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2021

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This paper was delivered at the International Theosophical History Conference, "The Theosophical Movement and Globalism: Interconnections, Innovations, and Comparisons." Online via Zoom, 8 October 2021.

The Relationship between the Theosophical Society and Western Esotericism

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1. The Theosophical Society: An Obvious Case of Esotericism?

Since the establishment of the field of Western esotericism in the early 1990s, the Theosophical Society has been part of the field's objects of study (Faivre 1994). The Theosophical Society is today often seen as an obvious example of esotericism, regardless of how one chooses to define the latter. The present paper aims to explore this connection between Western esotericism (the research field), esotericism (the object of study), and the Theosophical Society (as an example of esotericism). Emphasis is placed on the contemporary ostensibly self-evident status of the society as part of Western esotericism. How can we understand why scholars have come to conceive of Theosophy in this way?

I will argue that most scholars avoid explicitly addressing why they consider Theosophy to be relevant for the study of esotericism, which is curious given how unstable the category of esotericism have been within the field. If we cannot pinpoint what esotericism is, how then can Theosophy so clearly belong to it? As I will argue, there are different ways in which Theosophy *is* of relevance for the study of esotericism. However, given how historical Theosophists likely understood and used the words "esoteric" and "esotericism," it might make more sense to speak of esotericism *within* the Theosophical Society, rather than assuming that the historical Theosophical Society itself *was* esoteric. Being more precise about what makes the Theosophy an esoteric current might also open up for a less monolithic and more nuanced view of how we can understand the historical Theosophical Society today.

2. Two Views on Esotericism

Western esotericism has, during its thirty-something years as an academic research field, witnessed many debates regarding the nature and definition of its object of study. Some recent attempts have been made to summarize these debates and the many approaches to esotericism that have been suggested, and an extensive overview of these is beyond the scope of the present paper. In a very simplified view, however, it can be argued that individuals partaking in these debates tend to cluster around two positions: esotericism *as* tradition (whether historical, constructed by scholars, or imagined), or as a dimension *of* traditions. This latter view is and has for a long time been the popular understanding of the term, harking back to the ancient Greek context where *eso* meant roughly "inner." Scholars of esotericism have tended to avoid reproducing this understanding—which has historically also been that of esotericists—by positing that is esotericism is best understood as a theoretical construct rather than something to be taken as a phenomenon that exists by its own right.

The tendency to view esotericism as a theoretical construct goes back to Antoine Faivre (1994), who constructed Western esotericism as a methodological tool to characterize a set of historical source material. During the time that Faivre was writing his monograph, the previously mentioned popular understanding of esotericism dominated Academia, with scholars approaching what Faivre came to view as "Western esotericism" in ways that he considered as either too reductionistic or essentialist. To avoid these two extremes, Faivre attempted to offer a more precise and empirically grounded understanding of the term.

While it has been widely influential, Faivre's historical approach to esotericism has been criticized for relying on a textual canon that appears to have been constructed by esotericists, rather than being a neutral scholarly construct (Asprem and Strube 2021). The standard esoteric canon, in other words, might effectively reaffirm rather than complicate emic views of a universal esoteric tradition.

3. Theosophy and Esotericism

While the scholarly understanding of "esotericism" has been picked apart and put together numerous times, resulting in a million different takes on what esotericism is or how it should be understood, it appears as though virtually every scholar in the field agree that Theosophy is a form

of esotericism and the Theosophical Society an esoteric organization. Often considered the starting point for the establishment of the field of Western esotericism, Faivre's 1994 monograph included Theosophy as a modern esoteric current, seemingly due to the sources that they drew on and because of the claim to stand in tradition to the older theosophy, e.g., that of Jakob Böhme and other theosophers.

Though it might seem obvious that the Theosophical Society belong to esotericism, very little has been written regarding the relationship between this movement and the term. In fact, when scholars refer to Theosophy as esoteric, most do not explain why they do. This brings me to the following question: why do scholars today appear to take for granted that historical Theosophy constitutes a form of esotericism? To approach this question, I will survey two different approaches to both esotericism and the Theosophical Society from within the field of Western esotericism.

4. Two Views on Theosophy

Theosophy research is booming within and beyond the field of Western esotericism. Every year sees the publication of numerous monographs, anthologies, articles, conference papers, student theses and dissertations that cover Theosophy. Scholars are speaking of a sort of transcultural turn within Theosophy scholarship, with more and more individuals considering previously neglected aspects of the subject, such as individuals and groups beyond the first society and Theosophy's global and colonial dimensions (Chajes 2021). Two publications that can be placed prior to and after this turn are Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein's *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (2013) and Hans-Martin Krämer and Julian Strube's *Theosophy Across Boundaries* (2020). While the first work is intended as a guidebook to Theosophical history from the first Theosopical Society's beginning to the Theosophical movement's later off-shoots, focusing almost entirely on white, "Western" Theosophists, the second book casts the net wider and emphasizes Theosophy's global entanglements. Though the two approaches to Theosophy differ widely, both books identify Theosophy with esotericism, albeit in different ways.

Out of the two, only Hammer and Rothstein are transparent regarding why they characterize the Theosophical Society as esoteric: "Blavatsky's Theosophy inscribes itself in the history of Western esotericism by borrowing massively from Hermetism, Kabbalah, Gnosticism, magic, Freemasonry, and other earlier esoteric currents" (2013:8). In other words, this work is

organized around a Faivrean understanding of esotericism, wherein the Theosophical Society is seen as the modern heir to a much older tradition that emerged in "the West." This might account for why these authors focus entirely on "Western" Theosophy, something which later scholars have critiqued as it gives a false, "Westernized" image of a global organization (Strube 2021).

Krämer and Strube belong to such critics, arguing for the global character of both Theosophy and esotericism more generally. While they do not offer an explicit definition of esotericism itself, they locate the emergence of it in modernity, and regard the Theosophical Society as "perhaps the most relevant and instructive example" regarding esotericism's global character (2020:3). In earlier publications, Strube has situated the emergence of the notion of an *ésotérisme occidental* as the product of polemical identity formation within late-1800s occultist France (2017). Similarly, I have argued for the construction of something akin to "Western esotericism" by G.R.S. Mead (Gruffman 2021). In 1891, he urged "Western Theosophists" to study "Western sources," identified as the "fragments of religion, philosophy and mythology which have come down to us from the initiated ancients, and which, when not entirely suppressed, have been the most infamously misinterpreted" (Mead 1891a:479). The sources that he lists largely mirror those of Faivre, which further problematizes the notion of Western esotericism as being merely a theoretical construct. Strube also highlights the role of Theosophy in the production of this category, not least because Blavatsky appears to have borrowed her concept of "occultism" from the man responsible for coining the term, the famed magician Éliphas Lévi (1810–1875). It is noteworthy, however, that it is *occultism* that Blavatsky refers to in her early writings, not *esotericism*, a term that enters much later in her writing.

In addition to Lévi, Strube brings attention to the role of Papus (pen name of Gérard Encausse, 1865–1916), who in the early 1890s left Theosophy to form a counter-organization to the Theosophical Society. Papus, who viewed the Theosophical Society as a *mouvement oriental* dedicated to the study of esoteric Buddhism, disliked the "Eastern" turn that the society had taken, similarly to how many British Theosophists reacted (as conceptualized as "the Hermetic turn" within Theosophy, a term coined by Joscelyn Godwin in 1994) (Papus 1887:34). In a nationalistic fervor, Papus formed the organization *Groupe indépendant d'études ésotériques*, which would focus on French occultism and a perceived indigenous "French" or "Western" tradition.

Seeing as the Theosophical Society was considered to be an occultist group informed by Buddhist esotericism by Papus and others, the formation of this "Western" form of occultism and the notion of "Western" esoteric studies was largely created in response to the later orientation of Theosophy. In other words, Papus' view of Theosophy gives us a clue as to how the Theosophical Society was conceived of others, which is appears to be why Strube (2017) regards Theosophy as an esoteric organization. This is a strong case for how we might conceive of Theosophy in regards to esotericism. However, it is notable that Papus never explicitly characterized Theosophy as an esoteric organization – rather, he emphasized Theosophy's esoteric *understanding* of Buddhism.

Moreover, it appears as though Lévi, Papus, and other French occultists used the terms "esoteric" and "occult" together in a way that clearly constructs them as twin concepts. While Blavatsky was definitely informed by a French understanding of occultism, I have not yet encountered the same type of conflation of the two terms among Theosophists. Rather, early Theosophists appear to use the two terms to denote related but distinct concepts that are joined together because they are both regarded as relevant for Theosophy.

The view that occultism and esotericism are two sides of the same coin is common among scholars today. This is evident when one considers the two anthologies under study, which all use the two concepts in this way. Since the Theosophical Society overtly positioned itself as an occult society – evident, for instance, in how often the term is used in Theosophist writing – many assume that this must make them an esoteric society, whether one is following Faivre's definition of esotericism or not. However, as I hope to have shown, this view might not have been shared by Theosophists, as they appear to have used the terms in different ways, where esotericism denoted something more specific than merely being seen as a synonym to occultism.

To illustrate this point, I will present Mead's view on occultism. Following Blavatsky, Mead sharply distinguished between "the Occult Arts" and "real Occultism." In an article published in *Lucifer* in 1891, Mead stated that whereas "the Occult Arts" comprises practices such as "hypnotism, mesmerism, ceremonial magic, astrology" and many more, whereas "real Occultism" should be understood as "theoretical" in nature: "Occultism is not Theosophy in the ordinary sense of the term, much less is it Occult Arts, for an earnest Theosophist is nearer the path of Occultism than the dabbler in 'les science maudites'" (1891b:109). To Mead, an occultist is not the same as a Theosophist, but an advanced Theosophist can qualify as occultists after long

and arduous work. While this view of Mead's should not be taken as the standard view among Theosophists, it is relevant for this study as might help us better understand how occultism was understood within the society. Furthermore, the fact that Mead felt it necessary to separate between the two kinds of occultism seems to imply that many Theosophists *did* engage in the "Occult Arts" Mead described and viewed it as expressions of Theosophy. Characterizing Theosophy as an occult organization, whether with reference to its practical occultist dimensions or its occult theories, appears then to be fitting.

5. Occultism and Esotericism

While it makes sense to characterize Theosophy as occult, does that make the society into an esoteric one? Since we have reviewed a Theosophist view on occultism, it might be useful to turn again to historical Theosophists and how they viewed "esotericism." While "esoteric" and "esotericism" appear less frequently than "occult" and "occultism" in Theosophical journals, they are used frequently. I have not been able to locate an exposition of the meaning of esotericism akin to the one covering occultism by Mead. However, when this term and the related adjective appear in Theosophical books and journals, it is generally not in direct reference to Theosophy but instead used the way it was commonly understood at the time, i.e., as referring to a dimension of a tradition. For this reason, we find many Theosophists referring to esoteric dimensions within Christianity, Buddhism and the Vedas, or references to esoteric knowledge, understood as a form of knowledge that is reserved for the few. This way of understanding esotericism—as the interior side of any tradition, whether religious or philosophical—was also, until Faivre's successful monograph and the establishment of the field of Western esotericism, the dominant way of understanding "esotericism" within and outside of the Academy. This view, moreover, reflects the term's etymological root.

Another clue as to how Theosophists regarded the society in relation to esotericism can be found in the existence of the Esoteric Section associated with the Theosophical Society. While we do not know very much about the Esoteric Section, such as how it developed over time, or what, exactly, its members practiced, the fact that there was a need, or wish, for such an installment within the society is a strong point for the existence of "esotericism" *within* the Theosophical Society. Moreover, it might also help us better understand how the rest of the society was

constituted, or at least members of the Esoteric Section viewed the rest of the Theosophical Society. Seeing as Theosophists tended to view esotericism as related to an "inner" dimension, then it should follow that there was such a thing as an "exoteric," outer, dimension as well. It is possible that those Theosophists aware of the existence of the Esoteric Section viewed the rest of the Theosophical Society in this way.

It is unlikely that the existence of the Esoteric Section is the only form of esotericism within the Theosophical Society. The ways in which Theosophical scholars understood, imagined, appropriated, or invented the various sources that they claimed belong to Theosophy can be seen as another aspect of esotericism as understood in the second sense of the term. Blavatsky and others often interpreted the sources in ways that were unorthodox and creative, and which claimed that, through synthesis, a deeper, richer, and more complex meaning could be found. The act of synthesizing and interpreting sources in this way could, therefore, be regarded as a form of esoteric hermeneutics, or an act of "esotericizing" or "making esoteric" (cf. Granholm's concept of "discourse of on the esoteric," 2013:51). In his many writings on the importance of the society's second objective (the comparative and synthesizing study of religion, philosophy, and science), Mead considered such an enterprise to be what theoretical occultism was all about. Often stressing that no book, not even Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* or *The Secret Doctrine* ought to be treated as "inerrant scripture" that made up or described Theosophy, Mead's view was that each person ought to carry out synthesizing work in order to develop a Gnosis, the Divine Wisdom that lie at the heart of Theosophy (Mead 1908:262). This view appears to be in line with how Blavatsky herself viewed *The Secret Doctrine*. Early on in the book, she states that "[t]hese truths are in no sense put forward as a revelation; nor does the author claim the position of a revealer of mystic lore, now made public for the first time in the world's history. For what is contained in this work is to be found scattered throughout thousands of volumes embodying the scriptures of the great Asiatic and early European religions, hidden under glyph and symbol, and hitherto left unnoticed because of this veil" (Blavatsky 1888:vii).

However, given the strong focus on Blavatsky's books and the cult-like following she amassed especially after her death, many Theosophists (and scholars on Theosophy) appear to have been more interested in Blavatsky's specific synthesis rather than being inspired by her synthesizing approach. Quite a few Theosophists, it appears, were more akin to "typical" religious

devotees rather than being independent students in the acts of "making esoteric" the world's various religions, philosophies, and sciences.

6. Conclusion: Beyond Esoteric Theosophy?

As scholars have argued over how to best understand esotericism—as distinctly Western or global, constructed or historical—the inclusion of Theosophy into the category appears to have gone largely unconsidered. With Theosophy being taken as a natural part of the modern theoretical category of Western esotericism, scholars have even used Theosophy as a means by which they challenge previous characterizations of esotericism. As I hope to have illustrated, there are good reasons for why Theosophy ought to be considered part of the study of esotericism. If we consider the official viewpoints of important historical Theosophists, we can certainly discern that there was esotericism *within* the Theosophical Society and movement, exemplified by the existence of the Theosophical Society's Esoteric Section and in the claims, made by Blavatsky and others, of having access to esoteric insight. If we consider historical Theosophy as a whole, however, we might be mistaken if we consider the Theosophical Society as an esoteric organization. As the Scottish Orientalist John Nichol Farquhar noted in 1915, many individuals were attracted to Theosophy for reasons that had nothing to do with esotericism or occultism, but instead concerned its many different other dimensions, such as the political, social, and aesthetic. Bearing this in mind, one might ask in in what ways historical Theosophy ought to be understood in order to fully encapsulate its nature, scope, and orientation. Moreover, if Theosophy was not, as I have suggested, an esoteric movement *per se*—but rather a current that drew on and produced ideas about esotericism—then it should follow that Theosophy disqualifies as *exempli gratia* of esotericism. Assuming that the concept of "esotericism" will remain important for scholars (not least in the field organized around it) and if not Theosophy: what, then, is a typical example of esotericism?

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