

The Quest for Gnosis

G. R. S. Mead's Conception of Theosophy

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Master's Degree 30 HE credits
History of Religions Master's Program 120 HE credits
Fall term 2020
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Stockholms
universitet

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Abstract

G. R. S. Mead is an important but neglected historical personality of the British *fin-de-siècle* occult, Theosophical, and post-Theosophical milieu. While previous scholars of Theosophy have portrayed the Theosophical movement as quite cohesive in nature, I argue that it might have been a lot more pluralistic, with ostensibly key Theosophical concepts being open for debate. By a careful study of Mead's editorial activity, his debates with other Theosophists in leading occultist journal over the period 1890s through 1910s, I illustrate that Mead held alternative views of key Theosophical concepts. This gives us a clue as to how the movement of Theosophy can be characterized differently. I suggest that we speak of many different "Theosophies" rather than one singular "Theosophy" to better capture the seemingly diverse makeup of the Theosophical movement. I look at three areas wherein Mead's views differed from those of other important Theosophists: the concept of "the Masters" as spiritual authority, which sources to turn to and how to interpret them, and the question of whether occultism should be understood primarily in theoretical or in practical terms. I propose that by seeing Theosophy as a debating ground where many different Theosophists competed over the definition of their particular kind of Theosophy, we might also better account for why so many post-Theosophical currents emerged. Lastly, Mead's concept of "Gnosis" might have served as a bridge between his Theosophical and post-Theosophical periods, as the concept's meaning, along with Mead's spiritual outlook, does not appear to have changed over time. This gives some consequences to how we conceive of post-Theosophy, since he does not fit neatly within that category.

Keywords

Western esotericism, Theosophy, Theosophical Society, Theosophical Review, G.R.S. Mead, occultism, Quest Society, Gnosis, H.P. Blavatsky, Annie Besant, C.W. Leadbeater

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"The hidden secrets of the Holy Path
Shall take the name of Gnosis,
And I'll hand them on."¹

One: INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Who was G. R. S. Mead?*

George Robert Stow Mead (1863–1933) is an academically neglected but historically significant personality of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century occult milieu in Britain. Mead's historical significance can be found partly in his semi-scholarly work, such as his widely successful *Pistis Sophia* (1896—reprinted as recently as in 2018²), the first English translation of this Gnostic text, and *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* (1900—last reprinting that I know of was in 2017³), a work synthesizing early Christian corpora. Mead is also historically significant due to his long-running and impactful leadership role in the Theosophical Society. Not only was Mead the private secretary of one of the most central figures of the society, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1889–1891), but he was also, among other things, the general secretary of the society's European Section (1890–1898), joint-secretary of the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society (from 1890), and chief editor of one of the most popular Theosophical journals, *The Theosophical Review* (1907–1909). With this central role in the Theosophical Society, it is surprising that Mead has not received more attention from scholars of Theosophy.

After leaving the Theosophical Society, Mead founded a notable post-Theosophical organization, the Quest Society (1909–1930), whose membership comprised influential scientists, scholars, artists, and writers of the time, including physicist and psychic researcher Sir William Barrett, occultist Arthur Edward Waite, Tantric scholar John Woodroffe, poet William Butler Yeats, and author Gustav Meyrink.⁴ The society's primary activity was to publish *The Quest: A Quarterly Review*, which was

¹ George Robert Stow Mead, "Among the Gnostics of the First Two Centuries," *Lucifer*, vol. 20, no. 115, p. 42.

² George Robert Stow Mead, *Pistis Sophia: A Gnostic Miscellany*, San Marino: Marino Fine Books, 2018.

³ George Robert Stow Mead, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, Altenmünster: Jazzybee Verlag, 2017.

⁴ Joscelyn Godwin, "Mead, George Robert Stowe," *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al., Leiden: Brill, 2005, p. 786.

edited by and often featured articles written by Mead. While the new society and its journal were unaffiliated with Theosophy, one can see that they, in fact, had many similarities to the society it emerged from. The Quest Society's objectives broadly corresponded with those of the Theosophical Society; furthermore, the society's journal featured articles of a similar theme to what had been published by Mead in *The Theosophical Review*: namely a sort of individualized, pick-and-choose spirituality with influences from ancient religion.

Mead has inspired many: not least poet Ezra Pound, one of the contributors to Mead's *The Quest: A Quarterly Review*⁵, who was "deeply interested" in Mead, calling him "about as interesting—along his own line—as anyone I meet."⁶ Mead also inspired Portuguese poet Fernando Antonio Pessoa, British author Christopher Isherwood, and psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung, who was an avid reader of Mead's books as well as an acquaintance of Mead's.⁷ Even though the Quest was clearly a post-Theosophical organization, as it emerged directly out of the Theosophical Society, it has not been included in the academic study of post-Theosophy.

1.2 Previous Research on Mead

Despite the central role that Mead had in the Theosophical and wider occult milieu in addition to the influence that he has had on a broad range of individuals, he remains critically under-studied by academics, both as a Theosophist, a post-Theosophist, and a noteworthy and influential

5 For more on Mead's influence on Pound, see, especially, Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition: A Study of Ezra Pound's The Cantos*, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992; cf. Herbert N. Schneidau, *Ezra Pound: The Image and the Real*, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1969; William French and Timothy Materer, "Far Flung Vortices and Ezra Pound's 'Hindoo' Yogi," *Paideuma: Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1982, pp. 39-53; Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult*, Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994.

6 Tryphonopoulos, *Celestial Tradition*, p. 83.

7 For his influence on Pessoa, see António Cardiello and Pietro Gori, "Nietzsche's and Pessoa's Psychological Fictionalism," *Pessoa Plural—A Journal of Fernando Pessoa Studies*, Fall 2016, pp. 578-605; Isherwood, see James J. Berg and Chris Freeman, *The American Isherwood*: Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 2014; Jung, see Richard Noll, *The Jung Cult: Origins of a Charismatic Movement*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994, pp. 69, 182, 184, 327. See also George Robert Stow Mead, Letter to C.G. Jung, 19 November 1919. ETH Zürich, ETH-Bibliothek, Zürich, where Mead greets Jung as a friend, as well as invites him to write for his journal *The Quest: A Quarterly Review*. It seems clear that the two influenced one another, as Noll has hinted to. However, that relationship is beyond the scope of the present thesis.

spiritual-intellectual seeker.⁸ The scant focus on Mead in scholarship is more comprehensible when one considers the state of scholarship on Theosophy more generally, which has only recently begun to pick up.⁹

The most extensive work on Mead is Clare Goodrick-Clarke and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke's *G.R.S. Mead and the Gnostic Quest* (2005), an introductory biography that considers his function in the Theosophical Society, his role as an author and scholar, as well as his time in the Quest Society. The book also features a number of select publications by Mead along with the authors' commentary. A central notion regarding Mead in this work is his "recovering [of] the texts of the Western esoteric Tradition,"¹⁰ an idea which I will challenge in the present work. Scholars in the field of Western Esotericism have recently begun to trace how emic views of the spiritual "East" and "West" were constructed and how they consequently have influenced the field of study; how emic views have possibly seeped into etic frameworks. As I will attempt to illustrate, Mead appears to have played an active role not in recovering this "Tradition," as Goodrick-Clarke and Goodrick-Clarke holds, but rather in constructing it.

Another work that covers Mead is Clare Goodrick-Clarke's article "Mead's Gnosis: A Theosophical Exegesis in Ancient Heresy" (1992–1993), which traces Mead's emergence as an independent Theosophical thinker. Goodrick-Clarke contends that, since Mead was so drawn to Gnostic sources,

8 Noteworthy academic exceptions includes: Clare Goodrick-Clarke, "Mead's Gnosis: A Theosophical Exegesis of an Ancient Heresy," *Theosophical History* vol. 4, no. 4/5, 1992–1993, pp. 134–48; Godwin, "Mead," pp. 785–86; Clare Goodrick-Clarke and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *G.R.S. Mead and the Gnostic Quest*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2005; Dylan Burns, "Weren't Early Christians up Against a Gnostic Religion? G.R.S. Mead at the Dawn of the Modern Study of Gnosticism," *Hermes Explains: Thirty Questions about Western Esotericism*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, edited by Wouter Hanegraaff et al., 2019, pp. 61–69. Mead has also been the subject of a symposium by the journal *Theosophical History* in 1992 (see Joscelyn Godwin, "The Mead Symposium," *Theosophical History*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1992, p. 50, for a summary); as well as the subject of presentations at the July, 2005 *Theosophical History* conference.

9 As with many subjects that tend to be grouped together under the banner of "Western esotericism," scholars today typically explain that Theosophy has been left out of the academy as it was considered unfit for scholarly research. Within the History of Religions, for instance, Mircea Eliade referred to Theosophy as a "detestable 'spiritual' hybridism" in 1984 (Hammer and Rothstein, "Introduction," Hammer and Rothstein, p. 3). There is, however, a long tradition of Theosophists publishing their own research on Theosophy, making for scholarship that had a marked spiritual bent. This is, however, changing, with many new academic publications on Theosophy emerging every year, especially within the field of Western esotericism.

10 Goodrick-Clarke and Goodrick-Clarke, *G.R.S. Mead*, backmatter.

he should perhaps better be understood as a “Gnostic”¹¹ rather than a Theosophist proper.¹² This is also something that I will challenge. While I agree with Goodrick-Clarke that Mead’s spiritual outlook appears to have been different from that of other key Theosophists, I disagree with the normative statement regarding what makes a Theosophist. Since Mead identified as a Theosophist for some twenty years, I treat him as such. Membership in the Theosophical Society and a usage of the term Theosophy when referring to one’s spirituality is what should be used as a measuring stick for whom we conceive as Theosophists, not *our* ideas of who were or were not Theosophists.

1.3 *Research Questions and Contributions of the Present Study*

There is a growing interest in the historical Theosophical Society, with plenty of writing on a number of important Theosophists, such as Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Annie Besant, and Charles Webster Leadbeater. Additionally, there is a growing interest in spiritual currents that had their roots in, or were influenced by, Theosophy—movements that contemporary scholars refer to as “post-Theosophical.” Based on the writings and activities of a select number of individuals and movements, scholars have attempted to characterize the Theosophical and post-Theosophical movements so as to better be able to understand, compare, and study them. Broadly speaking, and I will return to this in more detail in section 2.3, the Theosophical current has been portrayed as a somewhat cohesive movement with a clear and steady center, a core doctrine, and certain key beliefs. Attempts have been made at identifying and characterizing the “Theosophical doctrine,” as well as key tenets of Theosophical beliefs. Attempts have also been made at identifying and characterizing post-Theosophical currents, which, broadly, are characterized as movements that in some way responded to Theosophical ideas.

¹¹ The author does not define “Gnostic” in her text. However, recent scholarship on Gnosticism (see e.g. King and Williams) have questioned the idea that “Gnostic” as a self-identificatory label existed historically, which further complicates her argument. In fact, Mead might have played a role in popularizing the very idea that there once existed self-proclaimed “Gnostics,” being the first individual to disseminate Gnostic texts to the English-speaking world. Mead’s commentary and analyses of these texts include the idea that the Gnostics were organized in certain ways and held certain views which differed from the mainstream, portraying them as differently religious.

¹² Goodrick-Clarke, “Mead’s Gnosis,” p. 138. She states that: “It is my belief that Mead was a Gnostic before he was a Theosophist; that what he found in Theosophy confirmed his Gnosticism; and that what he remained when he was done with Theosophy was a Gnostic—in short, that he was a Gnostic, first and last, a Theosophist only on the way.”

Given Mead's central placement in the Theosophical Society as the society's main "scholar" and one of its leaders, it is curious that his activities and writings about Theosophy have barely been included in academic research on Theosophy. Additionally, the fact that he appears to have held, as Goodrick-Clarke has suggested, alternative views of Theosophy, makes the exclusion of him from academic characterizations of Theosophy even more striking. Furthermore, since Mead eventually broke with the Theosophical Society and founded a new spiritual society, it is curious that he has not been included in writings on post-Theosophy, or hardly covered in academic writing at all.

Following this, my first research question concerns what an inclusion of him, his activities, and writings, would mean for current academic portrayals of the Theosophical Society and of Theosophy at large. In other words, what can Mead's activities and writings tell us about the state of Theosophy during his active years (1890s through early 1900s) in the society? Connected to this is my second research question, namely: How did Mead conceive of Theosophy and of important Theosophical concepts? Lastly, my third research question concerns Mead's eventual leaving the Theosophical Society and with Theosophy, and his founding of the Quest Society. What did Mead's break with Theosophy and establishment of the new society look like, and what does it tell us about how we can conceive of post-Theosophy?

Based on the writings and activities of Theosophists such as Blavatsky, Besant, and Leadbeater, Theosophy has been presented as cohesive movement with a clear and steady center, a core doctrine, and certain key beliefs. However, an inclusion of Mead's leadership, editorship and views in Theosophical history complicates this view. Through a close reading of Mead's writing during his Theosophical years, and a study of his activities as a leader and editor in the Theosophical Society, I have made two observations.

Firstly, 1890s through 1900s Theosophy appears to have been rife with conflicts regarding the meanings and understandings of various Theosophical concepts and ideas, calling into question the current academic portrayal of Theosophy as a movement with a central and agreed-upon doctrine and a narrow center part. Mead exemplifies a leader in the society that often quarreled with other Theosophists regarding various Theosophical areas of interest, and who held alternative views of

several ostensibly key Theosophical concepts and leanings. Moreover, he actively made such debates possible through his editorship in *The Theosophical Review*, which featured many articles that asked seemingly off-guard questions about Theosophy. Following this first observation, I suggest that we might better think of Theosophy as “Theosophies,” since there were so many different ideas of what Theosophy meant. Framed in this way, we might be able to better trace the various different kinds of views on Theosophy that surfaced during this time. Effectively, there might have been many Theosophies, rather than one. Subsequently, I challenge the leading academic portrayal of Theosophy as a double funnel with a narrow center part (Hammer and Rothstein, more on this in section 2.3), suggesting instead that we think of Theosophy as a spiritual debating ground which was loose, porous, and pluralistic in nature, where different Theosophical voices competed over the understandings and definitions of Theosophy. With virtually everything Theosophical being open for debate during this time, it appears to have made for an unsteady center. Perhaps my model of Theosophy as a spiritual debating ground, or as Theosophies, can also aid in our understanding of why the Theosophical Society was so successful. A movement with a doctrine which was open for debate, perhaps Theosophy offered a new, modern way for individuals to engage in a spiritual organization, where each member could pick and choose what they liked, leave out what they did not agree with, and come up with their own meanings and definitions for their spiritual outlook.

My second observation concerns Mead’s view of Theosophy and his stances towards supposed key Theosophical areas of interest. Following the first suggestion, that we might better understand Theosophy as Theosophies, I argue that Mead’s Theosophy differed significantly from the Theosophy of Blavatsky’s, Besant’s, and Leadbeater’s, as well as the academic portrayal of Theosophy. Mead did not give authority to Blavatsky’s “Masters;” he turned “West” rather than “East” for spiritual inspiration; and he understood occultism in strictly theoretical rather than practical terms.

Lastly, and in response to the third research question, I will illustrate that though Mead left the Theosophical Society and stopped identifying as a Theosophist, his spiritual outlook does not appear to have changed. Key here is the concept of “Gnosis” (Divine Wisdom), a term which Mead began

using already as a Theosophist and continued using in his new society, The Quest Society. While Mead certainly occupied the roles of both a Theosophist and later a post-Theosophist (since there is an obvious break in his identifying as a Theosophist, and his new society was clearly influenced by Theosophy), there appear to be certain fundamentals in his spirituality. This fact gives some consequences to how we view post-Theosophy, as the term is generally used to speak of spiritual movements that, in some clear way, broke with Theosophy “proper.” If Mead’s spiritual outlook remained the same during and after his Theosophical period, then what does that tell us about post-Theosophy? Again, here, I believe that the concept of Theosophies can aid us. Through an understanding of Theosophy as manifold, and by tracing these various kinds of Theosophy, we can perhaps better understand why so many post-Theosophical currents emerged. Perhaps they found that *their* Theosophy did not win out in the Theosophical debates, which inspired them to create their own societies wherein their particular version of Theosophy could be made central.

1.4 *Method*

Despite the fact that Theosophists themselves hardly thought of themselves as purely religious (their motto was “There is no religion higher than truth”), the Theosophical Society is today recognized as a religious organization by scholars.¹³ Working as an intellectual historian of religion, my primary task is to consider the texts and historical accounts of activities associated with a number of key actors in the Theosophical milieu, with Mead as my main focus.

Intellectual history can be said to encompass two areas: the history of thought and the social history of intellectuals.¹⁴ I will be engaging in both of these areas, considering the activities of historical actors (with a special focus on Mead) as well as the development of their thought in writing. The Theosophical Society could be studied from a number of different vantage points: sociological, historical, or even political, but since I am working from within the History of Religions, my subject of focus is the religious nature of the society. What did the religious landscape of Theosophists look like? More specifically—and I will return to this when discussing sources below—I am interested in

¹³ Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp. 1–3.

¹⁴ Daniel Wickberg, “Intellectual History vs. the Social History of Intellectuals,” *Rethinking History*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2001, pp. 383–95.

looking at how Theosophists chose to *present* themselves and their religious views. In particular, I will consider what a number of important Theosophical ideas meant for a number of important Theosophists: the notion of “the Masters,” Eastern versus Western Theosophy, as well as the nature of occultism. I will also be considering more broadly the concept of Theosophy and what it meant for different Theosophists, as well as what Mead’s concept of “Gnosis” meant for him during both the Theosophical time as well as during his Quest era.

1.5 Sources

Theosophical and other occult journals played a pivotal role in disseminating and popularizing alternative notions of spirituality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁵ As Mark S. Morrison has highlighted, this fact brings attention to the public nature of modern occultism, “serving both as the guarantor of its long term vogue and shaping its form and its institutions.”¹⁶ In other words, rather than taking place solely behind closed doors, much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century occultism inhabited a public space, making occult discourse widely accessible to a diverse and international readership. This meant that anyone who was interested in alternative spiritual ideas could consume and participate in the shaping of occult ideas. Readers did not even have to join an occult organization to become familiar with these ideas but could read these journals in their own homes. This also accounts for occultism’s far-reaching influence on various aspects of modernity,¹⁷ as many of these journals were quite successful commercially.

Today, these periodicals serve as powerful doors to the minutiae of everyday occultism, as they were published with amazing regularity and covered everything from organizational matters to information about meeting places, subjects of lectures, correspondences, reviews, commentary on various news et cetera. In other words, if one is interested in the *public* activities of these individuals, these periodicals serve as great sources, showing us how Theosophists themselves chose to present themselves and their ideas. In other words, they are our best sources of information not necessarily

15 For an overview of the influence of Theosophical periodicals on concepts of the East, see Gillian McCann, “Emergent Representations of the East: The Role of Theosophical Periodicals, 1879–1900,” Erik Reenberg Sand and Tim Rudbøg, editors, *Imagining the East: The Early Theosophical Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 165–86.

16 Mark S. Morrison, “The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival: Esoteric Wisdom, Modernity and Counter-Public Spheres,” *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2008, pp. 1–22.

17 For more on the modern character of “the occult revival,” see Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004.

regarding what Theosophists believed in (since it is difficult to access which *beliefs* someone holds) but how they chose to *present* themselves and how, in turn, these presentations resonated with others.

My main two sources for this project are the two most-read Theosophical journals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *The Theosophical Review* (formerly known as *Lucifer*, 1887–1897) as well *The Theosophist* (1879–currently).

Rather than basing my biographical data on Mead on Goodrick-Clarke and Goodrick-Clarke's introductory book, whose information is derived from hagiographical works by Theosophist Boris de Zirkoff (1902–1981), I have chosen to go back to the primary sources. Additionally worth noting is the fact that Goodrick-Clarke and Goodrick-Clarke's book was funded by the Blavatsky Trust, a contemporary Theosophical fund.¹⁸ Bearing this in mind, there might be certain motives underlying their way of presenting Theosophy and the Theosophical Society, seeing as the objective of this trust is “to let it be known that such a thing as theosophy exists,” with Theosophy being defined as

the ageless wisdom, as presented by the Mahatmas (also called adepts or Masters) and contained in the writings of Theosophical Society co-founder Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891) ... A recent recapitulation of the ancient wisdom tradition that has been disseminated by the founders of the modern Theosophical movement. The teachings are Universal Laws; Laws that establish the principle of Unity inherent in Nature and which are the basis of Universal Brotherhood.¹⁹

While the Blavatsky Trust is not connected to the Theosophical Society, it seems clear that it has a certain view of Theosophy, one which is derived from the teachings of Blavatsky and of her “Masters,” and which is normative in nature (since it clearly defines *how* Theosophy should be understood). For these reasons, I have preferred to work directly with the primary sources rather than leaning on Goodrick-Clarke and Goodrick-Clarke's secondary resource.

As I am looking to offer a fuller view of what Theosophy and the Theosophical Society looked like during Mead's active years, I have studied texts from when he began publishing in Theosophical

¹⁸ Geoffrey Farthing, “The Blavatsky Trust,” <http://www.blavatskytrust.org.uk/html/nfbti.htm>.

¹⁹ No author, “The Blavatsky Trust,” <http://blavatskytrust.org.uk/>.

journals, in 1889, to when he left the Theosophical Society in 1909. To better situate Mead historically, I have also studied the Theosophical Society prior to his joining, as well as after his departure. My second area of the thesis deals with Mead's post-Theosophy and what the development of his status as an independent spiritual thinker can tell us about post-Theosophy more generally. For this part, I have looked at Mead's writing from 1909, when he founded the Quest Society, until approximately the mid-1910s. Lastly, I have limited my research to that of the Adyar and British branches of the Theosophical Society, since these were the two that Mead was in most contact with.

Two: THEOSOPHY

2.1 *What is Theosophy?*

The academic study of Theosophy is a growing field.²⁰ Scholars are increasingly paying attention to the important roles that the Theosophical and post-Theosophical currents have played in inspiring a broad range of spiritual ideas and practices found in today's "New Age"²¹ religiosity and within contemporary esotericism.²² In addition, scholars have emphasized how the historical Theosophical milieu constituted an important meeting place for many cultural and political personalities, including socialists, feminists, and anti-colonialists, its wide-reaching impact on modernist literature, music, and art, as well as its impact on public perceptions of archaeology.²³

20 Important academic monographs and anthologies about the Theosophical movement include Bruce Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revisited: A History of the Theosophical Movement*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980; Maria Carlson, *No Religion Higher Than Truth*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993; Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994; Jeffrey D. Lavoie, *The Theosophical Society: The History of a Spiritualist Movement*, Boca Raton: Brown Walker Press, 2012; Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss, editors, *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah and the Transformation of Traditions*, Beer Shiva: Ben Gurion, 2016; Hammer and Rothstein, *Handbook*; and Erik Reenberg Sand and Tim Rudbøg, editors, *Imagining the East: The Early Theosophical Society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Worth consulting for an overview of the Theosophical Society's history is also James A. Santucci, "The Theosophical Society," *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, edited by Wouter J. Hanegraaff et al., Leiden: Brill, 2006, pp. 114-123.

21 "New Age" is a debated term, which is why I am putting it in citation marks. For more on the New Age as a religious movement, see, for instance, Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997. For more on Theosophy in "New Age" spirituality, see for instance Olav Hammer, "Theosophical Elements in New Age Religion," Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 237-60.

22 See Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm's *Contemporary Esotericism*, Stocksfield: Acumen, 2012, for an introduction to contemporary esotericism.

23 For more on Theosophy, gender, and feminism, see Joy Dixon, "Sexology and the Occult: Sexuality and Subjectivity in Theosophy's New Age," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1997, pp. 409-433, idem, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001, Per Faxneld, "Blavatsky the

Predicated on the notion that there exists a universal truth underlying all religion, philosophy, and science, Theosophy's composition and influence are described by Hammer and Rothstein in the *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* as a "double funnel, with a large aperture at either end."²⁴ Into the funnel went "the vastest array of imaginable religious concepts, occultist books, esoteric tracts, scientific discoveries, exotic term, 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," and at the other end came "a barrage of new ideas and practices, spreading through various movements of the 20th and 21st century, influencing popular religiosity, and finally permeating just about every nook and cranny of contemporary 'folk' religious culture."²⁵

The metaphor of the double funnel, in other words, makes historical Theosophy appear as though it drew a plethora of different sources and combined them in such a way that it came together to form a narrow center. Because this "center" could not hold, the funnel burst and created a new aperture out of which came the many post-Theosophical currents: the many became one, the one became many. I will return to this metaphor with some critique later on, as I do not think this idea sufficiently captures just how diverse 1890s and 1900s Theosophy actually seems to have been at its supposed

Satanist: Luciferianism in Theosophy and its Feminist Implications," *Temenos*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2012, pp. 203–30, Siv Ellen Kraft, "Theosophy, Gender and the 'New Woman,'" Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 357–74; Theosophy and race, see James A. Santucci, "The Notion of Race in Theosophy," *Nova Religio*, vol. 11, no. 3, 2008, pp. 37–64, Isaac Lubelsky, "Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy," Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 335–56, and Rajbir Singh Judge, "Dusky Countenances: Ambivalent Bodies and Desires in the Theosophical Society," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 264–94; Theosophy and art, see Michael Stoerber, "Re-Imagining Theosophy through Canadian Art: Indian Theosophical Influences on the Painting and Writing of Lawren Harris," *Re-Imagining South Asian Religions*, edited by Pashaura Singh and Michael Hawley, Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp. 193–220, Tessel M. Baudin, "Abstract Art as 'By-Product of Astral Manifestation': The Influence of Theosophy on Modern Art in Europe," Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 429–52, and Massimo Introvigne, "'Theosophical' Artistic Networks in the Americas, 1920–1950," *Nova Religio*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2016, pp. 33–56, idem, "The Sounding Cosmos Revisited: Sixteen Ringbom and the 'Discovery' of Theosophical Influence on Modern Art," *Nova Religio*, vol. 21, no. 3, 2018, pp. 29–46; Theosophy and music, see Christopher M. Scheer, "Enchanted Music, Enchanted Modernity: Theosophy, Maud McCarthy, and John Foulds.," *Journal of Musicological Research*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2018, pp. 5–29; Theosophy and literature, Ingvild Sælid Gilhus and Lisbeth Mikaelsson, "Theosophy and Popular Fiction," Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 453–72; on Theosophy and archaeology, see D. S. Anderson, "Crafting a Mysterious Ancient World: The Effects of Theosophy and esotericism on public perceptions of archaeology," *Nova Religio*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2019, pp. 13–26.

²⁴ Hammer and Rothstein, "Introduction," Hammer and Rothstein, p. 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

center; I am not sure we should be thinking of historical Theosophy as having, in terms of fixed doctrines, a clear center at all.

In a similar vein to Hammer and Rothstein, Maria Carlson, in her book *No Religion Higher Than Truth*, describes the “Theosophical doctrine” as follows:

The underlying premise of Theosophy is that there exists a single, universal occult tradition (the Secret Doctrine), ancient but ageless, on which all religions, past and present, are in part based. This ancient ‘wisdom-tradition,’ claim Theosophists, unites religion science, and philosophy into on grand synthesis that explains everything: God, the Universe, Man, Being, and Creation ... Theosophical cosmology—its understanding of the origin, structure, and dynamics of the universe—is complex, intricate, and, at times, disconcertingly contradictory ... the Theosophical doctrine, as originally conceived of by Mme Blavatsky, is a modern form of metaphysical monism, pantheism, and emanationism ... All-embracing, Theosophy derives its particular psychology and complex cosmology from sacred Hindu texts, mystery religions, Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism, and the vast body of Western occultism, both ancient and modern, with interpolations from the natural and social sciences, comparative religion, archaeology, medicine, and evolutionism. The result is an unusual blend of pantheism, occultism, and facile rationalism.²⁶

Here we see the notion that there existed a “Theosophical doctrine” with a clear center and an organized system of belief; a notion that I will challenge since it does not account for how many different views of Theosophy there appears to have been. Carlson herself even alludes to this when she states that its cosmology is sometimes contradictory, but without reflecting on the reason why that might be so. Moreover, Carlson bases her idea of general Theosophy on Blavatsky’s particular form of Theosophy. This, too, can be challenged, since Theosophy did not end with Blavatsky but was debated and constructed in various ways by different Theosophies following her. Conclusively, I seek to problematize these normative statements on Theosophy, which make Theosophy appear as one uniform movement. I hold, rather, that Theosophy appears to have been a lot more pluralistic in nature.

But before discussing this further, I will turn to a brief history of the main protagonists of the early Theosophical movement, namely the Theosophical Society itself. After discussing the history of the society, I will return to the academic study of Theosophy.

²⁶ Carlson, *No Religion*, pp. 114–15.

2.2 *The Theosophical Society*

With its strong influence on contemporary religiosity and culture, the Theosophical Society should be seen as one of the most important religious movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁷ The society was founded in New York City in 1875 by Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), George Henry Felt (1831–1906), and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891).²⁸ Before they decided on the name The Theosophical Society, a number of other names were suggested. The name they landed on came from the word Theosophy (God-wisdom or Wisdom of God), a combination of the Greek words “theos” (God) and “sophia” (wisdom), and chose to capitalize their use of the word to distinguish themselves from Christian theosophers such as Jacob Böhme (1575–1624).²⁹

The early Theosophical Society had its roots in nineteenth-century Spiritualism,³⁰ a number of European and North American occult currents grounded in the notion that living human beings could, via occult practice, communicate with spirits of deceased persons.³¹ In 1975, Blavatsky wrote that she traveled to New York to “on behalf of Truth in modern spiritualism ... to unveil what is and expose what is not.”³² Her motivations have been described as the mission to “replace spiritualist belief with the philosophy of occultism.”³³ The Theosophical Society can, in other words, be viewed as a post-Spiritualist movement. Given its Spiritualist roots, it might not be surprising that the early Theosophical Society was dedicated to occult practice such as astral travel.³⁴ This came to change over time, as Theosophists that were more interested in theory than in practice made their voices heard. Mead was one of those Theosophists.

A thoroughly international—and colonial—association, the Theosophical Society comprised, at the end of the nineteenth century, a large number of branches in British India, North America, Australia,

27 Hammer and Rothstein, “Introduction,” Hammer and Rothstein, p. 2.

28 Santucci, “Theosophical Society,” Hanegraaff et al., p. 1114.

29 Lavoire, *The Theosophical Society*, p. 13.

30 Ibid.; cf. Joscelyn Godwin, “Blavatsky and the First Generation of Theosophy,” Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 16–20.

31 For more on Spiritualism, see John Patrick Deveney, “Spiritualism,” Hanegraaff et al., p. 1074, and Cathy Gutierrez, *Plato’s Ghost*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.

32 Godwin, “Blavatsky,” Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 17–18.

33 Ibid., 18.

34 Godwin, “Blavatsky,” Hammer and Rothstein, p. 20. See also John Patrick Deveney, “The Two Theosophical Societies: Prolonged Life, Conditional Immortality, and the Individualized Immortal Monad,” Chajes and Huss, pp. 93–114; idem, “Astral Projection or Liberation of the Double and the Work of the Early Theosophical Society,” *Theosophical History Occasional Papers*, vol. 6, 1997.

and Europe.³⁵ Open to people of all backgrounds united in their search for occult wisdom, the initial society had one objective in 1875: “to collect and diffuse a knowledge of the laws which govern the universe.”³⁶ In 1878, the objectives were extended to include a number of instructions: that members “acquire an intimate knowledge of natural law, especially its occult manifestations”; “possess his inner, psychical self ... [and] study to develop his latent powers”; “personally exemplify the highest morality and religious aspiration”; “oppose materialism of science and every form of dogmatic theology, especially the Christian”; “make known among Western nations the long-suppressed facts about Oriental religious philosophies”; “counteract ... the efforts of missionaries to delude the so-called ‘Heathen’ and ‘Pagans’”; “disseminate a knowledge of the sublime teachings ... of the archaic period”; and “aid in the institution of a Brotherhood of Humanity.”³⁷

The objectives have been revised continuously since the inception of the first society, but since 1881 tend to concern three matters, here exemplified by the objectives put forth in 1886:

1. To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed or colour.
2. To promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literatures, religions and sciences.
3. A third object, pursued by a portion of the members of the Society, is to investigate unexplained laws of nature and the psychical powers of man.³⁸

³⁵ While Theosophists such as Olcott, Blavatsky and Besant participated in various nationalist endeavors, such as the support of the Indian National Movement, the society must be understood as colonial in nature. For an overview of the Theosophical Society’s contribution to Indian and Indonesian nationalism, see, for instance, Iskandar Nugroho’s Master’s thesis, “The Theosophical Educational Movement in Colonial Indonesia (1900–1947), University of New South Wales, 1995; Mark Bevir, “Theosophy and the Origins of the Indian National Congress,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1/3, 2003, pp. 99–115; and J. Barton Scott, “Miracle Publics: Theosophy, Christianity, and the Coulomb Affair,” *History of Religions*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2009, pp. 172–96. Furthermore, the fact that scholars have tended to emphasize Theosophists of European heritage rather than the various Theosophists of Hindu and Buddhist backgrounds can be seen as an instance of neo-colonial scholarship. Recent trends in academic scholarship on Theosophy has attempted to highlight “non-Western” Theosophists and their contributions to the Theosophical Society. See, for instance, Chajes and Huss, *Theosophical Appropriations* as well as Sand and Rudbøg, *Imagining the East*.

³⁶ Curuppumullage Jinarajadasa, *The Golden Book of the Theosophical Society (1875–1925)*, Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1925, p. 243.

³⁷ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Blavatsky Collected Writings vol. 1*, Wheaton: Theosophical Publishing House, 1996, pp. 376–77.

³⁸ Josephine Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*, Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1938, p. 550.

The early Theosophical Society engaged in various psychical experiments and investigations but soon came to be more than a society for research. In 1878, Olcott, now elected president of the society, and Blavatsky, who had become the society's primary theoretician after having published the first Theosophical book, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), traveled to India to establish a new headquarter there.³⁹ This was also when the British Theosophical Society was founded. In 1879, they received a letter from Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840–1921), editor of the leading English newspaper in India, *The Pioneer*. The contact with Sinnett proved to be very important for the society, as he helped publicize many of their activities, including Olcott's first address and information about their intention to create the Theosophical journal *The Theosophist*, first published in October 1879.⁴⁰

Sinnett soon started to claim that, like Blavatsky he was in contact with the two “Masters” or “Mahatmas” of Tibet, Blavatsky's alleged teachers of ancient wisdom who inspired much of her writing in *Isis Unveiled* (and later, *The Secret Doctrine*, 1888). Upon Sinnett's suggestion, Blavatsky agreed to prove their existence through the publication of the now-famous “Mahatma Letters,” which are today kept at the British Library. In these letters, “Masters” Morya Hoomi and Koot Hoomi expanded on themes Blavatsky had presented in *Isis Unveiled*, such as the presentation of a cosmological system in which human beings incarnated on earth through seven “Root Races,” as well as offered practical advice, including the promulgation of the requirements for disciples.⁴¹ These letters became a source of intense turmoil for the society, as the Society for Psychical Research of England investigated the letters in 1884, claiming that they were forged by Blavatsky.⁴² Blavatsky denied these claims and continued, together with Olcott and Sinnett, to state a continuing contact with “the Masters.” Sinnett went on to summarize their teaching in the widely popular 1883 book *Esoteric Buddhism*,⁴³ which also happens to be Mead's first introduction to Theosophy.

During the 1880s, Olcott and Blavatsky were active participants in the Ceylon “Buddhist revival,” establishing the Buddhist Theosophical Society and founded Buddhist schools. Due to these

39 Santucci, “Theosophical Society,” Hanegraaff et al., p. 116.

40 Ibid.

41 Godwin, “Blavatsky,” Hammer and Rothstein, p. 23. For more on the “Mahatma Letters,” see Geoffrey A. Barboka, *The Mahatmas and Their Letters*, Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1973.

42 For an historical account of Blavatsky's many “Masters,” see Kenneth Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.

43 Santucci, “Theosophical Society,” Hanegraaff et al., p. 116.

engagements, as well as the general fact of the move to India, many members in mainland Europe were discomfited with what appeared to be an inclination towards “Eastern” rather than “Western” ideas.⁴⁴

While the early society emphasized the study and dissemination of precisely “Indian” ideas, it had also included those of the “West.” Perhaps this is why a number of members, including the president of the British section, George Wyld (1821–1906), became so uncomfortable with the “turn to the East” that many attempted to create alternative movements within the Society dedicated to “Western” ideas. When Wyld’s independent Theosophical Christian society failed to succeed, he resigned.⁴⁵ The new president of the British section of the Theosophical Society, Anna Bonus Kingsford (1846–1888), attempted, together with Vice-President Edward Maitland (1824–1897), to change the society’s direction to focus on Catholic ideas rather than “Oriental” ones.⁴⁶ In 1884, the London Lodge came to be organized into two branches: one for the study of Hermetic and Christian Theosophy, and the other to focus on “Oriental” Theosophy. Eventually, the former came to be established as a fully independent occult organization known as the Hermetic Society.⁴⁷ Key to these struggles was the question of what Theosophy should mean and how one was to study it, a struggle that continued for later Theosophists.

Despite these divisions and dissensions, the Theosophical Society grew in membership during the 1880s. In 1885, Blavatsky left India for England, where she finished her *magnum opus*, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). The same year as the book was published, she created a new organization within the Theosophical Society, the Esoteric Section. I will return to this later on. It was also in the late 1880s that Blavatsky first met with two of her most favored pupils, Annie Besant (1847–1933), who later came to be president of the Adyar office of the Theosophical Society, and G. R. S. Mead, who became her private secretary.

44 For more on this, see Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, and Marco Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah and the Parting of East and West in the Early Theosophical Society,” *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, edited by Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, and Kocku von Stuckrad, Leiden: Brill, 2010.

45 Santucci, “Theosophical Society,” p. 1117.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

In 1907, when Olcott passed away, Besant, despite protests from the British Section of the Theosophical Society (where Mead played an active role in disputing this; I will return to this) became the new president of the Adyar branch. Together with Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934), the Theosophical Society Adyar came to change in form. Whereas earlier Theosophy had been heavily focused on exegesis of Blavatsky’s two books, Besant and Leadbeater focused instead on new psychic revelations from “the Masters,” whom Leadbeater claimed to be in contact with. From 1909 onward, claims that a new “World Teacher” was coming became one of their central ideas. This “World Teacher” was recognized in a young boy, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1896–1986), who received special training from Besant and Leadbeater to embody this role. Besant and Leadbeater soon founded the Order of the Star of the East, an organization to promote this establishment.⁴⁸ I will return to this when discussing Leadbeater.

Not all Theosophists were happy with this new turn in the Theosophical Society, but the organization continued to be successful, with Theosophy gaining in popularity throughout the war years until the late 1920s. In 1929, two years after Besant had declared that the “World Teacher” was finally ready to embark on his new leadership, Krishnamurti resigned from the Theosophical Society, rejecting the role that he was given. He emerged, instead, as an independent teacher and educator and became a well-known spiritual and philosophical personality in his own right outside of the Theosophical context.⁴⁹

The Theosophical Society’s heyday was between roughly 1890 and 1930.⁵⁰ The movement is still active today, and Theosophy has had a continuous impact on later religious movements, including various “New Age” currents. Today, the society is represented by three different organizations: The American Section is today based in Pasadena, California, along with the break-away group The United Lodge of Theosophists (founded in 1909). Lastly, the old headquarters in Adyar, India is still active, today under the leadership of Tim Boyd (as of 2014).⁵¹

48 Ibid, p. 1121.

49 Ibid, pp. 1121–122.

50 William Michael Ashcraft, *The Dawn of the New Cycle: Point Loma Theosophists and American Culture*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002, p. 23.

51 The Theosophical Society Adyar website, “Presidents and Officers,” <https://www.ts-adyar.org/content/international-officers>.

Theosophy attracted a number of upper-class and even aristocratic followers, such as princess Ada Troubetzkoy (née Winans) and British countess Muriel De La Warr (née Brassey, 1872–1939); it also attracted a number of now-famous individuals, such as inventor and military officer Abner Doubleday (1819–1893), astronomer Camille Flammarion (1842–1925), inventor Thomas Edison (1847–1931), and poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939).⁵²

Now that we have considered the history of the Theosophical Society in broad strokes, I will turn to the academic study of Theosophy.

2.3 *The Academic Study of Theosophy*

Scholars often divide Theosophy into different historical categories in order to capture the diverse body of Theosophists that have been active, the development of Theosophy, and how it has changed through the decades. Oftentimes, scholars use the categories first-, second- and third-generation Theosophy.⁵³ Broadly, the first generation is centered on the roles of Blavatsky and Olcott (1875–1891); the second with Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater (1890s through 1920s); and the third with the events in the 1920s and 1930s, after president of the American section, Katherine Tingley (1847–1929), moved the U.S. headquarters from New York to California.⁵⁴

Additionally, scholars use the categories “Theosophy” and “post-Theosophy,”⁵⁵ with the former referring to groups that were explicitly Theosophical and the latter encapsulating groups that emerged from a Theosophical context but developed their own formulations on spirituality. Mead’s work spans over both the first and second generations of Theosophy, and he inhabited the roles as both a Theosophist and a post-Theosophist.

⁵² Julie Chajes, *Recycled Lives: A History of Reincarnation in Blavatsky’s Theosophy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 42–43.

⁵³ For this categorization, see Hammer and Rothstein, *Handbook*; see also Santucci, “Theosophical Society,” Hanegraaff et al., pp. 114–123.

⁵⁴ For these three generations, see Joscelyn Godwin, “Blavatsky and the First Generation of Theosophy,” Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 15–31; Catherine Wessinger, “The Second Generation leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar),” Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 33–50; William Michael Ashcraft, “The Third Generation of Theosophy and Beyond,” Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 73–89.

⁵⁵ Egil Asprem, “Vorwort: Steiner und die theosophische Strömung,” *Schriften – Rudolf Steiner Kritische Ausgabe: Band 6: Schriften zur Anthropologie – Theosophie – Anthroposophie. Ein Fragment*, edited by Christian Clement. Stuttgart: frommann-holzboog Verlag, 2016, pp. 1–12.

The categorizations that have emerged are largely a product of the sources that have been studied, the individuals and groups that have been highlighted, and the concepts and practices that have been posited as core features of Theosophy. As more scholarship on Theosophy emerges, it is likely that these categorizations will shift, and new ones will be introduced. As I hope I will show, there is reason to question the predominant focus on Blavatsky, Olcott, Besant, and Leadbeater in the Theosophical Society. By focusing almost exclusively on the writings and activities of these individuals, scholars have created the impression that the Theosophical Society was a lot more cohesive than it appears to have been when Theosophists such as Mead are included in Theosophical history. Indeed, the early (1875 through the 1890s) society seems to have been rife with conflicts and debates regarding virtually everything Theosophical, including the very notion of what *Theosophia*, Divine Wisdom, should mean.

The fact that scholarship on G. R. S. Mead has been so scant has contributed to this impression of a cohesive movement. By writing him and his activities into the history of the Theosophical movement, I will show that Theosophy and the Theosophical Society appears to have been a lot less cohesive than how previous scholars have portrayed them. Supposed key ideas in Theosophy such as the notion of “the Masters,” which sources to turn to and how to interpret them, and whether occultism should be studied as a theory or put to practice are all examples of how many different ideas there appeared to have been about Theosophical matters, and how open for debate these ideas seem to have been.

Rather than a double funnel with a narrow middle part, or a movement with a clear doctrine and organized cosmology, Theosophy could rather, as I hope to illustrate, be conceptualized as a porous debating ground, where different Theosophists thought of and argued for an immense variety of understandings of all things Theosophical. Mead’s role in the Theosophical Society helps bring light to this, and opens up for new ways of looking at the nature of the Theosophical current during the 1890s and the early 1900s. Additionally, it will help us better understand *why* so many individuals broke with the Theosophical Society: i.e., why there is such a broad range of so-called post-Theosophical currents in the first place. It all has to do with how porous and open for discussion

Theosophy appears to have been in the beginning, and how it seems to have been made narrower after time.

Bringing attention to Mead is also in line with the recent trend in academic research of Theosophy that focuses on Theosophical individuals and movements beyond Blavatsky.⁵⁶ While it would be an understatement to claim that Blavatsky was seen as important in the Theosophical milieu, both by her contemporaries as well as by later Theosophists,⁵⁷ she was quite modest about her own work, calling *The Secret Doctrine* “but an atom.”⁵⁸ The intense focus on Blavatsky and her two books, both in Theosophical discourse as well as academic research, has made it appear as though Theosophy began and ended solely with Blavatsky. While she was eager to share her thoughts with a Theosophical audience, she did not intend for her books to be seen and read as bibles (even though they seemed to have been).⁵⁹ If we are to get a fuller picture of what Theosophy looked like, we ought to consider the more voices than just Blavatsky’s.

With that being said, before we can begin to trace the contours of this diverse field, or what I propose to call “the Theosophical debating ground,” we must begin by introducing the main protagonists that were part of it. Let us now turn to the woman that has come to define Theosophy both for scholars and largely for Theosophists themselves.

56 Scholars have recently begun to pay attention to a number of aspects and influences of Theosophy, including its influence on modernist art and literature, its influence on and representations of yoga and other “Eastern” practices and concepts, its influence on various “New Age” movements, its entanglement with early socialist, and feminist and colonialist discourses and projects. For more on the early Theosophical Society’s representations of “Eastern” concepts and practices, see Sand and Rudbøg, *Imagining the East*. For an overview of both early and later Theosophical currents, see Hammer and Rothstein, *Handbook*, which includes introductions to important later Theosophists and post-Theosophists such as Alice Bailey, Edgar Cayce, The I AM Activity, The Summit Lighthouse; as well as Theosophical influences on Ufology, popular fiction and art; and Theosophical attitudes towards science, race, and gender, among other things.

57 At the American Convention of 1892, she was remembered as a “leader.” See Annie Besant, “On the Watch-Tower,” *Lucifer*, vol. 10, no. 57, 1892, p. 182.

58 Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, “Philosophers and Philosophicules,” *Lucifer*, vol. 5, no. 26, 1889.

59 In *The Secret Doctrine*, she states that: “These truths are in no sense put forward as a revelation; nor does the author claim the position of a revealer of mystic lore, now made public for the first time in the world’s history. For what is contained in this work is to be found scattered throughout thousands of volumes embodying the scriptures of the great Asiatic and early European religions, hidden under glyph and symbol, and hitherto left unnoticed because of this veil,” p. vii.

2.4 Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891)

One of the most important actors in the “occult revival”⁶⁰ and broadly one of the most influential women of the nineteenth century,⁶¹ Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (her favorite sobriquet being H.P.B.) was often referred to as the “Mother” or “Lion” of Theosophy.⁶² She has been the most acknowledged Theosophist both within the Theosophical milieu as well as in academic scholarship on Theosophy, having been the subject of many biographies, both academic and hagiographical.⁶³ There is also a burgeoning academic interest in various aspects of her teachings, such as her view of Theosophy,⁶⁴ her theories of reincarnation,⁶⁵ as well as her theory of subtle anatomy.⁶⁶

In addition to Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), the two most historically significant Theosophical texts are Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). Blavatsky’s first book was edited by Platonist scholar and Theosophist Alexander Wilder (1823–1908), who claims not to have done much to the contents except considerably reducing the text.⁶⁷ 1268 pages long, it has been described as a “message to a post-Darwinian era preoccupied with the ‘war of science with religion,’” that, through occultism, the two sides could be reconciled.⁶⁸ By “occultism” Blavatsky here meant the “Hermetic philosophy, the anciently universal Wisdom religion” which Blavatsky with “magic,” “a divine science which led to a participation in the attributes of Divinity itself.”⁶⁹ While *Isis Unveiled* contained some parallels to “Eastern” religiosity and philosophy, this notion exploded in *The Secret Doctrine*, which was based on the purportedly ancient Tibetan *Book of Dzyan* and inspired by Blavatsky’s alleged teachers, “the Masters of Tibet.” At 1417 pages, the latter is even longer than *Isis*

60 Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014.

61 James A. Santucci, “Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna,” Hanegraaff et al., p. 177.

62 Annie Besant, “Theosophical Worthies: George Robert Stowe Mead,” *The Theosophist*, vol. 31, no. 4, p. 11.

63 For an introduction to Blavatsky, consult Santucci, “Blavatsky,” Hanegraaff et al., pp. 177–185. Some biographical accounts in monograph form include Marion Meade, *Madame Blavatsky: The Woman Behind the Myth*, New York: Putnam, 1980; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Helena Blavatsky*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2004; and Gary Lachman, *Madame Blavatsky: The Mother of Modern Spirituality*, New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2012.

64 Rudbøg’s PhD dissertation “H. P. Blavatsky’s Theosophy in Context: The Construction of Meaning in Modern Western Esotericism,” University of Exeter, 2013, considers Blavatsky’s views on Theosophy.

65 Chajes, *Recycled Lives*.

66 Malin Fitger, “The Concept of Subtle Anatomy in Western Esotericism and its Influence on Contemporary Yoga and Meditation,” PhD thesis, Stockholm University, forthcoming.

67 Alexander Wilder, “How *Isis Unveiled* Was Written,” *The Word*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1908.

68 Godwin, “Blavatsky,” Hammer and Rothstein, p. 20.

69 Santucci, “Blavatsky,” Hanegraaff et al., p. 180.

Unveiled and is often considered to be Blavatsky's *magnum opus*. Composed of two volumes,⁷⁰ *Cosmogogenesis* and *Anthropogenesis*, the first volume was intended as a reworking of *Isis Unveiled* and contain discussions on cosmic evolution, whereas the second volume discusses human evolution.⁷¹

The aim of *The Secret Doctrine* was

to show that Nature is not "a fortuitous concurrence of atoms," and to assign to man his rightful place in the scheme of the Universe; to rescue from degradation the archaic truths which are the basis of all religions; and to uncover, to some extent, the fundamental unity from which they all spring; finally, to show that the occult side of nature has never been approached by the Science.⁷²

Theosophists following Blavatsky made continuous references to her works, and many, including "President-Founder" Henry Steel Olcott, Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater, claimed to be in contact with her "Masters." Much of the Theosophical discourse following her two books were devoted to exegesis of her writings, not least because the writing was so difficult to understand. William Kingsland (1855–1936), then President of the Blavatsky Lodge in London, writes that after six months of collaborative systematic study of *The Secret Doctrine*, no consensus had been formed regarding its contents:

It has been no easy matter to form a clear and concise idea of the *modus operandi* of cosmogenesis as set forth in the stanzas and the accompanying commentary. They do not profess to do more than lift the corner of the veil. ... Those who are members of the Esoteric Section of the T. S. have a better chance of understanding the matter than the ordinary reader, but since numbers who have attended our Thursday evening meetings are not Esotericists, it has been impossible to treat the matter from any but an exoteric stand-point.⁷³

Readers of *Lucifer* had been promised a report that summarized the attempts at understanding the book. This had to be delayed, however, for, as Mead reported,

⁷⁰ Blavatsky's pupils, Annie Besant and Mead, later (1896) published a posthumous third edition to *The Secret Doctrine*, containing "the rejecta" of the first two volumes.

⁷¹ Santucci, "Blavatsky," Hanegraaff et al., 177–185.

⁷² Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion and Philosophy*, London: The Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888, p. viii.

⁷³ William Kingsland, "Theosophical Activities: The Secret Doctrine," *Lucifer*, vol 4., no. 23, 1889 p. 416.

The discussions on the first volume of the *Secret Doctrine* which have been reported by a stenographer were of so difficult a nature that much of the substance, as it stands, is entirely useless.⁷⁴

Despite their difficult prose, Blavatsky's books played a large role in popularizing Theosophy and its associated tenets, with her books being well-read by a spiritual audience to this day.⁷⁵ By her contemporaries, Blavatsky was probably *the* most important Theosophist: one needs only to look to the numerous memorials that were written upon her death,⁷⁶ wherein anxieties were expressed regarding the future of the movement. Annie Besant writes that “If there was one thing of which the British press was more sure ... it was that Theosophy was dead with its ‘inventor.’”⁷⁷ She contended, however, that “the Society, which had in it the very life of H. P. Blavatsky could not die.”⁷⁸ As we now know, this premonition proved to be true: Theosophy only grew after her death, with Theosophists such as Annie Besant, Charles Webster Leadbeater, and G. R. S. Mead bearing the torch that she had lit.

2.5 *The Return from Textual Hermeneutics to Occult Practice*

Annie Besant (1847–1933) and Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934) are often considered to be two of the most important “second-generation” Theosophists. Together, they influenced a turning away from a study of Blavatsky’s texts, highlighting instead the need for occult practice. In addition to claiming contact with “the Masters” through psychic means, they promulgated the coming of a new “World-Teacher” which would help bring about a “New Age.”

2.5.1 *Annie Besant (1847–1933)*

Before joining the Theosophical Society in 1889, Annie Besant was a political and social activist devoted to a number of causes, including the promotion of birth control, secularism, and socialism.⁷⁹

In addition to engagement in the National Secular Society, Besant also came to be involved in the

74 George Robert Stow Mead, “Notice to Those Interested in the ‘Transactions of the Blavatsky Lodge,’” *Lucifer*, vol. 5, no. 27, 1889, p. 178.

75 Both *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* are easily available online and a search on Google for Blavatsky yields some 3,700,000 results in March 2020.

76 See *Lucifer*, vol. 8, no. 46, 1891 and *Lucifer*, vol. 8, no. 47 1891.

77 Annie Besant, “H. P. B. How She Left Us,” *Lucifer*, vol. 8, no. 46, 1891, p. 353.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 354.

79 James A. Santucci, “Besant, Annie,” Hanegraaff et al., pp. 170–171.

Fabian Society, a British socialist organization, and later, the Social Democratic Federation. Besant was also engaged in various union causes and was elected to office in the London School Board. After being first drawn to Spiritualism, Besant happened upon *The Secret Doctrine*, after which she quickly joined the Theosophical Society, exchanging socialism for Theosophy. Consistent with her penchant for leadership prior to her joining the society, Besant quickly rose to great heights of leadership within the Theosophical Society. By 1890, one year after meeting Blavatsky, Besant had become a member and secretary of Blavatsky's exclusive Inner Group of the Esoteric Section of The Theosophical Society, where she, together with Mead and ten other disciples, received special esoteric instructions⁸⁰ and teachings from Blavatsky.⁸¹

When Blavatsky died, the leadership of the Inner Group passed to Besant. During this time, Besant co-edited, first with Blavatsky and later with Mead, Blavatsky's magazine *Lucifer* (later renamed *The Theosophical Review*). Besant was also the president of the Blavatsky Lodge in London, a position she held until the late 1890s, as well as the Vice-President of the Theosophical Society.⁸² In 1907, "President-Founder" Olcott claimed to have been visited by "Mahâtma"⁸³ Morya and "Mahâtma" Koot Hoomi who instructed him to appoint Besant as his successor.⁸⁴ This was met with a lot of criticism from the European headquarters, not least from Mead, who argued that the election of Besant should be considered illegitimate as Founders did not, according to previously established "Rules of the Society," have the power to elect but merely to nominate candidates for presidency.⁸⁵

By the mid-1890s, Besant became associated with Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934), an increasingly popular psychic investigator and occult writer. By 1895, the two had begun to investigate psychical phenomena, such as reincarnation and the astral plane, co-authoring a number of books dedicated to these subjects, including *Occult Chemistry* (1908). When Leadbeater in 1906 was charged with immoral conduct and subsequently resigned from the society, Besant defended him

80 These instructions were later printed in the posthumous third volume of *The Secret Doctrine* in 1897 by Besant and Mead.

81 Santucci, "Besant," Hanegraaff et al., p. 171.

82 Ibid.

83 *Sic*.

84 Henry S. Olcott, "A Conversation with the Mâhâtmas," *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 40, no. 235, p. 91.

85 George Robert Stow Mead, "The Coming Election to the Presidency," *The Theosophist*, vol. 28 supplement, 1907.

and in 1908 decided to reinstate him as a member of the society, despite the many critiques that she received (Mead being amongst those critics).

2.5.2 *Charles Webster Leadbeater (1854–1934)*

Before turning to Theosophy in 1883, Leadbeater was ordained priest in the Anglican church of Stockport, England.⁸⁶ After having traveled to the Theosophical Society's headquarters in India, Leadbeater began to claim that he was in contact with "the Masters" (more specifically, "Masters" Kuthumi and D.K.). "The Masters" instructed Leadbeater to "raise his kundalini" (a practice which would help him activate his chakras, energy points in the "subtle body"). Upon participating in this training and communicating with "the Masters," Leadbeater reported that he developed psychic faculties and clairvoyant abilities.⁸⁷ Besant, who had an intense interest in the subject of psychism, was immediately drawn to Leadbeater. Together, they came to engage in multiform psychical investigations, including astral travel, mirroring the Theosophical Society's early days as a post-Spiritualist current. Among their activities were clairvoyant investigations of the lives of past Theosophists, the archaeology and geographies of the Earth and space, and the constitution of atomic and sub-atomic worlds.⁸⁸ The turning away from textual hermeneutics (which had mostly been dedicated to the study of Blavatsky's books) led many members to leave the society.⁸⁹ Despite this, Besant kept to his side and remained loyal to him for the remainder of her life.⁹⁰

Eventually, Leadbeater came to cause even more uproar in the Society. In 1906, he was charged with immoral conduct, as there were allegations that he had been teaching masturbation to young boys.⁹¹ Leadbeater admitted to these charges and left the society for a time.⁹² Besant, however, reinstated Leadbeater into the Theosophical Society again, causing many members of the society (including Mead) to leave in protest.⁹³ The decision to reinstate Leadbeater had been influenced by a visit from

86 Brendan French, "Leadbeater, Charles Webster," Hanegraaff et al., p. 685.

87 Wessinger, "The Second Generation," Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 36–37.

88 Ibid.

89 French, "Leadbeater," Hanegraaff et al., p. 685.

90 Wessinger, "The Second Generation," Hammer and Rothstein, p. 37.

91 Ibid.

92 French, "Leadbeater," Hanegraaff et al., p. 685.

93 Wessinger, "The Second Generation," Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 37–38.

“the Masters” to Olcott, who had been instructed to write a letter to Leadbeater asking for his forgiveness for being treated so harshly while he was questioned for his actions. Leadbeater subsequently wrote to Besant that he had been asked by “the Masters” to stop with this sort of behavior.

In 1907, when Olcott claimed to have been visited by “the Masters” and having been told that Besant were to be elected president, he also claimed to have been informed that Leadbeater was still “fit to be [the Masters’] instrument” and to be rightfully “in [Their] presence.”⁹⁴ Following these revelations that Olcott received, Besant decided to reinstate Leadbeater into the society, and the two once again began to collaborative in psychic endeavors.⁹⁵

Once reinstated, Leadbeater again took an active leadership role. From 1908, he began to argue that he had discovered in a fourteen-year-old Brahmin boy, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1896–1986), a coming of a physical vessel for the “World Teacher,” the “Lord Maitreya.” Lord Maitreya was said to live in the Himalayas in a complex and refined physical form, which was too pure for the world beyond the Himalayas. Because of Lord Maitreya’s special status, this spiritual individual needed to occupy the body of an “innocent” person. Krishnamurti was decided by Besant and Leadbeater to fit this bill, as he was deemed by Leadbeater to have a pure aura (a claim based on Leadbeater’s alleged ability to see human auras).⁹⁶ Leadbeater and Besant adopted Krishnamurti along with his younger brother, Nityananda (1898–1925), and began giving the former special training so that he would be ready to inhabit the Lord Maitreya, being told that his body traveled to higher planes while he slept.⁹⁷

Leadbeater and Besant claimed that the coming of the World Teacher would bring about a “New Age,” the era of “the Seventh Ray,” which would lead to an occult reawakening of the world. To bring forth this evolution, Leadbeater and Besant installed a number of new projects into the Theosophical Society. Three of these are of special interest for the present thesis: the adoption, from French Universal Co-Freemasonry, of a new form of ritual initiation into the English section of the

94 Olcott, “A Conversation,” p. 93.

95 *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

96 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

97 *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Theosophical Society, thus introducing rituals into the society; the dissemination of millennialist propaganda (about the coming of the World Teacher) through the installment of the Order of the Star of the East (an initiative created by Besant); and the involvement, on the society's behalf, in the Liberal Catholic Church, where Leadbeater was a bishop and engaged in sacramental rites to help bring about the coming "New Age."⁹⁸

In other words, Besant and Leadbeater made several changes to the society: they brought about a new connection to Christianity, an interesting decision since the original Theosophical Society had been averse to precisely Christian dogmas, and they introduced clear ritual activities and occult practice into the society, which again mirrored the earlier Theosophical Society which had been more practical in orientation. In so doing, they effectively changed the Theosophical Society from a society mostly dedicated to theoretical occultism, which was centered around the comparative study and synthesis of religious, philosophical, and scientific texts, into a society that was centered around occult practice, millenarianism, and messianism. These new installations would later be referred to as "new-theosophical" matters by Theosophists like Mead, who disagreed with these changes, and saw that they were not in line with the kind of Theosophy that had drawn him into the society.

Mead, as we will see, was not interested in occult practice, nor was he heeding to dogmas communicated by "the Masters." In other words, while Mead's most immediate reason for leaving the Theosophical Society was Leadbeater's reinstatement following the charges for immoral conduct, there was more to his leaving: he did not agree with this form of Theosophy, since it was very different from the kind of Theosophy he was interested in. We see here an example of his Theosophy changed and came to be associated, at the hands of Besant and Leadbeater, with something more particular and vastly different from how the society had been previously. What had once meant "Divine Wisdom" for Theosophists like Mead came to be increasingly associated with ritual practice, millenarianism, and psychic authority.

⁹⁸ French, "Leadbeater," Hanegraaff et al., p. 687.

2.6 George Robert Stow Mead (1863–1933)

A staunch critic of Leadbeater and with an uneasy relationship to Besant, George Robert Stow⁹⁹ Mead was born in Nuneaton, Warwickshire in 1863¹⁰⁰ to parents Mary Mead¹⁰¹ and her husband Colonel Robert Mead, officer in Her Majesty's Ordnance of the British Army.¹⁰² The young Mead attended King's School, Rochester,¹⁰³ a middle-class Catholic school, and later went to study Mathematics and Classics at St. John's College, Cambridge. He graduated with a B.A. in Classics in 1884, having obtained third class in the Classical Tripos of the same year.¹⁰⁴ In the last year of college, Mead read Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*, which sparked his interest in both "Eastern" philosophy and Theosophy.¹⁰⁵ Mead has recalled that prior to reading Sinnett and first hearing of Theosophy,

there was something in me that made me read widely in the classics, believing that there was some reason why we had to study Greek and Latin other than for the sake of philology or even of a knowledge of 'literature.'¹⁰⁶

In other words, Mead came to Theosophy already with an inclination towards Classical, "Western" thought; and through his life work, he helped to popularize precisely these sources, both during and after his time in the Theosophical Society.

After college, Mead spent three years teaching as a public schoolmaster and later studied philosophy in Oxford.¹⁰⁷ An article in Theosophical magazine *The Path* recalls that during this time, he was "reading fourteen hours a day for five months," and then went on to Clermont Ferrand, France, where he was "following the literary and philosophical lectures ... start[ing] many on Theosophy and Spiritualism."¹⁰⁸ Reading "ravenously" during this time, Mead "became lost in the endless diversity of

99 "Stow" is sometimes spelled "Stowe"; I am using the spelling found in his obituaries in *The Times* and *The Eagle*.

100 No author, "Mead, George Robert Stow," *Alumni Cantabrigienses: A Biographical List of All Known Students, Graduates, and Holders of Office at the University of Cambridge, from the Earliest Times to 1900, vol II*, edited by John Venn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

101 Goodrick-Clarke and Goodrick-Clarke, *G.R.S. Mead*, p. 2. I have not been able to locate any more information regarding Mead's mother.

102 No author, "Mr. G. R. S. Mead Obituary," *The Times*, September 29, 1933, p. 14.

103 Ibid.

104 No author, "George Robert Stow Mead Obituary," *The Eagle* XLVIII, 1934-5, p. 70.

105 George Robert Stow Mead, "A Measure of What Theosophy Means to Me," *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 39, no. 234, 1907, p. 522.

106 Ibid., pp. 523–24.

107 No author, "Faces of Friends," *The Path*, vol. 8, no. 10, 1894, p. 305.

108 Ibid.

detail,” likening his heavy intake of literature to “an indigestion.”¹⁰⁹ It was not until later that became aware of the true meaning of Theosophy, which “means one thing only ... the knowledge that gnosis is realisation.”¹¹⁰

Mead joined the Theosophical Society in 1884,¹¹¹ first met Blavatsky in 1887, and two years later started working as her private secretary, a position he kept until her death in 1891.¹¹² As Blavatsky’s private secretary, Mead was in charge of her correspondences; sub-edited, together with Annie Besant her monthly Theosophical magazine *Lucifer* (founded in 1887, later renamed, by Mead, *The Theosophical Review*);¹¹³ and edited several of her articles and books, including *The Key to Theosophy* (1889) and *The Voice of the Silence* (1889).¹¹⁴ Mead himself states that he “corrected or edited everything H. P. B. wrote for publication” in the three last years of Blavatsky’s life.¹¹⁵ According to another source, he edited almost everything she wrote in English, “with the exception of *Isis Unveiled*,” hinting to the fact that he might have played a role in the editing of *The Secret Doctrine*.¹¹⁶ When Blavatsky died in May 1891, he gave the address at her cremation.¹¹⁷

Prior to her death, in 1890, Blavatsky had appointed Mead, together with Bertram Keightley (1860–1944), as joint-secretaries of the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society.¹¹⁸ A small study group for advanced students of Theosophy, the Esoteric Section had been founded in 1888 with Blavatsky as its outer leader (the inner leaders being “the Masters.”)¹¹⁹ In 1890, Blavatsky created an even more exclusive Inner Group of the Esoteric Section, where she made Mead and Besant the secretaries.¹²⁰

109 Mead, “A Measure,” p. 524.

110 Ibid., p. 521.

111 George Robert Stow Mead, *The Quest’—Old & New: A Retrospect and Prospect*, London: John M. Watkins, 1926.

112 No author, “Faces of Friends,” p. 306; cf. “George Robert Stow Mead Obituary,” p. 70; and “Mr. G. R. S. Mead Obituary,” *The Times*, September 29, 1933, p. 14.

113 *Lucifer*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1887.

114 Joscelyn Godwin, “Mead, George Robert Stowe,” Hanegraaff et al., p. 785.

115 George Robert Stow Mead, “Facts About ‘The Secret Doctrine,’” *The Occult Review*, vol. 45, no. 5, 1927, p. 320.

116 Scholars have tended to assume that Mead could not have edited *The Secret Doctrine* as he had not yet become Blavatsky’s private secretary (which he became one year after its publication). However, seeing as the two first met in 1887, it is not impossible that Mead helped edit the book. See George Robert Stow Mead, “On the Watch-Tower, *Lucifer*,” vol 20, no. 119, 1897, p. 354.

117 George Robert Stow Mead, “The Cremation,” *Lucifer*, vol. 8, no. 46, 1891, pp. 271–75.

118 H.J. Spielberg, editor. *The Inner Group Teachings of H.P. Blavatsky to Her Personal Pupils (1890–91)*, San Diego: Point Loma Publications, 1994, p. x.

119 Santucci, “Theosophical Society,” Hanegraaff et al., p. 1119.

120 Spielberg, *Inner Group*, p. xiii.

The Inner Group was composed of a dozen members¹²¹ who, over the course of twenty-two meetings, received Blavatsky's six *Esoteric Instructions* as well as teachings on cosmology and the constitution of human beings.¹²² Another member of the Esoteric Section was Laura M. Cooper (?–1926), who later married Mead in 1899.¹²³

In 1890, Mead had also become the general secretary of the European Section of the Theosophical Society,¹²⁴ a position that he held until 1898,¹²⁵ when he asked “the Executive Committee to relieve [him] of [his] official duties” so that he could “devote himself more particularly to the literary part of his work for the society.”¹²⁶ In 1907, when Olcott passed away, Mead was offered the position as vice-president of the society but turned it down.¹²⁷

In 1892, when Mead was working as the general director of the Theosophical Society's European Section, he forwarded the following motion at the American Convention:

Resolved: That the Theosophical Society, as such, has no creed, no formulated beliefs that could or should be enforced anyone inside or outside its ranks; that no doctrine can be declared as orthodox, and that no Theosophical papery can exist without annulling the very basis of ethics and the foundations of truth upon which the whole Theosophical teachings rest.¹²⁸

Already in 1892, it was established that Theosophy had no creed, no formulated beliefs, and no orthodox doctrines. This is important because it actually reflects the ideas that Mead later came to hold as crucial in the society: he frequently wrote about precisely the need for no dogma, the need

121 Ibid., pp. xiii-xiv. Members, besides Besant, Mead, Keightley, and Cooper, included Alice L. Cleather (1856–1939), Laura Cooper's sister Isabel Cooper-Oakley (1854–1939), Emily Kislingsbury (?–?), and Countess Constance Wachtmeister (1838–1910), H.A.W. Coryn (1863–1927), Walter R. Old (1864–1927), E.T. Sturdy (1860–1957), and Claude Falls Wright (1867–1923). There were also three “outside” members of the group: Rai B.K. Laheri (?–?), William Wynn Wescott (1848–1925), and William Quan Judge (1851–1896).

122 Ibid., p. xxi.

123 See Mead's obituary in *The Eagle*.

124 Blavatsky, “Theosophical Society: European Section,” *Lucifer*, vol. 7, no. 37, 1890, p. 78.

125 Mead delivered his last report as the General Secretary of the European Section in *The Theosophist's* January number of 1898. In 1899, he was succeeded by Otway Cuffe: see *The Theosophist*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1899, p. 241.

126 No author, “Theosophical Activities,” *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 22, no. 127, 1898, p. 182.

127 George Robert Stow Mead, “The Coming Election to the Presidency,” *The Theosophist*, vol. 28, supplements, 1906, pp. lvii-lix. In a retrospective, Mead states that he was offered the presidency but declined in order to pursue his own studies. I have not been able to verify this account. See George Robert Stow Mead, *The Quest'—Old & New: A Retrospect and Prospect*, London: John M. Watkins, 1926.

128 No author, “Theosophical Activities: American Convention,” *Lucifer*, vol. 10, no. 58, 1892, p. 346.

for openness of interpretation and freedom regarding individuals' choice of path. When he saw that these established notions were no longer adhered to, such as when Besant and Leadbeater brought psychic leadership to the Adyar branch, and effectively asserted a dogmatic belief in these authorities, Mead, as we have seen, eventually left the society. While it can be posited that Mead held a more liberal view of Theosophy than how Theosophy has come to be portrayed by scholars, his view was, rather, quite conservative view if one refers back to this motion. Regardless of whether Mead should be seen as a liberal or conservative Theosophist, he certainly had his quarrels over various Theosophical matters.

In 1893, Mead (together with Besant) acted as the joint editor of *Lucifer*,¹²⁹ and in 1907 the sole editor for *The Theosophical Review*, which *Lucifer* was renamed in 1897. Mead was also the editor of the monthly Theosophical journal *Vâhan* between 1891–1897¹³⁰ and contributed many articles to Theosophical journals, which included (in addition to the ones which he edited) *The Theosophist* (1879–currently)¹³¹ and *Theosophical Siftings* (1888–1895).¹³²

Following the public defense of Leadbeater by the General Secretary of the American Section, Dr. Weller van Hook, in 1908, and Besant's subsequent decision to reinstate Leadbeater into the society following this, Mead and around 700 other members of the British Section left the Theosophical Society in protest.¹³³ Around 100 of these ex-members founded, under the leadership of Mead, the Quest Society, which was active until 1930.¹³⁴ I will return to the Quest in a later section.

During his lifetime, Mead wrote and had published well over 200 articles. Most of these appeared in *The Theosophical Review* and *The Quest: A Quarterly Review*, but his publications also include scattered contributions to *The Occult Review* as well as various other occult and Theosophical

129 *Lucifer*, vol. 13, no. 75, 1893 was jointly edited by Besant and Mead.

130 Godwin, "Mead," p. 785.

131 For an index of all contributions to *The Theosophist*, see The Theosophical Society in Australia's index at <http://www.austheos.org.au/indices/THEOST.HTM>.

132 George Robert Stow Mead, "Theosophical Symbology," *Theosophical Siftings*, vol. 3, 1890, pp. 3–17; idem, "The Planetary Chain," vol. 5, 1892–1893, pp. 334–42.

133 Mead, 'The Quest'—*Old & New*, np.

134 Ibid.

magazines.¹³⁵ He also wrote, edited, and translated some thirty books, with the most famous being the first English translation of the Gnostic treatise *Pistis Sophia* (1896) as well as his synthesis of various Hellenistic currents, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten* (1900). Among Mead's many books and articles were translations and commentary on various religious and philosophical currents from the Hellenistic era, including books on Orpheus, Plotinus, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and Simon Magus; he also translated and commented on "Eastern" works such as *The Upanishads* and *The Dream of Ravan*. Additionally, Mead wrote extensively on various Theosophical matters, including the three objectives of the Theosophical Society as well as related Theosophical discourse. As one of the society's primary scholars, Mead delivered many lectures over the years, including lectures on the importance of the second objective of the society, (the comparative study of religion, science, and philosophy)¹³⁶ and "the necessity of esotericism in religion."¹³⁷

A member with several leadership positions in the Theosophical Society, Mead's departure from the Theosophical context was an important event in his life. With his firm placement in the Theosophical Society as one of its main scholars, the holder of multiple offices as well as the editor of *The Theosophical Review*, Mead could easily have had a continuous career as a Theosophical leader and writer had he stayed in the society. However, his many disagreements with the "neo-theosophical" turn in the society, under the leadership of Besant and Leadbeater, eventually became too much for him. As he recalled in 1926, the reasons for his leaving the society were many and were not limited to the Leadbeater scandal.¹³⁸ Mead had long been discomfited by the "neo-theosophy" of Besant and Leadbeater, including their "Mahātmā-ism;" their advancement of the importance of psychic revelations from Blavatsky's purported "Masters."¹³⁹

135 To this day, there is no published full bibliography of Mead's many writings. For a useful overlook, however, see Goodrick-Clarke and Goodrick-Clarke, *G.R.S. Mead*, pp. 206-19.

136 A. J. Hailey, "Theosophical Activities," *Lucifer*, vol. 11, no. 61, 1892, p. 79.

137 Laura M. Cooper, "Theosophical Activities: European Section," *Lucifer*, vol. 13, no. 73, 1893.

138 Apart from Goodrick-Clarke and Goodrick-Clarke's discussion of Mead's life in their biography, most scholarship on Mead mentions precisely the Leadbeater scandal as the reason for Mead's departure from the society. See, for instance, Godwin's biographical essay on Mead in Hanegraaff et al., p. 785.

139 Mead, *The Quest'—Old & New*, np.

A staunch believer in the three objects of the society,¹⁴⁰ of which the notion of “the Masters” was not a part, Mead found that Besant and Leadbeater had turned Theosophy into something different from what it was how he wanted it to be, as far as Mead seems to have been concerned. To Mead, Theosophy appears to have meant one thing in particular: Divine Wisdom that could be gained through comparative study and synthesis the best of all religions and philosophies. Moreover, Theosophy constituted for Mead an ideal and a “method,”¹⁴¹ not a set of dogmatic beliefs. This did not, in Mead’s view, have anything to do with “the Masters,” occult practice, psychic revelations, or even with Blavatsky and her books. Theosophy, and later, the Quest, constituted something else, namely an individual, mystical spiritual path: the search for Divine Wisdom. According to Mead himself, this had been his view all along. He stated that upon leaving the Theosophical Society,

I still loved the thing I sought. I had thus, on leaving, practically nothing to change, as far as my own studies and deepest spiritual interests were concerned. The old great things were true, in their proper measures and degrees.¹⁴²

In 1909, after leaving the Theosophical Society, Mead formed and became the first president of the Quest Society, as well as editor of its journal *The Quest: A Quarterly Review*, which was active until 1930.¹⁴³ After the journal ended its publication due to financial struggles, the society was dissolved.¹⁴⁴ I will return to this society in a later section.

For a time, Mead worked as the secretary of the Northbrook Society, an organization dedicated to helping Indian students.¹⁴⁵ After the cessation of the Quest Society, Mead became a part of the council for the Society for Promoting the Study of Religions,¹⁴⁶ a faith-based organization which

140 This is evident from Mead’s writing, which continuously refers back to the three objectives. Mead has written articles on all three. For the notion of “brotherhood,” see George Robert Stow Mead, “The True Brotherhood of Man,” *Lucifer*, vol. 9, no. 51, 1891, pp. 196-206; on the synthesis and comparative study of religions, see idem, “The Task of Theosophical Scholars in the West,” *Lucifer*, vol. 8, no. 48, 1891, pp. 477-80; on the powers innate in man, see, for instance, idem, “Notes on Nirvāna,” *Lucifer*, vol. 12, no. 67, 1893, pp. 9-16; vol. 12, no. 68, 1893, pp. 111-20; vol. 12, no. 69, 1893, pp. 185-92, where he expounds on the development of spiritual man and his reaching of nirvana through the expansion of consciousness.

141 See George Robert Stow Mead, “Correspondence,” *Lucifer*, vol. 13, no. 76, 1893, p. 338.

142 In ‘*The Quest*’—*Old & New*, np.

143 Mead’s obituary in *The Times*.

144 Ibid.

145 Mead’s obituary in the *The Eagle*.

146 Mead’s obituary in *The Times*.

resulted from the 1924 conference *Religions of Empire*, connected to the colonial British Empire Exhibition.¹⁴⁷ He died in London due to ill health in 1933, at 65 years old.¹⁴⁸

Now that we have looked at some of the main protagonists of the Theosophical Society—Blavatsky, Besant, Leadbeater and, of course, Mead—we will turn to one of Mead's favored activities as a leader in the Theosophical Society, namely his editorship. The reason why we will be looking at Mead's time as an editor is because it is precisely through his editorship that we can see just how diverse Theosophy appears to have been during his active years. As editor and contributor to *Lucifer* and *The Theosophical Review*, which *Lucifer* was renamed under Mead's editorship, he allowed room for a diverse range of authors, including those questioning important Theosophical ideas.

His decision to include these in the journal, along with his own articles, tell us a lot about how many different ideas there were about Theosophy as well as what Mead's position appears to have been regarding the nature of Theosophy. After I have considered Mead's editorship and what it tells us about the state of Theosophy during this time (1889, when Mead began publishing in Theosophical journals, through 1909, when Mead left the Theosophical Society), I will look more specifically at three areas where Mead himself differed from Blavatsky, Leadbeater, and Besant, which will further highlight how diverse Theosophy appears to have been during this time.

Three: THEOSOPHIES

3.1 The Theosophical Review: *A Theosophical Debating Ground*

A large part of Mead's historical significance lies in his editorship of *Lucifer* (later renamed *The Theosophical Review* by Mead), where he had joint editorship with Besant from 1893, and sole editorship between 1907 and 1909, when he left the Theosophical Society and *The Theosophical Review* ended its publication. Together with the long-running *The Theosophist*, it was the largest Theosophical magazine of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When he left the Theosophical Society and ended his time as chief editor of the *Theosophical Review*, he became

¹⁴⁷ J. Gordon Melton, *Faiths Across Time: 5,000 Years of Religious History*, four volumes, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2014, p. 1671.

¹⁴⁸ From Mead's obituary in *The Times*.

dearly missed—both within the Theosophical Society and in the wider occult milieu. This is evidenced by Besant’s farewell editorial where she writes that Mead was one of the Theosophical Society’s “most prominent workers;”¹⁴⁹ and *The Occult Review*, one of the most important occult periodicals of the time,¹⁵⁰ wrote that “The dissension in the Theosophical Society is all the more regretted in that it has entailed the cessation of the *Theosophical Review*, so admirably edited” by Mead, “whose work ... has been of extreme value.”¹⁵¹ In other words, Mead’s work was not merely seen as influential and impactful for an internal Theosophical readership but reached wider into the British *fin-de-siècle* occult milieu.

Besant recalls that under Mead’s “strong wish,” *Lucifer* “was changed in title and form, and was made more ‘impersonal.’”¹⁵² What she was referring to was Mead’s decision to rename Blavatsky’s magazine *Lucifer* to *The Theosophical Review*, a decision which shows us a number of things. Firstly, it shows—and I will return to this—that Mead had a more liberal stance towards Blavatsky, whom he did not view as having a sacrosanct status, since he took it upon himself to rebrand the magazine that she had founded. Secondly, it highlights Mead’s wish to make the journal more scholarly, perhaps to invite a more diverse body of contributors and a more general readership (which it succeeded in doing, as we saw from the quotation from *The Occult Review*). Thirdly and lastly, it reflects Mead’s wish to redirect the focus of the journal back to Theosophy—Divine Wisdom—from the more general occultism (Blavatsky had intended for the name *Lucifer* to reflect the periodical’s object to “bring light to ‘the hidden things of darkness’”¹⁵³). The result was, effectively, a new journal, marked by an increasing inclusion of many different types of Theosophists, who held different views of what Theosophy should mean. In other words, it became a space for Theosophical debates.

An interesting decision in Mead’s editorship of *The Theosophical Review* is the inclusion of articles by self-defined “agnostic Theosophist”¹⁵⁴ Alfred Richard Orage (1873–1934). Orage, who later stopped identifying as a Theosophist and went on to become the editor of the much more successful and

149 Besant, “Theosophical Worthies: George Robert Stowe Mead,” p. 505.

150 Morrisson, “The Periodical Culture,” p. 15.

151 No author, “Periodical Literature,” *The Occult Review*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1909, pp. 171–72.

152 Annie Besant, “On the Watch-Tower,” *The Theosophist*, vol. 30, no. 6, 1909, p. 511.

153 Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, “What’s in a Name? Why The Magazine is Called ‘Lucifer,’” *Lucifer*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1887.

154 Alfred Richard Orage, “In Defence of Agnosticism,” *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 39, no. 234, 1907, pp. 510–17.

wide-reaching modernist magazine *The New Age*¹⁵⁵ (which he edited between 1907 and 1922), was uneasy with many key Theosophical discourses and was allowed space in Mead's magazine to vex, in a witty manner, about his anxieties.¹⁵⁶ Among the topics covered by Orage is the question of whether there exists a "Theosophical point of view." Following this enquiry, he asks the provocative question "Is Theosophy everything, and therefore nothing?"¹⁵⁷

Included in *The Theosophical Review* is also an article about the Theosophical concept of man and of truth, where Orage states

So complex, in fact, is the Theosophical view of man that I doubt if anybody understand and comprehends it ... It often seems to me, in fact, in respect of man, that the Theosophical view is that there is no view. Just as the Truth is just that there is no truth; and the truth about the Ego is that there is no ego; so perhaps the Theosophical view of man is just that no view is possible.¹⁵⁸

Much of the allure of Theosophy during this time appears to have been the search for precisely man's "true" nature, along with the search for "truth." Orage's questioning of these things must, in other words, have been quite controversial. The fact that these kinds of things were written about in Mead's journal are quite telling regarding the ontological status of Theosophical concepts: they were not rock solid, but rather quite porous and open for debate.

In an article called "Occult Arts and Occult Faculty" from the following year (1907), Orage does little to hide his disdain for occult practitioners:

In attempting to discriminate between Occult Arts and Occult Faculty it is inevitable that something should be hurt ... The simplest distinction between an art and a faculty is perhaps this: an art can be taught

¹⁵⁵ For more on Orage and *The New Age*, see Lee Garver, "Seafarer Socialism: Pound, 'The New Age,' and Anglo-Medieval Radicalism," *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2006, pp. 1–21.

¹⁵⁶ Perhaps one of the reasons why Mead included Orage was because of their shared interest in Friedrich Nietzsche. Orage has published books on Nietzsche, such as *Friedrich Nietzsche: The Dionysian Spirit of the Age*. Edinburgh: Neill and Co, 1911, as well as articles and reviews on all things Nietzsche in *The New Age*. In a review of one of Orage's books on Nietzschean thought, Mead states: "Surely it is precisely among Theosophists that Nietzsche stands most chance of being understood. He is with us and not against us; he is a brilliant example of the soul of our striving, of that divine audacity without which we shall continue to lie prone upon the earth, not daring to raise ourselves and stand upright on the field of Armageddon." George Robert Stow Mead, "The Spirit of Nietzsche," *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 39, no. 232, 1906, pp. 380.

¹⁵⁷ Alfred Richard Orage, "Halt! What Goes There?" *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 38, no. 228, 1906, pp. 539–43.

¹⁵⁸ Alfred Richard Orage, "What is Man?" *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 39, no. 231, 1906, pp. 237–42.

but a faculty must be acquired ... the difference between an art and a faculty may be compared with the difference between a craft and a fine art. Hundreds of men may learn a craft, but the spirit that bloweth to secret places is needed to make an artist ... among the occult arts I include the whole list of magical, superstitious, mystery-making devices from astrology to zoomancy. Note I do not deny the reality of these arts. I simply deny their value of students of occult faculty.¹⁵⁹

He goes on to state that while the “undiscriminating public” might stand for occult arts, the Theosophical Society, as he conceives it, ought to stand for the occult faculty, which he describes as “Intuition, Insight and Imagination.”¹⁶⁰ He even goes on to state that the Theosophical Society ought

not to promulgate or propagate magical arts, but to develop in its members magical faculties; not to restore to the world the belief in older sympathetic magic of formulas and correspondences, but to create in the world the reality of a new magic, the magic of the winged powers of the mind.¹⁶¹

Seeing as many Theosophists indeed engaged in precisely the kind of “magic” Orage is questioning here, it is interesting that Mead allowed room for Orage to say these kinds of things.

The inclusion of Orage’s many articles criticizing important Theosophical concepts and asking seemingly off-guard questions regarding Theosophy and the Society met with a lot of critique. Many wondered why Orage even considered himself a Theosophist at all.¹⁶² Given the proclivities of his readers, it might seem curious that Mead decided to include these articles of Orage’s. As we will see, however, this is hardly surprising considering the stances Mead himself took during his years in the Theosophical Society. Already in 1891, a few months after Blavatsky died, Mead himself separated between precisely occult arts and “true occultism” in a manner similar to Orage, as we will see later on.

Now that we have considered what Mead’s activities as an editor can tell us about the state of Theosophy in the 1890s and early 1900s, we will look at some points of tension between Mead and Blavatsky, Leadbeater and Besant. Not only did Mead bump into many conflicts with these key Theosophists, as will be evident from what they had to say about each other, but they also disagreed

¹⁵⁹ Alfred Richard Orage, “Occult Arts and Occult Faculty,” *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 39, no. 233, 1907, p. 452–53.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 453.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 455.

¹⁶² Montagu Lomax, “Agnostic Theosophy II,” *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 39, no. 244, pp. 502–510.

on a number of important Theosophical concepts. A case study of Mead’s view on three Theosophical ideas—how to conceive of the notion of “the Masters,” which sources to turn to and how to interpret them, and whether one ought to study occultism as theory or practice it—all reveal how diverse Theosophy appears to have been, contrary to how it has been portrayed by academics today.

3.2. *Theosophical Debates: Mead, Blavatsky, Besant and Leadbeater*

Despite the fact that Mead lived with Blavatsky¹⁶³ and was allowed such a close position in regards to her work, the two often collided over differing opinions: Besant recalls that Blavatsky would “sometimes gird at his scholarly and critical methods,”¹⁶⁴ attacks Mead himself calls instances of “picturesque, not to say abusive, eloquence.”¹⁶⁵ Mead would often try to persuade her to change her writing, although he did not, he states, “alter [her] views and arguments.”¹⁶⁶

If the early cooperation between Mead and Blavatsky saw some tension, the differences between Mead’s vision of Theosophy and hers only grew after her death. While he regarded *The Secret Doctrine* as pivotal in laying before its reader the notion that there was such a thing as “the Secret Doctrine,” he recognized it as a fallible text, urging its readers to “choose the best in H. P. B.’s writings and let go of the worst.”¹⁶⁷ He was not happy with the way that her writings were increasingly seen as “scriptures” by fellow Theosophists, and it was his conviction that Blavatsky herself would not agree for them to be seen that way. Already before the *Theosophical review* period, when Mead clearly emerged as an independent Theosophical thinker, Mead wrote that Blavatsky

was a comet, not a planet, and her orbit was erratic ... how is it possible to make a scripture out of *The Secret Doctrine*? ... How consumedly she would have laughed to find herself in the minds of some erected into a prophet of a new faith!¹⁶⁸

163 Besant, “Theosophical Worthies: George Robert Stowe Mead,” p. 505.

164 Ibid.

165 Mead, “Facts About ‘The Secret Doctrine,’” p. 320.

166 Ibid., p. 321.

167 George Robert Stow Mead, “On the Watch-Tower,” *Lucifer*, vol. 20, no. 119, 1897, pp. 358–59.

168 Ibid.

Regarding the posthumous revision of Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), Mead wrote the following:

I am responsible for the major part of this revision ... Speaking generally, whatever 'howlers' I was able to detect, I amended ... Had I had the job today ... the bulk of the matter would be considerably reduced ... In any case, why should I have regarded the major part of the material as sacrosanct?¹⁶⁹

In other words, Mead did not regard Blavatsky's work as the end-all-be-all; to him, her writing was merely *one* expression of Theosophy, and it even had some problems inherent to it, seeing as he took upon himself the liberty to omit and change certain parts of her teachings.

To the question of whether he "believes in Blavatsky," he answered volubly: "to me this question sounds strange, even, if I may say so, vulgar."¹⁷⁰ Theosophy, to Mead, was "entirely independent of Madame Blavatsky."¹⁷¹ Mead clearly did not favor Blavatsky's nor any other specific expression of Theosophy, and especially no particular texts: as he has expressed elsewhere, "the meaning of Theosophy is not derived from books."¹⁷² Furthermore, and more specifically, he has stated that

THE SECRET DOCTRINE is a living thing; the books called *The Secret Doctrine*, *Esoteric Buddhism*, etc., are in themselves dead things, masks of the real SECRET DOCTRINE, and it depends on every student individually whether he can make their words—or, more important still, the ideas buried in their words—live in his own consciousness.¹⁷³

In other words, Mead did not see Theosophy as something that came from Blavatsky or ended with her thought.

Blavatsky was not the only Theosophist Mead had points of tension with. Regarding Annie Besant's publishing of the third volume of *The Secret Doctrine*, Mead writes:

169 Mead, "Facts About 'The Secret Doctrine,'" p. 321.

170 Mead, "Concerning H.P.B.," *The Theosophical Review* vol. 34, no. 200, 1904, p. 130.

171 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

172 Mead, "A Measure," p. 526.

173 George Robert Stow Mead, "Wheels within Wheels," *Lucifer*, vol. 13, no. 73, p. 58.

With this I refused to have anything to do whatever ... Mrs. Besant ... put a far higher valuation on everything H. P. B. had written than I did.¹⁷⁴

This is evident from an editorial in *Lucifer*—some months after Blavatsky’s death—where Besant emphatically declares *The Secret Doctrine* to be “the test of Theosophy everywhere ... Theosophy comes from her.”¹⁷⁵ It is interesting that Besant said this while her own work as shows a clear turning away from Blavatsky; perhaps she changed her mind later on. With Mead’s insistence on the importance of a Theosophy beyond Blavatsky, Besant came to conclude that Mead and herself held different views on Theosophy.¹⁷⁶ Theosophy, in other words, was even recognized as multiform by Theosophists themselves.

Besant’s and Mead’s disagreements regarding Theosophy’s meaning and nature gradually worsened, and in 1926, seventeen years after Mead had left the Theosophical Society, Mead reminisced that the Esoteric Section,

In the hands of Annie Besant ... became a camouflaged political caucus, “pulling” every crisis in the Society from within to suit A. B.’s own views and purposes.¹⁷⁷

What he is probably referring to here is Besant and Leadbeater’s millenarianist turn, which Mead remained strongly opposed to. It could also refer to the fact that Besant took it upon herself to define Theosophy in ways that did not resonate with Mead, ways that perhaps “tainted” the concept that he believed to be a lot more universal and general than Besant viewed it, as it became more and more associated with “the Masters” and occult practice, and less with the search for individual “Divine Wisdom.”

3.3 *Theosophies: The Many Different Ideas of Important Theosophical Concepts*

While I have not come across any scholarly attempts at defining the core elements in Theosophy (the closest being perhaps Carlson’s attempt at defining “*the* Theosophical doctrine”), there are three areas in particular that scholars often give as examples of key areas of Theosophy: the notion of “the Masters,” the appropriation and/or construction of “Eastern” ideas, and discourses on the nature of

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 322.

¹⁷⁵ Annie Besant, “Theosophy and Christianity,” *Lucifer*, vol. 9, no. 50, 1891, p. 90.

¹⁷⁶ Annie Besant. “On the Watch-Tower,” *The Theosophist*, vol. 30, no. 6, 1909, p. 511.

¹⁷⁷ Mead, ‘*The Quest*’—*Old & New*, np.

occultism. In the following section, I will show how an inclusion of Mead's ideas regarding these three matters challenge the idea of Theosophy as being cohesive, as he held ideas regarding these concepts than did Blavatsky, Besant and Leadbeater.

3.3.1 *The Notion of "the Masters"*

Both *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* are peppered with references to a group of spiritually enlightened beings from around the world that have bestowed their wisdom on Blavatsky. Referred to as "adepts," "Masters," or "Mahatmas,"¹⁷⁸ associated with them was the notion that they were, through their enlightened status, able to perform a number of supernatural feats, including the ability to psychically materialize letters.¹⁷⁹ Alexander Wilder, the editor of *Isis Unveiled*, recalls that Blavatsky would communicate with the "Masters" through "telepathy."¹⁸⁰ Following Blavatsky, many key Theosophists, such as Besant, Leadbeater and Alice Bailey (1880–1945) came to claim contact with these "Masters." Subsequently, current scholarship of Theosophy often presents the belief in "Masters" as central to Theosophy as such.¹⁸¹ This might, however, be an overstatement. Mead, for instance, did not believe in this notion. Rather, he taught something else: that one ought to become a Master oneself. Through an inclusion of Mead's view, we thus get an alternative window into what Theosophical attitudes were regarding the notion of "the Masters."

In an article called "The Master" (1906), Mead stated that

at the end of the Path of Self-conquest there can be no Masters in any sense of separation, since all who tread the Path to the end, we needs [*sic*] must believe, become one in the One and Only One. Masterhood may thus be thought of as at-one-ment with our God within and with our God without ... He who is consciously upon this Path, configured ever in this mode, is a self-learner, a candidate for Manhood ... no Master can raise up this veil for any but for himself.¹⁸²

178 Kenneth Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge*. New York: State U of New York P, 1994, p. 1.

179 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

180 Wilder, "How Isis," np.

181 Hammer and Rothstein, "Introduction," Hammer and Rothstein, p. 1

182 George Robert Stow Mead, "The Master," *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 39, no. 231, 1906, pp. 248–256.

In other words, Mead did not, as he has stated, “[preach] the Mahātmā-gospel of H. P. Blavatsky,”¹⁸³ but rather took the notion of “the Master” to be something to strive to, an ideal for each individual.

In 1907, after Olcott had published the document containing the conversations with “the Mahatmas,” Mead wrote an angry letter where he questioned Olcott’s claims to have received these psychic revelations. Not only was Mead unhappy with the fact that Olcott decided to elect Besant as president, seeing as the founders were not supposed to, according to the rules of the society, elect but merely nominate candidates; but he was also uneasy with the fact that Olcott wanted to forgive Leadbeater for his pedophilic activities. In the following text, Mead makes a clear statement regarding how he viewed “the Masters.” In addition to referring to “the Masters” as “apparitions,” thereby clearly questioning their ontological status, he also takes a strong stance against the very status that they were given, stating that a belief in their authority is a danger to the society itself:

It requires no apparitions from the invisible to persuade us that it is our plain duty to condemn wrong-doings and to safe-guard the ignorant and innocent; it requires no voice but that of conscience to teach us to strive to be in charity with all, even with those utterly callous to the misery they have caused; it requires nothing but ordinary observation to discover that the instruments which have been used in the Theosophical Society for the inculcation of many a lofty truth are one and all very imperfect and fallible men and women. But it requires more than pronouncements of such apparitions to persuade us that true Masters are utterly indifferent to grave moral obliquity in their pupils, and that there has been, as he himself claims, unbroken conscious access to the presence of true Masters by one who self-confessedly has all the time been systematically teaching practices which are universally condemned, and which are now long after their detection condemned by the same apparitions ... The authority of psychism has for long been on trial in the Theosophical Society. Were its authority to be now accepted as supreme and unquestioned, the Society would commit intellectual and moral suicide, and condemn itself publicly to the well-deserved reproach of fatuity; for psychic tyranny spells theosophic slavery.¹⁸⁴

After having left the Theosophical Society, Mead wrote in an article for *The Occult Review* that one can attach different meanings and authority to “the Masters,” “whether” one consider them to be “living person[s] ... or a psychic complex.”¹⁸⁵

183 Mead, *The Quest’—Old & New*, np.

184 George Robert Stow Mead, “That the Executive Committee of the British Section of the Theosophical Society cannot receive the pronouncements contained in the document entitled ‘A Conversation with the Mahatmas’ as a valid instruction to the Theosophical Society,” *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 40, no. 235, p. 96.

185 Mead, “Facts about ‘The Secret Doctrine,’” pp. 319–324.

Worth mentioning here is also a note, found in a scrapbook belonging to the Theosophist twins Harold Edward Hare (1868–1943) and William Loftus Hare (1868–1943), which stated that

I may add here a statement on my own authority that Mr. Mead accepted our view that the [Mahatma] Letters were from the mind & hand of H.P.B. in a private talk with me in Chelsea.¹⁸⁶

In other words, Mead did not grant special status to nor accepted psychic revelations from “the Masters,” making for a very alternative attitude towards this notion. Mead did not think that “the Masters” should be understood as authorities; rather, he held that “the Masters” constituted an ideal, something each person should strive to become similar to.

Congruent with this view that each person ought to become their own “Master,” Mead held that each person must choose their own path. Theosophy, for Mead, is “one Path”, yet it offers many. In a text called the “Personal Equation,” published in 1895, Mead writes that

there are as many paths as there are minds in men, and yet the Path is one. ... The path is the idea, the living essence, the æon out of space and time ... It is *this* Path which is *one for all*; the paths of men are as numerous as themselves. ... in other words, each of us has his own personal equation to solve, and the value of his *x* is the value of no other man’s.¹⁸⁷

The one “Path,” for Mead, is the search for Divine Wisdom: however, each person has their own “path” as each person is looking for their own personal Wisdom.

In 1906, Mead took this notion of an individual path further, stating that each person ought to, through self-knowledge, become divine. Not only does Mead grant special status to human beings (as they can become divine), but he also states, emphatically, that it is an event that takes place on earth, not on a psychic plane:

“Know thou thyself, and thou shalt be King.” Know then, thyself, and thou shalt by that same self-knowledge regain the memory of thy Divine estate. ... It is a question of knowing and understanding, of consciousness and being. It is not a kingdom to inherit in any sense of things material or semi-material ... not a region there in some heaven-world, as set over against a kingdom or stretch of

¹⁸⁶ Joscelyn Godwin, “The Mahatma Letters,” Sand and Rudbøg, p. 132.

¹⁸⁷ George Robert Stow Mead, “The Personal Equation,” *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 30, no. 177, 1902, pp. 255–260.

territory here on earth; it is a question of power and rulership, of knowledge and ability, of power and freedom in all regions, on all planes ... The Kingship, or Masterhood, should be thought of ... as the actual *self-realisation of being* whereby man *knowingly* is the deathless and eternal Æon of æons ... *We are now and always this Æon of æons, this Mystery of all mysteries.*¹⁸⁸

I see this as a continuation of his notion of the individual path for each person: everyone is to find their own path, and through self-knowledge, each person should strive to become divine. This is a very different view of authority compared to the views held by Besant, Olcott, and Leadbeater. The latter viewed “the Masters” as authorities and held that communication with them happened via psychic means. It is clear here that Mead neither expresses a belief in psychism, nor in external authority: to him, each person ought to be their own authority, and that is to take place on this earth, not on a different plane.

Mead held a very individualistic view regarding spirituality: it was personal, up for each individual to choose where to look and what to look for. Yet all individuals were united in this search, even if the search is different for each person. This text is even more comprehensible when considers that it might be in direct response to the more dogmatic stances held by other Theosophists, who viewed the “the Masters” as holders of the keys to Wisdom, and as the ones dictating the way.

3.3.2 *The Source of Inspiration: “Western” Theosophy*

Similarly to how the notion of “the Masters” has been framed as one of the central aspects of the Theosophy, the Theosophical Society’s “turning to the East” is one of the subjects which has been treated the most in scholarly literature on Theosophy.¹⁸⁹ As we will see, Mead was not one of the Theosophists who primarily turned “East” for spiritual inspiration: rather, he urged Theosophists to look to “the West.” He was not alone in doing this, however, so before looking at Mead I will give some brief context to the wider milieu that he was part of.

¹⁸⁸ George Robert Stow Mead, “Heirs of the Ages,” *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 39, no. 230, pp. 128–138. Emphases original.

¹⁸⁹ See, for instance, Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*; Pasi, “Oriental Kabbalah,” Huss, Pasi and von Stuckrad; Karl Baier, “Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer: Annotations on the Appropriation of the *Cakras* in Early Theosophy,” Chajes and Huss, pp. 309–354; Chajes, *Recycled Live*; Sand and Rudbøg, *Imagining the East*.

After the founding in New York in 1875, Blavatsky and Olcott left the U.S. in 1879 and ventured to Bombay, India, where they established the new headquarters.¹⁹⁰ The move to British India, the association with Buddhist groups in Ceylon, and Blavatsky's critiques of the Church gave the impression to many "Western" members that the Theosophical was turning more and more to "the East" for spiritual wisdom. Discourses of a sort of "positive orientalism,"¹⁹¹ views of "the East" as spiritually and/or culturally superior to "the West," was put forth by Blavatsky and Olcott. This is evident by the increasing inclusion of Sanskrit terms and "Indian" concepts in Blavatsky's writing¹⁹² and the many occasions in which Blavatsky and Olcott praised "Hindu" and "Buddhist" ideas and practices.¹⁹³ Spokespersons of the Theosophical Society in India, thus actively constructed a notion of an "Eastern tradition" which differed from that of the West.¹⁹⁴

The decision to move to India and the increasing inclusion of "Hindu" and "Buddhist" ideas into Theosophical discourse did not sit well with all Theosophists at the time. The glorifying view of the East caused a backlash in *fin-de-siècle* Theosophy and occultism, with post-Theosophical movements devoted to "Western" materials and practices being created in response.¹⁹⁵ In Britain, some of these "counter-movements" included the Hermetic Society and The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, both of which were founded the same year (1884).¹⁹⁶ Similar schisms appeared in France during this time and led to the creation of groups such as the Ordre kabbalistique de la Rose-Croix, founded in 1888, who took a clear "anti-Oriental" stance, focusing instead on Catholic practice. Julian Strube, who has studied these movements, argues that these engagements led to the active construction of an *ésotérisme occidental*, a "Western esotericism," which is why he argued that Western esotericism ought to be studied as an emic rather than an etic concept, as it usually is today.¹⁹⁷

190 Godwin, "Theosophical Society," p. 116.

191 For more on positive orientalism, or "enthusiasm for oriental religions" within occult discourse, see Joscelyn Godwin, "Orientalism," Hanegraaff et al., pp. 906–909.

192 Godwin, "Blavatsky," Hammer and Rothstein, p. 22.

193 Ibid.

194 Godwin, "Theosophical Society," p. 117.

195 Godwin speaks of a "Parting of East and West," a schism within the movement which spurred a "Hermetic reaction" or a turning to "Western" materials. Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, chapters sixteen and seventeen; cf. Godwin, "Theosophical Society," pp. 117–20.

196 Godwin, *Theosophical Enlightenment*, p. 333.

197 Julian Strube, "Occultist Identity Formations Between Theosophy and Socialism in *fin-de-siècle* France," *Numen*, vol. 64/5, no. 6, 2017, p. 576. Cf. Kennet Granholm, "Locating the West: Problematizing the Western in Western

Following Strube, I argue that Mead, from within the Theosophical Society, helped construct the notion of a “Western esotericism.” Thus, while Goodrick-Clarke and Goodrick-Clarke have argued that Mead “holds a crucial position in the modern transmission of the Western esoteric tradition,”¹⁹⁸ I argue, rather, than he played a pivotal role in *constructing* rather than transmitting the notion of a Western esoteric tradition. What I mean by constructing is that, through his work, he helped create the idea that such a tradition exists; he grouped together and framed certain sources in such a way that made them appear to have something in common. While he was perhaps not the first person to do this, he played an active role in making this category become popularized and gives us a clue as to how this category might have appeared in the “Western” imagination.

While Mead did not speak explicitly against “the East” (he wrote many articles and books devoted to subjects that dealt with “Eastern” philosophy and ideas¹⁹⁹), he did, through his scholarship, help construct the notion of a forgotten Western esoteric tradition. In addition to publishing an extensive number of articles and books devoted to what he considered to be “Western” sources, he also, importantly, sketched out a “Western field” for “theosophical scholars in the West.”²⁰⁰

In an early article (1891), first presented as a paper to the very first Convention of the European Section of the Theosophical Society, where Mead was the General Secretary,²⁰¹ he stated:

My intention is to lay before this Convention ... the sketch of a Western field for the theosophical industry which is practically inexhaustible for any generations. I refer to the fragments of religion, philosophy, and mythology which have come down to us from the initiated ancients, and which, when not entirely suppressed, have been most infamously misinterpreted. I conceive this is [*sic*] one of the most important tasks before our Society in the West.²⁰²

Mead then goes on to list “some of the main sources of our information with regard to the arcana of

Esotericism and Occultism,” *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, edited by Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic, Durham: Acumen, 2013, pp. 17–36.

198 Goodrick-Clarke and Goodrick-Clarke, *G.R.S. Mead*, p. 1.

199 E.g. a preface for *The Dream of Ravan*, 1896; an English translation of *The Upanishads*, 1896; and articles such as “Notes on Nirvâna,” 1893, and “The Fundamental Teachings of Buddhism,” 1894.

200 George Robert Stow Mead, “The Task of Theosophical Scholars in the West,” *Lucifer*, vol. 8, no. 48, 1891, p. 477.

201 No author, “Theosophical Activities,” *Lucifer*, vol. 8, no. 48, p. 516.

202 Mead, “The Task,” p. 477.

initiation, the old secret of antiquity and the great mystery of today”: Greek plays, hymns, epics, and philosophy; “Gnostic,” “Neoplatonic,” and “Hermetic” sources; “Kabbalah;” “apocryphal” and “heretical sources;” Old Norse “communings of our Scandinavian ancestors;” and European “folk lore” and “fairytales.”²⁰³ What followed this urging was his life-work: some seventeen books and hundreds of articles devoted to precisely the kinds of sources he lists in the article, with a preference for “Gnostic,” “Hermetic” and broadly Hellenistic sources.²⁰⁴

It is worth noting here that these sources largely mirror those mentioned in the pioneering scholarly work on Western esotericism by Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, published in 1994.²⁰⁵ While Faivre probably did not get this impression immediately from Mead, I do want to highlight that, prior to the etic framing of Western esotericism in the 1990s, there existed the notion of a “Western” esoteric tradition that existed in the emic imagination of occultists like Mead. In other words, before Western esotericism became an etic, conceptual category that scholars use to discuss certain sources, it was already in use in emic ways, as a *de facto* category. While scholars of Western esotericism today tend to view these sources as being connected either structurally (in an ideal-typical way)²⁰⁶ or because they have been grouped together by the hands of polemicists,²⁰⁷ Mead saw in these sources as pieces of the puzzle of a universal unbroken esoteric tradition. If one took to studying and synthesizing²⁰⁸ these sources, the puzzle pieces could be put together, and out would emerge a rebirth of a forgotten Wisdom tradition.

In other words, regardless of whether such a tradition can be conceived to have existed or not, Mead actively *constructed* the notion of a Western esoteric tradition by sketching out this field and framing these sources as belonging together in this way. While Mead did not mention the East as a counter-category in this manifesto-like article,²⁰⁹ his active urging that scholars ought to “turn West” can be

203 Ibid., pp. 477–78.

204 For an incomplete but still useful overview of Mead’s bibliography, consult Goodrick-Clarke and Goodrick-Clarke, *G.R.S Mead*, pp. 203–19.

205 Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, p. 11.

206 This is the view of Faivre, put forth in *Access to Western Esotericism*.

207 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

208 Mead mentions precisely synthesis as the main work of those studying these sources.

209 I borrow this notion of the text being like a manifesto from Goodrick-Clarke and Goodrick-Clarke, *G.R.S. Mead*, p. 56.

compared to the work of the anti-Oriental “counter-movements” that appeared in Britain and France, who also aided in constructing this notion.

3.3.3 *Theoretical and Practical Occultism*

With its roots in Spiritualism, occult training was part and parcel of the early Theosophical Society. Moreover, through Besant and Leadbeater’s psychic collaborations, where they claimed to be in contact with “the Masters” through psychic means, occult practice was once more introduced into the society, particularly in the early 1900s throughout the 1920s. Mead, however, was a Theosophist that did not advocate occult practice. Rather, he dedicated his Theosophical career to the second objective of the Theosophical Society, namely the comparative study and synthesis of religion, philosophy, and science.²¹⁰

In an article named “Occultism and Theosophy,” published in 1891, Mead wrote critically against occult practice, stating that

Theosophy, in its ideal sense of Divine Wisdom, is identical with real Occultism as distinguished from the Occult Arts ... Under the heading of Magic and the Occult Arts fall such arts and sciences as hypnotism, mesmerism, ceremonial magic, astrology, physical alchemy, the use of spells and enchantments, necromancy, chartomancy, cheiromancy, geomancy, and a thousand and one other mantic arts, physical and astral clairvoyance and clairaudience, psychometry and an almost endless list ... But none such are Occultists; they may be magicians and practitioners of the Occult Arts, but none are fit to untie the shoe-latchet of the Occultist, whose heart throbs in response to the pulsation of the Ocean of Compassion and whose mind vibrates in unison with the great harmony of the Intelligent Universe. How many are those who think they are student of Occultism simply because they can cast a horoscope and see a picture in the Astral Light, or psychometrise the contents of a letter ... Occultism is not Theosophy in the ordinary sense of the term, much less is it Occult Arts, for an earnest Theosophist is nearer the path of Occultism than the dabbler in “les sciences maudites.”²¹¹

We see here Mead’s position regarding the meaning of Theosophy: it meant, “in its ideal sense ... Divine Wisdom.” Furthermore, he here also equals “real Occultism” with precisely Divine Wisdom: the two are the same. Practical occultism, on the other hand, is not equaled with Theosophy: it is

²¹⁰ Mead even gave a lecture on the importance of the second objective of the society: see A. J. Hailey, “Theosophical Activities,” *Lucifer*, vol. 11, no. 61, 1892, p. 79.

²¹¹ George Robert Stow Mead, “Occultism and Theosophy,” *Lucifer*, vol. 9, no. 5, 1891, pp. 106–112.

something else, and, as it seems, it is also of a lower order: practicing occultism does not necessarily make someone a true Theosophist. Theosophy, again, meant one thing for Mead: Divine Wisdom. As we can see, this is very similar to how Orage thought of Theosophy and occultism; Mead was not the only Theosophist who held this view of Theosophy and of occultism.

In an editorial for *Lucifer*, published in 1896, he again condemned occult practice, stating that

The purification of humanity is a slow and painful process, but it can be accomplished, it will be accomplished. But this purification will never be brought about by mistaken members of the Theosophical Society popularizing treatises on sorcery and Tantrika literature, and dabbling in all those black arts and strange insanities that the real theosophists of all ages have unanimously condemned.²¹²

While it is unclear which practices Mead is referring to here, one can assume that he is once more speaking of practical occultism, which he here equals with “black arts.” It is clear that Mead had a pretty conservative view of occultism, one in which the more practical elements of occultism ought to be separated from the theoretical. This also goes on to show, once more, how many different Theosophists there were: had there not been practically oriented Theosophists, dabbling in “Tantrika literature” and “black arts,” Mead would not have felt the need to write such a thing in this editorial.

The idea that occultism is better understood in a theoretical manner, as Divine Wisdom, is a far cry from the early (1875) writings of Blavatsky, where she stated that

Occultism without practice will ever be like the statue of Pygmalion, and no one can animate it without infusing into it a spark of the sacred Divine Fire.²¹³

In other words, Mead held a view very different from the early Blavatsky. In 1926, when Mead was reminiscing about Blavatsky and his time in the society, he stated that

much that [Blavatsky] wrote I know to be very inaccurate, to say the least of it; while her whole outlook on life was that of an ‘occultist’—a view I now hold most firmly to be fundamentally false.²¹⁴

²¹² George Robert Stow Mead, “On the Watch-Tower,” *Lucifer*, vol. 17, no. 101, 1896, p. 360.

²¹³ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, “A Few Questions to Hiram,” *Spiritual Scientist*, vol. 2, no. 22, 1875, p. 236.

²¹⁴ “The Quest”—*Old & New*, np.

It is difficult to know what the young Mead thought of occultism when he was still Blavatsky's secretary—he might very well have agreed with her then—but it is notable that he, already a few months after she died, took such a strong stance against practical occultism.²¹⁵

In a later article (1911) called “The Rising Psychic Tide”, published after Mead had left the Theosophical Society, Mead expressed a similar idea. He contended that while psychical activity—separated from spiritualism, which he uses in “an ethico-religious sense”²¹⁶—was on the rise, it was not necessarily helping the spiritual development of human beings:

It seems almost as though the exaggerated denial of materialism, scepticism and rationalism had to be startled with as [*sic*] exaggerated assertion from the other side.²¹⁷

He continues to state that while psychical activity—which he defines as “a stepping-stone”²¹⁸ to the spiritual—is useful, the true purpose for people is to develop “Gnosis” (Divine Wisdom), which is “faith transformed to knowledge of a spiritual order.”²¹⁹ In other words, this later view is congruent with Mead's stance that it is “Gnosis,” a concept which I will return to, is his aim and goal—not occult practice.

It is clear, in other words, that Mead held very different ideas of some common Theosophical concepts than did other leading Theosophists. To summarize: Mead neither gave authority to, nor expressed a belief in, the notion of “the Masters,” but taught that one ought to become a Master oneself. Furthermore, he did not turn to “the East” for spiritual inspiration, but turned instead primarily to “the West,” helping construct the notion that there existed a forgotten “Western esoteric Tradition.” Lastly, he did not teach practical occultism, preferring instead theoretical occultism (which he equals to Theosophy, or Divine Wisdom).

²¹⁵ It is worth noting, however, that Mead ostensibly contacted and was convinced that he was in contact with his wife's spirit after her death in 1924. Godwin, “Mead,” p. 785; cf. Eileen J. Garrett (Mead's medium), *Awareness*, Creative Press, 1943. Regardless, this does not refute the fact that Mead publicly refuted occultism.

²¹⁶ George Robert Stow Mead, “The Rising Psychic Tide,” *The Quest: A Quarterly Review*, vol. 3, 1911–1912, p. 402.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 404.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 402.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

Now that we have considered what the inclusion of Mead in Theosophical history tells us (namely, that Theosophy appears to have been a lot more pluralistic in nature), I will turn to the next area of this thesis: Mead's post-Theosophical Society, the Quest. As we will see, it is likely *due to* the many conflicts that Mead had with important Theosophical ideas that Mead even founded this new society. Moreover, Mead does not appear to have changed his idea of what he was looking for: he merely changed names for it. The quest had begun even prior to the founding of the Quest Society: it was Divine Wisdom that Mead had appears to have been looking for all along.

Four: POST-THEOSOPHY

4.1 *What is Post-Theosophy?*

While the Theosophical Society was widely successful in gaining new members, the society saw many tensions over the years. This led to a variety of break-away groups, including Mead's Quest Society (1909–1930). However, Mead was not alone in leaving the Theosophical Society to create his own organization. Scholars today speak of a general “post-Theosophy,”²²⁰ movements and individuals that either emerged from the Theosophical context to form their own groups or that in some way clearly responded to Theosophical ideas. The teachings of these groups are treated as in some way distinct from Theosophy, since they are not directly tied to the Theosophical Society.

Some examples of post-Theosophical movements include Kingsford and Maitland's Hermetic Society (formed in 1884), Rudolf Steiner's (1861–1925) Anthroposophical Society (founded in 1913),²²¹ Alice Bailey's (1880–1949) Arcane School (formed in 1923), The I AM Activity (founded in 1930), The Church Universal and Triumphant (originally known as the Summit Lighthouse, founded in 1958), the Agni Yoga movement (also known as Living Ethics, founded in the 1930s), to mention a few.²²²

²²⁰ For a discussion of this, see Asprey, “Vorwort,” Clement. For a general survey of post-Theosophy, see Hammer and Rothstein, *Handbook*.

²²¹ For an overview to Steiner's Anthroposophical Society, see Cees Leijenhorst, “Anthroposophy,” Hanegraaff et al, pp. 88–89; idem, “Steiner, Rudolf,” Hanegraaff et al, p. 1090–91; see also Katharina Brandt and Olav Hammer, “Rudolf Steiner and Theosophy,” Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 113–133.

²²² Regarding the Hermetic Society, see Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, “Hermeticism and Hermetic Societies,” Hanegraaff et al., pp. 550–558; for more on Bailey, see James A. Santucci, “Bailey, Alice Ann,” Hanegraaff et al., pp. 158–60; Sean O'Callaghan, “The Theosophical Christology of Alice Bailey,” Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 93–112. For introductions to “I

Worth mentioning here is also Leadbeater and Besant's *protégé* Jiddu Krishnamurti,²²³ who emerged in the 1920s as an independent spiritual thinker, as well as staunchly anti-Theosophical perennialist-traditionalist author René Guénon (1886–1951).²²⁴ Included in this category is also the various “New Age” movements that have developed during the course of the nineteenth century.²²⁵

While the Quest Society has not been mentioned—to my knowledge—in any academic writing on post-Theosophy, it definitely ought to be included in this category, seeing as it is a movement that emerged directly out of the Theosophical Society. Additionally, it was clearly responding to Theosophy, being almost a bit of a counter-movement, or at least an alternative option to the Theosophical Society. Furthermore, the Quest Society had similar objectives to the Theosophical Society, and its journal, *The Quest: A Quarterly Review*, was very similar in form to *The Theosophical Review*.

An inclusion of Mead's Quest Society into the conceptual category post-Theosophy also complicates this narrative a little. If post-Theosophy is generally thought of as movements emerged out of a Theosophical context and formulated new ideas on spirituality, Mead's society does not fit neatly into this category. The reason for this is that Mead does not appear to have changed his ideas on spirituality; rather, it seems that he merely changed terminology. I see clear continuities between his Theosophical and Quest periods, with the notion of Divine Wisdom (first Theosophy, then Gnosis) spanning over the course of both periods. He has even stated himself that he never changed his view regarding his spirituality: his quest had been the same all along.

AM Activity,” see Jean-François Mayer, “I AM’ Activity,” Hanegraaff et al., pp. 587–88; Tim Rudbøg, “The I AM Activity,” Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 151–172. For more on “Summit Light House,” see Philipp Charles Lucas, “Summit Lighthouse (Church Universal and Triumphant),” Hanegraaff et al., pp. 1093–96; Michael Abranavel, “The Summit Lighthouse: Its Worldview and Theosophical Heritage,” Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 173–91; for Agni Yoga or Living Ethics, see Anita Stasulane, “The Theosophy of the Roerichs: Agni Yoga or Living Ethics,” Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 193–215.

²²³ One of Krishnamurti's publications include *The First and Last Freedom*, London: Gollancz, 1954. For more on Krishnamurti's thought, see, for instance, Avinash De Sousa, “Mind and Consciousness per J. Krishnamurti,” *Mens Sana Monographs*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2012, pp. 198–207.

²²⁴ For an introduction to Guénon, see William Quinn, “Guénon, René Jean Marie Joseph,” Hanegraaff et al., pp. 442–45.

²²⁵ See Hammer, “Theosophical Elements in New Age Religion,” Hammer and Rothstein, pp. 237–260.

If we think of Theosophy as a hegemonic²²⁶ battleground, where different voices competed over the meaning of Theosophy, Mead appears to have lost this battle. His idea of Theosophy did not correspond with the other leaders' view of it, which is perhaps why he eventually stopped identifying as a Theosophist. He chose, instead, to capitalize on and mobilize the concept of "Gnosis," a concept that he had already begun using for his spirituality while he was a Theosophist, and a concept which was less tied to the Theosophical Society. The fact that Mead gravitated towards "Gnostic" sources has led Clare Goodrick-Clarke to argue that Mead was perhaps always more of a "Gnostic" than a "Theosophist."²²⁷ As stated earlier, I disagree with this notion. Academics should not, in my view, get to decide who qualifies as a Theosophist (especially not when this particular individual himself publicly identified as one). Moreover, I believe that this normative trap might be the result of the narrow view of Theosophy that has dominated Academia to this day. If we, instead, view Theosophy as more pluralistic and open in nature, as a movement where different Theosophists thought of Theosophy in varying ways, we can perhaps better understand why Mead ended up choosing this concept over Theosophy. He *was* a Theosophist, but his idea of Theosophy did not win out, so he *became* a post-Theosophist with a preference for the concept of "Gnosis."

I will return to this concept of "Gnosis" further and analyze how Mead has used it over the course of both his Theosophical and Quest periods. But first, I will give some brief history of Mead's Quest Society.

4.2 *The Quest Society (1909–1930)*

Upon leaving the Theosophical Society in 1909, Mead brought with him a sizable amount of "devoted adherents," as Besant called them, ex-members of the British Section of the Theosophical Society, to his newly formed Quest Society.²²⁸ By the time he founded the Quest, he was "utterly disgusted with the Theosophical Society, its innumerable dogmatic assertions, its crooked methods and reprehensible proceedings."²²⁹ What he was clearly referring to here is the turn that the Theosophical

226 I am using the concept of hegemony here along Gramscian lines, i.e. to encapsulate how the Elite manipulates cultural ideas so that they appear to be the *status quo* even though there are alternative conceptions of the idea in question.

227 Clare Goodrick-Clarke, "Mead's Gnosis," p. 138.

228 Annie Besant, "Theosophical Worthies: George Robert Stowe Mead," pp. 505–6.

229 Mead, *The Quest'—Old & New*, np. All the following biographical data, including citations, are based on this account.

Society took under the leadership of Besant and Leadbeater, who, as we have discussed, turned the society into one dedicated above all to psychic investigations, dogmatic messages channeled from “the Masters.” I also think that he was referring to the fact that Besant reinstated Leadbeater despite his admittance of the sexual misconduct charges, which was Mead’s immediate, public reason for leaving the society.

To Mead, Theosophy had not meant a belief in “the Mahatmas” or occult practice, but rather in the “wisdom-element in the great religions and philosophies of the world,” in other words: in Divine Wisdom, which he first equaled with Theosophy and later with “Gnosis” and the Quest.

His aim with the Quest was to create “a clean society, an association that should be genuinely undogmatic, unpretentious, claiming no pseudo-revelations, and truly honest inside and out” with “‘esotericism’ and ‘occultism’” left out of the equation. This nicely sums up what Mead wanted the Quest Society to be, and what he found that the Theosophical Society no longer was for him. It is clear, in other words, that Mead did not leave the Theosophical Society because he changed his spiritual outlook, but because the society became increasingly associated with ideas, “neo-theosophy,” which Mead did not think were appropriate or suitable for the Theosophical Society.

The early Quest Society had around 700 members, a hundred of which were ex-members of the Theosophical Society.²³⁰ Founded in March 1909,²³¹ Mead was the Society’s first president (from its inception until 1920) as well as the editor of the society’s journal, *The Quest: A Quarterly Review* (1909–1930). Vice-president was occultist Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942), and later president was physicist and psychical researcher Sir William Fletcher Barrett (1844–1925). In addition to the ex-Theosophists, the Society’s membership included a broad range of renowned academics, intellectuals, authors, and artists, including author Gustav Meyrink (1868–1932), poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), composer Gustav Holst (1874–1913), Tantric scholar Sir John Woodroffe (1865–1936), Reverend Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson (1871–1914), existentialist philosopher Martin Buber (1874–1965), philosopher Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), Islamicist scholar Reynold

²³⁰ According to Mead’s 1926 retrospective *The Quest’—Old & New*. I have not been able to locate the year for this membership account.

²³¹ Godwin, “Mead,” Hanegraaff et al., pp. 785.

A. Nicholson (1868–1945) and philosopher and Traditionalist Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1947).²³²

The Quest Society had two objectives:

1. To promote investigation and comparative study of religion, philosophy, and science at the basis of experience.
2. To encourage the expression of the ideal in beautiful forms.²³³

The first objective clearly mirrors the Theosophical Society's second objective—Mead's favored objective while a Theosophist—the encouragement of the synthesis of religion, philosophy, and science. The second objective seems to mirror aestheticism's ideal of "art for art's sake" as well as the platonic ideal regarding the beauty of forms. This could potentially account for the large number of artists that became members of the Quest Society and contributors to *The Quest: A Quarterly Review*.

Contributors to *The Quest: A Quarterly Review* include a number of individuals of great repute, including scholar of comparative religion Robert Eisler (1882–1949), founder of modern study of Kabbalah Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), Christian mystic Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941), and poet and critic Ezra Pound (1885–1972). Mead published some 70 of the review's articles, largely keeping to the same kind of subjects that he had covered during his time in the *Theosophical Review*, such as discussions of early Christianity and Gnosticism, Hermeticism, mysticism, and mythology.

The Quest Society's primary activities were the publishing of *The Quest* as well as about half a dozen lectures that were delivered at the Kensington Town Hall in London. Between 1909 and 1916, the Quest lacked premises and met at Mead's home in London, with Mead's wife Laura acting as the society's secretary. The war years did little to help the organization's finances, with the society coming out of the first world war "a veritable hospital case."²³⁴ In 1919, the society decided to invest in two studios, for a lecture room and library respectively. The society was active until 1930, it was affected by the economic crisis of the Great Depression. While the society was significantly

²³² Ibid.

²³³ George Robert Stow Mead, "On the Nature of the Quest," *The Quest: A Quarterly Review*, vol. 1, 1910, p. 30.

²³⁴ Mead, *The Quest'—Old & New*, np.

economically depressed, its membership and contributors highlight the importance of this collective.

While Besant and other Theosophists at the time recognized Mead's new society as a new Theosophical society,²³⁵ Mead in fact stopped using the term "Theosophy" altogether when he formed The Quest. However, he continued to use a term which he had already introduced to his readership during his time in the Theosophical Society: "Gnosis." This concept corresponds to the notion of a Divine Wisdom that Mead believed that each religion has at its core.

Now that I have given some context to the Quest Society, I will turn to what I conceive of as more or less a fundamental in Mead's thought, namely the concept of "Gnosis." As we will see, this is a term which Mead initially equaled to Theosophy, and later came to view as the goal of the Quest Society.

4.3 *Gnosis: From Theosophy to the Quest*

One of the recurring concepts found in Mead's writing is the notion of "Gnosis."²³⁶ This is a term that Mead began using already in the Theosophical Society, and which he continued using throughout his Quest era. In the following section, I will give an overview of how Mead came to conceive of this concept, from the Theosophical time and during his time as leader of the Quest Society.

Originally a Greek concept and later associated, superficially, with the "Gnostics" of the early centuries AD, Mead came to view "Gnosis" in a more universal light, first as a synonym to Theosophy (Divine Wisdom), and later as the goal of the Quest Society (also Divine Wisdom). While he was not the first Theosophist to use the term,²³⁷ Mead later became the primary theoretician of "Gnosis" in

235 H. W., "Theosophy in Many Lands," *The Theosophist*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1909, p. 423.

236 For an overview of the term and concept of "Gnosis" within Western esotericism, see Antoine Faivre, "Gnosis' as a Term and Concept in the Esoteric Movements of the Modern West: An Attempt at Periodization," translated by Korshi Dosoo, *The Gnostic World*, edited by Garry Trompf et al., London: Routledge, 2018.

237 Nor was he the first person in history, of course. Gnosis as a concept has a long history in the History of Religions, specifically in early Christian contexts. But since this thesis is focused not on general history of religions, I will not be covering the history of the term prior to its use in Theosophy. In a Theosophical context, it is used, for instance, in the correspondence piece "Are the Teachings Ascribed to Jesus Contradictory?" by Gerald Massey in *Lucifer* vol. 1, no. 2, 1887, p. 137, where Massey refers to "the Gnosis" as a possession. An article by S.G. from the following year in the same journal, vol. 3, no. 16, on the Holy Grail speaks of a "divine Gnosis" as a "knowledge of our Being."

the Theosophical Society, dedicating many articles and books to the subject. Mead might have learned about the term from Blavatsky, who uses it in *The Secret Doctrine* as “hidden knowledge” as well as “but an echo of our archaic doctrine.”²³⁸ While he initially reserved “Gnosis,” as was custom at the time, to historical “Gnosticism,”²³⁹ he later came to associate it with Theosophy (not the Theosophical Society, but with a perennial, ahistorical Divine Wisdom underlying all religion and philosophy) and to view it as separate from “Gnosticism” and instead as a general conception in the History of Religions.

When he broke with the Theosophical Society in 1909, he continued to use the term “Gnosis” similarly to how he used it during his Theosophical years. This seems to indicate that he considered this concept to be independent of Theosophy, or at least independent of the Theosophical Society; moreover, it seems to be something of a constant in Mead’s thought.

Mead’s first use of the term in writing appeared to have been in his 1890 translation and commentary on the Gnostic text *Pistis-Sophia*, which had commentary by Blavatsky. As was the custom at the time, Mead reserved the term “Gnosis” for the ancient Gnostics, referring to “Gnosis” as a religious system. As Dylan Burns has highlighted, the early Mead actually saw “Gnosis” or “Gnosticism” as a precursor to Theosophy,²⁴⁰ stating that “true Gnosis is Theosophy.”²⁴¹

In 1891, Mead does something interesting: he separates Gnosis from “the Gnostics,” stating that “Gnosis” should be better understood more broadly as “Wisdom,”²⁴² independent of all religions, with “Gnosticism” being but “one of the exoteric expositions of the Gnosis.”²⁴³ This is line with Mead’s idea of Theosophy: it is the truth underlying all religions. What Mead does here, in other words, is to posit

238 Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, pp. 278, 449.

239 For arguments against the historical notion of an organized “Gnosticism”, see, for instance, Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism:” An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, and Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

240 For an overview of Mead’s contribution to modern conceptions of “Gnosticism,” see Burns, “Weren’t the Gnostics,” Hanegraaff et al., as well as Franz Winter, “Studying the “Gnostic Bible”: Samael Aun Weor and the Pistis Sophia,” *International Journal for the Study of New Religions*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2018, pp. 83–112; there is also a mention of Mead in Garry W. Trompf, “The Gnostic World: A History of Scholarship (until 2000),” *The Gnostic World*, edited by Garry Trompf et al., London: Routledge, 2018, pp. 26–42.

241 Mead, “The Task,” p. 478.

242 George Robert Stow Mead, “Theosophy and Occultism,” *Lucifer*, vol. 9, no. 50, p. 107.

243 George Robert Stow Mead, “Reply J. W. Brodie’s ‘The True Church of Christ,’” *Lucifer*, vol. 9, no. 50, 1891, p. 336.

“Gnosis” as a general concept in the History of Religions, independent not only of “the Gnostics,” but also independent of the Theosophical Society. In other words, we can already see here that Mead is claiming the concept for himself and his spirituality, which is not attached to the Theosophical Society (even if Mead was still a member and a leader there), but more broadly to his idea of Divine Wisdom, which during this time was equaled with Theosophy, but later came to be disassociated with Theosophy as he stopped identifying as a Theosophist. In other words, Mead carves out for himself a concept that corresponds to his idea of Divine Wisdom that was not tied to any specific organization.

The sentiment that “Gnosis” is a general concept is mirrored some twenty years later (1912–1913) in his writing in *The Quest*, where he separates “Christianised gnosis” with the more general “Gnosticism,” a form of religiosity he sees in various forms of Hellenistic religions. Here, he acknowledges that the sects and systems “differ widely,”²⁴⁴ but that the “the general conception of the gnosis remains the same,” with “Gnosis [being] ... a far more widely spread religious phenomenon and should be treated as a characteristic element of the general history of religion.”²⁴⁵ In other words, Mead here treats “Gnosis” as an independent *and* universal religious phenomenon, similarly to how he saw it already in the Theosophical Society.²⁴⁶

What did “Gnosis” mean for Mead? Overall, it, like Theosophy, appears to have meant “Divine Wisdom.” However, this “Divine Wisdom” later came to include a number of other ideas. More specifically, Mead’s “Divine Wisdom” seemed to have been concerned with what he calls “the Self” as well as with “the Mind.” As Mead states in the “Gnosis of the Mind” in 1906: “The Gnosis began, continued and ended in the knowledge of One’s Self, the All Self.”²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ He even states that “What has previously been called gnosticism is thus seen to be a department only, though an important department, of the history of the gnosis, and should be preferably referred to as the Christianised gnosis, if not the Christian gnosis.”

²⁴⁵ George Robert Stow Mead, “The Meaning of Gnosis in Higher Hellenistic Religion,” *The Quest: A Quarterly Review*, vol. 4, 1912-1913, pp. 676–678. Mead writes that it was “widely diffused prior to the rise of Christianity, mainly among the Hellenistic mystery-cults and mystic communities, or those forms of personal religion in which Oriental and Greek elements were blended. See “The Meaning of Gnosis in Higher Hellenistic Religion.”

²⁴⁶ Cf. René Guénon (1886–1951) who also spoke of gnosis as a general department of religion, not limited to “Gnosticism.” Guénon for instance published the magazine *La Gnose* (“The Gnosis”) between 1909 and 1912. The potential influence of Guénon on Mead or vice versa has not yet, to my knowledge, been explored in scholarship, except for a suggestion made by Faivre in “Gnosis,” p. 414.

²⁴⁷ George Robert Stow Mead, “The Gnosis of the Mind,” *The Theosophical Review*, vol. 38, no. 228, 1906, p. 502.

Moreover, Mead saw this knowledge of “the Self” in a particular way: it was a form of knowledge that transcends the rational and the emotional: “it is not a cult of intellect alone; it is not a cult of emotion alone.”²⁴⁸ Instead, it is a combination of both the intellectual and the emotional that leads to “Gnosis,” or Divine Wisdom.²⁴⁹

Scattered throughout Mead’s writings are different descriptions of how this “Divine Wisdom” is gained and what it leads to for the one who acquires it. The following text (published during his Quest-era) is perhaps the richest in meanings ascribed to this process:

Salvation by gnosis is the making whole, a spiritual completion or fulfilment of the nature of apotheōsis or theiōis, that is of transfiguration from the life of separation into the self-sufficient divine life ... gnosis was operated by means of essential transformation or transmutation leading to transfiguration. There was first of all a ‘passing through oneself,’ a mystical death, and finally a rebirth into the nature of a spiritual being or god ... All this was connected with the doctrine of the spiritual union or ‘sacred marriage,’ ... The new consciousness was conceived as the result of the impregnation of the inner self ... by the rays, emanations, effluxes of influences of the divine splendour ... spoken of as a ‘path,’ a gradual ‘ascent’ ... this path is not a psychic ‘heaven-journey’; it is rather a spiritual immediate way that opens out in every walk of life. There is no need to ‘leave the world’ to find it ... Gnosis, moreover, bestows freedom, sovereignty, kingship.²⁵⁰

In other words, Mead saw in “Gnosis” the potential for human beings on earth to become (spiritually) whole through the integration of dualisms. This, in turn, would lead through a transformation, a mystical death, through which one is reborn into a god. As divine, one would gain a new consciousness, a process that is gradual and happens during life on earth. Through this new consciousness, the individual acquires freedom. While Mead seems to have conceived of “Gnosis” as a general concept, he also appears to have had a rather specific idea of what it included. It meant that human beings could become spiritually whole (itself a very specific idea, since it meant that one had to integrate dualisms within one’s being), that human beings could transform through a mystical death and become reborn into a god, and that this new god-state meant that one would gradually achieve a new form of consciousness, which, in turn, would people to gain freedom on

²⁴⁸ George Robert Stow Mead, *The Gnosis of the Mind*, London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1906, p. 14.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Mead, “The Meaning,” pp. 676–97.

earth.²⁵¹ It is noteworthy here that while Mead is speaking of the state of becoming god, he places this occasion on earth: as he states, it is “not a psychic heaven-journey,” but something that “opens out in every walk on life.” If we recall for a second Mead’s view, during his Theosophical period, that occultism ought not to include practice, it appears that he is still holding this view here: man becomes a god on this earth, not on a different plane. It is not something that happens psychically, but it is a gradual becoming, one that has to do with consciousness rather than with “other worlds.” Moreover, it grants special status to human beings: they can themselves transform and become divine; this is not a status reserved for special groups such as “the Mahatmas.”

This way of describing “Gnosis” is also very similar to how Mead describes the purposes of the Quest Society. In a paper named “On the Nature of the Quest,” presented at the inaugural meeting for the Quest Society, Mead expounded upon the society’s two objectives (the comparative study of religion, science and philosophy, and the encouragement of the expression of beauty) and presented what he conceived to be the goal of the society. He stated that while many different suggestions had been made as for the name of the society, the attendees of the meeting had landed on “the Quest” as it seemed to “call up before the mind a further sense ... a different ‘feel’ from plain and simple research.”²⁵² The Quest, for Mead, “could be made to include both all that is best in research and all that is desirable in mysticism, and a host of other things as well”: while research “must be scientific,” and must always be open for re-negotiation by future scientists, the Quest connotes “finality”: “when

²⁵¹ Those who have studied the writings of Carl Gustav Jung might find see similarities to his concept of “individuation,” the notion that people can achieve a sense of fullness within their personality as they integrate dualisms into their being. In fact, as I stated in the introduction, Mead was likely a big influence on Jung. The latter owned some 18 of Mead’s books (see Noll, *The Jung Cult*, pp. 69, 182, 184, 327) and, again as I have stated prior, the two were acquaintances. Not only did Jung study these books, but he has also cited Mead numerous times in his writing. He even employs the term “Gnosis” (which might not, it should be stated, derive directly from Mead’s usage of the term) as a synonym to “psychological knowledge whose contents derive from the unconscious” (Jung, *Collected Works*, p. 223). Moreover, both Mead and Jung had ties to the spiritual-academic intellectual forum Eranos, which was founded by Dutch Olga Fröbe (*née* Kapteyn, 1881-1962), and later spearheaded by Jung. Fröbe invited the two of them to the first Eranos meeting, but both declined the offer (this and the following historical data is derived from Hakl’s book *Eranos*). Like Jung, Fröbe was an avid reader of Mead’s, taking particular interest in his writings on Gnosticism. It is curious that she has likened Jung’s concept of “the Self” with the notion of “the Quest.” I am not sure whether she is referring to Mead’s Quest here, or something else, but seeing as she was definitely familiar with Mead (and, presumably, with the Quest Society), it is not impossible that she made connections between the two men’s concepts.

²⁵² George Robert Stow Mead, “On the Nature of the Quest,” *The Quest: A Quarterly Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 32.

it is found it is the beginning and end of all things for man.”²⁵³ Furthermore, “it pertains to the depths and not the surfaces of things, to life and not to death, to the eternal and not the temporal.”²⁵⁴

More specifically, he goes on the state that the Quest

is the search or call of the soul for That alone which can completely satisfy the whole man, and make him self-initiative and self-creative. The call of the soul for its complement, its fulfilment, for that all that which it seems not to be ... It is this: salvation, satisfaction, certitude, completeness, perfection, wholeness; relief and rest from our present state of strain and tension, freedom from the separateness of bondage, by reconciliation of all opposites in the all-embracing immediacy of self-realisation.²⁵⁵

Furthermore, he states that

while research—investigation and comparative study—is one of our chief interests, the purpose of our Society, I would believe, embraces something far deeper, far more subtle, something more spiritual in the highest and profoundest meaning of the word—a more living, more vital, more immediate quest ... Man must seek in order to find; and then at each finding he should call, call to the Beloved to awake. He should refuse to be satisfied with knowledge; he should go still further, and call to the Soul of Nature to array herself in her living robes of glory. For not until then will the true lover be satisfied, not until then will the soul have found its true source and power—That from which its comes and has departed, and which alone can perfect it, reform it into wholeness, and so give it the peace which passeth all understanding, that true initiation, or consummation of the spiritual marriage, the *unio mystica*, or union of the within and the without, which illumines the mind, expands and intensifies consciousness, and partakes of the nature of the deepest and most vital experience of self-realisation. This is the Divine bequest that has been willed to us ... For until that power has been aroused unto creativeness, wisdom is not truly ours. We may have knowledge of many different things, we may be learned in many sciences, but true wisdom, I hold, is other; it carries with it, as it were, an innate, immediate and spontaneous response to things without, as they appear to be ‘without’ to normal consciousness. True wisdom is an ever-present initiator; it is not a fixed knowledge of any of many different appearances. Wisdom is a subtle, spiritual, instant power to understand the soul of things, and also to apply this understanding ever to immediate opportunity.

While he does not mention “Gnosis” directly, it seems as though this is what he is referring to: a spiritual Wisdom which transcends dualities, which is beyond rational knowledge, and which transforms the knower. In other words, a divine self-knowledge or Divine Wisdom.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 33.

Another indication that Mead did not appear to have changed his spiritual outlook is that he began using the term “the quest” already prior to his founding the Quest Society. Already in 1907, two years prior to the Quest’s inception, he wrote that

it is to the treasure-house of such living ideas, the priceless seeds of the Divine Sower, that the holy quest for gnosis and self-realisation conducts us. ... All the teachings, all the instructions of Theosophy can be summed up in one master living idea...,—that man is potential God.

In other words, we here see Mead making a clear parallel between “the quest,” “Divine Wisdom” and “Gnosis:” the quest is the quest for Gnosis, Gnosis being the same as Divine Wisdom or Theosophy.

As I have attempted to illustrate, Mead’s stance on spirituality does not appear to have changed between his Theosophical and post-Theosophical periods, and the concept of Divine Wisdom is key here, since it is what he transferred from Theosophy to the Quest. Theosophy had been for Mead Divine Wisdom; when it came to be associated with things Mead did not agree with—such as dogmas, psychical activity, and spiritual authorities—he transferred the idea of Divine Wisdom over to the Quest, via his concept of “Gnosis.”

Since Mead does not appear to have changed his mind regarding the meaning of this concept, it gives us some insight into how we can better understand the notion of post-Theosophy. If post-Theosophy is a concept that is meant to encapsulate those thinkers that emerged out of a Theosophical context and formulated *new* ideas on spirituality that were influenced by Theosophy, Mead does not fit neatly within this category. If we instead see Theosophy as a broader spectrum, it is easier to see how Mead could stop identifying as a Theosophist while still holding on to more or less the same view. What Mead stopped identifying with was not the idea of Divine Wisdom (which was how Mead defined Theosophy), but rather with the Theosophical Society. The concept of “Gnosis,” which Mead had begun using already during his Theosophical phase, is one that he held on to after exiting the Theosophical Society. “Gnosis” was the term Mead chose for his spirituality: it was the label that he chose to capitalize on, mobilize, and identify with, probably because it was more general than Theosophy came to be, and was not associated with the Theosophical Society (particularly not with Besant and Leadbeater) in the same way. But, again, this does not necessarily

mean that he changed the contents of his spiritual outlook: rather, he appears to have changed the vocabulary. Post-Theosophy, in Mead's case, thus appears more to be a matter of changing society and name, more-so than formulating a new spirituality.

Five: CONCLUSION

Despite his central role in the Theosophical Society and within the wider occult and alternative spiritual milieu, G. R. S. Mead has been seriously under-studied by academic scholars. Mead had numerous important functions in the Theosophical and post-Theosophical milieu of the 1890s through the 1920s: not only did he work as Helena Blavatsky's private secretary during the last years of her life, but he was also, among other things, the president of the British Section of the Theosophical Society, founder of the post-Theosophical organization The Quest Society, and broadly the "scholar" of the Theosophical Society, publishing immense numbers of books and articles. While Mead showed devout sympathy for Theosophy, he also had his foot in the wider occult and mystical milieu of the turn of the century, both through his introduction of "Gnostic" literature to the English-speaking world, as well as through his many other translations and syntheses of various other ancient religious texts.

The academic study of Theosophy is a growing field. Being still in its nascence, scholars of the field have mainly focused their historical research on a select number of prominent Theosophists such as Helena Blavatsky, Annie Leadbeater, and Charles Webster Leadbeater. Based on the activities and writings of these individuals, scholars have come to characterize Theosophy in a particular way: as a cohesive spiritual movement with a number of recurring themes and concepts. Rothstein and Hammer have, for instance, developed the metaphor of a double funnel with two large apertures and a narrow middle part in an attempt to explain Theosophy. According to this model, Theosophy drew on a large number of sources and combined them in such a way that they appeared cohesive, forming a center. Because this supposed center could not hold, they argue, the funnel burst and created a new aperture out of which came the many post-Theosophical currents. Another way of conceptualizing Theosophy is Carlson's attempt at characterizing "the Theosophical doctrine." In

this view, Theosophy can be condensed, more or less, to a central teaching. I have argued that these two ways of viewing Theosophy are quite limiting, since they assume that there was cohesion in the Theosophical Society.

More specifically, I have argued that the inclusion of Mead in Theosophical history complicates this view for two reasons. Firstly, through a careful study of Mead's editorship and writing, I have illustrated that the Theosophical journal *The Theosophical Review* was full of debates regarding supposed central tenets in Theosophy. Rather than having a clear doctrine and a center, it appears as though much of Theosophy was a lot more porous and open for debate. Through his editorship, Mead opened up for all sorts of discussions, even controversial ones, which seems to indicate that there were, indeed, many *different* Theosophical views. For this reason, I have suggested that we start speaking of different *Theosophies* to better capture this seeming pluralistic nature of 1890s and early 1900s Theosophy.

Second, I have studied three areas that are often viewed as elemental in Theosophical discourse: the notion of "the Masters" as spiritual authority, the source of inspiration (the supposed focus on "Eastern" spiritual ideas) as well as the view on occultism (practical or theoretical orientation). As we have seen, Mead held different views regarding these than did other Theosophists, which further complicates the view of Theosophy as having a clear and defined center. Rather than seeing "the Masters" as a group of spiritually enlightened authorities, he interpreted the notion of "the Master" to be a sort of ideal for each individual to strive to: each person should be their own "Master." When it came to sources, Mead emphatically argued that "Western" Theosophists ought to embrace "Western" sources for inspiration. While scholars have highlighted that debates regarding which sources to turn to existed within the Theosophical Society, the focus has been on individuals and groups that broke out of the Theosophical context due to their leanings away from "the East." Mead represents a Theosophist that "turned West" without leaving the society; furthermore, he also played a part in actively constructing what this "West" was made up of, as he framed certain sources as specifically "Western." Interestingly, these sources largely mirror those mentioned by Western esotericism scholar, Antoine Faivre, in his pioneering work within the field. This fact gives some consequences to how we conceive of the etic concept of Western esotericism. It appears as though

a prototypical concept of Western esotericism existed, in Mead's work, already before it was created as an etic concept. Lastly, I have brought light to Mead's stance towards occultism, which not only tells us about what Mead thought of it (he preferred theoretical over practical occultism), but it also shows us, again, how many different Theosophists there were. Some Theosophists clearly associated with and practiced practical occultism, such as astral traveling, whereas others, such as Mead, preferred instead the more abstract, theoretical, and book-oriented side of Theosophy.

In other words, not only did Mead actively aid in opening up for Theosophical debates, but he also exemplifies a Theosophist leader who held views different than those of other important Theosophists. Mead's views tell us a lot about how diverse early Theosophy appears to have been. Perhaps this can also help account for why Theosophy was attractive to so many, and such a diverse number of people: it offered many different forums and ideas for individuals to do as they pleased with.

Lastly, I have considered Mead's own view of Theosophy, which is centered around the notion of "Gnosis." Through a close reading of Mead's writing during both his Theosophical and Quest eras, I have gathered that the notion of "Gnosis" appears to have been more or less a constant in Mead's thought. Originally, Mead equated "Gnosis" with "Theosophy" with the two meaning "Divine Wisdom": in other words, the two terms were used interchangeably by Mead. However, as he left the Theosophical context, he kept the term "Gnosis" as a synonym to "Divine Knowledge" while disassociating it from the term "Theosophy." The term "Gnosis," in other words, appears as a sort of bridge between his Theosophical and post-Theosophical periods, and its contents do not appear to have changed. Indeed, Mead himself has even stated that his spiritual outlook remained the same after leaving the Theosophical Society. Since Mead does not appear to have changed his spirituality when leaving the Theosophical Society, this complicates the category of post-Theosophy a little. If post-Theosophy is a category which is meant to include currents and individuals which emerged out of the Theosophical context with new ideas, Mead does not appear to fit neatly into this category, since he does not seem to have changed his spiritual outlook. If we return to the concept of Theosophies, it is perhaps easier to understand how Mead could stop identifying as a Theosophist while apparently keeping to the same ideas. Since his idea of Theosophy lost in the Theosophical

debating ground, he changed vocabulary for his spirituality but seems to have kept to the same ideas. In other words, by viewing Theosophy more as a debating ground rather than as a firm doctrine, we can perhaps better account for why there are so many post-Theosophical movements to begin with: perhaps because their ideas of Theosophy did not win out in the Theosophical debates, so they had to form new movements with new names in order to establish themselves as independent thinkers. Had Theosophy continued to be as open as it was in the early days, perhaps less new movements had appeared. By seeing Theosophy as Theosophies, we can, in other words, better account for how diverse early Theosophy appears to have been, without slipping into normative statements regarding what proper Theosophy was.

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