the dispute of post-Romantic *Naturphilosophie* with scientific modernity (Erdbeer and Wessely 2009: 156). The separation between *Naturphilosophie* and *Naturwissenschaft* arguably gave rise to two distinct types of esotericism, ‘exact’ and ‘popular’:⁶³

Modern scientific discourse also bears traits of an esoteric discourse system due to the exclusivity of the collectives of specialists, the scientific hermeticism of its special languages and the claim to comprehensive explanation. The new, if you like ‘exact esotericism’ of modern knowledge is compensated for by two developments in the history of discourse: by the modern popularisation of knowledge, whose claim is decidedly non-

⁶³ For a more elaborate discussion of the relationship between *Naturphilosophie*, parascience, and modern esotericism, see Erdbeer 2010: 15–21.

esoteric [i.e. popular science, DZ], and by the *spin-off* of a second, popular esotericism that defines itself as a ‘secret doctrine for all’.

In this way, the emergence of modern science in the nineteenth century goes hand in hand with the emergence of modern ‘parascience,’ which can also be considered an esoteric format of knowledge popularisation. However, insofar as this second esotericism combines the inherited holistic approach of *Naturphilosophie* with the epistemological rhetoric of the exact model of science, it has formulated a *metascientific claim to explanation*. Modern esotericism conceives its vitalistic experiential knowledge⁶⁴ not only in distinction to the mode of the exact, it understands itself as the *a priori* of modern science. (Erdbeer and Wessely 2009: 170–171; my translation)⁶⁵

Erdbeer and Wessely thus understand ‘modern esotericism’ as a form of knowledge popularisation in the ideological heritage of *Naturphilosophie*. This discourse characteristically emulates the language of exact science—not in substance but on a metascientific level and with an added experiential dimension. The utility of this definition of “modern esotericism” is that it draws a bridge between major structural features of nineteenth-century modalities of *Naturphilosophie* (which, among others, would include Romantic mesmerism) and those of the twentieth-century holistic milieu.

Throughout most of European history, the philosophy of nature was identical with science. The emancipation of natural science from the philosophy of nature began in the eighteenth century, reflecting in the establishment of separate faculties at European universities. Georg Willhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), Goethe, and Schelling were most vocal in their critique of the emerging scientific disciplines and proposed qualitative models of *Naturphilosophie* that claimed to provide science with an ultimate grounding. They sought an understanding of nature that would compensate the notion of nature as the objective, ontological substrate of the mathematical models developed by science. Schelling’s model of nature as an organic whole that includes both objective and subjective aspects proved particularly influential in the early nineteenth century. Whereas Schelling aimed at developing a programmatic notion of nature, the Romantic response to his work has been contrasted as an

⁶⁴ Whereas Erdbeer and Wessely do not specify further what they mean by ‘vitalistic’ in this context, the nexus between vitalism and mesmerism, which prefigured occult vitalist conceptions, has been demonstrated above (section I.2).

⁶⁵ “Auch der moderne Wissenschaftsdiskurs trägt durch die Exklusivität der Spezialistenkollektive, durch die szientifische Hermetik seiner Sondersprachen und den Anspruch auf umfassende Erklärung Züge eines esoterischen Diskurssystems. Die neue, wenn man will ‘exakte Esoterik’ des modernen Wissens wird durch zwei Entwicklungen diskursgeschichtlich kompensiert: durch die moderne Wissenspopularisierung, deren Anspruch dezidiert nicht-esoterisch ist, und durch den *spin-off* einer zweiten, populären Esoterik, die sich selber als ‘Geheimlehre für alle’ definiert. Auf diese Weise geht mit der Entstehung der modernen Wissenschaft im 19. Jahrhundert die Entstehung der modernen ‘Parawissenschaft’ einher, die somit auch als esoterisches Format der Wissenspopularisierung gelten kann. Insofern diese zweite Esoterik aber den ererbten ganzheitlichen Zugang der Naturphilosophie mit der erkenntnistheoretischen Rhetorik des exakten Wissenschaftsmodells verbindet, hat sie einen *metaszientifischen Erklärungsanspruch* formuliert. Die Esoterik der Moderne konzipiert ihr vitalistisches Erfahrungswissen nicht allein in Abgrenzung zum Modus des Exakten, sie versteht sich selbst als Apriori der modernen Wissenschaft.”

aestheticisation and emotionalisation of nature (Groh and Groh 1991). Romantic-idealistic *Naturphilosophie* was variably understood as a rival enterprise to science, its speculative prelude, or a philosophical activity considered superior to science.

The relation between this ‘other,’ speculative way of thinking about nature on the one hand and the empirical, scientific method on the other remained contested. However, compared with the progress in physics, chemistry, and biology, German Idealism and Romanticism proved too narrow and pretentious to provide orientation for the empirical sciences. By the mid-nineteenth century, the methodological independence of the sciences from *Naturphilosophie* eventually translated into the institutional marginalisation of the discipline in German university politics. In short, the question, ‘what is nature?’ was unequivocally assigned to the sciences, whereas academic philosophy became an integral part of the ‘humanities’ (or *Geisteswissenschaften*) (Böhme 1989: 7–9; cf. Mutschler 2002: 7–13). As *Naturphilosophie* lost its footing in academia, meta- or rather parascientific speculation on nature became a common theme among lay authors—and scientists.

Materialistic versus Esoteric Naturphilosophie

The divergence between *Naturwissenschaft* and *Naturphilosophie* thus has had dire consequences for the latter, at least in academic terms. *Naturphilosophie* neither developed a tradition that has continued until the present nor a recognised canon—although a number of notable traditions now extinct and a selection of “classic works” on the theme could be named (Böhme 1989: 7; cf. Mutschler 2002: 13). At the backdrop of lacking institutionalisation, a new type of thinking about nature emerged outside academic philosophy. Philosophising scientists asserting the sole autonomy of science began to advocate for an inductive metaphysics or materialist view of nature. Its most notable spokespersons of international acclaim were Ludwig Friedrich Büchner (1824–1899), Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), and Friedrich Wilhelm Ostwald (1853–1932).⁶⁶

Around 1900, when an occult and alternative-medical notion of energy began to take shape, a similar development took place among proponents of a materialistic *Naturphilosophie*, who attempted to frame science as a *Weltanschauung*. The German-Baltic chemist Ostwald illustrates how the *Naturphilosophie* of materialistic thinkers resulted from an unquestioned submission to science in general, and the physics of energy in particular. In the late nineteenth century, physical theories of energy spilled over to the humanities but with comparably limited impact. The English term ‘energetics’ was probably first coined in 1855 by the Scottish mechanical engineer William J. M. Rankine (1820–1872) to describe dynamical

⁶⁶ For brief discussions of Büchner’s idea of ‘force’ and ‘matter’ and his scathing criticism of mesmerism, see Zoehrer 2020; 2021b.

processes in terms of energy rather than in terms of force and motion (Rankine 1855). Moving beyond physics, the German term *Energetik* adopted a wider ideological meaning. The term was popularised by Ostwald around 1900 and encompassed a form of monism that drew on natural science and claimed to explain matter, consciousness, and social systems as conversions of energy forms (see Ostwald 1892; 1902; 1909).

Ostwald's scientific *Naturphilosophie* did not remain unchallenged. In a scathing review titled "'Energetische' Kulturtheorien" published in 1909, Max Weber literally disenchanted Ostwald's extrapolation of energetic relations in physico-chemical processes to explain cultural, social, and economic systems. According to Weber, Ostwald's 'energetic' cultural theory represents a particular type of *Weltanschauung* (a comprehensive worldview based on a framework of values and modes of perception) that he defined as "naturalism," i. e., the attempt to derive normative judgments from natural scientific facts (Weber 1985 [1909]: 426). Weber argued that theories claiming the standards and methods of physics, chemistry, and technology as absolutes and applying them to the humanities must ultimately fail because they overestimate the explanatory scope of science.⁶⁷

Without explicit reference to either Rankine's physics or Ostwald's monistic physicalism, the term 'energetics' has been retained in the context of holistic practices. For example, Alexander Lowen's (1910–2008) body psychotherapy named "bioenergetic analysis" (Lowen 1975), Richard Bartlett's "Matrix Energetics" (Bartlett 2007), or in the German word *Humanenergetik* (human energetics, that is, energy healing applied to humans). However, the journey of the term energy into holistic healing practices is far more complex than this sketchy outline of the notion of 'energetics' suggests. As I argue in my historical exposition, occult discourse prepared the ground for holistic systems of energy healing.

A modality of *Naturphilosophie* that functioned as a direct antagonist to anti-metaphysical or positivist forms of scientism (themselves arguably a species of *Naturphilosophie*) were discourses that several scholars of religion have identified as 'esoteric.' Drawing on Weber's thesis of disenchantment, von Stuckrad regards Romantic *Naturphilosophie* as a programme of questioning the disenchantment of the world and the rationalisation of life. Hence, it constitutes a final attempt of "re-enchantment" that had a lasting influence on nineteenth and twentieth century "esoteric conceptions" (von Stuckrad 2003: 268–272). Whereas Romantic notions of an ensouled nature lost their relevance within academic science, the critique of a mechanistic view of nature in holistic, pantheistic/monistic, and vitalistic terms is a recurrent theme that has lasted until the present.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Exceptional contributors to a distinct 'philosophy of nature' critical of naturalism and Darwinism included Henri Bergson (1859–1941), Ludwig Klages (1872–1956), and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955). However, it was not their writings that succeeded in shifting the widely held conviction that the scientific-technological view of nature equals progress, but the ecological crisis in the latter half of the twentieth century (Mutschler 2002: 8).

⁶⁸ A similar argument was made by Hammer (2001: 321–320), who delineated family resemblances between Romantic and modern esoteric thought.

Following the footsteps of Faivre, Hanegraaff suggested to define *Naturphilosophie* as “a both intuitive and rigorous approach focusing on the reality underlying phenomenal reality” (Hanegraaff 1996: 64–65). Casually asserting that the field of “western esotericism” was closely interwoven with the *Naturphilosophie* of Renaissance thought and German Romanticism, Hanegraaff goes on to identify the genre of New Age science as *Naturphilosophie* rather than science per se (ibid.). The implication of this approach is that New Age science needs to be understood as a “belief system” that is properly studied within the domain of religious studies (ibid.: 27).

Scholars of religion confine themselves to describing beliefs, rather than engaging in debates over empirical evidence or scientific validity. However, a difference in *Erkenntnisinteresse* (epistemological interest) must not ignore that *Naturphilosophie* involves norms and internal criteria of judgment. Hanegraaff defines these as “internal consistency, philosophical elegance and religious profundity. Ultimately, such philosophies are convincing to the extent that they are perceived to ‘make sense’ of the world of experience” (ibid.: 66–67). As indicated also by Erdbeer and Wessely, the centrality of sense-making in the experienced world (*Lebenswelt*) is what sets *Naturphilosophie* apart from ‘natural philosophy’ and exact science (cf. Böhme 1989; Mutschler 2002).

A crucial challenge when framing esotericism as an extension of *Naturphilosophie* is that esotericism remains substantially fuzzy, since neither Idealistic and Romantic *Naturphilosophie* nor the contemporary holistic milieu feature a canonical set of texts or an institutionalised tradition. If *Naturphilosophie* is applied as an etic and retrospective category for esoteric discourses it is to some degree imposed on the subject matter, which is not unproblematic. Hanegraaff boldly demarcates *Naturphilosophie* as “not a secular but a religious philosophy, whether or not its defenders try to present it as such” (Hanegraaff 1996: 65), which clearly contradicts the fact that defenders of ‘esoteric’ worldviews—in Hanegraaff’s case New Age science—regularly “tend to invoke ‘science’ as the ultimate authority” (ibid.: 66) without fully realising their role in the making of religion (or an implicitly religious philosophy). This tension of elevating science as a central reference point within a qualitative, *Naturphilosophie*-inclined model of the world is characteristic for occult and holistic theories of hidden forces and subtle healing agents.

Next to the problem of labelling discourses as anonymous *Naturphilosophie*, a word of caution is due against the unreserved application of *Naturphilosophie* to the particular research subject of energy healing. While ‘esoteric’ worldviews may be better described in terms of parascience rather than (pseudo-)science as argued above, not all parascience necessarily shares the rank of *Naturphilosophie*. If we apply normative criteria such as stringency, coherence, elegance, and religious depth, arguably only a few occult and holistic authors meet these standards.

As it is not the intent of this thesis to undeservedly ‘enoble’ the designers of energy healing systems as *Naturphilosophen*, an accurate description must discern between parascientific views of nature and *Naturphilosophie* as a thorough philosophical system. Energetic healing theories are rooted in particular views of nature that either take recourse to scientific discourse or to non-European traditions of knowledge deemed complementary or superior to science. These views, including conceptions of the human being, their position in the universe, and the hidden powers accessible to them, determine the form and content of the healing ritual. However, they are not necessarily part of a full-fledged or rigorous systematic philosophy of nature.

Over time, earlier *Naturphilosophic* elements in (pre-)energetic healing theories have faded into the background. Compared to the complex elaborations of conceptual precursors such as Mesmer’s animal magnetism, Reichenbach’s *Od* theory, or Vivekananda’s notion of *prāṇa* (Zoehrer 2020; 2021b), as well as the thought of New Age scientists on energy such as William Tiller and Fritjof Capra (see section I.8.2; Zoehrer 2025b), the weight in the founding texts of contemporary schools of energy healing is not on the theoretical but the pragmatic: anecdotes of healing experiences and technical instructions take precedence over speculation.

The Praxis Dimension of Modern Esotericism: Embodiment, Performance, and Aesthetics

Erdbeer and Wessely argued that a crucial demarcation line between the scientific and the ‘esoteric’ is the binary opposition of disembodiment and embodiment. In the scientific pursuit of objectivity, the physical presence and individuality of the researcher rarely appear as the subject matter. The bodily circumstances disappear behind the results of research, producing bodiless, generalisable, and thus universally acceptable knowledge. Esoteric discourse, in contrast, embraces the physical body, presence, and performance (Erdbeer and Wessely 2009: 143). The association (not identification) of *Naturphilosophie* with esotericism (sensu Erdbeer and Wessely) and New Age thought (sensu Hanegraaff) finds additional support in Gernot Böhme’s distinction between the *Naturphilosophie* and exact sciences. What characterises *Naturphilosophie* is its proximity to *practical* philosophy and theories of the *body*. Different from science, which seeks to produce knowledge that is independent of the person who pursues it, *Naturphilosophie* does not separate knowledge from person (Böhme 1989: 11). Likewise, the Mutschler defines *Naturphilosophie* as “the mediation of theory and praxis on the level of science and experienced world (*Lebenswelt*), whereas the latter takes primacy (Mutschler 2002: 17; my translation).”⁶⁹

⁶⁹ “‘Naturphilosophie’ kann daher definiert werden die als [sic] Vermittlung von Theorie und Praxis auf der Ebene von Wissenschaft und Lebenswelt, wobei letztere den Primat hat.”

Mutschler noted that philosophers of science largely disregard the implicit dialectic between science and lifeworld, despite the latter's fundamental role in the daily work of scientists. In contrast, the task of a contemporary *Naturphilosophie* would be the elaboration of interpretations of science that go beyond an analysis of the conditions, propositions and formulas of theories (the domain of science of philosophy), and asks about the ideas of reality underlying those theories. Whether we perceive the cosmos as the place we have “been thrown into” (cf. Heidegger's *Geworfensein*) or as our “home” (*Heimat*) cannot be determined within a purely physical cosmology (Mutschler 2002: 186–187).

Despite their degree of abstraction, scientific notions may indeed be closer linked to our bodily experience than its formalism indicates. According to Mutschler, one of the few thinkers who had a sense for such “material” (in contrast to “formal”) interpretations of science was the German philosopher Aloys Wenzl (1887–1967), who elaborated on the relationship between formal physics and the metaphysical notions of wholeness, freedom, and finality.⁷⁰ Wenzl noted that the fundamental definitions of physics are first derived from the experiential sphere. According to Wenzl, “inertia, impulse, force, work, energy, effect are all terms that, when taken seriously, are drawn from our experience” (quoted in Mutschler 2002: 188).⁷¹ Hence, these terms must be considered “anthropomorphisms” that would lose their meaning if dismissed as such. Only from analogy to our own experience can we *understand* the meaning of forces, energy, or effects.

As this thesis will demonstrate, anthropomorphisms not only work in the direction from experienced lifeworld to formal physics but also in reverse fashion. Formalised physical terms can be re-anthropomorphised and this process is a key feature of occult and later holistic scientism. Examples include the term and ‘life force’ as conceptualised, among others, by the occult philosopher Carl du Prel (1899), ‘psychic force’ adopted by New Thought authors, and the function of quantum physics as a holistic code for the mind-over-matter-principle (cf. Zoehrer 2025b).

In analysing the bodily, performative, and experiential dimension of esotericism, the aesthetics of religion may offer complementary perspectives. The presupposition that body images affect physiological and mental is fundamental to rituals that pursue self-transformation (including healing). According to Traut and Wilke (2015), imagination plays the role of ‘making present what is non-present,’ and allows this non-presence to transfer into the world of experience. Their religious-aesthetic viewpoint holds that imagination ought to be understood as a key category in both religious ritual and the academic study thereof. Imagination functions as a medium that communicates reciprocally between systems of meaning (*Sinnsysteme*) and the world of senses (*Sinneswelten*). It is thus fundamental to the conditions for perceiving, visualising, and steering a conceived vital energy that activates the self-healing process

⁷⁰ Wenzl had a particular interest in ‘border issues’ (*Grenzfragen*) of science that touched on questions such as the mind-body-problem or free will as well parapsychological themes including clairvoyance and psychokinesis.

⁷¹ “Trägheit, Impuls, Kraft, Arbeit, Energie, Wirkung sind lauter Begriffe, die, wenn sie ernst genommen werden, aus unserem Erleben geschöpft sind.”

(Traut and Wilke 2015: 18). Forms of perception and body symbolism embedded within conceptual frameworks translate into corresponding techniques of self-transformation and meaning productions. In contrast to science, imagination for the sake of self-transformation plays a key role in religious practice in general, and esotericism in particular.

DEFINITION. Based on the above discussion, I propose to employ the term ‘modern esotericism’ as a typological category to explore vitalistic, parascientific worldviews that emerged in the wake of the ideological vacuum left behind by the decline of *Naturphilosophie*. Modern esoteric discourses are characterised by four main features: (1) they embrace a sense of wholeness including the agency of the ‘inner human,’ thus elevating the primacy of subjective consciousness in reaction to a highly differentiated, scientised, and objectifying culture; (2) they explain the essential cause underlying phenomenal reality in terms of hidden teleological principles, forces, or energies that are beyond the reach of conventional science; (3) their aim is personal transformation and the attainment of this-worldly goals through knowledge of and mastery over the supposed powers claimed to generate a living universe; (4) as a ‘secret doctrines for all,’ modern esoteric discourses are decisively public-oriented and ‘reveal’ themselves through the promotion of texts, artwork, rituals, and commercial services—thus opening up an imaginative interpretational space to facilitate potentially transformative experiences.

What are the implications of modern esoteric discourse for the study of energy healing? As with other forms of performance, written texts on energy healing (and its historical precursors) are not an afterthought to experience but crucially inform and shape (the healing) experience. The relationship between the scientific, objectifying view of the body and biomedicine, with its focus on the methodological *treatment* of a technically defined *disease*, may be juxtaposed to the relationship between the holistic view of the human self and corresponding therapies, where the focus is the process of *healing* from the experience of *illness* (see section II.1.3). The performance of an energetic ritual is directed at generating an experience, while its enactment is grounded in a specific conception of nature—above all, the belief in the agency of cosmic and/or vital powers that can be ritually invoked and harnessed for healing purposes.

2.3. From Occultism to Occulture

A major argument put forth in this thesis is that several contemporary forms of energy healing were heavily influenced by occult thought. In current academic discourse, the term occultism is typically used to refer to developments in nineteenth-century esoteric discourse, along with their extensions into the twentieth century. Adapting Hanegraaff’s (2006: 888) distinction, occultism encompasses both descriptive and typological levels of meaning. In its narrow descriptive usage, ‘occultism’ denotes the French esoteric movements that followed Éliphas Lévi (b. Alphonse Louis Constant, 1810–1875),

particularly those associated with neo-Martinism and Papus (né Gérard Anacleto Vincent Encausse, 1865–1916). In its more common descriptive usage, occultism encompasses other forms of fin-de-siècle esoteric groups that use the term as a self-descriptor including the Theosophical Society. The Theosophical Society's programme to uncover "the existence of occult forces unknown to science, in nature, and the presence of psychic and spiritual powers in man" (Blavatsky 1931 [1886]: 562) was paradigmatic for the efforts of occultists to overcome scientific materialism and religious dogmatism. Their claim that the secrets of nature were already known to the initiates of ancient mystery traditions led to the conflation of the terms esoteric(ism) and occult(ism) (Hanegraaff 2016: 162).

In a more analytical sense, 'occultism' refers not only to these specific currents but captures a type of esotericism that is characteristic of most of esoteric discourse from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. This broader label would also include other contemporaneous groups, for example, spiritualism, magical orders in the lineage of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (est. 1887–1903), and even more recent currents such as the New Age movement. From this point of view, occultism can be understood as comprising "all efforts by esoteric thinkers to respond to a disenchanted world, or more generally, attempts by individuals to interpret esoteric traditions within the context of modern disenchantment" (Hanegraaff 1996: 422). Occultism as a type of esoteric discourse thus encompasses the vast majority of esoteric movements that emerged since the mid-1800s and that share common roots in Enlightenment-era figures such as Emanuel Swedenborg and Franz Anton Mesmer.

The plausibility of an even broader typological definition was suggested by Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic. In opening their introduction to the edited volume *Occultism in a Global Perspective* (2013) they first provide an etymologically based notion of occultism before shifting to a particularistic description:

Terms such as 'the occult', 'occultism', 'occult sciences', 'occult properties' and 'occult philosophy' share a good deal of semantic commonality, and all have their etymological root in the Latin adjective 'occultus', meaning 'hidden' or 'secret'. Broadly speaking, what distinguishes occultism as a branch of human activity is an orientation towards hidden aspects of reality, those that are held to be commonly inaccessible to ordinary senses; an activity that simultaneously shares a certain similarity with both science and religion but cannot be reduced to either of them. (Bogdan and Djurdjevic 2013: 1)

While this characterisation of occultism *sensu lato* suggests applicability to any cultural setting or time period, it implicitly points to a particular historical discourse that already presupposes a degree of social differentiation of knowledge systems. As Bogdan and Djurdjevic pointed out, occultism positions itself vis-à-vis 'science' and 'religion' which opens up the question what kind of science and religious traditions they are referring to. Pursuing this question further, one inevitably arrives in the nineteenth

century, which was dominated by Euro-American colonial culture and where leading scientific disciplines including physics, chemistry and biology as well as science-based medicine had differentiated themselves from *Naturphilosophie* in the process of academic institutionalisation.

Departing from their first typological definition, Bogdan and Djurdjevic narrow down their description of occultism to fit a particular historiographical narrative. Expanding Hanegraaff's model that frames occultism as a subcategory of 'Western esotericism' reacting to the disenchantment of the late modern era, the authors specify occultism as "'modernized' forms of Western esotericism; that is, forms of esotericism that due to the impact of modernity, globalization and secularization were transformed and reinterpreted in the wake of the disenchantment of Western society" (Bogdan and Djurdjevic 2013: 1–2). Contextualised within a particular time and place, occultism thus refers to a distinctive form of theory and practice that first gained traction in mid-nineteenth-century France through the popular dissemination of the writings of Lévi. Lévi's ideas inspired the founding of a number of highly influential occult organisation in the Anglosphere including the Theosophical Society (est. 1875). This 'diffusionist' model of occultism as an essentially Western product—which effectively replaces a typological with a descriptive definition—has been refuted through recent publications that underscore the 'global' character of occultism. The Theosophical Society in particular has transgressed geographical and cultural boundaries and spawned a transcultural discourse across East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Europe, and America (Krämer and Strube 2020), which again accentuates the need of a broader *tertium comperationis*.

In a third attempt to define occultism, Bogdan and Djurdjevic suggested a constrained typological category that in principle may apply beyond the Euro-American context. This typology emphasises the diachronic continuity between earlier esoteric movements and occultism as a specific current of late modern esotericism, producing a corresponding checklist. Adapting Faivre's classic model of esotericism as a 'form of thought,' Bogdan and Djurdjevic (2013: 3–4) identified the following four substantive features of occult discourse:

- (1) correlative or analogical thinking, that is, the interpretation of the world as a web of mutually related sympathies;
- (2) the notion of correspondence between physical gestures (such as ritual acts), words, and the ultimate recipients or targets of these actions;
- (3) a significant role is played by intuition and imagination in occult activities (for example, ritual magic, astrology, the reading of tarot cards or other forms of divination, and alchemical experiments);

(4) a quest for spiritual perfection which includes the pursuit of perfect knowledge or ‘gnosis,’ whereby self-deification or union with the godhead may be attained.

In how far is this definition of occultism relevant to the history of energy healing? The first three features of Bogdan and Djurdjevic’s model apply relatively smoothly to schools of energy healing that have direct roots in the occult milieu (e.g., Pranic Healing, Reiki, and Therapeutic Touch, see Zoehrer 2020; 2024b; cf. Stein 2025). The therapeutic theory underlying these healing approaches involve (1) cartographies of a subtle body that correlates *cakras*—ethereal force centers—to particular physiological and psychological functions; (2) the belief that treating the *cakras* induces the restoration of well-being due to the principle of correspondence;⁷² and (3) the emphasis on the practitioner’s mindset and ability to visualise while conducting a healing ritual. However, although the healing agent is understood to be of divine origin in these schools, it cannot generally be claimed that they aspire for ‘gnosis’ or self-deification. A weaker formulation of Bogdan and Djurdjevic’s fourth point—i.e., the pursuit of knowledge of subtle energies and their control—would thus characterise occultism-inspired forms of energy healing more accurately.

To underscore the historical influence of occult (and by extension esoteric) currents on popular spirituality, the British cultural historian Christopher Partridge (2004; 2013) introduced the umbrella term ‘occulture.’ Building on Colin Campbells’s sociological notion of the ‘cultic milieu,’ occulture denotes the “contemporary alternative spirituality in the West” (Partridge 2004: 66). This expansive category ranges from holistic well-being culture, Gaia worship, UFO religion and psychedelics, to astrology, kabbalah, channelling, and New Age science (ibid.: 70). Partridge’s eclectic category is useful for capturing a vast but highly interrelated milieu. However, its weakness lies in presupposing a connection between self-described occult groups (e.g., Theosophy) and contemporary spiritual culture. Whether such links in fact exist must be examined on a case-by-case basis, as my thesis sets out to do for the field of energy healing. Before examining specific genealogies of energy healing and their occult roots, some reflections from a medical anthropological and psychosomatic point of view are warranted.

⁷² For example, the Chinese-Filipino healer Choa Kok Sui explicitly refers to a “Principle of Correspondence” in outlining his method and illustrates it thus: “What affects the energy body or the etheric body will tend to affect the physical body. And what affects the physical body will tend to affect the energy body. When the energy body is healed, the physical body will also be healed” (Choa Kok Sui 2012: 85).

3. Theorising Energy Healing

3.1. Placebo Effect or Mind-Body-Medicine?

“The credulous believe too much;
the scientific too little.”

—Albert Abrams⁷³

Is energy healing nothing less than the unwitting incorporation of the power of placebo? From a purely biomedical perspective many complementary remedies, including energy healing, could be interpreted this way. After all, the scientific investigation of animal magnetism—one of the most influential forebears of energy healing—was ‘debunked’ so to speak in 1784 through a formal investigation of the French Royal Academy of Sciences and the Paris Faculty of Medicine as “the first recorded instance of the use of a placebo” (Riskin 2009: 119). Mesmer’s therapy thus became an unprecedented nodal point in the histories of “psychology, medical testing, experimental practice” and state supervision of scientific conduct (ibid.). However, although Mesmer’s *theory* was spectacularly disproven, nobody doubted that his technique had an *effect* on his patients. This conundrum, the incongruence between explanation and effect, lies at the heart of placebos.

Placebo has been somewhat paradoxically defined as a substance or treatment “that is without specific activity for the condition being treated,” but which may be consciously employed for its “nonspecific psychological” or “presumed specific therapeutic effect” (Shapiro and Shapiro 1997: 41). Derived from the Latin verb meaning ‘to please,’ placebo *sensu stricto* refers to the administration of sham treatments to please or placate anxious patients. A patient’s mere expectation that an intervention will ameliorate his or her suffering, may result in a betterment of the condition—even if that intervention involves the proverbial ‘sugar pill,’ a saline injection, or the instructions of an authoritative figure (be it a doctor in a white lab coat or a trusted holistic practitioner). The term placebo is thus used in a confusing way, denoting both an ineffective form of treatment and an effective result of treatment. It points to the obscure borderland between mechanism and meaning, between neuroscience and symbols, where biomedical explanations reach their limits.

The placebo effect directly challenges the central assumption that the body can be modelled and manipulated purely in terms of physical and chemical mechanisms. The gold-standard for evaluating the efficacy of a medical intervention is the randomised controlled clinical trial, which involves a comparison of the “real” treatment with a “sham” drug (or surgery or device). Although irritating to

⁷³ Abrams 1916: 258.

some investigators, a significant number of patients receiving the sham treatment actually do improve compared to the control group that receives no treatment (Kaptchuk 2002).

The question of the therapeutic benefit of the placebo effect constituted the central theme of a conference that took place at Harvard University in 1994 and resulted in the volume *The Placebo Effect: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (1997), edited by the historian of science Anne Harrington (b. 1960). In recognition of the placebo effect and implicitly rehashing the stance of Romantic psychosomatic medicine, several participating theorists have demanded that the placebo effect should be integrated into the healthcare system and that “ideological biases of western science” pose an obstacle that ought to be removed for the sake of improving the quality of treatments (Harrington 1997: 233).

Arthur Kleinman (b. 1941), a discussant at the Harvard conference, pointed at reductionist mechanism—the scientific outlook that led to the very success of biomedicine—as the major cause of resistance to a more integrative view of medicine:

As a medical anthropologist, I will tell you that one of the most profound things about western biomedicine that differentiates it from every other system of medicine we know of in the world—as well as from western medicine prior to about the end of the seventeenth century—is its antivitalism. Its antivitalism, which we take as one of its chief achievements, is in fact what differentiates it from all other forms of healing. (Harrington 1997: 233)

In contrast, pre-scientific, traditional medicine would typically draw on notions such as “power” or “vital energy,” which function as “central mediators between the social and the physiological, the interpersonal and the personal” (ibid.). Kleinman asserted that the absence of these therapeutic agents “as an explanatory construct in biomedicine” would restrict the potential for a deeper understanding of healing (ibid.: 234).

There is mounting evidence that the placebo effect is a multi-layered phenomenon and that it depends on several psychosocial and environmental factors. Two theories have dominated the medical view on the placebo effect. One holds that the placebo effect is the result of suggestion on the side of the physician and an attitude of positive expectation on the side of the patient. The other suggests that placebos are a consequence of psychological conditioning (Finniss et al. 2010). However, a number of physicians promoting the integration of complementary and alternative approaches into medical practice suggest that there is more to the placebo effect than only psychological mechanisms. They argue for a placebo effect *sensu lato* which depends on three factors: first, the quality of interaction (or in mesmeric terms *rapport*) between the giver and receiver of the ‘drug’ or treatment; second, the interpersonal context including the spaces in which therapeutic encounters occur; and third, the rituals characterising a therapeutic setting that enables relaxation, focuses the attention of the client, and may reframe a

problem in another light that endows the sufferer with a renewed sense of meaning (Moerman 2011; Dieppe 2019).

Compared to biomedicine, far more attention has been given to the value of the therapeutic relationship in psychotherapy but without subsuming it under a vague placebo response. Several researchers and clinical practitioners have argued that the client-therapist relationship is the single largest factor that causes psychotherapeutic change (Orlinsky et al. 1994; Castongauy and Hill 2012). In proposing a generic model of psychotherapy based on an empirical meta-study Klaus D. Grawe (1943–2005) underscored the primary importance of the therapeutic relationship (which he denoted ‘alliance’) next to four other factors that are common in all schools of psychotherapy: activation of the clients’ resources (e.g., their motivation, skills, and strengths); the clarification of a client’s problem and its origins; problem actuation, that is, the processing of the client’s emotional experience of the problem during therapeutic sessions; and, finally, mastery or the application of appropriate coping strategies (Grawe et al. 1994; Grawe 2000).

Decades before Grawe suggested his common factors theory, the American psychiatrist Jerome D. Frank (1909–2005) explored cross-cultural features in the work of professionals as well as that of traditional healers and shamans (1961; cf. Frank and Frank, 1993). The key components of healing that Frank identified were (1) restoring morale and a sense of meaning (congruent with the clients’ local culture); (2) nurturing hope for improvement; (3) establishing an alliance between healer and client; (4) the healer’s ability to persuade; and (5) the compatibility between the views of the client and those of the healer. Keeping in mind the abovementioned distinction between disease and illness, biomedical or psychiatric definitions of disease and the differentiation between physical and psychological disorders are irrelevant to traditional healing systems, which focus on the experience of illness and healing embedded within a specific cultural context.

Arguably, similar factors could be at play in holistic settings. Given a highly specialised health system that is dominated by anonymity, time restraints, and managed care, holistic practitioners have found a market niche. Taking a quasi-pastoral (not to say psychotherapeutic) interest in the well-being of their clients, they offer something that is too often neglected in an apparatus- and pill-based medicine: attention to the individual. The ‘soft’ factor of the therapeutic relationship must therefore be kept in mind when discussing energy healing as in some cases it may be more crucial to the success of an energetic treatment than a particular conceptual metaphor, symbolic world, or technique (cf. Lown 1999). However, in contrast to psychotherapy or pastoral care, the approach of energy healing is generally not conversation but psychosomatic intervention.

Despite the importance of the therapeutic relationship, research on psychotherapeutic processes and results often emphasise the central role of the clients’ contribution—particularly their religious habitus.

A growing body of literature is highlighting the effect of individual religiosity (i.e., spirituality) and therapy outcomes for both psychotherapeutic and biomedical interventions. One impressive (although tentative) example was provided by David H. Rosmarin (n.d.a.), the director of the Spirituality and Mental Health Program at McLean Hospital and an associate professor of psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. His survey with psychiatric patients (n=159) concluded that respondents who stated belief in (presumably the Judeo-Christian) god had reduced potential for depression and self-harm, and, moreover, reported a higher level of psychological well-being than atheist or agnostic respondents (Rosmarin et al. 2013). The study also indicated that belief in “God” correlated strongly with increased expectations to gain from treatment, which suggests that faith is “a general cognitive attribute representing an optimistic mental schema” (ibid.: 445). Whereas the impact of theism on symptom change remained significant when the data was controlled for age and gender, no significant differences in therapeutic outcomes were measured in relation to religious affiliation.⁷⁴

The study Rosmarin’s team seems to affirm that fuzzy qualities such as trust, expectation, and hope are key ingredients to a healing process and that these qualities can be nurtured by a religious outlook and commitment on the side of the client. There appears to be a growing body of evidence for a positive influence of traditional forms of religious belief and practice on mental health (e.g., coping with stress, recovery from depression, reducing anxiety, life satisfaction), as well as physical health (e.g., coping with chronic illness, more rapid recovery from injuries, lower pain levels, healthier lifestyle choices). Whereas the beneficial effects of religiosity seem to outweigh, neurotic and pathological aspects do occur in religious contexts and must not be underestimated (e.g., cases of excessive dependency, rationalisation for prejudice and aggression, self-harming forms of asceticism). But on balance, religiosity is recognised to enhance various dimensions of health (cf. Koenig 1997; Koenig et al. 2012; Rosmarin and Koenig 2020; Koenig et al. 2024). One may reasonably hypothesise that such findings could also be relevant to the belief in subtle energies. However, only randomised clinical trials with a representative cohort could determine whether a client’s belief in the agency of energies correlates with a significant increase in subjective well-being and improved recovery.

The placebo effect is mostly used in the biomedical context as a code for causes that do not fit the mechanistic paradigm of science, which constrains itself to physical or chemical explanations. From a cultural studies point of view, the phenomenon points to a broader emerging field of research that has

⁷⁴ Assuming that religiosity correlates with health benefits regardless of confession, does this include atheism? An Innsbruck-based research group (Schnell et al. 2020) tested the hypothesis whether the *stability* of a worldview (that is, commitment to an ideology rather than its content, i.e., the belief in a transcendent reality) could provide a basis for stress resilience. Nominally religious *and* atheist individuals were thus expected to show decreased physiological (i.e., cardiovascular and cortisol) stress responses. However, the findings from a sample of fifty university students indicated lower stress responses among religious respondents compared with atheists, agnostics, and spiritual seekers (‘spiritual, but not religious’). Whereas self-ascribed atheism may suggest a stable, orientating worldview, it does not appear to be a predictor for stress resilience (ibid: 2984). However, due to the limited sample size of the study, its results should be viewed as preliminary.

been termed ‘mind-body medicine.’ In her historical study, *The Cure Within* (2008), Harrington subsumed under mind-body medicine various approaches including psychosomatics, the power of suggestion, positive thinking, meditation, mind-body exercises such as *qìgōng*, and the remarkable health impact of close-knit communities. In highlighting the growing biomedical interest in the mind’s role in healing during the 1990s, Harrington remarked that the “placebo effect was important above all for what it taught us about self-healing. It was not just a trick; it produced real (physiologically discernible) effects” (Harrington 2008: 133). The excitement around the research on the placebo effect led to the suggestion that religion “can produce a supercharged placebo effect—and now we have the scientific evidence to prove it” (ibid.: 135). In recent years, several biomedically trained physicians are indeed warming up to ideas that have roots in the American “religion of healthy-mindedness” (James 1902: 78–87), i.e., Christian Science and New Thought, and have crucially influenced practices of the New Age movement and the holistic milieu (cf. Schmid 2018; Täuber 2020)—including energy healing as this thesis will demonstrate (Zoehrer 2024; Zoehrer 2025b; 2025d).⁷⁵

Heuristically speaking, energy healing has a large overlap with mind-body medicine as described by Harrington for at least three reasons: First, energy healers typically deal with psychosomatic symptoms. Second, suggestion certainly plays a role in the dyadic relationship between practitioner and client. Keeping in mind the potential impact of a placebo, a healing agent does not have to be physically *real* in order to be therapeutically (either biomedically or psychotherapeutically) *effective*. Third, the conviction that vital energies that flood the universe or operate within living organism is inherently positive and life-affirming.

Neither a solely biomedical nor a psychotherapeutic framework can fully do justice to the multifaceted nature of energy healing. A biomedical study may measure the heartrate variability of patients undergoing an energetic treatment and thereby prove a relaxation response. However, this approach excludes the crucial qualitative factor of the therapeutic relationship. Likewise, a purely psychotherapeutic framing of energy healing would render a distorted picture as it overlooks that although holistic practitioners engage in conversation with their clients, inquire about their biography, and encourage them to specify their problems verbally, their form of intervention is not primarily logocentric. Although energy healers tend to emphasise rapport and the meaningful relationship between healer and client, this relationship is placed not only within a physical or psychosocial context, but often within a culturally shaped ritual setting. Accordingly, the experience of an energetic healing session involves the dimensions of the somatic, the subconscious, and symbolic codes that correspond to mental and bodily states.

⁷⁵ For a discussion of the problematic ethical implications related to the mantra that thoughts could “create one’s own reality,” see Horowitz 2014: 234–246.

In Section 4 of the Introduction, I argued against the use of the label ‘medicine’ in the context of energy healing as the term may suggest that the field is an established subfield of science-based medicine. With the advancement of psychoneuroimmunology, the integration of energetic practices is not to be ruled out completely. However, the question remains whether scientific plausibility is the only criterion for determining whether a practice is conducive to health and well-being. What informs an energetic ritual is a theoretical framework that usually involve anthropologies that go beyond the biomedical view of the human body. Energetic techniques may range from simple to elaborate forms, but a common aspect is the translation of a belief in a subtle healing agent—often expressed in metaphors of fluidity or radiation (cf. Zoehrer 2025b)—into concrete practical applications. The way the healing agent is imagined determines the shape of a healing ritual and thus the healing experience. Kleinman questioned the dismissal of pre-scientific healing practices on the grounds that they do not conform to the rigorous standards demanded by science. After all, “there is also a rigor to the way that metaphors move through social space, the way that rituals become part of the cultural body in the phenomenology of lived experience” (quoted in Harrington 1997: 237). This is also the point of Harrington’s term ‘mind-body medicine’: to reinforce the medical validity of ‘softer’ forms of therapeutic intervention and traditional lifestyles. However, to avoid the impression that mind-body medicine exerts a deterministic effect on patients—and to emphasise the importance of the patient’s or client’s active participation in the healing process—I propose using the term ‘mind-body healing’ instead, which, in practice, functions largely as a synonym for ‘holistic healing.’

3.2. Energy as a Therapeutic Medium

An idea that is common among therapeutic systems all over the world is that well-being can be restored by connecting a patient with a singular healing agent. In order to allow a comparative analysis of different schools across the historically related fields of exorcism, mesmerism, hypnosis, and psychoanalysis, the German clinical psychologist Burkhard Peter (b. 1949) introduced the term ‘therapeutic tertium.’ Peter, who had studied hypnotherapy under the American psychiatrist Milton H. Erickson (1901–1980), observed that most psychotherapeutic and psychosomatic treatments assume effective therapeutic factors that transcend the capacities of the therapeutic relationship. These factors can be distinguished between (a) a negative, anti-therapeutic tertium as the ultimate cause behind disease or suffering, and (b) a positive, therapeutic tertium that enables the healing process (Peter 2000; 2009). What makes this theory particularly interesting for the field of energy healing is that it offers a fresh understanding on how tertium-centred psychosomatic interventions function from a comparative-systematic point of view.

Neither negative nor positive *tertia* are directly accessible by the therapist (or healer) and the patient (or client). However, for healing to take place, the dyad of therapist and patient needs to activate the positive *tertium* and let it act (passively) as the healing agent that overcomes the effects of the negative *tertium*. Peter (2009: 70) vividly described this “ancient, magical healing thought,” that is, the belief in a transpersonal healing principle:

People have always believed that they have no control over their psychological or psychosomatic symptoms. This has to do with the fact that they experience them as involuntary, uninfluenceable, sometimes as coming from outside. It is therefore not unusual that they did not look for the healing principle within themselves, but rather outside of themselves, and ascribed I-foreign characteristics to it. They turned to a doctor, therapist or healer who they assumed possessed the special ability or respective skills to connect with this healing principle—the therapeutic *tertium*—and make it available for them.⁷⁶

According to Peter, the therapeutic *tertium* functions as a mental construct to solve a central dilemma: neither the healer nor the sufferer can directly control the causes underlying a mental or psychosomatic disease, and yet, therapeutic interventions are often successful. For example, whereas the exorcist Pater Johann Joseph Gaßner (1727–1779) sought to access a spiritual agent by means of ritual, Mesmer claimed to mediate a physical agent through his magnetic *séances*. Although both healing powers were conceptualised within different theoretical frameworks—one theological, the other physical—they had in common a *transpersonal* property (Peter 2009: 70).

During the resurgence of hypnotherapy in the 1970s, Erickson proposed the ‘unconscious’ (the history of which can be traced to Romantic medicine) as an *intrapersonal* therapeutic *tertium*. According to Erickson, the unconscious could be thought of as a wise, knowing, and benevolent instance within a person that can be contacted by both, therapist and patient, in the latter’s hypnotic state (*ibid.*: 74–75). The postulation of a therapeutic *tertium* in hypnotherapy thus solved the dilemma of external control or manipulation: It is not the hypnotiser who effects a healing process, but the inner personal resources represented by the idea of the unconscious.⁷⁷

This theoretical development in the field of hypnosis opens a striking parallel with energy healing, which is *per definitionem* a *tertium*-centred form of therapy: The role of the energy healer is generally

⁷⁶ Original: “Menschen haben von jeher geglaubt, sie hätten keine Kontrolle über ihre psychischen oder psychosomatischen Symptome. Das hat damit zu tun, dass sie diese als unwillkürlich, unbeeinflussbar, manchmal wie von außen kommend erleben. Es ist daher nicht ungewöhnlich, dass sie auch das heilende Prinzip nicht bei sich selbst, sondern außerhalb von sich suchten und diesem Ich-fremde Eigenschaften zuschrieben. Sie wandten sich an einen Arzt, Therapeuten oder Heiler, von dem sie annahmen, dass er die besondere Fähigkeit oder entsprechende Fertigkeiten besitze, sich mit diesem heilenden Prinzip – dem therapeutischen *Tertium* – in Verbindung zu setzen und es für sie nutzbar zu machen.”

⁷⁷ Notably, the term ‘resource orientation’ was coined through Erickson’s hypnotherapy and is common property in contemporary psychotherapy (Peter 2009: 76).

understood not as the cause of healing but as activating the self-healing powers ('energy') that are latent in the client, thus respecting the latter's autonomy. Although some psychologically oriented schools of energy healing aim to render unconscious material conscious for the sake of resolving psychosomatic issues (e.g., Emotional Freedom Technique), the majority of energy healing rituals pursue a more passive than cognitive approach in order to 'let the energy flow' and restore 'balance,' i.e., well-being as the therapeutic objective. In contrast to Erickson's hypnotherapy, there is no consensus among energy healers whether the healing power of energy is conceptualised as transpersonal (e.g., of cosmic or divine origin) or as intrapersonal (e.g., a life-force inherent in a human organism). The theorised locus of energy as a therapeutic tertium thus depends on the specific school or orientation.

The therapeutic tertium is an imaginary agent. Nonetheless, it is useful in bridging the gap between voluntary/expressible and involuntary/inexpressible processes that take place in a psychosomatic system. As the Viennese scholar of religion Karl Baier noted, the utility of this notion is that it may serve as an analytical tool to elucidate the structure of therapeutic theories without normatively evaluating their implicit truth claims. Crucially, the "ways in which the tertium and its activity are understood determine the roles of other agents within the healing process [e.g., therapist, patient, ritual, use of mediums] and the understanding of the process *in toto*" (Baier 2020b: 36). For the context of energy healing, the therapeutic tertium is generally denoted 'energy,' but can be specified under a different term—for example, as 'Prana,' 'Ki,' 'universal life energy,' or 'quantum potential'—corresponding to the specific tradition of an energetic practice.

When a singular healing agent is mediated to the patient, it is either transferred via direct human actions on the part of the therapist or via ritual objects. Baier captured this phenomenon under the notion of "therapeutic mediology," which designates "all manner of theoretical reflections on human mediality and technical media, such as devices and pharmaceuticals, that are considered to mediate the primal healing agent within a given medical or psychotherapeutic school" (Baier 2020b: 33). Building on Peter's notion of 'therapeutic tertium,' Baier applied the analytical category of therapeutic mediology to examine the concepts of three leading mesmerists: Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), the founder of the original system of animal magnetism, which Mesmer conceptualised as a medical application of physics and cosmological principles (iatrophysics); Kluge, an empirically oriented physician and representative of medical mesmerism who described in detail a wide range of mesmeric manual techniques that emphasised the magnetiser as medium; and Dietrich Georg von Kieser (1779–1862), likewise a Romantic physician but strongly influenced by Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. In contrast to Kluge, Kieser's therapeutic tertium was envisioned as the quasi-animistic activity of a 'telluric' force. He assumed that this force was inherent in metals, water, and plants, perceivable through adequate sensors such as the pendulum and the dowsing rod, and could be utilised for therapeutic purposes via adaptations of Mesmer's *baquets*—wooden tub-like containers filled with various materials and water that provided several patients at a time with animal magnetism (Baier 2020b).

The advantage of Baier's approach lies in bringing attention to the aspect of human and technical media in the therapeutic context. As the body techniques and the material culture of mesmerism prefigure the forms of later healing approaches, Baier's mesmeric mediology serves as a systematic paradigm. It complements research on mesmerism conducted solely from the perspective of a history of ideas, where the focus is usually put on the connections between animal magnetism and physics, magnetic theologies, and preceding forms of *magia naturalis* (ibid.: 34). Following Baier's systematisation, the contemporary field of energy healing can be divided into approaches that mediate healing energies via direct human (inter-)actions (e.g., symbolic gestures, laying-on-of-hands, prayers, imagination techniques, etc.) and those that transfer energies by means of ritual or technical objects (e.g., flower essences, scents, colours, musical instruments, radionic devices, etc.) (Endler 2020; cf. Introduction, section 5).

Therapeutic mediology is a basic theoretical framework that classifies tertium-centred approaches and outlines their essential elements without making normative claims about their ontological status or their effectiveness. Whether Mesmer's fluidum is indeed an imponderable, physical substrate or rather a figment of the 'imagination' as the Royal commission of the Academy of Sciences concluded, is a secondary question.⁷⁸ Keeping the formal structure of a tertium-centred therapeutic setting in mind, the focus of this thesis is the semantic evolution of the term energy as a therapeutic tertium, which—as will be demonstrated in detail (Zoehrer 2025b)—has significant roots in animal magnetism and adopted its central characteristic of being “located somewhere in-between mind and matter, being finer than usual matter but also too physical to be pure consciousness” (Baier 2020b: 36–37).

Energy-as-therapeutic-tertium can be imagined as a transpersonal agent, e.g., 'Prana' and 'universal life energy' (echoing Mesmer's cosmic fluidum), or as an intrapersonal agent, e.g., body's intelligence (reminiscent of Paracelsus' *inwendig arzt*, the inner physician). In any case, the complexity of the biopsychosocial system that underlies an immune response is reduced to a single factor, the agency of a subtle, vitalising energy. Even if it is rarely spelled out in the emic context as such, the key feature of the healing energies—however they are ideologically framed—is *teleological*: Its agency is directed towards the goal of a healthy, fully functional mind-body-system. The clearest indication of the teleological nature of energy is the term 'self-healing power,' which is not a precise biomedical term but typical of the language used in alternative medicine.

Being inherently teleological, the therapeutic tertium is embedded within an anthropology and cosmology, and thus incongruent with the mechanistic premise underlying physics, biology, and biomedicine, which has prevailed in European universities over Romantic *Naturphilosophie* by 1850. This ideological tension lies at the heart of the boundary work between the contemporary biomedically-oriented health system and the holistic milieu (cf. Zoehrer 2024). My thesis outlines how mesmeric,

⁷⁸ On the mixed positions regarding the argument of imagination as the healing agent among Mesmer and early French mesmerists, see Barkhoff 1995: 65–66.

occult, and holistic therapies have employed two fundamental strategies to render the therapeutic medium plausible to members of a science-trusting society: the appeal to science and the appeal to (imagined) non-European tradition.

4. Two Emic Patterns of Plausibilisation

“A discovery is premature if its implications cannot be connected by a series of simple logical steps to canonical, or generally accepted, knowledge.”

—Gunther S. Stent (1924–2008)⁷⁹

4.1. The Appeal to Science: Futuristic Retro-Medicine⁸⁰

A characteristic subtype of esotericism-*sensu*-parascience is what I propose to call ‘futuristic retro-medicine.’ This category aims to capture the recurring pattern of attempts to rehash mesmerism and its derivatives in new, scientific (sounding) terminology. Throughout its 250-year long *Wirkungsgeschichte* (Barkhoff 1995), mesmerism has been a catalyst for a plethora of cultural currents, including spiritualism, occultism, psychic research, and alternative healing schools. Despite or rather because of its academic niche character from the 1850s onwards, mesmerism had a significant impact on alternative medicine and a large segment of contemporary forms of energy healing. In religious-therapeutic discourse, concepts such as the *fluidum*, *Od*, ether, mind vibrations, and (subtle) energy—though generally discredited by the scientific mainstream—have constituted central principles of healing (cf. Zoehrer 2025b). These notions were usually embedded within the broader anthropologies, cosmologies, and religious attitudes that crucially shaped the imagination of magnetic healers, occultists, and twentieth-century holistic theorists, practitioners, and entrepreneurs.

A common narrative among these groups is that the scientific establishment prematurely misunderstood and rejected theories of hidden forces. These would in fact bear profound insights about the essential nature of the universe and the potential for innovative applications, including therapeutic ones. Proponents of alternative healing conceptions expect these supposedly misjudged discoveries to be reevaluated and rehabilitated by the scientific community, thus catalysing an integration of scientific knowledge *and* spiritual wisdom that will forcefully advance the evolution of humankind.

Futuristic retro-medicine emerged from such anticipations of the imminent experimental validation of nature’s finer forces. Its retrospective momentum involves the implicit or explicit reference to an older theory of a subtle agent. The futuristic aspect manifests in a rhetoric of scientific revolution connected with a utopian vision of a new medicine, often imagined as the lynchpin of a physically and spiritually prospering society. However, the expectation of an impending paradigm shift was perpetually deferred,

⁷⁹ Stent 1972: 84. Stent was a German-American molecular biologist.

⁸⁰ This section lays the theoretical basis for the case studies presented in Zoehrer 2025b and 2025d.

not least due to the elusive nature of the phenomena in question and a lack of scientific interest in what has been considered at best a fringe subject.

The persistence of futuristic retro-medicine is evidenced by its recurrence in the work of diverse figures such as Karl von Reichenbach, Albert Abrams, Wilhelm Reich, Randolph Stone, Alice Bailey, William A. Tiller, Fritjof Capra, Richard Gerber, and James L. Oschman. To some degree, this selection of nine medical futurists may appear arbitrary and other similarly influential representatives could have been chosen instead. However, these cases sufficiently illustrate how futuristic retro-medicine has taken shape in different contexts. With the exception of von Reichenbach, who produced a prototype of the topos centred on his notion of *Od*, these are Western twentieth-century figures with varied professional backgrounds but sharing a common interest in advancing energy-based healing models and developed physicalist explanations for their legitimisation. Following an analysis of each author's specific articulation of futuristic retro-medicine, I will summarise its defining features as a genre.

Reichenbach and the "Future Unveiling of the Laws of Od"

The classic case of futuristic retro-medicine is offered by von Reichenbach. Despite essentially rehashing Mesmer's physicalist notion of animal magnetism (including, for example, its feature of polarity and its origin from the sun), von Reichenbach mentions mesmerism only casually throughout his work. In the preface to the first volume of *Der sensitive Mensch* (1854/1855), one of the major works outlining his theory and experiments, von Reichenbach classified animal magnetism as an application of the *Od* (derived from Odin, the Norse god)—a hypothetical imponderable perceptible only to those he referred to as 'sensitives':

So-called mesmerism, or magnetic healing, is a *special application* of the Odic force in therapeutic practice—though, unfortunately, being without any scientific framework and consists merely of an aggregate of incoherent observations. The terms *Od* and mesmerism therefore in no way conflict with one another; each has its own distinct meaning: *Od* is a *world force* and encompasses all of creation through its infinite operations; Mesmerism is a *special application* of the *Od* in healing, introduced by Dr. Mesmer. (von Reichenbach 1854: xxix; emphasis in the original)⁸¹

⁸¹ "Der sogenannte Mesmerismus, das magnetische Kurieren ist eine spezielle Anwendung des odischen Dynamids im Heilverfahren, die hierher leider ohne allen wissenschaftlichen Verband und aus einem bloßen Aggregate unzusammenhängender Wahrnehmungen bestehend. Die Ausdrücke *Od* und Mesmerismus stehen einander darum auf keine Weise im Wege, jedes hat seine eigene Bedeutung: *Od* ist eine *Weltkraft* und umfaßt die ganze Schöpfung in unendlichem Eingreifen; Mesmerismus ist eine von Dr. Mesmer eingeführte spezielle Anwendung des Odes im Heilverfahren."

Von Reichenbach thus claimed that his Odic doctrine would set mesmerism on a proper empirical footing. He was convinced that his discovery would revolutionise science and enable new therapeutic appliances that would be of immense help to the medical professions. Arguing for the *Od* as the fundamental, unifying force, von Reichenbach derived a kind of ‘theory of everything’ that encompassed the sciences (physics, chemistry, mineralogy, botany, physiology, and medicine) and the humanities (law, education, psychology, theology, arts). With unhinged enthusiasm and absolute conviction von Reichenbach declared that the theory of *Od* holds the key to the future of physiology and medicine:

Anyone who has not shied away from the effort to acquaint themselves with it will agree with me when I do not suppress the conviction that every physiologist and every physician must not only take note of it but study it thoroughly—otherwise, they will remain ignorant of an entire domain of the most important truths within their field. While the physiologist comes to understand a series of life functions in [the phenomenon of] sensitivity hitherto overlooked, the physician discovers in the *Od* a force and activity without the knowledge of which he ends up not only helpless in numerous cases but is incapable even of understanding the symptoms of the illness before him—let alone managing their treatment in any way. The Odic doctrine will thus soon widen the gap between the educated and the uneducated physician and will distinguish, in these areas, the man of science from the learned tradesman. This is not to say that every physician must become a magnetiser—that is far from my intent—but a physician who understands nothing of the terrestrial *Od*, the solar and lunar *Od*, the Odic poles of human beings, the Odic influence of baths, [...] or the powerful effects of *Od* on convulsions [...], will undoubtedly play a pitiable role at the bedside of a sensitive patient. *The present and future unveiling of the laws of the Odic force must exert an almost revolutionary influence on entire sections of medicine.* (von Reichenbach 1854: xxxiv; my translation, emphasis added)⁸²

Against polemicists who saw in the *Od*-theory just another form of ‘mysticism’ (i.e., esotericism in the sense of an inaccessible doctrine), von Reichenbach indignantly defended his discovery: “Nothing is

⁸² “Wer sich die Mühe nicht hat verdrießen lassen, davon Kenntniß zu nehmen, wird mir beistimmen, wenn ich die Ueberzeugung nicht unterdrücke, daß jeder Physiolog und jeder Arzt davon nicht nur Notiz nehmen, sondern sie gründlich kennen lernen muß, wenn er in seinem Fache nicht über ein ganzes Gebiet der wichtigsten Wahrheiten in Unwissenheit hintanbleiben will. Während der Physiolog eine Reihe bis jetzt übersehener Lebensfunktionen in der Sensitivität kennen lernt, findet der Arzt in dem Ode eine Kraft und Thätigkeit, ohne deren Kenntniß er in zahlreichen Fällen nicht nur gar keine Hülfe weiß, sondern nicht einmal zum Verständniß der ihm vor Augen liegenden Krankheitssymptome zu gelangen, viel weniger ihre Leitung irgend zu beherrschen im Stande ist. Die odische Lehre wird auf solche Weise bald den Abstand zwischen einem gebildeten und einem ungebildeten Arzte vergrößern und in diesen Fächern den Mann von Wissenschaft vom gelehrten Handwerksmann unterscheiden. Nicht, daß ich damit meine, jeder Arzt müsse ein Magnetiseur seyn, das liegt weit ab von meinem Sinn, aber ein Arzt, der weder vom Erdode der Lage, vom Sonnen- und Mondode, von den odischen Polen der Menschen, vom odischen Einflusse der Bäder, (...) noch von dem mächtigen Einfluss des Odes auf die Krämpfe etwas versteht, (...), spielt jedenfalls vor dem Krankenbette eines Sensitiven eine klägliche Rolle. Auf ganze Abschnitte in der Medicin muß die gegenwärtige und künftige Entschleierung der Gesetze des Odes einen nahezu umwälzenden Einfluß nehmen.”

concealed in my writings. On the contrary, many clear facts of nature and consciousness [...] are determined as scientific facts, and thus wrested from mysticism, wherever such may still occur.” (von Reichenbach 1854: xxiii, my translation).⁸³ Although the disapproval of the *Od* theory by the German scientific community of his day was practically unanimous, Reichenbach’s unifying subtle force served as the cornerstone of the grand occult narratives of the nineteenth century and provided a conceptual framework for a number of alternative medical devices that prefigured Albert Abrams’ therapeutic gadgets (for example, the “oscilloclast”), Wilhelm Reich’s “orgone energy accumulator,” Dewanchand Varma’s “Pranometer,” and the radionic devices operated by holistic service providers (cf. Zoehrer 2025b; Bernard 2025)

Abrams’ “New Concepts in Diagnosis and Treatment”

An explicit attempt to frame mesmerism in terms of energy (although not the first one, cf. Zoehrer 2025b), was articulated by the American physician Albert Abrams (1863–1924). In his book *New Concepts in Diagnosis and Treatment* (1916), Abrams noted that the “whole domain of physics is tending toward a unification of various forms of force under one great principle. All the cosmic forces are now comprehended in a single word—*energy*” (p. 255). If everything could be explained through the principle of energy, so could the human body: “The energy emanating from the human organism is electro-magnetic” (ibid.). As Mesmer did 150 years before, Abrams proposes to approach medicine from physical principles: “The laws of physical science are universal and apply equally to living organisms and so-called inanimate things. This iatro-physical conception demonstrates the trend of unifying the various forms of force under one great principle” (ibid.: vii).

The basic assumption underlying Abrams’ iatrophysics is that the universe and living organisms are ultimately the manifestation of energetic vibration:

What is regarded as matter, is only an effect of a particular kind of motion and without vibrations, we would know nothing of the world and the universe about us. The movements of the universe are the manifestations of a single agent which is called energy. Man is made up of vibrations and personality is identified with atomic combinations. Every living being is a transformer of energy and speaking specifically when a man thinks, he changes the energy of his environment (earth, air, sun) into nervous energy (Abrams 1916: 255).

⁸³ “In meinen Schriften wird nichts verborgen gehalten. Es werden im Gegentheile lauter klare Thatsachen der Natur und des Bewußtseins [...] als wissenschaftliche Thatsache festgestellt, also vielmehr der Mystik entrissen, wo irgend welche noch statthatte.”

Abrams suggested that the occult aura of mesmerism as well as spiritualism, clairvoyance, and psychometry (the ability to diagnose disease via touch) could be removed if only reframed in his physicalist theory (ibid., 9; 254–255). Although his proposal to ground therapeutic intervention in the singular principle of energy had a negligible impact on biomedicine, it was enthusiastically received by alternative practitioners and historically anticipated the approaches of both ‘energy medicine’ (the use of electromagnetic fields for diagnosis and cures, cf. Oschman 2000) and ‘radionics’ (device-based forms of distant or psychic healing, cf. Tansley 1972).

Reich’s “Discovery of the Orgone”

Another futuristic medical theory that centred on a particular conception of energy was proposed by the controversial Austrian physician and psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), a student of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Reich blended Freudian psychoanalysis, Marxist political critique, and speculative biophysics. He claimed to have conducted extensive experimental research on a cosmic energy that he referred to as ‘orgone,’ a vitalistic agent that animates every cell and process of an organism. Having derived his orgone theory from Freud’s notion of libido and C. G. Jung’s vitalism, Reich projected sexual potential to cosmic levels and regarded the release of this energy as the key to health (Heller 2012: 495). Reich’s therapy was primarily a bodily practice that aimed to remove bodily tensions, interpreted as muscular and emotional ‘armor,’ and enable the free ‘flow’ of the orgone. His belief in this psycho-physical energy was literal to the degree that he constructed ‘orgone energy accumulators,’ i.e., wooden and metal boxes to detect, collect, and increase the amount of orgone in the human body (cf. Kripal 2007: 458).⁸⁴

The two volumes of Reich’s *The Discovery of the Orgone* (1942 and 1948 respectively) were seminal to popularising the term ‘energy field’ in relation to biological systems (Reich 1973a; 1973b). Without any reference to auras, subtle bodies, or other occult terms, he described the human body as “surrounded by an organotic energy field whose range depends on the organism’s vegetative liveliness” (Reich 1973a: 385). In the preface to the second edition of *The Discovery of the Orgone* (volume 1), Reich emphasised the revolutionary scientific value of his “discovery”:

The discovery of the orgone was the result of the consistent, clinical application of the concept of ‘psychic energy,’ initially in the field of psychiatry. The present volume can be considered an extensive introduction to the newly opened field of orgone biophysics. (Reich 1942: ix)

⁸⁴ Reich’s energetic devices are reminiscent of Mesmer’s magnetised baquets, see the discussion on energetic mediums in section I.4.

Reich's ideas had an enormous influence on the counterculture of the 1960s (Kripal 2007: 231–235) and inspired the psychotherapists Fritz Perls (1893–1970) and Alexander Lowen (1910–2008), as well as the psychiatrist John Pierrakos (1921–2001). Perls was an associate of the Esalen Institute (est. 1962) in Big Sur, California, and co-created Gestalt therapy with his wife Laura (née Lore Posner, 1905–1990). Lowen developed a branch of body psychotherapy that he popularised through his book *Bioenergetics* (1975). He co-founded the New York-based Bioenergetics Institute (est. 1955) with his colleague Pierrakos. Pierrakos' psychosomatic therapy called Core Energetics substantially informed the energy healing school of Barbara Ann Brennan (1939–2022) (Pierrakos 1987; Brennan 1988: 31–34). Thus, although Reich's 'orgone biophysics' was far from scientific recognition, his visionary model spawned a current of new approaches to treating the body and mind.

Stone's "New Energy Concept"

One of the earliest therapy designers to use the terms 'energy' and 'healing' in a book title was the Austrian-American chiropractic Randolph Stone (b. Rudolf Bautsch, 1890–1981), the inventor of Polarity Therapy. Stone first presented his therapeutic model in the book *The New Energy Concept of the Healing Art* (1948), revised in 1957 under the title *Energy: The Vital Polarity in the Healing Art* (Young 2011, 13). Stone's texts—written in an idiosyncratic English—produced an eclectic blend of osteopathic, chiropractic, naturopathic methods with yoga, ayurveda, New Thought, Theosophy, and Paracelsan alchemy (ibid.: 9–13).⁸⁵ At the core of his "new energy concept" is a critique of the over-specialisation of the sciences that has led the loss of an "over-all [sic] picture of man as a living being with lines of force working in fields of finer energies. These lines of force constitute his real being, and operate in and through the body in a continual exchange of new energy, replacing depleted energy fields and used materials as well as worn out tissues" (Stone 1957: 2). This 'holistic' view of the human being is embedded in a worldview that regards energy patterns as the essential reality of the universe (ibid.: 7).

Despite his critical stance towards science, Stone emphasised that he promises no miracles but "describes a rational therapy" and "a science of the future" that makes a "mechanical approach" to healing "totally obsolete" (Stone 1957: 5). He claimed that his notion of a "wireless energy field" may integrate ancient and modern healing knowledge (ibid.: 2). This energy field would equal "Prana," the vital force animating the body and the "universal life force in nature" (ibid.: 3; 62). Reminiscent of animal magnetism, Stone conceived health and illness by means of fluidal metaphors of flow (or balance) and disruption. His suggested treatment consists in removing "Energy Blocks" which are the real cause of pain and restore the currents' harmonious flow within the body's energy field (ibid.: 2). A

⁸⁵ On the principle of the polarity in Romantic mesmerism see Baier 2020: 49.

characteristic element of Stone's method is the term polarity which describes the dual nature of the vital energy's "flow": The expanding, building, and active "yang"-movement on the one hand, and the complementary contracting, cleansing, and receptive "ying"-movement (ibid.: 74). Stone's principle of polarity is expressed in different parts of the client's body and the practitioner's laying-on-of-hands gestures.

In *Health Building* (1985)—a posthumously revised compilation of earlier booklets originally published in 1962—Stone's therapeutic framework is rearticulated within the millenarian framework of Alice Ann Bailey (née La Trobe-Bateman, 1880–1949). In the chapter titled "The New Age & Polarity Therapy," he proclaimed the scientific and technological advances of the age to be signs of an impending millennial transformation (Stone 1985: 30). Again taking up the topos of an integration of ancient and modern knowledge he proposed that emerging scientific fields such as atomic physics would ultimately validate Polarity Therapy, which he situated within a lineage extending from Paracelsus to "ancient concepts of life," namely "odic fluid, mesmerism, animal magnetism, and many other names" (ibid.: 30–31). In short, Stone was well aware of the indebtedness of his healing approach to Mesmer and attempted to rehabilitate mesmerism through a rhetorical appeal to cutting-edge physics.

Bailey's "Medicine of the Future"

In her posthumously published book *Esoteric Healing* (1953), the British-American post-Theosophical author Alice Bailey envisioned nothing less than a "medicine of the future" (Bailey 1953: 278). Eschewing an in-depth engagement with the state of medicine of her time, Bailey outlined speculative projections for the development of medicine across the next two centuries.

To this end, she implemented a Hegelian dialectic. First, she voiced a general critique of conventional biomedicine (e.g., over-specialisation). Then she criticised the polemical stance of alternative medicine towards orthodox practice, calling out their hostility against the medical profession as counterproductive (Bailey 1953: 256). Lastly, considering all present approaches of healing deficient, she proposed a synthesis of conventional medical training with spiritual healing techniques. Genuine healing depended on the mastery of esoteric principles by spiritually advanced individuals. Thus, the medical profession of the future would combine "exoteric" medicine (for example, expertise in anatomy and physiology) and "esoteric learning" (i.e., knowledge of the etheric body, force centres or *cakras* and their relation to the hormone system, clairvoyance, and the manipulation of subtle energies) to form a "new medical science" (ibid.: 530).

The scientific key terms in *Esoteric Healing* are 'energy,' 'magnetic,' and 'radiation.' Bailey's differentiation between 'magnetic' and 'radiatory' healing has no grounding in actual physical theories

but rather represents her incognito description of mesmeric and New Thought techniques. Bailey's therapeutic model can be regarded as one of several reformulations of what is essentially mesmerism, reinterpreted through the lenses of Theosophy (particularly Blavatsky) and New Thought. While she downplayed the role of magnetic (or 'pranic') healing, her system preserved several features of animal magnetism: the importance of establishing rapport with the patient, the perfusion of the universe with the healing agent, the use of fluidal and fire metaphors, the belief in the seat of a clairvoyant sense in the solar plexus, and attention to energetic hygiene (Zoehrer 2025d). Similar to Mesmer, Bailey asserted that a subtle, cosmic force was the central key to health and healing, and that her therapeutic theory was on the threshold of scientific and medical recognition. It is, however, remarkable that Bailey did not refer to Mesmer or mesmerism at all in her entire oeuvre, and to "animal magnetism" only once in *Esoteric Healing* (Bailey 1953: 370). Given that her idol Blavatsky—herself far from rigorous in citing her sources—frequently mentioned mesmerism, this is a notable case of source amnesia.

Whereas Mesmer endorsed an Enlightenment-inspired physicalism, Bailey's appeal to physics was clearly outshined by her recognition of an authority higher than science. The majority of her books—including *Esoteric Healing*—contains material that was allegedly channelled by a Tibetan named Djwhal Khul, an emissary of a hierarchical order of ascended masters. Central assertions in her therapeutic model, for example, the correlation between force centres and glands, the functions of the etheric body, or projection of subtle energies were allegedly revealed by the 'Tibetan' and would require empirical verification by an "open-minded endocrinologist" (Bailey 1953: 218). This highlights the occult underpinning of Bailey's vision: the claim of the existence and effects of subtle energies is beyond falsification. It is not through experimental evidence but through channelled information and initiation that its knowledge and control are learnt.

On the surface level, Bailey proposed an integrative vision of medicine. However, producing empirical clinical evidence or the objective diagnosis of symptoms were of little relevance to her. Typical for complementary paradigms, Bailey's therapeutic model prioritised salutogenesis over pathology. It aimed at sustaining energetic balance rather than the treatment of particular diseases. This careful stance mirrors the disclaimers of contemporary energy practitioners who present their work as supportive rather than substitutive of conventional treatments. Despite her revolutionary rhetoric, Bailey admitted the speculative nature of her claims, noting that "more research and investigation" would be necessary to substantiate the etheric (or vital) body as the foundation of medical science (Bailey 1953: 276). In any case, Bailey's therapeutic model was an essential part of her esoteric grand narrative and had immense influence on later approaches of energy healing.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ For a more detailed account of Bailey's energetic system as an illustrative case study of futuristic retro-medicine and its decisive impact on the field of energy healing, see Zoehrer 2025d.

Tiller's "Medicine of Subtle Energies"

The Stanford professor of material sciences William A. Tiller (1929–2022) began to advocate for parapsychology, occultism, and alternative medicine in the name of science in the early 1970s. His paper titled “Towards a Medicine of Subtle Energies” (1977) outlined the gist of what he would repeat in other articles and books on the subject (e.g., Tiller 1979; 1997; 1999).

Using the metaphor of an iceberg, Tiller underscored the limits of our conventional scientific worldview and asserted that “most of Nature [sic] is still hidden from us and we know it not” (Tiller 1977: 2). From this widely accepted vantage point, he picked up a common occult claim (without explicitly stating so): “There are energies functioning in Nature completely different from those known to us via conventional science and upon which our present technological society is built” (ibid.). The hidden dimensions of nature need to be sought beyond physics. By way of circular reasoning, Tiller’s “conclusion” is that “that we live in a multidimensional universe and are ourselves multidimensional beings” that range from physical and chemical structures to energies, mind, spirit, and the divine (ibid.: 4–5). Departing from an explicit anti-materialistic stance, he argued for a psychosomatic theory of illness and healing, in which the ultimate causes of pathology are to be sought at the “level of Mind” (ibid.: 7). Although Tiller prioritised the mind’s impact on health, he did not intend to belittle biomedical interventions since the different anthropological “levels are coupled,” which allows for “some feedback modification of energy structure at a higher [causal, i.e., mental] level” (ibid.: 7).

Without explicitly mentioning energy medicine or radionics, Tiller endorsed the principle of energy transference from machines to humans. He anticipated “that the future will bring new medical therapeutic devices designed to generate, restore and sustain harmonious energy patterns at electromagnetic and other conventional energy levels” (Tiller 1977: 8). Relativising the effectivity of such gadgets, he regarded the negative placebo effect (or nocebo) as a major factor limiting the effectiveness of objective therapeutic interventions:

Of course, no matter how sophisticated these devices will eventually be, it must be recognized that the patient has free will and thus can “screw up” the process by his or her own mental input if they so desire. This psychophysiological factor will eventually be taken fully into account as medicine realizes that when one enters the domain of *subtle energy therapies*, one moves into the domain of subjective science, where the mental and emotional states of the patient influence the process in lawful ways and thus are a necessary part of the protocol for achieving a given effect. (Tiller 1977: 8–9)

Tiller's choice of the term "subjective science" reveals his fundamentally scientistic outlook that rarely considers psychology as a serious point of reference. His therapeutic concept is coloured by the imagery of mesmerists and occultists, when he vaguely described healing as the channelling of a needed energetic "frequency" to the "particular dimensional level" of the healee (Tiller 1977: 8). He emphasised the need "to be sharply attuned to the one to be healed" in order to ensure optimal energy transference without losses (ibid.). Furthermore, the success of energetic healing would depend on the trust that the healee has in the healer. Fears or doubts would hinder the healer's efforts (ibid.). The elements of transferring a healing agent, the significance of rapport, and the use of suggestion clearly echoes mesmeric techniques, which Tiller does not explicitly mention (Tiller 1977: 8).

While his article is brimming with highly technical sounding rhetoric, Tiller casually mentioned the correspondence between endocrine glands and *cakras*—an idea that first emerged in the occult discourse of the late 1920s and was popularised through Bailey's work (cf. Leland 2016: 226–227): "The endocrine-chakra pairs can be thought of as transducers of energy between the physical and other dimensions of the universe" (Tiller 1977: 10). Despite Tiller's credentials in material physics, the genre of his texts on subtle energies should be considered 'New Age science' (cf. Hanegraaff 1996) with a focus on theorising traditional occult themes and psychical research.

Tiller contributed regularly to the journal *Subtle Energies* (1990–2010), which aimed at studying the physiological and therapeutic effects of biofeedback, energy healing, yoga, and other mind-body exercises (cf. Zoehrer 2025b). Underscoring his role in the field, Tiller was frequently asked to contribute forewords or endorsements to books that promote energy healing in futuristic terms, for example, Richard Gerber's *Vibrational Medicine* (1988; see below), William Collinge's *Subtle Energy: Awakening to the Unseen Forces in Our Lives* (1998) and Richard Bartlett's *Matrix Energetics* (2007).⁸⁷ Tiller thus used his publicly perceived credibility as a physicist in the service of holistic conceptions.

Capra's "New Vision of Reality"

Drawing on the Kuhnian paradigm shift from Newtonian to modern physics, Capra proposed a "New Vision of Reality." Under this heading, the key figure of the 1980s New Age discourse (cf. Hanegraaff 1996; Bochinger 1994) presented a chapter on holistic health in his book *The Turning Point* (1982). True to his integralist approach, Capra envisioned holistic healing methods that are "consistent with the new physics" (Capra 1982: 305). However, the health revolution would be relatively effortless as holistic healing can adopt the medical wisdom that has been preserved in ancient and non-Western cultures.

⁸⁷ Bartlett, a trained chiropractic, provides a typical case of futuristic retro-medicine with a strong focus on holistic interpretations of quantum physics and their translation into healing rituals.

Extrapolating his controversial argument from *The Tao of Physics* (1975), Capra asserted that the advancement of modern science and medicine would steadily approach the knowledge and spirituality of many traditional cultures. Exploring the foundations for a future medicine, Capra assembled a patchwork of diverse therapeutic approaches: shamanism, Hippocratic medicine, Chinese medicine, psychosomatic self-healing, and contemporary forms of alternative medicine including Reichian bodywork and “energy medicine.”

In order to update energy medicine to the current state of physics, Capra critically addressed the common association of subtle energies with flows and other quasi-physical terms such as fluctuation, rhythm, vibration, and resonance. Rather than understanding these terms literally he proposed to see them as metaphorical representations of the dynamic patterns characteristic of self-organising systems (Capra 1982: 340). He suggested that these metaphors effectively capture the behavior of complex dynamic systems—particularly biological organisms—but rejected the notion that subtle energies were identical with empirically measurable physical energies. In this vein, he dismissed prescientific notions of *qi* as a subtle substance or force and reinterpreted it as a systemic principle of living organisms, expressed in terms of flow. Encapsulated in the language of *qi* are complex processes such as the circulation of fluids in the body and the continual exchange between organism and environment (ibid.: 314). Capra’s attempt to rationally reframe subtle energies as a metaphor has remained a minority position within the broader holistic health community (cf. Zoehrer 2025b).

At the heart of Capra’s therapeutic vision is the integration of science and spirituality. The major hindrance to realising this ideal was the dominance of the mechanistic view of the human body as a machine. He proposed a “systems view of living organisms” as both the antidote to mechanistic biomedicine and the foundation “for a new approach to health and health care” (Capra 1982: 321). As in the case of Tiller, Capra’s credentials as a physicist bolstered his public perception as a credible and authoritative spokesperson on religious-therapeutic matters. His reputation as a science populariser allowed him to pave the way for a plethora of books, publications, and seminars on holistic healing subsumed under the ‘New Age’ label (cf. Leane 2007). However, in contrast to Tiller, whose popular writings focused on promoting ‘energy medicine,’ Capra’s thematic interests were broader and encompassed mysticism, psychology, biology, ecology, economics, and socio-political questions.

Capra’s *The Turning Point* was listed as “recommended reading” in a popular guidebook for energy healing titled *Vibrational Medicine* (1988). It was authored by Richard Gerber (1954–2007), a specialist in internal medicine and holistic theorist, to whom we shall now turn.

Gerber's "Medicine for the New Age"

Embracing the revolutionary rhetoric typical of 1980s New Age scientism, Gerber's *Vibrational Medicine* set out to transcend the "Newtonian paradigm of physics" that he claimed formed the basis of conventional biomedicine—thus pursuing the same line of argument as Capra. The old paradigm is to be supplanted by "the Einsteinian viewpoint," which Gerber believed to offer a framework for understanding human beings as "interpenetrating, interactive energy fields" (Gerber 1988: 34). Rather than viewing the body as a complex biological machine—a perspective he associated with Newtonian mechanics—Gerber's position is explicitly vitalistic. He posits the existence of a "unique form of subtle energy," referred to as "life-force" or the "spirit that animates all living creatures," which—contradicting his allusions to an Einsteinian paradigm—is not yet fully understood by twentieth-century scientists (ibid.: 32). Unfortunately, he left his readers in the dark on how Einstein's theories would endorse vitalism, underscoring a more ceremonial or rhetorical scientism compared to Capra's physics-as-metaphor.

The energetic conception of the human being, Gerber argued, marks a departure from the conventional biomedical model. It is intertwined with spirituality: "This spiritual dimension is an aspect of human nature that is not taught in medical school nor well understood by most physicians. But the spiritual element is a part of human existence that must be taken into account if we are to truly understand the basic nature of health, illness, and personal growth" (Gerber 1988: 32). He further maintained that a truly progressive medicine—one open to alternative approaches—would inevitably rediscover the "human multidimensional anatomy [. . .] described by ancient schools of healing throughout the world," with the "etheric body" as one of its key components (ibid.: 33). Similar to Capra, Gerber regarded modern physics *and* ancient wisdom as the key sources from which the medicine of the future needs to draw.

Recognisable echoes of Bailey's millenarian vision are found in the chapter titled "The Emergence of Medicine for the New Age" (Gerber 1988: 415–466):

We are poised at a unique point in human history. Humanity is literally at the dawning of a New Age. Within the last 30 to 40 years the acquisition of knowledge and information has accelerated to a tremendous pace, beyond that seen upon this planet in all of recorded human history. (Gerber 1988: 415)

Gerber argued for the dawn of a New Age not by means of astrological calculation or revelation, but by listing the scientific breakthroughs of his time: systems theory, holography, high-energy particle physics, and new diagnostic imagining systems (for example, the electron microscope, the computed tomography scan, and magnetic resonance imaging). Yet, referring to Capra, Gerber suggested that modern science and ancient thought seek the same goal only with different means: "the old Oriental and Vedic teachers

came to their insights through meditation and inner psychic probing of the universe, while modern scientists have arrived at their conclusions through a more mechanistic, electronic, and empirical approach” (Gerber 1988: 417).

Following the trail trodden by Bailey and Tiller, Gerber was convinced that the “spiritual/holistic medicine of the future” surpasses biomedicine since it allegedly deals with the true cause of illness “at the subtle-energy level” (Gerber 1988, 428). Reflecting New Thought idealism (perhaps filtered through Bailey), “consciousness” takes priority over “energy” in Gerber’s model and is indeed “the highest form of energy” (ibid., 418). Picking up a Neoplatonic-Theosophical topos (and a hallmark in Bailey’s books), he viewed the journey of consciousness through matter as “the strongest driving force for the evolutionary process” of both humanity and the planet (ibid.). Gerber envisioned “holistic medicine” to be more than psychosomatic therapy and regarded “spirit,” the source of life, as a central “motivating factor in health” (ibid.: 419):

For truly, it is the endowing power of spirit that moves, inspires, and breathes life into that vehicle we perceive as the physical body. A system of medicine which denies or ignores its existence will be incomplete, because it leaves out the most fundamental quality of human existence—the spiritual dimension. (Gerber 1988: 419)

Gerber’s 1+4 anthropology (physical body plus the etheric, astral, mental, and causal bodies) was likely derived from Theosophical or post-Theosophical (i.e., Baileyan) sources (cf. Zoehrer 2025d). In line with the holistic thrust and implicitly continuing the nineteenth-century vitalism/mechanism debate, Gerber’s future medicine anticipated a shift from reductionism and the machine-model of living organisms to holism and the recognition of soul (Gerber 1988: 423). Among the practices of the “holistic medicine of the future” are “psychoenergetic approaches,” i.e., subtle-energy therapies including “homeopathy, [Bach] flower essences, gem elixirs, and a variety of other spiritual healing modalities” as well as the use of crystals and radionic devices (ibid.: 424; 428–429; 431). Future strategies to cope with psychological and environmental stress should additionally include meditation, vitamin supplementation, and other preventive measures at the physical and ‘subtle’ levels.

In Gerber’s vibrational medicine, health was understood to be the full “integration (...) of mind, body, and spirit” (Gerber 1988: 498). Picking up a term that hails from Reichenbach, Gerber proclaimed that “the future vibrational physicians will be more than doctors who dispense pills and potions. They will be healers and *sensitives*” (ibid., my emphasis). Once the “new paradigms in science” have taken hold and physiological systems are viewed as “interactive energies fields,” older medical techniques such as drugs and surgical interventions will be “slowly replace[d] with more subtle and less invasive methods of treatment” (ibid.). The physician/healer” of the future will be a teacher of how to lead a balanced, healthy lifestyle, focusing on nutrition, exercise, stress

reduction techniques, and meditation. “Spiritual health-care providers” will additionally provide readings of the *cakras* and meridians “through a variety of intuitive and instrumental techniques” (ibid.). Drawing on a Theosophical and Baileyan core theme, Gerber conceived that these practitioners would acknowledge “the validity of reincarnation” and that “illness is often created as a teaching experience for the soul” (ibid.).

Gerber fully recognised the merits of “orthodox medicine” in uplifting the human condition. However, its major shortcoming was that it failed to treat “the true causes of illness” (Gerber 1988: 495). The “emotional, mental, bioenergetic, and spiritual” factors that contribute to illness are not adequately addressed by biomedicine. Hence, Gerber claimed that

Over the next twenty years, we will see the creation of a whole new science of energy as it applies to human consciousness and subtle physiology. Spiritual scientists will begin to extend the limits of known science to incorporate higher energetic phenomena. Humankind is at a unique turning point in history. (Gerber 1988: 495)

Gerber argued that the major obstacle to the breakthrough of subtle energy-based practices was of a structural nature. As the healthcare system mainly covers conventional drug treatments, holistic approaches are afforded mostly by the upper middle class. Gerber envisioned “New Age health insurance companies” that would cover pills, surgeries, as well as homoeopathy, flower essences, and other forms of energy healing (ibid.: 496).

To envision the future, Gerber remembered the past. Whereas Capra showed little interest in history beyond paradigm shifts in physics, Gerber spent three pages of his guidebook to rehabilitate Mesmer. He bemoaned that despite academic validation in the early nineteenth century,

Mesmer’s work never achieved widespread recognition. As more recent laboratory investigations into the physiological effects of laying-on-of-hands have confirmed the magnetic nature of these subtle healing energies, researchers have demonstrated that Mesmer’s understanding of the magnetic nature of the subtle energies of the human body was centuries ahead of his contemporaries. As will be shown, direct measurement of these energies by conventional tools of electromagnetic detection are as difficult today as during Mesmer’s time. (Gerber 1988: 287–289)

In other words, mesmerism serves as a prototype of a future medicine. Nonetheless, Gerber’s appraisal of mesmerism is somewhat relativised by his distinction between “magnetic healing” and “spiritual healing.” Magnetic healing refers to laying-on-of-hands techniques that supposedly only affect the physical and etheric level. However, these are less efficient than spiritual healing, which purportedly work at the level of higher subtle bodies, including the “mind and spirit” (Gerber 1988: 318–319). A

similar distinction has been made by Atkinson and Bailey, reflecting the New Thought rivalry with contemporaneous mesmerists (Zoehrer 2025d).

Vibrational Medicine is a comparably well-documented reference work for practitioners that sought to contribute to “a field that badly needs some type of theoretical foundation upon which to build a new science of healing and understanding human illness” (Gerber 1988: 35). Wearing his white coat he hoped to provide a theoretical framework that could stimulate the design of experiments and clinical trials. However, ultimately, Gerber’s project was a *religious*-therapeutic one: “The point is that we must begin to investigate alternative healing methods for what they can teach us about ourselves as evolving spiritual beings, as well as for their treatments of ailments for which orthodox medicine can do very little” (ibid.: 36). His approach to the subject was not an open-ended inquiry but the delivery of a teaching that aimed at self-actualisation. Gerber regarded holistic therapies as the foundation of a future medicine that would serve as a gateway to spiritual insight and growth.

Oschman and the “Scientific Basis” of Energy Medicine

Although often cited by practitioners of energy healing, the American biophysicist James L. Oschman applied a conservative physical concept of energy that starkly differs from the more common emic notions of subtle healing agents and vital forces. While he does not rule out the effects of “undiscovered natural forces or ‘subtle energies’” (Oschman 2000: 223), Oschman sought to reconfigure ‘energy medicine’ (i.e., energy healing and bodywork) within a purely physical model and to ground holistic approaches in well-established physical principles. By explaining the body in terms of electricity, magnetism, cellular regulatory circuits, molecular vibrations, and electromagnetic waves, Oschman hoped to uncover the biophysical processes at the base of energy-based therapies, including laying-on-of-hands techniques, homeopathy, and acupuncture.

Oschman, a trained cellular biologist and physiologist, reported that he was approached in the late 1990s by the editorial board at the *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies* (est. 1996; published by Churchill Livingstone, an academic publisher on medical subjects) to clarify the term ‘energy.’ Since the term was employed in various orthodox *and* alternative medical contexts it was causing some measure of confusion. Determined to render the therapeutic concept of energy “acceptable to a scientific and intellectually critical mind,” Oschman set out not to investigate the clinical efficacy of energy-based therapies but to explore their underlying “mechanisms” and describe their phenomena within a medical scientific framework (Oschman 2000: xiii–xv). With the full knowledge that (subtle) energy-based therapies have been rejected as scientifically unfounded, Oschman pursued the development of a biophysical model to render them plausible.

In *Energy Medicine: The Scientific Basis* (2000), Oschman admitted that he discussed a subject “that scientists have always found extremely controversial and confusing. For centuries, concepts of ‘life force’ and ‘healing energy’ were virtually off-limits for consideration by serious and respectable scientists. Therapeutic approaches employing healing energy have been regarded with a great deal of skepticism” (Oschman 2000: xiii). His seemed to have convinced at least some medical professionals. In her preface to Oschman’s book, Candace B. Pert (1946–2013)—an American neuroscientist, discoverer of the brain’s opioid receptor, and pioneer in the field of psychoneuroimmunology—praised the author for having set “a milestone in the history of medicine” with his work. She expected that it “will open hearts and minds to new hypotheses and experimental approaches toward understanding important modes of healing previously thought to be too mysterious to be approached scientifically” (ibid.: xi). Pert hoped for a breakthrough of Oschman’s work, which would imply a new anthropological paradigm that conceives of the human body as a dynamic system “capable of sudden and dramatic transformations” that could lead the “mind and body” to stabilised states of healing (ibid.).

Attempting to establish common ground between biomedicine and alternative, energy-based therapies, Oschman’s views of the ‘life force’ were nuanced. On the one hand, he called for scientific open-mindedness towards vitalism and spirituality:

While the old emotional and dogmatic biases persist, the trend of modern research is toward explaining and validating the experiences of practitioners and recipients of energy therapies, including the type of healing that takes place in the religious context. Vitalism, as an undiscovered ‘life force’, has not been ruled out, and the role of spirit is not to be discounted. However, much is being discovered about how electricity, magnetism, and other energy fields are created and utilized by living organisms. [...] As a phenomenon, bioenergy fields have gone from scientific ‘nonsense’ to an important and expanding subject of biomedical research. (Oschman 2000: 22–23)

On the other hand, he flatly dismissed the belief in a single force that directs all organic processes by stating that “[t]here is no single ‘life force’ or ‘healing energy’” (Oschman 2000: 2). The body is rather made of a *multiplicity* of forces, energies, and information, and thus could be understood as an “energy system” (ibid.; emphasis added). Oschman underscored that about the link between physics, biology, and medicine there is nothing “mysterious, or unfathomable, or subtle” (Oschman 2000: 23). Living systems, in fact, generate measurable electromagnetic fields, and Oschman emphasised their potential clinical relevance.

Oschman began his book by presenting a number of historical precursors to the scientific study of electrobiology and biomagnetic fields as well as their diagnostic and therapeutic application. Briefly portraying Franz Anton Mesmer and the controversy surrounding his methods, Oschman indicated the

resemblance between mesmerism and contemporary practices including “therapeutic touch, polarity therapy, Reiki, aura balancing” etc. (ibid.: 5–8). In the second edition of his book, Oschman was more explicit about his admiration for Mesmer (although he somewhat misunderstood the term ‘animal magnetism’):

Franz Anton Mesmer discovered ‘animal magnetism’ and is still considered a charlatan by many. Yet we now know that he was correct—animals have biomagnetic fields around them [...], and mesmerism or hypnosis is still widely applied. Were [Albert] Abrams and Mesmer charlatans, fakes, and quacks, or were they ahead of their time? (Oschman 2016: 52).

The futuristic retro-medicine advocated by Oschman is thus of a more lucid type that is (at least dimly) aware of (some of) its forebears. Not only did he presume a historical connection between mesmerism and energy medicine. He claimed that it was about time to rehabilitate Mesmer for his discovery. In concluding *Energy Medicine* (first edition), Oschman argued why he believed that energy medicine was “the medicine of the future”:

Some discoveries are made before their time, and simply cannot be integrated into contemporary thought. *Concepts of ‘life energy’ and ‘healing energy’ have surfaced many times over the centuries.* Until recently, these concepts have been classic examples of prematurity. This situation has now changed. *A firm basis has been established for energetic phenomena previously regarded as impossible or unlikely.* Scientists have developed more than adequate measurable and logical connections between biological energy fields and generally accepted scientific knowledge. The key discoveries have been made in the course of ordinary science, in a wide range of disciplines, following traditional methods and logic. Because of the traditional bias against any examination of topics like ‘healing energy’ and ‘life force’, a *veritable scientific revolution* has taken place without attracting any interest in the academic community. Hopefully this book will introduce the subject to those in the biomedical research community who are open-minded enough to consider new possibilities for research and clinical applications. (Oschman 2000: 217; emphasis added)

Oschman’s invocation of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* by the American philosopher of science Thomas S. Kuhn (1922–1996) was more pronounced in the second edition of his book, where he ended on a more reflective note, acknowledging that “controversy and confusion” around “energy medicine” still persists but that an expert consensus affirming the “new paradigm” seemed to be emerging:

If the history of science has a lesson for us, it is that ‘consensus among experts’ is always changing—much faster in some areas than in others. And these changes are usually strongly resisted until the evidence for a new paradigm is overwhelming. [...] Energy medicine provides an example of a collection of completely reasonable and sound ideas

that have been widely researched but are still resisted, because skeptics believe the whole endeavour is utter nonsense, and incorrectly state that there is no scientific evidence. This book documents the fact that there is an abundance of scientific evidence supporting energy medicine. (Oschman 2016: 333)

What constitutes the “evidence” of energy medicine thus remains a question of interpretation. Convinced of its innovative potential, he envisioned an integration of conventional and unconventional approaches as a path forward:

The future of mainstream medicine depends on willingness to look at and explore and research the deep significance of complementary medical practices and the natural wisdoms of the body they reveal. Ultimately patients will judge the entire biomedical enterprise by its ability to uncover methods that lead to improvements in curing, caring for, and comforting patients. Practical innovations are bound to emerge from both conventional and unconventional sources, and from their integration. (Oschman 2016: 218)

This ambitious aim of integrating the unconventional into the conventional is reflected in Oschman’s concept of ‘energy medicine,’ which seeks to assimilate energy healing modalities into a biophysical framework. Accordingly, Oschman consistently treated energy healing *sensu stricto* (for example, Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, Polarity Therapy, acupuncture, etc.) on par with diagnoses and therapies that apply electric, magnetic, and electromagnetic fields. However, as his synthesis remained eclectic, he found more sympathisers among those who were already advocating holistic medicine than among medical professionals.

A case in point is the Swiss author Marco Bischof (b. 1947). Bischof is the director at the Institute for Future Science & Medicine based in Berlin, a “library for rejected knowledge” (*Bibliothek für Abgelehntes Wissen*).⁸⁸ In his book *Biophotonen* (1995), by now a classic in the German-speaking holistic milieu, Bischof discusses the phenomenon that living organisms emit a weak but measurable light (biophotons) and its possible therapeutic implications. Bischof contributed the preface to the German translation of Oschman’s *Energy Medicine* where he suggested that Oschman’s work demonstrated that the notion of “energy fields in the human body has, over the past decade, evolved from an esoteric speculation into an unquestionable scientific fact” (Bischof 2009: v).⁸⁹ Bischof’s scientific narrative thus functions along the dichotomies of esotericism/science and speculation/fact.

⁸⁸ Cf. <http://www.futurescienceandmedicine.de> (accessed on August 2, 2025).

⁸⁹ “Wie James Oschman schreibt, ist die Existenz von Energiefeldern im menschlichen Körper im letzten Jahrzehnt von einer esoterischen Spekulation zu einer unzweifelhaften wissenschaftlichen Tatsache geworden, und das Phänomen der bioenergetischen Felder hat sich mittlerweile zu einem wichtigen und weiter expandierenden Gegenstand biomedizinischer Forschung entwickelt.“

In contrast, Oschman avoided any references to the ‘esoteric’ and framed energy medicine solely as proto-science, i.e., an emerging science-based approach, within Kuhnian terms of ‘scientific revolution’ and the slow shift from old to new ‘paradigms.’ Ultimately, Oschman’s work represents a highly scientised and medicalised approach to energy healing that systematically filters out any language that could be associated with the religious, esoteric, or occult.⁹⁰ In the second edition of *Energy Medicine*, Oschman removed all references to ‘subtle energies’ that were still present in the first edition, suggesting that, in his view, integration could not come at the expense of scientific credibility.

Discussion

In hindsight, Bailey’s premonition on the future diversity of energetic healing modalities might have proven correct:

There will be eventually [...] hundreds and thousands of groups all over the world who will express this new attitude to healing, who will be bound together by their common knowledge and aims, but who will all express this to the best of their ability in their own peculiar field, in their own peculiar way and with their own peculiar terminology. (Bailey 1953: 375)

The picture that emerges from the above sample of representatives of futuristic retro-medicine is not one of convergence between esoteric and scientific discourses on energy, but rather one of their pluralisation. Four characteristic features emerge from these case studies: first, the use of scientism as a popular means of worldview production; second, claims of integrating orthodox and heterodox styles of medicine in the name of progress; third, varying degrees of awareness regarding the mesmeric roots of energy-based therapies; and fourth, the role of ‘esoteric’ teachings as foundational to futuristic therapeutic approaches.

(1) Scientism

Futuristic retro-medicine neither fits the frame of ‘rejected knowledge’ nor that of ‘pseudo-science’ (understood as fraudulent science). The category of ‘rejected knowledge’ is insufficient as it suggests a

⁹⁰ Oschman remarked on the occult in his foreword to Linnie Thomas’ *Encyclopedia of Energy Medicine* (2010: i): “A few centuries ago energetic phenomena such as electricity and magnetism were considered ‘occult’ a word that simply means secret, not easily understood, or concealed.” He made the point that as we now understand electricity and magnetism it is time to use precise scientific language to describe ‘energy medicine.’ However, Thomas did not adhere to Oschman’s scientific purism. She casually divided the field of energy healing into the categories ‘Eastern,’ ‘Western,’ ‘Shamanic,’ and ‘Spiritual.’ Having no fear of contact with the ‘esoteric,’ she included a chapter on Bailey’s *Esoteric Healing*, and similar therapeutic models of occult provenience.

one-sided exclusion of styles of thought, terminologies, and practical procedures. However, the explicit invocation of “negative Others” cuts both ways (cf. Hammer 2001: 329). As the existing paradigm of the corresponding scientific community is declared to be too narrow to recognise the hypothesised hidden natural force, proponents of subtle agent-based therapies perceive the current state of science as deficient and in need of refinement. This dynamic illustrates the ambivalent role of science within religious-therapeutic practices: although its cultural authority and technological impact were upheld without question, science was simultaneously depicted as not yet sufficiently advanced to grasp the effects of subtle energies or—as in the case of Capra and Oschman—the physical dynamics behind the metaphors.

The label ‘pseudoscience’ in a strict sense is inadequately applied to the authors discussed above as (to my knowledge) none of them were actively engaged in imitating science by fraudulent means. Although von Reichenbach’s theses on the *Od* were not adopted by the scientific community, he continued to be an engaged member of the scientific community of his day and his challenge proved fruitful to the clarification of terms and the scientific method (cf. Erdbeer 2008). As scientifically trained theorists, Abrams (physician), Tiller (material physicist), Capra (particle physicist), Gerber (internist), and Oschman (biophysicist) speculated about the potential of viewing the body as an energy system, although their generally positive view of alternative therapies remained a minority position within orthodox medicine. Notably, their works were not published through academic publishers—with the exception of Oschman’s. Oschman published *Energy Medicine* through the Churchill Livingstone, an Edinburgh-based publisher of medical textbooks which was incorporated into Elsevier as an imprint in 2001. Elsevier is a Dutch academic publishing company specialised on scientific, technical, and medical content, but commercially oriented and not affiliated with an academic institution. Even in Oschman’s case it is safe to assume that the majority of his audience already had an interest in alternative therapies and did not expect a rigorous and tested theoretical model.

Even less scientific expertise is to be expected of Bailey’s readers. She was explicit in describing her project as ‘esoteric’ and ascribed most of her work to channeled messages from her Tibetan master. Bailey’s epistemological approach is not empirical investigation but initiation. Nonetheless, she continued the Theosophical discursive strand of occult physicalism and used ‘energy,’ ‘rays,’ ‘magnetism,’ and ‘vibrations’ as key terms in her medical theory. Addressing esoteric practitioners and having published her books through her own publishing company Lucis Trust, Bailey was under no pressure to meet the standards of the scientific community (cf. Zoehrer 2025d).

Scientism is a less value-laden descriptor than ‘rejected knowledge’ or ‘pseudoscience.’ In his examination of late modern esoteric discourses, Olav Hammer employed the category of ‘scientism,’ defining it as the “active positioning of one’s own claims in relation to manifestations of any academic scientific discipline,” while not adhering to “methods generally approved within the scientific

community” (2001: 206). Scientistic approaches draw from mainstream scientific culture and seek to share in its authority and prestige, however, without being bound by its methodological standards and as a means to popularise their own worldview. When futuristic retro-medicine is interpreted as the advocacy of particular worldviews—with their corresponding anthropological and therapeutic implications—the question of evaluating claims of factuality or clinical efficacy is suspended. Considering that science can function “as a language of faith” (Hammer 2001), judgment on the veracity of an ideological system and its denial by critics can be methodologically withheld (cf. Zoehrer 2025b). More than imitating scientific discourse in a purely rhetorical manner, futuristic retro-science expresses a deeply held conviction: that an imminent revolution of the scientific worldview will put medicine on a new foundation. Its pathos aims to invoke a sense of hope in its readers that inexpensive, safe, and effective therapeutic interventions are possible. The integration of alternative and traditional methods is envisioned as a key to the evolution of medicine.

(2) Integration

Futuristic retro-medicine—as envisioned by most of the abovementioned authors—aims at the integration of orthodox medicine and alternative approaches that are often legitimised by reference to a subtle agent. However, their methods of integration differ considerably and may be discerned as monism, assimilation, and strong and weak synthesis. Monism is the path taken by Reichenbach, who conceived his *Od* as a “world force” (*Weltkraft*) and foundation of all sciences and medicine. Assimilation seeks the “[d]isocculting of the occult” (Abrams 1916: 9) and validation of alternative therapies by reframing them in purely physical terms. This was the approach taken by Abrams, Capra (partially), and Oschman. Synthesis may be understood to be a response to the differentiation of religion (or ‘spirituality’) and medicine into two distinct subsystems of modern society. Synthesisers seek to complement biomedicine with holistic and traditional healing practices. Stone and Capra aimed at a stronger synthesis where biomedicine, traditional medicine, and holistic therapies would be updated through the “wireless energy field” (Stone) or the “new physics” and “systems view” (Capra), nonetheless preserving methodological pluralism. In contrast to Stone, Capra argued for a more consistently physicalist model and rejected a literal reading of the metaphors common in traditional and holistic approaches. Bailey, Tiller, and Gerber proposed weaker syntheses by recognising an additional hidden dimension of nature where subtle energies operate and the merit of corresponding practices without demanding a fundamental adaptation to the standards of science-based medicine.

(3) *Mesmerism and Source Amnesia*

In *Claiming Knowledge*, Olav Hammer defined source amnesia as the “propensity to gloss over or be unaware of the fact that processes of reinterpretation have taken place. [...] In the case of religious bricolage, source amnesia typically takes place when a general term [e.g., astrology, shamanism, or reincarnation] used in connection with an older tradition becomes associated with specific, modern reinterpretations” (2001: 180).

In a significant strand of energy healing, source amnesia is conducted when ‘energy’ replaces Mesmer’s *fluidum* but preserved typically mesmeric practical elements (rapport, strokes, transmissions, etc.). Mesmerism is mentioned in some models of futuristic retro-medicine, and ignored in others. Reichenbach and Abrams acknowledge mesmerism, which they interpret as applications of *Od* or ‘energy’ respectively. Stone, Gerber, and Oschman recognise Mesmer as an important precursor to their medical theories. Gerber and Oschman explicitly suggest to rehabilitate Mesmer. By contrast, Bailey, Tiller, and Capra consistently overlook Mesmer’s contribution to the history of energy healing. A trend towards source amnesia can also be observed in energy healing modalities that claim Asian origins, e.g., Pranic Healing or Reiki. These do not constitute faithful replications of animal magnetism but are rather reinterpretations that contain both mesmeric and newer elements (see section II.4.2).

(4) *Esotericism*

Healing is a common element in the history of religion and testimonies of healing are often “taken as a confirmation of the truth and divine licence of the prophet or teacher, or of the supernatural being [or in this case energy] through whom the cure is effected” (Smart 1996: 193). As a vibrant part of the holistic milieu, futuristic retro-medicine stretches between a secularised, physicalist pole (Abrams, Oschman) sanitised of any occult or esoteric elements, and an esoteric pole that endorses the experience and practice of healing as a spiritual path (Stone, Bailey, Gerber). Table 3 provides an overview of the examples of futuristic retro-medicine according to the above discussed criteria.

In short, the variants of futuristic retro-medicine discussed above invoke the vision of an incumbent scientific revolution. The motif can be characterised by a constantly delayed ‘paradigm shift’ that is believed to be imminent but depends on the scientific community’s recognition of the proposed therapeutic model. Postulating a subtle healing agent, adopting contemporary scientific theories to support this conviction, and expressing hope for eventual validation have been shown to form a recurring pattern of plausibilisation. The genesis of the term ‘(subtle) energy’ in the context of occult physicalism and its impact on energy healing is further investigated in Zoehrer 2025b.

Author	Formal scientific or medical training	Model of integrating orthodox medicine and alternative approaches	Role of mesmerism	Self-declared endorsement of ‘esoteric’ thought
Karl von Reichenbach	yes	monism	reinterpreted	no
Albert Abrams	yes	assimilation	reinterpreted	no
Wilhelm Reich	yes	assimilation	ignored	no
Randolph Stone	no	strong synthesis	recognised as precursor	yes
Alice Bailey	no	weak synthesis	ignored	yes
William A. Tiller	yes	weak synthesis	ignored	not explicit
Fritjof Capra	yes	strong synthesis	ignored	not explicit, but occasional references to ‘esoteric’ thought
Richard Gerber	yes	weak synthesis	attempt to rehabilitate	yes
James L. Oschman	yes	assimilation	attempt to rehabilitate	no

Table 3: Examples of futuristic retro-medicine according to its proponents’ training, integration model, awareness of mesmerism, and position on esotericism.

The motive in the quest for subtle energies was only partially therapeutic. An optional element in futuristic medical theories is the promotion of a spiritual teaching.⁹¹ Bailey and Gerber openly advocated esoteric doctrines in relation to their healing model. A comparably strong emphasis on esoteric teachings, including the initiation through masters, is found in energy healing schools that claim to be of Asian origin but have provable historical links to older Euro-American healing practices.

4.2. The Appeal to a ‘Mystic East’: Occult Orientalism⁹²

To describe a particular strand of notions of Asian provenance that have been translated into English and other European languages as ‘energy,’ I propose the category ‘occult orientalism.’ South and East Asian terms denoting ethereal powers—e.g., *prāṇa*, *kuṇḍalinī*, and *qì/ki*—were central to a discourse that was shaped by both Euro-American and Asian actors. These terms are not only the result of imaginative projections of a ‘mystic East,’ but of transcultural exchanges that gave rise to diverse hybrid ideas and practices—including forms of energy healing. The identification of *prāṇa*, *kuṇḍalinī*, and *qì/ki* with the term of ‘energy’ was solidified through cross-cultural interpretations that were impacted by Orientalist scholarship, colonial dynamics, and modernisation processes with their anti-modernist critiques of Western science. Two crucial aspects mark how proponents of these concepts responded to the cultural authority of science. On the one hand, they reframed beliefs in vital forces, healing powers, and transformative potentials in terms that appeared secular, scientific (physical), and thus universally valid. On the other hand, they asserted access to ancient, local forms of knowledge deemed superior to mechanistic Western scientific paradigms.

The energy discourse shaped by occult orientalism cannot be reduced to a one-sided Western projection, nor can it be traced to pristine Asian origins. In Zoehrer 2025c, I demonstrate how the concepts of *prāṇa*, *kuṇḍalinī*, and *qì/ki* were reinterpreted through yogis and energy healers, the late modern response to Western scientific hegemony, and the construction of (often invented) Eastern traditions. While Euro-American authors initially shaped ‘positive’ orientalist visions, these were soon outpaced by translingual exchanges about Eastern wisdom involving both Western and Asian authors. Ideological and institutional foundations of the emerging religious-therapeutic discourse on energy included the Theosophical Society, the US-based New Thought movement, the Bengali intellectual milieu, currents

⁹¹ Rather than postulating a subtle substrate as a therapeutic medium, other physicalist variants of futuristic retro-medicine have been conceived that employ quantum physical analogies (e.g., indeterminism, observer effect, wave particle dualism, non-locality, entanglement). These approaches often represent scientific reinterpretations of the New Thought genre and tend to emphasise the belief in the power of mind or consciousness in ‘creating one’s own reality’ (Bartlett 2007, Dispenza 2017; cf. Hanegraaff 1996; Hammer 2001).

⁹² This section serves as an introduction to Zoehrer 2020; 2021b; and 2025c.

within modern yoga, and the Japanese occult scene around 1900. These networks anticipated the transcultural and ‘alternative’ orientation of the Human Potential Movement and the global holistic milieu that gained momentum from the 1960s onward. Occult-orientalist interpretations of energy thus evolved through a dynamic exchange between Euro-American and Asian participants and remains a defining feature of contemporary alternative spiritualities and holistic therapies.

The discourse history of *prāṇa* offers a particularly instructive case study of how an Indian term literally signifying ‘breath’ and metaphorically ‘vitality’ has come to be translated as ‘energy’ with the connotation of a subtle, vitalistic healing agent. In two articles (Zoehrer 2020; 2020b) I outlined how *prāṇa* was reinterpreted as a therapeutic tertium through the term’s mesmeric and occult transformation. In contrast to the overarching role of *qì* in Chinese medicine and contrary to emic narratives, *prāṇa* was not a central concept in Indian healing systems (i.e., Ayurveda). Energy healing modalities that refer to *prāṇa* can in fact be shown to be variants of mesmeric healing, often supplemented by Theosophical concepts of subtle physiology.

My research on *prāṇa*-based healing concepts examines how the gradual replacement of *fluidum* with *prāṇa* unfolded through the influence of the Romantic reception of the Upanishads, short-lived Theosophical healing activities, fringe-Masonic speculations, and early modern yoga theories in the late nineteenth century. The synthesis of mesmeric concepts with *prāṇa* and related Sanskrit notions began with the writings of Anquetil-Duperron and early German mesmerists in the early 1800s, and gained momentum through the contributions of Helena Blavatsky, Theodor Reuß (1855–1923), and Swami Vivekananda. These developments laid the conceptual groundwork for ‘Pranic Healing’—a method initially outlined by William W. Atkinson in the early twentieth century. Over the course of this evolution, *prāṇa* was adopted as a vital intermediary between microcosm and macrocosm, and as a bridge linking the somatic and mental domains—particularly via its regulation through breathwork (*pranayama*). The successive reshaping of mesmerism within an orientalist framework further enabled the incorporation of elements from yogic and tantric subtle physiology, which were reinterpreted to align with more pragmatic, this-worldly aims—specifically, health and healing.

In this way, mesmeric ideas and practices persisted in transformed, transcultural forms, shaped collaboratively by both Western and Indian authors. In the 1980s, the Chinese-Filipino entrepreneur Choa Kok Sui designed a healing system chiefly based upon Atkinson’s model, while also integrating elements from early twentieth-century Theosophical discourse on the *cakras* and the Etheric Double as well as drawing on contemporaneous New Age therapeutic practices and, to a lesser extent, Chinese medicine. Moreover, the existence of crucial links between Theosophical discourse, Alice Bailey’s post-Theosophical grand narrative, and Choa Kok Sui’s holistic enterprise are demonstrated in Zoehrer 2025b. This illustrative case study of a *prāṇa*-based therapeutic model underscores that futuristic retro-medicine

and occult orientalism are not mutually exclusive patterns of plausibilisation but in fact informed and reinforced each other.

III. Overview of Published Articles

This section summaries in thematic order the contents of my published articles pertaining to the genealogy of energy healing. The first two articles examine the role of energy healing within the contemporary holistic milieu, before shifting focus to the local context of Austria, where energy healers occupy a precarious position between spirituality and medicalisation. I then introduce the study of subtle energies as a historical subject, offering a working definition and demarcating the theme from the closely related field of subtle body conceptions. The third section analyses Alice Bailey's therapeutic concept in relation to a motif I designate as 'occult physicalism.' Her vision of futuristic retro-medicine reframed mesmeric and New Thought principles in terms of subtle energies and provided the theoretical foundation for numerous contemporary schools of energy healing. The final contributions delve into the discursive strand I refer to as 'occult orientalism' and offer an in-depth survey of the genealogy that culminated in Choa Kok Sui's Pranic Healing as a highly illustrative case study. In the concluding remarks, I outline the critical role that the two central patterns of plausibilisation, as examined in my case studies, have played in shaping the contemporary notion of subtle energies.

1. The Contemporary Field of Energy Healing

1.1. Energy Healing as a Core Practice of the Holistic Milieu

Zoehrer, Dominic. 2021a. "Das holistische Milieu - ein Gegenstand der künftigen Religionsbildung?" *Pädagogische Horizonte*, 4 (1): 85–100.

Note: This article was published in a German-language journal. Section II.1.1 offers a summary in English along with additional commentary.

is provided This article questions the 'world religions'-paradigm as it insufficiently represents the lived plurality of worldviews and religiosity in contemporary culture. Of particular importance to understanding the latter is the intersection of popular religiosity and self-help—a field here referred to as the 'holistic milieu.' Framed by an overview of the holistic milieu's ideological, practical and sociological characteristics from a religious studies perspective, the article underscores the prominence of the belief in subtle energies and the relevance of energy healing as a core holistic practice.

1.2. The Professionalisation of Energy Healing between Spirituality and Medicalisation: Austria as a Case Study

Zoehrer, Dominic. 2024b. “Between Spirituality and Medicalisation: The Professionalisation of Energy Healing in Austria.” In Lukas Pokorny, ed., *Religion in Austria*, vol. 9. Vienna: Praesens, pp. 41–97.

Departing from the local Austrian context, this article dives into the problem of professionalisation of energy healers. The interest group representing over 20,000 Austrian energy healers has carved out a market niche that sets itself apart from medical orthodoxy and (overtly) religious activities. Ideological boundary work is a crucial precondition to the group’s identity-formation and effort to attain social and legal recognition as a registered trade. The challenge of professionalising energy healing is traced to the history of mesmerism, a central progenitor of contemporary schools of energy healing. In addition to a historical sketch that outlines the connection between mesmerism and energy healing, three expert interviews with Viennese practitioners are discussed. These extensive interviews offer unique insights into the ambivalent roles of science, spirituality, esotericism, and secularisation in defining the profile of the most prominent holistic vocation in Austria, the birthplace of mesmerism.

2. Studying Subtle Energies as a Historical Subject: Approaches, Definition, Demarcations

Zoehrer, Dominic with Julian Strube and Marleen Thaler. 2025a (forthcoming). “Introduction.” In Julian Strube, Marleen Thaler, and Dominic Zoehrer, eds., *Subtle Energies in Therapy, Spirituality, Arts, and Politics. 1800–Present*. Brill: Numen Book Series. [17 pages]

Note: This contribution serves as the introduction to a volume that was co-edited with Julian Strube and Marleen Thaler. I have written the text in full, taking into account Strube and Thaler’s comments on content and form. The email correspondence demonstrating my authorship and the successive stages of the text’s development has been documented.

Introducing the first volume on subtle energies from a religious studies perspective, this text highlights the theme’s crucial role in alternative religiosities. Although ideas of energy have been a vital element in modern religion—particularly within esoteric traditions—they have received relatively little attention in historical scholarship to date. References to physical theories were a hallmark of nineteenth-century esoteric and religious-therapeutic movements, whose reverberations continue to shape popular culture and today’s holistic milieu. While previous scholarship has shown that discussions around the meanings of ‘science,’ ‘religion,’ and ‘esotericism’ were deeply interwoven (cf. Asprem 2014a; Bergunder 2016),

the contributions in this volume highlight in depth the significance of metaphors and analogies drawn from physical phenomena—such as magnetism, electricity, waves, vibration, ether, and energy.

The concept of energies in esoteric discourse—referred to in the volume as ‘subtle energies’ to distinguish them from the term’s established scientific meaning—serves as a particularly instructive lens through which to examine late modern responses to the hegemony of science. A hallmark of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century esoteric texts and practices is their enthusiastic engagement with physics, biology, and medicine. Esotericists blurred and intentionally transgressed the boundaries between science and non-science. The role of science in esoteric (and by extension holistic) discourses thus ambivalent. On the one hand, esoteric ideas seek legitimisation through appealing to the authorities of secular knowledge, that is, modern science. On the other hand, those same authorities may be subject to critique in favour of an advanced, supposedly superior (‘esoteric’) knowledge. Considering this complexity, I argue that the ascent and prevalence of the idea of subtle energies in the occult mindscape and related fields (i.e., modern yoga and the holistic milieu) involved a more intricate process than merely propagating reactionary, pre-scientific beliefs in supernatural powers or a debunked life force. The flourishing of forces, powers, and energies in the esoteric imagination constitutes a phenomenon in its own right and deserves deeper scholarly investigation.

Extending my thesis’ aim with regard to energy healing, the volume sheds light on the history of subtle energies, their manifold semantic layers, and the leading protagonists and the movements that were inspired by this idea. In the introduction, I argue that subtle energies can be approached from three perspectives:

- (a) the sceptical point of view that dismisses subtle energy as non- or pseudoscientific;
- (b) an emic approach that represents an inverted form of progressivism and defends the belief in occult powers (including subtle energies) as an element of perennial wisdom that has the potential to revolutionise science (‘futuristic retro-science’);
- (c) and lastly, the historical view which focuses on the protagonists of subtle energies, their texts, activities, movements, and social conditions. It seeks to trace lines of reception, explore transcultural reinterpretations, and examine the reciprocity between ideas and (ritual) practices. Consequently, the goal is to preserve semantic complexity and ambiguity through consistent historical contextualisation rather than reducing or blurring them through normative evaluations.

The current state of research on subtle energies is outlined, and a broad working definition is presented, which also lays the groundwork for my approach to reconstructing the key strands of energy healing according to the criterion of plausibilisation.

3. Energy Healing as Futuristic Retro-Medicine

3.1. Historical Roots of Subtle Energies: Occult Physicalism

Zoehrer, Dominic. 2025b (forthcoming). “Historical Roots of ‘Subtle Energies’: Occult Physicalism.” In Julian Strube, Marleen Thaler, and Dominic Zoehrer, eds., *Subtle Energies in Therapy, Spirituality, Arts, and Politics. 1800–Present*. Brill: Numen Book Series. [39 pages]

Occult physicalism, as I define in this chapter, refers to the appeal to physics to legitimise fundamentally occult ideas and practices. Inverting the approach of scientific naturalism, nineteenth- and twentieth-century proponents of occult thought laid the groundwork for a distinct discourse on energy. Five central themes have significantly shaped the concept of subtle energies as it emerged in the holistic milieu from the 1960s onwards: (1) the mesmeric *fluidum*; (2) Karl von Reichenbach’s *Od*; (3) occult ether models; (4) the concept of vibration as the mediator between mind and matter; and (5) occult energy theories.

To provide the backdrop to the divergence of scientific and occult discourses on energy, I demonstrate how ‘energy’ was formalised by German and British physicists as a scientific term denoting a physical quantity. Of crucial importance in this process was the conservation law of energy that the German physician and physicist Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894) articulated in its general form in 1847.⁹³ Helmholtz’ motive for establishing the term of energy was to ground the study of physiology on a rigorous mechanistic foundation. He thus opposed diametrically the Romantic vitalism of his teacher, the German physiologist and *Naturphilosoph* Johannes Müller (1801–1858), who had postulated ‘vital’ and ‘psychical principles’ as immaterial forces of the soul.

Speculations on the soul and its life force or vital principle had been the hallmark of German *Naturphilosophie*. With its increasing focus on empirical and quantitative methods, science separated from *Naturphilosophie*, leading to the latter’s eventual marginalisation in academic discourse. The discovery of energy played a key role in this process: It enabled precise calculations of physical systems, including physiological organisms, rendering the hypothesis of soul and vital forces superfluous.

I argue in this chapter that the occult discourse on energy emerged from an inversed scientific naturalism that was promoted by Romantic mesmerists, (proto-)spiritualists, (post-)Theosophists, and New Thought adherents. Their scientific apology presumed that the hidden powers of nature—allegedly known to older wisdom traditions—could in principle be affirmed and unveiled by modern science. The idea of subtle energies resulted from a—never fully completed—physicalisation of occult worldviews. Contrary to the original intention of introducing energy into physics, the term’s purely physical function was eventually reversed when it came to be reinterpreted as a vital and psychic agent.

Mesmer’s physicalist framework abstained from any reference to soul or vital forces. However, his system proved too rigid to fully explain the effects of the hypothetical *fluidum*, which from the outset

⁹³ This law stipulates that the total quantity of energy in a closed physical system is neither created nor destroyed but remains constant. Any particular form of energy (e.g., motion) can be transformed into other forms of energy (for instance, electricity).

had a crucial psychological aspect and was thought of as responsive to the mindset of the mesmerist. I demonstrate that theories of ‘energy’ were one of several attempts to complement or revise the concept of *fluidum*. French mesmerists of the Romantic period continued to speak of “energy” (*énergie*) not as a physical agent but as a mental force akin to “confidence” (*confiance*) and the power of “will” (*volonté*). In contrast, English mesmerists situated ‘energy’ within the physical realm. Chauncy Hare Townshend (1798–1868) defined the mesmeric influence as a “subtle, elastic, and ethereal medium” that also constitutes the “nervous energy,” which he identified with human vitality but still framed as a physical agent. Proposing a synthesis of physiology and metaphysics, Townshend postulated that this subtle agent could bridge the gap between “mind and matter,” “the visible and the invisible,” and “the subtle and the gross.” Suggesting an even stronger physicalist theory, the English physician William Newnham (1790–1865) understood the mesmeric healing agent to be a vitalistic, “imponderable element” that the English physicist Robert Hunt (1807–1887) coined as *energia*. However, when Newnham published his theory in 1845, the term *energia* had not been widely adopted as a physical term due to the critical intervention of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Neither did Newnham’s identification of the mesmeric *fluidum* with *energia* find resonance outside academic circles.

Following the successful establishment of energy physics around 1850, the term ‘energy’ also began to gain popularity in the religious-therapeutic context, however, heavily charged with meanings that transcended physics. Warren Felt Evans (1817–1889), the leading theoretician of the early New Thought movement, drew not on physicists but took Müller’s notion of “nervous energy” as an authoritative reference point to postulate an “inconceivably subtle life-force,” that is, the “universal, divine life-principle in nature.” Evans extrapolated Müller’s physiological theory into an eclectic cosmo-theology that synthesised philosophical idealism, the Gospels, American Transcendentalism, and Blavatskian Theosophy. Building on Evans’ work and Swami Vivekananda’s identification of *prāṇa* with energy, the prolific occult author William Walker Atkinson conceptualised “Prana” as an amalgam of “nerve force,” “vital energy,” and “Absolute Energy,” that could be projected as a healing power. In contrast to Atkinson’s combination of scientific and orientalist arguments for the agency of a subtle power, more Christian-leaning authors of the New Thought genre produced less exuberant explanations, and directly identified energy with God.

Whereas ‘energy’ was only a secondary term for mesmerists, Theosophists, and New Thought authors, it was central to the anthropology and cosmology of the post-Theosophist author Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949; née La Trobe-Bateman), whose ductus was profoundly shaped by Blavatsky’s works. Bailey’s energetic turn effectively recast occult etherology and translated it into a highly influential programme for training what could be termed ‘energy workers.’ I thus argue that Bailey functioned as a hinge joint between nineteenth-century occultism and contemporary energy healing.

From my historical exposition of occult-physicalist agents, I distilled the following eight characteristic features, which largely apply to the concept of subtle energies as employed by contemporary energy healers:

- (1) universalism;
- (2) claims of objectivity;
- (3) implicit metaphors;
- (4) vitalism;
- (5) consciousness;
- (6) divine qualities (optional!);
- (7) subtle technologies (including healing rituals);
- (8) and the ambivalent role of scientific authority.

3.2. Futuristic Retro-Medicine: Alice Bailey's *Esoteric Healing* and its Impact on Contemporary Energy Healing

Zoehrer, Dominic. 2025d. "Medical men in the new age': Alice Bailey's Impact on Contemporary Energy Healing." *Religions* 16 (5): #643. [39 pages]

This article analyses in depth the role of energy within the occult cosmology and anthropology of Alice Bailey and demonstrates how she impacted the emergence of energy healing. I reconstruct Bailey's principles of energy and outline how her theory of energy informed her vision of a "medicine of the future." In my concluding discussion I provide several examples how Bailey served as a model for major holistic actors of the later twentieth century.

Apart from presenting an original exploration of Bailey's thought and influence, this article stands out for amending the historical account of energy in esoteric discourse and its fusion with vitalist thought and alternative healing methods. I shed light on neglected aspects in the historiography of the early development of subtle energy-based therapeutic theories. These include (1) the relatively late establishment of energy in the list of occult healing agents; (2) the (partially occult) roots and influence of the psychological theory of energy proposed in the two essays "The Energies of Men" (1907a) and "The Powers of Men" (1907b) by William James (1842–1910); and (3) decisive figures that linked the occult and holistic discourses on energy, including Vivekananda, Atkinson, Abrams, and Stone. Compared to the work of these authors, Bailey's esoteric theory of 'energy' had the most lasting influence on the twentieth-century holistic milieu. I prove this point by sketching Bailey's grand narrative and therapeutic theory and by clarifying her role as (1) an authority on subtle physiology, (2) a patroness for (predominantly) female teacher-healers, (3) a model for the holistic theorist, (4) a model for the holistic guru—exemplified by Choa Kok Sui, and (5) an anonymous reference point for the basic energetic principles assumed to underlie energy healing.

My article on Bailey's influence on energy healing closes with a discussion of (1) her vitalism, which built upon the Swedenborgian-Blavatskian tenet of 'the One Life' as a transcendent, unifying principle

and translated it into an energetic cosmos where esoteric adepts act as co-creators; (2) the substantial and social dimension of Bailey's notion of esotericism compared to contemporary scholarly definitions; (3) Bailey's explicitly esoteric vision of a futuristic medicine, revealing an ambivalent stance towards science;⁹⁴ and (4) her appeals to a mystic East was largely limited to the invocation of a Tibetan masters, whereas she also pursued an anti-orientalist approach by de-Sanskritising Theosophical terms to reach a wider Euro-American readership.

4. Energy Healing as an Imagined Eastern Tradition

4.1. Historical Roots of Subtle Energies: Occult Orientalism

Zoehrer, Dominic. 2025c (forthcoming). "Historical Roots of 'Subtle Energies': Occult Orientalism." In Julian Strube, Marleen Thaler, and Dominic Zoehrer, eds., *Subtle Energies in Therapy, Spirituality, Arts, and Politics. 1800–Present*. Brill: Numen Book Series.

From the abstract:

This chapter explores how occult orientalism has contributed to the notion of subtle energies. Occult orientalism here denotes a discourse that involved the participation of both Euro-American and Asian actors. It encompasses (a) imaginations of a 'mystic East,' and (b) a transcultural exchange that has led to a wide range of hybrid ideas and practices. Within this framework, three types of ethereal power are profiled: (1) *kuṇḍalinī*, (2) *prāṇa*, and (3) *qì/ki*. The chapter demonstrates how the identification of these terms with 'energy' was the result of cross-cultural interpretations in the context of Oriental and religious studies, colonialism, modernisation, and anti-modernist reactions. Furthermore, it highlights their ambivalent relation to science. On the one hand, advocates of these notions recognised and responded to the social prestige of science, thereby reshaping the belief in vital agents, healing powers, and transformative potentials to adjust to a secular, quasi-physical, and hence universally valid language. On the other hand, they claimed access to ancient knowledge superior to Western-style science. Due to the common features of the notions examined, it is suggested to employ 'subtle energies' as a comparative category for further historical research and theoretical reflection.

From the concluding remarks:

The ideological and social structures that prepared the religious-therapeutic discourse on energy were the Theosophical Society, the [US-based] New Thought movement, the Bengali intelligentsia, strands of modern yoga, and the Japanese occult milieu around 1900.

⁹⁴ In contrast to, for example, Mesmer's enlightened physicalism, Bailey advocated a spiritualised, occult physicalism that derived its authority from Djwhal Khul, a representative of an alleged hierarchy of masters. Hence, not experimentation but initiation leads to understanding subtle energies and their control.

These networks prefigured the transcultural and ‘alternative’ character of the Human Potential Movement and the globalizing holistic milieu from the 1960s onward. In this light, the discourse on energies shaped within the occult orientalist framework can be neither reduced to a unilateral Western projection nor postulated to be derived from unpolluted Asian traditions. Rather, it emerged from a vibrant exchange between Euro-American and Asian actors, and continues to be a hallmark of the contemporary culture of alternative spiritualities and holistic therapies.

4.2. A Genealogy of Pranic Healing (1)

Zoehrer, Dominic. 2021b. “From Fluidum to *Prāṇa*: Reading Mesmerism through Orientalist Lenses.” In Lukas Pokorny and Franz Winter, eds., *The Occult Nineteenth Century: Roots, Developments, and Impact on the Modern World*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. 85–110.

One type of therapeutic agent often referred to in the context of energy healing is the Sanskrit term *prāṇa*, denoting both breath and vitality. This article argues that *prāṇa*-based practices are commonly rooted in a process of combining mesmeric elements with notions from Indian traditions, a process that was intensified within the globalising occult milieus of the nineteenth century. Key figures involved in the “pranic” branch in the reception history of mesmerism are presented, thus revealing the dynamic of intercultural transfers involved in *prāṇa*-based approaches of energy healing.

The notion of *prāṇa* attracted the interest of Romantic mesmerists and the emerging occult movement not least due to its intermediary function as a *tertium datur* between the soul and the body, the immaterial and the material realms. Building on the previous research by Franz Winter and Karl Baier, I delineate the earliest association of Mesmer’s fluidum with *prāṇa* in the context of French orientalism and German Romantic philosophy. I then zoom in on Blavatsky’s report on spectacular mesmeric healings during the early phase of the Theosophical Society in Ceylon in 1882. Her list of synonyms for the mesmeric *fluidum* is outstanding as it encapsulates both scientific and orientalist expressions that would become the hallmark of holistic descriptions of subtle energy (cf. section I.3). Apart from the Ceylon-episode, Blavatsky showed little interest in healing methods. However, her discussion of yogic and tantric conceptions of the subtle body kicked off a Theosophical discourse that had profound impact on a major segment of energy healing modalities.

Occult theories of healing also emerged in the German-speaking world. The journalist, Theosophist, and neo-gnostic Theodor Reuß was an early proponent of a mesmerism-based healing technique constructed around the notion of *prāṇa*. I discuss his article titled “Pranatherapie” that was published in the occult journal *Sphinx* in July 1894. Reuß notably construes *Pranatherapie* as the generic term for a number of healing arts that employ “the vital spirit, *prāṇa*, Od, life force, astral fluidum, also known as organic magnetism or nerve electricity,” again reiterating a combination of orientalism and physicalism.

Finally, I highlight the role of Vivekananda in merging the notion of *prāṇa* with mesmerism. From the position of an authority on yoga and spirituality, the neo-Hindu missionary crucially reinforced the orientalisation of mesmerism by introducing a semi-scientistic, semi-traditionalist interpretation of *prāṇa*. Penetrating the mindscape of the American alternative religious scene, Vivekananda proposed “Prana” as the shared root principle and universal force at the base of various practices, including mesmerism, hypnosis, spiritualism, and New Thought. Adopting mesmeric fluidal metaphors, Vivekananda interpreted disease as a disturbance in the “balance of Prana.” Opposing Christian Science and New Thought, he stressed that it was not faith that led to healing, but the transmission of Prana by a yogi who was able to control this cosmic force through suggested breathing exercises (*Pranayama*).

In short:

A gradual replacement of *fluidum* with *prāṇa* occurred through the Romantic reception of the Upanishads, occultist and fringe-Masonic teachings, and early modern yoga. [...] During the course of this development, not only was *prāṇa* and the mastering thereof through breathing techniques adopted as the lynchpin between the micro- and macrocosms, as well as the nexus between the bodily and mental dimensions. The attempt to reframe mesmerism in an orientalist context also triggered the transfer of several features of subtle physiology from yogic and tantric traditions, and their transformation in terms of rather this-worldly pursuits, namely health and healing. Mesmeric principles and techniques thus persist in transmuted shapes, that is, as transcultural products that were forged by Western and Indian authors alike. (Zoehrer 2021b: 107–108)

4.3. A Genealogy of Pranic Healing (2)

Zoehrer, Dominic. 2020. “Pranic Healing: A Mesmerist Echo in the New ‘Holistic’ Age.” In Hans Gerald Hödl, Astrid Mattes, and Lukas Pokorny, eds., *Religion in Austria*, vol. 5. Vienna: Praesens. 139–199.

This article sketches the origins and evolution of Pranic Healing by means of historical discourse analysis with a particular focus on its arrival and establishment in Austria. Section 2 discusses the influence of animal magnetism on present-day subtle energy-based techniques. Section 3 explores the interpretations of mesmerism in the context of occult literature in the decades around 1900. In this regard, two major hermeneutic frameworks were crucial: the appeal to ether physics on the one hand, and the appeal to an ancient, Eastern wisdom tradition on the other. Exemplary occult authors and their proposed concepts of a “pranic” healing agent are investigated in detail: Blavatsky, Reuß, and Atkinson (aka Yogi Ramacharaka). Section 4 elucidates the historical, doctrinal, and ritual dimensions of Choa Kok Sui’s healing movement, with a spotlight on its Austrian protagonists. I demonstrated Vienna’s pivotal role in exporting Pranic Healing to Central and Eastern Europe, which once more accentuates the city’s status as a nodal point in the entangled global history of subtle agent-based healing methods.

Personal Magnetism: Postscript on the Genealogy of Pranic Healing

New questions emerged in the course of examining the ideological background against which William W. Atkinson developed ‘Pranic Healing’ in the early 1900s, which were not addressed in my published articles on the subject. Although the association of *prāṇa* with the mesmeric *fluidum* had first been established with Anquetil-Duperron’s translation of the Upanishads around 1801/1802, the integration of specific breathing techniques into mesmeric healing rituals occurred more slowly.

One crucial entry point for the combination of breathing exercises with mesmeric discourse were American mail order courses on ‘personal magnetism.’ Despite the clearly mesmeric overtones, personal magnetism referred not to healing powers, but to the cultivation of personal attraction, persuasive public presence, and charisma (*avant la lettre*). Personal magnetism, in short, refers to the skill to draw the attention of others and influence them. Running parallel to the proliferating schools of magnetic healing and mesmeric spin-offs such as hypnotism, osteopathy, or chiropractic, personal magnetism can be regarded as part of the magnetism craze that swept the last three decades of the American nineteenth century. Whereas Mesmer’s art of rapport and persuasion aimed to evoke the healing crisis, American preachers, politicians, and entrepreneurs in the so-called ‘Gilded Age’ (c. 1870 to 1900) sought to develop the powers of a magnetic personality and thus win the sympathy and approval of their audiences.

Already in the American antebellum era (1815–1861), sublime orators among politicians were highly esteemed and characterised as ‘magnetic.’ Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865), who led his nation through the American Civil War and abolished slavery, was applauded in the *New Hampshire Sentinel* two years after his death for his leadership style and “personal magnetism” (Anonymous 1867: 1). An oratory of Anson Burlingame (1820–1870) marvelled about the diplomat’s “magnetism,” which had made him an outstandingly effective speaker. Burlingame reportedly “possessed an immense reserve of that subtle, forceful, overwhelming power which the word *magnetism* is used to signify” (Anonymous 1870: 630). His own conviction was amplified by enthusiasm and inspired conviction in others. Notably, while this “peculiar power of influencing others” seemed to grow out of a “mysterious gift, partly intellectual, partly spiritual, largely physical,” Burlingame’s words would only flow if he had attained “rapport” with his audience (ibid.: 631). During the 1880s, the press nicknamed the presidential candidate James G. Blaine (1830–1893) the “Magnetic Man” who had “a charm that binds men to him” (Young 2017: 27–29).

Personal magnetism shifted from a widespread popular fascination to a heavily marketed commodity. The American public was infatuated with ‘magnetic’ speakers. Initially, personal magnetism was regarded as a special talent one had to be born with. But what if personal magnetism could be acquired by the right training? This was the claim of self-published authors who began shaping the discourse on the subject by blending overtly flowery praise of magnetic powers with straightforward self-help strategies (Young 2017: 36). In 1888, the controversial social reform activist, actor, and self-help author

Albert Webster Edgerly (1852–1926) presented an unusually broad repertoire of breathing techniques aimed at strengthening ‘personal magnetism’ (cf. Shaftesbury 1888a; 1888b). Both themes, breath and magnetism, had already been circulating in the European and American occult milieus, for example, in the writings of Éliphas Lévi (b. Alphonse Louis Constant, 1810–1875) and Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875). Furthermore, techniques of breath retention for the purpose of entering altered states of consciousness were also known in Swedenborgian circles (Wilkinson 1851; Evans 1886; Toksvig 1948). Whether these discourses had an influence on Edgerly requires further investigation.

Edgerly graduated of the Boston University School of Law in 1876 and launched the Ralston Health Club, a mimicry of a utopian, esoteric order, in the same year (Martinelli 2012: 31). Using his *nom de plume* Edmund Shaftesbury, he presented his rules on diet and exercise, personal hygiene, deep breathing, attraction and sex in a total of eighty-two books (ibid.: 32).⁹⁵ Jeremy Young recounts about this episode:

Notwithstanding the continued popularity of their works – Edgerly alone claimed to have sold at least 800,000 volumes – the popularizers [of personal magnetism] represented the decline of personal magnetism in American culture. [...] Edgerly’s outlandish arguments demonstrated the increasing relegation of the term itself to the cultural fringes. With the dawn of a more scientific age, the sense of unexplainable mystery and wonder that had propelled the magnetism craze gradually dissipated; some cities even considered outlawing mesmeric stage acts as a public nuisance. (Young 2017: 38–39)

Public interest in personal magnetism thus prefigured a deeper American engagement with charisma throughout the twentieth century, but also fuelled the development of alternative therapeutic concepts. Powered by the self-help industry of the Gilded Age, new syntheses of personal magnetism, breathing exercises, occult healing theories, and yoga were forged, ultimately leading to Atkinson’s highly influential conception of Pranic Healing. Pranic Healing contributed to the formation of Reiki, Alice Bailey’s ‘esoteric healing,’ and Choa Kok Sui’s later adaptation. Edgerly’s prolific output served as a clear model for Atkinson’s series of books on personal magnetism and related principles aimed at generating success, wealth, and health.

⁹⁵ Edgerly’s concern with the loss of the vital force and his interest in sexuality, eugenics, and the future of the race was shared by Theosophical feminists (cf. Albrecht 2025).

IV. Concluding Remarks

“The really skilful and judicious steer clear of it from a fear of compromising their credit for commonsense; and while the caution necessarily attendant upon habitual scientific studies, dissuades the best men from meddling with that which may blight their hardly-earned laurels, the public is left to be swayed to and for by an undercurrent of fallacious half-truths, far more seductive and dangerous than absolute falsehoods.”

—Anonymous (1845: 221)

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the more celebrated contemporary of Mesmer, epitomised the attitude of the Enlightenment-minded thinker who defended science against bodily affects, infatuations, and an overflowing imagination (Barkhoff 1995: 64). In this spirit, Kant expressed his view on the subject of mesmerism in a letter written to Ludwig Ernst Borowski (1740–1831), a befriended Protestant clergyman, in 1790:

There is nothing further to be done against this nonsense than to allow the animal magnetiser to magnetise and disorganise himself for as long as it pleases him and other gullible individuals; while recommending to the state authorities that morality not be unduly compromised in the process. Otherwise, one should simply continue to follow the only true path of natural inquiry—through experiment and observation—that makes the properties of the object discernible to the external senses. A lengthy refutation would be beneath the dignity of reason and would accomplish nothing: contemptuous silence is more appropriate for this kind of lunacy. Such spectacles in the moral world last only a short while, only to make room for new follies. (Kant 1902 [1790]: 142–143; my translation)⁹⁶

Kant’s assessment of mesmerism prefigured the stance of contemporary sceptics towards energy healing: it is an inherently irrational activity that is not worth the attention of the serious scientist. Despite his scathing verdict, Kant soberly predicted that reason and science offered no remedy for such “nonsense”

⁹⁶ “Wider diesen Unfug ist nun nichts weiter zu thun, als den animalischen Magnetiseur magnetisiren und desorganisiren zu lassen, so lange es ihm und andern Leichtgläubigen gefällt; der Policy aber es zu empfehlen, daß der Moralität hiebei nicht zu nahe getreten werde, übrigens aber für sich den einzigen Weg der Naturforschung, durch Experiment und Beobachtung, die die Eigenschaften des Objects äusseren Sinnen kenntlich werden lassen, ferner zu befolgen. Weitläufige Widerlegung ist hier wider die Würde der Vernunft und richtet auch nichts aus: verachtendes Stillschweigen ist einer solchen Art von Wahnsinn besser angemessen: wie denn auch dergleichen Eräugnisse in der moralischen Welt nur eine kurze Zeit dauern, um andern Thorheiten Plaz zu machen.”

as the appetite of the gullible for delusions is insatiable. Mesmerism indeed made room for “new follies,” or to be historically more accurate: decisively prepared their ideological ground.

Sharply discerning real science from non-science in the Enlightenment tradition, Olav Hammer correctly observed that in “modern Esoteric thought (...) [s]cientific terms such as *energy*, *vibration* or *quantum* are deployed in ways that bear little or no resemblance to usage in texts dealing with natural science” (Hammer 2001: 507; emphasis in the original). He inferred that these terms must have been disembodied from their previous scientific domain, only to be integrated into ‘naïve’ esoteric narratives. For the case of energy healing, this thesis proved that this particular claim made by Hammer was only partially true. The origin of the term ‘energy’ and the development of its ‘esoteric’ meanings were considerably more complex than a mere binary between scientific orthodoxy versus esoteric deviance would imply.

As established in my thesis, German and French physicians supportive of mesmerism already used the term energy (*Energie* or *énergie*) around 1800, although in a rather casual manner that did not differentiate between nervous or physiological stimuli and mental vigour. A British attempt to reinterpret Mesmer’s cosmic *fluidum* as *energia* (a hypothetical agent effecting all physical, chemical, and biological changes) was short-lived but preceded the notion of energy that was formalised in physics around 1850. All of this implies that the idea of energy as a natural healing agent did not initially arise in an esoteric or otherwise reactionary context, but rather within scientific discourse. It was only through the differentiation of academic disciplines over the course of the nineteenth century—specifically, the establishment of physics, biology, and psychology as distinct fields of research—that a de-differentiated notion of energy could be classified as an occult theme.

A Brief History of Subtle Energy as a Healing Agent

Despite rampant source amnesia, no school of energy healing appeared out of thin air. Rather, each drew extensively from a highly diverse and globalising cultic milieu that took on its particular shape under the conditions of late modernity. The hegemonial status of science came to be reflected in the biomedical view of the human self. By contrast, religious-therapeutic practices derive from an anthropology that opposes a mechanistic view of the human body and emphasises the relevance of other, more ‘subtle’ layers of the self. As mediums thought to operate on intra- and transpersonal levels, subtle energies are not strictly defined, but remain semantically open to physicalist, psychological, or explicitly spiritual interpretations.

This thesis demonstrated that the evolution of the concept of subtle energy as a therapeutic medium was shaped by multiple ideological currents. Among the most influential were mesmerism, New Thought, occult discourse including Theosophy and post-Theosophical thought, and holistic health—a prominent

strand within the broader New Age movement. The alternative religious and medical milieus of the decades around 1900 were particularly fertile ground for the creation (or rather synthesis) of new healing systems centred on the idea of ‘energy’ per se. Two approaches of rendering energy as a singular healing power were discussed in detail: science as a frame of reference and the appeal to a transculturally imagined ‘mystic East.’

To varying degrees, physics served as a reference point for legitimising the belief that subtle energies permeate the universe and can be harnessed by appropriate means. When a particular model of a hidden imponderable or force was neglected by the scientific community (e.g., the mesmeric *fluidum*, Reichenbach’s *Od*, or the ether hypothesis), continuing popular interest preserved those models, particularly in the occult and later holistic milieus, where they were imbued with an aura of rejected yet superior knowledge, poised to ignite a scientific, medical, and technological revolution. The proposed category of ‘futuristic retro-medicine’ captures this recurring theme that overlaps with alternative religious-therapeutic discourse. Energy became a scientific key term in conceptions of a future medicine, which usually rehashed older attempts to declare a single, universal healing agent.

However, ‘energy’ was a term that had entered mesmeric discourse *prior* to the establishment of its now common physical definition. The notion of *énergie* was already common in the French mesmeric discourse of the early nineteenth century. It denoted the psychological *quality* (i.e., the intensity of will power) required on the side of the *magnetiseur* before energy was defined as a physical, objective *quantity* by German and British physicists around 1850. As shown in my discussion of the British physician William Newnham, energy became one of several other notions that were employed in the 1840s to reframe the discredited practice of mesmerism in less suspicious terms and replace the idea of *fluidum* with another physical concept that encompassed the meaning of life force. Nonetheless, only after the breakthrough of energy physics and the dismissal of ether theories, did (subtle) energy theories gain a strong footing among writers on alternative medical and esoteric subjects.

The appeal to a mystic East proved to be another efficient and long-lasting strategy to popularise the acceptance of an occult agent and its therapeutic function. Since Anquetil-Duperron’s annotated translation of the Upanishads in *Oupneck’hat* (1801/1802), the Sanskrit word *prāṇa* (breath, vitality) has been associated with the mesmeric *fluidum*. The interpretation of *prāṇa* as a therapeutic medium was a transcultural fin-de-siècle nineteenth-century product disseminated through the writings of Blavatsky, Olcott, du Prel, Reuß, Prasad, Vivekananda, and Atkinson. *Prāṇa* was reinterpreted as a functional equivalent of the mesmeric *fluidum* and incorporated into healing models grounded in a fundamentally mesmeric framework. *Prāṇa*-based therapeutic concepts thus emerged from an amalgam of magnetic healing, occult-vitalist cosmologies, breathing exercises taught in personal magnetism tutorials, and modern yoga. Their most popularised form was coined as ‘Pranic Healing’ by Atkinson-aka-Yogi Ramacharaka in the 1900s. *Prāṇa* was one of the earliest elements in the list of synonyms

describing a life force, which became a recurrent theme in occult, New Thought, and naturopathic texts as a ‘universal’—i.e., cosmic and transculturally affirmed—healing agent.

Compared to *prāṇa*, the word *qì* (vapor, breath)—a key term in Chinese thought and medicine—had a much slower entry into Euro-American religious-therapeutic discourse and was only partially identified with a quasi-mesmeric healing agent. *Qì* was translated by the German missionary-scholar Ernst Johann Eitel (1838–1908) as “vital breath or subtle energies” in the early 1870s. Although known to Theosophical authors by 1882 as ‘breath’ or ‘spirit’ through the translations of Chinese classics by James Legge, *qì* did not play a decisive role in Western religious-therapeutic contexts before the popularisation of Reiki and Traditional Chinese Medicine after World War II. As the work of Justin Stein has demonstrated, the Japanese translations of American occult texts, including Atkinson’s books, during the 1910s had a profound influence on the development of Reiki under Usui Mikao. But only with the enthusiastic reception of acupuncture in the West, did *qì* fully enter the list of vital energy-synonyms over the course the 1970s, when it found its basic, quasi-canonical form. As the idea of subtle energies had become prevalent in the Western alternative religious and alternative medical context, its holistic welcoming structures readily absorbed Chinese concepts of life force. In the aftermath of science’s rise to ideological hegemony, the idea of a singular therapeutic medium was thus rendered plausible either by recourse to a quasi-physical term or by tapping into the pre-scientific, non-European mindscape.

Twentieth-century holistic discourses on energy were never highly differentiated but enabled entanglements of scientistic and orientalist concepts. With the intention to disentangle mesmerism and psychic healing from its occult connotations, Albert Abrams placed the term energy at the centre of his iatrophysical model, which paved the path for radionics as well as ‘energy medicine,’ that is, the plausibilisation of energy healing within a purely biophysical framework. Abrams’ writings of the 1910s impacted early eclectic concepts of energy healing including Varma’s Pranothrapy and Stone’s Polarity Therapy. However, few authors popularised the concept of energy as a holistic healing principle to the extent that Alice A. Bailey did. Her esoteric grand narrative, allegedly ‘received’ from a Tibetan master, was articulated in a scientised language inherited from her occult predecessors.

Esoteric Healing (1953)—Bailey’s central contribution to the field of holistic healing—prepared a broad ideological ground for the growing market of subtle-energy therapies in the latter half of the twentieth century. Energies were the central mediatory agent in Bailey’s hierarchical cosmology and anthropology. Their vitalistic connotation was derived from two fundamental sources that Bailey interpreted through the works of Blavatsky and the Christian Science and New Thought genres: (1) Mesmer’s cosmic *fluidum*, and (2) Swedenborg’s doctrine of the ‘one life,’ which denotes a transcendent, divine principle that flows into all living organisms and vivifies them (*influx*). Bailey’s vision of a futuristic retro-medicine thus took the exact opposite path of scientification (despite its thin surface of physicalism) and formed a foundational framework for decidedly esoteric modalities of energy healing.

Bailey's *Esoteric Healing* became a cornerstone text for the twentieth-century field of energy healing, although its cryptic style rendered its value for practitioners more symbolic and mythic than substantial. The explicit 'esotericism' inherent in her vision of a medicine of the future is ambivalent. On the one hand, esoteric knowledge of healing is reserved to initiates. On the other hand, Bailey follows Blavatsky's footsteps by inverting the etymological meaning of 'esoteric' and declaring a secret doctrine for all. Respective semantic layers of the adjective 'esoteric' were addressed in my expert interviews with experienced representatives of the local field in Vienna (Austria). The 'esoteric' either refers to the strange and irrational 'other,' or it denotes the science of the future that is not yet fully understood and still taking shape. As a critique of overly specialised medicine, Bailey's 'esoteric healing' aligned with the broader counter-reaction to the scientification of life characteristic of alternative medicine. In this spirit, her vision of a simpler, more 'user-friendly' therapeutic system privileged intuition over medical expertise.

With the New Age wave of the 1970s and 1980s, propelled by bodywork modalities developed at the Esalen Institute and the Western reception of non-European responses to biomedicine (most notably Traditional Chinese Medicine and Ayurveda), a range of energy healing schools emerged and consolidated as a confident and self-aware segment of a larger holistic health movement. These schools were variously grouped under emic categories such as "wholistic healing" (Otto and Knight 1979) or "vibrational medicine" (Gerber 1988). However, the meaning of 'energy' was by no means uniform and remained contested. The literal view of 'subtle energy' as belonging to a realm of 'higher' physical frequencies was an interpretation favoured by some practitioners and received significant ideological support by the Stanford physicist William A. Tiller.

Well-meaning critiques of the notion of subtle energy were put forth by physicists who were generally sympathetic to the field. Fritjof Capra opted for a metaphorical reading of 'energy' and favoured a holistic, 'systems view of living organisms' (Capra 1982). A decade earlier, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker critically commented on Gopi Krishna's notion of "Prana," defined as a vitalistic energy that animates all living organisms and drives biological evolution. Von Weizsäcker was open-minded about Krishna's idea but proposed an analogy to quantum physical principles as a more appropriate explanation:

[...] the concept of *Prana* is not necessarily incompatible with our physics. *Prana* is spatially extended and vitalizing. Hence above all it is moving potency. The quantum theory designates something not entirely remote from this by the term "probability amplitude." The relationship may become clearer, when we consider probability as a strictly futuristic concept, that is, as the quantified expression of that towards which the "flow of time" is pressing to evolve. (Von Weizsäcker 1972: 40–41)

Capra and von Weizsäcker's attempts to connect "'hard science' and irrational mysticism" were symptomatic of "an era marked by inner conflict" (cf. Mutschler 1990: 184, my translation). Both

physicists shared the holistic concern of overcoming the so-called Cartesian dualism of subject and object by emphasising relational, participatory, and even mystical views of the world. However, their proposals to adopt a language more compatible with modern physics (and thus preserve the notion of ‘energy’ as a purely physical quantity) did not gain wide acceptance. Their voices went largely unnoticed in the torrent of practices that evolved around subtle energies. A possible reason is that their alternatives offered little advantage to the perceived universalism of energy: The word suggests scientific validity as well as compatibility with non-European, purportedly ancient traditions. Furthermore, owing to its everyday connotations with subjectively felt states, the term ‘energy’ carries an inner, psychological dimension that advocates of holistic thought are unwilling to relinquish.

Apart from energy, few other notions managed to capture such disparate phenomena as physical reality and the power of transformation, transcultural descriptions of an animating force, and the dimension of consciousness as a *single* unifying concept. Between the poles of consciousness and physical reality, subtle energy took on a third, mediating position in the sense of life force. Life force is thought to operate as an autonomous teleological principle that maintains the body’s health and a sense of balance. In cases of illness, however, the healing process is believed to be enhanced by mobilising or releasing the client’s vital energies through the practitioner’s intervention. As a therapeutic medium, the concept of subtle energy suggests the influence of a physical, objective agent that at the same time has a mental, subjective side, allowing it to respond to the thoughts and will of a practitioner (as well as the client herself). An exception are models of energy healing (or ‘energy medicine’) that aim to establish a strictly scientific framework, such as James L. Oschman’s attempt to explain subtle energies in terms of biophysics and thereby ‘sanitise’ energy healing of its esoteric or occult connotations.

The underlying presumption behind subtle energy theories is that reality is characterised by a continuum between the mental and the physical. This belief is encapsulated most concisely by Alice Bailey’s two principles of energy (derived from *rāja yoga*), repeatedly invoked in the holistic milieu: (a) all is energy, and (b) energy follows thought or attention. Bailey taught that the ‘stuff’ of reality is made up of energy but the power of the mind ultimately takes priority, reflecting the indebtedness of her therapeutic theory to the positive-mind metaphysics of New Thought. This influence was already apparent in one of her earliest books, *The Consciousness of the Atom* (1922), where Bailey conceived of an explicitly idealistic view of nature. Bailey’s physicalist idealism thus prefigured the New Age quantum metaphysics that emerged in the 1970s and translated into respective healing theories, where quantum physical principles serve as analogies to express the conviction that the mind holds subtle power over matter.

The most characteristic feature of subtle energies is their hovering between a physicalist understanding of energy and an idealistic extension that includes the ‘forces’ of the mind. Bailey’s first, quasi-monistic principle—that ‘all is energy’—is strongly relativised by her second one, which asserts the ultimate primacy of mind over energy and, hence, physical reality. This inherent contradiction expressed in

Bailey's energetic tenets, which may be understood as an attempt to synthesise the basic approaches of mesmerism and New Thought, has manifested in two distinct modalities of energy healing. On the one hand, occult-mesmeric practices that involve the belief in a singular subtle agent and a subtle physiology built around *cakras* and an etheric double. On the other hand, physicalist practices rooted in the New Thought tradition that draw on quantum analogies to express the power of thought, mindfulness, and visualisation.

All of this points to the fact that the concept of subtle energies represents one of Mesmer's most enduring legacies: a physicalist—or more precisely, cosmo-physiological—notion imbued with an intrinsic psychological dimension, making it responsive to the will (and nervous system) of the practitioner. This idea corresponds directly to the psychosomatic view of the human being and may explain the lasting relevance of Mesmer's 'discovery.' Karl Baier noted on the recurrent reinventions of mesmeric practices:

The theory of animal magnetism and its corresponding practices presumably speak to dimensions of human self-experience as an embodied being—dimensions that are not satisfactorily interpreted by physicalist theories in the style of Mesmer, yet are also neglected in a consistently psychologised approach to therapy. Sooner or later, what has been repressed resurfaces, and this is likely the reason why the mesmerist approach to the human person continues to experience periodic revivals. (Baier 2019: 129–130; my translation)⁹⁷

The *tour d'énergie* outlined in this thesis is not an exhaustive account of energy as a healing concept but only represents a preliminary attempt based on my historical exposition of the subject. Further research will shed light on theories and practices that went unnoticed in my study but may could provide a fuller picture of the pivotal role of subtle energies in shaping religious-therapeutic discourses and related domains such as body psychotherapy, modern yoga, meditation, and martial arts.

A Latent Spiritual Dimension

Mesmer attempted to create a medical method that was based on purely physical principles and thus hoped to convince the Enlightenment-era scientific community. In the holistic milieu, the function of physicalism has shifted. The talk of 'energies,' 'fields,' or quantum analogies do not primarily serve to sway the scientific community of accept the validity of a particular approach, but rather to reach laypersons by means of a secular, scientised language. Behind science as a 'language of faith' lies a

⁹⁷ "Vermutlich sprechen die Lehre vom animalischen Magnetismus und die ihr entsprechenden Praktiken Dimensionen der menschlichen Selbsterfahrung als leibliches Wesen an, die zwar durch physikalistische Theorien im Stil Mesmers nicht befriedigend interpretiert werden, die aber andererseits bei einer konsequenten Psychologisierung der Therapie außen vor bleiben. Über kurz oder lang meldet sich das Verdrängte wieder und das dürfte wohl der Grund sein, warum auch der mesmeristische Zugang zum Menschen immer wieder Neuauflagen erfährt."

message of self-empowerment: we are creators our own reality and the restoration of well-being starts with the ‘proper’ mindset, energetic hygiene, or a recharging of the *cakras*.

Energy healing is not by default identical with spiritual healing. As a therapeutic tertium, subtle energy extends to three levels. First, subtle energy is conceptualised as an *intrapersonal*, vitalistic principle that operates on a subtle physiological plane, often expressed as a ‘self-healing power.’ This teleological idea denotes the common core of all energy healing modalities. Furthermore, subtle energy can be imagined as a *transpersonal* agent that enables the formation of rapport—i.e., the intimate and exclusive attunement—between a practitioner and a client, which in some forms of energy healing (particularly those involving gentle touch and laying-on-of-hands) is crucial to activating unconscious potentials and, hence, the process of healing. Lastly, subtle energies can be understood to be a feature or even identical with a transcendent, divine entity. Accordingly, religious (or ‘spiritual’) brands of energy healing offer their practitioners not only a healing technique but a transformative personal path that holds out the promise of a spiritually fulfilled life.

Religious worldviews built around the belief in subtle energies and associated practices suggest that a higher degree of personal freedom and meaning is attainable by tuning into a higher, divine-like power. The claimed knowledge of self-healing powers may thus be regarded a first step towards a broader self-realisation of one’s own higher potentials and the cultivation of a way of life that aims to tune into what is postulated to be a divine energy. In this manner, energy healing can potentially be more than a way of restoring health and well-being and open up a spiritual dimension to life, which, however, is usually also associated with a higher degree of commitment (e.g., master-student relationships) than the commercialised *quid-pro-quo* relationship between provider and client. Thus, alternative medicine encompasses more than therapeutic practice; it also offers alternative worldviews (cf. Fuller 1989).

The Problem of Professionalisation

Without a robust institutional framework, practices draw from the cultic milieu only to disintegrate again after a few years or decades. The repeated cycles of reinventions of rather short-lived therapies based on subtle agents is a result of ephemeral, charisma-centred schools. Having been declared redundant in the sciences, the subsequent exclusion of life-force concepts have led to dynamics that are comparable to the fate of the notion of soul (cf. Stuckrad 2019). Expulsion from scientific discourse did not mark the end of the idea; rather, it developed a life of its own outside academic institutions, within the liberal and often chaotic cultic milieu—though it was occasionally taken up by individual scientists whose speculations fed back into the field (e.g., Driesch’s neovitalism, Rupert Sheldrake’s morphogenetic field, or Tiller’s subtle energies).

But even boundaries around academic disciplines are no absolutes and mild signs of rapprochement are visible on the scientific horizon: The field of energy healing could—in principle—receive a certain

degree of rehabilitation through biophysical research (cf. Oschman 2000) or psychoneuroimmunology and placebo studies (cf. Harrington 2008). However, such forms of scientific ‘recognition’ cannot fully render the crucial aspect of open-mindedness and active participation on the side of clients as objective factors. Any effects that can be safely attributed to a specific energetic treatment are thus likely to be generic and reproducible through other holistic practices that require the faith of the client. If this is the case, the benefit for individual modalities of energy healing and the probability of their ‘promotion’ through full integration in the healthcare system is rather limited. As my case study of the professionalisation of energy healing in Austria demonstrated, the free market of the holistic milieu still offers a more conducive and safer habitat to energy healers than the strictly regulated health system.

From a historical and cross-cultural point of view, science-based medicine and medical high-technology is the radical exception. Not least due to the consequent differentiation of academic disciplines throughout the nineteenth century, the accomplishments of Western, science-based medicine are unprecedented. As Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker remarked, science derived its success from consciously foregoing certain questions, particularly those that address the problem of existence, life, consciousness, and the ‘soul’ (Weizsäcker 1978: 167). Nonetheless, some historians of medicine doubt whether the unique differentiation of secular societies indeed constitutes a process of linear progress (e.g., Bruchhausen 2011). The rising popular interest in energy healing seems to indicate that a medicine of pills, surgery, and high-tech-diagnoses may not fully satisfy people’s therapeutic needs.

To reach a larger clientele, schools of energy healing are required to adjust to the standards of medical training. Medicalising and spiritual (or openly ‘esoteric’) types thus represent two poles within the spectrum of energy healing models, differing considerably in terms of sources, self-legitimation, and explanations of the healing process. Medicalising practices adopt a clinical framing as an explanatory basis for their method and utilise scientific terms or concepts either as ‘evidence’ for the efficacy of their approach, or in an analogical sense for illustrating their approach in a secular language. By contrast, spiritual strands make references to mythological origins, charismatic figures, ancient esoteric knowledge or channelled messages, and sacred places in the presentation of their approach. They may emphasise how a specific method has been personally received by a school founder through channelling or divine inspiration.

Paths Not Taken

Several aspects of the field of energy healing deserve more scholarly attention. First, one point of view that was largely neglected in this study is that of medical ethics. Illness, health, and healing are essential human experiences that often go far beyond the need of recovery from a particular disease. They carry the potential to open up existential questions about meaning and purpose, often triggering a fundamental change of outlook and personal lifestyle. Given the vulnerability of individuals seeking healing, there is every reason to exercise caution—both toward an ossified healthcare system dominated by biomedicine

and the pharmaceutical industry, and in regard to the exaggerated claims of holistic service providers. In many cases, consultation with a medical professional (or psychotherapist) is not only advisable but may be a life-saving necessity. Likewise, there are aspects of the experience of illness that are possibly neglected within the framework of disease-centred, scientifically oriented therapies. It may be in the interest of a suffering person to remain open and curious to alternatives that recognise more lucidly those aspects of healing that are too often ignored and omitted in a setting that relies on technological means of intervention and associated industrial products. Politicised epistemics in both biomedicine and the holistic milieu can thwart informed consent and suggest an obligation to act based on supposed 'evidence' while curtailing personal freedom and autonomy in therapeutic questions (cf. Illich 1975).

Second, a crucial area that absolutely requires scholarly engagement is the role of gender in the holistic milieu. Orthodox medicine and holistic healing are highly gendered fields, while men still dominate in the former and women in the latter. In the context of mesmerism, women had a higher predilection to be mesmerised. In Reichenbach's experiment with the hypothetical *Od*, his preferred research subjects were 'sensitives,' the majority of whom were women. My investigation of the local field in Vienna, Austria's capital, demonstrated that 80% of registered energy healers were female. A similar proportion is to be expected among the clientele. Sociological surveys could shed light on the specific role of female healers, their customers, and the gendered nature of the holistic milieu.

Third, the study of energy healing could benefit from an approach grounded in aesthetics and a theory of embodiment. Therefore, the above focus on plausibilisation patterns may be complemented by drawing attention to the significance of aesthetic aspects including (1) the rooms and materials used in creating the atmosphere for a healing ritual; (2) the performance of the practitioner by means of meditative states, invocations, and bodily gestures and interactions; and (3) the sensory responses, bodily transformations, and overall experience on the side of both the practitioner and the receiver of an energetic treatment.

Finally, energy healing serves as a specific case study of the transformation of religion under the conditions of late modernity. Next to shamans and spiritual healers, energy healers belong to a group of service providers that have been thriving in Western countries since the 1980s and have been referred to by sociologists as "religious entrepreneurs" (Hero 2010; 2021). A closer examination of their role will illuminate the de-differentiating dynamic that plays out between the poles of religion and therapy. Research on religious entrepreneurs would focus on the promotional strategies they engage in order to assert themselves in a highly competitive service market. Clinical interest in their practices are gaining inroads particularly in areas such as postnatal care, rehabilitation therapies, and palliative care.

While still in a position of an 'outsider' or 'challenger,' religious entrepreneurs shape a shifting religious landscape and the expanding health market, where the needs of the patient (and potential seeker) take

priority over the official boundaries between orthodox and heterodox offers. Robert C. Fuller described this changing attitude in the boundary work between medicine and religion thus:

Scholars have pondered why people residing in highly technological societies continue to opt for therapeutic practices outside those endorsed by scientific medicine. Among the most commonly cited reasons are easier access, lower cost, more emphasis on how to achieve high levels of wellbeing, and sheer desperation when conventional therapies aren't effective. Modern cognitive science suggests that humanity's most spontaneous or intuitive modes of thinking favour religious or supernatural conceptions of causality. Religiously or supernaturally phrased understandings of human wellbeing might intuitively appeal to many regardless of their empirical foundations. (Fuller 2021: 400)

This re-evaluation of the irreplaceable (and perhaps irrepressible) role of religious approaches to healing might indicate that a purist Enlightenment ideal of reason and science may have to come to terms with its own limitations. For better or worse, imagination shapes our perception and experiences more profoundly than the notion of an absolute, scientific objectivity allows for. The history of energy healing has pointed to the typically modern problem of finding an appropriate yet credible language and theory to describe the potential of healing and meaning-production, which seem virtually impossible to define in strictly scientific terms.

I hope my thesis has made it clear that energy healing is more an art than a science. It serves as a reminder that the process of healing often involves 'softer' or more 'subtle' dimensions—such as personal presence, attention, intuition, empathy, and affection—that go beyond what any 'hard' medical technology can offer. At the very least, this is what the sustained demand for energetic treatments seems to suggest.

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VI. Appendix: Overview of Published Articles

List of peer-reviewed contributions included in this thesis (in chronological order):

	Title	Journal/Volume	Year	# Words	# Pages (.docx)
1	Pranic Healing: A Mesmerist Echo in the New “Holistic” Age	<i>Religion in Austria</i> , vol. 5	2020	24,494	53
2	From <i>Fluidum</i> to <i>Prāṇa</i> : Reading Mesmerism Through Orientalist Lenses	<i>The Occult Nineteenth Century: Roots, Developments, and Impact on the Modern World.</i> (Festschrift for Karl Baier)	2021	10,184	24
3	Das holistische Milieu – ein Gegenstand der künftigen Religionsbildung?	<i>Pädagogische Horizonte</i> , 4 (1)	2021	5,000	19
4	Between Spirituality and Medicalisation: The Professionalisation of Energy Healing in Austria	<i>Religion in Austria</i> , vol. 9	2024	22,052	56
5	Introduction	<i>Subtle Energies in Therapy, Spirituality, Arts & Politics</i> (Brill Numen Series)	2025	7,674	18
6	Historical Roots of Subtle Energies: Occult Physicalism	<i>Subtle Energies in Therapy, Spirituality, Arts & Politics</i> (Brill Numen Series)	2025	17,855	36
7	Historical Roots of Subtle Energies: Occult Orientalism	<i>Subtle Energies in Therapy, Spirituality, Arts & Politics</i> (Brill Numen Series)	2025	11,119	23
8	“Medical men in the new age”: Alice Bailey’s Impact on Contemporary Energy Healing	<i>Religions</i> , 16 (5)	2025	25,307	42
			TOTAL	123,685	271



Das holistische Milieu – ein Gegenstand der künftigen Religionsbildung?

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ANGENOMMEN 9 AUG 2021

Das ‚Weltreligionen‘-Paradigma bildet die gelebte religiös-weltanschauliche Vielfalt nur unzureichend ab. Ein neues Verständnis von Religionsbildung muss daher über diese Denkform hinausgehen. Insbesondere die Verschränkung von Religion mit anderen kulturellen Bereichen ist stärker in den Blick zu nehmen. Hierzu gehört auch die Schnittmenge von Religiosität und Lebenshilfe, die als ‚holistisches Milieu‘ bezeichnet wird. Dieser Beitrag begründet, warum das holistische Milieu in den Lehrplan integriert werden sollte. Er vermittelt einen Überblick zu seinen weltanschaulichen, praktischen und soziologischen Merkmalen aus religionswissenschaftlicher Sicht. Die abschließende Diskussion umreißt zwei Ansätze, wie das holistische Milieu als Gegenstand für den religionsbezogenen Unterricht aufbereitet werden könnte.

SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER: religiöse Vielfalt, holistisches Milieu, Lebenshilfe, Spiritualität, alternative Therapien

1. Einleitung

In einer religiös und weltanschaulich pluralen Gesellschaft ergeben sich vielfältige Herausforderungen, für die es keine einfache Rezeptlösung gibt.² Eine dringende Frage ist, wie Vielfalt im religionsbezogenen Unterricht abgebildet werden soll. Wie sollen junge Menschen auf einen reflektierten Umgang mit religiöser und weltanschaulicher Vielfalt vorbereitet werden?

In der pädagogischen Literatur wurde religiöse Vielfalt maßgeblich anhand der Kategorie ‚Weltreligionen‘ verhandelt. Obwohl die religionspädagogische Forschung bereits differenzierte Debatten zu diesem seit 1886 verwendeten Begriff hervorgebracht hat, wirkt er bis in die Gegenwart fort. Von der Denkform ‚Weltreligionen‘ geht eine ungebrochene, performative Kraft aus, die Verschiedenheit und Gegensätzlichkeit überschaubar und damit domestizierbar erscheinen lässt. Sie

¹ Dieser Beitrag wurde durch die Unterstützung des Wissenschaftsfonds FWF ermöglicht (Projekt P 32232-G).

² In einer sich im Druck befindenden Einführung zur religiösen Vielfalt in Österreich beschreiben Karsten Lehmann und Wolfram Reiss diesen Prozess als das Verschwinden eines intuitiven Verständnisses von Religion.

ermöglichte die Klassifikation von außereuropäischen Traditionen nach protestantischen Kriterien (z. B. Transzendenzvorstellung, heilige Schriften oder Bekenntnis), um diese mit dem Christentum vergleichbar und damit verständlich zu machen (Koch, 2021a; Koch, 2021b).

Trotz ihrer pädagogischen Vorzüge führt die Komplexitätsreduktion des Weltreligionen-Paradigmas zur voreiligen Marginalisierung anderer Überzeugungen und Formen des Religiösen. Um dieser Tendenz entgegenzusteuern, empfiehlt Anne Koch einen dringenden Kurswechsel. Gegenüber essentialisierenden Kategorien wie Buddhismus, Christentum, Hinduismus, Islam und Judentum verweisen lokale Praktiken („lived religion“) oder aber auch neue religiöse Bewegungen auf ein viel breiteres Spektrum religiöser und weltanschaulicher Vielfalt. Populäre Ausdrucksformen von Spiritualität gehen noch weiter über formale religiöse Identitäten hinaus. Das ausschließlich europäische Phänomen der „Entkirchlichung“, also der Rückgang kirchlicher Monopolstellungen, lässt neue, oft nur kurzlebige Formen von Religion entstehen, die maßgeblich von individuellen Akteuren oder kleineren Gruppen getragen werden (Hock, 2014, S. 106; vgl. Campbell, 1972). Schließlich wird die Vielschichtigkeit von Religion deutlich anhand der intersektionalen Bezüge, mit denen sie verwoben ist, so etwa mit Literatur, Bildung, Wissenschaft, Politik, Wirtschaft oder Gender (Koch, 2021a, S. 289–291).

Mit ihrer Bandbreite an Zugängen kann Religionswissenschaft den konfessionell verantworteten Religionsunterricht inhaltlich wie didaktisch ergänzen. Sie kann unmittelbar auf Beobachtungen und Fragestellungen von Heranwachsenden eingehen, die mit Religion zu tun haben, aber nicht so recht in die Schubladen „Kirche“ oder „Weltreligion“ passen. Dieser Beitrag knüpft an Kochs Plädoyer für ein neues Verständnis von Religionsbildung an. Er behandelt die Schnittmenge von alternativer Religiosität und Lebenshilfe, die auch als „holistisches Milieu“ bezeichnet wird.

Drei Gründe können genannt werden, warum das holistische Milieu als Gegenstand im religionspädagogischen Kontext stärker berücksichtigt werden sollte:

1. Bezugnahme auf die Lebenswelt von Schülern (w/m/d). Aufgrund der breiten Akzeptanz holistischer Ideen und Praktiken in der Bevölkerung ist anzunehmen, dass junge Menschen bereits im engeren Familien- oder Bekanntenkreis Kontakt mit dem Feld haben bzw. hatten.

2. Vermittlung veränderter Bedeutungen von Religion im Kontext der Moderne. Das holistische Milieu reagiert auf die Divergenz von gesellschaftlichen Teilsystemen, indem es die Bereiche Religion/Spiritualität und Lebenshilfe/Heilung zu einer neuen Synthese führt (Lüddeckens, 2012).³

3. Den Schülern (w/m/d) ermöglichen, eine kritische, weil informierte Meinung zu bilden. Beim holistischen Milieu handelt es sich um ein zum Teil religiöses, aber

3 Ähnliche Entwicklungen können bei den Schnittmengen Religion und Politik (Stichworte: politische Religionen, Neue Christliche Rechte, Islamismus) oder Religion und Literatur bzw. Film (Stichwort: „fiction-based religion“) beobachtet werden.

weitgehend konfessionsunabhängiges Phänomen. Eine religionspädagogische Aufarbeitung des Themas wird daher von religionswissenschaftlichen Perspektiven, Theorien und Methoden besonders profitieren. Religionswissenschaft bietet ein grundsätzliches Vokabular an, um mit ideen- und praxisgeschichtlichem sowie empirisch fundiertem Wissen den Gegenstand differenziert zu reflektieren.

Dieser Beitrag stellt die Grundzüge des holistischen Milieus aus religionswissenschaftlicher Sicht vor. Im Anschluss an seine Begriffsbestimmung werden weltanschauliche Grundmotive, heimisch verbreitete Praktiken und die soziologische Verortung des holistischen Milieus beleuchtet. Eine abschließende Diskussion umreißt, wie das holistische Milieu als Gegenstand für den religionsbezogenen Unterricht aufbereitet werden könnte. Diese Übersicht vermittelt somit eine kleine Orientierung zu einem Feld, welches neben den ‚Weltreligionen‘ ein zentrales Segment des gegenwärtigen religiösen Lebens darstellt.

2. Das holistische Milieu: Lebenshilfe abseits von kirchlicher Religion und akademischem Diskurs

Ab den 1970er Jahren bildet sich in westlichen Gesellschaften eine selbstbewusste therapeutische und spirituelle ‚Gegenkultur‘ heraus, die weitgehend unabhängig von konventionellen Formen der religiösen Vergemeinschaftung agiert. Unterschiedliche soziologische Kategorien wurden vorgeschlagen, um dieses Phänomen zu erfassen. Hierzu zählen etwa das ‚kultische Milieu‘, ‚New Age‘, ‚entkirchlichte Spiritualität‘, ‚neospirituelle Szenen‘ oder das ‚holistische Milieu‘. Diese Etiketten bezeichnen chronologisch versetzte, aber inhaltlich eng verschränkte soziale Felder. Franz Höllinger und Thomas Tripold führten 2012 eine umfangreiche Studie zu den alternativ-therapeutischen und spirituellen Aktivitäten in Österreich durch. Sie betrachten den Begriff ‚holistisches Milieu‘ als besonders geeignet, um dieses dynamische Feld zu beschreiben. Neben der für das Milieu typischen Kritik an einer säkularistischen, naturwissenschaftlich orientierten Weltsicht als ‚Reduktionismus‘ bzw. ‚Materialismus‘ gibt es ein weiteres wichtiges Argument für diese Wahl: Die Selbstbezeichnung von Praktiken, Dienstleistungen und Therapien als ‚ganzheitlich‘ kommt mittlerweile häufiger vor als etwa die Label ‚New Age‘ oder ‚Esoterik‘ (Höllinger & Tripold, 2012, S. 12).⁴

Holistische Lebenshilfe umfasst Ratgeberliteratur und Dienstleistungen, die Gesundheit, persönliche Entwicklung, Selbstoptimierung, Erfolg und Sinnerfüllung fördern wollen. Auch wenn die Trennlinie zu rein säkularen Alternativen unscharf ist und nicht jeder holistische Anbieter (w/m/d) sein Produkt als ‚ganzheitlich‘

⁴ Trotz seiner semantischen Vielschichtigkeit hat sich der Begriff ‚Esoterik‘ im religionswissenschaftlichen Kontext ab 1965 als Kategorie für einen inhaltlich nur schwer abgrenzbaren Teilbereich des alternativ-religiösen Feldes herauskristallisiert. Historisch begriffen bezeichnet Esoterik als mittlerweile globales Phänomen keineswegs eine geschlossene, kontinuierliche Tradition, sondern ein komplexes Geflecht unterschiedlicher ideen- und praxisgeschichtlicher Strömungen (Baier, 2021).

anpreist, fällt holistische Lebenshilfe dadurch auf, dass sie sich nicht anhand eindeutiger akademischer Fachgebiete wie etwa Theologie, Naturwissenschaft, Medizin oder Psychotherapie einordnen lässt. Diese fachliche Entgrenzung holistischer Entwürfe reflektiert zum einen ein vielschichtiges Menschenbild („mind-body-spirit“), das mit der Ausdifferenzierung der Wissenschaften institutionell heimatlos geworden scheint. Zum anderen entspricht sie einem populärwissenschaftlichen Stil, der einerseits auf akademisches Wissen zurückgreift (zuweilen in vereinfachter oder gar verzerrter Form, vgl. Hammer, 2015) und andererseits alltagstaugliche Anwendungen dieses Wissens innerhalb eines synkretistischen, „wieder-verzaubern“ Sinnhorizonts vermitteln will. Holismus bevölkert somit das unregulierte Niemandsland zwischen hegemonialer Religion und akademischem Wissen.

Im Vergleich zur ansteckenden Aufbruchstimmung der amerikanischen New Age-Pioniere (w/m/d) der 1980er Jahre ist bei den holistischen Akteuren der letzten Dekaden die akute Dringlichkeit einer umfassenden Lösung für die Krisen einer materialistisch orientierten Menschheit in den Hintergrund getreten.⁵ Mit dem kommerziellen Durchbruch therapeutisch-spirituelle Ideen und Praktiken wurden diese zum festen Bestandteil der Gegenwartskultur (Knoblauch, 2009; Höllinger & Tripold, 2012), was zugleich den millenaristischen Eifer ihrer Vertreter abgemildert haben dürfte.⁶ Im Zentrum steht weniger die Umsetzung einer gegenkulturellen Vision als die konkrete Anwendungstauglichkeit im Alltag. Zum gegenwärtigen holistischen Buchmarkt gehören etwa Leitfäden für Kontemplation und Erleuchtung (Tolle, 1997), umfangreiche Ernährungstipps, die durch ein „Medical Medium“ gechannelt werden (William, 2015), „energetische“ Charakteranalyse und Stilberatung (Tuttle 2012) sowie Ratschläge zur Selbstverwirklichung mittels Heldenmythos und psychologisierter Alchemie (Peterson, 2021) – um nur plakativ einige einschlägige Topoi aus einem ausufernden Angebot zu nennen. Gemeinsam ist holistischen Autoren (w/m/d), dass es sich um geschickte Wissens- und Wertevermittler handelt, die eine breite Leserschaft adressieren. In ihren Texten stehen persönliche Sinnuche und praktische Wege zu diesseitigem Erfolg in engem Bezug zueinander. Ihre Bücher werden in zahlreiche Sprachen übersetzt und sind heute in praktisch allen Dienstleistungsgesellschaften der Welt verbreitet.

Neben dem Buchmarkt, der zusammen mit den ebenso umfangreichen Online-Angeboten entscheidend zur Verbreitung holistischer Ideen beiträgt, sind die praxisorientierten Dienstleister und entsprechende Organisationsformen die tra-

5 Vgl. auch die Unterscheidung zwischen New Age *sensu stricto* und *sensu lato* bei Hanegraaff (1998). Angesichts von Klimakrise und COVID-19 werden Endzeitszenarien und utopische Bestrebungen der Menschheitsrettung im aktuellen öffentlichen Diskurs in einer weitgehend säkularisierten Sprache verhandelt. Hierbei dienen Politik, Wissenschaft und Technologie als zentrale soteriologische Referenzpunkte. Technophobe Gegenreaktionen auf diesen Diskurs können hingegen zu dystopischen Verschwörungsmaythen neigen, die ebenso endzeitlich aufgeladen sind. Zur Verschiebung von religiöser zu säkularer Apokalypstik siehe Dein (2021).

6 Freilich ist ein millenaristisches Momentum latent weiterhin im Feld vorhanden. Den vorläufig letzten, medial breit rezipierten Ausdruck eines globalisierten New Age-Millenarismus fand die Erwartung eines mit dem Maya-Kalender assoziierten Epochenwechsels am 21. Dezember 2012 (Sitler, 2006).

genden Säulen des Milieus. Letztere werden in den Abschnitten 4 und 5 eingehender behandelt.

3. Weltanschauliche Leitmotive

Das holistische Feld kennt weder ein einheitliches Bekenntnis noch einen verbindlichen Kanon noch eine Zentralinstanz, die die Richtschnur für ‚Rechtläubigkeit‘ bestimmen würden. Aufgrund seiner Heterogenität muss beim didaktischen Versuch, ihre weltanschaulichen Inhalte darzustellen, jeder Anspruch einer vollständigen Gesamtdarstellung vermieden werden. Während Übersystematisierungen unangebracht sind, können dennoch typische Interessensgebiete und Identitätsmarker für das Feld festgemacht werden, wie etwa Heilen, Gesundheit, Natur, Energie, Entspannung, Bewusstsein, Potenzial und Spiritualität. Keiner dieser Begriffe ist eng bestimmt, aber sie alle suggerieren Selbstoptimierung und Sinnerfüllung. In Anlehnung an bisherige religionssoziologische und -systematische Studien kann die weltanschauliche Orientierung des holistischen Milieus durch folgende sieben Grundmotive umrissen werden:

(1) *Das Prinzip der Ganzheitlichkeit.* Hinter dem Label ‚holistisch‘ bzw. ‚ganzheitlich‘ verbergen sich oft ganz unterschiedliche Konnotationen, darunter (1) die Kritik an gesellschaftlichen Missständen, die als Folge eines einseitigen Fortschritts-glaubens (Stichworte: ‚reduktionistisches Menschenbild‘, ‚Materialismus‘, ‚mechanistisches Naturverständnis‘) sowie dogmatischer Religion verstanden werden; (2) ein Interesse an interdisziplinären Fragestellungen, die ausdifferenzierte Segmente der modernen Lebenswelt miteinander zu einer Gesamtschau verknüpfen; (3) die Rückkehr zu einer Anthropologie von Körper-Geist-Seele, die die Verkürzungen durch das biomechanische Modell überwinden soll; (4) der optimistische Anspruch ‚neuer‘ bzw. reformierter traditioneller Ansätze, die als Ergänzung oder gar Alternative zu ‚alten‘, herkömmlichen Methoden fungieren (vor allem im Zusammenhang von komplementären Heilverfahren); (5) die Sehnsucht nach Sinnentwürfen und Praktiken, die unter den Bedingungen der Säkularisierung und Technisierung als überholt gelten, wie etwa Mythos, Visionen und andere veränderte Bewusstseinszustände, Channeling, Astrologie, Numerologie, Divination, Radiästhesie, Geomantie oder die Arbeit mit feinstofflichen Energien (kurz ‚Esoterik‘ als verworfenes Wissen). Holismus hat also einen weiten Deutungsspielraum.

(2) *Die Entfaltung des persönlichen Potenzials und eines „höheren Bewusstseins“.* Holistische Ratgeber, Kurse und Behandlungsformen verstehen sich oftmals als Hilfestellung, um Klienten im Prozess der Persönlichkeitsentfaltung zu unterstützen. Therapeutische oder psychohygienische Aktivitäten zur Behandlung von körperlichen oder seelischen Beschwerden sowie zur Lösung von Beziehungsproblemen können als Vorbereitung für eine individuelle Transformation gedeutet werden, die auf eine Teilnahme des individuellen Bewusstseins an einer ‚höheren Realität‘ oder

einer ‚spirituellen Sphäre‘ verweist. Wichtige Impulse in dieser Hinsicht kamen aus dem Human Potential Movement⁷ und der Transpersonalen Psychologie, die ihrerseits eigene psychotherapeutische Richtungen hervorbrachten. Der Fokus auf Selbstverwirklichung, Kreativität und Sinn sowie die Betonung der Fähigkeit zur Selbsttranszendierung weicht deutlich ab von der religionskritischen bzw. religionsneutralen Grundhaltung, die führende psychologische und psychotherapeutische Schulen prägte. Die Neubewertung der Funktion von Religion sowie die Beschreibung der Wirkung religiöser Praktiken in psychologischer Sprache, insbesondere unter dem Einfluss C. G. Jungs, wird auch als „Psychologisierung der Religion“ charakterisiert (Hanegraaff, 1998, S. 224–255, 482–513).

(3) *Körper- und Erfahrungszentriertheit.* Entscheidend für den spirituellen Reifungsprozess des Individuums ist letztlich nicht das kognitive Erkennen, sondern die persönliche Erfahrung und Verinnerlichung der jeweiligen Wahrheit. Körperübungen versprechen, Stress abzubauen, die Leistungsfähigkeit zu steigern und das innere Gleichgewicht wiederherzustellen. Als Mittel zur Erzeugung intensiver Wahrnehmungen und außeralltäglicher Bewusstseinszustände können körperorientierte Praktiken, wie etwa energetische oder schamanische Heilungsrituale, meditative Körperhaltungen, Atemübungen, Trancetechniken oder Fasten eingesetzt werden (vgl. Höllinger & Tripold, 2012).

(4) *Erkenntnisanspruch durch die Berufung auf Tradition.* Einzelne Schulen oder Methoden des holistischen Feldes berufen sich auf eine (häufig imaginierte) geschichtliche Tradition, die ihre Legitimität und Wirksamkeit besonders hervorheben soll. Im Zuge der Globalisierung und der Beschäftigung mit vor- und außer-europäischen Kulturen erhielten Praktiken, die ihren Ursprung in der Kultur der Kelten, in Indien, Tibet, China, Japan, Ägypten, Hawaii oder diversen schamanischen Traditionen verorten, eine Aura der Glaubwürdigkeit (Hammer, 2001). Verbreitet ist auch die Annahme, dass sämtliche religiöse und philosophische Lehren Ausdruck einer einzigen zeitlosen Weisheit (*philosophia perennis*) sind, da letztlich jede kulturelle Tradition auf denselben grundlegenden Erfahrungen beruhen würde (ders.; vgl. Hanegraaff, 1998).

(5) *Erkenntnisanspruch durch die Berufung auf Naturwissenschaft.* Viele Protagonisten (w/m/d) des holistischen Milieus betonen, dass ihre Methoden mit den Erkenntnissen der modernen Naturwissenschaften übereinstimmen, ja sogar durch letztere bestätigt werden. Olav Hammer bezeichnete die Strategie, naturwissenschaftliche Rhetorik im Sinne einer „language of faith“ zu verwenden als „Szientismus“ (Hammer, 2001). Dabei stechen besonders physikalische Begriffe hervor, wie etwa Kraft, Schwingungen, Frequenzen, Dimensionen, Energie oder Quanten. Die Verschränkung von Naturwissenschaft und Naturphilosophie im New Age ermöglichte einerseits die Legitimation weltanschaulicher Entwürfe in einem säkularen Rahmen, andererseits

7 Das Esalen Institute in Kalifornien gilt als Geburtsstätte der humanistischen Psychologie und des Human Potential Movement.

erlaubte sie die Konstruktion eines ganzheitlichen Kosmos, in dem Religion und Wissenschaft wieder als Aspekte einer einheitlichen Wahrheit gedacht werden können.

(6) *Relative Autonomie des Individuums*. Individuelle Auswahlmöglichkeit ist ein zentrales Merkmal des holistischen Milieus. Das Ausprobieren von Praktiken, die Entspannung, Ausgeglichenheit oder Orientierung versprechen, wird durch die Marktförmigkeit des Feldes strukturell gefördert. Elemente aus tradierten Heilritualen oder religiösen Übungssystemen können übernommen werden, indem sie ihrer ursprünglichen religiösen und kulturellen Kontexte entkleidet und in der Rhetorik populärer Psychologie und Spiritualität reinterpretiert werden. In diesem Bereich findet die zeitgenössische ‚Patchwork-Religion‘ – oder weniger pejorativ ‚Melange-Spiritualität‘ – wesentliche Bausteine vor, die ganz nach persönlichen Präferenzen kombiniert werden können, ohne dabei von einer religiösen Instanz eingeschränkt zu werden. Die oft dafür gebrauchte Metapher des religiösen ‚Supermarkts‘ betont zwar die individuelle Wahlfreiheit, sollte aber einen wichtigen anderen Aspekt nicht vergessen machen: Externe Faktoren wie Medien, Verkaufstendenzen und die Vorlieben anderer üben einen ganz erheblichen Einfluss auf persönliche Entscheidungen aus (Hammer, 2010).

(7) *Hybridität, Synkretismus, Entdifferenzierung*. Holistische Zugänge positionieren sich zwischen den oder abseits der üblichen institutionellen Umgrenzungen, die durch etablierte religiöse Traditionen einerseits sowie Naturwissenschaft, Medizin und Psychologie bzw. Psychotherapie andererseits markiert werden. Gesellschaftliche Institutionen verhandeln untereinander ihre Autoritätsansprüche und Wirkungsfelder, indem sie sich auf ihre jeweils eigenen Funktionen und spezifischen Methoden der Problemlösung fokussieren. Diese zunehmende institutionelle Spezialisierung bzw. funktionale Ausdifferenzierung der Gesellschaft kennzeichnet in der Tat die europäische Moderne. Sie führte zur Ausgestaltung eigenständiger Organisationsformen in der Politik, der Wissenschaft, der Wirtschaft und im religiösen Feld (Luhmann, 1977). Etablierte religiöse Institutionen (z.B. die großen Volkskirchen) erfüllen ihre besondere Funktion dementsprechend weitgehend innerhalb ihres ihnen zugesprochenen Bereiches. Das holistische Milieu reagiert auf diesen gesellschaftlichen Prozess der Differenzierung. Sein Spezifikum liegt in einem dynamischen Synkretismus, der völlig disparate Elemente ungeachtet konventioneller Grenzziehungen miteinander verschränkt. Die weltanschaulichen und rituellen Elemente des holistischen Feldes werden sowohl aus bestehenden gesellschaftlichen Teilsystemen als auch außereuropäischen Kontexten importiert und zu neuen Hybriden zusammengefügt. Die strikte fachliche Trennung zwischen Religion, (Populär-)Philosophie, Heilkunde, Psychotherapie und Naturwissenschaft wird somit bewusst aufgeweicht, d. h. entdifferenziert (vgl. Lüddeckens, 2012).⁸

⁸ Zugleich könnte diese Entwicklung als weitere Ausdifferenzierung beschrieben werden. Somit wäre das holistische Milieu ein Spezialbereich, innerhalb dessen die funktionale Ausdifferenzierung der Gesellschaft nicht akzeptiert wird.

4. Praktiken

Welche konkreten Praktiken werden im holistischen Milieu in Österreich ausgeübt? Basierend auf ihrer empirischen Studie schlagen Höllinger & Tripold (2012) eine heuristische Einteilung einschlägiger Richtungen in drei Gruppen vor: (1) komplementäre Heilmethoden, (2) Körper-Bewusstseins-Übungen und (3) sonstige Praktiken.

Zu den komplementären Heilmethoden – den mit Abstand am weitesten verbreiteten Praktiken des Feldes – zählen u. a. Homöopathie, Akupunktur und andere Angebote der traditionellen chinesischen Medizin (TCM), Ayurveda, alternative Massagen sowie diverse Formen von Energiearbeit. Die Energiearbeit liefert ein besonders anschauliches Fallbeispiel einer weit verbreiteten holistischen Dienstleistung. Der Sammelbegriff umfasst ein breites Spektrum an Methoden, die darauf zielen, die ‚Selbstheilungskräfte‘ anzuregen bzw. das persönliche Wohlbefinden zu verbessern (z. B. Reiki, Kinesiologie, Bioresonanz, Cranio-Sakral-Therapie, Klangschalen- und Edelsteintherapien). Zentral ist in diesen Praktiken die Berufung auf das Konzept einer als ‚feinstofflich‘ begriffenen Energie, die das heilende Wirkprinzip darstellt (Endler, 2020). Seit 2013 sind mehr Humanenergetiker in Österreich registriert als allgemeine Ärzte. Mit Stichdatum 30. Juni 2019 zählt die WKO bundesweit 18.636 gewerblich registrierte Humanenergetiker. Dem stehen laut Jahrbuch der Gesundheitsstatistik 15.006 Allgemeinmediziner im Dezember 2018 gegenüber (Zoehrer, 2020; siehe Diagramm 1).

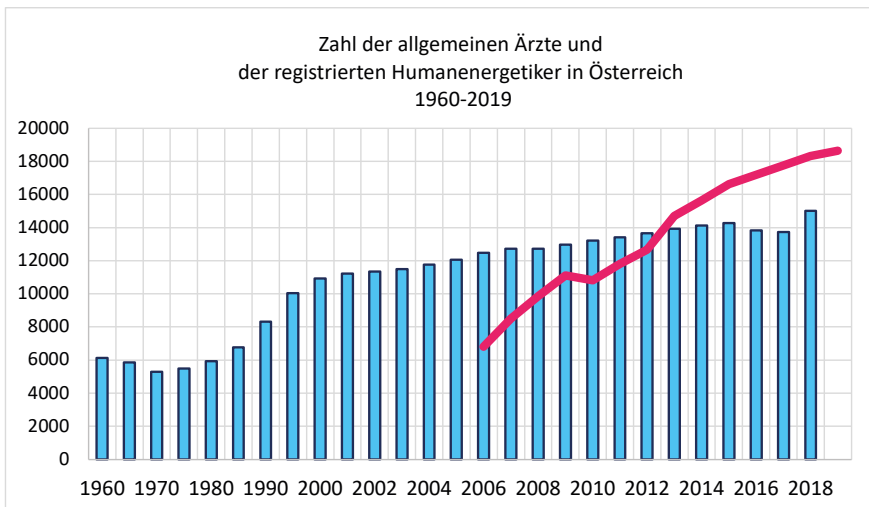


DIAGRAMM 1. Zahl der allgemeinen Ärzte (Balken) und der registrierten Humanenergetiker (Trendlinie) von 1960 bis 2019 in Österreich. Quellen: Statistik Austria 2019a; 2019b; E-Mail-Korrespondenz mit Kristina Hauser, Mitarbeiterin des Fachverbands persönliche Dienstleister an der österreichischen Wirtschaftskammer (30. September 2019). Eigene Darstellung.

Die Gruppe der Körper-Bewusstseins-Übungen bildet ein zweites facettenreiches Segment ganzheitlicher Praktiken wie z. B. Yoga, Feldenkrais, Qigong oder Meditation. Diese Praktiken erfordern die aktive und regelmäßige Beteiligung der Klienten (w/m/d). Sonstige ganzheitliche Angebote umfassen Pendeln, Radiästhesie (Rutengänger) und Geomantie, psychotherapeutisch orientierte Techniken der Leistungssteigerung (NLP, Mentaltraining), Astrologie, Kartenlegen und Orakel-deutungen. Hinzu kommen schamanische Heilrituale und Geistheilung (Höllinger & Tripold, 2012, S. 115).

Holistische Dienstleistungen überschneiden sich mit ihrem Schwerpunkt auf der Verbesserung der körperlich-seelischen Befindlichkeit mit dem florierenden Psychotherapie- und Wellnessmarkt. Auch konventionell ausgebildete Ärzte und medizinische Fachkräfte beginnen die positiven Wirkungen ganzheitlicher Ansätze zu entdecken und zu nutzen. Neben der Rivalität der typischen Gegenspieler im Gesundheitsfeld, nämlich der professionalisierten Medizin, Psychotherapie sowie Lebens- und Sozialberatern einerseits und dem holistischen Therapie- und Lebenshilfemarkt andererseits, lassen sich mittlerweile auch Annäherungen beobachten.⁹

Wie Höllinger & Tripold gezeigt haben, ist das holistische Milieu keinesfalls als Alternative im Sinne einer Gegenreligiosität zu den etablierten Kirchen zu verstehen. In ihrer Aufteilung des holistischen Feldes in „holistischer Kern“, „holistischer Rand“ und „christlich und holistisch Religiöse“, stellt letzteres das größte Sub-Milieu dar (Höllinger & Tripold, 2012, S. 122–124). Die soziale Überlappung von Teilnehmern kirchlich-gemeinschaftlicher und ganzheitlicher Angebote deutet darauf hin, dass traditionelle Religiosität und holistische Orientierung im Bewusstsein breiter Schichten des heutigen Christentums größtenteils kompatibel sind.

5. Soziale Struktur

Als ‚religiöse‘ Gegenwartskultur kann das holistische Milieu nur vor dem Hintergrund des komplexen Verhältnisses zwischen Religion und Moderne erfasst werden. Unter den Bedingungen der Moderne und der Entwicklung von Dienstleistungsgesellschaften hat sich die Wählbarkeit von Sinnangeboten verstärkt. Diese Transformation der Religion spiegelt sich auch in der sozialen Struktur des holistischen Milieus wider (Gladigow, 1995; Kippenberg, 1997). Weder kennt das Feld Kontrollinstanzen noch hierarchisch stratifizierte Großorganisationen, die Tausende von Mitgliedern haben. Abseits der üblichen religionsrechtlichen Kategorien von (explizit) religiösen Vereinen, Bekenntnisgemeinschaften und Religionsgesellschaften lassen sich dennoch konkrete, dauerhaftere Formen der Vergemeinschaftung im ganzheitlichen Feld feststellen. Trotz des vielfach betonten ‚fluiden‘ Charakters sei-

⁹ Vgl. etwa Dachverband österreichischer Ärztinnen und Ärzte für Ganzheitsmedizin (<http://www.ganzheitsmed.at>).

ner sozialen Strukturen sticht hier aus soziologischer Sicht insbesondere der Netzwerk- und Marktcharakter hervor.¹⁰

Gegenüber traditionellen Formen der religiösen Gemeinschaft, die sich durch längerfristige Bindungen und regelmäßige finanzielle Verpflichtungen kennzeichnen, ist im holistischen Milieu die kommerzialisierte Form der Anbieter-Klient-Beziehung – z. B. als ‚Klienten-‘ bzw. ‚Publikumskult‘ – vorrangig. Auf dieser Grundlage entstehen marktorientierte Netzwerke von persönlichen Dienstleistern (w/m/d), Einzelunternehmen, Zentren und Vereinen. Neben dem Buchmarkt für Lebenshilfe zählt eine ganze Reihe verschiedener teilweise verflochtener Institutionen genauso zum holistischen Milieu, wie z. B. Yogaschulen, Meditationszentren und alternative Therapieeinrichtungen, aber auch Festivals, Messen, Kurse, Zeitschriften und Webseiten (Hero, 2010; Lüddeckens, 2010; Knoblauch, 2010). Außerdem gibt es integrative Bereiche, die als Vermittlungsinstanzen zu den großen traditionellen Religionsgemeinschaften bzw. säkularen Einrichtungen fungieren. Hier ist etwa an christliche Bildungshäuser zu denken oder an Organisationen der Palliative Care, die eine Brücke zwischen dem holistischen Milieu und der Institution Krankenhaus bzw. Schulmedizin schlagen.

Im Rahmen von Kursen, Workshops und Seminaren werden ganzheitliche Inhalte und praktische Ansätze kommerziell verfügbar gemacht. Als pluralistisches Labor stellt das Milieu dem Klienten (w/m/d) eine Vielzahl experimenteller Lebensstile zur Verfügung, die bedarfsorientiert und vorübergehend angenommen werden. Dieser unverbindliche Charakter der Angebote auf der Seite der Dienstleister korrespondiert mit der Haltung der Zielgruppe: Hier ist ein vordergründiges Motiv häufig die individuelle Suche, d. h. das Streben nach Problemlösungen, das keinen Halt vor den Grenzen etablierter religiöser Institutionen und Glaubenssystemen macht, da diese als unzureichend empfunden werden.¹¹ Klienten des ganzheitlichen Lebenshilfemarktes suchen nach neuen Erfahrungen, sind offen für diverse weltanschauliche Orientierungen und entwickeln individuell angepasste Formen der Sinnstiftung (Campbell, 1972).

Das zunehmende Interesse an ganzheitlichen Aktivitäten führte dazu, dass diese ihren alternativ-untergründigen oder geheimwissenschaftlichen Anstrich verloren und mittlerweile als fester Bestandteil einer globalisierten Populärkultur betrachtet werden können.¹² Gemäß der österreichweiten Repräsentativbefragung

10 Zum Markt als religionssoziologisches Modell siehe erstmals Berger (1963), zur Erweiterung des Marktmodells auf diverse historische und gegenwärtige religiöse Organisationsformen, einschließlich Kirchen, siehe Zinser (2002).

11 Siehe der „spirituelle Wanderer“ als Idealtypus spätmoderner Religiosität (Gebhardt, Engelbrecht, & Bochinger, 2005).

12 Das holistische Milieu ist längst nicht mehr ein rein „westliches“ Phänomen. Der Mangel an Studien bezüglich der religiösen Gegenwartskultur außerhalb von Europa und Nordamerika darf über Globalisierungsprozesse nicht hinwegtäuschen. In den Mittelschichten Indiens, Japans, Russlands und ansatzweise in einigen islamischen Ländern sowie in Südamerika gibt es bereits einen holistischen Dienstleistungsmarkt. Zudem existiert ein weltweiter holistischer Tourismus, z. B. mit Yoga-Ressorts auf Bali, Ayurveda-Kuren in Sri Lanka und Indien oder neoschamanische Retreats am Machu Picchu in Peru. Diese Angebote werden keineswegs nur von Amerikanern und Europäern wahrgenommen (Karl Baier, persönliche Korrespondenz).

(n=1.020) durch Höllinger & Tripold dürfte bereits mehr als die Hälfte der österreichischen Bevölkerung mit diversen ganzheitlichen Anwendungen in Berührung gekommen sein, wobei komplementäre Heilverfahren wie erwähnt den größten Anklang finden. Während Gesundheitspflege, Entspannung, Krisenbewältigung und Persönlichkeitsentwicklung die wichtigsten Beweggründe für holistische Praktiker und ihre Klienten darstellen, werden insbesondere von den Protagonisten des Feldes auch „spirituelle Motive“ genannt (Höllinger & Tripold, 2012, S. 131–134).

Bei ganzheitlichen Praktiken kann sich der Übergang von Heilung zu Heil, Sinn und Spiritualität also fließend gestalten (Baier, Pokorny, & Zoehrer, 2018). Aufgrund des besonderen Schwerpunkts auf diese Bereiche und der dichten Vernetzung entsprechender Angebote untereinander kann das holistische Milieu vereinfacht auch als „therapeutisch-spirituelle Gegenwartskultur“ bezeichnet werden (Höllinger & Tripold, 2012). ‚Therapeutisch‘ bezieht sich in diesem Zusammenhang zunächst auf diverse holistische Hilfestellungen zur Gesundheitsförderung (Salutogenese), die sich in der Regel als Ergänzung zu den Dienstleistungen der professionellen Gesundheits- und Beratungsberufe (Ärzte, Psychologen, Lebensberater) verstehen. Über körperliche und mentale Gesundheitspflege und Prävention hinausgehend, bezeichnet ‚therapeutisch‘ im weiteren Sinne die Propagierung einer naturnahen und ökologischen Lebensweise, wobei auch Elemente der Lebensreformbewegung sowie alternative sozioökonomische Modelle, die auf Nachhaltigkeit bauen, aufgegriffen werden.¹³

‚Spiritualität‘ fungiert im ganzheitlichen Feld häufig als Gegenbegriff zu ‚organisierter Religion‘ sowie einer materialistischen Weltansicht verbunden mit einem auf Eigennutz bedachten Habitus, während er zugleich eine existenzielle, sinnstiftende Dimension einschließlich des Bezugs zu transzendenten Entitäten bejaht. Das Spektrum von Transzendenzvorstellungen reicht hier von der Beschäftigung mit Archetypen oder Aufgaben aus ‚früheren‘ Leben über die Kontaktaufnahme mit Naturgeistern bzw. Verstorbenen durch eine Schamanin bis hin zur Mobilisierung ‚feinstofflicher‘ Energien, die den individuellen Körper und den Kosmos durchwirken. Ein Segment des Milieus umfasst spirituelle Übungswege (z. B. Zen-Meditation, Guru-zentrierte Yoga-Gruppen) sowie Rituale, die ausdrücklich transpersonale Erfahrungen anstreben (z. B. im Rahmen einer schamanischen ‚Vision Quest‘, der Suche nach einem persönlichen Schutzwesen). Dabei bevorzugen holistische Akteure in der Selbstcharakterisierung ihrer Zugänge weitgehend das Adjektiv ‚spirituell‘, während ‚religiös‘ häufig mit ‚christlicher Religion‘ und damit Kirchlichkeit assoziiert wird (Knoblauch, 2009, S. 17). Holistische Spiritualität betont hingegen Inklusivität statt Exklusivität, Erfahrungsorientierung statt Dogmatik und die Anpassung der Praxis an individuelle Bedürfnisse statt an gemeinschaftliche Verpflichtungen.

¹³ Bernd Wedemeyer-Kolwe nennt vier Schwerpunkte der deutschen Lebensreform um 1900: Ernährung, Naturheilkunde, Körperkultur und Siedlungsgemeinschaften (Wedemeyer-Kolwe, 2017). Trotz der zeitlichen Differenz lassen sich deutliche Parallelen zwischen den Zielen und Interessensfeldern von Lebensreformbewegung und dem heutigen holistischen Milieu beobachten.

Im Schnittbereich Therapie und Spiritualität besteht die Gemeinsamkeit ganzheitlicher Angebote im Bestreben, Wohlbefinden und Resilienz zu optimieren sowie zur Entfaltung der Persönlichkeit beizutragen. Holistische Zugänge beanspruchen, konventionelle therapeutische Interventionen zu ergänzen, indem der Mensch in seiner Ganzheit von Körper, Seele und Geist betrachtet wird. Gerade aufgrund der geringen Ausprägung dauerhafter Institutionen und dem Mangel an allgemein verbindlichen Ausbildungs- oder Qualifikationskriterien unter holistischen Dienstleistern (w/m/d), kann jedoch die Unterscheidung zwischen seriösen und unseriösen Methoden erheblich erschwert sein (Höllinger & Tripold, 2012).

6. Diskussion: Didaktische Zugänge zum holistischen Milieu

Religion umfasst mehr als die klassische Kollektion von Weltreligionen, die wie Schmetterlinge fein säuberlich voneinander getrennt und präpariert in Schaukästen ausgestellt werden können. Religiöse und weltanschauliche Vielfalt in Österreich rührt nicht nur vom schrittweisen Rückzug ehemals hegemonialer kirchlicher Strukturen und der Pluralisierung durch Migration, sondern wird auch maßgeblich gefördert durch die Diffusion von Religion in Bereiche, die außerhalb traditioneller Gemeinschaftsstrukturen liegen. Zur Transformation von Religion in der Gegenwart tragen unterschiedliche Prozesse bei: die rechtliche Rahmenbedingung der Religions- und Glaubensfreiheit, die Entdifferenzierung von gesellschaftlichen Teilsystemen, globalisierte Praktiken und individuelle Sinnsuche. All diese Entwicklungen trugen zur Herausbildung eines holistischen Lebenshilfemarktes bei, der die gegenwärtige religiös-weltanschauliche Landschaft maßgeblich mitprägt. Diese gesellschaftliche Einbettung von Religion zu vermitteln, scheint ein wichtiges Bildungsziel, da es Schülern (w/m/d) hilft, ihre Gegenwartswelt zu verstehen.

Die große Bandbreite an Lehren und Praktiken im holistischen Milieu erschwert freilich eine standardisierte Behandlung im schulischen Unterricht. Trotz der Dynamik dieses Feldes können seine weltanschaulichen Schwerpunkte, Praktiken und soziale Struktur didaktisch reduziert und aufbereitet werden – wie in diesem Beitrag vorgeführt wurde. Ein pädagogisches Konzept zur Vermittlung von Grundwissen über die empirisch vorgefundene weltanschauliche Vielfalt wird bereits von Religionswissenschaftlern (w/m/d) diskutiert, die an der Entwicklung von Schulfächern zu Ethik, Lebenskunde und Religion u. Ä. beteiligt sind (Alberts, 2012; Frank, 2016).

Zumindest zwei kompatible Herangehensweisen an die Thematik sind im Rahmen des religionsbezogenen Unterrichts vorstellbar. Auf der einen Seite kann man an der lebensweltlichen Erfahrung der Schüler ab der Oberstufe anknüpfen: „Meine Yoga-Lehrerin begrüßt uns im Onlinekurs mit ‚Namaste‘. Was bedeutet das?“ oder „Die Tante Mitzi ist eine Energetikerin. Hat das was mit Religion zu tun?“ oder „Beweist die moderne Physik wirklich, dass Denken die Materie beeinflussen kann?“ Solche und ähnliche Fragen bieten nützliche Ausgangspunkte für vertiefende Aus-

einandersetzungen mit holistischen Themen. Viele Elemente des Feldes dürften den Heranwachsenden bereits bekannt sein, auch wenn sie nicht offensichtlich zur Kategorie Religion gehören. Ausgehend von der vertrauten religiösen Sozialisierung können Ähnlichkeiten und Differenzen besprochen und der Religionsbegriff neu abgesteckt werden. Auf der anderen Seite steht ein eher theoretischer Zugang, der sich z. B. am Modell der ‚europäischen Religionsgeschichte‘ orientiert und ein religions- und kulturwissenschaftliches Verständnis von Religion vermittelt. Ausgehend vom historischen Kontext der europäischen Moderne können dann konkrete Leit motive und Praktiken der therapeutisch-spirituellen Gegenwartskultur näher beleuchtet werden.

Die Religionswissenschaft besitzt einschlägige analytische Werkzeuge, um einen differenzierten Blick auf das holistische Milieu zu werfen. Sie zeichnet historische Einflüsse auf das Feld nach, beleuchtet dessen innere Ambivalenzen und stellt seine Rolle im breiteren gesellschaftlichen Kontext nuanciert dar. Sie verfolgt kein apologetisches Interesse, sondern untersucht die Bedingungen für Religion in der Moderne und ihre vielfältigen Ausdrucksformen, die weit über das Weltreligionen-Paradigma hinausgehen. Eine entsprechend fundierte Religionspädagogik wird ihren Beitrag leisten für eine der jugendlichen Neugier, der kritischen Reflexion und der Toleranz verpflichteten Bildung.

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Between Spirituality and Medicalisation: The Professionalisation of Energy Healing in Austria

Dominic Zoehrer

Abstract

Energy healing is the most prevalent activity in the Austrian holistic milieu, currently practised commercially by over 20,000 persons. Firmly rooted in the spiritual-therapeutic market, the professional status of energy healing has been contested as it is engaged in a vibrant boundary-work vis-à-vis the medical orthodoxy and expressly religious activities. This article explores the efforts of energy healers to attain social and legal recognition of their trade. The problem of professionalisation is traced to the history of mesmerism, a central progenitor of contemporary schools of energy healing. At this backdrop, three expert interviews provide novel insights into the ambivalent roles of esotericism, spirituality, science, and secularisation in carving out the profile of a typical holistic vocation.

Keywords: energy healing – esotericism – holistic milieu – Mesmerism – Professionalisation

Energia, that power which effects all the changes, whether chemical or molecular, which are constantly in progress; it is that agent which is for ever quickening all the elements of growth, and maintaining the conditions of a healthful vitality [...].¹

—Robert Hunt (1807–1887)

Well, that has always existed, energy work. Just very much in hiding. I also believe that the Enlightenment was much against it at the time. Then the large,

¹ Hunt 1844: 270; emphasis in the original. This quotation was cited in *Human Magnetism: Its Claims to Dispassionate Inquiry* (1845) written by the British physician William Newnham (1790–1865) (see context below).

dominant religions joined the Enlightenment. A lot of knowledge disappeared as a result. These were always oral traditions. But little was written down.²

—Manfred Schiffner

1. Introduction

The strict division between religion and medicine is a modern convention. Different paths have been pursued to deal with illness and restore health depending on the dominant worldview and state of knowledge of a given local context. The shaman, the medicine woman or man, the exorcist, and the faith healer have been vested with the authority to interpret illness and conduct ritual responses aimed at healing. In the European history of medicine, a watershed moment was the Cartesian distinction between body and mind/soul which set the stage for scientific reductionism. The abstracted human body came to be perceived as a material object that could be empirically studied, measured, and dissected. Biology, anatomy, physiology, and chemistry laid the foundation for scientifically-oriented medicine, relegating Christianity's role in medicine to the dimension of ethics and pastoral care of the sick (cf. Figl 2013: 36–37; Heller 2013: 325–326).

Due to the consequent differentiation of academic disciplines throughout the nineteenth century, “Western medicine” (or biomedicine) achieved unprecedented accomplishments. The natural sciences partially derive their success from foregoing certain questions, particularly those that concern existence, life, consciousness, and the “soul” (Weizsäcker 1978: 167). From a historical and intercultural point of view, the scientific and technological approach of biomedicine is the radical exception. However, despite the apparent clarity of disciplinary demarcations, doubts have been raised whether Europe's special path of differentiation and secularisation constitutes a process of linear progress (e.g., Bruchhausen 2011).

Claiming to overcome the split of the modern self, a segment of popular religious culture is characterised by an emphasis on a “holistic,” non-reductionist anthropology. In the so-called “holistic milieu,” a burgeoning self-help market where religiosity and therapy intersect (Heelas et al. 2005: 88–89),

² Transcribed excerpt from an interview with Schiffner, an Austrian attorney and energy healer (my translation). Original: “Also das hat es immer schon gegeben, die Energiearbeit. Halt sehr im Verborgenen. Ich glaub’ auch, dass damals die Aufklärung sehr dagegen war. Dann haben sich bei uns die großen dominanten Religionen der Aufklärung angeschlossen. Damit ist auch sehr viel Wissen verschwunden. Das waren immer mündliche Traditionen. Es wurde ja wenig aufgeschrieben.”

European heterodox medical practices have found ideological allies in non-European traditions that build on pre-modern views of the human being (Heller 2013: 335). Further common ground among holistic actors is found in the belief in a vital principle or force that opposes the materialism of scientific thought (cf. Schott 2017: 941–943). The typical entry point to the spiritual-therapeutic market is a personal crisis coupled with an exploration of the alternative therapeutic landscape.³ In contrast to pharmaceutical interventions and high-tech medicine, holistic healers prioritise the therapeutic relationship and employ a “soft” approach that commonly includes compassion, relaxation techniques, suggestion, imagination, and meditative states. In many cases, such quests lead to a focus on self-development and a more conscious way of life that may involve a comprehensive spiritual path.

In the Austrian holistic milieu, the most prevalent practice is energy healing (Höllinger and Tripold 2012: 114–121).⁴ Energy healing here refers to a range of diverse practices that aim to stimulate a clients’ self-healing process and improve the physical, mental, and social parameters of well-being. The common denominator of these practices is the presumption that “subtle energies” (to distinguish the term from known physical energies) function as a vitalising and healing agent. The Austrian field of energy healing offers a particularly insightful research subject that mirrors global processes of secularisation, scientification, and medicalisation on the one hand, and the emergence of new forms of religiosity on the other hand.

As of December 31, 2023, a total of 20,285 energy healers were practising their trade in Austria. Austrian energy healers have adopted the name *Humanenergetiker* (Human Energy Practitioners). They are organised as an “occupational group” (*Berufsgruppe*), which has been registered with the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber (*Wirtschaftskammer Österreich*; WKO)

3 Whereas the holistic milieu encompasses a wide range of practices that could be classified as therapeutic *and* spiritual to varying ratios, health and fitness were the primary motive for British clients to first engage with holistic activities according to a sociological study by Paul Heelas et al. (2005: 88–89, 91). A similar distribution of interests was found among participants of the Austrian holistic milieu where health, crisis management, and relaxation were named as the most prevalent reasons to embrace holistic services (Höllinger and Tripold 2012: 131–145).

4 Franz Höllinger and Thomas Tripold (2012) offered a useful distinction between three major subgroups of practices represented in the Austrian holistic milieu: (1) holistic healing approaches (e.g., energy healing, alternative body therapies, homeopathy, Traditional Chinese Medicine, and Ayurveda); (2) mind-body exercises (e.g., meditation, yoga, and *tàijiquán* or *qigōng*); and (3) other practices including shamanism, drowsing, divination techniques, and mental training.

since May 7, 2012.⁵ Austrian law differentiates between health professions and health-related activities. Human Energetics belongs to the latter and is designated not as a profession (*Beruf*) but as a free trade (*freies Gewerbe*). This lower professional status is largely due to the lack of requirements in terms of formal training.⁶ The total number of active energy healers in Austria has surpassed the numbers of general physicians and psychotherapists (see Figure 1). However, it should be noted that only about forty per cent of energy healers practise their trade full-time, and only twelve per cent make a living solely from energy healing (KMU Forschung Austria 2020: 19).

The trade group of energy healers emphatically denies that they claim scientific recognition. This position allows them to legally demarcate their activities vis-à-vis the medical practices, which according to § 2 of the Act on the Medical Profession (*Ärztegesetz*) are exclusively founded on medical-scientific knowledge (cf. Bundesgesetzblatt für die Republik Österreich 1998). As unregulated service providers, energy practitioners are forbidden by law to make diagnoses or offer treatments in the medical sense. To avoid conflict with other health or health-related services and carve out their own profile, the WKO emphasises the importance of maintaining “the boundaries to doctors, masseurs, physiotherapists, psychotherapists, psychologists, life and social counsellors, etc.”⁷

5 Information provided via email by Kristina Hauser, assistant at the Trade Association of Personal Service Providers (*Fachverband der persönlichen Dienstleister*), November 20, 2019.

6 In contrast to energy healing, other practices of the holistic milieu such as yoga, meditation, faith healing, or shamanism are not covered by the trade regulation act (*Gewerbeordnung*).

7 Information provided on August 6, 2024, via email by Petra Marsch, assistant at the Trade Association of Personal Service Providers (*Fachverband der persönlichen Dienstleister*), which includes energy healers. Original: “Dem Fachverband der persönlichen Dienstleister ist es wichtig, die Grenzen zu Ärzten, Masseuren, Physiotherapeuten, Psychotherapeuten, Psychologen, Lebens- und Sozialberater, etc. zu wahren [...]”

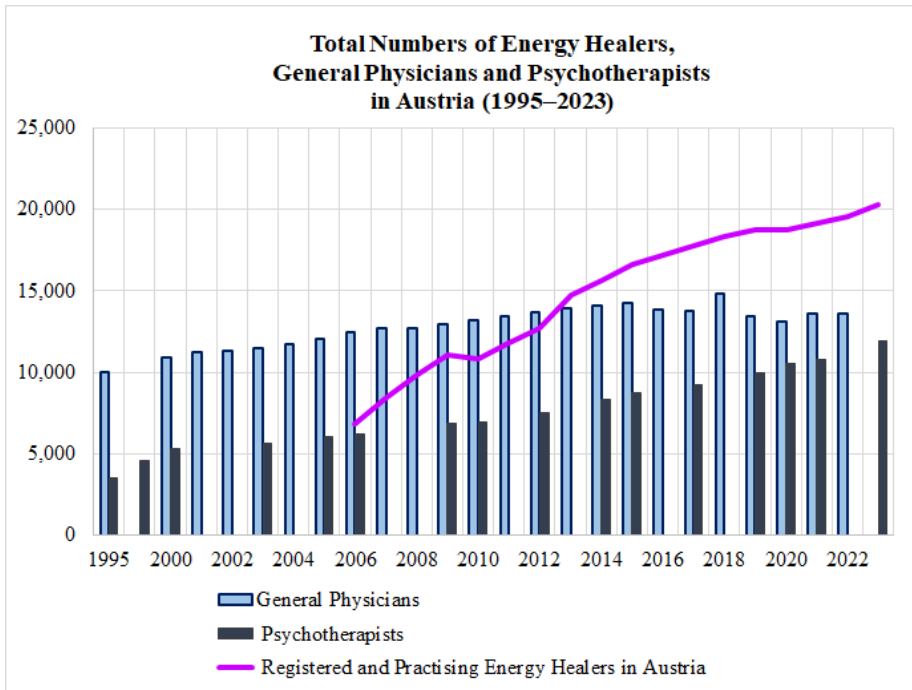


Figure 1: Total Numbers of energy healers (*Humanenergetiker*), general physicians, and psychotherapists in Austria (1995–2023). Own diagram based on: statistics provided by the WKO by email on September 30, 2019, and August 17, 2024; Österreichische Ärztekammer 2018–2022; Sagerschnig 2022; and bestNET Information-Service GmbH 2023. (The data set for psychotherapists is incomplete.)

Notably, the advocacy group of energy healers officially distances the trade from all forms of “promises of salvation and religious activities.”⁸ However, the demarcation line against “religious activities” is highly porous. In fact, the openness to a spiritual dimension of healing is a characteristic feature of this field where alternative medical and alternative religious discourses are often intertwined. Practitioners believe that subtle energies can be transmitted via laying on of hands, additional aids (e.g., incense, crystals, and symbols), or free of any physical means. One third of energy healers perform their rituals via “distant treatments” (*Fernbehandlung*) and one quarter of energy

⁸ “Ebenfalls gilt die klare Abgrenzung gegenüber allen Formen von Heilsversprechen und religiösen Tätigkeiten.”

healers interpret their client's "aura" for energetic diagnoses (KMU Forschung Austria 2020: 10–11). Nearly half of all Austrian practitioners claim that they were born with a special power or gift to energetically treat people or that they sense a calling to heal (ibid.: 18). One third of practitioners additionally offer courses on meditation, thirteen per cent are engaged in channelling, eleven per cent offer shamanic treatments and past life regressions, and six per cent offer yoga lessons. In short, the field of energy healing is firmly rooted in the holistic milieu.

The growth of a holistic market in Western European societies has been observed since the beginning of the 1980s and reflects the shift in how religious actors offer their services to potential recipients. The German sociologist Markus Hero describes the relationship between providers and clients as economical, that is, lacking any further commitments beyond the exchange of service and reward within a defined period. He states that the direct reciprocity (*quid pro quo*) of holistic market relationships differs from the traditional communitarian ways of life or confessional membership, and is thus clearly restricted in terms of material and personal investment. To ensure the client's trust in the provider, institutionalised structures—such as networks or occupational associations—have been established by service providers in order to signalise standards in training, ethics, and performance quality (Hero 2010: 59, 134–144).

This article explores the problem of professionalisation in the Austrian field of energy healing. The perfusion of methods and the lack of regulation in the field have raised questions regarding the quality of the services provided. This has prompted energy healers to develop a more distinct professional profile. The emergence of energy healing as a holistic vocation has wider ramifications regarding the institutional, legal, political, and financial contexts of healing professions. As energy healers are still far from legal recognition as a health profession, the existing legal framework poses disadvantages as well as opportunities. Although practitioners still need to negotiate public credibility in order to attain access to the health care system, their relative organisational independence allows for a very low barrier to engage in business.

How do tensions surrounding the professional status of "alternative"⁹ forms of healing play out in the concrete case of energy healers in Austria? This is the guiding question of the following study. Despite the historical fluidity in the hierarchical classification of health professions, the "marginalised" and "invisible" activities of holistic practitioners are still positioned outside the hegemonic framework of the "dominant," state-endorsed (i.e.,

⁹ That is, independent from the paradigm and legal framework of established health professions.

medical practitioners), “limited” (i.e., specialists such as pharmacists, dentists, or opticians), or “subordinated” health professions (i.e., nurses, physiotherapists, or radiographers) (Barcan 2010: 139). “Professionalisation” is here understood in the sense suggested by the British sociologist Mike Saks (2010: 892–893), that is, as legally-based strategies of exclusion that are designed to restrict and control access to an occupation in order to preserve or enhance its market position.

The dominance of orthodox medicine is challenged by the rising public interest in holistic approaches. An appropriate methodological framework to examine this process is provided by neo-Weberian analytical categories. This perspective assesses the interplay of power and interests in a pluralised market setting. It focuses on sectional occupational interests, the role of the state in regulating market conditions that privilege professions against potential competitors, political strategies, and lobby mechanisms. Parameters indicating professionalisation include the formation of occupational associations, the introduction of training criteria and ethical codes, rules of self-regulation, and gradual degrees of incorporation into the hegemonic medical system (Saks 2002: 148; 2010: 892–903). A key to maintaining legal borders around medical professions is the “boundary-work” between science and non-science.¹⁰

Before illuminating these aspects, a brief genealogy of the major currents of energy healing and their indebtedness to mesmerism is provided, which already prefigures the typical challenges faced by today’s practitioners (section 2). In contrast to its iatrophysical beginnings, the somnambulist states generated by mesmerists in their patients became a central research subject of German Romantic physicians and philosophers. Mesmeric religiosity played a key role in pollinating the alternative religious discourse of the nineteenth century. Its floating between physicalist explanations and phenomena suggesting a “spiritual” dimension of experience is paralleled by contemporary energy healing. At this backdrop, the question whether energy healing could be classified as a form of “spiritual healing” is explored (section 3). Then, expert interviews conducted with Vienna-based energy healers are summarised in a critical and contextualising manner (section 4). All three interviewees were seasoned practitioners who shared their practical knowledge through lectures and training courses and thus wielded interpretational authority in the field. Each represented a specific practical and organisational approach, that is, from the positions of (a) a lawyer and freestyle

10 “Boundary-work” describes the scientists’ defence of autonomy within their field of expertise. The engagement in boundary-work, however, also functions in the opposite direction in the sense that the established borders of science are being questioned or expanded from a non-scientific angle (Gieryn 1983; 1995; 1999).

practitioner, (b) a school-based practitioner, and (c) a practitioner who applied a trial-and-error method to solve health issues. Their insights into the operational dimension of the field delivered valuable qualitative data that is essential to identify key problems and develop a basic theoretical framework for further analysis (Liebold and Trinczek 2009). The subsequent discussion focuses on the asymmetry between established health professionals and energy healers. Particular aspects related to the problem of professionalisation are examined, including the ambivalent roles of esotericism, science, and secularisation (section 5). Finally, the preliminary findings of this study are summarised, and possible directions of further research indicated (section 6).

2. Between Science and Religion: Mesmerism as a Central Reference Point for the Genealogy of Energy Healing

The assumption of a subtle, vital energy—an ethereal “stuff” or vital force—that functions as a healing agent is common among energy healers. A skilful practitioner is thought to be able to manipulate this agent to stimulate a client’s self-healing process. Particular beliefs about the vital energy and its function in the body translate into particular healing rituals, where the dyadic relationship between practitioner and client takes a central role.¹¹

As contemporary sceptics argue, there is an inherent tension between energy healing and conventional medical (or psychological) interventions. The scientific community has repeatedly proven that the healing agents postulated by energy healers cannot be a physical substance or force (Carroll 2015a). Alternative explanations that critics deem more plausible than emic theories often involve the “placebo effect,” “hypnosis,” or “expectation of relief”—in short, explanations that stress the clients’ suggestibility and related biochemical effects (ibid.). Leaning towards psychological interpretations themselves, sceptics typically claim that emic theories of energy healing must be wrong because they do not fit into the Procrustean bed of physical science. However, despite the lack of satisfactory emic explanations, minor effects of energy healing—and be it “only” due to placebo—are not generally disputed.

A sceptic’s paragon to highlight the lack of scientific validity of energy healing is an eighteenth-century therapy called “animal magnetism” (Carroll 2015a; cf. Stenger 1998), which happens to be a most influential progenitor

11 The relational dimension is less pronounced in instrumental forms of energy healing, such as acupuncture.

of a large branch of contemporary forms of energy healing.¹² However, to invoke the dismissal of animal magnetism as an exemplary triumph of science over pseudo-science is a somewhat heavy-handed simplification.

The decades around 1800 saw a dazzling variety of therapeutic approaches competing with each other. A prevalent medical paradigm had not yet been established. Neither homeopathy, electroconvulsive therapy, Romantic psychology, phrenology,¹³ macrobiotic dietetics, nor animal magnetism could assert general validity of their claims (Schott 2018: 63). In 1774, while experimenting with magnetic cures at the suggestion of the German-Hungarian astronomer Maximilian Hell (1720–1792), the Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) concluded that it was not “mineral” magnets that had a salutary effect on his patient but an ethereal influence emanating from his own organism which he termed “animal magnetism.” Animal magnetism denoted a “fluidum” or “vital fire” (*Lebensfeuer*) that perfused the cosmos and could be transmitted via the nervous system of a suitable organism to the nerves of a diseased organism. Mesmer applied several techniques for transmitting the fluidum, including magnetic manipulations (passes on or above the patient’s body), group sessions around a tub (French: *baquet*), or by means of “magnetised” substances such as water or trees (ibid.). Mesmer believed that the fluidum played a significant role in constituting a close therapeutic relationship, the so-called *rapport*—a quasi-magnetic connection that was decisive for a successful outcome of the cure (Baier 2020a: 14).

After having stirred controversy among his colleagues in Vienna, Mesmer moved his practice to Paris in 1778. Six years later, two independent Royal Commissions, each appointed by Louis XVI (1754–1793), were conducted by a total of fifteen physicians and scientists to investigate the claims of Charles d’Eslon (1750–1786), a student of Mesmer. Both Commissions concluded (a) that there was no evidence for the physical existence of the postulated magnetic fluid, and (b) that the phenomena induced by animal magnetism were caused by “imagination” and “imitation” (Lanska and Lanska 2007).

The mesmerism controversy has been argued to be the watershed moment in the scientific culture of the Enlightenment and established a precedent for engaging with scientific deviance. The Swiss historian Caspar Hirschi (2013:

12 Although few historical studies so far have demonstrated the genealogical connection between animal magnetism and contemporary forms of energy healing (Zoehrer 2020; 2021), there are obvious similarities between the semantics of an etheric, cosmic “fluidum” and “subtle energy” on the one hand, and the syntax of mesmeric and several energetic healing theories on the other.

13 The study of the skull to predict character traits.

339) states that the official dismissal of animal magnetism by a “royal expert tribunal” signified the substitution of ethical with epistemological criteria in identifying charlatanry. The deviant scientist was now considered a charlatan—not because he intended to deceive but because he erred. And what constituted an objective error was the falsification of an apparently insufficient theory by means of a systematic series of experiments.

Furthermore, informal rebuttal by scientific peers was replaced with formal, institutionalised ways of exclusion, which, however, did not fully eliminate bias on the side of the privileged investigators. Contrary to Mesmer’s recommendation, the Commissions focused not on the effects of his curing method but solely on his theoretical claims (Hirschi 2013: 348). The report of the first Commission was authored by Jean Sylvain Bailly (1736–1793), an astronomer, freemason, and member of the *Académie des sciences*.¹⁴ Bailly did not spare with the classical Enlightenment rhetoric of the struggle of science against ignorance. Neither did he shy back from invoking the power of the state for the cause of the Enlightenment. This made the Commission vulnerable to attacks from pre-revolutionary political critics who accused the Commission of complicity with the crown and declared their solidarity with the mesmerists. Thus, the *Académie des sciences*, the major institution involved with the Commission,¹⁵ had forfeited its hard-earned reputation of independence and credibility as it turned into an “institutional symbol of a despotic knowledge culture” (ibid.: 355).

Despite the setback of the Commissions’ shattering verdict, mesmerism made a rapid recovery, and its disentanglement from academia proved to be a longer, intricate process. Although mesmerists were barred from the educational institutions of the French Republic, they successfully nested themselves in an “alternative intellectual world” that drew a growing crowd of literati, bourgeois, and aristocrats who had become disillusioned from the Enlightenment project (Hirschi 2013: 356). In the early 1800s, Berlin superseded Paris as the new capital of mesmerism, which advanced to become the lynchpin of Romantic medical and philosophical discourse (Baier 2020a: 18–19). In the 1830s, mesmerism spread to the Anglophone world and by the mid-nineteenth century the verb “to mesmerise” entered the English language as a synonym for hypnotising or capturing another’s full attention. In the 1840s, the inventor (or, rather, discoverer) of hypnotism, the Scottish surgeon James Braid (1795–1860), further developed ritual techniques that had their

14 This commission was also called the “Franklin Commission” due to the prominent role given to the American diplomat Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) as an external observer.

15 The other two being the *Faculté de médecine de Paris* and the *Société Royale de Médecine*.

roots in classical animal magnetism. A major precursor to hypnotism was the school of Armand Marie Jaques de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825), which avoided the “healing crisis” (*heilsame Krise*)—characteristic in Mesmer’s approach—and focused on the will power of the mesmerist and so-called somnambulatory, or sleepwalker-like, states. However, in contrast to Puységur and applying Occam’s Razor, Braid rejected wholesale the necessity of a fluidum to explain the effects in magnetised subjects. His disenchanting critique of mesmerism represented a turning point in its history, and contributed to the emergence of modern psychotherapies (Schott 1984).¹⁶

Mesmerism continued its meandering path outside academic institutions. In the latter third of the nineteenth century, “healing magnetism” (*Heilmagnetismus*) was the third alternative medical force in the German-speaking world next to naturopathy and homeopathy (Baier 2020a: 20). In the Anglo-sphere, “vital magnetism” or “magnetic healing” kicked off a cascade of new spiritual-therapeutic systems that creatively recycled Mesmer’s ideas with other terms. Magnetic healing inspired the creation of a number of American “healing cults,” most notably osteopathy, founded by Andrew Taylor Still (1828–1917), and chiropractic, founded by Daniel David Palmer (1845–1913) (Fuller 1989: 83, 64–69; cf. Reed 1932).¹⁷

As several historians have demonstrated, the influence of mesmerism stretched far beyond alternative therapeutic discourse. German Romantic-mesmeric authors fuelled the history of religion by merging therapy and reli-

16 An anonymous verdict on mesmerism published in the *British and Foreign Medical Review*, politely but firmly shelved mesmerism as a medical science: “[...] whilst we may fairly speak of mesmerism as a new art, evidence is wanting to show that it is a new science, involving any principle hitherto unknown. For the same reason, defective proof, we reject the reported phenomena, implying the receipt of intelligence through any other media than the customary organs of sense; although, in our judgment, it were better calmly to investigate these alleged marvels than rudely to deride them. This is a principle of action by which we have ever been guided. We hold ourselves in readiness to witness and candidly to examine any novel fact that may come in our way, as we believe our minds to be open to conviction on satisfactory evidence being adduced; and, whilst we have at all times pursued this method ourselves, it is the one we would, in conclusion, earnestly recommend to our readers” (Anonymous 1845: 485).

17 The American historian of medicine James C. Whorton adopted the (pejorative) term “medical cultist” from the American Medical Association, which described him as “one who in his practice follows a tenet or principle based on the authority of its promulgator to the exclusion of demonstration and scientific experience” (Whorton 2002: 223). Further characteristics of the medical cultist is the establishment of “one-theory, one-cure systems” that posit scientifically unexplainable cosmic powers or the agency of a mystical life force in the human body (ibid.: 225). Neither osteopathy nor chiropractic are regulated health professions in Austria. At the same time, both manipulation techniques constitute practices that are legally reserved for medical doctors and physiotherapists.

gion (Baier 2020a: 54). In tandem with *Naturphilosophie*, philosophical mesmerism proposed an organicist worldview that sought to capture the wholeness of being with its interplay of polarities (ibid.: 44–49). Mesmerism reflected and shaped the religious thought of the Romantic period (c. 1790–1820) and beyond, disseminating the notion of religion as a matter of sentiment and the appreciation of visionary and mystical experiences. In this manner, mesmerism paved the ground for the Euro-American revival of contemplation practices and the interest in yoga, Sufism, and shamanism (ibid.: 53–54). Mesmeric religiosity informed Christian reform efforts and played a stellar role in the emergence of nineteenth-century spiritualism, occultism, and parapsychology (ibid.: 20–30). In the American context, mesmerism was “interpreted as a progressive variation of the [Protestant] religious revivals” that marked the so-called Second Great Awakening (c. 1790–1840) (Fuller 1989: 46). It met the demands for “co-scientific, religious” experimentation and preached that physical and emotional ills could be solved through achieving harmony with an invisible, universal “spiritual power” (ibid.: 48). Similarly, Klaus Brand (2014) argued that mesmerism-saturated literature, where science and religion formed a de-differentiated blend, prefigured the twentieth-century discourse of “alternative” or “popular spirituality.”

The point here is that the history of mesmerism is the indispensable foundation for reconstructing a genealogy of the contemporary holistic milieu. Mesmerism was not only a prototype for later medical heterodoxies but also made significant inroads into religious culture. Its dynamic of science-orientation and the openness to religious experience and the subconscious are a hallmark of late modern alternative religiosity. Reimagining mesmeric principles and practices in a variety of new directions, the field of energy healing demonstrably shares the same inherent tension with academia and medical orthodoxy.

But how has mesmerism turned into energy healing? The notion of energy (*énergie*) already appears in the texts of French mesmerists, where it is regularly associated with confidence (*confiance*) and the power of will (*volonté*) expected of the successful practitioner (Deleuze 1819: 21–22, 55; Dupotet de Sennevoy 1838: 218, 220). The earliest known attempt to replace the mesmeric fluidum itself with the notion of energy appears in the book *Human Magnetism: Its Claims to Dispassionate Inquiry* (1845), written by the British physician William Newnham. Combining the ideas of Casimir Chardels (1777–1847), a psycho-fluidist of Puységur’s school, and the British physicist Robert Hunt (1807–1887), Newnham identified the mesmeric healing agent as the “principle of life” which supposedly emanates from the sun and

constitutes an “imponderable element” that Hunt coined “energia” (Newnham 1845: 193–195).¹⁸

Authors of the New Thought movement—America’s “religion of healthy-mindedness” (James 1902: 78) that was initially sparked by a magnetic healer—occasionally employed the notion of energy without making it central to their healing theories. In passing, Warren Felt Evans (1817–1889) referred to the curing power of the mind as “the most subtle energy in the universe” (1886: 13). Harriet Emilie Cady (1848–1941) identified God with an intelligent, “creative energy” (1896: 8), an idea that would be picked up in *Esoteric Healing* (1953) by the British-American post-Theosophist Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949) and later authors of the New Age genre. This development reveals a trend of de-physicalising the notion of energy for the sake of spiritualising it (Zoehrer forthcoming A).

Taking the risk of drawing an overtly simplified classification scheme, four major thrusts can be discerned that contributed to the twentieth-century global discourse on subtle energy and healing:

- (1) *Futuristic retro-medicine*. This notion shall here refer to the rebranding of mesmerism by charismatic innovators who replaced the notion of fluidum as a single quasi-panacean healing agent while maintaining its function under different names. On the one hand, metaphysical manual therapies upheld supernatural or vitalistic powers, such as “Providence” (Still) or “Innate Intelligence” (Palmer), thus demarcating themselves from the physico-chemical reductionism of mainstream medicine (Whorton 2002: 224–225). Chiropractic fertilised the conception of Polarity Therapy by the Austrian-American manual therapist and naturopath Randolph Stone (b. Rudolf Bautsch, 1890–1981). Stone was one of the earliest therapy inventors to merge the terms “energy” and “healing” (see Stone 1948; 1957). A notable spinoff of osteopathy is craniosacral therapy, a form of bodywork that was developed by the osteopath John E. Upledger (1932–2012) in the early 1980s (see Upledger and Vredevoogd 1983).¹⁹ On the

18 Newnham pointed out in a retrospective footnote that the British Association for the Advancement of Science had recently rejected Hunt’s notion of “energia” because the term was associated with material substance and, therefore, could not be applied to the phenomenon of light. Despite Newnham’s reservation regarding the term, he adhered to the basic principle of his theory. Five years later, Lord Kelvin William Thomson (1824–1907) formally defined the term kinetic energy, not as a substance but as the property of a physical system. Nonetheless, Newnham’s identification of the mesmeric fluidum with energia does not appear to have gained much traction.

19 In Austria, craniosacral therapy is offered by both medical and health-related professionals, including energy healers (Cranio Austria 2024).

other hand, iatrophysical models sought to rehabilitate mesmerism by adjusting to up-to-date scientific theories and technology. The most influential representative of this strand was the US-American physician Albert Abrams (1863–1924), who advocated for “energy” as a unifying healing principle (Abrams 1916). Abrams invented machines that anticipated both “energy medicine,” the biomedical use of electromagnetic fields for diagnosis and cures (Oschman 2000), and “radionics,” a device-based form of energy healing at distance (Tansley 1972; cf. Bischof 1995).

- (2) *The psychologisation of religion and therapy.* At the dawn of the century, the US-American psychologist and philosopher William James (1842–1910) discussed how latent mental, moral, and vital energies could be unlocked by yoga, auto-suggestion, and techniques of the New Thought or mind-cure movement (James 1907). James’ ideas entered the Human Potential Movement of the 1960s, which voraciously absorbed other models of “(subtle) energy” into its repertoire of psychology, mind-body exercises, and body work. These included, *inter alia*, the “orgone” of the Freud disciple Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), the tantric powers of *śakti* and *kuṇḍalinī*, and the Japanese concept of *ki* (Kripal 2007). The Esalen-based Human Potential Movement provided fertile ground for the emergence of body psychotherapies, such as Alexander Lowen’s (1910–2008) Bioenergetics and John Pierrakos’ (1921–2001) Core Energetics. These therapeutic innovations sparked the influential energy healing school of Barbara Ann Brennan (1939–2022), founded in 1982 (Leland 2016: 386–401).
- (3) *Occult discourses on healing.* Their hallmark was the amalgamation of physicalist imponderables (fluidum, ether, Od) and vitalist ideas (life force) with subtle body concepts (*prāṇa*, *cakras*, *nāḍīs*) that appealed to the wisdom of a mystic East. Relevant contributors of occult healing theories were Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891), the German occult philosopher Carl du Prel (1839–1899), the spy and fringe mason Theodor Reuß (1855–1923), the Hindu philosopher and missionary Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), the American New Thought leader William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932), and Alice Ann Bailey. Their ideas would directly influence now globalised energetic techniques including Usui Mikao’s 臼井 甕男 (1865–1926) Reiki,²⁰ Dolores Krieger (1921–2019) and Dora Kunz’ (1904–1999) Therapeutic Touch, and Choa Kok Sui’s (1952–2007)

²⁰ Apart from mesmerism and New Thought, a third influence on the formation of Reiki was esoteric Buddhism (*mikkyō*) (Stein forthcoming B).

Pranic Healing (Stein 2017; forthcoming B; Zoehrer 2020; 2021; forthcoming B; forthcoming C).

- (4) *Non-European therapeutic innovations that appeal to ancient regional traditions, the most notable example being Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM).* TCM conquered the Euro-American field of contemporary and alternative medicine from the early 1970s onwards (Unschuld 2018). Syntheses of the TCM meridian concept, muscle tests, and chiropractic led to Applied Kinesiology, developed by the American chiropractic George Joseph Goodheart (1918–2008) from 1964 onwards, and Touch for Health, conceived by Goodheart’s colleague John Thie (1933–2005) in 1973 (cf. Endler 2020: 123–124). As in the cases of yoga and meditation, the Euro-American discourse on mesmerism provided a broad “welcome structure” (Baier 1998; 2009) on which non-European medical approaches could build.

3. Is Energy Healing a Form of Spiritual Healing?

Echoing the fate of the imponderable mesmeric fluidum, “subtle energies” tend to be framed by sceptics as some ethereal substance or force that eschews scientific observation and is thus easily “debunked”:

The fact that no scientific instrument has been able to detect *subtle energy* and that modern science abandoned vitalism more than a century ago has had little deterrent effect on the belief that health depends on an invisible form of energy. [...] belief in subtle energy is based on faith (Carroll 2015b; emphasis in the original).²¹

Disregarding the tautology that “belief” is “based on faith,” this sceptic philosopher’s categorisation of energy healing as a matter of faith is a typical instance for how boundaries between conventional and alternative medicine are maintained: while orthodox medicine is validated by science, alternative medicine is about faith.

The demarcation between scientific reductionism and religiosity is not denied by practitioners. Emic systematisers of the field have subsumed energy healing under various categories, including “Wholistic Healing” (Otto

²¹ The naïve scientism inherent in this statement is noteworthy. Within the physical sciences, energy is not regarded a substance but a quantitative property of a system that is calculable. Physical energy is thus neither visible or substantial nor directly measurable in the way that fundamental quantities such as time, distance, weight, or temperature are.

and Knight 1979), “Vibrational Medicine” (Gerber 1988; 2001), and “Spiritual Healing” (Kunz 1995; Goldner 1999; Benor 2001). A significant number of energy healers affirm the significant overlap between healing and religion—or rather “spirituality” to use the preferred emic term that indicates the priority of experience over “dogma,” “institution,” and “tradition.” However, definitions for spiritual healing are naturally vague. The holistic psychotherapist Daniel J. Benor defined “spiritual healing” as the intentional influence on humans (or animals) “without utilizing known physical means of intervention” (Benor 1995: 234).

As Benor’s definition ignores the place of psychological interventions, spiritual healing could be narrowed down to a more substantial definition: interventions that explicitly draw on beliefs in spiritual entities or powers and related practices in order to support a person’s physical, mental, and/or social well-being. This is the approach taken by the Anglican theologian and philosopher of religion Sarah Coakley, according to whom, spiritual healing involves non-physical forces that are beyond direct access by means of empirical science. These forces are not presumed to be theistic only and may involve other transcendent entities or powers, for example, gods, spirits, ancestors, angels, and non-personal forms of spiritual energy (Coakley 2020: 2).

The meaning of “healing” in the context of spiritual healing is multivalent, relating to the experience of disturbed well-being, and may include (but not limited to) recovery from a clinical disease. Spiritual healing responds to the highly varied nature of human affliction, which ranges from physical ailments, mental illness, emotional trauma, or being haunted by an unrepented sin to disorders that transcend the individual—whether social, political, ecological, or religious. Appropriate forms of remedy are likewise multidimensional. This comprehensive notion of healing acknowledges that problems at all levels of human experience are deeply intertwined (cf. Coakley 2020: 5). Due to its specific anthropological, ontological, and soteriological presuppositions, spiritual healing cannot be exhaustively explained within a biomedical or psychological framework.

For heuristically systematising the field of spiritual healing methods, five ideal-typical sub-categories of spiritual healing have been discerned: (1) faith healing; (2) psychic/occult healing, including spirit surgery; (3) mental cure or positive thinking; (4) self-healing by means of tapping into an inner healing force through relaxation techniques; and (5) energy healing (Wolf 2005: 126–151). Despite partial overlaps in theory and practice among these forms of spiritual healing, this preliminary distinction emphasises that the central attention of those practices may range from the reliance on transcendent entities (gods, angels, or spirits) to the client’s own mind powers, and finally

to the idea of healing energies that eschew a classification as bodily, mental, or transcendent.

The professional profile (*Berufsprofil*) of Austrian energy healers explicitly mentions a spiritual dimension in its holistic three-tiered model of living organisms and systems. The model's three levels are referred to as (1) "material," (2) "energetic" or "subtle," and (3) "archetypal." Energy healers work exclusively on the second level, which is subdivided into the "level of information" and the "level of condensed energy." The former encompasses the mental capacities of thought and emotion (also called "mental body" or "emotional body") as well as the "Higher Self," where "human spirituality" is experienced and expressed regardless of confession (WKO 2020: 4–5). The latter includes elements of subtle body conceptions, for example, "aura," "chakras," or the "meridian system" (ibid.). In the final, archetypal level, cosmic principles (e.g., "hermetic laws") and blueprints of living and physical objects are stored. This level is off limits for energy workers but is said to be constitutional to their holistic worldview and view of the human being (ibid.)

Whereas the sources for this multilayered systems model are not disclosed, the terminology clearly indicates influences from Theosophical or post-Theosophical texts of the New Age genre (cf. Hall 2007; Cox 2022: 89–106; Zoehrer forthcoming C).²² The integration of a spiritual aspect in the profile of energy healers is remarkable because the document expressly serves to clarify "the differences and demarcations to neighbouring professional groups" (WKO 2020: 4).²³

Spirituality in the context of healing is not restricted to metaphysical and anthropological beliefs but has wider ramifications. Building on Robert C. Fuller's observations on the reception history of mesmerism, Anne Koch and Stefan Binder (2013: 23) underscored characteristic aspects in today's debates on the theoretical foundations of spiritual healing. First, spiritual healing has been influenced by specific philosophical traditions (American Transcendentalism, empirical theology, German idealism, German Romanticism)

22 The term "Higher Self" was used by Blavatsky, co-founder of the Theosophical Society (est. 1875), to describe a person's indestructible divine essence. In *The Key to Theosophy* (1890), Blavatsky defines the "Higher Self" as a "universally diffused 'divine principle'" and as "Atma the inseparable ray of the Universal and *One Self*. It is the God above, more than within, us" (Blavatsky 1890: 131, 175; emphasis in the original). The notion attained wide familiarity among New Age readers through the *Seth Material* (1963–1984), a collection of channelled messages "received" by the US-American author, poet, and self-styled psychic Jane Roberts (1929–1984). In combination with the beliefs derived from New Thought, the "Higher Self" came to be closely associated with the idea that each individual creates their own reality (Hanegraaff 1998: 122–126; Hammer 2004: 342).

23 "Dies verdeutlicht auch die Unterschiede und Abgrenzungen zu angrenzenden Berufsgruppen."

that are incompatible with the mechanistic biomedical view of the human being. Second, as in the case of classical mesmerism, spiritual healing (often) hovers between a physicalism (proposing a quasi-physical healing agent) on the one hand and attention to parapsychological phenomena (extra-sensory perception, e.g., telepathy and precognition) as well as altered states of consciousness (e.g., somnambulism) on the other (cf. Baier 2020a: 21). Third, the boundary-work between modes of spiritual healing and the scientific community appears to be not one-sided but a process of mutual exclusion. Spiritual healers reject placebo effects or a reduction to purely psychological explanations as an emic interpretive model. Although appeals to physics and psychology are symptoms of secularisation and reflect the influence of dominant culture, spiritual healing refuses full scientification and hence adaptation to a biomedical framework.

Although some practices of energy healing can be clearly assigned to the “spiritual” camp, the role of spirituality in the context of professionalisation is ambivalent. Justin Stein has shown that Reiki practitioners who are active in conventional hospitals in the United Kingdom and the United States apply three different ways to cope with varying degrees of acceptance of spiritual healing in a secular context: (1) the “strongly spiritual”; (2) the “softly spiritual”; and (3) the “silently spiritual.” At the top of the open/silent spectrum, practitioners explicitly stress the existence of transcendent beings, including *reiki*, as an “intelligent, loving agent that uses practitioners as its instruments in this world” (Stein forthcoming A). At the bottom of the spectrum, practitioners avoid to touch on Reiki’s spiritual dimension, especially when dealing with gatekeepers to medical institutions such as hospital administrators or other medical personnel. In short, “claims of ‘spirituality’ can work as boon or burden in biomedical settings” (ibid.).

This observation is relevant to the problem of professionalisation of energy healing in general. Some health professionals regard the epithet “spiritual” as equivalent to “ineffective,” “pseudo-scientific,” “unprofessional,” or even “unethical” (cf. Noseck-Licul 2013b). Cautioning against the inflated use of the notion of “spiritual,” Bruce Epperly, a theologian specialised in the spirituality of healing, stated that “[w]hile modern medicine has medicalized everything to the detriment of the patient, energy medicine has equally spiritualized everything to the detriment of the patient” (2001: 314). This underscores the precariousness of energy healing if clear boundaries around its spiritual dimension are lacking.

4. Expert Interviews

In the summer of 2019, I conducted three expert interviews with energy healers based in Vienna. The main criteria for their choice were that they were full-time practitioners with more than ten years of experience and held a certain degree of interpretational sovereignty within the field—for example, by means of lectures, seminars, and other forms of training. The semi-structured interviews touched upon issues such as the first encounter with energy healing, applied methods and the underlying view of the human being, the interviewee's perspectives on the professional status of energy healing, and his expectations of the field's future development (see questionnaire in the appendix).²⁴

The first interviewee, Manfred Schiffner, has been a defender of energy healers on the legal front, whose entry gate to the field was Reiki. He had been highly active as a disseminator of energetic methods and had expanded his repertoire to include meditation techniques, neo-shamanic elements, and his own freestyle method called “Morphogenetik” (developed with his colleague Sandra Roszmann).

The second interviewee, Johannes Leitgeb, is the Austrian coordinator of the International School of Therapeutic Touch and Energy (ISTTE) and thus represents a major strand of energy healing. His style could be termed school-based, although he also drew from other holistic teachers.

The third interviewee, Alexander Fegerl, takes an individual and issue-centred approach to the field. He entered the field not through a particular school but rather after a gradual, decades-long series of self-experimentation aimed at solving his own health issues. He had synthesised his own system by drawing on various schools, including kinesiology and Touch for Health as well as nutrition knowledge and physical exercises.

The interviewees' views and methods vary considerably from each other and none of them claimed to represent the field as a whole. However, taken together, the responses sketched several common issues that allow a better grasp of the wider field's self-understanding and challenge of professionalisation.

24 All three interview partners were male. I have presented detailed profiles of global and local female pioneers of energy healing elsewhere (Zoehrer 2020; forthcoming C).

4.1 Manfred Schiffner

The setting for the meeting with Schiffner was his law firm located in Vienna's seventh district. The interview was conducted between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. on June 26, 2019.²⁵ His office is attached to the Holistic Akademie (sic), an institution he created in 2007 to offer training in a variety of psychophysical techniques.²⁶ Throughout his career as an attorney, Schiffner had defended various practitioners of the holistic milieu, including psychic healers, energy healers, and hypnotists.²⁷

Schiffner asserted that a decisive turning point in a person's life often triggers them to change their jobs and become an energy healer. Those watershed moments could be the experience of burnout, a severe accident, or near-death experiences marked by anecdotes of a panoramic life review.²⁸ In the aftermath of such episodes, many would undergo a "shift of consciousness" (*Bewusstseinsveränderung*) and suddenly be able to perceive energy fields. Schiffner's own path to energy healing, however, was less spectacular. He reported that his first encounter with the field was through a Reiki course that was offered by a female hotel manager during a skiing vacation in the mid-1990s. Subsequently, Schiffner completed all training courses to become a licensed Reiki practitioner.²⁹ From that point onwards, Schiffner engaged with the field of alternative healing from a legal perspective.

In his memory, Austrian energy healers first began to develop a group identity throughout the 1990s. The trailblazer of the field was Reiki, followed

25 Neubaugasse 3/1. First contact was made via email on May 9, 2019.

26 These include, *inter alia*, the basics of energy healing, burning incense, a breath work called "soul balancing," accessing the "universal subtle information field" via "Morphogenetik," relaxation by means of singing bowls, and *ikebana*, the Japanese art of flower arrangement (see <https://holistic-studies.at/>; accessed on August 28, 2024). Earlier offers included courses on indigo children, communication with animals, shamanic trance drumming, and soul retrievals.

27 His first case of legally defending practitioners of non-regulated forms of healing involved three Filipino faith healers who were prosecuted for commercial fraud in Klagenfurt, Carinthia, in the 1990s. Salazar 1980 offers a brief overview of the history of faith healing in the Philippines.

28 For the origins of the topos of panoramic life reviews, which had gained currency among nineteenth-century Transcendentalists, mesmerists, spiritualists, and occultists, see Schlieter 2021.

29 According to Schiffner, Reiki had its boom in Austria during the 1990s and early 2000s. The role of Reiki in today's field is still considerable: in 2023, seventeen per cent of energy healers in Austria stated that they offer Reiki treatments (KMU Forschung Austria 2020: 7). Through the engagement of Hawayo Takata (1900–1980), Reiki expanded from Hawai'i to the contiguous United States after 1945 (Stein 2017).

by Pranic Healing, Bachflowers, and Applied Kinesiology. Their representatives applied for a trade licence (*Gewerbeschein*) at the WKO, where a fitting trade group had not been established yet. The first trade group to include energy healers was called “cosmo-biological services” (*kosmobiologische Dienstleistung*), from which the trade group of “human energy healers” (*Humanenergetiker*) emerged. This process took several years because the networks first had to develop and a representative of the trade group appointed. Today, the trade group of energy healers, consisting of “human” and “veterinary energy healing” (*Tierenergetik*) as well as “living space consulting” (*Lebensraum-Consulting*) has a comparatively stable position in the chamber of commerce.

Between 2008 and 2013, Schiffner was part of the work group to determine ethical and professional standards for the trade. This was particularly important in order to improve the reputation of the trade group and “lift it out of this whole swamp of esotericism” (*aus diesem ganzen Sumpf der Esoterik herausheben*). The aim was to raise the quality of energetic services and ensure their “respectable appearance” (*seriöses Auftreten*) towards both the public and the clients.³⁰

On the boundary-work vis-à-vis orthodox medicine (*Schulmedizin*), Schiffner explicated that healing in the energetic sense means the activation of self-healing powers that not only exist in humans but in any biological system, which is different from curing diseases. Furthermore, energy healers do not argue within the “scientific thought model” (*naturwissenschaftliches Denkmodell*). Scientific medicine (*Schulmedizin*) claims to be based on evidence. In contrast, Schiffner held that the evidence for energy healing was obvious from the ability of a biological system to self-heal. Only when a system is overwhelmed through physical injury, chemical intoxication, or psychological stress will it reach a tipping point after which external support is needed. Schiffner recognised that biomedicine has made tremendous progress and that “it would be foolish to negate it.”³¹ Likewise, it would be unwise to negate energy healing. Thus, Schiffner believes that the proper approach to the boundary-work between scientific and holistic modes of healing should not be the principle of “either/or” but rather “as well as.” He stated that the ultimate aim must be to restore the original balance of the client or patient.

On October 9, 2018, the Ministry of Health proposed an amendment to the *Ärztegesetz* that aimed at subsuming “complementary and alternative cures” (*Komplementär- und alternativmedizinische Heilverfahren*) under the

30 In the early years of the trade group, the pun “Energethik” was commonly used in order to stress the ethical stance of energy healers.

31 “Also das zu negieren, das wäre einfach dumm.”

activities of the medical profession (Ministerialentwurf 2018). Schiffner reacted by preparing a legal opinion that the WKO submitted to parliament on November 8 (WKO 2018). He criticised the wide scope for interpretation, which would have left the definition of “complementary and alternative cures” up to the courts to decide. In this form the *Ärztegesetz* could have been applied to energy healing techniques by framing them as a “cure” despite their lack of medical-scientific recognition. Such an interpretation would have effectively meant withdrawing the legal basis for energy healing as a free trade and restricting its practice to medical doctors (ibid.: 2). Ultimately, the passage in question was rejected by parliament and not adopted into law. As energy healers were not the only health-related practitioners who criticised the draft bill, this episode underscored the wider dynamic of an ongoing struggle for interpretational sovereignty in the Austrian health sector (cf. Endler 2020: 111).

The boundary-work of energy healers not only focused on demarcations against physicians but also on barring energetic practices that do not meet a certain minimum of rational comprehensibility (but not identical with scientificity)—a criterion required by the trade regulation act. This hazy norm has led to the situation that Reiki, a school of energy healing *par excellence*, had been excluded from the catalogue of energetic methods due to its initiation rituals and reference to a divine power. Schiffner commented that Reiki initiations were now interpreted as a conventional visualisation practice, which allowed Reiki practitioners to also be registered as energy healers.

Like Reiki, another fruit of the tree branching from mesmeric roots is hypnosis, which is still subject to boundary-work among energy healers, psychotherapists, and physicians. During the interview, Schiffner produced a draft document on therapeutic hypnosis released by the Ministry of Health (see Bundesministerium für Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz 2020), which stipulated that the practice of inducing trance in humans for the purpose of curing is restricted to psychotherapists. However, he remarked that the Supreme Court had decided in several cases that whether hypnosis is psychotherapeutic or not depends on the context. Aerophobia or exam anxiety, for example, could legally be treated by energy healers.

Not all energy healing practices consider themselves “spiritual.” Schiffner laid out that the market is being divided between energy healers without and those with a spiritual approach. The first group largely consists of practitioners who apply device-based energy healing, that is, radionics and bioresonance, both deriving from the iatrophysical approach of Albert Abrams (1916). Their energetic devices allegedly store “subtle information” of healthy organs, plants, remedies, and diseases and are used to scan as well as

balance the energetic state of the client. The second group consists of practitioners who refer to various spiritual beings, which include god(s), angels, as well as nature and ancestral spirits.³² As most energy healers, Schiffner himself belongs to the second camp. He believes that a reductionist view of the human self is insufficient. He suggests a septenary model of the human being that is somewhat reminiscent of Theosophical anthropology. The levels of his model are termed: (1) material; (2) energetic; (3) emotional; (4) mental; (5) morphogenetic;³³ (6) pure conscious; and (7) matrix or the level of “all spiritual principles and blueprints of creation.”

At the conclusion of the interview, Schiffner mentioned two books that he claimed had significantly expanded his view of the world: the German translation of Mircea Eliade’s (1907–1986) classic *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase* (1951),³⁴ which idealises the shamanic trance of archaic peoples as a universal path to a supposed mystical primal state; and *Die Atomisierung der Gesellschaft* (The Atomisation of Society; 2009), written by the Austrian theoretical physician and professor emeritus Herbert Pietschmann (b. 1936). This book juxtaposes Aristotelean (“either/or”) and Platonic logic (“as well as”) and develops a dialectical plea for tolerance and dialogue. In his publications and public addresses, Pietschmann criticises the limits of classical mechanistic thought and the mind/matter dualism typically ascribed to René Descartes (1596–1650). As a member of the scientific advisory board of the *Wiener Internationale Akademie für Ganzheitsmedizin* (Vienna International Academy for Holistic Medicine), Pietschmann applies quantum holism as a metaphor to describe the ideal complementary relationship between biomedicine and alternative medicine (see Pietschmann 2015).³⁵ In short, Schiffner found in Pietschmann an authoritative and open-minded spokesperson from the sciences for the cause of an integrative approach to health (cf. Pietschmann 2014). As evident in the other two expert interviews, the vacillating between appeals to ancient tradition and appeals to modern science are a hallmark of the field.

In Schiffner’s manual for basic training in energy healing, he lays out his vision for a future health profession:

32 On the role of subtle energies in the work with angels, see Noseck-Licul 2013a: 89–90.

33 The term “morphogenic” or “morphic field” was popularised by the British neovitalist biologist and parapsychologist Rupert Sheldrake (b. 1942) (see Sheldrake 1981; cf. Hanegraaff 1998: 68–69).

34 *Schamanismus und archaische Ekstasetechnik* (Eliade 2006 [1975]).

35 Similarly, and following the example of Isaac Newton (1643–1727), Pietschmann views science and religion (including “esotericism”) as complementary cultures of knowledge (Pietschmann 2007).

The institutionalised traditional healing professions (health and medical services, doctors, etc.) are not sufficient to bring about a solution [to the typical diseases of civilisation, e.g., stress, depression, addiction, etc.] from a national economic perspective. [...] The profession of the future is located in the health sector—not predominantly in its traditional form, but rather in the access to new levels of health, namely the psychological, social, energetic and transcendental dimensions (Schiffner 2013: 9).³⁶

Behind this vision is an anthropology that Schiffner described as “new” and “holistic.” It is the conviction that beyond their physical self, human beings are “systemically integrated,” possess an “energetic structure,” and in principle have access to special resources by means of their “consciousness” and their “transcendent connection” (2013: 9).

To realise his vision of energy healing in legal terms, Schiffner proposed a transition from free trade to a new health profession regulated by its own law (2013: 14). This would drastically reduce the number of energy healers but also ensure them a legal certainty that they do not have under the current law. As there is no dominant school or method of energy healing, the proposed professional training would equip energy healers with a common framework and basic competences upon which they could liberally synthesise various methods. However, in the interview he conceded that such a new legal framework is practically untenable. On the one hand, the WKO would resist losing its strongest growing trade group. On the other hand, the current trend in the European Union inhibits the formation of new professional groups and moves towards the liberalisation of markets. Schiffner regarded this development as problematic as the liberalisation of services would entail lower quality standards.

4.2 Johannes Leitgeb

The interview with Johannes Leitgeb (b. 1966) took place in his therapy office in the basement of his private home in Vienna’s twenty-first district between 10:00 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. on July 23, 2019.³⁷ Leitgeb is a trained carpenter, sculptor, and stage designer. He recalled that his interest in energy

36 “Die institutionalisierten traditionellen Heilungsberufe (Gesundheits- und Krankenwesen, Ärzte, etc.) reichen nicht aus, um gesamtwirtschaftlich gesehen eine Lösung [für die typischen Zivilisationskrankheiten] herbeizuführen. [...] Der Beruf der Zukunft ist auf dem Gesundheitssektor angesiedelt, und zwar nicht überwiegend in seiner bisherigen traditionellen Ausgestaltung, sondern im Zugang zu neuen Ebenen der Gesundheit, nämlich der psychischen, sozialen, energetischen und transzendenten Dimension.”

37 Schwemmäckergasse 38. First contact was established via email a week before.

healing was first induced by a personal crisis. After several failed psychotherapies, he received a successful treatment by a body psychotherapist. She happened to be an energy healing practitioner as well and stirred Leitgeb's curiosity about Therapeutic Touch (TT). Subsequently, Leitgeb contacted and joined the ISTTE. This TT school was founded in 2005 by the trained biochemist and television journalist Imre Kerner (1938–2020) in Haltern am See, Germany, for training practitioners in the German-speaking world.³⁸ The organisation was affiliated with the now inactive European group called International Therapeutic Touch Association based in Utrecht, Netherlands.

What distinguishes TT from other schools of energy healing is that it was developed in the context of nursing, where holistic ideas found a particularly open gate into the socio-cultural mainstream (Partridge 2005: 39). According to the website of the Therapeutic Touch International Association (TTIA),³⁹ TT is “a holistic, evidence-based practice that incorporates the intentional and compassionate use of universal energy to promote balance and well-being” (TTIA 2024a).

TT was first developed in the early 1970s by the Dutch-American Theosophist Dora Kunz (née Theodora Sophia van Gelder) and Dolores Krieger, a professor of nursing at New York University.⁴⁰ In TT, illness is conceptualised as a blockage in a person's “vital energy field” or “biofield.” The practitioner thus uses her hands to dissolve the disturbance and positively alter the energetic body of the client who is either lying down or sitting up straight in a chair. Apart from the notion of purifying and opening the *cakras*, a later Theosophical addition (cf. Baier 2016), the metaphor of the practitioner being a “channel” for a cosmic agent and enabling its “flow” to the recipient is an incognito variant of animal magnetism (Whorton 2002: 98).⁴¹ Despite the

38 The organisation's archived website features a collection of articles on TT that were published in German-language professional journals on nursing and palliative care. This material allows insight into the scope of Kerner's work (Kerner 2024).

39 TTIA is the “mainline” organisation that was rebranded under this name in 2008. It was launched in 1979 by Krieger and Kunz as Nurse Healers—Professional Associates International.

40 Kunz served as the president of the Theosophical Society in America from 1975 to 1987. For a detailed account of Kunz' Theosophical upbringing, her education under the English Theosophist Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934), and her career as a medical clairvoyant, see van Gelder and Chesley 2015.

41 Or as the holistic physician Richard Gerber (1988: 312) put it in his recapitulation of the history of TT: “‘magnetic healing’ has come a long way since the time of Mesmer.” A typical session of TT involves the five steps of (1) “centering” or taking a meditative attitude before treating the patient; (2) “assessing” the patient's energetic disbalances; (3) “unruffling” the patient's energy field by means of downward sweeping hand movements; (4) “transferring” or “channeling” energy to the patient; and (5) “smoothing” the patient's field and “stabilizing” her now replenished energies (Krieger 1979; Wurges and Frey 2006).

name, TT does not generally involve touching the client's physical body as the intervention can also be performed on the subtle body.⁴²

The declared motive to create TT was to sidestep the religious connotation of laying on of hands and endow this practice with a secular framework more suitable to the professional field of nursing. According to Krieger's introduction of TT in *The American Journal of Nursing*, she first became interested in the topic through the studies of the Canadian biochemist Bernard Grad (1920–2010), an investigator of the alleged abilities of the Hungarian-Canadian psychic healer Oscar Estabany⁴³ (Krieger 1975: 784–785). Krieger sought to “help clarify the underlying bioenergetics in people who were treated by the laying-on of hands” (ibid.: 785). Together with Kunz, she had organised seminars where Estabany was invited to heal patients under her supervision. Surprised by her observations, she “decided to study therapeutic touch in considerable detail” (ibid.).

Because “Western literature” supposedly yielded no clues to the explanation of healing through the laying on of hands and herself having “a considerable background in the study of comparative religions, particularly the Eastern religions,” Krieger concluded that the healing principle must be “*prana*” (1975: 785). Thus, at the formation stage of her method, she explained that the healing principle of laying on of hands occurred through the transfer of “*prana*” from the healer to the patient.⁴⁴ Her reference to “*prana*” as a vitalistic principle is a typical case of projecting a scientifically untenable or outdated position onto the Orient. In the early 1980s, Kunz and Krieger seemed to abandon vague appeals to oriental wisdom and began embedding their healing practice within the scientific framework of “integrated energy

42 This is especially the case in the North American schools. In contrast, Imre Kerner's school of TT involves actual laying on of hands.

43 Estabany (alternative spelling: Estebany) became acquainted with Grad, who had an interest in experiments with psychic healing, in 1957. Grad—who was already familiar with the orgone theory postulated by the controversial Austrian-American psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich—carried out several experiments on plant seeds and mice involving Estabany's professed healing powers in the 1960s (Duggan 2023).

44 “The East holds different assumptions about man and a different view of the dynamics of human relationships than the West, particularly about the personal interaction that occurs during the laying-on of hands. The basis for this interaction between healer and subject is thought to be a state of matter for which we in the West have neither a word nor a concept. In Sanskrit it is called *prana*. Our nearest translation would be vitality or vigor. Eastern literature states that the healthy person has an overabundance of *prana* and that the ill person has a deficit. Indeed, the deficit is the illness. *Prana* can be activated by will and can be transferred to another person if one has the intent to do so. The literature also states that *prana* is intrinsic in what we would call the oxygen molecule” (Krieger 1975: 785–786; emphasis in the original)

fields” developed by Martha E. Rogers (1914–1994), a US-American author and professor of nursing at New York University (cf. Rogers 1986).⁴⁵

Such scientific language notwithstanding, TT never abandoned its holistic approach, with its spiritual element becoming more pronounced over time. By 1989, Kunz—professionally less restricted than Krieger—published her clairvoyant observations of the *cakras* in medical patients (Karagulla and Kunz 1989). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Kunz and Krieger openly spoke of TT’s “spiritual dimension” and described TT as “both a technique for healing and an inner journey for the TT [sic] therapist” (Kunz 1995; Kunz and Krieger 2004: 14). In Krieger’s final book, she explored how TT has been embraced not only as a method of energy healing but “as a personal spiritual practice” that involves “consciousness,” “compassion,” “self-realization,” “the realm of the transpersonal,” and ultimately “spiritual transformation” (Krieger 2021: 1, 71, 142).

At the turn of the millennium, TT was one of the most employed forms of energy healing in the United States (Whorton 2002: 277). Although its acceptance by biomedical institutions varies, TT has become a widespread complementary practice taught in nursing schools in North America and Europe. By the end of the 1990s, at least 100,000 people had been introduced to the practice, including more than 43,000 health care professionals, with over 100 colleges and universities in seventy-five countries offering courses in TT (Rosa et al. 1998: 1005–1006; cf. Meehan 1998).

In Austria, TT has set one foot in the trade group of Human Energetics and the other in the professional field of nursing. Leitgeb explained that Kerner sought to translate the American model of TT in a manner that would be “more acceptable” to Europeans by filtering out the “esoteric” elements of the original system. Purportedly under the guidance of Kerner, the medical doctor Anita Maria Ritt-Wollmersdorfer (1956–2006) introduced TT in Austrian nursing training and practice in 1997.⁴⁶ In 2005, Ritt-Wollmersdorfer founded the Netzwerk Therapeutic Touch Teachers Austria (NTTTA)

⁴⁵ Rogers’ term “energy field” exceeds the theoretical boundaries of physics or life sciences. It denotes the ontological idea that organic and non-organic processes are characterised by the same infinite continuity of motions and exchanges: “Energy fields are postulated to constitute the fundamental unit of both the living and the nonliving. *Field* is a unifying concept. *Energy* signifies the dynamic nature of the field. *Energy fields* are infinite” (Rogers 1986: 4; emphasis in the original).

⁴⁶ According to Heidi Maria Ploner-Grißmann, a high-profile holistic physician and Ritt-Wollmersdorfer’s close collaborator, Ritt-Wollmersdorfer was commissioned to launch TT in Austria by Janet Quinn, a US-American professor of nursing and holistic healing expert. See Salute 2024.

(NTTTA 2018a).⁴⁷ For over two decades, health professionals have been able to learn TT as a recognised advanced training in Viennese educational institutions. TT has been effectively integrated in several hospital wards and palliative care units (Wiederkehr 2021; cf. Endler 2020: 121–122).⁴⁸ In 2016, complementary methods, which includes TT, were recognised by law as a “core competence” (*Kernkompetenz*) in the Healthcare and Nursing Act (*Gesundheits- und Krankenpflegegesetz*) (Wiederkehr 2021: 317).

In exploring the theoretical model behind TT, Leitgeb underscored that the practitioner works with the client’s “human energy field” (*menschliche Energiefeld*). The three basic elements of TT are giving energy, holding energy, and pulling energy. Leitgeb stressed that a key ability of the practitioner is to “sense” (*spüren*) the energies and emphasise with the client’s body. He implied a psychosomatic theory when he spoke of “going deeper” into certain points or areas of tension that trigger something in the client—for example, childhood traumata. Similar to process-oriented psychology, the TT practitioner focuses on the bodily dimension. Leitgeb asserted that energy cannot be explained in terms of a concept but is something that can only be felt either emotionally or bodily. Invoking the mystic East as the source of knowledge about subtle energies, he stated:

In Austria or in our Western culture, the problem is that you have to explain and justify the energetic. But there is a huge number of countries in Asia and India where it is completely normal. Sometimes I have the feeling that their knowledge should spill over to us, and that biomedicine should spill over to them.⁴⁹

According to Leitgeb, Kerner had attended seminars by the American energy healer Rosalyn L. Bruyere (b. 1946) and the self-declared Cheyenne-shaman

⁴⁷ The NTTTA follows the ethical standards of the TTIA but is not listed among its national chapters.

⁴⁸ See, for example, <https://www.wien.gv.at/arbeit-wirtschaft/beruf/medizinisch/ausbildung/weiterbildungen.html> and <https://www.rudolfinerhaus.at/das-rudolfinerhaus/spezialisierte-pflege/> (both accessed: August 24, 2024).

⁴⁹ “In Österreich oder in der westlichen Kultur ist das Problem, dass man das Energetische erklären und rechtfertigen muss. Es gibt aber einen riesigen Teil von Ländern im asiatischen und indischen Raum, wo es ganz normal da ist. Manchmal habe ich das Gefühl, ihr Wissen sollte zu uns schwappen, die Schulmedizin dort rüberschwappen.”

The following statement reflects the sentiment of Krieger’s introduction of TT to the general public: “[...] [O]ur culture does not understand energy within the same context as does the Eastern world. Most often *prana* is translated as vigor or vitality; however, an analysis of the literature indicates that the term really pertains to the organizing factors that underlie what we call the life process. *Prana*, therefore, is responsible for such phenomena as regeneration and wound healing” (1979: 12).

Charles “Hyemeyohsts” Storm (b. 1931 or 1935). Storm is a descendent of German immigrants who claims Native American ancestry. He attained fame with his first book *Seven Arrows* (1972), a poetic journey that supposedly outlines the worldview of the indigenous peoples of the Great Plains (von Stuckrad 2003: 151–152). Referring to Storm, Leitgeb described the human being as a circle consisting of four quarters: body, intellect, emotion, and spirit. Once the body and intellect are harmonised, one can work on one’s emotions. When the first three quarters are balanced, one’s spirituality will settle. In this context, Leitgeb characterised his “arch-Catholic” (*erzkatholisch*) upbringing in Tyrol as “penance without freedom” (*Buße ohne Freiheit*). To him, spirituality and contemplative exercises are not restricted to prayer; they are essentially connected to physical work, such as gardening, sculpting, and TT.

When practising TT, a meditative mindset—including relaxation, the cessation of thought, and being present in the here and now—would be instrumental in order to activate the client’s self-healing process.⁵⁰ The TT practitioner’s task is to enable a client to bring their own energy “to flow.” For the practitioner to get their own energies flowing before treating clients, Kerner instructed his students with a regimen of physical exercises, which were adopted from yoga, *qigōng*, and Lowen’s Bioenergetics.

Leitgeb claimed that working with TT refined the senses and perceptions. He asserted to see various colours and “frequencies” of the aura and learned to classify them. To interpret the meaning of the colours, year-long experience would be necessary, as knowledge gathered from books is supposedly insufficient. Leitgeb’s sensualism is not restricted to external perception but also involves the inner experience. He stated that “intuition” and “feeling” constitute “the first truth one needs to deal with” and thus would take priority over intellectual discourse when pursuing self-healing—a widely common view within the field.

In line with current Austrian legislation, Leitgeb underscored that he promises no healings. TT and energy healing only contribute to initiating an autonomous process in their clients that is aimed at self-healing. Leitgeb several times invoked the image of “path” or “way,” a ubiquitous metaphor in religious traditions. Practitioners would not only give advice but help clients to develop a sense of their own body, which supposedly led many clients to change their lives and find “a new way.” Leitgeb regarded TT as a structure that allows practitioners to walk “a personal path” and “a way to help people.”

50 The focus on a contemplative attitude during the healing ritual is a core feature of TT: “Therapeutic Touch is basically a healing meditation; that is, the primary act is to center oneself in a natural, tension-free manner and to maintain that center throughout the entirety of the Therapeutic Touch process” (Krieger 1992[1979]: 35).

Next to the aspect of spirituality, Leitgeb also emphasised the role of professionalism in TT. He explained that “energetic knowledge” ought to “stay on the ground, close to conventional medicine.”⁵¹ In Leitgeb’s opinion, the main problem in the relationship between energy healing and regular health professions was not a difference in ethos, but competitiveness and the struggle for limited access to resources and patients. Thus, he viewed the criticism of alternative approaches as not necessarily objective but often motivated by envy.

Another sticking point in TT’s integration into the health system concerns the problem of whether TT can be adequately taught in the restrictive framework of nursing education. He expressed scepticism about offering TT as an optional training for nursing students, for instance, at the Danube University Krems. He believed that due to time constraints their seminars would focus more on delivering information, whereas “the personal path is missing” (*der persönliche Weg fehlt*). Energy healing ought to be primarily about practice and personal development rather than intellectual learning.

To maintain high quality standards, Kerner’s students were required to renew their certificates every three years in order to validate their practice. However, the training he provided for TT practitioners was based on a holistic outlook, particularly for those who were not already active in a health profession. His curriculum involved retreats in Southern Europe for learning how to harness the “power of nature’s elements.” He supplemented TT training with “prayers,” “ceremonies,” and “ancient knowledge” of the neo-shamanic “medicine wheel” (Kerner n.d.).

Apart from Kerner and Storm, Leitgeb also mentioned the German naturopath Suzan H. Wiegel (1940–2013) and the populariser of Mongolian shamanism Galsan Tschinag (b. 1943) as his teachers. Despite Kerner’s alleged demarcation from the “esotericism” of Kunz and Krieger, the ISTTE is clearly steeped in the holistic milieu. However, the same can be said of its rivalling organisation, the NTTTA, which recommends books by Storm as well as Bruyere, the “New Age” classic *The Tao of Physics* (1975) by the Austrian-American author Fritjof Capra (b. 1939), and publications on “biophotons” (NTTTA 2018b).⁵² Compared to the strong holistic inclination of the Austrian TT organisations, the literature presented by the TTIA focuses exclusively on articles published in medical journals and dissertations (TTIA 2024b). This tension within TT is highly illustrative because it demonstrates

51 “Es ist wichtig, dass energetisches Wissen am Boden bleibt, nah an der Schulmedizin.”

52 Biophotons is measurable physical light emitted by biological organisms; however, its interpretation is still contested (see Bischof 1995).

how higher degrees of professionalisation appear to go hand in hand with stronger adaptation to secular, scientific forms of knowledge production.⁵³

Whereas ISTTE blossomed in the 2000s and early 2010s, the organisation had already entered a phase of stagnation at the time of the interview. Furthermore, Leitgeb confided that Kerner had been diagnosed with cancer and expected that the ISTTE would have to reorient itself after his demise, which occurred a year after the interview. Leitgeb expressed fears that TT could drop out of the Austrian health care system if there were no engaged practitioners who support its inclusion.

TT is a highly illustrative case for an energy healing modality that is characterised by a strong drive towards integration into the health care system on the one hand, and by an explicit spiritual dimension on the other hand. The latter has allowed for combinations with other ideas and practices of the holistic milieu that aim at personal development. As indicated by the metaphors of “journey” (Kunz and Krieger) or “path” (Leitgeb), Karl Baier’s description of spirituality as a “path culture” (*Wegkulturen*) applies perfectly to TT (Baier 2012; cf. Pokorny and Winter 2023: 192). Path cultures involve a set of “transformative lifestyles and practices” that aspire to endow people’s relationship to themselves and the world with an ethical and wholesome quality (ibid.). They are characterised by contemplative techniques, anthropological and cosmological frameworks, interpretations of significant experiences or states of consciousness, and distinct relationships for transmitting “path knowledge” (e.g., teacher/disciple or therapist/client). Institution-building from small groups to international organisations allows respective paths to further develop and create spaces for personal transformation (ibid.).

4.3 Alexander Fegerl

Alexander Fegerl (b. 1973) was chosen as a third interview partner because his entry into the field was not a mesmerism-inspired practice, such as Reiki or TT, but TCM and thus offered a different angle on the field. The interview was conducted on July 17, 2019, between 12:00 p.m. and 1:00 p.m. in the premises of the holistic joint practice Wellness-Energie-Zentrum in Vienna’s twenty-second district.⁵⁴ On his website, Fegerl introduced his “practice for holistic energy work” (*Praxis für ganzheitliche Energearbeit*) as unifying

⁵³ A parallel development is observable in the case of Reiki, which likewise attempts to make inroads in clinical research. See SwissReiki 2024.

⁵⁴ Hirschstettner Straße 19-21 C/2. First contact was made by email one week before.

the knowledge of an ancient healing tradition and modern physics (cf. Zoehrer forthcoming A; forthcoming B):

Utilise the *power of ancient cultures* in combination with modern knowledge to catapult your *body energy* upwards in all aspects. Do you feel weary, burnt out? Too much stress at work? Are you sleeping badly? Do you have the feeling that you cannot tolerate certain foods? Get to know the basics of energy work—so-called “energy medicine” is the medicine of the future! The ancient Chinese already knew about the connections and energy pathways in the body over 2000 years ago. Modern physics is confirming more and more details of this ancient knowledge. We can make use of this wisdom to help ourselves and make optimum use of our body’s own self-healing powers (Fegerl 2017; emphasis in the original).⁵⁵

Fegerl described his personal path to energy healing as an odyssey to find a cure for his severe pollen and food allergies as well as neurodermatitis that plagued him since he was ten years old. He recalled that medication (e.g., cortisone) only suppressed his symptoms and realised relatively early that conventional medicine was unable to solve his predicament and help him fully recover. After having tried various therapies, he attained first successes with diet changes and supplements in a steady trial-and-error process of self-experimentation. Next to his studies in law and economics, Fegerl pursued his interests privately until he became “mostly symptom-free” in 2003. He ascribed his healing on the one hand to his self-treatment, and on the other hand to a Tyrolean holistic medical practitioner (*Ganzheitsmediziner*) by the name of Hochenegg,⁵⁶ from whom he learned additional insights about holistic healing. Over the course of twenty years, Fegerl had accumulated knowledge in the fields of nutrition, supplements, herbs, physical exercise, acupuncture, aroma therapy, and more. On this basis and his own reported successes, he decided to work as a holistic healer and enrolled for a three-

55 “Nutzen Sie die *Macht alter Kulturen* in Kombination mit modernem Wissen um Ihre *Körper-Energie* in allen Belangen nach oben zu katapultieren. Fühlen Sie sich matt, ausgebrannt? Zu viel Stress im Job? Schlafen Sie schlecht? Haben Sie das Gefühl, Sie vertragen manche Nahrungsmittel nicht? Lernen Sie die Grundlagen der Energiearbeit kennen – die sogenannte „Energiemedizin“ ist die Medizin der Zukunft! Schon die alten Chinesen kannten die Zusammenhänge und Energiebahnen im Körper, vor über 2000 Jahren. Die moderne Physik bestätigt immer mehr Details dieses alten Wissens. Wir können uns diese Weisheit zunutze machen, um uns selbst zu helfen und unsere körpereigenen Selbstheilungskräfte optimal auszunutzen.”

56 Leonhard Johann Christian Hochenegg (1942–2009) was a pharmacologist and psychiatrist who integrated local Alpine and Filipino herbs as well as faith healing into his medical practice (Hochenegg 2024).

semester course in *Humanenergetik* with a focus on TCM at the Vitalakademie based in Vienna's third district.⁵⁷ The course encompassed units on the basics of energy healing, the Chinese art of space arrangement (*fēngshuǐ*), nutrition according to the doctrine of the “five elements” or “agents” (*wúxíng*), and the stimulation of a claimed “vital energy” (*qì*) via acupressure. He also completed courses in Kinesiology, which supposedly tests food incompatibilities via muscle-feedback.

While Fegerl was working full-time as a software consultant, he began to offer treatments as an energy healer on the side. In 2007, he opened his practice in his living room. Through his engagement with nutrition counselling according to TCM, he said to have noticed the role of correspondences between elements, organs, and psycho-social issues (for example, “earth–spleen–mother”). These psycho-somatic correspondences stimulated him to learn more about the psyche and complete training courses on family constellations (via a method called “systemic kinesiology”⁵⁸) and as a life and social counsellor (*Lebens- und Sozialberater*). In contrast to energy healing, life and social counselling is a regulated profession. Counsellors are officially allowed to work with ill clients, which endows them with a higher legal security. Fegerl said that his additional training in counselling allowed him to acquire additional skills in communication and crisis support.

When working with clients, the conventional boundaries around salutary methods were secondary to Fegerl as long as they could be used for his clients' benefit:

If I have the feeling that I can use something to help my clients—whether from a book, a course or a seminar, I don't care—then I take this knowledge. I'm only interested in what works, what I can offer as a tool, then I take it. It doesn't matter what it's called, whether it's life counselling or psychotherapy or nutritional supplements. What makes my work special is the joy of helping someone, of offering them something that helps them.⁵⁹

57 At that time Geusaugasse 17.

58 The practice was developed by the Upper Austrian psychologist and life consultant Martin Sourek (Sourek 2024). Fegerl explained that Sourek integrated elements from (1) the work with family and systemic constellations as developed by the German priest and psychoanalyst Anton “Bert” Hellinger (1925–2019); and (2) “Physioenergetik,” which was introduced in 1984 by the Belgian-Austrian osteopath Raphael van Assche.

59 “Wenn ich das Gefühl habe, dass kann mir nützen, meinen Klienten zu helfen – egal ob aus einem Buch, einem Kurs, einem Seminar, ist mir egal – dann hol ich mir dieses Wissen. Mich interessiert nur, was funktioniert, was kann ich anbieten als Werkzeug, dann hol ich's mir. Egal wie das dann heißt, ob das jetzt LSB heißt, oder Psychotherapie oder Nahrungsergänzung ist völlig gleich, sondern was meine Arbeit ausmacht, ist die Freude jemandem zu helfen, ihm etwas anzubieten, dass ihm hilft.”

Despite this pragmatic stance, Fegerl still viewed the lack of a required formal education for energy healers as problematic and would favour an obligatory three-year training programme.

To describe the ideal state of health, Fegerl employed the typical metaphors of “flow” and “balance” in the field, common both in animal magnetism and in TCM: “Health means that all energies of the body can freely flow. It means that all five elements are in balance.”⁶⁰ Mental and psychological health plays a role in achieving personal well-being, but Fegerl’s main focus lies on energetically testing his clients and finding the appropriate diet and exercise. The three-level anthropology of the professional profile of energy healers released by the WKO (material, subtle energetic/informational, archetypal) (WKO 2020) plays a minor role in Fegerl’s work. He prefers the four-level model of kinesiology (structural, biochemical, psychological, and informational) to localise the root of a problem and induce the appropriate measures. Moreover, Fegerl applies the concept of *yīnyáng*, from which four personality types can be derived that he claimed to be identical to the four temperaments of the ancient Greek humoral theory. The appropriate health measures would depend on the personality type. Fegerl adheres to the motto “the body is always right.” To accurately read the feedback of the body would be essential to the art of healing.

In the boundary-work between energy healing and biomedicine, Fegerl regarded the fault lines in the emotional realm—that is, distrust, reservations, and a discrepancy of interests—as well as in historically grown structures rather than on the objective level. He believed that ancient Chinese knowledge is highly compatible with the recent findings of psychoneuroimmunology, a field of research that emerged in the 1970s and investigates the relationship between psyche, immune system, nutrition, digestion, metabolism, and hormones. Thus, in principle, he saw no reason why energy healing could not become mainstream in the long run:

A new thing is somehow always suspicious and takes a long time to gain acceptance. And even if there are scientific findings that prove much of what was previously considered “esoteric,” it takes time to become established. It just happens slowly. [...] So I assume that what I’m doing now will perhaps be standard in medicine in several decades.⁶¹

60 On the use of hydraulic metaphors in animal magnetism, see van Rijn forthcoming.

61 “Was Neues ist immer irgendwie verdächtig und braucht lange bis es sich durchsetzt. Und auch wenn es wissenschaftliche Erkenntnisse gibt, die vieles von dem beweisen, was früher vielleicht als ‘esoterisch’ galten, braucht es Zeit, um sich zu etablieren. Das geht halt langsam. [...] Also ich gehe davon aus, dass das, was ich jetzt mache, wird vielleicht in mehreren Jahrzehnten in der Medizin Standard sein.”

What matters, according to Fegerl, is that people do not wait for health professionals to solve their problems but keep searching for solutions themselves, even if it is necessary to probe outside the established systems. Referring to his own life experience, he said that patients would ultimately be responsible themselves for trying different approaches to find out what best suits their situation.

Fegerl asserted that there is currently no institution that would provide transparent and publicly available information on the various therapeutic methods. Hence, he saw the future of medicine in the establishment of “health centres” (*Gesundheitszentren*) or “competence centres” (*Kompetenzzentren*), where medical doctors cooperate with psychologists, nutritionists, and energy healers in order to offer customised remedies depending on the patients’ themes.

The case of Fegerl is notable for the relatively strong emphasis on curing particular health issues related to allergies, neurodermatitis, and digestion. His current website omits any overt references to energy, modern physics, or ancient wisdom but is tailored to clients who suffer from the symptoms that he once struggled with and claimed to overcome. The keywords are “immune system,” “detox,” “well-being,” and “inner balance” (Fegerl 2024). Fegerl presents himself straightforwardly as a health expert who appeals to his own experience as anecdotal evidence, backed by the latest findings of psychoneuroimmunology. He proves that spirituality is not an obligatory ingredient for a holistic practitioner.

5. Discussion

The three interviews stimulate the examination of a number of issues related to the professionalisation of energy healing. Some of the most pertinent ones are: (1) the ambivalent role of “esotericism” in the field; (2) “science” as an emic reference point and legal demarcation line; (3) the legal asymmetry between medical orthodoxy and holistic practices; (4) degrees of integration into the health care system; and finally (5) the trade-offs required by secularisation.

5.1 Esotericism: A Fruitful Swamp?

Theories behind holistic healing are academically homeless (cf. von Stuckrad 2019). Claiming to be concerned with restoring well-being, they fall between the areas of expertise of biomedicine (i.e., the body) and psychotherapy (i.e.,

the mind). Holistic healing can be seen as a particular response to a functionally differentiated society, where subareas—for instance, religion, politics, science, law, or economics—are characterised by highly specialised nomenclatures and behavioural norms. The drifting of knowledge and practices between the subsystems of a differentiated society, termed “vertical transfer” by Burkhard Gladigow (1939–2022), is a characteristic feature of the modern European history of religion (Gladigow 1995). The holistic milieu appears likewise to be a reservoir that has received vertical transfers from the established systems of religion, science, medicine, and economics. However, it is not obvious whether the spiritual-therapeutic market constitutes a subsystem itself, if it is a subsystem in the making, or it eschews the process of differentiation altogether.

Holistic healing’s state of limbo is reminiscent of the modern discourse on esotericism as defined by the historian of science communication and Germanist Robert M. Erdbeer and the cultural historian Christina Wessely. In their view, esoteric discourse emerged as the twin sister of popular science. Its protagonists rely on the rhetoric of exact science (*Naturwissenschaft*) to deliver a “secret doctrine for all” (*Geheimlehre für alle*). The content of this doctrine, however, is not mainline science but a post-Romantic, parascientific, and vitalistic *Naturphilosophie* that is epistemically closer to subject-centred lived experience than the scientific experiment (Erdbeer and Wessely 2009: 170–171). Esoteric discourse finds itself in a precarious position. It is neither science nor philosophy or religion, but hovers between these fields (cf. Hanegraaff 1998: 515–518). Characteristic of esoteric *Naturphilosophie* is its inherent performative aspect. Arguably, esotericism in the sense of Erdbeer and Wessely applies to the work of those authors who crucially influenced the emergence of twentieth-century forms of energy healing, including, among others, du Prel, Vivekananda, Atkinson, Abrams, Bailey, and Reich (cf. Zoehrer 2020; 2021; forthcoming C).

The influence of esoteric discourse on energy healing was affirmed by Charly Lechner, the speaker of the trade group of energy healers in Vienna.⁶² Lechner (2023) associates esotericism with “the often dark, mysterious belief in the power of the myths, the universe, and its harmonies,”⁶³ and energy healing as its practical application. However, only a minority of energy healers refer to texts such as Bailey’s *Esoteric Healing*, where an explicitly esoteric, energy-based theory of healing is laid out (Zoehrer forthcoming C). It

62 “Die Grenze zwischen der Esoterik und der Energetik ist sicher nicht scharf zu ziehen.”

63 “[...] der oft dunkle geheimnisvolle Glaube an die Macht der Mythen, des Alls und seiner Harmonien [...]”

is notable that all three interviewees brought up the terms “esoteric” and “esotericism” of their own accord to distinguish their work. On the one hand, energy healing is to be hauled out from the “swamp of esotericism” (Schiffner) and esoteric elements are to be “filtered out” of energetic practice (Leitgeb). On the other hand, scientific progress might prove much of what today is considered “esoteric” (Fegerl). The term “esotericism” thus paradoxically appears to simultaneously serve as: (1) a unique selling point of energy healers vis-à-vis established health professions, (2) the unprofessional “other,” and (3) the scientific knowledge of the future.

5.2 Science: Ally and Gatekeeper

As the statements of the interviewees have indicated, science is perceived not as a threat to energy healers but as a potential ally. In present-time Austria, the validity of a therapeutic method is not determined by a state commission of scientific experts. Rather, the public and financial privilege enjoyed by practitioners predominantly depends on the legal framework. Austrian law regulates that the application of methods based on scientific knowledge are strictly reserved for medical doctors. However, as the attempt of the Ministry of Health in 2018 showed, alternative practices could in principle be ascribed to the domain of physicians given that the evidence of their safety and efficacy appears sufficient enough even if current explanations do not.

As prescribed by law, science functions as the gatekeeper of legal medical practice. The ambivalent scientificity of holistic therapies has ramifications for the way energy healers position themselves in the health market. On the one hand, energy healers defend their trade by officially insisting that their methods are *not* compatible with the scientific thought model. The professional profile of Austrian energy healers explicitly underscores this point:

This [human] energy field is not integrated into the physical world view currently recognised by science and therefore cannot be explained or proven scientifically yet. Accordingly, Humanenergetik [i.e., energy healing applied to humans] makes no claim to scientific verifiability or provability at the present moment (WKO 2020: 3).⁶⁴

⁶⁴ “Dieses Energiefeld ist nicht im derzeit wissenschaftlich-anerkannten physikalischen Weltbild integriert und dementsprechend momentan naturwissenschaftlich nicht erklärbar oder beweisbar. Dementsprechend wird zurzeit von der Humanenergetik kein Anspruch auf wissenschaftliche Nachweisbarkeit oder Beweisbarkeit erhoben.”

On the other hand, appeals to science are widespread within the field. It is apparent, for example, (1) in references to scientific authorities who insist on the limits of the scientific worldview, (2) in the legitimization of energy healing by reference to fields of research such as psychoneuroimmunology, or (3) in the presentation of online data bases of peer-reviewed studies on the claimed efficacy of energetic methods. In contrast to the Royal Commissions on mesmerism (if such an anachronistic comparison is allowed), the focus of these studies is not to examine the purported existence of the healing agent as a physical substance but the clients' perceptions of an energetic treatment and the question of its therapeutic benefit. Nonetheless, the proof of objective, clinical efficacy appears to be secondary compared to anecdotal reports of personal transformation.

This pragmatic stance is expressed when Schiffner recalled the subtle distinction between reality (*Realität*) and actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) as coined by Pietschmann: the former is relegated to ontological speculation, whereas the latter is what supposedly concerns both the physicist and the holistic healer in the first place. In the same vein, sceptics deny that energy healing has anything to do with energy in a physical sense but readily accept that it might have to do with complex conscious and nonconscious aspects in the therapeutic relationship that in some subjects may bring about significant physiological and psychological changes (Carroll 2015a). Thus, whereas disagreements about the ontological character of subtle energies will likely continue (a philosophical, not a scientific problem), minimal consensus may be reached on the physiological and psychological utility of practices rooted in metaphor.⁶⁵ Due to the imprecise emic use of physicalisms such as “energy,” “field,” or “resonance,” the sceptical boundary-work around exact science is expected to remain lively.

Appeals to science are widespread among holistic healers, and yet they draw from ideas, values, and principles that have their roots beyond what science can provide. Even scientific visions of holistic healing methods operate within natural-philosophical or openly esoteric frameworks, thus embracing a “re-enchanting” discourse that integrates vitalism, *telos*, and a notion of mystical interconnectedness of being in opposition to a purely “reductionist” or “materialist” scientific view (cf. Harrington 1996). Ruth Barcan, an Australian scholar of Gender and Cultural Studies, moved attention from boundary work between science and non-science at the macro-level to the

65 Like mesmerism, most energy healing modalities could be described as being closer to an art than a science. The skilful employment of a healing agent described in fluidal metaphors affects those who are more suggestible than others. A more refined theory to describe the interactions in a therapeutic setting could be developed based on the notion of “therapeutic mediologies” (see Baier 2020b).

micro-level, where individual practitioners negotiate between their own rationality and their gift of healing (Barcan 2010: 139–146; cf. KFU Forschung Austria 2020: 18). Spiritual-therapeutic providers are pressured to strike the balance between the integration of intuition and belief in transcendent powers in daily practice on the one hand, and social norms of credibility and scientific validity on the other. Further pursuing Barcan’s approach in relation to individual energy healers will provide a more nuanced picture of their micro-level strategies of boundary-work.

5.3 Between “Epistemic Regime” and “Heretical Imperative”

Two different interpretational frameworks could be suggested to describe the social position of energy healing: (a) the view from the “epistemic regime” that defines the discursive asymmetry between orthodoxy and heterodoxy (Schetsche and Schmied-Knittel 2018: 13); and (b) the perspective of the client who perceives a pluralistic marketplace ruled by the “heretical imperative” (Berger 1979).

Following the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), the crucial function of the dichotomy of orthodoxy and heterodoxy is the projection of cultural power (1993: 109). A society’s order of knowledge determines what is possible and what impossible in the life-world, what exists and what does not, and what an individual’s options of action are. The established order thus functions as a system of control that is upheld by “guardians of reality” (*Wächter der Wirklichkeit*): individual or collective actors—i.e., scientific institutions, mass media, and civil-society organisations (e.g., sceptics)—who either uphold the status quo of a prevailing order of knowledge or who themselves hold the authority to legitimise and secure knowledge (Biebert and Schetsche 2016: 101).

Although the oppositional pair of orthodoxy/heterodoxy first emerged in the context of the European history of religions, it fulfils an important function in the boundary-work between rivalling medical schools. Long before Bourdieu introduced the guiding difference in his social theory, “orthodox” and “heterodox medicine” had become common terms in medicine.⁶⁶ In this context, the stipulated contrast “suggests a clear demarcation line between

66 In the Anglo-American history of medicine, “orthodox medicine” and “heterodox medicine” entered common usage in the mid-nineteenth century. In the German-speaking world, *Allopathie* (a pejorative term used in contrast to homeopathy), *Schulmedizin* (pejorative to neutral), and *Staatsmedizin* (neutral) were the common terms used to describe medical orthodoxy in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Preferred contemporary terms are *wissenschaftliche Medizin* (scientific medicine) or simply *Medizin*.

natural versus supernatural, scientific versus non-scientific, rational versus irrational, professional versus *charlatanesque*, progressive versus occult etc.” (Schott 2018: 55). The distinction between “true” and “false” medicine serves to control social and financial privilege. Medical orthodoxy oversees which practices were eligible to coverage by the health insurance. As the German historian of medicine Heinz Schott has shown, the division between medical orthodoxy and heterodoxy was historically blurry and only ossified in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when biomedicine attained interpretational sovereignty in the aftermath of the scientific-technological revolution (ibid.).⁶⁷

Next to the highly organised health care system, which is supervised by state authorities and regulated by respective laws, there is a growing, demand-oriented but largely unregulated market for holistic healing methods. In the pragmatism of the therapeutic seeker, the official distinction between orthodoxy and heterodoxy becomes irrelevant. It appears that persons in distress have two therapeutic worlds from which they can choose services they deem suitable to solve their issues. The rising number of spiritual-therapeutic services outside of conventional medicine runs parallel to the trend of religious pluralisation. Similar to options of belief, therapy is becoming a matter of choice (Greek: *haíresis*; αἵρεσις). Hence, “heretical imperative” coined by the Austrian-American sociologist Peter L. Berger (1929–2017) could be expanded to include the individual’s choice in the realm of salutogenesis and therapeutic intervention. There is no single institutional authority that decides whether one ought to get the body “repaired,” explore psychological or “energetic” issues allegedly causing a symptom, or adopt radical lifestyle changes from diet to meditation. The increasing role of choice in health matters is emphasised by the market character of the holistic milieu and is also fuelled by the population’s decreasing satisfaction with the health care system (cf. Demox Research 2024).

As is the case for other European societies, the Austrian landscape of health and health-related professions builds on a discursive and legal asymmetry that determines the difference between orthodox medicine and non-conventional services. According to their self-understanding and in keeping with the established legal framework, Austrian energy healers cautiously advocate their cause and refrain from directly challenging the hegemony of biomedicine, psychotherapy, and other health professions. By outwardly negating a scientific basis to their practice, energy healers maintain their position

67 Although power struggles play a role, social constructivism can be taken to extremes. Disciplinary demarcation lines do depend on the inherent assumptions, logic, and principles that constitute a scientific or technological field.

as a free trade, constrained only by its own professional standards (*Standesregeln*). These rules curtail an “anything goes” dynamic and include the principle of not inflicting harm, the prohibition of making diagnoses or applying medical cures, transparent fees, confidentiality, and respect for the client’s autonomy (WKO 2014). In short, the Austrian trade group of energy healers is thus situated between the poles of a monopolistic, state-endorsed health care system and the pluralistic, unregulated holistic market.

5.4 The Problem of Integration into the Health Care System

Medicalisation is a strategy for schools of energy healing to gain a higher professional status. However, different schools prefer different degrees of collaboration with conventional medicine. The three-tier model suggested by Saks (2002: 156) can be adapted to illuminate the regulation of health services in Austria. Saks’ model distinguishes between the following levels of integration of complementary and alternative therapies into the health care system:

- (1) Medicalised “alternative” (i.e., optional) practices are characterised by special diagnostic approaches, stricter standards in training, and a high degree of organisation. They have assimilated to the medical professions and their exercise is restricted to medical doctors, psychotherapists, physiotherapists, or nurses. Examples are osteopathy, chiropractic, acupuncture, and hypnotherapy.
- (2) Complementary practices support conventional biomedical and psychotherapeutic interventions. They do not require general diagnostic skills and are either applied by health professionals or health-related professionals. Examples are TT in nursing, Reiki in palliative care (Nagel-Pölzer 2022), massage therapy, and counselling (*Lebens- und Sozialberatung*).
- (3) “Alternative” (i.e., independent) practices provide diagnosis and treatment based on anthropological, ontological, and epistemic principles that markedly differ from biomedicine. They exhibit varying degrees of organisation, are generally regarded as separate from the health care system, and are offered in the free market of the holistic milieu. Although they have a lower reputation and receive little to no financial support for clinical studies, they enjoy a higher degree of experimental freedom due to less institutional oversight. Examples are Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine (except acupuncture), as well as most forms of energy healing.

Whereas Schiffner's individualistic approach to energy healing fits the *alte native-independent* category, he envisions energy healing in the long run to become a fully accredited health profession on par with those of the first category. As a certified life coach, Fegerl applies his energetic toolbox partially in the second category. He sees the prospective place of energy healers in medical competence centres, which corresponds to the second and first levels of integration. Whereas TT inhabits the second and third category, Leitgeb and the ISTTE lean towards the latter because they view TT as a spiritual path requiring a greater personal commitment than "just" the application of a therapeutic technique employed by nurses.

5.5 Medicalisation Through Secularisation?

The professionalisation of a therapy goes hand in hand with secularisation, particularly if integration within the public health care system is aspired. The hallmark of holistic healing approaches is that they "form a bridge between medicine and spirituality" (Heller 2013: 338). However, their further medicalisation entails significant trade-offs that inevitably affect and transform their habitus. Language with religious overtones must be abandoned, references to non-empirical entities or powers must be muted, and medical knowledge must be incorporated into the doctrinal foundations. Those methods that have sufficiently medicalised to a point where they are employed by medical professionals had to largely shed their original spiritual framework.

Prime examples for the secularisation of therapy are osteopathic medicine (distinct from osteopathy, its original form) and chiropractic. Like many contemporary schools of energy healing, these two treatments have roots in mesmerism and American "metaphysical religion," which sought healing as a path to salvation (cf. Albanese 2007). In order to ameliorate their rivalry with the American Medical Association (est. 1847) and gain access to the hospital and insurance industries, osteopathic medicine and chiropractic relinquished mesmeric and metaphysical metaphors in favour of medically acceptable musculoskeletal explanations (Fuller 1989: 67). At the same time, both have managed to preserve their distinctive profile vis-à-vis regular medicine by upholding the innate sanctity of the human body as well as the therapeutic importance of human touch (*ibid.*).

Schiffner and Leitgeb regard energy healing as the heritage of shamanism and integrate neo-shamanic elements into their work. They regard the belief in spiritual forces and entities as well as techniques to attain altered states of consciousness as compatible with energy healing. If a school of energy heal-

ing sanitises its “spiritual” or “esoteric” dimension in order to raise its professional status, it also runs the risk of losing a considerable segment of its clientele. Thus, occupying a position as a low-threshold trade occupation has the advantage that it allows the practitioner to offer spiritual healing, spiritualised therapy, or commercialised “esotericism” in a liberal, demand-oriented market setting (see von Trotha 2007). The disadvantage is an ambivalent social reputation and blockage from access to a larger pool of potential clients and insurance coverage via the health care system.

Whereas resistance to professionalising energy healing schools remains high, the one-way vertical transfer of energetic techniques into the practice of established health or health-related professionals is legally less problematic. As evidenced by a number of medical doctors (e.g., acupuncture), nurses (e.g., TT), physiotherapists (e.g., craniosacral therapy, kinesiology), and life coaches (e.g., energetic constellation work), this process is already occurring.

Although medical doctors in Austria tend to monopolise the health system and attempted to co-opt holistic (including energetic) methods, the profession of psychotherapists pursued a defensive strategy (Endler 2020: 111). In 2014, the Ministry of Health released guidelines for strictly demarcating psychotherapy from “esoteric, spiritual, religious, and ideological services” (*esoterische, spirituelle, religiöse und weltanschauliche Angebote*), which explicitly included energetic techniques (Bundesministerium 2014). The vague formulations of the guideline and its secularist stance gave rise to controversy. In particular, the question how “empirically examined resources of spirituality” could be utilised for the sake of patients was not considered (Utsch 2014: 465). It is noteworthy that the guideline received substantial support from the Federal Office on Sect Issues (*Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen*) (Bundesministerium 2014: 20). This procedure underscores that the demarcation of boundaries around health professions is not necessarily determined by a transparent and rational discourse or evidence-based studies but rather by government agencies. Conversely, the psychotherapists’ dissociation from energy healing might have shielded the latter from unwanted professional encroachments on their field.

In brief, the boundary-work around energy healing remains dynamic. Whether the efforts by the WKO to introduce (voluntary) quality measures for energy healers and promote “professional rigour” (*berufliche Sorgfalt*) will elevate their social standing remains to be seen (WKO 2021). Meanwhile, the field has established a robust advocacy group within the WKO, which in the foreseeable future guarantees its role as a major player in the Austrian holistic milieu. An aging society, increasing infertility rates, the ris-

ing costs of the health care system, side-effects of high-tech treatments, medical malpractice, and the mental health crisis will produce no shortage of therapeutic seekers.

6. Concluding Remarks

Three decades before the explosion of energy healing modalities in the 1980s, Alice A. Bailey envisioned “the medicine of the future” (1953: 278). In her posthumously published book *Esoteric Healing*, she anticipated a form of integrative medicine that would combine orthodox medicine with “the art of spiritual healing” (ibid.: 557). This “new medical science” would require the study of the physical body and an understanding of the circulation and transmission of the “energies” that vitalise the human “etheric body” (ibid.: 530). Today, the incorporation of energy healing into the health care system remains almost utopian. Austrian energy healers nonetheless meet a seemingly growing demand for energetic treatments and succeeded in establishing their trade as a “health-related profession” (*gesundheitsbezogener Beruf*) parallel to the medical professions.

The exploration in this article only gave a glimpse into the problem of professionalisation faced by energy healers in Austria. In order to further examine how energy healers seek to raise the social standing and legal protection of their activities other factors need to be considered that were not herein touched upon.

The first one is the outstanding role of gender: seventy-eight per cent of Austrian energy healers are female (KMU Forschung Austria 2020: 5), which reflects a long-established trend in the holistic milieu (Woodhead 2007; cf. Zoehrer 2020). More research is required to understand how socio-economic conditions and psychological factors contribute to diverse gender expressions among energy healers and related spiritual practices (cf. Heller 2024). A second aspect, closely related to gender roles, concerns the introduction of energy healing into palliative care. TT and to a lesser degree Reiki are currently at the vanguard of such endeavours in Austria. This raises the question how energy healing relates to modalities of palliative care established by traditional religions. Third, several education centres affiliated with the Roman-Catholic Church offer seminars on energy healing (cf. Zoehrer 2020: 141 n. 9). How has the perception of the field shifted among mainline religions? What are the implications for its professional status? Fourth, the majority of energetic methods listed in the trade group’s profile have been imported from abroad. How have these practices influenced the practice of local traditions

of folk healing, including, for example, “healing magnetists” (*Heilmagnetiseure*) and “faith healers” (*Geistheiler*) (Noseck-Licul 2016; Obrecht 1999: 11, 129–132)? And lastly, comparative analyses with the holistic milieus of other European countries will allow a more precise assessment of the market advantage of Austria’s energy healers.

Within Austria’s holistic milieu, energy healing has advanced to become a stable and growing actor, intensely engaged with the dynamics of professional boundary-work. Although the field is largely unaware of its own historical background (cf. Stein forthcoming B), energetic methods have been heavily impacted by the far-reaching ripple effect of mesmerism and related esoteric discourses (sensu Erdbeer and Wessely) that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a self-label, “esotericism” officially functions as a shield to demarcate energy healers from the sphere of action of medical doctors. At the same time, the interviews suggest that a number of practitioners would hesitate to call themselves esotericists and rather use the term to disassociate themselves from an unprofessional “other.” Science is another ambivalent reference point in the field. Whereas the professional profile of energy healers denies that energy healing can be explained within a scientific framework, individual practitioners and schools refer to research projects and medical publications (particularly in the area of nursing) as confirmation for their work. Due to the anti-reductionist anthropology applied by most energy healers, the field is highly receptive to “spirituality” and permeable to vertical transfers from (historical and imagined) traditions without endorsing particular confessions.

In short, the field remains in a precarious position between paths of spiritual self-actualisation on the one hand, and the aim of full legal recognition as a health profession on the other. The above interviews and subsequent discussion lead to a conclusion that accords with the observation made by Anne Koch and Stefan Binder regarding holistic therapies:

In the relationship between secularism, spiritual healing and medicine, historical phases can be distinguished, depending on which system of persuasion exercised the greater influence. They have alternated in this position. This development cannot be described as a history of rationalist progress, nor as a grand narrative, which encompasses all social milieus (Koch and Binder 2013: 12).

As a core segment of the holistic milieu, energy healing superbly illustrates the cultural forces that shape current heterodox therapies. Non-dominant approaches of salutogenesis and self-help will likely continue to draw public interest. However, despite—or rather because—of their assertive advocacy

group in the WKO, it is unlikely that Austrian energy healers will make substantial advances towards attaining the legal status of a health profession in the near future. Given its character as a conglomeration of heterogeneous methods, it is to be expected to largely remain within the pluralistic setting of the spiritual-therapeutic market. Exceptions are female-dominated sectors of health care, in particular nursing and palliative care, where individual schools of energy healing are making some headway—however, in close collaboration with medical institutions.

Abbreviations

ISTTE	International School of Therapeutic Touch and Energy
NTTTA	Netzwerk Therapeutic Touch Teachers Austria
TCM	Traditional Chinese Medicine
TT	Therapeutic Touch
TTIA	Therapeutic Touch International Association
WKO	Wirtschaftskammer Österreich (Austrian Federal Economic Chamber)

Appendix

Guiding Questions Used for the Expert Interviews⁶⁸

(1) *Biographical backdrop:*

- Please describe your first steps towards energy healing.

(2) *Personal approach:*

- How would you characterise your specific approach to the field of energy work?
- How and where did you learn your methods?
- On which literature is your method based?
- How long have you been offering courses, seminars, lectures in this field?

(3) *Health ideal and view of the human being:*

- What is the aim of your practice?
- What image or model of the human being is behind it?

⁶⁸ Translated from the original German.

(4) *On the role of the healing agent:*

- How is healing brought about in your opinion?
- What do you feel or experience during an energetic session?

(5) *On the difference between energy healing and health professions:*

- How do you see the relationship between your approach and established health professions?
- To what extent does energy healing complement health professions?

(6) *Expectations of the future development of energy healing, particularly with regard to its professionalisation:*

- How do you see the future of energy healing in Austria?

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 Interview with Alexander Fegerl, Hirschstettner Straße 19-21 C/2, 2200 Vienna, July 17, 2019.
 Interview with Johannes Leitgeb, Schwemmäckergasse 38, 2100 Vienna, July 23, 2019.

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Introduction

Dominic Zoehrer, Marleen Thaler, and Julian Strube

When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not,
pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a pensioner;
not a cause, but a surprised spectator of this ethereal water;
that I desire and look up, and put myself in the attitude of
reception, but from some alien energy the visions come.
(Emerson 1841, 222)

Force, Power, Energy... [these] words, as commonly used,
have very loose meanings annexed to them;
and their ideas are very uncertain and confused.
(Hume 1999 [1748], §61)

As a skeptical empiricist, the philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) was not willing to readily accept the invisible entities that underpinned Newtonian physics. However, whereas terms surrounding energy were still marked by semantic fluidity during Hume’s time, physicists reached a firm consensus on their formal definitions by the mid-nineteenth century (Smith 1998). Ever since, energy has denoted the ability to do work, which manifests in mechanical, thermal, electrical, magnetic, and chemical forms. According to the laws of physics, one form of energy transforms into another while the total amount of energy remains constant. Energy is the fundamental principle underpinning all physical phenomena. This insight has led to a host of technological revolutions, including, for example, the complete electrification of factories and households. Albert Einstein’s (1879–1955) famous equation describing the equivalence of energy and mass ($E=mc^2$) opened up the additional possibility of tapping into nuclear energy with its far-reaching economic and political consequences in the post-1945 world.

The fact that ideas of energy have played a vital role in the context of modern religion, most saliently in the field of esotericism, has so far received little scholarly attention. Allusions to physical theories have been a distinctive element of esoteric currents in the nineteenth century, of which the ripple effects still impact popular culture and the contemporary holistic milieu, the flourishing self-help market at the intersection of religiosity and therapy (Heelas et al. 2005: 88–89). Indeed, it has been argued that debates

about the meanings of ‘science,’ ‘religion,’ and ‘esotericism’ have been inherently intertwined (cf. Asprem 2014; Bergunder 2016). Their entangled discourse has involved the use of analogies with physical phenomena such as magnetism, electricity, waves, vibration, ether, and energy. Yet, the appeal to science as a ‘language of faith’ in esoteric texts and practices does not merely echo or imitate scientific progress in a purely rhetorical manner (cf. Hammer 2001). Far from being an afterthought to physics, esoteric readings of energy have appeared in tandem with the history of science and produced their very own vibes, stimulating a cascade of practices and social movements.

Proponents of what came to be known as ‘occultism’ in the 1850s not only claimed to unite religion and science but also pursued a decidedly social reformist thrust that placed them at the center of the processes of secularization and modernization (Strube 2016; Bogdan and Djurdjevic 2014, 1–2). Although there is no clear demarcation between ‘esotericism’ and ‘occultism’ in either the historical sources or the scholarly literature, several studies have demonstrated the central role of these discourses to the boundary work between religion and science (e.g., Treitel 2004; Wolfram 2009). Recognizing this late modern dynamic and the colonial context that has additionally structured it (especially since the nineteenth century), scholars are increasingly turning their attention to exploring global historical perspectives on the field in contrast to the previous Eurocentric focus on ‘Western esotericism’ (Strube 2022; Asprem and Strube 2021). There is growing consensus that, rather than a unilateral diffusion of ‘Western’ knowledge, esoteric ideas have been shaped by global exchanges, especially between Europe and Asia. This applies particularly to concepts of ‘occult forces’ or ‘energies’ and narratives about the ‘Eastern’ origin of esoteric wisdom, which often served to assert superiority over an allegedly materialistic and reductionist ‘Western science’ (Strube 2023).

Energies in esoteric/occult discourse—henceforth called ‘subtle energies’ to demarcate the term energy from its established scientific use—offer a highly instructive case for late modern reactions to the hegemony of science. A hallmark of the creation of nineteenth- and twentieth-century esoteric texts and practices is their enthusiastic engagement with physics, biology, and medicine. The boundaries between science and non-science are thereby blurred and intentionally transgressed. On the one hand, esoteric ideas couch themselves in appeals to authorities of secular knowledge in order to suggest universal credibility. On the other hand, those same authorities may be subject to esoteric critique in the name of an advanced secret wisdom that is supposedly superior to modern science. The ascent and prevalence of the idea of subtle energies in the occult mindscape and related fields (i.e., modern yoga and the holistic milieu) thus involved a more complex process than merely justifying reactionary beliefs in pre-scientific powers or a debunked life force. Constituting a phenomenon in its own right, the flourishing of forces, powers, and energies in the esoteric imagination calls for a deeper scholarly investigation.

This volume was born out of the wish for a better understanding of the cultural, social, and political contexts in which subtle energies play a significant role. As disparate the concepts subsumed under this term may seem at first, they have evolved to form an interrelated discursive field where they fulfill

comparable functions. The volume's aim is to shed light on the history of subtle energies, their manifold semantic layers, and the leading protagonists and the movements that were inspired by this idea.

Methodology

In principle, the theme of subtle energies can be approached in three ways. First, the skeptical view regards any reference to a subtle energy as part of an outdated and redundant scientific theory, reactionary pseudoscience, or outright superstition that ought to be relegated to the cultural dustbin. Advocating for a progressivist model of history, the skeptic demarcates the era of modern science from a dark, pre-enlightenment past and its beliefs in gods, spirits, and magic. As 'energy' is an established term of physics, anyone who uses it outside the realm of science proper is surreptitiously employing scientific language for the appropriation of legitimacy (e.g., see Stenger 1998).

Second, the emic view on subtle energies adopts an inverted form of progressivism: modern science has obfuscated the perennial wisdom underlying the notion of occult powers. However, according to widespread narratives, this supposedly 'rejected knowledge' has survived in the form of cultural undercurrents. The physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), the industrialist and philosopher Karl von Reichenbach (1788–1869), and the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1879–1957) are portrayed as misunderstood geniuses, whose discoveries were discarded by the scientific authorities of their day but have been preserved and further developed by esoteric adepts. In addition to Mesmer's *fluidum*, Reichenbach's *Od*, and Reich's 'orgone,' non-European ideas of semi-transcendent powers are claimed to buttress the existence of an ancient wisdom tradition that has persisted in safe cultural reservoirs. Theories of subtle energy thus form a heterodox stream of secret knowledge that is expected to set the stage for the next scientific revolution (e.g., see White and Krippner 1977; Bischof 1995; Tiller 1997; McTaggart 2001; Alegretti et al. 2020).

Third, a historical view pays attention to the protagonists of subtle energies, namely, their texts, activities, movements, and social conditions. It is not fixated on engaging in boundary work between science and non-science but investigates the discourse on subtle energies in its broader cultural context, including religious, scientific, social, and political dimensions. The historian is concerned with lines of reception, transcultural reinterpretations, and the reciprocity between ideas and (ritual) practices. Consequently, the goal is to understand complexity and ambiguity through consistent historical contextualization rather than normative statements.

This volume is committed to a historical examination of subtle energies from a religious studies perspective. Thus, our premise in exploring the theme is less concerned with the question of ontological or epistemological veracity and more with performative utility and cultural relevance. Accordingly, the volume argues that a Eurocentric and positivist narrative of energy that categorizes subtle energies as pseudoscience by default will tend to overlook both their metaphorical nature and their function to

“establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” (Geertz 1966, 4). Subtle energies are typically believed to unfold transformative, healing, or restorative effects within frameworks of imagination, embodiment, and ritual. While recognizing the role of (rhetorical) appeals to science and the legitimizing use of secular language, the volume will focus on concrete case studies of subtle energy and examine their origins, their ideological context, and their global trajectories.

Our approach benefits from the global historical perspectives recently discussed in religious studies, which include a stronger consideration of ‘non-Western’ actors and the need to contextualize them within their local settings (Maltese and Strube 2021). On this basis, further comparative analyses will offer deeper insights into given traditions and their impact on contemporary practices. A historiography of subtle energies implies close readings of source materials and the examination of their surrounding discourses. This approach is supplemented by the use of philological and sociological methods in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of subtle energy-based currents in past and present.

Current State of Research

There does not seem to be a generally agreed-upon beginning point for the term ‘subtle energies’ in the context of alternative religious discourse. Speculations on subtle, imponderable matter (e.g., ether) and subtle anatomy (e.g., soul, aura, *cakras*) clearly preceded the notion, but the origin of the term still requires a closer examination. What is certain, however, is the influence of particular historical ideas (including the mesmeric *fluidum*, *qì*, or *prāṇa*) on the contemporary notion of subtle energy.

Over the past two decades, a considerable number of scholarly works have been published on specific variants of subtle energy and their associated doctrines, practices, and social formations. The volume *Energy Medicine East and West* (2011), edited by the medical practitioners David F. Mayor and Marc S. Micozzi, features two dozen essays that provide insights into the multilayered meaning of *qì* at the nexus between the real and the imagined. Contrary to the volume’s subtitle, *A Natural History of Qi*, the vast majority of contributors were medical professionals whose practice-oriented readings of *qì* ranged from philosophical and psychological to physicalist frameworks. (A notable exception was the anthropologist Nancy N. Chen, who contributed a valuable chapter on the historical role of *qì* in East Asian medical traditions; see Chen 2011.) Similar publications by Micozzi and his co-authors explored a circle of themes loosely subsumed under ‘energy, mind, and spirit’ in premodern Asian ethnomedicines (Micozzi et al. 2011; Micozzi and McCown 2011).

Qì is a foundational term in East Asian religion, medicine, and self-cultivation practice. The first serious historiography of the *qìgōng* wave sweeping through China in the 1980s and 1990s was published by David Palmer (2007), who highlighted the significance of the scientific discourse that underpinned *qì*-based practices and traced how *qìgōng* organizations crystallized around charismatic leaders. Utiraruto Otehode and Benjamin Penny have further examined the emergence of “*qìgōng* therapy” (*qìgōng liáofǎ*)

in mainland China during the 1950s as well as its successive boom three decades later (Otehode and Penny 2016; 2017). The reverberations of the *qìgōng* boom in the United States and its entanglements with politics, science, and the media were outlined in an intriguing cultural history of mind-body medicine written by Anne Harrington (2008: 222–230). Penny (2012) also presented a detailed history of one of the *qìgōng* movement's most salient representative, the Falun Gong. The members of this 'biospiritual practice' aim at self-perfection by transforming and cultivating the flows of *qì*. Penny's research demonstrated not only how contemporary discourses of *qì* have reinterpreted Daoist forms of inner alchemy and Buddhist notions of subtle bodies, but also how they are shaping the social and political discourse in China and beyond. Focusing on Japanese-American exchanges, Justin Stein analyzed the transnational development of the discourse on *ki* (the Japanese variant of *qì*) and showed that the term has not only been translated in terms of vital energy or life force but also as 'mind' or 'spirit' (Stein 2024).

South-Asian and Euro-American interactions spawned another plethora of practices and movements revolving around the belief in subtle energies. In two seminal volumes titled *Meditation und Moderne* (2009), Karl Baier shed light on how the mesmeric idea of a cosmic *fluidum* and related occult discourses of the nineteenth century engaged in cross-pollination with Buddhist and Hindu contemplative traditions. This exchange of ideas impacted the rise of modern meditation movements. Having demonstrated the key role of transcultural transfers between Euro-American and Asian discourses—the Romantic reception of *prāṇa* being one pertinent example—Baier developed an innovative paradigm that has proven fertile for further research in the areas of holistic mind-body practices and modern yoga studies. On this foundation, Magdalena Kraler investigated the semantic shifts of *prāṇa* in the context of modern yogic breathing techniques. Her study traced how Hindu reform movements, occult milieus, and transnational hygienic discourse have contributed to making *prāṇa* a concept of subtle energy par excellence (Kraler 2022). Kraler's work is the latest of a number of comprehensive studies on the emergence of modern yoga from transnational exchanges that have demonstrated how meanings of *prāṇa* shifted in the frameworks of Hindu reform movements, the Euro-American breath-movement, dance, harmonialism, and occultism (De Michelis 2004; Singleton 2010; Foxen 2020).

Taking the viewpoint of a 'global religious history,' Julian Strube has shown how discourses on *kuṇḍalinī* and the closely related divine force of *śakti* were central to exchanges between learned Indians, orientalist, and Theosophists against the backdrop of the broader horizon of religion, science, and politics (Strube 2022; 2023). Along similar lines, Marleen Thaler explored the scientification of *kuṇḍalinī* and how twentieth-century reinterpretations of *kuṇḍalinī* reflect macro-level social, cultural, and religious processes (Thaler 2024).

Catherine L. Albanese carved out the key assumption underlying American metaphysical religion: individual minds partake in an immanent "flow of spirit energy" (2007, 15) that perfuses the universe, integrating the self and the whole as well as linking the manifested, material world with invisible,

essential realities. Whereas healing is the central concern of metaphysical thought and practice, other applications of the energies of mind are equally pragmatic and this-worldly. Examples include the pursuit of psychological well-being, prosperity, and wisdom. Applying “a historiography of connection” (ibid., 515), Albanese laid out the synergies that appeared between European astrology, Hermetic speculation, and Masonic ideology with African magic and Native American religion when they encountered each other in the colonial period. From this original rhizome, Albanese traced the emergence of American metaphysical discourse per se, which encompassed Transcendentalism, spiritualism, Christian Science, New Thought, and Theosophy, and extends deeply into the New Age genre.

Therapeutic and religious discourses have traditionally been closely intertwined, not only within their local ethnic or national contexts but also through transcultural exchanges and the effects of globalization. To varying degrees, Asian traditions and American metaphysical religion have influenced the emergence of contemporary schools of energy healing. Energy healing denotes a globalizing market of healing rituals that aim to stimulate the clients’ self-healing process. A number of authors have approached this field from a genealogical and systematic angle (e.g., Albanese 2000; Endler 2020; Zoehrer 2020; 2024; Stein 2022). However, a comprehensive monograph laying out the history of the spectrum of energy healing modalities remains a desideratum.

Jeffrey Kripal (2007) explored various aspects of the theme of energy that was at the heart of the Esalen Institute’s (est. 1962) program to unlock the potentials latent in the human species. Kripal argued that the Californian retreat center provided a fertile ground for combining Asian subtle energy concepts with Western psychological and scientific paradigms. Thus, varied interpretations of energy—whether as a life force, a therapeutic tool, or a power that enables altered states of consciousness and drives human evolution—merged into a holistic vision of human potential. This integrative view of energy reflected the Institute’s broader mission to transcend traditional religious boundaries and promote a psychologized form of spirituality that was firmly rooted in the human body and personal experience.

Several other versions of subtle energy that gained traction in the twentieth century took on meanings beyond healing and self-development. Strube elaborated how the literary invention of an occult superforce called *vril* (from ‘virile’) by the famous Victorian author Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873) captured the imagination not only of the early Theosophists but also that of esoteric neo-Nazi circles as well as designers of computer games (Strube 2013; cf. Bulwer-Lytton 1871). Another important form of subtle energy that found its way into popular culture was *mana*. In his book *Mana: A History of a Western Category* (2017), Nicolas Meylan critically investigated Western conceptualizations of *mana*, a term borrowed from Oceanic languages. Meylan delineated how *mana* was first reinterpreted by scholars as supernatural power, and, subsequently, by holistic actors including contemporary Pagan witches as “subtle energy” (ibid., 160). The idea of terrestrial ‘dragon energies’ in the context of the Earth Mystery movement, which combines Romantic mesmeric and contemporary Pagan ideas with elements of the

Chinese art of *fēngshuǐ*, was discussed by Andy Letcher (2004) and Thaler (2023). An economic perspective on subtle energies was offered by Lisbeth Mikaelsson (2014), who examined how ‘energy’ functions as the common ideological currency of the New Age market. Its associated metaphor of flow—which one also encounters in Asian models of subtle physiology—displays multiple layers of spiritual, psychological, and financial meanings.

As the above variations of the topos of energy indicate, the secular neutrality and semantic flexibility of this generic term endow it with a unique capacity to integrate indigenous and local elements into a globalizing discourse. Elaborations on the nature and operation of subtle energy are in no way limited to marginal philosophical or religious speculations but are essential to the areas of alternative medicine, mind-body practices, political movements, and the arts. This volume explores the ideological underpinnings and cultural resonance of the concept of subtle energies, highlighting major currents as part of a larger, evolving discourse.

Heuristic Definition

Since this is the first scholarly volume that focuses exclusively on subtle energies as a general theme, a brief remark about how the term will be used is warranted. Although the notion of subtle energies is too protean to be limited to a single, unambiguous denotation, this volume employs it as a broad heuristic term. Subtle energies shall here refer to imagined agents that are claimed to work as an intermediary between physical and nonphysical (e.g., mental, psychic, subconscious, divine, etc.) levels of reality. Inaccessible to the five senses, these agents are yet expected to exert their influence by means of ritual and other techniques. Subtle energies thus serve as a resource that holds out the promise of vitalizing and healing or refining and perfecting the individual self. Furthermore, they may also function as a key to mobilize special powers required for the restoration and reinforcement of gendered, racial, and national identities. Anthropological and cosmological discourses centering around a form of subtle energy likewise involve spiritual, therapeutic, and socio-political dimensions and suggest ways of tapping into hidden human potentials.

Subtle Energies and Subtle Bodies

A note is also due regarding subtle energies’ role in connection with subtle bodies, i.e., models of subtle anatomies and physiologies. Ideas revolving around subtle bodies preceded the notion of ‘subtle energy’ and have been a feature in a variety of philosophical and religious traditions. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) spoke of the soul as a “subtle kind of body” (*soma ti leptomerēs*), Galen (129–216 CE) and the Neoplatonists, including Iamblichus (c. 245–325) and Proclus (412–485), referred to a “luminous vehicle” (*augoeides ochema*). The latter’s speculations invoked subtle bodies primarily in soteriological terms, that is, as means of transportation for the soul’s journey through the cosmic spheres (see Cox

2022). Neoplatonic texts played a key role in later philosophical and religious discourses on subtle bodies, most saliently within Sufi traditions and Islamic yoga (Hatley 2007; Samuel and Johnston 2013; Ernst 2016). Augustine (345–430) referred to a *subtile corpus*, and Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and René Descartes (1596–1650) had a scholarly debate about the *corpus subtilis* from which the English “subtle body” derives (Cox 2022, 35–38). Likewise, the English orientalist Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765–1837) translated the Sanskrit term *sūkṣma śarīra* as “subtle body,” which was picked up in the Theosophical discourse (ibid., 70–74, 108–110; cf. Mead 1919).

In South Asia, subtle body concepts played a minor role in late Vedic texts (c. fourth to first century BCE; e.g., the *Upaniṣads*). However, elaborate theories and practices had not developed fully before the seventh and eighth centuries, when medieval *tantra* (i.e., texts) began to offer detailed depictions of a subtle anatomy (Samuel 2008; cf. Samuel and Johnston 2013). David Gordon White defined *tantra* as “that Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine *energy* of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that *energy*, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways” (2000, 9; emphasis added). The subtleness of tantric agents, imagined to hover between material or bodily and divine dimensions, is a key characteristic of their transformative quality. Drawing extensively on tantric traditions, premodern South Asian yoga techniques employed conceptions of subtle bodies that inhabit a mesocosmic realm between the microcosm of the human being and the macrocosm of the universe. Integrating physical, mental, and transcendent dimensions, the subtle body constitutes a middle ground—or a mostly psychological “connective tissue”—that triangulates between the human body/conscious self (*ātman*), the greater cosmos, and ultimate reality (Foxen and Kuberry 2021, 41). Comparable visualizations of a divine body appear in the *bhakti* tradition (Holdrege 2015).

Before entering *tantra* and yoga traditions, South Asian physiological models were most rigorously discussed in Āyurvedic medical literature. Apart from the constituents of the gross material body, these models conceived of more refined attributes of the body. They included the vital material (*ojas*), found most concentrated in the form of semen; the digestive fire called *tejas*; and the five *vāyus* (winds) that indicate the internal movements of the body’s vital substances. The notion of *prāṇa*, the inward directed *vāyu*, also functions as the generic term for all these subtle vital powers and their “flow in, out, and within the body” (Foxen and Kuberry 2021, 42). A yogi’s path involves a process of working through the intermediary layers and forces of one’s being. This could mean drawing back the vital agents and destroying them as part of an ascetic path, or transforming the body into a perfect vessel of divine energies as in many tantric exercises.

A case in point for both pursuits—the quest for final liberation on the one hand, and the re-creation of the body through the visualized embodiment of divine qualities on the other—is *kuṇḍalinī*-centered practice. Instructions for raising *kuṇḍalinī*, a serpent-like power associated with the divine feminine

principle (*śakti*), are enclosed in the text sources of *haṭha* yoga, which began to emerge with greater intensity from the thirteenth century onward (Foxen and Kuberry 2021, 49). Residing at the heart (in earlier sources) or at the base of the spine (in later ones), the *haṭha* yogi's aim is to draw *kuṇḍalinī* up the central subtle channel (*suṣumnā*), to have it pass various *cakras* (circles) of deities or *granthis* (knots), and to either dissolve *kuṇḍalinī* through its ultimate unity with the divine masculine principle or use its power to set free the elixir of immortality seated at the crown of the head for the renewal of the body (ibid., 50; for the transcultural transformation of East Asian subtle body models, see Baier 2016; Leland 2016).

Comparable theories of a subtle physiology and practices aimed at directing the flows of subtle substances through visualized channels and centers were also developed in the Chinese context. Concepts of vital fluids and body cosmology can be traced back to philosophical and medical classics written during the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) (Harper 1997). Integrating elements from Daoist cosmology and Chinese medicine, the Daoist body is viewed as the abode of deities, the residence of subtle centers of alchemical transmutation, and hence the main location of cultivating the vital energy known as *qì* (Kohn 2013). In contrast to the ineffable *dào*—the fundamental ground of all being, the organic order of nature, the source of life—*qì* denotes the concrete aspect of the universe. *Qì* encompasses the material potency of all that exists. It animates living organisms and manifests in the human body as a subtle life force that is ingested through the food consumed and the air inhaled. Already in the *Lǚshì chūnqiū* (Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals; c. 240 BCE), human health was described in terms of harmonious and smooth flows of *qì* (ibid., 18–19). Since the third century CE, and building on earlier maps of the human body as the encapsulation of heaven and earth, Daoist practice has focused on cultivating the body via *qì* with the aim of refining the vital force and its derivatives to render the body a vessel for the divine and immortal. Notably, Daoist descriptions of the self-transformatory path are often laden with shamanistic imagery: an ecstatic flight into ever subtler, lighter, and higher realms until ultimate purity and freedom of the spirit is attained (ibid., 23–31).

These examples from vastly different traditions underpin that theories of subtle bodies have played a crucial role in medical, philosophical, and religious contexts. Cartographies of the subtle body have bridged the gap between the limited, physical body and the celestial or supernatural realms. Subtle bodies typically encapsulate the notion of vitalizing essences and metaphors of flow. Practices involving the visualization of processes in the subtle body are aimed at refining vital fluids—either to harmonize and heal the body or to embody the creative powers of immortal deities. In light of the above heuristic definition, subtle bodies and subtle energies share similar functions as intermediary agents characterized by invigorating, healing, or self-refining potential. Bearing in mind that the term itself is a nineteenth-century invention, super-fine power-substrates flowing through, into, or from the subtle body could retrospectively be labeled as 'subtle energies.' However, in order to fully grasp the broader significance of subtle energies, it is important to account for the use of the term outside discourses on subtle anatomies and physiologies. As several chapters in this volume will prove, crucial concepts of subtle

energy in the occult and holistic contexts are indeed premised on corresponding subtle bodies (e.g., *prāṇa*, *kuṇḍalinī*, or *qì*). However, this is not generally the case as other striking examples presented in this volume underscore. Subtle energies have been imagined as quasi-physiological agents as well as mental, terrestrial, cosmic, and divine powers.

Overview of Contents

A total of fifteen contributions shed light on subtle energies from interdisciplinary angles, covering historical and contemporary, theoretical and empirical, as well as local and global aspects. The volume is divided into four major sections. Providing theoretical context to its main theme, Dominic Zoehrer's overture offers two chapters that juxtapose two distinct modalities of subtle energy: 'occult physicalism' and 'occult orientalism.' Subtle energies neither have an exact definition nor a single authoritative origin as the term encapsulates ideas of highly diverse backgrounds. Zoehrer examines how this de facto generic category particularly draws from two major pools of influence, namely, Western scientific (or scientistic) concepts—for example, ether, *Od*, and vibrations—on the one hand, and ideas of South or East Asian origin—such as *kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, and *qì*—on the other. As distinct and unrelated these notions may appear, Zoehrer demonstrates that by developing a shared connotation with 'energy' they have entered a global discourse that has fundamental (although not exclusive) roots in nineteenth-century occultism.

The second section examines theoretical and historical aspects of subtle energies with a special focus on alternative healing. Opening this section, Bastian van Rijn takes us to a prototype of subtle energy, the cosmic *fluidum*, which was introduced as an iatrophysical agent by Mesmer. Approaching the evolution of animal magnetism through conceptual metaphor theory, van Rijn highlights how Mesmer originally relied heavily on metaphors of harmony as well as hydraulic images such as currents and resistance. Contemporary Dutch, French, and German practitioners of healing magnetism—despite speaking of 'energies' rather than subtle fluids—show varying degrees of continuity with Mesmer's selection of metaphors.

Reminiscent of Mesmer 150 years earlier, the Indian Theosophist and yogi-scientist Dewanchand Varma (1872–c. 1946) also sought to establish his innovative therapeutic practice in Paris. The life and work of this notable figure of the French alternative medical discourse is portrayed by Léo Bernard who zooms in on *la prânothérapie*, i.e., Varma's technique of spinal manipulation that purportedly improves the flow of 'prana' in a subject's body. The yogi's laboratory research led to the development of electrical devices for measuring the frequency of pranic currents circulating in the body, thus alluding to prana as 'primary energy'—a monistic agent designed to fuse Hindu cosmology and modern physics.

Justin Stein similarly argues that 'energy' serves as a master metaphor that effaces historical and cultural difference, thus rendering various healing practices intelligible to culturally distant communities. Belief

in a single form of subtle energy as a divine healing agent employs a perennialist paradigm that rhetorically bridges the ancient and the contemporary, ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ traditions, and religious and biomedical frames of reference. By tracing the genealogies of two prominent schools of energy healing—Reiki and Therapeutic Touch—Stein demonstrates the emergence of these practices from particular twentieth-century occult milieus and how the notion of energy obscures those origins in a pragmatic move toward universalism.

Despite large areas of overlap with other forms of subtle energy, Kin Cheung’s chapter underscores the unique set of semantics associated with *qi* and its particular applications for restoring well-being. Employing his own innovative method of ‘filial ethnography,’ Cheung examines the case of a Chinese American healer based in New York City, his father Cheung Sen Kan (b. 1955). Cheung junior provides an illustrative example of a working-class immigrant’s code-switching that oscillates between *qi*-based and biomedical interpretations.

Swinging from Greek antiquity to the Amazon forest, Wouter Hanegraaff examines the role of subtle energy inentheogenic spirituality. Taking the Greek term *energeia* as his point of departure, he discusses the problem of ‘translating’ the experience made in ayahuasca healing ceremonies—a practice that has been common among Indigenous peoples for millennia, which involves ingesting a psychoactive brew extracted from a liana. Hanegraaff makes the case that, as unspeakable and hidden qualities, ‘ayahuasca energies’ require an alteration of consciousness to be fully known.

Marleen Thaler looks at subtle energies through an eco-spiritual lens, highlighting the discourse on terrestrial energies, and thus expanding the topic of subtle energies beyond an anthropo-centric scope. After outlining central components of ‘terrestrial physiology,’ i.e., Earth chakras, Earth energies, and Earth grids, she compares two US-American representatives of terrestrial energy healing, Robert Coon (n.d.a.) and Drunvalo Melchizedek (né Bernard Perona; b. 1941).

The volume’s third section focuses on the cross-cultural transformations of ideas and practices relating to subtle energies in yoga and tantra. Its contributions underline the variety of (re-)interpretations of subtle energy as they have been expressed by guru-centered groups in South Asia, the Americas, and Europe.

Keith Cantú kicks off this section with a chapter on the Tamil yogi and author Sri Sabhapati Swami (c. 1828–1923/4) and his theory of initiation (*dīkṣā*) that was formulated in three works between 1890 and 1913. Departing from the synthesis of mesmerism and yoga in the writings of the early Theosophical Society, Cantú demonstrates how this discourse influenced Sabhapati’s thought on energy transference. Sabhapati constitutes an instructive case within the global history of mesmerism in particular and subtle energies in general.

Hugh Urban traces the development of the concept of *kuṇḍalinī*, a key element in tantra, from early South Asian texts to its Western popularization. He puts a spotlight on the controversial Indian guru

Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (aka Osho; 1931–1990). While traditional forms of tantra described *kuṇḍalinī* as the cosmic energy of the goddess (*śakti*) inherent within the physical body, Rajneesh redefined *kuṇḍalinī* primarily as sexual energy. Urban argues that Rajneesh’s ‘spiritual sexology’ drew on post-Freudian psychology and new experimental therapies practiced at the Esalen Institute.

Kuṇḍalinī and *śakti* are also central terms in Tova Olsson’s chapter, but with a focus on the lineage and teachings of Sally Kempton (1943–2023), a disciple of Swami Muktananda (1908–1982), the founder and guru of Siddha Yoga. As a missionary of the ‘Goddess of Yoga,’ Kempton carried on her guru’s tradition of transmission (*śaktipāta*) with her own feminist spin. Her writings show how she navigated between the patriarchic (and indeed abusive) environment of Siddha Yoga, her own feminist ideals, and psychologized interpretations of spiritual energies.

According to the French yoga pioneer and prophet Serge Raynaud de la Ferrière (1916–1962), the cultivation of *kuṇḍalinī* and *prāṇa* is the most efficient way to bring about inner transformation. De la Ferrière’s teachings, referred to as Yoghism, synthesized yoga with astrology, mysticism, Christian symbolism, Kabbalah, and numerology. Adrián Muñoz outlines de la Ferrière’s enduring influence in Latin America with an eye to his method of energy control and related astrological imagery.

The fourth section poses the question of the broader cultural significance of subtle energies. Notions of immaterial powers have not been confined to practices of healing or self-perfection but were also imagined as agents that advance the transformation of society at large. As the contributions in this section vividly demonstrate, subtle energies permeate yogic opera singing, *völkisch* nationalism and neo-Nazi symbolism, and Theosophical discourses on gender and race.

Magdalena Kraler explores subtle energies within the context of voice culture by showcasing the Austrian *fin-de-siècle* singer and breath therapist Benno Max Leser-Lasario (n.d.a.), who contributed to the development of a practice of vowel breathing (*Vokalatmung*) that supposedly improves the singing voice, promotes health, and unleashes hidden potentials. Kraler demonstrates how Leser-Lasario bridged Viennese occultism, *völkisch* ideas, and Ariosophy with transnational developments of early modern yoga—including *Mantramistik*, a system of mantras introduced by the German yoga pioneer and influential apologist of ‘Aryan faith’ Peryt Shou (1873–1953).

Julian Strube further scrutinizes the awkward relationship between subtle energies and blunt politics surrounding notions of race and nationality. His chapter traces how Bulwer-Lytton’s fictional concept of *vril* became associated in Theosophical, Anthroposophical, and Ariosophical circles with ‘Atlantean’ and ‘Aryan’ occult wisdom. From an early point on, occult and fascist authors had related *vril* to South Asian concepts of subtle energy to envision the formation of a ‘heroic’ élite that was supposed to spearhead a national and racial awakening. His focus on Shou and the Austrian ‘free energy’ inventor Karl Schappeller (1875–1947) exemplifies the acute political dimension of far-right occultism.

The volume's final contribution considers the dimensions of race and gender in the occult discourse on subtle energies. Jessica Albrecht examines the lives and work of the Theosophists Frances Swiney (1847–1922) and Ida Craddock (1857–1902) in the historical context of first-wave feminism, sexual reform, and eugenics. Both authors used the concept of vital forces and energies as a frame to blend esoteric receptions of 'Eastern religions' and yoga with science, female sexuality, and youth education.

Concluding Remarks

Claims of the existence and efficacy of subtle energies form one of the most pivotal and enduring elements of modern esoteric discourse and related contemporary religiosities. The ongoing transformation and dissemination of this idea has resulted in an impressive range of schools, ideological currents, and movements. Subtle energies thus form a distinctive nexus that deserves a closer historical and comparative investigation. The gist of this volume is not to capture in an essentialist manner what subtle energies *are*, but rather to highlight *how* the notion has been used across a broad semantic range. This compilation underscores that the application of subtle energies has not only decisively influenced alternative healing practices, esoteric anthropologies, or self-cultivation paths. They have also had a profound, although little recognized, impact on music and visual arts, debates on gender and race, as well as political and ecological movements. Furthermore, the volume illuminates how particular forms of subtle energy are intertwined with each other, thus forming a characteristic globalized discourse over the span of the past two hundred years.

The dazzling theme of subtle energies may well appear in many ways to be 'alien,' as Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) put it, but it poses by no means a case of 'rejected knowledge' in the sense that it would constitute the suppressed wisdom of a secret undercurrent (see Asprem 2021). Nonetheless, the globalized discourse of subtle energies has clearly been overlooked by academia for too long as a serious subject of research. This volume aims to serve as an antidote to this scholarly omission and illuminate at least some critical aspects of the multilayered history of this fascinating idea. We thus hope to offer an insightful contribution to the study of esotericism and related currents, and stimulate debate in the wider field of religious studies.

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Historical Roots of ‘Subtle Energies’: Occult Physicalism

Dominic Zoehrer

Abstract

‘Subtle energies’ is a key notion in the contemporary holistic milieu. It functions as an umbrella term that includes ideas such as ‘life force,’ non-physical healing agents, as well as powers that supposedly underlie psi-phenomena. The following two chapters argue that subtle energies as a generic concept is derived from two distinct pools of influence: (a) occult physicalism (this chapter’s focus) and (b) occult orientalism. Occult physicalism is here defined as the appeal to physics with the aim of rationalizing inherently occult ideas and practices. Inverting the worldview of scientific naturalism, the occult discourse on energy was produced by nineteenth and twentieth century actors. Five central themes that have decidedly shaped the semantics of subtle energies are discussed: (1) the mesmeric *fluidum*; (2) Karl von Reichenbach’s *Od*; (3) occult ether models; (4) the concept of vibration as the mediator between mind and matter; and (5) occult energy theories. On this basis, characteristic aspects of late modern notions of occult powers are distilled.

Keywords: Subtle energies, occultism, mesmerism, *Od*, ether theories, vibration, New Thought, holistic milieu, scientism, late modernity

It is interesting to note that the attempt of the scientist to release the energy of the atom is of the same general nature as the work of the esotericist when he endeavours to release the energy of the soul.

—Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949)¹

1. Introduction

Few ideas have fueled the imagination of late modern culture as powerfully as ‘energy.’ It is a key term in a wide array of holistic healing systems and mind-body practices, as well as within martial arts, neo-paganism, and eco-spirituality. Concepts of energy have been employed by the protagonists of alternative religious discourse since the late nineteenth century. The American psychologist William James (1842–1910) captured the theme in his essay “The Energies of Men,” in which he discussed how to unlock “reservoirs of energy” (1907, 4) to quicken the mind and the body. Acknowledging the psychological aspect of these energies, he investigated how dormant powers could be unleashed through a wide range of approaches, including yoga, auto-suggestion, religious conversions, and the techniques of the American mind-cure movement (i.e., Christian Science and New Thought). To date there is no precise definition of energy in its usage in the religious-therapeutic milieu, where the term functions as

¹ Bailey 1953, 5.

a floating signifier with various context-dependent readings. Although there is no single authoritative interpreter of the idea, it has been historically bound up in a web of physical, medical, and occult theories that is yet to be reconstructed.

Although energy is chiefly regarded as a physical quantity, the term is characterized by multileveled semantics that go well beyond the boundaries of science. Whereas physics applies a mathematically precise definition of energy, the fuzzy, ‘esoteric’ notion of energy is connotated more closely with colloquial meanings—for example, ‘to feel full of energy’ (or a lack thereof), ‘to boost your energy level,’ or to relax and ‘let the energy flow.’ In the 1970s, a genre of popular literature on physics emerged that bolstered parapsychological and mystical outlooks, which expanded further into the areas of holistic healing and self-help a decade later (cf. Leane 2007, 32–35). Riding on this wave of popular physics, William A. Tiller (1929–2022) proposed the term ‘subtle energies’ in order to acknowledge *human* perceptions that may be described as ‘energetic.’² A Stanford physicist and prolific author of the ‘New Age science’ genre, Tiller asserted that if current physical models are unable to explain energy healing,³ homeopathy, or psi-phenomena such as psychokinetics, then their premises must be incomplete. To account for subjectively experienced powers that supposedly exceed conventional physical explanations, he suggested to introduce ‘subtle energies’ as a complementary to the acknowledged fundamental forces of physics (Tiller 1977; 1993).

‘Subtle energies’ rapidly entered the standard vernacular of the holistic milieu as an umbrella term during the 1980s and subsumed—academically homeless yet immensely widespread—vitalistic notions such as ‘life force,’ ‘universal life energy,’ ‘vital energy,’ or ‘bioenergy’ (Davidson 1987; Werthmüller 2005; White and Krippner 1977). Tiller himself contributed regularly to the journal *Subtle Energies* (1990–2010), which aimed at studying the physiological and therapeutic effects of biofeedback, energy healing, yoga, and other mind-body exercises.⁴ Subtle energies may include gentle physical applications such as the use of light and colors; magnetic, electrical, and electromagnetic impulses; acoustic vibrations (e.g., singing bowls); as well as the soothing effects of physical touch (e.g., laying-on-of-hands). Likewise, the term has been used to signify teleological agents, powers associated with magical symbols, the qualitative state of a social or organizational system, as well as creative, transcendent entities.

² It should be noted that although Tiller was an influential disseminator, he was by no means the first author to use the term, which can be traced to nineteenth-century occultists who explicitly mention ‘subtle energy’ in passing (see section 6).

³ Energy healing involves methods that are applied within the dyadic relationship of healer and healee, for example, mesmeric strokes, laying-on-of-hands, the clearing and charging of *cakras*, healing at distance, etc.

⁴ *Subtle Energies* was a follow-up project to the volume *Energy Medicine Around the World* (1988) edited by the Indian biomedical engineer and ‘yogi scientist’ T. M. Srinivasan. The journal was co-founded by Srinivasan, the American biofeedback and *kundalini* researcher Elmer E. Green (1917–2017), and the American psychologist Carol J. Schneider (b. 1938). In 1996, the journal was renamed *Subtle Energies & Energy Medicine*, emphasizing a therapy-oriented shift and a lesser focus on theoretical speculation. Before the launch of *Subtle Energies*, the book *Subtle Energy* (1987) by the British author John Davidson had already underscored the broad range of fields concepts of subtle energies are applied, including holistic anthropologies, energy healing, the work with crystals, practices based on Earth energies including *Fēng Shuǐ*, and dowsing.

As a generic category, ‘subtle energies’ encompasses heterogeneous ideas that hail from diverse cultural and historical sources. Jürgen Wolf’s entry on “Power” in the *Brill Dictionary of Religion* (2006) discusses the central role of ‘energy’ or ‘cosmic power’ in “today’s independent religiosity” including yoga, therapeutic applications, or the Earth mysteries movement (“geomancy”)⁵ (Wolf 2006, 1484). Wolf gives a glimpse of the vast number of presumed synonyms typical in the contemporary religious discourse on energies:

The two areas, physical and spiritual, are connected by a super-fine matter. This energy too is quasi-identified with the Melanesian *mana*, the Indian *prana*, the Chinese *ki*, and, finally, *od* or ether, and Wilhelm Reich’s (1879–1957) *Orgone*, which last is said to correspond to the ‘ether’ (the physical cosmos of light waves) [...]. (Wolf 2006, 1485)

Wolf’s description reflects the eclecticism one often encounters in source material on subtle energies.⁶ Implicitly, this condensed list of the semi-transcendent powers most prominent in the field indicates two distinct pools of influence that have merged into the idea of subtle energies: out-of-date or fringe scientific theories (ether, *Od*, *Orgone*) on the one hand, and terms of non-European origin (*mana*, *prāṇa*, *qi*) on the other. As disparate as these concepts may first appear, they can be shown to have formed a shared discursive nexus that has roots in nineteenth-century occultism. This and the next chapter scrutinize the notion of subtle energies by outlining two sub-discourses that profoundly influenced its genesis, namely, occult physicalism and occult orientalism.

2. The Inversion of Scientific Naturalism

The formalization of energy as a scientific term was a key moment for the advancement of physics. In the mid-nineteenth century, physicists introduced a definition of energy that soon became the foundational and unifying principle of physics and the natural sciences. Physical energy came to denote a quantity measurable in terms of work. A set of energy equivalences allowed physicists to link thermal, electrical, chemical, and biological processes, eventually leading to the universal application of the notion of energy within the sciences. The basic theory of energy that is still valid in contemporary science emerged from the particular context of a German-British discourse as vividly illustrated in

⁵ For a discussion of terrestrial subtle physiology in the context of eco-spirituality see Marleen Thaler’s contribution in this volume.

⁶ To give a recent example for an emic explanation of ‘subtle energy’ that captures the vast range of the term’s potential meanings: “Subtle Energy is not an easy subject to pin down. The name itself reflects the difficulties in the detection of this type of energy. No standardized vocabulary for it exists: many different names for it are used around the world. East Indians call it Prana, and the Chinese call it Chi. In Europe, it is called Bio-Energy and the Field of Information, in North America, Subtle Energy. Physicists variously refer to it as Unified Energy, Universal Energy Field, the Field of Quantum Potential, the Zero Point Field. Other people call it Supreme Consciousness, Divine Power, or God. But we are all talking about the same thing” (Strashun 2023, 18). Remarkably, this description embraces the range of physical, vital, mental, and transcendent semantics associated with ‘subtle energy’ but omits older physicalist notions—e.g., *fluidum*, *Od*, ether, or Orgon—that typically make it into the list.

Crosbie Smith's (1998) cultural history of Victorian physics. Notably, the motive for establishing the term energy in physics derived from the study of physiology and the aim to set up the field on a rigorous mechanistic foundation.

The question of teleology, that is, purposeful organization, was still an intricate part of the biological and physiological discourse in the early nineteenth century. Physiologists harboring Romantic vitalist convictions drew from earlier medical and biological discussions about the existence and function of the soul as a hidden, organizing force. In this vein, the German physiologist and *Naturphilosoph* Johannes Müller (1801–1858) pondered the origin and nature of the soul's supposed forces in his magnum opus *Handbuch der Physiologie des Menschen*⁷ (1833–1840). Taking recourse to the *anima*-theory of the physician Georg Ernst Stahl (1659–1734), Müller speculated that the manifestations of two principles—the 'vital' (*Lebensprincip*) and the 'psychic' (*psychisches Princip*)—have their common root in a reasonable soul. Whereas psychological reason can only be *conscious* of the reasonable, the life principle *generates* the purposeful organization of biological matter, albeit in an unconscious manner (Müller 1835, 821).

Regarding both the vital and psychic principles as being 'immaterial,' Müller did not identify them with known physical phenomena. However, for the sake of illustration, he drew parallels with the effects of 'imponderable substances' on matter. In a section of his compendium titled "Physics of Nerves" (*Physik der Nerven*), Müller cautiously suggested an analogy between influences of immaterial agencies on organisms (i.e., conscious actions or unconscious self-organization) and transfers of 'imponderables' between material bodies:

There are, however, forces of nature, or imponderable substances, which—although not independent of matter—can leave a body without changing its material state and pass over to others, such as light, electricity, magnetism. The existence of these principles, their appearance in the bodies, and their flowing over from one body to another, shows us clearly that materialism, which recognizes nothing but the forces of atoms, is groundless; and without remotely wishing to compare the life-principle and psychical principle with those imponderable substances or forces, we see at least that there is nothing in the facts of physics which cancels the possibility of an immaterial principle that is independent of matter, though acting in the matter of organic bodies. (Müller 1835, 822; my translation; cf. Müller 1838, 824–25)⁸

⁷ The title literally translates as Compendium of Human Physiology. Müller's work was translated into English by the British physician William Baly (1814–1861) as *Elements of Physiology*.

⁸ "Es gibt allerdings Kräfte der Natur, oder imponderable Substanzen, welche, wenn auch nicht von der Materie unabhängig, doch ohne eine Veränderung in dem materiellen Zustande des Körpers sie verlassen und auf andere übergehen können, wie Licht, Elektrizität, Magnetismus. Die Existenz dieser Principien, ihr Erscheinen an den Körpern, und ihr Ueberströmen von einem auf den andern Körper zeigt uns deutlich, dass jener Materialismus, welcher ausser den Kräften der Atome nichts anerkennt, grundlos ist; und ohne entfernter Weise das Lebensprincip und psychische Princip mit jenen imponderablen Substanzen oder Kräften vergleichen zu wollen, sehen wir wenigstens, dass in den Thatsachen der Physik nichts ist, welches die Möglichkeit eines von der Materie unabhängigen, wenngleich in den organischen Körpern in der Materie wirkenden immateriellen Princip aufhobe."

Within a decade, Müller's vital principle and similar notions of 'life force' were rendered superfluous through the introduction of the idea of energy (Smith 1998, 129–31). In 1847, an outstanding student of Müller, the German physician and physicist Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894), articulated the conservation law of energy in its general form. This law stipulates that the total amount of energy in a closed physical system is neither created nor destroyed; it remains constant. One form of energy (e.g., motion) can be transformed into other forms of energy (for instance, electricity). Superseding the concept of imponderables, the notion of energy enabled precise calculations of the properties of physical systems, including physiological organisms. The hypothesis of a soul and its vital forces had no function in 'exact science'—characterized by mathematical models, empirical verification, and predictive power—and was deemed to be without heuristic value. As a consequence, assumptions of an inherent purpose or organizing principle operating in living organisms—a crucial idea among Romantic scientists and physicians—went out of fashion within the natural sciences and academia at large (cf. von Stuckrad 2022).

Speculations on a vital principle had been the hallmark of German *Naturphilosophie*. Although identical with science throughout most of European history, *Naturphilosophie* came to be distinguished from the natural sciences when the latter emancipated from philosophy in the eighteenth century, institutionally reflected in the formation of separate faculties at European universities. Idealistic and Romantic representatives of *Naturphilosophie* variably positioned their projects either as a rival enterprise to science, its speculative prelude, or a philosophical engagement considered superior to science. However, compared with the progress in physics, chemistry, and biology, *Naturphilosophie* ultimately proved too narrow and pretentious to provide orientation for the empirical sciences (Böhme 1989, 7–9; cf. Mutschler 2002, 7–13).

Naturphilosophie faded out as a philosophical pursuit and university discipline in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Against this backdrop, new types of thinking about nature took the stage. Some philosophizing scientists, such as the physician Ludwig Friedrich Büchner (1824–1899) or the biologist Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), asserted the sole autonomy of science and advocated for a materialist *Naturphilosophie* as the basis for an inductive metaphysics.⁹ Other scientists and laypersons still adhered the emotional appeal of Romantic *Naturphilosophie* and envisioned a cosmos that was replete with vital, teleological, and/or divine powers. Putting science into the service of anthropocentric worldviews,

⁹ In his introduction to *Force and Matter* (1864), the English edition of *Kraft und Stoff* (1855), Büchner argues for materialism as the "ideal conception" to overcome the focus on specialized details and "perceive the connection of the whole" (xiv). His project aims to grasp nothing less than the "unity of all physical and mental existence in the same fundamental laws and causes" (ibid.; emphasis in the original). Like Büchner, Haeckel belonged to the foremost popularizers of Darwin's theory of evolution in the German-speaking world. From his synopsis of the sciences in his book *Die Welträthsel* (1899), he inferred a monistic philosophy that supposedly crowned the "century of science" (*Jahrhundert der Naturwissenschaft*) (Haeckel 1899, iii–iv).

physical terms such as force, ether, vibrations, and energy were recharged with meanings that went beyond the qualities of inanimate matter and were applied to vitalist agents and mental powers.¹⁰ A decisive player in this type of reaction to the pressure of scientification was occultism, an array of authors and movements that envisioned social reform by advocating for a new synthesis of science and religion (Bogdan and Djurdjevic 2013, 1–2). By embracing a belief that hidden, supernatural forces were at the disposal to the adept, occultism (metaphorically speaking) formed a photographic negative to naturalist scientism.

Scientism *sensu lato* refers to worldviews in which science wields the highest epistemic authority and ‘the’ scientific method is held to provide the most trustworthy knowledge about reality (see Bogner 2021, 121). Olav Hammer applied the notion of scientism to his analysis of late modern esoteric discourses and defined scientism more narrowly as the “active positioning of one’s own claims in relation to manifestations of any academic scientific discipline,” without using “methods generally approved within the scientific community” (2001, 206). In other words, scientistic models borrow from the dominant scientific culture and aim to partake in its authority and prestige without being constrained by its rules. A problem with this definition is the implied clear-cut distinction between socially accepted science on the one hand and ‘esoteric,’ science-related speculation on the other. However, given that science is a gradual process, such a binary opposition overlooks the more nuanced differences between proto- (emerging), para- (lateral), and pseudo- (false or fraudulent) science and their highly intricate historical relationships (cf. Rupnow et al. 2008, 8). As Richard Noakes (2019) has argued for Victorian physics, the interest in occult and psychical themes immensely enhanced the curiosity and creativity in scientific and technological endeavors, which underscores the fluidity of boundary walls set up around science.¹¹

Nonetheless, from a history of religion perspective, it suffices to acknowledge that in late modernity anyone who claims an integrative worldview—be it a naturalistic or esoteric one—is practically compelled to take science as a reference point and resort to science as a “language of faith” (Hammer 2001, 205). The assumption of a hierarchy of sciences stems from the cultural pre-eminence of the exact sciences as they consolidated in the nineteenth century: physics and the interaction of elementary particles came to be regarded as the most fundamental science which determines the principles of inorganic and organic chemistry; the biological sciences (including physiology); and ultimately psychology and the social sciences. This order was first proposed by the French mathematician and positivist philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857). Comte conceived his scale of “purity” and “relative perfection of the different sciences” based on the criteria of abstraction, precision, and application of

¹⁰ The German philosopher Aloys Wenzl (1887–1967) argued that fundamental definitions of physics were derived from the bodily, human sphere of experience in the first place (see Mutschler 2002, 188).

¹¹ To be clear, scientism is here used as a neutral, descriptive term and must not be conflated with the pejorative notion of pseudoscience. What counts as science, scientism, or imitations of science remains problematic as the question involves normative standards that are defined according to particular rules in a given scientific community. However, this analysis is concerned with the cultural history of an idea, not its scientific validity.

mathematical analysis (1853, 29). His blatantly reductionist approach led to the conviction that physics somehow encompasses all other sciences.

The term ‘physicalism’ first emerged within the Vienna Circle in the early 1930s and stressed the idea that all sciences could in principle be expressed through the terminology of physics (see, in particular, Carnap 1931; 1934). Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970), the major spokesman of logical empiricism, identified the logical-mathematical language of physics as an intersubjective, universal language that supposedly serves as the foundation of a “unified science” (*Einheitswissenschaft*).¹² Pursuing the coherence of and the inter-translatability between the sciences, the Vienna Circle argued that all meaningful sentences are expressible in one language and all facts are knowable by means of a single methodology. This ideal was thought of as the linchpin of a “scientific world conception” (*wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung*) (Stadler 2015, 231–32, 361). The Vienna Circle formed the pinnacle of the scientific naturalism—the secularist variant of scientism—that emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century and sought to elevate the authority of science over matters of worldview, thus forging a materialistic version of *Naturphilosophie* (Böhme 1989, 9).¹³

The hegemonic position attributed to physics has thus impacted philosophical critiques of religious views and the field of religion itself. Although ‘modern esotericism’ has been argued to be a form of knowledge popularization in the ideological heritage of *Naturphilosophie* (Hanegraaff 1998; Hammer 2001; Erdbeer and Wessely 2009), the widespread image of physics as the most rigorous and fundamental of sciences inevitably came to function as its social currency (cf. Leane 2007, 6–7). As major players of modern esotericism, occultists shared a “strong belief in ‘science’ as an arbiter of truth” (Hanegraaff 1998, 66), although their views were starkly opposed to any form of scientific positivism. Occultists aimed to undermine materialism by lending a scientific (or rather scientistic) explanatory framework to cosmologies, anthropologies, and therapeutic-soteriological ideas: if everything in the universe—including life, mind, and the soul—could be reduced to matter and force (or energy), a physical explanation could in principle be provided for the domains of the occult. ‘Occult physicalism’ shall here be understood as the appeal to physical terms and theories with the aim of rationalizing an inherently occult worldview. Its emergence is concomitant with the rise of physics as the dominant science in the nineteenth century and its quest for uncovering fundamental natural laws behind the plethora of phenomena.

The genre ‘occult physicalism’ extends previous discussions on ‘occult forces’ (Hanegraaff 2006, 885–86). As indicated in the program of the Theosophical Society (est. 1875; see section 5), ‘occult forces’ encompassed those qualities or phenomena that could not easily be assimilated into mainline empirical

¹² Similarly, the philosopher of science Otto Neurath (1882–1945), a co-founder of the Vienna Circle, argued that the language and methods of physics are the paragon for meaningful and precise scientific propositions.

¹³ For a philosophical discussion of physicalism and its relation to materialism, see Stoljar 2023. For an enchanting account of the Vienna Circle’s members’ avid interest in magic, neopaganism, occultism, and the paranormal, see Josephson-Storm 2017.

science. Whereas electricity, magnetism, and the curative effects of medical substances had been increasingly understood and hence demystified by modern science, other phenomena remained mysterious—for example, the altered states of consciousness produced by animal magnetism and spiritualists. Paying little attention to rivalling psychological explanations, the quest for unlocking psychic, spiritual, or divine powers believed to perfuse the cosmos and the human soul has been a keen interest of occultists and closely related scientific and religious figures.

What I argue in this chapter is that the occult discourse on energy emerged from an inversed scientific naturalism that was propagated by Romantic mesmerists, (proto-)spiritualists, (post-)Theosophists, and New Thought adherents. Their scientific apology presumed that the hidden powers of nature could in principle be unveiled by modern science. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how the idea of subtle energies resulted from a—never fully completed—physicalization of occult worldviews. Responding to the scientific discourse of their time, occultists sought to subsume the belief in vital forces and the power of the human mind (loosely corresponding to Müller’s ‘vital’ and ‘psychic’ principles) under a physical frame of reference. Five key themes have decidedly informed the semantics of subtle energies: (1) the mesmeric *fluidum*; (2) Reichenbach’s *Od*; (3) ether models; (4) the concept of vibration as the mediator between mind and matter; and (5) occult energy theories. These are the focus of the next sections, which will be followed by a discussion of the main features of occult-physicalist agents.

3. Mesmer’s *Fluidum*

Arguably, the most outstanding precedent to the physicalism of nineteenth-century occultists was the cosmological model conceived by the physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815). Mesmer theorized that disturbances in the human body were caused by obstructions of a natural agency that he referred to as *fluidum*, that is, streams of an extremely fine matter that hypothetically permeates the cosmos. The restoration of health depended on harmonizing the *fluidum*’s flow via so-called magnetic strokes above the patient’s body. Other mesmeric interventions involved the concentrated gaze at or gentle breath upon a patient, as well as the use of non-human media of transmission such as the administration of magnetized water or group therapies around a ‘baquet,’ a vessel filled with magnetized objects (Baier 2020b).

Mesmer introduced his medical theory of ‘animal magnetism’ to the public in 1775 as a therapeutic application of the physics of his time (Feldt 1985, 31). He promoted his approach to the Bavarian Academy of Sciences (est. 1759) as an enlightened and rational alternative to the exorcism practiced by the Roman-Catholic priest Johann Joseph Gaßner (1727–1779). As he was able to produce similar cures as Gaßner without recourse to religious notions such as demons, possession, or Christ, Mesmer enhanced his scientific reputation even if only for a short period. Conversely, as Karl Baier has pointed out, it is highly probable that Mesmer was influenced by Gaßner’s method of laying-on-of-hands, which

prompted him to dispense with magnets and rely on his hands as the chief therapeutic instrument for radiating the *fluidum* (Baier 2015, 60–61).

The term ‘energy’ was rather uncommon in the scientific mindscape of the eighteenth century, which was primarily occupied with discussing ‘forces’ (Feldt 1985, 31). Distinctions between physical, physiological, and psychological processes had not yet been strictly drawn. Thus, notions such as magnetism, heat, aether or ether, *spiritus*, soul, and life force (*vis vitalis*) were still integral part in the investigation of the so-called imponderables, that is, postulated material substances whose weight could not be quantified. In theorizing his universal *fluidum*, Mesmer variably referred to the known imponderables of gravity, light, heat (or fire), electricity, and magnetism, finally settling on the latter (ibid., 33). Mesmer did not view his *fluidum* as operating in an intermediate position between physical and trans-physical dimensions that might suggest the “unification of opposites: religion and science, mind and matter, even God and the universe” (Hanegraaff 1998, 435)—an interpretation that would emerge among Romantic mesmerists. Rather, he remained a firm physicalist in his cosmological outlook. Instead of supposing the existence of spirit or soul, he proposed that matter and movement were the two fundamental principles of the universe, both having their transcendent origin in God (Baier 2024, 556).

Despite Mesmer’s enormous influence on nineteenth-century occult discourse, it would be anachronistic to classify him as an occultist. He was a physician who embedded his therapeutic method within the program of the so-called iatrophysics of the Leiden School. This medical current was initiated by Herman Boerhaave (1668–1738) and aimed at developing medicine on the basis of René Descartes (1596–1650) and Sir Isaac Newton’s (1643–1727) mechanical theories of nature (see Baier 2024, 545). Not only did Mesmer present his approach as an enlightened alternative to exorcism but also claimed to have found a superior medical theory that explains the nervous system’s role in the origin of disease. However, his theory of a fluidal curing agency and the almost theatrical performances of collective healing séances in Paris did not escape the criticism of the scientific community. Although animal magnetism was at first repudiated by the Viennese and Parisian medical establishment, it repeatedly drew intense academic interest in the nineteenth century, particularly during the Romantic period (Baier 2020a, 18–19; 2020b, 43–48). The interpretational ambiguity of the *fluidum* and the phenomenon of trance induced through mesmeric séances significantly influenced (1) Romantic philosophy, medicine, and religious thought (c. 1790–1820); (2) the development of hypnotherapy and psychotherapy; (3) the evolution of nineteenth-century new religious movements encompassing spiritualism, New Thought, and Theosophy; as well as (4) research in parapsychology.¹⁴

Mesmer’s physicalist framework proved too rigid for fully explaining the idea of *fluidum*, which from the outset had a salient psychological aspect and was thought of as responsive to the mindset of the

¹⁴ For comprehensive reception histories of mesmerism, see Ellenberger 1970; Crabtree 1993; Winter 1998; Baier 2009; 2015; 2020; Brand 2014.

mesmerist. Bertrand Méheust distinguished three major branches of animal magnetism that emerged in France by the mid-1780s (Méheust 1999; cf. Société de l'Harmonie d'Ostende 1786):

- (1) The mesmerists (*mesméristes*) followed Mesmer in explaining the physiological and psychological changes generated by magnetization as a result of the *fluidum*'s circulation. This position was decidedly physicalistic.
- (2) A branch headed by the theosopher Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin (1743–1803), termed by Méheust as “spiritualists” (*spiritualistes*), dismissed the agency of a *fluidum* and interpreted animal magnetism as the direct influence of the magnetiser's will and prayer. In exceptionally gifted subjects so-called somnambulic states were induced for the purpose of contacting celestial entities.
- (3) The psychofluidists (*psychofluidistes*) that were inspired by the teachings of Armand Marie Jacques de Chastenet de Puységur (1751–1825), who coined the term somnambulism (*somnambulisme*) to describe the sleep-like state induced by mesmeric techniques. Puységur acknowledged the *fluidum* but regarded it the substrate of the will, which he understood to be the primary principle behind the subtle influences on magnetized subjects.

This latter line of interpretation diverged from a purely physicalist framework without giving up the concept of a physical substrate. Puységur's school was crucial in the development of new forms of ‘religious psychology’ including New Thought (see section 6). Adam Crabtree went a step further and suggested that Mesmer's work was a prelude to what could be termed “the psychological turn in the West” that opened the path toward psychiatry, hypnosis, and depth psychology (Crabtree 2019; cf. 1993).

Theories of ‘energy’ were one of several attempts to revise the concept of *fluidum*. French mesmerists of the Romantic period still spoke of “energy” (*énergie*) not as a physical agent but as a mental force akin to “confidence” (*confiance*) and the power of “will” (*volonté*) (e.g., Deleuze 1819: 21–22, 55; Dupotet de Sennevoy 1838, 218, 220). The practitioner's skill in using his mental energies was seen as the key to the success of a magnetic treatment. In the medical literature of the anglosphere before 1800, energy had already adopted a physiological connotation in the form of ‘nervous energy.’ In 1845, the majority of physiological textbooks in Germany, France, and England still assumed the existence of a “nerve principle” (*Nervenprinzip*), “nervous force” (*Nervenkraft*) or “energy” (*Energie*) that provided a material explanation for the nervous system's organic functions (Heidler 1845, 1).

Along these lines, the English poet and mesmerist Chauncy Hare Townshend (1798–1868) crafted a monumental apology for animal magnetism titled *Facts in Mesmerism or Animal Magnetism, with Reasons for a Dispassionate Inquiry into it* (1840). Seeking to render mesmeric phenomena consistent with reason, Townshend thought of the mesmeric influence as a “subtle, elastic, and ethereal medium” that constitutes the power of human vitality known as “nervous energy” (Townshend 1840, 504–5). Suggesting a synthesis of physiology and metaphysics, Townshend postulated that this subtle agent could bridge the “palpable hiatus” between “mind and matter,” “the visible and the invisible,” and “the

subtle and the gross” (505). He thought the agent to be “within the domain of physics” (408) and that it could excite the nerves to vibrate in unison “just as tenced strings have a capacity to vibrate in correspondence with the air” (463). Townshend regarded this “vibratory medium” to be a necessary hypothesis to explain the “nearly simultaneous and correspondent action of the nervous systems” of a mesmerizer and patient when in the state of “rapport” (464; cf. Anonymous 1845, 219).

Rivalling theories strove to reestablish animal magnetism even firmer on (iatro-)physical ground. An early attempt to substitute the cosmic *fluidum* itself with energy as a purely physical term was put forth by the British physician William Newnham (1790–1865) in his book *Human Magnetism: Its Claims to Dispassionate Inquiry* (1845)—the title clearly echoing Townshend’s apology. Drawing on the ideas of Casimir Chardels (1777–1847), a psycho-fluidist of Puységur’s school, and the British physicist Robert Hunt (1807–1887), Newnham postulated that the mesmeric healing agent constituted the “principle of life” emanating from the sun.¹⁵ He identified this vital principle with “energia,” an “imponderable element” coined by Hunt (Newnham 1845, 193–95; cf. Zoehrer 2024). Newnham quoted the definition of “energia” directly from Hunt’s *Researches on Light* (1844):

Energia, that power which effects all the changes, whether chemical or molecular, which are constantly in progress; it is that agent which is for ever quickening all the elements of growth, and maintaining the conditions of a healthful vitality [...]. (Hunt 1844, 270; emphasis in the original)

It does not appear that Newnham’s identification of the magnetic *fluidum* with “energia” found much resonance among scientists, physicians, or other practitioners. A probable reason was that Newnham himself retracted the term in a post scriptum where he pointed out that the British Association for the Advancement of Science recommended to abandon Hunt’s notion of “energia.” The term was at the time limited to describing the “principle of a substantial element” (including light), that is, the purely physical realm. To denote the principle of chemical and biological processes another term, i.e., “actinism,” was therefore suggested (Newnham 1845, 213). In any case, to Newnham it was “obvious that the change of *term* will exert no influence upon” his basic physical theory (ibid.; emphasis in the original).

Within the narrow context of mesmeric theories, the above case studies already revealed multilayered meanings connected to the term energy in the first half of the nineteenth century. Energy continued its semantic career through the texts of the New Thought movement, where its physical and psychological dimensions were expanded to include divine powers. However, two other notions should be discussed

¹⁵ Already the late Mesmer—probably under the influence of Romantic thought—considered the sun to be the central source of movement, i.e., the cosmic *fluidum*, that “ensouls and enlivens” (*beseelt und belebt*) the solar system (Wolfart 1814, 291). Identifying the animating force of the sun with the work of God, he suggested the introduction of a solar cult at the center of a future folk religion (ibid., 290–295; cf. Barkhoff 1995, 203).

beforehand: *Od* and ether. These were employed to revive the idea of a mesmeric agent and would crucially shape occult views of energy.

4. Reichenbach's *Od*

A universal, imponderable agent of a slightly different kind that prefigured the notion of subtle energy was postulated by the German industrialist and chemist Karl Ludwig Freiherr von Reichenbach (1788–1869). From 1841 and until his death, Reichenbach asserted the existence of a fundamental force-principle (*Dynamid*) he christened *Od* (derived from Odin, the Norse god), which supposedly combined the qualities of electricity, magnetism, heat, and vital force. He claimed that *Od* emanated from both physical objects and biological organisms, but that its mysterious rays were immeasurable by instruments. They were perceived only by ‘sensitives,’ the majority of whom happened to be women and children. Notably, Reichenbach counted himself among those who were blind to the Odic radiations (Noakes 2019, 34–35).

In his two-volume tome *Physikalisch-physiologische Untersuchungen* (1849), Reichenbach referred to *Od* as a “world force” (*Weltkraft*), the source of all known physical and chemical phenomena as well as the force of life itself (*Lebenskraft*, also referred to as *Biod*) (von Reichenbach 1849, 120, 164). Although he was reserved toward animal magnetism, Reichenbach *de facto* rehashed Mesmer’s physicalist notion of *fluidum*, including its features of polarity, imponderability, and means for therapy. Thus, pouring old wine into new wineskins, he classified mesmerism as a subordinate “special application” (*spezielle Anwendung*) of the Odic force (von Reichenbach 1854, xxix). As a recognized natural scientist (*Naturforscher*), Reichenbach assumed the role of a detached and objective investigator, and developed a sophisticated series of tests with the aim of proving the existence of his postulated agent.

Nonetheless, the broad scientific disapproval of the *Od* theory was anything but subtle.¹⁶ Reichenbach’s teaching was alternately derided as delusion, heresy, fiction, and pseudoscience. James Braid (1795–1860), the Scottish surgeon and pioneer of hypnotism, viewed the effects described by Reichenbach’s “new force” as “due entirely to a mental influence” and “attributable to the power of the mind” on human physiology. (Braid 1846, 214, 216).¹⁷ A scathing polemic was meted out by the German physiologist

¹⁶ The scientific critique of Reichenbach presented here in staccato is more elaborately discussed in Erdbeer 2008.

¹⁷ In his article “The Power of the Mind over the Body” (1846) published for *The Medical Times* (in print between 1839 and 1851), Braid wrote: “I had not proceeded far [with perusing the *Abstract of Researches on Magnetism* (1846) by the Scottish chemist William Gregory (1803–1858)—an abridged version of von Reichenbach 1850, Gregory’s translation of von Reichenbach 1849], when my experience with hypnotic patients enabled me to perceive a source of fallacy, of which the Baron must either have been ignorant, or which he had entirely overlooked. From whatever cause this oversight had arisen, I felt confident that, however carefully and perseveringly he had prosecuted his experiments, and however well-calculated they had been for determining mere physical facts, still no reliance could be placed upon the accuracy of conclusions drawn from premises assumed as true, where especial care had not been taken to guard against the source of fallacy to which I refer—viz., the important influence of the *mental* part of the process, which is in active operation with patients during such experiments” (214).

and staunch critic of vitalism Emil du Bois-Reymond (1818–1896), a friend of the aforementioned Helmholtz. He described the doctrine on the *Od* as “magnetic wizardry” (*magnetischer Zuber*) and the “New Testament of Mesmerism” (*Neue Testament des Mesmerismus*) (du Bois-Reymond 1847 [1845], 522). In his inaugural address in Munich, the German chemist Justus von Liebig (1803–1873) explained “why the new *Od*-science will find no entry into the natural sciences.”¹⁸ Inducing “visual and perceptual apparitions in neurasthenic ill persons” could provide no evidence for the “existence of a new natural force” (von Liebig 1852, 18–19).¹⁹ At the outset of his rise as a science popularizer and leading spokesman of scientific naturalism in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Büchner conducted his own series of experiments in order to test Reichenbach’s hypothesis because he could not believe “that anybody could invent such a web of lies” (Büchner 1854, 11).²⁰

A more sophisticated refutation of Reichenbach’s *Od* was put forth by Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–1887), a physicist and pioneer of the neurophysiological measurement of sensation. In a tragicomical autobiographical narration titled *Erinnerungen an die letzten Tage der Odlehre und ihres Urhebers* (Memories of the Last Days of the *Od* Doctrine and its Originator; 1876), Fechner offered his critique of what he admitted to think to be “a kind of subjective phantasmagory.”²¹ The historian of science Robert M. Erdbeer pointed out that in contrast to many of the aforementioned opponents, Fechner’s scientific satire did not dismiss Reichenbach from a materialistic point of view but sought to establish clear boundaries around what constitutes exact science, and demarcate it from now disreputed *Naturphilosophie*.²²

Relentless criticism notwithstanding, Reichenbach must be credited as the last experimental scientist who seriously attempted to explain the full range of physical, biological, and psychic phenomena by means of a *single* agent (Erdbeer 2008, 143). His case is particularly instructive as it illustrates the emergence of a fracture in the style of thought (*Denkstilwechsel*) that led to the bifurcation of the scientific and occult discursive cultures in the mid-nineteenth century (ibid., 146). Despite the clear refutation of the Odic force as a *qualitas occulta* by the experimental science of his day, his work

¹⁸ “warum die neue Odwissenschaft keinen Eingang in das Gebiet der Naturforschung gefunden.”

¹⁹ “Kein Verständiger kann glauben, daß durch Gesichts- und Gefühlserscheinungen, welche in nervenschwachen Personen hervorgerufen werden, die Existenz einer neuen Naturkraft begründet werden könne.”

²⁰ “Ich konnte mir nicht denken, daß jemand ein solches Lügengebäude erfinden könne.”

²¹ “von dem ich in der Tat gestehe, daß ich es für eine Art subjectiver Phantasmagorie halte.”

²² While Fechner stood on the firm ground of experimental research and mathematical theory-building, he was a leading advocate of a panpsychist worldview. A central aspect of his thought was the idea that the whole universe was permeated by soul and that the highest purpose and essence of nature was life itself. This motive clearly bears the influence of the *Naturphilosophie* of Friedrich Schelling (1775–1854) and Lorenz Oken (1779–1851), who by the mid-nineteenth century had largely fallen into disrepute among the scientific establishment (Windelband 1910). Thus, like Reichenbach, Fechner was on the defensive against the materialistic attack on the belief in the soul, and pursued a realignment of *Naturphilosophie* while recognizing the advancements of exact science (Erdbeer 2008, 159). With his book *Zend-Avesta* (1851), Fechner envisaged his own meta-scientific form of a devotional text that aimed to defend the idea that “all of nature is living and divinely ensouled” (*die ganze Natur lebendig und göttlich beseelt sei*; Fechner 1851, iii). His approach was to combine “refined religious views” (*geläuterten religiösen Ansichten*) with the “requirements of an exact science” (*Forderungen einer exacten Naturwissenschaft*), while keeping the two distinct (ibid.).

vigorously stimulated the transatlantic discourses on mesmerism, spiritualism, and psychical research during the latter half of the nineteenth century (Nahm 2012, 322). European and American occult authors readily welcomed Reichenbach's ideas as an authoritative scientific reference point that justified their belief in subtle powers (e.g., Hittell 1860; Sawicki 2017, 236–48). Interpretations of the material property of the *Od* ranged from an ephemeral ray, glow, or current to a form of subtle matter, sometimes identified with the 'ectoplasm' postulated by spiritualists (O'Byrne 1926, 1).

A notable systematic theory of *Od* was formulated by the German philosopher and occultist Carl du Prel (1839–1899).²³ In his final work *Die Magie als Naturwissenschaft* (1899),²⁴ du Prel dismissed both monistic materialism and Cartesian dualism, and argued that *Od* could explain the mind-body-interaction. Reinforcing Reichenbach's vitalism and in line with Müller's distinction between vital and psychic principles, he stated that the *Od* constituted the vital substrate (*Lebenskraft*)—an agent that governs both subconscious self-organisation of the body and conscious mental activity.²⁵ Du Prel imagined *Od* to be the subtle medium underlying magnetic rapport, somnambulism, clairvoyance, dream oracles, and other psychical phenomena (du Prel 1899b, 1–25), including apparitions of ghosts (du Prel 1916). His elaborate project amounted to a list-ditch attempt to defend the idea that all physical, vital, and psychological phenomena could be accounted for by a unifying agent. Whereas du Prel's efforts to establish the credibility of the *Od* in academic circles were mostly unsuccessful, his thought on the unconscious, dreams, and the afterlife attracted considerable interest among writers, artists, and psychologists.²⁶

In addition to serving as the cornerstone of grand occult narratives, the *Od* also provided a conceptual framework for practical applications. Under the impact of Reichenbach's theory and in parallel to the discoveries of electromagnetism, X-rays, and radioactivity, occult theories moved from 'magnetic' or 'fluidal' imageries toward those of radiation (Haupt 2005, 173). By the dawn of the twentieth century, the discourse surrounding the rays of *Od* had merged with alternative medicine. A case in point was the introduction of a technical device named "*Od-ray apparatus*" (*Odstrahl-Apparat*), invented by the Swiss homeopath and naturopath Hermann Ulrich Ottinger (1879–1924). In external appearance and function, Ottinger's machine was comparable to other contemporaneous medical devices for phototherapy or

²³ Due to the Hodgson Report, which had investigated fraud allegations against Blavatsky, Du Prel left the Theosophical Society in February 1886 after only one and a half years. In the Fall of the same year, he founded the Psychologische Gesellschaft with the Theosophist and publisher Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden (1846–1916) in Munich, following the model of British Society for Psychical Research (est. 1882).

²⁴ Literal translation: The Magic as Science. The work was published in two volumes titled *Die magische Physik* (The Magical Physics) and *Die magische Psychologie* (The Magical Psychology).

²⁵ For du Prel's influence on *prāṇa*-based therapeutic concepts see Zoehrer 2020; 2021.

²⁶ Du Prel's work was demonstrably noted *inter alia* by the avant-garde author and psychiatrist Oskar Panizza (1853–1921), the poet Hanns von Gumpenberg (1866–1928), the poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), and the novelist and essayist Thomas Mann (1875–1955) (Pytlik 2005, 143–145). Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) regarded du Prel as a "spirited mystic" (*geistreicher Mystiker*) and cited him approvingly on several issues, for example, the difference between the waking consciousness and the soul, the role of dreams in opening the "gate to metaphysics" (*Pforte zur Metaphysik*), and the vital importance of the unconscious for creative activity (Freud 1914, 48, 384, 474; cf. Pytlik 2005, 146–149; Josephson-Storm 2017, 191).

electrotherapeutics and similarly described in technical language (Bigalke 2019, 23–24). To market his odic-magnetic machine more effectively, Ottinger—who practiced in Riethüsli, a neighborhood in St. Gallen—added the title ‘Yogi’ to his name in advertizing brochures. He did so not to underscore his mastery of a South Asian spiritual practice but rather to endow his therapy with the flair of the exotic and mysterious (Klatt 2009, 13 n. 13).²⁷ Ottinger had befriended Franz Hartmann (1838–1912), a physician, close associate of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), and prolific key figure of German and international Theosophy with a keen interest in occult healing approaches. During the winter of 1911/12, in the final months of his life, Hartmann applied Ottinger’s invention for treating his ailments. Although he reported a reinvigorating effect on his body, the *Od* emitter did not prevent the inevitable (Priem 1912, 50).²⁸

Of more lasting influence than Ottinger’s therapy would be the ‘iatro-physical conception’ of the American physician Albert Abrams (1863–1924). Abrams’ medical theory formed a central reference point for the development of machines that prefigured both ‘energy medicine’ (the use of electromagnetic fields for diagnosis and cures; cf. Oschman 2000), and ‘radionics’ (a device-based form of distant or psychic healing; cf. Tansley 1972). Abrams was convinced that “[d]isocculting the occult” was achievable if odic sensations, spiritualist materializations, and psychometry (the ability to diagnose disease via touch) were explained in terms of the unifying principle of “energy” (Abrams 1916, 9–11, 255–56). However, among early-twentieth century occultists, more in vogue than energy was the concept of ether.

5. Occult Ether Theories

Next to the cosmic *fluidum* and Odic emanations, a third important precursor to the notion of subtle energies were ether theories. The idea of a superfine, invisible substrate that permeates the universe enticed the imagination of occult thinkers, who built on both ancient and modern ether theories.²⁹ In the second half of the nineteenth century, the notion of ether received increased attention and credibility from the side of Victorian physicists. It should be stressed that ether physics proved to be a highly fruitful scientific hypothesis, ultimately leading in 1873 to the foundation of classical electrodynamics by the Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell (1831–1879) (Maxwell 1873; cf. Asprem 2011, 132).

The hypothesis of a subtle substrate that transmits light and other electrodynamic waves was taken up by trendsetting occult authors. A pivotal example of occult physicalism as a literary genre with a

²⁷ For a conspicuously similar case of a ‘Yogi’ inventor selling a subtle agent-based apparatus for therapeutic purposes, see Léo Bernard’s chapter in this volume.

²⁸ I thank Karl Baier for providing this helpful reference on Hartmann’s biography.

²⁹ Descartes’ interpretation of the ether had demonstrably influenced Mesmer’s conception of *fluidum* (Feldt 1985, 34). In contrast, Reichenbach only made scant references to ether (also spelled ‘aether’). He left open the question whether the emanations of the *Od* were of substantial or non-substantial quality (von Reichenbach 1854, 228, 340; 1849, 19), reflecting the already contested status of ether theories during his time.

predilection for ether theories is provided by the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, Madame Blavatsky. In her first major work *Isis Unveiled* (1877), Blavatsky crafted a loose synthesis of Mesmer's *fluidum*, Reichenbach's *Od*, and the concept of ether or 'Astral Light' in proposing a cosmic, magical agent (Blavatsky 1877, 125–62; cf. Baier 2009, 280). One of the major sources for *Isis Unveiled* was the English translation of *A History of Magic* (1854). Written by the Tyrolean physician Joseph Ennemoser (1787–1854), the book argued that Mesmer's teachings contained the scientific key to explaining magic and related phenomena, including alchemy, witchcraft, astrology, precognition, visionary states of mind, and religious ecstasy (Baier 2009, 258–59). Ennemoser's attempt to provide a theoretical framework that could lend plausibility to magical practices took the same line as Mesmer and other mesmerists who sought to explain the miraculous in scientific terms and trace them to natural causes. However, his systematic and historical overview and its translation into English reached an international audience. He thus paved the way for the Theosophist conception of occultism as a scientific program (ibid., 260).

A second crucial influence on *Isis Unveiled* was the French author Alphonse Louis Constant (1810–1875), better known by his pen name Éliphas Lévi. This pioneering figure of nineteenth-century occultism unleashed a renaissance of magic in France that would spread to the rest of Europe and the United States.³⁰ Lévi had adopted the widespread interpretation of magic as an application of the all-connecting mesmeric *fluidum*, which he also identified with Reichenbach's *Od* but preferred to call "astral light" (*lumière astrale*) (Lévi 1860, 19). As Julian Strube has argued, Lévi most likely discovered the notion of *lumière astrale* in the writings of Jean Du Potet de Sennevoy (1796–1881), the most vocal representative of the French *magnétistes spiritualistes*, to whom he explicitly referred (Strube 2016a, 65). Lévi was convinced that the astral light functioned as a *médiateur plastique* and was the power not only behind animal magnetism but the ultimate cause of magical operations. With Du Potet he agreed that this *agent magique* had been known to and employed by the Chaldean mages, the Gnostics, the alchemists, and the Kabbalists (ibid.). Having both natural and divine properties, the astral light functions as a universal medium that communicates between the corporeal and the spiritual spheres—a marked deviation from Mesmer's physicalist cosmology. While the astral light itself is "blind" (*aveugle*), it may be directed by "spirits of energy and action" (*les esprits d'énergie et d'action*) (Lévi 1860, 19) as well as the power of "will" (*volonté*) (Lévi 1856, 185).³¹ The key to controlling the astral light was thus the refinement of the will, a notion that Lévi adopted from the Puységur school—despite sharply distinguishing his own approach from somnambulism (Strube 2016a, 65–66).³²

³⁰ For a comprehensive study of the entanglements between French occultism, Catholicism, and socialism in Lévi's work and network, see Strube 2016b.

³¹ For example: "In the case of the clairvoyant, [the astral light] is subordinate to the intelligence, subject to the imagination and dependent on the will" (Lévi 1856, 185; my translation).

³² Lévi suggested that astral light turns into human light at the moment of conception, thus forming the seed for the astral body. The latter reflects the character of a person and mediates between the soul and the material body. Despite this intermediary function, the agency of astral light is not restricted to subtle bodies but is also transmitted

Lévi thought of the astral light in abstract terms as a “system of vibrations” (*système des vibrations*; 1856, 184) and retained metaphors of subtle matter throughout his work. However, in contrast to Ennemoser, he was more reluctant regarding the explanatory power of animal magnetism and the interpretation of magic by recourse to natural forces. His critical stance again drew major inspiration from Du Potet, who did not think of animal magnetism as an enlightened science that supersedes magic but rather as a still imperfect attempt to revive the teachings of the ancient adepts. Accordingly, he applied signs and symbols from old works on magic, wizardry, and the kabbalah in his practical experiments, which he believed to be derived from a universal language known to the priests and magicians of primeval times (Strube 2016b, 461–62; cf. Baier 2009, 269–70).

Ennemoser and Du Potet/Lévi thus represent two attitudes toward science that would prefigure downstream positions of occult authors. The first view was optimistic that the progress of science could shed light on ancient mysteries, and rationalized the belief in the supernatural by appealing to contemporaneous scientific frameworks. The second held ancient knowledge to be superior to science in its current state. *Isis Unveiled* mediated between both points of view. On the one hand, Blavatsky named luminaries of physics and technology such as Michael Faraday (1791–1867), Thomas A. Edison (1847–1931), Alexander G. Bell (1847–1922), William Crookes (1832–1919), and John Tyndall (1820–1893) as witnesses for the ‘etheric’ effects seen in contemporary discoveries and inventions. With the advances in understanding magnetism and electricity, and the invention of telegraphy and telephony, a full scientific explanation of a universal magical agent seemed more feasible than ever. On the other hand, Blavatsky more emphatically argued in line with Du Potet and Lévi that science was still a long way from fully grasping the ether as the force that is at the root of both physical phenomena and occult powers (Asprem 2011, 143). Her “master-key” would unlock those powers by unveiling the knowledge encrypted in the “science” of the ancient mysteries (Blavatsky 1877, title).

‘Energy’ was a secondary term in Blavatsky’s oeuvre. Her occult quest in *Isis Unveiled* revolved around the mesmeric *fluidum*, Reichenbach’s *Od*, and the “nature of the vital force, and how to command it” (Blavatsky 1877, 475). She employed fluidal and aerial metaphors interchangeably. *Od* could thus encompass “vital fluid” as well as the “breath of God” (ibid., 145–46; Blavatsky 1888, 76). Diving deeper, in *The Secret Doctrine* she suggested a causal reality behind all life and its biological and spiritual evolution that she called “the one Universal Life” (Blavatsky 1888, 634). This divine “Source of Life” is identified with “the Breath of the absoluteness,” the god Viṣṇu, and the “Solar active energy” from which “seven rays” emanate (290, 592). The latter signified seven gods, the creative forces of nature, and—more concretely—the known physical phenomenon (“light, heat, electricity, terrestrial magnetism, astral radiation, motion”) plus consciousness (“Intelligence”) (562; emphasis in the original).

through the nerves and concentrated in bodily centres (Baier 2009, 269). For the relationship between occult conceptions of ether and Lévi’s highly influential theory of subtle bodies, see Asprem 2011, 150–53.

Blavatsky associated (and practically identified) the “one life”³³ with a fundamental occult force that she named “Fohat,” the objectified manifestation of the divine and absolute “Universal Mind” (Blavatsky 1888, 110; emphasis in the original). On the earthly plane, Fohat’s influence is generated by the will of the mesmerist. On the cosmic plane, it is the “creative Logos” and formative power behind the planetary system and living organisms (ibid., 110–11). Fohat’s properties are explicitly energetic: it is described as “the energising and guiding intelligence in the Universal Electric or Vital Fluid” (ibid., 493), “the Solar Energy” and the “personified electric vital power, the transcendental binding Unity of all Cosmic Energies” (ibid., 111). By the late 1880s, imaginations of a psycho-physical agent of divine origin that are found scattered throughout Blavatsky’s work had already been a central theme in the blossoming New Thought movement (discussed in the next section).

Theosophical publications on the ether outlasted the climax of the scientific discourse on this hypothesis. Although the Michelson-Morley experiment (1887) and Albert Einstein’s (1879–1955) special theory of relativity (1905) ultimately rendered the ether redundant, a few high-ranking physicists continued to promote the idea. Perhaps most influential in this regard was the English physicist, spiritualist, and prolific writer Sir Oliver Joseph Lodge (1851–1940) (Bowler 2001, 89–101). From the 1880s until the early 1930s, Lodge developed a complex theory of ether as “the living garment of God” that combined physical, philosophical, and theological elements (Asprey 2011, 141–42; cf. Raia 2007).³⁴ His writings provided ideological fuel to early twentieth-century Theosophists who held on to “their old argument that modern science was catching up with, and helping to support, occult wisdom” (Noakes 2019, 311).³⁵

6. New Thought and the Vibrations of Mental Force

New Thought was a vigorous religious-therapeutic movement that first developed in New England during the 1860s and spread to the rest of North America between 1885 and 1895. Its key tenet was the firm belief that “faith is a force” (Horowitz 2014, 30). New Thought authors developed a plethora of practices around the idea that the “mind possesses an actual ethereal power” over the body and physical reality (ibid., 101). The “religion of healthy-mindedness” (James 1902, 78) has been counted as belonging to ‘American metaphysical religion’—a broader complex of ideological currents that additionally includes Transcendentalism, mesmerism, spiritism, and Theosophy, with offshoots extending far into the twentieth-century New Age movement.

³³ A likely influence on Blavatsky’s notion of “one life” was Swedenborg’s identical term that appeared in *Arcana Coelestia* (2009 [1752]) (e.g., n. 3001, n. 3484). The notion was taken up by other authors at the intersection of New Thought and occultism. For instance, see Evans 1884, 24; Ramacharaka 1906, 206.

³⁴ Lodge acted as the president of the Society for Psychical Research from 1901 to 1903 and again in 1932, which underscores his commitment to the field of paranormal research (Tymn 2015).

³⁵ For Theosophical references to Lodge, see, e.g., the revised edition of *Occult Chemistry* (1919; first published in 1908) by Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater; *Rational Mysticism* (1924) by William Kingsland (1855–1936); and *Primer of Occult Physics* (1927) by William Coode-Adams (1895–1961).

Catherine L. Albanese identified ‘movement and energy’ as one of four central themes characterizing metaphysical religion.³⁶ In the metaphysical vision of energy, “the practical imagination joins forces with will” in order to change the fabric of reality, bring about healing, and overcome obstacles on the path to personal success (2007, 15). This characterization appears filtered through the lens of New Age rhetoric, where ‘energies’ are indeed ubiquitous. However, in the context of New Thought in the decades around 1900, energy was only one among several physical terms used to describe the connection between the mind and outer reality.

The specific combination of physicalism and psychologization that is so prevalent in New Thought has its roots in American mesmerism. In contrast to the tendency of psychological or spiritualistic interpretations in Europe, American mesmerists preferred a scientific basis for their practice and refused subjectivizing explanations (Fuller 1986, 38; cf. Noakes 2019, 29). In reaction to the rise of science, scientism was an integral part of the New Thought movement from its inception: “The modern faith in science and utility was felt in the realm of the spirit, too” (Horowitz 2014, 114–15).³⁷ Initially sparked by the magnetic healer Phineas Quimby (1802–1866), protagonists of New Thought occasionally employed the notion of energy without making it central to their healing theories. A more widely used physical term among New Thought acolytes was ‘vibration.’

Olav Hammer (2001, 270) suggested that the New Age theme of ‘vibration’ echoed the work of the British-American author Alice Bailey. However, earlier occult sources on the power of vibration can be traced. As mentioned above, Lévi already spoke of the astral light in terms of vibrations. Five decades later, Annie Besant (1847–1933) and her co-Theosophist Charles W. Leadbeater (1847–1934) suggested in *Thought Forms* (1905) that thoughts produce “a radiating vibration.” This vibration would affect the various levels of “mental matter” but weaken “in proportion to the distance from their source” (21–23).³⁸ Their book set out to explain the idea that ‘thoughts are things,’ a tagline that was coined by the American journalist and New Thought popularizer Prentice Mulford (1834–1891).

‘Vibration’ had been a key term in the writings of the first theorist of New Thought, a New England-based Methodist minister-turned-Swedenborgian by the name of Warren Felt Evans (1817–1889). In

³⁶ The other three being (1) the preoccupation with the mind’s powers, (2) the correspondence principle, and (3) salvation-as-healing.

³⁷ Mitch Horowitz concisely described how scientism perfused New Thought: “Among New-Thoughters, the language for this project [i.e., a modern, rational program for psychological health] had long been in place. ‘We must deal scientifically with our faults,’ Emma Curtis Hopkins [1849–1925] had written. Phineas Quimby had foretold a ‘science of health and happiness.’ Poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox [1850–1919] wrote of ‘The Science of Right Thinking’ and Wallace D. Wattles [1860–1911] of ‘The Science of Being Great’” (Horowitz 2014, 115).

³⁸ The introduction of *Thought Forms* offers a perfect example of how occult physicalism uses vague references to both proven and disproven notions of a physical agency in order to brand clairvoyance, telepathy, and telekinesis as “physical phenomena” (Besant and Leadbeater 1905, 12): “Ether is now comfortably settled in the scientific kingdom, becoming almost more than a hypothesis. Mesmerism, under its new name of hypnotism, is no longer an outcast. Reichenbach’s experiments are still looked at askance, but are not wholly condemned. Rontgen’s [sic] rays have rearranged some of the older ideas of matter, while radium has revolutionised them, and is leading science beyond the borderland of ether into the astral world. The boundaries between animate and inanimate matter are broken down” (ibid., 11).

The Mental Cure (1869) Evans wrote that mental force is transmitted through the “vibrations” of an all-pervading “semi-spiritual essence,” which is “far more refined, elastic, and subtle, than the ether” or Reichenbach’s “odic force” (271, 251). He thought of this essence as the agent that is active between two minds in mesmeric and hypnotic rapport, and that it allows the mind to act upon matter (272).

In *Divine Law of Cure* (1884), Evans championed a monistic worldview in which mind and matter form “one substance under two forms of manifestation” (174). Regardless of his allusions to Newton and other eminent figures of modern science in defending his theory of vibration, Evans ultimately argued in terms of ancient metaphysics and identified the subtle essence as the Platonic “*animus mundi*, the soul of the universe” (206, 356). Moreover, Evans was a strong believer in German idealism and the radical idealism of the Irish philosopher Bishop George Berkeley (1685–1753) (9, 154). Citing Berkeley that “there is not any other substance than spirit,” Evans suggested a continuum from matter to mind:

If, as modern science affirms, all the properties of matter are forms of force, and we go one step further, as we inevitably must, and show that all force is spiritual, and all causation mental, then matter itself becomes only the manifestation of spirit, and mind the only real substance. (Evans 1884, 146–47)

Hovering between science talk and religious thought would remain a hallmark in Evans’ system. Evans mentioned ‘subtle energy’ in passing in *The Primitive Mind-cure* (1885), his penultimate book, when hailing the power of thought as “the primal force and most subtle energy in the universe” (13). Pure thought is energy, spirit, and the “first emanation from God” (14). Following Hegel, Evans thought that spirit would precede all action—both divine and human—and in contrast to matter was characterized by “freedom and spontaneity” (ibid.).

To further explicate his mind-over-matter theory, Evans provided a similar interpretation of ‘nervous energy.’ Arguing on the basis of a passage in the second volume of Johannes Müller’s *Elements of Physiology* (the English translation of Müller’s above-mentioned compendium), which discusses the effects of ideas (e.g., the thought of food) on bodily secretions (e.g., saliva), Evans proposed a form of cosmic physiology. Müller explained that a thought related to a secreting organ “causes a stream of nervous energy to be directed towards” the respective gland (Müller 1842, 1398).³⁹ The effect of secretion would be more marked if the thought was accompanied by passion or emotion. Evans extrapolated Müller’s physiological account into an eclectic cosmo-theology that combined philosophical idealism, the Gospels, American Transcendentalism, and Blavatskian Theosophy. The ‘nervous energy’ only exemplified a more general principle that Evans preferred

³⁹ The German original reads “stream of the nerve-principle” (*Strom des Nervenprinzips*) (Müller 1840, 568) instead of “nervous energy.”

to call the universal, divine life-principle in nature, the *akasa* (pronounced *ahasa*) of the Hindu metaphysics, an all-pervading, omnipresent, vivific principle of life and motion identical in its higher aspects with the Holy Spirit of the Gospels. An act of faith determines a current, so to speak, of this inconceivably subtle life-force toward the result aimed at and desired. Hence through faith, which is but a mode of thought in union with feeling, a disease is curable that otherwise would be incurable. (Evans 1885, 68–69; emphasis in the original)

This description prefigures twentieth-century discourses of subtle energies on three counts. The first is the manner of arguing for a ‘subtle life-force’ by means of an amalgam of scientific and orientalist notions, although ‘force’ will give way to ‘energy’ and references to *ākāśa* (literally: ether, space) will be replaced by *prāṇa* (see next chapter). Second, it anticipates the association of energy and glands, an idea that was picked up by early twentieth-century esoteric authors and integrated into more elaborate *cakra* systems (Leland 2016, 226–36). Third, it departs from the brain-body system to envision a universal, quasi-divine vital principle that mediates between the ontological levels of teleology (or mind) and matter. This rehabilitation of the vital principle (albeit outside the realm of scientific discourse) effectively reversed Helmholtz et al.’s dismissal of the vague notion of a life force and preference for exact description.⁴⁰

According to Evans, the true adept supposedly holds the key to the universal life-principle and thereby becomes a master of “magic,” “the science of sciences” (Evans 1885, 141). Among the applications enabled by knowledge of the life principle were “the relief of pain and the cure of disease” (140), ways to obtain longevity (147), “psychological telegraphy” (199), and the attainment of salvation, or “the true spiritual life” (215). With recourse to Blavatsky, Evans wrote that with every inhalation humans imbibed the universal life-principle into their bodies, thus suggesting once more an influx of subtle *matter*, while simultaneously insinuating that the potential of the vital agent could only be activated through “*will* and *spirit*” (137; emphasis in the original).

Evans was a theoretician first and foremost and provided only few practical guidelines and exercises, mostly in the form of prayers or affirmations. A more detailed set of practices related to an occult subtle agent would be developed by the exceptionally prolific author William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932).⁴¹ Atkinson substantially drew from the ideological ocean of mesmerism, science, and the occult that stretched out between Theosophy and New Thought (Albanese 2007, 438). He extended the Theosophical disdain for control of trance mediums by spirits to the battle against the control of an undisciplined and obstructive inner dialogue over the mind (*ibid.*). Espousing mental magic—the command of the conscious over the subconscious mind in order to realize personal goals—Atkinson

⁴⁰ In Evans’ further discussion of the “occult properties” of the “universal life-principle” the overlap with Blavatsky’s cocktail of references is obvious: it ranges from Du Potet’s occult adaptations of mesmerism, Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s (1803–1873) fictional force of *Vril* to the “Shekinah” in Hebrew Scriptures, the “Holy Spirit” of the New Testament, and the “astral light of the Kabala” and the Rosicrucians (Evans 1885, 136ff.).

⁴¹ For an in-depth discussion on Atkinson’s decisive role in early modern yoga, see Kraler 2022.

taught lessons on how to attain mastery over ‘thought vibrations,’ which he described in terms borrowed from physics.

Atkinson’s book *Dynamic Thought: The Law of Vibrant Energy* (1906) openly opposed “the Materialistic school” and declared that a “New Science” of force and energy was on the rise, providing a “new platform” to philosophy (24–25). He references the state of the art of physics when explaining that “all forms of Energy”—e.g., heat, magnetism, electricity, light, and X-rays—are produced by the vibration of substantial particles (125, 154, 171). The idea of ether had already been declared obsolete in the physics of his day. Nonetheless, Atkinson introduced the notion by invoking its sternest defender, Lodge, who had defined ether as “a perfectly continuous, subtle, incompressible substance” that functions as the “one universal medium” of motion and energy (Lodge 1889, 339, quoted in Atkinson 1906, 102). After illuminating its paradoxical features, Atkinson identified the ether with an ultra-fine substance he termed “Mind” (172)—or more precisely, a “Life and Mind Principle” (155) inherent in matter. On this basis, he declared “Vital-Mental Action” to be the more fundamental principle than mechanical vibration. This action is supposedly the ultimate source of all energy and all inorganic and organic matter (156). Capital-m “Mind” would perform its work in the brain and nervous system by virtue of its “Finer Force,” producing thought, and from thought mental “Force and Energy” (212). Atkinson assertively claimed that his theory would explain mesmerism, suggestion, hypnotism, and telepathy (209). Taking it a step further into the occult, he suggested that the “currents of Fine Force coursing through his nervous system” produced “an ‘Aura’ or egg-shaped projection of Mind” in a person, and that emotions and states of mind would correspond to a spectrum of colors in the Aura, as reported by “Occultists” (220–22). Atkinson’s ‘thought-stuff’ thus rehashed Besant and Leadbeater’s aforementioned ‘thought forms,’ once again underscoring the blended discourse that was shared by New Thought and Theosophy.⁴²

In *The Kybalion* (1908), “one of the most important and influential occult texts written in America” (Deslippe 2011, 1), Atkinson—under the pseudonym “Three Initiates”—reiterated the idea of a psychophysical continuum, that encompassed mind, matter, and energy as modes of vibration:

Modern Science has proven that all that we call Matter and Energy are but “modes of vibratory motion,” and some of the more advanced scientists are rapidly moving toward the positions of the occultists who hold that the phenomena of Mind are likewise modes of vibration or motion. (Three Initiates 1908, 138)

Vibration, force, and energy were interchangeable key terms in the books that Atkinson wrote in the guise of his yogi-persona Ramacharaka between 1903 and 1909. “All is in vibration. From the tiniest

⁴² Atkinson’s book is essentially another elaborate commentary on Mulford’s motto that ‘thoughts are things.’ Mitch Horowitz argues that a likely source for Mulford’s phrase was a Swedenborgian description of the spiritual world, the dwelling place of the “inner man,” laid out in Evans’ book *Soul and Body* (1876, 83): “In that world thoughts are things, and ideas are the most real entities of the universe.” Mulford reinterpreted “thoughts are things” as a formula for attracting prosperity, thus turning around Swedenborg’s introspective view (Horowitz 2014, 83).

atom to the greatest sun, everything is in a state of vibration” (Ramacharaka 1903, 51), he wrote in *The Hindu-Yogi Science of Breath*. By tuning into the rhythm of his body and the universe via “rhythmic breathing,” the yogi absorbed “Prana,” that is, “the spirit of life” (17), “nerve force” (19), “vital force” (10), “vital energy” (56), and “Absolute Energy” (16). Control over “Prana” allows the yogi to strengthen his body and acquire desired physical and mental qualities, transmute sexual into “creative energy,” communicate by telepathy, project “Prana” to heal others, and attain enlightenment or the “state of Universal Consciousness” (50–73). But Atkinson was less an innovator than a skillful systematizer of already abounding ideas. A decade before him, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) had disseminated his theory of an identity between *prāṇa* and energy on the one hand and related yogic exercises on the other for the attainment of superhuman powers (Zoehrer 2020; 2021; cf. next chapter).

Steeped in the occult mindscape, Atkinson tended to heavily frame his theories in scientific language and appeals to yogic teachings. In contrast, more Christian-leaning authors of the New Thought genre produced less exuberant amalgams of terms, and directly identified energy with God. In this vein, the homeopathic physician and New Thought author Harriet Emilie Cady (1848–1941) depicted God in *Lessons in Truth* (1896) as “spirit, or the creative energy which is the cause of all visible things” (8). This energy again bore the qualities of “life and intelligence” (ibid.) and was the source of all physical things and living beings.⁴³ The idea of God-as-Energy foreshadowed later New Age theologies, where notions of ultimate reality alternated between a personal deity (or superconscious mind) and energy as the fundamental principle, source, or essence of the universe (cf. Hanegraaff 1998, 187; Wolf 2006, 1484).

“New spirituality in America meant energy spirituality, and the energies of mesmerists and ether vibrations were only preparation for what had transpired” (Albanese 2007, 514). The ‘good vibrations’ of New Thought physicalism reached a preliminary end point in holistic interpretations of quantum physics. In this variant of scientific metaphysics, subtle energy is associated with the powers of ‘consciousness’ and their supposed influence on subatomic wave functions, hence material reality.⁴⁴ Inspired by both Theosophy and New Thought, a major figure that bridged the occult and holistic discourses on ‘atom consciousness’ was the author Alice Bailey, whose esoteric cosmology represented the shift from ether to energy.

⁴³ The identity of God and energy was not a New Thought invention. For example, the forerunner of American spiritualism Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910) had described the universe in his channeled tome titled *The Principles of Nature* (1847) as the manifestation of the “active energies of the Positive, Divine Mind” that influence all creation toward spiritual perfection (Davis 1847, 148–49). The notion of divine influence (Latin: *influx*) undoubtedly bears the mark of Emanuel Swedenborg’s (1688–1772) teachings (see, e.g., Swedenborg 2009 [1752], 1962, 2333–34).

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Capra 2000 (1975), 140–41; McTaggart 2008 (2001); Horowitz 2014, 268–72; Laszlo et al. 2016; cf. Hammer 2001, 270–303.

5. From Ether to Energy

Speculations on the ether were an expression of a much larger Theosophical agenda. In an early mission statement of 1886—later entitled by its editor C. Jinarājadāsa “The Original Programme of the Theosophical Society”—Blavatsky defined four objectives for her organization: first, to establish a Universal Brotherhood; second, to safeguard the primacy of personal merit over race, creed, or class, third, to pursue the study of “the philosophies of the East;” and fourth,

[t]o oppose materialism and theological dogmatism in every possible way, by demonstrating the existence of *occult forces unknown to science*, in nature, and the presence of psychic and spiritual powers in man; trying, at the same time to enlarge the views of the Spiritualists by showing them that there are other, many other agencies at work in the production of phenomena besides the “Spirits” of the dead. (Blavatsky 1931 [1886], 562; emphasis added)

‘Occult forces’ were believed to provide a deeper explanation of spiritualism, thus holding out the promise of a scientific but non-materialistic theory that was broad enough to shed new light on mesmerism, hypnosis, and psychical phenomena.⁴⁵ Whereas the first-generation Theosophists insisted on proving the agency of a cosmic *fluidum*, Od, ether, and other physicalist cognates of “psychic and spiritual powers,” such notions had already been superseded by psychological explanations in the academic context (see, most poignantly, Braid 1846). Resisting the course of the scientific community, Theosophists held on to theories of ether long after they went out of fashion.

When ‘ether’ was gradually replaced by ‘energy’ to denote subtle powers in early twentieth-century occult texts, their ductus was still heavily colored by Blavatsky’s ideological reservoir. At the helm of this conceptual shift in occult physicalism was Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949; née La Trobe-Bateman). She was born in Manchester, England, as the daughter of a wealthy civil engineer and raised a Christian. After evangelical work among British soldiers in India and a difficult marriage, Bailey stranded on the West Coast of the United States. In 1917, she joined the Pacific Grove Lodge of the Theosophical Society in California and soon after the Esoteric School of Theosophy headed by Annie Besant. Five years later, she broke with the Theosophical Society and founded the Arcane School, a training institution that offered correspondence courses based on messages she claimed to have received from a Tibetan Master (Leland 2016, 213).

In *The Consciousness of the Atom* (1922), one of her first books, Bailey argued for a cosmic evolution of consciousness. Rudimentary consciousness, she claimed, exists at the level of the atom and is the driving force behind the development toward higher forms of being. While Bailey still presupposed ‘ether’ as a primordial, intangible substance on which all matter rests, her idea of the fundamental building blocks of the universe put a far stronger emphasis on ‘intelligence’ and ‘energy’ (Bailey 1922,

⁴⁵ That even traditional entheogenic healing ceremonies could be interpreted in terms of ‘subtle energies’ and their hidden, unspeakable qualities rather than ‘spirits’ is discussed by Wouter Hanegraaff in this volume. In contrast to physicalist models, Hanegraaff’s argument rests on the psychological study of altered states of consciousness.

19–24). In her view of the atom, physics converges with psychology. “If you take these different qualities of the atom—energy, intelligence, ability to select and reject, to attract and repulse, sensation, movement, and desire—you have something which is very much like the psychology of a human being, only within a more limited radius and of a more circumscribed degree. Have we not, therefore, really got back to what might be termed the ‘psyche of the atom’?” (23). This psycho-physical microscopic entity partakes in a macroscopic spiritual process as it forms the seed for the cosmic evolution toward “God consciousness,” which manifests “that great Life, that all-embracing, universal Mind, that vibrant centre of energy [...] Whom we call God, or Force, or the Logos, the Existence” (58, 33).

A central feature of Bailey’s writings was what Olav Hammer aptly called “terminological creolization” (2001, 270). Reminiscent of the style of *Isis Unveiled*, Bailey blended the languages of physics and religion. Following the footsteps of the Theosophists, she envisioned an integrative worldview that sought to overcome both scientific materialism and a naïve belief in supernatural interventions:

Where the orthodox Christian would say with reverence, God, the scientist, with equal reverence, would say, Energy; yet they would both mean the same. Where the idealistic teacher would speak of the ‘God within’ the human form, others with equal accuracy would speak of the ‘energising faculty’ of man, which drives him into activity of a physical, emotional, or mental nature. (Bailey 1922, 24)

Bailey thus lifted the notion of energy to the level of a divine entity that forms the root of material reality, psychology, and spirituality, claiming their ultimate synthesis. Because she is dealing with energies, the “true esotericist” is closer to a “scientist” rather than a “mystic,” explained Bailey in her posthumously published book *Education in the New Age* (1954, 59). Esotericism is thus not only concerned with penetrating into secret realms in order to obtain hidden knowledge. It surpasses ordinary science due to the awareness of the true source and full hierarchy of energies that structure physical reality. Initiates would be endowed with superior insight into “the energy of life, the energies of the soul, and the forces of the phenomenal world” and know how to master them (*ibid.*).

The Baileyan esotericist is engaged in co-creation, thus contributing to the spiritual evolution of the cosmos. She holds the key to shape the various levels of the external world because she is supposedly aware of the vitalizing essence behind all physical reality, that is, the “*one life*” from which “divine energy” flows into all things (Bailey 1954, 18, 65; emphasis in the original). The macrocosmic evolution of the divine is mirrored by the evolution of human consciousness through the physical body at the microcosmic level (Bailey 1922, 4). Aiding the evolution of humankind, the esoteric disciple is supposed to put her knowledge about the “nature, control and direction of energy” into the service of others (Bailey 1949, 127).

Having attributed a quasi-divine quality to energy, Bailey offered an application of her concept of energy in her posthumously published book *Esoteric Healing* (1953). Here, she laid out an early formulation of

the basic principles that would also form an integral part of leading schools of energy healing including Therapeutic Touch, Brennan Healing Science, Choa Kuk Sui's Pranic Healing, and post-1980 forms of Reiki that integrated the *cakras* into its healing ritual:⁴⁶ (1) everything is composed of energy, from the atoms of physical reality to the subtle bodies that structure the human self (Bailey 1953, 35–36); (2) physical and psychological functions correspond to a system of “seven major centres of force” located in the “etheric body” (45, 144–99);⁴⁷ (3) healing is achieved by restoring the unimpeded “flow” of energy, which the esoteric healer achieves by directing “stream of energy” to the center associated with a patient's disease (101, 205); (4) “energy ever follows thought and goes where the thought is focussed” (101). The healer is thus instructed to imagine the pouring out of energy and visualize the patient receiving it (104–105), serving as a “pure channel” (677).

Similar to the *fluidum*, the occult ether, and New Thought vibrations, Bailey's notion of energy was not inanimate but responsive to attention, thought, and intention. The energetic turn in her cosmology and anthropology effectively recast occult etherology and translated it into a program for training what could be termed ‘energy workers.’ Bailey thus functioned as a hinge joint between nineteenth-century occultism and contemporary energy healing (cf. Zoehrer 2025).

7. Discussion: Characteristic Aspects of Occult-Physicalist Agents

Above historical outline presented five major conceptions of an occult power that were framed in physicalist terms and seeded the notion of subtle energies. Based on this exposition, the following eight characteristic aspects may be distilled.

First, *universalism*. The various ideas of a subtle force-substrate share the assertion of an agency that operates on physical, biological, and mental levels. Extrapolating the key property of physical energy—the ability to convert into various forms—subtle agents are imagined as universal mediums of transformation. In contrast to mainline physics, their semantic spectrum stretches from the material to the impalpable (i.e., the mental, interpersonal, and divine). Belief in an ethereal medium works as a heuristic to conceptually bridge perceived gaps between bodily and spiritual dimensions of human experience. Furthermore, as the contributions in this volume will elaborate, subtle energies operate as a universal currency, bridging distinct domains. They enable connections such as the transmission of ideas from antiquity to modernity, syntheses of “Eastern” spirituality with “Western” science, the correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm, the transmutation of the sexual drive into mystical experience, and the amplification of bodily vitality into collective power.

⁴⁶ For a comparative analysis of the term ‘energy’ in Reiki and Therapeutic Touch, see Justin Stein's contribution in this volume.

⁴⁷ *Esoteric Healing* features the most elaborate exposition of Bailey's highly influential *cakra*-system (Leland 2016, 222).

Second, *claims of objectivity*. Presuming a quasi-physical nature allows the conception of occult powers as something objective and hence malleable. Reflecting the shifting state of the art in the field of physics, the imponderable *fluidum*, Odic emanations, etheric vibrations, and the wave function of subatomic physics subsequently added to the ideological matrix from which the notion of subtle energy emerged. Whereas the character of these concepts historically moved from intuition (*Anschauung*) to abstraction, they unite around the idea of an invisible influence that directly affects immanent, physical reality. A postulated fine-material substance reinforces the claim that a certain ritual or treatment is effective—be it for the purpose of healing, spiritual self-refinement, or contacting higher entities.⁴⁸ The notion allows practitioners to explain (or rather imagine) the ‘mechanics’ underlying the psychosomatic chain of body, subconscious mind, and consciousness.⁴⁹

Third, *implicit metaphors*. A widespread tendency among occult and holistic authors has been to take up qualitative, metaphorical descriptions of abstract physical concepts (e.g., magnetism, ether, energy, or quantum entanglements), and then move into speculative realms where such descriptions are literally identified with a universal life principle or extrapolated to denote mystical states (Hammer 2001, 239, 269; cf. Asprem 2011, 133). Of particular influence were the fluidal, quasi-hydraulic descriptions prevalent in mesmerism that still reverberate in the field of energy healing when practitioners describe the healing process by means of vivid and intuitive images such as “letting the energy flow,” “transmitting energy,” or “balancing energies” (Werthmüller 2005, 34). By contrast, in modern physics, energy is not treated as a tangible substance and thus does not ‘flow’ in the conventional material sense.⁵⁰ Implicit metaphorical language is common among practitioners because it effectively translates abstract, distant concepts into ones that are familiar, embodied, and grounded in lived experience (cf. van Rijn in this volume).⁵¹

⁴⁸ The German term *feinstoffliche Energie* (literally: fine-material energy) more obviously underscores the imagination of subtle energy as ethereal ‘stuff’ (cf. Koch and Binder 2013, 21).

⁴⁹ Despite claims of objectivity and the construction of scientific frameworks, many practitioners would still concede that the concept “has eluded science in respect to its detection, measurement and theoretical understanding” (Alegretti 2020, 124).

⁵⁰ The problem of postulating ‘flows’ of subtle energies, which suggests a dynamic involving etheric substances, was already highlighted by Fritjof Capra (b. 1939), the Austrian-American physicist, author, and reluctant figurehead of the New Age wave of the 1980s. In *The Turning Point* (1982), Capra regarded quasi-physical terms that are typically used in the context of energy healing—such as fluctuation, rhythm, vibration, or resonance—as “metaphors describing the dynamic patterns of self-organization” (Capra 1988 [1982], 340). He argued that these metaphors would describe the principal features of complex dynamic systems—in this case living organisms—without necessarily referring to measurable physical parameters. Similarly, Capra rationalizes the notion of *qi*, which he understands to denote not a subtle substance but the principle of vital flow itself, that is, the circulation of fluids within the body or the continual exchanges between an organism and its environment (ibid., 314). However, Capra’s rational position remains a minority view within the holistic milieu.

Even within the framework of physics, associating energy with fluidal metaphors are not too far-fetched. So-called conserved quantities—including energy, linear momentum, angular momentum, and electric charge—can be conceptualized as immaterial substances to some degree. In this sense, energy transformations are often metaphorically described in terms of ‘flow’—that is, transfer—of the *properties* from one form (or physical system) to another, without denoting the literal movement of a material substance (cf. de Bianchi 2020b, 239).

⁵¹ Although metaphors are a typical element in the genre of occult physicalism, it must not be overlooked that progress in science itself is often driven by the use of metaphors and similes that only retrospectively were

Fourth, *vitalism*. A defining feature of occult physicalism is its opposition to a materialist narrative of life and the universe. The formal definition of energy by Helmholtz intended to disprove the existence of a life force beyond physical principles. Nonetheless, *fluidum*, *Od*, ether, the vibrations of New Thought, and the notion energy itself were repeatedly associated with vitalist semantics. Occult authors—both Western and Asian—adhering to vitalist ideas would seek additional support for their stance in pre-scientific, non-European physiological and medical discourses (see next chapter). Vitalistic agencies are integral to contemporary holistic practices, where ‘subtle energy’ and ‘life energy’ are often used interchangeably (cf. Werthmüller 2005, 35).

Fifth, *consciousness*. Physics proper is restricted to the study of inanimate matter and its motion through time and space. On a surface level, the strong association between energy and consciousness in alternative religion thus appears somewhat paradoxical. But a closer examination of how physical phenomena and theories are described in the source material reveals an underlying anthropomorphic style of messaging. Anthropomorphic imagery attracts lay readers more than purely technical explanations, which is why it is found so common in popular literature on physics (Leane 2007, 104). What Edward Slingerland observed for adherents of naturalistic physicalism applies even more so to proponents of occult physicalism: “It is clear that human beings, no matter how professionally or intellectually committed they are to physicalism, feel a constant compulsion to project agency onto the inanimate” (Slingerland 2008, 283). Subtle energies are a striking example for how the language of physics is used to convey an inherently anthropocentric worldview that particularly stresses the power of the mind.⁵²

Sixth, *divine qualities*. While insinuating the claim of physical materiality, the deeper semantics of occult powers may invoke divine qualities. Lévi’s ‘astral light,’ Blavatsky’s ‘Fohat,’ Evans’ ‘primal force,’ and Bailey’s ‘Energy’ explicitly featured the property of an all-pervading and life-giving entity. As Albanese observed for the New Age movement, “[l]ike all of American metaphysical religion [...], it discovered that the no-longer-secret name of God was Energy” (2007, 495). The latent ‘vertical’ dimension is additionally underscored in the modern yogic discourse on subtle energies and energy healing modalities such as Reiki or Pranic Healing (Stein 2019; Zoehrer 2020; 2021; cf. next chapter). However, divinity remains only an optional semantic layer that cannot be generalized for all concepts of subtle energy.

Seventh, *subtle technologies*. Metaphors of energy, when embodied and enacted, have manifested in rituals, aesthetics, stories, and machines. Conceptions of occult powers have resulted in a plethora of

identified as such. A prime example is the now redundant hypothesis of ether that has led to the discovery of the laws of electromagnetism.

⁵² Echoes of Esalen’s discourse of energy and human potential reverberate in contemporary fringe research on consciousness. Nanci Trivellato, for example, defines “Energetic *fluidity*” as “an intrinsic aspect of each individual, varying according to one’s evolutionary level” and malleable “at the command of the consciousness” (2020, 62). In the same vein, energy work amounts to a form of self-therapy that is aimed at “unblocking” stagnant energies and increasing “energetic fluidity” in order to optimize individual performance. As in mesmeric and New Thought texts, fluidal metaphors are used to connect consciousness and energy (ibid., 85–86; cf. de Bianchi 2020a, 6).

applications that aim to channel their transformative effect. The means for accessing, expressing, and/or utilizing what has been perceived as a superfine agency encompass *inter alia* (1) mind-body practices as ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault); (2) auto-suggestion and positive thinking; (3) entheogenic rituals (cf. Hanegraaff in this volume); (4) energy healing; (5) *fēngshuǐ* and comparable forms of living space arrangement; (6) aesthetical forms, i.e., music, visual arts, and dance; (7) science-fiction and *anime*; and (7) device-based activities including radiesthesia, biofeedback, or bioresonance treatment. Whereas the notion of subtle energy remains contested, epistemic congruence with mainline science has been much less relevant to practitioners than the the experiential and practical dimension.

Eighth, *the ambivalent role of scientific authority*. Scientific theories have continuously served as an authoritative reference point for notions of hidden powers, presenting them in a widely accepted language and thus endowing them with an aura of credibility. Notably, Mesmer argued for his iatrophysical treatment in accordance with the state of physics of his time. Influential proponents of spiritualism who argued for an ethereal agency looked back on outstanding scientific careers (e.g., Reichenbach, Crookes, and Lodge). The inversion of scientific naturalism seemed a feasible way to rationalize the belief in the world of spirits, occult forces, and the power of the mind. However, whereas some mesmerists, spiritualists, occultists, and New Thinkers sought confirmation for their worldview in science, others still regarded ancient wisdom teachings as superior sources of knowledge (e.g., Du Potet, Lévi, Blavatsky, and Evans).

Against the backdrop of the rise of physics as the paragon of exact science and objectivity, the retreat of *Naturphilosophie* from academic discourse, and academic psychology still in its formation stage, the central function of subtle agencies was to bridge the physical and subjective realms of reality via one unifying substrate. “*Naturphilosophie* has lost its reputation” (*die Naturphilosophie hat ihr Ansehen verloren*), as Fechner pointedly formulated it (1851, iii). How a credible outlook could be preserved that approached the ensouled side of nature at the same level of methodological rigor as science was a lingering question. Mesmer presented the iatrophysics of *fluidum* as an enlightened explanation to refute the belief in spiritual entities underlying exorcist healings. However, already latent in Mesmer’s physicalist system was the role of will power in the mesmerist, which was magnified in Puységur’s school. Among early nineteenth-century mesmerists in France, *énergie* meant mental energy and constituted a key component in effectively magnetizing subjects. The French psychological turn set the stage for hypnotherapy and thus the complete psychologization of mesmerism under Braid. In contrast to this development, some apologists of mesmerism attempted to preserve its physicalist framework. For example, Newnham reinterpreted the *fluidum* as the transformative, vital principle of nature and christened it ‘*energia*.’ In a similar vein but with the authority of an experimental scientist, Reichenbach postulated that his *Od* would constitute a cosmic force that is the root of all physical, chemical, biological, and mesmeric phenomena. The popular reception of Reichenbach’s extensive series of experiments with ‘sensitives’ and his natural explanation for spirit manifestations fueled public interest in spiritualism. Building on nineteenth-century enthusiasm for mesmerism, *Od*, and séances, the Theosophical Society

was founded with the purpose to investigate occult forces yet to be recognized by science as well as their effects in nature and the human psyche. The Theosophical endeavor inspired a host of other occult authors and groups to spread the belief in some form of ethereal or energetic substrate in making the case for the power of the mind over material reality. Well into the twentieth century, physical science still set the standard of proof required for the public acknowledgment of hypothetical agents. Thus, Tiller, the aforementioned physicist and figurehead of ‘New Age science,’ claimed to investigate subtle energies in a manner that would “lay the foundations for ‘Subjective Science’ on an equal footing with our present ‘Objective Science’” (1977, front matter).

Although proven untenable by the scientific community, speculations around *fluidum*, *Od*, ether, mind vibrations, and subtle energy inspired the imagination of magnetic healers, spiritualists, psychics, occultists, and contemporary holistic practitioners alike. They recycled refuted theories as misjudged discoveries that held out the promise to usher in a new era of scientific and spiritual progress once their truth had been widely recognized. Occult anticipations of the imminent scientific proof of nature’s finer forces sparked off a genre that could be called ‘futuristic retro-science.’ It underscored the dilemma of a ‘discovery’ that supposedly stood on the verge of a paradigm shift, whereas its ultimate scientific breakthrough was constantly delayed due to its subtlety. Hence the ambivalent role of science in the discourse of occult physicalism: whereas the social prestige of science and the technology it produced were undisputed, science was not ‘advanced’ enough to recognize the significance of a cosmic, subtle agent.

Interest in hidden powers of nature was immensely driven by ideological motives. The rise of empirical science from the eighteenth century onward went hand in hand with efforts to prove the limitations of a materialist vision of the world. The quest for a single, all-encompassing force-substrate could be viewed as part of the reaction against the perceived disintegration of modern society, the differentiation between nature and mind (or spirit), science and religion, and the divergence of academic disciplines. Evidence of a divine or universal agency would preserve the *one* ultimate reality at the root of *all* physical, biological, psychological, and alleged occult phenomena (cf. Hanegraaff 2006, 885–86). The postulation of such a vitalistic and intelligent cosmic power formed the basis for occult theories of everything, that is, claims of a unified realm behind the phenomenal world of matter and mind (*unus mundus*) that is accessible to the adept (see Zoehrer 2025; cf. Tiller 1979). This pursuit of scientific and metaphysical knowledge as an integrated undertaking reinforces the affinity of occultism to *Naturphilosophie*, although most occult authors were far from developing a rigorous philosophical system.

8. Concluding Remarks

What distinguishes subtle energies as ‘subtle’ is that they are neither measurable nor verifiable through the established means of physics. However, the clear-cut demarcation between physics and non-physics

is already the distilled and sanitized result from a centuries long process of boundary work. As the above sketch has attempted to show, the discourse on imponderable forces, powers, and energy was complex and involved physicians, physiologists, physicists, as well as scientific laypersons. Ideas of hidden, subtle powers (and corresponding substrates) were much less an afterthought to physics or its deficient imitation; rather, they developed in close contact with scientific discourse and often as an integral part thereof. Nonetheless, the framework of the reductionist, quantitative approach of physics was ultimately unsuitable for facilitating concepts of quasi-material agencies that were deemed outside the scope of systematic and exact experimental research.

From a religious studies perspective, the conception of occult powers must be viewed with regard to their experiential and performative implications. Their semantic vagueness was a feature, not a bug. The term's lack of precision increased its degree of suggestive potential. What subtle energies and their preceding models insinuate is both an ontological and an applicative universality: there is some kind of agency perfusing the cosmos that operates on material, vital, mental, and/or divine levels; and this all-encompassing agency is in principle accessible to humans (at least to the initiate). Its accessibility is underscored by emphasizing analogies that are closer to embodied and lived experience (e.g., self-healing potential or the mind-body relationship) rather than formulaic physical theories. Imaginations of a universal force-substrate thus may be understood to represent the extension of the human mind and body. The ontological premise of a psycho-physical continuum expands and potentiates the human self. Such an extended self-image suggests a path of empowerment that grants the adept or practitioner methods of harnessing a powerful cosmic medium. Whoever knows how to tap into this medium is assured to attain self-transformation, healing, and direct control over physical reality.

In the cultural context of late modernity, scientific discourses on hidden powers inherent in nature have functioned as a counter-narrative to positivistic naturalism. After the loss of an inherently teleological universe, humans can only be described as biological machines. The quest for a single, unifying cosmic principle could be interpreted as a reaction to the differentiation of the sciences, reflected in the fragmented conceptions of the modern self and hence his sense of estrangement. Paradoxically, the paradigm for late modern occult forces is Mesmer's *fluidum*, the linchpin of his physicalist, mechanistic worldview. Mesmer's holistic narrative deemed two principles sufficient to lay the basis for science, medicine, religion, and a utopian vision of a harmonious society: matter and its fluidal motion (Wolfart 1814). Although the psychological dimension in animal magnetism was made explicit in Puységur's school, occultists repeatedly fell back to physicalist formulations of a hidden, cosmic power.

Nonetheless, 'energy' has become such a persistent notion in twentieth-century holistic contexts because its implicit semantic range has always pointed beyond the physical level. Trending theories of physics—be it string theory, dark matter, or the Higgs-Boson (the 'God particle' that keeps the universe together)—have met with a much less enthusiastic reception. A likely reason is that their meanings are

too far from the human experience of feeling energetic.⁵³ They simply lack the anthropomorphic character of ‘energy,’ which would render them valuable for non-scientific applications. Another possible reason for the cultural inertia of ‘energy’ is that the term has come to be conjoined with Asian theories of subtle physiology. This opened the way for interpretations of subtle energy to transcend Western physicalist paradigms and reinforced a transcultural discursive stream that continues to mesmerize a global audience.⁵⁴

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⁵³ Even where such trending theories are employed for religious-therapeutic purposes, they are often still subsumed under ‘subtle energy’ as the overarching category (e.g., Kronn and Kamp 2022; Strashun 2023). Among holistic practitioners, a serious rival to the concept of ‘subtle energies’ is that of the ‘field.’ Field is a shorthand for a conglomerate of various terms borrowed from physics, for example, ‘energy field,’ ‘zero point field,’ or ‘field of quantum fluctuation’ (McTaggart 2008 [2001]). The term has moreover been applied to describe holistic anthropologies, e.g., the ‘human biofield’ (Brennan 1988), as well as parapsychological phenomena via the ‘morphic field’—a hypothetical medium discussed by the English biologist Rupert Sheldrake (b. 1942) (cf. Hanegraaff 1998, 73–74; Asprem 2014, 65). Sheldrake derived his notion from theories of morphogenetic fields that were first introduced in embryological research during the 1910s, while additional influences from Henri Bergson’s (1859–1941) *élan vital*, C. G. Jung’s (1875–1961) ‘collective unconscious,’ and the Theosophical ‘Akashic records’ are likely. Holistic fields share with comparable ideas of subtle energy the semantics of a vivid psycho-physical continuum but draw from the conceptual metaphor of ‘order’ rather than ‘flow.’

⁵⁴ I would like to thank Karl Baier and Julian Strube for reviewing and offering helpful comments on the first drafts of this chapter.

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Article

“Medical Men in the New Age”: Alice Bailey’s Impact on Contemporary Energy Healing

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Abstract: Energy healing refers to a globalising market of healing rituals that aim to stimulate the clients’ self-healing process. In the context of healing, the term ‘energy’ has multi-layered meanings and may denote physical, psychological, social, as well as spiritual principles of restoring well-being. This article demonstrates how the idea of energy as a healing agent was embedded within the occult cosmology and anthropology of the British-American post-Theosophist Alice A. Bailey (1880–1949). Applying historical discourse analysis, Bailey’s impact on the emergence of energy healing is examined. Her theory of energy is explored against the backdrop of her esoteric grand narrative. It is demonstrated how Bailey’s principles of energy formed the basis for her vision of a “medicine of the future”. A concluding discussion proves the global influence of Bailey’s ‘energetic turn’ and how it modelled the approach of major holistic actors of the later twentieth century.

Keywords: Alice Ann Bailey; subtle energies; occultism; esotericism; vitalism; energy healing; holistic milieu; seven rays; esoteric healing

“I have suggested that the medical profession in the New Age will deal increasingly with the theory of energy direction [...].”

(Bailey 1953, 218)

“The occultist works in energy and with energies.”

(Bailey 1957, 674)



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1. Introduction: Vital Energy in Occult and Holistic Discourses

‘Alternative spiritualities’ and ‘alternative medicine(s)’ have several ideological premises in common, two of which are particularly striking.¹ The first premise pertains to an anthropology that has been coined as ‘holistic’. A holistic view of the human self generally involves the triad of body, mind, and soul, if not more complex systems of subtle bodies thought to exist along the physical body. From this anthropological position, it is argued that in the treatment of illness—a person’s subjective experience of disturbed well-being—biomedical or psychotherapeutic cures are often insufficient because they neglect other, more causal levels of the human self. Responding to the apparent need for complementary, non-invasive therapeutic approaches, modalities of holistic healing have developed a rich discursive tradition over the past two centuries, accompanying the rise of biomedicine.

The second widely shared assumption by alternative spiritualities and therapies alike is ‘vitalism’. Vitalism refers to the belief in the agency of a ‘life-force’ or an animating ‘energy’ unrecognised by modern science. Biological entities are thus thought to possess a hidden resource of vitality that may be activated as a healing agent. Holistic practitioners

claim to be able to tap into this reservoir in order to mobilise their clients' 'self-healing powers' (cf. [Krabbe 1998](#), 77–78; [Sutcliffe 2003](#), 179; [Hammer 2015a](#), 375).²

In light of the socially conditioned dichotomy of heterodoxy and orthodoxy, alternative spiritualities and alternative medicine could be considered twin sisters on the heterodox side. Both bolster their respective identities by demarcating themselves from established religious institutions and the legally privileged medical professions, respectively. Not only do these two spheres share substantial and structural similarities. Several of their strands are also historically intertwined. This becomes most apparent in the contemporary field of the holistic milieu, which has not only been crucially informed by naturopathic treatments³ and non-European 'traditional' medicine⁴ but also by discourses on healing that have roots in occult thought.⁵

A salient example for the latter is energy healing, a central subfield of the holistic milieu. The British sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead observed that clients "who pursue the quest for subjective wellbeing" of "body, mind, and spirit" ([Heelas et al. 2005](#), 104) feel particularly attracted to energy healing. Over 80 per cent of respondents of their survey in Kendal, a town in northwestern England, agreed that all of life is pervaded by "some sort of spirit or life force", while more than two-thirds believe in "energy channels" in the body (*ibid.*, 25).

However, energy healing is by no means a local British phenomenon but a global, rapidly expanding market. It involves highly diverse religious–therapeutic practices that aim to stimulate the clients' self-healing process and improve the physical, mental, and social parameters of well-being. The common denominator of these practices is the conception of 'subtle energies' (to distinguish the term from the physical definition of energy) that function as the presumed vitalising agent. An optional but widely accepted feature in energy healing systems are cartographies of a subtle body including auras, *cakras* (or energy centres), and *nāḍīs* (also referred to as 'channels' or 'meridians'), which are believed to correspond to particular physical, psychological, and spiritual states or functions ([Zoehrer 2020](#); cf. [Samuel and Johnston 2013](#); [Leland 2016](#); [Cox 2022](#)).

When practitioners of the holistic milieu engage the metaphor of bringing energies 'into flow', it encompasses a qualitative, subjective aspect. Notwithstanding allusions to physics, the energy they refer to has little in common with the scientific definition, that is, the quantifiable ability of a physical system to perform work. It is rather more akin to experiences of vigour, the restoration of well-being, or the ability to live up to one's full potential. Theories built around these energies are not limited to circumscribing psychological or anthropological states, but may be embedded within ideas about the structure and evolution of the cosmos.

A *systematic* approach to the theme of 'subtle energies' already suggests an affinity with the field of occultism. Occultism, broadly understood, denotes cultural activities that are interested in the "hidden aspects of reality" inaccessible to ordinary senses (cf. [Bogdan and Djurdjevic 2013](#), 1). Whereas occult thought bears some similarity to science and religion, it belongs to neither and takes a precarious position in between both fields (*ibid.*).⁶ This structural feature applies neatly to 'holistic' models of subtle energy that typically appeal to modern science and/or ancient wisdom of a 'mystic East' as authorities of knowledge, without following the rules of scientific argumentation or scholarly historiography. To denote "contemporary alternative spirituality in the West" and building on Colin Campbell's notion of the "cultic milieu", [Christopher Partridge \(2004](#), p. 66) coined the term "occulture". This umbrella term includes inter alia holistic well-being culture, Gaia worship and eco-spirituality, psychedelics and entheogenic religion, astrology, kabbalah, Arthurian legends, prophecies, channelling, UFO religion, cyber-spirituality, New Age science, etc. (*ibid.*, 70). A problem with this etic category and its association with the occult

is that it suggests a connection between self-described occult groups (e.g., Theosophy) and contemporary spiritual culture. However, whether such links can in fact be established needs to be demonstrated on a case-by-case basis, as this article does for the example of energy healing.

Based on the observation of the systematic similarity between occult and holistic thought, this article probes whether a *historical* link can be established between early twentieth-century occultism and contemporary forms of energy healing. For this purpose, the notion of subtle energies is appropriately examined within the framework of esotericism studies, which is wide enough to encompass occultism and practices of the holistic milieu. In *Claiming Knowledge* (first published in 2001), Olav Hammer makes a cursory remark about the notion of energy in ‘esoteric’ discourse that provides some useful hints for further exploring the matter:

William James’ essay *The Energies of Men* has probably been influential in popularizing the term energies in its sense of “vital force”. Theosophy uses both energy (and the corresponding plural) and force. The latter term occurs frequently in *The Secret Doctrine*, but seems to have fallen in some disfavor in later positions, where energy (or energies) is all the more common. Energies are ubiquitous from the channeled books of Alice Bailey to various New Age texts. (Hammer 2004, 238)

In this brief paragraph, Hammer points to a typical characteristic of alternative religious worldviews that is not self-evident: the terms ‘energy’ and ‘vital force’ are semantically fused. This vitalistic position is a major point of demarcation vis-à-vis science and biomedicine. Whereas the formation and dissemination of the vitalistic conceptualisation of energy was more intricate than described in this short paragraph, Hammer’s mention of Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949) deserves further inquiry. As this article argues, Bailey is indeed a particularly instructive case in the religious–therapeutic discourse on energy. Her thoroughly vitalistic cosmos is perfused with subtle energies, which also form the core of her occult theory of healing.

Steven Sutcliffe (2003, 138–139) remarked that Bailey’s influence for the British “‘New Age’ culture of human potential, healing, and mind, body, and spirit pursuits” was “practically nil”. In his somewhat hasty assessment, Bailey’s “books continue to exert a muted impact upon more ascetic spiritual groups”, whereas her distinctive contribution to the genealogy of the field “lies in creating and disseminating a discourse on ‘New Age’ that early on acquired a life of its own” (ibid.). However, a closer look reveals that Bailey’s impact was not only limited to the millenarian thrust of her work. Several recent studies have also highlighted her specific contributions to the development of subtle body conceptions in recent years (see, for example, Leland 2016; Cox 2022). Bailey’s Christology was demonstrated to be the chief reference of the Theosophical–ufological system of the Scottish artist and occult author Benjamin Creme (1922–2016) (Pokorny 2021). However, a systematic analysis of the immense influence of Bailey’s thought on twentieth-century and current theories of holistic healing—including energy healing—still remains a desideratum (Wolf 2005, 148).

This article examines the manner in which Bailey functioned as a hinge joint between nineteenth-century occultism and the *global* contemporary holistic milieu, a major strand of what was formally captured under the rubric of ‘New Age movement’. Its aim is to assess her impact on the broader discourse of energy in the religious–therapeutic context. Section 2 explores the landmarks of this discourse and provides the backdrop to Bailey’s own theory of energy. Section 3 provides a brief overview of Bailey’s life and core elements of her work, before Section 4 zooms in on her notion of energy in the framework of her esoteric cosmology and anthropology. This sets the ground for investigating her therapeutic theory in Section 5, including her vision of the “medicine of the future”. Section 6 moves on

to major proponents of energy healing and discusses how they were influenced by Bailey's thought and example.

2. Some Early Milestones in the History of Energy Healing

Hammer's abovementioned comment is a useful starting point to further elucidate the formation of the occult/holistic notion of energy and how this idea spurred the emergence of energy healing as a core practice of the holistic milieu. First, as indicated by Hammer, early Theosophical texts still employed the terms 'fluidum', 'magnetism', 'electricity', 'ether', and 'force' at a much higher rate than 'energy'. The idea of a mesmeric-fluidal ether as a healing agent was still prevalent among nineteenth-century occultists. In the wake of the rapid progress of physics, occultists adjusted their terminology, leading to a stronger integration of 'energy', which had become the unifying notion underlying all physical phenomena by the late nineteenth century (Zoehrer 2025b; cf. Smith 1998).

Second, William James' role in shaping the notion of "vital force" appears less innovative when viewed against the backdrop of earlier proponents of the idea. Early medical theories of the nineteenth century already postulated an inherent healing power of nature, referred to as 'life force' (Latin: *vis vitalis*) (Schott 2017, 941). The German chemist and industrialist Karl von Reichenbach (1788–1869) reinterpreted the mesmeric *fluidum* in terms of his neologism *Od*, which he imagined to be a universal agent that encompasses both physical forces and the "life force" (German: *Lebenskraft*) (Reichenbach 1849). This association was taken up by the prolific occult author Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891), whose quest involved gaining knowledge of the "nature of the vital force, and how to command it" (Blavatsky 1877, 475). She identified Reichenbach's *Od* as "breath of God" and "vital fluid" (ibid., 145–146; Blavatsky 1888a: 76). A more systematic theory of *Od* was presented by German occult philosopher Carl du Prel (1839–1899) in his final work *Die Magie als Naturwissenschaft* [Magic as Science] (1899). Dismissing both monistic materialism and Cartesian dualism, du Prel imagined the speculative *Od* to be the central agent underlying magnetic rapport, somnambulism, clairvoyance, dream oracles, and other psychical phenomena. Like Reichenbach and Blavatsky, he thought of the *Od* as the substrate of *Lebenskraft* that enables both subconscious biological self-organisation as well as conscious thought processes (du Prel 1899b, 1–25). At the turn of the century, du Prel was read by leading psychologists including Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and James himself (Josephson-Storm 2017, 191). James' essay "The Energies of Men" (1907a), published in *The Philosophical Review*, discussed the problem of the subjective sense of feeling alive and how to tap into "reservoirs of energy" that animate the mind and body. Whereas James did not mention the exact term 'vital force' as Hammer implied, he dropped the notion "vital energy" in passing without developing a theory around it: The way to treat patients showing symptoms of morbid impulse was "to discover to them more usual and useful ways of throwing their stores of vital energy into gear" (James 1907a, 8; cf. James 1907b, 61).

In a revised essay for *The American Magazine*, retitled as "The Powers of Men" (1907b), James specified that energies understood psychologically comprise the aspects of both quantity and quality, which makes a purely physiological treatment of the subject impossible (James 1907b, 58). He covered a range of ways by which dormant mental and moral energies may be unlocked, including yoga, auto-suggestion, the dynamic force of ideas, religious conversions, and the optimism of the American "mind-cure movement" (also known as New Thought). Thus, James offered a heuristic psychological theory of energy based on anecdotes and his own observations of the religious-therapeutic field. While James cannot be considered a major proponent of the "life force", he must be credited for having recognised at an early stage the emergence of what half a century later would be termed 'human potential' (cf. Kripal 2007, 5, 105, 152). At least somewhat corroborating

Hammer's hypothesis, the co-founder of the Esalen Institute (est. 1962), Michael Murphy (b. 1930), indeed drew inspiration from James' texts, including "The Energies of Men" (Kripal 2007, 283). However, by the time the Human Potential Movement took off in the 1960s, also other models of subtle energies had abounded, for example, the *orgone* of the Freud-disciple Wilhelm Reich (1897–1957), *śakti* and *kuṇḍalinī* of the Tāntrikas, or the *ki* of the Japanese martial art Aikidō (Kripal 2007, 234, 283–284, 458; Stein 2024).

Third, whereas Alice Bailey was not the only link between occult and holistic discourses on energy, she championed an esoteric theory of 'energy' as only few other authors did. However, Bailey's role can only be properly assessed when contrasted with other outstanding torchbearers who contributed to the popularisation of the notion of energy in the religious–therapeutic context. For example, the American 'alternative' physician Albert Abrams (1863–1924) invented machines that prefigured both 'energy medicine' (the use of electromagnetic fields for diagnosis and cures, cf. Oschman 2000), and 'radionics' (a device-based form of distant or psychic healing, cf. Tansley 1972). In *New Concepts in Diagnosis and Treatment* (1916), Abrams laid out a medical theory based on 'vibrations', 'radiation', and 'energy'. Reminiscent of Franz A. Mesmer's (1834–1815) cosmic *fluidum* and Reichenbach's *Od*, Abrams claimed that his "iatro-physical conception" could demonstrate "the trend of unifying the various forms of force under one great principle", that is, "energy" (Abrams 1916: x, 255). He was convinced that energy is the "single agent" manifested in any physical motion and that every biological organism "is a transformer of energy" (ibid., 233). "Disocculting the occult", Abrams believed, was possible if mesmerism, spiritualism, clairvoyance, and psychometry (the ability to diagnose disease via touch) were explained in terms of energy (ibid., 9).

Abrams' scientism influenced notable innovators of manual therapies, including the Indian-French Theosophist and yogi scientist Dewanchand Varma (1872–ca. 1946), the developer of *prānothérapie*. Varma belongs to a series of authors who interpreted *prāṇa* (Sanskrit: "breath", "vitality") as an overarching healing energy, including the German occultist Theodor Reuß (1855–1923), the Hindu philosopher Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), and the American New Thought leader William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932), who coined the term "Pranic Healing" (cf. Zoehrer 2020, 2021). Partly inspired by Vivekananda and Varma, the Austrian-American chiropractic Randolph Stone (b. Rudolf Bausch, 1890–1981) introduced Polarity Therapy, which he first presented in the book *The New Energy Concept of the Healing Art* (1948), revised in 1957 under the title *Energy: the Vital Polarity in the Healing Art* (Young 2011, 13; Bernard 2025). This made Stone one of the earliest therapy designers to use the terms 'energy' and 'healing' in a book title. Yet having been self-published and mostly circulating among practitioners of his school, Stone's eclectic musings only reached a limited audience during their early phase.

In this particular discursive lineage, the role of Bailey seems negligible. However, in *Health Building* (1985), a revised collection of previously printed booklets first published in 1962, Stone reframed his therapy within a characteristically Baileyan rhetoric. In the chapter "The New Age & Polarity Therapy", he declared that "We are in the sign of Aquarius" and that the latest technological advancements were but manifestations of the dawning millennium (Stone 1985, 30). Stone suggested that the new science of energy, electromagnetism, and atom physics will confirm his Polarity Therapy—which he portrayed as being rooted in Paracelsus and "the ancient concepts of life" known as "odic fluid, mesmerism, animal magnetism, and many other names" (ibid., 30–31). Although he did not mention her in his books, Stone's allusion to the burgeoning 'New Age' discourse already belonged to the far-reaching ripple effect of Bailey's work. And as the following discussion will show, her influence encompassed much more than her millenarianism.

3. Alice Bailey's Life and Impact on 'New Age' Culture

Alice Bailey (née La Trobe-Bateman, 1880–1949) was born into a wealthy Manchester family and received a privileged Anglican education (Sutcliffe 2003, 46).⁷ Having experienced an unsettled and emotionally troubled childhood, Bailey served British soldiers as a missionary of the Young Women's Christian Association during her early twenties (Albanese 2007, 462). Following a personal crisis, she first encountered Theosophical literature around the age of thirty-five (Bailey 1973, 132–138) and became an avid reader and interpreter of Blavatsky. The twenty-seven books that Bailey published between 1922 and the late 1950s (posthumously) could be considered an extensive commentary on Blavatsky. A major political shift during Bailey's lifetime was the transition from British colonial supremacy to a US-dominated post-colonial era. The atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s—Bailey's most productive phase—was eclipsed by the memory of World War I and the anticipation of another war due to the rise of radical nationalism. Bailey's writings were part of the wave of alternative spirituality during the interwar period that sought a global outlook, unburdened by the political entanglements of mainline churches.

Seekership and a non-aligned discourse on religion were the hallmark of early twentieth-century unchurched spiritualities of the Anglo-American brand. The function of religion saw a shift from "cementing traditional communities to legitimating new identities" (Sutcliffe 2003, 53). To Bailey, the esoteric quest was more than a matter of individual fulfilment and meant dedication to the service of humanity. Heralding the dawn of a new era, it was a form of self-empowerment to counter the emergent totalitarian ideologies on the one hand and the perceived dogmatism and lethargy of the traditional churches on the other. However, despite her progressive leanings, Bailey was not exactly anti-traditional. Against the backdrop of a steadily declining British Empire, her copious Edwardian prose with its concern for socio-political issues appeared emphatically upper-class. Bailey's ample references to 'mankind', 'hierarchy', and 'race' seem outdated to contemporary readers and differ starkly from the more inclusive style of later holistic authors (ibid., 51–53).⁸

After evangelical work among British soldiers in India, a move to North America, and a failed marriage, Bailey came into contact with the American Section of the Theosophical Society Adyar. In 1917, she moved to Hollywood, California, near the Society's (then) national headquarters called Krotona—named after the location of the ancient school of Pythagoras. She rapidly climbed the ranks, was promoted the editor of the society's magazine *The Messenger* (1913–1927), and married the Society's national secretary, Foster Bailey (1888–1977). Around 1919, Bailey claimed to be in contact with a master she referred to as "the Tibetan" (later identified as Djwhal Khul) (Hammer 2004, 384). This marked the beginning of her practice of recording clairaudient scripts, the dissemination of which would become her true calling. The legitimacy of the Tibetan's messages was questioned by the then-president of the Theosophical Society Adyar Annie Besant (1847–1933),⁹ leading to the expulsion of Bailey and her husband from the organisation in 1920 (Sutcliffe 2003, 46–47).¹⁰ Two years later, Bailey established an educational charity under the name Lucis Trust in New York. Subsequently, she set up one of its main branches, the Arcane School, a correspondence school dedicated to answering the questions raised by readers of her publications (Santucci 2006, 159).

Bailey's reach was not limited to seekers of the anglosphere. In her unfinished autobiography, Bailey recounts that in 1930 the Dutch artist and Theosophist Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (1881–1962) visited her in Stamford, Connecticut, where her family then lived. Fröbe-Kapteyn shared her plan to establish a non-sectarian centre in Ascona, Switzerland, that would be "open to esoteric thinkers and occult students of all groups in Europe and elsewhere" (Bailey 1973, 217). Bailey supported the idea and lectured at Fröbe-Kapteyn's School for Spiritual Research between 1930 and 1932, until "German professors" beset

Ascona and changed “the whole tone and quality of the place” (ibid., 230), likely a hint to the increasing presence of Carl G. Jung (1875–1961) and Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). Following the suggestion of the latter, Fröbe-Kapteyn renamed her annual conference project ‘Eranos’. Eranos—originally inspired by Hermann Keyserling’s (1880–1946) School of Wisdom (*Schule der Weisheit*), founded in 1920—would go on to shape the spiritual and intellectual history of the twentieth century, however, without Bailey’s further participation.¹¹ Nonetheless, Bailey became a nodal point within the widely ramified rhizome of alternative-religious discourse from which later twentieth-century authors and practitioners would draw (Sutcliffe 2003, 54).

The premonition of a ‘New Age’ entered Bailey’s work as a key theme from the early 1930s onwards. Her first public mention of a ‘New Age’ appeared in *From Intellect to Intuition* (1932) (Sutcliffe 2003, 49). Whereas Blavatsky—Bailey’s revered idol—held an avowedly anti-Christian position, Bailey’s stance was anti-ecclesial but generally supportive of a basic Christian outlook. Thus, while building on Blavatsky, Bailey reinterpreted her heritage by embedding it in a form of millenarian Christology (ibid.). She gave Biblical apocalyptic eschatology a cyclical interpretation and declared that Christ’s return and the ‘Age of Aquarius’ were imminent. The precedent to this idea was put forth by the religious entrepreneur-turned-occult visionary Levi H. Dowling (1844–1911). Dowling’s *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* (1908) connected the Theosophical astro-mythology of *Geometry in Religion* (1890) with the eschatological pericope of the synoptic gospels (Bochinger 1994, 349–352, 363–364; cf. Buescher 2008, 5).¹²

While not being the only messenger of the ‘New Age,’ the Arcane School contributed substantially to its diffusion in the counter-culture of the 1960s and the alternative religious culture of the 1970s and 1980s. Bailey’s direct impact on the utopian phase of British ‘New Age’ spirituality is well attested. The co-founder of the Findhorn community, Dorothy Mclean, referred to her books as “basic spiritual teaching” in the 1950s and 1960s (Sutcliffe 2003, 54). Leading figures of early British ‘New Age’ networks including Anthony Brooke (1912–2011) and George Trevelyan (1906–1996) in the 1970s and later ‘New Age’ educators such as David Spangler (b. 1945) and William Bloom (b. 1948) explicitly recognised her input (ibid., 139).¹³ In the latter half of the 1980s, the label ‘New Age’ was bolstered by a flood of secondary sources that sought a category to capture (and criticise) the popular interest in meditation, renewed forms of piety, eco-spirituality, and the intersection of science, technology, and religion (Bochinger 1994, 517).

Bailey’s thought constituted a form of back-to-the-roots Theosophy that carried its own flavour. She restated various themes of Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*, expanded upon them, and on this basis developed complex classificatory schemes and systems of correspondence, following the pattern set by the second-generation Theosophist Charles W. Leadbeater (1854–1934). While theosophically conservative, her books have made a number of original contributions, including her doctrine of the “seven rays”, interpretations of esoteric astrology, and millenarian-messianic beliefs (Hammer 2004, 65). Most relevant to our discussion, Bailey reframed an inherently Theosophical cosmology and anthropology in terms of ‘energy’—the knowledge of which the esotericist and the esoteric healer are supposedly endowed with by means of initiation.

In Bailey’s metaphysical universe, a meritocratic “Hierarchy” of masters is guiding the spiritual progress of humankind. A primary objective of Bailey’s ‘Tibetan’ was to make public the hierarchy’s existence and its work to propel the evolution of humankind’s consciousness (Borsos 2012, 33). In promoting this idea, Bailey emulated her role model Blavatsky with the major difference that Bailey’s hierarchy—as in Leadbeater’s thought—was Christ-centred: “He has been for two thousand years the supreme Head of the Church Invisible, the Spiritual Hierarchy, composed of disciples of all faiths” (Bailey 1948, 60).

The present time is “the ante-chamber to the new age”, which will begin to reveal itself following the death of the current civilisation and the ensuing reappearance of Christ and his disciples (*ibid.*, 22, 127). Bailey declared that her disciples, referred to as the “New Group of World Servers”, were cooperating with the “Hierarchy” in order to prepare the world stage for Christ’s arrival (*ibid.*, 44, 55; cf. [Albanese 2007](#), 465).

Whereas Bailey’s work is much less dense and convoluted compared to Blavatsky’s,¹⁴ both share a brand of esotericism that gave itself a distinct air of sophistication and authority. Their sense of inherited aristocracy is mirrored in their adoration for hierarchies of invisible masters. This aspect in Bailey’s worldview stands in contrast to the democratisation of esoteric teachings to which the Theosophical Society and the Arcane School decisively contributed. The mass-produced practical manuals on energy healing that started to saturate the ‘New Age’ book market of the last three decades of the twentieth century were written not for initiates but for holistic service providers. Yet, as will be shown, Bailey still enjoys a considerable degree of authority in the religious–therapeutic field, and her lavish ideological inventory remains an important reference point.

4. Bailey’s Worldview

4.1. An ‘Esoteric’ Grand Narrative

Bailey’s arcane cosmology was of totalistic scale and has been counted among the ranks of the grand narratives conceived by other early twentieth-century authors such as C. G. Jung, Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), Pyotr D. Ouspensky (1878–1947), Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), and George I. Gurdjeff (1866–1949). What makes the architecture of Bailey’s work stand out is its relative coherence, its comparably intelligible Anglo-American style, and an awareness of contemporaneous secular concerns ([Sutcliffe 2003](#), 53–54).

The imprint of the cross-cultural Theosophical programme on Bailey’s thought appears in her assertion of combining ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ elements of thought. The American philosopher Oliver Leslie Reiser (1895–1974) lauded her attempt to harmonise the inward-directed “subjectivity” of the East and the scientific, objective outlook of the West (Reiser 1954: vi)—a clichéd dualism that has become a trope in alternative spiritualities.¹⁵ Retaining the (partially positive) orientalist strand prevalent among Theosophists, nineteen of Bailey’s books are claimed to have been ‘received’ messages from the ‘Tibetan’. At the same time, Bailey’s occultism—whose formative phase paralleled the breakthroughs of atomic physics during the 1920s—has a clear scientific streak. The allusions to physics in Bailey’s work are most pronounced in her early book *The Consciousness of the Atom* (1922). As Simon Cox puts it, she “shifted her cartographies of the soul into the realm of atom consciousness and the language of physics, presaging the flowering of electromagnetic, hyperdimensional, and later quantum-mystical subtle bodies of the New Age” ([Cox 2022](#), 198).

While steeped in occult discourse, Bailey’s self-description vacillates between ‘occult’ and ‘esoteric’. Following the example of earlier occult authors, including Eliphas Lévi (b. Alphonse Louis Constant, 1810–1875) and Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921), Bailey adopted the terms ‘esoteric’ and ‘esotericism’ to designate her own ideological programme that on the one hand alludes to the revelations of her master and on the hand appeals to the authority of science to explain hidden forces. Bailey conceived esotericism as a “school of thought” (Bailey 1934, 23) and the “science of the soul of all things” (Bailey 1954, 64) that builds on the presumption “that behind all happenings in the world of phenomena [...] exists the world of energies” (*ibid.*, 60). This emphasis on energies is pervasive in Bailey’s esotericism, which promised the esoteric student to gain knowledge of their nature, laws, and expressions (*ibid.*). An esotericist-*sensu*-Bailey is the initiate who is able to control those energies and thus actively participate in the cosmic evolution.

4.2. Cosmology

“Alice Bailey’s cosmology [...] can be considered an esoteric theory of everything” (Blackthorn 2020, 11). Due to its extensive and multi-layered structure, a full account of Bailey’s cosmology is not attempted here. However, three key features of her cosmology shed light on her notion of energy. These elements immediately affect her anthropology, her definition of esotericism, and her medical theory: (1) energies as the ultimate ontological substratum that forms all matter and living beings; (2) the evolution of the cosmos; and (3) a septenary scheme of principles based on “seven rays”, which give structure to the micro- and macrocosms and govern their unfolding.

Bailey’s worldview forms a synthesis of gnostic themes, a Neoplatonism- and New Thought-inspired panpsychic idealism, and post-Theosophical anthropology in which material reality is a secondary, delusive reality. All physical phenomena and human events are but expressions of an inner dimension of energy (Bailey 1954, 62). Bailey thought of energies as agents that shape the sphere of essential reality. These energies manifest materially according to their own rhythm and are only responsive to two distinct intelligent beings: the divine, ‘creative Intelligence’ on the one hand, and the initiated adept, on the other. Energies direct the activity of all matter and have their source in the “One Life”, also identified by Bailey as “Spirit”, “Monad”, and “Energy” (Bailey 1934, 23; 1957, 673).

The exaltation of this life principle is a recurring element throughout Bailey’s books. According to Bailey, the advanced esotericist has access to the “One Life”, which energises our planet and all living beings (Bailey 1954, 65; emphasis in the original). Her vitalism owed much to *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), where Blavatsky regarded the “Spiritual evolution of the *inner, immortal man*” as a basic tenet of her occult teaching (Blavatsky 1888a, 634; emphasis in the original).¹⁶ Associated with this idea of humanity’s spiritual evolution is the belief in (a) “the one Universal Life”, and (b) the host of “intelligences that animate” all manifestations of the vital principle and further their advancement (Blavatsky 1888a, 634). As later copied by Bailey, Blavatsky capitalised “the One Life”, which she related to the “law of karma” or the “effect-producing cause” that governs the world of being (ibid., 635).¹⁷

Representing various ontological (and hence anthropological) levels, Bailey discerned between physical, (individual) vital, astral, mental, and soul energies. These are hierarchically ranked, with the former constituting the lowest form of energy and the latter the highest. As Bailey regarded the soul to be closest to the divine source, this hierarchy also corresponds to the direction of evolution (Bailey 1953, 35; cf. idem.: 61). As foreshadowed in Blavatsky’s work, a central thread in Bailey’s writings is the idea of a cosmic evolution of consciousness, its journey into matter, and its ascendance back to its divine source. In line with the Theosophical understanding of evolution, she opposed the Darwinian view by assuming a teleological force that guides the gradual development of life. Bailey believed the evolution of the universe and the biological species to be the result of a creative, divine drive (Bailey 1922c, 3; cf. Hammer 2004, 229–230). Accordingly, she defined evolution as

something which drives all on toward the goal, and is the force which is gradually bringing order out of chaos; ultimate perfection out of temporary imperfection; good out of seeming evil; and out of darkness and disaster that which we shall some day recognise as beautiful, right, and true. (Bailey 1922c, 22)

Reflecting the ambitions of early Theosophists, Bailey’s teaching on evolution is embedded in a quasi-Hegelian synthesis of “Spirit and matter” that supposedly testifies to “the essential unity of the scientific and religious idea” (Bailey 1925, 103). Compensating for the weaknesses of “materialism” (i.e., naive scientism) and “supernaturalism” (i.e., creationism), Bailey suggests a third line of thought that she referred to as

Idealistic. It posits an evolutionary process within all manifestation, and identifies life with the cosmic process. It is the exact opposite of materialism, and brings the supernatural deity, predicated by the religionist, into the position of a great Entity or Life, Who is evolving through, and by means of, the universe, just as man is evolving consciousness through the medium of an objective physical body. (Bailey 1922c, 4; emphasis in the original)

“Life”, in Bailey’s terminology, thus denotes the divine being who evolves through the material universe at the macrocosmic level.¹⁸ This process corresponds to the evolution of human consciousness through the physical body at the microcosmic level. Bailey’s evolution theory is teleological in the sense that it recognises that the structure and development of the universe is oriented towards an overarching purpose. If, as Hammer (2004, p. 201) claims, the salient feature of science is the Baconian reduction to immediate causes and the dismissal of any teleological perspective (i.e., final causes), Bailey’s cosmology is decidedly non-scientific (cf. Mutschler 1990, 95). Since Bailey postulates a non-material, life-giving agency (“vitalising force”) (Bailey 1922c, 3; cf. Hammer 2004, 229–230), her cosmology is all the more reminiscent of the “living nature” in Antoine Faivre’s characterisation of esoteric thought (Faivre 1994).

Bailey’s singular principle of “one life” is refracted into seven distinct types of “force” or “energy” from which the micro- and macrocosms emerge (Bailey 1936, 316). Each of these “seven rays” corresponds to an abstract quality: (1) Will or Power; (2) Love or Wisdom; (3) Active Intelligence or Adaptability; (4) Harmony, Beauty, and Art; (5) Concrete Knowledge or Science; (6) Devotion or Abstract Idealism; and (7) Ceremonial Magic and Order (Santucci 2006, 159; Albanese 2007, 464; Hammer 2015b: 349). These fundamental qualities translate into Bailey’s anthropology, where the rays explain the characteristic features of races, cycles of civilisation, the soul, the personality, the human mental, astral, and physical bodies, and the *cakras* (“force centres”) (cf. Bailey 1936, 261). Bailey’s five-volume work entitled *A Treatise on the Seven Rays* elaborately applies her doctrine of the rays to psychology, astrology, and healing.¹⁹

Taking the seven rays as a point of departure, Bailey developed a system of correspondences which drew on raw templates that earlier Theosophical texts provided. Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) spoke of “primeval seven rays” in the thought of the Chaldeans, Egyptians, and Vedas. These were further identified as a septenary principle that Blavatsky detected in the nervous plexuses of the human body, in the human races, in yoga and gnosis, in the solar cycles, the “seven planets or gods” and in the somewhat enigmatic “seven creative forces of nature” (Blavatsky 1888a, 270, 573, 635; 1888b, 69, 92, 564, 608, 772). Using her characteristically opaque language, Blavatsky alluded to “seven Forces in Man and in all Nature” and the “septenary nature” of the sun (Blavatsky 1888a, 290). This “Seven Principal Force, called rays”, supposedly emanated from a “Mother substance”, which composes the “matrix of all the living and existing Forces in our solar system” (ibid.). Blavatsky equated the “Solar active energy” with “the Breath of the *absoluteness*” and the god Viṣṇu, who is referred to as “the *sevenfold Sun*” in the medieval Hindu text *Viṣṇu purāṇa* (ibid.; emphasis in the original). Blavatsky moreover offered a model of seven principles emanating from the one source of life framed in physicalist terms, plus a mental principle of intelligence:

With the Esotericists, from the remotest times the Universal Soul or *anima mundi*, the material reflection of the Immaterial Ideal, was the Source of Life of all beings and of the life principle of the three kingdoms; and it was *Septenary* with the Hermetic philosophers, as with all ancients. For it is represented as a Sevenfold cross, whose branches are respectively, *light, heat, electricity, terrestrial magnetism,*

astral radiation, motion, and Intelligence, or what some call self-consciousness (Blavatsky 1888b, 562).

Blavatsky, the head theoretician of the early Theosophical Society, was not the only inspiration for Bailey's cosmological model. In *The Masters and the Path* (1925), Leadbeater associated each of the seven rays with spiritual masters, a "characteristic magic" and its corresponding religion, jewels, planets, "Seven Spirits" or "Angels", and various methods of healing (pp. 266–300).²⁰ Five years before, Leadbeater produced a list of "seven Rays" or personal qualities in *The Science of the Sacraments* (1920). This liturgy book for the Liberal Catholic Church, co-founded by Leadbeater and James I. Wedgwood (1883–1951), described the seven attributes of character that a devout Christian ought to develop (Leadbeater 1920, 91–93). The list is largely identical with Bailey's designation of the rays.²¹ In an earlier Theosophical publication, *The Seven Rays of Development* (1910), the British Theosophist Arthur H. Ward presented a system of correspondences between Blavatsky's seven anthropological planes and "rays" representing the virtues of an initiate (cf. Leland 2016, 472). Four of those rays (devotion, art, knowledge, and action) also appear in Leadbeater's list.²²

In short, Bailey's theory of "seven rays" constituted a specific commentary on *The Secret Doctrine* that stands in a tradition of Theosophical authors trying to come to terms with Blavatsky's often impenetrable teachings. These reinterpretations resulted in creative explorations of the human position in the cosmos and corresponding paths of spiritual development. Bailey's septenary cosmology is a prime example of how she expanded "on the possibilities inherent in Blavatskian theosophy," as Hammer put it (Hammer 2004, 53). Catherine L. Albanese reiterated this point: Bailey promoted an inherently Theosophical message with her own spin (Albanese 2007, 464). Whereas Bailey's explanations of the rays were cumbersome and often incongruent—not unlike earlier Theosophical attempts—Albanese recognised the far-reaching impact it had:

In prose that was often well nigh impenetrable and dense with occult terminology (despite Bailey's own castigation of theosophical linguistic habits), she probed the dimensions and distinctions of spiritual energy that the rays represented. Her language would continue into the late twentieth century and on, as New Age and new spirituality aficionados spoke of what rays they had 'come in' (to the planet) on and how that distinguished them as persons. Whatever the ray, though, Bailey had taught them—as had twentieth-century metaphysicians across the board—that they were energy beings (Albanese 2007, 464).

The idea that humans are fundamentally "energy beings" thus formed the core of Bailey's anthropology.

4.3. Anthropology

Bailey's anthropology was intertwined with her model of the seven rays. However, she did not follow the septenary model slavishly. Diverging concepts of the human constitution appear throughout her work. For example, in her introductory remarks to *Esoteric Healing* (1953), Bailey suggested a fourfold division of "dense physical body" and the "more subtle sheaths" of "etheric body", "astral or desire [also: emotional] body", and "mental body" (Bailey 1953, 2–4). Bailey refers to these four bodies as "mechanisms" by which the "soul" manifests itself (ibid., 2–3). She thus followed Theosophical nomenclature in describing the structure of the human self (cf. Hall 2007), omitting, however, Sanskrit terms and thereby aiming for a more reader-friendly description. But even within the same book, Bailey's anthropological model is not set in stone. Forty pages later, she presents a variation of the four-sheaths-plus-soul structure that consists of six levels: (1) the soul; (2) the subtle bodies of the mind and the emotions (equivalent to the astral and mental bodies); (3) the vital body, equivalent to the etheric body; and three systems that belong to the physical body,

that is, (4) the endocrine system; (5) the nervous system; and (6) the cardiovascular system (Bailey 1953, 46, cf. 549).

Such inconsistencies notwithstanding, at the core of Bailey's esoteric anthropology is the notion of an etheric body. Through the etheric body, "all the energies flow, whether emanating from the soul, or from the sun, or from a planet" (Bailey 1934, 105). It is composed of "force currents" and "seven major centres of force" or "vital centres" (i.e., *cakra*)—each aligned with one of the seven rays. These etheric centres are linked by "lines of force" (i.e., *nāḍī*) with the physical nervous system (ibid., 77), which connect the microcosmic etheric body with its broader environment. Thus, the etheric bodies of humanity, the planet, and the solar system are interconnected, thus explaining the effect of macrocosmic, "astrological influences" (ibid., 246). Human beings move "in a whirlpool of forces of all types and qualities" and as they are composed of energies, they are "related to all other energies" (ibid.). The etheric body receives "the streams of energy" that vitalise the physical body (Bailey 1953, 34). As the energies are able to interact with the etheric body (itself composed of energy streams), their agency determines the state of a person's vitality (Bailey 1957, 673).

An initiate of the Arcane School should aim to vitalise and master the etheric body by means of "right thinking" (Bailey 1934, 246). Thought, mind, and consciousness affect energies, and energies manifest via the etheric body in physical reality. The idea of a continuum between mind, energy, and the material world—a crucial tenet of New Thought—forms a core aspect of Bailey's writings on magic and healing (cf. Bailey 1925, 1927, 1953).²³ However, although the mental dimension was crucial to Bailey, her focus was not the repetition of verbal affirmations or other forms of auto-suggestion but visualising the control of energy.

Bailey's descriptions of the etheric body exemplify how her orientalist and scientific rhetoric shifted over time. In her homage to Blavatsky, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire* (1925), Bailey still spoke of the etheric body as the receiver, assimilator, and distributor of "prana" (Bailey 1925, 97) rather than 'energy'. In line with Blavatsky, she defined "prana" as the "vital principle", which is connotated with "life force", an animating "active radiatory heat", and "the driving force of the evolving form" (Borsos 2012, 42). A decade later, in *Treatise on White Magic*, the etheric body turns into a transmitter for generic energies, including "prana" (Bailey 1934, 372), which in *Esoteric Healing* (1953) would rank below "soul energy".

4.4. Bailey's Laws of Energy

Throughout her work, Bailey presented various formulations of her laws of energy. A posthumous book, *The Externalisation of the Hierarchy* (1957), put them in a nutshell: "The keynotes upon which the occult philosophy is built, are: 1. There is naught in manifestation except organized energy. 2. Energy follows or conforms itself to thought. 3. The occultist works in energy and with energies" (Bailey 1957, 674).

Bailey asserted that all of manifested reality is energy: "There is naught but energy, for God is life" (Bailey 1953, 136). She believed energy's fundamental units to be atoms,²⁴ which give structure to matter by means of "more potent energies" (Bailey 1953, 35–36). When describing energy Bailey also resorted to metaphors of fire, following Blavatsky's preference (ibid., 328), as well as fluidal imagery including "streams," "flows", or "currents" (cf. 57). In the fashion of *Isis Unveiled*, Bailey mingled the languages of physics and religion, asserting to transcend both scientific materialism and naïve supernaturalism. The orthodox Christian speaking of "God" and the scientist speaking "with equal reverence" of "Energy" essentially mean the same (Bailey 1922c, 24). Bailey thus practically lifted the notion of energy to the level of a divine entity.

Bailey certainly contributed to the idea of God-as-Energy, which would become a common theme in later New Age ideas of ultimate reality (cf. Hanegraaff 1998, 187). However, she was not the first to make this proposition. The identity of God and energy was also propagated by New Thought authors several decades earlier, although without the same pronounced appeal to science. For example, Harriet Emilie Cady (1848–1941), a homoeopathic physician and student of the “mother of New Thought” Emma Curtis Hopkins (1849–1925), stated in her book *Lessons in Truth* (1896):

God is Spirit, or the creative *energy* which is the cause of all visible things. God as Spirit is the invisible life and intelligence (according to Webster’s definition of spirit) underlying all physical things. There could be no body, or visible part, to anything unless there were first Spirit as creative cause. (Cady 1896, 8; emphasis added)

In other words, divine Spirit is the cause of all existence, and this Spirit is energy. Cady’s reference to *Webster’s Complete Dictionary of the English Language* is notable because the mentioned entry on spirit includes the associations indicated by Cady: “intelligence”, “vital essence”, and “energy”.²⁵ The type of energy signified here refers to a general, *disembodied* life principle rather than a physical quantity relating to material systems. (Webster’s first edition of 1828 already tied “spirit” to “energy”, but described energy as the quality of a *material* substance.²⁶) Similar to Cady, Bailey emphasised the intelligent, creative, and vitalistic aspect of energy, and underscored its role as the driving force behind evolution (Bailey 1960, 256). Crucial to the work of the esotericist-sensu-Bailey is that the telos of divine energy is not insulated from human consciousness but is able to respond to thought and manifest in physical reality.

The second principle, “energy follows thought”, is found repeatedly in Bailey’s books. In *A Treatise on White Magic* (1934, 249), she refers to this principle as “the basic law underlying all magical work”. In the posthumously published *Discipleship in the New Age II* (1955), she speaks of “an occult platitude ever since the days of H.P.B. [...] which could safely be given to the general public” (Bailey 1955, 309). *Esoteric Psychology II* (1942) described “energy follows thought” as an “ancient rule” (Bailey 1942, 587). Bailey first mentioned this aphorism in *The Light of the Soul* (1927), her commentary on the *Yoga-sūtra* of the ancient Indian scholar Patañjali (ca. 350 CE). Here, she frames her principle as a “basic tenet of the Raja Yoga system” and an “oriental truism” (Bailey 1927, 20, 382). It is supposedly akin to the key principle of occult self-development, “As a man thinketh, so is he” (cf. Proverbs 23:7, KJV), which means that adepts only transform themselves by changing their desires and thoughts first.

Whereas Bailey omitted an explicit source for her energetic-mental law, a tangible candidate would be *The Yoga-Sutra of Patanjali* (1890), a translation and commentary by the Indian pundit Manilal Nabhubha Dvivedi (1858–1898)²⁷ that foreshadowed a series of commentaries on Patañjali, including those of Vivekananda and Bailey (cf. Vivekananda 1896). Bailey’s aphorism does not appear verbatim in Dvivedi’s text. However, it is easily derived from the phrase “*prāṇa* follows *vṛtti*” that appears in his introduction to *The Yoga-Sutra of Patanjali* and in a passage in the appendix to his book.²⁸ *Prāṇa* translates as ‘breath’ or ‘vital energy’, whereas *vṛtti* encompasses ‘mind’, ‘consciousness’, or ‘mental content’. Dvivedi explained the difference between *haṭha yoga* and *rāja yoga* in terms of the relation between *prāṇa* and *vṛtti*. While both forms of yoga aim for the attainment of *samādhi* or meditative absorption, *haṭha yoga* assumes that “*vṛtti* always follows *prāṇa*” and thus emphasises physical rather than mental exercises (Dvivedi 1890, vi). In contrast, *rāja yoga* teaches that “*prāṇa* follows *vṛtti*,” meaning that training begins with the mind and a focus on ethical conduct (ibid.; Appendix, vii). Dvivedi’s prioritisation of mental over physical exercises aligned with Bailey’s own preference. It is a small semantic step from ‘vitality

follows mind' to 'energy follows thought', and Bailey did indicate the principle's origin in *rāja yoga*.²⁹

Despite the indebtedness of Bailey's idealism to Theosophy and New Thought, she deemed her own energy doctrine superior to these currents. Whereas she agreed with New Thought (and Christian Science) on the mind's power, she criticised its over-emphasis on the mind, false claims to divine authority, and the focus of the mind's power to improve material well-being. Bailey sought to remedy its shortcomings and "wishful thinking" by forming a "group of initiates" who seek to improve the state of humanity by correctly implementing the idea that energy follows thought through acts of service (Bailey 1953, 192, 282–283, cf. 253–256). Alluding to Besant and Leadbeater's notion of "thought-forms", Bailey rejected the idea that thought could generate vibrations of "mental matter" (Bailey 1953, 575; cf. Besant and Leadbeater 1905, 21–23). She underscored instead the notion of energy as a more subtle mediating agency between mental and material reality (Bailey: *ibid.*).³⁰

Via the notion of energy, Bailey made a case against the dualism of mind and body that she viewed as the cause of the split between religion and science. "Orthodox religion", Bailey stated, has "separated the two great concepts of spirit and matter" (Bailey 1949, 127). It is the "new age workers" who would bridge the gulf between spirit and matter, and religion and science, by demonstrating that "throughout the universe there is only spiritual substance", that is the "motivating energy" behind all actions and forms (*ibid.*). Although energy is secondary to the power of thought,³¹ Bailey's third energetic principle—the adept works with energy—is a recurring leitmotif in her books.

4.5. *The Esoteric Path: Self-Knowledge and Energy Work*

Bailey's esotericism is imbued with the promise of the millennium. With the dawn of the "Aquarian Age", in which the return of Christ is imminent, the delusions plaguing humanity and hindering its spiritual progress will steadily dissipate. However, the process does not occur automatically but requires certain salvific means to usher in the new age. These means are self-knowledge and energy work.

Self-knowledge is the key to sensing "the vibration of that greater Life" of the macrocosm and thereby contributing to the evolution of consciousness (Bailey 1922c, 69). Knowing one's own mental power is the path to finding "the kingdom of God" within oneself (*ibid.*). In *Glamour: A World Problem* (1950), Bailey defines self-knowledge and the subsequent liberation from the bondage of delusion into freedom as the ultimate purpose of creation. Unlike human beings, who are trapped as "prisoners of the planet", only the deity or "Lord of the World" is completely untouched by the illusion of the world of phenomena (Bailey 1950, 242).³² However, once humans learn to "act purely as a channel for the energy of the soul", they are liberated from the distortions caused by sense perception, egoism, and transient emotions (Bailey 1950, 36–37).³³

Esotericists are supposedly aware of the energies that structure physical reality and consciously engage with them. They have both the spiritual depth of a mystic and the scientist's systematic approach to the study of energies.³⁴ In her book *Education in the New Age* (1954), Bailey defined the occupation of the esotericist as working with the "life energy", the causal factor behind physical reality. It is "discovering and working with those principles which energise each level of the cosmic physical plane and which are, in reality, aspects of the qualified life energy" (Bailey 1954, 64). Essential reality ultimately peaks in a single vital principle—the "one life", that is, "the flow of divine energy through all forms". This vital agent is the source of the living universe and all individual forms, through which "we live and move and have our being" (*ibid.*). Whoever knows the dimension of essence

attains the key to actively shaping the various levels of the external world (Bailey 1954, 18, 65).

While all forms ultimately emanate from the one source of energy, the esotericist is aware of a hierarchical spectrum of energies. These range from autonomous physical energies to the energies of consciousness operating on emotional and mental levels. These energies are captured by the “etheric body”, which manifests in and energises the dense body. The energies of the soul emanate from still higher mental levels, to which only the esotericist at a certain point of evolution becomes sensitive (Bailey 1954, 61, 65).³⁵ Initiates will not only learn to distinguish between physical, vital, and soul energies but also discover how to master them. Evoking, awakening, and directing the “energy of the soul”, which purifies the “centres”, the esoteric disciple will successfully contribute to dispelling “the world glamour” or delusion (Bailey 1950, 42–43). To comprehend the energies of the universe and to put them to creative use, proper mental preparation is required: “Esotericism therefore involves a life lived in tune with the inner subjective realities” (Bailey 1954, 67).

Esoteric work, as interpreted by Bailey, means co-creation. It “is the art of ‘bringing down to earth’ those energies which emanate from the highest sources and there ‘grounding them’ or anchoring them” (Bailey 1954, 67). The esotericist is able to mediate between the principles of ‘life’ (or essence) and ‘substance’ (or phenomena). By means of her individual soul and, by extension, the *anima mundi*, the esotericist has access to the various levels of the world of essence. The macrocosm, or “larger Self”, is suffused by an intricate network of meanings and energies, which are transmissible to the human microcosm via the “etheric body” (ibid., 66–67). The etheric body is characterised by a subtle web spanned by force centres along the individual spinal column, which function as portals between the micro- and macrocosm. They are the instruments by which the subjective reality of divine consciousness can be known (ibid.). These force centres are also the focal point in Bailey’s therapeutic theory (see Sections 5.2 and 5.3).

Motivated by the will to serve others, the disciple of esotericism is supposed to learn the “nature, control and direction of energy” (Bailey 1949, 127). The task of the esotericist is to redeem karma through “creative restoration and spiritual integration” (Bailey 1954, 65). This process will supposedly bear fruit in the next solar system, thus contributing to the cosmic evolution. One particular path of esoteric service is the mastering of energies for the purpose of healing.

5. Bailey’s Therapeutic Theory

5.1. The Main Source of Bailey’s Healing Concepts

Recycling material from her earlier books, the most comprehensive exposition of Bailey’s therapeutic theory is contained in *Esoteric Healing* (1953). The ‘source amnesia’ characteristic of the occult genre challenges the precise identification of earlier influences on the text. Most of *Esoteric Healing* is ‘authorised’ by virtue of having been ‘received’ from ‘the Tibetan’ and Bailey rarely makes references to printed sources, a notable exception being Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*.

“When one enters the realm of healing, one enters a world of much esoteric knowledge”, states the introduction to *Esoteric Healing* (Bailey 1953, 1). The book sets an unmatched paradigm for energy healing practitioners decades later and continues to attract readers seventy years after its publication. The posthumously published book—a tome of 771 pages—ranked among her top three bestsellers in 2018 (Blackthorn 2020, 390), indicating the lasting interest it has generated. Here, catchwords of the holistic milieu—consciousness, energy, and subtle bodies—were all combined in an optimistic programme of a future medicine.

With buoyant force, Bailey (or the unnamed editors of her posthumously published books) declared that the soul harbours unknown energies waiting to be released in a fashion that resembles “the attempt of the scientist to release the energy of the atom” (Bailey 1953, 5). Such is the work of the esotericist who strives to uncover “the true art of healing” by tapping into the body’s hidden powers (ibid.).³⁶ *Esoteric Healing* is structured in three parts: (1) the origin of disease; (2) the requirements for healing; and (3) the fundamental laws of healing. True to Bailey’s style, *Esoteric Healing* elaborates on vague Blavatskian tropes to the nth degree. Her long-winded explanations are repetitive and partially contradictory. Hence, any outline of Bailey’s medical theory must naturally remain selective and restrict itself to an attempt to capture the gist of her message.

Key elements of Bailey’s medical theory are built around the notion of an etheric (or vital) body. The new frontier of medicine, she argued, would emphasise the etheric body’s “mechanism of vital, pranic life”, which underlies the nervous system and operates through the “centres” and “nadis” (Bailey 1953, 274–277). The main function of the etheric body is to energise the physical body. At the same time, it serves as the central nexus between microcosm and macrocosm. It connects a person with the “energy body of the Earth and the solar system,” embedding her in a vast and vitalising network of cosmic energies (ibid., 2–3).

Bailey saw a natural connection between esoteric knowledge and therapeutic practice, as all initiates who have achieved “true liberation” would be “transmitters of spiritual energy” (Bailey 1953, 2). Not all esotericists are called to heal the body and many focus on other levels of the subtle body. Nonetheless, esoteric healers share the same aim: “to effect the free flow of energy” (Bailey 1953, 57). The healer is supposedly aware “that energy follows his thought and flows through him to the patient” (ibid., 601). Thus, esoteric healing means “essentially the manipulation of energies” (ibid., 600). It requires knowledge of the subtle force centres, an understanding of evolution, and the esotericist’s own soul development (ibid.).

5.2. The ‘Energetic’ Causes of Disease

Bailey justified her programme of esoteric healing by recourse to the typical line of reasoning of alternative against orthodox medicine (cf. Whorton 2002, 9). She reproached the latter for seeking to cure disease by suppressing the symptoms rather than treating the actual cause of an ailment. Bailey’s “new medicine” was not concerned with “the outer, tangible, physical effects” but claimed to address the “inner causes” located in a patient’s force centres (Bailey 1953, 273).³⁷

Against the backdrop of contemporaneous discoveries on how to improve vitality—for example, via vitamins and nutrition—Bailey highlighted the supposedly revolutionary yet unrecognised role of the etheric body.³⁸ Accordingly, individual disease is caused by disturbances in the etheric centres (Bailey 1953, 273, cf. 73–84)³⁹. Imbalances caused by karma reflect in the centres, which may lead to physical ailments.⁴⁰ A person’s immune response is determined by her etheric body, where the immediate cause of disease is claimed to be located:

All diseases—except those due to accidents, wounds resulting in infections, and epidemics—can in the last analysis be traced to some condition of the centres, and therefore to energy running wild, to energy over-active and misdirected, or insufficient and lacking altogether, or retained instead of used and transmuted into a higher corresponding centre of energy (Bailey 1953, 250–251).

In addition, Bailey laid out a psychosomatic theory of disease, where the etheric body takes an intermediary position between the “inner psyche” and the “outer form” (Bailey 1953, 337–338). Psychological problems arise due to energies affecting corresponding

centres in the etheric body, which in turn impact the endocrine system and lead to the secretion of hormones into the bloodstream via the glands (ibid.). Bailey was fully aware that the notions of “etheric body”, “force centres”, and “subtler energies” had little standing in medical science, but hypothesised that the study of the glands would confirm their agency (ibid., 46).⁴¹

Contrary to the force centres, energies preserve their “essentially divine nature” (Bailey 1953, 587–588). There are no diseased or evil energies, only energies that are out of balance and thus producing friction that manifests as pain, suffering, or even death (ibid.). However, Bailey still described instructions for energetic hygiene reminiscent of early mesmeric practice (Zoehrer 2020, 168). Whereas ‘energies’ are per se divine, subtle ‘forces’ may be contaminated and produce disease. The healer’s task is to carefully absorb those forces while guarding his own etheric body from infection (Bailey 1953, 100).⁴²

5.3. Two Occult Healing Modalities

Bailey claimed to have developed a form of occult healing that is superior to other classes of spiritual healing, e. g., the invocation of the “spirit of the earth”, collaboration with a “healing deva”, faith healing, prayers, affirmations, autosuggestion, and magnetic or hypnotic passes on the etheric body (Bailey 1953, 631, 644–647). Her approach involves the skill to move and project “energy currents” while applying “creative imagination” and “the power to visualize” (ibid., 575). According to Bailey, two basic forms of occult healing must be distinguished: “magnetic work” on the one hand, and the “work of radiation” on the other (ibid., 578, 643), which roughly correspond to animal magnetism and New Thought visualisation techniques. Magnetic healing involves a healer’s hands and aims at pouring “vital healing force” upon the patient (Bailey 1953, 642–643). Notably, Bailey refers to the magnetic healing agent also as “prana or vital planetary fluid”, revealing a likely influence from earlier forms of ‘pranic healing’ as proposed by Reuß, Vivekananda, or Atkinson (cf. Zoehrer 2021).⁴³

According to Bailey, not much training or knowledge is needed for the “natural healer” to transfer “prana”: “He heals but does not know how or why; prana simply flows through him in the form of a strong current of animal vitality”, that moves not through the *cakras* but through the spleen (Bailey 1953, 579). The magnetic/pranic healer uses his hands either through the laying-on-of-hands on the particular centres and the diseased area, or through activating the energy of the centre associated with the diseased organ via the hands (Bailey 1953, 649). An “average unintelligent healer” merely transmits “prana” and is only temporarily effective because he is unable to engage with the actual cause of disease (Bailey 1953, 329, cf. 579).

In contrast, radiatory healing is conducted without physical contact and aims to “feed the soul life of the patient” via the healer’s “auric emanation” (ibid., 643). Radiation is supposedly more advanced than magnetic healing as it draws soul energy and projects it on the patient’s aura and soul (ibid.). A crucial aspect of this approach is the concentration of “love and the healing force” in the brain, and their subsequent projection “into the stream of energy which issues from the ajna centre” between the eyebrows (Bailey 1953, 102). During the pouring out of energy in a group setting, Bailey suggests the following invocation: “May the love of the One Soul, focussed in this group, radiate upon you, my brother, and permeate every part of your body—healing, soothing, strengthening; and dissipating all that hinders service and good health” (ibid., 105).⁴⁴ In order to project a kind of love that is untainted by lower emotional qualities, it is the healer’s responsibility to cultivate herself as a “pure channel” (Bailey 1953, 677). Flooding the patient with “pure soul energy” was the “way that Christ worked”, supposedly surpassing all other forms of healing (Bailey 1953, 329).

Although Bailey downplayed the effect of magnetic (or pranic) healing, she retained a characteristic element of animal magnetism in her own system: The crucial requisite of a healer is the ability to enter into “sympathetic rapport with the patient” and induce an “unbreakable relationship between the healer’s etheric body and that of the patient [...] for a definite circulation of energies” (Bailey 1953, 7, 645). Numerous other parallels could be drawn between Bailey’s healing theory and classical animal magnetism. Among the most obvious are the grand vision of the role of healers in a new era, the cosmic or universal nature of the healing agent, the metaphors of flow and fire (ibid., 328), the association of clairvoyance with the solar plexus (ibid., 83),⁴⁵ measures for energetic hygiene (Bailey 1953, 100), and references to the music of the spheres.⁴⁶ In a sense, Bailey’s therapeutic model could be considered one of the many recycled editions of what inherently constitutes mesmerism, supplemented with elements of Theosophy and New Thought.

Esoteric Healing offers a case study of what I refer to as a ‘futuristic retro-medicine’ that envisions a revolutionary, utopian healing practice while mostly ignoring its conceptual precursors. Her juxtaposition of a magnetic versus a radiatory model falls in line with an observation described by the Swiss literary scholar Sabine Haupt. Haupt made the case that medical/psychological, physical, and occult theories converged in the early twentieth century into a discourse of radiation. The “spiritual-material force of nature” (*geistig-materielle Naturkraft*), which explained various paranormal phenomena and was first coined as ‘magnetic’ or ‘fluidal’, steadily moved towards a language of rays and radiation (Haupt 2005, 173).⁴⁷ Already Mesmer himself referred to an “invisible fire [...] equal to the light in the aether” that was transferred to his patients for the purpose of healing (Mesmer 1814, 110). The Romantic physician and *Naturphilosoph* Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869), a late scientific defender of mesmerism, introduced in his seminal work *Psyche. Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Seele* [On the Developmental History of the Soul] (1846) the notions “radiations of the unconscious” (*Strahlungen des Unbewußten*) and “radiations of the soul-life” (*Strahlungen des Seelenlebens*) (Carus 1846, 269–270). He believed that these somnambulist emanations were ejected during natural or magnetic sleep and influenced other people. Reichenbach thought his *Od* to manifest in the form of radiating light. His idea was adopted by Blavatsky and du Prel. Du Prel believed that “radiations emanating from the human organism could lead to [telepathic or telekinetic] action at a distance” (du Prel 1899a, 23).⁴⁸

Around 1900, occultists speculated whether the “X-rays” they postulated could be identical with the short-wavelength rays discovered in 1895 by the German physicist Konrad Röntgen (1845–1923). Röntgen’s discovery set the stage for the rapid development of radiation physics that included Henri Becquerel’s (1852–1908) research on natural radioactivity. Previously, the English physicist William Crookes (1832–1919), who later joined the Theosophical Society and served as president of the Society for Psychical Research between 1896 and 1899, attempted to explain spiritualist phenomena in terms of electromagnetic waves (Haupt 2005, 169).

Bailey did not indicate any concrete influence on her radiation theory. A likely template to Bailey’s idea of healing energies flowing or radiating from soul to soul is again to be found in the New Thought discourse. For example, Hopkins spoke of “the streams of healing energy that quiver forth from your soul” in a series of lectures first published as booklets in the 1930s (Hopkins 2017, 80). Atkinson only casually mentioned the term “mental radiation” (Dumont 1913, 31). However, some similarities can be found between Bailey’s description of radiatory healing and Atkinson’s “Spiritual Healing” outlined in his book *Psychic Healing* (1906), published under his pseudonym Yogi Ramacharaka.

Like Bailey, Atkinson invoked the imagery of the healer as a “channel” for a transcendent agent. “Spiritual Healing”, Atkinson believed, “is not ‘done’ by anyone. [...] he

healer becomes an instrument or channel through which flows the Spiritual Healing Force of the Universe. That is, the healer is able to open up his Spiritual Mind as a channel for the inflow of the Spiritual force of the Universe, which passes through the Healer into the Spiritual Mind of the patient” and, thus, restore health (Ramacharaka 1906, 174). Similar to Bailey’s radiatory healing, Atkinson positioned “Spiritual Healing” as a particularly “high form of healing” that depended on the healer’s degree of spiritual unfoldment. Mixing fluidal and light metaphors, he stated that the spiritual healer would let the “light of his or her higher mentality [...] pour forth upon the mind of the patient, bathing him in a wave of high thought and lifting him, temporarily to a higher plane of being” (ibid., 34). Atkinson’s spiritual healing involves the laying-on-of-hands as an option, keeping in mind that “Jesus and his apostles healed by Spiritual Power” and by means of the hands (ibid., 181). In comparable manner, Bailey asserted that the most advanced healers would have mastered both techniques, employing the “vital pranic force” and the “energy of the soul” to effect the healing process (Bailey 1953, 644).

These similarities notwithstanding (and regardless of whether they indicate historical connection or point to a common source), Bailey sharply demarcated her esoteric healer from ordinary “spiritual” or “metaphysical” healers (Bailey 1953, 524–529). Being in conscious touch with her own soul, the esoteric healer has the power to contact (“invoke”) the soul of her patient and enter into “telepathic rapport” with him (ibid., 524). The “healer in the New Age” has acquired the extraordinary ability to express “the quality of divinity” (ibid., 529). However, she ought not to adhere to some “vague mysticism” but must strive for “exact knowledge” about the subtle mechanism of the etheric double (ibid., 524). This involves mastery over her own energy centres, as they are the source of power for treating the patient’s corresponding centres. Thus, the esoteric healer is in tune with the divine, her patients, and herself via the medium of energy.

5.4. *Healing by Seven Rays*

In the final section of *Esoteric Healing*, Bailey suggested seven healing techniques corresponding to her seven rays. She omitted a clear step-by-step guideline on how to concretely apply the techniques and confined herself to opaque “ancient symbolic statements” as the disclosure of esoteric healing methods “would be too dangerous” (Bailey 1953, 705). Insinuating that in the early twenty-first century some disciple would interpret these “magical statements”, she evaded an explicit description of the practical details of her healing approach (ibid., 706).⁴⁹

Bailey’s elusiveness underscores a fundamental tension that underpins her book in general: on the one hand, she assured her readers of a full elucidation of ancient occult knowledge of healing, and on the other hand, she consistently moved the imminent breakthrough “to release the energy of the atom” into the future. Humanity was about to witness “a new era in scientific unfoldment” (Bailey 1953, 713), but just not yet. Essential practical aspects of Bailey’s proposed healing techniques ultimately remained shrouded in mystery, perhaps only reserved for the participants of her correspondence courses. Meanwhile, the revealed parts of her ‘esoteric’ healing conception were substantial enough to stimulate imaginative interpretations by her many readers.

5.5. *Medicine of the Future*

Nothing short of “the medicine of the future” is what Bailey envisioned in *Esoteric Healing* (Bailey 1953, 278). Having no interest in an empirical analysis of the current medical and therapeutic fields, she shared her bold intuitions of how “medical research will trend during the next two hundred years” (ibid.). By way of a Hegelian synthesis, she directed her critique against both biomedicine and religious–therapeutic practices only to offer

her own allegedly superior model. Thus, she did not subscribe to the trench warfare between orthodox and alternative medicine on behalf of the latter. In fact, she regarded the relentless attacks by the “mental schools” (specifically Mental Science, New Thought, Unity, Christian Science), chiropractics, and naturopaths against orthodox medicine as counterproductive (ibid., 256). The successes of these “cults” would by no means surpass the “God-given knowledge” of orthodox medicine (ibid.). At the same time, she saw potential in “faith cures”, which she appreciated as “custodians of needed truths” (ibid.). However, superior knowledge of the art of healing had to be rooted in a conscious and systematic understanding of the healing process. Only an “initiate of high degree” with a Christ-like nature would be worthy of such insight (ibid., 524). Thus, all contemporaneous approaches to medicine and healing appeared to Bailey as necessarily deficient. If they were successful, it was merely “accidental” but not due to conscious understanding (ibid.).

The future medicine that Bailey proposed would today be referred to as a form of ‘integrative medicine’ (cf. Wisneski and Anderson 2005) as it would fuse both conventional and alternative therapies: “Many healers in the New Age will combine orthodox study and knowledge with the art of spiritual healing” (Bailey 1953, 557). This “science and art” would respect the value of ordinary medical and surgical methods while employing “methods of occult healing” (ibid., 526). *Esoteric Healing* envisioned that the forthcoming medical profession would consist of “men and women of spiritual orientation” who are well versed in the “exoteric” skills and knowledge of orthodox medicine, physical anatomy, and conventional treatments of pathological symptoms. Their practice would be complemented with “esoteric learning.” From this fusion “a new medical science will emerge” that is built on two foundations: First, the established medical science concerning the physical body, and second, the “constantly growing understanding of the nature of the etheric body, of the centres, and of the transmission and circulation of certain controlled energies” (ibid., 530).

Bailey prefigured the self-understanding of contemporary energy healers as complementary rather than alternative (in the sense of substitutive) service providers in relation to biomedicine. Whereas seven decades after *Esoteric Healing*, the integration of energy healing into biomedicine remains largely unrealised, individual contact-free and subtle energy-based practices such as Therapeutic Touch have made significant inroads in the field of nursing, postnatal care, and palliative care (cf. Meehan 1998; Zoehrer 2025a).

Only a recalibration of the medical profession could fully meet the needs of a humanity that is increasingly becoming “sensitive and subjectively oriented” (Bailey 1953, 531), indicating the imperative to tap into the energies of the mind and soul. Bailey’s emphasis on the subjective factors of illness and healing was tied to her critique of the complexity and overspecialisation of medical science. In the future, diagnoses could be radically simplified because “Medical men in the New Age” (ibid., 276) understand the relation between the various energies and the centres. However, Bailey admitted at this point that her own knowledge was tentative and further research necessary:

Some day, when more research and investigation have been carried forward, the science of medicine will be built upon the fact of the vital body and its constituent energies. It will then be discovered that this science will be far simpler and less complicated than present medical science (ibid.)

Thus, although Bailey’s “fact of the vital body” was phrased in revolutionary language, it remained but a hypothesis. Despite her integrative vision, the empirical pursuit of objectively diagnosing symptoms was of little relevance to her. In contrast to highly specialised physicians, the “healer in the New Age” would require “more basic and less detailed” knowledge about the etheric “vehicle of energies” (ibid., 549).⁵⁰ While Bailey saw therapeutic value in sound hygiene, pharmaceuticals, vitamins, and exposure to sunlight, the central means in her idealistic medicine was “the use of the mind” (Bailey 1953, 219).

Thought supposedly influences the etheric body's centres, which again activate or inhibit the glands, thus affecting the hormone system. The future healer would be well versed in the relation between the glands and the centres (ibid., 218–220), proficient in directing energies (ibid., 218), and have a developed clairvoyant vision (ibid., 277).

As is typical for complementary approaches, the primary goal of Bailey's "Medicine in the next century" was not curative but preventive and salutogenic. The desirable condition to be achieved by means of energy transfers was "to keep the body in proper balanced order", which includes physiological and psychological aspects (ibid., 218–219). This indicates that Bailey recognised the limitation of her New Age healers who work entirely "with the vital energies" (ibid., 538). She thus anticipated the customary (and often legally required) self-delimitation of contemporary energy healers who constrain their services to the improvement of well-being as a supplement to the medical professional's cure.

6. Bailey's Influence on the Holistic Milieu

The following textual analysis shows that Bailey's influence on leading voices of the holistic milieu in general and the founders of energy healing schools in particular was anything but "muted" (cf. Sutcliffe 2003, 138). This section offers the following counter arguments: Bailey has been perceived as an authority on subtle physiology; she was invoked as a patroness by (predominantly female) authors on energy healing; and served as a model for both the holistic theorist and the holistic guru. Furthermore, implicit references to Bailey's principles of energy underscore that, whereas remembrance of her name has been muffled, the memory of her ideas was kept alive.

6.1. Bailey as an Authority on Subtle Physiology

Bailey's thought directly impacted the popular reception of subtle body concepts and related notions of healing in the latter half of the twentieth century. David V. Tansley (1938–1988), the English populariser of radionics, was among the first to combine radionics with Bailey's teachings on energy and the *cakras* (Tansley 1972, 1985), resulting in a Baileyan turn in a field dominated by engineers (cf. Rauer 1988). This trend was underlined by titles such as *Radionics: The New Age Science of Healing* (1974) by the occultist and flying saucer contactee Riley Hansard Crabb (1912–1994).⁵¹

Kurt Leland demonstrated that Bailey left a mark on the wave of authors who consolidated their own *cakra* systems during the 1980s. A number of these authors adopted (at least partially) the names and associations of the *cakras* coined by Bailey. These include the American engineer, psychologist, and Theosophist Zachary F. Lansdowne (b. 1944), author of *The Chakras and Esoteric Healing* (1986); the German psychologist Klausbernd Vollmar (b. 1946), a member of the Findhorn Community; and the German Reiki practitioner Bodo Baginski (1952–2012), who first combined the popularised seven-*cakra*-system with Reiki (Leland 2016, 372–375).

Several subtle physiological aspects of Bailey's *cakra* doctrine had a lasting effect and gained currency in energy healing modalities. Foundational to various school founders and popularisers is the notion that *cakras* can be over- or understimulated, improperly balanced, or blocked (Leland 2016, 443n23). Equally dispersed among energy healers is the doctrine that the *cakras* are associated with the endocrine glands (ibid., 214–215, 390). Another element adopted from Bailey by several energy healers—probably via the English portrait painter and esoteric author Vera Stanley Alder (1898–1984), a major disseminator of Bailey's teachings—is the belief in the necessity of seven major initiations. These correspond to the mastering of the seven *cakras*, that is, opening them for the uninterrupted flow of wisdom and force that each one represents (ibid., 216).⁵² Although these doctrinal features have become widespread in the field of energy healing, explicit references to Bailey are relatively

rare. For example, when Barbara Ann Brennan (1939–2022) first published her healing method in *Hands of Light* (first published 1987), she presented a *cakra* system that draws substantially on the above-mentioned Bailey features. However, Bailey is mentioned directly only twice: once in the context of discussing the process of incarnation, and once in the bibliography, which lists *Esoteric Healing* (Brennan 1988, 61, 283).

In *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire* (1925), Bailey foretold that by the end of the century, the function of the glands and their connection to the etheric body would be “established past all controversy, and the whole aim of preventive and curative medicine will shift to a higher level” (Bailey 1925, 89). Whereas the promised paradigm shift never materialised, several holistic theorists throughout the 1970s to 1990s rephrased Bailey’s idea, pouring old wine into new wineskins. One such case is William A. Tiller, who offered his take on Bailey’s “radiatory healing” by conceiving the “etheric body” (in his model consisting of the “endocrine/chakra system”, the acupuncture points, and the meridian system) as a “special antenna system”. Tiller postulated a version of the etheric body that would produce radiation comparable to electromagnetic emissions (Tiller 1997, 121, 128), thus again combining radionics with Bailey’s thought.⁵³

In short, the widespread association of *cakras* with subtle flows of energy, the stimulation or inhibition of glands, stages of initiation, and radiation drew abundant inspiration from Bailey. However, not only her ideas but also her personality became a point of reference in the holistic field.

6.2. Bailey as Enlightened Patroness

Several female protagonists of energy healing pointed to Bailey as a teacher of esoteric wisdom. The esotericist and “priestess of Isis” Naomi Ozaniec, for example, referred to Bailey throughout her book *The Elements of the Chakras* (1990) with an eye to channelled insights. Ozaniec repeated Djwhal Khul’s statement contained in the preface to Bailey’s books from 1934 onwards: “My work is to teach and spread the knowledge of the Ageless Wisdom wherever I can find a response” (cf. Ozaniec 1990, 6).⁵⁴ Other references by Ozaniec focus on Bailey’s instructions on how to develop mental clarity, telepathic skills, and higher levels of consciousness. Likewise, her follow-up book *Chakras: A Beginner’s Guide* Ozaniec (1999) starts with Bailey’s ‘revealed’ explanation of how the *cakras* function as a tool for “spiritual awakening”. A revised edition of her first book, now emphasising “Energy Centres for Total Health” in the subtitle, refers to Bailey as an authority on the subtle body and meditation (Ozaniec 2000).

Caroline Myss (b. 1952) was a “major spokesperson for chakra beliefs” during the 1990s (Hammer 2004, 190). Her book *Anatomy of the Spirit* (1996) presented a form of “intuitive healing” that combines Theosophical heritage with Christian sacraments and the Kabbalah. Although Myss did not explicitly cite Bailey, the latter’s *Esoteric Healing* is listed in her selected bibliography, again indicating the perception of Bailey as an authority in the field.

In *Wheels of Light* (first published in 1989), Rosalyn L. Bruyere (b. 1946) produced a hero-legend that British Theosophists and Bailey’s Arcane School “traveled to India, ‘became enlightened’, returned, and wrote about chakras” (Bruyere 1994; 57).⁵⁵ Despite this brief tribute, the self-declared clairvoyant and reader of the ‘human energy field’ cited Bailey only once (ibid., 27) when quoting from the posthumously published *The Rays and the Initiations* (1960) on the revelation of esoteric mysteries. The same quotation will be repeated in revised, gendered form by Diane Stein (b. 1948) as an epigraph to her book *Essential Reiki* (1995):

That which is a mystery shall no longer be so, and that which has been veiled will be revealed; that which has been withdrawn will emerge into the light, and

all *women* shall see and together they shall rejoice. (Stein 1995; cf. Bailey 1960, 332, emphasis added)

Stein, an American wicca and women's rights activist, represents a devoted feminism that, on a surface level, is incompatible with Bailey's Edwardian style. However, like Bailey and the early leaders of the New Thought movement, she advocated for the social recognition of religious–therapeutic approaches, which had been predominantly practiced by lay-women vis-à-vis a highly professionalised, “patriarchal medicine” (Stein 1990, 10).⁵⁶ Although Ozaniec, Myss, Bruyere, and Stein mention Bailey only punctually, what they have in common is that they invoke her as a patroness who not only was conversant with the art of healing but also taught a path to enlightenment.

Going beyond the adoration of Bailey as a symbolic figure, two male representatives of the holistic milieu built even more extensively on Bailey's repertoire and self-image. They were the American physician Richard Gerber, a systematiser of energy healing practices, and the Chinese-Filipino healer–teacher Choa Kok Sui, who initiated a global energy healing movement. Both began to publish on energy healing at the peak of the surge of New Age literature in the late 1980s.

6.3. “Medicine for the New Age”: Bailey as a Model for the Holistic Theorist

An instructive case for Bailey's often implicit but foundational influence on the holistic milieu of the 1980s is *Vibrational Medicine* (1988), an extensive compilation of various energy healing modalities, praised by *Publishers Weekly* as “the cutting edge of the whole health movement” (ibid., blurb).⁵⁷ The book was authored by Richard Gerber (1954–2007), a practitioner of internal medicine with an interest in alternative methods of healing.⁵⁸

Adopting the exorbitant revolutionary rhetoric of 1980s New Age scientism, Gerber sought to overcome “the Newtonian paradigm of physics” allegedly underlying established biomedicine and embrace “the Einsteinian viewpoint” that would allow us to understand the human being as “interpenetrating, interactive energy fields” (Gerber 1988, 34). In contrast to the “Newtonian” or mechanistic view of humans as sophisticated biological machines, the anthropology behind *Vibrational Medicine* is avowedly vitalistic. It presumes a “unique form of subtle energy that has yet to be fully grasped by the scientists of the twentieth century” and is known as “life-force” or the “spirit that animates all living creatures” (ibid., 32). According to Gerber, the energetic view of the human being was the decisive distinction compared to the biomedical framework: “This spiritual dimension is an aspect of human nature that is not taught in medical school nor well understood by most physicians. But the spiritual element is a part of human existence that must be taken into account if we are to truly understand the basic nature of health, illness, and personal growth” (ibid.). Moreover, he held that if medicine advanced by investigating and integrating alternative approaches it would certainly rediscover the “human multidimensional anatomy [...] described by ancient schools of healing throughout the world,” a central element of which is “the etheric body” (ibid., 33).

Whereas Gerber acknowledged the inspiration he received from Bailey, along with other Theosophists—i.e., Charles W. Leadbeater, Rudolph Steiner, Geoffrey Hodson, and Dolores Krieger—and physicists including Albert Einstein, David Bohm, and Tiller (ibid., 19), Bailey's impact on Gerber is tangible but rarely explicit. He cited *Esoteric Healing* only twice: First, in the context of discussing the lack of scientific recognition of the *nāḍīs* (“an intricate and most extensive network of fluid energies”), and second, when associating the *cakras* with the glands (Gerber 1988, 134–135, 138; cf. Bailey 1953, 195, 625). Without referring to Bailey, a notable parallel is Gerber's division of the “human subtle energetic anatomy” into “physical”, “etheric”, “astral”, and “mental” levels (Gerber 1988, 136), a fourfold nomenclature that was also applied in *Esoteric Healing* (Bailey 1953, 2–4). These

terms were either adopted from Bailey or derived from a common Theosophical source, for example, Besant, Leadbeater, or Arthur A. Powell (1882–1969) (cf. Leland 2016, 392)—possibly via Tiller’s texts.⁵⁹ Gerber additionally mentioned other subtle vehicles above the “mental body”, including the “causal body” (Gerber 1988, 154). The latter was a common element in Theosophical models (cf. Hall 2007), which also appeared in Bailey’s tabulation of subtle bodies with their corresponding force centres (Bailey 1953, 45).⁶⁰

Comparable to Bailey’s distinction between magnetic and radiation healing, Gerber discerned between less efficient “magnetic healing” or laying-on-of-hands techniques that supposedly only affect the physical and etheric level, on the one hand, and “spiritual healing”, which purportedly work at the level of higher subtle bodies including the “mind and spirit”, on the other (Gerber 1988, 318–319). As in Bailey’s idealism, “consciousness” takes priority over “energy”, and is indeed “the highest form of energy” (ibid., 418). Its journey through matter “provides the strongest driving force for the evolutionary process” of both humanity and the planet (ibid.). Recognisable echoes of Bailey’s vision are also found in the chapter titled “The Emergence of Medicine for the New Age”. Gerber believed that the “spiritual/holistic medicine of the future” surpasses biomedicine because it allegedly deals with the true cause of illness “at the subtle-energy level” (Gerber 1988, 428). Finally, the perhaps clearest indication of Bailey’s impact on Gerber is that he dedicated his book “to the vast spiritual Hierarchy which silently works to uplift the human condition”.

6.4. “Service to the World”: Bailey as a Model for the Holistic Guru

There is hardly any founder of a school of energy healing who so thoroughly emulated Bailey as Choa Kok Sui (1952–2007). Born as Samson Lim Choachuy to a Protestant father and a Buddhist mother, Choa Kok Sui relished the library of his father, a member of the Theosophical Society in the Philippines, during his teenage years. He developed a particular interest in mysticism, occultism, Rosicrucianism, and the Astar Foundation, a ‘mystery school’ founded in 1951 by Robert (1913–2006) and Earlyne Chaney (1916–1997).⁶¹ In his twenties, he conducted experiments with the aim of developing clairvoyant abilities (cf. Leland 2016, 376). Choa Kok Sui’s system called GMCKS Pranic Healing⁶² was an amalgam of Atkinson’s original exposition of “Pranic Healing” and the (post-)Theosophical *cakra* systems of Leadbeater, Arthur E. Powell, and Bailey. He thus embedded his school of energy healing firmly within twentieth-century esoteric discourse (Zoehrer 2020, 2021).

Choa Kok Sui drew extensively from Bailey’s work. Similar to Bailey, Choa Kok Sui claimed that parts of his healing concept were channelled from an inner teacher to whom he first referred to as “Respected Teacher Mei Ling” (Choa Kok Sui [1987] 1990, xxx). He later identified his master as the past incarnation of the Hindu god Rāma and the legendary Indian Tantric adept and Tibetan cultural hero Padmasambhava (also known as Guru Rinpoche, ca. 8th and 9th centuries CE) (Choa Kok Sui 2006, 17). Five of Bailey’s books are listed as “recommended reading” in Choa Kok Sui’s first book, *The Ancient Science and Art of Pranic Healing* (Choa Kok Sui 1987, 25, 337), re-published by Samuel Wieser as *Pranic Healing* (1990). In the introduction, Choa Kok Sui suggested *Esoteric Healing* to those who sought a deeper understanding of the *cakras* (Choa Kok Sui [1987] 1990, 22).

Choa Kok Sui regarded his healing movement as being at the helm of Bailey’s “divine Plan”, which anticipated the coming of a World Teacher towards the close of the twentieth century (cf. Bailey 1922c, 61). In support of this Plan, several disciples would be “sent to incarnate on the planet Earth” and initiate healing schools, including Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, *qigōng*, and, lastly, Pranic Healing (Choa Kok Sui 2006, 66–67). However, in contrast to other teachers of energy healing, ‘Master’ Choa Kok Sui claimed to be aware of his identity as an incarnated disciple of the Hierarchy (ibid.).

In *The Origin of Modern Pranik Healing* (2006), Choa Kok Sui recognised the historical indebtedness of his healing system to Mesmer, the Theosophists, and Bailey. While he appreciated *Esoteric Healing* for its “many priceless teachings and hints”, he also criticised Bailey for using her own terms that supposedly deviated from the dictations of Djwhal Khul. This was the case when she made the distinction between magnetic and radiatory healing (Choa Kok Sui 2006, 84), which depreciated healing through *prāṇa*. Choa Kok Sui regarded all traditional or occult therapies as insufficient “arts” instead of “science” (ibid.). His declared mission was to reorganise them and establish “a fully developed healing science” based on clairvoyant observations, systematic experiments, and a system of treatment protocols (ibid., 85). In this manner, Choa Kok Sui reproduced the tension already inherent in Bailey’s work: claims of scientific support on the one hand, and reliance on authoritative spirit guides on the other.

Apart from communion with a Tibetan master, Choa Kok Sui integrated dozens of other elements from Bailey into his doctrinal, ritual, and organisational system. These include meditations, invocation formulas, full moon gatherings, applications of the seven rays, and the establishment of a worldwide organisation for disseminating teachers and healers. Choa Kok Sui taught his disciples to regularly practice a meditation practice called “Meditation on the Twin Hearts” (Choa Kok Sui [1987] 1990, 237). Its purpose is twofold: On the one hand, it allows the pranik healer to develop “cosmic consciousness or illumination;” on the other, it is “a form of service to the world” (ibid.). Choa Kok Sui regarded this exercise as an instrument to harmonise and bless the world, thus ushering in the “Golden Age of World Peace” (The Pranik Healers 2023).

There are several indications that Bailey provided the template for the “Meditation on the Twin Hearts”. First, she instructed her “world servers” to meditate in order to pave the way for the New Age. Second, Bailey describes a technique similar to Choa Kok Sui’s in her *Letters on Occult Meditation* (1922), however, in less detail.⁶³ Third, Choa Kok Sui inserted a blessing obviously inspired by Bailey’s “Great Invocation”, which her Arcane School had promoted from 1935 onwards in order to advance the coming age, the return of Christ, and the execution of the “Plan of Love and Light” (Albanese 2007, 465). One line of Choa Kok Sui’s version appears to be a paraphrase: “From the Heart of God, Let the hearts of all sentient beings be filled with divine love and kindness” (Choa Kok Sui [1987] 1990, 240). The corresponding line in Bailey’s invocation reads: “From the point of Love within the Heart of God Let love stream forth into the hearts of men” (Bailey 1953, xi).⁶⁴

In its final version of 1945, Bailey’s Great Invocation reflects the three qualities attributed to God (intelligence or mind, love, and will) and summons their full realisation in humankind. Choa Kok Sui picked up on this theme in his list of “Spiritual Findings” (Choa Kok Sui 2006, 286). During full moons—inspired by Bailey’s interpretation of the Buddhist festival of Vesak and the full moon meditations practiced in the Arcane School—Choa Kok Sui’s disciples gather in groups to meditate and recite the Great Invocation (The Pranik Healers 2024b; cf. Bailey 1948, 154; 1957, 349–352, 419)⁶⁵. He brought Bailey’s Great Invocation up-to-date by reformulating it in a gender-inclusive and post-Christian language that speaks of “every person” instead of “all men”, of “human race” instead of “race of men”, and “Great Messenger” instead of “Christ” (The Pranik Healers 2024a). In this way, Choa Kok Sui practiced Bailey’s own advice to conserve aspects of the “old and beloved form”, but also to expand and enrich it (quoted as an epigraph in Choa Kok Sui [1992] 1995).⁶⁶

Choa Kok Sui gave the ‘seven rays’ another function by applying them to management rules. His booklet *Achieve the Impossible* (2012) presented a model of business management that promises the true path to success by following “ancient esoteric teachings” (Choa Kok Sui 2012, 67). Notably, he used Bailey’s attributes of the seven rays ad verbatim except for the last one: Instead of “Ceremonial Magic and Order”, he christened the seventh ray

“Organisation and Structure”, underscoring once more his pragmatic approach to Bailey’s esotericism (ibid., 80).

Organisation was indeed a skill of Choa Kok Sui that enabled the globalisation of Pranic Healing. On 23 July 1990, he established the World Pranic Healing Foundation to promote his healing system. The organisation set up branches in South East and East Asia, India, the Americas, Europe, and Oceania (Choa Kok Sui 2006, 201–209), and maintains its head office in Makati, Philippines. His global vision and missionary zeal were likely inspired by Bailey’s Lucis Trust and World Servers. But whereas Bailey’s teachings on healing remained highly abstract, Choa Kok Sui was praxis-oriented and translated several Baileyan elements into a simplified and applicable format.

6.5. Anonymous Baileyisms

Choa Kok Sui’s approach to focus on the concrete and practical reflects a general tendency among contemporary holistic authors. It omits much of the conspiratorial vibe of Bailey and other early New Age protagonists. Instead of complex cosmologies, initiations into hierarchies of esoteric masters, or grand millenarian narratives, the reader is given simple recipes for applying healing energies. As a consequence, Bailey’s influence in more recent introductions and handbooks on energy healing is often reduced to her basic principles of energy. For example, the American author Cyndi Dale (b. 1959) adopts Bailey’s principle of “there is naught but energy” and rehashes it in positive terms, however, without mentioning any source: “Energy is information that moves, and it comprises absolutely everything, including both the tangible and intangible aspects of ourselves” (Dale 2020, 9). Physical, psychological, and spiritual hardships are interpreted as symptoms of energetic imbalances. Correspondingly, the solution lies in “work on an energetic level” (ibid.). Dale thus embraced Bailey’s tenet that healing primarily takes place at the level of subtle energies. However, while Bailey envisioned an integration of orthodox and energetic medicine, Dale places energy healing firmly in the field of complementary therapies.

Bailey’s reach was not limited to American, British, or Filipino authors. A burgeoning European landscape of energy healers remains largely unexplored from a Religious Studies perspective, yet it stands to reason to assume that it has been decisively shaped by Bailey’s ideas. For example, the occupational profile of Austrian energy healers, which outlines the activities of more than 20,000 active practitioners and is meant to safeguard legal protection of the craft, contains a few Baileyisms without crediting her. The document states that “an energetic ritual is based on the principle ‘energy follows attention’” (WKO 2020, 7).⁶⁷ It describes a system of subtle energy bodies, including the etheric body, the emotional body, the mental body, and the spirit body (ibid., 3), clearly echoing Bailey’s (and earlier Theosophical) anthropology. The document further distinguishes between the level of information (encompassing mental and emotional energies) and the level of dense energy (the energies operating through the aura, *cakras*, and meridians) (ibid., 5). Charly Lechner, the speaker of the trade group of energy healers in Vienna, explicitly recognises a connection between energy healing and esotericism: “For sure, the boundary between esotericism and energy healing cannot be sharply drawn” (Lechner 2023).⁶⁸ He holds that esotericism represents the belief in the mysterious powers of the universe and its harmonies, while energy healing refers to “pragmatic knowledge” of energies “that are often inexplicable, but still effective” (ibid.).⁶⁹ In this self-understanding of energy work being a decidedly ‘esoteric’ practice Bailey’s ideas are reverberating.

7. Discussion: Bailey and the Occult–Holistic Connection

Alice Ann Bailey was a quiet and elusive but intensely imaginative author who had a sense for the appetites of the spiritual seekers of her time. The echoes of her thought were

far-reaching and still resonate with contemporary forms of energy healing. Several key points can be extracted from the above exploration of Bailey's work and influence on the holistic field, in which healing and 'New Age religiosity' merge together (Hammer 2015a: 373–374; cf. Albanese 2000).

First, Bailey forms a critical joint between the nineteenth-century occult vitalism (surrounding the terms of *fluidum*, *Od*, ether, and *prāṇa*) and the holistic vitalism of the twentieth century that largely focused on (vital or subtle) energy as the overarching notion for the supposed healing agent. Her energetic worldview was ingrained in the Blavatskian tenet of 'the One Life' as a transcendent, unifying principle. She believed the vital power to be the source of all energies making up the manifested world and the driver of evolution. Bailey's vitalism infused her cosmology, anthropology, esotericism, and therapeutic theory. Her religious–therapeutic model thus rested on the idea of a purpose-oriented, living universe, in which the levels of cosmos, solar system, planet, and humanity are intertwined. In this worldview, initiates are in a position of co-creators and active agents who partake in the cosmic evolution of consciousness. The outlook that Bailey offered was fundamentally optimistic, suggesting an independent, can-do mentality that flowed into her healing concept. Only few holistic actors designed a full-fledged cosmology as the basis of their healing approach. However, the belief in vitalising, subtle energies in connection with a subtle physiology (including an etheric body and *cakras*) remains a hallmark in the field and often bears Bailey's imprint.

Second, Bailey understood esotericism (and synonymously occultism) as the work with energies. "Esoteric healing" primarily engages with the flows of energy transmitted via the etheric or vital body, the nexus between the physical, material body, and the 'higher' subtle bodies, including the soul. Her use of the term 'esoteric' has a substantial and social dimension. On the one hand, it is rooted in an occult or New Thought variant of idealism, which emphasises the power of the mind over the energies that shape the world. On the other hand, access to the knowledge of essential reality requires initiation into a spiritual hierarchy of adepts and masters.

Bailey can be counted as an esotericist in terms of several etic definitions. Antoine Faivre suggested six defining features of 'Western esotericism'. Of these, the conception of an interconnected universe as 'living nature', animated by a light or a hidden fire, arguably also pertains to Bailey's cosmology rooted in 'the One Life' and the seven rays emanating from it. The other elements of Faivre's esoteric thought form—correspondence, mediation/imagination, transmutation, convergence, and lineal transmission (Faivre 1994, 10–15)—apply in varying degrees to Bailey's work. While most of them pale in comparison to Bailey's vitalism, the clearest indication of her work's esoteric character *sensu* Faivre, is her emphasis on the transmission of secret knowledge from master to student. The initiation of the adept as the defining trait of the 'esoteric' is underscored in Julian Strube's model. Based on a historiographical analysis, Strube notes three aspects associated with what has been described as 'esoteric' or in equivalent, non-European terms: (1) the appeal to a primordial religion or wisdom tradition; (2) secrecy and initiation; and (3) claims of special powers and associated practices, for example, magic and yoga (Strube 2023, 257).⁷⁰ All three features match Bailey's type of esotericism. However, Faivre and Strube's categories do not capture two further key elements of Bailey's esotericism: the appeal to science and the public dissemination of esoteric claims to knowledge.

What the historian of science communication Robert M. Erdbeer and cultural historian Christina Wessely termed "modern esotericism" may be a better fit. According to Erdbeer and Wessely, modern esotericism emerged in the wake of modern science and constitutes the shadow of popular science (Erdbeer and Wessely 2009: 156). Its central feature is that it uses the rhetoric of exact science (*Naturwissenschaft*) to deliver a "secret doctrine for all"

(*Geheimlehre für alle*). This doctrine, however, has less to do with science proper than a “vitalistic”, subject-centred *Naturphilosophie* (ibid., 170–171). Characteristic of *Naturphilosophie* is its inherent performative aspect, which also applies to Bailey’s energetic worldview, although its practical application is often only implicit or indicated since it is reserved for initiates. Channelling, meditation, prayers, and invocations were part and parcel of Bailey’s esotericism, as they are of religious–therapeutic approaches of the holistic milieu.

Bailey contributed to the notion of ‘esoteric’ as a possible self-label for holistic practitioners, although it remains a contested one. Only a fraction of energy healers openly declare themselves as esotericists. If so, ‘esoteric’ has a dual function: (1) to attract those already steeped in alternative-religious discourse and experimental spirituality (cf. Choa Kok Sui), and (2) to evade scientific and biomedical scrutiny by setting up a defensive demarcation (cf. Lechner 2023).

Third, Bailey’s appeal to science is half-hearted. The age of energy had dawned and would be fully realised with the tapping into the energy of the atom for peaceful purposes. In Bailey’s lifetime generating electricity from nuclear energy was a feasible yet unrealised hope. Although she alluded to science as the harbinger of progress, she did not regard science as the highest authority of knowledge and relied more on revelation and intuition than experimental validations of her hypotheses. Her therapeutic theory joins the genre of what I refer to as ‘futuristic retro-medicine’, the postulation of an iatrophysical theory that relies on a speculative power as a healing agent that has been recycled in numerous variations. The idea of healing through energy constitutes another addition to the chain of Mesmer, Reichenbach, du Prel, Blavatsky, Vivekananda, and Abrams. As in the prototype of mesmerism, Bailey stipulated that a subtle, cosmic agent holds out the potential for a revolutionary therapeutic application, and that it would be on the verge of recognition by science and medicine. However, science was not her highest authority.

In contrast to Mesmer’s enlightened physicalism, Bailey advocated a spiritualised, occult physicalism that derived its authority from Djwhal Khul, a representative of an alleged hierarchy of masters. She (or her posthumous editors) announced that the specifics of the relationship between the glands, the etheric body, and the higher energies are to be confirmed empirically by “the open-minded endocrinologist” sometime in the future (Bailey 1953, 218). This underlines the religious character of Bailey’s project: the assumption of a subtle agent is unfalsifiable. Not experimentation but initiation leads to its understanding and control. Although the paradigm shift in medicine is supposedly imminent, experimental validation is not urgent and the hierarchy’s guidance counts more than science. Accordingly, Bailey did not further pursue a stronger synthesis of her esoteric system with state-of-the-art physics.

The scientific key terms in *Esoteric Healing* are “energy”, “magnetic”, and “radiation”. Bailey’s distinction between “magnetic” and “radiatory” healing reflects her evaluation of mesmerism and New Thought, but hardly bears any connection to physical theories. It is noteworthy that Bailey completely ignored the continued scientific development that led to the rise of quantum physics during the 1920s and Erwin Schrödinger’s (1887–1961) development of wave mechanics. A reason could be the degree of abstraction in quantum physics, where intuition (*Anschaung*) gave way to a probability function of matter that describes a purely mathematical entity. Quantum waves elude physical reality until they ‘collapse’ by means of interaction, i.e., measurement. Despite the intangible nature of quantum physics, ‘quantum mysticism’ will become a key feature of New Age science and holistic reinterpretations of the mind-over-matter principle. Holistic interpretations of quantum physics appearing from the 1960s onwards will augment the New Thought doctrine that ‘mind creates material reality’, which underlies Bailey’s motto ‘energy follows thought’.

Fourth, Bailey's references to a 'mystic East' bear the mark of her Blavatskian heritage. Her work is framed by an occult orientalism involving secret Tibetan masters and opaque Sanskrit notions.⁷¹ However, her appeals to the East mostly remained within the bounds of Theosophical nomenclature while her writings were intended for a secularising, Western audience. On the one hand, Bailey uplifted purported South Asian wisdom to the level of exotic science. This motif is exemplified by the christening of her system of energy flows and transformation as "The Science of the Antahkarana" (Bailey 1954, 147). On the other hand, she pursued the approach of Besant and Leadbeater by de-Sanskritising Theosophical terms to reach a wider Euro-American readership. Examples are her translation of *cakras* as 'force centres', and her preference for the notion of energy over *prāṇa*. Thus, while preserving the air of a mysterious, ancient esoteric path forged by Asian masters, Bailey's teachings were couched in a scientised language. Emulations of this approach with a slightly more pronounced orientalist spin is found, for example, in Choa Kok Sui's "ancient science and art" of Pranic Healing (Choa Kok Sui 1987; cf. Zoehrer 2020, 172).

Fifth, Bailey crucially informed the basic doctrinal elements of energy healing, contributing to its global dissemination. Her influence reflects particularly in (a) the widespread adaptation of her principle 'energy follows thought'; (b) the role of the etheric body and the *cakras* in psychosomatic concepts of illness and healing; and (c) the appeal to a spiritual master as the source of knowledge surrounding hidden powers.

Sixth, Bailey's reception by later holistic authors reveals contrasting processes of pragmatism and technologisation. Holistic practices emerged as part of a highly competitive market of service providers in industrial societies of the post-World War II era. Holistic entrepreneurs such as Choa Kok Sui broke down the voluminous, verbose, and often arcane explanations of Theosophists and post-Theosophists (including Bailey) to basic principles and practical healing recipes expressed in simpler language. An almost opposite approach was chosen by scientist-occultists such as William A. Tiller. Tiller embedded elements of Bailey's doctrine into an abstract theory of subtle energy formulated in technical, physicalist language. In this way, he endowed (post-)Theosophical thought with an aura of scientific authority.

8. Concluding Remarks

Bailey was an innovative, early twentieth-century esotericist. Her grand narrative of cosmic evolution synthesised Theosophy, New Thought, and occult-Christian millenarianism. Part of that narrative embraced a vision of a "medicine of the future", that is, the "new age". Whereas her hope of an integrative medicine remains unfulfilled, energy healing has advanced to become a core practice of the holistic market. The recognised influence of Bailey's millenarianism thus appears to have been outpaced by another element of her legacy: the idea that phenomenal reality is but a manifestation of subtle energies, and that these energies are at the command of the adepts whom Bailey conceived as esoteric healers.

While earlier occult authors have explicitly referred to energy, Bailey introduced the most accentuated 'energetic turn' in the esoteric discourse on quasi-physical agents, i.e., the mesmeric *fluidum*, *Od*, or ether. Bailey was an imaginative author first and foremost, not a healer. Nonetheless, she (and her posthumous editors) provided a prototype for an occult energetic therapy that was translated into concrete healing modalities by later founders of energy healing schools. This made her a purveyor of ideas that bridged occult and holistic discourses.

As "there are no essentials in New Age historiography, only contingences and connections" (Sutcliffe 2003, 54), Bailey's role must not be overestimated. But it would be just as grave a mistake to downplay her ideological impact. Above exploration further substantiated Catherine L. Albanese's assessment that "Bailey—perhaps more than any

other single teacher from the theosophical world—set the stage for the New Age movement” (Albanese 2007, 466). Additional research is required to produce a fuller picture of Bailey’s impact on contemporary versions of energy healing. Attempts to reconstruct a genealogy of this discourse are somewhat hampered by “source amnesia” (Hammer 2004, 180), the glossing over of processes of reinterpretation, which pertains to Bailey herself as well as to her reception. Further insights are also expected to be gained from scrutinising the influence of earlier occult-vitalist discourse as well as life philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie*) on her thought. The association of ‘life force’ or a life principle with subtle energies is an ideological mainstay in the contemporary holistic milieu. However, its historical rhizome is yet to be fully excavated.

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Notes

- ¹ Alternative spiritualities in the narrow context of this article shall denote a rhizome of currents that stretch from (Romantic) mesmerism, American Transcendentalism, spiritism, Christian Science and New Thought, Theosophy and related esoteric groups, with offshoots of these nineteenth-century movements extending far into the twentieth-century New Age genre (cf. Fuller 1989; Albanese 2007; Hanegraaff 1998; Heelas et al. 2005; Höllinger and Tripold 2012; Brand 2014). Alternative medicine is here understood as therapies that are *de jure* not privileged to the same extent as the hegemonic, science-based biomedical system (Saks 2002). However, the boundaries between ‘alternative’ and ‘orthodox’ medicine are *de facto* porous as there are gradual degrees of incorporation of (1) autonomous/non-European, (2) complementary/supportive, and (3) optional/specialised practices into contemporary health systems (ibid., 148), dependent on specific local and national conditions.
- ² The recognition and stimulation of a patient’s self-healing ability is a fundamental theme in the history of medicine. Whereas the Renaissance physician Paracelsus (Theophrastus von Hohenheim, 1493–1541) referred to the “inner physician” (*inwendig arzt*) (Paracelsus 1928, 198), contemporary biomedicine speaks of the immune system.
- ³ For example, vegetarianism, hydrotherapy, light and air baths, massage therapy, hypnosis, and (auto-)suggestion (Krabbe 1998).
- ⁴ Including Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine, to note two outstanding examples (cf. Unschuld 2018; Lüddeckens 2020).
- ⁵ This article picks up the notion of “holistic milieu” as coined by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead to describe a prominent strand within the ‘New Age movement’ (cf. Heelas et al. 2005, 8). The “holistic milieu offers a ‘new age of wellbeing’” (ibid., 88–89), which encompasses a wide range of practices that to varying ratios could be classified as therapeutic *and* spiritual. Health and fitness are the primary motive for clients to first engage with holistic activities, followed by the interest in spirituality (ibid., 91). Due to the popularisation of its activities and its established market position, the holistic field has lost much of its former alternative temperament. The imminent millenarian vision of a ‘New Age’, although still latent, does not serve anymore as a convincing *pars pro toto* denotation of the milieu.
- ⁶ The American New Thought author and occultist William Walker Atkinson succinctly highlighted this characteristic tension in occult literature: “It is a marriage of the Ancient Occult Teachings to the latest and most advanced conceptions of Modern Science—an odd union, for the parties thereto are of entirely different temperaments” (Atkinson 1906, 3).
- ⁷ A more detailed account of Bailey’s illustrious family background, life, and legacy is provided by Isobel Blackthorn (2020). For an overview of Bailey’s life and work in the context of esotericism studies see (Bernard 2016).
- ⁸ Although Bailey found the “growing anti-Semitic feeling in the world [...] inexcusable” (Bailey 1953, 268), her own view of Jews was utterly clichéd. See, for example, her remarks on “The Jewish Problem” in Bailey 1944, 96–99.
- ⁹ Besant, who was a British women’s rights activist and socialist, served as president of the Theosophical Society Adyar between 1907 and 1933.

- 10 Bailey's occult orientalism via the allusion to Tibetan wisdom was largely cosmetrical. According to Olav Hammer, "there is hardly any local Tibetan color at all in these works—in fact, the master's name, Djwhal Khul, is not even phonetically a possible name for a Tibetan" (Hammer 2004, 132).
- 11 Thomas Hakl recounts that Bailey met the Jewish-Italian psychologist Roberto Assagioli for the first time in Ascona. Assagioli, who had worked with Freud and Jung, had already corresponded with Bailey in the 1920s. He pursued a project of combining Theosophical ideas with humanistic psychology using the term psychosynthesis. His influence would reach the Esalen Institute, the American "offshoot" of Eranos founded in 1962 by Michael Murphy and Richard Price (1930–1985) (Hakl 2013, 29–30; cf. Bochinger 1994, 402).
- 12 Christoph Bochinger, who also discusses Bailey's millenarianism, noted that the term 'New Age' was used by the English poet William Blake (1757–1827) who again was influenced by Emanuel Swedenborg's (1688–1772) concept of a 'New Church' (Bochinger 1994, 520).
- 13 Like Bailey, Spangler is an important patron for occult brands of contemporary energy healing. For example, Choa Kok Sui's first book *The Ancient Science and Art of Pranik Healing* (1987) cited Spangler's forecast of people "beginning to attune to" the energies of a "new world" (Choa Kok Sui 1987: xviii). Spangler provided the foreword for Dolores Krieger's *A Healer's Journey to Intuitive Knowing* (2020), which, however, omitted any reference to a 'new age'—indicating that the millenarian momentum in the holistic milieu had toned down.
- 14 In her autobiography, Bailey described her first encounter with Blavatsky's work as follows: "I sat up in bed reading 'The Secret Doctrine' at night and began to neglect reading my Bible, which I had been in the habit of doing. I liked the book and, at the same time, I disliked it cordially. I thought it was very badly written, incorrect and incoherent but I could not get away from it" (Bailey 1973, 138).
- 15 Reiser, reputedly a friend of Albert Einstein (1879–1955), advocated scientific humanism and showed a particular interest in psychic phenomena and parapsychics (cf. Reiser 1974).
- 16 Several occult authors including Bailey refer to an "inner man," a notion that has its roots in the antique Platonic-Christian metaphor (cf. Marksches 1995).
- 17 The term "One Life" came to be frequently invoked by Theosophical authors as a fundamental vital principle (cf. Kraler 2022, 180–272). Notably, Blavatsky was fully aware that the notion of a vital principle was controversially debated in academia: "Mr [Thomas Henry] Huxley [1825–1895, the English biologist, comparative anatomist, and stern defender of Darwin's theory which earned him the byname 'Darwin's Bulldog'] does not believe in 'Vital Force,' others do. Dr J. [James] H. Hutchinson Sterling's [1820–1909, a Scottish idealist philosopher and authority on Hegel] work 'Concerning Protoplasm' has made no small havoc of this dogmatic negation. Professor [Lionel Smith] Beale's [1828–1906, an English physician and microscopist] decision is also in favour of a Vital Principle, and Dr B. W. [Benjamin Ward] Richardson's [1828–1896, an English anaesthetist and physiologist] lectures on the 'Nervous Ether,' have been sufficiently quoted from. Thus, opinions are divided" (Blavatsky 1888a, 635). A probable influence on Blavatsky's notion of "one life" was Swedenborg's identical term mentioned in numerous passages of his *Arcana Coelestia* (1752). Swedenborg claimed that although living organisms appear to live autonomously they are recipients of a vivifying, "Divine influx" (Swedenborg [1752] 1946, n. 3001). Hence, "there is one only life, that of the Lord, which flows in and causes man to live" (ibid.). In *The Divine Law Of Cure* (1884), the New Thought theorist Warren Felt Evans (1817–1889) refers several times to the "one life" and explicitly cites Swedenborg's *Arcana Coelestia* (Evans 1884, 24). The theme was also taken up by Atkinson, who integrated the term "one life" into his vision of human evolution: "Man is a Centre of Consciousness in the great One Life of the Universe. His soul has climbed a great many steps before it reached its present position and stage of unfoldment. And it will pass through many more steps until it is entirely free and delivered from the necessity of its swaddling clothes" (Ramacharaka 1906, 206).
- 18 Whether Bailey's idea of evolution was influenced by the French life-philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941), whose *élan vital* was the central propeller of biological evolution in opposition to the Darwinian principle of random mutation (Bergson 1907), requires a separate investigation.
- 19 Of the five volumes only *Esoteric Psychology*, Volumes 1 (1936) and 2 (1942), were published in her lifetime.
- 20 The seven methods of healing Leadbeater associates the rays with are (1) drawing health "from the great fountain of Universal Life"; (2) the exercise of will-power; (3) the calculation of astrological influences and the invocation of the planetary spirits; (4) manual therapies including massage; (5) the employment of drugs; (6) faith-healing; and (7) magical invocations. Leadbeater asserted that a practitioner may operate with all seven powers but would be most effective when applying the method that corresponds to the "ray" of his specific personality (Leadbeater 1925, 280).
- 21 Leadbeater's literary assistant on Sanskrit texts Ernest E. Wood (1883–1965) published his interpretation on the subject in *The Seven Rays* (1925), which construes seven personality types largely reminiscent of Leadbeater's list of virtues without explicitly referring to it. Wood did, however, mention that Leadbeater encouraged him "to publish my own rays material as a book" (Wood 1925, 86).
- 22 The remaining three (religion, trade, healing) have no equivalent in Leadbeater's or Bailey's system.

- 23 Although the exact precursors to Bailey's esoteric idealism remain a matter of speculation, a similar view was articulated by Atkinson. In *Dynamic Thought* (1906), Atkinson proposed that mind, energy (or force), and matter belong to the same continuum. The universe is alive and responsive to thought. However, essential reality is mental and thus takes priority over matter. In other words, "All is Mind—Mind is All" (Atkinson 1906, 158). In this vein, Atkinson understood all material forms and all phenomena of force, energy, and motion to be manifestations of "Vital-Mental Action" (ibid., 157–159).
- 24 Bailey disregarded subatomic particles or specifications of energy in terms of physical theories, but boldly claimed that "the thought that all is energy has already been accepted by modern science" (Bailey 1955, 309).
- 25 After providing the more immediate meanings of "breath" and "aspire", and before listing associations with "soul" or "supernatural apparitions", *Webster's Dictionary* rendered spirit as "Life, or living substance, considered independently of corporeal existence; an intelligence conceived of apart from any physical organization or embodiment; vital essence, force, or energy, as distinct from matter" (Webster et al. 1886, 1273; identical to the entry in Webster et al. 1864, 1273).
- 26 "That which hath power or energy; the quality of any substance which manifests life, activity, or the power of strongly affecting other bodies; as the spirit of wine or of any liquor" (Webster 1828: SPI).
- 27 Dvivedi's work was supported by the Bombay Theosophical Publication Fund.
- 28 The appendix contains a translated and commented extract from another classic manual written in Sanskrit, the *Haṭhapradīpikā* (15th century CE). Dvivedi was the first to translate parts of the *Haṭhapradīpikā* into English. A translation published three years later by South Indian T. R. Srinivasa Iyengar and edited by Tukaram Tatya became widely influential in the emerging field of modern yoga (Kraler 2022, 240).
- 29 The English Theosophist and father of modern astrology Alan Leo (b. William Frederick Allan; 1860–1917) provided a possible junction between Dvivedi's and Bailey's formulations in *Mars: The War Lord* (1915): "It is a well-known fact to those who study the inner springs of human nature that Prana, or life, follows thought" (p. 35). A similar variation of the phrase was offered earlier by Atkinson: "Prana is moved by the Mind" (Ramacharaka 1906, 35).
- 30 Bailey is not entirely coherent when she states that "true healers have to create a healing thoughtform, and through this they consciously or unconsciously work" (Bailey 1953, 676).
- 31 Bailey's mental-energetic principle is construed as an unfalsifiable doctrine. While repeatedly stating that "there is nothing in the created world but energy in motion, and that every thought directs some aspects of that energy", Bailey also noticed that the influence of thought is limited by the sphere of "some greater thinking, directing energy" (Bailey 1953, 631). This qualification gives the last word to a superior, transcendent power, which makes her claim of the power of human thought elude any criticism.
- 32 In her early theological musings, Bailey characterised God in three parts as "Logos", "intelligent Love", and "intelligent loving Will" (Bailey 1922c, 41). In this tripartite union, God is the consciousness of the macrocosm and the "central life" (ibid., 49). Bailey later identified these three "Aspects" in the first volume of her *Esoteric Psychology* (1936) with a fatherly trinity that is associated with the major three rays (Will, Love-Wisdom, Active Intelligence). The motherly nature of God is represented by divine "Attributes" through the four minor rays (Harmony, Science, Devotion, and Magic) (Bailey 1936, 351; cf. Borsos 2012, 22).
- 33 Bailey obviously follows the template of the "three poisons" in Buddhism. She explicates that the troubled condition of the world is the result of human immersion in three types of delusion: First, the failure to see with mental clarity ("illusion"); second, the distraction caused by pride and selfish desires ("glamour"); and third, the emotional confusion situated on the "etheric levels" of the human self ("maya") (Bailey 1950, 20–22). A fourth obstacle is posed by the "Dweller on the Threshold", who guards the path of the aspirant to higher worlds of knowledge. This is a common theme among Theosophists that was first introduced as a literary invention in the occult-romantic novel *Zanoni* (1842) by Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873). Bailey's version of the Dweller represents "the final test of man's courage", a challenge that is comprised of his own sinful nature and impedes his qualification "to tread the Path of Holiness" (Bailey 1950, 22).
- 34 The definition of esotericism as hidden knowledge is dismissed by Bailey as too broad. It suggests that the esotericist is somebody who seeks "to penetrate into a certain secret realm" that is forbidden to the ordinary student (Bailey 1954, 59). Bailey regarded such a formal, epistemic understanding of esotericism as unsuitable and instead suggested a substantial definition focused on the mastery of energies. The mystic is excluded from the endeavour of the esotericist for she only hungers for a vague transcendent being. In contrast, the scientist is indeed dealing with energies like a "true esotericist", although he is unaware of their emanating source (ibid.).
- 35 Bailey laid out a variation of this hierarchy of energies elsewhere with "the life of the One Source" as the "primary energy," from which the soul manifests as "secondary energy" giving appearance to the third, physical form of energy (Bailey 1953, 586).
- 36 The nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 must have been in the vivid memory of her readers. In contrast, the use of the atom's energy for peaceful means was still a noble idea and a matter of intense research during Bailey's lifetime. (The first nuclear power station to connect to a power grid was built by the Soviets in 1954, cf. Kaiser and Madsen 2013.) Thus, her project of harnessing the soul's energy for healing paralleled the scientific and industrial pursuit of new (physical) energy sources in the post war era.

- 37 Later holistic authors would dissent from Bailey's model and regard *cakras* not as causes of disease but only as diagnostic tools. For example, Dora Kunz and Dolores Krieger, the creators of Therapeutic Touch, attempted "to correct a misconception—conveyed by many books—that disease starts in the chakras. Diseases are physical. A person gets a disease, and *then* the chakras are affected" (Kunz and Krieger 2004, 140).
- 38 Bailey used the terms "vital body", "etheric body", "double", and "energy body" synonymously (Bailey 1953, 455; cf. Bailey 1934, 500).
- 39 Bailey's earliest reference to etheric centres as an explanation for the cause and treatment of illness appears in *A Treatise on White Magic* (1934, 594) but is further elaborated in *Esoteric Healing*.
- 40 Bailey discerned three main sources of disease: First, the psychological state of the patient; second, his karmic debt; and third, harmful collective, environmental, or planetary influences. The "three planetary diseases" cancer, tuberculosis, and syphilis are supposedly the consequence of planetary "karma" (Bailey 1953, 275). Likewise, epidemics are an expression of a difficulty in the planetary etheric body (*ibid.*).
- 41 Bailey first postulated a systematic correlation between the "seven centres of force" and the glands in *The Soul and Its Mechanism* (1930, 120), which draws on a schematic diagram depicting the endocrine system contained in the book *Your Mysterious Glands* by the American physician Herman Harold Rubin (1891–1973) (Leland 2016, 226–227). This connection between subtle and medical physiology underscores a characteristic feature in Bailey's work: the combination of (fully anglicised) occult orientalist ideas with the appeal to science.
- 42 Attempting to clarify the difference between her notions of 'energy' and 'force', Bailey explained: "I wish to remind you that I use the word 'energy' in reference to the spiritual expression of any ray and the word 'force' to denote the use which men make of spiritual energy as they seek to employ it and usually, as yet, misapply it" (Bailey 1949, 16).
- 43 Bailey's main references on *prāṇa* are Rama Prasad's (c. 1860–1914) *The Science of Breath* (1890) and her own commentary on Patañjali (Bailey 1953, 356). Yet, breathing exercises are only of secondary importance to Bailey, who favoured thought over technique. The first priority of an aspirant is to establish "mind consciousness", "right thought", and awareness of their force centres (Bailey 1950, 257). Bailey thus disassociated herself from those who use breathing techniques that would at best produce physiological effects and merely activate "lower centres"—including occultists, Indian gurus, as well as opera singers. She contrasts the latter with a hypothetical future form of singing that would involve higher energies. As part of the "planetary symphony", this art of singing would ultimately perfect the "music of the spheres" (Bailey 1950, 257). On the early intersection of occult breathing techniques and opera singing see (Kraler 2025).
- 44 The term "One Soul" refers to the unison of a group collective (cf. Bailey 1953, 354).
- 45 The localisation of the sixth sense in the solar plexus has its roots in the Puységur school of mesmerism. Its earliest theorist, A.-A. Tardy de Montravel (N/A), described the "solar plexus" (*plexus solaire*) as "the organ of the sixth sense" (*l'organe du sixième sens*) (Tardy de Montravel 1787, 259–260, cf. 209, 266). Tardy and the Puységur school were an important reference point for Eberhard Gmelin (1751–1809), an empirically oriented German mesmerist. Mesmer already highlighted the role of the hypochondrium, the region of the upper stomach, thus drawing on a crucial element in the medical tradition of Paracelsus. Paracelsus thought that the hypochondrium was the seat of the life-spirit (*spiritus vitae*), which he referred to as *archeus* and inner alchemist (*alchimia microcosmi*) (Schott 2001: A384). Leading representatives of German Romantic medicine conceptualised the solar plexus and the brain as the seats of the unconscious and conscious souls respectively. These theories foreshadowed and influenced Carl G. Jung's analytical psychology (Baier 2019). I thank Karl Baier for these references.
- 46 On how Mesmer's notion of the music of the spheres was inspired by Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), see (Baier 2024).
- 47 Medieval Christian mystics already engaged in radiation symbolism. Gnostic and neoplatonic theories of light from antiquity and late antiquity were increasingly adopted since the late eighteenth century and entered the works of Swedenborg and Theosophy (Haupt 2005, 159–160).
- 48 Original: "die vom menschlichen Organismus ausgehenden Radiationen zu Fernwirkungen führen können".
- 49 Bailey's forecast coincides with the gradual materialisation of the coming Christ, which she believed to occur after 2025 (cf. Pokorny 2021, 207).
- 50 This suggestion of "basic knowledge" of the etheric somewhat contradicts Bailey's earlier critique of vague insinuations that are antithetical to "exact knowledge" (cf. Bailey 1953, 524).
- 51 From the early 1960s until the mid-1980s, Crabb served as the director of the Borderland Science Research Foundation (est. 1945) based in Eureka, California (BSRF 2024).
- 52 Brennan's other major reference points were the Neo-Reichian bodywork of *Bioenergetics* developed by Alexander Lowen (1910–2008) and the *Core Energetics* of Lowen's colleague John Pierrakos (1921–2001), who incorporated a Theosophy-based *cakra*-model into his body psychotherapy (Lowen 1975; Pierrakos 1987; cf. Kripal 2007, 229).
- 53 Cf. Abrams (1916, 255): "The energy emanating from the human organism is electro-magnetic".
- 54 The passage from the original "Extract from a Statement by the Tibetan" of August 1934 reads: "My work is to teach and spread the knowledge of the Ageless Wisdom wherever I can find a response, and I have been doing this for many years. I seek also to

help the Master M. [Morya] and the Master K. H. [Koot Hoomi] whenever opportunity offers, for I have been long connected with Them and with Their work. [...]”.

For a thorough historical examination of the intercultural transfer of the *cakras* within the early Theosophical context see (Baier 2016).

The only other reference to Bailey in *Essential Reiki* showcases the transmission of an idea through the female ‘lineage’ of Blavatsky, Bailey, and Stein into the Reiki discourse of the 1990s. Stein (1995, 103) introduced a triskelion-shaped Reiki symbol called “Antahkarana”, which she claimed was an ancient Tibetan symbol used for meditation and healing and mentioned by Bailey. Placed under a massage table during a Reiki session it supposedly amplifies healing energies (ibid.). The Vedāntic notion *antaḥkaraṇa* (Sanskrit: “inner instrument”) appeared in Blavatsky’s writings where it denoted the bridge between “lower” and “higher” minds (Leland 2016, 456n29). The idea was further developed by Bailey to describe an occult process of integrating the self and higher ontological levels. It refers to a method of bridging the ordinary and spiritual modes of understanding by means of a “thread of consciousness” (Bailey 1954, 2, 148). *Antahkaraṇa* also encompasses the links or channels that connect the adept with other world servers, with the Hierarchy, and ultimately with the Kingdom of God (ibid., 145). Bailey’s “Science of the Antahkarana” claims to explain how energies enter and exit the individual, and how they are used for self-transformation (ibid., 147). In *Esoteric Healing*, the development of *antaḥkaraṇa* is a quality required of the healer and related to the “power to command the spiritual will” (Bailey 1953, 525). Contrary to Stein, Bailey did not use a symbol to express the idea of *antaḥkaraṇa*.

Under the term “vibrational medicine” Gerber subsumed acupuncture, homeopathy, Bach flowers, crystals, radionics, subtle-energy fields and *cakras*, and meditation. Reflecting the increasing traction of the term ‘subtle energy’ in the 1990s, Gerber added the subtitle “The #1 Handbook of Subtle-Energy Therapies” to the book’s third edition of 2001.

The emic status of *Vibrational Medicine* was underscored by endorsements of the who’s who of the holistic milieu including Dolores Krieger (1921–2019), professor of nursing and co-founder of Therapeutic Touch, Larry Dossey (b. 1940), physician and advocate for religious–therapeutic means of intervention, Marilyn Ferguson (1938–2008), author of the New Age-Bible *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980), and C. Norman Shealy (b. 1932), founding president of the American Holistic Medical Association. The foreword to Gerber’s book was written by the Stanford professor of material sciences William A. Tiller (1929–2022), who since the early 1970 advocated for parapsychology, occultism, and alternative medicine in the name of science.

Gerber mentioned the term “emotional body” as a synonym for the “astral body”, which is not attested in earlier Theosophy (Hall 2007, 9), but established in the writings of Bailey and Arthur A. Powell (cf. Powell 1927, 2).

Bailey associated various levels of the causal body with the heart, *ajna*, and head centres.

The Chaney’s aimed to reconcile Spiritualism with Theosophy, the Arcane School, and Christianity. This ambition reflects in the structure of the spiritual hierarchy which they asserted to have inspired the founding of their organisation. One of the hierarchy’s masters was Kut-Hu-Mi (also spelled Koot Hoomi), a figure who appeared in both Blavatsky’s and Bailey’s writings (Stillson 1967, 133–145).

GMCKS is the acronym for Grand Master Choa Kok Sui.

To achieve “illumination” the occult pupil is instructed to form a “channel between the heart centre [...] and its corresponding head centre” (Bailey 1922b, 286).

Bailey’s Great Invocation found broad resonance in the holistic field. It was often reproduced and recited by the luminaries of the British New Age activists throughout the 1970s to 1990s (Sutcliffe 2003, 47, 139).

Sutcliffe 2003, 142–143) recounts a participant observation of a Scottish full moon meditation meeting of a group belonging to the Units of Service, a network that is part of Bailey’s Lucis Trust (cf. The Arcane School n.d.).

The referenced passage from Bailey’s *Initiation, Human and Solar* (1922) reads as follows: “The fundamentals have always been true. *To each generation is given the part of conserving the essential features of the old and beloved form, but also of wisely expanding and enriching it. Each cycle must add the gain of further research and scientific endeavor, and subtract that which is worn out and of no value. Each age must build in the product and triumphs of its period, and abstract the accretions of the past that would dim and blur the outline. Above all, to each generation is given the joy of demonstrating the strength of the old foundations and the opportunity to build upon these foundations a structure that will meet the needs of the inner evolving life*” (p. 2; Choa Kok Sui’s citation is marked in italics).

Original: “Ein energetisches Ritual basiert auf dem Prinzip ‘Energie folgt der Aufmerksamkeit’”.

“Die Grenze zwischen der Esoterik und der Energetik ist sicher nicht scharf zu ziehen”.

“Auf der energetischen Seite das pragmatische Wissen um mentale Kräfte, um Energieströme und um das Machbare, das oft genug nicht erklärbar ist, aber trotzdem wirksam stattfindet”.

A similar etic definition for esotericism that connects secrecy with special knowledge of hidden forces was suggested by Pokorný and Winter (2023, p. 3): “[E]sotericism’ is understood as an umbrella notion comprising largely nonhegemonic teachings and currents with shared structural features, foremostly centering on the idea that higher or special (practical) knowledge distilled from a discourse deemed secretive can be (incrementally) utilized by its practitioners to salvific or otherwise self-cultivational ends, thereby uncovering ulterior dynamics of life, nature, and/or the cosmos at large”.

- ⁷¹ Going beyond South Asia, a special role in her millenarian vision was attributed to Confucius, who—as a member of the “Great White Brotherhood”—was to incarnate in order to pave the way for the New Age (Pokorny 2024, 36).

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Historical Roots of ‘Subtle Energies’: Occult Orientalism

Dominic Zoehrer

Abstract

This chapter explores how occult orientalism has contributed to the notion of subtle energies. Occult orientalism here denotes a discourse that involved the participation of both Euro-American and Asian actors. It encompasses (a) imaginations of a ‘mystic East,’ and (b) a transcultural exchange that has led to a wide range of hybrid ideas and practices. Within this framework, three types of ethereal power are profiled: (1) *kuṇḍalinī*, (2) *prāṇa*, and (3) *qì/ki*. The chapter demonstrates how the identification of these terms with ‘energy’ was the result of cross-cultural interpretations in the context of Oriental and religious studies, colonialism, modernization, and anti-modernist reactions. Furthermore, it highlights their ambivalent relation to science. On the one hand, advocates of these notions recognized and responded to the social prestige of science, thereby reshaping the belief in vital agents, healing powers, and transformative potentials to adjust to a secular, quasi-physical, and hence universally valid language. On the other hand, they claimed access to ancient knowledge superior to Western-style science. Due to the common features of the notions examined, it is suggested to employ ‘subtle energies’ as a comparative category for further historical research and theoretical reflection.

Keywords: Subtle energies, occultism, orientalism, *kuṇḍalinī*, Human Potential Movement, *prāṇa*, *qì*, *ki*, energy healing, translation

Prana is not exactly breath. It is the name
for the energy that is in the universe.

—Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902)¹

1. Introduction: From Projections of a ‘Mystic East’ to Entangled History

When occultists, yoga instructors, and holistic healers speak of ‘energies’ they frequently resort to an alleged ancient knowledge of the East. Their sympathetic view of the Orient serves as the canvas on which their own predefined ideas of a cultural ‘other’ are projected. Already in antiquity, an ancient wisdom narrative that praised a tradition transmitted from India via Chaldea and Egypt to Greece was a common topos, later revived in the Renaissance with the belief in a *philosophia perennis* (Strube 2023a). In the nineteenth century, German Romantic historiographers associated ‘Oriental’ doctrines with contemporary theories of mesmerism, somnambulism, clairvoyance, magic, and contemplation in the early nineteenth century (Baier 2009, 200–243). The occult orientalism propagated by New Thought authors and Theosophists reified earlier Romantic and American Transcendentalist imaginations of a

¹ Vivekananda 1899 (1896), 132.

superior wisdom of the East (Christy 1932; Jackson 1975; Versluis 1993). Such enchanted visions of South and East Asia were additionally fueled by the academic construction of ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Buddhism’ in the nineteenth century, leading to the propagation of a ‘mystic East’ that harbors profound spiritual teachings allegedly absent in the ‘materialistic West’ (cf. Jackson 1981; King 2005; Partridge 2019, 22–25).

‘Orientalism’ initially described the assumption of a supposedly superior European cultural identity juxtaposed to an Oriental ‘other’ (Said 1978). Surpassing colonial and post-colonial identity politics, the term has advanced to encompass a far more complex process of exchange and amalgamation. Karl Baier (2016) demonstrated these nuances of orientalism in the case of the early Theosophical reception of *cakra* theories.² Following the argument put forth by the anthropologist Gerd Baumann (1953–2014), Baier questioned the interpretation of orientalism as a binary opposition between East and West. He pointed out that Helena P. Blavatsky’s (1831–1891) and her co-Theosophists did not simply promote a romanticized, ‘positive’ orientalism but rather held the view of a technically and socially advanced West, while conceptualizing the East as a repository of wisdom that mirrors the spiritual deficits of the West. Departing from this partially ‘negative,’ partially ‘positive’ orientalist vision, the early Theosophists ultimately opened a transcultural conversation that transformed the notion of *cakras* from an element of South Asian traditions to an iconic feature of global popular culture (ibid.). The Theosophical Society was thus a key player in a broader discourse of what is here referred to as ‘occult orientalism’—a discourse in which both ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ actors participated.

Baier’s application of a refined model of orientalism to the Theosophical context integrates two distinct scholarly perspectives (Cantú 2021). The first view focuses on Euro-American conceptions of a spiritually advanced Asia that criticized Western culture while clothing preconceived ideas in the garb of Eastern wisdom (see Rudbøg and Sand 2019). This gaze upon the Orient as the wellspring of wisdom has more to do with imagined identities than actual references to Asian thought. The second view recognizes that simple demarcations between historical and imagined traditions of the East are complicated by the fact that both Euro-American and Asian authors engaged in constructing the Orient. It turns the attention to protagonists of diverse cultural backgrounds and their collaboration and competition which ensued in global, transcultural entanglements (e.g., see Krämer and Strube 2020; Strube 2022). Both approaches—examining visions of the spiritual supremacy of the ‘East’ and the hybrids emerging from the encounter between ‘East’ and ‘West’—shine a light on how ‘subtle energies’ (a theme closely related to but not identical with subtle bodies including *cakra* conceptions) have been conceptualized in the alternative religious milieu.

The blurring of the lines between ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ thought has contributed to a thrust of hybridized ideas and practices that led to the formation of a global ‘esoteric’ current (Asprem and Strube

² *Cakras* (Sanskrit, literally: wheel or circle) denote subtle force centers visualized on the human body, typically along its central axis.

2021). Exemplifying this process for the South Asian context, Julian Strube (2021) has argued that an ‘entangled historical exchange’ in the late nineteenth century gave rise to a distinctively transcultural brand of occultism. This process was accelerated by Orientalist Studies, comparative studies of philology and religion, and European colonialism on the one hand, and Indian reformers and intellectuals, as well as the multinational Theosophical Society on the other hand.

Western imaginations of a mystic East naturally led to the interest in China—next to India another candidate for the cradle of *philosophia perennis*, i.e., the belief in an eternal, universal truth constituting the core of the world’s philosophical and religious teachings. Nonetheless, Euro-American esoteric encounters with China must not be reduced to the ‘East–West’ binary stereotype since idealizations of the exotic ‘other’ are only one aspect of the lively discursive trajectories that reverberate lively to this day. Recent scholarship has extended the investigation of the emergence of esotericism (including occultism) as a transcultural network of movements to include China (Pokorny and Winter 2024a). Compared to China, Korea, and Vietnam, research on ‘occult East Asia’ has been mostly conducted in relation to Japan, where esoteric themes from Euro-American authors were welcomed, creatively integrated with local traditions, and exported back to the West (e.g., Gaitanidis and Stein 2019; Yoshinaga 2021).

The complexity of the East-West encounters sketched above must be kept in mind when exploring conceptions of subtle energy attributed to Asian origins. A historical examination of how South and East Asian notions of hidden forces entered a global occult discourse does not allow for their clichéd characterization as pristine ‘Eastern’ wisdom teachings or their distorted ‘Western’ appropriations. This chapter outlines how three of the most salient orientalist types of an ethereal power—*kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, and *qì/ki*—have been translated as ‘energy.’ These cases will illustrate how occult orientalism has influenced the idea of subtle energies, and how this idea is interlocked with reactions to the globalization of Western-style science.

2. *Kuṇḍalinī*: From ‘Electricity Personified’ to ‘Evolutionary Energy’

Kuṇḍalinī (literally: the coiled one) plays a central role in various psychophysical techniques that were first conceived in South Asian traditions of yoga and tantra from the eighth century onward. It is the name of a subtle entity generally believed to lie dormant in the *mūlādhāra*, the lowest *cakra* of the body located at the base of the spine. The practitioner’s aim in awakening and cultivating *kuṇḍalinī* by the appropriate means is twofold: to realize transmutative, divine enjoyment (*bhoga*) and attain spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*) (White 1997, 134, 208, 219–20).

In the *fin-de-siècle*, *kuṇḍalinī*-based practices attracted the attention of both Indian and Western Theosophists as a key to unlocking superhuman abilities (*siddhis*). Blavatsky’s last major book, *The Voice of Silence* (1889), described *kuṇḍalinī* as “the ‘fiery power’,” “the ‘Serpentine’,” and “one of the

mystic ‘Yogi powers’” (76). She warned her readers of the potentially lethal nature of this “electro-spiritual force, a creative power which when aroused into action can as easily kill as it can create” (78).³ While associations with ‘force,’ ‘fire,’ or ‘electricity’ dominate in Blavatsky’s accounts, her description of *kuṇḍalinī* as a latent power transcending the biological framework of the human self and hovering between the material and mental levels of reality already covers central features of what later occult and yogic authors would identify as ‘energy.’

The conception of *kuṇḍalinī* as a natural force belonging to the sphere of physics was suggested decades before in a series of articles titled “The Dream of Ravan: A Mystery” and published in the *Dublin University Magazine* between 1853 and 1854. According to Baier, this is “one of the earliest, if not the first, English texts to refer to *kuṇḍalinī*,” whereas the notion is mentioned only once in a short footnote to a translated citation of the *Jñāneśvarī* (1290), a tantric commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* written in the Marathi language (Baier 2016, 327; cf. Cox 2022, 77–81). The section passionately described the blissful, rejuvenating, and thaumaturgical condition attainable by a yogi when rousing the “serpentine Power.” In addition to its snake- and goddess-like features, the author noted that the “extraordinary Power” of *kuṇḍalinī* might be imagined to be “electricity personified” (N. A. 1854, 463).

In the January 1880 issue of *The Theosophist*, a European Theosophist by the pseudonym “Truth seeker” quoted from “The Dream of Ravan” and thus “unintentionally triggered a pro-tantric shift” in the Theosophical Society (Baier 2016, 327). The Bengali Theosophist and tantra apologist Baradā Kānta Majumdār further developed the interpretation of *kuṇḍalinī* as a fundamental physical principle. In his first contribution to *The Theosophist* in April 1880, Majumdār identified her as “the grand pristine force which underlies organic and inorganic matter. Modern science also teaches us that heat, light, electricity, magnetism, &c., are but the modification of one great force” (Majumdār 1880, 173, quoted in Baier 2016, 331).

In contrast to the physicalist notions of *fluidum*, *Od*, or ether discussed in the preceding chapter, claims to scientific legitimacy of *kuṇḍalinī* drew not only to physical but also to a large extent from psychological theories. With its decidedly psychological bent, *kuṇḍalinī* advanced to become a key term in the Euro-American religious-therapeutic milieus of the twentieth century, most notably in the so-called Human Potential Movement and the field of Neo-Tantra, both emerging in the 1960s (Kripal 2007; Urban 2022), and transpersonal psychology which peaked during the 1980s (Grof and Grof 1986; Sanella 1987; Hofmann 2013). This development resulted in a semantic shift of this ambiguous Sanskrit term toward what Dimitry Okropiridze called an “amalgamation of South Asian religion with

³ For the ambivalent stance of the early Theosophical Society toward tantra, see Baier 2016. An early Theosophical adaptation of tantric techniques for raising *kuṇḍalinī* based on a septenary system of correspondences between elements, principles, colors, states of consciousness, etc. was practiced in Blavatsky’s Inner Group (est. 1890) (Leland 2016, 117–27). Charles Leadbeater (1847–1934) refers to Blavatsky in *The Inner Life* (1922), where he provides a short exposition of the dangers and utility of arousing the *kuṇḍalinī* (Leadbeater 1922, 298–309). George S. Arundale (1878–1945), president of the Theosophical Society Adyar between 1934 and 1945, offered a less dramatic introduction to the mysteries of *kuṇḍalinī* in his book *Kundalini: An Occult Experience* (1938).

metaphysical psychology” (2017, 122). The transcultural transfer of *kuṇḍalinī* was not merely a unilateral process of ‘Western’ translation, appropriation, and reinterpretation. Rather, it meant the formation of a hybrid idea that involved the contributions of South Asian yogis, including Swami Vivekananda and Gopi Krishna (1903–1984), as well as European authors such as the British lawyer and Orientalist Sir John George Woodroffe (1865–1936) and the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961) (ibid., 133).

Besides other common descriptors, such as ‘serpent,’ ‘Shakti [*śakti*],’ ‘power,’ and ‘force,’ the term ‘energy’ can be traced to English-language material on *kuṇḍalinī* written by Woodroffe with the support of a large network of fellow Tantrikas (Strube 2022, 220–26). In their eponymous book first published in 1918, they rendered *kuṇḍalinī* as ‘Serpent Power’ while also denoting her as “the Divine Cosmic Energy in bodies” (Avalon 1924 [1918], 1). The idea of a godlike energy likewise applies to the notion of ‘Prāṇa’ (breath), a form of ‘Vāyu’ (wind) that courses through the body as the “manifestation, self-begotten, the subtle, invisible, all-pervading, divine energy of eternal life,” derived from the female deity of *śakti* (ibid., 76, 78). Thus, both *kuṇḍalinī* and *prāṇa* were translated as ‘energy,’ presumably first in the Bengali tantric/Theosophical context and subsequently as a firm practice among twentieth-century authors.⁴

In a seminar held at the Psychological Club in Zurich in 1932, Jung discussed *kuṇḍalinī* as a symbol of self-transformation. He also associated *kuṇḍalinī* with energy, albeit in an indirect manner, by characterizing the *mūlādhāra*, the ‘root cakra’ located in the perineum where the “sleeping beauty” supposedly rests, as “psychical energy, or the libido” (Shamdasani 1996, 23).⁵ Among the attendees of Jung’s lectures on *kuṇḍalinī* was the scholar of religion Frederic Spiegelberg (1897–1994) (ibid., xxxvii), who participated in Jung’s Eranos symposia and taught Asian religions at Stanford University between 1941 and 1962. Almost four decades after Jung’s seminar, Spiegelberg contributed the introduction to the 1970 edition of the influential autobiography *Kundalini: The Evolutionary Energy in Man* (1971 [1967]) by Gopi Krishna.

The title of Krishna’s book brings to the fore the identification of *kuṇḍalinī* with ‘energy.’ Spiegelberg’s introduction gave Krishna the stage to present himself as an original Indian yogi unadulterated by Western thought. Elaborating on the problem of intercultural translation, he remarked that Krishna was “uneducated in Yoga, who yet through intense labour and persistent enthusiasm, succeeds in achieving, if not Samadhi, yet some very high state in Yoga perfection” (Spiegelberg 1970, 6). Due to the lack of a corresponding vocabulary in Western languages, he opined that the yogic “realm of inner body feelings” had never been fully translated (8). Spiegelberg portrayed Krishna, who lived most of his life in Kashmir and reportedly had his first *kuṇḍalinī* awakening at the age of thirty-four, as a self-taught yogi-

⁴ The third edition of Woodroffe’s *Shakti and Shakta* (1929; first published in 1918) mentions ‘energy’ forty-one times. For the amalgamation of Shakta philosophy, Western science, and occultism in advocating for a ‘Religion of Power,’ see Strube 2022, 233–37.

⁵ For Jung’s notes from the four seminar sessions in the original German, see Jung 1998 (1932).

experimenter who struggled to render his mystical experience understandable to Western readers. However, as Okropiridze (2017, 135–37) aptly observed, Krishna’s account heavily engaged in the syntax of positive orientalism and scientized language in a manner that clearly bears the imprint of Theosophy, Woodroffe, and Jung. Furthermore, Krishna’s autobiographical account was interspersed with commentaries by James Hillman (1926–2011), a Jungian therapist, which underscore Krishna’s acquaintance with Jungian thought while omitting traditional tantric sources.

Following his autobiography, Krishna published *Biologische Basis religiöser Erfahrung* (1971), which was introduced by a critical but largely favorable thirty-nine-page-long commentary by the German physicist and philosopher Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker (1912–2007), a student of Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976).⁶ Notably, Weizsäcker avoided the term ‘energy’ in relation to *kuṇḍalinī*, which he defined as “evolutive potency” (*evolutive Potenz*; Krishna and Weizsäcker 1971, 26). In Krishna’s chapters, the term ‘force’ (*Kraft*) predominates, whereas ‘energy’ appears only specified as ‘life energy’ (*Lebensenergie*) or ‘psychic energy’ (*psychische Energie*). Apparently, the dialogue between the yogi and the physicist led to a sharpening of notions. However, Weizsäcker’s insistence on preserving exact physical definitions could not stem the tide of the discursive current on energy that had already captured the psychological and religious-therapeutic fields.

It is significant that Krishna’s writings were primarily aimed at an American audience that was already deeply immersed in the theme of energy, which by this point had acquired depth-psychological and erotico-mystical connotations. In 1962, Michael Murphy (b. 1930) and Richard Price (1930–1985)—who had both studied under Spiegelberg (Kripal 2007, 73)—founded the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, the Mecca of the Human Potential Movement and nodal point of the American counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s. The central theme that sparked Esalen’s program was the pursuit of unlocking and exploring the evolutionary ‘Energy’ that the founders believed to be latent in the human species (*ibid.*, 93). The chance to release their potential energies was promised to the participants of Esalen’s series of lectures, workshops, and group therapies. These events aimed to increase a sense of “vitality” and “fulfillment” on the bodily, sexual, emotional, social, and spiritual levels (Leland 2016, 317). With a countercultural target audience hungry for self-realization, the Institute served as a major platform for authors who transmitted their own ideas of *kuṇḍalinī*-qua-energy to American seekers including the Gestalt therapist Claudio Naranjo (1932–2019), comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell (1904–1987), breath workers Christina⁷ (1941–2014) and Stanislav Grof (b. 1931), and psychiatrist Lee Sannella (1916–2010) (cf. White 1979; Thaler 2024).

⁶ Literally: The Biological Basis of Religious Experience. The English version of the book was published under the title *The Biological Basis of Religion and Genius* (1972) in Ruth Nanda Anshen’s (1900–2003) series *Religious Perspectives*.

⁷ Christina Grof had been a student of Campbell at Sarah Lawrence College, through whom she first encountered tantric themes. In 1973, she received an initiation by *śaktipāṭa*, the transmission of the goddess Śakti’s cosmic powers, from Swami Muktananda (1908–1982), the school founder of Siddha Yoga (see Kripal 2007, 261–63).

Apart from Krishna, other notable Indian disseminators of *kuṇḍalinī*-based forms of yoga included the founder of Sahaja Yoga (est. 1970) Shrī Mātājī Nirmalā Devī⁸ (1923–2011), the founder of 3HO (Healthy, Happy, Holy Organization; est. 1969) Yogi Bhajan⁹ (1929–2004), Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh¹⁰ aka “Osho” (1931–1990), and Amrit Desai (b. 1932).¹¹ These movement founders succeeded in making *kuṇḍalinī* a household name among American and European seekers during the latter third of the twentieth century.

The major spokespersons of *kuṇḍalinī* weaved together three distinct strands: (1) the accounts of autobiographical or other first-hand experiences to support the veracity of the transformative effects of a *kuṇḍalinī* awakening; (2) a tendency toward a scientized framing of yoga and tantra either in terms of physics, physiology, and evolutionary biology or psychology; and (3) the orientalist construction of the ‘East,’ particularly India, as the home of profound spiritual teachings lacking in the rational and materialist ‘West’—a dichotomy that in effect fueled an intense exchange between Euro-American and South-Asian authors, and resulted in hybrid conceptualizations of *kuṇḍalinī* (cf. De Michelis 2004; Madsen 2014; Okropiridze 2017; Strube 2022). Renderings of *kuṇḍalinī* into English—including ‘energy’—were more than unilateral translations of a simple term. In brief, rising from a fusion of the genre of spiritual biographies, Western scientific thought, and orientalist expectations of a sublime and ancient yogic path, *kuṇḍalinī*-as-energy evolved to become a globally recognized topos.

3. *Prāṇa*: From ‘Breath’ to ‘Cosmic Life Energy’

The Sanskrit term *prāṇa* literally means “breath.” Already in Vedic texts, *prāṇa* was used as a metaphor for vitality. In the discourses of the *Upaniṣads*, yoga, and South Asian medicine (*āyurveda*), *prāṇa* covered a wide semantic spectrum ranging from the cosmic vital principle and various physiological functions to the individual self (*ātman*) and even the supreme being (*brahman*) itself (Johnson 2009, 241). Although the notion was part of the Vedic oral tradition at least from the eighth or seventh century BCE onward, it was not until the early nineteenth century that *prāṇa* caught the attention of European authors. Romantic philosophers and occultists speculated about the functional similarity of *prāṇa* and the mesmeric *fluidum*, a parallel that was first perceived by the French orientalist Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) in his Latin translation of the *Upaniṣads*, the *Oupnek’hat* (1801/1802) (Winter 2005; Baier 2009, 203–5). However, a number of other terms also served as candidates for postulating semantic correspondences, reflective of the dominant physical or physiological theories of

Tova Olsson’s contribution in this volume further elaborates on Muktananda’s lineage and influence. Keith Cantú’s chapter explores the roots of the *śaktipāta* employed by the Tamil author Sri Sabhapati Swami (c. 1828–1923/4).

⁸ B. Nirmalā Srivastava.

⁹ B. Harbhajan Singh Khalsa.

¹⁰ B. Chandra Mohan Jain.

¹¹ Hugh Urban’s chapter in this volume illuminates the transformations of *kuṇḍalinī* in the sphere of Neo-Tantra, focusing on Rajneesh’s interpretation of *kuṇḍalinī* as sexual energy.

the day. These included, among others, “life force,” “nerve spirit,” or “ether” (Windischmann 1832, 1347–48).

‘Energy’ was a rather late addition to the semantic reservoir of *prāṇa*, but, as in the cases of *kuṇḍalinī* and *qì*, became a preferred translation in the twentieth-century holistic milieu. The diffusion of the notion of energy beyond the realm of physics in the latter half of the nineteenth century correlated with what William Thomson (1824–1907; ennobled in 1882 as Baron Kelvin) coined as the “epoch of energy” (Smith 1998, 128). This phase in the history of science was unleashed by the conceptualization of energy championed primarily by German and British physicists. An early formulation of the principle of energy conservation was proposed in *Über die Erhaltung der Kraft* (1847), a seminal treatise of the physiologist and physicist Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–1894). Helmholtz’ work was enthusiastically perceived by Thomson and his Northern British circle as a major contribution to physical science from the early 1850s onward (Smith 1998, 127).¹²

Remarkably, von Helmholtz’s original research interest was not prompted by data derived from physical experiments but was motivated by physiological questions concerning the idea of ‘life force’ (*Lebenskraft*). Whereas his teacher, the physiologist and *Naturphilosoph* Johannes Müller (1801–1858), argued for the agency of a life force as the expression of purposive organization, von Helmholtz opposed this view and argued in favor of a new and rigorous theoretical foundation for physiological science. He found like-minded young allies in the Berlin-based Physical Society (*Physikalische Gesellschaft*)—established in 1845 by the physiologists Emil du Bois-Reymond (1818–1896) and Ernst Wilhelm von Brücke (1819–1892)—who sought to radically rid physiology of all remnants of life force and ‘spirit’ (*Geist*) in order to advance physiology along purely mechanistic lines (Smith 1998, 129–31).

Against this backdrop, it was a peculiar turn of events that ‘energy’—whose conservation von Helmholtz regarded as the proof *against* the hypothesis of a life force—was adopted by modern yogis in order to robe the notion of *prāṇa* in scientific garments. The English orientalist Horace H. Wilson (1786–1860), the first Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University (est. 1832), had still translated *prāṇa* as “air,” “breath,” “life,” “vitality,” and “power” (Wilson 1832, 586). However, by the early 1870s, meanings including “spirit,” “soul,” and “energy” were added to the list in the Sanskrit-English dictionary of Wilson’s successor Monier Monier-Williams (1819–1899) (Monier-Williams 1872, 654). The Indian lexicographer Vaman Shivaram Apte (1858–1892) also translated *prāṇa* as “energy” (Apte 1890, 771).¹³

A vigorous early advocate of *prāṇa*-as-energy and corresponding cultivation techniques (*prāṇāyāma*) was the modern yoga pioneer Swami Vivekananda, a highly influential protagonist of both occult scientism and occult orientalism. Catering to his Western audience, Vivekananda presented an idealized form of yoga that *de facto* was far removed from ‘pure’ or ‘ancient’ South Asian traditions. Characteristic

¹² Von Helmholtz’s theory of vowel frequencies happened to be a crucial reference point for the occult breath therapist and opera singer Benno Max Leser-Lasario (see Magdalena Kraler’s contribution in this volume).

¹³ Neither Monier-Williams nor Apte qualified energy as ‘subtle.’

of the British-educated Bengali intelligentsia, his thought displayed the notable influence of English thinkers including David Hume (1711–1776) and Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) as well as the syncretistic Hindu reform movement Brahmo Samaj (est. 1828) (De Michelis 2004, 45–50). Vivekananda thus absorbed the scientific empiricism of modern European science while at the same time espousing the superiority of the Advaita Vedānta (non-duality, or the doctrine of absolute unity of *brahman* and *ātman*) over majority religions (Baier 2019, 245–55). He claimed to possess a higher knowledge that would allow him to tap into secret powers unknown to Western science, springing from timeless Hindu teachings and evidenced by direct experience. The structure of his narrative was clearly modeled after Theosophical and other occult templates but characterized by an explicit nationalist spin (ibid., 248).

Vivekananda's role model, leader of the Brahmo Samaj, and representative of Calcutta's rising middle class, Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884) had conceptualized *prāṇa* as a divine, omnipotent “prime force” fully accessible to the “yogi scientist,” thus foreshadowing Vivekananda's scientific program (quoted in Kraler 2022, 91–93). In his seminal book *Rāja Yoga* (1896), Vivekananda crafted the cosmological foundation for his technique of tapping into the powers of ‘Prana’ by synthesizing the mesmeric *fluidum*, occult interpretations of ether, force, and energy, and *Sāṃkhyan* metaphysics (Kraler 2022, 195–96). Believing “Prana” to infuse the mental and material levels of reality, he claimed that it was the

infinite, omnipresent manifesting power of this universe. [... O]ut of this Prana is evolved everything that we call energy, everything that we call force. It is the Prana that is manifesting as motion; it is the Prana that is manifesting as gravitation, as magnetism. It is the Prana that is manifesting as the actions of the body, as the nerve currents, as thought force. From thought, down to the lowest physical force, everything is but the manifestation of Prana. The sum-total of all force in the universe, mental or physical, when resolved back into its original state, is called Prana. (Vivekananda 1899 [1896], 30)

Keen to garner scientific backing for his theory of energy, Vivekananda succeeded in gaining the attention of Nikola Tesla (1856–1943). In a letter to the Sanskrit scholar and (by then former) Theosophist Edward T. Sturdy (1860–1957) dated February 13, 1896, he mentioned a brief encounter and conversation with the Serbian-American inventor and electrical engineer. He expressed his hopes that Tesla could “demonstrate mathematically that force and matter are reducible to potential energy” (Vivekananda 1989, Letter LVIII). Such a proof from an authority of Tesla's stature was crucial to his project as it would have endowed him with a firm scientific foundation for dissolving his material dualism of ‘Prana’ and ‘Akasha’¹⁴—and their proposed physical equivalents of ‘force’/‘energy’ and ‘matter’—into his preferred Vedāntic monism, where the “Universal Mind, the Brahmā” corresponds to

¹⁴ In Vivekananda's cosmogony, “Prana,” the source of all energy, is complemented by a second universal principle, that is, “Akasha” (from Sanskrit *ākāśa*: space, sky, or atmosphere), the primordial source of all matter. His choice of identifying *ākāśa* with ‘ether’ as an omnipresent magical substrate bears the mark of Theosophical influences, e.g., Blavatsky 1877 (cf. De Michelis 2004; Kraler 2022).

absolute reality (ibid.; cf. Pokazanyeva 2016, 339). Tesla's equation never materialized and became redundant when Albert Einstein (1879–1955) proved the equivalence of mass and energy ($E=mc^2$) in 1905—three years after Vivekananda's death and thus without further consequences for his cosmology.

Nevertheless, the association of *prāṇa* with 'magnetism,' 'life force,' and 'energy' continued to be underscored in the occult arena by the prolific American author William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932), who published a series of books under the pen name Yogi Ramacharaka. Following Vivekananda's model, Atkinson conceived of *prāṇa* as a healing agent, a tool for self-development, and a means to attain psychic abilities (Zoehrer 2020; 2021; Kraler 2022, 294–98). Interpretations of *prāṇa* as 'subtle force' and 'energy' were further reinforced by leading yoga proselytizers of the twentieth century who pursued the strategy of combining Sanskrit and scientific terms, including Sri Yogendra (né Manibhai Haribhai Desai; 1897–1989), Paramahansa Yogananda (né Mukunda Lal Ghosh; 1893–1952), and Swami Sivananda (né Kuppaswami Iyer; 1887–1963).¹⁵ Steeped in this scientific discourse of modern yoga, the aforementioned Gopi Krishna elaborated on the proposed connection between biology and the attainment of enlightenment. He construed 'Prana' as an "extremely fine biochemical essence of a highly delicate and volatile nature" stored in the brain and nervous system, or more exuberantly, as the "super-intelligent cosmic life energy" (Krishna 1970, 46–47).¹⁶

In a nutshell, and resembling the case of *kuṇḍalinī*, this rough sketch of the semantic evolution of *prāṇa* demonstrates the entanglement of both scientific and orientalist strands, chiefly spurred by the charismatic type of yogi scientists.¹⁷

4. *Qi/Ki* : From 'Steam of Boiling Rice' to 'Universe Energy'

¹⁵ For an in-depth discussion of these personalities and their contribution to the development of breath cultivation techniques at the intersection of yoga, occultism, and hygienic culture, see Kraler 2022.

¹⁶ Krishna likened the relation of physical energy to the universe with 'Prana' to biological organisms: "In Yoga parlance Prana is life and life is Prana. Life and vitality, the sense used here, do not mean soul or the spark of the divine man. Prana is merely the life energy by which divinity brings to existence the organic kingdoms and acts on the organic structures, as it creates and acts on the universe by means of physical energy" (Krishna 1970, 109). The metaphor of an architect working on matter to bring about the plethora of life indicates the teleological function of 'Prana': "Prana, starting with protoplasm and unicellular organisms, brings into existence the marvellous domain of life, endless in variety, exceedingly rich in shape and colour, creating classes, genera, species, subspecies, and groups, using the materials furnished by the physical world and the environment to create diversity, acting intelligently and purposefully with full knowledge of the laws and properties of matter as well as of the multitudinous organic creations it has to bring into being. While remaining constant and unaltered fundamentally, it enters into countless combinations, acting both as the architect and the object produced" (ibid., 110). Krishna thus regarded 'Prana' as a teleological principle that was ontologically distinct from inanimate matter. At the same time, he drew on physical traits such as "radiating," "moving," or "stuff": "Prana," he claimed, is "interwoven with our thoughts and actions, interpenetrating the atoms and molecules of matter, radiating with light, moving with wind and tide, marvellously subtle and agile, the stuff of our fancies and dreams, the life principle of creation, which is woven inextricably with the very texture of our being" (ibid.).

¹⁷ On the life and work of Dewanchand Varma (1872–c. 1954), a yogi-scientist *par excellence*, see Léo Bernard's contribution to this volume.

As indicated above, the orientalist variants of subtle energy emerged from appeals to non-Western traditional, pre-scientific forms of knowledge. References to culturally specific terms such as *mana*, *prāṇa*, and *qì* have been portrayed in the twentieth-century holistic milieu and alternative medicine as quasi-canonical synonyms of a universally acknowledged vitalistic agency (cf. Hammer 2001, 164–65). The universalism of subtle energies due to its quasi-physical quality is additionally emphasized by framing them as a phenomenon that is known under different names in a plethora of particular cultures. In the case of *qì* (Japanese variant: *ki*), the invocation of tradition ranges from long-standing philosophical, anthropological, and medical discourses (i.e., the Chinese notion of *qì* in the context of acupuncture) on the one hand to ‘imagined origins’ of practices that in fact emerged at much more recent dates (i.e., the transcultural development of *ki* as the occult power believed to be effective in Reiki) (Lüddeckens 2020).

The translation of *qì* as ‘(subtle) energy’ was no straightforward process. To begin with, *qì* designates a key term of East Asian thought. Its semantic levels embrace the natural element of air as well as more abstract metaphysical principles and moral qualities. Precursors of the character *qì* (氣) were possibly inscribed on oracle bones (Choe 1995, 41–54). Its logogram is a compound of two radicals, the phonetic *qǐ* (气, clouds) and the semantic *mǐ* (米, rice), hence signifying the ‘steam of boiling rice’ (Pokorny 2008, 44). The scholar Mòzǐ (fifth century BCE) used the character to describe breath, health, but also a form of deleterious vapor arising from dead bodies. Early Confucian philosophers offered diverse interpretations to capture the nature of *qì*. Mèngzǐ (fourth century BCE) regarded *qì* as a vital essence subject to the will, whereas Xúnzǐ (third century BCE) extended the locus of this essence to inanimate matter (ibid., 44–45). Around the third century BCE, the term entered the Chinese medical canon through the *Huángdì Nèijīng* (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor), where it conveyed the idea of a life-sustaining essence that manifests as breath, circulating bodily fluids, and mental activity (Zhang 1999, 76–77).

In debates with neo-Confucian scholar-officials during the seventeenth century, Jesuit missionaries suggested the semantic equivalence between *qì*, *aer* or *pneuma* (air), and *spiritus* (spirit) (Zhang 1999, 76). In the 1780s, the Beijing-based French Jesuit Joseph-Marie Amiot (1718–1793), a contemporary of Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) and friend of the prince and scholar Hongwu (1743–1811), described Chinese folk healers through the lens of animal magnetism, describing them as “magnetizers” (Strube 2024, 24). Amiot reinterpreted the mesmeric *fluidum* and the restoration of its balance in terms of “activity in the Ki,” which he translated as “vital principle” (ibid., 23).

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, *qì* belonged to a number of Chinese notions that were translated as ‘subtle energy.’ In 1856, the American missionary and sinologist Samuel Wells Williams (1812–1884) rendered “K’i” as “steam,” “breath,” “vital fluid,” “animal spirit” and “influence.” Meanwhile, “subtle energies” was one of the meanings he attributed to “Shin” (*shén* 神), the word for “deity,” “soul,” or “spirit” (Williams 1856, 81, 421). Two decades later, the German-born Protestant

missionary-scholar Ernst Johann Eitel (1838–1908) translated “K’i/Ch’i” as “breath,” “the principle of vitality,” and “physical energy.” He also interpreted two other terms as a form of energy, namely: “Tseng” (*jīng* 精), which signifies an element of Daoist-alchemical physiology and means “essence of vitality” and “subtle energy” (Eitel 1877, 153, 797),¹⁸ and “Ling” (*líng* 靈)—meaning deity, soul, and efficacious in modern usage—which Eitel translated as “spiritual energy” and “subtle breath” (369). Four years earlier, and in contrast to the above-mentioned dictionary entry, he had described “Hi” (*qì*), one of the core principles in the Chinese art of placement (*fēngshuǐ* 風水), as “vital breath or subtle energies” (Eitel 1873, 9).

The integration of the notion of *qì* into global occult thought occurred at a slower pace compared to *kuṇḍalinī* and *prāṇa*, before the term became a corner stone of various religious-therapeutic practices from the 1970s onward. An article entitled “Magnetism in Ancient China” that was published in *The Theosophist* of October 1879 interpreted *yīn* (陰) and *yáng* (陽) as the positive and negative poles of Reichenbach’s *Od* (Paladin 1879, 30), however, without any mention of *qì* as a healing agent. Blavatsky’s earliest comment on *qì* appears in a footnote to a discussion of a septenary anthropology supposedly contained in the ancient Zoroastrian scriptures. Citing from James Legge’s (1815–1897) recent translation of the *Yijing*, Blavatsky defined “Khi” as the sixth principle of the human self that signifies “breath” or “spirit.” It is “still material but purer than the zhing [*jīng*] and is made of the finer and more active form of ether” (Blavatsky 1882, 22; cf. Legge 1882, 355).¹⁹ The emphasis on the ethereal yet material and life-giving quality of *qì* was retained by the Japanese-American scholar of Buddhist thought and Theosophist Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarō (1870–1966). In *A Brief History of Early Chinese Philosophy* (1914), Suzuki discerned between various semantics of *qì* including “subtle substance,” “universal energy,” psychical and life-animating agency, and “nervous system of the macrocosm” (Suzuki 1914, 22–24).²⁰

Although Suzuki was widely read, the arguably foremost popularizers of the notion of *qì*/*ki* in the twentieth century were Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), the *qìgōng* movement, and Reiki (Unschuld 2018; Palmer 2007; Stein 2019).²¹ In the 1970s, these currents aligned with Euro-American practices to form a globalized religious-therapeutic discourse on vital energies, which constitute a central axiom in the field of complementary and alternative medicine. In current histories of Chinese medicine,

¹⁸ The three notions of *jīng*, *qì*, and *shén*—all denoted as ‘subtle energy’—together constitute a triad known as the “Three Treasures” (*sānbǎo* 三寶). Since the thirteenth century, the Three Treasures have been a central element in the Daoist self-cultivation practice of “internal alchemy” (*nèidān shù* 內丹術) (Olson 1993). *Jīngqìshén* (精氣神) represents various levels of refinement and transmutation that is required for the Daoist practitioner to attain health and longevity (Despeux 2008).

¹⁹ The China-issue of *The Theosophist* (November 1942), edited by Arundale, identifies “chi’i” with “the life-breath (*prāṇa* or *jīva* [soul])” (N. A. 1942, 177).

²⁰ Suzuki’s analogy between the nervous system and the macrocosm in explicating the nature of *qì* is reminiscent of Warren Felt Evans’ (1817–1889) generalization of “nervous energy” as the “universal, divine life-principle in nature” (see previous chapter).

²¹ For a filial ethnographical study of *qìgōng* in the glocalized context of the Chinese diaspora in New York, see Kin Cheung’s contribution in this volume.

the ‘subtle’ or ‘finest’ material aspects of *qì* and its close association with the blood flow are still recognized. However, *qì* is now explained in terms of functions rather than of substance: its presumed effect lies in activating, warming, protecting, and transforming the body (e.g., see Ergil et al. 2011, 33–35).

The occult transformation of the idea and application of *qì/ki* in East Asia and beyond is most clearly exemplified by the genealogy of Reiki, a paragon of energy healing by means of the laying-on-of-hands. Reiki practitioners claim to transfer a power called *reiki* (literally: mysterious *ki* or atmosphere) that is capable of physical, mental, and spiritual healing. Introduced in 1922 by Usui Mikao (1865–1926), the conception of Reiki received enormous stimulus from the early twentieth-century import of American occultism into Japan, in particular the vitalist view of *prāṇa* and closely related mesmeric healing practices coined *inter alia* by Atkinson’s *The Science of Psychic Healing* (1906) (Stein 2019, 88–99). Since the 1970s, English-language texts interpret *reiki* as ‘universal life energy,’ a translation that was introduced by the Japanese-American Reiki proliferator Hawayo Takata (1900–1980) and reintroduced in Japan as ‘universe energy’ (*uchū enerugii* 宇宙エネルギー) in the 1980s (ibid., 83).²²

Justin Stein (2024) has outlined two distinct although not incompatible streams of translating *ki* into English: ‘*ki* as energy’ and ‘*ki* as mind.’ While the translations of *ki* in terms of energy (including vital force) became the dominant current by the 1970s, another way to render *ki* was in terms of ‘feelings,’ ‘mind,’ or ‘spirit’ (ibid., 5). The latter was particularly endorsed by Tōhei Kōichi (1920–2011), a pioneering figure in the history of aikido (literally: the way of matching *ki*) who introduced the martial arts style to the United States from 1953 onward. Tōhei inherited the interpretation of *ki* as ‘mind’ and his focus on the mind’s power over the body from his teacher Nakamura Tempū (1876–1968). Nakamura was strongly impacted by New Thought teachings, specifically the books of Yogi Ramacharaka, which he had studied in the United States around 1910 (ibid., 19). The path of aikido’s birth, development and overseas export to American audiences thus ran parallel to that of Reiki. However, it also shows that despite drawing inspiration from the same Japanese-American occult discourse, ‘energy’ was not the only option for translating *ki*.

The American holistic milieu further merged orientalist with physicalist framings of subtle energy. This process is showcased by the journal *Subtle Energies*. Published by the Colorado-based International Society for the Study of Subtle Energies and Energy Medicine (ISSSEEM), the journal appeared tri-annually between 1990 and 2010.²³ According to its self-description, the journal was “designed to meet

²² Justin Stein argued that Takata began to “de-Japanize” Reiki by explaining it in terms of a divine origin in order to reach her American audiences in the postwar period (Stein 2019, 92–94). It is noteworthy that Atkinson had explicitly recognized a transcendent entity (i.e., ‘Infinite Being’ or ‘Infinite Mind’) as the source of the salutary “Power of the Universe” (Ramacharaka 1906, 189)—references that were dropped in early Reiki models.

²³ On the founders of the journal, see the previous chapter. A notable feature of *Subtle Energies* is the elaborate aesthetics of its cover pages. Its blend of religious motives, science imagery, and modern/psychedelic art could prove a worthwhile research subject in itself—especially if extended to the aesthetics of promotional materials and therapeutic spaces of energy healers.

the needs of experimental scientists, other empirical researchers, clinicians, theoreticians, healers and involved laypersons who have scientific interest in consciousness, healing, and the dynamics of human potential” (ISSSEEM 2023). Such appeals to science notwithstanding, the true sources of knowledge about subtle, universal, and/or vital energies are to be found in the East. The following quotation from an issue of *Subtle Energies* in 2003 exemplifies the journal’s claim of an imminent synthesis of Western science and traditional Asian knowledge cultures:

While Western science and medicine is just discovering chakra centers and meridians, the interest and investigation into human energy fields around the body began over 5,000 years ago. [...] Spiritual traditions from India, for example, speak of a universal energy called Prana, which is defined as the basic source of all life. Prana is a part of a psycho-physical system, which consists of a dynamic network of subtle channels, ‘winds,’ inner air, or essences. The Chinese, since 3000 B.C., have spoken of a vital energy, which they called Qi that is thought to be present in all matter. Attempts to manipulate this energy have been practiced by yogis for centuries. (Leigh et al. 2003, 79)

Portrayed as elements of ancient but superior bodies of knowledge, systems based on ‘Prana’ and ‘Qi’ are supposedly being rediscovered by the means of Western-style science and biomedicine. The future of science and medicine thus lies hidden in the past, waiting to be excavated through cutting-edge research. This passage illustrates how the contemporary holistic discourse on subtle energies, of which *qì* and *prāṇa* have been two outstanding prototypes, continues a typically occult motif: an idealizing orientalism that goes hand in hand with the belief in scientific progress.

In short, the identification of *qì/ki* with energy illustrates once more the transcultural exchange of the occult orientalist type. Whereas early Theosophists showed only peripheral interest in *qì/ki*, the locus of its occult transformation was the reception of Atkinson’s synthesis of yoga and mesmerism in pre-war Japan. From here the idea of *ki*-as-energy was imported to America (via Hawai‘i) and globalized through the Reiki movement spearheaded by Takata.²⁴ Atkinson inspired the alternative rendering *ki*-as-mind, which, however, gave way to associations of *ki* with energy as a vital principle. This development occurred at the same time as the Western reception of *qì* in the field of alternative medicine. From the 1960s onward, *qì* was integrated via the meridian concept of TCM into modalities of energy healing, for example, Applied Kinesiology and its spin-off Touch for Health. A more systematic perusal of occult and holistic texts and movements might shed more light on Euro-American readings of *qì/ki* and their influence on contemporary healing systems, martial arts, and mind-body practices.

²⁴ Stein’s contribution in this volume compares Reiki with Therapeutic Touch, another prominent school of energy healing with occult roots.

5. Discussion: Energy as a Product of Translation

Translation produces similarities between two languages while seeking to preserve the distinct original meaning of a word, text, and context. It is the attempt to solve the problem of cultural diversity by bridging difference and making the ‘other’ intelligible, at least approximately. Translation is necessarily achieved through a process of disembedding, reinterpreting, and integrating meanings into a transcultural discourse. This process is itself context-dependent and may obscure original meanings of a particular word while giving rise to new associations (Mikaelsson 2014). Translated notions may be generally understandable to cultural outsiders but always constitute re-conceptualizations of specific local semantics (cf. Casadio 2016, 37).

In the modern encounter between ‘East and West,’ the problem of translating profoundly different languages and writing systems has expanded and enriched vocabularies. This process has given rise to appropriations (and the resistance thereof), loanwords and neologisms, as well as new forms of cultural hybridity (Liu 1999a, 3–4). However, any examination of translingual practice must take into account the particular socio-economic and political conditions of translation and the targeted readership (Liu 1995, 2–10). East-West relations have been complicated by power asymmetries inherent in a colonial or hegemonial setting, leading to a politically charged tension between the ‘indigenous’ and the ‘global.’ This tension may be intensified, resolved, or reversed by acts of translations. Because of the power imbalance of the colonial and post-colonial eras, translations have been highly instrumental in the construction of a universalized, ecumenic modernity as the hallmark of globalization—although Western-dominated and thus contested (Liu 1999b, 34–37).

Against this backdrop, identifications of terms such as *kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, or *qì/ki* with ‘energy’ reveals something about the cultural and political contexts that enabled such a translation. Alternative religious and medical notions of energy were neither fashioned in a one-sided process within indigenous traditions nor can they be considered purely Western projections of Eastern knowledge. They were instead the result of cross-cultural interpretations that have been informed by Oriental and religious studies, scientification, modernization, and anti-modernist responses. Thus, hypothetical identifications of Sanskrit, Chinese, or Japanese terms with ‘energy’ constitute less a discovery of exact equivalences than a conscious production of the interaction between Asian, European, and American protagonists from the late nineteenth century onward (cf. Strube 2022, 33).

Since translations of *kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, and *qì/ki* into the language of ‘energy’ did not occur in an ideology-free vacuum, it is essential to consider the religious, philosophical, and therapeutic interests that reverberate in such connotations. Contemporaneous thought influenced the efforts of philosophers, philologists, and proselytizers (in their Christian, occult, yogic, or therapeutic variant) to capture the essence of these terms by using prevalent Western conceptual categories. As in any translingual practice, this process yielded a sequence of tentative translations, reflecting broader cultural trends.

Christian and scientific writings served European missionaries as important means in their pursuit for cultural supremacy. Likewise, their translation of authoritative native texts produced theological readings that reinterpreted or rather manipulated original semantics for evangelical purposes (Liu 1999b). Occultists—in particular in the Theosophical Society after its Indian turn—chose an inverse strategy: in their critique of Christian hegemony and mainline science, they appropriated local ideas and reintegrated them into their own ideological framework of perennial wisdom (Baier 2016). This pattern of syntheses and reinterpretations of non-European traditions was a central feature of late nineteenth and early twentieth century occult discourse that radiated into the postwar holistic milieu.

In the global discourse of occult orientalism, the recourse to ancient wisdom went hand in hand with a scientific dimension. Appeals to science reflected the acceptance of the authority of Western-style science but not at the expense of higher forms of knowledge. The fusion of ‘energy’ and orientalist references to tradition on the part of both Asian and Euro-American authors was thus colored by an ambivalent stance toward science and its ideological implications. *Kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, and *qì/ki* encapsulate the themes of vitalistic agents, inherent healing powers, and/or transformative potentials, which oppose a reductionist, materialist point of view. The function of these terms ran parallel to the wider occult reaction to the socially superior role of science, its perceived deficiencies, and the worldwide power imbalances that were coupled with its meteoric rise in the late modern era. Anti-hegemonial agendas supported the topos of an ancient or revealed and hence superior knowledge and embedded (supposedly) traditional anthropologies, cosmologies, and “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988) into an alternative narrative. This strategy was especially adopted by occultists, the pioneers of modern yoga, and early advocates of energy healing (e.g., Pranic Healing and Reiki).

Under the particular historical condition of colonialism, modernization, and globalization, Eastern terms connoted with ‘energy’ acquired new meanings that must be sharply distinguished from earlier, pre-colonial contexts. Through their participation in a globalized discourse, *kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, and *qì/ki* came to constitute key terms in a distinctive conceptual web that involved imaginations of cosmic forces, vital agents, and occult skills. However, whereas the coinage of these terms as ‘energy’ was culturally and politically conditioned, this does not imply that the choice of this expression was necessarily arbitrary or externally imposed.

Three features of the notion of energy made it a likely choice for translating signifiers of a subtle agent. First, energy suggest the universal validity of a physical principle. The term ‘energy’ gained unparalleled traction in science and engineering from the 1850s onward. Matter and energy came to be regarded as the fundamental principles of physical reality. Recognizing and reacting to the political power of science, claims of hidden vital, healing, or self-transformative powers were reshaped in secular, physical terms. Associating ethereal, yet supposedly efficacious agents with ‘energy’ underscored their claimed objective nature and hence universal applicability.

Second, in its colloquial, non-physical sense, the term energy enabled the intelligibility of similar experiences across cultures. As shown in the previous chapter, energy emerged as a key theme in the Western alternative religious and therapeutic milieu in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Drawing from preceding mesmerist discourses, the semantics of energy covered a wide range—from nervous energy, life force, and the mind-over-matter principle to suggestive influence, universal mediums, and the qualities of a divine being. Next to its relevance as a scientific term, European languages retained associations of ‘energy’ with subjective experiences described in vernacular language, e.g., vitality, vigor, and spirit. Thus, in the encounter with Asian theories of psychophysical practice and therapeutic interventions involving vital agents, ‘energy’ appeared to be a suitable expression. The term’s semantic flexibility not only suggested the possibility of comparison but also compatibility with Euro-American experiences.

Third, energy is analogous to renewal and transformative power. The ability of physical energy to manifest in various forms and shift from one form to another was reminiscent of the principle of transmutation in tantric and Daoist alchemy, whose practitioners aimed at the refinement of lower bodily fluids to attain higher mental or spiritual elixirs. The latter would allow practitioners not only greater mental control over themselves but also over their environment. Similarly, the term energy represented technological domination over the material dimension of life. Its presumed function as a transformative medium that is capable of communicating between the levels of inner/mental and external/material reality (including the human body) was already a recurrent theme in occult and New Thought texts (see previous chapter). This provided a template for translating Asian mind-body practices to secularized Western audiences. The transformative power attributed to subtle energies was not reduced to the individual level but extended to social reform and nation-building. Modern yoga movements in India and *qìgōng* movements in China have demonstrated how the belief in subtle energies could be channeled into collective efforts for political change (cf. De Michelis 2004; Baier 2019; Strube 2022; Palmer 2007; Ownby 2008; Penny 2012).

6. Concluding Remarks

Translations of *kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, and *qì/ki* as ‘energy’ exemplify the key dynamics that underlie occult orientalism. This chapter outlined how these terms were interwoven with careers of yogis and energy healers, the late modern reaction to the hegemony of science, and (invented) Eastern traditions. In that process, ‘positive’ orientalist visions on the side of Western authors were outpaced by the translingual exchange involving both Western and Asian protagonists. The ideological and social structures that prepared the religious-therapeutic discourse on energy were the Theosophical Society, the New Thought movement, the Bengali intelligentsia, strands of modern yoga, and the Japanese occult milieu around 1900. These networks prefigured the transcultural and ‘alternative’ character of the Human Potential Movement and the globalizing holistic milieu from the 1960s onward. In this light, the discourse on

energies shaped within the occult orientalist framework can be neither reduced to a unilateral Western projection nor postulated to be derived from unpolluted Asian traditions. Rather, it emerged from a vibrant exchange between Euro-American and Asian actors, and continues to be a hallmark of the contemporary culture of alternative spiritualities and holistic therapies.

A more systematic historical, philological, and comparative analysis would unearth how texts, practices, and movements surrounding subtle energies are related and how they still affect contemporary religious culture. Just as the term ‘supernatural powers’ has been a crucial guiding principle for defining and conceptualizing religion during the formation phase of religious studies (cf. Meylan 2017), much could be gained from applying ‘subtle energies’ as a *tertium comparationis*. As a comparative category, ‘subtle energies’ could be fruitfully employed for cross-culturally examining beliefs and practices centering on the mesmeric *fluidum*, life forces, ether, *Od*, *Orgon*, mind vibrations, *kuṇḍalinī*, *prāṇa*, *qì/ki*, or *mana*. The term encompasses a range of agents that are imagined to endow practitioners or their targets with vitalizing, curative, and self-refining powers. To avoid the pitfalls of decontextualization and essentialism, the ‘subtle energies’—used as a second-order category—should not be taken to signify a single, uniform concept but instead refers to highly heterogeneous discourses shaped by distinct cultural and historical contexts.

The above two-part exposition has shown that the notion of subtle energies has roots in two discernable strands here referred to as occult physicalism and occult orientalism. However, the fault line and cross connections between occult physicalism and occult orientalism only cover one aspect of a much wider mindscape. This vast discursive web also includes other areas in which subtle energies play (or have played) a key role, including physiological and vitalist theories, psychology, psychic research, body psychotherapy, martial arts, dance, music, visual arts, as well as fantasy literature and science fiction. A comprehensive review would cover these areas in more detail and thus reconstruct the development of what could be called a ‘globally entangled history of subtle energies’ (to adapt a phrase from Strube 2023b). In the absence of a single authoritative point of reference or a widely accepted emic definition, the concept of subtle energies inevitably remains conceptually fuzzy and dynamic. Yet it is precisely this semantic ambivalence and interpretational openness of ‘subtle energies’ that allows the notion to unfold its performative potential.²⁵

²⁵ Acknowledgments: I would like to thank Karl Baier, Magdalena Kraler, Julian Strube, and Lukas Pokorny for their helpful comments on an early draft of this chapter.

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CHAPTER 5

From *Fluidum* to *Prāṇa*: Reading Mesmerism Through Orientalist Lenses

Dominic S. Zoehrer

There in the Orient, where the light and the sun appear, we find in the promised lands the first humans in sacred harmony with nature, filled with the divine light of prophecy and poetry. In their early period of bloom, the Indians, Persians, Chinese, Egyptians, Israelites, and all the adjacent peoples indeed lived a magnetic life [...]

Ennemoser 1819a: 185; my translation

They are using prana ignorantly and calling it “magnetism.” If they would combine rhythmic breathing with their “magnetic” treatment they would double their efficiency.

Ramacharaka 1905a: 59

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INTRODUCTION: THE “PRANIC” BRANCH IN THE RECEPTION HISTORY OF MESMERISM

The deep influences of the Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) on the modern history of religion, psychology, and alternative forms of healing can hardly be overstated.¹ Animal magnetism, Mesmer’s theory and practice of healing introduced in the 1770s, asserted the existence of an invisible, etheric matter, or magnetic *fluidum*, perfusing the cosmos and all living beings. Illnesses, according to Mesmer’s model, were the result of disturbances or obstructions of this universal life force. Asserting that this fluid could be sensed and directed by a skilled “magnetiser” for healing purposes, he claimed to be endowed with a surplus thereof. Mesmer was convinced that transferring it to a patient would hasten the necessary crisis that leads to the cure and the re-establishment of the fluid’s harmonious flow through the body.

With the eventual repudiation of Mesmer’s theory through the French Royal Commission of 1784, the mesmerists and their extravagant healing séances soon became the epitome of “otherness” in the view of established physicians (Lanska and Lanska 2007: 308).² While his explanation of animal magnetism was dismissed by means of a strict reductionist methodology, the remarkable effects his treatments produced in “magnetised” subjects provided grounds for continued speculation. Although Mesmer’s own organisation was short-lived, his theories were rejected, and his practices were substantially modified by his students, his legacy would inspire several new branches and develop a rich reception history. A variation of the mesmeric treatment devised by the Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825) experienced a particularly illustrious career. Bypassing the cathartic but often violent healing crisis advocated by Mesmer, Puységur found that he could induce in his patients a condition of sleep-like trance: a *somnambulisme provoqué* (artificial somnambulism) (Puységur 1811). This phenomenon, which seemed to allow access to the unconscious and its hidden “paranormal” powers, decisively impacted the rise of several

¹ Alternative healing practices here refer to methods whose underlying anthropology and explanatory models lie outside the conventional biomedical framework.

² King Louis XVI (1754–1793) had charged the *Académie des Sciences* and the *Faculté de Médecine* with the establishment of a scientific commission to investigate Mesmer’s claims. The Commissioners demonstrated that the force of suggestion itself was sufficient to generate the effects and thus concluded that the mesmeric states were caused by the patient’s imagination and collective expectation (Lanska and Lanska 2007: 308).

nineteenth-century esoteric movements including spiritualism and psychological research, early psychology and psychiatry, as well as the New Thought movement (Hanegraaff 2013: 37–39).³ Furthermore, as Karl Baier has shown through two acclaimed comprehensive historical studies, even the early modern yoga and meditation movements were intertwined closely with mesmeric ideas (Baier 1998, 2009). A likely reason for such an embrace of mesmerism by a wide range of individuals and movements was the simplicity of the idea of a universal fluid that was open to various purposes and implications. It provided a rationale for the inherent connection between the micro- and the macrocosm, promising the ultimate key to health and harmony. Notwithstanding the scepticism of the medical and scientific establishment, the polyvalent character of the *fluidum* allowed it to function as a grand unifier of opposites and mediator between the material and spiritual levels of reality, science and religion, the cosmos and the divine (Hanegraaff 1998: 434–435).

The field of energy healing is another current of practices (though widely overlooked) that received crucial input from the discourses surrounding mesmerism (Baier 2013: 439). Energy healing has evolved to become a key protagonist among the various popular trends in today's holistic milieu, the now matured "New Age religion." Forms of energy healing encompass a highly heterogeneous array of approaches that claim to alter and reinvigorate disturbed states of a subtle, vital agency postulated to surround and penetrate biological organisms (cf. Albanese 1999: 314). The objective of restoring the balance of mind, soul, and body—in short, "well-being"—is attained through applying techniques that enable the undisrupted "flow" of the energy that mediates between the layers constituting the whole person. Ritual elements of classical mesmerism have survived in several energetic practices, such as the characteristic "passes" over the patient's body or certain measures of energetic hygiene. Most contemporary practitioners do not aim to effect a mesmeric crisis or to induce altered states of consciousness. However, an essential aspect of Mesmer's healing conception, namely the notion of a vital force with its ambivalent function as both a subtle substance *and* a mental or spiritual

³The New Thought movement, also known as Mind Cure, refers to a form of self-help psychology that became popular during the 1870s and formed a significant segment of the American cultic milieu by the end of the century. Following a novel interpretation of mesmerism put forward by Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1866), the adherents of New Thought upheld the idea that external reality, including illness and health, is primarily determined by one's inner beliefs and expectations (Hanegraaff 1998: 484–487).

agent sensitive to intention, has been retained in the majority of approaches that claim to heal through energy.

Ever since the parting of natural science from *Naturphilosophie* in the course of the Enlightenment, complementary and alternative healing approaches with their allusions to unknown powers became disassociated from allopathic, evidence-based medicine. In defence of their legitimacy, these practices had to adjust their explanatory frameworks repeatedly. References to functional equivalents of a universal agent imparting health and harmony that substituted the magnetic *fluidum* became a hallmark of energy healing, while Asian traditional philosophies increasingly replaced the European pre-Enlightenment and Romantic science as a useful source of authority. However, as the “distorted cultural echoes” of Mesmer’s healing practice (Lanska and Lanska 2007: 317) are still perceptible in the field of contemporary therapies, they merit a deeper understanding by examining the nexus of intercultural transfer dynamics. Among the muttering noise caused by the profuse spectrum of energy healing approaches today, one concrete tune is composed by practices that explicitly refer to the Sanskrit term *prāṇa*. These practices are rooted in a process of combining mesmeric elements with notions of the Indian traditions, a process that chiefly occurred within both the Western and Eastern cultic milieus of the nineteenth century. The objective of this chapter is to highlight some of the key figures that were involved in generating this particular branch of the reception history of mesmerism.

ANQUETIL-DUPERRON’S MESMERIC VIEW OF PRĀṆA AND ITS ENSUING RECEPTION AMONG GERMAN MESMERISTS

The flow of ideas and practices between cultures do not progress in simple one-way translations or in a linear fashion. Instead, they occur through reinterpretations and transformations by means of selective readings, adaptations, and innovative additions in new social contexts. Transcultural exegeses may be marked by pre-existing welcome structures, although the concrete needs of the receiving culture will differ. This has also been the case with European readings of *prāṇa*, which has been associated with prevalent vitalistic ideas including Mesmer’s animal magnetism and similar concepts. In its original Sanskrit context, *prāṇa* denotes “breath” *sensu stricto*, and “life principle” or “vital force” *sensu lato*. The notion of *prāṇa* first entered the Hindu textual corpus through the *Chāndogya*

Upaniṣad (eighth to sixth century BCE) and the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (c. 700 BCE) (Leland 2016: 25),⁴ and it was not until the nineteenth century that *prāṇa* entered the European mindscape. As Franz Winter has shown, the earliest association of Mesmer's *fluidum* with *prāṇa* was most likely put forth by the French orientalist Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) in his best-known work, the *Oupnek'hat* (1801/1802). The book consists of a rather liberal Latin translation of 50 Upanishads gathered from Persian manuscripts as well as the translator's extensive introductory remarks (Winter 2005: 90–91).

Anquetil-Duperron's introduction embedded the Upanishads within a form of *philosophia perennis*—the traditional conception of the existence of a universal wisdom that could be distilled from all major religious and philosophical teachings (Winter 2005: 100). He referred to his reconstruction of an Indian ur-philosophy as the *summa orientalis systematis*, which supposedly contained the foundation for all other “oriental” religious doctrines. However, what the French orientalist claimed to have uncovered as the quintessence of Indian philosophy and religion actually reflected more recent developments in the modern European history of ideas. In his attempt to develop a systematic summary of the Upanishads, Anquetil-Duperron considered the various influences (*influxus*) of the celestial bodies on the earthly bodies—living beings and inanimate objects—to be one of the fundamental principles of the perennial wisdom on which Indian theology was supposedly based (ibid.: 79–89). The reference points in his argument for a cosmic mediating force were the works of the German physician and physicist Rudolph Goclenius (the Younger; 1572–1621) as well as Mesmer, who in fact drew from earlier notions of magnetism in relation to healing practices including those espoused by Goclenius (Hanegraaff 1998: 433). Anquetil-Duperron claimed that the carrier substance of this spiritual or subtle force-principle was identical with the Upanishads' concept of *Pran*—rendered in the *Oupnek'hat* as *respiratio* (breathing), *halitus* (breath), and *anima* (air, breeze, breath, soul, or vital force). Divided manifoldly into *Pranha*, the *Pran* is the operative agency that animates the living beings of any kind (Winter 2005: 92). A noticeable feature in Anquetil-Duperron's discussion of *Pran*

⁴ In a later scripture, the *Prāśna Upaniṣad* (c. fourth century BCE), *prāṇa* and *rayi* (matter) represent the two fundamental principles of creation, while *prāṇa* is ascribed a superior position among the elements and praised as the supreme agency that maintains the life of all creatures (cf. verses 1.4 and 2.1–6 in Müller 1884: 272).

concerns the ambiguous and arcane nature he ascribed to it. Because *Pran* functions as the bond between the essentially differing soul and the body it can neither be purely material nor spiritual (ibid.). Therefore, its “cause and mode of action remains shrouded in darkness” (Anquetil-Duperron 1801/1802, vol. 1: XCVIII).⁵ The attractiveness of the notion of *prāṇa* among the mesmerists and within the emerging occultist movement was not least due to this intermediating function as a *tertium datur* between the immaterial and material realms.

Karl Joseph Hieronymus Windischmann (1775–1839), a German professor of philosophy and medicine at the University of Bonn, continued the identification of *prāṇa* with the mesmeric *fluidum* introduced by Anquetil-Duperron without referring to him as the originator of the idea. He further expanded the incorporation of Indian concepts into a mesmeric framework by building on the reception of India that had gained currency among German mesmerists who interpreted Indian forms of meditation as a “magnetic” phenomenon, including Joseph Ennemoser (1787–1854), Johann Karl Passavant (1790–1857), and Dietrich Georg von Kieser (1779–1862) (Baier 2009: 209–224). In his uncompleted oeuvre *Die Philosophie im Fortgang der Weltgeschichte* (Philosophy in the Course of World History; 1827–1834), which represents a first comprehensive exposition of East and South Asian thought in the German language, Windischmann elaborated on “the magnetic life of the soul” as the characteristic feature of the Indian mindset (ibid.: 222). Although his work has faded into obscurity today, it had considerable impact on other mesmerists through whom it influenced the reception of Indian spiritual practices by modern occultists (ibid.: 222–224).

Windischmann recognised the “magical state of the soul” achieved through Upanishadic meditation practices, that is, yoga, as a self-induced somnambulistic condition (Windischmann 1832: 1315). In his reading, a fundamental element of these practices is the concentration and introversion of “Prana” the “animating breath of Brahma,” which he identified with the traditional European medical idea of the *spiritus vitae* operating in living beings (ibid.: 1331). This Prana qua vital spirit does not only signify a subtle element but involves a dynamic, physiological aspect as

⁵ Cited in Winter 2013: 271.

well, namely the “pulsating and propulsive” artery movements representing the principle of life itself (ibid.).⁶

Based on the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* and later Upanishads, Windischmann reconstructed yogic meditation forms that involve the ascent of Prana as the carrier of the soul—or “Dschivas” (*jīva*)—in the context of a subtle physiology. He suggested that Prana ought to be inhaled and exhaled for the purpose of its centring and unification (“Joga”) in the heart, thus preparing the adept for the knowledge of one’s essential self (Windischmann 1832: 1346–1348). However, apart from this basic affirmation of conscious breathing, he apparently showed no further interest in concrete exercises that focused on the control of Prana, and neither did the mesmerists of his time (Baier 2009: 242). Focusing the vital force in the heart leads to the withdrawal of the senses, which corresponds to the first stage of the Upanishadic meditation comparable to a “magnetic sleep” (Windischmann 1832: 1347–1349). The next stage is described by Windischmann as the ascent of the soul that is carried by “Udana”—the upwards moving manifestation of Prana—from the heart to the forehead, to the crown, and ultimately to its highest destination: perfect liberation by means of the ecstatic union with “Brahma”, the ultimate reality and absolute, all-inclusive ground of the universe (*brahman*) (ibid.: 1351, 1359, 1363).⁷

While the main focus of his interpretation of the Upanishads was the adept’s progressive journey to salvation, the narrower context of healing and the role of Prana therein was of secondary importance. However, in the course of describing the phases that precede the ascent of the soul, he mentioned that a healing process may occur through somnambulatory experiences—implying the concentration of Prana in the heart, accompanied by the shutting down of senses—when a suffering person immerses in the

⁶Windischmann lists several other synonyms for the vital spirit that were in vogue at his time and reflect the term’s broad semantic range that encapsulates matter, force, life, and spirit; for example, *pneuma*, “life force,” “life spirit,” “life ether,” “nerve spirit,” as well as animal or magnetic *fluidum* (Windischmann 1832: 1347–1348, note *).

⁷On its path towards the brain, the “etheric current” of Udana moves with the soul through the “Suschumua” [sic], the “vein of sweet sleep” (Windischmann 1832: 1351; see also n. 20 in this chapter). In the light of mesmerism, Windischmann described the soul’s substrate in the form of a subtle fluid that moves along bodily centres corresponding to stages of spiritual progress. His interpretation and his focus on the bodily and therapeutic aspect of meditation would prefigure the reception of *kuṇḍalinī-yoga* and the *cakras* by the late nineteenth-century occultists and second-generation theosophists.

“inner source of life” and returns invigorated to the presence of daylight. Then, “his body is refreshed, his soul calmed and more capable for the practical life” (Windischmann 1832: 1052). According to Windischmann’s healing concept, recovery does not necessarily depend on the treatment of a magnetiser; it occurs in the individual himself if he is able to attain a deep restorative, somnambulist sleep (Baier 2009: 224–228).

The mesmeric interpretation of Indian philosophy developed by Windischmann was popularised through more simplified and readable presentations by other German mesmerists, in particular Ennemoser. His *Geschichte der Magie* (1819b; second edition 1844), a history of magic, contains a summary of the reception of Indian thought in German mesmerism. Its English translation by Mary Howitt (1799–1888) was published in 1854 and constituted a significant source for the Theosophical musings on magic, animal magnetism, and Indian thought that would unfold two decades later (Baier 2009: 243–244).

BLAVATSKY’S ORIENTALISM AND “THE POWER TO HEAL”

The Russian author Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, is credited with weaving together several doctrinal elements into an occultist synthesis which formed the roots of modern Theosophy. These included teachings from spiritualism, traditional esotericism, magic and the occult sciences, mesmerism, Romantic *Naturphilosophie*, as well as the emerging knowledge about Indian religions (Hanegraaff 1998: 448).

Blavatsky’s outspoken rejection of the “dogmatism” and “exclusivism” of traditional Christianity—articulated trenchantly in *Isis Unveiled* (1877)—was a significant driving force behind the vision of Indian superiority and the assimilation of oriental religious elements in the Western occultist framework. While ancient Egypt served as the ultimate source of Blavatsky’s original version of a “primordial wisdom” during her early Hermeticist period, the projected root of that perennial philosophy moved increasingly eastward in the late 1870s, namely to India. However, the oriental turn of the Theosophical Society was only fully realised when Blavatsky and her fellow-Theosophist Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) moved to South Asia in 1879 to get involved with Ceylonese Buddhism and subsequently neo-Hindu movements (Hanegraaff 1998: 449–453). For many Westerners, Theosophical literature opened the gate to Eastern religious thought, although Blavatsky’s teachings of this period remained “to a large extent a Western [occultist] interpretation of Hinduism and

Buddhism” and were “heavily coloured by the prevailing Orientalist discourse at the time” (Bogdan 2006: 237).

Blavatsky’s views of India were deeply intertwined with her quest for the *occulta philosophia*, that is, the Hermeticists’ synthesis of religion and magic, as well as her scientific legitimisation of occult practice as a form of *magia naturalis* (Hanegraaff 1998: 449–450). The latter aim is reflected in Blavatsky’s attempt to reinterpret spiritualism within an occultist context, in which magic functions as a form of natural science despite the repudiation of the existence of hidden forces in nature by established science. Oscillating between the literal and the metaphorical, Blavatsky borrowed terminology from classical physics to make a case for the mesmeric fluid as the key to the study of natural magic: being filled by the “the radiant light of the universal magnetic ocean,” equivalent to “the divine breath,” the cosmos allows for the possibility of magic (Blavatsky 1877: 282). The exploration of this cosmic agent would “unlock the secrets of psychology and physiology” and ultimately explain all physical and spiritual phenomena (ibid.). Blavatsky thus directly drew on the physicalist claims of the early mesmerists, and suggested that there ought to be sound scientific evidence for the workings of magic. At the same time, the religiously connoted reference to the “divine breath” in this context already foreshadowed her explicit identification of the luminous magnetic fluid with *prāṇa* six years later.

In contrast to the New Thought movement, a major branch in the reception history of mesmerism, healing practice never played a central role in the early phase of the Theosophical Society (Baier 2009: 434). The only exception was the temporary but spectacular engagement of Olcott as a mesmerist healer in Ceylon in 1882. An article authored by Blavatsky and published in the April 1883 issue of *The Theosophist* entitled “The Power to Heal” contains a passionate testimony of “mesmeric methods,” including the account of more than 50 (!) paralytics supposedly healed by Olcott. After reproducing several anecdotes of miracle healings and exorcisms, Blavatsky suggested that there existed “unanswerable proof that the mesmeric fluid has manifested itself similarly in all ages,” referring to its alternative names such as “*pran* [sic], od, aura, electro-magnetism, or whatever else you prefer to call it” (Blavatsky 1991 [1883]: 382–383). She explained that the power to heal essentially depended on the healer’s power of will, self-confidence, knowledge, and compassion to project the vital agent into the patient’s nervous system and thus restore health, that is, fluidal equilibrium. Correspondingly, faith and “polaric receptivity” are

required on the side of the patient for recovery to occur. Optimistic trust is indeed so crucial that supreme and unshakable faith *alone* could bring about the healing process (ibid.: 383–385). Blavatsky thus temporarily transcends the pure physicalism of animal magnetism by implicitly building a bridge to the idealistic “mind cure” approach of the New Thought authors. In *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), her notion of *prāṇa* would re-enter a scientific discourse. In passing, she interpreted “prana” as the “fiery lives” that provide microbes with “vital constructive energy” and thereby support the process of building up the human body (Blavatsky 2011 [1888]: 263).

Blavatsky never pursued the matter of healing much further than she did in her account of Olcott’s grand mesmeric experiment. However, her eclectic and imaginative style generated a broad reservoir of ideas that became a departure point for more comprehensive interpretations of mesmerist practices through orientalist lenses. At least two elements of her teachings had a lasting impact on twentieth-century concepts of the subtle body and related healing techniques. First, her discussion of the human aura entrenched the idea of subtle sheaths surrounding the body and perceptible to clairvoyants and adepts in occultic movements as well as the wider cultic milieu (Leland 2016: 114–115). In her *Esoteric Instruction No. 3* (1897), she drew a correlation between the colour shades of an individual’s aura and his or her mental state: corresponding to the various emotions, the “circulating vitality of Prāṇa” produces vibrations throughout the nervous system. This process again causes “undulations in the psychic Aura of the person which results in chromatic effects” (Blavatsky 1980 [1897]: 621). In several forms of the energetic healing practice, the shape, colour, and intensity of the human aura will serve as an indicator for a client’s corresponding health condition. Second, her tantra-inspired claims regarding the existence of seven “centres of force” directly influenced the *cakra* systems devised by second-generation Theosophists including Annie Besant (1847–1933), Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934), and Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949) (Leland 2016: 98–99). Moreover, as will be elucidated below, Blavatsky spurred a discourse on subtle anatomy that was further popularised by leading representatives of occultism, neo-Hinduism, and New Thought.

REUß'S FIRST ANNOUNCEMENT OF PRANATHERAPIE

As the end of the nineteenth century was approaching, the “pranisation” of mesmerist techniques was “in the air.” Stimulated by Theosophical musings, the creation of great syntheses of Eastern and Western wisdom traditions was gaining momentum in the alternative religious milieu. In the German-speaking world, Theodor Reuß (1855–1923) was probably the first author to claim a mesmerism-based healing technique constructed around the notion of *prāṇa*. The journalist, Theosophist, Freemason, and neo-gnostic Reuß was an active, albeit not uncontroversial figure in European occult and fringe-Masonic circles. In July 1894 he contributed an article entitled “Pranatherapie” to the journal *Sphinx* (1886–1896).⁸ Under the pseudonym Theodor Regens, Reuß embedded his essay on *prāṇa*-based therapies in the context of mesmeric treatments and their offshoots. Prompted by a public discussion of “white magic” by the German philosopher and occult author Carl du Prel (1839–1899),⁹ Reuß presented a systematic overview of particular healing arts including du Prel’s “sympathetic cure”:

The treatment of illnesses of the human body by means of the exteriorised Od¹⁰ is a subcategory of the generic *prana therapy*. Prana therapy is the teaching of the healing art of the vital spirit, *prāṇa*, Od, life force, astral fluidum, also known as organic magnetism or nerve electricity. (Regens 1894: 14–15; my translation; emphasis in the original)

In the syncretistic style characteristic of nineteenth-century occultists, which would be adopted by twentieth-century New Age authors, Reuß presented a list of supposedly identical notions that indicated the presumed existence of a universal, invisible force or energy unknown to conventional science or orthodox theology. Thus, he adopted the earlier mesmerist and Theosophical interpretations of *prāṇa* and claimed it to be

⁸ The *Sphinx*, launched and edited by the German Theosophist Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden (1846–1916), initially promoted monism and experiment-based occultism but eventually served as a Theosophical publication organ from the early 1890s onwards (Frick 1978: 296).

⁹ Du Prel’s article “Die sympathetische Kurmethode” (1894) appeared in *Die Zukunft* (The Future), a Vienna-based weekly magazine that was published with interruptions from 1879 to 1896 and promoted revolutionary social-democratic and anarchistic ideas.

¹⁰ Derived from the Norse god Odin, the term “Od” was coined by the German chemist Karl von Reichenbach (1788–1869) and describes a vitalist force that was believed to permeate and animate all biological organisms.

a synonym for the magnetic fluid or the ancient notion of the *spiritus vitae*, while raising its status as an overarching category. He described “prana” as a healing agent that underlies four particular methods of treatment: First, the remedy of prana is mediated through a physical ointment in the case of the somewhat obscure “mummial” or “balsamic” treatment. Second, the transfer of salutary prana may occur by means of a “spiritual mummy” in the case of a “sympathetic cure” as applied by du Prel. Third, the direct transmission of prana from the healer to the patient is classified as mesmerism or “magnetic cure.” Lastly, healing may be imparted through the so-called “magnetic sleep” in the process of a hypnotic cure. The essential difference between these healing techniques, Reuß explained, only lie in the modality of how the body of the ill person is supplied with replenishing prana (Regens 1894: 15). As Henrik Bogdan observed, Reuß’s positive orientalism can easily be explained by his earlier involvement with Theosophy (Bogdan 2006: 237). Whether prana ultimately refers to a spiritual agency, a quasi-physical but subtle substance, an elusive energetic potential, or the psychological use of the force of suggestion remains ambiguous.¹¹ Furthermore, the development of a complete healing system was not Reuß’s concern, and it was only two decades later that he would mention *Pranatherapie* again, albeit at the backdrop of a somewhat shifted context as will be further discussed below.

VIVEKANANDA’S PRĀṆA-BASED MODEL OF ALTERNATIVE HEALING METHODS

Vivekananda (1863–1902), born as Narendranath Datta, is known today as “the pioneer of the neo-Hindu mission in the West” (Baier 2009: 467). Having formed a synthesis of elements from his native Neo-Vedāntic esotericism on the one hand, and concepts of Western occultism, mesmerism, and New Thought on the other, his teachings were tailored to the interests and ideological horizon of the American cultic milieu of the late nineteenth century (ibid.: 468–472). Vivekananda’s achievements in popularising early modern yoga typically take precedence in historical accounts. However, he also played a crucial role in reinforcing the orientalised of mesmerism by introducing a semi-scientistic, semi-traditionalist

¹¹ Reuß concluded his article with an admonition that any abusive application of prana would amount to “black magic.” Only theurgists who recognise that the source of all vital force is divine may use it for the benefit of their fellow men (Regens 1894: 16).

interpretation of *prāṇa* from the position of an “esotericised” Hindu spiritual authority.

During Vivekananda’s first voyage to America and Europe between 1893 and 1897, the voluble and charismatic teacher from the East attracted an audience that moved within the orbit of the bustling cultic milieu in *fin de siècle* America. This diverse field stretched from liberal Christians, members of the New Thought movement, and Theosophists to spiritists, astrologists, and palmists. Due to his acquaintance with the milieu’s central themes and endowed with the aura of a *swami* from the land considered to be the oldest and purest cradle of mysticism and occult knowledge, Vivekananda’s message easily found resonance. While he had the chance to enjoy English-style schooling as an offspring of the Western-oriented middle-class of Calcutta, Vivekananda also became familiar with the urban alternative religious milieu of the city, which had avidly absorbed Western influences through the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), mesmerism, and American transcendentalism (Baier 2009: 468).¹² However, secular philosophical ideas would continue to influence his later thought and writings, thus facilitating his reinvention of yoga in a fashion that would appeal to a broader Western audience (de Michelis 2004: 93–96).

Despite the apparent common ground between Vivekananda and the American scene, he made no pretence in his personal correspondences regarding the superiority of his neo-Hindu spirituality vis-à-vis Western esoteric groups. In particular, he scorned the crude orientalism of the Theosophical Society, which he considered simply an “Indian grafting of American Spiritualism—with only a few Sanskrit words taking the place of spiritualistic jargon” (Vivekananda 1958: 318). Outdoing what he

¹²Emic literature produced after the swami’s death tended to exaggerate the influence of the Bengali mystic Ramakrishna (1836–1886) whom Vivekananda adopted as his guru during a brief period between 1884 and 1886. For example, while the Bengali text *Sri Rāmākṛṣṇa Kathāmṛta* (1907; The Nectar of Sri Ramakrishna’s Words) written by Mahendranath Gupta (1854–1932) contains no account of an explicit spiritual transmission to Vivekananda, the liberal English translation thereof penned by Swami Nikhilananda (1895–1973)—*The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (1984 [1942])—provides a polished narrative of Ramakrishna appointing Vivekananda as his spiritual heir. However, a more careful historical analysis of the available evidence underlines the more significant role of his former master Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884) in the moulding of Vivekananda’s neo-Vedāntic outlook, and in introducing him to Western esoteric and occult culture. Whereas Ramakrishna’s Hinduism was relatively free of Western influences, Sen’s teachings had adopted Christian, Enlightenment, Romantic, and spiritualist elements (de Michelis 2004: 49–50, 70, 100–108).

considered to be amateurish Theosophical attempts, Vivekananda presented the West with another version of ancient Indian knowledge through the lenses of secularised neo-Hindu thought. As will be demonstrated his *prāṇa* model¹³ was greatly influenced by mesmeric concepts that were readily available in America's vibrant cultic milieu. In his approach towards the West he assimilated the already anonymised mesmeric fluid, at that time more commonly known as "life force," by defining and popularising a Sanskrit equivalent of it. The notion of *prāṇa* formed the central nexus of his cosmology and anthropology, and represented the extrapolation of the vital function of breath to the level of an omnipresent, universal energy. Although conjectures that drew parallels between *prāṇa* and the mesmeric *fluidum* had already been circulating as shown above, Vivekananda is counted among the first to explicitly assimilate *prāṇa* as a central category into a cosmology entrenched in mesmeric ideas (cf. de Michelis 2004: 162; Baier 2009: 479). His explorations of *prāṇa* added potent conceptual and practical elements to the reservoir of the cultic milieu, from alternative healing techniques to modern yoga.

In his seminal text *Rāja Yoga* (1896),¹⁴ Vivekananda presented his own interpretation of yoga together with a rather liberal, annotated translation of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras*. His reading of Patañjali singled out the practice-oriented parts of the *Yoga Sūtras*, that is, *aṣṭāṅga yoga* (the "yoga of the eight limbs"),¹⁵ and selected the fourth limb of yoga—*prāṇāyāma*, the conscious inhibition or control of *prāṇa*—as the foundational theme of his yoga conception. The discursive strategy employed in *Rāja Yoga* was to start from largely "disenchanted" premises, that is, by casting a rationalised yogic cosmology that contains ample scientific elements. On the basis of a quasi-materialistic *Naturphilosophie*, Vivekananda designed a

¹³ As Elizabeth de Michelis (2004: 151–153) has observed, Vivekananda's synthesis does not result in a rigorous, coherent worldview, but instead strings together three distinguishable approaches, namely the *Prāṇa* Model, the *Samādhi* Model, and the neo-Advaitic "mode of thought."

¹⁴ De Michelis (2004: 3) appraises the book as "seminal" since not only does it translate classical Hindu approaches to yoga history, concepts, and practices for Western audiences but actively reshapes them on secular terms. Drawing from earlier classifications, Vivekananda discerned between the four traditional yogas of *karma* (deeds), *bhakti* (loving devotion), *rāja* (king, i.e., royal), and *jñāna* (knowledge), and defined *rājayoga* as the superior path to realise divine truth (Baier 2009: 471–472).

¹⁵ The eight limbs encompass *yama* (restraints); *niyama* (observances); *āsana* (postures); *prāṇāyāma* (regulation of breath); *pratyāhāra* (withdrawal of the senses); *dhāraṇa* (concentration); *dhyāna* (meditation); and *samādhi* (immersion) (de Michelis 2004: 15 note 3).

theory and practice of yoga that was highly congenial to mesmeric, Harmonial, and psychological ideas prevalent in the Western cultic milieu. An analysis of Vivekananda's Prana theory outlined in *Rāja Yoga* demonstrates how he assimilated three defining principles of classical mesmerism within his own hermeneutic framework: first, Prana functions as a subtle, vitalistic element that fills and permeates the cosmos; second, the unequal distribution of Prana in the human body accounts for illness; third, the application of certain techniques, referred to as *Pranayama*, enables the storing and transmission of Prana for healing purposes (de Michelis 2004: 159–168).

The initial appeal of mesmeric notions consisted in their claims to offer a comprehensive explanation for alternative healing practices. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of an energetic agent had expanded to involve not only explanations for spontaneous healing experiences, but also paranormal abilities and meditation practice. The notion of a cosmic energy underlying these phenomena was “common property” in the Western cultic milieu (Baier 2009: 480). Therefore, Vivekananda could easily penetrate the mindscape of the American alternative religious scene and propose “Prana” as the shared root principle and universal force at the base of its various practices:

We see sects in every country who have attempted this control of Prana. In this country [USA] there are Mind-healers, Faith-healers, Spiritualists, Christian Scientists, Hypnotists, etc., and if we examine these different bodies, we shall find at the back of each this control of the Prana, whether they know it or not. If you boil all their theories down, the residuum will be that. It is the one and the same force they are manipulating, only unknowingly. They have stumbled on the discovery of a force and are using it unconsciously without knowing its nature, but it is the same as the Yogi uses, and which comes from Prana. (Vivekananda 1907 [1896]: 149–150)

Obviously, Vivekananda recognised a partial truth in the practices of the cultic milieu of his time while arguing for a grand “unified theory of alternative healing”¹⁶ based on his concept of Prana as a functional equivalent to the omnipresent “vital force” that had superseded Mesmer's *fluidum*. Unintentionally, this passage reveals more about our author's own affinity with esoteric healing concepts and his attempt to recast them in an

¹⁶This wording was suggested by Karl Baier (personal exchange).

orientalist light than it offers a sound theoretical model encompassing these practices. As Karl Baier (2009: 480) observed, Vivekananda de facto introduced a Sanskrit term to simply replace an already well-established Western notion, thus repeating exactly the kind of orientalism that he accused the Western Theosophists of.

Vivekananda loosely followed the traditional cosmology of Sāṃkhya-Yoga while mainly constructing his own mesmeric/occultist adoption of *prāṇa* that is cast within the terms of modern physical sciences. He thus introduced the dyadic couple of Prana and Akasha as the fundamental principles of an active, omnipresent “energy”¹⁷ and a passive, primordial “matter” that give structure to the universe (de Michelis 2004: 154–156). The semantic fuzziness attached to these two notions allows for the interpretational flexibility typical for occultist ether theories. On the one hand, Vivekananda described the functional pair of Prana-Akasha as a subtle but quasi-physical substance that fills the universe like an “infinite ocean” (Vivekananda 1907: 149), which is highly reminiscent of Mesmer’s cosmic fluid. He suggested that this cosmic substratum offered the explanatory framework for spiritist perceptions, occult clairvoyance, and healing at distance (ibid.: 154). The apparent motive for choosing Sanskrit terminology to denote his *naturphilosophical* key concept was to match ancient Indian knowledge, that is, Sāṃkhya thought, with the worldview of contemporary physics and its associated notions of mechanistic instrumental causality and primal matter (de Michelis 2004: 125, 157).

On the other hand, the terminological fluidity of both notions becomes apparent when Vivekananda outlines the implications of his cosmology for spiritual practice. He ascribed far greater importance to Prana than Akasha, and moved on to expand his (only superficially) materialistic concept to include decidedly vitalistic and occult nuances (Vivekananda 1907: 147–150). To fulfil its role as a universal mediating agent, Prana is characterised by an inner polarity that encompasses both material (“gross”) and mental (“subtle”) energies, thus blending the cosmological into the anthropological levels. Having this two-fold psycho-physical property allows Prana to essentially perform the same function as the mesmeric *fluidum*, while implicitly suspending the role of Akasha. Understanding

¹⁷ By the end of the nineteenth century, physicists had developed a notion of energy that served as a unifying concept for several theories including Newtonian mechanics and gravitation, thermodynamics, and electromagnetism. Thus, identifying *prāṇa* with physical energy would bestow the Sanskrit term with the quality of a unifying idea based on sound science.

the workings of Prana is the key to the hidden powers. In this vein, Vivekananda offered his readers the prospect that whoever “has discovered and learnt how to manipulate the internal forces [i.e., via Raja Yoga] will get the whole of nature under his control” (ibid.: 132). By asserting the conscious transmission of a vital force, several passages in *Rāja Yoga* seamlessly tie into mesmeric interpretations of exerting influence over others, that is, for the purpose of healing or charismatic persuasion (cf. ibid.: 154–155; 172–173). It becomes clear that, some dispersed scientific and causal-mechanistic allusions notwithstanding, the swami ultimately endorsed his own occultist *Naturphilosophie* that is not rooted in the principle of causality but in correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm.

Corresponding to his identification of the fluidic healing agent with Prana, he defined disease as a disturbance in the “balance of Prana” (Vivekananda 1907: 155). He stressed that it is not faith that leads to healing, but the transmission of Prana by a “pure man, who has controlled the Prana” and is able to convey his own increased pranic vibration to the patient (ibid.). The material feature of the mesmeric fluid, and the necessity of its equal distribution to overcome illness, are still recognisable in Vivekananda’s description of the act of healing, which aims to “take away the superfluous Prana, or to supply the Prana that is wanting” (ibid.: 156).

Vivekananda’s suggested technique for acquiring and cultivating the healing agent clearly diverges from mesmeric healing practices. Pranayama, which is the core objective of Raja Yoga, involves the command over one’s own Prana and subsequently the ability to influence others by means of magical correspondence between the life energies that pervade the individual and the universe at large. Vivekananda imagined Prana as an essentially magic substratum that is mastered by the advanced yogi through Pranayama. Akin to a form of *magia naturalis*, he postulated that control of one’s own bodily Prana would enable control over all other bodies composed of Prana, thus enacting the exchange between microcosm and macrocosm (Vivekananda 1907: 146–149). Rhythmic breathing and the practice of meditation will intensify the process of accumulating and concentrating Prana, which in turn leads to the ability to heal others (ibid.: 153–155), accelerates the spiritual evolution of the yogi (ibid.: 156), and allows the practitioner to control successively subtler levels of Prana.

Despite the occult abilities that may be acquired through Pranayama, the final aim of the practice is neither healing nor magic; it is “Samadhi,” the immersion into the highest state of pranic vibration and the ultimate

knowledge of reality (Vivekananda 1907: 159). This is the point where the more mundane, secular motives merge with the soteriological, spiritual objectives in Vivekananda's teachings. He makes the psychic, viz. occult and mystical, orientation the hallmark of his approach while contrasting it with Delsartism, a method of breathing and bodily expression introduced by François Delsarte (1811–1871),¹⁸ which Vivekananda negligently regarded as a purely physical practice (ibid.: 138). However, by the time Vivekananda entered the stage, American Delsartism, popularised by Genevieve Stebbins (1857–1934),¹⁹ had already decisively influenced the emerging body culture in both the New Thought movement and occultist groups, prefiguring modern yoga (Baier 2009: 454–467, 458). In *Dynamic Breathing and Harmonic Gymnastics* (1892), Stebbins had connected breathing exercises with the idea of a universal life force and the control thereof in a grand holistic vision with deep religious implications. She thus co-shaped the “welcome structures” of America's end-of-the-century New Thought circles and aspiring body cultures that already involved breathing techniques, body postures, and elaborate methods of meditation, enabling Vivekananda's interpretation of yoga to fall on fertile ground.

As far as the swami's concept of healing is concerned, it remains eclectic and sketchy without resulting in a coherent system. However, his recombination of several elements from both the Western cultic milieu and his

¹⁸Delsarte was a French teacher of acting and singing. He earned fame throughout Europe for developing a theory of aesthetic principles in the context of the pedagogy of dramatic expression. His spirito-physical exercises for the coordination of voice and breath with physical postures were popular beyond the professional circles of theatre and opera (Singleton 2010: 144).

¹⁹Stebbins became known as arguably the foremost representative of Delsartism in America and a pioneer of modern dance. Her theories drew on the ideas of the Delsarte-student Steele Mackaye (1842–1894), the system of gymnastic exercises developed by Pehr Henrik Ling (1776–1839), as well as yoga. Furthermore, she was a member of the Church of Light, which entertained close connections with a short-lived but influential occult and neo-Rosicrucian group of the mid-1880s, the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor (Deveney 2006: 486–487). Accordingly, Stebbins focused on practice-oriented occultism and interpreted Delsarte's ideas in esoteric terms (Singleton 2010: 144). Rejecting the notion that science opposes religion, she suggested that her breathing exercises not only had a positive medical effect but that they also enabled the practitioner to influence his or her mental state to the point of mystical ecstasy. Through breathing, not only air but also ether is being absorbed, which she identified as the divine life force (Baier 2009: 458–461). The vital energy accumulated in this manner possesses “both mental and magnetic powers” that become freely available to the practitioner (Stebbins 1892: 53).

native Indian esoteric traditions would prove to be of crucial relevance for later developments of Pranic Healing. In the chapters of *Rāja Yoga* entitled “The Psychic Prāṇa” and “The Control of Psychic Prāṇa,” Vivekananda introduced a subtle physiology that adopts elements from the traditions of *haṭha yoga* and tantrism, for example, subtle nerve channels called “Nadis,” and a form of spiritual energy situated at the base of the spine known as “Kundalini” (coiled one) (Vivekananda 1907: 160, 169). The central aim of the yogi is to open up the “Sushumna”.²⁰ Connected with the Sushumna, which interpenetrates the cerebrospinal axis, are the seven “centres” or “lotuses” through which the human energies are drawn, transferred, and transformed in the process of spiritual practice (ibid.).²¹ Diverging from classical symbolic readings, he interpreted all these subtle body elements literally, endowing them with an ontological status in accordance with his materialistic-monistic *Naturphilosophie* (de Michelis 2004: 167). Whereas Vivekananda did not directly graft them into his discussion of healing, these components would be integrated onto twentieth-century energy healing systems.

Sounding both familiar and exotic at the same time, the message of *Rāja Yoga* exerted a notable attractivity on Western audiences for two reasons. On the one hand, Vivekananda offered a spiritual teaching that was remodelled to suit rationalistic and scientific modes of thinking without forsaking an essentially esoteric horizon of meaning. Arguing for the fundamental role of Prana as *the* universal life energy and psychic force, he assimilated the function of Mesmer’s *fluidum* as a scientific category to legitimise alternative healing practices, occult phenomena, and ultimately his own version of yoga. On the other hand, by incorporating elements from traditional Indian teachings, he capitalised on his public image as a Hindu authority and clearly outshone any previous attempts by Western Theosophists to promote oriental wisdom. Whereas Blavatsky had sought

²⁰ Vivekananda refers to the three major Nadis (tube, pipe), which are “Ida” (comfort) and “Pingala” (tawny, golden), each respectively running to the left and the right of the Sushumna (gracious, kind), the central Nadi stretching along the spine. First mentioned in the *Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (c. 500 BCE), the *nāḍīs* were thought of in later Yogic and Tantric texts as subtle nerve- or arteries-like channels that conduct *prāṇa*, the vital energy, between the *cakras* (Leland 2016: 25, 33).

²¹ Vivekananda did not yet refer to these lotuses explicitly as *cakras*, but in passing mentioned their traditional tantric names. According to Kurt Leland (2016: 154), this passage in *Rāja Yoga* is possibly the first instance that the Sanskrit names of the seven *cakras* appear on American soil.

to incorporate elements from Indian traditions into an inherently Western esoteric programme, the swami “was the first Indian to succeed in acting as an effectual bridge-builder between Eastern and Western esoteric milieus” (de Michelis 2004: 92). In short, Vivekananda provided a worldview that had a secularist, scientific taste at first but was ultimately appealing to romantic dreams of a transfigured India.

REUß CONTINUED: FROM PRANATHERAPIE TO PRANA HEALING

When Reuß took up again the issue of *Pranatherapie* in an article published in his own journal, the *Ori flamme* (1902–1915), he did so at a backdrop different from the early 1890s. This time, he embedded the therapeutic application of *prāṇa* within the context of arcane “Hermetic” teachings surrounding a “mystic anatomy” of human beings. The *Ori flamme*²² was established as the official organ for the Ordo Templi Orientis (henceforth: O.T.O.), a consolidation of Reuß’s widespread fringe-Masonic network.²³ Sexual magic was a core element of the O.T.O.’s teachings, which had its roots in the writings of the occultist author Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875). Reuß linked the sexual magic of Randolph—transmitted via the Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor and the Hermetic Brotherhood of Light—with yogic practices that had been introduced to him by the “first Viennese yogi,” occultist, Freemason, and Rosicrucian Karl Kellner (1851–1905) (Bogdan 2006: 222).²⁴

²²The name *Ori flamme* (from Lat. *aureaflamma*, golden flame) was derived from the battle standard of the Kings of France used by the French crusaders. High-grade Masonic rites in France have used the symbol as well, which, according to legend, had been depicted on the heraldic banner of Charlemagne (742–814) (Frick 1978: 469).

²³Reuß first revealed the O.T.O.’s existence in the “jubilee edition” of the *Ori flamme* in 1912. The British occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) had become involved with Reuß’s project only shortly before (Pasi 2006: 901). Through Crowley, the O.T.O. attained dubious international fame, while contributing significantly to the promotion and dissemination of tantric teachings in the West.

²⁴Apparently, both Kellner and the leading German Theosophist Franz Hartmann (1838–1912) were involved in Reuß’s Masonic undertakings at least in the early days of the *Ori flamme* and contributed occasionally to his publication. Together with Reuß they seemed to have formed the arcane triumvirate referred to as the “Inner Triangle” (Pasi 2006: 899). There are no indications of rituals involving sexual elements in Kellner’s extant papers, and the notion of “sexual magic” does not appear in Reuß’s publications until Kellner’s death in 1906 (ibid.).

In the July 1913 edition of the *Oriflamme*, Reuß published a short but densely written essay, entitled “Mystic Anatomy,” on his subtle body conception under the pseudonym “Merlin.” Therein he portrayed an esoteric transmission line of a Hermetic medical art. Having its foundation in “the finer forces of nature” this healing technique would surpass “ordinary medical science” (Merlin 1913: 4).²⁵ Turning from the medical to the magical and mystical, Reuß (qua Merlin) introduced the notion of “the great act of transmutation of the reproductive energy,” which he claimed to be a means for attaining knowledge of, and even union with, the god-head. What follows is a cryptic hint to this “Hermetic Mystery” in the form of a condensed account of tantric anatomy, subtle channels, body centres, and lists of correspondences that conspicuously resemble Blavatsky’s *Esoteric Instruction* (1897).²⁶ Reuß presented 3 main and 11 minor “Nadis” (or ‘nerve fibres’), 42 lotuses (or “nerve plexuses”) of which 7 are listed by name,²⁷ 7 “Tattvas” encompassing 3 transcendent principles and 4 physical elements, as well as the Tattvas’ correspondence to bodily organs and glands (ibid.: 5).²⁸

Following this opaque introduction to mystic anatomy, Reuß dedicated the last paragraphs of his article to a brief note on the role of “Prana” in restoring health. Accordingly, Prana is contained in the air, transcending however the mere material form as an all-penetrating vital agent (Merlin 1913: 7). He then presented a concise description of a healing method that has much stronger parallels to classical mesmerism than those practices he had earlier subsumed under *Pranatherapie*:

²⁵ Reuß claims that Paracelsus (1493–1541), Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535), and Mesmer among other physicians of renown were acquainted with this mystical art.

²⁶ For an overview of Blavatsky’s interpretation of subtle anatomy, see Leland 2016: 102–116.

²⁷ These lotuses are defined as “the Psychic Centres of the Body, within which force and life-energy are stored up” (Merlin 1913: 5–6). He adopts Blavatsky’s number of seven main lotuses or “cakras” that are of special importance and are listed by name (roughly resembling their original Sanskrit terms), location (although incompletely), and their corresponding number of petals: (1) Mudladhar Lotus at the base of the spine (4 petals); (2) Swadkisthan Lotus (6); (3) Manipur Lotus under the navel (10); (4) Anahat Lotus in the heart (12); (5) Vishudda Lotus (16); (6) Ajna Lotus between the eyes (2); (7) Sakasrar Lotus (1000).

²⁸ Without referring to Blavatsky, the passage on the *Tattvas* and the pituitary gland closely follows her *Esoteric Instruction No. 3* (see Blavatsky 1980 [1897]: 611–618).

We absorb the Prana of the air in every breath we take. But we can train our breathing to absorb, inhale, a greater quantity of Prana than is ordinarily required for our daily life. And this Surplus-Prana we are able to store in our Nerve-Centres, Lotuses or Plexus, until such time as we may require it again for special use. This function can be compared to the *storing* of materialistic electricity in a Leyden Jar. Through this self-willed, conscious accumulation of *surplus Prana* in our body, the physical body develops [*sic*] forces which previously lay dormant in him. Persons who have by accumulation of Surplus Prana developed such special Forces by special intellectual training may become able to transfer, exhale, disseminate, pass on (part) of their own stored up Prana to Others! This is called then, and is used for *Prana Healing* [...]. (ibid.: 7; emphasis in the original.)

There is a striking similarity between this summarised account of Prana Healing and a passage in a chapter of William Walker Atkinson's (Ramacharaka; 1862–1932) *Hindu Yogi Science of Breath* entitled “The Esoteric Theory of Breath” (see Ramacharaka 1905: 17–19). Atkinson was a lawyer, businessman, and prolific writer, and one of the most influential key figures of the New Thought movement in the beginning of the twentieth century. From 1903 onward he had produced several books on yoga practice, health, and occult abilities under the pseudonym Ramacharaka (Baier 2009: 486–487). While he had neither theoretically expanded his first idea of *prāṇa*-based therapeutic practices nor promoted it any further, Reuß (*qua* Merlin) had simply paraphrased another author's text without revealing his sources.

Reuß's summary reflects three basic elements of Atkinson's conception of Pranic Healing²⁹ contained in *Hindu Yogi Science of Breath*: (1) the absorption of Prana through inhalation and the increase of Prana through controlled breathing—an idea that had already been common property in the American cultic milieu of the 1890s due to the writings of Stebbins and Vivekananda (Ramacharaka 1905: 18); (2) recharging the healer's seven “vital centres” or “nerve centres”³⁰ through controlled breathing (ibid.: 56, 58); (3) the alleged ability to awaken occult forces through will-power in connection with breathing (ibid.: 69), including the imparting of one's supply of Prana *qua* vitality to another person (ibid.: 18, 52, 58–59;

²⁹The term “Pranic Healing” itself probably appears for the first time in a later book called *The Science of Psychic Healing* (1906), in which Atkinson presented it as a subcategory of a more elaborate healing concept rooted in mesmerist and New Thought ideas.

³⁰Leadbeater (1922 [1911]: 287–297) instead refers to “force-centres,” thus following Blavatsky's nomenclature. Apart from breathing control, several aspects of Pranic Healing were later popularised through Leadbeater's books in the 1910s and 1920s.

cf. Leadbeater 1922 [1911]: 122). The principles constituting Reuß's revised definition of *Pranatherapie* were not so mystical after all as they had already been disseminated at least among Anglophone circles of the cultic milieu. Therefore, Reuß can hardly be considered an innovator regarding a healing technique. Although his articles from 1894 and 1913 were too sketchy and shrouded in arcane language to leave behind an applicable practice, they did foreshadow a more in-depth inclusion of yogic and tantric anatomy into a mesmeric framework that would become a hallmark of *prāṇa*-based and similar forms of energy healing conceived by subsequent twentieth-century authors.

Notwithstanding his esoteric allusions, Atkinson insisted that “all persons are potential healers,” and that the ability to increase one's own store of vital force and transmit it to others for curing diseases is only a matter of confidence and practice (Ramacharaka 1906: 13–14, 21). This motive of democratising the power to heal would be echoed through the many offshoots of his blueprint of Pranic Healing. One of them was a homonymous—but trademarked—healing practice that was established by the Chinese-Filipino author and entrepreneur Choa Kok Sui (1952–2007), whose first book, *Pranic Healing* (1987), implicitly built on Atkinson's approach in combination with the ‘Western Chakra System’ (Leland 2016). Choa Kok Sui thus established the conceptual framework for a global enterprise of practitioners that would compete with other prevalent forms of energy healing, such as Reiki or Therapeutic Touch.

CONCLUSION

A gradual replacement of *fluidum* with *prāṇa* occurred through the Romantic reception of the Upanishads, occultist and fringe-Masonic teachings, and early modern yoga as these currents were influenced by the orientalism fashionable across the nineteenth-century cultic milieus. The above discussion roughly drafted a historical outline of some outstanding authors involved in the project of synthesising mesmeric elements with the notion of *prāṇa* and adjacent Sanskrit terms. This process began with the speculations of Anquetil-Duperron and German mesmerists in the early 1800s, was intensified by Blavatsky, Reuß, and Vivekananda, and prepared the matrix for the architecture of Pranic Healing, a method that was first conceived by Atkinson in the early 1900s. During the course of this development, not only was *prāṇa* and the mastering thereof through breathing techniques adopted as the lynchpin between the micro- and macrocosms, as well as the nexus between the bodily and mental dimensions. The

attempt to reframe mesmerism in an orientalist context also triggered the transfer of several features of subtle physiology from yogic and tantric traditions, and their transformation in terms of rather this-worldly pursuits, namely health and healing. Mesmeric principles and techniques thus persist in transmuted shapes, that is, as transcultural products that were forged by Western and Indian authors alike.

In view of Albert Einstein's (1879–1955) special theory of relativity (1905), the scientific community that had rejected Mesmer's *fluidum* on empirical grounds, dismissed the *naturphilosophical* idea of a cosmic ether once and for all. Meanwhile, the vitalistic and occult connotations inherent in the physicalist notion of a universal force-substrate were enshrined in esoteric texts and healing practices by adopting a Sanskrit notion that endowed the idea with an aura of ancient wisdom. Taking this path, Mesmer's theory spanned a bridge linking the medical anthropologies of the Renaissance to those of the late nineteenth century cultic milieu, which still linger on—albeit in orientalist forms.

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Pranic Healing: A Mesmerist Echo in the New “Holistic” Age

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If the medicine of imagination is the best,
why shouldn't we practice it?¹
– Charles Deslon (1750–1786)

[T]he commission's conclusion, 'it's just imagination,'
would see its significance reversed, and would have the role
not of an ending but of a beginning.²
– Léon Chertok (1911–1991) and Isabelle Stengers (1949–2013)

1. Introduction

“Energy healing” embraces a rapidly expanding field where therapy, spirituality, and business are deeply interwoven. Despite the reported lack of biomedical evidence for this type of practice, its relative popularity in Euro-American societies and beyond appears to soar unabatedly while providers

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1 Deslon 1780: 46-47 (cited in Pattie 1994: 105). The French physician Deslon—sometimes spelled d'Eslon—was one of the leading Parisian mesmerists during the early 1780s. He collaborated with a scientific commission installed by King Louis XVI (1754–1793; r. 1774–1792) to investigate the validity of the medical theory of the controversial German-Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815).

2 Chertok and Stengers 1989: 37, cited in English translation in Ogden 2018: 67.

of energetic methods have firmly established themselves in a demand-oriented service market (Zinser 1997; Albanese 1999; 2000; Hero 2011). The umbrella term denotes a range of practices that aim to enhance individual “self-healing powers” and improve “physical, mental, spiritual, and social well-being” (Wirtschaftskammer Österreich 2020: 16). Central to these practices is the concept of some form of “subtle” energy that functions as the presumed healing agent. Other notions tightly associated with the *leitmotif* of energy are metaphors of “flow,” the removal of “blockages,” and vivid imageries of a subtle anatomy including auras, energy centres (*cakras*), and channels.³

Whereas alternative approaches to healing that postulate non-physical energies have already been part and parcel of the New Age Movement from the mid-1970s onwards (Hanegraaff 1998), the term “(subtle-)energy healing” was not widely used until the late 1990s. Around the turn of the millennium, “energy healing” began to substitute the term “energy medicine,” which had been in use as an emic category but tended to emphasise scientific theories, that is, the merging of subtle energies or hypothetical biofields with measurable electro-magnetic phenomena (Capra 1988; Albanese 2000; Oschman 2001; ISSSEEM 1990).⁴ In the German-speaking world, the terms *Energiearbeit* (energy work)⁵ and *Humanenergetik* (human energetics)⁶ have become prevalent. Both terms avoid direct associations with medical terminol-

3 Throughout this paper I use the standard Sanskrit transliteration of a term (e.g., *cakra*, *prāṇa*, etc.) when discussing its wider conceptual history, and author-specific romanisations when referring to emic discourses (e.g., *chakra*, *prana*, etc.).

4 Definitional vagueness that blends scientific and medical rhetoric with occult semantics is a characteristic feature of the field. This is exemplified in the self-description of the International Society for the Study of Subtle Energies and Energy Medicine (ISSSEEM) in its first edition of *Subtle Energies*, a journal published between 1990 and 2010, where the organisation declared its interest in the “study of informational systems and energies that interact with the human psyche and physiology, either enhancing or perturbing healthy homeostasis.” The terms “informational,” “energetic,” or “interactions” are not further specified or contextualised and thus left open to interpretation. The ISSSEEM was founded by Carol Schneider, T. M. Srinivasan, and Elmer Green, and incorporated in Colorado in October 1989. Steven Schwartz acted as the founding editor of *Subtle Energies* (ISSSEEM 2019). An online archive of the journal is available via its website (ISSSEEM 2020).

5 A possible etymological influence on the name “energy work” is the term “bodywork” (*Körperarbeit*), which not only involves manual therapies and breathing practices (“breath-work”) but also broadly overlaps with energetic practices (cf. Cassar 2004: 48–49; Arps-Aubert 2010; I thank Magdalena Kraler for pointing out this connection). Regarding the differentiation between energy work *sensu stricto* and *sensu lato*, see Endler in this volume.

6 The term *Humanenergetik* parallels the term *Humanmedizin* (human medicine) and denotes the energetic treatment of humans as opposed to animals or living spaces.

ogy as a strategy of legal self-protection vis-à-vis the established health sector. The current state of sociological research does not yet allow for broader international comparative analyses, but it is to be expected that energy healing is already a household name in Europe and North America.⁷

Since December 2013, more energy healers (without medical training) than general physicians have been registered in Austria. As of June 30, 2019, a total of 18,636 persons were listed under the occupational group *Humanenergetik* by the Austrian Chamber of Commerce (*Wirtschaftskammer Österreich*). By comparison, the national statistics of health professions counted 15,006 general physicians in December 2018 (Statistik Austria 2019). This uptrend of energy healing may be understood as an implicit protest against the felt insufficiencies of biomedicine on the one hand,⁸ and against the outsourcing of the theme of healing from the established religious communities on the other.⁹ The majority of energy healers are women, which reflects a conspicuous general tendency of female dominance among alternative health practitioners. By the same token, the field of energy healing is largely powered by female entrepreneurs who aspire to meet unspoken needs

7 A brief but somewhat dated sociological exploration regarding the legal and professional status of energy healers in Austria is presented by Höllinger and Tripold 2012: 230–231.

8 In terms of incorporation into medical institutions, several therapies rooted in a notion of subtle energies, for example, acupuncture, osteopathy, and chiropractic, have already been embedded in settings of professional medical care, and are practiced by trained physicians or physiotherapists. However, it must be noted that these practices are not listed among the official methods of occupational energy healers released by the Austrian Chamber of Commerce (*Wirtschaftskammer Österreich* 2014) since their application *de jure* requires professional medical qualifications.

9 Meanwhile, it is not only leading secular institutions for adult training—i.e., the Institute for Economic Promotion (*Wirtschaftsförderungsinstitut*) and the adult education centres (*Volkshochschulen*)—that offer courses in energy healing despite the occasional public outrage (see Endler in this volume). Also several Roman-Catholic education centres have gradually added similar courses to their programme. Seminar units include introductions to Therapeutic Touch, Kinesiology, craniosacral therapy, Polarity Therapy, Jin Shin Jyutsu, Touch for Health, etc. See, for example, the recent programme booklets of Kloster Bezauf (2017); Bildungszentrum St. Franziskus (2019); Bildungshaus Schloss Puchberg (2019); and Bildungszentrum Floridsdorf (2020). Parallel to the integration of offers from the side of energy healing schools into the course portfolio of Catholic centres, old Christian traditions of laying on of hands are updated in view of energy healing and mixed with its concepts. See, for example, Höfler 2011 and Eglin 2019.

of society's members and to carve out a worthy professional role for "holistic" healers (cf. Höllinger and Tripold 2012: 129-131; Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2013).¹⁰

Reiki, Therapeutic Touch, Applied Kinesiology, Bach flower remedies, healing with crystals, the colour therapy Aura-Soma, and Pranic Healing—the subject theme of this paper—may be counted as "classics" among the plethora of present-day energetic techniques (Hammer 2001: 92; 2005: 856-857; Ernst 2019: 269).¹¹ Arguably, Reiki was *the* trailblazer in the field as it prepared the social and ideological ground for several other practices that followed suit (cf. Stein 2017; see also Endler in this volume). In Reiki's slipstream, Pranic Healing succeeded within a decade to achieve a considerable degree of prominence (Leland 2016: 380), forming an integral part of the first wave of energetic techniques to gain traction in Austria during the 1990s.¹² Pranic Healing provides an illustrative case study since it represents a vast number of practices that allude to a perennial healing wisdom of the "East," whereas their major roots can be found in relatively recent Euro-American traditions that evolved into transcultural, globalised hybrids as shall be further elaborated here.

The leading promoter of Pranic Healing is the Manila-based Institute for Inner Studies, which was established in 1987 by the chemical engineer, businessman, and author Choa Kok Sui (1952–2007). The Institute stands out for its level of organisation and its drive to promote its healing concept worldwide. In sociological terms, Choa Kok Sui's movement oscillates between client-oriented providers that focus on therapeutic or consulting services, and a spiritual following that emphasises self-cultivation through yoga and devotion to the guru (cf. Stark and Bainbridge 1985: 26-30; Dieckmann 2019a). In terms of objectives, his enterprise exemplifies the attempt to achieve a

10 7.8 per cent of the 2,850 Viennese energy healers are legal entities such as incorporated businesses (e.g., GmbH, e. U., OG, or KG) and associations; 73.8 per cent (or 2,012 persons) of practitioners are female; and only 18.5 per cent (or 527 persons) are male. These figures have been derived from the online data base provided by the Wirtschaftskammer Wien 2020. While most practitioners are female, gender distribution among school founders seems to be rather even, whereas lobbyists and attorneys of energy healers are predominantly male.

11 A description of the total of contemporary forms of energy healing would soon turn into a tiresome catalogue of details. However, a concise overview is provided by Endler in the form of a systematic typology of energy healing practices based on family resemblances (see Endler in this volume).

12 Expert interview conducted with Manfred Schiffner, a leading attorney and lobbyist for energy healers in Austria, in the *Holistic Akademie* [sic], Neubaugasse 3, 1070 Vienna, on May 15, 2019.

“holistic” synthesis of techniques for well-being, financial success, and spiritual perfection. However, this dynamic fusion could not escape the inevitable tensions that would eventually arise both within the Pranic Healing movement and in negotiating its position with the broader society.

Public reactions to Austria’s “globalised” version of Pranic Healing have been ambivalent. Media coverage on the practice sways between fascination and scepticism¹³ and the attention drawn from the authorities has been mixed. Recently, the website of the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care, and Consumer Protection (*Bundesministerium für Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz*) mentioned Pranic Healing (*Prana Energiearbeit*) as one among several other common approaches in the field of complementary and alternative medicine (BMSGPK 2019). This development may already indicate a more relaxed social attitude towards energy healing, even if its providers are far from being endorsed by the state or the general public. In 2004, the health ministry¹⁴ rebuked the Viennese branch of Pranic Healing for displaying “misleading formulations” on its website, where the practice was illegally connected with claims of curing—an activity that *de jure* is strictly reserved for health professionals (Dieckmann 2019a: 194). A year earlier, Pranic Healing was the first energetic practice to be framed within Austria’s “cult discourse” (Warto 2008) when the Federal Office for Cult Affairs (*Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen*; BSS) listed it among the “20 groups or areas most frequently inquired about”—although still far behind frontrunners such as the Church of Scientology, Satanism, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses (BSS 2003: 43).¹⁵ From a constitutional perspective, the state-monitoring of a group under the label of *Sekte* (cult) clearly represents a form of public stigmatisation (Brünner 2004). Thus, the “boundary-work” (cf. Gieryn 1983) to defend the interpretational sovereignty of state-approved medical and religious establishments alike resulted in the demarcation of Pranic Healing as a deviant practice.

13 A selection of rather favourable articles and interviews published by Austrian newspapers and magazines during the 2000s is provided on the website of the institute: <https://www.energie-institut.com/presse/> (accessed: March 5, 2020). This initial media interest in Pranic Healing declined noticeably after the group was branded a “cult” (*Sekte*) by the authorities (see below).

14 Between 2003 and 2007, the official name of the ministry was Federal Ministry for Health and Women (*Bundesministerium für Gesundheit und Frauen*).

15 Apart from this incident, the annual reports released by the BSS placed no particular focus on energy healing until 2018, when in reaction to a major media hype (see Endler, this volume) some problematic aspects of energy healing were discussed under the sections “health” and “esotericism” (BSS 2018: 47–48, 104–105).

When Choa Kok Sui was notified about the public criticism the Austrian branch of his school was facing, he directed his local spokesperson to present his system as follows:

Since ancient times, energetic healing has existed in India, China, Asia, Europe, and all over the world. However, it was mingled with superstition and superstitious practices, and given different names. The basic principles were obscure and many times even dubious. Among scholars, the general concept of energy already existed for more than 200 or 300 years, and probably a hundred years ago scientists and intellectuals came to know about the idea of subtle phenomena. What we did was to examine the various healing practices clairvoyantly and empirically. We discarded those that were not practicable, secure, or effective. New concepts, principles, and terms were formulated that did not exist before. New healing techniques were added and systematically organised. Based on our understanding of the concept and the function of the chakras as well as our experiments, treatments were developed for nearly every illness. What mattered most was the intuitive guidance I received from my teacher and the higher beings. This is how modern Pranic Healing was developed by Master Choa Kok Sui (Dieckmann 2019a: 194-195, my translation).¹⁶

This brief apologia encapsulates Choa Kok Sui's self-image as the one who—with the help of his “teacher” and spiritual guides—re-discovered an ancient healing tradition that in principle is open to investigation through empirical methods. He related elsewhere that his “teacher,” from whom he asserts to have received esoteric knowledge, is no other than Padmasambhava (eighth century), the legendary founder of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, thus emphasising the transcendent source of his healing wisdom

16 “Energetisches Heilen hat seit uralter Zeit in Indien, China, Asien, Europa, überall auf der Welt existiert. Aber es wurde mit einer Menge Aberglauben und abergläubischen Praktiken vermischt und erhielt verschiedene Namen. Die Konzepte und Grundlagen waren undurchsichtig und manchmal sogar anzuzweifeln. Das generelle Konzept der Energie existierte unter den Gebildeten bereits vor mehr als 200 bis 300 Jahren und vom Konzept der Feinstofflichkeit wussten Wissenschaftler und Intellektuelle wahrscheinlich schon vor etwa 100 Jahren. Was wir taten war, die verschiedenen Praktiken der Heilung hellseherisch und empirisch zu untersuchen. Jene, welche nicht praktikabel, sicher oder effektiv waren, haben wir ausgeschieden. Neue Konzepte, Prinzipien und Terminologien wurden formuliert, die es vorher nicht gegeben hatte. Neue Heilungstechniken wurden hinzugefügt und systematisch organisiert. Basierend auf unserem Verständnis des Konzepts und der Funktion der Chakras und den Experimenten wurden Behandlungen für nahezu jede Erkrankung erarbeitet. Das Wichtigste dabei war die intuitive Führung, die durch meinen Lehrer und die höheren Wesen übermitteln wurde. Das ist der Weg, wie das moderne Pranic Healing durch Master Choa Kok Sui entwickelt wurde.”

(Choa Kok Sui 2006: 15-18).¹⁷ Even if the above emic account is not necessarily inaccurate in all respects, it essentially underpins a mythical narrative that blurs the distinction between fact, fiction, and epiphany, thus provoking several questions that underlie an etic historiography. Is Pranic Healing really “ancient”? Was it first developed in “India” as the name suggests? Were there any demonstrable precursors to Choa Kok Sui’s technique? What kind of text materials were available to him when he conceived his system during the 1980s?

The present paper attempts to explore the origins and evolution of Pranic Healing by means of historical discourse analysis and to reconstruct its arrival and establishment in Austria. Section 2 sketches the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of mesmerism, a major progenitor of present-day subtle energy-based techniques that was developed in Vienna by the charismatic physician Franz Anton Mesmer. Disputed and finally rejected by the contemporaneous medical establishment, mesmeric practices found a fertile ground in the religio-therapeutic and alternative medical milieus especially of the American and European nineteenth century, inspiring the emergence of various alternative therapies, some of which are still widely practiced today.¹⁸ Section 3 explores the interpretations of mesmerism in the context of occult literature in the decades around 1900. In this regard, two major hermeneutic frameworks were crucial: the appeal to ether physics, and the appeal to an ancient, Eastern wisdom tradition. Reading mesmerism in light of occult orientalism would fuse the magnetic healing agent with a vital principle referred to as *prāṇa*,¹⁹ eventu-

17 Padmasambhava (Sanskrit: “the Lotus-born”), also known as Guru Rinpoche (Tibetan: “precious teacher”), was the mythical Buddhist master who introduced tantric teachings to the eighth century Tibet. Tibetan hagiographies portray him as the one who submitted the demons of the local Bön-traditions to the dharma. His tantric rituals and meditation techniques constitute the basis of the Nyingma School, the oldest order of Tibetan Buddhism (Sørensen 2003: 790-791).

18 These two milieus—the religio-therapeutic and the alternative medical—were interrelated time and again. Nevertheless, they need to be distinguished because, since Mesmer’s time, some forms of magnetic healing relied on religio-therapeutic ideas while others did not. The latter group was concerned with establishing therapeutic magnetism as a secular therapy without any religious connotations whatsoever. Although some historians of mesmerism argue that the occult and religio-therapeutic interpretation of mesmerism became dominant in the nineteenth century because of the victory of modern medicine, there was still a significant strand of mesmerism that tried to establish itself as an alternative medical practice, such as homeopathy.

19 The Sanskrit term *prāṇa* literally translates as “breath.” Already in Vedic texts, *prāṇa* came to denote a form of life-force. In the philosophical discourses of the *Upaniṣads*,

ally leading to a hybrid system known as “Pranic Healing.” In its basic features, this system would sow the seeds for Choa Kok Sui’s healing movement, which section 4 elucidates in its historical, doctrinal, and ritual dimensions, with a spotlight on its Austrian protagonists. As will be shown, Austria’s role in exporting Pranic Healing to Central and Eastern Europe has been pivotal, which once more accentuates the country’s status as a nodal point in the globalised discourse on energy healing

2. Mesmerism: A Major Progenitor of Energetic Therapies

Mesmerism parallels a particular group of contemporary forms of energy healing, that may be subsumed as “laying on of hands,” in three basic aspects. With respect to their healing concept, these practices propose: first, the idea of a subtle force-substance that envelops and infuses the body, influencing its functions; second, that a practitioner is able to accomplish cures through applying gentle passes on or around the body, thus restoring the flow and/or proper distribution of the force-substance; and third, from the view of the natural sciences, the rationale behind these practices lacks recognition, and consequently, they have been dismissed by the medical orthodoxy. These conspicuous similarities are not of a purely “analogical” nature but indeed “homological” (cf. Freiburger 2019: 143)—that is, the result of a genealogy that is rooted in Mesmer’s medical system and whose transmission and variation has led to a sprawling reception history. The following historical sketch will highlight in broad strokes the line of development from mesmerism’s origins to its impact on the religio-therapeutic circles of the late nineteenth century, which would prove an influential source for later practices involving the idea of subtle energies.²⁰

yogic practices, and Indian medicine (*āyurveda*), the term covers a wide semantic spectrum spanning from the cosmic vital principle and various physiological functions to the individual spirit (*ātman*) and the supreme being (*brahman*) (Apte 1890: 772; Monier-Williams 2008: 705; Johnson 2009: 241).

20 For in-depth historical studies on mesmerism in Europe, see Darnton 1968; Ellenberger 1970: 53-109; Winter 1998. Podmore 1909 and Fuller 1982 provide classical accounts of Mesmer’s influence on the US-American alternative religious milieus of the nineteenth-century. Ogden 2018 crafted a poignant critique of mesmerism in America’s antebellum period as a means of the privileged class to use the credulity of the masses and to exert control over slaves, women, and the mentally ill. Crabtree 1988 offers a concise overview of the reception history of mesmerism with a view towards the psychological, medical,

In the early 1770s, Mesmer had developed a method of cure that he termed *magnétisme animal*, or in German *thierischer Magnetismus* (animal magnetism). He assumed the agency of a subtle substance he called “magnetic fluidum”—a form of invisible and imponderable matter that permeates and connects the cosmos and all living beings. He considered disruptions of the fluid’s motion or its depletion within the body as the cause of disease. The remedy thus consisted in applying certain techniques that Mesmer believed would re-establish the magnetic fluid’s equilibrium throughout the body—a veritable panacea in his view. A crucial feature in Mesmer’s approach was the induction of the “crisis,” that is, cathartic convulsions that supposedly accelerated the healing process. He initially employed physical (“mineral”) magnets, but soon adopted the idea that a magnetiser was able to effect a cure by entering into *rappport*—i.e., tuning in—with the patient and by using his hands to direct the flow of “animal magnetism” to the patient’s body (Ellenberger 1970: 62, 69, 76).²¹

Mesmer’s sensationalist demonstrations of his therapy in public attracted the full spectrum of awe, success, and fame, as well as suspicion and outright hostility. At first, Mesmer tendered his services to the members of the Viennese upper class. However, after a humiliating failure to cure the young pianist Maria Theresia Paradis (1759–1824) of her blindness, he relocated from Vienna to Paris. There he stayed between 1778 and 1785 to perform group healing *séances* on a flamboyant scale, literally “mesmerising” the French capital (Ellenberger 1970: 57–69). Among the Austrian, German, and French scientific communities, Mesmer’s system generated polarised opinions and there was concern among the medical and political authorities that his patients—predominantly well-off aristocratic women—were falling for a shrewd “charlatan” (Wolfart 1966 [1814]: viii; Hirschi 2013). When Mesmer’s assertion of the physical existence of a subtle *fluidum* was empirically falsified in 1784 by two scientific commissions that had been charged by

and parapsychological currents of thought impacted by Mesmer’s work. Karl Baier (1998; 2009) has demonstrated how the early modern yoga and meditation movements were entangled with mesmeric interpretations.

21 Being “a son of the enlightenment,” as Ellenberger (1970: 62) notes, Mesmer rejected references to a mystical or divine healing agent and instead sought a rational theory. Mesmer’s physicalist theory rested on the notion of “one uncreated primary essence” or God, and two “primary essences” (*Grundwesen*) of “nature” that constitute the created universe: matter and motion (Wolfart 1966 [1814]: 33). He thus ascribed the therapeutic effects of his technique not to the work of a transcendent, spiritual being or the exorcism of evil spirits but to the proper flow of the natural magnetic *fluidum*.

King Louis XVI to investigate his claims,²² adherents of his system became the paragon of the irrational “other” in the view of the established scientists and physicians of the time (Lanska and Lanska 2007: 308). The commission had dismissed the conceptual framework of animal magnetism by implementing a strict reductionist methodology—a novum for the emerging science-based medical establishment. Its members concluded that the mesmeric states of patients were not caused by a physical medium but rather by the patients’ own “imagination” and “collective expectation” (ibid.). However, the remarkable effects that mesmerists produced in “magnetised” subjects—including occasional cures—provided grounds for continued speculation and controversy around the practice.

Disappointed by the rejection of his project, the ensuing public ridicule, and the growing difficulties that arose between him and his students, Mesmer decided to leave Paris for good in 1785 (Ellenberger 1970: 67). After the charismatic initial phase dominated by Mesmer between 1777 and 1784, a period of diverging schools set in as the ambiguity of his theory ended in disputes among his disciples regarding the properties of the *fluidum*. Developing its own dynamics, the practice of mesmerism emancipated itself from its creator and diffused along various lines in post-revolutionary France as well as in Germany in the relative absence of Mesmer during the 1790s and 1800s.

Despite its monumental repudiation through the royal scientific commission and the gradual detachment of the natural sciences from *Naturphilosophie* in the subsequent decades, the subject of mesmerism and its associated unusual mental states (or “altered states of consciousness”; cf. Tart 1969)

22 The first commission was formed by members of the *Académie des sciences* (Academy of Sciences) and the *Faculté de médecine* (Faculty of Medicine), the second one by the *Académie royale de médecine* (Royal Academy of Medicine). King Louis’ concern with Mesmer was more political than scientifically motivated. The intensifying controversy caused by Mesmer’s popular but unorthodox practice and the increasing hostility it received from academic and professional opponents who doubted the existence of animal magnetism caused him to be alarmed. Mesmer’s extravagant group *séances* and his “society of wealthy patrons” (Lanska and Lanska 2007: 307), called the *Société de l’Harmonie Universelle* (Society of Universal Harmony; founded in 1783), posed a potential threat to the order of the *Ancien Régime* upheld by the monarchy, aristocracy, and police (ibid.: 308). The *Société de l’Harmonie Universelle* was dissolved in 1789 due to the mounting political upheavals.

continued to attract both scholarly and lay interest.²³ In April 1845, a dispassionate investigation based on an extensive review of mesmerist theories and experimental studies was anonymously published in *The British and Foreign Medical Review*. The review (Anonymous 1845: 485) concluded “that whilst we may fairly speak of mesmerism as a new *art*, evidence is wanting to show that it is a new *science*, involving any principle hitherto unknown” (emphases in the original). Understood as an art, the therapeutic skill of the magnetiser depended on his ability to suggest and to stimulate “the imagination and the hope” (ibid.: 484) in his subject by means of establishing *rapport*.

Sidelined by medical science, the mesmerist discourse was passionately welcomed in the new experimental religious field that emerged during the Euro-American nineteenth century. Following Adam Crabtree (1988), three main lineages of this field can be identified as: (1) the “occult medico-philosophical tradition” in Germany that adopted Mesmer’s physicalist theory; (2) the introduction of “magnetic magic” in France; and (3) the upsurge of spiritualism in the United States. The influence of mesmerism on the latter’s alternative religious milieu, however, went beyond spiritualism. Starting with a lecture tour in 1836, Charles Poyen (1815–1844)—a student of the prominent French mesmerist Amand-Marie-Jacques de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825)—popularised mesmerism among the US-American public (Ogden 2018: 68–77).²⁴ Being one of several other antebellum alternative medical systems, mesmerism appeared as a “progressive variation of the religious revivals” and swept along in the wake of the enthusiasm unleashed by the outburst of religious activities during America’s so-called Second Great Awakening (ca. 1790–1840) (Fuller 1989: 46). In particular through the connection of some strands of American mesmerism with Swedenborgian themes, mesmerism influenced what Catherine Albanese (2007: 181) has

23 Although Mesmer’s *theory* had been falsified, there did exist a narrow probability that at least his *technique* could be integrated into the medical sciences. In 1829, for example, the first well-documented cases of the successful use of animal magnetism as an anaesthetic during surgeries appeared. However, this promising new role of the mesmerist method in professional medicine faded as soon as safer analgesic chemicals were introduced (Crabtree 1988; Whorton 2002: 109).

24 Puységur had found in 1784 that he could induce in his patients a condition of sleep-like trance that he called *somnambulisme provoqué* (artificial somnambulism), and that he considered a superior variant of the healing crisis (Ellenberger 1970: 45, 70–74). Associated with this peculiar state of consciousness were reports about the emergence of “paranormal” powers and access to the hidden, unconscious realms of the mind. The proponents of artificial somnambulism adopted a psychological theory and a simplified technique of mesmerisation, which set them apart from the explanations of the orthodox Mesmerists (ibid.: 72).

coined “American metaphysical religion,” which encompassed Swedenborgianism, Quakerism, progressivist demands for social reform, Transcendentalism, spiritualism, and New Thought.²⁵ To its American audiences, mesmerism did not only function as a curious therapeutic system. It also became a way for the individual mind to enter into *rapport* with the higher dimensions of reality. Surrendering to the magnetiser meant to trust in an internal universe of mind and spirit. American mesmeric accounts were thus increasingly interweaving with discourses on encounters with spirits, clairvoyant visions, psychic powers, and mystical experiences—a process that had started with the Puységurism of the 1780s in France and was further intensified by the German Romantics in the 1820s and 1830s (Albanese 2007: 195, 198–201).

By the end of the 1870s, mesmerism had ultimately fallen into disrepute among trained physicians both in Europe and North America (Ellenberger 1970: 85). Meanwhile, alternative therapists outside the medical professions engaged mesmerist rhetoric as the base for a scientific discourse on subtle forces, subtle anatomy, and healing, which continued through the language of “energy” and “chakras” in the texts of the Theosophical Society, the New Age, and the contemporary holistic milieu.²⁶ One influential populariser of mesmerism as a spiritualised science (or rather scientific spirituality) was Edwin D. Babbitt (1828–1905).²⁷ In *Vital Magnetism the Life-Fountain* (1874a), Babbitt presents the “life-aura” in physicalist, psychosomatic, and occult terms:

25 The reformed magnetic therapy of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1866), a short-time follower of Poyen, set the stage for the birth of New Thought (Fuller 1982: 118–136)—the highly influential “religion of healthy-mindedness” (James 1902: 78–126). As a form of popular self-help psychology, New Thought expanded throughout the 1870s and constituted an established segment of the American cultic milieu by the end of the century. Building on Quimby, the adherents of New Thought espoused the idea that external reality, including illness and health, essentially depends on one’s inner beliefs and expectations (Hanegraaff 1998: 484–487).

26 Following Olav Hammer’s (2001: 201–330) definition, scientism denotes a strategy of self-legitimation by presenting a religion in scientific language, rather than the examination of religion by means of various (natural) scientific methods. While religious scientism may appear as “pseudoscience” from a purely scientific perspective, this approach of self-presentation is not reduced to mere rhetoric. Religious scientism does not stop with the terminological mimicry of science; it also involves the aspect of blurring the boundaries between religious outlooks and the natural sciences by styling the religious experience as inherently equivalent to the rigorous standards of scientific empiricism, thus attempting to enhance its epistemic validity and social acceptability (Baier 2019: 246).

27 Babbitt founded the New York College of Magnetism in 1883 and awarded the degree of Doctor of Magnetism (D.M.) to the graduates of his correspondence courses (Illinois State Board of Health 1878: 137). Note the similarity between D.M. and the regular degree of professional physicians, M.D. (Doctor of Medicine).

Every human being combines both vital magnetism and vital electricity, which constitute the life-aura. This is the connecting link between the soul and body, the medium through which the mind thinks in connection with the brain, and the unifying principle of both the voluntary and involuntary forces. These are not mere assertions, but facts founded on clairvoyant observations and on experiment (ibid.: 19; cf. Babbitt 1874b: 19-20).

“Life-aura” had thus superseded Mesmer’s *fluidum* without giving up the latter’s function as the principle of vitality and harmony.²⁸ At this point, “ether theories” to explain electro-magnetic phenomena were still seriously debated by professional physicists (see section 2). Hence, the idea of a continuum from matter to mind, generated by an intermediate subtle substance too fine to detect mechanically but clairvoyantly perceivable, did not appear far-fetched for the metaphysically inclined (Folk 2017: 62). In his book *Health Guide* (1874b), Babbitt labelled his health promotion project “higher science of life and the life-forces,” stressing a decidedly vitalistic bend. His recommendations on “magnetic manipulation,” diet, exercise, relaxation, and relationships indicate the comprehensive range of self-help approaches that closely parallels the repertoire of contemporary holistic practitioners. Alternative healers such as Babbitt contributed to the continued proliferation of “magnetic healing” as a folk healing practice and seminally influenced the genesis of several fringe therapies during America’s late nineteenth century. Particularly worthy of mention in this context are osteopathy, devised in 1892 by Andrew Taylor Still (1828–1917), as well as chiropractic, developed three years later by Daniel David Palmer (1845–1913). Both rival systems have succeeded in establishing highly professionalised schools that today operate on a global scale (Albanese 1986; Gevitz 2014; Folk 2017).

This cursory exploration of the meandering reception history of mesmerism served to demonstrate how Mesmer ideologically prepared the way for the mindscape of holistic healing. Ever since 1784, the boundaries between “allopathic” or “regular” medicine on the one hand and mesmerist approaches on the other have been repeatedly challenged, defended, and reinforced. Psychology and psychotherapy were still in the making and physical theories of the “ether” not yet abandoned. Therefore, the spectacular mental and physical effects that were reportedly produced in magnetised subjects strongly suggested an empirical basis to the belief in a vital, subtle agency. However, in

28 The concept of the aura was already known to Puységurian mesmerists like Eberhard Gmelin (1751–1809) at the end of the eighteenth century (see Gmelin 1789: 626), and adopted by some Romantic German mesmerists (e.g., Kluge 1815: 259-260). It can be interpreted as an expression of the individualisation of the cosmic *fluidum* in the wake of Puységurism. I thank Karl Baier for these references.

pursuing a theory of the human inner life in strictly mechanical terms, the defence of mesmerism regularly resulted in “a fine art of fuzzy thinking” (Fuller 1982: 49-50) that oscillated between physical, physiological, psychological, and occult paradigms. In this way, mesmerism became a prototype for later projects of a “scientific religion” that developed in the context of the occult movement and substantially informed emerging currents of alternative cures. In the religio-therapeutic milieu, “magnetic” teachers and healers would often enough find an enthralled audience, allowing them to thrive offside the institutions of orthodox science and religion.

3. Occult Transformations of Animal Magnetism: The Amalgamation of *fluidum* and *prāṇa*

During the Romantic period, mesmerism was not only intensely debated in literature, philosophy, and medicine, but also taught in several German universities despite its controversial standing in academia. In the 1870s and 1880s, mesmerism firmly settled down in niches beyond the sciences. It was practiced by healers offside the medical professions and enjoyed much prestige by occultists of all kinds (Baier 2016: 337). As Mesmer’s explanation of his healing system via the agency of a magnetic *fluidum* had been deemed untenable from the viewpoint of the emerging medical science, other theoretical frameworks took its place with two approaches standing out. This section outlines the process of how mesmerism entered into new syntheses with the latest theories of physics and was fused with globalising orientalist discourses. Applying these two strategies, leading protagonists of the alternative religious milieus ideologically refurbished a marginalised, pre-scientific “Western” healing approach during the decades before and after 1900, thus preparing the groundwork for various twentieth-century forms of laying on of hands.

Following Mesmer’s own approach, legitimisations of mesmerism resorted to new developments in physics. Throughout the nineteenth century, the yet unknown physical properties of molecules, atoms, and particles quickened both scientific and ideological speculation. Mesmer’s physicalist theory rested on the notion of “one uncreated primary essence” or God, and two “primary essences” that constitute the created universe: matter and motion. In this vein, “nature” results from the harmonious interplay between material substances and their movement (Wolfart 1966 [1814]: 33). Already the classical mechanics of René Descartes (1596–1650) and Isaac Newton (1643–1727) had been based on matter and motion as fundamental dual principles

of physical reality (Asprem 2011: 138-139). While these theistic scholars saw no contradiction between their notion of physics and their religious convictions, the German physiologist and author Ludwig Büchner (1824–1899) propagated the view that the physical universe (that is, total existence) can be fully explained through force and matter. In his popular science book *Kraft und Stoff* (Force and Matter; 1855), he suggested that these are the two fundamental principles from which all other phenomena derive. The functional pair of force and matter is uncreated, inseparable, and eternal, thus making the idea of a divine creator superfluous (Büchner 1855: 1-10). Accordingly, he strictly dismissed the necessity of a life force, a concept upheld only by “the mystics among the natural scientists” (ibid.: 181-190, 228).²⁹ However, this “scientific materialism” (Gregory 1977)—or rather “materialistic scientism” due to its heavy ideological charge—was to be challenged by the religious variant of scientism that reverted to a kind of subtle matter still discussed by physicists. The idea of “ether” (or “luminiferous ether”), that is, an imponderable medium that purportedly fills empty space and enables the propagation of light, proved to be a useful hypothesis to the British physicists of the Victorian era. Ether physics reached its climax of success in the 1870s when it gave rise to the formulation of a mathematical theory of electromagnetism by the British physicist James Clerk Maxwell (1831–1879). His theory explained light, electricity, and magnetism as three manifestations of a single physical phenomenon (Asprem 2011: 135-136). Reflecting the developments in physics, where the idea of an all-pervading, invisible substance linking all parts of the universe was a central element among defenders of idealistic or vitalistic worldviews, the ether became a mainstay in the texts of occultists, spiritualists, and psychical researchers produced in the *fin de siècle*.³⁰ Moreover, this period was marked by a gruelling struggle of the Christian churches to come to terms with the modern natural sciences and their

29 Büchner’s *Kraft und Stoff* was translated into fifteen languages. Together with the Dutch physiologist Jacob Moleschott (1822–1893) and the German-Swiss natural scientist Carl Vogt (1817–1895), he is considered a main proponent of the so-called materialism controversy of the mid-nineteenth century that ensued after the emancipation of biology from Romantic-idealistic *Naturphilosophie* (Gregory 1977: 105-106). Carl G. Jung (1875–1961), a staunch believer in the existence of the soul and a defender of the intellectual merit of vitalism, commented on the impact of Büchner’s book that it “became one of the most widely read books in German public libraries about twenty years after educated persons had begun to forget about it” (Jung 1933: 228).

30 References to ether in esoteric speculation only lasted as long as the existence of ether was seriously discussed within the discourse of physics. Albert Einstein’s (1879–1955) special theory of relativity (1905) and the development of quantum mechanics in the

discoveries, which often contradicted traditional beliefs. This situation enhanced the rise of scientific-leaning doctrines within both the Buddhist and the Hindu outreach to Western societies, which operated in close liaison with the social structures of the alternative religious milieu, thus leading to mutual ideological exchange (cf. Baier 2019: 245).

In the ambitious project of the *fin de siècle* occultists and their religious competitors, the perennial ancient wisdom was not only expected to be confirmed by a post-materialistic science, but was also rediscovered in Eastern teachings. Functionally similar concepts of Asian origin came to be associated and identified with the *fluidum* to the point that some authors suggested India to be the homeland of animal magnetism. The stereotypical opposition between the “spiritual East” and the “materialist West” was a characteristic feature of nineteenth-century orientalism, particularly in the context of Romantic thought and the globalising alternative religious milieu. While the reconceptualisation of mesmerism in orientalist terms already began with the first European translation of the *Upaniṣads*—the *Oupnek’hat* (1801/1802) by the French orientalist Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) (Winter 2005; 2013)—this process was accelerated through the theosophical adoption and transformation of Indian ideas including speculations on the subtle body, in particular the *cakra* system (Zoehrer 2020). Idealisations of the East had been a key element in the history of Western esoteric discourses (for example, the concept of Platonic Orientalism; see Hanegraaff 2009). In these contexts, “positive” orientalism refers to a particular variant of esoteric “othering” that asserts the “East”—be it Egypt, Chaldea, India, Shangri-La, or China—to possess some kind of knowledge superior to that of “the West” (Granholm 2011: 22–23). A particularly resolute form of orientalism hitherto unprecedented in the Euro-American history of esotericism was adopted by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) and her fellow members of the Theosophical Society, with an explicit focus on South Asia. Promoting India as the cradle of mysticism and occult knowledge, the leaders of the Theosophical Society eventually moved to India in 1879 (ibid.: 23). The perception that the West requires Eastern teachings to reinvigorate its de-spiritualised culture was—and still is—highly influential in propelling the transfer of religious

1920s ultimately rendered nineteenth-century ether physics redundant, despite the resistance of some Victorian physicists who continued to support the notion of ether. Most influential in this regard was the Maxwellian theorist, ardent spiritualist, and liberal Christian Oliver Lodge (1851–1940) (cf. Bowler 2001: 89–101). Notably, spurred by the post-theosophical author Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949), the founder of the Arcane School, the central point of reference for scientific metaphysics that would eventually enter New Age literature and related discourses shifted from ether concepts to the notion of “energy” (Hammer 2001: 269).

ideas and practices from Asian to Euro-American social contexts. However, this binary model of deficiency/completion waters down the more complex situation of inter- and transcultural reception processes (Baier 2016: 315). In view of the theosophical reception of tantric subtle body elements in the early 1880s, Karl Baier stresses that the transfer of cultural items rarely occurs in a mono-directional fashion. Instead, intercultural transfers often depend on the reciprocal dynamics between “releasing” and “welcoming” structures. This mutual entanglement between apparently analogous discourses framed by texts, practices, groups, and networks on both the “giving” and the “receiving” side has led to innovative transcultural productions (ibid.: 317). In this manner, earlier mesmerist discourses on the control of the *fluidum* and the two main centres of the fluidal body (brain/spinal marrow and the solar plexus) provided the welcoming structure that was to converge with the theosophical reception of tantric visions of the subtle body and the yogic techniques to acquire paranormal powers (*siddhis*). The combination of mesmerism with Indian traditions was central in the thought of Blavatsky and her fellow theosophist Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) because it held out the prospect of providing a perennial and yet scientifically sound knowledge of altered states of consciousness (“ecstatic states”), clairvoyance, and other occult skills together with the means to attain them.³¹

Based on these general remarks on scientific and orientalist discourses, I will now turn to the concrete textual evidence for the reinterpretation of the mesmeric healing agent in terms of ether and *prāṇa*, eventually leading to the development of a complete healing system under the rubric of “Pranic Healing.”

3.1. The Mesmeric Agent in Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* (1877)

Already at an early stage, the Theosophical Society set the tone for the imaginative scientific and orientalist readings of mesmerism that were to follow

31 Moreover, following the theses of prominent Romantic mesmerists such as the Tyrolean physician Joseph Ennemoser (1787–1854) and the German physician Johann Carl Passavant (1790–1857), the early theosophists regarded yoga as the linchpin of Indian thought and identified magnetic somnambulism and ecstasy as the major key to understanding yogic practice as a form of self-mesmerisation (Baier 2016: 337).

in its footsteps. Blavatsky's first major work, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), a foundational text for the Theosophical Society,³² framed mesmerism as the key to the theory and practice of magic.³³ In her patchwork style, she equated the universal mesmeric agent—the “invisible, but [...] too tangible fluid”—with a broad and liberal range of alternative names (Blavatsky 1877: 129). An illustrative example for Blavatsky's radical use of the rhetorical figure of synonymisation is provided by the opening paragraph to chapter 5, where she exhibits an amalgam of forty(!) disembedded notions to fit a narrative of perennial knowledge concerning the source of all physical, vital, and magical forces. Blavatsky states that while this arcane matrix was known to the mesmerists as “nerve-aura and fluid,” it was described by means of various tropes of light or fire in the Christian Bible and other ancient texts (ibid.: 125). She claims that the Hindu equivalent to this force-medium was “akasha” (*ākāśa*), which translates as “open space,” “sky,” or “ether” (Apte 1890: 221; Monier-Williams 2008: 127).³⁴ Acknowledging the existence of a single “all-pervading, subtle [*sic*] principle which has recently been baptized THE UNIVERSAL ETHER,” she asserts to pierce through the “infinite confusion of names to express one and the same thing” (Blavatsky 1877: 128, capitalisation in the original). From this primordial force or substance emanate the known

32 Blavatsky argued for the book's *raison d'être* as “a plea for the recognition of the Hermetic philosophy, the anciently universal Wisdom-Religion, as the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology” (Blavatsky 1877: vii). She went to great lengths—plagiarisms notwithstanding (see Campbell 1980: 32–38)—to present occultism as a form of *magia naturalis* that is rooted in a perennial wisdom tradition. Despite its many references to yogis and Vedantic wisdom, *Isis Unveiled* still has a decidedly “Western” focus (Hanegraaff 1998: 455; Hall 2007: 24–26) and eclectically gathers themes from Neoplatonic emanationist cosmology, Gnosticism, the Bible, Paracelsus, Rosicrucianism, Christian kabbalah, Swedenborgianism, and mesmerism. Blavatsky extensively drew on the magic of the French occult author Eliphas Lévi (1810–1875), the English novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873), as well as the theories of contemporaneous physicists and the studies of the orientalist Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) to bolster the scientific credibility of her occult message.

33 Blavatsky's view of mesmerism as a key to scientifically understanding paranormal phenomena and magic as well as Indian philosophy including yoga was crucially informed by Ennemoser and the Scottish pioneer of Mesmerism in the anglophone world, John C. Colquhoun (1803–1870) (see Baier 2016: 337–338).

34 In the *Vedas* and the *Upaniṣads*, the term *ākāśa* is associated with the idea of “world-space,” that is, the cosmic expanse in which all things live or exist. In the *Chāndogyaopaniṣad* (eighth to sixth century BCE), this space is sometimes used as a synonym for *brahman*, the ultimate, divine being. In India's epic period (from 1000 to 600 BCE) the semantics of *ākāśa* shifted and the term came to denote “ether,” an all-pervading substratum and one of the five elements, which contrasts its earlier meaning of immaterial space (Johnson 2009: 11).

physical phenomena of magnetism, electricity, and heat (ibid.: 125-126), as well as the “vital forces,” which Blavatsky continually associates with occult and mysterious powers (ibid.: 133-134, 485). The wisdom of the “ancient priests” pertaining to the astral light surpassed the modern scientific views of ether in its semantic scope and involved a crucial teleological element, “for in the Æther [*sic*] they placed the Eternal Idea pervading the Universe, or the *Will* which becomes *Force*, and creates or organizes *matter*” (ibid.: 57, emphasis in the original). Accordingly, Blavatsky’s notion of “eternal ether” is metonymic with the “source of life, the reservoir of all energy, and the propeller of every change of matter” (ibid.: xxvii), the “breath of life” (ibid.: 133) and the Platonic “soul of the world,” which the adepts of magic know how to tap into (ibid.: 129). Beneath the occasional allusions to physical terms thus lies a biting criticism of the reductionist methodology of science and its perception of biological organisms as mechanical automata (ibid.: 237, 312-313, 485).³⁵ The sages of hermetic philosophy have discovered “the nature of the soul—a form composed of nervous fluid and atmospheric ether” and therefore knew how to bridge the gap between body and soul (ibid.: 475). In light of this tradition, both an anthropology based on materialistic science and the traditional Christian dichotomy of body and soul must be discarded.

Vacillating between the categories of principle, force, and substance, the flamboyant musings in *Isis Unveiled* indicate the existence of an ancient and occult wisdom surrounding the essence of vital processes and magical powers, but without ever committing to a single definition. Blavatsky repeatedly invokes mesmerism as an ally against the perceived materialism of modern science, whereby the universal *fluidum*-turned-ether functions as the enigmatic interface between body and psyche, as well as the human and the transcendent spheres (Blavatsky 1877: 282).

Her allusions to the mesmeric agent notwithstanding, Blavatsky’s immediate interest in *Isis Unveiled* was not the development of therapeutic applications. Instead, her occult *leitmotif* was the quest for an arcane knowledge of the “nature of the vital force, and how to command it” (Blavatsky 1877: 475). In other words, she sought mastery over the “universal ether”—synonymous with the “universal magnetic ocean” and “divine breath” (ibid.: 282; cf. Gen 2:7)—and was convinced that this is the mediating principle by which the adept gained access to paranormal powers enabling him to project the “ethereal body,” levitate, or perform miracles (ibid.: 281, 485, 486). While mesmerism remained a fascinating but mostly speculative topic for Blavatsky, her co-theosophist Olcott would take an experimental approach.

35 Blavatsky (1877: 130-131) openly defends mesmerism against the inability of science as a still valid hypothesis for explaining ancient mysteries.

3.2. “The Power to Heal” through “pran”: Blavatsky on Olcott’s Mesmeric Episode (1882–1883)

While Blavatsky’s initial choice of a Sanskrit synonym for the *fluidum* fell on “akasha” due to its translatability as “ether,” it appears that she soon preferred the notion of “pran” or “prana” to argue for the mesmeric agent in orientalist terms. This lexical transposition occurred in the context of the Theosophical Society’s resolute Indian turn, marked by the arrival of its founders Blavatsky and Olcott in Bombay in February 1879 (Goodricke-Clarke 2004: 13).³⁶ Contrary to Blavatsky, Olcott’s interest in mesmerism was not only theoretical but practical. In the 1850s, he participated in a spiritualist circle in Amherst, Ohio, where he gained first-hand experience with healing by laying on of hands. The discovery of his own healing skills led him to mesmeric literature in search for explanations. In the summer of 1882, Olcott was travelling in Ceylon to promote his theosophical education campaign for Buddhists when he performed a mesmeric ritual on a half-paralysed man.³⁷ The reported success of the man’s cure led to the spread of Olcott’s reputation as a mesmeric healer. This incident sparked an intense but brief period of his engagement as a charismatic healer. Olcott toured several parts of India including Adyar and Bengal to perform healings and holds lectures (Lavoie 2012: 57, 65–66). A perusal of his *Collection of Lectures* (1883) delivered in India and Ceylon between 1879 and 1883 indicates the high relevance he attested to mesmerism—“a modern European discovery of an old Asiatic science” (Olcott 1883: 178)—for the theosophical project.³⁸ However, he did not attempt to develop new approaches of theorising or orientalisising the mesmeric agent, and instead referred to the *Researches on Magnetism* (1850)

36 In 1882, the Theosophical Society’s headquarters, first established in New York, was relocated from Bombay (today’s Mumbai) to Adyar, a suburb south of Madras (today’s Chennai) (Goodricke-Clarke 2004: 13).

37 Olcott’s healing ministry was not only motivated by altruism. Catholic missionaries on Ceylon had recently turned a Buddhist shrine to a Lourdes-like pilgrimage site. Thus, fearing mass conversions of Buddhists to Christianity, he undermined the establishment of a Catholic monopoly on healing by offering cures in the name of “Lord Buddha” (Baier 2009: 322). In a pluralistic fashion, Choa Kok Sui would keep the theosophical appellation “Lord Buddha” in his addresses, next to “Lord Jesus,” “Lord Krishna,” and “Lord Rama” (Choa Kok Sui 2006).

38 In contrast to the reverence Olcott displayed towards Indian thought, its secrets still required the key of mesmerism to be unlocked. In a lecture delivered to students of the Theosophical Society at the Patcheppa’s Hall in Madras on June 7, 1882, Olcott declared: “So I say to you, gentlemen, if you wish to understand Hinduism, learn the moden [*sic*] art that was introduced to the notice of polite Paris at the close of the last century by Anthony Mesmer” (Olcott 1883: 211).

written by the notable German chemist and industrialist Karl Freiherr von Reichenbach (1788–1869) to explain the mechanism underlying mesmerism (Olcott 1883: 52–53, 163–164).³⁹

Blavatsky was more daring in her mesmeric hypothesising. In the April 1883 issue of *The Theosophist*, she published an article entitled “The Power to Heal,” wherein she testifies to the efficacy of mesmerism and passionately reports the recovery of more than fifty(!) paralytics allegedly healed by Olcott in Ceylon the year before. Following a dense reproduction of anecdotes of miracle healings and exorcisms, Blavatsky declares that there exists “unanswerable proof that the mesmeric fluid has manifested itself similarly in all ages” (Blavatsky 1883: 158). Applying the analogy of electric conduction, she summarises the healing principle of mesmerism as follows:

A person in health is charged with positive vitality — *pran*, od, aura, electro-magnetism, or whatever else you prefer to call it: one in ill-health is negatively charged: the positive vitality, or health element, may be discharged by an effort of the healer’s will into the receptive nervous system of the patient: they touch each other, the fluid passes, equilibrium is restored in the sick man’s system, the miracle of healing is wrought, and the lame walk, the blind see, deaf hear, dumb speak, and humours of long standing vanish in a moment! (Blavatsky 1883: 159, emphasis in the original).

In her typically liberal style of postulating new synonyms, Blavatsky places “*pran*” on the same semantic level with vitality charges, Reichenbach’s *od*, the *aura*, and electromagnetism.⁴⁰ The “*pranaisation*” of mesmerism is not further pursued by Blavatsky; however, her imaginative eclecticism would produce a broad reservoir of ideas on which more comprehensive and systematic interpretations of mesmerist practices through orientalist lenses will draw. Furthermore, the early theosophical experiments with mesmeric healings in India were only short-lived. Towards the end of 1883, Blavatsky—via a message from the theosophical masters received telepathically—ordered Olcott to stop his healing tours. And as he found his followers’ seemingly insatiable need for cure to be increasingly burdensome, he gladly complied (Lavoie 2012: 66).

39 Von Reichenbach, whose theoretical work became highly influential in occult circles, proposed the existence of a physico-vitalistic field he called “*Odic force*” or “*od*,” by which he sought to explain the known physical phenomena and to provide a re-conceptualisation of the mesmeric medium (Reichenbach 1850).

40 Notably, she qualifies the physicalism of her analogy by emphasising the role of the healer’s power of will, self-confidence, knowledge, and compassion to project the vital agent into the patient’s nervous system and thus restore health, that is, fluidal equilibrium.

As the epitome of the vital principle, the concept of *prāṇa* would eventually surpass the role of mesmeric techniques in the context of the Theosophical Society. With their reception of the tantric subtle body during the 1880s, anglophone occult authors began to ascribe significance to *prāṇa* not only as an alternative term for the mesmeric healing agent but also as a central element in their anthropology. In her *magnum opus* of 1888, *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky recognised “prāṇa” (or the “life principle”) as one of seven universal principles corresponding to the (by now, quasi-canonised) septenary constitution of the human being.⁴¹ Whereas the prāṇa and the (ethereal) “double” or “astral body” were operating on separate planes of Blavatsky’s model, the second-generation theosophists came to associate prāṇa directly with the “etheric double” as the nexus between macro- and microcosm and between the gross and subtle levels of being. The decisive step in this direction was taken by Annie Besant (1847–1933)⁴² and Charles W. Leadbeater (1854–1934).⁴³ Both concepts, the healing quality of the vital principle and the “etheric double,” were to become fundamental constituents in Choa Kok Sui’s Pranic Healing. But he was not the first one to conceive of a *prāṇa*-named mesmeric therapy.

41 In Blavatsky’s transliteration, the seven human principles are composed of: (1) Âtmâ (or Self); (2) Buddhi (Spiritual Soul); (3) Manas (consisting of Higher Manas, the spiritual or higher ego, and Lower Manas, the ordinary mind); (4) Kâma Rûpa (the seat of animal desires and passions); (5) Prana (the life principle); (6) Linga Sharîra (the double, or astral body); and (7) Sthûla Sharîra (the physical body) (Blavatsky 2011 [1888]: 177; cf. a slightly shifted model where the positions of “Linga Sharîra” and “Prana” are swapped in Blavatsky 1890: 90–92). Devised as a critique of Neoplatonic and spiritualist tripartite models, the sevenfold schema of the human being ranging from subtle to material bodies or states of consciousness was first put forth in an unsigned article entitled “Fragments of Occult Truth,” published in the October 1881 issue of *The Theosophist*. Authorship of the article is attributed to the short-time theosophist Allan Octavian Hume (1829–1912) (Hall 2007: 5).

42 Besant succeeded Olcott as the second president of the Theosophical Society Adyar—a position she held from 1907 and until her death in 1933.

43 Leadbeater, originally ordained as an Anglican priest, joined the Theosophical Society in 1883. He became a leading member of Adyar branch and was a close associate of Besant.

3.3. German Occultists and “the spearhead of Pranatherapie” (1894)

As the end of the nineteenth century was approaching, the blending of mesmerist techniques with the notion of *prāṇa* also started to emerge in the writings of German occultists. Vivified by the international theosophical musings, the glorification of India as the source of perennial wisdom was gaining momentum also in the European alternative religious milieu. The German journalist, anarchist, neo-gnostic, and fringe-masonic activist Theodor Reuß (1855–1923),⁴⁴ was likely the first author to announce a name that directly connected *prāṇa* to an implicitly mesmeric therapy. Using the pseudonym “Theodor Regens,” he contributed an article entitled “Pranatherapie” (Prana Therapy) to the German-language theosophical journal *Sphinx* in July 1894—his first public article devoted to the occult.⁴⁵ Highly reminiscent of Blavatsky’s medley in “The Power to Heal” less than a year before, Reuß vaguely defined *Pranatherapie* as “the healing art of the vital spirit, *prāṇa* [*sic*], od, life force, astral fluidum, also known as organic magnetism or nerve electricity” (Regens 1894: 14–15, my translation; emphasis in the original).⁴⁶ The term denotes a generic category for treating diseases by means of transferring “exteriorised Od” or “*prāṇa*” to the ailing body, and encompassed the four sub-categories of (1) “mummial” or “balsamic,” (2) “sympathetic,” (3) magnetic, and (4) hypnotic cures (*ibid.*: 15). In the typically opaque language of contemporaneous occult authors, Reuß made use of the semantic ambiguity of *prāṇa* by flexibly adjusting it to signify either a spiritual agency, the power of suggestion, or a subtle substance (“magnetic astral fluid”). His article further contains a brief anecdote of his own success with a pranic-mesmeric

44 In 1885, Reuß had briefly joined the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society after an encounter with Blavatsky (Frick 1978: 465; cf. Möller and Howe 1986: 75, 93).

45 The *Sphinx* (publication period: 1886–1896) was launched and edited by the German theosophist and author Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden (1846–1916), who played a leading role in forming the German branch of the Theosophical Society in 1884, the short-lived *Theosophische Societät Germania* (*Loge Germania*, in brief), serving as the society’s president until its disbandment in December 1886. The magazine initially promoted monism and experiment-based occultism but eventually served as a theosophical publication organ from the early 1890s onwards. Regular contributors to the *Sphinx* were Carl Du Prel (1839–1899) and the occult author Carl Kiesewetter (1854–1895), both founding members of the *Loge Germania* (Frick 1978: 296; Möller and Howe 1986: 75).

46 “Pranatherapie ist die Lehre von der Heilkunst mittels des Lebensgeistes, *Prāṇa*, Od, Vitalkraft, Astralfluidum, auch organischer Magnetismus oder Nerven=Elektrizität genannt.”

treatment, but does not further specify details on the origins or techniques thereof.

According to Reuß, his sketch of *Pranatherapie* was originally inspired by a recent report on the subject of “sympathetic cures” published by the German philosopher and occultist Carl du Prel.⁴⁷ Du Prel wrote regularly for the *Sphinx* and was no unknown figure in the alternative religious milieu. Until February 1886 (shortly after Blavatsky’s “Mahatma Letters” were exposed as fraud), he served as the second vice-president of the German branch of the Theosophical Society founded in August 1884. With his notable discussion of the phenomena of dreams, somnambulism, trance, mesmeric healing, and latent human powers published in *Philosophie der Mystik* (Philosophy of Mystics; 1885), du Prel advanced to become a leading spokesperson in German spiritualist and occultist circles, contributing to early psychical research (Kaiser 2006: 59–61). His elaborate arguments were largely built on the basis of Western philosophical and scientific themes including the critical epistemology of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), the “Essay on Ghost-seeing” (1850) by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860),⁴⁸ and the physiology of perception pioneered by Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–1887) among others. Occasionally, du Prel also exhibited some orientalist leanings in the footsteps of earlier authors of the German-speaking world. He stated, for instance, that the ancient Indians practiced self-somnambulism—an idea that had already been spread by mesmerists and philosophers of the late Romantic era (see, e.g., Ennemoser 1819: 185; Windischmann 1832: 1315). He further speculated that the historical roots of animal magnetism might be found in ancient India, and that its first application could have come about through the “pre-

47 Du Prel’s article “Die sympathetische Kurmethode” (1894) appeared in the eighty-sixth issue of *Die Zukunft* (The Future), a Vienna-based weekly magazine that was published with interruptions from 1879 to 1896 and promoted revolutionary social-democratic and anarchistic ideas. In “Die sympathetische Kurmethode” Du Prel criticised the prevailing view that animal magnetism is to be interpreted as a form of suggestion, and instead returned to a physicalist concept by suggesting that the magnetic rapport is best explained as “odic amalgamation” (odische Verschmelzung) (Du Prel 1894: 308). Expressing his indignation over the discussion of such an “eminent esoteric theme” in the “daily press,” Reuß saw himself compelled to explain those sympathetic cures in their broader contexts of “white magic” and the art of healing by means of the life-spirit, i.e., *prāṇa* (Regens 1894: 14).

48 This essay (original title: “Versuch über Geistersehn und was damit zusammenhängt”) was published in the first volume of Schopenhauer’s *Parerga und Paralipomena* (1850) (cf. Schopenhauer 1977: 247–335). Schopenhauer regarded animal magnetism and magic as serious fields of study, accepted the phenomena of seeing spirits to be objectively true, and in his essay attempted to provide a theoretical explanation thereof.

scription of an auto-somnambulist” in a similar way that subjects in a somnambulatory state have prescribed remedies for themselves and others (du Prel 1885: 238-239). Because the “magical forces of the psyche” as well as the techniques of ecstasy to reveal the “transcendental subject” controlling the “unconscious life of the soul” were well known to the Hindu sages, neither Mesmer nor Puységur could claim the glory that is due to true discoverers (ibid.: 405, 444). However, du Prel remarked that of this ancient knowledge only the “exoteric elements” are still present in the strange practices of the fakirs, whereas the “esoteric elements” have hitherto only been partially revealed to the Indian and European members of the Theosophical Society (ibid.: 444-445). Even so, he framed his theory of mesmerism and somnambulism ultimately not in orientalist but in scientific terms. Reacting to Büchner’s sharp polemics against mesmerism that appeared in the revised edition of *Kraft und Stoff* published two years prior to *Philosophie der Mystik*, du Prel developed a psychophysical model for interpreting animal magnetism and related phenomena (ibid.: 239-279, 391-399) that would influence second-generation theosophists⁴⁹ as well as Carl G. Jung,⁵⁰ and prefigure the monistic-mystical pathos of later New Age discourses.

Meanwhile, Reuß would go on to present himself publicly as the “spearhead and representative of Prana-Therapy, i.e., the natural cure by means of the life-force known as Od or Prana” (cited in Möller and Howe 1986: 83).⁵¹ This is how he is introduced in the “address book of united truth-seekers,” printed two years after his first announcement of *Pranatherapie*.⁵² The serious development of a complete healing system, however, was obviously not his concern, and he would revisit and revise the idea of *Pranatherapie* only

49 In her article on “Hypnotism” (1890), published in the *Universal Review*, Besant draws on du Prel’s “admirable argument” regarding the matter-force-spirit-continuum and the movability of the sensation threshold to explain the control of the magnetiser or hypnotist over an individual (Besant 1890: 167). A year earlier, Besant had published an article under the same title in the October issue of the theosophical journal *Lucifer* (1887-1897). There, she invoked the study of hypnotism to critique “Materialistic science,” and to reiterate the “impossibility of thought and will being the mere result of molecular vibration” (Besant 1889: 102).

50 See, for example, Jung’s anti-materialism that was shaped by du Prel’s interpretation of Kant (Bishop 2008: 141-143).

51 “[...] ‘Vorkämpfer und Vertreter der Prana-Therapie, d. i. die Naturheilkunst mittels der Lebenskraft gen(annt) Od oder Prana’ [...]”

52 The *Adress-Buch vereinter Wahrheits-Sucher* (1896) was published by the German actor, spiritist, and occult author Leopold Engel (1858-1931), an acquaintance of Reuß. The two occultists first met 1895 in Berlin when Reuß was about to re-activate the Order of the Illuminati founded by Adam Weishaupt (1748-1830), which had ceased to exist after being banned by the Bavarian government in 1784 (Möller and Howe 1986: 87).

two decades later.⁵³ In the July 1913 edition of his journal *Oriflamme*, Reuß published an essay on subtle bodies entitled “Mystic Anatomy,” where he gives a short explanation on “*Prana Heilung*” (Prana Healing) (Merlin 1913). As shown elsewhere (Zoehrer 2020), this passage is in fact a paraphrased excerpt from *The Hindu-Yogi Science of Breath* (1903a), a book written by a certain Yogi Ramacharaka. Unlike Reuß, however, Ramacharaka did develop a basic outline of “Pranic Healing” as an applicable healing practice, which will be the core subject of the following section.

3.4. Yogi Ramacharaka’s System of “Pranic Healing” (1906)

Starting with the early 1880s, *prāṇa*-as-vitality gained ideological importance among occult authors, as shown above. Endowed with an aura of ancient Indian wisdom, the notion functioned as a synonym for the magnetic *fluidum*, employed to illustrate charges and transfers of vitalising energies. Additionally, *prāṇa* denoted a subtle anthropological level above the directly perceivable and below the purely mental. This section investigates the increasing inclusion of *prāṇa*-as-breath while the discourse on vitalism and occult powers shifted from metaphysical speculations (with the notable exception of Olcott) to more practice-oriented instructions including concrete therapeutic models.

In the 1890s, the audiences of the New Thought and the emerging physical culture movements became enthralled with “yogic” breathing techniques introduced by the American author and Delsartean gymnastics teacher Genevieve Stebbins (1857–1934) and the neo-Hindu missionary Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902). In *Dynamic Breathing and Harmonic Gymnastics* (1892), Stebbins developed a comprehensive system of self-cultivation, embedding dozens of breathing, relaxation, and energising exercises within a sophisticated theory of “psychical, aesthetic and physical culture.” One mind-body exercise described in her book, vaguely named “yoga breathing [...] because of its use by the Brahmins and Yogis of India,” involves the image of breathing through various body parts until the whole organism is immersed in “one grand surging influx of dynamic life” (Stebbins 1892: 82–83). While Stebbins’ book contains no further reference to yoga nor to India, the brief passage on yoga breathing reflects the rising awareness of and interest in such

⁵³ One exception was the booklet entitled *Was ist Okkultismus und wie erlangt man okkulte Kräfte* (1902) published by Reuß under the pen name “Hans Merlin.” In the section headed by the title “Okkulte Heilkunde” (Occult Healing Arts) (Merlin 1902: 43–47), he refers to his earlier article on *Pranatherapie*, from which substantial parts are reproduced.

practices. Being critical of both Western physical culture and what he perceived as distortive appropriations on Indian heritage by Western occultists, in particular the theosophists, Vivekananda forged his own synthesis of neo-Vedāntic esotericism with conceptual elements of Western occultism, mesmerism, and New Thought (Baier 2009: 468–472). His book *Raja Yoga* (1896) would become a key text of the early modern yoga movement in the Euro-American context. However, although less prominently, *Raja Yoga* also contributed to reinforcing orientalist versions of mesmerism by introducing a semi-scientific, semi-tradition-oriented interpretation of *prāṇa* from the position of an “esotericised” Hindu spiritual authority (Baier 2009; Kraler 2020; Zoehrer 2020). The “Prāṇa” theory outlined therein by Vivekananda demonstrates how he assimilated three defining principles of classical mesmerism within his own hermeneutic framework: first, Prāṇa functions as a subtle, vitalistic element that fills and permeates the cosmos; second, the unequal distribution of Prāṇa in the human body accounts for illness; third, the application of certain techniques—essentially Prāṇāyāma⁵⁴—enables the storing and transmission of Prāṇa for healing purposes (de Michelis 2004: 159–168).⁵⁵

In short, the propagation of breathing exercises through both Western harmonic and neo-Hindu yogic discourses set the stage for the *prāṇa*-discourse of William Walker Atkinson (1862–1932). A Chicago-based former attorney, Atkinson was a prolific and highly influential writer. His books addressed a broad range of groups within the alternative religious milieu of his time, from New Thought (or “mind cure”), mesmerism, spiritism, and Rosicrucianism, to yoga and occult topics.⁵⁶ A typical feature of his writing style are his clear

⁵⁴ *Prāṇāyāma* is the conscious “inhibition or control of *prāṇa*” and denotes the fourth of the eight limbs (*aṣṭāṅga*) of yoga as described in Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras*. A prerequisite for more advanced *yoga* practice, its aim is to becalm the mind and body by using techniques of patterned breathing (de Michelis 2004: 15; Johnson 2009: 242).

⁵⁵ When the advanced yogi has mastered Prāṇa, an essentially magical substratum, he would not only develop the skill to heal but would grow spiritually, and, ultimately, enter “Samādhi,” the highest state of pranic vibration (Vivekananda 1907 [1896]: 146–159). This is the point where the more mundane, secular motives merge with the soteriological, spiritual objectives in Vivekananda’s teachings. He makes the “psychic,” that is, the occult and mystical, orientation the hallmark of his approach while contrasting it with Delsartism, a method of breathing and bodily expression introduced by François Delsarte (1811–1871), which Vivekananda casually depreciated as a purely physical practice (ibid.: 138).

⁵⁶ Around 1900, the distinction between New Thought and occultism begins to blur as occultists increasingly adopt New Thought techniques of healing, hypnosis, and suggestion in their own research and writings, which they perceived—together with mesmerism—as belonging to the realm of the “hidden forces of human nature” (Karl Baier, personal communication).

and concise formulations as well as the systematic structure of his texts, which radically discerns his way of presentation from the Blavatskian diction of speculative eclecticism.⁵⁷ Between 1903 and 1909, Atkinson published a successful series of more than a dozen books on Indian philosophy, yoga, and healing practices under the pseudonym “Yogi Ramacharaka.”⁵⁸

Atkinson-*qua*-Ramacharaka’s speciality were teachings promoting a healthy and spiritual lifestyle cloaked in “Yogi lore” but aligned with a New Thought outlook (Ramacharaka 1903a: 7; cf. Baier 2009: 486-487). Despite generously drawing on Vivekananda’s *Raja Yoga* without accounting for his sources (cf. Singleton 2010: 145), his cosmology and instructions for yoga practice are characterised by a more rigorous and systematic exposition than that of his role model. Building on Vivekananda’s “neo-Hindu-mesmerist perspective,” he envisioned yoga as a highly developed secret “science” of the cosmic energy underlying all changes, as well as as a mystical, experience-based spiritual practice (Baier 2009: 491). In his books *Science of Breath* (mentioned above) and *Advanced Course in Yogi Philosophy and Oriental Occultism* (1905) he thus elaborated on *prāṇa* and *prāṇāyāma* within the framework of his own New Thought-oriented worldview.⁵⁹

The term “Pranic Healing” probably appears for the first time in Atkinson’s book *Fourteen Lessons in Yogi Philosophy* (1903b),⁶⁰ although elements of the practical instructions associated with it had already been indicated in his *Science of Breath*. He would further unfold this healing concept in *Science of Psychic Healing* (1906).⁶¹ Atkinson’s notion of “Prana,” from which “all Energy and Force” manifest in accordance with natural laws, di-

57 Only a portion of his books were published under Atkinson’s real name because depending on genre he adopted different identities. As “Magus Incognito” he wrote about the arcane secrets of Rosicrucianism; as the French mesmerist “Theron Q. Dumont” about mental will power and techniques of suggestion; and under the Hindu-sounding titles “Swami Panchadasi” and “Swami Bhakta Vishita” (his most successful persona) about the afterlife, mediumship, and clairvoyance.

58 The series was published in Chicago by the Yogi Publication Society, founded and probably managed by Atkinson himself.

59 The influence of New Thought elements is apparent, for example, in his reading of *prāṇāyāma* as referring to “the science or art of controlling the Prana by the Mind, or Will” (Ramacharaka 1905: 301). At the same time, an affinity to occult circles, including theosophical and fringe-masonic groups, is revealed when he claims that *rājayoga* would constitute “the basis of the power of the ‘Adepts,’ and ‘Masters,’” and was “exercised by the advanced spiritual men of the East and West” (ibid.: 299-300).

60 See Ramacharaka 1903b: 142. I thank Kraler for this crucial reference.

61 Chapters six to ten are dedicated to the subject. They are entitled: “The Principles of Pranic Healing” (ch. 6), “The Practice of Pranic Healing” (ch. 7), “Pranic Breathing” (ch. 8), “Pranic Treatments” (ch. 9), and “Auto-Pranic Treatments” (ch. 10).

rectly continues Vivekananda's occult scientism. At the same time, he upholds the decidedly perennialist concept that the "Oriental" always had superior knowledge of Prana and its application (Ramacharaka 1906: 10). Whereas Prana may appear in form of physical energy, for example, electricity, light, and heat, it ought to be primarily identified with "Life Force." It operates both within individual biological organisms and on a macrocosmic level as the "Energy of the Mind of the Universe" (ibid.: 35-37). Thus, Prana functions as an ethereal mediating agent between the physical, biological, and mental spheres of the self, and a substratum connecting microcosm and macrocosm. In physiological terms, the pranic "Vital Force" is literally associated with fluid movements within the body; for example, the circulation of blood, nerve currents, and the body's ingestion of food, water, and air. Apart from essential chemical substances or biochemical nutrients, a subtler form of Prana can be drawn from its great reservoir, the "Universal Mind" (ibid.: 46-47), clearly reflecting the imprint of a New Thought-inspired cosmology.

"Psychic Healing," according to Atkinson, refers to the treatment of illnesses and the restoration of normal bodily conditions through the power of the mind. As a generic category it subsumes three methods of healing: (1) "Mental Healing," tantamount to mental cure or healing by suggestion; (2) "Spiritual Healing," the transmission of a supreme healing power from the higher mind of a spiritually advanced healer to the mind of the patient; and (3) "Pranic Healing" (Ramacharaka 1906: 33-34). Synthesising Prana and breathing techniques with mesmerist concepts and magnetic strokes, he conceptualises the latter as a comparably coherent healing system. Atkinson defined "Pranic Healing" as

healing by the sending of Prana or Vital Force to the affected parts, thereby stimulating the cells and tissue to normal activity, the result being that the waste matter is ejected from the system, and normal conditions restored. This form of healing is known in the Western world as "Magnetic Healing," etc., and many cures have been made by reason thereof [...] (ibid.: 33).

"Pranic Healing" is thus explicitly identified with mesmerism, at least in terms of the basic healing concept and practice. Atkinson remarks, however, that although many cures have been accomplished in the name of magnetic healing, the principles underlying its application have not been sufficiently understood. Somewhat echoing the falsification of Mesmer's claims and subsequent rejection of mesmerism by the emerging scientific medicine, he questions not the efficacy of magnetic healing but its deficient explanations. He then indicates the existence of a longstanding Indian healing tradition of which the non-initiated could only catch a glimpse at best. Only through his authority as a mediator between East and West may one be incrementally

introduced to higher and more complete knowledge: “They are using Prana ignorantly and calling it ‘magnetism.’ If they would [*sic*] combine rhythmic breathing with their ‘magnetic’ treatment they would double their efficiency” (Ramacharaka 1903a: 59; 1906: 79). From Duperron-Anquetil’s introduction to the *Oupnek’hat* onwards, the notion of *prāṇa* had been interpreted in mesmeric terms. A hundred years after, the situation is precisely reversed: *prāṇa* now defines the “yogified” interpretational framework for making sense of and recognising the existence of the mesmeric *fluidum*, the principles of animal magnetism, and the role of the solar plexus (Baier 2009: 492).

Exercising his role as an authoritative yogi, Atkinson-*qua*-Ramacharaka entirely ignored the factual historical development of “Pranic Healing,” and embedded it within a constructed tradition of ancient India: “The old Yogi teachers of over twenty-five centuries ago, had reduced this form of healing to a science, and traces of their knowledge filtered out to all parts of the world” (Ramacharaka 1906: 41). They would have passed on their knowledge to the Egyptians, who would go on to establish schools of their own. In a perennialist fashion, he recounted that Hebrews, Assyrians, and Greeks—including Hippocrates (c. 460–c. 370 BCE), the founder of medicine as a distinct profession, who was allegedly familiar with curing by the laying on of hands—had obtained their medical knowledge from Egypt. He further held that variants of “Pranic Healing” were practiced by the Celtic druids who healed by breathing on the affected parts and medieval faith healers. Initiates of this healing wisdom were also Jan Baptist van Helmont (1580–1644) and William Maxwell (1581–1641), who developed actual historical forerunner models of animal magnetism (cf. Hanegraaff 1998: 433), and, finally, Mesmer himself (Ramacharaka 1906: 41–43). In brief, Atkinson envisioned India as the cradle of wisdom and the native country of mesmerism.

Several practice elements of Atkinson’s “Pranic Healing” bear close resemblance to classical mesmerism: the principle of conveying the healing agent from the healer to the patient (cf. Ramacharaka 1906: 37) via direct laying on of hands (*ibid.*: 43–45) or varying sweeping motions at a closer or farther distance from the body (*ibid.*: 54); the idea that the vital force pours from the healer’s finger tips (*ibid.*); achieving varying degrees of intensity and quality of the energy transfer by applying specific hand and finger postures (*ibid.*: 58); replenishing affected body parts with a fresh and full supply of vital energy (*ibid.*: 37, 49); measures of energetic hygiene, i.e., flicking the

fingers as if tossing away the diseased condition (ibid.: 78); charging intermediate objects with the vital force (ibid.: 69); and the projection of the healing agent via imagination to patients at a distance (ibid.: 88-99).⁶²

The crucial difference between “Pranic Healing” and animal magnetism lies: first, in the former’s transposition from *fluidum* to Prana; second, in the method of accumulating Prana through rhythmic breathing, that is, “Pranic Breathing” (Ramacharaka 1906: 71-72); and third, in the notion of a subtle anatomy in the form of “Seven Vital Centers.” Atkinson employs the latter in the context of a set of self-healing techniques referred to as “Auto-Pranic Healing.” One of these techniques, the “Grand Yogi Psychic Breath” (ibid.: 98-100), is obviously loosely based on Stebbins’ “yoga breathing” mentioned above,⁶³ but focuses the attention of the visualisation on the seven centres located along the spine and the head instead of the limbs and shoulders as in Stebbins’ instructions. Following a relaxation phase, the adept mentally guides the flow of *Prana* to the centres located at: (1) the forehead; (2) the back of the head; (3) the base of the brain; (4) the solar plexus; (5) the sacral region (defined as the lower part of the spine); (6) the region of the navel; and (7) the reproductive region. This exercise aims to energise the whole body by applying rhythmic breathing, projecting Prana to the vital centres, and thus energetically attuning all physiological structures. Although Atkinson did not yet refer to these subtle centres as “chakras,” they foreshadow their popularisation through *The Serpent Power* (1919)⁶⁴ by John George Woodroffe (1865–1936) or *The Chakras* (1927) by Leadbeater (already referring to Woodroffe), which would kick off a reception process that culminated in the quasi-canonisation of a globalised *cakra* system during the 1970s (Leland 2016).

Despite the esoteric secrecy that seems to surround the original art of healing through Prana, Atkinson stressed the general accessibility of healing knowledge. He encouraged his readers to tap into the “divine heritage” of healing power bestowed upon humankind, the “Brotherhood of Man.” And those who spread the “glad tidings of Health and Strength” will reconcile their fellow human beings with “Mother Nature.” Because “all persons are potential healers,” the ability to increase one’s own charge of vital force and

62 For an account of typical elements of a mesmeric *séance*, that is, laying on of hands, healing at distance, the magnetisation of intermediary objects, the advice to shake out the fingers after performing magnetic passes, see Ennemoser 1852: 127-154. Several instructions for employing the hands and the fingers, as well as their expected effects during a healing session, are presented in detail by Carl A. F. Kluge (1782–1844) (1815: 328-364).

63 Stebbins’ exercise contains a visualisation of drawing in breath through various body parts, but she neither mentions *prāṇa* nor the existence of subtle body centres.

64 *The Serpent Power* was published under the pseudonym “Arthur Avalon.”

transmit it to others for curing diseases is only a matter of confidence and practice (Ramacharaka 1906: 30-31, 49). This motive of democratising the power to heal reverberates through the many offshoots of Atkinson's "Pranic Healing," including the homonymous healing system of the Chinese Filipino author and entrepreneur Choa Kok Sui.

4. Choa Kok Sui's Pranic Healing Movement (1987–present)

4.1. Beginnings and Global Expansion

Subtle energy-based healing systems formed a central component of the New Age service market (Hanegraaff 1998: 53-55). Several of these healing systems incorporate a theory of the subtle body influenced by occult authors from Blavatsky onwards. These have combined early mesmerist notions of nerve plexuses with South Asian *cakra* models employed in tantric techniques of spiritual self-cultivation (Baier 2016: 338-341). Kurt Leland (2016) reconstructs the process of how the *cakras* gradually came to be tightly associated with physiological and psychological functions between the 1930s and 1970s, resulting in a standard list of *cakra* qualities that became iconic features of New Age therapies of the 1970s and 1980s. The case of the Pranic Healing movement spearheaded by the charismatic healer and spiritual teacher Choa Kok Sui underscores that this phase of emerging energy healing schools not only took place within Euro-American boundaries but was already part of a globalised esoteric discourse.⁶⁵

Choa Kok Sui (civil name: Samson Lim Choachuy) was born in Quezon City on August 18, 1952, to a Chinese family of entrepreneurs living in the Filipino province of Cebu.⁶⁶ His father was a Protestant Christian and purportedly a freemason and member of the Scottish Rite, his mother a devout Buddhist who revered the Bodhisattva *Guānyīn*. Due to his bi-religious upbringing, he is likely to have learned how to deal pragmatically with doctrinal pluralism at an early age. This skill would later reflect in his teachings, which would synthesise elements from theosophical and New Thought discourses,

⁶⁵ Choa Kok Sui's followers refer to him as "Grand Master Choa Kok Sui."

⁶⁶ The following account is based on an emic description of Choa Kok Sui's biography and the genesis of his healing system presented in *The Origin of Modern Pranic Healing and Arhatic Yoga* (2006), edited by Charlotte Anderson. See also the brief overview given in Introvigne and Zoccatelli 2018.

as well as the Christian and Buddhist traditions. Choa Kok Sui, who attended Roman Catholic schools, claims that he became an avid reader of mysticism, occultism, yoga, and *qigōng* from the age of twelve. He was fascinated by the teachings of AMORC⁶⁷ and the books of Arthur E. Powell (1882–1969), who extensively drew on the ideas of Blavatsky and second-generation theosophists. Choa Kok Sui's interest in alternative healing practices was first stimulated by the book *Esoteric Healing* (1953) written by Bailey,⁶⁸ *The Therapeutic Touch* (1979) written by the theosophist and professor of nursing Dolores Krieger (1921–2019), and—unsurprisingly—the works of Yogi Ramacharaka. During his early twenties, he studied medical *qigōng* with Tai Chi masters. As a college student, Choa Kok Sui was reportedly engaged in local esoteric circles.⁶⁹ In 1976, after earning a degree in chemical engineering, he moved to Makati City, Metro Manila, where he graduated in business management and started experimenting with various business models for several years.⁷⁰

On April 27, 1987, Choa Kok Sui founded the Institute for Inner Studies, Inc. in Manila,⁷¹ an event that was soon followed by the publication of his

67 AMORC, the Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis, was the first Rosicrucian society active in the United States. Founded in 1915 in New York by Harvey Spencer Lewis (1883–1939), an advertising agent and co-founder of the New York Society of Psychical Research, AMORC established a visible presence in several countries beyond the United States through its temples, publishing houses, and magazines, and influenced various breakaway groups (Introigne 2006: 1019–1020).

68 Cf. note 30.

69 In 1971, Choa Kok Sui met a kabbalist known as “Mang” Dabon, who claimed paranormal healing skills and became his first spiritual mentor. The following year, Choa Kok Sui was introduced to “Mang” Nenet (d. 1999), a lawyer, devout Catholic, clairvoyant, and talisman-maker. Nenet's father reportedly founded the first branch of the Theosophical Society in Cebu. According to the website of the Theosophical Society in the Philippines (<http://theosophy.ph/>), its presence on the islands dates back to May 19, 1925, when Devereux M. Myers, a Lieutenant of the US Air Corps, founded the first permanent lodge in Manila, a branch of the American organisation. Another six local lodges were formed subsequently, including the Cebu lodge. Between 1982 and 1985, Choa Kok Sui conducted experiments with Mike Nator (d. 2003) and his nephew, which he claims helped him develop spiritual senses and occult healing abilities (Choa Kok Sui 2006: 15–56).

70 According to Burgi Sedlak, he owned a shoe factory in the Philippines (e-mail correspondence, December 28, 2018).

71 In the same year, Pranic Healing was established as a registered trademark. Publications and workshops in the name of “Master Choa Kok Sui (MCKS) Pranic Healing” are registered with and protected at least by Filipino, US, and German trademark and copyright laws. However, the trademark of Choa Kok Sui's technique does not restrict the use of the name “Pranic Healing” as such. In 2014, for example, a Delhi High Court decided that Pranic Healing is an “ancient technique of yoga,” that is, public Indian heritage, and thus

first book, *The Ancient Science & Art of Pranic Healing* (1987) (see Figure 1).⁷² Starting from this base, he began to hold weekend seminars on his healing technique on a regular base. His work triggered an international movement and centres were founded in the Philippines, other South East Asian countries including Indonesia (1989), the United States (1990), India (1991), Brazil (1992), Europe (1992),⁷³ Canada (1993), and Australia (1995). In 2004, Pranic Healing arrived relatively late in Japan through the propagation of Hazel Wardha (1944–2018),⁷⁴ who received significant local support by the popular esoteric author Masaru Emoto (1943–2014) known for his claim that the subtle quality of water could be influenced through verbal or written messages (Emoto 2004; Choa Kok Sui 2006: 201–209).

Choa Kok Sui developed a six-level curriculum that initiates the student into various concepts and techniques of Pranic Healing, moving from basic

rejected claims of monopoly by the Institute for Inner Studies, founded by Choa Kok Sui (Singh 2014).

⁷² The book's title obviously resembles that of Atkinson's *The Art and Science of Personal Magnetis* (1913), published under his French pseudonym "Theron Q. Dumont," which Choa Kok Sui was certainly familiar with. Another notable aspect linking *The Ancient Science & Art of Pranic Healing* to the American esoteric discourse is that its American edition was published in 1990 by Samuel Weiser Publishing under the simple title *Pranic Healing*. Weiser Antiquarian Books was founded by Samuel Weiser (1900–1982) in New York City in 1926. Formerly known as the "Weiser Bookstore," it is the oldest bookstore in the United States that focuses on esoteric and occult themes. Going beyond collecting and selling books, Weiser founded a publishing house in 1956. The company's activities particularly benefited from the increasing popular interest in esotericism, mysticism, and Eastern religions fuelled by the counter-culture of the 1960s. Since 2006, Weiser Antiquarian Books publishes extensive on-line catalogues on its website, devoted to several twentieth-century occultists as well as subjects related to occultism including hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, alchemy, and spiritualism (see <https://www.weiserantiquarian.com/about.php>; accessed: November 5, 2018). Choa Kok Sui's first introduction to Pranic Healing was reportedly translated into more than thirty languages (Choa Kok Sui 2006: 120).

⁷³ Roberto Zamperini established the first Italian centre of Choa Kok Sui's school in 1992. Several advertisers of Pranic Healing were sent from Italy to other European countries, including Turkey, Bulgaria, the United Kingdom, Spain, Finland, Sweden, and Norway. Although Choa Kok Sui had been touring Europe including Austria as early as 1991, the first Austrian healing centre was established several years later (see section 3.3). In 2005, Hazel Wardha organised Pranic Healing events in England with the support of Lynne McTaggart (b. 1951), a prominent American New Age author.

⁷⁴ Wardha was an India-born Australian homoeopathy practitioner and spiritual leader. She first learned of Choa Kok Sui's system in January 1998 during a visit to India. See her official commemorative site at <https://www.drhazelwardha.com/> (accessed: May 28, 2020).

to more sophisticated approaches (Choa Kok Sui 1990: 19; 2004: 36-37).⁷⁵ Levels one to three are covered by Choa Kok Sui's introductory textbook. Instructions at levels four and five are provided in *Advanced Pranic Healing* (1995) and *Pranic Psychotherapy* (1989), respectively. The textbook for the sixth level is *Pranic Crystal Healing* (1996a). In addition to Pranic Healing, Choa Kok Sui created "Arhatic Yoga," a set of techniques for self-cultivation and spiritual awakening that he developed for his students.⁷⁶ The Institute for Inner Studies generates revenues by globally coordinating the training of healers and teachers, and issuing licences. After Choa's untimely death on March 19, 2007, his daughter Christine Choachuy took the chair of the Institute. However, in the following years, several branches would break away from the mother organisation and form independent groups, including Austria's *Institut für Energiearbeit* (see section 3.3).

4.2. Doctrinal and Ritual Principles of Choa Kok Sui's System

Choa Kok Sui's healing system integrates three main components: (1) the adoption of the notion of *prāṇa* as a vital force-substance, which is functionally equivalent to the magnetic *fluidum*; (2) the conception of a subtle anatomy drawn mainly from theosophical sources, in particular the aura and the etheric double, *cakras*, and channels; and (3) the technical elements of mesmerist practice, that is, magnetic strokes above the client's body, hygienic precautions to be taken by the practitioner, and the transfer of the healing agent. These components deserve a closer examination with a view to their textual sources.

In his first book, Choa Kok Sui defines Pranic Healing as "an ancient science and art of healing" which heals the whole body by utilising "prana."

⁷⁵ The six levels comprise: (1) "Elementary Pranic Healing," where the first steps to pranic healing within three to five sessions are conveyed; (2) "Intermediate Pranic Healing," which focuses on breathing techniques and deeper explanations on the major *cakras*; (3) "Distant Pranic Healing," involving the application of occult skills and requiring several months to several years to master; (4) "Advanced Pranic Healing," which teaches the use of visualisation for employing various types of *prāṇa*; (5) "Pranic Psychotherapy," an advanced technique of Pranic Healing that offers complementary approaches to conventional psychotherapeutic treatments and requires proficiency in the first two levels to practice it; and finally (6) "Pranic Crystal Healing," which teaches the application of crystals in support of pranic treatments.

⁷⁶ "Arhatic" derives from the Sanskrit word *arhat*, which means "the deserving one" in the sense of being worthy of honour. In the Buddhist context, *arhat* chiefly refers to a person who has attained enlightenment by practicing the teachings of the Buddha.

This “vital energy” or “life force” is also referred to as “ki,” “mana,” “ruah,” “pneuma,” and the “breath of life” (Choa Kok Sui 1989 [1987]: 2)—that is, the quasi-canonical synonyms for the psycho-physical agency in contemporary energy healing practices (cf. Hammer 2001: 164-165).⁷⁷ The state of health is attained when the energy system of the human body is in balance, signalled by subjective well-being. The three main sources of prana are sunlight, the air, and earth. Absorbing prana through exposure to sunlight, breathing exercises, walking barefoot, but also through consuming clean water and fresh food has the effect of replenishing the level of prana contained by a person. Furthermore, prana can be assimilated from healthy trees (in particular pine trees) or through projection from a pranic healer (Choa Kok Sui 1989: 2-4).

77 Although each of the terms listed—*qì*, *mana*, *ruach*, *pneuma*—may function as a representative of the vital principle in a liberal reading, their respective historical and cultural contexts as well as multi-layered meanings must be taken into account. *Qì*—variously spelled “ki,” “chi,” or “qi”—denotes an influential Chinese notion that encompasses semantic levels ranging from its literal meanings “rice vapour” or “air” to fundamental metaphysical agencies and even moral qualities. The term entered Chinese medical theory through the *Huángdì Nèijīng* (Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor) around the third century BCE, conveying the idea of a life-sustaining essence that manifests in the form of breath, circulating bodily fluids as well as mental activities (Zhang 1999: 76-77). Notwithstanding the early scholarly—albeit mostly apologetic—discussions of *qì* by the Jesuit missionaries to China around 1600, the term fully joined the Euro-American religio-therapeutic discourse after 1945 through the canonisation of “Traditional Chinese Medicine” and the Reiki movement. While the original meaning of the Polynesian term *mana* remains vague, various translations of this impersonal force have been put forth without being able to capture its full sense—e.g., “authority,” “power,” “influence,” “prestige,” or “blessing.” All living beings (including humans) and things (including devices, weapons, or clothes) are endowed with a certain amount of *mana*, allowing them to fulfil their respective potentials and purposes. Death or destruction would lead to the loss of *mana* (Greschat 2002: 722-723). The Hebrew word *ruach* denotes “breath” or “wind” (*sensu stricto*), and functions as the central metaphor of nature used in the Old Testament to describe the dynamic “spirit” of JHWH, who is invisible and yet powerful, goal-driven, and omnipresent (Oeming 2000: 564). *Pneuma* originally refers to the ancient Greek word for breath and adopted the meanings of “spirit” or “soul” (Bremmer 1993; MacGregor 1993). Anaximenes of Miletus (ca. 585–525 BCE) was among the first known thinkers to propose an analogy between human breath (*pneuma*) and atmospheric air (*aer*) with the microcosmic life principle and the macrocosmic soul of the world (Vamvacas 2009: 47-49). Building on earlier theories of *pneuma* developed by Aristotle (384–322 BCE) and the Stoics, the influential Greek physician Galen (129–200 CE) distinguished between a vital and a psychic *pneuma* to explain the arterial system and the nervous system (Lloyd 2007: 142-143). New Testament authors, in particular John and Paul, contrast *pneuma* (“spirit”) to *sarx* (“flesh”) and render the Old Testament theme of *ruach ha-kodesh*, the divine influence and agency in the world, as *pneuma hagion* (“Holy Spirit”) (MacGregor 2005).

The underlying anthropological view in Pranic Healing is the division of the physical body into two parts: the “visible physical body” and the “bioplasmic body,” also called “etheric double.”⁷⁸ Composed of an invisible, subtle matter, the bioplasmic interpenetrates the visible body, extending ten to twelve centimetres beyond its surface. The “invisible luminous energy field,” the part of the bioplasmic body that closely follows the contour of the visible physical body, is referred to as the “inner aura,” which again is interpenetrated and superimposed by the “health aura” (cf. Leadbeater 1902; Powell 1925) and ultimately the “outer aura” extending about one meter away from the visible body (Choa Kok Sui 1990: 9-13).⁷⁹ The visible, dense body and the invisible, bioplasmic body are related through the principle of correspondence: “what affects one affects the other and vice versa” (ibid.: 12).

78 The Etheric Double emerged as a key term from theosophical discourses on the subtle body. In her “Esoteric Instructions,” Blavatsky adopted the Sanskrit notion of “Linga Sarira” (from *liṅga*: mark, or image; and *śarīra*: body), which she identified with the “astral body” and the *doppelgänger* of the physical body, reflecting the latter’s shape and functions. She defined this subtle body to be habitually in a passive state, composed of ethereal matter, and functioning as a “vehicle of Prāna” (Blavatsky 1980a [1890-1891]: 704-707). The body’s etheric duplicate mediates between the divine and the natural world by drawing life from “jīva,” the universal and divine life, and disseminating it to the parts of the physical body as “Prāna” (ibid.: 704). To reduce the redundancy of other synonyms of the term, such as the “astral body, the ethereal body, the fluidic body, the double, the wraith,” etc., Besant (1892: 9) suggested to replace them with “Etheric Double” instead. Leading theosophical authors accepted this change and Etheric Double became the conventional term adopted by Leadbeater, Bailey, and Powell. In traditional *hatha yoga*, and related systems, the *liṅga-śarīra*—also called *sūkṣma-śarīra*, i.e., the “subtle body”—is thought to be composed of the individual’s *prāṇa*, which vitalises the *sthūla-śarīra* (“gross body”). In general, the *sūkṣma-śarīra* has been used from Upaniṣadic times onwards as a name for the embodied self in contrast to the physical body. In Tantric, yogic, and *saṃkhyā* physiology, it provides the vehicle for the transmigrating self (*ātman*), as it moves from one gross body to another (Johnson 2009: 311-312).

79 This differentiation between the Etheric Double, the inner aura, and the outer aura was already put forth by the medical electrician Walter J. Kilner (1847-1920), who developed devices he claimed would detect the human aura (Kilner 1911; see also Powell 1925). The bioplasmic body in Choa Kok Sui’s presentation fulfils three functions consisting in a teleological, a physiological, and a diagnostic aspect. First, it informs the material level of the human body according to its original design. Second, the Double absorbs external prana and distributes it throughout the physical body, thus ensuring a person’s health and vitality. Third, the bioplasmic body encompasses the various layers of aura, which serve as a diagnostic tool to the clairvoyant healer. An early precedent for synaesthetic readings of the aura can be found in Blavatsky’s *Instruction No. III* (1897), where she draws a correlation between the colour shades of an individual’s aura and his or her mental state. Corresponding to the various emotions, the “circulating vitality of Prāna” produces vibrations throughout the nervous system. This process again causes “undulations in the psychic Aura of the person which results in chromatic effects” (Blavatsky 1980b [1897]: 621).

Any disturbance in the subtle energy body may manifest as illness. Likewise, any bodily ailment or injury results in a corresponding pranic leak in and around the affected area. Therefore, being intimately related to the physical body, the bioplasmic body serves as the central locus of intervention in Pranic Healing. If a disruption of the flow of prana occurs, the practitioner needs to detect blockages, insufficiencies, or excesses, and lead the flow of subtle energies back to balance. A major source of Choa Kok Sui's conception of the properties and function of the bioplasmic body is Powell's *Etheric Double* (1925), which consolidates the ideas that Leadbeater and Besant expressed on the theme of the etheric body and related healing practices.⁸⁰ A most crucial feature of the Etheric Double is that it contains several "force centres" which absorb and distribute "Prâna" to the whole etheric body, thus vitalising the physical body (ibid.: 22-27).⁸¹

In Choa Kok Sui's system of the subtle body, eleven major "chakras"—each about eight to ten centimetres in diameter—"control and energize" the vital organs of the visible physical body and ensure their proper functioning.⁸² Special chakras, such as the minor chakras located in the palms, may be activated to develop psychic abilities, that is, the sensing of subtle energies and auras as well as the projection of prana (Choa Kok Sui 1990: 14). In *Rainbow Body* (2016), a comprehensive study on the reception history of the *cakras* in the twentieth century, Leland calls Choa Kok Sui "an example of an innovative, consolidating validator" of the *cakra* system (Leland 2016: 380). His pragmatic solution seeks to make sense of the conflicting *cakra* models ex-

80 Choa Kok Sui himself recommends Powell's book for a deeper study of Pranic Healing and provides a brief summary thereof in Choa Kok Sui 1990: 19-20. The adopted concepts include, for example, the notion that the existence of Prâna is not yet formally recognised by orthodox Western science despite good reasons to suspect the activity of a vital agent in biological organisms (Powell 1925: 8-21). Its source is the sun, and Prâna enters the atoms of the atmosphere through the sun's rays and is eventually stored in biological organisms through respiration (ibid.). Pranic currents through the body are accessible through the power of will (ibid.: 74-78).

81 Whereas Powell closely followed Leadbeater's subtle anatomy based on seven chakras, Choa Kok Sui adds four more: the Sex, Solar Plexus, Forehead, and Meng Mein Chakras.

82 Each chakra corresponds to certain physiological functions. In *Pranic Psychotherapy* (1989) and *The Spiritual Essence of Man* (2003), Choa Kok Sui additionally allocates psychological and kabbalistic functions to the chakras (Choa Kok Sui 1990: 96-97; 2000a [1989]: 9; 2003: 7).

isting in the esoteric field by introducing a consolidated system that was initially based on eleven chakras and later joined by a twelfth one.⁸³ Underscoring Choa Kok Sui's theosophical sympathies, he preserves several features of Leadbeater's system that have already been discarded by the prevalent New Age *cakra* maps by the 1980s, most notably the colour schemes and structures assigned to each energy centre.⁸⁴ Another, less central element in Choa Kok Sui's subtle anatomy are "bioplasmic channels," also called "meridians" (a reference to Traditional Chinese Medicine) or "nadis" (a reference to a tantric concept), by which *prana* and the subtle, bioplasmic matter are distributed throughout the body.⁸⁵

The basic Pranic Healing ritual is based on two principles. First, the affected parts of the patient's subtle body need to be removed of diseased bioplasmic/etheric matter ("cleansing"). In the next step the practitioner projects fresh prana into the client's double ("energising") by means of certain movements or positions of her hands while guiding the flow of prana through her intention (Choa Kok Sui 1990: 4, 25-27; cf. Powell 1925: 74-78). Purification and recharging the affected areas in the bioplasmic body leads to the corresponding restoration of the physical body. The aim of this contact-free method is to restore the body's natural capacity of self-healing or to increase the speed of the healing process.⁸⁶

In a healing session, the practitioner first establishes "rapport" with the client, and then scans the inner aura and all major chakras through her

83 Building on the canonised seven-chakra-system, Choa Kok Sui preserved the Navel and Spleen Chakra from Leadbeater. The existence of the Meng Mein and Forehead Chakras were allegedly revealed to Choa Kok Sui through inner transmission from his master Mei Ling (Anderson 2009: 103). Finally, Choa Kok Sui's announcement of a twelfth chakra was made in his book *Meditations for Soul-Realization* (2000b). This special chakra—the "soul star," seat of the "incarnated soul"—transcends the physical body and is located about thirty centimetres above the head (Choa Kok Sui 2000b: 95-99).

84 The air brush paintings of the chakras in *The Art & Science of Pranic Healing* designed by the "clairvoyant artist" Benny Gantioqui are strikingly similar to the non-prismatic colour scheme devised by Leadbeater, although they show more detail. Even the illustrations of Choa Kok Sui's additional chakras bear some resemblance to Leadbeater's vision.

85 Whereas prana is associated with vitality and health, bioplasmic matter is usually specified as "congested," "dirty," and "diseased" (Choa Kok Sui 1990: 12-18).

86 Choa Kok Sui lists concrete ailments that his method supposedly can heal. He claims that minor issues such as headaches, digestion problems, toothaches, or muscle pains could be relieved almost immediately. Even major illnesses and problems concerning the eyes, liver, kidney, or the heart could be treated with several sessions over the period of a few months (Choa Kok Sui 1990: 7). Notably, Choa Kok Sui 1990 also contains the following declarative colophon: "The material in this book is not intended to replace competent medical treatment."

hands.⁸⁷ This is followed by a series of downward sweeping movements, starting from the head and working down to the feet at about twenty centimetres above the physical body (“general sweeping”).⁸⁸ To avoid self-contamination, the practitioner is required to flick her hands downward after each streak while throwing the disease subtle matter into a bin of salt water (“bioplasmic waste disposal unit”) prepared beforehand.⁸⁹ The practitioner mentally affirms the process by focusing her intention to purify the subtle body.⁹⁰ Next, depending on the problem and the state of the subtle body, the individual chakras are treated according to prescription. After cleansing the affected chakra (“local sweeping”), the practitioner energises it while performing “pranic breathing,” that is, deep abdominal breathing, and projects prana via her hands. When sufficient prana has transferred, the recharged chakras are stabilised by visualising the projection of blue colour, which is then wiped across the energy centres three times.

The practitioner herself is required to be in optimal physical health when healing, and she must have the pure intention of restoring the well-being of the patient.⁹¹ In addition to the physical self-preparation for projecting prana

87 A detailed instruction for the Pranic Healing session is given in Choa Kok Sui 1990: 25–56. However, Choa Kok Sui uses the term “rapport” without further theoretical discussion (see, for example, Choa Kok Sui 1990: 88).

88 This ritual element is clearly mesmeric. See, for example, Ennemoser 1852: 36.

89 Powell (1925: 74–78) also advised healers to take precautions in order to avoid adopting the same ailments of his patient. Thus, diseased subtle matter that has been withdrawn needs to be disposed of by shaking it off one’s hands, or by throwing it into a basin of water. The shaking of the fingers after magnetic strokes was part of classical mesmerist practice. See, for example, Ennemoser 1852: 36: “Many magnetisers slightly shake their fingers after each stroke. This method, that never harms, is in certain cases beneficial and for that reason it is good to form a habit of doing so.” (My translation. The original reads: “Viele Magnetiseurs schütteln nach jedem Striche leicht ihre Finger. Dieses Verfahren, welches niemals schadet, ist in gewissen Fällen vortheilhaft und aus diesem Grund ist es gut, sich dasselbe anzugewöhnen.”)

90 Choa Kok Sui notes that some clients may become drowsy as a result of sweeping. In such cases, he recommends to apply a few upward sweeping movements to reawaken the client (Choa Kok Sui 1990: 37).

91 One early indication to the necessity of such precautions when building rapport (or “sympathy”) between magnetiser and subject can be found in the writings of the French naturalist Joseph Philippe François Deleuze (1753–1835). In his *Introduction pratique sur le magnétisme animal* (1819), Deleuze mentions the dangers that may occur in the state of magnetic rapport, and recommends that the magnetiser only treats a patient when he himself is in good health. This is to avoid the transfer of “spoiled life-fluidum” or the discharge of “diseased matter” to the subject’s body (Deleuze 1853: 266–267). Although the healthy magnetiser is able to feel the symptoms of his patient due to reciprocal sympathy, he does not absorb diseased matter because his will ejects the fluidum in a mindset of acting and

through regular physical exercise, healthy diet, and yoga, Choa Kok Sui further recommends practitioners to practice his meditation technique called “Meditation on the Twin Hearts” in order to activate the Heart and Crown Chakras (Choa Kok Sui 1990: 237-244). Another decidedly spiritual feature of Pranic Healing is the framing of the healing ritual through an invocation prayer to start and a thanksgiving prayer to conclude the session.⁹² If deemed necessary, the practitioner may request the assignment of a healing angel to assist the healing process of the patient until full recovery is achieved (Choa Kok Sui 2000a: 28-30).

A dim echo of animal magnetism appears on the first pages of *The Ancient Science & Art*, when Choa Kok Sui mentions “magnetic healing” among other synonyms for Pranic Healing (Choa Kok Sui 1989: 2).⁹³ As shown above, the main textual sources from which he drew the key elements for his own system were the theosophical writings of Leadbeater and Powell. Several direct quotations in his books also indicate his familiarity with Bailey’s and Ramacharaka’s works besides contemporary New Age literature. Although less significant to the main body of his system, some minor elements have been adapted from acupuncture and *qigōng*. However, Choa Kok Sui did not regard himself solely as an author and healer. He asserted to be a master standing in a certain spiritual lineage, having received guidance from an inner teacher whom he referred to as the Lord Mahaguru Mei Ling and identified with the spirit of Padmasambhava (Choa Kok Sui 2006: 15-18).⁹⁴ These allusions to a spiritual grand master form an essential part of Choa Kok

giving without suffering or receiving. The magnetiser is required to consider his practice a “religious act” that requires “the greatest concentration and the purest intention” (ibid.: 31).

92 The following prayer for divine and spiritual blessings is suggested by Choa Kok Sui at the start of a healing session: “To the Universal Supreme God, we humbly invoke for your blessings for guidance, healing, help and protection. Thank you. In full faith. To my spiritual teachers, all the great ones, healing angels, healing ministers, and spiritual helpers, we thank you all for your blessings and healing! In full faith” (Choa Kok Sui 2000a: 28). He recommends this prayer to conclude the session: “To the Supreme God, thank you for assigning a healing angel and healing minister to this patient (specify the name) until healing is complete. With lots of love and gratitude. Thank you. In full faith” (ibid.: 30).

93 In the American version of his introductory work, Choa Kok Sui aims to specify the terminology of his system and states that the “energy or prana projected is not magnetic, but rather vitalizing and strengthening. This is why the use of the term magnetic healing for pranic healing is inaccurate” (Choa Kok Sui 1990: 154).

94 According to Choa Kok Sui, Padmasambhava had incarnated in his earlier lives as the Hindu god Rama and the god Nefertem of ancient Egyptian mythology. A *thankga*, a Tibetan painting of Buddhist deities or *maṇḍalas*, depicting Padmasambhava, decorates the wall of the main room in the Viennese Pranic Healing centre, the *Institut für Energiearbeit*.

Sui's theosophical heritage and emphasise the aura of a secret, transcendent origin surrounding his teachings.

4.3. "Austria ... shall become a spiritual empire"

How did Pranic Healing arrive in Austria, the cradle of its almost forgotten forebear, Mesmer's animal magnetism? The first Austrian licence holder of Choa Kok Sui's style of Pranic Healing was a former high school teacher and well-travelled Reiki instructor, Thai masseuse, and Shiatsu practitioner by the name of Burgi Sedlak (b. 1956).⁹⁵ Interested in Filipino faith healing, she visited Baguio⁹⁶ in the summer of 1991, where she first came across Choa Kok Sui's book. Curious about Pranic Healing and the man behind it, she drove to Manila and asked him to hold a basic course in Salzburg. He accepted her invitation and in the same year presented his system for the first time in the German-speaking world.⁹⁷ In 1993, Sedlak founded the *Internationale Prana-Schule Austria—Sedlak*, an incorporated company. However, she decided to work independently from Choa Kok Sui's organisation in 2004 because of her aversion to what she perceived as a growing personality cult.⁹⁸ She went on to establish her own method of energy healing under the name *PranicVita*, which combines energetic practice with consciousness training and meditation.

The main institution in Austria offering courses and treatments in Choa Kok Sui's style of healing is the *Institut für Energiearbeit*.⁹⁹ The institute attained special significance for the European branch of the Pranic Healing movement as it formed a gateway for the dissemination of the practice into Eastern Europe. The institute was originally founded as a Reiki centre on

95 This summary of Sedlak's journey into Pranic Healing is based on personal communications received from Sedlak via e-mail on December 18 and 28, 2018, and on January 11, 2019, as well as a brief biographical portrait (Horvat 2018).

96 Baguio is a city in the mountainous Northern area of Luzon, the main island of the Philippines.

97 According to Sedlak, Choa Kok Sui held basic and advanced courses in Salzburg in the following two years, whereas she attended several training courses in that time period on the Philippines as was required for national representatives.

98 See also the self-critical reflections by Dieckmann (2019a: 46-50) regarding the projection of a father-figure onto her master.

99 The following account is based on an expert interview conducted with Dieckmann and Thann in the premises of the *Institut für Energiearbeit* on March 28, 2018. The dates were counterchecked with the chronological record maintained by the *Institut für Energiearbeit* as well as with Dieckmann's recently published memoir *Ich gestehe: Ich habe einen Guru! BEYOND* (I Confess: I Have a Guru! BEYOND; 2019).

March 24, 1995, by Claudia Dieckmann (b. 1955) and has been located in Vienna's third district since April 2015.¹⁰⁰ Dieckmann, a former manager in a real estate company, worked as a Usui-Reiki practitioner for two years before encountering Pranic Healing. Having faced several problems with Reiki—i.e., “self-contamination with diseased energies” leading to signs of paralysis, initial aggravation of the symptoms in her clients, and insufficient explanations about the chakras—Dieckmann was open for an alternative approach. While visiting her Reiki-master Nalini in 1996, she discovered the German translation of *Pranic Healing* (1990), *Grundlagen des Pranaheilens*, published in the same year by the Hermann Bauer Verlag, a leading German publisher of esoteric literature.¹⁰¹ She was immediately intrigued by the answers she found in Choa Kok Sui's system and vividly describes her experience when she saw the master's picture on the back of the book:

His eyes pierced right through me and just as at the moment of my first Reiki initiation a lightning struck through me down to the little toe. The energy was powerful, almost convulsive. I recognised it and the intensity frightened me. But accepting no resistance, the realisation shot through me: It is him! (Dieckmann 2019a: 17, my translation).¹⁰²

Dieckmann sent a letter to the Institute for Inner Studies inquiring about the possibility to receive more in-depth training, and was advised to attend courses in Munich taught by Sai Cholleti, the head of the German branch.¹⁰³ In 1997, she met Choa Kok Sui in person at the first European conference of pranic healers in Germany. In the following year, after graduating from a course on Arhatic Yoga, she obtained her first sub-license contract. The contract was directly signed by the master and allowed her to teach the basic

100 Kaisergartengasse 1a/3, 1030 Vienna. The first centre of the *Institut für Energiearbeit* was located in Schopenhauerstraße 52/4, in Vienna's eighteenth district between March 1995 and April 2003.

101 The Hermann Bauer Verlag was founded in 1937 and is based in Freiburg im Breisgau.

102 “Seine Augen durchdrangen mich und wie damals bei der ersten Reikieinweihung durchfuhr mich bis in die kleine Zehe ein Blitz. Die Energie war mächtig, fast erschütternd. Das kannte ich und die Intensität machte mir Angst. Keine Widerrede duldend durchfuhr mich die Erkenntnis: Er ist es!”

103 During the mid-1990s, Choletti had learned about Pranic Healing while in India and was personally trained by Choa Kok Sui. He became the main proponent of Pranic Healing in Germany (see Prana Germany e. V. at <https://www.prana-heilung.de/>). Originally, Dieckmann was asked to attend a basic course held by Sedlak in Tyrol, which, however, was not followed through due to personal reasons.

level of Pranic Healing in Austria (Dieckmann 2019a: 50).¹⁰⁴ For 2001, she arranged Choa Kok Sui's first visit to Vienna, where he delivered a public lecture on June 22 in the Hotel Kaiser Franz Josef, followed by a weekend seminar on "higher clairvoyance."¹⁰⁵ In May 2002, he spoke to an audience of 120 people in the Small Ceremonial Hall of the University of Vienna (*Kleiner Festsaal der Universität Wien*; see Figure 2) (ibid.: 91-94; 102-104).¹⁰⁶ In November of the same year, Jana Thann (b. 1967, née Bagaric) completed a basic seminar in Dieckmann's centre and would soon after join as a self-employed cooperation partner (ibid.: 136-141).¹⁰⁷ Underscoring their independence from Sedlak's group, Dieckmann and Thann registered an association under the name *VLUG Verein Leben und Gesundheit* (VLUG Life and Health Association) on March 23, 2004. By that time, Austria had become a globally leading nation in producing qualified pranic healers. Several hundred students graduated from Dieckmann's courses per year, and a dozen practitioners worked full-time as co-operation partners directly at her centre. Her dedication was reportedly acknowledged by Choa Kok Sui who named her the "Jeanne d'Arc of Pranic Healing" (ibid.: 150-151). On the weekend of May 15–16, 2004, after Choa Kok Sui gave a course on Kriyashakti in Vienna (see Figures 3 and 4),¹⁰⁸ he endowed Dieckmann with the instruction licenses for all courses declaring "Austria was once a significant empire. Now it shall become a spiritual empire," and asked her to raise pranic healers in Central and Eastern Europe. Accepting the mission, Dieckmann

104 Officially, Dieckmann worked under the supervision of Sedlak, the national representative of Choa Kok Sui's organisation in Austria until 2004. Their work relationship was marked by open rivalry and therefore not without friction (see Dieckmann 2019a).

105 The Hotel Kaiser Franz Josef, where Choa Kok Sui also enjoyed living and teaching in the years to follow during his brief stays in Austria, is located in Sieveringer Str. 4, in Vienna's nineteenth district.

106 See also the press release issued by the *Institut für Energiearbeit* (2001) on June 12.

107 Thann supports the *Institut für Energiearbeit* in the areas of public relations and marketing, project management, corporate identity, and quality management.

108 Kriyashakti is derived from the Sanskrit compound term *kriyā-śakti* ("performance" or "action"; and "power," "strength," or "ability"; cf. Monier-Williams 2008: 320, 1044) and may be rendered as the power of (paranormal) action. The term refers to Choa Kok Sui's teachings on cultivating thought power to attract success and financial prosperity. He gave his first seminar on this topic in Vienna on the weekend of May 25 and 26, 2002 (see Pranic-Healing Österreich at <https://www.prana.at>). Kriyashakti is not to be mistaken with Kriya Yoga ("yoga of action"), a meditation practice that was taught by Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952).

trained local teachers in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland between 2004 and 2009.¹⁰⁹

Family disputes and power struggles surrounding Choa Kok Sui's legacy ensued after his demise. Dieckmann would eventually secede from the Filipino mother organisation and join forces with the late master's life and business partner Charlotte Anderson (1944–2016),¹¹⁰ who founded The Institute for Inner Sciences as a new international umbrella organisation in Vienna on January 4, 2010 (Dieckmann 2019b: 67; see Figure 5). However, three years later, Dieckmann and her team also broke ties with Anderson (ibid.: 209). Operating autonomously ever since, they have continued their enterprise in the spiritual lineage of Master Choa Kok Sui.

Although the services of the *Institut für Energiearbeit* mainly constitute lectures, courses, and workshops on Pranic Healing, it also offers a wide range of other holistic activities, including seminars for deleting allergies, new moon purification rituals, as well as courses on yoga and meditation.¹¹¹ Especially advanced pranic healers are encouraged to regularly practice yoga because the cultivation of their own “spiritual alignment” helps them to effectively meet the needs of their clients’ “body-mind-soul unit” (Dieckmann and Thann 2015: 2). Providing “energetic,” “holistic,” and “spiritual” knowledge related to the diverse aspects of life, the institute professes to offer a path to health, success, and spirituality (ibid.). This orientation of the *Institut für Energiearbeit* clearly represents the core interests of the female-dominated, professionalising holistic service industry that Albanese (1999: 310) identified as “wealth and health and metaphysics.” The considerable achievement of Dieckmann's enterprise in Austria and beyond traces back to her business acumen and organisational skill on the one hand, and a crisis-proofed devotion to her master and resolute sense of mission on the other.¹¹²

5. Concluding Remarks

Based on the above historical exposition of the genesis of Pranic Healing, four salient developments can be deduced. First, the degree of conceptual

109 See Dieckmann 2019a: 270–273 as well as the local press coverage collected on her institute's website (Institut für Energiearbeit at <https://www.energie-institut.com/>).

110 According to Dieckmann (2019b: 117), Anderson was born into a well-to-do American family and had managed a “world-famous heavy metal band” with her first husband before she met Choa Kok Sui whom she supported with her financial know-how.

111 See the information brochure produced by Dieckmann and Thann 2015.

112 Throughout her memoirs, Dieckmann regularly stresses the formative impact of having attended a Catholic convent school on her personality.

sophistication of *prāṇa*-based therapies has increased over time. While Anquetil-Duperron, Romantic authors, and occultists speculated about the functional similarity of *prāṇa* and *fluidum*, Atkinson added the element of “yogic” breathing techniques and a tantric-theosophical subtle anatomy onto basic mesmeric practice, thus designing a first applicable system under the name of Pranic Healing. Choa Kok Sui’s healing system followed Atkinson’s basic pattern but additionally incorporated features of later theosophical discourses on the *cakras* and the Etheric Double, along with influences from contemporaneous New Age therapies as well as—to a much lesser degree—Chinese medicine. Second, and closely related to the conceptual refinements, a trend of pragmatism can be observed from metaphysical speculations to more application-oriented textbooks as well as professional commercialisation, best exemplified by Choa Kok Sui’s organisation. Third, the discursive knot of *prāṇa* and magnetic healing has expanded from its European to a transcultural and globalised framework, triggered by the South Asian turn of the Theosophical Society and the active inclusion of non-Western participants into a common esoteric discourse. However, going beyond the better-known Western, Indian, and East Asian protagonists, the case of a Filipino-Chinese charismatic healer sheds new light on the role of an apparently marginal player in the global esoteric network. Fourth, the pranic branch of the reception history of animal magnetism came at a sacrifice: its orientalisation has been marked by a gradual process of “source amnesia,” that is, the obscuration of its historical origins, accompanied by the introduction of new mythical masters, spiritual lines of transmission, and imagined healing traditions. From a pragmatic, emic point of view, this epistemic strategy may seem natural because the refurbishment of “rejected knowledge” with a fresh coat of paint is less demanding than grappling with Mesmer’s controversial legacy.

In his later years, Mesmer had portrayed a vision of a splendid future society where special authorities would function as educators, counsellors, and healers, and deployed to each parish in order to ensure the wellbeing and perfection of humankind. These prestigious and publicly funded ministers would be referred to as the “chaplain of the community” (*Geistliche der Gemeinde*), and they would oversee education in physics, morality, and health care—in short, teach and apply mesmerism (Wolfart 1966 [1814]: 296–300). Mesmer’s “holistic” model of society did not actualise the way he had pictured it, and yet his discovery was not completely lost. It only took on paths different than what he could have imagined. One of those unforeseeable paths led to Choa Kok Sui’s healing movement, which veils mesmeric techniques within the aura of an “ancient” and “Eastern” healing wisdom. Thus, the cultural echoes of animal magnetism may be “distorted” (Lanska and Lanska 2007: 317) but they are still audible. Pranic Healing is a case in point that its

hybridised forms are alive and kicking in today's holistic milieu—although mesmerism was shaken off by the medical authorities of the Enlightenment and went unheeded by the dominant religions. Two centuries after Mesmer, Choa Kok Sui presaged that Austria would become a “spiritual empire.” This vision may not have materialised either, and yet, time and again, Austria has provided an eminently fertile ground for aspiring energy healers.

Appendix



Figure 1: The cover of the second edition (1989) of Choa Kok Sui's first book, published in 1987. The coloured concentric circles in the background represents a cakra, while the overlay image depicts the typical position of the "receiving" (right) and "projecting" (left) hands during the transfer of "prana" (indicated by parallel rays to and from the palms, respectively)—the core element of the Pranic Healing ritual.



Figure 2: Choa Kok Sui demonstrating an exercise during a lecture delivered at the University of Vienna on May 24, 2002. Reprinted by courtesy of the *Institut für Energiearbeit*.



Figure 3: Choa Kok Sui with Claudia Dieckmann, the founder of the *Institut für Energiearbeit*. The picture was taken on May 16, 2004, at the occasion of a seminar on “Kriyashakti” held in the Kolping Haus “Gemeinsam leben” in Favoriten, Vienna’s tenth district. Reprinted by courtesy of the *Institut für Energiearbeit*.



Figure 4: Choa Kok Sui with Jana Thann, authorised officer at the *Institut für Energiearbeit*. The picture was taken on May 16, 2004, at the occasion of a seminar on “Kriyashakti” held in the Kolping Haus “Gemeinsam leben” in Favoriten, Vienna’s tenth district. Reprinted by courtesy of the *Institut für Energiearbeit*.

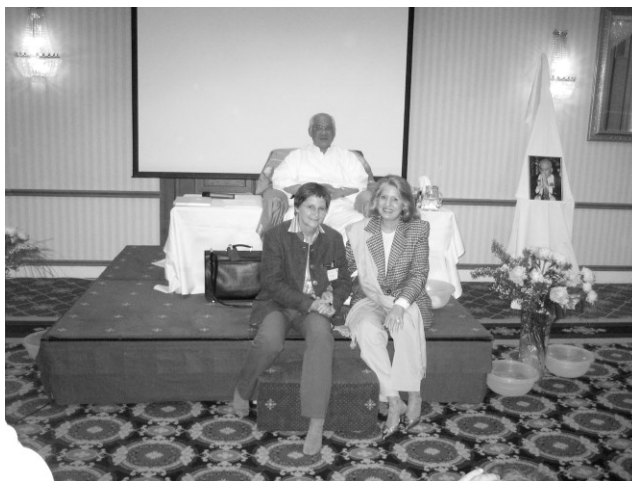


Figure 10: Claudia Dickmann (left) seated on a stage next to Charlotte Anderson (right) at the feet of Choa Kok Sui. The picture was taken on May 15, 2005, at the occasion of the seminar “Hinduism Revealed” in Salzburg, Choa Kok Sui’s final stay in Austria. Reprinted by courtesy of the *Institut für Energiearbeit*.

List of Abbreviations

AMORC	Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis
BMSGPK	<i>Bundesministerium für Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz</i> (Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care, and Consumer Protection)
BSS	<i>Bundesstelle für Sektenfragen</i> (Federal Office for Cult Affairs)
ISSSEEM	International Society for the Study of Subtle Energies and Energy Medicine

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¹¹³ Du Prel resumes his discussion in an article entitled "Die sympathetische Kur" and published in the subsequent issue of *Die Zukunft*, 7 (34), pp. 360–369.

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Abstract

Energy healing is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the market of holistic services. Despite its rapid global expansion in recent decades, the historical roots of energy healing have received only limited scholarly attention. This thesis explores the genealogy of energy healing. It demonstrates that appeals to cutting-edge science in the promotion of ‘revolutionary’ healing systems often reiterate older ideas that trace back to the Enlightenment era. In 1784, mesmerism—a key precursor to contemporary energy healing modalities—was discredited by two scientific commissions. Nonetheless, the healing system named after its founder, the physician Franz A. Mesmer (1734–1815), was later reabsorbed into academic discourse by German and French physicians and subsequently transformed within the American religious-therapeutic milieu of the late nineteenth century.

While the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of mesmerism is a well-established field of research, the innovative contribution of this thesis lies in examining how the concepts of ‘energy’ and *prāṇa* became linked to mesmeric practice. It does so by reconstructing two discursive trajectories that have decisively shaped contemporary practices: (1) the topos of futuristic retro-medicine, and (2) invocations of a ‘mystic East’ as the (imagined) origin of ancient healing traditions. A close reading of nineteenth-century sources reveals that the term energy, understood as a healing agent, was not adopted to mimic scientific discourse but, in fact, predates the now-established physical concept of energy. The evolution of mesmeric healing systems was further stimulated by transcultural exchange and anti-colonial critique. These hybrid practices aligned with alternative medicine and employed similar arguments for the existence of a vitalistic agents.

Occult discourses in the decades around 1900 played a decisive role in describing and disseminating conceptions of energy as a life force. Their main patterns of plausibilisation are exemplified through the genealogy of two case studies that drew extensively from occult sources: (1) the highly influential system of ‘Esoteric Healing,’ introduced in 1953 through a posthumous book by the post-Theosophical author Alice A. Bailey (1880–1949); and (2) a globally propagated variant of ‘Pranic Healing,’ developed in the late 1980s by the holistic guru Choa Kok Sui (1952–2007). These cases illustrate how Mesmer’s controversial legacy was reinterpreted through scientific and orientalist lenses, and popularised *incognito* within the holistic milieu. The historical exposition of energy healing provides the backdrop for qualitative expert interviews conducted with energy healers based in Vienna, Austria, the birthplace of mesmerism.

Keywords: animal magnetism, energy healing, esotericism, holistic milieu, life force, mesmerism, occultism, plausibilisation, scientification, spirituality, subtle energy, vitalism

Abstract (Deutsch)

Energiearbeit ist einer der am rasantesten wachsenden Bereiche im Markt für holistische Dienstleistungen. Trotz ihrer beträchtlichen globalen Expansion in den letzten Jahrzehnten haben die historischen Wurzeln der Energiearbeit nur begrenzte Beachtung gefunden. Diese Dissertation untersucht die Genealogie der Energiearbeit. Sie zeigt auf, dass Berufungen auf moderne Wissenschaft bei der Bewerbung „revolutionärer“ Heilmethoden häufig ältere Ideen aufgreifen, die bis in die Epoche der Aufklärung zurückreichen. Im Jahr 1784 wurde der Mesmerismus – ein wesentlicher Vorläufer zeitgenössischer Methoden der Energiearbeit – von zwei wissenschaftlichen Kommissionen diskreditiert. Dennoch wurde das nach seinem Begründer, dem Arzt Franz A. Mesmer (1734–1815), benannte Heilverfahren später von deutschen und französischen Mediziner*innen wieder in den akademischen Diskurs aufgenommen und anschließend im amerikanischen religiös-therapeutischen Milieu des späten 19. Jahrhunderts weiterentwickelt.

Während die Wirkungsgeschichte des Mesmerismus ein gut etabliertes Forschungsfeld ist, liegt der innovative Beitrag dieser Arbeit darin, zu untersuchen, wie die Konzepte von „Energie“ und *prāṇa* mit mesmeristischer Praxis verknüpft wurden. Dies geschieht durch die Rekonstruktion von zwei diskursiven Trajektorien, die zeitgenössische Praktiken entscheidend geprägt haben: (1) der Topos der futuristischen Retro-Medizin, und (2) die Beschwörung eines „mystischen Ostens“ als (imaginiertem) Ursprung alter Heiltraditionen. Eine Durchsicht der Quellen des 19. Jahrhunderts belegt, dass der Begriff Energie, verstanden als Heilkraft, nicht aufgegriffen wurde, um den naturwissenschaftlichen Diskurs zu imitieren, sondern dem heute etablierten physikalischen Energiebegriff tatsächlich vorausgeht. Die Evolution mesmeristischer Heilungssysteme wurde durch transkulturellen Austausch und antikoloniale Kritik zusätzlich stimuliert. Diese hybriden Praktiken verbanden sich mit der Alternativmedizin und verwendeten ähnliche Argumente für die Existenz vitalistischer Wirkkräfte.

Okkulte Diskurse in den Jahrzehnten um 1900 spielten eine entscheidende Rolle bei der Beschreibung und Verbreitung der Vorstellung von Energie als Lebenskraft. Ihre wesentlichen Plausibilisierungsmuster werden anhand der Genealogie zweier Fallstudien veranschaulicht, die weitgehend auf okkulte Quellen zurückgreifen: (1) das einflussreiche System des „Esoteric Healing“, 1953 eingeführt durch ein posthumes Werk der post-theosophischen Autorin Alice A. Bailey (1880–1949), und (2) eine weltweit verbreitete Variante des „Pranic Healing“, die Ende der 1980er Jahre vom holistischen Guru Choa Kok Sui (1952–2007) entwickelt wurde. Diese Fälle zeigen, wie Mesmers kontroverses Erbe durch szientistische und orientalistische Linsen neu interpretiert und *inkognito* innerhalb des holistischen Milieus popularisiert wurde. Die historische Erörterung der Energiearbeit bildet den Hintergrund für qualitative Experteninterviews mit Energiearbeiter*innen, die in Wien ansässig sind—dem Geburtsort des Mesmerismus.