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THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY AND POLITICS

Esoteric Discourse, Esoteric Monism, and Theosophical Identity in Late 19th and Early 20th Century Britain and Ireland

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Declaration

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is entirely my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism.

Colin Duggan

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For Maeve, who brought this battle to an end.

I have seen Maeve of the Battles wandering over the hill,
And I know that the deed that is in my heart is her deed,
And my soul is blown about by the wild wind of her will,
For always the living must follow whither the dead would lead –
I have seen Maeve of the Battles wandering over the hill.

I would dream a dream at twilight of ease and beauty and peace –
A dream of light on the mountains, and calm on the restless sea;
A dream of the gentle days of the world when battle shall cease
And the things that are in hatred and wrath no longer shall be.
I would dream a dream at twilight of ease and beauty and peace.

Eva Gore Booth, 1914

Abstract

This thesis addresses the connection between esotericism and political ideas in the formative decades of the Theosophical Society, including Irish dimensions. The Theosophical Society provided the most influential and widespread forum for esoteric discourse in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This thesis examines how the introduction of the term 'universal brotherhood' as one of the Society's core principles led to an increase in political discourse among the membership of a supposedly 'neutral' and apolitical institution. It argues that political and social reform-inspired interpretations of this idea helped to legitimise calls for theosophists to involve themselves more practically in improving the conditions of society. The resulting debates about universal brotherhood brought two of the Society's other central ideas under scrutiny; the individualist nature of spiritual evolution and the neutrality of the Society with respect to individual beliefs, such as the belief in guiding masters. These three topics were debated and negotiated in the Society's journals, among a global network of publishers and authors. In this thesis, contributions from two significant periods in the Society's history are discussed in detail to highlight their centrality. One is the period leading up to the secession, in 1895, of the American Section, under the leadership of William Q. Judge. The second examines the events of Annie Besant's presidency that led to her eventual rejection of the principle of neutrality in 1916. Several Irish individuals are discussed to demonstrate the importance of esoteric discourse to their political actions and it is argued that the concept of 'esoteric monism' provides the most cogent explanation for the connection between esotericism and politics in these cases.

Chapter One: The Theosophical Society and Politics

The Theosophical Society was a highly organised and global group of individuals who brought together "the vastest array imaginable of religious concepts, occultist books, esoteric tracts, scientific discoveries, exotic terms, texts and concepts from India, Tibet, Ancient Egypt and elsewhere, Gnostic and Hermetic theories, wild speculations regarding fabled continents, and sundry elements of late nineteenth century culture."[1] Hammer and Rothstein argue that the Society and its various fragmentations constitute one of the "modern world's most important religious traditions."[2] However, the Society's institutions and global network of publications and individual correspondence also make it one of the most important motivators and facilitators of social and political activism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Though officially apolitical, the Theosophical Society provided public space for discussion of a range of topics concerning religion, culture, science, and society, many of which were political in nature. Through the pages of its numerous international, national, and regional journals and periodicals, members of the Theosophical Society accessed the most up to date information about the organisation to which they belonged and the activities of its global membership. Many of the publications were a vehicle for widely respected authority figures within the Theosophical Society to guide the thinking of the greater membership but most did not eschew the diversity of opinion, publishing articles with strong and differing stances regardless of their provenance or the author's notoriety.

This study demonstrates and elucidates the connection between esoteric discourse, in the form of theosophical literature, and politics, in the form of social and political activism in Britain and Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with a primary focus on the Irish milieu. It argues that the rise to prominence of the Theosophical Society's first object, to form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, sparked a debate about members' responsibility to improve the social conditions of those less fortunate than themselves and the methods by which such action should be carried out. This debate brought two of the Theosophical Society's principles into focus and conflict, its institutional neutrality towards religious and political perspectives and the freedom of individuals to hold whatever beliefs they

[1] Hammer and Rothstein, 'Introduction', 1
[2] Ibid., 2

wished, resulting in real-world effects for the cohesion of the Theosophical Society and its apolitical status.

Chapter two shows how neutrality and individual freedom of belief became central concepts in theosophical discourse and examines the ways in which they were interpreted and combined by different members of the Theosophical Society to both politicise, and maintain, its neutrality. It traces the development and rise to prominence of the Theosophical Society's first object of Universal Brotherhood and shows how its subsequent political interpretations led to the justification of social reform activism and even socialism. With a focus on the theosophical career of the Society's second president, Annie Besant, chapter three examines two major events in the history of the Theosophical Society, as they were reported and discussed in the pages of the Society's periodicals, to show the real-world effects of the tension between neutrality and individual freedom of belief. The first is the secession of the American Section of the Theosophical Society under the leadership of William Q. Judge, one of the founding members of the Society. The analysis demonstrates the strength of feeling among the membership regarding the principles of neutrality and individual freedom of belief and how they were leveraged into political power. The second is the activist turn taken by the Society on Annie Besant's assumption of the presidency in 1907 and during which she made several attempts to navigate the principles of neutrality and individual freedom while maintaining Society cohesion.[3] These events are significant not only because they resulted in changes of direction for the Society but they produced high levels of engagement by the membership in one of its central debates, i.e. institutional neutrality and individual freedom of belief. Catalysed by the increasing importance of the Society's first object of Universal Brotherhood, members sought guidance on how to practically apply their theosophical beliefs in the world around them. However, the long-held principle of neutrality prevented the leadership from offering specific suggestions that would inevitably endorse one social or political viewpoint over another. This initially resulted in a policy of non-interference at the institutional level but, in their capacity as individuals, members could endorse and act on whatever beliefs they wished. These two principles collided in the events described in chapter three when individuals were so prominent and/or authoritative as members or leaders of the

[3] Ibid., 238

Society that it became impossible to separate their individual speech and actions from their roles as Society officials. Chapters four and five serve as case studies in the connection between esoteric discourse and politics in Britain and Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Chapter four examines the development of theosophical discourse on feminism through the pages of the periodicals and describes the theosophically inspired gender politics of the couple, James and Margaret Cousins, two significant figures in the women's movement in Britain and Ireland. Chapter five shows the influence of theosophical discourse on the national politics of George Russell, the most influential Irish theosophist, and James Cousins, both of whom developed their fascination with Irish mythology into ideas and ideals for the future Irish nation despite the universalism and globalism of the Society to which they belonged.

Western Esotericism

This study engages with the relatively new sub-field of Western esotericism to provide perspective and reflection on the materials and themes. Esotericism is an often misunderstood and vaguely deployed concept in scholarship. However, there is increasing recognition of the field and its seeking to historicise this term and the subject matter with which it has been associated. Western esotericism scholars are engaged in the theoretical and methodological debates concerning the conceptualisation of esotericism. It is this specific focus on a neglected aspect of Western culture, along with the lack of critical reflection on the problems posed by the study of religions more broadly, that is missing from much of the scholarly literature concerned with the material examined in the present study.

Esoteric Discourse

Broadly, definitions of esotericism can be sorted into historical and typographical. But for the purposes of this study, esotericism will be regarded discursively, i.e. as esoteric discourse.[4] The term discourse has been variously used and defined across the disciplines and fields of the humanities and social sciences. It is important to clarify the scope of the term as it is used in the present study and address the level at which the discursive analysis takes place. Following the approach of Kocku von Stuckrad, "[d]iscourses can be seen as the *social organisation of tradition, meaning and matters of knowledge*" and "[d]iscourse analysis…aims at reconstructing the process of social construction, objectification, communication, and legitimization of meaning structures."[5] The discursive approach implies studying religions as "systems of communication and shared action" as opposed to "belief systems."[6] This approach recognises religions as "powerful ingredients of public discourse" because they "serve as instruments in the communicative formation of identity and provide people with a concrete script of action."[7] This study examines public theosophical discourse to show how the meaning of theosophy, the identity of theosophists, and the legitimacy and real-world implications of theosophical knowledge were negotiated against a changing social and political context.

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[4] For discussion of the definitions of, and approaches to, 'esotericism', see Faivre, *Access*, 3-15; Hanegraaff, 'Esotericism', 336-340; von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, 1-5; von Stuckrad, 'Western Esotericism', 79-84

[5] Von Stuckrad, 'Western Esotericism', 85 and 'Discursive Study of Religion' (2013), 8-9

[6] Ibid., 'Discursive Study of Religion' (2003), 268

[7] Ibid., 269

For von Stuckrad, esoteric discourse has two dimensions: "claims of higher knowledge and ways of accessing this higher knowledge."[8] The first concerns claims to a totalising knowledge system, i.e. "a wisdom that is superior to other interpretations of cosmos and history" and "a vision of truth as a master key for answering all questions of humankind."[9] This dimension of esoteric discourse is "closely linked to a discourse of *secrecy*," more particularly to a dynamic of concealment and revelation. The second dimension of esoteric discourse concerns "specific means of gaining higher knowledge" such as "mediation and individual experience."[10] In examining the claims made by individuals in the theosophical milieu, it is possible to highlight instances where public theosophical discourse supported a progressive script for action and those where it resisted. The debate surrounding Theosophical Society members' responsibility to improve the social conditions of the less fortunate was a discussion of how theosophy could become a script for progressive political and social action rather than one for individualised passivity. Esoteric discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries encompassed a wide range of movements including the Theosophical Society, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Spiritualism and mediumship, and the Society for Psychical Research. However, the Theosophical Society was the prime point of articulation and success for esotericism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, offering a totalising worldview to large numbers of people globally. The Society provided the space for debates about occultism, religion, science, politics, and art and its global network of members produced a vast amount of literature.

Theosophical Identity

In terms of theosophical identity, the breadth of opinion among members renders any characterisation of a 'theosophist' almost useless. The negotiation of theosophical identity began with the Society itself and the notion of the authentic theosophist was invoked by many contributors to the journals to legitimise their arguments. As one member of the Society noted:

> I do not know how widespread is the tendency, but I have been noticing among many of our best and most thoughtful members a reluctance to

[8] Ibid., 'Western Esotericism', 88
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 91

> style themselves "Theosophist." Instead, the unwieldy title, "a member of the Theosophical Society," is used. To this is usually added "and I am trying to become a Theosophist."[11]

The high levels of autonomy enjoyed by individual members, lodges, branches, and national sections of the Society resist the idea that there was an organisational whole. There was no official link between the Theosophical Society and its parallel organisations, the Esoteric Section and, later, the Theosophical Order of Service apart from the fact that many of the same individuals were involved. Combined with the ever-evolving discussions in the periodicals, it is virtually impossible to describe a coherent worldview expressed by the Theosophical Society to which one must subscribe to be considered a 'theosophist.' The Society itself was rarely coherent and existed in a state of flux and fragmentation, represented at different times and in different places by different personalities with broadly similar but differently prioritised ideas. The advantage of such flexibility was the ability to openly discuss the full extent of almost any issue without fear of censorship. Instead, Society members were exercised when the opportunity arose to rebuke someone's opinion in print. There was some policing of the boundaries of theosophical discourse, particularly by Helena P. Blavatsky, one of the Society's founders, but the atmosphere fostered by the Society engendered a culture of open debate on a whole range of issues. The disadvantage of this flexibility was the tendency to fragmentation and members were often emboldened to leave the Society and institute their own versions of theosophy.

Esoteric Monism

Derived from the work of von Stuckrad, this study introduces the term 'esoteric monism' to help understand how, for some individuals, theosophy came to be a progressive script for action in the social and political realms. The term also seeks to rectify an inherent problem found in some scholarly accounts of the Society members discussed in this study, i.e. the separation of an individual's religious or esoteric activities from their social or political ones. Von Stuckrad argues that "most esoteric currents share an ontological monism" and their "cosmology derives from world views that constitute a unity of material and non-material realms of reality."[12]

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[11] Guild, 'What Shall We Call Ourselves?', 258
[12] Von Stuckrad, 'Western Esotericism', 93

Esoteric monism is the enterprise of actively bringing about a correlation between knowledge gained in the material and non-material realms, i.e. forming a singular knowledge system that can account for the totality of reality, from the ancient traditions of myriad cultures and the latest developments in psychology, social science, and physics to visions, dreams, and mystic experiences. This concept seeks to address the different ways individuals acquired knowledge, how they valued and confirmed that knowledge, and the impulse to bring about a correlation, where one did not exist, between knowledge of the material and non-material realms by changing the conditions of the former. Any negation or incoherence meant that the knowledge system was not totalising and therefore not perfect. Individuals with a tendency towards esoteric monism often showed scepticism but sought to overcome it by seeking correlating knowledge from a variety of sources. However, this is not to say that individuals did not also use incoherence as a justification to completely reject certain types of knowledge. As von Stuckrad argues at the end of his analysis of another example of seeking perfect knowledge, Johann Heinrich Alsted's *Encyclopaedia*, "the reasons for adopting or refuting certain philosophical and religious assumptions were not merely intellectual; they were heavily contingent, and often precarious, political, military, and economic contexts."[13]

To explain this idea in more detail, Wouter Hanegraaff's proposed analytical typology of knowledge types serves as a useful starting point because it "differentiates between three basic kinds of knowledge referred to as reason, faith, and gnosis."[14] The first, reason, is characterised by being communicable and verifiable, therefore the truth of this kind of knowledge requires only that it be checked. The second, faith, is communicable but not verifiable, therefore the truth of it cannot be checked and must be accepted on the authority of a text or teacher. The third, gnosis, is neither communicable nor verifiable, therefore the truth of it is beheld only by the individual who receives it. For such an individual, gnosis is "a gift from God," its truth irrefutable, and its content only "beheld directly by some faculty beyond the senses and reason."[15] A given individual can receive knowledge empirically from the material realm through their own senses, which includes reason and faith in the authority of texts and teachers, or through personal spiritual experience of the non-

[13] Von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge*, 194
[14] Hanegraaff, 'Reason, Faith, and Gnosis', 138
[15] Ibid., 140

material realm, which includes visions, dreams, revelation, and gnosis. The important factor is how an individual comes to accept the truth of the knowledge received. If knowledge received in the material realm is confirmed by knowledge received from the other, or vice versa, the basic requirement of ontological monism is fulfilled in unifying the material and the non-material. Actively seeking out this kind of knowledge correlation or acting to change the conditions of the material realm to bring it about, is the active element of esoteric monism and offers some insight into the work of those theosophists who participated in social and political activism. Theosophy is often discussed in terms of intellectual apprehension and curricular advancement, but this is almost always accompanied by the idea that studying its texts and ideas is a preface to receiving a personal experience of its full and true significance i.e. that materially accessing theosophical knowledge comes before accessing it non-materially as a 'gnostic' experience of total knowledge.[16]

For certain individuals, esoteric monism was the mechanism through which they accessed and contextualised knowledge, became satisfied with truth, and sought to override any natural scepticism, e.g. the continuous and multifaceted search undertaken by W.B. Yeats and Aleister Crowley, throughout their long esoteric careers, for an experience of truth and perfect knowledge powerful enough to overcome their sharp scepticism. Esoteric monism often comprised a struggle for individuals as they sought to bring coherence to a range of paradoxes in the material and non-material realms. However, engaging in esoteric monism also made it possible for individuals to see one aspect of human existence in terms of another, e.g. to see politics in spiritual terms. Individuals engaged in esoteric monism valued sources of knowledge differently and knowledge gained through material means was often sub-ordinated to knowledge gained from the non-material realm. Looking at Hanegraaff's typology, gnosis was the purest form of knowledge and a totalising experience in itself. For some, art and literature bridged the gap between the material and the non-material and lent an air of the former's purity to things existing in the realm of the latter. However, the primary reason why knowledge gained from the material realm was not to be trusted on its own merits was that it could be changed whereas knowledge gained from the non-material could not. In some cases,

[16] Gnostic is used here in the sense of Hanegraaff's analytical typology described above.

the material realm must be changed to reflect the truth of non-material knowledge and from there arose the impulse to action.

It is important to distinguish this analysis from others that highlight how individuals participating in esoteric discourse often appealed to science, tradition, and personal experience to authorise and legitimise their views. Olav Hammer's *Claiming Knowledge* analyses such discursive strategies and contextualises them as "both a result of and a reaction against the broader Enlightenment project."[17] Marco Pasi also notes this pragmatic side of the esoteric milieu as it sought credibility for its ideas, arguing that "[o]ccultists did their best to catch up with new cultural developments, striving to have their doctrines anointed with the holy oil of credibility, gained by scientific and/or rationalist discourses."[18] Though this study takes account of such strategies of appealing to various types of authority, esoteric monism refers to the activity of confirming the correlation between the material and non-material realms by seeking it or bringing it about and accounts for how esoteric discourse in the late 19th and early 20th centuries produced social and political activism. The impulse to action is the impulse to maintain and improve the internal logical consistency of a worldview that must be totalising, where all things, material and non-material must be accounted for and correlate with one another. To illustrate the concept of esoteric monism as it is used in this study, the following section presents examples taken from the work of Annie Besant, James Cousins, and George Russell.

In a speech delivered at the Tenth Annual Convention of the European Section of the Theosophical Society in 1898, Besant encouraged members to "[c]are only for the upward treading of the world" and reminded them that the only thing worth living for is so "the world may be the better because [they] have been living in it."[19] She spoke of theosophy as a tool that can "test…everything in science, in philosophy, and in politics…to see…whether there is veiled within some dangerous misleading demon who would draw humanity astray from the path which it ought to tread."[20] For Besant, assimilating the full significance of theosophy is accessing knowledge of the non-material realm that can be used to test knowledge gained

[17] Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 508
[18] Pasi, *Aleister Crowley*, 61
[19] Besant, 'The Inner Purpose of the Theosophical Society', 5
[20] Ibid., 2

through the material to see if it correlates with the truth of theosophy, thereby guiding any action taken to improve the world. It became more common in theosophical discourse to make the impulse to improve the conditions of society a product of authentic theosophical identity, i.e. an individual who has attained a kind of enlightenment or gnosis by fully realising the totalising significance of theosophy. In the March 1909 issue of *The Theosophist*, Besant argued that "if the Theosophist, by the Divine Wisdom that he studies, does not become wise for the helping of all around him, then his life is really worse than the ordinary life."[21] Such an individual has no excuses because "[o]n every side knowledge pours in on him" and "with these advantages of knowing, [his] doing ought to be better than the doing of the majority around [him]."[22] The implication is that a true theosophist would, by definition, seek to bring about the necessary change in the material world so that it would correlate with the non-material. In the December 1912 issue of *The Theosophist*, Besant argued for the importance of religious ideals as guides to action in any social re-organisation of society. She highlighted the ideal of self-sacrifice and discussed how it was re-asserting itself in Christianity and appearing in the "fierce shape of democratic Socialism."[23] Besant asserted that a "belief in the Immanence of God compels the recognition of the Solidarity of Man" so self-sacrifice and working for the good of others is a practical recognition of this truth. Therefore, social reform activities must also be "based on the practical recognition of a common Life in which all are sharers" and all who are "cultured and comfortable shall feel diseased and tortured unless [they] are doing [their] utmost to relieve [their] brothers and sisters from suffering."[24] This serves as an example of Besant 'testing' religion and politics, showing that they share a core ideal, and seeking to bring about a correlation between the state of the non-material and material realms.

In the March 1906 issue of *The Theosophical Review*, James Cousins argued for the truth of his concept of 'fundamental Mythology' because "behind the personifications that crowd the Mythologies of the world," it is possible to "discern an interior relationship and a significance that is true to the facts of enlightened science and to the history and experience of men of the highest spiritual and

[21] Besant, 'The Theosophic Life', 517
[22] Ibid.
[23] Besant, 'The Bearing of Religious Ideals', 511-512
[24] Ibid., 515

intellectual attainments."[25] His concept of 'fundamental Mythology' is analogous to total knowledge and made true by the correlation between material and non-material sources of knowledge. In the November 1907 issue of *The Theosophist*, Cousins recounts his methodology in considering the esoteric significance of mythology and described it as "first intuitively apprehending the spiritual meaning of the myth in meditation, and afterwards verifying and checking the result comparatively by the operation of the intellect."[26] In 1913, James Cousins argued that humanity must progress with a "religious philosophy" that must find its "test and realisation in a complete practical altruism."[27] For Cousins, philosophy included material knowledge gained through the sciences and its combination with knowledge gained through the non-material would only be correct if it led to individuals acting to improve society accordingly. He argued that this should not be a "temporary association of philosophy, religion and action: they must be inevitable and inseparable, the view of life compelling irresistible to altruism, the altruistic effort being intelligible only in the light of the principles behind it."[28] In a discussion about the relationship between Theosophy and the arts, Cousins argued that "any coherent presentation of truth…conforms with the quaternary of qualities: appearance in its separate teachings; form, in their balanced totality; desire, in their practical outcome in altruistic effort; thought, in the final ratification of pure reason."[29] This is a restatement of his argument above in which truth is tested by its having multiple sources and leading to action to improve the world.

George Russell expressed his esoteric monism across his political and spiritual writings. The December 30th, 1905 editorial of the *Irish Homestead* presented his agricultural co-operative societies as "taking up the eternal task of perfecting human society" and argued that unless poverty and social conditions are addressed, "all our religion of brotherhood is a sham."[30] In 1912, Russell highlighted the importance of material and non-material knowledge being brought to bear on the individual and that the "object of all religion, art, literature and economics is the creation of perfect human beings": religion acts on man's spiritual nature, arts on the aesthetic,

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[25] Cousins, 'The Mythos in Ireland', 66
[26] Cousins, 'The Wisdom-Religion in Ireland', 131
[27] Cousins, 'The Bases of Theosophy', 27
[28] Ibid, 27-28
[29] Cousins, 'Theosophy and the Arts', 381
[30] Russell, Editorial (30/12/1905), 950

literature on the intellectual, and economics on the material.[31] In Russell's 1918 work, *The Candle of Vision*, he offered an example of how he sought to confirm knowledge gained through his visions, the non-material, in the physical world. He cited a vision in which he saw a brightly fulfilled future for Ireland brought about by the advent of "some child of destiny, around whom the future of Ireland was to pivot" and that although he had no intellectual reason to believe it to be true he looks "everywhere in the face of youth, in the aspect of every new notability, hoping before I die to recognise the broad-browed avatar of my vision."[32] Russell was not convinced by his vision alone but was open to the truth of it, hoping to one day confirm it through his empirical senses. Esoteric monism is often accompanied by scepticism and the seeking of corroboration through different methods of acquiring knowledge. In Russell's writing on the origin of speech, he again shows that he valued the knowledge acquired through his meditative visions but sought further corroboration.

> I had nearly all my correspondences vividly in mind before I inquired of friends more learned than myself what were the reputed origins of human speech, and in what books I could find whatever knowledge there was, and then I came upon the Aryan roots; and there I thought and still think are to be found many evidences in corroboration of my intuitions… Intuition must be used in these correspondences, for the art of using them is not altogether discoverable by the intellect. I hope also that my partial illumination will be completed, corrected or verified by others.[33]

Russell's political ideas and actions were derived from his theosophical beliefs. His monistic viewpoint dictated the extent and type of actions he would take based on those beliefs, i.e. he encouraged agricultural co-operation as a form of collective action because individuals are, ultimately, part of the divine unity and collective action benefits everyone in both the spiritual and political realms.

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[31] Russell, *Co-operation and Nationality*, 63
[32] Russell, *The Candle of Vision*, 101
[33] Ibid., 130-131

Occultism and Perennialism

Finally, the use of the terms occultism and perennialism in the present study must be addressed for clarity. Occultism has at times been used synonymously with 'esotericism' and Wouter Hanegraaff comments that "the term occultism tends to be used as referring specifically to 19th century developments within the general history of Western esotericism, as well as their derivations through the 20th century."[34] However, Pasi includes some more specific characteristics of occultism such as the emphasis placed on the "*need to solve the conflict between science and religion*" by Eliphas Lévi, the outspoken distancing from Christianity by many occultists, "*the importance given to the spiritual realisation of the individual*" to be achieved through various techniques, and the fact that "occultism tried to construct its identity in *demarcating itself from other contemporary heterodox movements,* in particular from spiritualism."[35] Spiritualism and occultism are both treated under the rubric of esoteric discourse in this study but there are a number of differences between them. There were polemics between occultists and spiritualists, many of which were started by Blavatsky when she claimed a special place for the Theosophical Society's ideas with respect to the survival of the soul and subordinated to them the popular spiritualistic practices of contacting the dead.

Perennialism refers to two concepts that are crucial to the understanding of esoteric discourse in the present study; *prisca theologia* ('First Theology') and *philosophia perennis* ('Eternal Theology). They are succinctly summed up by von Stuckrad as the notion that "the eternal truth had been handed down through the ages by extraordinary teachers, including Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus and Pythagoras."[36] The next section continues this introduction with a discussion of politics and esoteric discourse.

[34] Hanegraaff, 'Occult/Occultism', 888.
[35] Pasi, 'Occultism', 1366-1367.
[36] Von Stuckrad, 'Western Esotericism', 82.

Politics and Esotericism

The relationship between politics and esotericism is an under-researched area for two reasons. First, the role of esotericism in European history has only been addressed relatively recently. Second, esotericism's relationship to politics has been marginalised due to the dominance of a discourse linking esotericism and occultism with fascism and irrationality. The history of this marginalisation cannot be fully explored here but Marco Pasi argues that the association "has been made authoritative by Theodor Adorno in his Theses against Occultism, originally written in 1947 and then included in his Minima Moralia, published in 1950."[37] Pasi also notes that George Orwell "had made a similar point in an essay on William Butler Yeats, first published in 1946" due to the poet's "marked sympathy for the then emerging European fascist movements."[38] Pasi argues that although W.H. Auden had also written an essay about Yeats' "passion for the occult," it was Orwell who was the "first to establish a clear link between Yeats' private occult interests and his right-wing political sympathies, and therefore to make, at the same time, a general point about the intrinsic connection between occultism and fascism."[39] Formed in the post-war search for an explanation of the horrors that followed the rise of European fascism, this idea has been pervasive in Western intellectual discourse which led the marginalisation of the topic by scholars. In the instances where esotericism has been addressed by the scholarly literature, it's importance as an element of European history has been de-emphasised or the prevailing idea of it being intrinsically linked to the irrational and fascism has been reified. In the 1970s, sociologists Colin Campbell, Edward Tiryakian, and Marcello Truzzi all made significant contributions to the study of esotericism using sociological approaches. Campbell introduced the idea of the 'cultic milieu' to describe the kind of religious activity that has come to be known by the term 'New Age'.[40] However, the connotations of Campbell's 'cultic milieu' included aspects of deviancy, i.e. such activities were characterized as alternatives to contemporary mainstream, or normal, religious activity. This problem is also evident in the work of Tiryakian and Truzzi as their approach to esoteric or occult topics was also based on the notion that it

[37] Pasi, 'The Modernity of Occultism', 59-60.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Campbell, 'The Cult, The Cultic Milieu and Secularisation', 121-122

involved some kind of deviant behaviour, seen as underground or counter-cultural.[41] All three of these approaches were grounded in discourses of secularisation that assumed that religions and religious activities were in a state of decline and would eventually give way to atheism, agnosticism, and other rationally informed viewpoints. In another important early survey of the topics that came to be addressed by the field of Western esotericism, the historian James Webb took a similar view, titling his work, *The Flight from Reason*. Ultimately, the work was carried out under the assumption that secularisation was a definitive process at work in the industrialised West, leading inevitably to the construction of definitions based on contrasting religion, science, and esotericism or rational and irrational forms of knowledge.

Joy Dixon comments on the post-war attitude towards esotericism in terms of the Theosophical Society and suggests that "[b]y the time Orwell was writing, many members of the TS had already turned away from socialism and socialist or liberal feminism, and had embraced new right-wing movements like Social Credit and even Oswald Mosely's British Union of Fascists."[42] However, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many members of the Theosophical Society were involved in women's suffrage, the labour movement, vegetarianism, anti-vivisection, non-violent cultural nationalism, and pacifism. The social activist tone was set early in the Society's history under the presidency of Henry Steele Olcott who was involved in "initiating the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka, upgrading the position of the outcastes in India by establishing "Pariah schools," and establishing an Oriental Library to preserve Indian Sanskrit and other manuscripts."[43] Olcott maintained that he was acting as an individual and not in his capacity as president of the Society, a claim he would later interrogate when made by William Q. Judge during the years leading up to the secession of the American Section.[44] Dixon argues that the Theosophical Society brought together men and women "with a range of progressive and humanitarian interests" in an "oppositional, radical culture" and cites their dismissal by H. M. Hyndman as "old cranks, humanitarians, vegetarians, anti-vivisectionists and anti-vaccinationists, arty-crafties and all the rest of them."[45] However, this does not mean that there weren't conservative Society members in the years before the wars and the

[41] Tiryakian, *On the Margin of the Visible* and Truzzi, 'Definition and Dimensions of the Occult'
[42] Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 143
[43] Santucci, 'Theosophy', 238
[44] See Chapter 3
[45] Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 10

liberal/conservative, right/left wing binaries tend to break down when spiritual elitism begins to justify authoritarian and hierarchical systems of organisation. Joselyn Godwin suggested the existence of an esotericism of the left and right, with many members of the Theosophical Society falling into the former category, but this over-simplification has been rightly criticised by several scholars.[46] Egil Asprem has noted that "[d]iscussions of esotericism's relation to politics have often been guided by two opposite and equally flawed stereotypes. One holds that esotericism is a form of right-wing proto-fascism, while the other sees it as an inherently left-leaning, countercultural, progressive and anti-authoritarian impulse."[47] Marco Pasi has also criticised the use of Godwin's distinction and argued its unsuitability as a framework for analysing Aleister Crowley's politics.[48] Dixon argues that disparate individuals and activities were united under the umbrella of the Theosophical Society by a shared "critique of the liberal ideal of the individual, and of the state as an association of autonomous individuals" that engendered "a recovery of liberal individualism through an emphasis on individual purity and individual self-control."[49] The importance of individualism and what it meant for Society members is a major focus of chapters two and three of this study.

Despite the obstacles, there have been several notable regional studies on esotericism and politics. Some address the communal aspects of the Theosophical Society, exemplified by places like Point Loma and Halcyon in California.[50] Others are concerned with the connections between esotericism and socialism in the United States and Europe.[51] Then there is the work that has focused on the role of theosophy as a political movement against the backdrop of Indian colonial politics and in the British context more broadly.[52] Finally, there are a number of studies addressing the post-war association of esotericism with right-wing politics.[53] The present study addresses a regional gap in the literature by taking its case studies from

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[46] Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 204
[47] Asprem, 'Review', 247
[48] Pasi, 'The Problems of Rejected Knowledge', 204-205
[49] Ibid., 150
[50] See Melton, 'The Theosophical Communities', and Ivey, *Radiance from Halcyon*.
[51] See McKanan, 'Faith in the Phalanx' and Strube, 'Socialist Religion'.
[52] See Bevir, 'Theosophy as a political movement', 'Theosophy and the origins of the Indian National Congress', 'In opposition to the Raj: Annie Besant and the dialectic of empire', 'The Formation of the All-India Home Rule League', and *The Making of British Socialism*, and Dixon, *Divine Feminine*.
[53] See Strube, *Vril* & 'Nazism and the Occult' and Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun* & *The Occult Roots of Nazism*

the Irish theosophical and political milieu while providing an in-depth analysis of the Theosophical Society's relationship to politics and the discursive mechanisms by which its ideas were deployed to justify political action. As Dixon notes, "[s]ince claims about spirituality are so often aligned with claims about the absolute or transcendent, an appeal to the spiritual can become a powerful cultural and political resource."[54] For members of the Theosophical Society who claimed to have access to absolute or perfect knowledge, this resource was made more powerful in its expansive scope and authority. This study also follows Marco Pasi's analysis of Aleister Crowley's connection to politics which does not "seek to find a consistent political doctrine, but rather to understand the way in which Crowley confronted the reality of his times, how he interpreted it and how he related to it," an idea that applies to the individuals discussed throughout the present work.[55] Pasi highlights another theme that is central to this study, that of the balance between "personal achievement of spiritual goals" and "the interests of the masses."[56] The shift from holding an interest only in the spiritual development of the self to a concern with humanity, and the universe more generally, informs the binary distinction made in chapter two, where individuals prioritised the spiritual development of the self or the improvement of the conditions of society so that many selves could flourish. Those members who tended towards conservativism eschewed social reform in favour of the importance of spiritual development of the self and those who tended towards more progressive causes prioritised the conditions on which spiritual development of the self is contingent. While Pasi offers a useful analysis of the problems facing one individual, this study analyses several individuals to highlight the array of the membership's political interests, justifications, and problems. People and organisations change and, while it is not useful to employ the left-right distinction or ascribe a political position to any individual, group, or set of teachings, it is useful to examine how esoteric discourse was used to justify political action. Like any other religious ideas, those at work in esoteric discourse could be deployed to support almost any political position, rendering the search for intrinsic links between sets of beliefs and any one kind of political action fruitless. The changing political landscape of the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the rise of new and extreme

[54] Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 12
[55] Pasi, *Aleister Crowley*, 25
[56] Ibid., 27

interpretations of government and society that argued for wholesale, dispensational, and often violent change. Many individuals were engaging with such ideas at different times in their lives historically prior to the carrying out of atrocities by the regimes who may have taken inspiration from those ideas. This study shows that some individuals were spurred into political action by the realisation of spiritual truths and others deployed spiritual truth to support their preferred political action. For others, there was no discernible difference, spiritual truth and political action were part of the totalising knowledge system to which they subscribed, where all things had to correspond and be accounted for in an internally consistent way. In the present work, individuals' actions and stated beliefs are contextualised to analyse the extent to which their theosophical worldviews can be said to provide a script for action and to which their esoteric monism spurred their political activism.

Sources and Period

The Theosophical Society has produced a vast amount of literature in the form of periodicals, pamphlets, and journals. Though not exhaustive, the website of The Theosophical Society in Australia maintains an index of 219,318 entries across 151 publications from Australia, Canada, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Holland, India, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Philippines, Singapore, United Kingdom, and the United States of America.[57] Over half of these titles published their first issue within the time period relevant to this study and at least 47 of those are partially or completely digitised and available online at the website of the International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals, the Haithi Trust Digital Library, and through a number of university and national libraries.[58] This study relies heavily on the periodicals of the Theosophical Society for several reasons. There has been a lack of systematic use of the Society's journals that has led to an under-representation of the voices of the Society's broad membership and a tendency to categorise theosophists in ways that the existence of such a range of differing interests and opinions does not bear out. Much of the literature to date that has made use of this expansive resource either uses a small selection of articles or articles by individuals already considered important voices such as Besant, Olcott, Blavatsky, and Judge. In trying to gauge the relationship between members' worldviews and their political actions, it is imperative to survey the broadest possible selection of individuals. The periodicals were the material expression of the individual freedom of belief afforded to the Society members and the forum in which this freedom was negotiated in terms of institutional and official neutrality. Theosophical Society journals acted as space for people to put forward their ideas about theosophy and for more prominent members to inform the membership, making the journals a useful resource for analysis of authority and individualism. It is important to remember that the Society was not made up of one type of member and the significance of contributions to the periodicals must be measured as an indication of the Society's breadth and freedom of opinion. Though some members were more famous or influential than others, many were just individuals who were invested enough in the work of the Society that they took the time to contribute their own ideas. The global and political distribution of such efforts has left scholars with

[57] http://www.austheos.org.au/indices/pindex.htm
[58] http://www.iapsop.com/ and https://www.hathitrust.org/

an enormously valuable cultural artefact. This point is returned to throughout this study as 'authentic' theosophical identity was leveraged by Annie Besant, and others, to convince members of the correctness of one interpretation of theosophy over another. Though the production of the Society's periodicals represented a step forward in the democratisation of the means of knowledge production, it remained an elitist pursuit due to the costs and expertise required. The Society's ability to publish and globally circulate its periodicals in the late 19th and early 20th century owed as much to colonial infrastructure and clericalism as it did to the radical individualism of its members. While the case studies discussed in chapters four and five also make use of theosophical periodicals, the highlighted individuals were all involved in publications devoted to their own interests. George Russell became editor of the *Irish Homestead*, the organ of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, a group founded in 1894 to advocate for agricultural cooperativism. James and Margaret Cousins founded the Irish suffrage paper, the *Irish Citizen*. This study uses sources dating from the early 1880s through to the years just after the end of the first world war, a period characterised by a shift from certainty and positivity about the future and the role of the sciences in solving all the problems of humanity to the shocking outbreak of violence in Europe in 1914. In Irish terms, the major labour activism or the 1913 lockout and the incidents that led to the Easter Rising of 1916 are significant in their disruption of progressive political narratives.

History

The Theosophical Society was formed on November 17th, 1875 in New York City by a group of sixteen individuals.[59] Henry Steel Olcott suggested its formation to William Quan Judge and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky after they attended a lecture by George Henry Felt that September.[60] The lecture concerned Felt's claim that he had discovered how to manifest 'elementals,' ""creatures evolved in the four kingdoms of earth, air, fire, and water" (identified as gnomes, sylphs, salamanders, and undines)." The Society was initially set up to study the kinds of phenomena he had been discussing along with other similar lines of investigation.[61] Citing archive minutes regarding the founding, Santucci notes "that a society [was] formed for the study and elucidation of Occultism, the Cabala & c."[62] The Society accepts that "Truth or Divine Wisdom (*theosophia*) is found, at least in part, in all religions; it thereby accepts the expected consequences that all religions should be studied rather than condemned."[63] Despite this early focus on forms of occultism and the changes to both structure and content the Society would endure, the centrality of Blavatsky's writings was unquestioned and the majority of theosophical texts are "expositions of, or enlargements upon her own extensive writings."[64] Further, the early ruptures in the Society were "based in large part on the degree of adherence to the Blavatskyan body of teachings."[65]

Dublin Hermetic Society and the Dublin Lodge

While this study considers the global reach of the Theosophical Society, its case studies have a regional focus on Ireland. Though there is literature that addresses some of the topics examined in this study, there is a lack of scholarly output that approaches the material from a Western esotericism perspective.[66] Further, within

[59] Santucci, 'Theosophy', 231
[60] Santucci, 'Theosophical Society', 1115.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Santucci, 'Theosophy', 231
[63] Santucci, 'Theosophical Society', 1114.
[64] Santucci, 'Theosophy', 231
[65] Ibid.
[66] See Foster, *W. B. Yeats, A Life, Vol. I & II* and Nally, *Envisioning Ireland* for discussion of W.B. Yeats; Allen, *George Russell (AE) and the New Ireland* and Kain & O'Brien, *George Russell (A. E.)* for George Russell; Lennon, *Irish Orientalism* and Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold* for James Cousins; and Ramusack, 'Cultural Missionaries' and Candy, 'Relating Feminisms' for Margaret Cousins.

those studies that have addressed the theosophical milieu in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Irish context has been overshadowed by activities elsewhere.[67]

The history of the Theosophical Society in Ireland is intertwined with that of the Society's controversies and fragmentations. On the 15th/16th June 1885, the first Dublin Hermetic Society was founded by W.B. Yeats and Charles Johnston along with others such as Claude Falls Wright, Charles Weekes, and Hamilton Malcolm Magee.[68] One of the most significant individuals in this milieu, George Russell, initially declined to formally join the Society but did spend time with Johnston studying Indian texts. Russell was born in Lurgan, Co. Armagh and has been described as a poet, painter, writer, editor and mystic. His multi-faceted life and character were summed up by the French writer and journalist, Simone Téry, a friend and correspondent of Russell's for many years, in *L'ile des bardes* (1925).

> Have you doubts regarding Providence, the origin of the universe and its end? Go see A.E. – Are you seeking information on Gaelic literature, the Celtic soul, Irish history? Go see A.E. – Are you interested in painting? Go see A.E. – Do you want to know the exports of eggs…or how best to cultivate bees? Go see A.E. – Do you find society badly run, and want to better it? Run to A.E.'s…You doubt yourself? Find life insipid? A.E. will give you confidence, comfort you. – Do you need a friend? A.E. is always there. [trans. R. M. Kain][69]

Russell is often known by his pen-name, AE, adopted after an editor could only make out the first two letters of the word Aeon, with which he signed a letter to the editor of the journal *Lucifer* in 1888. This pseudonym was primarily, though not always, reserved for his correspondences and articles concerning esoteric or theosophical subject matter. He most often signed factual pieces with his full name and his poetry and illustrations with either his full name or the abbreviation, G.W.R. Russell met Yeats in 1884 at the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin and soon after developed an interest in theosophy that would last for the rest of his life. Russell

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[67] See Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, Hammer & Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, and Ivey, *Radiance from Halcyon*. See also Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, Oppenheim, *The Other World*, and Owen, *The Place of Enchantment* for a discussion of the broader esoteric milieu in late 19th and early 20th century Britain.
[68] Goodrick-Clarke, 'Hermeticism and Hermetic Societies', 555.
[69] Cited in Kain & O'Brien, *George Russell (A.E.)*, 15

eventually became a member of the Dublin Hermetic Society but when it became the Dublin Lodge of the Theosophical Society in April 1886, he hesitated again before committing to membership. He enjoyed the freedom and broad remit of the Dublin Hermetic Society and feared the limitations he might have to endure under the much larger Theosophical Society. In the December 1888 issue of *Lucifer*, Russell responded to an editorial by Blavatsky published in the October issue. Blavatsky had been arguing against setting up lodges of magic or practical occultism, something that interested many members, as the level of training required takes many lives to achieve. Russell's article appeared two years before he finally joined the Society, in December 1890, and admits the reason for his scepticism of societies as "the almost certain degeneracy of any Society or Sect formed by mortal hands."[70] He argued that the founders, though "inspired by the purest motives…cannot read the heart, nor know the mind" of members and therefore "the T.S. is not representative of Theosophy, but only of itself – a gathering of many earnest seekers after truth, many powerful intellects, many saints, and many sinners and lovers of curiosity."[71] Russell's instinct toward scepticism of organised societies presaged the difficulties the Society would later face regarding the intentions and motives of members and his essentialism with respect to theosophy highlights a significant point about theosophical identities: membership in the Society did not mean an individual held certain beliefs or principles just as non-membership did not mean an individual could not be a 'theosophist' or an authoritative voice on theosophical subjects. Summerfield comments that although Russell hesitated, "his assent, when given, came from the depths of his being, and his loyalty to Madame Blavatsky, though not to the organisation she left behind her, lasted for the rest of his life."[72]

In the June 1890 issue of *Lucifer*, Claude Falls Wright, then secretary, published a report on the Dublin Lodge of the Theosophical Society that gives a good indication of the level of interest in theosophy in Dublin.

> Amongst a nation of orators, it is needless to say that there is little lack of rhetorical ability. At our public meetings speech after speech follow in brilliant succession, and the flow of discussion is often sustained until a

[70] Russell, 'Lodges of Magic', 339
[71] Ibid.
[72] Summerfield, *That Myriad Minded Man*, 1

> later hour. There is seldom now a smaller attendance that forty-five persons; the last meeting numbered fifty, and we anticipate between sixty and seventy people next night, (June 4th), the last of the session, when a debate will be held on "Theosophy and Socialism," to be opened by a paper on the subject by Mr. E. A. Neale.[73]

A similar report in the August 1890 issue of *Lucifer* announced that the Dublin Lodge moved to a "more commodious premises" and compliments the work of the members for their activity which has "accentuated the need for further accommodation."[74] The November 1890 issue of *Lucifer* reports on the visit of Annie Besant, who arrived in Ireland, early in her theosophical career, on the 2nd of October for a lecturing tour and delivered her first lecture on the 3rd of October in the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin. The report stated that the visit

> [had]…a most excellent effect upon the Dublin Lodge. Towards the close of the last Session the average attendance was from forty to forty-five. The attendance at each of the three open meetings held since Mrs. Besant's visit numbered over sixty-five. But it is in the style of the meetings that the greatest change is shown. Visitors no longer come so much to attack Theosophy as to enquire into the various phases of the subject, and several of the visitors have joined as associates in order to study the questions more deeply.[75]

Frederick J. Dick's report in the March 1891 issue of *Lucifer* stated that the Dublin Lodge had "maintained its activity" and outlined plans for a new scheme for a more efficient running of the Society and greater ability to cope "with the ever-increasing demands on the spare time of these members, all of whom are engaged in other avocations during the day-time."[76] Dick credited Annie Besant's lecture from the previous October as the impetus for this increase in work.[77] The Society was clearly experiencing an increase in the amount and quality of activity and support at this time in Dublin, aided by Besant's publicity tour. The new scheme mentioned in the

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[73] Wright, 'Ireland', 343.
[74] Anon. (a), 'Ireland', 522. The author of this report is not given. The previous secretary, Claude F. Wright had left for London and the new secretary Frederick J. Dick had been announced in this report, so Dick may have been its author.
[75] Anon. (b), 'Ireland', 257. The author of this report is not given but likely to be Frederick J. Dick.
[76] Dick (a), 'Ireland', 80.
[77] Ibid.

March report came to fruition the next month. In April 1891, a residential commune was established in a row of Georgian houses at 3 Upper Ely Place, Dublin which came to be known as the 'Household'. In his report in the May 1891 issue of *Lucifer*, Dick described this move as follows;

> During the past two months the Dublin Lodge has endeavoured to definitely fulfil the first object of the T.S. by a formation of a working nucleus under one roof. The Headquarters for the Theosophical movement in the Emerald Isle is now located at 3, Upper Ely Place, Dublin, in a quiet yet central neighbourhood; and five members and one associate have therein taken up their abode.[78]

George Russell was one of the members who took up residence in the 'Household' and, with Yeats, painted several murals on the walls.[79] Of the Household, Yeats said it was the "one house where nobody thought or talked politics…where a number of young men lived together, and, for want of a better name, were called Theosophists" and he recalled "young men struggling, with inexact terminology and insufficient learning, for some new religious conception, on which they could base their lives; and some few strange or able men."[80] The report in the August 1891 issue of *Lucifer* detailed the meetings taking place at the household;

> There is a class on The Secret Doctrine on Thursdays; a class on the Key to Theosophy on Mondays; a Conversational Meeting on alternate Wednesdays; and the Lodge is open to friends and enquirers on Saturdays. So our Dublin brothers are showing no lack of activity.[81]

However, as Summerfield points out, Russell's loyalty to Blavatsky did not necessarily imply an enduring love of the Society itself, particularly due to the various changes, fragmentations, and controversies that occurred after her death in May 1891.

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[78] Dick (b), 'Ireland', 253
[79] Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life Vol. I*, 114
[80] Yeats, *The Collected Works Vol. III*, 157.
[81] Anon. (c), 'Ireland', 519.

Secession of the Dublin Lodge

The most significant of these was the secession of the American Section of the Theosophical Society in April 1895 after William Q. Judge had become "embroiled in a struggle between Besant and Olcott over competing claims to both charismatic and rational-legal authority."[82] With the successful expansion of the American Section, Judge, as its General Secretary, grew powerful and while he used his ongoing claims to communication with the Mahatmas, enlightened masters with whom only Blavatsky had communicated, to cement his place as president in waiting, it also made him a target for Olcott, who thought his messages from the masters were forgeries.[83] An inquiry was called on the basis that Judge's constant assertions of the reality of the masters, a belief not all Society members held, were infringing on the right to individual freedom of belief and compromising the Society's neutrality. In the aftermath of the inquiry, Judge formed, and was elected president of, the Theosophical Society in America, a completely separate and autonomous organisation. In July 1895, the Dublin Lodge of the Theosophical Society withdrew from the European Section of the Society, as it was before the split, and aligned themselves with Judge's new group. The Dublin Lodge became part of a new European organisation, The Theosophical Society in Europe, and elected Judge as their president.[84] By August 1895, *Lucifer* had published notice of their ceasing to exist as a lodge of the Theosophical Society (Adyar).[85] By January 1896, the *Irish Theosophist*, edited by Daniel N. Dunlop and published in Dublin from October 1892 until September 1897, was reporting on their weekly meetings and the reconfirmation of its officers. Judge was born in Ireland and both Russell and Dunlop were steadfast in their support of his leadership. Russell showed his support for Judge in the February 1895 issue of the *Irish Theosophist* by arguing that the "intuitive trust which so many members of the T.S. have in William Q. Judge…shows that he is a real teacher."[86] Judge died in March 1896 and his passing was announced in the April 1896 issues of *The Theosophist*, the *Irish Theosophist*, and in

[82] Wessinger, 'The Second Generation', 45
[83] See chapter three for details of events leading up to the secession.
[84] See Dunlop, 'Fourth Annual Convention of the European Section T.S.' and 'First Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society in Europe'.
[85] Besant, 'Theosophical Activities', 512-513. Appending the location of the society's headquarters, Adyar, is the conventional way to distinguish it from Judge's new organisation.
[86] Russell, 'On the Spur of the Moment', 77-78.

Theosophy.[87] Russell remembered him, in the April 1896 issue of the *Irish Theosophist*, as "a hero out of the remote, antique, giant ages come among us."[88] Russell realised the need for a steady hand to guide the Dublin members through such a transitional period and in the May 1896 issue of the *Irish Theosophist*, he published a piece called 'Self-Reliance'. He allayed any fears the membership may have had and subtly reflected on the disruption caused by the leadership struggle and subsequent secession, calling instead for the focus to remain on the content of theosophical ideas rather than the vessel:

> I have no doubt about our future; no doubt but that we will have a guide and an unbroken succession of guides. But I think their task would be easier, our way be less clouded with dejection and doubt, if we placed our trust in no hierarchy of beings, however august, but in the Law of which they are ministers…Something like this, I think, the Wise Ones would wish each one of us to speak: "O Brotherhood of Light, though I long to be with you, though it sustains me to think you are behind me, though your aid made sure my path, still, if the Law does not permit you to act for me to-day, I trust in the Ones whose love a fiery breath never ceases; I fall back on it with exultation; I rely upon it joyfully."[89]

The Theosophical Society in Europe, the European counterpart of Judge's new organisation, continued their affiliation with the Theosophical Society in America under Judge's successor, E.T. Hargrove, and the subsequent leadership of Katherine Tingley.[90] Tingley had joined the Society on October 13th,1894, in the middle of the disorienting events that resulted in the secession of the American Section and within weeks, Judge "admitted her into the elite Esoteric Section."[91] Her close relationship with Judge saw her rise to power after his death and though she supported the succession of Hargrove to the presidency, she had positioned herself as the new charismatic leader and occult authority in the Society by assuming the role of outer

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[87] After April 1896, *The Path*, Judge's periodical published in New York, became *Theosophy*.
[88] Russell, 'W. Q. J.', 123
[89] Russell, 'Self-Reliance', 152
[90] Dunlop, 'Convention of the TS in America', 160
[91] Rudbøg, 'Point Loma, Theosophy, and Katherine Tingley', 54. The Esoteric Section had been Blavatsky's secretive inner circle and under her exclusive control. Annie Besant and William Q. Judge became co-heads of this section after her death.

head of the Esoteric Section, a position previously held by Blavatsky.[92] Tingley launched a world crusade, a concerted effort on the part of many prominent members to travel to as many places as possible winning support for their faction. She included trips to Britain and Ireland as part of her enterprise and remained in Dublin for the Second Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society in Europe held there on August 2nd and 3rd, 1896. Dunlop reported on Tingley and her fellow crusaders as follows:

> Reaching Dublin on July 23rd their work in Ireland was soon arranged and taken in hand. Open-air meetings were held and the spirit of enquiry awakened. On Saturday, August 1st, a "Brotherhood Supper" was given to the poor of Dublin. This was a delightful gathering. The tables were beautifully arranged and flowers were tastefully displayed around the hall. Delegates from all parts had arrived to attend the Convention, and set to work to make the poor people happy and comfortable. Songs were beautifully rendered by Bros. Neresheimer, Walton and others. A few appropriate speeches were made, but no one so touched the hearts of all as Mrs. Tingley. The effect of her words was simply magical.[93]

The period through to the spring of 1897 was an evangelical one with crusaders from the Theosophical Society in America travelling all over the world while Besant also made the trip to America to galvanise those members who remained loyal to the Theosophical Society (Adyar).

Theosophy Declines in Ireland

The September 1897 issue of the *Irish Theosophist* was its last and Robert Coates, an honorary secretary of the Dublin Lodge who later joined the effort in Point Loma, announced the departure of Daniel Dunlop to the United States and lamented the number of good people who had left the Dublin Lodge: "O America, what a populous lodge this would be if you only restored us our own again!"[94] *Theosophy*, the periodical previously known as *The Path* and edited by E.T. Hargrove, came under the editorship of Katherine Tingley and changed its name to *Universal Brotherhood* in November 1897 after Hargrove resigned earlier that year. Tingley's autocratic

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[92] Ibid., 55
[93] Dunlop, 'Second Annual Convention', 219
[94] Coates, 'The T.S. in Europe (Ireland), 240

leadership style had started to cause problems and in 1898, Hargrove "declared that "by Order of the Master" Tingley was no longer head of the Esoteric Section" and left the Theosophical Society in America to form his own group, also called The Theosophical Society in America, headquartered in New York.[95] Hargrove's group attracted some prominent members including Charles Johnson, one of the founders of the Dublin Lodge, Vera Johnson, Blavatsky's niece who became Charles' wife, and some of William Q. Judge's closest associates, Archibald and Julia Keightley (a.k.a. Jasper Niemand).[96] It would eventually expand with branches in North America and Europe but disbanded in the 1940s, never gaining the reach and influence of Tingley's enterprise.

The December 1897 issue of *Universal Brotherhood* carried a further indication of the situation in Dublin:

> Lack of funds somewhat cripples the outward activity of the Dublin Branch at present. The ability of the members is directed with the same energy as ever to the work of publishing "The Internationalist" and carrying on meetings for members and interested enquirers at the Branch rooms. Can Ireland still take care of itself?[97]

The March 1898 issue of *Universal Brotherhood* contained Tingley's proclamation, at the Fourth Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society in America, of the formation of a new organisation, Universal Brotherhood. Tingley's new organisation subsumed the Theosophical Society in America, making it "one of the most important departments of the Universal Brotherhood" and those in attendance resolved to make her Leader and Official Head of both groups.[98] Dunlop was in attendance and Tingley's consolidation of power was the first in a series of events that led to his, and Russell's, departure from the Theosophical Society in America. Although, the September 1898 issue of *Universal Brotherhood* contained a letter from Dunlop, in his capacity as President of Universal Brotherhood Lodge No. 10 and H.P.B. Branch of the Theosophical Society in America in New York, addressed to Katherine Tingley, in which he expressed loyalty and devotion to her, he left the

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[95] Godwin, 'Blavatsky and the First Generation', 29
[96] See Chapter three for discussion of Julia Keightley's pseudonymous writings.
[97] Tingley, 'Theosophical Activities', 130
[98] Fussell, 'Miscellaneous News', 317

Society the following year. Activity at the Dublin Lodge had already fallen off and the February 1899 issue of *Universal Brotherhood* contained a report by Katherine Tingley on further crusader activities in Ireland that mentioned only two members: "On December 7th the Crusaders, Mrs. A. L. Cleather and Bro. Basil Crump, went to Dublin for the first time, where they enjoyed the real Irish hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. F. J. Dick."[99] Matters in Dublin would get worse with the impact of the influential Dunlop leaving Tingley's organisation after she took offence at his characterisation of the status quo in the March 1899 issue of *Universal Brotherhood*. Dunlop aired his concerns that the Society had lost touch with Blavatsky and that instead of "defending her to the utmost, very many members adopted the policy of minimizing her position in the Society."[100] He argued that Blavatsky's physical presence was a "centre of energy, and where she was not physically present the progress made was in proportion to the loyalty shown towards her."[101] The implication was that in the absence of a Blavatsky-centred approach in Tingley's new organisation, progress had stalled and the new direction of the movement was undesirable. Dunlop reminded the readers that they had pledged to "carry on this work of which humanity stand in so much need" and "are not seeking for "powers.""[102] He was arguing for the primacy of working for the good of others over seeking for occult knowledge and ability, an enterprise Blavatsky downplayed more than Tingley. Dunlop contended that Tingley had not limited members' opportunities to "hold faithfully to [their] sacred obligation" so they should "go right on and work mightily, caring only for the success of the Cause."[103] The November 1899 issue of *The Lamp*, a Toronto-based journal edited by Albert E.S. Smythe who had been expelled from Universal Brotherhood by Tingley, contained a piece by Dunlop in which he celebrated authentic theosophical identity in opposition to the status quo in America.

> We have had enough theosophical partyism. The true theosophist knows not party, society, creed or nationality. They are all alike to him, passing phases of our little day. Sectional differences have built up walls between

[99] Tingley, 'Brotherhood Activities', 632
[100] Dunlop, 'Then and Now', 658
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid., 658-659
[103] Ibid., 659

> brother pilgrims; hunting for, and emphasizing the failings of others has made the "free, unsectarian body" which H.P.B. hoped for, hitherto impossible. Brotherhood has been spelt backwards too often…Tale-bearing, back-biting, and talking uncharitably of our brothers, is reprehensible no matter where, or by whom it is indulged in. It will not do to compromise with the ethical law, and say, in effect, "I am not bound by mere ethics; I am working for brotherhood, and everyone who expresses opinions contrary to mine, or exercises, fearlessly, his own judgement, must be denounced." One of the most essential ways of working for brotherhood is to live the ethical life, and be just to all who happen to differ from us.[104]

Dunlop left the Universal Brotherhood and the Theosophical Society in America and returned to England. From there, he contributed an explanatory piece to the December 1899 issue of *The Lamp*, which had become a non-sectarian publication striving for objectivity amid the deepening split between the global theosophical groups. In the face of questions from his American colleagues as to why he left Universal Brotherhood, Dunlop responded by asking why the Universal Brotherhood left him. He claimed that he "exercised the constitutional right which graciously grants freedom in the expression of opinion" and then observed "that universal brotherhood was absent somewhere."[105] He described a widening gap between him and his comrades but found solace in that ""little infinite world" called the heart" and the knowledge that "the wisdom of God lasts for ever, and will rule the universe when the U.B. shall have ceased to exist for millions of years."[106] Dunlop admitted that, on reaching Ireland, en route to England, when he "looked upon its still waters," he realised that he "had been too long indifferent to many ignoble things, done in the name of brotherhood."[107] He described Tingley's organisation as an autocracy and conceded that, in the beginning, he thought of it as "possible solution of many difficulties then existing" but "[t]wo years' experience gradually culminated in the conviction, often stifled and held back, that it was the beginning of sorrow, and the path to death and decay inevitably."[108] In the same

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[104] Dunlop, 'Some Little Observations', 133
[105] Dunlop, 'Our English Letter', 156
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.

issue of *The Lamp*, Albert Smythe, its editor, provided details of other high profile departures from Tingley's organisation including information about some English members who resigned after losing confidence in the leader.[109] Dunlop's opinion of the Universal Brotherhood resonated with the Dublin Lodge, resulting in the majority of members, including Russell, following his lead. Smythe commented that in "Dublin, the old workers are reviving, on the original lines of the T.S., a Society which will once more bring Madam Blavatsky's ideals to the front in Ireland."[110] However, Frederick J. Dick elected to remain associated with Tingley's group and the January, 1900 issue of *Universal Brotherhood Path* reminded readers that in "Ireland, the faithful work of Brother Dick and his comrades is bearing fruit and the philosophy is blossoming out in practical work among the children" and the "faithful members have shown that they have made Theosophy a living power in their lives and learned to apply it."[111] Tingley mentioned only two other individuals active in Dublin, Frederick's wife, Anne Dick, and Arthur Dwyer, who had been a resident of the 'Household' at the same time as Russell and Dunlop. Efforts to revive the lodge's connection with the Theosophical Society (Adyar) did not come to fruition until 1904 but Russell reformed the Dublin Hermetic Society in 1900 to provide a space in which to continue their connection with the works of Blavatsky. Tingley grew increasingly authoritarian, claimed ever greater occult powers for herself, began restricting access to non-Universal Brotherhood materials, and subjected her members to tests of loyalty. The February 1900 issue of *The Lamp* published an interview, conducted by Dunlop's wife, Eleanor, with Alice Cleather, one of Tingley's Crusaders and a respected member of the Society whose resignation had been discussed by Smythe in his 'Editorial Notes' mentioned above. Cleather speaks of how she had been tested by Tingley as to her occult status and then castigated as mentally ill after her resignation. When asked if Tingley's organisation did valuable work, she responded:

> There may be some value. Wherever it is done, in the few active branches, by sincere people, it has undoubtedly good results. But the same work is done on a larger scale by other humanitarian associations, with no laudation of personalities, and free from the objectionable bogey

[109] Smythe, 'Editorial Notes', 160-167
[110] Ibid., 166
[111] Tingley, 'Mirror of the Movement: Work in Europe', 566

> of an autocracy under which every member is supposed to have freedom of opinion, but where very soon all opinion is made subservient to the ruling one about the absolute infallibility of the 'Leader.' Why, I have heard members declare in private and public meetings that the 'Leader' was greater than any great Teacher within the historical period, and that the Founder of Christianity was nothing compared to her.[112]

Perhaps to invoke her association with Judge, Tingley changed the name of her periodical to *Universal Brotherhood Path* beginning with the January 1900 issue. The August, October, November, and December 1900 issues all contained small, similar accounts of activity in Dublin.[113] All of them reference the work of Frederick and Anne Dick with the Lotus Circles, a theosophical children's group, but nothing else seems to be occurring, or worth reporting. One of the reports suggested that Dick's letters were full of interesting accounts but chose not to mention any of the specific contents. In 1900, Tingley moved the headquarters of her organisation to Point Loma, California and by early 1902, the only mentions of the Dublin Lodge in *Universal Brotherhood Path* referred to Frederick J. Dick and the great work he and his wife were doing. The August 1902 issue of *Universal Brotherhood Path* mentioned Dick's visit to Point Loma where his wife had been undergoing treatment for an illness. It also indicated his intent to move to California on a permanent basis.[114]

The Second and Third Dublin Lodges

In 1904, the president of the Theosophical Society (Adyar), Henry Steel Olcott, issued a new charter for the Dublin Lodge and the November 1904 issue of the *Theosophical Review* reported that "a new Branch has been formed in Ireland, under the name "The Dublin Lodge" and that "Mr. George W. Russell, once the leading spirit of the old "Dublin Lodge," and editor of the Irish Theosophist, is president."[115] It was during this period that James and Margaret Cousins became members of the Society.[116] However, this iteration of the Dublin Lodge did not sustain much theosophical activity, probably due to Russell's new job with the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, and the journal that reported its formation did not mention it

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[112] Dunlop, Eleanor, 'Interview with Mrs. Alice L. Cleather', 208
[113] Dublin is mentioned in Tingley's 'Mirror of the Movement' section.
[114] Tingley, 'Mirror of the Movement', 353
[115] Besant, 'From Many Lands', 271-272
[116] James Cousins' membership certificate is dated 1906 according to *We Two Together*

again.[117] The reports of the 1905, 1906, 1907, and 1908 Anniversary and Convention listed the Dublin Lodge among its branches with Russell as president.[118] The supplement to the June 1909 issue of *The Theosophist* listed the Dublin Lodge as one of those dissolved upon returning their charter.[119] Dismayed by the leadership of Annie Besant, George Russell reformed the Dublin Hermetic Society and continued to run meetings, using much the same intellectual content as the Theosophical Society, until he left for London in 1933. The June 1910 issue of *The Theosophist* reported on a visit to Ireland by Annie Besant in October 1909 and lamented that there "was not a single Lodge in Ireland."[120] However, "for some years, a band of students of spiritual things had been gathered by Mr. and Mrs. Cousins" and "after the President's visit two Lodges were duly constituted, one (the Irish Lodge) for scattered students through the country, the other (the Dublin Lodge) for the study circle whose members were all abstainers from animal food."[121] James Cousins was appointed Presidential Agent for Ireland[122] and the supplement to the June 1910 issue of *The Theosophist* listed the Dublin Lodge, along with the Irish Lodge, the Belfast Lodge, and the County Wexford Lodge, as new lodges, the first two chartered on December 9th, 1909 and the others on April 30th, 1910.[123] The supplement to the August 1910 issue of *The Theosophist* listed a newly chartered lodge in Dundalk, Co. Louth.[124] The June report continued: "it is hoped that the necessary seven to form a National Society will be in order within a year from the President's visit, or at any rate before her next visit. Mr. J. H. Cousins will be pleased to hear from any one [sic] interested in Ireland, and Theosophists passing through Dublin will be cordially welcomed. His address is 35, Strand Road, Sandymount, Dublin."[125] The rhetoric of this report suggests that Besant wanted to remedy the dismal state the Society in Ireland had fallen into, but the Dublin Lodge never regained its former glory. In the December 1909 issue of *The Theosophist*, a report appeared that described Besant's trip to Dublin, "where Theosophy has maintained a slight footing for many years,"

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[117] See Chapter five for Russell's involvement with the IAOS.
[118] Olcott, *General Report…1905,* 120 and *General Report…1906*, 124; Besant, *General Report…1907*, 90 and *General Report…1908,* 124
[119] Aria, 'New Lodges: Lodges Dissolved', x
[120] X., 'Theosophy in Many Lands', 1232.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Cited in Pielou, 'Mrs. Besant and Ireland', 184-185
[123] Aria, 'New Lodges'(a), xxxi
[124] Aria, 'New Lodges'(b), xliii
[125] X., 'Theosophy in Many Lands', 1232.

and reminded the readers that "Mr. Dunlop has many tales to tell of the early days in Dublin, before the Judge secession, when activities were greater than of late years."[126] In the same issue (December 1909), Besant spoke of her trip to Dublin:

> The Land of Saints has not, so far, taken her rightful place in Theosophy, for she is to Europe what India is to the world – a witness for the spiritual life. The time has come when the light should burn up upon her altars, and Dublin has breathed upon the smouldering embers…The outcome of the visit to Dublin is the formation of two Lodges – a very satisfactory beginning for the Theosophical Society in Ireland. Each will start with about twenty members. May their work prosper under the Blessing on which all our work depends.[127]

The following year, reports of progress in Ireland continued. The April 1910 issue of *The Theosophist* gave a "report of the vigorous work in Dublin:"

> On February 9th, a Reformers' Club was opened with every prospect of success before it, at the home of the Dublin Lodges of the T.S. A large company listened to speeches on Social Reform, Dietetic and Hygienic Reform, Progressive Thought, Progressive Science, and on the following evening the first public meeting of the Irish Lodge of the T.S. was held and Mr. J. H. Cousins delivered the first of three lectures on "The Mythology of Ancient Ireland." Other lectures and classes are also in full swing and we gather that a Lodge is being planned in Belfast. The President's visit to Ireland last autumn has evidently been like sunshine on the mountains; the snow is melting and already the music of the torrents is beginning to fill the air.[128]

The June 1910 issue of *The Theosophist* contains a similar report suggesting that the "work in Ireland appears to progress most favourably."

> A beginning has been made in Belfast, when Mr. Sanderson preached in the Progressive League Church on Theosophy. The church was crowded and many remained to ask questions. New Lodges have been formed in

[126] H.W., 'Theosophy in Many Lands'(a), 422
[127] Besant, 'On The Watch-Tower'(g), 298-299
[128] H.W., 'Theosophy in Many Lands'(b), 956

> County Louth and County Wexford. The Dublin Lodge made trial of a plan to fill an evening when the Lecturer fails or the fount of inspiration runs dry for some reason; which has seldom been known to fail. Questions are written on slips of paper, folded and mixed in a hat and then drawn out. Each person present, after five minutes breathing-space for reflexion, has to give a reasoned answer to whatever question has been drawn. The result is described as a fine exercise in rapid arrangement of thought and extemporaneous expression and a delightful discussion.[129]

This small amount of progress stalled, and it was the April 1913 issue of *The Theosophist* that contained the next report on activity in Ireland: "The Irish Lodge opened its 1912-1913 Session by an address form Mrs. Despard on the 'Message of Theosophy to the Modern World,' at the home of Mr. Cousins, the Presidential Agent. Thirty turned up and many questions were asked."[130] Similar to Tingley's reporting only on the activities of Frederick J. Dick, the fact that practically all references to theosophical activity include James Cousins suggests that the reports were optimistic at best. The Irish theosophical milieu had been negatively impacted by the departure of so many of its leading figures to America and Britain and the pattern continued when the Cousins left for India in 1913. Pierce Leslie Pielou, who was "married to the sister of Margaret E. Cousins and collaborated with her in psychical research,"[131] was appointed Presidential Agent and by 1919, a charter was granted for an Irish National Section, the importance of which was commented on by Besant as follows.

> The birth of an Irish Section is of great significance to the Theosophical movement, especially in the West. Ireland is to the West that which India is to the East in particular and to the world in general – the great home of spirituality. When the rest of Europe was plunged in darkness consequent upon the destruction of the Graeco-Roman civilization, Ireland remained the home of learning and sent her missionaries throughout the Continent. As regards Western Europe, Ireland is the one

[129] X., 'Theosophy in Many Lands', 1231
[130] S.R., 'Theosophy in Many Lands: Ireland', 123
[131] McCorrestine, 'William Fletcher Barrett', 45

> home in which the denizens of worlds other than ours are made welcome, are recognised and appreciated, treated as comrades on life's evolutionary pathway. Celtic Ireland supplies the imagination which Teuton England so conspicuously lacks. Sorely tried in the fiery furnace of great tribulations, Ireland will emerge to become once again the purified heart of Europe; and the promise of this mighty future lies in the renaissance of our Theosophical movement from a period of stillness, for without the Theosophical spirit no nation can live as the world now moves. The misunderstandings between Britain and Ireland should now begin to find solution in the united efforts of the English, Scottish and Irish Theosophical Societies, to build firmly the foundations of a brotherhood to transcend and transmute all those separative influences which derive their strength from mistrust, ignorance and doubt.[132]

The next chapter shows how the rise to prominence of Universal Brotherhood as the first object of the Society caused a Society-wide debate on the practical duties and responsibilities of members to the least fortunate in society.

[132] Cited in Pielou, 'Mrs. Besant and Ireland', 184-185

Chapter Two: Universal Brotherhood and Individualism

> To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.[133]

The question of the relationship between the Theosophical Society, political action, and social reform was a source of major debate for its members. Whereas officially the Society maintained a neutral stance, its members debated questions surrounding their duties and responsibilities to each other. More contentiously, they discussed the responsibilities of those with time, money, or both to those living and working in desperate social conditions. This debate normally took place under the rubric of one of the Society's stated main aims, that of Universal Brotherhood, and included a range of individualist responses to suggestions of collective action.[134] This basic form of the 'interference' debate will be discussed with examples below. Members proposed interpretations of Universal Brotherhood that led to arguments over the extent to which, if at all, they should interfere in the lives of others and over the implications, both material and spiritual, of doing so on an individual or collective basis. Those members who took a strong activist position had as their objective the improvement of conditions for people in society generally and some would go on to become ardent campaigners for women's rights, the labour movement, and the expansion of education. Others cited karma, the individualism of spiritual evolution, and the neutrality of the Society as reasons not to get involved in social issues at all.

This chapter begins by explaining the two different conceptions of individualism operative in theosophical discourse, each derived from the writings and argumentation of prominent leaders. It continues by showing how the seemingly opposing ideas of individualism and Universal Brotherhood were reconciled in the work and writings of some leading members. It then traces the history of the idea of Universal Brotherhood and its development from a vague and infrequently mentioned notion to its eventual enshrining as the 'first object' of the Theosophical Society. To demonstrate how the political attitudes of members grew in parallel with the growing prominence of this idea, the chapter discusses the earliest examples of political contributions by members that highlighted and framed the 'interference'

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[133] Olcott, 'General Report of the Thirteenth Convention', 53

[134] Universal Brotherhood was not one of the Society's aims on its foundation. See Santucci, 'Foreword' for questions surrounding original founding motives of the Society.

debate in the pages of the Theosophical Society's periodicals. These contributions also show the scope of members' politics, the types of issues that were of concern, and the changing strategies for legitimising belief and action. For the 1880s and 1890s, examples are primarily taken from *The Theosophist* and *Lucifer*. Based in Adyar, *The Theosophist* was and still is the main organ of the Society. It began publication in 1879, seven years before *The Path* and eight years before *Lucifer,* and was edited by Blavatsky until 1887. It provides the earliest expressions of theosophical discourse and is one of the most authoritative sources for issues of concern to the Society and its members. *Lucifer*, first published in 1887, was Blavatsky's London-based publication also provides an authoritative expression of theosophical discourse in this period. Finally, there is a discussion of the profound impact of socialism on the Society's idea of Universal Brotherhood and on political discourse within the Society more generally. Sometimes taken as a synonym for brotherhood and at other times held up as the radical other of members' prized individualism, socialism brought together, and epitomised, the many elements that comprised the interference debate, both at the level of the individual and the state.

Theosophical Individualism

In theosophical terms, individualism is thought of in one of two ways. One is the idea of focusing on the spiritual evolution of the self as an evolving unit of the divine in a cosmic history of reincarnation, with the ultimate goal of returning to the original divine unity from whence all things derive.[135] The other refers to the freedom of thought and belief afforded to Society members by one another. Annie Besant talked at length throughout her career about the importance of thought to the theosophical enterprise, but the problem arose when the freedom to act in accordance with those thoughts and beliefs was asserted.[136] Even the act of expressing beliefs strongly and authoritatively would later become an issue for the general secretary of the American Section, William Q. Judge.[137] The question of social action caused consternation for Society members because the 'theological' version of theosophical individualism encouraged the prioritization of the self and its evolutionary spiritual development. However, those members who favoured collective social action in the service of others offered more nuanced theologies of the self. Prominent leaders like Annie Besant, George Russell, and James Cousins were at pains to point out that the individual is important only insofar as it exists as part of the divine unity of the universe and achieving the goal of return to that unity is not merely an individual, spiritual process but a physical, practical, and collective one. Besant viewed individuality as limited and "but a passing phase in the age-long development of the portion of Divinity that we call the human Spirit."[138] The argument was that in working to improve the conditions of others, more individuals will flourish and come into the knowledge that they are part of this grand enterprise, thereby facilitating and expediting it. Russell argued that "undiluted individualism is not a paying game" and "individualism in our economic life…prevents concerted action for the general good."[139] Although a hesitant supporter of Besant and a great admirer of Blavatsky, Russell's view of collective action is much closer to that of Besant. He wrote:

> The evolution of humanity beyond its present level depends absolutely on its power to unify and create true social organisms. Life in its higher

[135] See Besant, 'The Building of the Individual' and Cousins, 'The Soul'.
[136] See Besant's Practical Theosophy section in chapter 3
[137] See the Judge Case section in chapter 3
[138] Besant, 'The Building of the Individual', 11
[139] Russell, 'Business Men and Co-operative Societies', 121 and *The National Being*, 89

> forms is only possible because of the union of myriads of tiny lives to form a larger being, which manifests will, intelligence, affection, and the spiritual powers.[140]

James Cousins argued that the "fullest and truest expression of the individual can only be effected through the co-ordination of the various functions of the body corporate."[141] The *Irish Theosophist* was already publishing similar sentiments in the early 1890s. Herbert Burrows, a British social activist and friend of Besant's, attacked extreme forms of individualism in an article of April 1893:

> One of the canons of the newest literary school of thought is an extreme individualism at any cost to those around us, the pushing of the individual development to its utmost limits, a naturalism which means separate units in life rather than a collective whole. Not so says Theosophy. Humanity is one, and individual progress is impossible apart from all.[142]

The ways in which Society members conceived of, and expressed, their individualism are entangled with the importance of the Society's eventual 'first object' of Universal Brotherhood and are central to understanding the divide over the rights and duties of members to social action. Bruce Campbell highlights five dilemmas he sees as fundamental to the Theosophical Society that caused or contributed to its central ambiguity, the first of which he calls Mystical Ideal versus Institutional Reality. He argues that for theosophy, the belief in a mystical ideal, i.e. that there is an accessible core behind every religion and that the divine is "both permeating the world and…hidden behind or beyond appearances," means that individuality itself can be seen as just another illusion to be overcome in the process of "making contact with the immanent divine."[143] The ambiguity arises when this ideal is expressed through the mechanics of the political and institutional society of individuals, the very obstacles that prevent divine union, leaving members to attempt a reconciliation of an individualistic mysticism with a collective institution. This can be seen in the communal living projects at locations like Halcyon, California,

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[140] Russell, *The National Being*, 40-41
[141] Cousins, *The Bases of Theosophy*, 37
[142] Burrows, 'Theosophy and Life', 66
[143] Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, 181-182

described in the work of Paul Ivey. Ivey's work on political and social aspects of North American theosophical groups shows a contrast between how concepts of individualism and the potential extent of theosophical involvement in social and political action were perceived in different regions. Speaking of the American milieu, he describes the theosophists as a group "arrayed against the typical understanding of individualism that characterized the upper class."[144] The commitment to communal living demonstrated by many American theosophists demonstrated their embrace of the "utter naturalness and importance of universal brotherhood to social and spiritual progress."[145] In his work on Halcyon, Ivey notes how "bringing lived realities into relationship and harmony with the community's ideals was an ongoing challenge."[146] While many in London and Dublin were expressing Universal Brotherhood in practical ways by working to improve the conditions of society, those who travelled to the west coast of the United States sought to express the first object by creating a new type of society. This point indicates a simple binary that will frame the beliefs and actions of individuals throughout this study. There are those individuals who prioritise the spiritual development of the self in bringing about the evolution of humanity and creating a better society; the 'non-interference' position. Others prioritised improving the conditions of society to facilitate the spiritual development of all individuals, including those who are restricted by their desperate situations, thereby expediting the evolution of humanity; the 'interference' position. Among those who espoused the latter, some sought to improve the conditions of the society in which they lived and others sought to create perfect social conditions through communal living in new communities. Individuals who tended towards the interference position also tended to be esoteric monists and to advocate for a compromise position. For them, there was no distinction between spiritual and political imperatives and achieving correspondence in parallel spheres of life was paramount to ensuring that their worldview was coherent and totalising.

Prioritising improving social conditions, whether for its own sake or as part of an esoteric monist approach, is the common thread for progressives in the

[144] Ivey, 'The Theosophical Movement', 215
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ivey, *Radiance from Halcyon*, 4

theosophical milieu as it allows a direct engagement with social reform policy. Ivey characterises those at Halcyon along these lines:

> they fervently believed that the reorganization of society along socialist lines would create a moral atmosphere that would produce the evolution of humanity through the heightened spiritual forces provided by the Avatar and would facilitate the creation and production of new technologies that would aid in humankind's material progress.[147]

As part of their monist enterprise, the Halcyon community believed that new social conditions would facilitate the flourishing of individual selves who would, in turn, provide new ways to improve humanity's social conditions more broadly. Ivey notes that the American Section, under the leadership of Judge, was distinguished by his emphasis on

> the practical application of theosophical precepts, telling the membership to dispense with psychic "phenomena" and "platitudes" and reminding them to exercise their "common sense on all and every occasion." The American organization of theosophists was unique in its attention to the importance of the individual spiritual growth and service to others, and in its emphasis on social and political reform. Judge's writings de-emphasize the so-called psychic phenomena that brought scorn and derision onto Blavatsky…His practical applications of Theosophy emphasized moral action over the more philosophical teachings of Blavatsky.[148]

Arguing that the American Section was unique in its social project is perhaps underestimating the social activity in other sections of the Society but Judge was advocating this practical, and monist, position much earlier than any other leader within the Society. However, Judge was also reserving the 'psychic phenomena' for his own use in leadership struggles. In claiming psychic and occult abilities for himself, he built a cache of charismatic authority that would help him cement his control over the American Section leading up to and after their secession from the main Society in 1895. American theosophical communities such as Halcyon were

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[147] Ibid., 11
[148] Ibid., 21-22

more socialist in their organisation than European groups, where Besant's influence managed to emphasize social reform while simultaneously striving to maintain the apolitical narrative of the Society, at least until 1916. This important moment will be considered in the next chapter along with a discussion of how the issues of individualism and brotherhood played out during Besant's presidency. The next section explains the origin of the idea of Universal Brotherhood and shows how it rose from a rarely mentioned and vague notion to a driving force in the Society as its 'first object'.

The Origin of Universal Brotherhood

The notion of Universal Brotherhood is central to the debates around interfering in the lives of others through social reform. Before discussing some politicised examples of its usage, it is necessary to clarify this idea and its importance to the Theosophical Society. This section demonstrates that although the Society was officially apolitical, the move towards Universal Brotherhood as its first object paved the way for members to interpret the Society's aims politically in terms of social reform. James Santucci argues that the formulation of the Society's 'three objects' has misled scholars regarding the original founding motives;

> it was not a Society founded on three well-defined objects...nor was the first object - "to form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity" - to be considered of greatest significance in the early days of the Society…[149]

Santucci's contention that the idea of brotherhood, or Universal Brotherhood, was not one of the founding principles of The Theosophical Society is followed up by showing that the idea became more prevalent as the Society's scope and influence grew, putting members in contact with a growing number of people with different religious backgrounds in different parts of the world. In 1895, Olcott recalled the founding of the Society as follows:

> It was to be a body for the collection and diffusion of knowledge; for occult research, and the study and dissemination of ancient philosophical and theosophical ideas...The idea of Universal Brotherhood was not there...The little group of founders were all of European blood, with no strong natural antagonism as to religions, and caste distinctions were to them non-existent. The Brotherhood plank in the Society's future platform was, therefore, not thought of: [sic] later on, however, when our sphere of influence extended so as to bring us into relations with Asiatics and their religions and social systems, it became a necessity, and, in fact, the corner-stone of our edifice.[150]

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[149] Santucci, 'Foreword'.
[150] Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves,* 120-121.

The development of the notion of brotherhood from infrequent mention to first object takes place over several iterations of the Society's rules, by-laws, and objects. There are at least three instances where the final phrasing of 'Universal Brotherhood' is prefigured. The first appears very early in a Blavatsky article in the July 1875 issue of a Boston journal, the *Spiritual Scientist.* Commenting on the popularity of spiritualism and its ability to bring about a resurgence of interest in occultism, Blavatsky referred to the unifying power of an 'Immortal Brotherhood;'

> Truth will prevail at last, and Spiritualism, the new world's conqueror, reviving, like the fabulous Phoenix out of the ashes of its first parent, Occultism, will unite for ever in one Immortal Brotherhood all antagonistic races; for this new St. Michael will crush for ever the dragon's head—of Death![151]

The next instance appears in the second volume of Blavatsky's two volume, 1877 work, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*. The relevant section criticised Christianity for reducing ancient metaphysical wisdom to the coming of Jesus and asserting him as its end:

> A theomythos intended to symbolize the coming day, near the close of the great cycle, when the "glad tidings" from heaven should proclaim the universal brotherhood and common faith of humanity, the day of regeneration--was violently distorted into an accomplished fact.[152]

The third instance appears, in Blavatsky's words, in a "New York Circular drafted mainly by Colonel H. S. Olcott" but Olcott claims she was responsible for large sections.[153] The circular provided information to correspondents of the Society and was "ready for distribution on May 3rd, 1878."[154] It outlines one of the teachings of the Society

> to aid in the institution of a Brotherhood of Humanity, wherein all good and pure men, of every race, shall recognize each other as the equal

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[151] Blavatsky, 'A Few Questions to "Hiraf***"', 101 (reprinted in de Zirkoff, *H.P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*).
[152] Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled Vol. 2*, 238.
[153] de Zirkoff, *H.P. Blavatsky Collected Writings,* 375.
[154] Ibid.

> effects (upon this planet) of one Uncreate, Universal, Infinite, and Everlasting Cause.[155]

This is by far the most important of the three instances that prefigure the final phrasing of the first object as it is the first official printed document to formulate this idea of brotherhood as something "[t]he Society teaches and expects its fellows to personally exemplify."[156] The first two instances place the achievement of an immortal or universal brotherhood on a cosmic timescale and, although the third does not speculate on when such a brotherhood could be realised, it is the first to delegate, at least some, responsibility to individual members.

New by-laws were drawn up after Olcott delivered an address in Bombay on March 23rd, 1879, just over a month after his arrival in India.[157] Grace Knoche lists the seven 'plans' of the Society that were derived from the stated object in the first paragraph of the original *Preamble and By-laws of the Theosophical Society:*[158]

> The title of the Theosophical Society explains the objects and desires of its founders: they seek "to obtain knowledge of the nature and attributes of the Supreme Power and of the higher spirits by the aid of physical processes." In other words, they hope, that by going deeper than modern science has hitherto done, into the esoteric philosophies of ancient times, they may be enabled to obtain, for themselves and other investigators, proof of the existence of an "Unseen Universe," the nature of its inhabitants, if such there be, and the laws which govern them and their relations with mankind.[159]

This shows that in the first instance, the Society was unconcerned with the idea of Universal Brotherhood. However, by December 1879, it had been decided in the General Council meeting at Benares to include it in the first line of the revised version of the *Principles, Rules, and By-Laws* drawn up in March of that year. The following analysis refers to the revised document as it appeared in *The Theosophist* in

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[155] Olcott & Blavatsky, 'The Theosophical Society: Its Origin, Plan and Aims', 377 (reprinted in de Zirkoff, *H.P. Blavatsky Collected Writings*). See also Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, 400-401 for his recollection of the division of authorial labour.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Knoche, 'Our Directives', 582
[158] This document was dated October 30th, 1875 but the actual date of organisation, according to Olcott was November 17th, 1875, see Olcott, *Old Diary Leaves*, 136.
[159] Anon., 'Preamble of the T.S.', 515.

April 1880. The title of the report, 'The Theosophical Society or Universal Brotherhood', directly equates the Society with the concept of Universal Brotherhood and contains the following assertions;

> "I. The Theosophical Society is formed upon the basis of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity...VI. It is not lawful for any officer of the Parent Society to express, by word or act, any hostility to, or preference for, any one Section, whether religious or philosophical, more than another. All must be regarded and treated as equally the objects of the Society's solicitude and exertions. All have an equal right to have the essential features of their religious belief laid before the tribunal of an impartial world. And no officer of the Society, in his capacity as an officer, has the right to preach his own sectarian views and beliefs to members assembled, except when the meeting consists of his co-religionists."[160]

The strength and position of the first statement show how important it was to demonstrate the global and universalising nature of the Society. Along with the assertion of freedom of belief, it served as a positive public relations effort after the Society's activities in the early days had prompted its transition to a secret society in 1876. Santucci comments that the reasons were never fully explained but it was "most likely in connection with psychic experiments, including attempts to achieve out-of-body experiences, which were never intended for public exposure."[161] In the 1879-80 formulation above, the statement on Universal Brotherhood is separate from the sixth (numbered) statement condemning intolerance of other religious and philosophical positions *within* the Society. The direct instruction of tolerance was to be interpreted as a rule of conduct between Society members regarding religious beliefs and not a pathway to political or social interpretations of Universal Brotherhood. At this time, the Society was divided into three sections; the first contained the most senior and knowledgeable, the second comprised those individuals who had proved themselves, and the third was made up of probationers. The statement on the second section reads as follows;

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[160] Seervai, 'The Theosophical Society or Universal Brotherhood', 179.
[161] Santucci, 'Theosophical Society', 1115.

> The Second Section embraces such Theosophists as have proved by their fidelity, zeal, and courage, and their devotion to the Society, that they have become able to regard all men as equally their brothers, irrespective of caste, colour, race, or creed; and who are ready to defend the life or honour of a brother Theosophist even at the risk of their own lives.[162]

It suggests that proven members regard *all* men as "equally their brothers, irrespective of caste, colour, race, or creed." This creates space for interpretations of the rules that ask questions about the Society's attitude towards the poor, uneducated, and disenfranchised individuals in society and the duties and responsibilities of individual members to take action in remedying such situations. The wording of the operative phrase 'all men' would be combined with the earlier statement on Universal Brotherhood and appear in the 'three objects' of the Society in 1891.

The April 1880 article also outlines the "general plans of the Society." These plans prefigure the more succinct 'three objects' that would later be codified in the Society's constitution. The relevant parts are included here:

> (c)— To promote a feeling of brotherhood among nations; and assist in the international exchange of useful arts and products, by advice, information, and co-operation with all worthy individuals and associations; provided, however, that no benefit or percentage shall be taken by the Society for its corporate services...(f)— To promote in every practicable way, in countries where needed, the spread of non-sectarian education.[163]

The concept of brotherhood is used in an international context and is becoming politicised in the sense that it promotes co-operation and peaceful exchange among nations. The ambition to spread non-sectarian education would remain one of the most important aspects of the Society's work and, as a social issue, is a further widening of the space in which to read the rules as promoting active engagement in reform. It is also another expression of the public relations effort to reinforce the global and universalising project that has at this point become, at least publicly, the

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[162] Seervai, 'The Theosophical Society or Universal Brotherhood', 179.
[163] Ibid.

priority of the Society. The twelfth statement of the rules in the 1880 article concerns the "initiation fee of one pound sterling" to be collected from every fellow, the funds to be used for educational and practical resources within the Society but also for "other various works of a beneficent character, as founding of asylums, schools, &c."[164] This statement further improves the image of the Society but also demonstrates an active commitment to the improvement of conditions for individuals in general society. Combined with the previous statement on education, it was only a matter of time before these opportunities to interpret the Society's plans politically led to members taking direct action to address social inequality.

Knoche reports that the council met again in February 1881 and revised the 'plans' section of the 1879-80 version. 'Rules of the Theosophical Society together with an explanation of its Objects and Principles' replaced the previous seven statements on the 'general plans of the society' with four. The first of these is the earliest formulation to resemble the final phrasing of the first object of the Society:

> To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, the obvious philanthropic value of which must be beyond dispute, while the esoteric significance of a union formed on that plan, is conceived by the Founders, for reasons derived from a study of Oriental Philosophy, to be of great importance.[165]

This is the first published form of the idea found in the 1878 circular mentioned above. Although Blavatsky and Olcott would resist organised efforts to bring about Universal Brotherhood through interference in society, preferring instead to talk of it as a distant and cosmic ideal, this statement links the achievement of that ideal to the philanthropic actions of Society members. These changes and a full report of the council meeting were published in the supplement to *The Theosophist* in June 1881 but the first object is there reduced to "To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity."[166] The references to philanthropy and esoteric significance have been removed and the recording secretary devotes two paragraphs to the Indian government's suspicions of the Society's political agenda.

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[164] Ibid.
[165] 'Rules of the Theosophical Society together with an explanation of its Objects and Principles' cited in Knoche, 'Our Directives', 585
[166] Mavalankar, 'Rules of The Theosophical Society', +2

> When the Society first established its Head-Quarters in India, misconceptions arose concerning its nature, and it was groundlessly suspected of nourishing political designs. In reality it has no concern with politics at all; and even, going further than this attitude of indifference, it distinctly refuses to admit or retain any fellowship with persons who are engaged in any unlawful enterprise directed against the stability of the Government under which they live.[167]

As a British colony, India was governed by the Indian Penal Code which contained a broad provision to address sedition. Clearly, the philanthropic references were removed so as not to stoke the fears of the Indian government regarding the Society's social and political intentions.

In January 1882, there was yet another set of revisions and the General Council produced just three 'Primary Objects'. The significantly streamlined first of these was: "To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed or colour."[168] This version matches the final phrasing regarding Universal Brotherhood and brings back the instruction of tolerance found in the 'Second Section' description from the 1879-80 version of the document. The first object did not change for another six years when sex and caste were officially added in December 1888.[169] However, in November 1887, a year earlier, the then president of the Blavatsky Lodge in London, Thomas B. Harbottle, began his article on 'Brotherhood' as follows;

> The Theosophical Society has always placed in the forefront of its programme, as its first and most important object, the formation of the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood, without distinction of race, creed, caste, or sex.[170]

Apart from the inaccuracy of claiming the Society has *always* prioritised the idea of Universal Brotherhood, he seems to have chosen to include divisions based on caste

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[167] Ibid.
[168] 'Report of the Proceedings of a Public Meeting. . .of the Theosophical Society' cited in Knoche, 'Our Directives', 586.
[169] Olcott, 'General Report of the Thirteenth Convention', 53. For ease and accuracy of reference, reports and regular features published in theosophical periodicals that contained an aggregation of contributions from various individuals are attributed to the editor of the journal in which they appear, e.g. the general report cited here was compiled from various contributions and is attributed to Olcott.
[170] Harbottle, 'Brotherhood', 212

and sex but left out those based on colour, perhaps seeking conciseness by equating it with race. It is possible that he was privy to a draft document a full year before the changes were made or the Blavatsky Lodge had independently chosen to add further specificity to their interpretation of Universal Brotherhood, inspiring a Society-wide change. Universal Brotherhood's gain in significance saw it become a lynchpin of many articles addressing the role of the Society and its members in political and social activity. The next section discusses some of these articles to illustrate the scope and type of members' political concerns and explores the significance of Universal Brotherhood's new-found prominence.

Theosophists' Politics

Political and social action could only be undertaken by individual members, acting as individuals, since the Society's apolitical stance prevented it from supporting one cause or another. This section looks at some of the earliest examples of articles appearing in theosophical periodicals in which this political neutrality was circulated and affirmed, beginning with the Society's responses to accusations of political agitation in the Indian context. It then traces the development of the debate among members on practical theosophy, a theosophically inspired basis for ethical, social, and, political action informed by various interpretations of Universal Brotherhood.

Colonial Politics

Santucci notes that under Olcott's leadership, the work of the Society

> expanded to include social activism, such as initiating the Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka, upgrading the position of the outcastes in India by establishing "Pariah schools," and establishing an Oriental Library to preserve Indian Sanskrit and other manuscripts.[171]

The early references to politics in theosophical journals are indeed concerned with the perception of the Society's activities in India and one of the earliest direct statements on the Society's position came from Blavatsky in the July 1882 issue of *The Theosophist*. She is responding to an article in the *Indian Daily News* that discussed the political import of one of Olcott's lectures. Perceiving it as a call to political revolution, an editor at the paper took exception to Olcott's appeal to Indian university graduates "to employ their talents and education for a holier and more patriotic object than that of aping European vices, or turning themselves into caricatures of Bradlaugh and Ingersoll."[172] Blavatsky refuted the editor's view, claiming that the Society is "for the elevation of public morals, the dissemination of knowledge throughout the land, the study of Sanskrit."[173] She chided the editor for his suspicions: "the Jeremiah of Calcutta detects a black cloud of threatening political omen."[174] The editor's concern with Olcott's political agenda implied a socialist or communist inclination in his lecture and the work of the Society. Blavatsky cited

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[171] Santucci, 'Theosophy', 238
[172] Blavatsky, 'The Political Side of Theosophy', 259
[173] Ibid.
[174] Ibid.

Olcott's lecture at length to show that this perception was completely at variance with what was actually said. Ultimately, Blavatsky's piece is not about the political side of the Theosophical Society, it is a defence against the charge of bringing red revolution to India. Defending attacks on the Society was one of Blavatsky's strengths and she lashed out at the editor, dismissed his accusations almost entirely, and warned that the Society keeps "a special scrap-book where are gummed for the instruction of the coming race of Theosophists the records of fatuous attacks upon ourselves and our cause."[175]

In July of 1883, *The Theosophist* printed an article, in the supplement, responding to the recurring perception of the Society as a political threat. This perception was based on the kind of work the Society, primarily in the person of Olcott, was undertaking in Asia and as the Blavatsky piece from July 1882 shows, it was not a positive one. It was pervasive enough that Olcott published his own explanation of the position of the Society and why it was wrongly perceived as having a political agenda. His assertion was clear:

> The tenacious observance by the Founders of our Society of the principle of absolute neutrality, on its behalf, in all questions which lie outside the limits of its declared "objects," ought to have obviated the necessity to say that there is a natural and perpetual divorce between Theosophy and Politics. Upon a hundred platforms I have announced this fact, and in every other practicable way, public and private, it has been affirmed and reiterated. Before we came to India, the word Politics had never been pronounced in connection with our names; for the idea was too absurd to be even entertained, much less expressed.[176]

Olcott was at pains to explain that all foreigners in India are put under surveillance until their agenda could be established. Therefore, it was natural that the Theosophical Society should be watched until they were shown to be true to their stated purpose. He claimed this process came to an end and that "in the year 1880, the Government of India, after an examination of our papers and other evidence, became convinced of our political neutrality, and issued all the necessary orders to

[175] Blavatsky, 'The Political Side of Theosophy', 260
[176] Olcott, 'Politics and Theosophy', +14

relieve us from further annoying surveillance."[177] The article goes on to admonish Society members found to be giving answers to political questions and circulating opinion on political issues without due regard to the neutrality of the Society, sometimes speaking as if these opinions were those of the Society itself. He issued a strong warning regarding members and politics;

> our Rules, and traditional policy alike, prohibit every officer and fellow of the Society, AS SUCH, to meddle with political questions in the slightest degree, and to compromise the Society by saying that it has, AS SUCH, any opinion upon those or any other questions. The Presidents of Branches, in all countries, will be good enough to read this protest to their members, and in every instance when initiating a candidate to give him to understand – as I invariably do – the fact of our corporate neutrality.[178]

Olcott followed this by admitting his willingness to use his office to expel members, if necessary, for contradicting this statement and compromising the neutrality of the corporate Society by attempting to speak on its behalf. Despite the work individually undertaken by people like Olcott, the early years of the 1880s lacked a theosophical discourse of political action. However, the Indian government's fears were not entirely without foundation. Mark Bevir argues that despite Blavatsky and Olcott's assurances, the Society "quite clearly played a political role within India."[179] He recounts an episode at the Society's annual convention in 1884 where several Indian theosophists were to meet with the intention of forming a national political movement. In line with the leadership's efforts to assuage the fears of Indian authorities, the "would-be nationalists had to meet, therefore, not in the Society's headquarters under the auspices of its annual convention, but rather across the road as a clearly distinct group."[180] The examples of distancing the Society from political discourse discussed above show that the Theosophical Society's policy of neutrality was formed and enshrined due to the leadership's colonial context rather than any kind of spiritual or intellectual idea of rising above petty politics. This also helps us to understand why neutrality would come to be such a source of difficulty for the

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[177] Ibid.
[178] Olcott, 'Politics and Theosophy', +14
[179] Bevir, 'Theosophy as a Political Movement', 159
[180] Ibid.

Society, during the Judge case and the presidency of Annie Besant, when litigated in the relative liberty of Britain or the United States.

Practical Theosophy and Individual Altruism

Later in the 1880s, after the problems with the Indian government had subsided, questions of interference arose within the Society in the form of a discourse on practical theosophy. Articles appeared addressing members' concerns about how they should live the principles of theosophy in their everyday lives and many contained some form of argument for individual altruism. One of the earliest examples of this ethical questioning was published in the June 1887 issue of *The Theosophist* by a leading American theosophist, Jirah D. Buck.[181] He argued for the priority of individualism in ethical action, suggesting that the differing global contexts in which members find themselves necessitates individual interpretation.

> The real ethics of theosophy apply to *man*, not man in India or Europe, or America alone, but to man everywhere, and at all times, and under every condition, and here is just the reason why more specific instructions cannot be given. The doctrine *per se*, is set forth, the *application* must be made by the individual, and if the doctrine be not capable of such varied application, it cannot be universally true.[182]

Buck refuted legislating for theosophical ideas and argued against any declaration on how to apply theosophical ideas practically that would be binding on Society members worldwide. Buck also warns that individual obligations should not be ignored or removed from one's life to attain more quickly some kind of spiritual achievement.

> Let it be clearly shown that theosophy has a practical application to the family, to the home circle, to husband and wife…Let it be clearly shown that no husband can progress in, or even enter the Path by ignoring or deserting his wife and children, but on the contrary, that they may and ought to be his companions at every step, and that nothing so unifies a household, as one genuine theosophic life therein, and theosophy will

[181] Sometimes published under the pseudonym Harij.
[182] Buck, 'Practical Theosophy', 534

> begin to be understood, and as it is understood it will be espoused and exemplified.[183]

Buck prioritised improvement of the self and the individual application of theosophical ideas in daily life over any idea to improve social conditions. He relied on the exemplary power of theosophical ideas properly applied in the household to demonstrate their truth and bring others into the theosophical enterprise.

One of the earliest examples of a contributor questioning the duty of a student of theosophy in terms of interference posed the problem of an individual encountering 'evil'. In the August 1887 issue of *The Path,*[184] William Q. Judge took a relativist and individualist approach to the idea of duty by asking: "Is it our duty to interfere if we see a wrong being done?" Echoing his close associate, Buck, he answered simply that "[t]he question of duty is one that can be decided fully only by each individual himself."[185] Judge's explanation invoked theosophical ideas of 'Wisdom' and gave the example of an abusive man acting unwisely. He stated that the man is his brother and argued that, along with the duty to help the abused, his "duty lies toward the man, not in condemnation, but seeking the cause that makes him unwise, strive to alleviate — if not free him from it."[186] Judge was advocating for the same individual altruism that many other leaders at the time endorsed, one that is active, in the sense of the duty to interfere, but passive in that it does not seek out those in need. He did not engage with questions of duty towards individuals in poor social conditions and was more concerned with individuals' moral failings. This article is just one, among many, that illustrates the difficulty faced by readers trying to resolve the ambivalence perpetuated by juxtaposing passive individual altruism with strident calls for the realisation of Universal Brotherhood.

Interpretations of Universal Brotherhood

Once Universal Brotherhood became the first object of the Society, several pieces referring to Universal Brotherhood, Human Brotherhood, or the Brotherhood of Man appeared throughout the 1880s. Many of these treated the concept in a vague and generalised sense due to a lack of clarity from the leadership about the

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[183] Ibid.
[184] The New York based periodical edited by William Q. Judge.
[185] American Mystic, 'Am I my Brother's Keeper?' American Mystic is just one of Judge's many pseudonyms.
[186] Ibid.

implications of the first object. Under the colonial government of India, Blavatsky and Olcott employed the conception of Universal Brotherhood as a distant and worthy goal for the global Society and resisted moves by other contributors that brought the idea into the more immediate future where it could be used as justification for political and social action. The earliest articles on Universal Brotherhood were attempts at understanding the import of the newly promoted first object. The supplement to the March 1883 issue of *The Theosophist* carried a short piece by Ram Das Sen[187] in which the lack of specificity is apparent: "Our conduct in life should therefore be to practice truth, beneficence and charity – to look upon all mankind as brethren, to love them, to help them, and do them all the good we can."[188] This is the earliest example of individual altruism being offered as an expression of brotherhood, though not in the context of interference or organised social action. The supplement to the following month's issue of *The Theosophist* contained a short piece by Olcott in which he presented the idea of human brotherhood as an individual realisation. Referring to a Sufi poet enraptured by religious truth, Olcott commented that he

> could not think of himself as of any race, or creed, or locality. So feels every true Theosophist; for when the Divine idea of human brotherhood takes possession of him, and the insignificance of worldly distinctions and differences is clearly apprehended, he speaks what he has to say without regard to his own nationality, or creed, or those of his hearers.[189]

Olcott presented the idea of a spiritual brotherhood whose members have individually come to realise the universality of religious truths, rather than a material, worldly, and practical brotherhood in which they are individually enjoined to improve the conditions of the other in as much as they can.

In the November 1887 issue of *Lucifer*, the editors printed a letter and an editorial response that would give the clearest explanation thus far of Universal Brotherhood and how it was to be applied. The letter appealed to the Society to lend its wisdom to the practical problems of the world and the editorial response defended

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[187] Ramdas Sen was a noted scholar and writer in India in this period. His name appears in the article in three-word form.
[188] Sen, 'The Brotherhood of Man', +3
[189] Olcott, 'Theosophy and Brotherhood', +2

the Society against accusations of not having produced tangible results or implementable ideas about resolving social ills. Blavatsky argued that the ignorance of the masses prevented them from attaining to high ideals:

> Schemes for Universal Brotherhood, and the redemption of mankind, might be given out plentifully by the great adepts of life, and would be mere dead-letter utterances while individuals remain ignorant, and unable to grasp the great meaning of their teachers.[190]

She argued that this ignorance hinders the effects of any practical solution that might be imposed from above and, like the articles from Judge and Buck that same year, valorised the work of the individual. Blavatsky enjoined everyone to continue as much good and charitable work as they could despite not knowing who to help and who to leave alone because of her assertion that misery was a karmic requirement for some individuals.

> Yet it is an absolute fact that without good works the spirit of brotherhood would die in the world; and this can never be. Therefore is the double activity of learning and doing most necessary; we have to do good, and we have to do it rightly, with knowledge.[191]

She then turned to the idea of Universal Brotherhood and gave the following definition which was printed in all uppercase letters in the original issue. This formulation was the culmination of the vague and general sentiments about Universal Brotherhood produced since the early 1880s and a reminder of the individual responsibility of the true theosophist to practice altruism towards his brother.

> HE WHO DOES NOT PRACTISE ALTRUISM; HE WHO IS NOT PREPARED TO SHARE HIS LAST MORSEL WITH A WEAKER OR POORER THAN HIMSELF; HE WHO NEGLECTS TO HELP HIS BROTHER MAN, OF WHATEVER RACE, NATION, OR CREED, WHENEVER AND WHEREVER HE MEETS SUFFERING, AND WHO TURNS A DEAF EAR TO THE CRY OF

[190] Blavatsky, 'Let Every Man Prove His Own Work', 169
[191] Ibid.

> HUMAN MISERY; HE WHO HEARS AN INNOCENT PERSON SLANDERED, WHETHER A BROTHER THEOSOPHIST OR NOT, AND DOES NOT UNDERTAKE HIS DEFENCE AS HE WOULD UNDERTAKE HIS OWN – IS NO THEOSOPHIST.[192]

This may seem like a concise summation of what was expected of a theosophist, but the phrasing creates an identity-based loophole. Rhetoric about who was a theosophist and what it meant to be a true or authentic theosophist was common, and many Society members saw themselves only as aspiring to become theosophists through the work of the Society. The call to altruism could then be ignored on the grounds that an individual had not yet attained the requisite status of 'theosophist'. In effect, this formulation did not encourage members to act in any particular way, it simply stated that anyone who did not act altruistically was not a theosophist. It is not useful, in an academic study, to seek out a set of characteristics that could define a theosophist when there was no agreement within the movement. Only instances where the possessor of the label is charged with a certain standard of behaviour, like Blavatsky's words above, are crucial in understanding the internal debate.

The discussion gathered pace in 1889 and the March issue of *The Theosophist* published an unsigned contribution admonishing those who thought that Theosophy was "an individual internal thing, a system of cosmogony, philosophy, ontology, to which the term *practical* is completely inapplicable."[193] The tension caused by the ambivalence inherent in the individualism/brotherhood discourse is apparent in the author's rebuke of those who "hardly stir a finger to help others" and yet claimed all disadvantaged members of society as their brothers and sisters. Despite judging those who did not lend their help to others in the material realm, the author did not suggest organised or collective action as a solution. Instead, the prioritisation of the self was returned to and practical theosophy was limited to the practice of setting an example for others:

> Practical Theosophists today…cannot, under the rule of the present morality, and with existing social, religious and political institutions, live and act as they would were all men as they themselves are. The most

[192] Ibid.
[193] Anon, 'Practical Theosophy', 319

> they can hope to do is to try their best to prepare the world for the reception of human brotherhood as the foundation of all our ideas of life and morality; and this they can best accomplish by each one making himself pure and strong; for then they become centres of a spiritual health which is "catching," they become "layu points," so to say through which there flows into the world from another plane of existence the spirit of brotherhood, of mercy, of pity and of love.[194]

The June 1889 issue of *The Theosophist* contained an article by Olcott in which he discussed the idea that there might be an applied version of pure and abstract theosophy just as there was an applied version of pure and abstract mathematics. Here he explicitly articulated the central question, and difficulty, regarding the role of theosophists' interference and political actions:

> Can the Fellows of the Theosophical Society apply their knowledge to the affairs of our mundane existence? Is it possible to materialize, however imperfectly, the great mass of high aspirations and altruistic sentiments that have accumulated in the literature of Theosophy and in the souls of Theosophists, and which at present, for want of an outlet, seem to threaten us with a congestion of spirituality?[195]

However, when he considered the idea of Universal Brotherhood as it is laid out in the objects of the Society, there was no indication that he saw a connection between it and a call to political action on the part of the membership. Olcott moved to dilute any immediate implications, in terms of social action, of the first object's transition into the material realm, describing it as a

> purpose so high, so deep, so universally sympathetic, so distant of realization, that it becomes vague and confused when the attention is directed to it, and to most Fellows this Object is about equivalent in practice to the formation of a nucleus for the recurrence of the Golden Age, or for the re-establishment of the garden of Eden.[196]

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[194] Ibid., 325. Derived from the Sanskrit *Laya*, Layu points are described by Blavatsky in the *The Secret Doctrine* as points of matter where every differentiation has ceased.
[195] Olcott, 'Applied Theosophy', 515
[196] Ibid., 516

Olcott held up the first object as a utopian ideal, an almost unobtainable goal that would only be accomplished in the distant future after many more lifetimes of evolution. Distancing the first object from immediate material concerns maintained his own views on the role of the individual in social issues and the neutrality of the Society. Equating the realisation of the first object with Eden and a Golden Age rarefies it and deters political interpretation that might suggest that Universal Brotherhood could be brought about by material means and in a more immediate timeframe. The July 1889 issue of *The Theosophist* published a response by Blavatsky to a letter received by the editors in which the author, 'A Bengalee', took issue with Olcott's characterisation of the first object.[197] The author of the letter claimed that Olcott's arguments presented Universal Brotherhood as "too vague an idea to influence the lives of men, or practically affect their actions" and argued that "the theory of the Brotherhood of Man, when adequately realized by the understanding, is capable of producing a complete revolution in our previous ideas of the import and value of life."[198] Articles such as Olcott's were not immediately and clearly understood by readers due to the combination of a passive individual altruism with the apparently practical and activist implications of Universal Brotherhood. Blavatsky's response spoke for Olcott:

> what was intended to be understood, was that the universal realization of human Brotherhood is a matter of the distant future, and therefore an object which no one can place before himself as one of the "practical" problems for his solution.[199]

This refutation maintained the idea that Universal Brotherhood was so lofty an ideal as to be almost unattainable and kept it distanced from any impulse to look to political action and social reform as paths to its achievement. Blavatsky described the many barriers to fulfilling Universal Brotherhood, including a long list of social ills. She cited ignorance as the root cause of all obstructions, implying that knowledge is the only true cure. Blavatsky took a paragraph to admit that theosophy holds no monopoly on the idea of Human Brotherhood but still took some credit for the

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[197] The piece does not have an author attributed to it but the style and motivation suggests that it is most likely Blavatsky.
[198] Bengalee, 'Human Brotherhood', 630
[199] Blavatsky, 'Universal Brotherhood', 588. The response to the letter was printed earlier in the issue than the letter itself.

Society in commenting that "it might perhaps be more correct to say that Human Brotherhood is an eminently theosophical idea, which at present is not confined to those who profess themselves Theosophists."[200] She listed the other interests and groups that also held to the idea of brotherhood and suggested something that, perhaps unintentionally, anticipated the political activist direction the Society would take over the next two decades.

> If the Theosophical Society is to be of real service to the world as a vehicle for the dissemination of the Brotherhood of Man, it must begin by extending its own sympathies, so as to include all those who at present accept that idea as part of their programme or creed. To refuse or neglect to do this would be a stultification of its own professions, and a reductio ad absurdum of Universal Brotherhood itself.[201]

This article also argued against some material solutions that would help to bring about Universal Brotherhood, such as the redistribution of wealth, because the elements of humanity whose activities initially caused the inequality of wealth distribution would not have changed and would begin working anew with the same agenda as before. There was little practical advice in this article and it rejected ideas of broad based material solutions. Blavatsky reaffirmed the individualism of the Society, arguing for the prioritisation of the self and that Universal Brotherhood was a slow process requiring a realisation in the individual of sympathy for his fellow man.

Jirah D. Buck attempted to explain the importance of Universal Brotherhood in the November 1889 issue of *The Path* in which he offered a very individualistic interpretation. He argued that once an individual accepts brotherhood as fact and is determined to "act in accordance with the implied relation at all times and in all circumstances" then "[s]elf-conquest alone can satisfy the ethical claims of the Brotherhood of Humanity."[202] Buck was cementing the idea, prominent among leading members at that time, that the self should take priority and there was no need to look for an activist or organised interpretation of the first object. His article was immediately followed by a contribution that claimed the first object of the

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[200] Ibid.
[201] Ibid., 588-589
[202] Buck, 'Brotherhood', 248

Society to be the only object because the second and third were merely means to the first. Offering no practical solutions, the author, Arthur Gebhard, endorsed the same interpretation as Buck, namely a mystical realisation leading to individual altruism. Though Gebhard maintained that achieving Universal Brotherhood was a distant and spiritual idea, he did assert the freedom offered by the Society to individuals to hold a more practical and immediate view:

> Yet in the Theosophical Society there is room for all, from the man who thinks that Universal Brotherhood can be slowly brought about or even approximated by raising the ethical standard of the community, or the man who sees in charity the fulfilment of the command "Thou shalt love they neighbour as thyself," up to him who knows that Universal Brotherhood can be attained alone by the practical road of a mystic or yogi.[203]

Duty in Blavatsky's The Key to Theosophy

By 1889, Blavatsky published *The Key to Theosophy*, an accessible text that explained all the features of theosophy in an easily digested question and answer format. Addressing the growth of interest in practical applications of theosophical ideas, she devoted an entire section to 'practical theosophy' in which she addressed questions of duty, politics, and social reform. Blavatsky gave a clear indication that others, not the self, should be primary in the performance of duty, which she defined as that which is "*due* to Humanity, to our fellow-men, neighbours, family, and especially that which we owe to all those who are poorer and more helpless than we are ourselves."[204] Although this remained an individualist assertion of duty, the growing importance of social issues saw her include the poorest in society in her explanation. Blavatsky answered the question of what was due to humanity as follows: "Full recognition of equal rights and privileges for all, and without distinction of race, colour, social position, or birth."[205] This ran counter to many assertions of the impossibility of equality made by some of her contemporaries.[206] Blavatsky blamed the political

[203] Gebhard, 'The Society and its Object', 250
[204] Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, 229
[205] Ibid., 230
[206] See Cooper-Oakley's criticism of Besant in the next chapter.

system for the 'oblivion' of such rights and privileges and commented that the Theosophical Society carefully avoided politics:

> To seek to achieve political reforms before we have effected a reform in *human nature, is like putting new wine into old bottles*. Make men feel and recognise in their innermost hearts what is their real, true duty to all men, and every old abuse of power, every iniquitous law in the national policy, based on human, social or political selfishness, will disappear of itself.[207]

Blavatsky's recognition of the needs of the poor did not dissuade her from her position, held in common with Judge and Buck, that the self must be the primary focus of improvement if a real change was to occur in society. This was a clear statement of the difference between Blavatsky and Annie Besant regarding politics and social reform. Blavatsky argued that a change to human nature must come first whereas Besant, though admitting the importance of a change in human nature, maintained throughout her career that it would be an easier and faster achievement if individuals were not limited by their dreadful social conditions.

Blavatsky stated that the Society "takes absolutely no part in any national or party politics" because different contexts demanded different political action depending on the individuals involved; "each is left perfectly free to follow out his or her particular line of political thought and action, so long as this does not conflict with Theosophical principles or hurt the Theosophical Society."[208] Blavatsky was reiterating the importance of individual freedom in political action. But the last point, a lesson learned in India and Sri Lanka, regarding the effects of members' actions on the Society's reputation, would become central during the secession of Judge and the presidency of Besant. Returning to social questions, Blavatsky commented that the principles of the Society demand that members do not "stand aloof" and conceded that if "humanity can be developed mentally and spiritually by the enforcement…of the soundest and most scientific physiological laws, it is the bounden [sic] duty of all who strive for this development to do their utmost to see that those laws shall be generally carried out."[209] This contradicted the freedom

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[207] Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, 231
[208] Ibid., 232
[209] Ibid.

asserted in the previous point but was hedged by the fact that she referred only to the soundest and most scientific laws. Blavatsky also admitted that in places where social conditions were not conducive to the required training of bodies and spirits, "the T.S. is in thorough sympathy and harmony with all true efforts in this direction."[210] However, Blavatsky was not emphatic about these points and stopped short of an endorsement of social action. She argued that "little satisfactory social work is accomplished" because different reformers have different solutions.[211] In response to a direct question about how theosophy could be applied to good effect, Blavatsky returned to the only principle she believed could bring about the desired changes and argued that improving the conditions of society could not guarantee spiritual development because both good and bad conditions hamper the spiritual life:

> In the present state of society…we are continually brought face to face with the fact that large numbers of people are suffering from misery, poverty and disease. Their physical condition is wretched, and their mental and spiritual faculties are often almost dormant. On the other hand, many persons at the opposite end of the social scale are leading lives of careless indifference, material luxury, and selfish indulgence…Both are the effects of the conditions which surround those who are subject to them, and the neglect of social duty on the one side is most closely connected with the stunted and arrested development on the other…it is only by all men becoming brothers and all women sisters, and by all practising in their daily lives true brotherhood and true sisterhood, that the real human solidarity, which lies at the root of the elevation of the race, can ever be attained.[212]

Blavatsky identified the lack of development in some sections of society with the neglect of social duty in others. For her, the proper widespread application of theosophically inspired individual altruism, though not organised or actively targeting issues, would remove everyone's spiritual limitations at once. This 'practical theosophy' relied on individuals acting in accordance with theosophical principles in their daily lives and deciding for themselves if their actions would contribute to the

[210] Ibid., 233
[211] Ibid.
[212] Ibid., 233-234

object of true brotherhood: "in every conceivable case he himself must be a centre of spiritual action, and from him and his own daily individual life must radiate those higher spiritual forces which alone can regenerate his fellow-men."[213] Blavatsky offered a karmic explanation of this:

> In helping on the development of others, the Theosophist believes that he is not only helping them to fulfil their Karma, but that he is also, in the strictest sense, fulfilling his own. It is the development of humanity, of which both he and they are integral parts, that he has always in view, and he knows that any failure on his part to respond to the highest within him retards not only himself but all, in their progressive march. By his actions, he can make it either more difficult or more easy for humanity to attain the next higher plane of being.[214]

Blavatsky demonstrated her closeness to Besant in this section. Both suggested that the thoughts and actions of individuals are intrinsically connected and vital to the realisation of divine unity. However, Besant saw no reason not to organise and work collectively to expedite the process by enlisting individuals with time and resources to help improve the conditions of the worst off in society. The articles from 1889 show a strong resistance among leading theosophists to any activist or organised impulses towards broader social reform that might arise from the centrality of Universal Brotherhood to the Society's message. However, in Blavatsky and Gebhard made the first admissions that there was space for a more immediate interpretation of the first object, even if they did not believe that social action could successfully contribute to the grand enterprise of human evolution.

Universal Brotherhood as Practical Ethics

Following the assertions of a direct link between Universal Brotherhood and ethics, morality, or practicality by an anonymous contributor to *The Theosophist* in 1889, a contributor to the October 1891 issue of *The Path* made the same case without having to withhold his name. The article continued the trend of the mystical and individual altruism interpretation of Universal Brotherhood but directly linked all action and duty to accomplishing the first object:

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[213] Ibid., 236
[214] Ibid.

> This first object is the highest object known to man, for its development and full realization leads to the expansion of individual consciousness into universal consciousness; this is the chief duty of man on this earthly plane of action and duty.[215]

This movement towards introducing a more active interpretation of Universal Brotherhood while trying to maintain individual freedom gained traction. In January 1893, an issue of the *Irish Theosophist* placed the emphasis on individual altruism but strongly encouraged people to give themselves entirely to working for others. This contrasted with earlier characterisations of individual altruism where members were not encouraged to seek out those in need but merely attend to those whom they encountered. The article directly linked the seeking out of those in need with physically and materially helping humanity in its development.

> If you would help humanity seek the Path…give yourself utterly and entirely…Seek out your toiling brothers and sisters. Clasp their toil-stained hands in Brotherhood; let your arms entwine around your sister and your heart beat close to hers; let your tears mingle with those that flow from her grief-dimmed eyes; let the sufferers feel that they are not alone in their misery, that they are not too lost, too sinful for you to love; tell them and prove it by your life that you are one with them, that your life is bound up with theirs…What matter if no apparent results crown your efforts!..What matters if, when the great brotherhood is an accomplished fact, no one gives a passing thought to you!...Find the path; point it out to others. There is no other way to help humanity.[216]

This description of helping those in need as an expression of Universal Brotherhood and contribution to its achievement is unrecognizable from the distant, spiritual, and cosmic explanations given in earlier years. There is still no call to organised or collective action here but it is another step away from the prioritisation of the self as the only way to Universal Brotherhood. Although it is still a self-centred approach, in the sense that it calls for a very tangible self-sacrifice in the expression of Universal Brotherhood, the author emphasised the alleviation of suffering for those in need

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[215] Lonakar, 'The Criterion of Morality', 203
[216] Lawrence, 'The Perfect Way', 31-32

despite the possibility of it having no visible impact on the final realisation of the first object.

In August 1893, a contributor identified only as F.R. argued from an esoteric monist idea of theosophical completeness for ethical action derived from the idea of Universal Brotherhood.

> Now, it is on this very point, this fundamental point of *completeness* that Theosophy proves itself to be the master-philosophy...For, being in itself complete, - a synthesis of science, of religion, of philosophy, that embraces the entire Cosmos, subjective as well as objective; that pierces behind the veil of illusion unto a perception of the one Absolute Law – it necessarily contains within itself all that there is of truth in the smaller, narrower religions or philosophies, for it embraces *all* truth…we claim that in the teachings of Theosophy the knowledge requisite for such an all-embracing view of our true relationship to each other, of our origin, of our object, of our destiny can be found.[217]

Although there were no explicit calls to action in this piece, the author relied on the completeness of the theosophical knowledge system to offer up a 'view of our true relationship to each other'. This contributor argued that the concept of brotherhood encompassed every plane of being:

> the Theosophical basis of Brotherhood, being the interdependence and solidarity of the human race on *every* plane of being, is no partial or artificial basis, but is indeed "a *fact* in nature; not a something which is to be brought about, but a something to be recognized," its ethical system is "based upon *natural law*, and has its extension into every plane of human life and consciousness."[218]

The implication of solidarity on every plane of being is that Universal Brotherhood is no longer just a spiritual statement or a distant goal but an ideal that should also be expressed in material and physical ways. In the July 1894 issue of the *Irish Theosophist*,

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[217] F.R., 'The Theosophical Basis of Brotherhood', 111
[218] Ibid., 115

Agnes Varian continued to assert the practicality and completeness of a theosophical ethics based on the first object:

> The teaching of the brotherhood of man, and the real unity of each with each, really sums up the whole Ethical question, and gives the reason why it is incumbent on us to live for each other, helpful and sympathising, and at the same time explains the misery, indifference, and sense of isolation that is so prevalent…We are so inwoven with each other that none can be quite free when any remain bound…we are each responsible while there remains on earth one wrong, one cruelty, one unkindness; and it is our duty to help, and our glory that we may help, "the rolling wheels of this great world."[219]

The acceptance of responsibility and assertion of duty continued to ground the enterprise of achieving Universal Brotherhood in the actions of members towards those in need. Although there was no call for organised action in this piece, Varian's belief in the practicality and ethics of theosophical ideas would be put to the test on a large scale at Halcyon in California where she and her husband John played central roles. In the August 1894 issue of the *Irish Theosophist*, Lilian Edger also made a strong connection between practical theosophy and brotherhood, and reminded the reader what was at stake:

> The foundation of Practical Theosophy is Brotherhood, and the foundation of Brotherhood is the realization of the unity of mankind – nay, more than that, the unity of the whole universe…It is one aim of Theosophy to hasten the time when all shall be one; and as the oneness must be brought about on all planes and in all things, so there is an infinite number of aspects to Practical Theosophy, an infinite number of directions in which it may work.[220]

Edger was one of the first to interpret Universal Brotherhood in such an active sense by emphasising the importance of expediting the evolution of humanity. She introduced an element of urgency that ran counter to the cosmically distant

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[219] Varian, 'The Ethics of Theosophy'. Married to John Varian. See Ivey, *Radiance from Halcyon* for their foundational role at the California community.
[220] Edger, 'Practical Theosophy', 132-133

characterisations of Universal Brotherhood offered by leading members in earlier years. However, echoing the comments of Jirah Buck, Edger was not advocating a seeking out of those in need. She argued that applying the principle of brotherhood should begin in the home and extend into everyday life. Though she did not suggest organised action and prioritised the improvement of the self over the conditions of society, she argued from an esoteric monist point of view when she spoke about achieving oneness in 'all planes and in all things'. The final phrase of the quote, 'infinite number of directions in which it may work', is an expression of the newfound space to interpret the strong association between practical theosophy and Universal Brotherhood in more overt social and political ways. A similar assertion, by Katherine Hillard, of the centrality of Universal Brotherhood to ethical action appeared in the May 1895 issue of *The Path*:

> The basis for ethics…is the idea of universal brotherhood founded upon the conviction of our spiritual unity, and therefore having its impulse from within rather than from without, the cultivation of right thought, that from it may spring spontaneously right speech and right action.[221]

The simplicity of this statement illustrated how the idea of Universal Brotherhood being the foundation of practical theosophy and ethical action had become firmly established in the ongoing discourse.

The mystical and distant version of Universal Brotherhood had become a secondary concern and was perceived as the endpoint of a process that should begin immediately in the material realm. It made a return in an anonymous contribution to the January 1896 issue of *The Path*. The discourse had, by this time, shifted to the point where anonymity was the preserve of those arguing against activist interpretations of Universal Brotherhood instead of those arguing for considerations of those in need.[222] Addressing the role of theosophy in ameliorating modern social problems, the author pointed out that harmony and brotherhood were the only solutions to society's ills, but railed against any political ideology that claimed to be able to enact them. His solution was to set a good example and wait:

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[221] Hillard, 'A Basis for Ethics', 47-48

[222] While the journals were a forum for the full breadth of discussion, contributors may have remained anonymous for local reasons and not just because they were arguing against accepted norms.

> The ideals of Brotherhood are only the beginning of man's awakening to a natural fact. Bye and bye in the sweep of cycles no doubt the whole body of humanity will reach that point of knowledge where a perfect realization of these facts will have become possible. It may take aeons of time; meanwhile the duty devolves upon those who are beginning to feel a budding interest in such problems, to live a life, the example of which may be worth imitating, and point out the way to those below…[223]

By this time Universal Brotherhood had become a common justification for supporting and directing social reform due to the firm emphasis in theosophical discourse on the connection between the first object and practical, ethical expressions of theosophical ideas and principles. The introduction of the esoteric monist justification that Universal Brotherhood must be active on every plane, i.e. that the spiritual activities of members to form the distant cosmic brotherhood should have their corresponding material activities on the physical plane, was a powerful step in cementing this connection. The idea of a distant and cosmic Universal Brotherhood had receded substantially and, as the anonymity of this last example shows, become part of an unpopular justification for doing nothing.

The analysis of early references to brotherhood and politics in the pages of its most important publications shows that Blavatsky and Olcott were intent on maintaining the neutrality of the corporate Society through their insistence on the role of individual altruism in any conception of theosophical ethics or practical theosophy. Any attempt to characterise the Society as political or having a social agenda was refuted. The potential for the first object of the Society to be interpreted politically was kept in check by distancing the reality of Universal Brotherhood from the material world and situating its achievement in the spiritual realm, the distant future, or both. The examples above illustrate the position of the leadership of the Society, formed primarily under the watchful colonial government of India, throughout the 1880s and this insistence on individual altruism has been shown to be in full effect up until 1889. Though Blavatsky's position regarding duty softened noticeably in the *Key to Theosophy,* Annie Besant's rise to prominence throughout the 1890s produced a more significant shift in tone.

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[223] Anon., 'Theosophy and Modern Social Problems', 314

In 1887, an important debate on politics and brotherhood began in the pages of *Lucifer* between two contributors, Thomas B. Harbottle and J. Brailsford Bright. Through a series of articles and responses concerned with socialism, Harbottle and Brailsford Bright articulated the extremes of the debate around politics, social reform, and Universal Brotherhood, setting the terms of this debate in theosophical periodicals until the 1910s. This back and forth between regular Society members demonstrated the divide regarding the practicality of theosophical ideas and members' willingness to involve themselves in social reform. How should individuals act and conduct themselves regarding the plight of others? Should individuals act collectively or singly? In the early Society, political questions were addressed by Besant and Olcott in response to accusations of communism and ongoing suspicions surrounding the political agenda of the Society in India.[224] However, as the discussions of the activist import of Universal Brotherhood grew bolder, debates shifted towards the question of how the actions of members reflected on the Society as a whole and how collective action by members infringed on the individual freedom of belief and neutrality.

[224] See Blavatsky, 'The Political Side of Theosophy' and Olcott, 'Politics and Theosophy'

Socialism and Brotherhood

This section looks at the range of opinions and interpretations of socialism among Society members as presented in articles submitted to theosophical journals. It begins with a short discussion of the compatibility of theosophy and socialism in terms of the benefits each offered to proponents of the other. The chapter reviews and analyses a debate on socialism from the pages of *Lucifer* to show how it set the parameters of the interference debate as early as the late 1880s. Socialism was presented in one of three ways in theosophical periodicals: as a revolutionary ideology and radical other of theosophical individualism, as completely compatible with theosophy, or as a policy enacted to improve the conditions of society for the least fortunate. Each of these is analysed with examples to illustrate the numerous voices active in political discourse in the theosophical milieu.

Esotericism and Socialism

The nature of Universal Brotherhood and the importance of individualism were the important points of articulation throughout this debate. Different formulations of the role of reincarnation and Karma were claimed as religious justifications for one position or another. Socialism occupied a space in theosophical discourse defined by the question and extent of interference in social conditions by individuals and the state. To answer the question of why socialists, with an agenda rooted in the physical and material world, were attracted to esotericism, Dan McKanan's work on Fourierism in America suggests three contributions made by esotericism to early socialism.

> First, it offered a new way of being religious for socialists who deplored the social conservatism of mainstream churches. Second, it made it possible to expand the scope of radicalism to include the full range of human concerns – an important concern for socialists who felt that political revolution focused on too narrow a range of issues. And third, it made it possible for socialists to be radical in a constructive, rather than merely critical, way.[225]

McKanan suggests that all this made it easier for 'middleclass idealists' to become involved with socialism and warns that it created "enduring tension with those

[225] McKanan, 'Faith in the Phalanx', 205-206

theorists who believed that only a class-conscious proletariat could build a social society."[226] Though his three contributions are offered from the perspective of individuals who were socialists first and then turned to esotericism as a way of being religious, they provide a useful frame to view theosophists who become interested in socialism. The first of these contributions is context-specific and characterises the American milieu more accurately than it does the European. However, it is arguably true for Besant and a few other members who found their way to the Society from socialist circles. The second of these contributions holds true for those theosophists who looked to socialism and social reform as a way of widening the scope of their theosophical activities. Due to the impact of esoteric monism and political interpretations of Universal Brotherhood, Society members could expand their interests from a purely individualistic and spiritual enterprise to one that could account for 'the full range of human concerns'. The third contribution also applies to Society members who advocated socialistic policies in that it allowed them to offer practical solutions to problems that were holding back humanity as a whole.

Carla Risseuw argues that Theosophy disagreed with socialism and communism as it "saw these as too narrow and materialistic opposing forces, which neglected the valued 'spirituality' and the strength of existing philosophies of colonially dominated cultures."[227] Although she refers primarily to colonial India, her essentialist rendering of theosophy, as a singular ideology removed from the individuals who espoused it, ignores the nuanced debates about socialism and socially informed policy conducted in the periodicals and the differing colonial contexts in which the Society was active. Individual members were not all opposed to socialism and many strove to reconcile their beliefs and religious ideas with mechanisms that could bring about improved conditions for human development. While focusing on race and colonialism, Risseuw notes that the Society's "central value of 'universal brotherhood'…was opposed to colonialism in principle, but in the notion of universal brotherhood itself there were differences of degree."[228] This point fails to offer a thorough discussion of the concept of Universal Brotherhood, mistaking it for a direct equality imposed from the outside rather than a structured

[226] Ibid., 206
[227] Risseuw, 'Thinking Culture Through Counter-culture', 185
[228] Ibid., 201

inequality working towards equality from the inside.[229] Readings of theosophy in essentialist terms, assuming consistent and static ideas to which all members, or even all leaders, agreed, ignores the impact of the principle of individual freedom of belief. Impinging on this right, afforded to all members, would constitute the basis of the charges made against William Q. Judge in 1895 and those levelled at Annie Besant in the wake of her policy shifts on becoming president of the Society in 1907.

Harbottle-Brailsford Bright Debate

The first time the question of politics and Universal Brotherhood was directly addressed and debated in terms of interference, social reform, socialism, and activism was in a set of articles, responses, and published correspondence printed in the theosophical journal *Lucifer* between November 1887 and May 1888. The interlocutors were Thomas B. Harbottle, then president of the Blavatsky Lodge in London, and J. Brailsford Bright, who had served on the original council of the Fabian Parliamentary League with Annie Besant and George Bernard Shaw.[230] At a meeting to consider proposals for the establishment of the British Section, called by Olcott and held at No. 9, Conduit Street on Monday the 8th of October, 1888, Harbottle was appointed to the committee tasked with drawing up the code of rules. The other appointees to this committee were Olcott himself, A.P. Sinnett, John Varley, and the newly appointed General Secretary of the section, A. Keightley.[231] Harbottle initiated a discussion of Universal Brotherhood in the November 1887 issue of *Lucifer* and the December 1887 issue carried J. Brailsford Bright's contribution. Harbottle responded in the January 1888 issue and Brailsford Bright followed with a two-part article in the March and May 1888 issues. Harbottle represented the individual altruism position, set out by Blavatsky and Olcott, and regarded socialism as a materialist ideology seeking to bring about societal changes on a revolutionary scale. J. Brailsford Bright represented the opposite position and saw socialism and theosophy as being two, wholly reconcilable, elements of the same process. He had an ideological view of socialism as a totalising force and used the

[229] See Besant on the familial inequality of universal brotherhood in the section on her developed worldview or the more conservative assertions of inherent inequality of Cooper-Oakley in the section on Besant's early political contributions.
[230] Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, 202. Thomas Benfield Harbottle was also a noted writer of reference books.
[231] Keightley, 'Theosophical Activities', 260

rhetoric of revolution in his writings, a feature that was moderated by his refutation of the charge of materialism and advocating for a spiritualised socialism.

Harbottle began by stating that the idea of Universal Brotherhood had not received enough attention, despite its position as the 'first object' of the Society. He argued that although the idea was easily apprehended on the intellectual level, due to its precursors in Christianity and certain types of politics, such a superficial understanding of Universal Brotherhood had led to inaction. In contrast, a full realisation of the import and inner meaning of Universal Brotherhood is required to inspire individuals to tend to their duties. Answering a question about the nature of Universal Brotherhood, "the main spring of Theosophy," he offered a negative definition: "*Socialism* as preached in this 19th century it certainly is not."[232] He added that "there would be little difficulty in shewing that modern materialistic Socialism is directly at variance with all the teachings of theosophy" and accused it of advocating "a direct interference with the results of the law of Karma."[233] Harbottle emphasised the primacy of Karma in dictating individual social conditions and that interference with a divine law was wrong. He also claimed that socialism contravened the parable of the talents "by giving to the man who hid his talent in a napkin, a portion of the ten talents acquired by the labour of his more industrious fellow."[234] He used a religious justification to counter a central idea of socialism, that redistribution of the fairly earned wealth of one individual to an undeserving individual was unfair. Harbottle appealed to religious laws to support his view of society. Given the freedom of individuals to hold their own beliefs and non-sectarian nature of the Society, it was common for members to appeal to at least two different religions when employing this strategy. In fact, it was almost mandatory given the potential to interpret the use of single religious references as sectarian and impinging on the individualism of others. The April 1890 issue of *Lucifer* carried an example of this in an article entitled 'The True Brotherhood of the Kingdom of Heaven' in which the author claimed that

> Christ alone showed us how to work out our salvation by practically living out that righteousness through love which is the very essence of the

[232] Harbottle, 'Brotherhood', 213.
[233] Ibid.
[234] Ibid.

> divine nature and which is the test of fitness for the true brotherhood of the kingdom of heaven.[235]

An editor's note followed that could not admonish the author for his interpretation of Universal Brotherhood but also could not permit his sectarian and, for the editors, ill-informed views on Christ as the only teacher to have advanced the true notion of brotherhood to be published without comment.

> As we take no responsibility for the opinions expressed by our contributors, but leave to each the duty of speaking the truth as he sees it, it is perhaps hardly necessary to express our dissent from the form in which the writer of the above clothes the great principle of Universal Brotherhood. But we must enter our protest against the undue exaltation of Christ, and against the statement that he "alone" showed the right way. Buddha showed it centuries before Christ, and Buddhism has been far less of a failure than Christianity in the matter of practically inducing brotherhood.[236]

The periodicals often published contentious articles to demonstrate the freedom of members to hold their own beliefs, but they also presented an opportunity for the editors to express their distaste for certain views and educate their readership.

Harbottle's argument suggested that his own material well-being was a factor in his perspective and, if his appeal to Karma and the parable of the talents was genuine, his social conditions were the result of his actions in his past incarnations, making him a deserving individual. However, Harbottle did advocate certain types of active or practical benevolence; "...an understanding of the real meaning of "Brotherhood" must entail active benevolence, that is to say work for others in some form or other, upon every one who does not wilfully thrust aside the obligation."[237] Like Blavatsky and Olcott, Harbottle's Universal Brotherhood was an individual and mystical realisation, not simply the acceptance of an idea. Using the figures of Jesus and Gautama as examples, he contended that Universal Brotherhood was not

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[235] McPherson, 'The True Brotherhood of the Kingdom of Heaven', 156.
[236] Ibid.
[237] Harbottle, 'Brotherhood', 213

> a mere formula, to be accepted as an article of faith, and then laid on the shelf. Once understood, it must influence all who have sufficient strength of purpose to fight their own lower selfish personalities, and must lead them to the practical realisation of their aspirations towards true unselfishness and active benevolence.[238]

His use of the phrase 'active benevolence' suggests a development from the passive individual altruism espoused by Blavatsky, but there are no indications that he was suggesting seeking out those in need. Harbottle's interpretation of Universal Brotherhood does not recognise material equality or the fight to achieve it. He relied on the idea of a mystical realisation of the 'true' implications of the first object and suggested that it is "beyond the physical, beyond the intellectual man, that we must look for that fraternity, arising out of unity and equality, which cannot be found on the purely material plane of existence."[239] In terms of the debate around interference, Harbottle advocated action to help those in need but offered no practical suggestions. Returning to passive individual altruism, he asserted that it "is for every man to determine what he can do for the good of humanity; all are not equally gifted, but all can do something."[240] This contradicts his earlier statements on not interfering with the law of *Karma*. He encouraged each person to help in some way, but to avoid any organised redistributive system that would disrupt the working of religious laws. While Harbottle recognised the importance of individual benevolent action towards others, he was not concerned with the impact such individual benevolence would have on the working of religious laws. This leads to one of two potential explanations: he believed individual benevolence was not effective enough to impact the working of religious laws or only individual action was a valid way of 'interfering' in the working of religious laws. In either case, he did not advocate interference to the degree that it could effectively improve social circumstances. Harbottle disagreed most with systematic attempts to change society that would threaten the esteem afforded to him by *Karma*.

J. Brailsford Bright began his article in the January 1888 issue of *Lucifer* by refuting Harbottle's characterisation of socialism and claiming it led him to the study

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[238] Ibid., 215
[239] Ibid., 214
[240] Ibid., 215

of theosophy. He argued that Harbottle confused the "general system or class of systems known as Socialism, with certain methods of propagating its principles."[241] Brailsford Bright took exception to a paragraph containing three statements; that socialism is not Universal Brotherhood, that materialistic socialism is directly at variance with Theosophy, and that socialism interferes with *Karma* and the parable of the talents. He tackled the third of these statements first by saying "if Socialists do advocate, consciously or unconsciously, anything of the sort, they are sinning against the light, and are impious as well as childish in their efforts."[242] Brailsford Bright then contested the accusation of materialism in the second statement and assumed that Harbottle's meaning of 'materialistic' was tied up with the worldly concerns of

> better feeding, housing, &c., of those who do the active work of society, technical instruction, such general education as fits a man for the domestic and secular duties of life, and the reorganisation of society with these objects upon a "co-operative" basis, in which public salaried officers, elected by their fellows, will take the place of capitalists and landlords, and in which the production and distribution of wealth will be more systematically regulated. This system, of course, takes no account of the law of Karma.[243]

However, he described an idea of collective Karma where socialism provided a foundation on which Theosophy could build.

> Socialists may prepare the way for a revelation of the noble truths of Theosophy to the multitude; they may help to raise the intellectual and instinctive moral standard of the whole community to such an extent that all will, in the next generation following after the Social Revolution be amenable to those truths. In this way Socialism would not, indeed, interfere with the results of the law of Karma, but would, as the precursor of Theosophy, be the indirect means of enabling multitudes to rise and free themselves from its bonds.[244]

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[241] Brailsford Bright, 'Theosophy and Modern Socialism', 282.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid., 282-283
[244] Ibid., 283-284

This was a complete, socialist embrace of the idea of improving the conditions of society first to allow individuals to flourish and become part of the evolutionary enterprise of humanity. Brailsford Bright contested Harbottle's interpretation of the parable of the talents by suggesting that talents are wasted by rich idle people much more under the existing system than they could possibly be under a system of shared labour. He argued that socialism could provide the population with enough leisure and freedom to develop perceptive or gnostic faculties because "[a]t present this minimum of leisure and economic independence is probably unattainable by nineteen-twentieths of the population."[245] To deal with the charge that socialism and theosophy were in no way compatible, Brailsford Bright asked Harbottle to show some examples of the variance because it was too sweepingly general for a beginner like him to refute. Brailsford Bright explained the amenability of theosophy to the ideals of communism and anarchism but bemoaned their impracticality. He argued that although Universal Brotherhood and socialism were not the same, they were not antagonistic; "[m]y own belief is that Theosophy and "materialistic" Socialism will be found to be working along different planes in the same direction."[246] He continued by giving a full statement of his political interpretation of Universal Brotherhood;

> Any Universal Brotherhood of Theosophists must be based upon Socialist principles, inter alia: its foundations may extend further and deeper than those of Socialism, but cannot be less extensive. Greed and War (political or industrial), Social Caste and Privilege, Political Domination of Man over Man, are as out of place in a true Brotherhood as wolves in a flock of sheep. Yet the exclusion of these anti-social demons and the enthronement in their place of Universal Love and Peace, if effected by such a Brotherhood, would simply leave Socialists nothing to do but to organize the material framework of their co-operative commonwealths.[247]

[245] Ibid., 284-285
[246] Ibid., 287
[247] Ibid.

Brailsford Bright argued that the goals of socialism were a necessary subset of theosophical Universal Brotherhood. He completed his reconciliation of socialism with theosophical ideas by offering a religious interpretation of socialism.

> At present the mass of Socialists content themselves with basing their social and economic faith upon the ethical principles of Justice, Freedom and Brotherhood. But the highest, because most mystical of these principles, that of Brotherhood, or better, Human Solidarity...forms the unconscious link between modern Socialism on the one hand, and Esoteric Buddhism, Esoteric Christianity, and Theosophy generally, on the other…As the various "orthodox" varieties, first of Christianity, then of Mohammedanism, perish with the destruction or collapse of the Social systems that have grown up along with them, this simple religion of Human Solidarity will take possession of the deserted shrines of Christ and Allah, and will begin to seek out its own fount of inspiration. Then will be the time for the Universal Brotherhood of Theosophists to step in to the breach.[248]

Brailsford Bright advocated a systematic socialist approach to improving the conditions of all in society with the least well off experiencing the most improvements. He suggested that the collectivisation of duties and responsibilities in society would have a beneficial effect on both individual and collective Karma. This interpretation of Universal Brotherhood was based on equality in both material and spiritual terms, as opposed to Harbottle's spiritual approach. Brailsford Bright also invoked ideas of Karma to justify his views on providing the necessary conditions for expediting the development of individuals along theosophical lines. His political interpretation of the first object contended that Universal Brotherhood was the religious element of socialism.

The January 1888 issue published Harbottle's response, in which he clarified his meaning of 'materialistic socialism'. He claimed the important difference was in the value attached to the 'material and physical well-being' of mankind by theosophy and socialism. He emphatically stated his views on the Karmic causes and implications of the social conditions of individuals:

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[248] Ibid.

> Theosophy regards any given earth life as an infinitesimal link in the chain of lives which leads from the first glimmerings of a separate consciousness up to the very threshold of Divinity and All-knowledge. And taking the doctrines of Re-incarnation and Karma, as interacting laws, it sees in the apparent injustices of physical life, and in the inequalities of intellectual and moral development among mankind, the results of good or bad use made of opportunities in previous incarnations.[249]

Harbottle's view reinforced his arguments on the operation of Karma and re-incarnation. People in society were not equal and there were good reasons for it. His mention of those in the 'chain of lives' on the 'threshold of Divinity and All-knowledge' invoked the idea that there were those who were more spiritually developed and had access to higher forms of knowledge. Harbottle combined the elitism of esoteric discourse with his appeals to religious laws to legitimise a conservative position of maintaining the social status quo. He criticised the socialist goal of improving the conditions of society as ignorant of the cosmic perspectives to which he had access:

> …the Socialist movement is itself a part of the cyclic Karma, and in its endeavour to rectify what seem, from its limited point of view, injustices, it cannot fail to be unjust to those the justice of whose position in life it declines to recognise. Thus it cannot be otherwise than that it should meet with opposition from those whose object is the improvement of humanity as a whole.[250]

Harbottle claimed that it was the role of those who knew better to oppose the forces of interference in karmic justice. Full understanding of *Karma* would allow those in the socialist movement to see the true justice of the conditions in which individuals found themselves. The distinction between Brailsford Bright's view of socialism, as improving the ordinary decencies of human society, and Harbottle's view of theosophy, as improving the whole of humanity, is an example of the binary between those who thought the individual self should be the primary focus of theosophical

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[249] Harbottle, 'Socialism and Theosophy', 415
[250] Ibid., 415-416

enterprise and those who argued that the conditions of society must be improved to allow individuals to flourish. Where Brailsford Bright argued that without basic levels of freedom and economic independence, individuals cannot develop spiritually, Harbottle's view was that individuals' conditions were dictated by religious laws and, therefore, integral to their spiritual development. Like Blavatsky's clarification on this issue, he argued that for some individuals, it was a part of their spiritual development to be without the freedoms and independence the socialist wishes for them.

The next point of contention for Harbottle concerned the existence of a spiritual hierarchy that recognised the "immense gulf…between ordinary humanity…and those who are on the threshold of Divinity."[251] He argued that this is incompatible with socialism's hatred of domination that substituted the "existing domination of intelligence" for "that of mere numbers."[252] He stated that "an accepted disciple practically surrenders his personal liberty, and pledges himself to obedience to those great ones who are the initiators of the Theosophical movement."[253] Harbottle did not include himself or other ordinary Society members among these elite groups that had access to higher or total knowledge and should be obeyed over and above the mere numbers, or democratic will, of ordinary people. Again, esoteric discourse was used to support existing power structures and resist the socialist, reformist discourse advanced by Brailsford Bright. Harbottle expanded on this point by pointing out that socialist visions of equality where there was a redistribution of opportunity do not take account of the concurrent redistribution of responsibilities.

> Every opportunity is also a responsibility, and from those to whom much is given much will be demanded. Further, responsibility is thrust upon those who can bear it, and to relieve them from it, and transfer it [sic] the shoulders of the weaker brethren, is an interference with the laws of Karma, and can only lead to a retardation of the general evolution of humanity.[254]

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[251] Ibid.
[252] Ibid.
[253] Ibid.
[254] Ibid., 417

He argued that those who find themselves in better conditions are there for Karmic reasons and, being more spiritually developed, have the capacity to bear more responsibility than others. Conversely, those in worse situations carry a Karmic burden and to transfer responsibility to them would be interference and an obstacle to the overall development of humanity. This strategy of legitimating inaction on behalf of the poor, disenfranchised, and uneducated in society by those individuals who were in positions to make significant, widespread change had the effect of justifying one's status or wealth. Hence, one deserves what one has and rightly possesses the ability to discharge great responsibility. The appeal serves to maintain the status quo and support the individualist discourse.

Brailsford Bright concluded his thoughts on the subject over the course of two articles in the March and May 1888 issues of *Lucifer*. He attempted to show in more detail why theosophists should not oppose socialism. He first addressed the point of interference with Karma and rejoiced that he had won Harbottle over "…for he proclaims in his January letter…that "the Socialist movement is itself a part of the cyclic Karma.""[255] He cited Harbottle's comments on the Karmic injustice of socialist interference and the inability of the theosophically uniformed to see the true justice of the status quo. Brailsford Bright seized on Harbottle's inconsistency and was curious to know, if socialism was part of the 'cyclic karma', then "[c]an…an agent, of Karma, be accused of injustice? If so, QUIS CUSTODIET IPSOS CUSTODES? [who will guard the guards themselves?] Surely not either myself, or any other contributor to Lucifer."[256] He continued his argument by reminding the reader that the transfer of responsibility was not from individuals to other less able individuals but from individuals to socialist, collective entities that were themselves a part of the 'cyclic Karma'. For Brailsford Bright, the real question for theosophists was whether socialism formed part of the "progressive and main evolutionary current, or of the retrogressive back current."[257] He believed that, at the very least, theosophists should ascertain for themselves the answer to this question before opposing socialism, "lest haply they be found fighting against the gods."[258] Brailsford Bright successfully appropriated the appeal to the law of Karma and employed the

[255] Brailsford Bright, 'Theosophy and Modern Socialism II', 62
[256] Ibid.
[257] Ibid., 63
[258] Ibid.

same legitimising strategy to support his call for widespread social change and resistance to the prevailing discourse.

Finally, Brailsford Bright directly addressed Harbottle's emphatic statement about the role of Karma and re-incarnation in the conditions faced by the poor, disenfranchised, and uneducated in society. He argued that even if they are "suffering as Mr. Harbottle seems to suggest from the evil Karmic growths they have accumulated during past existences…it is not for their fellow-men to judge of" nor does it justify inaction on the part of those able to help.[259] Refuting the individual altruist approach, Brailsford Bright asserted that "everyone is, in his political or collective capacity, his brother's keeper" and was "shirking his duty as a conscious agent of evolution, that is of Nature if he refuses to recognise this."[260] He refused to accept that one cannot interfere in the lives of others when the material causes of their suffering were known. Brailsford Bright appropriated Harbottle's appeal to higher knowledge but instead held up a sense of duty motivated by humanity's evolutionary development as the higher knowledge. Brailsford Bright then returned to the strategy of sacralising socialism to conclude his arguments. He juxtaposed socialism and theosophy as the physical and spiritual aspects of the same evolutionary process and argued that socialism's aim to improve the material conditions of society was merely a stepping stone.

> The movement to my mind is simply part of the great evolutionary current which is bringing back the true Golden Age, the age in which Humanity and Divinity, Love and Wisdom, will once more be united as they have never been within historical times...The man cannot become a complete man until he has first become a complete human animal; the divine spark has no temple yet to occupy.[261]

Universal Brotherhood was the central concept in his arguments for theosophy as esoteric socialism and he completed the process of sacralisation by appropriating the same idea of individual realisation that Harbottle used in the very first article.

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[259] Ibid., 66
[260] Ibid.
[261] Brailsford Bright, 'Theosophy and Modern Socialism Conclusion', 227

> Socialism…like Theosophy…creates such bonds of spiritual intimacy between its disciples as demand warmer and closer terms, like "brotherhood," "comradeship," and "solidarity." Socialism, when completely grasped, rises in the hearts of its disciples to the rank of a religion, and thus justifies the half-mystic naturalism of some of its poetry and oratory. Socialists may already be said to constitute a great Universal Church, minus dogmas and priestcraft – undesirable appendages which, let us hope, we may never be cursed with![262]

Socialism, like Harbottle's concept of Universal Brotherhood, must be fully grasped, appreciated, and realised "in the hearts of its disciples" and not simply intellectualised. Claiming legitimacy for their positions by appealing to these higher or total modes of knowing shows how both of these authors participated in esoteric discourse but advocated entirely opposite approaches. Appeals to karmic justice, participation in esoteric discourse around higher knowledge, political interpretations of Universal Brotherhood, and sacred socialism comprise the basic elements of debates among members of the Theosophical Society who sought legitimacy for active involvement in social reform.

The next section analyses the contributions concerning socialism, brotherhood, and interference that followed the Harbottle-Brailsford Bright debate. Three distinct viewpoints on socialism were presented in theosophical periodicals: socialism as revolutionary ideology and the radical other of individualism, socialism as theosophy where both are presented as the same, reconcilable, or not antagonistic, and socialism as enacting social policy through existing institutions. These pragmatic voices supported the introduction of socialistic policies, like the expansion of education and franchise under a democratic government, to improve the material conditions of society without the dispensational change required by some socialists.

Socialism as Ideology and Radical Other

Harbottle and Brailsford Bright both regarded socialism as an ideology but in slightly different ways. Where Harbottle presented socialism in terms of revolutionary rhetoric and as the radical other of individualism, Brailsford Bright presented it as an ideology of collective individualism, albeit with a religious bent. Harbottle's

[262] Ibid., 229

demonization of socialism amounted to large scale state-led interference with the karmic dispensation of individuals and he rejected its being compatible or with theosophy. Apart from his distaste for socialism as an ideology seeking to fundamentally realign society, Harbottle also rejected the more moderate position of employing socialistic policies to improve social conditions, holding fast to the interpretation of Universal Brotherhood as passive individual altruism fuelled by a deep spiritual realisation with cosmically distant goals. Brailsford Bright wished to provide the conditions for individuals to develop and did not view the karmic effects of interference as negative. Rather, he saw socialism as an agent of Karma and brotherhood as the religious element of socialism. Brailsford Bright's efforts to bring about a full combination of theosophy and socialism bridged the gap between his adherence to an ideologically based implementation of socialism as a large-scale project and his sacred interpretation of Universal Brotherhood.

Harbottle was not alone in his suspicion of materialistic socialists. Isabel Cooper-Oakley, a prominent and well-respected member of the Society, was a strong critic of the prevalence of 'socialistic writing' that referred to Universal Brotherhood and provided an alternative conservative and elitist interpretation. Her 1890 article invoked esoteric monism to assert the validity of her position by arguing that if theosophy is "the unity underlying all outward forms of thought and religion, then must it necessarily have its conservative, as well as its liberal and socialistic aspect."[263] The necessity of a conservative aspect was based on the idea that theosophy represents an underlying unity of knowledge and demonstrates the totalising enterprise of esoteric monism. Cooper-Oakley argued against the democratisation of access to higher knowledge by asserting that

> Theosophy…must of necessity be markedly conservative, or it could not fulfil its function, that of handing down to the "few" of each race and generation the same Truths and Principles, carefully guarded, and shielded from the knowledge and gaze of the "many."[264]

Referring to the ideas of *philosophia perennis* and *prisca theologia,* Cooper-Oakley asserted that access to total knowledge was granted to a select few in every generation. These

[263] Cooper-Oakley, 'Some Conservative Aspects of Theosophy', 62
[264] Ibid.

few were, in her opinion, charged with protecting that knowledge and playing their part in passing it on to the next generation. For her, widespread access to total knowledge would be detrimental to society and the knowledge itself. Cooper-Oakley distinguished between the theosophical idea of brotherhood and those put forward by socialistic thinkers where the latter merely "enforces kindliness and consideration to all men without distinction of race or sex."[265] Like previous opponents of interference, she argued for a mystical interpretation of Universal Brotherhood that "acknowledges as Brother, in the full sense of the term, only that man or woman whose mental and spiritual aspirations are the same…[and]…postulates certain attributes, certain qualities, as an absolute necessity."[266] This characterisation pushed the achievement of Universal Brotherhood into the distant future, removing it from the urgencies of the present, material realm. True Universal Brotherhood could only exist among those who shared similar spiritual and mental qualities and, although she did not preclude the less well off in society from participating in her brotherhood, it is unclear how those who were in terrible conditions, due, as she later argues, to their karmic burden, could possibly have developed the necessary attributes. Citing Christianity, Egyptian religion, and Pythagorean philosophy, Cooper-Oakley refuted the idea that full equality is possible as there must always be spiritual inequality, an elite who know and others who do not, or can not. For Cooper-Oakley, actions in past lives imposed a limit on full spiritual equality and karmic law explained the circumstances, terrible or otherwise, in which individuals find themselves. She agreed that people in miserable conditions in society should be helped to a degree but that

> believing in Karma, it is impossible to accede to, or sympathise with, violent remedies, or sudden changes, for the sufferers are not struggling with blind Fate's cruel decree, but they are where they are, by the order of Nature's immutable laws; their sufferings being the resultant of their past lives. Let us take heed that our remedy be not worse than the disease, and that we do not start causes and become responsible for effects which may enhance the difficulties of subsequent evolution.[267]

[265] Ibid.
[266] Ibid.
[267] Ibid., 64

With both Harbottle and Blavatsky, she argued that by improving or removing people from the conditions into which they were born deprives them of their ability to pay the karmic price they owe, thereby obstructing their spiritual evolution.

In the February 1894 issue of the *Irish Theosophist*, T.A. Duncan criticised materialistic applications of the idea of brotherhood by ideological socialists. He characterised the socialist enterprise as working "for the regeneration of the world, and the restoration of a true Human Brotherhood" achieved by "a re-adjustment of the social environment; a more equal distribution of wealth, and of the instruments of production; fair work and fair wage for all who *can* work, and a reasonable sustenance for those who *cannot*."[268] Though Duncan admired the goals of this enterprise, he did not believe it would "bring about the millennium" or have "the promise of any permanence."[269] He returned to Blavatskyan arguments of prioritising the self and criticised the idea that "by merely changing a man's external conditions," it was possible to "affect his internal disposition."[270] Duncan posited an extreme version of this argument by attributing a moral and fatalist essentialism to human nature. Instead of assuming that an individual would flourish by improving social conditions, he argued that it would merely give them a "chance to develop freely whatever qualities there are in him, of good and evil."[271] Duncan was not arguing that people should not have the opportunity to develop, he was criticising those who "expect the regeneration of society…to result from any such readjustment of social conditions."[272] The materialism of socialistic ideas was anathema to many Society members who believed that the spiritual development of the self was the first priority of individuals. Duncan reiterated Blavatsky's message by saying individuals "must work from within outwards" in order to "permanently change the face of society, and bring about the social millennium our friends dream of."[273] Finally, he asserted the need for members to prove their "belief in the Brotherhood of Humanity in a practical fashion" but offered only the same passive individual altruism as its expression.[274]

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[268] Duncan, 'The Brotherhood and Service of Man', 462
[269] Ibid.
[270] Ibid.
[271] Ibid.
[272] Ibid.
[273] Ibid.
[274] Ibid., 465

In the October 1895 issue of *The Theosophist*, a contributor identified as JGOT joined the critique by arguing the difficulties of achieving "brotherhood on [the] principle of equality." The author asserted that equality is nowhere found in nature and not only are individual men and women different from each other in myriad ways, but all life in the universe was different down to the molecular level.

> The socialist's equality craze is therefore unnatural and could only produce untold misery if enforced in practice. Why should people be thus unequal, all having proceeded from the same divine breath? Because each is as he developed himself and his divine qualities, in the past.[275]

The author appealed to the state of nature in criticising socialism's prioritisation of equality and offered a karmic explanation for why each individual is different. Another extreme aspect was added to this formulation of the argument that downplayed any idea of service, duty, or sacrifice emphasised by other members on either side of the interference debate. Practical brotherhood "cannot be attained by one part sacrificing itself for another part, because that would merely strengthen the latter in doing less and less for themselves, and thus exhaust the wiser, till both perish."[276] Holding fast to a strong interpretation of the individualist enterprise of prioritising the spiritual development of the self, this contributor asserted the necessity of "inequality, self-dependence, sympathy, mutual respect, openness, candour, unvarying courtesy, and perfect trust" in the expression of practical brotherhood. The only quarter offered in this interpretation where "one brother is strong" and "the other weak" is that the "self-constituted strong must kindly bear and guide those who are considered weak without harsh treatment or words."[277] The conclusion quickly returned the reader to the importance of individualism in both material and spiritual aspects.

> As to self-dependence, that must apply in every direction, concerning the means of livelihood, as well as in spiritual progress. Unearned subsistence as well as "second hand" knowledge – that is such from hearsay or mere

[275] JGOT, 'Brotherhood', 17
[276] Ibid.
[277] Ibid.

> reading – cannot advance us. Nothing will do except self-gathered experience.[278]

This is the most ardent defence of the logic of prioritising the self above the improvement of the conditions of others and, like the others, it assumed that if everyone did the same, humanity would evolve towards the achievement of Universal Brotherhood faster than relying on any social policy.

JGOT's contribution shows the growing influence of social Darwinism, a position that viewed socialism and socialistic policy as radically other, on the debates around individualism and social reform. However, as early as 1893, Besant had warned against the kind of arguments advanced above. For her, the argument that successful evolutionary progress, through the "Struggle for Existence and the Survival of the Fittest," *necessarily* implied a "fiercely competitive" society, where "the conditions of struggle should not be relaxed," is one of "the most mischievous applications of Modern Science to Ethics."[279] Besant argued that the fittest survivors of struggle would be "strong, unscrupulous fighters" but not necessarily the fittest for society as "helpful, conscientious, compassionate, human beings" because, unlike plants and animals, humans have a moral aspect to their fitness.[280] The discourse on social Darwinism evolved to include this aspect and the August 1894 issue of the *Irish Theosophist* carried some editorial notes describing Benjamin Kidd's *Social Evolution* as "epoch-making" due to the importance attributed to "the religious instinct as the main factor in the evolution of Society."[281] Dunlop's excitement about *Social Evolution* can be explained by his finding a theosophical parallel in Kidd's opposition to socialism but support for social reform. Dunlop paraphrased Kidd's argument that "social development is moving in the direction of equal opportunities for all, which will increase the rivalry of existence, and raise the people to the highest efficiency."[282] This interpretation of social Darwinism mirrors, and supports, the arguments of those more socialistically inclined members who prioritised the improvement of the conditions of society to expedite the spiritual evolution of humanity. It is also another example of how ideas were developed and interpreted to support both sides

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[278] Ibid., 18
[279] Besant, 'On The Watch-Tower'(c), 265
[280] Ibid.
[281] Dunlop, 'Notes by the Way', 154
[282] Ibid.

of the arguments around social reform and interference. The August 1896 issue of the *Irish Theosophist* published an article by James Duncan that invoked social Darwinism as characteristic of all that was wrong with late 19th century Britain and Ireland.[283] He lamented the absence of brotherhood and "the cruel struggle for existence" that causes "the weak, the poor, the helpless" to be "pitilessly crushed by the strong, the wealthy, the able."[284] Duncan compared the "fittest to survive" to "the bird of prey" and characterised the "pitiful competition between individuals for the means of earning a bare subsistence" as having "a relentless and vigilant ferocity worthy of the wild beasts of the jungle."[285] Duncan certainly did not agree with the arguments set out by JGOT above, choosing instead to take hope from, and valorise, the social activism of "brave and strenuous men and women spending life and energy unsparingly in the endeavour to raise their fellow-creatures to better conditions of existence and higher ideals of life and thought."[286] His derogatory critique of social Darwinism and extreme individualism shows that he is on the side of those who strive to improve the conditions of society. Duncan concluded by reminding the reader that this kind of work was motivated by "the love of humanity, the sense of brotherhood."[287]

A.E. Webb, responding to the growing number of articles concerned with the similar goals of socialism and the Society, contributed a series of articles to *The Theosophist* in late 1900 and early 1901. He presented socialism as entirely opposed to theosophy and addressed those who thought that the two were reconcilable through the idea of Universal Brotherhood. Webb argued that people who have a "superficial knowledge of Theosophy" interpreted the idea of Universal Brotherhood as "the exercise of the greatest possible unselfishness in all our actions and in all dealings with our fellows" and therefore theosophists must be socialists.[288] He claimed, on the contrary, that theosophy advocates "the necessity of conditions that are practically opposed to all that the socialist strives for" and "presents contradictions which surpass his comprehension."[289] These contradictions refer to religious formulations,

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[283] Duncan was one of the members of the Dublin Lodge living at Upper Ely Place known as 'The Household'.
[284] Duncan, 'Brotherhood', 217
[285] Ibid.
[286] Ibid., 218
[287] Ibid.
[288] Webb, 'Theosophy and Socialism', 37
[289] Ibid., 38

such as the incarnation of souls, and Webb stressed the importance of individualism, struggle, and development towards a superior, more knowledgeable existence. For him, Karma and re-incarnation were central to the development of the individual and the evolution of humanity. Webb argued that socialism was the exact reverse of individualism because this progress could only occur under challenging circumstances in the presence of competition. The interference of the state in the life of the individual meant that

> he is not thrown on his own resources; his individuality cannot grow because he has nothing to compete against, for by means of co-operation he would lean upon others and they would lean upon him; there can be no self-dependence in that.[290]

Webb's conception of Universal Brotherhood echoes that of Harbottle, Blavatsky, and Olcott, in its individualism. He presented socialism as an ideology and argued that no system that subverted the natural processes of competitive evolution was sustainable as it would stagnate and give way to individualism. Though Webb agreed that socialism and theosophy had similar aims, he asserted their completely different methods and disagreed with trying to legislate for equality as it was a subversion of natural processes. Finally, he moderated his position, relative to the previous example, by agreeing with many of the socialistic policies introduced in the period and praising socialists for their good work in social reform. However, he argued that any successful socialistic policy "is not Socialism…but our present day Individualism."[291]

Critics of socialism who presented it as a fully formed ideology with revolutionary goals and radical methods were concerned with several different issues. More conservative Society members were often concerned about the dispensational changes that could result from a socialist revolution. Some believed they deserved their position in the world due to the actions of their past lives and argued to maintain the status quo while others simply didn't want to lose their wealth and privilege. Many other members targeted the materialism of socialists as both a moral failing and an indicator of their ignorance of higher knowledge and the cosmic

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[290] Ibid., 41
[291] Ibid., 44

workings of the universe. Some of them were driven by esoteric monism and couldn't accept a system that didn't account for all aspects of human experience. Finally, there were those influenced by the circulation of several texts on social Darwinism who looked to science to argue against interfering with the natural order of things. Some believed the experience of poverty and hunger were integral to the spiritual development of the individual and therefore, the evolution of humanity. The strength of the individualist impulse for many in the Society was clear and adhering to it carried many benefits for those who were among the more privileged in society: the idea that they deserved what they had, the luxury of a vague individual altruism as a guiding ethical principle, and a pious certainty in their own higher knowledge as more spiritually developed individuals. In general, this set of arguments for the prioritisation of the self and non-interference in the lives of others would decrease in popularity over the following decade. Individualism would remain a core element of the debate but became more nuanced and palatable under the influence of people like Annie Besant.

Socialism as Theosophy

The examples above cast socialism as a materialistic, unnatural ideology and the antithesis of theosophy with its prized individualism. R.T. Paterson took up the mantle of Brailsford Bright, in the wake of Webb's arguments, and drew out the points of comparison between socialism and theosophy to a similar extent in two contributions to *The Theosophist* in July and August of 1901. He immediately addressed the polemic and radical ways in which socialism had been presented, arguing that they skewed opinions and prevented a critical evaluation of the social issues that socialism highlighted. Paterson lamented the terror inspired by such polemical uses of the word by those who know nothing about it and moderated the position that socialism is some grand scheme that seeks a revolutionary overhaul of society. Speaking of those who are frightened at the mention of it, he suggested that if they consider the issues raised by socialism, "they would not only not be frightened at them, but…would probably lend their sympathy."[292] Paterson's position was more concerned with highlighting the issues at stake than the articulation and defence of purist ideologies. He was speaking to members, like Harbottle, who were deeply suspicious of ideologically driven socialism and feared it as a revolutionary overhaul

[292] Paterson, 'Socialism and Theosophy', 617

of society rather than as a set of policies. Paterson's article indicated familiarity with the Harbottle-Brailsford Bright debate and he offered a practical middle ground. Like Harbottle, he believed in the individual implications, and benefits, of the concepts of karma and reincarnation. Individuals should have responsibility in all things. However, like Brailsford-Bright, he saw the idea of Universal Brotherhood working practically through the principles of socialism and rejected scaremongering presentations of it as a coming revolution. For him, the social issues were the most important aspect and, in their tendency towards Universal Brotherhood, socialism and theosophy were in sympathy with each other.

An author who synthesised theosophy and socialism to the same degree as Brailsford Bright was Isabella Jean Bird. In contributions to *The Theosophist* of April and May of 1905, she presented theosophy and socialism as one and the same. She argued for a broader and more holistic conception of both movements, stating that socialism was "the ideal of brotherhood thrown into concrete form, and brotherhood is the recognition of the unity of creation."[293] Bird surpassed Brailsford Bright's sacralisation of socialism by positing a "True Socialism," grounded in esoteric monism, that "can never cease until everything shares in the marriage feast of Spirit and Matter."[294] She believed that the experience of misery, through hunger and poverty, is a necessary part of the spiritual development of the self, but that social reformers should establish the best conditions for individuals to evolve. Bird's article succeeded in collapsing the distinctions between socialism and theosophy made by other authors and articulated an almost ideological version of a theosophical socialism. The ideas of Karma and re-incarnation remained central to her interpretation and were fused with the expression of Universal Brotherhood through social reform.

In 1911, *The Theosophist* published an article from Leslie Haden Guest who argued from an esoteric monist perspective for the existence of parallels between the spiritual evolution of theosophical teachings and the biological evolution of Darwin.[295] Guest quickly removed any link between his comparison and one that

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[293] Bird, 'Some Considerations of Socialism', 411
[294] Ibid.
[295] Haden Guest was a prominent journalist and author who served as a doctor in both world wars. He went on to become a successful politician with the British Labour party and was honoured with a peerage.

would lead to a tacit endorsement of more dangerous forms of social Darwinism by referring to Peter Kropotkin's work, *Mutual Aid*. He commented that "laying the stress on 'mutual aid' among animals, puts the struggle for existence into quite a secondary position."[296] He was also referring here to the essay partly responsible for Kropotkin's book, Thomas Huxley's 'The Struggle for Existence'. Haden Guest provided a comparison, based on ideas of evolution, that incorporated co-operation among individuals and argued against interpretations of evolution that could be used to justify more dangerous forms of individualism. He argued that the spheres of politics, social affairs, ideas, and religion were failing to provide much needed guidance regarding social reconstruction and that "[i]nto this world of strife, confusion and pain, Theosophy comes like a flood of sunlight, bringing illumination, peace, order, and definite assurance of progress."[297] Haden Guest asserted the certainty of theosophy's idea of evolution and its achievement in the material world "by the continued reincarnation of Spirit, in bodies of matter."[298] He saw socialism as the material aspect of theosophical spiritual evolution and he supported his argument through an appeal to esoteric monism.

> The evolution of man takes place in the physical, astral and mental worlds. In each of these worlds men should be provided by Society with the best possible conditions. In the physical world, all men should be provided with at least the necessary minimum of food, clothing, warmth and housing required to keep their physical bodies in good health.[299]

The monist enterprise required there to be a corresponding action at all levels of human evolution and Haden Guest was firmly on the side of interference to improve human conditions in every realm. He argued that "sweeping changes" were needed but "Theosophy gives us a firm foundation" and "much of what is now called Socialism will be required" to achieve the desired results."[300] It is clear that Haden Guest's conception of socialism as a part of theosophy sacralises socialism. He concludes with a strong call for the importance of duty and sacrifice:

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[296] Haden Guest, 'Theosophy and Social Construction', 48
[297] Ibid., 51-52
[298] Ibid.
[299] Ibid., 60-61
[300] Ibid.

> Those who are older in evolution must recognise where we stand, must see their duty, and, seeing it, pour out their life and their service in sacrifice to the world. For this, too, is the law of evolution, that the worlds grow by the outpouring of the life which is more highly evolved, for the benefit of that which is less evolved… Pour help, love, sympathy, compassion into the world, for so shall the world grow, so shall the reconstructed social order that we need so badly be founded, and founded upon the understanding of God's plan for the world, which is Evolution.[301]

Paterson, Bird, and Guest all argue for reconciliation between socialism and theosophy. Paterson was pragmatic, seeing the common goals as the most important aspect of the discussion, and wished to change the perception of socialism that had grown out of its misrepresentation by its critics. Bird was idealistic and presented a fully combined and sacralised version of theosophical socialism based on esoteric monism. Guest also wrote from an esoteric monism position and argued that the correspondence between biological and spiritual evolution should be the motivating factor to provide all with the necessities to participate in the spiritual evolution of humanity.

Socialism as Policy

The early 1890s saw a change in the discourse around 'practical' and 'applied' theosophy that resulted in a clear grounding of ethical considerations in the first object, Universal Brotherhood. Where earlier there was encouragement to set an example for others, do what one could to help if the opportunity arises, and remember that ethical action starts at home, by the middle of the 1890s, specifics on the application of theosophical principles were sought. In the September and October 1896 issues of *The Theosophist*, Alexander Fullerton, the leader of the American lodges that chose to remain affiliated with Adyar after the secession of the American Section, asked the question of completeness in the application of theosophical ideals. He argued that members were seeking an ethical guideline that "roots itself in fixed laws of being," "meets the needs of every part of this composite human nature," "gives adequate motive to right life," and "demonstrates that

[301] Ibid., 63-64

adequacy by its results on its adherents."[302] This description of what the members sought was specific, complete, empirical, and the opposite of the vague individual altruism or selfish practical theosophy previously offered by the leadership. Fullerton questioned the point of theosophy having vast knowledge but failing "just where its value is to be demonstrated, - the explanation and the cure of human misery and sin."[303] He demanded "direct treatment of cause" in the effort to improve "human condition," not palliatives for individual problems, and asserted that "anything short of that is both unphilosophical and unreligious."[304] Like his American brethren at Halcyon, Fullerton was eager for direct action to elevate people out of miserable conditions.

The contribution of W.G. John to the March 1904 issue of *The Theosophist* followed Paterson's model in that it sketched out a positive relationship between socialism and theosophy but maintained some strong distinctions. Like Paterson, he suggested that socialism was widely misunderstood and he abhorred polemical presentations of a revolutionary movement. John was a strong advocate of individualism and the necessity of karma and reincarnation for the evolution and development of the individual. He favoured socialism and saw it as a part of brotherhood if it is engaged with improving individuals' ability to develop and progress. John's positive attitude also extended to socialistic policy and state legislation, the kind of interference that so many theosophists viewed as a disruption of karmic justice. He legitimised his position through the logic of reincarnation and charismatic authority by arguing that the fact that the majority of "our best heads and hearts are engaged in some effort for progress of the masses shows that the standard of Egos [individual souls] coming into incarnation is being raised" and "it is for each of us to help in raising this standard."[305] Although John agreed with socialistic policy on practically every count, he saw the position on individualism as a major distinction and point of divergence between socialism and theosophy. However, he echoed Brailsford Bright by arguing that if socialism "seeks to provide that rest and peace for all [that which allows individual development], it is part of the

[302] Fullerton, 'Theosophy in Practice', 730
[303] Ibid.
[304] Ibid., 731
[305] John, 'Socialism and Individuality', 360

great plan of Brotherhood" and an ally "in the development of the character of Individuality."[306]

The embrace of pragmatism in the approach to socialism occurred in the early and middle parts of the first decade of the 20th century and corresponded with the rising influence of Annie Besant. Though many members were in favour of social policies that improved social conditions, as it would allow them to flourish and contribute to the theosophical project, others, while happy to see any amelioration of suffering, remained critical. In 1906, Lilian Edger returned to the idea of prioritising the development of the self over improvement of social conditions to facilitate the evolution of humanity. She praised "[a]ll efforts at social reform" because "they emphasise our responsibility" but lamented the impossibility of equality "so long as there is such variation in the characters of men."[307] Edger was responding to the prevalence of social reform and policy advocacy in the early 1900s and, like Blavatsky, she warned of the impermanence of the results when "all lasting reform depends on the growth and improvement of the character of the individuals composing society."[308]

By October 1911, pragmatism had won and Sydney Ransom's article in *The Theosophist* showed no concern for the ideological dangers of socialism or the purity of the individualist theosophical project. He first argued that the message of theosophy was perfectly clear, "that there is a living spiritual tie that unites all humanity" and "the spiritual teacher is to do every thing in his power to bring that unity into practical expression."[309] For him, the method of doing so did not matter: "By socialism? If needs be. Outside socialism? If needs be."[310] Ransom explained that as long as the principle of "developing all the good impulses in human nature, and starving out the bad" is the goal, then "perfect freedom of opinion" was allowed in the chosen methods of achieving it.[311] He admonished those who invoked karmic explanations of terrible social conditions and justified their inaction by claiming that individuals in those conditions have something to learn from the experience. He argued that the "average consciousness of a man to-day is beyond the stage where

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[306] Ibid.
[307] Edger, 'The Basis of Brotherhood', 937
[308] Ibid.
[309] Ransom, 'To A Socialist Brother', 85
[310] Ibid.
[311] Ibid., 86

physical destitution can teach anything, and the deliberate holding back of evolution is criminal."[312] Finally, Ransom addressed the concerns of those who only recognised the binary of individualism and socialism by outlining the role and limitation of each.

> All the socialistic work cannot overthrow individualism, though it will show certain defects of that system. Nor can individualism ever become supreme simply because the power of combination and co-operation has been shown in many ways.[313]

Fullerton, John, and Ransom were in favour of pragmatism at almost any cost and although they were hesitant to state a preference for any political solution or a holistic sacralisation of such, they firmly asserted the need to ameliorate the conditions of the least fortunate in society.

[312] Ibid., 87
[313] Ibid., 89

Conclusion

Though the Society was officially neutral, its members sought ethical guidance from leaders and each other on social and political issues. The rise to prominence of the first object in the Society's constitution caused a parallel rise in its practical interpretations with many members arguing against any kind of interference in the lives of others except when demonstrating one's commitment to Universal Brotherhood through individual altruism. Others argued for individuals to sacrifice on behalf of others and work actively in society to improve the conditions of the least fortunate with some calling for organised activism and state policies to effect change more quickly. The earliest examples cited corporate neutrality as the reason not to get involved in politics but this soon gave way to legitimising arguments based on Karmic justice and the process of reincarnation. These religious factors were cited by all sides to support their positions while those who argued for non-interference or individual altruism also cited the primacy of the spiritual development of the self to the theosophical enterprise. Socialism acted as an important arena in which to debate the merits of individualism and Universal Brotherhood, the importance of material and spiritual realms, and interference versus inaction. Ambivalences arising from the juxtaposition and valorisation of Universal Brotherhood and individualism provided the space for a shift away from the hard-line positions on socialism, social reform, and interference taken by Harbottle, Blavatsky, and Olcott, to the more nuanced positions justified by appeals to evolving interpretations of the same religious formulations. It was far more likely to be the ordinary members who voiced their social concerns and advocated for social reform, while prominent leaders preferred to interpret the first object in a much more abstract way. In cases where individuals truly believed the arguments for non-interference from a karmic perspective, it is possible to attribute this phenomenon to differing levels of access to texts and discussion of theosophical ideas. It is also possible that in the absence of this access, ordinary members were not busying themselves with wide ranging intellectual explorations of comparative religion and theosophical writings, and required a more hands-on way to express their principles. However, it is difficult to ignore Max Weber's assertion that those "with high social and economic privilege will scarcely be prone to evolve the idea of salvation. Rather they assign to religion the primary

function of legitimizing their own life pattern and situation in the world."[314] The gap between ordinary members' immediacy and leaders' preference for cosmic distance would close somewhat due to the rising influence, and eventual presidency, of Annie Besant, who was still proclaimed herself a socialist on becoming a member of the Theosophical Society. The next chapter focuses on her involvement in the case against Judge, grounded in accusations of compromising the Society's neutrality and infringing on individuals' freedom of belief, and her own struggles with similar issues during her presidency.

[314] Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, 107

Chapter Three: The Politics of Neutrality

> Blavatsky viewed Theosophy as Wisdom, Besant advanced it as Will and Activity.[315]

This chapter concerns Annie Besant's journey from avowed socialist to activist president of the Theosophical Society and her continuing navigation of the Society's corporate neutrality and commitment to individualism, both in terms of spiritual development and freedom of belief. Besant's early political contributions to theosophical periodicals are examined to highlight her socialist legacy and the beginnings of her efforts to blend social reform issues with theosophical principles. This is followed by a thorough explanation of the Judge case and the subsequent secession of the American Section of the Society to show how the concepts of neutrality and individualism were deployed to great effect in bringing about a momentous shift in the history of the Society. The chapter analyses key moments in Besant's presidency, such as the formation of The Theosophical Order of Service, that indicated her new policy of making the Society a more practical and effective organisation. This is followed by a discussion of how Besant developed her practical theosophy, the subsequent accusations of compromising the Society's neutrality, and an examination of her fully developed arguments for a practical, socially oriented theosophy guided by the Society's ideals. The final section traces the resurgence of criticism against the president that led to her eventual, and emphatic, rejection of neutrality as a true principle of the Society. Though she was often under attack for her activities as president of the Society, there were many who had an enduring love and admiration for Besant and the sheer extent of her accomplishments in the social sphere. Margaret Cousins, an ardent campaigner for women in Ireland and India, described Besant as "among the best known and most loved women in the world" and "the forerunner of the new age of which already the prominent feature is the emergence of Woman to power in all aspects of public service."[316]

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[315] Santucci, 'Theosophy', 239
[316] Cousins, M., 'The Forerunner', 189

Annie Besant's Early Politics

Annie Besant came to the Theosophical Society from Fabian socialism and, as Janet Oppenheim remarks, it "helped to turn her attention away from the social crusades in which, for years, she had sought alternative outlets for her religious zeal."[317] Besant would return to these social crusades with the full resources of the Society at her disposal and, like McKanan's American socialists, theosophy added a completeness to her project by including the "full range of human concerns" and a way to be religious in the face of the "conservatism of the mainstream churches."[318] Besant's motivations in the many different stages of an extremely active life were complex and, as Oppenheim warns in regard to motive, "the historian who ventures to assign reasons does so at substantial risk."[319] However, it is possible to trace the development of her political discourse and the ways in which she balanced her desire to improve the conditions of society with the ever present neutrality of the Theosophical Society and the individualism of its members. Oppenheim argues that "Theosophy perfectly served Besant's needs" and allowed her to "resume her earlier quest for life's hidden purpose without appearing to succumb entirely to blind religiosity."[320] However, though the first part of Oppenheim's assertion is evident from an examination of Besant's life's work, the second part emphasises Besant's religious aspects over her commitment to social projects. Conversely, Mark Bevir indicates Besant's reliance on "people and networks brought together by the Society" to support All-India Home Rule League activities despite the fact that "the league remained independent of the Society" and her continued denials that it "was in any way political."[321] Her willingness to risk the ire of other members suggests she prioritised her social and political interests above her spiritual life in the Society. K. Paul Johnson suggests a similar prioritisation of Besant's activities when he argues that her theosophical interests were heavily influenced by Charles W. Leadbeater but "her political mission was her own, an area in which he [Leadbeater] rarely became involved."[322] He also cites the lack of recognition for Olcott's influence on Besant and argues that "[Olcott] may have been the most crucial figure in her life."[323]

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[317] Oppenheim, *The Other World*, 190-191
[318] McKanan, 'Faith in the Phalanx', 205-206
[319] Ibid.
[320] Ibid., 191
[321] Bevir, 'Theosophy as a Political Movement', 160
[322] Johnson, *Initiates of Theosophical Masters*, 197
[323] Ibid., 197

Johnson points to Besant's tour of India with Olcott in 1894 as a pivotal moment in her path to becoming a political and religious leader, after which, "her commitment to India was absolute, and her loyalty to Olcott firmly established."[324] Johnson's reminder of the influence of Olcott highlights the similarity of approach he shared with Besant. For both figures, the problem of analysing motivation arises from the separation of their political and social activities from their spiritual ones. Olcott's activities in Sri Lanka and India were the first to be criticised for their political bent but he succeeded in maintaining the appearance of a strict division of labour between his work in the Theosophical Society and his *individual* social and political activities. Besant's socialism was complemented by her discovery of theosophy and, over time, she developed an overarching worldview that could account for all aspects of human life. Taking account of this esoteric monist position, where an individual sees their political and spiritual activities as corresponding aspects of a single enterprise, makes the issue of motivation more nuanced while reducing it to a single impulse.

Besant's earliest contributions to theosophical periodicals were very practically oriented and often concerned with vindicating her decision to join the Society. Her first article was highly indicative of her views regarding activism and social reform. She would have to modulate her language throughout her career to suit her audiences and leadership roles but, in many respects, this first iteration of Besant the social reformer is the same one operating years later. The June 1889 issue of *Lucifer* saw her immediately reinforce Blavatsky's stance on individual altruism but stray from her theosophical mentor's passive interpretation when she argued that it "remains only a name so long as it is severed from personal service of Humanity."[325] Besant called for the improvement of the selfless character through "personal acts of service to our brothers and sisters struggling in the sad environment made for them by our modern civilization."[326] Reconciling her theosophical views with her residual socialist tendencies and navigating the tricky rhetoric of individualism and neutrality became defining features of Besant's theosophical career as she shifted the emphasis from passive individual altruism to collective activism. Besant later developed her

[324] Ibid., 197. This was also the point at which Olcott appointed Besant the official prosecutor of the case against William Q. Judge, a point returned to in the relevant section below.
[325] Besant, 'Practical Work for Theosophists', 271-272
[326] Ibid.

'theologies' of duty and sacrifice with respect to improving the lives of others but even in this early example, she merely paid lip service to the idea of individual altruism before encouraging the active seeking out and performance of service to help those in need. She advised individuals to live simple and frugal lives, thereby purifying the personal life and leaving behind only "the active service due to our fellows."[327] Besant presented her call to service in a way that signalled her difference from Blavatsky and Olcott's individual altruism without binding any member. She couched her activist ideas on improving the lives of others in a theosophical discussion of improving the self. Besant collapsed the binary of interference/non-interference and argued for a prioritisation of the self through the prioritisation of others. She continued her practical tone, in the most literal sense, by listing a number of roles that could benefit from the service of "painstaking and cultured men and women."[328] In a unique passage, Besant provided specific, practical applications of theosophical principles when she spoke of the need for managers at Board Schools and provided an address to which women could write to volunteer their leisure time "'mothering' invalided children."[329] Besant also provided useful suggestions for the wealthy: buy shares in companies and demand better treatment for their overworked servants, redirect dividends to union funds, and, where none existed, urge the workers to unite and organise. At the same time as Blavatsky and Olcott's articles were removing any sense of urgency or practicality from the growing importance of the first object, Besant's was the first signed contribution to directly address Universal Brotherhood's implications for active service. She argued that her "suggestions may serve as examples of the kind of service which is crying aloud to be done, of practical profession of the Brotherhood of Man" but that as a socialist, she knew that "such work…can only act as palliative, not as cure."[330] In asserting the primacy of Universal Brotherhood as the first principle and its implicit duty of service for the membership, Besant elevated the debate that began between Harbottle and Brailsford Bright two years earlier.[331] However, and somewhat inexplicably, her subsequent contributions lacked such practical encouragements. Instead, Besant began the gradual development of an overarching, ideal-driven, system of

[327] Ibid., 272
[328] Ibid.
[329] Ibid.
[330] Ibid., 273
[331] See chapter on Universal Brotherhood

theosophical argumentation designed to help people realise for themselves the value of service in the social realm.

In the August 1889 issue of *Lucifer*, Besant reflected on her choice to join the Society and published the transcript of a lecture she delivered at the Hall of Science on August 4th of that year. The audience consisted of Freethought party members, whom she felt were owed an explanation for her shift from the primarily atheistic world of Freethought and Fabian socialism to the religious and esoteric milieu of the Theosophical Society. After arguing that her long materialist and scientific research had not provided her with a satisfactory solution to the problem of life, Besant took the opportunity, just two months after the *Lucifer* article containing her practical suggestions, to explain the importance of neutrality to the Society and highlighted it as one of its most appealing aspects. This is her earliest public declaration of her support and admiration for the concept of neutrality and she assured her audience that the Society "pledges you to no theory…forces upon you no view…[and]…doesn't ask you to accept one view of the universe or another."[332] She emphasised her point by reiterating an earlier idea from Blavatsky regarding theosophical identity that "[n]ot everyone who is a member of the Society is a Theosophist" and "many persons might join it who in no sense accepted the Theosophical view of the Universe."[333] Besant distinguished between merely being a member of the Theosophical Society and someone who "desired to become a student of Theosophy," with the latter coming to the Society's "special teachings."[334] Responding to criticism that her views on *Karma* were not compatible with socialism, Besant completed the vindication of her decision to be a socialist turned theosophist by claiming the opposite. She appealed to the regularity and predictability of cause and effect by arguing "if the present has been made by the past, the present makes the future as the past has made it."[335] Besant invoked this as a motive for action because "by working now you can mould the future and make it better and happier than the past."[336] Although she moderated her tone in this lecture, compared to the

[332] Besant, 'Why I Became a Theosophist', 489
[333] Ibid., 490
[334] Ibid.
[335] Ibid., 496
[336] Ibid.

article described above, she was still making the case for action in the material world to improve conditions and, ultimately, expedite the evolution of humanity.

The August 1889 publication of Besant's explanatory lecture to her former Freethought colleagues in *Lucifer* was the first of two contributions in which she clarified her views to her new theosophical audience. In the second article, she outlined her opinions on social issues and took pains to expand on the implicit association, alluded to in her lecture, between brotherhood and duty. Besant was among the first to seriously challenge and admonish the proponents of the argument that not interfering in the lives of the worst off in society was the best policy, because their conditions were the result of *Karma*. She appealed to authenticity arguing that "true-hearted men and women who recognise the tie of human brotherhood" were eager to work for improving the lives of those who face "terrible wrongs and daily misery."[337] Besant claimed that "misunderstood Theosophical teachings" had been used by those who "sit idly regarding the sufferings of the more unfortunate members of the human family," arguing that they "cannot interfere with Karma."[338] Besant considered herself "at once a Socialist and a Theosophist" and improving the conditions of the worst off in society fulfilled the goals of both worldviews, which for her were combined.[339] She engaged with the idea of Karma on both the individual and collective levels and warned, in the case of the former, that selfish inaction served only to generate new evil Karma and caused obstructions in future incarnations. Besant's view was that "collective life also generates a collective Karma" and nations must work "to generate better Karma."[340] She argued for a national approach to "place society on a sounder, because more moral, basis" so that "the embryo of a nobler future will be generated by the efforts of today."[341] Besant called for a direct and immediate response to the social conditions of the worst off in society and provided a karmic argument against inaction and advocated collective action to create a better future for everyone. Besant concluded with a return to the authentic identity argument when she reminded the readers that the "path…of the Theosophist…is one of self-sacrificing and strenuous endeavour to raise his brethren out of poverty, out of misery, out of evil of every kind" and this "duty shines clearly

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[337] Besant, 'Karma and Social Improvement', 457
[338] Ibid.
[339] Ibid.
[340] Ibid., 461
[341] Ibid.

out of the darkness that surrounds us."[342] Isabel Cooper-Oakley, the critic of 'socialistic writing', rejected Besant's assertion of a spiritual equality among all people that could be made manifest by improving the conditions of people's lives and giving them the tools to flourish. She argued for a spiritual class system, led by the elect, that would be apparent despite the best efforts of social policy. Besant later admitted the importance of Cooper-Oakley's arguments to theosophical teachings and advanced her own ideas on spiritual hierarchy, albeit in a more palatable, practical form. Besant refrained from contributing any more practical and socialist articles for a period, choosing, or being advised, to be an explainer and evangelist for the Society rather than involved in the ongoing debates about practicality and social activism. This coincided with her becoming a close pupil of Blavatsky and the beginning of her ascent to prominence in the Theosophical Society.

Besant's return to the debate around the social conditions of the poor occurred (perhaps indicative of her operating under editorial advice) just after Blavatsky's death, in the July 1891 issue of *Lucifer*. She continued her project of blending her previously held views with the theosophical by addressing population control, a policy she believed could improve social conditions and with which she had a long association. To achieve the desired results, Besant suggested advocating control of the sexual impulse among the population and characterised her view as passing "from neo-Malthusianism to what will be called asceticism."[343] Besant was still in the early days of her theosophical career and this example shows that she was in the process of transplanting her goals from socialism to theosophy rather than deriving them from theosophical ideas. At this stage, theosophy was providing the completeness of worldview in its religious aspect for Besant, the socialist.

In the March 1892 issue of *Lucifer*, Besant began her recurring editorial piece, 'On The Watch-Tower', in which she took the opportunity to address the readership directly and comment on important current events and societal issues. She migrated this feature to the *Theosophical Review*, *Lucifer's* name after August 1897, and then to *The Theosophist* on becoming president in 1907. Besant continued her move away from Blavatsky and Olcott's position that Universal Brotherhood was a far off, cosmically oriented, guiding ideal rather than an achievable goal in the foreseeable

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[342] Ibid.
[343] Besant, 'Theosophy & the Law of Population', 398-399

future. In an article in the first issue of the *Irish Theosophist* in October 1892, she fused the connection between Universal Brotherhood and duty with authentic theosophical identity, a call to action on the part of all theosophists. She argued that "the key-note of Theosophy is brotherhood" but not in the sense of "a dreamy Utopia, far away either in time or space, Brotherhood to be carried out, right here and now, in our family and social life."[344] Though she was encouraging individual altruism, Besant addressed the passivity of earlier formulations by encouraging the theosophist to "study his surroundings, to see where he can most usefully employ his energies" and "seek opportunities of active personal service."[345] This was very different from Blavatsky, Olcott, and Harbottle's comments on individual altruism where duty only accrued to the theosophist when encountering those in need. Besant became the first member of the Society in a leadership role to encourage members to "take part in such social and political movements as his best judgement approves" and "never to give up any kind of social service, unless it be to take up some heavier task."[346] Referring to "the ordinary work of political or social reform, or of philanthropy," Besant argued it "should only be renounced in favour of some more toilsome and imperative duty, not in favour of ease and selfish pursuits. Thus should the Theosophist live."[347] Besant was clear in this short contribution. The *Irish Theosophist* was directed at a smaller and less theosophically experienced audience in 1892 and short, pointed pieces, like this one, were very effective for Besant in spreading her interpretation of theosophy. Two months later, in December 1892, the *Irish Theosophist* published the transcript of her lecture delivered in the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin that November. The lecture was on death and reincarnation, but Besant took the opportunity to remind those assembled that because bodily life was temporary and impermanent, it was important "to look forward to, and to interest ourselves in the spiritual life." Then, she argued, "we can extend a hand to our less fortunate brethren."[348]

By 1893, Besant had completed the transition from her earlier results-based, specific practicality to the overarching ideal driven framework she would rely on, and continue to develop, for the rest of her career. Her contribution to the June issue of

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[344] Besant, 'The Theosophical Life', 4-5
[345] Ibid.
[346] Ibid
[347] Ibid.
[348] Besant, 'Problems of Death and the Afterlife', 24

Lucifer argued that any worthwhile philosophy "must have a bearing upon human life and human conduct, and the deeper the philosophy the more far-reaching will be its bearing upon both."[349] The practical application of theosophy had been exercising the more socially conscious Society members but the clashing of the principle of individual freedom of belief with the prioritisation of Universal Brotherhood left it lacking in the kind of specificity that characterised the beginning of Besant's career. Besant tried to explain this lack with an appeal to the totalising nature of the theosophical project.

> A Philosophy which stretches through millenniums, proclaiming eternal truths and unchanging laws, obviously cannot lay down authoritatively the details or practical applications which must vary with all great alterations in political systems and all diversities of economic conditions.[350]

Her new-found appreciation for the universalism of theosophy was part of Besant's reason for moving away from situation-specific suggestions for practical action. Also, her growing role as a leader in the Society necessitated a more diplomatic stance so as not to alienate certain members. However, in another first for such an influential theosophist, she argued, through an appeal to karmic law, that legislative approaches could be valid and effective for nations experiencing a range of social ills. Besant gave the example of 'slums' as environments that perpetuated their misery because their very existence attracts the incarnation of "souls of a most undeveloped type" and argued that if nations didn't want to attract undesirable souls, who dragged their country down, they should find a way to improve the conditions of society.

> The practical outcome of this view of matters is that national legislation is advisable to get rid of these magnets of evil, and that it may be wisely employed as a means on the physical plane to remove physical evils.[351]

She also argued the correlate of this idea, that if a nation wished to attract more developed souls, it should invest in arts and education. Besant's endorsement of improvements brought about by legislation, even if it was couched in karmic

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[349] Besant, 'Theosophy and its Practical Application', 309
[350] Ibid.
[351] Ibid., 311

reasoning, was the last artefact of her socialistic tendencies, though this would be jettisoned later in her career in favour of a wholly ideal-centred approach. Besant's attempts to reconcile her socialism with theosophy resulted in the equal prioritisation of the improvement of the self and the conditions in which many selves were forced to live. She argued that individuals' brains and minds must be trained to accelerate evolution, citing it as "the basis necessary for the next great step forward, the evolution of the spiritual consciousness."[352] This was the first time she linked the development of individuals in poor conditions to the rate of spiritual development for all humanity, increasing the urgency of her rhetoric and goals. For Besant, engaging in the cultural and educational activities that contributed to the development of the self could only be done when leisure time was available, beyond mere subsistence. Besant was in the process of developing theosophical argumentation to support the same outcomes she sought in socialism and, by doing so, brought a sense of urgency and achievability to previously lofty theosophical goals. However, politics were just "a means to an end" that would "always become a mass of intrigue and corruption" but to "serve man, to help forward human evolution, is always a noble and ennobling aim" in whatever field it may be.[353] Through the guiding ideals of service and duty, Besant's project continued to argue that "the salvation of the world is in the hands of man" but her theosophically informed approach to social reform was temporarily interrupted.[354] 1893 saw the first rumblings of what became a defining event in the history of the Society, and Besant's career, the secession of the American Section in the aftermath of the Judge Case.

[352] Ibid., 312
[353] Ibid., 313
[354] Ibid.

The Judge Case

William Q. Judge was the general secretary of the American Section of the Theosophical Society. The two years from 1893 to 1895 saw the escalation of debates around neutrality that would lead to the secession of his faction from the global Society. The Judge Case, sometimes called the Judge Affair, was in many ways the making of Annie Besant in the Society. It secured her position at the right hand of Olcott, removed Judge as a rival, and gave her the power to guide the Society in her preferred direction. While both Judge and Besant spent much energy and ink discussing the duty and sacrifice of individuals in order to help others, Judge spent much more on psychic phenomena, increasing his reputation as an occultist and cementing his sole authority among his followers on theosophical issues. Judge died on March 21st, 1896, the year after the secession, but while he lived he enjoyed a level of authority and devotion among his followers Besant never attained.[355] Besant's actions were contested on more than one occasion, and many articles were published by Society members respectfully disagreeing with her on numerous issues. However, from the Judge Case, Besant learned to navigate the paradoxes of the Society and understand the nuances of leadership with far greater success than her American counterpart. The period from 1893 to 1895 was an invaluable educational experience for Besant as she participated in the fracturing of the global Society over issues of corporate neutrality and the individual freedom of belief of both ordinary members and high-ranking officials. The lessons she learned from this period almost certainly help to explain why she waited until 1916 to eventually reveal her true opinions on the Society's supposed neutrality.

Several theosophical periodicals, each a mouthpiece for its editor, are central to explaining the events of "the great split." Upon Blavatsky's death, the editorship of the London-based *Lucifer* passed to Annie Besant and, as president, Olcott was editor of the Society's official organ, *The Theosophist.* Judge had already amassed quite a substantial readership for his New York-based periodical, *The Path* and later, the *Irish Theosophist*, under the editorship of Daniel N. Dunlop, became his proxy publication in Europe.

[355] An obituary and death notice for Judge appeared in *Theosophy*, the name for *The Path*, in April, 1896.

The Death of Blavatsky

The first significant moment in a long sequence of events was the death of Blavatsky in 1891. As the Society's authority on occultism, Blavatsky claimed to be in direct communication with entities known as the masters or mahatmas, "a collective of spiritually evolved beings" who were claimed to have "insights into a truly ancient wisdom tradition, from which all genuine Western and Eastern religions and philosophies derive."[356] Communications with the masters took the form of letters and often appeared in unexplained circumstances, a process referred to as 'precipitation' as correspondence was thought to materialise as if out of thin air. Judge sought to take up Blavatsky's occult mantle and upon her death he claimed to be receiving letters from the same masters. These communications were initially treated as authentic by Besant and Olcott in the sense that they went along with the instructions contained within about how to structure the Society in Blavatsky's absence, including the appointment of Judge and Besant as co-heads of the Esoteric Section, Blavatsky's secretive inner circle under her exclusive control.[357] In 1892, on the instruction of one of these letters, Olcott announced his resignation as president of the Society and Judge, as vice-president, became his presumptive successor. The March 1892 issue of *Lucifer* announced Olcott's resignation and published the text of the relevant communications. Olcott claimed he had wanted to resign for some time, citing his health as the reason why he must do so. In May 1892, *The Path* published the proceedings of the annual convention of the American Section of the TS, held in Chicago in April, where it was reported that "the branches voted for William Q. Judge as successor to Col. Olcott."[358] In the same month (May 1892), Besant added her support to the decision but was keen to remind readers that with "a Society extending all over the world, it takes a long time to reach a decision."[359] She added that it "is clear that Bro. Judge will be the next President, whether now or at some future date, but whether he will take office at once or not will remain doubtful for some months."[360] Besant may have known that Olcott's resignation was to be delayed for the legal reasons he reported in the May 1892 issue of *The Theosophist*,

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[356] Hammer and Rothstein, 'Introduction', 1
[357] Godwin, 'Blavatsky and the First Generation', 27
[358] Judge, 'Annual Convention', 66. Where official reports are unsigned, I have attributed them to the editor.
[359] Besant, 'On The Watch-Tower'(a), 181
[360] Ibid.

that as the Society was not a legal entity, it did not hold any of the property interests, and with everything in the president's name, he needed time to divest them to the Society.[361] By August 1892, the results of similar ballots at the convention of the European Section of the TS were published in both *Lucifer* and *The Path*, both reporting the unanimity of the vote for Judge to succeed Olcott.[362] In September 1892, the same reports were published in *The Theosophist* along with a letter from Olcott in which he revoked his resignation, referring specifically to a communication he received from Judge encouraging him not to retire. Judge claimed that he was not yet able to leave his post as Secretary of the American Section and enclosed the transcript of a message he had received for Olcott from a master that "it is not time, nor right, nor just, nor wise, nor the real wish of the ⁂ that you should go out, either corporeally or officially."[363] Amid all the politeness and politics, Judge shored up his claim to the presidency while maintaining his reputation and loyalty to Olcott. Olcott credited a "long rest in the mountains" with restoring his "health…and mental and physical vigour" and declared Judge his "constitutional successor…eligible for duty as such upon his relinquishment of any other office in the Society which he may hold at the time of my death."[364] Judge now had the backing of the branches and the sitting president-founder for his claim to the future leadership of the global Society, while gesturing strongly towards his commitment to the American Section and Olcott's presidency. Olcott's reference to the message from a master also lent legitimacy to the truth of Judge's communications with the masters over the previous year. This topic was causing quite a lot of consternation among the members, particularly as the messages appeared to greatly benefit Judge in the aftermath of Blavatsky's death. If Judge had been, as many would later suggest, producing the letters himself, the perception of his rise to the presidency as a little too expedient may have been a factor in the masters' sudden change of heart concerning Olcott's retirement. Judge's problems intensified when his statements on the truth of the existence of the masters, something not all members agreed on, were seen to impinge on the neutrality of the Society and the right of other individual members not to believe in their existence, at least in the absence of empirical

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[361] Olcott, 'The President's Retirement'(a), +8-9. The plus sign in front of a page number denotes its place in the supplement to that month's issue.
[362] Besant, 'Convention of the European Section' and Judge, 'European Section Convention'.
[363] Olcott, 'The President's Retirement'(b), +91. The symbol refers to the masters.
[364] Ibid.

evidence. During this increasingly tense period in the Society, *Lucifer* and *The Theosophist* rarely referred to the masters or their messages while *The Path* was engaged in a sustained effort to spread knowledge about them and their centrality to the Theosophical Society. Blavatsky had used her communications with the masters to great success in reinforcing her reputation as a great occultist and chosen leader, but she was not interested in expounding on them as a fundamental concept of theosophy. However, few in the leadership seemed comfortable with Judge's claim to the same abilities, even if he was really receiving messages from the masters, and his growing influence and personal agenda were causes for concern. Now that Judge had launched a propaganda campaign, writing, speaking, and publishing about the masters almost exclusively, the first signs of the impending split began to appear.

The Path had been educating and fascinating its readers with the existence of the masters and their messages since at least 1888 when 'Letters That Have Helped Me' appeared in the December issue. This article became a series dedicated to the masters' messages as Judge sought to position the fact of their existence at the forefront of theosophical discourse. However, it was Blavatsky's death in May 1891, announced by Besant in her June editorial in *Lucifer*, that caused the marked increase in Judge and his associates' masters related output.[365] Julia Keightley, a confidant of Judge publishing under her pseudonym Jasper Niemand (secretly at this point), contributed an article to *The Path* in August 1891 containing a message from the masters. The message was quick to encourage the membership to maintain their efforts for the Society in the wake of such a great loss. It reminded the readers that "[t]act, discretion, and zeal are more than ever needed" and "[t]he humblest worker is seen and helped."[366] The published message was attributed to a master with whom Blavatsky had claimed to communicate, but the article did not make clear who received the message, referring only to "a student theosophist." However, Keightley was at pains to note that the message had arrived "since the departure from this plane of H.P. Blavatsky…from that Master of whom H.P.B was the reverent pupil" and was "[a]ttested by His real signature and seal."[367] Directly following this article, Judge contributed further reflection on the difficult period following Blavatsky's death. Referring to the masters, he asserted that "these beings exist" and "for those

[365] Besant, 'An Editorial Word'.
[366] Niemand, 'Ingratitude is not one of our faults', 138
[367] Ibid., 137

who have studied in the right way plenty of proof has been offered; for others the proofs exist within themselves."[368] This was the beginning of the propaganda campaign, designed to cement Judge's position as the charismatic and occult successor to Blavatsky, that would ultimately lead to public accusations by two prominent members, Walter Old and Sydney Edge, that he was compromising the Society's position of neutrality on the issue of the existence of the masters. Old and Edge's accusations were made in July 1893, just after the Society's presence at the World's Fair in Chicago, the success of which, due in large part to Judge's efforts, led to a substantial increase in membership for the American Section. Their timing raises questions about whether the leadership was really concerned about the Society's neutrality or Judge's growing influence and power as the head of the TS's largest and wealthiest section. Judge continued to pave the way for potential new messages from the masters that would not only comfort in times of loss and change but guide those chosen few who received them.

> Such messages have been received before H.P.B.'s departure by persons in no way connected with her, and have since that sad event also come to encourage those who are entitled to such encouragement. The contents of these are not for the public, nor indeed for any one save those to whom they have come.[369]

Though Judge would not be admonished publicly for another two years, he was already building the case for his leadership and the validity of his beliefs and abilities. The following month's (September 1891) issue of *The Path* published 'Extracts from Col. Olcott's London Addresses', without comment, in which the reader was reminded of when Olcott had affirmed his personal belief in the masters.[370]

In the period after Blavatsky's death, Judge was in London with Besant and both had received messages from the masters, though the messages for Besant came through Judge. Judge's efforts in *The Path* to legitimise the receipt of messages from the masters by individuals other than Blavatsky were ongoing, but much of the content of these messages was not published. In private, he had been receiving messages for Besant, Olcott, and others, containing instructions from the masters

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[368] Judge, 'Are We Deserted', 141
[369] Ibid., 142
[370] Olcott, 'Extracts from Col. Olcott's London Addresses', 184-185

similar to those that encouraged the president to resign and then revoke his resignation. The October 1891 issue of *The Theosophist* published a significant lecture delivered by Annie Besant to the Secular Society at the Hall of Science in London. She announced that more messages had arrived and used this evidence to mark another stage in her transition from her socialist secularism to a theosophically informed worldview.

> You have known me in this hall for sixteen and a half years. (Cheers.) You have never known me tell a lie to you. ("No, never," and loud cheers.) My worst public enemy has never cast a slur upon my integrity. ("Never," and cheers.) I tell you that since Madame Blavatsky left I have had letters in the same handwriting as the letters which she received. (Sensation.) Unless you think dead persons can write, that is a remarkable fact.[371]

There are several possible explanations for Besant's role in all this, none of which can be proven correct. If Judge was actually receiving messages from the masters, Besant may have been convinced of their authenticity by believing to have witnessed the phenomenon of their precipitation first-hand. Judge's charisma and authority could have convinced Besant that he was receiving messages from the masters in the absence of Besant experiencing it for herself. A third scenario is that Judge worked with Besant's full knowledge to give the appearance of having received messages from the masters to build a narrative that furthered their positions in the Society and maintain its stability in uncertain times. Statements by Besant, like the one quoted above, and Olcott, like the one Judge reprinted in the September 1891 issue of *The Path*, were assertions of belief in the existence of the masters by prominent leaders of the Society. When Judge was later indicted based on his lack of neutrality, he marshalled these statements of belief, and others like them, in defence of his right to assert his own beliefs. The implication was that the Society's neutrality was often more useful as an instrument of prosecution in the court of public appeal than a principle to be adhered to at all costs. That same month, October 1891, *The Path* moved to correct rumours, apparently circulating in America and based on her comments in the lecture to the Secular Society, that Besant had received messages

[371] Besant, 'Annie Besant's Farewell to Secularism', +11-12

from H.P.B. It clarified that the messages Besant had confirmed were from the same masters as Blavatsky's, not that Besant herself had received messages from her former mentor's occult interlocutors. This clarification was important to Judge because, despite his efforts to make these phenomena seem commonplace, he didn't want any confusion over his role as Blavatsky's sole successor and the Society's authority on occult matters. The article explained that Besant refused to "exhibit the messages or submit them to tests" but wished to verify their existence and origin so "as to vindicate the character of H. P. B., that being a matter of public moment."[372] Judge supported her refusal to make the messages available because the existence of the masters is "a matter for individual conviction."[373] His invocation of members' individual freedom of belief paid lip service to the Society's principle of neutrality, while his periodical continued to print evangelising articles, an enterprise yet to reach its full intensity.

In the December 1892 issue of *The Path*, Alexander Fullerton, a prominent member of the American Section and close associate of Judge, helped to place the masters in their role as overseers of the theosophical project, but not direct interveners in the lives of ordinary members. He argued that it "may not be possible to obliterate human misery" but everyone must "help each philanthropist attempting it."[374] Though Fullerton was on the side of interference with regard to the conditions of the worst off in society, his aim in this article was to reassure the readership that "however silent the Masters may seem…no man who deeply feels the call to altruistic effort need doubt that it comes from that hidden Brotherhood."[375] The implication was that it was normal for ordinary members not to have direct communications from the masters, a sentiment that helped cement Judge's claim to occult expertise and the sole medium for the will of the masters. The article contributed to the process of installing the masters at the forefront of all theosophical activity by discussing them in concert with activities derived from individual altruism, a topic often addressed by Blavatsky and Besant without reference to masters. For Fullerton, and others influenced by Judge, the masters formed a hidden brotherhood, and though they did not directly interfere, the impulses felt by individuals were attributed

[372] Judge, 'Mirror of the Movement'(b), 229
[373] Ibid.
[374] Fullerton, 'Interference by Adepts', 286
[375] Ibid.

to them. This contrasts with Besant's argument that the impulse to altruism arises from the realisation of Universal Brotherhood, not from the prompting of hidden masters. December 1892's issue of *The Path* also contained an explanatory article in which Judge delved into the nuances of how the masters communicated with people through their ability to 'precipitate' messages.[376] This term was widely used to refer to the appearance of messages from nowhere. It could refer to the appearance of ink on paper, the appearance of messages inside sealed envelopes, or the appearance of pieces of paper with messages on them. Every issue of *The Path* in the three years leading up to the secession of the Society contained many articles that explicitly advanced Judge's views, agenda, and reputation.

1893 saw the trend continue with Judge's contribution to the February issue of *The Path*. He set up a binary between "that phase on which the Masters who are behind insist and which is called by H.P.B in *The Voice of the Silence* the "heart doctrine"" and the intellectual and scientific side of theosophy, which was less prone to practical occultism and, in Judge's characterisation, social action and Society work.[377] Judge appealed to the content of a number of letters the masters delivered to Blavatsky and A.P. Sinnett, author of the influential texts *The Occult World* and *Esoteric Buddhism*. The letters emphasised philanthropic work over intellectual enterprise and he argued that the Society should reorient itself in this direction making theosophy "forceful for the proving and the exemplifying of the doctrine and object of Universal Brotherhood."[378] Judge did not want the membership engaged in intellectual pursuits, particularly when those intellectual pursuits extended to the study of practical occultism, because critical thinking or seeking empirical evidence could weaken his influence. Further, those members who looked to Judge, and the messages he received, as a sole source of authority in theosophical matters would not be distracted from the work he wished them to do. Under the guise of Eusebio Urban, one of Judge's many pseudonyms, he moved strongly against the principle of neutrality in the March 1893 issue of *The Path*. In 'The Mahatmas as Ideals and Facts', he argued that belief in the masters should be proclaimed but not enforced, stopping just short of a complete disavowal of neutrality and individual freedom of belief. He claimed that the quality and quantity of work undertaken by the Society in

[376] Judge, 'Imagination and Occult Phenomena'
[377] Judge, What the Masters Have Said', 333
[378] Ibid., 335

areas where "the members boldly avow their belief and are not afraid to speak of this high ideal" was far higher than where there is "constant doubt, ceaseless asking for material proof, incessant fear of what the world or science or friends will think."[379] Judge also continued the anti-intellectual theme arguing that if people simply accepted the truth of the existence of the masters, they could get on with carrying out the good work he prescribed. The same issue (March 1893) also continued to educate its readership in Judge's abilities, authority, and connection to Blavatsky by printing one of her letters in which she explains the precipitation of messages.[380]

Attacks from India

In April 1893, *Lucifer* printed Judge's first published response to direct criticism of his activities. He had received a letter from India, it is unclear from whom, warning of the dangers of dogmatism and fanaticism regarding belief in the existence of the masters. Judge's influential position in the Society and his constant promotion of everything related to the masters and their messages were perceived to be violating the principle of neutrality. He responded by arguing that individuals, including him, are free to believe whatever they want, and the Society has no dogma to which an individual could be bound. He did, however, take the opportunity to expound on his belief in the masters and the benefits arising from it. Judge was also obliged to respond to criticism surrounding the letter published by Jasper Niemand (Julia Keightley) in August 1891. He refuted any suggestion that he was Jasper Niemand or the unnamed recipient of the message from the master. Judge also denied any knowledge of the signature and seal mentioned in the article as evidence of the authenticity of the message.

In July 1893, Judge published an article in *The Theosophist* about the presence of Theosophy and the Theosophical Society at the World's Fair Parliament of Religions in Chicago.[381] The July issues of *The Path* and *Lucifer* also devoted space to the upcoming activities in Chicago. After this event, the American Section of the TS grew substantially, and with it, Judge's charismatic and financial power. Not coincidentally, the same issue of *The Theosophist* published an article by two prominent members who were close to Olcott: Walter Old and Sydney Edge. Their

[379] Urban, 'The Mahatmas as Ideals and Facts', 377
[380] Blavatsky, 'HP Blavatsky on Precipitation', 381
[381] Judge, 'Theosophy at the World's Fair'.

article began the public expression of unease about Judge's methods and activities that had been felt by many members in private since Blavatsky's death. Edge, in his report from India, dated May 8th and published in the June 1893 issue of *Lucifer*, the month before these attacks, stated that "Walter Old joins me here this week for a change, as it has been excessively hot in Madras, and Col. Olcott will doubtless come up before long."[382] The fact that they were together in India around this time helps to explain the coordinated effort on the part of the Indian Section, demonstrated in the July issue of *The Theosophist,* to bring Judge to task and halt his rise to power. Old and Edge referred to Judge's contribution to the April issue of *Lucifer* as "nothing less than a declaration of his creed on certain matters directly related to the Theosophical movement" and argued that since it was "coming from one who holds a prominent position in the Society, it cannot fail to carry with it an importance which would not attach to the same statements when coming from a junior member of our body."[383] Although they recognised Judge's proclaimed awareness of individual freedom of expression, they insisted that the contribution to *Lucifer* (April 1893) and "much that has lately come from the same pen, is in itself a "leading to dogmatism" and to the forming of a "creed," which Mr. Judge, holding the position he does, cannot be ignorant of."[384] The problem arose because Judge cited his own experience when making statements about these matters and "there goes with it the force of something more than opinion, in short, the weight of authority; and when received as true by others who have not as yet proved it for themselves, it amounts virtually to a dogma."[385] Old and Edge argued that continued assertions of belief by individuals with authority without supplying evidence led to dogma and went against the spirit of the Society. Old and Edge turned to Judge's denial of any knowledge of the seal used to authenticate communications from the master, the same one referred to in the Niemand article of 1891. They pointed out that major changes, that favoured Judge, occurred in the Society after Blavatsky's death, all based on messages from the masters authenticated with a seal. The accusation was that Judge must have had some knowledge of the seal in 1891 because it was mentioned in an article in his periodical by an author they suspected to be writing under a pseudonym. Although it was later revealed that Julia Keightley was Jasper Niemand,

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[382] Edge, 'Indian Letter', 338
[383] Old and Edge, 'Theosophic Freethought', 606
[384] Ibid., 606-607
[385] Ibid., 607

this did not mean that Judge did not also use the pseudonym or have a direct influence on what she wrote.

The attacks continued in the same issue (July 1893) of *The Theosophist* in an article contributed by N.D. Khandalavala, a prominent member of the Indian section of the Society and another close associate of Olcott. Referring to Judge's contribution to the April 1893 issue of *Lucifer*, the response to the initial private letter from India, Khandalavala reiterated that Judge provided no discussion of evidence for his assertion of belief in the masters. He also drew attention to the status of the masters, pointing out that, for Blavatsky, they were human and remained rather vague, whereas Judge's masters had a plan for the Society and could interfere in the life of humanity by supernatural means. Judge's status as a high-ranking official continually stating his personal beliefs was cited again, along with the danger of charismatic authority, when Khandalavala argued that identifying someone "as worthy to be the high guides of religious and spiritual knowledge, on whom we are to rely, is a means of producing misconceptions and differences and the raising up of sects and dogmas."[386] This comment was prescient of the split that was to come as The World's Fair and Besant's tour of America both contributed to the growth of the American Section. Judge, realising he would never be president of the global Society, settled for its biggest and most financially successful section. The original letter to Judge, that provoked this series of correspondence, was most likely penned by some combination of Old, Edge, Olcott, and Khandalavala, given their level of engagement in the correspondence that followed Judge's response.

During the same period, when the criticism of Judge took to the pages of *The Theosophist*, *The Path* continued to publish articles about the masters. The May 1893 issue contained a letter of support, 'Rishees, Masters, and Mahatmas', conveniently, considering Judge's response to criticism from India, and purportedly from a Hindu signed Lakshman. This issue (May 1893) also printed a report of the convention of the American Section, held in April, at which Judge continued his campaign of bringing the masters to the forefront of the Society's activities and ideals, even projecting them into its origin story. The report stated that Judge addressed the convention to show that "the Society was actually founded under the direction of the

[386] Khandalavala, 'Theosophy in the West: The Tendency Towards Dogmatism', 626

Mahatmas who constitute a Lodge of Initiates from whom religion and philosophy flow at all times."[387] In the June 1893 issue of *The Path*, in a discussion about who might or might not have the ability to receive messages from the masters, Judge reaffirmed his unique status by directly addressing the problem of individuals who "sometimes write messages claimed to be from the Masters when they are not."[388] The same issue also printed a conversation between Judge and Blavatsky about adepts, reminding readers yet again of his occult pedigree.[389] Judge's intensification of his propaganda campaign anticipated his defence, at least in the court of public opinion, of the charges he would face by reiterating his deep knowledge of occultism and close connection to Blavatsky. The following month's issue (July 1893) used an unsigned memorial Lotus Day address, the day marking the death of Blavatsky, to remind everyone of the great relationship she had with Judge. The August 1893 issue of *The Path* continued the assault on the intellectual and scientific impulses within the Society by attempting to turn attention away from the need for evidence of the existence of the masters. Judge explained that evidence is hard to find because the masters "do not come forth by astounding phenomena to convince the world of their existence" because "the world is not ready, but is in such a condition that the end would be obstructed and damage be the result."[390] This issue of *The Path* (August 1893) also contained a report on the convention of the European Section of the TS, held on July 6th, 1893, at which Judge spoke about the problem of dogmatism. He warned that speaking about dogmatism, when it did not exist, would bring it about and "advised all not to mistake earnestness, devotion, and loyalty for dogmatism."[391] Judge used every opportunity available, in print and in person, to respond to the ongoing criticism, particularly from the Indian Section, that he was fomenting dogmatism, infringing on individual's freedom of belief, and compromising the principle of neutrality.

Besant used her editorial in the August 1893 issue of *Lucifer* to address Judge's situation, the larger topic of the masters, her belief in them, and their role in the Society. This editorial endorsed the role of the masters in no less emphatic a fashion than Judge, but Besant was not engaged in a sustained campaign of advocating their

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[387] Judge, 'Mirror of the Movement'(d), 63
[388] Judge, 'Masters, Adepts, Teachers, and Disciples', 67
[389] Judge, 'Occult Vibrations: A Fragment of Conversation with H.P.B. in 1888'
[390] Judge, 'The Adepts and Modern Science', 134-135
[391] Judge, 'Mirror of the Movement'(e), 157

importance and encouraging others to believe in them. Further, Besant was not as public a figure as Judge, the vice-president of the global Society and presumptive successor to Olcott, though no less influential in her role as co-head of the Esoteric Section. Amid the tension caused by Judge and the Indian Section, Besant's sentiments in this editorial are not characteristic of her writings in general. It was rare for her to emphasise the role of the masters so strongly and the concept did not inform her later leadership of the Society. Although she tried to contextualise her remarks by including the duty of service to others, Besant was emphatic when she stated that the "keynote of the work of each of us is that of devotion to the Masters" and "[w]e never hesitate to speak out our certainty of their existence and of their continued interest in and work through the Society."[392] The strangeness of Besant's editorial continued and she almost precisely mirrored some of Judge's remarks, perhaps indicating they had worked together on her statement of support or, at the very least, she had agreed to help insulate him from further criticism. The period between the death of Blavatsky and the intervention of Olcott found Besant in league with Judge on more than one occasion and this editorial was remarkably uncharacteristic. She paraphrased Judge's anti-intellectual arguments that Society activities were more successful where there were members who proclaimed their belief in the masters and their significant role in guiding the work. Besant claimed that from her many "observations made in Europe and America" of theosophical branches, "in so far as the Masters are recognized as "Facts and Ideals" by the members, so far also are the societies progressive and influential."[393] Finally, reiterating another of Judge's arguments, she stated that without "erecting belief in the Masters into a dogma which members must tacitly, if not openly, accept, every member who does believe in Them should be ready to say so if challenged."[394] In this editorial, Besant made herself vulnerable to the same kinds of attacks that had been aimed at Judge by presenting all of his positions and arguments in her role as a prominent, leading theosophist.

In his contribution to *The Path* of September 1893, Judge followed up on the theme of conviction, questioning whether individuals should be allowed to proclaim their beliefs. He directly addressed the Khandalavala article from the July issue of

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[392] Besant, 'On The Watch-Tower'(d), 529
[393] Ibid., 530
[394] Ibid.

The Theosophist and reminded the reader that the Society's "policy is freedom to members and perfect neutrality on the part of the T.S.."[395] Judge did not agree that his role as an officer of the Society precluded him from exercising his individual freedom of belief, describing any such restriction as "a monstrous thing, contrary to our constitution and quite against a long history in which, from H.P.B. and Col. Olcott down, all members have had perfect freedom of expression."[396] He cited the examples of Blavatsky, Olcott, and Sinnett who proclaimed their belief in the existence of the masters while being leaders and prominent Society members. In the same issue (September 1893), Alexander Fullerton drew the attention of the American readership to Besant's editorial as "one of those trumpet-toned proclamations of certain assurance of Masters and Their work which so startle week-kneed [sic] Theosophists."[397] He also reiterated Judge's anti-intellectual argument, ridiculing those individuals who "believe nothing they do not see and yet demand to see without first fulfilling the conditions to sight."[398]

Judge and Besant continued working together to defend him from attacks and assert the right to express individual belief, even if it might carry the weight of authority. The October issue of *The Path* published yet another article, this time unsigned, explaining the precipitation of messages and further fuelling the propaganda for Judge's ideas and reputation.[399] This piece was directly followed by a rare contribution to Judge's periodical by Besant that was reprinted in *Lucifer* the following month (November 1893). She defended Judge by admonishing his critics for making a hasty, and thereby incorrect, characterisation of his activities, who "then work on as though the labelling had been done after conscientious analysis."[400] Besant argued that this "superficial and mischievous habit" could be found among Society members, "some of whom are unable to distinguish between the holding of convictions and the desire to dogmatise as to the convictions that should be held by others."[401] Besant continued by not only asserting the right of someone to proclaim a truth they believed they had found but their responsibility, if it is good for mankind,

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[395] Judge, 'Our Convictions: Shall We Assert Them', 179
[396] Ibid.
[397] Fullerton, 'Literary Notes', 186
[398] Ibid.
[399] Anon., 'Occult Arts', 193-198
[400] Besant, 'Conviction and Dogmatism', 199
[401] Ibid.

to "speak it out clearly."[402] Besant's strident support of Judge in this short period indicates their complicity and either Besant was aware of Judge's machinations or she had been thoroughly convinced of his abilities to communicate with the masters. This episode in Besant's career constituted a valuable learning experience regarding the mechanics of neutrality and the interplay of belief and action, one that almost certainly influenced how she would handle those same accusations during her presidency.

The intense campaign of support for Judge in the October 1893 issue of *The Path,* part of a concerted effort to galvanise the readers in his favour, continued with two other endorsements from prominent American members. J. D. Buck, a close friend of Judge, took his turn to emphatically declare that he holds "the Masters to be facts, determined by the sequence of all evolution, by history, by direct testimony of H.P.B. and many other witnesses."[403] Buck rejected the idea that statements like his would lead to dogmatism, arguing that the masters were not idols, but ideals, and as such are "the moving fiery chariots of the Gods…the *ultima thule* of human evolution: something to strive for, work for, die for if need be."[404] It is almost impossible to be more emphatic than Buck in a statement of belief in the masters or of support for Judge. His contribution was followed by Alexander Fullerton's more measured sentiments, in which any need for evidence of the existence of the masters was dismissed in favour of a spiritual identification with them. Appealing to authentic theosophical identity, he reflected a lack of personal experience of the masters back on the individuals themselves, calling into question their worthiness to be bestowed with such evidence. Fullerton reinforced Judge's anti-intellectual argument for a faith-based approach, arguing that masters would not contact individuals based on their "intellectual interest or critical acumen or even open-mindedness to proof" but on the "sincere and unselfish devotion to the Theosophic Cause" and "continuous and whole-souled labor on its behalf."[405] All of the individuals who contributed to the October issue of *The Path* were together in America for the World's Fair, resulting in the emphatic articles of support published therein. However, Besant's upcoming

[402] Ibid., 200
[403] Buck, 'The Everlasting Personal Equation', 208
[404] Ibid.
[405] Fullerton, 'Proof as to Masters', 218

trip to India, after the World's Fair in Chicago, and meeting with Olcott, would precipitate a change of heart.

The November issue of *The Path* continued Judge's campaign, containing more articles on the precipitation of messages and the right of members to free thought. Along with the reprint of Besant's article on conviction, the issue described the effect of the Theosophical Congress at the World's Fair on the growth of the American Section, reporting that "[n]ever in the history of the Society…has the membership grown so rapidly. Three new Branches have been chartered within the last month, with a total membership of about sixty."[406] The success of the American Section and Besant's imminent shift from defender to prosecutor were the two most significant factors in Judge's secession, still a full year and a half away. The December 1893 issue of *Lucifer* saw Judge invoking Blavatsky and the Society's constitution to refute the charge of dogmatism in the Society.[407] The January 1894 issue of *The Path* continued its articles educating the readership on occultism, including another piece by Alexander Fullerton. He followed his earlier arguments on the unworthiness of individuals to receive empirical evidence of the existence of the masters with a thorough explanation of the many different ways in which the masters communicate their messages, only to assert that "tests of genuineness in any or all the above modes must here be inpracticable [sic]."[408] Every month's issue of *The Path* throughout this period was replete with themed articles supporting Judge, in the authority and expertise of his occult knowledge, the existence of the masters, the redundancy of seeking evidence, and the freedom of individual belief. The April 1894 issue of *The Path* contained an unsigned article in which two fictional characters, a zealous theosophist and a constitutional theosophist, summed up the relevant arguments and talking points. They debate the neutrality of the Society and the reasons why, unlike individuals, it may not take up a definite stance on a particular issue. The focus then switched to the existence of the masters where the constitutional theosophist proceeded to educate the other that Blavatsky, Olcott, and Judge had always proclaimed their personal belief in the masters as facts and ideals, but that none of them wished it to have a place in the constitution or become dogma. The issue of social reform, a topic on which many theosophists proclaimed definite stances, was

[406] GDOY, 'American Section', 256
[407] Judge, 'Blavatskianism'
[408] Fullerton, 'Relations With Masters', 308

offered as a test case for the same principle because "there are those who loudly object to the expression of personal beliefs by such as have firm ones regarding Mahatmas" but "heedlessly violate the Constitution by having us adopt some definite attitude toward a passing question of social reform."[409] These arguments raised questions about why Judge was targeted for his beliefs while others were not. Was it, as his detractors argued, that his high rank lent authority to his continuous evangelism for the masters? Or, was his growing power and influence drawing too much attention to the messages from the masters and other psychic phenomena? Olcott may have balked at this attention. He was aware of the potential for scandal as Blavatsky's communications from the masters had formed part of an investigation carried out by the Society for Psychical Research in 1884-5, the report of which called her one of "the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting impostors in history."[410]

Besant's role as Judge's whole-hearted supporter came to an end during her travels in India. Olcott won Besant to his side and offered her the role of prosecutor in the formal case made against Judge, a role she duly accepted. *The Theosophist* of May 1894 contained the Executive Order of her appointment and Olcott sent Judge notice of his suspension as vice-president pending an inquiry.[411] The issue contained a report from the annual convention of the American Section at which it was resolved that the section held to the opinion that the term of succession to the presidency of the Society should be for life. As Judge took the opportunity to inform the convention that he had been notified by Olcott of his suspension, a resolution was carried to the effect that the suspension was void in that it exceeded the powers of the president and was unwarranted in the constitution.[412] A resolution reaffirming "the right of all to believe or disbelieve in the Mahatmas or Masters"[413] was also passed with the following rider:

> if in the face of a protest of this Section an investigation is to go on, then that Col. Olcott, Annie Besant, A. P. Sinnett, and others should be investigated, and they be compelled to show their commission from the

[409] Anon., 'Theosophical Society and Reforms: A Conversation', 12
[410] Hodgson, 'Report of the Committee', 207
[411] Olcott, 'Executive Notice', +26
[412] Judge, 'Mirror of the Movement'(f), 65
[413] Ibid.

> Mahatmas and to divulge what they know thereon and to show the truthfulness of their claims thereon.[414]

This convention demonstrated Judge's influence over the American Section and the success of his campaign in the period before the secession. The May 1894 issue of *The Path* published an article from another prominent American theosophist, C.J. Lopez, asserting the necessity of the masters to the theosophical enterprise. Lopez argued that the masters are the "ideals to imitate" if Theosophy was to become "a practical guide" and "not a mere speculation, an intellectual fad, or a sort of system of mental gymnastics."[415] This contributor was at pains to point out that the masters were "men more advanced on the path of evolution" and this was a "conception…devoid of superstition and mysticism."[416] Though Judge would later see the value of taking a similar position, Lopez's emphasis on a natural interpretation of the masters as ideals, not as supernatural entities, and the supporting discussion of the many ways in which their existence could be proved provided a stark contrast to Judge's persistent claims that occult expertise was far more important than evidence. The following month (June 1894), *The Path* published correspondence between Judge and an unnamed fellow of the Society. The letter to Judge was a statement of facts on which Judge's opinion was requested and the piece took the form of a hypothetical situation in which the fellow had been sent messages from an unnamed person that were purported to be from the masters. The fellow asked if this was a matter for inquiry on the charge that the sending of messages purporting to come from a master was, in some way, untheosophical. Judge's reply was a stand in for his own defence and he reiterated that many prominent leaders of the Society had received messages, it should be a personal matter for them, and that it would violate the constitution to judge whether someone had truly received such communications.

The Enquiry

Lucifer remained completely quiet on the ongoing Judge Affair until July 1894, as Besant had not yet returned to London. As the inquiry was underway, her editorials deferred any substantive comment until the August issue, in which a full report of the

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[414] Ibid., 66
[415] Lopez, 'Do Masters Exist?', 52
[416] Ibid.

proceedings appeared. The first order of business was to clear up any bureaucratic confusion over Judge's status as vice-president. It was noted that Judge may not have held the position legally because he was appointed before new rules, calling for the vice-president to be an elected office, came into effect. Olcott claimed that Judge had been elected, albeit in the absence of official notice, and asserted that he could be tried by the Judicial Committee. If he had not been shown to be a rightful vice-president, Judge could have argued that only his own branch or lodge had the right to try him, giving him a significant advantage. Olcott then moved on to the official charges brought against Judge: "[t]hat he practised deception, in sending false messages, orders and letters, as if sent and written by "Masters"" and was untruthful in various other instances. Olcott then highlighted the significance of the trial, framing it as a question of individual freedom vs official capacity: "Are these solely acts done in his private capacity; or may they or either of them be laid against him as wrong-doing by the Vice-President?"[417] Placing the concept of corporate neutrality at the forefront of the debate, he claimed this "grave question" would establish "a precedent for future contingencies" and wondered if the inquiry itself was "a breach of the religious neutrality guaranteed in the T.S Constitution."[418] Olcott admitted that, despite many in the Society asserting that it did constitute such a breach, he had thought it possible to circumvent the problem when he first issued the call for the inquiry. However, having met with Judge and made aware of his proposed defence, Olcott argued that holding the inquiry would lead the Society to an unpalatable dilemma. On the one hand, they would "have to deny him the common justice of listening to his statements and examining his proofs," an outcome Olcott described as "monstrous in even a common court of law, much more in a Brotherhood like ours, based on lines of ideal justice."[419] On the other hand, the inquiry would bear witness while Judge mounted a defence of his innocence by asserting "that Mahatmas exist, are related to our Society, and in personal connection with himself" and bringing "many witnesses and documentary proofs to support his statements."[420] Olcott described the second option as being "plunged into the very abyss we wish to escape from" as hearing arguments on these issues would "violate the most vital spirit

[417] Besant, 'The Neutrality of the T.S.', 452. Minutes attributed to journal editor in this case. This report also appeared in *The Path* of August, 1894.
[418] Ibid., 452-453
[419] Ibid.
[420] Ibid.

of our federal compact, its neutrality in matters of belief."[421] He then reminded everyone that he was certain of the existence of the masters but would resign his presidency if that belief became part of the constitution or Society dogma, and that "every one in our membership is as free to disbelieve and deny their existence as I am to believe and affirm it."[422] Finally, he declared that the inquiry could not proceed at the cost of violating the corporate neutrality of the Society. In the event of a similar defence being mounted in any future inquiries, the precedent should hold even at the risk of letting a guilty party avoid consequence. Although Olcott restored Judge to the rank of vice-president, the entire inquiry served as a showpiece for the membership, designed to reduce Judge's power, avoid the public scandal of prosecuting a forgery case against one of their own leaders, and, hopefully, put the issue to rest.

There followed a statement from Besant in which she described the need for holding the inquiry and minimised her role as Judge's accuser. She explained that the charges of forgery against such a high-ranking official created a difficult situation, one made worse by the publication of the Old and Edge article, and that the Indian Section threatened to secede if Judge ever became president with such charges hanging over him. Besant stated that because of the impending crisis, she was asked "as well-known in the world and the T.S. and as a close friend and colleague of Mr. Judge to intervene in the matter."[423] She claimed her actions, in attempting to "put an end to the growing friction and suspicion," were for the good of the Society and Judge because she believed "that many of the charges were false, dictated and circulated malevolently, that others were much exaggerated and were largely susceptible of explanation, and that what might remain of valid complaint might be put an end to without public controversy."[424] Besant continued her reckoning of the inquiry until, eventually, the charges against Judge were so reduced in significance, a thorough understanding of occult minutiae would be required for the reader to apprehend the difference. She argued that Judge had 'channelled' the messages but presented them as if they were 'precipitated'.

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[421] Ibid.
[422] Ibid.
[423] Ibid., 458
[424] Ibid.

> I believe that Mr. Judge wrote with his own hand, consciously or automatically I do not know, in the script adopted as that of the Master, messages which he received from the Master or from chelas; and I know that, in my own case, I believed that the messages he gave me in the well-known script were messages directly precipitated or directly written by the Master.[425]

Besant's distinction can be understood in terms of mechanism and authority. Channelling messages was to practice mediumship, during which the medium allowed, called upon, or were forced by the master, or other entity, to speak or write words without conscious intention. However, precipitation of messages did not involve a medium, it was the apparition of writing on pieces of paper or entire letters, sealed in envelopes, purported to be direct communications from the masters. The implication of suggesting Judge received messages through channelling was that he could not know for sure if a master had communicated through him because "[a]ny good medium may be used for precipitating messages by any of the varied entities in the Occult world."[426] The accusation that he presented these channelled messages as precipitated messages implied Judge wished to add an air of certainty to their origin, and authority to their contents. Besant was much less interested than Judge in involving the membership at large in nuanced esoteric matters. She hoped the conclusion of the inquiry would "put an end to the craze for receiving letters and messages, which are more likely to be subhuman or human in their origin than superhuman."[427] Besant succeeded in making the charges seem so insignificant or impenetrable that punishing Judge was unnecessary. But her comments had two other effects. In a return to Blavatsky's approach, she reintroduced a level of complexity and danger with respect to direct communications from the masters, or other entities, that positioned her as the expert on occultism and psychic phenomena. This assured her charismatic authority and allowed her to refocus the efforts of the membership "back on the evolution of their own spiritual nature, by which alone they can be safely guided through the mazes of the super-physical world," and the implied performance of their duty through service.[428]

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[425] Ibid., 460
[426] Ibid., 461
[427] Ibid.
[428] Ibid.

The report also contained a statement from Judge in which he denied forging the names and handwriting of masters. He reasserted the authenticity of the messages he had received. Though he declared himself "an agent of the Mahatmas," he denied infringing on individual freedom of belief or the Society's neutrality by seeking "to induce that belief in others."[429] Judge argued that his affirmation of his communications with the masters was the first time he had "ever made the claim," stating "I am pressed into the place where I must make it."[430] Judge did not specifically address Besant's arguments about the confusion over the method of his receiving the messages, preserving his reputation to some degree.

Lucifer's co-editor, GRS Mead, wrote an editorial and contributed an article to the issue reporting the inquiry. Both pieces were pitched in a way that suggested the whole affair was over, freeing the Society to move on with its important work. But that was not the case. Although the machinations occurring behind the scenes among the leadership throughout this period can never be fully understood, the power of the discourse on individual freedom of belief and Society neutrality in maintaining existing authority structures is clear. Ordinary Society members were primarily concerned with maintaining their individual freedom of belief while simultaneously expressing their desire for the Society to provide a governing principle for their practical work. Judge was concerned with expanding the scope and effectiveness of the Society, but in the face of the tension between individualism and brotherhood, mystical ideals and practical work, and charismatic and official authority, he couldn't convince everyone of his vision. The case highlighted the tension between the leadership and ordinary members who, despite being prominent and respected individuals, were not privy to the inner workings of the Society. Once the charges against Judge were made known to the wider membership, there was no other option than to call for a formal inquiry. His retirement having been the subject of some of Judge's messages, Olcott's suspicions concerning their authenticity led to the hard line taken by the Indian Section with respect to the necessity for an inquiry. However, the public nature of the inquiry resulted in Olcott's admission of his inability to try Judge, due to the Society's stated principles, and, instead of finding the resolution demanded by the membership at large, or the prosecution wished for

[429] Ibid., 462
[430] Ibid.

by the president, the leadership worked together to perform a sense of resolution and present a united front. The same charge of violating the Society's corporate neutrality would be levelled at Besant later in her career, though not in a formal inquiry, and this episode must have taught her much about the membership's strong feelings about their individual freedom of belief. However, the question of individual freedom to act on those beliefs, particularly as an influential leader of the Society, remained unresolved.

Aftermath of the Enquiry

In the period after the enquiry, *Lucifer* carried on as normal, as if the entire affair had never happened, while *The Path* continued its agenda-driven articles about the masters. However, *The Path* of September 1894 published a circular signed by the three other prominent leaders within the theosophical milieu who were, at least as far as Judge was concerned, just as culpable for compromising the principle of neutrality regarding the existence of the masters, namely, Olcott, Besant, and Sinnett. Entitled 'Occultism and Truth', it aimed to curtail claims to occult power by warning against false occultists.[431] The fact that Judge published this article suggests he was happy to go along with the post-enquiry efforts to smooth out the tension between the American Section and the rest of the Society or that he knew he could use it later as an example of bias against him. This 'truce' continued in the following month's issue (October 1894) of *The Path* in which Olcott published an article, directed at the American membership, that overtly sought a new sense of unity in the global Society. As part of his propaganda campaign, Judge had published numerous articles emphasising the importance of the Americas for the future of the Society and the evolution of humanity. In seeking unity, Olcott reminded members in the American Section of the importance of an Indian-centred Theosophical Society and attempted to create an atmosphere of normality.

> "We have passed through the recent crisis with ease and safety because of our Constitution and it is due to that that we are to-day stronger and more united than ever before. Behind us is a wrack of storm-clouds,

[431] Olcott, Sinnett, Besant et al., 'Occultism and Truth'.

> before us the sun of peace shines. I call upon every loyal member of the Society to do what he can to strengthen its solidarity."[432]

This article presaged and attempted to stave off the impending breakdown in relations among the leaders of the Society and the ultimate secession of the American Section. December 1894's issue of the *Irish Theosophist* revelled in the periodical's new role as Judge's mouthpiece in Europe and signalled the beginning of the end of his participation in Olcott's Society. It contained thoughts on neutrality and brotherhood in the second of a series of articles from one of Judge's closest associates, Jasper Niemand/Julia Keightley, and a letter from Judge to the editor. Judge explained that the charges against him would not simply go away in the aftermath of the inquiry and that people were demanding a full explanation from him. In October and November, the influential London paper, the *Westminster Gazette*, published a series of articles detailing the entire affair, going back to the death of Blavatsky. Clearly not satisfied with the inability of the leadership and the judicial committee to sanction Judge, one of the members with access to the sensitive documents in the case, thought to be Walter Old, one of the authors of the first public attack on him, released them to the press to see him tried in public. For the leadership, it was one thing to have these charges made available and hold an internal public inquiry but it was wholly another when intimate details of the case and the inner workings of the Society were available to the public at large. Having already survived the scandal of the Society for Psychical Research's report into Blavatsky's claims, the potential damage of smear campaign was not lost on anyone. In his letter to the editor, Judge branded the newspaper articles false and assured everyone that he would address all of it when the time was right, guided as he was by the masters.[433] In the December issue of *The Path*, Judge was defiant in an article that took the format of a set of 'theosophical don'ts'. Anticipating the ways in which his messages could be shown to be fraudulent by comparison to others, he was particularly interested in informing his readers not to think there was only one way that messages could be received or that they could only be received by certain people.

> "*Don't* talk as if messages from the Masters are all precipitated on rice paper, the writing incorporated in the paper, and such child's talk,

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[432] Olcott, 'T.S. Solidarity and Ideals', 206-207
[433] Judge, 'The Charges Against William Q. Judge', 47-48

> indulged in only by those who do not know. And forget not that precipitation proves only that something was precipitated. It can be done by mediums and by various sorts of occultists."[434]

Judge also responded to Olcott's emphasis on the importance of an Indian centred Society by encouraging his readers not to think that "the only true occultism is found in the East, or that we must go to the East for it, or that the West has none of it" and reminding them that "the greatest known Adept [Blavatsky] was a Western woman, a Russian, and that the energy of the lodge of Masters was first expended here in the West in this age."[435] This December 1894 issue is also the first time *Lucifer* publishes anything directly related to the Judge case. The widespread publication of the details in the press had caused no small amount of chaos for the Society as demands came from within, and without, to explain the charges and reach a more satisfying conclusion than that offered by the toothless judicial inquiry. A new section entitled 'Clash of Opinion' was created to give voice to as many grievances and responses as possible. Various statements from numerous lodges were published, some in full support of Judge, some calling for his resignation in light of the articles in the *Westminster Gazette*, some demanding a full written explanation from him, and some arguing that the matter should be left well enough alone. The Dublin Lodge was one of those who sent their statement of support for Judge.[436]

As the Society moved into 1895, the last months before the secession, the January issue of *The Theosophist* published Olcott's remarks on the Judge case, made as part of his address to the nineteenth anniversary of the Theosophical Society gathering at Adyar in November 1894. Olcott lamented the inability of the inquiry to "dispose of the charges against Mr. Judge" and that it "set in motion most powerful opposing currents of feeling."[437] These remarks contained the first published murmurs of the threat of secession: "I have even had it intimated that if Mr. Judge should be forced to resign, the Section will secede in a body, form an American Theosophical Society independently, and elect him President."[438] He reiterated that the Society could not legally try Judge as vice-president for acts

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[434] Judge, 'Theosophical Don't', 277
[435] Ibid.
[436] Mead, 'The Clash of Opinion'(a), 339-340. Attributed to the editor.
[437] Olcott, 'The Judge Case', 8
[438] Ibid., 9

committed by Judge the individual. The only recourse is to wait to see "how an individual accused of the immoral act of deception usually behaves."[439] Olcott's suggestion, although no one could compel it, was for Judge to resign and offer himself for re-election. He argued this would alleviate the tension within the Society and allow members to have their say in who represented them. The *Irish Theosophist* continued in its role as Judge's mouthpiece in Europe with the January 1895 issue publishing another in the series of articles by Jasper Niemand/Julia Keightley and one by Judge, addressing adepts and masters. The issue showed a substantial increase in the quantity and pitch of pro-Judge contributions as his camp worked to offset the damage caused by the newspaper articles and the inflammatory rhetoric coming from some sections of the Society. An article by Henry Travers Edge, a former personal pupil of Blavatsky who sided with Judge, characterised the trouble facing the Society as part of the masters' plan that "will prove invaluable as a means of winnowing out the substantial from the evanescent element in that body."[440] He suggested that those who claimed not to know if Judge was innocent or guilty "are not able to discern who is their teacher and who is not," an excusable problem for ordinary individuals but "not creditable to a student of occultism."[441] In effect, Edge was delegitimising anyone who could not tell that Judge was a true teacher and occultist, and he relished the idea of tempering the ranks of true believers. The next contribution came from Jirah D. Buck, Judge's close associate and future vice-president of the Theosophical Society in America. It took the form of a letter to the editor in which he claimed that his letter to *Lucifer* protesting the circulation of 'Occultism and Truth', Besant, Olcott, and Sinnett's condemnation of false occultists, was denied publication because they wanted the matter to be put to rest. This is a rare example of an individual claiming to have been censored by the editors of a theosophical journal and contrasts starkly with Judge's agreement to publish articles in *The Path* that were not generally favourable to his cause. The *Irish Theosophist*, in the interests of fairness, published Buck's letter instead. It asserted that the circular was a blow to Judge by insinuation. He argued that the residual "bitterness and hostility to Mr. Judge" at the conclusion of the inquiry "under guise of a general lesson on morality found an outlet in "Occultism and Truth.""[442] A

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[439] Ibid.
[440] Edge, 'The "Row" in the T.S.', 58
[441] Ibid., 59
[442] Buck, '"Occultism and Truth": To the Editor of the Irish Theosophist', 67

simultaneous campaign of support for Judge was underway in the January 1895 issue of *The Path,* beginning with some more Blavatsky-centred material. This was followed by an article in which Judge presented himself as an expert arbitrator in cases where the genuineness of messages was contested. He claimed that a member had sent him a message purported to be from a master and, on evaluating it, he provided "a signed certificate that the message is not genuine and had been concocted by three persons."[443] Judge counselled that real communications from the masters could be identified by "a peculiar and definite odor which could not be imitated and which once identified would not be forgotten" despite asserting, only a month earlier, that there was no single common factor in identifying genuine messages.[444] The previous month, he prepared his readers for the possibility of his being accused of forgery based on conditions outlined by Olcott, and he wanted to be able to dismiss the idea of identifying characteristics. However, in this piece, he asserted his expertise by outlining his own litmus test for the validity of messages, one that could only be administered by those who had experience of authentic messages in the first place. Judge sealed his new position as arbiter by inviting people to send him "any and all messages, real or pretended" and he would "guarantee to render a decision according to the fact in each case."[445] Alexander Fullerton's contribution discussed the growth in the number of people who expressed their belief in the masters and suggested reasons why some were hesitant to believe, or express their belief.[446] Finally, the review section contained a repudiation of the *Westminster Gazette* for "hastening to try and gather the pecuniary profits of its long attack on the T.S." by publishing "the whole thing in the form of a pamphlet" before receiving Judge's response.[447] The reviewer slated the pamphlet as "a monument of assumption, presumption, and ignorance, combined with malice and falsehood" that "may be put on the shelf with the S.P.R. Report on H.P.B.," adding that it is "not sold by the Path."[448] The pamphlet was an aggregation of the *Westminster Gazette* articles, with an updated commentary, and was published under the title *Isis Very Much Unveiled* in December, 1894.[449] The review called for a new edition of the pamphlet to include

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[443] Judge, 'Bogus Mahatma Messages', 303
[444] Ibid.
[445] Ibid.
[446] Fullerton, 'The Real Reason'
[447] Judge, 'Literary Notes'(a), 322. Attributed to the editor.
[448] Ibid.
[449] Edmund, *Isis Very Much Unveiled: Being the Story of the Great Mahatma Hoax*.

Judge's "5000 words long" reply that was "printed in full by the New York *Sun*."[450] In a letter to the editor of the January 1895 issue of *Lucifer*, the German theosophist Franz Hartmann suggested that the pamphlet be read by everyone because it shows "what Theosophy is *not* and what a Theosophical Society ought *not* to be."[451] He cautioned against clinging "to the turban of a Mahatma," "the coat tail of Mr. Judge," or "H.P. Blavatsky's or Mrs. Besant's apronstrings" for "the attainment of self-knowledge" and argued that it is necessary to "grow spiritually strong enough so as not to require any crutches."[452] Along with Hartmann's encouragement to learn the lesson of individual growth from the publication of the Judge case, Mead's 'The Clash of Opinion' section contained the resolutions of a number of lodges calling for Judge to respond to the accusations printed in the *Westminster Gazette* and, subsequently, the pamphlet. Much of the ire among ordinary Society members arose from some of the details relating to the inner workings of the Society and the Esoteric Section, of which Walter Old, the presumed whistleblower, had been a member.

While Besant toured Australia and New Zealand in the early part of 1895, Judge continued his agenda-driven contributions to the *Irish Theosophist*. The February issue continued the series by Jasper Niemand/Julia Keightley in which questions purported to be from readers were answered while taking the opportunity to thoroughly discuss the masters. Judge contributed an article, 'Three Great Ideas', the third of which argued that the masters are "living, veritable facts" that have "reached up to what perfection this period of evolution and this solar system will allow."[453] Judge had not previously been concerned with presenting the masters in this way, as natural products of evolution, because his earlier arguments against the need for evidence were bolstered by his lack of specificity. His tone in this article recalled the previously mentioned statemen by CJ Lopez, that argued for a conception of the masters "devoid of superstition and mysticism."[454] In the wake of widespread public reaction to the idea of receiving messages from higher beings, it was important for Judge to emphasise that the masters were not supernatural, in order to offset the ridicule meted out by the press. In the same issue (February 1895), George Russell contributed "some intuitions about brotherhood and trust in

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[450] Judge, 'Literary Notes'(a), 322. Attributed to the editor.
[451] Mead, 'Clash of Opinion'(b), 428. Hartmann's letter contained in section attributed to the editor.
[452] Ibid.
[453] Judge, 'Three Great Ideas', 73
[454] Lopez, 'Do Masters Exist?', 52

persons" to the sustained campaign to cement Irish support for Judge using the *Irish Theosophist* as a direct link to the British theosophical milieu.[455] Russell appealed to the value of a "deep-seated intuition" in claiming that the "intuitive trust which so many members of the T.S. have in William Q. Judge…shows that he is a real teacher."[456] He argued that when accusations are made about "things we cannot personally investigate, it is only the spirit within us can speak and decide."[457] Russell's esoteric monism is evident here as he argued that in cases where reason and evidence have not yet shown to be effectual, the only thing to rely on is the spirit. He highlighted Judge's record as a member and leader of the Theosophical Society, arguing that it would offset any wrongdoing even if the truth was worse than the accusations facing him. The characteristics and work ascribed to Judge were part of the charismatic fervour with which he went about his theosophical pursuits. Russell followed Edge's lead in trusting his intuition about Judge's calibre as a teacher, albeit in less accusatory terms, and his intervention on the side of Judge was a highly authoritative and influential endorsement. The pandering to the Irish readership continued as Russell's comments were followed by the printing of an unsigned recollection of Judge's presence at a gathering in Dublin in 1888. The story recalled when Judge "first heard of the Dublin Lodge he felt that it "rang" in his ears" and he "hoped that it would become a living power in Ireland" as he "knew of no European race that was more naturally occult, especially the western Irish."[458] Importantly, Judge asserted that "he would counsel the Lodge to aspire to the principles of the Masters."[459] This issue (February 1895) contained an article and a letter to the editor by Judge, the first of which sought validity for his communications from the masters by appealing to authority. He explained that he had received a message from the masters with instructions to send it to A.P. Sinnett and offered the reply as proof that Sinnett believed in the authenticity of his messages. Judge addressed his lack of response to the charges levelled at him by explaining, in his letter to the editor, that the reason he had not fully done so is that he had not been furnished with copies of the supporting documentary evidence. Finally, in a microcosmic presaging of events about to happen on an international scale, Edge reported on the resignation of

[455] Russell, 'On The Spur of the Moment', 77
[456] Ibid.
[457] Ibid.
[458] Anon., 'A Reminiscence', 81
[459] Ibid.

Society members from the Blavatsky Lodge in London, due to its passing of resolutions condemning Judge, to form the H.P.B. Lodge.[460] On the American side, the February 1895 issue of *The Path* published the first in a series of articles from Judge, in which he listed testimonials to the existence of the masters, and reported on various resolutions of support passed by American lodges.

In the February 1895 issue of *Lucifer*, Besant broke her silence in a substantial article addressing the state of the Society and the fallout from the Judge case. She admitted that the messages she talked about in her 1891 speech at the Hall of Science were not genuine and that there had been other communications she had not mentioned in her July 1894 Statement at the Convention. Besant described these omitted messages as deliberately written by Judge in order to get what he wanted in the absence of any other higher authority and claimed she was restricted from publicly asserting her opinion at the time without evidence because of the gravity of the issue. This was a marked departure from her statement after the inquiry, and any accord struck the previous summer among Judge, Besant, and Olcott, could not be maintained in the aftermath of the *Westminster Gazette* publications. The leadership in India and London had closed ranks and were prepared for whatever might arise from finally bringing the Judge case to its conclusion. The issue also contained a letter from GRS Mead in which he criticised Judge and his followers, and a letter from Judge claiming he still hadn't been furnished with the supporting documentation of the charges made against him. Judge's claims in this regard were the centre of an overwrought series of conflicting published correspondence between the major parties in the March 1895 issue of the *Irish Theosophist*. This issue also continued to demonstrate Judge's expertise by publishing extracts from his letters to various students speaking about the masters. Frederick J. Dick, the Secretary of the Dublin Lodge, followed Russell in lending his influential voice to Judge's campaign, albeit in a more defiant contribution, and urged followers of Judge to attack, rather than simply defend against, the actions taken by the Society against him. Finally, Judge contributed a piece outlining how the entire affair was engineered for Besant to force his resignation, Olcott "to resign his office," and "then Mrs. Besant was to be nominated as President."[461] He claimed Besant "said several times" the proceeding

[460] Edge, '"H.P.B." Lodge T.S.', 88
[461] Judge, 'The Persecution of William Q. Judge', 103

was to prevent him "succeeding to the Presidency."[462] Judge supported his claims by reproducing a series of letters from Besant that showed her using the looming charges to convince him to resign his position as co-head of the Esoteric Section, a role he had taken up, along with Besant, after the death of Blavatsky and under instruction from the masters. He ridiculed the idea that he would resign in the interest of the Society if he were an honourable man, a suggestion made by Olcott and others in the Indian Section, and rounded off this precis of his defence by reiterating his claim that documents were withheld from him, preventing him from offering a full explanation. By now, the *Irish Theosophist* was almost completely under Judge's control but, as the principle of giving everyone their say still held, this issue also published A.P. Sinnett's letter denying Judge's claim that Sinnett thought his messages genuine.

The March 1895 issue of *The Path* continued to demonstrate the alignment between it and the *Irish Theosophist* in the months leading up to the secession. Judge contributed the next instalment of his collected testimonials to the existence of the masters along with another article dedicated to the masters' messages. This issue reproduced the persecution piece from the *Irish Theosophist*, in which Judge claimed he was the victim of a concerted effort to remove him from the vice-presidency, and published an open letter from Judge to Mead that addressed all the calls for Judge's resignation and, once again, reiterated his lack of access to the relevant prosecution documents. Finally, it was announced that the Convention of the American Section, at which the secession occurred, would be held in Boston in April 1895.

As a result of the confusion that had engulfed the Theosophical Society in London, the March 1895 *Lucifer* had regressed to publishing a series of correspondence where claims and counterclaims were offered, and all offence taken was given the required space and ink for a response. 'The Clash of Opinion' section began with a letter from Bertram Keightley criticising an internal circular, made public by the document leak, Judge had sent to the members of the Esoteric Section the previous November (1894). He argued that the spirit and tone of the circular, which Judge claimed was directed by a master, was not at one with a master who taught theosophical principles.[463] The section continued with Judge repeating his

[462] Ibid.
[463] Mead, 'The Clash of Opinion'(c), 58-64

claim that he had not received the relevant documents necessary for him to offer a full explanation of the charges made against him. This was immediately followed by a letter from Walter Old claiming that he had.

The April 1895 issue of the *Irish Theosophist* contained more of Jasper Niemand's articles on the masters and some material reminding the readers of how much Blavatsky valued Judge and the American Section of the Society. Jirah D Buck contributed a letter to the editor in which he claimed that "[i]n America to retain confidence in H.P.B. and stand squarely by Mr. Judge means exactly the same thing."[464] Anticipating the upcoming split, he questioned the future of sustained relations with other sections "[i]f such association is to be determined by our joining the assaults on Mr. Judge."[465] *The Path* of the same month (April 1895) started with Judge defending himself from the charge of fomenting sectarianism between the east and west by claiming that the spiritual crest of evolution is in the west. Though he had often emphasised the importance of America in the theosophical enterprise, this was a response to Olcott's reminder to the American readership of the importance of India. The 'Literary Notes' section made a short reference to the February 1895 issue of *Lucifer* as being almost entirely composed of articles about Judge and, unsurprisingly, carried a glowing review of the *Irish Theosophist*:

> "Surely the Irish Theosophist is advancing with great strides! With the able and devoted band of workers and writers who sustain it, and the "H.P.B. Press" converted into the "*Irish Theosophist* Press" ("without Devachanic break"[466], as the Dublin Lodge Letter wittily puts it), a bright future, full of strength and usefulness, stretches before it."[467]

The April 1895 *Lucifer* continued to show the disarray of the London organisation by publishing several letters from various people contesting things that were said and not said about each other. This issue saw the publication of a letter from Besant to Olcott in which she asked for the case documents and proposed to hold a Special Convention to put the Judge matter to rest. The March and April 1895 issues of *The Theosophist* published details of Olcott's intention to sail for London

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[464] Buck, 'Letters to the Editor', 127
[465] Ibid.
[466] According to Blavatsky, Devachan is where souls find temporary respite between reincarnations.
[467] Judge, 'Literary Notes'(b), 28

and his agreement to provide Besant with all the documentary evidence gathered for the original inquiry for her use at the Special Convention. However, on Besant's return to London, the Special Convention was abandoned as it became clear that the secession of the American Section was imminent and inevitable.

The Secession of the American Section

At their Ninth Annual Convention in Boston, held on the 28th and 29th of April 1895, the American Section voted for their autonomy from the Theosophical Society with its headquarters in Adyar. William Q. Judge was elected president and they named themselves the Theosophical Society in America. By May of 1895, *Lucifer*, *The Path*, and the *Irish Theosophist* were consumed with attack and defence, hearing everyone's voice, and dissecting every published detail offered by anyone about anyone connected to the Judge case. The editor of the *Irish Theosophist*, Daniel N. Dunlop, characterised the situation as a ""man-hunt" along unconstitutional lines" and a "sickly clamor, devoid of one redeeming feature."[468] He took Besant to task for her contradictory statements regarding her knowledge of the authenticity of the messages and her dissimulation as to the differences between direct precipitation and channelling. Dunlop referred to Besant's statement from the inquiry and particularly to her assertion that the charges against Judge could be reduced to the single charge of "seeking to gain influence and authority by unfair means" as part of his attempt to ascend to the presidency, "a position of authority in the T.S. to which his long and eminent services *justly entitle* him."[469] He pointed out that it would be unnecessary for Judge to use unfair means to gain something to which he was entitled, unless that entitlement was disputed, and if that was the case, then the dispute would be the unfair aspect. Dunlop's article was followed by a short report on the Ninth Annual Convention of the American Section, which became the First Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society in America. The full report of the proceedings appeared in *The Path* of May 1895, an issue that began with the now customary contributions on Blavatsky and articles discussing evidence of the existence of the masters. This was followed by a Judge article in which he revised the entire history of the Society to establish the legitimacy of his secession and the primacy of his new group. Entitled 'The Theosophical Society. Inside Facts as to its Organization.-A *De Facto* Body.-The

[468] Dunlop, 'Notes by the Way', 143
[469] Ibid., 146 Dunlop citing Besant's statement after the inquiry.

Real T.S. in New York.-The President Still a Delegate to Foreign Lands, and Holding Over in Office', the article cited a number of bureaucratic technicalities to show that the entirety of the Theosophical Society outside of America was illegitimate due to the lack of legal and procedural standing for Olcott and Blavatsky's actions and amendments in India.[470] The full report of the secession proceedings ended with an account of Judge's lecture to the convention in which he provided an explanation of the charges made against him despite his continued assertions that he had not been provided with the necessary documents. It was subsequently moved, and carried, that his explanation was perfectly satisfactory and entirely unnecessary.[471] Besant's comments on the situation in the May 1895 issue of *Lucifer* were brusque: "No solution could have been better for the T.S., however sad we may feel for those who have cut themselves off from the Society to which H.P.B. gave her life."[472]

June 1895's issue of the *Irish Theosophist* continued with the familiar themes of the masters, Blavatsky, and the Judge case, and published Judge's letter to Olcott outlining his revised history of the legitimate Theosophical Society. Dunlop's editorial notes celebrated the secession and endorsed Judge's revisionist account of the American Society's status as the true parent Society. The same month, (June 1895) *Lucifer* saw Besant return to the actual work of the Society with a general article on the themes of brotherhood, service, and duty in which she argued that the "movement is meant for human service, for work in the outer world, and its general reputation is therefore a matter of importance."[473] Besant's refocusing on her own agenda was part of the global Society's desire to move on from Judge's secession and the ensuing reputational damage. In fact, the July 1895 issue of the *Irish Theosophist* reported on the Convention of the European Section of the Theosophical Society at which it was made clear that members wanted nothing to do with the new American Society. Several delegates objected to this exclusionary stance and walked out on the meeting. Mirroring the secession of the American Section, there followed a report of the First Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society in Europe, an autonomous society formed for those in Europe who supported Judge and whose new constitution

[470] Judge, 'The Theosophical Society'
[471] Judge, 'Ninth Annual Convention'
[472] Besant, 'On The Watch-Tower'(f), 184
[473] Besant, 'Brotherhood, True and False', 309

provided for 'perfect neutrality as regards beliefs or disbeliefs of members'. Dunlop, became President of the Irish national section of the new society, George Russell became Vice-president, and Frederick J. Dick became Treasurer. In the meantime, the Theosophical Society (Adyar) was trying to address the issues that led to the secession in the first place. Discussion in the July 1895 *Lucifer* turned to debates around the limits of executive power and Olcott contributed a letter to the general council outlining his views on the weight attributed to the teachings of influential leaders. Judge was not mentioned by name but the implication was clear when Olcott argued that it "should be made a serious offence" to "give out any teachings as by authority" because their value "is not augmented in the least degree by attaching to it an authoritative name."[474] This is exactly the kind of problem Besant would face during her presidency. Olcott's words, along with the precedent of neutrality set by the inquiry, would influence her stated position until 1916. Besant resumed her role as an evangelist and explainer of theosophy in her contributions to periodicals after the secession of the American Section. But questions of neutrality and freedom of action, particularly pertaining to influential leaders, did not abate. The Judge case highlighted how the general membership of the Society valued their individual freedom of belief and their right to act in accordance with those beliefs. However, many also called for that freedom to be curtailed when it impacted on the neutrality of the society, the freedom of others, or the reputation of the Theosophical Society. In the figure of Judge, individual freedom began to bleed into institutional or official authority so the principle of corporate neutrality was invoked as the reason to initiate a formal inquiry *and* to suspend that inquiry. Olcott and Besant were able to invoke the same principle to both garner support for a prosecution of Judge and justify stopping short of having to litigate the minutiae of potentially scandalous claims to occult and psychic phenomena in a semi-public forum. The next section describes the continued development of Besant's vision for the Society, one that concentrated on encouraging the membership to become involved in social reform issues while attempting to avoid charges of infringing on their individual freedom of belief or compromising the neutrality of the Society.

[474] Besant, 'Theosophical Activities'(e), 417. Attributed to the editor as Olcott's letter appears in a larger section.

Besant's Presidential Activism

The corporate neutrality of the Theosophical Society was a matter of intense debate for its members but, at a time of such significant social change, it was almost impossible to maintain. Diana Burfield notes the significance of the Society as a locus of social reform and culture criticism, and situates it "in the context of the emergent social groups of the eighteen-eighties which expressed the protest of sections of the middle and upper classes against what they perceived as a monstrous and life-denying orthodoxy."[475] Annie Besant's importance in the politicisation of the Society and its members cannot be overstated and her influence significantly contributed to the concern with socialism and social reform in the political discourse of the Society. Socialism spurred political discussion in all areas of life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Having a former member of the Fabian society as president of the Theosophical Society had a real impact on how members discussed politics. Besant's activities drew positive and negative responses from the membership as the long-debated, underlying questions of whether one should interfere with the conditions of others and, if so, the extent and type of interference, became a central issue during her rise and eventual presidency. The role of the state in legislating to improve the conditions of society, the ability of individual humanitarianism to address social issues, or leaving individuals to experience the karmic value of the negative aspects of their lives, as part of a long journey through innumerable incarnations, were all thoroughly discussed in terms that had been well established by the contributions discussed in the previous chapter.

Besant's presidential address in 1907 offered some clues to her agenda. She stated the right of all members to their own beliefs and their duty to extend that right to each other. Harking back to the lessons of the Judge Affair, she also made a statement on the rights of members to express their beliefs in full equality with their rights to be sceptical of others. She argued that the Society "affirms the existence of Divine Wisdom" and its purpose was to "spread the Teachings which lead up to the attainment of that Wisdom, while leaving its members as individuals the fullest freedom to give to any of those teachings any form which expresses their own thinking, and even to deny any one of them."[476] Having given such a statement on

[475] Burfield, 'Theosophy and Feminism: Some Explorations in Nineteenth Century Biography', 52
[476] Besant, 'Presidential Address', 860-861

individual freedoms, Besant proceeded to articulate her intention to mobilise the resources at her disposal in achieving her social agenda. Besant commented that the organisational work of the Society was almost complete and the task at hand was "to use the organisation [Olcott] created, and to guide it to the accomplishment of its purpose – the spread of theosophical ideas, and the growth of knowledge."[477] The organisational work of the Society refers to its internal workings so this marked a shift from an inward-facing idea of work to an outward-facing one. Besant argued that "Lodges should not be content with a programme of lectures, private and public, and with classes" but that "members should be known as good workers in all branches of beneficent activity."[478] Despite Besant's assurances of individual freedoms and the Society's neutrality, she echoed her writings of 1889 with such an intentional statement of organised social work. In asserting the duty of members to spread theosophical teachings, she shifted the focus to those outside of the Lodges and, in linking it to the idea of 'beneficent activity', she dramatically shifted the debate on interference, individualism, and neutrality. Besant spared little time in acting upon her proposals, and founded the Theosophical Order of Service in 1908 to facilitate social and political action without impinging on the corporate neutrality of the Society proper. However, the idea was not entirely her own and built upon a history of forming 'leagues' at the local level to accomplish certain goals, many of which were administrative tasks or organised activities for members. Leagues that were formed around social reform ideas usually concerned themselves with the least political issues so as not to draw too much attention from other members.

The League of Theosophical Workers

The precedent for Besant's new order was set at the annual convention of the American Section in April 1891 and *The Path* of June 1891 reported on the foundation of the "League of Theosophical Workers…in accordance with the report of the committee…for founding such a league."[479] Besant was touring America during that time and may have been influenced by the foundation of the League of Theosophical Workers. Its description, in the August 1891 issue of *Lucifer,* as an organisation "to carry on in organised fashion all kinds of propagandist and charitable work, that may tend to the spreading of the Theosophical ideal"

[477] Ibid., 861
[478] Ibid.
[479] Judge, 'Mirror of the Movement'(a), 90-91

prefiguring the language she used in her presidential address and the announcement of the Order of Service in 1908.[480] The European Section followed suit, expanding the League of Theosophical Workers, and Isabell Cooper-Oakley acted as Secretary despite her opposition to the influence of socialism and social policy on the Society's work. No one objected to the organised aspect of the League's work or argued that its social agenda was compromising the neutrality of the Society. This may have been due to the autonomy enjoyed by local branches to decide the nature of the work and the tendency to choose issues that were either not contentious enough to be polarising or not ambitious enough to have a significant impact. *The Path* of September 1891 reported that five leagues had then been established, conducting activities that included a picnic, a two-week trip to the country for working girls, doctor's visits to the poor and sick, and raising charitable funds.[481] The next month's (October 1891) *Lucifer* reported that the American league's activities included "a picnic into the country for forty boys; six working girls sent to the country for two weeks; League restaurant; a singing class, and two domestic libraries."[482] By November 1891, *Lucifer* had reports of the league's activities in the UK, which included "a Debating Class, a Sewing Class, a Free Labour Bureau and Registry, two new Branches at Liverpool and Dublin, Reading Circles, and last but not least, *Creche*."[483] The January 1892 issue of *The Path* reported in its 'London Letter' that the league in the UK had started a crèche and a day nursery, raised £80, and was about to open a soup kitchen.[484] The tone of the reports from these leagues changed within a couple of years. There were fewer reports of members involved in socially conscious work and more summaries of the leagues' activities as centres of propaganda and expansion. The December 1893 issue of *Lucifer* reported on the American League as "sending out tracts, newspaper articles, etc. getting thereby hundreds of newspapers who gladly print Theosophic matter obtained so easily" and that a "scrap-book [of their PR successes] is one of the latest innovations and will be interesting to read in years to come."[485] In only two years, these leagues went from being the charitable, publicly active, and socially conscious arm of the Theosophical

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[480] Besant, 'Theosophical Activities'(a), 517
[481] Ver Planck, 'Work in the Leagues', 198-199
[482] Besant, 'Theosophical Activities'(b), 172
[483] Besant, 'Theosophical Activities'(c), 256
[484] Judge, 'Mirror of the Movement'(c), 325-326. Attributed to the editor as letter appears in larger section.
[485] Besant, 'Theosophical Activities'(d), 345

Society to a propaganda machine documenting its successes. The influence of Judge is apparent as, by 1893, he was much more concerned with education and propaganda, to both fuel his unprecedented expansion of the Society and cement his role as its leader, than with 'beneficent activities'. However, in London, Besant's influence ensured the social aspect of league activities at the time. The April 1893 issue of *Lucifer* reported on the distinctly socialistic activity of The League of Theosophical Workers in London:

> It is proposed to start a Laundry, fitted with the best machinery and arranged on the best sanitary conditions, to give employment to many of the struggling women in the neighbourhood, the profits up to a certain point to be divided among the women as a bonus in addition to their fixed wage, and the surplus to be set aside to start similar self-supporting and profit-sharing enterprises elsewhere.[486]

The Leagues of Theosophical Workers had been formed to redirect the enthusiastic organisational and administrative efforts of the Society towards social issues. In America, it quickly reverted under the leadership of Judge. In London, though it maintained its social focus, the league began to wane as the global Society focused their time and energy on the Judge Affair. However, Besant would formally reinstitute the spirit of the original league as The Theosophical Order of Service on assuming the presidency.

The Theosophical Order of Service

The constitution of the Theosophical Order of Service was announced in the supplement to the February 1908 issue of *The Theosophist.*

> A number of members of the T.S., feeling the wish to organise themselves for various lines of service, to actively promote the first object of the Society, I hereby constitute an order, to be called "The T.S. Order of Service," under the constitution of which Leagues may be formed for any special purpose on which a group of members is agreed, the objects

[486] Besant, 'On The Watch-Tower'(b), 91

> and bye-laws of such Leagues to become valid, as constituted under the order, after approval by the Central Council.[487]

The March 1908 issue of *The Theosophist* contained a follow-up article that explained and legitimised the new order by reprinting an article published in *Lucifer* in January 1888. The text of the article was communicated to Blavatsky and signed by A Master of Wisdom, lending the legitimacy of a master's words to Besant's new project without getting involved in the difficult and risky option of producing new messages from the masters. Besant emphatically tied the work of the order to the theosophical enterprise at its most cosmic and universal by arguing that it was "a trumpet call, summoning the Theosophical Society to take up its great role as the pioneer of the Religion of Humanity, which will be the mother of a new civilisation, and to prepare to lay the foundations of that civilisation in a way worthy of future master-builders."[488] She laid the responsibility of achieving these lofty and distant goals at the feet of the membership, or at least those members that consider themselves aspirational theosophists, and insisted that the work must begin immediately.

> Those who aspire to return, life after life, to share in this gigantic work of rearing a civilisation based on the spiritual idea of Universal Brotherhood, should now begin to try their 'prentice hands on hewing into shape the rough stones that lie around them on every side; so shall they gradually become expert craftsmen, and prepare for the higher work of the future.[489]

Finally, Besant invoked the authority of the masters to legitimise her efforts to take the Society in a more activist social direction by encouraging the readership to "listen to a Master's idea of what the Theosophical Society should be, as a whole, in its Lodges and in individual members."[490] She cited the reprinted article from the master, 'Some Words on Daily Life':

> Theosophy should not represent merely a collection of moral verities, a bundle of metaphysical ethics, epitomised in theoretical dissertations. Theosophy *must be made practical*; and it has, therefore, to be

[487] Besant, 'The T.S. Order of Service'(a), 24
[488] Besant, 'The T.S. Order of Service'(b), 487
[489] Ibid.
[490] Ibid.

> disencumbered of useless digressions, in the sense of desultory orations and fine talk. Let every Theosophist only do his duty, that which he can and ought to do, and very soon the sum of human misery, within and around the areas of every branch of your Society, will be found visibly diminished. Forget Self in working for others – and the task will become an easy and a light one for you."[491]

The article, originally published during Blavatsky's time, was meant to encourage passive individual altruism but was now being used to legitimise an organised effort to work towards specific results based on one's beliefs. This article set the tone for Besant's approach to the practical elements of theosophy for the rest of her career. She used it for its activist rhetoric as it claimed that "Theosophy has to fight intolerance, ignorance and selfishness…without fear or hesitation" and the Society must "tell the Truth to the very face of Lie."[492] Besant found a justification in the words of the master to subtly undermine the idea of corporate neutrality without directly addressing it. The article stated that the Society, "*[a]s an association*…has not only the right, but the duty to uncloak vice and do its best to redress wrongs, whether through the voice of its chosen lecturers or the printed word of its journals and publications," but argued that "its Fellows, or Members, have *individually* no such right (italics in original)."[493] Though the article also pointed out the individual responsibility of members to set an example and to improve themselves by helping their weaker brethren, the distinction drawn between the responsibilities of the Society as a whole and the duties of the individual members had not been highlighted in any other context by a prominent or leading theosophist, yet here it was pointed out by the president. It had always been Besant's wish to mobilise the resources of the global Society in service of her social reform goals and she employed such indirect strategies to navigate the issue of the Society's neutrality. This article showed the sense of freedom she believed she had found through reinterpreting the words of the masters and forming an organisation that operated parallel to the main Society, but retained access to its most important resource, the membership. The Judge case loomed large in this article's references to concentrating on one's own flaws before judging others for their actions. Besant used her experience of the Judge

[491] Ibid., 487-488
[492] Ibid., 489
[493] Ibid.

case to anticipate the kinds of attacks she would face and based her new order on an interpretation of Universal Brotherhood that all members could agree on and legitimised it with a message from the masters received when Blavatsky was alive, messages that almost all members accepted as true and genuine. The article from the master concluded with "the problem of true Theosophy and its great mission," offering a twofold path to its solution. The first part was the "working out of clear unequivocal conceptions of ethics, ideas and duties, such as shall best and most fully satisfy the right and altruistic feelings in men," and the second was the "modelling of these conceptions for their adaptation into such forms of daily life, as shall offer a field where they may be applied with most equitableness."[494] Appended to the reprint was an essay in which Besant took up the challenge and developed her worldview in response to these two requirements. She disseminated it through a series of lectures given all over the world, called "Ideals and Morality," and in her numerous contributions to theosophical publications. The reprint of the master's article was followed by Besant's commentary in which she paraphrased the sentiments she wished the reader to note. Besant suggested that the purpose of the new order was the mission of the Society; "making Theosophy practical in order that the sum of human misery, within and around the areas of every branch of our Society may be visibly diminished."[495] She was careful to point out the individualist nature of the enterprise by assuring readers that "[o]nly those members who feel that the time has come for such an effort will, naturally join the Order."[496] She was also at pains to emphasise that though "animated by a common spirit" would be "diverse in methods and in opinions."[497] To demonstrate her efforts to balance individualism, held so dear by the membership, with her wish to see the collective power of the Theosophical Society harnessed in service to society, she offered the example of "sincere Individualists and sincere Socialists."[498] Besant explained that although they "have a common aim, the improvement of society…they differ widely in their methods and lines of work" and since the Society has "members of both kinds; both should work in their different ways, in different Leagues, with those like-minded with

[494] Ibid., 490
[495] Ibid., 491
[496] Ibid.
[497] Ibid.
[498] Ibid.

themselves."[499] Besant provided specific administrative details as to the hierarchical organisation of the Central and National Councils that would approve and organise the leagues, a form of tiered democracy that would later inform her lectures on how the state should be organised. She concluded that the "object is to keep the whole movement permeated by theosophical ideals, but also to permeate the outside world with the same ideals."[500] The article explaining the formation of the Order of Service was the template for the development of an overarching worldview that would mark her theosophical career.

The reports on the activities of The League of Theosophical Workers ran from October 1891 up to April 1893 in *Lucifer* and June 1893 in *The Path*. However, the focus of the entire Society was shifting to the Judge case and the debates around corporate neutrality and individual freedom of belief. Members rejected the compromising of corporate neutrality that resulted from an individual in an influential position, Judge, repeating, and thereby lending authority to, his belief in the existence of the masters. However, there was no backlash against the movement towards practical social work on a corporate and organised level instigated by the foundation of The League of Theosophical Workers. When Besant became president, corporate neutrality and individual freedom of belief arguments were invoked again, not about religious beliefs as such, but about the freedom of individuals, including influential or prominent members, to act on them, thereby setting an authoritative and charismatic example. Therefore, despite numerous arguments invoking freedom of belief and the duty of individual altruism, if too many individuals acted as examples to others and expressed individual altruism together, it lent authority to one issue over another and infringed on the freedom of others to disagree. The local leagues formed under the auspices of The League of Theosophical Workers began with very socially oriented work and coincided with the debates around socialism in theosophical periodicals in the early 1890s yet did not attract criticism. However, leagues affiliated with the Order of Service could be formed to stand for or against any specific issue, allowing greater individual freedom than their predecessors, yet were a central aspect of the criticism levelled at Besant during her presidency. Perhaps if the work of the original League of Theosophical

[499] Ibid.
[500] Ibid.

Workers was not interrupted by the onset of the Judge Affair, it would have faced similar issues. It was Besant's change in rhetoric, the scale of her vision, and socialist legacy that exercised her critics. In her case, individual freedom and corporate neutrality were not the basis for levelling formal charges, as they were for Judge, but there was a significant concern among certain sections of the membership that the Society was about to completely change direction. Besant had two significant advantages over Judge when faced with similar issues: she was already president and had enjoyed the full support of Olcott up until his death.

Having learned some harsh lessons from the Judge Affair, Besant used The Theosophical Order of Service to mitigate any negative response from the Society to what she saw as her presidency's responsibility to "bring it more to the front in physical plane activities," a mission she thought herself well prepared for given her activities up to that point.[501] The practicality of Theosophy in one's life was an important theme for Society members as far back as the 1890s and the new order's motto was 'A Union of all who love for the Service of all who Suffer'. However, most importantly for Besant, it allowed the resources of the Theosophical Society to be mobilised on important social issues "without committing any members of the Society who disagreed with them."[502] Besant later recalled the formation of the Order of Service as having caused no real issues for members: "A few people objected to the Order of Service but it caused no friction worth speaking of, while it attracted some who felt the need for such work as it encouraged."[503] The next section traces the development of Besant's ideal-driven worldview inspired by her reading of the master's article she reprinted on the formation of the Order of Service.

[501] Besant, 'The Wider Outlook', 131
[502] Ibid., 132
[503] Ibid.

Besant's Practical Theosophy

Although Besant had been combining her socialist tendencies with a theosophical approach for years, it was during her presidency that her ideas coalesced into a coherent and communicable worldview and she used her platform to speak about it often and at length. She delivered numerous lectures from 1909 to 1912, many of which she collected and published to spread her ideas on practical theosophy. One of the most important aspects of her worldview was her interpretation of Universal Brotherhood, not as a full social equality of individuals but as an inequality analogous to that found within a family. Besant's spiritual hierarchy echoed that offered by Cooper-Oakley in her criticism of socialist discourse in theosophical periodicals but was a much more pleasant and gentle expression. She argued that like the children in a family share parents in common, so does the brotherhood of man and "[h]uman life is a portion of that one Father-life."[504] For Besant, the only true equality is that "God lives equally in all that exists" and "[a]ll have hidden within them the possibility of rising to the highest perfection" but inequality arises on the physical plane because of "the long evolutionary chain of life."[505] In a lecture delivered in the summer of 1909 and published in 1910, she began from this platform of Universal Brotherhood as a family-based form of inequality and crafted a theology of theosophical action. Besant offered the example of the Masons as the only other society that recognised the importance of Universal Brotherhood and argued that "there is nothing more rigid in its order and in the authority committed to the officers than a Masonic Lodge."[506] She claimed that "[h]ierarchy is there recognised as the very condition of liberty" and that the implications of her interpretation of Universal Brotherhood for the Theosophical Society are the same. Besant saw the hierarchy as entrusting the "destinies of humanity" and "the evolving growth of man" to the wise who have "the right to rule" and whose "commands of wisdom are gladly carried out by the less wise, who recognise the authority of those wiser than themselves."[507] She argued that this kind of hierarchy was essential to achieving liberty and offered her interpretation of Universal Brotherhood as a family of unequal individuals. Besant explained that "there is a difference of age in the

[504] Besant, *The Ideals of Theosophy*, 16
[505] Ibid., 16-17
[506] Besant, *The Changing World*, 77
[507] Ibid.

individualised human Spirits, and that there are elders and youngers in the great human family" due to the "natural law of reincarnation," and so some are wiser than others.[508] Having established the authority of wisdom, she moved on to the importance of ideals in guiding and edifying human action because of their ability to bring about change in human nature. Besant argued that the Society should "hold up great ideals before the young" which would "fire their hearts to passionate enthusiasm, until self-sacrifice shall be a joy and not a sacrifice at all, in order that the ideal they worship may become realised on earth."[509] Besant was attempting to formulate a theology of theosophical action that would inspire people to work towards alleviating social problems, not through forced, legislative equality, but through the realisation of theosophical ideals. This allowed her to mobilise the Society behind shared ideals while avoiding direct infringements on individual freedom of belief.

Besant offered several examples of social ills that could be addressed by applying her analysis, the first being her explanation that criminal behaviour was carried out by young souls. She argued that a criminal should not be imprisoned or sentenced to useless labour but treated as "a younger brother who does not know how to guide himself."[510] For Besant, it was the duty of an elder to train the criminal in "some honest trade whereby he might gain a livelihood" and to "lay down the very wholesome law that if a man will not work neither shall he eat."[511] She argued for "rational amusement…that will cultivate" while the criminal was in prison and for letting the "willingness to live the decent life be the only key to the door of the jail."[512] Besant applied her interpretation of Universal Brotherhood to economics and argued for a "scheme of production and distribution which shall make human life less burdened on the one side, less full of useless luxury on the other."[513] She marked her transition from a socialist to a socially driven theosophist by arguing that this couldn't be achieved "along the rough and ready lines of the Socialism of the streets" but through the "most careful consideration of all the problems which are

[508] Ibid., 78
[509] Ibid., 82
[510] Ibid., 93
[511] Ibid.
[512] Ibid., 93-94
[513] Ibid., 97

interlinked the one with the other."[514] Whatever "system of general co-operation, of general profit-sharing, or something along those lines" would be put in place, she cautioned that the ignorant should never be given "the control over that on which their food supply depends."[515] Despite Besant's wish for some kind of socially inspired economic system, she was committed to the idea that those who knew better should be in control. She offered a similar opinion on trade disputes, arguing that people should not be striking when they didn't know the details of how the business works lest they strike their local industry out of business. Besant applied the same interpretation of Universal Brotherhood to the organisation of government more broadly and claimed "power for the wise and not for the ignorant."[516] Brotherhood was her justification for rule by the wise, and though she conceded that she was not in favour of the universal vote, she offered a tiered model of increasing suffrage in parallel with knowledge and responsibility.

> I would give a vote to every man and woman for the municipality in the town where they lived, and where they understood the questions which they wanted their representatives to arrange for them. And then, when it came to a larger area, I would only give the vote to those who had had some experience in guiding the smaller affairs of a town or a parish, and who were older and therefore had more experience. And so I would restrict your suffrage as I increased the area over which the representatives elected by that suffrage extended their rule. And while everyone should have a vote in the small affairs they understood in their own neighbourhood, only the educated should have it in larger affairs, where knowledge of economics and of history is necessary for rational legislation. And only the more experienced should have it for control of the nation; and only a very small minority for all international relations, which are not understood by one man out of a hundred, although all your Parliament votes upon them.[517]

Besant's political views as such were similar to Blavatsky's in that she had no concern for party politics or the enactment of legislation as primary modes of

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[514] Ibid.
[515] Ibid.
[516] Besant, *The Ideals of Theosophy*, 28
[517] Besant, 'Social Problems', 24

achieving her goals. She argued that "[l]iberty and the vote have practically nothing in common" and emphasised her position that individual spiritual development should be prioritised over coercive laws. For Besant, "political freedom…is the result of the freedom of the individual, and not the outcome of the warring passions of men."[518] This is the crux of Besant's practical theosophy, that spiritually developing individuals will be guided by the ideals of the Society, primarily Universal Brotherhood, and derive practical applications of theosophy from them. She was careful to maintain the individualist aspect so as not to expose herself to criticism based on dogmatism or corporate neutrality. Besant argued that "while the Ideal of Brotherhood is binding" on all members, her application of it to life was her "view of the right application" which "may, and will, be traversed by many…fellow-members."[519] Besant's interpretation of Universal Brotherhood allowed her to call for social reform and make it the responsibility of individual members without infringing on their individuality. She invoked "the sense of Social Duty that realises that those who gain by social condition should use their gains for Society and not only for themselves" and encouraged a kind of self-propelled version of socialism. Besant advocated for the improvement of social conditions for all to thrive and partake in spiritual development and the theosophical enterprise. She summed up her position as follows:

> You see roughly, then, the Ideal which I would put before you – full education; work of some sort for all, whether of hands or of brain; a minimum of well-being for all, to give full development of the faculties with which they were born; and training of the younger by the elder; and so more rapid progress for all.[520]

Criticism of Besant's Policies

After the foundation of the Order of Service and Besant's lectures calling for members to involve themselves in social reform activities, she drew criticism. The debate was summed up in a series of three articles by Mabel Hilary Charles on the connections between the Society and politics that began in the May 1909 issue of *The Theosophist*. Charles took the idea of Universal Brotherhood as a metonym for the

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[518] Besant, *The Changing World*, 102
[519] Besant, *The Ideals of Theosophy*, 14-15
[520] Ibid., 29

attendant debates on whether the Society or its members should be politically involved in social issues and pointed out the difference between Besant and Olcott's presidencies. She outlined two ideal types, the Occultist and the Statesman, and proceeded to analyse their respective motives and methods for achieving their stated, sometimes common, goals. However, she argued that "these types are permanently antagonistic" and "result in men completely out of touch with each other, working as they do in unallied worlds."[521] For Charles, the decisions and perspectives of these two types were conditioned regarding short and long-term goals. The Statesman was short-sighted in order to achieve faster results whereas the Occultist could see the big picture and was concerned with the improvement of the entire human race into eternity.

> The Occultist's precepts are for the guidance of man *as he should be*, and can be only carried out in their fullness by pilgrims on the way to the Ideal, The Statesman's laws have for their basis in the fact of man *as he is*, and are for the better regulation of actual and current affairs.[522]

Charles described those disciples of great teachers who, on coming to know "the beauty and fundamental truth" of their wisdom, "insist upon these 'counsels of perfection' being carried out by the Statesman in practical politics."[523] She believed this to be foolish, claiming that the results were never as good as one might expect, and demonstrated the ill effects of this strategy of implementing higher truths in practical politics. Charles discussed state interference in the regulation of sexual health as an example, and quoted Besant regarding sexual behaviour: "All intercourse between the sexes that is not prompted by a desire for offspring, is sinful and wrong."[524] She analysed this statement and the effects of trying to implement its truth on a broad social level:

> The Occultist therefore condemns in one breath a variety of pleasures which the world puts under different headings as damnable, necessary,

[521] Charles, 'Brotherhood', 140
[522] Ibid.
[523] Ibid.
[524] Ibid., 141

> lawful, and virtuous. Of these four, the 'necessary evil' is the second, the procreation of children the third, and neo-malthusianism the fourth.[525]

She argued that humans didn't have the level of control to follow such a truth without having realised it for themselves. Moreover, enforcing it would be pointless, at best, and harmful, at worst. Charles asked, "Would it not be better to let the average man and woman toil up the ladder step by step, rather than hurl condemnation upon them from above because they are not at the top?"[526] Instead, she advocated sensible legislation that would allow individuals to work their way, lifetime by lifetime, to a higher state of existence. Charles discussed vivisection, vaccination, and vegetarianism in a similar vein, and generally sided with a pragmatic social program addressing material concerns informed by best practice. She invoked scientific and rational approaches to administering society because most people were not developed enough in their self-control or knowledge to act in moral, ethical, and spiritual ways of their own accord. A practical politics should protect them and allow them to achieve this higher and more evolved state on their own because higher spiritual knowledge could not be legislated for directly. Charles, in close alignment with Besant, supported using socially informed state legislation to facilitate evolution and progress but not forcing it upon people who were not ready.

Charles' criticism of Besant began by recapping the changes that had occurred under her presidency. She cited Olcott's opinion that the Society was apolitical and should never commit to one side or the other on any such issues but as individuals, members were free to involve themselves. Charles discussed Besant as seeming to "approve of policy interference" and the Order of Service as "bringing subsidiary interests into affiliation."[527] Although she was in favour of government legislation that could facilitate the evolution of individuals, she was sceptical of the Order of Service. She questioned if Besant, and the others joining the leagues, genuinely approved of a sensible approach, i.e. her approach to interference, rather than the kind of forced enlightenment approach she rejected. Charles wondered if they would be a help in ushering in a more enlightened age or if they would simply be a hindrance to "the machinery of government now running, the one that is

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[525] Ibid.
[526] Ibid., 142-143
[527] Ibid., 146

suitable to this hapless age of Iron and Blood!"[528] Charles' arguments on the role and extent of legislation were not controversial for Besant. In 1910, she presented a similar argument regarding people's need to discover the import of theosophical teachings for themselves:

> Hence, Brotherhood must have its roots in Spirit, and spread outwards through the intellectual and emotional realms, until it finally asserts itself in the material; it can never be made by legislation imposed from without it; it must triumph by Spirit, out-welling from within.[529]

Both women agreed that higher knowledge could not be legislated for by the state, but that certain kinds of government legislation were important in creating the necessary conditions for the fulfilment of human spiritual potential. However, Besant was not sensible enough for Charles, given her support of interfering legislation, and she worried that the leagues formed under the rubric of the Order of Service would become a vehicle for the political agenda of an 'occultist', not a 'statesman'. Charles was rare in her advocacy of a progressive social agenda to elevate the worst off in society that was not derived from theosophical ideas. Her concern was not that the Society's neutrality would be compromised or that her individual freedom of belief would be diminished, but that individuals simply could not abide by laws or moral precepts inspired by higher knowledge they did not understand and it was unfair to expect or force it.

Charles returned to her commentary two years later in the February 1911 issue of *The Theosophist* with an article focusing on the new direction the Society had taken under Besant's presidency. She argued that the passive policy under Olcott, of corporate neutrality and individual freedom, was out of favour and had been replaced with a second policy that "breathes all through the spirit of activity, assertion, even of warfare."[530] Charles referred to the announcement of the Order of Service, and the accompanying article by Besant in which the masters were invoked, to legitimise the new organisation and its aims. She directed the reader to the section of the master's letter that referred directly to the actions of the Society as an association and its corporate rights and duties. Charles found this second policy to be

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[528] Ibid.
[529] Besant, 'The Brotherhood of Religions', 339
[530] Charles, 'Two Policies', 733

a complete volte-face from the first and, where the first refused to bind the Society, leaving its members as free individuals to attend to issues to which they felt attached, this new policy bound the Society and seemed to deny the individual's right to act alone. Though she pointed out the potential infringement on the individual freedom of belief and corporate neutrality of the Society, these were not the real issues for Charles. She appreciated the idea of working in the world to help create better conditions, but was cautious of the drawbacks, asserting that "the penalty of action is mistake, the penalty of mistake is suffering and limitation."[531] Charles, despite the noble aim of the Order of Service, found it difficult to reconcile herself to all its manifestations. Due to Besant's attempts to navigate corporate neutrality issues by encouraging leagues to be founded in opposition to others, where there was a difference of belief among the membership, Charles pointed out that the real danger of this new policy, and the activities of the Order of Service, would be sectarianism. She returned to her main point from the 1909 article and argued that the leagues were causing clashes between people who were at different stages in their evolution and that "younger Brethren will first meet with unpopularity, then with ostracism, and a day may even arrive when we 'unsectarian' people positively expel them."[532] Besant published a response to this article in the pages that followed in which she reaffirmed that the Order of Service could include opposing leagues and that this was intended to preserve the non-committal character of the Society. She asserted the advantage of this as allowing members with the same goals but different methods to achieve their aims, but did not address Charles' fears that it may have the opposite effect and lead to sectarianism.

Charles contributed her third article to the July 1912 issue of *The Theosophist* and reviewed her earlier fears that Besant "was bringing into the Theosophical Society several of these questions of the hour which Colonel Olcott specially mentioned as not being our affair" and the leagues "force (or try to force) impossibly high ideals on an unprepared world."[533] She cited her previous articles as having foretold of certain scenarios that would arise out of the new policy but a 'calamity' had occurred that she never in her "most pessimistic moments thought of

[531] Ibid., 734
[532] Ibid., 736
[533] Charles, 'The T.S. Has No Tenets', 600

anticipating!"[534] Charles was referring to the formation of the Order of the Star in the East in 1911, purportedly in January of that year but publicly announced in July in both *The Theosophist* and the *Theosophic Messenger* (the official organ of the American Section of the Theosophical Society). Catherine Wessinger describes this period as one in which there was a shift "beyond belief in progressive evolution, which was taught by Blavatsky, to a "progressive millennialism," the expectation of an imminent transition to a collective salvation accomplished by humans working according to the plan of superhuman agents."[535] Everything Besant had done since assuming the presidency was part of her efforts to expedite the evolution of humanity, bring urgency to the theosophical enterprise, and dispel the passive conceptions of individual altruism that permitted laziness and inaction on the part of the members. Her announcement of the Order of the Star in the East contained the following explanation of its function:

> This order has been founded to draw together those who, whether inside or outside the T.S., believe in the near coming of a great spiritual Teacher for the helping of the world. It is thought that its members may, on the physical plane, do something to prepare public opinion for His coming and to create an atmosphere of welcome and of reverence; and, on the higher planes, may unite in forming an instrument of service ready for His use.[536]

Like her fears about the founding of the Order of Service, Charles cautioned that the Order of the Star in the East was becoming all-consuming of the Society's energy and promoted a singular doctrine that all members were being pressured or fooled into accepting. This criticism echoed those directed at Judge, as Besant had become the authoritative voice expressing her individual belief; to the extent that some members feared it would become dogma. Charles quoted the South African, New Zealander, and French sections of the Society to show how they had thrown themselves behind the new order. She also stated her hope that rumours of the German section's vehement opposition to the order were not true as she believed a strident anti-Order of the Star in the East policy to be just as undesirable for Society

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[534] Ibid., 602
[535] Wessinger, 'The Second Generation', 34
[536] Besant, 'Order of the Star in the East', 608

members as everyone following one leader. Charles concluded her article, and the series, by quoting from a letter published by Besant to demonstrate the Society's lack of tenets or creed and affirm its neutrality and impartiality. As with the earlier contribution, Besant published her response to Charles in the pages that immediately followed, claiming she had done all she could to defend herself from allegations regarding the neutrality of the Society, citing her record of setting up the Order of Service as an outlet for people to found leagues to share their interests. Though Charles was critical of Besant, she was nuanced in her assessment of the direction in which the president was taking the Society. She did not fall back on simpler arguments around individual freedom of belief and corporate neutrality until the formation of the Order of the Star in the East. Charles later "began circulating material critical of Besant" and by April 1913, "was demanding sweeping reforms in the society, beginning with Besant's resignation as president."[537] However, Besant was not cowed by the criticism and the next section looks at her mature thought on an ideal-centred, theosophically derived worldview.

Besant's Guiding Ideals

The years between 1912 and 1916 saw Besant become increasingly active as a practical organiser and increasingly frustrated with the criticism of her presidency. She would never face the kind of charges levelled at Judge and no other leading theosophist enjoyed her level of influence and respect. Besant had overseen the rehabilitation of the language of socialism and completed her transition from socialist to socially oriented theosophist. In August 1912, an article appeared in *Bibby's Annual 1908* that directly addressed how socialism's deficiencies were corrected by theosophical ideals. She argued that "economics alone are [sic] not enough to make a nation prosperous and free" because "behind economics lie men and women" who must be "trained into a noble humanity" in order for economics or politics to succeed.[538] Besant criticised socialism's emphasis on improving social conditions while negating the individuals themselves and argued against the idea that an improved environment will automatically lead to a better humanity. She asserted her belief that "the next great stage of civilization will be Socialistic" but cautioned that "unless it be possible to have a Socialism where the wisest shall guide, and plan, and

[537] Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 87
[538] Besant, 'The Future of Socialism', 1

direct, I do not see that the mere change of economic conditions will make things so enormously better than they are today."[539] Besant retained the goals of her socialist past but sought the completeness that theosophical ideas added to her project in its accounting for the "full range of human concerns," and a way to be religious in the face of the "conservatism of the mainstream churches."[540] She was committed to using whatever means available to improve social conditions, but was acutely aware, in her criticism of socialism, that "man wants something more than food to eat and raiment to put on."[541] Besant feared that socialism's treatment of man "as a body only and not as a spiritual intelligence" would be its downfall.[542]

Nonetheless, Besant's practical theosophy was a form of theosophical socialism. Her lecture at Stratford Town Hall on the 31st of July, 1912, published in November of that year, was evidence that she did not wish to hide that fact. Besant argued for a practical approach to social problems based on education and individual spiritual development, not on hasty legislation. She claimed that "[w]ealth is produced in enormous masses" and invoked Universal Brotherhood, love, and a sense of social duty as the methods through which it could be redistributed "for the common good."[543] The strongly socialist aspect of her statement, that wealth should be redistributed, was mitigated by its not being governmentally mandated. Instead, Besant's argument was that it should be driven by Universal Brotherhood, leading to a kind of self-propelled socialism. This was the first of three teachings, the other two being evolution and the law of justice, that bear on social problems. She recapped her interpretation of Universal Brotherhood as the opposite of equality and the enacting of a family-based hierarchy of care and responsibility to one's youngers. This was where Besant's rehabilitated socialism, guided by theosophical ideals, veered sharply from the different types of equality debated and offered by the more conventional ideologies. She argued that "it would be easy to make a Society, if all our people were clever, strong, healthy, vigorous; it is harder when so many are handicapped from the moment of birth."[544] Besant was speaking to her theosophical readership and a wider socialistic milieu to convince people that, although her

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[539] Ibid., 1-2
[540] McKanan, 'Faith in the Phalanx', 205-206
[541] Besant, 'The Future of Socialism', 1-2
[542] Ibid.
[543] Besant, 'Social Problems', 5
[544] Ibid., 9

interpretation was more difficult to implement, it would ultimately be more effective because it accounted for human nature. She invited people to engage in "the harder task…to find out how a graded Society can answer to the gradation of nature, so that all shall be happy, all shall have enough, all shall develop to the full qualities they bring with them."[545] Besant presented a spiritual hierarchy of unequal individuals where "the elders may bear the responsibility and the burden, and the youngers may be trained by love and wisdom and help,"[546] a more appealing formulation than previous characterisations of the same principle. Its compassionate aspects were designed to attract people from the progressive milieu, theosophical and non-theosophical, who found secular socialism either materialistic or incomplete. Finally, Besant explained the cause of spiritual inequality and why it was important to implement a system that accounted for it, namely reincarnation. Individuals born into new lives bring back the experiences of their previous lives in the form of faculties and "each new body is more developed, in order to fit the more highly developed faculties of the eternal Spirit who thus grows."[547] For Besant, reincarnation explained "why people are different, why capacities are different, why people are unequal…why gradation cannot be escaped from, and why the older souls are bound to help the younger and to try to quicken their evolution."[548]

In the December 1912 and January 1913 issues of *The Theosophist*, Besant tied together her thoughts on the importance of religious ideals and their place in social reform. She connected thought and action at the level of society and civilisation, arguing that the right ideals caused the right actions and brought about the evolution of humanity. Besant began with the individual, claiming that a "man's thoughts modify, may even re-create, his innate character" and "that which he believes, being part of his thought, affects his actions, and according to the strength of the belief and the extent to which it occupies his thoughts will be the effect upon his conduct."[549] Ideals, as guiding principles of action, were such an important part of Besant's worldview because they were "created by the mind; nourished by desire" and press "ever outwardly into the world of manifestation" to become actions. For Besant, the religious ideal was "that which comes closest to the heart and most dominates the

[545] Ibid.
[546] Ibid.
[547] Ibid., 26-27
[548] Ibid.
[549] Besant, 'The Bearing of Religious Ideals', 462-463

brain" and those who were responsible for governing societies should not underestimate "the bearing of the religious ideals of citizens on the society in which they live."[550] She cited ancient civilizations built around central religious ideals and "moulded and shaped by the thoughts which flow from it."[551] Besant argued for making the ideal of the duty of service a primary organising principle of society and noted that it was already present in democratic socialism. However, she criticised the ability of this ideology to be constructive due to its having "class hatred as its inspiration" and "every effort that springs from hatred is doomed to exhaust itself in failure."[552] Besant built on her theosophical socialism by arguing for a socialism of love inspired by the "noble longing of the happy to bring happiness to the unhappy, of the educated to bring knowledge to the uneducated, of those who have leisure to bring leisure and diminution of toil to those who labour."[553]

Besant discussed other ideals that everyone could respect and contribute to a healthy society, starting with the interconnectedness of all life. She argued that "nothing that injures another can be permanently good for any one of us" and "the health of the body politic, as much as of the body individual, depends on the healthy working of every part, that if one part is diseased the whole of the body suffers."[554] Besant made a direct political link from this platform to argue that a "belief in the Immanence of Gods compels the recognition of the Solidarity of Man" which meant "that there must be no slums, and no plague-spots of vice in our cities; it means the disappearance of the frightful poverty which gnaws at the life of millions of our fellow-beings."[555] Finally, she assigned the responsibility to act by suggesting those "who are cultured and comfortable shall feel diseased and tortured" if they are not doing everything they can to relieve suffering."[556] This was an expression of Besant's esoteric monism as her justification for political action was rooted in a correspondence between the physical and the spiritual realms. Besant continued her discussion of ideals with a commentary on sacrifice, and its importance to the "actual work of Social Reconstruction."[557] She illustrated how naturally and instinctively

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[550] Ibid., 463-464
[551] Ibid.
[552] Ibid., 512
[553] Ibid.
[554] Ibid., 513
[555] Ibid., 515
[556] Ibid.
[557] Ibid., 518

family members would sacrifice for one another in a time of scarcity, by making sure the youngest are fed first, because "the elders feel that the burden must not fall on the weaker shoulders, while they are there to bear it in their stead."[558] Besant argued this will lead to a "nobler social State" governed by the principle; "*From* each according to his capacity; *to* each according to his needs" but achieved only through "religious effort and the religious spirit."[559] Her solution was grounded in the natural characteristics of humanity and presented as an evolution of those characteristics that already exist in the human heart and spirit. Besant had no faith in politics to truly change society and believed such social change could only result from true sea change in the hearts and minds of the people achieved through religious spirit and reason. Criticism of the president's policy, and continued efforts to mobilise the membership to work for social reform, albeit based on a theosophical theory of action derived from Besant's exegesis, became more pronounced in 1914 and the next section explores the debates that resulted in her eventual rejection of the Society's neutrality in 1916.

[558] Ibid.
[559] Ibid., 519-520

The Rejection of Neutrality

Neutrality had two major implications in theosophical discourse. First, the Society was considered neutral regarding politics, a stance that emerged early in the Society's history due to governmental suspicions of its actions in colonial India. Second, the neutrality of the Society regarding religion prevented any one set of beliefs becoming dogmatic or dominant, and ensured individual freedom of belief for its members. Individualism of belief had long been used to justify individual actions derived from those beliefs, a freedom asserted by Olcott when he was engaged in educational work in Sri Lanka. However, though most members could involve themselves in whatever social or political work energised them, both Judge and Besant were challenged for exercising their freedom to act on their beliefs because their disproportionately strong influence and authority could lead to infringements on the rights of others. As discussed above, Judge's case played out in a different context and, although Besant was never in danger of being ousted, she eventually took a strong stand and, in 1916, rejected the principle of corporate neutrality outright. The Society's long-held outward appearance of neutrality was primarily due to the articles by Blavatsky and Olcott, but the debate surrounding the practical application of theosophy to the real world was also a constant undercurrent.[560] Members of the Society under the presidency of Annie Besant became concerned by her individual activism and were alarmed by the formation of the Order of Service in 1908 and the Order of the Star in the East in 1911. In 1914, Besant began to publish a radical journal concerned with issues of Indian national reform called *The Commonweal*. Her overtly political activities sparked W.H. Kirby, who had been president of the Giordano Bruno Lodge in Genoa, to publish his thoughts on the matter in the May 1914 issue of *The Theosophist.* Kirby's article incited a controversy that played out in a series of articles over the following two years. It is yet another example of the fairly democratic nature of theosophical periodicals, expressed in the debates on socialism already discussed. The periodicals continued in their importance to the Society as an open forum encouraging the membership to work out the Society's paradoxes and conflicts.

Kirby argued against Besant's assertion of her individual liberty in matters of politics and asked if the president enjoyed the same level of freedom in her speech and actions as ordinary members. He was concerned with the ramifications for the

[560] See Olcott, 'Politics and Theosophy' and Blavatsky, 'The Political Side of Theosophy'

Society and its individual members of a "weekly publication of a radical nature edited by its President, printed and published on its premises, and largely dependent upon Theosophists and Theosophical resources for its existence and maintenance."[561]

The global character of the Society was also highlighted by the example of the Indian context, which exerted a direct effect on Society discourse. Besant's engagement with Indian national politics, through the pages of her new journal, caused Kirby to worry about the Society's reputation as an apolitical institution. In support, he cited Blavatsky and Olcott, referring specifically to Olcott's 'Politics and Theosophy' from the July 1883 Supplement to *The Theosophist*, an article designed to allay the Indian government's fears that the Society had a communist political agenda. He also cited an 1895 lecture by Besant, published in 1913, highlighting her earlier attitudes. Besant's lecture addressed the role of the politician in society, suggesting that they should be governed by the highest ideals but that, ultimately, the ideals should remain after the politics had gone.[562] She had always advocated a system governed by high ideals and argued that legislation, though it could be used to improve the lives of those less fortunate in society, could not fix society in the absence of the spiritual development of individuals. The difference for Kirby was Besant's shift from talking about ideals in politics to becoming involved in politics itself. Curuppumullage Jinarajadasa, a prolific theosophist who would become the fourth president of the Society in 1943, contributed a follow up article to the July 1914 issue of *The Theosophist*. He reaffirmed Kirby's concerns about Society members, particularly leaders, meddling in social and political issues because it was unwise and contrary to the advice of the founders. Jinarajadasa argued that despite the reverence rightfully owed to Blavatsky and Olcott, it was a "fatal policy to take what they said as a Theosophical dogma" because "we are discovering more of Theosophy day by day" and "later generations of Theosophists may be wiser on some points than the earlier."[563] Previously, Judge had been criticised for his authoritative expressions of belief in the masters because it could become theosophical dogma. However, Jinarajadasa claimed that Besant is free to act in ways that run counter to the declarations of Blavatsky and Olcott, despite her authoritative

[561] Kirby, 'Theosophists and Politics', 285
[562] Besant, 'The Place of Politics'
[563] Jinarajadasa, 'Why Not Theosophists and Politics', 576

position, exactly because the founders' statements were not dogma. He dismissed Olcott's advice as specific to the Indian context of the 1880s and, while he conceded that it was reasonable for officials, in this case, Besant, to refrain from making declarations on behalf of the Society as a whole: individuals must be free to do what they wanted or needed to do. Jinarajadasa was of the same opinion as Besant; that theosophists should be involved in guiding social reforms because "we Theosophists alone have the true principles that should guide all human activities, and…it is our duty as Theosophists to guide them."[564]

Johan van Manen's article in the August 1914 issue of *The Theosophist* attempted to sum up this central issue for the members: "Theosophy has at one time or another to face the problem: in or out of the world; temporal or spiritual power; the inner or the outer man."[565] Ultimately, offering this choice sets this author apart from the esoteric monism of members like Annie Besant, James Cousins, and George Russell who would seek to dissolve such binaries in an overarching system rather than force a choice between them. Van Manen was concerned with the consequences of action and offered a slippery slope argument to suggest that the involvement of the Society or its representatives in political work "can scarcely be regarded as anything else than the thin end of the wedge, which is to enter the whole social fabric of the world…to an extent scarcely to be forseen [sic]."[566] He praised the process and facilitation of criticism of the Society by individual members because it would force others to form an opinion of their own on social and political interference. The process would then lead to a more intelligent, educated, and mature comprehension of the nature and task of the Society, its destiny, and function regarding civilisation and culture. It is worth noting that his encouragement of more criticism and debate did not include a call to action but instead, distanced the Society from the immediate work other members believed should be done. For the most part, van Manen agreed with Kirby but was displeased with the easy supersession of the founders' statements on the issue. Directly responding to Jinarajadasa's comments on dogma, he argued that "it seems as fatal to be bound in cast iron dogmas of the past as to demolish all tradition and authority for the future."[567] Van

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[564] Ibid., 577-578
[565] Von Manen, 'Theosophists and Politics', 697. Von Manen was a Dutch theosophist, orientalist, and Tibetologist who eventually left the Society over a disagreement with Besant.
[566] Ibid.
[567] Ibid., 711

Manen concluded by returning to Blavatsky's position and citing *The Key to Theosophy* that individuals should pursue their political activities in as much as they don't conflict with or hurt the Society. For him, this was the root of the problem identified by Kirby but, ultimately, was a return to the passive individual altruism favoured by Blavatsky and Olcott over two decades earlier.

Besant entered this discussion responding to repeated calls for her guidance on political issues, particularly the outbreak of World War I and Indian national politics. In *The Theosophist* of December 1914, her recurring editorial piece, 'On The Watch-Tower', reiterated her hesitancy to use the official organ of the Society as a vehicle for her views on social and political questions because "they might hurt the susceptibilities of some readers" and "there are other agencies [she] can use for the special local matters on which prejudices so easily arise."[568] Besant declined this opportunity to impress her political opinions on the readers of *The Theosophist*, choosing instead to maintain the neutrality of the Society and its leading journal. Support for the president came in the January 1915 issue of *The Theosophist* from T.H. Martyn, general secretary of the Australian Society on three different occasions. Martyn had been a long-time supporter of Besant but would break with the Society over his involvement in publicising, and Besant's handling of, sexual misconduct accusations against Charles Webster Leadbeater in 1921.[569] On the issue of Besant's social and political activities, Martyn argued the impossibility of outlining rules that would work in all cases or stand up to all criticism. He added that enshrining any such rules in the constitution of the Society would be detrimental because it "is of necessity incomplete, and if altered in any way it will still be imperfect."[570] Martyn refuted the idea that the public perception of Besant's political activities had negative implications for the Society and argued that the constitution should be left indefinite to allow the president the privilege of adapting to changing conditions through its interpretation. He believed that as the world continued to change, the problem would shift from a question of should theosophy and politics be separated to one of can theosophy and politics be separated.

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[568] Besant, 'On The Watch-Tower'(i), 193-194
[569] See Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 110-112 for details of Martyn's involvement and Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 94-138 for more details and analysis of Leadbeater's history of sexual misconduct.
[570] Martyn, 'Politics and Theosophy', 259

In 1915, amid all this criticism, Besant published a booklet entitled, *The Basis of Morality*, in which she weighed the different modes of moral authority. She began with the authority of revelation: "No Revelation is accepted as fully binding in any ancient religion."[571] However, she conceded that "sacred books contain much that is pure, lofty, inspiring, belonging to the highest morality, the true utterances of the Sages and Saints of mankind."[572] Besant discussed the authority of one's own intuition and conscience, arguing that although it is "our best available individual light," "we shall not take it as a basis of morality" as "to overrule the conscience of another is to induce in him moral paralysis, and to seek to dominate the will of another is a crime."[573] Besant dismissed Utility because it "does not place morality on a universal basis" and "disregards the happiness of the minority."[574] The crux of her argument was that morality is based on Evolution and "the duty…of the civilised and highly advanced man is not the same as the duty of the savage…[t]hat is Right which subserves Evolution; that is Wrong which antagonises it."[575] Besant linked the ideas of duty and service to enlightenment or a state of advanced spiritual development and argued that individuals are in one of two evolutionary phases:

> the first from the savage to the highly civilised man who is still working primarily for himself and his family, still working for private ends predominantly; and the second, at present but sparsely followed, in which the man, realising the supreme claim of the whole upon its part, seeks the public good predominantly, renounces individual advantages and private gains, and consecrates himself to the service of God and of man.[576]

Besant concluded with a cautious commentary on the value of Mystic authority and argued that "it has, it ought to have no authority outside the Mystic himself."[577] Similar to her arguments against individual intuition, "the Voice of the God within only becomes authoritative for another when the God within that other self answers the Mystic's appeal" and the mystic "cannot, by virtue of the God within him,

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[571] Besant, *The Basis of Morality*, 6
[572] Ibid.
[573] Ibid., 12-13
[574] Ibid., 21
[575] Ibid., 25
[576] Ibid., 27
[577] Ibid., 40

enslave his fellow-men."[578] This comment evoked the Judge Affair, but also reflected on Besant's predicament at this time. She was guiding people to think for themselves while encouraging them to think of service, duty, and advanced spiritual progress as intrinsically linked. Besant was saying that one cannot force another to understand why these are linked but when one is advanced in spiritual evolution, they will act according to the ideals she discussed.

In March 1916, Besant was forced to respond to concerns about the Society's neutrality stemming from her political work and used her editorial to reassert the individual freedom of members. She reassured her readers that the Society should not declare itself in favour of or against any political or religious system and that it must not even make "the doctrines it exists to proclaim – such as the possibility of the knowledge of God, re-incarnation, karma, etc. – binding on its members."[579] The onset of World War I gave Besant a chance to speak to her readers with a new air of unity and she encouraged them to think about important issues. Against this backdrop, she sought to justify her political actions through appeals to esoteric monism. Her recurring editorial in the July 1916 issue of *The Theosophist* used the war as proof "that human life cannot be divided up into fragments" and "politics and ethics, problems of the citizen and of the religionist are interwoven throughout."[580] Besant argued that politics includes "all the activities of collective life" and offered the analogy of the circulatory system to chide those who insisted on separating it.

> Some wiseacres would not, if they had their way, allow the blood to course unhindered through artery and vein from and to the same heart. They would insist on setting aside some to circle round the liver, some round the brain, some round the lungs, as they divide morality, religion, commerce, professional life, into separate and dissociated organs, instead of the organs of the whole body politic.[581]

As well as expressing her esoteric monism, this was a direct response to her critics and a metaphoric reflection on the disunity in the Society regarding her presidency. By September 1916, Besant was tired of the criticism and escalated her rhetoric. She

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578 Ibid.
579 Ibid., 579
580 Besant, 'On The Watch-Tower'(k), 361-362
581 Ibid.

targeted her detractors and admonished those, like van Manen, who offered only further intellectual speculation instead of a mode of practically applying theosophical principles to everyday life.

> There is a very feeble movement in England to narrow the broad platform of the Theosophical Society, and to force its members into only one activity – if it can be so called – the discussion of certain doctrines perennially, with no application to the burning questions of the day. We may be, theoretically, Universal Brothers, but we must not engage in any practical brotherly work; we may accept Reincarnation, but we must not apply it to education; we may lecture on Karma as a theory, but not as explaining current events; we may believe in superhuman Good and Evil Powers, but we must not recognise their workings in the struggles of Nations. Against these limitations, which deprive our knowledge of all practical usefulness, against this selfish isolation from a suffering world, against this futility of a dozen old women meeting in a Theosophical Bethel to chatter over a Wisdom they are incapable of either grasping or applying, I protest with my whole soul. With a great price I won the freedom to think and to speak, and while I live, I will never surrender it. If the T.S. disapproves of it, let it say so. But I will not shackle either the T.S. or myself in obedience to the prattle of Anglo-Indian Bath tea-tables.[582]

Besant ended this iteration of the practical theosophy and interference debate with her article in the November 1916 issue of *The Theosophist*. Attacking the very principle on which her critics based their arguments, she explained that the Society's concept of neutrality "exists nowhere in its memorandum of Association", and the constitution permitted collective action when it was in accordance with the first object of Universal Brotherhood.

> Object I with sub-clause (d) secures to the Society as such the right to do collectively all things incidental or conducive to the formation of "a

[582] Besant, 'On The Watch-Tower'(l), 588-589

> nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex caste, or colour."[583]

Besant was unapologetic, putting "an end to the supposed "neutrality," against which [she] had often chafed and had openly rebelled."[584] She claimed the principle came from Olcott and became axiomatic but it was "merely an *ipse dixit* of his, not binding upon anybody."[585] This was the first time Besant, or any leading theosophist, outwardly rejected the notion of the Society's corporate neutrality. She explained that the extent of the Society's new freedom to ignore the ideas of neutrality, to aid the realisation of the Objects, was to be decided by autonomous units within the Society. Delegating the decision to the autonomous lodges invoked the spirit of individual freedom of belief to undermine a principle of the Society that, despite having no solid basis in the constitution, had achieved universal agreement far beyond some of theosophy's ostensibly more important ideas, and had been used for decades as a stick to beat its most prominent leaders. Besant addressed the role Blavatsky and Olcott played in establishing the neutrality of the Society as a principle and the India incidents that prompted the issuance of such opinions. She argued that her role as president was to make the Society more practical and returned to the letter from the masters reprinted with her article explaining the function of her Order of Service.

> I suppose that I was chosen as the President of the Society in order to bring it more to the front in physical plane activities, for which my whole previous life had been a preparation; moreover, the educational work into which I had thrown myself, the institution of the Order of the Sons and Daughters of India, the movement against child parentage, and the advocacy of foreign travel for Hindus, with various other lines of work, had rendered it fairly plain that to me Theosophical work included all beneficent activities, and that I was striving to carry out the injunction in a letter from a member of the Occult Hierarchy, published by H.P.B., that "Theosophy must be made practical," and that in the

583 Besant, 'The Wider Outlook', 129
584 Ibid.
585 Ibid.

> neighbourhood of a Theosophical Lodge there should be a sensible diminution of poverty and misery.[586]

Besant spent the remainder of the article making the case, one she had been making for almost a decade, that it was a responsibility and a duty for theosophists to involve themselves in social reforms and play a practical role in the evolution of all humanity. She claimed that the Society was "the Herald of the Coming Age" and "has been studying for 42 years the deeper truths of life."[587] Besant ridiculed the idea that such "a large fund of common knowledge, of inestimable value to the world" would be used by a few people to "quicken their own evolution…instead of investing it in the solution of problems on the right answer to which depends the coming civilisation."[588] Besant always tried to convince people to make their own choice and join her struggle, but maintained that it was not binding. The call to action implicit in this quote reminded people of the importance of their enterprise since the future of humanity was at stake. Besant warned that although the membership "have all been somewhat hypnotised by that "blessed word" neutrality…the entire liberty of thought and action must remain for every member, every Lodge, every National Society, and for the Society as a whole."[589] Free of the yoke of corporate neutrality, Besant's article echoed the specific practicality of her first article in the June 1889 issue of *Lucifer*. She outlined the breadth of work to be done in the world under the headings of Reconstruction of the Empire, Poverty, Education, International and National Politics. These all fell under the purview of a theosophist's duty "to prepare the world for a civilisation based on Brotherhood, with all which that word implies of mutual duty and helpfulness. Clause 2 (d) binds us to do all things conducive to that preparation."[590]

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[586] Ibid., 131-132
[587] Ibid., 136-137
[588] Ibid.
[589] Ibid., 137
[590] Ibid., 138

Conclusion

Society membership, or being influenced by its ideas, did not necessitate that an individual tended towards progressive or reformist political positions. However, those who participated in the theosophical milieu and were active in social reform issues tended towards esoteric monism. Politically active members engaged in a comparative search for core principles and values, expressed the need to reconcile opposites, and displayed an enthusiasm to debate the role of religious ideas in ways that provided people with a script and authoritative justification for action in the political and social spheres. These aspects are all part of an esoteric monist enterprise where a knowledge system increased in authoritativeness as it increased its totalizing coherence.

Annie Besant joined the Theosophical Society as a socialist seeking a complete understanding of humanity. Her initial practicality was stymied during Blavatsky's mentorship, but she crafted an ideal-centred, practical theosophy that could justify her focus on duty and service. Derived from the first object, Universal Brotherhood, Besant's approach linked an individual's realisation of their responsibility towards others with a state of enlightenment. Her focus on expediting the spiritual evolution of all humanity led her to link the fate of those in the worst social conditions to the cosmic fate of every single soul on its journey back to divine unity. Though she did everything in her power to preserve it, Besant struggled with the neutrality of the Society in her social activism and the importance of nuance in navigating issues of individual freedom of belief was a fresh lesson learned during the Judge Case. The principle of neutrality and the idea of individual freedom of belief were used by both sides of the debates around social interference, in the broad criticisms of Besant and Judge, and ultimately in the secession of the American Section and Besant's rejection of neutrality. In fact, the same principle of neutrality was cited as grounds to hold and halt the enquiry into Judge's claimed communications from the masters. Judge tried to move the discourse away from intellectualism towards faith and created a charismatic cult of personality. In terms of social reform, he attempted to garner enough power so that people would just do as he said and not waste their time coming to the same realisations on their own. Besant's experience spurred her to circumvent issues of neutrality and individual freedom of belief by setting up orders and leagues parallel to, but separate from, the

Society to create spaces in which her social and political agenda could be enacted. She also realised that Judge's faith-based approach drew too much criticism and opted for her own wide-reaching campaign of convincing the membership, through appealing to ideals and wisdom, to come to the realisation of their duties to each other on their own. In the end, Besant's rejection of the principle of neutrality allowed her to dispense with some of the vagueness required by her universalist and ideal-driven argumentation and recapture the specific practicality of some of her earliest theosophical contributions.

The network of periodicals is hugely important in understanding the centrality and quantity of argumentation around issues of neutrality and individual freedom of belief during the Judge Case. Judge used his publication to set the stage for his attempt to take power through an intense propaganda campaign and his annexation of the *Irish Theosophist* extended the range of his influence. The effort to halt his rise and the ensuing resistance were global phenomena where the periodicals facilitated discussion, argumentation, and correspondence across the world. It is also remarkable that the principle of neutrality was affirmed in the Indian colonial context for fear of prosecution and became a mainstay of theosophical discourse for decades. The globalism of the Society was apparent again when Besant's political activities in India, along with her founding of the Order of the Star in the East, reignited the neutrality debates elsewhere in the world, debates that would eventually prompt her to reject the principle entirely. Tracking these developments through the pages of the theosophical periodicals helps to understand the complexity of the debates about neutrality and interference by giving voice to ordinary members as well as prominent leaders. It shows that there was some accountability derived from public discussion and provided a global framework in which to work through the problems caused by the juxtaposition of Universal Brotherhood, interpreted as duty or service to one another, and the strong individualism of the theosophical enterprise, interpreted as a soul participating in a cosmic journey of reincarnation back to the divine unity. Ultimately, a principle with the weakest institutional or constitutional basis was dismantled in a single article yet it shaped the activities of the Society for decades from colonial India to the first major fragmentation of the Society in America and its eventual decline under Besant's relentless social activism.

Chapter Four: Suffrage, Gender, and Esoteric Discourse

The Theosophical Society provided new cultural spaces for women in which social conventions could be renegotiated outside of the established social institutions, such as church, university, and government. This chapter looks at the role of women and the state of gender politics in the broader theosophical milieu using early examples of feminist discourse from the journals of the Theosophical Society. It highlights the political nature of the Society's discourse on women under the leadership of Helena P. Blavatsky and, later, Annie Besant and demonstrates how the discourse on women can be understood in the same terms as are outlined in chapters two and three, i.e. a debate over interference and whether to prioritise social reform or spiritual development of the self. The contributions of prominent members Susan Gay and Charlotte Despard are discussed to show how the discourse on the women's movement became spiritualised through theosophical ideas. This is followed by analyses of the writings of suffrage campaigners and married couple, Margaret and James Cousins, whose contributions to society, esoteric discourse, and feminist discourse in Ireland were significant.

Dixon comments that "[a]lthough many men and women in the mainstream churches supported the women's suffrage movement, the conservative churchmen who dominated both Anglicanism and Nonconformity proved slow to endorse women's rights" whereas "[e]soteric and occult organizations seemed more receptive."[591] Ellwood and Wessinger argue that "the Theosophical worldview and institutional expressions have been very supportive of the equal leadership of women" and the Society's ideas "inform much of feminist spirituality."[592] Religious authority, in both the charismatic and official sense, was extended to women in the Theosophical Society, a shift that contrasted strongly with the exclusionary nature of women's roles in establishment structures such as government and the university.[593] Dixon argues that all kinds of authority "had come to be represented as the property of European men, not of 'Asiatics' and women" and that the history of the Theosophical Society can be read as "a series of attempts to create a usable version of both eastern and feminine authority."[594] Spirituality was perceived as feminine or

[591] Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 3
[592] Ellwood and Wessinger, 'The Feminism of "Universal Brotherhood"', 83
[593] Dixon, *Divine Feminine* and Kraft, 'Theosophy, Gender, and the "New Woman"', 357
[594] Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 19

exotic and hence as "a subordinated knowledge" unless it was "a source of authority," in which case "it tended still to be associated with western forms of male privilege, such as the clergy and the academic establishment."[595] Wessinger and Ellwood use the term 'status inconsistency' to describe those men and women members who were attracted to the Society because they were marginalised by some other established institution.

> In reference to religion, this might be a person with innate gifts of spiritual leadership or theological articulation who is denied the opportunity to develop them in a respected mainline theological school and to practice them as a priest or minister in an established denomination, for reasons of race, economic deprivation, lack of social standing – or gender.[596]

Mary Bednarowski argues that women were attracted to religious alternatives that were characterised by

> a perception of the divine that deemphasised the masculine either by means of a bisexual divinity or an impersonal, nonanthropomorphic divine principle; a tempering or denial of the doctrine of the Fall; a denial of the need for a traditional ordained clergy; a view of marriage that did not stress the married state and motherhood as the proper sphere for woman and her only means of fulfilment.[597]

The first of these, reducing the emphasis on masculine divinity, is indicative of esoteric monism, and attracted both men and women interested in this totalising enterprise to the Theosophical Society. Ellwood and Wessinger also discuss the features of the theosophical milieu that made it attractive to "middle- to upper-class, well-educated, and intellectually-oriented women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."[598] They argue that the Society fostered a "nurturing style of spirituality that has characterized most woman-dominated religious movements of that era" and "the doctrine of *karma* enabled the understanding of the conditions of

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[595] Ibid.
[596] Ellwood and Wessinger, 'The Feminism of "Universal Brotherhood"', 71
[597] Bednarowski, 'Outside the Mainstream', 209
[598] Ellwood and Wessinger, 'The Feminism of "Universal Brotherhood"', 75

one's life, including gender, in a "scientific" kind of way."[599] Ellwood and Wessinger suggest that the scholarly syllabus of the Theosophical Society suited the "finishing-school, liberal Protestant milieu of upper-class Boston, New York, or San Francisco, from which American Theosophical women were most likely to be recruited" and that Blavatsky demonstrated the greater importance of the feminine "in the Mother Goddess of antiquity, the Sophias and Aeons of Gnosticism, the Shaktis and Prajnas of the East, and more."[600] In more practical terms, they argue that the non-exclusivist nature of the Society offered the flexibility to "participate in a respectable church of the dominant faith, as many had to for family or social reasons" and its asceticism appealed to women "caught in situations contaminated by sexual or alcoholic excess."[601] Finally, Ellwood and Wessinger cite the example set by "prominent Theosophical women" that "women could take full control of their lives," "could be eminently productive and useful to the world," and "have direct, unmediated access to spiritual truth and power, outside the male-written scriptures or man-powered churches."[602]

Dixon argues that the public perception of esoteric discourse in the late nineteenth century underwent an important shift in the early twentieth century. In the 1890s, Eastern mysticism was considered masculine and rational and became "a key element in the scientific spirituality of the Theosophical Society in England" that was used to "authorize a particular kind of spiritual authority and spiritual experience."[603] The masculine discourse of applying rational science to spirituality gave way to a feminised esoteric discourse in the early twentieth century when "[w]omen became emblematic of a personal, emotional, and subjective religiosity, and spirituality was increasingly represented as an essentially feminine enterprise."[604] This shift aligns with the growing influence of Annie Besant through the first years of the twentieth century. Besant's influence on the Society was immense and the number of female members increased, resulting in the "kinds of spiritual activity that were celebrated within the TS characterized, by both critics and supporters, as

[599] Ibid.
[600] Ibid., 76
[601] Ibid.
[602] Ibid.
[603] Dixon, *Divine Feminine, 42-43*
[604] Ibid, 67

distinctly feminine."[605] Dixon notes that this shift has contributed to the larger problem of women's spirituality and women's politics being addressed in separate scholarly literatures.[606] The same logic can be applied to certain men, such as George Russell, whose participation in esoteric discourse has been marginalised or treated separately in scholarly literature. Russell's politics are more often explained in secular, modern terms, with reference to his Protestant upbringing, instead of highlighting the clear influence of the Theosophical Society. One reason why both male and female engagement with the theosophical milieu has been marginalised in the scholarly literature is the post-WWII perception of esoteric discourse as a non-rational religious activity, particularly the occult practices such as magic, certain types of spiritualism, and astrology.[607] Conversely, Christianity was the rational religion and the peak of humanity's spiritual development, given its long history of scholarly engagement with various theologies and philosophies. However, the scholarly projection of non-rationality onto esoteric discourse of the late 19th and early 20th centuries ignores the contrary examples. Efforts to apply science to spirituality were apparent in the activities of the Theosophical Society and, most notably, the Society for Psychical Research. The SPR was an organisation concerned with testing theories about the survival of the soul after death and the claims of mediums to communicate with 'the other side,' ideas perceived by many as perfectly rational given the type of evidence available to them.[608] Men's politics and spirituality are fully accounted for together when they fit into one of the established Christian denominations, but are treated separately in the case of more heterodox religious interests, such as esoteric discourse. Although there are a few cases where this has recently been rectified, such as the occultism of Crowley and Yeats, men who were perceived as seriously involved in politics are rarely analysed through the lens of their more marginal religious views.[609] Women's involvement in religion is more often characterised by an implied irrationality which was extended to men's involvement in religious activities that became feminised in the early twentieth

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[605] Ibid., 68
[606] Ibid., 3
[607] See chapter one for discussion of post-war associations of the occult with the irrational. Also Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*.
[608] McCorrestine, 'William Fletcher Barrett'. There is a distinction to be made between occultism and spiritualism at the time relating to their claims about rationality and available evidence. It was much more palatable to prove the existence of the soul after death than to find evidence for higher order intelligences or astral beings.
[609] See Pasi, *Aleister Crowley* and Nally, *Envisioning Ireland*.

century. Commenting on the American context, Mary Bednarowski argues that the "experiences and contributions of women have gone largely unrecorded in the standard American religious histories…the women go to church and the men exercise the authority as members of the clergy and as professional theologians."[610] This point can be expanded to argue that the religious experiences and contributions of men who were active outside the mainstream churches and involved in feminised esoteric discourse have also been largely ignored.

The period from the Theosophical Society's foundation in 1875 to at least the early 1930s is marked by the rise and influence of its two most prominent women, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Annie Besant, both of whom were effective in their charismatic and organisational leadership roles. The character of the Society under their respective periods of influence was marked by their contrasting personalities and styles. Blavatsky's interest in occultism was a feature in the very early stages, but the quickly globalising Society downplayed this aspect over time.[611] Politically, Blavatsky's neutrality and passive altruism were influential on members' ideas and levels of activism, but her death in 1891 marked the beginning of Besant's rise in the Society. Although she did not assume the presidency until 1907, the intervening period saw Besant in the roles of head of the Esoteric Section and committee member of the Society.[612] She had been introduced to radical politics early in her life and did not hesitate to bring her activist impulses to the officially apolitical Theosophical Society through the pages of the journals and the founding of the Theosophical Order of Service, a parallel organisation designed to facilitate the more political activities of members.[613]

Besant rarely wrote specifically about women's issues, choosing instead to have a broad-based philosophy of action.[614] In fact, it could be argued that despite the example she set as a female leader, Besant remained rather conservative on women's issues. However, early in her career, she was not averse to making specific and practical suggestions when the opportunity presented itself. In the May 1893

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[610] Bednarowski, 'Outside the Mainstream', 208
[611] See chapter 2 for discussion on the rise of the first object of the Society.
[612] See Nethercot, *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant*, 99-109 for a description of the controversy surrounding Besant's ascent to the presidency. The Esoteric Section was formed by Blavatsky to satisfy certain members' wish to pursue occult experimentation. W.B. Yeats became a member of this group.
[613] See chapter 2 for the change in rhetoric regarding political activism under Blavatsky and Besant.
[614] See chapter 3 for a discussion of Besant's worldview.

issue of the English feminist periodical *Shafts*, edited by Margaret Sibthorp, Besant made an appeal for direct intervention to improve the conditions of washerwomen. She and two other signatories asked for enough money to purchase new machinery for the women and guarantee them a fair minimum wage for their work.[615] Though she was arguing in this piece for improving the conditions of women, it was from a labour rights perspective rather than an engagement with the women's movement. In 1900, Besant delivered a set of lectures in Benares published in 1901 as *Ancient Ideals in Modern Life*. One of these deals specifically with womanhood and is one of the few times Besant chose to single out gender for special attention in theosophical literature. She described the origin of the two sexes as follows:

> We are told at the very beginning of creative work, when humanity was to be produced, the Creator divided himself into two halves, one half male and the other female…The sex distinction is not simply found in humanity, it goes through all the kingdoms of Nature, even though the name of sex is not universally applied.[616]

She offered this theosophical interpretation of Hinduism to justify her belief in the equality of the sexes in the spiritual sense, but emphasised the importance of their division. However, in contrast to the specificity of her piece in *Shafts*, this text is primarily concerned with the lessons that can be learned from the presentation of women in ancient Indian contexts and does not consider any practical implications. Besant focused on ideals from which modern society could draw inspiration and she invoked the ancient Indian woman as an ideal for womanhood and to illustrate the usefulness of the division of the sexes.

> Any attempt to bridge over that difference, any attempt to turn a man into a woman, or a woman into a man, means the throwing back of humanity, a check on its orderly, on its progressive evolution. Certain distinct qualities are evolved in each sex; certain distinct powers are found assigned to the one sex or to the other. To try to unsex either, is to

[615] Besant et al., 'A Profit Sharing Laundry, 59
[616] Besant, *Ancient Ideals*, 109-110

> make a fundamental blunder; and we need to have our theory clear and distinct, ere our practices can be wisely and rightly directed.[617]

Besant viewed the division of the sexes as perfectly natural and crucial to the evolution of humanity because "the predominant physical characteristics differ; in one of these series the intellectual qualities find their best expression, in the other the emotional."[618] However, as "evolution nears its ending, the differences become less marked, until the two are united, the halves of one body as at first."[619] For Besant, the evolution of humanity will eventually solve the gender binary and acts taken by established institutions cannot force its resolution in any immediate sense. However, education enables individuals to access their full potential and that flourishing will expedite the evolutionary process that will lead to the unification of the sexes. She was an ardent advocate for the expansion of education and elaborated the kinds of education she felt were necessary to achieve the goals of humanity. Besant did not argue for the specific and direct interventions that marked her early career, but she never abandoned her advocacy of educating individuals and providing the tools for understanding so that they will truly develop.

In 1909, Besant delivered another series of lectures, one of which, concerned with women joining the labour force. This example illustrates her less than fully progressive stance with respect to the women's movement. She did not deny women the right to labour, but cautioned about the potential for exploitation and the hidden costs of mothers working outside the home.

> [W]hen a woman has taken up the trade of the wife and mother, and then goes out to work in the mill, leaving the children behind and the baby uncared for save by hired care, then wages are driven down because she is willing to work for lower wages, knowing the misery of the children she has left at home; then come the playing-off of the wife against the husband, of the woman against the man; the children are the sufferers from the taking away of the mother to work in the mill, and the

[617] Ibid.
[618] Ibid., 111
[619] Ibid.

> man is turned out to walk the streets because cheaper female labour has taken his place.[620]

Besant viewed the division of the sexes as natural and necessary and argued that men and women "can never be equal in the labour market, because the woman is the childbearer, and there comes in the difference, and the question of the nation's health and vigour."[621] She was not in favour of social reform for its own sake and only agreed with women's right to labour from the point of view of individual freedom. Besant was primarily concerned with creating the best conditions for the theosophical evolution of humanity and women leaving the home did not contribute to her project.

The next section looks at some of the earliest and, in many cases, most progressive contributions to the discourse on women in the theosophical journals to show how the concept of equality developed over time and on different sides of the Atlantic.

[620] Besant, *The Changing World*, 99-100
[621] Ibid., 100

Discourse on Women in Theosophical Journals

The earliest examples of the discourse on women in the theosophical journals are from the first years of the 1890s. However, the starting point for much of the discussion was Blavatsky who devoted many pages of *The Secret Doctrine* to the cosmic history and evolution of humanity. She dated "the separation of the sexes by natural evolution" into male and female to the period of the third stage of human evolutionary development, the Third Root Race, also known as the Lemurians.[622] Individual Society members interpreted this separation in different ways, asking how it could be applied to men and women, and their responsibilities to each other, rather than as a distant concept in humanity's cosmic history.

The debate can be broken down into two major positions, the first of which is that men and women are spiritually equal but physically and mentally different and possessed of characteristics that aid in the evolution of humanity. The second position is that men and women are wholly equal and their differences are primarily a social construct that oppresses women and ultimately impedes the evolution of humanity. In the June 1890 issue of *The Path*, Jirah D. Buck (under the pseudonym D. Harij) published one of the earliest articles to address the question of the sexes from this more critical perspective. He argued that it "will not be denied by any fairminded and intelligent person that the brotherhood of man includes also the sisterhood of woman."[623] Buck asserted that women should be recognised as a crucial part of the theosophical enterprise and "the real progress of the whole human race."[624] He then addressed the question of celibacy and argued that suppressing the animal nature does not result in the best possible outcome from present conditions. Theosophical sexual asceticism was preferred by many Society members who believed that excess sex, i.e. sex beyond the purpose of reproduction, was giving in to lust and tainted the purity of the soul on its spiritual journey. However, Buck argued that marriages can work and love can prosper because the "love of a true woman will redeem any man from the dominion of lust, who really desires to conquer himself" and the "love of a true man will elevate and glorify any woman who really feels her womanhood and aspires toward its highest realization."[625] He often argued from a

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[622] Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine Vol. 1*, 5
[623] Harij, 'Brotherhood and Sex', 82
[624] Ibid.
[625] Ibid., 84

position that considered the home to be the starting point for the practical application of theosophical ideals but, in this case, was concerned with the possibility of marriages failing under the pressures of celibacy.[626] Buck sought to assure his readers that marriages that express true theosophical intentions would not fail and "few marriages are so bad that they cannot thus be turned to account in the real life of the soul."[627] He concluded by prioritising spiritual opportunities for women within their marriages over their opportunities to seek equality with men in other spheres of life: "Equal love, equal intelligence, equal wealth and social position fade into insignificance in the presences of equal opportunity."[628] This was the first time women's spiritual equality with men was asserted in the theosophical journals, but Buck's conclusion suggests that it was not meant to imply their equality in any other way.

1890 also saw the first contribution to theosophical journals on women's issues from one of the Society's most committed feminists, Susan Gay, who had previously published *Womanhood in Its Eternal Aspect* in 1879. A "former spiritualist with Swedenborgian sympathies," Gay "joined the Theosophical Society in May 1890 and immediately began to exploit the possibilities that Blavatsky's teachings, especially those on karma and reincarnation, offered to her feminist project."[629] The October 1890 issue of *Lucifer* published 'The Future of Women' in which Gay asserted that a "palace can hardly be raised on a quagmire" and change must be made to physical social conditions in a tangible way to facilitate the evolution of man.[630] In contrast to Blavatsky et al., she prioritised the improvement of social conditions over the development of the self. Gay argued that the soul is sexless and "[o]nly in the light of re-embodiment is it possible to understand the question of sex fully" because experiences gained in both male and female bodies are essential to human spiritual development.[631] For Gay, the potential for race improvement is directly impeded by the failure to acknowledge the full rights of women. She claimed that men would quickly legislate for such vindication and improve women's lives if they knew with certainty that they must one day experience it themselves. Gay

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[626] See Buck's arguments in Chapter two on practical theosophy.
[627] Harij, 'Brotherhood and Sex', 84
[628] Ibid.
[629] Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 157
[630] Gay, 'The Future of Women', 116-117
[631] Ibid.

outlined a theosophically informed understanding of sex and used it to justify her support for institutional social reforms, unlike those who argued against interference in any circumstances or that legislation would not work. For Gay, the future is the full acknowledgement of women as equal and she asserted that "[t]he principle of Fraternity will be extended to woman; she will be acknowledged as a noble sister, and the equal of her brother."[632] Though both used the language of brotherhood to express women's rights to equality, Buck and Gay were arguing for different outcomes. The former suggested that equality of spiritual opportunity was the most important and should supersede any other type, but the latter wished for full equality in every way.

In the May 1891 issue of *Lucifer*, Jirah D. Buck (again under the pseudonym D. Harij) expanded on his equality of spiritual opportunity arguments by following Gay's argumentation on the sexless soul. The article began with criticism of Christian ethics, arguing that if they are "based on justice and charity, the Christian theology and practice have entirely lost sight of their originals, and this is nowhere more apparent than in the treatment of women."[633] Buck highlighted the injustice of the ownership of children by the man when born in wedlock and their forced possession by the mother when not. He argued that the "average man in his social relations, utterly disregards the rights and the best interests of woman" and that through his supreme selfishness and "the laws and customs he has enacted to foster and protect it, he perpetrates in another form that barbarism which held that woman has no soul."[634] Buck continued with an illustration of the double standard that applied to men and women in society.

> Man may be steeped to the very lips in sin and rottenness, and hold up his head in society and be welcomed by the mothers and daughters of society as a suitable mate to a pure and virtuous woman, particularly if his grasp of the purse-strings has been firm and successful. In fact, it is thought quite the thing to "reform" one of these moral lepers by marrying him to a virtuous, innocent, and ignorant girl! When, however, this code is applied to woman it is completely reversed. Let but a breath

[632] Ibid., 122
[633] Harij, 'Theosophy and the Social Evil', 188
[634] Ibid.

> of scandal be breathed against a woman, even though she be innocent, or let it be suspected that her body has been defiled even by force or by fraud, as is more often the case, and she is both doomed and damned. Qualities of mind or of heart count for nothing.[635]

He argued that theosophy was the solution to the unjust circumstance in which "man has deprived woman of the consciousness that she is an immortal soul inhabiting a physical and mortal body"[636] and that "the Universal Brotherhood of man…fully and equally includes woman."[637] Buck concluded by reaffirming that sex is "but an incident of gestation" and "no ritualistic mummeries can possibly take the place of the simple truth and consideration for others."[638] Though he based his argumentation on the idea of the sexless soul, his solution did not call for material changes in the conditions of women generally, but for equal treatment at the hands of men. Dixon points out that British Society members tended towards more nuanced interpretations of sex in this period. Susan Gay's call for equality refrained from the kind of binary essentialism that casts male and female as naturally possessed of certain sets of characteristics whereas Buck merely inched towards a recognition of equality without clarifying its practical implications. One of the earliest examples of a theosophically informed binary essentialism of the sexes on the American side is cited by W. Michael Ashcraft in his work on Point Loma.[639] In October 1891, Mercie Thirds, who would be one of the representatives of the American Section at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, offered the following characterisation of the essential features of the sexes in the *American Section Papers*:

> The soul, as man, gathers; as woman it assimilates…As man it struggles; as woman it endures. As man it learns through action; as woman it realizes through feeling. As man its ambition would vault to starry heaven; as woman its sympathy quells this soaring egotism, and by self-sacrifice merges it into a grander altruism.[640]

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[635] Ibid., 189
[636] Ibid.
[637] Ibid., 190
[638] Ibid., 191
[639] See Dixon, 'Sexology and the Occult' for a full discussion of theosophical responses to gender and sex in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
[640] Cited in Ashcraft, *The Dawn of the New Cycle*, 116-117

The implicit subordination of women in such an essentialist characterisation, e.g. the active, ambitious man versus the passive, self-sacrificing woman, is exactly the kind of restriction on women that members like Susan Gay contested.

In the November 1892 issue of *Lucifer*, Gay continued her argument that the soul was beyond sex and woman was profoundly important as the "most potent source of the true progress of man."[641] However, she claimed that woman's power for good was destroyed when she is placed in a "restricted and purely functional existence."[642] Gay appealed to the knowledge elitism of theosophical discourse by claiming that the "futility of the subordination of one-half of humanity to the other is more apparent to the Theosophist than to any other person."[643] She argued that the theosophist knows that "the law of reincarnation involves perfect justice for every incarnated soul" and that embodiment as men and women is "an essential reaction and experience, without which neither spiritual growth nor perfect character development can be possible."[644] For Gay, theosophists have the tools and the knowledge to understand and rise above the common issues facing broader society and, as such, it was imperative to act to reduce the Karma of the least fortunate or, at the very least, not aggravate it by supporting institutions that maintain the status quo.[645] She was an ardent proponent of interfering through whatever means necessary to establish the conditions in which the evolution of humanity could be expedited. Gay blamed the indifference of governments to social reforms for the terrible conditions experienced by women who were "forced upon the streets to avoid starvation" and subjected to "cruelty and vice."[646] She cited Theosophy as having "a high and enduring standard of life in the cooperation of man and woman in its leading work" and suggested that "if those who have received its message will respond in thought and deed to the key-note struck, they will lay the foundation of the future redemption of our race."[647]

Gay also published her theosophically informed views in non-theosophical publications. Her January 1893 article in the English feminist magazine, *Shafts*,

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[641] Gay, 'Cooperation of Man and Woman in Human Life', 236
[642] Ibid.
[643] Ibid., 241-242
[644] Ibid.
[645] Ibid., 238
[646] Ibid., 242
[647] Ibid.

advocated for the theory of re-embodiment, that it "unlocks the first door towards the knowledge of ourselves. *Know thyself* is the first and last motto of the individual who desires to penetrate beyond the phenomena presented to a few very limited senses."[648] For the readership of *Shafts*, she also appealed to Christianity to support her position, a common strategy for members of the Theosophical Society for two reasons. First, Christianity, as the popular religion, authorised a theosophical concept by referring to the work and utterances of "Jesus of Nazareth." Second, appealing to more than one religious conception to support an argument fended off accusations from other members, or editors, that an author was infringing on members' individual freedom of belief.[649] Though Gay was a proponent of social reform to achieve human development, she echoed Blavatsky and Besant by reminding her readers that individual realisation and "right thought" were also essential for women's freedom. Besant's worldview had always highlighted the importance of "right thought" as a powerful force in society and Gay also invoked this mental attitude.

> This is why the freedom of woman can never be created by laws or institutions, or exterior methods, but by a mental attitude, a ripeness of spirit, which extends fraternity to her, sees its necessity and justice, and thence naturally expresses itself on the external plane.[650]

In 1893, Jerome A. Anderson gave a lecture at the World's Fair in Chicago entitled 'Reincarnation as Applied to the Sex Problem'. Anderson was a prominent American theosophist, a member of the San Francisco branch of the Theosophical Society, and President of the Federation of Branches of the Theosophical Societies of the Pacific Coast. He explained that the soul is sexless but "it incarnates…in a series of male forms, and again in a series of female forms" in order to "know all the possibilities of life or of consciousness."[651] For Anderson, this theosophical perspective dissolved the sex problem and therefore "all the hope of man and woman becoming similar mentally, or in any other way, except as countless ages of evolution shall have rounded out and equilibrated both aspects of life is childish babbling."[652]

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[648] Gay, 'Womanhood From The Theosophical Point Of View', 152
[649] See McPherson article in Chapter 2 for an example of this.
[650] Gay, 'Womanhood From The Theosophical Point Of View', 152
[651] Anderson, 'Reincarnation as Applied to the Sex Problem', 62
[652] Ibid.

He argued that souls incarnated as men and women were at "opposite poles of conscious being upon this plane" that could "only be unified when the sexless, passionless human soul shall have acquired all necessary or possible experiences; when it shall have completed its evolution now in active operation."[653] Anderson's argument deployed the same distancing strategy used by those who tried to ward off political interpretations of Universal Brotherhood: placing the full equality of the sexes, in all spheres of life, in a cosmic, spiritual, and distant context. His ideas were presented to the readership of *The Irish Theosophist* in April 1894 in an editorial by Daniel Dunlop. The piece discussed a group called the Brotherhood of the New Life, founded by Thomas Lake Harris, and was, for the most part, critical of their work. However, the role of the feminine in their activities was highlighted to illustrate a theosophical response to the sex problem. Dunlop cited Anderson that "Theosophy offers…another viewpoint from which to obtain a broader, more philosophic conception of human life, its duties, responsibilities, and opportunities" because it recognised "the true relations our souls bear to our bodies, that upon its own habitation the soul is sexless and passionless."[654] Though Anderson, like Gay, reminded the reader of the implications of the sexless soul, that men must recognise that the female sex will be, and must be, theirs in "many future lives," his arguments pertained only to male/female relations, and not to women's equality more broadly.[655] Like Buck, he was concerned with restoring "marriage to its pristine purity," and offered an equality-based argument for sexual discipline that would free individuals to "use the creative energy, now perverted and wasted, upon intellectual and spiritual planes."[656]

The April and May 1894 issues of *Lucifer* provided the stage for the debate between those who advocated an essentialised and natural division of the sexes and those who offered more nuanced approaches. In the April 1894 issue, the second essay in a two-part series by Kali Prasanna Mukherji, a prominent Indian member of the Society, addressed the two kinds of Karma that can affect an individual's sex in their next incarnation, "the Karma of compensation" and "the Karma of selection."[657] The first of these accounted for individuals born female, so that they

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[653] Ibid.
[654] Dunlop, 'Notes By The Way: The Sex Problem', 89, citing Anderson
[655] Ibid.
[656] Anderson, 'Reincarnation as Applied to the Sex Problem', 63
[657] Mukherji, 'Scraps from a Hindu Notebook', 161

might experience the negative actions they perpetrated on a female during their previous incarnation. The second accounted for an individual born female who, while living as a male in a previous incarnation, developed "mental characteristics peculiar to females" or "constantly regrets deeply that he was not born a female."[658] Mukherji subscribed to a binary and essentialist view of the sexes and laid out a set of characteristics that corresponded to males and females. He argued that a male has "constant desire to help others," "constant desire to control others," "behave[s] so that others may be attached to him" and is possessed of "Heroism," "High-mindedness," "Powerful intellect," "Generalizing," and "Liberality."[659] A female was presented as the exact opposite, having a "constant desire to be helped by others," "constant desire to be controlled by others," "sacrifice[s] one's self to the happiness of another" and is possessed of "Meekness," "Kind-heartedness," "Constant devotion," a "Particularizing" attitude, and "Economy."[660] This was a common and enduring conception of the sexes among Theosophists based on a principle of complementarity. Like most opinions expressed in theosophical fora, it did not go unchallenged. The following month, in the May 1894 issue, AM Glass, a prominent British member of the Society, responded to Muhkerji's over-simplistic characterisation of the sexes, describing it as an "effort to make flowers of one colour grow all in one place, and flowers of another hue in another," and reminded the reader that the "evolutionary efforts of Nature…are far different."[661] Instead, Glass offered the view that "a large and increasing number of souls are incarnated in the feminine form, who have outlived the primitive desire for, or acquiescence in, control, and are deeply inspired with the desire for freedom, and a full share in the world's work."[662] He argued that there were "many women who naturally control those around them," that "the intellectual powers of women are rapidly unfolding since education has been opened fully to them," and women have a strong claim to "a share in general government" due to the fact that helping others was "more characteristic of the modern woman than the modern man."[663] Glass's assertion that women were benefitting greatly from access to education places him on the side of

[658] Ibid.
[659] Ibid.
[660] Ibid.
[661] Glass, 'Correspondence: Sex in Reincarnation', 253
[662] Ibid.
[663] Ibid.

interfering to improve conditions as a way to expedite the theosophical enterprise. Glass took issue with Jerome Anderson's 1893 comments to illustrate how binary essentialism did not contribute to the advancement of women. Anderson had earlier encouraged the recognition of equality between the souls of women and men, but Glass cited the following statement as evidence of their implied physical inequality: "[a]ll the hope of man and woman becoming similar mentally, or in any other way, except as countless ages of evolution shall have rounded out and equilibrated both aspects of life, is childish babbling."[664] Glass countered Anderson's distancing strategy by highlighting the immediate and physical ways in which women were gaining equality, and admonished his approach as a source of "so much injustice to woman."[665] He warned of the karmic cost to those who would close "any avenue of progress" through "the attempt to accentuate mere sex" and asserted that "all that tends to relegate womanhood to subserviency and inferiority must give way to the higher teachings of a Theosophy which fixes its eyes ever upon the Eternal Soul."[666] The spiritual equality of souls was leveraged into a full equality of the sexes by some members, but used as a reason to maintain the status quo by others. Anderson and Buck merely wished for women to be treated better at the hands of their husbands while subscribing to the view that the souls incarnated into women's bodies were there for karmic reasons. Others, such as Gay and Glass, proposed that society should take account of the full equality of women in practical and immediate ways.

The October and November 1894 issues of the *Irish Theosophist* carried articles by Georgiana Brereton which addressed the question of how women's social conditions affected their potential for theosophical development as well as the practical implications of spiritual equality.

> It is proposed to examine whether, and in what way, present social arrangements cramp and limit artificially the physical, mental and moral stature of women, and lessen their power of developing such other faculties as may be their inheritance; to examine how far the due liberty of possessing and using their own bodies, powers and faculties, has been wrested from women in the dark ages of animal passion, through which

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[664] Ibid. and Anderson, 'Reincarnation as Applied to the Sex Problem', 62
[665] Ibid.
[666] Ibid., 253-254

> the race has passed or is passing; to try and discover whether, and in what way, individuals are responsible for this retarding of woman's life, and curtailing of woman's freedom; to try and ascertain also whether we cannot make some effective efforts to undo, as far as our own lives are concerned, a part of the accumulated evils with which womanhood is weighted.[667]

She argued that in order for woman to gain her proper place, she must first be "considered as an individual human being" and given "full opportunity for the healthy development of her body and all inherited or potential powers."[668] Brereton believed that women should "follow special training of some aptitude" so that individuals could be "self-supporting." That the lack of such "social arrangements…has been a serious loss to humanity."[669] Brereton's individualisation of women resisted the essential binary characterisation of the sexes and offered a theosophical and practical basis for educating women to their full potential as participants in the theosophical enterprise.

In the September 1895 issue of *Lucifer*, Susan Gay provided another example of questioning the commitment to equality on the physical and spiritual planes. Where AM Glass had criticised Jerome Anderson's binary essentialism, he now became subject to similar criticism himself. Gay addressed Glass's reference, in a multi-part essay on early Christianity in *Lucifer*, to the biblical analogy between the husband/wife relationship and the Christ/Church relationship. For Gay, this was an error on the part of Glass, someone who was an ardent supporter of equality for women in all spheres, because the biblical relationship between husband and wife is one of subordination. Gay argued that "[o]n the physical side man and woman are the complements of each other…it is alien to the spirit of true religion…to teach that an individual of one sex is the head of another of the other sex, or that woman is inferior because of her womanhood and her maternal capacities."[670] Gay rejected the binary essentialism of ""woman" as the Soul, and "man" as the outer Reason" as well as those who engaged in the "exaltation of the feminine at the expense of the

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[667] Brereton, 'The Application of Brotherhood', 2
[668] Ibid., 28
[669] Ibid.
[670] Gay, 'Correspondence: Sex Symbology', 79

masculine."[671] She argued that each individual, regardless of sex, is on "the pathway to that divine relation which makes all united in equal sonship" and any "[s]ymbology which degrades one sex and represents it as inferior to the other is a thing to be avoided by all genuine Theosophists."[672]

The period around the turn of the 19th century saw the cementing of political and social interpretations of the sexless soul and the spiritual equality of the sexes. By 1902, it had crossed the Atlantic to become part of the American discourse on women and, along with the impact of the ascension of Katherine Tingley to the leadership, countered the lack of nuance regarding the division of the sexes that had been pervasive there. The February 2nd, 1902 issue of Tingley's journal, *The New Century*, published a contribution entitled 'Evolution of the Woman Question: No Real Antagonisms Between the Sexes'. The article rejected "the present position or functions of women or of men" as "an unchanging decree of Nature" and argued that the world does not demand "sex credentials" in its requirement for "spiritual wisdom, spiritual strength, for justice and for fearlessness."[673] On the European side, the growing influence of Annie Besant and her eventual presidency changed how women's issues were addressed despite her maintaining a binary essentialist view of the sexes and their spiritual complementarity. Besant encouraged broader activist tendencies, undergirded by a spiritual impulse, on every issue, that set the tone for contributors like Susan Gay and Charlotte Despard to advocate strong positions on the enfranchisement and freedom of women. Though Gay had earlier argued that women were crucial to the theosophical enterprise, and therefore improving their social conditions aided the evolution of humanity, Charlotte Despard completed the process of spiritualising the women's movement.

The foundation of the Theosophical Order of Service had given members a powerful tool in organising resources on behalf of a wide range of social issues, many of them directly impacting women. In the January 1909 issue of *The Theosophist*, a contribution by Dr. Louise C. Appel, the first organising secretary of the Order of Service, showed the scope of such issues and their effect on the women's

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[671] Ibid.
[672] Ibid.
[673] S. C. 'Evolution of the Woman Question', 4. See Ashcraft, *The Dawn of a New Cycle* for more on women's issues in the American milieu after the Judge secession.

movement.[674] She discussed some of Josephine Butler's speeches, a noted feminist and campaigner against the Contagious Diseases Acts, agreeing wholeheartedly with the idea that state regulation of sexual health not only discriminates against women but was "based upon the tacit permission to men to be impure, and upon the tacit endeavour to save men, at whatever cost, and in whatever way, from the consequences of sexual impurity."[675] As a medical doctor and abolitionist, Appel argued that it was her "duty to adopt only those methods of cure and of prevention" that were not based on any such permission, and to abolish those that were.[676] She discussed a number of articles from the *British Medical Journal* that suggested soldiers should be vaccinated against diseases arising out of vice and reminded the reader that such vaccines were developed through experimentation on apes. Appel bemoaned the fact that to "the sufferings inflicted on women and children, there are now added the sufferings inflicted on animals in the vain endeavour to discover a means, or vaccine, for making sexual vice 'safe' for men."[677] She rejected the "tacit assumption underlying the whole system of regulation…that vice is necessary to men, and that unfortunate women, young girls, and unprotected animals, may be sacrificed to man's physical 'necessity', and to the prevention of disease."[678]

Charlotte Despard was a prominent suffragist in Britain and Ireland and her 1913 work, *Theosophy and the Woman's Movement*, was a summation of her position on the spiritual impulse behind the campaign to improve the conditions of women. She argued that the women's movement was "in the direct line of spiritual evolution" and, together with other contemporary movements, part of a larger enterprise of "preparing for that 'one far off divine event to which the whole creation moves'."[679] This illustrates her theosophical view of a monistic universe in which everything is connected and evolving towards divine unity. She claimed this truth had been offered by all the great spiritual messengers of history, but no one had succeeded in implementing a true Brotherhood of Humanity and unity of all life. Despard held a

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[674] Appel also represented the Order of Service at the International Anti-Vivisection and Animal Protection Congress in July, 1909. See Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 140
[675] Appel, 'Brotherhood: The White Slave Traffic', 301
[676] Ibid., 302
[677] Ibid., 304
[678] Ibid.
[679] Despard, *Theosophy and the Woman's Movement*, 1-2

similar view to Besant as to how humanity should proceed and cited access to education as the groundwork for future spiritual evolution, particularly for women.

> We shall not have a strong, wise and noble race, capable of self-government, on the one hand, and of reverence for beauty and greatness on the other – a nation able to receive and to follow practically the teaching of the Wise Ones, until we have a true, strong, well-developed and finely educated generation of women.[680]

Despard was convinced that social action was required to create the conditions in which humanity could thrive and evolve. She also echoed Besant's ideas on equality and claimed that the first object of the Society means that there is no distinction between people, not that there is no difference. Despard supported the idea that not all people are equal, some are more spiritually advanced than others and that the advice of the 'older brothers' should be heeded. She cautioned that the problem arises when such differences "are interpreted into superiorities and include a right to domination."[681] Despard was not a collectivist and, like Besant, was a great advocate of individualism of action but argued that it came with great duty and responsibility because "life itself is one and…the human spirit, manifesting in the physical universe through its veil of flesh, is actually a ray of the Divine, passing on from life to life and carrying with it the sum of experience gained, to be wrought into qualities in the spiritual worlds."[682] Despard argued for a bottom-up approach to the spiritual evolution of humanity. Engagement with theosophy provided the tools for the individual to grow and evolve and he or she would then be able to help improve the conditions of others. Those others, in turn, would become similarly educated and take on individual responsibility and duty themselves, always developing and building on what came before. Despard's interpretation of theosophical ideas provided the basis for a practical worldview that sought progress in numerous causes. She saw a definite parallel between the rise of theosophy and the women's movement.

> Both movements would seem to have for their object the Preparation of the World for a deeper revelation than has yet been given to men, and

[680] Ibid., 5
[681] Ibid., 7
[682] Ibid., 21

> for a new race, possessing faculties higher than those enjoyed by any, save the most gifted human beings of today.[683]

Like Susan Gay, and unlike Besant, Despard did not concern herself with a binary essentialist view of women's natural qualities and how they contributed to a complementarity with men. She was interested in material changes to the social conditions of women that could give them the opportunity to flourish as individuals and contribute to the spiritual evolution of humanity.

Susan Gay revisited her views on the women's movement in the February and March 1914 issues of *The Theosophist*, beginning with a discussion of the theosophical history of the root races and the transient evolutionary necessity of the human condition of dual sexes. She recounted the encumbered position of women throughout theosophical evolutionary history, culminating in their struggles of the early 20th century, and credited women with inventing altruism along the way. Gay refuted the argument that women should have political representation simply because they were different and had another point of view.

> I, for one, do not claim the franchise, or any other right, for any reason less cogent than this – that I am part of the human race, a soul, garbed in the flesh but made in the image of God; and I take my stand as a soul and not as flesh; as mind and not as body; and because I am Man, with the Eternal before me, and need the evolution which comes from freedom and does not come from subserviency. I stand for Brotherhood, regardless of sex or any old-time creed, and I ask that Brotherhood may be extended to me that I may the better hold it forth to others.[684]

Gay appealed directly to her theosophical perspective to justify her demand to be enfranchised, not as a woman who should be treated equally but as a human soul. She provided other examples of theosophical justification for political action, such as arguing that improving social conditions would reduce infant mortality, provide longer lives, and give souls more opportunity to evolve and learn, possibly reducing the number of incarnations required. Gay's distaste for the body was apparent in her self-presentation as a soul seeking political enfranchisement and her comparison of

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683 Ibid., 43
684 Gay, 'The Garment of Womanhood', 753-754

gender to a garment. She predicted the future evolution of human parthenogenesis and the use of occult powers to manifest newly incarnated egos in adult bodies, dispensing with gestation and women's reproductive burden. Gay was convinced that a body's gender should not affect its role in the world and highlighted the less tangible aspects of humanity shared by both men and women.

> Nothing in the form of sex must constitute a chain which retards, and exceptional ability, aptitude, talent, must be welcomed for the common good, regardless of sex, or caste, or any external distinction. For this, the Theosophical Society should ever be the pioneer. That the fact of sex could be the means of compelling the ego who wears the garment of womanhood to forego all rights and liberties, all personal expansion, will be understood to bar out progress for the race.[685]

The contributions of Appel, Gay, and Despard illustrate the widespread use of theosophical justifications to encourage social reform and show that their political actions were derived from their theosophical views. Under Besant's presidency, during which she set an activist tone for the Society, the argumentation for improving the social conditions of women strengthened and, apart from Besant, much of the binary essentialism was minimised. Dixon argues that the "creation of a feminist spirituality within the TS was constrained by the limits of contemporary discourses on race, gender, empire, and religion" but when the views of Susan Gay and Charlotte Despard are examined as part of a totalising knowledge system of esoteric monism, the entire enterprise of human evolution, not just feminism, is at stake. The next section looks at the case of James and Margaret Cousins who also viewed their gender politics through the totalising lens of theosophy and resisted the binary essentialism of natural characteristics in the division of the sexes.

[685] Ibid., 888

James and Margaret Cousins

James Cousins (1873-1956) was born in Belfast and Margaret Cousins, née Gillespie (1878-1954), in Boyle, Co. Roscommon. James moved to Dublin in 1897 and became familiar with more famous figures of the Literary Revival such as George Russell and W.B. Yeats. Margaret attended the Royal Academy of Music in Dublin in 1898 and the couple married in 1903. They became active members of the Theosophical Society, held séances at their home, and maintained an interest in astrology and automatic drawing. Margaret became a vegetarian, as her husband was, and in 1904 became secretary of the Irish Vegetarian Society.[686] In 1906, while travelling to address a vegetarian conference in England, she attended the conference of the National Council of Women. This was the impulse to join the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association on her return to Ireland. James followed suit and was one of the original members of the Irishwomen's Franchise League that Margaret founded in 1908 due to her dissatisfaction with the approach of the Irish Women's Suffrage and Local Government Association. Margaret and James co-founded the suffrage paper, *The Irish Citizen,* and James became one of its editors. Margaret continued her interest in English suffrage and in 1909 worked for the Women's Social and Political Union in London. During that time, she served a month in Holloway prison for smashing windows at 10 Downing Street, a sentence she would repeat at Tullamore prison in 1913 for similar activities at Dublin Castle (the seat of British rule in Ireland). James and Margaret went to Liverpool in 1913, where James worked in a vegetarian food factory, and in 1915 travelled to India at the invitation of Annie Besant. James and Margaret spent the rest of their lives in India. Margaret was a founding member of the Women's Indian Association, one of its honorary secretaries, and edited their magazine. She was involved in organising the first all-India women's conference in 1926 and the all-Asia women's conference in 1931.[687] James became one of the editors of Besant's paper, *New India*, and, like Margaret, worked as an educator and lecturer. However, he was publicly fired from his position at the newspaper due to his support of Irish nationalism and Indian self-reliance. His view differed significantly from the more imperialist one taken by

[686] See Leneman, 'The Awakened Instinct' for Margaret Cousins' vegetarian activism and how it contributed to women's emancipation.
[687] See Forbes, 'Caged Tigers' for an account of Margaret Cousins' feminist work in India and Ramusack, 'Cultural Missionaries' for an overview early women activists in India.

Besant, and much of the British administration in India, who advocated Indian Home Rule but ultimately wished to maintain the Imperial family of nations. James was a supporter of agricultural co-operation, as was George Russell, and was asked for help on this matter by Rabindranath Tagore. James went on to open the first public art gallery in India in 1924 and eventually became art adviser to the Government of Travancore, a princely state located at the south-western tip of British India.[688]

Esoteric Dublin

Published in 1950, *We Two Together* represents a record of the memories of James and Margaret, according to which, James met George Russell for the first time in 1897. Russell had already been a poetic influence on James and became an influential part of his involvement with the Theosophical Society. Speaking after his first visit to Russell's house, James recalled that "[t]henceforward, and for sixteen years, I was a regular visitor to AE's home."[689] Russell had been a central figure in the Dublin milieu since 1885 when the first iteration of the Dublin Hermetic Society was founded. At the time of James' first meeting with Russell, the Irish theosophists were aligned with the American secession, led by William Q. Judge, and acting under the name 'The Theosophical Society in Europe (Ireland)'. James' certificate of membership of the Theosophical Society is dated May 16th, 1908, according to *We Two Together*. By this time, the Dublin Lodge had been reconstituted by the issue of a charter, in 1904, by Olcott, president of the Theosophical Society (Adyar), thereby bringing the Irish members back under the umbrella of the Society they had left to follow Judge. Russell returned the charter the following year, leaving James and Margaret as the primary theosophical organisers in Dublin in 1909.

Theosophy and Practical Politics

In her November 1908 article in *The Theosophist*, 'Concerning Practical Politics', Margaret invoked the scientific conception of evolution to demonstrate the equality of all humanity and argued that its influence can be seen in the "levelling down on one side, and an ennobling on the other side, of class distinctions…rapidly taking place in all thinking men's minds."[690] Siding with members like Gay and Despard

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[688] Clarke, Frances. 'Cousins, James Henry Sproull' and 'Cousins, Margaret (Gretta) Elizabeth'
[689] Cousins and Cousins, *We Two Together*, 43
[690] Cousins, 'Concerning Practical Politics', 119-120

against binary essentialism, Margaret claimed that each individual possessed the "divine right of Kingship" in their own person and that the growing realisation of this fact was making possible the progressive movements of the time. She wanted to ensure that this realisation extended to women and was not only used to make men more equal with each other. Margaret made a direct connection between her theosophical perspective and the suffrage movement by referring to the 'Unseen Helpers', the hidden masters.

> Nature works as a duality in this world of manifestation; only through the union of masculine and feminine can the manifestation continue; and it is at this time of crisis that the Unseen Helpers of the Race-evolution have inspired a certain band of women to sound with no uncertain note their demand for enfranchisement, their claim to the right of a full and equal share in the government under which they, as well as men, live, and work, and think.[691]

Margaret spiritualised the suffrage movement because it was part of the same overarching enterprise of creating the necessary social conditions to facilitate and expedite the evolution of humanity. She argued that the enfranchisement of women was "on the physical plane, only a symbol of the entry, on the mental plane, of the intuition to share in the operations of the intellect; and through the intuition the soul will be able to function and eventually spiritualise the materialistic tendencies of the age."[692] Margaret was convinced that life was the opportunity for souls to develop and reveal the divine knowledge within. Echoing the work of Susan Gay, men did not realise the extent of the damage they were doing in limiting such potential. However, men who did not support the women's movement were "battling against the Evolution-Spirit in the individual and in the race, and this can only result in harm to themselves."[693]

Like many other theosophists, James and Margaret developed their views on the sexes from an understanding of reincarnation. James explained that he was predisposed to resisting the "perfect assimilation of anything that came to [him] through the intellect alone" and required "a synthesis of the mind, the emotions, and

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[691] Ibid., 120-121
[692] Ibid., 123-124
[693] Ibid., 124

some living application and creation in the imagination, to give [him] a vital realisation of any proposition."[694] Like Russell, James held an esoteric monist perspective on knowledge that drove him to seek truth on more than one level and through more than one mode of knowing. For both men, something verifiably true should be so on all levels of reality and therefore accessible through the senses, reason, and intuition. James described having a vision that, along with his intellectual apprehension of the idea, helped his realisation of the truth of reincarnation:

> I suddenly saw myself as myself coming from myself, through the gate of parenthood, moving towards the gate of death, to myself. I recognised paternal and maternal transmissions in characteristics of body, mind and feeling but saw my-self as the spectator and user of these, modifying them according to the genius and purpose of my real self.[695]

James described the same process of acquiring and internalising knowledge in the development of his relationship with Margaret and, ultimately, his attitude towards the division of the sexes. He claimed their engagement to each other was not just a period of becoming familiar with Margaret, describing her as the "individual who was destined to broaden me into real manhood by stimulating in me the reactions of latent womanhood, and for whom I was to do a complementary service."[696] James labelled the division into male and female "too crude" and argued that any knowledge of Margaret that he "might acquire through the externals of speech and action, arose from responses of the "her" within [himself]."[697] He described the "admixture of feminine receptiveness and creativeness" in himself and the "certain touch of masculine power and initiative" in Margaret as a legacy, and proof, of the "innumerable criss-crossings of the super-physical nature."[698] Though James advocated for a nuanced idea of the sexes, in that no individual was fully one or the other, he did ascribe certain characteristics to the feminine and masculine that suggest a binary essentialism of the concepts, if not of the physical sexes. The idea of corroborating his knowledge of Margaret acquired through the empirical senses with the experiential knowledge gained from the responses of the feminine aspect within

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[694] Cousins and Cousins, *We Two Together*, 67
[695] Ibid., 67-68
[696] Ibid., 81
[697] Ibid.
[698] Ibid.

himself is another example of his esoteric monism, an enterprise through which James accessed truth, became satisfied with its veracity, and overrided his scepticism.[699] Margaret described her conversion to vegetarianism in similar terms, where direct experiential knowledge confirmed to her the rightness of the decision after she engaged with the reasoning of the movement; "That vow was taken by my Spiritual Will to my Highest Self after a moment of illumination."[700] For James and Margaret, not only *does* the spiritual perspective justify the corresponding social or political action, they *must* correspond with each other. Aspects on different planes of existence, the physical, mental, spiritual etc. must correspond as part of a singular totalising knowledge system.

Feminism and The Irish Citizen

In *We Two Together*, Margaret recounts memories of her early family life, as the eldest of four girls, as her first experiences of gender inequality. She claimed that she was "so sensitive and intuitional" that she knew her "little sisters were unwelcome as they monotonously came along."[701] Margaret "felt acutely the injustice of this attitude and atmosphere" where "[b]oys were wanted and expected" and afforded "much more freedom of action, movement and friendship."[702] She claimed that a "sense of natural equality with the masculine world was [her] birthright." Her commitment to women's issues as an adult expressed itself in the publication of the *Irish Citizen*, the suffragist newspaper to which both she and James contributed time and content.[703] However, there have been misattributions of authors to articles in some of the literature. The June 1st, 1912 issue of the *Irish Citizen* contained an article entitled 'The Discovery of the Femaculine', signed by M.E., that has been falsely attributed to Margaret by Catherine Candy. Although Margaret's middle name was Elizabeth and Candy presents some reasonable arguments to suggest it fits with her general line of thought, the coining of the term 'femaculine' in the *Irish Citizen* article was the work of Marion Duggan, a prominent suffrage campaigner in Dublin at that time.[704]

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[699] The problems that such an enterprise presented for James are addressed in the work of Gauri Viswanathan and returned to in the chapter on nationalisms.
[700] Cousins and Cousins, *We Two Together*, 89-90.
[701] Ibid., 54
[702] Ibid.
[703] Ibid.
[704] Candy, 'Relating feminisms, nationalisms and imperialisms', 583

Addressing the contention that ordinary Irish people did not want suffrage for women, both James and Margaret contributed to the *Irish Citizen* in November of 1912. In the November 23rd issue, James refuted the idea that the demand for suffrage was not present among the Irish electorate and concluded with one of the clearest examples of linking actions in the political sphere to theosophical perspectives and esoteric monism. He offered a theosophical condemnation of party politics and the Irish Parliamentary Party, who in 1912 were propping up Prime Minister Herbert Asquith's Liberal Party government in exchange for advancing Ireland's Home Rule agenda. James took issue with the Irish Party's strategic decision to use their parliamentary leverage to bring about legislation on Irish Home Rule only and not on the expansion of suffrage to women.

> The Irish Party, by its slavish adoption of the hand-to-mouth policy of expediency, has done violence to the soul of the race which it claims to represent. They cannot keep back the next great stage in human progress; but there are many who are filled with dread that the failure of Ireland's representatives to rise to a great occasion is a signal from the Cosmos that the struggle of a nation for seven centuries is still far from its termination.[705]

Margaret's thoughts followed in the November 30th issue where she recounted that the state of affairs in Irish constituencies was to blame for the perceived lack of interest in expanding the franchise and parliamentary politics more broadly. She argued that in practical terms, "the Parliamentary vote is of little value even to men in the present political conditions" and "[t]hree-quarters of the constituencies in Ireland have no contested elections."[706] Margaret explained that she had attended meetings in constituencies that had not had an election for "so long that the women municipal voters there took it for granted that they had the Parliamentary as well as Local Government vote."[707] She was convinced that once those elections were contested, the demand for suffrage among women would "become a passionate clamour."[708]

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[705] Cousins, 'An Irishman's View', 214
[706] Cousins, 'Leinster', 221
[707] Ibid.
[708] Ibid.

The January 25th, 1913 issue contained an example of the spiritualisation of the women's movement in an address delivered by James to the Irish Women's Franchise League. In an edifying reminder that "[s]truggle is the condition of progress," he argued that although the "immediate aim of the vote may not be attained; the spiritual forces you have let loose in the world are incalculable for the regeneration of humanity."[709] In a lecture to a non-theosophical audience, James imparted a spiritual impulse to the suffrage movement and contextualised it as a necessary step in the theosophical evolution of humanity. He also demonstrated his esoteric monism by suggesting that "the freedom of Ireland, so far as it is in line with the evolution of humanity, is safe" and "the enfranchisement of womanhood is safe" because they are "essentially one."[710] In the March 8th, 1913 issue of *The Irish Citizen*, published after her imprisonment in Tullamore, Margaret showed that her commitment to suffrage was not actually a political act but one connected deeply to her sense of freedom and justice, a sense derived from her study of theosophy. The article commented on militancy and the relationship of the punishment to the crime, particularly in the case of social agitation, and shows her commitment to improving the social conditions of women to facilitate their participation in the theosophical enterprise.

> In that we have proved that the human spirit, the individual will to live, is the only law-giver, and that women can win their battle through facing death as well as life. We know that we are above the law, and that in submitting to it according to the terms we ourselves impose on it, we are in a far-off way following the example of that supreme Crucified One who came not to destroy the law but to fulfil it; that we suffer but to redeem, and that indeed we are co-workers with Him for the upliftment of our people.[711]

Her reference to Jesus mirrors Susan Gay's strategy of spiritualising the women's movement when publishing in a non-theosophical journal, but the commitment to the ideas of duty and sacrifice resonates strongly with Besant's theosophical worldview.

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[709] Cousins, 'Where We Stand in Woman Suffrage', 285
[710] Ibid., 285
[711] Cousins, 'Are Suffragists Above the Law?," 333

In the early October 1915 issues of the *Irish Citizen,* Margaret published one the most comprehensive account of her thoughts on the women's movement, and placed herself firmly on the side of social activism. She called for conditions to be drastically improved for women so that they could partake in their own individual spiritual evolution and play their role in the evolution of humanity. Margaret argued that "[i]t is the conditions that make the difference" and those who wish to help women "out of their chains must study the root causes of their disabilities, so that effort may not be misspent in removing the branches while leaving the roots untouched, ready to send out new branches at the first convenient moment."[712] She was convinced that women were limited by society, not by the fact of being women, and the implication resists binary essentialism and natural characteristics of the sexes. This runs contrary to the more conventional Besant who took a naturalised approach to the functions and proclivities of women. Cousins echoed Susan Gay by distinguishing between women's enfranchisement and women's emancipation.

> Real freedom is a condition of full self-consciousness; of awakened, self-reliant mind; of soul aware of its inherent divinity; a condition absolutely necessary to the expression of these for the service and opportunity for growth by artificial barriers, by prejudiced customs, by fear of results or by force is to dwarf the soul, the crime of crimes. Free opportunity is to the real person, the thinker, as necessary as free air and free sunlight are to the body.[713]

Where Besant envisioned the elimination of the sex distinction as part of a distant evolutionary process, Margaret indicated her support for immediate actions that could be taken to minimise it. She argued that dress reform was "one of the important factors in the emancipation of women. The less sex differentiation there is in dress, the more likely chance there is of women being treated as free human beings, not as females."[714] For Margaret, changing the simplest of cultural conditions would lead to a changed perception of women, and their equality as individuals would be demonstrated in practical and visible ways. She wanted to change the conditions of society by creating opportunities not just for women to flourish

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[712] Cousins, 'The Emancipation of Woman'(a), 113
[713] Ibid.
[714] Ibid.

physically but to be free to develop as individual souls. Every aspect of her argument was derived from her overarching theosophical perspectives on the soul. Participation in social progress was participation in the evolution of humanity back to the divine unity.

Margaret agreed entirely with Besant, and most Society members, that education should play a crucial role in the progress of the women's movement everywhere. She argued that "[i]n the great school of life no class must be closed to women any more than to men; experience and responsibility are its teachers, and to deny the lessons of either to women who are eager for knowledge is to impoverish the soul and humanity."[715] Along with the practicalities of day to day schooling, Margaret was referring to the education, experience, and spiritual development of the soul on its journey from body to body, the restriction of which was a restriction of humanity. In this article, Cousins also comments on celibacy, arguing that through "economic independence women will be in a position to enforce their naturally chaste instincts regarding sex questions."[716] She concluded with an all-encompassing statement of her esoteric monism, expressing her view that the women's movement was just a part of a larger theosophical enterprise of individual spiritual development.

> All are part of the great inclusive movement for the emancipation of woman. That movement has its beginning in the individual, but its end in the redemption of the whole earth, for all people and things are so inter-dependent that even one being cannot be wholly free and happy so long as the oppression of any other exists. As one seeks for true individual freedom one learns altruism, and the freedom of the one woman becomes the freedom of all.[717]

Cousins Bound for India

The *Irish Citizen* published a farewell letter from Margaret in September 1915 though it would not be her final involvement in the Irish milieu. Her letter spoke about the affinity that existed between Ireland and India and affirmed her theosophically inspired commitment to address the plight of Indian women.

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[715] Ibid.
[716] Cousins, 'The Emancipation of Woman'(b), 121
[717] Ibid.

> I do not know what form my work for Indian women will take. Local conditions will regulate that probably, but something, I know will be given me to do, for my heart yearns for all the woes of all women, and the economy of Nature and evolution must use my past experience and faculties in the best way, in the future as in the past.[718]

Her references to Nature and evolution indicated her self-perception as someone doing the spiritual work of humanity as it strove to return to the divine unity. Margaret remained in touch with the women's movement in Ireland and *The Irish Citizen* continued in her absence until 1920. In a January 1917 contribution, Margaret sought to boost morale in Ireland, claiming that the "little paper stands for a great deal" and was a tangible demonstration of their "continuity and purpose," "capability in action," and "self reliance even when…men supporters are withdrawn from [the] field."[719] As evidenced by her time spent in prison, Margaret was a supporter of civil disobedience and militancy in service of the cause of women's suffrage. Historian Louise Ryan suggests that this may have been counter-productive as it took the "initiative away from working class women instead of trying to help such women organise."[720] Ryan also argues that the attitude of militant women appears "patronising" because "they saw themselves as the saviours of women, 'suffragettes with mother love burning in their hearts', who would get the vote for the poor, uneducated, less well off women."[721] However, Margaret saw herself as an agent of human evolution and, like other Society members, argued that the higher knowledge and understanding to which theosophists had access compelled them to take action on behalf of those who were not in a position to help themselves. Only when the social conditions of the least fortunate in society had improved could they participate in the theosophical enterprise of individual spiritual development on behalf of humanity as a whole. Margaret expected action from all Society members and, in the December 1918 issue of *The Theosophist*, she demanded immediate and direct action from all those who would call themselves theosophists.

> It is for all of us who are Theosophists to bring about these reforms more rapidly by acting in every detail of our lives according to the dictates of

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[718] Cousins. 'Farewell Letter from Mrs. Cousins'
[719] Cited in Ryan, *Irish Feminism and the Vote*, 7
[720] Ibid., 20
[721] Ibid.

> our Higher Self, and by attempting that of which it feels capable, irrespective of the form and the conventions with which the past has curbed it or given it undue licence, and similarly by identifying those with whom we are associated with that formless Inner Nature which is seeking avenues for its self-expression as the Server of Humanity.[722]

Like Gay, and unlike those who prioritised the improvement of the self over social reform, Margaret sought to use any means necessary, including legislation, to effect the necessary changes to society. Historian Barbara Ramusack argues that in India, Margaret was an active supporter "of Indian nationalists and their demand for self-government" and "continued to think of the colonial government as a considerable factor in achieving improvements in the condition of Indian women."[723] Though Ramusack mentions Margaret's involvement with the Theosophical Society and explains that her interest in India came from such an engagement, she fails to highlight the theosophical justifications for her political actions.[724] Margaret's December 1918 contribution to *The Theosophist* is a clear exposition of her theosophical perspective on social issues. As the women's movement grew in stature and success, she argued that nations' increasing "recognition of the value of womanhood…is yet but a *step*, and far from the attainment of full realisation of the principle which the First Object of the T.S. sets out to accomplish."[725] She listed several issues still to be resolved to demonstrate how much work there was still to do so that "the soul shall not be in bondage to the arbitrary customs and unnecessary restrictions imposed on the form it is functioning through."[726] Margaret was convinced that "[t]he awareness of sex…was one expression of that "Curse of Eve" which it is part of the great mission of Theosophy to reverse."[727] However, she noted that "as it was the first to be manifested it will probably be the last to be transcended, and in the meantime it is the most difficult to which to apply the true Theosophical attitude."[728]

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[722] Cousins, 'Without Distinction of Sex', 223
[723] Ramusack, 'Cultural Missionaries', 316-317
[724] Distancing individuals from their involvement with the Society is a common theme in the scholarly literature and more examples are discussed in Chapter 5.
[725] Ibid., 214
[726] Ibid., 215
[727] Ibid., 217
[728] Ibid., 213

Conclusion

The discourse on women in the Theosophical Society was political, and the expansion of women's suffrage or the improvement of the social conditions of women more broadly were debated in the same terms as other political and social issues. Some argued for social reform that would grant full equality to women in all spheres of life, allowing them to fully participate in the theosophical enterprise of spiritual evolution and the restoration of divine unity. Others argued that spiritual equality was sufficient for women, given its superior importance to any other type of equality, and that their status in the material realm should remain unchanged. The development and popularisation of the first argument, for full equality, took place in the pages of theosophical journals in Europe and the United States. Under the presidency of Annie Besant, this movement for full equality gained momentum, not because she was a proponent but because she had put in place the organisational apparatus required to achieve this aim in the form of the Theosophical Order of Service. This process culminated in the overt spiritualisation of the women's movement, based on theosophical ideas, by members like Charlotte Despard, a perspective that was communicated not just to other members but to the public. It is clear from the case of James and Margaret Cousins that the women's movement in Ireland also had a component spiritualised by theosophical ideas. Joy Dixon argues that those who spiritualised the women's movement "believed that the women's movement was a religious crusade, that it was a symptom of a larger set of spiritual changes."[729] However, Dixon does not go far enough because, for some of the individuals discussed in this chapter, it is a question of epistemology. Their actions were derived from knowledge gained and reinforced by esoteric monism and the women's movement was a part of humanity's spiritual evolution. Those individuals who resisted a binary essentialism of the division of the sexes, where each had its natural characteristics and role to play in complementarity with one another, were much more likely to advocate immediate and practical social changes to improve the conditions and freedoms of women.

Many of the individuals discussed in this chapter came to know the truth of women's equality through their intellectual and religious studies, reinforced through their personal spiritual experiences. Their esoteric monism led them to seek truth in

[729] Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 200

all religions and attempt to rehabilitate a Christianity tainted and incomplete in its institutional forms. The Cousins and Susan Gay reinterpreted Christianity in the light of their esoteric pursuits. They wished to find within Christianity the same justifications for political and social action they derived from theosophical ideas, an enterprise that stems from a legacy belief that the religion of the rational west must contain within it a rational justification for their political beliefs regarding the role of women. Further, their esoteric monism must be able to account for Christianity in the sense that it must have a pure form to be discovered in a new interpretation of the texts, the discovery of non-canonical texts, or personal experience. Dixon argues that the conflation of "political with secular makes it difficult to perceive the extent to which, in much early twentieth-century feminist writing, the political realm was reconstituted as a sacred space."[730] However, the conflation of Christianity with the political and secular when addressing both men and women in history makes it difficult to perceive that much of this newly sacralised space was the product of engagements with esoteric discourse. The feminisation of esoteric discourse has allowed individuals who participated in esoteric discourse to be marginalised through the same process Dixon is critiquing. The next chapter looks at how the esoteric interests of James Cousins and George Russell have been marginalised as it examines the intersection of theosophy with ideas of nationalism.

[730] Ibid., 205

Chapter Five: Theosophy and Irish Nationalism

Having shown the influence of theosophical ideas on women's suffrage and gender politics, this chapter aims to demonstrate the profound effect these ideas had on the discourse around Irish nationalism. It begins by highlighting the importance of Ireland and its landscape to the theosophical worldview, particularly that of the Society's leaders. This is followed by a discussion of the role of George Russell and W.B. Yeats in imagining and popularising ideas of Ireland as an enchanted and mystical landscape. The ideas of Irish nationality developed by George Russell and James Cousins are explored to show how their views were rooted in their fascination for the landscape and Irish mythology. This is followed by an analysis of Russell's advocacy for the agricultural co-operative movement as a fusion of his ideas for the Irish nation with the Society's first object of Universal Brotherhood. It also shows how theosophical perspectives informed his ideas of socialism and evolution, and how they were incorporated into his vision for a rural civilisation in Ireland. The chapter then discusses Russell and Cousins' developed thought on nationality and politics to show how it was derived from theosophical ideas and an esoteric monist approach to knowledge. Finally, drawing on the work of Joseph Lennon and Gauri Viswanathan, the perspectives of Russell and Cousins are reviewed through a discussion of the usefulness of theosophical identities in historical analysis.

Conceptions of Ireland as an ancient land and imminent modern nation fuelled attempts to construct a new Irish identity in several ways, ranging from the purely practical to the highest forms of idealism. The Theosophical Society had spiritualized global geography by locating the ancient wisdom, or *prisca theologia,* in certain parts of the world. In the very early days of the Society, Egypt was an important source of ancient wisdom and knowledge. As the Society expanded, interest in Asian religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism, grew quickly and the Society's focus shifted further East. The ancient culture of India was held in the highest regard as the oldest, least adulterated expression of the *prisca theologia.* The physical effect of this shift occurred in 1886 when the headquarters of the Society were moved to Adyar, Madras (now South Chennai), in India. Ireland occupied a special place on this theosophical map and was often celebrated as India's Western counterpart, an enchanted landscape awash with supernatural beings and a native population naturally inclined towards mysticism. Though Ireland was an important

location in global theosophical geography, it was not always a hub of theosophical resources and the significance of holding a claim over the Dublin Lodge during the Society's leadership struggles was largely symbolic.

The Society's leaders gestured towards Ireland's importance and made concerted efforts to ensure the success of the Irish lodges on several occasions. According to a story in the February 1895 issue of the *Irish Theosophist*, Judge, who was born in Ireland, was delighted to learn of the formation of the Dublin Lodge and he "hoped that it would become a living power in Ireland" as he "knew of no European race that was more naturally occult, especially the western Irish."[731] The June 1896 issue of the *Irish Theosophist* carried a short piece by John M. Pryse, a prominent American member of the Society who, along with his brother, provided much of the early Society's expertise in printing and publishing. Pryse claimed he was directed to send a message to the *Irish Theosophist* by "[t]hat mysterious personage, the occult successor of Mr. Judge"[732], Katherine Tingley, the new head of the Esoteric Section of the American Society and future founder and leader of Universal Brotherhood. Like Judge, Tingley viewed Ireland as a spiritual centre on the theosophical map and in the wake of Judge's death she sought to reassure the Dublin Lodge and retain the symbolic capital of association with the Irish theosophists. The message of consolation and consolidation consisted of seven separate points focused on Ireland's special status and the Society's commitment to the theosophical enterprise there.

> 1. That the future of our Society in Ireland is full of hope. Now your workers are few in number, but soon there will be many. The Irish people, unlike the most of [sic] Europeans, have never descended into the slough of materialism; mystical beliefs have not been driven by materialism from out of an island so small yet so important.
>
> 2. That there are Masters in Ireland, and certain conditions essential always to occultism. Not all of the primeval flames have been extinguished.

[731] Anon., 'A Reminiscence', 81
[732] Pryse, 'An Interesting Letter', 178

> 3. That there is an occult connection between Ireland and this country as lasting as time.
>
> 4. That the short stay here of Brothers Dick and Dunlop enabled a special tie to be formed between the occult centres here and in Dublin that will last into the far-coming ages.
>
> 5. That the school for the revival of the lost Mysteries of antiquity, soon to be established in America, will have a reacting effect, allowing a similar though smaller institution to be formed in Ireland.
>
> 6. That the Masters keep an especial fire always lit in the Dublin centre, which will produce its manifest result in due time, and in spite of every obstacle.
>
> 7. That though there are so few of you, your loyalty is known in the right quarter, and its influence will spread over the island and in due season bring forth its harvest.[733]

The School for the Revival of the Lost Mysteries of Antiquity was an educational enterprise founded by Tingley at Point Loma, and the building included stones taken from spiritually significant locations around the world.[734] Ireland was one of these locations. In the August 1896 issue of the *Irish Theosophist,* Daniel Dunlop reported that at that year's convention, "Bro. Russell was then called upon to address the Convention *re* the stone to be taken from Killarney and sent to the U. S. A. to form part of the building for the School for the revival of the lost Mysteries of antiquity."[735] Having a physical piece of Ireland included in the building housing Tingley's new school shows the importance of symbolically binding Ireland to the American project, and the widely held theosophical significance of Ireland's landscape.

Ireland continued to be an important location in theosophical geography and, in her autobiography, Annie Besant lamented having been born in London: "three-quarters of my blood and all my heart are Irish. My dear mother was of purest Irish

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[733] Ibid., 178-179
[734] Rudbøg, 'Point Loma', 56
[735] Dunlop, 'Second Annual Convention', 222

descent, and my father was Irish on his mother's side."[736] She describes Ireland as the "ancient land once inhabited by mighty men of wisdom, that in later times became the Island of Saints, and shall once again be the Island of Sages, when the Wheel turns round."[737] Besant thought of Ireland as "the India of Europe" and the "western land which is the other pole of the spiritual magnet"[738], a country with a demonstrably ancient culture and possessed of a mystical landscape. During her presidency, in the April 1908 issue of *The Theosophist*, Besant wrote that "if the Theosophical Society would arouse to its duty [in Ireland], the circuit would be completed and the work would go forward" but "[u]nhappily little has been done."[739] The Theosophical Society in Dublin at this time had re-joined Besant's Adyar-based Society but lacked the organisational zeal of the period leading up to, and immediately after, their joining the European Section of Judge's Theosophical Society in America.[740] The decline in activity began around the time Daniel Dunlop departed for the United States, in 1897, and the *Irish Theosophist* ceased operations. By 1900, Dublin Lodge activity had severely tapered off due to the fallout from Dunlop's decision to leave Katherine Tingley's new organisation, Universal Brotherhood. Russell followed suit, leaving Frederick J. Dick, secretary of the Dublin Lodge while it was affiliated with Tingley's organisation, the only prominent member to maintain allegiance to the American project. However, he and his wife moved to Point Loma, the new headquarters of Universal Brotherhood, in 1902. Russell led the Irish faction back to the Theosophical Society (Adyar) in 1904, possibly with Dunlop's encouragement in his new role with the Theosophical Society (Adyar) in London. However, Russell became dismayed with the Society's new activist direction under President Annie Besant, returned the new lodge's charter in 1909, and left the Society. The lack of reported activity in the Dublin Lodge during Russell's tenure, 1904-1909, most likely exacerbated by his new role with the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, may have spurred Besant to describe the remaining Theosophists of Dublin as "little in touch with the pulsing life which is making itself felt throughout the world."[741] However, she was not ready to give up and announced

[736] Besant, Annie Besant: An Autobiography, 111
[737] Ibid., 112
[738] Besant, 'From the Editor', 580
[739] Ibid.
[740] See history of the Society in Ireland section in the Introduction chapter.
[741] Ibid.

the need for people in Ireland with "clear brains," "warm hearts," the "intuition to recognise the call of the Masters," and the "readiness to follow Their indications for the world-work."[742] Besant reminded her members of the significance of Ireland in her theosophical vision: "Ireland is needed; of all western countries she is the best fitted to give a body to the great Teacher "Who is for to come."[743] Besant visited Ireland in October 1909 and shortly after, the Irish Lodge and the Dublin Lodge were formed, and James Cousins was appointed Presidential Agent for Ireland.[744] It was not until 1919 that a new charter was granted for an Irish National Section, prompting Besant to repeat the enduring sentiments of her 1908 article:

> The birth of an Irish Section is of great significance to the Theosophical movement, especially in the West. Ireland is to the West that which India is to the East in particular and to the world in general – the great home of spirituality.[745]

She refers to Ireland as "the one home in which the denizens of worlds other than ours are made welcome, are recognised and appreciated, treated as comrades on life's evolutionary pathway."[746] Besant's reference to the populated landscape, one of the most common tropes about Ireland's mystical inclination, evokes the mystical geography of James Cousins and George Russell, who both used Irish mythology as starting points to discuss their ideas of nation and civilisation. Though she shared in the perception of Ireland as an enchanted landscape, Besant's esoteric monism informed her view of Ireland's emerging nationhood, the nature of its independence, and its role in the British Empire. Speaking of Irish Home Rule in the December 1912 issue of *The Theosophist*, she argued that it was "part of a far larger question – the organisation of the Empire" and that she "would separate national from imperial and international questions, and seek to make the Empire an organic whole, composed of States which were self-governing, each within its own limits. Of these, Ireland would naturally be one."[747] Though she advocated for Irish Home Rule, Besant's esoteric monism facilitated a view of the British Empire as an organising

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[742] Ibid.
[743] Ibid.
[744] Cited in Pielou, 'Mrs. Besant and Ireland', 184-185
[745] Ibid., 185
[746] Ibid.
[747] Besant, 'On The Watch-Tower'(h), 325-326

principle in her hierarchical view of the world, a view that was replicated at every level of British government.[748]

[748] See Besant on hierarchy in Universal Brotherhood and its application in the organisation of democracy in chapter 2.

Nationalist Theosophists

George Russell and William Butler Yeats, played a large part, through their art and writings, in popularising the perception of Ireland as a dreamy, mystical place, full of supernatural beings. Much has been made of their early friendship, and later respectful rivalry, as both were part of the group from which the Dublin Hermetic Society and the Dublin Lodge eventually formed. Russell's interest in theosophy stemmed from this relationship and, as his biographer Henry Summerfield commented, although Russell had always wanted to be a painter, "[h]e was turned aside from this purpose…by an influence which was then acting powerfully upon many distinguished minds whose spiritual needs were left unsatisfied by their traditional faiths."[749] Asserting that Russell was somehow distracted from his long held wish to be an artist misses a major point about the way he perceived both art and spirituality. Russell connected spirituality and art so often that in 'Art and Literature' from 1906, he felt compelled to provide a definition of spirituality: "the power certain minds have of apprehending formless spiritual essences, of seeing the eternal in the transitory, of relating the particular to the universal, the type to the archetype."[750] Russell's esoteric monism is evident in his seeking correspondences between the realms of the spiritual and the physical and is crucial in understanding the connections between myriad aspects of his life.

The two began to part ways when Yeats moved on from the study of theosophy to join the ritual magic organisation, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Yeats was drawn to the more practical and experimental aspects of esoteric discourse in this period while Russell maintained his interest in the intellectual and visionary. They also differed in their attitudes to the accessibility of esoteric materials or knowledge; almost anyone could join the Theosophical Society but the Golden Dawn was a highly secretive and elitist group. Russell did not see himself as particularly special, believing that much of what he had achieved through his engagement with esoteric topics was available to anyone, as the following passage illustrates:

> We have within us the Lamp of the World; and Nature, the genie, is Slave of the Lamp, and must fashion life about us as we fashion it within

[749] Summerfield, *That Myriad Minded Man*, 1
[750] Russell, *Imaginations and Reveries*, 54

> ourselves. What we are alone has power. We may give up the outward personal struggle and ambition, and if we leave all to the Law all that is rightly ours will be paid. Man becomes truly the Superman when he has this proud consciousness. No matter where he may be, in what seeming obscurity, he is still the King, still master of his fate, and circumstance reels about him or is still as he, in the solitude of his spirit, is mighty or is humble. We are indeed most miserable when we dream we have no power over circumstance, and I account it the highest wisdom to know this of the living universe that there is no destiny in it other than that we make for ourselves. How the spirit is kindled, how it feels its power, when, outwardly quiet, it can see the coming and going of life, as it dilates within itself or is still! Then do we move in miracle and wonder. Then does the universe appear to us as it did to the Indian sage who said that to him who was perfect in meditation all rivers were sacred as the Ganges and all speech was holy.[751]

This passage addressed the individual power and capability found within everyone, the manifestation of which is achieved through knowledge, the 'highest wisdom'. Though he appealed to a higher knowledge and the means to access it, he presented esoteric discourse in a democratised way, in the sense that higher knowledge, and any resulting benefits, was available to all. Russell's esoteric monism demanded that spiritual truths be mirrored in the physical world, hence his political views that advocated for the improvement of the conditions of society to raise individuals up to a life in which they become active participants in the theosophical evolutionary enterprise. Russell claimed he was no different from anyone else in terms of ability or potential:

> There is no personal virtue in me other than this that I followed a path all may travel but on which few do journey…As one who has travelled a little on that way and who has had some far-off vision of the Many-Coloured Land, if I tell what I know, and how I came to see most clearly, I may give hope to those who would fain believe in that world the seers spake of, but who cannot understand the language written by those who

[751] Russell, *The Candle of Vision*, 17-18

> had seen that beauty of old, or who may have thought the ancient scriptures but a record of extravagant desires. None need special gifts or genius. Gifts! There are no gifts. For all that is ours we have paid the price. There is nothing we aspire to for which we cannot barter some spiritual merchandise of our own. Genius! There is no stinting of this by the Keeper of the Treasure House. It is not bestowed but is won…Powers are not bestowed by caprice on any…Our religions make promises to be fulfilled beyond the grave because they have no knowledge now to be put to the test, but the ancients spake of a divine vision to be attained while we are yet in the body.[752]

Russell felt compelled to share any useful knowledge or wisdom he may have gained from his activities and the preceding passage illustrates the major difference between his approach to esoteric discourse and that of Yeats. While Russell made clear he had no special attributes above those of others, Yeats often owned his elitism in this respect. Yeats' engagements with esoteric discourse were intricately woven with his perception of himself as a poet, not just in the sense of someone who writes poetry, but in the 'true' sense of the word. In 1937, Yeats wrote that a poet "is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete."[753] This was not simply a claim to be set apart by being possessed of the necessary, yet mundane, abilities to be a successful poet, but an esoteric interpretation of the poet as a medium with access to total knowledge and visions of the other world.

However, Russell and Yeats shared ideas about Irishness and Irish identity. A contemporary and member of the Theosophical Society commented on their similarities as follows: "W.B. Yeats and A.E. are both of them Mystics and both of them Irishmen. They have both been profoundly influenced by the wisdom of the East, and they both look to ancient Irish legend for their inspiration."[754] However, for Yeats, the ideas were more important than the reality. James Webb argues that "Yeats was an occultist first, and a nationalist second"[755] and that in Yeats' mind,

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[752] Russell, *The Candle of Vision*, 19-20
[753] Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 509
[754] Mor, 'W.B. Yeats and A.E. (George Russell)', 105
[755] Webb, *The Occult Underground*, 321. See Nally, *Envisioning Ireland* for a full analysis of Yeats' esoterically informed nationalism.

"his nationalism was in no way divorced from the occultism."[756] Yeats' occultism "applied itself in his plays and poetry to the task of reconstructing an Ireland of the imagination…which provided one of the few coherent images of what was meant by "the Irish nation.""[757] Though Webb argues that "[w]ith A.E. the same fusion of occultism and nationalism took place, unlike Yeats, Russell took a practical approach to changing the conditions of Irish society to help bring about his national vision.[758] This characterisation reverses the popular notion of these two men at the time, that Yeats was the active personality with "the power of the magician to cast a glamour" and Russell the passive one with "the power of the visionary to reach an ecstasy."[759] Russell's nationalism was a source of tension in his life but as it developed into a theosophically inspired and coherent schema for a new Irish nation, it informed and suffused his entire worldview. In his preface to a collection of essays published in 1915, Russell apologised for the breadth of topics addressed in the book because he had "not been able to make up a book with only one theme."[760] He described the fundamental tension in his life as follows:

> My temperament would only allow me to be happy when I was working at art. My conscience would not let me have peace unless I worked with other Irishmen at the reconstruction of Irish life. Birth in Ireland gave me a bias towards Irish nationalism, while the spirit which inhabits my body told me the politics of eternity ought to be my only concern, and that all other races equally with my own were children of the Great King. To aid in movements one must be orthodox. My desire to help prompted agreement, while my intellect was always heretical.[761]

Ultimately, this tension resolved itself in a life that excelled at a wide range of pursuits motivated by his spiritual certainty of theosophical ideals and compulsion to act upon them.

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[756] Ibid., 323
[757] Ibid.
[758] Ibid.
[759] Mor, 'W.B. Yeats and A.E. (George Russell)',106
[760] Russell, *Imaginations and Reveries*, ix
[761] Ibid.

Russell's Mystical Geography

Though the Irish landscape, its ancient history, and its cast of mythological characters were important for many theosophists, few were so enthralled as George Russell. His obsession with a landscape that offered a window into a parallel world populated with supernatural creatures began with his earliest visions, all of which occurred while he was walking in the countryside. In his 1918 text, *A Candle of Vision*, Russell recalled having had his first mystical experiences in County Armagh in the mid-1880s, around the same time he first encountered Yeats:

> I was aged about sixteen or seventeen years, when I, the slackest and least ideal of boys, with my life already made dark by those desires of body and heart with which we so soon learn to taint our youth, became aware of a mysterious life quickening inside within my life. Looking back I know not of anything in friendship, anything I had read, to call this forth. It was, I thought, self-begotten. I began to be astonished with myself, for, walking along country roads, intense and passionate imaginations of another world, of an interior nature began to overpower me. They were like strangers who suddenly enter a house, who brush aside the doorkeeper, and who will not be denied.[762]

At first, he thought these visionary experiences were coming to him from within, but quickly came to believe they came to him from the outside, from the universe. In *The Candle of Vision*, he describes a meditative practice, "a training for higher adventures of the soul," designed to "attain mastery of the will."[763] Russell explained his meditation as "the inexpressible yearning of the inner man to go out into the infinite" but the infinite was "the ultimate being of us."[764] He equated the microcosmic individual with the macrocosmic universe where each is the reflection of the other. The realisation of this relationship, the correspondence between the inner and the outer, is a common theme in esoteric discourse and in this case, meditation is presented as the means of access to higher knowledge and union with the universe constitutes the achievement of total knowledge. In another passage, Russell described his experience of nature as an unveiling: "As I walked in the

[762] Russell, *The Candle of Vision*, 4
[763] Ibid., 21
[764] Ibid.

evening down the lanes scented by the honeysuckle my senses were expectant of some unveiling about to take place."[765] Unveiling in this context is an example of the rhetoric of secrecy, the revealing and concealing of knowledge, a key dynamic of esoteric discourse. Russell saw a landscape that was teeming with creatures of one kind or another. In the June 1897 issue of *Theosophy*, he argued that because "the land is so full of memorials of an extra-ordinary past," anything seemed possible in the Irish landscape and he would not be surprised to see "the fiery eyes of the cyclops wandering over the mountains."[766] In the November 1897 issue of *Universal Brotherhood*, Russell expressed his dream to live in the vibrant landscape of Ireland, to "dwell in a cabin on the hillside in this dear and living land…and there attempt some innocent and unambitious magic."[767] He clarified his meaning of the word magic by suggesting he would lay his head "in the lap of a serener nature," "be on friendly terms with the winds and mountains," and be granted an insight into "the destiny which the great powers are shaping for [the Irish] in this isle, the mingling of God and nature and man in a being, one, yet infinite in number."[768] Russell described his hillside as a place where the "barriers between the sphere of light and the sphere of darkness are fragile" and "races of the Sidhe are often present."[769] His contention that everything originated in a divine unity often produced visions that depicted life as it would be when that unity was restored. He recalled a vision of a land of "shining folk" whose "perfectness was like the perfectness of a flower, a beauty which had never, it seemed, been broken by act of the individualised will."[770] Russell noted that these 'folk' "moved as if in some orchestration of their being" and if "one moved to breathe the magical airs from the fountains, many bent in rhythm."[771] His depiction of a utopian unity showed his concern that individuality itself was society's and humanity's biggest problem because it "makes possible a choice between good and evil," but when individuals identify with the whole of being, they work together, moved by the same impulse.[772] This diminished role for individualism puts Russell at

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[765] Ibid., 5-6
[766] Russell, 'Ireland Behind the Veil', 77-78
[767] Russell, 'From the Irish Hills', 7
[768] Ibid.
[769] Ibid., 9
[770] Ibid., 33
[771] Ibid.
[772] Ibid.

odds with many other theosophists, for whom the individualism of the theosophical evolutionary enterprise was a core component of their worldview.

A series of articles in the second half of the 1890s showed how Russell's idea of the Irish nation developed from his visions, fascination with the Irish landscape, and reading of Irish mythology. Russell often equated the beings from his visions with the characters of Irish mythology, the earliest published example of which appears in the March and April 1895 issues of the *Irish Theosophist*. He suggested that in "these legends, prodigal of enchantment, where Gods, heroes and bright supernatural beings mingle," he had found "not misty but clear traces of that old wisdom-religion once universal."[773] Russell imagined these mythological stories playing out in the Irish landscape and viewed them as evidence of *prisca theologia*, the primeval wisdom found at the core of all religions and mythologies. He argued that "[m]ystic symbolism is the same the world over, and applying it to the old Celtic romances, phantasy and faeryland are transformed into history and we are reading about the ancient Irish Adepts."[774] For Russell, Irish mythology was an expression of the *prisca theologia*, evidence of the universality of mystical experiences, and a history of esoteric adeptship in Ireland.

By 1897, Russell had further developed his interpretation of Irish mythology into a vision for a new nation and sought to rouse people to thought and action on its behalf by invoking ancient impulses. The January and February issues of the *Irish Theosophist* carried a piece called 'The Awakening of the Fires', in which he discussed the nation of Ireland, its ancient history, and its essential character. Russell argued that previous attempts to win Irish freedom failed because they had tried to build a civilization that was not true to Ireland's ancient history and essential characteristics: "it was not in our destiny that we should attempt a civilization like that of other lands."[775] He lamented those failed expressions of nationality that "forget what a past was [Ireland's] and what a destiny awaits [its people] if [they] will rise responsive to it."[776] Like Besant, Judge, and Tingley, Russell carried high hopes for Ireland if it could reclaim its history and give new expression to its mystical and heroic character. He claimed that the ancient heroes of Irish mythology embodied "all that was best

[773] Russell, 'The Legends of Ancient Eire', 101
[774] Ibid.
[775] Russell, 'The Awakening of the Fires', 66
[776] Ibid.

and noblest" in Ireland's past and "as guardians of the race they shed their influence on the isle."[777] He put special focus on "the reverence for truth among the Fianna," the ancient warriors of Irish mythology to whom "falsehood was never attributed," and suggested that "in these days when our public life is filled with slander and unworthy imputation, we might do worse than turn back to that ideal Paganism of the past."[778] Russell was quick to clarify that he was not calling for "the renewal of the ancient order" but "for the return of the same light which was manifest in the past" to bring about a flourishing of Irish civilisation true to its essential character.[779] He equated such a fulfilment of Ireland's destiny with its people realising the "immemorial truth of man's inmost divinity."[780] Although Russell argued for the importance of literature to the enterprise of building a nation and civilisation, he prioritised the manifestation of heroic essential characteristics in every single citizen as critical to its success. Like Besant, Russell knew that the evolution of humanity towards divine unity depended on this individualist spiritual enterprise, so he sought to bring about the social changes necessary to expedite that process. Prioritising individuals and their intrinsic divinity recalls the arguments made by Blavatsky et al. that favoured individual altruism over any kind of interference in society. However, Russell hoped that in Ireland, "where so many well nigh hopeless causes have found faithful adherents," he could create the conditions where all the people would "follow still higher ideals" and "not relegate idealism to the poets only" so that any national undertaking must be consistent "with the dignity and beauty of life."[781] Russell's idea for the destiny of Ireland was the "begetting of a humanity whose desires and visions shall rise above earth illimitable into godlike nature, who shall renew for the world the hope, the beauty, the magic, the wonder which will draw the buried stars which are the souls of men to the native firmament of spiritual light and elemental power."[782] This was the role he, and many other leaders of the theosophical milieu, had set out for Ireland, as India's European counterpart in its ancientness and wisdom.

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[777] Ibid., 85
[778] Ibid.
[779] Ibid., 85-86
[780] Ibid., 86
[781] Ibid., 87
[782] Ibid.

Russell cited established religion as the one major obstacle to the realisation of his vision and argued that it "must be removed at whatever cost."[783] He pointed out that the difficulty in removing this obstacle stemmed from "one of the very virtues of the people, their reverence for religion."[784] Russell argued that Christianity in Ireland "enables its priests to sway men from their natural choice of hero and cause by the threat of spiritual terrors" and that "is not a land a freeman can think of with pride."[785] He was adamant that established religion in Ireland is an affront to true freedom and he called for "some of the defiant spirit of the old warrior brood."[786] Citing Ephesians 6:12, Russell declared that he does not "war against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers" and that when faced with "influences which fetter progress, against an iron materialism where the beauty of life perishes, let us revolt, let us war for ever."[787] He was also certain that even obstacles as difficult to overcome as the power of established religion would not be able to withstand the "greater potencies" that were growing in the people of Ireland.[788] Russell claimed that "the rush of the earth-breath" was uplifting the people, imbuing them with a "sense of power; and through the power sometimes flashes the glory, the spiritual radiance which will be ours hereafter, if old prophecy can be trusted and our hearts prompt us true."[789] He reminded the reader that the places of Irish mythology were still there in all their "mystic beauty" and the "green hills grow alive with the star-children, flashing on their twilight errands from gods to men."[790] When people realised their true nature, the "isle will be the Sacred Island once again and [the] great ones the light-givers to humanity, not voicing new things, but only of the old, old truths one more affirmation."[791] Russell summed up this revival of the *prisca theologia* and the true nature of mankind as "the One Life, the One Breath, chanting its innumerable tones of thought and joy and love in the heart of man, one voice throughout myriad years whose message eterne is this – you are by your nature immortal, and you may be, if you will it, divine."[792]

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[783] Ibid., 88
[784] Ibid.
[785] Ibid.
[786] Ibid.
[787] Ibid.
[788] Ibid.
[789] Ibid.
[790] Ibid., 88-89
[791] Ibid., 89
[792] Ibid.

In the April and May 1897 issues of the *Irish Theosophist*, Russell continued his explanation of his national ideal and his criticism of the influence of established religion, "the true problem" confronting the Irish nation.[793] He argued that the priests were the "real rulers…who dictate politics and public action with no less authority than they speak upon religion and morals" and cited one particular priest who "would not permit a political meeting to be held in his diocese, and his fiat was received with a submission which showed how accurately the politician gauged the strength opposed to him."[794] Russell spoke of the inevitability of a "clash with the priestly power" when there were those "whose hope for the world is that the intuitions of the true and good divinely implanted in each man's breast shall supersede tradition and old authority."[795] Russell abhorred how priests used their claim to knowledge of heaven and hell to manipulate people's fear of death and the afterlife. He explained that the ancient heroes of Ireland had no such fear because the "land of the immortals glimmered about them in dream and vision, and already before the decaying of the form the spirit of the hero had crossed the threshold and clasped hands with the gods."[796] Russell's concept of freedom applied to each individual and the nation as a whole, and he argued that the thought of it "lets loose the flood-gates of an illimitable fire into the soul."[797] He wished to see "a nation flinging aside the shackles of superstition, putting "aside all external tradition and rule" in the face of priests' claims that "the hosts of the everlasting are arrayed in battle against it."[798] Russell relished the idea that though priests "threaten the spirit with obscure torment for ever and ever," the people would persist and "obey the orders of another captain, that Unknown Deity within whose trumpet-call sounds louder than all the cries of men."[799] Russell's challenge to his readers to choose the ideals of the ancient Irish hero and their inner divinity over the tyranny of the priesthood recalls Besant's arguments to bring individuals to their own realisations through theosophical ideals such as Universal Brotherhood. He warned that "a pitiful blind struggle" awaits "a nationality whose ideals are not definitely conceived" and pointed out the importance of fighting for "intellectual freedom" and striving to

[793] Russell, 'Priest or Hero', 127
[794] Ibid.
[795] Ibid.
[796] Ibid., 128
[797] Ibid.
[798] Ibid.
[799] Ibid.

formulate a vision for Ireland "until at last the ideal becomes no more phantasmal but living…and the nations become aware of a new presence amid their councils."[800]

In his 1899 essay, 'Nationality or Cosmopolitanism', Russell no longer referred to Irish mythology, but argued that the "national spirit seems to be making a last effort to assert itself in literature and to overcome cosmopolitan influences and the art of writers who express a purely personal feeling."[801] However, he cautioned against "literature loosely held together by some emotional characteristics common to the writers" because it "does not fulfil the purpose of a literature or art created by a number of men who have a common aim in building up an overwhelming ideal – who create, in a sense, a soul for their country."[802] For Russell, national literature and art must channel an already present and ancient national spirit, the full flourishing of which would create a great civilisation and contribute to the evolution of all mankind. Though Russell was aware that nationalism led to the assertion of a single identity over others and was contrary to a broader idea of Universal Brotherhood, he argued that it could be justified if the country in question had a "profound conviction that its peculiar ideal is nobler than that which the cosmopolitan spirit suggests" and "so precious to it that its loss would be as the loss of the soul."[803] In Ireland of 1899, Russell believed that "nationality was never so strong" and was "beginning to be felt, less as a political movement than as a spiritual force" that could quickly "create a national ideal in Ireland."[804] Russell's nationalism was deeply connected to art and literature and their ability to help individuals participate in their spiritual evolution and the theosophical enterprise. He had high hopes for the potential of a fully realised Irish national spirit, arguing that the role of a national literature was to "reveal Ireland in clear and beautiful light" and "create the Ireland in the heart."[805] Although "much in the creation of the Ireland in the mind is already done," it "needs retelling by the new writers."[806] Russell's arguments about the building up of a new Irish nation were firmly rooted in his images of ancient heroism played out in an enchanted Irish landscape. He was explicit about

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[800] Ibid.
[801] Russell, *Imaginations and Reveries*, 14
[802] Ibid., 14-15
[803] Ibid., 16
[804] Ibid.
[805] Ibid., 17
[806] Ibid., 19

the intrinsic divinity of humanity. Although he argued that its realisation on the level of the individual was integral to the bringing about of a new Irish civilisation, and the evolution of humanity, he prioritised social reform to allow everyone to participate in the theosophical enterprise. In the agricultural cooperation movement, he found a vehicle for the practical expression of his vision for the Irish nation and this is outlined below.

Cousins' Mythological Nation

James Cousins' fascination with the mythology and landscape of Ireland rivalled that of Russell's. Gauri Viswanathan points out that Cousins was working on a book, *The Geography of Ireland,* at the same time that his poem, 'Etain the Beloved' (1912) was published. Although the book "was never completed…the two projects crystalized in his mind as a common one."[807] She recounts his description of "the writing of Ireland's geography – with its own national unity – as less a process of cartographic empiricism than of imaginative selection."[808] Cousins published several articles on Irish mythology in theosophical periodicals between 1906 and 1912, the first of which appeared in the March 1906 issue of *The Theosophical Review*. Like Russell, Cousins viewed mythologies as expressions of ancient truth and wisdom, *prisca theologia*, and he was convinced of the existence of a "fundamental Mythology" at the beginnings of history.[809] He viewed this 'fundamental Mythology' as a totalising idea of truth and knowledge no matter the location or time of "such primal revelation."[810]

> What is, was; what was, is: this is the key where with every illuminated soul has unlocked the mystery of himself and the universe…We therefore approach our study by regarding universal Mythology as a vehicle for the manifestation of truths relating to the deepest problems of the mind of man, the Whence? Why? and Whither? of the universe, and of himself as bound to the same.[811]

Expressions of Cousins' 'fundamental Mythology', or *prisca theologia*, can be found in any time or place and become the means of access to total knowledge of the self and the universe. He argued that the mythologies of the world were expressions of the

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[807] Viswanathan, 'Ireland, India, and the Poetics of Internationalism', 16
[808] Ibid.
[809] Cousins, James, 'The Mythos in Ireland', 66
[810] Ibid.
[811] Ibid.

"indestructible Ego which, passing from each to each, is enriched by the individual, tribal, or race-consciousness of its personalities, and will one day gather itself and them into one simple conscious expression of the Divine Word."[812] Like the theosophical enterprise of human spiritual evolution that will ultimately return all individuals in to divine unity, different expressions of the *prisca theologia* found throughout the ages will become one again. Cousins' article provided a detailed exegesis of Irish mythology to demonstrate that it was an expression of ancient and eternal truth.

The February 1908 issue of *The Theosophical Review* published an address delivered by Cousins before the Dublin School of Art Gaelic Society in which he argued for the primacy of mythology over art.

> When we have perceived the mythical element which lies behind all expression in art-forms; when we have apprehended the fact that every artist, whatever be his subject and medium, is a maker of myths; when we have understood to some extent the mythology of Art, we shall have gone a good way towards perceiving and understanding the art of Mythology.[813]

Revealing his esoteric monism, Cousins' belief that mythology was an expression of the *prisca theologia* necessitated that it contained everything else, including art and the creation of art, because it was also expressing some form of eternal truth. Cousins gave the creation of art and literature a higher priority than Russell who primarily encouraged only art and literature that specifically channelled the national spirit. The August 1908 issue of *The Theosophical Review* published an adaptation of another lecture James delivered before the Dublin University Gaelic Society in May of that year, in which he argued for the practical value of studying myth. Through examples, he hoped to encourage his readers to "enter upon a detailed study," which would lead them to conclude that "the mythology of Ireland – apart altogether from philology is, in respect of its qualities both out and inner, second not even to the classical mythology."[814] Like Russell, Cousins hoped his argument that the ancient culture and mythology of Ireland surpassed the classical mythologies of Greece and

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[812] Ibid., 67-68
[813] Cousins, James, 'The Mythos in Ireland: Art and Mythology', 496
[814] Cousins, James, 'A Plea for the Study of Irish Mythology', 543

Rome would have a practical influence on the emerging Irish nation, imbuing it with the same eternal truths. The July 1910 issue of *The Theosophist* published the transcript of a lecture delivered by Cousins at the opening public lectures of the Irish Lodge of the Theosophical Society in Dublin on February 19th, 1910. He argued for the importance of the ancient literature of Ireland and lamented the extent to which it had been ignored. Cousins drew some comparisons to show that Celtic gods, such as Lugh, had been shown to be important deities in other parts of Europe. After a short history lesson on the near eradication of Irish culture, he described the rediscovery of the Irish language in the late 19th century as the revelation of a language as pure and valuable as Greek, and a mythology and culture unsurpassed.

Cousins' exploration of Irish mythology and its relevance for the emerging Irish nation was at its most complete in an article he published in the October 1912 issue of *The Theosophist*. He offered some prevailing perspectives on Ireland, commenting that if one was "a Protestant of the very narrow kind…the enunciation of the word Ireland will call up…an emotion of religious antagonism" and for a Catholic, it will "fill you with the pathos and glow of an ideal of national and religious freedom that your forefathers have died for."[815] Cousins added that "perhaps the most widespread view of Ireland is that of a dreamy feminine person, beautiful to gaze upon, but devoid of the supreme Anglo-Saxon virtue of practicality, who wears shamrocks, plays upon a harp, and insists on the right to speak her own language, and govern herself."[816] Cousins recounted the tragic history of Ireland but maintained that despite these prevailing attitudes towards the political or the religious situation in Ireland, there existed "an extraordinary power of recuperation and continuity in a more or less definite body of thought which is regarded as Irish."[817] He described this 'body of thought' as the

> fundamental basis, the *spiritual character*, from which, in nations, as in individuals, some revelation wells up at special times, some illuminating generalisation that co-ordinates apparent contradiction in word and

[815] Cousins, James, 'The Spiritual Secret of Ireland', 34
[816] Ibid., 35
[817] Ibid., 36

> deed, and discloses the true direction of progress of the individual or the nation.[818]

Cousins argued that if one could understand "the spiritual character of a people…[one] may write its history in advance" and that "the expression of that spiritual character, whereby we may most readily come at its secret and its message, is its mythology."[819] For Cousins, mythology expressed a "universal form of symbolism" and a "pure and unsophisticated intuition, which is the basis of succeeding intellectual formulations in ritual and dogma."[820] His argument that mythology contained all knowledge shows that he viewed it as a totalising knowledge system and his idea that it could be easily intuited refers to the means of access, the two major components of esoteric discourse. Cousins argued that despite all the efforts to obscure and destroy the memory of a distinctive culture in Ireland, it "possesses a mythos that is not second to that of Greece, and almost equal to that of India, in expression and significance."[821] Though Cousins was eager to demonstrate the superiority of Irish mythology over that of Greece or Rome, as a member of the Theosophical Society, he could not raise it to the level of Indian mythology.

Russell argued that the weakness in the Irish character was the ease with which its superior talents for religiosity were co-opted by the established Christian religions in Ireland with their manipulative threats about death and the afterlife. Cousins made a similar point when he argued that Irish people reacted to stories of death with optimistic determinism because of their "sense of nearness to the inner world, and a picturesqueness of thought and word arising from the naturally symbolic tendency of the Keltic mind."[822] Though he argued that this was "the charm of the people," like Russell, he also viewed it as "the defect of Ireland – a spirit of acquiescence which leads to a lack of initiative in what an industrial age regards as the important things in life."[823] Cousins credits this compliant aspect of the national spirit for the preservation of Ireland's soul despite its tragic history of oppression: "In times of calamity the genius of Ireland has bent like the pine to the storm; but as soon as the stress has passed, the natural resilience of faith has raised her again towards

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[818] Ibid., 36-37
[819] Ibid.
[820] Ibid.
[821] Ibid., 37-38
[822] Ibid., 42-43
[823] Ibid., 43

the sky."[824] Ireland's lack of initiative in the practical matters of the modern world allowed it to preserve its ancient wisdom and become a "trumpet through which to sound once more the great note of spiritual unity."[825] Ireland's importance in the theosophical worldview lay in its untapped potential to revive ancient truth. Cousins argued that the particularities of its national character were "the secret of recuperation and continuity."[826] For Cousins, "the spiritual Secret of Ireland" was the recognition "of One Being as the essential source of all things; and of One Activity, co-ordinating all the apparently diverse activities of the universe."[827] Like Russell and Besant, his conclusion was that if all people, in Ireland and elsewhere, recognised this essential unity and acted accordingly through cooperation and organisation, all manner of things would be achievable.

Both Russell and Cousins derived their visions for a new nation in Ireland from their interpretations of Irish mythology as an expression of *prisca theologia*, the ancient and eternal wisdom of divine unity. They hoped for the realisation of this truth in all people to facilitate the development of Irish individuals who would participate in the theosophical evolutionary enterprise. The next section looks at how Russell embraced the agricultural cooperation movement to implement his ideals of Universal Brotherhood and an enlightened Irish civilisation.

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[824] Ibid.
[825] Ibid.
[826] Ibid.
[827] Ibid.

Brotherhood and Co-operation

Russell's time as editor of the *Irish Homestead* and, subsequently, the *Irish Statesman* gave him a strong platform for disseminating his ideas on agricultural co-operation, both as a system that protected farmers from exploitation by middlemen and the government, and as a practical expression of his theosophical ideals. The *Irish Homestead* was the organ of the Irish Agricultural Organisational Society and, in 1923, it merged with the newly revived *Irish Statesman,* a weekly journal that had been connected to The Irish Dominion League in its first run from June 1919 to June 1920. The Irish Dominion League was a short-lived Irish political party, founded in 1919 by the founder of the IAOS, Sir Horace Plunkett. The party advocated dominion status for Ireland as part of the British Empire, opposed the partition of the island, and dissolved in November 1921 after the establishment of the Irish Free State.[828] Russell's editorial contributions to these periodicals illustrate his thinking on the co-operative movement in Ireland and, in conjunction with his contributions to theosophical periodicals and his own published texts, show his esoteric monist approach to improving society and the development of humanity in Ireland. Russell's advocacy of the agricultural co-operative movement was a practical and pragmatic extension of his vision for the role of the countryside and its inhabitants in Ireland's spiritual and economic future. It fused his belief in the practical application of Universal Brotherhood, his theosophical nationalism, his fascination with the Irish landscape, and his wish to see it come to life with as many shining citizens as he had seen in his visions. Russell used the *Irish Homestead* to bring his ideals into rural Irish homes and to remind the people within that they are crucial to the life of their country. In the April 14th 1906 issue, Russell argued that "the character of a civilisation is the aggregate character of the homes of the people" and suggested prioritising the improvement of the "home life of the average man" because "there it is we are judged by other races."[829] Russell also used his new platform to speak across conventional political lines and to encourage people to work together in the interests of the nation. He tried to moderate extremes of political positions in the interest of the welfare of all people at all levels of Irish society. In the May 16th 1908 issue of the *Irish Homestead*, Russell spoke directly to both sides of the debate over Ireland's future. He encouraged nationalists to "be patriotic in some other way than

[828] Shovlin, *The Irish Literary Periodical*, 14.
[829] Russell, 'At The Roots of Nationality', 282-283

in talk," to "build up a new order as well as pull down an old one" and unionists to "show your unity with the rest of Ireland," to "convince people that you have a positive policy as well as a negative policy."[830] Above all Russell enjoined both sides to "show that, despite different theories of government," they "hold the welfare of [their] fellow-Irishmen dear, and will co-operate with them and work with them and aid them in all that principle allows."[831] Though he appealed to individuals across the political spectrum, Russell maintained his distance from party politics, choosing instead to focus on strength through unity, and reassured those who would come to the co-operative movement that it would not conflict with their positions on the other political issues of the day. He argued that the "farmers' movement needs the Unionist and the Nationalist. Orangeman, Parliamentarian, Sinn Feiner, Clerical, Anti-Clerical" and that "these names stand for ideals amongst which every co-operator is free to choose, but with which co-operation as such has no concern."[832] Russell saw the co-operative movement as fundamental to the prosperity of Ireland and argued that all must "recognise the importance to the nation of the interests of the farming community."[833]

Publishing such articles was new ground for Russell, who rarely took the opportunity to write about politics or social issues in the theosophical periodicals, preferring instead to contribute poems, stories, illustrations, and essays. He had, however, contributed some indicative thoughts on the 'objects' of the Theosophical Society to the November 1892 issue of the *Irish Theosophist*. This was during the period of Russell's first affiliation with the Society and the objects themselves had recently been finalised.[834] As discussed earlier, debate around these objects spanned a political spectrum of interpretation regarding the duty, or lack thereof, of Society members to actively engage in activities to improve the conditions of society and help the least fortunate. Russell's contribution summed up his early conclusions concerning this debate, beginning with those elements of theosophical discourse that initially attracted him to the milieu and exercised him at the time of the article's publication: the literature and religions of India. He argued that in "these old philosophies of the East we find the stimulus to brotherly action" and supported his

[830] Russell, 'The Testing of Co-operators: The Duty of the People', 386
[831] Ibid.
[832] Russell, 'Should the I.A.O.S. Become Political?', 685-686
[833] Ibid.
[834] See section on the development of the objects in Chapter 2

claim by citing Krishna: "on this Path to whatever place one would go that place one's self becomes!"[835] Russell appealed to Universal Brotherhood, not just as a principle of the Society, but as an ancient truth and, by referring specifically to 'brotherly action' and asserting that one becomes what one does, implied that acting on it was more important than simply realising or understanding it. His article was published while the League of Theosophical Workers was operational, a year after Universal Brotherhood was cemented as the Society's first object, a month after Besant's article in the same journal calling on theosophists to "seek opportunities of active personal service,"[836] and in the middle of the transitional period in which Universal Brotherhood was being reinterpreted as an impulse to social reform. Universal Brotherhood implied action for Russell. He argued that "in a nature where unity underlies all differences…the duty of any man who perceives this unity is clear, the call for brotherly action is imperative, selfishness cannot any longer wear the mask of wisdom."[837] This last phrase seems to be directed at those who argued from a position of higher knowledge and karmic insight that individuals in desperate social conditions were there because of the actions of their past incarnations and need to overcome their circumstances to gain the necessary experience to aid their spiritual development. Russell moved away from the individualism and cosmic distance of Blavatsky's individual altruism and towards the collectivism and immediacy of Besant, despite his preference for Blavatsky's ideas in almost all other matters. Though this is an early indication of the kind of collectivism Russell came to espouse with the co-operative movement, there is no evidence to suggest that he thinks the Theosophical Society, as an institution, should become actively involved in any issues. Contributions like this were rare for Russell, since he did not see the Society as a forum for political or social discourse, nor was personally invested in the Society as a unified entity or involved in the issues that threatened to fragment it. However, his political and social attitudes were directly inspired by his theosophical ones and, as editor of the *Irish Homestead*, Russell took every opportunity to write about his convictions, often in theosophical terms, in the realm of agricultural co-operation.

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[835] Russell, 'A Word Upon the Objects', 9
[836] Ibid.
[837] Ibid., 10

Russell in the Irish Homestead

Russell became editor of the *Irish Homestead* in 1905 and immediately began discussing the co-operative movement in theosophically-inspired language. His appointment came not long after re-joining the Theosophical Society (Adyar) in 1904, three years before Annie Besant assumed the presidency. Though she was not yet president, Besant's influence was already substantial and, when considering the similarities between her practical theosophy and Russell's, it would be easy to think him her biggest supporter. In the November 4th, 1905 issue of the *Irish Homestead*, Russell's editorial contained similarities to both the social reformist arguments of Besant and the more overt socialism of Brailsford Bright discussed in chapter two. He set out his material ideals for rural life, achievable through co-operative societies, and argued that, although his detractors sneered and said they were "not lofty enough…the good and simple things by which life endures are the things the wise will aim at."[838] Russell argued that everything he was offering had been achieved by co-operative communities elsewhere. He anticipated that readers might respond with excuses, borne out of an inferiority complex, as to why it could not be done. He countered such negativity with decidedly theosophical language:

> There is not a country in Europe where the peasant farmers had not to work their way from conditions a great deal worse than any we suffer from now. Are we then to confess that we are an inferior race? That our brains are incapable of solving our own problems, and that we have not enough national character to evolve a civilisation of our own?

Russell's earlier characterisation of the Irish as an ancient race with a distinct national character is apparent here as is his hope that it could be fully expressed through the building up of a unique civilisation, like that of the Greeks and Romans, centred around an idealised rural life. Co-operative communities were merely the first step in the process of developing a civilisation from Ireland's essential characteristics, a process that was itself part of the evolution of humanity. Russell insisted that this work would not only bring about material benefits but spiritual ones.

[838] Russell, Editorial (4/11/1905), 802

> We don't believe the last day will come, or any new Jerusalem appear in the heavens until men have made the most there is to be made out of this old world…We invite people to work to carry out these ideals. They won't lose by it. They will get by giving. They will be well paid. Nobody has ever stepped out of himself and worked for the good of all who has not been well paid. Energies have been born in them, illuminations and inward content, and if this is true of the prophets and martyrs of forlorn hopes, it is as true and as sure for those who work for the co-operative idea, in whose fulfilment whatever benefits one must benefit all.[839]

For Russell, the simple and enduring aspects of life were the platform on which loftier ideals could be realised, and the very act of working for the benefit of all brought about 'illuminations and inward content.' This relationship between the material ideals of the agricultural co-operative society and spiritual development is similar to Brailsford Bright's arguments from the late 1880s that socialism is the material aspect of theosophy, that it paves the way for the spiritual revolution.[840] Overall, this passage relies heavily on theosophically inspired ideas to argue for the improvement of social conditions through the benefits of co-operation. Where Besant and Brailsford Bright argued to improve social conditions so that individuals could partake in the spiritual development of the self, Russell encouraged those same individuals to work together, not only because it would offset the impact of their social conditions, but the very act itself would bring about their spiritual development. Besant argued that theosophists would work in the service of others once they realised the truth of universal brotherhood and the significance of the evolutionary enterprise but Russell, working outside the Society, espoused a more practical expression of his theosophy by involving those who needed help rather than waiting for sometimes hesitant theosophical workers to join the cause.

Russell also spoke of agricultural co-operation in terms of Universal Brotherhood but, unlike the vague and distant notions deployed by Blavatsky and Olcott in previous decades, he invoked the ideal in a much more practical and immediate sense. In the December 30th, 1905 issue of the *Irish Homestead*, he bemoaned the lack of social and economic action in Ireland and highlighted the need

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[839] Ibid.
[840] See Socialism section of Chapter 2

to do "whatever can be done justly by a community to place its units in comfort and beyond the dread of poverty."[841] Russell argued that neglecting this basic social work rendered the "religion of brotherhood a sham."[842] Firmly on the side of action, he followed up with lines that could have easily come from Besant's pen or the pages of the *Irish Theosophist*:

> We prefer to think of our societies taking up the eternal task of perfecting human society…We believe in evolution rather than revolution, and it is to the harmonious movement of society to kindly ends rather than to the action of individuals we must look for the solution of the problems of life.[843]

Russell is referring to co-operative societies but his characterisation of their function is as if Besant were discussing the Theosophical Society. Finally, he suggested that the "unrest over Europe, the revolutions and peasant uprisings are attempts of despairing humanity to bring about some happy and secure form of life" and they "should not leave to the new races the work of regeneration."[844] Russell adressed an audience of rural farmers and merchants, not theosophists, and although the invocation of brotherhood could be taken in a general social or religious sense, referring to the 'new races' could not. Russell had been immersed in theosophical subject matter for over two decades by the time he took over the editorship of the *Irish Homestead,* so when he appealed to brotherhood and evolution, it is difficult to interpret them in any other way.

Russell viewed the maximisation of social and economic efficiencies through co-operative collectives as a practical expression of the 'religion of brotherhood' and a step toward the perfecting of human society through the spiritual development of the individual, society, civilisation, and race, towards an ultimate unity. As the voice of a movement seeking efficiency in the agricultural industry, Russell was well versed in and up to date with the relevant economic and technological developments. The *Irish Homestead* is replete with articles on the adoption and implementation of the latest methods in everything from dairy farming to bee keeping. Everything was

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[841] Russell, 'Editorial (30/12/1905)', 950
[842] Ibid.
[843] Ibid.
[844] Ibid.

marshalled into the service, not just of economic expediency, but the larger enterprise of brotherhood. Russell's contribution to the April 7th, 1906 issue of the *Irish Homestead* outlined his plan to unite the people in "a brotherhood so as to make their hard work lighter and their efforts more effective" and "bring modern science and modern thought, wherever they can be usefully applied."[845] His harnessing of science and technology in his mission to improve society and create a new rural civilisation was fuelled by his belief in the latent abilities of humanity. Russell reassured those who might think they had not "the power and energy to do such work" and claimed that the "energy will be a gift from heaven…a kind of fiery baptism which every sincere soul receives when it undertakes an unselfish labour."[846]

Russell's use of the concepts of race, civilisation, and national character in the *Irish Homestead* was clearly informed by theosophical ideas. However, Russell was not particularly concerned with the details of these major theosophical topics, i.e. cosmological root races and the coming of future races.[847] His practicality and pragmatism regarding real people was much more influential in shaping his concerns, and resulted in a far more immediate interpretation of spiritual development and evolution. Russell's vision of a new Irish nation developed from his fascination with Irish mythology, its landscape, and its ancient wisdom and his plan for a co-operative, rural civilisation was a crucial element. Though his vision was comprehensive, he insisted on the importance of first improving home life because if "you aim at a civilization of a high and noble character you must begin at the hearth" and where "the food is poor and the cooking worse you cannot expect a healthy and vigorous race."[848] Russell advocated for implementing improvements at every level of society in expression of the national character, giving material improvements in social conditions priority over the improvement of the self. Unlike Besant, who wished to improve society so more individuals could spiritually develop, Russell was convinced that spiritual development began as soon as individuals embarked on co-operative work, thereby improving themselves and the conditions for others simultaneously. In the July 6th,1907 issue of the *Irish Homestead*, Russell clearly stated that co-operation was not just economics and statistics but "will make

[845] Russell, 'Local Organisation', 262
[846] Ibid.
[847] See Russell, 'The Ascending Cycle'.
[848] Ibid., 283

you a better man" because "[b]ehind it is the divine idea of love of brotherhood."[849] Russell elevated the co-operative movement to the level of a battle where "the prize disputed is the welfare of a nation," argued that the evolution of Irish civilisation was at stake, and insisted that it could be achieved due to the latent abilities and energy of individuals working as a collective brotherhood.[850] In the August 24th, 1907 issue of the *Irish Homestead*, as part of an article on emigration and rural depopulation, Russell called for the creation of a better society, an earthly paradise of brotherhood:

> We know boys and girls leave such districts with short tears, but they grow into an enduring joy, because, though God decreed that the physical man must bend to the earth and earn his bread in labour, He meant also that the spirit in man should not be bowed, but should be erect, ever reaching up to the heaven world, and laying hold of wisdom, and that there should be brotherhood among men, and that man's claim to paradise hereafter should be based on his work in first creating an earthly paradise here.[851]

Russell linked wisdom and brotherhood to the creation of an earthly paradise and argued that any social order or distant country that did not offer this to its workers and or "give the freest play to every human faculty of those people" was destined to lose them.[852]

Socialism and Evolution

Russell's commitment to the idea that changing the social conditions of the least fortunate was integral to their spiritual development meant addressing two other schools of thought with similar dynamics. The socialistic elements of Russell's agricultural cooperation prompted him to defend his views and distinguish them from state socialism. In the October 19th, 1907 issue of the *Irish Homestead*, Russell gave his clearest statement on socialism as an ideology and illustrated his position in the debates on socialism outlined in chapter two. He began by dismissing the first of "two great ideas in Socialism," community of property, due to its particular difficulties in the Irish context, arguing that "the average farmer in Ireland will

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[849] Russell, 'Co-operation and Character: "A Good Conceit" of Ourselves', 526
[850] Ibid., 527
[851] Russell, 'The Competition For Populations', 666
[852] Ibid.

barricade his holding against the State, and pour down boiling oil on its emissaries, if it wants to nationalise his land."[853] However, he argued that the second great idea, community of effort, maintained individual freedoms while reaping the benefits of collective action and "so ensures the element of progress."[854] Finally, Russell highlighted the flexibility and adaptability of his cooperative movement compared to state socialism and argued that an "Irish parish now can organise itself in any way it likes" and "have all the advantages of community of effort without the disadvantage of waiting for the State to sanction or approve of its way of progressing."[855]

Just as he sought to distance his views on agricultural cooperation from state socialism, Russell distinguished his views on evolution from the extreme individualism of social Darwinist interpretations. He stressed the importance of environment and social conditions to individuals in the April 18th, 1908 issue of the *Irish Homestead* and presented his suspicions that proof of the Darwinian version of evolution was not yet fully accepted by scientists. Russell argued that "evolution of some sort is going on" and "if anything has been proved…it is the effect of environment on character and physique."[856] He asked if the social order of Ireland should have the effect of developing "the characteristics of the individualistic self-seeking creature of prey, or the social habits of bees and the co-operative tribe of creatures to whom the life of the colony is everything and the life of the individual very little."[857] Russell's version of evolution was one in which individuals are changed and sculpted by their environmental and social factors and he was convinced that setting up the right conditions would contribute to, and expedite, the perfection of society and the spiritual evolution of humanity. Russell continued his discussion of evolution and his critique of Darwin's theory in the October 17th, 1908 issue of the *Irish Theosophist.* He argued that phrases like "the struggle for existence" and "the survival of the fittest" had too often been used to justify extreme individualism. Like the articles addressing social Darwinism in the 1890s, he cautioned against interpreting such phrases as a licence from nature to believe that "might is right, and the race or species which cannot back up its spiritual, moral, or aesthetic qualities with force is bound to disappear when its interests clash with other races or

[853] Russell, 'Organise! The Socialist Movement', 825
[854] Ibid., 826
[855] Ibid.
[856] Russell, 'The Greatest Problem in Ireland: Are we to be like Tigers or Bees?', 301
[857] Ibid.

species."[858] Russell did not believe that Darwin would have endorsed the political, economic, and military implications deduced from his theory of evolution but, he argued, "a lot of people deduce a philosophy of life very like this from Darwin, and it is all they know of Darwin or all they want to know."[859] Russell offered an opposing view to social Darwinist inspired individualism, arguing that "it is actual economic efficiency which decides the place or fate of races" and he was concerned "to find out what factors make most for national efficiency and how the Irish race may survive and disprove the prophet."[860] In this sense, Russell was clearly influenced by Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Facto of Evolution* because he did not dismiss scientific evolutionary theories altogether, just those that he found incomplete. He argued that a "later generation of nature observers…have discovered mutual aid and mutual support everywhere in nature."[861] Russell urged that "this co-operation between members of the same species is a far more powerful factor in the maintenance of life and in promoting progress to a higher type than the keen competition which the earlier scientists declared was the chief cause of development."[862] Though he correctly related the observed importance of co-operative behaviour among members of the same species, he took the opportunity to add its unobserved significance "in promoting progress to a higher type."[863] Russell argued that "[m]utual aid co-operation between races and species is really a law of nature" and "is as true of nations of men as it is of the nations among insects."[864] He used this interpretation of evolutionary theory in his efforts to impress upon his readers the importance of the co-operative movement, not just to the lives of individuals, but to the survival of Ireland as a nation and a civilisation.

> Our classes warring against each other are fighting against the continuance of the race. Whoever wins, Ireland loses. The economic waste of unassociated effort is responsible for most of our emigration statistics…Tillage declines, labour is dead and bad, the land goes to grass. The beast replaces man. Still fewer people are employed, and so it

[858] Russell, *The Salt Which Preserves a Race*, 837
[859] Ibid.
[860] Ibid.
[861] Ibid., 837-838
[862] Ibid.
[863] Ibid.
[864] Ibid.

> goes on because we have not learnt nature's law that mutual and organised effort is essential to a nation's life.[865]

Having appealed to scientific theories of evolution, Russell then spiritualised cooperation as part of a religious appeal to legitimise his position and convince his readers. Though he did not mention theosophy directly, he claimed that the religion he and his readers professed enforced the teaching of co-operation because "[n]atural law and supernatural law work to the same end, flowing as they do out of the same Divine Will" and "[t]he law of mutual aid is a spiritual law."[866] Russell's esoteric monism led him to scientific evolutionary theories that corresponded with knowledge he had already intuited through his own mysticism and theosophical worldview. His earlier dismissal of social Darwinism, as a guiding principle of society, made way for the more nuanced theories that followed, and allowed him to maintain the coherence of his monistic worldview and reinforce his belief in Universal Brotherhood.

Russell's Rural Civilisation

In 1909, Russell addressed the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society and presented a distilled version of the arguments he made as editor of their journal: an economic and theosophically inspired encouragement to create "a social order where the struggle for existence will give way to a brotherhood of workers; where men, dependent on the success of their united endeavours for their own prosperity, will instinctively think first of the community, and secondly of themselves."[867] Like Besant, he was fully convinced of the power of individuals working together to effect significant change in society with, or without, the help of the state. Russell argued that "political action is the least important thing" and that it was better to "have no legislation at all than have our eyes perpetually fixed on Westminster until the powers and possibilities of the State assume monstrous and unnatural proportions in men's minds, and what men can do for themselves without State aid sinks into insignificance."[868] The similarities with Besant's articulated worldview did not end there as Russell asserted that the "great thing" for the co-operative movement "to

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[865] Ibid.
[866] Ibid., 838
[867] Russell, *The Building Up of a Rural Civilisation*, 11
[868] Ibid., 9

have is an ideal of its own to work towards."[869] His ideal was very similar to those that governed Besant's social vision, in the sense that it could not be inspired or achieved by politics alone, and it required the "infinitely higher possibilities, which arise through the voluntary co-operation of men to wring from nature and life the utmost they can give," leading to a utopian rural civilisation.[870]

Russell didn't overtly refer to theosophy or its principles in his writings and speeches for the IAOS. But it is clear, through his frequent references to brotherhood, the enlightenment that comes with working for others, and the subsequent evolution of society, that his zeal for the co-operative movement was driven by his theosophical worldview. His position as an advocate of immediate and widespread social reform makes him as much of a theosophically driven activist as Besant. But his loyalty to Blavatsky, distrust of the Society as an institution, and of its political stance under the influence of Besant, kept two of the most influential members on opposing sides of major events in the Society's history. In the co-operative movement, Russell found a way to practically express his views of a new Irish nation with an ideal rural civilisation to match the ancient civilisations of Greece. Though he separated his theosophical life from his political and social ones, in his various contributions to theosophical periodicals and political journals, his own published texts provided him with the freedom to bring together his views on all facets of life. The next section looks at Russell and Cousins' developed worldviews and their theosophically inspired politics that, like Besant's, were made more authentic by the organising principle of esoteric monism.

[869] Ibid.
[870] Ibid.

Divine Nations and Theosophical Politics

Though Russell continued his work with the *Irish Homestead*, and later the *Irish Statesman*, he began to publish independently of the IAOS and the Theosophical Society. This gave him the freedom to present his developed and comprehensive thought on agricultural cooperation, Universal Brotherhood, and the essential character of the Irish nation. His 1912 text, *Co-operation and Nationality*, appeared with the subtitle, *A Guide For Rural Reformers From This To The Next Generation*, and was the first significant publication that outlined his practical, theosophical, and esoteric monist vision for the Irish nation. Russell's idea of the nation mirrored the theosophical structure of the divine unity, in that it is comprised of many individual souls, and he argued that a "race whose people do not manifest in infinite variety their power to take united action, to evolve their own ideals of society, culture, and industry, has no right to call itself a nation at all."[871] Eschewing the mainstream political and sectarian attempts to define Irish nationality, Russell argued that the co-operative movement was one of the few "bodies in Ireland which have evolved ideals of industry, culture, and a social order of their own, which are Irish" and apart from such creative movements, there was "actually no evidence of any kind to prove Ireland is a nationality, a living entity with the power of growth from within."[872] He argued that the cooperative movement held sacred a "vision of a great future" and was vital to the success of the nation. Russell claimed that he was writing for "those who are working at laying deep the foundations of a new social order, to hearten them with some thought of what their labour may bring to Ireland" because humanity is "going from the Great Deep of Deity, with wind and water, fire and earth, stars and sun, lordly companions for it on its path to a divine destiny."[873] Following his comments in the *Irish Homestead* that mutual aid and co-operative action were necessary parts of evolution, Russell argued they "were instinctive with ancient rural communities" and the "true foundation on which alone a rural civilization could be built up."[874] Russell appealed to the antiquity and instinctual nature of cooperation among rural communities to strengthen the argument for taking up his cooperative cause, in effect asserting that agricultural cooperation was

[871] Russell, *Co-operation and Nationality*, 52
[872] Ibid., 52-53
[873] Ibid., 96
[874] Ibid., 7-8

part of ancient wisdom. For him, and many others in the esoteric milieu, ancient knowledge was purer and therefore more likely to be correct, as it was closer in time to the divine unity, from which everything derived, and untainted by the passage of time or humanity's descent into the material realm.

Free from editorial restraint, Russell's mysticism and visions of an enchanted landscape found new expression and his zealous pantheism was again on display. He encouraged "pioneers of civilization" to go to Ireland's rural areas "with a divine passion in them, the desire of the God-implanted spirit, to make the world about them into some likeness of the Kingdom of Light."[875] Russell bemoaned the depopulation of rural areas in the face of the difficult and exploitative conditions that prevailed in the absence of his social order. He argued that people leaving the land in Ireland "go anywhere – to any crowded slum – rather than to the fields" which he described as "God's world – all the light, the glory, the beauty which the earth puts forth to her children – the dawn over the hills, the green grass, the odour and incense of flowers, the smell of the turned-up sod…the multitudinous magnificence of nature."[876] Though Russell was not formally addressing his readership of the *Irish Homestead*, he was still addressing their concerns but in a much more overtly theosophical way.

Russell extended his authorial freedom to politics and voiced his commitment to democracy in similarly theosophical terms: "Every man has in him a spark of divinity, and with its bursting into flame, with the discovery of the law of his own being, kingships and overlordships must disappear."[877] He also cautioned about the dangers of anarchy, arguing that the belief in "far off divine events" should not distract from "the fact that democracy to-day stands in peril of change into anarchy."[878] Russell, while invoking the equality of individual souls, was wary of the distance and vagueness implied by individual altruism, preferring instead to focus on immediate political concerns. Like the socialists described by Dan McKanan, Russell was not satisfied with the merely material solution to the world's problems offered by his socialist friends: "they are so logical and unanswerable…telling me that two and two make four, whereas I have a deep-rooted conviction that a happier assortment of

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[875] Ibid., 44
[876] Ibid., 22-23
[877] Russell, *Co-operation and Nationality*, 55
[878] Ibid.

figures might bring about a more pleasing result."[879] His solution required some of the creativity and spontaneity that arises in the presence of a full humanity and he argued that like "the poet who formed out of three sounds, not a fourth sound, but a star," he would "like to shift things about more loosely in hopes of a sudden star emerging out of human chemicals mixed in less equal proportions than [his] socialist friends contemplate in their formula."[880] Russell argued strongly against a lack of social order, calling it the "worst thing which can happen to a social community" and equating it with the kind of individualism found in "the gospel according to Beelzebub."[881] He was convinced of the material and spiritual benefits of his social order, arguing that the best kind "is that which produces the finest type of human being, with the social or kindly instincts most strongly developed."[882] Russell demonstrated that he, along with Besant et al., was an advocate of improving social conditions to expedite the evolution of humanity by asserting that "[f]ine character in a race is evolved and not taught…It arises from the structure of society and the appeal it makes to them."[883] Russell's advocacy for the improvement of social conditions is apparent in a speech he delivered about the Dublin strike in the Royal Albert Hall, London, on November 1st, 1913, to an audience of 12,000 persons. He described the terrible conditions in the tenement buildings of Dublin and the lives of the labourers who lived there. Even in so public a forum, he did not hesitate to express his anger in theosophical terms: "It maddens one to think that man the immortal, man the divine, should exist in such degradation, that his heirship of the ages should be the life of a brute."[884] Russell grouped together the "workers in the towns and…the men in the cabins in the country" as the "hope of Ireland" and argued that the "poor have always helped each other" so now they "listen eagerly to the preachers of a social order based on brotherhood and co-operation."[885] Russell recognises these concepts only as part of a larger theosophically informed enterprise and he modulated his tone and vocabulary throughout his writings to most appropriately describe them to his audience.

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[879] Ibid., 24. See chapter 2.
[880] Ibid., 24-25
[881] Ibid., 34
[882] Russell, *Co-operation and Nationality*, 34
[883] Ibid., 35
[884] Russell, *The Dublin Strike*, 2
[885] Ibid., 3

By 1913, James Cousins had developed his thought on the political implications of theosophical ideals and in *The Bases of Theosophy*, he argued for a practical application of Universal Brotherhood encompassing everything from the conduct of the individual to the organisation of the nation state. He maintained that "the recognition of a universal human participation in the origin, progress and destiny of the universe – a sharing in the universal karma – has compelled the adoption of the rule of Universal Brotherhood both in theory and practice."[886] Wishing to demonstrate a theosophical justification for political activism, Cousins argued that this theosophical axiom carried an implication, "not merely of tolerance but of sympathy towards diverse systems of thought, and a suspension of extreme judgement on the conduct of individuals and nations."[887] Hence, though the Society was an apolitical institution, a theosophist should not ignore the "work-a-day questions of national and international relationships" but instead "bring himself to the applied science of good government" where "his apprehension of the essential unity behind diversity will materially affect his conduct in the stress of political life."[888] Cousins defended the more political direction taken by the Society under the presidency of Annie Besant and reminded readers that the Society was still "a non-political organisation" but not in the sense of it "having no politics."[889] Instead, he argued that "all policies that make for good government find a place" in the Society because "no political policy enjoys an ascendency."[890] At a time when Besant was being criticised for her activist presidency, Cousins celebrated the diversity of opinion, arguing that it "does not mean that the Fellows of the Theosophical Society are social invertebrates: on the contrary, from the President downwards, they are to be found among the doughtiest fighters in the many sides of human interest."[891] However, he was careful to distinguish "between free political altruism and party politics" because the "Theosophist who seeks to influence the life of humanity through legislation can bind no one to his ways and means: neither can he consent to be bound to the policy of any party."[892] Most of his contemporaries in the Society held a similar view on party politics but some, including Besant, advocated the use of

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[886] Cousins, James, *The Bases of Theosophy*, 33
[887] Ibid.
[888] Ibid., 46
[889] Ibid.
[890] Ibid., 46-47
[891] Ibid., 47
[892] Ibid.

legislation if it could be shown to improve the conditions of society and help individuals participate in the theosophical evolutionary enterprise. Echoing Russell's comments on the necessity of freedom, Cousins argued for a theosophical justification for political and social action by placing an enlightened individualism at the core of the evolutionary enterprise.

> But in the last analysis there is only one cause, the cause of liberty: there is only one fight, the fight of the single soul to gain possession of itself…Whoever and however it may be, the end is one: the breaking down of limitations, the expansion of horizons, the realisation of self.[893]

Cousins argued the impossibility "for any single individual in a state of relativity to achieve absolute freedom" so it is necessary to accept "a condition of limited freedom, freedom modified by an admixture of slavery, so to speak."[894] The organisation of this set of limitations constituted Cousins' concept of the nation in which "the fullest possible measure of self-realisation in a world crowded by other wills intent upon the same end" could be achieved by avoiding "the wastage of friction and opposition" and "recognising the universal legitimacy of the claims of others."[895] He argued that organising society in this way was "the essence of philosophic wisdom" and "the *raison d'etre* of social altruism" in that individuals would consciously embrace a voluntarily limitation to allow the most efficient procession of the evolutionary enterprise as part of a system that valued each individual's soul as an equal part of the divine unity.[896] Accepting such a voluntary limitation demonstrated an individual's understanding and commitment to the theosophical evolutionary enterprise and that they were enlightened members of society. Cousins described the ideal nation as a "nation of free slaves – or, put the other way round, of bound freemen and freewomen" that recognised "the great fundamental urge to freedom common to all its units" who voluntarily bound themselves so "a social organisation will be constructed capable of giving the maximum opportunity of personal freedom to the maximum number of persons."[897] He argued that none of this could be achieved "while one nation bears an enforced relationship to another"

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[893] Ibid., 49
[894] Ibid., 50
[895] Ibid.
[896] Ibid.
[897] Ibid.

or "one section of the nation is economically, politically, or religiously under the domination of another section."[898] Hence, the reason why members should, "in matters of religious belief and conduct; of philosophical research and speculation; of physical science, mental science, social science…seek for the path of least resistance toward the ideal of voluntary union and service."[899]

By 1915, Russell had fully spiritualised his idea of the nation and the unifying work of cooperatives. In his essay 'Spiritual Conflict,' he argued that the seemingly opposite concepts of solidarity and liberty were competing within "one being, humanity, and indicate eternal desires of the soul" that show a "human fullness, in which the opposites may be reconciled."[900] Russell viewed "all empires, nationalities, and movements [as] spiritual in their origin" because they were based on ideals that arise in the souls of individuals. He argued that the socialistic state connects people to "something greater than themselves, and so ennobles the average man" whereas more libertarian states "quickens intelligence and will."[901] Russell viewed both as flawed, the former caused "a loss in individual initiative" and the latter "self-absorption and a lower standard of citizenship or interest in national affairs" but he argued that the "oscillations in society provide the corrective."[902] The following year, Russell published his most significant work on his vision for the Irish nation, *The National Being*. In their biography of Russell, Richard Kain and James O'Brien argue that this text "made him a creator of the conscience of the race."[903] To show how widely Russell's text was read, Kain and O'Brien cite the second edition (1923) of Ernest Boyd's *Ireland's Literary Renaissance*, the first edition (1916) of which was the first critical account of the literature and writers of the Revival and attributed great significance to the role played by the Theosophical Society. Boyd argued that *The National Being* "achieved the fame and popularity of a national gospel" and "was read alike by British statesmen, Sinn Fein leaders, and the general public; it established the author's fame as one of the few clear and absolutely disinterested minds engaged upon the Irish problem, as part of the general problem of humanity's evolution

[898] Ibid., 51
[899] Ibid.
[900] Russell, *Imaginations and Reveries*, 91
[901] Ibid.
[902] Ibid.
[903] Kain & O'Brien, *George Russell (A.E.)*, 45

towards a new social order."[904] Russell spoke directly to "the proletarian in our cities" and the "worker in our modern world," who was part of an exploitative relationship with those who employ his labour, assuring him that "the divine signature is over all his being, that in some way he is co-related with the Eternal…a symbol of God Himself…the child of Deity…[h]is life is Its very breath so that Deity may become his very self."[905] Russell's juxtaposition of theosophical ideas and socialist language illustrates his esoteric monism. He argued that "[i]n the divine order there is both freedom and solidarity" and it "is the virtue of the soul to be free and its nature to love."[906] Like Besant, he preserved the role of individual freedom within his worldview by suggesting that an individual soul working freely for the benefit of others "by its own will…is most united with all other life."[907] Russell's individualism, in which it is possible to be completely free and in solidarity with others, was a product of his esoteric monism and he argued that the "sundering on earth of virtues in unison in the heavens explains the struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism, between nationality and imperialism, between individualist and socialist, between dynamic and static in philosophy."[908] He was convinced that all conflicts were the result of the insufficient earthly accounting of divine principles and the possibility existed to transcend these conflicts by realising they were "one in the unmanifest spirit."[909] To the extent that Russell's ideas on co-operation were socialistic, he is another example of an individual who found socialism and theosophy to be highly compatible, one being the complement of the other. However, though he was like Besant in many ways, their starting points were completely different. Russell was a young mystic who found in the co-operative movement a practical expression of his theosophical principles. Besant was a young socialist who found in the Theosophical Society a more complete and inspiring framework for her activist and practical tendencies. Russell argued that "[n]ecessity and our own hearts should lead us to a brotherhood in industry" and "[o]ur ideal should be economic harmony and intellectual diversity."[910] Intellectual freedom was crucial to Russell's approach, and unlike his friend Judge, he encouraged a critical

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[904] Boyd, *Ireland's Literary Renaissance*, 237 and cited in Kain & O'Brien, *George Russell (A.E.)*, 45
[905] Russell, *The National Being*, 66
[906] Ibid., 72
[907] Ibid.
[908] Ibid., 72-73
[909] Ibid.
[910] Ibid., 129-130

attitude to "all who would make us think in flocks" and considered the soul to be on a "personal adventure, a quest for the way and the truth and the life."[911] He argued that if individuals seek the truth for themselves, they "shall be true initiates and masters in the guild."[912]

Russell's conviction that returning to the divine unity was the common goal of all humanity, and that improving the conditions of society would help achieve it, led him to see the state as a necessary unifying entity in the long march of human evolution, despite its "domination of the individual."[913] In another example of his esoteric monism, he highlighted the intrinsic nature of the "amalgamation of individuals into nationalities and empires" by appealing to its correspondence with the "development of highly organized beings out of unicellular organisms."[914] Russell saw this process culminating in a humanity "so psychically knit together that, as a being, it will manifest some form of cosmic consciousness in which the individual will share" and argued that humans must have an innate knowledge of this cosmic outcome "or we would find the sacrifices men make for the State otherwise inexplicable."[915] The first of these sacrifices had come with the onset of World War I and the idealistic nationalisms of Cousins and Russell, based on the flourishing of individuals through art and altruism, had never included the possibility of violence on such a scale. Cousins offered his theosophical perspective on the war in 1914 and suggested that "there is widespread feeling that Christian doctrine and practice in Europe are on trial."[916] He argued that whatever the outcome for Christianity, "there remains through all fluctuations a fundamental religious teaching that is based, not on texts in an ancient book that may be given a Teutonic or Anglo-Saxon interpretation, but on spiritual laws that are based in the nature of things, and are verified in reason and experience."[917] Cousins was convinced that, with perspective, there was some good to come from the apparent evil of war and offered comfort, in the theosophical interpretation of reincarnation, that "conscious human life does not begin with birth, and does not enter on a fixed state at death."[918] He explained that

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[911] Ibid., 130
[912] Ibid.
[913] Ibid., 159
[914] Ibid.
[915] Ibid.
[916] Cousins, *War*, 6
[917] Ibid., 7
[918] Ibid., 24

life is always working towards progress, "a passage from darkness to light, from ignorance to conscious knowledge, from evil to good," so theosophy does not "regard with the same gloom as others the "cutting off" of men or women "in the prime of life.""[919] Death was simply another birth, and to die "in discharge of an ennobling duty, and in circumstances of exalted emotion, is probably a much more valuable experience to the soul than a long life of dull common-placeness."[920]

Further sacrifices were made in the Easter Rising of 1916 and Russell's writings after those violent events sought to heal the nation he had worked so hard to imagine into being. In his 1917 essay, 'The New Nation,' he argued that the Irish were "all one people," "closer to each other in character than…to any other race," and that the "necessary preliminary to political adjustment is moral adjustment, forgiveness, and mutual understanding."[921] In 1917, he addressed the political strife in Ireland in 'Thoughts for a Convention', in which he argued for the separation of Church religions and party politics if there was be "national accord among Irishmen."[922] Speaking of the potential for hostility between the north and south if Ulster were to opt out of a self-governing Ireland, Russell warned that "[n]othing was ever gained in life by hatred" and the "brotherhood between men will be deliberately broken to the ruin of spiritual life in Ireland."[923] In December 1920, Russell contributed to *Pearson's Magazine* in the USA and tried to explain the myriad political struggles in Ireland. The editor called it the "best, the truest, and most original article I have ever received in my forty years as Editor."[924] Russell addressed the "root of the Irish trouble" and argued that the "Irish people want to be free…because they feel in themselves a genius which has not yet been manifested in a civilization."[925] Since violence erupted in 1916, Russell held to his theosophically-inspired ideas to explain the apparent need for rebellion among the Irish and "how loathsome to them is the character in which British statesmen would mould them."[926] Russell argued that "antagonism springs from biological and spiritual

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[919] Ibid., 26
[920] Ibid.
[921] Russell, *Imaginations and Reveries (2nd Edition),* 158
[922] Ibid., 132-133
[923] Ibid., 142
[924] Russell, *The Inner and the Outer Ireland*, 3
[925] Ibid., 4
[926] Ibid., 5

necessity" but did judge the morality of such needs. Instead, he offered an insight into the tension within his character:

> The moralist in me will hear of nothing but a brotherhood of humanity, and race hatreds are abhorrent to it. The artist in me delights in varieties of culture and civilization, and it tells me it is well worth some bloodshed to save the world from being "engirdled with Brixton," the dreadful outcome of imperialism which George Moore foresaw in one of his Irish and more lucid intervals.[927]

Russell did not believe it was "possible to make contented Britons out of Irishmen" because their "nationality is a real thing" and is "so old that their legends go back to the beginning of time."[928] Echoing his earlier writings, he argued that although the "Irish character anciently was full of charm" and the "people were lively, imaginative and sympathetic," their "power of sympathy and understanding…made them politically weak."[929] However, Russell was convinced that Irish people had undergone "a deep and…enduring change" under the militarised oppression in the six years before 1920. He argued that it had "strengthened the will" and the political rebels had become "the highest types of Irishmen" he had ever met.[930] He concluded by explaining why he was so concerned with the politics of the state even though he found "the consolations of life in things with which governments cannot interfere, in the light and beauty the Earth puts forth for her children."[931] Russell believed in freedom and that the universe "exists for the purposes of soul."[932] His political motivations arose from a concern that without essential freedoms, men and nations could not "fulfil their destiny, or illuminate earth with light or wisdom from that divinity…or mould external circumstance into the image of the Heaven they conceive in their hearts."[933]

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[927] Ibid.
[928] Ibid.
[929] Ibid., 9
[930] Ibid.
[931] Ibid., 15
[932] Ibid.
[933] Ibid.

Theosophical Identity

Joseph Lennon argues for the existence of a distinctly 'Irish Orientalism' and discusses its role in the work of Yeats and Russell. The importance of Ireland to theosophical leaders was often summed up in such terms; Judge knew of "no European race that was more naturally occult"[934] than the Irish, Tingley was sure that "mystical beliefs have not been driven by materialism from out of an island so small yet so important"[935], and Besant believed Ireland was an "ancient land once inhabited by mighty men of wisdom, that in later times became the Island of Saints, and shall once again be the Island of Sages, when the Wheel turns round."[936] Lennon's 'Irish Orientalism' is a very useful concept in understanding how Ireland was characterised as mystical, feminine, and pre-modern, but it does not account for the significant role of theosophical discourse. In fact, Lennon makes a concerted effort to distance authors of the revival, like Russell and Cousins, from the Theosophical Society and its ideas. However, Lennon does address the scholarly treatment of Yeats regarding Orientalism and argues that due to the "nativistic legacy of Irish literature…principally concerned with "things Irish"," a large proportion of the work ignores this aspect of the poet because of its 'unIrishness'.[937] This same reasoning can be applied, along with the embarrassment felt by critics after WWII, to the neglect of Yeats and Russell's esoteric interests. Lennon's argument is primarily concerned with understanding literature, but is also relevant to cultural studies more generally. Even if material hadn't been ignored based on its perceived irrationality, it still had to pass the Irishness test, measuring its usefulness to the enterprise of reflecting on and maintaining a national identity. Despite Lennon's clarity regarding the omission of Orientalist materials from the study of Irish literature, he fails to fully account for the significance of esoteric discourse and, more specifically, theosophy. His chapter on Russell routinely mentions theosophy and Indian philosophy as separate facets of Russell's activities because it serves his overall argument. However, Russell would not have had an interest in Indian philosophy if it were not for his engagement with the Theosophical Society and much of his early understanding of Indian philosophy relied on the writings of other theosophically

[934] Anon., 'A Reminiscence', 81
[935] Ibid., 178-179
[936] Ibid., 112
[937] Lennon, *Irish Orientalism*, 251

inclined individuals. The same issue arises when Lennon cites Gauri Viswanathan to argue that Irish Society members, i.e. James Cousins, George Russell, and W.B. Yeats, experienced a conversion motivated by "points of overlap and convergence" from anticolonial and labor politics, on the one hand, to Theosophy and Orientalism, on the other."[938] The concept of conversion does not help to understand this material as it over-emphasises the portions of theosophical discourse concerned with religions while ignoring the question of whether this makes theosophy itself religious. Further, most conversion narratives involve a starker break with a previous religion than is evident in the narratives of the individuals discussed in the present work. In these cases, there was no conversion from one religion to another but a shift away from the idea of denominational religious identity towards a broader, coherent worldview that would encompass the entirety of the human experience. Lennon suggests that Russell's mysticism "never led him away…from practical matters such as journalism, agricultural reform, and political meditation, through which he directly impacted Ireland's future nation."[939] Recreating Summerfield's mistake regarding art, Lennon argues that Russell's interest in esoteric discourse might have distracted him from the worthy causes he supported. This enterprise of distancing ignores the fact that Russell's esoteric monism provided the impulse and the script for his practical activism, just as it did for his art, and was not a potential distraction from his respectable activities. The idea that an individual involved in esoteric discourse must somehow be disconnected from the real world is a pervasive one and is certainly not true of the individuals examined in the present work. On several occasions, Lennon repeats the same reversal in terms of interest or influence which forces the reader to understand the individual subject as the primary object of study, easily separable from theosophy. For example, Lennon argues that Cousins borrowed much from theosophical treatises instead of presenting him as an engaged participant in theosophical discourse whose work and vision was itself a form of theosophy. This distancing of James Cousins, Irish writer during the Revival, from James Cousins, ardent theosophist, is clear when Lennon argues that "[i]n order to rationalize the link between Ireland and India," Cousins "embraced Theosophy's quasi-racial theories, which resembled the speculative work of

[938] Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold* and Lennon, *Irish Orientalism*, 309
[939] Ibid., 298

antiquarians, who had sought to prove an Oriental origin for the Celts."[940] The subtle subordination of theosophy suggests that Cousins encountered the problem of rationalizing the link between Ireland and India and subsequently used theosophical ideas to solve it. Lennon fails to clarify that Cousins' concern with the link between Ireland and India was entirely derived from his engagement with theosophy or that his perception of this link was coloured by theosophical narratives about the value of India.

Both Lennon and Viswanathan offer analyses of the synthesising strategies of James Cousins, part of a common enterprise among those participating in esoteric discourse that is accounted for in the present work under esoteric monism. Later in his career, in India, Cousins talked about his synthetic vision and Lennon argues that "[a]ll of his work was charged with what he termed a vision of cultural syncretism, or *samadarsana*, which he translated as "same-sightedness.""[941] Though Lennon acknowledges Cousins' syncretism, he doesn't recognise its source or place it in its theosophical context as part of a larger enterprise of truth-seeking comparitivism. In a further effort to distance Cousins from the theosophical milieu that influenced him and was influenced by him, Lennon argues that Cousins' vision differed significantly from theosophy. Even though Lennon's argument requires a non-existent essentialist version of theosophy from which Cousins' work can be separated, he maintains that "Cousins's cultural syncretism clearly borrowed tremendously from such tenets, even though he brought them in new directions toward artistic, literary, and educational goals."[942] Cousins was not the first or the only individual involved with the Theosophical Society to seek expressions of his spiritual beliefs in other spheres of life and arguing that his participation in esoteric monism is something uniquely his own indicates the incompleteness of Lennon's framework. Lennon claims that although James and Margaret Cousins were influenced by theosophy throughout their lives, "[a]ny evaluation of their writings and activism, however, should not be limited to their Theosophical work."[943] Furthering his case, Lennon argues that Cousins brought "a different agenda than Besant, Olcott, Judge, or Blavatsky to Theosophy" but this falsely assumes that all four of these individuals shared the same agenda.

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[940] Ibid., 324
[941] Lennon, *Irish Orientalism*, 324
[942] Ibid., 329
[943] Ibid., 333

Such argumentation also repeats the essentialisation of what it meant to be a member of the Theosophical Society by unfairly referencing the lives of prominent leaders to the exclusion of others. Lennon justifies his separation of James and Margaret Cousins from the theosophical milieu by arguing that they "did not remain entirely within the movement," another indication of the essentialism at work in his conception of a broad group of individuals with a diversity of opinions who engaged with the Society and its materials in myriad ways. No one is arguing that the work of James Cousins should be viewed only through the lens of his engagement with theosophy but it is vital for any analysis of his work to take a complete and nuanced account of that engagement, not the cursory and essentialist one offered by Lennon.

Like Viswanathan, Lennon characterises certain parts of Cousins' thought in terms of a paradox, particularly those parts that try to deal with the universalism of his theosophical ideas and the localism of his activism. Lennon argues that:

> His cultural politics paralleled his aesthetics and his mysticism; in both, he studiously avoided reifications, emphasizing that the goal of artistic creation was not the art object, but the process itself. The same held true for education, anticolonialism, and religion, for which he argued the importance of local culture and individual experience.[944]

Cousins embrace of 'paradox', e.g. the concern with Universal Brotherhood and localism, is not so counter-intuitive when his esoteric monism and belief that everything is a part of the divine whole are considered. The localism expressed by Cousins in his advocacy for social issues in India was important in so far as they were easiest to accomplish and were most immediately beneficial to the people he was trying to help. Russell also had this problem when he was advocating for nationalism while being a proponent of Universal Brotherhood. Lennon's striving to separate James Cousins from the theosophy he espoused continues with the following summation:

> His cultural vision resembles a totalizing Western philosophy, but it does not promote a hierarchy based on racial, ethnic, cultural, or political

[944] Ibid., 325

> divisions, nor does it advocate any program for one culture's hegemony.[945]

The idea that all theosophy or all theosophists promoted hierarchical worldviews is another essentialisation and Lennon ignores the fact that Cousins' work can be characterised as having a hierarchy of knowledge. Even by a definition by which Cousins' work could be seen as entirely non-hierarchical, he would not be the only member of the Theosophical Society who fits such a definition. Viswanathan tries to similarly characterise Cousins' work as non-hierarchical and the difficulties of achieving it:

> If today internationalism signifies economic globalization rather than spirituality, it is a measure of the acute difficulties Cousins faced in developing an aesthetics that could accommodate politics without being subordinated to it.[946]

Viswanathan correctly points out that Cousins' was trying to avoid subordination, but does not make clear that he wished to achieve this 'accommodation' through the unification of his aesthetics and his politics using the aesthetic as his starting position. Cousins' enterprise cannot be read as a philosophy of politics or aesthetics because both were derived from theosophical ideals and related to one another in the context of his esoteric monism. The practical application of Cousins' ideal in society was the logical outcome of a knowledge system that tries to account for all aspects of human experience because such a system should be able to provide the script for action that will make the world better and expedite the evolution of humanity.

Viswanathan also employs distancing strategies in her treatment of James Cousins, where the individual is singled out and held apart from theosophy itself:

> Though Cousins's views on theosophy were fairly unexceptional, virtually alone among theosophists he developed a perspective on war, violence, and fratricide that allowed for a creative synthesis of spirituality and politics and brought him much closer to post-nationalist forms of

[945] Ibid., 326
[946] Viswanathan, 'Ireland, India, and the Poetics of Internationalism', 30

> thinking about decolonization – views that were highly suspect at the time.[947]

Cousins did not hold views on theosophy, an assertion that places him in the role of onlooker, he was an active participant in crafting theosophical discourse, and his broader worldview was suffused with theosophical ideas. Interpreting theosophy in a manner that is different from others was characteristic of many theosophists and moves Cousins closer to theosophy for doing it, not further away. Like Lennon, Viswanathan discusses Cousins' synthetic vision without reference to a broader theosophical context where esoteric monism provided the context for a comparative and unifying enterprise that was a feature of many theosophists' work. Instead of comparing Cousins to other individuals engaged in theosophy to demonstrate their diversity of opinion and monist enterprise, his participation in the theosophical milieu is held up as that which sets him apart from it. Such analyses of single individuals by authors at pains to separate them from theosophy indicate an overall strategy that seeks to raise certain individuals above their life long engagement with esoteric discourse. Though Lennon is correct in asserting that such analysis should not be limited to their theosophical work, the same could be argued about an analysis of any member of the Society. The important point is that individuals should not be separated from their theosophical lives simply because their mode of theosophical engagement does not fit some preconceived essentialist mould. The study of the Theosophical Society and its members is a study in disagreement and fragmentation, but this does not diminish the profound influence theosophical ideas had over many individuals for the rest of their lives.

[947] Viswanathan, 'Ireland, India, and the Poetics of Internationalism', 9

Conclusion

Encouraged by the work of George Russell and W. B. Yeats, among others, images of Ireland's enchanted landscape and mystically inclined populace played a powerful role in the imagination of members of the Theosophical Society on both sides of the Atlantic. Both Russell and Cousins' fascination with Irish mythology inspired their ideas and convictions about the future of the Irish nation. Russell was driven by his visions of a unified and noble civilisation while Cousins wished to see Ireland's ancient wisdom, an expression of the *prisca theologia*, infuse the life of the emerging nation. Both individuals developed their thought within their exploration of theosophical ideas and sought practical expressions of ideals such as Universal Brotherhood through social reform. Russell's affiliation with the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society gave him the platform to speak directly to rural Ireland, often in the language of theosophy, about the benefits of co-operation. His careful evaluation of the economic, scientific, and spiritual benefits of the movement was a product of his esoteric monist approach to knowledge and, as presented in the pages of the *Irish Homestead*, contributed to the attempt to realise his ideal-driven rural civilisation in Ireland.

Russell's independent publications gave him the freedom to present his developed worldview in overt theosophical terms, particularly with respect to the spiritual component of agricultural co-operation. Although Russell remained loyal to Blavatsky's interpretations of theosophy, he differed from her on some crucial points such as the duty of the individual versus the duty of the collective and an immediate, activist, and political interpretation of the object of Universal Brotherhood versus a distant, cosmological one. Russell's withdrawal from the Society under the leadership of Annie Besant demonstrated his preference for Blavatskyan theosophy, not on the issue of duty but on the role of the Theosophical Society as an institution. His writings on the three objects and the co-operative movement suggested he favoured the politics of Annie Besant but not her deployment of Society resources in achieving those ends. Russell rarely spoke of the imperative for Society members to join any group or work for progressive politics. For him as a loyal follower of Blavatsky, that was too much of an encroachment on individuality. However, as an individual, he chose to join the IAOS and used the idea of Universal Brotherhood to unite the rural population. Russell justified and legitimised his political ideas in a periodical meant

entirely for public consumption; the broader the readership the better. The *Irish Homestead* was directed not at the primarily elite classes that populated the theosophical milieu in Dublin but at farmers and rural merchants all over Ireland. Even though he used his contributions to the *Irish Homestead* and his books as vehicles for theosophical ideas, he rarely used his contributions to theosophical journals as a vehicle for his politics. Cousins did not have the same hesitations about Besant's politicisation of the Society and used his contributions to theosophical journals, as well as his own publications, to express his political opinions. Cousins wished to see the truth of theosophy and Universal Brotherhood applied to every level of society and advanced an idea of the nation built upon providing the maximum freedom to individuals to flourish and fully participate in the theosophical enterprise of human spiritual evolution. Like Russell, Cousins' later writings offered a fully spiritualised theosophical perspective on political matters, including the violence brought on by the war in Europe and rebellion in Ireland.

The influence of theosophy on Cousins and Russell's ideas of the nation, national politics, and international affairs is clear from their work and lifelong engagement with the milieu but the question of theosophical identity remains fraught. Theosophical history is a history of fragmentation, diffusion, and interpretation and efforts to define theosophy or offer essential characteristics do not further the understanding of the source material. This is particularly true when trying to qualify individuals for categories such as theosophist, non-theosophist, or writer influenced by theosophy. The extent to which any one individual was or was not a theosophist is not only impossible to measure, it hinders historical analysis. Further, the subordination of spiritual and esoteric categories to others, e.g. seeing Yeats as a poet who had an interest in occultism or Russell as a painter distracted by theosophy, creates a distance between individuals and profoundly influential aspects of their lives, diminishing the prospect of a full understanding of the material. Theosophy itself became too diffuse to make direct claims of influence without discussing the myriad interpretations and opinions it produced. In this respect, the Society's most profound effect was to open an institutional space that permitted types of thinking that were restricted in other social arenas. Its comparitivism, its search for core principles and values, its need to bring together opposites, and its need to debate and argue the role of religious and scientific ideas were part of a totalising knowledge

system that provided people with a script for action and a justification of those actions. The authority of such a knowledge system was rooted in its ability to account for all aspects of human experience, the totality of reality, in the past, present, and future of the evolutionary path.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Esoteric discourse is an important negotiator of religious and socio-political identity and the Theosophical Society, despite its official status, had always been political because its members were political. Some in the Society may have been able to achieve the kind of aloofness necessary to remain uninvolved in material affairs but most could not and for them, it was important that there was a lived, experiential aspect to their theosophical lives beyond intellectualism and inward-seeking. In characterising members' politics, the left/right binary does not provide useful insight because the connection between esoteric discourse and politics is nuanced, particularly when examining individuals whose motivation is an esoteric monist perspective, i.e. goals derived from a spiritual enterprise do not fit neatly into a party-political spectrum of ideology. Many individuals maintained an elitism of knowledge and hierarchical social perspective while fiercely advocating for those who were less fortunate. Esoteric monism accounts for the way in which political action and religious ideas are not just connected, but inseparable when analysing the work of certain individuals involved with the Society.

Scholarly accounts of the history and influence of theosophy that invoke a singular theosophical identity or attribute essential characteristics to the Society, or its members, are not just inaccurate, they fail to account for some of the most important aspects of the milieu. Those accounts of individuals that distance their subjects from the Society do just as much damage because they rely on an essential theosophical identity against which they can contrast their preferred subject. Extricating individual subjects from the milieu that was so important in their lives fails to acknowledge that it was their engagement with the Society that allowed them the cultural space and access to interpret theosophical materials in individualised ways. It is incorrect to argue that having an individual perspective on theosophy justifies distancing a subject from one of their life-long pursuits because it was common to express different opinions and to have a broad representation of ideas. It is necessary to deal with the radical individualism of the Society's members and not succumb to essentialism. Even those members who may have been wholly committed to the Society at one time in their lives may have been much more reluctant at others. Not only did individuals hold a range of interpretations, they changed over the course of their lives, and tracking the broader membership makes it possible to trace the

shifting attitudes of the Society, e.g. from the early individualism of Blavatsky to an acceptance of Besant's individualist collectivism. George Russell is a prime example of an individual who challenges the idea of a stable theosophical identity even though he was influenced by and participated in Society discourse for his entire adult life. A loyal follower of Blavatsky, Russell was a firm advocate for leaving politics and activism out of the Society's official purview. However, he did not endorse Blavatsky's passive individual altruism and, despite his obvious distaste for Besant's commandeering of Society resources to her own ends, there is an easy comparison to be made in terms of their commitment to helping people raise themselves up from their unfavourable conditions and participate in an enterprise in which the spiritual fate of the entire human race is at stake. The Society expressed no coherent worldview and its organisation existed in a constant state of flux, being at different times and different places representative of different things while co-existing with a host of parallel organisations populated by an overlap of individuals. Theosophical history requires a combination of studying a Society in constant fragmentation that consisted of individuals striving to bring together every facet of human experience into a coherent and totalising knowledge system. The radical subjectivity of the theosophical enterprise brought about such a breadth of interpretations and intersected with so many aspects of life that it ultimately led to the diffusion of theosophical ideas throughout many of the cultural and religious movements that followed later in the 20th century.

While the machinations occurring behind the scenes among the Society's leadership can never be fully apprehended, it is clear from the investigation of how the Judge Case was reported to the membership all over the world that the discourse on individual freedom of belief and Society neutrality had a powerful, if not paradoxical, influence in maintaining existing authority structures. Due to the centrality of individualism, theosophical debates were set out in the broadest possible terms and represented the entire spectrum of possible theories for any given subject, e.g. the Society's discussions of socialism. Such discussions between Society members are crucial to mapping the extent of debate on religious, political, and scientific issues of the day and were influential beyond the theosophical readership. In political terms, individuals like George Russell and Margaret Cousins derived their politics from theosophical discourse and, though they may or may not have remained

committed to the Theosophical Society, their participation in these debates shaped their perspectives and ability to take the debate to the political sphere.

The advantage of the vagueness at the centre of the institution was that it allowed the space to discuss broadly and fully almost any issue without fear of rebuke. Although the chance of disagreement was high, sometimes by those in charge, the atmosphere fostered open debate on a range of issues. This open atmosphere was partly responsible for the churn of members leaving to found their own societies or institute fragmentary versions of the Society. There is of course no authentic or genuine Theosophical Society and even the idea of the first or biggest instance of the organisation does not necessarily confer any measure of authority. Of greater importance is the role of the Theosophical Society in empowering and offering a holistic, ubersemiotic, totalising worldview to more people than ever before, and this provided the impulse and passion that drove real change for good and bad.

As the Society became more global and Universal Brotherhood rose to prominence as the Society's first object, the Society's members looked to their leaders for guidance on theosophists' responsibility to improve the social conditions of those less fortunate than themselves and the methods by which such action should be carried out. This debate brought two of the Society's principles into focus and conflict, that of the Society's neutrality and individual freedom of belief, resulting in real-world effects for the cohesion of the Society and its apolitical status. Multiple practical interpretations of the implied spiritual equality of the first object became an important part of the Society's discourse and the debate concerning the karmic and moral ramifications of interfering in the lives of others ensued. For some, Universal Brotherhood became a statement of the equality and interconnectedness of all souls, not just in their divine essence but in their immediate and physical state, requiring large scale social reform to realise such equality. For others, Universal Brotherhood was simply a statement of the divine equality of souls and carried the implication of a hierarchy where souls were younger or older, wiser or less wise, based on their past incarnations and everyone must prioritise their own individual spiritual development and carry on their karmic journey by living through their current conditions. There were those, like Besant, who characterised this hierarchy, not as a callous status quo, but as a familial responsibility to help those younger souls by doing all they could,

including social reform, to improve their ability to grasp theosophical truths, join the theosophical enterprise, and accelerate humanity's spiritual evolution. This family of inequality required the older, wiser souls, to be leaders as they had access to higher and total forms of knowledge. A penchant for expediency links this interpretation with that of members who wished to see large scale and immediate social reform because prioritising the improvement of social conditions would allow the maximum number of individuals to focus on their spiritual development, instead of mere subsistence, and more quickly bring about the goal of human evolution, the unity of all souls in the divinity from which they came. Those individuals who favoured expediting the cosmically long process of unity with the primordial divinity through interference tended towards an esoteric monist worldview. Simply being a member of the Society or influenced by the milieu was not enough to make an individual a progressive activist or social reformist. For many politically active members, authoritative justification to act in the material realm was derived from the primacy of knowledge gained from the non-material realm, leading them to effect the required changes to bring about a correspondence between the two and expediting the theosophical enterprise.

The new-found impetus to actively get involved in the lives and social condition of others that began with the rise of Universal Brotherhood, and flourished under Annie Besant, and the sustained assertions about the existence of the masters by Judge brought the focus of debate onto the principle of corporate neutrality. Since the Society's formative years in India, a strict policy of neutrality had the power of precedent but was not part of the Society's constitution. While this neutrality was used to support the Society's commitment to individual freedom of belief, a principle that was enshrined in the Society's rules by April 1880, it was also used to justify the Society not taking any particular position on social or political issues. The secession of the American Section under the leadership of Judge shows the tension created by the clash of corporate neutrality and individual freedom of belief, a tension that was leveraged by Olcott to halt Judge's rise to power in the wake of his claims to be in contact with the masters. The question arose as to whether Judge was acting as an individual, with the attendant freedoms, or did his official role within the Society bind him to the principle of neutrality. Over a decade later, Besant faced the same problem, albeit from a position of power. Besant's shift to individual collectivism and

nuanced encouragement of social activism through a parallel organisation revived the neutrality debate and the responsibility of Society officials to be bound by it. Besant tried to shift the agency back towards each individual by arguing that once an individual truly realised the import and extent of Universal Brotherhood and the interconnectedness of all things, they would come to the same conclusions. Ultimately, Besant held enough power to reject the precedent of institutional neutrality.

The regional history of the Theosophical Society in Ireland and the analysis provided in the case studies fill a gap in the scholarly literature, particularly regarding the connection between esotericism and politics. Theosophical activity in Ireland was relatively small when compared to the other European centres but it had an outsize influence on theosophical discourse. Fuelled by Yeats' and Russell's fascination with an enchanted Irish landscape, this influence was largely due to the symbolic value of Ireland as the 'India of the West' which also lent an air of authority to Irish members that they would perhaps not have had otherwise. The tendency of Irish members to leave for London, India, and, primarily, the United States was a constant drain on theosophical activity in Dublin while adding to that of other locations. These international theosophists were made more influential by their travelling. The cases studies demonstrate the connection between esoteric discourse and political activism in Ireland in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Improving the social conditions of women was a primary concern for many in the Society and although this did not always mean offering full equality with men, it was directed at allowing them to focus on spiritual development. Those who held an idea of complementarity of the sexes did not see how extended suffrage to women or fighting for their rights in the labour market would contribute to the spiritual evolution of humanity because those were not expressions of female characteristics. However, for individuals like Despard, Gay, and the Cousins, the women's movement was about more the vote or even the full recognition of women's rights. They strove for women's full participation in the human experience in the material and non-material realms and were convinced that the flourishing of women would accelerate the evolution of humanity. The stakes were similarly high for George Russell in his commitment to improve the conditions of rural society in Ireland to maximise individual flourishing and spiritual development. Russell's commitment to Universal

Brotherhood and esoteric monism, combined with his fascination for the landscape, drove his powerful advocacy of the agricultural co-operative movement, elevating it to a level far above the mere economic benefits. Russell's and Cousins' obsession with the mythology and landscape of Ireland maintained its spiritual importance to the Society despite theosophical fortunes there never again reaching the zenith of the early years of the first Dublin Lodge.

Theosophical periodicals are an invaluable resource in which the full range of debate among the membership was published. In themselves, they refute the usefulness of essentialising theosophical identities. Their number and reach allowed them to be effective vehicles, not just for esoteric discourse, but for the important and ongoing debates around individual freedom of belief and institutional neutrality. The periodicals allowed the leadership to gauge the sentiment of their members and, in the cases of Judge and Besant, this led to a measure of accountability, albeit among sustained campaigns of leadership propaganda. Future work on the Theosophical Society must take account of the breath of content and opinion expressed in the pages of the periodicals and make use of the myriad voices represented therein. No other religious, esoteric, or political movement was so hierarchical while having such high levels of horizontal engagement in identity politics.

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