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Views from the Great White Brotherhood

A study concerning notions about race in the teachings of the
Theosophical Society and the Rosicrucian Fellowship

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ABSTRACT

The nineteenth century witnessed a great deal interest in Esotericism, which resulted in the creation of a significant number of Occult organizations. Many of them were influenced by the Theosophical Society, arguably the most important of the groups that came into existence before the Great War, a further example being the Rosicrucian Fellowship. The writings of these two organizations' primary founders contain teachings about race that were influenced by beliefs concerning the inferiority of certain peoples that were prevalent at the time. While this is often acknowledged in academic studies, the matter is largely marginalized.

The aim of this paper is to investigate how these teachings reinforce preexisting ideas about race. The findings indicate that this is partially achieved through the use of language and partially by presenting the notions within the context of a cosmology which casts inequalities found in society as part of an evolutionary process in which any atrocities committed by a dominant group are seen as merely hastening a divinely instituted chain of events that is already in motion. This matter is relevant to the present time because these beliefs are part of living traditions and because it is arguable that the racist discourse which shaped them in the first place is still just as influential today.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Ever westward in the wake of the shining sun, the light of the world, has gone the star of empire, and is it not reasonable to suppose that the spiritual light has kept pace with civilization, or even preceded it as thought precedes action?

Max Heindel, *Gleanings of a Mystic* (1922)

The latter part of the nineteenth century witnessed a flourishing of interest in Esotericism. This is evidenced by the impressive number of Occult organizations that came into existence during the decades preceding the Great War, such as the highly influential Theosophical Society, which was founded in 1876. As Alex Owen states in her study of *fin de siècle* Occultism in Britain and its relation to “the modern,” *The Places of Enchantment* (2004), these groups were permeated by an unmistakable bourgeois tone that tended to attract those with a shared frame of both social and intellectual reference.¹ This served to set them apart from the enormously popular Victorian Spiritualist movement, thereby creating an elitist alternative for seekers. In others words, interest in the late nineteenth century for Occult groups informed by Esoteric thought was largely a middle class phenomenon.

Admittedly, this can partially be explained in terms of practicality. Luxuries afforded by a thicker wallet would of course naturally grant one the time and resources necessary to pursue the different lines of study offered by such groups. However, in terms of appeal, I believe that these organizations would have been particularly attractive to members of the rapidly expanding middle classes because the values and attitudes shared by this particular demographic in regard to questions concerning race, the situation of women, and sexuality informed the teachings and constitution of the groups themselves. Often based upon an elaborate hierarchical framework, the very structure of a number of these Occult organizations such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the Ordo Templi Orientis mirrored what was becoming an increasingly complex situation concerning class division due to changes in society brought on by modernity.

¹ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 5.

During the late nineteenth century, the birth of new sciences such as genetics made a significant impact on the way many of what could be termed the educated middle classes perceived the society in which they lived. This resulted in the creation of various bourgeois ideologies, comfortably resting on the increasingly politicized name of Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882) and the notion of evolution, which could shuffle the blame for the inequalities found in society onto “nature.”² Social movements such as the then fashionable eugenics, largely the creation of Darwin’s cousin Sir Francis Galton (1822 – 1911), urged that immediate actions be taken to improve the genetic condition of the human race. It was suggested that this could be accomplished by, for example, encouraging valuable human strains such as those typically identified with the bourgeoisie and eliminating those associated with, as historian Eric Hobsbawm so neatly phrases it, “the poor, the colonized or unpopular strangers.”³ Occultists, ever eager to prepare a proper vessel for the soul, were often interested in these views.

Since a number of these Occult groups, perhaps best exemplified by the Theosophical Society, became involved with progressive and humanitarian movements such as the campaign for women’s rights, one could perhaps be led to believe that such organizations (and this argument could very well be extended to refer to the present) contributed in a significant manner to the advancement of groups that have traditionally been oppressed or marginalized. Certainly, Theosophist Annie Besant’s (1847 – 1933) efforts in the campaign for Indian Home Rule seem to indicate that this was the case; however, a strong argument could be made asserting that the above mentioned movement acted largely with bourgeois interests in mind.

In *The Key to Theosophy* (1889), Helena Blavatsky (1831 – 1891), the Society’s primary founder, states that the movement’s first “object” is to “form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, color, or creed.”⁴ However, Owen maintains that “occultism...was potentially threatening to a leveling and democratic vision.”⁵ What is perhaps the most significant example of such a

² Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire* (London: Pheonix Press, 1987) 253.

³ Ibid.

⁴ H.P. Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (1889), 20 April 2009, <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadenakeykey-hp.htm>>.

⁵ Owen 135.

menace to egalitarianism can be found in the Theosophical teachings concerning “Root Races,” which present an elaborate model of the evolution of mankind in which different “races” rise and, after having reached their evolutionary maximum, go into decline. Similar notions concerning race also feature prominently in the evolutionary schemes offered by a number of derivative groups that were influenced by the Theosophical Society in different ways, such as the Rosicrucian Fellowship.

It is my feeling that the racist implications of these teachings are, at best, marginalized by academic studies of Occultism and, at worst, often excused because views promulgating the inferiority of other races were a relatively common feature of the time during which so many of these groups appeared on both sides of the Atlantic. The Theosophical Society, for example, was founded at the beginning of the period historian Eric Hobsbawm demarcates as the Age of Empire, 1875 – 1914. During this small space of time, roughly one-quarter of the world’s surface was dealt up as colonies among half a dozen states; Britain alone increased its territory by an astonishing four million miles.⁶ In this paper, I will examine in what way these teachings – firstly, as set forth in the writings of H.P. Blavatsky and, secondly, as further developed by Max Heindel (1865 – 1919), the founder of the Rosicrucian Fellowship -- reinforce the racist discourse that was prevalent during those years.

I believe this to be an important matter to investigate primarily for two reasons. Firstly, it is of value because these teachings are still components of living traditions. The Theosophical Society, though presently existing in a splintered form, still has a substantial number of members throughout the world. The Rosicrucian Fellowship, alive and well, still offers correspondence courses for eager adepts and holds “healing meetings” at the organization’s headquarters in Oceanside, California. Furthermore, similar notions clothed in religious garb which proclaim racial superiority have periodically resurfaced at times not quite as comfortably remote from our own as the Victorian Era. Cosmotheism, the creation of white supremacist leader William Pierce (1933 – 2002), is but one example of a new religious movement which urges believers to maintain the purity of their “stock.” When racist ideas exist within the framework of a set of religious beliefs, the matter becomes a

⁶ Hobsbawm 6 – 12; 59.

particularly difficult one to contend with since they are based upon alleged divine revelation and thus can never completely be disproved. That such a distasteful way of perceiving others would become part of a religious tradition in the first place is not such a strange occurrence if one is of the opinion, as sociologist Émile Durkheim was, that religion is a reflection of society which mirrors “all its features, even the most vulgar and repellent.”⁷

Secondly, I feel that this is a subject that needs further examination because racist discourse is arguably just as influential today as it was over a century ago, although the particular groups cast as inferior may at times change. The Southern Poverty Law Center, a non-governmental civil rights organization located in Montgomery, Alabama, reports that at the current time there are 926 active hate groups in the United States alone.⁸ This number, already troubling in its sheer enormity, represents a staggering 50% increase since the year 2000.⁹ While this disturbing trend could perhaps at least be partially accounted for as being a response to the tragic events that occurred on September 11, 2001, it should not be permitted to continue its existence as a largely socially acceptable one. The wholesale demeaning of Muslims and immigrants that regularly occurs in the mainstream American media indicates that it has indeed reached that stage.

This paper consists of five parts in addition to the introduction. The first chapter, Design of the Present Study, presents the aim of the study, the primary and secondary material used, the method used, and the theories upon which the approach is based. The next chapter presents information which will provide the reader with a greater understanding of the context in which the primary material was produced. Firstly, definitions are provided for a number of terms used frequently in the paper which have often been used interchangeably in studies through the years. Afterwards, topics such as Occultism and Esotericism in general, nineteenth century Occultism, the history of the Theosophical Society, the origin of the Rosicrucian Fellowship, the relationship between colonialism and imperialism, and racial

⁷ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1995 [first published as *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* in 1912]) 423.

⁸ “Stand Strong Against Hate.” *SPLCenter.org*, 2009, *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 16 July 2009, <<http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?aid=1017>>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

stereotyping are covered. In the results chapter, teachings concerning race as presented by Blavatsky and Heindel are examined. The following section discusses aspects of these teachings in connection with orientalism and Cosmotheism, as well as possibilities for further research. Lastly, the conclusion offers a brief summary along with a few closing remarks.

2 DESIGN OF THE PRESENT STUDY

This is a hermeneutic study which focuses on Helena Blavatsky's teachings concerning Root Races and the version later proposed by Rosicrucian Fellowship founder Max Heindel. Traditional hermeneutics, which has roots that extend back to antiquity, most often concerns the interpretation of texts. In the case of this paper, the writings being examined are key pieces of literature central to the religious movements mentioned above. The works are briefly presented in the subsection entitled "Material."

2.1 Aim

The main objective of this study is to investigate how these teachings reinforce notions regarding the inferiority of certain races. While it is often admitted in academic studies of nineteenth century Occult movements that the ideas they offered did indeed contain what could today be recognized as racist ideas, I find it puzzling that research concerning, for example, the space Root Races occupy in modern Theosophical thought appears to be virtually non-existent. Are these teachings still a central part of the system or have they silently been shuffled to the periphery as an awkward remnant from a time many would prefer to forget?

While I was unable to make a contribution in that particular area due to a lack of time, it did come to my attention while compiling material to present in this paper that many of the passages from Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) I selected to discuss in the chapters that follow as examples of what I believe to be racist thought can also be found in the work entitled *An Abridgement of the Secret Doctrine* (1966). I find it interesting that a massive amount of material – over one thousand pages – was cut from the original text and yet these lines were considered important enough to include in what is declared to be a work “partly for the general reader unwilling to embark on the thirteen hundred pages of the original two volumes, and partly for the serious student, to serve as an introduction and guide to the larger work.”¹

¹Elizabeth Preston & Christmas Humphreys, foreword, *An Abridgement of the Secret Doctrine* (London: The Theosophical Publishing House, Ltd., 1966) ix.

Admittedly, the abridgment was published several decades ago. However, to the best of my knowledge, this is the most recent abridgement offered by the Society.

It is my hope that in the future more attention will be given to the aspect of late nineteenth century Occultism on which I focus in this paper, not merely because it is of interest for historical reasons but because these teachings are still being promulgated to modern-day seekers insofar as the writings in which they so prominently figure are still considered to be key texts. For this reason, I believe the matter has relevance for the present time. In *Gods in the Global Village* (2007), Kurtz reminds us of the less desirable underbelly of religious diversity when he takes up an example from the not-so-distant past: the Serbian Orthodox Christian campaign of ethnic cleansing which resulted in the “wholesale slaughter” of Muslims in the former Yugoslavia.² The Ku Klux Klan is still a part of the cultural landscape of the United States, using religious argumentation to defend the organization’s disdain for African Americans and Jews. The writings of Savitri Devi (1905 -1982) reinterpret Adolf Hitler (1889 – 1945) as Kalki, the final avatar of Vishnu. It must be kept in mind that while certain “theories” which concern the idea of race could, with the passage of time, be disproved, for example those offered by different forms of scientific racism, religious teachings – at least to the extent they claim to be based on divine revelation – can never be.

2.2 Material

The majority of the primary sources examined in the study are texts composed by Helena P. Blavatsky and Max Heindel. While both claim that the information they present was initially transmitted to them by spiritual beings – the Mahatmas in the case of Blavatsky and the Elder Brothers in the case of Heindel – I treat the matter in this paper as if the production of the writings was unaided by any such “helpers.” While I can in no way prove that these beings do not exist, I am of the opinion that the Mahatmas and the Elder Brothers were devised to be tools which would lend legitimacy and authority to what was being proposed.

² Lester R. Kurtz, *Gods in the Global Village*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 2007) 2.

In regard to the Theosophical Society, my main focus is on *The Secret Doctrine*. Less voluminous writings, however, are referred to as well, the majority of which are also the work of Blavatsky. For one who does not have the time to take in the massive two volumes of *The Secret Doctrine*, he or she may acquire the above-mentioned very much abridged version which is mercifully comprised of just over 250 pages. However, the fact that nearly 1,000 pages of text have been in some way “removed,” the parts remaining being chosen by two editors over 70 years after Blavatsky’s death, makes it in my opinion a questionable substitution.

Heindel’s *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* is the primary source used when examining the beliefs of the organization he founded. Other texts referred to in regard to the Rosicrucian Fellowship are *Gleanings of a Mystic*, also the work of Heindel, as well as *The Birth of the Rosicrucian Fellowship*, written by his second wife, Augusta Foss Heindel (1865 – 1949). As various members of the Theosophical Society and the Rosicrucian Fellowship have made great efforts through the years to ensure that their literature is available to seekers, the bulk of the material consulted is available on the internet.

Secondary material consulted consists of various studies concerning colonialism, imperialism and the construction of racial stereotypes, as well as texts pertaining to Occultism and Esotericism, several treating the subjects in general and others addressing the nineteenth century mystical revival in particular.

2.3 Method

Primary sources were interpreted in light of Émile Durkheim’s (1858 – 1917) theories concerning the social function of religion, as expressed in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). In this section, I give a short presentation of some of his ideas as well as demonstrate that, according to Durkheim’s definition, Theosophy and the version of Rosicrucianism created by Max Heindel can be treated as religions.

2.3.1 Durkheim: the social function of religion

For Durkheim, a pioneer in the field of sociology, religion was a social construction. In contrast to a number of his contemporaries, he maintains that because it exists as such a potent force in human culture, religion could not be regarded as merely an archaic way of interpreting the world. On the other hand, however, the believer did not have a correct understanding of the origin of the forces with which he or she thought himself or herself to be in contact. Durkheim states that

[b]ecause social pressure makes itself felt through mental channels, it was bound to give man the idea that outside him there are one or several powers, moral yet mighty, to which he is subject.³

Although Durkheim is of that opinion that religion has a natural origin, he asserts that it indeed is very real and serves a critical function in society. It acts as a source of solidarity and identification for the individuals that comprise the particular grouping in question. It provides authority figures, a meaning for life, and cohesion. Mostly importantly, it provides a means of social control by reinforcing the morals and social norms that are held by the group which then can be reaffirmed when individuals gather for services and assemblies and to participate in the rituals that are specific to their form of religion. This is especially important because, if left too long without reinforcement, the beliefs and convictions of individuals will weaken in strength.⁴

Durkheim's study of the communal nature of religion was primarily based on his observations regarding totemism among Australian Aboriginal clans. Members of such groupings are not related by descent but regard themselves as a kinship group because they share a common name, which is often that of an animal or species of plant; this is the clan totem.⁵ In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, he addresses what it is that is really transpiring when the clan gathers to worship its emblem: unbeknown to the individual members, the group worships and celebrates itself on these occasions. Seen in this light, religion can, Durkheim posits, be seen as "a system of ideas by means of which people represent to themselves the society of

³ Durkheim 211.

⁴ Durkheim 212, 429.

⁵ Durkheim 100.

which they are members and the opaque but intimate relations that they have with it.”⁶ He attributes religion with the function of transmitting the core collective beliefs and sentiments that bind communities together from one generation to another.⁷ This ensures that religion, or some sort of substitute for it, will always be needed if the society’s integrity is to be maintained.

I believe that when examining both groups upon which this paper focuses one can see many examples of what Durkheim suggests is the social function of religion in terms of being a transmitter of collective beliefs as well as a binding force. For example, teachings of religious import concerning race can in some cases serve to reinforce preexistent beliefs concerning the inferiority of certain groups of people.

It should be acknowledged, however, that those who shaped and supported these teachings were most likely not aware of their racist implications. Durkheim states that

[p]recisely because society has its own specific nature that is different from our nature as individuals, it pursues ends that are also specifically its own; but because it can achieve those ends only by working through us, it categorically demands our cooperation. Society requires us to make ourselves its servants, forgetful of our own interests.⁸

This phenomenon can also be understood in terms of the Foucauldian notion of discourse, which can for the sake of simplicity be defined as a self-confirming, institutionalized way of thinking. Serving as a social boundary, it defines what can be said about a particular subject and the sorts of connections that can be made between different ideas. Discourses are, according to this view, inescapable, and they affect the way in which we perceive everything, most often with us being completely unaware of it. Hobsbawm states that racism’s central role in the nineteenth century cannot be overemphasized.⁹ The popularity of eugenics and other forms of “scientific racism” testifies to just how widespread ideas concerning the inferiority of other races were. It is my belief that these notions most certainly shaped Theosophical and Rosicrucian ideas concerning the evolution of mankind.

⁶ Durkheim 227.

⁷ Durkheim 350 – 354.

⁸ Durkheim 209.

⁹ Hobsbawm 252.

The use of Durkheim's theories in this study could of course be called into question for several reasons. One such reason concerns the fact that – as Fields points out in her introduction to *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* – both the ethnography and outlook upon gender found in his writings are “outdated” and “quaint.”¹⁰ While reading his study, one often encounters passages where the language used shows that he was also influenced by the same discourse that influenced the Theosophical Society. One can find an example of this in Chapter Two of Book One where he compares the mentality of “the primitive” to the mentality of a child.¹¹ Furthermore, one can also call into question his division of the world into the conceptual categories “sacred” and “profane” as there clearly do exist some religious traditions which regard all aspects of life as sacred.¹² With the above mentioned points taken into consideration, I am of the opinion that many of his insights are still useful insofar as they recognize the social function of religion.

2.3.2 Are Theosophy and Rosicrucianism religions?

A further difficulty lies in determining whether or not Theosophy and Rosicrucianism can be treated as religions. I believe that, when viewed from a sociological perspective, they certainly can be. The classic sociological definition of religion is the one offered by Durkheim. In the chapter of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* wherein he addresses ‘preliminary questions,’ he states that

[a] religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.¹³

For Durkheim, religion, “an eminently collective thing,” is inseparable from the idea of a Church, a term which he defines in the following way:

¹⁰ Karen E. Fields, introduction, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1995) xxiv.

¹¹ Durkheim 49.

¹² Kurtz 22.

¹³ Durkheim 44.

A society whose members are united because they imagine the sacred world and its relations with the profane world in the same way, and because they translate this common representation into identical practices, is what is called a Church.¹⁴

Kurtz summarizes and revises this definition, eliminating the ethnocentric term “Church,” and states that religion, from a sociological perspective, consists of beliefs concerning the sacred, practices, and the community of those drawn together by a religious tradition.¹⁵

In regard to the first aspect addressed in the definition of religion suggested by Durkheim, beliefs, Theosophy does present a number of ideas for the consideration of interested individuals. Reincarnation, karma, the existence of worlds beyond the physical, the possibility of conscious participation in the evolutionary process and free will are examples of these notions.¹⁶ While members are not expected to subscribe to all of the ideas mentioned above, there exists nonetheless a distinctive and highly complex system of ideas, explained in occasionally excruciatingly detailed terms in *The Secret Doctrine*, which can be recognized as being Theosophy. In regard to the Rosicrucian Fellowship, one can find a distinctive set of beliefs which can be seen as being peculiar to this organization in *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception*. A massive tome, it contains an evolutionary scheme which appears to be largely based on Theosophical teachings, but repackaged and peddled by Heindel as “Esoteric Christianity.” While this means that many of the “Eastern” trappings of Theosophy were wrenched away, certain aspects such as a belief in reincarnation remained.

The second aspect of Durkheim’s definition, which concerns rituals and practices that are specific to each group, is a more difficult matter. However, *The Quest*, the “official journal” of the Theosophical Society in America, prints a list of dates that are of interest in regard to the history and teachings of the organization. For example, in the issue for May – June 2006, one can read that the 8th of May is White Lotus Day; Blavatsky passed away on this date in it was 1891.¹⁷ Another such date

¹⁴ Durkheim 41.

¹⁵ Kurtz 11.

¹⁶ “FAQs: What specific doctrines do Theosophists believe in?” *Theosophical.org*, 2008, *The Theosophical Society in America*, 2 May 2009, <<http://www.theosophical.org/about/faqs.php>>.

¹⁷ “Calendar,” *The Quest* May – June 2006: 116.

is the 17th of February. While originally known as Olcott Day to mark the anniversary of the co-founder's passing, it officially began to be observed as Adyar Day in 1926 as a day to "remember and give thanks to those who walked before us, who dedicated their lives to Theosophy, and who gave us the very special gift of Adyar [the Society's international headquarters, established in Adyar in 1882]" even though various traditions had already developed specifically pertaining to the remembrance of Olcott.¹⁸

Furthermore, each year witnesses a number of gatherings and conferences organized by the Society. For example, the 123rd Summer National Gathering occurred in June of 2009.¹⁹ Moreover, the opportunity has been offered to go on a "spiritual journey" to "Blavatsky and Olcott's Tibet."²⁰ Interested individuals not having several thousand dollars to spend on such a trip can purchase a "slide lecture journey" on DVD entitled *Blavatsky's Tibet: Sacred Power Places and their Spiritual Mysteries* through Quest Books.

Also in regard to the second part of Durkheim's definition of religion, while there is no mandatory lifestyle that members are expected to follow, the Theosophical Society in America offers the following information when addressing the question of what practices Theosophists follow:

All members of the Theosophical Society decide what practices and manner of living are appropriate for them, but many Theosophists follow a certain regimen of life that is implied by Theosophical ideas...They meditate regularly, both to gain insight into themselves and as a service to humanity. They are vegetarians and avoid the use of furs or skins for which animals are killed. They do not use alcohol or drugs (except under a doctor's order). They support the rights of all human beings for fair and just treatment, being therefore supporters of women's and minority rights. They respect differences of culture and support intellectual freedom. Theosophists are not asked to accept any opinion or adopt any practice that does not appeal to their inner sense of reason and morality.

¹⁸ Ananya S. Rajan, "The History of Adyar Day," *The Quest* January - February 2005: 32.

¹⁹ "123rd Summer National Gathering," *Theosophical.org*, 2009, *The Theosophical Society in America*, 16 July 2009, <<http://www.theosophical.org/events/nationalprograms/sng09/SNG09CompleteProgram.pdf>>.

²⁰ "Theosophical Society in America Presents The [sic] Pilgrimage Tour of Blavatsky and Olcott's Tibet," advertisement, 5 June 2009, <[http://www.mysticaltibet.com/pdf/The%20Pilgrimage %20Tour%20of%20Blavatsky%20and%20Olcott.pdf](http://www.mysticaltibet.com/pdf/The%20Pilgrimage%20Tour%20of%20Blavatsky%20and%20Olcott.pdf)>.

While the above does state that a Theosophist is free to choose the manner in which he or she chooses to live, there clearly are certain practices that are associated with Theosophy. It is also arguable, I believe, that enjoying the freedom to be able to pick and choose beliefs and lifestyle ingredients as one sees fit constitutes a practice. Furthermore, it is common for individual groups to have developed an idiosyncratic way of conducting meetings, which may for example be opened and closed by group meditation and the reading of short texts.²¹ Pym encourages Theosophists to devote some minutes of each day to meditation in order to link themselves to “a greater, more potent force,” something which she asserts is sorely needed in our present time when so many problems humanity is facing seem to be a direct result of our own behavior. She states that

[by] taking the great teachers of humanity into our daily thoughts and once more acknowledging them as the vital force in the life scheme, we can realize that the Society exists to carry on their work.²²

Prayer, meditation, and healing are important facets of the way of life members of the Rosicrucian Fellowship are urged to follow.²³ Specific dates for healing services are astrologically determined.²⁴ Interestingly, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception*, referred to on the Fellowship’s homepage as the group’s “main textbook,” is largely silent upon the matter of healing. This leads me to believe that it was a later development in terms of being a focal point, as a significant amount of material has come into existence on the subject since 1909. Other practices recommended to adepts include adhering to a strict vegetarian diet and the eventual taking of a vow of

²¹ “FAQ:s What do Theosophists do in their meetings?” *Theosophical.org*, 2008, *The Theosophical Society in America*, 2 May 2009, <<http://www.theosophical.org/about/faqs.php>>.

²² Willamay Pym, “Theosophy: Changeless Yet Always Changing,” *The Quest* November - December 2004: 221.

²³ Max Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 7th ed. (Oceanside: Rosicrucian Fellowship, 1909), 6 July 2009, <<http://www.archive.org/stream/rosicruciancosmo00hein#page/18/mode/2up>>, 462 - 466; 489 - 482.

²⁴ “The Rosicrucian Fellowship Year 2009 Healing Dates Card,” *Rosicrucianfellowship.org*, 2008, *The Rosicrucian Fellowship*, 17 July 2009, <<http://www.rosicrucianfellowship.org/student/English/2009healing.pdf>>.

celibacy.²⁵ The use of drugs and alcohol is also discouraged because such substances are believed to stunt spiritual growth and harm the subtle bodies.²⁶

The last part of Durkheim's definition concerns the community. The notion of religion as a bond and how it relates to Theosophy is addressed by Blavatsky in an article entitled "Is Theosophy a Religion?" (1888). She states that

Theosophy, we say, is not *a* Religion. Yet there are, as everyone knows, certain beliefs, philosophical, religious and scientific, which have become so closely associated in recent years with the word "Theosophy" that they have come to be taken by the general public for theosophy itself... It is perhaps necessary, first of all, to say, that the assertion that "Theosophy is not *a* Religion," by no means excludes the fact that "Theosophy *is* Religion" itself. A Religion in the true and only correct sense, is a bond uniting men together--not a particular set of dogmas and beliefs... Theosophy is RELIGION [her emphasis], and the Society its one Universal Church.²⁷

One can deduce by reading the above passage that the idea of the Society itself as a community is central in Theosophy. This view is also expressed by Pym in "Theosophy: Changeless Yet Always Changing" (2004) where she writes that

Theosophy can show that there is often much deeper satisfaction from the accomplishments of a group than from those of an individual, the latter tending to isolate the achiever.²⁸

In terms of Heindel's organization, the third aspect of the definition exists in the form of the Fellowship. While it may be geographically difficult for members to meet at the group's international headquarters in Oceanside, California, a large degree of focus is put on performing tasks that connect members with one another in what could perhaps be termed a less conventional way. For example, when the healing service is performed in the specially dedicated chapel in California, members who cannot be physically present can still participate by following a set of instructions:

²⁵ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 467 - 473.

²⁶ "Effects of Drugs, Alcohol, and Tobacco," *Rosicrucian.com*, 2008, *The Rosicrucian Fellowship*, 17 July 2009, <<http://www.rosicrucian.com/zineen/pamen002.htm>>.

²⁷ Blavatsky, "Is Theosophy a Religion?" *Lucifer*, November 1888, *Blavatsky Net Foundation*, 29 May 2009, <<http://www.blavatsky.net/blavatsky/arts/IsTheosophyA Religion.htm>>.

²⁸ Pym 221.

About 6:30 pm (7:30 pm if daylight savings) by your own clock, on the dates given below, sit down and relax in the quiet of your own home or wherever you may be. Close your eyes and make a mental picture of the Pure White Rose in the center of the Rosicrucian Emblem on the west wall of our Temple at Mount Ecclesia. Then read the **HEALING SERVICE**. During the concentration on **DIVINE LOVE AND HEALING**, put all the intensity of feeling possible, so that you may become a living channel for the Divine Healing Power that comes direct from the Father.²⁹

Performing such a ritual even if one is utterly alone in a desolate location reinforces a bond between the individual and the larger group with which he or she identifies. Another example concerns the student taking correspondences courses signing his or her name on a card to be mailed back to the Fellowship; this ensures that the “connection with the spiritual forces of the Fellowship” will be maintained.³⁰

In conclusion, I believe that from a sociological point of view, Theosophy and Rosicrucianism can be treated as religions because they contain discernable versions of the three essential elements found in Durkheim’s definition – beliefs, practices and community. A deeper glance into the history and development of these organizations is included in the background chapter, which follows.

²⁹ “The Rosicrucian Fellowship Year 2009 Healing Dates Card.”

³⁰ “Study Rosicrucian Fundamentals at Home,” *Rosicrucian.com*, 2008, *The Rosicrucian Fellowship*, 15 July 2009, <<http://www.rosicrucian.com/study.htm>>.

3 BACKGROUND

This part of the paper contains information that sheds light on the findings presented in the results section. Firstly, the terms “Occult” and “Esoteric” are defined. Next, a brief account of nineteenth century Occultism is provided, as the Theosophical Society and the Rosicrucian Fellowship came into existence within the framework of a greater movement known as the mystical revival. Afterwards, information concerning history and development of each of these two organizations is given.

The focus of the section then moves on to cover subjects that informed the way in which races were viewed during the nineteenth century and would by extension have informed the teachings of different Occult groups. The relationship between terms “colonialism” and “imperialism” is defined; these two words, like “Occult” and “Esoteric,” are often used interchangeably, which can be problematic. Lastly, racial stereotypes that come into existence when different cultures encounter each other in the context of colonialism are examined.

3.1 Definitions: Occult and Esoteric

Richards and Versluis maintain that the development of Western culture has been profoundly influenced by Esotericism.¹ One need only look to the works of William Shakespeare, William Butler Yeats, or – more recently – Umberto Eco to find a trace of this. It pervades the tones of Mozart’s finest compositions. The ideas expounded by G.W.F. Hegel, Isaac Newton and Carl Jung show that the development of fields such as philosophy and science were also affected by Esotericism.² In *Gnosis and Hermeticism: From Antiquity to Modern Times* (1997), Roelof van de Broek and Wouter Hanegraaf make the hefty claim that Western Esotericism deserves to be

¹ John Richards & Arthur Versluis, introduction, *Esotericism, Art, and Imagination*, ed. A. Versluis, L. Irwin, J. Richards, M. Weinstein (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008) vii.

² Ibid.

placed next to Greek rationality and Biblical faith as one of the major currents in the development of Western culture.³

In his landmark study *Access to Western Esotericism* (1994), Faivre states that the foundations of Western Esotericism can be traced back to antiquity. However, it should be stated that it was only at the beginning of the Renaissance (fourteenth – seventeenth centuries) that one can detect the emergence of what he refers to as “a will to bring together a variety of ancient materials” that could potentially make up a “homogeneous whole.”⁴ In *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (1998), Hanegraaff states that when attempting to define the components of Western Esotericism, one can distinguish “two philosophical traditions (neoplatonism and hermeticism), three ‘traditional sciences’ (astrology, *magia*, and alchemy), and one current of theosophical speculation (kabbalah).”⁵ The birth of modern Western Esotericism is often dated to 1875, the year the Theosophical Society was founded.⁶

While the adjective “Esoteric” dates back to antiquity, its appearance as a noun is relatively recent.⁷ It derives from the Greek *esoterikos* and is a comparative form of *eso*, which means “inner” or “within.”⁸ “Ter” implies an opposition.⁹ The word itself, Faivre asserts, is rather empty of meaning, but it often conjures up images of something secret, such as restricted realms of knowledge.¹⁰ However, he considers this to be too exclusive a definition, especially if one bears in mind the tremendous amount of literature produced concerning alchemy, a key area in Esotericism, in the sixteenth century.¹¹ A second meaning commonly attributed to the word is that it serves to designate a type of knowledge, emanating from a spiritual locus, which one may attain after having transcended the prescribed ways and techniques (which will

³ Roelof van de Broek & Wouter Hanegraaf, preface, *Gnosis and Hermeticism: From Antiquity to Modern Times*, ed. Roelof van de Broek & Wouter Hanegraaf (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) vii – x.

⁴ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 7.

⁵ Wouter Hanegraaf, *New Age Religion and Western Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998) 338.

⁶ Kocku von Stuckard, *Western Esotericism* (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2005) 123.

⁷ Hanegraaf 384.

⁸ Richards & Versluis vii – viii.

⁹ Faivre 4.

¹⁰ Faivre 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

vary depending upon the particular tradition in question) that can lead one to it. This higher level of knowledge overarches all systems and initiations, which are only so many different ways by which one can gain access to it.¹² The difficulty here is that Esotericism then becomes entangled with the concept of initiation, something which is a part of any number of religious traditions.

The first known appearance of the term “Esoteric” dates to around 166 CE. Lucian of Samosata (c. 120 CE – 180) uses it in his *The Auction of Lives* (166 CE) when he makes a claim that Aristotle had both “esoteric” (inner) and “exoteric” (outer) teachings.¹³ By 1665 it had apparently become part of the English language, as it appears in Thomas Stanley’s (1625 – 1678) *History of Philosophy* (1655 – 1661) (ibid.). French author and magician Alphonse-Louis Constant (1810-1875), writing under the name Eliphas Lévi, popularized it in 1856 in his classic work *Dogme et ritual*. Lévi also has the distinction of coining the other term that has become so problematic, *l’occultisme*. At the present, it is believed that he derived the term *l’ésotérisme* from Jacques Matter’s (1791 – 1864) *Historie du gnosticisme* (1828), which contains the earliest known use of the word. In 1883 it made its way into English through the writings of Theosophist A.P. Sinnet (1840 – 1921).

To one who is unfamiliar with this long-neglected area of study, the two terms can be a source of confusion and frustration. They have often been regarded as equivalent and have thus been used interchangeably through the years, both in popular and scholarly literature. A further complication stems from the fact that, as Olav Hammer points out in his study *Claiming Knowledge* (2001), both have “a variety of applications, emic as well as etic.”¹⁴ For those who are sympathetic to the subject at hand, “Esoteric” and “Occult”, while often being used indiscriminately, refer to “the nature of beliefs and practices which purport to explore and utilize secret knowledge.”³¹ A skeptic, on the other hand, might use “Occult” in place of the terms “anti-scientific” or “irrational.”¹⁵ In more recent academic studies, in particular those written after the early 1970s, attempts have been made to concretely

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Faivre viii.

¹⁴ Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) 5.

³¹ Hammer 6.

¹⁵ Ibid.

distinguish them from one another and show their relationship. So far none of the options presented have gained universal acceptance in the academic community.

This paper takes as its point of departure the differentiation offered by Faivre in *Access to Western Esotericism* and expanded upon by Hanegraaf in *New Age Religion and Western Culture*. For Faivre, Esotericism is a group of belief systems that share a set of core characteristics and Occultism refers to certain historical developments within that framework, “a group of practices or a form of action that would derive its legitimacy from Esotericism.”¹⁶ Occultism can thus be understood as a dimension of Esotericism.

Faivre states that Esotericism is a form of thought which is identifiable by the presence of six characteristics. Four of these are intrinsic and as such must be present in order for something to be classified as “Esoteric”. To these, two other secondary components may be added. These are not fundamental, but they are frequently found in conjunction with the others.¹⁷ These characteristics are:

- Correspondences – According to Esoteric thought, symbolic and real correspondences exist between all parts of the universe which, while being more or less veiled at first sight, are intended to be read and deciphered.

Faivre makes a distinction between two different kinds of correspondences. Firstly, there are those that exist in nature, “seen and unseen,” an example of which would be correspondences between the planets and parts of the human body. Secondly, there are correspondences between Nature (“the cosmos”), history and revealed texts. An example here would be the Kabbalah, Christian or Jewish. According to this way of seeing things, Nature and the scripture are in harmony with one another, and knowledge of one aids in gaining knowledge of the other.¹⁸

¹⁶ Faivre 35.

¹⁷ Faivre 10.

¹⁸ Faivre 10 – 11.

- Living Nature – Nature is conceptualized as being essentially alive in all of its parts, which are linked by a dynamic network of sympathies and antipathies. It is sometimes believed to be inhabited by a light or some kind of hidden fire. Faivre states that gaining knowledge of how the parts are linked is the object of Esotericism.¹⁹
- Imagination and mediations – The idea of correspondences implies the possibility of mediation between higher and lower worlds, by means of the use of rituals, symbolic images, mandalas and intermediary spirits, in order to gain knowledge of the self and the worlds. The imagination becomes a tool for attaining gnosis.²⁰
- Experience of transmutation – As Faivre points out, without the idea of the experience of transmutation factored in, one would be left with just another form of speculative spirituality. The term “transformation” would not make an adequate substitute, as it does not imply the idea of the passage from one plane to another or the modification of the subject in its very nature. Instead, Faivre makes use of the alchemical term “transmutation” to convey the notion of an inner process experienced by the initiate, which should be understood as a metamorphosis.²¹
- The praxis of concordance – This refers to a tendency in later developments of the Esoteric tradition (beginning at the end of the fifteenth century) to try and establish common denominators between different systems in the hope of obtaining “a gnosis of superior quality.”²²
- Transmission – This final component concerns the transmission, following a pre-established channel, of Esoteric teachings from master to disciple. This ensures the authenticity of the knowledge. Another factor of importance here is initiation; a disciple cannot initiate him or herself.

¹⁹ Faivre 11.

²⁰ Hanegraaf 399.

²¹ Faivre 13.

²² Faivre 14.

Hanegraaf's approach to defining Occultism is based on the work of Faivre. However, he makes it more specific and uses it to describe post-Enlightenment developments of Esotericism which were influenced by the rationalism and secularism of the modern age.²³ He suggests that Occultism can be defined as "all attempts by Esotericists to come to terms with a disenchanted world or, alternatively, by people in general to make sense of Esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted world."²⁴

When discussing the impact of the Industrial Revolution, it seems a gross underestimation to state that the world changed remarkably in a, relatively speaking, short span of time. Very often a one-sided picture emerges, and the focus is put on the countless ways in which our lives have been improved. However, it is also possible to feel that our engagement in the seemingly endless exercise of attempting to figure out how everything works has caused us to lose something very valuable. This can lead to, as it did for the Romantics, a desire for the re-enchantment of the world.²⁵ Occultism, on the other hand, accepts this disenchanted world in which there is no longer a sense of "irreducible mystery...based upon an experience of the sacred as present in the daily world" and aims to adapt Esotericism to it.²⁶ The groups discussed in this paper date from the nineteenth century and thus can be seen as being a part of the Occult movement based on definitions given by Faivre and Hanegraaf.

3.2 Nineteenth century Occultism

There is very little in the world of what could perhaps be termed for the sake of convenience "modern currents of alternative spirituality" that does not have roots that were already in existence, in many cases, well before the *fin de siècle*. Certain features, such as what Robert A. Segal terms the "secular myth" of flying saucers as well as the mid twentieth century concoction known as Wicca, are relatively recent

²³ Hammer 7; Hanegraaf 421 - 422.

²⁴ Hanegraaf 422.

²⁵ Hanegraaf 423.

²⁶ Ibid.

additions.²⁷ However, as Stuart Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman state in the introduction to *Beyond New Age* (2000), a volume of essays which aims to problematize the label “New Age”, “seeking” is far from being a newly established spiritual *modus operandi*, especially among those whose life situations afforded them the necessary financial security and leisure time with which they could pursue their goals.²⁸

To such a seeker of spiritual truth in the Western world, the closing years of the nineteenth century must have been a bewildering time. Sutcliffe & Bowman refer to the urban *fin de siècle* as a seedbed for such brave and often deep-pocketed travelers who were aiming to reach largely unknown realms.²⁹ For those who were not entirely ready to abandon the symbols and mythology of a Christian upbringing, Rudolf Steiner’s refurnished version of Theosophy offered a new interpretation in a more familiar and therefore perhaps more comforting packaging. Those looking for something a little more exotic could follow the teachings imparted by mysterious Himalayan “Masters” to the enigmatic H.P. Blavatsky and immerse themselves in visions of wisdom from the East, as filtered through the eyes of Empire. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn had much to offer both Egyptophiles who were thirsty for the wisdom of Hermes Trismegistus and those fascinated by tales of the legendary (and possibly entirely fabricated) German doctor and mystic Christian Rosenkreuz, a central figure in several Occult traditions including Max Heindel’s brand of Rosicrucianism. Those interested in activities generally frowned upon by Victorian morality could seek out the infamous Aleister Crowley (1875 – 1947) and gain access to the secrets of sacred sexuality.

The names mentioned above are only a smattering of the offerings which were available to those who had the time, patience and money to explore this most curious and fascinating marketplace stocked with disembodied intelligences eager to share wisdom long forgotten, complicated amalgamations of disparate religious traditions which have their origins both thousands of miles and years apart, the return of Christ

²⁷ Robert A. Segal, “Jung’s Psychologising of Religion,” *Beyond New Age*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe & Marion Bowman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2000) 74.

²⁸ Steven Sutcliffe & Marion Bowman, introduction, *Beyond New Age*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe & Marion Bowman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2000) 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

as a World Teacher in the form of a young Indian boy who would some years later renounce this role, organizations with elaborate internal structures consisting of a myriad of degrees ascendable often only by the mastery of staggering amounts of highly detailed information concerning, e.g., kabbalistic correspondences, and colorful leaders with personalities as turbulent and inscrutable as the very forces they were trying to understand.

It is curious that this phenomenon has received such little scholarly attention, even though historians are most certainly aware of its existence. This becomes especially puzzling when one takes into consideration the large number of Occult organizations that mushroomed during the years leading up to the Great War, as well as the sheer volume of literature devoted to the subject that was produced in different forms throughout the period.³⁰ Owen states the following in the introduction to *The Place of Enchantment*:

By the 1890s the terms *mysticism* and *mystical revival* were in general use to refer to one of the most remarked trends of the decade: the widespread emergence of a new esoteric spirituality and a proliferation of spiritual groups and identities that together constituted what contemporaries called the new “spiritual movement of the age.”³¹

This seems to indicate that it was more than a mere handful of individuals who considered themselves spiritual explorers or who at the very least had an interest in this new movement. Owen posits that the lack of academic attention given to something which was obviously so important at the time could be due to the fact that mysticism and the Occult appear to run counter to how we understand both modern culture and the modern mind-set.³²

The mystical revival was shaped by a number of significant intellectual trends and fashionable interests from the latter part of the nineteenth century including an enthusiasm for science, vitalism, philosophical idealism and a dislike of materialism.³² It was also heavily influenced by contemporary scholarship in

³⁰ Owen 6; Hobsbawm 262.

³¹ Owen 4.

³² Ibid.

³² Owen 28.

budding fields of study such as folklore, Egyptology, philology, anthropology and comparative religion. Although attention was directed both to the East and the West, the version of the East that was its focal point was a romanticized construction shaped by European interests.

Orientalist essentialism, however, resulted in the production of stereotypes concerning both the East and the West.³³ As Owen maintains, one must also bear in mind that the deeply cherished European Occult tradition that was at the heart of so many of the movement's teachings was also invented or, perhaps more accurately stated, reinvented to serve its current purpose. It appealed to a then common predilection for secret societies, archaic origins and all things Gothic.³⁴ The revival did not, however, come into existence by some means as magical as the ones it attempted to explain. The Victorians, ever fascinated by the mysterious, had long had an interest in a great number of phenomena that could sloppily, for the sake of convenience, be grouped under the umbrella term "Occultism," such as séances, clairvoyance, palmistry, astrology, materialization, crystal gazing, just as the previous generation had been fascinated by phrenology and mesmerism.³⁵

Eager seekers, largely drawn from the base of the educated middle-classes, were promised access to ancient wisdom and the tools with which to conduct Esoteric readings of the sacred literatures of the world which had only recently been made accessible.³⁶ As Dixon maintains, at least when operating on the physical plane, "social class and its associated cultural capital regulated access to the mysteries."³⁷ Journals such as W.T. Stead's *Borderland* (1893 – 1897) and Ralph Shirley's *The Occult Review* (1905 – 1951) offered discussions on topics as diverse as alchemy, Buddhism, hypnotism and psychology and printed material from such well-known names as Aleister Crowley and Arthur Edward Waite (1857 – 1942).³⁸

³³ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion* (Florence: Routledge, 1999) 3.

³⁴ Owen 28.

³⁵ Owen 17 – 18.

³⁶ Owen 4.

³⁷ Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminism: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) 8.

³⁸ Owen 28.

Men and women both ordinary and extraordinary, many of whom could no longer identify with “formal Christian observance,” were involved with this new movement and embraced the heterodox animistic crazy quilt of spirituality offered by Occultism, which was pieced together from odds and ends from the mystical traditions of both the East and the West.³⁹ For example, writers W.B. Yeats (1865 – 1939) and Edith Bland (1858 – 1924) (who found fame penning children’s books under the name E. Nesbit) had both been active members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Doctors, lawyers and other “respectable types” were also well-represented. On the other hand, a youthful Aleister Crowley passed through on his way to create his own such groups, spending just enough time in the ranks to throw the entire group into confusion. The apparent ease with which members could flit from one group on to the next indicates the interrelatedness of the organizations that were a part of the mystical revival.

In certain respects, it is possible to view some of these groups as constituting a “somewhat elitist counterpoint,” as Owen phrases it, to the enormously successful spiritualist movement that had captured the popular imagination on both sides of the Atlantic.⁴⁰ This notion of an exclusive alternative is also shared by Dixon. In her study *The Divine Feminine* (2001), she states the following:

The late nineteenth-century occult revival came in many guises. Some, such as certain forms of astrology or fairground fortunetelling, were relatively popular and democratic. Others, like the magical Order of the Golden Dawn or the Theosophical Society itself, were more self-consciously elitist. The TS deliberately constructed itself as a religion for the “thinking classes.” It appealed above all to an elite, educated, middle- and upper-middle-class constituency.⁴¹

For example, the Theosophical Society’s European pedigree and “Eastern” teachings were given a higher status. The privileging of learning and the hard work and discipline the study of the teachings required over mediumistic gifts also served to

³⁹ Owen 4.

⁴⁰ Owen 5.

⁴¹ Dixon 8.

widen the gulf.⁴² It is to the Theosophical Society we will now turn, the largest and most influential of these Occult organizations.

3.3 The Theosophical Society

The Theosophical Society played a key role in both the development and perpetuation of Esotericism. In *Western Esotericism* (2005), von Stuckard provides several reasons which aim to account for why the group was, as he terms it, “the most important recurrent stimulus of Esoteric discourses into the twentieth century.”⁴³ Firstly, he credits Helena P. Blavatsky’s ingenious repackaging of the Esoteric traditions. Secondly, the assimilation of Eastern doctrines into a romanticized view of the “Orient” moved the seat of the purest form of ancient wisdom to Tibet and India. Thirdly, Blavatsky’s charisma helped her writings to be viewed by a wide circle of individuals as a series of revelations. Fourthly, the “Esoteric School” she established became the model for a significant number of initiatory societies and magical orders that also strove to follow the Rosicrucian and Masonic tradition. Lastly, due to the dialogue in which the Theosophists engaged with contemporary philologists and religious scholars, the Theosophical Society serves as an excellent example of the mixture of religious and scientific thought present in Western societies. These exchanges also in turn resulted in the popularization of Theosophical teachings.⁴⁴

The details of the life of the colorful creator of Theosophy vary depending upon the source consulted. As is the case with many other spiritual and religious leaders, there is a tendency for the facts of their earthly existence to become shrouded by myth and rumor.⁴⁵ Born Helena Petrovna von Hahn in Ekaterinoslav in what is now Ukraine, her childhood was spent in the company of Russian nobility, as she was largely raised by her aristocratic grandparents. After a brief and unhappy marriage, she abandoned her husband for a life of “bohemian adventure.”⁴⁶ Although information concerning precisely which countries she traveled to before her

⁴² Owen 5.

⁴³ von Stuckard 122.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Owen 29.

appearance in New York City in 1874 is far from being comprehensive, it is believed that she visited Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Italy and France.

Much of the mystery is in fact the result of Blavatsky's use of creative obfuscation in what can be seen as an attempt to mythologize her existence. According to her version of events, she traveled the globe in search of spiritual enlightenment and studied with Holy Men in Tibet.⁴⁷ It is tempting to completely dismiss her accounts regarding the various adventures upon which she claimed to have embarked, but von Stuckard urges us to bear in mind the following:

Even if HPB had undertaken only half of these journeys, it would have been a clear indication of her extraordinary character and her driving ambition to abandon bourgeois mores and to achieve an education and self-emancipation denied to most women of her generation. Her whole life was a provocation to the guardians of Victorian etiquette.⁴⁸

Her claims of having received her knowledge from Tibet and India would eventually become a central part of her career. Hammer states that this process of appropriation in which "exotic" elements were incorporated into different branches of Esotericism was the result of a shift within post-Enlightenment Esotericism that already had begun before Blavatsky's time.⁴⁹ An interest in other religions, especially concerning mythology, was already established by the latter years of the Age of Enlightenment. Translations of religious texts from the East started appearing during the closing years of the eighteenth century. As a result, new avenues were opened for exploration and speculation.

Blavatsky's gifts as a psychic were reputedly recognized in her early years, and by the time she appeared in Cairo and Paris in the 1870s, she had already spent some time working as a medium in Spiritualist circles.⁵⁰ She had also apparently taken up an interest in the study of Occultism and Eastern religious lore somewhere along the way.⁵¹

⁴⁷ von Stuckard 122.

⁴⁸ von Stuckard 124.

⁴⁹ Hammer 81.

⁵⁰ Owen 29.

⁵¹ Hammer 81; Owen 29.

Whether she truly accepted Spiritualist teachings is a debatable matter, as she in later years became increasingly concerned with emphasizing the differences between “true occultism” and Spiritualism.⁵² Pym states that

[b]y producing phenomena to demonstrate the existence of nonphysical realities, HPB and her colleagues hoped to convince materialists that such realities needed consideration for their hidden implications and fundamental importance. Later in her life, however, she questioned the wisdom of her early procedure and regretted the practices she had employed.⁵³

What is clear is that in 1874 she surfaced in New York City and met the acquaintance of ex-army officer turned journalist Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832 – 1907) who was at that time publishing a series of newspapers articles concerning Spiritualist events occurring at a Vermont farm. The two developed a close association initially grounded on a mutual disdain for Spiritualism’s preoccupation with producing phenomena.⁵⁴ In 1875 they inaugurated the Theosophical Society together, along with Irish lawyer and fellow Esotericist William Quan Judge (1851 – 1896) and a number of other seekers who had for some time been meeting in Blavatsky’s rooms to discuss spiritual topics.

The term “theosophy,” which had already been in use to designate several schools of thought that predate Blavatsky’s, was appropriated to signify that the group had access to the “Wisdom of the Gods.”⁵⁵ The organization had originally been founded with the intention of reforming American Spiritualism, but it soon became associated with “oriental” mysticism as Blavatsky wove together a tremendous amount of Occult lore with her own special brand of “eastern-oriented metaphysics” into what would be for some a highly appealing synthesis.⁵⁶ Ideas and symbols from Egypt, India and Tibet were utilized as legitimations for the Society’s criticism of contemporary life in both Europe and America, which was becoming increasingly materialistic. For a period spanning roughly nine years at the beginning of the twentieth century (1901 – 1910), the Society became more accommodating to

⁵² Hanegraaf 449.

⁵³ Pym 220.

⁵⁴ Owen 29.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Esoteric Christianity, but during its early years it offered interested parties a new and exciting form of spirituality to explore that resonated with late-Victorian orientalism.⁵⁷



Fig. 1. HP Blavatsky, New York 1877.

Theosophical tradition maintains that the true founders of the society, and those who provided Blavatsky with her inspiration and authority, were the Mahatmas, or Masters of the Great White Lodge, an Occult Brotherhood said to be located in Tibet; its members were allegedly drawn from the world's most spiritually advanced "Adepts."⁵⁸ In 1907, Blavatsky offered the following explanation:

There is beyond the Himalayas a nucleus of Adepts, of various nationalities, and the Teshu Lama knows them, and they act together, and some of them are with him and yet remain unknown in their true character even to the average lamas—who are ignorant fools mostly. My Master and KH and several others I know personally are there, coming and going, and they all are in communication with Adepts in Egypt and Syria, and even Europe.⁵⁹

While communication with the Mahatmas had originally occurred, in typical Spiritualist fashion, during séances, it soon began to take the form of a written correspondence. Precisely who or what these mysterious "Masters" were supposed

⁵⁷ Owen 29.

⁵⁸ Dixon 3.

⁵⁹ Quoted in von Stuckard 123.

to be is no easy matter to sort out. Accounts existing within the labyrinthine history of the Theosophical Society vary. Blavatsky claimed, for example, that she was continuously in contact with two individuals she described as Indian gurus: Mahatma Morya (“Master M”), born in the Punjab, and Mahatma Koot Hoomi (“Master KH”), from Kashmir.⁶⁰ Sometimes they are described as beings who have the ability to materialize and incarnate at various places, and sometimes they are said to be subtle forces of energy that need to assume some sort of corporeal form in order to render themselves visible to humans.⁶¹

The existence of a brotherhood of sages had already at that time long been part of the European imagination, taking such forms as the Renaissance notion of a succession of world teachers in possession of the *prisca theologia* and the Rosicrucian secret society.⁶² By the end of the nineteenth century, European fantasies concerning the “mysterious” East became superimposed upon it. In Theosophical literature, this group is often referred to as the “Great White Brotherhood,” although other Occult organizations have also used this curious term. C.W. Leadbeater (1854 – 1934) states the following concerning the brotherhood in *The Masters and the Path* (1925):

THERE has always been a Brotherhood of Adepts, the Great White Brotherhood; there have always been Those who knew, those who possessed this inner wisdom, and our Masters are among the present representatives of that mighty line of Seers and Sages. Part of the knowledge which They have garnered during countless aeons is available to every one on the physical plane under the name of Theosophy.⁶³

With the above words, he effectively gives new life to a well-worn concept in order to use it as a legitimizing tool.

The impressive Isis Unveiled (1877) was the first installment of the Theosophical Society’s teachings. Hammer states that the contents of the two volumes reveal the enormity of the project at hand:

⁶⁰ von Stuckard 123.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ C.W. Leadbeater, *The Masters and the Path* (1925; New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007) 57.

namely to integrate Atlantis, Reichenbach's odic force, mesmerism, Tibet, Paracelsus' archaicus, spirit apparitions, magic, alchemy, India, rosicrucianism, the kabbala and much more into one single edifice, by processing all these topics through a hermeneutics that made them relevant in an age of religious doubt and scientific materialism. It is as if Blavatsky had taken on the challenge to incorporate the totality of the 1870s cultic milieu.⁶⁴

She claimed that all of it had been transmitted to her by the Mahatmas. Through the years, the focus of the doctrine would change. For example, the spiritual center of Theosophy eventually strayed away from its original homeland of Egypt (an area also of interest for the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn) and began to gradually migrate to India. This move became concrete in 1879 when Blavatsky and Olcott relocated to Bombay and established the Society's world headquarters at Adyar, near Madras (now Chennai), in south India.⁶⁵

The relocation had been initially aided by the Society's newly formed relationship with the Indian reform movement the Arya Samaj. Difficulties eventually arose in regard to certain teachings concerning the Theosophical concept of God, as well as the Society's criticism of contemporary Hinduism, and the two organizations parted ways in 1882. In India, Olcott and Blavatsky met Alfred Percy Sinnett, an influential newspaper editor with an interest in Spiritualism. Already familiar with Blavatsky's reputation as a medium, she impressed him with "demonstrations of phenomena" which she attributed to the Masters. Soon afterwards, Sinnett himself began to receive letters that were alleged to have been written by the Mahatmas. This continued for a period of four years, spanning from 1880 to 1884. The letters, totaling 145, were edited and published by the Theosophical University Press in 1923. Sinnett returned to England and became a central figure within the London Theosophical circles during the 1880s. When accusations began to fly concerning the authorship of the letters, Sinnett came forward and defended the authenticity of the Mahatmas.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Hammer 83.

⁶⁵ Dixon 3.

⁶⁶ von Stuckard 126.

Once established in India, the Theosophical Society drew both Europeans and Indians as members. Branches were subsequently established in different cities by a number of “educated” Hindus and Parsis.⁶⁷ Although largely successful in the early years, problems did arise. Arguments ensued concerning the concept of a Universal Brotherhood in relation to caste distinction. Others found it troubling that all correspondence from the Masters was sent solely through Europeans.⁶⁸ Many, however, responded positively to the Society’s anti-Christian and anti-Western polemic. The group’s presence in turn helped to strengthen Hindu conservatives and attempts to revive orthodox Hinduism.⁶⁹

The development of the movement after this period became increasingly complex. This was partially due to the fact that the relationship between Blavatsky and Olcott, whom she had called her “Theosophical Twin,” deteriorated as the years went by. In 1887, she returned to London. The following year, she published *The Secret Doctrine*. In one respect, the two volumes that make up this most fascinating journey through the cosmos can be regarded as a response to Sinnet’s publication in the form of two books of his own interpretation of the Mahatma letters. Blavatsky, not to be outdone (if one assumes that she, whatever the motive might have been, was the one who authored the letters in the first place) compiled her own statement in the form of nearly 1,500 pages of text which elaborate upon the dizzyingly complex Theosophical theories concerning the structure of the universe, the creation of mankind and the ancient truth behind all religions which had all come, like so many different streams, from a common source.⁷⁰

Conflict within the Society was a recurrent theme during the last years of Blavatsky’s life, and after her death in 1891 the organization she had worked so hard to establish suffered from infighting largely concerning the matter of succession.⁷¹ The seeds for many of the squabbles were, however, already sown while Blavatsky was still alive. She and Olcott had entered into an unpleasant power struggle which

⁶⁷ Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 170.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Jones 179.

⁷⁰ von Stuckard 128.

⁷¹ von Stuckard 128.

initially was settled by the establishment of a new Esoteric Section in London; Blavatsky reigned over this division, and Olcott was left in charge of the Indian Section in Adyar. Parallels to the tension between the two can be found in the correspondence from the Masters that appeared during this period. They trouble themselves with and complain about such mundane things as a lack of paper, and they lash out verbally at other Masters.⁷²

This process of deterioration continued and engaged many players in the ensuing discord and drama, such as Annie Besant, Katherine Tingley and Rudolf Steiner.⁷³ Steiner, at one time the first General Secretary of the Theosophical Society in Germany, would eventually break with the Society because he felt that its emphasis on “oriental” teachings was not in alignment with his own Christian worldview.⁷⁴ After the death of Olcott, Besant took over as president of the Society in India. A social reformer interested in the rights of women and Indian Home Rule, she traveled around India lecturing on the glories of the region’s ancient past. Criticized for her uncritical praise of Hindu society, she answered the accusations by organizing the Theosophical Order of Service which worked to, among other things, promote education and end child marriage.⁷⁵ Becoming increasingly engaged in politics, she joined the Indian National Congress in 1914 and became its president in 1917. With the rise of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 – 1948) in 1921, she stepped out of the center; she could not accept his leadership because the two had fundamental differences of opinion in regard to India’s future. Further problems in terms of their relationship were caused by Gandhi’s rejection of Theosophical notions including the Masters and Besant’s opposition to Gandhi’s concept of non-violent resistance.⁷⁶

The Theosophical Society’s membership flourished during Besant’s first years as president. It increased by fifty percent and reached 45,000 during the 1920s.⁷⁷ However, this number declined sharply after 1930, dropping down to about 35,000

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ von Stuckard 129.

⁷⁴ von Stuckard 130.

⁷⁵ Jones 175.

⁷⁶ Harold Coward, introduction, *Indian Critiques of Gandhi*, ed. Harold Coward (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003) 6.

⁷⁷ Jones 176.

or less.⁷⁸ This occurrence can partially be interpreted as a response to actions taken by certain of the Society's members, including Besant, in regard to the "discovery" of Jiddu Krishnamurti, a young Indian boy who was believed to be the vehicle of the next World Teacher. Besant eventually obtained guardianship of Krishnamurti, as well as his brother, and formed a cult around him – the Order of the Star in the East. He was promptly whisked away and given a "European" upbringing and education deemed suitable for such an exalted presence – an act which was eventually legally opposed, but to no avail, by the boys' father.⁷⁹ In 1929, Krishnamurti dissolved the Order and by 1930 he had resigned from the Theosophical Society.⁸⁰ Three years later, Besant passed away.



Fig. 2. Henry Steel Olcott, Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater, Adyar 1905.

The history of the Theosophical Society includes, not just the original organization, but also a significant number of other groups that have in one way or another a connection to Blavatsky's teachings, such as the United Lodge of Theosophists, the Arcane School and the Rosicrucian Fellowship. The Indian Section, however, has remained since its inauguration the major component of the Society. In his essay "Theosophy and Its Heirs" (2000), Tingay provides a taxonomy in which he

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ C.V. Williams, *Jiddu Krishnamurti* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004) 36.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

classifies modern groups “that have links with Blavatsky’s initiative.”⁸¹ Firstly, there are “controlled movements” which may have their own organizational structures but which have a membership that is wholly drawn from the parent society. “Schismatic movements” are groups that make use of the term “Theosophy,” or that claim to present Blavatsky’s teachings, but which have separated themselves from the parent society. “Derivative movements” are groups formed by one-time members of the parent society and which embody some aspect of Theosophical teaching. However, the members may disavow or downplay the importance of this connection. Lastly, “influenced movements” have memberships and leaderships that while largely drawn from the parent society are also open to others.⁸²

At the present, all that is required of those interested in joining the Theosophical Society – with the exception of paying a yearly fee – is the acceptance of the Society’s three “objects.” These are as follows:

1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.
2. To encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy and Science.
3. To investigate unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man (“Benefits of Joining the Society”).

The subject of the next part of this section, the Rosicrucian Fellowship, is an example of a “derivative movement” as described above. It was founded by Christian Occultist and Theosophist Max Heindel (born Carl Louis von Grasshoff). Its teachings are purported to have been transmitted to Heindel by what he referred to as an Elder Brother of the Rosicrucian Order, an organization consisting of a number of spiritual beings that had advanced beyond the level of “ordinary” men who have as a goal aiding mankind in working towards its betterment.

⁸¹ Kevin Tingay, “Theosophy and its Heirs,” *Beyond New Age*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe & Marion Bowman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2000) 40.

⁸² *Ibid.*

3.4 The Rosicrucian Fellowship

As the Rosicrucian Fellowship has received far less attention in terms of serious academic study than the Theosophical Society, finding information from a third-party source is at the present a difficult feat. The information given in this section is largely drawn from an account of the movement's origins entitled *The Birth of the Rosicrucian Fellowship* (1923) which was authored by Heindel's second wife Augusta Foss Heindel. Also a member of the Theosophical Society, she shared his interest in the Occult and aided him in the promotion of the organization he was to create. Unless otherwise stated, quotes appearing in this section are taken from *The Birth of the Rosicrucian Fellowship*, which is not paginated.

Heindel, born into a noble family with connections to "the German Court during the time of Prince Bismarck," spent the early part of his life in Denmark. At the age of sixteen, he left his home in Scandinavia to work in the shipyards of Glasgow, Scotland, where he eventually became an engineer. Working as Chief Engineer on a trading steamer afforded him the still at that time relatively rare opportunity to travel extensively, and as a result he acquired a vast knowledge of the world and its peoples.

From 1895 – 1901, he was employed as a consulting engineer in New York City. Within a tragically short span of time, he married, fathered three children and became a widower when his wife passed away in 1905. Two years prior to her death, the family had relocated to Los Angeles and it was here where Heindel began to develop an interest in metaphysics. He joined the local branch of the Theosophical Society and even served as its vice-president from 1904 to 1905. He became increasingly desirous of understanding the cause of humanity's sufferings and sorrow and of finding a way to help alleviate them. He began to study astrology and found that it gave him the key by which he could fathom "the mysteries of man's inner nature."

During the summer of 1905, as a result of, according to Augusta Foss Heindel, working too hard due to his intense desire for the acquisition of spiritual knowledge, Heindel fell ill; it is unclear from the account she provides what the actual cause was,

but it appears to have had something to do with his heart. On and off, for a period lasting several months, he spent time out of his body, continuing his quest for truth on other planes. When he recovered his health, he embarked upon a lecturing tour in order to spread news of his experiences and the information he had acquired.



Fig. 3. Max Heindel, unknown place and date.

In the autumn of 1907, following an especially successful period in Minnesota, he was persuaded by a friend to travel to Berlin in order to meet a man who had a reputation of being a remarkable teacher and lecturer. He did so, and after “a short time,” he came to the conclusion that this individual could not offer him anything that he did not already know. A name is not given in the text, but enough biographical information about Heindel exists to ascertain that this man was Rudolf Steiner. Shortly after having come to this realization, he was contacted by a spiritual “being.” He would shortly afterwards learn that this visitor was actually an Elder Brother of the Rosicrucian Order, an organization which according to the Fellowship’s literature has its roots in the thirteenth century.

“When occasion requires,” a number of the spiritual beings which compose the Order work in the physical world, either in the form of men or in their invisible vehicles. Augusta Foss Heindel states that “it must be strictly kept in mind that they

never influence any one against his will or contrary to his desires, but only strengthen good wherever found.” When they are at work in the world as men, they dwell in a house that one might believe to be the home of “some well-to-do but not ostentatious person.” A similar concern over the stature of a house, which can be seen as sending an interesting message concerning social class, was expressed in 1911 by Annie Besant when during her presidential address she made some remarks in regard to the need for the Theosophical Society to have “a worthy Headquarters in the Metropolis of the Empire.” She declared the following:

You must, from your geographical position, from your place in the world-empire, occupy the leading place in the Movement so far as the English-speaking lands are concerned, and it is not quite consonant with the dignity of the Movement that you should have to meet always in a hired house.⁸³

The beings which make up part of the Rosicrucian Order are, when engaged in work on the physical plane, employed in offices and occupy positions of distinction in the communities of which they are a part. However, at the same time, they as spiritual beings dwell in an etheric temple which surrounds and interpenetrates the physical building in which they live. Such auric atmospheres are found around buildings where people are devoted to spiritual undertakings, and they differ in color. Although Heindel calls them “human” in his writings, it is to be remembered that they are well exalted above our own status.

When an aspirant, such as Max Heindel in this case, has evolved to a sufficient degree, his or her soul body gives off a degree of luminosity which then serves to attract an Elder Brother as a spiritual teacher. Information is then transmitted via what Augusta Foss Heindel describes as “a self-conscious picture consciousness” by which ideas are sent to the aspirant in the form of pictures and vibrations. The pupil has, through his own evolutionary work, become like a “tuning fork tuned to a pitch identical with that of the vibration of the ideas sent out by the Elder Brother in the pictures.” His or her consciousness is then lifted to the level which is required for the particular initiation that is then being given. Such an initiation can only be understood, according to Augusta Foss Heindel, as an internal experience whereby

⁸³ Quoted in Dixon 10.

latent powers are converted to dynamic energy which the initiate learns through the initiation how to use.

The Elder Brother that contacted Heindel offered him the knowledge he had so long desired, but only on the condition that he keep it a secret. After much consideration, Heindel decided that he would not be able to comply with what the being proposed because he was interested in using the knowledge he would gain in order to help his fellow man. Roughly one month later, the Elder Brother returned and informed Heindel, who had without his knowledge actually been under observation by the Order for a number of years prior to having been contacted, that he had stood his test. He had thus proved himself to be the most suitable candidate to share this information with mankind. The previous contender had apparently failed the same test in 1905.

The visits continued and the Elder Brother revealed to Heindel the information that would eventually become the teachings of the Rosicrucian Fellowship. He was also given directions to “the Temple of the Rose Cross,” which was located “near the border between Bohemia and Germany,” where he would spend, once having reached this mysterious destination, a little over a month in direct contact with the Elder Brothers, receiving personal instruction. He was furthermore directed to make public the information he had been given by the end of the first decade of the century. He then returned to the United States and commenced work on turning this into a reality, establishing Rosicrucian Fellowship Centers in cities such as Columbus, Seattle and Portland. The teachings he had received were, in compliance with the Elder Brothers’ orders, published in book form as *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* in November of 1909. Afterwards, he returned to Los Angeles and resumed lecturing. The Fellowship’s headquarters was established at Mount Ecclesia in Oceanside, California. A temple was eventually erected at the site, and it was dedicated for the purpose of healing on December 25, 1920, nearly two years after Heindel’s death, under direction of the Elder Brothers.

In regard to the Fellowship’s life in more recent years, a directory of local offices has listings for over thirty different countries, but the webpage has not been updated

since 2003.⁸⁴ The information available on the Fellowship's official site pertaining to membership states, quite interestingly, that the Fellowship "is an association of Christian men and women banded together for the purpose of helping to make Christianity a living factor in the world."⁸⁵ No mention is made about Occultism, a word which frequently appears throughout Heindel's writings. In order to become a member, an interested individual must complete a preliminary correspondence course. In *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception*, Heindel writes that all are welcome to join with the exception of hypnotists and professional mediums, clairvoyants or astrologers; the latter three are excluded as they take payment for something which, according to the literature of the Fellowship, should be given for free.⁸⁶ Hypnotists are not suitable Adepts for the sort of work Fellowship members engage in because the act of controlling others "by the exercise of will power" is deemed to be a form of mental assault and is even considered to be more reprehensible than an act of violence carried out on the physical plane.⁸⁷

The teachings concerning race as presented in *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* are in some respects similar to those expounded by Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine*. This is hardly surprising when one recalls Heindel's early involvement with the Theosophical Society. However, the racist implications in the teachings offered by the Rosicrucian Fellowship are, I believe, more striking. Even the first paragraph of the introduction conveniently sets the tone for the hundreds of pages that follow:

The Western world is undoubtedly the vanguard of the human race...Buddha, great, grand and sublime, may be the 'light of Asia,' but Christ will yet be acknowledged the 'Light of the World.' As the sun outshines the brightest star in the heavens, dispels every vestige of darkness and gives life and light to all beings, so, in a not too distant

⁸⁴ "Rosicrucian Fellowship Worldwide Centers and Study Groups," *Rosicrucianfellowship.org*, 2003, *The Rosicrucian Fellowship*, 17 July 2009, <<http://www.rosicrucianfellowship.org/foreign/contacts.htm>>.

⁸⁵ "Membership," *Rosicrucianfellowship.org*, 2009, *The Rosicrucian Fellowship*, 16 July 2009, <<http://www.rosicrucianfellowship.org/member.htm>>.

⁸⁶ "FAQs: We understand that the Rosicrucians do not set price upon their lessons nor upon their healing ministrations. Is not the workman 'worthy of his hire?'" *Rosicrucianfellowship.org*, 2008, *The Rosicrucian Fellowship*, 17 July 2009, <<http://www.rosicrucianfellowship.org/faq1.htm>>.

⁸⁷ "The Dangers of Hypnotism," *Rosicrucian.com*, 2008, *The Rosicrucian Fellowship*, 15 July 2009, <<http://rosicrucian.com/zineen/pamen025.htm>>.

future, will the true religion of Christ supersede and obliterate all other religions, to the eternal benefit of mankind.⁸⁸

This matter will be discussed more fully in a later section of the paper. Both sets of teachings, however, were of course informed by the racist discourse that was such an inescapable and influential force during the “Age of Empire.”

3.5 Definitions: colonialism and imperialism

One major difficulty inherent in speaking about imperialism lies in the fact that this term is often used interchangeably with the term “colonialism.” Ania Loomba offers the following solution:

One useful way of distinguishing between them might be to not separate them in temporal but in spatial terms and to think of imperialism or neo-imperialism as the phenomenon that originates in the metropolis, the process which leads to domination and control. Its result, or what happens in the colonies as a consequence of imperial domination, is colonialism or neocolonialism. Thus the imperial country is the ‘metropole’ from which power flows, and the colony or neo-colony is the place which it penetrates and controls. Imperialism can function without formal colonies (as in United States imperialism today) but colonialism cannot.⁸⁹

In a similar manner, Said defines the relationship between colonialism and imperialism by using the latter term to describe the practice, theory and attitudes of “a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory” and reserving the former for “the implanting of settlements on distant territory.”⁹⁰ Colonialism is, for both Said and Loomba, a consequence of imperialism. As Thornton suggests, colonialism is, then, “imperialism seen from below.”⁹¹ According to this viewpoint, colonialism is a state of mind rather than a status, the ‘context of existence’ for those who are subject to international power. If imperialism is what was used to justify Robinson

⁸⁸ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 17.

⁸⁹ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998) 6 – 7.

⁹⁰ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, Vintage 1993) 8.

⁹¹ Quoted in Alastair Pennycook, *English Discourses of Colonialism*, London: Routledge, 1998) 34.

Crusoe's relationship to Friday, colonialism can then be understood as Friday's awareness of his subjugated position.⁹²

In the preface to *Strangers in the Land* (2002), a study of the British Indian Empire, Roderick Cavaliero writes that it is difficult to remember that Britain, a key center for the mystical revival of the nineteenth century, "now shrunken, solipsistic, offshore,...once ruled the sea and a quarter of the population of the globe."⁹³ Attempts were made, such as the establishment of Empire Day, to institutionalize a sense of pride in imperialism. This created a cultural climate in which Empire permeated everything from Christmas pantomimes to music hall entertainment to children's periodicals.⁹⁴ Such conditions encouraged the masses to identify themselves with the imperial state and nation, which, though done unconsciously, serves to justify and legitimize "the social and political system represented by that state."⁹⁵

The above can bring to mind Durkheim's notions concerning the efforts a society makes in order to pull itself together. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he maintains that "a society is not constituted simply by the mass of individuals who comprise it, the ground they occupy, the things they use, or the movements they make, but above all by the idea it has of itself."⁹⁶ Individuals are "led to impute to themselves shared inborn essences and fabulous collective identities."⁹⁷ Examples of such events are the "nighttime *effervescences*" of the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazis.⁹⁸

Hobsbawm states that "it is impossible to deny that the idea of superiority to, and domination over, a world of dark skins in remote places was genuinely popular, and thus benefited the politics of imperialism."⁹⁹ One byproduct of imperial expansion is the construction of racial stereotypes, the subject to which we will now turn.

⁹² Pennycook 34.

⁹³ Roderick Cavaliero, *Strangers in the Land* (London: Tauris & Company, Limited, 2002) xv.

⁹⁴ Daphne M. Kutzer, *Empire's Children* (London: Routledge 2000) xiv.

⁹⁵ Hobsbawm 70.

⁹⁶ Durkheim 425.

⁹⁷ Fields xlii.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Hobsbawm 70.

3.6 Racial stereotyping

Racial stereotyping did not originate as a product of modern colonialism. Templates were produced depicting “barbarians” and “outsiders” as early as the Greek and Roman periods, and these were then subsequently recycled and reworked in the light of Christian thought in medieval and early modern Europe¹⁰⁰. Loomba maintains that this process can be traced to certain difficulties that arose when the time came to account for the existence of “savages” if it was so that mankind did indeed share the same parents, as was clearly stated in the Bible. One way to address this problem was to cast them as beings that had somehow incurred the wrath of God. This line of thinking, instead of providing a durable solution upon which a nation could indefinitely lean without giving the matter any further consideration, was in actuality only a temporary fix that served to spawn further conceptual difficulties and resulted in an ambivalence concerning whether these fallen people could be led back into the fold or not.

Early ideas concerning race, such as the impossibility of “washing the Ethiope white” and the notion of Islam as the predominant binary opposite of and largest threat to Christianity, were reused in intensified and expanded versions during the time of European colonial expansion.¹⁰¹ Exploration narratives such as Samuel Purchas’ (1575 – 1626) compilation *Hakluytus Posthumus* (1625) began to shape the generic “other” into particular groups. While the categories presented may be confusing to modern day readers, they can be viewed as early ethnographies that delineate what were perceived to be the specific characteristics of various non-European peoples.

The various nations involved in colonial enterprises managed to, despite their own differences, produce similar stereotypes. Colonists from a number of different lands, e.g., France, England and Spain, attributed qualities such as laziness, aggression, greed, sexual promiscuity, innocence, and irrationality to Africans, Native Americans, Indians, the Irish, and other groups in what appears to be an arbitrary

¹⁰⁰ Loomba 105.

¹⁰¹ Loomba 106.

manner.¹⁰² Racial and cultural differences were, however, not necessarily signified primarily by skin color. In the case of Charles Kingsley, for example, it was the lack of such a difference in terms of hue that made his first trip to Ireland all the more horrifying:

I am haunted by the human chimpanzees I saw along that hundred miles of horrible country.... But to see white chimpanzees is dreadful; if they were black, one would not feel it so much, but their skins, except where tanned by exposure, are as white as ours.¹⁰³

It should be noted that some of the descriptions listed above were also applied to the working classes in the rulers' own countries.¹⁰⁴ In short, it can be said that these constructions, though filtered through the dynamics of actual encounters, were based on the observation of certain features, preconceptions concerning the natives, and the colonists' imperatives.

Colonial enterprises were usually accompanied by efforts to convert the local population. This aim eventually came to serve the purpose of justifying economic pillage.¹⁰⁵ Attempts were not often successful, but fantasies and hopes lived on in plays, travel narratives and pamphlets depicting obedient and willing conversions. It was believed that what had once been impossible – washing the black away – could now be attained through Christianity. In an article entitled “Observations on the state of society among the Asiatic subjects of Great Britain, particularly with respect to morals, and on the means of improving it,” missionary Charles Grant (1746– 1823) expressed the view that “Hindoos err, because they are ignorant, and their errors have never fairly been laid before them.”¹⁰⁶ The solution is obvious to Grant:

The communication of our light and knowledge to them, would prove the best remedy for their disorders, and this remedy is proposed, from a full conviction that if

¹⁰² Loomba 107.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Loomba 109.

¹⁰⁴ Loomba 109.

¹⁰⁵ Loomba 114.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Pennycook 78.

judiciously and patiently applied, it would have great and happy effects upon them, effects honourable and advantageous for us.¹⁰⁷

An interesting parallel between these thoughts concerning the superiority of Christianity over all other religions will be seen later in this paper when Max Heindel's writings are examined.

The idea of the "noble savage," however, represents an uncomfortable contradiction. On the one hand, it indicates the achievements of the colonial powers; on the other hand, it alludes to the ever present threat of impurity and even hybridization through race mixing.¹⁰⁸ Another troubling line of thinking suggested that if black could be made white that easily, it was also perhaps be the case that white could be made black. The phrase "turning Turk," which entered the English language during the Renaissance, reflected these concerns about Christians being led astray and Europeans "going native."¹⁰⁹ There were those opportunistic individuals, however, who fantasized about certain combinations that would mix the best qualities associated with certain races and produce in turn the ideal subject.¹¹⁰

Concepts regarding racial difference eventually found their way into the contemporary discourse of science and were thus given a new strength and intensity. Carl Linnaeus' (1707 – 1787) categorization of *Homo sapiens* was already by the mid-eighteenth century developed and expanded into a complex web of races and accompanying characteristics. The "African" is described, for example, as "crafty, indolent, negligent" and "governed by caprice," whereas the "European" is described as "gentle, acute, inventive" and "governed by laws."¹¹¹ Loomba suggests that two points about such "scientific" theories of race, which appear to serve no other purpose than reinforcing the notion of European superiority, should be kept in mind. Firstly, the idea of different biological races further aggravated the contradiction between such alleged differences and the notion of the human species having a

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Pennycook 78.

¹⁰⁸ Loomba 118 – 119.

¹⁰⁹ Loomba 114 – 115.

¹¹⁰ Loomba 121.

¹¹¹ Loomba 115.

common origin.¹¹² Secondly, these “scientific” discussions of race unfortunately expanded upon the existing negative stereotypes rather than challenging them.¹¹³

Scientific racism in the nineteenth century resulted in the emergence of a number of “sciences” which sought to investigate the differences between races such as the *fin de siècle* creation criminal anthropology, most commonly associated with the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso. Lombroso is most well-known for his theory of the “born criminal” (*delinquente nato*), a dangerous individual marked by certain characteristics that resembled traits that had been dominant in some earlier moment of the species-history.¹¹⁴ His or her innate propensity for criminal behaviors could be accounted for by atavism. Whereas most individuals evolve, the violent criminal had done the opposite. Criminals were thus evolutionary regressions resembling “savages” from less civilized societies.

In his study *Criminal Man* (1876), the founding text of criminology, Lombroso, relying heavily on the popularity of Darwin’s theory of evolution, claims to have converted the study of crime into a science which draws conclusions based on case studies and empirical data.¹¹⁵ He was interested in establishing a new type of research that would focus on the criminal rather than crime. However, the modern reader may find his methodology to be more than a bit questionable, due to a lack of standardization and systematization.¹¹⁶ Many of his assumptions were, however, at the time of the book’s publication shared by his colleagues in fields such as medicine and anthropology. One such belief concerned the way in which physical traits reflected psychological and moral states.¹¹⁷

In the earliest published version of his theory, Lombroso describes both the physical and psychological features that would become associated with criminal anthropology. He claims that criminals, which he originally lumped together in a

¹¹² Loomba 116.

¹¹³ Loomba 117.

¹¹⁴ Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body* (Cambridge: The University of Cambridge Press, 2004) 92.

¹¹⁵ Mary Gibson & Nicole Hahn Rafter, introduction, *Criminal Man*, transl. Mary Gibson & Nicole Hahn Rafter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 7.

¹¹⁶ Gibson & Rafter 8.

¹¹⁷ Gibson & Rafter 9.

single group, have smaller and more deformed skulls, lighter beard growth and are taller and heavier than those individuals considered to be “healthy.”¹¹⁸ They are less sensitive to pain, which he interprets as being a reflection of their moral obtuseness, and they are, in general, physically weak. Sloping foreheads, crooked noses, large ears, protruding jaws, and dark skin, eyes and hair are also features common to the criminal.¹¹⁹

His theory was refined and developed further in subsequent editions of Criminal Man in which he pays increasing attention to certain groups that were beginning to cause feelings of anxiety in late nineteenth century Europe and America due to the radical political and economic changes that accompanied urbanization, industrialization and democratization. These groups include women, Africans and other races that were considered to be inferior, the lower classes, southern Italians, and, interestingly, children.¹²⁰ Although Lombroso felt that certain groups were more honest than others, he was an advocate of harsh punishment, including the death penalty, for groups he considered atavistic.

In his treatment of the variable of race, Lombroso equates white men with civilization and black, yellow and brown men with “primitive” or “savage” societies.¹²¹ In early evolutionary stages, he argues, violence and sexual licentiousness came natural. However, these gradually gave way to our modern notions of justice and monogamy. Although his point of departure – the inferiority of non-European peoples – was a belief also held by many of his contemporaries, his conclusion served to inject racism into the new field of criminology.¹²²

When biological differences such as skull sizes become racial characteristics and it is insisted that there is a connection between these factors and cultural attributes, “savagery” and “civilization” are thus converted into permanent states of being, which of course makes the concept of improvement “by social means” a bit

¹¹⁸ Gibson & Rafter 9.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Gibson & Rafter 15.

¹²¹ Gibson & Rafter 17; Cesare Lombroso, *Criminal Man*, transl. Mary Gibson & Nicole Hahn Rafter (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 91.

¹²² Gibson & Rafter 17 – 18.

meaningless.¹²³ If it truly was the case that mankind was made up of a number of different species, it only seemed natural that one group must fill the position of the aristocracy. From that particular line of thought, one did not have to travel very long to come to the conclusion that the white “species” was to be served by the “lower” races. These peoples had been predestined to serve nobler beings. They could even be trained much like domestic animals and subjected to various types of experiments. Different groups were seen as intrinsically suited for different tasks. Any wars in which extermination would play a role were completely justifiable. In those instances they proved useless, they were to be abandoned to their uncivilized state. As Loomba states, if one believes the above, endeavoring “to lead them to a higher morality and intellectual development would be as foolish as to expect that lime trees would, by cultivation, bear peaches, or the monkey would learn to speak by training.”¹²⁴

Durkheim states that religion reflects society as it truly is, with all of its “flaws and imperfections.”¹²⁵ Examining only the idealistic side of religion gives one an incomplete view. Notions similar to the ones mentioned above concerning degeneration and the justification of atrocities committed by dominant groups are also found in the teachings of the Theosophical Society and the Rosicrucian Fellowship in which they are viewed as hastening a process that was already naturally occurring in alignment with a cosmic law. This will be shown in the next section of this paper.

¹²³ Loomba 117.

¹²⁴ Loomba 117.

¹²⁵ Durkheim 422.

4 RESULTS

This section presents the findings of my examination of the primary material used in this study. It is divided into two parts. The first one takes up the views expressed by Blavatsky and the second one concerns those offered by Heindel.

The question this paper seeks to answer is how teachings concerning race as set forth in the writings of Blavatsky and Heindel reinforce notions about the inferiority of other races. An examination of the texts consulted indicated that this is accomplished in two main ways. Firstly, it is achieved through the use of language, especially in terms of the selection of adjectives. Descriptive words such as the colorful “narrow-brained” and the more straightforward “lower,” “semi-barbaric,” “backward,” “semi-human,” “inferior,” and “lost” are used in connection with non-privileged groups such as the Aboriginal Australians and the Jewish people. In contrast, privileged groups such as the so-called Anglo-Saxons and Aryan Hindus are labeled as “god-informed,” “civilized,” “spiritual,” “precocious,” and “advanced.”

Another way in which the teachings reinforce racist ideas is built into the very fabric of the cosmologies they present. Those currently in disfavor with the dominant group are quite simply regarded as being evolutionary failures on a downward spiral. This line of thought automatically and irrefutably (as it concerns a scheme that was divinely instituted) puts these peoples in a subordinate position and any sort of misfortune that happens to befall them, whether it be a natural catastrophe or an attack launched by the dominant group, is viewed as merely a natural consequence brought on by the inferior group’s weakness, obstinacy or disobedience. Once this framework is firmly established in one’s mind, any number of abuses and atrocities can be justified under the banner of karmic law.

4.1 The Root Races according to Blavatsky

The cosmology presented in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) differs from the one that is found in *Isis Unveiled* (1877). In the latter, mentions of reincarnation are scarce and

the practice of magic is encouraged.¹ This makes sense as the Theosophical Society's affinity with Eastern concepts was something that developed over a number of years.

The jargon-ridden text is heavily peppered with terms which can cause difficulties for one who is largely unfamiliar with Theosophical thought. The situation is not made easier by the fact that certain teachers and commentators were inconsistent when explaining matters. An example of this can be seen in the following passage from *Studies in Occult Philosophy* (1945), authored by Gottfried de Purucker (1874 – 1942):

I would like to answer this evening a very interesting question I have received. It reads:

"This has to do with *sub-races*, and branch *sub-races*. The precessional [sic] cycle of 25,920 is the length of a whole National Race. You say that a Family Race is seven times the length of a National Race, which would be seven times 25,920. Now in *The Theosophical Forum* of November 15, 1932, pages 82-3, you say 'we are actually in the fifth sub-race of the European family-race, but on a much larger cycle we are also nearing the middle point of the Primary or Major Fourth Sub-Race of the Fifth Root-Race. In other words, of this Primary or Major Fourth Sub-Race of the Fifth Root-Race, we are a small minor branchlet, which is the fifth of its own septenary cycle...' Could you please explain further?"

"The reason for this statement quoted is that I called the European Race a National Race according to the scheme I gave in *Fundamentals*. But here, because I was writing quickly and not consulting my former words, I am caught by saying that the European Race formed a Family Race. The answer to that is very simple. I used the word 'Family Race' not technically, but merely to show that the entire family of the European peoples formed a racial family."²

Aware of the potential for misunderstanding, the author of the entry entitled "sub-race" which appears in the Theosophical University Press' online edition of the *Encyclopedic Theosophical Glossary* states the following:

¹ John Michael Greer, *The New Encyclopedia of the Occult* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Worldwide, Ltd., 2003) 483.

² Gottfried de Purucker, *Studies in Occult Philosophy* (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1945), 16 July 2009, <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/soph/sop-hp.htm>>, n. pag.

Because of the successive divisions into septenary units, it is at times difficult to determine just what subrace may be intended by a writer, and careful study is needed.³

One can find a similar problem in this passage from an article by John P. Van Mater entitled “The Evolution of Humanity and Its Civilizations”:

The ancients divided human history into many cycles related to the cosmic clock. In modern theosophy these periods are called root-races, subraces, family races, tribes, nations -- cycles of five hundred, a thousand, many thousands of years. Blavatsky projected the life cycle of humanity on this physical globe as divided into seven primary human stocks or root-races. Each root-race is divided into seven subraces, and each subrace into seven family races. These in turn consist of seven national cycles, each of which is built of seven tribal races...One way to calculate the races and their subdivisions is to start with a figure for the ideal life of a human being (some 72 years) somewhat as follows: seven generations of men make up a nation, a cycle of some 500 years. Seven of these national cycles in turn go to form a tribal race, which endures some 3, 600 years.⁴

Which is it: Are national cycles divided up into tribal races or do tribal races consist of national cycles?

If those who profess to hold these beliefs have difficulties in using terminology consistently, it cannot possibly be hugely shocking if others on the outside face troubles when attempting to sort out the details. Even Blavatsky addresses the issue in *The Secret Doctrine*. In a section entitled “A Few Early Theosophical Misconceptions Concerning Planets, Rounds, and Man,” she places a goodly portion of the blame on the shoulders of the Masters themselves by declaring that much of the confusion in fact stems from their clumsy usage of terminology as well as the vagueness of their replies when answering questions.⁵ An alternative reason for the apparent wide-spread befuddlement is given in a footnote which appears in the same section, in which she abruptly assumes, due to her unfamiliarity with the English

³ “Subrace,” *Encyclopedic Theosophical Glossary* (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1999), 5 May 2009, <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/etgloss/sr-sum.htm>>, n. pag.

⁴ John P. Van Mater, “The Evolution of Humanity and Its Civilizations,” *Sunrise* April – May 1995. *Theosophical University Press*, 2 May 2009, <<http://theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/evol/ev-jvms.htm>>, par. 7 - 8.

⁵ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 1: 152 – 163.

language, complete responsibility for the mistakes. The general tone of the section, however, sends quite a different message.⁶

Another possible cause of the “misconceptions” is indicated by the extensive number of mysterious hints which litter the text suggesting that not all of the information concerning the evolutionary process can be given out at the present time, an example of which states that “this is one of those subjects upon which very little may be said to the general public.”⁷ At one point Blavatsky puzzlingly writes that there is some information that she “does not feel competent to give ... out fully,” a statement which she unfortunately does not elucidate.⁸ When the blame is not being shuffled between Blavatsky and the Masters, it is – in a bold and somewhat alarming move – hurled at the reader: the difficulties experienced are the result of the doctrine being “incomprehensible to western minds.”⁹

In *The Secret Doctrine*, H.P. Blavatsky lays forth a theory concerning the gradual evolution of the universe and mankind in which everything occurs in cycles as the great consciousness that lies behind all that is manifests itself in a myriad of different ways. This process occurs over a tremendous span of time consisting of millions of years in which the cosmos and the immense variety of forms that it contains comes into existence out of the primal void and, at intervals, eventually returns to it. Monads, which can be defined as basic units of consciousness, descend from their original state of unity and enter into an evolutionary scheme in which they begin at the lowest possible level and eventually pass through the vegetable, animal, and human kingdoms where they learn the lessons that are applicable at each level.

Human beings are then an inseparable part of the universe and have a spark of the cosmic fire as their essence. They are one class of “young gods” and are incarnated in this particular form at a stage of their evolutionary journey, which is about halfway to reaching the stage of a fully developed god. There are hosts of lesser beings below man, and above him there are other greater beings that have, through

⁶ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 1: 163.

⁷ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 1: 233.

⁸ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 164.

⁹ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 1: 161.

their own evolutionary processes, gained more experience and as a result have deeper wisdom.

Once the monads have moved beyond the human level of development, they become Dhyān-Chohans, spiritual beings present on planes above “normal” human perception. These beings are also divided up into a complex hierarchical structure involving different sorts of powers and functions within the universe.¹⁰ Blavatsky describes them as

the collective hosts of spiritual beings – the Angelic Hosts of Christianity, the Elohim and “Messengers” of the Jews – who are the vehicle for the manifestation of the divine or universal thought and will. They are the Intelligent Forces that give to and enact in Nature her “laws,” while themselves acting according to laws imposed upon them in a similar manner by still higher Powers.¹¹

The seemingly ever-present focus on hierarchies in nineteenth century Occultism in general can be seen as a reflection of contemporary concerns about class structure brought on by the emergence of a conceptually difficult situation caused by the rapid expansion of the middle classes as well as pre-existent imperialistic notions concerning superiority and rank. When one reads the following – granted that one is familiar with them – Durkheim’s notions regarding the subservience of the individual to the society may come to mind:

This hierarchy of spiritual Beings, through which the Universal Mind comes into action, is like an Army...which is composed of army corps, divisions, brigades, regiments and so forth, each with its separate individuality or life, and its limited freedom of action and limited responsibilities; each contained in a larger individuality, to which its own interests are subservient, and each containing lesser individualities in itself.¹²

Durkheim himself writes in regard to hierarchies and systems of classification in religious thought, reminding us of the social origin of religion, that

¹⁰ Greer 482.

¹¹ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 1: 38.

¹² Ibid.

man would not even have thought of ordering his knowledge in that way if he had not already known what a hierarchy is...Hierarchy is exclusively a social thing. Only in society do superiors, subordinates, and equals exist...We have taken them from society and projected them into our representation of the world.¹³

In the course of their journey up the evolutionary ladder, the above-mentioned monads reincarnate through a chain of seven different worlds, of which ours is said to be the most material. The evolution of the particular group of monads that comprises humanity is divided up into seven different stages of manifestation which can be understood as phases in development, termed somewhat confusingly “Root Races.” Each of these Root Races consists of many races as the word could be understood today and is further divided into seven sub-races; this division also consists of other smaller racial units.

Each Race has its own leader, called a manu, a bodhisattva that is responsible for all aspects of religious life as well as a host of other officials - all said to be members of the Great White Brotherhood - that are involved in the processes taking place.¹⁴ One can also see a parallel here with imperialistic notions concerning colonial government where important aspects of life are determined by, in many cases, unseen presences in remote locations. When discussing British colonial administration in India, Loomba states that “millions of Indians never saw an English person throughout the term of the Raj, although that did not mean their lives had not been woven into the fabric of empire.”¹⁵ An interesting parallel to this phenomenon can be found in *The Secret Doctrine* where Blavatsky writes the following:

In every Cosmogony, behind and higher than the *creative* deity, there is a superior deity, a planner, an Architect, *of whom* the Creator is but the executive agent. And still higher, *over* and *around*, *within* and *without*, there is the UNKNOWABLE and the *unknown*, the Source and Cause of all these Emanations.¹⁶

At the midpoint of its cycle, after having reached its evolutionary maximum, each Root Race goes into decline and the next Root Race begins. This results in a

¹³ Durkheim 149.

¹⁴ Greer 398.

¹⁵ Loomba 111.

¹⁶ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 43.

continual overlapping. The wide variety of types of people which we see around us today can be accounted for by the different subdivisions of the major races – all at various stages of their evolution – intermingling and crossing with one another. The older Race eventually loses its own idiosyncratic qualities in terms of character and external type, and with the passage of time starts to assume the features of the younger one. Small groups of the older Races will, however, survive in desolate places until they, the so-called failures of nature, degenerate and finally become extinct.¹⁷

The first Root Race, termed collectively the Polarians, lived at the North Pole and was made up of ethereal beings which Annie Besant describes in *The Ancient Wisdom* as “jelly-like amorphous creatures.”¹⁸ Hyperborean, a continent which according to Theosophical geography now makes up northern Asia, was home to the second Root Race, which had a more concrete form than their ethereal predecessors and was therefore capable of sexual reproduction. The egg-laying and four-armed third Root Race which Besant portrays as “ape-like creatures” lived in Lemuria.¹⁹ The fourth Root Race, the Atlanteans, was more recognizably “human-like”; they are the ancestors of the majority of the present “non-white” peoples of the world.²⁰

Blavatsky asserted that humanity is presently in the fifth Root Race which has now been in existence for approximately one million years. The various peoples of Europe, the Middle East and India all have their origins in this particular stage of manifestation.²¹ In a general sense, our Root Race is comprised of all the peoples living at the present for the simple reason that they all happen to be alive during this period of development. However, many are actually descendants of the previous Root Race. An example would be the Chinese: although descended from the last sub-race of the fourth Root Race, they are counted as being among the fifth Root Race peoples, the so-called Aryans. Two more Root Races will come before humanity is done on this planet, moving on to Mercury for a subsequent stage of development. The next will appear in California in the twenty-sixth century. A new

¹⁷ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 445.

¹⁸ Annie Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1889) 360.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Greer 398; Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 740.

²¹ Greer 398.

sub-race, however, is already beginning to be formed in the United States which will ultimately succeed the fifth sub-race of the present Root Race, the Europeans. According to Blavatsky, the American people have become – due to a strong combination of different nationalities – “almost a race *sui generis*.”²²

The above is quite interesting to ponder for one who is of the opinion that the United States now holds a position strikingly similar to that previously held by the British Empire. One can see here another example of, as Durkheim points out, religion being “first and foremost a system of ideas by means of which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it.”²³ In regard to the position Americans would eventually be taking in the evolutionary scheme, Theosophical thought as expressed in *The Secret Doctrine* reflects a process that was, it could be argued, slowly beginning to unfold on the physical plane at the time at which Blavatsky’s words were first committed to paper.

The Theosophical notion that all that is living has descended from an initial unity suggests that the system of belief presented by Blavatsky is perhaps founded upon an egalitarian vision in which every being, as an incarnation of the divine, has the same worth. The first object of the Society which expresses a desire for mankind to work together without “distinction of race, color or creed,” would also seem to indicate this. However, there is much written in *The Secret Doctrine* that seems to show that this is not the case. For example, Blavatsky momentarily turns her efforts at one point in the text toward dispelling what she terms a “myth” which portrays “tribes of savages, whose reasoning powers are very little above the level of the animals” as being “unjustly disinherited” or “unfavoured.” She points out that they are in fact the latest arrivals among the human Monads. At the close of the previous stage of manifestation, they had barely “evolved from their last transitional and lower animal forms.”²⁴ These, the so-called lowest specimens of humanity, “the ‘narrow-brained’ South-Sea Islander, the African, the Australian,” now have to evolve during this present stage of manifestation in order to reach the level of the “average class.”²⁵ The choice of descriptive words employed in the passage sends a message to the

²² Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 444.

²³ Durkheim 227.

²⁴ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 167 – 168.

²⁵ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 168.

reader which in essence defeats the purpose of launching what all too briefly appeared to be a humanitarian defense.

In fact, Blavatsky states emphatically that “the *specific unity of mankind* is not without exceptions even now.”²⁶ If the reader was left feeling uncertain about the Theosophical position on the matter as presented in *The Secret Doctrine*, the issue will be resolved when he or she encounters the topic again, clarified and elaborated upon, two hundred pages later:

Mankind is obviously divided into god-informed men and lower human creatures. The intellectual difference between the Aryan and other civilized nations and such savages as the South Sea Islanders, is inexplicable on any other grounds. No amount of culture, nor generations of training amid civilization, could raise such human specimens as the Bushmen, the Veddhas of Ceylon, and some African tribes, to the same intellectual level as the Aryans, the Semites, and the Turanians so called. The "sacred spark" is missing in them and it is they who are the only *inferior* races on the globe, now happily -- owing to the wise adjustment of nature which ever works in that direction -- fast dying out. Verily mankind is "of one blood," *but not of the same essence*. We are the hot-house, artificially quickened plants in nature, having in us a spark, which in them is latent.²⁷

The idea of divisions between different races is of course inherent in the cosmology presented by Blavatsky. That these divisions exist was one point at which Theosophy and the natural sciences at the time were in agreement. Blavatsky states that

[i]f your all-denying modern science and so-called philosophy do not contest that the human family is composed of a variety of well-defined types and races, it is only because the fact is undeniable, no one would say that there was no external difference between an Englishman, an African negro, and a Japanese or Chinaman.²⁸

The alleged differences concerning potentialities, mental capabilities and outward forms that exist between the different races are from a Theosophical point of view understandable in terms of the different levels of karma previously attained by the

²⁶ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 195.

²⁷ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 421.

²⁸ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 444.

incarnating Monads. Blavatsky states that they could not all have attained or retained the same degree of purity based on their previous lives in other worlds.²⁹

Furthermore, groups considered to be inferior such as the Andamese and the Aboriginal Australians – described in *The Secret Doctrine* as the descendants of “half-animal tribes or races” from the third Root Race – should be regarded as being fortunate because they do not have to contend with the weighty karmic burden that those who live in “civilised countries” do; their state of development made them unfit to “occupy the forms of men destined for incarnation in higher intellectual Races.”³⁰ One finds a similar line of thinking present in Campbell’s *The British Empire* (1887), published one year before *The Secret Doctrine* was printed, in which he laments about the “many cares and anxieties, alarms and troubles” that burden Great Britain because of its colonial holdings.³¹ He states that “we cannot shake off these responsibilities if we would. Citizens of a great Empire we are and must be.”³²

The contemporaneous fear of impurity resulting from the mixing of different races – a concern which it should be remembered still exists for various separatist groups – also manifests itself in *The Secret Doctrine*. Wide-spread sterility among the female “savages” is, according to Blavatsky, the result of such abominable relations.³³ This sterility is not merely viewed as being a consequence of violating a physiological law, but it is seen from a Theosophical perspective as “a decree of *Karmic* evolution in the question of further survival of the abnormal race.”³⁴ She states that

[a] process of decimation is taking place all over the globe, among those races, whose "time is up" -- among just those stocks, be it remarked, which esoteric philosophy regards as the senile representatives of lost archaic nations. It is inaccurate to maintain that the extinction of a lower race is *invariably* due to cruelties or abuses perpetrated by colonists... Those who realize that every Root-Race runs through a gamut of seven sub-races with seven branchlets, etc., will understand the "why." The tide-wave of

²⁹ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 168.

³⁰ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 162.

³¹ George Campbell, *The British Empire*, (London: Cassell & Company, Ltd., 1887), 13 May 2009, <<http://www.archive.org/stream/britishempire00camp#page/n7/mode/2up>>, 2.

³² Ibid.

³³ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 196.

³⁴ Ibid.

incarnating EGOS has rolled past them to harvest experience in more developed and less senile stocks; and their extinction is hence a Karmic necessity.³⁵

When such “crossing” does occur and results in offspring, the being that is produced from such a union is described as abnormally hairy and semi-human. Examples provided in the text are “the wild men of Borneo, the Veddhas of Ceylon, classed by Prof. Flower among Aryans (!) [author’s emphasis], most of the remaining Australians, Bushmen, Negritos, Andaman Islanders, etc.”³⁶

Some groups, several of which are mentioned above, received more attention from Blavatsky than others did in regard to their alleged inferiority. One such group is the Jewish people, who were collectively described as “averse to anything which had no direct bearing upon their own ethnical, tribal, and individual benefits.”³⁷ Selfishness, sensuality and “gross realism” are three “idiosyncratic defects” which, according to *The Secret Doctrine* characterize many of the Jewish people at the present age.³⁸ Having little knowledge of “the real divine Occultism,” and ignoring the higher spiritual hierarchies, they instead made use of sorcery and “various maleficent forces.”³⁹ They are often negatively compared in the text to “Aryan Hindus,” a group which is given a privileged status as “the most metaphysical and spiritual people on earth.”⁴⁰ One way in which Blavatsky emphasizes this superiority is by pointing out that the Aryan Hindu “belongs to the oldest races now on earth,” which are nearly one million years old, and that the “Semite Hebrew” belongs to a small sub-race that is “some 8,000 years old and no more.”⁴¹ While the praising of this particular group may cause one to question the arguments set forth in this paper, it must be kept in mind that the “Hindus” in question are of course an invention of the Western imagination.

A further blow is delivered to the Jewish people by taking away various accomplishments and attributing them to another group which has a more privileged position in the evolutionary scheme presented in *The Secret Doctrine*. An example

³⁵ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 780.

³⁶ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 196.

³⁷ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 1: 230.

³⁸ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 470.

³⁹ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 230.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 471.

of this occurs in a passage concerning ancient measurements in which it is debated whether the measurements that are described in the Old Testament could have come from either Egypt or India, rather than being a discovery made by the Jewish people.⁴² Another example of such marginalization – and one that could be considered much more offensive – occurs when Jehovah receives a demotion and becomes “the jealous, repenting, cruel, tribal God of the Israelites.”⁴³ After being witness to such an assault, the words which open both volumes may seem a bit hollow and oddly out of place:

This Work

I Dedicate to all True Theosophists,

In every Country,

And of every Race,

for they called it forth, and for them it was recorded.

As will be shown in the next section, the Jews also receive harsh treatment in the writings of Max Heindel.

4.2 Notions regarding race in the writings of Heindel

One major difference between the Theosophical Society and the Rosicrucian Fellowship lies in the fact that Blavatsky looked largely to the East for inspiration while Heindel asserted that the Fellowship was firmly rooted in “true Esoteric Christianity.”⁴⁴ Even though *Gleanings of a Mystic* opens with Heindel stating rather encouragingly that it must “be clearly understood that we consider it reprehensible to express condemnation of any society or order, no matter what its practices,” the blitzkrieg begins on the very next page.⁴⁵ He shares with the reader the following cautionary information:

⁴² Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 1: 316.

⁴³ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 420.

⁴⁴ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 17.

⁴⁵ Heindel, *Gleanings of a Mystic* 7.

But as the religion of the backward races is of a lower order than the religion of the pioneers, the Christian nations, so also the Mystery Teaching of the East is more elementary than that of the West, and the Hindu or Chinese Initiate is on a correspondingly lower rung of the ladder of attainment than the Western Mystic. Please ponder this well so that you may not fall a victim to misguided people who try to persuade other that the Christian religion is crude compared with oriental cults.⁴⁶

Furthermore, he warns that Eastern practices such as breathing exercises should be avoided altogether, not merely because they are useless to the Western aspirant, but for the reason that they will actually hamper one's "soul growth."⁴⁷ Nearly seventy pages later, he states the matter in even clearer terms: "The imported Hindu breathing exercises have certainly sent many people to insane asylums."⁴⁸

In a chapter in *Gleanings of a Mystic* which discusses the anticipated coming of Christ, Heindel once again privileges Christianity at the expense of all the other religions of the world when he writes that "we may rest assured that the divine leaders of evolution made no mistake when they gave the Christian Religion to the Western World – the most advanced teaching to the most precocious among mankind."⁴⁹ A similar statement can be found in *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* where he writes that "as Christianity is the religion of the most advanced Race, it must be the most advanced Religion."⁵⁰ In regard to the location at which we might expect Christ to reappear, Heindel assures his readers that the "great and wise Being" that directs evolution has the sense to know that "the Western World would never accept the scion of what it regards as a semi-barbaric race for its Savior."⁵¹ Furthermore, as Christ came from "the most cosmopolitan part of the civilized world" two thousand years ago, it would only be logical to assume that the same will hold true for his upcoming embodiment.⁵²

A further difference between the belief systems of the Theosophical Society and the Rosicrucian Fellowship concerns cosmology. The evolutionary scheme presented in

⁴⁶ Heindel, *Gleanings of a Mystic* 8.

⁴⁷ Heindel, *Gleanings of a Mystic* 9.

⁴⁸ Heindel, *Gleanings of a Mystic* 73.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 168.

⁵¹ Heindel, *Gleanings of a Mystic* 72.

⁵² Heindel, *Gleanings of a Mystic* 75.

the *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* features sixteen different Races, a number which significantly exceeds the total given by Blavatsky.⁵³ Heindel address the matter without the use of names and claims that the discrepancy between this number and the one given by, presumably, the Theosophical Society can be accounted for by the following simple explanation:

Some very valuable works on Occultism, bringing before the public the teachings of the Eastern Wisdom, have nevertheless contained certain mistakes, owing to a misunderstanding of the teachings by those who were so fortunate as to receive them. All books, not written directly by the Elder Brothers, are liable to contain such errors.⁵⁴

Thus, in a very swift way, he successfully usurps spiritual authority from the Society.

According to Heindel, when a Race emerges, a particular group of spirits “ensouls” the forms. The elasticity of new “race bodies” affords great scope for the souls that are reborn in them to improve these forms and thus evolve. Such bodies are reserved for the most advanced of these souls. Souls, or spirits as they are alternately called, are able to evolve to a certain stage while utilizing the particular forms they happen to be dwelling in at the time, but after reaching that point they cannot go any further. When the forms have reached their limit of attainment and can no longer be improved, they will then begin to undergo a process of degeneration which continues until the last member of the Race dies out. This is because, as Heindel states in the spirit of the *fin de siècle* preoccupation with progress, “there can be no standing still in nature.”⁵⁵

Forms for a new race are then created, which provide the souls with new possibilities for further advancement and development. The old bodies are then discarded for the new. Less advanced souls will come to inhabit the old ones, which will then be utilized as “stepping-stones on the path of progress.”⁵⁶ Souls of “increasing inferiority” will make use of them until they degenerate to a point at which there are no souls low enough to gain anything by being reborn in such bodies. In a process

⁵³ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 271.

⁵⁴ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 270.

⁵⁵ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 289.

⁵⁶ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 290.

described similarly by the Theosophical Society, the women of the race will become sterile, and the race forms will eventually die out.⁵⁷ One can also draw parallels between the degeneration described here and the notion of evolutionary regression Lombroso presents in his work concerning criminal anthropology. Heindel states that modern science, as it only speaks of evolution, does not take into consideration the process of degeneration which is the fate of bodies that have “crystallized” beyond any possibility of improvement.⁵⁸ As a cautionary tale, Heindel recounts an event that occurred long ago when an entire part of the earth was propelled into space as a result of the sheer volume of evolutionary “failures” that dwelled in that particular area. The chunk of earth that suffered this fate is actually what we now call the moon. When beings become such an obstruction, it is “necessary to get them out of the way.”⁵⁹

As an example of the effects of degeneration on the physical form, Heindel points out in a manner that is strongly reminiscent of early ethnographies in which the traits of various races encountered by early explorers are described that the “Teutonic-Anglo-Saxon race,” the one to which – he informs the reader – “we” belong, has a softer and more flexible body as well as a more high-strung nervous system than any of the other races found on earth at this time.⁶⁰ In comparison, he brings up the case of the “Indian” and “Negro”: they have harder bodies, and their nervous system, which is duller than ours, makes them less sensitive to laceration. They can, he states, continue fighting after receiving wounds that might kill a “white man.”⁶¹ This particular example is especially interesting because it could be interpreted in such a way that would leave the reader with the impression that, because of the differences described above, the “Indian” and the “Negro” are stronger than the “white man” and thus superior; this was presumably, however, not Heindel’s intent.

The sixteen races are also referred to in Heindel’s writings as the “sixteen paths to destruction” because the incarnating soul is placed in a precarious situation as it is always possible that it will become too attached to the race in which it has

⁵⁷ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 290.

⁵⁸ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 291.

⁵⁹ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 264.

⁶⁰ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 290.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

incarnated. If this occurs, it will then not be able to advance and may, due to a sort of crystallization process, be confined to that particular race when it starts to degenerate, which is what, he states, “happened to the Jews.”⁶² Views concerning the Jewish people as expressed in *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* in which they are characterized by such traits as cunning, selfishness and avarice are very similar to those found in *The Secret Doctrine*.⁶³ According to Heindel, the spirits which were incarnated in the “Jewish Race-bodies” became so attached to that particular race and as a result they are drawn back into it when they are reborn:

“Once a Jew, always a Jew” is their slogan. They have entirely forgotten their spiritual nature and glory in the material fact of being “Abraham’s seed.” Therefore they are neither “fish nor flesh.” They have no part in the advancing Aryan Race and yet they are beyond those remnants of the Lemurian and Atlantean peoples which are still with us. They have become a people without a country, an anomaly among mankind.⁶⁴

There is hope, however, for those Jews who are willing to marry non-Jews. It is by this action that they “will be saved in spite of themselves.” Just as they had become “lost” by marrying into “inferior Races,” they will save themselves by melding with those who are “more advanced.”⁶⁵ One can detect here a similar fear concerning impurity resulting from “crossing” as the one expressed in the Theosophical teachings.

Another notion found in the teachings of the Rosicrucian Fellowship, and one which also appears in a different form in Anthroposophy, concerns what are termed “race spirits.” In *Gleanings of a Mystic*, Heindel explains that “each nation has a different race spirit which broods as a cloud over the whole country.”⁶⁶ It is from this being that different nations receive the specific physical features by which, according to Heindel, they can be recognized. This spirit acts as a guardian and works tirelessly for the development of the race by promoting the growth of ideals that are compatible with the group’s capacity for development.⁶⁷ However, as humanity has

⁶² Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 306.

⁶³ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 310.

⁶⁴ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 312.

⁶⁵ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 314.

⁶⁶ Heindel, *Gleanings of a Mystic* 109.

⁶⁷ Heindel, *Gleanings of a Mystic* 109.

free will, the wishes of the spirit are not always fulfilled. Eventually all progress halts, and the race begins to degenerate. A stage is finally reached where it becomes necessary for some kind of a blow to be dealt so that it may be shattered completely, allowing a new civilization to be built in its place.⁶⁸ When this time comes, some individual -- “an Alexander, a Caesar, a Napoleon, or a kaiser” – appears and “is raised up to administer the blow.”⁶⁹ Heindel reminds us of Christ’s words: “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.”⁷⁰ This person, in some instances laboring under that impression that he or she is acting independently, is in actuality being used as an instrument by the race spirits, “the invisible government of the world, the power behind thrones...who see the necessity of breaking up civilizations that have outlived their usefulness.”⁷¹

Heindel maintains that this process must take place in order for humanity to be able to evolve under what he claims to be both a new and a higher ideal. As long as mankind is divided up into races and nations, there can never truly be peace on earth. Hope for the future is expressed in regard to the melding of humanity occurring in the United States which will, according to Heindel, ultimately result in the emergence of a “*new race with higher ideals and feelings of universal brotherhood* [author’s emphasis].”⁷² While it is possible to interpret the above as a peaceful desire to unite mankind, one must remember that Heindel has very definite ideas about just how this ideal society should be.

An addendum has since been added to the online edition of Heindel’s text, accessible through the Fellowship’s homepage, in which the following is declared:

The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception was published in 1909. Many of the examples used by Max Heindel were taken from his era using words and definitions from the early twentieth century. Some of the wording...raises concerns; however, we should

⁶⁸ Heindel, *Gleanings of a Mystic* 110.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Heindel, *Gleanings of a Mystic* 112; *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) [...] Matthew 10:34.

⁷¹ Heindel, *Gleanings of a Mystic* 112.

⁷² Ibid.

not allow this to distract us from the underlying message. The Rosicrucian Teachings promote Universal Brotherhood.⁷³

Several paragraphs later, a quote by Heindel is given, presumably in order to demonstrate his awareness concerning the misdeeds committed by his own race:

It has been said by white men against the white race, that wherever it goes the other races dies out. The whites have been guilty of fearful oppression against those other races, having in many cases massacred multitudes of the defenseless and unsuspecting natives--as witness the conduct of the Spaniards towards the ancient Peruvians and Mexicans, to specify but one of many instances.⁷⁴

What makes this particularly of interest is that the author of the addendum left off the sentence which comes immediately afterward and which sends an entirely message:

It is equally true, however, that even had the whites not massacred, starved, enslaved, expatriated and otherwise maltreated those older races, the latter would nevertheless have died out just as surely, though more slowly, because such is the Law of Evolution--the Order of Nature.⁷⁵

A similar passage written by Blavatsky which expresses the view that the extinction of races is a “Karmic necessity” was quoted in the previous section.⁷⁶ Even though such a text should be read with an understanding of the cultural context in which arose, it still can deliver quite a shock to the modern reader.

⁷³ Max Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception*, online version , 16 July 2009, <<http://www.rosicrucian.com/rcc/rcceng00htm.>>, n. pag.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Heindel, *The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception* 209.

⁷⁶ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 780.

5 DISCUSSION

Topics treated in this section include the relationship between Theosophy and orientalism, parallels between the teachings examined in this paper and those found in the white supremacist religion Cosmotheism, and possibilities for future research.

5.1 Theosophy and orientalism

In recent years it has become increasingly apparent to which extent Western discourses about the East reflect the power relations between Eastern and Western societies.¹ In his highly influential study, *Orientalism* (1978), one of the founding texts of post-colonial theory, Edward Said sheds light on ways in which Western discourse has constructed a “knowledge” of the East which is shaped in the interests of legitimating colonialism and the political supremacy of the West. The “Orient” is, according to Said, a European invention and helps define the West as its contrasting image. “Orientalism” describes the relationship between the two. The pictures of the East that are constructed provide more information concerning the hopes and fears of those who created them rather than about those they are supposed to portray.

It might be tempting to dismiss claims regarding racist overtones in Theosophical teachings by referring to the fact that Blavatsky alleged that the information she presented actually came from “Himalayan” masters. Also, the privileged status given to “Aryan Hindus” in *The Secret Doctrine* might raise doubts about whether such claims are valid. It must be remembered, however, that these romanticized images of mystical “Himalayans” and “Hindus” are in fact Western constructions. In *The Masters and the Path* (1925), C.W. Leadbeater provides a number of descriptions concerning the outward appearance of the Masters as well as their lifestyle. They are depicted as “fine-looking men” with “practically perfect” physical bodies. A floor-plan of Master Kuthumi’s house is even included, giving the reader an almost uncomfortably intimate view into his life. After the subjects of his bathroom and veranda are treated, we learn about his servants and his fondness for horseback riding and relaxing in his armchair. All of this is a bit surprising

¹ King 82.

considering the fact that it concerns a highly advanced being living in a ravine in Tibet.

Furthermore, the Theosophical Society played an important role – one I feel is too often underestimated – in the spreading of information about India and Sri Lanka in the West. Although improvements in communication and transportation had already by the time the Society came into existence created a situation in which Europe and Asia were brought much closer together, travel to India was still in the late nineteenth century something available to very few as a result of issues concerning class, race and gender. Early members of the Society comprised part of the small group of men and women in Europe who dared to make the claim that Hinduism and Buddhism might actually contain certain truths that Christianity had forgotten.² What becomes especially problematic is that they also claimed that they had succeeded in unearthing the Esoteric truth of certain “Eastern” religious traditions and by doing so managed to rescue knowledge that had fallen into degraded forms in modern-day India.³

Richard King maintains that even the notion of a Hindu religion was originally the invention of Western orientalist who based their observations on their own Judaeo-Christian perspective.⁴ Indians become, in the above context, the “subjugated objects of a superior (i.e. higher-order) knowledge,” which is the possession of the Western expert. This occurs because Indological works are not only comprised of descriptive accounts of what is being studied, but also provide commentaries “which claim to represent the thoughts and actions of the Indian subject in such a manner as to communicate their general nature or ‘essence’ to the Western reader.”⁵ Even when the descriptions given are romanticized and present a version of the East that is superior to the West, they are still a distortion that enables control by perpetuating stereotypes. It is my belief that the above most certainly applies to the versions of “Hinduism” and “Buddhism” that Blavatsky and other teachers in the Theosophical Society presented.

² Dixon 10.

³ Dixon 26.

⁴ King 90.

⁵ Ibid.

5.2 Parallels with Cosmotheism

A number of parallels can be seen between the teachings discussed in the preceding chapters, especially as expressed by Heindel, and those set forth by William L. Pierce. (1933 – 2002) in the literature he composed in regard to Cosmotheism, a white supremacist religion he founded in the 1970s. Pierce, author of the *The Turner Diaries* (1978), a novel depicting a violent revolution in the United States which culminates in a race-war and ultimately results in the extinction of all the non-white peoples of the world, also founded the National Alliance, a white separatist political organization, in 1974, roughly around the same time he created Cosmotheism.

Views found in Cosmotheism also permeate the National Alliance. The “General Principles” of the organization, as delineated on the group’s homepage, describe mankind’s involvement in a hierarchical evolutionary scheme.⁶ Perhaps not surprisingly, the reader of this information is presumed to be a member of what is termed the “Aryan (or European) race.” This race, along with the various other races in existence at the present, has over the course of thousands of years developed a set of “special characteristics” and has, due to natural selection, adapted to its environment and advanced along its particular evolutionary path. Those groups which evolved in the North, an environment considered far more demanding, needed to have a great deal of self-discipline and the capability to plan well in order to survive. As a result, this race advanced more rapidly than those who found themselves in what is considered to be the stable climate of the tropics in terms of the “higher mental faculties,” which consist of problem-solving skills, the ability to conceptualize and the capacity to deny the need for instant gratification. Due to the enormous variation in circumstances and environmental factors that exists in the world, the natural result is that one encounters differences between the races in regard to how capable they are of building and sustaining a civilized society and to what degree they can aid Nature “in the task of evolution.” As is also the case in the teachings presented by Blavatsky and Heindel, any inequalities one observes in the

⁶ “General Principles,” *Natall.com*, 2009, *The National Alliance*, 15 July 2009, <<http://natall.com/what-is-na/na1.html>>.

world around them are merely natural consequences of the evolutionary process and are essential to progress.

In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky writes about the karmic burden which is the plight of those who live in “civilised countries.”⁷ A similar view is expressed in the literature of the National Alliance wherein it is stated that as part of the Aryan race, one is automatically enmeshed in “an inevitable hierarchy of obligations or responsibilities.”⁸ The obligations are summarized as follows:

First, we have an obligation to the Nature of which we are a part to participate as effectively as we can in its eternal quest for higher levels of development, higher forms of life...Second, we have an obligation to our race as a collective agent of progress. Nature has refined and honed the special qualities embodied in the Aryan race so we would be better able to fulfill the mission allotted to us. Even though Nature also has developed other forms of life, including other races of man, we have a special obligation to our own race: to ensure its survival, to safeguard its unique characteristics, to improve its quality. Third, we have an obligation to those members of our race who are most conscious of their own obligations and most active in meeting them...Finally, we have a responsibility to ourselves to be the best and strongest individuals that we can be.⁹

One of the goals of the National Alliance which builds on the worldview described above is to establish a “white living space,” comprised of segregated schools, neighborhoods, recreation areas and workplaces in order to protect so-called Aryan nations such as Britain and America from “the sickness of ‘multiculturalism.’”¹⁰ Another is the building of an “Aryan Society.” Just as the Root Races are comprised of many different sub-races, this society will be comprised of smaller subgroups such as “Germanic societies, Celtic societies, Slavic societies, Baltic societies, and so on.” The uniting factor will be a common set of “Aryan values” which will exist after all customs and values considered Semitic and non-Aryan are uprooted. The society imagined is captured in the following passage and is described as one

⁷ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 2: 162.

⁸ “General Principles.”

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “National Alliance Goals,” *Natall.com*, 2009, *The National Alliance*, 15 July 2009, <<http://natall.com/what-is-na/na2.html>>.

in which young men and women gather to revel with polkas or waltzes, reels or jigs, or any other White dances, but never to undulate or jerk to negroid jazz or rock rhythms. It means pop music without Barry Manilow and art galleries without Marc Chagall. It means films in which the appearance of any non-White face on the screen is a sure sign that what's being shown is either archival newsreel footage or a historical drama about the bad, old days. It means neighborhoods, schools, work groups, and universities in which there is a feeling of family and comradeship, of a shared heritage and a shared destiny. It means a sense of rootedness, which in turn engenders a sense of responsibility and energizes a moral compass, so that people once again know instinctively what is wholesome and natural and what is degenerate and alien.¹¹

Other goals the Alliance aims at achieving are the establishment of a government which would act solely in accordance with the interests of the Aryan race, an educational system dedicated to passing on the society's cultural heritage to coming generations as well as teaching the young how to be useful members of society, and, lastly, the establishment of an economic policy to be based on "racial principles" which would reward individuals engaged in activities that are beneficial to the Aryan race.¹² Those eligible for membership are all non-Jewish individuals with a wholly European pedigree who are over 18 years of age and are of "good character." Homosexuals, bisexuals, those with drug or alcohol addictions, and individuals having non-white spouses or dependents need not apply.¹³

Similar views concerning race and evolution are expressed in the literature available for download at the Cosmotheist community's homepage. A significant difference, however, exists in terms of the language used. While the author of the National Alliance's literature is quite explicit in using terms such as 'non-White,' 'Semitic' and 'negroid,' the Cosmotheist "scripture," comprised of a set of writings composed by Pierce entitled "The Cosmotheist Trilogy," is littered with references to one's "stock" and the need to protect it from corruption. The message becomes clear, however, in statements such as these:

¹¹ "National Alliance Goals," *Natall.com*, 2009, *The National Alliance*, 15 July 2009, <<http://natall.com/what-is-na/na2.html>>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Requirements for Membership," *Natall.com*, 2009, *The National Alliance*, 15 July 2009, <<http://natall.com/what-is-na/na7.html>>.

He shall keep his stock pure; he shall not permit his blood to mix with that of other stocks, for each stock follows a different course along the Path of Life. When stocks are mixed, the inner sense of direction is lost [sic] with it the potential for attaining Divine Consciousness.¹⁴

One can find a significant number of similarities between the writings of Blavatsky, Heindel and Pierce. All describe an elaborate evolutionary scheme in which much focus is put on race. Fears are expressed concerning contamination caused by the mixing of races. Inequalities existing in society are explained away as a byproduct of the evolutionary process and even painted as being conducive to progress. One difference between these three belief systems is that much effort has been spent both in regard to the Theosophical Society and the Rosicrucian Fellowship in trying to demonstrate that the teachings are not racist. Proponents of Cosmotheism, on the other hand, are quite straightforward about the nature of their beliefs, stating that the religion provides “an all encompassing worldview for White Europeans around the globe.”¹⁵

5.3 Further research

The scope of this paper was, in its initial stages, much wider. The original idea was to research reasons which would account for why nineteenth century British Occult organizations drew the bulk of their members from the middle classes. Preliminary research indicated that it could largely be explained by the fact that these classes shared a common frame of reference in terms of values and that these values informed the teachings Occult organizations offered and thus served to reinforce them. Some of these values concern the position of women in society, the sorts of sexual expression that are permitted in terms of being viewed as healthy, as well as how other races are perceived. Eventually the latter became the main focus of this paper, as time would not permit a thorough enough investigation of all of the above named aspects.

¹⁴ William L. Pierce, “The Cosmotheist Trilogy,” n.d., *Cosmotheism.net*, 10 July 2009, <<http://cosmotheism.net/TheCosmotheistTrilogy.pdf>>, 14.

¹⁵ “Cosmotheism – An Introduction,” *Cosmotheism.net*, 2008, *Cosmotheism.Net project*, 23 July 2009, <<http://www.cosmotheism.net>>.

These other aspects – attitudes concerning the place of women and acceptable forms of sexuality – would be worthwhile areas to investigate. Women were often allowed to fill prominent roles in such groups as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and, as we have seen, the Theosophical Society. However, the teachings expounded by these groups often sent a completely different message which was more along the lines of the saccharine notion of the “Angel in the House” that was so deeply cherished by the Victorians. In terms of sexuality, it is possible to view Aleister Crowley’s promotion of homosexual practices as magical acts as a way of reinforcing the idea that homosexuality is in some way abnormal.

Another area that could use some more research is the other group upon which this paper focused – the Rosicrucian Fellowship – both in terms of historical background and teachings. At the present, there is a lack of third party sources of which a researcher can make use. Furthermore, the general lack of consistency in the usage of Theosophical terminology encountered while examining primary sources indicates that some academic work could be done in regard to that rather problematical matter.

Interesting results could also be yielded through a study of the history of the Theosophical Society in light of the discourses of orientalism and imperialism, in which actions would be the focus. To appropriate the religious beliefs of another culture and claim to have a monopoly on the correct way to interpret them is, seen from one perspective, both brash and outrageous. Asserting that one is saving these beliefs from degenerating further in the hands of the society in which those very beliefs had their origin smacks of imperialistic arrogance. The usurpation of a young boy believed by alleged pedophile C.W. Leadbeater to be the next World Teacher is also a powerful example of this.

Although Besant is often credited with playing such an important role in the question of Indian Home Rule, one can speculate as to whether there were also downsides to her engagement in the movement. One area that was largely important to Besant was education. The reforms that she and other India-based Theosophists tried to push through concerned teaching Sanskrit and the meaning of Hindu symbols and rites. Institutions such as the Besant Theosophical College and the Besant Theosophical High School were established with this aim in mind. An issue here that begs to be

addressed concerns just whose interpretation it is that would be the one imparted to students.

In conclusion, there is much work to be done in terms of studying Esotericism and Occultism, both in regard to the nineteenth century mystical revival and the subjects in general. As these areas have only very recently begun to be treated as worthy of serious study, this is not very surprising.

6 CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to investigate – using Durkheim’s theories concerning the social function of religion as a point of departure – how notions about race found in the teachings of the Theosophical Society and the Rosicrucian Fellowship reinforce notions concerning the inferiority of other races. An examination of several texts written by the groups’ primary founders, H.P. Blavatsky and Max Heindel, indicated that this is accomplished largely through the use of language, in particular the choice of adjectives, and through presenting notions prevalent in the discourse of the time as being part of a hugely complex divinely instituted evolutionary process in which all social injustices are explained away as part of the plan.

The nineteenth century saw a horrifying parade of different notions supported by various pseudo-sciences that sought to justify ideas concerning the inferiority of other races march through the halls of academia and out into the popular imagination. In time, it was possible to disprove a number of these theories. For example, the issue of whether or not human beings constitute a single species was central to nineteenth century anthropological and scientific debates. However, the mixed populations produced by the inter-marriage of different races in places like the West Indies indicated that ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’ were indeed members of the same species.¹ What makes the Theosophical and Rosicrucian teachings so problematical is one can never really negate a divinely ordained system which posits that certain groups of people have a greater worth than others. This makes such notions potentially far more dangerous than those posited by, for example, different fields of scientific racism.

While I find it difficult to believe that a serious dispute would arise in the academic community concerning whether or not the teachings discussed in this paper actually do contain racist ideas, I feel that this is an issue of importance and worthy of extra study for two main reasons: Firstly, these teachings are still part of living traditions and due to their religious import cannot be refuted. Secondly, it is arguable that the same racist discourse influences us just as much today as it did our Victorian

¹ Loomba 116.

forbearers. If anyone is doubtful about this, I suggest that they ponder the fact that the reception of America's first African-American president has not been an entirely warm one. A yearlong killing spree in Moscow, beginning in 2007, which left twenty immigrants dead – the work of a skinhead gang – indicates that racism is alive and well in a number of places throughout the world.²

We would perhaps like to imagine that after all these years, especially following the African-American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, we are so much more enlightened than our ancestors were when it comes to the acceptance of our fellow man and what we perceive are factors that unite us or make us different from one another. The very fact that having a black president was even at all regarded as a monumental step rather than a normal occurrence shows very clearly that there is still an enormous amount of work to be done. Furthermore, orientalism is often discussed in such a way that could potentially lead one to believe that it is describing something that occurred in a distant past. However, it is a concept that could very well be extended to describe what the United States has done in recent years in terms of constructing a “knowledge” of the Middle East. Johan Höglund, for example, argues in his article “Electronic Empire: Orientalism Revisited in the Military Shooter” that orientalism shapes the “Eastern” environment to which one is transported while playing military-inspired computer games.³

Loomba maintains that race has served as one of the most powerful markers of human identity. Today, the color of one's skin is of course the primary marker of race. This indicates that, since it is only certain characteristics that signify race in very specific circumstances, these divisions are socially imagined rather than being indicative of a biological reality.⁴ However, although we may be aware that these sorts of classifications are a myth, it cannot be forgotten that the societal conditions and inequalities created by them are quite real. This is why notions concerning the

² “Russia: Moscow Skinheads Murder 20 Immigrants,” *SPLCenter.org*, 2009, *Southern Poverty Law Center*, 18 July 2009, <<http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?aid=1017>>.

³ Johan Höglund, “Electronic Empire: Orientalism Revisited in the Military Shooter,” *Game Studies*, September 2008, *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, 5 May 2009, <<http://gamestudies.org/0801/articles/hoeglund>>.

⁴ Loomba 116.

inferiority of certain races, even when expressed in the form of religious or spiritual teachings, should never be ignored or excused.

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