

Chapter 8

Historical and Sociological Analysis of the Early Theosophical Movement

8.1.1 Blavatsky as Initiator of the Modern Theosophical Movement

To gain a different perspective that accounts for some of its unique historical convolutions, the theosophical movement can be examined more directly as a sociological phenomenon. The preliminary assessment of the theosophical movement as an alternative, minority worldview, based upon deviant cognitive knowledge, can be expanded by introduction of some of the more familiar categories proper to the sociology of religion. We shall first try and examine some of the more significant internal historical dynamics of the theosophical movement before discussing how it may be categorised in the broader sociological context. We shall limit our historical framework to roughly the first thirty-five years of the movement, the most volatile and intriguing phase of its history. This period covers the time of the formation of the Theosophical Society through to the power struggle after Blavatsky's death and the ultimate ascendancy of the Besant-Leadbeater faction.

The first and most critically identifiable fact we can distinguish is that the nineteenth century theosophical movement was mostly shaped and defined through the vision and conceptual apparatus provided by Madame Blavatsky. And without her charismatic leadership and uncompromising promotion of the theosophical agenda, it appears unlikely that the movement could have attained its unique form. Although spiritualist theory and other occult and mystical materials were part of the contemporary minority alternative cognitive mix, it was Madame Blavatsky who quickly became noted as a knowledgeable, experienced, and flamboyant authority within the genre.¹ In fact, some of the first public descriptions of her character, background, and interests that appeared in America were written by future Theosophical Society co-founder Henry Olcott, whom she first met while they both were in Chittenden Vermont in October 1874 observing the phenomena surrounding the Eddy séances.² He introduced her as an expert

¹ See for example, Anonymous, *About Spiritualism (An Interview With Madame Blavatsky)*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2001, <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/aboutspiritualism.htm>>. (Accessed March 3, 2002). Also, Anonymous, *A Miracle Worker of To-Day*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2000, <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/olcottpmg84.htm>>. (Accessed March 2, 2002).

² The Eddy brothers, William and Horatio, gained notoriety as mediums capable of producing elaborate

on spiritualistic phenomena, which she claimed was based on extensive first hand knowledge and experience. Her critique of the belief that discarnate spirits were the primary source of spiritualist phenomena immediately drew attention from others as she and Olcott began their association. He quickly deferred to her claims of expertise, setting the tone of their respective roles and professional relationship. Madame Blavatsky became identified as both authoritative theoretician of the Eastern/occult/esoteric tradition and first-hand psychic/medium/mystic. Olcott on the other hand, because of his strong organisational and analytical abilities and his skill at public speaking, fit more comfortably within the administrative and proselytising sphere. His subsequent belief that he had in fact made personal contact with some of the Masters via Blavatsky's occult manipulations and through ostensible personal messages and signs furthered his assurance that there was a factual basis that confirmed and legitimated her claims and theories.

Thus, with confidence that there was a basis of supernatural credibility supporting her claims, Olcott was able to proceed firmly convinced that he was devoting his efforts to a worthy and revolutionary cause. His trust of Madame Blavatsky was based on her personal charisma, shaman-type skills, belief that the Masters sanctioned her ideas and intentions. However, that implicit trust did not sustain itself to the fullest during the entire duration of their activities. In his later reflections, though firmly committed to the theosophical worldview and esteeming Blavatsky as a specially designated messenger, he admitted a degree of naivety in his past uncritical approach.³ Olcott to many contemporaries was in fact regarded as a dupe in Blavatsky's schemes, noted as an honest and forthright person who simply fell under her sway. His desire to partake in what he perceived was a special cause, revelatory of a transcendent wisdom, was thought to have obscured his better judgment.⁴

Madame Blavatsky was widely reputed to have been regularly engaged in

showings of psychic manifestation. These would often include simultaneous appearances of multiple allegedly ghostly entities of diverse backgrounds that would interact with the spectators gathered to observe such phenomena. The séances took place in a small room on their farmhouse, featuring a specially constructed cabinet in which the active medium sat. Olcott was writing a series of investigative articles for the *Daily Telegraph* in which he concluded that at least a portion of the phenomena appeared to be genuine.

³ See H. S. Olcott, *The First Leave of T. S. History*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online. 2000, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/olcott1890.htm>>. (Accessed March 7, 2002).

⁴ See Richard Hodgson, *Col. Olcott and Mr. R. Hodgson*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online,

extraordinary experiences characterised generically as supersensory, or mystical in form. As well she was noted as the primary methodical and rational expounder of theory and doctrine. From a sociological point of view, she thus can legitimately be classified to some degree exhibiting experiential/visionary characteristics of “prophet” “seer” and “magician” on the one hand; as well as fulfilling a distinctive though limited “priestly” function of doctrinal formalisation and technical exposition on the other. She was the prophetess/seer bringing a new religiously grounded and supernaturally sanctioned vision and message (albeit largely based on a different way of treating extant materials), while yet being endowed with what were interpreted as magical/supersensory powers shaped through numinous experiences in her own life. And yet she was the thoroughly rational, methodical, doggedly determined systematic architect, eager to debate and dispute the minutiae of a bewilderingly eclectic range of topics. She was a co-founder of the first organisational incarnation of the movement; the liaison between the supernatural sponsors and the public; the main source of theoretical and conceptual teachings; as well as an individual who was acknowledged as having a life history of non-prosaic behaviour and extraordinary experiences. A non-conventional innately charismatic and exotic “outsider” who yet pointed to a pedigree of noble birth and social standing.⁵

8.1.2 Olcott and the Charisma of Office

Olcott more properly exhibited the “charisma of office” than of personality or by virtue of his own extraordinary experiences. Although subsequently developing an ability to perform acts of healing, his theosophical functions were more along administrative and “priestly” lines, including extensive teaching, public speaking, and propagandising as well as organisational planning and administration. His relationship with Blavatsky began with him in obvious awe of her alleged personal relationship with the Masters and capacity to perform psychic phenomena. It also appears clear that with time his suspicions grew about the credibility of some of her claims and demonstrations.

2001, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/hodgson2.htm>>. (Accessed May 4, 2002).

⁵ For examples of contemporaneous opinions of the early impression made by Blavatsky, see Anonymous, *Madame Blavatsky's Power. Events in the Career of a Remarkable Woman*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2001, <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/anonmadblapower.htm>>. (Accessed March 8, 2002). And, Anonymous, *The 'Complex Character of Madame Blavatsky*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2000, <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/anoncomplex.htm>>. (Accessed March 18,

However, his loyalty to the cause and principles of the movement remained steady as he focussed on particular concerns of special interest. In his own right he was a significant figure in the revival of Buddhist pride and a contributor to educational reform.⁶ His strength lay in practical action, and though believing in the authenticity of the Masters and their cause, he deferred to Madame Blavatsky as the more privileged and specially designated decipherer of the plans intended by her “bosses” (as she referred to the Masters on occasion).

8.1.3 Blavatsky’s Charismatic and Authoritative Leadership Qualifications – Conformity to the Taxonomy of the Shaman

For sociological purposes, the possible verification or refutation of the contents of Madame Blavatsky’s extraordinary experiences is of only tangential relevance. What is important is simply recognising that she indeed claimed to be capable of wilfully initiating as well as serving as a passive subject for various forms of non-rational and extraordinary modes of experience. And on multiple occasions, she was observed by witnesses to be apparently engaged in what appeared to be such activities. Whether under trance, through some form of self-induced technique, or initiated via other inexplicable means. Regardless of cause or verifiability, the consensus public opinion was that Madame Blavatsky possessed, claimed to possess, or was thought to possess the capacity to consistently enter unusual states of consciousness and to be able to reveal privileged esoteric information. Even if those states were nothing more than involuntary spontaneous hallucinatory intrusions or abnormal delusions on the one hand, or if they were manifestations of more transpersonal and significant levels of apperception on the other, her reputation as a psychically skilled and active practitioner was established for public consumption. Her notoriety and enigmatic appeal were perpetuated by her reputation and enhanced by her charismatic behaviour.

Blavatsky can be seen to exhibit a mix of prophet/ seer/magician characteristics and to be possessed with a super-ordinate amount of personal charisma. Even the prophet

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⁶ See Ransom, op. cit., pp. 242–244, and Howard Murphet, *Yankee Beacon of Buddhist Light*, Wheaton/Madras/London: Quest Books, 1988, pp. 132–152 for example of Olcott’s Buddhist related activities.

must be endowed with charisma, which in itself pertains to special and rare qualities of personality. The vast majority of anecdotal recollections from those having met her abound with comments about her magnetism, vivacity, psychological complexity, inclination to always be the centre of attention, captivating conversational skills, intense emotional makeup, passionate concern for her causes, and so on. The consensus opinion would indicate that in the eyes of others she was imbued with a significant amount of charisma.⁷ Weber has this view of the connection between charisma, magic, and the prophet.

... it is only under very unusual circumstances that a prophet succeeds in establishing his authority without charismatic demonstration, which in practice meant magic. At least the bearers of "new" teaching practically always needed such validation.⁸

Wach sees common psychological predispositions underlying the categories of prophet, seer, and magician, which converge in the recognition of a special charismatic status for the individual.

Psychologically, these three types of religious activity are similar in possessing the same nervous susceptibility and sensitiveness, the same disposition to trances and ecstasy, and the same inclination to vision, audition, and "clairvoyance." In so far as these gifts are regarded as congenital, a part of the "natural" equipment of the individual, the charisma resulting from it is a personal one.⁹

Blavatsky demonstrated her charismatic/magical/prophetic nature in many ways. Via public episodes of purported occult demonstration, by appearing to be in trance and possessed by other intelligences, by proclaiming to be privy to insights and knowledge attained through supersensory means, and so on. Also, as we have noted, she possessed the traits of systematic priestly rationalist. However, in her case, classification in the priestly category would appear to be a supplementary function. Although proactive with most major organisational matters, her public institutional functions were limited. Even though a co-founder with Olcott of the Theosophical Society, she accepted the modest title of Recording Secretary in the original societal division of offices. Her major public

⁷ See for example, Laura Holloway, *Madame Blavatsky: A Pen Picture*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives, 2001, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/holloway4.htm>>. (Accessed March 30, 2002).

⁸ Max Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1963, p. 47.

⁹ Joachim Wach, *Sociology of Religion*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1962, p. 354.

functions more properly were undertaken via the written word or conversationally as teacher, expounder of sacred wisdom, proselytiser, and social critic. But these activities were clearly supportive of her defining and unique role as the chosen messenger and liaison between the esoteric and the exoteric domains. Late in her career she took more of an active structured role within the Society as leader of the Esoteric Group, giving semi-private instruction and teaching for a selective elite portion of the London lodge of the Theosophical Society. In this regard the following words from Wach partly apply.

As the guardian of tradition, the priest is also the wise man, the adviser, educator, and philosopher. His various administrative duties are derived from his cultic activities.¹⁰

Blavatsky, in part because of her personal eccentricities, charismatic persona, and unconventionality did not conform to such a conservative and institutionalised image. She was though, most explicitly the guardian and defender of the esoteric occult tradition of knowledge that she was propagating and disseminating, as well as “advisor, educator and philosopher” in a personalized idiosyncratic style. As noted earlier, Madame Blavatsky and other theosophical spokespersons were adamant about stating that theosophy was “not a cult.” From their perspective, because part of the motivation of the movement was a broad syncretistic assimilation and distillation of selected thematic materials from both sacred and secular sources, the Theosophical Society consensus opinion was that it should not be classified in traditional religious terms. Since there was no uniform and binding profession of faith required, no necessary adherence to ritualistic procedure, a voluntary option of accepting or ignoring individually defined forms of worship, theosophists felt that they had escaped typical religious classification. However, the thrusts of those objections mostly were intended to show that the theosophical movement was categorically unlike schismatic groups that deviated from mainstream religions. The internal feeling that they were not a sect or a cult does not negate the fact that the movement itself yet displays characteristics conforming to such forms of analysis

The theosophical movement and its subsequent institutions appears to have arisen primarily because Madame Blavatsky was able to galvanize the interest, and provide a comprehensive worldview encompassing a broad range of occult, spiritualist, mystical

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 366.

and similar minority cognitive subjects. Because of her charismatic persona, her claims of expert knowledge, reputation for fluency in supersensible experience, and privileged relationship with the Masters, she seamlessly assumed a role of authority figure. An informal but dedicated cult of personality grew around Madame Blavatsky and other psychically endowed leaders during the duration of the movement. Blavatsky (the human being) was venerated during her lifetime by the most devout theosophists as a specially chosen messenger, a liaison with more advanced beings. Although the mystification and mythologizing of her role led many to feel that she as the “true adept” was an equal with her Masters, Blavatsky herself constantly deferred to their superior status. She consistently referred to herself as the messenger, the vehicle, the body, used to transmit knowledge and initiate plans made higher up in the occult hierarchy. Although she clearly aimed to demonstrate her qualifications for this intermediary role, she never claimed to be an equal to the Masters. Although utilising purported demonstrations of supersensory phenomena to enhance her own psychically grounded mystique and image, this was in support of the larger cause of the Masters. She saw her own primary role as their messenger and prophet of their message about the urgent need for a change away from the status quo of dogmatic religion, stultifying rationalism, and dehumanising materialism, towards an esoteric spiritual worldview.

As well, Blavatsky had no administrative duties per se other than nominally suggested by her Recording Secretary title.¹¹ Within the theosophical movement, she was recognised primarily for her charismatic qualities and as the authoritative messenger and liaison with the supernaturally sanctioning hierarchy said to be sponsoring the Theosophical Society. In this sense she clearly can be seen as a prophet of the coming new world-order, expressed as the impending shift in evolutionary cycles and sanctified by the privileged visionary insights vouchsafed to her by the Masters. Weber’s distinguishing prophet criteria of a personal call and personal revelation seem to be met in Blavatsky’s case. She certainly acted as if her chosen role was to proclaim the wisdom of the Masters and her status as messenger, and that this had been revealed at least at times through supersensory and visionary means.

¹¹ See Symonds, *op. cit.*, pp. 84–85 regarding the nominal duties of Blavatsky as “Corresponding Secretary” and her primary role as authoritative theoretician.

Her exposition and consolidation of the ideational content, though based on reason and logic, nonetheless was partly legitimated by emphasising mythic and extraordinary associations. As a co-founder of the Theosophical Society, she acted largely informally rather than in any official capacity when advising, suggesting, and often insisting upon embarkation along particular lines of action. At times, her administrative input was expressed purely from the personal viewpoint, at other times, she claimed decisions should be made because the Masters so desired. Yet it is important to recognise that her interest in the minutiae of Theosophical Society matters was extensive. By no means was she a “hands off” aloof personage, removed from the day-to-day occurrences and issues. She in fact took very opinionated positions about all facets of the Society. Her justification would be that “the objectives of the Masters” must be the primary criteria for decisions made and actions taken. And she presented her own motives as extensions of those of the Masters.¹²

During her lifespan and beyond, she was sometimes casually and derisively referred to as a “priestess” by cynics in the public and the media. And though the loose and imprecise appellation was more for sensationalistic public consumption than anything else, her efforts at proselytising and doctrinal construction do connote some of the associations of the priestly office. So it would seem fair to say that Blavatsky performed certain functions that were “priestly,” but her dominant role was as the supernaturally sanctioned, extraordinary, psychically endowed movement leader.

Carrying on the enunciation of leadership characteristics, we find that Nelson¹³ provides a more inclusive categorisation when he redefines the role of shaman to include all religious leaders who possess what are believed to be mystic abilities and psychic powers, and whose leadership depends on the possession of personal charisma. The categories Nelson delineates are mystics, prophets, mediums, healers, and sorcerers. Each of these has a specific relationship with the domain of the supernatural, although the distinctions are somewhat malleable and an individual may be fluent in more than one form of shamanism. These however are presented as ideal types. The mystic professes familiarity with ultimate reality as the result of a profoundly personal and intense

¹² See Meade, op. cit., pp. 234–239 for discussion of Blavatsky’s use of the Masters for her own motives.

¹³ Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, pp. 246–247.

experience of the sacred. The prophet functions as the human voice or communicator of what is believed to be transcendent intent. The medium is the source of contact with spirits on intermediate planes of reality. The healer has limited capacity to access the realms of the supernatural, restricted to functions dealing with human health. The sorcerer has the facility of utilising supernatural or magical forces to induce physical and psychological alteration. It is the cumulative sum of personal experience founded upon exercise of his natural abilities that gives the shaman his status. And his authority derives from, and is legitimated by, his personal experience of the sacred. Predominately, the shaman is clearly a strongly charismatic person.

It is important to note that position and authority derive from the possession of natural spiritual powers or gifts, and that leadership is based on charisma. Blavatsky apparently conformed in those ways. As well, the experiential basis and legitimation via personal contact with the sacred likewise were criteria that Blavatsky seems to have met. The five categories delineated by Nelson can also be applied to Blavatsky. Of those, the category least common would be of healer, though some indirect instances may be inferred. The mediumistic/magical elements are well documented in the statements regarding her fluency in trance, possession, and other altered states of consciousness. Interpreting the sorcerer criteria, it may be fair to consider Blavatsky's familiarity with such practices having been obtained during her extensive travels and exposure to different esoteric sources and teachers. And many of the phenomena attributed to her, regardless of their origin and operational mechanics, could be interpreted as examples of sorcerer-type behaviour when perceived by others.

Interestingly, although an outspoken proponent of an ultimately mystical worldview, there is minimal explicit detail about having her own mystical experience, though some personal grounds do appear likely from inferences in her writings and statements.¹⁴ Blavatsky doesn't talk in any great detail about subjective experiences with

¹⁴ See Cranston, op. cit., pp. 55–60, for examples of how Blavatsky undertook the quest for demonstrable occult power in hopes of subsequently acquiring more transcendent knowledge and irrefutable “mathematical” proof of mystical premises. Her own experiences are believed to be alluded to or disguised in her fiction and travel narratives, but refer more to occult phenomena than revealing classical mystical characteristics. Her most explicit reference to the techniques of mystical realisation are in *The Voice of the Silence*, which was not intended as a personal statement, but was purported to be a translation of an esoteric Tibetan text. See also Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater, *Talks on the Path of Occultism. Volume Two. The Voice of the Silence*, Adyar/Wheaton/London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1991, for a later

the classical mystical symptoms such as merging/union of self in the Absolute/God, sense of temporal and spatial transcendence, blissful rapture, and so on.¹⁵ Her most personal hints of mystical experience pertain to her devotion to her Master and associated sensations of awe, reverence, and emotional satiation. In her writings and discussions she enthusiastically endorses such overt mystical systems as Vedanta and Neoplatonism, as well as the mystical strains in all other traditions, but her own reputation and recollections seem more grounded upon occult, magical, and other similar forms of extraordinary sensory-extended experience.¹⁶

The prophet role appears to be the major element of her shamanistic credentials, since much of her rhetoric pertains to defence of the Mahatmas and exposition of their message. In fact, the very effort of trying to institute a new worldview based on the authority of the Masters can be seen as a prophetic enterprise, since she is anticipating a radically different spiritually grounded future based upon a disavowal of the profane and dogmatic present. Weber says this about the role of prophet.

For our purposes here, the personal call is the decisive element distinguishing the prophet from the priest. The latter lays claim to authority by virtue of his service in a sacred tradition, while the prophet's claim is based on personal revelation and charisma.¹⁷

Blavatsky's calling, as it were, has been recounted by her in describing how she believed that her Master had instructed her to form an organisation dedicated to meting out selected portions of the wisdom-tradition. Her revelation had allegedly come about through an incremental process of progressively more profound and enlightening initiations and instructions involving her Masters in their occult functions. Her charisma derived from her personality and demeanour. And even traits such as her Russian accent, allusions to exotic travels, familiarity with obscure customs and mores, as well as her idiosyncratic appearance and mannerisms may have added to her charismatic allure. Such "foreign" and "defect" factors do enter into the equation in the makeup of charismatic

neo-theosophical occult interpretation of this text. See Corona Trew, *The Nature of Consciousness in H.P. Blavatsky and the Secret Doctrine*, op. cit. p. 67 for a view of Blavatsky as inspired by others with mystical insight rather than use of the criterion of personal experience.

¹⁵ See as an example of many such analyses, the characteristics enunciated as "core" by W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, London: Macmillan and Company, 1961, pp. 41–133.

¹⁶ In Meade, op. cit., pp. 464–466, the argument is made that Blavatsky's presumed psychic capacity was less dramatic than assumed, with hypnotism posited as a more prominent explanation.

leaders.

Without a foreignness, then, that still manages to carry a flavour of familiarity and to symbolize one's roots, and without a subtlety of defect, a leader's potential for an image of charisma is seriously imperilled... Such a semi-independent leader is not as aloof or remote as he would like us to believe: we sense, from our own imagery, that he needs us as we need him.¹⁸

Blavatsky may be seen to have demonstrated the characteristics and exhibited behaviours consistent with most of the types enunciated by Nelson during the span of her career. Classifying her within this broad taxonomical definition of the shaman, it is clear that in her early public days she must have appeared especially charismatic and intriguing to those searching for authoritative personal expertise on occult, parascientific, mystical, and other such unusual deviant categories of experience. While spiritualism was a prominent topic of curiosity and speculation, she met Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and others who soon formed the originating nucleus of the Theosophical Society. Her conversational expertise on Eastern thought, Masonry, Rosicrucianism, Western Occultism, and other subjects, as well as engaging discussion of exotic travels, mysterious teachers, and unusual experiences helped entrench her charismatic reputation.

As well as the traits of charisma and the varieties of shaman-type experiences, there are other categories that seem to typify her behaviour. Ellwood has presented an interesting interpretation of Blavatsky and Olcott as exemplifications of the liminal religious personality, perpetually embarking upon spiritual quests in which physical wanderings and change of locations reflect an inner striving. This ultimate motivation is for a transformation of consciousness from the prosaic to an enhanced spiritual state of being. And the personality configurations of such a role are characterised by such terms as sacred misfit, wandering friar, holy man, clown, court jester, or shaman. This individual is an "outsider" living on the fringe of conventionality, and stands as an indicator of the possible inversion of normal social structures and values.

All her life, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-91) personified the vocation of permanently dwelling in or near liminality. With her exotic accent, hints of an adventurous past, imported cigarettes, rough-edged tongue, amazing psychic phenomena, and aura of being an envoy of mysterious powers, she was always a wanderer, a colourful misfit in whatever society she found herself. She spoke, like

¹⁷ Weber, op. cit., p. 46.

¹⁸ Irvine Schiffer, *Charisma*, New York: The Free Press, 1973, pp. 32-33.

a magus of old, of having received occult initiations in the East and of wandering to arcane shrines of wisdom...

Both Blavatsky and Olcott had backgrounds of status within the established social structure, as different as those backgrounds were... Neither of the future Theosophists, however, found the status satisfactory.¹⁹

The peculiarities of her demeanour and her introduction as a multilingual Russian noblewoman turned spiritual adventuress, who had penetrated deep into the hidden mysteries of those exotic locales likewise added to this mystique.

8.2.1 Early Theosophical Society Membership

While gaining a reputation as an expert via her articles and discussions on such topics, a circle of the earnest, the curious, and those seeking an alternative spiritual worldview soon gravitated towards Blavatsky. Some of the people she had met as speculative enquirers searching for spiritualistic, occult, parascientific and mystical knowledge played important parts in the early establishment of the Theosophical Society. The formation of the Society itself came about as a logical extension of informal meetings and gatherings, often with Blavatsky as the centre of attention.

Topics of conversation, galvanized by Blavatsky's profound and witty comments included "the phallic element in religions; recent wonders among mediums; history; the souls of flowers; Italian characters; the strangeness of travel; chemistry; poetry; Nature's trinity; Romanism; gravitation; the Carbonari; jugglery; Crookes' new discoveries about the force of light; the literature of magic"...²⁰

From such gatherings and subsequent publicity engendered by newspaper interviews and word-of-mouth dissemination, Madame Blavatsky's reputation spread, making her what might be considered as a minor "underground" celebrity amongst those attracted to consideration of alternative philosophies and theoretical opinions.²¹ The idea of forming a society for more formal discussion was proposed during one of these gatherings by

¹⁹ Robert S. Ellwood Jr., *Alternative Altars*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979, pp. 106-107.

²⁰ Gomes, op. cit., p 84.

²¹ See for example, Anonymous, *A Visit to Madame Blavatsky*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2000, <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/commercialgazettecinnnati.htm>>. (Accessed March 7, 2002). Also, Anonymous, *Theosophy in New York. Facts About Mme. Blavatsky, Her Powers and Her Religion*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online. 2000, <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/nyworld1886.htm>>. (Accessed March 9, 2002).

Olcott, and confirmed by Blavatsky “nodding assent.” ²²

The original members ²³ consisted of W.L. Alden, an editorialist with the New York Times who later became a critic and disavowed his connection. Mrs. Emma Hardinge Britten, a veteran spiritualist medium and author of a book called *Art Magic*, which appeared at the same time as *Isis Unveiled* and discussed similar themes and concepts. She too became a later enemy, threatening a lawsuit when her book was linked to the Theosophical Society, later charging that *Isis Unveiled* was in fact based on a stolen manuscript. Her husband, Dr. W. Britten, publisher of the spiritualist paper *Nineteenth Century Miracles* also was an original member who quickly dropped out of the Society. John Storer Cobb was an English Barrister and Doctor of Laws, a leader in the Cremation Movement who also lost interest and withdrew. George H. Felt was a New York engineer and lecturer on the esoteric side of ancient architecture who similarly disappeared from the Society. His lecture on proportion in the Pyramids immediately preceded the motion for forming the Society. William Quan Judge was a twenty-four year old law clerk at the time, and later became a major Society figure, leading an American secession after a bitter leadership dispute with Olcott and Besant. Dr. E. De Lara was a European scholar who remained a member. C. M. Massey was an English barrister with a strong interest in spiritualism. His professional reputation was besmirched when it was discovered that an experiment of Blavatsky’s involved him as recipient of alleged psychically materialised letters. He later became a founding member of the Society for Psychical Research and testified against and disavowed Blavatsky when she was under investigation. Herbert D. Monachesi was a New York newspaper writer who dropped out of the Society. Henry J. Newton was a wealthy New Yorker, president of the Society of Spiritualists and an expert on photography. He was elected the original Treasurer of the Theosophical Society, but quickly left the organisation when he realised that revelations of the miraculous would not be immediately forthcoming. Dr. Seth Pancoast was a former professor at a medical college, and an expert on the Kabala. Psychically sensitive, he wrote for spiritualist publications and remained a member his whole life. Charles

²² Gomes, op. cit, p. 86.

²³ For an insider perspective, see R. B. Westbrook, *Reminiscences of Original American Theosophists*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2002, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/westbrook.htm>>. (Accessed November 26, 2002).

Southeran came from a famous family of booksellers. A political activist, his public appearances were felt inappropriate by Blavatsky, and his resignation was accepted. He denounced Blavatsky publicly and provoked a reaction in the Society necessitating the use of secret handshakes, passwords and signs. He later apologised and returned to the Society, aiding Blavatsky with literary work during the time she was writing *Isis Unveiled*. However, he again became an enemy and departed from the Society. Judge R.B. Westbrook was a professor of philology and a Vice-President of the Society. However, he appears to have played an inconsequential role and is not mentioned subsequently. Rev. J.H. Wiggin was the editor of the *Liberal Christian*, but resigned in a matter of months. C. E. Simmons, M.D. was a New York physician, and did not significantly figure in organisational events. Neither did James. Hyslop, or H.M. Stevens.

From this group of original members, it can be seen that the cross-section of educational and professional backgrounds was relatively sophisticated, and mostly drawn from middle and upper classes. However, by the percentage of those original members who did not remain a part of the Society for very long, and may have found explicit points of grievance, it also appears that the emerging Society was unable to adequately prove viable enough to retain interest and loyalty. The very general intent of the Society as it approached inception was this.

In consequence of a proposal of Col. Henry S. Olcott, that a society be formed for the study and elucidation of Occultism, the Cabala, etc.²⁴

Once the constitution, by-laws, objects, offices, and institutional elements had been settled upon, it seemed that specific objections and complaints were more likely to lead to dissent than the original non-specific “study and elucidation” intentions.

8.2.2 Olcott and Blavatsky’s Leadership of the Theosophical Society

The real Theosophical Society leadership came from Blavatsky and from Olcott. They were effectively co-workers in the effort to provide what they considered more credible legitimization for psychic phenomena than currently prevailed within the spiritualist environment itself. In a sense then, the theosophical movement may be viewed

²⁴ Ibid.

as a schism of spiritualism in the sense that the spiritualist movement provided an existing framework that was partly amicable to some of the tenets incorporated into theosophy. Blavatsky stressed that there was an authentic occult basis for much of what manifested in the spiritualist milieu, but that the explanations used by spiritualists was often simplistic, naïve, distorted by Christian and scientific categorisations. In attempting to rehabilitate the psychic element from popular interpretations and integrate it within her own eclectic theoretical mix, she incurred intense wrath from a segment of the spiritualist base. On the other hand, her efforts at presenting a broader frame of reference and quasi-scientific objectivity attracted a number of supporters and admirers. While drawn to Blavatsky initially by her charisma and apparent depth of knowledge on occult and related topics, Olcott was gradually informed of the wider mystical/occult hierarchal worldview that encompassed spiritualist phenomena and provided a more profound interpretative rationale.

Madame Blavatsky, whom he now saw frequently, was sowing in his mind the seeds of an idea that spread beyond the horizons of the meagre spiritualistic philosophy. Gradually she let him know that, scattered in different parts of the world, but united in aims and work, that there was a secret Brotherhood of Adepts. There were advanced yogins with many supernatural powers. Even the *chelas* (pupils) of these Adepts had developed extrasensory powers. Adepts, and some of their *chelas*, could, for instance, travel astrally in full consciousness, and if necessary materialize their astral bodies. In other words they could, if they wished, appear as a phantom to anyone...

Eventually she told him that this mysterious Brotherhood was, for its own high purposes, to some extent using the new upsurge of spiritism in the modern world...

Well, who could say what occult forces worked behind the scenes? If, as Madame said, a secret Brotherhood of White Magicians existed... and was using its special powers, and spectacular phenomena, as shock tactics to lead to the spread of a non-materialistic philosophy of life, then that is what the world of the 1870's needed.²⁵

Olcott made a personal commitment to Blavatsky and the cause of the Masters, withdrawing from his family, rearranging and eventually abandoning his legal career, finding and then sharing lodgings with Blavatsky. They were soon cohabiting together for practical purposes as they sought to initiate the theosophical enterprise in earnest. The

²⁵ Howard Murphet, *Yankee Beacon of Buddhist Light*, Wheaton/Madras/London: Quest Books, 1988, pp. 45-46.

official theosophical position was that the relationship was an entirely Platonic and fraternal friendship, based upon mutually beneficial and reciprocally useful needs. Olcott was able to bring organisational leadership and focus to the movement while at the same time being available to help Blavatsky in her literary efforts. She was able to attain the security and routine needed to produce a thorough and extensive exposition of the theosophical stance and do the work of the Masters. As well, Olcott's commitment was reinforced by the mysterious and alleged occult reception of letters from the Masters, urging him to put all his efforts into the cause, abandon his current way of life, and implicitly trust in Blavatsky's claims, actions, motives.

The relationship was also one in which gender roles did not clearly define the division of power and office. Blavatsky was noted by many contemporaries to behave in a "man-like" manner, both in terms of her demeanour and her appearance. Puttick, for example, classifies Blavatsky as "male-identified" because of her masculine role-behaviour.²⁶ She surmises that in spite of this, as a woman Blavatsky was more likely to be denigrated than Olcott, even though she was clearly the more valuable contributor.

Blavatsky outshone Olcott both as a charismatic leader and formulator of Theosophical doctrine, and is much better known than him, but has widely been condemned as a charlatan—a fate perhaps more likely to fall on female than male leaders.²⁷

The presence of strong charismatic and visionary female theosophical leaders has been a common phenomenon in the history of the movement.²⁸ Comprehensive discussion of the possible reasons for this would involve hypotheses taking us far beyond our delimited topic, though it should be noted that in the history of the broad theosophical movement, many such leading figures indeed were of this feminine type. From Blavatsky rival Anna Kingsford and contemporary Emma Britten to subsequent individuals as Annie Besant, Katherine Tingley, Alice Cleather, Alice Bailey, Elizabeth Prophet, Dion Fortune, and others, charismatic female leadership representatives have often been in the forefront.

²⁶ Elizabeth Puttick. *Women in New Religions: In Search of Community, Sexuality and Spiritual Power*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997, p. 192.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 184.

²⁸ For discussion of Blavatsky, Besant, and Tingley, and the inferences drawn regarding Blavatsky's androgynous characteristics, see James Santucci, *Women in the Theosophical Movement*, retrieved from Theosophical History, 1990, <<http://www.theohistory.org/womenints.html>>. (Accessed November 12, 2002).

However, in practical implementation, female leadership has also been most effective with an efficient male partner. Kingsford and Maitland; Blavatsky and Olcott; Besant and Leadbeater; to a lesser degree, Judge and Tingley; Mark and Elizabeth Prophet. Narrowing our focus to the two pairs under consideration within our time span, perhaps differing conclusions may be reached. Blavatsky was the dominant visionary with natural charisma while Olcott was the efficient practical organiser, adapting to his role and acquiring the charisma of office. With the other pair, Leadbeater was the primary visionary with strong charisma while Besant emerged as a natural fit in the position of institutional leader. However, her charisma may have equalled or surpassed that of Leadbeater while Olcott was less innately qualified or effusive than Blavatsky. However, in both cases, the female was publicly recognised as the natural and authoritative leader of the partnership.

In the initial partnership, the relationship between Blavatsky and Olcott has been represented as a harmonious and mutually respectful collaboration. The traditional theosophical narrative of the faith, vision, dedication, selflessness of the Founders in their work to actualise the ideals of their cause has received more critical treatment in later years. Besides the salacious aspersions of enemies and opponents, which may or may not have any factual basis and cannot be definitively treated, questions have arisen about the gullibility of Olcott in his response to the claims of Blavatsky and the Masters. In writing his memoirs decades later, Olcott admitted in retrospect that he might have been misled or deceived. And Blavatsky mentions in her letters that Olcott was a “psychologized baby,”²⁹ an apparent reference to possible hypnotic suggestion, or at least, easy manipulation and control. In the letters purported to come from the Masters, at times an almost intimidating and self-interested tone can be detected about matters which bear no connection to their ostensible aims or reflect their supposed spiritual supremacy. Here is Godwin’s view about the intent of the letters of “Master Serapis.”

Viewed in such a context, Serapis’s letters to Olcott have little of the reverence and the high moral tone one might expect of an adept, and virtually no indication of how the disciple might proceed on the quest to perfection, beyond indulging in a fascination with occult phenomena. They read more as the advice of a Machiavellian schemer than as the words of a “Master of Wisdom.” Serapis... seems mainly concerned to bind Olcott to his cause by way of occult promises

²⁹ Godwin, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

and financial ties.³⁰

Olcott's fascination with occult phenomena apparently made him susceptible to the sway of Blavatsky's charisma and the authority that her own psychic/shamanistic talents implied. When the communications from the Masters were accepted as genuine productions of supernatural forces, he was able to commit on an emotional and a rational basis to the cause enunciated by Blavatsky and sanctioned by the Masters. His role as Theosophical Society President began based on trust in the authenticity of the hierarchy of authority, extending from spiritual planes through the Masters, into the Theosophical Society, which thus gave his own office special self-sufficient charismatically endowed status.³¹

If the Masters are the hidden sponsors of the Theosophical Society, then the role of President must carry with it assurance that the line of communication remains efficacious. However, initially the office of the President was mostly a symbol of authority rather than the real seat of power. Olcott conducted institutional business, made practical and financial arrangements, presided at meetings, gave speeches, and accepted responsibility for organisational affairs. However, he was, as President, more subservient and passive regarding long term planning and overall strategy, dependent on Blavatsky as prophetess of the cause, and on communications from the Masters to validate decisions or suggest directions for activity. Ironically, after leaving America, settling in India, and converting to Buddhism, his own sense of self-confidence and justification in the role as President led to more independent exercise of authority. This incremental distancing from Blavatsky caused increasingly greater conflict between them, especially during the latter years of her life.

Still exercising organisational sway via personal charisma, a record of supersensory experiences, expertise and authority in occult and mystical knowledge, status as emissary of the Masters, the damage to her reputation in the Hodgson exposure created a credibility gap for many. Her disreputable notoriety delegitimised her own position and the reception of the theosophical worldview for many. However, it also

³⁰ Ibid., p 291.

³¹ See K. Paul Johnson, *Initiates of Theosophical Masters*, op. cit., pp. 198–201, and Ransom, op. cit., pp. 286–315.

accented her charisma and added to her mystique for others. From the point-of-view of sceptics, the continual allegiance and loyalty directed to Blavatsky in spite of her public disgraces seemed incomprehensible. As well as her relentless efforts to maintain the belief in the supernatural agencies allegedly operating for promotion of theosophical objectives. Here is a representative sceptical position

Even if one cannot accept the orthodox Theosophical explanations of these phenomena ... one is left in a state of wonder at their magnitude. Surely the physical and mental effort expended in incessant letter writing in various hands, and the production of multi-volume works of incomprehensible philosophy and pseudo-anthropology, the continuous behind-the-scenes arrangement of marvels – and interspersed, the seeming placid at-homes charged with quiet electricity, delighting the most unsusceptible of guests—surely all this was more than a great hoax or a great joke. Blavatsky was, at the least, one of history's supreme role-players. She was completely unendowed with the very physical attributes of an actress. She never, in fact, faced audiences—it was Olcott who performed in public—yet in *tete-a-tete*, or in the privacy of her own room, she convinced her followers and ultimately herself of the reality of a cast of characters far more fascinating than those found on most of the world's stages of the 1880s. Whether she achieved this with the help of hashish or by sheer imaginative paranoia matters little. The performances were convincing enough, and satisfying enough, to carry her through all manner of exposure and denunciations, to new triumphs over and over again. She had one other attribute of a great actress. She had periodic moments of pure sanity in which she was amused, pleased, or terrified at her own performances. It was their quality that removed her above her disciples, most of whom had not a grain of humour, and were either dupes or foils or conscious accessories.³²

This view suggests that Blavatsky was driven by a desire to be the centre of attention, to manipulate, control, and exert influence over others through staged performances.

However, even if a valid interpretation, it is not contradictory to the possibility of Blavatsky being motivated by authentic religious impulses. From her perspective, it is conceivable that any means were felt to be justified, and sanctified by her calling, and thus fair in promoting her spiritual vision of reality. Apparently firmly convinced and assured of the superiority of her beliefs and ideas, she may have utilised all of her innate abilities and all possible techniques to try and support her position. As well, the very use of deceptive and misleading methods to make what is felt to be a more important existential statement conforms to the profile of the shaman and the psychology of the

³² Warren Sylvester Smith, *The London Heretics: 1870 – 1914*, London: Constable, 1967, pp. 154-155.

trickster.

Ellwood implies that, rather than being an aberration and atypical of her personality, her penchant for indulging in trickery and disruption was part of an overall psychological complex.

Three ways in which this trickery can be related to Madame Blavatsky's vocation come to mind. First, she was like a shaman, with her preternatural guides, and shamans commonly employ both sleight-of-hand and inflated narratives about their own supernatural inclinations to facilitate belief and confidence in their clients. Second, she was ... like a trickster in that she enjoyed fooling people and thereby deflating the pretensions of society, a labor congenial to the genuine outsider and denizen of two worlds—the trickster is at once righteous, comic, and amoral. Third, the evidence suggests she may have had at least a mild case of dissociation or multiple personality ... While pathological if extreme, some degree of multiple personality may comport with many important religious phenomena: visions, possessions, and inspiration. When one learns how to “trigger” the shift, even while attributing it to supernatural overshadowing, it facilitates mediumship and shamanism.³³

Ellwood notes three components that may, collectively, account for Blavatsky's behaviour. These are that “she was like a shaman,” that she was “like a trickster,” and that “she may have had at least a mild case of dissociation or multiple personality.” These three traits may be supported by noting some of the themes of our earlier discussions. Nelson's classification of shaman characteristics appear to generally represent Blavatsky's public persona and support the theory that she did, indeed, within the framework of her late nineteenth century environment, exhibit shaman-like characteristics. The behavioural predilections of the trickster are here adduced to account for Blavatsky's tendencies to indulge in trickery and deception. And use of Gowan's taxonomy supports the theory of dissociation or multiple personality being directly related to discrete kinds of numinous and visionary experience. If we include Evans' theory of transitional triggers and the Para-Jungian speculation about the contents of imaginal experience, further hypotheses about the specific forms of her experience may be suggested. And factoring in what was motivationally relevant to her (namely, the legitimising of the theosophical worldview), we may get a fairly comprehensive look at the number of influences that were operative when Blavatsky was engaged in defining

³³ Ellwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-110.

the theosophical mindset.³⁴

Olcott meanwhile had grown into a more comfortable fit as President, particularly in his activities geared to reviving Buddhist pride and tradition as well as promotion of other Eastern cultural and educational projects. His belief in the cause had gradually become a matter of personal conscience and principle, less dependent on Blavatsky's authoritative interpretations. And though not totally estranged, a certain element of cautious distancing grew between them. Particularly when Hodgson's critique and other accusations of suspicion were factored into his overview. At one point when Blavatsky's machinations became too overbearing, he offered his resignation. A compromise agreement was reached in which Blavatsky permanently left India while he remained president at Adyar. In subsequent years, particularly with the introduction of Annie Besant into the Society and the presidential ambitions of W.Q. Judge becoming more pronounced, issues of leadership became the primary concern of the movement.

8.2.3 Theosophical Society Organisational Dynamics

During Blavatsky's lifetime the Theosophical movement was broader than just the Theosophical Society. Disputes about content and direction as well as jealousies and struggles for organisational power and status ensued virtually from the outset. A major bifurcation developed in the movement as the tone and content of Blavatsky's writings shifted in emphasis and empathy. The major thrust of *Isis Unveiled* was the rehabilitation and promotion of an esotericism grounded in Western occult and mystical sources. Reincarnation is almost completely absent from the text, though later enthusiasts have tried to show that it was mostly implied. However, by the time of *The Secret Doctrine*, a much more Eastern oriented presentation emerged. As well, the transference of the Theosophical Society headquarters (and Blavatsky and Olcott) to India was interpreted as a prioritisation of Eastern interests. Many who did not share the apparent transfer to a more Eastern frame of reference rebelled or left the Theosophical Society to forge more accommodating systems.³⁵ Amongst those who at first tried to change the orientation,

³⁴ Gowan's typology was discussed in chapters 5, and pertinent elements of the theories of Evans and the Para-Jungians in chapter 6.

³⁵ A notable example was Rudolph Steiner, who formed his own theosophical offshoot, The Anthroposophical Society. See Geoffrey Ahern, *Sun At Midnight: The Rudolph Steiner Movement and the*

but instead created her own organisation was Anna Kingsford. Intellectually equal, at least, to Blavatsky, and actively experienced in psychic and visionary experience, she was noted as a charismatic and passionate speaker. At first she agreed to an uneasy accommodation with the Theosophical Society by keeping a separate lodge dedicated to a Western esoteric orientation in distinction to the official lodge in London controlled by A.P. Sinnett. However, distrust of Blavatsky and her claims about Masterly sanctions, and the unhappiness with the emphasis on Eastern doctrine, she defected from the Theosophical Society.³⁶

This and many other withdrawals, transferences of allegiance, casualties of power struggles were in large part exacerbated by the very organisational structure of the Theosophical Society. The institutional structure featured grass roots local groups in different cities or areas known as lodges, each of which was individually sanctioned on receipt of official charter from the world body headquarters at Adyar. Within the lodge structure, decisions were made by democratic vote. And as the number of lodges in different countries grew, they were organised into national sections, each with its own decision-making ruling council. Though the lodge members elected the councils of the sections, a power struggle between all three levels of organisation often ensued. Section councils frequently fought against both the local lodges and the international corporate leadership as cliques and individuals sought to gain ascendancy, implement their own policies, and promotion of their particular interpretation of doctrines and objectives. In 1886 Judge led the first American section, with other countries likewise instituting their own sections. England in 1888, India in 1891, Australia and Sweden in 1895, New Zealand in 1896, the Netherlands in 1897, and France in 1899, with other countries following in the course of the next three decades. Because the initial objectives and methods of achieving those goals were never precisely enunciated in the early Theosophical Society manifesto, enough legitimate discretionary territory remained for factions to arrive at their own formulations. And with Blavatsky's death, the cohesiveness localised around her persona quickly dissipated into an ongoing series of battles,

Western Esoteric Tradition, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: The Aquarian Press, 1984.

³⁶ See Edward Maitland, *Anna Kingsford, Madame Blavatsky, and the Theosophists*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2001, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/maitland1913.htm>>. (Accessed October 22, 2002).

accusations, personality conflicts, clashes of ambition, genuine disagreements about treatment of content, direction to pursue, and goals to prioritise.

8.2.4 Problems of Succession and the Criterion of Masterly Sanctification

Despite the fluid and malleable organisation structure, a shared criterion for legitimising claims of theosophical leadership was the stamp of Masterly approval. The legitimacy of authority in the Theosophical Society always was grounded upon the prerequisite of Masterly approval and sanction. By initially stating that the Theosophical Society was formed by order of the Masters to help effect a change in public worldviews towards a more spiritual orientation, any line of action or statement of principle would have to be justified by conforming to those sentiments. Whoever could therefore prove or establish by evidence or logical reasoning that they were legitimately acting according to the will of the Masters would thus be in position to wield power. The office of President was assumed to automatically carry with it that assurance. However, where dissenting opinion was supported by purported evidence of the Masters intentions, the question then became a matter of deciding which claim was more authentic and believable. Madame Blavatsky, as the first prophetess of the Masters for the Theosophical Society was in the unique position of having been acknowledged as their emissary and co-worker. However, the office of President also carried with it the assumption of Masterly sanctification. As well, the existence of the presumed independently emitted “Mahatma letters” to selected individuals provided another seemingly reliable ground for interpreting their will.

Another channel of contact with the Mahatmas was through alleged personal conversation or apparitional presence. Blavatsky, Olcott and others claimed to have had normal in person conversations with the Masters. In addition, a number of apparitional encounters were believed to have occurred. And perhaps most problematical in so far as credibility is concerned, it was an accepted and taken-for-granted assumption that “astral visits” via clairvoyance and dreams was a legitimate and cognitively trustworthy means of communication with the Masters. The premise that the inner self was cognisant and active in astral form during sleep was a basic theosophical tenet. Thus, claims about out-of-body meetings with the Masters during sleep were admissible arguments. No matter how allusive, elusive, or non-verifiable the contents of those purported meetings may

have been. Disputes over the credibility or authenticity of all of these sources of possible Masterly communication plagued the future history of the theosophical movement.³⁷

8.2.5 Leadership Dispute and Conflicting Endorsements

After the death of Madame Blavatsky in 1891, the theosophical movement entered a phase of leadership conflict. During her lifetime, it was assumed by Society loyalists that despite “outsider” debunking of her claims to supernatural communication with the Masters, Madame Blavatsky was yet the most authoritative representative of their will and intentions. With the loss of her personal charisma and expertise, the Society was left to stand on the beliefs, principles, ideals built into its ideational structure and the leadership skills and charisma of others. Olcott retained the stature of his office, but without exuding the same charismatic presence of Blavatsky. Questions quickly arose from critics who felt that the supernatural endorsement from the Masters would be withdrawn or diminished. In his own conscience he believed he was conducting Society business the way the Masters had intended, and that his subjective communications via occult or astral channels was yet legitimate. In 1892 for example, during a period of internal leadership struggle, Olcott believed that the Masters had been in direct communication with him.

On 10 February the president clairaudiently received a message from his Masters to the effect (a) that a messenger from Him would be coming ... : (b) that the relationship between Himself, H.P.B. and myself was unbreakable: (c) That I must be prepared for a change of body, as my present one has nearly served its purpose: (d) That I had not done well in trying to resign prematurely: I was still wanted at my post, and must be content to remain indefinitely, until He gave me permission to abandon it: (e) That the time was not ripe for carrying out my scheme of a great international Buddhist League ... : (f) That all the stories of Him having cast me off and withdrawn his protection were false, for he kept constant watch over me and would never desert me.³⁸

This enunciation of messages was believed to be an authentic announcement from the

³⁷ Blavatsky, Olcott and other theosophical figures have claimed to have had person-to-person discussions with entities they claimed or believed were Masters. See K. Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Brotherhood*, op. cit., pp. 1–15 for examples of such scenarios. The importance of purported dream or “astral” communication grew under the leadership of Besant, Leadbeater and Arundale. See for example, Charles W. Leadbeater, *The Inner Life*. Wheaton/Madras/London: Quest Books, 1978, pp. 1–31. Also, K. Paul Johnson, op. cit., pp. 193–194.

³⁸ Ransom, op. cit., pp. 287–288.

Master, and allowed Olcott to feel morally and objectively justified in believing that he still was upholding the legitimate work of his office, sanctified by Masterly approval. In any event, confident in the Masters authoritative commendation, Olcott confronted Judge in the struggle for presidency of the Theosophical Society.

Judge, who in 1888 had been made Vice-President of the entire society, had increased American membership to over six thousand, and made that section the most profitable. He claimed to be the legitimate inner esoteric heir of Blavatsky, while Olcott was considered only the outer exoteric corporate leader. Judge too needed to show Masterly endorsement of his own candidacy. The office of President was such that the prerequisite qualification required that the leader have direct access to the Masters. Judge had made claims of such connections, especially in letters that he said he had received. However, despite Theosophical Society members belief in the continued proactive interest of the Masters in their organisation, and the continuity of their relations, cynical suspicion of motives appeared to become an unavoidable issue in such struggles for power. Judge now was accused of using fraudulent letters to give the impression that the Masters favoured him as president.

A certain amount of opinion had formed that Mr. Judge was issuing letters purporting to be in the handwriting of a Master, with His signature, and some had upon them the impress of the “seal” bought so long before at Delhi by Col. Olcott, because he thought it resembled the Master M’s cryptogram. Judge denied having done so. A little later he asked the Colonel not to force an inquiry into the “bogus letters” and the “Lahore brass” i.e. the Delhi seal.³⁹

With claim and counter-claim carefully construed to reflect the alleged wishes of the Masters, and defended by clever and obtuse arguments, leadership of the Theosophical Society became as much a matter of trust and faith in the individual as it did on disputable pieces of evidence said to reflect the will of the Masters.

8.2.6 The Veneration of Blavatsky and the Basis of “Blavatskyism”

Another new factor entering the equation was the emerging veneration of Madame Blavatsky as an avatar, or sainted presence, now raised above the delimiting flaws intrinsic to her human personality. Since her output had come to an earthy

³⁹ Ibid., p. 289.

cessation, all her writings, teachings, instructions, opinions, attained the status of “holy writ” for a portion of the theosophical movement. As the final authority on matters of doctrine, the Masters, and organisational objectives, it was felt that the “true transmission” of theosophy had been received relatively self-contained and intact. And the goal of the movement should be to further clarify and embody her vision rather than venture into unexplored speculative territory. This was especially so in regards to the Masters, who were felt to have been working with and through Blavatsky, but might not be readily accessible or active in a different organisational configuration. The faction mostly loyal to Judge generally expressed that perspective.

Olcott was first thrown into conflict with those who considered that the theosophical movement as it had existed under Blavatsky had now become a closed and complete self-contained system. He began to keep a diary to try and clarify his memories and observations on the changing dynamics of the movement.

His object in writing this work was not to provide material for future historians but to “combat a growing tendency within the Society to deify Madame Blavatsky.” There were disturbing signs that a new sect was springing up around her memory – a sect of people who, when challenged on the intrinsic reasonableness of one of their statements, would answer with restrained breath, “But you know she said so ...” as if that closed all debate.

This raised the Colonel’s bristles. To him *no* person should be taken as final authority on matters occult and spiritual. In this he was true to the teachings of his Master and his late colleague. For this freedom of thought, this absence of authoritarianism, he had continually fought.

“It was but too evident,” he writes ... “that unless I spoke out what I alone knew, the true history of our movement could never be written.” ... ⁴⁰

The fear of a “sect springing up around her memory” did not materialise into a formal organisation replete with rituals or worship. Although for some devotees the personal veneration extended quite deeply. However, the legend of her life story acquired more of a mythical status within theosophical circles. The importance of her role as messenger of the Masters, her own calling and extraordinary skills, and the revelation of the large content of knowledge and theory that was her legacy became the primary elements pertaining to that narrative.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Murphet, op. cit., p.251

⁴¹ See, Daniel H. Caldwell, “*Bear Witness!*” *Who Was the Real H.P.B.?*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2002, < <http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/whitelotus2000.htm>>. (Accessed April 10,

Olcott recognised the possible dangers of a revisionist historicism when he noted that the true history of the theosophical movement could never be written from the vested vantage point of a mythologized interpretation of events. And part of that trend to special veneration and esteem eventuated in what was characterised as the “back to Blavatsky,” “Blavatskyism,” or “pure theosophy” movement. That trend drew sharp distinction between the theosophical claims and ideas propagated by Blavatsky and the later derisively labelled “Neotheosophy” which emanated from the Theosophical Society under the Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater ascendancy. There also were more general social and philosophical differences which may have been implicit before but which began to surface with Blavatsky’s exit. The Judge forces, which consisted of most American and some British and European groups, preferred a focus on the Western occult and mystical tradition and were less than sympathetic with Indian causes and doctrines. The official Adyar-based organisation, led by Olcott first and Besant next, were more attuned to Hindu and Buddhist thought and terminology, and became more directly involved with Indian social issues. As well, the Besant and Leadbeater embellishment and revision of Blavatsky formulated myth and doctrine ventured along lines felt inappropriate, delusionary, and even heretical to the pure and original teachings. For example, this quote from a pamphlet on recommended books for study illustrates the strong emotional reaction felt by those maintaining loyalty to a “pure Blavatsky” version of theosophy.

Lists have been prepared by those who prefer Neo-theosophy and psychic trash. An analysis of these lists shows that the majority of the books are by those who prefer to forget Blavatsky and the Masters, and are intent on destroying real Theosophy. The purpose of this list is to show what are real Theosophical works, to those who have been led to believe the psychic and religious rubbish of the Neo-Theosophists The works of H.P. Blavatsky have served as a nucleus, which H.P.B.’s students used for their material. ⁴²

8.2.7 The Besant-Leadbeater Faction

The schism in the movement began with Blavatsky’s death and the battle for control between Olcott and Judge. The arrival of Besant and Leadbeater as major Theosophical Society influences however occurred during the last years of Blavatsky’s

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life. Leadbeater, an ex-clergyman who at that time made no claims of possessing extraordinary psychic powers, was hurriedly given Blavatsky's assurances that he had been accepted as a chela of the Masters after his continued entreaties.⁴³ And in lieu of the usual seven-year probationary period, he was put to use as a multi-purpose aide, performing various (often menial) tasks set by Blavatsky and Olcott over the next few years in different (mostly Eastern) locales.

During this time he claimed that during a forty-two day span, through intensive effort and the help of his Master, he was able to make a dramatic breakthrough and highly cultivate his psychic powers. It was upon the claim of advanced clairvoyance that his future organisational status and authority was founded. In recounting his life history, Leadbeater painted a picture in which his attraction to theosophy (and that of his organisational associates) appeared destined to occur at that particular historical juncture. According to his clairvoyantly-inspired narratives, their collaboration was a continuation of similar collective activities undertaken in past lives amongst the same group of elite theosophists. Subsequently, it was established that much of his early biographical storyline had been embellished and romanticised. Rather than living a youthful life of exotic travel and adventure, he grew up conventionally in England, and through the help of his uncle, became a curate in Hampshire. His main interests before discovering theosophy were working with young people and exploring spiritualism and psychic phenomena.⁴⁴

Besant was a high profile social reformer, gifted orator, and proponent of Free Thought. After some preliminary hesitant ponderings on the claims of theosophy, she delved deeper when reviewing *The Secret Doctrine*, later meeting with Madame Blavatsky on a number of informal occasions. After expressions of reciprocal respect, and recognition of mutual needs and opportunities, she unexpectedly announced her conversion to theosophy and her personal devotion to its leader. Blavatsky recognised in Besant a kindred soul, and made every effort to assure her ascendancy within the London

⁴² Robert A. Hughes, *A Study Course in Theosophy and Occultism*. n.p., n.d.

⁴³ See Hugh Shearman, *Charles Webster Leadbeater: A Biography*, London/Ojai/Sydney: The St. Alban Press, 1980, pp. 7–9.

⁴⁴ See Washington, op. cit., pp. 115–125.

branch of the Society.⁴⁵ The depth of affection in the relationship between these two strong-willed, charismatic and blunt speaking women has been the topic of much analysis, beginning almost immediately upon Besant's conversion. Those that were familiar with her before her conversion were surprised at the choice of belief she adopted, but not necessarily surprised at her tendency to passionate and full emotional commitment to a cause.⁴⁶ At the time, Blavatsky was in the midst of a public dispute with Olcott and was trying to rehabilitate her personal reputation and her professional credibility. A sincere and effusive show of faith and support from a well known and opinionated but respected figure like Besant renewed her public image and provided personal moral support and enthusiasm. Besant quickly ascended to a position of power, and obtained Blavatsky's endorsement as a leader of the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society after her own death. A post she deemed to share with Judge even though Blavatsky had explicitly sanctioned her as sole successor.

Besant's official duties were set by Blavatsky while she was still alive, and later by Olcott. They included much in the way of travel and lectures, including official Theosophical Society representation at the American convention of 1892 and at the World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893. During Judge's challenge to Olcott, based on unspecified and most likely accusations about his moral conduct, Besant had originally taken his side, but the charges were dropped. Subsequently she withdrew support for Judge in light of the suspicious nature of his letters claiming endorsement from the Masters. In June of 1894 the conflict between factions widened, and illustrates how Theosophical Society leadership struggles ostensibly were about legitimacy of succession, but more realistically were based on clashes of personality and differing ways of interpreting and furthering the theosophical agenda.⁴⁷

8.2.8 Schism and Division – The Judge Secession

A compromise resolution was reached during a meeting of the Judicial Committee investigating the allegations surrounding Judge's letters of Masterly endorsement. This

⁴⁵ See Cranston, op. cit., pp. 361–364.

⁴⁶ George Bernard Shaw was one who came to such a conclusion. See Anne Taylor, *Annie Besant: A Biography*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 243.

⁴⁷ See Ransom, op. cit., pp. 286–315 for events of this period.

stated that since the accusations were brought against Judge in his official capacity as a Vice-President of the Society, he would have to have been found guilty of official misconduct. However, he claimed to be acting merely as a private member, entitled to his own personal beliefs like every other member. And officially declaring the existence or non-existence of the Masters would be in breach of the non-sectarian and non-dogmatic nature of the Society, and hence outside of their jurisdiction. This legalistic defence cleverly orchestrated by Judge did not satisfy critics however. Judge had declared that though the letters were in fact written in his own handwriting, he in fact was acting as a chela, utilising extrasensory powers in precipitating the psychically transmitted intentions of the Masters. Besant agreed with the rationale of this explanation, but pointed the finger of guilt at Judge for not disclosing this in advance, and letting the assumption stand that the letters were totally independent productions of the Masters.⁴⁸

The schism in the Society did not heal with this debate, but split the factions further apart. Judge had declared that the Masters endorsed him as the sole head of the Esoteric Section of the Society and that Besant no longer had a place in it. They had shared leadership after Blavatsky's death. The rationale used by Judge was even more obtuse and dependent on faith in the credibility of his supersensory insights and information. To discredit Besant, he claimed that she was under control by the "dark side," malevolent occult forces that wished to destroy the Theosophical Society. Judge declared that Besant had come under the hypnotic spell of certain Indian Brahmins, particularly, Gyanendra N. Chakravarti, a scholar who was well received at the Parliament of Religions. Judge's views were seconded by one of his major supporters, Archibald Keightly, who claims to have witnessed a radical transformation of Besant's personality after extended contact with Chakravarti. Olcott took Besant's side, and the matter was again debated in the annual 1894 convention. Besant denied the accusations and asked Judge to resign, which he refused to do. Confusion increased when it was discovered that Judge himself was an admirer of Chakravarti until receiving a communication entitled "By Master's Direction," which turned him in the opposite direction.⁴⁹ Further complications about these events ensued years later, when a fervent

⁴⁸ See Murphet, op. cit., pp. 264–276.

⁴⁹ See William Q. Judge, *By Master's Direction*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 1894, <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/judgebmd1894.htm>>. (Accessed October 29, 2002).

Judge supporter, Alice Cleather, said that Judge himself had fallen under the influence of a powerful medium, Katherine Tingley, who herself had orchestrated the plan of an American secession. This eventuated with all but ten American Lodges falling under the control of Judge and his associates. The Judge faction believed that they were the legitimate line of succession through which the Masters were working, and retained the Blavatsky-centric orthodoxy of theosophical doctrine. Tingley succeeded Judge after his death in March 1896 with the leadership of the largely American-based “Theosophical Society, the Western Hemisphere.” However, opposition to Tingley’s increasingly formalistic and ritualistic obsessions arose, and a further schism in 1909 produced the United Lodge of Theosophists led by Robert Crosbie. The Adyar-based Theosophical Society likewise insisted that the Masters were still communicating with its leaders, particularly Olcott and Besant. However, the input of new theosophical doctrine initiated by Besant and Leadbeater (her now psychically empowered occult mentor) shifted emphasis within the worldview enunciated by Blavatsky.⁵⁰

8.2.9 Legitimation of the Besant-Leadbeater Rationale

With full legitimacy only accorded theosophical leaders who convincingly claimed to be in contact with the Masters, it was necessary for Besant and Leadbeater to show that they were authentic members of the occult hierarchy, personally approved by the Masters as trusted and valuable exponents of their message and work. For Besant, it seems that her private experiences of Masterly communication were mostly in the form of emotionally tinged visions, often perceived in dreams or states of suggestibility. From her perspective, reflecting upon the nature of her own intrusions into the private subjective domain of extraordinary experiences, a firm and assured sense of confidence in their credibility persisted throughout her life.

And let me say that more than all I had hoped for in that first plunge has been realised, and that a certainty of knowledge has been gained on doctrines seen as true as that swift flash of illumination. *I know* by personal experience, that the Soul exists, and that my Soul, not my body, is myself; that it can leave the body at will; that it can, disembodied, reach and learn from living human teachers, and bring back and impress on the physical brain that which it has learned; that this process of transferring consciousness from one range of being, as it were, to

⁵⁰ For the change in Theosophical Society orientation under Besant, see Johnson, op. cit, pp. 193–201.

another, is a very slow process... and that my own experience of it, still so imperfect, so fragmentary, when compared with the experience of the highly trained, is like the first struggles of a child learning to speak compared with the perfect oratory of the practiced speaker: that consciousness, so far from being dependent on the brain, is more active when freed from the gross forms of matter than when encased within them: that the great Sages spoken of by H.P. Blavatsky exist: that they wield powers and possess knowledge before which our control of Nature and knowledge of her ways is but as child's play. All this, and much more, have I learned, and I am but a pupil of low grade, as it were in the infant class of the Occult school: so the first plunge has been successful, and the intuition has been justified.⁵¹

What is notable about this candid statement is that Besant consistently refers to her own limited psychic capacity. She says she is “a pupil of low grade,” her own experience is “so imperfect, so fragmentary.” It seems reasonable to assume that she must have had higher expectations of deeper and more continuous experience. Whether her expectations were based on her own feelings and desires entirely, or perhaps based on what others claimed or suggested is uncertain. However, she notes that “when compared with the experience of the highly trained” she does not possess the same degree of insight or visionary depth. The fact that C.W. Leadbeater was acknowledged as her psychic mentor and collaborator would indicate that she might have had him in mind as an example. However, despite feelings of a certain inadequacy, the qualitative fullness seems to have been considered “successful” and “justified.” Her sense of the validity of the essentials of the theosophical worldview is expressed in no uncertain terms. And she explicitly states that she has personal experiential knowledge of the Masters and has been accessible to their teachings and communications.

As in the case of Blavatsky and all who claimed first hand psychic rapport and interaction with the Masters, any number of psychological, historical, extraordinary, and other factors may have contributed to their own personal mixes of belief. Here is one estimate of Besant's state of mind when susceptible to such occurrences.

She was to report many such meetings with astral guides throughout her life as a Theosophist; they appeared at convenient times and gave the messages she wanted to hear. But it would go against all we know of her character to suspect her of simple lying. She had grown up in a family that took the supernatural for granted; ... Later she learned from C.W. Leadbeater, her guide in matters occult, that whatever she saw in her imagination was a veridical vision; imagine a

⁵¹ Annie Besant, *Annie Besant: An Autobiography*, London: The Gresham Press, 1908, pp. 345-346.

Master, and you have seen him.⁵²

Whatever the possible source of her visions, it seems undeniable that Besant sincerely believed that she was in personal occult communication with the Masters, and thus a legitimate operative in the grand evolutionary plan. Motivated by her sense of partaking of a specially legitimated world-transforming mission, in public Besant usually exhibited a sense of poise and an earnestness about the theosophical cause. As well, driven by a passionate concern for social justice and equality, she became deeply involved in the movement for Indian independence. However, to many both within and outside the theosophical movement, her public political aspirations were considered to be indistinguishable from her private theosophical beliefs. Especially in seeking the realisation of the first Object of the Society, the pursuit of universal brotherhood. Before being elected President in 1907, she and Leadbeater had become mainstays of the movement by demonstrating charismatic demeanour and authoritative leadership within the Theosophical Society. Leadbeater had been temporarily forced to resign when charges of sexual misconduct became public. However, sympathising with his claims of pedagogical and occult motives, Besant endorsed his reinstatement.⁵³ As President, she added the authority of office, insuring that the link between the Theosophical Society and the Masters was still in place, but re-interpreted and reformulated according to new occult insights deriving from her own, and especially, Leadbeater's experiences.

Besant and Leadbeater were the dominant Theosophical Society authorities through the first three decades of the twentieth century, and directed the movement towards a prioritisation of millenarian beliefs within a modified theosophical vision of the impending new reconfiguration of the occult hierarchy. Their legitimation of what was termed Neotheosophy by critics was based on the criteria of personal supersensory exploration and communication with the Masters. Materialisations, bodily meetings, physical signs and portents were rarely referred to. The preferred locale was now the "astral plane," where through occult technique or during sleep, an ongoing succession of initiations and meetings with a variety of esteemed hierarchal personages was said to

⁵² Rosemary Dinnage, *Annie Besant*, Harmondsworth/New York//Markham/Ringwood/Auckland: Penguin Books, 1986, p. 83.

⁵³ For the history of this episode, see Gregory Tillet, *The Elder Brother*, New York and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, pp. 77–102.

have been occurring. Leadbeater often would prompt others about their recollections of such alleged meetings, and hint at scenarios and fill in details, to which they acquiesced. Or he would amplify and embellish dream recollections of others with his own interpretations, thus reconfirming the current Theosophical Society position on the intentions of the Masters. And while the “back to Blavatsky” element rejected such radical revisionism, elsewhere in and on the fringes of the theosophical movement during the twentieth century, others also claimed more personal contact with the Masters.⁵⁴ Pursuing that avenue of historical and doctrinal transition and deviation, while fascinating as a topic unto-itself, carries us beyond the scope of our inquiry, which is primarily concerned with Blavatsky’s influence and nineteenth century movement dynamics. Having outlined some of the important historical developments of the early stages of the theosophical movement, it may be useful to try and augment that perspective by seeing how more traditional sociological theories and terms may be applied.

8.3 Sociological Classifications

8.3.1 Sociological Definitions of Religious Movements - Introduction

The identification of classifications based on distinctive traits and characteristics found in religious movements and organisations have been a major area of focus by many scholars. Most commonly analysed have been the major forms of church, sect, and cult, with even further subdivisions, subcategories, and criteria of definition being proffered.⁵⁵ As well, the term NRMs (new religious movements) has in recent years become another useful methodological classification. Extensive analysis, evaluation, and comparison of the particular scholarly schemas falls beyond our purview. However, although usage of terms sometimes is nuanced, and varies from analyst to analyst, similar phenomena are often being described along somewhat different lines. We will try to utilise the categories

⁵⁴ See, Alice Bailey, *The Externalisation of the Hierarchy*, New York: Lucis Press, 1968. Harlette Augusta Curtiss and F. Homer Curtiss, *The Message of Aquaria: The Significance and Mission of the Aquarian Age*, Washington: The Curtiss Philosophic Book Co., 1947. Benjamin Creme, *Maitreya’s Mission*, Amsterdam/London/Los Angeles: Share International Foundation, 1990. Elizabeth Clare Prophet, *The Great White Brotherhood in the Culture, History and Religion of America*, Livingston, MT: Summit University Press, 1987.

⁵⁵ For discussion of the definitions of the terms NRM, church, cult and sect, see Lorne L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The New Sociology of Religious Movements*, Toronto/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 30–40.

and definitions that seem most pertinent and applicable in explaining the particularities of the theosophical movement. Although some of the references refer to later historical stages, the significant characteristics identified do appear to encompass dynamics present during the formative years of the theosophical movement. The confusion over the use of terms and definitions is unavoidable, so we must therefore examine particular analyses and try and see the terms and categories of reference that are deemed applicable to the theosophical movement.

8.3.2 Church, Cult, Sect, New Religious Movement – Points of Theosophical Conformity

Let us begin with a generalised overview of some of the defining characteristics of the various classifications. A church provides continuity and sustains tradition within a given society, representing the religion of a mainstream social clientele. A sect is a smaller voluntary loyal and dedicated alliance, featuring strict and focussed leadership. The sect will try and ensure that it remains as insulated as possible from the influence of other groups. Historically, the majority of modern religions originated as sects, acquiring many of the characteristics of churches as they became more socially entrenched over time. A further classification has been noted in the form of the cult. While the sect in many cases can be considered a derivation of a dominant church, the cult is seen as a more subjectively oriented and socially detached minority group.

... cults ... being small groups geared toward inner spiritual fulfilment with little relation to historical society at all (e.g. Theosophy, Self-Realization Fellowship and other Asian-based meditation centred groups). The distinctions are Western. In broader non-Western perspective we must admit that there are nearly as many kinds of religious institutions as there are communities and sub communities.⁵⁶

Here, theosophy is seen conforming to a general cultic definition because it was a (relatively) small group that prioritised “inner spiritual fulfilment” and has “little relation to historical society at all.” The first point seems accurate. The aims and interests of theosophical teachings have always been directed towards effecting progressive spiritual development of individual followers, through suggested paths of conduct, study, disciplines, and techniques. The second point is not entirely accurate. The first object of

⁵⁶ William E. Paden, *Religious Worlds*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1988, p. 59.

the Theosophical Society was to strive towards the realisation of universal brotherhood. This ideal, and the belief that societies and races were distinct evolving entities with collective karma and destinies meant that historical events were interpreted in light of specific beliefs and expectations. Although theosophical organisations believed that social and political concerns were addressable more by changes in worldview and a re-orientation of values, at various times theosophical leaders have expressed partisan opinion about world events. For instance, Annie Besant was a major figure in the movement for Indian independence, though questions arose when it appeared that she was blurring the distinction between her opinions as an individual and her role as President of the Theosophical Society. And, at times, differences in political stance bred conflict when attempting to apply theosophical sanctions to specific historical situations. Yet, ultimately, the emphasis was on individual spiritual development, with social progress perceived not as an end unto itself, but more the by-product of a more enlightened understanding.

The primary importance in theosophy of individual spiritual fulfilment via an eclectic syncretism can be considered an example of a means of salvation, indicated in this quote from Bryan Wilson.

... the new cults propose to take the individual out of his society, and to save him by the wisdom of some other, wholly exotic body of belief and practice.⁵⁷

This reference perhaps is more accurate regarding more recent scenarios than that of the early theosophical movement, though it does appear at least somewhat applicable. On the one hand, Blavatsky, Besant, and many theosophical leaders excessively pandered to facets of Eastern esotericism to illustrate the contrast with entrenched Western conventional thought. And even those who were more focussed on the materials of Western esotericism in a sense were reconstructing “the wisdom of some other, wholly exotic body of belief and practice” by reviving and revising discredited and disputed concepts.

We also may move from consideration under the term “cult” to that of “sect.” In Wilson’s sevenfold division of sects, the most applicable category for theosophy would

⁵⁷ Bryan Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion*, London/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 98.

be as a “manipulationist sect.” Hexham and Poewe define this as a sect that prioritises this-worldly salvation, especially acquired through success in mental self-improvement. These sects are primarily individualistic rather focussed on communal or familial objectives, emphasising mental hygiene. The growth of these sects occurs principally where the goals of personal achievement predominate and where emphasis is on personal accomplishment.

The West is riddled with groups of this kind—Transcendental Meditation, EST, Theosophy, Christian Science, Scientology, and so on.

... Wilson contends that they ... attract that segment of the population that is semi-sophisticated in their ability to imitate the general reasoning of philosophers and scientists. ... They are articulate and eager for shortcuts to prestige and power.⁵⁸

The objective of improving the mind would be considered consistent with theosophical belief, though this was perceived as part of an overall strategy towards attaining greater degrees of consciousness and more advanced spiritual status. Theosophy was primarily presented as a private inner-directed personal option, with worldly success and social achievement criteria of peripheral or indirect interest in the formative years of the movement. An important factor in acquiring public credibility and serious respect was by obtaining favourable endorsement from those considered esteemed or respected in society at large. Thus, when such successful individuals made positive statements, or joined as members, their social or professional status was often noted and used to suggest prestige for the movement. Even today, there is a continual effort to show that theosophy must have some enduring worth if people such as Yeats, Einstein, Gandhi, Kandinsky, and so forth have at one time, said something favourable about any facet of the theosophical worldview. Even if just a casual reference or remark.

As an older manipulationist sect, theosophy did not concentrate on issues of physical health in attracting interest of the public, but more significantly, aspired to affect a shift in worldview to a more fluid and open-ended occult and spiritual orientation. And though not conceived as dissociated ends unto themselves, but integral elements of the wider belief system, expansion of consciousness and mental hygiene were definite criteria of the theosophical outlook. Encouragement in partaking of yoga, morally based

⁵⁸ Irving Hexham and Karla Poewe, *Understanding Cults and New Religions*, Grand Rapids: William B.

recommendations of vegetarianism, abstinence from alcohol, and other “right living” practices were seen as part of the proper theosophical self-disciplinary way-of-life, befitting the ethical values of the belief system and providing the proper setting for cultivation of spiritual objectives.

The late nineteenth century was a time when the kind of individualistic, secular, modern attitude that valued personal achievement was already in force. People like Blavatsky, Olcott, Besant, Judge, and many others can be seen as strong willed, clearly focussed, goal-oriented. Although the content of their cause lauded supra rational states of consciousness, a strong rationalistic attitude was used in systemising and promoting that vision. And the types of persons who were perceived as potential clients and sympathisers were also expected to be objective and thoughtful individuals, with an interest in the perennial mysteries of life. The theosophical demographic ideally was “that segment of the population that is semi-sophisticated in their ability to imitate the general reasoning of philosophers and scientists.” The list of original members perhaps reveals the clientele that Blavatsky hoped to attract to the movement. Mostly professionals with respectable educational credentials, all aspiring to find a credible spiritually oriented worldview that could not be debunked by the arguments of science. Yet, Blavatsky’s writings, though attempting to challenge and accommodate scientific and scholarly disputes with the semblance of depth and erudition, did not in fact convert the vast majority of experts and authorities. Rather, when not totally scorned or ignored, her major works were usually dismissed or superficially patronised. Examples of her pretensions at superior expertise can be found in her critique of famed scholar Benjamin Jowett for allegedly failing to discern Plato’s “real” intents and her attempt to gain the endorsement of respected scholars like Max Mueller for her esoteric interpretation of Hindu and Buddhist texts. Here Mueller diplomatically explains his disinclination to concur with Blavatsky’s perspective in a letter to Olcott.

I felt it my duty to protest against what seems to me a lowering of a beautiful religion. Her name and prestige were doing real mischief among people who were honestly striving for higher religious views, and were quite willing to recognize all that was true and beautiful and good in other religions. Madame Blavatsky seems to me to have had the same temperament, but was either deceived by others

Eerdman’s Publishing Company, 1987, p. 129.

or carried away by her own imagination.⁵⁹

And here is the justification underlying her dispute with Jowett.

Well, Dr. Jowett is a great Greek scholar, let us say one of the first in England; but this does not make of him an authority on ancient history or geography. I, for one, have “the sublime audacity” of setting Dr. Jowett’s claim of knowing Plato’s *inner* thought, and his authority on the *spirit* of Platonic and other philosophies, at naught.⁶⁰

As well, the general lack of esteem accorded theosophy in scholarly circles was reinforced by Madame Blavatsky’s disreputability. An example is this reaction from William James in commenting about Hodgson’s investigation.

By the way, who is Mr. Richard Hodgson? ... I am glad of his demolition of that jade, Blavatsky ...⁶¹

8.3.3 Typecasting of Theosophical Followers

A steady flow of apologists and expounders have continued over the years to insist that those works do indeed merit credit as profound and intellectually sophisticated productions. The question arises about the depth of sophisticated intellect and analytical skills of those followers who insist on the veracity of Blavatsky’s works. Were critics too harsh, snobbish, elitist, and unsympathetic, or was the average theosophist perhaps less inclined or capable of scrutinising the ideational system thoroughly enough? Washington suggests that theosophical followers in fact were not necessarily prepared to judge critically or objectively when occasion demanded. Speaking of Blavatsky’s books, he draws this impression of the demographic of the early theosophical movement.

But the point of *Isis Unveiled* was not to please reviewers and scholars. It appeals instead to passionate amateurs and spiritual autodidacts: readers too concerned with answers to important questions to be bothered with academic quibbles about authenticity and internal coherence. Blavatsky’s book answered to deep needs at a time when religious doubt was fuelled by the first great age of mass education. The late nineteenth century produced a large, semi-educated readership with the appetite, the aspirations and the lack of intellectual sophistication necessary to

⁵⁹ Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Scholar Extraordinary: The Life and Times of Professor the Rt. Hon. Friedrich Max Mueller. P. C.*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1974, p.329.

⁶⁰ H.P. Blavatsky. *Is Theosophy At Bay?*, retrieved from The Blavatsky Archives Online, 2000, <<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/blav89itab.htm>>. (Accessed November 8 2002).

⁶¹ Gardner Murphy and Robert O. Ballou. ed. *William James on Psychical Research*, Clifton, New Jersey: A.M. Kelley, 1973, p. 64.

consume such texts. It was the milieu portrayed so vividly in England by Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, George Gissing and Hale White: the world of autodidacts, penny newspapers, weekly encyclopaedias, evening classes, public lectures, workers' educational institutes, debating unions, libraries of popular classics, socialist societies and art clubs ... where nudism and dietary reform linked arms with universal brotherhood and occult wisdom.⁶²

Such a sweeping typecasting of course cannot be totally inclusive, though it would appear to be generally applicable in terms of the social environment that many theosophists emerged from.

Basically, it seems fair to say that Theosophy represented a spiritual home for persons like Blavatsky, Besant, Tingley, Olcott, or Bailey who came from respectable, in some cases high-status, backgrounds, but who nonetheless found themselves intellectually and spiritually ill at ease. Typically they seem to have been people of deep mental interests in religious and philosophical topics, but without conventional education in them—perhaps without access to it—they were the kind of people who read a lot of serious books, but in the library or at home rather than the university classroom. They were “status inconsistent” persons whose outward life, however comfortable, was at odds with what they inwardly sensed themselves to be.⁶³

The “deep mental interest” without the discipline and perspective of “conventional education” of course does not negate the worth or credibility of any theosophical doctrine or belief. Personal spiritual vision and intuition are not necessarily acquired through conventional channels of education. However, perhaps the attempt to create a wide eclectic synthesis legitimated from disparate sources revealed a lack of depth and proper context in the understanding and treatment of those materials. The urgency of a spiritual calling and the desire to articulate that vision in a form that would be widely respected intellectually as well as emotionally alluring perhaps eventuated in presentations that were deemed less self-evidently truer than hoped for.

Conversely though, to those empathetic or receptive to the particular line of argumentation, presentment of detail, framework of premises and speculative inferences, the theosophical worldview did in fact appear to be intellectually sound and credible. For instance, Ellwood presents a thoroughly lucid and well-reasoned exposition of his personal preference for the theosophical worldview. He begins by stating that his

⁶² Peter Washington, op. cit., p. 53.

⁶³ Robert Ellwood Jr., *Theosophy*, in *America's Alternative Religions*, ed. Timothy Miller, Albany, New

attraction to theosophy was the result of a mid-life realisation that long pondered metaphysical and philosophical questions were most attractively and plausibly answered from within the theosophical framework of explanation. He feels that the deep and perplexing questions that he has spent much of his life seeking satisfactory answers for are not beyond the scope of human inquiry, but are most adequately and meaningfully answered via the theosophical worldview.

From Ellwood's point-of-view, he recognised that the theosophical perspective provided a personally satisfying explanation for problems he was unable to reconcile through other ideational systems, and thus provides a level of comfort for conduct in everyday living. The perennially perplexing problems that have perpetually plagued all of humanity's best efforts at resolution appear to be at least capable of a comprehensive and satisfying treatment, even if the final answers are illuminating rather than necessarily absolute. For Ellwood, the theosophical tradition is a positive and optimistic one in which it is believed that there can be discerned a real understanding of the true nature of the cosmos.⁶⁴

Another interesting fact was that over time, "middle aged and urban women" did become a significant portion of the movement.⁶⁵ Wilson notes this phenomenon as well.

It is not surprising, emerging when they did and couching their doctrines and discourses in intellectual literary form, that Christian Science, Theosophy and the Vedanta movement should have attracted something of a leisure class—middle-aged, increasingly functionless, relatively well-to-do women.⁶⁶

With a history of strong and charismatic women leaders, and a subject matter emphasising personal spiritual development, it is not surprising to find that women were inclined to take an interest in the theosophical movement.⁶⁷ The "leisure class" description may also be applied more broadly considering that theosophy was directed to middle and upper classes, and thus would find a certain percentage of both sexes with

York: State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 322.

⁶⁴ Robert Ellwood, *Theosophy: A Modern Expression of Wisdom of the Ages*, Wheaton/ Madras/London: Quest Books, 1986, p. 2.

⁶⁵ For the convergence of theosophy with other feminine interests in Russia, see Maria Carlson, *Fashionable Occultism in The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997, p. 141.

⁶⁶ Wilson, *The Social Dimensions of Sectarianism*, op. cit., p.240.

⁶⁷ See Johnson, op. cit. pp. 161–207 and James Santucci, *Women in the Theosophical Movement*. Theosophical History, 1990, < <http://www.theohistory.org/womenints.html>>. (November 12, 2002). for

enough leisure time to become active contributors to the movement. Whether intellectually, organisationally, financially, or in other ways. It does thus appear that women provided an inspirational and motivational resource from which leadership figures emerged. And a number of “relatively well-to-do women,” did provide crucial patronage and support. Wealthy patrons of both sexes did have important logistical roles in the history of the movement, especially during the career of Madame Blavatsky. Housing, travel, and other expenses were often taken care of by such wealthy supporters as Lady Caithness, Countess Wachtmeister, the Keightlys, various Indian and other patrons and sponsors. The land and buildings of the Adyar headquarters of the Theosophical Society was such a gift.

In addition a certain portion of the theosophical clientele came from the aesthetic domain. The influence was largely at the creative level for individual artists, inspiring particular forms of experimentation and thematic exploration.⁶⁸ Whether the aesthetic productions faithfully evoked resonant theosophical sentiments cannot be estimated because of the fusion of subjective factors at the percipient stage. However, there is no doubt that a number of major figures through a number of artistic mediums did in fact incorporate into their works insights, intuitions, feelings, impressions that had occurred as a result of theosophical influences. These include Yeats, Kandinsky, Scriabin, and many others who were directly influenced by theosophy in one way or another.⁶⁹ So this permeation of new ideas into the aesthetic sphere attracted a clientele interested in the theosophical analysis and description of the inner self and the spiritualised cosmos both for personal edification as well as for creative stimulus.⁷⁰

8.3.4 Further Refined Definitions and Points of Theosophical Conformity – Excursus Religion, Gnostic Sect, Alienation, Counterculture, Psychic Deprivation, Client Cult, Prototype NRM, Cosmological Communion

discussion of the importance of Women within the movement.

⁶⁸ Extensive discussion of the influence of theosophy and other esoteric influences on abstract painting in particular can be found in *The Spiritual In Art: Abstract Painting 1890 – 1985*, ed. Edward Weisberger, New York: Abbeville Press, 1986.

⁶⁹ See Cranston, op. cit., pp 463–498 for a list of some of the more notable figures.

⁷⁰ See, Shearer West, *Fin de Siecle: Art and Society in an Age of Uncertainty*, Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press, 1994, pp 113–118.

Ellwood introduced another useful classification for theosophy. He classifies the movement as a non-normative form of excursus religion, a minority and alternative movement away (or, “excursus”) from the familiar dominant and established social forms of religion by individuals or small groups. The primary objective is a more personalised and psychologically oriented quest for depth of experience and spiritual fulfilment. And in the process, cognisance of another alternative symbolic universe emerges that may engender alienation and conflict with the familiar social self and environment.

Consider Helena Blavatsky ... Though she was brought up in Aristocratic circles in Orthodox Russia, and though she occasionally had wistful yearnings towards conventional faith and life, the major features of her inner life were occult initiations, communications with transcendent masters, and the paranormal powers they worked through her—all of which created in her non-social self that could only be socialized through new sets of relationships centring on its own phenomena.

This personality was intertwined with a long-standing sense of alienation from society and tension from it.⁷¹

The content of knowledge that identified theosophy as a distinct movement has been noted to pertain to esoteric, occult, mystical, and similarly designated experiential materials. From the sociological perspective, groups defined by prioritising such specialised subject matter appears to fit the classification introduced by Wilson as “gnostic sects.” Towler here characterises this orientation.

... *gnostic* sects are those which impart to their members a special knowledge which radically changes worldly life. By these esoteric means life on earth is transformed, and eternity begins here and now.⁷²

A critical characteristic of the theosophical message imparted from Blavatsky and all major spokespersons indeed was that a special esoteric message was being disseminated. Although that special knowledge could be uncovered within specific extant religious, philosophical, and scientific sources, the common exoteric readings did not provide the essential key to proper comprehension. It was only via the esoteric interpretation that the purported deeper, spiritually grounded blueprint to noumenal reality could be explicated. Blavatsky insisted that this esoteric mode of envisioning reality did “radically change worldly life” and reveals the true basis of the human enterprise. And adopting that

⁷¹ Ellwood, op. cit., p. 54.

⁷² Robert Towler, *Homo Religiosus*, London: Constable, 1974, pp. 123–124.

worldview and acting and thinking accordingly would effectively transform life. Taking the first steps on the path towards consciously willed spiritual evolution would significantly alter the karmic dynamics, and, in a sense, be a new beginning “here and now” towards Mahatmaship.

In another sense, the term “gnostic” has a more specific bearing on the philosophical slant enunciated by Madame Blavatsky. Her radically dualistic orientation in which spirit and matter; the permanent soul principle and the body; the forces of good and of evil; white and black magic; selfishness and selflessness; and so on, were polarised and uncompromisingly contrasted, revealing an attitude consistent with traditional gnostic belief. The following description seems to be a fair assessment of Blavatsky’s perpetuation of a gnostic mindset.

Gnosticism, originally a philosophy of radical world-denial emanating from Pythagorean metaphysics, Neo-Platonism and various occult schools, looked upon the empirical universe as the abode of pain, darkness, and wretchedness into which the human soul, a fragment of the divine *pleroma* had fallen inadvertently , imprisoned in time and bodily circumstances. The soul was enjoined by Gnostic teaching to flee the world of sense and return to the celestial “home” ... Gnosticism is, of course, typical of both the ascetic and ahistorical mentality of certain “perfectionist” movements. The Gnostic imagination and its kindred world is among such religious groups as the Cathars of the Middle Ages, the Rosicrucians, the Theosophists, and the Christian Scientists...⁷³

Though later theosophical commentaries and doctrinal interpretations tried to place a more positive emphasis on the spiritually enhancing value of “this world” accomplishments and opportunities, the influence of Blavatsky’s gnostic valuation remained intrinsic in her writings, and is embedded in the theosophical worldview as first articulated.

A further categorical classification that expands on the ramifications of a gnostic orientation may be introduced. In *Natural Symbols*, Mary Douglas presents a schema of sociological analysis based upon the dynamics of interaction between individuals, smaller social groups, and society at large.⁷⁴ She uses the two main categories of classification, grid and group, which are fluid and variable, and figuratively intersect horizontally and vertically at discrete points on an axis between extreme positions. Defining the nature of

⁷³ Carl A. Raschke, *The Interruption of Eternity: Modern Gnosticism and the Origins of the New Religious Consciousness*, Chicago: Nelson – Hall, 1980, p.20.

the self or ego according to public or private criteria of meaning represents a horizontal continuum. And dependence on social or individual systems of classification expresses a vertical range of options. The various configurations emerging from analysis by this methodology are classified according to their intersectional location along the axis.

What can be derived from this theoretical framework is that the theosophical mindset clearly represents a preference for spiritual rather than material values; the prioritisation of personal goals and ideals rather than collectively oriented social objectives; the valuation of ideas, beliefs, principles that are privately felt to be meaningful rather than the uncritical acceptance of the dominant social worldviews. Douglas also extends her categorisation by identifying the different forms of symbolic reaction to the human body. Theosophy, with its preference for the subjective domain and the personal spiritual concerns of the individual, would naturally and inevitably express the gnostic bifurcation exemplified in Blavatsky's thought and intrinsic to the theosophical position. Spirit is hypostatized as unconditionally pure and transcendent. The body is entirely negative, a prison that confines and restricts mind, soul, spirit. As well, Douglas discerns an element of alienation implicit in this sort of gnostic view.

I am suggesting that the symbolic medium of the body has its restricted code to express and sustain alienation of a sub-category from the wider society. In this code the claims of the body and of the wider society are not highly credited ... The body is despised and disregarded, consciousness is conceptually separated from its vehicle and accorded independent honour. Experimenting with consciousness becomes the most personal form of experience, contributing least to the wider social systems and therefore most approved. This is where the dichotomy of spirit and matter become an instant theme.⁷⁵

Incorporating this form of analysis, it may be surmised that theosophy's intrinsic gnostic position may at least in part reflect a certain degree of alienation from mainstream social worldviews in which material, impersonal, and collective values are embedded while the spiritual, subjective and personal concerns are accorded secondary status. And as a minority cognitive alternative option, considered intellectually disputable and disreputable by mainstream legitimating institutions, it seems that a certain amount of alienation would be inevitable.

⁷⁴ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p.164.

Recognition of the factor of alienation also brings up the question of whether theosophy may be considered a counterculture. The term emerged in the late nineteen sixties in specific response to the phenomena surrounding the emerging youth culture of Western societies, and remains characterised by references to topical and historical issues. As such, the term implies too specific a set of associations to be fully applicable for our purposes. However, it may yet prove useful if the topical context is bracketed out. For example, Roszak has this definition of a counterculture.

Meaning: a culture so radically disaffiliated from the mainstream assumptions of our society that it scarcely looks to many as a culture at all, but takes on the alarming appearance of a barbaric intrusion.⁷⁶

The connotations of this definition suggest an extreme sense of alienation. The intention of radical change is clearly explicit. Not an attempt to legitimise or justify a dissenting perspective, but a wholesale substitution of another incongruent minority option. This definition obviously shows a polarised set of extreme stances. However, the reference to the countercultural environment is not wholly applicable for theosophical analysis. The theosophical movement was not primarily age related or overwhelmingly demographically determined, but more based on shared empathy of ideas and beliefs. Thus it was more ideological and theoretical than it was practical and lifestyles related, although those factors did apply under certain circumstances, and were legitimate systemic elements. Another definition that has some application is the following.

We will regard as countercultural only a set of beliefs that is contrary to the very roots or foundation upon which the dominant culture rests... A counterculture rejects, particularly at its beginning, rationality itself, the fundamental root of societies, particularly those of contemporary Western Europe and North America....

The social change that would have to take place in the dominant society (namely a removal of its rational basis) before that counterculture could find it acceptable is so extensive and drastic that the behavioural alternative a counterculture prescribes is a sectarian one ... Countercultural beliefs lead to their adherents cutting themselves off from mainstream society and severing the ties that bind them to the dominant order. A counterculture that would be satisfied with some modification of the wider culture is no counterculture at all.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1969, P. 42.

⁷⁷ Kenneth Westhues, *Society's Shadows: Studies in the Sociology of Countercultures*, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd. 1972, pp. 10–11.

Here, we find that the “set of beliefs that is contrary to the very roots or foundation upon which the dominant culture rests” may reasonably be said to apply to the theosophical orientation when the esoteric perspective is invoked. The “rejection of rationality” also can be recognised, in the sense of it being superseded by promotion of more spiritual and higher orders of consciousness. And “Western Europe and North America” was pretty much the same geographical environment the theosophical movement initially attempted to work in. Even when relocating Theosophical Society headquarters to India and incorporating more Eastern based doctrinal elements, the theosophical message was largely directed to the Western world, where the ensconced worldviews of religion, philosophy, and science were constantly under challenge and critique. And though Eastern values and insights were promulgated as superior in many instances, they were used as ideals meant to stimulate reassessment of Western perspectives as much as for their own intrinsic merit.

The objective of an “extensive and drastic social change” was not really part of the program, which was more directed to a change of attitudes and conduct by private individuals. Social change was expected to follow as a natural and logical consequence of the adoption of the theosophical worldview, with its belief in an enlightened valuation of spiritual development. A quasi “trickle down” systemic approach was assumed, in which the reaping of positive karma and attaining spiritual enlightenment would naturally and inevitably lead to a more equable and compassionate society. Focus was on changing the orientation of mind first; hoping subsequent improvement in social behaviour would follow. So that once the ultimate objective of attaining spiritual realisation was achieved, the new and absolute way of perceiving true relationships would fall into place.

...the only way in which we can interpret our realization of unity in the world of the relative is through love of all creatures; just as any unkind or hurtful action is a denial of the Reality in which we all are one, so are self-sacrifice, love for all that lives and service of our fellowmen the expression in the world of relativity of that supreme Reality which can never be fully expressed here, the utter unity of all that is. Love, indeed is the nearest approach to Reality we can find in the world of the relative...

Justice is the demand of those bound in the world of illusion, love the joy of those who know Reality.

... Life is not concerned with the questions and errors of our illusion-bound

consciousness; *life is more than just, life is one*. In the unity of all that is, the problem of the justice of life is transcended; the reality of the unity of life is experienced.⁷⁸

The “removal of its rational basis” was a dominant theosophical theme, part of the overall objective of instituting a new, spiritually grounded worldview based upon a wider interpretation of human potential. And the sectarian charge is also ambiguous. As mentioned earlier, theosophy as such did not reject traditional religions or systems of thought, but attempted to reveal a new way of understanding and acting based on a different interpretation of ideational materials. Yet, as an independent organisation with its own doctrines and ethical precepts (even if drawn from other sources) it yet did provide a self-contained alternative system of belief. In some sense then it did “lead to their adherents cutting themselves off from mainstream society and severing the ties that bind them to the dominant order.” However, that “cutting themselves off from the mainstream” pertained more to the realm of subjective belief than objective disruption of lifestyle. Although, particular theosophical ethical precepts certainly did encourage changes in the routines of individuals. For instance theosophical leaders enunciated stances on causes like the promotion of vegetarianism, anti-vivisection, proto-feminist rights, racial equality, religious tolerance, improvement in labour conditions, and other topical social issues. However, the espousal of theosophical opinion was to suggest the necessity of broader compassionate and selfless values becoming part of the prevailing mindset rather than either a revolutionary destruction of the existing order or a collective withdrawal from the world. Although Blavatsky did at times idealise world-renunciation and an ascetic lifestyle, she usually qualified her opinion by admitting that it wasn’t an option that the majority of theosophists could realistically pursue. In the end then, theosophy, if defined this way as a counterculture is “no counterculture at all” because although desirous of radical sweeping changes in worldview and conduct, still was “satisfied with some modification of the wider culture.” The belief in evolutionary stages, gradual hierarchal progression, metaphysical roots of societies and peoples, and so on, provided justification and rationalisation for acceptance of a long-term and incremental transformation. Although the main objectives of the Theosophical Society implied a

⁷⁸ J. J. van der Leeuw, *The Conquest of Illusion*, Wheaton/Madras/London: Quest Books, 1968, p. 198.

quasi-utopian future of equality, tolerance, and spiritual values, those ends were believed to be achievable through steady progressive modification and the cumulative effects of individual enlightenment.

Another analytical term that accounts for the factor of alienation a somewhat different way is that of “psychic deprivation” as enunciated by Glock and Stark. They see theosophy falling under the category of a cult because it does not necessarily conform to the stricter definitions of church or sect. They have this comment in reference to cults.

These are religious movements which draw their inspiration from other than the primary religion of the culture, and which are not schismatic movements in the same sense as sects, whose concern is with preserving a purer form of the traditional faith. ... it does not provide a way to account for Theosophy ... ⁷⁹

Glock and Stark distinguish the criterion of deprivation as a contributing factor towards the appeal of cults, and list five specific kinds. These are economic, social, organismic, ethical, and psychic. They believe that psychical deprivation arises when individuals are in situations where their systems of value break down and the worldview by which they derived purpose and meaning no longer is felt to be effective. Thus, to compensate and reacquire a viable and comforting orientation, they seek out alternatives that appear to embody the values and beliefs they find meaningful. As well, the attraction of an alternative framework of belief may be in the kind of “way to salvation” that is offered. Theosophy is considered a system that appeals to a portion of such psychically deprived individuals.

Whether the movement is secular or religious, responses to psychic deprivation are generally extreme because it constitutes a rejection of the prevailing value orientation of the society. ... When they take up a religious solution it will typically be of the cult variety ... The entire occult milieu ... is made up of persons afflicted with psychic deprivations. Movements born in this setting such as Theosophy ... are essentially religious innovations that reject dominant ... traditions, and are classified as cults. ⁸⁰

Rejection of the dominant dogmatic and materialistic worldviews represented by mainstream traditions of religion, philosophy, and science was a common denominator for many of the early theosophists. Especially Blavatsky and most of the major

⁷⁹ Glock and Stark, op. cit., p.245.

theoreticians of the movement.

And by interpreting theosophy under the definition of cult, other possible features may be discovered. For instance, the classifications of “audience cult,” and its more formal derivation “client cult” appear to be valid frameworks for analysing certain theosophical traits. Dawson gives the following descriptions of these categories, noting that client cults evolve from audience cults, and then “cult movements” may emerge in particular instances. He says this about audience cults.

The label refers to the loosely structured events at which individuals lecture and distribute literature about a variety of esoteric, mystical, eccentric, and occult topics. At various conferences and meetings certain sets of ideas and certain lecturers may attract a consistent following. But no formal and persistent organization results. The audience for the ideas in question remain mere consumers of cultic goods ...

At a more organized level, these situations may develop into ‘client cults,’ or such arrangements may arise independently... The services of the cult leader or leaders may become quite highly organized... Theosophy began this way...

Finally, with success, an audience cult may become a ‘cult movement’...

Examples of cult movements are Theosophy in its maturity, Krishna Consciousness, and the Unification Church.⁸¹

We can see that theosophy fits fairly comfortably within this framework. Prefatory to the formal inception of the Theosophical Society, Blavatsky and Olcott became known for hosting “conferences and meetings” at their joint residence in New York, nicknamed “The Lamasery.” Various small circles of likeminded individuals, drawn together by common interest in spiritualistic phenomena, occultism, esoteric topics, fringe scientific interests, religious, philosophical and scientific issues and theories congregated there and elsewhere. Lectures, discussions, promotion and recommendation of favoured written materials helped foster a sense of solidarity and common ideational empathy. Blavatsky stood out as the most charismatic presence, and the informal associations led to the next step, the formation of the more highly organised Theosophical Society. With consolidation of a basic platform of beliefs and objectives, and the popularisation of the theosophical worldview through writings, lectures, discussions, media reports, the theosophical cause became entrenched as a minority cognitive option, specialising in an esoteric, gnostic, syncretistic orientation. The worldview eventually extended beyond the

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 254.

confines of the official Theosophical Society when schisms and disputes eventuated in reconfigured or reappraised systemic admixtures after Blavatsky's death. Thus the movement attained a self-sufficiency of its own, with Blavatsky's legend attaining semi-mythical status and her writings serving as the definitive authoritative statement of the initial theosophical worldview.

What had essentially begun as an audience or client cult emerged more formally institutionalised, and spread beyond the single definitive body into a broader movement. And as such, the movement that Madame Blavatsky began may be classified as an important foundational legitimator of later NRMs, directly or indirectly influencing other schools, groups, individuals, and thus, spreading elements of its ideational structure into society at large. That conclusion appears to be confirmed by the following quotes.

Another fountainhead of ideas and movements that have become part of the current NRM scene is Theosophy... Theosophy is particularly important for understanding several other religious groups that are still extant. Rudolph Steiner's Anthroposophy, Krishnamurti, J.I. Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky all stem directly from activities of the Theosophical Society, and the development of modern Buddhism, both in its western forms and especially in its indigenous form on present-day Sri Lanka, is largely due to Olcott's work.⁸²

Theosophy is important for several reasons. One, it has become the most pervasive form of Gnostic occultism in the Western world. More than one hundred occult organizations can be traced directly to Theosophy, and they perpetuate its teachings or slight variations. The names of the overwhelming majority do not refer to Theosophy, and many adherents seem quite unaware of the theosophical heritage in which these groups are rooted. However, through the many books published by the Theosophical Society, the Gnostic tradition has been passed to the modern world. In the contemporary atmosphere of religious and intellectual freedom Gnosticism has been reborn.

Two, the Theosophical Society has also been a major factor in preparing the West for the influx and acceptance of Eastern ideas and spiritual practices. Such acceptance inspired the spread of belief in reincarnation and the revival of interest in astrology....

Throughout the decades, Theosophy also provided a nurturing home for astrology, and many of the early leading astrologers began in theosophical lodges.

Three, theosophical teachings led to the New Age movement...

The resulting New Age movement helped popularise several theosophical ideas... The movement also provided a community in which channelling was encouraged and channels nurtured. Because theosophical Gnosticism provided the intellectual

⁸¹ Lorne L. Dawson, op. cit., pp. 36–37.

⁸² George D. Chryssides, *Exploring New Religions*, London and New York: Cassell, 1999, p. 87.

base for the New Age movement, it was not surprising to see the new channels teaching the variations as they assumed leadership positions in the movement.⁸³

Since we are concerned with the early phase of the theosophical movement, in depth analysis of the decades after the Besant/Leadbeater ascendancy are outside our range of inquiry. However, the legacy of theosophy includes this role as a historical precursor, “intellectual base,” and entrenched alternative source of spiritually grounded ideas for subsequent NRMs.

What is instructive however is the statement that “the movement also provided a community” that encouraged and nurtured ideas and behaviours consistent with the theosophical esoteric, occult, mystical worldview. The concept of a shared ideational orientation based on common, deeply felt religious or spiritual ideas, values, and beliefs provide the opportunity to introduce another applicable term. That of “cosmological communion.”

A central organizing feature of communion has been cosmological, or religion in the broadest sense: a shared set of beliefs, values, and behavioural orientations... People the world over “quest” for cosmological communions as they search for, create, join, and maintain relationships which afford social and psychic bonding, while the specific content of interaction and belief will vary with time, place and circumstances... The communions people create represent but a small segment within the larger social universe. In other words, communions are organized around selected segments of the social universe, while other aspects of social existence may be perceived as secondary to primary communion.⁸⁴

It would seem fair to characterise the efforts of those who were part of the early theosophical sect/cult/ proto-NRM as a “quest for cosmological communion.” While the specific ideational content was a variable within that “social universe” that happened to have been largely comprised of gnostic, occult, and mystical materials, it provided an attractive plausible and satisfying option for those who sought social and psychic bonding within the parameters of that movement. “Primary communion,” or the shared values and ideals of the theosophical platform, took precedence over what were interpreted as secondary and peripheral aspects of social life. Thus, the type of full-scale commitment

⁸³ J. Gordon Melton, *Finding Enlightenment: Ramtha's School of Ancient Wisdom*, Hillsboro, Oregon: Beyond Words Publishing Inc., 1998, pp. 43–44.

⁸⁴ Robert C. Ness, *New Religious Movements in Historical Perspective*, in *Cults and New Religious Movements*, ed. Marc Galanter, Washington D.C: The American Psychiatric Association, 1989, pp. 46–47.

sought by Blavatsky highly prioritised a radical and uncompromising adoption of the criteria enunciated in theosophical doctrines. These would ultimately require consistent adherence to actions and thoughts that helped further the three major objectives of the Theosophical Society. As well as an ever-vigilant struggle to wilfully tame the passions, submerge the ego, and allow the selfless and intuitive higher aspect of the spiritual self to emerge fully. The quest for cosmological communion ideally, from the theosophical perspective, would be the collective harmonious choice of likeminded individuals consciously entering fully upon the evolutionary path towards progressive spiritual enlightenment

The sociological dynamics of the theosophical movement can thus be interpreted and categorised according to a number of explicit theories and by application of a variety of terms. Our brief discussion has not been intended as exhaustive, but merely an indicator of some of the pertinent treatments than can be accorded theosophy. What Blavatsky constructed was built to challenge “dogmatic religion” and “materialistic science,” while legitimating all forms of esoteric, archaic, Eastern, magical, mythical, occult, mystical, forms of thought and belief.