

Disqualified Knowledge: Theosophy and the Revolt of  
the *Fin-de-Siècle*

by

McNeil Christian Taylor  
Class of 2013

A thesis (or essay) submitted to the  
faculty of Wesleyan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors in History

## **Acknowledgements**

I would first like to thank my advisor William Johnston for his support, and encouragement that there is indeed something that matters in regards to this eccentric curiosity of history. Without his guidance it would've been difficult to trust my own instincts in regards to this topic that few people have heard of, and truly look at this era of history without prejudices.

I would also like to thank Professor Jennifer Tucker, who pointed me towards the burgeoning literature on Theosophy in relation to feminism and gender studies, aspects that I was completely unaware of when beginning this project.

I am also indebted to Wesleyan University for providing me with the Davenport Grant, with which I was able to travel to the Theosophical Society's archives in Adyar, India this past summer. The vast majority of this thesis would be impossible without the primary sources I found there.

And last but not least, I would like to thank the Theosophical Society at both Adyar and Ojai, California for their cooperation and assistance with this project.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. The Fin-de-Siecle: Pros and Cons of the New Science.....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2. Occult Science and the Scientific Revolution.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>3. Feminine Authority, Eastern Authority.....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>77</b>

## Introduction

*“As you will no doubt know,” said my father, “in old apartments there are rooms which are sometimes forgotten. Unvisited for months on end, they wilt neglected between the old walls and it happens that they close in on themselves, become overgrown with bricks, and, lost once and for all to our memory, forfeit their only claim to existence. The doors, leading to them from some backstairs landing, have been overlooked by people living in the apartment for so long that they merge with the wall, grow into it, and all trace of them is obliterated in a complicated design of lines and cracks.”*  
 --Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles*

In the old apartment building of history, there is perhaps always this danger: a forgotten room somewhere whose entrance is starting to disappear into “a complicated design of lines and cracks.” What’s forgotten is not merely a single event or historical actor, a bemusing tale that we hope has simple instructional value for “the present day”; rather, what’s forgotten is a *room*—entire spaces containing relations of people and objects, possibilities of being itself. Perhaps it no longer has any use for us, or perhaps it too closely reminds us, as a garish or exaggerated mirror, of the room we reside in now—either way, it is our disuse itself that has rendered it inaccessible. This essay will focus on one such “room”, that of the *fin-de-siecle* period (roughly 1880-1920), and how one item in particular, the Theosophical Society, articulated a flamboyant revolt against modernity’s reduction of the possible modes of being, thought, and action. If Theosophy (and the broader European interest in occultism which it perhaps embodies) is given attention at all in studies of this period, it is usually as a sort of regression or romantic escapism from the rapid technological progress of the nineteenth century. However, it soon becomes clear that Theosophy’s critics wielded the teleological notion of “regression” merely to distract from what was actually a rebellion.

To most contemporary observers, Theosophical doctrine often seemed like a mess of oriental clichés spouted by the infamous, bewildering Russian “spiritual medium” Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Her claims of astral travel and semi-divine beings were easily dismissed by the newly anointed gentlemen of Victorian science— a speed bump in the way of the bullet train of modernity, momentarily dredging up those lifestyles (primitive), practices (superstitious), and thoughts (irrational), that were supposed to have been laid to rest long before. Yet by 1928 Theosophy had 45,000 official members in fourteen different countries, in addition to numerous celebrity admirers such as W.B. Yeats, Wassily Kandinsky, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In regards to Theosophical literature, Alex Owen writes, “The accounts themselves are dated, coherent narratives redolent of self-discipline and order. Furthermore, the documents have survived. Someone has seen fit to keep them. They have been preserved, stored, passed down. Ultimately they have become part of an archive. Clearly they mean something.”<sup>1</sup> A cigar-smoking Russian noblewoman communicating telepathically with Tibetan sages in the Himalayas— what does it all “mean”?

Therefore this thesis is not merely a naive attempt to open the door to this forgotten room, but rather seeing if it can be opened at all, if it has not yet congealed into a series of incomprehensible lines and cracks, and if so-- who erased it in the first place, and why? Did they, too, unknowingly seal themselves within this forgotten room? Or did modern science provide them with the foresight and skill to both remain outside, and, make us forget there ever was an “inside”? My primary

---

<sup>1</sup> Alex Owen, *Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) 2

task in this essay is to trace the development of this effacement, and expose its own “lines and cracks”. What informed this response to Theosophy? It was this mechanism that subjugated and effaced the occult, and, yet ironically, also “occulted” itself via a strategic self-effacement. This is attested to by the degree to which the methodologies of scientism and positivism have continued to persist relatively un-assailed within the social sciences to this day. Through a brief overview of the history of the Theosophical Society and a recent historiographical debate over the evaluation of religious phenomena by historians, I first hope to demonstrate how the two are combined, and why a problem crystallized in the *fin-de-siecle* has persisted to this day.

The Theosophical Society was founded by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott, and William Quan Judge in New York City in 1875. Organized as a non-proselytizing, non-sectarian society, their stated objectives were as follows: “1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color. 2. To encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy, and Science. 3. To investigate the unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man.” To this day, agreement with these principles is the only requirement for membership in the Theosophical Society.

Blavatsky had already established a reputation for herself as a Spiritualist medium in New York, but the period of her life immediately preceding the founding of the TS, during which she purportedly travelled to Tibet and Egypt, remains shrouded in mystery. What is clear is that by 1875, the image that shocked, appalled, and fascinated contemporary observers was fully formed. “She suggested the

*monsterism* of those strange forms Blake drew; whose clothes, hair, gestures, seem part of the rocks and trees which surround them; who walk girdled with the Zodiac and hold converse with the gods,” as one contemporary observer described her.<sup>2</sup> During this period, from its founding in 1875 until the move to India in 1878, the society displayed little of the Buddhist and Hindu characteristics for which it would become well-known. Instead, Blavatsky promoted a mixture of contemporary Spiritualism with ancient Greek and Egyptian sources, such as the writings of Hermes Trismegistos and Neoplatonic philosophy. It was with the publication of Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* in 1877 that the society assumed the syncretic character that came to define it during the 1880’s. Drawing on the traditional sources of western esotericism—Rosicrucianism, Neoplatonism, Christian mysticism— together with some of the common tenets of Buddhism and Vedantic Hinduism, Blavatsky synthesized many of the key concepts used by 20<sup>th</sup> century New Age movements—namely, the existence of an ancient “wisdom religion” or perennial philosophy, which united all the contemporary religions into a single truth.

Blavatsky moved the headquarters of the society to Adyar, a suburb of Madras (now Chennai) in India in 1879. Theosophy quickly assumed the international, Anglo-Indian identity that so confused contemporary notions of imperialism—Blavatsky explicitly identified the society with Indian nationalism, integrating with the Arya Samaj independence movement and rechristening it the

---

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) 23

“Theosophical Society of the Arya Samaj”.<sup>3</sup> Members of the society during this period included A.O. Hume, who founded the Indian National Congress in 1885, and A.P. Sinnett, largely responsible for popularizing Buddhism in Britain with the best-sellers *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) and *The Occult World* (1888). However, these two men, together with Blavatsky, were complicit in what was perhaps the most alien, uncompromising, and delegitimizing element of Theosophical doctrine—the existence of the “Mahatmas”, semi-divine beings residing in the Tibetan Himalayas who initiated Blavatsky into ancient teachings, which she presented to the world as Theosophy. Blavatsky claimed to deliver, by occult methods, letters between Hume and Sinnett and the Mahatmas, which were published in 1882 and initiated the firestorm of controversy that continued unabated for decades until the society’s decline in prominence.

It was perhaps this incident (amongst many other tales of Blavatsky’s mediumistic abilities) that led the Society for Psychical Research to conduct an investigation into Theosophy in 1886. At the end of a 200 page report, Richard Hodgson, the leader of the investigation, stated: “For our part we regard her neither as the mouthpiece of hidden seers, nor as a mere vulgar adventuress; we think that she has achieved a title to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious and interesting impostors in history.”<sup>4</sup> The report caused a good deal of dissension amongst Theosophists, and was said to have greatly

---

<sup>3</sup> A Hindu reform movement founded in 1875 by Swami Dayananda, who was the first Indian to call for “swarajya” or self-rule. The union between the two movements only lasted until 1882, when Dayananda became disillusioned with Blavatsky after allegations of forgery.

<sup>4</sup> “The Society for Psychical Research and the Theosophical Phenomena The Report of the S.P.R. on Madame Blavatsky” <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/sprhpb.htm>



weakened the ailing Blavatsky, who died two years later in 1888. However, the ensuing controversy proved to be something of a boon to the society over the next few years, as its prominence and membership swelled to even greater heights during the 1890s.

Much of this was also due to the new leadership of Anne Besant.<sup>5</sup> A figure more palatable to Victorian sensibilities than Blavatsky, Besant gave a genteel respectability to the society. A former self-professed atheist and materialist as well as a lifelong feminist, Besant spoke of her “conversion” to theism and Theosophy by Blavatsky, inspiring a great deal of women to follow in her wake. Writers, philosophers, painters (W.B. Yeats, Andrei Bely, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, amongst others) joined in large numbers as well. As the Indian Nationalist movement grew in prominence, Besant emphasized Hinduism rather than Buddhism in Theosophical doctrine; she became president of the Indian National Congress in 1917. The society also drew attention during this period for their population of the arrival of a “World Teacher” (based on the Buddhist notion of the future bodhisattva Maitreya) who would usher in a new age of spiritual awakening. The society selected the young boy Jiddhu Krishnamurti, who went on to achieve fame years after distancing himself from Theosophy. It was also during this time that the young Mohandas Gandhi first became interested in Theosophy, having met Theosophists while studying law in London. Gandhi actively promoted Theosophy

---

<sup>5</sup> After the death of Blavatsky, a schism occurred between supporters of Besant and those of William Quan Judge. Judge went on to establish headquarters in Pasadena, California, which to this day operates as “The Theosophical Society”. Besant’s branch, which maintained the majority of followers and the Adyar headquarters, is now known as “The Theosophical Society—Adyar” and is the main subject of this essay.

during his time in South Africa and remained a lifelong friend and colleague of Besant, despite also later distancing himself from Theosophical teachings.

There is no one clear reason for Theosophy's rather sudden retreat after the 1920's from its omnipresence in European cultural affairs, but rather several possible factors. The most general argument concerns the fact that Theosophy relied heavily on the spiritual, cultural, and political optimism that thrived in turn of the century Europe before being decimated by the First World War. Another, more specific reason is that several strands of Theosophical teachings were tarnished after being appropriated by *volkisch* groups in Austria and Germany who promoted neo-pagan philosophies that laid the foundation for Nazism. And although certain Nazis (such as Himmler) had a personal interest in occultism, the Nazi bureaucracy persecuted occult organizations such as Theosophy, seeing them as a rival to the state. Similar phenomena occurred in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. As Theosophy was extremely popular in Austria, Germany, and Russia, its base of support was severely weakened, and perhaps irreversibly so with India's independence from Britain in 1947. This process occurred in intellectual circles as well—Theosophy was seen as a vestige of dualistic, essentialist thought during the heyday of existentialism, a characterization that only increased in the post-modern era.

Thus what remains of Theosophy in the public imagination (if anything at all) are the scandals—forged letters, revolving bookcases, Krishnamurti and Gandhi's cryptic silence. It's therefore easy to let Theosophy remain a frivolous curiosity, gathering dust amongst the other discarded oddities of *fin-de-siecle* decadence.

Merely reiterating and analyzing Theosophical doctrine itself accomplishes little—many of Blavatsky and Besant’s teachings have become well integrated into and popularized by 20<sup>th</sup> century New Age philosophy. My investigation is not into the particular qualities or origin of such thought, but instead how it came to be conceived of as a separate category and hierarchized in the first place. To give an idea of the stakes involved, I will begin by looking at a debate from 2007 between two historians concerning the role of the social scientist in evaluating purportedly supernatural phenomena, and how this affects the notion of history as an objective social science.

The launching point of the debate between Tor Egil Forland and Brad Gregory concerns a purported miracle experienced by two Norwegian brothers in 1652. Stranded on a 20-meter island in Norway’s Fox lakes, the brothers claimed that a fresh, edible plant continually grew overnight for a twelve-day period, providing them with the minimum sustenance necessary to survive until they were rescued by a search party. The boys insisted that God had answered their prayers; however, even the local priest who wrote down the narrative was suspicious.<sup>6</sup> Forland introduces the idea of an “epistemological gap” between objective social scientists and religious believers, and argues that it is ultimately insurmountable:

Does this mean that not only science but also social science and the empirical humanities—including history and the study of religion—are unable to speak to believers in an idiom they accept? And vice versa: is the implication that believers cannot convey their experiences to (social) scientists in a way acceptable to

---

<sup>6</sup> Tor Egil Forland, “Acts of God? Miracles and Scientific Explanation” *History and Theory* 47 (2008:) 486.

the latter? Is there an unbridgeable gap of communication? I think yes.<sup>7</sup>

Forland thus comes to the conclusion that “To be accepted as science—to be part of the scientific community—even theology must conform to scientific atheism.”<sup>8</sup> He argues that science must presuppose a metaphysical naturalism that necessarily excludes the religious claims of a “supernatural being” that “affects matter and matters.”<sup>9</sup>

Gregory takes issue with this understanding of a “supernatural” God, as it “makes assumptions about what God would be like if God were real.”<sup>10</sup> Gregory examines the genealogy of this notion of the divine, and ironically finds it to originate in medieval Christian theology. Represented by thinkers like William of Occam, God is imagined as something that possesses being, like all things that exist; yet God is also different from everything else that exists. God is therefore “the highest being” within this univocal metaphysical framework, “as if Zeus was discovered to really dwell on Mount Olympus.”<sup>11</sup> It’s thus easy to see how increasing knowledge of the natural world would eventually negate such a being.

Gregory then examines the implications of this theology on the methodology of science: “The methodological assumptions that make science what it is derive not from the *findings* of science, but from science’s own *philosophical self-limitations*.”<sup>12</sup>

For Gregory, empirical observation is not the origin of science; its origin is a

---

<sup>7</sup> Forland, 484.

<sup>8</sup> Forland, 492.

<sup>9</sup> Forland 493

<sup>10</sup> Brad Gregory, “No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion” *History and Theory* 47 (2008:) 504

<sup>11</sup> Gregory, 506

<sup>12</sup> Gregory, 506

metaphysical argument: “It has not ‘attained [the] position’ of metaphysical naturalism as a working hypothesis ‘because modern science is an empirical quest’. No, science begins from metaphysical naturalism as a postulate with critical-realist empiricism as its corollary.”<sup>13</sup> This postulate of metaphysical naturalism thus negates possible understandings of God that Gregory argues are wholly compatible with scientific findings:

A radically transcendent God would be neither outside nor inside his creation. He would not hover beyond the universe (or multiple universes) at unimaginably enormous distances of billions of light-years. Rather, if real, such a God could be wholly present to everything in the natural world precisely and only because he would be altogether inconceivable in spatial categories.<sup>14</sup>

Similar to ideas found in Christian mysticism and Vedanta, it was this conception of divinity that Theosophists used to explain events termed “supernatural”. However, Forland insists that, “We do not study past (or contemporary) religious actors for the sake of the past or the actors themselves; we study history or religion for our own sake.”<sup>15</sup> It soon becomes clear why this is necessary for Forland—he expresses his “bafflement” at Gregory’s understanding of God, claiming it suffers from both an “overflow and lack of meaning”.<sup>16</sup> Because Forland lacks the knowledge or ability to operate within this non-rationalistic discursive framework, his immediate reaction is to ignore it. In doing so, he provides a teleological justification for modern

---

<sup>13</sup> Gregory, 506.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory, 503.

<sup>15</sup> Forland, 485.

<sup>16</sup> Tor Egil Forland, “Historiography Without God”, *History and Theory* 47 (2008:) 495.

rationalism that not only invalidates methods of historiography, but actual subjects of history as well:

What it meant to them is just a step on the road to what is in it for us, and at some points along this road our own ontology must substitute for the ontology of our study objects which, after all, has only historical (or anthropological) interest in a limited sense.<sup>17</sup>

Forland is thus threatened by the foreign ontology represented by these pre-modern, irrational historical actors. More accurately, he is threatened by ontological investigation itself. In this sense, he is a direct descendent of the imperialistic attitudes of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a parallel Gregory makes clear:

Were Forland's views not still shared by so many academics today, reading his article would seem like intellectual time travel. In it we are, as it were, transported back to a late-nineteenth-century world innocent of the revolution in post-Newtonian physics, in which science and religion "appear mutually exclusive," the one clearly "an empirical quest" that necessarily excludes any and all "unempirical and unscientific" claims of the other.<sup>18</sup>

Forland's methodology assumes the modern social scientist embodies a sort of ontology, perfected through the trials of history and yet somehow no longer subject to it, that is an adequate (and the only) lens through which the necessary judgments of the past can be made. It supposes that at a certain point, the advent of modernity, history suddenly stopped and would subsequently yield itself to the analysis of the newly created, a-historical and objective social scientist.

---

<sup>17</sup> Forland, 495.

<sup>18</sup> Brad Gregory, "No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion *History and Theory* 47 (December 2008), 495-519

The teleology assumed by Forland, with its enshrinement of the “objective truth value”, was most acutely questioned by Michel Foucault in the 1970s in an ongoing project that he termed the “genealogy of knowledge”.<sup>19</sup> For Foucault, this was an attempt to combat the sciences’ elevation by institutionalized, hierarchical discourse at the expense of other forms of knowledge—with the goal of an “insurrection of subjugated knowledges.”<sup>20</sup> The opposing discourses Foucault describes encapsulates the tensions of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as well as between Forland and Gregory:

It is not therefore via an empiricism that the genealogical project unfolds, nor even via a positivism in the ordinary sense of that term. What it really does is to entertain the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects.<sup>21</sup>

For Foucault, Forland’s empiricism implies a mode of being that inevitably stifles certain voices—voices that include traditions like occultism and even religious discourse in its entirety, a form of knowledge that secularization sought to “disqualify”.

As he further describes this “disqualified knowledge”, the parallel with Theosophy becomes clearer—it is “beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity” and “owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by

---

<sup>19</sup> A reference to Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morality*. I will discuss Nietzsche’s critique of *fin-de-siecle* positivism in Chapter 1.

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, “Lecture One: 7 January 1976” trans. Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, appearing in *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Random House, 1980), 83

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, 83.

everything surrounding it.”<sup>22</sup> Both Theosophy’s impact on *fin-de-siecle* society and the mechanism by which it functioned are impossible to understand without positioning it in relation to its critics. But how do we avoid seeing these critics as merely a faceless stand-in for “modernity”, and instead examine who they were, and what were their assumptions? It’s here that the preliminary aspect of Foucault’s genealogy, that of “archaeology” comes in to play. Defined as an “analysis of local discursivities”, I wish to invoke archaeology in the physical sense as well, in a reference to the “forgotten room” with which I opened this essay. This spatial quality is also emphasized by Foucault: “Endeavoring to decipher discourse through the use of spatial, strategic metaphors enables one to grasp precisely the points at which discourses are transformed in, through and on the basis of relations of power.” In this sense, archaeology is the process by which the physical room—the territorial relation of the subjugated knowledge to its opposition—is first analyzed as a discourse, thus resurrecting the fact that the discourse existed, that the subjugated knowledge was given attention at all, and thus exposing the “harshness of everything surrounding it.” It is only through this archaeology that the genealogy can take place, the process by which “the subjected knowledges which were thus released would be brought into play.”<sup>23</sup>

Foucault is careful to note that his methodology is not in any way anti-scientific, emphasizing that this “insurrection of knowledge” is not concerned with “the contents, methods or concepts of a science” but rather the “effects of the centralizing powers which are linked to the institution and functioning of an

---

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, 82.

<sup>23</sup> Foucault, 85



organized scientific discourse within a society such as ours.”<sup>24</sup> This process by which knowledges are accumulated within a finite hierarchy leads us to a key aspect of Foucault’s thought—historically determined social structures decide *which* knowledges are accommodated as well as their status as a science. This process is hardly innocuous for Foucault, as knowledge is inevitably intertwined with power as it is exercised in a social context, as he writes, “it is surely necessary to question ourselves about our aspirations to the kind of power that is presumed to accompany such a science.”<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, this positivist science is defined just as much by the negative space of knowledges it seeks to stifle:

What types of knowledge do you want to disqualify in the very instant of your demand: ‘Is it a science’? Which speaking, discoursing subjects—which subjects of experience and knowledge—do you then want to ‘diminish’ when you say: ‘I who conduct this discourse am conducting a scientific discourse, and I am a scientist’?<sup>26</sup>

As I hope to illustrate with the case of the Theosophical Society, their “speaking, discoursing subjects” were silenced for very particular reasons—they were women, they were Indians, they were irrational. Theosophists looked to India not for its material wealth, but for its spiritual wisdom; they saw women not as exemplars of Victorian refinement but as leaders with power; and viewed science not as materialism but as something rich in theological meaning. Science and theology, masculinity and femininity, eastern and western religion—the Theosophical Society

---

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, 84

<sup>25</sup> Foucault, 84

<sup>26</sup> Foucault, 85

subverted all of these binaries and contemporary observers' expectations of how they ought to function.

## 1. THE FIN-DE-SIECLE: PROS AND CONS OF THE NEW SCIENCE

*The Superman was adored, and the Subman was adored... one had faith and was skeptical, one was naturalistic and precious, robust and morbid; one dreamed of ancient castles and shady avenues, autumnal gardens, glassy ponds, jewels, hashish, disease and demonism, but also of prairies, vast horizons, forges and rolling-mills, naked wrestlers, the uprisings of the slaves of toil, man and woman in the primeval Garden, and the destruction of society. Admittedly these were contradictions and very different battle cries, but they all breathed the same breath of life. If that epoch had been analyzed, some such nonsense would have come out as a square circle supposed to be made of wooden iron; but in reality all this had blended into shimmering significance.*  
-Robert Musil, "The Man Without Qualities"

Given the luxury of posterity, here Austrian novelist Robert Musil, writing in the 1920's, encapsulates the inherently contradictory nature of *fin-de-siecle* society. Positivism and mysticism; progressivism and pessimism; secularization and religious renewal-- all these seemingly opposed forces developed concurrently within the cultural ferment of late nineteenth-century Europe. Spurred by unprecedented technological progress, hopes for a utopian future developed alongside fears of anarchism and apocalyptic chaos. Due to the interest, mostly from literary critics and art historians, in the pessimistic "decadent" writers and artists of the 1880's, the notion of the *fin-de-siecle* as a period of decay has become dominant. Despite the misgivings of the avant-garde, most Europeans remained enthralled by the potential of the new era, writes Walter Laquer:

There was nostalgia for the past and a feeling that the modern world debased everything—men, women, children, love, the cities, the nations, the race—even death. But there was also Victor Hugo who had written:

‘The nineteenth century is great, and the twentieth will be better!’ The great majority of Europeans agreed with him despite the strains and stresses of modern city life, loneliness and insecurity, social unrest and economic setbacks.<sup>27</sup>

It’s impossible to ignore the rise of imperialism in the 1880’s, both in terms of its effect on nationalistic optimism as well its role in importing exotic ideas like Buddhism and Hinduism to receptive westerners. Many strands of eastern-influenced mysticism flourished alongside Theosophy during the *fin-de-siecle*, notably the Spiritualists and avant-garde artistic movements like the Symbolists and Decadents.<sup>28</sup>

The mirror image of this trend was displayed most brazenly in Academia. Scholars in the 1870s, incited by the progress of Auguste Comte, historicism, and the uprising of materialist philosophy, made a radical shift that anointed the “scientific” as the highest of all forms of knowledge. These scholars, primarily Dutch and German, valued *wissenschaft*, a method of research and learning that emphasized scientific rigor, as the primary mode of university instruction. Thus *religionswissenschaft*, the “science of religion” was born. In 1877 the Dutch government passed the Dutch Universities Act, which removed theology from the curricula of universities and replaced it with “History of Religion”, which aimed to be neutral and scientific. This new academic culture, fostering “knowledge for

---

<sup>27</sup> Walter Laqueur “Fin-de-siecle: Once More with Feeling”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31 (1996:) 5-47.

<sup>28</sup> The Symbolist and Modernist artists who dabbled in Theosophy reads like a “who’s who” of *fin-de-siecle* society—the painters Odilon Redon, Wassily Kandinsky, and Piet Mondrian; writers like W.B. Yeats, Arthur Conan Doyle, Fernando Pessoa, and Andrei Bely—now legendary figures from across Europe who devoted a large part of their private lives, and often writings, to Theosophical teachings.

knowledge's sake", saw the appearance of "academic celebrities", such as Max Müller, who drew prestige to their university, as well as nation. Thus, the science of religion was inevitably drawn into the realm of politics, and most importantly, imperialism.

I will investigate the opinions of two *fin-de-siecle* thinkers, Max Müller and Friedrich Nietzsche, who encapsulate the contradictory nature of the period, especially in their relationship to Theosophy. The two share some obvious parallels—namely as contemporaneous German philologists interested in Indian texts and the philosophy of science. However, they had very different ideas about what kind of claims they're scientific training allowed them to make. Müller was an Orientalist who longed to make the study of Eastern Religions scientific, while Nietzsche, a critic of organized religion, also railed against scientific positivism. Müller fiercely criticized the Theosophical Society, while Theosophists were heavily influenced by Nietzsche's works. It's within this intellectual debate that I will contextualize Theosophists' efforts to create an Indian Theosophical university specializing in science, hopefully demonstrating the extent to which the new scientific culture of the academy advanced and solidified imperial power.

### **Nietzsche and the Faith of Science**

Although Nietzsche would seem opposed to Theosophy in regards to his anti-metaphysical leanings, his methodology and orientation are remarkably similar. Like Theosophists, he looked to the ancient past as a source of inspiration (the pre-Socratic philosophers and *The Laws of Manu*) rather than a modern Christianized society he viewed as decadent and nihilistic, all the while rejecting materialist

natural science as a suitable replacement for Christianity. He also, like Theosophists, developed his philosophy in tandem with Max Müller's popularization of ancient Indian texts. Nietzsche was quite familiar with Müller's work, and read *Lectures on the Science of Religion* in 1875, in which Müller lavishly praised *The Laws of Manu*. Nietzsche was also effusive in his admiration of the text; his choice of translation, however, offers a tantalizing glimpse into a rather murky area of his thought. Louis Jacolliot, a sort of "amateur Indologist" and translator of Nietzsche's *Manu*, has been widely discredited as a "fraud" with little knowledge or appreciation of Indian culture. Two of his most vocal critics were Max Müller and Madame Blavatsky; however, Jacolliot's popularity "made him a major source and even inspiration for the early years of the Theosophical Society", writes David Smith, and Blavatsky does indeed cite Jacolliot in early works such as *Isis Unveiled*.<sup>29</sup> Smith also cites a report from Meta von Salis-Maschlins that states Nietzsche conversed with Paul Deussen in May 1887 about "the Theosophic movement's link to eastern religions."<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche also attended a spiritualist séance in 1882, after which he flippantly remarked "I was expecting something else, and I had in advance provided myself with three fine theories, physiologico-psychologico-moral, but I didn't have to use my theories at all."<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche obviously displayed some curiosity in Spiritualism and Theosophy, but his opinions are otherwise unknown. Theosophists, on the other hand, were eager to invoke Nietzsche as a "fellow traveler" after his death and ensuing rise in reputation. This could partly be due to the fact that Rudolf Steiner, a Theosophist

---

<sup>29</sup> David Smith, "Nietzsche's Hinduism, Nietzsche's India: Another Look" *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 28 (2004:) 44.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Smith, 44.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Smith, 43.

before founding the Anthroposophical movement, began his career as a Nietzsche scholar, and visited the ailing Nietzsche several times before his death. Theosophists seemed to ignore Nietzsche's disdain for transcendental reality, instead choosing to see him as promoting a non-rationalistic, individualistic spirituality divorced from Christian dogma.

I wish to consider Nietzsche as one of many *fin-de-siecle* figures grappling with the implications of positivism and materialism for the natural sciences. This is not to negate the iconoclastic nature of his philosophy; rather, contextualizing him within his time highlights his articulateness and unique position to illuminate one of the major epistemological debates of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although Nietzsche's disinclination towards otherworldliness is a key aspect of his philosophy, attempts to label him as either atheistic or anti-scientific are irrelevant in relation to his interests in truth and knowledge themselves. Although less rigorous than his systematic deconstructions of objective truth in, for example, *The Genealogy of Morality* (1887), his writings on science in *The Gay Science* (1882)<sup>32</sup> make up for this with their passion, specificity, and deliberate contrarianism to the prevailing academic culture of the day.

In these aphorisms its easy to why Nietzsche was embraced by Theosophists, as it soon becomes clear that he did indeed value something non-material: "Would it not be probable that... the most superficial and external aspect of existence—what is most apparent, its skin and sensualization—would be grasped first—and might

---

<sup>32</sup> The title, also translated as "Joyful Wisdom", is not meant to invoke the natural sciences, but rather the life-affirming philosophy of medieval provencal troubadours.

even be the only thing that allowed itself to be grasped?”<sup>33</sup> What is this other “thing” that is worth “grasping”? Nietzsche uses the word “spirit” (*geist*) throughout his writings, and its meaning frequently shifts. And while it is unlikely that it implied any Theosophical notion of a “soul”, it is clear that Nietzsche saw some imposition of purpose, or life-affirmation, as necessary in the process of seeking knowledge. It is this notion that seems to have particularly caught the eyes of Theosophists, and Madame Blavatsky in particular. While they were more conciliatory towards modern science than Nietzsche, their idea of occult science (as will be discussed further in Chapter Two) was based on the idea of hidden properties that operated beyond the material plane. These properties gave meaning by virtue of their “hiddenness”, by their requirement of seeking. The necessity of ‘meaning’ is further emphasized by Nietzsche in one of his more flippant remarks: “A ‘scientific’ interpretation of the world, as you understand it, might... be one of the *most stupid* of all possible interpretations of the world, meaning that it would be one of the poorest in meaning.” Theosophists took it upon themselves to give “meaning” to recent scientific advancements like special relativity and quantum mechanics, usually by implying a theological or metaphysical significance. The inclusion of such “superfluous” or tangential concepts into science is something Nietzsche anticipates as well:

And even now the time seems remote when artistic energies and the practical wisdom of life will join with scientific thinking to form a higher organic system in relation to which scholars, physicians, artists, and

---

<sup>33</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974) 335



legislators—as we know them at present—would have to look like paltry relics of ancient times.<sup>34</sup>

This hope for a new or revised methodology of science became a key idea for Theosophists, who wished to broaden the vocabulary of science to include terms that had been written out by secularization. Unlike Nietzsche, however, they did not see this possibility as “remote” at all.

Nietzsche claims, however, that science itself already practices this imposition of meaning—it has merely chosen a “poor meaning”:

It is no different with the faith with which so many materialistic natural scientists rest content nowadays, the faith in a world that is supposed to have its equivalent and its measure in human thought and human valuations—a “world of truth” that can be mastered completely and forever with the aid of our square little reason.<sup>35</sup>

Nietzsche’s association of the previously opposed terms “faith” and “materialistic” hints at the subtext of his argument—that the new science is merely another *interpretation* of the world also predicated upon metaphysics, and thus in no way superior to religion. In an unpublished letter he writes, “Against that positivism which stops before phenomena, saying ‘there are only facts,’ I should say no, it is precisely that facts do not exist, only interpretations”.<sup>36</sup>

For Nietzsche, the exclusivity of the new scientific paradigm is its most problematic aspect. While he is personally disinclined to the mechanistic analogies

---

<sup>34</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 173

<sup>35</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 355.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann, (New York: Viking Press, 1982) 458.

it employs, the fact that it seeks to negate all other modes of interpretation is its greatest flaw:

That the only justifiable interpretation of the world should be one in which *you* are justified because one can continue to work and do research scientifically in *your* sense (you really mean, mechanistically?)—an interpretation that permits counting, calculating, weighing, seeing, and touching, and nothing more—that is a crudity and a naivete...<sup>37</sup>

The idea that science is a more accurate rendering of the world than religion is a “naivete”—for both are based upon faith: “It is clear that science too rests on a faith; there is no science ‘without presuppositions.’”<sup>38</sup> Further, these presuppositions are not absolute or universal; they all lead to an end—a faith in the necessity of truth itself. Thus the positivist trend amongst scientists is ideological, even religious:

It always remains a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests—that even we devotees of knowledge today, we godless ones and anti-metaphysicians, still take our fire too from the flame which a faith thousands of years old has kindled: that Christian faith, which was also Plato’s faith, that God is truth, that truth is divine...<sup>39</sup>

This is remarkably similar to Siv Ellen Kraft’s characterization of Theosophy: “The idea of an ancient wisdom was not invented by Theosophists but gained, in the context of emerging globalization, appeal as a solution to the dilemmas of conflicting truth-claims.”<sup>40</sup> The idea of primordial, unified knowledge—common to both India

---

<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 335.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 335.

<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 173.

<sup>40</sup> Siv Ellen Kraft “To Mix or Not to Mix: Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism in the History of Theosophy” *Numen* 49, (2002:) 154.

and the west—was key to Theosophists’ desire to transcend the “conflicting truth-claims” of Indian metaphysics and western science.

### **Max Müller and the Science of Religion**

For Max Müller, this unification of knowledge lay not in the ancient past, but in the future. And the path to this future was not any sort of bridge between the two modes of knowledge, but rather a complete embrace of western science. Müller spoke of a “religion of the future” which would be the “fulfillment of all the religions of the past”<sup>41</sup> which he rigorously divided into different categories or “families” of his own fashioning. He was amongst the first to popularize the notion of a shared Aryan family of races, languages, and religions, although he strongly rebuked the racist connotations it quickly accrued.<sup>42</sup> He was explicit in his dislike of Blavatsky’s “un-scientific methods” as well as Theosophy’s interest in contemporary India; Müller remarked that India, “was not on the surface, but lay many centuries beneath it; and as to paying a globe-trotter’s visit to Calcutta and Bombay I might as well walk through Oxford Street and Bond Street.”<sup>43</sup> Müller likewise believed that only a few exemplary Indians retained the power of rationality inherent to Indo-European culture. He wrote of Rajendralal Mitra as “a scholar and critic in our sense of the word, who has proved himself above the prejudices of his class.”<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Kraft, 154.

<sup>42</sup> The discovery of a common linguistic source of Indian and European languages was made by Sir William Jones of the Calcutta Asiatic Society in 1786. The notion of a shared Indo-Aryan ancestry was remarkably influential during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly amongst the German romantics.

<sup>43</sup> Kraft, 154

<sup>44</sup> Rajesh Kochhar, “Seductive Orientalism: English Education and Modern Science in Colonial India” *Social Scientist* 36, (2008:), 53

As the de-facto founder of the science of religion, Müller enjoyed a surprising amount of celebrity within Victorian society, having created the department of comparative religion at Oxford, which he chaired. N.J. Girardot writes:

Thus Müller may be understood more fully within the lineage of great intellectual entrepreneurs of certain self-proclaimed comparative ways of knowing the Oriental languages and civilizations that achieved for the first time an institutional preferment within the changing and increasingly internationalized and imperialistic academic institutions of the Western world.<sup>45</sup>

In 1875, Müller was the subject of a biographical piece in *Vanity Fair* proclaiming him as one of the “Great Men of the day” and that same year he participated in a series of debates with Charles Darwin over the origin of language. His critical edition of the Rig Veda was the subject of great acclaim, and did much to spur academic interest in India.

Tomoko Masuzawa offers a revealing analysis of Müller’s new scientific approach: “It may be useful to consider, therefore, the origin of the science of religion out of the science of language—or, comparative religion out of comparative philology—as an arc spanning this decade.”<sup>46</sup> The fact that Masuzawa substitutes “comparative” for “science” illuminates the latter’s unique quality in Müller’s scholarship. Science, for Müller, is the practice of comparing; of recognizing parallel categories and arranging the particulars to conform to these categories. Thus the

---

<sup>45</sup>N. J. Girardot, “Max Müller's "Sacred Books" and the Nineteenth-Century Production of the Comparative Science of Religions”, *History of Religions* 41, (2002:) 214

<sup>46</sup> Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religion: or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 209.

nature of these religions is subservient to Müller's abstract conceptual schemes. There is no rigorous investigation into the different tenets of each religion, or any claims to empiricism via anthropological research. Masuzawa describes his work as "discoursing on the deeper stratum of language... seldom rising to the sphere of generality adequate for the presentation of any 'characteristic features' or 'defining beliefs' of this or that religion."<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, Müller insisted on the elevated status of his new discipline, describing it as a "physical science" as opposed to "historical science" (what would today be termed the natural and social sciences, respectively.)<sup>48</sup>

N.J. Girardot describes the political implications of this new paradigm: "...the concept of 'pure' science as a pursuit fitted, like Latin and Greek, to train the minds of gentlemen for the work of administering an empire".<sup>49</sup> Müller himself expressed delight that "there is so much to explore, so much to sift so much to arrange" in the new discipline of human sciences;<sup>50</sup> this approach, argues Girardot, implies the "oldest of comparative-martial principles: 'divide and conquer'".<sup>51</sup> Although German, Müller lived the majority of his life in England, and prided himself on his chaired position at Oxford, as well as English culture in general:

England has proved that she knows not only how to conquer but how to rule... [England] has realized, and more than realized, the dream of Alexander, the marriage of the East and the West, and has drawn the

---

<sup>47</sup> Masuzawa, 210.

<sup>48</sup> Masuzawa, 211

<sup>49</sup> Girardot, 216

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Girardot, 217

<sup>51</sup> Girardot, 217

principle nations of the world together more closely than they have ever been before.<sup>52</sup>

It should come as no surprise that Müller's new position as Chair of Comparative Religion was funded by the British East India Company, after the Oxford committee elected to give his sought-after position as Boden Professor of Sanskrit to Monier-Monier Williams instead. The committee said of Müller: "The thesis of the Aryan brotherhood of Britons and Indians was far more than a proposition of science: it was also an ethic."<sup>53</sup> Despite this surprisingly penetrating reading of Müller, he went on to an illustrious career at Oxford, although he never taught Sanskrit. The prestigious Boden Sanskrit Professorship to which Monier-Williams acceded, however, embodied much of the same values. It was funded by retired British Army Col. Joseph Boden, who's stated goal was the translation of Christian scripture into Sanskrit to facilitate "the conversion of the natives of India to the Christian religion."<sup>54</sup> This was never accomplished, but Monier-Williams did compile the first Sanskrit-English dictionary, which was published by the British East India Company in 1851.

### **Educating the Colony**

In many ways, British educational policy in India implemented the assumptions behind Müller's science of religion. Education is the most pointed example of the deliberate ideological pressure placed upon colonial India by the British. Naturally, in the colonial mindset it was seen as a tool with which they could sustain their rule on a deeply ingrained social level. For most of the early 19<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Girardot, 217.

<sup>53</sup> Kochhar, 54.

<sup>54</sup> Kochhar, 54.

century, colonial administrators were intent on eliminating education in ancient Indian metaphysics altogether in favor of western science. Rajive Tiwari writes:

[The British] believed that “true knowledge of nature”, if expressed in simple language, could bring rationality to the Indians. The spread of the European understanding of the universe would uproot the prevailing “absurdity” which is based on religious mythology. European explanations of eclipses would shatter the lore of “Rahu and Ketu”. This should lead to a weakening of the whole ‘fabrick of falsehood’.<sup>55</sup>

Initially, however, many educators deliberately included Indian texts in their curriculum. Lancelot Wilkinson, the political agent in Bhopal, created a Sanskrit college in which students were instructed in Bhaskar’s *Siddhant Shiromani* as well as Galileo, Copernicus, and Newton. The goal of these ventures was to expose Indian students to the “rational” aspects of their own tradition, so they could then appreciate the inherent rationality of all western science. However, by the second half of the nineteenth century, instruction in western science (to the complete exclusion of Indian thought) was ubiquitous, even at colleges created and funded by Indians. Interestingly, the British did not apply the same scientific rigor to their own religious traditions, writes Rajive Tiwari: “The transnarrative of scientific progress that was constructed for the colonies by the metropolis highlighted the conflict between the indigenous traditional beliefs and science but suppressed the history of conflict between Christianity and science.”<sup>56</sup> This can be seen in the case of J.R. Ballantyne, president of Benaras Sanskrit College from 1846 to 1862, who’s stated

---

<sup>55</sup>Rajive Tiwari, “A Transnarrative for the Colony: Astronomy Education and Religion in 19th Century India”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, (2006:) 1269

<sup>56</sup> Tiwari, 274

goal was the conversion of Indian students to Christianity, while simultaneously “modernizing” their Hindu mindset through empirical science.

Anne Besant’s educational endeavors in India were a deliberate attempt to counteract the disappearance of Indian traditional thought as well as its rationalization. This was emblematic of a larger movement within Indian intellectual history, represented by figures such as Swami Vivekananda, who sought to actively re-construct (or, it has been argued, simply construct) a uniquely Indian spirituality that emphasized the soteriological, intuitive aspect of texts like the Upanishads. T. Raychaudhuri writes: “A selective veneration for elements of the Hindu culture was thus the cultural bed-rock of the nationalist awareness.”<sup>57</sup> She founded the Central Hindu College in 1898, which was eventually absorbed into the Benaras Hindu University. Dr. Arthur Richardson, an English science graduate, was made the principal. English staff members taught science and mathematics, while Indians taught Sanskrit, logic, and history. Besant’s primary goal was the education of girls, specifically *Indian* education. She remarked that “Western education was not suitable for the education of Eastern girls” and that “the *national* movement for the education of girls must be one which meets the national needs”.<sup>58</sup> Besant’s notion of “national education” was thus one that combined both western and eastern knowledge. This was applauded by contemporary observers sympathetic to the nationalist cause:

---

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Jonardon Ganeri, “The Hindu Syllogism: Nineteenth-Century Perceptions of Indian Logical Thought”, *Philosophy East and West* 46, (1996:), 2.

<sup>58</sup> Anne Besant, *Ancient Ideals in Modern Life* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1901) 20



[Besant] is now most actively engaged in good work—stirring up the Hindus—trying to rouse them to religious zeal, unworldly ambition, and fidelity to their own race and country. She has founded a Hindu College at Benares, and is now starting Hindu schools all over India, with the object of training up and educating, in the highest sense of the term, Hindus as Hindus, restoring their religion to its original purity and strengthening their adherence to it, teaching them to be proud of it instead of ashamed of it; and thereby remedying the great evil of the purely secular education of the British government, which only seduces them from the wholesome moral restraining influences which with all its faults their old faith still possesses, and leaving them stranded with nothing to replace what has been taken from them.<sup>59</sup>

While this author preserves some of the patronizing tone and essentialist assumptions about “Hinduism”, he differs markedly from the standard mode of imperial thought, namely in his insistence that Indians should be “proud” instead of “ashamed” of their religion. He even goes so far as to call secular education “evil”, believing it has “taken” something from Indians, thus mirroring Besant’s own radicalism. A similarly laudatory account of the college was given by Harvard Professor of Sanskrit Daniel H. H. Ingalls, though many decades later: “Here under her benign eye young Indians discussed such questions as the wrongs done to India, the bond between Hindus, the building of an Indian nation.”<sup>60</sup> He also notes that, “Contributions of money began to pour into her schools from a source the missionaries had scarcely touched, the increasingly wealthy and increasingly

---

<sup>59</sup> W. E. Ayton Wilkinson, “MRS. ANNIE BESANT AND THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY”, *The Monist* 14, (1904:), 784.

<sup>60</sup> Daniel H. H. Ingalls, “The Heritage of a Fallible Saint: Annie Besant’s Gifts to India” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 109, (1965:), 86

frustrated Hindu middle class.”<sup>61</sup> In this sense, Besant opened up education as an avenue for Indians’ self-participation in the intellectual conversation of the Victorian era.

When Besant tried to expand the college into a national, state supported university in 1910, the reactions were appropriately hostile. The most illuminating response comes from E.W. Thompson, a Christian reverend who authored multiple polemics against the Theosophical Society. He writes: “The truth is that the [Madras] Senate has no concern with religion as such. It has never considered or approved any one among the several religions of India; but it has consistently ignored them all.”<sup>62</sup> This is a rather ironic statement when examining the history of British governance in India. The British used Müller’s notions of the Indo-European race to introduce themselves as natural rulers, or “liberators” of their Hindu, Indo-European kin from oppression under Muslim rulers.<sup>63</sup> Conversely, they subsequently rewarded administrative and civic positions to Muslims, who had become a powerless minority in need of protection from the Hindu masses. In this sense, the British never “ignored” religion, but were in fact hyper-conscious of it. Thompson himself is implicated in this mindset—although he invokes an objective, secular philosophy, another one of his anti-Theosophical polemical pamphlets was published by a Christian missionary organization in India. In it he states that, “the influence of theosophic occultism upon the young intellectual life of India at a

---

<sup>61</sup> Ingalls, 86

<sup>62</sup> Thompson, E.W. *Esoteric Theosophy and Public Education*, 12

<sup>63</sup> Kochhar writes, “Indo-Europeanism placed in the hands of the British Government a powerful instrument of connexion and conciliation with the upper-caste Hindus.” All religions were then associated with particular qualities: Muslims with loyalty, Sikhs with military prowess, etc.

turning-point in the history of this country is much larger and more important than any personal question.”<sup>64</sup> It’s easy to see why Theosophy and occultism are dangerous to him—through their syncretism, they undermine the imperial “divide and conquer” attitude towards India’s religious heterogeneity. In the eyes of the scientists of religion, Theosophy remained “unclassifiable” and therefore dangerous. “Esoteric Theosophy may be a new-fangled cult and, in the opinion of the majority, foolish to the last degree; but the Madras Senate is not set either to appraise or to refute it, so long as Theosophy stands outside the University.”<sup>65</sup> There is more at play here than secularism—by keeping Theosophy “outside the university”, he is really keeping out much more political, less “occult” forces: nationalism, feminism, anything consciously Indian. He cites an editorial from the London Times in which the author comments: “Nowhere could such teaching do more harm. Most of us hitherto thought Theosophy to be an innocent fad associated with strange jargon and inane ceremonies. But in India it counts for much at a time when robust good sense and scientific training are needed.”<sup>66</sup> Like Thompson, he reveals that it is not the “strange jargon and inane ceremonies” which ultimately threaten him, but rather something “more”. Ultimately, Besant was not successful; the Central Hindu College was absorbed into the national but secular Benaras Hindu University in 1917, after which her participation declined significantly.

In all of these examples, science and religion were both means towards an end, whether it was admitted or not. Nietzsche’s insistence on the inevitability of

---

<sup>64</sup> E.W. Thompson, *Theosophy of Mrs. Besant*, (Mysore: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1913) 1

<sup>65</sup> Thompson, 13

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Thompson, 21

purpose, or will, in the seeker of knowledge was apparent both in the imperialist categorizing of Müller and his colleagues as well as the political subversion of Besant. For the “scientists of religion”, science, often inextricable from Christian proselytizing, was a means to dissect and thereby silence living religious traditions; for Besant, it lent credibility to the revivification of these traditions. Nowhere did science actually function “objectively”, as it was so brazenly announced to by the proponents of *wissenschaft*.

## 2. OCCULT SCIENCE AND THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION

“Q. Theosophy and its doctrines are often referred to as a newfangled religion. Is it a religion? A. It is not. Theosophy is Divine Knowledge or Science.”<sup>67</sup> So begins H.P. Blavatsky in the opening of *The Key to Theosophy*. Theosophists’ desire to justify their work to the natural sciences was a never-ending task, and the vast majority of Theosophical writings on science are defensive and conciliatory. They are also aware of the potential of their writings to provoke and hopefully enlighten; they optimistically position themselves on the precipice of a new era, assigning themselves the task of giving meaning to the questions posed by new scientific developments. The nature of the realms of knowledge affected by special relativity and atomic energy are inherently theological in the eyes of Theosophists. Their strategy for proving this is two-fold: first, to align themselves with modern science while distancing themselves from Christian dogma; and second, to argue that occult teachings (sometimes re-interpreted by Theosophists) predict recent scientific discoveries. At the outset of the society, Blavatsky was interested in justifying her mission by purely scientific means; as the society continued, witnessing the progress made in areas like quantum mechanics and special relativity, Theosophists became more interested in the convergence and mutual enrichment of what they considered the parallel avenues of knowledge, occultism and physics. It is also necessary to make clear Theosophists’ frequent uses of terms like occult and astral and rid them of their colloquial, even pejorative connotations. These were terms used throughout the Medieval, Renaissance, and early Modern periods, often with

---

<sup>67</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, (New York: Quest Books, 1972) 1

shifting definitions both within and without the realm that came to be termed modern science. Using 20<sup>th</sup> century historiographic reevaluations of the scientific revolution, I hope to illustrate that Theosophists' conception of science was not simply a *fin-de-siecle* curiosity but rather the continuity of an intellectual tradition crystallized in the scientific revolution itself.

### **Alchemy and Scientia**

This historiographic shift is most often associated with the scholarship of Frances Yates, whose works *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964) and *The Art of Memory* (1966) have been called “paradigm-shifting” in their attempt to illustrate the influence of occultism on Renaissance and early 17<sup>th</sup> century science.<sup>68</sup> Writing in 1982, Keith Hutchison develops Yates' arguments by examining the Medieval conceptions of science which 17<sup>th</sup> century thinkers rejected: “The philosophy [of the medieval] era exhibited a very strong tendency to dismiss the occult, and furthermore... the innovators of the seventeenth century perceived this inability to handle the occult as an important fault in the philosophy they were supplanting.”<sup>69</sup> The medieval *scientia*, based almost completely on Aristotle, was an investigation strictly into the *causes* of natural phenomena; any cause that couldn't be observed via the senses was therefore unknowable, and subject to God alone. Thus properties like magnetism (and later gravity) were occult forces, not subject to investigation by science. Cornelius Agrippa summarizes this view succinctly:

And they are called occult qualities, because their

---

<sup>68</sup> Brian Vickers, Paolo Rossi, and A.G. Debus are but a few of the scholars who have debated the tenability of the “Yates Thesis” throughout the 1970's and '80s.

<sup>69</sup> Keith Hutchison “What Happened to Occult Qualities in the Scientific Revolution?” *Isis* 73, (1982:), 233.

Causes lie hid [from our senses], and mans intellect cannot in any way reach, and find them out. Wherefore Philosophers have attained to the greatest part of them by long experience [and conjecture], rather then by the search of reason.<sup>70</sup>

Here the notion of Aristotelian scholasticism as “empirical” is thrown into doubt, as Agrippa presents a dichotomy between sensing and experiencing.

The shift towards the latter, i.e. the confidence to make conjectures based purely on observation, to a large extent developed from alchemists, amongst the first to explicitly reject Aristotelian and Galenic medicine. “Just as a man reads a book on paper, so the physician is compelled to spell out the stars of the firmament in order to know his conclusions... It is like a letter which has been sent to us from a hundred miles off, and in which the writer’s mind speaks to us,”<sup>71</sup> wrote Paracelsus, the most influential Renaissance alchemist. He portrays nature as something intelligible to man, who is able to draw conclusions simply based on observation.

This was a key influence on Blavatsky, as she states herself:

illuminated with the light of eternal truth, these rich-poor alchemists fixed their attention upon the things that lie beyond the common ken, recognizing nothing inscrutable but the first cause, and finding no questions unsolvable. To dare, to know, to will... was their constant rule.<sup>72</sup>

Allen G. Debus writes: “In short, the Paracelsians called for a new observational approach to nature, and for them chemistry or alchemy seemed to be

---

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Hutchison, 239.

<sup>71</sup> Catherine Wilson, “Visual Surface and Visual Symbol: The Microscope and the Occult in Early Modern Science”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49 (1988:), 87.

<sup>72</sup> H.P. Blavatsky, “Alchemy and the Secret Doctrine” (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Press, 1927) 25-26

the best example of what this new science should be."<sup>73</sup> The emphasis on chemistry<sup>74</sup> is emblematic of this new approach, as chemical processes contain much that cannot be "sensed" by the human eye, and therefore not worthy of scientific study in the Aristotelian model; yet the effects of the process are still observed by the alchemist.

This approach appears in a remarkably similar description of herbal medicine from Johannes Kepler: "In its enquiry into the kinds and properties of herbs, medicine initially knew nothing of necessary and certain causes, but has finally learnt of these through diligence and rational conjecture, and it is to some extent still seeking..."<sup>75</sup> Francis Bacon, whose occult leanings are perhaps the best documented, wrote of his goal to "bring to light the true textures and configurations of bodies; on which all the occult, and, as they are called, specific properties and virtues in things depend."<sup>76</sup> All of these authors, both alchemical and "scientific", are aware of the functioning of occult forces that must be dealt with to explain the functioning of the natural world, even if they cannot sense their origin. It is only through repeated experimenting that their "cause" may be "rationally conjectured."

### **Identity and Difference**

Much of the traditional narrative of the history of science has the occult being "written out" during the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and totally disappearing by

---

<sup>73</sup> Allen G. Debus, "Chemists, Physicians, and Changing Perspectives on the Scientific Revolution" *Isis* 89, (1998:), 66

<sup>74</sup> The terms *alchemy* and *chemistry* were interchangeable during this period, and alchemists were largely responsible for introducing chemistry into the realm of modern science.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Hutchison, 240

<sup>76</sup> Quoted in Wilson, 95



the time of the Enlightenment. Michel Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, analyzes the process by which the *episteme* of the sixteenth century was replaced by a mechanistic worldview over the course of the seventeenth century. The Paracelsian mode of thought, viewing nature as a living organism intelligible to man, was based on a mirrored relationship between microcosm and macrocosm, whether earth and heaven, animal and man, or any of the practically endless permutations of resemblances. “Resemblance, which had for long been the fundamental category of knowledge-- both the form and the content of what we know-- became dissociated in an analysis based on terms of identity and difference,” writes Foucault. This shift was first linguistic, as words were no longer seen as having power over nature:

The empirical domain which sixteenth-century man saw as a complex of kinships, resemblances, and affinities, and in which language and things were endlessly interwoven – this whole vast field was to take on a new configuration. This new configuration may, I suppose, be called ‘rationalism’.<sup>77</sup>

There were many figures associated with this development—namely Francis Bacon, who, despite his occult interests, insisted on the institutionalization of science by the state, while Descartes was largely responsible for the mechanistic analogy becoming dominant in the sciences. Descartes’ mind-body dualism was also fundamental to a worldview that now posited a schism between the observer and his environment:

The activity of the mind... will therefore no longer consist in *drawing things together*, in setting out on a quest for everything that might reveal some sort of kinship, attraction, or secretly shared nature within

---

<sup>77</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* trans. Travistock/Routledge (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002) 60.

them, but, on the contrary, in *discriminating*, that is, in establishing their identities...<sup>78</sup>

Thus the Paracelsian model was seen as superstitious, or even insane, as Foucault argues.<sup>79</sup> Objects were no longer seen as a part of the vast network of nature, but rather were isolated, brought into the laboratory, and subjected to experiments with results that could be demonstrated empirically.

From now on, every resemblance must be subjected to proof by comparison, that is, it will not be accepted until its identity and the series of its differences have been discovered by means of measurement with a common unit, or, more radically, by its position in an order.<sup>80</sup>

Foucault saves his most controversial yet fascinating claim for the end of the discussion: “Lastly, a final consequence, since to know is to discriminate, history and science will become separated from one another.”<sup>81</sup> He attributes this to the new emphasis on certainty rather similitude, as well as the “disenchantment” of the written word and its separation from nature. To follow this train of thought would add an ironic element to late 19<sup>th</sup> century historians’ aspiration towards scientific legitimacy: the very movement that created “scientific rigor” did so by identifying itself in opposition to history.

The new model, while mechanistic, was by no means atheistic. This is best exemplified in the methodological writings of Descartes, who proposed the theory of “matter in motion” and the idea of nature as a machine rather than a living

---

<sup>78</sup> Foucault, 60.

<sup>79</sup> See Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*, in which he argues the insane habit of “seeing resemblances” was embodied in literary figures such as Don Quixote, a representation of the renaissance *episteme* adrift in the “classical age”.

<sup>80</sup> Foucault, 61.

<sup>81</sup> Foucault, 61.

organism. He made great effort, however, to remove the materialist implications of his worldview, devoting a chapter of the *Discourse on Method* to proving “the existence of God and the human soul, which form the foundation of this metaphysic.”<sup>82</sup> He goes on to make his view of the relationship between theology and science even more explicit:

I honoured our Theology and aspired as much as anyone to reach to heaven, but having learned to regard it as a most highly assured fact that the road is not less open to the most ignorant than to the most learned, and that the revealed truths which conduct thither are quite above our intelligence, I should not have dared to submit them to the feebleness of my reasonings; and I thought that, in order to undertake to examine them and succeed in so doing, it was necessary to have some extraordinary assistance from above and to be more than a mere man.<sup>83</sup>

In this passage, Descartes’ view is heavily reminiscent of medieval Aristotelianism—he displays a great disinclination towards pursuing occult topics that are seen as pertaining to God only. His statement that “the road is not less open to the most ignorant than to the most learned” speaks to the new role of the scientist during this period. Whereas the alchemist required spiritual work on himself in order to access occult knowledge, in Descartes’ time it was presumably just as easily accessed by those he viewed as charlatans or fools.

A similar discontinuity can be seen in the example of Isaac Newton, whose career began almost 30 years after Descartes’ death, and during a period when interest in alchemy and neoplatonism was waning. Newton’s occult interests have

---

<sup>82</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, (Boston: Focus Publishing, 2007) 1

<sup>83</sup> Descartes, 7

slowly gathered scholarly attention in the centuries since his death. A practicing alchemist who devoted hours of solitary labor to his heretical theological writings (all of which went unpublished), Newton was determined to discredit Descartes' mechanistic philosophy as well as to find an active role for God in the functioning of his recently formulated physical laws. Newton subtly reveals his occult leanings even in his famous *Principia*: "I do not define time, space, place and motion, as being well known to all. Only I must observe, that the vulgar conceive those quantities under no other notions but from the relation they bear to sensible objects."<sup>84</sup> These fundamental physical processes are thus not apparent via any "vulgar" empiricism; they are decidedly esoteric, not "well known to all."

It is true that amongst the successors of Newton, there was an emphasis on mechanistic analogies and mathematical certainties that put them at odds with occult methods. However, there are well-documented revivals of Paracelsianism in 1640s and 1650s England, as well as increased studies of the alchemist Jan Baptist Van Helmont after his death in 1644.<sup>85</sup> John Webster, a Puritan educational reformer writing in 1654, argues for the inclusion of alchemists Robert Fludd and Oliver Croll into university curricula that also include Bacon, Kepler, and Descartes.<sup>86</sup> In Spain, defenses of Paracelsus' views are found well into the 18<sup>th</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Isaac Newton, *Principia Mathematica Philosophiae Naturalis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972) p. 33

<sup>85</sup> "The England of the 1640s and 1650s experienced a dramatic revival of Paracelsianism, evidently because its prophetic, visionary, and anti-authoritarian messages answered to a political state of civil war and violent conflict among radical sects" Wilson, 93.

<sup>86</sup> Wilson, 93

century.<sup>87</sup> It's readily apparent that the formation of modern science did not occur immediately in a "revolution", but rather followed an erratic course. Allen G. Debus articulates an approach to the history of science that takes this quality into account:

Instead of selecting data that "make sense" to the acolyte of modern science, the historian should therefore try to make sense of the philosophical, mystical or religious "side-steps" of otherwise "sound" scientific workers of the past—"side-steps" that are usually excused by the spirit or rather backwardness of the period. It is these that present a challenge to the historian: to uncover the internal reason and justification for their presence in the mind of the savant and their organic coherence with his scientific ideas... The two sets of thought—the scientific and the non-scientific—will then emerge not as simply juxtaposed or as having been conceived in spite of each other, but as an organic whole in which they support and confirm each other.<sup>88</sup>

It was this notion, of science and religion as mutually confirming each other, which was so intriguing to Theosophists. Although heavily influenced by figures like Paracelsus, who embodied this spiritual aspect of science, they made a key modification. Living in a global, pluralistic (relative to the 16<sup>th</sup> century) world, they realized that the specifically Christian language used by Paracelsians rendered inaccessible several of the advantages provided by modern science; instead of removing this religious language, however, they instead attempted to use language from *all* religious traditions. Poetic language was not a problem as much as dogmatic language—the more religious traditions they referenced, the more they were able to confirm recent scientific discoveries.

---

<sup>87</sup> Debus, 79

<sup>88</sup> Allen G. Debus "Chemists, Physicians, and Changing Perspectives on the Scientific Revolution" *Isis* 89, (1998: )66.

### Occult Science

Published in 1889, *The Key to Theosophy* is an introduction to, and perhaps even apology for the Theosophical Society, which had been awash in both controversy and allure throughout the 1880s. Structured as a quasi-Socratic dialogue, the “questions” aim to cover some of the most common criticisms of the society, namely its supernatural and pseudo-scientific elements. Blavatsky has a clear strategy of counter-argument throughout the work. Somewhat surprisingly, she does not attempt to attack the working methods or assumptions of contemporary natural scientists; rather, she puts herself and the society squarely in the camp of her purported opponents. She begins:

We believe in nothing supernatural, as I have told you already. Had Edison lived and invented his phonograph two hundred years ago, he would most probably have been burnt along with it, and the whole attributed to the devil. The powers which they exercise are simply the development of potencies lying latent in every man and woman, and the existence of which even official science begins to recognize.<sup>89</sup>

Her tone is even somewhat reproachful, as if the scientific rigor of Theosophy should be obvious. “Blavatsky’s appeal was a combination of mystery and scientism,” writes Joy Dixon. “She unabashedly drew on western rationalist norms for authority and at the same time forced her interlocutors to participate in, or at least acknowledge, her critique of those same norms.”<sup>90</sup> In order to further distinguish her argument, Blavatsky sets Theosophical doctrine apart from the

---

<sup>89</sup> Blavatsky, 156.

<sup>90</sup> Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) 24.

traditional, seemingly superstitious dogma of the Christian churches, and aligns it with “official science”. The reference to Edison is not arbitrary, and sets a precedent for all subsequent Theosophical apologetics. Recent, paradigm-shifting advancements, such as Edison’s electrical appliances and later Einstein’s special relativity, became the favorite tools of Theosophists to show the interrelatedness of their work with scientific advancement. They portray these discoveries as quasi-occult phenomena, which they claim were anticipated both in Theosophical doctrine as well as ancient Indian thought.

Blavatsky’s description of Theosophical practice serves to emphasize the rigorous, scientific nature of Theosophy even further:

The methods used by our scholars and students of the psycho-spiritual sciences do not differ from those of students of the natural and physical sciences, as you may see. Only our fields of research are on two different planes...<sup>91</sup>

Both her characterization of Theosophists (“scholars and students”) and Theosophy (“psycho-spiritual sciences”) deliberately use the vocabulary of academia. She portrays Theosophists not as religious practitioners but as seekers of knowledge, a theme which is further elaborated on as she distances Theosophy from religious faith: “Faith is a word not to be found in theosophical dictionaries: we say *knowledge based, on observation and experience.*”<sup>92</sup> Theosophy is not only based on knowledge, but as Blavatsky emphasizes, *empirical* knowledge. This observational form of empiricism mirrors the alchemical writings of Paracelsus as well as the descriptive methods of early 17<sup>th</sup> century science. Like the Paracelsians, Blavatsky conceives of

---

<sup>91</sup> Blavatsky, 51.

<sup>92</sup> Blavatsky, 51.

a broader range of knowledge than what ended up being included in “official science”; she sees “psycho-spiritual sciences” and research into “different planes” as valid fields for the application of the scientific method.

By 1905, Theosophists were actively seeking to analyze scientific developments through an occult perspective. Rather than simply justifying themselves scientifically, they portrayed themselves as working alongside the natural sciences in a different, but complementary, manner:

One chief function of the great movement which our founders initiated is that of peacemaker between the combatants. Its aim has been to show that Religion and Science are two aspects of the same great truth, and that it is by co-operation, and not by antagonism, that either can hope to attain its object. Twenty-five years ago Science, although triumphant, had practically reached the limits of its progress along purely material lines. It had touched the borderland of matter, and could not advance further without entering a region which has always been recognized as the domain of religion.<sup>93</sup>

So begins G.E. Sutcliffe in *Theosophy and Science*, published in 1906. A year earlier, Albert Einstein published the paper “On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies” in which he proposed his theory of special relativity. This was of great interest to Theosophists; for the first time, seemingly counter-intuitive, paradoxical concepts concerning the natural world were being proposed not by maligned occultists, but by “men of science”. As scientists continued to pry deeper into the structure of the atom and the components of matter, Theosophists’ interest in the natural sciences only increased. However, science remained “one aspect”, separate from religion, of the “same great truth”. Like Blavatsky, Sutcliffe is concerned with science and

---

<sup>93</sup> E.G. Sutcliffe, *Theosophy and Science* (Bombay: Duftur Ashkara Press, 1906), 1.



religion as categories, and treats them as such. Although he urges cooperation between them, they remain distinct. This orientation is shown to be dependent upon specific historical contexts:

Three or four centuries ago the heads of the Christian Churches possessed almost absolute power in the West, and used that power to stifle as far as possible scientific thought. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Science, in its turn, having obtained the upper hand, delivered a vigorous attack upon religious creeds, and before the close of the nineteenth century, it had practically shattered the foundations upon which the Christian Churches had based their teachings. This was the condition of affairs when twenty-five years ago the two founders of the Theosophical Society came to Bombay...<sup>94</sup>

The frankness of this account serves to emphasize the desired lack of religiosity surrounding the Theosophical Society, as Theosophists during this time were clearly aware of their unique role in relation to mainstream Christianity. They relished their ability to distance themselves from the history of the Catholic Church, even as they simultaneously emphasized concepts like the archetypal Christ in their writings.<sup>95</sup> Sutcliffe clearly has no illusions about the status of Christianity in Europe, as he states that science has “shattered the foundations upon which the Christian Churches had based their teachings.” In his view, the conflict between science and religion is a violent one. However, Theosophists imbibed heavily of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century optimism that abounded in Europe before World War I; his remark “this was the condition of affairs” implies that the Theosophical Society has made progress in healing the misunderstanding between science and religion. In his

---

<sup>94</sup> Sutcliffe, 1.

<sup>95</sup> Anne Besant’s *Esoteric Christianity* was published in 1905, and the society in general incorporated much more Christian mysticism under her leadership.

narrative, the categorical boundaries between the two serves to make the ascendancy of the Theosophical Society even more prescient and timely.

Sutcliffe proceeds to invoke modern scientific advancements in a detailed justification of Theosophical and Indian cosmology in general:

One point of difference between Scientific and Theosophical teaching was in the length of time a solar system could last. Lord Kelvin had stated that our sun could not continue to give out light and heat for more than 100 millions of years; while in Theosophical writings it was said that the life of our solar system was identical with what is known as a Day of Brahma, which as many here know is 4,320,000,000 years; that is, about forty times the length assigned by Lord Kelvin. In a letter published recently in a leading scientific journal, it was shown that the discovery of an enormous amount of energy locked up in the atom, enabled the life of our sun to be increased to forty times the length of that calculated by Kelvin, or in other words to 4,000,000,000 of years, a period which is practically identical with that published many years previously in Theosophical literature.<sup>96</sup>

The assumption of agreement between Theosophical and Indian cosmology is important in this context. Although he uses the Hindu terminology, Sutcliffe's source of authority is not an ancient Indian text, but "Theosophical literature". Thus the invocation of authority is two-fold, looking to theological as well as scientific sources. Furthermore, in these references there is a dichotomy in the treatment of citation and content. When referencing theology, the citation is malleable and the content is fixed, in keeping with the Theosophical tendency to universalize religious doctrine. With science, the content is malleable, with the citation of Kelvin assuming importance as it provides the authority. This is in accord with Blavatsky's strategy,

---

<sup>96</sup> Sutcliffe, 1.

which portrays Theosophy as more science than religion. The “energy locked up in the atom” would go on to become perhaps the favorite scientific topic of Theosophists, and is discussed further by Sutcliffe.

The convergence of physics and theology becomes most explicit concerning the concept of atomic energy. Sutcliffe no longer makes categorical distinctions, and even argues that their means of description are synonymous. Interestingly, the deeper into science he delves, the more Christian his language becomes:

Amongst the early Christians [atomic energy] was known as the power of the Holy Ghost, or the third person of the Christian trinity. This leads to the question as to what connection there is between the power of the Holy Ghost and the power locked up in the atom. To this question Theosophical literature gives the answer. In the evolution of a solar system the work undertaken by the third person of the Trinity is the building up of the material atom. Hence, to possess the power of the Holy Ghost, is to control the forces locked up in the atom.<sup>97</sup>

Once again, Sutcliffe positions the Theosophical Society at a precipitous moment in history. It is their natural task to explain and contextualize this discovery, which would otherwise be devoid of resonant meaning. Although he uses Christian theology, he makes sure to qualify his reference by specifying that it was the “early” Christians, not the medieval Catholic Church. Even still, employing the holy ghost, one of the most widely misunderstood Christian doctrines, is a curious choice in order to explain the theological nature of atomic energy. Rather, it seems Sutcliffe is eager to rejuvenate what seems like a tired concept, and in the process have Theosophy take credit for the re-appreciation of true “early” Christianity. He brings

---

<sup>97</sup> Sutcliffe, 2.

in Indian metaphysics in order to further bolster the adaptability of Christian doctrine to atomic energy:

It would seem that one method of controlling this force is by means of sound, and is known in India as Mantra Vidya. It is conceivable that a series of chords which are harmonic with the complex atomic vibrations, may form a link with them, and so make available a portion of this locked-up energy. It is said that by striking certain chords, solid vessels can be ruptured, and even dynamite exploded so the utilization of atomic forces may be only an extension of the same laws. The shout that brought down the wall of Jericho, as arranged by Joshua, a man trained by Moses in the occult sciences, may be an instance in point.<sup>98</sup>

Here he combines all the strands of Theosophical knowledge into one specific example. Indian philosophy, Biblical scripture, atomic energy, and “occult science” are shown to be one and the same. This is the furthest Sutcliffe ventures into speculation; whereas Theosophists had always argued that Biblical scripture contained occult teachings, here Sutcliffe implies that these teachings were some sort of organized scientific discipline. The primacy of Moses for both the Jewish and Christian traditions allows him to insert a scientific basis for Christianity almost at the source. Thus he simultaneously makes Christianity exotic and scientific, aspects that were completely foreign to it at the turn of the 20th century.

By the 1920's, the Theosophical attitude towards science shifted towards a more critical stance. Having made no tangible progress (at least in the eyes of the public) at bridging the gap between the natural sciences and religion, Theosophists began to point out some of what they saw as flaws in natural scientists' methodology: “It is interesting, of course, to notice the difference also, for the

---

<sup>98</sup> Sutcliffe, 2.

attention of the scientist is fixed on the boundary (the form) while the Theosophist concentrates on the life or the 'fluid' flowing into and out of our physical space."<sup>99</sup>

Taken from a lecture by E.W. Preston at the Scientific Group of the Theosophical Society in London, here he continues the "occult science" theme of Sutcliffe but draws sharper distinctions between the two categories, while subtly rebuking science. The depiction of scientists "fixed on the boundary" implies their interest is superficial, in opposition to Theosophists who are focused "on the life". The shortcomings of modern science are emphasized as he continues:

It is this step—the acceptance of a fluid or force, whether discrete or not, which makes the holes in the aether—which has not been accepted by science, and probably will not be accepted for some time. The electron probably is not quite over the borders of the physical plane, but the next step of science must lead there, for at present it is dealing with the etheric levels of the physical—an advance that has been made only since the discovery of radio-activity—or in other words, science in the study of radio-activity is actually dealing with etheric matter.<sup>100</sup>

Here he implies that Theosophy is better equipped to deal with the discoveries science has made, namely radioactivity. Like Sutcliffe and Blavatsky, he uses "occult" terminology when discussing scientific achievements whenever possible. However, there is none of his predecessors' optimism; rather, he is frank about the sciences' dismissal of Theosophical doctrine. This makes him no less confident, as he insists that, "the next step of science must lead" beyond the physical plane.

---

<sup>99</sup> E.W. Preston, *The Occult Study of the Electron* (London: Scientific Group Theosophical Society in England, 1925) 12.

<sup>100</sup> Preston, 12.

Preston's analysis of quantum mechanics displays a serious knowledge of the field, and makes a strong case for an immaterial, if not occult, aspect of natural science. He criticizes scientists' hesitation in embracing this aspect:

This means that science is premature in regarding the hydrogen nucleus as the proton, the ultimate positive element and counterpart of the electron. We must suppose the constituent parts of the hydrogen and helium nuclei to be bound by stronger bonds even than those which hold these units in the nuclei of heavier elements, bonds which are not affected by any physical mass at present known to science.<sup>101</sup>

Here Preston is attempting to grapple with the subatomic forces that are not predicted by classical physics, while demonstrating a much greater knowledge of scientific terms and methodology than Blavatsky and Sutcliffe. However, he reverts to using "occult" terminology when trying to extrapolate upon the significance of such phenomenon:

The electron or E1 provides an outlet for force from the Astral plane. This force is discrete since it is itself a stream of Astral atoms, and therefore flows out in quanta or units which are smaller than the electron. Thus in the Quantum Theory we have a foreshadowing of the laws governing the manifestation of Astral force on the Physical plane.<sup>102</sup>

What all these writers have in common is their intense interest in science. Although Preston's evaluation and critique of Quantum Mechanics shows hardly any influence of Blavatsky and her aspirations to scientific legitimacy, Theosophists never doubted the value or importance of science. Rather, the necessity of a new science, informed by physics but going beyond the material plane, remained one of

---

<sup>101</sup> Preston, 9.

<sup>102</sup> Preston, 14.

the cornerstones of Theosophical thought throughout their history. It was only the accessibility, or potential reception of this new field by the public, that caused them to change the tone of their writings. The intellectual confidence displayed by Blavatsky and Sutcliffe was very characteristic of their time. However, as this *fin-de-siecle* optimism receded after World War I, Theosophists tempered their hopes for the acceptance of an occult science; but as Preston's writing shows, their interest in it did not wane, but instead became sharper and more focused. Unfortunately, this new attitude seemed to have less success in capturing the general public's attention than Blavatsky and her more lavish claims.

### 3. EASTERN AUTHORITY, FEMININE AUTHORITY

A high-profile esoteric society that espoused eastern religion was scandalous enough for the simultaneously Christian and scientific *fin-de-siecle* Britain. Yet this was only exacerbated by the fact that the Theosophical Society was presided over by a succession of two women, both of whom flouted the norms of the late Victorian era. Kumari Jayardena characterizes Blavatsky and Besant as deliberately rebellious in this regard: “It is not an exaggeration to say that the “scandals” they caused reverberated around the world to the disgust of the Victorian establishment and the delight of dissenters in the West and the East.”<sup>103</sup>

To many observers, the theme of gender was also interwoven with the ideology Blavatsky and Besant were voicing, as the dominant imperial attitude towards Hinduism saw it as a religion that encouraged idleness, effeminacy, and daydreaming. On the other hand, the two women were very different from one another in their character, methodology, and interests. The hostility towards Besant was often tinged with begrudging respect, as she possessed actual political power as the president of the Indian National Congress, whereas Blavatsky was easier to dismiss as an eccentric charlatan. During the early years of the society, Blavatsky was criticized for a lack of knowledge of oriental religions—“fraud” was the most common pejorative used by critics. After Besant assumed power, her “Indian-ness” was not questioned—rather, it was assumed, and used as leverage against her. Joy Dixon, in *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*, writes: “One way to

---

<sup>103</sup> Kumari Jayardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Colonial Rule* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 112



read the history of the TS, from its earliest years through the 1930s, is to see it as a series of attempts to create a usable version of both eastern and feminine authority.”<sup>104</sup> Theosophy was thus precisely located at the site where anxieties over changing power relations—both sexual and imperial—were most acutely manifested.

During the *fin-de-siecle*, “oriental ideas” were always more than just ideas. In *Byway’s of Belief*, Noel Conrad writes: “So far as denial of creed concerns the society, it is sufficiently extraordinary, for I know of no single member who does not believe a whole body of Oriental dogmas, and who does not associate this belief with membership.”<sup>105</sup> Conrad is writing as a professed Christian, and also rebukes the prevailing academic culture of scientific positivism. Yet the “oriental” aspect of Theosophy bothers him just as much as it did for many of Theosophy’s more “secular” critics. His portrayal of Blavatsky is far milder than any of his contemporaries, yet still penetrating:

Madame Blavatsky was no vulgar fraud, but a complex and fascinating figure who, possessing an effective though somewhat shallow knowledge of Oriental thought, was able to popularize it just at the psychological moment among Westerners, who never read their own philosophers and are under the spell of that great Eastern delusion that action belongs to the West and thought to the East.<sup>106</sup>

His reference to “that great Eastern delusion” is a surprising characterization of the intellectual cross-pollination between Europe and India, implying that eastern

---

<sup>104</sup> Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) 19

<sup>105</sup> Noel Conrad, *Byways of Belief*, (London: Frank Palmer, 1895) 19

<sup>106</sup> Conrad, 20

authors are responsible for the creation of this dichotomy. Based on the available material, Europeans seem more responsible for depicting “the east” as a land of fanciful contemplation. This tendency is embodied in this description of Hinduism by Sir Monier-Monier Williams, Oxford Professor of Sanskrit:

...Its policy being to check the development of intellect, and keep the inferior castes in perpetual childhood, it encouraged and appetite for exaggeration more monstrous and absurd than would be tolerated in the most extravagant European fairy-tale. The more improbable the statement, the more childish delight it was calculated to awaken.<sup>107</sup>

Here Williams introduces an adult/child binary that again mirrors that of male/female and colonizer/colonized. Rather than comparing Hinduism to Christianity, he compares it to a European fairy-tale—Hinduism is not something foreign to the west, but rather something it has outgrown.

Femininity and spiritual authority had become steadily associated during the nineteenth century, in both mainstream evangelical circles as well as in the Romantic and Symbolist movements. However, “Insofar as the spiritual had become feminized or exoticized, it was a subordinated knowledge; conversely, insofar as the spiritual was a source of authority, it tended still to be associated with western forms of male privilege,” writes Dixon.<sup>108</sup> During this period, Theosophy was but one embodiment of a larger occult trend that was primarily expressed through women. Alex Owen, describing the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (a mystical

---

<sup>107</sup> Quoted in Madras: The Christian Literature Society, S.P.C.K. Press, Vepery, 1894 “Who Is Mrs. Besant? And Why Has She Come to India?”.

<sup>108</sup> Dixon, 19.

organization closely aligned with Theosophy)<sup>109</sup> depicts a characteristic phenomenon of these movements: “It was often women who became involved first, drawing in friends, brothers, and husbands, and going on to assume positions of prominence within the Order’s structured hierarchy.”<sup>110</sup> Jayawardena writes that within the spiritualist movement, “Mediums were inevitably women,” because women possessed spiritual power, as well as “the right to exercise it.”<sup>111</sup> An “indomitable will”<sup>112</sup> was seen as inherent characteristic of the occult practitioner, regardless of their sex. This was in direct contrast to the prevailing Victorian notions of gender, which emphasized active masculinity and passive femininity. Many female Theosophists, such as Katherine Tingley, Alice Bailey, and Besant, came from unhappy marriages, and Blavatsky herself remained unmarried from 1875 onwards. This de-centering of gender took place on a theological level as well. Blavatsky explicitly rejected the Christian God as “but the gigantic shadow of *man*, and not man at his best, either” and instead postulated that “God is a universally diffused, infinite principle”.<sup>113</sup> Mary Farrell Bednarowski also argues that the Theosophical doctrine of reincarnation attracted women, providing an “escape from gender” that promised the immortality of the soul across various physical embodiments.<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> The Order’s membership drew on similarly elite demographics of Victorian Society, including members such as W.B. Yeats and Aleister Crowley, and also focused on the western esoteric tradition.

<sup>110</sup> Alex Owen, *Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) 3.

<sup>111</sup> Jayardena, 113.

<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Owen, 88.

<sup>113</sup> Quoted in Bednarowski, 222.

<sup>114</sup> Mary Farrell Bednarowski, “Outside the Mainstream: Women’s Religion and

### Blavatsky, Besant, and the Imperial Feminine

The most visible and enduring attack on Theosophy (or, more accurately, Blavatsky) came from the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), who published the results of a year and a half long study in December of 1885. The leader of the investigation, Richard Hodgson, concluded that Blavatsky was not to be viewed as “the mouthpiece of hidden seers, nor as a mere vulgar adventuress; we think that she has achieved a title to permanent remembrance as one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting imposters in history.”<sup>115</sup> The question begs itself—In what manner did the society view Blavatsky as an imposter? Was it solely as a spiritual medium, or the simple fact that a woman possessed such great influence and authority?

As an organization involved in “psychical” activities, the SPR, like Theosophy, was often seen as pseudoscience. Many men involved in such activities during the Victorian era were wary of letting women participate in their work, as they feared they would be even further de-legitimized.<sup>116</sup> The SPR’s opinion had weight within these circles, and claimed to undertake their investigation of Theosophy only because of the seriousness of Blavatsky’s supernatural claims. SPR member Frederic Myers admitted that he believed Blavatsky might have answers to the spiritual

---

Women Religious Leaders in Nineteenth-Century America” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48 (1980): 222

<sup>115</sup> “The Society for Psychical Research and the Theosophical Phenomena The Report of the S.P.R. on Madame Blavatsky”  
<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/sprhpb.htm>

<sup>116</sup> A group of scientists including Alfred Russell Wallace (a high-profile proponent of Spiritualism) barred women from entry to the Ethnological Society in the early 1870s; almost all British scientific societies continued to exclude women until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

questions of the modern age, and viewed materialist natural science as an impediment to these questions.<sup>117</sup> However, all of Hodgson's evidence implicating Blavatsky with fraud came from a couple of dissatisfied ex-Theosophists by the name of Coulomb, who had a personal vendetta against Blavatsky.<sup>118</sup> Myers later said that the SPR's investigation into Theosophy was part of an investigation into religious claims as a whole, remarking that in the industrial, post-Darwinian age, "the *emotional* creed of educated men is becoming divorced from their *scientific* creed."<sup>119</sup> The implied association of emotion with spirituality is emblematic of gendered 19<sup>th</sup> century views on religion. His focus on "educated men" is telling, as "the late Victorian crisis of faith was implicitly presented as a genteel and masculine dilemma," notes Dixon.<sup>120</sup>

This masculine crisis of faith was played out most explicitly in the Mahatma Letters, another instance of Blavatsky's forgery in the eyes of the SPR. During the early 1880s, Blavatsky informed A.P. Sinnett and A.O. Hume (the two most prominent Theosophists after herself) of her ability to communicate with her Mahatmas in Tibet<sup>121</sup> via occult means. She then agreed to transmit letters the two men wrote to the Mahatmas, as well as the Mahatmas' responses. The letters, now residing in the British Museum, are a microcosm of the inner workings of imperial,

---

<sup>117</sup> Owen, 20.

<sup>118</sup> It was believed by Henry Steel Olcott that the couple joined the Society purely as a means of acquiring financial support and lodging. The couple, who were devout Christians, also participated in missionary activity in India and were in conflict with Blavatsky over Theosophy's syncretic nature.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Owen, 20.

<sup>120</sup> Dixon, 20.

<sup>121</sup> The purported semi-divine gurus who transmitted their teachings to Blavatsky before the founding of the TS.

spiritual, and gendered power. The two men themselves represent opposite poles of the Anglo-Indian elite: Sinnett was a Tory and avowed imperialist, whereas Hume, a liberal and proponent of Indian independence, founded the Indian National Congress in 1885. However, both men effectively put their trust in Blavatsky and her purported powers, as the sincerity of their letters evidences.<sup>122</sup> Dixon argues that the two interpretations of the letters—authentic communications with semi-divine beings (as the two men believed) or Blavatsky as “ventriloquist”—raise the same complex questions. In both cases, Hume and Sinnett acknowledged the spiritual authority of persons who they would otherwise find racially inferior (the Mahatmas)—all the while relying on the powers of the inferior sex (Blavatsky). This assumption of power on Blavatsky’s part (either as real intermediary or assuming the voice of the Mahatmas herself) was, Dixon argues, a way for her to perform a self-consciously masculine role.<sup>123</sup> Thus it is irrelevant whether Blavatsky’s Mahatmas were an orientalist figment of the imagination or a true embodiment of eastern religion—what’s more noteworthy is that the idea of eastern religion itself became a locus of uninhibited subversion of gender norms.

Anne Besant underwent much of the same criticisms as Blavatsky, despite her much more traditionally feminine appearance, as this critique demonstrates:

One Sunday morning recently I attended one of Mrs. Besant’s lectures at the large Queen’s Hall; there was not a vacant seat, although hundreds of them were five shillings each. The audience was composed chiefly of ladies, and the faces of some of them were a psychological study. When Mrs. Besant made her

---

<sup>122</sup> Interestingly, Hume was more cautious and reserved, whereas Sinnett was always convinced of both the Mahatmas’ existence and Blavatsky’s occult powers.

<sup>123</sup> Dixon, 27.

appearance they looked upon her with an expression of awe and admiration, as they would have looked at a spook at a spiritual séance; and when the torrents and cataracts of fine words flowed from her lips, those ladies became spellbound.<sup>124</sup>

This passage, drawn from a polemical work by J.N. Maskelyne solely devoted to Theosophy, is indicative of the suspicion, and outright hostility, many British felt towards the society. The “torrents and cataracts of fine words” that “flowed from her lips” gives the impression of Besant as charismatic and manipulative, almost a kind of sorceress that left her audience “spellbound”. Maskelyne subtly reveals the way socio-economics and gender color his judgment of theosophy—he characterizes the audience as rich, idle, women, as five shillings was a hefty price for a lecture, and Queens Hall was said to have seated around 2,500 people. Thus his fear is of a political nature: “Indian mysticism has such fascination for and pernicious influence over some people, that it leads them to accept without question the statements of every exponent of it who professes supernatural power.” This attention to Theosophy’s popularity reveals itself as a form of paranoia as he continues: “Everything possible should be done to check the spread of this pernicious doctrine of superstition. I trust that this pamphlet will cause the light of common sense to dispel some of the artificial glamour surrounding Indian mysticism.”<sup>125</sup> The fact that he repeats the word “pernicious” shows that his concern is practical and related to the social effects of Theosophy, particularly upon women. It seems there was some basis for this concern, as “prominent feminists were

---

<sup>124</sup> J.N. Maskelyne, *The Fraud of Modern “Theosophy” Exposed: A Brief History of the Greatest Imposture Ever Perpetrated Under the Cloak of Religion* (London: George Routledge & Sons Limited, 1912) 11.

<sup>125</sup> Maskelyne, 11

hundreds of times more likely to join the [Theosophical Society] than were members of the general population,"<sup>126</sup> writes Dixon. E.W. Thompson is even more explicitly sexist in his examination of Besant, saying, "And once again, as in Madame Blavatsky's time, the Theosophical Society is made to rest upon the basis of a woman's infallibility."<sup>127</sup>

Interestingly, Besant encountered a similar dynamic in India, as this report from resentful Indian Christians evidences. Just as eastern religion functioned to allow Blavatsky and Besant to subvert Victorian gender expectations, in this example, traditional Christianity reifies those standards, despite the Indian context:

Mrs. Besant might therefore expect to find a large number of "imbeciles," "muffs" "flapdoodle (food for fools) babies." Her expectations were realized. At Bangalore she was hailed as "the veritable goddess of Ind, coming from the far off West for the spiritual regeneration of the land." Sir Sheshadri Iyar, the Dewan of Mysore, said she was "the incarnation of Saraswati and their sister."<sup>128</sup>

The authors of this report, the editorial board of the Madras Christian Literature Society, echo many of Maskelyne's fears in regards to Besant's charisma and popularity. She is again associated with feminine spirituality, able to ensnare gullible audiences with superficial charms. They are also perturbed by her comparison to a Hindu goddess, especially since she comes from "the west". This aspect is further emphasized as they compare her to Blavatsky:

---

<sup>126</sup> Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) 6.

<sup>127</sup> E.W. Thompson, *Theosophy of Mrs. Besant*, (Mysore: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1913) 1.

<sup>128</sup> "Who Is Mrs. Besant? And Why Has She Come to India?" Madras: The Christian Literature Society, S.P.C.K. Press, Vepery, 1894 p. 24



A few years ago a white lady, Madame Blavatsky, caused a great sensation in Ceylon by calling herself a Buddhist. The Sinhalese showed her as much honour as if she had been a queen. Now a white lady, Mrs. Besant, has caused equal wonder in India by declaring herself a Hindu, and going about lecturing in favour of her new religion.<sup>129</sup>

The binary presented here, with the “white lad[ies]” on one side and Buddhism and Hinduism on the other, is meant to show the unnaturalness of Blavatsky and Besant’s position. This is tied to fears of their power, as they reference Blavatsky being shown “as much honour as if she had been a queen” whereas Besant had been portrayed as a “goddess”. These authors are completely aware of the manner in which eastern religion allows Blavatsky and Besant to exercise a certain power in India—many Indians were presumably eager to see westerners validate Hinduism. Kumari Jayardena, discussing women Theosophists in India, writes that, “Their own examples of female leadership, rebellion and independence as women” were able to influence “local people who were able to relate to the ‘new women’ from the West, who sympathized with the political aspirations of the colonized.”<sup>130</sup> However, from the Indian Christian perspective, this negates an entire century or more of western behavior that they had sought to acclimate themselves towards. Christianity was a way for many Indians to compensate for a perceived inferiority to the west, an inferiority they saw as caused by the superstitious and backwards Hindu religion. In this sense, Besant’s preaching of Hinduism undermined all their possible senses of identity. She embodied the authority of Victorian Britain that they aspired to, while simultaneously displaying the “Indian-ness” they had left behind, despite

---

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>130</sup> Kumari Jayardena, *The White Woman’s Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Colonial Rule* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 108.

experiencing none of the racial subjugation of British imperialism. The power that made this possible (Blavatsky as a “queen” and Besant as a “goddess”) was translation. Whereas Besant imported eastern religion to subvert the limitations of gender, these authors used western religion to subvert the limitations of political subjugation. The primacy of a religious mindset (whether dogmatic or syncretic) over nationality becomes clear, as I will show with the example of Mahatma Gandhi—a figure who attempted a similar overcoming of political subjugation as these authors, but in a manner informed by Blavatsky and Besant’s understanding of eastern religion.

### **Gandhi and the Colonial Masculine**

For Mohandas Gandhi the empowering potential of a foreign religion was not simply an inversion determined by politics—rather, imperial and colonial identities became the function of a fluid identity that was first and foremost spiritual. Gandhi and many other “colonized” men felt an acute sense of emasculation during the British era—at one point during his childhood, Gandhi even wondered if the British owed their technological and military prowess to the fact that they ate meat.<sup>131</sup> It is not my intention, however, to undergo a psycho-biographical examination into Gandhi’s various sexual practices (of which there is plenty of speculation), but rather explore his construction of a public persona that was uniquely masculine. In the same manner that Blavatsky and Besant used the “feminine” aspects of eastern religion towards an empowerment that was decidedly un-feminine by Victorian standards, Gandhi used the “masculine” aspects of Christianity to create an

---

<sup>131</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 44.

empowered identity that was similarly beguiling to British imperialists. The key intellectual influence and means by which he accomplished this was the Theosophical notion of the archetypal Christ figure, which provided Gandhi with the mytho-poetic language to simultaneously subvert his colonial identity and transcend his imperial one.

Gandhi displayed an intense interest in Indian religion, as well as Christianity, from childhood onwards. Gandhi met two Theosophists while studying law in London, who gave him a copy of *The Bhagavad Gita*, perhaps the most important text in his life, and introduced him to Blavatsky and Besant. Gandhi wrote in a letter to the *Natal Advertiser* that the “phenomenal success” of the Theosophical Society

is an unmistakable sign of a return from materialistic tendencies, which have made us so selfish, to the unadulterated esoteric teachings of not only Jesus Christ, but also of Buddha, Zoroaster, and Mahomed, who are no longer so generally denounced by the civilized world as false prophets, but whose and Jesus's teachings are beginning to be acknowledged to be complementary of one another.<sup>132</sup>

Surprisingly, Gandhi makes no reference to Hinduism or a prophet such as Krishna, instead using the Buddha as metonymy for India. His relating them to “the civilized world” is telling—Buddhism was generally seen as a more rational, scientific religion than Hinduism, which often seemed idolatrous and overly sensual to Victorian sensibilities. Gandhi was very prone to this line of thinking—he later described himself during this period as an “English gentleman”, dressing with a top

---

<sup>132</sup> “Letter to the ‘Natal Advertiser’” *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 1, Government of India, 1969

hat and black coat and trousers.<sup>133</sup> This aspiration towards western ideals of masculinity became decidedly more spiritual as he immersed himself in Theosophy.

While living in South Africa, Gandhi became a bookseller for Esoteric Christianity, an offshoot organization of the Theosophical Society founded by Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland that emphasized an archetypal understanding of Jesus Christ and Christian mysticism. Gandhi wrote in a letter to the Theosophist A.M. Lewis, “During my stay here I intend to spread as much as possible information about Theosophy (To me there is little difference between Theosophy and Esoteric Christianity).”<sup>134</sup> In the same letter, he displays a passionate determination for the project:

I had occasion to come in contact with a doctor in Pretoria. He seemed to be the only gentleman in addition to another who took interest in theosophical subjects. I gave him *The Perfect Way* to read. He liked it so much that he wished me to get another copy for him. I made him a present of my copy. I would therefore thank you if you will kindly send me a copy of *The Perfect Way*.<sup>135</sup>

This scenario, seemingly innocuous on the surface, hints at the subversive power of Theosophical doctrine in the hands of Gandhi. A young Indian man was somehow able to garner the attention and sympathy of a white South African “gentleman” based on these esoteric teachings; Gandhi’s closest friends in South Africa, Henry Polack and Herman Kallenbach, were also Theosophists. Gandhi’s ability to dialogue

---

<sup>133</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 126.

<sup>134</sup> Letter to Mrs. A.M. Lewis”, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 1, Government of India, 1969

<sup>135</sup> “Letter to Mrs. A.M. Lewis”, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 1, Government of India, 1969

with British imperial officials while maintaining a basis in Indian spirituality later became one of his trademark attributes, and as this instance shows, his interest in Theosophy was a key formative influence on this political tact. Like Blavatsky and Besant, Gandhi's "foreignness" (both natural assumed) allowed him to access, and even create, audiences and discursive formations whose functioning would otherwise be impeded within the imperial framework. Much of Gandhi's success in awakening national consciousness was his awareness of this unique ability within himself. This notion of individual spirituality affecting political action was articulated by Blavatsky herself, as she described a "Distributive Karma" in which individual moral effort benefits all of humanity. A special case of this is "National Karma" which views nation states as spiritual units contributing to the 'karma of the world'; National Karma can be restored to a healthy state by 'heroic souls'.<sup>136</sup> Whether Gandhi was inspired towards his role as "Mahatma" (literally "great soul") from such ideas is impossible to determine; what's clear, however, is that Theosophy was necessary to articulate the intertwining of individual spirituality and political action that became so crucial to Gandhi. His secretary Pyarelal said of Gandhi's early Theosophical years: "Whatever he absorbed in this extremely impressionable and formative phase stayed with him for life."<sup>137</sup>

This is further supported by the actual content of *The Perfect Way*, the book Gandhi was so zealously promoting. In it Anna Kingsford claims, "The supreme manifestation of the Christ principle will occur through the spiritual fertilization of

---

<sup>136</sup> H.P. Blavatsky *The Key to Theosophy* (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophy Trust Books, 2007) 33.

<sup>137</sup> Quoted in Katherine Tidrick, *Gandhi: A Political and Spiritual Life*, (New York: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, 2006) 33.

the West by the East, in tandem with the spiritual revivification of the East by the West.”<sup>138</sup> Here, Kingsford’s sexual metaphor invokes the Victorian notions of western masculinity and eastern femininity; however, it does not make the west active or the east passive—instead they are interdependent. It’s easy to see how during his mature career, Gandhi sought both the “fertilization” of unfamiliar audiences with Indian spirituality, as well as the “revivification” of Indian nationalist consciousness through his own action. The fact that Kingsford describes this process as “the Christ principle” is important—as she elaborates on the nature of this principle, it begins to recall even more of Gandhi’s spiritual and moral ethic:

Christ, then, is primarily not a person, but a principle, a process, a system of life and thought, by the observance of which man becomes purified from Matter and transmuted into Spirit. And he is *a* Christ who, in virtue of his observance of this process to its utmost extent while yet in the body, constitutes a full manifestation of the qualities of spirit.<sup>139</sup>

Pyarelal wrote that these ideas, “gave a very distinct coloring to [Gandhi’s] thoughts on some very vital aspects e.g. Brahmacharya, the doctrine of absolute through Christ’s suffering, allegorical interpretations of the scriptures, etc.”<sup>140</sup> This obviously raises the daunting question of whether Gandhi actually viewed himself as a Christ figure. Katherine Tidrick says: “[Gandhi] never said outright that he hoped to become a Christ. But on many occasions, using the language of Esoteric Christianity, he said it as clearly as made no difference.” This can be seen in Gandhi’s letters during the 1920’s: “I hope to attain perfection. It is the dharma of everyone to

---

<sup>138</sup> Anna Kingsford, *The Perfect Way: Or, The Finding of Christ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1882) 25.

<sup>139</sup>Kingsford, 25.

<sup>140</sup> Quoted in Tidrick, 33.

become perfect. I have been able to see my dharma. The attainment of perfection should not, I think, be impossible if the circumstances are favorable” and, to his son Motilal, “There is no point in trying to know the difference between a perfect man and God.”<sup>141</sup>

Gandhi invoked this asceticism in both a Christian and Indian sense, depending on his audience. Gandhi’s appearance to European audiences—gaunt, diminutive, clad in a loincloth—self-knowingly mocked western notions of the childlike and effeminate Hindu. This accomplished a similar purpose to Blavatsky’s self-mythologizing garb—both figures submitted to cultural signifiers despite the expected mockery, thereby daring critics to examine the underlying spiritual bases that informed and necessitated them.

Kingsford’s presentation of Christian asceticism was also enticing to Gandhi in a foreign, western sense, as he felt constrained his entire life by the expectations of caste duty, family and fatherhood. This becoming of “pure spirit” tapped into the Platonic Christianity prized for centuries by western thinkers (including Theosophists), a school of thought that had inevitably become associated with masculine intellect and rationality. Kingsford’s incorporation of “revivification” made sense to Gandhi as an active, masculine quality—it was his duty to awaken Indians to the spirituality inherent in their culture. This symbiotic relationship distinguishes Gandhi’s asceticism as Christian (or, more accurately, Christ-like) rather than Indian—his individual renunciation was designed to reciprocally produce a spiritual flowering and political strengthening of the Indian state itself.

---

<sup>141</sup> “My Sentinels”, “Letter to Motilal” Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 1, Government of India, 1969

Thus Gandhi appeared to Indians as a spiritual-moral masculine “hero”, while also confronting Europeans as the wholly other, simultaneously submitting to and transcending the caricature they had created. In this self-invented mytho-poetic reality, Gandhi did indeed function as “a” Christ.

Blavatsky, Besant, and Gandhi all took a collagist approach towards the construction of identity—they seemed to deliberately use the incongruousness of their parts to create a whole that was somehow more powerful because of it. Most glaringly in the case of Blavatsky, this incongruousness sometimes bordered on fiction—Alex Owen writes that a disproportionate number of female spiritualist mediums came from “theatrical backgrounds”.<sup>142</sup> These figures used the concept of “play” and the poetic approach to being implied within it to give themselves a voice where it had been denied elsewhere—gentlemanly science, in the case of Blavatsky and Besant, or imperial government in the case of Gandhi. Foreign spirituality provided them with the perfect arena for this experimentation—it was a new mythic language, a poetry that had not yet been depleted of meaning by the forces of modernity or imperialism.

---

<sup>142</sup> Owen, 108.



## Conclusion

*Yogibogeybox in Dawson chambers. Isis Unveiled. Their Pali book we tried to pawn. Crossleged under an umbrel umbershoot he thrones an Aztec logos, functioning on astral levels, their oversoul, mahamahatma. The faithful hermetists await the light, ripe for chelaship, ringabout him... Lotus ladies tend them i'the eyes, their pineal glands aglow. Filled with his god, he thrones, Buddh under plantain. Gulfer of souls, engulfer. Hesouls, shesouls, shoals of souls. Engulfed with wailing creecries, whirled, whirling, they bewail.*

-James Joyce, Ulysses

Historians are concerned with doorways—how we access the past, how we access foreign modes of being. And if language, via textual evidence, is our only door, Joyce’s satirical smirk would seem to suggest that the door to Theosophy is forever closed. Presumably describing a Theosophical séance during the late 1910’s, one can easily see how many of Theosophy’s cultural signifiers became ripe for satire in disillusioned post-war Europe. Joyce delights in taking these terms, presumably full of meaning for the “faithful hermetists”, and playing with their meaninglessness—their pure sonorous quality, their polysyllabic absurdity. Ironically, by heightening this rhythmic incantation, he produces a new sort of poetry, though surely different from the one Blavatsky intended. But is this really any different from Blavatsky’s original interpolation of these Indian terms? Like Joyce, she appropriated a language that had meaning for another people, and prioritized her own ends above the texts’ “true meaning”. In effect she created her own poetry, one that posited a poetic mode of being itself as a necessary response to the limitations of a gendered, materialist, and dogmatically Christian mode of being. And, for a while, it resonated.

What I’ve hoped to show is that Theosophy did indeed possess some of this poetic playfulness during its emergence onto the world stage, despite its eventual

ossification. What's more unfortunate than the specific fate of Theosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, is the continued manner in which this spirit of questioning, of reconfiguration, was ignored in favor of categorizing discourses ("New Age") that essentially reified the "other" in response to the fragility of modern rationalism.

The current status of Theosophy is nebulous, and varies from country to country. With the aid of the Davenport grant, I was able to visit and conduct research at the international headquarters in Adyar, India, as well as the lodge in Ojai, California. The Adyar headquarters, set in a lush, expansive park where the Adyar river empties into the Bay of Bengal, seemed stuck in time—a fading relic of India's Victorian past. None of the auto-rickshaw drivers I asked were familiar with its location or even existence, despite the fact that it occupies a huge swath of land in the center of Chennai's industrial sprawl. The grounds themselves are tranquil and well kept (despite India's omnipresent wild dogs), housing stately Victorian buildings and Hindu-Buddhist shrines that slumber beneath a canopy of banyan trees. The archival staff were courteous, despite a limited facility with English; I was surprised to find that the entire staff, as well as other readers who came to the library, were all Indian. While not possessing the British character I was expecting, the society's clientele were clearly the "Anglo-Indian" elite—several members with whom I spoke came from Brahmin families associated with Theosophy since its inception. The texts they were studying were probably no different than those studied by *fin-de-siecle* Theosophists—a mixture of what seemed like astrological charts, Blavatsky's cosmology, and scholarly interpretations of ancient Indian

philosophy. Thus the Adyar branch seemed to confirm Donald Lopez's description of Theosophy as a "relic of a bygone era".<sup>143</sup>

The Krotona Library, operated by the Theosophical Society—Ojai, was a much more vibrant embodiment of contemporary Theosophy. Perched on an open, grassy hill overlooking the Ojai valley, the library is a relatively small but busy enclave of what seemed like all-purpose spiritual seekers. Most people using the library were not interested in Theosophical doctrine itself as much as tangential or interrelated topics such as Jungian psychology or the teachings of Krishnamurti. Some were pursuing graduate programs in nearby institutions like the Pacifica Institute or California Institute for Integral Studies (CIIS), while others also participated in events at the nearby Krishnamurti Institute, also located in Ojai. It seems like Theosophy has managed to thrive in what could be considered the "New Age" culture of Ojai and California as a whole—it continues to attract members not for its own doctrine, but rather for its influence on subsequent spiritual movements.

Theosophy at Ojai was something entirely different from the *fin-de-siecle* Theosophy represented at Adyar, peacefully entombed under sprawling banyan trees within the heart of modern India's urban congestion. Thus what's important is not a dogmatic adherence to Blavatsky's doctrine, but rather the persistence of this form of knowledge (whether occult, or religious in a general sense) and the continued bewilderment with which its confronted by a knowledge that refuses to recognize its own historically contingent self-limitations. The predictions made by 19<sup>th</sup> century secularization theorists become more inaccurate each day, as seen in

---

<sup>143</sup> Donald Lopez, "Belief" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 24.

phenomena as diverse as the continued popularity and growth of New Age philosophies in Europe and the United States, the surge of Christianity in post-colonial Africa and communist China, or the persistent religiosity of the Islamic world. Theosophy was a rebellion at the source of the methodology that still renders these diverse phenomena inaccessible to the modern social scientist. In tracing this process, hopefully I've brought some of what Theosophy represented "into play", into dialogue with a world not becoming more modern and homogenous, as late nineteenth century positivists supposed, but rather, increasingly complex and heterogeneous.

In this de-centering of modernity, Blavatsky authoritatively posited a center that was feminine, irrational, non-western, in short, everything *lacking* authority. Ultimately, it is of little importance whether Theosophy was a "true resurgence" of some ancient obscure knowledge; what *is* important is how Theosophists took these disqualified ideas—antiquity, obscurity—and for a brief time, made them an enticing means of knowledge in a society obsessed with progress and appearance; how they took what was previously the province of romantic poets in Europe and solitary ascetics in India and brought them together, producing an international movement of not just "occultists" but of artists, scientists, feminists, politicians. It was this movement and discourse, this communal seeking and appropriating of disparate knowledges for the reconstituting of the self, which refuses to be disqualified.

## Bibliography

### Introduction

Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001)

Tor Egil Forland, "Acts of God? Miracles and Scientific Explanation" *History and Theory* 47 (2008)

Tor Egil Forland, "Historiography Without God", *History and Theory* 47 (2008)

Michel Foucault, "Lecture One: 7 January 1976" trans. Alessandro Fontana and Pasquale Pasquino, appearing in *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Random House, 1980)

Brad Gregory, "No Room for God? History, Science, Metaphysics, and the Study of Religion" *History and Theory* 47 (2008)

Alex Owen, *Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010)

### The Fin-de-Siecle: Pros and Cons of the New Science

Anne Besant, *Ancient Ideals in Modern Life* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1901)

Jonardon Ganeri, "The Hindu Syllogism: Nineteenth-Century Perceptions of Indian Logical Thought", *Philosophy East and West* 46, (1996)

N. J. Girardot, "Max Müller's "Sacred Books" and the Nineteenth-Century Production of the Comparative Science of Religions", *History of Religions* 41, (2002)

Daniel H. H. Ingalls, "The Heritage of a Fallible Saint: Annie Besant's Gifts to India" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 109, (1965)

Rajesh Kochhar, "Seductive Orientalism: English Education and Modern Science in Colonial India" *Social Scientist* 36, (2008)

Siv Ellen Kraft "To Mix or Not to Mix: Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism in the History of Theosophy" *Numen* 49, (2002)

Walter Laqueur "Fin-de-siecle: Once More with Feeling", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 31 (1996)

Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religion: or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005)

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974)

David Smith, "Nietzsche's Hinduism, Nietzsche's India: Another Look" *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 28 (2004)

E.W. Thompson, *Theosophy of Mrs. Besant*, (Mysore: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1913)

Rajive Tiwari, "A Transnarrative for the Colony: Astronomy Education and Religion in 19th Century India", *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, (2006)

W. E. Ayton Wilkinson, "MRS. ANNIE BESANT AND THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY", *The Monist* 14, (1904)

### **Occult Science and the Scientific Revolution**

H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, (New York: Quest Books, 1972)

Allen G. Debus, "Chemists, Physicians, and Changing Perspectives on the Scientific Revolution" *Isis* 89, (1998)

Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, (Boston: Focus Publishing, 2007)

Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001)

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* trans. Travistock/Routledge (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002)

Keith Hutchison "What Happened to Occult Qualities in the Scientific Revolution?" *Isis* 73, (1982)

Isaac Newton, *Principia Mathematica Philosophiae Naturalis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972)

E.W. Preston, *The Occult Study of the Electron* (London: Scientific Group Theosophical Society in England, 1925)

E.G. Sutcliffe, *Theosophy and Science* (Bombay: Duftur Ashkara Press, 1906)

Catherine Wilson, "Visual Surface and Visual Symbol: The Microscope and the Occult in Early Modern Science", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 49 (1988)

### **Eastern Authority, Feminine Authority**

Mary Farrell Bednarowski, "Outside the Mainstream: Women's Religion and Women Religious Leaders in Nineteenth-Century America" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48 (1980)

H.P. Blavatsky *The Key to Theosophy* (Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophy Trust Books, 2007)

Noel Conrad, *Byways of Belief*, (London: Frank Palmer, 1895)

Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001)

Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. 1, Government of India, 1969

Mahatma Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993)

Kumari Jayardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Colonial Rule* (New York: Routledge, 1995)

Anna Kingsford, *The Perfect Way: Or, The Finding of Christ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1882)

J.N. Maskelyne, *The Fraud of Modern "Theosophy" Exposed: A Brief History of the Greatest Imposture Ever Perpetrated Under the Cloak of Religion* (London: George Routledge & Sons Limited, 1912)

Alex Owen, *Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010)

E.W. Thompson, *Theosophy of Mrs. Besant*, (Mysore: Wesleyan Mission Press, 1913)

Katherine Tidrick, *Gandhi: A Political and Spiritual Life*, (New York: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, 2006)

"Who Is Mrs. Besant? And Why Has She Come to India?" Madras: The Christian Literature Society, S.P.C.K. Press, Vepery, 1894

**Conclusion**

Donald Lopez, "Belief" in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)