

Chapter 1

Introduction: Methodological Issues and Thematic Categories

1.1 Explanation of Terms and Parameters of This Study

The wording of the title, “*The Theosophical Movement of the Nineteenth Century: the Legitimation of the Disputable and the Entrenchment of the Disreputable*” is suggestive, implicit with issues we will examine in the substance of this work. Before we begin though, we must proffer a rationale for choosing and using these terms. To avoid ambiguity and minimise misconception, it seems reasonable to state our intentions at the outset. Following this we will examine some of the inherent methodological issues, which must be taken into account when dealing with theosophical materials. We shall conclude this opening chapter by outlining the thematic areas this study will encompass, followed by a brief survey of relevant literature, and our reasons for choosing this field of study as our topic of interest.

The modern theosophical movement is the object of our attention.¹ Defining the parameters of this movement for our purposes requires an unavoidable bracketing out of both early pre-nineteenth century proto-foundational roots as well as most twentieth century history. Those areas will be discussed in due course tangentially where applicable, but won’t be the major focus of our study. Thus our historical scope will primarily focus on the period between 1875 when the Theosophical Society was formed, and 1907, when Annie Besant was elected President. We will concentrate particularly on

¹ The word “theosophy” is a translation from the Greek, meaning “divine wisdom.” It was introduced in the third century and is credited to the Neo-Platonist Ammonius Saccas. Subsequently, individuals with mystical and gnostic inclinations adopted the term sporadically, most notably Pseudo-Dionysus in the sixth century, Jacob Boehme in the early seventeenth century, and Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin in the late eighteenth century. In searching for an appropriate name for their fledgling organization in 1875, Charles Sotheran, one of the original members, came upon the word “Theosophy” while thumbing through the pages of a dictionary. The organization was then named the Theosophical Society. In subsequent written usage, there is no strict consistency about capitalisation or small case lettering of the words “theosophy,” “theosophist,” or “theosophical.” There are discrepancies, which appear from writer to writer. Capitalisation usually signifies special respect or importance, a differentiation based on personal considerations or patterned after other familiar examples. In the writings of Madame Blavatsky, “Theosophy” and other derivations are often capitalised wherever used. To avoid confusion, we shall only use capitalisation when referring to the specific organisational entity, the Theosophical Society. For normal written usage, such as in “theosophical movement,” “theosophical ideas,” and so on, we shall stick with the non-capitalised forms. However, in quotes and citations there will be an inconsistency dependent on the practice of the specific writer.

the theosophical movement as it coalesced and took form primarily under Madame Blavatsky in the late nineteenth century. We also will follow the movement past her lifetime into the early twentieth century and the first organisational crisis of succession, noting the conflicting claims to authoritative status by those vying for the Presidency of the Theosophical Society.

However, before discussing the theosophical movement, the consideration of worldview form, function and content becomes an important prefatory issue. We must establish a prior theoretical foundation for our interpretation of the theosophical worldview in relation to historical and sociological processes. The types of traditional mindset of a society, ways of perceiving the world, choice of evaluative criteria and so on are culturally created and transmitted. The emergence of the Theosophical Society in the nineteenth century can only be understood fully by recognising that it appeared as a protest against conventional and habitual ways of envisioning reality.

It can therefore be said that our study most properly pertains to the developmental process underlying the unique body of ideas and beliefs constituting the theosophical worldview during its formative years. Rather than simply describing or evaluating theosophical doctrine, or exclusively tracing historical events, we have opted to examine how the initial theosophical worldview of the late nineteenth century coalesced and took its specific unique form. We shall try to identify and analyse the discrete and essential constituent elements that collectively contributed to the emergence of this unified, coherent, encompassing way of envisioning reality.

The formal theosophical worldview was explicitly created to provide an alternative to the dominant Western mainstream orientations represented through the institutions of religion, philosophy, and science. These, as conventionally recognised, were felt by Madame Blavatsky and her supporters to be severely demeaning of the intrinsic spiritual dignity of humankind and bereft of their potential worth and value. Thus the theosophical system of ideas, beliefs, objectives, and ideals was crafted to be both a critique of mainstream traditions of truth and knowledge as well as a more intellectually appealing and emotionally satisfying plausible alternative, positing what was believed to be a superior and more accurate esoteric representation of reality. It can therefore be recognised as being forged through a dialectic in which the vision articulated

by Blavatsky and shared by her sympathisers inevitably and necessarily was shaped and structured in light of contemporary sentiments, standards, and expectations. No matter how radical the theosophical worldview may have been, it yet could only aspire to legitimacy by confronting established tradition rather than ignoring or minimising the apparent differences.

What we are dealing with are the dynamics of this confrontational process. While Madame Blavatsky and the other theosophical leaders were attempting to debunk and refute the visions of reality represented through mainstream institutions of knowledge, they yet were painstakingly attempting to attain legitimacy by providing rehabilitated, revised, and renewed content felt to be more accurate and meaningful. This “esoteric” orientation reflected a positive valuation and promotion of occult and mystical principles and beliefs, and characterised the theosophical perspective on reality. This process of simultaneous critique and constructivism was an ongoing phenomenon, most clearly identifiable in a few critical areas intrinsic to theosophical worldview formation. We have isolated these and categorised them as the fields of motivational relevancy, synthetic knowledge, extraordinary experience, supernatural authority, and sacred text equivalency. As well, it is important to note that worldview formation is more than the pure representation of the visions or insights of individuals, and involves many social factors. Ideas and beliefs do not exist in isolation. It is necessary to examine the significant events that transpired during our time frame of theosophical history in light of familiar sociological terms. This allows a broader overview of the personal and social dynamics underlying the formation of the early theosophical worldview. Thus what our study will emphasise are the significant elements of the attempted legitimation process and the efforts to construct what was intended to be a consensually preferable alternative vision of reality.

Having delineated some of the preliminary parameters of our approach to the theosophical movement, we must now continue to clarify our title description. This entails firstly explaining our use of the term “legitimation.” We will interpret it as a socially oriented process of explanation, rationalisation, and justification of encompassing belief and ideational systems. Berger expresses a more concise sociological view.

By legitimation is meant socially objectivated knowledge that serves to explain the social order.²

In our examination of the theosophical movement, we will focus on the process whereby certain types of purported extrasensory, non-rational, numinous and mystical forms of experience and related types of knowledge were subject to an intended rehabilitation process. These varieties of abnormal, unusual, normally inexplicable phenomena, and systems of knowledge dependent on their credibility, were consensually evaluated as dubious, disputable, disreputable, by the authoritative representatives of the dominant institutions of legitimation, such as the Christian Church and the most prestigious schools of empirical science. The theosophical intention was to try and apply a different set of evaluative and interpretive criteria, to attain a new legitimacy and dignity for ideas and experiences mostly dismissed contemptuously or ignored as unworthy of serious consideration. These efforts aimed at reclaiming paranormal and mystical phenomena as actual and factual, natural manifestations of latent human experiential capacities. In attempting to rehabilitate, revise, reformulate ideas and beliefs mostly discredited in the late nineteenth century, theosophical theoreticians essentially were trying to strip away what they felt were the accumulation of centuries of accrued superstition and misconception. The successful accomplishment of that objective would validate the inclusion of such premises in wider social discourse, even if just as plausible hypotheses. By achieving these ends, such disputable content could then be at least somewhat legitimated into “socially objectivated knowledge” presented as an alternative to the dominant prevalent religious, philosophical, and scientific worldviews of the time.

From the theosophical position, those types of extraordinary experience were presented as sources of credible cognitive knowledge, albeit uncommon and atypical. However, when filtered through mainstream nineteenth century Western categories of interpretation, were simply considered dubious, suspect, deceptive, and at best, “disputable.” As were the cosmological and anthropological schemas propagated in theosophical teachings. The theosophical movement was animated by a desire to “explain the social order” in the widest sense, and reality itself, in a radically different

² Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969, p. 29.

way than prevailed through the primary institutions of legitimation (mainly the consensus opinions of the socially entrenched religious, philosophic and scientific status quo). Though fully cognisant of the disputability of its doctrines and claims, the theosophical leaders insisted on the validity of their vision, and were fully committed to the worldview so represented.

In attempting to prepare, shape, and articulate a view of reality incorporating disputable claims about the potentials of human experience and of knowledge about the hidden workings of the universe, the theosophical theoreticians, proselytisers, and supporters entered the fray in a conflict of ideas. Their movement was not the only one of its type in that social milieu, but it was certainly the most conceptually comprehensive and ambitious. And its dominant leader, spiritual inspiration, and ideational source, Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) was in the forefront of the battle. As an icon and figurehead of this alternative way of representing reality, her own personal behaviour and history became subjects of public curiosity and scrutiny. By force of her charismatic personality, confrontational and argumentative persona, exotic life of adventure, and alleged participation in a variety of extrasensory episodes, she was often classified as “disreputable” in the larger social environment. Essentially, the perceived private and personal, as well as the public and professional aspects of her life were open to incessant criticism and judgment. To those who thought her a charlatan, opportunist, dilettante, immoral reprobate, her reputation was predominantly and irrevocably negative. For those who trusted the validity of her position and thought favourably (or at least neutrally) of her as a person, the view of her disreputability was muted or rejected. Her personal flaws were considered unavoidable “karmic” by-products of the important role she held as prophetic disseminator of a spiritually oriented vision. Where critics saw delusion, deception and manipulation, supporters saw exceptional and unusual qualities, supported with a supernatural rationale to justify what may have seemed unsettling to outsiders. Where supporters attributed contradictory, inconsistent, intimidating behaviour and opinion to Blavatsky’s “colourful personality,” critics saw a more cynical and self-serving attitude in operation.

However, Blavatsky’s disreputability was not confined to the domain of public opinion. Besides undertaking the daunting task of constructing an unorthodox,

unconventional, and controversial ideational system, she aggressively initiated challenges or responded to personal and doctrinal attacks by contemporary critics. Her targets most often were the defenders of the status quo in religion and science, creating or sustaining an environment of perpetual tension, simmering with hostility towards “enemies” and “accusers.” This confrontational stance is evident in many of her writings, and illustrates her intense desire to gain a degree of respect and recognition while yet challenging many of the cherished premises of orthodox systems of thought. In that social context her reputation as personally disreputable increased with every controversy. And in one controversy of particular note, the investigation conducted by Richard Hodgson of the Society for Psychical Research, her personal credibility and that of the society both suffered severe and long lasting harm, reinforcing the notion of disrepute. And by extension, the theosophical movement itself was likewise perceived as dubious, both because of substantive doubts about the merits of the theosophical worldview, and through association with Blavatsky and others of questionable standing, who nonetheless challenged the legitimacy of the ensconced primary worldviews.

The efforts aimed at entrenching the Theosophical Society as a viable institution worldwide required the powers of organisation, persuasion and argumentation. And an unflinching devotion, sense of mission, and conviction of the essential truth of the cause. Blavatsky and others equally outside of mainstream orthodoxy and likewise considered disreputable by their enemies undertook the effort to entrench the movement wherever opportunity presented itself. And in so doing, essentially challenged the foundations of the dominant traditional Western institutions of legitimation while positing an alternative based on a mix of non-traditional sources. However, when circumstances indicated the likelihood of a more sympathetic reception of the theosophical message elsewhere than in the West, and opportunity presented itself, the founders of the Theosophical Society availed themselves of the chance to explore possible new connections and alliances in India, Ceylon, and elsewhere in Eastern countries of their era. Yet, even when adapting and reformulating doctrinal content and social objectives in the East, the theosophical movement still was largely focused on confronting and challenging the primary Western vision of reality. Societal branches were established and proliferated throughout many Western countries. Theosophical literature was often focused on issues pertaining to

Western sensibilities. And Western-based enemies and critics continued to confront the movement and reiterate insinuations of disreputability, regardless of geographical location.

In the theosophical system, many provocative doctrines and conceptual premises were integrated into a comprehensive schema, which attracted varying degrees of interest and curiosity from many outside the movement. However, perhaps the most controversial of all theosophical principles, and the most disreputable to many, was the claim that a group of “Mahatmas,” or “perfected humans,” were actively working through and guiding the Theosophical Society, with their objective being the acceleration of spiritual evolution for humanity at large. The belief in this kind of secret spiritually advanced brotherhood operating covertly through an unbroken span of time was not a new one, having been part of the lore found in Rosicrucian and Masonic traditions as well as in popular fiction, such as the contemporary novel *Zanoni*, by Bulwer-Lytton. This premise was one ardently insisted upon as being literally and factually valid by Blavatsky, and perhaps defined the tone of the movement in her lifetime. Subsequently this doctrine acquired additional layers of interpretative connotation, becoming the dominant controversy and perhaps most disreputable element of the movement to critics. As well, many other incidents, issues, controversies engulfed the theosophical movement in its attempt to gain a wider public footing as a serious and viable worldview, deserving of respect and consideration from those willing to acknowledge the validity of its main principles.

We will attempt to explore events and issues from a variety of vantage points, recognising the theosophical movement as a social and historical phenomenon, emerging as a reaction to the dominant worldviews at its time of modern origin. And as a thorough and determined attempt to create a lasting ideational legacy, embodying spiritual values and an enhanced visionary worldview in the form of a specific nexus of ideas, ideals, beliefs, symbols.

1.2 Methodological Issues

1.2.1 Methodological Issue 1 – Questions Surrounding the Classification of Theosophy as a Subject of Religious Studies

Moving on to the problems of dealing with theosophical materials, we find that there are a number of issues that must be considered before actually embarking on the task at hand. One cannot simply delve into the subject matter without first examining possible sources of confusion or misconception. In fact, assurance that the theosophical movement can be comprehensively studied under the auspices of a particular discipline is the first issue that must be confronted.

The modern theosophical movement is an intriguing field of study for those interested in the history of ideas and of non-traditional social religious entities. In fact, part of the intrigue, and a hint of the necessity for a broad approach, is the very assumption that theosophy itself (as formally represented in various societies, lodges, organisations) is in fact, identifiable exclusively or primarily as a “religion” as typically understood and delineated. Although there are many definitions and perspectives about what constitutes religion, pursuing the variations and nuances and the positions from which they emanate takes us far away from our task. For instance, the very assumption that religion can be adequately defined as an all-encompassing concept is open to challenge.

Religion is not a native term; it is a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define. It is a second-order, generic concept that plays the same role in establishing a disciplinary horizon that a concept such as “language” plays in linguistics or “culture” plays in anthropology. There can be no disciplined study of religion without such a horizon.³

Given the necessity for a somewhat selective and pragmatic definition that will adequately serve our purposes of providing such a “horizon”, we must establish a conceptual framework that comfortably works with the data of the theosophical enterprise to be in discussed. The parameters of the following approach seem to provide such a position.

³ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Religion, Religions, Religious*, in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 281.

To practice history of religions in a fashion consistent with the disciplines claim of title is to insist on discussing the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions of those discourses, practices, and institutions that characteristically represent themselves as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine.⁴

The defining criterion for a religious orientation would thus seem to be a commitment to a set of beliefs, ideas, values that would be considered essentially spiritual, grounded in the transcendent, and which are expressed through, and embodied within, the most efficacious cultural forms in particular historical and social environments. The institution of religion, with its social, doctrinal, and value concerns sanctioned by transcendental premises of one variety or another, has historically been considered the primary representation of spiritually oriented worldviews. And the modern theosophical movement unequivocally was founded on a firm and explicit spiritual orientation. However, although therefore “religious” in terms of essential values, ideas, and beliefs, the founding theosophical theoreticians insisted that they were not promulgating a sectarian “religion.” This distinction between the esoterically articulated presumed pure universal spiritual source, and the assumed flawed and ossified formulations of exoteric religions was a key element in theosophists establishing their sense of a distinctive identity.

As we shall see, one of the initial organisational intentions of the founders of the theosophical movement was to emphasise that theosophy was a synthesis of diverse streams of thought, inclusive of particular core spiritual themes, yet not restrictive or exclusivist. A typical theosophical statement of position regarding religious stance would be as follows;

Theosophy is the essential truth underlying all religions and does not recognize any one religion as being supreme over the others or as the last word of truth.⁵

Though positioned as aloof from the confines and perceived limitations of, and commitments to, any single specific external religious institution or system, proclamations about embodying or synthesising the “essential truth underlying all

⁴ Bruce Lincoln, *Thesis on Method*, in *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, ed. Russell T. McCutcheon, London and New York: Cassell, 1999, p. 395.

⁵ H. T. Edge, *Theosophy and Christianity*, retrieved from The Theosophical University Press Online, 1998, <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/gdpmanu/th-xity/th-xity1.htm>>. (Accessed February 25, 2002).

religions” certainly seems to place the movement legitimately within the purview of the discipline of religious studies. The theosophical “discourses, practices and institutions” indeed are intended to embody and reflect “eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine” beliefs and values, although other motives and objectives coexist as ends to be pursued. The theosophical worldview is one such representation, a unique and idiosyncratic ideational and value saturated system of ideas, principles, and beliefs, shaped by “the temporal, contextual, situated, interested, human, and material dimensions.” And because the explicit religious quotient and focus is only part (albeit, perhaps the most essential and defining) of a more complex system, incorporating other secular aims, it seems appropriate to try and draw upon the widest set of methodological options.

Historically, much of the doctrinal theosophical content, various points of institutional emphasis, selective prioritisation of intentions and objectives, have been malleable and easily re-configurable to suit needs and adapt to the requirements of the occasion. Theosophical teachings and the theosophical approach thus could be tailored specifically to appeal to those both without commitment to a specific religion as well as those desirous of a different way of interpreting and evaluating existing traditions, with or without extensive or exclusive use of the apparatus of religion per se. As institutionalised in 1875 in New York City, the Theosophical Society presented itself to the public in the broadest possible light, carefully crafting objectives and by-laws intended to appeal to the general speculative inquirer. The initial Objects were

“... to collect and diffuse a knowledge of the laws which govern the universe.”⁶ And to reiterate the stance of neutrality, objectivity, social egalitarianism, and the desire to pursue truth for its own sake, the initial Preamble carefully spells out the position to be adopted by the fledgling society in its self-presentation to the public.

Whatever may be the private opinions of its members, the society has no dogmas to enforce, no creed to disseminate. It is formed neither as a Spiritualistic schism, nor to serve as the foe or friend of any sectarian or philosophic body. Its only axiom is the omnipotence of truth, its only creed a profession of unqualified devotion to its discovery and propaganda. In considering the qualifications of applicants for membership it knows neither race, sex, colour, country nor creed...⁷

⁶ Josephine Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*, Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1938, p. 81.

⁷ Ibid.

As well as carefully and methodically trying to present to the public a neutral starting point, where previous social and ideological biases would be recognised as counterproductive and antithetical to the pursuit of “the omnipotence of truth,” the emphasis was continually placed on appeal to all forms of inquiry. Thus there would be equal legitimacy for the devout religious orientation, the rational philosophical perspective, the detached scientific approach, or any sincere seeker after compatible forms of truth. This fundamental organisational premise has persisted amongst the various factions over the duration of the movement. For instance, this statement comes over fifty years after the first public assertion of objectives.

Theosophy touches life at all points and illuminates every problem, but, naturally, different people find certain aspects more attractive than others—especially at the beginning. To the most intuitive, who immediately perceive the practical importance of its teachings for the happiness and welfare of humanity, this is the greatest incentive to its study; others appreciate its profound speculative features; some are attracted by its revelation of the inner meaning and basic unity of the great world religions; and there are many who prefer the scientific aspect, which includes the rational explanation of occult phenomena.⁸

And yet, despite explicit attempts to present to the public an image of a diversified non-sectarian enterprise, with rational and intellectual avenues of approach, theosophy has most commonly been identified and defined as a particular religious orientation. For instance, over a hundred years after the founding of the Theosophical Society, it is perceived primarily in the following terms.

A religious movement founded by Madame H. P. Blavatsky and Annie Besant...⁹

However, the original Theosophical Society was legally classified not a religious body per se, but recognised as an organisation teaching the study of religions. In the 1880s a judge in St. Louis had this opinion when dealing with a case of incorporation.

To teach religions is educational, not religious. “To promote the study of religions” is in part to promote the study of the history of man. I add the

⁸ Charles J. Ryan, *What is Theosophy*, retrieved from The Theosophical University Press Online, 1998, <<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/gdpmanu/ryan-wh/wit-hp.htm>>. (Accessed February 26, 2002).

⁹ *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, ed. Alan Bullock, Oliver Stallybrass, Stephen Trombley, London: Fontana Press, 1988, p. 858.

subordinate finding that the Society has no religious creed and practices no worship.¹⁰

And yet technically, according to that judgment, if theosophy wasn't a religion as familiarly recognised, why has it been predominantly interpreted as one? Perhaps the reason was that even though not legally presented as such, nor constitutionally organised as one, a significant portion of its doctrines and the manifest behaviours and attitudes of a substantial portion of its membership gave reason to identify the movement more as belonging to the category of religion than anything else. Arguments for viewing it as a primarily secular speculative enterprise have been made. And a case could likewise be framed to suggest that a major function was the objective investigation of paranormal phenomena. And yet, the interpretation as a "religious movement" was the one that most permeated public consciousness.

Another one of the main reasons was associative. In the early days of the movement, the implications and connotations surrounding the movement derived from its connections to occult, mystical, and esoteric religious subject matter. And in a later phase of the movement, the main association was with its partial reconfiguration as a ceremonial, devotion-prioritised entity. This most obvious example of theosophy appearing nearest the form of a traditional religious entity evolved through the nineteen twenties with the millenarian fervour surrounding belief in the immanent appearance of the world saviour. With the Theosophical Society sanctification and justification of the anointment of Jiddu Krishnamurti as this world saviour, and his subsequent sudden and dramatic repudiation of the role, a major portion of the theosophical movement most closely took on the look of a cult.¹¹

Besides associative connections to religion in public consciousness, many of the elements of a religious rather than secular identification can be clearly observed, even though the Theosophical Society at its very inception was intending to present itself as

¹⁰ Sylvia Cranston, *H.P.B. The Extraordinary Life & Influence of Helena Blavatsky*, New York: G. Putnam's Sons, 1993, p. 147.

¹¹ A special-interest offshoot of the Theosophical Society, devoted to the "coming of the World Teacher" was established in 1911 and called Order of the Star in the East. It was dissolved in 1929 by Krishnamurti himself when he repudiated all messianic claims and dissociated himself from all religious organizations. See Roland Vernon, *Star in the East: Krishnamurti, the Invention of a Messiah*, New York: Palgrave, 2000.

more than a religious orientation. The contents of its doctrines, rationale for its ethical conduct, its most cherished ideals are grounded in an affirmative and explicit belief in the spiritual sustenance of reality. So, despite efforts to appear purely non-sectarian and intellectually detached from partisan religious positions, the theosophical movement appears to fall more within than outside the field of religious studies. The history, sociology, psychology and philosophy of religion adequately provide the means of investigation. As well, the hermeneutical approach adds a dimension of inner meaning, revealing more of the intentions and feelings implicit in written documents. So despite continued efforts to present the movement as a secular speculative endeavour or branch of scientific inquiry, it most naturally and logically has fallen under this purview more than of any other discipline.

1.2.2 Methodological Issue 2 – The Rationale for Classification as a Sub-Genre of Esoteric Studies and The Importance of Madame Blavatsky

However, because the Theosophical movement has shown an intrinsic fluidity in the treatment and interpretation of conceptual materials (i.e. shifts in prioritisation of the three main objects of the society and subsequent positions taken in interpreting subject matter), and the way it has publicly represented itself (i.e. as a quasi-scientific investigative body, a secularly based speculative enterprise, a repository of supernatural knowledge, a link in a historic esoteric tradition), a thorough examination of any facet of the movement must avail itself of as many methodological tools as can reasonably be applied without distorting historical facts or offering one-dimensional reductive suggestions. As well, because of the contents, objectives, self-proclaimed links to past occult, mystical, spiritually oriented traditions, it is quite apparent that the theosophical movement falls more precisely under the specialised auspices of “esoteric studies” within the broad discipline of religious studies. All facets of the field of religious studies can certainly be utilised, but this emerging sub-genre seems especially appropriate as an intellectual locale for the study of this movement. Rather than receiving treatment primarily as a deviant and eccentric cult, or as a minor curiosity, the theosophical movement can be recognised as a fully legitimate expression of religious and spiritual impulses, utilising much of the pre-existing and contemporary conceptual apparatus

pertaining to esoteric and spiritual traditions. The contributions of Hanegraaff in *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, Versluis in *Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism*, and Faivre in *Access to Western Esotericism* particularly are important, helping to sharpen the historical focus and bring fresh methodological clarity and conceptual vigour to a domain traditionally treated superficially, from the vantage point of a vested emotional bias, or dismissed as confused and confusing. Hanegraaff for instance, sees the need for

... the study of western esotericism not to restrict itself to empirico-historical description of narrowly-circumscribed currents and personalities, but also to develop interpretive theories pertaining to various dimensions of western esotericism in general—or, at least, large and significant sub-areas of it.¹²

The theosophical movement is certainly at least a “significant sub-area” of esotericism, and requires “interpretive theories” which venture beyond the “narrowly-circumscribed currents and personalities” which usually are the major focus of attention. And Versluis had these observations about the difficulty of a purely empirical methodology applied to this category of religious studies.

What is more, we cannot adequately investigate, singly or comparatively, variants of esotericism without an awareness from the outset that we are entering into unfamiliar territory for the strictly rationalist or scientific mind, and that in order to understand it in any genuine way, we will have to learn at least imaginatively to enter into it.¹³

This acknowledgment that unfamiliar academic territory is the subject matter of study, and that a rigid rationalism or scientism will likely be incapable of eliciting genuine understanding also suggests the need for a comprehensive and proactive approach. By stating that the investigator has to try to incorporate a more imaginative understanding, issues are raised about the boundaries of objective scholarship. However interesting and important, such disputes and debates are beyond the scope of our topic. Suffice it to say that we shall endeavour to utilise the methods that seem most appropriate for particular issues. A detached objectivity is necessary to try and understand social and historical events and evaluate claims that clearly were intended to be judged in terms of factual

¹² Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Some Remarks on the Study of Western Esotericism*, retrieved from Esoterica, 1999, <<http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/Hanegraaff.html>>. (Accessed February 26, 2002).

¹³ Arthur Versluis, *What is Esoteric? Methods in the Study of Western Esotericism*, retrieved from Esoterica, 2002, <<http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeIV/Methods.htm>>. (Accessed February 26, 2002).

accuracy. But with the theosophical movement being a “variant of esotericism,” the ideas, beliefs, experiential expectations represent an orientation to the world which is expressed through use of its own idiosyncratic terminology, symbolism, and conceptual model of reality. To “imaginatively enter into it” requires a hermeneutical explication of textual materials, where different levels of meaning may be discerned. Trying to understand the frame of reference and the values, intentions, and motives of the author allows a broader understanding of the actual text or document. However, even such an approach may be problematic. For instance, Madame Blavatsky adamantly insisted upon the historical veracity and literal meaning of many key theosophical premises. However, she also noted the need for symbolic encoding and decoding of esoteric knowledge. So the intent and the implications of her words must be carefully scrutinised to try and elucidate her specific message at any given time. Dealing with theosophical materials, we can aspire to show both “inner” and “outer” layers of significance where each seems most evident.

We feel that the most productive way to extract the maximum value from source material is to attempt to apply the methods that most effectively help us uncover the most seemingly logical and transparent meanings pertaining to the particular issue at hand. At times, statements and events can be readily comprehended without recourse to secondary forms of analyses. And in other situations, the apparent surface meanings do not convey the full depth of concern of the author. It should be stressed too that we shall be taking a thematic rather than a chronological and purely descriptive historical approach. Each main chapter will attempt to isolate and elucidate particular issues, which collectively, will be shown to logically cohere and demonstrate our position. We will outline these major themes shortly. However, we must first discuss some of the problems faced in any treatment of theosophical materials.

At the outset it must be stated that our intention is not to produce a strict linear historical account of the role of seminal figures, significant events, and accomplishments of the theosophical movement itself. Rather, we will discuss the personages and pertinent historical events as they relate to our chosen themes. In particular, we will focus on the character, contributions, and argumentative style, of Madame Blavatsky. As the primary source of theosophical knowledge and theory, supported by her own claims of skilled

supersensory ability, and credited by others with demonstrating such prowess, she must be the central focus of any study of the early (modern) theosophical movement. We will examine her charismatic leadership role within the theosophical movement, as well as the content of her message and the manner in which she crafted her arguments.

Concerning other figures, not all personages contributed to the same degree, or in the same ways, though many played significant roles in various phases of the movement. We shall direct most of our attention to Madame Blavatsky because of the unique multiple functions she had in the movement. Her creative and inspirational impetus was far more significant than any other figure, and her uniqueness as authoritative magician, prophetess, and priestess as it were, defined how theosophy was publicly perceived in the late nineteenth century.

1.2.3 Methodological Issue 3 – The Treatment of the Premises of Occultism

A major issue that must be discussed before embarking on an analysis of any esoteric system of thought is the treatment of the claims of occult, psychic, abnormal, mystical and similarly unusual but intense forms of subjective experience. A number of questions immediately come to mind. Firstly, the very disputability of such experiential claims has traditionally engendered scepticism.

The main problem ... has been the pervasiveness in intellectual circles of a worldview that makes examination of the evidence, let alone open-minded examination, very difficult. Because of the resulting “absolute disdain on a priori grounds,” the leaders of the scientific, philosophical, and theological communities have been in no position to do anything to mitigate the “indiscriminate credulity” that often abounds in other circles.¹⁴

Such entrenched cynicism would immediately dismiss all such claims as unworthy of serious consideration at the outset. If the sceptical perspective denies factual authenticity, are there other approaches in which these forms of experience are accorded more legitimacy? Should the claims of extrasensory and transcendently cognitive states of consciousness be treated empathetically and accepted as empirically factual because the subject makes such assertions and presumably believes them to be true? Can they be evaluated as psychologically real to the percipient, but not necessarily valid as

¹⁴ David Ray Griffin, *Parapsychology, Philosophy, and Spirituality*, Albany, New York: State University of

consensually binding objectively verifiable statements of fact? Or should a purely sceptical scientific standard be applied? McClenon for instance avoids such true/false, real/illusionary dichotomies by stating that such phenomena, which he terms “wondrous events,” are sociologically real because they are perceived to be authentic modes of experience by particular social groups, who behave and believe with that premise taken as an undisputable given. He considers scientifically anomalous phenomena such as extrasensory perception, apparitions, out-of-body experiences, spiritual possession, contact with the dead, and other similar phenomena to be examples of such wondrous events. As well, though not specifically encompassing spiritual and religious experiences, such as mystical states of consciousness, he sees a direct connection. Even fraudulent claims to such experience may be accepted as important because they are considered a form of oral literature and reinforce folk beliefs of believers.

Many wondrous experiences support belief in spiritual powers or forces. They play a role in the development of religious ideologies. The universal elements that recur within these episodes contribute to uniformities within folk belief. However, the capacity for experiencing wondrous events is not evenly distributed. Some people report far more incidents than others. Those who possess the greatest ability to experience anomalous episodes tend to fulfil special roles within their societies. They develop and perform ceremonies that include wondrous exhibitions.¹⁵

Where theosophy is concerned, there are a number of implications. Madame Blavatsky clearly was one who was considered to be proficient at experiencing wondrous events by her followers, and assumed a special role within the theosophical movement. At times, the anomalous phenomena she was associated with at certain public occasions may be likened to “wondrous exhibitions,” although the likelihood of some quotient of fraud seems a reasonable conclusion. As well, the use of the term “wondrous events,” while an apt way to characterise of such phenomena, connotes too much of an impression of the miraculous to totally fit the theosophical profile. Blavatsky and most theosophists insist upon the belief that supersensory abilities are part of the natural order, latent capacities for most, but consciously and wilfully developed by those following the path of esoteric wisdom. Thus, we have chosen to use the term “extraordinary” to indicate

New York Press, 1997, p. 33.

¹⁵ James McClenon, *Wondrous Events: Foundations of Religious Belief*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994, p. 1.

more of a theosophical tonality. As well, McClenon refrains from using qualifying words when referring to the manifestation of these kinds of phenomena. He feels that the sociological reality precludes the necessity for questions based on empirical criteria. However, certain difficulties arise when treating purely theosophical materials. A persistent theme of theosophical thinkers is that extraordinary supersensory experiences are in fact empirically legitimate. That they do reveal as yet hidden cosmological and anthropological truths, as well as a much more extended picture of the nature of man. So it would seem judicious to qualify most claims where necessary by using words like “ostensible,” “purported,” “alleged,” “supposed,” “claimed,” and so forth.

It should also be noted that we shall include references to mystical experience under the category of “extraordinary” for the sake of convenience. Although there are qualitative differences between mystical and paranormal modes of experience, both are integral elements of the theosophical belief system. We shall differentiate between them when necessary in the course of our discussion. Such issues are complex, involving a number of imprecise variables. And thus any methodological approach inevitably must be somewhat selective and adaptable, capable of acknowledging the difficulties inherent in dealing with ambivalent and allusive claims and beliefs.

1.2.4 Methodological Issue 4 – Interpreting the Theosophical Historical Record

As well, another contentious area involves certain discrepancies and diverse interpretations of known records, verifiable facts and tangible documentation. Not all statements, policies, shifts in focus were equally monumental or important. Much time and effort was spent on the minutiae of the day-to-day societal operations. Many crises dealt with petty logistical affairs or the inevitable clashes and conflicts between personalities. As well, there are acknowledged gaps and lack of consensual agreement about particular situations and chains of events, inevitably necessitating speculation and inference. This is particularly true about the so-called “veiled years” of Madame Blavatsky, which have been, and still are, the subject of diverse lines of speculative exploration. The words of Carl Becker come to mind when contemplating the dilemma of dealing with somewhat ambiguous historical data.

In truth, the actual past is gone, and the world of history is an intangible world, recreated imaginatively, and present in our mind.¹⁶

Yet though any historical presentation inevitably reflects a subjective orientation in the arrangement, shaping, interpretation of the materials, a judicious attentiveness to the known record and primary data, as well as references to diverse (and often, conflicting) sources may allow for a wide scope for estimation and evaluation of the meaning and implications of the issue under consideration.

This brings us more particularly to consideration of past treatments of theosophical materials proper. A major issue that must be confronted is the fact that theosophical history has rarely been dealt with from a neutral perspective. In fact, with some exceptions, partisan polarisation has dominated the way theosophical history has been handled. Essentially, the two extremes are those of committed adherent and dismissive sceptic. Not all such starting points are at the extreme ends of the spectrum, though many clearly are. As well, a further qualification must be noted. When the theosophical movement eventually generated offshoots and independent bodies, a variety of vested interest historical revisions and reinterpretations of events and ideas subsequently followed. Thus, even amongst dedicated theosophical adherents, there are diverging points of view and revaluations. As well, even amongst sceptics, opinions vary about the possible contributions and value of the movement. Even presupposing problems of credibility, proven dubious claims, and factual contradictions or errors. To illustrate the problematical issues of dealing with explicitly partisan accounts and evaluations of theosophical materials, let us look at a few representative examples. Firstly, a typical example of how the theosophical movement was viewed from the inside by an adherent.

The Theosophical Movement in the world is age long. It existed in the far distant past, as it will continue for ages to come. It can exist quite apart from any organization, and has often done so. It is that centre in the mind of Manu (the collective mind of man), which makes for unity, and seeks to raise the concrete mind to higher levels of expression. We can trace this movement not only in the religious philosophies of the past, but in the rise and fall of nations and in the growth of new forms of civilization, art and invention. It is particularly active at

¹⁶ Carl. L. Becker, *What Are Historical Facts*, in *The Philosophy of History In Our Time*, ed. Hans Meyerhoff, Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959, p. 128.

the present time when evolution is being speeded up and new complex forces are playing upon the human race.

A Theosophical organization is the physical body in which the Movement may embody itself for the time being. It has appeared many times in the past under different names.¹⁷

Clearly there is much to explicate in such a statement of belief. We will deal with the implications of this kind of content in due course. What is important to note here is that to adherents, the movement and its organisations are believed to play a unique role in history and thus have a special elite status, and that there is assumed a direct linear participatory link between the movement and the manifestation of supernatural evolutionary forces. Thus, in reading, researching, evaluating theosophical “insider” materials, this kind of presentational perspective must be kept in mind.

And at the other extreme, that of unsympathetic sceptic, we find this kind of generalisation about the origins of theosophy.

Spiritualism was also the cradle for Theosophy, the creation of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91), an eccentric Russian mystic who lived a life of scandal and died amid accusations that she was a fraud.¹⁸

Extreme veneration or contempt does not in itself negate the possible worth of histories, critiques, interpretations of theosophy in any form. Legitimate insights and valuable information can certainly be extracted. However, it is important to recognise that a priori premises do shape presentations, and therefore must be taken into consideration when evaluating sources and statements. As well, even in neutral and more objective studies, it is worth noting that there are inevitable implicit subjective assessments and judgments built into the fabric of the exposition.

Since one of the considerations of a thorough methodological approach is a judicial and contextual understanding and accounting for possible preferential shaping of theosophical materials by commentators, it also stands to reason that the historical personages themselves would obviously be presenting a vested point of view in the

¹⁷ Prajnanda, *The Eternal Movement*, in *The Aryan Path*, Bombay: The Theosophy Company, August 1930, p. 501.

¹⁸ Russell Chandler, *Understanding the New Age*, Dallas/London/Vancouver/Melbourne: Word Publishing, 1991, p. 34.

primary source documentation. As history was lived, and events transpired, the normal and natural human reactions would be to reflect the feelings and intentions of the moment. Books, letters, conversations, actions taken and so forth, would be construed in light of the needs and issues of the moment. Sometimes, posterity may have been in mind as well as the need to “set the record straight” in a favourable light. But it seems more likely that short-term focus and dealing with immediate priorities would determine the tone of interaction. Thus, finding obvious contradictions and inconclusive statements seems unavoidable, and part of the “human equation” of real people conducting themselves in real time. However, it also should be emphasised that there is a difference between spontaneous statement, action, reaction, and premeditated, calculated deception or intentional allusiveness. Trying to differentiate and determine if certain contradictory or fallacious statements, anecdotes, recollections were merely the result of normal human fallibility and embellishment, or intentionally misleading and meant to deceive for ulterior purposes is another difficulty in methodological procedure. Perhaps this intrinsic difficulty of dealing with original documentation can be inferred in these words from Meiland in speaking about history.

... it attempts to deal with a certain class of present entities (which we will call “documents” and which includes artefacts, memoirs, records, and memory beliefs) in a certain way. ... The historian “tells a story” which is in the past tense. Each historian creates the past or part of the past in writing history. ... He is trying to give a coherent account of presently existing objects (namely, the documents), which, as we say, are related to past events. He tells a story that accounts for the existence and nature of these documents.¹⁹

The variety of polarised opinion in secondary sources as well as difficulty of understanding the complete context of primary documentation will invariably lead to a certain amount of subjective evaluation in analysis of theosophical materials. This though is unavoidable and will require subjective judgment as we proceed.

1.2.5 Methodological Issue 5 – The Utility of Sociological Analyses

Having touched on some of the methodological problems of dealing with extant historical treatments of the theosophical movement, we must now turn to some other

¹⁹ Jack W. Meiland, *Scepticism and Historical Knowledge*, New York: Random House, 1965, p. 192.

preliminary issues shaping our approach to the subject. The use of the historical materials is just one means of dealing with the issues. We must also make use of the conceptual apparatus of sociology. Particularly, the sociologies of knowledge and of religion. Although separate disciplines, there is an overlap of connecting interests which allows for mutually beneficial insights. For instance, Berger and Luckmann see this relationship as crucial, and a key to the wider understanding of religious phenomena.

... the sociology of religion is an integral and even central part of the sociology of knowledge. Its most important task is to analyse the cognitive and normative apparatus by which a socially constituted universe (that is, “knowledge” about it) is legitimated. This will involve the sociology of religion in the study of religion in the sense in which this term is commonly known in Western civilization ... But the sociology of religion will also deal with other legitimating systems, whether one wishes to call these religious or pseudo religious...²⁰

It will be important to look at the “cognitive and normative apparatus” which were incorporated into the theosophical orientation as the knowledge about their “socially constituted universe” was constructed, articulated, and legitimated. And clearly theosophy is subsumed as an “other legitimating system” which Berger and Luckmann would likely classify outside the Western religious norm, possibly as “pseudo religious.” As a movement with religious motives and objectives, a distinctive hierarchal structure, clear authoritative criteria, canons of revealed and hidden truths, charismatic leadership, appeals to supersensory experience, theosophy can thus be analysed according to a number of the classifications and categories proposed by various sociologists and other analysts. However, the temptation to impose reductive conclusions must also be factored in as a methodological difficulty. Even when a particular classification or typology appears to be accurate, there may be other ways to treat the subject at hand. We will explore a variety of theoretical schemas when dealing with the specific thematic issues, trying to provide the most efficacious analytical models.

²⁰ P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *Sociology of Religion and Sociology of Knowledge*, in *Sociology of Religion*, ed. Roland Robertson, Harmondsworth/Baltimore/Ringwood/Markham: Penguin Books, 1972, p. 69.

1.2.6 Methodological Issue 6 – The Importance of Psychological Considerations

As well as the historical and the sociological approaches to the theosophical movement, we must utilise the psychological perspective. However we do so with qualifications, and with full cognisance that the resultant explanations are often only a particular selective way of dealing with the ambivalent materials of human subjectivity. And yet, it also seems apparent that a fuller comprehension of some of the motives and actions of individuals may be aided by understanding possible motivational and formative influences. Not to necessarily reduce complex processes to simple ones, but to try and illuminate behaviours and attitudes, with possible hypotheses about causal connections between feeling, thought, and behaviour. The more problematical question perhaps is interpreting and evaluating what specific experiences may be considered to be authentically numinous and extraordinary, and what may more properly pertain to more familiar and prosaic subconscious or conscious sources. With Madame Blavatsky in particular, there appears to be a mix of different types of personal experience that coalesce and find expression in the manifest forms of her writings, inter-personal relationships, and public conduct. Certainly at least some of her beliefs and behaviour are shaped by what she interpreted as paranormal and religious experience. As well, it seems fair to observe that other motives and ambitions likewise have had a determinative influence on her presentations and actions. Where discussion relates to what may be considered the religious quotient, these words reflect the perspective necessary to properly evaluate the phenomenon in question.

To talk about religious experience from a psychological perspective is in no way to try to explain it away in terms of simpler or more fundamental psychological components, a process which both diminishes its reality and usually also requires denial of its actual phenomenology.²¹

However, once criteria of religious experience and psychology become part of the analytical apparatus, other issues come into play. For instance the role of the imagination (in its most comprehensive sense) is also an important component of the psychological approach. In dealing with claims of supersensory, mystical, numinous, phenomena, not factoring in the role imagination may play would be a serious omission. Selective theories and speculative directions suggested in the works of the psychoanalytical,

Jungian, archetypal, and other schools and sources help provide a broader spectrum for interpretation of subjective influences.

1.2.7 Methodological Issue 7 – Dynamics of the Structured Empathy Approach

The historical, sociological and psychological elements of our methodological apparatus may lead to a wider understanding of theosophical events and the positions taken by individuals. However, it neglects a very important dimension. That is the issue of inner meaningfulness and feelings of worth and spiritual contentment experienced by the adherent. To try and understand the subjective side of a belief system, one must try and evoke a resonant tone by the non-judgmental treatment of texts and other significant expressions of the viewpoints and feelings of those committed to the system of beliefs and values. The terms “phenomenological” and “hermeneutical” have most commonly been used in such applications. However, each carries connotations and associations specifically rooted to their respective sources of origin. The hermeneutical approach derives from biblical exegesis while the phenomenological discipline emerged from the philosophical school of phenomenology. Although great amounts of subsequent work have produced more refined and specialised techniques of analyses, we feel a more neutral and broader term would suffice to characterise our treatment of theosophical materials. We feel the term “structured empathy” as defined by Smart is more applicable and less restrictive. He defines this approach in these words.

... the empathy needs to be structured. We have to comprehend the structure of another’s world: in general, we have to try to understand the structure of belief inside the head of a believer.²²

The attempt to understand the theosophical worldview as a “structure of belief inside the head of the believer” requires historical, psychological, sociological, philosophical perspectives be factored into the total approach. The need for structured empathy suggests that both an objective disciplined “structural” perspective as well as a subjectively expansive “empathetic” commitment be juxtaposed to produce a result which reveals both the outer and the inner sides of the system. The outer side would encompass the system in terms of its historical and social structure and dynamics. The

²¹ Lionel Corbott, *The Religious Function of the Psyche*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 18.

²² Ninian Smart, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, Upper Saddle River, New

inner would attempt to illustrate how the worldview serves as a satisfying and viable way of envisioning reality for those committed to its premises and doctrines. Our priority will be a focus on the way the theosophical edifice was construed and presented, and thus must therefore be primarily structural. However, as a framework of values, ideas and beliefs, its worthiness cannot be judged merely by its outer form or by how it was construed. Nor can the enunciation of anomalies, contradictions, and dubious occurrences be considered justification to dismiss the subjective merit that adherents and sympathisers have accorded it. The enduring presence of the modern theosophical movement for over a century and a quarter illustrates that the worldview it espouses retains a degree of public attractiveness. An empathetic awareness of such allure must be factored into any analysis of the definitive doctrines, ideas, values, and beliefs to provide a realistic assessment of the attractiveness of theosophy to those committed to its worldview.

1.2.8 Methodological Issue 8 – Textual Analysis as a Means of Explication

A major methodological technique we will use will be textual analysis of a number of relevant articles written by Madame Blavatsky. In trying to understand how she intentionally wanted to present theosophical ideas and beliefs to the public, a thorough analysis of her own words and argumentative style seems a useful means of explicating the theosophical message. In trying to construct a comprehensive and convincing alternative worldview that attracted newcomers, convinced sceptics, and reassured believers, Blavatsky was challenged by a variety of simultaneous needs when writing articles and books. Trying to trace such motives in her writings somewhat qualifies the hermeneutical method. Expressions of spiritual values, ideas, beliefs, certainly permeate her writings, but there were also more pragmatic and immediate concerns. Blavatsky expended a great deal of time and effort in her writings critiquing contrary positions while trying to boost public confidence and assurance in her own stance. However, because our primary interest is in trying to follow how intentions of legitimation were represented, textual analysis will be a major part of our procedure. An unavoidable selectivity of written materials for analysis is necessary, so we have tried to isolate writings that directly relate to the theme under discussion. Blavatsky was a prolific author from the time she embarked upon her mission, having written extensively both in

Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000, p. 14.

private correspondence and in general and specialised publications. Often a number of leaps from issue to issue can be found in single articles as she surveyed a broad range of concerns while yet addressing a particular topic or question. We will examine the creation of her three main books, *Isis Unveiled*, *The Secret Doctrine*, and *The Voice of the Silence* in a separate chapter, because the crafting of those works was intended to present the theosophical worldview in a more formal and enduring light. Elsewhere we will draw from representative articles to illustrate her approach to issues at given discrete moments, where the needs to explain, emphasise, reiterate specific points was paramount. In her writings she often proceeded with both critical and constructionist motives, simultaneously trying to debunk critics and enemies while hoping to elicit public confidence in the trustworthiness of the theosophical vision of reality.

1.2.9 Methodological Consideration 9 – Theosophy’s Philosophical Perspective

And finally, there are philosophical questions that arise when perusing the doctrinal formulations of the theosophical movement. Perennial questions about the nature of the universe, the meaning and purpose of life, the grounds for choosing proper ethical conduct, the different types of knowledge and modes of experience, the structure of the mind, and so forth. Theosophical answers to such philosophical questions were not necessarily original, and often were based on eclectic, selective, and distinctive interpretations of philosophies, philosophers, scientists, religious, mythological, and occult traditions, by appeal to subjective experience, and so forth. And though often lacking originality per se, the weaving together of diverse strands of conceptual materials in support of a priori premises is in itself a valuable form of creative activity. Given our aim of examining the structure of the theosophical legitimating process, we cannot pursue in depth discussions of the relative strengths or weaknesses of their answers to such perennial philosophical questions. To do so would lead to excessive digressions and veer away from our topic. What is important though is to show how the theosophical ideational system was presented as an all-encompassing solution to such philosophical dilemmas.

The theosophical approach to the major philosophical issues reflected more of a religious than a purely intellectual or secular orientation, and thus can be considered a

“religious philosophy” with a priori assumptions about the primacy of a mystical ground of Being. In the course of our discussion we will see that the philosophy enunciated by theosophy drew from diverse sources. Most particularly, appearing as a hybrid variant of an Absolute Idealist metaphysical stance, with Vedantic, Neoplatonic, Mahayana Buddhist, and other similar strands contributing to the overall philosophical position. As a general orientation to the world though, Madame Blavatsky created a system that was most explicitly gnostic in outlook.²³ As we pursue our thematic analysis of the process of theosophical legitimation, evaluation of the merits or problems of the theosophical philosophical stance per se is beyond our purview. We can describe how Blavatsky dealt with specific philosophical issues, her viewpoint, and the parallels or support she felt she discerned from extant sources. However, recognition of the philosophical overview of theosophy is important in understanding the kind of speculative foundation that was in process of being consolidated by Madame Blavatsky and other theoreticians. So it may prove useful to provide an inclusive definition at the outset.

Theosophy differs from speculative philosophy in allowing validity to some classes of mystical experience as regard soul and spirit, and in recognising clairvoyance and telepathy and kindred forms of perception as linking the worlds of psyche and body. Its content describes a transcendental field as the only real ... from which emerge material universes in series, with properties revealing that supreme Being. Two polarities appear at the first manifesting stage, consciousness or spirit ... and matter or energy... Simultaneously, life appears clothed in matter and spirit, as form or species ... In a sense, life is the direct reflection of the transcendent supreme, hence biological thinking has a privileged place in Theosophy. Thus, cycles of life are perceived in body, psyche, soul and spirit. The lesser of these is reincarnation of impersonal soul in many personalities. A larger epoch is “the cycle of necessity,” where spirit evolves over vast periods.²⁴

This philosophical orientation is here presented in its distilled essential form and obviously reveals a syncretistic origin. We will be more concerned with how and why such a stance was construed than with the credibility of its assumptions.

²³ The non-capitalised use of the term “gnostic” refers to the philosophical orientation rather than the historical Gnostic religion.

²⁴ Fritz Kunz, *Theosophy*, in *Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Dagobert D. Runes, Ames, Iowa: Littlefield,

1.3 Thematic Categories

1.3.1 Thematic Category 1 – Intentionality and Motivation

The historical approach provides detail about what events transpired and who the significant personages were. The sociological approach gives a broader social understanding of how a belief system came to fruition under particular circumstances and took the form it did. The psychological approach is an attempt to understand possible motivational factors and the influence of personal character on the evolution of the system and the institution. The examination of philosophical positions reveals the consensual stance on perennial speculative issues. Structural empathetic analysis of significant documents and passages can convey the tone of the personal dedication and faith of those committed to the system of beliefs, ideas and values. As well, through textual and stylistic analysis, we may attempt to explicate some of the ways Blavatsky tried to gain legitimation for the theosophical worldview, as well as rehabilitate or create her own image for public consumption

Having now discussed the meaning of our title, looked at the major methodological considerations and the intrinsic problems of dealing with the particulars of theosophical data, it remains to explain our selection of thematic categories. The first area that we will try and explore is that of intentionality and motivation. The kind of ideas, objectives, and ambitions that the theosophical impetus was driven by. And the feelings that Blavatsky and her followers had of her special mission and purpose. As well, a look at how she typically expressed her own feelings and thoughts reveals a pattern of both critical and constructive rhetoric in her writings as she attempted to deconstruct traditional entrenched positions while promoting the emergent theosophical option. Additionally, it is instructive to see what the Theosophical Society was attempting to achieve by regularly revising and rewording its formal statements of purpose. Ultimately, the overarching intent underlying all particular objectives was to change the way reality was perceived by instituting a new worldview that prioritised esoteric ideas and beliefs.

Adams & Co., 1959, p. 317.

1.3.2 Thematic Category 2 – The Nature of Worldviews

The second thematic area derives from the conclusions of the first, and lead to a discussion of the dynamics of worldviews. It will be necessary to examine the nature of worldviews to be able to understand why Blavatsky felt such urgency in rejecting the status quo positions of her time in favour of a differently prioritised perspective. Thus, we must look at how worldviews are established, maintained, transmitted, and potentially changed. Where the theosophical worldview fits in relation to the dominant Western traditions. What the main categories of knowledge are upon which the representations of reality have been built in Western tradition. And what the nineteenth century mix of authoritative and alternative worldviews was when the theosophical movement was initially consolidating.

1.3.3 Thematic Category 3 – Blavatsky’s Treatment of the Categories of Knowledge

A major aim of Madame Blavatsky was to show that theosophy is an inclusive source of knowledge. In essence, the synthesis of religion, philosophy and science. Those three categories of knowledge are also the same three that have been crucial in the creation of worldviews. So obviously, to gain mainstream status as a legitimate and credible alternative, Blavatsky had to make a convincing and appealing case for choice of the theosophical option in opposition to the entrenched authoritative traditional positions. This is the next theme we will explore. We will look at how Blavatsky confronted the entrenched positions by challenging each of the main legitimating institutions of Western thought. We will explore her critique of conventional exoteric profane knowledge and her attempt to present a constructivist vision of esoteric sacred wisdom that subsumed all lesser forms.

1.3.4 Thematic Category 4 – The Importance of Experience as a Legitimizing Factor

The effort to validate the theosophical worldview with a spiritually prioritised interpretation of knowledge was one facet of the legitimating process. An equally

significant factor was establishing that the potentialities of human experience extended beyond the familiar, and indeed provided access to more etherealised planes of being and more refined states of consciousness. As the dominant figure of the movement, it was crucial for Blavatsky to maintain authoritative leadership status by demonstrating personal familiarity, self-assurance, and control of such rare and unique powers. It will be necessary to look at Blavatsky's personal history to see the kinds of purported extraordinary experiences she allegedly was subject to. And if she can be fairly profiled under a typology that accounts for a wide variety of numinous experiences. Her statements on enhanced powers and states of consciousness are essential parts of the theosophical worldview, supporting the theoretical arguments of the esoteric view of knowledge. As well, though intent on promoting an expanded vision of human potential, she yet presented that developmental path as one requiring dedication, commitment, and moral strength.

1.3.5 Thematic Category 5 – The Masters as Authoritative Sources and Paradigmatic Ideals

A uniquely theosophical concern within the wider topic of paranormal phenomena and altered states of consciousness that requires separate thematic attention is the doctrine of 'Masters,' 'Mahatmas,' 'Brotherhood of Adepts.' In the theosophical context, the importance of belief in these supremely evolved, spiritually enlightened entities goes back to its roots in Blavatsky's personal experiences. These purportedly began as non-corporeal apparitions and progressed to include a relationship of ongoing reciprocal communications on subtle planes of being, as well as periods of physical visitation and teaching. The importance of the idea of the Masters for legitimating purposes was significant. As well, it was perhaps the most contentious and divisive issue of the theosophical movement. A look at the main competing theories about the origins and nature of the Masters will reveal contradictory positions, ranging from total commitment to belief in their veridical status to charges of cynical invention. But they may not necessarily be mutually exclusive. It may be possible to accommodate specific parts of each to produce a more comprehensive hypothesis. Regardless of possible origins or credibility, the idea of the Masters played a large role in the legitimating apparatus used

by Blavatsky and others. Blavatsky's personal leadership authority was reinforced through belief that she was the mediator of their intentions. And not only was the idea of the Masters important as a doctrinal component, but also it served other purposes in Theosophical Society operations as well as providing a criterion for determining leadership credentials. We shall try and explore these functions. As well, Blavatsky's highly contested exposure as an instigator of fraud by Richard Hodgson must be examined. This investigation had long-lasting effects on the theosophical movement and further entrenched Blavatsky's disreputability.

1.3.6 Thematic Category 6 – Blavatsky's Major Literary Legacy – the Formal Entrenchment of the Theosophical Vision

The attempt to gain legitimation for an alternative worldview required confronting existing mainstream opponents critically, as well as creating a positively constructed, intellectually defensible, and emotionally enticing system of ideas and beliefs. From the theosophical perspective, consolidation and formalisation of critical doctrines and essential premises was needed to provide a source of trustworthy and authoritative knowledge. By undertaking the task of consolidating theosophical beliefs in book form, and proclaiming the importance and gravity of those publications, Madame Blavatsky created a solid and authoritative corpus of formal theosophical doctrine. For many supporters, those books acquired status as semi-sacred texts, invested with special meaning and surrounded by an aura of mystique. She in fact, produced three especially significant and self-contained written works that served to define and guide the movement in specific ways. We will examine the circumstances surrounding the composition of *Isis Unveiled*, *The Secret Doctrine*, and the *Voice of the Silence*. As well, the main intentions and thrust of each must be explored.

1.3.7 Thematic Category 7 – Historical and Sociological Dynamics

The theoretical foundation and the kinds of beliefs and values promoted and favoured are only one aspect of the larger whole. They serve to provide support and assurance, an apparatus of probable explanations, and a source of motivational enthusiasm for believers. For the non-committed and curious public, knowledge of the

speculative system and the grounds upon which is based provides a firm basis for consideration and judgment of the merits of the option. In terms of internal organisational dynamics, acceptance of the belief system gave legitimacy to pursuit of the objectives of the Theosophical Society. In this thematic area, we will examine theosophical history from a sociological perspective. First we will identify some of the basic traits and characteristics of the main leadership figures and the dynamics of interaction occurring over the first four decades of the modern theosophical movement. Leadership succession depended on special sanctification, and competing claims and proofs eventuating in schisms and conflict. As well, the theosophical movement has sometimes been marginally treated through a number of sociological schemas. We shall look at some of the main categories of analysis and try to provide an overview of how it can be construed in those terms.

Such is the thematic outline of the study to follow. We hope to establish that the theosophical movement of the late nineteenth century was motivated to entrench a non-conventional, spiritually prioritised worldview as a viable alternative to the mainstream positions expounded in Western culture. This necessitated an intensive critique of the dominant worldviews while yet constructively creating a unique mix of extant and original ideational materials. A plausibility structure built upon motives of urgent and necessary change, a valuation of esoteric knowledge, extrasensory and mystical forms of experience, transcendently grounded figures of authority, and definitive quasi-sacred texts provided a foundation that allowed the theosophical message to take form and be disseminated. The disputability of much of its ideational content and ostensible objectives clearly marked it as a minority movement within the larger Western mainstream. And the disreputability of Blavatsky and others marginalized the credibility of its premises. It is this process of attempted legitimation that we will examine.

1.4 Survey of Literary Resources

Our use of literary resources should briefly be explained before embarking upon our study. Our bibliography lists both specific theosophical documentation as well as items related to our discussion on other foundational concerns. We may categorise our

bibliography into four divisions. First, literature used for information about specific background areas of concern and for elucidating problems of procedure. Second, primary literature concerning the history, individuals, and controversies of the theosophical movement during the time frame of our study. Third, secondary materials deriving from theosophical circles or featuring explicitly theosophical subject matter but either written after our period of concern or with indirect bearing on our themes. Fourth, supplementary literature dealing with facets of theosophy in one way or another, but coming from disciplines and perspectives not explicitly affiliated with theosophy per se. These divisions are not intended to be inflexible, but serve as a useful convenience for our survey of literary resources.

The first category will not be expounded upon in detail, because the utilisation of these materials has been mostly for guidance in our preparation and approach to the subject at hand. We have listed a variety of books that have been helpful in clarifying specific questions pertaining to historical, sociological, psychological, philosophical and other areas that have arisen during the process of research, organisation, and planning. We have noted in our citations these references when they are utilised as part of our analysis. Otherwise, the books listed have provided information that has helped illuminate and inform our understanding of both central and peripheral issues. For example, a number of books were consulted to clarify issues about nineteenth century cultural history and the conflicts of ideas; the mechanics of parapsychology; the traits of mystical experience; theories of the unconscious; methodological problems, sociological theories, and so forth.

In regards to the second category, theosophical context-specific documentation, there have been a variety of literary treatments of theosophical history and belief during the more than a century and a quarter since the inception of the modern theosophical movement. The primary materials consulted include the writings, reminiscences, correspondences of central theosophical personages as well as the contemporaneous observations, anecdotal recollections, opinions and commentaries of those who were involved in some way with the theosophical movement, such as members of an organisation, sympathisers, critics, analysts, acquaintances, or journalists. Let us give specific examples of how we have utilised primary materials, bearing in mind that we

have attempted to be judiciously selective in the choice of items we have included. With the advances in modern electronic technology, and the presence of multiple Internet databases, we currently have accessibility to thousands of purely theosophical items extending over the complete history of the movement. Many hundred of these at the least may be classified as primary documents.

Most crucial in any study of early theosophical history is the literary output of Madame Blavatsky. Her major books, *Isis Unveiled*, *The Secret Doctrine*, and *The Voice of the Silence* will be accorded specific treatment in chapter seven. Her other significant book, *The Key to Theosophy* provides a more condensed and popularised exposition of key theosophical principles. Equally important for our purposes are some of the extensive quantities of articles that she wrote for a number of publications. We have specifically chosen some for textual analysis, such as *Philosophers and Philosophicules. Occult or Exact Science? Occultism Versus the Occult Arts. Mahatmas and Chelas. What are the Theosophists?* Others such as *The Theosophical Society: Its Mission and Its Future*, *The Organisation of the Theosophical Society*, *The Sign of the Times*, show her attitude towards the Theosophical Society and the broader social environment. The article *My Books* was written shortly before her death and is instructive as a response to intensive criticism of her methods. All articles reveal succinct commentary on specific theosophical doctrines and attitudes as well as discrete opinions on the state-of-affairs surrounding her private affairs and the wider social environment. *Collected Writings. Vol. 1. 1874 – 1878* is significant in the compilation of many early personal statements.

Blavatsky also conducted a number of correspondences. Documentation includes *Letters From H. P. Blavatsky to Her Family in Russia*, which reveals how she portrayed events from a familial perspective. The other side of this form of correspondence is visible in her sister Vera Petrovna de Zhelihovsky's *Helena Petrovna Blavatsky*. Insight into the relationship between Blavatsky and other theosophical personages can be found in *Letters of H. P. B. to Dr. Hartmann 1885 – 1886. Letter From H. P. Blavatsky to Henry S. Olcott. Letters of H. P. Blavatsky to W. Q. Judge and Other Miscellaneous Letters*. A compilation of anecdotal testimony about Blavatsky's extraordinary experiences by Daniel H. Caldwell entitled *The Esoteric World of Madame Blavatsky* is a useful resource relating to that specific issue. The volume of reminiscences compiled by

Mary K. Neff entitled *Personal Memoirs of H.P. Blavatsky* is also informative. A variety of newspaper articles (mostly anonymously written) from the early formative years of the Theosophical Society provide insight into how Blavatsky and theosophy appeared to the curious public. These include *The Theosophical Society. The Lamasary at New York. A Miracle Worker of To-Day. A Visit to Madame Blavatsky. Madame Blavatsky's Power. Events in the Career of a Remarkable Woman*. Recollections about the formation of the Theosophical Society can be found in R.B. Westbrook's *Reminiscences of Original American Theosophists*. First-hand reminiscences about Blavatsky's literary methods are evident in Bertram Keightly's *Mr. Bertram Keightly's Account of the Writing of the Secret Doctrine* and Archibald Keightly's *Reminiscences of H. P. Blavatsky*. Criticism by contemporaries of Blavatsky's methods and claims of scholarship are explored in William Emmette Coleman's *Critical Historical Review of the Theosophical Society, Henry Kiddle and the Mahatma; or H. K. vs. K. H., The Sources of Madame Blavatsky's Writings*. Other critiques voiced during her lifetime by former supporters are found in Elliott Coues *Blavatsky Unveiled*, A. O. Hume on *Madame Blavatsky*, Count Witte on *Madame Blavatsky*, and William T. Brown's *Blavatsky and Her Followers*. Support is shown in *General Doubleday in Defense of Madame Blavatsky, Statement by Constance Wachtmeister*, and Ellen H. Morgan's *A Defense of Madame Blavatsky's Views and Phenomenal Abilities*. These are representative examples of some of the useful primary information pertaining specifically to Madame Blavatsky.

As well as documentation focussing on Blavatsky, the writings, correspondence, and recollections relating to other key theosophical figures are important primary documents. For instance Theosophical Society President H.S. Olcott's *Inaugural Address of the President-Founder of the Theosophical Society* is a key document elucidating the original intentions of the movement. How he presented the idea of the Masters to the theosophical public can be discerned in his article *The Himalayan Brothers*. His recollections of theosophical history are evident in *The First Leave of T. S. History*. And how he presented himself and the impression made during Hodgson's inquiry are evident in *Henry S. Olcott's Deposition to the Society for Psychical Research, 1884*. Early exposition of theosophical doctrine prior to Blavatsky's authoritative presentation can be found in A.P. Sinnett's *The Occult World*. William Q. Judge also presented an early

theosophical overview in his book *The Ocean of Theosophy*. His personal assessment of the utility of theosophy is found in *Letters That Have Helped Me*. Signs of the political undertones that informed his interpretation of the Masters are evident in *The Mahatmas As Ideals and Facts*, *An Interesting Letter (Written to an Indian Brother)*, *Masters, Adepts, Teachers, and Disciples*. The justification for his claims of Presidential legitimacy are found in *By Master's Direction*. As well, the text of all Theosophical Society rules, bylaws, and objectives as well as the particulars of other key formal investigations and complaints have been utilised.

The details of Hodgson's investigation can be found in the Society for Psychical Research Committee's *Report of the General Meeting of the SPR on May 29, 1885: Hodgson's Report on Madame Blavatsky (Meeting 1)* and *Report of the General Meeting of the SPR on June 26, 1885: Hodgson's Report on Madame Blavatsky (Meeting 2)*. The perspective of her primary accuser, Madame Coulomb is presented in *Theosophy. Madame Coulomb v. Madame Blavatsky*. Hodgson's hypothesis about Blavatsky's motives appear in his *The Theosophical Society. Russian Intrigue or Religious Evolution?*

Amongst other primary materials are further contemporary critiques, defences, expositions and observations on specific issues, events, and persons. Some of the writings of Besant, Leadbeater, and other significant theosophical leaders can also be considered primary reference material as well. However, much of their output came after the time period under discussion and therefore is not strictly reflective of the orientation that prevailed as the theosophical worldview was first emerging. We therefore have classified their work as supplementary, though recognising that this is a fluid distinction.

The third category, secondary theosophical literature, consists for the most part, of the commentaries, observations, and studies that have proliferated after the ascendancy of Besant as President of the Theosophical Society. They do not necessarily reflect the tone or feelings that prevailed while the theosophical movement was first emerging as a distinct entity. And whether written by advocates, adversaries, neutral analysts or commentators, they are unavoidably conditioned by knowledge and events occurring after the period under discussion. Many though are informative, and help provide useful hypotheses and greater understanding of all facets of theosophy.

For two thorough but very differently oriented overviews of the history of the theosophical movement there are Josephine Ransom's *A Short History of the Theosophical Society: 1875 – 1937*, which embodies an orthodox Theosophical Society perspective and the compilation of a series of articles known as *The Theosophical Movement 1875 – 1925: A History and a Survey*, an interpretation based on a stricter loyalty to a Blavatsky-centric version of theosophy. Charles J. Ryan's *H. P. Blavatsky and the Theosophical Movement* and Walter J. Carrither's *The Founding of the Theosophical Society* likewise share such a position. Gomes' *The Dawning of the Theosophical Movement* is more scholarly and non-partisan while Godwin's *The Theosophical Enlightenment* covers important ground about earlier occult and esoteric figures and groups. Peter Washington's *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* is more cynical and suspicious of the premises of theosophy and of esoteric movements in general.

Biographies of Madame Blavatsky abound and often draw contrasting pictures. Perhaps the most thorough recent book sympathetic to Blavatsky is Sylvia Cranston's *H.P.B., The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement*. Another comprehensive biography, but from a less empathetic perspective, is Marion Meade's *Madame Blavatsky: The Woman Behind the Myth*. Other critical accounts are found in John Symonds' *Madame Blavatsky, Medium and Magician* and Williams' *Priestess of the Occult*. Murphet's *When Daylight Comes: A Biography of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky* is informative, but more imaginatively written, as is his biography of Olcott, *Yankee Beacon of Buddhist Light: Life of Col. Henry S. Olcott*. Caldwell indulges in metaphysical speculation about the purported role that Blavatsky played in advancing the cause of spiritual evolution in "*Bear Witness!*" *Who Was the Real H.P.B.?* Hobbes' *Madame Blavatsky and the Latter-Day Messengers of the Masters* also ventures along similar lines. As can be seen from just these examples, there are a wide variety of stances in secondary literary materials intended to portray Blavatsky according to position of the author.

Secondary commentary and analysis about early theosophical controversies are plentiful. For example, attempted refutations of the Hodgson Report from a theosophical perspective are found in Harrison's *H. P. Blavatsky and the SPR: An Examination of the Hodgson Report of 1885*, Edges' *First Report of the Committee of the Society for*

Psychical Research, Studds' *Concerning H. P. B.: An Examination of the So-Called Proofs of Fraud on the Part of Madame Blavatsky*, and Carrithers' *Obituary: The "Hodgson Report" on Madame Blavatsky*. Johnson's speculation about the possible identity of the theosophical Masters is found in his books *The Masters Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Brotherhood* and *Initiates of Theosophical Masters*. These have engendered great controversy and have been challenged by others, such as Caldwell's *A Closer Look at Some of K. Paul Johnson's Arguments Concerning H.S. Olcott's Testimony About the Masters*. Investigation into the possible origins of *The Book of Dzyan* are found in Reigle's *The Book of Dzyan Research Reports* and Pratt's *The Book of Dzyan*. And even analysis of the stanzas of *The Book of Dzyan* by those not affiliated with theosophy is accessible in *Man, the Measure of All Things* by Sri Krishna Prem and Sri Madhava Ashish and *Man, Son of Man*, by Ashish.

Exposition and analysis of theosophical doctrine is perhaps the most familiar and available form of theosophical literature. Complete philosophical overviews are found in *Theosophy: A Modern Revival of Ancient Wisdom* by Kuhn, *Man, God and the Universe* by Taimni, and the four volume work by Poortman, *Vehicles of Consciousness*. Extensive conceptual analysis of theosophical history, ideas, and beliefs based on a Blavatsky-centric theosophical position is evident in the books of de Purucker, *Fountain-Source of Occultism*, *The Esoteric Tradition*, *Man in Evolution* and *Fundamentals of the Esoteric Philosophy*. Thoroughly detailed presentations of the particulars of the theosophical worldview have been available since the beginnings of the theosophical movement. Many specialise in specific themes, such as *Rounds and Races: Our Divine Parentage and Destiny* by van Pelt, *The Universal Mystery Language and Its Interpretation* by Edge, *A Geometry of Space-Consciousness* by Perkins, *The Doctrine of the Subtle Body in Western Tradition* by Mead, *The Doctrine of Cycles* by Ross, *The Seven Rays* by Woods, *Occult Chronology* by James, and so forth. Most of these kinds of works are presented with the assumption that the foundation of the theosophical worldview is sound, and that further description, analysis, and hypothesis are worthwhile endeavours. Another form of exposition also can be found prominently amidst theosophical literature.

Going back to Blavatsky and other early theosophical theoreticians, we find discussion of specific theosophical issues that are based on the authority of personal

supersensory or numinous experience. Most notably, a number of prominent figures within the Theosophical Society have written extensively on specific topics based on the data deriving from their purported supersensory abilities. Besant and Leadbeater for example collaborated on a number of books allegedly utilising clairvoyance, such as in *Thought Forms*. Leadbeater was widely recognised for his clairvoyant abilities, and produced an extensive body of writings. In *A Textbook of Theosophy* he presents his overview of the theosophical system. In *The Hidden Side of Things* he describes the occult perception of everyday objects, events, and situations. In *The Devachanic Plane or the Heaven World: Its Characteristics and Inhabitants* he catalogues the phenomena and environment of an alleged more spiritually refined and subtler sphere of being. Other leading theosophists likewise have presented their own literary recollections of such excursions of consciousness. Former Theosophical Society President George Arundale has expressed his impressions in *Nirvana: An Occult Experience* and *The Lotus Fire: A Study in Symbolic Yoga*. Geoffrey Hodson has also written extensively about his clairvoyant experience, such as in *Clairvoyant Investigations, Thus Have I Heard, Kingdom of the Gods*. In any survey of theosophical literature, recognition of such experiential based accounts must be noted. The most significant conflict within the theosophical movement was between those who believed that the vision of Blavatsky was complete, and others who felt it appropriate to amend their own insights. And since Besant and Leadbeater were the most prominent examples of the latter camp, it is instructive to understand more about their personal backgrounds and lives. Besant wrote her own *Autobiography* in which her conversion to theosophy is defended. Other biographies are also insightful. Nethercott's *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant* comprehensively covers her theosophical years. Taylor in *Annie Besant: A Biography* and Dinnage in *Annie Besant* also provide useful insight. Shearman's *Charles Webster Leadbeater* shows the conventional theosophical side while *The Elder Brother* by Tillet explores in more detail the controversies and accusations surrounding Leadbeater.

Another form of literature that can be specifically identified deals with the existential value and spiritual worth felt to be implicit in the theosophical worldview. From the perspective of the theosophical devotee, organisation member, or sympathiser, the theosophical system of ideas and beliefs provides fully satisfactory intellectual

explanatory and emotionally satiating value. In the writings of former Theosophical Society Presidents we often find this kind of inspirational and encouraging testimony, intended to confirm the worthiness of the theosophical orientation and its relevance for the future. For instance Jinarajadasa's *Divine Vision* portrays the theosophical way of interpreting reality as the recognition of implicit mystical harmony. N. Sri Ram presents a more intellectually based view of the pertinence of theosophy in *An Approach to Reality*. Burnier Radha in *Looking at the World* attempts to show the necessity for a more spiritual and compassionate attitude in the modern world. As well, many other arguments have been made over the decades for the adoption of the theosophical worldview, or at the least, the permeation of ethical values and ideals propounded in theosophy and consonant with similar public attitudes. For instance in Long's *This Era's Opportunity*, Knoche's *On the Shores of Darkness There is Light*, Orderberg's *The Dawn of a New Age*, Robb's *Access to Great Ideas*, we find exhortations of encouragement and reasoned explanations of why theosophy should be a preferred option. In Ellwood's *Theosophy: A Modern Expression of Wisdom of the Ages*, we see a logically reasoned and philosophically justified modern case made for the adoption of a theosophical worldview. Such kinds of attitude and motive are embedded in much of theosophical literature, often expressed in reaction to the dominant orientations of the day and of the locale.

In addition, though not necessarily included directly as part of the theosophical oeuvre, it should be mentioned that the writings of various proponents of later splinter organisations deriving from the original theosophical movement are of interest. Ahern's *Sun At Midnight: The Rudolph Steiner Movement and the Western Esoteric Tradition* provides a useful sociological framework for interpreting Steiner's role. *Maitreya's Mission* by Crème, *The Message of Aquaria: The Significance and Mission of the Aquarian Age* by the Curtiss', Kingsford and Maitland's *The Perfect Way: or, the Finding of the Christ*, Prophet's *The Great White Brotherhood in the Culture, History and Religion of America*, Bailey's *The Externalisation of the Heirarchy*, although critically indebted, reveal deviations from the orthodox theosophical stance. The issues surrounding Krishnamurti's defection are explored in Lutyens' *Krishnamurti: The Years of Awakening*, Vernon's *Star in the East: Krishnamurti, the Invention of a Messiah*, Fields' *The Reluctant Messiah*, Jayakar's *Krishnamurti: A Biography*.

The fourth category is of literary treatments directed explicitly towards theosophy, but coming from outside of theosophical circles. This reflects a number of attitudes and premises, and form a source of supplementary materials. For instance, since the days of Blavatsky, most branches of Christianity have perceived theosophy to be a hostile and misguided rival. With Blavatsky's intense criticism of traditional Christianity, and fundamental divergences on doctrinal grounds, it is not surprising that such suspicion has persisted. Even attempts by some theosophists to propound versions of "esoteric Christianity" have done little to quell distrust. And even with the waning of theosophy per se and the absorption of many of its premises in newer organisations and movements, reaction to theosophy has usually been negative. For instance, in Chandler's *Understanding the New Age*, Hoyt and Yamamoto's *The New Age Rage*, Streiker's *New Age Comes to Main Street: What Worried Christians Must Know*, Peters' *The Cosmic Self: A Penetrating Look at Today's New Age Movements*, and Lind's *From Nirvana to the New Age*, we see theosophical ideas and beliefs contrasted negatively with those of Christianity, even when expressed in the idiom of more recent schools and groups.

As well as criticism from the Christian vantage point, theosophy has often been the target of dismissive and contemptuous treatments by rationalists, scientists, and those not accepting the credibility of occult and mystical claims. Because theosophy is defined by such principles, it remains an obvious and inviting target for such critics. This kind of critique is found in Webb's *The Flight From Reason* and *The Occult Establishment*, where adoption of the theosophical mindset is perceived to be a regressive and defensive reaction. Smith's *The London Heretics: 1870 – 1914*, Kurtz's *The Transcendental Temptation*, Evans' *Cults of Unreason*, and Faber's *New Age Thinking: A Psychoanalytic Critique* also express the same kind of critical evaluation.

A different critical treatment of theosophy comes from those who accept the premise of a transcendental ground to reality and numinous forms of religious experience. However, from this perspective, the theosophical form of esotericism is found to be superficial and inauthentic, inferior to more traditional strains of religiosity. Perhaps the most notable of such critics was Rene Guenon, who thought of theosophy as a "pseudo religion." Though his most notable critique is not available in English translation, the gist of his argument is repeated in *East and West*. As well, his line of criticism has been

reiterated by Eliade in *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashions: Essays in Comparative Religion*. Eliade himself in *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* finds the theosophical approach to be an inferior emulation of true religious behaviour. Blavatsky's assumptions were found to be dubious by Bharati in *The Light at the Center: Context and Pretext of Modern Mysticism*. Even during the early days of the theosophical movement there was often ambivalence and protestation when Blavatsky and others tried to show a seamless connectivity between their version of esotericism and those of living traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. For instance, Max Mueller's views of *Esoteric Buddhism* were inconsistent with theosophical claims. Although a number of traditional religious representatives did admit to certain similarities and shared beliefs, many were openly doubtful.

As well as critical literary treatments, theosophy has also been evaluated more positively by outside sources. Where some have seen delusion, deception, and denial, others have recognised a legitimate expression of spiritual values and estimable ethical ideals. For instance, rather than being derided as an inauthentic imitation of a true religious tradition, Godwin in *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Faivre in *Access to Western Esotericism*, Hanegraaff in *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Trevelyan in *A Vision of the Aquarian Age: The Emerging Spiritual World View*, and Melton, Clark and Kelly in *New Age Almanac* point out the legitimacy of the historical minority esoteric stream of thought and belief in which modern theosophy locates itself.

The critique of the non-rational element applies to more than just the theosophical, but to the even wider religious spectrum. However, the theosophical belief in the desirability of supersensory and mystical modes of consciousness places it in a minority position. As the twentieth century progressed however, recognition that levels of experience deeper or more profound than normal consciousness may be accessible has provided some sense of justification for theosophical objectives. In *Unfinished Animal* Roszak argues for the worthiness of the theosophical vision of extended human potential. In *The Spectrum of Consciousness* Wilber provides a model of consciousness compatible to that found in theosophical literature, even using similar categories and terms at times. In *The Planetaryization of Consciousness: From the Individual to the Whole*, Rudhyar

hypothesises about an evolutionary scenario featuring personal and collective changes in consciousness towards a more integrated, spiritually grounded future condition of humankind, paralleling basic theosophical beliefs. In White's *The Meeting of Science and Spirit: Guidelines for a New Age*, theosophical cosmology and cyclical theory is considered a plausible hypothesis.

The acknowledgement of the theosophical movement as a precursor to later spiritually directed movements was seen as an influence of negative ideas and beliefs from the competing Christian perspective. However, from more objective positions, the historical precedent is recognised simply a neutral sociological fact, without judgment of merits of the system of thought and ideals. Ellwood's *Alternative Altars: Unconventional and Eastern Spirituality in America*. Heelas' *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of the Self and the Sacralization of Modernity*. Chryssides' *Exploring New Religions*. Dawson's *Comprehending Cults: The New Sociology of Religious Movements*. Wilson's *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism: Sects and New Religious Movements in Contemporary Society*. Glock and Stark's *Religion and Society in Tension*. Hexham and Powe's *Understanding Cults and New Religions*. Melton's *Finding Enlightenment: Ramtha's School of Ancient Wisdom*. All these, amongst other writings, explicitly comment on theosophy to one degree or another from a historical or sociological perspective.

Thus it can be seen by just this cursory list of references that all such supplementary literary sources provide a number of interesting and useful perspectives. Whether explicitly adversarial, neutral, or affirmative of particular facets of theosophy. In conjunction with primary context-specific theosophical resources, other secondary theosophical literature, and supplementary information from beyond theosophical circles, we find a full spectrum of pertinent materials.

1.5 Importance of This Study

In light of these broad approaches to the subject matter of theosophy, it may be asked why our analysis is pertinent and what new insight may be gained about the theosophical movement. As a social phenomenon in existence for over a hundred and twenty-five years, facets of the theosophical worldview have permeated other groups and

schools of thought. As well, the original Theosophical Society has endured, as have other organisations and individuals loyal to or inspired by the basic vision of Blavatsky. Therefore, it would be fair to say that though not numerically notable, theosophy is yet a living meaningful preferential way of envisioning reality, with its own accrued traditions and distinctive quasi-mythical narrative. We have also seen that there have been a number of treatments from the adversarial, promotional, and analytical perspectives, whether condemning, praising, or investigating particular aspects of theosophy.

Rather than duplicate other approaches, we hope to show that our line of speculative inquiry indeed sheds new light on the process by which the distinctly theosophical vision of reality was articulated and presented. We feel that our study is unique in the fact that it treats the attempted legitimation process of the theosophical movement by Blavatsky and others structurally. As an ongoing, developing, dialectical phenomenon, in which the dominant motives, insights, experiential influences of individuals are directed towards the deconstruction of the unacceptable profane status quo positions while simultaneously attempting to provide more preferable spiritually grounded content for those very same institutions. Yet such a process involves more than just intellectual operations, and is inevitably influenced in unexpected or unanticipated ways by the interactions and actions of individuals. In theosophical history, much of the disreputability of Blavatsky and others derived from attitudes and behaviours less estimable than ideally expected. In our analysis, we have attempted to account for the ambivalences and ambiguities prevalent in theosophical history by suggesting profiles accommodating Blavatsky's experiential background as well as by utilising a sociological overview of theosophical history.

We also feel that it is important to isolate and look at the critical elements of the legitimation process because such a focus provides a very different way of examining the formation and evolution of the theosophical worldview and understanding how a new, explicitly created system of thought and belief can take effective form. Most treatments have concentrated on biographical, historical and doctrinal exposition. Though often illuminating, succinct or provocative, they do not usually deal with root issues relating to the sociology of knowledge, such as the function of worldviews. Our discussions of motives and intentions, the criteria of knowledge and truth, the potentialities of human

experience, the functions of supernatural authorities, the utility of unassailable texts reveal the integrated connectivity of ideas and beliefs intrinsic to the worldview embedded in theosophy. Our modest efforts in concentrating on such aspects of the theosophical movement are not intended to diminish the work and worth of the more conventional treatments of theosophical materials. Rather, we hope to provide a complementary and somewhat novel way of interpreting and assessing the early development of one of the more interesting and controversial minority worldviews.