

The Theosophical Society and its Subaltern Acolytes (1880-1986)

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Abstract:

The Theosophical Society (est. 1875), and its associated texts have sometimes been characterized as counter-Orientalizing or only partially Orientalizing, in the sense of at least departing from "official" British-Indian Orientalism and providing a critique of that discourse. In somewhat the same vein, the society has also been characterized as playful, self-ironic and/or postmodernist, and/or as broadly reformist in not only an anti-colonial but also an anti-patriarchal and pro-or-proto-feminist way. These approaches fail to grapple with the nature of the orientalism that was fundamental to the foundation of the TS, as well as the pronounced entrepreneurial and exploitative aspect of the cult, its strategic and emotional structuring, and the significance of its syncretizing and revitalizationist processes.

The great white brotherhood and their little dark helpers

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In several important recent works on syncretism, Stewart has been careful to keep in the forefront that the term syncretism, and related terms, have been defined and deployed in a variety of ways. Objections to the term have included the idea that it 1) "derides mixture," suggesting impurity, and 2) that it "presupposes 'purity' in the traditions that combine." Its defenders have, on the other hand, embraced syncretism and related concepts exactly because they involve mixture and challenge the primacy of entrenched traditions. Thus, it seems very true that "in literary theory and cultural studies . . . the condition of hybridity has become something to celebrate." From a more anthropological viewpoint, Stewart notes, Melville Herskovits conceived of syncretism "as indicative of resistances to domination or as pointing to sites of survival for cultural survival," and this viewpoint has perhaps "anticipated more recent studies of syncretism that have elaborated this framework of resistance and the politics of culture," (Stewart 1999: 40-41, 51)

I only wish to add to this the notion that when one confronts a case like the Theosophical Society, which most certainly was a syncretic movement, and frequently derided as an impure mixture, one does not have to conclude that the movement *was ipso facto* a vehicle of resistance. Stewart does

not, by the way, build into his argument that resistance is a necessary ingredient, but recent studies of the TS have indeed tended to celebrate its hybridity in this regard. However, in this paper, I suggest that we need to be alert to the strategic intentions of the founders of a syncretic organization, and to its function as an entrepreneurial cult, and to issues of its internal stratification, its reward structure, and its treatment of new recruits.

Competition, costs, and real estate in early TS history

In an interesting paper by Gauri Viswanathan, which casts the TS as an important anti-colonial movement as well as a philosophically vital one, we read of “the phenomenal, worldwide growth of The Theosophical Society” (Viswanathan 2000: 2, and see also Viswanathan 2005: 131), but the TS, as a cult which at one time seemed poised to become an established religion, “failed to live up to its early promise,” according to Stark and Bainbridge. As these authors point out, in writing about US membership, the Theosophists followed a path that closely tracked that of Christian Science, Divine Science and Ba’hai, starting in the urban northeast and subsequently experiencing most of its growth on the Pacific shore. (Stark and Bainbridge, 242-43) Also, if the 1926 U.S. Census data is to be believed, Christian Science had shown great expansion at that time, which only leveled off in the 1950’s, while various Theosophist groups in the United States had dwindled to a handful.ⁱ By 1926, even the Liberal Catholic Church (a T.S. offshoot) boasted more members than the TS.

Clearly, the TS, founded in the United States, faced considerable competition there, and this goes far in explaining the founders decision to move out into the world. Formed in 1875 in New York City, by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, the founders moved, in 1880, to India, where they were able to establish a headquarters at Adyar, near Madras (now Chennai). There, for awhile, they were able to develop a following that included members of the Anglo-India community, including professionals, merchants and some former and serving British civil servants and military officers, and also Indians, Sinhalese and other “oriental” colonial persons, drawn from a variety of social formations.

The movement of the TS to India was inspired by a number of considerations. Blavatsky had previously attempted to institutionalize some pre-TS versions of her esoteric project in Europe and Egypt and these had not thrived, so India seemed like a natural next site.ⁱⁱ One sees, for instance, that the list of ancient cultures invoked by Blavatsky, which previously had centered on middle eastern ideas, spirit figures, ritual forms and so-on, now shifted to the Indian and the Indo-Tibetan. Another consideration, which has not hitherto been adequately addressed, is that in America the TS faced stiff costs and competition, and the move to India considerably improved TS prospects on both fronts, while also improving living standards for the founders. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the TS’s acquisition of its considerable properties near Madras. In Volume II of his *Old Diary Leaves*, Olcott recalled that “I had been observing places, people, and climates, with a view to selecting the best place for a permanent headquarters for the Society.” He was initially attracted to Ceylon, as it “presented a most charming appearance to one seeking an Asian home,” but decided against it on several grounds including distance from India, “the cost of postage, and the backward intellectual state of the people as a whole.”

This, then, is about costs of doing business: the TS depended at that time, and for a long time to come, on income generated by the sales of texts and memberships, and both required expensive mail communication and shipping. It is also about the recruitment pool: some critical mass was required for memberships to rise, and Indians and Anglo-Indians, more than Ceylonese, were numerous and displayed a mental outlook to which Theosophy might be expected to appeal. This is somewhat ironic in light of the fact that Colonel Olcott was to spend so much time in Ceylon, on “Buddhist-Theosophical” projects, but the fact remains that India promised the best conditions for the organization’s expansion.

Thus, in Spring of 1880, the founders were asked by a local supporter in Madras to have a look at a sizable estate that had come on the market at a reasonable price.

We were driven to Adyar, and at the first glance knew that our future home was found. The palatial building, its two riverside smaller bungalows, its brick-and-mortar stables, coach-house, storerooms, and swimming-bath; its avenue of ancient mango and banyan trees, and its large plantation of casuarinas (one of the cone-bearing trees) made up an enchanting country residence, while the price asked—Rs. 9000 odd, or about £600—was so modest, in fact, merely nominal, as to make the project of its purchase seem feasible even for us. We accordingly decided to take it, and in due course this was effected by the noble help of P. Iyaloo Naidu and Judge Muttusawmy Chetty, the first of whom advanced part of the money and the other secured a loan of the rest, on very easy terms. An appeal was at once issued for subscriptions, and within the next year I had the satisfaction of being able to pay it all off, and receive the title-deeds.

“We have never regretted our choice,” wrote Olcott, for Adyar is a sort of Paradise.” Indeed it was, and still remains—now as part of one of the more upscale neighborhoods of Chennai. Olcott and the TS, it turns out, were on the winning side of a real estate phenomenon brought on by the opening of the hill station (see below) at Ootacamund, which now hosted the Anglo-Indian community of Madras for almost half the year. This had inspired many British to throw “their grand Madras bungalows on a market without bidders.” What Olcott paid for “Huddleston’s Gardens,” as it was previously known, “was about the price of the old materials if the buildings should be torn down.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The Theosophists as political reformers

The three basic aims of the TS, still given great importance by its adherents, are as follows:

1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or color
2. To encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy and Science
3. To investigate the unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man. (in Washington 1993: 69)^v

To begin with the first aim, this included broadly democratic and anti-colonial tendencies. Overwhelmingly, these tendencies were voiced in moderate ways by the Theosophists, even by the most politically active of them, Annie Besant and A.O. Hume. These important figures, and Blavatsky and Olcott, the founders, were very often in friendly or at least cordial contact with official British India, and talked and wrote exclusively of reform and political “evolution,” very seldom of civil disobedience, and never of revolution. Olcott, for his part, was content to see an India (and Ceylon) ruled by the British and once wrote dismissively of A.O. Hume’s establishment of the National Congress that “he has his heart’s desire in being Boss-General in Native politics,” (Barker 1925: 327), and elsewhere that the TS had helped to make Indians “more tractable as subjects.” (in Prothero 1996: 135-36)

Furthermore, as Frost points out, in all of the imperial cities around the Indian Ocean, emergent and/or “westernizing” or “modernizing” elites, often in conjunction with sympathetic westerners, “shared similar concerns for reform and oversaw parallel campaigns for religious revival, social and educational improvement and constitutional change.” (Frost 2002: 937) Very few of these groups, in fact, had anything to do with the TS. So, while Dixon, for instance, writes that “one of the functions of the Theosophical Society was to bring together men and women with a range of progressive and humanitarian interests” (Dixon 2001: 9-10, and see also van der Veer 2001: 56-58 for a similar view), this may be less a specific observation to make about the TS and much more just one instance of a general tendency. The same can be said about Viswanathan’s idea that TS members were “exploring alternative possibilities for imagining colonial relations outside a hierarchical framework.” (Viswanathan 2000: 2, also see Bevir 1998: 66) Perhaps they were, but many others were as well. That is, the Theosophists were politically more or less of their time and not ahead of it, in regard to their generally very mild critiques of imperial rule.

Feminism, sexuality, women: the TS as social reformer

It has become conventional to regard the Theosophical Society as pro-or-proto feminist. In this, it carries forward analyses offered by scholars of the earlier Spiritualist movement, who broadly endorse the notion that Spiritualism created a new sphere in which conventional gender categories could be challenged and in which women's voices could be publicly heard (for instance, Braude 1989: 200-02; Owen: 1990-8-12; Tromp 2003: 67, 78) In similar fashion, Dixon writes, largely with the TS in mind, that "esoteric religion—what we now might call alternative or New Age spirituality—provided a crucial space for the articulation of this unorthodox vision," by which she means the union of feminist politics and feminist spirituality. (Dixon 2001: 3, 19)

More specifically, in the Indian case, according to Metcalf, "Some few English women sought to create a space for female authority within an India free of colonial domination." Blavatsky, according to this view, and later Annie Besant, "defiantly asserted a power of their own . . . building upon, but inverting, the stereotypes which depreciated India as a 'spiritual land,' and women as 'religious' they challenged the accepted discourses of both empire and gender." (Metcalf 1994: 110) This seems problematic. To begin with, theosophy was, as Mullin puts it, "in tune with contemporary social purity campaigns to impose a single moral standard of sexual continence and self-restraint." (Mullin 2001: 78) If anything, this is too mild, because the Theosophists glorified a celibacy that went well beyond conventional purity attitudes. Blavatsky herself claimed to be a virgin, though various of her biographers dispute this possibility, pointing out that Blavatsky did marry twice and that she probably bore a son (who died in childhood). (Carlson 1993: 40, Johnson 1994: 34). Olcott, for his part, disparaged sexual pleasure and the advocated of strict celibacy, especially for young recruits, though he had been married, had fathered children, and probably had kept a mistress. (Prothero 1996: 47-48)

Of course, disparagement of heterosexuality and advocacy of celibacy could go very well with some feminist trends, but this seems out of place here. The connection between these attitudes about sexuality and feminism proper is perhaps best made with regard to Annie Besant, Olcott's successor as TS president. Besant, who came into the Theosophical Society from a personal and political background, as a divorced mother, socialist, and agitator for sexual equality, as a vanguard feminist of her time, very completely renounced her previous advocacy of contraception. (Besant 240; Candy 2001: 39, Viswanathan 1998:196) She also came to identify the notion of "spirituality"—recall Metcalf's idea that this was "inverted" in its meanings—with Eastern womanhood, so that while western women might be working toward some perhaps androgynous status, Indian women were to be celebrated for their unchanging femininity. Furthermore, although Besant came to be known in India for, among other things, her advocacy of women's education, she was wary of going too far: "We have women enough who are brilliantly intellectual and competent; let us leave unmarred the one type which is the incarnation of spiritual beauty." (in Kraft 2002:164-179) This seems a tepid challenge to conventional gender discourse.

Science and Theosophy

Let me start this section with a comment on some New Age notions. In a 1974 invitation to a conference at the “Institute for the Study of Consciousness,” in Berkeley, Ira Einhorn informed Stewart Brand, publisher of the *Whole Earth Catalogue*, of an attempt to “reach some agreement on the new paradigm that is emerging from the study of consciousness, physics, and parapsychology.” This was the discourse world in which Brand and other pioneering new agers wandered: the utopian narratives involved “a convergence of specialized fields in a single ‘paradigm’ expressed in an ‘emergence’ whose pure form would exchange the dogmatism of formal scholarship for the direct experiential face-to-face interactions of inspired seekers.” (Binkley 2003: 302-03)

This sounds Theosophical. Of course, in their second aim, the Theosophists express their approval of science, which would certainly include parapsychology, along with philosophy and comparative religion. They were scientific, in some way, if we use, for instance, a late popular nineteenth-century sense captured by Hammer as follows: “each spokesperson argues for his or her own conception of the world as compatible with contemporary science, but also as a body of knowledge that transcends the unnecessary or artificial limitations imposed by modernism.” (Hammer 2001: 223) Viswanathan similarly finds that Theosophists were people “looking for new forms of religion not founded on faith alone that would also be amenable to the tools and techniques of science.” (Viswanathan 2000: 6) There is some distance, perhaps, between Ira Einhorn’s “new paradigm, and Viswanathan’s position, and that of Candy, for whom the TS is “that masterful mix of magic, science, and philosophy, (which) insisted that all knowledge was part of one ancient wisdom.” (Candy 2001: 8) But not much.

I wonder, really, if any contemporary scholar believes that the Theosophists were successful in their explanations of “the unexplained laws of nature.” According to Bevir, writing of Annie Besant’s version of science, “her theosophy really does avoid supernaturalism,” because it adopts an emanationist monistic pantheism which comprehends “the whole universe as a unity unfurling and returning to itself in an evolutionary process.” (Bevir 1998: 16) McMahan, in somewhat the same vein, writes that the Theosophists “made liberal use of Darwinian theory to promote the idea of spiritual evolution,” and also notes Olcott’s aim of presenting Buddhism in a way that “could be interpreted as consonant with the modern, scientific worldview (though broadly interpreted vis-à-vis Theosophy).” (McMahan 2004: 908-09) The question is, of course, how broadly?

To take another example of the problem, in regard to evolution, Viswanathan claims that the TS offered an alternative theory, to the extent that “here, indeed, was a quasi-religion that satisfied spiritual drives while grounding them in the biological development of human consciousness, from insensate matter to thinking subject.” (Viswanathan 2000: 6) Here I agree with Kraft that it is important to distinguish emic from etic levels in the study of Theosophy. (Kraft 2002: 153) Darwinian evolution, for instance, had been, in Blavatsky’s eyes, one of the main artificial or unnecessary limitations spoken of earlier, and she was confident enough to offer her own alternative, which, in one version, begins as follows:

1. The eternal parent wrapped in her ever invisible robes had slumbered once again for seven eternities.
2. Time was not, for it lay asleep in the infinite bosom of duration.
3. Universal mind was not, for there were no ah-hi to contain it.

This is from the Book of Dzyan, written in Senzar and transmitted through Madame Blavatsky, according to whom Senzar is "a tongue absent from the nomenclature of languages and dialects with which philology is acquainted" (I, xxxvii).^v There were, as you can see, no Ah-Hi in the beginning—Ah-Hi, being a Senzar word meaning "wise serpents." They did show up, of course, and so did Universal Mind, a bit after that. In the passages that follow, the rest of the conditioned universe comes into being as well. The degree to which this can be regarded as a view grounded in the biological development of consciousness is open to question. Granted, it is "evolutionary." In sum, we should allow for some latitude in our understanding of science, when considering the uses to which the term is put by Theosophists and their admirers. Some of these latter have gone so far as to link the rise of the modern occult to science and modernity in general, but we should remember, as Laquerer has recently put it "If modern means anything—and maybe it does not—it is that we do not believe in a secret history of angels." (Laqueuer 2006: 126) Or wise serpents.

From spirits to Masters

A secret history of the "masters" is central to understanding the TS, and this involved a move from a disconfirmable Spiritualism, which delivered client-centered information, to a more secure form of occult communication, which delivered universal wisdom. A typical medium in the Victorian parlor might give out the wrong details about a deceased relative and might, herself, be exposed as a fraud, but in the Theosophical reformulation of matters, messages of great but attractive abstraction could be received, from "perfected Masters" or "Adepts" who were thought to be actually existing but inaccessible beings who had mastered occult science.

There were two steps involved here. First was to show that Spiritualism was unreliable and subject to fraud. This Blavatsky and Olcott both had done in various ways. Olcott, though entirely and some have said extraordinarily capable of belief in unseen beings, had written that the spiritualism of his day had been corrupted and was unreliable, not to mention in various cases stimulating sexual immorality. (Prothero 1996: 44-45; also see Tromp 2003) Blavatsky, for her part, had developed by the time of her meeting with Olcott the notion that what is seen in a séance is not the actually spirit of a deceased person, but only an impermanent "shell," a kind of subtle material remains of the person which would itself decompose. (Godwin 1994: 282; Carlson 1993: 29)^{vi}

Related to this is another Theosophical idea: the distinction between *exoteric* and *esoteric* truths. It is an exoteric truth that conventional spiritualism summons up impermanent "shells," with whom one can "exchange sentimentalities," but it is an esoteric truth that one may achieve real occult powers. (Godwin 1994: 292) Then too, there is a distance between the two kinds of knowledge, which can be marked off in intervals which measure the progress of an individual, and also a corresponding path for self-improvement, under proper guidance, which involves degrees, along the

lines of a Masonic organization.

Here then, enter the “The Great White Brotherhood,” “Brotherhood of the White Lodge,” “The Masters,” or Adepts, Masters of Wisdom, Masters of Compassion, or Mahatmas. Blavatsky claimed to have met one of these, the Master Morya, in 1851 (Washington 1993: 34), in London, where she indeed seems to have been in the 1850’s—a rare confirmable Blavatsky sighting in the years 1849-59 (Carlson 1993: 39)—but the “brotherhood” of masters, a sort of corporate body of perfected adepts, did not appear until later (Hammer 2001: 380-81) They immediately appealed to Olcott, and became a centerpiece of the Theosophical system for years to come.

The “precipitated” communications of the Masters, received through the minds of Blavatsky and others and written down by them, formed the essential occult link that was claimed as a Theosophical property and sold by the TS in the form of texts. The Masters were not, properly speaking, any sort of “spirit,” but they might as well have been, as they could disembody at will and at once, and were normally resident in some unknown section of Tibet. They could transport themselves from their world to ours, and sometimes did so. Finally, one could, by one’s own efforts, and aided by the intermediary knowledge of the founders, become a Master.

The path of the Masters

The Masters participated in the workings of this world, and were said to retain some level of subtle but material reality. Olcott himself, for instance, came to know the Masters when in 1875 he received an ordinary letter, by mail, from “Tuitit Bey,” of the “Egyptian Brotherhood of Luxor.” Among other things, Tuitit Bey assured Olcott that “Sister Helen is a valiant, trustworthy servant.” Communications from other Masters followed, and were compelling in strengthening Olcott’s resolve to throw his lot in with Blavatsky. Prothero 1996: 59-61) This whole series of episodes, which included a visit in the flesh by yet another Master, who left his turban as material proof of his visit, highlights the issue of Olcott’s gullibility, and also illustrates the use of the Masters as a recruiting tool for the new organization. Godwin says, of the same sequence, that it seems as though the Colonel “was being manipulated in order to enroll him into the program that she and her ‘Brothers of Luxor’ were promoting.” (Godwin 1994: 291-92) Here, by the way, notice that some of the Masters still had an “Egyptian” complexion: after the move to India this was deemphasized. It is very important that the Masters could write physical letters that were delivered by regular mail, and could choose to ‘wear’ a conventionally material body. By such retention of normal qualities, they remained essentially human, and thereby provided an escape valve in case of error or unclarity in doctrinal matters. As Kraft puts it, “The larger share of wisdom must remain covered, since it would be incomprehensible (and potentially dangerous) to the profane mind of the day or, alternatively, because it is *unknown even to the Masters of Wisdom.*” Nevertheless, both Blavatsky (herself an apprentice Master) and the Masters themselves were to be regarded as “more evolved than their contemporaries.” (Kraft 2002: 155, my emphasis)

Why, by the way, had Blavatsky not dematerialized and taken up residence with the more ethereal Masters in their Himalayan fastness? This was a question asked even by Theosophists, including Alfred Sinnett, who managed to satisfy himself by observing that “she has stopped short of that

further development in adeptship that would have tided her right over the boundary between this and occult world altogether.” (Sinnott 1884: 33)

She was, herself, nearly a Master, but the path is a graduated one, with achievements on the way to be measured by degree, as in Masonry, from which Theosophy borrowed heavily in its organizational details. Ordinary humans, on joining the Theosophical Society, were allowed to enter on the path of adeptship, though they need not, and, in some cases, certain individuals were encouraged to do so. It was by no means expected that everyone would follow this path: ordinary members could enjoy companionship and discussion at lodge meetings, and incidentally purchase and read Theosophical materials, without ever taking on the burden of adeptship or “chelaood,” which involved self-denial and celibacy.

The formulation of the route to masterhood has a history that has not yet been exhaustively elucidated. For instance, at his inaugural address to the TS in 1875, Olcott had this to say, in prefacing a section on Neo-Platonism:

Certainly the Theosophical Society cannot be compared to an ancient school of theurgy, for scarcely one of its members yet suspects that the obtaining of cult knowledge requires any more sacrifices than any other branch of knowledge. (Olcott 1931: 12)

This seems coy—did one member know more than the others?— but, in any case, after the move to India, the nature of the sacrifices began to be clarified. Sinnott put it like this:

Never, I believe, in less than seven years from the time at which a candidate for initiation is accepted as a probationer, is he ever admitted to the very first of the ordeals, whatever they may be, which bar the way to the earliest decrees of occultism, and there is no security for him that the seven years may not be extended *ad libitum*. (Sinnott 1881: 27)

“A Chela,” wrote A.O. Hume (before his break with the TS), “is a son, pupil, apprentice and disciple, all in one, and a great deal more.” He cannot be a true chela unless he has “given up all his worldly objects.” (in Johnson 1994: 238) Not surprisingly, while ordinary members were easy enough to locate, suitable candidates for esoteric adeptship were sometimes hard to find, and this will become relevant further on when we examine recruitment measures that were used to locate promising adept-trainees.

Syncretism and revitalization styles in Theosophy

Putting aside for the moment the interesting question of whether or not all cultural products, and even culture itself, can be regarded as syncretic, it is at least clear that the velocity and richness of syncretic assembly varies over time and across space. One reason for this, of course, is that syncretic movements have often been smashed by police power: the heretic is almost always peddling a syncretism. Thus, one way to think about syncretisms is that they will increase in time as ecclesiastical police power diminishes, that is, as religions are disestablished. For the present case, one should not lose sight of the fact that in India at the time of the early Theosophists, religion was certainly disestablished, had never been formally established^{vii}, in practical terms, since the arrival of the East India Company in the 17th century, and had been symbolically *disestablished*, by the terms of Victoria's very popular Proclamation of 1858, which guaranteed non-interference in religious matters. (Trevithick 1990: 504; Taylor 2004: 271)

So we expect syncretism to arise with the disestablishment that is part of the rise of modernity as officially tolerant of religious diversity. This, interestingly, is exactly what Colonel Olcott himself noticed in his "Inaugural Address" to the newly constituted TS in New York 1875:

However much or little we may do, I think it would have been hardly possible to hope for anything if the work had been begun in any country which did not afford perfect political and religious liberty. It certainly would have been useless to attempt it in except in one where all religions stand alike before the law, and where religious heterodoxy works no abridgement of civil rights. (Olcott 1931: 11)

This is syncretism, heterodoxy, as an option, a choice, and this is one thing that connects the TS to the "New Age," wherein all religious goods are on open display. However, syncretism can also arise as 'revitalization' movements, in conditions of imperialist or other cultural "stress," on the model outlined by Wallace many years ago. And this, in the Theosophical and Indian context, can bear some analysis. First of all, in the Wallace-defined revitalization movement, 'culture clash,' or 'culture contact' was the precipitating element, and the recombination of religious elements in a revitalization movement were drawn from indigenous and foreign sources. This is a cultural crisis, in short, for the dominated group. A second feature of the revitalization movement, however, is a related crisis, experienced not only by a group, but also, following Weber's ideas about charismatic origins of cults, by an individual whose inspirations are subsequently translated and institutionalized. (Wallace 1956: 273-74) One issue here, I think, is that, in the case at hand—the Indian and Theosophical situation—the individuals involved are situated at various distances from possible triggers of crisis.

If, for instance, British imperial control of India can itself be thought of as a crisis to at least some Indians, it cannot be thought to be so for the Theosophical founders themselves, who after all voluntarily entered India in order to further the fortunes of a cult they had established in New York City. They may indeed have undergone personal crises of a sort that are often associated with

religious founders or converts ^{viii}, but not of the type that one tends to associate with revitalization. On the other hand, some of the Indian or Sinhalese Theosophists may well have experienced crises in regard to their own subaltern status in the imperial context. The Theosophist and Buddhist activist Anagarika Dharmapala, for instance, whose life is examined at length further on, frequently recorded in his diary experiencing the sorts of racist slights and arbitrary imperialist injustices that might constitute a personal crisis of the colonial encounter. I have examined, for instance, a small 1904 diary of Dharmapala's, in Sarnath, at the back of which is scrawled a list of life-complaints. There are some purely personal difficulties, but other points are directly connected to the colonial experience

1. Abnormal punishments received as a child.
2. Kicked by a coolie
3. ill-treated by parents
4. mistreated by Christians
5. received knocks at Dehiwale
6. at Calcutta beaten by a European coward
7. insulted by an English blackguard at Muttra
8. insulted by Mrs. Besant and Col. Olcott (ADS 1904)

The last complaint, about Besant and Olcott, is particularly interesting because, after all, it was their Theosophical Society to which he felt initially drawn in part because it had an anti-colonial reputation. Dharmapala did eventually break off from the TS after, particularly, Olcott and he fell into disagreement over religious matters, but not, on the other hand, in regard to any "colonial" topic. For now, my main point is that Dharmapala, more than Blavatsky and Olcott, or any of the other mainly Euro-American senior officers, felt in his body, with the intimacy of hard knocks, with the same emotional force as though it were an internal family matter, the impact of colonial realities. Later in his life, Dharmapala rewrote the family history that once featured abnormal punishments and ill-treatment, and recalled that "My family, which is Sinhalese, has been Buddhist without a break for twenty-two hundred years," and that they lived in a home with a garden in which "even snakes glided gracefully through the tangled underbrush; for, they knew they were making their home with Buddhists, who would not disturb them." (Dharmapala, 1927: 721) Between the two, the scribbled list of angry complaints and the polished autobiographical account, there is a great deal of work that Blavatsky and Olcott and the other Theosophical founders simply did not have to do, and could not have done. All of this means, I think, that we should be alert to the different ways in which people can be part of and emotionally attached to the same syncretic—or revitalizationist—movement.

I shall return to Dharmapala at a later point. Now let me make the emotional part of the equation even more plain: Dharmapala never forswore his attachment to Blavatsky, regarding her, with Olcott, as one of his foster-parents. As to Besant, in 1893 he had written that "she was a mother to me" during his first visit to America, where he spoke at the World's Parliament of Religions. (ADC, Aug., 15, 1893). Of Besant and Olcott both, here is a diary entry from 1918: "I attacked Annie

Besant in 1907”—Dharmapala did not approve of what he saw as a too-Hindu tilt on her part:

[but] in 1912 I remembered only the good she had done. In 1916 I sent her rps. 500. I felt sorry I couldn't see Colonel Olcott in his last days. I lost my father feb. 17, 1906—Col. Olcott died on the same day a year later. (ADS 1918)

This is a simple point but worth making: as a child and as a subaltern, Dharmapala could not have had a “Theosophical” experience that was like the experience of his older Euro-American mentors. They had quite consciously cobbled together a syncretic entrepreneurial cult, while he had discovered that cult, after the fact, as a revitalizationist resource.

Theosophy in Ooty: good and bad savages

The hill stations of India were designed by the British to institutionalize domestic and recreational spaces that were appropriate to their predominantly middle-class British values and/or aspirations, and several of them were of key importance to the early growth of the TS. In general Dharmapala and other “indigenous” Theosophists, stayed away from, or were prevented from entering, the spaces that had been carved out by Anglo-Indians, and which appeared in several forms, including cantonments, clubs and, most interesting here, hill stations such as Simla, Ootacamund and Mount Abu. These latter came into being (or were expanded from village beginnings) in the early 1800's, grew rapidly through the last century of British Indian rule, and were frequented by the middle-class professional British who comprised an important pool of recruitment and leadership for the Theosophists.

The hill stations, each one of which was a sort of “England in the Tropics,” were places where one might be recharged as a European, having been for most of the year baked into Asiatic form down in the plains. This process took on almost an official therapeutic status and was at work, for instance, on European children who were thought to improve on a range of health measures as much by going to the hill stations as by returning to England itself. (Buettner 2004: 46-47)

The TS founders were frequently to be found in these stations, often as guests. Blavatsky, for instance, spent enough time at Ootacamund to form her own opinion of the tribal peoples who inhabited the surrounding hills. In an essay on some of these she knitted bits of her theosophical cosmos into prevailing ethnographic understandings. Of the Todas and their rituals, and of the Kurumba people, she wrote the following perfectly binary-orientalist paragraph:

All these peculiar ceremonies, these rites belonging to a philosophy obviously secret, lead people versed in ancient Chaldean, Egyptian, and even mediaeval magic, to think that the Todds are cognizant, even if not of the whole system, at least of a part of the veiled sciences, or occultism. Only the practice of this system, divided from the remotest times into

white and black magic, can furnish a logical explanation of this enviable sentiment of respect regarding truth and this high morality lived by a half-savage tribe, primitive, without religion and having nothing in common with the other people living on earth. According to us - and it is our unshakable conviction—the Todds are the disciples—half unconscious, perhaps, of the antique science of white Magic, while the Moulou-Kouroums remain the odious off-spring of black magic or sorcery. (Blavatsky 1930: 183-85)

Blavatsky had her particular Theosophical outlook, of course, but it paralleled nicely the official British view, which early on had marked the Todas as “white,” so to say, in their honest and simple pastoralism, marked by “high morality,” and the Kurumbas as debased and superstitious, “black,” as it were, in their odious practices of foraging and sorcery. (Kennedy 1996: 73-77, Bird 1987) The previous passage is from her work, **The Blue Mountain**, but related racist ideas are available in the more famous **Secret Doctrine**, where Blavatsky wrote of “those tribes of savages, whose reasoning powers are very little above the level of the animals.” (Blavatsky, 1888: 168) Blavatsky was not usually at Ooty to do ethnography, though, and below is her sketch of party at which she presided regally, after the psychic replacement of a sapphire ring, the telekinesis of some bells, and the “precipitation” of letters, some from the Master Jual-Khool (or Jual-Kool). I quote it at length, from a letter to A.P. Sinnett, because it captures so many elements of Blavatsky’s performance, and of the appeal it made to a well-placed audience:

Everybody here, bombarding me with invitations to receptions, balls, dinners etc. and seeing that the Mountain will *not go* to Mahomet coming Mahomet-like to the mountain sitting at her foot, and -- kissing my hands!!! Why, they have turned crazy -- archi-crazy! and all this for a poor sapphire ring doubled from that of Mrs. Carmichael which became forthwith thinner and smaller the sapphire in her ring having positively become visibly smaller, (this is *the* thing par *excellence* that flabbergasted and floored definitely Mr. Carmichael who could not be converted until then properly); and for a few poultry bells in Mr. F. Webster's (Chief Secretary) pocket, and a letter written to him *in his own handwriting* which I had never seen and which he swears he cannot recognize as *not being* his though the flapdoodles therein are not surely his; and for some letters sent on the aristocratic noses of the paramount powers at Ooty by Jual-Khool (who salaams you) and etc. etc. etc. Well here I am, my rest destroyed, my existence a torture; my hopes of solitude blasted and -- the *lioness* of the day. (Barker 1925: 45)

No surprise, then, that Olcott bought a cottage near Ooty in 1888, where he expected that he and Blavatsky might someday retire. “Gulmarg” was near Snowdon Peak Reservoir, some 7000 feet

above sea level, way above the heat and dust of the plains below.

It is interesting to note that the Theosophists Annie Besant and George Arundale, by order of the Government of Madras, who were annoyed with their involvement in the Home Rule activities of the time, were briefly interned there in 1917. Dharmapala, at roughly the same time, having annoyed the Ceylon Government, and having been interned in Calcutta at their request by Government of Bengal, wrote “here is my lot suffering as an exile, abandoned by one and all except for a few lines from my mother I live in solitary confinement.” (AD May 11, 1917) He exaggerated somewhat: he was able to see his many Bengali acquaintances during this time, but the point remains that the white Theosophists were living a very different kind of life.

The Theosophy of Simla: Masters, servants, picnics

Simla is no doubt the most famous of all the hill stations, and one with which the European Theosophists were intimately familiar. Simla was the summer capital of British India, and an American author, F. Marion Crawford, who spent a year in India in 1879-80, captures its fame well in the following passage from his novel *Mr. Isaacs*.

To Simla the whole supreme Government migrates for the summer—
Viceroy, council, clerks, printers, and hangers-on. Thither the high official
from the plains takes his wife, his daughters, and his liver.

Once there, the visitor could enjoy a variety of entertainments and comforts:

On the slopes of "Jako"—the wooded eminence that rises above the town
—the enterprising German establishes his concert-hall and his beer-garden;
among the rhododendron trees Madame Blavatzky (sic), Colonel Olcott
and Mr. Sinnett move mysteriously in the performance of their wonders;
and the wealthy tourist from America, the botanist from Berlin, and the
casual peer from Great Britain, are not wanting to complete the motley
crowd.

Notice first, that the hill station is a place for work, sometimes, though at a more relaxed than normal pace, but largely for recreation, music, drinking, tourism, and the occult. As Pradhan writes, the hill stations offered an array of shops, services and restaurants that catered to a European expatriate community “which sought association with the urban middle class consumers in Europe.” So, there were, Simla and the other stations, according to Pradhan. who canvassed gazetteers, commercial literature, guidebooks and other sources for her work, drapers, bakers, sporting equipment dealers, gun dealers, tack suppliers, hatmakers, dress makers, dry cleaners, furniture dealers and appraisers, piano makers, at least one gramophone maker, photographic establishments, jewelers, opticians and other specialty dealers. (Pradhan 2007: 84) I have included Pradhan’s long list here because I want to make the point that, at the same time, in Europe and America, the

department store was becoming a center in the transformation of consumption such that, in the words of an American historian, it became “above all an imaginative, improvisational, even surreal culture, freely mixing often contradictory elements into fascinating and original patterns,” (Leach, 1984: 321) There were no department stores as such in the hill stations, but everything was available, and mixture, in home furnishings as well as religion and philosophy, was the rule of the day.

This is all, I think, in line with an insight from Ben-Yahuda, who writes, of the occult, that it suits modernity well in that “religion is no longer understood as work, or as the worshipping of the deities, but is relegated to leisure activities.” (Ben-Yahuda 1986: 10) So, while we may question the greater argument about its centrality to the development of modernity itself, “spiritualism,” in Carlson’s words, “appealed to its practitioners for various reasons,” including, “for many, it was just fun.” (Carlson 1993: 28)

A second important point, about the passage from Crawford, is that there are no “natives” in it. His is a fictional sketch, of course, but the overall tone is probably accurate, and the meeting of Blavatsky, Olcott and Sinnett was real enough. It is to this kind of Simla, where modern forms of recreation and consumption allowed for the assembly of an Anglo-Indian lifestyle that could largely exclude Asians, that Blavatsky came in 1880, as a guest of A.P. Sinnett, an early Theosophist and author of “Esoteric Buddhism” and other Theosophical classics.

Natives could not, however, be entirely removed from the scene. Here is one: “he stupidly plodded back with the empty bottles under his arm, instead of asking about and finding someone able to supply the required water.” This is from Sinnett, writing about a Simla picnic,^{ix} one of several attended by Blavatsky and Olcott, and graced by Blavatsky with her performance of “phenomena.” The coolie had been given the task of fetching clean water for tea, and had failed in the attempt. In the next paragraph, by way of clarifying his attitude towards servants in general, Sinnett writes that this was an act “abnormally stupid even for a coolie.”

At that picnic, after Madame Blavatsky had psychically located a perfectly matching china cup, to replace one broken during the hike, the servants, “as usual at an Indian picnic” set up at “a little distance . . . lighted a fire and set to work.” The distance could not have been too great, of course, or the picnickers would not have been served their tea, but it was distance enough. Pradhan has noted that, in their retelling of the history of the Hill Station, many official accounts either understated and/or “demeaned” local resistance to British takeover. (Pradhan 2007: 34-38) While “native” services were, of course, essential not only to the establishment but to the ongoing maintenance of the hill stations, the erasure of the natives was an essential element in a performance of English middle-class culture, including an exotic but domesticated and entirely voluntary occultism decorated by harmless “phenomena.”

On the other hand, there was the problem of the Theosophical Masters, who supplied the wisdom package for the TS. They were, like servants, largely invisible, but a key TS doctrine was that their exalted role was attainable through effort. The TS posited an occult meritocracy and, although few wished to take on the burden of such a path, it was important that some were seen to do so. It was important to develop serious recruits. In the following sections, I will look at some of the most important South Asian recruits, in order to develop an understanding of the conditions of their

membership and, in several cases, defections.

Mavalankar Damodar: date of return is yet uncertain

Theosophical terminology has never been entirely consistent, and so we find that a Master began as an initiate, or a “chela,” the standard word for student in the context of a Hindu Guru-Chela (or shisya) relationship, or an “adept” or “adept-trainee.” Blavatsky, in a Theosophical glossary written in Europe toward the end of her life, and published posthumously, defined “initiate” as follows:

The designation of anyone who was received into and had revealed to him the mysteries and secrets of either Masonry or Occultism. In times of antiquity, those who had been initiated into the arcane knowledge taught by the Hierophants of the Mysteries; and in our modern days those of have been initiated by the adepts of mystic lore into the mysterious knowledge, which, notwithstanding the lapse of ages, has yet a few real votaries on earth. (in Johnson, 1994: 1)

Anyone, of course, could become an initiate, and aspire to become, in time, a Master. However, it was presented to all potential candidates as an extremely difficult path, strewn with obstacles, uncertain of a good ending, not to be taken on lightly. This explains, perhaps, the significant number of famous Theosophical initiates who were very young men, or even boys.

Damodar was one of these. Born in 1861 in Ahmedabad, into a wealthy Brahmin family, Damodar attended English language schools, was betrothed in childhood to a future wife of the appropriate Brahman class and economic status, and was expected to take on his family’s business. A sickly child, a vision came to him early, of a helpful, curative parental individual who healed him. At the age of eighteen, he read Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled*, applied for TS membership, and, in 1880, moved to the first TS headquarters in Bombay where he saw a portrait of Koot Hoomi,^x to whom he connected his childhood vision.

Colonel Olcott observed that Damodar, “as frail as a girl,” was also inordinately diligent and loyal: “no child was ever more obedient to a parent, no foster-son more utterly selfless in his love to a foster-mother, than he to H.P.B. [Blavatsky]” (ODL: 212) The new acolyte soon became Recording Secretary for the TS, renounced his marriage and his inheritance, to the great disappointment of his father and patrilateral kin who, though originally members of the TS themselves, promptly resigned. This calls into question, I believe, the degree to which the Theosophists should be uncritically regarded as sympathetic, more than the “official” British, to the common run of “Indians,” and underscores, on the other hand, how much depended on removing promising recruits from their kinfolk and local communities.

Damodar, certainly, was extremely isolated in 1884, the year of Blavatsky’s final “phenomenon” scandal at Adyar, which forced her to leave India. His loyalty to the TS and personally to Blavatsky intact, Damodar decided to travel to Tibet to find the abode of the Masters, including Koot Hoomi, a move that would vindicate his mentor and validate his own faith. He was coughing blood, from

tuberculosis, even as he made his plans. This expedition was followed, by the Theosophists as well as their critics, with considerable interest, and even a well-placed trepidation but no one could deny that it was a logical next step for a devoted initiate to take.

“The most disquieting rumors” were soon circulated, wrote Olcott, after Damodar had apparently left the hill station at Darjeeling on his trek toward Tibet, and that “it was reported to me from Chumboi, Sikkim, that his corpse, frozen stark and stiff, had been found in the snows, and his clothing at a little distance.” Olcott downplayed this report and claimed that it was mainly believed by “those who denied the existence of the White Lodge, and who wished to cast some opprobrium on us for allowing a young fanatic to sacrifice his life in so evidently vain a quest.” Mindful of the society’s reputation, Olcott could only claim that “Well, we bore it, as we did, and ever since have, similar malicious stories, with as much equanimity as we could summon.”

Damodar, on the other hand, seems simply to have died, though that is not the conclusion reached by Olcott, who felt that “It is quite possible that Damodar’s rejected clothing may have been found in the snows, for it was agreed that he should receive Tibetan dress, and be supplied with food, shelter, transportation, and all necessaries.” In regard to the actual corpse, Olcott claimed that a “Maya of his body may have been left there to make it appear as if the pilgrim had succumbed.” (ODL: 265-79)

There are indications that Olcott felt genuine grief at what he might well have known to be the most probable outcome, and also, at least one letter from Blavatsky to the Theosophist Hartmann, in Adyar. The letter was reproduced in *The Path*, February, 1896, and written from Wurzburg.

[Damodar] wrote a last word from there [Darjeeling] to the office bidding goodbye and saying: "If I am not back by July 21st you may count me as dead." He did not come back, and Olcott was in great grief and wrote to me about two months ago, to ask me whether I knew anything. News had come by some Tibetan peddlers in Darjeeling that a young man of that description, with very long flowing hair, had been found frozen in the (forget the name) pass, stark dead, with twelve rupees in his pockets and his things and hat a few yards off. Olcott was in despair . . . Well I know that he is alive, and am almost certain that he is in Tibet -- as I am certain also that he will not come back -- not for years, at any rate. (LHBH)

Blavatsky was also certain that her own charisma had inspired Damodar to take this trip, and wrote Hartman, in the same letter, that

I do know what he told me before going away—and at that moment he would not have said a fib, when he wept like a Magdalene. He said, "I go for your sake. If the Maha Chohan is satisfied with my services and my devotion, He may permit me to vindicate you by proving that Masters *do* exist. If I fail no one shall ever see me for years to come, but I will send messages. But I am determined in the meanwhile to make people give up

searching for me. I want them to believe I am dead.”

This is why I think he must have arranged some trick to spread reports of his death by freezing. But if the poor boy had indeed met with such an accident -- why I think I would commit suicide; for it is out of pure devotion for me that he went. I would never forgive myself for this, for letting him go. That's the truth and only the truth. Don't be harsh, Doctor— forgive him his faults and mistakes, willing and unwilling.

This was in a private letter. How was the matter handled in public? Four months later, Olcott, in Adyar, had the following notice published in the *Theosophist*:

To relieve the anxiety of a great many friends who have been anxious to learn the fate of our brother Damodar K. Mavalankar, and to dispel the rumours of his death which came by way of Sikkim and Darjeeling, we are very happy to state that we have positive news as late as the 7th of June that he has safely reached his destination, is alive, and under the guardianship of the friends whom he sought. The date of his return, however, is yet uncertain, and will probably remain so for a long time to come. (SDM)

In the classic Weberian notion that charisma is something that requires eventual routinization, one encounters the reality that this routinization is not always successful. Charisma can also be thought of as a resource that can be exhausted, and which must eventually be replenished. Clearly, for the Theosophical Society, the Masters were major operators in the charismatic process. Viswanathan, in a footnote, mentions the “disruptive effects of charismatic authority,” and offers the opinion that the Damodar episode, which she glosses as consisting in his renunciation of “property, family and caste in order to spend the remainder of his life in Tibet,” is something that “cracks open the tensions in institutional life caused by discipleship to a charismatic ideal.” (Viswanathan 2000: 12n) So it does, and probably other things as well.

Dharmapala, going on with Koot Hoomi

I have already introduced Dharmapala, who is well known for his campaign, beginning in 1891, to reclaim the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya as a Buddhist shrine, and as the founder of the world's first international and ecumenical Buddhist organization, the Mahabodhi Society. He was born Dom David Hewavitarne in 1864, in Colombo, to a wealthy business family. His life story, which has been dealt with comprehensively elsewhere (for instance, Obeyesekere 1976; Roberts 1997; Trevithick 2006) is not surprisingly richly complicated by the multiple perspectives, enablements, and obstacles that marked the lives of many such “colonials” of the time. He met Olcott and Blavatsky for the first time in 1880, when they visited Ceylon. He was impressed by the Colonel's public lectures, in one of which he noted that no western Theosophist “holds to his

or her ancestral sect, nor has any belief in, or connection with, Christianity in any form whatsoever,” but, on the other hand, seeks connection with Asian religions. (Olcott, 1880:37, and see Prothero 1996: 95) This was attractive, in colonial Ceylon, and Dharmapala recalls his first meeting dramatically:

I remember going up to greet them. The moment I touched their hands, I felt overjoyed. The desire for universal brotherhood, for all the things they wanted for humanity, struck a responsive chord in me. (Dharmapala, 1927:723)

The Theosophists also noted Dharmapala and, when he was invited to travel to India, to the Adyar headquarters, his family objected, but this was not effective against the intentions of the TS founders: at one point when his parents had nearly “dissuaded Col. Olcott to take me to Madras,” Blavatsky swept into the room and declared “if you don’t let him go he will die!” (ADS, Vol. 3, May 1919) In short, Blavatsky was compelling in her presentation of Dharmapala’s destiny, to his family and to Dharmapala himself. He went with Blavatsky and Olcott to India, and it changed his life while at the same time reinforcing his understanding that Blavatsky was a great figure: “The steamer entered the harbour and the Madras Theosophists came on board and received HPB with divine honours. Brahmans prostrated before her.” (ADS, Vol. 3 May, 1918)

By 1884, he was back in Ceylon and had a job with the Education Department. He lived, however, at the TS headquarters and, during this time, was “initiated” by the Colonel as a candidate for adeptship. He claimed to have been satisfied with the requirements. He had, anyway, made a vow of celibacy—as a conventional and temporary act associated with the lay Buddhism—when he was nine years old, and had come to regard the vow as binding; “In my case it had made a permanent impression on my mind.” (Dharmapala, 1927: 721)

He was soon devoted fulltime to Theosophy, and from the mid 1880’s until his visit to Bodh Gaya in north India in 1891, Dharmapala was working primarily with Olcott, and with the Theosophist C.W. Leadbeater, on “Buddhist Education” projects and general Theosophical business. (Tillet, 1982), Thus, his diaries of the time are filled with many mundane office details. “Ordered the peon to arrange the Sandaresa files, “ he wrote, of a Sinhalese newspaper put out by the Colombo Theosophical Society (ADC, Jan. 10 1889) and a few days later, “Got up at 3 am and folded paper.” (ADC, Jan. 16 1889)

In other instances, Dharmapala was advance man and publicist for Olcott. Arriving in Singapore, for instance, “I went on shore. ... and sent a circular to the Sinhalese Buddhists asking them to go on board to welcome the Colonel.” (ADC Jan. 23 1889) In June of 1889, we read the following:

The Buddhist sent to European and American subscribers. The paper has not been sent since 1st April. Sirisena ordered to do work in accounts from 10-3 daily. Notices sent out about Col. Olcott's lecture. Upstairs white washed. C.P.G.P. Wimalasooriya, and L.B. Mahagedera were engaged the whole night in making decorations etc in the Hall for the Col's reception. (ADC June 17 1889)

The Colonel was almost continually booked for lectures, after which books were sold. Sometimes sales were brisk. A typical entry reads “There was a rush for books after the lecture, Anti-Christian tracts were eagerly bought.” Another section tells us that “In the night Colonel lectured at the Sudhammalaya, Fort Galle. Sold books.” (ADC July 3 1889)

It has been nearly unanimous among recent scholars that Dharmapala had an early and fortuitous attachment to Theosophy but was essentially—I use the word advisedly—a Sinhalese Buddhist, and never really a serious Theosophical *chela*. (for instance, see Goonatilake 2005: 143 Malalgoda, 1976: 246, and Obeyesekere, 1972 and 1976). However, I think this is not so, and that he was not only strongly attached to both Theosophical founders, but also to their various occult powers and beliefs. For instance, in the same entry where he records that he sold books at Fort Galle, he notes, without disapprobation, well after Blavatsky had departed for Europe in the wake of the Coulomb “phenomena” scandal, that a theosophical acquaintance had paid a visit “to Mr. Wijeyaratna's where he saw the handkerchief whereon Madame B. made W's name appear *phenomenally*.” (ADC July 5 1889, my emphasis)

He clearly accepted, as Blavatsky and Olcott did, that “phenomena” were a normal part of Theosophy. He also continued to read her works eagerly: later in 1889, for instance, he was pleased to have received “Key to Theosophy” and “Voice of the Silence” from our revered Madame Blavatsky.” He also sometimes relied on Olcott’s powers, as when he was “mesmerized” him by way of cure (ADC Feb. 7-8 1889).

Later in his life, Dharmapala and Olcott quarreled and the close connection between the two was broken, but Dharmapala continued to remain loyal to Blavatsky and to important aspects of Theosophy. After a new “Esoteric Section” of the Theosophical Society was inaugurated, under Blavatsky’s leadership in London, Dharmapala “applied for initiation.” (ADC Jan. 4 1891), and he recorded not too long after that he had received “my certificate of admission to the Esoteric School of Theosophy. [No 1007].” ADC March 4 1891) He took it very seriously:

... My food consists only of bread, rice, milk and jam . . I was assured by the Master that I won't die a premature death? Who knows that I may live to join the sacred brotherhood? ... An upheaval of spirituality should sooner or later take place and blessed is he who has won by his work a place in the Esoteric School of Theosophy. (ADC March 26 1891)

Some scholars claim that Dharmapala completely severed with the Theosophists and even that he was never entirely a convinced member of the group. One occasionally finds support for this in Dharmapala’s diaries, but I think not much. Consider, for instance, a diary entry from 1902

... my early Theosophical experiences. The Masters about whom I learnt from the writings were to me at that time realities. At the bidding of H.P.B. they were prepared to do all sorts of miraculous things. The occult mystery exploded and the T S leaving out the Masters went after Krishna.

There is no theosophy of H.P.B. at present. Now it is Besantine Krishnaism with a dilution of Esotericism and science. (July 12 1902)

One could emphasize the second phrase in this passage, and decide that by 1902 “the Masters” were no longer “realities” for Dharmapala, but this comports badly with the fact that he never repudiated the “Masters.” Indeed, one reads, frequently, strong criticism not so much of Theosophy but of Theosophical imposters or usurpers, among whom he counted, not Olcott and Blavatsky but, primarily, Leadbeater, Besant and Jinarajadasa: “the three imposters are Besant, CWL and Jinarajadas.” (August 14, 1924), or, “the Theosophical Society under Mrs. Besant is a Christianized necromancy.” (ADSU August 14 1925. On the other hand, he is often reading the Mahatma letters, and making such statements as “Koot Hoomi is called a humble follower of the former Gautama Buddha.” So, the problem with the TS, according to Dharmapala, was not that the Masters were exposed as frauds, but that the society, under Blavatsky’s successors in India, had been led away from the ideas of the founders, and toward Christianity and “Krishnaism.” (ADSU July 11 1924) On the other hand, Dharmapala certainly broke with the formal Theosophical Society, after a long history of friction, primarily with Olcott, who had disagreed with him intently in 1896 over proper strategy in the Bodh Gaya case, and then in 1904, when Olcott made disparaging remarks about the Kandy Tooth Relic, a much venerated relic of the Buddha. Finally, after Dharmapala found a stable source of financial support for his own projects, in the person of a wealthy Hawaiian, Mary Foster (1844-1930), he had less reason to seek Olcott’s advice or support. An important point here is that Dharmapala located Mary Foster while returning, through Hawaii, from his first American trip, during the course of which he had, in the company of Annie Besant, attended and spoken at the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago.^{xi} On his arrival in Honolulu, he was greeted by a party of well-wishers including Mary Foster, a member of Hawaii’s wealthy creolized elite: she was herself of English and Hawaiian ancestry, her brother Mark had been a member of Queen Lili’u-okalani’s last cabinet, and the family owned large tracts of land in Oahu and in Honolulu. (Karpziel 1996: 177-85) She was also a Theosophical sympathizer, but the great bulk of her contributions went, not to the Theosophical Society, but to Dharmapala’s own Mahabodhi Society. In short, Dharmapala had moved out into the world on tracks laid by the Theosophical Society.^{xii} How should one judge a charismatic routinization scenario in this case? While Dharmapala obviously cut himself off from the TS itself, he continued to feed off the charisma of its founders, so to say, by maintaining his beliefs in their posited Masters, especially Koot Hoomi, even while establishing his own organization in partial opposition to the TS. He had been the perfect chela, chaste, loyal, and hard-working, and in some ways remained so ever after, writing in his diaries until the day of his death “go on my son, I will help you’-K.H.”

Leadbeater and his protégés: Jinarajadas and Krisnamurti

In the organization of religious groups, control of sexuality is often an issue. Celibacy as we have seen, was important to the Theosophists primarily in regard to the recruitment of new adepts. Married people, and marriage in general, was not forbidden, but the new cadre of religious specialists—the Masters in training—was envisioned as entirely celibate. Erotic susceptibilities were to be guarded against at all times, and in this context, Charles Webster Leadbeater, with his considerable homoerotic interests, supplies new complications for our analysis.^{xiii}

Leadbeater's Theosophical career, which lasted from 1883 to 1915, saw the recruitment and training of some of the society's most famous initiates. He was born in 1847 (Tillett 1982) in Cheshire, and claimed that, as a young child he was taken to Brazil, where his father, a railway engineer, died of malaria and his younger brother was killed during by bandits. There is no evidence for this. (Tillet) Eventually—and this can be substantiated—Leadbeater became an Anglican clergyman, and, by 1880 was a curate in a Hampshire parish called Bramshott, where he organized a number of church activities involving young people: a study group for boys, for instance, and the Juvenile Branch of the Church of England temperance Society.

Leadbeater, like Blavatsky and Olcott before him, was interested in and critical of spiritualism, and contacts he made in the early 1880's inspired him to join the Theosophical Society. He soon left his church post and resolved to sail for Ceylon. (for basic information on Leadbeater see Tillett 1982 and Washington 1993).

For awhile, Leadbeater stayed at the Adyar compound, where he was instructed in proper clairvoyant technique by Blavatsky. Sent to Colombo in 1886, Leadbeater, he acted there as an assistant to Olcott, particularly in regard to activities in regard to the Buddhist Theosophical Society, and lived and worked in the society's very spare headquarters. He was not, however, content to be a lowly initiate. He harbored his own ambitions, and, by way of carrying them forward, became himself an active recruiter of young initiates.

One of Dharmapala's diary entries points to the complications: "Scandalous reports about C.W.L. again current. " (ADC June 7 1889) And, not long afterwards, "Pity that C.W.L. does not take that interest that he ought to take. The time that he spends in the company of boys could well be utilized in a better way." (ADC July 21 1889) At one point Leadbeater was charged with "kidnapping the son of C.D. Hendrick" (ADC Nov. 16 1889), and Washington reports, though I do not see the source for this, that when Leadbeater met one of his most famous "initiates," then-thirteen year old Curumulagge Jinarajadasa, he was so infatuated that he "tried to abduct the lad from his vigilant parents by swimming out to a waiting boat in Colombo Harbor with him." (Washington 1993: 117-18)

However that may be, the parents and the Theosophical Society were eventually convinced to allow Leadbeater to take Jinarajadas to London with him, after, in Dharmapala's words, " C.W.L. showed me Mr. Sinnett's letter about the "Ceylon boy".—An incarnation of on (sic) whom the M's are interested." (ADC Nov. 18 1889). This meant, really, that one of the Master's "precipitated letters" this time through Sinnett, had marked Jinarajadasa as a suitable candidate for advanced occult training. Leadbeater added something of his own to this, claiming that Jinarajadasa was also the

reincarnation of his murdered younger brother.

On their arrival in London, Sinnett became a tutor for A.P. Sinnett's son, with whom he also taught Jinarajadasa, and he supplemented his income through his publications and lecture tours.

Jinarajadasa completed his education, through St. John's College, Cambridge, and became in time, in his own right, a major Theosophical speaker and organizer. He did not, however, become a "Master," or, more to the point, even continue on the celibate path laid down for serious initiates. Indeed, in 1916, he married the feminist and Theosophist Dorothy M. Graham. Though he could have at various times become President of the society and did take on that role temporarily capacity in 1945, he was primarily an organizer and a publicist for the TS, and not a major charismatic source, as was apparently originally envisioned by Leadbeater and his supporters.

Jinarajadasa's early relationship with Leadbeater, and any sexuality that may have been involved, is open to question,^{xiv} but Leadbeater was later accused, in a series of events that put considerable strain on the theosophical society in India, America and Britain, of having advised young men in his care to masturbate regularly, often, in his own words, using a certain amount of "indicative action." (Campbell 1980: 155-57) This piece of Theosophical lore is too complicated to discuss in full here, and has not in my view been adequately addressed, but it does complicate the present analysis to some extent. For the moment, I will mark it as an overdetermination: the basic Theosophical move, of seeking out young subaltern men, for their presumed combination of susceptibility, idealism, loyalty and submissiveness, was obviously intensified, in Leadbeater's case, by sexual attraction.

Krishnamurti: World Teacher

After Annie Besant assumed the Theosophical Presidency in 1907, Leadbeater became one of her closest supporters and aides, and a major generator of new ideas for the TS. Back in India, at the Adyar compound, and in line with previous Theosophical practice but also in a major innovation of it, he continued to look for talented native initiates and, in particular, one who would become a "World Teacher," a position that he created in consultation with and approval from Besant. The final candidate, though not without some early competition, turned out to be Jiddu Krishnamurti, who was "discovered" by Leadbeater in April of 1909, as he bathed in the company of other young men at the Adyar beach. Leadbeater thought that he saw in this young man an "extraordinary aura." Krishnamurti, then fourteen, was also slow at his school lessons, had been chronically ill, primarily with malaria, since early childhood, and utterly impoverished.

Leadbeater convinced the father to allow Jiddu and his brother to move into the Adyar compound, where he promptly took control over all aspects of their life, including education, diet, sports and personal hygiene. He made sure that the boys were washed properly, and he tried to keep them as much as possible away from women. Krishnamurti's father, having second thoughts, sued the society, unsuccessfully, "in a bizarre lawsuit which included charges of deification and sodomy" (Washington 1993: 134). Shortly thereafter, Annie Besant took over the care of the boys, taking them to London permanently, in 1912.

It was in London that Krishnamurti began his remarkable public career. Leadbeater himself left

Theosophy, in 1915, and Besant was unable to persuade Krishnamurti, in 1929, from proclaiming the dissolution of the Order of the Star in the East, the ritual protocol wherein the Theosophists had enshrined the notion of World Teacher (in 1911). “You can form other organizations and expect someone else,” he said, “With that I am not concerned, nor with creating new cages, new decorations for those cages.” (Luytens 1983:)

In some recent writing on the Theosophists, we read the judgment, though usually hedged around by formal recognitions that they were not entirely free of “Orientalist” bias, that they were champions of the subaltern, the colonized, and women. However, this rests uneasily with the fact that they made a habit of taking on subaltern initiates, all of them young males, and subjecting them, or enticing them to take on, more so than others, very high levels of devotion. So, while Viswanathan, for instance, regards the “precipitated” work as a “pivotal representation of a spiritual master who is simultaneously a debased clerical figure coping with the humiliating condescensions of a colonial administration” (Viswanathan 2000: 6), we should remember that the Theosophists themselves used real humans, real debased clerical figures, often, as secretaries and translators, aides, and perhaps as sexual objects.

Damodar died in his attempt to live up to Theosophical ideas, but Jinarajadasa avoided that fate, as did Dharmapala, who also managed to create a major religious institution in his own right, in the form of the Mahabodhi Society. Krishnamurti, for his part, continued his mystical career for many years after his final break with the TS, until his death in southern California in 1986. If he had been recruited into the TS under the umbrella of some one else’s charismatic personality and experiences, this had changed, in 1922, in Ojai, California, where Krishnamurti established his permanent home. It was in Ojai, one suspects, that Krishnamurti began to prepare his future, using the TS as a platform, fueled by his own “revitalizationist” conversion, born of pain and confusion, both physical and mental:

In front of me was my body and over my head I saw the Star, bright and clear. Then I could feel the vibrations of the Lord Buddha; I beheld Lord Maitreya and Master K.H. I was so happy, calm and at peace. I could still see my body and I was hovering near it. There was such profound calmness both in the air and within myself, the calmness of the bottom of a deep unfathomable lake. (Luytens 1983: 237-238)

This was Krishnamurti’s own charismatic empowerment event, based on his Theosophical tutelage, and it fueled his eventual determination to dissolve the Order of the Star in the East, thus going free-lance in regard to his Theosophical managers, whose own particular package of compensators had outlived its expiration date.

Krishnamurti earned a tremendous amount of money in his lifetime, though the financial arrangements were complicated and, toward the end of his life, contested by some of his close associates. Still, he lived very well, supported by proceeds from his own writings, which were copyrighted and sold through a trust entitled Krishnamurti Writings Incorporated, or KWINC. (Washington 193: 277, 363-64) What was his message? Godwin puts it well and, by the way, with

no apparent irony:

Krishnamurti demonstrated in his own person an extreme form of the Theosophical Enlightenment, consisting in his utter rejection of all gods, religions, faiths, scriptures, doctrines, Mahatmas, and gurus. All that was left was a “state,” which he radiated so powerfully that this teacher without a teaching never lacked for audiences—or wealthy devotees. (Godwin 1994: 367)

No trudging off half-clad into the snows at the urging of western religious entrepreneurs for Krishnamurti, though he did occasionally head for the mountains. Switzerland, for instance, hosted some very fine hill stations, like Gstaad: his friend Aldous Huxley reported on a talk he had heard there:

It was like listening to a discourse of the Buddha—such power, such intrinsic authority, such an uncompromising refusal to allow the *homme moyen sensuel* any escapes or surrogates, and gurus, saviours, fuerhers, churches.

Huxley was staying at the Palace Hotel: “we breathe good air, eat large meals, and listen to Krishnamurti,” he reported in a letter (in Bedford 1973: 692). After Gstaad, back to the Ojai until the next lecture tour, there to enjoy, in the language of today’s Chamber of Commerce:

A village—as we locals call it—of about 8,000, Ojai is a vibrant place with so much natural beauty that it gained fame decades ago when the area was photographed to represent Shangri-La in the 1939 movie, *The Lost Horizon*.

It would be hard to invent this, or, for that matter, Ojai’s locally famous “Pink Moment,” when the “day’s fading light bathes the nearby mountains in shades of pink and purple.” The website includes Ojai’s current religious profile: “Well known for its new age gurus and the coexistence of protestants, Catholics and yoga practitioners, a rich fabric of spiritualism has evolved with room for all.” (www.ci.ojai.ca.us/ click “visit Ojai”)

Masters and servants

I remember at a party in New Delhi some twenty years ago, in one of the newer suburbs, which are dubbed “colonies,” being asked by my host to witness his humiliation of a servant. My friend—he was a friend of mine—invited the man into the apartment, from where he had been waiting, on a stair landing which also served as his bedroom, and asked him, in English, “are you a man or a monkey?” The servant, who was from somewhere in Nepal, answered, in English, “a monkey,” at which the whole party laughed. I did not laugh, which created a momentary awkwardness, but we moved on quickly to other things.

At another party in the same neighborhood, not long afterward, after some Johnny Walker whiskey had been consumed by the assembled men—the women were elsewhere—one of the guests told me, the only western man in the room, that “this isn’t the real India.” The real India, he told me, and this was warmly affirmed by the others, was in the villages. Our consideration of this was briefly interrupted by the entry of a servant who came in to check on our supply of snacks.

Not all Theosophical servants were invisible in this way, of course. Madame Blavatsky’s servant Babula, for instance, was quite well known. On one visit to France, as recorded in a letter to Sinnet, a group of Russian aristocrats insisted that Blavatsky attend “their dinners and lunches, their sumptuous palaces and etc.,” and Babula, with his “gold earrings and theosophical livery,” was a great sensation. She added that she might even “have an extra earring put in his nose before I go to Paris.” (Barker 1925: 83-84) And the candidates for adeptship I have described were also highly visible, but all began as servants to the unseen Masters, and also, by the same token, to the TS founders and senior officers.

I want to end, therefore, by invoking an image about servants and their role in the formation and maintenance of the TS. I have already mentioned the debased figure of the “stupid” coolie, so out of Sinnett’s sight that he might have been burying a china cup, at Blavatsky’s request, not too far away from that famous Simla picnic. I have no evidence that this in fact happened, but I do want to emphasize that Blavatsky did indeed have her playful side, which no doubt in some circumstances involved the active collusion of subalterns.

Even here, though, we should not lose sight of the stratification that marked the Theosophical Society from its very beginning. Have a look at a drawing by Albert Rawson (available in K. Paul Johnson’s 1994 *The Masters Revealed*, and also at www.theosophycanada.com/bios/HPB_Bio.htm). Rawson, an American adventurer, artist, and Mason who met Blavatsky in Cairo in 1851—another of the few attested early sightings of her wanderings that comports with her own narratives—met up with her again in New York City. His sketch of the “Lamasery,” the apartment where Blavatsky and Olcott lived in the years 1875-1878, is worth pondering. It features a table in the center foreground of a parlor. Seated there are two white women and two white men engaged in conversation. Behind them is a wall decorated with a jungle scene, including an elephant and a leaping tiger. At the right, in a doorway opening into the parlor, is a servant, in what looks to be Indian dress. The servant in the doorway, in the shadow, is carrying a large salver, with a domed cover. His face is dark, and darker even than it has to be, in the shadows.

Notes:

- i. Campbell reports that, in the United States (for which we have the most reliable data), TS membership was perhaps 6000 in 1896, comprising 103 branches (Campbell 1993:104). This was probably the high point in U.S. membership, after which decline was continuous and steep. According to TS of India annual reports, the accuracy of which has not been independently assessed, membership there did rise through the 1920's, and even saw a rise during the World War II era, but thereafter began a steady decline. (Tingay 2000: 40)
- ii. In my own account here I have not bothered to provide sources for the some of the more well-known features of the movement. For these, one can see lively narrative treatments by for instance, Campbell 1980, and Washington 1993.
- iii. In regard to Old Diary Leaves, Olcott's multi-volume diaries, I have looked at the texts themselves, but for this article have used the online available versions, which are as reliable as the published texts. For the case at hand, see www.theosophical.org/resources/articles/HouseboatJourneywithHPB.pdf.
- iv. One finds these three in various forms, and while Washington writes that it dates from 1896, it may date from an earlier period. Certainly in their broad outline they were apparent from the beginning.
- v. I have seen the published texts here, but have now relied on the online version, which can be seen www.theosociety.org/ and elsewhere. The passage in question is from the first section of Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine: Part I, Cosmic Evolution, Seven STanzans Translated with Commentaries from the Secret Book of Dzyan*.
- vi. Prothero (1996), I think, attributes more to Olcott, in the formulation of these ideas, than do other authors, and perhaps he is right. This should be important in the consideration of some historical problems. If Olcott was more instrumental in the construction of basic TS conventions than is normally recognized, this may well change our view of how repeated scandals over Blavatsky's productions of occult "phenomena" were managed by him. However, this is not germane to the present argument.
- vii. The East India Company had connection with the Anglican Ecclesiastical Establishment in India, but this body was primarily to service the Anglo-Indian community, and was notably non-missionary. As the first Anglican Bishop of Calcutta put it, "We have work enough for years to come, in schools, barracks, hospitals and prisons, and among those who have no religion at all, without interfering with any species of superstition." (in Cox 2004: 249)
- viii. In Blavatsky's case this might be investigated from the angle of her reactions to the loss of a child, or to various of the early adulterous scandals that were rumored about her (Johnson 1994: 34), but these are not even established as to their basic particulars much less attached by her in any text or reminiscence to a religious crisis of any sort. As to Olcott, Prothero discusses his life in good detail, but I do not locate in his work a specific crisis that brings him to Theosophy or to India.
- ix. In this section the excerpts from Sinnett are all from his book *The Occult World* (1885).
- x. There is a famous Portrait of Master Koot Hoomi by a German, Hermann Schmiechen, from 1884, which was apparently done in conformance with Blavatsky's view of him. www.blavatskyarchives.com/hpbphotos12.htm. Obviously this is not what Damodar saw, and I am unable to discover what it was he did see.
- xi. "Some likened me to Christ," wrote Dharmapala of his Chicago speech. It is interesting as well that part of his speech was devoted to evolution which, in its proposal of a mechanism without a god behind it, "cause and effect," he summed up as "Buddhist," which is very much in line with Blavatsky's and Olcott's general

Theosophical ideas. (McMahan 2004: 899-900)

- xii. Karpel estimates (Karpeil 1996: 184) that Foster donated more than \$300,000 to Dharmapala from the late 19th century to the time of her death in 1930, which, conservatively, is worth 5 or 6 millions of today's dollars. She is not, however, counted as a large donor to the Theosophical Society itself.
- xiii. Leadbeater's of great interest to scholars of Theosophy for a variety of reasons, not least of all because he eventually broke off from the main body of the Theosophists in order to become a "Bishop" in the Liberal Catholic Church. The LCC never attained great membership and is today very tiny in membership and influence, but it, like Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy, was one of the significant offshoots of Theosophy that testify at once to the dynamism and instability of Blavatsky's and Olcott's creation.
- xiv. Jinarajadasa denied it, but did little to rescue Leadbeater's reputation, given that he also acknowledged Leadbeater's obvious "liking for every boy" and "antipathy for womankind." In regard to some of the charges brought against Leadbeater, see Dixon 2001: 94-118; Luytens 1975, and Tillet 1982) Luytens offers one, among many interesting stories, of a note retrieved from a Toronto flat where Leadbeater had stayed with one boy. In part it read: "Glad sensation is so pleasant. Thousand kisses darling." Luytens also details what is known of an affair involving Hubert van Hook, who was at one point, prior to Krishnamurti, a candidate for World Teacher. "Hubert later swore to Mrs. Besant that Leadbeater had 'misused' him." (Luytens 1975: 45n).

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