

The late nineteenth century witnessed a renewed interest in all things occult from activities aimed at contacting the souls of the dead to secret societies devoted to unlocking the mysteries of the universe. What set this revival apart from the previous ones, however, was the sheer volume of materials that modern industrial technology allowed. Steam and electrical powered presses churned out hundreds of books and periodicals monthly devoted to occultism and other parapsychological pursuits. Publishers like W. Foulsham and Co. flourished, in a large part, because of the high level of demand for its products and its ability to meet those demands. Consumer culture too felt the impact of occultism as instruments such as the Ouija board were invented and sold on a large scale. The famous Ansley China even got into the game with its Nelrose Cup, which allowed users to know their fortunes all while enjoying a cup of tea.¹

This occult revival has long been a topic for historians and, like the movement itself, has witnessed waves of interest that ebb and flow with the times. One of the most enduring debates centers on whether this late nineteenth century occultism was the last dying breath of age-old superstitions, as argued by Max Weber in what he calls the disenchantment of the world, or something more. Alex Owen, for instance, examines the ways that occultism played a major role in emerging definitions of modernity and scientific thinking.²

This paper seeks to add to the study of this subject by offering another explanation for the growth in interest in the occult and esotericism in Britain in the final decades of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. I suggest that the growth of empire and globalization played a major role in the popularity of esoteric and occult ideas. Through discussing groups like the Theosophists and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, both of which originated out

¹Mark S. Morrison, "The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival: Esoteric Wisdom, Modernity and Counter-Public Spheres," *Journal of Modern Literature* 31 (Winter 2008): 1-22.

²Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 10-11.

in the world and then moved to the United States and England, it will be suggested that esoteric ideas allowed members to contest traditional religious, social, and cultural ideas.

Theosophical Society

The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott and was very influential in the occult revival of the late nineteenth century.

Blavatsky influence, for instance, is seen in the writings and ideas of the founding members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and in other important groups that emerged in the late nineteenth century. The Theosophists also influenced many accomplished thinkers and writers of the time including Annie Besant, William Butler Yeats, Lewis Carroll, Henry Rider Haggard, and Arthur Conan Doyle.³

Blavatsky thought that the Theosophical Society would allow her to reveal the ancient knowledge that she had received from what she called the ‘Mahatmas.’ These ancient truths were presented to the world in her writings and teachings including *Isis Unveiled*, published in 1877, and *The Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888. At the core of Theosophic beliefs were three fundamental ideas. First, there was the belief in the basic unity of all existence, which Theosophists called the One Life, the One Reality. According to Theosophist Geoffrey Farthing, it was “the source of Being, and of all beings; it is in everything—in fact, it is everything, for there is nothing else.”⁴ This oneness incorporated both the material and spiritual world. As Farthing explained, “all forms that come into being, from atoms to men, are animated by the same Life; the forms disintegrate, the Life remains. We human beings are one with it; our life is

³ Susan Greenwood, *The Encyclopedia of Magic and Witchcraft: An Illustrated Historical Reference to Spiritual Worlds* (London: Hermes House, 2005), 170-71.

⁴ Geoffrey A. Farthing, “Basic Ideas of Theosophy,” accessed on February 1, 2014 at <http://blavatskyarchives.com/2scope.htm>.

that Life.”⁵ Even differences and apparent opposites in the universe were façades behind which existed the underlying complete Oneness.

The second fundamental concept was that of universal law which was cyclical, continuously producing universes and forms out of the absolute being. Theosophists, for instance, rejected the belief in a moment of creation and instead looked to what historian Alex Owen calls “an evolutionary flux a continuous ebbing and flowing of matter and spirit.”⁶ As Farthing explained, the periods were like day and night, “with the coming of night, everything seems to disappear, merged into a uniform darkness; as the sun rises, all things once more reappear—temporarily, just as their disappearance had been temporary.”⁷ This process would ultimately cumulate in universal perfection. Thirdly, Theosophists believed in the progress of consciousness developing through these cycles to an ever-increasing realization of unity. On an individual level, this meant the evolution over multiple lifetimes to the realization of ultimate reality.⁸

Both Henry Steel Olcott and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky had travelled extensively to places like Egypt and India and both had a deep and sincere interest in what they encountered. Olcott, in particular, was familiar with the British Orientalist school and also had a deep interest in the cultures of India and in the Indian Renaissance. These interests, combined with Blavatsky’s knowledge of Buddhism were blended to become a large part of Theosophy. On one trip to India in the 1870s, Olcott and Blavatsky met the English writer Alfred Percy Sennett (pronounced sin-nut). Drawing on the knowledge he gained from Blavatsky and Olcott, Sennett

⁵ Farthing, “Basic Ideas of Theosophy.”

⁶ Owen, 34.

⁷ Farthing, “Basic Ideas of Theosophy.”

⁸ Ibid.

published *The Occult World* in 1881 and *Esoteric Buddhism* in 1883 and was influential in establishment the British Theosophical Society.⁹

Theosophy also facilitated the larger circulation of ideas. Its headquarters, for instance, was first established in New York in 1875 but in 1880 the main office was moved to Adyar, India. Branches were also opened in London and other places in Europe. These branches allowed for the construction of global communities as members often moved from branch to branch. The Society also began publishing *The Theosophist* in October 1879 which kept members informed of the latest news from the Society as well as gave members a place to discuss and debate beliefs and doctrines.¹⁰

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn

The Theosophical Society played a role in the creation of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1888. Founded by Samuel Liddell McGregor Mathers, William Wynn Westcott, and William Robert Woodman, the Golden Dawn aimed to bring together various occult ideas and practices. As Westcott noted, “The eastern school of Theosophy and Occultism and our own Hermetic Society of the G.D. are fraternities of students whose predecessors must have come from the same stock of magi as the scientific priests of a remote antiquity. The two Societies, different in modes of teaching and in language, are allied by mutual understanding and respect, and their aim is similar.”¹¹ Like Theosophy, the Golden Dawn also attracted famous members including writers Bram Stoker and W. B. Yeats. Unlike the Theosophical Society, however, the Golden Dawn had a very strict structure and clearly defined ranks of membership. It also emphasized instruction in the use of magic and occult techniques.

⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁰ Morrison, “The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival”:7-8; Owen, 30-34.

¹¹ W. Wynn Westcott, “Historic Lecture on the Golden Dawn,” accessed on February 2, 2014 at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/eso/historic.htm>.

The hierarchy of the Golden Dawn was based on the level of magical knowledge divided into three orders. In order to achieve the first level, members had to be trained in astrology, tarot reading, and divination. The second level required members to have been taught alchemy and astral projection. The third and highest level was thought to be the "Secret Chiefs", spiritual beings who held a true knowledge of the cosmos. The founding document of the organization declared that the Golden Dawn was created with the permission of the Secret Chiefs to study "Occult Science and further investigation of the Mysteries of Life and Death."¹²

Like the Theosophists and other groups, the founders of the Golden Dawn were influenced by religious ideas from other parts of the world. Some of the first documents used in the establishment of the Golden Dawn rituals had been part of the Royal Order of the Sikha and the Sa't Bh'hai founded by Indian Army Officer James Henry Lawrence-Archer.¹³ Other foundational concepts and ideas were taken from Ancient Greece and Egypt. Also, like The Theosophical Society, the Golden Dawn opened temples in several cities to facilitate the movement of people and ideas. The first temple, Isis-Urania was in London in 1888 followed by the founding of the Osiris temple in Yorkshire, the Horus temple in Bradford, and the Amen-Ra temple in Edinburgh. Three temples were also located Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia in the United States.¹⁴

Global Influences

As has been suggested, both the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn emerged in a global context. Blavatsky gained the knowledge that she would later use to create Theosophy while traveling through Asia. More specifically, she argued that it was

¹² Nevill Drury, *Stealing Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Modern Western Magic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁴ Owen, 54.

in Tibet that she met and lived with the Masters, or Mahatmas, that revealed the secrets and doctrines of Theosophy. Blavatsky claimed that this knowledge first came through actual communications in the mountains of Tibet but later was revealed through letters sent periodically to her.

As time went on, Blavatsky incorporated ideas from Hinduism and Buddhism into Theosophy. One of the best examples of this incorporation can be seen in the way that Blavatsky viewed the human body. As historian John Crow has recently demonstrated, prior to travelling through India and Tibet, Blavatsky understood the human body to be comprised of three levels: physical, mental, and spiritual. Following her travels through Asia from 1875 to 1879, she reformulated her understanding of the body to include seven levels. The lowest form was still the physical body and the highest form the spiritual body, but the emotional and mental level contained many more levels.¹⁵ As Blavatsky explained in *The Key to Theosophy*, the body is comprised the Lower Quaternary made up of the “Rupa, or Sthula-sarira which is the physical body; Prana Life, or Vital principled; Linga- sarira, the Astral Body; [and] Kamarupa, the seat of animal desires and passions.”¹⁶ This Lower Quaternary was, as she noted, “the center of the animal man, where lies the line of demarcation which separates the mortal man from the immortal entity.”¹⁷ The higher divisions of the body included the Manas, which is “the higher human mind;” and the Buddhi, the Spiritual Soul, and Atma, the connection to the one world spirit.¹⁸

¹⁵ John L. Crow, “Taming the Astral Body: The Theosophical Society’s Ongoing Problem of Emotion and Control,” *Journal of American Academy of Religion*,” 80 (September 2012), 710-11.

¹⁶ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy* (London: The Theosophical Publishing Company, 2007), 68.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

As Crow further notes, Blavatsky also linked the process of purification of the high divisions of the body from its lower parts to both karma and reincarnation. Blavatsky, Olcott, and Sinnett believed that the body was a vessel for the spirit to endure suffering and, as a result, spiritual growth and eventually the release of cycles of birth suffering and death. Likewise, Theosophists accepted the idea of karma as a spiritual law of action and reaction directly related to reincarnation. As Blavatsky explained,

Those who believe in Karma have to believe in destiny, which, from birth to death, every man is weaving thread by thread around himself, as a spider does his cobweb; and this destiny is guided either by the heavenly voice of the invisible prototype outside of us, or by our more intimate astral, or inner man, who is but too often the evil genius of the embodied entity called man.... When the last strand is woven, and man is seemingly enwrapped in the net-work of his own doing, then he finds himself completely under the empire of this self-made destiny. It then either fixes him like the inert shell against the immovable rock, or carries him away like a feather in a whirlwind raised by his own actions, and this is - KARMA.¹⁹

Blavatsky's understanding of karma and reincarnation has often been criticized by her contemporaries and modern scholars as oversimplifications of complex ideas. These criticisms, however, miss the larger point that, regardless how she interpreted the concepts, she used those influences to create a new system of beliefs and construct larger global communities.²⁰

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn also used global connections, especially connections to Ancient Egypt. As Henrik Bogdan has demonstrated, the officers of the first

¹⁹ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy* (Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1978) 1: 638.

²⁰ Crow, 710-11.

order were given titles that directly referenced Ancient Egypt. The titles included Osiris, Horus, “Thmaa-Est,” and Anubis (ahnew-bis). During the initiation ritual to the first order, the temple was adorned with Egyptian references. For instance, the two major pillars through which initiates walked contained passages from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and, as was mentioned earlier, Golden Dawn temples carried Egyptian names.²¹ As Westcott noted about the influence of Egypt, it “is a curious fact that the classic nations, the Greeks and Romans, have handed down to us but slight glimpses of the Ancient Magic, and this is more notable because Greece succeeded to the mastership of Egypt . . . Greece did indeed succeed to a share in the mysteries of the Egyptians for the Eleusinian Mysteries were copies of the ancient ceremonies of Isis, Osiris and Serapis (serap-is).”²² Westcott is careful to make the point that true spiritual knowledge originated in Egypt and was then passed down through Greece, Rome and then Europe.

Both societies also shared the idea that in one spirit that flowed through everything in existence. To the Theosophists, this spirit was manifested in apparent contradictions like the simultaneous existence of good and evil or wealth and poverty. To the founders of the Golden Dawn, there was only God, and “all various gods, angels, and demons” were just different appearances of it.²³

Conclusion

Both the Theosophists and the members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn used ideas and concepts taken from other parts of the world to construct spiritual beliefs that existed in opposition to not only Christianity, but also to larger dichotomies which existed in the imperial

²¹ Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), 140.

²² Westcott, “Historic Lecture.”

²³ Bogdan, 140.

setting. In so doing, both groups undermined socially constructed divisions and hierarchies and created cultural spaces of resistance. India and Egypt, for instance, became not just places under British control, or places in need of civilizing, but rather sources of true and greater knowledge. In addition, these places were not merely reduced to objects of fantasy, as Edward Said suggested, but stood along such places as Ancient Greece and Rome, as genuine contributors in the quest for a greater spirituality.