Nothing Higher Than the Truth:
Modern Theosophy, Buddhism, and the Making of Cultural Nationalism in India

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April 2015

A thesis submitted to McGill University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis considers the development of modern theosophical doctrine, and in particular, the effects it had on modern Buddhism, within the framework of the formation of the early Indian nation state. Founded in New York in 1875, and still existing in over 100 countries, the Theosophical Society soon established itself as an occult movement that was inspired by the romantic poetry and comparative philology of the colonial period. The relocation of its international headquarters to Madras, India, in 1878 had profound and unpredictable consequences that reflect diverse cosmopolitan and modernizing trends. While it has been acknowledged that this spiritually oriented, international movement had an impact on the shaping of modern Buddhism, and became involved with political and social concerns specific to British-ruled India through its elite South Asian connections, there has been no study that deliberately connects these two elements together. This thesis locates the usage of theosophical Buddhist imagery, mythology, and doctrine in the evolution of popular Indian national culture. I take up this topic primarily through a juxtaposition of the prominent theosophist Annie Besant (1847-1933), and Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1944).

Résumé

Ce mémoire considère le développement de la doctrine théosophique moderne et spécifiquement ses effets sur le bouddhisme moderne dans le cadre de la formation de l'état-nation indien. Fondée à New York en 1875 et comptant encore des adeptes dans plus de 100 pays, la Société Théosophique s'est rapidement établie comme un mouvement occulte inspiré par la poésie romantique et la philologie comparative d'une époque colonialiste. La relocalisation, en 1878, de son siège international à Madras en Inde a été à l'origine de plusieurs développements aussi profonds qu'inattendus, qui reflètent diverses tendances vers la modernisation et le cosmopolitisme. L'impact du mouvement spirituel international qu'est la théosophie sur la formation du bouddhisme moderne a déjà été reconnu, comme son implication politique et sociale, par ses connexions avec les élites de l'Asie du Sud, dans les problèmes spécifiques de l'Inde sous gouvernance britannique. Aucune étude n'a cependant entrepris de lier délibérément ces deux éléments. Ce mémoire retrace l'imagerie, la mythologie et la doctrine bouddhistes théosophiques dans l'évolution de la culture populaire indienne. J'examine ce sujet inexploré principalement par une juxtaposition de l'importante théosophiste Annie Besant (1847-1933) et de Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1944).

Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my supervisor Davesh Soneji (McGill University) for encouraging me to pursue this fascinating area of research. I also extend my gratitude to all of those responsible for the excellent scholarship on this subject. This thesis was made possible through the Joseph S. Bombardier grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute. Through their financial support, I was able to study and travel to India and Nepal to pursue this line of research. I would also like to thank Dr. Andrea Marion Pinkney (McGill University) for encouraging me to think in numbers when my writing became unwieldy, and finally Dr. Leslie Orr (Concordia University), for her careful reading and comments on the final draft.

Note on Transliteration

In this thesis words from Indian languages appear in their conventional transliteration, without the use of diacritical marks. Thus, ahimsa and not ahiṃsā, Shaiva and not Śaiva. When diacritical marks appear in original sources, they are reproduced following the original.

Introduction

The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875 by the Russian mystic, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), and the American lawyer and colonial, Henry Steele Olcott (1832-1907). It aimed to replace the "illusions" of modern spiritualism that had been developing in anticlerical circles, with the "higher knowledge" of occultism. Publically, the Society began to favor the superior esoteric wisdom of the "East" over that of the "West" as an intellectual and evolutionary counter proposal to: dogmatic Christianity, the rise of unrestrained Spiritualism, and the threat of scientific materialism. The transferal of allegiance from western mysticism to the "Higher" wisdom of South Asia was followed by an early re-location of Society headquarters from New York, to Madras, India in 1878. There are many thought-provoking outcomes of these historical developments, which reflect several transnational and modernizing trends. This paper considers how, through their cosmopolitan allegiances, the Theosophical Society fostered a Christian oriented modern Buddhism as the universal religion for a new commonwealth of humanity. I argue that this liberal and cosmopolitan religious outlook was influential in the early construction of an elite cultural nationalism in South Asia. It was during a time of intellectual recruitment, a time of political awakening, when Indian nationalism was inextricably mixed with religion. I take as a specific example the Theosophical Society's Buddhist favoritism and the impact this had on Mohandas Gandhi's own political awakening.

Buddhism, newly conceived as a world religion, was remotely known to theosophical leaders thanks to two distinct, yet interrelated phases: beginning with the process of colonizing South Asia through its conquest as a resource, and later, by its cultivation as an object of European fascination. This process reached its maturity with the study of comparative religion in the

1860s, and peaked, according to Jeffrey Franklin's research on the Buddha in Victorian England (2005), in the "Buddhism steeped Nineties" (941). A set of terms, images and impressions of Buddhism were therefore in circulation and scattered throughout Blavatsky's published works. The textual basis of the Society consists of Helena Blavatsky's massive written works: *Isis Unveiled* (1877), in two volumes of more than 600 pages each, and later, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). Her second book especially provided an enduring synthesis of western esotericism and various elements of Eastern religions, primarily Vedantic Hinduism and Buddhism, filtered through orientalist discourse. The book was published on the Society's own printing press, acquired after the two founders had relocated to India. Once there, they quickly attracted an elite South Indian English speaking audience, and became among the first Westerners to convert to Buddhism on their initial visit to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) in 1880. *The Secret Doctrine* spoke as a distinctive authority on "Esoteric Buddhist doctrine," which it equated with theosophy's own "Wisdom Religion." It claimed to represent secret Buddhist teachings that were channeled via eternal Masters, or Mahatmas, dwelling in the remote Himalayas.

Theosophical doctrine incorporated the romantic poetry and the comparative philology of the fragmented period of the late nineteenth century; a period when Christianity continued to be pushed to the margins due to a greater awareness of cultural diversity through colonial expansion, and the secularizing procedures of modernity. Blavatsky's written works were popular because they expressed an anticlerical narrative and discussed newly globalized concept of "religion". This discussion intersected with the orientalist scholarship on the so-called Eastern Religions, and with various interpretations of Buddhist scripture. Her written works, all executed in English, were an affront to academics such as Friedrich Max Muller (1823-1900), who, though firmly rooted in Christian theology, struggled with the complexities of understanding the

bewildering variety of Buddhist scriptures written in their original languages of Sanskrit and Pali. The Oxford professor and orientalist Muller, who was quoted by Blavatsky on several occasions, was compelled to publish several academic exposes.[1] In one, he warned other "serious scholars" not to underestimate the importance of the Russian aristocrat and mystic Helena Blavatsky's perpetuation of a "widespread, weird, fake and fakish pseudo-Tibetica and pseudo-Buddhica" (Muller 1893: 778).

His warnings went unheeded. Far from being merely an aberration, or a movement on the fringe, modern theosophy was bound up in the logic of the period and had a lasting effect, not only on the reception of Buddhism in the West, but is an occult movement which has been increasingly identified as central to the modern narrative (Oppenheim 1985; Owen 1989, 2004; Wilson 2013; Viswanathan 1998; Aravamudan 2006).[2] Almost from the beginning, it was a transnational movement dealing with a wide range of issues and interests that addressed the processes of industrialization, and the related political-social upheavals of colonialism, and missionization.

The Theosophical Society was at a distinctive meeting point with the intellectual and cultural shifts in Western Europe and America, and the new "syncretizing intellectual elites" in South Asia (Hanes 1993). English educated South Asian members, writers, and readers were recruited thanks to the positive emphasis on specific representations of South Asian religious culture,

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[1] Blavatsky expressed her gratitude to the research done by orientalist scholars such as Sir W. Jones, Max Muller, Burnouf, Colebrooke, Haug, de Saint-Hilaire, and others.

[2] Modernity, informed by modernism, is based on enlightenment ideals of reason and rationality, and processes of modernization positing a human rather than divine social order (see Bjorn Wittrock: "Rethinking Modernity". In *Identity, Culture and Globalization* (Ben-Rafael & Sternberg (eds), 49–73. Leiden: Brill. 2001). These works bring attention to the often-neglected role of occultism in the processes of modernization. See: Janet Oppenheim. *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research In England*, 1850-1914 (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Alex Owen. *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004); Leigh Wilson. *Modernism and Magic: Experiments with Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Occult*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

along with their distinctly anticolonial and anticlerical rhetoric and organizational skills. One important reader and admirer of the Theosophical Society was Mohandas Gandhi, who was influenced by the Society's discovery of India's religious traditions. I consider Gandhi's relationship to the subsequent leader of the Society, Annie Besant and their dealings with Buddhism and politics in light of earlier developments. Travis Hanes' research into the origins of the Indian National Congress comments on how the theosophical movement provided organization and confidence for early modern Indian political developments, and the mechanism by which translations of European concepts were formed into indigenous expressions by leading nationalist figures, such as Mohandas Gandhi (Hanes 1993). The Theosophical Society collaborated with local leaders and introduced these associates to a global network of mystics.

The mingling of European and indigenous cultural and intellectual trends through the Society, and the complex connection to colonialism, and the related field of Orientalism, along with its participation in early Indian nationalism, and the processes of modernity has been explored by Lubelsky (2012), Van der Veer (1999), King (1999), Viswanathan (1998), among others. These important studies deploy critical approaches to social history to recover the central role of occultism, religion, and anti-colonialism in the shaping of the modern nation-state. But when considering theosophical leaders' essentialist claims to sacred knowledge, and its incorporation into the prevailing narratives of Indian culture, what is often stressed in these works are: the promotion of Hindu Vedas (Prothero 2009); appropriation of the language of Hindu mysticism (King 1999); and partiality for "brahmanical, aryanized Hinduism" (Viswanathan 1998). Locating the usage of Buddhist imagery, mythology, and doctrine in modern Indian developments has been largely left unexplored.

Materials and Methods

Drawing on the idioms of Orientalism (Said 1979), cosmopolitanism (Bose & Manjapra 2010; Aravamudan 2006) and transnationalism (Hannerz 1996), I suggest that modern theosophy's constructions of Buddhism were partial to Protestantism and esoteric Christianity. Even though it was anti-Christian, theosophy continued to reflect Christian principals and missionary institutions. Modern theosophy is a constellation of ideas, but when regarded more generally, it represents a greater trend towards a universalized world religious ideal that was non-institutional, liberal, and more radically individual. I consider also how this more global trend also became a kind of elite and 'sacralized' idea of social and cultural reform in India.

The first chapter of this thesis is meant to provide the necessary background to the Theosophical Society's involvement in early Indian Nationalism, by considering the two founders relocation, in 1875, of headquarters to Madras—one of the earliest English foundations in India. This was at the beginning of the peak period of anticolonial struggle in South Asia, which began around 1890 and lasted until the mid-20th century (Bose & Manjapra 1). It was a period heralding a "new arena of colonial dominance and indigenous agency" (Prakash 1999: 20), and represents a time of bitter subjugation, and intellectual recruitment. For my analysis, I rely primarily on the scholarship of Stephen Prothero (1996), and Gananath Obeyesekere (2004, 1998). My primary sources are early issues of the Society's journal *The Theosophist* (1879--1899), and Olcott's most influential publication, *The Buddhist Catechism* (1881), which continues to be taught in Sri Lankan schools. The so-called "Euro-rational," or Protestant Buddhism, of Henry Olcott is contrasted with the kind of secret society Blavatsky promoted and the esoteric Buddhism she exported.

The following chapter examines how both Annie Besant and Mohandas Gandhi initially

developed their awareness of popular Buddhist and Hindu teachings through their encounter with Helena Blavatsky while in Victorian England. My examples rely on Arthur H. Nethercot's (1963) seminal historical account of Besant's many lives, and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke's (2010) level-headed analysis of the occult. I make explicit the concepts that are succinctly explained in Anne Taylor's biography of Annie Besant (1992): theosophical interpretations of Buddhism were thoroughly infused with liberal and esoteric Christian ideals. The very nature of this 'secret' Christian gospel is of course complex. Western esotericism combines natural empirical observation with notions of a harmonious otherworldly order, and is an area of academic study that Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Joscelyn Godwin (1994), and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1998) have explored in greater detail with respect to the Theosophical Society. I consider the instances when Blavatsky and others sought to synthesize elements of Christian religious language with modern translations of Buddhist texts, within the process of the revival of Buddhism, and the impact these ideas had on Gandhi's own ideals. This chapter also incorporates Katherine Tidrick's (2006) research on Christian influences in Gandhi's early career in my analysis of his religious sentiments.

The final chapter considers the relevance of theosophy and Buddhism to Besant and Gandhi's political careers in India. This involves a critical consideration of Besant's printed public debates, texts, and journal publications, which have been contextualized by the remarkable research of Gauri Viswanathan (2000, 1998). When considering Gandhi's thoughts on Buddhism, I draw from *The Collected Works* (1894-1948) of Gandhi and his autobiography, *My Experiments With Truth*, first published in 1940. *The Collected Works* consist of 100 volumes of Gandhi's writings, including letters, essays, and interviews spanning almost 60 years of his public life.

This exploration of the influence of theosophy's Buddhism is divided into three parts: (i)

discussion of the relocation of the co-founders (Henry Olcott and Helena Blavatsky) to South Asia; (ii) analysis of Annie Besant and Mohandas Gandhi's early exposure to theosophy and Buddhism, within Victorian English society; and (iii) consideration of Gandhi and Besant's discourse on Buddhism. All parts are situated within a climate of modernizing religious revivalism and nationalism.

What this thesis has not attempted to do is define Buddhist thought, or Buddhist ethics, according to any of the different "vehicles." Firstly, there is an astounding amount of history and literature that developed around the personality of the Buddha, the bodhisattvas, and related teachings, cults, and rituals. Within Buddhist history are many competing voices, often vociferous in points of difference, in terms of philosophy and ethics. I try to leave aside the questions of authenticity, and focus instead on the development of modern Buddhism limited to certain discourses popularized through alternative anti-colonialist movements and the rise of English print culture.

Overall, my goal is to introduce the reader to the multiple ways in which the category of Buddhism is used as a unifying force within a dynamic cosmopolitan network of influential and creative individuals, all publicly confronting the issues of modernization, secularization, and globalization.

Chapter 1

Locating Theosophical Buddhism in South Asia

As early as 1877, while still in New York, and only two years after co-founding the Theosophical Society, Colonel Henry Steele Olcott had made connections through written correspondence with prominent Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka, and with leading members of the most dominant Hindu reform movement, the Arya Samaj.[3] Appealing to the Arya Samaj's founder Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Olcott states, "Finding in Christianity nothing that should satisfy their [the American theosophists] reason or intention they have turned to the East for light and openly proclaimed themselves foes of Christianity. We come to your feet as children to a parent and say: "Look at us, our teacher. Tell us what we ought to do. We place ourselves under your instruction." (Prothero 65). In another letter to a Buddhist monk (the Rev. Piyartana Tissa Terunanse), Olcott juxtaposes the "brutal sensuality and ignorance" of the so-called West with a presumed East as, "the way to purification, illumination, power, beautitude" (ibid 65). He implores his South Asian correspondent to come and rescue the West from its "demoralizing theology" (ibid 66). The letter also includes an early confession of his Buddhist faith: "We the leaders of the Theosophical Society believe in the Incomprehensible Principle and the Divine Philosophy taught by Sakya Muni. With all my heart and soul I accept and profess the philosophy and try to act up to the precepts of Gautama Buddha" (ibid 66).

The letters reveal the theosophical founders as devoted Truth seekers, however, Hinduism and Buddhism were often fused into their own "Wisdom-Religion," and repeatedly underpinned by Christian references, despite all of the anti-Christian rhetoric. Said has remarked on this impulse as refuting the possibility of intellectual exchange or understanding, due to the goal of a

[3] See for more details, Josephine Ransome: *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*. (Madras, India: Wheaton, Ill., USA: Theosophical Pub. House, 1938).

"belligerent collective identity" (1979: xxvii). But when activated within this colonial milieu, the construction of a "unifying value system" (ibid 52), already verbally assembled in the Theosophical Society's advocacy of a 'universal brotherhood of humanity,' evoked not only a metaphysical counterpart to the British empire, and its intense missionary presence, but also ideals of modern social organization, which included the intellectual and spiritual leadership of both the "spiritual East" and the "material West."[4]

Perhaps due to its anti-Christian sentiments, the Society had failed to draw sufficient support in America, while in South Asia, these sentiments combined with the society's reverence for Buddhism and Hinduism suggested that the Theosophical Society could be a powerful ally in the revitalization of traditional authority. Based on a tentative merger in May of 1878 with the Arya Samaj, and with Helena Blavatsky's "energetic coaching" (via the orders from her Himalayan Masters) Henry Olcott was persuaded to board the steamship *Canada* with her, on course for Bombay via London on December 17, 1878 (Prothero 72-74). Unlike other Anglo-Indians, the founders found their place within indigenous communities, and they had professedly come not to profit, but to learn from "Asian gurus" (ibid 75). By all accounts, the fact that they were publically promoting the wisdom of Indian traditions, and expressing interest in their revival, had an "electrifying impact on educated Indian society" (Hanes 85).

According to Hanes, the new Indian elites, as products of western education and indoctrination, found themselves in a dilemma: their colonial education cut traditional ties, while at the same time racist government policy restricted career prospects (75). Olcott and Blavatsky's

[4] America appeared at the time as a great anti-colonialist western power that successfully defeated British rule. It was among what Anderson terms the "creole communities" that had successfully developed an early conception of nationhood, which closely coincided with the onset of the age of nationalism in Europe (1820-1920) (in Jones 50-67). One can draw certain parallels in the way that both the Americans and the Anglicized elite in India constituted simultaneously an excluded colonial community and an upper class.

speeches attracted attention primarily from those western educated elites struggling with a sense of perpetual degradation, and desiring stronger claims to authority and respectability. In the words of one leading Indian nationalist, Bipan Chandra Pal (1858-1932), which are reiterated by Gandhi and many others, "This Society told our people that instead of having any reason to be ashamed of their past or the legacies left to them by it, they had every reason to feel justly proud…because their ancient seers and saints had been the spokesmen of the highest truths and their old books, so woefully misunderstood today, had been the repositories of the highest human illumination and wisdom" (344).

Ordering the Buddhist Faith

The Theosophical Society eventually employed many "modes of publicity" to survive and occupy a place in South Asian history, but print publishing was initially "the quintessential Theosophical task" (Scott 176).[5] Morrison's article draws attention to the subject of the use of periodicals in the occult revival, finding that "The print culture of modernity and the public sphere predicated upon it were the driving engine of modern occultism, serving both as a guarantor of its long term vogue and shaping its form and its institutions" (3). The Society's first monthly periodical, *The Theosophist*, was released in October 1879, just eight months after their arrival. On its first pages were promises to "give the same cordial welcome to communications from one class of religionists as to those from another" (*The Theosophist* Vol.I., no.1, Oct. 1879).

The theosophical movement, when re-located near Madras, presented itself as a unique collaboration between individuals and communities from disparate social and political groups, under the banner of a universal brotherhood. According to the journal's editor, Helena

[5] Proselytization, lectures, annual conventions, schools, and magical spectacles are also identified by Scott as among the many "modes" of publicity used by the Society. Print became central in nineteenth century India to "public contestations over religion," which developed new vernacular literary forms and ways of developing and regulating vocabularies (Scott 18).

Blavatsky: “it found itself in alliance with the Indian Arya Samaj, headed by the learned Pandit Dayananda Saraswati, and the Ceylonese Buddhists, under the erudite H. Sumangala, High Priest of Adam's Peak and President of the Widyodaya College, Colombo” (ibid). Pages from their first journal publication ensured western readers that “their authors are among the best native scholars of India,” announcing that the creation of the English language journal was due to:

> the rapid expansion of the Theosophical Society from America to various European and Asiatic countries; the increasing difficulty and expense in maintaining correspondence by letter with members so widely scattered; the necessity for an organ through which the native scholars of the East could communicate their learning to the Western world, and, especially, through which the sublimity of Aryan, Buddhistic, Parsi, and other religions might be expounded by their own priests or pandits, the only competent interpreters; and finally, the need of a repository of the facts—especially such as relate to Occultism—gathered by the Society’s Fellows among different nations (*The Theosophist* Vol.I., no.1, Oct. 1879).

The first publication also included an initial installment of the Swami’s autobiography; an abridged version of Edwin Arnold’s hugely popular poem on the Buddha’s life; and a promise of future contributions from their “Buddhist Brothers” in Ceylon.

Initially, the Society’s actions had to make sense to a curious western public, a small but socially significant elite in India, and Buddhists in Ceylon. Changes in the Society’s manifesto were continually being made to accommodate these diverse groups. For example, the oft-cited three objectives: “1. To form a nucleus of universal brotherhood; 2. To study comparative religion, science, and philosophy, and; 3. To investigate the hidden laws of nature and the powers innate in humanity” (Johnson 1994: 7), were modified several times in India. Most significantly, the second objective was changed to: to promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literature, religions and sciences, and vindicate their importance. This was to be achieved by gathering and translating “original works of value” along with oral instructions form

"learned" individuals. It was expressed at a meeting on Dec. 17, 1879 held in Banares as one of the chief "Principles, Rules and Bye-Laws," and then published in their monthly periodical:

> To gather for the Society's library and put into written forms correct information upon the various ancient philosophies, traditions, and legends, and, as the Council shall decide it permissible, disseminate the same in such practicable ways as the translation and publication of original works of value, and extracts from and commentaries upon the same, or the oral instructions of persons learned in their respective departments (*The Theosophist* Vol. I., no.7 April 1880).

There was a mixed response to the plan to publish English translations of scriptures. According to Prothero, Dayananda's initial view was somewhat more positive than a leading Sinhalese monk, Hikkaduve Sumangala, who stated that it was "a matter next to impossibility" to translate Buddhist sutras into English (Prothero 67). The Theosophical Society actually became very successful in achieving this aim.

The Adyar library and Research Centre, established by Olcott in 1886 at the Society's headquarters in Madras was, according to Blavatsky, the "crown and glory of the Theosophical Society" (1890: 300).[6] Blavatsky comments that, "in the department of Buddhistic Literature it is richer than any Library in India, and probably equal to most in Western countries"…having received, "the noble present of a complete set of the Pâli version of the *Tripitakas*, engraved on palm leaves and comprising 60 volumes with nearly 5000 pages" (ibid).

The fact that these Theravada Buddhist scriptures, the most complete extant of the early canon (first written down in Sri Lanka in 29 BCE) were now being preserved by the theosophists and their institutions reflects the continuation of a methodological trend of categorizing and systematizing South Asian knowledge. It was a continuation of what had begun with colonialism, and orientalist scholarship. Even Max Muller, the Oxford professor and harsh critic

[6] In her *Recent Progress in Theosophy*, published in the North American Review, 1890.

of Blavatsky's 'Esoteric Buddhism,' praised Olcott's efforts because they helped his own compellation efforts, by imposing a sense of order upon the unruly reality of the Buddhist faith through the publication of texts. In an 1893 article published while in London he writes:

> Colonel Olcott, has of late years entered on a much more healthy sphere of activity, one in which he and his friends may do some real good. He has encouraged and helped the publication of authentic texts of the old Brahmanic and the Buddhist religions. He has tried to inspire both Brahmans and Buddhists with respect for their old religions, and has helped them to discover in their sacred books some rays of truth to guide them through the dark shadows of life. He has shown them how, in spite of many differences, their various sects share much in common, and how they should surrender what is not essential and keep what is essential as the true bond of a wide religious brotherhood.[7]

The academic study of Buddhism, which began in earnest during the nineteenth century, occurred within the context of colonialism when most Europeans experienced a "deep distaste for Buddhism's negations" (Godwin 322). With Muller, and other philologists under his influence, like T.W. Rhys Davids (1843-1922), Buddhism received a more supportive reading as a universal teaching based on what was gleaned through selective translations, often filtered through Christian theology. Rhys Davids argued for an affinity between Buddhism and Christian doctrine, presenting a vision of "true" Buddhism that was entirely dependent on ancient Pali sources.

Scholarship of comparative religion had favored the scriptural accounts in the *Tripitaka* over the miraculous events told in the *Jatakas*, and similarly favored the Theravadin canon over Mahayana scriptures and the many Vajrayana texts written in Sanskrit and Tibetan, which were originally given a demonic status. There was a focus on translating the sacred narrative of the life story of Gautama Siddhartha and making comparisons with the figure of Jesus Christ. These new readings fashioned a sympathetic portrait of a sheltered prince who turns to aestheticism,

[7] The article was published in *The Nineteenth Century* (London, May 1893), pp. 767-788.

balancing the extremes of self-indulgence and self-denial before coming to sit under a Bodhi tree somewhere in the vicinity of Banares, finally finding the truth about suffering and sharing it with everyone out of compassion. Moreover, the picture of the Buddha consistently emerged as one who had broken through an unjust Brahmanical hierarchy, much like "Jesus Christ had done when he broke from Judaism, and as the Church of England broke from "priest ridden" Catholicism (Franklin 943). When commenting on the nature of this scholarship Franklin states that it was:

> Driven by a Protestant belief in truth-telling authority of the most ancient textual sources, they unavoidably participated in the appropriation of Buddhism from its indigenous context by attempting to strip it of its local mythologies and turn into a purified textual object of Western knowledge, a project that was inseparable from the British national project of imperialism (ibid).

The Protestant fixation with "truth-telling" finds its place among the nineteenth century obsession with history and the project of orientalist scholars. The sacred histories of Indian were being examined using methods that focused on the correlation and dating of texts and manuscripts, collecting and ordering source material to determine who wrote it, and where and when it was written. In the process, a master narrative of the Buddha and his teachings emerged. This account of Buddhism became a subject of fascination in the West, to the point where members of the Christian clergy became very anxious as sources of wisdom moved eastward (Franklin 943-944).

The English poet and journalist Edwin Arnold provided further elaboration on the account of the "enlightened one" and his teachings in *The Light of Asia*. He had at his disposal "the writings of Victorian Buddhologists like Max Muller and the Rhys Davids" (Franklin 946). The poem portrays the Buddha as ready to question and break from the dominant Brahmanic "popish"

authority, turning his compassion into something reflective of what Franklin describes as nineteenth-century middle class ideology, using the lines: "Pity and need/ Make all flesh kin. There is no caste in blood" (in Franklin 951). Through Arnold's portrayal, the story of the life and teachings of the Buddha was being represented with a more dramatic effect. In Franklin's view, Edwin Arnold's poem serves as a cultural artifact because it "duplicates dominant ideologies of late Victorian society" and introduces "crisis" by renegotiating authority, and by creating "extreme ambivalence" between the categories of ""us" and "them," British and Indian, Christian and Buddhist" (948).

The Light of Asia, Edwin Arnold's best-selling depiction of the Buddha's journey to Enlightenment, was enormously popular in Europe, and the Theosophical Society provided it an even wider circulation by publishing it in the October 1879 edition of *The Theosophist.* The poem, which first appeared in 1879, is a classic example of how Buddhism became the ideal export to spiritually inclined Westerners searching for alternatives to Christianity. While Rhys Davids gave it a favorable review, Muller suggested that it gave a false impression of Buddhist doctrine, and perpetuated the misleading analogy between the Buddha and Christ (Lubelsky 10). It is interesting to consider that in regards to comparative scholarship, the writings of Arnold took on a different emphasis. He presents a more daring and romantic picture by elaborating on the *Jataka* tales of the Buddha's past lives as a bodhisattva, and more devotional Mahayana scripture that tend towards his deification. His poem re-enlists the exotic orient while taking on the tropes of Christian evangelicalism. Images of "dharma" as divine retribution surface: "It slayeth and saveth, nowhere moved except unto the working out of doom; Its threads are Love and Life; and Death and Pain the shuttles of its loom" (Arnold 158).

The poem appears to have been written under the powerful grip of the chosen one concept and it had a very wide circulation. It was published in *The Theosophist* as Edwin Arnold's "theme *con amore,*" in the words of Helena Blavatsky. She explains that due to this poet's pure and sincere motivation and learning, the Buddha and his philosophy are subjects the "western poet has earned the right to grateful remembrance" (*The Theosophist* Vol.I., no.1, Oct., 1879). Blavatsky considers the recollection of the historical Buddha as being relevant to all Indians because he was, "one who loved India and the Indian peoples" (ibid). The Buddha is also made universally significant by providing him with a genealogy among all esteemed religions and disciplines: the Catholics called him "St. Josaphat," and scholars regard him as "the most perfect among religious founders" (ibid). The readers is given the estimation that "470 millions of our race live and die in the tenets of Gautama" (ibid). In those numbers is the massing of a transnational, yet unified, religious body.

In defending the poem as a subject of the poet's personal inclination, theosophy simultaneously appeals to an "insider perspective" (Scott 15) on religion, and to ideals of freedom of thought, enabling the founders to thus liberally and publicly promote the superiority of the Buddha and Buddhist philosophy, in the same way that they were free to demote orthodox Christianity. But far from conflicting with Christianity, this modern form of Buddhism appears to be the culmination of its evolution (Snodgrass 104).

In accordance with these nineteenth century trends, theosophy further endorses the Buddha as a great ethical leader and archetypal modern day hero, and selected Buddhist teachings as the hallmark of a liberal humanist religion. It was this vision of Buddhism as a humanistic and universalistic reform movement that became the gospel of the English gentry. The image is sustained in the language itself:

> When one searches the world's records for the purest, the highest ideal of a religious reformer, he seeks no further after reading this Buddha's life. In wisdom, zeal, humility, purity of life and thought; in ardor for the good of mankind; in provocation to do good deeds, to toleration, charity and gentleness, Buddha excels other men as the Himalayas excel other peaks in height. Alone among the founders of religions, he had no word of malediction nor even reproach for those who differed with his views. His doctrines are the embodiment of universal love. Not only our philologists — cold anatomists of time-honored creeds who scientifically dissect the victims of their critical analysis — but even those who are prepossessed against his faith, have ever found but words of praise for Gautama. Nothing can be higher or purer than his social and moral code (*The Theosophist* vol I., no.I, Oct., 1879).

The founders had rediscovered the basis of their modern religion in Buddhist symbols and imagery which confirmed principles of love, tolerance, and social justice that could match and surpass the ideal character of Jesus, and topple all other Gods, including, "Vishnu, Shiva, Surya or any other god" (ibid). Moreover, the commentary stresses that the Buddha's teachings were responsible for a lasting positive transformation in the Asian character. It is as though Asia was infused with his occult presence: "Buddhism from its beginning has changed the moral aspect of not only India but of nearly the whole of Asia; and that, breaking up its most cruel customs, it became a blessing to the countless millions of the East — of our brothers" (ibid).

Although their Buddhist favoritism challenged the Brahmin historical narrative, it was initially overlooked because their overall position resonated with many South Asians who interpreted the triumph of British imperialism as a failure of indigenous institutions to provide the kind of moral and technical base for Indian unity against imperial aggression (Prothero 76).[8]

[8] Bose remarks that, while western intellectuals found a rationale for their position as rulers in racial evolutionary theory, South Asians tended to ground European superiority not in race, but on their ability to organize, the "cognitive and economic features of capitalist power" (Bose & Manjapra 68). Remarkably, Olcott's first speech, delivered less than a month after his arrival in Bombay, responded to the crisis of colonialism by propagating programs for practical reforms featuring the new, modern, optimistically progressive style of middle class culture, now applied to "Hindus who can rise above their castes and every other reactionary influence" (Prothero 76).

Prothero remarks on how Olcott's earlier thesis—the East as the way to purify the West—was modified in India with the contention that Asia was in need of American technological and commercial knowledge, in order to revive "the moral and spiritual example of ancient India" (75-76). Of course the centrality of the "West" reflects no internal superiority, and it is the outcome of conquest and colonization that permits itself to exult its values, technologies, and political institutions as its exclusive achievement.

Early Theosophy and the Protestant Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka

Although they addressed a small elite group of Hindus in India, Olcott and Balvatsky often looked to the "other" Christianity-- Buddhism and its Christ-like teacher-- not to the radical otherness of Hinduism, for answers to their religious queries. Buddhism was being put into service to provide common ground for addressing universalist themes; theories of karma and reincarnation —concepts with cross-cultural explanatory power that could be easily grasped— were employed to invoke notions of a secular morality for modern individuals.

The two founders became among the first Buddhists converts from America on their initial tour of the island colony of Ceylon on May 16th 1880. Before departing for Ceylon, Blavatsky expressed in *The Theosophist* her high regard for their connections with Sinhalese Buddhist *bhikkhus*:

> In the whole experience of the officers of the Theosophical Society, no incident has been more cheering and delightful, than the friendliness with which their advances have been met by the Buddhists. If we had been brothers long separated, our greeting could not have been warmer. Says the venerable Chief Priest Sumana Tissa, of the Paramananda Vihare, near Point de Galle — now in his sixty-sixth year: "To use an Oriental simile, I and my many disciples anxiously wait your arrival, as a swarm of peacocks joyously long for the downpour of a shower." We trust that our duties will permit us before long to meet all our Sinhalese brothers in person, and exchange congratulations over the encouraging prospects of our peaceful humanitarian mission (*The Theosophist* Vol.I., no.2, 1879).

Ceylon quickly became an important theosophical center and experimental grounds for "theosophical techniques combining spirituality with national aspiration" (Lublesky 101). In this initial visit, which lasted two months, Olcott established seven branches of the Theosophical Society, and a network of Buddhist schools (Lubelsky 102). The studying of Olcott's activities in Sri Lanka established that his Buddhist theosophy borrowed heavily from nineteenth century liberal Protestant principles and the methods of sustaining them: churches, chapels, schools, the press, and the individual crusader. Through his study of modern theosophy's entrance into Sri Lankan politics Obeyesekere (2004) has shown how this version of Buddhism has since become the "official" Buddhism of the post-colonial Sri Lankan state. According to Richard Gombrich, who collaborated on an earlier study with Obeyesekere (1988), "probably the most important function of the Buddhist Theosophical Society [in Sri Lanka] was that it founded and ran Buddhist schools to emulate those founded by the Christian missions" (205).

The founding of a branch of theosophy in Sri Lanka in 1880 that incorporated the leadership of Sinhalese Buddhists striving to gain back control over education and social customs by systematizing Buddhism, historically marks the second phase of Buddhism's Protestant-styled revival on the island.[9] This second and lasting phase was a direct affront to the Christian community, and was informed by what Prothero identifies as three interconnected influences, which Olcott actively promoted: Protestant modernism, Orientalism, and the elite cosmopolitan culture of the metropolitan gentry (286).

[9] There was a surge of enthusiasm that arose primarily out of the response to the threat of Protestant missions receiving the support of the colonial government in the late 19th century. According to Prothero, it was not until 1862 that a modern Buddhist resistance first became organized by starting their own press to propagate Buddhism, in response to anti-Buddhist pamphlets (95). As in India, English education was essential for social advancement, and the printing press was a necessary tool for resisting Christian missionary activity. A series of debates in the 1860s and 1870s also increased Buddhism's public appeal among lay society. The most famous being the 1873 Panadura debates, in which the Buddhist monk, Mohottivatte Gunananda, famously defeated a Protestant minister in arguing for the supremacy of the Buddhist religion after prolonged attacks by the Protestants. For more see H.L. Seneviratne: *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Reviving Buddhism, according to Olcott, involved, first and foremost, educating the Sinhalese in Buddhist social and religious morality through propagating true "Southern Buddhism," free from ritual and superstition. In the preface to his *Buddhist Catechism* (1881), Olcott proclaims:

> I am afraid we shall have to wait for this help [in translating] to come from the Buḍḍhist bikkhus, almost the only learned men of Ceylon; at least I have not been able during an intimate intercourse of twenty-two years, to arouse their zeal. It has always seemed to me incongruous that an American, making no claims at all to scholarship, should be looked to by the Sinhalese to help them teach the dharma to their children; and as I believe I have said in an earlier edition, I only consented to write THE BUDDHIST CATECHISM after I had found that no bhikkhu would undertake it. Whatever its demerits, I can at least say that the work contains the essence of some 15,000 pages of Buḍḍhist teaching that I have read in connexion with my work.[10]

Olcott's Buddhism rested, not necessarily on his knowledge of Buddhist *suttas*, but on translations of Buddhist texts interpreted by Professor Rhys-Davids. Their interpretation was coupled with a nineteenth century enthusiastic confidence in occult evolutionary sciences, one that incorporated a kind of religious messianic optimism: man will know and master themselves and the world and finally be free and happy.[11] According to Prothero, implicit in his understanding of Buddhism are the promotion of two contradictory impulses—the democratic and the elite (290). These impulses, at work in the cosmopolitan rationale, resulted in at least two key assumptions: first, that the masses had an obligation to aspire to elevate themselves out of their inferior subcultures; and, second, that genteel had a corresponding duty to lift the masses up (Prothero 290).

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[10] The *Catechism* was first published on July 24th 1881 in Sinhalese and later translated in English and other languages (Gombrich 205). It would later go through more that forty editions and be translated into over twenty languages, and is still in use in Sri Lankan schools (Prothero 1995: 285). According to Prothero, "as early as 1885, Buddhists whom Olcott dismissed as sectarians had argued that the *Buddhist Catechism* should be burned," and Sumangala had threatened to oppose that same document because of Olcott's ostensibly unorthodox presentation of nirvana" (158). The 42nd edition (1908) of the text includes "corrections" by Sumangala.

[11] Mircea Eliade remarks on this phenomenon in his book, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, 1969.

The ‘White Buddhist,’ as Olcott is called on the island, sums up the essence of Buddhist teachings in his Catechism as: “ “self-culture”; “universal love”; and “justice,” because of its insistence that, through karma, “everyone will unerringly reap the rewards of his actions, bad or good” (Olcott 1887: 53). Buddhism is re-defined in an atmosphere of skeptical secularism, not as a religion, but as a “moral philosophy” taught by “the wisest, noblest and most holy being” (ibid 1; 3). Moreover, in defense of its scientific validity Olcott states that Buddhism has been corrupted over time by its own devotees: “Like every other religion that has existed many centuries, it certainly now contains untruth mingled with truth; ever gold is found mixed with dross. The poetical imagination, the zeal, or the lingering superstition of Buddhist devotees have, in various ages, and in various lands, caused the noble principles of the Buddha's moral doctrines to be coupled more or less with what might be removed to advantage” (Prothero 190). The Catechism also targets the proximity of Hindu *devales*, or temples, to Buddhist temples as an “excrescence on pure Buddhism, left by the Tamil sovereign of former days” (ibid 224).

According to Prothero, Olcott “joined the Protestant modernists in championing a religiously-based progressivism in which humanity and society were advancing in a never ending progression to a crowning state of perfectibility” (288). He conflated Buddhist principles of reincarnation, karma, nirvana, and the elimination of suffering with “scientific” notions of human evolution. His was a mystical science that held, according to Prothero, a divinity of humankind specific to the Protestant modernist ethos, which ran counter to Calvinist notions of the depravity of humanity. The notion of human perfectibility was a defining feature of the TS, and although it was a radical protest against the various living forms of Buddhism, it was also drawn from notions of *siddha* culture, and *siddhi* cultivation, described in tantric texts, whose translations were a source of fetishistic fascination central to the discourse on India at the turn of

the century.[12] Both Olcott and Blavatsky reference the term *iddhis*, which is a term found throughout Buddhist and Hindu literature. It often refers to superhuman powers derived from meditative practice (Prothero 910). The civilizing and reformist impulses of theosophical discourse, their "preoccupation with moral probity and social order" (Prothero 291), and their stress on "not only individual moral and supernatural cultivation but also collective social reform" (ibid 292) under a progressive leadership are elements that seemed to coalesce in the newly cast heroic figure of the bodhisattva that was being promoted in Edwin Arnold's poem.

Though they claimed to be humble students of Buddhism, they operated as modern-day gurus and sought out young South Asian converts to their cause. In Sri Lanka, Olcott's young protégé, the Christian educated Sinhalese Buddhist Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), was active in the chain of events that led to the establishment of Bodh Gaya as a sacred Buddhist site in India. According to Steven Kemper (2015), Dharmapala's continuation of the "Protestant" reformation of Buddhism in Sri Lanka drove Buddhist monks towards increased political involvement and eventual militarization.[13] One of Dharmapala's major interests was promoting the missionary component of Buddhism. He shared with theosophists a disdain for the popular practices of Ceylonese Buddhists, criticizing Buddhist monks for not acting to spread the Buddha's dharma abroad like many of the brave "padres from England and America" (Seneviratne 38). In part thanks to the "European energy" that initially sustained him, this celibate social activist became recognized not only as a "key figure in both the development of modern Buddhism," but also in "the development of modern Sinhalese Sri Lankan identity" (Salmond 94).

[12] See Hugh Urban: "The Cult of Ecstasy*:* Tantrism, The New Age, and the Spiritual Logic of Late Capitalism". (*History of Religions*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Feb. 2000)), pp. 268-304. He argues that there is an intimate relationship between the "late capitalism" of the West and the recent fascination with *Tantra*, and its contemporary forms.
[13] See Steven Kemper: *Rescued from the Nation: Angarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist World* (2015).

Later known as a *mahavir*, or "great hero," he named Arnold as the "greatest bard of Buddha's dharma" (Prothero 99). In his view, it was the appearance of Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* that initiated the theosophy's "mission of proclaiming the Truths of Buddhism in India and elsewhere" (ibid 99). He was initially moved, by Arnold's romantic presentation of the degraded site of the Buddha's enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, to visit India in 1891 and devise a plan to purchase the land to restore the site as a sacred Buddhist center (Prothero 159).[14] Dharmapala also extended his gratitude to Olcott for his cosmopolitan influence on the Hindus—"six centuries of ignorance has been filed off by the humanizing education imported to them [the Hindus] by the British government and the prejudice which the enlightened Hindus had against Buddhism has been removed by the efforts of Colonial Olcott and other eminent Europeans, and today there are in India those who would welcome back their long lost brothers if they would visit and settle down in India, and carry on the Buddhist work" (ibid 99-100).

Eventually, Dharmapala turned against his mentors in the Theosophical Society. In an essay written in 1906, entitled "Theosophical Degenerates" he writes, "Theosophy is a Eurasian pantheism, it is neither purely Eastern nor Western. It is an 'occult' mixture given to the credulous world by a band of impostors, who deceive the world by plagiarizing Buddhist Pali pharases and Vedantic metaphysics."[15] The objection was also against the Society's universalistic stance on religion, and one of the main issues was the fact that, as Prothero says, the Society's "seemingly emphatic embrace of both Buddhism and Hinduism shared with missionary Christianity and British colonialism an imperial thrust. He [Olcott] was demanding in

[14] In 1885 Arnold published a few articles in *The Telegraph*, a London periodical of which he was editor, drawing attention to the deplorable condition of the Buddha Gaya Temple and its surroundings. He also addressed a letter to the Government of India: "It is certainly painful to one who realizes the immense significance of this spot in the history of Asia and of humanity to wander round the precincts of the holy tree and to see hundreds of broken sculptures lying in the jungle scattered; some delicately carved with incidents of Buddha legend, some bearing clear and precious inscriptions in early or later characters" (*The Maha Bodhi Centenary Volume* 1891-1991), 25.
[15] In *Maha-Bodhi and the United Buddhist World* (v.14, no. 7 (July 1906)), 106.

short, that his Asian correspondents become "anonymous theosophists"—adherents of a new ideology that was not self-consciously their own" (69).

Early Theosophy and Buddhism in India

By the time Olcott and Blavatsky arrived in India in the late nineteenth century, there was already a significant revival of interest in Buddhism taking place within South Asian and European intellectual circles, making it more accessible to concerned social activists (Omvedt 233). Buddhism was being promoted among lower castes as an alternative to elite Brahmanic leadership; the developing 'Hindu' ideology was being contested by various anti-caste movements, starting with Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) in Maharashtra, and Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) in Tamil Nadu (ibid 224: 17). Phule's *Satya Shodhak Samaj* (Universal Religion of Truth) founded in 1873 carried only echoes of the bodhisattva ideal, but interestingly, his criteria for a true universal religion shared many of the same features as theosophy's 'Wisdom Religion' (ibid 232).[16]

According to Omvedt, the Dalit leader Thass first turned to the Buddha's dharma as an alternative to Brahmanic leadership after meeting with Olcott (236).[17] With Olcott's help, Thass was able to visit Sri Lanka, convert to Buddhism, and establish the Sakya Buddhist Society in Madras in 1898. In many ways India's first Law Minister, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1871-1956), became one of the chief inheritors of Thass' legacy. Prothero points out that, though ultimately unsuccessful himself, Olcott had also created a precedent for Ambedkar by working in

[16] Phule founded a Buddhist inspired anti-caste movement in India, along with women's and farmer's movements in Maharashtra. According to Omvedt, he embarked on a career as a social reformer due to his disillusionment with Brahmin leadership in nationalism, and in response to various elite organizations, such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj. He started schools, then founded the 'Truth Seekers" society (1875) (Omvedt 227).

[17] Thass established the Advaidananda Sabha in 1876, and launched a magazine called Dravida Pandian. He urged so-called untouchable Hindus to declare themselves as casteless Dravidians. See Ravikumar: "Iyothee Thass and the Politics of Naming" (*The Sunday Pioneer*, Sept. 28 2005).

India, through the agency of his 'Dravidian Buddhist Society', to convert Hindu untouchables to Buddhism, following the success of his Buddhist reform work in Sri Lanka (Prothero 154).

There were concerns about the direction of the Society due to Olcott's involvement with Buddhism, and many Hindu members wondered if the society was antagonistic towards Hinduism. The leader of the Arya Samaj, Swami Dayananda, had publicly withdrawn his support soon after Olcott and Blavatsky converted to Buddhism in Ceylon, and, according to Obeyesekere, "as Olcott got more and more involved in Buddhism his relationship with Blavatsky got increasingly strained" (2012: 53). She feared the disruption of the Society's more or less amicable coexistence of theosophy within India thanks to the support of Brahmin elites.

Olcott tried to defend himself against being categorized as a Buddhist convert by conflating Buddhism, Hinduism and theosophy. He used the term 'Aryan' as a unifying philosophy and shared ancestry stating, "our Buddhism was that of the master adept Gautama Buddha which was identically the Wisdom Religion of the Aryan Upanishads, and the soul of all the ancient world-faiths. Our Buddhism was, in a word, a philosophy, not a creed" (Lopez 2008:11). Meanwhile, though opposed to Olcott's Buddhist favoritism, Helena Blavatsky was also forced to defend her special brand of esoteric Buddhism, which spread among the parlors of artists, politicians, and social activists in English society.[18]

While Olcott's plan for the Society focused on the cultivation of the rational and moral "Southern Buddhist" elements, and on the call for Buddhist education in Ceylon (and eventually in India), Blavatsky aimed at having exclusive control over esoteric knowledge within the Theosophical Society. She set out to accomplish this after leaving India, amidst a veritable storm

[18] According to Aravamudan, "Theosophy brought a new literary consciousness to bear on cultural communication, something that would generate profoundly comic and satirical effects in Joyce's and Desani's novels, as much as it had serious followers from Yeats and Tagore to Cousins" (111). See also Micheal Gomes: *Theosophy in the Nineteenth Century: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Press, 1994).

of accusations, creating an exclusive esoteric branch of the Theosophical Society in London. It was imagined as a space apart from the widely dispersed exoteric sections that remained under Olcott's charge as President. She lost no time in raising money from wealthy supporters to establish another monthly publication, *Lucifer*.

Madame Blavatsky: The "High Priestess of Esoteric Buddhism"

This epithet was used in a *Vanity Fair* article (1885), and later appeared in the *Times of India.* It surfaced around the time that an ailing and enormously overweight Blavatsky was driven from India under an assumed name, after an investigation by the Society of Psychical Research (London) published a damning report in December of 1885. The famous report, compiled by Richard Hodgson, criticized her occultist claims and injured her reputation by revealing the Mahatma letters, which were used by Blavatsky as proof of the existence of her Tibetan Masters, to be fraudulent.[19] This 200-page report only added to the tensions that had been mounting between her and Olcott. She eventually settled in London and demanded a post as head of a new London Lodge.

She became an international celebrity with an impressive list of friends and supporters when she established her "secret class" of theosophy in the West for her accomplished "Esotericists."[20] Blavatsky established her spiritual experimentation within the extraordinary social developments

[19] Helena Blavatsky left India due to the combined assault from Christian missionaries, the Coulomb's betrayal, and the Hodgson investigation. Olcott refers to this as the "malicious Christian-Coulomb-Hodgson assault" in his Diary (Lubelsky 55). The Christian missionaries in Madras had obtained letters proving her fraudulent activity from the Coulomb's, a French couple who worked for Blavatsky. For more see Barton J. Scott: "Miracle Publics: Theosophy, Christianity, and the Coulomb Affair" (*History of Religions*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (November 2009)), pp. 172-196. His dissertation insists on the centrality of an "anticlerical modernity" through English and Indian colonial religious reformers, namely, Karsandas Mulji, Dayanand Saraswati and Helena Blavatsky.

[20] I rely mostly on the works of Goodrick-Clarke (2008), Joscelyn Godwin (1994), and Isaac Lubelsky (2012). See also Sylvia Cranston: *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky* (New York: Putman, 1993); Peter Washington: *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: A History of the Mystics, Mediums, and Misfits Who Brought Spiritualism to America.* (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1993); and Paul K. Johnson: *The Master's Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1994).

of Victorian London, holding court in the evenings at her apartment after vigorously writing throughout the day. She quickly found a formidable new disciple—one of England's most famous social activists, Annie Besant. Besant would take charge of the lodge after Blavatsky's death at the age of 60 in May of 1891, and later act as president of the Theosophical Society at its Adyar headquarters.

When compared with Olcott's activities, Blavatsky's interest in Buddhism is often regarded as peripheral to her commitment to theosophy, however the strategic geographical relocation of her Masters to Tibet, and her later emphasis on Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhist doctrine, reflects a particular interest in Buddhism, which influenced her later writings and her claims to an authoritative lineage.[21] Though at odds with Olcott's expressly Buddhist faith, wanting instead to continue in the pursuit of an all-inclusive Universal Brotherhood, Blavatsky often used her own ideas of "Northern Buddhism" to promote a doctrine for elect members.

A distinction was being made by Blavatsky and another key theosophist, Alfred Sinnett, between the exoteric Buddhism of the "Southern Church," which refers to the Buddha's public teachings emphasized by Olcott and Dharmapala, and the "schools of the Northern Church," which Blavatsky described as being "established in those countries to which his initiated Arhats retired after the Master's [Gautama Buddha] death" (Blavatsky 1883: 304-05). Blavatsky had confirmed in *The Theosophist* (1883) that Koot Hoomi Lal Sing (one of her mysterious Mahatmas) had been disseminating "Northern Buddhist," or "esoteric Arhat doctrine," which had little in common with "popular, dogmatic Buddhism," but was identical with the inner teachings of the Mahayana school of Northern Buddhism, and linked to the root race of "Aryan

[21] According to Goodrick-Clarke, during 1882 and 1883, Blavatsky regularly wrote about the Mahatmas in a "Trans-Himalayan Tibetan setting." A geographical focus on Sikkim and eastern Tibet beginning in 1882 was a new development. Formerly, the Mahatmas were associated with the Punjab and Kashmir, reflecting the founders' association with a Sikh reform group after visiting the region in October of 1880 (134).

Asiatics"-- the highly evolved spirits who emanated as Tibetan mystics.[22] Though she accepted commonly held views of Tibetan Lamaism as a degenerate form of Buddhism, she followed the nineteenth century occultist trend that increasingly displaced India by Tibet, "as the source and preserve of secret knowledge and as the abode of lost races" (Lopez 1998: 50).

Blavatsky had referenced Buddhism in *Isis Unveiled*, but her visit to Ceylon in 1880, when she took Buddhist vows along with Olcott, was her first impression of a living Theravadin Buddhist community.[23] Due to the public conversion to Buddhism in Ceylon, and ongoing references to Buddhism, thanks especially to Olcott's role in the Buddhist revival, and to Alfred Sinnett's publication, *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), Blavatsky was required to publicly reconcile her Buddhist interests with the Theosophical Society's greater commitments. In *The Key To Theosophy* (1889), she defends her Buddhist favoritism on the grounds that the "Buddha was the first to embody these lofty ethics [of her Wisdom-Religion] in his public teachings, and to make them the foundation and the very essence of his public system" (1889: 14). Blavatsky further attempts to explain the relation between theosophy and esoteric Buddhism:

> ENQ. You are often spoken of as "Esoteric Buddhists." Are you then all followers of Gautama Buddha?
> THEO. ….The mistake has arisen from a misunderstanding of the real meaning of the title of Mr. Sinnett's excellent work, "Esoteric Buddhism." Which last word ought to have been spelt with one, instead of two, d's, as then sm would have meant what was intended for, merely "Wisdonims" (Bodha, Bodhi, "intelligence," "wisdom") instead of Buddhism, Gautama's religious philosophy. Theosophy, as already said, is the WISDOM-RELIGION (1889:12-13).

Her Buddhism became a repository for whatever meaning she assigned to it. If her words felt strange, yet familiar, it was not necessarily because they were magically passed on to her by

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[22] See H.P. Blavatsky: "Mistaken Notions" (*The Theosophist*, vol. IV., no. 5 (Feb. 1883)). In Blavatsky, *Collected Writings* (Vol. IV), 304-305.

[23] In *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky equates Buddhist doctrine to the secret teachings of Pythagoras. Buddha is the "unknowable Deity," an immortal spirit known only by such men as the Arhats who have united themselves "with God" (see pp. 289-291).

Tibetan Masters, but because they borrowed from a very broad historical perspective. Elevated and archaic idioms such as these were appealing as a way to claim authoritative knowledge and combine its archaic Asian flavor, its exotic vocabulary and lineage, with Christian traditions of Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, and Hermeticism.[24]

Blavatsky wrote her second manifesto after they had relocated the Society's headquarters to Adyar in 1880. *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) is comprised of three sections: (i) Cosmic Evolution; (ii) The Evolution of Symbolism in its Approximate Order; and (iii) Science and the Secret Doctrine Contrasted. The publication of yet another massive work added to her reputation. At the time, Max Muller remarked that in *The Secret Doctrine* he "could find nothing that cannot be traced back to generally accessible Brahmanic or Buddhistic sources only everything is muddled or misunderstood" (1893: 785). According to Godwin's more recent scholarship on the Theosophical Society it, "was filled with the ideals of a Mahayana Buddhist" (1994: 331). Yet the theosophical approach remained eclectic and Buddhist concepts were adopted in so far as it seemed that they could be assimilated.

Despite the fact that she had only a partial understanding of Tibetan culture, and little access to authentic esoteric Buddhist texts, her final work, *The Voice of Silence* (1889), written after she had left India, was presented as a Buddhist text she had encountered years before. It was even endorsed by the ninth Panchen Lama in 1937 as an authentic Mahayana text (Johnson 204), and described as real Mahayana Buddhism by the famous Japanese Buddhist scholar D.T. Suzuki (1870-1966). In the preface, Blavatsky claims that the work is derived from "The Book of the Golden Precepts," which form part of the same series on which *The Secret Doctrine* was based.

[24] Blavatsky's appropriation of ideas and terms from esoteric Christian philosophical movements dating from the late ancient world is discussed at length by Goodrick-Clarke (2010) and by Wouter J. Hanegraaff (1998). These ideas are often classified as esoteric because of their teachings on gnosis (attaining a higher knowledge), and emphasis on symbolic or actual correspondences between the visible and invisible universe.

Both works were allegedly written in a sacerdotal language called Senzar and translated by Blavatsky. The mysterious original language, known in the West only by her, was described as the oldest Aryan language. Her translations were thus "part of India's original Aryan, Buddhist civilization" (Lubelsky 215). *The Voice of Silence* is a thin volume consisting mostly of stern cryptic commands given to the weary, earth-ensnared pupil. It often references the bodhisattva image for inspiration: "Know, O Disciple, this is the Secret Path, selected by the Buddhas of Perfection, who sacrificed THE SELF to weaker Selves" (1976: 33).

In these works the greater puzzles of the universe, and her own troubling accusations of fraudulence by the Society of Psychical Research, were all resolved despite the inability of the exact sciences, and of the western mind more generally, to approach the manifested universe from a metaphysical viewpoint: "there is a transcendental set of causes put in motion, so to speak, in the occurrence of these phenomena [occult sciences], which, not being in relation to our narrow range of cognition, can only be traced to their source and their nature, and understood by the spiritual faculties of the Adept" (ibid 56). A failure to understand was due to the readers' own separation from the zenith of the esoteric language, and from their own "Higher" selves.

Blavatsky appeared to flourish on the faith in an institution of Masters and renunciation of will as a way to self-mastery, and her authority often rested on the chords she managed to strike in people's hearts. In Lopez's assessment, the language she uses allocates authority in the power of lineage and the tradition of guru disciple, employing notions of secrecy and veiled esoteric words, sacred puzzles, and dual meanings (1998: 66-69). Her claim to the title of "priestess of esoteric Buddhism" was based on the belief that she had access to a higher knowledge, which could be transmitted to an obedient initiate, or "Lanoo." As an adherent of esoteric paradigms, Blavatsky not only elaborated upon the mystical and poetical narrative of acting as a bearer of

"older," "hidden," "higher" knowledge, she also claimed that her knowledge had been transmitted by a particular means: from master to student as part of a specific form of tradition and transmission.

There is a long history of the importance of the guru in Indian traditions, but it is intensified in the various Tantric doctrines. They are often described as revealed teachings, orally expressed by a deity to a master and then to initiates, surviving this way for subsequent generations. Becoming a guru usually involved specific social and physical factors, such as caste, gender, and ritual knowledge. In Padoux's description the guru, or acharya, must also be "specialists in intensified ritual" and are often thought to be superhuman (Padoux 45-46). The Tibetan tantras that Blavatsky may have come into contact with certainly described a path of a Great Vehicle, or Mantra path, that was held to be superior to the other so-called lesser vehicles of Buddhism. *The* Indeed, *Voice of Silence* contains a deliberate contrast between two spiritual paths of Buddhist doctrine, the esoteric and exoteric, based upon the initiates' aspirations and abilities: "Yet if the "Doctrine of the Heart" is too high-winged for thee, If thou need'st help thyself and fearest to offer help to others,-- then, thou of timid heart, be warned in time: remain content with the "Eye Doctrine" of the Law. For if the "Secret Path" is unattainable this "day," it is within thy reach "to-morrow" (ibid 33-34). Her "Heart" Doctrine was for select individuals, or compassionate bodhisattvas, attuned to the sufferings of the masses, and willing to endure an arduous path of greater renunciation for the sake of others, thus becoming a "savior of the world" (ibid 43).

Annie Besant became spellbound by Blavatsky and her teachings, according to Lubelsky, "Soon after meeting Besant, she turned her into her confidante and marked her as her chosen successor" (214). When visiting Blavatsky in 1889 in France, Besant supposedly experienced a

vision of Master Morya, and like Olcott, was completely inducted into Blavatsky's visionary world.[25] Olcott boasts, in *The Theosophist* of August 1889, of the Society's latest acquisition:

> We have the most convincing proofs that the Theosophical idea is taking hold upon the Western mind, and winning the respect of advanced thinkers hitherto hostile. Among recent accessions, one of the most notable in every respect is Mrs. Annie Besant, who bears the same relation to Mr. Bradlaugh in the Secularist movement in England, as Madame Blavatsky does to myself in our own work. Besides being one of the most intellectual and best educated women, speakers, and writers of our epoch, she is conspicuous for courageous devotion to any cause with which she identifies herself, and the malignity of her bitterest foes has not been able to furnish her reputation for purity of life and unselfishness of motive.

The well-known Victorian crusader, Annie Besant, suddenly came under the influence of Blavatsky's charisma after writing a review of *The Secret Doctrine* in 1889.[26] She projected a very different public image from that of the flamboyant Russian writer. At the time, Besant was a well-respected Englishwoman with a successful political career as a highly influential agent of the secular-rationalist movement. Her conversion to theosophy came as a shock to her associates in leading radical liberal, socialist, and secular circles. Besant immediately tackled the outrage in an article entitled, "Why I Became A Theosophist" (1890).[27] It was a way of addressing criticisms leveled at her by so-called "obstinate" Freethinkers, and a way of spreading the theosophical message. In it, she refers to the connection between growth and change as a sign of

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[25] The Theosophical Society's first French Lodge was launched in March 1889 and its founding was seen as the most significant event in the occult sphere in France in the 1880s. It was while residing in Fontainbleau, near Paris, that Blavatsky wrote *The Voice of Silence (*Lubelsky 215).

[26] *The Theosophist* of September 1889 (vol. 10, 757-761) includes Besant's lengthy review (first published in *The National Reformer*) of *The Secret Doctrine*. It begins with her impressions of Blavatsky as "the apostle of a new revelation."

[27] As well as working closely with the 'freethought' activist, secularist, and journalist, Charles Bradlaugh (who was well-known in India), Besant befriended socialists such as Walter Crane, Edward Aveling, and Bernard Shaw. For an overview of Besant's life and career, see Anne: *Annie Besant: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); for her work in India, I rely on Arthur H. Nethercot: *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); Isaac Lubelsky: *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of Indian Nationalism* (Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2012), especially chapter 8-9, 247-317; and S.R. Bakshi, *Annie Besant, Founder of the Home Rule Movement* (New Delhi: Amol Publications, 1990).

intellectual life and progress, and not the mark of an irrational and emotional mind.[28] She reminds the National Secular Society of its own motto "We seek for Truth," which seemingly echoed the theosophy's own slogan, "Nothing Higher Than the Truth."

Summary

On the one hand, Blavatsky and Olcott relied on the double rhetoric of anti-Christian and inclusive language to draw in South Asian and European members, elaborating on the notion that the materialistic "West" was in need of the spiritual wisdom of the so-called "East." On the other, they depended western comparative scholarship and on aspects of Protestantism, ancient Christianity, and modern scientific theory as a way of reinterpreting Buddhism as the doctrine of their 'Wisdom Religion'. Blavatsky's esoteric Buddhism differed from Olcott's Protestant Buddhism, and thus promoted more than one "grammar" relative to their inclinations and interests. In both cases particular colonial resources and circumstances determined their language of "Guru English": a term coined by Aravamudan to describe what happens when indigenous religious and cultural concepts are represented in modern terms. Moreover, the distinction being made by Blavatsky and Olcott between exoteric doctrine and inner individual esoteric quests "found its elaboration in print and in the promotional culture of modern capitalism" (Morrison 4). Despite the call for the revival of ancient tradition, the collective journey to a utopian future

[28] For a critical evaluation of Besant's conversion to Theosophy, see Gauri Viswanathan: *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton University Press, 1998), chapter 6, 177-207. In Viswanathan's assessment, former biographers such as Taylor and Nethercot deride her lack of commitment, and ultimately fail to understand her conversion. A much earlier account of Besant's career by Geoffrey West (1929) does in fact provide a more emphatic understanding, offering a chapter on the conversion phenomena. See his: *The Life of Annie Besant* (London: Gerald Howe, 1929). For another unbiased account, see Mark Bevir's article: "Annie Besant's Quest for Truth: Christianity, Secularism and New Age Thought" (*The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 50.1 (1999)), 62-93, which studies her life stages "in the context of the Victorian crisis of faith and the social concerns it helped raise" (62). For feminist readings see Catherine Lowman Wessinger: *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism, 1847-1933* (Lewiston N.Y.: Edwin Mellin Press, 1988); Rosemary Dinnage: "Annie Besant". In *The Lives of Modern Women* series (Middlesex: Penguin, 1986); Kamari Hayawardena: *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Colonial Rule* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Joy Dixon: *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001)

exposed a modernity arrived at through the framework of bi-directional translation, with English (modern press, literature, doctrine) as the central medium. One of the enduring impacts on Buddhism was the projection of modern (Enlightened liberal) values of tolerance, nonviolence, and occult scientific theory onto Buddhist teachings. Another important outcome was the revival of the Buddhist religion in Sri Lanka, in India, and in a globalized sense. And a less studied consequence was the fact that Madame Blavatsky gave wide publicity to ideas about the primacy of the "Guru-chela dynamic," effectively creating "a space for a class of modern gurus to emerge into middle class and international prominence" (Obeyesekere 356).

The project of recovering South Asian culture was, however, intolerant towards contemporary diversity and there is evidence that anti-Christian and anti-imperialist rhetoric had a tendency to become a caricature of itself. Often interpretations and innovations of scriptural sources were based on free, rather than literal translations. As we have seen, the theosophists built on a Buddhism that had already in a sense been violated. Effectively, as Lopez has remarked, "The decontextualization of texts from traditional use conveys not Buddhism, but a perennial philosophy that is at once universal and personal" (2008: 79). The religion proclaimed by theosophy undercut the traditional authority of the Buddhist Sangha, and became problematic for South Asian theosophical converts like Angarika Dharmapala, whose own Buddhist faith was being consumed by theosophy's extreme universalism.

The strong Buddhist flavor in theosophy carried over to, and was further transformed by, the subsequent leaders of the Society. Annie Besant continued to unite theosophy and cultural nationalism as the next international president of the Theosophical Society and leader in the India home rule movement, at a time when Mohandas Gandhi was rising as a political rival.

Chapter 2

Annie Besant and Mahatma Gandhi's Quest for Truth

The following chapters continue to trace developments in theosophy, by examining how Besant and Gandhi's surprising spiritual-political convictions engaged with, and further modified, modern Buddhist ideas. It is often held that Besant turned, after committing herself to India, from Olcott's Buddhist emphasis to one that favored Brahmanical Hinduism (Taylor 1992; Lowman Wessinger 1988; Viswanathan 1998; Chandra 2001). However, Besant clearly regarded the reconciliation of Buddhism with Hinduism as fundamental to India's glorified plan to, "rise to her former level in supreme intellectual and spiritual achievement" (1939: 100-106). This was imagined as a time when "Buddhists and orthodox Hindus lived side by side" (ibid). Her educational policies supposed that the great Buddhist Universities of the past were the true model of higher learning for Indians. In terms of a social and political utopia, it was thought that under the "Buddhist Age" great progress was made in India, and that under Buddhism's influence the country had enjoyed a "wholesome, industrious, prosperous life" (ibid 100-106).

It is also significant that Besant's conversion to theosophy in 1891, re-location to India in 1893, and her subsequent involvement with Indian education and politics, led to the eventual promotion of Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) as a living incarnate Buddha (Maitreya) and World Teacher, or Messiah. This extraordinary plan was hatched, according to Goodrick-Clarke's analysis, by using the central inspiration of the Protestant Adventists, namely, the expectation of Christ's premillennial return (142). The doctrine was newly articulated by combining it with the Buddhist prophecy of the arrival of the bodhisattva Maitreya, mentioned

earlier in Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*.[29] Buddhism and theosophy were thus drawn further into the orbit of esoteric Christianity, and certain controversy.

This chapter is also intended to chart Gandhi's early exposure to the Theosophical Society in England during a time when Blavatsky was a controversial celebrity 'Esotericist' in Europe. So why use theosophy to gain insight into Gandhi? The literature suggests that he was suspicious of the Society's mysterious Mahatmas and of the lack of moral discipline among its members, but there is evidence that he maintained a broader allegiance with their utopian vision of a brotherhood of humanity and was inspired by their reading of Buddhism.[30] The main events of his life can be separated into three distinct stages, which built links across political and geographical boundaries. These are: (i) his student years in England; (ii) the more than two decades spent building his political career in southern Africa; and finally, (iii) his return to India in 1915. This chapter focuses on the first two phases, while the final chapter considers his entrance into Indian politics.

[29] After HPB's death in 1891 a second generation of leaders in the Theosophical Society in Adyar came in with Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater. Four innovative developments of their new theosophy are summarized by Goodrick-Clarke as: 1. Emphasis on the acquisition and practice of psychic and occult powers, notably clairvoyance, astral exploration, past lives research; 2. The Adventist claim, based on a psychic reading by Leadbeater in 1909, that a young Indian boy, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1896-1986), would serve as the vehicle of the World Teacher, the Christ or Lord Maitreya (the Buddha of the 6th root race); 3. the assimilation of Catholicism and its sacraments into the Theosophical Society (Adyar) through the Liberal Catholic Church; 4. The promotion of the writings of both Besant and Leadbeater. See Goodrick-Clarke: *Constructing Tradition: Means and Myths of Transmission in Western Esotericism* (Andreas B. Kilcher, ed. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010), 142.

[30] After Gandhi had left London to practice law in South Africa (1893-1915), he delivered a series of lectures to the Johannesburg Lodge of the Theosophical Society defining his points of difference with the Theosophical Society. Summarized in two local newspapers, *The Star* and *The Indian Opinion,* the lectures reveal his reservations about Theosophy (see *Collected Works* Vol. 4: 368-70, 4 March 1905; 115-117, 11 March 1905; 405-9, 15 April 1905; and Vol. 91: 40-41, 25 March 1905). In Tidrick's assessment, "The final lecture made explicit his misgivings about theosophists. He criticized their dilettantism, their disregard of the necessity of living a pure and truthful life, without which the meaning of the works for which they had such an appetite could not be understood. He deplored their preoccupation with 'the development of occult powers', and neglect of 'the central idea of Theosophy, the brotherhood of mankind and the moral growth of man'" (64-65).

There is, of course, an enormous quantity of scholarship on Mohandas Gandhi's social, political, and moral experimentations.[31] His political style has often been interpreted as a return to 'traditional modes,' however, current scholarship tends to show how cosmopolitan his message, and its mode of delivery, actually was (Hyslop 30). Gandhi's religion was, as he repeatedly said, a "humanistic" creed, which was partly instinctual and partly received.[32] Though a devout Hindu, and shaped by features of traditional Indian thought, particularly the kind of Vaishnavism found in his home town of Gujarat, he was an individual with multiple cultural identifications, and sources of inspiration. His ideas were informed by a range of dissenting international trends, from Tolstoy to Ruskin to Thoreau. His religious outlook was universalistic and idealistic: "the soul of religions is one, but encased in a multitude of forms" (in Rao 38).

From very early on Gandhi was open to a variety of religious influences, and by all accounts, he was particularly influenced by the Christian teachings of 'The Sermon on the Mount,' which was being discussed in theosophical circles. He frequently compared the Buddha and Christ as equals in selfless service, stressing their relentless social action for the good of humanity. These comparisons were prevalent among neo-theosophical leaders, like Besant, whose imperative was to forge links between the religions of Buddhism and Hinduism with esoteric Christianity, in order to complete the ultimate aim of the Theosophical Society—to deliver a new messiah for a universal brotherhood of humanity.

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[31] Debates continually evolve in the literature on Gandhi. For a recent list of publications by and about Gandhi, see Ananda M. Pandiri: *A Comprehensive, Annotated Bibliography on Mahatma Gandhi: Books and Pamphlets about Mahatma Gandhi* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007); see also, Veena Rani Howard: The Mahatma: Evolving Narratives and Native Discourse in Gandhi Studies" (*Religion Compass*. vol. 1, Issue 3 (2007)), 380-397.

[32] Gandhi's eclectic religious convictions were, of course, also inspired by his interest in a range of faiths. In addition to theosophical translations of Buddhist and Hindu texts, he read the Bible, the Koran, and was particularly interested in Leo Tolstoy's writings during the initial phase of his political career in South Africa in the 1890's. For a comprehensive list of Gandhi's main literary sources see Bhavsar; Lindley; Upadhyay: *Bibliography of Books Read by Mahatma Gandhi* (Ahmed: Gujarat Vidyapith, 2011: 9).

Annie Besant Turns Theosophical

In Besant's view, theosophy professed a beautiful visionary ideal that ought to be realized. In an article published in *Lucifer* in 1889 she writes: "There is a sore need, it seems to me, in our un-brotherly, anti-social civilization, of this distinct affirmation of a brotherhood as broad as Humanity itself" (Besant 1889: 13).[33] Her fearlessness in the political domain extended to her new faith in theosophy. In true theosophical style, she endorsed the law of karma as the theory of ethical causation necessary for improving social conditions: "By every action we modify the present and mould the future; that the past has created so evil an heritage but makes the need the sorer for strenuous effort now" (ibid 22). At this point, her central interests revolved around a set of strong occultist inclinations, which were based on her belief in the existence of great world teachers-- "men of various nationalities"-- with extraordinary spiritual powers, from which, she sincerely believed, theosophists derived their teachings. In fact, although Besant refers to karma and reincarnation, there is little mention of Buddhism, or Hinduism, in this early defensive essay.

By all appearances, the notions of karma and reincarnation, which played a significant role in *The Secret Doctrine,* were a revelation to Besant that satisfied both her intellect, and her deepest feeling for social justice and individual responsibility (Taylor 242). Her membership into Blavatsky's exclusive esoteric Section in 1889 further directed her faith in the human capacity to evolve, through a program of personal purification, in order to arrive at some elevated and salvific knowledge. This drew from a range of yoga inspired practices that focused on the elevation of the spirit through rising to higher levels of perfection.[34] It was a philanthropic and noble process that crucially involved service to others who were less 'karmically' fortunate.

[33] See Besant's article: "Karma and Social Improvement". In *Lucifer, A Theosophical Magazine* (London, August 1889).

[34] See Mark Singleton: "Yoga, Eugenics, and Spiritual Darwinism in the Early Twentieth Century" (*International Journal of Hindu Studies* 11, 2 (2007): 125-46). In it, he recovers the mid-19th century European preoccupation with

Even at this early stage in her theosophical career, Besant's views focused on the ethical and political possibilities of Blavatsky's more metaphysical sovereignty, and she made no secret of these thoughts. They are clearly demonstrated in her work for *Lucifer,* and in numerous pamphlets, speeches, and newspapers. Publishing her first article for *Lucifer* in the June 1889 issue entitled, "Practical Work for Theosophists," she cautioned readers along the same lines of Blavatsky's *The Voice of Silence:* "…not until the lower self is slain and only the voice of the Higher self is heard;…not until personal desire has been lost in the desire to service humanity;…not until this point is reached can power be safely trusted in human hands" (*Lucifer* 4: 271 June 1889).

The central logic of the esoteric Section was that it was meant to quicken the minds of elite members for their actual evolution as leaders, or Saviors, who could command a higher form of civilization. This required following a program of individual spiritual development that upheld the central logic of the modern-day bodhisattva—a life in service to others motivated by the desire to deliver the masses from their suffering. The motivation was humanitarian, noble, and just, and it was hoped that these higher aims, coupled with Besant's more practical measures, would re-legitimate the Society:

> But the sight of noble lives, strenuously and selflessly working for human good, battling against poverty and sorrow, the twin daughters of Ignorance, these will justify Theosophy in the eyes of the world, proving that self-devotion can exist apart from superstition, that clear-eyed Intellect can walk hand in hand with the Love that saves (*Lucifer* 4: 271 June 1889).

Two months later, Besant published another article in *Lucifer* entitled, "Karma and Social Improvement," which was directed to move theosophists from introspection to social action on

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the manipulation of the body to often nationalistic ends through these "highly malleable cultural ideologies", which intertwined with popular thought and practice and were called into the service of sharply divergent social and political enterprises, from Fabianism to Fascism (125).

the basis of an underlying unity of brotherhood, and the threat of the negative karmic consequences of inaction:

> Each of us is, in a sense, a Karmic agent, and if we can decrease human poverty and misery, it is because, in the revolution of the centuries, the time has come for that social improvement to be made. If we slothfully and selfishly refuse to do our appointed share in sowing the good seed, we are generating fresh evil Karma by our refusal, and though the good seed will be sown by other hands and bear its glorious fruit, we are shutting ourselves out from a share of that harvest (*Lucifer* 4: 459 August 1889).

This closely followed Blavatsky's work in which she states: "Sow kindly acts and thou shalt reap their fruition. Inaction in a deed of mercy becomes an action in a deadly sin" (1889: 31). The lessons of elite liberalism are writ large here: in this middle class model, what karmic law presented was not widespread indifference, but a solution to social problems that could simultaneously work towards the greater good, while justifying class status. The doctrine provided a deeper meaning to the lives of individual members who could accumulate positive benefits of good karma, public recognition, and a radical reputation.

The doctrines of reincarnation and karma were widely applied to Christian thought and literature at the time, and this thinking was built on Blavatsky's earlier refinements to these principles, which essentially re-invented the concepts to serve as a "scientific" alternative to Christian morality (Hanegraaff 480). In Besant's view, esoteric initiation to theosophy's 'Path of Perfection' required "profound service to God and unwearying service of Man" (1912: 70). Like Jesus, the Path preached the "law of love" and it described how heroic souls could rise and restore "National Karma" through individual moral effort based on universally applied ethics (Tidrick 16). Following her re-location to the Society's headquarters in Madras in 1893, this emphasis becomes even clearer; in a lecture on the "Laws of Higher Life" delivered by Besant at

an annual convention of the Theosophical Society in Varanasi in 1903, she lays out some guidelines for those who desire to serve humanity:

> The Sacrificer comes across a man who is ignorant, while he himself is wise. Does he feel the contempt of the man of knowledge for the man of ignorance, and hold himself above him as his superior and as separate? Nay, he does not feel his wisdom as his own, but as common property belonging to all alike, and he shares his wisdom in the separate form with the ignorance in the other separate form: and he does it without feeling the difference, because of the unity of the Self (1903: 17).

Besant's 'Law of Sacrifice,' described earlier in her *Esoteric Christianity* (1901), was based upon the operation of Blavatsky's "Distributive Karma," which ensured that individual effort, which entails making sacrifices, benefited all of humanity. It was derived from her reading of the Gita – act without self-concern—and her interpretation of the Bodhisattva-Christ figure as a model of moral conduct, and harbinger of grace:

> Such a one has become truly divine, a Saviour of men, and he takes up the world-work for which all this has been the preparation. Into him must pour all the forces that make against man, in order that in him they may be changed into forces that help. Thus he becomes one of the Peace-centers of the world, which transmute the forces of combat that would otherwise crush man. For the Christs of the world are these Peace-centers into which pour all warring forces, to be changed within them and then poured out as forces that work for harmony (1914: 22)

According to Viswanathan, theosophy encouraged an alternative route for many intellectuals who not only lacked faith in traditional Christianity, but also were "wary of an unreconstructed nihilism" (2000: 5). This alternative course allowed them to "salvage the pre-orthodox aspects of Christianity found in the early mysteries, alternatively dubbed "esoteric Christianity"" (ibid). Within this context, theosophy engaged in exoteric proselytizing using the tropes of Christian evangelicalism, attempting to restore purpose to human progress by using modern evolutionary theory in its doctrine to support elaborate hierarchies of progressive spiritual evolution.

According to Antoine Fauves's argument, western esotericism has four chief characteristics: "belief in "symbolic and real correspondences… among all parts of the universe, both seen and unseen"; a sense of nature as animated by life energy or divinity; an affirmation of the imagination's ability to explore realms between the material world and the divine; and a belief in humans' abilities to engage in spiritual self-transmutation" (in Morrison 3). In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky had described an emanationist cosmology that made use of Buddhist terminology, but retained deep roots in the western esoteric and scientific traditions. Her cosmology created a powerful new idea of the highly evolved adept, who could advance far beyond ordinary human beings, and this became a major source of inspiration for many theosophical converts. J.K. Daji, a regular contributer to *The Theosophist*, writes in an article entitled 'Self-Knowledge and Self-Culture': "The crown of evolution is the elevation of man to the dignity of man-god"… "by hearty discriminate co-operation with the progressive tendency of evolution, one can promote progress to a considerable degree and such a promotion of progress of right individual effort is known as self culture" (*The Theosophist,* Oct. 1889: 31-32).

On becoming a theosophist, occult and class hierarchies converged and sustained the context in which Besant herself understood and explained her own activities. Of course, Besant was genuinely interested in advancing an ethic of active compassion in the practical realm of politics and public policy. The Theosophical Society did voice awareness and concerns about issues such as poverty and the destruction of the living environment under the surge of industrialism and world wars, and the loss of faith in a loving God. Theosophy's moral teachings concerning service and self-sacrifice appealed strongly to Besant's own most strongly held convictions (Lowman Wessinger 308). It was an approach that was a natural extension of her reform activism in England and Ireland: focusing on such issues as population control, birth control, and

workers rights. But it is important not to lose sight of the fact that Besant's political ideology was a kind of progressive imperialism that became infused with the occult.

Before leaving for India, Besant had already been informed in England by the theosophy's idea of India having once been an advanced civilization led by "the equivalent of what used to be called the Aryan race," and the idea of the Buddha as the great "Aryan Savior" (Besant 1927: 44).[35] In Besant's incredibly zealous mind, the Theosophical Society was the result of a natural spiritual impulse known to the "White Brotherhood," and initiated members. They described a Universal Brotherhood that mandated an organized Society in the hands of the highly educated: "the wisest, the most experienced, and the morally best" (1912: 75). This neo-theosophical blueprint of a mystical imperialism, a "higher socialism," or "aristocratic socialism" (Lowman Wessinger 242), informed Besant's policy during her reign as president of the Theosophical Society (1907-1933), and president of the Indian National Congress (1915-17).

Gandhi Discovers His Spiritual Side

Mohandas Gandhi, who later claimed leadership of his country from Besant, first crossed her path during his student years in London (1888-1891). It was while studying Law in London at the University of Oxford that Gandhi first encountered 'Oriental' ideas filtered through the Christian imagination, thanks to his many theosophical acquaintances (Tidrick 10). The romantic image of the Buddha depicted in Edwin Arnold's poem especially influenced Gandhi and he was utterly convinced of the authenticity of the English writers heroic presentation of the Buddha.[36]

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[35] Besant made statements about India as the Aryan homeland before she first sailed to India (Lubelsky 255-256). There are obvious comparisons between Besant's prophesy, at the beginning of the 20th century, of a superhuman Aryan race, and Adolph Hitler's sinister dreams of Aryan supremacy. For more on this see Goodrick-Clarke (1992), and his 1998 book: *Hitler's Priestess: Savitri Devi, the Hindu-Aryan Myth and Neo-Nazism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

[36] Gandhi announced many years later, in 1927, that reading it was his first introduction to religious study (*CW* 35: 310).

Through these circles he came to regard Gautama as the greatest teacher of *ahimsa* (nonviolence).

Theosophy provided Gandhi with important contacts and, as he himself maintained, introduced him to his own culture. Speaking of Blavatsky's book, *The Key to Theosophy* (1889), Gandhi echoed the sentiments of many Indian theosophists: "[her book] stimulated in me the desire to read books on Hinduism, and disabused me of the notion fostered by the missionaries that Hinduism was rife with superstition" (Dixon 2003: 71). Moreover, he expressed that by coming into touch with theosophy, "he had his attention turned to things spiritual, and that, through the influence of the writings of Mrs. Besant and other theosophical authors, his whole life had been affected, and he had been led to realize that the spiritual side of man's nature was of paramount importance" (Lubelsky 272-3).

Gandhi first became particularly inspired through meeting two theosophical brothers during his second year in England. They encouraged him to read Edwin Arnold's best-seller, *The Light of Asia,* and his translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita* (*The Song Celestial*). He writes in *An Autobiography*; "I read it [*The light of Asia*] with even greater interest than I did the Bhagavad Gita…Once I began it I could not leave it off" (Tidrick 69). Apparently, these two works by Arnold were the first religious books he studied during his student days in London between 1888 and 1891 (Anand 60).

The two brothers were also responsible for introducing him to Blavatsky, and the controversial new convert, Annie Besant. He quickly became an admirer of both their work. According to Tidrick, when Gandhi set up his office in Johannesburg, among the pictures he hung on his walls were those of Tolstoy, Jesus Christ, and Besant" (Tidrick 60). In a letter he wrote to her in 1905 he expressed his "reverence" for Annie Besant, and several references to her

in his Autobiography show him paying her his respect. Later in 1947 he wrote, "Dr. Mrs. Besant undoubtedly contributed to the cause of freedom in India" (*CW* 95: 166).

Mohandas Gandhi and Theosophy's Christian-Buddha

The impulse behind much of Gandhi's interest in the Buddhist religion was philosophical, and stemmed from a belief in the dignity, goodness, and genius of human beings. As Alter puts it: "it would be hard to find a truly historical figure who, ostensibly at least, placed more faith in humanity and the power of the human spirit than Mahatma" (112). The particular Buddhism he spoke of was a symbol of his faith in humanitarianism and universal love, a symbol augmented through his comparison of the life of Jesus, with that of the Buddha. Approaching religion from a cross-cultural perspective, Gandhi mentions the consequences of such a comparison: "Once we began to compare the life of Jesus with that of Buddha. 'Look at Gautama's compassion!' said I. 'It was not confined to mankind, it was extended to all living beings. Does not one's heart overflow with love to think of the lamb joyously perched on his shoulders? One fails to notice this love for all living beings in the life of Jesus.' The comparison pained the good lady" (*AA* 22). He later expanded upon this comparison in a letter written in July of 1913: "It is difficult to say who was the greatest among Krishna, Rama, the Buddha, the Jesus…In point of character alone possibly the Buddha was the greatest. But who can say? They have been described by their devotees according to their own inclination" (*CW* 12: 126).

Thought-provoking comparisons between Buddha and Christ do stand out in Gandhi's thinking. There are numerous instances where the two are held as exemplary of a salvific and rarified concern for humanity. Although he held a negative view of Christianity in his youth, and later held the opinion that becoming a Christian "denationalized" a person, Gandhi was able to isolate Christian principles from Jesus and synthesize them with modern renderings of Buddhism

(and Hinduism) because theosophy had, in a sense, paved the way. Connections can be traced, not only to Edwin Arnold's Christian-Buddha, but also to Gandhi's communications, while in England, with the president of the British Theosophical Society, Dr. Anna Kingsford (1846-1888). She had collaborated with Edward Maitland on *The Perfect Way,* or, *The Finding of Christ* (1888).[37] The document represents another attempt in the reconciliation of Hermetic-Christian views of Jesus with the Buddha:

> And so far from being intended as a rival and supplanter of Buddhism, it [Christianity] was the direct and necessary sequel to that system; and the two are but parts of one continuous, harmonious whole, where of the later division is but the indispensable supplement and complement of the earlier. Buddha and Jesus are, therefore, necessary the one to the other; and in the whole system thus completed, Buddha is the Mind, and Jesus is the Heart; Buddha is the general, Jesus is the particular; Buddha is the brother of the universe, Jesus is the brother of men; Buddha is Philosophy, Jesus is Religion; Buddha is the Circumference, Jesus is the Within; Buddha is the System, Jesus is the Point of Radiation; Buddha is the Manifestation, Jesus is the Spirit; in a word, Buddha is the "Man," Jesus is the "Woman." But for Buddha, Jesus could not have been, nor would he have sufficed the whole man; for the man must have the Mind illuminated before the Affections can be kindled. Nor would Buddha have been complete without Jesus. Buddha completed the regeneration of the Mind; and by his doctrine and practice men are prepared for the grace which comes by Jesus. Wherefore no man can be, properly, Christian, who is not also, and first, Buddhist. Thus the two religions constitute, respectively, the exterior and interior of the same Gospel, the foundation being in Buddhism (1888: 49).

The references to Buddhism suggest that despite Kingsford and Maitland's deliberate break from theosophy's commitments to "Eastern" doctrine, there was a continued desire to unite the Buddha and Christ. Ever since Blavatsky wrote her *Secret Doctrine*, a holy union of Christian principles with those of Buddhism were being preached in theosophy as a path to a "Higher"

[37] Kingsford and Maitland's Hermetic Society (1884-87) was created partly as a response to the "eastern" focus of the Theosophical Society. As discussed by Marco Pasi (2010), this opposition marks the point where a distinction between "eastern" and "western" esotericism was originally made. See his "Oriental Kabbalah and the parting of East and West in the early Theosophical Society." In *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretation, Transformation, Adaptations* (B.Huss, M. Pasi, & K. von Stuckrad (eds), Leiden, Brill), 151-66.

wisdom. In *The Perfect Way*, the attainment of Nirvana appears in the drama of Christ, enacted in the processes of Incarnation, Resurrection, Redemption, Ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit (Kingsford 6).

Bringing back elements of the Christian faith was actually welcomed by those who bewailed the anti-Christian language of theosophical literature. In a letter published in *The Theosophist* of March 1884, a Lt. Col, D.M. Strong writes: "At last, the President of the London Lodge [Anna Kingsford] has put into words the thoughts of Esoteric Christians"… "To me personally it has been a matter of regret that in attacking orthodox representations of Christianity, your Society has hitherto been hardly careful to guard itself against the imputation of antagonism to the essential mysteries of that religion" (*The Theosophist*, March 1884: 143). The desire for a true interpretation of religion among theosophists had ironically created a space in which ancient Christian principles and the Christ ideal could be preserved under the banner of the universal secret 'Wisdom-Religion' of old.

It was in Johannesburg that Gandhi elaborated on the connection between theology and political practice. It was also during his time in South Africa that the Theosophical Society had a major intersection with Gandhi's life, and it was out of discussions with the Johannesburg theosophists that Gandhi began not only a much more intensive devotion to Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, but a lifelong interest in esoteric Christianity. Tidrick proposes that, "there are reasons to think that Gandhi not only remained a convert to the basic doctrines of the Esoteric Christian Union [which overlapped with the Theosophical Society] but began to apply them to himself, as a Christ in the making" (45). She points to how his writings are "saturated in the ideology of Esoteric Christianity," particularly with regards to his progress towards perfection (45). In *An Autobiography*, Gandhi himself states that, "Though I took a path my Christian

friends had not intended for me, I have remained forever indebted to them for the religious quest that they awakened in me. I shall always cherish the memory of their contact. The years that followed had more, not less, of such sweet and sacred contacts in store for me" (*AA* 87).

Gandhi's early exposure to theosophy may explain his frequent juxtapositions of the Buddha and Christ in his speeches and his larger cosmopolitan mission—"unless I group unities I shall never be able to unite the whole world" (*CW* 17: 408). The highest ideals of Christian love and humility, which were applied to Buddhism, played an important part in the development of his religious philosophy. In addition to his theosophical introduction to Gautama and the *Bhagavad Gita*, he was particularly moved by the teachings of 'The Sermon on the Mount,' which went "straight to his heart." In his own words, "My young mind tried to unify the teaching of the *Gita*, *The Light of Asia* and the Sermon on the Mount.... That renunciation was the highest form of religion appealed to me greatly" (*AA* 69).

The Sermon, which served his political campaigns in South Africa and India, is one of the most commented upon biblical passages, and according to Gandhi, "The message of Jesus is contained in the Sermon on the Mount, unadulterated and taken as a whole…If I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it I should not hesitate to say, "Oh yes I am a Christian" (Holtom 3). His project to fashion a national program on the principles of the Sermon on the Mount, "compendiously described as the doctrine of Ahiṁsā" (Gorringe 156), was not a passive renunciation of the world, but an active asceticism through self-purification.

Recent writings on Gandhi tend to acknowledge the fact that his religious convictions and ascetic practices were integral to his social and political strategies of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*, which were essentially developed while working in South Africa (Alter 2000; Tidrick 2006).[38]

[38] According to T.S. Rukmani, *satyagraha* took many forms in India: nonviolent noncooperation, civil disobedience, fasting swadeshi, and using cloth only produced in India, which led to widespread propagation of

Satyagraha, also known as passive resistance, was explained as a scientific truth, and a superior natural law underlying all religions. Writing on Indian Home rule while in South Africa, he explained in his anti-colonial manifesto, *Hind Swaraj* (Home Rule) (1910) that, "the force of love is the same as the force of the soul or truth" (1910: Chapter XVII). Later speaking in a meeting in Bombay in 1924, he declared that it was the Buddha who "taught us to defy appearances and trust in the final triumph of Truth and Love" (*CW* 24: 86). These words carry echoes of Edwin Arnold's portrayal of the Buddha's dharma: "Such is the Law which moves to righteousness, Which none at last can turn aside or stay; The heart of it is Love, the end of it Is Peace and Consummation sweet. Obey!" (1926: 158).

The intention to surrender the results of virtuous activities for the sake of others was certainly arrived at from various sources, but when these teachings are brought together a subtext emerges: the comparisons sharpen the meaning of a man whose contemplative gaze is turned outwards to face the remarkable task of liberating humanity. In a way, the symbols of "the Cross, Buddhahood, and Brahmanhood," as the ideal life of surrender mapped out by Besant's "Law of Sacrifice," became emblems for Gandhi's dual crusade against British occupation, and universal suffering. In Gandhi's thought, as in Annie Besant's, through the higher path of love for all beings and through active duty, they could take on suffering for the sake of others. It entailed "daily sacrifices in common human life" through a "Great Renunciation," here described by Besant:

> We talk of the Great Renunciation. We speak of These, before whose Feet we bow, as Those who have "made the Great Renunciation." Do not dream that They made Their Renunciation when, standing on the threshold of Nirvana, They heard the sobbing of the world in anguish, and turned back to help. It was not then that the real, the great, renunciation was made. They made it over and over again in the

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spinning and weaving and the *charkha* (spinning wheel), the boycott of foreign cloth, strike, and even nonpayment of taxes. See Rukmani's: "Tagore and Gandhi" (In *Indian Critiques of Gandhi*, 111).

> hundreds of lives that lie behind Them; They made it by the constant practice of the small renunciations of life, by continual pity, by daily sacrifices in common human life.[39]

Gandhi came into contact with spirituality just at the moment when, "the 'Wisdom Religion' and the evangelical conscience briefly converged" (Tidrick 20). In terms of the greater mission of nation-building in the early twentieth century, Van der Veer mentions that the role of the evangelical project was used as a tool to convert people to a morally inspired existence, one "in which individual conscience of sins and atonement are catchwords within a nation with a mission" (23). In a sense, Gandhi's metaphysical understanding of social justice was thrust upon him. He seemed to accept the theosophy's ideal path, which at times identified *moksa*, or *nirvana*, with a kind of martyrdom for achieving social harmony through personal spiritual advancement. In a letter to Premabehn Kantak, dated August 12, 1932, Gandhi writes: "It is not necessary to cultivate pride or contempt in order that one may be able to stand against the world. Jesus stood against the world, Buddha stood against his times and Prahlada also acted in the same way. All of them were humility incarnate" (*CW* 50: 361).

His own spiritual development was guided by theosophy's principal preoccupation with notions of service, sympathetic suffering, and renunciation geared towards purification (Tidrick 46). Moreover, according to Tidrick, the reconciliation of the "esoterically Christian" concept of "seeing God" with the Hindu goal of *moksa* was a "lifelong project for Gandhi" (47). In June of 1926 Gandhi states, "it is not possible to see God face to face unless you crucify the flesh" (*CW* 31: 69; 29).

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[39] See Annie Besant: *The Brotherhood of Religions* (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1913), p.7. Besant's Law of Sacrifice was modeled on the gnostic "eastern" and "western" teachings rehabilitated by Blavatksy. It dictates that man can become a vehicle for the divine through controlling and purifying the body. Restraining the "lower faculties" (by prolonged fasting, prayer, ect.) was said to shape the body to the needs of the "Higher Consciousness." For Besant, following Blavatsky, renunciation was the secret to achieving the "Life Divine" for the purpose of saving mankind.

According to Tidrick, Gandhi strayed from "the traditional Indian believer" (20), but nonetheless Gandhi's tactics drew from South Asian beliefs about the power of ascetic practice, and notions of self-mastery through the attainment of *siddhis*. Like the theosophical leaders, Gandhi gave a crucial place to the urgency of inward revolution as the mechanism to bring about a radical transformation of society. This utopian link between the "transformation of subjectivity and the transformation of the material world" also points to broader shifts in the development of a radically privatized spirituality, which articulated new understandings of religious experience (Dixon 2001: 228). Through theosophy, social duty became a blend of Christian and modern Buddhist principals, which were being re-worked into a two-fold determinism that incorporated "inner" individual progress and freedom with external anti-imperial circumstances. Ultimately this course of duty could elevate the right individual to the station of a Buddha or Christ. The mechanisms for this kind of liberation were, however, not always clear.

Summary

When Blavatsky, no doubt the central figure behind theosophy's syncretic program, wrote about her 'Wisdom Religion' she was often motivated by scholarly debates to rescue ancient truths and uncover their fundamental unity, and thus the unity of humanity: "There was a time when the whole world, the totality of mankind, had one religion, and they were of 'one lip'…(Blavatsky 1966: 174). Though Besant resisted western cultural imperialism, her theosophical conversion led her to the presupposition of a symbiotic relation between western and eastern nations, further mediated through explanations of human progress that regarded self-sacrifice as restorative of a commonwealth of humanity. While Annie Besant and her contemporaries employed the language of universalism, they focused on authenticating Blavatsky's ideas of an occult hierarchy that could help save the world-- men of genius who

could help raise their fellow man. In esoteric discourse there is an emphasis on the way humans can belong to the divine sphere; how they can turn into a powerful embodiment of the divine, a revealer and even a savior (Kilcher xi). Besant was uncertain about the effectiveness of discrete social movements occurring in England, and was therefore receptive to these currents of thought. The way Viswanathan puts it: "Despite her keen suspicion of institutional forms of authority she could not resist the allure cast by a center of emanating influence, given the inexorable thrust of her thinking on social duty as institutionally guaranteed and protected" (1998: 188). When she later became complicit in the project of Indian Home Rule, the Theosophical Society saw it as a conflict of interest, but as the following chapter shows, it was the Theosophical Society that facilitated Annie Besant's entry into Indian politics and provided a starting point for launching her quest for a new Messiah.

Gandhi developed his faith after being inspired by initial encounters with theosophy in Victorian England and in South Africa. He was inspired by Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, which was "the culmination and expression of a historically specific wave of interest in the Buddha in the West" that emphasized similarities with traditional conceptions of Jesus (Franklin 943-944). Theosophy moved Gandhi into a fuller appreciation of the moral imperative that one is bound to follow one's conscience, even take on the suffering of others, when it comes into conflict with unjust laws. Distinguished as a man of enlightened ideas and of European culture, who had been educated in the imperial capital, Gandhi chose rather to experiment with more radical ideas: walking the way of a bodhisattva, preserving the idea of self-sacrifice and service to humanity. In the course of resisting racial discrimination in South Africa, Gandhi had developed a novel political technique of mass nonviolent resistance partly due his association with people who were at odds with the dominant establishment at the time. Gandhi's deep

commitment to political and spiritual liberation sustained his movement from British Empire to the turmoil of Indian nationhood, which led the Mahatma to and through a greater transnational cosmopolitanism.

Chapter 3

Spiritualizing Politics in the Indian Context

As the title suggests, the trajectory of this chapter traces the rise of Annie Besant, the occultist extraordinaire, in the arena of national politics, with the intention of drawing comparisons between her promotion of the idea of a living Buddha-Christ, and the emergent image of Gandhi as a national and international spiritual icon. Interwoven in the notion of a modern day Mahatma is a kind of liberal universal ethics, promoting a moral equation that is in part a cosmopolitan concept belonging to a broader intellectual milieu that persisted throughout the anti-colonial campaign. This cosmopolitanism describes an ethical-political project that transcends cultural boundaries because it fosters universal values. The concept was enhanced in the Theosophical Society by the idea that a world federation could only be advanced under the guidance of timeless masters, and Annie Besant felt the need to establish living proof of their existence. This had implications for Gandhi's emerging national liberation movement; it was Besant who gave Gandhi the famous title "Mahatma," the same name by which theosophy called its own masters.[40] Though it came to capture the world's imagination, it was a title he regularly disavowed and is described as an affliction in his Autobiography: "The woes of *Mahatmas* are known to *Mahatmas* alone" (242).

Reconciling Modern Buddhism with the Indian Nation

[40] According to Aravamudan, "the Theosophists helped familiarize the anglophone world with the meaning of this divine attribute well before it ended up serving in place of Gandhi's given name" (232). Besant's distinctive influence on Gandhi became more complex and fraught with tension as the two figures settled in India, and entered into national politics. For a more devotional perspective toward Besant see Dr. I.M. Muthanna: *Mother Besant and Mahatma Gandhi* (Madras: Eskay Art Printers, 1986); A more scholarly approach is Jyoti Chandra: *Annie Besant: From Theosophy to Nationalism* (Delhi: K.K. Publications, 2001), especially chapter 8, 167-196.

Besant, who had abandoned her secular dissent by becoming a Theosophist, had become chief editor of *Lucifer* after Blavatsky's death in 1891, and chief inheritor of the Esoteric Society. She continued Blavatsky's great belief in universal brotherhood, and the Society's "flexible oscillation between the language of oriental mysticism and that of colonial uplift and education" (Aravamudan 111). Her interest in India was not newly born: she had written on the topic, criticizing Disraeli's foreign policy, and her associate, Charles Bradlaugh, was active in his support of the Indian nationalist movement. Bradlaugh even attended the 1889 meeting of the Bombay Congress and was being called the MP for India.[41] Initially resisting Olcott's invitations, Besant eventually went on her first trip to India in 1892 and, according to Taylor, "as soon as she committed herself to visit India the theosophical pendulum swung in the opposite direction to that pursued by Henry Olcott" (266).

From the moment she relocated to southern India in 1893, Besant did appear to favor Brahmanism over Buddhism. During a tour of India in 1896-97, she proposed to wealthy Hindus to establish a Hindu college for boys based on Hindu tradition and culture (Nethercott 62).[42] When Besant, whom her associate Bernard Shaw described as "the greatest orator in England, and possibly in Europe," delivered speeches to young Indians, she reportedly filled them with a sense of responsibility and optimism (Nethercott 69-70). Once the Central Hindu College was established in Benares in 1898, Besant co-authored, with the secretary of the college, Bhagavan Das (1869-1958), a Hindu counterpart to Olcott's *Buddhist Catechism*.

Significant for the future of this college, and for the Theosophical Society, was her appointment at the college of a new teacher from England—the intellectual George Arundale,

[41] For more on this see Joanne Stafford Mortimer's article: "Annie Besant and India 1913-1917". (*Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Jan., 1983)), 61-78.
[42] The college was established with the money Besant raised through various sources, including the Maharajahs of Kashmir and Benares. The college would later become the still active Benares Hindu University (Lubelsky 258). Besant also started a Central Hindu Girls School backed by Francesca Arundale, George Arundale's Aunt.

who would become the president of the Society while in India, after marrying the young theosophical convert Rukmini Arundale (1904-1986) (Nethercot 71). Besant also extended an invitation to Arundale's mentor, the English Bishop C.W. Leadbeater of the Liberal Catholic Church, to join her in India and aid her in realizing her cultural and educational goals (Nethercot 92). Two years after joining the Theosophical Society in 1883, Leadbeater travelled to Ceylon with Olcott to help establish the English Buddhist Academy, and he was also instrumental in choosing Jiddu Krishanmurti in 1909 to play the role of the World Teacher.

Annie Besant, like many western theosophists in India, identified with Indian values and adopted native dress codes; she even attempted to live according to orthodox Hindu ritual regulations (ibid 45). While to most devout Hindus "she was no different from any ordinary untouchable in the caste sense" (Dixon 2003: 81), Besant claimed "Indianness" on account of past incarnations: "I know her [India] by my own incarnated past, and by the love of India, that makes me reckon nothing worth having in comparison with her service. I know her, I love her" (in Wessinger 213). But while engaged with establishing formal Hindu education, and adopting the habits of the Brahmin caste, Besant lectured in India on the essential relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism:

> Hinduism and Buddhism would do well if—mother and daughter—they rushed together again in a motherly and filial embrace, and forgot in that embrace the history of their estrangement, forgot in that embrace the history of their long separation. Then would the Indian home again be at one, one roof-tree covering mother and daughter alike, thus able to influence the western world with one lip and with one tongue, helping forward the redemption of that humanity of which the Buddha was born, and for which He lived. Let all re-echo the words which close the account of His departure: "Bow down with clasped hands! Hard, hard is a Buddha to meet with through hundreds of ages! (1897: 58).[43]

[43] Besant, from the third Convention lecture delivered in 1896 at Adyar, Madras, on the 21st Anniversary of the Theosophical Society entitled 'Buddhism' (73-74)—the other three lectures were on Hinduism, Zorastrianism, and Christianity.

For Besant, the Buddha was still the greatest religious intellectual of all times. She was very familiar with Edwin Arnold's poem; her commentary on Blavatsky's esoteric doctrine (*SD*) includes numerous quotations from Arnold as a way of clarifying Blavatsky's message. She even defends the poet's rendition of the Buddha's life against those who then saw it at the time as an essentially Christian interpretation. The importance of Buddhism, the growing fascination for it in the West, the moral and pragmatic social action it could convey, the many countries that had already adopted it as their faith: these facets were never far from Besant's thoughts.

One of the issues the Theosophical Society continued to face in India was the accusation that they were a Buddhist organization. For example, in 1899, the aging Olcott was requested to address a "national society of Sanskrit pandits" and, to his relief, they showed confidence in the Society. It was understood that scoring points with Indian intellectuals was important not only to theosophy's survival, but also to the Buddhist revival. In Olcott's words:

> Owing to my profession of Buddhism, and H.P.B.'s, the Society had always been looked at askance as, perhaps, secretly hostile to Hinduism, and, possibly, a Buddhistic agency of propaganda, though not the least cause had been given for so unjust a misrepresentation of our policy as a Society, the fact is, eclecticism in religion is the least conceivable attitude of the sectarians, whatsoever form of religion, they may follow, and our Society is to-day in Burma, and to a much less extent in Ceylon, suspected of ultra-Hinduism because of Mrs. Besant's bold avowal of her religious preferences, as it was, fifteen years ago, of being exclusively Buddhistic, because of its two Founders and Damodar having taken Five Precepts from Dharmarama Terunnanse, at Galle, in 1880, in the presence of a great multitude of excited Buddhists.[44]

Although he had inaugurated the Dravidian Buddhist Society in India, he maintained it was an entirely indigenous initiative (Prothero 141). In an 1896 lecture on "the four great religions" delivered on the twenty-first Anniversary of the Theosophical Society, Besant's chief goal was to bridge the divide between the two faiths on the basis of universal brotherhood, a shared history,

[44] *The Theosophist* (V. XXI, no. I, Oct. 1899).

and the sheer numbers of Buddhists worldwide. She admonishes the antagonism that existed towards modern Buddhist movements by some elite Hindus:

> Born on Indian soil, speaking with Indian lips, reproducing the noblest moralities of the Hindu Scriptures, recognizing the Hindu Gods, the Buddha is still rejected by the Indian people as a Teacher, though inconsistently worshipped as an Avātara by many of the orthodox Hindus. Why should there be enmity instead of brotherhood, why should there be suspicion and hatred instead of peace? This mighty religion that moulds so many million minds, this noble philosophy that trains so many million intellects, this life—the most perfect in its details of which there is any record amongst the histories of men, evolved in our race—why should you exclude them form your sympathy, why withhold from them your reverence and your love? The Buddha comes to you, a man of your own race, the glory of the Hindu nation, born in the Kshattriya cast, belonging to the Āryan people, teaching the ancient truths in a new form, and making them ready for the training of vaster multitudes. He is also the world's greatest among its teachers, purest and fairest flowered on the Indian soil, this teacher spake the Indian tongue, and loved the Indian people (1897: 58).

Smoothing out relations between Buddhists and Hindus served Besant's romanticized view of early Indian society, and her hopes around its present restoration through national programs. In Besant's mind, if the Buddha had succeeded in "purifying the [Brāhmana] caste, He would thus have restored it to its ancient splendor" (1897: 59). Her educational programs, though geared towards Hindus, frequently make reference to the imperative to re-instill the Buddha's "immortal ideal." In a commentary on Blavatsky's *Voice of Silence*, Besant observes that: "Buddhism as a religion has long vanished from India…but the effect that the Buddha desired to produce still remains to a large extent in the Hindu religion of the present day" (Besant; Leadbeater 1926: 334). Consistent with European thought at the time, the very best of Hinduism was thought to be what it had gained from Buddhism.

Some of her ideas concerning Indian education are mapped out in her 1926 publication entitled, *India: Bond or Free?*. In it, she looked to the great monasteries of the "Buddhist Age"

as the model for India's higher education. She even suggested using the *Jatakas* for details on how to educate and discipline India's youth: "We can, however, reconstruct the outline of the living University from the Buddhist *Jatakas*, wherein we find no less than 105 references to it, showing how teachers and students lived in Ancient India, and the discipline imposed on the latter, sons of Kings and themselves future rulers though they might be!" (Besant 1926: 97). Besant wanted Indians to cease believing in western education and turn instead to India's Buddhist past for inspiration. The discipline she proposed turned towards a kind of spiritual development that used elements of the Buddhist eight-fold path as the foundation for a greater commonwealth. When describing the rationale behind the educational program Besant states the following goals: "to evolve and discipline the mind in right thinking, right discrimination, right judgment, right memory…To make the man a good Citizen of a free and spiritual Commonwealth of Humanity" (ibid 129).

Annie Besant wanted India's youth to revive their ancient traditions and use them to fit the needs of modern society. Building on what Aravamudan describes as the first wave (1858 to 1919) of cosmopolitan syncretisms and nationalist ideology, Besant gained from enlightenment arguments that the "historically particular project of European nation-state formation was an outworking of universal history, in terms of the growth of reason, civilized humanity and justice" (Bose & Manjapra 8). Indians who were active in forming independence movements were also compelled to justify their own history and society with some reference to these enlightenment values (Omvedt 219). This constructed vocabulary of a privileged West and its political vision persisted alongside another discourse around representations of India as a superior spiritual resource. A wide body of scholarship has now established that by the late nineteenth century many Indian nationalists shared the orientalist sentiment that while the West had made

advancements in the political and material domains, it was India's spiritual legacy that could offer a different kind of greatness. There was thus an important sharing of imperialist and nationalist terms that changed the status of Indian religious practice under the development of a new political nationalism, which typically coalesced around certain models for the constitution of education and community.

Besant's Dual Plan: Delivering the Future Buddha while Governing India

According to Nethercot, Besant had publicly declared, shortly after coming to India, that she would never indulge in political activities, and she forbade her students at the boys' college to take part in political controversies (86-87). But the involvement of the Theosophical Society in Indian politics intensified when Besant assumed presidency of the Society in Adyar, winning the votes of ten thousand of the thirteen thousand members worldwide. She traveled all over India, making important connections with the Brahmin elite, which helped with her election as president of the international Theosophical Society when Olcott died in 1907, and in her brief presidency of the Indian National Congress in 1917. She became friendly with Motilal Nehru (1861-1931), even initiating him into the Society, and with Gopal Krshna Gokhale (1866-1915), who had been a member of the Theosophical Society before embarking on his political career (Lubelsky 259-260).[45]

Indian home rule was openly described by Besant as a pre-condition for the triumph of a new benevolent Empire ruled by "spiritual-minded persons." She believed that friendly co-operation between all religions would restore the lost glory on the Brahmins as natural leaders of their nation. Playing into the objectives of elite brahmanical leaders, in her opinion, allowing local

[45] After the war, Besant's position on Gandhi's *satyagraha* and her support of the government's use of force to stop violence initiated by the "satyagrahis," forced many members of her Home Rule League, including Gokhale and Nehru, to resign and join Tilak's All-India Home Rule League (Lowman Wessinger 85).

self-government among certain Hindus could consolidate the strength of the Empire. As Viswanathan points out, Annie Besant's more extreme qualification of brotherhood as hierarchy allowed her to firmly maintain that "humanity is brotherhood, but brotherhood does not mean identity, and brotherhood does not imply a flat dead level of absolute similarity and so-called equality…. The wise are not equal to the ignorant…The genius of the Empire is to make every nation that you conquer feel that you bring them into the Imperial Family, that they and you from that time forward are brothers" (1998: 195).

The Indian National Congress, which was "the principal modern political body in Indian up until the country's independence in 1947," had already been created under the influence of a theosophical vision (Lubelsky 247).[46] Allan Octavian Hume (1829-1912), the man behind its foundation in 1885, was a strong proponent of theosophy, and the connection between these two organizations drew grew closer under Besant's leadership. Important to note is that before re-locating to India, Gandhi expressed his own gratitude to Hume (whom he also refers to as "Mr. Dadabhai") for being the "author of Nationalism": "Had not the Grand Old Man of India prepared the soil, our young men could not have even spoken about Home Rule. How can we forget what Mr. Hume has written, how he has lashed us into action, and with what effort he has awakened us, in order to achieve the objects of the Congress?" (Gandhi 1910: 5). Gandhi believed that the mature "political wisdom" of the English should not be rejected. He saw the model promoted by Congress political elites, at this point, as a necessary rung in the evolution of India from a "child-like state." At this early point in his career he considered figures like Hume and Gokhal as elders that India, in its infancy, needed to follow.

[46] See Mark Bevir: "Theosophy and the Origins of the National Congress" (*International Journal of Hindu Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1/3 (Feb. 2003)), pp. 99-115. And Travis Hanes III: "On the Origins of the Indian National Congress: A Case Study of Cross-Cultural Synthesis" (*Journal of World History*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring, 1993)), 69-68. For more extensive information on the topic, see Mehrotra, S. R.: *The Emergence of the Indian National Congress* (Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1971).

Annie Besant launched a Home Rule League for India in 1915, as an auxiliary of the Indian National Congress. Shortly before this, in 1914, she founded two newspapers as the platform for the promotion of ideas on self-government: *The Commonwealth* and *New India*. Thanks to "her experience as a journalist and publisher" she was able to construct an efficient propaganda machine in India (Lubelsky 213). Because the articles appearing in the newspapers she had founded became so combative towards the British, she and George Arundale were interned for three months in June 1917 by the government of Madras (Lublesky 263). This roused international condemnation, and due to her willingness to stand up for the cause of Indian Independence, and her ability to organize a program of action, in 1917, while in her seventies, she was nominated by Tilak as president of the Indian National Congress.

Locating the Future Buddha-Christ

The focus on a more messianic objective, or "progressive millennial" view, was one she shared with Charles Leadbeater, whom she had invited to join her in India to aid her in realizing her ambitious cultural and educational goals. With Leadbeater's assistance, the messianic objective was combined with the national element into a single doctrine, which "aimed at advancing Indian nationalism from an esoteric historical perspective" (Lubelsky 261). Delivering her first speech as president of the Indian National Congress in December of 1917, Besant defined nationhood as "a spark of the Divine Fire, a fragment of the Divine Life, outbreathed into the world, …The magic of Nationality is the feeling of oneness, and the use of Nationality is to serve the world in the particular way for which its type fits it" (1917: 34). Nationalism was imagined as a divine social necessity. Each nation had something to contribute and for India, the demand for self-rule was a demand for the evolution of India's "own nature for the service of humanity" (ibid). Linked to evolutionism, nationalism rested on the hope that something humane

could be salvaged of faith in God and the inevitable advancement of humanity under the banner of science and industry.

Besant's faith in the Brahmanical *varna* theory and Aryan supremacy assimilated the Mahayana Buddhist teachings exposed in Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine.* Buddhism was important because it reinforced elements of her esoteric Christian messianic aims, while increasing the transnational social, cultural and symbolic capital of the Theosophical Society. The greater familiarity and translatability of Buddhism, as opposed to "Brahmanism," served to rewrite religious cosmopolitanism for urbanites. According to Besant's commentary on Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*: "The word Buddha is used in three distinct senses. Sometimes, as in this case, it means simply enlightened, illuminated, or wise. Sometimes it is used as a name for the Lord Gautama. In other cases it means the high office in the Occult Hierarchy of the Head of the Second Ray, the great department of teaching and religion, which has been described in *The Masters and the Path*" (1947: 364). Besant goes on to relate that the Buddhists have a list of twenty-four Buddhas, "of whom the present holder of the office is the Lord Gautama, who will be succeeded in the far future by the Lord Maitreya" (ibid 364).

Besant describes the Buddha Maitreya ('loving-kindness')-- regarded in some Buddhist scriptures as the future Buddha of this world-- as a World Teacher in order to fulfill certain theosophical expectations of a coming Mahatma. Many of the members of the Society were discussing English translations of writings from devotional Chinese Mahayana schools. Besant and Leadbeater went so far as to promote young Indian theosophists as embodiments of the cosmic Buddhas these texts described. Krishnamurti was the World Teacher, come as the future Buddha Maitreya, and Rukmini Devi was chosen as World Mother, or Kwan-yin. Besant fulfilled her mystic vision by relying on Mahayana Buddhist concepts as sources of inspiration:

"Gautama became one with Amitabha – that is, He became the Buddha. He continues His work on the higher planes, but in the world of men He works through the dual Bodhisattva, whose male form is Kwan-shi-yin, the Lord Maitreya, and whose female form is Kwan-yin, the mysterious companion and *shakti* of the former in almost all religions" (Besant 1947: 683).

While Gandhi was pioneering his passive resistance experiments in South Africa, Besant was promoting the idea of the coming of a World Teacher, a Buddha, a Christ. This anticipation had been a common one in esoteric, and more ordinary, theosophical circles, but it was not until the end of a lecture at Madras on December 31st 1908, not long before she set out on her annual tour of Europe and America, that she declared it publicly: "In speaking of the bodhisattva and his position in the occult hierarchy, she proclaimed: "Among the mightiest of the Hierarchy is His place, Teacher and Guide, whom even the Masters call Their ROCK OF AGES. High above Them, They bow before Him, and yet He will deign once more to tread our mortal ways" (Nethercot 128).

This plan would lead to the eventual mystical initiation and education of a 14 year old Telugu Brahmin boy named by Leadbeater in 1909 as the embodiment of their Christian and 'Buddhistically' inspired vision. By 1929, Jiddu Krishnamurti renounced his leadership role, and threw the Theosophical Society into its longest lasting crisis. He argued that "Truth is a pathless land….Truth, being limitless,…cannot be organized: nor should any organization be formed to lead or to coerce people along any particular path" (Dixon 2001: 227). Krishnamurti went on to teach on themes of compassion, self-knowledge, and the need for each individual to find their own way to enlightenment. These themes continued to present philosophical teachings with "uncanny similarities to Buddhism."[47]

[47] See Hillary Rodrigues: "An Instance of Dependent Origination: Are Krishnamurti's Teachings Buddhadharma?" (*Pacific World Journal*, Series 3, No. 9, Fall 2007). He finds many similarities between Krishnamurit's teachings

Annie Besant could not succeed in Indian politics due to her obsession with mystical forms, her celebration of hierarchies, and her definitively European descent. This Victorian crusader, who had helped introduce the Mahatma title, became Gandhi's chief opponent, referring to him as a "Dictator," and criticizing him in *New India* for "advocating a new primitivism for India" (Nethercot 330-331). She feared that India would degenerate into anarchy with the rise of revolutionary movements, and was increasingly viewed-- especially in light of her defense of the massacre at Amritsar-- as preserving British interests (Lubelsky 283).[48] Meanwhile, Gandhi's more radical nationalist movement was gaining ground after calling for a boycott on the systems of government, and discrediting theosophy's "brand of occult cosmopolitanism" (Aravamudan 124). Gandhi later admitted that "Dr. mrs. Besant undoubtedly contributed to the cause of freedom in India" (CW 95: 166), but his use of religious idiom for political purposes was ultimately more accessible and had a much more contagious effect.

Mahatma Gandhi: Inhabiting the Messianic Space

By the time Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1915, at the age of 46, Annie Besant had already "built a national reputation as a reformer and Nationalist" and was approaching the high point of her political popularity (Dixon 2003: 74-75). According to Meduri, because Besant's campaign was so successful she became Gandhi's first major adversary, and he "had to fight off her influence in order to consolidate the national movement on indigenous terms and on truths that were closer to what some nationalists believed were the real issues at stake in Indian independence" (1996: 142). Gandhi realized that the desire for political autonomy was not

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and Mahayana doctrine. For biographical material on Krishnamurti; Mary Lutyens: Krishnamurti: *The Years of Awakening* (London: John Murray, 1975); and Pupul Jayakar: *Krishnamurti: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986).

[48] In 1919, over 400 unarmed Indians were killed by British-led soldiers at Amritsar in the Punjab region. It marked a turning point in Indian modern history and was a prelude to Gandhi's commitment to the cause of Indian nationalism.

only among the middle classes, who were behind the Congress, but was also among the popular classes. Writing to Viceroy on April 29, 1918, he states that, "I have been coming into most intimate touch with the riots ever since my return from South Africa to India, and I wish to assure you that the desire for Home Rule has widely penetrated them [the masses]" (CW 17 243).

Gandhi was received with a mixture of respect and distrust by the Indian National Congress due to his non-conformist approach set out in *Hind Swaraj*; at the time Besant thought it rejected the elite version of empire hoped to preserve, because he was openly critical of how English educated Indians had become "foreigners in their own land" and how they were responsible for having "enslaved India" (Gandhi 1910: 74). *Satyagraha* (truth force; passive resistance), rejected by Annie Besant as deliberately "provocative," was an ingenious mix of moral reason with politics, and it has been variously interpreted as Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, and Jain in inspiration.

Because Gandhi located himself as an insider to mainstream Hinduism, the radical reinterpretation he brought to Hinduism has often gone unnoticed. However, as Tidrick observes, "Indians who have written about Gandhi have found it difficult to come to grips with the 'Hinduism' he professed (Tidrick 46). According to Nanda, his Hinduism was often reduced to a few fundamental beliefs: "the supreme reality of God; the ultimate unity of all life; the value of love as a means of realizing God" (6). These beliefs were elaborated upon within the context of anti-colonial nationalism, while under the influence of a religiously inspired universalism being circulated among the 'cosmopolitical'.

Gandhi was himself aware of the new look he brought to Hinduism, which at the time was on occasion regarded as a broadcasting Buddhism. In March of 1933, he defended his religious

convictions by referring to the actions of the Buddha: "My attempt is not to replace Hinduism by another ism, but reform Hinduism. My own belief is that Gautam Buddha himself did not desire to found a separate sect or religion but to rid Hinduism of what appeared to him to be evil" (*CW* 54: 124). In a speech to a Buddhist Association in Colombo (Nov. 25, 1927) he further describes the true nature of Hinduism with regards to Buddhism, stating: "Buddha succeeded to reform Hinduism and Hinduism absorbed all that was good and best in Buddha's teachings" (*CW* 35: 313). At this same time, during his two week visit to Ceylon in November 1927, Gandhi mentions how he had been "accused" by his "fellow countrymen" of "being a follower of the Buddha and of spreading Buddhistic teachings under the guise of sanatan Hinduism" (*CW* 35: 244). In an earlier speech in 1925 delivered in Calcutta Gandhi delivered a similar statement; "Many friends consider that I am expressing in my own life the teachings of Buddha, I accept their testimony…I am trying my level best to follow these teachings" (*CW* 31: 299-302). And on one occasion in his defense, Gandhi says that he "owes a great deal to the inspiration derived from the life of the Enlightened One," and that he is "proud to be accused of being Buddhist" (*CW* 35: 244).

An important aspect of his personal and religio-political quest was the way in which he understood Buddhist teachings as an integral part of the poetic backdrop of India's morally pure past, and its anticipated freedom. Gandhi repeatedly mentioned that the spirit of Buddhism dominated India. His first public reference to Buddhism on his return to India was made at the Missionary Conference in Madras in 1917. He stated that Hinduism was a mighty force because of its underlying *swadeshi* (self-sufficiency), and that it was erroneous to think that it had driven out Buddhism (*CW* 5: 152; 16: 106). His exposure to orientalist rhetoric on Buddhism is perhaps the hidden rationale that enabled him to make such statements in 1927 and 1928 to the Buddhists

of Ceylon: "It is my deliberate opinion that the essential part of the teachings of the Buddha now forms an integral part of Hinduism," and, "In Hindu culture, Buddhistic culture is necessarily included for the simple reason that Buddha himself was an Indian—a Hindu amongst Hindus. [I have] never seen anything in my life to warrant belief that he renounced Hinduism and adopted a new faith" (*CW* 35: 244; 326). The philanthropist Annie Besant delivered the same message in Adyar that year: "We should never forget that Gotama was born and brought up and lived and died a Hindu. His teaching, far-reaching and original as it was, and really subversive of the religion of the day, was Indian throughout" (1897: 41).

Gandhi held clear ideas about what Buddhist practice should look like. Reflecting on his first visit to Burma in 1902, Gandhi states in his autobiography that, "I was pained by their [the monks] lethargy. I did not like the innumerable little candles burning in the temple, and the rats running about the sanctum brought to my mind thoughts of Swami Dayanand's experience at Morvi" (*AA* 237). It also brings to mind Dharmapala's earlier rationale for the restoration of Bodh Gaya as a sacred Buddhist site in India. Both these influential figures publicly supported the orientalist view: contemporary Buddhist practitioners had neglected the original purity of the teachings. The more powerful their rendition of Buddhism became the lazier and more immoral were those who ignored the wisdom of the Buddha's message.

Gandhi outlines for the Buddhists of Colombo in 1927 the indispensible conditions for truly understanding Buddhism; this starts with knowledge of Sanskrit, and observing the "five rules of self-restraint": celibacy, truth, ahimsa, non-stealing, and poverty (*CW* 35: 311). He criticizes the Ceylonese Buddhists for abandoning the essence of their religion: "Buddhists outside India have many inconsistencies between [the] central facts of Buddha's life and practice" (*CW* 35: 245). Gandhi expressed the opinion that Buddhism was never properly "assimilated in its fullness in

Ceylon, Burma, China, or Tibet" (*CW* 35: 245). In the same fashion, he states in a letter to Darbari Sahdu (August 23, 1932), "Who am I to criticize a great soul like the Buddha? Besides, I love and revere him. But did he himself set up the organization [of monasteries] or did his followers do so? Whoever did it, the monasteries which were established became, in obedience to this universal law, stagnant and by and by acquired reputation as dens of sloth. Even today we find Buddhist monks in Ceylon, Burma and Tibet sunk in ignorance and the veritable images of sloth" (*CW* 50: 410). The 'universal law' Gandhi defines here as being the risk of falling into delusion without first cultivating inward purity. Writing at the end of his Autobiography, Gandhi declares; "…God can never be realized by one who is not pure of heart" (*AA* ?). In an earlier speech delivered on July 19, 1916, Gandhi claimed that had the Buddha and Christ not spent years preparing themselves for their mission, they would no be "what they are" (in Anand 62).

How exactly does he further define Buddhism for these Buddhist monks? Firstly, it was Hinduism that had "absorbed all that was good and best in Buddha's teachings" (*CW* 35: 313), and rather than being atheistic, "the Buddha said that the Law was God Himself" (ibid: 246). Moreover, Buddha's *nirvana* was not defined by Gandhi as extinction, but rather, as an attainable goal in this very lifetime: "it is a living peace, happiness of a soul conscious of having found its own abode in the heart of the Eternal" (ibid: 246). In addition to the Buddha's "contribution of restoring God to His eternal place," in Gandhi's view, the Buddha's greatest message was his regard for the value placed on the sacredness of all life (ibid: 246). The special importance that he gave to Buddhism located the Buddha's message squarely in India—"I feel that we in India have perhaps more fully, though by no means as fully as possible, interpreted the message of the Buddha…" (*CW* 40: 161). These religious convictions were always negotiating with social responsibility, reflecting a 'bodhisattvic' endeavor of compassion and truth telling.

Ahimsa (nonviolence) became the anthem of Gandhi's social reform and universal religion that was, according to Gandhi, based in India's past: "it is the religion of a Kshatriya. Mahavira was a Kshatriya, Buddha was a Kshatriya, Rama and Krishna were Kshatriyas and all of them were votaries of ahimsa" (*CW* 31: 524). According to Ghosh's comparison between Gandhian and Buddhist *ahimsa*, "the virtues of *metta* [fellowship; kindness] and *karuna* [compassion] together constitute the concept" in Buddhsim (14) The Buddha only mentions it sparingly for the realization of social harmony, whereas Gandhi gave it great importance as weapon against social injustice (ibid 114-115). In Gandhi's opinion, the heart of Buddha's message was the law of *ahimsa*, and its application required a well-tempered and disciplined mind. He was disappointed to see that this message had "only touched but the surface" in the hearts of those countries that were supposedly the repositories of the Buddhist faith. Speaking to the Buddhists of Burma again in March of 1929, he declares: "So many priests are sitting here today. If some of them will take upon themselves the work of interpreting the message of the Buddha, they will revolutionize life" (*CW* 40: 162). And this on the same tour of Burma: "You who do well to own the Buddha as your teacher will do well to explore the limitless possibilities of non-violence…You have, as I conceive it, one of the greatest truths that the world can ever have uttered by one of the greatest teachers of mankind, viz., ahimsa… It can become, if you will make wise use of it, your own saving and the saving of mankind" (*CW* 40: 159-169). Gandhi urged self-purification and penance on laity and monks alike; he exhorted the latter to 'revolutionize life' by interpreting the Buddha's message through their hearts, so as to reveal the 'hidden meaning lying behind the written work.'

Gandhi's religious beliefs were not purely a philosophical assertion, or theistic proposition; he was deeply committed to specific beliefs and practices derived from a thorough exposure to a

sacralized idea of politics. His many tours of Burma touched a political and spiritual chord with Burmese monks and nationalists, even inspiring some of Burma's nationalist leaders, also negotiating British rule, to visit India and adopt Gandhian *satyagraha* (Edwards 168).

The Gandhian concern for nonviolence and social equality has a nuanced history. At crucial times he wished to evoke loyalty to the British Empire in every Indian. In a letter discussing Home Rule, Gandhi explains the Indian necessity, during the pendency of the First World War, to defend the British Government by providing "able-bodied sons as a sacrifice to the Empire" (ibid). He failed in his recruitment efforts because most Indians felt no sense of duty towards the British Raj.

Many point out that the Mahatma was actually detached from the real world in which real change could take place. At the time, the American educated Dr. Ambedkar (among Gandhi's main political opponents) voiced this opinion, and in his mind, the Mahatma's actions were dwarfed by his rhetoric and sermonizing.[49] Viswanathan remarks that, though Gandhi is often celebrated as the savior of untouchables, his vision of "an all-embracing unity, partakes in the language of transcendental mysticism, its lofty and liberal sentiment beclouding the possibilities of real political change for untouchables" (1998: 221).[50] As Ambedkar became increasingly suspicious of all majoritarian politics, he "took a relentlessly oppositional stance to Gandhi and Congress," even accusing Gandhi of manipulating issues for his own personal fame and glory (Dirks 269-270).

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[49] See Ambedkar: "What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables" (1945).

[50] Although Gandhi's official Congress platform in 1905 became self-reliance through the *charkha,* and he conveys images of an epic battle between good and evil in his *Hind Swaraj*: "The British Government in India constitutes a struggle between the Modern Civilisation, which is the Kingdom of Satan, and the Ancient Civilisation, which is the Kingdom of God. The one is the God of War, the other is the God of Love" (Gandhi 1910: Chapter XVII), he vied with Englishmen in loyalty to the British constitution and did not always want to disrupt the tendencies of a Brahmin-dominated Congress. Moreover, Gyan Pandey's assessment of his specific '*Instructions'* addressing the Awadh peasant revolts in 1920, finds that commitment to nonviolence flowed, not simply form an abhorrence of physical violence, but also from a concern for protecting the interests of landlords. He concludes that in supporting the upper-middle classes, Gandhi actually compromised the strength of the peasantry.

Ambedkar's criticism, and his complex political relationship with Gandhi are important to this discussion. However, putting the debates between Ambedkar and Gandhi into context would require a major detour into their different political trajectories, and is beyond the scope of this essay. [51] Each represented separate interest groups, and they both had an immense bearing on contemporary Indian politics. What is worth mentioning is that Buddhism provided a cultural reference for both Gandhi and Ambedkar, each finding inspiration and significance towards different ends.[52] Though Gandhi stated he was "proud to be accused of being a follower of the Buddha," and though he himself said that, "one of the many things for which I revere the life of Gautama Buddha is his utter abolition of untouchability, that is, distinction between high and low" (*CW* 35: 244; 54: 233), he ultimately supported the continuation of caste and imperial hierarchies in significant domains. In Viswanathan's opinion, it was Ambedkar who actually became one of the most significant recent interpreters of Buddhism (1998: 228).[53] As a final critique of caste and rejection of Hindu society, Ambedkar actually converted to Buddhism in the

[51] For more information on the topic see Gail Omvedt: *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1994). And Omvedt: *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (New Delhi: Sage, 2003). Also Bhagwan Das: *Thus Spoke Ambedkar* (Vol.1: A Stake in the Nation. New Delhi: Navayana, 2010).

[52] Ambedkar's strategic conversion to Buddhism was based on an emphasis of the Buddha's rejection of the Brahmanic system of social ordering (*chaturvarnya*), which led to the systematic exclusion of the untouchable castes. This social-political interpretation of Buddhism (which was a major challenge to existing forms of Buddhism [Omvedt 2]) was part of a wave of anti-caste movements that attempted to invoke a non-Brahmin political identity. It was a scheme that also followed Olcott's attempts to mobilize a Buddhist identity in India among low caste Hindus. This challenged both Besant and Gandhi's belief that Indian people should follow their ancestral calling by maintaining their social position according to specific caste groups, or social duties.

[53] According to Anupama Rao, Ambedkar was critical of Gandhi's "penitential politics" because it inflicted a violence of its own on two levels: "first by failing to recognize Dalit's quest for dignity and social recognition, and second, by redefining dalits as perpetrators of social violence rather than its historical victims" See: *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley and L.A.: University of California Press, 2009), 165.

final year of his life, and encouraged the mass conversion of untouchables to Buddhism (Dirks 271).[54]

In viewing Gandhi in relation to theosophy, we may also gain insight into what he felt it meant to be a spiritual leader. The notion of a leader who could challenge injustice on the basis of a religious impulse seemed to be an organic manifestation of the theosophical ideal. Responding to a critic in *Young India* in May of 1920, Gandhi called on the greater "symbiosis" of Buddhist and Christian philosophy to clarify his own sources of inspirations, which describes what Pandey identifies as the real significance of the Mahatma myth: 'someone' who challenges the powers that be, 'someone' who has come to deliver (254):

> What was the "larger symbiosis" that the Buddha and Christ preached? Buddha fearlessly carried the war into the enemy's camp and brought down on its knees an arrogant priesthood. Christ drove out the money-changers from the temple of Jerusalem and drew down curses from Heaven upon hypocrites and the Pharisees. Both were for intensely direct action. But even as Buddha and Christ chastised they showed unmistakable gentleness and love behind every act of theirs. They would not raise a finger against their enemies, but would gladly surrender themselves rather than the truth for which they lived. Buddha would have died resisting the priesthood, if the majesty of his love had not proved to be equal to the task of bringing down the priesthood. Christ died on the Cross with a crown of thorns on his head defying the might of a whole Empire. And if I raise resistances of a non-violent character I simply and humbly follow in the footsteps of the great teachers named by my critic (*CW* 17: 408).

There was nothing in theosophy's version of Christian, or Buddhist, truth that prevented Gandhi from following in the footsteps of these two religious figures. An important feature being stressed about the Buddha was that he was not of divine origins; he had arrived at enlightenment by way of the humble ascetic. And by virtue of his enlightenment, the Buddha was ascribed the intensely public activity of confronting social injustice. Gandhi himself denied that he had

[54] Ambedkar's conversion in 1956 was preceded by two decades of maneuvers by Hindu political leaders to persuade him not to leave Hinduism. By encouraging mass conversion to Buddhism, the Buddhist population in India increased from 141, 426 in 1952 to 3, 206, 142 in 1961 (Viswanathan 1998: 225).

attained the inner transformation of the Buddha: he could not be a modern Buddha because the Buddha and other prophets, "had gone the way they went in order to stop wars." (*CW* 93: 289 in Anand 69). The fact that he could not was "proof positive" that he had no divine powers since he was "not able to establish peace" (*CW* 95: 54 in Anand 69). Gandhi seized the idea that the practitioner of *satyagraha* has to make every effort to lead a pure life, even believing that political violence is a reflection of the *satyagrahi's* failure to implement *swaraj*. This notion of the connection between personal transformation and political reform was greatly based on western occult ideals: traditionally Buddhism regards suffering and social injustice as essential conditions of existence.

The distinctiveness of Gandhi's understanding of Christianity and Buddhism linked the personal life with public service in the form of political action. Resting on the principles of *satyagraha* and *ahimsa*, his protests led to massive nonviolent movements against imperialism over the course of the next three decades. The strong link between morality, religious identity and politics, appears to be the articulation of a kind of ethical humanism with a Christian advocacy of self-fulfillment where, "goodness begins in that subjective experience, but by exemplary action, it asserts its humanistic relevance of what begins there, no longer now something subjectively limited (as matters of taste are) but reaching out to 'the whole world,' making possible a humanistic universalism" (Bilgrami 102).

Summary

In unique ways, both Besant and Gandhi were struggling for Indian independence as a kind of quest for personal, national, and universal salvation. The religious and the political were inseparable in their thinking, and both conceded that certain changes in society could bring about

changes in human nature, and vice versa. Taking their cues from orientalist thought, they spoke of the Buddha as an important social reformer, and of the lasting positive impression Buddhism had made on the Hindu religion, and on Indian civilization. Using the argument that western models were unsuitable for India, they hoped to bring Hindus back to their faith by proposing a vision inspired by wisdom and love. At the same time these creative individuals took practical measures that addressed colonial subordination in a very publicized way.

More than Annie Besant, Gandhi appears as a combination of a soul emancipator and politician. In terms of religious doctrine, Gandhi's "crypto-Christian" (to use Aravamudan's term) and Buddhist course served as the foundation of his philosophy of non-violence and self-sacrifice (232). The figure of the Buddha-Christ was central to the Mahatma's work and writings, providing him with an exemplary model of an ideal self on a heroic crusade for justice. The greatness of his accomplishment was to take this ideal, mediated through the dominant culture, and turn it into a powerful and effective social force on a larger scale. For Gandhi, the concept of *swaraj* (freedom, self-rule) inherently embodied greater individual freedom, equality, and justice. It promised an end to the present suffering and instability, thanks to the efforts of all Indians on the path to moral and physical perfection. Unlike Besant, the way Alter puts it, Gandhi "wanted nothing less than a nation of sober celibates who would embody a new moral order, and not just a cadre of "great souls" who might inspire contingent enthusiasm" (10).

Like the theosophists, he was inspired by a transcendent sense of things that mixed mysticism with liberal strategies of exclusion, which, as Partha Chatterjee has observed, "leads inevitably to an elitism of the intelligentsia, rooted in the vision of radical regeneration of national culture" (in Said 1994: 217). In many instances Gandhi's pacifism was conditional, restricting the *ahimsa* ideal to himself and those closest to him. His nationalist thinking was heavily invested in the

notion of duty relative to caste status, which placed him at odds with activists such as Ambedkar. Gandhi believed that people's transformation was hindered by non-rational drives, particularly those which he and other moralists called lust and greed. Gandhi himself once said that, "Religion, not in the conventional but in the broadest sense, helps me to have a glimpse of the divine essence. This glimpse is impossible without full development of the moral sense. Hence religion and morality are, for me, synonymous terms" (*AA* 24).

Due to the messianic space he inhabited, a little more than a decade after the publication of *Hind Swaraj*, the title of Mohandas had been elevated to the divine status of Mahatma, and Gandhi swiftly became India's most iconic figure around the world. Gandhi remains in the public imagination, popular art, and in the speeches of policy makers, as an Indian nationalist and apostle of peace. Captivating images of Gandhi, which pictured him inhabiting an ambiguous "messianic space" (Pinney 2), came into circulation after his death in 1948 at the hands of a Hindu extremist, which further reinforced a kind of sacred economy. Popular visual representations of the 1970's created a juxtaposition of Gandhi, Buddha and Christ, as "an emblem of brotherhood" intended to "encourage the unity of postcolonial India" (Morgan 173). The spoken and written word still had the power to transfix, but the dream, because of its seemingly limitlessness, also required a visual intelligence if something coherent was to be created.

In the case of Annie Besant, her progressive messianic vision followed the logic that, since Buddhism could be reconciled with a Christian faith, and an elite esoteric evolutionary hierarchy, so too could a Hindu nation, and thus a savior could be miraculously staged in India as the twentieth century ambassador of world peace. This was more than just another way of imagining the national character of India through the tunnel vision of Christian zealotry, rather it

demonstrates what Viswanathan has characterized as Besant's "associative and coalescent form of thinking," which enabled syncretism more so than any "intellectual strategy" (1998: 205). However, her ideals conflicted with the political and spiritual goals of nationalism as they were being shaped in specific localities in India because her nationalist agenda was premised on a different set of expectations. Besant attempted to fuse "the trend toward decolonization with the revival of spirituality world-wide, with India as the nodal point from which ties between nations would be forged" (ibid). Revealing the incoherence at the heart of theosophy's counter-discourse to colonial ideology, she plunged into the promotion of Indian Home Rule, while at the same time promoting Krishnamurti as a living Buddha. Although her political career in India was brief, through turning her focus on India's artistic revival Besant was "able to refocus the national gaze on the artistic and religious practices of the temple, and claim them for theosophy" (Meduri 2005: 70). The Besant Memorial School was created near the Theosophical Society in Adyar in 1934 with the express goal of providing an artistic and idealistic education to young Indians. Rukmini Devi Arundale, who was meant to serve as World Mother, was encouraged through the Theosophical Society to recreate an authentic Indian classical dance tradition, even staging Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia* as a dance drama in the 1920s. Spear has commented on how "the transformative effect of the historical construction of an essential India was as profound in the arts as any other aspect of Indian life" (436).

Conclusions

The circle of this inquiry into the trajectories of theosophy and modern Buddhism, and of their place in early Indian nationalism has come to a close. Progressively liberal and positively occultist, theosophy was a way of reimagining religion as an ethical and spiritual conversation that in principal excluded no one. According to its slogan, "nothing higher than the truth," fragments of ultimate truth could be located in all religions. This faith contained elaborations on religious liberalism in the European sense: that all religions fundamentally share the same truth and are "ways of life," synonymous with moral standards. Theosophists also harnessed to an occult agenda a list of the main forces behind the logic of modernity: European Enlightenment ideals of reason, evolutionary science, civilized humanity, and justice. It's influence was characteristically middle class and nontraditional and, in accordance with nineteenth century occultist and intellectual trends, the movement followed the commodification of South Asia's spiritual heritage by favoring the superior wisdom of the "East" over that of the "West." The shape Buddhism took under these conditions serves as an interesting example of the contours of colonialism.

Among the earliest western devotees of Buddhism, theosophists assimilated the interpretive strategies of comparative philology, regarding Buddhism as a philosophical system based on reason, and the Buddha as the greatest ethical leader. I have stressed how through the Society's incessant and varied activities, modern Buddhist doctrine was further classified and unified by establishing a number of crucial organizations in Sri Lanka, and British ruled India. The Adyar Library still exists in the form the Theosophical Society gave it, and many of the schools they founded have continued under theosophical guidance. I have also discussed how the Society, in pursuing these more practical measures, became the unlikely catalyst of a series of intellectual

and religious struggles at the end of the nineteenth century, when the tide of anti-colonial nationalism was beginning to gather momentum.

In his acclaimed work, *Imagined Communities*, Anderson says of the time: "There was a decline in sacred communities, language and lineages, a fundamental change was taking place in modes of apprehending the world, which made it possible to think of Nation" (22). Anderson further characterizes the era as a "Messianic time" which saw the predominance of two "technical means of for 're-presenting' the kind of imagined community that is the nation": the newspaper and the novel. Publications like *The Secret Doctrine*, along with periodicals such as *The Theosophist* and *Lucifer*, effectively publicized a new spirituality within the culture of modern capitalism.

Their literature was the outcome of a particular orientalist interaction between Europe and India, attracting those who were "alienated from extreme forms of both British colonialism and Indian nationalism" (Viswanathan 2000: 3). The movement expressed a shared concern for finding, within an increasingly secular modernity, a locus of meaning and value along a collaborative set of metaphysical, ethical, and political lines. Much of the collections of speeches and writings possess the voltage of dramatization that resonated with the time. Occurring within an assumed climate of religious tolerance and cosmopolitan universalism, the discourse initially inverted the colonial epistemology of knowledge and power by emphasizing the spiritual superiority of South Asia and challenging western authority. Even though they operated on the fringes of society, their notions of conflict resolution through brotherly love made it an easy shift from the intention to preserve "Aryan and other Eastern literature, religions and sciences, and vindicate their importance," to that of religious uplift and education, setting out new markers for national ideals.

Through theosophy, social duty became a blend of Christian and modern Buddhist principals, which were being re-worked into a two-fold determinism that incorporated "inner" individual progress and freedom with external anti-imperial circumstances. Gandhi, and the theosophists, were part of a cosmopolitan effort to bring about a certain political and spiritual awakening, one focusing on India's legacy as a means of serving up an undisturbed calm. There are of course difficulties in imagining a straight line that can take us from modern theosophy and Buddhism to Gandhian nationalism. There is compelling evidence that the Theosophical Society exercised something of a seminal influence at the time, but just how central was his use of religious idiom and his personal 'Mahatmahood' to generating a mass following for the Congress? Characterized in his early life as a conformist with a strongly developed liberal and moral sense, he had a messianic turn with a mission to change society and evidence suggests that any easy separation of his nationalism and spiritual mission during the early period of Indian Congress is untenable.

As V.S. Naipaul puts it, Gandhi had to work out his faith in alien societies; he was "constantly rescued and redefined by external events" under the stimulus of other cultures (110). He fell in with the Theosophical Society in the very heart of western civilization at the time, crediting the movement for introducing him to his spiritual side. Through his early encounters with Annie Besant and others, Gandhi had a thorough exposure to a 'sacralized' idea of politics, which combined social reform with personal spiritual growth. There was a shared vision and response: in spite of the directive to retreat into oneself and be attentive to an inner voice, the only place for a person of religion was in the political sphere (Lal 289). The pattern of his foreign-created Mahatmahood held throughout his career.

His sympathies lay with dissenting and peripheral philosophies, movements, and figures. Even though Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant were being publicly ridiculed for their occult

beliefs in England, Gandhi made lasting connections with theosophists, ascribing to them a critical role in shaping his own understanding of spirituality. He was further introduced to the idea that, through a process of correct alignment with the great laws that govern the universe—laws discoverable through spiritual 'experiments'—mankind can be made perfect. As Tidrick has noted, Gandhi "came to accept and apply to himself some of Blavatsky's and Besant's ideas about the extraordinary powers of the spiritually superior man" (20). As a consequence of this acceptance Gandhi once wrote, "I have been known as a crank, faddist, mad man. Evidently the reputation is well deserved. For wherever I go, I draw to myself cranks, faddists and mad men" (in Lal 282).

Thanks to theosophical renderings of South Asian tradition, Buddhism and Christianity could be fitted into what Gandhi chose to regard as the universal religion of humanity. The highest ideals of Christian love and humility, which were applied to Buddhism, played an important part in the development of his religious and political philosophy. Theosophists would have had no difficulty in understanding Gandhi's injunction to listen to the still voice within, his ongoing obsession with celibacy, and insistence on vegetarianism. Their respective understandings of Buddhism represent different ways of navigating over a large terrain having common references or indicators.

The blurring of borders between Buddhism and esoteric Christianity was in many respects effectuated and demonstrated through pluralistic, cosmopolitan religious alternatives. This made it possible to formulate more liberal personal approaches. One of the unavoidable results is that rather than resisting the aims of colonialism, the consolations of a stronger link between inner transformation and social action enabled its believers to shore up claims of bourgeois individuality. It could be argued that these developments remain within the liberal humanist

tradition of the West, and further reinforce liberal mechanisms of control. Gandhian principles of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* were at times not only validating, but expanding upon the influence of this elite power over the socially oppressed. Annie Besant's conversion to theosophy and involvement with Indian home rule combined to "invest alternative spiritual movements with the restorative power to redeem what England had long since lost" (Viswanathan 1998: 203). As Obeyesekere, and others, have helped to clarify: spiritually oriented, pacifistic, international movements whose form of resistance resonates strongly with liberal movements aimed at empowering the "marginal" can, and often do, reproduce the same hegemonic structures they confronted.

It is interesting that many people today are inclined to disown both the modern theosophical movement and Gandhian nationalism as something of a relic of an earlier age. Their notions of a spiritual and national identity mutually sacralized by reverence makes both movements somewhat more resistant to rational evaluation and justified criticism. But these ideas are not an obscure chapter in our history. There are a set of distinct beliefs seen in the works of Blavatsky and Olcott, Besant and Krishnamurti, Rukmini Devi and Gandhi, and even in the work of the Tibetan spiritual leader and modern Buddhist extraordinaire-- the Dalia Lama, who has been the most visible and influential Buddhist teacher to embrace the discourse on Buddhism and science (Lopez 2008: 28-30).

There is significantly more research that would both enrich and complicate the issues I have considered. The evangelical fever of theosophy was felt long after its disappearance from Indian politics; once the movement became detached from Congress it continued to fashion itself as a site of Indian heritage through publications of texts, public lectures, even creating a space for the reinvention of Indian classical dance. Part of theosophy's success lies in the collusion of various

elements, and the after lives of these theosophical ideals are memorialized and live on in a larger vision of Indian culture through the rediscovered site of Bodh Gaya, in the popular streams of Gandhian iconography, and through the Society's cultural institutions.

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