Claiming Knowledge

Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age

Olav Hammer

BRILL

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BY

OLAV HAMMER

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For Lene

non ego laudari curo: tecum
dum modo sim, quaeso segnis inersque vocer.
te spectem, suprema mihi cum venerit hora,
et teneam moriens deficiente manu.

Tibullus *Elegiae*

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PREFACE

This study is concerned with a rarely studied sector of the history of religions: certain currents of modern or post-Enlightenment Western esotericism. Such currents have played a considerable role in the intellectual history of the West. They continue to hold great fascination for millions of people throughout Europe and North America. Nevertheless, they have been largely neglected by scholars.

One could think of several reasons for defying the canons of good taste in the history of religions. In itself, the dearth of scholarly studies in a field that affects and interests so many in the lay public makes the need for scholarly investigation particularly felt. It is something of an oddity that prominent religious innovators such as Alice Bailey or Helen Schucman and their respective doctrines have been slighted by historians of religion. The point of departure of the present study, however, also lies in a second direction. My decision to investigate contemporary forms of esotericism is due to a more overarching interest in the challenges and paradoxes inherent in religious faith and religious innovation in a modern, post-Enlightenment setting. This interest has motivated the restriction to certain contemporary or near-contemporary esoteric positions, i.e. those formulated during the period from 1875 to 1999.[1]

There is a common tendency, probably inherited from the Enlightenment and strengthened in the early days of anthropology, to adopt an exclusivist and elitist view of Western intellectual development. According to this view, the development of science, of technology and of rationalist philosophies are part of a dynamic modernity, whereas folk religion in various guises, occult and esoteric currents, new religious movements and idealist beliefs form a kind of cultural arrière-guarde, stagnant survivals of magical thinking or reflexes of pre-scientific speculation. This study will attempt to show that although such a perspective may be valid at the grandest of scales, as witnessed by the gradual secularization not only of Western European

[1] The former date represents the date of publication of Helena Blavatsky's first articles. The latter is the date of publication of the most recent texts available at the time of writing.

society but of many religious traditions during the last two centuries, it unnecessarily trivializes the creativity of such non-rationalist perspectives in coming to grips with the forces of modernity.

This study, then, combines these two personal interests and attempts to understand some of the mechanisms by which a number of modern esoteric currents have attempted to modernize, democratize and legitimize themselves, adapting themselves to an increasingly hostile cultural environment.

A text such such as this must attempt to find a delicate balance between the neutral standards of reporting and the effect of an analysis that may or may not, depending on the perspective chosen, border on debunking. It is therefore more than merely a matter of record to state initially my stance in relation to the tradition that I discuss. What follows is an attempt to draw up a map of a territory that I myself do not inhabit; a spiritual tradition that in a deep sense is foreign country to me, who identify myself with the Enlightenment tradition. In attempting to come to grips with religious traditions that one does not share, four categories of approaches have emerged.[2] The first, the skeptical, is primarily concerned with evaluating the truth claims of those statements within a tradition that have empirical content, and generally show little or no interest in religion as a cultural phenomenon. The second, the theological, is motivated by the concerns of one's own religious point of view (e.g. Christian or perennialist), with the concomitant temptation to present value judgements as to the integrity of the tradition that one studies. The third is hermeneutical and attempts to reproduce as faithfully as possible the world-view of the believers themselves. Such studies are often centrally concerned with the meaning of cultural elements, as ways of understanding and living in the world. The fourth is analytic and sees such a hermeneutical reconstruction as the point of departure of an analysis that differentiates sharply between the emic (or believers') perspective and the etic (or analytic) perspective. Commonly associated with the hermeneutical approach is the concept of *epoche*, the bracketing of questions of truth or falsehood. Religious questions are characterized as meta-empirical and are therefore largely insulated from critique. The analytic perspective on the contrary notes

[2] These categories are intended as ideal types, and the labels are chosen for convenience and not for any particular theoretical implications.

that the documented doctrines and rituals of the worlds religions vary in all respects and are thus entirely dependent on social and historical context. Their claims are human constructions, and it is therefore relevant to ask how, by whom and for what purposes these claims are produced, legitimized, disseminated and reproduced.[3]

The point of departure of the present study is a sincere attempt at crafting an accurate picture of certain themes within the Esoteric Tradition, an analysis that naturally is based on the statements of the religious virtuosi of that tradition. It is, nevertheless, ultimately motivated by an analytic approach and therefore implies a strategy of reading that attempts to find subtexts that are implicit in the data but which are not part of the self-representation of the religious tradition itself. It is the opposite of a hermeneutical stance, an avowed attempt to subject a tradition that at times sees itself as an ahistorical perennial wisdom to what Mircea Eliade called "the terror of history".

The Plan of This Study

The present study is divided into three main sections. The first serves as a necessary background, presenting some terms and concepts used throughout the text. Since this is a study of a modern mode of religious discourse as much as it is a study specifically of the Esoteric

[3] The difference between a hermeneutical and an analytical approach need not only be a matter of personal predilection. Hermeneutical approaches often build on a post-Wittgensteinian view that considers the only legitimate approach to a foreign culture to be an understanding of what the world looks like from the inside, and insists that every life-form is closed and cannot or should not be judged by those who are alien to it. The hermeneutical approach, however, seems problematic on several accounts. Firstly, it can tacitly accept the presuppositions of certain post-Enlightenment protestant theologies in supposing that religions deal with a non-empirical, transcendent realm. This obscures the border between the meta-empirical claims (such as the "meaning" of life or the existence of a transcendent deity) and the many empirical propositions (e.g. the existence of witches or angels or the efficacy of spiritual healing) presented within any given tradition. Secondly, drawn to its conclusion, such a view is epistemologically hard to defend. Only those who participate actively in politics could understand the world of politics, while the untold millions who vote, comment on the activities of politicians, read newspapers and reflect on current affairs are only privy to the life-form of the spectator and do not "really" understand what politics is all about. Thirdly, as this example illustrates, it risks becoming ideologically blinkered, in that it can e.g. reify myth at the expense of the active process of myth-making, or ritual at the expense of the acts of postulating or contesting "correct" performance.

Tradition, several crucial terms relating to the study of religion and modernity are presented in chapter 2, before the Esoteric Tradition is briefly introduced in chapter 3. The second section, comprising chapters 4 to 6 and thus by far the most extensive, presents what I have called the three discursive strategies. The third and final section consists of chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 7 examines how all three strategies interconnect and form a whole by examining a particular case: how the strategies are used to support the concept of reincarnation. A short summary caps the text.

Note

The present study relies on a variety of primary sources of the tradition under investigation as well as on a variety of other literature. Although there have been a few cases in which such a division has had to be made on somewhat impressionistic grounds, the dichotomy is usually quite straight-forward.

In the notes, references to sources of the tradition studied here are usually given by means of the name of the author followed by an abbreviated title, e.g. Judge *Ocean of Theosophy*. A few exceptions, works quoted very frequently, or which are part of a series of collected works, are referred to by means of abbreviations, thus BCW II refers to Blavatsky's *Collected Writings*, second volume. These references will be readily understandable from the information given in the list of sources. References to all other literature are given in the format Author year: page, e.g. Hanegraaff 1996: 123.

Since the present study deals with English-language literature of a popular nature, the occasional terms in Sanskrit and other languages that are cited will here not be transliterated with philological accuracy but are rendered in a simplified, anglicizing spelling.

All scriptural passages are cited from the King James Version, unless, of course, they are part of a quote from Esoteric sources.

Finally, a stilistic feature of the text should perhaps be noted. In reporting the opinions of various esoteric writers, it soon became overly cumbersome to use phraseology such as "according to . . .", "as claimed by . . ." or "purportedly . . ." in order to consistently distinguish my own statements from those of my sources. My frequent recourse to a kind of *erlebte Rede* to summarize opinions that are not my own should, however, cause the reader no undue confusion.

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Numerous individuals within the confines of academia have provided valuable insights, criticisms and comments on various parts of this study. My thesis supervisor during the earliest stages of the project, Tord Olsson, encouraged me to embark on a project that concerns itself with what was then (and perhaps still is) a quite unorthodox field. Most of the present study was carried out under the supervision of Catharina Raudvere, whose attention to the minutiae of the text has been invaluable. Wouter Hanegraaff has commented on large portions of a draft of this text. J. Gordon Melton contributed with his encyclopedic knowledge of new religious movements. Olle Qvarnström assisted with his knowledge of the Indian background of several esoteric doctrines. I have benefited greatly from discussing Jung's work as well as anthroposophy with Kurt Almqvist. The need to present certain aspects of physics as a background to certain esoteric claims has required me to venture into a field far removed from my own. The help and advice of assistant professor Hans-Uno Bengtsson at the Department of Theoretical Physics, Lund University, is gratefully acknowledged. Johan Modée has sharpened my thought on the philosophy of religion. I have had useful discussions of various points of the theory and methodology of the social sciences and humanities with several of my colleagues at the Department of History of Religions, notably Stefan Arvidsson and Torsten Jansson. My understanding of rhetoric has benefited from the expertise of Anders Eriksson. Special thanks go to Marcus Lecaros, whose insights in the workings of Macintosh computers on quite a few occasions saved me from utter despair. Finally, among all the other individuals who have contributed in one way or another, I wish to thank my academic colleagues at the Department of History of Religions at the University of Lund, as well as participants in various conferences and seminars at which I have participated during these years: Ilhan Ataseven, Sten Barnekow, Inger Callewaert, Thomas Larsson, Jonas Otterbeck, Bodil Liljefors Persson, Heike Peter, Jonas Svensson, Leif Stenberg and Pierre Wiktorin have all contributed with comments on aspects of my work. Finally, the influence of Ylva Vramming should be acknowledged: when I returned to academia after ten years

in the world of business, it was largely her enthusiasm as a lecturer in the history of religions that slowly transformed what was initially a hobby into an avocation and career.

Rarely does the *Acknowledgments* section of a dissertation neglect to thank the author's spouse and family for their support. In my case, the cause for gratitude runs much deeper than mere convention. Most dissertation projects in the history of religions seem to start with an interest in a specific area or tradition, and are followed by a rather arduous quest for some method to apply to the mass of data. My quandary was the opposite one. From the outset, my focus of interest was on the conditions of religious innovation in a modern society. The fundmental questions of theoretical approach were also easy to settle. I could see no valid reason why religion should not be treated just as any other human and social phenomenon infused with ideological claims. Some form of methodological naturalism with a critical edge seemed to be an obvious choice. Deciding on a set of empirical data proved to be a more drawn-out process. One false start even included exploratory field work on religious syncretism in an urban South American setting. The Gordian knot was finally cut by my wife Lene. Her casual remark "why don't you write about the New Age" reawakened an interest in Western alternative religiosity that had been dormant for years, and thereby started me off on this path. Without her, this book would certainly never have been written.

Thanks also to my parents Are and Friedl, without those intellectual curiosity and near-native command of the English language this text would have been a lot less readable.

Much of the source material is not available from any Scandinavian university library, and had to be purchased or borrowed from abroad. The costs involved were to a great extent defrayed by a generous grant from the Birgit and Gad Rausing Foundation, which is gratefully acknowledged.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

An Encounter

Healing rituals come in many versions. One form that has grown immensely popular over the last two decades of the twentieth century is Reiki which, basically, is a method of laying on of hands. Strictly speaking, one does not learn a skill in order to become a Reiki healer, one is initiated. In a traditional village setting anywhere in the third world, the Reiki initiation ritual would probably appear to blend in quite well. Among the activities of the ritual one finds elements which might remind an onlooker of "pre-modern" religiosity. These include stages where the ritual leader or Reiki master walks around the adept tracing certain sacred (and secret) symbols in the air with his hands, and where the master opens the crown of the adept's head by blowing forcefully onto it. On the occasion when I participated in such an initiation ritual, it brought back memories of being subjected to a shaman's *soplada*, or sacred breath, in South America several years earlier.

However, once one begins to gather information on the details of Reiki doctrine and on what the ritual is deemed to accomplish, any illusion one might have held of a truly traditional ritual is quickly dispelled. No spirits, demons or gods are invoked. Reiki, it is said, activates an invisible universal life energy that resonates in harmony with the basic frequencies of the patient's body. No dream time or indigenous culture hero is credited with the discovery of this miraculous force—Reiki is an ancient healing art that came from Tibet, and was brought to the West through the efforts of a nineteenth century Japanese monk. Nor does Reiki require faith in anything whatsoever, since the effects of being initiated as a Reiki healer will gradually manifest themselves as one becomes aware of this subtle energy. As the Reiki master who officiated on this particular occasion told us, we should not expect anything drastic to happen immediately; give the energy time and concentrate on it, and soon the effects will become apparent.

There are excellent reasons to assume that Reiki energy only exists as a cultural construction. The most parsimonious analysis of Reiki energy is analogous to that of the commission led in 1784 by Benjamin Franklin to ascertain the nature and effects of animal magnetism: "it is not, like the electric fluid, luminous and visible; its action is not, like the attraction of the loadstone, the object of our sight; it has neither taste nor smell, its process is silent, and it surrounds you and penetrates your frame, without your being informed of its presence by the sense of touch [. . .] not one of the commissioners felt any sensation, or at least none which ought to be ascribed to the action of magnetism".[1] According to the commission, the effects on the patients, although so clearly visible, were in fact due to imagination, the touch of the magnetizer and imitation of the behavior of other affected patients. Mutatis mutandis, this assessment would be applicable to Reiki as well. With regard to Reiki, as to dozens of other unchurched and more specifically esoteric modes of spirituality based entirely on a shared understanding of how the world works, one could therefore ask how this particular social construction is constituted and made plausible. How can one understand the relationship between the seemingly pre-Enlightenment beliefs of many such elements of contemporary religiosity (vital forces, systems of correspondences, invisible spiritual beings, etc.) and the relatively modern, post-Enlightenment legitimizing reasons given by adherents attempting to explain why such unorthodox beliefs should be accepted? These explanations and rationales and their relation to some of the givens of the modern world are the central focus of my study.

Historical Framework

The Enlightenment Revolution

In the narrow, historical sense, the Enlightenment refers to the current of critical thought that characterized most of the eighteenth century in countries such as England, Scotland and France. In a broader sense, the term *Enlightenment project* is often used to denote the intellectual legacy of this critical mode of thinking. During the Enlightenment in the historical sense of the word, scrutiny and criticism were the

[1] From the Bailly report on mesmerism, as quoted in Walmsley 1967: 135.

order of the day. Established religion, at once a dominant ideology and an instrument of political power, was a primary target of the scorn, wit and critical acumen of the Enlightenment philosophers.[2]

Which were the older religious or doctrinal foundations targeted by the Enlightenment thinkers? In their study of the history of Biblical exegesis, Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg describe a kind of generalized pre-Enlightenment Christianity, a mode of thought that they argue was accepted by authoritative Christian writers more or less irrespective of their overt denominational differences.[3] These underlying assumptions constitute what Harrisville and Sundberg call the Augustinian worldview; an "entire hermeneutical universe" that they consider to be "precritical":[4]

> The Bible was immediate to the reader, not a distant document. Its influence was intensely felt. At a given moment, any passage or combination of passages, even from widely divergent sources within the scriptures, could disclose God's will [. . .] The true church was one with the unchanging, pure teaching of its Lord passed on to all humanity by the authority of the apostles.[5]

In sharp contrast with this boundless faith in authoritative doctrine was a dark view of mankind:

> Human beings require divine grace to live. This grace does not reside in them as a quality. Nature and grace are opposed [. . .] Human beings are pilgrims on this earth. They are travelers on a confusing, chaotic and perilous journey. They are in a desperate search for their proper home. A Christian knows that there is no rest until one rests in God. Finally, the Augustinian tradition is essentially trust in the tradition of the Church over individual faith.[6]

Setting aside the sometimes vast differences between individual philosophers, the Enlightenment worldview was profoundly antithetical to

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[2] It should go without saying that the present discussion of the Enlightenment is a bare-bones background to the study that follows. The complexity and intrinsic interest of the Enlightenment attitude to religion has given rise to many monograph-length studies, to which the interested reader is referred. Cf. Gay 1967–1970, Hampson 1968 and Byrne 1996.

[3] Harrisville & Sundberg 1995, esp. pp. 28 ff.

[4] Although Harrisville's and Sundberg's short description is a reification of the actual diversity of pre-Enlightenment ideologies, it contains enough truth to serve as a base-line from which to view movements that consciously set out to counteract this pre-critical worldview.

[5] Harrisville & Sundberg 1995: 14.

[6] Harrisville & Sundberg 1995: 28.

this Augustinian conception. Humanity is not fallen, we have within us a rational faculty that we can use to free ourselves from our self-imposed tutelage. If our understanding of the world differs from that presented in authoritative revealed teachings, it is the latter that must yield. Even the most cursory acquaintance with education, health care, legislation or science in Europe or North America will confirm that the Enlightenment project is a near-hegemonic part of modern Western culture.[7]

Any post-Enlightenment religion in the West will be directly or indirectly marked by the Enlightenment project. In this sense, even the staunchest fundamentalists are truly modern. Christian inerrantists regard the Bible as factual in every respect, in conscious opposition to the majority view. Their principal spokespersons will, when necessary, attempt to support their positions by arguing from the same basis of historical scholarship and rational debate as their liberal critics. They may argue that the resurrection actually occurred, not only because the Bible says so, but also because there are purportedly rational reasons for holding such a belief.[8]

The Enlightenment has also profoundly impacted on the faiths of non-Christian groups. Judaism has had its *haskalah* and its split into orthodox, conservative and liberal groups. There are Muslim modernisms. Even Mormonism, that representative of a stern literal belief in revealed teachings, bears the unmistakable stamp of Enlightenment thought. In their encounters with potential converts, Mormon missionaries will typically point to a scriptural rationale for belief. One is urged to read the Book of Mormon, "and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost".[9] An elite group of Mormon intellectuals, however, discusses issues such as the archaeological and linguistic evidence supporting the Book of Mormon, or the historical scholarship that might confirm the view of Joseph Smith as a genuine prophet.[10] Similarly, the esoteric cur-

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[7] "Near-hegemonic" is a qualifier adopted to acknowledge the existence of pockets of resistance, e.g. the struggle of Biblical literalists to remove Darwinism from school curricula in certain American states.

[8] Thus, a central trend in contemporary philosophy of religion is the attempt by several writers, such as Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, William Lane Craig and others, to ground Christian faith in the argument that it is *rational* to believe. Cf. Plantinga 1990 and 1999, Swinburne 1993 and Craig 1979.

[9] Moroni 10:4.

[10] At the forefront of this elite stands Hugh Nibley, who has published numerous works of an apologetic yet scholarly nature.

rents that have been formulated over the last two centuries have commonly taken the context of the post-Enlightenment era for granted.

Firstly, modern religions must somehow confront the democratic ideal inherent in the famous *sapere aude* of Kant. Should the rational faculties and experience of the individual be subservient to revelation, in a firm return to the Augustinian worldview? Or should one follow the principle only to accept "what feels accurate and truthful to your own heart"?[11] Secondly, the Enlightenment also saw the triumph of an orderly and systematic study of nature, the development of the ascendancy of Science over Scripture. Generally speaking, post-Enlightenment religions have felt the need to come to grips with the ever stronger hegemony of the scientific worldview, whether by embracing or rejecting it.

Finally, if Christianity was seen as authoritarian and obscurantist, this was a major contributing factor to the positive reevaluation of several non-Western cultures. However, exotic peoples were not described impartially in the mode of the ideal anthropologist, but used as ideological weapons. In his *Lettres persanes* (1721) Montesquieu had a group of Persians criticize the mores of contemporary Paris. Diderot had a fictional Tahitian act as a critic of Western civilization in his *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville* (1772). Leibniz, Voltaire and others idealized China as the epitome of a rational society. In the Romantic era, India was introduced as a major focus of interest. Post-Enlightenment religions thrive in an age when such non-Western cultures are at least minimally familiar to many, and there is a tangible need to come to grips with the sudden relativization of Christianity as just one faith among many.

Esotericism, Occultism, Esoteric Tradition

The specific post-Enlightenment movements surveyed here range from theosophy to the New Age. To what extent is it meaningful to label these positions using designations such as *esoteric* or *occult*, both of which can be found in scholarly as well as popular literature? Both terms have a variety of applications, emic as well as etic. It is hardly surprising that emic meanings have varied according to the sympathies of the writer. For those who are sympathetically inclined, "occult" and "esoteric" (often used indiscriminately) denote

[11] Myss *Anatomy of the Spirit*, p. 30.

the nature of beliefs and practices which purport to explore and utilize secret knowledge. For skeptics, "occult" is little more than a synonym of "anti-scientific" or "irrational".[12] Theologically minded authors may use the word as a pejorative term.

Since the early 1970's, efforts have been made to give these words a more circumscribed application. Several such etic uses exist, however, none of which has gained universal acceptance in scholarly literature. An early article on the sociology of the occult stipulated a distinction between esotericism as a theoretical framework and occultism as a practical application of this framework.[13] Such a distinction appears somewhat artificial, and the present study indicates no specific differences in the discursive strategies found in texts presenting the theoretical or practical aspects of e.g. recent New Age beliefs. Furthermore, it appears to parallel distinctions between religion and magic found in earlier literature but now largely abandoned. Nevertheless, this use has had its followers.[14]

A different criterion of demarcation, espoused by Antoine Faivre, differentiates esoteric currents from the occult by presenting a set of core characteristics in order to define esotericism, and reserving the term "occult" for certain historical developments within the broader framework of esotericism. Faivre defines esotericism as a group of belief systems with at least the following four core characteristics in common: the idea of correspondences; the concept of a living nature; an emic epistemology that accords imagination, rituals, symbolic images and similar mediating elements a crucial role in the construction of knowledge; and an experience of personal transmutation. Two further criteria are more loosely connected with esotericism, in that they are often present but not essential to the concept. These are an active syncretistic tendency ("concordance" in Faivre's terminology) and a system of transmission of doctrines.[15] Occultism is then seen as a "dimension of esotericism".[16]

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[12] For a brief overview of such emic uses and of early attempts to etically define such terms, see Truzzi 1974: 243 f.

[13] Tiryakian 1974: 265 f.

[14] See notably Antoine Faivre's article "Occultism" in the Encyclopedia of Religions, Faivre 1987.

[15] For a succinct discussion, see Faivre & Needleman 1993: xv ff. and Faivre 1998: 119 f.

[16] Faivre 1994: 33.

In an approach based on the Faivrean dichotomy, Hanegraaff wishes to define "occultism" strictly as post-Enlightenment developments of esotericism, i.e. positions influenced by the rationalism and secularism of the modern age.[17] The positions surveyed in the present study all date from the last two centuries and thus form part of "occultism" in the senses favored by Faivre and Hanegraaff.

The present study runs into yet another terminological problem. Out of the vast variety of post-Enlightenment forms of esotericism, five positions have been selected and need to be referred to collectively. In order to avoid a large number of cumbersome circumlocutions such as "the set of five post-Enlightenment positions from Blavatsky to the New Age", it would be entirely feasible to construct a terminology à la Faivre and Hanegraaff, and speak e.g. of late modern occultism or neo-occultism.

However, the simultaneous existence of various uses of the word "occult" and "occultism", of which several are pre-theoretical and pejorative, complicates any emic use of "occult".[18] Nevertheless, some linguistic mechanism is needed to mark when the specific positions studied here are intended, when modern developments of esotericism are denoted and when reference is made to a broader concept of esotericism. For the purposes of the present study, a threefold linguistic convention has been constructed. The terms *esoteric*, *esotericism* and cognate words without any qualifying adjective refer broadly to esotericism as a historico-religious phenomenon. Occasionally, the term post-Enlightenment esotericism will be used to demarcate the developments of the past two centuries. Finally, I will stipulatively refer to the five positions analyzed here as the Modern Esoteric Tradition or, more succinctly, the Esoteric Tradition. There is no depth of intention intended in this use, which is adopted for convenience only.[19] It is for this reason that the term Esoteric Tradition (or

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[17] For Hanegraaff's view on occultism vs. esotericism, see Hanegraaff 1996: 421 ff. His specific definition of the latter is "all attempts by esotericists to come to grips with a disenchanted world or, alternatively, by people in general to make sense of esotericism from the perspective of a disenchanted secular world". Perhaps somewhat confusingly, he nevertheless follows the common emic use of the term "occult sciences" to refer to the three classical practices of alchemy, magic and astrology; cf Hanegraaff 1998: 375.

[18] The situation here is not unlike that for the terms "sect" and "cult", which have clearly defined scholarly uses, and nevertheless cause problems because of the highly pejorative connotations of these terms in everyday language.

[19] In particular, the use of the word Tradition in the singular should not be

synonymously, Modern Esoteric Tradition) will be capitalized throughout when used to denote the sum of these positions: it should be interpreted as a proper name, rather than as a combination of adjective and noun with an unambiguously identifiable semantic content.

Modernity and its Phases

The roots of esotericism can be traced back beyond the dawn of the modern era.[20] In his *Access to Western Esotericism*, Antoine Faivre delineates several ancient and medieval traditions that were instrumental in the emergence of modern esotericism, including specific theories and practices (alchemy, astrology, magic) as well as certain schools of thought (hermeticism, Neoplatonism, kabbala). The time frame adopted here (cf. chapter 3), however, entails a focus on an Esoteric Tradition that exists within, and interacts ambivalently with, the structures of modernity.[21]

The characteristic traits of modernity—social, cultural, economic, scientific and others—have been discussed in a vast body of literature. For the purposes of this study, I have selected a number of terms that I use to systematize the discussion—among them *secularization, globalization* and *tradition*. Before discussing them in the following chapter, a few words should be said on the proposed phases of modernity itself. The present study does not attempt to pigeonhole elements of the Modern Esoteric Tradition as e.g. modern, high modern, late modern or postmodern. Nevertheless, sociological discussions of modernity tend to focus on taxonomic issues to such an

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construed as an argument in favor of the Platonic fallacy, i.e. that a clear-cut tradition conforming to a basic core definition exists and that actual practices or sets of doctrines belong or do not belong to this tradition according to fixed and objective criteria. The choice of the singular rather than the plural "Esoteric Traditions" is entirely a matter of linguistic convention. The discussion found in chapter 3 and in the list of sources—the elucidation of links and resemblances, the list of schools of thought, the presentation of writers and works—is intended to be a necessary and sufficient map of the term Esoteric Tradition, as used here.

[20] For a closer discussion of the sense in which this historical connection can be said to constitute a tradition, see the section *Tradition, Continuity and Innovation* below.

[21] Since the term *modern* can be used in a number of different ways, a clarifying note is in order. The term is here primarily used to denote a set of social characteristics rather than a specific period in time. This grounding in sociological rather than historical usage implies that I employ the term "modern" throughout this study to refer to the Enlightenment project and its consequences. This point should perhaps especially be noted by readers accustomed to the common usage of many historians to denote the entire period from the Renaissance to the present, whence expressions such as "early modern Europe".

extent that it is necessary at the outset to present arguments as to why such a subdivision into phases of modernity is of no central concern here.

Is There a Postmodern Religion?

The Esoteric Tradition is fragmented and seems, in its manifestation as the New Age movement, to fragment even further. It might be reasonable to pose the question whether this development signifies the emergence of a postmodern form of religion.

The debate on postmodernity raged throughout the 1980s, gradually subsiding during the following decade. Perhaps *postmodernity* was, primarily, an intellectually fashionable word, denoting a vaguely sensed cultural condition with extremely fluid contours. Nevertheless, any discussion of religion in relation to the characteristics of modernity must touch at some point on the contested question as to whether or not a major cultural shift occurred during the last half of the twentieth century, i.e. whether or not we live in (or at the cusp of) a postmodern age. This is, in a sense, unfortunate. Above all, the discussion of the 1980s demonstrated the lack of common ground from which such issues could be successfully settled. Definitions of crucial terms varied widely. Postmodernism could cover anything from epistemological relativism[22] to the seamless blending of popular art with high culture[23] to the deconstruction of sociological terminology.[24] Consequently, questions of periodization, of political implications, and of the raison d'être of the postmodern condition and its possible similarities with other historical epochs were also impossible to settle. As the discussion has cooled down, some generalizations can be offered. This is largely due to a timely volume of essays devoted to the issue of modern and postmodern religion.[25]

If a postmodern religion exists, what are its characteristics? According to sociologist of religion James Beckford, postmodern culture exhibits the following features:[26]

> A refusal to regard positivistic, rationalistic, instrumental criteria as the sole or exclusive standard of worthwhile knowledge.

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[22] E.g. in Lyotard's groundbreaking study Lyotard 1974.
[23] Turner 1990: 3.
[24] Turner 1990: 6.
[25] Heelas 1998.
[26] Beckford 1992: 19.

> A willingness to combine symbols from disparate codes or frameworks of meaning, even at the cost of disjunction and eclecticism.
>
> A celebration of spontaneity, fragmentation, superficiality, irony and playfulness.
>
> A willingness to abandon the search for over-arching or triumphalist myths, narratives or frameworks of knowledge.

The postmodernity of the Esoteric Tradition is at best hesitant. It certainly continues to exhibit key characteristics of modernity. In the words of Anthony Giddens, "the postmodern outlook sees a plurality of heterogeneous claims to knowledge, in which science does not have a privileged place".[27] Yet it is precisely in science that the Esoteric Tradition has attempted to find one of its main sources of rhetorical support. Authors within this tradition are rarely content with a blind leap of faith, but are conspicuously concerned with linking their claims with contemporary physics and biology. Several other modern religions are also concerned with their relationship with science, whether this relationship is seen as positive, negative or ambivalent.[28] Thus, contemporary forms of religion can attempt to draw a measure of legitimacy from what is arguably still the dominant metanarrative of our epoch.

Nor is Beckford's second characteristic, the willingness to combine symbols from disparate codes or frameworks of meaning, necessarily an exclusive characteristic of present-day religious systems. Syncretism is part and parcel of most modes of religious creativity.

The applicability of Beckford's third and fourth characteristics is even more dubious. Should we accept Beckford's characteristics literally, the message of the postmodern prophet would be along the lines: "Don't take me too seriously, everything I tell you is ironic, superficial, playful, made from assorted fragments of other prophetic revelations, a *bricolage*". If there is a lesson to be learnt from the way in which modern prophets legitimize their teachings, it is a very different one. The most eclectic constructions are presented as a logically coherent structure culled from a single source.[29]

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[27] Giddens 1990: 2.

[28] Thus, see Rothstein 1996 for a discussion of the rhetorical use of science in TM and ISKCON.

[29] As an example, few modern revelations draw on as many and as diverse sources as Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy. Nevertheless, his followers adamantly insist that his entire teachings are perfectly consistent and have sprung directly from Steiner's spiritual insights. Other modern religious traditions in a similar vein attempt to dis-

This study will amply demonstrate that Esoteric doctrines can indeed be seen as a form of *bricolage*, but that they appear so only from the scholar's, not the adherent's, perspective. Thus, New Age doctrines can been viewed as pastiches in a narrow, technical sense: a kind of imitation of other styles or discourses without an awareness that what one represents is an imitation. However, to the extent that Esoteric texts are concerned with the development of collective identities based on the appropriation of exotic Others, the vocabulary of postmodern theory in all its varieties is perhaps not the most useful. Fredric Jameson remarks that a crucial component of the postmodern condition is the demise of the conception of a unique self and a private identity.[30] On the contrary, a belief in the existence of a core or true Self is a recurring theme in New Age texts. The appropriation of shamanic techniques or the creation of pastiches on Indian philosophies are part of the attempt to bring out that core Self behind the veil of the false ego.

Other characteristics of the Esoteric Tradition are perhaps more suggestive of postmodernity in Beckford's sense. Fragmented stories have replaced the grand narratives of earlier epochs. The faith in science is only partial. As a source of rhetorical legitimacy, science can be complemented by personal revelation in the form of e.g. psychic or channeled messages. However, to ask whether any such beliefs are traditional or postmodern is not necessarily useful. Personal revelation is a mainstay of many religious traditions, and could therefore be considered to be a genuinely pre-modern trait. At the same time, contemporary prophetic messages exhibit a range of occasionally conflicting messages, without such contradictions being perceived as problematic—a characteristic that seems to fit well with the second of Beckford's four defining characteristics of postmodernity. One can conclude that the Esoteric Tradition conforms to Beckford's criteria in some respects and does not conform in others; his scheme of classification thus hardly appears a very promising analytic tool.

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guise the eclecticism of their sources. Scholars have attempted to find the roots of Mormonism in nineteenth century American folk magic, the kabbala and Swedenborgianism; for the Mormon church itself, Mormonism is a direct reflex of the Christian faith of the first century CE.

[30] Jameson 1983: 114.

Late Modernity

If the postmodern characteristics of present-day esotericism may be exaggerated at the expense of its equally prevalent modern aspects, other thinkers propose an exacerbated late form of modernity, thereby providing us with a different set of conceptual tools. Foremost among the proponents of such a concept of late modernity is Anthony Giddens.

At the risk of overly generalizing in describing a complex set of positions, a crucial difference between the theorists of postmodernity and of late modernity could be expressed in terms of their respective views on identity formation. Theorists of the postmodern condition see the present as a state of radical shifting between identities, a flux of ironical, playful and/or superficial 'selves'. Giddens considers identity to be as crucial an existential question as ever, but notes that the mechanisms of identity formation have changed. In late modernity, we construct "who we really are" by engaging in self-reflexive speculation and considering a variety of options. As will become apparent, the Esoteric Tradition indeed engages its adherents in such identity work: reflexively, by presenting the reader as an incomplete project in constant spiritual progress; as a series of options by seeing a range of exotic cultures as possible Others to use as mirrors in which to judge the success or failure of our own lives.

Giddens' historiography rests on a view of modernity as discontinuous with earlier social forms.[31] According to Giddens, the characteristics of modernity, understood as a series of social, institutional and cultural formations with their roots in seventeenth century Western society, have been radicalized in recent decades. These characteristics include factors such as the pace and scope of change, and the rise of new social institutions such as the nation-state. On the basis of this conception, he has formulated a terminology for the analysis of late modernity, which comprises inter alia the following analytical concepts.[32]

The *separation of time and space* entails an abstract view of space and of time. Spatial separation decreases in importance, as it becomes possible to enter into various kinds of relations with physically absent

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[31] Giddens' terminology seems usable also in a historiography that sees changes rather than radical discontinuities between traditional and modern societies. The brief summary given here thus implies no commitment to any particular view of the rise of modernity.

[32] Giddens 1991; 1990: 17 ff.

or distant others. Similarly, the time-line of late modernity is divorced from the practical experience of individuals. It is possible to make references to past or future periods that are entirely abstracted from everyday life. The time-line of the Esoteric Tradition does indeed encompass a mythical history with little direct relevance to the here-and-now of the individual adherent of Esoteric belief systems. However, rather than seeing this as a consequence of late modernity, one might argue that this time-line of mythic history has deeper roots in the intellectual history of the West. The characteristics of late modernity could then be said to manifest themselves in the scope of cultures and epochs that are pre-empted by the narratives based on this time-line, rather than in the existence of the time-line itself. A somewhat fuller discussion of the concept of time-lines will follow.

Related to the separation of time and space is the concept of *disembedding*, i.e. the separation of locally grounded relations and their transposition to entirely new contexts. This characteristic of late modernity is related to the concept of globalization, as outlined in chapter 3. Whereas elements of local culture might be disembedded and transposed into a neighboring locality, modern communications make it feasible to disembed elements of Indian, Chinese or Native American origin and reembed them in a Western context, thereby giving these elements new functions and new meanings.

Connected to this removal of social relations from their immediate contexts is the concept of *trust* or faith in expert systems. In the specific case of the disembedding of cultural elements, the entrepreneurs who instigate processes of disembedding and disseminate their radically recontextualized versions of how these cultural elements should be understood function as experts of sorts. Acceptance of the new narratives requires faith in their veracity as opposed to a critical hermeneutic.

Finally, as noted above, *reflexivity* is also a crucial characteristic of late modernity. Knowledge of social life is used in the conscious construction of self-identity. Most events and actions in late modern society can become the object of reflection. In practically every area of life, there are competing theories on how one "should" act and think. In the context of the Esoteric Tradition, the element of reflexivity manifests itself in several ways. One of these, which will not be pursued to any significant extent here, is the market characteristics inherent in this form of religiosity. Every element of the cultic milieu can be made the object of a separate personal choice. Another manifestation

of reflexivity is a decreasing concern with cosmogonic myths or social charters and an increasing insistence on personalized legends, self-centered rituals and the spiritual transformation of each individual. Reflexivity results in the proliferation of personal projects: Esoteric literature abounds in descriptions of how to transform oneself in various ways in order to become a healthier, happier and more spiritual person.[33]

Further Delimitations

The preceding section defined a very general framework for the present study: certain aspects of esoteric religiosity during the post-Enlightenment age. When attempting to further delimit the scope, one can only envy authors of the sixteenth century, who were expected to compose titles for their books stretching over half a page. The title of the present study suffers from the limits of space imposed on contemporary writers, and is in a sense both too narrow and too broad.

The study of the history of religions tends at times to conflate two entities that in practice do not necessarily overlap. On the one hand, there are the texts of any given tradition: canonical works, commentaries, theological or philosophical discussions, tracts etc. On the other, there are the stated beliefs, the explanations given and the actions performed by adherents. When the relationship between the two is examined in detail within a given religious tradition, the distance between them can be quite striking.

It is possible, and indeed quite likely, that a similar relationship exists between the "official" doctrines of varieties of esoteric thought—say, theosophy or anthroposophy—and the actual beliefs of individual theosophists or anthroposophists, as evidenced by their statements or their praxis. Such a divergence most certainly exists in the fluid and fuzzy cultic milieu of the New Age. The textbook on Reiki healing may stress the claim that Reiki is an ancient healing art originating from Tibet. The individual healer may find such a claim utterly uninteresting, and base his or her allegiance to the method

[33] This preoccupation with transforming the self is a major focus of Heelas' study of the New Age (Heelas 1996). The present study concentrates on the narrower question of how Esoteric narratives attempt to cue the readers' perceptions of such transformative processes.

on the certitude that it works. At yet another remove from the core of doctrinal texts or manuals of ritual, the clients of Reiki healing may even be unaware of the existence of any such claims. Perhaps it is not even important whether the doctrines are plausible or the rituals efficacious, as long as warm and pleasant emotions are elicited. However, the beliefs, reactions and attitudes of practitioners and laymen, although a highly interesting subject in its own right, are expressly excluded from this study.

Finally, to present a complete study of texts, even from the present limited subset of Esoteric positions, would be impossible. By now, the number of books constituting a complete corpus of e.g. New Age literature must have reached five figures. New books of immediate concern to the New Age milieu are published almost daily. Chapter 3 concludes with a review of the selection criteria for a subset of texts. This subset has been consulted for the present study and is presented in the list of sources.

The present study is not intended as a catalogue of the opinions of the various positions. To discuss general or theoretical aspects of the Modern Esoteric Tradition without entering into the empirical specifics leaves the reader in a fog of abstractions; referring exhaustively to a vast corpus of source texts entails the risk of constructing an under-theorized descriptive study. In order to strike a balance between the descriptive and analytic goals of this study, I have resorted to using case studies from the consulted sources as exemplars. These particular cases are subjected to a symptomatic reading, a mode of interpretation that uses empirical details to highlight a broader point. Although the narrow focus and the chosen approach are, as in any other case, a compromise, at least it has the double advantage of extendibility and falsifiability. To the extent that the generalizations presented here are valid, they can serve as a basis for similar surveys of other texts within the positions surveyed here, of other post-Enlightenment esoteric positions, or even of other modern forms of religiosity. The findings here may then be subsumed or overturned by such a broader perspective. Furthermore, to the extent that the survey tests a restricted set of source texts, it is open to falsification by subsequent readers who find legitimizing strategies and discourses of knowledge that do not conform to my findings. To such an extent, this thesis is indeed, as the title implies, intended as a study of a circumscribed aspect of the Esoteric Tradition.

Finally, it should be noted that this study, although in part an analysis of concepts of knowledge, does not purport to elucidate the actual mechanisms through which Esoteric theories are constructed—the etic epistemology, if one will—but the emic or purported roots of Esoteric thought. A study of the actual processes of constructing Esoteric positions would devote attention to such elements as analogic reasoning, a crucial factor in the development of the systems of correspondence that are ubiquitous within the Esoteric Tradition. It would focus on the cognitive and social processes leading to the rise and maintenance of Esoteric belief systems and practices. It would also consider the actual mechanisms of schism and continuity that engender new positions and separate them from their historical roots. While such processes are in themselves highly interesting and merit a study of their own, they are only marginally included in the scope of the present study.

Previous Research

The several dozen unorthodox practices and beliefs addressed in these pages did not just spring from the unique imagination of a few creative individuals. It has become more and more generally recognized that the history of Western culture does not only involve the twin pillars of Hellenic rationality and Biblical religion. A third current, a loosely related set of schools and traditions: hermeticists, alchemists, rosicrucians, occultists, theosophers and esotericists, has existed since the very beginning of the common era.[34] The study of these esoteric currents was once a narrow and barely reputable field of scholarship. Some groundbreaking studies began to change the academic view of these currents. Thus, Frances Yates' *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* has become a classic in the field of history of ideas.[35] By now, numerous publications have appeared on e.g. medieval and renaissance magic.[36]

In a sense, the study of esotericism is still laden with some less-than-obvious presuppositions, not least the fact that the least stud-

[34] van den Broek & Hanegraaff 1998: vii.

[35] Yates 1964.

[36] There is a considerable literature on pre-Enlightenment esoteric and magical practices. For the former one might mention Thorndike 1923, Walker 1958, Yates 1964 and Thomas 1978; for the latter, Flint 1990 and Kieckhefer 1990.

ied, and probably the most controversial, esoteric traditions are those closest to us in time. Rationalists scoff at theosophy or the New Age. Theologically minded authors wage polemics more than writing scholarly monographs. Adherents construct hagiographies. Even many admirers of older forms of hermetica are tempted to characterize the modern outcrops of these traditions as trivialized and misinterpreted forms of esotericism.[37] At times, the state of the art in this field resembles the studies of Buddhist traditions that were still common fifty to a hundred years ago: the actual religious doctrines and practices of Buddhist communities were generally construed as degenerate, hybridized and unduly popularized forms of a pristine, more philosophical and thus "truer" Buddhism.[38]

Although the scholarly literature on post-Enlightenment esotericism is, by the standards of the history of religions, relatively meager, this chapter is not intended to be an exhaustive guide. Such a survey would occupy an inordinate proportion of the total text. Instead, those scholarly works have been included that are either seminal in nature and/or in turn contain exhaustive references to further studies. More specific articles or monographs will be cited or referred to as they become relevant to the present study.

Since the present study addresses, on the one hand, certain esoteric positions covering approximately one hundred and twenty years, from the canonical formulations of Theosophical doctrine around the mid-1870s, up to New Age texts appearing at the time of writing and, on the other hand, the discursive strategies that support the doctrines of these positions, a survey of the scholarly work can appropriately be divided into two sections: work dealing with the positions and work dealing with the strategies.

Studies of the Esoteric Positions Surveyed

A considerable amount of literature exists on the Theosophical Society and on theosophy, most of it based on the believer's or the critic's point of view. A large proportion of the more scholarly literature focuses on the biographies of its leading figures and on events in the history of the society itself. Joscelyn Godwin tells the story of the

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[37] To take one example among many, Harold Bloom makes such a distinction throughout his *Omens of Millennium*; Bloom 1996.

[38] Lopez 1998 discusses the skewed scholarly historiography of Buddhism.

people and events that led up to the formation of the Theosophical Society.[39] The biographies of Blavatsky include those of Meade[40] and Washington,[41] which are skeptical in tone, and those of Cranston[42] and Overton,[43] which have frankly hagiographic aims. Olcott's biography is told in Stephen Prothero's *The White Buddhist*, which felicitously links the vicissitudes of the Theosophical Society with larger societal developments in the late nineteenth century.[44] The history of the Theosophical Society has been told numerous times, notably in the biographies of Blavatsky, and in Henry Olcott's autobiographical *Old Diary Leaves*.

Books presenting the doctrines of theosophy are, with few exceptions, apologetic. The overwhelming majority of these works present theosophy as a fixed set of coherent doctrines, largely eschew discussions of historical changes, and aim to presenting theosophical doctrines in an easily understandable format for potential converts. An early representative of this genre is William Q. Judge's *Ocean of Theosophy* published in 1893. A more recent, balanced account nevertheless constructed from an insider's perspective is Robert Ellwood's *Theosophy*.[45] A much smaller volume of literature is comprised of scholarly discussions of the doctrines and practices of theosophy. The classic study by a non-theosophist was written two decades ago by Bruce Campbell.[46] Among the very few existing studies of specific doctrinal topics one finds Robert Ellwood's study of theosophical reincarnation doctrine.[47] Paul Johnson devotes two volumes to the individuals that he suggests were the historical models for the Masters of theosophy.[48] Specialized articles on specific facets of this history can be found in the journal *Theosophical History*.

The literature on theosophy is growing, and the depth of scholarship steadily improving. The lack of scholarly attention is, however, clearly felt when one turns to the post-theosophical schools. After the death of Helena Blavatsky, the most prolific and influential theosophical

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[39] Godwin 1994.
[40] Meade 1980.
[41] Washington 1995.
[42] Cranston 1993.
[43] Overton 1988.
[44] Prothero 1996.
[45] Ellwood 1986.
[46] Campbell 1980.
[47] Ellwood 1996.
[48] Johnson 1994 and 1995.

writer was Charles Leadbeater. Together with Annie Besant, his close collaborator, Leadbeater introduced some major innovations in the theosophical doctrines. Leadbeater's life has been documented in an extensive biography,[49] as has Besant's,[50] but there are no monograph length studies devoted to their reformulation of theosophy.

Other individuals and groups who created post-theosophical creeds and spread them through their writings and their practical endeavors as spokespersons for an esoteric worldview have, with a single exception, received equally little attention. There are no scholarly biographies of Steiner, Cayce, Bailey, Martinus, Ballard, Prophet, or of any other post-theosophical writer. There are no monograph-length studies of the doctrines developed by any of these individuals, with the exception of Rudolf Steiner's creation anthroposophy. There are also surprisingly few articles in scholarly journals and anthologies devoted to these movements.

Rudolf Steiner and the Anthroposophical Society that he created have been the focus of a number of scholarly studies. Many of these are devoted to the practical aspects of anthroposophy: Waldorf education, biodynamic farming or anthroposophical medicine. There is another set of literature written by critics, many of them arguing from a Christian viewpoint. Among the few scholarly books devoted to anthroposophy as a new religious movement, the best is perhaps Geoffrey Ahern's *Sun at Midnight*.[51]

Edgar Cayce and the Association for Research and Enlightenment that he founded have been the object of an article by Philip Lucas.[52] Hanegraaff's standard work on the New Age includes analyses of the Cayce material throughout the text.[53] A recent addition to the scant literature is a book by K. Paul Johnson, which hovers between the scholarly and the apologetic.[54] Practically all other literature on Cayce is purely apologetic. The dearth of material on Cayce is all the more surprising considering his fundamental importance to the development of twentieth century esotericism.

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[49] Tillett 1982.
[50] Nethercot 1960.
[51] Ahern 1984.
[52] Lucas 1995.
[53] Hanegraaff 1996: 34 ff. et passim.
[54] Johnson 1998. Johnson's book gives a solid historical background on Cayce and numerous details of his doctrines, yet departs from the usual goals of historical scholarship through its insistence on finding evidence to corroborate that Cayce was a "true psychic".

The American lineage that occasionally appears in these pages has also received surprisingly scant attention. Ballard and his movement, the I AM religious activity, are described in a lengthy article by Charles S. Braden.[55] The Church Universal and Triumphant is the focus of a slender volume edited by James Lewis and J. Gordon Melton.[56] Melton's encyclopedia of American religions lists dozens of other post-theosophical groups that have received little or no scholarly attention.[57]

A somewhat different situation prevails with regard to the topical subject of the New Age. The vast majority of books fall into one of three categories: they are either apologetic, theological-critical or debunking in character. Nevertheless, a small and growing amount of academic literature has begun to emerge.

At first, academic interest in the New Age was minimal. Much of the earliest literature directly relevant to the subject was concerned with what was seen as the re-emergence of "the occult".[58] In the early 1990's, works specifically targeting New Age religiosity began to appear. An early study by Gordon Melton, Jerome Clark and Aidan Kelly is almost entirely descriptive, yet contains useful background information on a number of people and terms of significance in the New Age milieu.[59] The first truly scholarly study of the New Age, an anthology published by James Lewis and Gordon Melton in 1992, appeared more than two decades after the term New Age began to be used among adherents of alternative or counter-cultural creeds. The contributors to this volume presented useful material on the historical roots of the New Age as well as on such specific topics as prophetic rituals ("channeling") and healing. Since then, up to the time of writing, the number of published works has increased steadily.

Christoph Bochinger's massive study *"New Age" und moderne Religion*, published in 1994, deserves credit for the extreme thoroughness with which it surveys the material, particularly the historical background of several of the themes found in theosophical and New Age literature. Bochinger's data focus on the situation in Germany, making his work a rich source of information on the penetration by a pre-

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[55] Braden 1949.
[56] Lewis & Melton 1994.
[57] Melton 1996.
[58] E.g. Marty 1970, Tiryakian 1974, Truzzi 1974, Webb 1974 and 1976, Kerr & Crow 1983.
[59] Melton et al. 1991.

dominantly American religious phenomenon of a continental European setting. The present study is particularly indebted to his in-depth discussion of two specific themes, namely the concept of the Aquarian Age and the writings of Fritjof Capra. However, Bochinger's work is also characterized by a theoretical presupposition that is a odds with that of most of his peers. Whereas all other writers see the New Age as a constellation of ideas revolving around a number of common themes, Bochinger claims there is no such entity as the New Age, and that in fact the whole concept has been artificially created by publishers and the media.[60]

Michael York's work surveys the New Age milieu and discusses prominent individuals and groups who have shaped the New Age.[61] The focus of the work is, however, sociological. A central aim of his book, sub-titled *A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-pagan Movements*, is to categorize New Age as well as neo-pagan groups according to the typologies employed by sociologists of religion. York thus surveys various classificatory schemata of the sect-cult variety. His suggestion that Luther Gerlach's and Virginia Hine's concept of a segmented polycentric integrated network (or SPIN), characterized by a non-centralized many-celled structure, most adequately characterizes the organization of the New Age does not seem to have generated any significant following.

Richard Kyle has presented a broad and very succinct review of the New Age, firmly placing it in the context of a broader Western esotericism.[62] Kyle's work is considerably more generalizing than Hanegraaff's book *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, published a year after Kyle's contribution. Kyle's study can therefore largely be considered to have been superseded by the latter.

Paul Heelas' approach is sociological, although in a different sense than York's.[63] Heelas attempts to show the extent to which New Age doctrines are indebted to the preoccupations of modernity. In particular, Heelas devotes considerable attention to the previously rather neglected prosperity and business aspects of the New Age literature. Heelas diagnoses the concerns of New Agers as being the same as

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[60] I have made correspondingly ample use of empirical material drawn from Bochinger's study, but have not found his overarching hypothesis particularly useful.
[61] York 1995.
[62] Kyle 1995.
[63] Heelas 1996.

those of the mainstream of modernity: e.g. dealing with the self through incessant reflexive identity work. To this extent, the New Age is part of modernity. At the same time, the New Age radicalizes and extends many of the solutions to these concerns offered by more mainstream ideologies. The New Age identity is seen to encompass possibilities that extend well beyond the conception of the self supported by secular alternatives. To this extent, the New Age is both part of modernity and an alternative to it.

Wouter Hanegraaff's *New Age Religion and Western Culture* has gained a well-deserved reputation as the standard reference work on the New Age.[64] The first section of his book presents a central corpus of New Age texts in great detail. Hanegraaff selects books for reading that deal with the New Age worldview either explicitly, or more indirectly by discussing New Age science, healing or channeling. The second section assesses the extent to which this corpus expresses a common worldview. Hanegraaff constructs a fine-grained analysis of a common, underlying New Age ideology with specific doctrinal statements on such topics as life after death, spiritual evolution, good and evil and the role of science. The third section interprets this common worldview as a legacy of an older Western esotericism, which has been profoundly transformed through a process of secularization and modernization. My indebtedness to his work will be readily apparent to the reader of the present study.

A number of monographs and articles on more specialized subjects have also appeared. These include McGuire 1988 on healing; Hess 1993 on the relationship between the New Age and science; Brown 1994 on prophetic rituals ("channeling"); Melton 1997 on one specific religious innovator within the New Age milieu, J.Z. Knight; Saliba 1999 on the Christian response to the New Age; and many others. The works by Bochinger, Heelas and Hanegraaff referred to above also contain valuable surveys of the growing literature on New Age religiosity. Hanegraaff, in particular, discusses the relative merits and demerits of previous scholarly studies in considerable depth.

Studies of the Discursive Strategies Surveyed

Whereas it is relatively feasible to survey the previous studies of the New Age and its predecessors, a survey of the studies made on the

[64] Hanegraaff 1996.

three discursive strategies of scientism, the construction of tradition and the appeal to experience is a considerably more difficult undertaking. In the broadest sense, the field is both vast and fragmented; on the other hand, few works deal specifically with the emic epistemology of the tradition that they address.

There is a vast and growing number of studies dealing with the relationship between religion and science. Many of them review particular themes in the history of scientific ideas in relation to dominant religion, e.g. the impact of Darwinism on Christian denominations.[65] However, fewer studies address the way in which spokespersons for a religious worldview conceive of science. There are full-length studies examining, respectively, the perceived relations between science and Islam,[66] Transcendental Meditation and Krishna movements.[67] The particular relation between science and the Modern Esoteric Tradition is the subject of the monograph by Hess mentioned above.[68] The apologetic and skeptical literature is, as usual, incomparably more abundant.[69]

The term *tradition* in the present context is to be taken in a narrower sense than might initially be apparent. This study is not concerned with the "actual" (or etic) tradition behind a contemporary manifestation of religion, but with the revealed or mythic tradition (the "emic" historiography) that a spokesperson for a religious doctrine propounds. Two classic studies from the early 1980s are particularly relevant in this connection. Perhaps the most influential statement of the view that tradition can be employed as a strategic discourse is Edward Shils' *Tradition*.[70] For Shils, tradition is not only the repository of custom, but a creative and dynamic process by which certain cultural predilections are actually designated as constituting time-hallowed custom. The locus classicus of the closely related topic of "invention of tradition" is the anthology of that name

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[65] The literature is surveyed in the extensive bibliographic essay at the end of Brooke 1991.

[66] Stenberg 1996.

[67] Rothstein 1996.

[68] Hess 1993.

[69] A number of apologetic works are reviewed in Hanegraaff 1996. Attempts to disprove the claims of New Age science range from Lucas 1990 to Stenger 1995. Magazines such as *Skeptical Inquirer* as well as web sites maintained by skeptics, e.g. www.skepdic.com, also contain a wealth of debunking material as well as literature surveys of the anti-pseudoscience field.

[70] Shils 1981.

edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger.[71] The contributors to this volume investigated how seemingly ancient traditions, especially in Great Britain and the British colonies, were in fact the products of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The final chapter, by Eric Hobsbawm, concluded that traditions were assiduously created in an epoch which saw major disruptions of what were in fact older traditions. Many of the invented traditions surveyed in this volume had political implications, e.g. by being consciously created in order to mobilize social groups or to gain legitimacy. Invented traditions, however, need not only have nationalistic or macropolitical implications, as the study of most new religious movements can attest to. The study of constructed or invented history has expanded since then.[72] Studies that more specifically investigate how non-Western cultures are appropriated by, and integrated into, a Western view of "tradition" are often more concerned with the impact of exotic Others on "high culture",[73] or operate within an earlier time frame than the one adopted here.[74] Nevertheless, the number of works examining the imaginative construction of Atlantis,[75] Egypt,[76] India,[77] Tibet[78] or Native America[79] is steadily growing.

Several Enlightenment philosophers, perhaps most notably Hume and Kant, devalued the evidential value of religious experience. A large number of writers from various fields have attempted to construct a wide variety of apologetic arguments from experience. Recent decades have seen a return to experience in various works in the philosophy of religion. Books by William Alston, William Wainwright, Keith Yandell and others have—at times with a surprisingly pre-Enlightenment or even naive realism—attempted to use personal experience as an argument for a theistic faith.[80] On the other hand,

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[71] Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983.

[72] A few texts that have appeared since the publication of Hobsbawm's and Ranger's anthology include Sahlins 1985, Waldman 1986, Borofsky 1987, Hanson 1989 and Friedman 1992.

[73] Said 1978.

[74] Relevant examples would be Hornung 1990 and Schwab 1984.

[75] Sprague de Camp 1954, Ellis 1998.

[76] Iversen 1961, Greener 1966, Curl 1982, Baltrusaitis 1985, Assman 1997 and Hornung 1999.

[77] Clarke 1997.

[78] Bishop 1989 and 1993; Lopez 1995 and 1998.

[79] Francis 1992, Bordewich 1996, Parkhill 1997.

[80] Alston 1991, Wainwright 1981 and Yandell 1993.

the Enlightenment critique has deepened and has been anchored in robust research. Cognitive and social psychologists have carried out experimental studies of the ways in which interpretations of experience are generated and maintained, including the ways in which people tend to systematically misinterpret their experiences.[81] Historians of religion have also proposed new understandings of religious experience. Mystical experiences, once commonly conceived as transcultural expressions of a perennial philosophy or of pan-human psychological characteristics, are more and more commonly perceived as the products of specific doctrinal systems.[82] The philosophical aspects of the category of religious experience itself have been discussed in depth by Wayne Proudfoot.[83] The interplay between power and experience is the subject of a study by Grace Jantzen.[84] The role of experience is central within the Esoteric Tradition, yet once again the vast majority of the published literature is apologetic or skeptical.

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[81] The study of "cognitive illusions" is a rapidly expanding field. For a review, see e.g. Nisbett & Ross 1980, Gilovich 1991, Sutherland 1992, Baron 1992, Piattelli-Palmarini 1994 and the numerous references cited in those works.

[82] Katz 1978, 1983 and 1992.

[83] Proudfoot 1985.

[84] Jantzen 1995.

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CHAPTER TWO

SOME THEORETICAL PRELIMINARIES

> When *I* use a word, Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.
>
> Lewis Carroll
> *Through the Looking-Glass*

A number of terms and concepts will recur throughout this study which, in turn, are embedded in a larger theoretical framework. The present chapter is intended to provide an introduction to this basic vocabulary, and will to some extent place and define these terms within that theoretical framework. It should be noted from the outset that definitions are considered here from a strongly nominalist position, i.e. as stipulative constructs.[1]

The Cultic Milieu

Surveys of contemporary religious belief reveal a highly fragmented worldview. This is certainly true of professed belief in the paranormal, or in various esoteric doctrines. Typically, many more people

[1] A remark on the import of definitions may be in order. A statement of the form "the term X means so-and-so" can be construed in (at least) two different ways. (For a discussion of definitions in the study of religion, see Spiro 1966). In one reading, the term X when correctly used has precisely those meanings that are enumerated in the right-hand clause of the defining sentence. In a different reading, the sentence "the term X means so-and-so" merely states that a convenient short-hand notation for a certain description is X. The distinction is important and depends, among other things, on one's view of the status of terminology in the humanities. At times, it seems as if the "correct" use of terms is at stake in scholarly debates. It should therefore be noted from the outset that all definitions in this study are to be construed in the second sense. None of the basic terms used here have natural referents that would make it strictly speaking incorrect to define them otherwise. Most if not all have been ascribed numerous alternative definitions in the scholarly literature. Furthermore, several of them have theory-laden meanings in other disciplines or exist in everyday language, and therefore also have meanings which may contradict the definitions given here.

believe in ESP than in astrology or reincarnation. Still fewer appear to be acquainted with channeling or crystal healing.[2] Thus, individuals who adopt certain elements of such New Age beliefs do so by combining bits and pieces to form their own individual mix.

Scholars who have studied modern religious movements, e.g. sociologists of religion, have typically been concerned with cults, sects and denominations—organized bodies of believers led by a spiritual hierarchy, who have ideally adopted creeds defined by a canon of writings. The loosely adopted beliefs appearing to underlie the surveys of New Age beliefs belong to a different kind of religiosity, a cultural "underground" current labeled by Colin Campbell as the cultic milieu.[3] The cultic milieu consists of all those individuals who have adopted such beliefs with varying degrees of commitment, without expressing them in an organized setting: people who, for instance, believe in UFOs yet would not choose to associate with the members of a UFO cult. Campbell surmised that new religious movements tended to arise out of the cultic milieu and crystallize around some of its ideas. Movements have their life cycles, are born, thrive for a while and may then pass into oblivion. To Campbell, the unorthodox ideas underlying them seemed relatively constant.

Campbell also noted that the cultic milieu supported unrelated or even mutually contradictory beliefs which nevertheless shared certain important characteristics. Thus, the belief in spirit mediums, in astrology or in the prophecies of Nostradamus constitute what might be called rejected knowledge, i.e. ideas that flourish in a society whose institutions take little notice of them, or even attempt to suppress them. Astrology is not taught in publicly funded schools, nor is it applied in health care, enlisted in the process of corporate decision-making or invoked in judiciary procedures. Those wishing to defend the value of astrology often do so in defiance of the societally accepted worldview. Believers may be tempted to explain their unenviable position as the result of the efforts of a powerful orthodoxy to suppress inopportune truths.

People in a minority position may tend to seek each other's support. This can lead to a mutual sympathy between the various individuals and loose-knit groups that defend the beliefs prevalent in the cultic milieu. They find common interests, a social network is built

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[2] Bruce 1996: 197 f.
[3] Campbell 1972.

up, and new religious movements may gradually arise around such views. Individuals with a firm commitment to these alternative doctrines and a strong entrepreneurial spirit may propound their ideas in courses, books or lectures, and may become the dominant spokespersons for these views. To the extent that an interaction and an ecumenical spirit exists between these groups, creative spokespersons may actively attempt to discover—or invent—common traits uniting their respective interests. This in turn leads to innovative syntheses between previously unrelated ideas from the cultic milieu.[4] Some of these innovations become important new religious trends, while others remain the more or less idiosyncratic creations of their creators. Thus ideas, practices and movements are born out of the cultic milieu. Some thrive, while others disappear after a few years to be superseded by new trends.

Discourse and Position

Due to the mechanisms of the cultic milieu, various trends and movements engendered by the same milieu will tend to share certain doctrinal characteristics and come to constitute a family of related ideas and practices. The concept of *discourse* is used here to denote the often tacit presuppositions that unite groups of such trends.

The term *discourse* has several different meanings. In the social sciences, the term is commonly associated with the work of Michel Foucault. Using the term discourse draws attention to the mechanisms of ideology and power that include and accept certain voices, while at the same time excluding others. It implies that certain propositions regarding the human condition and the constitution of reality, which are historically contingent and culturally constructed, are presented within the discourse as if they were natural, trans-historical facts and thus protected from scrutiny. The limits of the discourse also define the boundaries of what may tolerably be questioned. Within those limits, however, spokespersons elaborate on the details

[4] Thus, tarot readers and astrologers, crystal healers and aura therapists may conclude that each of them has found his/her own way to a common goal of spiritual evolution, and will see all paths as more or less equally valid. From there, it is only a small step to creating mixtures between these doctrines and practices, so that the different cards of the tarot pack are assumed to correspond to the various gems and stones of the crystal healer's tool kit or to the various signs of the zodiac.

of the discourse. Through a variety of textual strategies, writers both reproduce and alter the meanings of a number of key elements of the Esoteric worldview, such as "religious experience", "tradition" or "science". To the extent that individuals or groups formulate specific versions of the doctrines and practices accepted within the boundaries of the discourse, these versions will be called *positions*.

There is every reason to assume that the worldviews of the adherents of various Esoteric doctrines are fragmented and vaguely underpinned. As in the major religious traditions, it is the task of the religious virtuosi to provide a more elaborate and coherent whole. Those who write books, hold speeches, post Internet sites or appear on television propose particular ways in which sectors of experience should be constructed and interpreted. These religious virtuosi formulate the vocabulary that other spokespersons will adopt and adapt. They present doctrinal elements that can be modified, yet not abandoned with impunity. The discourse sets fuzzy limits for religious creativity, which manifest over time as the processes of divergence between movements and continuity within families of movements that is typical for the history of religions. The very vocabulary of the discipline is evidence of this awareness of family resemblances caused by adherence to the norms of specific discourses: the division of modern religious movements into e.g. a New Thought family, a conservative Christian family, a Mormon family or a family of neo-Buddhist schools.[5]

Secularization

I intend to demonstrate in the body of the present study that three basic persuasive mechanisms found in Esoteric texts exist in symbiosis with a trend toward secularization. Since the very concept of secularization is a multi-dimensional, ambiguous and contested term, it may be wise to begin with this very aspect of modernity. Broadly following the theories of sociologist of religion Karel Dobbelaere, secularization can be understood in three different senses.[6] In the first sense, secularization refers to the increasing functional differentiation

[5] Thus, Melton's standard encyclopedia of American religions is built on a similar system of classification; Melton 1996.

[6] See Dobbelaere 1987 and 1989.

of society into distinct spheres. Education, science, health care and legislation, once intimately connected with religious authority, become increasingly independent of it. Secularization can also refer to a process of presumed decline in overt performance of religious activities and proclaimed adherence to religious beliefs.[7] Finally, the term can refer to the changes within the religious economy itself.

Such changes can take several different forms. Firstly, the institutions and power structures of most modern nation-states rely minimally, if at all, on the belief in a supernatural realm, of whatever description. Individuals, on the other hand, may persist in looking for religiously formulated beliefs. A secularized society will provide such individuals with few generally accepted or imposed beliefs. Thus, those seeking religious answers will in a far greater measure be compelled to seek these out for themselves. The decline of religious monopoly in a secularized society may paradoxically lead to a proliferation of competing religious alternatives on a privatized spiritual marketplace. Secondly, the religious answers provided in this marketplace will need to adapt in some respect to prevalent ideas in the society where they exist. Religious beliefs that violate such default assumptions risk remaining marginal.[8] Thus, compulsory education has led to a religious economy whose default assumptions include some mode of coexistence with science.

For the following discussion, it is crucial to note that the focus lies entirely on secularization understood as changes in the religious economy, specifically emphasizing the structural characteristics of religious worldviews. More specifically, it centers on an alternative or unchurched religiosity that has gained in importance in certain Western societies due to the decline of the state-supported, culturally privileged or nation-wide creed as the single or even main locus of religious authority in those countries. The specific internal changes caused by this process, which range from an increased awareness of competing worldviews to a shift from full-time to part-time involvement of the religious specialists, will become apparent in the main discussion.

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[7] Whether or not such a decline is taking place on a global scale remains contested. The qualifier "presumed" implies that the present study does not depend on whether or not the proponents of this form of secularization thesis are right.

[8] Cf. Boyer 1994, especially ch. 4.

Globalization

If individuals seek reenchantment in religious beliefs within the context of a modern, secularized society in which the hegemony of institutional creeds has eroded, in which direction should they turn? Where do religious innovations come from? An answer to this question can be found in one of the salient socio-cultural processes of the contemporary world: globalization.[9]

Globalization is described in one of the seminal papers on the subject as the fact that "the world is rapidly coming to be apprehended as 'one place', that is as a totality wherein discrete selves, nation-states, and even civilizational traditions have their respective niches, each interconnected by complex, reticular relationships of belligerence and beneficence, competition and compromise, discordance and detente".[10] Of course, cultural elements have always been transported across geographical distances, and have been incorporated among other groups than those who created these elements. The transformation leading to our own time is one of degree rather than essence. Yet given the scope of contact and the rapidity of influence, it is reasonable to see our own time as one of unprecedented globalization. The emergence of a mass culture, the development of electronic media, the emergence of more efficient systems of goods distribution and the increased movement of people across national borders have resulted in a large-scale interaction of cultures. Globalization is not a single, well-defined entity but a common term for a set of processes. A first distinction can be made between globalization as regarding the *production*, the *consumption* and the *distribution* of religious elements.

The element of global distribution is linked to the objective transnational processes that constitute one of the central elements of the paradigm of globalization. Thus, the highly successful marketing of American New Age literature is a particularly salient facet of the global distribution of religious products. Globalized consumption of cultural elements is partly related to a shift in *communitas*. Whereas older imagined communities were defined by geographical borders—the nation state would be a prime example—newer ones have become increasingly divorced from such geographically definable contexts.

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[9] Robertson & Garrett 1991, Robertson 1992 and Beyer 1994.
[10] Robertson & Garrett 1991: ix f.

Thus, a Californian with a passionate interest in UFO channeling might feel a much stronger bond of sympathy with a British or Swedish UFO enthusiast than with his Southern Baptist neighbor.

Here, however, I will primarily focus on the production of religious elements. This study will focus particularly on globalized religious production as objectified in modern religious texts. The globalization of religious production concerns the fact that Esoteric texts make overt use of a variety of historical epochs and more or less exotic cultures. These purported sources of spiritual wisdom are used as the significant Others in identity construction work. Thus, in contrast with the objective transnational structures involved in global distribution, production is intimately linked with the second central element of the globalization paradigm, i.e. the subjective awareness of the variety of other cultures.

An important aspect of globalization should be noted. The appropriation of foreign cultural elements is aided by a highly selective disembedding and reembedding process. It is selective in that only those cultural elements that are perceived as somehow helpful or interesting are borrowed and transformed. Moreover, elements lifted out of the context of a different culture are colored to a varying degree by the local contexts into which they are transplanted.[11] Thus, disembedding can produce an entire spectrum of new cultural processes. At one end of this spectrum are new cultural products that I propose to call *structurally conservative*. In such products, surface characteristics such as verbal expression, body language and social norms accepted by the actors might be adapted to local conditions, whereas the fundamental structures are retained.[12] At the other end, one finds *structurally radical* cultural products. Here, the surface characteristics of the disembedded cultural product are retained, while the fundamental structures—e.g. religious, ethnic or gender codes—are disregarded.[13]

Thus, highly specific and sometimes idiosyncratic modes of appropriation and change lurk behind the generalizing term of

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[11] For a more general discussion of this aspect of globalization, see Robertson 1992: 172 f., Sahlins 1993 and Robertson 1995.

[12] A characteristic example might be the stock exchanges in New York, Stockholm and Tokyo, where a truly internationalized set of economic processes is expressed with relatively marginal local adaptations.

[13] An example here might be the custom adopted by many tourists of wearing local clothing, without any awareness of the cultural codes permeating the choice of clothing.

"globalization". Religious globalization, as documented in the pages of this study, appears to be a Western phenomenon: instigated by authoritative spokespersons in the West, aided by economically forceful Western institutions (notably major publishing houses) and consumed predominantly by Western audiences.

Tradition, Continuity and Innovation

Tradition is yet another word with several meanings. It can refer to the transmission of social practices and beliefs from generation to generation. The contrast between traditional and modern societies is often intimately connected with such a view of tradition. Thus, in a classic study of modernity and modernization, Marshall Berman proposed rapid change as one of the hallmarks of modernity.[14] In a famous Marxian quote, Berman saw the modern world as one where "all that is solid melts into air". The issue of continuity versus change is thus a vital aspect in the positioning of modern religions in relation firstly to their respective historical roots, secondly to modernity.

However, tradition can also connote stability and authenticity. Spokespersons for a religious order may therefore wish to stress tradition and continuity, even invariance, over change and innovation. Thus, Hanegraaff contends that writers positive to the New Age will highlight continuity, whereas authors negative to it will point to the innovations.[15] Appeals to continuity as well as to change can be exploited as strategic devices, creating and disrupting links in order to further one's own teachings. Thus, "tradition" does not necessarily denote the existence of an actual chain of historical links back to the pre-modern past, but also indicates the existence of a discourse which may well serve as a modality of adaptation and change.[16] Both custom and innovation can receive their legitimacy through appeal to tradition.

Barring the event of outright invention of tradition, the question of the relationship between the emic discourse of tradition and the etic view of history can benefit from the identification of several levels of both similarity and innovation. Firstly, there is the formal level:

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[14] Berman 1983.

[15] Hanegraaff 1998: 360.

[16] This view of "tradition" has its intellectual roots in the sociological analysis of Edward Shils, cf. Shils 1981. See the brief discussion at the end of chapter 1.

doctrines or rituals may resemble (or differ from) each other at the level of overt characteristics or form. Secondly, there is the level of social context, e.g. questions such as the stratification of the participants and their place within the society as a whole. Thirdly, there is the level of cultural context, e.g. the place of a given ritual within the ritual cycle or of a doctrine within a general worldview. Fourthly, and finally, there is the level of emic interpretation, i.e. how the specifics of the ritual or doctrine are understood by members of the community. Change and continuity can be manifested at any of these levels, either wholly or partly independently of the others.[17]

Historical precedents are sought through a comparison of formal characteristics, whereas individuals with a vested interest in finding continuity regularly overlook the levels of social and cultural context as well as emic interpretation. Formal similarities are impressionistically used in two ways to establish the existence of a tradition. They are said to testify to an unbroken chain stretching far back into the past. They also serve to support the universalistic thesis that there is a common core, a *philosophia perennis*, underlying all major traditions. Terms taken from a number of religious traditions denote concepts claimed to be essentially identical.

Modern life is emically often seen as the opposite of tradition. If the adherent highlights continuity to the near exclusion of change, this view of history may counteract the rootlessness or homelessness of the modern condition. However, such traditionalist discourse is a product of modernity itself, and the construction of an antidote to modernity takes place on the very preconditions of modernity. A strategy of synonymization converts differences into similarities in an attempt to create a grand narrative from many smaller local narratives.

Beside the doctrinal contents of a modern religion, the mode of transmission of these doctrines also highlights the tension between tradition and modernity. The prime mode of religious education

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[17] Thus, to give just one example, the ritual laying on of hands may be formally almost identical in e.g. New Age, as well as in charismatic Christian contexts. Nevertheless, the differences of social and cultural context and of emic interpretation are vast. The Christian healers may be part of a hierarchical priesthood whereas his New Age colleague may be an independent entrepreneur. The Christian healing occurs within a cultural setting defined by the church building and the Sunday service in which it may take place, the New Age healing by its "client cult" characteristics; Christian healers may interpret the source of their ability as "Jesus" whereas the New Age healer may interpret his successes as the result of "universal energies"; and so forth.

associated with the term "traditional" is socialization into a given social group and the adoption of group norms and values. Religious virtuosi, e.g. shamans and priests, might emerge through a process of apprenticeship or religious education. Such transmission from master to disciple is still common, but there are also other means by which rituals or legends are formed and transmitted.[18] A seeming continuity, a "tradition" in quotes, can arise through the incorporation of earlier textual material. Spokespersons of a later generation will read earlier works and selectively pick elements in order to incorporate them in their own doctrines. If tradition is intended to imply an unbroken succession in which older members of the community introduce or initiate the younger, the thread connecting many modern religious movements to their purported historical roots is weak indeed.

Spokespersons

Obviously, doctrinal shifts that define new positions don't just happen of their own accord. Although the use of the concept of discourse by implication rejects the neo-romantic notion of the text as somehow emanating from the singular creativity of the individual author, specific individuals do articulate the discourse and introduce innovations that modify its limits. Thus, linked to the concept of position is that of the spokesperson.[19]

Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge have proposed three ideal types of new religious movements.[20] The most loosely organized are audience cults, which "display little or no formal organization. Most who take part in audience cults do so entirely through the mass media: books, magazines, newspapers, TV, astrology columns and the like." A somewhat deeper level of commitment is found in client cults, in which a personal exchange takes place between a healer, diviner or medium and his or her clients. The third level of commitment, the cult movement, is practically synonymous with the "cults" and "sects" of more traditional terminology.

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[18] See e.g. the discussion in Stark & Bainbridge 1985: 101 ff. on schism and discontinuity in the transmission of religious tradition.

[19] This term is to all purposes synonymous with the concepts *movement intellectual* and *exponent*, found in other texts.

[20] Stark & Bainbridge 1985: 26 ff.

For the Esoteric Tradition, I propose a modified model of this tripartite scheme. Each of the three types of movement proposed by Stark and Bainbridge corresponds to a successive layer of commitment to religious doctrines, rituals and organizational forms. At the perimeter are those who come into contact with practices or beliefs through the narratives of their friends or magazine articles. Those who actively seek out a diviner, healer etc. enter the client cult stage. Further toward the center are those who adopt an Esoteric worldview and may even become diviners or healers themselves. A fourth level, not discussed by Stark and Bainbridge, consists of the innovators or spokespersons who perform a novel exegesis of the discourse, more or less subtly modify the received doctrines and rituals and then propagate them as authentic teachings.

Discourse hinges on power and authority, especially in the sense implied by Bruce Lincoln: to be in authority is to have (or take) the right to speak.[21] To the extent that their reformulation becomes a distinct and visible position within the discourse of the Esoteric Tradition, certain writers become prominent innovators. They are crucial to the emergence of Esoteric doctrine in at least three ways. Their biographical data are reworked and represented in accordance with the demands of hagiography. Their texts are disseminated and can be read as authoritative statements of Esoteric doctrine. These texts in turn become the source of further doctrinal elaboration among adepts who rise to the position of innovators, generating new positions within the Esoteric discourse.

Movement Texts

The concept of spokesperson is paralleled by that of the movement text.[22] The biography of the spokesperson is one facet of the construction of the movement. The doctrinal and ritual texts of the spokesperson are the other. It is in these texts that spokespersons attempt to authoritatively create and articulate their position within the discourse. Occasionally, one physical text may contain both an autobiography and core doctrines. More commonly, the biography

[21] Lincoln 1994.

[22] My present point of departure is the conception of movement text as defined in Thörn 1997: 172 ff.

of the spokesperson serves to rhetorically bolster the claims of the doctrinal or ritual movement texts.

The concept of movement texts functions as an ideal type. Just as no absolute line distinguishes those spokespersons who have decisively transformed the religious tradition to which they belong from those lesser representatives who merely reproduce existing legend elements, movement texts also span a broad spectrum from the absolutely central to the arguably marginal, with any number of intermediate degrees of relevance. The selection of a delimited set of texts from literature comprising many thousands of volumes will necessarily be contestable. The reader is referred to chapter 3 and to the list of sources for a discussion of the criteria of selection.

The movement texts selected here are material objects, books. In this capacity, they participate in the same field of production, distribution and sale as other books. They will be perceived and classified by writers and readers in the way other books are. One of the most fundamental distinctions made by a general public is between fictional and non-fictional books. Although the distinction between and the characteristics of these categories is perhaps undertheorized, paratextual markers clearly set up such a dichotomy. These two categories are usually placed in different physical sections of book stores and libraries. Bestseller lists are divided into fiction and non-fiction sections. A library catalogue record may characterize the work as belonging to either category. A subtitle or other short text on the dust-cover may alternatively describe a book as a novel, a textbook or a work of reference. An index of terms and names will place a work in the non-fiction category. Numerous linguistic markers in the text itself may also signal to the reader the category to which a book is meant to belong.

Movement texts hover in a strange borderland between factual and fictional narratives. Emically, they will be marked and perceived as belonging to either category. At the same time, movement texts seem to address "typically religious" subjects such as the origin of the world, the existence of spiritual beings or the correct performance of rituals. Religious narratives have traditionally been characterized by means of a limited number of genre terms: myth, legend, hagiography etc. One could suspect that modern movement texts might correspond to specific genres of textual material from pre-modern religious movements. However, terms such as myth and legend do not appear to be used at all to emically categorize movement texts.

Whether or not modern movement texts etically share any inter-

esting properties with more traditional religious genres such as myth, legend or folk tale, is of course dependent on how these terms are defined. One significant problem with these terms is that they are used in a number of different senses, connected by nothing much more than a vague resemblance. In a relatively recent work, William Doty surveyed the extant literature and found some fifty definitions of the term myth, several of them incommensurable.[23] A basic dichotomy can be drawn between formal and functional definitions. Formal definitions of traditional genres generally appear to be of limited applicability to modern movement texts.[24] To the extent that traditional items of the vocabulary of history of religions are used here, they should be taken in a functional as well as heuristic sense. Thus, a considerable number of founding figures within various modern religions have been the subject of biographical texts. Evidently, autobiographies, as well as biographies written by adherents of the doctrines in question, are not merely "factual" documents regarding the life of the spokesperson. They adhere to the givens of the autobiographical or hagiographic genre. Since they are produced from within a given movement or position, they exhibit traits of that movement's or position's construction of its own identity. Discursive strategies important to that movement can be found in the presentation of its founding figure. Such biographical texts are a subset of a somewhat larger group of writings outlining the historical background of the movement, and can to all intents and purposes be placed in the same category as other emic historiographies. Manuals of ritual within modern as well as traditional religious movements also share functional traits. They outline the specifics of how a ritual should be performed, often giving the "official" or "accepted" view of how the ritual is meant to be interpreted.

This, however, leaves one with a considerable mass of movement texts that have no obvious correlates in the writings of older religious traditions. Modern books might functionally be considered mixtures of doctrinal statements, polemic tracts, fictional accounts and exegeses superimposed on other religious doctrines.[25] Given the

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[23] Doty 1986.

[24] Thus, the books of the corpus under investigation are fundamentally influenced by innovative genres of the last two centuries: novels, popularizations of science, edifying self-help tracts, didactic treatises etc.

[25] To take a few examples from the sources, what traditional counterparts are there of books such as Helena Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*, Alice Bailey's *Esoteric Psychology* or James Redfield's *Celestine Prophecy*? Works such as these are only conceivable within a modern context.

fundamentally modern as well as hybrid genres that constitute such books *in toto*, individual ideas expressed therein, single passages as well as larger sections of text within such works can nevertheless be seen as functionally similar to older genres.

Here, the terms *myth* and *legend* will be applied to such parts of the movement texts that correspond to a fairly straight-forward stipulative definition.[26] According to this view, one can differentiate between the narrative categories of myth and legend on the following grounds.[27] Elements of a text constitute myth (or are mythic in character) if they purport to constitute a grand narrative of the nature of the cosmos (cosmology, cosmogenesis) or of mankind (anthropology, anthropogenesis). Elements of a text constitute legend (or are legendary in character) if they relate specific events purporting to describe named people and places, e.g. founders of a creed or of a specific ritual. Elements of a text will be described as *myth elements* or *legend elements* if they are fragmentary or allude to a grand meta-narrative that is not explicitly present in the text.

Religious movement texts have given rise to *emic hermeneutics*, i.e. the output of various sympathetically inclined writers purporting to explain the texts of the most authoritative spokespersons. Commentaries may be of several types. Most are simply popularizations. Others are structured as commented selected passages from central movement texts. A very limited number of texts are "theological" in character. They attempt to elucidate points of doctrine, perhaps in order to compare them with competing Biblical claims.[28]

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[26] It should perhaps be specified that the sets defined are fuzzy, yet the definitions themselves are straight-forward. In this respect, the stipulative definitions given here are not fundamentally different from many other definitions of terms in the humanities.

[27] The present heuristic is not unlike certain classical distinctions, e.g. that drawn by William Bascom in Bascom 1965. Myth is considered factual by the members of a culture. It concerns a remote time and tells of a different or earlier world than our own. Legend, although also factual, tells of events closer in time and occurring in the same world that we inhabit. Folktales are considered fictitious by the members of the society in which they are told. However, Bascom's definitions presuppose privileged access to the mental representations of the members of a religion, a criterion I find epistemologically dubious. A similar, more recent definition that lies close to my own use is that proposed by Tangherlini 1990: 385, who stresses legend as being typically mono-episodic, historicized and reflective of commonly held values of the group among which the legend is told.

[28] Among the few representatives of this genre, see Wapnick *The Meaning of Forgiveness*.

Time-lines

One specific theme of many religious movement texts is of particular interest in the context of the present study. Numerous such texts explicitly or implicitly present an overarching conception of the course of history. Such a basic schema does not so much derive from the empirical facts of history, as provide a framework within which historical events can be understood. Thus, two basic sets of frameworks, defined respectively as progressive and cyclical, have coexisted more or less uneasily throughout Western history.[29] Each of these sets can in turn be subdivided into a number of varieties. Progressive schemata may see evolution as teleological or mechanical. Teleological schemata may in turn be promoted by an immanent logic of history, or by a transcendent force. Cyclical schemata can present history as an eternal recurrence or as a gradual spiral in which each cycle is either better or worse than the preceding one. In this study, such basic schemata will be referred to as *time-lines*.[30] Myths that need not be overtly concerned with the articulation of history according to some such basic schema can still be implicitly structured in support of a given time-line. Hero narratives, while primarily concerned with describing their protagonists and their actions, will nevertheless contribute to the construction and reproduction of a time-line in which the present human state of affairs is seen to have been preceded by a heroic and suprahuman condition.

Modern movement texts perform similar functions, by mythologizing the history of the cosmos and of mankind. Speculation on the direction of history may thus conceive of history as finite, and the end product of historical change may be understood in teleological or eschatological terms—or both. Change may also be seen e.g. in

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[29] See Trompf 1977 for a detailed discussion of such meta-historical schemata.

[30] Since time is a basic dimension of our experience of life, time-lines are part of many non-religious discourses as well, from secular ideologies to literary texts. The idea of time-lines, as used here, is inspired by two sources. The first is a term from literary criticism, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotopes. However, Bakhtin claimed that new literary forms such as the modern novel became possible because new conceptions of time actually became predominant in society, whereas the time-line of the religious movement text is part of the ideal order imagined by the spokespersons and may stand in opposition to predominant conceptions of time. The second source is the study of meta-historical narratives in history of ideas, especially on the coexistence of cyclical as well as progressive conceptions of the course of history.

utopian or dystopian terms. Different Western cultures, both secular and religious, tend to construct their distinct versions of historiography, narratives of the end of time that can be placed along these two axes. The Esoteric Tradition has its characteristic time-lines, a topic that will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Discursive Strategies

Emic Epistemology, Rhetoric and Religious Creativity

The presuppositions of a religious discourse are actively constructed: when historically contingent claims are transformed into self-evident truths, some person or social group must do the actual work required to effect the transformation. Doing so implies mastering some set of techniques whereby one can make a potential audience accept one's claims: discourse presupposes a discourse-producing process. Myths or legends within a modern religious tradition are at times set forth with oracular authority, in a way that is simply meant to be believed. Little or no explicit argumentation need support the claims. Much more commonly, however, the reproduction of myth and legend elements is defended by having recourse to a set of arguments. Thus, at the simplest level, one may be told to pray or to "feel in one's heart" whether the doctrines are true—a basic appeal to the validity of personal experience. Such arguments will here be called discursive strategies: discursive in that they are part of the religious discourse rather than its praxis, strategies in that they construct and defend the discourse.

Writers from any modern religious position face similar problems: how can the reader be persuaded that the writer really knows what he or she purports to know? Just as there is an explicit or implicit epistemology underlying factual claims in non-religious contexts, there is also an emic epistemology of religion, a set of methods and sources of knowledge that spokespersons from within that tradition regard as legitimate. Few modern religious texts appear to be based on pure fideism, the position that faith should be held irrespective of arguments. Much more commonly, some minimal form of evidentialism enters into the picture. The question is then: precisely what counts as evidence within the religious tradition under scrutiny? Such questions of emic epistemology are the most fundamental part of the discursive strategies of the text. Uncovering this aspect of the discursive

strategies entails an attempt to describe and analyze not so much the substantive doctrines of the discourse, as the question how movement texts claim to present authoritative knowledge.

Whatever the claims of emic epistemology, i.e. the purported sources of knowledge, the answers that are usually forthcoming when such questions are asked also settle the question of what supposedly lends plausibility to the claims set out in a given movement text. Thus, the concept of discursive strategy also involves one particular aspect of rhetoric. Since antiquity, rhetoric has been construed as two related but distinct verbal arts. The most basic and pared back definition of the first aspect of the term is Aristotelian: rhetoric is the art of persuasion. Rhetorical analysis would then be the method of identifying, by examining their verbal structures, the way in which writers attempt to persuade their readers that they present a valid argument. In the second sense of the term, the one adopted, for instance, by Quintilian, rhetoric is the art of speaking well. Aristotle's principal interest lay in the argumentative structure, Quintilian's in the formal characteristics of style and narration.

Latin rhetorical terminology further divided the art of constructing and delivering an effective speech into five parts. The argumentational structure of the speech is covered by the first two. *Inventio* deals with construction of arguments. *Dispositio* is concerned with the arrangement of the arguments in a persuasive order. The art of speaking well is covered by the three last parts: *elocutio* (finding appropriate language to express oneself), *memoria* and *pronunciatio*.

Rhetoric in the general sense of the word need in fact be no more than persuasiveness. An appeal to personal experience may well be characterized as a rhetoric of experience. The more specific sense in which the word rhetoric is used typically deals with the details of textual formulae. It makes sense to speak of the rhetorical analysis of a particular speech or of a textual passage. It is less clear that rhetorical analysis could apply to an entire corpus of literature. Discursive strategies, as defined here, resemble rhetoric in the sense of *inventio*, but do not involve any of the other pillars of classical rhetoric.

The third and final aspect of a discursive strategy is its capacity as a source of creative elaboration. If, for instance, the Mormon church uses references to Biblical texts as a discursive strategy, this is not only an element of emic epistemology and a means of developing arguments (*inventio*). The use of particular scriptural passages can also inspire new doctrinal developments. How "should" these

passages be interpreted? Why have other denominations "misinterpreted" them? What conclusions should one draw from the "true" meaning that has been discovered? If the church relies on revelations imparted to its most highly ranked officials, legends will begin to develop around the mode of transmission, the personal qualities of the recipients and the history of previous revelations.

Three Discursive Strategies

The argument of this study is founded on the conceptual framework outlined above. Three discursive strategies of the Modern Esoteric Tradition will be the subject of this study.

One specific element of modern rhetoric, viz. the creation and severing of links,[31] is crucial to the first two discursive strategies under discussion. Ideologies define themselves not only in terms of their own doctrines and practices, but also in relation to other ideologies. Whether negative or positive, such pointers to other ideologies can be seen as a reliance on the designation of *significant Others*.[32] As will be shown below, the discursive strategies of the Esoteric Tradition rely to a considerable degree on the (real or imagined) characteristics of such positive and negative significant Others.

The first strategy is that of tradition. If what has previously been regarded as tradition, typically the generally accepted variety of Christianity prevalent in any given time and place, is contested, what tradition can replace it? An emic tradition is constructed by means of a massive disembedding from a fairly well-defined range of times and places. Behind the construction of traditions lies a grand totalizing project aimed at showing that the various local traditions are mere reflections of a *philosophia perennis*, an ageless wisdom. The second strategy is the matter of rationality and science. In a secular age, one might expect pleas for a religious worldview to be decreasingly based on appeals to a generally accepted revelation or scripture, and increasingly dependent on claims to legitimacy related to the purported rationality of such a worldview.

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[31] This is not one of the figures of classical rhetoric, but a significant innovation of the "new rhetoric". See especially Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1971 and Perelman 1982.

[32] The term *significant Others* was coined by George Herbert Mead in the 1930s and has been used in the theory of personality development. Here, the concept is metaphorically extended to refer to the process whereby movement spokespersons construct the identities of their doctrines in relation to abstract or concrete Others.

Besides the two strategies that delineate positive Others, the third appeals to experience. For reasons that will become clearer in chapter 6, the undermining of centralized religious authority has partly transformed the Esoteric Tradition into a mode of religiosity that bases far-reaching claims of validity on the highly problematic concept of experience, either personal (and therefore reflexive) or vicarious. Since the present study deals with a set of texts, the discursive strategy investigated is not experience itself (whatever that might be) but narratives of experience.

In practice, the three discursive strategies seldom appear in splendid isolation. The prophet of a new religious movement may have received his insights through initiation, visionary experiences or meditation. Once the prophet is able to give a structured representation of these insights, he realizes that they are in fact closely paralleled by the latest scientific discoveries. Exegetes of the new prophetic wisdom will be able to point out the astounding resemblances between the prophet's revelation and a variety of ancient spiritual traditions. Thus, the new insights are presented simultaneously as the privileged experience of the prophet himself, as scientifically sound and as an ageless wisdom. The case study in chapter 7 intends to show how all three discursive strategies can work together to legitimize the same doctrinal claims.

The three discursive strategies operate in an empirical world of religious doctrines, of spokespersons, movements and movement texts. Before delving into the specifics of tradition, scientism and experience, the following chapter will attempt to give the reader a historically structured background understanding of modern esotericism. Those who already have some familiarity with the history of the Modern Esoteric Tradition may wish to proceed directly to chapter 4.

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CHAPTER THREE

SOME ESOTERIC POSITIONS: A HISTORICAL SKETCH

Introduction

The previous chapter introduced some key terms and concepts that are germane to the study of modern, post-Enlightenment religion. The present chapter is intended as a brief introduction to the place of the Esoteric positions that will be the focus of the rest of this study within the broader context of post-Enlightenment esotericism. It should be noted that the information given here is not meant to be a grand survey of Western esotericism, but is specifically intended to satisfy the following three purposes:

Firstly, the Esoteric Tradition has only recently become an accepted focus of scholarly study. In contrast to the situation regarding the major religious traditions of the world, one cannot expect readers of the present study to be familiar with the background of the positions discussed here. This sketch is intended to provide basic background information for those unfamiliar with the forms of alternative religiosity discussed in the rest of this study. This implies presenting a bare-bones account that can readily be supplemented with fuller descriptions in existing surveys.[1]

Secondly, it concentrates on the five positions whose discursive strategies are in focus here; thus, a vast number of positions and individual spokespersons are not included. A chronicle attempting to survey the variety of positions of post-Enlightenment esotericism on an equal footing would, at the very least, note that there are several lineages of a more general esoteric thought. One lineage would be the Swedenborgian, beginning with the Swedish visionary, continuing with certain aspects of nineteenth century spiritualism and ending in the Swedenborgian churches of the present time. Another lineage is that of Christian theosophy, leading from Jacob Böhme to

[1] Readers interested in pursuing the broader question of the development and varieties of Western esotericism may wish to consult Faivre & Needleman 1993, Faivre 1994, Hanegraaff 1996 chs. 14 and 15, and van den Broek & Hanegraaff 1998.

Franz von Baader and beyond. Another would be the history of initiatory societies from the rosicrucians and freemasons to the present-day proliferation of "occult" or esoteric schools—*AMORC, Builders of the Adytum* and many others. Another still might be the French occult revival. All these will be passed by in silence, as will *a fortiori* the entire history of pre-Enlightenment esotericism. Since the present study focuses on a lineage from theosophy up to the present, the most direct precursor with which this story will begin is Franz Mesmer.

Thirdly, it is written with the specific goal of this study in mind, viz. to elucidate the discursive strategies of these positions. As will become clear, these discursive strategies are often developed in an attempt to adapt to various structural characteristics of the dominant culture, such as individualism, faith in science and awareness of the world as one global community. Arguably, the details of doctrinal similarities or chains of influence are often subordinate to the cultural context of the Esoteric Tradition. For a study with such a focus, the doctrinal specifics of the various Esoteric positions are undoubtedly of secondary importance.

The Modernization of Esotericism: An Overview

Spokespersons of the Esoteric Tradition, especially in its guise as theosophy and the New Age, frequently refer to their teachings as ancient, even "ageless". Historians of religion who have studied the Esoteric Tradition fall roughly into two groups on the issue of historical roots and continuity with earlier traditions. One group may delineate the historical development differently than adherents would, yet still agree in drawing parallels with older traditions. Not infrequently, the Esoteric Tradition is seen as a modern manifestation of a tradition dating back to renaissance hermeticism, or reaching back still further to the Gnostics, or even to pythagoreanism and orphicism.[2] There is a good case to be made for a different view of history, espoused by a second group of scholars, in which such links to premodern epochs are seen as more tenuous due to a radical modernization of these earlier traditions.[3] Certain specific aspects of the

[2] Kyle 1995.

[3] Thus, Wouter Hanegraaff argues persuasively that the changes that have taken place in esotericism over the last two centuries represent a massive adaptation to the requirements of the modern secular context, cf. Hanegraaff 1996, ch. 15. The

modernization of esotericism form the bulk of the remainder of this study; in the interest of a brief orientation, a few salient points may, however, be mentioned here. The case for change can be formulated in terms of the discussion of form, social and cultural context and emic interpretation outlined in the preceding chapter.

There are distinct differences in focus between older and newer esotericisms, even on the most overt, i.e. formal, level. Antoine Faivre points out that late medieval esotericism constructed esoteric speculation on Christian foundations, alchemy and astrology.[4] Major forms of esotericism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are non-Christian or relate extremely freely to their Christian roots. Alchemy plays a marginal role. Only astrology retains (or more accurately, has regained) a position as a key element of speculative thought.

The social and cultural context has changed radically from pre-modern esotericism to the nineteenth and twentieth century Esoteric Tradition. Intellectuals of the Renaissance had no historical tools for disproving the accepted view of the hermetic texts as Egyptian philosophical treatises of the utmost antiquity. They had no conception of the structure of matter that could have made it obvious that the more literal (i.e. pseudo-chemical) interpretations of alchemy were untenable. There were numerous common-sense arguments as well as theological attacks on astrology, but no empirical tests and no understanding of the cognitive and socio-psychological mechanisms involved in divination with which they could have refuted astrology on purely rationalist grounds.

All these arguments are available to modern skeptics, many of them since the beginning of the Enlightenment. New Age spokespersons may appear to seek assurance in a retreat to pre-modern beliefs and practices. But in a sense, this is an illusion. Contemporary astrology cannot be equivalent to medieval astrology, since even its most enthusiastic supporters must be aware of the fact that they are advocating a minority position. Few if any believers in mystical Egypt are entirely cut off from exoteric information on the pyramids. Esoteric writers such as Edouard Schuré and Rudolf Steiner, who believed in the historicity and great antiquity of Hermes Trismegistus, had

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presentation which follows in this chapter is, however, not directly based on the discussion there, but is tailored to the requirements of the subsequent discussion of the discursive strategies rather than contents of post-Enlightenment esotericism.

[4] Faivre 1994: 53 ff.

to defend their minority views. Adepts of alchemy will almost be forced to a adopt a non-literalist interpretation and will probably choose a Jungian model, since even the most elementary scientific literacy has dispelled the conceit that matter can be transmuted through chemical processes. Modern esotericists are not part and parcel of a culture of accepted claims, but must actively reinterpret or reject any negative evidence that they encounter. Their arguments can therefore be infused with the rhetoric appropriate to a minority position, e.g. the need to depict materialists and skeptics as their negative Others.

Finally, even an apparent continuity, such as the survival of astrology, can mask vast differences in emic interpretation. Intense propagandistic and political efforts against astrology nearly eradicated the practice. During the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, astrology as a craft was to all practical purposes defunct. Furthermore, modern, revived astrology has undergone a major transformation. Many practicing astrologers seem to have adopted a psychologizing approach to interpretation, created more or less single-handedly by Dane Rudhyar in the 1930s.[5] The history of premodern astrology is complex and multi-faceted. At the risk of gross over-simplification, one could say that the two main foci of astrology were divinatory and philosophical-theosophical. The divinatory aspect was evident in the reading of charts, which often centered on the health of the individual. The philosophical-theosophical aspect attempted to understand how and why there could be a correlation between the movements of the planets and life on earth. Modern, psychologizing theories of astrology are largely a creation of the twentieth century—rather obviously so since the psychological theories invoked are contemporary developments.

What is the direction of change? In the complex interplay of tradition and innovation, the most decisive break in esotericism is its transformation in the pre-Romantic and Romantic epochs. Five factors profoundly influenced not only the doctrinal details of various positions, but the very foundations from which Esoteric doctrines would be constructed.

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[5] Rudhyar (1895–1985) began his spiritual quest as a student of western occultism and lived among American theosophists during the early 1920s. His acquaintance with Jungian thought led him to synthesize the two traditions in a vast written output. His main work, *The Astrology of Personality* (1936), became the central manifesto of this new form of astrology. Rudhyar's continuing interest in theosophy made him dedicate this book to Alice Bailey. Cf. Lewis 1994: 458 ff.

Firstly, whereas older esoteric traditions in the West had the Church authorities as their main competitor (and at times foe), the Enlightenment saw the rise of codified and institutionalized scientific enterprises and of rationalism. From now on, modern esoteric positions would generally construct their boundaries in relation to two competing worldviews rather than one, and adopt the language of science and rationalism. Hanegraaff notes in particular how the post-Enlightenment esoteric movements were influenced by the adoption of a framework of instrumental cause and effect overlaid on older conceptions.[6] In Hanegraaff's terminology, the esoteric currents became secularized.[7] Present-day Esoteric positions thus appear to vacillate between the two worldviews. Generalizing somewhat, modern texts on divination or healing can attempt to explain the rationale of their craft both in terms of correspondences ("as above so below"; in analogy with a hologram, man and the cosmos mirror each other) and of causation (subtle energies undetected by science effect healing or emanate from the heavenly bodies), whereas older esoteric positions were generally rooted in a pre-mechanistic worldview in which correspondences and signatures were upheld through divine will.

Secondly, Enlightenment thinking and its successors saw the idea of progress spread throughout the intellectual milieu. Social and biological evolutionism were two aspects of this more abstract underlying paradigm. Modern Esoteric positions would also be formulated within this worldview of meliorism, the concept that history goes forward and that people and cultures progress.[8]

Thirdly, the period at the end of the Enlightenment also saw a considerably expanded knowledge of non-Christian religions. Whereas much earlier esotericism attempted to reinterpret Christian doctrines or received its inspirations from fantasy images of relatively nearby cultures (Egypt, in particular), the educated classes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries began to have access to translations of Hindu scriptures as well as popularizations of other exotic religious systems.

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[6] Older positions can combine (and confuse) theories of correspondence with Platonicizing theories of causation in which a world spirit mediates influences from the heavenly powers to the sublunar world.

[7] Hanegraaff 1998: 375.

[8] Here, I adopt the concept of meliorism to denote a form of teleological evolutionism which considers evolution to be a near-synonym of progress. As is well known, orthodox neodarwinist theories of evolution are by contrast non-teleological.

Fourthly, the Enlightenment period saw the gradual emergence of a new view of social hierarchies, characterized by greater mobility and pointing the way toward the individualism of contemporary Western societies. In the field of esotericism, these changes manifested in an ever greater diversity of approaches. Mesmerism and spiritualism were doctrinally vague and could be appropriated by spiritual entrepreneurs for the most diverse purposes.[9]

Finally, numerous post-Enlightenment esoteric movements in general, and the New Age in particular, have seen an interiorization and psychologization of their doctrines. Thus, alchemy is thought to deal less with the transmutation of metals and more with the transmutation of the Self; astrology less with one's destiny and more with one's personality; magic less with influencing the external world and more with exploring the "archetypal" elements in one's own psyche. However, this factor is less pervasive than the former. Thus, manuals of healing continue to talk of energies thought to be objectively existing forces and not merely part of one's Self. Esoteric historiography is treated by spokespersons as true, not just as an archetypal myth.

Such changes will come into focus in the following chapters. Chapter 4 focuses on the approach toward a variety of exotic Others. Chapter 5 addresses the opinions on science held by the Esoteric spokespersons. Chapter 6 covers the increased (professed) reliance on one's own individual experience. The gradual secularization of esotericism, as it adopted these new elements, will be briefly covered in a later section of the present chapter ("A Brief Chronology of the Modern Esoteric Tradition").

Before proceeding, it should finally be noted that some of the most profound changes in the emergence of modernity must be excluded by spokespersons for the Esoteric Tradition, since their acceptance would undermine any religious perspective. The Enlightenment project presents rationality and the scientific method as uniquely transcultural phenomena and understands religions as products of specific social, cultural and historical contexts. In a sense fundamentally at odds with pre-modern views, it can define religion as a set of discourses and practices which "invest specific human preferences with transcendent status by misrepresenting them as revealed truths, primordial traditions, divine commandments and so forth".[10] Such ration-

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[9] The diversity of opinion is documented in monographs such as Gauld 1992 (for mesmerism) and Moore 1977 (for spiritualism).

[10] Lincoln 2000: 416.

alist perspectives are profoundly antithetical to those wishing to embrace any religious (and by implication, any esoteric) point of view, and are therefore effectively excluded from the boundaries of acceptable discourse.[11] Thus, it should be emphasized that esotericism has been profoundly but selectively modernized.

Some Themes of the Modern Esoteric Tradition

During the 120 year period within which the five positions discussed in this study have flourished, i.e. from the late nineteenth century until today, the religious landscape has presented a bewildering array of claims and possibilities. With the possible exception of Alice Bailey, who principally expanded on the possibilities inherent in Blavatskian theosophy, the major spokespersons for the various positions have shared an omnivorous spiritual appetite. They absorbed an immense number of the diverse culturally available elements, interpreted this material through a hermeneutic framework of their own and presented the result as a coherent doctrine. The section "A Brief Chronology of the Modern Esoteric Tradition" will be devoted to uncovering a few of these influences. In spite of the methodological *bricolage* employed by these spokespersons, the Modern Esoteric Tradition taken collectively nevertheless displays the necessary balance between coherence and diversity to make it meaningful to speak of a discourse with a variety of positions, in the senses of these terms delineated in the previous chapter. This is certainly not the place to attempt any extensive review of the doctrinal components of the Modern Esoteric Tradition.[12] Such an undertaking has never been performed and would be of considerable intrinsic interest. It would, however, fill a massive volume. Nevertheless, the Esoteric Tradition is much less known than any of the "major" religious traditions. The following brief summary may, therefore, help readers who are unfamiliar with the five positions to gain a minimal acquaintance with some of these themes.

Modern Esoteric texts present a cosmic history with three common traits. Firstly, history is the story of evolution. The world itself comes into being through evolution rather than creation. Humanity

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[11] See Gellner 1992 for a defense of the modernist position on science versus religion and Bell 1996 for an attack of the same view.

[12] Hanegraaff does this for the New Age movement.

evolves, as do consciousness and spirituality. Secondly, cosmic history includes our own world as just one planet among many. Ever since Swedenborg, esotericism has encompassed belief in spiritually evolved beings in other worlds than our own. Thirdly, in our world, particular peoples and cultures carry history forward: Lemuria, Atlantis, ancient Egypt and India are among the stations of cosmic history. Evolution is the closest one comes to an Esoteric key symbol in Sherry Ortner's sense.[13]

Esoteric cosmologies reckon with a hierarchically structured set of spiritually evolved beings. The deity plays a relatively minor role in most positions. If a God is invoked, he/she/it is often presented in the most abstract of terms, perhaps as the Ground of Being. Esoteric God sometimes appears as a classical example of a *deus otiosus*. Between this shadowy deity and humans stand a variety of beings. The nature of these beings and their status within the respective hierarchies differ from one position to another. They may be devas, angels, theosophical masters, space brothers, and so forth. Different positions within the Esoteric Tradition place varying emphasis on these hierarchies. Thus Steiner emphasized the role of the archangels, Bailey placed the theosophical Masters foremost whereas several New Age books focus on angels. The place and evolution of each form of being within this conception of the cosmos follows a grand Plan. This applies especially to human beings, which is the reason why divination is possible. Rituals of divination, such as the use of tarot cards, have become some of the most widespread elements of New Age culture.

Evolution, and thus time itself, is teleological; therefore, it is also possible to predict in general terms the collective future of mankind. Theosophy conceived of the present as a major turning point. Over the eons, spirit had become progressively more entrapped in matter. The present time, however, marks the beginning of a great ascent of consciousness. This theosophical framework has been reinterpreted and rephrased within most post-theosophical positions. One conception is close to the original theosophical model and sees the future as yet another evolutionary step for mankind. Other models are more apocalyptic and appear to predict the end of history as we know it.

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[13] Ortner 1973; The defining characteristics of a key symbol in Ortner's view is that it constitutes a culture's means of sorting experience and categorizing the world by subsuming a number of different overt characteristics under a common heading. Evolution serves such functions by e.g. simultaneously explaining world history, the fate of the individual and the observable differences between religious traditions.

The Esoteric Tradition constructs personhood differently to secular alternatives or many other religious traditions. Generally speaking, Esoteric positions imply a gnosticizing conception of the Self.[14] It is common to posit that we have within us a spiritual or higher self, a part of us that can be more or less sharply distinguished from the ego, which is the element that we believe to be our personality whilst in a state of ordinary consciousness. We are often unaware of this higher Self, and need an awakening call or spiritual exercises to get in touch with what is perceived as the "true" essence of our persons. Such gnosticizing beliefs infuse Esoteric positions of the 1970s and 1980s that are as diverse as *A Course in Miracles*,[15] the books of Solara[16] and the pop psychology of Wayne Dyer.[17] In a psychologizing age, it is perhaps only natural that some form of psychology, often of a Jungian or transpersonal variety, should be part of the Esoteric view of personhood. In particular, the Jungian concept of a collective unconscious as the seat of the archetypes has become a mainstay of the New Age worldview.

Most Esoteric positions also claim that we possess several bodies: besides the physical body there are one or more subtle bodies. The physical body is often conceived of as surrounded by an aura, which may or may not be identified with one of the subtle bodies. One of the subtle bodies is understood as the locus of foci of "energy", the chakras, usually conceived of as seven in number. Exactly how the subtle bodies, the ego and Higher self, and the psyche with its Jungian components are interrelated is left to the creative elaboration of each individual spokespersons, or is perhaps more commonly left vaguely sketched.

If we are composite beings, in which parts other than the physical body play a significant role, spiritual as well as bodily healing will be construed as something quite different than the mere restoration of health as understood in a biomedical context. Certain Esoteric

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[14] Here, *Gnosticizing* is not to be understood as a synonym of *Gnostic*, in the historic sense that was defined in the conference on the origins of Gnosticism held in Messina in 1966 (cf. Rudolph 1987: 56 f.), but in a more general meaning, as a complex of ideas that can be found in other traditions than those that flourished around the Eastern Mediterranean during the first centuries CE.

[15] The course is described in chapter 6.

[16] Solara's channeled books claim that we are spiritual beings who have incarnated in matter and forgotten who we are, cf. *You Are Called*.

[17] Thus, one of the messages in Dyer's *Real Magic* is that we have a true or core Self that can effect seeming miracles.

positions, from anthroposophy and Edgar Cayce to the New Age, place great emphasis on complementary medicine. To the extent that such methods are understood as in some way involving spiritual aspects, they have been included here as well. To take just one example, Reiki healing is not only a method of physical cure, but (at least for its spokespersons and practitioners) also involves specific beliefs about cosmic energies and non-physical aspects of human physiology.

Belief systems that regard humans as being more than physical organisms will be able to find a place for theories of existence after physical death and conceptions of afterlife. Within the Esoteric tradition, theosophy played a crucial role in replacing alternative theories (spiritualistic, Swedenborgian and others) with a near-consensus as to the reality of a melioristic model of reincarnation and karma.

Each Esoteric position also contains speculations on the nature of knowledge. How can one "know" that mankind evolved on Atlantis, that we have subtle bodies, that colors influence our auras? The problem of knowledge becomes particularly acute whenever an Esoteric spokesperson reflects on the widespread skepticism of society as a whole. A common response is the claim that there are other, perhaps better, roads to insight than our rational minds. Perhaps our intuition or our feelings can guide us. Maybe there are ancient cultures whose spiritual insights have not yet been matched by modern, materialistic man. Or could there even be suprahuman sources of wisdom? Belief in such sources has produced a considerable interest in messages received through revelation, variously understood as channeling, reading a kind of cosmic memory bank variously known as the Akashic record or the Book of Life, or conducting conversations with spirits, angels or even God.

A Brief Chronology of the Modern Esoteric Tradition

The Mesmerist Tradition

In the 1770s, Austrian physician Franz Mesmer created a form of alternative medicine.[18] Every illness, he claimed, is ultimately caused by an imbalance in the animal magnetism that flows through the

[18] Mesmer's methods and theories did build on various precursors. However, his skills in marketing his practices initiated a large-scale movement built on a specific, scientistic interpretation of healing. In this sense, Mesmer indeed created something new. The story of the birth of mesmerism will be told in greater detail in chapter 5.

human body. Mesmer created a variety of healing rituals to redress these imbalances. These rituals routinely involved a crisis followed by a cure. By the end of the 1770s, Mesmer's renown was such that he had attracted a fair number of disciples.

In 1784, one of these disciples, the marquis de Puységur, introduced a significant innovation into mesmerism. The marquis surmised that Mesmer's cures were due to an altered state of consciousness, which he called magnetic sleep or somnambulism, and discovered that this state could involve a much wider range of phenomena than the crisis-cure pattern. Some of the marquis' patients became extraordinarily attentive to the wishes of the mesmerist, sometimes to the point of seemingly reading his thoughts. Other patients experienced out-of-body phenomena. Still others heard voices, received messages from spirit beings, and demonstrated a whole range of ostensibly paranormal abilities. Quite a few somnambules and mediums transmitted messages reminiscent of Swedenborgian doctrines. Significant sections of the alternative religiosity of the post-Enlightenment era grew out of the marriage of rituals reminiscent of those created by Mesmer, and beliefs inspired by Swedenborg's texts. These spectacular phenomena were recorded and discussed, and formed the core of a proto-spiritualist culture.[19]

Germany was an especially fertile environment for such endeavors. Romanticism and *Naturphilosophie* paved the way for a wider acceptance of mesmerism, which was described in favorable terms in contemporary literature and aroused the interest of scientists and philosophers. Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert was among the first to include a description of mesmerism in his *Ansichten von der Nachtseite der Naturwissenschaften*, published in 1808. Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling made it part of a larger doctrinal framework in *Theorie der Geisterkunde*, published in the same year. The interest in the more spectacular aspects of mesmerism went hand in hand with a fascination for the supernatural, and led to an interest in "spontaneous" cases of prophetic

[19] The question of the origins of spiritualism is thus not as straightforward as one might imagine when reading standard accounts such as Nelson 1969, Moore 1977, Brandon 1983 and Owen 1989. Besides the trance messages of Andrew Jackson Davies, the "spirit rappings" received by Margaret and Katherine Fox of Hydesville, N.Y. are usually quoted as points of departure. This would place the origins of spiritualism in 1848. The very similar movements that existed in early 19th century Germany, Sweden and France are not always mentioned in these historical accounts. Any attempt to trace the roots of the phenomenon of spiritualism will rather find the roots of certain *forms* of spiritualism.

revelation. The messages of several celebrated *somnambules* were recorded as maps of the spiritual world. The best-known of these accounts is poet-physician Justinus Kerner's description of the visionary Friederike Hauffe in *Die Seherin von Prevorst* (1829).

After a few false starts, mesmerism reached America in 1836. One of the marquis de Puységur's pupils, Charles Poyen, established an itinerant mesmerist practice in New England. Poyen remained in North America until 1840, and taught literally hundreds of people the techniques of mesmerism. Some American mesmerists followed paths reminiscent of the German proto-spiritualists. Thus, among the starting points of spiritualism *sensu stricto* were the Swedenborgian spirit messages received in the 1840s by the American cobbler Andrew Jackson Davies when under mesmeric trance. Others developed mesmerism into a uniquely American family of religious traditions. One of Poyen's many apprentices stands out as one of the most influential figures of modern American religiosity: Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1846). Quimby eschewed the ballast of metaphysical and cosmological speculation that had been part and parcel of much European mesmerism. He expressed his theories in a vague theistic language, religious enough to be acceptable to a churched country such as the USA, yet not specific enough in doctrinal contents to offend the members of any particular creed. Quimby took a practice that reeked of mysticism and transformed it into an eminently practical recipe for health, happiness and prosperity. The reason for such a radical change in mesmerism could be sought in the particular individualism of early nineteenth century American society, a mode of thinking and living that not only reworked an esoteric praxis into a recipe for living, but also remolded Old World Protestantism into prosperity thinking and Oriental philosophies into transcendentalism.

A number of Quimby's former patients founded their own religious movements, collectively known as harmonial religions. They fall into two broad categories, Christian Science on the one hand and the various New Thought denominations on the other.[20] If Quimby was only vaguely theistic, the harmonial religions were all the more inspired by Scripture. In several harmonial religions, and especially in Christian Science, the roots in American mesmerism are all but hidden under a christianized theology, based on scrip-

[20] For a historical introduction to the harmonial religions, including a lengthy bibliography of earlier studies of the subject, see Satter 1999.

tural interpretation. Harmonial religions, although of great intrinsic interest, fall outside the scope of the present study, except in one important respect. Throughout the development of post-theosophical esotericism, rituals and doctrines with roots in American harmonial religion have been reincorporated into a more explicitly Esoteric framework. Books by late twentieth-century writers such as Wayne Dyer, Deepak Chopra and Shakti Gawain as well as the channeled *A Course in Miracles* are among the true bestsellers of the New Age movement. They employ discursive strategies foreign to most harmonial religions which, generally speaking, attempted to find a scriptural rationale for their doctrines. Nevertheless, the doctrines themselves all lean heavily on elements borrowed from the harmonial religions.

Theosophy

The first position within the Esoteric Tradition on which the present study focuses is theosophy, a movement created by the colorful Russian exilée Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Madame Blavatsky, as she became known, was born in Ekaterinoslav in the Ukraine in 1831. She manifested purported psychic abilities early in life, worked as a medium, and also studied occult lore. Her steps during nearly twenty years of travel are difficult, and at times impossible to trace. During this period, she claimed to have studied in Tibet and to have met spiritual teachers from India and the Himalayas known as Mahatmas or Masters. A more historically accurate account of her life during this period notes her successive involvement in various spiritualist, fringe Masonic and esotericist ventures.[21]

Blavatsky's claims of having received her occult knowledge from Tibet and India would later become central elements of her career. They were also part of a significant development of post-Enlightenment religious creativity. The story of the appropriation and incorporation of such exotic doctrinal details into theosophy and the other positions of the Esoteric Tradition will be told in chapter 4, but it should be noted that this process was the result of a shift within post-Enlightenment esotericism that began much earlier. Raymond Schwab and Joscelyn Godwin have shown how the late Enlightenment fostered an interest in non-Christian religions, and especially in their myths.[22] The earliest translations of religious texts from the East, e.g.

[21] Godwin 1994, ch. 14.
[22] Schwab 1984, esp. ch. 9; Godwin 1994.

the Avesta as presented in Abraham Anquetil-Duperron's translation from 1771, or the earliest renderings of Upanishad texts published shortly thereafter, opened up a new field for scholarship as well as speculation. What place did these newly discovered religious and philosophical systems have in the spiritual history of humanity?

Pioneers such as Richard Payne Knight (1751–1824) introduced his readers to theories explaining the origins of the world's mythologies, and by implication diminished the perceived distance between Christian and non-Christian ("pagan") beliefs. Others, such as Friedrich Schlegel and Madame de Staël, witnessed the simultaneous revival of the Behmenist tradition, the discovery of the Orient and the birth of Romanticism, and attempted to formulate grand syntheses of these currents. Romantic speculative religion was in some sense understood to be essentially the same as Christian theosophy, Hinduism and Neoplatonism.[23] Generally speaking, the theories espoused by such amateur scholars were totalizing schemes purporting to explain *all* religion in terms of e.g. an underlying pantheism, astral or sexual symbolism. These early writers, who saw their own work as a scientific exploration of religion, indirectly contributed to the creation of an esoteric interpretation of Indian and other cultures. The gradual professionalization of the history of religions and its adoption of more rigorous standards gradually forced the more fanciful interpretations out onto an esoteric fringe. Many early nineteenth century proponents of orientalizing esotericism soon sank into obscurity: today forgotten writers such as Richard Payne Knight, Charles Nodier, Godfrey Higgins, Emma Hardinge-Britten and Hargrave Jennings can be seen as the precursors of Blavatsky.

In 1874, Blavatsky settled in America, where she began her twin careers as creator of a new religious movement and writer of Esoteric doctrinal literature. Her efforts in the former direction appear to stem from her involvement in spiritualist circles. Séances usually purported to transmit messages from the spirits of the deceased, and spanned a wide range from simple greetings to surviving family members, to elaborate cosmological discourses. Blavatsky's major innovation was to claim that the messages she received came not from the dead, but from living spiritual masters of Oriental origin. These masters at first revealed their intentions through the usual séances, and soon progressed to communicating through correspondence.

[23] Schwab 1984: 229 ff.

Theosophy can in this sense be said to be a post-spiritualist movement. However, Blavatsky's immense religious appetite and creativity soon amalgamated large sections of the then popular occult lore into a unique mix, while claiming that it had all been transmitted through her by her Masters. *Isis Unveiled*, commenced in 1875 and published in 1877, was the first major product of Blavatsky's doctrinal creativity, a work which, in the words of her preface, constituted "a plea for the recognition of the Hermetic philosophy, the anciently universal Wisdom-Religion, as the only possible key to the Absolute in science and theology".[24] Nevertheless, a perusal of the contents of her massive text reveals a project far vaster than this, namely to integrate Atlantis, Reichenbach's odic force, mesmerism, Tibet, Paracelsus' *archaeus*, spirit apparitions, magic, alchemy, India, rosicrucianism, the kabbala and much more into one single edifice, by processing all these topics through a hermeneutics that made them relevant in an age of religious doubt and scientific materialism. It is as if Blavatsky had taken on the challenge to incorporate the totality of the 1870s cultic milieu.

In the years to come, theosophical doctrine would change focus to some extent. Soon after the publication of *Isis Unveiled*, the homeland of the "anciently universal Wisdom-Religion" shifted away from Egypt and the near East and moved increasingly towards India. Blavatsky's move to Bombay in 1879 basically confirmed a doctrinal change that was already well under way. Over the period from 1880 to 1884, theosophist Alfred Sinnett received numerous letters purportedly written by the Mahatmas. A profoundly reformed theosophical doctrine took shape in these 145 letters of varying length. The *Mahatma Letters* were only edited and published in 1923.[25] However, they formed the basis of two published books by Alfred Sinnett: *Occult World* and *Esoteric Buddhism*. Blavatsky had apparently painted herself into a corner. If one does not accept theosophical historiography at face value, there can hardly be any other conclusion than this: Blavatsky wrote the *Mahatma Letters* single-handedly, propounded a vast and complex mythology, but received neither credit or remuneration for her work. All of this went to Sinnett. Soon after the publication of *Esoteric Buddhism*, Blavatsky set out to

[24] IU I:vii.

[25] By Trevor Barker, see the bibliographic reference to Mahatma Letters in the list of sources.

compile her own definitive statement, based on the same material. The result was *The Secret Doctrine*, a work of truly colossal proportions published in 1888. Its nearly 1,500 pages contain a vast panorama of the cosmos, and a myth detailing the creation and development of the human species. In many ways, *The Secret Doctrine* defined the discourse within which subsequent positions were worked out. Some details were altered or fleshed out and other aspects of theosophical orthodoxy abandoned, resulting in a large family of neo- and post-theosophical systems.

Even what is the probably best summary to date of the teachings of theosophy[26] has its shortcomings in that it takes very little account of the doctrinal developments within the Theosophical Society after the death of Madame Blavatsky. In fact, there is hardly any scholarly treatment of neo-theosophy as developed by the prolific Charles Leadbeater. Perhaps this is due to the details of his biography, which are at times ludicrous and at times unsavory.[27] Leadbeater fabricated a life history that bears hardly any resemblance to what is known of the real facts of his life. He created his own church and appointed himself bishop. The most publicized element of his career was, however, his sexual abuse of young boys placed under his tutelage. For the historian of religion, the fact remains that despite the problematic aspects of Leadbeater's character and biography, he has had an enduring influence on the further development of the Esoteric tradition. Commonplace beliefs within the New Age, e.g. the human aura and the chakra system, are the results of Leadbeater's creativity.

Three Post-Theosophical Positions

The birth of theosophical orientalism coincided with a wave of interest in the *philosophia perennis*, the primordial tradition supposedly underlying all the major religions of the world. In a classic published in 1889, *Les grands initiés*, Edouard Schuré presented an eclectic list of Great Initiates of this primordial Tradition: Rama, Krishna, Hermes, Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato and Jesus. Theosophy followed a similar line and attempted to show that all great religious traditions are the more or less distorted reflexes of this common ancient tradition. However, two great Asian religions, Hinduism and Buddhism,

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[26] Campbell 1980.
[27] The standard biography of this eccentric guru is Tillet 1982.

were added to the traditions known to previous generations of esotericists, viz. pythagoreanism, orphicism, Neoplatonism, hermeticism, kabbala etc.

Although the stated aims of the post-theosophical spokespersons may have been to forge such a grand synthesis of East and West, politics on the ground were very different. Through processes of institutional schism and doctrinal innovation, a number of post-theosophical movements arose, and instead of a grand synthesis there was soon an entire spectrum of positions with similar narratives yet often incompatible details. A few of these developments gained international prominence and a considerable number of adherents; some of these are discussed in the present study.[28]

Rudolf Steiner

Rudolf Steiner was born in 1861 in the village of Kraljevec, in what is today Croatia. His family moved to Mödling near Vienna, thus Steiner was able to attend the Polytechnic and study mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology. In Vienna, Steiner also met the influential theosophist Friedrich Eckstein, who introduced him to a circle of friends with an interest in esotericism. Steiner combined these interests in alternative religiosity with what was perhaps a more orthodox career. Steiner's deep knowledge of Goethe led to his being invited to Weimar, where his work for the next seven years consisted in editing the scientific writings of Goethe. In his spare time, Steiner worked on a thesis in philosophy, a treatise on Fichte's epistemology. In 1891, Steiner received his doctorate.[29]

During his Weimar years Steiner published a work on the esoteric significance of a tale by Goethe. The theosophical lodge in Berlin invited Steiner to hold lectures. In the Theosophical Society, Steiner met his future wife Marie von Sievers. Von Sievers and

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[28] Conversely, I have eschewed post-theosophical movements that have a more local influence or a more tenuous relationship to the theosophical lineage. Among the former, the works of Martinus (1890–1981, Denmark), Henrik von Zeipel (1882–1971, Sweden) and Joseph Anton Schneiderfranken (1876–1943, Germany) would have merited study. Among the latter, one could mention the Traditionalist school of Fritjof Schuon; the Rosicrucian Fellowship, a modern self-proclaimed rosicrucian movement founded by Max Heindel; and the Universal White Brotherhood of Omraam Mikhael Aivanhov. These and other similar positions would be natural extensions of the present study.

[29] The thesis was published in the following year as *Wahrheit und Wissenschaft. Vorspiel einer 'Philosophie der Freiheit'*.

Steiner visited London in 1902, Steiner was introduced to Annie Besant and was promptly made secretary general of the German section of the Theosophical Society. In 1899 or 1900, Steiner had experienced a religious crisis that precipitated a major change in his thinking. Earlier works, such as *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (1893), build on a kind of monism according to which it is impossible, for instance, to distinguish between our perception of a tree and the tree "as such". The distinction between the material and spiritual worlds, crucial to Steiner's entire post-1900 production, is simply not a topic addressed by him during this early phase. In *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* there is also a proto-existentialist tone, a view of the individual as a unique and self-determining being.

The spiritual reorientation and the contact with esotericism set Steiner on a path of eclecticism and synthesis that produced a highly original and speculative occult philosophy. The theosophical years from 1902 to 1913 were particularly productive. Several books that are considered fundamental to anthroposophy were written during this period, particularly *Theosophie* (1904), *Wie erlangt man Erkentnisse der höheren Welten* (1904) and *Die Geheimwissenschaft im Umriss* (1910). Over the years, the doctrinal differences between Steiner and Besant/Leadbeater became increasingly irreconcilable. Steiner's orientation toward Christian theosophical mysticism was incompatible with the theosophists' predilection for India and its religions. A break came in early 1913, when Steiner was expelled from the Theosophical Society, formed the Anthroposophical Society and was followed by the majority of German theosophists. After 1913, Steiner worked on establishing an anthroposophical center in the Swiss town of Dornach. Steiner continued to elaborate on anthroposophy, particularly by implementing its doctrines in various areas of practical activity. Anthroposophical teachings have been applied to fields such as education (Waldorf schools), medicine, art (especially eurythmics) and agriculture (biodynamic farming). Steiner died on March 30, 1925.

Rudolf Steiner's worldview is composed of elements from the most disparate sources. His epistemology is influenced by German idealism, especially Fichte. His doctrines combine Christian mysticism, rosicrucian esotericism, Goethean science and, perhaps most importantly, a substantial theosophical element, with a generous dose of personal creativity. Steiner's writings are evidence of a profound knowledge of Western esotericism. It is, however, not an easy task to trace all the influences on his thinking, since Steiner maintained

that his philosophy was an integrated whole that came from direct spiritual insight. Despite the fact that theosophy is the single major source of his doctrines, Steiner even denied ever having been influenced by Blavatsky or Besant.

Alice Bailey

According to emic historiography, Alice LaTrobe Bateman (1880–1949) (later Bailey) met a turbaned stranger in her youth who told her that important work waited ahead. In her quest to understand what had happened, she joined the Theosophical Society in Pacific Groves, California. Through theosophy, she came to identify the turbaned stranger as the master Koot Hoomi. In 1919, she was approached by another master, a Tibetan called Djwhal Khul (also known as D.K.). Bailey and D.K. began a series of telepathic dictations, which resulted in nineteen books. Her first book, *Initiation Human and Solar*, was at first favorably received by her fellow theosophists. Soon, however, her claims to be a recipient of ageless wisdom from the Masters met with opposition. Annie Besant reportedly attempted to control the production of messages from the masters, and Alice Bailey and her husband Foster were expelled from the Theosophical Society in 1920. Alice Bailey founded the Arcane School in 1923, but the movement split up after her death in 1949.

To a large extent, Bailey's teachings are a restatement and amplification of the theosophy of *The Secret Doctrine*. Bailey inherited from Blavatsky and Leadbeater a predilection for profuse details and complex classificatory schemes. Thus, Bailey's cosmology rests on the belief in a multi-level hierarchy of spiritual masters and in a classification of the entire cosmos according to a sevenfold scheme. Her books have, however, also introduced shifts in emphasis as well as new doctrinal elements. Her interest in esoteric astrology, her doctrine of the seven rays (i.e. seven spiritual principles that underlie manifest reality) and her messianic belief in the imminent arrival of a New Age are original contributions to theosophical doctrine.

Bailey's influence on the New Age is both direct and indirect. The messianism of her message, her interest in astrology and her insistence on personal spiritual evolution prefigure similar interests in the New Age. A more indirect influence is the prominent position of one of her pupils, Roberto Assagioli, in the emerging New Age.[30]

[30] On Assagioli, see Campbell 1980: 155.

Assagioli was a close associate of Bailey's, a founder of an organization based on the message in Bailey's *Discipleship in the New Age* and the creator of psychosynthesis, a method of guided imagery that remains popular in the New Age and is endorsed by well-known present-day astrologers such as Liz Greene and Howard Sasportas. Bailey is thus an important precursor of New Age beliefs, both through her own works and through her pupils.

Edgar Cayce

Edgar Cayce (1877–1945) was born on a farm near Hopkinsville, Kentucky. At the age of twenty-one, Cayce developed a gradual paralysis of the throat which led to the loss of his voice. When doctors were unable to determine the cause of this condition, Cayce attempted to find an alternative treatment and tried hypnosis. Once in a self-induced trance, he was able to recommend a cure which successfully restored his speech. He subsequently learned to enter this trance at will and to give "readings", in which he would answer questions that were asked by those in attendance. Eventually, he would become one of the most publicized psychics of all times. For many years the information requested of Cayce related mainly to matters of health. After meeting esotericist Arthur Lammers in 1923, the scope of his readings expanded to include such topics as astrology, the occult history of Atlantis, reincarnation, and prophecy.

Cayce's position within the Esoteric Tradition differs from the other positions presented here in that he never attempted to systematically present his opinions on any topic. From the thousands of readings recorded by a stenographer, pious adepts have collected a series of volumes with his pronouncements on various topics, from the occult properties of stones and minerals to the hidden spiritual life of Jesus. There are also several biographies, at least one major collection of readings on various topics and a CD-ROM with the entire corpus of material, but no authoritative texts purporting to systematize the contents of all of Cayce's readings into one single doctrinal canon. Cayce's work is important to the history of the Modern Esoteric Tradition in that it formed a bridge between theosophy and the New Age at a time when many institutionalized esoteric movements were experiencing a decline in membership. A number of New Age doctrines, e.g. speculation on the precise character of reincarnation or the use of crystals for healing and spiritual development, are contemporary reflexes of Cayce's ideas.

Modern Psycho-Religion

From the mid-nineteenth century on, there are two main reference points from which the history of the Modern Esoteric Tradition can be traced. The primary reference point would be theosophy and its heirs; the secondary reference point would be the harmonial religions that followed Quimby. Theosophy and the harmonial religions arose from the same mesmerist roots, developed at approximately the same time (the late 1800s), and thrived on the backdrop of a religious culture that was both individualistic and eclectic, and which absorbed nineteenth-century transcendentalism, the doctrines of Emanuel Swedenborg, the introduction on American soil of Hindu monism, etc. Theosophy cultivated the mystical and speculative elements of its precursors, Quimby and his successors pared mesmerism back to a minimal creed of personal well-being and prosperity. Although these two in many respects held distinct beliefs and envisioned different goals, they both grew out of the same cultic milieu. When this milieu grew sufficiently strong, both trends gradually came to influence each other, partly merging into a single family of doctrines and practices. A third, more recent reference point has been the psychologization of religion. For the purposes of tracing the emergence of the New Age, four trends towards psychologization are of particular significance: late New Thought, Jungianism, humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology.[31]

Whereas the early New Thought denominations debated questions of health and prosperity in theological terms, twentieth century writers within this tradition increasingly incorporated the ideals and terminology of contemporary popular psychology.[32] Furthermore, popular psychology itself presented personhood in a new way, favoring self-realization and expressivity over the older values of restraint and self-control. In the sphere of the harmonial religions, self-realization came to be identified as the realization of entrepreneurial drives, of

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[31] The following remarks are intended as a brief positioning for those who are unfamiliar with these psychological traditions. Readers are directed to the relevant literature for fuller accounts. Syntheses between religion and psychology are not a unique facet of New Age religion, but are part of a wider cultural phenomenon; for a general review of the issues, see Homans 1987. On the historical development of Jungianism, see Noll 1994; for those who read Swedish, Almqvist 1997 is an excellent account of the religious or gnosticizing aspect of Jung's work. On humanistic and transpersonal psychology, see Tart 1977.

[32] The present discussion is based on Satter 1999, ch. 7.

success in the "masculine" world. These new values were formulated in a quasi-psychological vocabulary, seeing the sub-conscious mind as the locus of divine power. It is thus during the first two decades of the twentieth century that New Thought became at once a distinctly American form of pop psychology and a religion of prosperity and success. After 1920, the New Thought denominations increasingly lost momentum, but their legacy permeated the most diverse forms of positive thinking and self-help literature, from the autosuggestion methods of Emile Coué, via the prosperity protestantism of Norman Vincent Peale, to New Age bestsellers by Louise Hay, Shakti Gawain and Wayne Dyer.

The incorporation of Jungianism into the Esoteric Tradition is hardly surprising, considering that there are good reasons for regarding Jung himself as an esotericist, as well as someone who adapted esoteric motifs to the requirements of a psychologizing and scientistic epoch.[33] Jung's wide-ranging intellectual appetite led him to immerse himself in a vast range of non-Christian religious traditions. Foremost among these were contemporary esotericism, gnosticism, alchemy and a variety of Asian religions. Several commentators have

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[33] Cf. the lengthy discussions of this issue in Wehr 1992 and Hanegraaff 1996: 496 ff. It should perhaps be noted that the study of Jung's intellectual roots remains a problematic subject. The most comprehensive work to date, Noll 1994, firstly focuses exclusively on Jung's early work, and secondly is at times more polemically anti-Jungian than the sources warrant. Thus, Noll's contention (1994: 69), repeated by Hanegraaff (1996: 510), that Jung's gnosticizing religiosity is mainly due to the "enormous—but still unacknowledged—influence" of G.R.S. Mead is weakly supported by evidence and therefore controversial; cf. Almqvist 1997: 55 f., 64 f. et passim. For a survey of the critique of Noll's work, cf. Shamdasani 1998. Further critical work on the Jungian corpus remains difficult for three reasons. Firstly, Jung wanted to be seen by posterity as an empirical scholar, and therefore throughout most of his life actively denied being influenced by gnostic and esoteric worldviews. Most famously, Martin Buber had in *Eclipse of God* (1952) divulged the secret that Jung had written a gnosticizing manuscript bearing the title *Septem sermones ad mortuos*, and claimed that Jung privately harbored gnostic sympathies. Jung, who for personal reasons disliked Buber, took this to be an open accusation, and entered into a heated polemic in which he vehemently denied any such links (Almqvist 1997: 47 ff.). Secondly, Jung and the Jung family have withdrawn key documents from public scrutiny, which has meant that much of our knowledge of Jung's personal development is known primarily from Jung's more or less mythological autobiography. Thirdly, Jung wrote several versions of a number of his more important papers. When they were published in his Collected Works, they were arranged thematically rather than chronologically and were published to reflect the latest revisions rather than in a format suitable for the historically interested scholar.

noted these roots of Jung's thought.[34] The most publicized and controversial attempt in recent years is the work of Richard Noll, who in detail attempted to trace how Jung's earliest texts, from the period between 1896 and the late 1910s, draw on a wide reading of various forms of turn-of-the century esotericism. By 1902, the year of his doctoral dissertation *Zur Psychologie und Pathologie sogenannter okkulter Phänomene*, he had become acquainted with gnosticism, an interest he pursued for the remainder of his life by reading a variety of literature ranging from the church fathers Irenaeus and Hippolytus to the contemporary studies of theosophist G.R.S. Mead. Mary Anne Atwood's *A Suggestive Inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery* appears to have been an important contributor to his interest in alchemy.[35] From the late 1920s on, Jung became an avid collector of alchemical texts, and began a vast hermeneutic work published in two volumes (12 and 13) of his Collected Works. His interest in the Orient was more ambivalent. Jung wrote mytho-poetic commentaries on the Tibetan Book of the Dead, the I Ching and the chakra system, but was nevertheless convinced that there were insurmountable differences between "Eastern" and "Western" mentalities. All of these religious influences were subsequently transformed by being processed through Jung's often idiosyncratic hermeneutics.

Tracing the *roots* of Jung's psycho-religious belief system and its subsequent *influence* on the New Age are, however, two distinct projects. Even a cursory acquaintance with the use of Jungian concepts and terms in New Age texts will reveal the highly selective reception of Jung's vast opus. New Age Jungians have adopted certain of Jung's key terms, such as the archetypes and the collective unconscious, but have tended to use them in a somewhat different sense than Jung did.[36] The tendency to identify "occult" practices with psychological processes such as individuation is also a legacy of Jung's work. Jung's emphasis on the primacy and irreducibility of religious experience is also in line with New Age views. However, there are also significant differences between Jung's own opinions and those of New Age Jungians. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, Jung saw religious

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[34] The history of these attempts to link Jung to the occult revival is outlined in Shamdasani 1998: 6 ff.

[35] Merkur 1993: 65 ff. Merkur notes that "Jung followed Atwood's sequence quite closely".

[36] Thus, see the transformations of the term *archetype* traced in chapter 6.

experience as experience, not as an unproblematic reflex of a spiritual reality. New Age beliefs that some part of the mind is linked to the divine are not readily compatible with a Jungian perspective. Secondly, Jung explored and modified his concepts repeatedly throughout a career that spanned 65 years, and often changed his opinion or contradicted himself. New Age understandings are far more homogenizing, a tendency that may partly be due to over-reliance on secondary sources.[37] Those aspects of Jung's work that are the least "spiritual" are among those that have been tacitly dropped. This applies especially to experimental, psychological research on word associations or on complexes, in which Jung reveals a positivistic side that one rarely if ever sees a trace of in neo-Jungian literature. Furthermore, Jung is prone to seeing the human psyche as the locus of dark, destructive forces, a view that is at odds with the generally optimistic outlook of the New Age. Jung was also fundamentally elitist, believing that only a minority of people were spiritually mature enough to understand and accept his ideas. The egalitarian ideal of the New Age is at odds with such a view. Jung was highly critical of any attempts by Westerners to adopt Eastern doctrines or practice rituals of Indian origin. Modern New Agers, on the other hand, are apt to eagerly embrace the Orient as a positive Other. Conversely, Jung was also heir to a nationalist or *völkisch* stream of thought, a topic explored at length by critics such as Richard Noll but generally passed by in silence in New Age texts.

Humanistic psychology, transpersonal psychology and a variety of extramural therapies from the late 1950s to the present day also contributed to psychologizing religion. Humanistic psychology developed in the 1950s as an alternative to the then regnant paradigms of psychology: psychoanalytic theory on the one hand, behaviorism on the other. Nevertheless, humanistic psychology was not so much a radical innovation as a return to certain turn-of-the-century ideals. Psychology entered into a period of institutionalization and specialization at the end of the nineteenth century.[38] One of the most important moves towards creating an independent academic discipline out of a venture that had previously been a compartment within the larger

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[37] One suspects the influence not least of popularizations, e.g. by Jolande Jacobi, which tend to present Jung's often abstruse concepts in a simple, and indeed overly reified, format.

[38] Robinson 1995: 304 ff.

philosophical fold was to adapt to regnant positivist standards. One group of academic psychologists therefore embraced physiological or biological determinism. Another group, including major figures such as Fechner, Wundt and William James, reacted against this reductionism and espoused a view that saw consciousness as the primary phenomenon to study. The view of religion espoused by the two groups was an integral part of their respective theoretical frameworks. A fundamental split divided psychoanalysts and others who viewed religion essentially as a response to psychological needs, from psychologists who saw spirituality as a legitimate part of human life. Indeed, several American psychologists of religion. notably Edwin Starbuck, James Leuba and William James, postulated a kind of hierarchy of experience. Whatever their differences, they all argued that spiritual needs and values were central in the realization of one's inner potential. The humanistic psychologists of the latter half of the twentieth century took a similar stance: in a reaction to what came to be regarded as the pessimism, reductionism and mechanism of the mainstream psychologists, a new generation of psychologists preferred to focus on health and the fulfillment of human potential. Gordon Allport, Erich Fromm, Rollo May and others built theoretical frameworks within which to understand concepts such as self-realization.

The transpersonal psychologists took the aims of humanistic psychology another step further. Transpersonal psychology also drew inspiration from early twentieth century figures, again especially the work of William James. James was one of the first writers with an interest in mystical and peak experiences. Importantly, he did so from a teleological point of view. Transcendent experiences are thus not only described, but are analyzed within a framework of meaningful, personal development that would be profoundly congenial to a religious conception of the human predicament. Abraham Maslow, generally regarded as the founder of transpersonal psychology, continued in the Jamesian tradition and studied the lives of individuals who, in his view, had realized their potential. Maslow's conclusion was that these self-realized people had profited from numerous peak experiences. These were in turn characterized as involving, inter alia, a sense of timelessness, an "acute identity-experience", a deepened perception, a transcendence of opposites and an integration of the person at all levels. What James had seen as some of the hallmarks of religious or mystical experience now became the sign of a truly healthy individual.

"Spirituality" and psychology soon fused thoroughly. Transpersonal psychology became an established concept with the foundation in 1969 of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*. The editor of this journal, Anthony Sutich, programmatically positioned the new school as a fourth force beside the three forces of behaviorism, classical psychoanalytic theory and humanistic psychology. In a frequently quoted formulation, he presented the aim of the new psychological schools as the empirically scientific study of, among many other things:

> transpersonal process, values and states, unitive consciousness, metaneeds, peak experiences, ecstasy, mystical experience, being, essence, bliss, awe, wonder, transcendence of the self, spirit, sacralization of everyday life, oneness, cosmic awareness, cosmic play, individual and species-wide synergy, the theories and practices of meditation, spiritual paths, compassion, transpersonal cooperation, transpersonal realization and actualization; and related concepts, experiences and activities[39]

This list is surely at least as imbued with modern religious values as with psychology. That so many of these terms are presented in the singular is also symptomatic of the apologetic and essentialist tenor of much transpersonal psychology. Practically all the main figures of this historical lineage, from William James to Abraham Maslow and beyond, were convinced that religious experience was primary whereas doctrines and rituals were secondary. A basically unitary mystical experience had, they felt, been variously interpreted in different cultures. Both the emphasis on individual experience and the psychologizing defense of the belief in a *philosophia perennis* are, of course, profoundly resonant with the concerns of New Agers. Spokespersons of the New Age would soon claim transpersonal psychology as a part of the ongoing consciousness revolution. Fritjof Capra put it succinctly: "a number of transpersonal psychologists are working on conceptual systems intended to bridge and integrate psychology and spiritual quest."[40] Importantly, both the humanistic and transpersonal psychologies were not only psycho-religious doctrines, but also the philosophical underpinning of a vast variety of therapeutic methods. The Esalen Institute at Big Sur, founded by Michael Murphy and Richard Price in 1962, became a center at which these methods developed, met and cross-fertilized. With the important exception of Fritz Perls, whose Gestalt Therapy is profoundly suspicious of any

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[39] Sutich as quoted in Wulff 1991: 613.
[40] Capra *Turning Point*, p. 405.

claims to spirituality, practically all the major figures at Esalen saw these therapies in terms that were both psychological and "spiritual".[41]

The Rise and Transformation of the New Age

The late 1950s saw the first stirrings within the cultic milieu of a belief in a coming new age. A variety of small movements arose, revolving around revealed messages from beings in space and presenting a synthesis of post-theosophical and other esoteric doctrines. These movements might have remained marginal, had it not been for the explosion of the counterculture in the 1960s and early 1970s. The various historical threads that we have followed began to converge: nineteenth century doctrinal elements such as theosophy and post-theosophical esotericism as well as harmonial or positive thinking were now eclectically combined with the religious psychologies mentioned above: transpersonal psychology, Jungianism and a variety of Eastern teachings. It became perfectly feasible for the same individuals to consult the I Ching, practice Jungian astrology, read Abraham Maslow's writings on peak experiences, etc. The reason for the ready incorporation of such disparate sources was a similar goal of exploring an individualized and largely non-Christian religiosity.

The cultural conditions that fostered numerous attempts to combine these disparate sources led to a gradual self-awareness as a new spiritual force. In Hanegraaff's terms, the cultic milieu became conscious of itself.[42] A loose network of people committed to a utopian vision built on such a variety of doctrinal foundations was initially identified with the concept of the Age of Aquarius. By the early 1970s, the term New Age had become increasingly common.[43] With a decade

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[41] For a detailed history of the Esalen Institute, cf. Anderson 1983.

[42] Hanegraaff 1996: 17, 522 et passim.

[43] Both terms are founded on astrological lore. The astrological zodiac (i.e. the points on the terrestrial horizon) moves in relation to the astronomical zodiac (the fixed stars) at a rate of one revolution each 25,920 years. During the late Babylonian era, when astrology developed, the point on the horizon identified as 0° Aries pointed at 0° Aries in the sky. Due to the phenomenon known as the precession of the equinox, the astrological zodiac and the astronomical points of reference diverge as time passes. After 2,160 years, the two will be 30° or one sign apart. The first astrologer to be aware of this shift and give it a cosmological significance was Abu Ma'shar (805–885) of Baghdad. His works on the astrological ages was translated into Latin in the early 16th century. Abu Ma'shar speculated on the effects of a coming shift between the Piscean and Aquarian Ages. The concept of astrological ages, however, remained peripheral until the late 19th and early 20th century. Celestial events were certainly a central element in divinatory art during

of perspective, journalist Marilyn Ferguson in her apologetic and highly influential book *The Aquarian Conspiracy* summed up the New Age as a gentle conspiracy of awakened and transformed individuals.

Thirty years have passed since then. There is less of a movement; the New Age appears to have metamorphosed from a vaguely coherent network into a form of collective behavior. The belief in the millennium which originally gave the New Age its name has weakened.[44] Characteristically countercultural elements of the first generation of New Age belief have tacitly been dropped.[45] Moreover, whereas the first generation of New Age spokespersons were aware of their own place within a more or less definable movement, and used "New Age" as a self-designation, the term has become increasingly understood as a pejorative, even meaningless epithet. Interestingly, considering the individualism of the New Age, no new emic term for their collective identity seems to have formed. Thus there is no longer the same awareness of forming part of a reasonably coherent cultic milieu. Nevertheless, many manifestations of the New Age as a variety of forms of religiosity with a strong touch of family resemblance are still firmly present. Bookstores tend to contain large sections with headings such as "New Age", "alternative health", "spirituality" and "self improvement". Books identified by publishers and retailers as

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the Middle Ages and Renaissance, but the main importance was given major conjunctions and unusual visible events (comets, eclipses). Around the turn of this century, theosophical and occult writers began to speculate once again on the meaning of the astrological ages. Bochinger 1994: 340 ff. notes that the belief in a coming Age of Aquarius made its appearance in theosophical circles just before the turn of the twentieth century, and refers to a theosophical pamphlet dated 1899 as the first written source to revive this astrological claim. See the section "Pseudo-Rational Calculations" in chapter 5 for more details.

[44] According to the dean of New Age studies, J. Gordon Melton, it is almost impossible to find anybody in the USA who is still committed to this vision. Also see Melton 1995. Fairly recent movement texts, however, still build on the idea that we are entering a new epoch in human history. See e.g. Zukav *Seat of the Soul* and Redfield *Tenth Insight*. Zukav's book, although a decade old at the time of writing, became a best-seller in 1998 after a presentation on the Oprah Winfrey show.

[45] Heelas 1996: 49 ff. and Hanegraaff 1996: 11 ff. give valuable surveys of such changes. Heelas discusses the increased prominence of prosperity thinking in the later New Age, and the concomitant influence of New Age beliefs of mainstream society through e.g. management seminars. Hanegraaff notes the shift in the New Age constituency from younger people to a larger age group; from vaguely left-wing political views to a less obviously political stance; and the disassociation from the psychedelic subculture. Arguably, some of these changes are sociological rather than doctrinal shifts. In the following analysis, I will occasionally refer to two generations of New Age thought, and will assume the broader time frame when speaking generally of New Age doctrines.

"New Age" become bestsellers. The New Age *movement* may be on the wane, but the wider New Age *religiosity*, i.e. a doctrinally and historically related group of doctrines and rituals codified in a set of texts, shows no sign of disappearing.

As in any other religious tradition, there is continuity as well as change. Some concepts once considered vital to the movement, such as the millenarian hope, have thus gradually diminished in importance. Others, for instance crystal healing and the veneration of dolphins, were barely known then but have come to the fore during these last few years. The sociological composition of the movement has changed, with a much larger middle-aged constituency. Techniques once seen as linked by the common ideological core of a major planetary shift (the New Age *sensu stricto*) became part of an encompassing worldview that emphasized personal rather than global transformation (the New Age *sensu lato*), to finally once again become increasingly compartmentalized, giving rise to small islands of specialized interest linked by a tenuous and largely invisible set of common values (a second generation New Age). Nevertheless, the changes in the doctrinal or ritualistic focus of these islands of interest have not been all that radical. Here are some chapter headings in a catalogue of "metaphysical" books, published in 1976.[46] All of them can be found in modern New Age/metaphysical bookstores:

astrology	Jungian psychology
Cayce	mythology
color and aura	numerology
dreams	parapsychology
gems and stones	reincarnation and karma
graphology	tantra
healing	tarot
Indian philosophy	UFOs
Jewish mysticism	yoga

The ideas, practices and doctrines presented in such lists are certainly a varied mixture. Are they a kind of cultural flotsam, an anarchic collection of any idea that mainstream society has decided to reject? The scholarship on the New Age has attempted to find common denominators.[47]

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[46] Popenoe 1976.

[47] This, however, disregards Bochinger 1994 whose thesis it is that the New Age strictly speaking does not exist but is a construction instigated by various publishers

Lewis & Melton (1992) summarized the relatively few previous attempts at delimiting the New Age, but the editors of the volume avoided committing themselves to any list of such traits. York (1995) is much more sociological in approach, and attempts to circumscribe the New Age in terms of its organizational structures (or lack of the same). A first major attempt to formulate a doctrinal as distinct from a social definition was Heelas (1996), who introduced the concept of the sacralization of the self. According to Heelas, the concept of veneration of an inner essence within the individual, the Self, is common to most if not all New Age doctrines. However, Hanegraaff (1996) represents by far the most ambitious attempt to find common doctrinal elements, ranging from ethics to cosmology, from occult anatomy to specific conceptions of human history. Hanegraaff also introduced the useful distinction between the millennialist New Age *sensu stricto* and the broader New Age *sensu lato*.

In an attempt to identify a smaller and therefore simpler subset of doctrines common to many movement texts, I propose the following nine characteristics for the New Age *sensu lato*:[48]

1. The professed statement that the entire cosmos is an unbroken whole.
2. A more fundamental idealism that is masked by the professed holism: the doctrine that our inner states, attitudes and/or beliefs have a fundamental role in influencing our circumstances.
3. Idealism is monist: the basic "stuff" of the cosmos is non-material, "energy".
4. Holism applies especially to ourselves: we are a unity of body, mind and spirit. Many of our problems in life can only be solved by treating this unity as a whole.
5. Holism applies to our environment: by combining the ecological with the spiritual, we can repair the ills that we have inflicted on the Earth.
6. Each one of us has a unique role in this holistic cosmos, and this role can be discovered through various procedures, ranging from divination to meditation.
7. Each one of us evolves, not only during this life-time but over a succession of lives.
8. These basic ideas (as well as others) are not available to us primarily through rational thinking but through other means. One way to arrive

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and media. Needless to say, this approach hardly leads to any conception of common aspects of New Age doctrines. See the section "Previous Research" of chapter 1 for a somewhat more extended review of the literature.

[48] This list of nine points constitutes a minor variation on a list of ten presented in Hammer 1997.

at these "truths" is through personal experience; another is through embracing the spirituality of various non-Western peoples.
9. The specific path that any of us will follow in order to gain these insights is an idiosyncratic one; our experiences and feelings are primary guides on our spiritual path, and since all individuals are different, many paths are valid.

These points, especially the last, imply a wide diversity of opinions. Whether or not this justifies calling the New Age *a* position in opposition to e.g. theosophy or anthroposophy, or a *group* of positions, is a question of terminology rather than of empirical fact.[49] In this study, I will indiscriminately either use the singular and call the New Age *a* position, or refer to a family of positions. The reader should be alerted to the fact that the former mode of writing in no way implies a reductionist view of the New Age as a clearly definable single position with equally distinct borders vis-à-vis the other positions.

Considering the diversity of historical sources and the variety of opinions, it is particularly striking to notice how slowly the discursive strategies have changed, and how they recur despite of doctrinal differences. There may be a straightforward reason for this continuity. Doctrines and rituals are overt elements of a position, and can be rapidly appropriated or discarded by their spokespersons. Discursive strategies are structural elements, dictated in part by cultural context and largely transparent to the spokespersons. Thus, methods of healing that emic historiography may understand as recent products of the American West Coast may be ascribed to ancient, Oriental sources in a way reminiscent of Blavatsky's Oriental universalism, and science is invoked in terms that have not changed radically since the 1870s. The rhetorical appeal to personal experience as a *via regia* to higher knowledge might possibly be seen as a result of the influence of Jungian, humanistic and transpersonal perspectives. However, it is equally conceivable that Jungian, humanistic and transpersonal perspectives became interesting to the cultic milieu because they resonated with democratic and individualistic values fostered by the surrounding culture. Furthermore, an appeal to experience is not unique to the New Age, but is used as a discursive strategy that would have been readily recognizable to readers

[49] That is, there is no way to empirically investigate whether the New Age is a single position with many variations or many different positions with numerous similarities.

of anthroposophical texts from the early twentieth century. It is not least for this reason that the New Age will be treated as *rhetorically* on a par with theosophy and the various post-theosophical positions, despite the fact that the New Age has many more *doctrinal* roots than Blavatsky's version of theosophy.

An American Lineage

This study will focus almost exclusively on the five positions outlined above: theosophy (Blavatskian and neo-theosophical), Bailey, Steiner, Cayce and the New Age. Occasionally, it will be instructive to draw parallels and contrasts with other positions. A brief introduction to an American lineage of post-Enlightenment esotericism is therefore in order, simply to place three of its positions in context.

Nicholas Konstantinovich Roerich was born in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1874. In the late 1890s, Roerich became one of the artists who would introduce Western modernist art in Russia. Together with his wife Helena, he also created a theosophically inspired form of esotericism. Between 1916 and 1919 Roerich had written a collection of sixty-four blank verse poems that were published in Berlin in Russian and subsequently translated into English as *Flame in the Chalice*. In them, one finds Roerich's commitment to an esoteric worldview. At the core of Roerich's belief system is the theosophical concept of a beginningless and endless universe, which manifests itself in recurring cycles of creation and dissolution of material forms. On the human plane, this means the rise and fall of civilizations and, in terms of individual life, the reincarnation of the soul. From the early 1920s the Roerichs, who had settled in the USA, founded the Agni Yoga society to propagate their post-theosophical position. However, they soon left America again, and settled in India. Several expeditions to the trans-Himalayan plateau followed. Nicholas Roerich died in Kulu in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh in 1947.

A different branch on the theosophical tree is represented by the I AM Religious Activity and its many offshoots. This movement was started by Guy W. Ballard. One day in 1930, the founding legend goes, while hiking around the mountains he encountered the Ascended Master Saint Germain.[50] Saint Germain offered Ballard a refreshing

[50] The Comte de Saint Germain was one of the most famous occultists of his time. He lived in eighteenth-century France, claimed to be several centuries old, and possessed a great reputation as a mystic and alchemist.

drink, a creamy liquid which had an astonishing, vivifying effect on him. Saint Germain identified the liquid as a substance coming from the Universal Supply. Over a period of time, he then introduced Ballard to the doctrines of the Ascended Masters and guided him towards a number of experiences that prepared him to assume his new role as the Messenger of these Masters. In 1932, Ballard founded the I AM Religious Activity. His doctrines were subsequently published in a series of books, of which several appeared under the pseudonym Godfre Ray King.[51] Ballard continued his work as leader of the activity together with his wife Edna and son Donald, until his death in 1939. The I AM Religious Activity still exists but maintains a very low profile, avoiding all publicity.

According to the I AM Religious Activity, the Great White Brotherhood, i.e. the Masters that have been referred to in theosophical texts but reorganized in a different configuration than that described by Leadbeater, have revealed through Guy Ballard truths not previously known. These include belief in the presence of God within each person, known as the "Mighty I Am Presence", a mythic cosmology in which the universe is organized around a central Sun, and rituals of decreeing.

The I AM Religious Activity suffered several crises, during which splinter groups formed. One of these, Bridge to Freedom, in turn engendered the Church Universal and Triumphant (then called the Summit Lighthouse) under the leadership of Mark L. Prophet. After Mark Prophet's death in 1973, his wife Elizabeth Clare Prophet assumed leadership of the CUT. At the time of writing (May 2000), Prophet is reported to be suffering from Alzheimer's disease and on the verge of retiring, and the future direction of the movement has not been settled.

The doctrines of the Church Universal and Triumphant are contained in the many books of messages said to come from the Ascended Masters and the volumes written by the Prophets, especially their basic text, *Climb the Highest Mountain*. The church describes the teachings as essentially Judeo-Christian but centered on the eternal truths

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[51] *Unveiled Mysteries*, an account of the encounter with Saint Germain, quickly followed by its sequel, *The Magic Presence*. Through the 1930s, other publications were released: *"I AM" Adorations and Affirmations*, which gave the texts for the decrees, the affirmations and invocations regularly repeated by students of the I AM; and *"I AM" Discourses*, a series of lectures purportedly by Saint Germain, which contain the tenets of the movement.

of the Universal Christ as they are found in the religions of both East and West. According to CUT teachings, the soul is the living potential of God. Souls were conceived in the Mind of God and then born as a manifestation of the duality of God, i.e. as a being of both spirit and matter. The individual thus consists of two parts, the higher, changeless self and the lower, changing self. The whole of creation reflects the duality of spirit and material world. The I AM Presence, or individualized presence of God, is the divine identity of each individual. Each person is a manifestation of this Presence into the material world. As spiritual beings, we have an unlimited potential. As beings manifested on the material plane, the individual is limited by the boundaries set by the Deity. After the soul has become purified through numerous incarnations, it can return to the Divine Source through a process known as the Ascension, and thus the soul ultimately is able to reunite with the I AM Presence.

The Choice of Positions and Texts

Writing the history of the New Age thus entails unraveling several historical threads, of which only a few are covered here. The other historical lineages—harmonial, Jungian, occult, therapeutic and others—naturally merit study, but are largely excluded from the present discussion, mainly for reasons of scope and clarity of delimitation. Separate studies of the development of discursive strategies, rhetoric and mythic elaboration of each of these historical lineages would be desirable, but would be of sufficient magnitude to merit their own full-length treatments. There are also theoretical reasons for this limitation. Firstly, the lineage of "occult" societies that gave the New Age part of its interest in divination was semi-secret. A historiography of its strategies might fruitfully concentrate at least as much on its initiatory praxis and its sociological characteristics as a set of new religious movements, as on the relatively few movement texts that became prominent. Secondly, Jungian esotericism rests on a highly distinct hermeneutic that would require its own study to unravel it. Neopaganism, although included in several earlier studies of the New Age,[52] has developed into an increasingly distinctive movement that is often intensely critical of the New Age as understood here. The history of humanistic, transpersonal and similar therapies is an under-

[52] York 1995, Hanegraaff 1996: 77 ff. and Hammer 1997: 124 ff.

developed theme worthy of a full-length discussion. Finally, the harmonial religions are also a case unto themselves, since they represent a thorough assimilation of discursive strategies based on scriptural precedents. These roots and developments are only included to the extent that they directly influence New Age doctrines and rituals. Simply speaking, the discursive strategies of the New Age show the clearest continuity with the lineage that involves theosophy and the various post-theosophical positions.

Theosophy as a Starting Point

Post-Enlightenment esotericism can be seen figuratively as a funnel-shaped construction, with the development of the doctrines of the Theosophical Society as the pivotal set of events. From the Enlightenment up to the early 1880s, esoteric texts presented a mass of conflicting positions. Christian theosophy, rosicrucianism, sexual magic, spiritualist messages, systems of unorthodox medicine, mesmerism, oriental influences and many other elements constituted a base of unchurched religiosity from which competing spokespersons picked and combined components *ad libitum*. There were few grand narratives that attempted to link these disparate teachings, and certainly none with a significant market share.

Theosophy is a natural starting point for the present study, since the event that changed the fragmented esoteric landscape into a more or less coherent discourse was precisely the success of the Theosophical Society after 1880. The teachings found in the letters from the Mahatmas and in Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*, and especially in Helena Blavatsky's magnum opus *The Secret Doctrine*, constituted a master narrative which, in practice, came to define the subsequent development of esotericism.[53] The vast panorama of esoteric cosmology and history presented in the theosophical literature constitutes a myth purporting to definitively answer the basic questions regarding the origin, nature and destiny of man. In this sense, theosophy is one of the crowning achievements of modernist myth-making.

Successful religious movements tend to multiply through fission. Theosophy is certainly no exception. The Theosophical Society attracted a number of ambitious and gifted religious entrepreneurs.

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[53] The crucial role of theosophy is especially apparent from the vehement attacks against it by those who had different views of what esotericism should be. René Guénon's intense dislike of theosophy is a case in point.

Some exploited themes of esotericism that were left untouched by the central myths of theosophy. Late nineteenth century British astrologers such as Alan Leo are a case in point. Several astrological societies were formed, and the foundations were laid of a vast modern literary output on chart interpretation. Other religious innovators presented variations on the basic theosophical themes, myths that clearly resemble the *Secret Doctrine* of Blavatsky, but differ in significant respects or amplify the teachings found therein. Once the Theosophical Society at Adyar had lost its paramount role as trendsetter, esotericism was arguably once again as fragmented as it had been in the pre-Blavatsky days. There was, however, an important difference: new esotericisms were likely to be positions within a generalized post-theosophical discourse.

The third reason for choosing this particular period in the history of esotericism is considerably more pragmatic. If the subject of esotericism in general receives surprisingly little scholarly attention, this is particularly true of the developments that have taken place during the 125 years from the birth of theosophy to the present.

The Multiplicity of Positions

This study includes what can be seen as several distinct positions of the Esoteric Tradition. A few words are therefore in order to contrast the present approach with delimitations chosen in previous scholarship. Wouter Hanegraaff's *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, the standard work to date on the New Age, also contains rather disparate elements, ranging from Edgar Cayce and Shirley MacLaine to Louise Hay and Ramtha. At first, they might appear to be united by little more than the label New Age, and in fact, not even this unequivocally applies to a considerably earlier figure such as Cayce. Nevertheless, through a detailed reading of some two hundred source texts, Hanegraaff succeeds in showing that there are numerous fundamental shared assumptions within this corpus.

The present study focuses on an even more diverse set of texts, starting from the writings of Helena Blavatsky. However, there is no clear evidence to suggest that the differences between e.g. Alice Bailey's doctrines and any of these New Age manifestations are greater than those within the New Age corpus itself. Especially with regard to the problem of claiming knowledge, I will attempt to show that there is considerable continuity between the various positions, one in which individual differences between authors within a move-

ment are of the same order of magnitude as the differences between "schools", movements or positions.

Finally, what makes the present study manageable in scope and size is the far more limited number of questions I ask of my material, as compared to Hanegraaff. Whereas Hanegraaff seeks an underlying set of substantive doctrines, my study addresses only the topic of three discursive strategies. The present study is, in a sense, a mirror image of his: the texts span a longer time period, but far fewer topics are pursued in the analysis of these texts.

The Choice of Sources

For older positions, the source material for the present study centers on works that have gained a privileged place within each position. However, the malleability of the New Age concept prevents the formation of any simple consensus as to which books from the last decades are "required reading". This situation presents the need to define a set of texts, which may serve as core material for an analysis. In this case, the selection of sources has been arrived at in a two-pass sweep over the available literature. Firstly, and most importantly, a number of relevant sectors of the New Age *sensu lato* were singled out. These include widespread forms of divination and healing, channeled messages that have received more than a fleeting attention within the New Age, and programmatic statements on various points of doctrine or ritual. To these were added the works of a number of well-known and prominent spokespersons of a New Age worldview, including best-selling authors such as Deepak Chopra and James Redfield. In the second sweep over the field, a few books within each such sector were selected. The sectors as well as the sources representative of these sectors were arrived at by cross-referencing journals, especially the *New Age Journal* (USA), *Kindred Spirit* (UK), *Esotera* (Germany), *Energivågen* (Sweden), *Alternativt Nettverk* (Norway) and *Nyt aspekt* (Denmark), as well as promotional material and Internet sites with "Frequently Asked Questions". Hopefully, this method has produced a fairly comprehensive selection of doctrines and practices that are, seen on an international scale, widespread throughout the New Age milieu.[54]

[54] It may be worth noting that the sweep over a number of journals, book catalogues and web sites of international provenience has also been part of an effort to avoid grounding the study in sources relevant primarily to the local situation in

The volatility of the New Age scene makes it unlikely that many of the specific authors or titles quoted will become and remain "classics" within their field. In fact, individual spokespersons can rise to stardom and be demoted within the span of a few years. Thus James Redfield, author of some of the most commercially successful programmatic statements of the New Age worldview ever to be published, rose to fame in the mid-1990s. His book *The Celestine Prophecy* remained on the New York Times bestseller list for 165 weeks. Five years later, a leading New Age publication from the UK called his sequel, *The Secret of Shambhala*, "indigestible pap".[55] Sic transit gloria mundi. The texts should therefore be construed as primarily chosen for being symptomatic of specific topics that have shown some continuity over the years (e.g. the New Age worldview, Reiki healing or astrology), rather than for their qualities as individual works. The full set of Esoteric texts that are referred to here is presented in the list of sources at the end of this study.

Sweden, the country in which most of the work was conducted. In the same vein, no books by Swedish New Age writers are quoted (although a nearly complete corpus of such books has been consulted in connection with a different project, Hammer 1997).

[55] *Kindred Spirit*, issue 50, 2000, p. 66.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE APPEAL TO TRADITION

> Durch die gewöhnliche Geschichte kann sich der Mensch nur über einen geringen Teil dessen belehren, was die Menschheit in der Vorzeit erlebt hat
>
> Rudolf Steiner
> *Aus der Akasha-Chronik*

> Remember. Make an effort to remember. Or failing that, invent.
>
> Monique Wittig
> *Les guerillières*

Emic and Etic Historiography

Besides the obvious and central tasks of expounding what they consider to be correct doctrines and giving adherents instructions in the performance of efficacious ritual, numerous religious movement texts are concerned with the history of these doctrines and rituals. History as seen by non-believers will normally deal with human creators of these religious elements, placing them in a more or less well-defined social and historical context. Early Mormonism might be understood in the context of early nineteenth century American culture, especially in what has been called the magic worldview of that period.[1] The rise of the Jehovah's Witnesses could be interpreted as a product of turn-of-the-century popular millennialism.[2] Specific individuals and dates will be prominent in such accounts. To take the same examples: Mormonism will be described as the product of a number of creative prophetic figures, notably of course of Joseph Smith. The Jehovah's Witness movement will be interpreted as the creation of specific pastors such as Charles Taze Russell and Joseph Rutherford.

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[1] Quinn 1998.
[2] Penton 1995.

For the believer, however, such a secular historiography will be decidedly inadequate, even patently false. For the adherent, Mormonism was not *created* by Joseph Smith but *transmitted* to him from a transcendent source. Any similarities to nineteenth century popular magic are considered spurious, since Mormonism is the revival of true Christianity as it was practiced in the days of the Apostles.[3] Following the common usage of the terms *emic* and *etic* in anthropological literature to distinguish the informants' views from those of researchers, secular studies can be described as etic, whereas the accounts of believers constitute emic historiography.

Of course, it is quite conceivable that the ordinary believer will accept the claims of emic historiography as simple statements of fact. The existence of a widely divergent etic historiography need perhaps never be confronted. For spokespersons of at least some religious movements, the situation is different. In a modern, post-Enlightenment context, critical and well-documented historical accounts will be readily available. Different movements vary in their wish or ability to counter the claims of historical-critical research. Some spokespersons will be aware of the gap between their own accounts and those of non-believers. Their responses cover a wide scale, from acceptance of the results of historical-critical methods to an all-out rejection.

The Esoteric Tradition is no exception. Its movement texts are engaged in the construction of a historical lineage. What is perhaps most striking is the fact that Esoteric writers do not necessarily see older generations of esoteric writers as their spiritual forebears. This was still largely the case at the very beginning of the period covered in the present study. Henry Olcott, co-founder with Helena Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society, constructed such a lineage in his first presidential address, in which he referred to Albertus Magnus, Alfarabi, Roger Bacon, Cagliostro, Pico della Mirandola, Robert Fludd, Paracelsus, Cornelius Agrippa, Henry More, the Chaldeans, kabbalists, Egyptians, hermeticists, alchemists and rosicrucians.[4] V.S. Solovyoff, one of Blavatsky's earliest biographers, refers to one of her letters in which she traces the theosophical idea back to the

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[3] Certain movements, of which Mormonism is, once again, a particularly apt example, will devote considerable resources to refuting etic history. The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), an apologetic research organization devoted to supporting Mormon emic historiography, is also known for its aggressive tactics in confronting divergent points of view.

[4] Quoted in Prothero 1996: 50 f.

Jewish and Egyptian kabbala, hermetic philosophy, Paracelsus and Reichenbach.[5] Neither of them ventured beyond the ancient Near East in their quest for roots. The shift came a few years after the founding of the Theosophical Society. In one of her earliest articles, published in 1875, Blavatsky claimed that the ancient sages possessed greater knowledge of the workings of the cosmos than any contemporary scientist.[6] A statement to the same effect can be found thirteen years later, in *The Secret Doctrine*. However, the "ancient sages" of 1875 are Chaldeans and kabbalists, whereas their counterparts of 1888 had largely become identified with Hindu Yogis.[7] Post-theosophical positions have, to a considerable extent, followed the lead of the later Blavatsky in placing its positive Others outside the Western sphere. Especially the New Age literature of the late twentieth century has largely severed its roots as a Western esoteric movement, and prefers to place the origins of its doctrines either in the East or among native peoples. Over time, the Esoteric Tradition would thus seem to have become a locus of massive globalization. The trend towards seeing non-European religious traditions as one's positive Others is a central concern in this chapter.

However, the purpose of the present chapter is not to provide an exhaustive survey of how such a historical lineage has been constructed and used in order to legitimize the Esoteric Tradition. Even a cursory perusal of a few issues of recent New Age magazines from various countries will reveal an interest in methods and doctrines ascribed (in no particular order) to India, Egypt, Native America (north, central and south), aboriginal Australia, Hawaii, a generic Polynesia, the Celts, pre-Christian Scandinavia, Japan, China and Tibet. A description of New Age beliefs with the details of their provenances as seen by the New Age community itself would soon simply become a tiresome catalogue of details. The purpose here is the more modest one of highlighting certain features of the emic

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[5] Solovyoff 1895: 256 ff.

[6] "A Few Questions to 'Hiraf'", BCW I: 101 ff., esp. p. 115, 116 et passim.

[7] For the latter, cf. SD I: 516; the beginning of this transition appears to predate Blavatsky's and Olcott's move to India. An article in *The Theosophist*, October 1879, the year of their arrival in India, refers to the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and the Vedas as well as to Neoplatonism and the kabbala; "What is Theosophy?", BCW II: 87 ff.; another article by Blavatsky in the same issue explains that "the aphorisms of Patañjali are even more essential than the 'Divine Revelations' of Andrew Jackson Davies", see "The Drift of Western Spiritualism", BCW II: 108. By 1880, theosophy had become thoroughly orientalized.

view of tradition, especially in its relation to the processes of religious globalization.

The Modern Esoteric Tradition presents a few particular twists to the question of emic versus etic historiography. Structured religious movements can attempt to impose limits on what constitutes acceptable historiography. Christianity is a case in point: critical methods began to be applied remarkably late to the New Testament, for reasons that are at least in part ideological.[8] Some scholars from within Mormonism or Christian Science have, at times, found the climate of debate such that they have weakened or even severed their affiliation with their respective organizations.[9] The Esoteric Tradition is, at least in part, more loosely organized. Especially in its contemporary manifestation as a vast and ramified New Age culture, few constraints are imposed by authorities on the critical inquisitiveness of its adherents. Nevertheless, there is no clear evidence to suggest that the absence of overt censorship or official sanctions has resulted in any narrowing of the gap between historiography and mythography.

The Esoteric varieties of historiography are part and parcel of the vast panorama of the intellectual history of the West. Consequently, this chapter will only provide the most cursory view of the process of accretion by which various historical myths were formed: questions such as when and how images of e.g. Tibet or Egypt entered into the Esoteric Tradition. By the early 1880s, mythical history had incorporated most of the cultures referred to in the Modern Esoteric Tradition. The first part of this chapter will follow the emic chronology to the extent that this is feasible in a history that is inherently sketchy and contradictory, and attempts to present a view of how

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[8] Considering how long a Biblical canon had been in existence, it is remarkable that a sustained historical criticism of the Bible can be said to begin with seventeenth century thinkers such as Spinoza (1632–1677) and Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), as well as Enlightenment figures such as Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768). Spinoza was persecuted for his opinions, Bayle masked his heterodoxy so effectively behind a fideistic defense that modern commentators still argue about his opinions, and Reimarus' findings were so controversial that they were published posthumously and anonymously by Lessing. For an overview of the history of historical-critical research, see Harrisville & Sundberg 1995.

[9] This applies especially to the most prominent scholars from within these movements. Mormon historian Daniel Quinn left Brigham Young University to retain his freedom of investigation (Quinn 1998: xiii). Stephen Gottschalk, a historian of the Christian Science movement, was expelled from the church. Even Robert Peel, who devoted a life-time of scholarship to justifying the life and work of Mary Baker Eddy to his readers, was considered suspiciously heterodox (Gill 1998: 581 f.).

Esoteric knowledge within the 120 year period in focus has been constructed: what elements were purportedly taken from each respective culture. The remaining sections of this chapter will discuss the methods used in constructing a tradition: the adaptations and the inventions involved.

Imaginative History and Sacred Geography

The successive stages of emic historiography are intimately linked with the geographical locations at which various events in the spiritual evolution of mankind are purported to have taken place. Other religious traditions also construct such spatio-temporal networks. Thus, the mediaeval European religious landscape was dotted with pilgrimage sites, each associated with a saint and his or her period and role in salvific history. Christian traditions have also had their particularly privileged sites, spiritual centers such as Rome and Jerusalem. However, the Christian landscape was read through the focus of one's own religion. As even the most cursory acquaintance with the history of the crusades will show, Jerusalem was not primarily esteemed for its role in the two other Abrahamitic faiths, but for its place in the mythic historiography of Christianity.

The Esoteric and Christian Traditions diverge in this respect. Most sites of veneration within the former are located well outside the Western sphere,[10] and are venerated precisely because they are imagined to be non-Western. The fascination with Tibet is not described in terms of the role Tibet has played in the construction of a modern alternative religiosity, but for the esoteric practices purportedly practiced by the Tibetans themselves, practices that might alter the spiritual course of the West. The Tibetan Book of the Dead is celebrated not because of its theosophical or Jungian commentaries, but because of the "scientific" understanding of the process of dying that it is thought to impart.[11]

The choice of exotic locations in the sacred geography of the Esoteric Tradition is intimately connected with its status as a modern

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[10] However, the Esoteric Tradition is beginning to build up an internal sacred geography. Sites such as Mt. Shasta in northern California, Stonehenge and Glastonbury in England, Findhorn in Scotland or Sedona, Arizona, attract large numbers of New Age seekers for their association with e.g. UFO lore, the supposed magical powers of the Druids, nature spirits or "energy vortices", and not for their role for significant Others.

[11] Lopez 1998: 46 ff.

form of religiosity. It reflects the curiosity of Western intellectuals faced with the fact that the world encompasses a variety of modes of life, some of which, according to their interpretations, might just conceivably be better than that of the West. The modern world, however, is also a world of global contacts and global travel. Theosophical texts could place the abode of the Mahatmas in Shigatse, no doubt merely an exotic name to readers a century ago. Today, Shigatse is something much more concrete: the second largest town in Tibet, a destination of at least some tourism (presumably to visit the Tashilhunpo monastery), a physical location within the political boundaries of China. Although the trend is by no means unambiguous, the sacred geography of the Esoteric Tradition seems to range from the relatively mundane and empirically verifiable, to the more diffuse or even purely imaginative. The myth of Atlantis is hard to defend in a society where the concept of continental drift is part of elementary scientific literacy. Precise locations in mundane geography can be checked, and the opinions of those who are appropriated have a bearing on the construction of tradition. The Others might make their voices heard and must be taken into account. When Oriental philosophies are invoked, it is now often in the vaguest of terms. Where Leadbeater was precise, a book such as Kilham's *The Five Tibetans* is completely vague and lacks any local color. While earlier generations of esotericists firmly placed the origin of the tarot deck in ancient Egypt, a contemporary text such as Giles' *Tarot: The Complete Guide* reports this as a modern legend.[12] Whereas Swedenborg discoursed with spirits and angels on planets in the solar system which, with the advent of the Voyager missions, have become objects of more mundane forms of exploration, modern channelers refer to more distant locations such as the Pleiades,[13] Arcturus[14] or starship commands in interstellar space.[15]

Although the texts reviewed here contain numerous references to exotic places, the rhetoric of presence is rarely invoked in the more recent (New Age) texts. Two exceptions stand out, both of them neo-shamanic: Michael Harner's account of his visionary experiences among the Conibo Indians of northeastern Peru, and Olga Kharitidi's

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[12] Giles *Tarot*.
[13] Marciniak and Hand Clow present themselves as channels for the "Pleiadians".
[14] Jasmuheen *Living on Light*.
[15] See the section on revelation in chapter 6.

recollections of her spiritual adventures among the Altai of Siberia.[16] A closer reading reveals deeply anomalous elements in both of these texts. Harner, early in his book *The Way of the Shaman*, describes an ayahuasca session that bears the imprint of lived experience.[17] However, nothing in the remainder of his exposé of neo-shamanic ritual resembles these frightening hallucinatory ordeals. His use of the rhetoric of presence seems to serve no other purpose than that of ethos: Harner is reliable because he has been there. Kharitidi's case is not that different. Her account of the time she spent working at a hospital in the Altai region of Russia appears realistic, as do the autobiographic portions of her story. However it appears that the point of these realistic passages is to give rhetorical strength to the highly spectacular (and, one suspects, utterly non-reproducible) shamanic experiences, including contact with a subterranean world called Belovodia. It is perhaps no coincidence that the back cover of Kharitidi's book carries a somewhat problematic endorsement by Harner, who compares her to Carlos Castaneda.

Apart from these few exceptions, where actual places and times are invoked, this is done in a fashion that resembles what Richard Hofstadter has referred to as paranoid scholarship.[18] In an effort to bolster a preexisting frame of understanding with a historical background, isolated and often unrelated events and elements are juxtaposed and combined into a new edifice. Scholars seldom bother to contest these claims, while many people within the cultic milieu probably lack both the knowledge and the desire to approach these constructions in a critical spirit.

Case Study—Constructing the Chakra *System, Part I*

The Esoteric Tradition abounds in examples where emic historiography contrasts sharply with etic history. Generally speaking, emic historiography highlights only a few episodes in what is conceived of as the spiritual development of mankind. It creates a (usually vague) chronology, from ancient civilizations on continents that have long since disappeared, via cultures also known to non-esoteric historiography such as Egypt and India, delves on the figure of Christ

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[16] Harner *Way of the Shaman* and Kharitidi *Entering the Circle*.

[17] Ayahuasca, Banisteriopsis caapi, is a hallucinogenic vine of tropical South America.

[18] Hofstadter 1965.

and rapidly proceeds to the present age. Together, these historical stations form a more or less fragmentary myth. The myth itself, however, developed in a different chronological order. The oldest element is the meta-historical readiness to interpret history in terms of a movement from an ancient Golden Age, via a less-than-perfect present, up to a utopian future. From there on, this basic scheme, common to several religious historiographies, was filled with details as knowledge of the non-Christian world expanded.

The differences between the two histories, emic and etic, may perhaps best be introduced by means of a concrete example, which illustrates the claims as well as aims of emic historiography. This example will constitute one of the main threads connecting the various sections of this chapter, and will serve as a background against which to broaden the perspective and investigate aspects of the Esoteric construction of emic history.

Within the New Age, there are numerous methods of ritual healing. Several of these are underpinned by an esoteric theory of the constitution of the human body. Among other details, it is postulated that there is a kind of vital force or energy that flows within the body (or around it; the details vary). This flow is concentrated in several focal points, the chakras (the common anglicized version of Sanskrit *cakra-* "wheel"), of which there are usually said to be seven. According to the apologetic literature, these centers are hierarchically interconnected in a chakra system. The "coarsest" chakra is located near the pelvis or the base of the spine, while the most subtle radiates from the crown of the head.

Theories that underpin healing explain that the vital flow of energy through the chakras can be blocked, leading to a partial or complete obstruction. This in turn is said to cause illness on a physical, mental or spiritual level. Problems associated with the chakras can be remedied by various means. Ritual methods employed by healers include the laying on of hands, the application of colored substances or lights, the use of gems, and treatment with massage and scented oils. Most, if not all of these methods have a very short recorded history. Thus, two such methods, crystal healing and Aura-Soma, have their roots in the early 1980s. The term chakra itself is, of course, much older, and is taken from an Indian context.

Aura-Soma is thus one of many instructive examples of this ambivalence towards finding historical ties or constructing a tradition. For its practitioners, the core of Aura-Soma is the interpretation and

use of colors. Although said to encompass much more—the energies of herbs and crystals, appealing ingredients in many sectors of the New Age—colors remain the principal argument invoked when the method is presented. The first sentence in the principal movement text of Aura-Soma[19] is "You are the colors you choose". Aura-Soma is thus part of a tradition of color therapies and of metaphysical speculation concerning the symbolic significance of colors. A brief introduction to the etic historiography of color therapies could proceed as follows:

Newton's optics reduced colors to a purely physical phenomenon. Goethe attempted to restitute a subjective aspect to colors. Although Goethe seems to have conceived of his project as a scientific investigation of colors which, in contrast with Newton's optics, was non-reductionist, later interpreters gave this Romantic theory an arguably spiritual interpretation. Metaphysical theories of color later became part of the theosophical movement as well as of anthroposophy. Therapies based on such theories emerged around 1870.[20] These methods were developed at a time when a more conservative science also investigated the psychological reactions to light and color, but the esoteric speculations drew conclusions that went considerably further than was justified from a strictly scientific perspective.[21]

Color therapies appear to have remained a fairly marginal interest within the Esoteric Tradition until the beginning of the 1980s. During the relatively short period that has passed since then, the connection with transparent or colored minerals ("crystals") and the belief in the existence of energy centers within the body (chakras) endowed with different colors has given color therapies a considerable boost. While Aura-Soma is an independent form of color therapy combined with a specific metaphysical system, it draws nourishment from a renewed wave of interest in the purported hidden meanings of colors.

The founding legend of Aura-Soma briefly mentions the etic historiography, but does so in an interpretive framework that differs sharply from that of the literature written by non-believers. The main

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[19] Dalichow & Booth *Aura-Soma*.

[20] The main nineteenth century precursor of modern color therapies was Edwin Babbitt (1828–1905), author of *The Principles of Light and Color* (1878).

[21] A condensed history of older esoteric theories of color can be found in Gardner 1957: 212 f.

movement text behind Aura-Soma, by Irene Dalichow and Mike Booth, mentions Dinshah Ghadiali as a precursor.[22] One of Ghadiali's books—reported to have been published in 1933 but oddly enough never mentioned by name in Dalichow and Booth's book—is referred to as a classic.[23] Martin Gardner, the dean of the skeptical movement, notes that Ghadiali was indicted for fraud for his invention, the Spectro-Chrome Machine. In Gardner's opinion, Ghadiali was "perhaps the greatest quack of them all".[24]

The context within which Aura-Soma is placed also contains clear references to a contemporary worldview, e.g. in its tendencies toward the use of a psychologizing terminology. What do proponents of Aura-Soma therapy propose to accomplish by purportedly reviving ancient healing methods? The list of ailments in Dalichow and Booth's book contains numerous references to what mainstream medical science would characterize as physical and emotional problems, without drawing any boundaries between the two. As a random example, a bottle named after the theosophical master Sanat Kumara, number 61 of the over one hundred so-called balance bottles, supposedly brings about a better understanding of suffering (one's own as well as that of other people), is beneficial for relationship problems, clears deep fears and other threatening feelings and is useful for skin diseases, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease.

For the purposes of the discussion of emic historiography, it should be noted that the relatively late and well-documented Esoteric tradition plays hardly any role whatsoever in the texts of Aura-Soma. The construction of the method itself, and of the texts that describe the method, rests on different foundations altogether. Despite several distinctly modern traits, the main focus of the primary movement texts is on distant and diffuse connections with e.g. Oriental predecessors, or on the presentation of Aura-Soma as a present-day form of what is generally and vaguely conceived of as "ancient wisdom".[25] Through the use of these strategies, Aura-Soma is freed

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[22] Dinshah Ghadiali, a parsee from Bombay, had read Babbitt's book and began experimenting with color therapy. After emigrating to the USA, he introduced the method there and trained several hundred practitioners from 1920 onwards. After a few years, however, he began to face opposition from bio-medical authorities, as well as legal problems.

[23] Dalichow & Booth *Aura-Soma*, pp. 12 f.

[24] Gardner 1957: 211 ff.

[25] The term *theosophy* is not found in the index to Vicky Wall's autobiography, despite of the fact that theosophical ideas are the main source of the metaphysics behind Aura-Soma.

from its historical context, bound to particular cultural and historical circumstances in the West. Instead, a picture is created of a kind of perennial philosophy that is revealed again and again throughout the course of history. Dalichow and Booth mention the founder of the method, Vicky Wall, as the rediscoverer of an already pre-existing set of doctrines:

> Vicky's clairvoyance enabled her to perceive a person as a "rainbow". She could also perceive if something was not right in this rainbow. She was amazed when, at more than 60 years of age, she learned that her ideas coincided with the ancient Indian Chakra Teaching.[26]

The choice of words makes the historical ties even vaguer. The chakra system which, as we shall see, entered the West from specific texts that had a well-documented history from the seventeenth century and had roots in Tantric meditative praxis, is relegated to a distant and unspecified past through the use of the word "ancient". The belief that the chakras are endowed with the colors of the rainbow is by association also described as ancient, a claim that etic historiography would consider dubious at best.

Other clues reveal further stations in the transmission of ancient wisdom. Aura-Soma relies on the "energies" embodied in over a hundred different scented liquids, usually perfumed essences and oils. The liquids have names that bespeak a mythopoetic appropriation of a range of cultures: there are Egyptian bottles, Atlantean bottles, Essene bottles. The founding legend of Aura-Soma therapy thus rests on the rhetorical appeal to positive Others, a myth of the Golden Age with a strong emotional appeal. Allusions to Egypt or ancient India, e.g. in the form of frequent references to the chakra system, do not only rely on recognition within the New Age culture. These references are evidence of a kind of inverted Orientalism, a widespread myth that can be accepted by a far larger audience than the inner circle of believers, which describes the ancient Orient as a place filled with mystery and wisdom. Without such a myth, the rhetorical appeal to India would appear to make little sense.

Just as traditional Orientalist discourse holds up the Orient as a mirror in which the modernity of the West can be favorably reflected, the positive Orientalist myth of a Golden Age also serves a specific

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[26] Dalichow & Booth *Aura-Soma*, p. 26. Ironically, as we shall see, the concept of the "rainbow body" has little to do with Tantric traditions and considerably more with the teachings of the American esotericist Christopher Hills.

ideological purpose. While purporting to speak of a different culture, it presents a morality for our own. The Orient—or a fantasy image of the Orient—is used as an example for our own age, a way of exposing the ills that our culture is heir to. The Others, it is implied, are intuitive while we function within the limited confines of rationality. They fill their world with beauty, while ours is gray and ugly. The ancient teachings that have been rediscovered or revived are said to provide a direct link to these positive predecessors and can help us reestablish those values that the materialist West has lost.

At the same time, the myth of the Golden Age largely compensates for the obvious problems of legitimacy that arise when a new Esoteric doctrine or praxis is created. Considering the fact that Aura-Soma is a product of the early 1980s, it is perhaps not surprising that the main texts expounding Aura-Soma repeatedly insist on the ancient origins of this method. Dalichow and Booth even claim that Aura-Soma is based on archetypal knowledge embedded in our genes. The only thing Vicky Wall did when she transmitted the knowledge of the "new" method was to awaken what had already existed latently in humanity.[27]

The companion to the myth of the Golden Age, anti-modernist critique, is seldom made explicit. Rather than criticizing the woes of the present, the positive alternatives are emphasized. Only in the beginning of Dalichow and Booth's text do the authors express a strong disapproval of the modern way of life:

> It could probably not have been predicted in the time that Alice Bailey lived, what abuse to nature and to human beings would come about through civilization. Today, people are again giving credence to ancient wisdom in order to offset the damage done. They are turning back to ancient knowledge of natural laws and rhythms and the unity of life.[28]

Nevertheless, as the last sentence of this quote indicates, ancient wisdom is being revived. After a long parenthesis in the history of mankind, we are reverting to a higher manifestation of the state we once came from: a utopia in which the primeval wisdom and the best in the present-day world form a happy synthesis.

To summarize, the mythography of Aura-Soma rests on a few basic—and at times implicit—claims. Doctrines and practices propounded in the central movement texts are, it is said, in actual fact

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[27] Dalichow & Booth *Aura-Soma*, pp. 12 f.; 228.
[28] Dalichow & Booth *Aura-Soma*, p. 12.

ancient. These ancient roots combine a number of cultures that are considered quite distinct or even entirely imaginary by etic historiography, such as Egypt, India and Atlantis. The particular claims fall within a broad spectrum ranging from the moderately plausible (e.g. that Aura-Soma is a link in an age-old chakra tradition) to the entirely spurious (e.g. that some of the effects of the method are to heal problems stemming from previous incarnations on Atlantis). These roots are part of an invented tradition, and the construction of this tradition has been carried out by employing a limited set of tropes or strategies. Finally, despite these claims of hoary antiquity, the supposedly ancient methods serve purposes that are distinctly modern, particularly in the way they present the human predicament. We shall return to the broader question of similar claims made for the Esoteric Tradition throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Questions of Tradition

As the remainder of this chapter will show, Aura-Soma is just one of many Esoteric positions that base their mythopoetic pasts on similar arguments. The questions that will be raised here can now be briefly presented. The roots that one claims for one's movement are not chosen at random, but clearly serve a purpose. One's own creed, it is claimed, is not a modern creation but a form of wisdom rooted in a golden age. Furthermore, this golden age is not just a vaguely depicted mythical epoch at the beginning of time, an Esoteric counterpart of the garden of Eden. Several specific cultures are directly or indirectly identified as bearers of this primeval wisdom.

Thus, a first question that can be asked regarding the source texts is: who are the significant Others, what are the specific cultures invoked by Esoteric writers in their construction of tradition, and how did these cultures become incorporated into the mythography of the Esoteric Tradition? Related to this is the question of precisely which elements of the modern Esoteric Tradition are purportedly taken from these cultures. Secondly, how are these cultures seen to be interrelated at various stages of the development of the Modern Esoteric Tradition? Is there, for instance, an overarching myth linking the various significant Others? Thirdly, how do writers from within the Modern Esoteric Tradition relate to the tradition that has dominated their own part of the world, i.e. Christianity? Finally, through what mechanisms are concrete doctrines and rituals transformed from being part and parcel of a non-Western religion to

constituting part of a discursive strategy of the Modern Esoteric Tradition? How have the original versions of concepts such as *karma* or *chakra* been transformed into their modern counterparts?

Some Significant Others of Esoteric Historiography

The purpose of the present section is to highlight some of the most salient cultures invoked by Esoteric writers in their efforts to explain the roots of their doctrines. It is not intended as an exhaustive catalogue of significant Others, nor even a catalogue of all significant Others within the selected source texts. The result would be an overly long descriptive section. Rather, this section highlights the elements of emic historiography that have the longest-standing and arguably greatest influence within the Modern Esoteric Tradition. Two remarks should therefore be made at the outset.

Judging from the published material of the last few years, the set of cultures invoked by at least some individuals within the cultic milieu appears to be expanding. Celtic spirituality, Korean healing and Polynesian body therapies are just three of many innovations in this field.[29] Furthermore, the historiography of the Esoteric Tradition is not only a product of appropriating exotic Others. Movement texts, especially from earlier positions such as theosophy and anthroposophy, tended to refer to elements of Western esotericism, naming figures such as Agrippa or Paracelsus. Although such references masked the existence of more contemporary sources of their ideas, writers such as Blavatsky and Steiner did at times acknowledge the same roots that etic historiography identifies. Other spokespersons, e.g. Cayce, show little awareness of etic historiography. Others again, e.g. Elizabeth Prophet of the CUT, are obviously aware of etic history but resist its implications. Although I discuss differences in the particular use various positions make of history, the present discussion is not intended to assess and quantify the relative importance

[29] The interested reader can find a plethora of such exotic practices advertised in many New Age magazines as well as on web sites such as www.newageinfo.com. Specifically, Celtic spirituality is the subject of books such as Elsbeth & Johnson *The Silver Wheel* and McCoy *Celtic Women's Spirituality*; a form of Korean healing called Dahn Hak has recently begun to spread through the United States and Western Europe, cf. Internet sites such as the home page of the Sedona Dahn Institute at www.sedonaretreat.com. Among the Polynesian elements, one finds a Hawaiian type of massage called lomi-lomi.

of "invented" vis-à-vis "real" history, and my concentration on the use of exotic Others as a discursive strategy should not tempt the reader to assume that all Esoteric writers present an equally ideologically skewed picture of history.

Imaginary Utopias

Esoteric historiography usually starts with the development of the cosmos, an example being the section entitled Cosmogenesis of Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*. For our purposes, i.e. investigating the purported origins of esoteric knowledge, emic history is set apart from prehistory with the evolution of the first sentient beings on this planet. Esoteric myths present a vast panorama of races and peoples that inhabited now vanished continents. The texts merely hint at their ways of life, their occult capabilities, and their possible contributions to the development of mankind. Several imaginary cultures are mentioned, but only a few are subject to mythic elaboration in the Esoteric texts. Here, we shall mainly examine the two imaginary civilizations that have been singled out as primeval utopias by the Esoteric positions reviewed here, viz. Atlantis and Lemuria, and briefly comment on the existence of others such as Agartha and Shambala.[30]

Of the four, Atlantis has the longest recorded history as a myth. As is well known, Atlantis is first mentioned in two of Plato's dialogues, *Timaios* and *Kritias*. In the first, one of the protagonists, Kritias, tells "a story derived from ancient tradition". Kritias recounts how the Greek statesman Solon, on a voyage to Egypt, heard the tale of Atlantis from a group of priests. West of the Pillars of Herakles (i.e. the Strait of Gibraltar) there had once been an empire called Atlantis. The Atlanteans, a war-like people, had attempted to conquer the entire Mediterranean region but had been defeated by brave Athenians. After their military downfall, a great earthquake devastated Atlantis. The fabled continent sank beneath the surface of the ocean. Kritias continues in the eponymous dialogue *Kritias* to describe life on Atlantis in much greater detail. The ruler of the continent was the god Poseidon, who was also the father of the entire race of Atlanteans.

[30] Although the literature on the Atlantis myth is vast, most of it is written either from a believer's or a skeptic's point of view. Helpful historic surveys of the myth are Sprague de Camp 1954 and Ellis 1998. Even these, however, place emphasis on what is historically reasonable and therefore give esoteric speculation a rather cursory attention.

On the south coast of the main island, the inhabitants built a large city of the same name. A palace and a temple were erected in the city. Both were lavishly decorated with gold, silver, brass, tin, ivory and a metal called *oreichalkon*. In the precincts of the temple, the kings of Atlantis would assemble to settle matters of state. In time, the Atlanteans declined and were duly punished by Zeus.

The details of Atlantis read like a projection of Athenian myths, civilization and technology. The ships of the Atlanteans are Greek triremes. The palaces are greater than Greek buildings, but are constructed of materials well known to Plato's contemporaries. The government of Atlantis is based on Plato's conception of the ideal, meritocratic state. As will soon become clear, the Platonic story of Atlantis is rarely retold as such, but merely serves as the raw material for esoteric elaboration.

Several authors during the Hellenistic period refer to Atlantis. Broadly speaking, earlier authors treated the Atlantis theme as fiction, while later writers are inclined to see it as factual. Neoplatonists such as Proclus began to create corroborating tales to buttress the alleged factuality of the Atlantis legend.[31]

Of Plato's dialogues, only the *Timaios* had been preserved during the early Middle Ages. It is precisely in this dialogue that Plato presents the legend of Atlantis. Oddly enough, however, interest in Atlantis seems to have been exceedingly scant during the Middle Ages.[32] Only with the utopian speculations of early modern Europe does Atlantis once again become a focus of interest. Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (published posthumously in 1627) is arguably the best-known use of the Atlantis trope in the utopian discourse of the early modern age. After this revival of interest, Atlantis became subject to mythic elaboration in books by Bailly, Delille de Sales, Fabre d'Olivet and others.

The concept of Lemuria was born in the 1860s and 1870s, when a group of British geologists noted the striking resemblances between fossils and sedimentary strata from the Permian age found in India and South Africa. Since these species could not have crossed the

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[31] Sprague de Camp 1954: 17 f.

[32] The Timaios was translated into Latin by Chalcidius in the fourth century, and was available to medieval scholars in a truncated form comprising sections 17A to 53B; cf. Price 1992: 74. The story of Atlantis is introduced in sections 20D, 24D, 25E, 26A and 26C, and was thus part of the meager medieval Platonic canon.

open sea, and since continents were thought to be immobile, geologists explained the presence of these fossils on geographically distant land masses by postulating the existence of connecting land bridges that had long since sunk beneath the oceans. Ernst Haeckel in particular invoked such a hypothetical land bridge in order to explain the distribution of lemurs in Africa, India, Madagascar and the Malay Peninsula. The English biologist Philip L. Scalter, who elaborated on Haeckel's theory, therefore named the land bridge Lemuria.

However, Atlantis and Lemuria were not the only imaginary utopias of post-Enlightenment esotericism. Nineteenth as well as twentieth century speculation created several other fabled places, inhabited by semi-divine people with superhuman abilities.[33] Many remained the creation of only one spokesperson. Most of them, from the continent Pan of the channeled book Oahspe[34] and the Arktogäa of Jörg Lanz[35] to modern New Age creations such as Cordemia and Lumania,[36] have had little or no influence on the Esoteric Tradition as a whole. Others have lived their life in the pages of a few writers who have formed their own esoteric lineage. One such lineage created and elaborated on a fabled city variously spelled Agartha, Agarthi, Agarttha and Asgartha.[37] It is, however, difficult to locate more than a mere

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[33] The best exposé of these fabled places is to be found in Godwin 1996.

[34] Newbrough 1882.

[35] Goodrick-Clarke 1985.

[36] Hanegraaff 1996: 310 n. 34.

[37] The city of Agarthi was invented in 1873, in Jacolliot's *Le fils de dieu*. The theme was taken and elaborated on by the Christian hermeticist Saint Yves d'Alveydre in his *Mission de l'Inde*, published in 1910. In 1924, the same story was retold with minor variations by the Polish writer Ferdinand Ossendowski in his *Bêtes, hommes et dieux*. Its place as an abode of spiritually highly evolved beings, the spiritual capital of the world, is explained as follows in Ossendowski's book. During the Golden Age, the planet was ruled from a city known as Paradesha, the Supreme Land or Paradise. History is cyclical, every age terminated by an inexorable decline. The present dark age, Kali Yuga, began in the year 3102 BCE. The inhabitants of Paradesha moved to a city under the surface of the Earth in order to avoid being contaminated with evil, and named it Agharti, supposedly meaning "The Inaccessible".

The French traditionalist writer René Guénon collected these three previous myths (which he considered veridical) and elaborated on them in his book *Le roi du monde*, published in 1927. In a vocabulary adopted from theosophical as well as Hindu sources, the relationship between the human and suprahuman worlds is, according to Guénon, mediated by the Manu. In universalistic fashion, Guénon finds etymological reflexes of the term Manu in the Mina or Menes of the Egyptians, the Greek Minos and the Celtic Menw. Reminiscences of the Manu are found in the Kabbalistic legend of the angel Metatron, whose function in Christianity is assumed by the archangel Michael. All these correspondences, says Guénon, are due to common historical roots. In the remote past, the sages of Agharti practiced an

handful of references to Agartha in modern literature; a search on the Internet will locate a very few modern esotericists who appear to take the legend at face value. None of the New Age texts reviewed for the present study accord Agartha any importance.

If Agartha is a minor contender, the legend of Shambala (with variant spellings such as Shamballa and Shamballah) has, by contrast, become an integrated component of modern Esoteric mythography.[38] The concept of Shambala was originally part of classical Hinduism and is identified in the Mahabharata as the birthplace of Kalki, the coming avatar of Vishnu. The concept was reinterpreted in Mahayana Buddhism and was introduced to the Modern Esoteric Tradition by Helena Blavatsky. In the index to *The Secret Doctrine*, Shamballah is identified as The White Island, located in the midst of Central Asia. This was the place where the last survivors, the "elect", of the Lemurian continent had taken their refuge. In this way, Shamballa was connected to the master narrative of theosophical and post-theosophical historiography. However, Shamballa plays a distinctly minor role in *The Secret Doctrine*.

The legend of Shamballa was elaborated by post-theosophical spokespersons such as Charles Leadbeater, Alice Bailey and Nicholas Roerich. Especially Roerich and Bailey are responsible for an extensive mythologizing of Shamballa. Thus, Alice Bailey places the headquarters of her spiritual hierarchy in Shamballa. It is, however, not at all clear that Bailey conceived of Shamballa as a physically extant place. Sometimes this seems to be a non-material city (however one would conceive of such an entity):

> The central home of this Hierarchy is at Shamballa, a centre in the Gobi desert, called in the ancient books the "White Island". It exists in etheric matter, and when the race of men on earth have developed etheric vision its location will be recognised and its reality admitted.

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initiatory religion that gave man the ability to communicate with the divine. As a part of their faith, they venerated the Manu. Every now and then, the sages would come up to the surface of the Earth and propagate their faith. One of them, the master Rama, spread the Agarthian religion over a vast area from northern Europe to India, and was thus the culture hero who founded Indo-European civilization. In the north, a vestigial memory of the homeland of their culture was retained in the name Asgard, the mythic abode of the Norse gods.

Guénon, who believed he had rescued Agartha from the hands of writers such as Jacolliot, whom he considered to be "un écrivain fort peu sérieux" (Guénon 1958: 7), was the last within the time span considered here to have given the fabled city any serious consideration.

[38] Perhaps its main claim to fame in our own time is the fact that a major series of Esoteric/New Age books are published under the label Shambala.

> The development of this vision is rapidly coming to pass, as may be seen from the newspapers and the current literature of the day, but the location of Shamballa will be one of the latest etheric sacred spots to be revealed as it exists in the matter of the second ether.[39]

At other times, it is affirmed that Shamballa is something entirely foreign to our conception of geographical space:

> Shamballa is simply a word conveying the idea of a vast focal point of energies which are assembled and brought together by the planetary Logos in order to create a manifestation adequate to His unfolding intention and planetary service.[40]

Even more than in the case of Alice Bailey, Shamballa became a central discursive strategy in the writings of Helena and Nicholas Roerich. Whereas Blavatsky and Bailey briefly report on ancient documents and channeled information, respectively, Nicholas Roerich visited Central Asia in 1925–1928 and claimed to have personally heard numerous tales of Shamballa. The Roerichs' new religious movement, Agni Yoga, revolved around the purported fire worship of Shamballa. Their neo-theosophical doctrines were expounded in books such as Helena Roerich's *Agni Yoga*, published in 1929.

However, Atlantis won over Agartha, Shamballa and other mythic sites thanks to the efforts of Helena Blavatsky. The details of Atlantis as a theme of esoteric speculation were also laid down by Blavatsky. Her description of Atlantis constitutes a typical discourse: the details can be contested or amplified on by writers such as Charles Leadbeater, Rudolf Steiner or Max Heindel. These positions, however, are mere elaborations on a basic structure that has been retained among Atlantis enthusiasts up to our own time.

Esoteric Atlantis

The 1880s saw the revival of esoteric historiography. Three books marked this renaissance of speculative thought.[41] The first was Ignatius Donnelly's influential *Atlantis* (1882). The second was the resurrection of Jean Sylvain Bailly's theory that the homeland of humanity lay near the North Pole in the Methodist minister William F. Warren's *Paradise Found* (1885). The third was the incorporation of both theories in Helena Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1888).

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[39] Bailey *Initiation, Human and Solar*, p. 33.
[40] Bailey *Discipleship in the New Age*, p. 404.
[41] The discussion in this section is indebted to Gardner 1957: 164 ff.

Donnelly and Warren pursue the same theme, but come to vastly different conclusions. Where, they ask themselves, did the garden of Eden lie? In pre-Enlightenment days, the answer would have been obvious. The roots of mankind were in the Middle East. Warren mobilized an array of arguments to prove his claim that the original Utopia was located in the Arctic region, which had once had a much milder climate. It was the deluge of Noah which had lowered the temperatures near the North Pole and made the former Eden uninhabitable. Donnelly, a writer with a strong scientistic bent, had a number of pseudo-rational reasons for assuming that the garden of Eden was in fact none other than the fabled Atlantis. The synthesizing genius of Madame Blavatsky combined Bailly's/Warren's and Donnelly's ideas into a vast, unified panorama of occult history. Blavatsky's theories became the dominant discourse. Post-theosophical writers have proposed modified schemes which bear the distinct imprint of *The Secret Doctrine* and merely modify the details.

After Blavatsky, post-theosophical spokespersons retain much the same basic myth, Atlantis is conceived as the source of occult lore. Different positions elaborate on the Atlantis theme to varying degrees. Atlantis is also an ambivalent Other, since the continent sank due to the moral deficiencies of its inhabitants. Once again, different positions conceive of the roots of the downfall of Atlantis and the fate of its inhabitants in different terms, and elaborate on these subjects in varying degrees of detail.

Alice Bailey would be a good example of an Esoteric spokesperson in whose writings Atlantis plays a distinctly minor role. The outlines of theosophical mythography are clearly present. Atlantis was the home of one of the seven theosophical root-races, each with its own specific mission in the evolution of mankind:

> In the third root race, the Lemurian, the physical aspect of man was carried to a high stage of perfection. Later in the great race which preceded ours, the Atlantean, and which perished in the flood, the emotional nature of man was developed. Then in the race to which we belong, the Aryan or fifth race, the development of the concrete or lower mind is the goal, and this we are developing each decade.[42]

Atlantis is depicted as an advanced civilization from a technological point of view. This is a theme reminiscent of the Atlantis myths of Steiner and Cayce.

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[42] Bailey *Consciousness of the Atom*, pp. 134 f.

> All that the modern processes of civilisation have made possible, and much more than that which today comes under the name of scientific discovery were known in old Atlantis, but they were not developed by men themselves but given to them as a free gift, much as people today give to a child beautiful and wonderful things which the child uses and enjoys but which he does not understand in any way. Great and beautiful cities, full of temples and great buildings (of which the Chaldean and Babylonian remains are the degenerate remnants, and the modern skyscraper the child) were everywhere to be found. Most of our modern scientific knowledge was possessed by these priest-kings and constituted in the eyes of the masses a form of wonderful magic. Sanitation, hygiene, means of transportation and air machines were developed and of a very high order.[43]

As for the spiritual state of the Atlanteans, Bailey had a less positive evaluation than most of her Esotericist colleagues. In stark contrast with other positions, Atlantis became an ambivalent, if not negative Other in Bailey's works. The religion of Atlantis was spiritualism, a far from flattering statement coming from the pen of Alice Bailey, who denounced contemporary spiritualism as a base form of religiosity, or what she termed as "lower psychism".[44] Bailey's version of the myth is utopian inasmuch as Atlantean civilization had the seeds of spirituality:

> The Atlantean civilisation was definitely religious in its attitudes; religion was the commonplace of life and the raison d'être of all that was. The world after death was the subject of interest and unwavering, unquestioning belief. The subtle influences emanating from the unseen realms, the forces of nature and man's relation to them through a keen sensitivity, and the entire gamut of his emotional attitudes constituted the life of the race, and coloured all that there was or might have been of embryo thought. The result of all this, inherited by us when history as we now have it arose (from the time of the flood, whenever that might have been), can be expressed by such words as animism, spiritualism, lower psychism and feeling. The sense of God, the sense of immortality, the sense of subtler inner relationships, the sense of worship and the undue sensitivity of modern man is our outstanding heritage from the civilisations which existed upon old Atlantis.[45]

However, as in earlier Atlantis myths, the inhabitants of the continent brought destruction on themselves:

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[43] Bailey *Externalization of the Hierarchy*, p. 122.
[44] Bailey *The Destiny of Nations*, p. 43.
[45] Bailey *Education in the New Age*, p. 42.

> the major sin of the Atlantean people was theft—widespread and general. The seeds of aggression and of personal acquisitiveness began to show themselves, culminating in the great war (as related in The Secret Doctrine) between the Lords of the Shining Countenance and the Lords of the Dark Face. To procure what they coveted and felt they needed, the most highly evolved of that race began to practice magic.[46]

Atlantis was therefore obliterated. Mythic memories of this event remain in the Biblical story of the flood. Atlantean wisdom, base as it may have been, was then transmitted to peoples in various centers around the world. Since the USA is the modern remnant of Atlantis, this purportedly explains why esoteric and spiritualist groups flourished there.[47] Here lies the esoteric-historical rationale for Bailey's own position. Her movement could flourish in America, since America inherited the religious yearnings of Atlantis. At the same time, all competing schools were merely modern realizations of the lesser forms of spirituality that had existed on the fabled continent. Only Bailey's version of the Ageless Wisdom could present a form of faith appropriate to the next turn of the evolutionary spiral. Atlantis became not only a discursive strategy underpinning Esoteric Tradition in general, but specifically of her own position within the Tradition.

Walter Scott-Elliott was among the most influential post-theosophical writers to produce full-scale elaborations on the Atlantis myth. His book *The Story of Atlantis*, published in 1896, expanded on Blavatsky's basic myth by adding highly specific details of the various ethnic groups that supposedly inhabited Atlantis. Among Scott-Elliott's many interests were the scientific and technical advances of the Atlanteans, whom he credited with inventing writing, astronomy, advanced weapons and aircraft. Basing their views on Scott-Elliott, both Rudolf Steiner and Charles Leadbeater created elaborate myths that portrayed the sunken continent as a technological utopia, complete with airships that could fly in the dense atmosphere.[48] Following Blavatsky, both also placed Atlantis into grand narratives of world history as one of seven successive cultures.

Typical of the use of the Atlantis legend in earlier positions within the Esoteric Tradition has been the contention that the tradition as a whole has precursors in primeval times, when wise and intuitive

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[46] Bailey *Esoteric Healing*, p. 231.
[47] Bailey *The Destiny of Nations*, p. 90.
[48] The main source of Steiner's views on Atlantis is his book *Aus der Akashachronik*.

people populated the sunken continent. Blavatsky's, Leadbeater's or Steiner's interest in Atlantis seems not to have been to link any specific element of their doctrines to Atlantean religion, but to project utopia onto the Atlanteans and see them as a positive significant Other. Cayce went one crucial step beyond this generalized utopia. As in his description of other past epochs, Cayce's story of Atlantis is filled with minute details of the various civilizations that peopled the continent, their manners and material culture, down to specifics of particular people who had lived there.[49] Atlantis had, in this elaboration of the basic myth, been destroyed three times. Its inhabitants were at first not human beings as we know them, but a variety of living entities reminiscent of people as well as animals. Like his theosophical predecessors, he claimed that the first human Atlanteans were bisexual. In time, a large civilization evolved. Cayce delves on its religions, and paints the picture of a society divided into two factions. The Law of One resembles a mystery school, with a high priestess guiding adepts during meditation and helping them to attain "fourth-dimensional consciousness". Opposed to this group are the Sons of Belial or Baal, depicted as egotistical materialists. At the time of its final destruction, Atlantis had already broken up into three land masses, Poseidia, Aryan and Og. Finally, these territories were also destroyed, and their inhabitants left and colonized parts of the world known also from exoteric historiography.

Like his fellow Esoteric spokespersons, Cayce paints a picture of a continent with a spiritually and technically highly advanced civilization. The enduring legacy of his Atlantis readings is his claim that the wise Atlanteans used crystals. Their culture, material as well as religious, centered around the Tuaoi stone, a six-sided structure used to convert etheric rays from the sun into energy and, more importantly, for spiritual purposes. New Age bookstores usually carry a large section of stones and gems. Cayce's readings lie at the root of the contemporary interest in their occult properties.

In one of his readings, Cayce stated somewhat puzzlingly that the veracity of the stories concerning Atlantis depended on the credence that each listener gave to these tales:

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[49] The following brief summary of a vast material is culled from the pages of Cayce *Edgar Cayce on Atlantis*, Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, pp. 371 ff. and Johnson 1998: 62 ff.

> There has been considerable given respecting such a lost continent by those channels such as the writer of Two Planets, or Atlantis—or Poseidia or Lemuria—that has been published through some Theosophical literature. As to whether this information is true or not, depends upon the credence individuals give to this class of information.[50]

One is tempted to read this statement as one of the first signs of the individualistic epistemology of the New Age. Truth is to be understood pragmatically as whatever is useful and inspirational to each individual.

Thus, one set of positions reproduces Blavatsky's views but does not dwell at any length on the Atlantis theme. Another set of positions on the contrary creates exceedingly detailed myths on Atlantis. These two ends of the spectrum might be labeled the minimal and full-scale elaborations of the Atlantis myth. The parasitism of the Esoteric Tradition in relation to contemporary science is clear when one examines the fate of the Atlantis theme at the onset of the New Age. While Esoteric spokespersons of the first few decades of the twentieth century—Steiner, Cayce, Max Heindel and others—took the existence of Atlantis for granted, later speculation often seems to center on the question of whether Atlantis indeed truly existed. Plate tectonics and marine cartography have irrevocably marginalized the Atlantis legend. Explicit references to mythical continents in New Age books have become rare.[51] However, one particular facet of New Age religiosity, the common claims regarding the spiritual properties of gems, stones and minerals, were originally supported with this Esoteric myth. This gave the Atlantis theme a distinctive role as a discursive strategy. Today, however, it is quite feasible and common in the New Age milieu to refer to crystals without holding a belief in their ritual efficacy grounded in esoteric Atlantean historiography.

The main exceptions to this trend are subcultures within the New Age that crucially depend on the Atlantis myth. A case in point is Ramtha's School of Enlightenment, a religious group that has formed around the channeled messages transmitted to J.Z. Knight.[52] Ramtha,

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[50] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 371.

[51] Maguire Thompson *Atlas of the New Age*, p. 114 reproduces the legend that the practices of crystal healing and color healing originated in Atlantis and were carried over to Egypt, but introduces this legend with the words "there is a theory". Strictly speaking, it is, of course, entirely true that such a theory exists, even if it happened to have been introduced by Edgar Cayce in the 1920s.

[52] Knight's/Ramtha's Atlantis myth has been described in detail by J. Gordon Melton, who has carried out considerable field work among Knight's followers; cf. Melton 1998: 17 ff.

the entity said to speak through Knight, is described as the spirit of an Atlantean who lived 35,000 years ago. The messages include a description of Atlantis which, however, differs from the theosophical narrative on significant points.

Egypt

Although the Christian tradition was hegemonic before the Enlightenment, the fascination with ancient religious traditions existed earlier. Egypt, especially, was a long-standing focus of projection.[53] As far back as in the late Hellenistic age, numerous attempts were made to interpret the Egyptian script allegorically, as actual knowledge of the hieroglyphs had practically died out. According to Plotinus, each sign was endowed with a symbolism that the initiated could use to gain profound spiritual insights.[54]

This veneration of purported Egyptian wisdom was never entirely lost. The interest of early Christian writers such as Lactantius and Augustine ensured the survival of at least some knowledge of hermetic philosophy throughout the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, as is well known, the major revival of this school of thought constituted the Renaissance hermetic tradition, which Frances Yates has characterized as pseudo-Egyptianizing. Esoteric interpretations of Egypt could justifiably be divided into three periods, punctuated by major advances in the factual knowledge of ancient Egyptian culture. Firstly, there is a pre-Casaubon and a post-Casaubon era.[55] Yates relates how Isaac Casaubon (1556–1614), a scholar of Greek from Geneva, published an examination of the context and language of the Hermetic corpus in 1614, dating it not to the time of Moses but to late antiquity. In many quarters, Casaubon's work went unheeded, and the purported wisdom of the Egyptians has continued to fascinate some esotericists up to our own time. As we will see, a few exponents of the Modern Esoteric Tradition continue, three centuries later, to treat the Thrice Great Hermes as a historic figure. Nevertheless, Casaubon marked the beginning of a split between emic and etic historiography. Secondly, there is a pre-Champollion and a post-Champollion

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[53] The main sources of the history of Egyptianizing mythography are to be found in chapter 1, note 76.

[54] Plotinus *Enneads* V, 8.6.

[55] Although ultimately based on Frances Yates' study of Hermeticism, this distinction should not be read as an endorsement of the untenably strong view of this divide found in Yates 1964: 398 ff.

era. The deciphering of the hieroglyphs made it possible to gain insights into the actual religion and culture of ancient Egypt that made it more difficult to support fantasy projections.

Notwithstanding Casaubon's arguments, a number of writers thus continued to support the view of the hermetic texts as the repository of immeasurably ancient wisdom. Among these, one finds several leading seventeenth and eighteenth century intellectuals. Thus, polymaths and enthusiasts such as the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher (1602–80), the Cambridge Platonist Ralph Cudworth (1617–88) and the theologian and philologist Johann Albert Fabricius (1668–1736) continued to expound on the purported meaning of the Egyptian hieroglyphs and on the antiquity of the thrice great Hermes. In Kircher's autobiographical sketch, he recounts how one day around 1630, his imagination was fired when he happened to see a book containing illustrations of Egyptian obelisks erected in Rome.[56] Kircher would publish several works on Egyptian mysteries and the arcana of the hieroglyphs. His research on the meaning of obelisk inscriptions came to fruition in 1650 with the publication of *Obeliscus Pamphilus*. His main work, the three-volume *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, published between 1652 and 1654, is a vestige of the pre-Casaubon view of the hermetic writings as a source of spiritual wisdom. Kircher's interest in Egyptianizing hermeticism continued until the end of his life. Cudworth's Egyptophile work is slightly later; his *True Intellectual System of the Universe* was published in 1678. Egypt becomes the source of learning, the homeland of original monotheism. The hieroglyphs are once again indicated as a means of transmitting arcane wisdom to the initiated. However, Cudworth was clearly influenced by writing in a post-Casaubon's age, and went out of his way to demonstrate the fallacy of Casaubon's argument.[57]

Thus, the projection of primal wisdom on the Egyptians dates back long before the period surveyed here. The Church's weakened position as a result of the Enlightenment led to a new wave of positive interpretations of certain non-Western cultures. It should, however, be noted that Egypt, by far the most important locus of positive projections during the pre-modern epoch, was intensely devalued during the Enlightenment. Chaldeans, Egyptians, Persians and Phoenicians were admittedly capable of logical thought: Diderot noted

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[56] See Conor 1974: 37 f.
[57] Assmann 1997: 85.

that all these nations were well versed in "theology, ethics, politics, war, agriculture, metallurgy and most of the mechanical arts which necessity and industry bring forth among men assembled in towns and subjected to laws".[58] However, scientific thought developed nowhere but in Greece. Egypt remained "a breeding ground for superstitions, an ideal country for magicians and fortune tellers and for the worship of cats and onions".[59] The Enlightenment *philosophes* rejected the old order, whether Christian or Hermeticist. It was part of the project of a revived esotericism of the end of the eighteenth century to attempt to support the pre-Enlightenment claim to Egypt as a fountainhead of wisdom.

The Egyptianizing trend of the Renaissance was carried into modern times by various masonic and rosicrucian groups, and became a staple of the French occult revival. For the purposes of the present study, perhaps the most important addition to the emic historiography of post-Enlightenment esotericism occurred when Antoine Court de Gébelin in 1781 claimed (entirely spurious) ancient Egyptian roots for the tarot.[60] Egypt continued to be a major source of projections until Jean-François Champollion in 1822 began to decipher the Egyptian hieroglyphs. From the 1830s and 1840s, fantasy images of ancient Egypt found competitors in more scholarly approaches to that culture. However, Egypt retained a role in post-Enlightenment esotericism superior to that of India well beyond the 1830s. In a different context, perhaps the last major product of religious imagination to have its roots in fantasies of Egypt is the *Book of Abraham*, one of the canonical texts of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, i.e. the Mormons.[61] While Egypt also continues to play a role in the twentieth century Esoteric Tradition, it is certainly no longer as powerful as before.

Theosophy

Until the inception of the period studied here, Egypt appears to have been more the mythic source of individual doctrinal elements, or (as

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[58] Quoted in Gay 1967–70, vol. I p. 79.

[59] Gay 1967–70, vol. I p. 80.

[60] For the story of Gébelin and his tarot myth, see Decker et al. 1996.

[61] The story of the Book of Abraham, a canonical scripture of the Mormons based on Joseph Smith's imaginative interpretation of an Egyptian funerary text, has been retold several times in the critical literature on the LDS church, see e.g. Brodie 1995: 170 ff.

in High Romantic discourse) the vaguely sketched source of an initiatory wisdom, than part of a chain of redemptive history. *Isis Unveiled* marks not only an overt incorporation of Egypt in the Esoteric historical narrative, but also the beginning of the process by which it would begin to lose its privileged role as a focus of religious projection. As we have seen, Blavatsky had already begun to orient her religious creativity further east, towards the Indian subcontinent. The shift is underpinned mythologically by the assumption that the Egyptians were actually descendants of the Aryans, whose spiritual traditions should thus represent a purer form of the ancient wisdom religion. He refers approvingly to baron Bunsen's imaginative history of Egypt as a source for this hypothesis.[62] Among the suggestive traits linking the two, Blavatsky notes sun-worship, theocratic and sacerdotal government and a number of (spurious) etymologies.[63] The transitional *Mahatma Letters* retain references to Egypt, to its mysteries, priests and "occultists". In a historiography that points forward to the fully elaborated doctrinal position expounded in *The Secret Doctrine*, Egypt is seen in the *Mahatma Letters* as one of a series of historic cultures to have transmitted elements of the primeval wisdom religion.[64]

Egypt continues to play a complex role in theosophy. In his popularization of theosophy, William Q. Judge summarizes the esoteric history of Egypt.[65] The connection between Egypt and other major cultures is also explained, whereby the mythic foundation of the theosophical shift from Egypt to India is further elaborated on. India and Egypt had regular contacts, and therefore the perennial philosophy was equally well preserved by both nations. Due to a series of historical accidents, these contacts were severed and Egyptian civilization foundered. The ancient wisdom was retained in India, whereas Judge claims that most of Egyptian philosophy was lost in the process of transmission to the Jews. However, spiritual wisdom has other ways of surviving history: the success of theosophy in Europe and America during Judge's own lifetime is explained by the wave of Egyptian souls beings reincarnated there. Blavatsky's near-contemporary Schuré

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[62] IU II: 435; The reference is to baron Christian Karl Bunsen's *Egypt's Place in Universal History*, a work in five volumes written in 1845–57.

[63] IU II: 437 f.

[64] See especially ML letter 23B.

[65] Judge *Ocean of Theosophy*, esp. pp. 8, 19 and 109.

also reserves a place for Egypt in his grand scheme of history. For him, Egypt was "une véritable citadelle de la science sacrée". His Egypt, however, is purely mythical, since Schuré appears to be one of the remaining firm believers in the historicity of Hermes Trismegistus.[66]

By the advent of neo-theosophy, Egypt essentially only remained as a name for "mysteries" with little if anything to do with actual Egyptian culture. In a sense, Annie Besant's historiography reverses that of Blavatsky. Whereas Blavatsky abandoned her Egyptian masters and her allusions to Isis in order to delve into the secrets of a generalized Indian Orient, Besant returns to Egypt in laudatory passages such as the following, in which she attempts to describe the lost years of Jesus:

> From [the Himalayas] he proceeded later to Egypt. He had been fully instructed in the secret teachings which were the real fount of life among the Essenes, and was initiated in Egypt as a disciple of that one sublime Lodge from which every great religion has its Founder. For Egypt has remained one of the world-centres of the true Mysteries, whereof all semi-public Mysteries are the faint and far-off reflections.[67]

Leadbeater concurs, but places the Egyptians in esoteric historiography as the heirs to Atlantean civilization. However, despite any such affirmations as to the priority of Egypt in spiritual matters, neo-theosophical doctrine is more apt to refer to India than to Egypt.

Cayce

Cayce devotes a considerable number of readings to ancient Egypt. This material consists of a highly idiosyncratic mix of a common core of Esoteric lore and the personal creativity of Cayce. Among the former elements, one finds the idea that Egypt became a spiritual center after the downfall of Lemuria and Atlantis. Generally valid for the entire Esoteric Tradition is Cayce's belief in the special role of the pyramids. Among the latter elements is the synthesis that Cayce attempted to forge with the apocalypticism that he may have inherited from his conservative Christian upbringing. He prophesied that documents would be found near the Sphinx that would validate his historiography. Egypt not only had a special

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[66] Schuré 1899: 113 ff.
[67] Besant *Esoteric Christianity*, pp. 130 f.

significance in the past evolution of mankind, but would (soon) play a new and important role in ushering in a coming age.[68]

Cayce's Egypt thus has the curious position of being presented as the source of an ancient wisdom still to be revealed, i.e. as a discursive strategy for doctrinal claims that had not yet been presented. In Cayce's own readings, Egypt is primarily a focus of mythic elaboration. In a manner somewhat reminiscent of Leadbeater's and Steiner's attempts to follow individual people back through previous lives, Cayce claimed that he himself, his son and wife had played crucial roles in the history of Egypt. The readings place this history at a far earlier date than any culture recognized by archaeologists, viz. around the year 10,500 BCE. Like his Esoteric predecessors, Cayce in his readings on Egypt shows a curious obsession with race and skin color. Cayce's ancient alter ego, a priest named Ra Ta, is presented as a light-skinned conqueror of a somewhat inferior dark-skinned race. A simple psychological explanation might also be given for Cayce's contention that in his previous incarnation he had been the spiritual instructor of the Egyptians, and that he had been venerated as the god Ra after his death.[69]

Steiner

Steiner is one of the last Esoteric spokespersons to give Egypt a prominent role in history. He introduces Egyptian culture into his mythical septenary scheme of history. After the downfall of Atlantis, mankind flourishes under seven successive post-Atlantic cultures. In a clean break with etic chronology, Indian culture came first, then Persian and only after this Egypto-Chaldean culture. The fourth culture is the Graeco-Roman. The fifth, which began in 1413 AD has no proper name, but is the culture in which we are presently living. After this, a sixth and seventh post-Atlantic culture will follow. Two aspects of this mythic historiography concern us here. Firstly, Steiner's mythic history is concerned not with overt events, but with the development of spiritual entities and abilities. The main task of post-Atlantean man was to develop the faculty of thinking and of perceiving the external world. The role of the Egypto-Chaldean civ-

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[68] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, pp. 423 ff.

[69] Johnson 1998: 65 ff. Cayce's interest in race is Blavatskian rather than racist, i.e. he seemed to believe that races were distinct and basic varieties of humanity, but that they were to co-operate in harmony. See the quote in Johnson 1998: 83.

ilization was to develop science and technique and to "[derive] the laws of the spiritual world from the physical sense-world that concealed it".[70] Secondly, the seven cultures are organized in pairs, so that a special relation holds between the Indian and the seventh post-Atlantic culture; the Persian and the sixth post-Atlantic culture; the Egypto-Chaldean and the present fifth post-Atlantic culture; whereas Graeco-Roman culture is unique. Steiner explained the esoteric link between Egypt and our own age in a series of twelve lectures held in 1908, when Steiner was the head of the German Theosophical Society.[71] One might speculate that Steiner's emphasis on Egypt was part of his struggle against the dominance of the indophile Adyar theosophists.

Steiner is highly idiosyncratic in his view of revealed history. He shares with his theosophical counterparts a general conception of a downward slope of history, in which knowledge of the higher worlds was gradually lost as civilizations succeeded one another. The precise role of Egyptian culture in Steiner's historiography is, however, distinctly his own. Egyptian culture transmitted its occult knowledge through initiations, its insights being similar to those of Steiner's own position.[72] Initiations also afforded Egyptian adepts an understanding of occult anatomy and physiology, the stages of evolution of the human form from the Lemurian age up to the post-Atlantic. Insights were presented in mythic form, especially in the story of Isis, Osiris and Horus. As usual, however, Steiner's view of myth is a unique blend of esoteric allegorical reading and extreme literalism.[73]

What is the role of Egypt for the Modern Esoteric Tradition? Once again, Steiner's answer is in part original. His presentation of Egyptian wisdom appears to be written as a general critique of contemporary materialist civilization. Modern thinkers have vaguely glimpsed the spiritual truths of the Egyptians, but have fundamentally misinterpreted them. Egyptian initiate priests had the ability to see their gods, beings which combined animal and human features.

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[70] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 264.

[71] These lectures were published as *Aegyptische Mythen und Mysterien*.

[72] Steiner *Aegyptische Mythen und Mysterien*, p. 109.

[73] Steiner's literalism can be seen in his belief that Osiris was a real spiritual being who took human shape in order to visit the earth. The typically Steinerian combination of literalism with esoteric allegorical interpretation enters into his retelling of the myth when he explains that the long headdress that is iconographically associated with Osiris represents a spiritual sense organ that was attached to the head. Steiner *Aegyptische Mythen und Mysterien*, 105 f.

In the modern age, Darwin misunderstood this spiritual truth and believed that humans descended from animals.[74] Egyptian heritage has degenerated—thinking has "mummified" and the true understanding of the higher worlds has all but disappeared. It has therefore become necessary in our time to revive the heritage from ancient Egypt.[75] Anthroposophists have the task of renewing human knowledge of the creative forces in nature, as the Egyptians attempted to do through the Osiris-Isis myth. Steiner's mythic historiography of Egypt can thus be seen as in part a veiled reference to the struggle between anthroposophy and its detractors during his own lifetime.

The Egypt of the New Age

Generally speaking, New Age texts have followed the lead of Blavatsky by orienting themselves more towards a generalized Orient than toward Egypt. Mentions of the mystery schools of Egypt and the supernatural properties of pyramids have by no means disappeared completely from the New Age literature. Nevertheless, in New Age texts, Egypt is more commonly invoked as the homeland of specific techniques and doctrines than as a stepping-stone in an overarching myth of human development.[76]

Most prominently, some texts continue to locate the origins of the tarot deck in ancient Egypt. As mentioned above, this legend has its origins in the writings of the French freemason and esotericist Antoine Court de Gébelin. His *Le monde primitif*, book VIII, contains the origin myth that has been reproduced in numerous tarot books since then.[77] Among modern writers, Eden Gray quotes the legend

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[74] Steiner *Aegyptische Mythen und Mysterien*, pp. 184 ff. and 193.

[75] After the lengthy description of esoteric historiography that makes up the bulk of the book, the last pages of *Aegyptische Mythen und Mysterien* contain such exhortations to his fellow anthroposophists.

[76] For reasons that probably belong to the irreducible idiosyncrasies of history, several initiatory groups outside the Esoteric Tradition as defined here have retained the egyptianizing mythic historiography. Several "rosicrucian" organizations received the idea of Egyptian wisdom from an international federation of secret societies, FUDOSI, created some time after 1918 by the Belgian occultist Emile Dantinne; cf. White 1999: 261 f. Thus the modern rosicrucian society AMORC (Antiquus Mysticus Ordo Rosae Crucis), at its headquarters in San José, California, has a museum of Egyptian artifacts, originals as well as replicas, and a retail outlet named Alexandria. The Order claims to have kept alive a chain of ancient mystical knowledge handed down from the great priests and pharaohs of 5,000 years ago.

[77] The origins and development of this legend are amply documented in Decker et al. 1996.

and relies on the French occultist Gérard Encausse (Papus) as a source, while remaining mildly skeptical.[78] Karen Hamaker-Zondag does not commit herself to any opinion, and states with regard to a possible Egyptian origin that "we just do not know".[79] Mary Greer simply calls the deck "ancient", but does not endorse a specifically Egyptian origin.[80] Several of the movement texts reviewed here, however, reject the claim outright. Tad Mann's *The Elements of the Tarot* explicitly calls the claim a legend.[81] Rachel Pollack calls Court de Gébelin's historiography "fanciful".[82] Cynthia Giles *Tarot: the Complete Guide*, arguably the most historically sophisticated among the apologetic books, refers to Court de Gébelin's encounter with the tarot deck and explains:

> As far as we know, the entire idea of the Tarot as an esoteric and divinatory element, so familiar to us now, began at that moment [—] Court de Gébelin, on seeing the exotic and obviously symbolic Tarot trumps, immediately believed them to be Egyptian.[83]

Other legends that claim Egyptian roots for various New Age practices have survived more intact. An often repeated statement in texts on healing is that reflexology has its roots in Ancient Egypt—a mural, possibly depicting a man massaging another man's foot, is commonly adduced as proof of the antiquity of reflexology. Not uncommonly, astrology is supposed to have roots in Egypt. Both statements conflict with etic historiography, which sees astrology as a Babylonian and Hellenistic praxis, and reflexology as the product of the American healer Eunice Ingham, who created this technique in the 1930s and introduced the method in two books.[84]

Ancient Egyptian roots are also claimed for methods of ritual healing resembling Reiki, called Seichim and Sekhem, which in light of conventional historiography appear to date back no further than to 1984. Seichim is a system of ritual healing created by a Patrick Ziegler. Ziegler is said to have stayed overnight in a pyramid, and "experienced many initiations including an electric blue-white ball

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[78] Gray *Complete Guide to the Tarot*, p. 6.
[79] Hamaker-Zondag *Way of the Tarot*, p. 9.
[80] Greer *Tarot for your Self*, pp. 1 and 240 ff.
[81] Mann *Tarot*.
[82] Pollack *Seventy Eight Degrees of Wisdom*, p. 6.
[83] Giles *Tarot*, pp. 23 f.
[84] Ingham 1938 and its sequel Ingham 1951.

of light entering his heart".[85] After returning to the United States shortly thereafter, Patrick became a Reiki Master and began practicing Seichim at the same time as Reiki. Two of Ziegler's students, Kathleen McMasters and Tom Seamon, developed a full set of seven initiatory levels known as attunements, effectively formalizing the first of several schools of pseudo-Egyptianizing healing as practiced at the time of writing. Although the method was received through revelation, connections with Egypt are claimed in that the word *skhm* is supposedly an Ancient Egyptian synonym of Chinese *qi* or Sanskrit *prana*. Some of Ziegler's students then claimed that they had been given psychic information on other Egyptian "energies", called Seichem and Sekhem, that were different from Seichim. At present, the phonetic similarity of the three names and the indistinguishable ritualism of the various practices has created a confused situation in which practitioners can claim to have either purified or combined any of these healing "energies".[86]

Egyptian culture is also invoked in ways that somewhat better resemble conventional historiography. Books on aromatherapy focus on the use of scented oils as well as incense in ancient Egypt. Lawless notes that

> The ancient Egyptians were renowned for their knowledge and expertise regarding aromatics, and the use of incense in Egypt goes back to prehistoric times.[87] [—]
>
> Thus, aromatics played an essential role in most ritual practices, which tended to combine religious, therapeutic and social elements.[88]

There is no reason to doubt that scented oils were used medicinally in Egypt. Etic historiography is, however, more likely to note the rather later creation of aromatherapy in early twentieth century

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[85] See web site http://www.wholeliving.com/BR-Online/1998/122/sekhem/sekhem.html.

[86] Information on these more or less volatile Reiki-like methods of healing is mainly to be found on the World Wide Web. Healer Helen Belot is said by some to have been the first to receive the full set of symbols associated with Sekhem, see the web site angelReiki.nu/seichim/seichim.htm. Other healers, such as Diane Ruth Shewmaker, claim to have received Sekhem independently of Ziegler or Belot, see http://www.wholeliving.com/BR-Online/1998/122/sekhem/sekhem.html. Some claim that the terms are interchangeable, others that they are distinct.

[87] Lawless *Aromatherapy and the Mind*, p. 24; A similar claim is found in Maguire Thompson *Atlas of the New Age*, pp. 116 f.

[88] Lawless *Aromatherapy and the Mind*, p. 62.

France.[89] The emergence of modern aromatherapy can be traced to a book by René-Maurice Gattefossé dating from 1928. Its entry into the modern Esoteric Tradition is due to yet another French aromatherapist, Marguerite Maury, who published a book on her theories in 1962, *The Secrets of Life and Youth*. Lawless acknowledges this late history, but gives it the type of twist frequently encountered in Esoteric literature:

> When the French perfumer René Gattefossé published his book *Aromathérapie* in the late 1920s, describing the physical and physiological benefits of using natural aromatics, he was simply reviving and updating an ancient healing system.[90]

Lawless does not discuss whether Egyptian practices resembled modern aromatherapy, whether ancient theories underlying those practices in any way corresponded to the doctrines espoused by modern aromatherapists, or whether Gattefossé or Maury were inspired by any concrete knowledge of their purported predecessors. Indeed, when actually describing a ritual use of aromatics in Egypt, she describes a scene which hardly corresponds to the reality of the modern aromatherapist's praxis:

> A papyrus dated 1500 BC shows cones of unguent being fixed onto the heads of Egyptian men and women in preparation for a ceremonial occasion. These were designed to gradually melt in the course of the evening, scenting their hair, their skin and the air around them.[91]

Although significantly different from the entirely spurious Egyptian history presented by e.g. Leadbeater and Besant, Lawless' references to ancient aromatherapists is one version of the discursive strategy of creating tradition, and as such will be discussed below in the section on strategies of appropriation.

India

When Blavatsky entered the scene, an educated Western audience had already had access to Indian texts in translated form for a hundred years. These texts provided an important impetus for a cultural movement that Raymond Schwab called the Oriental Renaissance. The

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[89] Melton et al. 1991: 180.
[90] Lawless *Aromatherapy and the Mind*, p. 20.
[91] Lawless *Aromatherapy and the Mind*, p. 61.

story of this movement has been amply covered by previous scholarship and need not be recapitulated here.[92] Suffice it to say that the positive Orientalism of the nineteenth century was a multifaceted mode of thought. Blavatsky combined two of the dominant Orientalist discourses of the epoch in her attempt to attribute perennial wisdom to the sages of the Indian subcontinent. Firstly, the "Aryans" of ancient India were constituted into a separate people or race. Secondly, that race was seen as the bearer of an ageless wisdom.

For centuries, educated people in the West had sought positive Others in the past. In a Christian context, the natural place to look for one's most ancient cultural roots was the eastern Mediterranean area. This was where the garden of Eden had lain, this was the cradle of humanity, the place where the primal language of mankind, Hebrew, had been spoken. This turn toward the Orient was partly the result of the Enlightenment. Firstly, the Christian heritage, especially the authority of the Bible, was called into question. Secondly, it became increasingly accepted that the shores of the Ganges had been the home of great civilizations. German eighteenth century preromantic thinkers such as Herder believed that everything of value came from the mountainous regions of Asia. Swedenborg agreed, as angels had explained to him that the Old Testament was modeled on an original text from Central Asia.[93]

The turn toward the Orient was incorporated into several contemporary discourses. One was part of the counter-Enlightenment and of Romanticism, transmitted from Hamann and Herder to literary colleagues such as Novalis and Jean-Paul as well as to philosophers such as Schelling and Schlegel.[94] If the Orient was older than classical antiquity, this implied that India represented "the infant state, [. . .] innocent, pure, and with unexhausted potential".[95] By discovering the roots of humanity in India, by adopting its monistic idealism and studying its primeval language Sanskrit, Romantic poets hoped to further their ideal of a restoration of a past golden age, to build a future utopia on a vision of unity of the various nations, of mankind with nature, and of science and philosophy with art.

In German-speaking states, this positive Orientalism developed into a German nationalist agenda. The affinities between the German

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[92] See Schwab 1984, Halbfass 1988 and Clarke 1997.
[93] Hallengren 1997: 26 ff.
[94] Schwab 1984: 204 ff.
[95] Halbfass 1988: 70.

and Sanskrit languages were used to construct a mythic history in which the Germans were heirs to the glorious civilization of the ancient Indians. A fanciful etymology, linking the Indian self-designation *arya* with the German word *Ehre*, underpinned this nationalist history. Germans and Aryans were soon conceived of as a "race" with superior qualities. If one mode of positive Orientalism was pan-Germanic and racist, a different Orientalist discourse developed the themes of Romanticism. A particularly important form of the Oriental Renaissance was the influence of the East on American transcendentalism. The fascination with India felt by Emerson and his colleagues has been well documented.[96]

Theosophy is an amalgam of both discourses: Blavatsky's synthesizing genius adopted both the Romantic and the racial versions of positive Orientalism. She constructed a historical myth which incorporated races and sub-races, but only on rare occasions are her writings overtly racist. Statements such as the following seem to be motivated more by her contempt for the Abrahamitic creeds, than by any direct dislike of individuals of any particular "race":

> [. . .] a people perhaps the least spiritual of the human family—the Semitic. A branch that has never been able to develop out of its numerous tongues a language capable of embodying ideas of a moral and intellectual world; whose form of expression and drift of thought could never soar higher than the purely sensual and terrestrial figures of speech; whose literature has left nothing original, nothing that was not borrowed from the Aryan thought; and whose science and philosophy are utterly wanting in those noble features which characterize the highly spiritual and metaphysical systems of the Indo-European (Japhetic) race.[97]

> the "semitic" languages are the bastard descendants of the first phonetic corruptions of the eldest children of the early Sanskrit [. . .] The Semites, especially the Arabs, are later Aryans—degenerate in spirituality and perfected in materiality.[98]

The role of the Jewish people in the developmental history of mankind is, according to Blavatsky, to have transmitted the most misunderstood and distorted interpretations of the ancient wisdom religion to the first Christians. Blavatsky's few openly anti-Semitic pronouncements seem to be the result of the intense dislike she felt for Christianity:

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[96] Versluis 1994.
[97] IU II: 434 f.
[98] SD II: 200.

> With the Semite, [the symbol of] that *stooping* man meant the *fall* of Spirit into matter, and that *fall* and *degradation* were apotheosized by him with the result of dragging Deity down to the level of man. For the Aryan, the symbol represented the divorce of Spirit from matter, its merging into and return to its primal source [. . .]
>
> The Aryan views were those of the whole Pagan world. The Semite interpretations emanated from, and were pre-eminently those of a small tribe, thus marking its national features and the idiosyncratic defects that characterize many of the Jews to this day—gross realism, selfishness and sensuality.[99]

Quotes such as these are fortunately rare in *The Secret Doctrine*. Rather than denouncing Semitic peoples, Blavatsky concentrates on outlining the hoary wisdom of the East. The efforts of the Theosophical Society played a significant role in introducing numerous Sanskrit terms—karma, maya, atman, brahman, nirvana, samsara and others—to educated Westerners. While *The Secret Doctrine* does not directly refer to American transcendentalism, it is perhaps not a matter of chance that Blavatsky's indophilia developed during her stay in New York, rather than in her earlier days in Europe. Blavatsky's doctrines thus appear to carry a different form of Orientalism, one in which the Orient is not so much admired for its potential links to contemporary "Aryans" as for its presumed closeness to a *philosophia perennis*.

As noted above, *Isis Unveiled* bears witness to the shift eastward: the title alludes to Egyptian mysteries, while the work itself contains numerous references to India. However, India is still described as one recipient among many others of a primeval wisdom, and only gradually begins to receive a privileged position as the homeland par excellence of the ancient wisdom religion. The iconography of *Isis Unveiled* supports this universalistic interpretation: two large line drawings show what are said to be exact correspondences between the worldview of Hinduism and that of the kabbala.[100]

By the time the theosophical doctrines expounded in the *Mahatma Letters* came to be explained in a more accessible format, the references to ancient India had become so central to theosophy as to motivate Alfred Sinnett to choose to name the new doctrine Esoteric Buddhism.[101] Sinnett explains:

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[99] SD II: 470.

[100] Fold-outs between pages 264 and 265 of IU I.

[101] Sinnett *Esoteric Buddhism*. It should be noted that Blavatsky herself was hardly overjoyed by Sinnett's equation, calling his book "an excellent work with a very unfortunate title"; cf. SD I: xvii f.

> exoteric Buddhism has remained in closer union with the esoteric doctrine than any other popular religion. An exposition of the inner knowledge addressed to English readers in the present day, will thus associate itself irresistibly with the familiar outlines of Buddhist teaching [. . .] the esoteric doctrine [may] be most conveniently studied in its Buddhist aspect.[102]

It should be noted that the India that has now entered theosophy is an imagined India. Throughout Blavatsky's work, the Orient continues to be a homogenized and generalized culture. Thus, a generic Buddhism enters the *Mahatma Letters*, e.g. in a passage where Tibetan lamas and Theravada (Pali) scriptures coexist without any sense of the anachronism involved.[103]

From the *Mahatma Letters* and onwards, through *The Secret Doctrine* and further throughout the neo-theosophy of Leadbeater and Besant, India has come to occupy a unique position. Numerous items of theosophical vocabulary are taken from Sanskrit or coined in a kind of Theosophical Hybrid Sanskrit. Concepts are taken from Hindu or Buddhist sources and subjected to varying degrees of modification. Thus, the index to *The Secret Doctrine* reveals the use of literally hundreds of such terms.

This indianizing trend is strengthened in neo-theosophy. Leadbeater even chose to include an entire chapter on Buddhism in one of his numerous books devoted to the fundamentals on theosophy, as if Buddhism and "occultism" were, in a sense, mere reflexes of one another.[104] One of Charles Leadbeater's most extensive treatments of emic historiography, *Man: whence, how and whither*, reserves a central role in the spiritual development of mankind for the Indians. The early "Aryan race" is portrayed—albeit in somewhat saccharine terms—as a people of intense religious devotion:

> The civilisation was a very bright and happy one, with much music, dancing and gaiety, and to this their religion conduced, for it was eminently one of praise and thanksgiving. The people were constantly singing hymns of praise, and they recognized Devas behind all natural forces.[105]

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[102] Sinnett *Esoteric Buddhism*, p. 28.

[103] ML p. 58.

[104] Leadbeater *Some Glimpses of Occultism*, ch. 4. Leadbeater's rationale for doing so follows orthodox theosophical doctrine, namely that "Theosophy is identical with *esoteric* Buddhism and Hinduism", *Some Glimpses of Occultism*, p. 115.

[105] Leadbeater *Man: Whence, How and Whither*, pp. 266 ff.

The portrayal of India is, however, beset with a deep ambiguity. In the grand (neo-)theosophical scheme of history, India and its inhabitants are not perceived as the source of spiritual wisdom, but merely as its relayers from more ancient roots. As in most post-theosophical positions, the various ancient civilizations participated in a kind of super-diffusionist scheme of history: the Aryans were a wave of immigrants from Atlantis who founded an empire in South India and thereafter sent emissaries to Egypt. Even the Sanskrit language, which in Blavatsky's opinion was the language of the gods, is now said not to truly belong to India but to have an extraterrestrial origin. It was, says Leadbeater, the language that certain beings called the Lords of the Flame brought with them when they came from Venus to spiritually awaken the inhabitants of the Earth.[106] Furthermore, in numerous cases when terminology is borrowed from Sanskrit, it is given entirely new meanings. To mention just one example, neo-theosophical texts use the word nirvana. The neo-theosophical concept, however, has very little to do with any Buddhist use of the word. In Leadbeater's cosmology, nirvana is a physical location in inter-stellar space to which souls are whisked off before being reincarnated on a new globe.

Cayce

Cayce's India is not so much the source of deep spiritual truths as the homeland of certain of the primordial "races" which, in typically post-theosophical fashion, he contends populated the earth. Elements of Indian religions that have entered the Esoteric Tradition play rather minor roles in Cayce's readings. Some such elements are Indian only in a linguistic sense.

As in several other Esoteric positions, Cayce believed that he accessed the Akashic record during his trance readings. *Akasha* is ultimately a Sanskrit word,[107] but the concept of Akashic records seems

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[106] Leadbeater *Man: Whence, How and Whither*, p. 258 n. 1. In neo-theosophical cosmology, the Lords of the Flame were beings from Venus who arrived on Earth in order to form the occult hierarchy that has governed our planet since then; they initiated the process of spiritual evolution that gave those creatures that had evolved (in a more Darwinian sense) from animal to humanoid the spark of consciousness; cf. Leadbeater *Man: Whence, How and Whither*, esp. pp. 101 ff.

[107] Monier-Williams' Sanskrit dictionary defines this term as "the subtle and ethereal fluid supposed to fill and pervade the universe and to be the peculiar vehicle of life and sound".

to be an innovation of Blavatsky's. Questions put to him regarding the concept of karma are also answered in a language that is more reminiscent of Cayce's Christian background than of any knowledge he may have had of karma in Indian thought. Readings on karma mention Galatians 6:7 "As ye sow, so shall ye reap".[108] It is explained in quasi-Biblical language as "Ye shall pay every whit, that ye break of the law of the Lord".[109] Karma has been partly lifted off our shoulders by the intercession of Christ: "Karmic influences must ever be met, but He has prepared a way that takes them upon Himself".[110]

Cayce's perception of himself as a Christian is perhaps most obvious in the way he transformed an element that did have at least a partially Indian origin into a christianized praxis. Cayce recommended meditation; numerous of his readings are devoted to this subject. K. Paul Johnson has traced Cayce's interest not only to theosophical ideas on the chakras and meditation, but also to his acquaintance with a representative of the Radhasoami movement.[111] His readings on meditation, however, focus on the result of meditation as worshipping God, explain that meditation is identical with prayer, and quote the scriptures in support of the practice.[112] Furthermore, meditation should only be practiced after one has surrounded oneself "with the spirit of the Christ".[113] Although the results of meditation are described in terms reminiscent of kundalini yoga—"the raising of those activative forces of the physical body known as the centers"[114]—the chakras are only very occasionally mentioned by name. They are de-indianized by being more neutrally termed *centers*. They are occasionally explained in terms comprehensible only to an osteopath: one of his readings claims that the kundalini energy is distributed throughout the body through three centers located, respectively, in the third cervical, ninth dorsal and fourth lumbar vertebra.[115] Cayce is certainly unusual in his eagerness to disguise the Indian affiliation of some of his teachings, rather than exploit them as a discursive strategy.

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[108] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 130.
[109] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 131.
[110] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 132.
[111] Johnson 1998: 126 ff.
[112] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, pp. 103 ff.
[113] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 107.
[114] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 107.
[115] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 251.

Steiner

Steiner's ambivalence vis-à-vis India is manifest in his core texts. After the end of the Atlantean period, wise people from that continent migrated to what today is known as India. However:

> What is contained in the Vedas, the books of Indian wisdom, is not the original form of the exalted wisdom fostered by these great teachers in ancient times, but only a feeble echo of it. Only supersensible sight can look back to the unrecorded original wisdom behind what was written.[116]

Thus, Steiner's India has little to do with what emic history knows of the continent, despite the use of a number of Sanskrit terms in anthroposophical texts, such as karma and maya. The "correct" meaning of such terms is guaranteed by supersensible sight, i.e. the explanations that Steiner constructed from his privileged experience. As usual, Steiner's insights take precedence over any attempts to construct mythology on the basis of actual history. This is fully acknowledged by Steiner:

> What the term "ancient Indians" means here is not what is usually understood by it. No outer documents have come down to us from the time we are speaking of here. The nation of people now known as Indians belongs to a historical stage of evolution that came about only much later than this.[117]

Steiner does, however, occasionally discuss texts and doctrines that originate from India in the usual, historical sense. Thus, a cycle of lectures is devoted to the Bhagavad-Gita, and this as well as other lecture cycles refer to the Vedas.[118] Steiner's interpretation of these Indian texts combines a basic acquaintance with the history of Indian religions with a hermeneutic strategy that is distinctly his own.

Ancient India was the homeland of three distinct spiritual movements, according to Steiner: the Vedic, Samkhya and yogic currents.[119] All three currents were developed at a time when sages still possessed clairvoyant faculties, and each represents the application of these faculties to a different aspect of reality. The Vedic current is monistic and deals mainly with the unity of man and the world,

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[116] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 255.
[117] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 256.
[118] Steiner *Die Bhagavadgita und die Paulusbriefe*.
[119] Steiner *Die Bhagavadgita und die Paulusbriefe*, lect. 1, pp. 4 f.

albeit in a mythic form. Samkhya philosophy is primarily concerned with the forms with which the soul clothes itself. Yoga tells of the spiritual evolution of the soul. The greatness of the Bhagavad-Gita consists in the fact that it synthesizes all three currents. For Steiner, the purpose of studying these three Indian traditions is to extract from them something of use to contemporary adepts of spiritual science. Thus, Steiner claims that Samkhya philosophy is in all essentials a precursor to anthroposophical doctrines on the human constitution, on life after death and on the waking and sleeping states. Vedic philosophy confirms anthroposophical doctrines on the evolution of the cosmos from the Saturn state up to our own time. Finally, the yogic traditions confirm the picture of the potentialities and evolution of the soul described in anthroposophy.[120]

This identification between the three currents of Indian thought and three preoccupations of anthroposophical doctrine explains the role of the Bhagavad-Gita in Steiner's emic historiography. The Indian epic represents the confluence of three great spiritual currents during the Indian epoch, a text of the highest significance that appeared at a crucial moment in the cultural and spiritual development of India.[121] The structural parallels that have been built up between Indian philosophy and spiritual science thus prepare the way for a reading of Steiner's life work as yet another corpus of teachings that has arrived at a significant time in human history. In a double movement not untypical of Steiner, anthroposophy is the key to discovering the inner meaning of older religious traditions, which then turn out not only to be basically identical with anthroposophy, but to symbolically point to the arrival of Steiner's revelations as the apex of human spirituality.

The India of the New Age

One of the most influential New Age spokespersons to elaborate on the role of India in the transmission of a purported perennial philosophy was Fritjof Capra. The central concern of his *The Tao of Physics*, published in 1975, is to show that there are significant parallels between modern physics and the worldview of mysticism. Like his Esoteric predecessors, he believes that the mysticism of the East has been particularly successful in preserving the qualities of the

[120] Steiner *Die Bhagavadgita und die Paulusbriefe*, lect. 1, pp. 9 f.
[121] Steiner *Die Bhagavadgita und die Paulusbriefe*, lect. 1, pp. 10 f.

perennial philosophy. An extended exegesis of Capra's Orient was offered by Bochinger, whose analysis can be summarized in the following points:[122]

Capra understands Indian thought, irrespective of its "mythical elaborations", as being fundamentally concerned with the unity of the world hidden behind the veil of *maya*. Eastern mysticism is thus monistic. The multiple manifestations emanating from this unitary core are effected by an immanent law of the cosmos. Since Indian religions see everything as aspects of this single underlying reality, everything is related to everything else. Capra quotes a passage from the Avatamsaka Sutra to that effect, a quote that has become more or less divorced from its Buddhist origins and has spread through the New Age literature.[123] The goal of Indian religion, and especially of its mystical paths, is to transcend this duality and grasp the underlying unity in one, intuitive leap. This insight is also said to entail an ethical stance towards all sentient beings, since we are all enmeshed in the same web of existence. Although it resonates with popular conceptions of Indian religion, this is a view of "Indian thought" (in the singular) that is not only homogenizing in the extreme but misrepresents most varieties of Hinduism as well as Buddhism.[124]

A much later writer who contributed to shaping an imaginary India for the New Age is James Redfield. Redfield followed up his two immensely successful novels *The Celestine Prophecy* and *The Tenth Insight* with a more programmatic statement of creed: *The Celestine Vision*, published in 1998. It works as a movement text for the second generation of the New Age in much the same way as the books of Marilyn Ferguson, David Spangler or Shirley MacLaine did for the first generation. Redfield retains few of the mytho-historical fixed points that had entered into esotericism at the end of the Enlightenment. India, however, still retains its privileged position. A perusal of Redfield's survey of India shows that the following subjects are associated with Indian culture and religion:[125] karma; the power of

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[122] Bochinger 1994: 435 ff.

[123] Hanegraaff 1996: 140; The quote reads "In the heaven of Indra, there is said to be a network of pearls, so arranged that if you look at one you see all the others reflected in it. In the same way each object in the world is not merely itself but involves every other object and in fact is everything else. 'In every particle of dust, there are present Buddhas without number'".

[124] A detailed critique can be found in Bochinger 1994: 454 ff.

[125] The singular is purposely used here, since New Age writers in general and Redfield in particular similarly reify Indian cultures into a more or less homogenous whole.

the yogis over their physical bodies; ayurveda;[126] prana; and the supposed parallels between Indian philosophy and modern physics made famous by Capra and others.

As one reads extensively through the New Age literature, these themes recur with considerable frequency. The most recent movement text surveyed here, *Atlas of the New Age*, published in 1999, continues to refer inter alia to the belief in auras, the chakra system, the concept of karma, meditation and various yogic methods as core elements of a generalized Hinduism. India has become distinctly adapted to the requirements of modern New Agers in dubious claims such as "Hinduism has no well defined ecclesiastical system and emphasizes the direct religious experience".[127]

What is striking is the fact that India has retained a central role in the construction of an Esoteric worldview throughout the 120 years covered by the present study, from the *Mahatma Letters* to *The Celestine Vision*, while the precise reasons why the Indian sages are seen as positive Others has shifted radically during this time. At the most general level, it can be noted that the quantum metaphysics of Redfield, traceable back to Capra, could obviously not have existed during the apex of theosophy; that ayurveda was practically unknown in the West until it began to be associated with Transcendental Meditation; and that the only early references to prana in the *Mahatma Letters* regard the meditative practice of *pranayama*, i.e. breath control, which furthermore is described as a rather hazardous method.[128] Karma, the remaining term, is a central component of all the Esoteric positions described here, but a closer reading reveals how the term has become enmeshed in the particular praxis of each age. Redfield writes from within a cultic milieu where prosperity consciousness has gained a dominant position.[129] His associations go to cash flow and to the practice of tithing, and the individuals he mentions are exponents of New Thought and of positive thinking such as Charles Fillmore, Napoleon Hill and Norman Vincent Peale.[130] If we give

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[126] I.e. in the de-Indianized version propounded by Deepak Chopra.

[127] Maguire Thompson *Atlas of the New Age*, p. 122.

[128] ML p. 321. Yoga itself was, according to Melton et al. 1991: 150, introduced to the West by the Theosophical Society in the late 1880s; there are already a very few references to yogic powers in the Mahatma Letters, see e.g. ML p. 134.

[129] For a discussion of prosperity consciousness, cf. Meyer 1965 and Heelas 1996.

[130] Redfield *Celestine Vision*, ch. 10. Charles Fillmore (1854–1948) founded the Unity School of Christianity together with his wife Myrtle. Unity is based on the belief that we create our life experiences through our way of thinking, and uses

away love, energy and money, the law of karma will ensure that we are generously compensated for our efforts. Needless to say, the links to any Indian concept of karma are tenuous at best.

Tibet

Western involvement with Tibet—and its active incorporation into the imaginative geography of the West—began in 1773, with the first British military expedition to the country.[131] Tibet officially closed its borders to foreigners in 1792, and only a few intrepid travelers would cross into forbidden country before the military expedition of 1904, when British troops led by Francis Younghusband reached Lhasa. By the year 1800, Tibet was already conceived of as a place of spiritual mystery, and there were speculations on links with the equally mysterious Egyptian culture:

> Between [Egypt] . . . and Tibet, there seemed, at one time or another, to have existed a frequent communication; and Egypt appeared even now to merit respectful mention, whenever they named it.[132]

In 1844, two French priests, Evariste Huc and Father Gabet, entered Tibet. They were the first to write a detailed account of the country, published in 1850. Their book was translated into English as *Recollections of Travel in Tartary, Tibet and China*, bringing Huc's and Gabet's account to a wider audience. Through Blavatsky's appropriation of part of their narrative, they would come to influence the Modern Esoteric Tradition.

Well into the early twentieth century, Tibetan religion was described in terms of overt ambiguity. The earliest explorers were impressed with the orderliness of monastic rule and the morality of Tibetan everyday life. They commented on the role played by religious institutions in the exercise of political power.[133] Conspicuously absent, con-

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affirmative prayer to tap into this creative power. Napoleon Hill (1883–1970) presented his message of success through best-selling books such as *Think and Grow Rich*. Norman Vincent Peale (1898–1993) was the enormously successful author of books such as *The Power of Positive Thinking*.

[131] Two important sources of information on imaginary Tibet are Bishop 1989 and 1993; the brief summary given here is heavily indebted to these two books.

[132] S. Turner, *An Account of an Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet*, published in 1800, quoted in Bishop 1993: 34. The Teshoo Lama of the book's title is identical with the Panchen Lama. Turner's account was published seventeen years after his return, see Bishop 1989: 26.

[133] Bishop 1989: 52 f.

sidering later developments, are reports on any "mystical" aspects of Tibetan life. At the same time, monks were also perceived to be lazy and indolent. Early accounts use adjectives such as "bigoted", "absurd", "ridiculous" and "boring" to describe Tibetan Buddhism.[134] Outside the discourse of esotericism, even as late an account as the celebrated explorer Sven Hedin's *Trans-Himalaya* (published in 1909) describes Tibetan Buddhism as a superstition upheld by priestly drones:

> All these religious officials are the parasites of Tibet, and live at the expense of the working people. [. . .] The lamas hold the people in a spiritual tutelage, and are themselves the obedient slaves under vast tomes of narrow-minded dogmas, that have petrified over the centuries and can neither be altered nor criticized since they are regarded as canonical; they proclaim these dogmas as absolute truth and thus bar the way to free and independent thinking [. . .] Hardly any other country on Earth is as burdened with priests. And while the people toil, the monks at the sound of the trumpet gather around their teapots made of heavy silver and their bowls filled with tsampa.[135]

Blavatsky is one of the first writers to use Tibet as an entirely positive Other. By claiming to have visited and studied in Tibet, she achieved a measure of legitimacy. Blavatsky's use of Tibet as a discursive strategy extends to her personal life: part of her legitimacy as an Esoteric spokesperson lies in autobiographical sections of her writings, notably a story told in *Isis Unveiled* according to which she visited Tibet and witnessed a variety of miraculous events.[136] Several critical authors have claimed that Blavatsky's story was more or less directly plagiarized from Evariste Huc's account.[137] Even today, however, theosophically motivated writers attempt to support her claims.[138]

The odd pretense of *The Secret Doctrine* is to have uncovered a historical object, open to decoding: an ancient manuscript found in a

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[134] Bishop 1989: 56 ff.

[135] Hedin 1909: 546 f. My translation of the original Swedish text: "Alla dessa religiösa äro Tibets parasiter, som lefva på det arbetande folkets bekostnad [. . .] Af lamas hålles folket i andlig fångenskap, och lamas själfva äro lydiga slafvar under folianter av trångbröstade dogmer, som stelnat sedan sekler och icke få rubbas eller kritiseras, ty de äro kanoniska, förkunna den absoluta sanningen och stänga vägen för allt fritt och själfständigt tänkande [. . .] Knappt något annat land på jorden är så prästridet som Tibet. Och medan folket sliter ondt, samla sig munkarna vid snäckhornets kallelsestötar kring sina silfvertunga teskålar och sina tsambafyllda skålar."

[136] The account of Blavatsky's alleged travels in Tibet can be found in IU II: 598 ff.

[137] These allegations can be found in Williams 1946 and Liljegren 1957: 27.

[138] Cf. Cranston 1993: 82 ff.

Himalayan cave but otherwise unknown to science, the *Book of Dzyan*. The purported "text", highly cryptic as it is, would indeed require a vast commentary—perhaps something along the lines indicated by Blavatsky. For instance, what is one to make of the following stanza, culled at random from Blavatsky's text? A shadowy picture of evolution is capped with an entirely cryptic remark:

> The spark hangs from the flame by the thinnest thread of Fohat. It journeys through the Seven Worlds of Maya. It stops in the first (*Kingdom*), and is a metal and a stone; it passes into the second (*Kingdom*) and behold—a plant; the plant whirls through seven forms and becomes a sacred animal; (the first shadow of the physical man)
>
> From the combined attributes of these, manu (*man*), the thinker, is formed. Who forms him? The seven lives; and the one life. Who completes him? The fivefold Lha. And who perfects the last body? Fish, sin and soma (*the moon*).[139]

Yet both the text and the commentary are fictitious, a rather careless pastiche of contemporary philological methods. Even the heading of the introductory section, the Proem, of *The Secret Doctrine* gives it all away: *Pages from a Pre-Historic Period* being an impossible (and probably unintended) oxymoron.

Considering the central role of a mythic Tibet in the construction of Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*, the relative lack of interest shown by several post-theosophical writers is striking. Only the neo-theosophy of Leadbeater gives Tibet a major role as the home of the Masters (whenever they choose to inhabit physical bodies). We shall return to the Masters in a subsequent chapter. Steiner reserves no special role for Tibet in his scheme of human history. Cayce does mention Tibet in his readings, but only in order to give them a minor role in the mythic history of human life. In typically Caycean fashion, Tibet is incorporated into a highly imaginative historiography, in which Transhimalayan sages came to Egypt ten and a half million years ago in order to aid its spiritual development.[140] Alice Bailey's position would appear particularly ambivalent in this respect, as nineteen of her books were purportedly dictated by a Tibetan Master. However, there is hardly any local Tibetan color at all in these works—in fact, the Master's name, Djwhal Khul, is not even phonetically a possible name for a Tibetan. Interest in the actual

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[139] SD I: 238.
[140] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, pp. 392 ff.

religions of Tibet contemporary with Bailey appears to be emphasized in two esoteric lineages that are not focused on here: one is theosophical, represented by Walter Evans-Wentz who had a Tibetan manuscript translated and published as the Tibetan Book of the Dead; the other is a Jungian tradition, since Jung contributed with a highly allegorical reading of the Book of the Dead.[141]

Tibet reappears as a focus of considerable interest in several New Age positions. A major impetus was no doubt the forced emigration of Tibetan lamas to the West. A variety of forms of Tibetan Buddhism arose in America and Europe, ranging from the more orthodox to the distinctly syncretistic. One attempt at an Esoteric/New Age rereading of Tibetan Buddhism, Sogyal Rinpoche's *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*,[142] has become a best-seller in New Age circles and has been translated into a number of European languages.

At the other end of the spectrum are books such as *The Five Tibetans*, in which the Tibetan background is so tenuous as to be nearly invisible.[143] From here, one passes from the realm of reinterpretation of tradition to that of invention of tradition. Whereas the Shigatse of Leadbeater is a fantasy image of a physically existing town, the Tibetan monasteries in which the exercises presented in *The Five Tibetans* were supposedly created have no concrete features that allow them to be identified.[144] The author explicitly declares that he finds the question of their origin uninteresting. Similarly,

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[141] Jung contributed to converting the earlier overt ambiguity into a covert one. He believed that the Tibetan Book of the Dead was one of the great masterpieces of psychological insight, but also claimed that it should be read in a different order than the Tibetans themselves do. Thus, the true spiritual insight of a Tibetan text is only revealed when it is read and interpreted by a non-Tibetan. See Jung 1957. For a critical commentary on Jung's hermeneutics, see Lopez 1998: 56 ff.

[142] Rinpoche 1998.

[143] Kilham *Five Tibetans*.

[144] The discovery of the yoga exercises that form the topic of this book is presented in a rather curious story. The author, Christopher Kilham, learned them at an esoteric school in California with the unlikely name Institute of Mentalphysics, founded in 1927 by the Reverend Edwin J. Dingle, an English journalist and publisher who died in 1972. The meditative praxis that Kilham became acquainted with at this institute were complemented by several other exercises included in a booklet by a Peter Kelder. Curiously, both Dingle and Kelder claimed in typically post-Blavatskyan fashion to have visited Tibet and to have studied meditation under the direction of a lama. It is perhaps not incidental that Kilham has produced material on several other New Age topics (including *The Bread and Circus Whole Food Bible*, *Kava* and *Take Charge of Your Health and Inner Power*) but has no recorded expertise in the field of Tibetan studies.

there are schools of Reiki that claim Tibetan roots and build on the premise that Tibetan characters and numbers have mystical, healing properties.[145] Reiki healing as such is in some texts claimed to be a Tibetan method.[146] Both the Tibetan forms of Reiki and the claim to Tibetan roots for all versions of Reiki healing are, however, the creation of late twentieth century Western healers.

Native Americans

With Montaigne comes a new focus of projection. Basing his ideas on first-hand sources such as the chronicles of Jean de Léry and André Thévet, Montaigne wrote an essay during the 1580s entitled *On Cannibals*.[147] Despite this title, his view of the Brazilian Tupinamba Indians, as filtered through such chroniclers, is highly positive. Montaigne appears to have invented the literary trope of the noble savage, although he does not seem to have used the phrase itself.[148] It is precisely because the Tupinamba lack the refinements of European civilization that they also lack all our vices. On the virtues of these "natural" people, Montaigne declares:

> Toutes choses, dict Platon, sont produictes ou par la nature, ou par la fortune, ou par l'art: les plus grandes et les plus belles, par l'une ou l'aultre des deux premieres; les moindres et imparfaictes, par la derniere. Ces nations me semblent doncques ainsi barbares pour avoir receu fort peu de façon de l'esprit humain, et estre encores fort voisines de leur naïfveté originelle. [. . .] car il me semble que ce que nous veoyons par experience en ces nations là surpasse non seulement toutes les peinctures de quoy la poësie a embelly l'aage doré, et toutes ses inventions à feindre une heureuse condition de l'homme, mais encores la conception et le desir mesme de la philosophie: ils n'ont peu imaginer une naïfveté si pure et simple, comme nous le veoyons par experience; ny n'ont peu croire que nostre societé se peust maintenir avecques si peu d'artifice et de soudeure humaine. C'est une nation, diroy je à Platon, en laquelle il n'y a aulcune espece de traficque,

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[145] See web site www.geocities.com/HotSprings/9434/branches1. html#Tibetan.
[146] Honervogt *Reiki*.
[147] Essay no. 30.
[148] Nor, of course, is the essay *On Cannibals* primitivist in the sense a modern text might be. Montaigne sees the Tupinamba Indians through the lenses available to a sixteenth century European humanist. Partly he tries to interpret them as heirs to Greek virtues; the "savages" are noble because their simplicity and innocence mirror the ideals that Montaigne read into the Greek world. Partly their primitive nobility comes from virtues much more acclaimed in Montaigne's age than in our own, especially valor in their "noble and generous" wars.

> nulle cognoissance de lettres, nulle science de nombres, nul nom de magistrat ny de superiorité politique, nul usage de service, de richesse ou de pauvreté, nuls contracts, nulles successions, nuls partages, nulles occupations qu'oysifves, nul respect de parenté que commun, nul vestements, nulle agriculture, nul metal, nul usage de vin ou de bled; les paroles mesmes qui signifient le mensonge, la trahison, la dissimulation, l'avarice, l'envie, la detraction, le pardon, inouyes.[149]

Considering the early date at which Montaigne created the idea of the noble savage, it has taken a remarkably long time for native Americans to become incorporated as the positive Other of any esoteric position. The early Puritans saw Indians in purely negative terms. The Shaker movement was one of the first alternative religious traditions to show a positive interest in Indians. Songs and speeches were said to be received from the spirits of deceased Indians by psychic means.[150] Shaker religion may be one of the roots of the fascination with Indian "spirit guides" within the American spiritualist movement.

However, native Americans did not enter the New Age through the theosophical lineage. "Indians" play a role in theosophical historiography only to the extent that traces of the civilization of Atlantis can be found among them.[151] The fascination for native Americans as holders of spiritual wisdom appears to be much more recent. There were isolated episodes of interest in the shamanic traditions of the

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[149] In John Florio's classical 1603 rendition of Montaigne's essays, also available as e-text at darkwing.uoregon.edu/~rbear/montaigne, this passage is rendered "All things (saith Plato) are produced either by nature, by fortune, or by art. The greatest and fairest by one or other of the two first, the least and imperfect by the last. Those nations seeme therefore so barbarous unto me, because they have received very little fashion from humane wit, and are yet neere their originall naturalitie. [. . .] what in those nations we see by experience, doth not only exceed all the pictures wherewith licentious Poesie hath proudly imbellished the golden age, and all her quaint inventions to faine a happy condition of man, but also the conception and desire of Philosophy. They could not imagine a genuitie so pure and simple as we see it by experience; nor ever beleeve our societie might be maintained with so little art and humane combination. It is a nation, would I answer Plato, that hath no kinde of traffike, no knowledge of Letters, no intelligence of numbers, no name of magistrate, nor of politike superioritie; no use of service, of riches or of povertie; no contracts, no successions, no partitions, no occupation but idle; no respect of kindred, but common, no apparell but naturall, no manuring of lands, no use of wine, corne, or mettle. The very words that import lying, falshood, treason, dissimulations, covetousnes, envie, detraction, and pardon, were never heard of amongst them."

[150] Stein 1992: 176.

[151] IU I: 595 ff.

native Americas, the best known being the Mexican odyssey of banker Gordon Wasson in the 1950s.[152] A more wide-spread interest in native American religions, however, only blossomed in the sixties.

In the late 1960s, a young anthropologist became an instant celebrity. This was during the heady years when the counterculture swept over the industrialized world. Carlos Castaneda's books about his meetings with the mysterious Don Juan Matús came at the most propitious moment. The stories about the wise master of psychedelia and his materialist and rather dense Western disciple voiced a nostalgia for the natural order and a discontent with occidental culture. Don Juan most probably never existed.[153] If he did exist, Castaneda's purported meetings with him are certainly pure fiction. But that is not the point. For a generation of people hungry for a different way of life, the message was clear. Native Americans possessed a vast wisdom, a spirituality lost to us.

The following years could present something at least as good as a secretive Don Juan. In the Upper Amazon region, there were wise old shamans who held the keys to insight and wisdom. William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg published a collection of descriptions of visionary experiences, which became an underground classic.[154] Native American spirituality from then on became the basis for several forms of New Age religiosity. One visitor to the upper Amazon region was particularly successful in establishing himself as a New Age shaman. After doing field work with the Shuar and the Conibo, Michael Harner left the academic world and devoted himself to holding workshops in trance techniques. Although Harner's may be the best known, there is a whole range of westernized versions of indigenous religions. Perhaps the most wide-spread of these is a kind of syncretistic Plains-inspired neoshamanism created by Sun Bear, a Chippewa.

Neoshamanisms such as those of Castaneda, Sun Bear or Michael Harner present themselves as the spiritual descendants of millennia-old traditions. There are, however, considerable similarities with other

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[152] The account of Wasson's journey was published in *Life* magazine in 1957; see Wasson 1957. His travelogue probably achieved greater fame because it dealt with hallucinogens than with Mazatec shamanism: Wasson's story was published only a few years after Huxley's *Doors of Perception*, which publicized the psychedelic experience.

[153] The standard refutation of Castaneda's claims can be found in deMille 1976 and 1990.

[154] Ginsberg & Burroughs 1963.

elements of New Age religiosity and a concomitant contrast with what might be called traditional forms of shamanism, i.e. the various visionary healing techniques documented in anthropological literature. At the risk of overly reifying pre-modern shamanisms, the following contrasts can be noted:

Neoshamanisms emphasize healing in the broadest sense, i.e. beyond curing illnesses, primarily through personal transformation as part of the life project of the individual. Thus, they partake of typically late modern concerns with identity formation. Pre-modern shamanisms tend to focus on the healing of illnesses, causes are often sought in magical attacks caused by enmity, the breaking of taboos, etc.

Texts of neoshamanism tend to justify their beliefs in "modern", even scientistic language. Pre-modern shamanisms among less acculturated peoples will obviously lack such a vocabulary.

Neoshamanisms are typically eclectic. The neo-shaman may also practice tarot reading, believe in channeling or visit non-shamanic healers. Pre-modern shamanisms rarely coexist with alternative ideologies that could form the basis of any eclecticism. The cosmology associated with traditional shamanic practices is typically complex, featuring numerous spirits, sets of origin myths and world transformation myths, far-reaching webs of correspondences, etc.

Finally, neoshamanisms can manifest optimism and success orientation, often combined with a melioristic or evolutionary time-line. Neoshamanisms tend to regard modern society as cut off from its spiritual roots. By tapping into shamanic insights, more is achieved than just addressing the present needs of individual practitioners. Pre-modern shamanisms will typically face problems distinctly grounded in the here-and-now.

A factor that contributes to the success of neo-shamanic religiosity is the ability of cultural stereotypes to mold expectations. Traditional shamanisms, with a near-ubiquitous emphasis on power and violence, do not conform generally very well to Western images of what Indians are supposed to think and do. Neoshamanisms are almost inherently more successful in this respect, since they are created *by* exponents of alternative Western religiosity, principally *for* adherents of alternative Western religiosity.

Although the contrast should not be carried too far, it could be argued that early movement texts of neoshamanism such as Castaneda's and Harner's books saw native Americans as positive Others because they could offer something distinctively *different*, whereas recent

movement texts increasingly attempt to assimilate native Americans into a perennial philosophy and appreciate them as positive Others because they offer yet another version of the *same* generalized spirituality.

A later neo-shamanic text such as Kenneth Meadows' *The Medicine Way*, published in 1990, uses "the Indian" as just one representative among others of a perennial wisdom. The text on the back cover explains that the book contains "a distillation of the ancient shamanic truths of the American Indian, blended with wisdom derived from the East and from Europe including Scandinavia". The aims of this perennial wisdom is typically late modern, since the same quote explains that the goal of the information in the book is to find "the way consciously to shape your own destiny and learn how to find fulfillment in life".[155] Its doctrinal content and its description of the rituals to perform in order to achieve this goal are also typical of the eclecticism of much New Age literature. Systems of correspondences are constructed, in which it is e.g. said that totem animals correspond to each of the four elements.[156] Explanations are also given in terms that are readily acceptable to a New Age audience: for instance, certain rituals are said to cleanse the aura[157] or to affect the energy body.[158]

The latest text analyzed here, *Atlas of the New Age*, carries this universalizing hermeneutic to its conclusion by affirming that native American religions are superficially distinct yet essentially similar, not only to each other but also to all other spiritual traditions.[159] Beneath the cultural diversity of various native American religions, they are all claimed to worship the earth as mother and the sky as father.[160] Under the heading "Similar wisdoms", sun worship is said to be a trait uniting many agrarian societies. Oddly enough, the only concrete example in this section addresses the cult of Ra among the Egyptians, although the text is placed in the chapter on the Americas. The heading "Timeless backdrop" presents mythic representations of

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[155] Meadows *Medicine Way*, back cover.
[156] Meadows *Medicine Way*, pp. 53 ff.
[157] Meadows *Medicine Way*, p. 80.
[158] Meadows *Medicine Way*, p. 137.
[159] Maguire Thompson *Atlas of the New Age*. For a universalistic appraisal of Native American religions, see pp. 12 ff.
[160] For a controversial counter-proposal that this is a claim introduced by whites, see Gill 1987.

the moon as an ahistorical symbolism common to religions on a world-wide basis. Other universalizing traits include burning fragrant herbs, the practice of purifying oneself in sweat lodges, and certain forms of divination. A complete synthesis between a variety of traditional rituals and a New Age interpretive framework is found in claims such as "smudging was a traditional native American technique for purifying and clearing negative energies from individual human auras".[161]

The New Age Blend of Traditions

To summarize, the mythography of the Esoteric Tradition has described a double movement. Mythic reinterpretations of foreign cultures have arisen and entered the Esoteric Tradition at a number of points during its history. At each point, the Esoteric Tradition has more often than not incorporated the prevalent conceptions of its time, rather than constructed origin legends *ex nihilo*. To that extent, the Esoteric Tradition is at any point in time an outgrowth of the culture within which it develops.

Theosophy provided a grand metanarrative that attempted to fuse Atlantis, Egypt, India and other cultures into one single historic myth. Similar myths were constructed by post-theosophical spokespersons, especially Rudolf Steiner. The New Age once again fragments the myth. Beside a very vague claim that all spiritual traditions are in some sense the same, the literature of the New Age abounds in ethnographic idiosyncrasies. Modern doctrines and practices are, sometimes for little if any discernible reason, variously ascribed to Atlantis, Tibet or Egypt, to Celts or Polynesians, Altai tribesmen or indigenous peoples of north-eastern Peru. Any one doctrine or practice is also quite likely to have several more or less conflicting purported sources: origin legends can be constructed not only by forging a coherent narrative, but also by accretion.

In this short survey of the *bricolage* of New Age mythic or emic history, it seems appropriate to end with a method representing a truly universal blend of more or less spurious traditions. Arguably, the "Oriental" element most obviously part of a New Age worldview is Reiki healing. Reiki was popularized in the West by Hawayo Takata, a woman of Japanese descent born in Hawaii. Literature on

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[161] Maguire Thompson *Atlas of the New Age*, p. 22.

Reiki traces her lineage back to Japan and to the person of Mikao Usui, of whom few verifiable biographical data are available. According to a widespread founding legend, Usui had an ardent wish as a Christian convert to be able to perform healing miracles of the kind reported in the New Testament, and was rewarded by receiving knowledge of Reiki from various sources, including otherwise unknown Tibetan texts and a personal revelatory experience atop a mountain. In the thoroughly eclectic fashion typical of many New Age doctrines, books on Reiki can also note that this form of healing transmits a form of universal life energy to the chakras, force centers purportedly known to "most Eastern philosophies".[162] Etic historiography is only able to trace Reiki in the form practiced today back to Takata, although there does seem to be a Japanese form of Reiki transmitted through a different lineage. Reiki began to spread throughout the West around 1980. At the time of writing, two decades later, there is a truly amazing variety of healing systems which all claim to be part of the tradition of Reiki healing. Besides the lineage most commonly practiced in the West, there are practitioners claiming a more genuine Japanese tradition, who call their method Traditional Japanese Reiki.[163] There are varieties that can be traced back to one of the few Japanese students taught by Hawayo Takata.[164] There are Egyptianizing forms.[165] There are Tibetanizing varieties.[166] There are several forms of Reiki that have added or deleted elements of the lineages from which they stem, due to psychic information purportedly imparted by a variety of spirit guides.[167] There are forms of Reiki claimed to come from Atlantis or Lemuria.[168] There are forms that include belief in the Ascended Masters of theosophy.[169] Finally, there are forms that freely mix several or all of the above.[170]

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[162] Arjava Petter *Reiki Fire*, p. 100.

[163] See web site www.japanese-reiki.org.

[164] Raku Kei Reiki, see web site www.sacredpath.org/html/reiki/general/orighand-kanji.htm.

[165] Sekhem, see web site www.geocities.com/HotSprings/5985/aEgoddess.htm.

[166] Several forms of healing claim to be Tibetan versions of Reiki, see web site www.geocities.com/HotSprings/9434/branches1. html#Tibetan.

[167] Tera Mai Reiki, see web site www.ozemail.com.au/~teramai/kathleen.html.

[168] Stein *Essential Reiki*; See also statement by Helen Belot on web site www.geocities.com/HotSprings/5985/aEgoddess.htm.

[169] Reiki Plus®, see web site www.reikiplus.com/ what_is_reikiplus.html.

[170] Among these one finds Usui Tibetan Reiki, see web site angelreiki.nu/level3/tibetan.htm; Sacred Path Reiki, see web site www.sacredpath.org/html/reiki/indexs/indexr.htm.

The ancient civilizations and native peoples invoked by each position within the modern Esoteric Tradition were part of the Western cultural landscape of that time. Theosophy appropriated Atlantis from other esotericists, Lemuria from Haeckel, Egypt from the French occultists, India from the Oriental renaissance, and so forth. From theosophy and onwards, more or less the same set of exotic cultures have been invoked by each of the various Esoteric positions, while the roles these cultures play within each position differs. The differences rarely seem to be motivated by any lesser or greater reliance on actual elements culled from, say, Egypt, India or Tibet. Rather, each position comprises a ready historiographic schema into which the various cultures are fitted. Earlier positions, notably those of Blavatsky, the neo-theosophists and Steiner had grand metanarratives in which e.g. Egypt or Atlantis played clearly defined roles. More recent positions, e.g. Cayce's readings, present more fragmented myths. Various New Age writers reduce the role of these significant cultures to that of a source of particular doctrinal elements.

In the New Age, exotic cultures are used in a variety of ways. At times, elements are disembedded from their original contexts and used in new ways. The concept of karma exists in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain contexts, but receives new applications in New Age texts. At the other end of the spectrum are entirely spurious attributions, in which the significant Others are little more than interchangeable tokens. Reiki healing as presented above is a case in point. For the outsider, no differentiating characteristics in these methods justify specific attributions to Atlantis, Egypt, Tibet or any other source. If the purported origins of New Age elements are taken as signs of religious globalization, it is a globalization effected through a structurally radical disembedding.

The Role of Christianity

After the death of Helena Blavatsky, theosophists began to discuss whether the Masters had said the final word through her, or if there could be new recipients of occult messages. Groups formed around successful proponents of new messages through a process of innovation and schism. In many cases, these post-theosophical positions represented a partial appropriation of Christian elements.

Blavatsky's attitude toward exoteric religion in general and Christianity in particular was almost entirely negative. Chapters in *Isis*

Unveiled carry titles such as "Christian Crimes and Heathen Virtues" and "Esoteric Doctrines of Buddhism Parodied in Christianity".[171] In a Mahatma Letter, "Koot Hoomi" states that two thirds of all evil has been caused by the clergy.[172] Whereas Christianity was particularly far removed from Blavatsky's conception of ancient wisdom, India had carried on the tradition reasonably well.

Many post-theosophical positions reverted to giving Christ an important role in cosmic history. New legends were created around him. Some elevated Jesus to the role of a cosmic Christ. Perhaps he is the leader of the Ascended Masters? He might be a cosmic being of light. Or could he be a spiritual being emanating from the Sun? Other spokespersons reduced him to the status of a human being, albeit one who is spiritually highly evolved. He might have been a spiritual teacher who was inspired by the traditions into which he was initiated during extensive travels in the East. Or did he live among the Essenes and adopt their religion? Perhaps he received initiatory knowledge as a member of Egyptian mystery cults? Some spokespersons attempt to explain the superior wisdom of Jesus by tracing his spiritual evolution over many incarnations, back to lives on Atlantis. The emergence of so many post-theosophical legends is very likely the effect of societal and legislative secularization. Earlier esotericists had to adapt their innovations to the demands of the censors and of the law. The new spokespersons faced little or no risk of being prosecuted for their efforts to complement or replace the Christ legends of the Scriptures with legends of their own.

It is not my purpose to survey the field of esoteric interpretations of the figure of Christ—the question addressed in many Esoteric texts as to who Christ "really" was beyond the literalist or exoteric understanding found in mainstream Christian denominations—but to investigate two aspects of the appropriation of Christian elements that are directly relevant to the concept of tradition as a discursive strategy. Firstly, what esoteric lore did Jesus supposedly teach, and how did he arrive at this knowledge? Secondly, in what way are the Christian scriptures said to represent or misrepresent this "truer" esoteric message of Jesus?

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[171] IU chapters II and VI respectively.
[172] ML No. 10, p. 57.

Contrasting Attitudes to the Christian Tradition

On several accounts, the doctrines of the Esoteric Tradition are at odds with contemporary mainstream interpretations of Christianity. Thus, few Esoteric writers are unproblematically positive towards Christianity. Edgar Cayce springs to mind as a prime example of a person who combined faith in Biblical inerrancy with the propagation of highly unorthodox beliefs. These ranged from matters not touched upon in the Bible—the existence of vanished continents, a hidden history of the human race, prophecies of vast geological changes—to those that contradict Biblical tenets, especially reincarnationist belief. The hagiographies of Cayce describe a long process of coming to grips with such unorthodox beliefs. There are also numerous traces of such beliefs in Cayce's own writings. Thus, Cayce's professed belief in a variety of esoteric topics is supported in several of his works through references to the Scriptures. To cite a few examples, Cayce believed that the basis of numerology can be found in the Bible,[173] that the first record of astrology can be seen in the book of Job, "who lived before Moses",[174] that the forces emanating from gems are manifestations of the living God,[175] and that the New Testament teaches reincarnation.[176]

If there are few entirely positive accounts of Christianity in Esoteric writings, there are also—perhaps more suprisingly—few entirely negative appraisals. *The Secret Doctrine* is studded with snide remarks against Judaism as well as Christianity. As noted above, if there is any anti-Semitism in Blavatsky's magnum opus, it derives from the unfortunate position of Judaism as the origin of Christianity. As early as in the section entitled *Introduction*, Blavatsky notes that all the civilized nations for over 1,500 years have accepted Jewish derivations for direct Divine Revelation.[177] Even Blavatsky, however, left a small opening in the generally unfavorable review of the Christian faith. Before his teachings were corrupted by the church, Jesus had included elements of the perennial philosophy in what Blavatsky described as his secret teachings.[178] The "real" Christ was thus distinguished from the figure of the Bible.

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[173] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 66.
[174] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 138.
[175] Curley *Gems and Stones* p. 11.
[176] E.g. Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 123.
[177] SD I: xxvi.
[178] IU II: 191.

Thus, few positions within the Esoteric Tradition portray Christianity or Christ as either unambiguously positive or negative. In a sense, this applies even to such a Biblical literalist as Cayce: if Cayce used Christianity as a positive Other, he did so with a difference. Nevertheless, Cayce was profoundly influenced by the Biblical texts, which he is said to have reread every year. The ambivalence towards Scriptural teachings is much greater in the case of esotericists such as Charles Leadbeater, Annie Besant, Rudolf Steiner or Mark Prophet. The figure of Christ plays a crucial role in an entire sub-family of post-theosophical teachings. Nevertheless, it is a Christ that bears few resemblances to the Christ of most Christian denominations. Prophet's Christ propounds lost teachings on karma and reincarnation, teachings he had adopted during his years as a student of Oriental wisdom in the Himalayas. Leadbeater's and Besant's Christ is also the student of mystery cults, but in his case, these esoteric schools are Egyptian rather than Asiatic. Steiner's Christ is barely human at all, but rather a solar spirit who decided to inhabit a human body for a few years.[179] Such Esoteric views of Christianity manifest themselves in two ways. The first is in the spokespersons' unorthodox exegesis of scripture, the second in their distinct understanding of the figure of Christ.

Alternative Exegesis

If Esoteric Christianity is a fundamentally reinterpreted religion, the Esoteric reading of Scripture is also a highly allegorical art. Perhaps no Esoteric writer has been so preoccupied with scriptural exegesis as Rudolf Steiner.[180] Steiner's readings of central Christian texts such

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[179] Besant taught that the historical Jesus had been mythically linked to a Solar Hero, whence the dates for the two main festivals of the Christian year: Christmas at the winter solstice and Easter at the spring equinox. Symbolically, the myth represented the "true" drama of Christ, the Logos descending into matter; cf. Besant *Esoteric Christianity*, esp. ch. VI. Rudolf Steiner, who was the head of the German section of the Theosophical Society at the time that Besant was its international leader, may have arrived at his unorthodox Christology in part as a development of Besant's views.

[180] A close contender that does not, however, form part of the core positions of this study is the Church Universal and Triumphant. The CUT, which is seen by its spokespersons as a Christian denomination, includes distinctly unorthodox Scriptural exegesis. Links are created between the theosophical heritage of the CUT and the Biblical texts to which it wishes to conform. The most publicized aspect of this endeavor has been the incorporation of the legend of Jesus in the Himalayas, a subject to which I will briefly return. However, there are quite a few other exam-

as the Lord's prayer or the four gospels reveal an extensive reinterpretation of the texts.[181] Steiner's method is by no means new. One prevalent mode of both Rabbinical and Christian exegesis at the beginning of the Common Era was, to construct an oxymoron, literal-allegorical. Every single snippet of text, every syntactic or semantic peculiarity, had its place in the Scripture as a whole. Allegorical readings were adopted in order to harmonize a mass of seemingly contradictory statements, or to make doctrinal or moral sense of difficult passages.[182] Steiner's position is somewhat analogous. The Bible, he claims, should not be interpreted along philological lines, since a scientific hermeneutics destroys the "real" content of the Scripture.[183] His close reading of Scriptural passages is thus not in line with contemporary historical-critical research, but rather literal-allegorical in the older sense: he uses the minutiae of New Testament quotes to construct strangely literalistic as well as highly allegorical exegeses far removed from any common Christian reading. Thus, in John 19:31–34, the evangelist relates that the bones of the crucified were smashed by soldiers, but that Jesus was not treated in this way:

> The Jews therefore, because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain upon the cross on the sabbath day, (for that sabbath day was an high day,) besought Pilate that their legs might be broken, and that they might be taken away.
>
> Then came the soldiers, and brake the legs of the first, and of the other which was crucified with him.

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ples. The "Ancient of Days" of the Bible is identical to the ruler of Venus, Sanat Kumara. (Prophet *Climb the Highest Mountain*, p. 98) When the nations built the Tower of Babel, this action led to their dispersal through the impersonal law of karma. (Prophet *Climb the Highest Mountain*, p. 99) The book is even introduced with a scriptural quote, which places Mark and Elizabeth Prophet within the framework of Christian historiography: the "two witnesses" of Revelation. The examples could be multiplied indefinitely: the first volume of *Climb the Highest Mountain* includes references to some 510 biblical passages, with concomitant exegesis.

[181] Among the many works that Steiner devoted to a reading and reinterpretation of Biblical texts, one finds lecture cycles devoted to the esoteric exegesis of the gospels such as *Das Johannes-Evangelium; Die Apokalypse des Johannes; Das Johannes-Evangelium im Verhältnis zu den drei anderen Evangelien, besonders zu dem Lukas-Evangelium; Das Lukas-Evangelium; Das Matthäus-Evangelium; Exkurse in das Gebiet des Markus-Evangelium; Das Markus-Evangelium* as well as commentaries on other Scriptural texts such as *Die Bhagavad Gita und die Paulusbriefe*. A good source of references to Steinerian Scriptural exegesis is Arenson 1975: 993 ff.

[182] A good survey of early allegorical exegesis can be found in Kugel & Greer 1997.

[183] For an overview, see also Stieglitz 1955: 47.

> But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs:
>
> But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water.

Steiner concludes that this textual passage has a deeper esoteric significance, that there must have been a hidden reason for not breaking the bones of the crucified Christ. He draws the conclusion that Jesus had had his skeleton miraculously transformed at the baptism in the river Jordan.[184]

The unorthodox hermeneutics of scripture and the alternative Christ legends are closely linked. The differences between Steiner's, Leadbeater's and Prophet's Christs on one hand, and the Christ of mainstream Christian denominations on the other, basically boil down to the belief that Jesus the historical person revealed other teachings than those found in the canonical texts of the New Testament, but that these teachings nevertheless are hinted at in Scripture. Although the contents of these teachings may be typical of the Esoteric Tradition and depart considerably from more mainstream interpretations, the concept of hidden meanings in the Biblical texts is, of course, far from unknown. From the *lectio mystica* of the Church Fathers to the revelations given to the Swedish prophet Emanuel Swedenborg, quite a few Christian writers have expounded the doctrine that the true message of the Gospels stands at a considerable remove from any literal meaning.

Rudolf Steiner's view of Scripture is more radical. His use of Scripture as a discursive strategy is also far more incidental, since it is the spiritual science of Steiner himself that serves as the foundation supporting his claims to exegetical insight. Whoever follows Steiner's method to the end, it is said, will be able to access the Akashic record, a record of every event and every thought that has ever occurred. Past lives, the evolution of the earth, details of life at the court of king Arthur—everything is revealed to the spiritually advanced visionary. For this very reason, the true nature of Christ and of the Gospels will also become clear. Nobody, however, has advanced as far along the spiritual path as Steiner himself. Thus, in practice, Steiner's christology and his view of Scripture are presented

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[184] Steiner *Aegyptische Mythen und Mysterien*, lect. 10, pp. 160 ff.

as revealed truths. Steiner's view of Scripture is thus merely one of the many products of his spiritual insights. The path to these insights will be presented in greater detail in chapter 6.

The Figure of Christ

Stories of an esoteric Christ that involve this figure as a discursive strategy typically attempt to answer two questions: Firstly, are there non-Biblical doctrines that are part of "true" Christianity? Secondly, if such doctrines were preached by Jesus, where and how did he learn them? If the first question can be answered affirmatively, this can be used by the Esoteric spokesperson to claim that the non-scriptural doctrines of early Christianity are basically identical to those taught in one's own movement text. When the second question is answered, the genuineness of these non-orthodox doctrines is rendered more plausible.

An affirmative answer to the first question basically entails that a part of Jesus' message was either too precious to be divulged to the masses,[185] or too threatening to those in leading positions to be allowed to stand uncensored by later church authorities. That the former alternative should be the case is at times supported with Scriptural quotes made to imply that Jesus had a private teaching that was not to be revealed in the texts available to a general readership. A collection of such quotes (culled and interpreted from a theosophical point of view) can be found in Annie Besant's *Esoteric Christianity*.[186] Here, one finds such statements as Mark 4:10–11 and 33–34:

> And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable.
>
> And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables.

> And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it.
>
> But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples.

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[185] This is the stance taken e.g. by Annie Besant, cf. *Esoteric Christianity* ch. 1.

[186] Two chapters of Besant's book, II and III, are devoted to the "hidden side of Christianity".

Taken out of context, such passages can surely be understood as a proof of the existence of two levels of Christianity, an exoteric doctrine for hoi polloi and a hidden teaching for the elect few.

The answer to the second question, the origin of the non-scriptural part of Christianity, incorporates legends of Jesus' background and upbringing, especially the question of his missing years. In her best-selling book *Out on a Limb*, Shirley MacLaine recounts a conversation with a friend:

> "You know that nothing is recorded in the Bible about Christ from the time he was about twelve until he began to really teach at about thirty years old. Right?"
>
> "Yes," I said, "I had heard about that and I just figured he didn't have much to say until he got older."
>
> "Well, no," said David, "a lot of people think that those eighteen missing years were spent traveling in and around India and Tibet and Persia and the Near East. There are all kinds of legends and stories about a man who sounds just like Christ. His description is matched everywhere and he said he was the Son of God and he corroborated the beliefs of the Hindus that reincarnation was in fact true. They say he became an adept yogi and mastered complete control over his body and the physical world around him. He evidently went around doing all those miracles that were recorded later in the Bible and tried to teach people that they could do the same things too if they got more in touch with their spiritual selves and their own potential power."[187]

Scriptural references to what Jesus did during this period of some eighteen years are limited to the terse and unrevealing remark in Luke 2:52: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." However, John 21:25 has the following intriguing passage: "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written". This scriptural passage can, given an appropriate hermeneutic, support the thesis that there are hidden messages unknown to exoteric religion. Thus, anything can be inferred about this period. Esoteric doctrines become legitimate in that they were allegedly adopted by Jesus during this mysterious period and later taught to his most favored disciples.

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[187] MacLaine, *Out on a Limb*, pp. 233 f.

The doctrine of the hidden years of Jesus is occasionally used as a discursive strategy in the sense that it buttresses specific claims within the Esoteric Tradition. One example is found in Diane Stein's book on Reiki healing.[188] The historical background of Reiki lies in the intersection of exoteric history and legend. Founder Mikao Usui is described as:

> [a] principal of the Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan, and also a Christian minister. Asked by his students to be shown the method by which Jesus did healing, Usui began a ten-year quest to find and learn the skill [. . .] Mikao Usui then traveled to the United States, where he lived for seven years. When he received no further answers from the Christians here, he entered the University of Chicago Divinity School. He is said to have received his Doctor of Theology there, where he studied comparative religions and philosophies.[189]

Stein is aware of the discrepancy between emic and etic historiography:

> [I]n a search for records, Reiki Master William Rand found that Mikao Usui had never been to Doshisha University, as principal, teacher or student. Further, there are no records of his attendance at the University of Chicago, nor of receiving a degree.[190]

Her conclusion, however, is different to the one that a non-believer might espouse. Rather than rejecting the founding legend, she perceives the need to anchor the claims to ancient history in sources that are partly independent of the Usui lineage. The story of Usui's visit to America, she speculates, was probably constructed to make a teaching with Oriental roots more palatable to a Western audience. However, Reiki has a genuine Western lineage as well. This is where the story of Jesus in the Orient comes in. Jesus supposedly learned to perform miraculous healings through the use of a healing system essentially identical to Reiki. How did a healer in the Middle East come to know about Reiki? Stein reproduces a legend that synthesizes several themes of the Esoteric Tradition.[191] The Three Magi were actually Buddhist monks who took Jesus on a tour of Egypt and India. Inspired by what he learned, Jesus became a

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[188] Stein *Essential Reiki*.
[189] Stein *Essential Reiki*, p. 9.
[190] Stein *Essential Reiki*, p. 9.
[191] Stein *Essential Reiki*, pp. 10 ff.; Stein herself characterizes this story as "scholarly information".

member of an Essene order. He survived the crucifixion and lived near Srinagar until dying of natural causes at the age of 120.

More often, perhaps, the hidden life of Jesus becomes a focus of its own mythic elaboration. The precise events of his purported stay in the Himalayas and other non-Biblical episodes are recorded in full-length books such as Levi Dowling's *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*.

Indirectly, Shirley MacLaine's story of the Himalayan Jesus illustrates the route by which references to Scripture can become part of the discursive strategies of the Modern Esoteric Tradition. If the Modern Esoteric Tradition, as I argue in this study, builds its discursive strategies partly on Enlightenment values, a critique of traditional Christian dogma will be part of the Tradition. By being presented as an Eastern yogi, Jesus can be made to teach doctrines such as reincarnation and karma as part of the true legacy of early Christianity. Anti-clerical sentiment will be channeled into the proposition that throughout their entire history, the Western churches have misrepresented what Jesus actually taught.

A number of Modern Esoteric texts claim that Jesus was in fact a member of (or at least deeply influenced by) the Essenes, the religious fraternity that composed the Dead Sea scrolls.[192] The contents of this legend show a rationalized and humanized Jesus, but also a Jesus who was initiated into a secret society. These two characteristics of the figure of Jesus point to the Enlightenment as the source of the story. Scholarship on modern Jesus legends indicate Karl Bahrdt as the origin of the Essene myth.[193] K.H. Venturini fleshed out the details of the story in his *Natural History of the Great Prophet of Nazareth* (1800–1802).

Several Esoteric writers adopt the Essene theme; indeed, the earliest source reviewed here refers to it as an established fact.[194] From then on, each spokesperson will elaborate on the basics of the leg-

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[192] Cf. Kittler *Edgar Cayce on the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Several "modern apocrypha" which are not part of my set of Esoteric positions, however, rely more heavily on this legend. Among the principal texts in this genre one finds the anonymous *Esseerbrief* (1849) as well as Edmond Szekely's books collected under the title *The Essene Gospel of Peace*, written in the 1970s. Szekely also founded a First Christian Essene Church. An Essene Church of Christ based in part on Szekely's theories is still in existence.

[193] Goodspeed 1956: 21; Beskow 1979: 67; Kranenborg 1998.

[194] "A Few Questions to 'Hiraf'", BCW I: 106.

end. Thus, Rudolf Steiner gives a wealth of details on this period of Jesus' life.[195] After a long series of travels, Jesus had acquired clairvoyant faculties at the age of 24. This fact came to the attention of some Essenes who lived in Nazareth, who admitted him to their order without requiring that he go through the usual initiatory rituals. Jesus stayed among them until his twenty-eighth year and was given esoteric knowledge in the form of visions.[196] Besant and Leadbeater combine this legend with other legend elements, explaining that Jesus began his spiritual career in an Essene monastery but later continued to Egypt, where he received various further initiations.[197]

Cayce also gives the Essenes considerable emphasis.[198] The picture he paints of them is very positive. They are said to have accorded women the same status as men.[199] As in the other positions examined, Jesus is claimed to have joined the Essenes during his "hidden years", but this legend theme is greatly elaborated on; here, Mary and Joseph had previously come into contact with this group, and the initiations of Jesus were planned beforehand. The principal aim of being initiated among the Essenes was to receive instructions in astrology, numerology, phrenology and the doctrine of reincarnation.[200] For Cayce, the link between Jesus and the Essenes parallels his own quest for a personally viable syncretism between Christianity and esotericism. Furthermore, in his past-life readings, Cayce often claimed that his clients had been acquaintances of Jesus and/or members of the Essene community. In time, a whole gallery of characters supposedly involved in this period of Jesus' life emerged from these trance sessions.

The purported contacts between Jesus and the Indian subcontinent are of a different nature than the Essene theme. Whereas the latter is based on late Enlightenment interests such as hidden fraternities

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[195] Steiner *Aus der Akashaforschung: Das fünfte Evangelium*, especially the fourth lecture of this cycle.

[196] Among these spiritual truths, one finds doctrines that etic historiography would be more prone to credit Steiner himself with. Thus, Jesus purportedly became aware of the existence of and the distinction between two classes of spiritual entities central to anthroposophy, the so-called Luciferian and Ahrimanic beings.

[197] Besant *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 130 ff.

[198] See especially Kittler *Cayce on the Dead Sea Scrolls* for a full (and apologetic) overview of Cayce's beliefs on this matter.

[199] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 205.

[200] For the story of the Essenes as proto-esotericists, see Kittler *Cayce on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ch. 15.

and rationalistic interpretations of Christianity, the former involves a romantic conception of India and the Himalayas that has somewhat later roots. As seen above, the imaginative use of India and Central Asia in religious discourse dates from the early decades of the nineteenth century. The link between Jesus and this imagined Orient appears surprisingly late.[201] In 1887, Nicolas Notovitch, a Russian war correspondent, went on a journey through India. According to Notovitch himself, while en route to Leh, the capital of Ladakh,[202] he heard a Tibetan lama in a monastery refer to a grand lama named Issa. Notovitch inquired further, and discovered that a chronicle of the life of Issa existed at the monastery of Himis (modern Hemis). Notovitch visited Himis and was told by the chief lama that such a scroll did in fact exist, and that it was originally written in the Pali language and had later been translated into Tibetan. The monastery at Himis possessed the Tibetan translation, while the original was said to be in the library of Lhasa. Notovitch had the text translated from Tibetan by an interpreter. The claims made by Notovitch have been refuted on several occasions, most famously by Max Müller.[203]

If Notovitch's book is of primarily historical interest, his ideas were taken over and rephrased by several esotericists. Levi Dowling elaborates on the legend in a book that is still in print over 90 years later: *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*.[204] Dowling devotes chapter 36 to Jesus' travels in the Himalayas. The Issa legend again entered the Esoteric Tradition with Nicholas and Helena Roerich.[205] In his book *Himalaya*, he makes reference to writings and manuscripts about Issa—some of which he claims to have seen and others which people has told him about. Roerich allegedly recorded independently, in his own travel diary, the same legend of Issa previously seen by Notovitch. Cayce, finally, claims that Jesus' Essene teacher sent him off on a journey to India. In this way, Cayce links two originally separate Jesus legends. The Indian/Himalayan theme is considerably younger than the story of the Essenes, but through Cayce's bricolage, the two are seamlessly combined.

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[201] The story of Notovitch has been presented in several critical publications. My brief account is based on Goodspeed 1956, Beskow 1979 and Romarheim 1989.

[202] The northernmost part of Indian Kashmir, along the Tibetan border.

[203] A summary of these rebuttals can be found in Goodspeed 1956: 10 ff.

[204] Originally printed in 1907, this book has gone through some seventy reprints.

[205] Especially in the emic historiography of the CUT, Roerich is explicitly given an important role in the discovery of the lost teachings of Jesus.

Throughout the twentieth century, many individuals have understood the work of Notovitch as fact rather than fiction. Of the various present-day esoteric movements, probably no group emphasizes the legend of the Himalayan Jesus as much as the Church Universal and Triumphant. Elizabeth Prophet devotes a tome of more than 400 pages to compiling some of the previous legendary material, especially the claims made by Notovitch and Roerich, and adds her own material to support the claim that these narratives should be understood as fact, not fiction.[206] The subtitle and the endorsements printed on the cover set the tone for her work: her book contains "documentary evidence of Jesus' 17-year journey to the East", and is characterized as "brilliant detective work". Why is the Issa legend so important? The answer becomes apparent when one reviews another book by Elizabeth Prophet, *The Lost Teachings of Jesus*, published in 1986. By purportedly having been deeply influenced by Eastern teachings, Jesus becomes not the prophet of a particular religion but of a *philosophia perennis*. We will return to the legends surrounding reincarnation in early Christianity in chapter 7.

The Himalayan Christ and the Essene Christ are interpretations that have survived well into the New Age, as the quote from Shirley MacLaine attests. Other earlier Esoteric views have more or less disappeared, whereas yet others have since been constructed. Rudolf Steiner constructed an elaborate myth around the concept that Christ was an incarnation of a solar spirit and that Jesus were two children who bore the same name, who prepared the way for a human incarnation of this spirit. Through what appears to be the idiosyncrasy of religious history, this way of perceiving Christ has remained the prerogative of the anthroposophical movement. On the other hand, the space age has generated beliefs concerning Christ that would have been impossible in earlier positions. Channeled texts refer to Jesus as an ascended Master working from a base in outer space under the new name of Sananda.[207] Finally, Jesus plays a rather curious role in one area of the New Age. *A Course in Miracles* is said to have been channeled from a discarnate entity perceived as Jesus but never explicitly named as such in the ensuing text. In a sense, the most diffuse Christ legend has also become one of the most influential.

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[206] Prophet *The Lost Years of Jesus*.
[207] Klein *Crystal Stair*.

Christianity as a Significant Other

Even such a brief review as this shows that the images of Christian doctrines and of Christ have roles as significant Others similar to the exotic religious elements borrowed from India or the native Americas. "Christianity" becomes an element in a fixed grand narrative, just as "India" or "Shamanism" are elements in that narrative; the preconceived schema of that narrative is ultimately more important than any doctrinal content as perceived by mainstream spokespersons of the respective original traditions. The reincorporation of Christianity is as half-hearted as the globalization of the Esoteric Tradition and the incorporation of exotic Others.

The massive reinterpretation and appropriation of a variety of traditions also leads to one of the recurrent paradoxes of the Modern Esoteric Tradition, one that is as apparent in theosophy as in the New Age, and that spokespersons for the Esoteric Tradition themselves avoid addressing. The inclusivism of the Esoteric Tradition inevitably creates barriers against various negative Others who do not wish to be included. Movement texts may be filled with the unintended irony of bitter polemics waged against those declared to be narrow-minded, or intolerance of opinions declared to be intolerant. Thus, those Christians and Buddhists who were opposed to the theosophical project of declaring that the differences between the two religions were mere superficial details concealing a common truth were haughtily dismissed by Leadbeater: "no wonder, then, that those who can see no light but that which shines through their own tiny lamps, should be unable to grasp so great a religious idea".[208] Nevertheless, attacks against ideological opponents have become less frequent with the advent of the plethora of New Age positions. Through a series of strategic maneuvers, the historical contingencies that have led to the piecemeal disembedding of fragments of other traditions and their reconstruction as part of a perennial philosophy have been transformed into an emic historiography of the New Age treated by the sources as unproblematic, self-evident fact. It is to these strategies of religious *bricolage* that we shall now turn our attention.

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[208] Leadbeater *Some Glimpses of Occultism*, p. 116.

Constructing a Tradition

What is striking to a reader of Esoteric literature is not only the gap between emic historiography and the historiography of an outsider, but also that this gap does not seem to decrease more than marginally with the passage of time. Rather, legends are constructed, live for a while and gradually fade out of the picture—perhaps because scholarship disproving the legend has become too embarrassing—only to be superseded by new legends. As noted above, the Renaissance hermeticists worked within a view of history in which their own tradition was represented as an ancient philosophy, contemporary with Moses, only to have this legend gradually undermined by scholarly studies such as the philological work of Isaac Casaubon; although the belief in the wisdom and great antiquity of the hermetic texts was tenacious, at the beginning of the period in time studied here only a conservative minority still believed in the existence of Hermes Trismegistus. Many esoteric groups of the eighteenth century (and a few of the nineteenth and twentieth) professed a literal belief in the legend of Christian Rosenkreutz, founder of a line of rosicrucian societies. As it became progressively clearer that Christian Rosenkreutz was a fictitious character, he was less commonly invoked. Blavatsky and other modern Esotericists refer to Atlantis. As the basics of continental drift become part of general awareness, the legend of Atlantis grows less plausible and becomes a minority view. Esoteric texts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century may refer to all three: hermetica, rosicrucian lore and Atlantean wisdom. Modern New Age texts have adapted to our times and present different legends: of the noble savage, of the unity of all faiths, of the unsurpassed wisdom of Oriental sages.

Theosophy is by no means based exclusively on such legends. It presents its adherents with a historiography based on a curious mix of the spurious and the historically plausible. *The Secret Doctrine* freely combines imaginary Others such as the Atlanteans with the merely semi-fictitious, e.g. concepts of a generalized Orient, with references to existing Neoplatonic and Gnostic sources that actually seem to have been used to construct theosophical doctrines. Indeed, Plato was considered to have been one of the great Initiates. Rudolf Steiner was widely read and also referred to actual predecessors, inter alia within Western esotericism and from the Romantic movement. To

take a few more or less random examples, his book *Theosophy* contains references to Carus, Goethe, Lessing, Plato, the Pythagoreans and Jean Paul Richter. Contemporary Esoteric writers rarely if ever evince such historical consciousness (or interest).

Generally speaking, later representatives of the Esoteric Tradition once again move away from a position in which a consensus between esoteric and exoteric historiography is conceivable. There are remarkably few references to "actual" history within the New Age or the Church Universal and Triumphant. Still, the building blocks used to construct emic history are often the same religions and cultures that are discussed in a more conventionally academic setting. After all, Egypt, India and Tibet exist in the annals of conventional scholarship as well.

The transformation from etic to emic history takes place despite the existence of readily available information from non-esoteric sources. In fact, there are even specialized studies that discuss popular reinterpretations of e.g. Native American cultures, along somewhat the same lines as the literature in which other contemporary legends are discussed and deconstructed. The question as to why this transformation takes place and why non-esoteric books are so seldom consulted as a corrective is one that can hardly be subjected to direct empirical investigation. However, two mechanisms are well known from other, similar contexts and represent plausible factors in this process. Firstly, a strongly held conviction is a powerful filter against unwanted information.[209] Secondly, emic historiography is often constructed and accepted in the context of what might be called peripheral religion.[210] Within many mainstream Christian denominations,

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[209] There is extensive literature on the formation of hypotheses and their maintenance in the face of contrary evidence, literature that thus bears on this question. See Gilovich 1991: 9 ff., Kunda 1999: 111 ff. and the references given there.

[210] The term peripheral religion is perhaps most closely associated with the work of I.M. Lewis, who used it to designate religious movements not supported by central institutions within a society. See Lewis 1989. Possession cults that rally marginalized women might be a typical example. In the sense used here, peripheral religion is a somewhat wider concept, denoting a form of religion at one end of a continuum rather than a distinct type. Peripheral religions have little or no support from official bodies, have few full-time officials and are therefore not transmitted through societally recognized channels of learning. Whereas e.g. the Catholic Church is a clear-cut example of centralized religion, a charismatic cult is typically peripheral. See Klass 1995 on part-time religious practitioners, and especially ch. 9 of his monograph, for a fuller discussion of the issues involved.

it takes years of training, including courses in the history of Christianity and the historical-critical study of the Bible, to enter the clergy. Esoteric spokespersons, by contrast, tend to be self-taught or may have pursued specialized courses at private institutions that do not generally foster historical awareness. Once they have established themselves as e.g. practitioners of divination or complementary medicine, they will typically work as entrepreneurs rather than as members of a tightly knit professional corps. Their interpretation of doctrines and rituals will have a marked tendency towards individual variation. Furthermore, and most importantly for the present purpose, whatever historical training is imparted through such unofficial bodies will in itself be infused with the mythology of the Esoteric Tradition.

Clearly, emic historiography rarely builds its narratives *ex nihilo*. Elements recognizable from a non-esoteric tradition of historiography are reinterpreted and find their way into accounts of mythologized or emic history. The task of the following sections will be to identify and name some of the particular strategies through which etic history is transformed into emic history.

Stages of Invention

The emic historiography or mythic history of the Esoteric Tradition can be broadly subdivided into two trends. The first is the wholesale invention of tradition, the transformation of fiction into alleged fact. The second, to be described in the section that follows, is the reworking of an existing tradition.

There are several versions of this process of invention. On the one hand, one finds fictional accounts transformed into legend elements which are then taken as factual by Esoteric spokespersons. This is the process that transformed Plato's literary device Atlantis into a place that Blavatsky, Bailey, Steiner, Cayce and others treated as literal fact. Similar processes transformed Bahrdt's and Venturini's tales of Jesus among the Essenes into legends reiterated by a host of Esoteric writers. Other examples are Castaneda's fictional discussions with his Yaqui teacher, the *Book of Dzyan* seen only by Helena Blavatsky and on which she based *The Secret Doctrine*, the missing Mayan tablets about the alleged lost civilization of Mu recovered and interpreted by James Churchward, the most certainly non-existent manuscript about the lost years of Jesus supposedly seen by Notovitch and others in a Ladakhi monastery, and so forth. On the other hand,

there are accounts presented by their writers as fiction, but as fiction of a special kind: esoteric adventure stories that are said explicitly or implicitly to convey spiritual truths. Here one finds the kind of occult fiction made popular in the mid- to late-nineteenth century by Bulwer-Lytton (*Zanoni, The Coming Race*), Marie Corelli (*A Romance of Two Worlds*), and a host of less popular writers, as well as present-day bestsellers such as James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy* and *The Tenth Insight*. A similar phenomenon is that of certain fantasy writers who are cited as sources of inspiration by Esoteric spokespersons—Marion Bradley Zimmer's *Avalon* books spring to mind.[211]

Occasionally, we see the development of a whole chain of fictionality and reinterpretation. A case in point are the occult novels by Bulwer-Lytton, which heavily influenced Helena Blavatsky and, indirectly, her post-theosophical successors.[212] These in turn claimed that some of those Esoteric doctrines born in the pages of Bulwer-Lytton's novels actually came from other sources. Rudolf Steiner's meditative exercises, which are intended to increase one's ability to perceive spiritual realities hidden to the ordinary observer, include meeting a shadowy figure called the Guardian at the threshold. This figure was introduced to the Esoteric Tradition by being taken from Bulwer-Lytton's *Zanoni*, published in 1842. What started as fictional or semi-fictional accounts have at times influenced readers to the extent that new belief systems have developed on the basis of such tales.

Stages of Appropriation

As we have seen, tradition in the emic sense, i.e. as perceived by Esoteric writers, is a constructed tradition. It often diverges greatly from etic historiography, sometimes to the point of incorporating elements from fictional literary devices describing entirely imaginary cultures. More commonly, however, elements are appropriated from cultures that do, in fact, exist (or existed in a documented past). Shamanisms do exist in fourth world contexts. Indian religions really do have concepts such as reincarnation, karma, maya and chakras. *The Mayan Factor* by José Argüelles foretold a global "harmonic con-

[211] Luhrmann 1989: 93 ff.
[212] Liljegren 1957.

vergence" in 1987, after interpreting in the freest of manners a calendar that actually was once used by the Mayas.[213]

The historical process by which such an appropriation takes place commonly follows distinct stages. First, travel narratives are published, or ethnographic or historical accounts become available, in which the exotic custom is presented. The descriptions in such books are not directly intended to be emulated by a Western audience. Creative spokespersons steeped in the Esoteric Tradition read these texts and transform them to fit in with culturally predetermined elements of their own (Western) tradition. Then come the first do-it-yourself books, works that transform the new element from a belief to be accepted to a practice to be performed or an experience to be sought after. Knowledge that was previously difficult to gain now becomes increasingly available to a general readership. A small number of Esoteric interpretations commonly become trend-setting templates that structure the doctrines presented in later works.

The rapid process of reinterpretation and change soon transforms the originally exotic doctrine into an organic part of the new context. Neoshamanism as practiced by Harner's adepts differs significantly from the "traditional" or tribal shamanism of Harner's Shuar and Conibo teachers. Sufism in the west is something quite different than Sufism among e.g. the Mourids of Senegal, while the kabbala of the occult revival is distinct from the complex kabbalism of medieval Provence. Writers will attempt to stress continuity and disregard change, a legitimizing process that has its typical elements. It is to these that we shall now proceed.

Reduction

The cover term *reduction* is used here to denote several related techniques of reducing the complexity, variety and contextuality of the traditions from which elements are taken. Thus, New Age understandings of actually existing exotic traditions, e.g. shamanism, the kabbala or meditation, are often radically pared-back versions of the originals. The vast variety of cultures from which shamanic elements could be disembedded are reduced by Harner to a handful, and these are in turn homogenized. Harnerian drumming techniques are

[213] Argüelles' theories on the Mayan calendar are discussed in the section "Calculations and the Rhetoric of Rationality" in chapter 5.

loosely modeled on a generalized Siberian ritual. A communal ritual, the spirit canoe, is identified as Salishan, i.e. as what might etically be understood as one ritual chosen on uncertain grounds from among many others that existed in a wide cultural area with numerous regional differences.[214] The complexities of the Jewish kabbala, with its numerous schools, its arcane texts and its path of religious instruction stretching over many years, is reduced to a New Age kabbala, a basic system of correspondences that can be explained in one, slender volume.[215] Meditation or yoga become instrumental techniques, partly divorced from the intricate philosophies with which they were originally associated.

The repertoire of mankind's religious creativity is vast but not limitless. At the grandest of scales, there are just a few basic themes available to those who wish to speculate on e.g. life after death. Death can be the end of everything; we can be transported into some transcendent realm; there is the idea of resurrection; or we can return to a new life. However, some acquaintance with the history of religions soon dispels this neat picture. The more one looks at the structures, interpretations, ideological uses and narrative details of the various speculations on life after death, the more they appear to be unique. Hindu reincarnation is not the same as kabbalistic reincarnation. Among the kabbalists, Isaac Luria has a very different conception of reincarnation than does the anonymous author of the Zohar. However, a synthesizing spokesperson intent on finding a perennial philosophy underlying the divergent traditions, has ample material from which to synthesize, and every opportunity to reduce traditions to the grand scale on which the divergences can come to appear as insignificant details. Reduction thus prepares the way for using the other, more specific strategies of appropriation that follow.

Pattern Recognition

Pattern recognition is a basic cognitive strategy employed in our attempt to orient ourselves in the world. We form hypotheses that help us find order and covariation even in random data, and then apply a strategy of selective hypothesis testing to ensure that the existence of the patterns we have projected onto the data will be cor-

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[214] Harner *Way of the Shaman.*
[215] Parfitt *Elements of the Qabalah.*

roborated.[216] A similar type of pattern recognition is also part of the common perennialist belief in an underlying spiritual unity behind religious diversity. Once such a theory has been formed, it can be more or less spuriously corroborated by adducing carefully selected and skewed data. An extreme proponent of this strategy such as Joseph Campbell maintained that the most divergent myths are basically reflections of one underlying "monomyth".[217] A more skeptical reader might suspect selective reading of the world's myths behind such a claim.

Esoteric literature abounds in examples of pattern recognition. From *The Secret Doctrine* up to present-day New Age texts, authors tell us that all religions, or at least all the "great" traditions, are reflexes of man's common spiritual heritage. They have all told similar myths, accepted reincarnation doctrine as true, employed similar divinatory methods, accepted the existence of hierarchies of spiritual beings, awaited the arrival of a messianic figure or practiced essentially identical methods of healing. A typical trait of much New Age religiosity is its combination of eclecticism and pattern recognition. On the one hand, doctrinal and ritual elements are taken from the most diverse sources. On the other, considerable effort is spent on showing that these seemingly disparate elements in fact point to the same underlying reality.

Thus, a variety of symbols that may etically appear to be selected more or less at random from the vast variety of options, are claimed to be universal or near-universal. The cross and the fire are central to traditions ranging from Christianity and Hinduism to alchemy, masonry, Platonism and kabbalism.[218] Especially the number seven, central to theosophy, serves as a focus of pattern recognition: since many religions contain at least some doctrines describing elements grouped in sevens, they can be proclaimed to be essentially the same. "Brahmanical religion" believed in seven inhabited worlds; Egyptian religion believed in the transmigration of souls in seven stages; Mithraism had seven mysteries; several masonic lodges have seven steps. Blavatsky devotes an entire article to presenting such similarities, claiming that they are due to a common spiritual heritage.[219]

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[216] Cf. the references in note 209 above.
[217] Campbell 1949.
[218] "Cross and Fire", BCW II: 144 ff.
[219] "The Number Seven", BCW II: 408 ff. One is reminded of similar attempts

Rather than surveying an entire field for further examples of pattern recognition, I will briefly discuss two particular cases.[220] The first, the use of crystals, bases its pattern recognition on obvious overt parallels. Stones are or were indeed used for ritual purposes in numerous religious frameworks, although the anthropologist or historian of religion might be tempted to conclude that the differences are at least as significant as any similarities of form. The second involves a different mode of pattern recognition. Esoteric spokespersons have constructed parallels in their attempts to join systems, creating patterns where the outsider sees none. The difference may be one of degree, but exploit different traits in the religious raw material used to build correspondences.

The Search for Parallels

Crystals were a marginal point of interest in the Esoteric Tradition until quite recently. Central Esoteric spokespersons such as Blavatsky, Steiner and Bailey do not mention them. Even a relatively recent catalogue of esoteric literature[221] lists a mere handful of texts on the subject. Most of these pertain to folk beliefs and astrological lore. Crystals seem to have become one small part of a budding New Age movement with the compilation of Cayce's readings on gems and minerals, a slender volume published in 1960.[222] J. Gordon Melton dates the considerable present-day fascination with crystals and crystal healing back to a series of channeled books by Californian medium Frank Alper, published in 1982.[223] Crystal lore and crystal ritualism would seem to be one of the most recent additions to the Esoteric Tradition.

Katrina Raphaell is the author of an early movement text that expounds the principles of crystal healing. Her historiography of crystal healing can be seen as an exemplar of pattern recognition. Several earlier uses of crystals in ritual or therapeutic settings are adduced as proof of the antiquity of her own praxis.[224] Chapter III of her book has the heading "The Ancient Art of Laying on Stones". She explains:

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by Jung to show that there are universal archetypes and that especially the number four plays a central role in the spiritual heritage of mankind.

[220] I will return to another example, the doctrine of reincarnation, in chapter 7.

[221] Popenoe 1976.

[222] Curley *Gems and Stones*.

[223] Melton et al. 1991: 287.

[224] Raphaell *Crystal Enlightenment*, especially pp. 8 ff.

> Down through the ages, civilizations have used the powers of crystals and stones for many purposes. The oldest legends and lore of crystal magic leads us back to the ancient continent of Atlantis. It is supposed that the evolved inhabitants of this advanced race used crystals to channel and harness the cosmic force [. . .] The survivors of Atlantis began anew and continued to perpetuate the knowledge of crystals in Egypt, South America and Tibet.[225]

On its way towards the New Age, the esoteric knowledge of crystals then passed on to India, Israel, "certain tribes of Mexican Indians" and to Greece and Rome. Thus, Raphaell notes that Exodus records that a breast plate made of twelve precious stones was worn by Aaron, endowing him with "incredible spiritual powers".[226] Indian astrologers advised their clients to collect specific gems to ward off harmful astrological influences. Greeks and Romans wore talismans made of stone. The Mexican Indians, as a generic entity, believed in some form of after-life existence in which certain souls were transformed into crystals. No effort is made to reconcile the vast and obvious differences in use between each of these four versions of crystal belief. The very fact that stones and gems were used ritually is in itself a sufficient reason to proclaim the antiquity of crystal healing.

The Construction of Correspondences

Typical of the development of New Age religiosity is thus its eclecticism. Modern spokespersons attempt to combine the most disparate sources into a personal synthesis. Since numerous systems exist that are built on the number seven, they are understood as being in some sense freely interchangeable. Naomi Ozaniec notes that there were seven metals and seven planets in Renaissance alchemy, and concludes that "in reality", the alchemists worked with the chakra system. When no overt similarities are to be found, correspondences can be forced upon the material. Even though the kabbalistic tree of life bears no obvious resemblance to the chakra system, the two are said to be related.

Ozaniec constructs elaborate correspondences between elements that share few if any overt similarities. Ozaniec's attempt to form a coherent pattern linking the Bach flower remedies[227] and the seven

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[225] Raphaell *Crystal Enlightenment*, p. 8.

[226] Only a generation earlier, Bailey had used the story of the breast-plate with twelve stones to find an entirely different pattern, namely that the number twelve holds a profound spiritual significance. See Bailey *From Bethlehem to Calvary*, p. 75.

[227] A system of healing based on homeopathy and developed in the 1920s by

chakras is a particularly apt example. In this case, the construction of correspondences is complicated by the awkward fact that there are thirty-eight flower remedies to be associated with seven chakras. Thus, she contends that the ajna chakra, i.e. the chakra between the eyebrows, corresponds to the Bach flower remedies beech, cerato, chestnut bud, gentian, olive and walnut. How can she know? We are not told explicitly, but can gather from remarks throughout her book that the author knows because she has personally experienced the effects she writes about. We are on the verge of leaving the subject of the construction of tradition to embark on a very different discursive strategy: experience.

Synonymization

Another strategy, closely related to pattern recognition, is synonymization. Whereas pattern recognition rhetorically erases differences between divergent elements of religious praxis and doctrines—myth A is essentially the same as myth B, ritual X is merely a version of ritual Y—synonymization wields its homogenizing influence over religious terminology. An example of synonymization at work is the following passage from *Essential Reiki* by Diane Stein:

> The living body, human or animal, radiates warmth and energy. This energy is the life force itself, and has as many names as there are human civilizations [. . .] The Polynesian Hunas call this healing force *Mana*, and the Native American Iroquois people call it *Orenda*. It is known as *Prana* in India, *Ruach* in Hebrew, *Barraka* in the Islamic countries and *Ch'i* in China. Some individual healers have termed it *Orgone Energy* (Wilhelm Reich), *Animal Magnetism* (Franz Mesmer), and *Archaeus* (Paracelsus). In Japan the energy is termed *Ki* and it is from this word that Reiki is named.[228]

Synonymization utilizes the curious double role of words in a foreign language interspersed in a text written in e.g. English. As in ethnographic accounts or travel writing, the exotic terminology gives an air of authenticity to the text, a hint that the author is cognizant with the writings of an exotic culture, or at least with a specialized and arcane vocabulary that is not accessible to the lay person. At

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the English physician Edward Bach; see Bach *Heal thyself* and Scheffer *Bach Flower Therapy*.

[228] Stein *Essential Reiki*, p. 16; For a similar but shorter list, see Honervogt *Reiki* ch. 2.

the same time, the sheer incomprehensibility and untranslateability of the terminology ensures that the reader will have little choice but to accept the interpretations of the writer.[229] To what extent is it reasonable to claim, as Diane Stein does, that *mana* equals *prana*? The average reader has little scope for evaluating the author's claims.

The praxis of synonymization is fully developed in Blavatsky's writings and is carried forward to several post-theosophical positions, e.g. anthroposophy. The predilection for Sanskrit terminology and the de facto roots in Western esotericism made it tempting for Blavatsky and others to draw parallels between concepts and terms drawn from the two traditions. Rudolf Steiner, who vacillated, during a productive period of his life, between Indian terminology and Christian/Rosicrucian esoteric thought, created some highly tenuous links between Indian and Western concepts. Building on a *völkisch* concept of the unique nature of each nation or "people", Steiner felt that Indian concepts should not be used by Westerners. This belief is grounded in Steiner's views of the nature of language. At first, there was only one single language, in which the sounds directly corresponded to the reality they designated. As time passed, this language was profoundly altered to reflect the differences of climate, local conditions and racial characteristics. The words which the ancient Indians created are still full of the magic of the sacred primeval language, but are uniquely adapted to the place where it was spoken. What is of Indian origin can therefore not be utilized by us Europeans.[230] Thus, three of the nine spiritual hierarchies of pseudo-Dionysius were spuriously assimilated with various beings with Sanskrit names: The Dynamis of pseudo-Dionysius were seen as the same as beings called *Mohat*, the Archai were declared to be identical to *Asuras* and the Angels with so-called *Lunar pitris*.

New Age literature is considerably more sparing in its use of terms in foreign languages, but occasionally carries its strategy of synonymization to extremes, as the above quote by Diane Stein demonstrates.

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[229] This strategy is, of course, by no means exclusive to the Modern Esoteric Tradition, but can be found in other genres that are prone to interspersing texts with words in foreign languages. The use of exotic languages in scholarly texts has also on occasion been deconstructed as tendentious and actively misleading, cf. Dubuisson's criticism of Eliade's translations from Sanskrit texts in Dubuisson 1993: 229.

[230] See especially Steiner *Grundelemente der Esoterik*, lecture 15 pp. 108 f.

The Time-line of Esoteric Historiography

In the early part of the period studied here, notably in theosophical and anthroposophical writing, the various Others that are invoked are combined into a grand view of history. A time-line is sketched, in which primeval wisdom has been modified and partly lost, but is now in the process of being recovered. A particularly complex example of this myth is found in the writings of Rudolf Steiner, who presents several singular events in the history of mankind as points along this great U-shaped curve. Some elements of his mythography of human history are:

> The fall in the Lemurian age: Luciferic Beings interfered with man's evolution
> The fall in the Atlantic age: Ahrimanic Beings interfered with man's evolution
> The event at Golgotha in 33 CE: the turning point in human history and the bottom of the U-shaped curve
> The inception of the Age of Michael in 1879: beginning a spiritual ascent under the direction of the archangel
> The end of Kali Yuga in 1899
> The activation of the Christ impulse in 1908

This sense of utopian telos is so powerful that dystopian narratives culled from other historiographic schemes may be reinterpreted to fit the esoteric master narrative. The classical Indian concept of the four yugas conceives of time on a grand scale as composed of a progression of four ages.[231] This conception of time operates with a dystopian teleology. The first, Golden Age, was an era of longevity and prosperity. Each successive age has entailed a further decadence of the human race. The present age, Kali Yuga, is the most debased. So far, we are only at the beginning of a long period of spiritual darkness. Rudolf Steiner constructs a historiography revolving around several cyclical schemes. One of these is directly modeled on the Puranic scheme, but with one crucial difference. Kali Yuga lies behind us. It came to an end in 1899.[232] We are at the beginning of a period of spiritual evolution.

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[231] The terms for the four ages predate the classical era and are already found in Vedic texts, initially denoting various sides of dice used in gambling. Their use as designations of four epochs in elaborate myths of world ages first appears in a passage of the Aitareyabrahmana, and is greatly elaborated on in the classical Purana literature.

[232] There are numerous references in Steiner's writings to a precise dating of

Although the complexity of Steiner's myth is unsurpassed, many other Esoteric texts at least implicitly maintain that elements of wisdom found among ancient or primal peoples are now being recovered for the benefit of modern mankind. As I have briefly discussed in chapter 2, there are several time-lines in Western intellectual history; the U-shaped view of history competes with several other models: primitivistic, utopian, dystopian and non-teleological. Where does one find the origins of the particular conception of time of the Modern Esoteric Tradition, a time-line that seems to combine the primitivist and utopian models?

The Redemptive Narrative

Ancient versions of the myth, such as the Book of Daniel and the writings of Hesiod, present the Golden Age as a diffuse period in the past. Soon, however, a kind of positive Orientalism[233] came to conflate this Golden Age with a distant, exotic Other. Sometimes the positive Other is projected onto a culture which does, in fact, lie in the verifiable past. The interest in ancient Egypt found in theosophical writings is the veneration of the ageless wisdom of an ancient culture. Sometimes, the cultures that have been the focus of positive Orientalism are imaginary, although not all writers that appealed to them would have concurred in describing them as such. Plato's Atlantis is the obvious case in point.

However, the Esoteric time-line is not exclusively primitivistic. We are, say many spokespersons, on the verge of entering a new epoch in human evolution. Even writers who do not share this millenarian expectation adopt a melioristic perspective. We have passed the bottom of the U curve. This U-shaped time-line might be attributed to the Neoplatonic (and possibly Gnostic) influence on the Esoteric Tradition in general and writers such as Blavatsky in particular. However, there is a closer precedent for Esoteric emic historiography: Romanticism. Many Romantic poets and philosophers espoused the U-shaped time-line. To quote M.H. Abrams' classic study on the Romantic version of this myth:

Kali Yuga as the period from 3101 BCE to the year 1899 CE. A listing of such references can be found in Arenson 1975: 405.

[233] Although Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (Said 1978) used the term to specifically denote Western images of the cultural and geographic Orient, in my metaphoric usage, positive Orientalism is a generic term for homogenizing approaches to other cultures, and can as such be applied to peoples that in no way are part of a geographical East, even e.g. Native Americans.

> The poet or philosopher, as the avant-garde of general human consciousness, possesses the vision of an imminent culmination of history which will be equivalent to a recovered paradise or golden age. The movement toward this goal is a circuitous journey and quest, ending in the attainment of self-knowledge, wisdom and power [. . .] The dynamic of the process is the tension toward closure of the divisions, contraries or "contradictions" themselves.[234]

To take just one example among many, Novalis' fragmentary novel *Die Lehrlinge zu Saïs* is constructed on the Romantic premise that man and nature were one in the primeval Golden Age, and that a new union between man and nature is about to take place:

> und so scheint allmählich die alte goldne Zeit zurückzukommen,
> in der sie [i.e. die Natur] den Menschen Freundin, Trösterin, Priesterin und Wunderthäterin war,
> als sie unter ihnen wohnte
> und ein himmlischer Umgang die Menschen zu Unsterblichen machte.
>
> Dann werden die Gestirne die Erde wieder besuchen,
> der sie gram geworden waren in jenen Zeiten der Verfinsterung;
> dann legt die Sonne ihren strengen Zepter nieder,
> und wird wieder Stern unter Sternen,
> und alle Geschlechter der Welt kommen dann nach langer Trennung wieder zusammen.[235]

The protagonists of Novalis' highly allegorical tale are engaged in a quest for the renewal of that magic period of human history. By extending our natural capacities, we will once again develop our intuitive faculties and reach a new understanding of nature.

Different Esoteric positions have constructed different myths from this culturally derived raw material. Theosophy contributed with what was arguably the grandest scheme of all. Universes are created and annihilated in an infinite number of cycles. Anthroposophy has a

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[234] Abrams 1971: 255.

[235] Quote from part 2, "Die Natur", of Novalis' *Die Lehrlinge zu Saïs*. "And so the age seems to return in which [nature] was the friend, consoler, priestess and wonder-worker of humanity; when she lived among people and a divine company made them immortal. Then the heavenly bodies, whose wrath struck Earth during the days of darkness, will once again visit Her; and the Sun shall lay down its stern scepter and will once again become one star among many; and all the creatures of the Earth will join again after their long separation."

shorter time span, concentrating exclusively on the present cycle. It makes up for its narrower perspective by giving even more lavish attention to detail than theosophy. Gradually, through successive positions within the Esoteric Tradition, the focus narrows considerably. Steiner focuses on the present cycle, ascribing little significance to the distant future while discussing revealed history at great length. Thus, Steiner records the minute details of e.g. human physiology during the Atlantean stage. The New Age *sensu stricto* is mainly interested in the coming age. It has no interest at all in the distant future, and the picture of the past is usually very sketchy. Exceptions are subcultures within the New Age cultic milieu where speculations regarding, for instance, Atlantis or Egypt are of particular interest. Some of these offshoots from the general trend within the Esoteric Tradition were mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Although the historiography of the Esoteric Tradition appears to become increasingly piecemeal as various positions emerge, some trends can be summarized from what has been said above. Beyond the varying details of historical faiths, there is said to be a core of ancient wisdom that has been transmitted up to the present day. Certain cultures are invariably singled out as the links in this chain. A set of such core cultures has remained remarkably constant: Atlantis, Egypt, India remain staples of the New Age. With time, however, an increasing number of cultures are seen as embodiments of that positive Other. Thus, the Japan of Zen Buddhism or Reiki, the Tibet of monasticism and of the Dalai Lama, and the China of qigong are added to the list. However, as the number of claimed predecessors has increased, they have become part of an ever more patchy Esoteric historiography. The positive Others serve to support specific claims and practices, rather than a grand view of history as a whole. When one arrives at the latest generation of New Age literature, esoteric history finally dissolves into a flurry of fragments. References to everything from native American wisdom to the ancient East are very common.[236] Few authors, however, make any attempts to link

[236] The most all-embracing emic historiography reviewed here, Maguire Thompson *Atlas of the New Age*, can serve as a catalog of the entire field. Parallels and purported sources of current New Age practices are found in the Americas, in Greek mythology, Celtic spirituality, the kabbala, Sufism, Egypt, India, China, Japan, Tibet, Australia and Hawaii. The one spiritual heritage that is almost completely left out of this historical narrative is, ironically enough, the Western esoteric tradition.

together the various cultures in a more general scheme of human spiritual history. The Esoteric redemptive history has increasingly become an implicit structuring schema, rather than an overtly formulated myth.

The Perennial Philosophy

Each tradition referred to seems to have its own role in Esoteric historiography. Egypt is the land of initiation, of great mysteries; India is the source of concepts such as reincarnation, karma and the subtle bodies; Tibet plays the role of the homeland of sages and the repository of ancient scriptures. In a sense, however, the distinction between an Egyptian tradition and one based on a generalized India, or even an imaginary one such as the wisdom of the Atlanteans, is a scholarly construction. Consider, for instance, the following statement of Leadbeater's:

> Now this great sacrifice—the descent of the Second Logos into matter in the form of monadic essence—was somewhat elaborately set forth in symbol in the ritual of the Egyptian form of the Sotâpatti initiation, and, as before stated, the Christ had frequently used a description of the exoteric side of its ceremonies to illustrate and emphasize his teaching on the subject [—] The formula, handed down to the Egyptians from the exponents of Atlantean magic in far distant ages, ran thus:—
>
> "Then shall the candidate be bound upon the wooden cross, he shall die, he shall be buried, and shall descend into the underworld; after the third day he shall be brought back from the dead, and shall be carried up into heaven to be the right hand of Him from Whom he came, having learnt to guide (or rule) the living and the dead."[237]

The Christian story of the crucifixion and resurrection is thus claimed to actually be an Egyptian version of an Indian ritual, explainable in vaguely Neoplatonic terminology but ultimately derived from Atlantis.

Basically, neither Egypt, India, Atlantis or Neoplatonism figure in this story as representatives of their respective historical times and geographical locations as they are understood by historians of religion. Esoterically, they are all stations in the transmission of an ageless wisdom, a *philosophia perennis* that has been accessible to the initiates of all times and places. Leadbeater is in no way extreme in his eclecticism. Half a century later, New Age movement texts can express a similar belief in the universality (or near-universality) of all creeds in the following terms:

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[237] Leadbeater *The Christian Creed*, pp. 62–3.

> From my reading in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, I see striking resemblances to the root philosophies of virtually all religions [. . .] Tantric mysticism [. . .] displays the essence of every world metaphysical system, including Wicca. The original teachings of Jesus are found in Buddhism as well.[238]

The argument underlying the construction of an Atlantean, Egyptian or Indian wisdom is not only to point at the ancient origins of particular doctrinal points or ritual practices. A second use of tradition as a discursive strategy seems to be to buttress the claim that there is a common core to all religions (and in fact, say New Age authors such as Capra, common also to the most up-to-date forms of science).

This element of the emic history of the Esoteric Tradition mirrors a concept found in a centuries-old Christian attempt to come to grips with the diversity of faiths: the belief that God had presented a revelation to people all over the globe, and that Scriptural revelation was only the purest and most developed form of this universal (natural) theology. Thus, one of the main impulses behind the study of the kabbala during the Renaissance and up to the seventeenth century was the belief that Jewish mysticism contained a current of truth that heralded Christian revelation.[239] From the late eighteenth century onwards, the story of the primeval wisdom, the *prisca theologia*, is told with a new twist. Christian doctrines are now no longer the end point of spiritual evolution. Instead, various spokespersons begin to use the trope of the perennial philosophy in an attempt to legitimize their own particular positions within the Esoteric Tradition.

Whereas the reigning nineteenth century paradigm, evolutionism, held that religion had proceeded in several stages from the most barbaric stages to civilized faiths, the idea of the primordial revelation stressed the existence of a spark of true religion even among the most "savage" peoples. Where this primordial monotheism was not found, a degenerative process had taken place. It is hardly surprising that some proponents of primordial monotheism had theological

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[238] Stein *Essential Reiki*, p. 129.

[239] This belief was common to several of the most prominent Christian kabbalists, e.g. Pico della Mirandola, Guillaume Postel and Christian Knorr von Rosenroth; cf. Coudert 1999: 111 ff. The belief in a perennial philosophy that manifests differently among e.g. Jews and Christians and yet has significant common traits goes back earlier, and can be found at least as early as the dawn of the Renaissance, in the writings of Nicholas of Cusa.

motives for their choice.[240] The similarity between the Christian and Esoteric versions of the *philosophia perennis* theme were obvious enough for Annie Besant to have noted them with approval. Of Andrew Lang she says:

> He points to the existence of a common tradition, which, he alleges, cannot have been evolved by the savages for themselves, being men whose ordinary beliefs are of the crudest kind and whose minds are little developed. He shows, under crude beliefs and degraded views, lofty traditions of a sublime character, touching the nature of the Divine Being and His relations with men [—] Such ideas manifestly cannot have been conceived by the savages among whom they are found, and they remain as eloquent witnesses of the revelations made by some great Teacher.[241]

Differentiation Between Exoteric and Esoteric Religion

Religious diversity fosters relativism. The strategies employed to come to grips with the existence of radically different faiths can be placed along a continuum. On the exclusive side are religions whose proponents claim that salvation (or whatever ultimate goal they espouse) is only to be achieved through their specific creed and reject syncretistic trends or even ecumenical efforts.[242] At the centre of the spectrum, one could place those that accept the limited worth of certain other faiths but reject those that differ too much from one's own doctrines.[243] Truly inclusive systems attempt to incorporate a vast number of competing faiths, although they will typically be valued differently and ranked according to a number of criteria. Several positions within the Modern Esoteric Tradition have attempted to follow such inclusive strategies. They incorporate more and more faiths into the same grand scheme, and understand them as part of a divine revelation common to all mankind. The differences are explained in evolutionary terms: revelation that has passed down in

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[240] Drobin 1979: 184 ff. notes the overrepresentation of Catholics among the pro-monotheist party and of Protestants among the evolutionists. Here, the primus inter pares is pater W. Schmidt, author of the monumental *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*.

[241] Besant *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 11; If Besant, as a spokesperson of the Esoteric Tradition, could applaud the ideas of Lang, this is perhaps because Lang's theories partially had roots in his own brand of esoteric religiosity. Andrew Lang was a rather unorthodox scholar, with interests in spiritualist and paranormal phenomena. Considerable space of his main work *The Making of Religion* is devoted to the discussion of such phenomena.

[242] The Jehovah's Witnesses would be a case in point.

[243] Those forms of Islam that accept Christianity and Judaism as book religions might count as examples of this position.

a more primitive form among some, and a more spiritually evolved version among other peoples.

The belief in a *philosophia perennis* presents those who would rely on such a strategy with a particular problem. How does one account for overt differences between religious traditions? A strategy more radical than either synonymization or pattern recognition is the wholesale denial that the most spiritually advanced adherents of a certain religion actually believe in the doctrines of that faith. According to this strategy, most believers are caught up in a superficial, exoteric mode of belief. Those who have been initiated, whether by others or through their own insight, have reached an esoteric understanding. It is thus significant that one of the earliest exposés of theosophy is entitled *Esoteric Buddhism*.[244]

The concept of an inner and an outer meaning of religious texts and religious praxis is an old one in the West. After all, Christian canonical scriptures present something of an anomaly since they incorporate a number of canonical scriptures of another religion—Judaism. One of the earliest means of harmonizing and reconciling the two faiths was typological interpretation, the belief that everything found overtly in the New Testament is found implicitly in the Old Testament. Ancient, medieval and early modern readers of the Bible started with an understanding of what they were supposed to find in the texts, and created their exegetical tools based on that understanding.[245]

In theological circles, such speculations on the nature of the religions of earlier historical epochs as more or less imperfect revelations of the same underlying truth were far from uncommon. One of the pioneers of the history of religions, Nathan Söderblom, was also a bishop of the Swedish Lutheran Church. His interest in Iranian religion was in part motivated by his religious faith. Divine revelation had been given to the Persians, but in a form that only vaguely foreshadowed the fullness of the gospels. The Modern Esoteric Tradition does something analogous, but turns the priorities upside down: the Abrahamitic, monotheistic religions are those that have been furthest removed from the ancient wisdom religion.

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[244] Sinnett *Esoteric Buddhism*.

[245] Among the literature on the history of Biblical interpretation, typological and otherwise, see especially Smalley 1983, Harrisville & Sundberg 1995 and Kugel & Greer 1997.

Perhaps the most influential presentation of the doctrine of exoteric versus esoteric religion is Edouard Schuré's *Les grands initiés*, published in 1899 and reprinted countless times. Schuré believed that a series of initiated masters had preserved the perennial philosophy and had guarded it from all corrupting influences. These masters were Rama, Krishna, Hermes Trismegistus, Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato and Jesus. Schuré's work strikes one as a peculiar blend of etic historiography, esoteric legend and outright fiction. His description of the life of Jesus thus refers to historic-critic scholars such as D.F. Strauss, to legends such as Jesus initiation among the Essenes, and to fictional episodes—or revealed episodes; the boundaries are far from clear—such as the precise details of his initiation among these Essenes.

Beliefs similar to these would come to flourish in a number of twentieth-century esoteric and spiritual systems. As is well known, Jung distinguished between the overt manifestation of a myth and its archetypal layers accessible to a spiritually awakened elite. Another example is the Mystery School of Hermann Keyserling.[246] Keyserling believed not only in the existence of an esoteric form of religion, but in a kind of onion-layered structure in which the adept comes progressively to the "actual" message of the faith. The crucial distinction is that between the inner meaning (*Sinn*) of religion and its expression (*Ausdruck*).[247] Thus, the creative hermeneutic of the Esoteric Tradition entered a well-prepared cultural setting.

Theosophy claims that the true meaning of other religious faiths is hidden in the original scriptures, is most obscured in Christian scriptures and only becomes manifest in theosophy. In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky presents a legend of the origin of other religions as well as of her own doctrine that explains why a highly allegoric reading of Hindu or Buddhist scriptures is necessary to bring out the inner, hidden meaning of these texts. Firstly, why should Indian texts have this special quality? This is because the esotericism of the ancient Indian sages has been best preserved among "the few brahmins who have studied their Secret Philosophy".[248] This is in turn largely due to the fact that Sanskrit is no human language but the

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[246] For Keyserling and his school, cf. Gallagher Parks 1934 and Boyer 1979.

[247] See e.g. the essays in Keyserling 1922 for a discussion of man's purported spiritual crisis based on this distinction.

[248] SD II: 635.

language of the gods, and can therefore be used as a vehicle to transmit ancient wisdom in a way that no European language can match.[249] Secondly, why should these texts be read allegorically rather than literally? Because the main works of Indian philosophy, the Upanishads (spuriously translated by Blavatsky as "the conquest of ignorance by the revelation of *secret, spiritual* knowledge") were expurgated by the brahmins once it became clear to them that they could not be kept entirely out of the reach of individuals of low caste.[250] This was done by detaching the most important portions of the text, but the brahmins also ensured that a master key was transmitted among the initiated, to enable them to read the remainder with an appropriate hermeneutic.

To summarize, the distinction made by several writers between an exoteric and an esoteric form of religion combines several topoi common within the Esoteric Tradition. It eliminates the relativism that one risks when facing the diversity of human faiths: behind the many masks of religion lies one single core wisdom. It explains the difference between various exoteric faiths by placing them within the various stages of Esoteric historiography, thus incorporating them into one of the dominating metanarratives of the Modern Esoteric Tradition. It provides a place in the (emic) spiritual history of mankind for the initiates who have transmitted perennial philosophy, always making sure that it is phrased in a language adapted to the needs and abilities of the recipient.

One common version of this theme specifically sees mysticism as the underlying core of the perennial philosophy. The negative Other of mysticism is organized religion. One particularly explicit formulation of this dichotomy can be found in Amit Goswami's *The Self-Aware Universe*. According to Goswami, the same message of unity underlying diversity was proclaimed by mystics as diverse as Catherine of Genoa, Hui-Neng, Ibn al-Arabi, Moses de Leon, Padmasambhava, Eckhart, al-Hallaj, Shankara and Jesus.[251] Why, then, do Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians disagree on so many issues if the "essence" of each religion is identical? Goswami's answer is that "mysticism is a universal enterprise. There is no parochialism in mysticism. Parochialism enters when religions simplify mystical teachings

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[249] SD I: 269.
[250] SD I: 270 ff.
[251] Goswami *Self-Aware Universe*, p. 52 f.

to make them more communicable to the masses of humankind".[252]

Most positions discussed here embrace similar views of a single, perennial philosophy transmitted in more or less pristine form. However, a somewhat different strategy was adopted by Steiner, one strikingly reminiscent of Carl Jung's attitude to non-Western religions. Steiner believed that different peoples constituted groups with clearly differentiated essences, each ethnic group having a distinct *Volksseele*.[253] A spiritual scientific investigation of this essence shows that spiritual differences are partly embodied in the blood.[254] Higher truths can be found everywhere.[255] Nevertheless, those of the Western tradition are best suited to us through spiritual necessity.[256]

The overt message of the Esoteric Tradition is one of universalism. The subtext is rather more particularistic, since all other faiths are interpreted through a strongly distorting hermeneutic filter. This is a characteristic example of creolization: the structures that are particular to one's own faith, in this case a kind of esoteric doctrinal system, are clothed in a pan-religious vocabulary.

Esoteric Exegesis of Myth

The allegorizing message of the exoteric/esoteric distinction allows Esoteric writers considerable freedom. Only certain cultures are part of the source material on which these writers draw. One might hypothesize that these are cultures that have points of overt affinity with the Esoteric Tradition. Even from these cultures, one chooses highly selectively. The double process of selective choice and creative hermeneutics applies not least to the role of myth in the Esoteric Tradition. In fact, apart from mysticism, one of the elements of religion that has most frequently been appropriated for the purpose of constructing an inner meaning and a perennial philosophy is myth. Interpretations of myth that claim to reveal truths relevant to our

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[252] Goswami *Self-Aware Universe*, p. 54.

[253] "Wie der Finger als einzelnes Glied zum ganzen Leibe gehören, so gehören die einzelnen Menschen des Volkes zu einer Volksseele [. . .] Sie ist eine absolute realität: der Eingeweihte kan sich mit dieser Seele unterhalten." Steiner *Aegyptische Mythen und Mysterien*, lect. 12, p. 201. ("Just as a single finger belongs to the entire body, individual human beings belong to a folk soul. This soul is an absolute reality: the initiate can hold a conversation with this soul").

[254] See Steiner's speech *Das Blut ist ein ganz besonderer Saft.*

[255] Steiner *Aegyptische Mythen und Mysterien*, lect. 12, p. 200.

[256] Steiner *Aegyptische Mythen und Mysterien*, lect. 10, p. 157.

own predicament are by no means exclusively part of the Esoteric positions presented here. The many predecessors on this path include a number of German Romantics, Carl Jung, and those writers from Joseph Campbell to Rollo May who attempt to revalorize myth as a cure for the spiritual ills of the West. Jung and his followers are probably more paradigmatic examples of this psychologizing exegesis of myth.

Nevertheless, the belief that myth is a repository of the deepest spiritual wisdom is also found in the Esoteric Tradition. In the selection of texts reviewed here, this belief predates Jung's work. Early theosophy is only marginally interested in the subject. Thus, the *Mahatma Letters* still lack discussions of myth. Blavatsky affirms both in *Isis Unveiled* and in *The Secret Doctrine* that myths have both a core of wisdom and a historical and scientific foundation, but these are only passing remarks.[257] By the turn of the century and the advent of neo-theosophy, myth has entered the discourse of tradition. Besant uses a simile based on Plato's story of the cave:

> "myth" is by no means what most people imagine it to be—a mere fanciful story erected on a basis of fact, or even altogether apart from fact. A myth is far truer than a history, for a history only gives a story of the shadows, whereas a myth gives a story of the substances that cast the shadows.[258]

In Esoteric texts, the admiration of mythic wisdom is linked with the belief in two or more layers of religious truth. The overt meaning of the myth becomes the mere trappings with which believers in exoteric doctrines content themselves, while the deeper truths need to be revealed by an interpreter with the requisite insights. Again, Jung is perhaps the best-known exponent in our own century of such a hermeneutic. Spokespersons of the Esoteric Tradition propose similar understandings of myth. Thus, Alice Bailey writes on the life of Christ:

> Scholars spend their lives in proving that the whole story is only a myth. It should, however, be pointed out that a myth is the summarised belief and knowledge of the past, handed down to us for our guidance and forming the foundation of a newer revelation, and that it is a stepping-stone to the next truth. A myth is a valid and proven truth which bridges, step by step, the gap between the past gained knowledge, the present formulated truth, and the infinite and divine possibilities

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[257] IU II: 406, SD I: 339.
[258] Besant *Esoteric Christianity*, p. 152.

> of the future. The ancient myths and the old mysteries give us a sequential presentation of the divine message as it went forth from God in response to the need of man, down the ages. The truth of one age becomes the myth of the next, but its significance and its reality remain untouched, and require only re-interpretation in the present.[259]

The precise interpretation of myth, however, changes with time. In the earlier positions, myth is often understood in a literalistic/esoteric fashion. In New Age readings, Jungian psychologizing interpretations have come to dominate. A central figure in this Jungian turn was Dane Rudhyar. Rudhyar was instrumental in the shift of twentieth century astrology away from predictive interpretations to psychological chart readings. Within the New Age, texts on divination therefore stand out for their frequent reliance on myths interpreted in a more or less orthodox Jungian fashion.

Compared with e.g. the claims of aromatherapists or reflexologists to continue ancient Egyptian practices, the diviners' reliance on myths is a different kind of appeal to tradition. Modern Jungian astrologers, from Dane Rudhyar to Liz Greene, do not claim that their interpretation of charts is a direct inheritance from an age-old understanding of divination. Rather, their use of myth is as neo-Jungian as their interpretation. Myths are supposedly part of a transcultural heritage. Just as a more orthodox Jungian might use myths for the amplification of a dream, a Jungian astrologer will use myths to amplify the web of associations with a given element of the chart.

In November of 1977, astronomer Charles Kowal discovered a comet with an erratic orbit between Saturn and Uranus. At first, this comet was believed to be a small planet, and the astrological community was gripped with excitement. Within a year there were ephemerides for the new "planet". Specialists from within the astrological community attempted to interpret the meaning of this new celestial body. Customarily, celestial bodies are named by committees of astronomers, and in this case the comet/planet was given the designation Chiron. Although the name was hardly chosen for astrological reasons, the praxis here as elsewhere in astrology was to attempt to draw parallels with the Greek mythic figure after whom it was named.

Different Greek myths describe Chiron as variously the companion, ruler or ancestor of the centaurs. In a fight with Hercules,

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[259] Bailey *From Bethlehem to Calvary*, p. 7.

Chiron was hit by an arrow which caused an unhealable wound. Chiron, being one of the immortals, was thus condemned to eternal suffering. He attempted to remedy his plight by healing others, until he was allowed to swap destinies with Prometheus, took his place and died. This bare-bones rendition of the myth hardly does justice to its variations and its richness of details: astrological books on Chiron exploit virtually every aspect of the myth in order to amplify the basic theme of the role of this celestial object in chart interpretation, a theme sometimes referred to as "the wounded healer". A couple of quotes taken at random from one book devoted to the subject will illustrate the ease with which astrologers move between the psychological, mythological and astrological/technical aspects of their worldview:

> Poseidon (the Greek name for Neptune), was Chiron's half-brother and also fathered by Saturn, and thus helps us glimpse the meaning behind some of the themes that appear in the lives of those with Chiron in Pisces or in the 12th house (Dionysus too is often associated with the sign of Pisces).[260]
>
> Those with Chiron/Jupiter [aspects] often enjoy taking risks and tempting fate. Zeus was sometimes said to have been the father of the three Fates, who executed his decisions. Earlier versions of the myth, however, put supreme authority in the hands of the Fates themselves. With Chiron/Jupiter contacts, we may have a sneaky feeling that *we* are the final arbiter of our destiny.[261]

The story of Chiron serves as an example of a very common way of using myths. Many other divination manuals are, in this respect, quite similar. Thus, Liz Greene's discussion of the role of Pluto is replete with references to myths depicting the concept of destiny, Greek (the *moirai*) and Mesopotamian (Ereshkigal).[262] Tarot books are equally likely to use mythic material. As Cynthia Giles notes, "today, there is a virtual cornucopia of mythical universes for the Tarot. Among them the world of the Greek gods and goddesses, shamanic pagan/tribal life, Norse and Celtic sagas, Arthurian legends, and the mysteries of Japan's "floating world".[263]

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[260] Reinhart *Chiron*, pp. 170 f.
[261] Reinhart *Chiron*, pp. 224 f.
[262] Greene *Astrology of Fate*.
[263] Giles *Tarot*, p. 121.

Source Amnesia

A crucial strategy in transforming the unfamiliar and exotic into yet another building block of a New Age worldview is *source amnesia*: the propensity to gloss over or be unaware of the fact that processes of reinterpretation have taken place. A reduction of complex doctrines to a few building blocks, the extensive search for more or less spurious parallels or the application of various speculative hermeneutics to myths would hardly work if one were acutely aware of the Procrustean tactics used in each of these cases. Thus, all the other strategies become available to those who accept New Age historiography through the application of the meta-strategy of source amnesia.

My proposal to call this meta-strategy source amnesia is the loan and metaphorical usage of a term from cognitive psychology. In psychology, the term refers to the not uncommon fact that one may remember a piece of information but forget where one learnt of it, thus e.g. confounding what actually happened with hearsay, a snippet of dialogue from a movie or a sequence from a dream. In the case of religious bricolage, source amnesia typically takes place when a general term used in connection with an older tradition becomes associated with specific, modern reinterpretations. This is the case when Michael Harner's specific version of shamanism, created in the late 1960s and early 1970s, becomes associated with "core shamanism" or with "shamanism" *tout court*. This is the case when "reincarnation" is automatically understood to imply the melioristic, Esoteric understanding of the term. This is also the case when the Jungian, psychologizing vocabulary of twentieth century astrologers such as Dane Rudhyar, Liz Greene or Stephen Arroyo is understood as being astrology in the singular, rather than as a specific, late modern interpretation of astrology.

These examples point to the double role of source amnesia. In a chapter that deals with the discovery as well as invention of similarities in order to construct a tradition with deep roots for one's doctrines, it should perhaps be emphasized that source amnesia also eliminates the problems associated with the many innovations introduced to the material. The spokespersons whose claims are said to rest on an ageless wisdom may, from an emic point of view, in fact be the very same individuals who invent radically new religious doctrines and rituals.

As we shall see in the following case study, source amnesia may operate in several stages. Each major spokesperson will regard the

more or less radical reinterpretations of his or her predecessors as a self-evident point of departure. With time, a chain of transmission is built up, in which the latest spokespersons may have a horizon in time that stretches no more than twenty or thirty years back, and in which anything older than this is considered to belong to a diffuse, ancient past. The question whether one's preferred doctrines are truly the result of an ancient tradition or were remade a few years ago by some creative religious entrepreneur becomes irrelevant. The latest innovation and the ageless tradition are perceived to be essentially the same.

Case Study—Constructing the Chakra System, Part II

A case study introduced this section: the widespread belief in an esoteric anatomy, including energy centers identified by the Sanskrit term *chakra*. Armed with an understanding of the modalities of religious globalization in the Esoteric Tradition, we shall now return to the history and development of the belief in a chakra system. The focus lies on two questions. How have various spokespersons gradually adapted what is originally a concept embedded in a context of Indian Tantra to the radically different setting of the modern West? What have they achieved by doing so?

The Indian Background

The historical development of Hinduism is notoriously difficult to trace, not least because historiography and mythography in the Western senses are barely distinguished in the classical sources. The idea of a vital force (prana) and the channels along which it flows (nadi) appear in the earliest Upanishads (perhaps as early as 7th–8th century BCE).[264] The heart was said to be the center of 72,000 nadis, and the place into which the senses are withdrawn during sleep. It was, however, only in the later Upanishads—the earliest of which were composed somewhere between the second century BCE and the second century CE—that reference was first made to the basic concepts of the Indian esoteric physiology that would come to include the chakra system. These precursors of the chakra system were absorbed by Tantrism, a family of doctrines and practices that

[264] Where no other sources are explicitly quoted, the information on the Indian background has been compiled from Gupta 1979, Heilijgers-Seelen 1990 and White 1996.

developed some time around the sixth century CE with the aim of effecting the liberation[265] of individual adepts through various ritual practices.[266] A reinterpretation of Tantric doctrine during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries internalized the "magic" or ritualistic aspect of earlier Tantrism. Rather than manipulating aspects of the external world, the *tantrika* was enjoined to effect the mystic liberation through meditative manipulation of this inner world. An esoteric physiology developed, especially within two schools known, respectively, as Pascimamnaya (or "Western Transmission") and Yogini Kaula, which gave rise to a yogic practice revolving around a system of cakras or wheels.[267]

Developed Tantric doctrine postulates six, seven, nine, twelve or even twenty-seven chakras, depending on the mode of reckoning.[268] Most commonly, there are said to be six, with a seventh center on the crown of the head strictly considered to be located outside the chakra system. The chakras are strung along the central or Sushumna channel, usually located at the spine but in a subtle body (*suksma sarira*) rather than the physical body. The chakras are described as focal points of meditation; structures within the subtle body that are "pierced" (*vedha, bhedana*) by the kundalini force as the yogi perfects breath control and other techniques.[269] To aid the meditative process, each chakra is described by means of a wealth of symbolic associations or correspondences. Building upon the speculation in the later Upanishads, each chakra, as well as having a specific position in the physical body, element, mantra, and deity, also has a particular number of petals, and is associated with one of the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, a corresponding color, shape, animal, plane of existence, sense-organ, mantric sound, and so on. As is usually the case with systems of correspondences, the actual associations are arbitrary. For instance, smell and feet are associated with Muladhara, taste and hand with Svadhishthana, sight and anus with Manipura, etc.

The Tantric doctrines and practices wandered back and forth

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[265] This vague term is chosen deliberately, since various groups of Tantrics interpreted the goal of their efforts in widely divergent ways, from spiritual liberation to physical longevity to the mastery of suprahuman abilities (siddhis).

[266] White 1996: 1.

[267] White 1996: 4 f.

[268] White 1996: 367 n. 95.

[269] White 1996: 318 ff. The vocabulary is a reminiscence of the origin of Tantric praxis in sexual ritual and its subsequent interiorization.

across highly permeable religious borders: the belief in a hidden anatomy is found in Hindu as well as Jain and Buddhist Tantric texts.

Appropriation by Esoteric Spokespersons

Throughout the nineteenth century, Tantric concepts, including the chakra terminology, remained part of the more obscure areas of Sanskrit vocabulary. Monier-Williams' monumental *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, of which the first edition appeared in 1872, is said to have mistranslated several of the chakra terms.[270] The concept of chakras entered theosophy after Blavatsky's and Olcott's relocation to India; certain rituals reserved for the inner, secret circle of theosophical adepts rested on the belief in an occult physiology comprising such centers.[271] During the two first decades of the twentieth century, public knowledge in the West of the chakra system improved. The first overviews in English appeared, notably a summary chapter on the chakras published by Charles Leadbeater in 1910.[272] The Theosophical Society in Adyar also edited two volumes of translations dealing with the chakra system.[273]

The fact that Tantric yoga and cosmology became familiar to a larger audience of Westerners interested in non-Christian religions is, however, largely due to the efforts of Sir John Woodroffe, judge at the High Courts of Calcutta. The principles of what he variously called Kundali Yoga and Laya Yoga were presented in works dating from the 1910s. Of his rather voluminous works, the most influential was *The Serpent Power*, which was first published in 1919 and went through seven editions. The book consists of two Sanskrit texts, the *Sat-Cakra-Nirupana* and the *Padhuka-Pañcaka*, written in Assam (northeastern India) in the sixteenth century, together with Woodroffe's own lengthy introduction.

Woodroffe's introduction to Tantrism and the chakras is quite technical, employing numerous Sanskrit terms. His book is clearly

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[270] Woodroffe 1919, 2nd ed.: 4 f. presents a list of Monier-Williams' mistakes. He thus notes that Monier-Williams erroneously placed the *anahata* or heart chakra at the base of the nose and the *ajna chakra* in the fontanel. Later editions have corrected such errors.

[271] Blavatsky's instructions to her inner group, as quoted in Johnson 1998: 124 f.

[272] Leadbeater *The Inner Life*, vol. I section 5.

[273] One of these, a slender volume of some eighty pages, consists of a translation of a seventeenth century text, the *Shiva Samhita*. The texts in the other, *Thirty Minor Upanishads*, include some late Upanishads that deal with yoga, including Tantric theories regarding the chakras.

directed at a scholarly audience: it includes the original Sanskrit texts, which were reproduced in earlier editions in Devanagari characters whereas later editions contain a transcription. The translation and detailed commentary follow the original texts verse by verse. Woodroffe's presentation can hardly have appealed to a generalized readership, and has probably served principally as a source of facts for later popularizers and spokespersons for various esoteric positions. Woodroffe comments on some of these reinterpretations in later editions of his book, and is quite critical of e.g. Leadbeater's theories.[274] Nevertheless, Woodroffe can be seen as partly having caused the reinterpretation he deplores. He compares Western physiology and its Tantric counterpart in ways that may well have inspired Leadbeater and his Esoteric colleagues to draw bold parallels between the two.[275]

Tantric theories about the chakras, as presented by Woodroffe, were based to a large extent on the traditional religious concepts and iconography of the particular time and culture in which they were formulated. By disembedding and reembedding these theories, writers ensured that chakra beliefs would adapt to a variety of different contexts of the modern West. The chakras reached an academic audience as well as an educated lay readership thanks to writers such as Carl Jung,[276] Mircea Eliade[277] and Joseph Campbell,[278] each with his own reasons for wishing to appropriate the chakras. The reinterpretations effected by these authors, especially Jung, are at times quite radical compared to the material presented in Woodroffe's work, but fall beyond the scope of the present study.

As noted above, a more influential interpretation of the chakras was introduced to a Western audience by the theosophists, beginning with Charles Leadbeater.[279] Leadbeater does not so much present Tantric chakra beliefs as reconstruct them. According to his view, the chakras have an objective existence and can be perceived through psychic vision. This is a view that gives distincter contours

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[274] Woodroffe 1919, 7th ed.: pp. 6 ff.

[275] Woodroffe 1919, 2nd ed.: pp. 105 ff.

[276] Jung held lectures on the chakra system in 1932; Clarke 1995 reproduces several short texts by Jung on the chakras.

[277] Eliade 1958.

[278] Campbell 1974.

[279] The main sources of theosophical chakra doctrines are Leadbeater's two books *The Inner Life*, published in 1910, and especially *The Chakras*, published in 1927.

to the doctrines found in the Tantric sources, where it is not made clear whether the chakras are independently existing structures in the subtle body, or if the yogi somehow "creates" the chakras by visualizing them as part of his meditative praxis.[280] Once the chakras are unequivocally claimed to possess an objective existence apart from the intentions of the yogi, their number and properties could also be fixed. The number of chakras was now said to be seven, partly because this was the number of chakras in the texts published by Woodroffe, and no doubt also partly because the theosophical worldview is based on septenary schemata. Leadbeater's basic transformation of the material from a complex and sometimes contradictory set of opinions on the chakras presented in deliberately obscure texts composed over several centuries, to a simple doctrinal statement directed at a large audience, constitutes the radical reduction of the exotic Other on which all subsequent discussions of the chakras are based. Leadbeater also makes several original claims, which have been followed by almost all subsequent theosophical and New Age writers. In a characteristic example of source amnesia, this has usually been done without acknowledging Leadbeater as the source of these innovations.

According to Leadbeater's professed clairvoyant perception, the chakras are seen as energy vortexes in each of the subtle bodies. This, again, diverges from the Indian traditions, where the chakras are perceived as centers of vital force, but in which modern scientistic concepts such as "energy" have no obvious counterparts. The theosophical doctrine has integrated the chakra system into a Western context infused with the rhetorical strength of science and technology. This also appears to explain why certain aspects of the Tantric systems as presented by Woodroffe, which may have appeared too pre-modern, were tacitly dropped. Woodroffe explains that Kundalini is the name of a Hindu goddess, the consort of Shiva, who may appear in her impersonal aspect as a vital force coiled up at the base of the spine.[281] Leadbeater and later Esotericists up to and including New Age writers have reinterpreted kundalini as simply a form of energy.

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[280] Eliade 1958: 234 calls the chakras "transphysiological", implying that all the centers represent yogic states.

[281] Woodroffe 1919: 1.

Leadbeater may also have been the first to suggest that the chakras are the links that connect the physical body and the various subtle bodies (i.e. the etheric, astral, mental and other bodies). Theosophical doctrine implies that the chakras are receivers and transmitters of a cosmic vital force necessary to the well-being of the individual. Thus, Leadbeater is the originator of the prevalent New Age praxis of healing, balancing or unblocking the chakras through various forms of ritual.

Leadbeater associates each chakra with a number of anatomical details in the physical body. Each chakra corresponds to a gland, a nerve plexus, a vertebra and an organ. Thus, the *ajna chakra* corresponds to the pituitary gland, a plexus in the head known as the *plexus venosus caroticus internus* and the first cervical vertebra.[282] Similar links, especially those between chakras and glands, will become part of the Esoteric consensus and play a central role in Alice Bailey's version of the subtle anatomy.[283] The Tantric authors themselves would probably have lacked the detailed anatomical knowledge of the human nervous system to construct such specific parallels.

Leadbeater's description retains the link between the chakras and the praxis of meditation. In the form of yoga that Leadbeater (following Woodroffe) calls Laya Yoga—corresponding to what is more commonly known today as Kundalini Yoga—the point is to let the vital force rise through each of the chakras and finally emerge through the crown chakra. The crucial difference between Tantric and theosophical conceptions lies in Leadbeater's literalist interpretation of the esoteric anatomy and in the details of this view of the human bodies. Whereas the Tantric adept reaches his goal of enlightenment and liberation by visualizing the vital force passing through the subtle canals along the spine, Leadbeater claims that the meditative practices make the preexisting energy centers grow larger and rotate at a higher speed.

Leadbeater's chakra system with its septenary base is, in a way, particularly subject to pattern recognition, since there are numerous other esoteric concepts that are based on seven entities. Thus, Leadbeater attempts to demonstrate the analogies between his own theory of the chakras and the Christian theosophy propounded by

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[282] Leadbeater *The Chakras*, p. 41.

[283] In Bailey's *The Soul and its Mechanisms* the entire sixth chapter, entitled "The Seven Centres of Force", is devoted to the chakra theories.

Johann Georg Gichtel, editor of Jakob Böhme's writings and in many ways a follower of Behmenist creed.[284] On the cover of Leadbeater's book *The Chakras*, one finds one of Gichtel's illustrations, originally published in 1696, in which circles and astrological signs have been placed on a male figure. In the navel, Gichtel has placed the moon. The left and right sides of the abdomen are the seats of Mercury and Venus, respectively. The heart is the organ of the sun, while the chest houses Mars. The sign for Jupiter is placed on the forehead, while Saturn adorns the crown.

Analogical reasoning presents problems once one recognizes that there are considerable divergences as well as similarities. Gichtel's astrological worldview is hardly the reflex of a universal insight into the human chakra system. An interpretation of Gichtel's illustration based on etic history rather than emic pattern recognition will more likely show the influence of an idea developed by Gichtel's main source of inspiration, Jakob Böhme. Böhme tried to construct a traditional, hermetic system of correspondences between man, the microcosm, and the planetary system, the macrocosm, and did so from within a heliocentric picture of the world. Whereas the chakra system of the Tantric yogi consists of a vertical hierarchy, Böhme's and Gichtel's systems are built on a near-symmetrical schema, of which man's heart constitutes the center, and within which the sun is lodged as a symbol of vital force and spiritual light.[285]

Chakras Enter the New Age

With the spread and popularization of esoteric ideas and practices through the counterculture of the late 60s and early 70s, parts of theosophical lore, particularly the concept of the chakras, entered the developing New Age. Leadbeater's book has gone through numerous reprints, and has sold widely. However, the esoteric anatomy and the chakras seem to have been of minor interest within the early New Age culture. A catalogue of esoteric books published in 1976 lists only half a dozen titles in its "Occult Anatomy" section.[286] A few more (including Woodroffe's *The Serpent Power*) are to be found in the Tantra section. The chakras are described in books on yoga aimed at a somewhat different audience than books in the Esoteric

[284] For Gichtel, see Gorceix 1975 and Versluis 1999: 29 ff.
[285] Weeks 1991: 72 f.
[286] Popenoe 1976.

Tradition. The practice of yoga itself was presented in do-it-yourself manuals, often of hatha yoga, in which this originally religious practice is presented as a set of physical exercises in which cosmological doctrines appeared to be an optional appendage.[287] Others were publications connected with the doctrines and practices of the various Hindu movements, e.g. Kripalu Yoga, which were brought to the West after the relaxation of American visa regulations made it possible for missionaries of these movements to immigrate.[288]

On some points, Leadbeater's account was to be superseded by the innovations of writers of this early New Age period. Leadbeater describes each chakra as colored, but gives a rather intricate description of the details of each chakra. His *ajna chakra* is divided into one half that is rose-colored with a tinge of yellow, and another that is purplish-blue. Later systems are neater, more symmetrical. The majority of New Age texts present the chakras as a sequence of centers which to the clairvoyant eye display the seven colors of the rainbow; the *ajna chakra* is usually described as blue. What is seldom if ever made explicit in these texts is the novelty of this color scheme.[289] The association between the chakras and the colors of the spectrum appears to have originated with the American esotericist Christopher Hills. His system, loosely based on theosophy, was taught at a kind of esoteric educational commune based in Santa Cruz, California, called The University of the Trees. Hills' metaphysical system is partly based on an interpretation of the symbolism of colors first presented in his book *Nuclear Evolution: A Guide to Cosmic Enlightenment*, published in 1968. A complete system of correspondences with the chakras was probably worked out some time during the seventies, and appeared in print in the sequel *Nuclear Evolution: The Rainbow Body* (1977). Basically, all subsequent New Age authors base their

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[287] One of the most prolific American writers on yoga throughout the 1960s and early 1970s was Richard Hittleman. His books tended to present yoga as a set of physical exercises useful to those who wished to reduce their weight and keep healthy. Book titles such as *Yoga 28 Day Exercise Plan* (1969) and *Weight Control Through Yoga* (1971) are characteristic of his down-to-earth approach.

[288] For information on some of these movements, see Thursby 1995, esp. pp. 202 f.

[289] To be precise, Leadbeater prefigures this account of the chakras in his *The Inner Life*, vol I section 5, published in 1910. The reference to the correspondence between the seven chakras, seven colors and seven notes of the musical scale is, however, made only in passing and disappears from sight in the remainder of that chapter, as well as in his considerably more elaborate account in *The Chakras*.

theories on Leadbeater's concepts as revised by Hills. Source amnesia is once again in operation here, since Hills' ideas are adopted without any reference to the fact that the rainbow model of the chakras is an innovation.

The chakras firmly entered the mainstream of Esoteric speculation in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. A book from 1990, Naomi Ozaniec's *The Elements of the Chakras*, is still firmly rooted in a theosophical tradition, and in fact begins with a quote from Alice Bailey's channeled material. However, Ozaniec treats the chakras in typically eclectic New Age fashion by constructing homologies with elements, sentiments, colors, animals and even Bach flower remedies and affirmations. A similarly eclectic work, Dalichow & Booth's *Aura-Soma*, departs somewhat more radically from the theosophical model by positing nine rather than seven chakras. The authors of this book also attempt to construct vast systems of correspondence.

By the late 1990s, the chakras had also largely separated from their theosophical context. One of the most popular accounts of the chakras in New Age literature to date is *Anatomy of the Spirit* by Caroline Myss, which appeared in 1996. The paperback editions of Myss' book were published by major publishers with no links to the New Age milieu, a fact that is symptomatic of the wide acceptance that the concept of chakras has received.[290] In Myss' exposé, the links to the Tantric praxis of "piercing" the sushumna in order to let the kundalini force rise have nearly disappeared. The chakra system has now been transformed firstly into a set of labels by means of which various life experiences can be named, and secondly into a series of homologies that bear the unmistakable stamp of modern New Age creativity. Each chakra can be linked to anatomical details of the human body, to colors, emotions, personality traits, illnesses etc. Despite the fact that earlier books have been freely available to later authors, there is a considerable divergence of opinion. This is especially the case with those kinds of homologies that did not exist in classical times, perhaps most notably the personality traits reportedly associated with each chakra. The greatest consensus seems to lie in those correspondences that were established by theosophical writers, especially, of course, Leadbeater and Bailey. This short but documented lineage disappears from sight in New Age texts such as

[290] The American paperback edition of Myss' book was published by Random House, the British version by Bantam.

Aura-Soma. The connection between chakras and glands, a set of homologies with roots dating back to around 1930, is described as "traditional" by Dalichow and Booth.[291] Paula Horan affirms that Reiki healers have always known of this connection.[292]

The most recent books, especially Myss', depart radically even from this tradition, and create an entirely new symbology of the chakras that has almost no remaining similarities with Tantric Hinduism. Myss, who describes herself as an intuitive healer, is mainly interested in the role the chakras are said to play in the well-being of her clients and readers. Illnesses and personal problems are attributed to each of the seven chakras.

Chakra Ideology

During the 1990s, the concept of the chakras has gradually gone from being part of a theosophical or post-theosophical worldview to becoming part of popular culture. Thus, a search on the Internet conducted in May 2000 produced nearly 87,000 sites that contained the word chakra.[293] Dozens of books[294] and innumerable courses, services and products contribute to making the concept of the chakras familiar to the general public. Since Carolyne Myss has become a major spokesperson for chakra beliefs, her book *Anatomy of the Spirit* is worth a more detailed reading.

In Myss' presentation, the background in Tantric praxis has all but disappeared. The links to a specific theosophical tradition are also subdued. For Myss, the chakra system is simply a reality that she and other intuitive people can observe. We shall take a look at four innovations in Myss' text, which allow the concept of chakras to be adapted to the radically different context within which her views of the esoteric anatomy are placed.

Firstly, the author is clearly more familiar with Western culture and its esoteric and mainstream religious traditions than with India. Her associations primarily involve the kabbala, the sacraments and

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[291] Dalichow & Booth *Aura-Soma*, p. 39.

[292] Horan *Empowerment Through Reiki*, p. 41.

[293] The Altavista search engine was used for this search. The actual number of sites discussing the chakras (as opposed to merely mentioning them) remains unknown, since many more sites that contain the word chakra will not be accessible to Altavista.

[294] In May 2000, the on-line bookseller Amazon.com carried 47 titles containing the word chakra. Many more books include information on the chakra system as part of e.g. a discussion of healing.

God, rather than, for instance, the sushumna channel or the kundalini force. Practically the only reference to the Eastern origins of the chakra system is an illustration borrowed from Joseph Campbell's *The Mythic Image*. This figure is all the more puzzling as it depicts the contours of a meditating person, and thus refers to that cultural background of which Myss' text says next to nothing. Secondly, Myss works with what she calls intuitive medicine, and uses her chakra system as one way of expressing her views on the genesis of illness and the modalities of healing. Thirdly, Myss lives in a psychologizing culture. As we will see, the concept of the chakras is used in a context defined by a genre of self-help literature. Finally, not only does the author live in a psychologizing culture, but in a Western and more specifically American environment. Psychological theories and practices will define certain character traits as part of the psychological constitution of the healthy individual and other traits as pathological. Thus, American folk (as well as "academic") psychologies share certain value judgments.[295] The chakra system becomes a set of terms and concepts by means of which the readers can understand and reconstruct their life histories as a gradual assimilation of these fundamental American values.

Like her predecessors, Myss establishes a detailed set of links with regard to the chakras. In her system, each chakra matches a part of the (physical) anatomy, a character trait or part of the human psyche, a sacrament, and one of the kabbalistic principles or *sefirot*. For example, the *vishuddha* or throat chakra is said to match the thyroid gland, throat, neck and mouth; the will; the sacrament of confession; and the sefirot Hesed and Gevurah. There are some difficulties involved in creating such a set of correspondences. The fact that there are ten sefirot to match with seven chakras is one such problem, which Myss handles by assigning one sefirah to certain chakras and two sefirot to others. The other problem is the randomness of several such correspondences. The association between the throat and the will is fairly opaque. It is therefore of interest to note the rationale given by the author to explain why and how she juxtaposes elements that are obviously the products of widely divergent historical traditions. Thus, the *vishuddha chakra* and the catholic confession obviously share no common ancestry, a fact that Myss is

[295] Kirschner 1996.

naturally aware of. Nevertheless it makes sense for her to link these two elements. The following quote illustrates several of the legitimizing strategies found in the Esoteric Tradition:

> We are born knowing these seven sacred truths. Indeed, each of us essentially is a "biological edition" of them. We are taught variations of these truths again as children through our tribes' religious practices. And even if we are not consciously taught these truths, they awaken in us automatically—in our guts, in our minds, in our sense of the natural order of life [. . .]
>
> The truths contained in the scriptural teachings of the different religious traditions are meant to unite us, not separate us. Literal interpretation causes separation, whereas symbolic interpretation—seeing that all of them address the identical design of our spiritual natures—brings us together [. . .]
>
> Merging Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Jewish spiritual traditions into one system with common sacred truths constitutes a powerful system of guidance that can enhance our minds and bodies and show us how to manage our spirits within the world.[296]

A passage such as this builds in part on simple rhetorical techniques. By using expressions with strong positive connotations such as "truths", "natural order", "sacred", "clarity and depth" and "powerful", the reader is led to see the existence and meaning of the chakra system as self-evident rather than controversial. Such a text, however, also functions on a more general level by basing the concept of chakras on foundations that are probably shared by many readers within the New Age community.

Tantric praxis is, of course, linked to its local religious worldview, for instance certain forms of Kashmiri Shaivism. Theosophical chakra doctrines are also part of their specific religious context: theosophy is a fairly well-defined system with explicit doctrines set out in authoritative texts. In comparison with the texts of such reasonably well-structured creeds, New Age literature has a much vaguer doctrinal underpinning. Just as every individual is free to pick fragments from a dozen cultures and combine them in an idiosyncratic mix, Myss creates correspondences between the chakras and a number of historically unrelated and structurally dissimilar traditions. Thus, the function of the heart chakra is explained in terms of Christian virtues such as forgiveness, and Jesus is explicitly mentioned as an exam-

[296] Myss *Anatomy of the Spirit*, pp. 90 f.

ple. Such attempts to link different faiths lie on the borderline between the purportedly historical and the transhistorical: the truth lies not in the texts themselves (at least not in any orthodox interpretations of these texts) but in our Selves. To the extent that different historical traditions seem to differ, we are dealing with details that only imperfectly mask a common core of wisdom that lies open to those who are sufficiently spiritually evolved.

Despite the fragmented religiosity, there is a shared cosmology underlying numerous New Age books, and indeed many works of the Esoteric Tradition. This cosmology, also adopted by Caroline Myss, could be called hermetic idealism. It is idealist in the sense that it sees spiritual impulses rather than material causes as the primary mechanism operative in the cosmos. It is hermetic through its implication that these spiritual impulses affect the material world by other means than through mundane chains of cause and effect, e.g. through Jungian synchronicities or through correspondences. It is a cosmology with deep roots in Western esotericism.

The first chakra, says Myss, is the chakra of the tribe, the group and the nation. Through this chakra, the collective spirit of the entire society is linked to the lives of individual people. Myss gives the example of the economic depression that hit the United States during the 1930s, a national event that she feels coincided in a significant way with an epidemic of polio ("*All Is One*: when an entire nation becomes infected with fear, that energy extends to its children"), which in turn corresponded to the election of a president hit by polio (Roosevelt), who somehow incarnated the American destiny. When the depression lifted and was replaced by an economic boom during the 1950s, this in turn coincided meaningfully with Jonas Salk inventing the polio vaccine.[297]

Nevertheless, the purpose of establishing long lists of correspondences does not seem to be merely to indicate analogies between different religious traditions or construct a hermetic view of history. Myss also has a practical goal. As an intuitive healer, Myss is primarily interested in using chakra correspondences as a diagnostic tool. In stark contrast with both their primary functions in Tantric schools (objects of meditative praxis) and in theosophy (construction of an "occult" view of the human being), Myss converts the chakras

[297] Myss relates this episode of American history on pp. 106 f.

into a symbolic language with which personal problems can be discussed. Myss herself does not see the terminology as merely symbolic, but as literal. Myss' work is part of a long lineage of Western modes of naming and explaining psychosomatic illness—a tradition where various trends have successively explained illness in terms of magnetism, humoral imbalance, harmful influences from the uterus or irritated spine.[298]

One of many examples is the *anahata* or heart chakra. Myss explains that this is "the central powerhouse of the human energy system", and therefore of vital importance to a person's health and strength.[299] This chakra is, inter alia, linked with the heart and circulatory system, ribs, chest, thymus, lungs, shoulders, arms, hands and diaphragm. These "medical" correspondences are exemplified through a few anecdotes. A man suffering from high blood pressure has problems related to the *anahata* chakra.

However, Myss is not primarily concerned with physical illness. Her focus clearly lies on more diffuse problems, emotional difficulties and existential crises. Among the many correspondences established with the chakras, character traits are of prime significance. Many if not most of the anecdotes Myss uses to buttress her claims fall within a genre of folk psychological narratives. The heart chakra is not only affected in the case of circulatory ailments, but also of emotional problems. In a more or less neo-Jungian vein, the author tells us that the heart chakra is related to the archetype of the wounded child. This is illustrated, as is common in self-help books, with bare-bones narratives in which the main protagonists are identified merely by proper name and occupation. "Derek", a thirty-seven year-old businessman, and "Perry", a medical doctor, are made to demonstrate the psychological problems attached to the heart chakra, e.g. the effects of unsolved early traumas on adult life.

Who are the protagonists of these minimal narratives? More often than not, they are people with a strong entrepreneurial spirit, individuals who only require minimal prompting from Myss to affirm their unique personality. A considerable number of them are self-employed. These examples are most probably selected as objects of identification for the generally middle class group of people that one

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[298] Shorter 1993 is an excellent review of the folk theories of psychosomatic illness over the last 150 years.

[299] Myss *Anatomy of the Spirit*, p. 197.

might suspect constitute Myss' main readership. Even the few blue collar workers, such as the carpenter "Jack", are often presented in the role of recently self-employed entrepreneurs.

This rather particular cast of characters points to a hidden ideological agenda that Myss' book shares with countless other titles in genres such as self-help, personal development, complementary medicine, astrology and the tarot. Such texts tend to be constructed around narratives of development. The characters depicted, e.g. in the illness narratives or the astrological chart readings reproduced in such books, suffer from various problems and weaknesses that are overcome by means of the insights and methods offered. As noted, these genres of literature contribute to establishing culturally grounded distinctions between unwanted and prized character traits. While Myss' book may explicitly build on a kind of perennial philosophy, the synthesis of kabbala and chakra systems—it nevertheless implicitly participates in a contemporary, culturally defined discourse on what aspects of the self are highly valued.

Like many other New Age writers, Myss claims that people are responsible both for creating their own illnesses and for healing themselves:

> Energy medicine is a holistic philosophy that teaches: "I am responsible for the creation of my health. I therefore participated, at some level, in the creation of this illness. I can participate in the healing of this illness by healing myself, which means simultaneously healing my emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual being." [. . .] The process of curing is passive; that is, the patient is inclined to give his or her authority over to the physician and prescribed treatment [. . .] Healing, on the other hand, is an active, internal process that includes investigating one's attitudes, memories and beliefs with the desire to release all negative patterns that prevent one's full emotional and spiritual recovery.[300]

The concept of self-healing is a deeply ingrained ideal in modern Western society. In her study of the cultural roots of psychotherapeutic discourse, Suzanne Kirschner notes that it is common for therapists, although they work within different post-Freudian schools, to assert the same ideals of self-reliance and self-improvement in their patients. Therapy helps those patients who help themselves.[301]

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[300] Myss *Anatomy of the Spirit*, pp. 47 f.

[301] Kirschner 1996. See also Bellah et al. 1985, which to a large extent is devoted to modern American concepts of the self and their expression in a therapeutic setting.

The ideal of autonomy and truthfulness to one's Self are recurrent motives in Myss' narratives. Time and again, Myss paints a sharp contrast between loyalty to one's own wishes and needs, and loyalty to the group to which one belongs. Among the crucial lessons learnt by the protagonists of the anecdotes are: the importance of freeing oneself from the ideas received through one's upbringing; individuation; learning to make choices; and getting to know one's own motives and drives. The author's individualist credo is summed up in one passage as "the realization that no one person or group of people can determine your life's path".[302] Myss' individualism fits well with Western folk psychological attributions: lay people tend to interpret the actions of others in terms of their personal dispositions, whereas formal psychologies are far more inclined to take situational factors into account.[303]

That such a narrative is ideologically and culturally motivated need of course not imply that it cannot have a liberating effect on its readership. In one of the many rhetorical *exempla*, "Julie" is afflicted with cancer and dies, because she puts the wishes and needs of her brutal and insensitive husband before her own. Whatever the effect on readers caught up in similar problems, this narrative is a product of the culture within which Myss and many of her readers live. A more patriarchal society or one that values group interests over personal well-being might see "Julie" as a laudable example of self-sacrifice for a greater good. To make sure that her readers really get the point, Myss creates an even more obvious example by contrasting "Julie" with "Joanna", who lives in an equally destructive relationship but manages to identify her own needs and finally divorces her husband.

Together with several dozen other short narratives, the stories of "Julie" and "Joanna" bring home the value of being self-directing, individualistic, active, emotionally autonomous and true to one's own needs. These values are by no means cross-culturally appreciated. Studies show that adult Anglo-Americans, faced with behavior they interpret as a sign of emotional dependence and passivity, react in a more strongly negative way than individuals with roots in certain Mediterranean or East Asian cultures.[304] It seems quite reasonable to suppose that Myss' use of chakra terminology and of the kab-

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[302] Myss *Anatomy of the Spirit*, p. 242.
[303] See Kunda 1999: 525 ff. and references given there.
[304] Kirschner 1996: 45.

balistic sefirot in *Anatomy of the Spirit* is basically an example of creolization, in this case a choice of exotic terminology used to express values firmly rooted in an American protestant-Calvinist religiosity.

Since the chakra system is disembedded from its cultural context in a Tantric meditative praxis, and the significance of the individual chakras is no longer defined by normative Tantric texts, how can the modern New Ager attain the desired knowledge? Myss' emic epistemology also reflects a particular modern Western religious ideal. The author gives her readers specific advice on how to integrate the correspondences regarding the seven chakras into their personal biographies:

> Try to diagnose your own relationship with each of the seven power centres of your body. Make yourself the object of your first intuitive evaluation. [. . .] Ultimately, you will learn *symbolic sight*, the ability to use your intuition to interpret the power symbols in your life [. . .] But you need an internal method of absorbing this information to make it *real* for you. First and foremost, focus your attention on learning to interpret your life's challenges symbolically. Find a meaning in them. Think and feel how they connect to your health.[305]

Some of the key words in this passage concern the object of knowledge. Whereas the Tantric yogi has been socialized into a religious discipline with an intricately developed cosmology and a well-defined concept of liberation, the New Age adherents who read Myss' book have a different focus for their religious quest: to understand their lives and themselves through their relations to the chakras.

Other key words reveal the mechanisms through which such knowledge can be gained: through intuition, through one's understanding of symbols, through feeling, one's own interpretive faculties, an inner method. Here, self-help literature such as Myss' book radicalizes the ideology of knowledge found in mainstream psychotherapies. Standard therapies assume that the therapist possesses a degree of knowledge that the person undergoing therapy needs to arrive at gradually, through patient coaching. Myss puts her cards on the table, explains the foundations of the chakra system and encourages her readers to take over from there and, in a sense, become their own therapists. Whereas the ideal personality as depicted in the illness narratives points to roots in a Calvinistic heritage, the view of knowledge seems to be rooted in the Romantic era and its belief in the primacy of the Self and its emotions.

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[305] Myss *Anatomy of the Spirit*, p. 57 f.; emphases in the original.

Concluding Remarks: Structurally Radical Globalization

Each position within the Esoteric Tradition draws support from exotic Others in ways determined at least as much by the strategic interests of their respective spokespersons as by any fidelity to the sources. Thus, Blavatsky and Bailey draw on Hindu beliefs to further their ideas of a universal wisdom religion common to all mankind; Steiner concludes that classical texts from India can be read as premonitions of the development of his own *Geisteswissenschaft*; Cayce Christianizes his loans from Hinduism so that they fit his religious self-perception; and various New Age authors select isolated legend elements in order to show that contemporary New Age beliefs are reflexes of ancient philosophies. Whatever the differences between the myth-making of these Esoteric writers, however, these points appear to be generally valid:

1. The historiography of the Esoteric Tradition is a mythic history which attempts to project "the ideal order" onto other peoples.
2. This projection is part of a U-shaped utopian discourse, in which the ageless wisdom preserved by these ancient or exotic Others is on the verge of overcoming the materialism of the present.
3. This sense of a return to a primeval state is most clearly reminiscent of Romantic historiography.
4. The particular peoples chosen as objects of projection belong to the stereotypes of the wider cultural milieu, and are appropriated by Esoteric spokespersons who project the roles of significant Others on these peoples.
5. Individual differences between historical myths are motivated at times by processes of schism and innovation within the Esoteric Tradition (as was the case with Bailey's references to Atlantis or Steiner's use of mythic Egypt), and at times merely by the individual predilections of the various spokespersons.
6. For ideologically based reasons, earlier positions within the Esoteric Tradition stress the elite nature of esoteric knowledge whereas later positions are egalitarian.
7. Attitudes toward both the Christian heritage and a generalized Orient have been contentious issues and prime causes of schism and innovation.

This simultaneous embracing of nostalgia and hope projected on the far past and again on the future is a time-line one recognizes as typical of numerous Western utopian models. Esoteric versions of this utopian discourse, however, are more specifically constructed around an image of modern society. Qualities allegedly lacking in Western

society, e.g. authenticity, proximity to nature, and a reliance on intuition rather than on intellectualism and rationality, are overt elements of this modern utopia. On a more subtly hidden level, however, the utopian discourse values qualities that form part of a specific contemporary Western ideology, including entrepreneurial spirit, independence, autonomy and expressiveness.

The construction of the Modern Esoteric Tradition would prima facie also seem a good example of the globalization of cultures. Nevertheless, Esoteric globalization is structurally radical, in the sense defined in chapter 2. The tarot is spuriously connected with Egypt, crystal healing with Atlantis. Other components of the Modern Esoteric Tradition are, on equally dubious grounds, linked to Tibet or the Native Americas. Somewhat less arbitrarily, the chakras are seen as part of an Indian heritage. However, even this genuinely Indian concept has been altered almost beyond recognition on its way toward a complete integration in the Esoteric Tradition. Rather than merely exemplifying globalization, the ascription of non-Western roots to various elements of the Esoteric Tradition form part of a kind of sacred history and sacred geography of the Western imagination. Each sub-tradition—e.g. Reiki, neoshamanism or astrology—creates its own mythic history out of a fairly constant pool of resources available to the Esoteric Tradition. To put it bluntly, no significant spokespersons within the New Age community claim to represent ancient Albanian wisdom, simply because beliefs regarding ancient Albania are not part of our cultural stereotypes.[306]

Nevertheless, the connection between emic and etic history is often remarkably tenuous, considering the free availability of well-supported historical research. If esoteric history is a source of rhetorical legitimacy, this state of affairs in itself poses a problem. In the modern West, a well-known and widely disseminated exoteric history presents a vastly different panorama. What legitimates esoteric historiography itself? As this chapter has repeatedly shown, the appeal to tradition is buttressed by other discursive strategies, particularly that of privileged experience.

We have seen above how one of the founders of modern crystal lore, Katrina Raphaell, is a present-day exponent of Esoteric

[306] Of course, a successful spiritual entrepreneur might create legends of an ancient Albanian wisdom, and contribute to adding yet another significant Other to the pool of resources available to later spokespersons.

historiography. How has she arrived at the pseudohistorical facts that she presents? The following quote from the introduction to Raphaell's book explains: "The information in this book was received through personal attunement and meditation with the stones over several years' time."[307] Ultimately, history is accessible to us not through conventional historiographic methods but through a form of gnosis, through religious experience and insight. The democratic ideal of the text even implies that no doctrinal statement can match the significance of every reader's individual spiritual experience. This is why Myss, in her book *Anatomy of the Spirit*, can devote some three hundred pages to building up a complex and detailed system of correspondences, only to radically relativize the importance of all her claims by telling her readers to "take with you only what feels accurate and truthful to your own heart".[308] We shall return to the privileged role of personal experience in chapter 6.

[307] Raphaell *Crystal Enlightenment*, unpaginated introduction.
[308] Myss *Anatomy of the Spirit*, p. 30.

CHAPTER FIVE

SCIENTISM AS A LANGUAGE OF FAITH

> The Hindu initiated Yogi knows really ten times more than the greatest European physicist of the ultimate nature and constitution of light.
>
> Helena Blavatsky in 1888[1]

> [Modern physics] has made a great step towards the worldview of the Eastern mystics.
>
> Fritjof Capra in 1975[2]

Science as a Significant Other

The slow and incomplete differentiation between science and religion from the days of Copernicus and Bacon to the present time has been amply documented.[3] Seventeenth-century scientists could still define the goal of natural science as the elucidation of God's nature and his relation to the world. Nevertheless, the gradual demise of the Aristotelian worldview from the mid-seventeenth century onwards fundamentally secularized the metaphysical underpinnings of research. Among the most fundamental changes, the following can be singled out: Teleological "final causes" were eschewed, and the nature of scientific explanation came to be seen in a Baconian sense as the search for immediate causes. The sharp distinction between the sub-lunar and celestial spheres disappeared: the laws of nature were unitary and applied to the entire cosmos. Empirical investigation increasingly superseded reliance on authorities, scriptural as well as Aristotelian. Together, such new modes of inquiry fostered a mechanistic and therefore fundamentally non-religious view of physics. Divine will operated in a remarkably predictable fashion. Once God put the world into operation, it could continue indefinitely, without the need for any transcendent intervention.

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[1] SD I:516.
[2] Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 155.
[3] See such standard reference works as Brooke 1991.

It has been argued that rationalism and science may have played a minor role in the massive secularization of society: most people simply were not (and are probably even today not) particularly aware of what the scientific worldview entails.[4] Nevertheless, regardless of whether science has influenced the general population, the strength of the scientific worldview has certainly influenced spokespersons of most if not all modern religions. The natural sciences have experienced an unparalleled success since the scientific revolution. Knowledge of nature in all its facets has increased exponentially, as have the technical advances resulting from this knowledge. For many people, at least in the West, the scientific endeavor has, in a sense, replaced the religious as the *via regia* to knowledge. To the considerable extent that traditional religions have presented empirical claims testable by science, these religious claims have, more often than not, been found problematic or wanting. Religious creativity, particularly after the Enlightenment, has adopted partially new strategies in order to come to grips with its main competitor.

Science aims to explain the empirical world in naturalistic terms. Science offers rationalist and non-supernatural answers to questions, ranging from the existence of ghosts and witches to the origin of the human species, that were once answered through a variety of religious traditions. Thus, in the post-Enlightenment age, numerous spokespersons for religious outlooks have struggled to define the position of religion vis-à-vis the steadily more dominant scientific worldview. This has produced a whole gamut of responses.[5] Defenses of religion organized as *God of the gaps* arguments attempt to define the proper domain of religion as the remaining lacunae of the sciences, e.g. the transition from inorganic matter to life, the underlying reason for the existence of the regularities of the cosmos, or the correlation between the abstract world of mathematics and the real, concrete world. Clearly, to the extent that such gaps are closed by science, apologists for a religious faith will find themselves in an increasingly defensive position. Another type of solutions, the *conflict*

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[4] Bruce 1996: 48 ff.

[5] For a somewhat similar way of classifying the relation between religion and science in terms of conflict, independence, dialogue and integration, see chapter 4 in Barbour 1998. The difference in approach may be due to Barbour's empirical area of investigation: Christian responses to science, and primarily those responses that have been articulated by intellectuals. Thus, Barbour only briefly discusses "fundamentalist" responses to science or responses that would embrace "pseudoscience".

version, is proposed by religious hard-liners who would consistently make science and reason subservient to revelation. Yet another variety of solutions are based on a *two worlds* approach, in which religion is wholly other, and thus utterly incommensurable with (and therefore immune to attacks from) science. Perhaps religion concerns a domain that lies beyond the spatio-temporal world dealt with by science. Perhaps religion does not describe the empirical world at all, but is a feeling, a form of life, a language game. A fourth mode of solving the dilemma, the *scientistic*, takes the line that scientific inquiry—provided it is interpreted correctly—serves to prove the validity of the religious point of view.

The Esoteric Tradition also makes use of these strategies to varying degrees. However, the Esoteric Tradition reveals its roots in the cultic milieu at least as often as it shows traces of intellectual speculation: all four strategies can readily be found in "folk" versions. A kind of God of the gaps argument rests on the belief that there are vast areas of human experience that cannot be explained by conventional science. Unexplained phenomena, sometimes called Forteana after Charles Fort, an avid collector of anecdotes of the mysterious, haunt the pages of Esoteric texts. Esoteric versions of the conflict argument attempt to show e.g. that Descartes, Newton or Darwin were fundamentally mistaken. The two worlds approach is most readily apparent in pragmatic claims that scientific truth is something other than spiritual truth: from a spiritual point of view, what matters is that a belief or practice is useful in helping a person to live a good life. The scientistic version, the one that will be most fully explored in the following pages, insists that science and spirituality are two sides of the same coin, and that good scientific arguments exist for accepting e.g. clairvoyance, healing or positive thinking.

One of the most striking characteristics of the Esoteric Tradition is precisely its use of contemporary science as a source of legitimacy. However, in its role as significant Other, science is subjected to two fundamental processes of reinterpretation. Firstly, Esoteric writers implicitly choose one of several possible understandings of what kind of activity "science", this elusive and abstract entity, might actually be. Secondly, having decided how to understand the essential characteristics of science, the intellectual and ethical import of science is judged against pre-existing normative standards.

A common view of science espoused by members of the scientific community itself is that it basically constitutes a method of inquiry.

A true proposition arrived at by wild guessing is not part of science.[6] A proposition held tentatively because it corresponds to the state of the art at any given time, but later found to be false, may perfectly well constitute part of science. As a method of inquiry, science is typically said to be characterized by being intersubjective, repeatable and error correcting. Furthermore, this is a view that skeptics and public intellectuals from the scientific community often attempt to put across to a broader audience. As Carl Sagan put it in one of his numerous popularizations of science: "the method of science, as stodgy and grumpy as it may seem, is far more important than the findings of science".[7] Despite the ready availability of this interpretation of the scientific project, this is a view that one rarely if ever finds in Esoteric movement texts. Whether they attack science, comment neutrally on it or attempt to cite it in their favor, Esoteric spokespersons, from Blavatsky to the latest New Age writers, often implicitly understand "science" to be variously the body of statements, the terminology and/or the technical applications of science.[8] To some extent, these spokespersons support a minority view, according to which science is fundamentally infused with rhetoric and conventions of social practice.[9] Under such an extreme relativist view, science became just another belief system, albeit supported by near-hegemonic vested interests.

Science, understood in this way as a body of doctrines, is made to serve two diametrically opposite roles. On the one hand, the Esoteric Tradition, from theosophy to the present-day New Age, has expressed a distinctly negative view of conventional science. On the other, selected pieces of scientific discourse have been elevated to the status of legend elements in the construction of a large number of Esoteric doctrines.

Science is, however, not only used as a significant Other, a basis of legitimacy and source of doctrinal elements. A recurrent theme within the Esoteric Tradition is the tenet that the opposition between

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[6] This view, again, predates the scientific worldview by centuries and is grounded in philosophical tradition. The opinion that knowledge consists of justified true belief rather than factually correct propositions can be traced back to Plato, especially his dialogue *Theaetetos*.

[7] Sagan 1996: 22.

[8] The only partial exception is Rudolf Steiner, whose *Geisteswissenschaft* is explicitly presented as a method of inquiry. It is, however, a method of clairvoyant investigation, with characteristics that make it more profitable to analyze his claims in the following chapter as a particular mode of religious experience.

[9] A few prominent examples will be mentioned later in this section.

religion and science has been, or soon will be, overcome. Traditional religions, it is said, had to be accepted as revealed truth. Only the authority of Scripture or of the church could convince the believer. With the advent of the modern age, religion itself has become amenable to scientific confirmation. One quote among many is the following statement by Foster Bailey, in the introduction to one of the books of his wife, Alice Bailey:

> The age-old method of arriving at truth by the process of accepting new authorities and comparing them with previously established doctrines, while of undoubted value in the training of the mind, is gradually being transcended. In its place is emerging in both the religious and philosophical worlds a new capacity to take a more scientific position.[10]

The ambivalent discourse vis-à-vis science found in such Esoteric texts in part runs parallel to the generally changing relation between science and faith which also manifests itself in other religious traditions. The clash between science and conservative Christian denominations has resulted in the rise of creationism.[11] Mormons resort to a religiously motivated interpretation of archaeological and linguistic data to support their claim that their emic historiography is factually correct.[12] Muslim scholars of various persuasions have attempted to formulate Islamicized science.[13] A number of modern religious movements use science to delimit and define their own views, whether science is predominantly seen as an ally (cf. Transcendental Meditation) or as an enemy (cf. ISKCON).[14] The rhetorical appeal to the ethos of science is thus arguably a pervasive part of modernity, rather than merely a part of the Modern Esoteric Tradition.

Scientism: *A Definition*

In order to approach the problem of science as a discursive strategy, a definition (or at least a heuristic) of a key term of this study, viz. *scientism*, is necessary. The present discussion will follow the usage

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[10] Bailey *Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, p. vii.

[11] The literature on creationism is vast. There is even a planned ten-volume set of documents, edited by Ronald Numbers, *Creationism in twentieth-century America* (1995–). For a survey of the issue, see Toumey 1994.

[12] To cite just one of many examples, the argument of Sorenson 1985 is that the events in the Book of Mormon took place on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Southern Mexico. Sorenson adduces purported evidence based on climate, geography, the existence of writing, secret societies, the use of metal, and so forth.

[13] Stenberg 1996.

[14] Rothstein 1996.

adopted in previous scholarly studies of the Esoteric Tradition.[15] A simple stipulative definition adequate for the purposes of this chapter is as follows: Scientism is the active positioning of one's own claims in relation to the manifestations of any academic scientific discipline, including, but not limited to, the use of technical devices, scientific terminology, mathematical calculations, theories, references and stylistic features—without, however, the use of methods generally approved within the scientific community, and without subsequent social acceptance of these manifestations by the mainstream of the scientific community through e.g. peer reviewed publication in academic journals.[16]

The concept of scientism is thus, in the present context, largely constructed in opposition to "mainstream" science, i.e. science as practiced away from the desks of New Age writers. A potential problem is that although there is a considerable body of literature aimed at describing the essentials of the scientific method, there is far from complete consensus. Generally speaking, two fundamentally different views of science exist: realist (our theories in some sense reflect conditions in the "real" world) and non-realist or relativist (our theories are constructs which may or may not have any bearing to the "real" world). Both views, furthermore, come in an array of weaker and stronger versions. The defense of the distinction between science and scientism along philosophical lines is a knotty problem, and would require a detailed discussion of several such options.[17] In several extreme non-realist or relativist positions, any essential difference between science and scientism would be difficult or even impossible to maintain. Some positions see science as essentially a cultural construct, and "knowledge" as being defined by consensus.[18] In an anar-

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[15] Cf. York 1995: 45 f.

[16] It should perhaps be noted that the term *scientism* has a different meaning in everyday language as a somewhat pejorative term for the belief that science can and should be applied to all aspects of life.

[17] See Gross & Levitt 1996 for an impassioned critique of non-realist views of science.

[18] An important theoretical statement of such a view is the Strong Program as set forth in Bloor 1976. Among the better-known empirical investigations based on an even more non-realist view of science are the ethnomethodologically inspired studies Latour & Woolgar 1979 and Latour 1987. Among the most contentious elements of both the Strong Program and the ethnomethodological studies of science is the claim that the outcome of struggles between proponents of competing theories is settled through social processes rather than via an appeal to an external, empirical reality.

chistic science à la Feyerabend or in Nelson Goodman's constructed worlds, many different constructs exist, each made plausible by our discursive habits,[19] while in Alan Gross' rhetorical view, good science is science that is accepted on rhetorical grounds by people generally identified by society as scientists of high standing.[20]

The purpose of the present discussion is not to construct a normative definition of science and to debunk Esoteric claims. The complex methodological and philosophical issues have therefore largely been avoided by bracketing the entire issue of the validity of any theory and heuristically treating the boundary between science and scientism as a socially constructed, fluid and contested border—as in the above definition. From skeptical scientists' point of view, the scientistic or pseudo-scientific might run a whole gamut from mild versions such as flawed experimental tests of the paranormal to cult archaeology à la Erich von Däniken, and the boundary line might be drawn up in each specific case for partly divergent reasons.[21] A few examples will clarify the concept of scientism.

Proclaiming that there was once a continent named Atlantis, where people lived in a golden age, does not constitute scientism. Reinterpreting archaeological findings to "prove" that Atlantis once existed is scientism. Parapsychology is not in itself scientism, if generally accepted attempts are made to impose rigorous laboratory controls on experiments. Parapsychological scientism might be to attempt to explain purported manifestations of clairvoyance by referring to quantum mechanics in ways that are not accepted by the community of physicists. Belief in auras is not scientistic in itself, but becomes infused with scientism if the phenomenon is explained in terms of electromagnetism and a controversial claim is made that auras can be detected by means of advanced photographic technology.

Scientism in this sense does not always have a bearing on the Esoteric Tradition. The fringe archaeology of Erich von Däniken might well be considered scientistic. However, von Däniken's theory of ancient astronauts would only enter the discussion of this chapter

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[19] Goodman's work has rendered him descriptions such as pluralist, relativist and non-realist. The underlying theme of his epistemology, e.g. in Goodman 1978, is that humans construct the symbolic worlds they live in. The symbol systems of the sciences, philosophy, the arts, perception, and everyday discourse thus constitute various "ways of worldmaking".

[20] Gross 1990.

[21] Harrold & Eve 1995.

if and when it were to become integrated as a legend (or legend element) by parts of the Esoteric subculture. Skeptical literature seldom distinguishes between "religious" scientism and other scientistic claims. The topic of the present chapter is thus limited to scientism as it applies specifically to a position within the Modern Esoteric Tradition.

Finally, it should be stressed that scientism need not only be constructed in relation to the natural sciences. History and archaeology are also frequently invoked. This also appears to be a late modern phenomenon, in view of the fact that many other modern religious movements also rest on historical and archaeological arguments. The expeditions to find Noah's ark or traces of the deluge, motivated by Christian apologetic concerns, are cases in point.

An Outline

Many mainstream sciences are mirrored by scientistic theories, controversial doctrines vigorously defended by proponents of the cultic milieu. The life sciences are complemented by more or less vitalistic theories such as that proposed by Rupert Sheldrake.[22] As a counterpart to mainstream botany are theories claiming an emotional life for plants or correlating the growth cycles of crops with astrological events.[23] Chemistry is found in an occult version, where the results have been reached by clairvoyant means.[24] Geologists have Esoteric counterparts among those who believe in sunken continents or prophecies of cataclysmic earth changes.[25] Perhaps best known and most fully developed (and indeed supported by a few physicists), physics has its Other in what might be called quantum metaphysics, the syncretism between mysticism and physics. Previous studies of the relationship between science and the Esoteric Tradition, especially the New Age, have generally studied such full-scale attempts to create a "spiritualized" or holistic science. I will return to this subject toward the end of the present chapter. Other fringe or unconven-

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[22] Sheldrake *A New Science of Life*.

[23] The former opinion, associated with the work of Cleve Backster, was publicized in Tomkins & Bird 1973. This contemporary legend still circulates in the cultic milieu. The second claim is an integral part of biodynamic farming. Details can be found in the considerable literature within this field.

[24] Leadbeater *Occult Chemistry*.

[25] See Godwin 1996 for a detailed review of this theme.

tional subjects that are sometimes supported by means of scientistic claims and in turn form the basis of alternative counterparts to mainstream sciences are cryptozoology, evidence suggestive of reincarnation, astrological claims, healing, crop circles, chemical or biological transmutation, tachyons,[26] free energy, and many others.

However, the present discussion also intends to devote space to other near-ubiquitous aspects of the influence of science on Esoteric religiosity. Especially in its guise as the New Age, Esoteric positions are often far from systematic. Other, more patchy means of forging a creolization between science and religion are quite common.

Firstly, the Esoteric Tradition does not only construct complete versions of physics, chemistry or biology, as illustrated above. It also appropriates contemporary legends that circulate in the cultic milieu, creating more or less disconnected scientistic theories around a large number of popular claims. "Fringe" archeology[27] may incorporate legends or legend elements concerning Atlantis, crystal skulls from Mesoamerica or ancient astronauts. Fringe astronomy variously incorporates UFO lore, legends that claim that there is a giant human face on Mars or that the earth will pass through a large photon belt. Fringe medicine includes legends concerning mysterious forces in the ground that affect human health, and which can be detected by dowsers.

Secondly, there is what one might call the "cargo cult" approach to science. These are cases in which the external trappings of science are used and invoked, often in an isolated attempt to adapt scientific vocabulary or build pseudo-technical cult objects or perform quasi-rational calculations to buttress specific articles of Esoteric belief.

The remainder of the present chapter is structured as follows: First, a brief historical review will outline the development of various views on science, from the early Esoteric creolization between faith and science in the writings and praxis of Mesmer and the mesmerists, to the attitudes toward science held within each position of

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[26] Tachyons are hypothetical particles that move faster than light. If they exist, the laws of physics predict that they have quite exotic properties. For example, they accelerate if they lose energy, so that a zero-energy tachyon will become infinitely fast. The concept was first introduced into physics by Gerald Feinberg, in a paper entitled *On the possibility of faster-than-light particles*, published in 1967. The idea soon seeped into the cultic milieu, and at present a number of companies claim, on dubious grounds, that their products involve tachyons.

[27] The terminology of the literature on such phenomena vacillates between adjectives such as fringe, cult or marginal—perhaps for reasons of political correctness.

the Esoteric Tradition as delimited here, from theosophy to the New Age. To what extent does each position conceive of itself as scientific? To what extent is science seen as a negative or positive Other?

The next section attempts to distinguish between some of the various ways in which scientism enters into any given position. Is there a widespread use of terms originating within the scientific community? Are there references to scientific theories? Are there explicit attempts to adapt to the challenge of rationalism? This section will also briefly assess the responses to critical comments from the scientific community.

The following two sections discuss how scientistic discourse is used to construct "spiritualized science", the kind of science that spokespersons of various Esoteric positions might regard as positive Others. In particular, we will see how speculative interpretations of physics, ranging from Blavatsky's scientism to the "quantum metaphysics" of Capra and his successors, support the monistic idealism of the Esoteric Tradition. As with the other chapters of this study, a final section will apply these insights to a case study and examine how particular claims have been supported by scientistic as well as non-scientistic discursive strategies. Esoteric interpretations of science, especially physics, are used to support semi-naturalistic interpretations of events that a different age would have seen as miraculous or supernatural.

Historical Background

An already classic study by John Hedley Brooke[28] has undermined the commonly held view that the relationship between science and religion can be understood as a simple shift of balance from a position where religious faith and religious authorities dominated over science and the scientific community, to one in which the discourse of science dominated over faith. Although the historiography of science versus dominant forms of Christianity has become considerably more fine-grained through Brooke's work, the story of the relationship between science and post-Enlightenment esotericism remains sketchier. The historical sections of the present chapter point at a fundamental mechanism in the construction of esoteric doctrines. Each period has its particular dominant themes, aspects of scientific discourse that are especially liable to be used by contemporary reli-

[28] Brooke 1991.

gious imagination. Positive, negative or ambivalent images of the scientific Other grow from such specific confrontations with e.g. electromagnetism, the theory of evolution, positivistic philosophy, the theory of relativity or quantum mechanics.

The pre-modern history of this relationship is relatively well known, and need only be recapitulated in its barest outline. Hermetic philosophy was espoused by the intellectual elite during the Renaissance and well into the 17th century.[29] Divination, notably in the form of astrology, was practiced by luminaries of the scientific revolution, of which Johannes Kepler was perhaps the most famous.[30] The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed a gradual weakening of the cultural status of esotericism. Hermeticism slowly began to erode, in part due to the philological scholarship of Isaac Casaubon. Political moves also served to deal a near-fatal blow to divination. Thus, the French authorities forbade the printing of ephemerides in 1710.[31] However, esotericism never died out. Quite to the contrary, there were strong theosophical and speculative currents within many Rosicrucian and Masonic groups throughout Europe. These groups, part of a vast intellectual and political underground, fall outside the scope of the present study. When esotericism left the confines of various semi-secret societies and became a highly visible element of society at the end of the Enlightenment, a new relationship with dominant scientific discourses was established.

The Rise of Positive Scientism

When esotericism met Enlightenment thought and the development of a new natural science, several new syncretisms arose. In the Behmenist lineage, for instance, Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702–1782) was an early exponent of such a view. By the second half of the 18th century, Oetinger constructed what has been named a theology of electricity by adapting Böhme's theosophy to the scientific worldview.[32] However, the work of Franz Mesmer was the first

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[29] Yates 1964.

[30] On Kepler and astrology see Fuzeau-Bræsch 1989: 58 et passim, Knappich 1967 passim, Tester 1987: 232 ff. Even Francis Bacon, father of the scientific method, did not reject astrology but would have it "purified of all tradition that is not based on reason or physical speculations", Tester 1987: 220 f.

[31] Fuzeau-Bræsch 1989: 61.

[32] For a brief review, cf. Deghaye 1993: 236; a detailed account can be found in Benz 1971.

fully-fledged exponent of scientism within the lineage that is the object of the present study. Here, scientism became both a persuasive mechanism of central importance and a source of legend elements in a modernized esoteric worldview. The boundary between scientific truth and speculation had also been essentially contested. For early hermeticists or magicians such as Giordano Bruno, Cornelius Agrippa or Robert Fludd, there was no perceived entity "science" that needed to be confronted. By contrast, numerous proponents of post-Enlightenment esotericism, from Mesmer, via the spiritualists, theosophy and its offshoots and up to the New Age of the present day, have actively positioned themselves and been defined by others in terms of their position in relation to science.

Literature on Mesmer generally discusses his contribution to the development of hypnosis,[33] and to the discovery of the unconscious.[34] A focus on his scientistic reinterpretation of hermeticism and construction of ritual healing in scientistic terms also reveals Mesmer as the successful originator of a kind of "secular religion". His story has been told in a number of books, and need only be briefly recapitulated.[35]

Little is known of Mesmer's early years. He studied theology and natural science, before switching to law and finally enrolling at the faculty of medicine in Vienna in 1760. Mesmer drew on four different traditions in the history of ideas. Two were overtly rationalist: the "new" medicine, which evolved during the early to mid-eighteenth century, and the contemporary German Enlightenment. Two were grounded in pre-modern thought: the older medical "heretics", especially as represented by the tradition of Paracelsus, and the practices of contemporary popular ritual healers.

The status of medicine as a science was being negotiated during the mid-eighteenth century.[36] Hippocrates, Galen and the classical authors were still seen as authorities. Nevertheless, experimental and clinical studies began to form part of the "new" medical science. The center of this discipline was the medical faculty at Leyden, under

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[33] Gauld 1992.

[34] Ellenberger 1980.

[35] Mesmer's life history has been told many times since the appearance of his first biography, published by Justinus Kerner in 1856. Among the more recent literature, cf. Walmsley 1967, Darnton 1968, Benz 1976, Ellenberger 1980, Gauld 1992, Crabtree 1993 and Pattie 1996.

[36] For the history of eighteenth century medicine, cf. Pickstone 1996.

the pioneer Hermann Boerhaave (1668–1738).[37] Medicine in Vienna was strongly influenced by the Leyden school, since several disciples of Boerhaave had been contracted to teach there. When Mesmer entered medical school in 1760, the boundaries between "scientific" and "superstitious" were fluid as well as hotly contested. Thus, like so many intellectuals of his time, Anton Stoerk, teacher at Vienna and supporter of the Leyden school, also firmly believed in witchcraft.[38]

Mesmer's studies took place in the aftermath of the German Enlightenment, founded by Christian Wolff (1679–1754). Whereas the French and Scottish Enlightenments were anti-clerical and skeptical, Wolff attempted to forge a series of grand syntheses between intellectualist versions of Christian theology and rationalism. Wolff's influence was immense. The previously dominant teaching of an Aristotelian worldview was replaced at many German universities by a mechanistic cosmology. The Wolffians rejected any concept of *qualitates occultae*, considering these to be reducible to the interaction of *atomi materiales*. Any influence between two bodies must therefore be mediated by material factors. It has been argued that Mesmer, who studied under the Wolffian scholar Johann Adam Ickstatt in the mid-1750s, received the main impetus to adopt a rationalist vocabulary and a predisposition for appealing to rationalist explanations during this formative period.[39]

If Leyden medicine and Wolffian rationalism explain the secularized style of Mesmer's praxis, the role of the tradition from Paracelsus is contested.[40] Paracelsus, like Mesmer in his thesis *De planetarum influxu*, rejected traditional astrology, but nevertheless believed that the planets exercised an influence on man. Paracelsians also used magnets therapeutically.[41] However, a more direct influence is the religious folk healing practiced in the southern German-speaking world in the mid- to late eighteenth century, a subject to which we shall shortly return.

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[37] Boerhaave was considered an eminent clinician and a brilliant teacher. Two of his textbooks, *Institutiones medicae* (1708) and *Aphorismi de cognoscendis et curandis morbis* (1709), were reprinted in numerous editions and exerted a considerable influence on the study of medicine. For the life and career of Boerhaave, see Lindeboom 1968.

[38] Walmsley 1967: 30.

[39] Kupsch 1985.

[40] Walmsley 1967: 21 f.

[41] Walmsley 1967: 32.

Mesmer's treatment in 1774 of Franziska Oesterlin is his first known case of magnetic therapy.[42] Over a two-year period, Oesterlin had been afflicted with convulsions, vomiting, fainting spells, blindness, paralysis and a host of other symptoms. Initially, Mesmer attempted to cure her with traditional remedies such as bloodletting. Mesmer was informed by his friend, the Jesuit pater Maximilian Hell, that certain English doctors had begun to experiment with the use of magnets in medical treatment. Mesmer asked Hell to procure a number of magnets, and began his own series of magnetic cures on July 28th, 1774. Two horseshoe-shaped magnets were attached to the patient's feet and a heart-shaped magnet placed over her heart. Soon, Miss Oesterlin reported sensations of heat and pain, and periods of intense perspiration followed during the night. In the morning, however, she showed every sign of having been cured. Mesmer explained this course of events in terms of a necessary crisis followed by a cure.[43]

Most important to the development of mesmerism was the Bavarian priest and exorcist Johann Joseph Gassner (1727–1779). The symptoms produced by Gassner closely resembled those of mesmeric healing, including the precipitation of a crisis.[44] Mesmer confronted Gassner, claiming that in reality Gassner also practiced animal magnetism, but falsely attributed his successes to religious causes through ignorance. In fact, there is good reason to believe that Mesmer, quite to the contrary, imitated Gassner and then eliminated his competitor.[45] Mesmer gave proof of a schismatic, sectarian behavior found time and again among his successors: adepts learn a method from their teachers, only to repudiate them.[46]

Mesmer now entered a period of pecuniary success and popular support, coupled with recurring conflicts with the scientific establishment. In 1778, he moved to Paris, where he specialized in treating members of the French aristocracy. Seen as ritual healing, the

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[42] Walmsley 1967: 50 ff.
[43] Walmsley 1967: 54 f.
[44] A Gassnerian cure is recorded in detail in Ellenberger 1980: 54.
[45] Ellenberger 1980: 63.
[46] Quimby, the father of the American mind cure movement, forged his craft from mesmerism and later in life denied this. Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science and at one time a disciple of Quimby, vilified both mesmerism and mind cure. Freud, who ultimately owed his discovery of the unconscious to a line of hypnotists and magnetizers traceable back to Mesmer, is said to have mentioned his predecessor only twice in his voluminous writings.

repertoire of mesmerism was now considerably expanded. Mesmer developed a cultic object with a distinctly scientistic touch. A primitive form of electric accumulator, the Leyden flask, had been invented during the 1740s. The Leyden flask consists of a glass bottle insulated with metal foil. This bottle is filled with water, and a bundle of conductive metal wires are suspended in the liquid. Mesmer's invention, the *baquet*, was similarly constructed, and was designed as an accumulator of animal magnetism. An oak cask was perforated to allow the insertion of metal rods. Inside the cask were containers holding "magnetized" water, i.e. water touched by Mesmer. These containers were, in turn, placed in water, iron filings, broken glass, sand or crushed iron ore.

Experience comes with no ready-made labels, but calls for interpretation and explanation. Mesmer's attempts to formulate a theory of magnetic healing reveal the complex interplay between ritual healing and scientistic formulation. In 1779, he published his best-known explanation of animal magnetism, *Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal*, in which the method is described and given a theoretical background.[47] Magnets, he claimed, do not cure illness due to their form or because of any curative properties located within the magnet itself, but by affecting a force or fluid within the patient. When properly manipulated, this magnetic fluid can induce a crisis in the patient, who should then begin to recover. In fact, Mesmer's cures were not all that novel. If one disregards the scientistic explanations, mesmeric healing was very much part of a folk tradition of exorcism and laying on of hands. Exorcism, however, was a craft on the wane, having neither the scientific legitimacy to gain academic respect nor the scientistic trappings to survive the disdain of Enlightenment critics.

There is a distinct risk involved in the use of scientistic strategies. The significant Others are actively constructing their own version of the events in question. To the extent that these versions are incompatible, the construction of legends gives rise to conflicts in the real world. With traditional exorcism eliminated and defined as non-science, Mesmer became the next target of the very same accusations that he had previously leveled at Gassner. The conflicts rarely questioned that Mesmer could effect the cures he claimed, but

[47] Mesmer 1779.

consistently attacked his explanations.[48] Several scientific bodies confronted Mesmer, claiming that he had, in reality, influenced the imagination of his patients, while falsely attributing his successes to animal magnetism due to ignorance.[49] The parallels with the Gassner case are obvious.

The most famous of these scientific bodies was the commission led by Benjamin Franklin. The members of this commission included several luminaries of contemporary science: the astronomer Jean-Sylvain Bailly, the polymath and naturalist Antoine Lavoisier, and Joseph-Ignace Guillotin, who lent his name to the infamous beheading machine. Their report was published on August 11, 1784. The baquet had been carefully examined for electric and magnetic properties, and was pronounced to possess neither. Furthermore "not one of the commissioners felt any sensation, or at least none which ought to be ascribed to the action of magnetism".[50] The report concludes that the effects so clearly visible on the patients are in fact due to imagination, the touch of the magnetizer and imitation of the behavior of other affected patients.

If one sectarian schism enabled Mesmer to profit from Gassner's method and distance himself from his role model, the same strategy made it possible for some of Mesmer's pupils to avoid being contaminated by the charges of lacking a scientific basis that now beset Mesmer himself. The most successful of these schismatics was the Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825). At first he copied one of Mesmer's rituals, a form of healing that had been developed for the simultaneous treatment of many patients. Each patient would hold the end of a rope, attached to the branches of a large elm which was supposed to conduct magnetism efficiently.[51] Experiences with a highly suggestible subject, a servant by the name of Victor Race, led him to take yet another step toward secularizing and psychologizing mesmerism. Victor did not experience the usual crisis, but acted as a somnambulist. Any resulting cures were effected during such trance-like states. No baquet was needed, and no crisis was required. The

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[48] A further, common line of attack was the imputation of immoral behavior of mesmerists in respect of young women who had purportedly been reduced to passive compliance through mesmerism. These charges appear to have been leveled at mesmerists irrespective of their doctrinal position or details in ritual praxis.

[49] Walmsley 1967: 98.

[50] Walmsley 1967: 126.

[51] Ellenberger 1980: 71.

true cause of a successful cure was declared to be the will of the mesmerist. In 1785, the marquis finally formulated a theory of mesmerism largely stripped of its hermetic cosmology.[52] The *Société de l'Harmonie*, i.e. the organization which had served as a focal point for the mesmerists, split in two. The orthodox mesmerists remained in one camp, while the reformists who followed Puységur founded their own branch based in Strasbourg.

This schism would eventually be followed by many others in the creation of various positions regarding the existence and nature of controversial phenomena—esoteric, parapsychological or skeptical. According to Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge, schismatics typically see themselves as returning to an earlier, perhaps purer or emotionally more effervescent form of their faith.[53] The case of many of the modern positions on the paranormal is different, and illustrates the scientistic discourse of the Enlightenment project. Successive generations of spokespersons could create their own versions of healing praxis and theory, on the existence of an afterlife or on supernatural phenomena, not according to traditional schismatic "holier/more authentic/more traditional-than-thou" lines, but by employing a new strategy: they could claim to be, in some sense, more scientific and less irrational than their negative Others.[54] Spiritualists tended to understand their own project as a scientific investigation of the afterlife. Parapsychologists distanced themselves from their spiritualist roots by attempting to define themselves as more scientific. They did so e.g. by attempting to professionalize and institutionalize their activities.[55]

The first generations of parapsychologists emulated the practices of mainstream science, created journals for the peer-reviewed dissemination of their ideas and affirmed their ties to mainstream values of their times. However, in a manner reminiscent of the Esoteric

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[52] Ellenberger 1980: 72.

[53] Stark & Bainbridge 1985: 101 ff.

[54] For this theme, see Moore 1977, esp. part II, and Hess 1993, esp. pp. 32 ff.

[55] This process can be illustrated by a few successive moves. A first such step was the establishment in London of the Society for Psychical Research in 1882. A second was the affiliation with academia when William MacDougall and J.B. Rhine in 1927 founded the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. Further moves towards academic respectability came in 1969 with the partial affiliation of the American Parapsychological Association with the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and in 1973 with the establishment of a department of parapsychology at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands.

use of scientism focused on in the remainder of this chapter, the allegiance to the scientific method only extended up to a certain point. Experiments were carried out from the point of view that "there was an important body of evidence tending prima facie to establish the independence of soul or spirit".[56] Furthermore, the incidence of fraud among even the most prominent of the early parapsychologists suggests that experimentation was, to a disturbing extent, carried out to support vested interests.[57]

Ambivalent Scientism in the Esoteric Tradition

Early scientism is generally positive. Animal magnetism and spiritualist phenomena, often understood as scientific, held out the hope of reconciling faith and science. There are overt parallels with Romantic *Naturphilosophie*, a mode of thought that attempted to forge a synthesis between the idealist monism current at the time with contemporary findings within e.g. physics and biology. By the time one enters the Modern Esoteric Tradition as exemplified by the earliest works analyzed here, science has become a much more ambivalent counterpart. Esoteric spokespersons can construct a dichotomy between positive/spiritual and negative/materialistic forms of science. This ambivalence will recur throughout the period covered in this study.

Theosophy

The founding of the Theosophical Society can in itself be interpreted as an apogee of nineteenth century scientism. Scientism seemingly entered every facet of the Society, from its founding charter to its canonical scriptures. The founders of the Theosophical Society entered three principles into the stated purposes of the organization:[58]

> 1. The formation of a universal brotherhood without distinction of race, creed, caste or color,
> 2. The encouragement of studies in comparative religion, philosophy and science, and
> 3. The investigation of unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.

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[56] Henry Sidgwick's 1888 presidential address to the SPR, quoted in Moore 1977: 141.

[57] The case of S.G. Soal is instructive in this respect, see Gilovich 1991: 163 ff.

[58] These are part of the revised bylaws of 1878 of the Theosophical Society; see Campbell 1980: 28.

It has been pointed out that the third of these principles embodies a paradox.[59] The Society set as one of its goals to investigate phenomena whose existence is, in itself, highly disputable. The basic premises of theosophy would therefore seem to be fertile ground in the quest for scientistic formulations. Scientism and the double role of science is evident from the beginning of theosophical literature. This dichotomy between two forms of science is found in Blavatsky's early articles, as well as in the first full-scale attempt to construct a theosophical doctrine: *Isis Unveiled.*

Blavatsky repeatedly wages bitter polemics against contemporary scientists. Conventional scientists are denounced again and again as narrow-minded, materialistic, prejudiced, and so forth. At the same time, theosophy provides a link back to earlier modes of scientism.[60] Like so many of her post-theosophical successors up to and including the New Age, Blavatsky invokes 'genuine' or 'spiritual' science[61] firstly to support a vast variety of fringe phenomena, secondly to legitimize a number of her own specific doctrines, and thirdly to argue for her historiography.

As regards the first use of science, the early articles, as well as *Isis Unveiled*, argue that a genuine or spiritual science would include levitation,[62] mesmerism,[63] magic,[64] phantom photography,[65] mediumistic phenomena,[66] healing[67] and alchemy.[68] *The Theosophist*, the journal of the Theosophical Society, reproduced this view in the text on its cover: "a monthly journal devoted to oriental philosophy, art, literature and occultism, embracing mesmerism, spiritualism and other secret sciences".[69] Thus, theosophy is not opposed to science, but is, in fact, a higher form of science than what is ordinarily understood by the term:

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[59] Washington 1995: 69.
[60] Campbell 1980.
[61] For the first expression, see IU I:46 and 54; for the second, see IU I:49.
[62] "Footnote to 'An Indian Aethrobat'" 1880, BCW II:272; IU I:497.
[63] IU I:165 ff.
[64] IU p. 25; "Magic", BCW II:31 ff.
[65] IU I:463 f.; Blavatsky relates an incident with a Bengal fakir who preceded Ted Serios, who famously claimed to be able to fix images on film through paranormal means, by nearly a century.
[66] IU p. 46.
[67] IU I:165.
[68] IU I:49.
[69] See plate facing page 96 in BCW II.

> The exercise of *magical* power is the exercise of *natural* powers, but SUPERIOR to the ordinary functions of Nature. A miracle is not a violation of the laws of Nature, except for ignorant people. Magic is but a *science*, a profound knowledge of the Occult forces in Nature, and of the laws governing the invisible and visible world. A powerful mesmerizer, profoundly learned in his science, such as Baron Du Potet, Regazzoni, Pietro d'Amicis of Bologna, are [sic!] *magicians*, for they have become the adepts, the initiated ones, into the great mystery of our Mother Nature.[70]

Examples of the second use include statements to the effect that contemporary science has begun to vindicate the theosophical doctrines concerning the age of the earth, considered to be vastly superior to received opinion;[71] science corroborates theosophical theories on the development of man;[72] clairvoyant investigation of the cosmos is supported by the work of a Professor W. Denton;[73] and the existence of the sunken continent of Atlantis can be verified through modern methods of philology and historiography.[74]

Thirdly, like her later counterparts, Blavatsky insists that the knowledge of the ancients and contemporary science are versions of the same thing. Blavatsky even states that ancient cultures knew more of science than contemporary scientists, but veiled their knowledge in myth and symbols or reserved it for an initiated few.[75] History, however, moves in cycles. In a future age, the true science of the ancient races will be rediscovered, and materialistic science will be ridiculed.[76]

Theosophical doctrines were reworked with the change of focus towards the Orient. Nevertheless, the double use of science remains a constant throughout Blavatsky's theosophical career. This ambivalence towards science is thus found briefly stated in the *Mahatma Letters* and again in *The Secret Doctrine*. In letter 11 from K.H. to Alan Octavian Hume, which is largely devoted to the subject, conventional science is described with adjectives such as "misleading", "vacillating", "uncertain" and "incomplete".[77] It is this last term which is

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[70] "The Science of Magic" 1875, BCW I:137; emphases in the original.
[71] IU I:3, 587.
[72] IU I:293 ff.
[73] IU I:331.
[74] IU I:591 ff.
[75] This is affirmed throughout Blavatsky's writings. Cf. IU pp. 25, 35 and many other passages.
[76] IU I:51 f.
[77] ML pp. 59 ff.

most central to the argument of the letter: science is a half-truth. Esoteric doctrine does not so much deny the validity of science as attempt to go far beyond it, by explaining the spiritual entities and events that are supposedly the "real" causes of the phenomena of physics and chemistry.

The Secret Doctrine can be seen as a paradigmatic example of how both attitudes to science, negative as well as positive, can be articulated. On the one hand, this work is filled with scathing references to the limitations of science, such as: "[T]he divergence of scientific opinions is so great that no reliance can ever be placed upon *scientific* speculation",[78] where the juxtaposition of the italicized word "scientific" and the derogatory "speculation" creates a rhetorical link more commonly used by skeptics against the Esoteric Tradition, or:

> Are we to believe in the old Jewish fable of the rib of Adam yielding Eve? Even such belief is more logical and reasonable than the descent of man from the Quadrumana without any reservation; as the former hides an esoteric truth under a fabulous version, while the latter conceals no deeper fact than a desire to force upon mankind a materialistic fiction.[79]

In this quote, the contempt for materialistic science is further strengthened by the contrast with Judaism, a religion that Blavatsky considered to be particularly far removed from the core of esoteric doctrine.

On the other hand, *The Secret Doctrine* is thoroughly imbued with the rhetoric of scientism. Although the basic cosmological doctrine of this work was said to ultimately derive from ancient wisdom, a form of *philosophia perennis* transmitted to Helena Blavatsky in unadulterated form by a group of spiritually evolved beings residing in the Himalayas, known as the Mahatmas or Masters, innumerable details of this revealed cosmology are given a rhetorical legitimacy by references to e.g. archaeological findings, contemporary biological theories such as Haeckel's version of evolutionism, and so forth. Blavatsky considered a positioning vis-à-vis science to be of such importance that the entire third parts of both Book I and Book II, a total of some 350 pages, bear the common heading *Science and the Secret Doctrine Contrasted*. These two sections are devoted to simultaneously refuting orthodox science and finding support in it for occult doctrines.

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[78] SD II:149 note †.
[79] SD II:193.

Both *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* have their shortcomings as religious literature, not least the sheer inaccessibility of these monumental works. Theosophical doctrine, however, also gained influence in late nineteenth century Europe and America through a number of popularized textbooks. An early example is A.P. Sinnett's *Occult World*, published in 1881, which claims the status of science for the purported supernatural feats of the ancient sages.[80] A Perhaps more influential popularization is William Q. Judge's *The Ocean of Theosophy*, a theosophical primer first produced in 1893, which has been reprinted countless times up to the present day. In this compendium, the theosophical view of the relationship between religion and science is made explicit:

> Although [the word Theosophy] contains by derivation the name God and may thus at first sight seem to embrace religion alone, it does not neglect science, for it is the science of sciences and therefore has been called the wisdom religion. For no science is complete which leaves out any department of nature, whether visible or invisible, and that religion which, depending solely on an assumed revelation, turns away from things and the laws which govern them is nothing but a delusion, a foe to progress, an obstacle in the way of man's advancement toward happiness. Embracing both the scientific and the religious, Theosophy is a scientific religion and a religious science.[81]

From an analytical point of view, the term syncretism seems to lurk just beyond the horizon of Judge's view.

Scientism After Blavatsky

After the death of Helena Blavatsky, the Theosophical Society entered its second generation. Blavatsky's paramount interest in the theory of evolution was replaced by several new foci of scientism. The chief ideologist and medium of the Society, Charles Leadbeater, thus formulated an occult chemistry based on a greatly modified atomic theory.[82] Considerably more influential, however, was Leadbeater's occult

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[80] Sinnett *Occult World*, pp. 13 ff.

[81] Judge *Ocean of Theosophy*, p. 1.

[82] Leadbeater took the lead by beginning the occult investigation of matter in 1895, but was soon followed in his efforts by Annie Besant. By purportedly developing a visionary ability, they claimed to see structures inside the atom. Each element thus consisted of atoms containing a specific number of such smaller particles. These and other results were published in *Occult Chemistry*, a work which appeared in several successively more elaborate editions. Although Leadbeater was the principal clairvoyant, the enduring interest in (a kind of) chemistry is probably due to

anatomy. Elaborating on a few hints found in Blavatsky's writings, Leadbeater proposed a theory of the human aura in 1903. This theory was followed by the view that normally invisible "energies" are concentrated in seven focal points, the chakras.[83] On the one hand, Leadbeater's theosophical reformulations of science influenced the scientism of anthroposophy. On the other, the concepts of the human aura and the chakra system were adopted by successive generations of occultists, and were finally absorbed as legend elements into New Age lore without any general awareness of the theosophical origin of these concepts.

Theosophy furnished the Esoteric Tradition with a discourse on science that has been replicated countless times since then. Each spokesperson argues for his or her own conception of the world as compatible with contemporary science, but also as a body of knowledge that transcends the unnecessary or artificial limitations imposed by materialism. The following discussion will outline the arguments of several influential spokespersons. It would perhaps not be quite accurate to call these arguments separate positions, since they present minor variations on the theosophical theme.

In another respect, however, each spokesperson does define his or her own position. Besides generalizing discussions of science as a whole, each spokesperson also tends to disembed those particular aspects of the sciences that were felt to be especially relevant to his or her specific position. *The Secret Doctrine* mentions dozens of works by contemporary scientists. No part of science plays as crucial a role as evolutionism. Just as science in general can serve both as a positive and negative Other, evolution plays a similar double role. Post-theosophical spokespersons partly look to other branches of science in order to structure and delimit their arguments.

In the story of scientism within the Esoteric Tradition, Edgar Cayce stands out as the least explicit and perhaps least sophisticated.

Annie Besant's fascination with science, especially chemistry; see Nethercot 1960: 156 ff. This might explain the incorporation of contemporary developments in mainstream chemistry into the theory of occult chemistry, e.g. the discovery that certain molecules exist in two mirror-image versions. Versions of occult chemistry occasionally resurface in various parascience theories, but by no means have the same great influence on the Esoteric Tradition as metaphysical interpretations of physics. The reason for this, one might speculate, is that Besant's and Leadbeater's occult chemistry does not directly support an idealistic picture of the world, but basically constitutes a highly imaginative reformulation of mainstream, materialistic chemistry.

[83] See the case study at the end of chapter 4.

In part, this may be an unintended outcome of the format in which his teachings were presented: short readings on subjects presented by individual questioners, rather than a systematic exposition of doctrines. In part, it may also reflect Cayce's social and religious background as a Biblical literalist with little formal schooling. In part, finally, Cayce's relative lack of interest in science may be due to his understanding of his religious mission. Where theosophists saw their creed as a synthesis of science and religion, and Steiner understood his revealed teachings as a spiritual science *tout court*, Cayce was prone to interpret his inner experiences as revelations granted by the grace of God. Cayce is one of the few Esoteric spokespersons who actually saw himself as the spokesperson for a religious worldview.

The few readings with direct bearing on science clearly reflect this divergent evaluation of science. Cayce explicitly states that "natural laws are God's laws".[84] When occasionally questioned on a subject with direct bearing on science, the answer is likely to be religious or "metaphysical" rather than scientistic.[85] Given a choice between astronomy and astrology, says Cayce, the latter is more valuable since it directly deals with the circumstances of individual people, while the former is abstract and distant.[86] For Cayce, science thus seems to have little or no intrinsic value. Science is only interesting as a vehicle of religious truths that concern an individual person. The Cayce material thus involves very little actual discussion of the role of science or its function as a positive or negative force in society. In the terms given below, Cayce's scientism is mainly terminological.

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[84] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 38.

[85] A case in point is the answer Cayce gave when asked to explain "the law of relativity", cf. Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, pp. 38 f. The reading begins: "The law of relativity we find, as has been given, relates to the law as has been set in motion in the beginning, when the universe as a whole came into existence. As related to the mind and the earth conditions, we find first beginning with the earth in its position, with the other elements about same. Those became the law of the relative position regarding the spheres, and as there begun the lowest form of animal and mineral, and vegetable, forces in the earth, we begun with all relative position regarding those conditions from other spheres, and their relations to same." A very generous interpretation would be that the expression "*law* of relativity" was not intended by the questioner nor understood by Cayce as implying the *theory* of relativity. Similarly metaphysical responses are given to questions concerning the nature of light, gravity and magnetism.

[86] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 147. The same reading gives an interpretation of sun spot activity that falls squarely within the mythic, participatory mode of thinking discussed by Lévy-Bruhl: sun spots are caused by the turmoil of human emotions.

Whereas theosophy is clearly articulated against the backdrop of a general belief in evolution, anthroposophy constructs its scientism from partly different premises. There are, indeed, numerous references to Darwin and Haeckel in Steiner's opus, but the scientistic focus of anthroposophy lies elsewhere. Firstly, there are a number of anthroposophical constructions of science which bear obvious resemblance to the "occult" sciences of Charles Leadbeater. Thus, Steiner's view of the aura is a near-copy of the second-generation theosophical occult anatomy as developed by Leadbeater. Secondly, and addressed more closely in chapter 6, anthroposophy has an overtly formulated epistemology, which claims rational status for its visionary means of attaining knowledge. As a direct consequence, Steiner's work is permeated with the double construction of science.

For Steiner, the possibility of empirical verification is based on the fact that spiritual science and natural science complement each other, rather than stand in conflict. Steiner basically proposes a version of the "two worlds" model, arguing that natural science is correct within its restricted domain, but only there. When the two views are in harmony, natural science is made to buttress the claims of spiritual science. When the two views conflict, spiritual science takes precedence. The reason for this hierarchy is the materialism of ordinary science. Steiner's writings are filled with negative statements regarding materialism: since thoughts have an effect on the physical plane, materialism will cause epidemics of madness;[87] materialism is illogical,[88] destructive,[89] a reflex of the "psycho-sexual" element in human life.[90] In fact, the existence and prevalence of materialism in itself has spiritual causes. Materialism is the result of the influence of Ahrimanic spirits,[91] and increases in strength every time Halley's comet enters the earthly sphere.[92] Thus, materialism can be subsumed

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[87] Steiner *Theosophie des Rosenkreuzers*, lect. 6 pp. 46 f.

[88] Steiner *Inneres Wesen des Menschen und Leben zwischen Tod und neuer Geburt*, lect. 4 p. 16.

[89] Steiner, *Exkurse in das Gebiet des Markusevangeliums*, lect. 7 pp. 114 ff.

[90] Steiner *Weltwesen und Ichheit*, lect. 5 pp. 109 ff.

[91] Steiner *Die Geheimnisse der Schwelle*, lect 2 pp. 4 ff.

[92] Steiner *Der Christusimpuls und die Entwicklung des Ich-Bewusstseins*, lect. 5 pp. 16 ff. That materialism has spiritual causes is supported by Steiner's contention that Halley's comet should not be seen as the instrumental cause of materialism, but as the macrocosmic equivalent of materialism in the microcosm of humanity; thus, the title of the lecture in which this correspondence is discussed, is *Entsprechungen zwischen Mikrokosmos und Makrokosmos*.

under the more encompassing idealist order, just as mainstream science is simply a subsection of spiritual science.

Since anthroposophical, visionary knowledge is not only claimed to be built on rational foundations, but is also, in the terms of a central Steinerian work, "knowledge of higher worlds",[93] science in the ordinary sense of the term is necessarily construed as a lower form of knowledge. Negative views of science are found throughout Steiner's work. Any pedagogical theory is dry and dead if not alimented by the fresh juices of spiritual science.[94] What is taught in genetics (*Vererbungstheorie*) is mere nonsense.[95] And more generally: science without illumination and without the Christ impulse is a godless, superficial, mechanical science.[96] The more encompassing, idealist science that Steiner advocates was once generally accepted, but has nearly died out. However, Wagner and Goethe are harbingers of a future renaissance for idealist science.[97]

Steiner frees himself from the need for empirical investigation by claiming the ability to clairvoyantly access the Akashic record. In the Akashic record, Steiner found innumerable specific details on the workings of the cosmos and the human being, all presented as empirical facts. Thus, regarding e.g. life on Atlantis, Steiner explains that the climate on this lost continent was vastly different from that of the modern world. The atmosphere was saturated with humidity, a constant fog made it impossible to see the sun and the moon clearly, and there was no rainbow.[98] These facts not only *can* but *should* be arrived at by inner processes divorced from the scientific method:

> Diese tatsachen sind durch rein übersinnlichen Beobachtung gewonnen; und es muß sogar gesagt werden daß der Geistesforscher am besten tut, wenn er sich aller Schlußfolgerungen aus seinen naturwissentschaftlichen Erkenntnissen peinlich genau entäußert; denn durch solche Schlußfolgerungen wird ihm leicht der unbefangene innere Sinn der Geistesforschung in die Irre geführt.[99]

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[93] Cf. the title of Steiner *How to Attain Knowledge of the Higher Worlds*.

[94] Steiner *Luzifer-Gnosis*, p. 333.

[95] Steiner *Heilpädagogischer Kurs*, p. 15.

[96] Steiner *Das Johannesevangelium im Verhältnis zu den drei anderen Evangelien*, lect. 12 pp. 11 ff.

[97] Steiner *Welt, Erde und Mensch*, lect. 11 pp. 13 ff.

[98] Steiner *Theosophie des Rosenkreutzers*, lect 11 p. 82; Steiner "Vorurteile aus vermeinter Wissenschaft", p. 727.

[99] Steiner "Vorurteile aus vermeinter Wissenschaft", p. 727; "These facts are attained purely through supersensible observation; and it must even be said that

Only a few paragraphs after this admonition, however, Steiner adds evidence from contemporary science to support his views, namely the statements of a paleontologist by the name of Hilgard.[100]

Besides a general scientism that attempts to characterize Steiner's clairvoyant perception as a higher form of science, numerous more specific forms of scientism or "fringe" science have been formulated within the anthroposophical framework. Due to the more spiritually based form of knowledge afforded by the anthroposophical imaginative process, Steiner felt competent to present his views on the most diverse subjects: matters normally defined as belonging to the domain of science, yet made immune to scientific critique because of Steiner's radical dichotomy—agronomy, chemistry, pharmacology, physiology, anatomy, developmental psychology, astronomy, physics etc. Anthroposophy carries scientism to lengths unparalleled in any other Esoteric position. Of these spiritualized sciences, anthroposophical medicine and agriculture continue to be widely practiced among his followers. Thus, anthroposophical medicine represents a complete reformulation of physiology and pharmacology from the standpoint of a theory of man and nature that encompasses non-material factors: spiritual forces, normally invisible components of the self, spiritual beings. Steiner's views are partly supported through reference to his clairvoyant experience, partly through scientism in the sense that clinical trials are cited as a source of legitimacy.

As we have seen, both mainstream and spiritual science can be supported by claims to objectivity and research, the difference being that spiritual science is said to take in a larger sector of reality. When it comes to the practical results of spiritual science, the dichotomy is partly constructed on different grounds. Criticism of the applications of mainstream sciences is commonly formulated in ethical or moral terms: anthroposophical (i.e. biodynamic) agriculture is to be preferred, not primarily because it is based on a better or more spiritual science, but because it treats the earth, crops and animals better than does conventional agriculture. Frans Carlgren, a leading present-day exponent of anthroposophy, explains the superiority of biodynamic farming:

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the spiritual scientist should abstain entirely from having recourse to his knowledge of the natural sciences, since such conclusions could easily mislead the inner sense of spiritual research."

[100] Steiner "Vorurteile aus vermeinter Wissenschaft", p. 728.

> Crop cultivation and animal husbandry nowadays function as a kind of industry, and it is considered obvious that they, like all other forms of industry, always need to increase their productivity.
>
> Manipulated strains of wheat are given large amounts of artificial fertilizer and are treated with pesticides in order to yield harvests of tens of tons per hectare, elite cows that can barely stand on their own legs, whose udders have to be suspended and whose diet is calculated by computer spend the entire productive part of their lives standing or lying still, chewing protein-enriched fodder in extreme quantities in order to yield 8 to 10 tons of milk per year.
>
> [—] As long as the nitrogen supply [to plants] is effected by microorganisms, there is a natural balance in the supply of nutrients. As man begins to spread large quantities of artificial fertilizers, something new begins to take place. After World War II, fertilization with nitrogen has increased dramatically in large parts of the world. The consequence is a drastic imbalance in the ecosystem of which agriculture is a part, and in places indirectly also in society.[101]

To follow up the vast ramifications of anthroposophical scientism in these and other fields would be carrying this discussion too far. Suffice it to say that to this day, Steiner's *Geisteswissenschaft* continues to inspire researchers with an allegiance to anthroposophy to experimentally study and defend even the most unorthodox of Steiner's claims.[102]

Bailey replicates the theosophical position, in which science and religion can form a perfect union. Her history of science and religion involves a pre-scientific Middle Age in which knowledge of the material world was lacking; a materialistic period with a lack of understanding of the spiritual world; and the present, a period featuring a fruitful synthesis of both domains:

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[101] Carlgren 1985: 88f. The English text quoted here is my translation from the original Swedish text: "Växtodling och djurhållning fungerar numera ofta som ett slags industrier, och det anses självklart att de lika väl som sådana branscher ständigt skall öka sin produktivitet. Högförädlade vetesorter får stora givor av handelsgödsel och besprutas eller bepudras med pesticider för att ge tiotonsskördar per hektar, knäsvaga elitkor med juverbehå och datorkomponerad diet tillbringar hela den produktiva delen av sina liv med att stå eller ligga stilla och tugga i sig proteinrikt kraftfoder i hittills oanade mängder för att kunna frambringa 8–10 ton mjölk om året. [—] Så länge tillförseln av kväve [till växter] ombesörjs av organismer, finns det en naturlig balans i näringstillgången. Men när människan sprider ut stora mängder konstgödsel, sker något helt annat. Efter andra världskriget har kvävegödslingen ökat drastiskt i stora delar av världen. Följden har blivit svåra rubbningar i de ekosystem där jordbruket ingår, och på en del håll indirekt även i samhällslivet."

[102] The degree of Steiner's departure from "normal science" in Kuhn's sense of the word may be gleaned from the—admittedly anecdotal—fact that Steiner rejected Harvey's theory of blood circulation, and was convinced that the heart did *not* pump blood.

> [Bailey's teachings] should tend to bring about a reaction in favor of a system of philosophy which will link both Spirit and matter, and demonstrate the essential unity of the scientific and religious idea. The two are at present somewhat divorced, and we are only just beginning to grope our intellectual way out of the depths of a materialistic interpretation. It must not be forgotten, however, that under the Law of Action and Reaction, the long period of materialistic thought has been a necessary one for humanity, because the mysticism of the Middle Ages has led us too far in the opposite direction.[103]

> Perhaps by the union of these three lines of science, religion, and philosophy we may get a working knowledge of the truth as it is.[104]

Here, one also encounters the double construction of "science". Bailey presents a specific exegesis of what she calls materialism as the negative Other. As demonstrated by the following quote, Bailey's conception of materialism is perhaps closer to naive realism than to materialism in any usual sense of the word.

> [Materialism] teaches that "the presentation which we have in consciousness of an external world is true"; that things are what they seem; that matter and force, as we know them, are the only reality, and that it is not possible for man to get beyond the tangible. He should be satisfied with facts as he knows them, or as science tells him they are.[105]

The last sentence is of particular rhetorical importance. It links "science" with authority, presenting it as a body of doctrines imposed from without rather than a method of systematic inquiry. As the quote unfolds, we are led to a position one recognizes as a standard theosophical point of view: normal science is not in error, it is just a limited version, a subset of a vaster, spiritualized science. Two aspects differentiate spiritualized science from its materialistic counterpart. It is teleological in the sense that it recognizes a purpose in nature. It is idealistic in that it reckons with the existence of nonmaterial vital forces:

> This is a perfectly legitimate method of solution, but for some of us it fails in that it does not go far enough. In refusing to concern itself with anything except that which can be proven and demonstrated it stops short at the very point where the enquirer says, "That is so, but

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[103] Bailey *Treatise on Cosmic Fire*, pp. xiii–xiv.
[104] Bailey *Consciousness of the Atom*, p. 17.
[105] Bailey *Consciousness of the Atom*, p. 13.

> why?" It leaves out of its calculation much that is known and realised as truth by the average man, even though he may be unable to explain why he knows it to be true. Men everywhere are recognising the accuracy of the facts of the realistic school, and of material science, yet at the same time they feel innately that there is, underlying the proven objective manifestation, some vitalising force, and some coherent purpose which cannot be accounted for in terms of matter alone.[106]

Bailey devotes the rest of the book from which this quote is taken—*The Consciousness of the Atom*—to an attempt to formulate such a spiritualized science. We will return to her book in a later section of this chapter.

Bailey elaborated the details of a social or utopian vision, in which the concept of *antahkarana* holds a central role.[107] This is variously defined as a channel of energy, a state of awareness, or "the path, or bridge, between higher and lower mind, serving as a medium of communication between the two [. . .] built by the aspirant himself in mental matter."[108] A crucial goal of becoming a disciple of esoteric knowledge was to "build antahkarana", i.e. increase one's spiritual awareness. *Discipleship in the New Age* makes passing use of the word "scientific" to characterize this work.[109] In a book published shortly before her death, Bailey had fully elevated the concept of the building of antahkarana to that of a spiritualized science, a "mode of bridging the gap which exists in man's consciousness between the world of ordinary human experience, the threefold world of physical-emotional-mental functioning, and the higher levels of so-called spiritual development which is the world of ideas, of intuitive perception, of spiritual insight and understanding", in praxis a gradual process achieved through meditation, through the understanding of symbols, and through service through discipleship.[110] This new science would transcend the differences between Western and Eastern modes of thinking, bridge the gap between the lower mind and the soul, and make us understand our own nature—in short, enable us to become ideal citizens of the coming utopia.

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[106] Bailey *Consciousness of the Atom*, pp. 13 f.

[107] This concept is found sporadically throughout her work, beginning with her first volume *Initiation Human and Solar*, and becomes a focal topic in some of her last books, *Discipleship in the New Age* and *Education in the New Age*.

[108] This definition is found in Bailey *Initiation Human and Solar*, p. 215 as well as *Letters on Occult Meditation*, p. 350.

[109] Bailey *Discipleship in the New Age*, vol. II, p. 254.

[110] Bailey *Education in the New Age*, p. 2.

The shift towards a spiritualized science is justified in an argument that prefigures the New Age of the 1970s. A new, spiritualized science is needed because mainstream science is rooted in a Piscean, i.e. militant and separative, way of thinking. Spiritualized science at the cusp of the Age of Aquarius needs to be synthetic and inclusive, or what New Age spokespersons would call holistic. In this respect, Bailey's positive millennialism appears to be a direct precursor of ideas that would spread throughout the cultic milieu of the 1960s and 1970s.

Ambivalent Scientism in the New Age

As the Esoteric Tradition received fresh impetus in the late 1960s, the ambivalent view of science continued to play an important role. In the New Age critique of Enlightenment rationalism, intuition and emotion were at times placed above the intellect. One finds, in the sources, a version of the two worlds argument whereby science and other cognitive modes (intuition, emotion, art . . .) are claimed to be fundamentally different, yet complementary. Science has its domain, and this domain can and should be left to itself. Intuition and religious sentiment also have their domains. In an ideal world, people would develop logical, linear thinking as well as holistic or intuitive apprehension. C.G. Jung is sometimes adduced as the spokesperson of such an argument. In his quadripartite model of the human psyche, intellect, emotion, intuition and perception are distinct yet equivalent functions.[111] At times, authors refer to the theory of differentiated brain hemisphere functions.[112] Research on brain physiology indicates a certain specialization of functions between the left and right brain hemispheres. According to a popularized version of this theory, reproduced in a number of New Age texts, the left hemisphere is masculine, rational and verbal, while the right hemisphere is feminine, intuitive and non-verbal. Western civilization is purportedly dominated by left-hemisphere thinking. A well-rounded person would, according to this theory, integrate the two cerebral hemispheres. Although it claims a separate domain of validity for logical, rational thinking, the latter argument in itself rests on a scientistic argument,

[111] Jung 1971 is devoted to the theory of the four functions.

[112] The theory of the separate functions of the brain hemispheres was originally set out in Ornstein 1972. For an account of how this legend element relates to the actual results of brain research, see Corballis 1999.

since the mainstream scientific community does not generally endorse a theory claiming that brain hemisphere functions are so distinct.

At the same time, a distinct hierarchy emerged. A conflict theme can be seen in the manifestos of the budding New Age movement of the 1970s and early 1980s, which explicitly denounced what was perceived as the materialistic and atomistic nature of the current scientific method. Fundamental movement texts such as Fritjof Capra's *The Turning Point* and Marilyn Ferguson's *The Aquarian Conspiracy* contrast (bad) mainstream science with (good) metaphysical science. Similar anti-science sentiments were not only part of the early New Age of the seventies, but have continued up into our own time. James Redfield's best-selling novel *The Tenth Insight* (1995) is a science-fiction account of the struggle between materialistic science and the representatives of a higher spiritual evolution. In this novel, conventional science is represented by a group of caricatured scientists, who attempt to extract energy from space at the cost of destroying their immediate environment. The heroes of this story combat the villains through distinctly non-scientific, paranormal means. Both positive and negative constructions of science are involved in this not-so-subtle metaphor for modernity.

The fear of science and technology is arguably not only part of an Esoteric discourse, but has broader relevance as an aspect of late modernity. Even the briefest cultural history of the ambivalent or negative attitudes toward science in the late modern age is, of course, well beyond the scope of the present study. It may perhaps suffice to note a few examples. A brief look at the ecological movement, especially in its "deep ecology" variety, reveals similar tendencies. One of the earliest examples, a 1972 report presented by Barbara Ward and René Dubos to the United Nations World Conference on the Human Environment, argued that man's technological capacity spelled impending doom for the planet.[113] Variously formulated critiques of conventional science have also been forthcoming from a number of intellectuals in the social sciences, ranging from Horkheimer and Adorno[114] to Ulrich Beck.[115] Although permeating fields as diverse as sociology and ecology, the distrust of science is, perhaps, most apparent when formulated in religious terms.

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[113] Bramwell 1989: 211.
[114] Horkheimer & Adorno 1997.
[115] Beck 1992.

Conventional, mechanistic science has thus been constructed as one of the negative significant Others which serve to demarcate the boundaries of the New Age. "Conventional science" is, of course, an extremely vague concept. A closer reading reveals the highly selective attention to the various negative Others that could conceivably be included in this category. Newtonian mechanics is repeatedly denounced as a limited view of the physical universe, and thus plays a considerable role in the self-definition of modern, New Age positions. On the other hand, surprisingly little emphasis is placed on Darwinism. Compared with the almost obsessive preoccupation of theosophy with materialistic theories of evolution, later positions of the Esoteric Tradition have shown surprisingly little concern with counteracting the impact of Darwinism. A few extant attempts at doing so have positioned themselves close to the "scientific creationism" position usually associated with conservative Christianity.

Arguably, a critique of science can only be formulated within the structures of modernity. At the same time, science carries such weight in contemporary society that the very term "unscientific" has strongly negative connotations. How, then, do New Age authors wish their readers to conceive of the position of the New Age vis-à-vis conventional science? As with the earlier positions, a critique of science coexists with claims that one's own New Age doctrines are, in fact, scientific. These conflicting views of science are typically embedded in an emic historiography structured by the characteristic U-shaped time-line. The recent past has been dominated by negative forms of science. The present is a time of transformation, the beginning of the upward slope. A new form of science is taking shape, one that points back to the wisdom of the ancients. Perhaps the most influential exponent of such a view within the New Age is Fritjof Capra. Capra devotes some space in his book *The Turning Point* to reviewing the history of the natural sciences in the West.[116] The following brief summary presents the main points of his critique.[117]

Capra opens his book with a massive indictment on Western society, in a section tellingly called *Crisis and Transformation*. Within the space of a few pages, one finds descriptions of the arms race, air

[116] The following discussion is mainly based on chapters 1 and 2 in Capra *Turning Point*.

[117] Whether or not his views of the main protagonists of his story are essentially correct is an issue that falls outside the scope of the present study.

pollution, health hazards, unemployment, the depletion of natural resources and inflation. In a quasi-Spenglerian mood, Capra presents curves outlining the rise and fall of various civilizations, ominously warning of impeding doom for our own culture.[118] Where does the current (i.e. 1982) crisis in Western civilization come from? Capra sees the root of evil as an erroneous view of the world and our place in it, what Capra, adopting a metaphor, calls "the strikingly consistent preferral of yang values" which basically entails that:

> our culture takes pride in being scientific. Our time is referred to as the Scientific Age. It is dominated by rational thought, and scientific knowledge is often considered the only acceptable kind of knowledge. That there can be intuitive knowledge, or awareness, which is just as reliable and valid, is generally not recognized. This attitude, known as scientism, is widespread, pervading our educational system and all other social and political institutions.[119]

Capra then proceeds to present the historical sources of this scientistic worldview. Whereas most Esoteric positions construct either science in the abstract, or science as defined by then current doctrines, as ambivalent, Capra presents a third theme in the story of ambivalent science. The history of science is appropriated and interpreted in the light of his own ideological needs, not unlike the way in which exotic Others are subjected to similar reinterpretations.

Most of the founding fathers of modern science who are discussed are presented as ambiguous figures. While Capra by no means denies the significance of Galileo's shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric cosmology, he argues that the underlying ideology of Galilean science was reductionistic:

> To make it possible for scientists to describe nature mathematically, Galileo postulated that they should restrict to studying the essential properties of material bodies—shapes, numbers and movements—which could be measured and quantified. Other properties, like color, sound, taste or smell were merely subjective mental projections which should be excluded from the domain of science.[120]

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[118] Capra's own references are not Spengler, but Hegel, Saint-Simon and Herbert Spencer (Capra *Turning Point*, p. 9). How reasonable it is for Capra to associate these more or less evolutionist and utopian thinkers with his gloomy picture of the rise of modernity remains somewhat unclear.

[119] Capra *Turning Point*, pp. 22 f. It is, of course, somewhat ironic that I stipulatively define and use the term scientism to denote precisely the kind of logic that underlies Capra's own discussion.

[120] Capra *Turning Point*, p. 39.

Thus, Capra broadly follows a standard account of Galilean celestial mechanics as the starting point of a gradual separation of the sensible world into primary and secondary qualities.[121] Perhaps more interestingly, Capra's negative evaluation of mainstream science as deleteriously reductionistic resembles the struggle of Romantic science against its mechanistic counterparts. Thus, the above quote specifically echoes the polemics between Goethe and the Newtonians on the nature of color.[122] The major culprit in Capra's narrative, however, is Descartes, who produced the ultimate split between the cognitive faculties and the rest of our organisms, between soul and body, mind and matter, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.[123] Descartes' legacy is a mechanistic conception of science that still pervades our culture. Capra's sketch is not only a brief review of Western science, but also a kind of philosophy of history, an overarching perspective of the ups and downs of our culture, made to fit our own historical background into the developmental curves he presented shortly before.

Notwithstanding the attacks of a writer who has undoubtedly received an authoritative status within the New Age culture, Capra's texts are better known for their advocacy of science as a legitimate path to knowledge. If we are at the beginning of the upward part of the evolutionary curve, an integrated, holistic and non-materialistic science awaits us. Indeed, Capra's own descriptions of science point the way to an integration of rationality and mysticism, in fact to a Tao of physics. Whence this positive re-evaluation of science in a distinctly anti-scientific context? An answer to this apparent contradiction is provided by rhetorician Alan Gross: "From a rhetorical point of view, the high esteem bestowed upon science gives its communications a built-in ethos of especial intensity".[124] As will be apparent from the remainder of the present chapter, this ethos has profoundly affected the argumentation supporting a variety of New Age claims.

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[121] Cf. Barbour 1998: 12.

[122] Goethe also waged polemics against the Newtonians on several other accounts: on their methodology, on their understanding of the relationship between experiment and theory, as well as on a number of detailed empirical claims. For the present purposes, the most interesting difference is that which perhaps most clearly marks Goethe as a Romantic scientist: his wish to study actual perceptual phenomena in terms that did not reduce them to abstract properties. The controversies surrounding Goethe's *Zur Farbenlehre* (1810) are summarized in Sepper 1988 and 1990.

[123] Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 27.

[124] Gross 1990: 21.

Modes of Scientism

The positive aspect of scientism, the rhetorical force it carries, infuses the texts of the Modern Esoteric Tradition in a variety of ways. Previous studies have generally concentrated on the ideological statements of texts on New Age science, the attempts to forge a synthesis between the New Age worldview and e.g. certain aspects of physics or biology. Such full-scale attempts, as exemplified by the books of Fritjof Capra, will be the subject of a later section. The present section will broaden the perspective and look at a wide variety of scientistic influences on New Age texts, some of the strategies adopted by Esoteric spokespersons in their need to find legitimacy in contemporary science.

Perhaps the simplest appeal to the legitimizing force of science is the one manifest in paratextual markers such as endorsements and academic titles. Whether or not they are relevant to one's work as a spokesperson for Esoteric claims, academic titles can be prominently displayed. Although the value of a Ph.D. is crucially dependent on the institution at which it has been acquired, the subject of one's post-graduate studies and a number of other factors, the title itself frequently is invoked as if it automatically confers expert status on the bearer.[125]

There is a vast spectrum of scientistic strategies, from the appeal to academic credentials to the use of ideas, terminologies and methods that at least resemble those of science. The remainder of this section will survey a sample of such modes of scientism.

Terminological Scientism

The perusal of a few volumes of New Age texts will present the reader with terminological loans from the physical sciences: energy, frequencies, vibrations, dimensions and, of course, the term science itself. The crucial difference between the (mainstream) scientific and the scientistic uses of such terminology seems to lie in the referents of such terms. Scientific usage requires that key terms be defined,

[125] At times, this is carried to great lengths. A minor author within the Esoteric Tradition, Patrick Flanagan, has written books on the purported paranormal powers of pyramids: *Pyramid Power* and *Beyond Pyramid Power*. His doctorate, which appears to be used to support his controversial claims, turns out to be a degree in alternative medicine conferred by a private institute in Sri Lanka.

whereas scientistic usage is considerably vaguer, at times to the point of making it hard to discern any meaning beyond the purely rhetorical. This section will briefly review the use of some of the most frequently recurring loan words.

The word "science" is used within several positions of the Esoteric Tradition. When e.g. proponents of Reiki healing call their method a science, the term "science" is, of course, in itself a loan from mainstream usage. Despite the differences between the various positions, there are generally two crucial differences between the non-Esoteric and Esoteric applications of the term. Firstly, there are few Esoteric attempts to overtly discuss what science is intended to denote.[126] Secondly, whether the meaning of science is given in the texts or must be deduced from actual usage, there is little relation to the non-Esoteric meaning of the word. This is by no means unique to the Esoteric Tradition, and seems to be a fairly common trait in modern religious movements.[127] There thus appears to be a tendency to use the word science rhetorically, a move that squares well with the double image of science as a negative as well as positive Other.

Theosophy took one step in this direction when William Q. Judge called theosophy a scientific religion or religious science. With the exception of anthroposophy, few post-theosophical positions unambiguously construe themselves as scientific enterprises. Several, however, choose to designate parts of their doctrines or practices as scientific. Thus, movement texts from the Church Universal and Triumphant call decreeing Science of the Spoken Word.[128]

Several of the most commonly used scientistic terms in the New Age movement are fairly old. It is hardly possible to determine exactly when they began to be used metaphorically. The New Age movement and its Esoteric predecessors use several common such terms.

The Secret Doctrine uses the term *dimension* only sparingly. Two quotes use the word in its ordinary sense of spatio-temporal direction, i.e. the three dimensions of space plus time as a fourth dimension. The analogy between scientific and metaphoric use is made in a third

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[126] The most notable exception is anthroposophy, which will be discussed at length in chapter 6.

[127] Transcendental meditation calls itself a Vedic science. Several American harmonial religions, most notably Christian Science, have adopted the term *science* as a self-designation.

[128] Decreeing is a form of ritual invocation. One of the movement texts of the CUT, written by Mark and Elizabeth Prophet, is called *Science of the Spoken Word*.

passage. For Blavatsky, the human mind is not a geometrical but a metaphysical dimension.[129] The word remains rare in Cayce's and Steiner's terminologies. The term *dimension* has become common in segments of the New Age, especially UFO and Ascension lore. "Higher dimensions" imply forms of life more advanced on the ladder of spiritual evolution. This usage is probably a direct loan from the writings of Alice Bailey, who explains:

> The fourth dimension is the ability to see through and around a thing. The fifth dimension is the ability, for instance, to take an eye, and by means of that eye to put oneself en rapport with all other eyes in the solar system. To see in the sixth dimension might be defined as the power to take a pebble off the beach, and by means of it to put oneself in accord with the entire planet. Now in the fifth dimension, where you took the eye, you were limited to a particular line of manifestation, but in the case of the sixth dimension, where you took a pebble, you were put in touch with the entire planet.[130]

William James' essay *The Energies of Men*[131] has probably been influential in popularizing the term *energies* in its sense of "vital force". Theosophy uses both *energy* (and the corresponding plural) and *force*. The latter term occurs frequently in *The Secret Doctrine*, but seems to have fallen in some disfavor in later positions, where *energy* (or *energies*) is all the more common. Energies are ubiquitous from the channeled books of Alice Bailey to various New Age texts.

Vibration is a commonly used term, beginning with Leadbeater. Cayce and Bailey use the term very frequently, as do several New Age authors. As with other scientistic terms, the precise meaning of the word *vibration* is not always easy to determine. In theosophical usage, *vibrations* are a metaphoric extension of the understanding of light as consisting of electro-magnetic waves. Those waves that have certain frequencies located within a rather narrow band are visible. Others, e.g. in the infrared and ultraviolet parts of the spectrum, are not visible to the naked eye. The theosophical metaphor confuses frequencies with vibrations, and extends the usage to any part of the occult experience that is not accepted by non-esotericists.[132]

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[129] SD I:628.

[130] Bailey *Consciousness of the Atom*, pp. 138 f.

[131] James 1907.

[132] To be precise, theosophical literature can compound two mistakes by claiming that sounds represent lower vibrations and light higher, cf. Leadbeater *Some Glimpses of Occultism*, pp. 130 f.

This invisible world is then said to be composed of finer or higher vibrations. As we evolve spiritually, we can also attain higher vibrational states. The term *frequency*, which might have been a more appropriate metaphor, appears to be an innovation of the New Age.[133]

The frequent reference to the *quantum* is, of course, a result of popularizations of quantum physics. A later section will be devoted to the topic of quantum metaphysics.

Several of these terms are used to represent the core metaphor of much of the Esoteric Tradition: spiritual evolution is a change of dimension, an increase of frequency, a heightened rate of vibration, a greater awareness of or access to the quantum level of reality. As such, they are freely interchangeable with other metaphoric renderings of the same core meaning, e.g. the frequent use of the concept of light. Those who further human and planetary evolution are light-workers; accepting an Esoteric worldview entails living in the light.[134]

Besides such recurrent terms, there are numerous others. Scientific terminology frequently appears to be used in a metaphorical sense, where the literal meaning beneath the metaphor is left open to interpretation. This practice is so pervasive that a reasonably thorough review of textual occurrences would amount to a massive catalogue of rhetorical or metaphorical uses of terms from biology, physics, chemistry and other sciences. A more selective account will be found in several of the later sections.

Paratechnology and Parascience

The constructivist definition of science and scientism highlights a vast gray zone, where entire fields of activity are included as scientific by the New Age camp and excluded by the academic camp. These will be designated here by the terms parascience and paratechnology, areas that mimic mainstream science and mainstream technology, respectively.

There are journals devoted to these subjects. Some, such as the *Fortean Times*, are classics.[135] There are others, such as the *Journal of*

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[133] *Frequency* and *vibration* are used interchangeably in New Age literature, in the same way as *vibration* is used in the older literature. See e.g. George Trevelyan's introduction to Spangler *Revelation* (p. 13).

[134] Gawain *Living in the Light*.

[135] *Fortean Times* is a monthly magazine founded in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort, avid collector of tales of the paranormal and writer of several books presenting assorted fringe phenomena.

Scientific Exploration, which are also a general fora for parascience.[136] Still others promote alternative views on specific subjects. Thus, there are specialized UFO magazines, journals devoted to the study of crop circles and publications catering to those with a particular interest in astrology. Entire branches of parascience and paratechnology have been developed by enthusiasts within the cultic milieu: methods for generating free energy, levitating objects by means of antigravity, concentrating mysterious energies in pyramids, vivifying water by making it swirl in appropriate geometric patterns, discovering energy lines in the ground or detecting and photographing the presence of vital forces in and around the human body.

Paratechnology or parascience enters into the discursive strategies supporting several methods of healing, based on the belief in the existence of normally invisible life forces in and around the human body. Of course, although New Age forms of healing in etic terms would be considered rituals, and are effective for the same poorly understood reasons for which other healing rituals can be effective, healing is not seen in those terms by those who practice it. The vital forces or life energies are described as empirical facts. The universal life energy is normally said to be invisible and impossible to measure. According to some writers in this field, this is not entirely true. Paula Horan notes how a specific technique, Kirlian photography, can capture these streams of energy on photographic film.[137]

In 1939, Semyon Davidovitch Kirlian discovered the process now known as Kirlian Photography. This method consists of placing an object or body part directly on a piece of photographic paper and then passing a high voltage across the object. The photographic paper will then become exposed and will reveal a glowing "aura" around the object. Kirlian photographers claim that different moods and levels of psychic power will show up in these photos. Such claims have been proposed by Dr. Thelma Moss of UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute and her former student, Kendall Johnson.[138] Their conclusions are that Kirlian photography is a window onto the world

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[136] The *Journal of Scientific Exploration* publishes papers that "are for various reasons ignored or studied inadequately within mainstream science." It claims to provide "a forum for investigations; [and] neither promotes nor aims to debunk any of these topics." An online version is available at www.jse.com, the website from which the present quotes are taken.

[137] Horan *Empowerment Through Reiki*, pp. 18, 20, 152.

[138] Moss 1974 and 1979.

of "bioenergy". Moss and Johnson believe that Kirlian photography actually depicts a hitherto invisible astral body, while others believe that it is a merely an electrical effect that is somehow sensitive to psychic states.

The parameters governing the appearance and behavior of the corona have been studied, and the phenomenon seems to be trivial in the sense that it appears to lack any major scientific or technical applications. The method of photographing such discharges has, however, been supplemented with a number of empirically unsupported claims of a more metaphysical nature, which have been favorably received within the cultic milieu. The glowing contour has been interpreted as the aura or bioenergetic field of the object. In the case of, for instance, a hand, the size and color of the glow would reflect the vitality of the person. The mechanisms of discourse formation are apparent, since skeptics have, on several occasions, attempted to refute such claims.[139] Kirlian photography illustrates how a well known and thoroughly investigated method can receive entirely different interpretations among mainstream scientists and among Esoteric spokespersons. As such, it is just one of several techniques on the contested borderline between science and belief.

Technological Ritual Objects

Closely related to the theme of parascience and paratechnology is that of technological (or para-technological) ritual objects. New Age religion is permeated with ritual: healing, divination and channeling are all ritual acts. As with the rituals of other religious traditions, many of them encompass the use of ritual objects. A distinctive feature of New Age religion is its reliance on the trappings of technology in selecting such ritual objects.[140] Dowsing rods and pendulums could be considered to be the extreme low-tech end of this

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[139] A brief and rather polemical presentation of Kirlian photography as pseudoscience is found in Randi 1995; a more thorough examination of the technique as a physical and parascientific phenomenon can be found in Watkins & Bickel 1991.

[140] This is, of course, not meant to imply that New Age religion exclusively focuses on quasi-technological objects in its rituals. Even distinctly non-technological ritual objects such as the stones and gems of crystal healing or the colored and scented liquids of Aura-Soma are given scientistic explanations in the movement texts. Thus, books on crystals may refer to the piezoelectric effect or to the fact that crystals are used in radio receivers. Such a claim can be found e.g. in Horan *Empowerment Through Reiki*, p. 84. Cf. also Melton et al. 1981: 287 f.

phenomenon. At the other end, one finds aura cameras purportedly able to capture the human aura on film, and so-called brain machines said to enhance the user's meditative powers.[141]

Roy Rappaport has described two important aspects of ritual objects. Firstly, their use has to do with in-group conventions, with the public order and the individual's participation in it.[142] Secondly, material objects tend to stand indexically for something intangible. Thus, what is represented by these seemingly technical devices is often something insubstantial: the ritual object makes visible and accessible forces or qualities generally considered part of a hidden order of things, and displays these occult qualities to participants and audiences. Ritual objects are meant to be taken at face value: rods and cameras are not intended to *symbolize* forces, but to directly *represent* them. The dowsing rod makes present the hidden ley lines or diffuse energies thought to emanate from the earth. The aura camera makes visible those normally invisible colors said to surround us. Brain machines use blinking lamps to display and give meaning to various brain states that are otherwise not readily distinguishable. They are therefore able to strengthen the participants' conviction that such forces exist, and lend support to the ritual specialists' claims to possessing extraordinary capabilities to detect these energies and skills in interpreting the images, whether through intuition or according to a formalized set of rules. Without ritual means of substantiating such claims, both the doctrines and the associated status would risk being devoid of significance.

The modernist aura of many such ritual objects stems from the rhetorical ethos associated with technology: computers represent order and rationality, cameras imply objective reproduction.[143] Several rit-

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[141] Aura cameras were introduced on the market by electronics engineer Guy Coggins in 1992. However, earlier attempts to catch auras on photographic film date back to the end of the nineteenth century. Aura cameras use colored LCD displays, triggered by the skin resistance of the person being photographed, in order to create a picture resembling esoteric descriptions of the human aura. Brain machines, also known as mind machines or brain tuners, employ rhythmic lights and sounds to produce a change in brain waves, accompanied by a slight but perceptible change in one's state of consciousness. Since the late 1980s, there are a number of competing brands of such machines.

[142] Rappaport 1999, ch. 5. Much of the discussion in the following paragraphs is indebted to the theoretical framework found in Rappaport's treatment of ritual objects.

[143] Such rhetorical use naturally requires selective attention. The skeptic's views, namely that computers operate according to the principle of "garbage in, garbage

ual objects partake both of the latest science and of ancient wisdom, thus becoming embodiments of the otherwise abstract time-line of the Esoteric tradition. Crystals are ancient instruments of spiritual development used by the Atlanteans or by Native Americans, but are also associated with contemporary physics (the piezoelectric effect), or with computers (silicon chips are made from single crystals). Where etic historiography sees an innovation in the Esoteric Tradition, emic explanations surrounding this and other ritual objects represent their status as part of a perennial spiritual order of things.

The apparent objectivity associated with such ritual objects has important consequences. A socially constructed order, e.g. one that posits correspondences between specific colors and certain states of mind or forms of illness, is represented as a natural order. The glow of light and colors around the human body is not merely depicted in stylized form, as are the halos of Christian iconography, but is meant as an actual representation of these lights and colors through technical means. It requires a considerable level of suspicion to question what is placed directly before one's eyes.

Finally, Kirlian photography and aura pictures produce a form of modern iconography. They have aesthetic qualities which surely contribute to their enduring popularity within the New Age community. Furthermore, aura images or Kirlian photographs are claimed to be specifically correlated with each person, in fact with each fleeting moment. By their seeming objectivity and instrumentality, these objects are well-suited to expressing the unique individuality of each participant, an important characteristic of a late modern religious belief, in a canonical language that is both public and grounded in scientism.

Calculations and the Rhetoric of Rationality

Yet another mode of scientism consists in the claims that one's theories are logical or rational, i.e. in the way that Steiner explains that anthroposophy is logical because geometry is logical, or Lewis writes that astrology is rational *inter alia* because it can be subjected to statistical calculations.[144] One particularly prominent example of such pseudo-rational calculations regards the view of the U-shaped

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out", that dowsing rods only enhance the muscular twitches of the dowser and that cameras are eminently manipulable, need to be kept outside the boundaries of the discourse.

[144] Lewis 1994: xvi.

time-line of the Esoteric Tradition. When will the decisive breakthroughs on the upward part of the curve take place?

Arguably, non-Scriptural apocalyptic thought in the West dates at least as far back as the belief in celestial omens or the prophecies of Nostradamus. Beginning with the nineteenth century, apocalyptic thought has once again become a significant strand of the Esoteric Tradition. Such messages can gain legitimacy in a number of ways. Edgar Cayce delivered a number of doomsday messages. Gigantic earthquakes and floods would take place as the Piscean Age gave way to the Aquarian. Portions of Atlantis would rise again.[145] Quite a few post-Caycean psychics have elaborated on these readings and predict similar cataclysmic earth changes.[146] All of the claims referred to are elaborations on narratives of visionary experiences.

However, apocalypticism is also frequently constructed within a scientistic framework, by arguing that the nature and date of future changes can be arrived at rationally, through calculation. Three such discourses have been adopted by the Modern Esoteric Tradition. In all three forms, a millenarian tradition with roots in a Western Esoteric Tradition is ascribed with archaic and/or exotic roots. In all three discourses, another major characteristic of the Esoteric Tradition is also evident. Each author freely combines themes that already exist within the tradition. Even highly innovative and speculative contributions can be seen to mainly consist of a regrouping and a shift of emphasis among pre-existing discursive elements. Often, in fact, the earliest traceable example of the use of any given discursive element—the moment when it may have been invented or for the first time made public—is rarely the most successful.

The oldest of the three is pyramidology, the belief that important events in the history of mankind can be dated prophetically by measuring certain dimensions of the Cheops pyramid at Gizeh.[147] During the late nineteenth century, pyramidology found its way into the religious belief systems of several Christian denominations, and became an important element in the rise of the Adventist movement.[148] During

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[145] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, pp. 442 ff., Johnson 1998: 86 ff.

[146] Among those who publicize their claims are Lori Toye, Gordon Michael Scallion, and others. The reader is referred to web sites such as www.iamerica.com (Toye) and www.earthchanges.com (Scallion).

[147] The history of pyramidology is related in Tompkins 1971 and Gardner 1957: 173 ff.

[148] Briefly, in 1859 the British publisher John Taylor wrote a book called *The*

the twentieth century, however, pyramidology seems to have become increasingly marginalized within the cultic milieu. Cayce's readings constitute a possible exception, in that they contain references to prophetic speculations based on the dimension of the Cheops pyramid.[149] A major earth change predicted for 1936 is said to be recorded in the pyramid, but Cayce does not refer to any calculations used to arrive at this date. The remaining two quasi-rational calculations, the attempt to find prophetic messages in the Maya calendar and to calculate the inception of the Age of Aquarius have, however, continued to fascinate segments of the cultic milieu.

Maya Calendar

The belief that the Mayan calendar holds prophetic omens relevant for all of mankind is a relatively recent one, and can be dated to the mid-1970s. It does, however, have its predecessors. In the 1870s and 1880s, the archaeologist Augustus le Plongeon integrated the Mayas into the emic historiography of the cultic milieu when he created the legend of the lost continent of Mu and claimed that it had been populated by refugees from the Yucatan peninsula. The link to the Mayas was, however, weakened when this theme was picked up by writer James Churchward, who produced several books on Mu

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Great Pyramid: Why Was It Built? And Who Built It? Taylor believed that the architect who had planned and supervised the building of the Great Pyramid of Cheops was not an Egyptian but probably Noah, the biblical patriarch. Later pyramidologists retained Taylor's hypothesis of a non-Egyptian origin, but suggested that its designer was Melchizedek. Beyond such details, the basis of pyramidology was the belief that significant facts had been encoded into the measurements of the Great Pyramid. Thus, Taylor noted that the ratio of the perimeter of the base of the pyramid to twice its height gave a fairly close approximation of the number pi. Taylor performed a number of calculations on various other dimensions of the pyramid, and concluded that it was constructed by using a unit of length which he called the "pyramid inch". Twenty-five "pyramid inches" made a "pyramid cubit," and ten million pyramid cubits approximates the length of the radius of the earth on its polar axis fairly closely. Taylor concluded that the Great Pyramid was a model of the earth.

The most important innovation in pyramidology was introduced by C. Piazzi Smyth, a British Israelite and the Astronomer-Royal of Scotland. The pyramid, he contended, was not only a model of the earth, but also of divine history. He and his followers attempted to deduce the date of the Second Coming from certain measurements, a form of macro-historical divination that would be incorporated into late 19th century movements such as Millerism and certain precursors of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

[149] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, pp. 413 ff.

but placed the continent in the Pacific.[150] The more specific present-day interest in the Mayan calendar can, however, be traced back to Frank Waters' book *Mexico Mystique*.[151] Waters, better known for his pseudo-ethnographic *Book of the Hopi*, was soon thereafter followed by Peter Balin. Not only is he the author of a book on the subject—*The Flight of the Feathered Serpent*[152]—but he has also designed a Mayan tarot deck, the Xultan Tarot.

The Mayan calendar continued to be a peripheral subject until a breakthrough came in 1987 with the work of José Argüelles.[153] His bestseller, *The Mayan Factor*, published in that year, contributed to placing Argüelles among the best-known spokesmen of the New Age movement. His name appeared in *Time, Newsweek* and the *Wall Street Journal*.[154] In *The Mayan Factor*, Argüelles' argues that the Mayas possessed a science superior to our own. Since the highest achievement of the Mayas was their precise astronomical observations, their calendar embodies a knowledge of cosmic rhythms not found in Gregorian time. When attempting to explain how he uncovered these hitherto unknown facets of Mayan culture, Argüelles mentions *inter alia* his belief in a perennial philosophy, his meeting with non-traditional Native American spokespersons such as Sun Bear and Tony Shearer, extensive study of esoteric texts, his own intuitive faculties and a series of visionary experiences.[155] The Mayan calendar, however, is a mathematically precise structure, and it is in his efforts to decode the exact details of its purported prophetic significance that quasi-rational or scientistic arguments enter. Briefly, the crucial element of Argüelles idea is that the Mayan calendar not only has a first date, but also an end: since the calendar is cyclical rather than linear, there is a point at which the various cycles that comprise it coincide in exactly the same way as they did when the calendar began. This date, he claimed, was December 21st, 2012. Besides this idea, which still has supporters within the New Age milieu, Argüelles

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[150] James Churchward (1832–1936) wrote five volumes on this imaginary continent, starting with Churchward 1926.

[151] Waters 1975.

[152] Balin 1978.

[153] Argüelles, born 1939, received his Ph.D. in Art History and aesthetics from the University of Chicago in 1969. Beside an academic career, Argüelles also has a documented record as peace activist, and co-organized the First Whole Earth Festival in Davis, California.

[154] Melton et al. 1991: 368.

[155] For the latter, see especially Argüelles *Mayan Factor*, pp. 30 f.

constructed an elaborate set of correspondences between the particular elements of the Mayan calendar and historic world events, various other systems of correspondences (notably the I Ching), the parts of the human body, planets, abstract properties, and so forth. The details of this system, however, do not seem to have had any greater effect on the larger New Age community.

Enthusiasm for José Argüelles' Mayan calendar theories waned rapidly after the Harmonic Convergence. His lasting contribution to New Age lore was to introduce two specific dates into the apocalyptic speculations. Even today, a number of New Age spokespersons can refer to 1987 as the beginning of a major shift in human/planetary awareness.[156] More commonly, the year 2012 is seen by parts of the New Age culture as a crucial date.

One characteristic of the Mayan Calendar theme within the Esoteric Tradition is its reliance on mathematical and astronomical calculations. There is a strong pseudo-rational streak apparent in such calculations. The high visibility of Argüelles' book and project prompted critics to comment that Argüelles created his own version of the calendar. In part, this criticism came from trained archaeologists. In part, there was also criticism from other spokespersons within the Esoteric Tradition, people who accepted the basic premise of the discourse—that the Mayan calendar has prophetic importance for our own destiny—but rejected Argüelles' specific interpretation of how the calendar was to be understood. Argüelles' prime opponent in this discourse-internal polemics is John Major Jenkins, author of a number of Esoteric books. A comprehensive statement of his views appeared in 1994.[157] The debate continues, not least on the Internet, as to the exact details of dating, but the general premise shared only within the discourse is left intact: that this dating is at least as important for those of us living today as it was for classical Mayan culture.

Interestingly, the most eclectic and most speculative claims regarding the Mayan calendar are also the most widely publicized. Recently, two spokespersons of the Esoteric Tradition, Barbara Hand Clow and Barbara Marciniak, have created a cosmological myth of theosophical complexity which incorporates a number of strands, ranging from UFO lore to Mayan calendar apocalypticism.[158] Whereas

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[156] Including channel Barbara Marciniak mentioned below.

[157] Jenkins 1994.

[158] Hand Clow *Pleiadian Agenda*; Marciniak *Bringers of the Dawn* and *Earth: Pleiadian Keys*.

Jenkins and Balin have been published by small publishing companies and have received scant attention outside the American New Age culture, books by Clow and Marciniak have been translated into a number of languages, including German and Swedish.

Age of Aquarius

Whereas the Mayan calendar remains a focus of interest within limited segments of the cultic milieu, the concept of the Age of Aquarius was a mainstay of the post-theosophical position of Alice Bailey and of the early New Age movement. All of astrology could be conceived of as scientistic in the sense that quasi-rational calculations are performed within a system of ritual divination. The astrological works consulted for the present study are more concerned with the psychological and spiritual implications of astrology than with the elements of horoscope casting. Any elementary textbook will, however, amply describe the painstaking calculations that are needed—or were, at least, before the advent of computers—in order to prepare a chart. Here, I shall restrict myself to the perhaps most important astrological calculation for the New Age *sensu stricto*, namely references to the precise dating of the Aquarian Age. The development of the concept itself has been documented in other scholarly literature, and will only be briefly summarized here.[159]

In theory, the concept is simple enough: the Aquarian Age begins in the year when the sun rises for the first time in the sign of Aquarius on the vernal equinox. However, since neither astrological signs nor constellations are neatly bounded entities, quasi-rational attempts have been made to specify, with varying degrees of precision, when this event could be expected to take place.

The "Age of Aquarius" and the astrological lore associated with it reappears several times throughout the history of astrology, especially in medieval Arabic astrology, but only had marginal importance in the West until the theme was appropriated by theosophy.[160]

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[159] See especially the valuable survey in Bochinger 1994: 308 ff., on which the following summary is heavily based. See also Hanegraaff 1996: 331 ff. Bochinger's attempts to find precursors to the concept of the New Age in the writings of William Blake and in Orage's literary journal of that name are, however, hardly convincing. Since the expression is composed of two of the most common words in the English language, the phrase *new age* has no doubt appeared in print on quite a few occasions before it was used as a central concept in Alice Bailey's books.

[160] Other astrological events, notably major conjunctions such as that between Jupiter and Saturn, were more typically associated with historical changes. The his-

The first example of the more recent Esoteric mythologizing of the Platonic year and the astrological ages is dated by Bochinger to *Geometry in Religion*, an anonymous text published in 1890.[161] Levi Dowling is credited with the first use of the term Aquarian Age in a printed text of any wider dissemination, in the *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ*, published in 1908.

Both the terms New Age and Aquarian Age are crucial concepts in the books of Alice Bailey. However, Bailey never dates the beginning of the Aquarian Age precisely, but intimates that we are in transition into this new age, and will be entering it relatively soon.[162] This vague dating should, however, probably be understood on a cosmic scale, since Bailey specifies that "soon" means perhaps within the next two hundred years.[163] Only once does she offer specific dates: new teachings preparing for the Aquarian age will be revealed beginning in 1975—information that could have been understood as prophetic in a budding New Age.[164] A similar vagueness prevails in the writings of early New Age spokespersons. A few, however, will take the next step by attempting to date with precision the actual onset of the new astrological epoch.

Hanegraaff lists datings that vary from the directly imminent (Spangler's opinion that it had already started on Christmas of 1967) to the far-off (the year 2376, according to an astrological calculation accepted by neo-pagan author Zsuzsanna Budapest).[165] Various authors thus have widely divergent opinions on the date of inception of the Age of Aquarius. Some of these dates, e.g. Spangler's, have been arrived at through a revelatory experience. From the point of view of the discursive strategies employed, however, it is interesting to note that some claims rest on an apparent rationalization of such apocalyptic calculations. Several of these speculations are grounded less in prophetic vision than in the numerical details of astrological calculations, performed as if they were part of a truly well-grounded,

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tory of the belief in the importance of the Platonic year before theosophy is only marginally relevant for the present purposes. The interested reader is referred to Bochinger 1994.

[161] Bochinger 1994: 340.

[162] See e.g. Bailey *Education in the New Age*, p. 151, *Externalization of the Hierarchy*, p. 3. Bailey even prefigures the theme of the hippie musical Hair and explains that we are at "the dawn of the Aquarian Age", cf. *Rays and Initiations*, p. 234.

[163] Bailey *Education in the New Age*, p. 99; *Esoteric Psychology*, vol I, p. 292.

[164] Bailey *Rays and Initiations*, p. 255.

[165] Hanegraaff 1996: 335.

empirically verifiable worldview. Bailey's own vague predictions accord with astrological orthodoxy. The precession of the equinoxes makes the astrological and the astronomical zodiacs coincide every 25,920 years. A shift in one sign thus takes one twelfth of that span of time, or 2160 years. A widespread assumption among esotericists is that the ministry of Jesus marked the beginning of the age of Pisces. According to this line of reasoning, the beginning of the age of Aquarius could therefore be expected by the end of the twenty-second century, or somewhat more than two centuries after the appearance of Bailey's publications.

Whatever their differences in approach and dating, all the above authors are united by their paradoxical application of rational procedures to a problem that gains relevance only within a specific religious discourse.

Struggles With Opponents

Esoteric spokespersons have been able to reinterpret and appropriate exotic Others with only a modicum of resistance from e.g. professional anthropologists, historians or representatives of those Others (see chapter 4). Nor do Esoteric spokespersons who appropriate exotic or ancient cultures for their own purposes generally show much awareness of the fact that their interpretations are largely rejected by mainstream scholarship. The following chapter will show how Esoteric texts present a picture of religious experience that is at odds with much of scholarship on the nature of such experiences. The opposition from psychologists, philosophers or scholars of religion is more or less non-existent. If anything, the awareness within the Esoteric Tradition of the existence of any such discrepancy is even slighter. When it comes to scientistic reinterpretations, the situation is somewhat different. There is a vociferous anti-pseudoscience movement that publishes extensively and attempts to reach a broad audience. Not only do Esoteric spokespersons write texts and develop practices that are scientistic in the modes outlined here, but they do so under fire from the opposition. How do Esoteric spokespersons react to such critique?

Skeptical or naturalistic approaches to purportedly religious, empirically observable phenomena have probably existed in many cultures, and can definitely be attested from Greek antiquity.[166] Skeptical

[166] Tambiah 1990: 9 refers to a Hippocratic text on epilepsy which rejects supernatural explanations of the disease.

inquiry into specific, empirically verifiable claims also has a long and venerable history. The commission set up to inquire into the facts of mesmeric healing is one event in a long and underexplored history of resistance to religious claims. Anti-paranormal skepticism as a comprehensive project is a much more recent phenomenon.[167] When Martin Gardner published his *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* in 1957, he had few predecessors.[168] Institutionalized skepticism is even more recent: the *Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Paranormal* (CSICOP), the first body formally committed to investigating extraordinary claims at the fringes of science, was founded in 1976.[169] Soon after its foundation, sister organizations were formed around the world.

Organized skeptics attempt to engage in debate with defenders of the paranormal. Especially the Internet is rife with disputes, ranging from the carefully crafted to the blatantly *ad hominem*. Some of the more aggressive and/or more savvy proponents of controversial claims have, in turn, attacked the skeptics, the most publicized of these efforts being the libel suit that Uri Geller filed against CSICOP.[170] Perhaps surprisingly, however, many Esoteric texts show little or no overt awareness of the controversial nature of the claims that they present, despite the ready availability of opposing views. Proponents of healing will claim that the healer radiates a special kind of energy, despite the fact that this claim was seriously undermined by studies carried out as early as the 1780s. They will support their claim by referring to a scientistic method of capturing such energies on photographic film, despite the fact that the claims associated with this method have repeatedly been proved invalid.

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[167] In using the word skepticism, I follow the self-understanding of the rationalist organizations mentioned below. The word *skepticism* has a variety of meanings, which cannot be explored here; the skepticism of CSICOP is something quite different from e.g. the philosophical skepticism of David Hume.

[168] There were isolated predecessors in the 19th and early 20th century. Perhaps the most celebrated was Charles Mackay, cf. Mackay 1869. Other early figures were Joseph Jastrow and Harry Houdini.

[169] There is a certain continuity of interest with much earlier parapsychological societies such as the Society for Psychical Research, but the SPR and similar organizations were composed of skeptical members as well as staunch believers in the paranormal. To generalize somewhat, the SPR carried out much of its research in the hope of finding true paranormal events among the many claims, whereas CSICOP conducts its investigations to debunk any such claims.

[170] In 1991, Geller filed suits against James Randi as well as CSICOP with which Randi was affiliated. After a four-year legal battle, The U.S. District Court in Washington D.C. ruled in favor of CSICOP and awarded almost $150,000 in sanctions against Geller.

The mechanisms of discourse formation, i.e. excluding dissenting opinions from the discussion, are in operation.[171]

However, the problems of arguing from a minority position are, on occasion, explicitly addressed in discussions of science, perhaps because some awareness of such a split between majority views and New Age doctrines is inherent in the very fact that science is construed as an ambivalent Other. If there are "spiritualized" scientists who have embraced a holistic view, there must perforce be others who represent the much-maligned materialistic Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm. In confronting these proponents of materialism, a characteristic underdog rhetoric is formed.

One way of handling opposition could be termed the "mirror-image response". Those positive traits that skeptics or mainstream scientists would like to associate with their project are in turn used by New Agers to describe their own position. As David Hess rightly remarks, New Age spokespersons regard themselves as the true skeptics, in their own way.[172] They have debunked the limitations of the dogmatic materialism that they feel many of their opponents are burdened with. The more insistent the rejections from mainstream culture, the more intensely they work at constructing such an alternative view, in which the skeptical Others are interpreted as misguided by their materialistic preconceptions. Perhaps this is why segments of the cultic milieu have been so preoccupied with views that verge on the paranoid: the belief that there is a massive and heavy-handed cover-up of UFO phenomena by the government,[173] that complementary medicine is rejected because of intense lobbying by the multi-billion dollar pharmaceutical industry, and so forth—

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[171] There are mechanisms of discourse formation active among the organized skeptics as well, but the boundaries here are different and possibly less rigid. Typically, the skeptical narrative will deal with the hard data of the case, e.g. whether double-blind experiments can show that dowsing has a naturalistic explanation. Cultural and social factors, symbolism, aspects of ritual behavior and other facets of dowsing that might interest an anthropologist disappear from such narratives, and one is only left with "irrational" and ultimately destructive and threatening behavior. Some skeptical texts, e.g. Sagan 1996, take social mechanisms into account and represent a hybrid genre.

[172] Hess 1993: 15.

[173] Cf. Saler, Ziegler & Moore 1997 and their analysis of the contemporary legend that a UFO crashed at Roswell, New Mexico. This legend includes assertions that the space-craft was retrieved by government officials, and that the authorities are involved in a massive cover-up.

all the way to believing that the Bilderberg group or a clique of extremely wealthy individuals controls the world.[174]

Closely connected with this, there is also a mirror-image response when it comes to the moral aspect of "fringe" scientific claims. Skeptics act as moral entrepreneurs, people who perform the messy but necessary job of unmasking those who perpetrate dubious claims, and e.g. endanger public health by promoting quack remedies for pecuniary reasons.[175] Spokespersons who propose such claims in turn act as moral entrepreneurs who unmask the devious strategies of the system, which e.g. tries to keep cheap, efficient and harmless alternative treatments from a suffering public. Irrespective of the factuality of either side, there is a distinct parallelism between the narratives constructed by both camps.

Scientism and Esoteric Evolutionism

One facet of theosophical creed is an alternative historiography, revolving around a vast panorama of cosmic cycles, evolutions of solar systems with each such system inhabited by a number of races succeeding each other over millions of years. Esoteric spokespersons resort to an array of scientistic strategies in order to legitimize this alternative history: arguments that consist of mirror images of sciences as diverse as archaeology, biology and philology.

Thus, *The Secret Doctrine* contains detailed histories of e.g. the inhabitants of the fabled continents of Atlantis and Lemuria. Blavatsky's claims regarding these races are highly precise, with specifics concerning the anatomy and physiology of the Atlanteans and Lemurians. Nearly every aspect of *The Secret Doctrine*, including these physiological details of vanished races, is buttressed with appeals to scientific legitimacy. Several contemporary fringe scientists contributed to the pseudo-archaeological arguments that were used to substantiate the claims that these continents have existed. Helena Blavatsky's endorsement of the Atlantis legend as fact was notably indebted to enthusiasts

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[174] Icke *Robots' Rebellion*

[175] The term "moral entrepreneur" is connected with Becker 1963, but is used here in a somewhat weaker sense. Becker sees the moral entrepreneur as the bearer of an "absolute ethic". In the relativistic and fragmented ideological landscape of late modernity, neither the skeptics or the New Agers seem quite that dogmatic.

such as Ignatius Donnelly, who tried in the 1870s to locate the ruins of the fabled continent.[176]

Other legitimizing claims rest on a kind of pseudo-philological work, since the truth of human history was purportedly recorded in texts that required translation and clarification. The *Stanzas of Dzyan*, the purported source of the perennial philosophy underlying *The Secret Doctrine*, is commented in the latter work with footnotes and the trappings of a philological apparatus.[177]

Finally, since humans in theosophical and post-theosophical doctrines are part of a vast evolutionary panorama, various Esoteric positions have attempted to define their respective claims in relation to contemporary mainstream formulations of evolutionism. The following discussion will focus on the last of these three interfaces between faith and science.

Evolution and the Esoteric Tradition

Concepts such as progress and evolution, which are obviously central not only to the Esoteric Tradition but to modernity as such, can mean a number of different things.[178] Pre-Enlightenment thinkers tended to base their conceptions on a religious framework, in which evolution is manifested in human history and consists of a manifestation of a divine plan. The twelfth century speculations of Joachim of Fiore are a paradigmatic example. The Joachimites saw history as a series of progressively better dispensations, mediated by a divine rather than human process. Modern ideas of progress operate on an innerworldly arena and predicate one or more of the following three kinds of progress: improvement in the state of our knowledge; improvement in the material conditions of our lives; and improvement of our civilizational or moral state.[179]

The question of how modern ideas of progress are related to older

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[176] There are a dozen references to Donnelly in *The Secret Doctrine*.

[177] Pseudo-philology is even more developed in several CUT publications. An esoteric historiography is supported by a use of footnotes, references and other scholarly apparatus that constitutes a perfect mimesis of that found in e.g. peer reviewed publications.

[178] The literature on the history of the idea of progress and evolution is enormous. A classic orientation can be found in Bury 1924; For a summary, see Wallace 1981.

[179] This tripartite scheme is due to von Wright 1997. The fact that "progress" can mean such different things has also been thoroughly exploited by critics of the idea of progress from Rousseau to our days.

beliefs is a complex and contentious issue. Both of the two main interpretations still appear to have their defenders, and are indeed so general that neither can be easily refuted. The first, argued by Karl Löwith, sees the Enlightenment view of evolution as derived from Christian chiliastic doctrines.[180] The other, propounded by Hans Blumenberg, claims that there are vast differences between the two types of progressivism.[181] The earlier versions emphasized a transcendent Plan, whereas later evolutionism was immanent. Furthermore, earlier views attempt to address existential and macro-historical concerns, whereas later formulations are concerned with concrete historical events.[182]

Whichever of these lines one might wish to pursue, the fact remains that Esoteric spokespersons came to defend a distinctly non-secular and non-Christian version of the belief in spiritual progress in a cultural context in which entirely secular views of evolution were becoming ever stronger. One could point to Darwinism as a major break, a shift in the use of the concept of evolution that Esoteric spokespersons would actively struggle with, from Blavatsky and several decades onwards. In its relation to previous and competing understandings of evolution, the Darwinian form of the concept, as expressed in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and onwards, can be seen as a decisive turn towards a Weberian *Entzauberung der Welt*. Whereas melioristic understandings of evolution conflate that term with progress, are generally utopian and tend towards a teleological view of human and natural history, Darwinism, with its understanding of evolution as a blind and mechanistic process with no moral implications, constituted a quite distinct theory.

In theory, it would have been entirely feasible to believe in Darwinian evolution as a law operating in the natural world, and to retain belief in spiritual progress as a force applicable to human history. In practice, the two concepts were not always easily distinguishable. Esoteric spokespersons became champions of the former, the idea of the spiritual ascent of mankind, and have combated the latter as if the evolution of species were a misrepresentation of "true" evolution. These Esoteric spokespersons can give an a priori definition of evolution which sets the agenda. The discussion is thereby implicitly

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[180] The classic formulation is Löwith 1949; see also Tuveson 1949.
[181] Blumenberg 1966.
[182] For a summary and evaluation of the two views, see Wallace 1981.

directed towards the "spiritual" understanding of the term. Thus, Alice Bailey stipulates (without overtly indicating that this is an unorthodox stipulation) that the word *evolution* suggests

> something which drives all on toward the goal, and is the force which is gradually bringing order out of chaos; ultimate perfection out of temporary imperfection; good out of seeming evil; and out of darkness and disaster that which we shall some day recognise as beautiful, right, and true.[183]

Not unlike Christian or Muslim apologetics, the nineteenth and early twentieth century writers within the Esoteric Tradition had selected Darwinism as one of their prime targets.[184] When Darwinism was discussed, there were subtle differences of emphasis as compared with its place as the rhetorical foe of "creation science". The main ideological difficulty that Christian and Muslim authors have with Darwinism is the perceived need to defend the place and role of a creator deity in opposition to a system operating along purely mechanistic lines. Writers within the Esoteric Tradition, on the other hand, rarely discuss creation. In theosophy and anthroposophy, for instance, evolution is accepted as a fact. Thus, the main difference in relation to Darwinian evolutionism is the need to defend the teleological, non-mechanistic aspect of their respective versions of evolutionism.

Blavatsky's writings are permeated with evolutionism, and contrast in several ways with other contemporary views. Firstly, Blavatsky's complex, cyclical macrohistorical time-line necessitates the uneasy marriage of two contradictory ideas: that of progress and that of recurrence. Secondly, Blavatsky lived in a scientistic and post-Darwinian age, but felt a strong need to distance herself from the mechanistic implications of Darwinism. Thirdly, on the grandest scale, Blavatsky's concept of history resembles other religious conceptions in that it postulates a plan mediated by superhuman beings; nevertheless, the mechanisms and the sequence of events in Blavatsky's writings is distinctly non-Christian, and forms the basis of an Esoteric discourse subsequently developed by Leadbeater, Steiner and Bailey, and has distinct echoes in the Cayce material as well as in a number of New Age texts.

Evolution, it is claimed, does not operate on the principle of ran-

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[183] Bailey *Consciousness of the Atom*, p. 22.

[184] This is especially true of Blavatsky's oeuvre, thus *The Secret Doctrine* contains dozens of references, generally negative, to Darwin's theory of evolution.

dom mutations, but is guided along by an intelligent and purposeful plan towards a more or less well-defined goal. The Esoteric Tradition would be compatible with pre-Darwinian, idealistic theories of evolution, e.g. the Hegelian view whereby there is a preexisting plan immanent in history. Darwinism, on the other hand, presupposes no ulterior mechanism that guides evolution. The profusion of individuals of any species, the struggle for survival and the occurrence of random mutations—of which some will be beneficial to the survival of a larger number of individuals—are the necessary and sufficient motors of change. How, then, is Darwinism approached within the various positions?[185]

Theosophy explicitly espouses a distinctly individual theory of evolution, which forms a central part of its doctrinal teachings.[186] In fact, there are more references to the term *evolution* in the index to *The Secret Doctrine* than to nearly any other word. Theosophical evolution is grounded in the same Neoplatonic roots that underlie many other manifestations of the Esoteric Tradition. The living entities that populate the cosmos emanate from a unitary Ground of Being. After eons, these beings return to the source from which they came. Theosophy elaborates on this basic scheme by creating a synthesis with ideas culled from a number of Oriental religious systems, as well as from late nineteenth century science.

In the theosophical scheme, the divine Ground of Being manifests itself through an eternal, cyclic progression of emanations and retractions. The period of emanation, or *manvantara*, is identified with the Hindu concept of the Day of Brahma. The period of retraction, or *pralaya*, is correspondingly identified with the Night of Brahma. Each manvantara involves the emanation and gradual evolution of numerous universes, each containing innumerable solar systems. In each solar system, evolution operates as an ongoing process. It begins with the development of ethereal matter, out of which the mineral, vegetable and animal kingdoms evolve. Many millions of years ago, much earlier than the time scale of anthropology or of evolutionary biology, the ancestors of mankind began their existence on Earth.

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[185] In the following, Bailey's books will be passed over in silence. As noted above, Bailey understood the term evolution entirely as spiritual progress. There is no real discussion of the relationship to and conflicts with materialistic evolution; in fact Darwin is mentioned only once, and then in passing, in the *Unfinished Autobiography*.

[186] Campbell 1980: 61

Man then devolved from a spiritual existence to a more material form, and will eventually evolve back to a more spiritual form of life. This process consists of seven partially overlapping "root-races", each with seven "sub-races", manifesting on Earth. Generally speaking, our present state of development has just passed the materialistic nadir, variously conceived of as the end of the fourth ("Atlantean") root-race or the beginning of the fifth ("Aryan"), and is now beginning its ascent towards a higher form.

Each of us consists of seven components, of which the physical body is only one—the lowest. The parts of us that reincarnate and thus participate in the evolutionary scheme are the three "highest", non-material components. Every human monad or triplicity of higher souls participates in the grand evolutionary pattern of emanation and retraction. "The evolution of the external form or body round the astral is produced by the terrestrial forces, just as in the case of the lower kingdoms; but the evolution of the internal or real man is purely spiritual."[187] Each individual monad, however, develops at a different speed, which would explain why there can be more enlightened and less enlightened people living at the same time.

Those evolutionists with a materialistic and non-teleological view of evolution who are most frequently—and most polemically—referred to in *The Secret Doctrine* are Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Thomas Huxley, Alfred Russell Wallace and Ernst Haeckel. Generally speaking, their theories are not denounced as erroneous, but merely as incomplete. Adaptive traits are, indeed, positively reinforced and preserved by the motor of Darwinian evolution: the profusion of individuals struggling for survival. But where do these adaptive traits themselves come from? "[Natural selection] can produce nothing, and only operates on the rough material presented to it".[188]

> The truth is that the differentiating causes known to modern science only come into operation after the physicalization of the primeval animal root-types out of the astral. Darwinism only meets Evolution at its midway point—that is to say when astral evolution has given place to the play of the ordinary physical forces with which our present senses acquaint us.[189]

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[187] SD II:75.
[188] SD II:648.
[189] SD II:648 f.

The reason why different species manifest physiological variation is thus a kind of vitalistic principle, "a sub-conscious intelligence pervading matter, ultimately traceable to a reflection of the Divine and Dhyan-Chohanic wisdom".[190]

Post-Theosophical Positions

Cayce, as often the least sophisticated from a scientific perspective, reiterates the now familiar theosophical idea that evolution in the Darwinian sense is an erroneous doctrine, but that man continually progresses in a spiritual sense. Behind the somewhat diffuse language in the following quote, one senses a rejection of Darwinism, an acceptance of spiritual evolution, and an incorporation of this evolutionary process in the U-shaped time-line:

> Man was made in the beginning [. . .] Man did not descend from the monkey, but man has evolved—resuscitation, you see—from time to time, time to time, here a little, there a little, line upon line, and line and line upon line. In all ages we find that this has been the developing [. . .] (The body) becomes a living soul, provided it has reached that developing in the creation where the soul may enter and find the lodging place. All souls were created in the beginning, and are finding their way back to whence they came.[191]

Steiner characteristically engages in extended polemics with Darwin, and condemns Darwin's theory on several accounts as a garbled representation of the facts. Darwin glimpsed the truth, but misunderstood what he saw because of his materialistic bias. Firstly, a materialistic view of evolution cannot explain the free ethical life of mankind.[192] Secondly, Darwinism is incompatible with a truly spiritual life.[193] Thirdly, Steiner's clairvoyant vision reveals that animal and human shapes differed from primal forms, a fact demonstrated in Egyptian theriomorphic images but misunderstood by Darwin.[194]

The spiritualized evolution of theosophy and of the various post-theosophical positions face two major problems as the biological sciences evolve. The first is the very fact that conventional evolutionary

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[190] SD II:649. In theosophical doctrine, the Dhyan Chohans are the architects of the visible world, a collective host of spiritual beings who manifest the divine through the workings of natural law; identified with the archangels of Christian belief.

[191] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, pp. 177 f.

[192] Steiner *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path*, pp. 180 ff.

[193] Steiner *Das Karma des Materialismus*, lect. 6 p. 13.

[194] Steiner *Aegyptische Mythen und Mysterien.*

history is supported by a vast number of observational facts, thus making it increasingly difficult to maintain a theosophical and post-theosophical view of the emergence of species. As we have seen, none of the Esoteric spokespersons really addresses the question of how to account for the data on which Darwin rested his case within a non-Darwinian framework. The usual strategy is merely to bluntly state that Darwin was immoral or mistaken.

The second problem is the time-span of natural history, which has increased since the days of Blavatsky and Steiner. Only half a century separate *The Secret Doctrine* from Charles Lyell's ground-breaking studies of the geological ages that pushed history back from Bishop Usher's six thousand years. The time-spans reproduced by Steiner several decades later seem impossibly short to the modern-day reader. Steiner's disciple, Günther Wachsmuth, remedied the apparent discrepancy between C14 dating and Steiner's revelation through the 'discovery' that radioactive decay itself only began somewhere between the astrological Age of Libra (circa 15,000 years BCE) and Age of Virgo (circa 13,800 BCE).[195]

New Age spokespersons have generally followed a less heroic path by simply avoiding the topic of evolution altogether. In what appears to be an irreducible ethnographic fact of the modern religious landscape, many religiously conservative spokespersons of the Abrahamitic traditions are intensely preoccupied with defining the relationship between scriptural faith and Darwinian evolution, e.g. by developing and defending various forms of creationism, while the topic has simply faded out of the Esoteric Tradition.

Scientism and Esoteric Cosmology

Every position within the Esoteric Tradition has had its own idea of what aspects of science were interesting. Each position has also had its own cultural context from which to draw ideas and inspiration. Lemuria was a legitimate and interesting biological theory during the 1880s, when Blavatsky appropriated the idea for her own purposes. New Age writers may still refer to Lemuria, although as a legend element rather than a piece of biological lore with roots in Haeckel's writings. Various theories of physics or chemistry have pre-

[195] Ahern 1982: 55.

vailed during a certain period, only to cease to be of interest to esotericists once they became outdated and fell by the wayside. Mesmerists believed in a universal magnetic fluid; modern esotericists have abandoned this concept entirely. Similarly, spiritualists used the vocabulary and ideas of their own time to explain the seemingly paranormal.

The trend has continued up to our own age. Interestingly, modern physics is used by several faiths to support their sometimes mutually incompatible claims. To this effect, different religious traditions choose partly different aspects of physics for their apologetic purposes. Whereas this section concentrates on quantum physics, since this is the aspect of modern science that has most preoccupied the Esoteric Tradition, spokespersons of a theistic faith may be more inclined to rely on the anthropic principle, the claim that the laws of physics are fine-tuned for the existence of life. One might argue that this selective reading of science is due to the interest of the New Age in human consciousness, ESP and healing, whereas theists are more interested in finding support for a "fine-tuner" of the universe, i.e. God. The net result of such claims seems to be that popular media are likely to portray the relationship between science and religion as increasingly concordant, whereas statistics show that scientists are generally more irreligious than before.[196]

The Scientistic Cosmology of The Secret Doctrine

Blavatsky positioned herself vis-à-vis science from the beginning of her theosophical career. The *Mahatma Letters* present a rather unsystematic polemic against contemporary science, and present the doctrinal contents of the letters from the Masters as far superior to received scientific opinion.[197] The nucleus of her later argument is prefigured in the following passage from letter No. 11: "Modern science is our best ally. Yet it is generally that same science which is made the enemy to break our heads with".[198]

With *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky expanded on this dual nature of science. The heavy-handed polemics continue, but like few other texts before the work by Capra, which will be discussed below, this

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[196] According to a poll published in 1997 and 1998, some 40 percent of scientists profess to believe in a deity or a life after death; However, among the top award-winning scientists, only seven percent did. Larson & Witham 1997 and 1998.

[197] Thus see ML pp. 1 ff., 60 f., 68 f., 241.

[198] ML p. 63.

tome also attempts to construct a full-scale syncretism between science and Esotericism. In this respect, her work mirrors a discussion typical also of mainstream (i.e. non-Esoteric) science and philosophy during the second half of the nineteenth century, a period that is often seen as a struggle between a materialistic and idealistic view of science.[199] The materialist paradigm had already been worked out in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by people like Buffon and Laplace: an explanation of nature and the cosmos that eschewed any teleological factors and reduced the physical world to the operation of regular, mechanical laws.[200] This worldview became a focus of heated debate by proponents of idealism, who posited the existence of spiritual as well as material factors in the workings of the cosmos, explained the latter in terms of the former, and set up a hierarchical relationship whereby the spiritual realm was declared to be in some sense superior to the material. Since material factors were subordinate to spiritual causes, materialism was also perceived as an inferior or even threatening philosophy. The luminaries of the natural sciences were increasingly materialists, at least in the methodological sense. The world was considered to be a mechanism, entirely dependent on causal relationships. An argument from the opponents of materialism, later echoed by Blavatsky, was that even materialists based their explanatory models on what were ultimately metaphysical concepts, e.g. "force" and "matter".

The two large sections of *The Secret Doctrine* that Blavatsky devotes to the discussion of science are far from systematic and frequently obscure. The links with contemporary evolutionism are probably the best known aspect of Blavatsky's scientism. This section will attempt an exegesis of the other major aspect of this facet of theosophy: the claim, made nearly a hundred years before Fritjof Capra, that the modern physical sciences point to the same reality as Oriental or Esoteric beliefs. Blavatsky reverts to this point again and again:

> If there is anything on earth like progress, Science will some day have to give up, *nolens volens*, such monstrous ideas as her physical, self-guiding *laws*—void of soul and Spirit—and then turn to the occult teachings. It has done so already, however altered the title-page and revised

[199] For the relationship between science and religion in the nineteenth century, see Brooke 1991 and Barbour 1998.

[200] Brooke 1991: 238 ff.

> edition of the Scientific Catechism. It is now half a century since, in comparing modern with ancient thought, it has been found that, however different our philosophy may appear from that of the ancients, it is, nevertheless, composed only of *additions* and *subtractions* taken from the old philosophy and *transmitted drop by drop through the filter of antecedents* [. . .] all comes to science from ancient notions, all is based on the conceptions of archaic nations.[201]
>
> That day is fast approaching when it will be confessed that the "forces" we know of are but the phenomenal manifestations of realities *we* know nothing about,—but which *were known to the ancients and—by them worshipped*.[202]
>
> Science is slowly but as surely approaching our domains of the Occult. It is forced by its own discoveries to adopt *nolens volens* our phraseology and symbols.[203]

The main difference, of course, is that physics was a very different science during Blavatsky's productive years, i.e. the 1870s and 1880s, than the quantum mechanics and relativity theory favored by New Age spokespersons. It is a view of the world in which atoms are indivisible. In particular, it is a formulation of physics typical of the age after James Clark Maxwell but before Einstein. In work carried out during the 1860s and published in 1873 as *A Treatise on Electricity and Magnetism*, Maxwell was able to show that the equations of electricity and magnetism admit of wave-like solutions, electromagnetic waves that propagate at the speed of light. This made it natural to identify light as an electromagnetic wave. In accordance with prevailing mechanical models, it was thought that waves had to propagate through some medium. What this medium could be, however, remained a complete mystery, since it had to be so subtle that it had no detectable gravitational effects and allowed planets and other celestial objects to traverse it without any retardation. It would take Einstein's 1905 paper *On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies* to prove decisively that the concept of the aether was unnecessary. In the intervening decades, physicists (as well as popularizers of physics) developed a number of sometimes mutually contradictory cosmological models of space, light, magnetism and electricity.

Where theosophy goes beyond science, Blavatsky blames contemporary scientists for any discord. Some rhetorical mechanisms Blavatsky

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[201] SD I:506 f.; emphasis in the original.
[202] SD I:509; emphasis in the original.
[203] SD I:549; emphasis in the original.

used to explain the opposition are quite simple, and will be instantly recognizable to readers of present-day New Age texts attempting to come to grips with a similar opposition. "People have laughed at everything and scouted every unpopular idea at first, and then ended by accepting it."[204] Other objections touch on the substance of conventional science. These basically boil down to three arguments:

Firstly, Blavatsky repeatedly insists that scientists contradict one another, and that their theories consequently cannot be more than working hypotheses.[205] Especially the then prevailing atomic theories are taken as proof of the inferiority of science compared to "occultism". For a materialist, atoms are either indivisible, hard objects—a theory which, however, would not account for the range of known physical phenomena—or are divisible, which would merely push back the question of the ultimate constitution of matter one more level, since these sub-elements of the atoms are, in turn, either indivisible hard objects or divisible.[206] Where the self-understanding of the scientific community might point to the malleability of its theories as a positive aspect of the scientific endeavor, Blavatsky sees it as a sign of ignorance among scientists. From this—now superseded—problem, Blavatsky concludes that facts are explained better from an "occult" view in which atoms and physical forces are mere projections of conscious beings from a supersensible realm.

Secondly, occultism posits the existence of one single Ur-element, a fact that science does not (yet) acknowledge.[207] Science rejects the monistic idealism of theosophy (and of several post-theosophical positions), and is therefore at fault.

Thirdly, occultism reveals the workings of both spirit and matter, whereas ordinary science denies the existence of spirit. Although theosophy posits no unknowables, it does assume the existence of a hidden reality open to investigation only by those whose senses have been sufficiently trained, or who have psychic gifts. Where theosophists acknowledge matter *and* spirit, two aspects of an underlying unity, materialistic science only accepts the existence of the former.

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[204] SD I:480. This is such a staple of the cultic milieu that organized skeptics even have their own pat answer, attributed to Carl Sagan: "they laughed at Galileo, but they also laughed at Bozo the Clown".

[205] SD I:483 f.

[206] This dilemma recurs frequently throughout the section devoted to "Science and the Secret Doctrine Contrasted". A brief summary can be found in SD I:519 f.

[207] SD I:549; ML p. 63.

Nevertheless, Blavatsky does not just summarily dismiss science. Why, then, does she conceive it possible to harmonize science and theosophy? Partly because she believes that there are important common grounds between the two. Partly because the weaknesses of conventional science are merely temporary shortcomings. Over time, a new form of science will emerge which reverts to the wisdom of the ancients, now scorned by bigoted and self-professed savants.

One point of common understanding that unites science and "occultism" against a common adversary, the theistic faiths, lies in the rejection of unknowable, absolutely transcendent causes. The theosophical cosmos emerges and disappears in an endless succession of cycles of evolution and involution. Since there is no transcendent God to start the process, the logical outcome of such a view is a kind of pantheism.

> Well may a man of science ask himself, "What power is it that directs each atom" [. . .] Theists would solve the question by answering "God"; and would solve nothing philosophically. Occultism answers on its own pantheistic grounds.[208]

A second point of contact lies in the holism of theosophy, a view of the cosmos as an interdependent whole which, according to Blavatsky, will gain the belated recognition of modern astronomers and philosophers.[209]

It thus remains for Blavatsky to explain in detail where the two join forces, where occultism can unveil realities unreachable by science, and why science rejects theosophy when the latter encompasses all of science but goes beyond it at significant points. The last two hundred pages of the first volume of *The Secret Doctrine* are devoted to this project. The arguments adduced here as to precisely why true science and theosophy are compatible are numerous, and are typically based on strategies also generally operative in the appropriation of significant Others—hardly surprising, since the world of science is, in fact, a significant Other for theosophy, just as it is for many other modern religious movements.

The first strategy is pattern recognition, a kind of loose fit between the surface characteristics of the Esoteric and the scientific worldviews. Two examples from the argument in *The Secret Doctrine* may

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[208] SD I:549.
[209] SD I:480.

be mentioned here. Firstly, chemistry demonstrates the indestructibility of matter, and this is the belated scientific insight into the "occult" doctrine that the universe is eternal and only temporarily goes into the unmanifested or *pralaya* state.[210] Secondly, although the atomic theory of matter was well developed by the late nineteenth century, it had not yet been convincingly verified at that time. Many chemists, and a few physicists, still held open the possibility that matter might be continuous. Thus, the chemistry of the 1880s could not define the "boundaries" that distinguish chemical elements by other means than overt differences in appearance or behavior in various reactions. This is an insight that makes chemistry approach the "occult" belief that all matter is ultimately a variety of manifestations of a unitary *prima materia*.[211]

A second argument is based on the strategy of synonymization. Devas and genii are declared to be the same entities that science calls forces.[212] The chemical terms *molecule, atom* and *particle* refer to the realities that "occultists" name *Hosts, Monads* and *Devas*.[213] The periodic table of Mendeleeff is explained as consisting of seven families of elements plus an eighth that only fits awkwardly into the system; this is said to correspond to the Hindu allegory of Aditi, the Mother or Infinite Space who accepted seven of her sons and rejected the eighth.[214]

"There can be no conflict between the occult and so-called exact Science, where the conclusions of the latter are based on a substratum of unassailable fact".[215] The last proviso is important. The correspondence between science and occultism is not complete. In fact, science is only now (at the end of the nineteenth century) approaching the stage at which occultism has been for thousands of years. Like other spokespersons of the Esoteric Tradition, Blavatsky constructs a distinction between the bigoted and contradictory beliefs of materialistic scientists and *true* or *real* science[216]—which, by definition, is not materialistic.[217]

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[210] SD I:552.
[211] SD I:546 f.
[212] SD I:478.
[213] SD I:548.
[214] SD I:553.
[215] SD I:477.
[216] For the term "true science", see SD I:514.
[217] SD I:518.

Blavatsky thus builds on the presupposition, by now familiar, that science is a body of doctrines, and constructs the characteristic dichotomy between two forms of science.[218] The split between the two is a historical phenomenon, and Blavatsky blames certain individual thinkers for this split. Bacon was an early culprit due to the materialism of his method, the general tenor of his writing and, more specifically, his misunderstanding of spiritual evolution.[219] Descartes was a "worshipper of matter".[220] Newton's materialistic mistake was to posit the law of gravity as a primary force rather than an effect of underlying spiritual causes.[221] Other scientists were "spiritually" inclined, and these are selectively approved of. Thus, some of the more speculative passages from Newton's writings are quoted in support of a spiritualized interpretation of gravity.[222] But then, Blavatsky claims, on shaky grounds, that Newton arrived at his ideas by reading Böhme.[223] Kepler is admired for his way of combining scientific and esoteric thought.[224] The positive side of Descartes' work was his belief in magnetic forces and alchemy.[225] However, even the greatest scientists are merely rediscovering ancient knowledge, expressed through cryptic symbolism in Indian scriptures and also transmitted by a lineage of Western occultists including Paracelsus and assorted kabbalists and alchemists. This is a view of the history of Western science that, *mutatis mutandis*, will reappear in crucial movement texts of the New Age.

Atomic Metaphysics

In a sense, theosophical spokespersons such as Alice Bailey and Edgar Cayce lived in an intermediate age. The quasi-physical language of mesmerism was on the wane, its results explainable in secularized terms such as "the subconscious" or "hypnosis".[226] Quantum mechanics

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[218] For spiritualized science described as true science, see SD I:496.
[219] SD I:481.
[220] IU I:206.
[221] SD I:490.
[222] SD I:490 ff.
[223] This claim originated with the English Christian theosopher William Law (1686–1761) and remains controversial; see Versluis 1999: 319.
[224] IU I:207.
[225] IU I:206.
[226] This is not to say that spokespersons of the Modern Esoteric Tradition did not continue to defend the existence of paranormal phenomena in the séance rooms of the mesmerists, but only that the scientistic vocabulary of mesmerism had become

was in its infancy; metaphysical exegetics of its findings were non-existent. This may, perhaps, account for the particular form of scientism found in Leadbeater's theories of matter, in Alice Bailey's books, and in certain of Cayce's readings. The history of the mesmerist use of the vocabulary and theories of physics is reasonably well documented. Readers of modern New Age literature will invariably have come across references to quantum mechanics and relativity theory. The history of the intermediate period, including a concept that one might call atomic metaphysics, is an under-explored theme in the history of alternative religiosity. Blavatsky paved the way for the post-theosophical positions and, as seen above, used the contemporary disagreement on the nature of atoms to support her own claims. She ascribes knowledge of atoms to her ancient sources; the *Stanzas of Dzyan* purportedly use a word with that meaning.

Leadbeater developed an occult chemistry of his own, a view of matter that might support older esoteric claims.[227] In particular, a highly personal view of atomic structure could vindicate the old belief in a *prima materia*, the attempts of the alchemists to transform base matter into gold and the belief of many esotericists that there are "subtle planes", i.e. a variety of invisible worlds. Matter exists not only in its well-known solid, liquid and gaseous forms, but also in an "etheric" state. This refined matter is normally invisible and would account for the posited existence of an astral and an etheric world. Furthermore, Leadbeater claims that the atoms as known by contemporary science consist of a still more fine-grained structure, which he calls ultimate atoms.[228] These ultimate atoms are all identical except for the fact that some are positive/male and others negative/female. By combining these ultimate atoms in new ways, matter can be transmuted.

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marginalized. Even an ardent defender of mesmerism such as Leadbeater attempts to explain mesmerism in terms of other forces, more in tune with the science and scientism of his own time. "Magnetism", he explains, is in reality a cascade of tiny particles poured out from the sun, absorbed by the human body and circulated as a vital fluid through the nerves much as blood is circulated through arteries and veins. A healthy man radiates some of this fluid, which can then be absorbed by those who lack it. (Leadbeater *Some Glimpses of Occultism*, pp. 154 ff.) Whereas Mesmer's own theories are pastiches on the theories of electromagnetism of his time, Leadbeater created a personal synthesis of atomic theory and vitalism to explain the same phenomena.

[227] The description in this paragraph is based on Leadbeater *Some Glimpses of Occultism*, ch. 5.

[228] Being infinite in number and identical, they resemble Leibniz' monads.

An idiosyncratic understanding of atomic theory is an even more central part of Alice Bailey's teachings. The belief in a *prima materia* remains: "there is but one substance, present in nature in varying degrees of density and of vibratory activity, [. . .] this substance is impelled by urgent purpose and expressive of divine intent."[229] However, Bailey goes beyond this and devotes an entire volume, *The Consciousness of the Atom*, published in 1922, to constructing a syncretism between atomic theory and esotericism. Or rather, in Bailey's own words, "to present [. . .] the testimony of science as to the relation of matter and of consciousness".[230] However, the ideas she presents are not so much scientific as religious. Firstly, matter should be understood from within the pantheistic framework of theosophy and several post-theosophical schools in which the vital or creative force resides in the cosmos itself. The atom has qualities that (at least metaphorically) tend to be applied to humans as well: to attract and repel, to have energy, movement, even sensation. In a manner reminiscent of later New Age writers, Bailey conflates the metaphorical with the factual by claiming that this suggests that atoms, albeit to a limited extent, are conscious.[231]

Secondly, after the discovery of the inner structure of the atom, contemporary conceptions of matter had changed. Rather than being visualized as hard, indivisible balls, atoms were now seen as shells of electrons spinning round a nucleus. Bailey somehow connects this new model of the atom with two ideas, one of which is older and will go out of fashion, and one that is more recent and will be repeated throughout New Age literature. The first is the concept of the aether as the primeval stuff of the cosmos. The second is the belief that the concept of matter itself is being superseded by the concepts of force or energy. It is as if a linguistic revision of the term "matter" could exorcise materialism.

Such insights, Bailey contends, show that the language of the physical sciences and the language of religion simply use different terms to denote the same idealistic worldview:

> Where the orthodox Christian would say with reverence, God, the scientist with equal reverence would say, Energy; yet they would both mean the same. Where the idealistic teacher would speak of "God

[229] Bailey *Esoteric Psychology*, vol I, p. xxiii.
[230] Bailey *Consciousness of the Atom*, p. 5.
[231] Cf. especially Bailey *Consciousness of the Atom*, pp. 38 ff.

> within" the human form, others with equal accuracy would speak of the "energising faculty" of man, which drives him into activity of a physical, emotional, or mental nature.[232]

However, as in other Esoteric positions, scientism is not only manifest in such direct attempts to show that faith is scientific. Later passages, such as the following published in 1934, is characteristic of a process of terminological creolization and creation of scientistic legend elements which is unmistakably Bailey's own. The doctrinal contents of a branch of esotericism central to her teachings, esoteric astrology, is expressed in a vocabulary borrowed from contemporary physics:

> This is a transition period between the passing out of the Piscean Age, with its emphasis upon authority and belief, and the coming in of the Aquarian Age, with its emphasis upon individual understanding and direct knowledge. The activity of these forces, characteristic of the two signs, produces in the atoms of the human body a corresponding activity. We are on the verge of new knowledges and the atoms of the body are being tuned up for reception. Those atoms which are predominantly Piscean are beginning to slow down their activity and to be "occultly withdrawn," as it is called, or abstracted, whilst those which are responsive to the New Age tendencies are, in their turn, being stimulated and their vibratory activity increased.[233]

Atomic theory was phased out of the budding New Age movement, and has been superseded by references to quantum mechanics. There remains a widespread theory of "vibrations" that may stem from the countercultural argot of the 1960s, but which seems to echo Bailey's use of similar terms.

The problem besetting most Esoteric spokespersons is their lack of sophistication when discussing science. Alice Bailey solves the problem with particular ingenuity: Her Tibetan Master Djwhal Khul explains that it is his channel, Alice Bailey, who lacks the necessary knowledge to allow him to fully transmit his theories: "I [D. K.] am also handicapped by the complete ignorance of A. A. B. on these matters which involve electrical knowledge and terms".[234] With the advent of the New Age, this problem would be solved at least to the satisfaction of New Agers themselves. The most widely accepted syncretisms between faith and science were created by spokespersons

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[232] Bailey *Consciousness of the Atom*, pp. 43 f.
[233] Bailey *Externalization of the Hierarchy*, p. 3.
[234] Bailey *Esoteric Healing*, p. 379.

with the necessary scientific background. It is to the most celebrated of these syncretisms that we shall now turn.

Quantum Metaphysics

Quantum theory arose during the first decades of the twentieth century, with the efforts of Max Planck and Albert Einstein to solve certain anomalies in physics.[235] A peculiarity of quantum mechanics soon became apparent: the theories can be expressed in a highly abstract mathematical formalism and are amenable to rigorous experimental research. At the same time, any attempts to express the results in ordinary language or to visualize them will lead to an utterly paradoxical picture of the sub-atomic world. The most common approach adopted by physicists has been to view quantum mechanics operationally, apply its mathematical formalism to practical problems, and eschew any discussion of the philosophical issues. Writers from outside the community of physicists have, on the other hand, been centrally preoccupied with formulating what they see as the wider implications of the "strangeness" of the subatomic world. In discussions of the metaphysical or religious implications of quantum physics, a few specific findings are regularly singled out by New Age writers as especially interesting to the construction of an interpretive framework. These can very briefly be summarized as follows:[236]

Quantum mechanics asserts that a measurement does not simply yield information about a preexisting state, but forces an indeterminate state to take on certain values. A property called spin can thus be given a precise value through measurement. However, contrary to the behavior of macroscopic objects (in which an object will have e.g. a specific length, regardless of whether this length is being measured), spin is indeterminate until measurement. In a sense, it is meaningless to ask what spin the particle had before being measured.

By deciding which properties one wishes to measure, one thus forces particles to exhibit certain properties. In 1924, Louis de Broglie showed that at the quantum level, neutrons, electrons and other

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[235] Among these anomalies were the photoelectric effect and the discrete bands of light emitted by hydrogen atoms. There are numerous histories of twentieth-century physics that present the details of the early development of quantum mechanics in an accessible format: see e.g. Pagels 1982 and Stenger 1995.

[236] The following description is based on Trefil 1980, Pagels 1982, Stenger 1995, Kragh 1996 and especially Lindley 1997; References to "mainstream science" are implicitly intended to refer to physics as presented in these texts.

objects that were traditionally understood as particles seem to exhibit either particle or wave properties, depending on what properties of the object are measured. Thus, neutrons and electrons diffract through small openings in the same way as waves. Nevertheless, they also act as tiny particles and can e.g. loose energy in collisions with other particles. This wave-particle duality is known as complementarity.

Certain values such as the position of particles obey statistical laws rather than the precise predictability of classical mechanics. When particles such as photons are forced through two slits and hit a screen further away, they will form an interference pattern consisting of light and dark bands. The process is roughly analogous to the way in which waves, passing through two openings in a harbor wall, form crests and troughs. If photons are sent through the two slits at a pace of a few photons per second, each photon will hit the distant screen at some location which cannot be accurately predicted. As the photons pass through, they will begin to form the familiar interference pattern. Thus the exact path of each photon cannot be known in advance, and it is only possible to specify the probability of finding the particle at any given location. Nevertheless, *en masse*, they will strictly obey statistical laws that make them form the characteristic pattern.

Since properties exist only through measurement, it is, by implication, impossible to simultaneously determine the values of certain pairs of properties of the same particle with equal precision, when these properties require mutually exclusive methods of detection. The classical example is the impossibility of measuring both the position and the momentum of the electron with equal precision, since the act of measuring the electrons disturbs either their position or their momentum. A number of other pairs of properties behave in the same way. In 1927, Werner Heisenberg indicated a precise numerical value for the amount of uncertainty involved.

A final aspect of quantum mechanics to be subjected to various metaphysical interpretations is non-locality. A paper written by Albert Einstein, Boris Podolsky and Nathan Rosen in 1935 presented an argument that has become famous, especially in a form later developed by David Bohm. The argument suggested, on theoretical grounds, that two particles, even when separated by distances such that there could be no communication between them at the speed of light, seem to act in concordance. Imagine a particle decaying and giving rise to two electrons. As these race apart, spin is measured. For reasons of symmetry, total spin is conserved. If one particle is measured

to have spin "up", the other must have spin "down". However, spin is an indeterminate value until measured. Thus, measuring the spin of one electron would appear to instantaneously determine that of the other. This effect of non-locality is often called the EPR paradox, after the initials of the writers of the original article.

As a mathematical model, quantum theory has proved itself capable of making calculations and predictions to a high level of accuracy, and has been amply confirmed by seventy years of experimental work and practical applications. However, the philosophical issues—the question of "what it means"—have spawned a number of positions, since the quantum level behaves so differently from the large-scale world with which we are familiar. How can we, as human (and inherently macroscopic) subjects, conceptualize the indeterminate, complementary, uncertain, probabilistic and non-local behavior of quantum systems? In order to understand the position of the various New Age metaphysics, it is instructive to see them against the backdrop of mainstream interpretations.

From the 1930s and for the next several decades, the most influential position was the Copenhagen interpretation, formulated by Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg and Max Born. This interpretation of quantum mechanics is thoroughly pragmatic or operational. A system that has not been measured is truly indeterminate. It is literally meaningless to ask what state a system is in before measurement has been performed. This position offered a picture of quantum mechanics that was deeply unpalatable to those who held a classical view of an independent reality that had specific properties regardless of any measurements. Furthermore, the Copenhagen position basically avoided the question of how an indeterminate value could become determinate through the act of measurement.

Especially from the 1950s and on, several alternative positions were formulated that deviated from the Copenhagen orthodoxy. One set of interpretations, first proposed by Louis de Broglie in 1927 and championed more recently by David Bohm, claims that the indeterminacy of quantum systems is due to "hidden" variables that in themselves are not indeterminate. Bohm's version of quantum mechanics describes the same set of experimental data as standard formulations, but achieves determinacy at the cost of increased mathematical complexity and the introduction of unobservable variables.

A far more spectacular interpretation is the many-worlds approach proposed by Hugh Everett in 1957. Every time a quantum system

"settles" on one of several possible outcomes, the world splits. Since there are as many parallel universes as there are quantum outcomes, which is a truly staggering amount, Everett's interpretation is unparsimonious to say the least.

Still further interpretations, based on an idealistic ontology, are of marginal significance within the scientific community but have greatly influenced the quantum metaphysics of the New Age. A metaphysical interpretation of this kind that has been espoused by a minority regards human consciousness as the factor that makes measurements become real. John von Neumann approached such a position, and in the 1960s a similar idealistic metaphysics was developed at greater length by Eugene Wigner. Still other interpretations exist, but the general picture that emerges of quantum mechanics during the first decades is that of a dominant interpretive framework (Copenhagen) and a host of minor ones.

Finally, all the above interpretations have increasingly receded into the historical annals of twentieth century physics. Since the 1980s, decoherence, a version of quantum mechanics developed by Murray Gell-Mann, James B. Hartle and others, has emerged as the dominant framework. This position attempts to come to grips with the fundamental gap in the theory of Bohr and his colleagues: the transition from the indeterminacy of the quantum level to the familiar behavior of large-scale objects obeying the laws of classical physics. A quantum object can exist in two (or more) states at once. It is then said to exist in a "superposition of states". Every system, whether quantum or classical (such as any macroscopic object), is in contact with an external environment consisting of a vast collection of atoms. This coupling between a quantum system in a superposition and the environment in which it is embedded leads the system to collapse or decay with extreme rapidity into one state or another. This is the process known as decoherence.

Quantum mechanics has reached a lay audience through a filter of interpretations that can be called quantum metaphysics, composed partly of the above interpretations and partly of other, more speculative understandings.[237] Besides their scientific writings and more restrained interpretive frameworks, several of the above-mentioned founders of quantum physics wrote in a more popular format, and

[237] The term *quantum metaphysics* appears to have been coined by physicist Victor Stenger, cf. Stenger 1995.

attempted to speculate on the affinities between physics and mysticism or a variety of Platonic, Pythagorean or Oriental philosophies in a holistic vision at times reminiscent of the Romantic sciences of the early nineteenth century. Such hermeneutic efforts were, however, only the first links in a chain of quasi-religious interpretations that have continued up to the present.[238]

Thus, the first links in this chain are not part of the Esoteric Tradition, but were the result of various speculative philosophical ventures by the pioneers of quantum mechanics. As the reader of the preceding sections will come to recognize, there are also parallels to the theosophical and post-theosophical efforts to use classical physics to support Esoteric claims. These parallels are never mentioned in the early popularizations by James Jeans, Arthur Eddington and other physicists, who were probably unaware of them. Nevertheless, whether by chance or by structural necessity, quantum philosophical speculations and theosophical doctrines came to resemble each other, so that the metaphysical interests and positive Orientalism of several physicists in the generation from Bohr to Heisenberg became relevant to yet another set of post-theosophical positions: those subsumed under the New Age heading.

In this chain, the books of Fritjof Capra stand out as the paradigmatic text for a generation of New Agers.[239] Capra's claims were

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[238] Some modern Esoteric spokespersons are also aware of this tradition: see Wilber *Quantum Questions*. Wilber repeatedly stresses that the main players in the development of quantum mechanics rejected any mystical implications of their scientific work. Wilber's views, although historically more defensible than those of his Esoteric colleagues, have gone largely unheeded in the New Age milieu.

[239] In this chapter, only the quantum metaphysics of Capra and others will be discussed at length, as an example of the use of scientism as a discursive strategy. However, quantum metaphysics is symptomatic of the emergence in the 1970s and early 1980s of several other attempts at syntheses between New Age doctrines and science. None of these, however, seem to have had the lasting, broad appeal of Capra's claims. For the sake of completeness, the main efforts in this direction should be mentioned; a much more detailed account of these and other theories of New Age science can be found in Hanegraaff 1996, especially ch. 3. Among these syncretistic efforts, one might single out the respective theories of Ilya Prigogine, Karl Pribram, Rupert Sheldrake, James Lovelock and Ken Wilber.

The Russian-born Prigogine was in 1977 awarded the Nobel Prize in chemistry for his work on thermodynamics, especially his research on dissipative structures, i.e. complex and stable ordered systems which arise out of non-ordered systems. Prigogine himself as well as several of his followers (especially co-author Isabelle Stengers) attempted to extend his theories to encompass inter alia social systems, attempts which appealed to the early New Age movement because of their implied holism.

Pribram is a neurologist and behavioral scientist who launched the idea that the

not overly original. His main contribution was to summarize earlier quantum metaphysical claims at the right time, in a format that was interesting and accessible to the rising New Age milieu. In these later interpretations, the more restrained views, e.g. the Copenhagen interpretation dominant in the scientific community when Capra wrote his book, have received a subordinate role.[240] Instead, modern quantum metaphysicians from Capra to the present have implied that quantum mechanics links the subjectivity of the human mind with the workings of the universe.[241] Thus, Amit Goswami has attempted to base ESP in the quantum world,[242] and Deepak Chopra has coined

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brain was "holographic", because e.g. memory information seemed to be encoded throughout the brain rather than in local areas. He then became acquainted with David Bohm's theory that the universe was holographic, and drew the conclusion that we are holograms decoding other holograms. Our everyday understanding of the world is thus illusory, whereas mystical and visionary states may lift the veil and let us see the otherwise hidden underlying reality. The primary appeal of Pribram's theory was that it proposed that we and the world around us are made of the same *prima materia*, and that we in sense create the world we live in since the decoding activity of our brains determines what the world will look like to us.

Sheldrake is a biologist who has proposed that complex systems, and living organisms in particular, develop according to pre-existing characteristic shapes, *morphogenetic fields*. Morphogenesis would account for a variety of biological processes, from the development of specialized cells in the embryo to the restoration of damaged structures in living beings. Whereas standard accounts are thoroughly mechanistic and explain such phenomena in terms of genetic processes, Sheldrake's theory is closer to vitalism (although this is refuted by Sheldrake himself). This explains its attraction to the New Age, since Sheldrake's theory implies that the world is ultimately not explainable within a materialistic framework.

The Gaia hypothesis was developed by James Lovelock in collaboration with Lynn Margulis. Their contention that the earth functions as a holistic system with distinct, emergent properties has, however, mainly entered the New Age through an overinterpretation according to which the earth actually is a living entity.

Finally, there is the philosophical synthesis of Ken Wilber. Wilber, who in New Age circles seems to be better known for his development of transpersonal psychology, has, in recent publications such as *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, attempted to show that the epistemological grounds of science and religion are quite similar. Firstly, science resembles religion in that it rests on non-empirical foundations such as logic and mathematics. Secondly, the mystical traditions with their spiritual exercises resemble science in that they represent an empirical investigation of man's inner world. Whereas all the previously mentioned syncretisms of science and religion belong to the first generation of New Age writings, Wilber's work in this direction is a much later product, published at a time when the New Age vision itself appears to have crumbled into a number of isolated doctrines and rituals. At the time of writing, it is too early to see what effect Wilber's grand unifying scheme might have on the cultic milieu.

[240] Thus, remarkably, the term Copenhagen interpretation is not to be found in the index to *The Tao of Physics*. It is mentioned in passing on pp. 143 et passim, but Capra's metaphysical theses are constructed from quite different premises.

[241] Capra *Tao of Physics*.

[242] Goswami *Self-Aware Universe*.

the term "quantum healing".[243] Since Capra represents the turning point in this effort to understand physics metaphysically, the remainder of this section will be chronologically structured in relation to Capra's work.

The Pre-Capra Generation

The effort to reconcile the natural sciences and religion is by no means an innovation of the Esoteric Tradition, much less of the twentieth century. Similar efforts have been underway since the earliest separation between empirical science from the more speculative worldview of Christian Aristotelianism.[244] The attempts to interpret modern physics in philosophical or even religious terms carries on a venerable tradition, the main innovation being the shift from classical towards modern physics, and from an exclusively Western perspective of metaphysics towards a greater interest in the Orient.

Quantum mechanics, in the majority view among scientists, remains completely materialistic and is deterministic, albeit in a somewhat different sense than classical mechanics: even if single measurements present a picture of randomness, series of measurements strictly adhere to statistical laws. Nevertheless, as the preceding sub-section has shown, several attempts were already underway by the mid-1920s to explain how the findings of contemporary physics could be philosophically interpreted. Although these interpretive efforts were based on considerations of a scientific nature, certain aspects of quantum theory soon also became inextricably connected with more popular attempts to elucidate their "meaning". Several leading scientists wrote books for a lay audience. These books were, in turn, discussed by philosophers, writers and journalists attempting to wrest philosophical or theological interpretations from the "new physics".[245] The ensuing chain of quantum metaphysical claims and interpretations thus represents a variety of religious or metaphysical frameworks superimposed

[243] Chopra *Quantum Healing*.

[244] Brooke 1991 contains numerous references to such attempted syntheses; cf. chapter 6 on 18th and early 19th century natural theology, with its attempts to find evidence of the existence and nature of God in "the uniformity of plan observable in Nature".

[245] This aspect of the reception of quantum physics has been neglected, compared to the study of the more specifically scientific debate on the issues involved. For an interesting exception to this trend in the historiography of science, see Silverbark 1999. Silverbark notes how leading theologians, writers and intellectuals in Sweden already by the early 1930s overinterpreted quantum theory as a scientific support of a theistic faith and against materialism; Silverbark 1999: 197.

on the mathematical formalism and the verifiable data. The philosophical positions of five of the leading scientists who helped to popularize quantum physics are briefly summarized in the following sub-section.[246]

When knighted in 1947, Niels Bohr, one of the founding fathers of the new physics, demonstrated his interest in oriental philosophies by choosing the yin/yang symbol for his coat of arms.[247] However, leading commentators on Bohr's life and work have played down the influence of philosophy on his achievements in physics. Thus, David Favrholdt has attempted to dismiss this influence, along with other similar influences by philosophers such as Kierkegaard and William James, as "myths".[248] His biographer, Abraham Pais, concludes that "there is no evidence of any kind that philosophers played any role in Bohr's discovery of complementarity".[249]

James Jeans wrote one of the first popularizations of modern physics, *The Mysterious Universe* (1931). Jeans reflected on the puzzling fact that mathematics, as a set of formal operations based on a foundation of axioms, should be such a perfect tool for describing empirical facts. This lead him to a kind of Neoplatonic speculation on the correspondence between the empirical world and "ultimate reality". Just as the shadows in Plato's cave somehow resembled the outer world, so does mathematical formalism reflect the unknowable reality. Jeans became celebrated for his way of making his views accessible through the inventive use of metaphor, and was notably quoted for his statement that the universe begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine. Commentators have less often reflected on the fact that Jeans himself regarded his metaphors as "crude anthropomorphic language".[250]

Perhaps the first popularizer to explicitly connect physics with religion was Arthur Eddington, who contributed several books to this genre, notably *The Nature of the Physical World* (1928) and *The Philosophy of Physical Science* (1938). Eddington, who was a Quaker, had good personal reasons for proclaiming that "religion became possible for a reasonable scientific man about the year 1927".[251]

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[246] For a brief survey, see also Clarke 1997: 167 ff.
[247] Clarke 1997: 168.
[248] Favrholdt 1992.
[249] Pais 1991: 424.
[250] Quoted in Wilber *Quantum Questions*, p. 136.
[251] Quoted in Deery 1996: 130.

Heisenberg had a life-long interest in India dating back to the 1930s. His interest in the East apparently earned him the nick-name "the Buddha".[252] His philosophical statements, however, appeared much later. Heisenberg's *Physics and Philosophy* was published in 1959, late in his life. Here, one senses little of the quantum mysticism that later commentators with New Age affiliation have attributed to him. In fact, Heisenberg discusses at length and endorses the decidedly non-mystical Copenhagen interpretation. Furthermore, in this book, Heisenberg's discussion of philosophy is limited to the West.

A more explicit fascination of a modern quantum physicist with an Eastern religio-philosophical tradition is seen in the life and work of Erwin Schrödinger. Schrödinger had a long-standing interest in the history of ideas and in the philosophical implications of science. In 1918–19, Schrödinger, who was driven by a passionate interest in philosophy, immersed himself in the works of Schopenhauer.[253] Through reading Schopenhauer, he became acquainted—at a remove—with Indian philosophy. Schrödinger soon continued with the more scholarly literature on Hinduism and Buddhism, including classics by Max Müller, Paul Deussen and Thomas Rhys-Davies. His personal metaphysical outlook, as expressed in his book *Meine Weltansicht*, variously attempted to find answers to metaphysical problems in Buddhism, Samkhya philosophy and especially Vedanta philosophy.[254] However, according to his biographer, Schrödinger's interest in Indian religion and philosophy and his achievements in physics were "strangely dissociated".[255] Schrödinger's studies of Hindu mysticism never compelled him to pursue the same course as quantum metaphysicists such as David Bohm or Fritjof Capra.

> Schrödinger was more deeply versed in and more sympathetic with philosophic ideas than any other scientist of modern times, yet he rejected the philosophic conclusions that others were so willing to draw from his work, or, to be more precise, he rejected the idea that such far-reaching conclusions could be drawn from any work in theoretical physics.[256]

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[252] Deery 1996: 146.

[253] For information on Schrödinger's interest in India, cf. Moore 1989: 111 ff.

[254] Ten chapters were written in 1925, but were left unpublished. Schrödinger wrote another five chapters in 1960, and the entire volume was published in 1961, the year of his death.

[255] Moore 1989: 114.

[256] Moore 1989: 2.

Whereas the philosophical work and Orientalist interests of scientists from Bohr to Schrödinger remain a discrete backdrop to the construction of a synthesis between science and Esoteric beliefs, the philosophical aspects of quantum mechanics were pursued at far greater length by David Bohm. It should be noted that Bohm, mentioned above in connection with the "hidden variables" interpretation of quantum mechanics, is considered a distinguished scientist by his colleagues in mainstream science, yet was also adopted as a major source of inspiration by New Age spokespersons.

Bohm began his career as an assistant professor at Princeton, where he wrote a highly regarded textbook, *Quantum Theory*. He became a celebrated figure in the world of physics, *inter alia* for his role in the discovery of the so-called Aharonov-Bohm effect. In 1952, he formulated a theory of quantum mechanics that would eliminate, by means of hidden variables, the inherent indeterminacy of Bohr's and Heisenberg's formulations. Once again, quantum physics could be formulated in entirely deterministic terms. Bohm received little support for his theory, since almost by definition, there can be no empirical data to support the existence of variables that are hidden. Incidentally, a deterministic physics would not appeal particularly to New Age spokespersons either, since such a view would incorporate the quantum world into the mechanistic scheme of classical physics. However, one aspect of Bohm's theory has continued to fascinate New Age writers. Bohm attempted to formulate a theory that was, in a profound and radical sense, holistic.[257]

After the mid-1960s, Bohm developed this holistic view further, thereby departing more significantly from mainstream physics and positioning himself as a speculative philosopher. He developed a concept of "the implicate order", a view of the world in which every part of the cosmos carries some information on every other part. To explain this view, Bohm used the metaphor of a hologram, in which information on the entire hologram is also contained in its parts. The view of the world as an unbroken whole and the simile of the holographic universe have received wide attention in New

[257] Holism can be construed in at least two senses. One sense is fully consonant with classical science as well as common sense: causes can have effects that are distant in space. Thus, the gravitational pull of the moon affects the tides in what could be said to be a holistic system. Non-locality, however, implies that two events can be connected despite of distances that are so great that no signal travelling even at the speed of light could have enough time to pass between the two.

Age circles, but have failed to convince any significant segment of the scientific community. Part of this rejection has to do with the demands of the scientific method itself: neither Bohm nor his successors were able to formulate any crucial tests that could empirically support a belief in the existence of an implicate order. Another reason for such a skeptical response was Bohm's metaphysical interests, which were highly unorthodox by mainstream standards. His association with Krishnamurti probably tainted him with various negative connotations of mysticism in the eyes of many scientists. His interest in the purported paranormal powers of Uri Geller can hardly have furthered his cultural capital.

Several physicists had thus attempted to bridge the gap by presenting popularized views of their philosophical conceptions of science. These were, in turn, integrated into a humanistic and literary framework by people such as Aldous Huxley, whose interest in science was unusual for a writer of his time.[258] Popular attempts to explicitly combine science and faith were, in fact, quite common during the 1930s and 1940s. There was even a journal specifically devoted to the issue, *Main Currents of Modern Thought*, which managed to attract contributions by several of the world's most renowned scientists.[259] In the process, however, physics underwent a process described by Paul Feyerabend in the following rather unflattering terms:

> Movements that view quantum mechanics as a turning point in thought—and that includes fly-by-night mystics, prophets of a New Age, and relativists of all sorts—get aroused by the cultural component and forget prediction and technology.[260]

To these forgotten components, one might add terminological precision and mathematical formalism. It is easy to see how Heisenberg's uncertainty principle might be used as an inspiring and poetic metaphor for reflecting on the relation between the world and the observer. It is much harder to see how any such reflections might help to elucidate precisely which variables are related by the uncertainty

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[258] See Deery 1996, esp. pp. 134 ff., on Huxley as a mediating link between the "two cultures".

[259] Deery 1996: 146; This journal was founded in 1940 by theosophist Fritz Kunz, later edited in collaboration with Emily Sellon. The journal would later have a minor role in the birth of the New Age: Fritjof Capra and Ken Wilber had texts published here in the early 1970s, before they became well-known spokespersons of the New Age.

[260] Feyerabend 1992.

principle, or how this "uncertainty" could receive a mathematical formulation as precise as that given by Heisenberg. Aldous Huxley, as a writer and popularizer, could allow himself to eschew any such questions and simply continue using the metaphor.

Claims that there is a profound similarity between Eastern philosophies and modern physics, a mainstay in quantum metaphysics, are found also in Huxley's books. He thus claimed that "in a non-scientific, intuitive way, the Chinese anticipated modern scientific thought in many respects".[261] His understanding of science was passable but limited. Some of the popular misconceptions, termed here as creolizations, stem from Huxley. Among the more acceptable popularizations of physics, one also finds major mistakes. Consider, for instance, the following statement uttered by one of the protagonists of his 1925 novel *Barren Leaves*: "within the atom there is neither space nor time":[262] one may suspect that part of Huxley's use of science in such passages is to add a distinct stylistic touch to his writings and, conceivably, to show off his erudition. Huxley's forays into contemporary physics were limited to passing references in otherwise fictional books. Popular accounts of quantum mechanics remained a minor genre until 1975, the year in which Fritjof Capra's immensely successful *The Tao of Physics* was published.

Fritjof Capra

Capra's views will be discussed here on the basis of two of his books, *The Tao of Physics* (originally published in 1975, and subsequently printed in two revised editions) and *The Turning Point* (1981).[263] The former is entirely devoted to physics, and attempts to find parallels between the worldview of quantum mechanics and relativity theory on the one hand and mysticism on the other. The latter, as its title suggests, is a blueprint for a utopia that Capra senses is imminent. This book is broader in scope than *The Tao of Physics*, and goes beyond the subject of the present section to encompass a variety of topics: Capra advocates a paradigm shift *inter alia* in medicine, economy, psychology and the biological sciences. Hanegraaff has reviewed

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[261] Quoted in Deery 1996: 135.

[262] Huxley 1925: 344 f.

[263] Capra has written several other books, which have not received the same status as the two reviewed here. His most recent book at the time of writing, *The Web of Life* (published in 1996), is of interest in the broader perspective of understanding the syncretism of religion and science, but deals primarily with deep ecology rather than physics.

Capra's treatment of these topics extensively,[264] and the following discussion will be limited to his attempts to create a parallelism between science and mysticism.

Capra's basic thesis shifted somewhat between the first version of *The Tao of Physics* and subsequent editions. In his early statements, his argument was concerned with the ubiquity of intriguing textual parallels between Eastern and Western worldviews. Beginning with the second edition, his views have become radicalized, and can be summarized as follows: the perennial philosophy is the best philosophical background to modern science.[265] The perennial philosophy specifically envisaged by Capra is an amalgam of Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist ideas. Capra supports his view *inter alia* by quoting statements by Niels Bohr, Julius Oppenheimer and Werner Heisenberg on the purported similarity between Hindu and Buddhist thought and the emerging worldview of modern physics.[266] These parallels are set out as if they could be taken for granted, since at the very outset, Capra declares his project to be to "explore this relationship between the concepts of modern physics and the basic ideas in the philosophical and religious traditions of the far East"[267]—i.e. to explore links whose very existence by the normal standards of scholarship remains to be demonstrated.

Like his predecessors, Capra is no expert on the history of religions. Scholars have given a critical evaluation of the method by which various Oriental religious and philosophical positions were converted by Capra into reflexes of such a perennial philosophy: "One of the more interesting aspects of the book was the way in which it seemed to misinterpret Asian religions and cultures on almost every page".[268] Chapter 4 briefly addressed this question of Capra's construction of "the Orient". For the purposes of the present chapter, a review of Capra's construction of science is in order. As in the section on Capra's Orientalism, the present summary is indebted to Bochinger's in-depth exegesis of Capra's texts, as well as to several critiques of his interpretations of quantum physics.[269]

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[264] Cf. Hanegraaff 1996: 107 f., 133 ff., 344 f. and 358.
[265] Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 17.
[266] Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 22.
[267] Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 23.
[268] Diem & Lewis 1992.
[269] Especially Stenger 1995.

Capra presents his readers with a brief and accessible summary of the history of classical and modern physics.[270] The controversial aspect of his work has to do with the conclusions Capra draws from the development of modern physics, i.e. relativity theory, quantum mechanics and particle physics. Much is made in *The Tao of Physics* of the fact that both physicists and mystics claim that their insights are in some sense ineffable. Nevertheless, having stated at the outset that language must misrepresent underlying reality,[271] verbal interpretations of science lie at the core of Capra's own project. Two central claims proposed by Capra rely particularly on some highly controversial physics.

The first is a philosophically idealist position developed by Eugene Wigner, Henry Stapp and others.[272] In *Symmetries and Reflections* (1967), Wigner accords the human mind a considerably larger role than do the vast majority of his colleagues. The classic properties of the macroscopic world arise out of the indeterminate quantum world because a human consciousness observes it. An obvious refutation of this argument is that events occurring in places where there are no human observers would remain indeterminate. What happens if an experiment is recorded on film but not seen by anybody, and the negative is kept undeveloped for a year and only then developed and looked at by a human observer? A hard-line idealist position would imply that the indeterminate property gains a specific value one year after the experiment is performed, which would appear a blatant absurdity.

The second is bootstrap theory, created by Geoffrey Chew in 1961. The theory itself rests on technical arguments, but is summa-

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[270] Capra *Tao of Physics*, pp. 63 ff.

[271] See esp. Capra *Tao of Physics*, ch. 2.

[272] Capra is more cautious in the first edition of *Tao of Physics* than in the second. The main theme of the book is the presentation of a Wigner-like idealist physics. In an afterword to the second edition, however, Capra goes considerably further by including Jungian psychology and parapsychology among the aspects of reality congruent with quantum physics. As for the background to quantum idealism, Wigner's production makes it reasonable to interpret him as a founding figure. Capra also quotes John Wheeler as if he were a major figure in the creation of an idealist metaphysics (Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 153), an interpretation that, however, does not seem to accord with Wheeler's own views; cf. Stenger 1995. The embracing of Jung and the paranormal moves Capra even closer in the direction of the most unorthodox interpreters of quantum physics, who invoke the EPR paradox as a support for the reality of extra-sensory perception and similar paranormal claims; see the section on Amit Goswami below.

rized and utilized by Capra in the following manner: bootstrap theory, said to be the ultimately "democratic" and anti-mechanistic interpretation of physics, denies the existence of a set of truly basic particles, properties or natural laws on which everything else builds. Every aspect is dependent on every other, so that the cosmos comes to appear as an unbreakable web of interrelations. Physics according to this view become enmeshed in a kind of hermeneutic circle, in which no detail can be understood without understanding the whole, but in which the whole cannot be grasped except by attempting to unravel the web at some end.

Capra correctly represents the essentials of bootstrap theory, but avoids placing it in its historical context. The cornerstone of the bootstrap model was the idea that the properties of the ever larger family of experimentally detected particles could be explained by positing that each particle was composed of other particles, so that there were no "fundamental" particles in the literal sense of the word. This theory of the internal constitution of particles had its most serious competitor in the quark model, developed independently in 1964 by Murray Gell-Mann and George Zweig. Although at that point there was no evidence to definitively determine the validity of either of these models, the bootstrap theory lacked widespread support. This was principally due to the greater explanatory economy of the quark model, since the bootstrap hypothesis could not explain the symmetrical properties of the various groups or families of particles. Furthermore, the quark theory offered the prospect of experimental confirmation by finding evidence of particles predicted by the theory. The discovery of the so-called J/ψ meson in 1974 decisively confirmed the quark model, and the scientific community almost unanimously adopted the quark hypothesis as the definitive model of particle physics.[273] Thus, by the time Capra published the first edition of *The Tao of Physics*, Chew's proposal had already been demoted to the status of yet another historical curiosity in the development of physics.[274] Nevertheless, Capra continued to support the

[273] For this historical development, cf. Kragh 1996: 673 ff.

[274] Chew's hypothesis seems to live on primarily as a legitimizing argument in the history of several forms of modern religiosity other than the New Age, perhaps due to the influence of Capra's popularization. Thus, adherents of the channeled Urantia Book have attempted to link the cosmology of that text with Chew's bootstrap theory; see the web site ubfellowship.org/studies/intro_theo/synopsis_part4.htm.

bootstrap hypothesis in his later writings,[275] and avoided informing his presumably less knowledgeable readers of the fact that his argument in part rested on marginal or even defunct theories of physics.[276]

A skeptic might conclude from this argument, and from the one presented in chapter 4, that Capra has chosen to combine a view of quantum physics shared by practically none of his colleagues with a presentation of the Orient that most specialists on Asian religions would regard as fundamentally misguided. This remark, however, is not primarily intended to debunk Capra's claims, but to suggest that he has specific reasons for presenting a view that is fundamentally at odds with "normal" science and historiography. The use of highly controversial or marginal science shows that the use of physics is rhetorical, part of a discursive strategy. One might argue that the choice of scientific theory is in part determined by an ideological discourse that Capra has chosen, for separate reasons, to support. Two questions in this context are therefore precisely *what* Capra's claims are, and *how* (rhetorically) Capra argues in constructing a position that is extremely unorthodox from a mainstream scientific point of view, and nevertheless paradigmatic for a large audience with links to the cultic milieu—including, as we shall see, later New Age spokespersons.

Capra presents not so much quantum physics *per se* as a specific worldview for which he attempts to find support in modern science. *The Tao of Physics* sometimes gives the impression of a grand, sweeping search for anything that will fit the pre-established pattern of parallelism between physics and mysticism. Thus, although Capra has a clear predilection for Chew's bootstrap hypothesis, he does refer briefly to the quark model as well.[277] At this point, Capra invokes this theory as yet another parallel to the world of Eastern

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[275] The model is lauded as a scientific advance in the addenda to the second edition of *Tao of Physics*, published in 1983; these remarks stood unrevised in the third edition, published in 1991.

[276] Hanegraaff 1996: 64 notes that the claims of the most prominent spokespersons for a New Age science are often more cautious than the exegesis of their readers, and that there is a sound core to their analysis, viz. the insight that scientific data do not speak for themselves but are in need of an interpretation. Although the latter statement is certainly valid, the story of the bootstrap hypothesis also sheds some light on the efforts made by some of these spokespersons to skew the reader's interpretation in a direction that current scientific research can hardly warrant. It would seem that New Age scientists are strongly interested in disseminating a specific form of *Naturphilosophie* and therefore select and adjust scientific facts accordingly.

[277] Capra *Tao of Physics*, pp. 282 ff.

mysticism. In a win/win argument, both of the competing (and mutually incompatible) models of particle physics are declared to be similar to elements in the worldview of the East. Thus, what appear to be important to Capra are neither the concrete developments of contemporary physics nor the actual specifics of any particular Eastern tradition, but rather an underlying metaphysics of science that can be summarized in four points.

Firstly, his physics is holistic, a science in which the split between body and spirit, between matter and energy, between consciousness and the outer world, between intellect and intuition are transcended.[278] Indeed, the world turns out to be a dynamic web of relationships, of energy patterns, rather than an array of objects.[279] Yet at the same time as Capra's point of view is intended to be holistic, the non-material, non-rational side of each pair is singled out as being in some sense preferable. Clearly, this is science for an audience that places experience and intuition above logic and empirical investigation, values its construction of the Orient more highly than it values its own cultural context, and wishes to transcend materialism. Science, it is suggested, deals with limited aspects of reality, whereas Eastern mysticism is said to transcend both the senses and the intellect in a direct grasp of reality as an undifferentiated whole.[280] Science offers relative knowledge, whereas Eastern mysticism is concerned with absolute knowledge.[281] Science cannot go as far as mysticism, but has made a great step towards the worldview of the Eastern sages.[282] Matter does not really exist, since it is merely an aspect of energy.[283]

Secondly, it is a view of physics that supports the view of history as a U-shaped time-line. Capra's construction of a history of science centered on a materialistic fall and a return to a previous, holistic vision has been discussed above. *The Tao of Physics* depicts the entire

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[278] Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 34.
[279] Capra *Tao of Physics*, pp. 91 f.
[280] Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 47 et passim.
[281] Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 321.
[282] Capra *Tao of Physics*, pp. 153 f.
[283] In an unorthodox interpretation of the special theory of relativity, matter is said to be not a substance but a form of energy, cf. Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 88. Energy thus becomes the modern equivalent of the older concept of *materia prima*. A more orthodox interpretation might say that matter and energy are interchangeable, but to claim that matter "really" is energy is somewhat akin to saying that there is no such substance as ice, since in reality, it is a form of water. Capra's claim has circulated throughout the New Age literature, as can be seen later in this chapter.

course of Western science after the Ionian nature philosophers as part of this Fall.[284]

Thirdly, it is a worldview that, in a sense, reverses the process inaugurated by Galileo, in which we, as humans, hold a marginal position in the periphery of the cosmos. With the idealist interpretation of physics, in which quantum events crucially depend on human consciousness, mankind once again takes center stage.

Fourthly, Capra's construction of science entails a critique of Western culture. Modern physics is not only better equipped to explain certain facts of the natural world, it is said to be better science in a moral sense as well. The Cartesian split between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* is not only a principal cause of the Fall of science, but part of the reason for our alienation:

> Most individuals are aware of themselves as isolated egos existing "inside" their bodies. The mind has been separated from the body and given the futile task of controlling it, thus causing an apparent conflict between the conscious mind and the involuntary instincts. Each individual has been split up further into a large number of separate compartments, according to his or her activities, talents, feelings, beliefs, etc., which are engaged in endless conflicts generating continuous metaphysical confusion and frustration.[285]

Classical science also led to a view of the material world as radically separate from ourselves, and therefore as a machine to be used and exploited. For Capra, classical science is part of the same worldview that has led to ecological disaster.[286] Yet another split that Capra feels to be inherent in classical science is an overreliance on rationality at the expense of our intuitive faculties. The task of modern physics, supposedly holistic and transcending the barrier between intellect and intuition, is therefore far vaster than merely that of understanding certain phenomena at the sub-atomic and cosmic scales; it is to usher in a new way of understanding ourselves, our relation to the earth, ourselves and each other, and ultimately to heal the problems of the modern condition. Thus, Capra's version of quantum mechanics becomes a harbinger of a new age.

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[284] Capra *Tao of Physics*, pp. 25 f.; See the discussion above, in the section "Ambivalent Scientism in the New Age".

[285] Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 28. For a later expression of the same sentiment, see Capra *Turning Point* p. 44.

[286] Capra *Turning Point*, p. 47.

Let us now turn briefly to the question of *how* Capra's worldview is presented, i.e. to some aspects of its rhetorical construction. A basic characteristic of his entire project is its broad sweep and its references to subjects of broad appeal. To science enthusiasts wary of mysticism, Capra's scientism becomes a discursive strategy that supports the validity of the perennial philosophy. To those with a background in the cultic milieu, interested in spiritual traditions but alienated from science, Capra's appeal to positive, exotic Others becomes a discursive strategy that buttresses the scientistic claims.

Other rhetorical mechanisms are bound up in the details of the text. A recurring trait is Capra's often unwarranted but rhetorically useful generalizations. A minority position is presented as if it were applicable to the community of physicists as a whole. Statements presenting controversial theories or equally controversial parallels between science and mysticism are introduced with rhetorical markers such as "in fact" and "it is evident that"; the language of *The Tao of Physics* is factual, and tends to represent the parallels between physics and mysticism as if they were self-evident.[287] Ideas belonging to one specific interpretation of one single Asian tradition become representative of the perennial philosophy as a whole. And just as Capra singles out the works of a few specific cultural brokers such as D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts or Richard Wilhelm to transmit "Oriental philosophy" to the uninitiated, specific scientists, texts or quotes are singled out to function as cultural brokers between the scientific community and a scientifically naive readership. The passages from Niels Bohr or Werner Heisenberg are surely not selected for their representativity, but for their ability to act as advocates of Capra's own positions.[288]

Just as a variety of religious perspectives can be homogenized by means of strategies of pattern recognition and synonymization, these strategies can be extended to encompass science within the same fold. Throughout his texts, Capra points at suggestive metaphoric similarities and more or less fuzzy synonyms in order to connect science with Eastern mysticism. Thus, a specific model describing the interaction of a class of fundamental particles, S-matrix theory, is said to be similar to the relationship between the hexagrams of the

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[287] The factual, "indicative" rather than "subjunctive" language is ubiquitous; as for rhetorical markers, see e.g. Capra *Tao of Physics*, pp. 319, 338.

[288] Quotes dismissing quantum metaphysics are not hard to find in the literature, but are absent from Capra's text.

Chinese *Book of Changes*.[289] Complementarity in the highly precise sense used in physics is claimed to be the same as the complementarity of yin and yang.[290] The equally precise "paradoxicality" of the wave-particle duality is conflated with the paradoxicality of the Tao Te Ching and of Zen koans.[291] The startling nature of the mystical experience is confused with the startling nature of certain results of physics.[292] The awareness of the interrelation of fundamental particles in physics is placed side by side with the belief in the interrelatedness of the macroscopic world that Eastern mysticism is said to stress.[293] The idea that the experimenter in a sense creates the outcome of his experiment through his active participation in the process he studies is compared with the mystic's wholehearted participation in the quest for enlightenment.[294] Unity between opposites such as the interchangeability of matter and energy is said to be the same as the fundamental unity of opposites found in the yin/yang symbolism.[295]

Various senses of terms in English are also conflated, as in the following quote. One gets the impression that a rather mundane sense of a claim to the effect that the laws of nature are human constructs (they were formulated by human beings and expressed in a format devised by humans) spills over into a much more spectacular, idealist claim (the laws of nature are valid only to the extent that humans observe them or even believe in them):

> The notion of an eternal, divine law of nature greatly influenced Western philosophy and science. Descartes wrote about the "laws which God has put into nature", and Newton believed that the highest aim of his scientific work was to give evidence of the "laws impressed upon nature by God". To discover the ultimate fundamental laws of nature remained the aim of natural scientists for three centuries following Newton.
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> In modern physics, a very different attitude has now developed. Physicists have come to see that all their theories of natural phenomena, including all the "laws" they describe, are creations of the human

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[289] Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 312.
[290] Capra *Tao of Physics*, pp. 173 ff.
[291] Capra *Tao of Physics*, pp. 56 ff., 77 et passim. Capra even claims that early quantum mechanics presented problems that could not be solved by logical reasoning, a rendering of history that is perhaps not quite in accordance with standard views of the development of twentieth century physics.
[292] Capra *Tao of Physics*, pp. 61 f.
[293] Capra *Tao of Physics*, pp. ch. 10.
[294] Capra *Tao of Physics*, pp. 153 f.
[295] Capra *Tao of Physics*, ch. 11, Capra *Turning Point*, p. 68.

> mind; properties of our conceptual map of reality, rather than of reality itself.[296]

Other examples of the same rhetorical mechanism are passages where the act of experimentation and the act of observation are conflated.[297] A more mainstream interpretation of quantum mechanics would see measurement as involving the interaction of two physical systems, the measuring apparatus and the quantum system. In a conflated interpretation of the terms, the observer effect becomes the effect of human consciousness.

Furthermore, the rhetorical effect of the iconography in Capra's books should not be underestimated. An illustration in *The Tao of Physics* creates parallels between formulas of physics and a Sanskrit text.[298] Both will be equally incomprehensible to the average reader, but present a vague graphic similarity. A photomontage, in which a figure of Shiva Nataraja is superimposed on an image from a bubble chamber, is provided with a caption that totally merges science and mysticism, explaining that the illustration depicts "The Dance of Shiva pictured by twelfth-century Eastern artists and twentieth-century Western physicists".[299]

A view as unusual as Capra's could hardly avoid meeting with adverse reactions from critics. Capra naturally became aware of the skepticism within the scientific community, and acknowledges the existence of this criticism with a rhetorical flourish. The second edition of his book includes a defense of his project that addresses a few peripheral quibbles, but never mentions the fundamental problems pointed at by his critics.[300] To that extent, Capra's text is yet another model of discourse formation.

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[296] Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 317.

[297] Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 78 as well as *Turning Point*, p. 68 note that is the experimental apparatus and the measurement that are interconnected. On p. 152 of *Tao of Physics*, it is the human observer who is the crucial link, but Capra then immediately retreats by explaining that is due to the human observer's setting up the experiment. On p. 93 of *Tao of Physics*, the human observer, without qualifications, is included "in an essential way". Capra *Turning Point*, p. 76 constructs an enthymatic link between the two: "human consciousness plays a crucial role in the process of observation, and in atomic physics determines to a large extent the properties of the observed phenomena".

[298] Capra *Tao of Physics*, pp. 138 f.

[299] Capra *Tao of Physics*, plate 7.

[300] Capra *Tao of Physics*, p. 14 of 2nd edition and p. 369. Basically, Capra's defense follows three lines. He claims that his critics have misunderstood the term

The Post-Capra Generation

Capra is trained in physics, unlike the majority of his successors. While Capra attempts to retain reasonable scientific accuracy in his description of early quantum mechanics, a spate of books subsequently published represent a much broader spectrum of approaches. As we will see in the following discussion, quantum physics is invoked by writers such as Deepak Chopra[301] and Danah Zohar in ways that manifestly retain only the creolization aspect of the original.

Some references to quantum physics treat Capra's and other quantum metaphysicians' hermeneutic efforts as legend elements. Capra's interpretations acquire the status of well-known facts, and are quoted as such in later literature. Thus, without direct references or supporting arguments, Spangler's *Revelation* appeals to Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle to support the view that the universe is holistic, that "observer and observed are one".[302]

Other writers attempt grand syntheses on the same scale as Capra's. The present section will review, in chronological order, four post-Capra attempts to unite physics with New Age themes: books by Gary Zukav, Michael Talbot, Danah Zohar and Amit Goswami.[303] Together, they represent a time span from the late 1970s up to the end of the 1990s.

Gary Zukav

The best-known book on quantum metaphysics to be published after Capra's was written by journalist Gary Zukav. His book *The Wu Li Masters*, published in 1979, partly reproduces the argument in *The Tao of Physics*, but concentrates more on comparing popularized physics with the emerging New Age worldview than on showing purported parallels to Eastern philosophy. The New Age doctrines of *The Wu Li Masters* are relatively subdued. However, one gets a different view of Zukav's agenda as a spokesperson for the New Age worldview from his later best-selling book *The Seat of the Soul* (1989). The

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mysticism, misunderstood the development of science and misunderstood the relevance of the quantum world for macroscopic physics.

[301] We shall return to Deepak Chopra later, in the section entitled "Scientific Miracles and the Creolization of Faith".

[302] Spangler *Revelation*, p. 28.

[303] These books do not by any means exhaust the quantum metaphysical literature. Other books in this genre are Lawrence LeShan *The Medium, the Mystic and the Physicist*; Robert Jantsch *The Self-Organizing Universe*; Fred Alan Wolf's books, including *The Eagle's Quest*; and several others that are omitted in the interest of brevity.

latter is a compilation of prevalent New Age themes, presented with oracular authority. Zukav presents a utopian picture of a coming evolutionary leap in the history of the human race, a time when we shall all possess paranormal abilities.

Zukav's Wu Li project grew out of a 1976 conference at Esalen on Physics and Consciousness, sponsored by Michael Murphy and Jack Sarfatti.[304] One of Zukav's mentors in the field of physics throughout the development of the book was David Finkelstein, who also wrote an introduction and endorsement. Finkelstein, an active physicist at the Georgia Institute of Technology, was naturally aware of the variety of interpretations of the hard data. His own candor is apparent from the introduction to Zukav's book. Finkelstein notes that there are two fundamentally different ways of understanding physics. One is the majority view that quantum mechanics deals with the randomness of objects at the smallest scale. The other, held by a small minority, is that human consciousness is somehow involved in the quantum world. Finkelstein, who is convinced that this is the view of the future, of "daring and integrated thinkers", nevertheless admits that few of his colleagues share this view.[305] Zukav's book, like Capra's, is thus the metaphysical interpretation of a highly unorthodox view of science. As with Capra's book, after the introduction, the lay reader of *The Wu Li Masters* is given little chance to understand what constitutes mainstream physics and what does not. As in other Esoteric texts, the purpose is surely not to give a balanced account, but to support a given thesis. Zukav's remark that his book is about the *essence* of physics could hardly be more misleading after Finkelstein's cautious positioning.[306]

Zukav's interpretation of physics resonates with themes that are most likely due to immersion in a New Age worldview. Firstly, his physics is idealistic. Space and time, he claims, do not really exist but are mental constructs.[307] More radically idealist that his predecessors, Zukav entertains the notion that we create the particles that

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[304] Michael Murphy was a co-founder of the Esalen Institute. Jack Sarfatti is something of an *eminence grise* of the quantum metaphysics genre: his unorthodox theories have never been presented in a book addressed to a New Age audience, but is quoted by several quantum metaphysicists as an important influence on their own writings. See e.g. Talbot *Mysticism and the New Physics*, pp. 40 f., 60 f., 77 f., 95 f. et passim.

[305] Zukav *Wu Li Masters*, p. 20.

[306] Zukav *Wu Li Masters*, p. 34.

[307] Zukav *Wu Li Masters*, p. 42.

we experiment with, indeed the reality we live in.[308] "The new physics is based not upon 'absolute truth', but on *us*".[309] Only when the technician looks at the results of an experiment does the indeterminacy of the quantum system give way to the properties of the macroscopic level.[310]

Secondly, his physics is anti-reductionistic. By combining formal research and seeming paradoxes, the new physics is also said to be holistic in that it unites the rational and non-rational aspects of our psyches. This is metaphorically expressed by means of one of the most widespread scientistic legends of his day, claiming that classical physics is a left-brain activity, whereas modern physics has overcome the split.[311] In support of this holistic view, Zukav invokes the theories of David Bohm.[312]

Thirdly, Zukav's physics is animistic. The *wu li* of the title is said to mean, among other things, "patterns of organic energy". For Zukav, the difference between the organic and the inorganic is a prejudice, and especially in the quantum world, events take place that, are in a sense, organic. Zukav uses words such as *dynamic, intimate, know, make decisions* and *respond* to characterize this world.[313] He even speculates that photons might be conscious.[314]

Fourthly, Zukav's physics is mystical and related to a variety of Buddhist doctrines. The Many Worlds interpretation is said to postulate the interrelatedness of all subsystems of a composite system, and is thus a mystical vision of the world.[315] The relation between the underlying indeterminate nature of the quantum system and the effects that one can actually observe are said to parallel the relationship between absolute and relative planes of reality in Mahayana

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[308] Zukav *Wu Li Masters*, pp. 54, 95; and especially 114 ff. Such statements are clearly not meant in the down-to-earth sense that experiments may create particles, but the considerably more radical claim that particles have no objective existence. One is reminded of a Berkeleyan idealism transposed to the world of quantum systems.

[309] Zukav *Wu Li Masters*, p. 63.

[310] Zukav *Wu Li Masters*, p. 101.

[311] Zukav *Wu Li Masters*, pp. 64 f.

[312] Bohm's holism is very briefly mentioned by Capra in *Tao of Physics*, pp. 149 f. Zukav devotes several pages to the theory of the implicate order (Zukav *Wu Li Masters*, pp. 323 ff.), and can therefore be said to have introduced Bohm as a new legend element into New Age scientism.

[313] Thus, see Zukav *Wu Li Masters*, pp. 72 f. Note the parallels with Alice Bailey's animistic theory of conscious atoms summarized above.

[314] Zukav *Wu Li Masters*, p. 88.

[315] Zukav *Wu Li Masters*, p. 107.

Buddhism.[316] Like Capra, Zukav cites a Mahayana Buddhist text, the Avatamsaka Sutra, in support of his view.[317]

Michael Talbot

In 1980, Michael Talbot published *Mysticism and the New Physics*. Although he has written several books on similar themes since then, this text became one of the classics of the New Age. Talbot had previously published *A Mile To Midsummer*, a book that dealt with visionary experiences ranging from apparitions of the Virgin to UFO sightings, concluding from such phenomena that on a fundamental level, we create our own reality. When we choose to describe the world in specific terms, the world comes to appear in that way. Talbot thus approached physics from a pre-existing idealist and Esoteric platform.

The basics of Talbot's argument are familiar from Capra's attempts to link quantum mechanics and a generalized mysticism. His physics is quite similar, e.g. tacitly eschewing the Copenhagen interpretation for Wigner's consciousness-based quantum metaphysics.[318] Talbot's mysticism is also predominantly a New Age reading of various oriental sources, supplemented by numerous references to Castaneda's books. However, while Capra roams in an ambiguous borderland between making intriguing textual parallels and actually affirming that the ontology of physics and mysticism is identical, Talbot has gone a step further in the latter direction. The world as we see it is an illusion, *maya*, created by ourselves. Fundamental findings of quantum theory are interpreted as the corroboration of this belief by modern science.

If consciousness affects material reality, that would mean that we are able to fundamentally alter our objective circumstances by changing our mind-set. Talbot affirms that this is the explanation for the purportedly mysterious phenomenon that it is possible to walk on glowing coals without injuring one's feet.[319] Here the New Age

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[316] Zukav *Wu Li Masters*, pp. 253 ff.

[317] Zukav *Wu Li Masters*, p. 255.

[318] Talbot *Mysticism and the New Physics*, pp. 32 ff.

[319] From a non-apologetic perspective, firewalking is a ritual rather than a paranormal event. That this ritual can be carried out without the participants risking any grave injuries is due to the fact that coals have a low heat capacity and a poor thermal conductivity. Modern firewalking rituals are sometimes presented as paranormal feats, but can also be carried out with the stated purpose of overcoming

doctrine that we create our own reality, a belief that originated with the harmonial religions and was absorbed into the Esoteric Tradition through seminal movement texts such as the Seth material, receives a scientistic underpinning.

If mind can influence matter, this has far-reaching consequences for our worldview. A new science of the mind must accord a much more important place to consciousness than older psychologies have done. Talbot contends that mainstream psychology denies that consciousness exists, referring to behaviorist texts from the early 1950s.[320] Furthermore, if material events are caused by mind, a new science must be teleological rather than mechanistic.[321] Thus, where mainstream biology sees causal processes in operation in the development of the embryo, Talbot contends—in a kind of god-of-the-gaps argument—that cell differentiation in the embryo is unexplainable without recourse to teleological principles.[322]

Talbot sees quantum physics as not only supporting a new way of perceiving the world, but also a different way of living in it. Modern physics heralds a revolutionary new age, an age of spirituality. Indeed, he affirms, quantum physics has given religion a scientific basis.[323] However, this is not just a generic religion, but one that resembles contemporary New Age thinking. It is a psychologized religion, a religion whose main function is to give us a glimpse into ourselves. It is a religion concerned with visionary experiences and the paranormal—interests that can perhaps be traced to the fact that Talbot's text was written toward the end of the psychedelic era. Physics is made to support an extreme relativism, in which the visions of the Virgin at Fátima are based on one set of self-imposed rules and the everyday reality we experience is based on another set, but in which all rules are equally valid.

In a later work, *The Holographic Universe* (1991), Talbot continues to elaborate on these theories. He claims, on the basis on a reading of David Bohm's theories, that the universe is actually a kind of hologram. Using this model, Talbot develops a view of the cosmos that embraces and ostensibly explains the paranormal. His form of

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fears and encourage risk-taking, and are said to require adequate mental preparation. For a study of firewalking as a religious ritual, see Danforth 1989.

[320] Talbot *Mysticism and the New Physics*, pp. 45 f.

[321] Talbot *Mysticism and the New Physics*, p. 50.

[322] Talbot *Mysticism and the New Physics*, pp. 51 ff.

[323] Talbot *Mysticism and the New Physics*, p. 161.

quantum physics, he asserts, is capable of explaining such phenomena as telepathy, out-of-body experiences, lucid dreams and a variety of mystical and religious traditions such as cosmic unity and miraculous healing. Talbot's model is considerably more New Age-oriented than either *The Tao of Physics* or *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, and resembles the use of quantum metaphysics found again and again in later literature. We shall return to this appropriation of physics in the case study towards the end of this chapter.

Danah Zohar

Danah Zohar, who pursued undergraduate studies in physics and philosophy at MIT, began her career as a writer in 1982 with a book attempting to link ESP with modern physics, *Through the Time Barrier*. She became a best-selling author in the early 1990s by exploiting similar topics, i.e. the purported metaphysical consequences of modern physics. By the middle of the decade, she had become one of the leading figures in one of the perhaps more paradoxical aspects of modern religiosity: the application of New Age themes to the world of business management.[324]

The Quantum Self follows the lead of Capra and Zukav in adopting Wigner's version of quantum idealism. Reality, she claims, fundamentally takes shape because we choose to observe it.[325] Like Zukav, she speculates on the possibility that seemingly inanimate objects possess a rudimentary consciousness.[326] However, if Capra, Zukav and Talbot are interested in quantum physics for its possible religious implications, Zohar's project appears to be centered on a vision of a more ethical society, a kind of new age based on a metaphorical appropriation of a new physics. Newtonian physics has made us strangers in a cold and mechanical world. Quantum mechanics, interpreted idealistically, can restore meaning to our lives. In Zohar's U-shaped time-line, the new physics will act as a higher manifestation of the meaningful cosmos and panpsychism of antiquity and the Middle Ages. Zohar remains unclear as to whether it is the *language* of quantum mechanics that, used metaphorically, can inspire us, or whether it is the actual *results* of the revolution in

[324] Three of her books will be briefly reviewed here: *The Quantum Self* (1990), *The Quantum Society* (1994) and *ReWiring the Corporate Brain* (1997).
[325] Zohar *Quantum Self*, ch. 3.
[326] Zohar *Quantum Self*, ch. 4.

physics that, interpreted ontologically, can give us a new picture of the world.

Together with her husband, psychiatrist Ian Marshall, Zohar further extends the metaphors of quantum physics in *The Quantum Society*, in order to create a vision of a new form of society. Zohar and Marshall aim to undermine the dualities of mind and nature, spirit and matter, self and other, by invoking an interpretation of quantum physics as a holistic, pluralistic, and integrative theory. The resemblance between the structure of the universe and the structure of the mind, they claim, enables individuals to conceptualize reality as it is pictured in quantum physics. In a late version of the New Age vision *sensu stricto*, Zohar and Marshall use analogies and metaphors culled *inter alia* from quantum mechanics to evoke a new way of organizing peaceful, evolving societies.

Although Zohar's scientism is perhaps more distant from mainstream science than that of any other author reviewed in the present section, her ideas have become a visible part of the workshop circuit of the world of management consulting. This is especially notable in the latest of the three books surveyed here. Despite its title, *ReWiring the Corporate Brain*, this book resonates with business management themes and continues to exploit terminology from quantum metaphysics and chaos theory. Typically of her highly unorthodox application of such terms, Zohar contends that most businesses are run in a Newtonian fashion, that a paradigm shift is necessary, and that a quantum model of the self and of business organization is needed. By the term Newtonian, she understands organizations that are hierarchically run, rigid, linear and atomistic. The quantum model of business management implies an organic structure, and an openness to change, intuition, creativity and holistic thinking. The change from one model of business organization to another is described as a quantum leap.

The parallels drawn are often so extreme that one is at a loss to judge whether Zohar makes literal claims or employs poetic license.[327] Thus, a consultant's indecision to either work on a corporation's bottom line or on its corporate culture is said to be a business parallel to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.[328] Zohar is overtly ambiguous

[327] In this respect, Zohar's book is an example of a small genre of books with titles such as *Quantum Golf*, *Quantum Creativity* and *Quantum Psychology*.

[328] Zohar *ReWiring the Corporate Brain*, ch. 3.

on the status of her vocabulary. At times she concedes that her use of the word "quantum" is metaphoric. On other occasions she contends that creativity is a quantum characteristic of the brain, and that Bohr's and Heisenberg's theories are, in fact, directly relevant to the world of business management.[329] Although Zohar started out by attempting to fuse science and pop philosophy, it is not easy to judge whether *ReWiring the Corporate Brain* is better seen as examples of the application of scientistic vocabulary, or as a genuine instance of a scientistic metaphysics.

Amit Goswami

Amit Goswami was a professor at the Institute of Theoretical Science at the University of Oregon for many years. Goswami has published several books presenting an idealist interpretation of quantum mechanics, the best-known being *The Self-Aware Universe* (1993). In 1996, Goswami and Henry Swift[330] began publishing an on-line bulletin called *Science Within Consciousness*, carrying articles on idealist quantum metaphysics. In his publications, Goswami presents two principal claims.

Firstly, quantum physics is best explained within a framework that hovers between idealism and neutral monism.[331] More precisely, the underlying "stuff" of the universe that, according to Goswami, is revealed by quantum physics should be understood as consciousness. In Goswami's terminology, however, consciousness is not the same as mind, but an unknowable something that transcends both mind and matter. Perhaps, in Berkeleyan fashion, one could interpret Goswami as saying that it is a transcendent consciousness that causes the properties of the macroscopic world to emerge.

Secondly, he claims that quantum mechanics provides support for claims of a variety of paranormal phenomena. Psychic phenomena, such as distant viewing and out-of-body experiences, are examples of what he calls the non-local operation of consciousness, which he

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[329] See especially Zohar *ReWiring the Corporate Brain*, ch. 3, which is constructed on parallels that hover in a borderland between explicit metaphor and literalism.

[330] Swift is a retired military researcher with a doctorate in experimental physics conferred by the University of Iowa in 1943.

[331] Since then, he and his wife Maggie Goswami have published *Science and Spirituality: A Quantum Integration* (1998), which makes the more specific claim that Indian versions of idealism are best suited to explain quantum physics. Here, only *The Self-Aware Universe* will be addressed.

attempts to support by means of an unorthodox interpretation of the EPR paradox. It has been formally demonstrated that the seemingly coordinated behavior of two particles at a distance implied in the EPR paradox cannot be used to transmit information.[332] Goswami's solution to this problem is to invoke a principle of his own, which he calls downward causation by consciousness. His idea is that consciousness collapses quantum waves of possibility into actual events, and that conscious intention can correlate two quantum objects. This would purportedly explain how, for instance, telepathy could be possible.[333] Goswami's quantum metaphysics thus goes beyond the construction of an idealist philosophy. In his publications and on-line bulletins, Goswami has invoked his interpretation of physics to endorse a variety of New Age claims ranging from psychokinesis and remote viewing to channeling and healing. We shall return to such uses of quantum metaphysics in the following section.

Goswami's own professed purpose is to show that physics not only has suggestive parallels with Indian monistic idealism (as Capra did), but to demonstrate that a philosophy of monistic idealism is the *only* reasonable ontological framework within which it is possible to make sense of the world of quantum mechanics. The rhetorical strategies employed to do so are highly reminiscent of those found in *The Tao of Physics*. The idealism that Goswami refers to is a kind of *philosophia perennis*: "the same essential ideas occur repeatedly in the idealist literature of many cultures".[334] This universalizing view of religion is constructed by a liberal use of synonymization and pattern recognition. Thus, the twin elements of the Indian concept of *nama-rupa*, generally translated as "name and form", are assimilated to Western philosophical and psychological terminology by being interpreted as "transcendent archetypes" and "immanent form", respectively. The Hindu term *brahman* is explained as a synonym of the Christian Holy Spirit.[335] The range of idealist philosophies quoted in support of Goswami's own thesis is far vaster than Capra's. In *The Self-Aware Universe*, there are references to Vedanta, Daoism, Mahayana Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, Platonism, Yoga, and a host of other tra-

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[332] This demonstration was made by Philippe Eberhard, whence the name Eberhard theorem.

[333] The skeptic's response would be that this is an attempt to explain an imperfectly instantiated paranormal phenomenon by means of an ad hoc hypothesis.

[334] Goswami *Self-Aware Universe*, p. 49.

[335] Goswami *Self-Aware Universe*, p. 51.

ditions. Goswami's physics is equally unorthodox. The traditional Copenhagen interpretation is explained in passing and the more up-to-date theories of decoherence do not enter the discussion, whereas theories that might support Goswami's own views are referred to throughout his text.[336]

Adopting such an idealist interpretation would, according to Goswami, have much wider implications than just supplanting one view of the world with another. Classical physics, the Newtonian world-machine, leaves no place for God.[337] Nor does it reserve any privileged position for human consciousness.[338] By embracing philosophical materialism, the worldview underpinning classical physics is also said to foster materialism in the everyday sense of the word, i.e. the wish to hoard possessions.[339] Consequently, quantum metaphysics is not only a way of understanding physical reality, but ultimately a path to reconcile science and religion, make us accept the validity of spiritual experiences, heal our alienation and, ultimately, effect a major social transformation:

> If ordinary people really knew that consciousness and not matter is the link that connects us with each other and the world, then their view about war and peace, environmental pollution, social justice, religious values, and all other endeavors would change radically.[340]

In order to further his idealistic interpretation, Goswami, like his colleagues in the quantum metaphysical genre, combines a view of physics shared with very few scientists with a description of Indian philosophy that is hardly defensible from a historical point of view. Rather than being a presentation of modern physics in any conventional

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[336] It can be noted that recent statements of quantum metaphysics share their historical perspective with most popularizations of the topic: the developments of the first forty years are overemphasized at the expense of the advances of the last few decades.

[337] Goswami quotes Laplace's famous quip concerning God: "I have no use for that particular hypothesis"; Goswami *Self-Aware Universe*, p. 16.

[338] Goswami constructs the same straw man as Talbot in *Mysticism and the New Physics* pp. 45 f., by claiming that the view of consciousness as an epiphenomenon of material (neurological) processes reduces consciousness to the status of an illusion; *Self-Aware Universe*, p. 6. The argument may have had some validity during the apogee of behaviorism, but is distinctly out of place in works written in the 1980s and 1990s.

[339] Goswami *Self-Aware Universe*, p. 13.

[340] Goswami *Self-Aware Universe*, p. 8. This utopian agenda is so central to Goswami's project that the first chapter of *The Self-Aware Universe* is devoted to it, i.e. before the author discusses physics.

sense, *The Self-Aware Universe* appears to center on the need for spiritual transformation and the possibility of seeing the birth of a new age. Significantly, paratextual markers in Goswami's *The Self-Aware Universe* contribute to labeling his work as neither a work of popularized physics nor a book on idealist philosophy, but specifically as an example of New Age literature. The endorsements and comments on the back flap are thus not principally those of fellow physicists, but of New Age spokespersons—healer Larry Dossey, an anonymous reviewer from the Yoga Journal. The preface is an endorsement by an even more controversial quantum metaphysicist, Fred Alan Wolf, who became known for his Capra-like assertion that there are significant parallels between modern physics and traditional shamanism.[341] The references to other works include Joseph Campbell, Fritjof Capra and Sri Aurobindo as well as Bohr, Heisenberg and Einstein. Finally, it can be noted that *The Self-Aware Universe* was published by Jeremy Tarcher, a major player in the field of New Age books.

Quantum Metaphysics as Spiritual Science

At a pinch, the message of various quantum metaphysical authors could be compressed into short statements. Capra: quantum physics parallels mysticism; Zukav: quantum physics shows that we are the creators of our worlds; Talbot: quantum physics has given religion a scientific basis; Zohar: quantum physics leads us to a better world with better-run businesses; Wolf: quantum physics parallels shamanism. Goswami: an idealist interpretation of quantum physics can heal our alienation. The exact details of the scientistic arguments put forth to support these claims also vary, although there is a core of popularized quantum mechanical experiments that are referred to throughout this literature. The uncertainty principle can be quoted to legitimize anything from a new corporate structure to a transcendental idealist ontology to an anthropocentric picture of the universe. Whatever the differences, the common agenda of these authors is to construct a view of how the world is constituted, and of our place in this cosmos, that from an etic point of view has distinctly scientistic traits. As with earlier Esoteric positions, the argument continues to be that there are two forms of science: a materialistic and basically superseded version, and a more spiritual version which accepts a broader

[341] For Fred Alan Wolf's views, see e.g. his *Taking the Quantum Leap*, Wolf 1981.

range of phenomena than materialistic science and can point the way to a new way of life.

There are relatively few books that specifically address the question of constructing a synthesis between religion and science, but their influence has spread through the New Age literature. In 1980, when Marilyn Ferguson attempted to sum up the first years of the New Age movement, scientism as espoused by Capra, Prigogine, Pribram and others prompted her to claim that the New Age as a whole was a rational enterprise.[342] The trend has continued throughout the twenty years that have followed. The extended case study of the concluding section of this chapter will examine how such a view of spiritualized science can be actively used as a discursive strategy to support claims of the cultic milieu that have ostensibly nothing to do with science.

Case Study: Scientific Miracles and the Creolization of Faith

In many religious traditions, adherents produce and reproduce narratives of certain events that are singled out as so remarkable as to be classed as miraculous. This first assertion sets forth the presupposition underlying the entire discussion of this section: the focus here is not on a set of events, miraculous or otherwise, but on a class of narratives that present certain purported events as being extraordinary.

Materialism, seen as an all-encompassing order within which every event can potentially be explained in naturalistic terms, is, of course, incompatible with the acceptance of miracles. Materialism attacks the foundations of traditional miracle narratives, questioning whether the events depicted actually have occurred and, if so, whether their explanation might not be found in the natural order of things. Although the roots of modern materialism go back to antiquity, having been adopted by several Greek thinkers, the modern challenge to miracle narratives coincides with the rise of the Enlightenment. The most celebrated Enlightenment critic of miracles, David Hume, rejected belief in the miraculous in a famous argument, which since

[342] This is a claim that runs through Ferguson *Aquarian Conspiracy*, and is a main theme of the Introduction and of ch. 6 of that book.

then has been the subject of considerable debate and refinement.[343] According to Chapter X ("Of Miracles") of Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), a miracle "may accurately be defined as a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent". Hume then provides a famous rebuttal of miracles. As Hume puts it:

> [N]o testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish [. . .] When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle.

Hume's argument set the trend for a devastating rationalist critique of miracle narratives. From a religious point of view, three basic options were available. The first involved accepting the rationalist response of reducing miracle narratives to something other than veridical reports of miracles, perhaps to pseudo-events[344] or textual passages of mainly literary merit. Leading post-Enlightenment theologians of several faiths have adopted versions of this strategy and have downplayed the significance of Biblical miracles. Some have felt the distance between modern society and the miraculous nature of the gospels to be so acute that they have striven to radically demythologize the New Testament, following the example of Rudolf Bultmann.[345]

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[343] Tweyman 1995 is a compilation of critical and exegetical papers on Hume's philosophy of religion. One should perhaps note that the skepticism against miracles has a history that goes back before Hume, indeed Hume acknowledged that his own argument was partially modeled on an argument made by bishop John Tillotson in 1676 in his defense of Anglicanism against Catholicism; see Gaskin 1988: 238 f. The historical details need not concern us here, since Hume's argument became the locus classicus of modern secular critiques against miracle belief.

[344] A vast skeptical literature attempts to debunk miracle narratives. Debunking narratives are an interesting textual genre in their own right, but fall outside the scope of this study. Some prominent examples are Gardner 1957, Randi 1995 and Shermer 1997.

[345] Thus, according to Bultmann "the worldview of the Scripture is mythological and therefore unacceptable to modern man whose thinking has been shaped by science and is therefore no longer mythological. Modern man always makes use of technical means which are the result of science. In case of illness modern man has recourse to physicians, to medical science. In case of economic and political affairs,

The second alternative involved partially accepting the rationalist critique, while insisting that a small core of true miracles remains. Conservative Christian apologists may argue that the Resurrection is a true divine intervention, precisely because it goes against the natural order that anybody should be revived after the death of the body.[346]

The third alternative is characteristic of much of the Esoteric Tradition. Within the positions reviewed here, a background assumption of a natural order also exists. However, the scientific community is given no privileged position when it comes to specifying where these boundaries should be drawn. The natural order, it is claimed, encompasses far more than conventional scientists are willing to accept.[347] In this respect, Franz Mesmer is a typical exponent of that tradition. He created a scientistic cosmology capable of explaining seemingly miraculous healing. Since the time of Mesmer, spokespersons for the Esoteric Tradition have manifested a characteristic ambiguity towards the miraculous. On one hand, an author of Esoteric texts might characterize spontaneous remission from a life-threatening disease as a natural consequence of certain spiritual "laws". On the other hand, the same writer may be tempted to call the cure "miraculous".[348]

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he makes use of the results of psychological, social, economic and political sciences, and so on. Nobody reckons with direct intervention by transcendent powers"; Bultmann 1958: 36.

[346] Theistic arguments from miracles may be less common than they once were; nevertheless, apologist philosophers of religion at times still argue for the existence of true miracles. For a short review of the issues involved, see Martin 1990: 188 ff. and Taliaferro 1998: 374 ff.

[347] Although for reasons of scope as well as space they fall outside the present study, it should be noted that there is a third group which attempts to formulate the borders of the "miraculous": the community of parapsychologists. In contrast with the generally materialistic skeptics, their concept of what is natural is larger and may encompass ESP, psychokinesis and other controversial phenomena. In contrast with spokespersons of the Esoteric Tradition, they attempt to verify such claims with more or less orthodox scientific methods, rather than use science as a source of legend elements and as a rhetorical tool to support their claims. For a brief history of parapsychology and a description of these positions, see Fuller 1973, Moore 1977, Hess 1983 and Mauskopf 1996. Esotericists, skeptics and parapsychologists should be seen as ideal types in a field where many nuanced positions can be found. There are New Agers who accept relatively few paranormal events as genuine and others who embrace a most eclectic mix of controversial claims, parapsychologists who are highly skeptical and others who are not, and so forth.

[348] Chopra *Quantum Healing*, ch. 1, which is significantly entitled "After the Miracle".

Miracles Within the New Age

Esoteric movement texts present three ways in which miracles may manifest themselves.[349] First, there are miracles that depend on the ability of uniquely privileged charismatic figures. Certain Esoteric texts are hagiographies of such individuals. Some of these are discussed in greater detail in chapter 6. A second group of explanations embody an extension and democratization of this privilege. Potentially, it is claimed, we all harbor such quasi-supernatural capabilities. A number of Esoteric texts are handbooks of ritual or of magic means of attaining such capabilities. This democratization of privileged experience will be addressed in the last section of chapter 6.

A third group of texts presents miracles as the result of the very structure of the cosmos. Just as the everyday functioning of the world is due to laws of nature, miracles are also the automatic result of following certain laws: what one might be tempted to call *laws of supernature*. The shortcomings we observe in the world—illness, infirmity, poverty, even death—can potentially be overcome by applying the insights afforded by these texts. This scientistic mode of explaining miracles is, in a sense, the most original contribution of the Esoteric Tradition to the problem of constructing theodicies, and therefore merits closer examination.

The Use of Miracles

Miracle narratives are told for a purpose. They illustrate the power of the transcendent to intervene in the human sphere. They single out charismatic individuals and provide evidence of their unique status. They contribute to a solution to the problem of evil: miracles often involve counteracting suffering in one guise or another. Miracle narratives also form part of an overarching picture of how the world is constituted. In the Esoteric Tradition, miracle narratives partake of all these functions.

Esoteric miracle stories typically present descriptions of a small set of human experiences. Four such domains stand out:

- Healing narratives. The spontaneous remission of, for instance, a cancer patient can be described as a miraculous event.

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[349] The term "miracles" should here be taken as an etic term, few narratives that the historian of religions would be tempted to classify as miracle narratives are perceived as such by Esoteric writers.

• Material success through "mind cure" methods require an explanation of the seemingly miraculous connection between a mental event (an affirmation, a positive mind-set) and changes in one's objective circumstances.
• Divination is also "miraculous" in relation to a prior framework in which information can only be transmitted through ordinary, i.e. non-paranormal, channels.
• Extrasensory powers such as ESP and psychokinesis are usually merely presented as astounding ("miraculous") facts, but are sometimes also seen as phenomena in need of an explanation.[350]

Healing narratives are of particular interest for the present purposes, i.e. the investigation of scientistic discursive strategies that inform miracle narratives. As we shall see, modern science is commonly invoked when spokespersons of the Esoteric Tradition attempt to explain seemingly miraculous cures. The purported powers of positive thinking are sometimes also explained in scientistic terms. To a lesser extent, scientism enters into the discussion of how divination and ESP are possible. That astrology or clairvoyance are less thoroughly presented in a framework that depends on scientism appears to be primarily for idiosyncratic historical reasons.

Divinatory Miracles

Divination is frequently justified by referring to the antiquity of the craft. In one important respect, however, scientistic strategies form part of the movement texts of divination. Astrology or the tarot build on the apparent mystery that details of a person's life should coincide with certain events that befall inanimate objects: the position of certain celestial bodies against the horizon, or the random selection of cards from a pack. The Esoteric Tradition eschews theistic as well as rationalistic explanations of this phenomenon, and resorts to what adherents see as a law of nature: synchronicity. This term, popularized by C.G. Jung, was coined to denote a small class of events in which an extraordinary co-occurrence of events in the objective

[350] Arguably, however, parapsychologists have been more interested in detecting and explaining ESP, while Esoteric texts are prone to present ESP as a brute fact. The remainder of the present discussion will therefore be limited to the topics of divination, positive thinking and healing. For a discussion of science and ESP in nineteenth and twentieth century esotericism, see Fuller 1973. For a more specific discussion of the construction of boundaries between mainstream science, parapsychology and the New Age, the reader is referred to a fuller discussion in Hess 1993 and to Mauskopf 1996: 875 ff.

world closely paralleled a major psychological breakthrough.[351] Later Jungian authors have extended the use of the term to encompass basically any coincidences that are subjectively perceived as meaningful. In Jungian as well as New Age literature, it is frequently stressed that the principle of synchronicity is a *scientific* principle, albeit a controversial one.[352]

In astrological texts, synchronicity is invoked in two contexts. Firstly, synchronicity purportedly explains why a person born at a certain time manifests personality traits that are to be found in the natal chart. Howard Sasportas, one of the most influential Jungian astrologers of our time, uses the term synchronicity to explain the mechanics of astrology. Sasportas explains the significance of transits:[353]

> [T]hese events are the external synchronous manifestation of inner changes which are taking place. In other words, the core Self may use outer events to promote the kinds of changes we need to go through in order to grow into what we are meant to become.[354]

Secondly, synchronicity is invoked to explain the influences of celestial bodies discovered after the golden age of astrology (i.e. the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance). Pluto was discovered in 1930 by astronomer Clyde Tombaugh. Astrologers use the concept of synchronicity to speculate both on why Pluto was discovered at this particular moment, and on how the influences of the planet should be interpreted. Thus:

> Many astrologers believe that it's no coincidence that Pluto's discovery was more or less synchronous with the development of psychology which has pried the lid off the facade of the ego/self to probe the hidden and often violent depths beneath.[355]

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[351] The concept of synchronicity is discussed at greater length in chapter 6. It is remarkable that Jung built a theory with such far-reaching influence on the Esoteric Tradition on one single concrete example, found in Jung 1960, § 982 f. This is the story of a patient of Jung's who during a therapy session was relating a dream in which she had received a piece of jewelry in the shape of a golden scarab. At that very moment, a golden-green scarabaeid beetle, the common rose-chafer, flew against Jung's window. The experience, says Jung, punctured the patient's rationalism.

[352] For the opinion that synchronicity is a scientific law, cf. Mansfield 1995. Mansfield especially attempts to link synchronicity with quantum mechanics.

[353] Transits are astrologically significant angles formed between (a) a given planet as it stands against the horizon at a given point in the life of a person and (b) the position of that planet at birth. For instance, 14 years after a person's birth, Saturn stands at (approximately) a 180° angle to the position in which that planet was found at birth. This transit, an *opposition*, is perceived as important by astrologers.

[354] Sasportas *Gods of Change*, pp. 6 f.

[355] Merlin *Character and Fate*, p. 88.

Pluto was named after the Greek god of the underworld. Although it seems reasonable to assume that astronomers who name celestial objects are uninfluenced by (and probably uninterested in) the use astrologers will make of these objects, mythological associations to these names are deemed important within the astrological community. Chart interpretations of Pluto therefore include key terms that metaphorically link the idea of the underworld with the psychologizing framework of Jungian astrology. Such key words might include the destruction of the ego, radical transformation through crisis and the breakthrough of unconscious drives.

Synchronicity is thus invoked as a law of nature explaining a set of correlations and analogies that skeptics (including, one may presume, most mainstream scientists who give divination any thought) consider to be merely superstitious. Since synchronicity is not evoked in the context of conventional science, it can be seen as a characteristic example of a law of "spiritualized science", a law of supernature that New Age spokespersons see as unjustly rejected by the scientific mainstream.

A much more elaborate scientistic strategy is to be found in a movement text on the tarot. In her book *Tarot: the Complete Guide*, Cynthia Giles explains the workings of the tarot deck in several scientistic enthymemes. She begins by explaining why it is reasonable that there should be a supernatural realm as well as instruments for reading off this level of reality:

> 1) The reason we don't see our experienced reality the same way physicists see quantum reality, is that we use different instruments. We use our physical senses, rather than particle accelerators and the like. 2) As we already know, our physical senses observe only the light found in the middle of the total spectrum of light; light frequencies at the very low and very high ends of the spectrum of light are invisible to our physical senses, and can only be "seen" with the aid of other instrumentation [. . .] 3) It does not, therefore, seem entirely outrageous to think that our senses may pick up only the *middle* of the reality spectrum [. . .] so it's possible to imagine that there might be a *high* end of the reality spectrum, invisible to us because we don't have any instrumentation to detect it.[356]

[356] Giles *Tarot*, pp. 149 ff. Emphases in the original. Giles is frank enough to concede that most physicists would find her explanation a "gross misrepresentation" of their concepts. The simile between the perception of the transcendent and the perception of electromagnetic waves outside the visible spectrum has been exploited in earlier Esoteric texts, notably in Leadbeater's *Some Glimpses of Occultism*, pp. 130 f.

Having prepared the ground, she embarks on a lengthy discussion of why and how physics and divination may be related. One of the drawbacks of divination, from the scientist's point of view, is that it lacks the basic characteristics of any scientific enterprise: the methods are not measurable, repeatable or objectively verifiable. Giles resorts to her understanding of quantum metaphysics and constructs an elaborate set of analogies.[357]

Firstly, there is no simple cause-and-effect relationship on the quantum level. By analogy, the supernatural end of the reality spectrum might obey similar statistical rules. Secondly, physicists never observe quantum level processes directly, but only through the traces left and the results of experiments. Similarly, diviners never observe the hidden processes of the supernatural level, but only the manifestations that this level leaves in tarot decks or astrological charts. Thirdly, the process of observation fundamentally influences the results of experiments on quantum events. By analogy, two diviners will not give a specific subject exactly the same readings. Fourthly, quantum theory allows for non-locality, i.e. the interconnection of events at a distance. This, Giles feels, would help us to understand why seemingly unconnected events (cards drawn from a pack, incidents in the life of a person) nevertheless seem correlated. A fifth and perhaps even looser analogy connects chaos theory, in which single and seemingly small-scale events can influence the outcome of large systems, with our purported abilities to intuit such outcomes. At some level of awareness, Giles speculates, perhaps our brains have the ability to pick up clues as to the direction in which such chaotic systems are developing.

In the few pages that she devotes to giving scientistic support to tarot reading, Giles appeals to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, quantum experiments, the observer effect, the EPR paradox, David Bohm's holographic model, chaos theory and the differentiated functions of the brain hemispheres. These have basically been the scientistic staples of the New Age worldview ever since the 1970s.

The Miracles of Positive Thinking and Healing

One of the direct influences of nineteenth century mind cure philosophies on the New Age is the interest in positive thinking. By culti-

[357] In such exceedingly loose analogies, a skeptic might find yet another manifestation of pattern recognition. The important matter here, however, is the fact that a ritual of divination should be defended by means of appeals to physics.

vating an appropriate attitude, it is purportedly possible to attract happiness, prosperity and health. According to a number of New Age authors, the most influential probably being Louise Hay and Shakti Gawain, the universe is infinitely generous. By changing our attitudes, we can tap into this cosmic machinery and cause unlimited resources—including money—to manifest in our lives. Scientism enters positive thinking in those cases where a spokesperson presents an argument that purports to explain why it is possible to create miracles in one's life by changing one's way of thinking.[358] Thus, Shakti Gawain introduces her book *Creative Visualization* by giving a lengthy exposé of why thought can transform our seemingly objective circumstances.[359] The scientistic enthymeme can be summarized as follows:

Gawain's metaphysics is one of idealist monism. The physical universe is energy. Scientists have now come to the same conclusion reached by spiritual teachers long ago: there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as matter; the basic "stuff" of the cosmos is a kind of force or energy. In the domain of science, this is evident once one begins to look at the sub-microscopic world. What seemed, on a macroscopic scale, to consist of solid and separate objects now appears as tiny particles that are constituted ultimately of pure energy. This means that we, too, are made up of energy. Literally, we and the world are one, since we are constituted of the same underlying force.

What is it that causes the differences between the various manifestations of this underlying energy? If literally *everything* is energy, what differentiates human beings from, say, trees or gnats or molecules or thoughts? Gawain's answer is that energy manifests itself in more or less dense, subtle, vibrating and volatile forms. The "matter" we are made of is simply a denser and less subtle form of energy, while the thoughts we produce are more subtle forms of that same energy. The crucial enthymeme in the chain is Gawain's belief that similar forms of energy attract each other. When seemingly by chance we meet someone we have just thought of, this is because our thoughts and that person matched each other vibrationally. Similarly, thoughts of prosperity attract prosperity itself.

The literature on prosperity thinking essentially consists of handbooks of ritual, a form of modern magic. The scientistic strategies

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[358] Michael Talbot's role as a proponent of such arguments is discussed above.

[359] The following discussion summarizes an argument found in Gawain *Creative Visualization*, ch. 1.

appear to justify magical thinking to a readership that lives in an age when the very concept of magic no longer carries much rhetorical strength. Quite commonly, however, the basic discursive strategy lies elsewhere. Sometimes, as in Deepak Chopra's book *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, the language is more explicitly religious.[360] Correct attitudes attract wealth because the laws that govern this correlation are "the thoughts of God".[361] Perhaps most commonly, however, legitimacy rests on the narratives of experience that tend to make up the backbone of these books. The important thing is not whether it is divine Mind, subtle energies or other forces that make miracles come true. The crucial test of prosperity thinking lies in the experiences of the author and his or her clients, testimonies of people who have manifested prosperity in their own lives and therefore constitute living proof of the efficacy of magic.

One common claim within the New Age literature is that positive thinking specifically influences one's health. Miracle narratives underpinned by a scientistic discursive strategy are thus quite common and detailed in texts dealing with healing in the broadest sense of the word. It is to such texts that we shall now turn our attention.

Ever since the days of mesmerism, the vocabulary of physics has served as a source of scientistic explanations. In New Age literature, the magnetism and electricity of earlier texts have been replaced by the near-ubiquitous term *energy*. Healing thus serves to strengthen, modify or unblock energy. Not infrequently, explanations are more detailed, with suitable attributes being given to specify the nature of this energy and the reason why ritual healing works. Thus the central movement text of Aura-Soma healing explains the human aura as "the electromagnetic field surrounding every person".[362] The colored liquids that are the main ritual objects within this system "unlock the secrets of the vibrations of the body and harmonize them".[363] Colors and light contain the essence of what we receive into our bodies when we take vitamins and minerals, which, according to the authors of this text, means that the human body is a living photoelectric cell. Every time the bottles are shaken, a subtle interplay is said to take place between the user and the bottles:

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[360] Chopra *Seven Spiritual Laws*.
[361] Chopra *Seven Spiritual Laws*, p. 108.
[362] Dalichow & Booth *Aura-Soma*, p. 3.
[363] Dalichow & Booth *Aura-Soma*, p. 8.

> In the process of shaking the bottle, the energy of the user's electromagnetic field goes into the content of the bottle. Thereby the healing potential is heightened. [. . .] Furthermore, by shaking the bottle with the left hand, some of the potential of the right side of the applier's brain penetrates the substance.[364]

Such scientistic metaphors can be so opaque that it becomes practically impossible to decipher a literal meaning behind the surface of the discourse. Perhaps the intent is entirely rhetorical.[365] Readers with a modest understanding of science in the non-Esoteric sense of the word will get the impression that considerable erudition lies behind the statements of the author.

Both financially and in terms of personal fame, the Indian-American doctor Deepak Chopra has been one the most successful of the many writers of books relating miraculous events.[366] Chopra has established a distinguished career in the medical profession.[367] In 1985, Chopra was introduced to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the founder of the Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement. While continuing to pursue a successful academic and professional life, Chopra also became a high-ranking member of TM, and was finally seen as Maharishi's heir. Around 1990, however, conflicts arose and Chopra left the movement.[368] Since then, Chopra has advocated an Esoteric worldview that combines TM and ayurveda, Western medicine and elements that could have been culled from New Thought texts. As we will see, Chopra's worldview resembles Quimby's at least as much as it rests on Maharishi or modern science.

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[364] Dalichow & Booth *Aura-Soma*, p. 81.

[365] There are parallels with other religious traditions, in which verbal performances with little semantic content discernible to the audience nevertheless fulfil a rhetorical function, cf. Fernandez 1982, ch. 19, on the Bwiti religion of Gabon.

[366] Chopra has become one of the best known alternative medicine advocates of our time. He is the author of 19 books, a couple of which have been on the best-seller list simultaneously, as well as of more than 30 audio, video, and CD-ROM programs. He has been published in a dozen languages. Nearly 10 million copies of his books have been sold in English alone.

[367] Chopra attended the All India Institute of Medical Sciences and embarked on a career in Western medicine. After graduating in 1968, he interned at a New Jersey hospital, trained for several more years at the Lahey Clinic and the University of Virginia Hospital and became board-certified in internal medicine and endocrinology. He taught at Tufts and Boston University Schools of Medicine, became the chief of staff at the New England Memorial Hospital and established a large private practice.

[368] The first edition of *Quantum Healing* was printed in 1989 while Chopra still was a disciple. It contains a dedication to Maharishi, and includes two of Maharishi's books in its bibliography. These acknowledgements of Maharishi's influence have been removed from the second edition.

Part of Chopra's production is a presentation of some basic rules of healthy living. Among these topics is his advice on diet and preventive health care. Other parts of his works are devoted to popular psychology, e.g. our quest for love and recognition. Although these subjects are integrated with the rest of Chopra's idealist metaphysics, these aspects of Chopra's many books are not obviously relevant to the subject of modern miracle narratives, and will therefore be excluded from the remainder of this discussion.

Chopra presents a picture of the human predicament that resembles nineteenth century mind cure ideologies. The back cover of his book *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* contains a programmatic statement of his radical mind-over-matter teachings. According to this text, Chopra

> is justly famous for explaining how our attitude towards ourselves can change the way we age. Interestingly, this exciting and revolutionary area of research is also being underpinned by contemporary discoveries in quantum physics. [The book demonstrates] the innate intelligence of the mind/body processes and the extent to which sickness and aging are created by nothing more than gaps in our self-knowledge. By increasing this self-knowledge, we can master simple yet effective ways to metabolize time, and so achieve our unbounded potential.

Harmony, health and success are part of the path towards spiritual mastery over all aspects of life. Section headings in Chopra's book promise to deliver the key to longevity, to defeating entropy, and finally to breaking the spell of mortality. Thus, by adopting the right attitude, even death can be overcome:

> I would like you to join me on a journey of discovery. We will explore a place where the rules of everyday existence do not apply. These rules explicitly state that to grow old, become frail, and die is the ultimate destiny of us all. And so it has been for century after century. However, I want you to suspend your assumptions about what we call reality so that we can become pioneers in a land where youthful vigor, renewal, creativity, joy, fulfillment and timelessness are the common experience of everyday life and *where aging, senility, infirmity and death are not even entertained as a possibility*.[369]

If we truly have the capacity to reach a state where death does not exist, why isn't the world populated with immortal beings? Chopra's answer is negative conditioning. We have been programmed to believe

[369] Chopra *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, p. 3 (emphasis added).

in ten false propositions that form the bedrock of our shared illusion. The tenth of these falsehoods is the belief that "Suffering is necessary—it is a part of reality. We are inevitable victims of sickness, aging, and death".[370] Thus, as in several strands of New Thought idealism, false beliefs are the cause of illness and death. In Chopra's view (as in quite a few other New Age texts), belief not only causes suffering and evil, but the entire world is, in a sense, a projection of our minds. In Chopra's words, "The physical world, including our bodies, is a response of the observer. We create our bodies as we create the experience of our world".[371]

It would be truly miraculous if we were able to circumvent the processes of aging, senility, infirmity and even death. However, Chopra writes from a position that is subject to the dynamics of modernization, and his attitude to miracle narratives is ambiguous. In his book *Quantum Healing* he explains:

> In my own practice, several cancer patients have recovered completely after having been declared incurable and given only a few months to live. I didn't think they were miracles.[372]

A few pages later, however, he states: "Several times in my medical career I have been privileged to witness miraculous cures".[373] The solution to the apparent contradiction lies in Chopra's interpretation of miraculous events. Chopra's colleague and friend, Wayne Dyer, understands such acts in terms that the reader easily recognizes as religious. In *Real Magic*, Dyer alternately ascribes the workings of the miraculous to the higher Self or to "God (or whatever you call that invisible part of ourselves)".[374] At a first glance, Chopra's message appears considerably more secularized. Miracles are caused neither by God nor by any divine spark within the self, but through the operation of scientific-spiritual principles. The science of these miracle narratives is, however, scientistic in the sense adopted here. They represent a synthesis of ayurvedic medicine, New Thought/New Age idealism and scientific terminology culled particularly from three sources: TM, quantum metaphysics and the vocabulary of modern technology.

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[370] Chopra *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, p. 4.
[371] Chopra *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, p. 5.
[372] Chopra *Quantum Healing*, p. 2.
[373] Chopra *Quantum Healing*, p. 21.
[374] The former expression is to be found in Dyer *Real Magic*, p. 14, the latter on page 12.

Chopra claims that deep within us lies the innermost core of being, which he identifies as an unchanging, timeless, flowing field.[375] This field is the witness of the changing world, but is itself immune to change—hence immortality. The concept of *unified field* is a key term in Maharishi's worldview, which has probably been directly borrowed by Chopra, his former disciple. Another key term from TM is *intelligence*, which is also frequently used by Chopra.[376] Thus, he claims, the void within each atom pulsates with invisible intelligence.[377]

The second and more frequently culled source of loans is popularized quantum physics. As is common in New Age books, there are no references to other authors. Whether or not the purported implications of quantum physics ultimately derive from Capra's and Zukav's quantum metaphysics is therefore impossible to prove, although the similarities are such that a mere coincidence seems highly unlikely. In a direct echo of Capra, Chopra claims that modern science supports ancient Indian wisdom.[378]

Chopra's book *Quantum Healing* devotes considerable space to the spiritual laws that are said to govern our lives. His discussion is based on the following observation: The body is material, the mind is not. Body and mind would therefore seem to belong to two entirely different realms. Nevertheless, the two are obviously connected. An event in consciousness may cause a bodily reaction. A frightening sight causes the production of adrenaline. Conversely, a bodily event may elicit a mental response. Photons strike the retina, and we have the impression of seeing light. In thinking, brain activity and mental content are virtually simultaneous. The thought of some specific object, e.g. a rose, corresponds to the firing of untold numbers of neurons. The full, miraculous consequences of this mind/body connection are illustrated by the following anecdote. Chopra relates the case of a female patient who was erroneously diagnosed as suffering from gallstones, and who therefore underwent surgical treatment:

> [W]hen she was opened up, it was found that she had a large malignant tumor that had spread to her liver, with scattered pockets of cancer throughout her abdominal cavity. [. . .] Because the woman's

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[375] Chopra *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, p. 8 et passim.

[376] For a brief review of the belief system of TM, including the terms *field* and *intelligence*, see Rothstein 1996: 27 ff.

[377] Chopra *Quantum Healing*, p. 25.

[378] Chopra *Quantum Healing*, p. 18.

> daughter pleaded with me not to tell her mother the truth, I informed my patient that the gallstones had been successfully removed. [. . .] Eight months later I was astonished to see the same woman back in my office. She had returned for a routine physical exam, which revealed no jaundice, no pain, and no detectable signs of cancer. Only after another year passed did she confess anything unusual to me. She said "Doctor, I was so sure I had cancer two years ago that when it turned out to be just gallstones, I told myself I would never be sick another day in my life." Her cancer never recurred.[379]

The mental event (the patient's resolve not to succumb to illness) corresponded to her bodily condition. Chopra explains this apparently mysterious connection between body and mind—which, incidentally, has given rise to a wealth of hypotheses and research outside the New Age context—by means of an analogy. Chopra calls such cases of seemingly miraculous spontaneous remission *quantum events*. The metaphor is constructed in the following manner:

At the scale in which quantum mechanics is relevant, light can behave either as a wave or as a stream of particles. Nevertheless, the wave-like and particle-like properties are manifestations of the "same" entity, i.e. light. In an analogous manner, the human being can exhibit bodily or mental properties. Mental and bodily aspects are manifestations of the same underlying reality. This mysterious entity is first simply identified as a question mark: ? Later, Chopra gives this ? the name *quantum body*. This unknown and perhaps unknowable quantum body is the site of miraculous cures. From this ineffable source emanates our potential freedom from aging, illness, infirmity and death. Chopra claims that a detour into the ? zone "can change any physical reality in the body".[380]

Having established the metaphor, Chopra makes a crucial transition. The simile is now seen as a factual explanation:

> A physicist could object that we are just making metaphors here, that the hidden world of elementary particles and fundamental forces explored by quantum physics is very different from the mind's hidden world. Yet, one can argue that the inconceivable region from which we fetch the thought of a rose is the same as that from which a photon emerges—or the cosmos. Intelligence, we will discover, has many quantum properties.[381]

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[379] Chopra *Quantum Healing*, p. 98.
[380] Chopra *Quantum Healing*, p. 97.
[381] Chopra *Quantum Healing*, p. 99.

While quantum physics may be Chopra's main source of scientistic loans, it is certainly not the only one. In Chopra's unorthodox hermeneutics, Einstein claimed that time, space and matter do not exist. Everything is made up of energy and information.

A third mode of scientism is the frequent use of technical and scientific metaphors. These are very probably intended as metaphors, and Chopra does nothing to place them within a more overarching worldview. Thus, one finds, among many others, the following statements: Each cell is a miniature terminal connected to the cosmic computer.[382] Our sensory impressions are a "steady-state version of reality".[383] Subatomic particles are, in reality, energy coded to carry specific information.[384]

The credibility of such scientistic formulations is buttressed by the seamless amalgamation with references to "common sense" observations as well as to medical science rather than scientism. Aging (dismissed a page earlier as illusory) is explained as being partly due to the failing of DNA repair mechanisms to counteract mistakes in genetic replication.[385] Most bodily functions, from blood circulation to hormonal balance, are taken care of without any conscious involvement. Since this statement is obviously true, then perhaps the very next statement also becomes plausible: that such functions would not be subject to degeneration and aging if they were conscious rather than unconscious.[386]

While Chopra's philosophy is close to that of the harmonial religions, his discursive strategy is quite different. His predecessors in the New Thought movement expressed their brand of positive thinking in a language that borrowed, to a varying extent, from Christian and scriptural terminology. In Chopra's texts, Christianity plays a marginal role. Here is one of his few references to Christianity:

> Modern science is just discovering the implications of all this [i.e. of the theories Chopra presents], but it has been imparted for centuries through spiritual traditions in which masters have preserved the youthfulness of their bodies far into old age. India, China, Japan, and to a lesser extent the Christian West have given birth to sages who realized

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[382] Chopra *Quantum Healing*, p. 18.
[383] Chopra *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, p. 30.
[384] Chopra *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, p. 14.
[385] Chopra *Quantum Healing*, p. 19.
[386] Chopra *Quantum Healing*, p. 23. For the rhetoric of proximity or liaison, see Perelman 1982: 49 ff.

> their essential nature as a flow of intelligence. By preserving that flow and nurturing it, they overcame entropy from a deeper level of Nature.[387]

A century after Quimby and Mary Baker Eddy, syncretism no longer takes place with Christianity but with the traditions of the East.

Varieties of Scientism

Chopra has built a reputation on his concept of quantum healing. Texts describing other methods of healing may also include scientistic strategies, although usually far less elaborate than Chopra's. It may be briefly noted that these strategies can be based on entirely different arguments than his. Thus, Reiki healing is described in the following terms on a website dedicated to this method:

> Reiki is nonpolarized subatomic energy that is released as a harmonic into energy blueprints (e.g. the body) that are in a state of disharmony. Once it leaves the subatomic world, it must polarize because it is entering the physical, manifest world where it is acted upon by time. Because it is, by nature, a harmonic, it will polarize and form a mirror image of any disharmonious frequency in that energy blueprint, thereby restoring normal harmony and well being. This, in turn, accelerates the natural healing processes of the body.[388]

Another method, Aura-Soma, is explained in its principal movement text as a means of using the healing energies of colors, plants and crystals to affect, *inter alia*, the electromagnetic field surrounding the human body.[389] Exponents of crystal healing will readily refer to the piezoelectric effect of certain minerals.[390] A central text on Bach flower therapy explains that flower essences heal negative states of the mind because they have "the same harmonious energy frequency as the human soul quality concerned",[391] while movement texts describing other methods will, in turn, contain still other scientistic passages. Without going into any further details, this should suffice to show that there are many ways in which New Age spokespersons understand the laws of supernature.

Miracles remain contested, as do purported explanations of miracles. Science is invoked by believers as well as by skeptics. As we

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[387] Chopra *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, p. 16.
[388] Text quoted from web site www.parama.com/science.htm.
[389] Dalichow & Booth *Aura-Soma*, pp. 30 f.
[390] Horan *Empowerment Through Reiki*, p. 84.
[391] Scheffer *Bach Flower Therapy*, p. 17.

have seen, miracle narratives are defended in the name of a spiritualized science. However, one of the two main strategies used to debunk miracle narratives is to adduce "scientific", i.e. naturalistic, explanations.[392] All of the main topics for which scientistic rationales are invoked—healing, divination, ESP, and so forth—are attacked by skeptics who use arguments taken from a more conventional version of science.

To spokespersons of the Esoteric Tradition, the rhetorical ethos of science remains important. The competing scientistic explanations of Chopra, Shakti Gawain or Dalichow and Booth bear no obvious resemblance to each other. There is no consensus within the New Age as to the exact mechanisms that govern miraculous events. The only recurrent trait is the brute fact of scientism itself: the willingness to assume that miracles are created within the boundaries of the regular laws of nature, but that these laws differ significantly from those recognized by conventional scientists.

Modern Miracles

Miracle narratives have survived remarkably well, despite two centuries of onslaught from skeptics. Judging from the sales figures of books by authors such as Deepak Chopra, Wayne Dyer, Louise Hay and Shakti Gawain, narratives of everyday miracles appear to appeal to a wide readership. The popularity of the theme seems firstly to lie in the fact that miracle narratives represent what sociologists of religion William Bainbridge and Rodney Stark call *compensators*.[393] By their definition, these are beliefs that promise rewards to be obtained in the distant future, or in a context that cannot be easily verified. Many miracle narratives of the Esoteric Tradition describe rewards to compensate for very specific needs.

Secondly, their appeal also lies in the fact that they present these compensators in terms that are consonant with the dynamics of modernization and secularization. Everyday miracles require no divine

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[392] The other fundamental strategy is to deny that the contested event has occurred, e.g. by questioning the reliability of the witnesses.

[393] Stark & Bainbridge 1985: 7. It should perhaps be noted that I use their term *compensator* while rejecting a central proposition that Stark and Bainbridge attach to this term, namely that credible compensators can only be created by postulating the existence of an active supernatural domain. In the world of quantum miracles, this only holds true if "supernatural" is defined so widely as to include what I have called the laws of supernature.

intervention, no pilgrimages, no contact with charismatic individuals, no belief in exotic doctrines. They are presented as regularities of (super)nature that can be utilized by each and every one of us. Indeed, it is our birthright to experience miracles. Quite a few New Age books serve as collections of specific rituals that the reader is encouraged to perform in order to start the cosmic miracle generator.

Thirdly, miracle narratives often seem to represent a sacralization of those values that each particular society finds particularly important. Some modern miracle narratives single out values that would seem central to any society, particularly health and the avoidance of suffering and death. But as we have seen from the example of Shakti Gawain, miracle narratives also sacralize values that are more specific to a given cultural context. In hunting and gathering societies, hunting activities in particular were ritualized. Prey was seen as the bearer of suprahuman qualities. In agrarian societies, the growth cycles of the staple crops are typically sacralized. Modern, urbanized westerners rarely hunt for food, nor are they directly dependent on the crop cycle for their survival. Their economy is based on the access to cash and goods. Modern miracle narratives quite frequently describe how material success is to be realized.[394] In his book *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, Chopra explains that these seven laws, besides resulting in good health, energy, enthusiasm for life, fulfilling relationships, creative freedom, emotional and psychological stability, a sense of well-being and peace of mind, also allow one to "create unlimited wealth with effortless ease and to experience success in every endeavor".[395] What conclusions can one draw as to the spiritual state of all those untold millions who fail to manifest prosperity in their lives? Do they break the laws of supernature? Chopra remains strangely silent on the reasons for the abject poverty that afflicts so many of his fellow Indians.

Final Remarks: Re-enchanting Science

It has been argued that the birth of post-Enlightenment esotericism is an unintended outcome of the Enlightenment project.[396] Structurally,

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[394] This "prosperity consciousness" component of the New Age is a main focus of Heelas 1996.

[395] Chopra 1996: 1 f.

[396] Godwin 1994.

it rests on the very pillars of secularization that it overtly rejects: anti-Christian rhetoric, confidence in science, the unproblematic adoption of experience as a litmus test of true faith. The mirror image of modernity is the nostalgic discourse of traditionalism. Among the aspects of nostalgia relevant in the present context are the various literary, popular and social-scientific accounts of the feeling of being homeless and rootless in society, of history as a story of gradual decline, of the loss of wholeness. The growth of nostalgia in this particular sense has been especially linked with trends in philosophy and in the social sciences in Germany, e.g. Tönnies dichotomy between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, or Spengler's contention that the West was nearing the end of its historical bloom.[397] Here, the concept will be approached via the Weberian concept of rationalization.

Weber's studies in the sociology of religion are permeated with the evolutionist approach to history characteristic of his time. The final step leading to modern society was identified as the rationalization of society. In Weber's sense of the word, purpose rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) is an instrumental principle leading to a thoroughly formalized bureaucracy, judiciary system and economy. This instrumental rationality cannot be used to evaluate the meaningfulness of an institution or activity in human terms (*Wertrationalität*), but only in terms of effectiveness in achieving a given goal. Weber's model of social progress closely parallels that of scientific progress as seen by those positivists who were his contemporaries.

The religious worldview set up divinely ordained goals, and the means were adapted to these goals. In modern society only the means remain, and these operate through a logic of their own. From a belief in a divine order, Western society comes to believe only in an order. From giving religious legitimacy to the political system, society becomes based on a bureaucratic state apparatus based on purpose rationality. Some of the trappings of religion remain, but belief in a transcendent ground of being erodes. Rationality in this sense of the word spreads to all sectors of society. A rational production requires far-reaching specialization. A rational societal administration requires an ever greater bureaucracy. A rational judicial system requires a detailed set of rules, more or less divorced from questions concerning what is morally right.

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[397] For a brief review of the history of such descriptions of nostalgia, see Robertson 1992: 146 ff.

The replacement of religious values by a secular order can be judged as anything from liberating to deeply regrettable. Weber's attitude was one of deep pessimism. Religion acted as an integrating factor. Modern society has no such centripetal force. Religious narratives are superseded by scientific narratives. But this change comes at a cost: although science is clearly superior in its ability to answer questions of when and how a given event takes place, it is not concerned with answering why this event occurs rather than another. If there is no answer to that question, everything loses its meaning. In Weber's famous phrase, the world has become disenchanted. In particular, science has lost its luster, and has become yet another element in a rationalized world: "the intellectual constructions of science constitute an unreal realm of bloodless abstractions".[398] "Science is meaningless, since it does not answer the only question that is important to us: 'What shall we do, and how should we live?' It is an absolutely indisputable fact that science cannot answer this question."[399]

There are several conceivable strategies available to re-enchant the world. If science is the culprit, a different, spiritualized view of science could be constructed. Another solution might be to embrace the nostalgia inherent in Weber's conception of modernity. If premodern peoples lived in a world where enchantment still reigned, if their societies were suffused with the divine, we might be able to recover an answer to our question "why" by searching primal cultures for the answers to our malaise. This nostalgic or archaicizing strategy formed the subject matter of chapter 4. The Esoteric Tradition attempts to do both, and is thus simultaneously primitivistic and scientistic.

Each Esoteric position echoes, in its own way, the critiques and standpoints of the Tradition as a whole. Yet each bases the precise details of its scientism, its critique and its picture of a spiritualized or "re-enchanted" science on a form of parasitism on the mainstream science of its own age. Blavatsky devotes several pages to discussing the relation between the physical aether and the Esoteric aether or akasha, claiming that the scientific concept was a disfigured reflex of the ancient concept.[400] Two decades later, the theory of the all-pervasive aether had been ousted from physics, and with it any

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[398] Weber 1991: 140 f.
[399] Weber, quoting Tolstoi, in Weber 1991: 143.
[400] SD I:485 ff.

rhetorical legitimacy theosophy could derive from it. Soon, Esoteric spokespersons shifted their attention to new and more promising scientific theories. The common points of such scientistic reformulations are hardly the substantive details, since these often have a lifespan of just a few decades, or even a few years. Rather, there are underlying similarities between the use of science among spokespersons from Blavatsky to the most recent New Age writers. Once these underlying similarities are distilled from the sources, one can detect their fundamental similarity to yet another form of re-enchanted science, namely that of Romanticism.

Romanticism is an ideal type; some leading historians have insisted on the plurality of Romanticisms.[401] Early Romanticism differs from late Romanticism, German and French Romantics did not share the same agenda, and individual writers differed from each other in important respects. This variety of positions can also be found in Romantic science, e.g. in the differences in attitude to "occult" or religious phenomena, or in the varying proportion of philosophical speculation and empirical support in the work of various Romantic scientists. It is therefore hardly surprising that major works on Romanticism and Romantic science provide no checklists of the core features of science during the Romantic age.[402] The following discussion should therefore also be seen as constructing an ideal type. The common characteristics of Esoteric science and their similarities with Romantic science can be summed up here in the following eight points:

1) All Esoteric positions surveyed here reject the materialism of mainstream science. For New Age spokespersons from Capra to Shakti Gawain, materialism is invalid since matter *per se* is only an aspect of an underlying *prima materia*, and in this sense does not exist. Instead of the dominant materialism, many affirm an idealism.[403] For New

[401] This is not the place to pursue in any detail the question of the existence and characteristics of Romanticism, or Romanticisms in the plural. In his early works, Arthur Lovejoy was a prominent representative of an extreme nominalist view, cf. Lovejoy 1948 (an early work, since this is a reprint of an article originally published in 1924). The fact that there are numerous kinds of Romanticism need, however, not preclude the existence of similarities. The later Lovejoy, as well as other prominent scholars studying the Romantic period, have concurred in finding such recurrent ideas. See in particular Abrams 1971, especially pp. 169 ff., for a review of the issue. A useful summary is also found in Hanegraaff 1998a.

[402] Cunningham & Jardine 1990, Poggi & Bossi 1994.

[403] The monistic idealism of Blavatsky was mentioned above. A similar view is

Age writers such as Capra, everything in the world is made of energy, including ourselves and our thoughts. Other texts, e.g. those based on *A Course in Miracles*, go to the extreme of denying the very existence of the material world. Many other writers, while not explicitly formulating cosmological doctrines, nevertheless base their belief systems and their rituals on forces and correspondences that are non-material. To the extent that there are material objects in the world, they obey laws that in themselves belong to a non-material dimension. Such non-material forces govern the correlation between celestial objects or cards of the tarot deck and events in a person's life; affirmations and success; healing energies and recovery from illness.

Romantic science similarly contains an element of idealism: positing vital forces, a spiritual element to nature. The worldview of Romanticism has been called natural supernaturalism.[404] Whereas the Enlightenment project attempts to rationalize the supernatural, Romanticism does the opposite. In the natural world, one can find the signs that point to something higher. The life force is, in a sense, the immanent divinity.

2) Spokespersons for a spiritualized science affirm its holistic nature. The separation between ourselves and the material world, and the belief that the world consists of separate objects, are illusory. Systems of complementary medicine that build on New Age presuppositions such as the existence of invisible energies also describe themselves as holistic.

Romantic science is equally characterized by its antireductionism, the idea of unity (a) between all sciences: holism rather than specialization, (b) in nature itself: the discovery of the ur-type behind the varieties and in the conception of the cosmos as a vast and organic whole, and (c) between the human being and the world around us. In several ways, Romantic science is an anti-Cartesian view of the world, at least in the sense that it positions itself against the standard picture of Descartes as the philosopher of dichotomies between body and soul, between subject and object.

3) Esoteric writers construct a holistic science largely through analogical thinking. Within the New Age context, this means finding analogies between e.g. quantum physics and other sciences, society,

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held by Alice Bailey: "there is but one substance, present in nature in varying degrees of density and of vibratory activity" (Bailey *Esoteric Psychology*, vol I, p. xxiii). New Age writers can also affirm that matter is "really" energy.

[404] Abrams 1971.

even corporate culture. Analogies are found or constructed between various religious traditions, from Buddhism to shamanism, and the latest advances of the natural sciences.

Similarly, analogy was a potent tool in the hand of Romantic *Naturphilosophen*, a tool that was at times consciously wielded. Novalis made an almost programmatic statement in *Christenheit oder Europa*: "lernt den Zauberstab der Analogie zu gebrauchen". Writers and Romantic scientists, from physicist Johann Wilhelm Ritter to writer Johann Joseph von Görres, would follow suit by attempting to formulate vast analogies between man as microcosm and nature as macrocosm.

4) Spiritualized science rests on a broader base of human faculties than mere rationality. Intuition, imagination and emotion are all part of the tools of the spiritualized scientist, or at least closely allied to his project. Thus, Esoteric spokespersons similarly posit science, as a set of doctrines arrived at by means of discursive reason, to be a subset of the vaster knowledge of the cosmos that various higher faculties are able to reach. Even Capra, who explicitly limits himself to the domain reachable by scientific methods, claims that mystics are able to apprehend in an intuitive glimpse what scientists laboriously reach through empirical investigation. For most Esoteric writers, experience in one form or another is able to see further, and is more important, than scientific verification. This is a subject to which we will return in the following chapter.

Similarly, the Romantics admired their own version of anti-mechanistic science. They believed that the human being possesses faculties that go beyond the confines of rationality—faculties assigned a variety of labels such as intuition and imagination. Romantic scientists could still conceive of science as fundamentally allied with art, poetry and myth. Historian Paul Johnson dates the bifurcation into two cultures to around 1830.[405] Esoteric scientism, a later phenomenon, rejects this split and attempts to return to a prelapsarian state.

5) Spiritualized science is not the value-free method of inquiry that mainstream science is often construed to be, but an enterprise imbued with ethical norms. Fritjof Capra, Marilyn Ferguson, Gary Zukav, and other early New Age authors predicted that the 1980s would be a revolutionary time "because the whole structure of our

[405] Johnson 1991.

society does not correspond with the worldview of emerging scientific thought."[406] They blamed classical physics for a variety of social ills and saw the new physics, especially quantum mechanics, as a tool for personal and global transformation. Similarly, in her book *The Quantum Self*, Danah Zohar asserts that "Cartesian philosophy wrenched human beings from their familiar social and religious context and thrust us headlong into . . . our I-centered culture, a culture dominated by egocentricity."[407] The new holistic physics was supposed to teach people to be less selfish, to recognize that they are part of a greater whole, and to work cooperatively for the benefit of everyone.

There is also an ethical side to Romantic science. If there is a divine purpose unfolding in nature, knowledge of nature cannot be morally neutral. Our purpose is to further life-affirming modes of research. Perhaps even our attitude toward the matter to be studied should be one of reverence or admiration rather than objectivity.

6) Esoteric spokespersons wish to integrate a larger set of phenomena into its "spiritualized science" than the mainstream scientific community accepts. Since thought and "matter" are one, we are able to communicate with people (telepathy), "read" or even influence objects (ESP, PK), attract material wealth (Gawain), and heal ourselves from life-threatening illness (Chopra) by tapping into the possibilities offered by quantum metaphysics. There is a large set of phenomena, forcefully rejected by the community of skeptics but espoused by at least some New Age spokespersons, and believed by the latter to be in some sense scientific. Skeptics are understood as narrow-minded. Their a priori judgments supposedly prevent them from embracing the vaster Esoteric view of the cosmos.

Romantic science, especially in Germany, also had its share of proponents of the supernatural. Mesmerism, spiritualism, visions and the paranormal were all part of a vaster conception of the world. Quite a few Romantic writers were interested in science as well as the supernatural. The better-known of these include Justinus Kerner, a medical doctor known today principally for his documentation of the visions of Friederike Hauffe, the "seeress of Prevorst"; J.H. Jung-Stilling, who was a surgeon and school teacher but gained fame through his mesmerist-mystical work *Theorie der Geisterkunde* (1808);

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[406] Ferguson *Aquarian Conspiracy*, p. 145.
[407] Zohar *Quantum Self*, p. 18.

H. Werner, doctor of philosophy and author of *Die Schutzgeister* (1839); Joseph Ennemoser, professor of medicine at the University of Bonn and interpreter of the history of religions in terms of animal magnetism; G.H. von Schubert, an able popularizer of contemporary science and an aficionado of mesmerism; and C.A. von Eschenmayer, physician and professor of philosophy in Tübingen, the creator of a highly original theory of the supernatural.[408]

7) Esoteric spokespersons build on the U-shaped time-line by affirming that the most modern forms of science merely attempt to recover the wisdom of the ancients. Romantic science is also integrated in a specific view of historical development. The same U-shaped view of history that informs the Romantic view of ancient and exotic cultures is also adopted in the understanding of the development of science. The ancients possessed a holistic understanding that modern science is groping to regain. The latest developments of science are prefigured in ancient myths. An influential writer within this latter tradition, who foreshadows much of the later discourse on science, is G.H. von Schubert (1780–1860). His *Ansichten von der Nachtseite der Naturwissenschaften* includes a historiography that would become a mainstay of the Modern Esoteric Tradition. At the dawn of history, man lived in a state of unity with nature. Here, the utopian time-line becomes bound up with the optimistic scientism of Schubert's own epoch. The ancient utopia will be revived, but in the guise of scientific progress, of which Schubert presents a summary.[409] The specific idea that the findings of contemporary science are prefigured in ancient myths is also found in Romantic histories of science. Romantic writers such as J. Christoph Salomo Schweigger published numerous works attempting to show that ancient myths were symbolic expressions of scientific truths. Thus, the Greek myth of Castor and Pollux prefigured the modern understanding of negative and positive charges in electricity.[410]

8) These characteristics are not only structurally the converse of a materialistic and non-teleological mainstream science, but are con-

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[408] All of these are mentioned in Ellenberger 1980 and Gauld 1992.

[409] von Engelhardt 1990: 55 ff. Cf. also the similarities with the basic elements of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* in Morgan 1990.

[410] For Schweigger see von Engelhardt 1990: 61. The earliest texts reviewed here are not only structurally similar to Romantic theories, but directly refer to them. Thus, Blavatsky legitimizes her own historiography by citing Schweigger as an authority, IU I: 23.

structed by Esoteric spokespersons in active opposition to, and at times in direct conflict with, dominant currents in mainstream science, which are explicitly invoked as negative Others. Spokespersons from the skeptical movement in turn actively combat what they see as pseudo-science.

Similarly, Romantic science was, to a considerable extent, an active revolt against the rationalism of the epoch that preceded it, an age considered to be narrow, poor and partial, imbued with a mechanizing and demeaning spirit. To the Romantics proper, the negative Other was mechanistic science. The Romantics could see Newton as the arch-symbol of Enlightenment narrowness, as witnessed by Goethe's attack on Newton's optics. The Romantic scientists also had their detractors. Although strictly speaking, the skeptical movement is a modern phenomenon, Romantic scientists such as Goethe were, in turn, attacked by the Newtonians. It is therefore hardly a coincidence that Rudolf Steiner, arguably the most historically and philosophically sophisticated spokesperson of the Esoteric Tradition, explicitly sided with Goethean science against the materialistic science of the majority of his contemporaries.

The differences between Romantic and Esoteric science can be seen as largely consisting in a radicalization of the Romantic conception of the world. Science is made to rhetorically support certain claims that are a priori doctrines within the Esoteric Tradition, especially in various New Age positions. To the extent that these beliefs developed after the decline of the Romantic movement, modern scientism departs from its predecessors. Among the beliefs espoused by the New Age and ultimately derivable from American harmonial religions is the idea that our observation of the world fundamentally shapes it. We create our own reality. Since we create reality, we can attract harmony, health, longevity and prosperity at will. Romantic science, on the other hand, was fundamentally empirical and believed in the existence of a world independent of our wishes.[411]

However, such differences hardly detract from the basic structural similarities. New Age science constitutes a kind of epistemological circle. A specific view of the world is clothed in scientific terminology and expressed by means of carefully selected bits and pieces of

[411] See Sepper 1990 on Goethe's fundamentally empirical approach to science.

science in what is essentially a scientistic *bricolage*. Conversely, the underlying worldview is then said to be supported by the scientistic edifice thus constructed. In an age where science carries an enormous rhetorical weight, but is devoid of fundamentally appealing qualities such as goal, meaning and purpose, it remains tempting to claim scientific status for what are essentially religious beliefs.

CHAPTER SIX

NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCE

> You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc.
>
> Pascal
> *Pensées*

Introduction

Traditions may be spurious, the scientific underpinning weak. When all is said and done, the New Age spokesperson will readily adduce a supporting claim of an entirely different order. There is no real need to believe in any particular doctrines, nor is one obliged to trust in their antiquity or their scientific basis. The ultimate litmus test is whether you can experience their veracity for yourself. Who can doubt the existence of earth energies or ley lines after having learned to identify them by means of a pendulum or dowsing rod? Who can remain skeptical as to the efficacy of healing after having been cured of a debilitating illness? Who could wish to question the skills of the astrologer after a successful chart reading?

This chapter, like the remainder of the present study, is not concerned with the beliefs of adherents to various Esoteric doctrines and practices, but with the movement texts that present and codify such beliefs. Considering the role of experience in shaping and maintaining Esoteric beliefs, it is hardly surprising that movement texts should make numerous references to experience. Esoteric movement texts include (and are at times even largely constituted by) what will be referred to here as narratives of experience, as well as descriptions of rituals that the reader is encouraged to perform in order to

gain such experiences. Wouter Hanegraaff, however, has pointed out a fundamental paradox in the New Age literature: a form of religion that emphasizes the primacy of personal experience is nevertheless largely based on the revelations accorded to a small number of religious virtuosi.[1] An analysis of narratives of experience also contributes to resolving this apparent contradiction.

As with the two discursive practices previously surveyed, this chapter attempts, among other things, to place such narratives within the setting of modernity. References to the wisdom of the Orient only make sense in an age willing to seek its truths outside its own cultural setting. The use of the terminology of quantum physics as a source of legend elements is even more obviously the product of a modern age. As we turn to the third discursive strategy, the question naturally arises: how can something so seemingly perennial as religious experience be related to fundamental characteristics of modernity? The first section of the present chapter briefly addresses this issue, and rests heavily on existing scholarship. The remainder of the chapter forays into more novel territory: the use of narratives of experience within the Esoteric positions surveyed in this study. Experience is a multifaceted phenomenon; a perusal of the Esoteric sources analyzed here reveals a vast variety of narratives of spiritual experience. As with the chapters on tradition and scientism, the purpose of the present chapter is not to build up an exhaustive catalogue of such narratives. Its principal aims are to discuss some prominent forms of narrative as a discursive strategy from a theoretical perspective to be developed below, and to follow the course of such narratives from the centralized context of theosophy up to the highly fragmented religious ecology of the New Age.

Esoteric movement texts display a wealth of narratives of experience. A rough and ready classification is based on the purported experiencer.[2] The second section of this chapter deals with the arguably simplest form of narrative of experience: one in which experiences of third persons are related. Among such narratives are stories about people who have been helped by healers or have had their character and fate analyzed by means of an astrological chart reading.

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[1] Hanegraaff 1996: 27.

[2] The classification is rough and ready in the sense that it has no profound depth of intention. Narratives of receiving privileged information can of course be told in the third rather than the first person, as any hagiography will show. Narratives that cue everyday experience can literally be first-person narratives. The terminology, adopted for ease of reference, simply reflects statistical trends in the source texts.

The third section deals with narratives of revelatory experiences of the religious virtuosi of the Esoteric Tradition. How are these forms of privileged experience presented to the reader? Such narratives are often written in the first person, attempting to convince the reader that the spokesperson who has written the text is the genuine recipient of spiritual truths. Such claims raise a number of concomitant questions: how do the narratives of experience portray the source and the recipient of such privileged insights, i.e. how do they attempt to confer validity to the message and expert status on the experiencer?

A fourth section of this chapter deals with one of the more dramatic claims of certain positions within the Esoteric Tradition. Many religious traditions contain the premise that a privileged few can access ordinarily hidden knowledge through mystical visions, prophetic revelation or other extraordinary means. The positions surveyed in that section, however, are unusual in that they claim that nearly everybody can rise to such an exalted position by following certain instrumental rules. Narratives of this kind are often phrased in the second person, since they give the reader the instructions necessary to partake of spiritual insights.

As with the chapters on tradition and scientism, the present study of narratives of experience ends with a case study. By surveying a central text for many New Age adherents, *A Course In Miracles*, we will see the role of all three kinds of narratives in an ongoing process of canonization.

The Problematic Nature of Personal Experience

To many people, it will appear self-evident that a historical claim may be either reasonably correct or largely spurious. To most, it will hardly seem an extraordinary claim that appeals to science may or may not be evaluated as factually correct. That experience can be deconstructed as a strategy may seem a counter-intuitive claim to some readers. Personal experience might appear a solid foundation on which to place one's trust. Indeed, various religious traditions, whether esoteric or not, give experience a basic role. Even sophisticated philosophers of religion with an apologetic bent are at times apt to present such claims.[3]

[3] The concept of religious experience has been used to attack the dominant position of evidentialist epistemology: are there other reasons than, say, publicly available

The present section, which is heavily indebted to established scholarship, aims to introduce the reader to the reasons for the position chosen here: that religious experience can favorably be regarded as an analyzable construction rather than as a basic fact of human life. The purpose here is to very briefly review two topics. Firstly, this section will argue that the status of religious experience is contingent on historical context. Secondly, it will consider various post-Enlightenment rationalist critiques of the belief that experience can serve as a more or less transparent representation of an underlying reality. Having established the usefulness of a view of narratives of experience that departs radically from the self-understanding of the believer, a broad model for analyzing such narratives will be introduced.

On the History of Religious Experience

Religious experience comes in many forms. Some experiences are perceived as happening in the exterior world. Strange and meaningful coincidences, answered prayers, miraculous healings and meetings with spiritual beings belong to the repertoire of several religious traditions. In modern times, even such exotic experiences as being contacted and abducted by aliens have been explained by some people in terms one might readily be tempted to call religious.[4] Other experiences take place within the experiencer: visions and mystical experiences are examples that spring to mind. There can hardly be any reasonable doubt that similar experiences, of the kind that a modern observer would label religious, have existed as far back in time and as far away geographically as our sources permit us to see.[5]

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evidence and argumentation based on such evidence, to support theistic belief? Especially one such non-evidentialist position, Reformed epistemology, has been the topic of considerable interest among apologists for a theistic faith. The precise details of Reformed epistemology are not crucial to the present purpose, but the gist of the argument is that religious experiences are said to "ground" religious faith and are therefore sufficient reason to make theistic faith warranted. Reformed epistemology is primarily associated with Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. See Wolterstorff 1976, Plantinga & Wolterstorff 1983 and the subsequently revised position in Plantinga 1993. See also Alston 1991 and Mavrodes 1988. See Martin 1990: 266 ff. for a critique.

[4] Thus, some experiences of contact with aliens elaborate on the spiritual messages allegedly received from them. The story of George Adamski is an early example of this legend motif, cf. Adamski & Leslie 1953.

[5] In accordance with the constructivist perspective outlined below, it is my contention that there are no religious experiences *per se*, only experiences that are interpreted as religious. However, to avoid employing an overly cumbersome phrase-

People have reported visions, feelings of terror or trust towards the superhuman, prophetic calling and many other sentiments that may readily be seen as religious. However, the understanding and appraisal of religious experiences has been markedly different in pre-modern and modern contexts.

As Wayne Proudfoot notes in his analysis of religious experience, contemporary "common sense" interpretations of the labels *religious* and *experience* are in themselves the products of the last two centuries.[6] In societies where religion permeates most aspects of everyday life, no demarcated sector of human life will be singled out as specifically religious. Furthermore, a spectacular religious experience such as a vision will be understood differently in a traditional society than in a modern, nineteenth or twentieth century setting. In a traditional context, there will frequently be a given set of culturally defined interpretations of what has happened, typically that a spiritual being of some description has appeared before the visionary. In a modern context, naturalistic and non-naturalistic interpretations will compete. Finally, religious experience will fill a variety of distinct social roles in different ideological settings. As long as established religion is supported by a hierarchically structured organization, the personal experience of an individual in a subordinate position within this hierarchy may well present a threat to the hermeneutic hegemony of those at the top.[7]

Religious experience has been perceived as problematic on this account. In an older, epistemologically realist view of religion, the visions of charismatic individuals and prominent mystics may potentially play a disturbing role. Authority, in the view of Bruce Lincoln, is a form of power intermediate between the milder persuasion and the stronger coercion.[8] Authority has to do with defining, redefining and defending the limits of acceptable speech: who has the right to voice opinions on e.g. religious matters. By expressing one's religious experiences, one risks encroaching on the authority of others.

The ambivalent role of mysticism makes this ideological point particularly clear. To take just one specific example, the visions of

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ology, the term "religious experience" will be used as a shorthand for the more precise formulation.

[6] Proudfoot 1985: xii.

[7] Cf. Jantzen 1995, especially chapter 7.

[8] Lincoln 1994: 3 ff.

Hildegard of Bingen were set out in texts that were received differently depending on how well they conformed to ecclesiastical expectations. She was famous during her lifetime, assumed a public role that was most unusual for a medieval woman, and was revered as a saint after her death in 1179.[9] Sections of her work are devoted to topics that put these facts into context. Hildegard wrote during a time of controversy, when various unorthodox movements, including the Cathars, had shaken the Church. In these struggles, Hildegard placed herself on the conservative side in her early texts. She denounced disobedience and rebellion against the Mother Church, exhorted her readers to intellectual humility by claiming that one should not investigate the secrets of God, and presented the struggle between Church and heretics in apocalyptic terms. Nevertheless, on occasion she could also voice opinions, especially on legal matters, that were less palatable to the ecclesiastical powers. On such occasions, she was simply ignored.[10] Clearly, narratives of experience only held authority when they conformed to pre-established doctrines.[11]

The Enlightenment and its Detractors

No single thinker has been as influential in undermining pre-Enlightenment realism in respect of religious experience as Immanuel Kant. Kant was brought up in a pietistic milieu and must have been well aware of the primacy (and status) of personal spiritual experience in these circles. However, Kant's skeptical attitude to any claims to knowledge of the transcendent are fundamental to his post-1770 critical philosophy.[12] Since all knowledge available to us is inevitably structured by our categories of thought, cognition of a suprahuman realm is precluded. For Kant, religion thus ceases to be a set of doctrines based on the theoretical cognition of such a suprahuman realm

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[9] Weeks 1993: 43 ff.

[10] Weeks 1993: 56.

[11] The history of mysticism has generally been written from a near-apologetic point of view; the sociology of mysticism and the topic of the situation of mystics in terms of the social and political struggles of their times have been considerably less developed. The cursory remarks presented here reflect studies such as Jantzen 1995.

[12] In accounts of Kant's life and work, the shift in philosophical thought is generally placed in 1770, when Kant delivered his inaugural lecture at the University of Königsberg, *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World*, in which he suggested for the first time that space and time should be regarded as categories by which we interpret experience, rather than as "real" and independent attributes of the world. See Kant 1992.

and of a God, and becomes a moral creed. In an argument that is as much theological as philosophical, Kant argues that we are too flawed to be able to adhere to a moral code without the belief in a God.[13] Thus, "God" in the Kantian system comes to function primarily as a regulative idea. As Allen Wood puts it in his survey of Kant's concept of religion, "I can have religion in this sense even if I am an agnostic, so long as my awareness of duty is enlivened with the thought that if there is a God, then my duties are God's commands".[14] A religion that could be embraced by agnostics was certainly an innovation compared to the more "classical" modes of naive realism.

Faced with the decreasing ethos of the Christian scriptural tradition, religious writers of the post-Enlightenment age began, despite the Kantian stricture, to revive experience as a source of legitimacy. A fundamental contribution to this revalorization was Friedrich Schleiermacher's rejection of two common contemporary interpretations of the "essence" of religion. It is, he explained in a famous passage, neither doctrine nor ethics.[15] The core of religion is consciousness of the deity, gained through immediate feeling. The initial impetus to appeal to individual experience seems to have been made in response to the Kantian stricture. Schleiermacher, however, attempted to show that there could indeed be a valid experience of the transcendent, glimpsed in a moment of unmediated intuition. His concept of feeling was not quite the unbridled subjectivity of the subsequent Romantic generation. Nevertheless, Schleiermacher's work gave considerable impetus to a modern argument in defense of religion, in which "true" religion is to be found in the inner life of man, rather than in any intersubjective expressions of faith. Antidogmatism and antiritualism were no obstacles to true faith but, on the contrary, signs of a higher spirituality.

Schleiermacher introduced a way of regarding religion that has been immensely successful up to our own time. The Romantic conception of religion as a form of human experience that is entirely

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[13] Kant 1998.

[14] Wood 1992: 406.

[15] The second speech of Schleiermacher's *Ueber die Religion* is devoted to this issue. Schleiermacher was, of course, not the first to invoke the argument that experience was central to religion. Radical pietists as well as pre-Romantic thinkers such as Hamann could be mentioned as important precursors. Arguably, however, Schleiermacher was the one to bring arguments from experience into the mainstream of Protestant theology.

sui generis, and which is based not on doctrines, ecclesiastical affiliation, moral codes or ritualism but on intuition and experience, has become widely adopted among present-day believers of many persuasions. This emphasis on inner spirituality has become part of a common sense impression of the nature of "religion"; the culturally constructed roots of this understanding have arguably receded from view. Although this is certainly not the place to assess the religiosity of the Romantic age, it is a commonplace in the history of ideas that Romantic writers reevaluated religion, especially in the form of religious feeling, intuition and mysticism. The Romantic view of religious experience appears to seriously underestimate the importance of the Kantian critical philosophy. It is as if feeling and intuition were able to peek beyond the edges of the limitations set up by Kant. Thus, many of the greatest German Romantic authors and philosophers—Tieck, Schlegel, Schelling, Novalis and others—were deeply influenced by mysticism, especially the seventeenth century visionary Jakob Böhme, who was "rediscovered" shortly before 1800.[16]

Faced with the dearth of evidential arguments for theistic belief, modern philosophers of religion resort to new versions of the argument from experience. Major figures in the history of Western mainstream religion thus collude to present experience as a *via regia* to understanding underlying reality—yet, within the last few decades, the epistemological validity of personal spiritual experience has come to be successfully deconstructed. Although the present study is devoted to a specific form of religiosity, the role of arguments from experience within the Esoteric Tradition is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a larger cultural trend. The remainder of the present section will furnish the reader with a brief historical background to the ensuing discussion of experience within the Esoteric Tradition.

The Authority of Experience in the Modern Esoteric Tradition

Hierarchically organized movements within the Esoteric Tradition were largely centered around the authoritative voice of the highest ranking spokespersons. Accepting the validity of the personal expe-

[16] Böhme was never really forgotten. A line of transmission connects him with the Romantics via Christian theosophists such as Friedrich Christoph Oetinger and Franz von Baader; see Deghaye 1993. However, Ludwig Tieck's interest in Böhme and Tieck's influence on his circle of Romantic friends arguably makes it appropriate to speak of a Böhme revival. See Brown 1977; Brown 1979: 133 ff.; Walsh 1983; Benz 1983.

rience of individual members could potentially have undermined the hierarchy through which knowledge was transmitted. Experience in theosophy, anthroposophy or the Church Universal and Triumphant is therefore basically privileged experience, an access to higher wisdom possessed by the select few. Only within the latest generation of Esoteric thought has personal experience risen to the fore as a major discursive strategy—perhaps *the* major discursive strategy.

The Esoteric Tradition can hardly be said to be supported by profound philosophical arguments. It is certainly not my contention that the proponents of theosophy or the New Age were influenced by the Kantian analysis of experience or by Schleiermacher's appeal to the feeling of absolute dependence. Nevertheless, it is possible to regard the revalorization of experience in this, generally speaking, philosophically unsophisticated tradition as a sign of the general cultural climate of late modernity.

If, as is argued here, experience is only accessible through interpretation, a crucial question lies in how interpretation is constructed. Any claim that an experience "should" be interpreted in one specific way is imbued with rhetoric and power over discourse. The Esoteric Tradition bears witness to the gradual democratization of religiosity. In general terms, early modern spokespersons, particularly the leaders of the Theosophical Society, had more overt control over interpretation than later exponents. The movement texts of three specific, subsequent positions within the Esoteric Tradition manifest different attitudes to the role, and interpretation, of experience.

Theosophy as expounded in several authoritative movement texts pays little overt attention to religious experience. The central myths of theosophy were revealed to Helena Blavatsky and a select few of her closest associates. Blavatsky staged a number of central experiences in the lives of other leading theosophists to buttress her position as sole ideologist of the movement. To the extent that belief in theosophical doctrines rests on experience, it rests on those legends that portray Blavatsky as the only legitimate recipient of religious insights. Narratives of experience that circulate in theosophical literature typically concern either the experiences of the spokespersons themselves, or of those experiences certain theosophists had of the miraculous powers of Helena Blavatsky. The movement texts offer few if any indications as to how the individual theosophist could arrive at the same conclusions as the spokespersons themselves.

Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy presents a new picture of the

role of authority. The cosmological myths of anthroposophy are in no way less complex or detailed than those of theosophy. Since the central movement texts of anthroposophy are the writings of Rudolf Steiner, his views are authoritative. Nevertheless, both Steiner himself and his exegetes have emphasized that it is entirely feasible for others to reach the same results and verify his statements. As will be explored in greater detail in a later section, anthroposophical literature presents detailed methods of obtaining the requisite spiritual experience. However, there are, in fact, two counteracting strategies at work. Firstly, no follower of Steiner has been deemed by the various local anthroposophical societies to have attained the same mastery of the methods of spiritual exploration. Secondly, specific elements in the path towards a knowledge of the "higher worlds" are expressly aimed at making experience conform to dogma.

Finally, New Age texts can present experience as a democratic road to spiritual insight. Quotes from New Age movement texts amply attest to the role ascribed to individual experience and the overt disavowal of the authoritative voices of those who would preach *ex cathedra* how experience "should" be interpreted. The democratic ideal implies that even information channeled from the loftiest intergalactic source should only be accepted if it rings true to the individual who receives the information. The democratization of religious experience within the Esoteric Tradition has gone hand in hand with the psychologization of religion. Not only is truth to be found within each of us: the very locus of spirituality is our own Self.

Privileged experience remains an important element of New Age beliefs, especially in the guise of channeling. However, the New Age gives the personal experiences of each and every adept, as well as individual testimonies, a status they do not have in other contexts. In the modern age, authority has, in a sense, become more problematic. In order to be a successful supplier of religious doctrines and practices on a competitive spiritual market, one must somehow convey the message that one's competitors' claims are less valid than one's own. At the same time, New Age spokespersons overtly espouse a democratic and individualistic ideal, encouraging individual seekers to trust their own experiences more than the doctrines of the movement texts. Personal religious experience has become an asset as well as a problem.

A Brief History of Esoteric Revelation

The legitimacy of religious messages, especially revelations, often rests on the claim that the prophet has direct contact with a transcendent source of wisdom. This creates something of a paradox for the Esoteric spokesperson. Whereas the use of tradition as a discursive strategy highlights similarities at the expense of differences, revelation highlights the unique qualities of the revealed message at the expense of historical links. To a non-believer, the Book of Mormon is clearly reminiscent of the Bible, to the extent of being seen as a pastiche. Mormon apologists have been intensely preoccupied with showing that this similarity is not due to Joseph Smith's familiarity with Scriptural formulae, but to the roots of the Book of Mormon in Near Eastern literary traditions. In a similar vein, post-theosophical prophets find it necessary to point out that their messages have been arrived at, not by reading the texts of their predecessors, but through an independent revelation. Vicky Wall, the founder of Aura-Soma therapy, rests her case heavily on staples of theosophical doctrine such as the existence of ascended Masters, Atlantis and a melioristic conception of reincarnation. Nevertheless, theosophy is not even mentioned in the index of her book *The Miracle of Colour Healing*.

Despite this denial of a recent historical lineage, revealed teachings have deep roots in the Esoteric Tradition. Of the positions discussed here, theosophy is the earliest that is based on information said to originate with spiritual masters. These suprahuman teachers used a variety of paranormal means to transmit their messages to Madame Blavatsky as well as to Alfred Sinnett. Prophets up to the present time rely on older revealed texts within this lineage: anthroposophy incorporates theosophical beliefs, as does the American lineage briefly mentioned in chapter 3. New Age revelations recycle and combine doctrines from New Thought, fragments of theosophically inspired beliefs, the revelations imparted to Jane Roberts in the 1970s and assorted contemporary legends. A characteristic example is Edgar Cayce. Since Cayce was simultaneously committed to a conservative Christian creed and involved with post-theosophical teachings, he gave readings in which the Bible, Jesus and the mystery of the trinity uneasily coexisted with themes such as astrology, reincarnation and karma, telepathy, the occult powers of gems and stones, astral travel, Atlantis, the hidden history of Egypt, electromagnetic healing, future earth changes and many other topics.

Channeling *per se* is often dated from the early 1950s, when UFO enthusiasts began to deliver messages from extraterrestrial beings.[17] These messages, however, remained a marginal interest of the UFO "contactee" subculture. The breakthrough of revelation as a mode of knowledge in the New Age came with two classic early cases: Findhorn and the Seth material.

Findhorn was established by three adherents of alternative religiosity, Peter and Eileen Caddy and Dorothy Maclean. Messages received from local elementals or devas during meditation directed the everyday life of the membership of the Findhorn community. The Findhorn community was a major source of inspiration to seekers of the late 1960s and 1970s, and received thousands of visitors. Books on the community, especially *The Findhorn Garden*, elevated it to near-mythical status.[18] The channeled messages received by the founders, however, never became the basis of any major movement text distributed through the New Age network. The most important channeled text to come from the community was written by David Spangler in 1976.[19]

By then, a major manifesto for New Age thought had already been recorded by a housewife from Elmira, New York. The breakthrough for channeled messages as movement texts came with the books of Jane Roberts. For the growing New Age network, this was the first time that channeled messages were widely read and accepted. From 1970 until her death in 1984, Roberts produced nearly one Seth book per year. Since the days of Jane Roberts, interest in channeling has exploded. Today there are probably several thousand channels, conveying messages from a bewildering array of sources. Many have only a local audience, and conduct sessions for groups of interested listeners. A smaller number of channelers have published books and have become more or less short-lived celebrities. A small minority have reached a wide audience and succeeded in giving their messages a visible and permanent presence in the cultic milieu.

Channeled messages are an interesting phenomenon in the history of religions. They can present entire cosmologies, ethical messages and precepts for living that underline the fundamentally religious

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[17] Melton 1995a.

[18] Findhorn Community *Findhorn Garden*. The published material on the Findhorn Community in turn rests on earlier, self-published tracts such as the undated *The Findhorn Garden: An Experiment in the Co-operation Between Three Kingdoms*, probably written around 1968.

[19] Spangler *Revelation*.

nature of New Age doctrines. At the same time, many New Age revelations are good examples of the influence of modernization and globalization on the religious ecology.

Summary

Pre-Enlightenment views of religious experience were certainly complex and multi-faceted. Nevertheless, the history of heresiology points to two privileged hermeneutic strategies that gradually eroded with the Reformation and rise of the early modern age.[20] The first was that of ideological centralism, the recurrent attempts to define an ultimate authority that could decide which experiences were politically and ideologically desirable and which were not. The second is that of epistemological realism. A recurrent argument against "undesirable" experiences was the contention that they were diabolically inspired. It could be accepted that such experiences had a suprahuman source, albeit one that was depicted in utterly negative terms.

With the rise of the modern era, both claims were radically undermined. Firstly, Enlightenment philosophers began to attack religious experience on new grounds: rather than being judged for theological reasons as either divinely inspired or diabolical, religious experiences began to be deconstructed in naturalistic terms as delusional or based on a faulty understanding of how the world works. Secondly, the hegemony of the centralized authority continued to crumble. Religious groups and individuals were increasingly able to define their own criteria for what should count as desirable experiences. Thus, in a seeming paradox, spiritual experience has been increasingly valued within many religious traditions, while scholarly studies of the formation and interpretation of experience have become steadily more sophisticated at dismantling the epistemological status of religious experience. It is to such constructivist theories that we shall now turn.

Toward a Constructivist Model of Religious Experience

Essentialism or Constructivism?

Philosophical arguments against the epistemological validity of religious experience attack one of the foundations of religious belief. Conflicting religious claims tend to undermine each religion's central

[20] See such standard accounts as Lambert 1992.

claim to be a vehicle for expressing ultimate reality. One attempt to remedy this increasing fragmentation is provided by the concept of a "perennial philosophy", which claims that there are mystical experiences common to all religious traditions, experiences which provide an immediate direct contact with a transcendent, absolute reality.[21] A list of perennialists would include William James, Evelyn Underhill, Mircea Eliade, Aldous Huxley, Rudolf Otto and W.T. Stace. If such experiences provide an essential common core that transcends any differences—especially doctrinal differences—among traditions, they would also, it is argued, constitute evidence that religion is truly a pointer to an ultimate reality.

Present-day perennialism in a narrow sense of the word typically concentrates on mysticism. A broader perennialism would take into account a much vaster array of religious experiences. Perhaps the best known proponent of such a broad view was Carl Jung, whose theories remain influential among a general readership. His basic attitude to religious experience throughout his writings is that experience is an absolute, an element *sui generis* in the life of a human being.[22] Indeed, for Jung, "true" religion is what he calls "immediate experience".[23] Experience itself is always true, in a pragmatic sense. Whatever becomes an integrated part of one's life is a true experience. The considerable differences between the experiences reported from various religious traditions are claimed to be mere superficialities, explainable in terms of transcultural underlying archetypes.

The perennialist position, whether considered in the narrow or broad sense, is not only an apologetic project, but has had many adherents among scholars of religion. It is perhaps still the dominant perspective outside the confines of departments of religious studies. Perennialist writers are referred to by the more sophisticated spokespersons of the Esoteric Tradition, to the exclusion of any dissenting voices. Before addressing the question of *how* to contextualize experience, it is therefore in order to briefly present the reasons *why* to contextualize.

The perennialist claim has been strongly challenged by scholars characterized as *contextualists* by one of the best-known among them, Steven T. Katz.[24] Put simply, Katz claims that every experience is

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[21] Forman 1990: 3.
[22] Jung 1977.
[23] Jung 1958, § 75; Jung 1977, § 692.
[24] Katz 1992b: 5.

inevitably structured by and expressed in the symbolism and language of the culture within which the mystic lives. There can be no such thing as a context-free "pure" mystical experience. Katz's position has, in turn, been challenged by another group of scholars characterized as *decontextualists* by their best-known exponent, Robert Forman. Forman claims that his position "swings the pendulum back toward the perennialist philosophy camp".[25] The decontextualist position is more closely allied with the religious perspective itself. It maintains that there are transcultural experiences that are interpreted differently in different cultural settings.

Forman has criticized Katz on several accounts.[26] Whatever the validity of Forman's critique, his own model is grounded in his study of a very few types of religious experience, mainly what he calls the "pure consciousness event" or PCE.[27] The inherent weakness of the decontextualist position is its difficulties in coming to grips with other, perhaps more mundane forms of experience. For the vast majority of religious experiences, perhaps all but the "pure consciousness event", the contextualist or constructivist perspective seems most adequate. The constructivist approach goes beyond the brute fact of experience, viz. that people report visions, premonitions, feelings of prophetic calling and so forth. It accounts for the specific contents of such visions, premonitions and callings in a way that Forman's position seems ill equipped to do. Katz's arguments on the cultural

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[25] Forman 1990: 39.

[26] Forman's criticism emphasizes the following points: Firstly, Katz does not defend his crucial assumption that all experience is mediated by language. Secondly, Katz implicitly assumes that any difference in religious concepts leads to a difference in mystical experience. Closely related to this is the criticism that Katz implies that there is a one-to-one relation between concept and experience. Furthermore, whereas Katz claims that the religious context causes the content of mystical experience, the opposite link of cause and effect might hold. Finally, there are recorded cases of persons whose mystical experiences are so unexpected to themselves that these experiences are not reasonably explained by Katz's contextualist paradigm. Forman's criticisms of Katz in particular, and of contextualism in general, are contained in Forman 1990: 15 ff. For Katz's reply, see Katz 1992: 5. Ironically, Forman may be quite right in assuming that there is a transcultural aspect to religious experiences, albeit in a very different sense than he probably intends. Neurobiological research conducted in the 1990s strongly suggests that common forms of visionary experience are due to heightened activity in the right temporal lobe. Such activity can be experimentally triggered by applying an electromagnetic field to this part of the brain. The emotions that correlate with this cerebral activity, whether induced or spontaneous, are instantly interpreted along culturally available lines. For a summary of this research, cf. Persinger 1999.

[27] Recently, Forman has introduced a further concept, that of a "dualistic mystical state"; see Forman 1999.

grounding of mystical experience are a fortiori applicable to other forms of religious experience.

The Basis of Constructivism

At least since the early Enlightenment, skeptically inclined writers have developed what one, paraphrasing Ricoeur, might call an epistemology of suspicion. An adequate description of religious experiences requires that one presents the narrative of the experiencer as well as his or her framework of interpretation. For the person who believes in angels, a meeting with an angelic being is nothing other than precisely a meeting with angels, a living proof of the existence of such a class of beings. An analysis of the phenomenon under an epistemology of suspicion can hardly avoid the observation that there are serious flaws in considering such an experience to be a transparent representation of underlying reality. Any experience can be subsumed under several explanations—theoretically, under an infinity of explanations. Epistemologists of suspicion have addressed several interrelated questions. Why is experience a dubious guide to understanding reality? On what grounds do spokespersons for various religious positions construct explanations? What alternative explanations could one find?

The epistemology of suspicion was based on the position that belief, in Hume's famous words, should be proportioned to the evidence.[28] What counted as evidence became a matter of dispute. Mesmerism, which indubitably produced publicly verifiable effects, was critically investigated by several scientific commissions, and was dismissed in no uncertain terms.[29] Spiritualism attracted millions with its promise of delivering evidence of life after death, but was also the focus of intense skeptical scrutiny.[30] A detailed history of organized naturalist skepticism remains to be written, and falls outside the scope of the present study. These remarks should, however, be kept in mind as a backdrop to the following discussion of the role of personal experience in the Modern Esoteric Tradition. The deconstruction of the epistemological role of experience and the development of a constructivist model for understanding such experience are the results of the rationalist project.

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[28] From *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section X:1.
[29] Cf. Walmsley 1967: 128 ff., Pattie 1994: 142 ff.
[30] For the skeptical responses to spiritualism, see Brandon 1983.

Constructivism can be seen a set of related theories rather than as a single, well-defined method of studying religious experience. There are two correlated approaches to the specific constructivist explanatory model employed here. The first focuses on the cognitive processes that lead to interpreting a given experience in a specific way. This approach would investigate how the decision to believe in any given explanation of experience is made by the experiencer, given the uncertain basis of any such belief. The second recognizes that these decisions are not only based on purely cognitive factors, but also to a great extent on social constraints. One's own beliefs are modeled on the beliefs of other people, especially those with whom one has strong affective links. For the present purposes, it is particularly important to note that these positive Others, who serve as reference groups in shaping one's interpretation of experience, can be the physically and temporally distant Others of a printed text. Acknowledging the importance both of the cognitive and the social elements (including the specifically textual) in such an analysis, the term sociocognitive model will be adopted here.[31]

Put simply, a sociocognitive model of religious experience denies the existence of religious experiences *per se*, claiming firstly that most experiences can be defined, by the experiencer as well as by others, as either non-religious or religious, and secondly that the experiencer will tend to adopt the culturally accepted definition of the experience if the person or group who proffers this definition is seen as authoritative. Religious experience thus basically has little or no epistemological value, since experience and its interpretation is crucially dependent on the worldview espoused by one's reference group.

Skeptical literature is especially concerned with this facet of the cultic milieu in general and New Age thought in particular. The scientific community would reject the experiences of e.g. dowsing, healing or divination as "anecdotal". Skeptics present in considerable detail the potential fallacies of basing far-reaching claims concerning e.g. the workings of the cosmos on personal experience. Although the agenda of the historian of religions is a different one, there is good reason to draw lessons from this perspective in the development of a sociocognitive model.

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[31] The term is borrowed from the work of Nicholas Spanos, but may have an earlier provenience. See Spanos 1996.

Finally, the sociocognitive model has the advantage of simplifying matters of classification. If there are no religious or spiritual experiences *per se*, there are no inherent limits as to what kinds of experience can be regarded as being connected to an Esoteric worldview. As the section on divination narratives below will demonstrate, practically any facet of our experience can be interpreted as a manifestation of an underlying spiritual reality.

A first step towards constructing an analytic tool for the study of religious experience is to acknowledge that experience itself is permanently beyond the reach of scientific investigation. Nobody can have any access to the experiences of another person, since we cannot see the world from the perspective of anybody but ourselves. The only records we have any insight into are the traces left by such experiences: texts, stories, ritual acts, art. To name just one of many Esoteric writers, it is by all means conceivable that all the claims made by Rudolf Steiner are based on a deeply felt personal experience. However, our only access to Steiner's world is through his writings. What Steiner actually felt and saw is impossible for anybody else to know—since only Steiner was Steiner. Not even if one follows the anthroposophical method of attaining "knowledge of the higher worlds" (see the section on second-person narratives below), can one guarantee that one's experiences will be the same as Steiner's, although anthroposophists have strong apologetic reasons for making such a claim. Strictly speaking, not even my own experiences are accessible to me except through traces. In this case, these traces can be my memories of the experience and the stories I have told myself and others about my experiences.

The path from the experience itself to the trace of the experience is influenced by a number of factors, some of which have become increasingly well understood over the last few decades. Not content with simply registering our subjective impressions, we organize them into larger units, according to a number of factors.

Narratives of experience build on the memory of a past event. A robust finding of memory research is that memory is no fixed archive of past events, but an active reconstruction.[32] Although generally speaking, there is a basic integrity in one's recollections in the sense that one is very unlikely to construct one's view of the past from a wealth of spurious memories, one's reminiscences are nevertheless

[32] Research on memory is summarized in Schacter 1997.

structured by mechanisms inherent in our mental functioning. Confused recollections are reassembled into a more coherent whole. Details are omitted or added. The sequence of events can be altered. The overall content of the past is subtly altered to fit the purposes of the present.

One of the most fundamental mechanisms used to bring order into one's experiences (or one's memories of experience) is causal attribution. The pioneering work of Albert Michotte showed experimentally how sequences of events can be perceived as causally connected, even when there is no such relationship.[33] Conversely, when events do not share surface similarities or are not obviously contiguous in time, real causal connections remain undetected. These mechanisms result in fundamentally flawed interpretations of the events that one witnesses.

Furthermore, experiences are judged according to criteria such as salience. One aspect of salience is the feeling of strangeness or uniqueness. The commonplace leaves few traces in our memory, the unusual stands out. We are, however, singularly inept at processing statistical information that would give us a rational understanding of how uncommon such experiences actually are. By disregarding base-rates, using skewed statistical samples and neglecting disconfirming evidence, we reinterpret, to a more or less radical extent, the import of our experiences.

By applying a number of other strategies, beliefs based on memories constructed and interpreted by such means are left unchallenged. These strategies include subjective confirmation, the generation of ad hoc hypotheses to support one's claims and the active reinterpretation of conflicting opinions in order to generate a more coherent belief.

Experiences are apt to be narrated to others. When this is done, new skewing strategies enter into the picture. Narratives of experience are often crucially structured by available cultural templates. Thus, there are culturally accepted standards for the emplotment of a narrative.[34] We are likely to reinterpret our own role, to level or

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[33] Michotte 1963.

[34] A particularly interesting example is Vogler 1992. Vogler has written a manual for successful story-writing that has influenced Hollywood movie-makers in their attempts to give their stories the "right" format to have popular appeal. The fact that Vogler, a follower of Joseph Campbell's theory of myths, believes that his manual reproduces a cross-cultural archetype rather than the structure of Western folk narratives hardly detracts from the perceptiveness of his analysis of the emplotment of such narratives.

sharpen details of the narrative to put our point across. Texts that essentially consist of collections of narratives will be anthologized in order to prove a claim. Books on healing will hardly be filled with tales of botched treatments. Astrologers will be reluctant to report meetings with dissatisfied clients, and books on near death-experiences will most probably omit dreary or frightening narratives.

Just as with the construction of memory, perhaps the single most important factor to skew the narration of religious experience is the salience of such experiences. Commonplace events can be put into words by the culturally available models of how the world works. There are few uncertainties and ambiguities involved in attributing well-known explanations to one's own mental states or to the behavior of other people. The biological substratum underlying our emotions seems to be quite restricted. We have pleasant and unpleasant emotions, which can come in stronger or weaker forms.[35] In practice, we find our emotional states to be far more differentiated. We are not merely aware of a weak unpleasant feeling, we are able to label such a state as nervousness, shame, worry, a mild depression, sadness or anxiety. We are not only aware of a strong, pleasant feeling, but consider ourselves to be happy, in love, proud, creative or filled with energy. The attribution of specific experiential states is automatic and will most probably give the impression of being natural, despite the fact that the vocabulary we use to describe our emotions shows how even quite commonplace feelings are structured by cognition as well as by cultural expectations.

If everyday experience is structured by cultural templates that may appear transparent to the experiencer, salient and unusual experiences, on the other hand, seem to call for overt theorizing. If I wake up in the morning and recall having experienced vivid inner images of a person with a different name, appearance and life history than my own, the label "dream" obviously and immediately springs to mind. If similar mental imagery becomes available to me while awake, and has arisen at the suggestion of an authoritative person who carries the title of regression therapist, an explanation is called for. In the contemporary world, there are innumerable sources of explanation. Books, lectures, courses, Internet sites, newspaper and magazine articles, the explanations provided by friends and relatives and

[35] Fiske & Taylor 1991, ch. 10.

many other sources assist in constructing a viable explanation of the inner imagery. The person who has had a strange experience encounters a vast folklore of narratives of similar experiences.

Narratives of religious experience are models of past events as well as models for future experience. Numerous Christian apologetic texts are based on the premise that religious faith can be fostered at will. One of the best known examples comes from Pascal's *Pensées*, in the section that contains the argument known as Pascal's Wager. If, as Pascal argues, the only sensible decision is to opt for faith, what should one do if one lacks the ability to believe? Pascal's dialogue gives a succinct answer:

> [. . .] je suis fait d'une telle sorte que je ne puis croire. Que voulez-vous donc que je fasse. [. . .] Vous voulez aller à la foi, et vous n'en savez pas le chemin; vous voulez vous guérir de l'infidélité, et vous en demandez le remède; apprenez de ceux qui ont été liés comme vous, et qui parient maintenant tout leur bien; ce sont gens qui savent ce chemin que vous voudriez suivre, et guéris d'un mal dont vous voulez guérir. Suivez la manière par où ils ont commencé: c'est en faisant tout comme s'ils croyaient, en prenant de l'eau bénite, en faisant dire des messes, etc.[36]

A similar induced faith is a central part of many second-person narratives, as will be shown below. Pascal had the perceptiveness to understand and admit that experiences could be created by means of the appropriate cueing. As we will see, narratives of experience of the Esoteric Tradition serve a similar purpose, with the important difference that the active, prescriptive role of such narratives is masked by the claim that they are merely descriptive.

Third-Person Narratives: Vicarious Experience

The present section is concerned with narratives in the third person. These are typically short segments of text in which persons of the writer's acquaintance, or clients he has met in his practice, act

[36] Pascal *Pensées* §233. "[I] am so made that I cannot believe. What, then, would you have me do? /. . ./ You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief, and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc."

as rhetorical exempla, e.g. of healing, of the efficacy of divinatory ritual, of meetings with angels or of the facticity of past-life experiences. They relate experiences of these more or less anonymous people in terms of an overarching worldview. It is this worldview that defines what experiences "count". Some would easily be classified as religious by an observer, e.g. being miraculously helped by a healer with invisible life forces at his command. Others become part of the Esoteric worldview simply because this view is sufficiently encompassing. Practically any experience can be grist for the mill.

What could be the point of such narratives, involving people that the reader does not know, and presenting their stories with few of the literary devices that make for compelling reading? One reason, made plausible by the sheer numbers of such narratives in some texts, may be the appeal of this simplest of rhetorical devices: repetition takes the place of demonstration. Another may have to do with the double function of such narratives: the referential, which attempts to relate events that have taken place, and the constitutive which actively shapes the expectations and experiences of the readers. Like texts from other religious traditions, third-person narratives provide readers with the means to construct meaningful links between the doctrinal system of the text and the reader's own life. Complex and ambiguous processes that have no specific interpretation in themselves are given an appearance of coherence and interpreted in theory-laden terms. If the construction works, this may well be due to the mystifying nature of narratives, and of language in general. There are reasons to believe that the referential aspect is part of our common sense understanding of language. That language contributes to *constructing* our reality may seem counter-intuitive. Thus, narratives are readily believed to be transparent renditions of underlying facts.

For the present discussion, two types of examples have been singled out to illustrate the import of third-person narratives: stories of people who are helped by various unconventional therapies, and narratives of individuals who have their life course interpreted by an astrologer. They illustrate two facets of the cueing properties of narratives. The healing narratives presented here deal with overt characteristics of the spokesperson's worldview: what does illness mean, how is a cure effected, what properties of the body and of the world need one presuppose to make sense of the healing process? The divination narratives evidently also contain such references to the worldview of the diviner, but go beyond it to reveal a hidden agenda.

The implied audience of the narrative is not only presented with elements of the craft of astrology, but of a culture-bound underlying discourse on what it means to be a person.

Healing Narratives and the Construction of a Worldview

Third person narratives abound in the Esoteric self-help literature. Books by such authors as Louise Hay, Shakti Gawain, Deepak Chopra or Wayne Dyer tend to be structured around such narratives. Third person narratives also make frequent appearances in books that propound alternative therapies. Whereas the praxis and rhetoric of science infuse reports of biomedical treatments, e.g. in the form of references to clinical trials, the third-person healing narrative is arguably the most important discursive strategy of the alternative therapy textbook.[37] The view adopted here sees healing narratives as models *of* and models *for* alternative therapies.

Firstly, healing narratives are bare-bones recollections of patients whose experiences of illness and recovery are presented as rhetorical proof of the validity of the writer's doctrines of healing. Different writers will emphasize different aspects of their therapies: the curative agents, the etiology of disease or various more far-reaching claims concerning the worldview within which such healing methods have their place. These different emphases are illustrated by the following narratives taken from texts on alternative medicine.

The first narrative is matter-of-fact, closely patterned on case studies of mainstream medicine. The narrative would not necessarily be worded very differently if the patient had been given standard medication rather than a Bach flower remedy. The rhetorical legitimacy is given to the remedy itself, rather than to the unorthodox theory that underlies Edward Bach's specific form of complementary medicine.

> A young woman participating in a meditation camp cut three quarters of the way through the tip of her finger when preparing vegetables. The cut bled profusely and no doctor was immediately available. She was given a few drops of Rescue Remedy in water every few minutes

[37] One of the conclusions after reviewing the sources, however, is that books on complementary medicine are surprisingly prone to presenting claims on the basis of the writer's authority alone, not even adding the weak support of anecdotal evidence. Thus Lawless, Raphaell, Stein and Scheffer present aromatherapy, crystal healing, Reiki and Bach flower remedies with only the feeblest attempts to demonstrate that any of their claims are actually valid.

> as a first-aid measure, and a pressure bandage was put on to stop the bleeding. When the bleeding had stopped, Rescue Remedy Cream was cautiously applied to the wound surfaces, and finger and fingertip were held together with dressing [. . .] By the fifth day, the wound had healed completely.[38]

The second narrative, taken from the same text on Bach flower remedies, goes further in that it establishes an important distinction. The alternative therapy is not only efficacious, but actually works *better* than conventional medicine.

> A little girl of 16 months pulled a tablecloth off the table. Freshly made tea caused severe burns on her head and all down her right side, and she had to be admitted to hospital. Her mother had immediately given her Rescue Remedy, also taking it herself [. . .] The doctors felt they could not offer much hope when they saw the extent of the burns. That day and throughout the following day the mother treated the burns with Rescue Remedy Cream. The doctors let her do it, for apart from pain relief there was nothing they could do at that point [. . .] The child was discharged from the hospital on the fifth day—"a miracle cure".[39]

Healing methods in use in the cultic milieu differ greatly in terms of the actual practices involved. Nevertheless, there are underlying assumptions uniting many of them. The following examples show how third-person narratives can be used to underpin such assumptions. The first, consisting of several sections taken from a rather long case history, illustrates the wounded-healer legend element: the common belief that healing abilities come to those who are able to transcend great personal suffering.

> Marnie, forty-four, is a healer, a genuinely anointed healer, who began her work following a seven-year-long "dark night of the soul" in which she had to heal herself. When Marnie was thirty, she was a social worker in Scotland, lived an active life, had a number of friends, and enjoyed her work immensely. Then she was diagnosed with an "undiagnosable" condition. With each month, Marnie developed increasing pain, sometimes in her back, sometimes as intensive migraines, sometimes in her legs [. . .] Melanie spiraled into depression [. . .] One night

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[38] Scheffer *Bach Flower Therapy*, p. 206. Rescue Remedy essentially consists of water infused with the "energies" of Star of Bethlehem, Rock Rose, Impatiens, Cherry Plum and Clematis. What the down-to-earth narrative does not indicate is the highly unorthodox belief system behind the reported cures. Sudden noises, accidents, negative feelings of all kinds are said to cause energetic traumas, in which subtle (spiritual) elements have withdrawn from the physical body.

[39] Scheffer *Bach Flower Therapy*, p. 206.

> while she was weeping, Marnie said she reached "surrender". "I realized that I might never feel better, and if that's the case, what would I then say to God? I surrendered completely. I said, 'whatever you choose for me, so be it. Just give me strength'". Marnie's pain instantly eased, and her hands filled with heat—not ordinary body heat, but "spiritual heat" [. . .] Marnie is now a greatly loved and highly respected healer.[40]

The second example, in which Deepak Chopra relates an anecdote from his family history, illustrates an equally common presupposition, namely that belief in illness engenders illness.[41]

> For years I heard about the terrible allergies my mother suffered in [Jammu]. Her tormentor was the pollen of a native flower that covered the ground when it blossomed every spring. It caused her to have severe asthma attacks; her body swelled, and on her skin appeared large welts and blisters [. . .] One spring the rains had made the roads impassable, and my father decided that they should fly back home early. They boarded the plane, and after an hour it touched down. [My father] put his hands reassuringly on my mother's arm, but he could already see the red spots on her skin and the effort it took for her just to breathe. My mother's allergy was so severe that the steward ran up and asked what was wrong. "There's nothing you can do", my father said, "It's the pollen in Jammu". "Jammu?". The steward looked puzzled. "We haven't landed there yet".[42]

Both the "wounded healer" legend element and the "belief engenders illness" element are metaphysical beliefs that elude any demonstration in the stricter sense of the word.[43] Narratives such as these can act persuasively by giving a rhetorical confirmation of such basic assumptions.

Finally, the following example interprets the experiences of the subject of the narrative in terms that are only fully understandable within a specific worldview, the one that the writer happens to embrace. One instance of healing becomes a singular event that instantiates an entire anthropology and cosmology. Here, the writer goes beyond the generalities of New Age healing by adopting the particulars of one specific healing system.

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[40] Myss *Anatomy of the Spirit*, pp. 226 f.

[41] The roots of this belief go back at least as far as to the nineteenth century healer Phineas Parkhurst Quimby.

[42] Chopra *Quantum Healing*, pp. 117 f.

[43] Psychosomatic medicine would accept the more modest statement that "some beliefs may contribute to causing illness", but New Age authors are apt to draw much more far-reaching conclusions. See Martin 1997.

> Sitting before me in desolation and despair is a rather colorless woman, with an uncaring and uncared for look about her. The signals she is sending out are very weak, and yet, as I regard her, the personal or "true" aura, although paled almost to the point of insignificance, lights up in my consciousness. I detach. In the flashback of time, I see the glowing, beautiful soul (or aura) clearly revealed and shining through [. . .] My hand reaches for the "Rescue" [. . .] I lift the bottle, and in the other hand I hold my torch, the light I use to release the energies within the colors.[44]

The generalities of such a narrative are, of course, perfectly understandable even for a reader with no knowledge of the technique involved, Aura-Soma therapy. References to past lives, embedded in the text without being spelled out, make sense for readers with a general appreciation of New Age doctrines. So does the term "energies". The concept of a "true aura", the equation between soul and aura, and the cryptic references to "Rescue" belong to the specifics of this therapy; one needs to have read earlier sections of this text for a full understanding of the passage quoted.[45]

Healing narratives such as those exemplified above constitute phases in a kind of progressive rhetoric: from the belief that healing is efficacious, to accepting that it is *more* efficacious than any competing systems, to finally being open to the idea that healing has these properties because human beings and the cosmos are constituted in a specific way. However, healing narratives speak not only of healing as a method, but also of those being healed: who they are, what processes of illness and recovery they pass through. Healing narratives subtly reinforce specific notions of personhood, of the character and development of illness, and provide a structuring script through which relevant parts of the reader's life history can be interpreted. More or less diffuse symptoms can be given a label. Changes in the experiences of the reader are subsumed under the ready-made schemata of the healing narrative. A positive outcome can be anticipated, since collections of healing narratives are prime examples of selective reporting and almost by definition exclude failed cases.

Symptoms of "illness" as related in these narratives are both potentially vaguer and vastly more encompassing than those recognized

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[44] Wall *Miracle of Colour Healing*, p. 114 f.

[45] The true aura is said to be a small spherical structure located in the abdomen, in which information on the person's past, present and future lives is stored, see Dalichow & Booth *Aura-Soma*, pp. 34 ff. *Rescue* is the name of a blue and violet oil, see Wall *Miracle of Colour Healing*, pp. 110 ff.

in conventional medicine. Many texts present what would emically be considered somatic, psychological and existential or social problems together, without any distinction, in a way that has earned these methods the epithet *holistic*. Thus in a central text on crystal healing, the mineral Kunzite is said to be useful in meditation, to make people more loving, to balance negative emotional states and help the circulatory system.[46] Aromatherapist Julia Lawless recommends jasmine essence for migraine as well as lack of confidence.[47] Judy Hall claims that past life regressions can help those afflicted with epilepsy, sexual problems and phobias.[48] Diane Stein recommends Reiki healing for relieving pain, speeding the healing process, stopping bleeding, relaxing the recipient and balancing chakra and aura energies.[49] At the far end of this spectrum, another Reiki healer, Tanmaya Honervogt, includes narratives of people who have been helped with problems ranging from physical illness such as allergies and inflammatory pains, to psychological problems such as depression, to a medley of needs such as healing pets and reviving potted plants, to fulfilling diffuse, culturally constructed desires such as "finding one's inner self", "enhancing one's intuition" and even "balancing one's organs".[50] Narratives of healing similarly juxtapose or even conflate the tales of people cured from physical symptoms with stories of clients whose emotional troubles were alleviated. Intuitive healer Caroline Myss presents case studies of clients whose physical and emotional states are closely interconnected: their chronic pain goes with their compulsive behavior,[51] back injuries have to do with anguish over failed business ventures,[52] cancer is linked with fear of loneliness.[53]

Part of the healing narrative is the story of the treatment itself. The narrative may briefly describe the intervention of the healer, and will naturally be couched in the terminological framework of the specific method employed: what crystals were placed on the patient's body, what aromatic oils were applied, how did the energies feel during the healing session? They will cue the reader with

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[46] Raphaell *Crystal Enlightenment*, pp. 114 ff.
[47] Lawless *Aromatherapy*, pp. 163 ff.
[48] Hall *Past Life Therapy*, pp. 15 ff.
[49] Stein *Essential Reiki*, p. 21.
[50] Honervogt *Reiki* is constructed around numerous such narratives. The examples here are mainly taken from chapters 2 and 8.
[51] Myss *Anatomy of the Spirit*, pp. 158f.
[52] Myss *Anatomy of the Spirit*, p. 200.
[53] Myss *Anatomy of the Spirit*, pp. 245 ff.

only a modicum of knowledge of the method to an understanding of what will happen during treatment. A narrative that affirms that "Usui Reiki energies" feel alternately hot and cold, whereas "Tera Mai Reiki energies" feel like effervescent bubbles or small electrical impulses, will lead neophyte healers learning these techniques to interpret a variety of vague proprioceptions in the appropriate way.[54]

For most patients, it is reasonable to assume that the point of the treatment is not just to get diagnosed or to experience the healing itself, but to get better. The healing narrative has typical ways of coming to grips with the effects of healing on the patient. Thus, ever since the inception of post-Enlightenment alternative medicine, especially of mesmerism, it has been a commonplace within numerous forms of ritual healing that a crisis of some sort is to be expected. Before the patient recovers, there will be a period during which the symptoms will be exacerbated. This belief can be found in methods as diverse as mesmerism,[55] homeopathy,[56] crystal healing[57] and Reiki.[58] The following brief narrative is one example among many. A woman attempted to treat her varicose veins by massaging them with an Aura-Soma oil. In order to clean the oil off her hands, she rubbed them along her neck. The client happened to have a benign tumor growing on her thyroid gland. Vicky Wall quotes her as saying:

> "By the fourth night my throat had come up with an angry red rash! My husband was alarmed and told me to stop using the oil immediately. He said I was obviously allergic to it [. . .] Anyway, the rash gradually subsided, and three days later I put my hands up to feel if it had gone completely. It had—and so had the [tumor] growth!" The rash was what we call a "healing crisis". It often occurs when there is something toxic to overcome.[59]

The common belief in a healing crisis may be the effect of cultural diffusion between practitioners of various systems of healing, but could

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[54] See web site www.Reiki-seichem.com/Reiki.html.

[55] For the story of Theresa Paradis, her crisis and cure, see Walmsley 1967: 82 ff. and Pattie 1994: 57 ff.

[56] "When you are given a homeopathic remedy several things can happen. You may just start to recover and go on so to do. Sometimes your body needs to go through a healing crisis and you may then become temporarily worse as the remedy stimulates the body to heal itself." (from homeopathy FAQ at web site www.cactusventures.com/webstuff3/homeopat.htm).

[57] Bravo *Crystal Healing Secrets*, p. 13.

[58] Honervogt *Reiki*, ch. 4.

[59] Wall *Miracle of Colour Healing*, p. 113.

also be the result of a common observation. Many illnesses present a pattern of repeated ups and downs before the patient recovers.[60] Healing narratives will cue the reader to understand temporary ups, or even a lack of amelioration in his or her continuing problems, as a sign of the efficacy of the healing. Thus, a section of Mechthild Scheffer's *Bach Flower Therapy* is significantly entitled "Apparent Failure".[61] A failed treatment (i.e. one that a skeptical observer or a conventional medical doctor would consider failed) can be rationalized as not "really" being a failure, by being incorporated in an all-encompassing order in which misfortunes can readily be reinterpreted.

The interpretive moves that one finds in Scheffer's text on Bach flower remedies, as well as in other texts on healing, can be briefly summed up in five points. Illness "has a meaning", it gives the patients a chance to understand that they need to change their lives. Therapies can be attempted "at the wrong moment", e.g. the patient is still not ready to accept healing, or it is part of a greater plan that the patient should remain ill or even die rather than recover. Another argument blames the patient for "wanting to be ill", since there are benefits in being a victim. The patient may have been skeptical to the extent of blocking the healing effects from taking place. Finally, the patient may have been too impatient to allow the very subtle effects of the therapy to take effect.

Healing narratives are not representative records of treatment but rhetorical exempla. Therefore, they include no room for uncertainty or real failure. Thus, the healing narrative provides readers with hermeneutic strategies that allow them to interpret any development whatsoever in terms of a direct causal relationship between a therapy and a subsequent outcome.

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[60] The reasons for this phenomenon are multiple. Some illnesses typically present a fluctuating pattern, a period of recovery will be followed by a period of aggravated symptoms and then by another recovery. To the extent that subjective feelings of amelioration are involved in judging the efficacy of a treatment, the statistical phenomenon of regression towards the mean implicates the role of so-called random error in a sequence of imperfectly correlated events. A large number of factors will influence the well-being of a patient. After a period of random errors that have conspired to produce a better-than-average feeling, it is statistically likely that random error will make the patient feel less well. Finally, there are the effects of suggestion: a patient who "knows" that a crisis followed by relief is expected is likely to experience a crisis followed by a period of relief.

[61] Scheffer *Bach Flower Therapy*, pp. 212 ff.

Divination Narratives and the Construction of Personhood

There are thematic constraints that tend to differentiate divination narratives from healing narratives. Whereas healing narratives are squarely centered on the specific ailment of a patient and on his or her recovery, and are thus typically devoid of any details that are extraneous to the illness and are anonymous and nearly impossible to corroborate, many divination rituals contain a much fuller representation of the person being discussed. Since a divinatory technique such as astrology claims to uncover a large number of salient facts about a person's life, an astrology narrative will typically encompass a much wider spectrum of the native's life.

What does astrology purport to disclose? The astrology books consulted for the present study, which are written from a strongly psychologizing perspective, present a wealth of material on biography and personal development, some of it in abstract form, some of it embedded in third-person narratives. Liz Greene and Howard Sasportas, highly regarded authors within the astrological community, have published volumes, separately as well as jointly, outlining what they perceive as the dynamics of individuation as reflected in birth charts.

The chart interpretation, holistic as a New Age system is normatively intended to be, reflects every aspect of life. Since the twelfth house and the placement of Neptune are said to disclose the anatomy of things hidden, even prenatal experiences are supposedly revealed. Chart elements continue to indicate our fundamental drives through early childhood, adolescence, adult life and the aging process. The third person narratives employed in these books are often linked with the highly technical terminology of the astrological trade. A longish quote, taken from a chart reading covering fourteen full pages, will hopefully give an idea firstly of the flavor and import of such narratives of personal development, and secondly of the distinct touch of New Age doctrines (energies, creating one's own world, a pre-set plan within which life unfolds, a true self underlying the changing personality) that have become part of many astrological texts:

> The energies in a house actually manifest in the unfoldment of the life-plan [. . .] Those with Leo on the Ascendant create a world in which the need to develop their power, authority and creative expression (Leo) is the means of defining their individual selfhood (1st [house]). Because the Ascendant ruler—the Sun—is placed in the 5th, self-discovery is

> also linked to the 5th house: Kate told me that raising a child on her own (5th house—children) has contributed more than anything else to her sense of power and capability. It is also through the spare-time activities (5th) of studying psychology and healing that Kate's real inner self has been touched [. . .] In Kate's case, the Sun (the chart ruler) is aspected by all three outer planets, suggesting the battles, challenges and breakthroughs she has faced in finding her own identity and confidence [. . .] With Pluto in the house of the self, the journey to find who she really is must include a descent into the netherworld. Kate commented: "Finding myself has been a major task. Projecting myself out to the world looks like taking the rest of my life!"[62]

What does it mean to say that every phase of life is revealed in the chart? At times, the vicissitudes of our everyday lives appear to the astrologer to be mere ephemera, manifestations of who we "really" are. The chart seems to disclose an authentic self, in a sense close to the Rousseauan and Romantic notion of an "inner nature". For psychologizing astrologers such as Sasportas, Greene and others, the concept of an inner nature is especially related to the concept of self (sometimes capitalized as Self to note its status as archetype) as developed by Jung.

The concept of a genuine and stable core of the individual personality as revealed through the birth chart may be clothed in the vocabulary of an Esoteric belief system, but resonates with modern conceptions of the self. To elucidate some of these characteristics, I wish to borrow a useful set of concepts presented in a seminal work by philosopher Charles Taylor and developed by historian of ideas Petteri Pietikäinen.[63] Taylor sees a decisive change in the conception of the self in the early modern age, and suggests that Montaigne was a representative of this new outlook. Generalizing somewhat, earlier narratives of the self presented the individual as a set of fleeting surface characteristics under which lay the core common to mankind as such. The antique exhortation to "know thyself" was a call to understand the human condition, not to grasp the unique individuality of each person. Montaigne and his followers introduced

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[62] Sasportas *The Twelve Houses*, pp. 354 f. The houses are twelve sectors in a chart said to represent various areas in life such as work, family or material possessions. A typical feature of astrology is the polysemy of its symbols: as the quote indicates, the fifth house can represent many things, *inter alia* creativity, children, artistic endeavors and expressivity.

[63] Taylor 1989 and Pietikäinen 1999, respectively.

the concept of an underlying core self, individual to each of us.[64] Pietikäinen elaborates on this idea, suggesting that certain modern conceptions of such a "true" or "deep" self can be understood in terms of the following aspects or attributes: authenticity, subjectivism, expressivism, narrativism and edification. A pared-back version of this concept of "deep self" can be applied to understanding divination narratives.

Authenticity is a term for the wide-spread assumption that in fact, there is a core self behind the variety of ephemeral presentations in everyday life,[65] but that we lack the capacity to be true to this core self. In order to find and restore our identities, we have to look inward to seek our true identity. This inner quest can be aided by methods such as chart reading, since the motion of celestial bodies is thought to mirror the core self in accordance with the oft-quoted formula "as above, so below". To truly understand the role of the astrological consultation is not to have one's fortune read, but to want to attain authenticity by deciphering the scripts written for oneself and being faithful to them. Kate, in the above quote, in a sense finds her "real inner self" by accepting the life script encoded in the chart.

The second element of the deep self in Pietikäinen's model, *subjectivism*, incorporates the idea that to be truly oneself is to encourage the discovery of one's personal idiosyncrasies. From the 1930s and onwards, psychologized divination has incorporated an essential component of subjectivist interpretations of the self: the unconscious. Deep within us, usually inaccessible to our everyday consciousness, are hidden sides of our personalities that the chart allows us to face. Even our sometimes deeply contradictory drives and urges are due not to the varying fortunes of circumstance, but to a corresponding multiplicity of inner forces that reflects the core self in a variety of ways. Sasportas explains this in theoretical (Jungian) terms, and then gives a concrete example:

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[64] Taylor 1989: 177 ff.

[65] The existence of such an independent, authentic and stable self is largely a cultural construct, supported both by folk psychological beliefs and by mainstream psychological discourse. For a brief review of the former, see Kunda 1999, ch. 11. For an overview of the latter, see Kirschner 1996, ch. 3. This view of the self as a stable entity may seem so commonsensical that it may be pertinent to recall that there is also a radically different view of the self, espoused by a long line of philosophers from David Hume to Bertrand Russell. On this view, the self is merely a convenient label for a succession of states.

> A person consists of a multiplicity of selves. We exhibit one kind of behavior at work, another at home, another at social gatherings and yet another alone on a country walk [. . .] the various planets and signs also represent various bits and parts of us [. . .] What might Kathy's Venus rising in Virgo look like? How might it approach people? What does it need or like? It likes looking neat, tidy and efficient. It's probably cautious and reserved [. . .] Venus wants to be liked; it wants to please and harmonise. Uranus in the 10th doesn't care much about that [. . .] Every subpersonality has an archetype at its core. Deep within a subpersonality—what gives rise to and builds up a subpersonality—is an archetypal drive, urge or principle.[66]

Expressivism, the third element of the deep self, refers to the idea that our core identity must be expressed through some overt medium. We can express this core in a variety of ways, from the basic choices we make in life regarding marriage, work and parenting, to the seeming trivia of everyday life: our outward appearance, our way of speaking or gesturing. Again, Sasportas explains:

> I did some ongoing work with a woman who had Mars conjunct Uranus in Cancer on the Ascendant, sextile Saturn in Virgo. She had a subpersonality that built up around this placement. [She] would drive up in her Morris Minor and confidently open up the door, get out and walk in a determined manner to the meeting. She wore a scarf, had a white jacket on, neatly pressed slacks and carried a briefcase [. . .] what organised her to wear that scarf, and those slacks, to walk like that and behave like that? The core was the archetype or principle of efficiency and effectiveness.[67]

Narrativism conveys the idea that we tell the stories of our lives, stories that construct a temporal unity for our identities, and that link our specific life histories with purported grand overarching themes. The frequent parallels between the third-person narratives involving specific clients and references to myths is an example of a common trend among Jungians to connect individual stories with collective narratives. Jung himself held that such narratives express most fully the psychic state of a people in a given culture.

The impact of astrology even on educated Westerners can to some extent be explained by the fact that divination offers a conceptual framework for constructing a narrative unity of life. This narrative unity is held together by our imaginative applications of, say, purported

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[66] Greene & Sasportas *The Development of Personality*, pp. 165 ff.
[67] Greene & Sasportas *The Development of Personality*, p. 169.

existential or depth-psychological insights encoded in those astrological symbols that the astrologer's clients find plausible and relevant to their individual life histories. Some astrology texts consist of lectures for an audience, with the audience responses recorded. In these exchanges, one hears the attempts of those who attended the lecture to make the insights that were first presented as relevant to the anonymous subjects of third-person narratives relevant also to themselves. In the following passage, legend elements from popular psychology (e.g. the belief that even the earliest childhood experiences determine decisively what becomes of us as adults) are combined with the astrological discourse:[68]

> [Astrologer]: The planet that aspects the Moon will indicate something of our experience of the mother—those things she does which register with us.
>
> [Woman in audience:] I had to stop breast feeding at seven weeks because I had blocked milk ducts. My daughter has the Moon in 7 Libra opposite Saturn in 9 Aries [. . .]
>
> [Astrologer:] You see, around the age of two months, your daughter's Moon progressed from 7 to 9 Libra and exactly opposed her Saturn. So her experience of you (her mother) was colored by the principle of Saturn [. . .] Your milk—her source of sustenance (the Moon)—was blocked (Saturn) [. . .] Later on, based on that experience and possible other things, your daughter may not feel that the world is a very safe place for her.
>
> [Woman in audience: . . .] She really does believe that the world is against her.[69]

Narrativism is particularly strong in astrologers' and tarot readers' adoption of Jung's theory of archetypes and the collective unconscious. The wholesale adoption of a Jungian framework gains its plausibility partly from Jung's own dabbling with divination, but also, and more forcefully, from Jung's insistence on the deep continuity between the symbolic systems (myths, religions, art, philosophy) of past traditions and the psychological development of the present-day individual. The astrological narrative purveys a sense of this continuity and furnishes a narrative form within which one's life history

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[68] The use of the expression "*legend elements* from popular psychology" reflects the fact that experiences from an age as early as two months cannot possibly register in long term memory since the brain of the infant has not developed sufficiently.

[69] Greene & Sasportas *The Development of Personality*, p. 38.

can be understood. The two elements of the utopian time-line, traditionality (myth, symbolism, alchemy) and telos (individuation, "discovering" one's true core in the mythic plot), can be joined together in narrating elements of the life story of single individuals. Thus, Jungian astrologer Liz Greene discusses at length the horoscope of a folk singer who, after a deep depression, committed suicide. Her analysis weaves together strands as seemingly diverse as the Greek myth of Hades and Hekate, the transits of Saturn over planets in the 12th house (commonly interpreted by astrologers as the eruption of family conflicts that the native is unable to grasp), developments during the person's adolescence and Jungian psychologist Erich Neumann's speculations on ancient matriarchies.[70] The tragic death of a young man is, in a sense, rendered explicable by being enmeshed in events of cosmic and world-historical significance.

The fifth and last element of the deep self, *edification*, unites all of the above. For Pietikäinen, edification is the construction of a set of supporting and directing ideas and practices. Specifically, edification alludes to the art of diagnosing and healing the "wounded" or otherwise inauthentic or false self. Divination narratives only end when the chart reading allows the client to come to grips with his or her situation. The authentic self is gradually uncovered from the dross of conditioning; the subjective drives of the unconscious are faced, often in order to retract projections from others; the narrative of one's life course is understood. Astrology would not have its therapeutic aspects without a strong edifying impulse. Thus, in her book *Character and Fate*, astrologer Katharine Merlin relates the life history of "Kim", a thirty-four year old artist. The narrative not only purports to describe who she is, but also what her main challenges are in becoming whole and fulfilled.

> Since wherever Saturn is found in a chart pinpoints how and in what way a person most needs to grow, it's usually also what they resist and fear: the most undeveloped aspect of their personality. Kim's fear, with Saturn in the second [house] square Mercury in the fifth is like an judgmental, harsh inner voice [. . .] Coping with this voice and eventually understanding that it's her own unintegrated and potentially useful conscience, not some cruel external force, can free Kim from her deepest and most paralysing conflict.[71]

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[70] Greene & Sasportas *Dynamics of the Unconscious*, pp. 148 ff.
[71] Merlin *Character and Fate*, p. 199.

In the process of edification, the chart is the metaphorical map of events leading, in optimal cases, to individuation. Astrology, like many other systems of divination, reveals itself as potentially constituting a counseling art.

Finally, this analysis of divination narratives as therapeutic interventions intended to unmask a unique self should be tempered with one important qualification. The birth chart metaphorically works like a complex clock, with numerous interlocking cycles. The slowest of these, the revolutions of the outer planets, progress too slowly to affect each native in a unique fashion. Third-person narratives link the destiny of each of us to purported macro-historical changes. As the following quote shows, eisegesis links the extremely slow cycles of Uranus and Pluto[72] with long-term shifts in Western society, in a way that can be reminiscent of millennialist writers' attempts to link Scriptural prophecies with current events: a match is easy to find, since there is an infinite pool of raw data to choose from.

> There is a whole generation coming of age who were born with Uranus conjunct Pluto in Virgo from late 1962 to 1968 or thereabouts [. . .] The children born then emerged into a world where old values and mores were being challenged and overthrown, as described by Uranus conjunct Pluto [. . .] With Uranus and Pluto in earthy Virgo, punks are using their bodies to make a statement to society. On another more positive level, you see a growing interest in alternative health, diet and medicine—Virgo is the sign of health.[73]

With such a generous hermeneutics, one would be hard pressed to find any state of affairs that didn't fit.

Spiritual Experience as Social Praxis

Narratives of healing and divination tell the stories of individual people: of particular clients whose illnesses are framed in a New Age setting or whose life stories are interpreted as the emergence of the true self. They highlight one of the fundamental paradoxes of such modern narratives of experience. In what can be seen as a legacy both of a Protestant tradition and of a Romantic emphasis on inner states, experiences of this kind are seen as taking place on a personal, even private arena. Labeled *spiritual* rather than *religious*, expe-

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[72] Uranus takes 84 years to complete a full cycle, Pluto 248 years.
[73] Greene & Sasportas *The Development of Personality*, p. 77.

riences are presented in numerous New Age texts as self-validating and primary. Thus, attention is turned away from the fact that the frame of interpretation is culturally constituted, and that ritual forms and collective practices fundamentally shape individual experience. An illustration of this tension between the seemingly private nature of experience and the collectively constituted explanations provided for them can be found in texts by Shirley MacLaine. The author describes her journey from being a skeptical onlooker to becoming convinced of the validity of a range of New Age practices and doctrines, from channeling to reincarnation.[74] These practices and doctrines are, of course, those made available to her by people in her social network. Nevertheless, MacLaine considers herself a person who has "never been much for doing anything communally"[75] and calls this participation in rituals scripted by others and her gradual adoption of pre-existing, culturally available religious options a "quest for my self".[76]

Basically, books such as *Out on a Limb* consist of extended conversion narratives, and MacLaine's life history conforms to the general pattern of such narratives as presented in the literature on conversion.[77] A crisis that is perceived both as a cultural malaise (the state of the world, our disregard for the environment, etc.) and in personal terms (an unsatisfactory relationship) is interpreted as a spiritual problem. Gradually, a variety of "spiritual", i.e. New Age, options are tried, met with some initial skepticism and accepted or rejected on a piece-meal basis. The process resembles what Rambo has called experimental conversion.[78] Old friends who reject her new interests cause increasing irritation and are angrily dismissed. Step by step, skeptical objections are overcome, and MacLaine's new identity as an advocate of the new creed emerges. Her meeting with a trance channeler is characteristic of the process.

During a business trip in Sweden, MacLaine has the occasion to visit Sture Johansson, a carpenter from the Stockholm area who, emically speaking, acts as a channel for the disembodied entity Ambres. MacLaine meets Johansson/Ambres through a Swedish

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[74] MacLaine's story of conversion can be found in numerous sections of autobiographical works such as *Dancing in the Light, It's all in the Playing* and *Out on a Limb*.
[75] MacLaine *Out on a Limb*, p. 143.
[76] MacLaine *Out on a Limb*, p. 5.
[77] Cf. Lofland & Skonovd 1981.
[78] Rambo 1993: 15.

acquaintance named Lars. MacLaine is thrilled to meet a trance channel and figures that the opportunity to do so is more than just a coincidence. At the same time, she is repelled by the vocabulary used by Lars when speaking of Ambres. MacLaine describes her ambivalent feelings:

> I found that the minute I got into discussions of the metaphysical and heard people using words like "occult", "astral plane", "cosmic vibrations", "etheric memory", "soul", "God"—the standard vocabulary of a study as old as time—I reacted with nervous derision, sarcastic laughter, suspicion or outright contempt. This time was no exception. Yet I wanted to know more. I wanted to "experience" a medium myself.[79]

As she begins to participate in the ritual, her doubts are put aside. Listening to the distinct voice of Ambres, she

> felt sure Sturé [sic!] had nothing to do with it. He was only some kind of telephone through which some spiritual entity spoke. In fact, I could "feel" the personality, the humor, the ancient rhythm of the thoughts of this entity called Ambres. He gestured and laughed and made succinct and overt points with his own energy, not the energy of Sturé.[80]

MacLaine's picture of herself as a level-headed and skeptically inclined individualist, and her acceptance of trance channeling as a real phenomenon after meeting with Ambres, can be read symptomatically as representative of the many narratives of third-person experience in the New Age literature. In order to assess the strength of the cueing of an experience such as this, it should perhaps be borne in mind firstly that the author was only able to understand Johansson/Ambres through the medium of an interpreter, secondly that she herself, as a professional actress, is presumably well acquainted with the need to embody more than one personality.

Narratives can be met with overt doubt, and yet prime subsequent experiences. They provide pointers useful to readers who are pursuing their own journey of experimental conversion, and who wish to construct a map of the territory in which this journey may take place. Few advocates can be gentler and less coercive than those speaking from the pages of a printed text. They allow readers to let their own experiences be cued and interpreted so subtly as to allow the illusion of a purely self-driven, personal spiritual quest to be maintained.

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[79] MacLaine *Out on a Limb*, pp. 139 f.
[80] MacLaine *Out on a Limb*, p. 145.

First-Person Narratives: Privileged Experience

First person narratives appear in many varieties. Esoteric spokespersons relate their near-death and out-of-body experiences, their dreams, their experiences of the uncanny, amazing synchronicities, meetings with angels and conversion experiences, to mention just a few examples. Again, rather than presenting a list of such experiences, a kind of late modern, Esoteric version of William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, the present section concentrates on the arguably most important form of first-person narrative for the construction and consolidation of positions within the Esoteric Tradition: revelatory experiences, in which spokespersons claim to have gained privileged insight into those spiritual truths they present in their movement texts.

Prophecy, Spiritualism, Channeling

In pre-modern cultures around the world, religious specialists have acted as mediators between mankind and the suprahuman sphere. The literature on such cultures has described these mediating experiences as the result of possession by spirits or gods, as shamanic flight, as trance or ecstasy, mediumship, or prophecy. In the modern age, similar contacts have been labelled as channeling.[81] The present section attempts to place the channeling phenomenon within the broader framework of the history of revelatory experience, with its loose and sometimes contradictory use of terminology. What unites channelers with other recipients of revealed knowledge? What differentiates the category labels used for recipients of such revelatory experiences?

In the scholarly literature, one purported basic distinction is drawn between the passive and active reception of revealed knowledge.

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[81] By concentrating on the intersubjective aspects of such phenomena, i.e. the claims of those who speak from privileged experience, the problem raised in Hanegraaff 1996: 26 ff. is avoided, namely how we could judge whether the experience of prophecy and that of channeling are in any sense "the same". The similarities of rhetorical use are certainly not implied to confer validity on New Age claims to perpetuating an ancient spiritual tradition, a conclusion that New Agers themselves are prone to draw; cf. Hanegraaff 1996: 27. Questions of inner states, psychological characteristics or etiology are of no intrinsic interest for a study that concentrates on the strategic effects of claiming to transmit information from a suprahuman source. However, for a naturalistic and experimentally supported explanation of the arguably related phenomenon of glossolalia as a learned behavior provided with a culturally accepted label, see Spanos 1996: 146 ff.

Typically, shamans are said to be involved in an active relation with the spirit world, whereas those who are possessed remain passive victims. However, it is far from certain that these are distinct traits that really do differentiate between useful categories. It is easy to find examples from the literature that defy any such simple labels, in which the same religious virtuoso partakes of both functions.[82]

Conversely, the same term at times seems to encompass rather diverse functions. Certain Old Testament prophets act as diviners or interpreters of dreams. The prophetic figures of 1 Samuel spring to mind. Others are mouthpieces of the divine wrath, moral and social reformers, and defenders of the cult of YHWH. Among these are the later prophets, e.g. Elijah. It is by no means obvious that functions as different as divination and preaching religious purity can felicitously be placed under the same heading.

Mystics and visionaries, arguably also recipients of revealed knowledge, are equally ill-defined groups. Steven Katz and others claim that mysticism contains an inherently conservative function, in that individual mystics are mouthpieces for the religious traditions that they inherit. This obviously makes it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to determine what the purported common core might be behind these various traditions.[83]

Whatever the difficulties involved in establishing any finer subdivision into categories, a twofold distinction does seem appropriate. Firstly, one can distinguish the experience narratives of the religious virtuosi from those of the ordinary participants in the cultic milieu. Whereas a large number of people in the cultic milieu will attest to having had extraordinary experiences, doctrinal positions only evolve when experience narratives are constructed and propagated by religiously gifted people with a strong entrepreneurial spirit. As we shall see, this holds even for the ostensibly democratized religious milieu of the New Age.

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[82] Thus, within the multiethnic Ghimbala cult of Niger, adherents are subject to ecstatic experiences of an involuntary as well as a voluntary kind. Cf. Gibbal 1994. The religious virtuoso, the *gaw*, can enter this state at will, but can on occasion also be struck by the presence of the genii and experience difficulty in extricating himself. Is the *gaw* a shaman on one occasion and merely the victim of possession on the other?

[83] Perhaps for this reason, there is little or no agreement in the literature as to who should be called a mystic. Definitional purists have reduced the list of bona fide mystics almost in absurdum. Should union with the divine be a criterion? That would remove Hildegard of Bingen from the list. Should reports of personal experience be a prime prerequisite? That would exclude Eckhart. Cf. Weeks 1993: 3 f.

Secondly, one could set up a minimal dichotomy of these religious virtuosi. There are those who transmit a given corpus of knowledge, and there are those who are the purported recipients of revealed knowledge.[84] Beyond this, the subdivision of the second category into any number of labels seems in part to be motivated by academic traditions. The location in place and time of those practitioners who receive revealed knowledge makes them more or less liable to be called by one or the other of the many terms. A visionary in Africa will more likely be described in the scholarly literature as a diviner or as someone possessed. A Siberian or Native American will be classed as a shaman. A visionary within an Abrahamitic faith will be classified as a prophet or mystic. If he or she worked within an unchurched spirituality, terms such as medium or channel (or in some groups, contactee) would be the most likely. There is no intrinsically obvious reason why e.g. Joseph Smith should be classed as a prophet rather that as a member of any other category of entrepreneur of revealed religion.

What could unite the diverse individuals who fall under the description "religious virtuoso claiming to transmit revealed knowledge"? Beneath the considerable differences between recipients of revealed knowledge in various cultural settings, an attempt has been made to distil some traits common to prophetic figures. A phenomenological characteristic in five points has been proposed by Sheppard and Herbrechtsmeier.[85] The following list rephrases and summarizes their definition:

> 1. Prophets have conceived of their activity as the result of a personal divine commission. The transcendent source of the message has appointed them to transmit a revealed message to their community.
> 2. Religious traditions have evolved around the messages of the prophets, which have become part of a scriptural canon. Such writings also typically contain records of the prophets' activities.
> 3. Whereas later scholarship may see prophetic activity as embedded in the socio-cultural context of the community in which the prophet lives, the tradition around the prophetic utterances regards them as transcendent truths.
> 4. Prophetic messages typically contain elements of social criticism, although the precise nature of this criticism will vary.

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[84] This dichotomy is modeled on Weber's famous distinction between the priest and the prophet.

[85] Sheppard & Herbrechtsmeier 1987.

5. Prophets have performed the double role of maintaining and reforming the religious traditions within which they operated. Their demands for change can thus be phrased in terms of a return to what they considered to be the purity of an ancient tradition.

Seen from this general perspective, prophecy in the broad sense of Sheppard and Herbrechtsmeier has not abated in the modern age. Visionaries of many persuasions have proclaimed messages that fit with the above definitions. The Enlightenment started the trend toward a historical-critical approach to prophetic messages. Nevertheless, revelatory messages continued to be imparted to mesmerist somnambules and spiritualists, to Shakers and Mormons, and to the spokespersons of a number of alternative faiths. Thus, a person such as Friederike Hauffe, the early 19th century visionary "seeress of Prevorst", presented a complete cosmology while in a state of trance, and would etically qualify as a prophet.[86]

According to a succinct definition proposed by Susanne Riordan, channeling is "a process in which information is accessed and expressed by someone who is convinced that the source is not their ordinary consciousness".[87] There is a minor epistemological problem with Riordan's formulation as it stands: how could we possibly know what the channel is convinced of, except through their a posteriori description of the experience? Nevertheless, a slightly modified version will suffice for the present purposes: channels typically *present* their messages as if they came from a source separate from their ordinary consciousness, and were accessed from these sources in states of trance through the use of ouija boards, by clairvoyant perception, mystical vision, automatic writing and other psychic or paranormal means.[88] Riordan's definition is thus basically identical to the first element of Sheppard's and Herbrechtsmeier's fivefold model. As we will see, successful channels also comply with the remaining four elements. Accepting this definition, there appear to be no good prima facie grounds for distinguishing channeling from prophecy.

The present section will discuss the claim to accessing revealed knowledge as a discursive strategy. By referring to the privileged position one has as a recipient of higher wisdom, one attempts to

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[86] Kerner 1829.
[87] Riordan 1992: 105.
[88] For a phenomenological subdivision of channeling along similar lines, see Hanegraaff 1996: 27 ff.

legitimize one's specific doctrinal claims. What spokespersons present in their texts is no longer the result of their own religious creativity, but the wisdom of transcendent beings—angels, spirits, Jesus, perhaps even God himself. When the appeal to revealed insights is seen as a discursive strategy, two questions readily present themselves. Firstly, who are the recipients of privileged wisdom, i.e. how are they described in the movement texts? Secondly, what is the purported source of the messages received by modern prophets?

Finally, it can be briefly mentioned that there are several arenas where the three discursive strategies coalesce, where scientism, the construction of tradition and prophetic revelation are invoked in the same context. One example is the books of Barbara Marciniak and Barbara Hand Clow, which consist of channeled messages in which purportedly ancient prophecies based on the Mayan calendar and information allegedly received from space entities from the Pleiades are connected. Another such arena is crystal healing. The belief in the efficacy of certain gems and minerals can be traced to the readings of Edgar Cayce, dating from the 1920s to his death in 1944. Crystal healing is thus a distinctly recent theory. It has, however, been constructed as ancient and scientifically valid, and this "fact" comes from channeled sources.

The Status of Privileged Experience in the Esoteric Tradition

Perhaps no other forms of religious experience have received such positive appreciation as visionary experiences and mysticism. Many Esoteric spokespersons use their own mystical or visionary experiences as elements of their discursive strategies. This facet of experience will be explored in the following section. Here, we will briefly assess another side of mysticism: how Esoteric movement texts interpret and strategically use the fact that mystical and visionary experiences are reported from a variety of religious traditions.

Steven Katz offers a typology of such interpretations of revelatory states.[89] According to Katz, there have been three basic approaches in the understanding of mysticism. The first interpretive framework claims that there is a fundamental unity in all mysticism, compared to which observable differences are mere details. This analysis is the

[89] Katz 1978. It should be stressed that this is a typology of *interpretations*, not a typology of mystical states.

foundation of the concept of a *philosophia perennis*. The second framework claims that there are significant differences in the way mystical experiences are interpreted in various religions, but that these are divergent ways of understanding what is essentially the same experience. The third position constructs a typology with a few classes of mystical experience into which all reported forms of mystical experience can be classified. This tripartite scheme of hermeneutic strategies can be used as a simple analytical tool in appraising the views on privileged experience expressed in Esoteric movement texts.[90]

A truly value-free typology of mystical experience would probably be devastating to an apologetic argument. If the Christian theist and the Vedantic non-theist have equally "genuine" experiences, all religious truths are relative. One solution to this dilemma is to adopt a heresiological hermeneutic. Mystical experiences do differ, but these differences are to be understood as a difference between "true" and "false" revelation. Perhaps surprisingly, considering the vested interest of theosophy in the concept of a *philosophia perennis*, Blavatsky (writing as Koot Hoomi) recognizes that there are fundamental differences between the accounts of various mystics. Blavatsky/Koot Hoomi, however, adopts a heresiological argument. Not only are there better and worse accounts of the underlying single truth behind all mystical experience. Several reasons are indicated to explain why truth cannot be transmitted by every mystic with equal fidelity:

> In reference to your wonder that the views of the three mystics "are far from being identical", what does the fact prove? Were they instructed by *disembodied*, pure and wise Spirits—even by those at one remove from our earth on the higher plane—would not the teachings be identical? [—] if in the different spheres contradictory doctrines are propounded, these doctrines cannot contain the Truth, for Truth is *One*, and cannot admit of diametrically opposite views; and pure Spirits who see it *as it is*, with the veil of matter entirely withdrawn from it—cannot err [—] if we admit the fact of various or different agencies (individual Brothers for instance) endeavoring to develop the *Egos* of different

[90] Katz's own view constitutes a fourth approach, whereby experience and interpretation cannot be distinguished. Katz elaborates on the hypothesis that this complex of experience and interpretation is as varied as the religious cultures within which each mystic lives. For the purposes of the present discussion, this fourth alternative can be omitted. Such an approach goes counter to the universalistic claims of the Esoteric Tradition, is therefore distinctly non-apologetic and is to the best of my knowledge never referred to in Esoteric literature.

> individuals, without subjecting their wills to their own (as it is forbidden) but by availing themselves of their physical, moral and intellectual idiosyncrasies; if we add to this the countless kosmical influences which distort and deflect all efforts to achieve definite purposes: if we remember, moreover, the direct hostility of the Brethren of the Shadow always on the watch to perplex and haze the neophyte's brain, I think we shall have no difficulty in understanding how even a definite spiritual advance may to a certain extent lead different individuals to apparently different conclusions and theories.[91]

The above passage specifically purports to explain the divergence of opinion between the emerging theosophical doctrine and the contemporary spiritualist doctrines of Stainton Moses. Mahatma letter No. 48 takes up the same discussion once again, and specifies the "moral and intellectual idiosyncrasies" that make Stainton Moses' revelations less trustworthy.[92] His meat-eating diet and drinking habits prevented him from gaining access to Truth.

Post-theosophical spokespersons constructed similar arguments to prove that their own revelations were genuine while those of other spokespersons, including Madame Blavatsky, were flawed. Rudolf Steiner is intent on upholding the difference between true and false clairvoyance. His own method is scientific, whereas others are illusory: "anyone wanting to speak about esoteric science must keep a sharp eye out for all the distractions and illusions that can arise from conjecturing about the revealed mysteries of the world without approaching them scientifically".[93] Alice Bailey, in turn, only once mentions Rudolf Steiner, and then only to reject one of anthroposophy's specific claims: "I differ somewhat concerning the periods indicated by such occult teachers as Steiner, for though the seven year cycles have their place, the division is apt to be over-applied".[94] Considering that Steiner was one of the most successful near-contemporary competitors of Bailey's, it seems striking that Bailey barely acknowledges his existence. The American lineage, in turn, rejects the teachings of Alice Bailey. One of the publications issued by the Church Universal and Triumphant explains:

> In the past we have had to withdraw our support from those who were given the opportunity to represent us. The one who for a time

[91] ML No. 9, p. 49. Emphases in the original.
[92] ML No. 48, p. 272.
[93] Steiner *An Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 16.
[94] Bailey *Education in the New Age*, p. 8.

> had the opportunity of representing the master Djwal Kul soon lost that authority through intellectual pride and the brittleness of the lower mental body, which can never be the channel of the mind of God. Thus I expose to you the false teachings subtly woven into the work of Alice Bailey, whose failure to surrender totally rendered her unfit as an instrument of the Tibetan Master.[95]

Such blatantly heresiological accounts are no longer as obviously available within the considerably more individualistic New Age community. Every person's right to his or her experience is repeatedly affirmed. The following passage is a modern account of the reasons for mutually contradicting revelations:

> It would be impossible to answer the question of the "true" system. All would be true to the extent to which people at their level of growth support them. However, they would all be untrue if they were not truly experienced. They would only be reflections. Symbols are never absolute. They are bound to time and space and, therefore, to cultural experiences.[96]

Experience can be supported by what could be called first-order claims: the source of the experience is a higher being, while the message embodied in the experience is true. This is typical of theosophy and of most post-theosophical positions. Anthroposophists will admit in theory that Steiner's clairvoyant faculties were not infallible. In practice, however, anthroposophy is clearly based on the assumption that Steiner revealed a scientifically accurate as well as objectively true picture of spiritual realities. Experience can also be supported by second-order claims. Even if the source may not actually be an entity endowed with higher wisdom, even if it is not an unproblematic representation of an objective reality, the message may still be "true" in a pragmatic sense. It may be helpful in the lives of individuals who find that the message rings true. It is this second-order defense that one finds in texts such as Dalichow and Booth's *Aura-Soma*, quoted above.

As a philosophical position, such a pragmatic view of religion dates back at least to William James.[97] Thus, for James, theism is prefer-

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[95] Kuthumi 1976: 28.

[96] Dalichow & Booth *Aura-Soma*, pp. 54 f.

[97] As is well known, William James was in turn indebted to Charles Sanders Peirce for the term pragmatism. However, Peirce's concept of pragmatism is distinct from James'. To simplify, Peirce was concerned with questions of meaning and truth, James with the usefulness of beliefs. Peirce actively distanced himself from this aspect of James' work.

able to materialism, because theism is more morally useful. Therefore, theism is pragmatically "true". This pragmatic concept of James' was adopted by Carl Jung, who explicitly claimed that all religious experiences are true to the extent that they are integrated into the experiencer's life. If a Pueblo Indian believes that the Sun is God, that is the truth—for him. And if Saint Augustine claimed that the Sun is not God but a material object created by God, that is also true—for him.[98]

In the Modern Esoteric Tradition, the decisive step toward pragmatism was taken by Alice Bailey. One finds a clear premonition of the individualistic, second-order New Age position in quotes such as the following:

> In spiritual issues, names, personalities, and the voice of external authority, hold small place. That alone is a safe guide which holds its warranty from inner recognition and inner direction. It is not, therefore, material whether the reader receive the message of these pages as a spiritual appeal in an idealistic setting, a presentation of alleged facts, or a theory evolved by one student and presented for the consideration of fellow students. To each it is offered for whatever of inner response it may evoke, for whatever of inspiration and of light it may bring.[99]

Pragmatism leads to certain paradoxes. Even within the overtly individualistic New Age, there is still an underlying if muted *de facto* hierarchy. There are systems purveyed by people of lower as well as higher levels of spiritual growth. In praxis, some revealed messages are more highly appreciated than others. In theory, however, spokespersons of the New Age can insist that whatever rings true to the reader is "true". Even writers within the New Age culture sometimes perceive such a position as being problematic. Michael Brown has discussed the strategies employed by channelers when confronted with the existence of rivals channeling the same entities, strategies that range from direct co-operation under a jointly administered foundation, via mild tolerance, to defending one's sole right to channeling a certain entity by means of trademarking and copyrighting.[100]

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[98] The example of the Pueblo Indian and Saint Augustine can be found in Jung CW 18, § 688. This text is a transcript of a public lecture; Jung is then asked (in § 689) whether the beliefs of the committed Nazi or Moslem [sic!] are also true in this sense of the word and, rather puzzlingly, answers (§ 690) that "Gott ist furchtbar; der lebendige Gott ist lebendige Furcht. Ich sehe es als ein Instrument an".

[99] Bailey *Initiation Human and Solar*, pp. 1 f.

[100] Brown 1997: 158 ff.

There are obvious contradictions inherent in a professed tolerance for differing opinions on the one hand, and a structured system of revealed rituals and doctrines on the other. The difficulties in solving such contradictions within the New Age culture can be exemplified through Reiki healing. Since Reiki is a ritualized laying on of hands, the ability to heal through Reiki is, in theory, not a question of skill or knowledge. Reiki is said to be a universal life force for which the healer merely acts as a channel. Nevertheless, a distinct boundary is drawn between Reiki and other forms of ritualized laying on of hands. The right to call oneself a Reiki healer is passed on through a chain of masters and adepts, via a ritual of initiation. From the stage of beginner to that of master, the adept typically passes a number of clearly predefined stages. At the highest stage, the Reiki Master has the right to initiate other adepts. In this way a chain of succession has been established, going back to the semi-legendary Japanese founder Mikao Usui.[101]

For the inner circle of practitioners for whom Reiki, sociologically speaking, functions as a religious movement, Reiki has the structure of a hierarchically constituted pyramid. Over and above the three basic stages of initiation from healer to master are those privileged few who were directly initiated as masters by Hawayo Takata, and who are therefore the principal recipients of the charisma of the founder. In a manner familiar to the historian of religions, creative individuals within this pyramidal structure have broken out of the hierarchy and created their own organizations around methods of healing said to be similar to, but not identical with, the original form. As noted in chapter 4, approximately thirty different forms of healing based on Reiki exist today. Some of these schisms or innovations are motivated by finding (or inventing) other purported historical roots than those accepted by the Usui Reiki lineage. Others are founded on the revelatory insights of post-Takata practitioners. The founder of a new form of healing may thus claim that the practice, as performed so far, is incomplete. What looks like an innovation is said to actually be the manifestation of knowledge that has

[101] The chain of succession is important within the Reiki community and establishes the legitimacy of the individual healer. See e.g. Honervogt *Reiki*, who is careful to give the details of her own link back to the founding father: Mikao Usui initiated Chujiro Hayashi who initiated Hawayo Takata who initiated Mary McFadyen who initiated Himani who initiated Tanmaya Honervogt.

only now been revealed. Thus, Tera-Mai™ Reiki is one of the newer branches of the Reiki tree, but bases its claims to legitimacy on the revelation of ancient wisdom.[102] Its founder Kathleen Milner, originally a Reiki master in the Usui lineage, claims to have received a series of revelations beginning in February 1991. Several "highly evolved beings from an inner plane" revealed to Milner that there were higher vibrations of Reiki that had in fact been known to Usui and Takata, but had only now been made public. Perhaps in an attempt to prevent further schisms within the new lineage, Kathleen Milner has trademarked the term Tera-Mai.

The Source of Wisdom

The period from theosophy to the New Age has seen a proliferation of sources from which revealed wisdom is said to come. Whereas theosophy and the earlier post-theosophical positions primarily acknowledged two types of sources—the Masters and the Akashic record, a kind of universal memory bank where all historical events have left traces—the boom of channeling since the inception of the New Age has introduced a host of new beings. Although some of the purported sources of channeled messages continue to be recognizable products of the theosophical lineage while others are modernized versions of pseudo-Dionysius' angelic hierarchy, present-day channelers claim to have psychic contact with a bewildering array of entities including dolphins, animals, guides, their own Higher Self, various beings of light, deceased humans, angels and archangels, assorted disembodied entities, space brothers, Jesus and God himself.

A perusal of the material shows that the ascription to various sources has implications for creating and differentiating specific positions within the broader Esoteric discourse. Common or similar themes will often be expressed with a different vocabulary, with different emphases and with different ideological agendas, by ascribing one's own messages to sources such as Ascended Masters, the Akashic record, space commander Ashtar or a collective of entities known as Michael. Some of the most recent channeled material, however, seems to have entered a new and more eclectic phase. The same channels can now purport to receive messages from Jesus, the Ascended Masters and space beings. The differences between

[102] See web site www.ozemail.com.au/~atlrise/teramai/kathleen.html.

Christianizing, post-theosophical and UFO-inspired lore appear to be shrinking.

Theosophical Masters

There are as many biographies of Helena Blavatsky as there are biographers. The story of the birth of the Masters has been told several times, and the following account is a summary of existing scholarship.[103] If one is to believe the recollections of Blavatsky herself, the Mahatmas entered the Esoteric Tradition in the summer of 1851, on her twentieth birthday. Blavatsky had purchased a sketchbook, and on its first page wrote the cryptic entry "Nuit mémorable. Certaine nuit par un clair de lune qui se couchait à—Ramsgate, 12 août, 1851—lorsque je rencontrai le maître de mes rêves". The words could equally well have referred to a romantic interlude, but were later interpreted to mean a first encounter with one of the Mahatmas, Morya.

A more reliable well-spring for the myth of the Masters is her allegation of contacts with an occult fraternity, the Brotherhood of Luxor. In the spring of 1875, Blavatsky was beginning to actively distance herself from spiritualism. She began to support a failing Boston paper for the spiritualist milieu, the *Spiritual Scientist*. This paper was to disseminate Blavatsky's opinions. Her collaborator, Henry Olcott, was informed that her work with the *Spiritual Scientist* was sponsored by seven Egyptian adepts of a universal mystic brotherhood. In early May that year, Olcott received his first letter from one of these adepts, Tuitit Bey. Several subsequent letters were signed Serapis Bey.[104] Olcott understood these messages as instructions from the African section of the Occult Brotherhood.[105]

The letters from Tuitit and Serapis have little doctrinal content, consist mainly of exhortations and practical advice to Olcott, and seem to have been intended for Olcott's eyes only. They were only published by C. Jinarajadasa half a century later, as *Letters from the Masters of Wisdom*. When Blavatsky set out to write her first book, *Isis Unveiled*, she told Olcott that she received the material for this

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[103] The various biographies of Blavatsky have been characterized as "all of them flawed"; Prothero 1996: xx. When versions differ, I have followed Meade 1980 as the most voluminous biography written by a non-believer. Cranston 1993 is more detailed, but has a considerable hagiographical bent that makes her work difficult to use.

[104] Meade 1980: 140 ff.

[105] Olcott 1895, I:17 f.

work from "her Teachers,—the 'Brothers', 'Adepts', 'Sages', 'Masters', as they have been variously called".[106] Again, this information was directed personally at Olcott, who included it in his reminiscences.

The turning point that converted the Mahatmas from a rather peripheral element in theosophical lore into an official doctrine and central discursive strategy was when the Masters began a voluminous correspondence with Alfred P. Sinnett.[107] One hundred twenty such letters were written between 1880 and 1884. They cover large parts of the occult cosmology that would soon become the basis of a revised theosophy, a doctrinal statement which would largely supersede *Isis Unveiled*. Sinnett attempted to formulate the doctrines of this disparate material in his *Esoteric Buddhism*, published in 1883. Blavatsky countered by expounding the new doctrines in considerably more detail in her 1888 magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*. Her introduction to this book acknowledges Sinnett's efforts in the following, somewhat condescending words:

> Since the appearance of Theosophical literature in England, it has become customary to call its teachings "Esoteric Buddhism." And, having become a habit—as an old proverb based on daily experience has it—"Error runs down an inclined plane, while Truth has to laboriously climb its way up hill." [—] The esoteric truths, presented in Mr. Sinnett's work, had ceased to be esoteric from the very moment they were made public; nor did it contain the religion of Buddha, but simply a few tenets from a hitherto hidden teaching which are now supplemented by many more, enlarged and explained in the present volumes.[108]

However, Blavatsky is reticent in supplying information about these Masters. It became a major project for several post-Blavatskian authors to either accept and elaborate on these Masters, or to reject them in favor of some more appealing source of revealed knowledge.

Blavatsky's Masters were the source of a wealth of esoteric information, but were thus not in themselves a major source of mythic creativity. Although the doctrines of *The Secret Doctrine* were said to be derived from letters written by Morya and Koot Hoomi, the

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[106] Olcott 1895, I:208.

[107] Accusations of fraud surrounded this correspondence, with claims being made that the letters were written by Blavatsky herself, or by accomplices. In orthodox theosophical historiography, these letters are still defended as the genuine products of the Mahatmas. Theosophical apologists such as Sylvia Cranston have attempted to vindicate her claims. Cf. Cranston 1993: 265 ff.

[108] SD I:xvii.

Masters themselves appear only marginally in this work. The Masters lore would be considerably amplified in the neo-theosophy of Charles Leadbeater. Leadbeater noted that "there has been among Theosophical students a great deal of vagueness and uncertainty about the Masters",[109] and set out to rectify this problem by devoting an entire volume, *The Masters and the Path*, to them. His writings represent an apotheosis of myth-making on these Masters. As an inheritance of a nineteenth century evolutionist framework, all life forms are connected by what could be called a great chain of being. Animals evolve into human beings. Human beings in turn evolve from lower stages of spirituality into higher stages. Among the most highly evolved humans who retain a physical form visible to the uninitiated, Leadbeater cites the great men (sic!) of art, music, literature, science, philosophy, philanthropy, statecraft and religion. The Masters are regarded as beings who have evolved even further, and who have lost the need for any material form in the course of this process, yet choose to don a physical body in order to interact with ordinary humans.

Like Blavatsky, Leadbeater stresses how ordinary this physical appearance can be. The Masters have no overt characteristics that could infallibly distinguish them from other men. Three Masters, Kuthumi, Morya and Djwal Kul, reside in an unspecified valley in Tibet. They live in houses, described in the most fastidious detail by Leadbeater—who even includes architects' ground plans in his writings. They have jobs, Kuthumi being the custodian of an occult subterranean museum.[110] As for physical work, the Masters employ laborers to tend their gardens, as would any colonial gentleman. Nevertheless, external appearances are deceptive. The Masters also belong to an occult hierarchy, the details of which are lavishly described by Leadbeater. Their physical manifestations are, in fact, bodies temporarily adopted by the Masters. Kuthumi, for instance, merely happens to wear the body of a Kashmiri Brahman.

A utopian tone enters Leadbeater's description as he relates that the present time is particularly propitious for entering into a discipleship under the Masters. The steps necessary to attain adepthood are outlined in *At the Feet of the Master*, purportedly the work of Jiddu Krishnamurti but almost certainly ghost-written by Leadbeater.[111] At

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[109] Leadbeater *The Masters and the Path*, p. 21.
[110] Leadbeater *The Masters and the Path*, p. 23.
[111] To be precise, theosophical lore states that the contents of the book were dic-

the present time, the Masters involve themselves in the spiritual progress of mankind, making it possible to compress into a few lifetimes an evolution that otherwise would take many thousands of years to accomplish.[112] The Masters reveal themselves to those who take the first steps toward discipleship, for instance by sending a "helpful thought" or a "steady stream of magnetism".[113] The Masters would appear to have acquired a saintly or even semi-divine status.

In the various post-theosophical positions, lore on the theosophical Masters has developed along several distinct lines. Some positions place little or no emphasis on them. Rudolf Steiner posits a hierarchy of divine beings between man and the absolute but, perhaps due to his Christian syncretism, identifies these with angels, archangels and other beings of a platonized Christian worldview. The Masters, with their abode in the Himalayas and their Indian or at least Oriental names, must have appeared rather suspect to the Christian esotericist Steiner. His revelations are unusual among post-theosophical positions in not appearing to ascribe the Masters any role whatsoever—the ultimate in low level mythologizing. They do not appear in the basic works analyzed here, nor are they listed in Arenson's master index to Steiner's lectures, the *Leitfaden durch 50 Vortragszyklen Rudolf Steiners*.

It is perhaps more surprising that an equally devout Christian esotericist, Edgar Cayce, was in fact able to make room for them. The theosophical Masters, especially in the neo-theosophical divinized form, are, of course, particularly difficult to consolidate with Biblical monotheism. Cayce accepted the existence of a Great White Brotherhood. Together with angels and archangels, they form a hierarchy of spiritual beings. Only Jesus, however, is a Master of Masters. The role of these intermediate beings is down-played, as in the following exchange:

> Q: Who are the Masters directly in charge? Is Saint Germain—[114]
> A: (interrupting) Those that are directed by the Lord of lords, the King of kings, Him that came that ye might be one with the Father.

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tated by the Master Kuthumi to Krishnamurti, who visited the Master every evening in his astral body (see Leadbeater *The Masters and the Path*, pp. 54 ff.). A secular historian notes that Krishnamurti was a boy of thirteen when *At the Feet of the Master* was written, and draws the conclusion that the book indeed contains someone else's words.

[112] Leadbeater *The Masters and the Path*, p. 50.

[113] Leadbeater *The Masters and the Path*, p. 60.

[114] The Cayce readings are sorted by a code number, not by date. Most probably,

Q: Is Saint Germain among them? Who is Halaliel?
A: These are all but messengers of the Most High. [—]
Q: Is Saint Germain among them?
A: When needed.[115]

Interestingly, Cayce claimed that Virginia Beach, his home town after 1931, was the center of the White Brotherhood.[116]

In neither Steiner's or Cayce's positions are references to these Masters important discursive strategies—the claim to legitimacy lies elsewhere. These strategies constitute a low level mythologizing of the Masters. A different strategy is to accept the Masters as a vital part of one's own teachings, but to give a different picture of the hierarchy than that of orthodox theosophy. In these positions, the teachings themselves are dictated by the Masters. Their existence is a crucial discursive strategy. Firstly, the existence of the Masters is, of course, an indispensable prerequisite if the teachings are to have any validity. Secondly, the Masters become the focus of myth. Several post-theosophical positions have produced an especially elaborate mythology, with numerous details concerning the previous lives of the Masters and their respective roles in the spiritual evolution of mankind. One set of positions, from Charles Leadbeater to Alice Bailey, elaborates the Masters myth with almost obsessive attention to hierarchy and status. Another, the American post-theosophical lineage, multiplies the number of Masters indefinitely.

Alice Bailey adopted the neo-theosophical concept of quasi-divine Masters, but introduced a significant shift in the composition of the pantheon by granting a special status to the Master Djwhal Khul or D.K. This person already makes his appearance in the Mahatma Letters. Djul Khool (as he is known there) is, however, a minor character. Only one of the Mahatma Letters is purportedly composed by him. He is mentioned as a chela or disciple, and attains masterhood as the letters progress. Leadbeater agrees, claiming that D.K. attained adeptship "only a few years ago".[117] In the official founding legend, as recorded in her writings, D.K. states that during November 1919 he contacted Alice Bailey telepathically and asked

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the reference to Saint Germain is due to the highly publicized I AM movement that was founded seven years after Cayce's meeting with the occult.

[115] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 10.

[116] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 445.

[117] Leadbeater *The Masters and the Path*, p. 40.

her to do some writing and publish some books. She refused because she did not believe in the so-called occult literature being published. Shortly thereafter, following another telepathic contact, she changed her mind, and between 1919 and her death in 1949 recorded what is known among her followers as Ageless Wisdom. As for more mundane influences, Alice Bailey freely acknowledges the importance of her studies of Helena Blavatsky's writings.

Alice Bailey produced a Masters myth that rests heavily on that of Charles Leadbeater, but goes beyond it in mythic elaboration. The Masters have human bodies, and in their aspects as quasi-human entities have lives that resemble those of ordinary humans. One hears echoes of Leadbeater's nearly contemporaneous *The Masters and the Path* in statements such as the following:

> The Master Morya, Who is one of the best known of the Eastern adepts, and Who numbers amongst His pupils a large number of Europeans and Americans, is a Rajput Prince, and for many decades held an authoritative position in Indian affairs. He works in close co-operation with the Manu, and will Himself eventually hold office as the Manu of the sixth root-race. He dwells, as does His Brother, the Master K.H., at Shigatse in the Himalayas, and is a well-known figure to the inhabitants of that far-away village. He is a man of tall and commanding presence, dark hair and beard and dark eyes, and might be considered stern were it not for the expression that lies in His eyes.[118]

More important in Bailey's conception of the world, however, is the superhuman aspect of the Masters. They form a strict hierarchy, the details of which are expounded in great and at times bewildering detail. Each Master occupies a specific position within the hierarchy, and administers a closely delimited sector of the workings of the cosmos. Each Master is embodied in a human vehicle, which is cast aside when the passage of time has made it too frail. Specific Masters may therefore be known under a number of different manifestations. Considering the complexity of the ensuing system of levels, Masters and spiritual functions, a complete survey of the pantheon of Masters is well beyond the scope of the present study. Since the Tibetan Master Djwhal Khul is the reported source of practically all her teachings, the appeal to the wisdom of this particular Master is the central discursive strategy of Bailey's position. Who is D.K., according to Bailey, and what role does D.K. play in her pantheon?

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[118] Bailey *Initiation Human and Solar*, p. 54.

A lengthy quote will show the properties that Bailey claimed for this previously minor character:

> The Master Djwhal Khul, or the Master D.K. as He is frequently called, is another adept on the second Ray of Love-Wisdom. He is the latest of the adepts taking initiation, having taken the fifth initiation in 1875, and is therefore occupying the same body in which He took the initiation, most of the other Masters having taken the fifth initiation whilst occupying earlier vehicles. His body is not a young one, and He is a Tibetan. He is very devoted to the Master K.H. and occupies a little house not far distant from the larger one of the Master, and from His willingness to serve and to do anything that has to be done, He has been called "the Messenger of the Masters." He is profoundly learned, and knows more about the rays and planetary Hierarchies of the solar system than anyone else in the ranks of the Masters. He works with those who heal, and co-operates unknown and unseen with the seekers after truth in the world's great laboratories, with all who definitely aim at the healing and solacing of the world, and with the great philanthropic world movements such as the Red Cross. He occupies Himself with various pupils of different Masters who can profit by His instruction, and within the last ten years has relieved both the Master M. and the Master K.H. of a good deal of Their teaching work, taking over from Them for certain stated times some of Their pupils and disciples. He works largely, too, with certain groups of the devas of the ethers, who are the healing devas, and who thus collaborate with Him in the work of healing some of the physical ills of humanity. He it was Who dictated a large part of that momentous book The Secret Doctrine, and Who showed to H.P. Blavatsky many of the pictures, and gave her much of the data that is to be found in that book.[119]

The Masters, once a shadowy collective of wise teachers, have become endowed with detailed biographical data.

New Sources of Revelation

The theosophical Masters continue to exist in New Age literature, but their role is oddly muted. It is as if the American lineage of the post-theosophical tradition had a near-monopoly on them. Whereas the I AM religious activity and the Church Universal and Triumphant heavily emphasize the Ascended Masters, lists and directories of channelers (and their purported sources) on the Internet present a bewildering array of entities. In the New Age, Morya and Kuthumi have become more or less passé.

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[119] Bailey *Initiation Human and Solar*, pp. 57 f.

A number of mutually incompatible systems claim to have Jesus as their source. The arguably best known, *A Course in Miracles*, will be discussed below. Eric Klein and other authors of literature on the process of Ascension refer to Jesus.[120] Jesus in his space brother guise as Sananda has been channeled extensively since the early 1950s, when Dorothy Martin received messages from "Sananda of the planet Clarion" through automatic writing. Other writers, notably Steiner and Cayce, refer to the Akashic record as their source of information. Angels and Archangels have also been the purported sources of various messages. One of the texts consulted for the present study even builds heavily on step-by-step instructions in how to receive channeled information from one's angels.[121] Another text is replete with rituals intended to establish contact with angels through psychic means, both in order to receive messages and, perhaps more originally, to reverse the direction of communication and send letters to the angels explaining what one wishes to effect or change in life.[122]

Besides those mentioned above, channeled materials from the 1970s up to the present purport to come from a large variety of sources. A few have become well-known through books, the efforts of specific channels or of a number of people claiming to transmit messages from the same source. Among them one finds entities named Ambres, Bartholomew, John, Lazaris, Limitless Love and Truth, Mafu, Orin, P'taah, Ramala, Ramtha and Seth. One even finds messages channeled from God. Perhaps the most interesting from the point of view of mythic elaboration are the messages purportedly coming from extraterrestrial beings, since these have been channeled by a large number of independently operating mediums and have given rise to a veritable exomythology. These will be focused on later in this section.

The main shift in the Esoteric mythology that deals with the source of revealed knowledge is the change from beings whose existence is, at least in theory, empirically verifiable to sources that are not. The

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[120] The Ascension is commonly described as a change from our present third-dimensional existence to a higher dimension. The precise effects of such a process are often cryptically alluded to, but the implication is that we will gain increasing paranormal powers and will finally transcend ordinary constraints of time and space entirely. Klein *Crystal Stair* and Solara *Star-Borne* are movement texts filled with Ascension lore, but there are other channels who present similar cosmologies.

[121] Daniel et al. *Ask Your Angels*.

[122] Lynn Taylor *Messengers of Light*, especially part III; for the concept of angel letters, see ch. 13.

Tibetan Masters still have a place in Esoteric lore, but greater prominence is given to invisible spiritual guides, whose messages are received telepathically. The belief that beings from outer space intervene in human affairs by transmitting messages to their human channels effectively withdraws these messages and their sources from the scrutiny of unsympathetic outsiders.[123]

Messages from aliens precede both the rise of the Masters mythology and the current wave of interest in UFOs. The Swedish Christian esotericist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) claimed to have spoken with spirits from other planets. Scattered among the varied contents of his magnum opus, *Arcana caelestia*, Swedenborg reveals details of life in the solar system. He informs his readers that the inhabitants of Jupiter walk with an extremely peculiar gait, bending sideways at every third step;[124] that Saturnians quite unceremoniously dispose of their dead by dumping them in the nearest forest;[125] and that the beings who live on the Moon speak by making belching sounds at each other. Besides these rather peculiar details, however, there is one facet of Swedenborg's teachings that many contemporary UFO enthusiasts would recognize. The denizens of space resemble us, but are spiritually much more evolved, and lead a life of pristine innocence[126] that has been compared to the utopia of Swedenborg's near-contemporary Rousseau.[127]

Whereas classical Western traditions, Christian as well as Aristotelian, gave our own planet a unique position within the cosmos, nineteenth century religious creativity typically gave heed to the greatly expanded worldview of contemporary science. Outside the Esoteric Tradition as defined here, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints or Mormons are perhaps the best-known examples. The revelations received by Joseph Smith and expanded on by several Mormon theologians revealed a cosmos filled with inhabited worlds, each presided over by a deity. The God revered by mainstream Christians and

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[123] The existence of physically embodied Masters was the subject of the controversies around Helena Blavatsky and the publication of the Hodgson Report in 1884. Although there are equally skeptical books on the UFO phenomenon and on channeling, the existence of aliens and the possibility of receiving telepathic messages are hardly amenable to the same direct disconfirmation as Blavatsky's occult phenomena.

[124] Swedenborg 1983–, § 8541.

[125] Swedenborg 1983–, § 8947.

[126] Swedenborg 1983–, § 10159 ff.

[127] Lagercrantz 1996: 116.

Mormons alike is reduced to the local maker and ruler of our own world. Tales of extraterrestrial beings also spread in spiritualist circles, perhaps the most celebrated case being the medium Helene Smith described by psychologist Théodore Flournoy at the turn of the twentieth century.[128] Smith described her visions of the planet Mars, delivered specimens of Martian language (which her skeptical biographer Flournoy analyzed as a limited, home-made vocabulary structured according to the rules of French syntax) and painted scenes of purple Martian vegetation under a green sky.

With the advent of the theosophical Masters and the spread of theosophical lore throughout most of the esotericist community at the end of the 19th century, the Masters, rather than extraterrestrials, were the focus of mythic elaboration. However, the identification of the theosophical Brotherhood with beings from space is, in a sense, prefigured in second-generation theosophical literature. The beings that rule our Earth are a subgroup of the vast hierarchy that presides over the cosmos. Charles Leadbeater is explicit on the question of extraterrestrials. Speaking of the brotherhood of all living beings, he explains:

> We see that it is not merely a brotherhood of humanity, or even of life in this Chain of worlds, but that all Chains in the Solar System mutually interact and help one another. I have no direct evidence that Solar Systems give assistance to each other in such ways, but I should imagine it by analogy to be almost certain that even that is done. At least I have myself seen Visitors from other systems.[129]

The shift from the Masters back to the extraterrestrial intelligences was largely the effect of the influence of George Adamski. Adamski (1891–1965) was the first well-known (and perhaps still the best known) contactee. His first book, *Flying Saucers have Landed*, co-written with Desmond Leslie, was published in 1953. There, Adamski presented his claims of having met humanoid creatures from other worlds and of having received spiritual teachings from them. However, long before he became the most publicized contactee of the 1950s, Adamski had been interested in various forms of post-theosophical esotericism.[130] He even founded an organization, the Royal Order

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[128] Flournoy 1900.

[129] Leadbeater *The Masters and the Path*, pp. 277 f.

[130] The following biographical data on Adamski are taken from Rothstein 2000: 72 ff.

of Tibet, to disseminate the messages of the Masters. In the 1940s, he wrote a short story revolving around spiritual contacts with mysterious, highly evolved beings. A decade later, the same claims would once again be presented, but this time as biographical facts of Adamski's own life. Other texts from the period of his involvement with The Royal Order of Tibet were reworked, and the Oriental Mahatmas were replaced with aliens.

Adamski's success was the start of a boom for UFO-related religiosity, the outcome of what began as a contemporary legend with few if any spiritual overtones. The story of secular UFO mythology, from the legendary "flying saucer" sightings of Kenneth Arnold in 1947 up to the present day, has been told and retold many times and need occupy us no further.[131] UFO lore and Esoteric teachings begin to intersect with the early contactee phenomenon of the 1950s. Select individuals not only claimed to have observed UFOs, but to have been taken aboard. Others explained that they had been contacted telepathically, or had met Venusians who lived incognito among humans. One set of contactees/abductees remains far removed from the Esoteric mainstream. These are people who claim to have been forcibly abducted and subjected to humiliating and frightening experiments by aliens. In this genre of legends, those who "remember" such experiences variously claim to have received implants or to have had egg cells removed.[132] The other set concerns us here: these are contactees who claim that the aliens with whom they have been in contact were, on the contrary, wise and spiritually evolved beings, concerned for the welfare of our planet and its inhabitants. These positive contactee stories are frequently reminiscent of utopian narratives in general, and of theosophical mythology in particular.

Among the contactees who were influential in the aftermath of Adamski, one might mention George Hunt Williamson. Writing under the *nom de plume* of Brother Phillip, Williamson combined esoteric lore with the then new interest in "flying saucers". Williamson was involved in Soulcraft, an occult group centered on messages received through automatic writing. Daniel Fry is another early contactee. His alien contact, A-Ian, was stationed on Earth to help humanity,

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[131] A detailed review of the history of the UFO movement can be found in Peebles 1994.

[132] Among the apologetic literature, one finds Jacobs 1992 and Mack 1994; For a skeptical perspective see Klass 1989, Spanos 1996: 117 ff. and Matheson 1998.

a claim that Fry presented in several books. Fry founded an organization named Understanding to spread his message. Among the still active contactees with positive messages, one finds the Swiss writer Eduard "Billy" Meier, who claims to have contact with beings from the Pleiades. A religious movement has been organized around Billy Meier and his messages.[133] The early contactees generally knew each other and met at yearly gatherings at Giant Rock, near Landers, California.

Space beings sighted or intuited by contactees come in an array of forms, some of which have reached more lasting fame than Adamski's Venusian contact Orthon. Adamski, Fry and Meier all based their claims on physical contact with aliens, backing up these claims with photographs or video footage of alleged space crafts. Increasingly, however, messages from space beings are said to be received telepathically. The more frequently invoked include the collective of space beings known as the Ashtar Command. These beings entered occult lore in the early days of UFO channeling. In or around 1952, George Van Tassel, former aircraft inspector for the Lockheed company, began weekly Friday night channelings of UFO inhabitants.[134] Ashtar entered history in a series of channeled messages beginning in July 1952.[135] These messages were recorded in Van Tassel's book *I Rode a Flying Saucer*.[136]

Channeler Ken Carey was perhaps the first person claiming to transmit material from extraterrestrial intelligences to reach beyond the confines of the UFO subculture and influence a larger New Age audience. His first book, *Starseed Transmissions*, channeled in 1978–79, was highly acclaimed by several prominent figures of the American

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[133] Meier is presented in a highly critical book by Kal Korff, Korff 1995.

[134] *Fortean Times* issue 118, available on-line at www.forteantimes.com/artic/118/rock.html.

[135] Van Tassel 1952.

[136] The channeled messages resulted in further books; Van Tassel also founded the *College of Universal Wisdom* and began to publish a monthly magazine called *Proceedings*. There is an official web site dedicated to spreading Van Tassel's contactee messages, at www.georgevantassel.org. Since then, Ashtar has risen to become the head of a number of space beings. According to a statement on the official web site, the transition from Ashtar, in the singular, to the collective Ashtar Command was effected by a man named Robert Short, a friend of Van Tassel and editor of a 1950s UFO magazine called *Interplanetary News*. At present, various members of the Ashtar Command are channeled by individuals around the globe. Two of the most prolific channels publish the messages they receive under the adopted names Tuella and Tuieta. In their version of this UFO pantheon, the Ashtar Command consists of several named beings with distinctly defined roles.

New Age movement.[137] Since then, several groups of extraterrestrial entities have been claimed as sources of spiritual wisdom. One such purported extraterrestrial source to have received a following in the cultic milieu are the Pleiadians. The aforementioned Billy Meier seems to have been the first contactee to claim contact with beings from the Pleiades. Subsequent writers such as Barbara Marciniak and Elizabeth Hand Clow, whose books have been translated into a number of foreign languages and whose messages purportedly also come from wise beings from the Pleiades, claim to have had few physical sightings. Nearly all "contacts" with the Pleiadians have been of a mental or spiritual character. Like the Ashtar Command, the Pleiadians were thus brought to life by a highly publicized contactee, and have since been kept alive by new channels who attribute the information they receive to a source that they are familiar with through reading or personal acquaintance with previous channels.

Finally, Sirius has also been the attributed home of some of these sources of extraterrestrial wisdom. The interest in Sirius dates back to a widespread piece of contemporary anthropological lore, namely that the Dogon people of Mali know that Sirius is a double star.[138] This story was the basis of books such as Robert Temple's *The Sirius Mystery* (1976), which have argued that this knowledge must be due to contacts between denizens of Sirius and Dogon elders. Thus, in a flourish typical of the late modern context of the cultic milieu, the legitimacy of a source of revealed knowledge characteristic of the science fiction age is buttressed by appealing to a purported ancient tradition from Mali.

Some present-day channels who claim to receive messages from space beings once again make the same identification that Leadbeater did, but do so retrospectively: the theosophical Masters were in fact beings from space. Channeler Celeste Korsholm explains:

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[137] Melton et al. 1991: 40.

[138] It has been argued that this is a contemporary legend, based on an uncritical reading of ethnographic fieldwork carried out by Marcel Griaule. Peer criticism of Griaule's work is summarized in van Beek 1991. As for the Sirius legend, Van Beek speculates that Griaule, who had a documented interest in astronomy and a strong wish to find complex symbolic and mythic universes among the Dogon, questioned his informants in such an authoritarian and leading way that they assented to the ethnographer's wishes by describing Sirius as a double star, thus creating a new myth by confabulation.

> The Brother/Sisterhood of Light is a multi-dimensional, interplanetary, intergalactic organization of beings who choose to serve the divine cosmic plan in this universe. One dimension of the Brother/Sisterhood of Light consists of the Ascended Masters. These perfected beings have mastered third dimensional incarnations with love. They have evolved beyond the need to return to physical incarnations. They have ascended into higher levels of consciousness. Many Ascended Masters decide to return as teachers and guides for their younger brothers and sisters along the evolutionary path.
>
> The teaching branch of the Brotherhood works in many ways with many different channels to bring the higher spiritual wisdom to the mass consciousness. Right before World War II, the Masters knew that war was imminent. The Christ Council decided to release a great outpouring of love in a new universal prayer. They used Alice Bailey, a well known channel for the Theosophical Society, to record it in English words. We know this prayer as the Great Invocation.[139]

Whereas Korsholm and others claim that the Great White Brotherhood consists of various space beings, some channels believe that there is a kind of division of labor between two related hierarchies. Eric Klein lets Sananda, i.e. Jesus, explain that the Brotherhood consists of Masters who have chosen to incarnate on Earth, whereas the Ashtar Command is composed of non-terrestrial Masters.[140] Whatever the details, the eclecticism of the contemporary cultic milieu effaces the historical development of Masters myths and contactee lore, and makes the entire gamut of legends available to individual channelers.

The Nature of the Channeled Messages

The contents of revealed messages serve as part of the discursive strategy of experience. A new revealed message will be judged according to its coherence with earlier messages, which function as an implicit canon. A perusal of this canon reveals variations on a few common themes. The question of how these themes change over time and within the various positions would merit its own study. However, such an examination of the material would far exceed the scope of the present discussion.[141] A few salient points will be

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[139] From web site www.spiritweb.com/Spirit/masters-ets-angels.html.

[140] See web site spiritweb.org/Spirit/ascension-klein.html.

[141] Such a study would especially focus on the changes from earlier, post-theosophical revelations to the New Age. There are both continuities and significant differences. These changes include major shifts in focus, most importantly perhaps being the common New Age idea that we somehow create the world we live in.

discussed, to illustrate how homogeneous the various texts can be, despite the fact that they are transmitted from the most diverse purported sources and by a large variety of human channels. The present section will discuss the conformity of a common discourse, whereas the next, "The Source and the Message", will discuss the creation of some positions within that discourse.

Despite the bewildering array of sources of wisdom, there are enough common themes in much of the channeled material to identify a kind of New Age theology.[142] For a number of reasons, these texts claim, we have forgotten who we really are. We are not the material bodies, the limited beings that everyday experience tells us that we are. In reality, we are sparks of the divine, incarnated on this earthly plane but not of it. Many of these messages combine spirituality and psychology in their attempt to understand this forgetfulness. This may account for the fact that one channeled book claims to have the spirit of William James as its invisible source.[143] Perhaps it is fear that has blocked us from realizing our true nature. Or perhaps it is the dominance of a monolithic religion, the materialistic culture we live in or the limitations of rationality. The result of this forgetfulness is our feeling of separation from the divine, whether this divine is conceived as our own true nature, as an external Ground of Being, or both.

We create the world we live in. Our inner states are reflected in the outer world. The suffering and evil that we believe we see around us is a projection of our own fear, our forgetfulness. Perhaps, as *A Course in Miracles* would have it, everything we experience in everyday life is actually an illusion created by our egos. Since we have forgotten our true natures, we create a flawed reality. However, there are grounds for hope. We have incarnated again and again, learned

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Older positions are more apt to stress the details of the historical plan that we are all said to be part of, i.e. the spiritual evolution of mankind. However, older as well as newer revelations are typically self-contradictory on this point. We are all responsible for our actions, and our own actions in this life are considered to contribute to our fate in the next. Nevertheless, we are part of a grand historical narrative that has already been set out in advance. Generalizing somewhat, early positions stress the development of the macro-historical narrative, whereas New Age revelations emphasize the creative role of the individual. This shift can be interpreted as yet another effect of the drift towards democratization within the Esoteric Tradition.

[142] For the concept of a channeled worldview, cf. especially Riordan 1992.

[143] The spirit messages of William James were collected in a book by Jane Roberts, *The Afterdeath Journal of an American Philosopher*, published in 1978.

our spiritual lessons and are now ready for a great spiritual leap. To help us, angels, devas, dolphins or extraterrestrials are ready to come to our aid. Even Jesus or God himself has begun to contact gifted psychics among us in order to prepare us for this evolutionary step. There are now ways for us to shift our perception, in order to become aware of what magnificent beings we actually are. This bare-bones gnosticizing myth is expressed in a variety of terminologies. Different channeled messages emphasize different parts of this basic framework. As we shall see, however, even the most seemingly extravagant mythologies, in which aliens fight out intergalactic battles with humans as their instruments, or in which the details of our past lives are spelt out in painstaking detail, are basically elaborations on this U-shaped time-line of falling into spiritual sleep and awakening to our own true divinity.

Besides a melioristic perspective and a call for self-improvement, revealed teachings often contain a mythological component. Several channeled New Age teachings are low on cosmological content, *A Course in Miracles* being an apt example. On the other hand, theosophy and several post-theosophical systems including certain varieties of New Age material (especially texts that deal with UFO lore) carry a considerable fund of Esoteric cosmogony, cosmology and historiography. Among the many more or less unorthodox claims reported in the New Age literature, one finds statements such as the following: the earth is hollow, and is peopled with various species of beings;[144] the Earth will soon reverse its poles;[145] the Earth is surrounded by thousands of invisible spaceships;[146] many humans are, in fact, reincarnated space beings;[147] the Earth is part of a battle ground between galactic warriors who live in a different dimension and can normally not be seen by humans;[148] the forests are inhabited by the little people, who are governed by their own kings.[149] Channeled or revealed cosmologies are at times very distantly removed from the worldview propagated by e.g. the educational institutions in the West and presumably shared by the majority of the population. However, the reader who is familiar with UFO beliefs, folk beliefs

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[144] Klein *Crystal Stair*, ch. 1.
[145] Klein *Crystal Stair*, ch. 2.
[146] Klein *Crystal Stair*, ch. 2.
[147] A whole genre that started with *Starseed Transmissions* presents such claims.
[148] Solara *Star-Borne*.
[149] Solara *Star-Borne*, p. 214.

and earlier "occult" claims recognizes legends of the hollow earth, pole shifts etc. as staples of esoteric lore. The mechanisms of the cultic milieu, in which such fragments of folk belief are kaleidoscopically combined, are particularly evident in such channeled cosmologies.

The Source and the Message

The existence of a channeled theology implies that New Age revelations function as a discourse. The messages transmitted center on similar themes, but do so with doctrinal details and in a language that differentiates the various messages from each other. Channels transmit messages couched in a terminology that they "know" is related to that particular source. Thus, *A Course in Miracles*, claimed to be transmitted from Jesus, is written in a distinctly christianized voice. In an analogous fashion, the Seth books also form a whole by virtue of their doctrinal and terminological specifics. Messages channeled from extraterrestrials may couch post-theosophical prophecies in a language reminiscent both of the terminology of military hierarchies and of science fiction. The Michael Teachings, in turn, have their own highly specific terminology and doctrines, which are more or less incomprehensible to those who stand outside this position. This section briefly focuses on three such purported sources of channeled messages and the positions that have crystallized around them. Each such position is readily identifiable by doctrinal and linguistic cues, which one would presume that new channels need to get acquainted with in order to appear authoritative among their peers.

The sociocognitive perspective is especially applicable in the case of sources said to be channeled by several people. Channels for the collective identity Michael learn the appropriate vocabulary and the correct creeds by studying earlier transmissions. This enables them to produce material that readers of previous Michael texts will be ready to accept as genuine.[150] Channels are primed to produce teachings of a specific kind. The founding legends, the spiritual autobiographies and the literary devices used to maintain the feeling that one is truly being addressed by another being all collude to masking the mechanism involved. Believers' reflections on the Michael material also indicate the way in which coherence can be main-

[150] This process is analogous to that which makes the Book of Mormon from a stylistic point of view resemble a pastiche of Scriptural texts.

tained: there are ready explanations for any discrepancies between individual messages. An Internet site devoted to the Michael material explains:

> Michael has an easier time transmitting certain information that is specific in nature through channels who have expertise on those subjects. For instance, it would be easier, and likely more accurate, to have information channeled about building a certain kind of technical project through a Michael channel who is a scientist or engineer, rather than through a Michael channel who hasn't seen a science book since high school, and who isn't interested in that kind of information at all. Likewise on health or business issues.[151]

The Seth material was the first of a new wave of channeled texts, which came well after the interest in spiritualism had subsided and well after the death of Edgar Cayce. According to the founding legend, Seth first manifested in 1963 when Jane Roberts and her husband Robert Butts experimented with an Ouija board. Soon thereafter, Seth began to speak through Jane Roberts when she fell into a trance. The first book of recorded messages was published as *The Seth Material* in 1970. Over the next thirteen years, Roberts would publish extensively. The Seth material gained a wide following in the emerging New Age movement. It played a crucial role in presenting as a whole the ideological contents of what would become the New Age worldview, thus defining a new discourse. Controversies have since arisen around other channels who have purported to receive messages from the same source.[152]

The range of the Seth material is quite broad, and treats subjects ranging from basic existential questions to the nature of dreams and the possibility of space travel. Perhaps the most influential concept in the material is a premise that runs through the New Age worldview: we literally create our reality by means of our thoughts, attitudes and beliefs. Everything we experience is a projection of our own inner world. Negative thoughts engender negative conditions in life. Once we realize this, we can begin to create the world we like:

> If you are in poor health, you can remedy it. If your personal relationships are unsatisfactory, you can change them for the better. If you are in poverty, you can find yourself surrounded by abundance [. . .] The world as you know it is a picture of your expectations. The

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[151] http://home.inreach.com/lorazz/michael-teachings/mfaq.html.

[152] For a brief survey of this competing Seth material, see Melton et al. 1991: 97.

> world as the race of man knows it is the realization en masse of your individual expectations.[153]

How do we go about creating such a new experience? Once again, the answer is formulated in terms of a dichotomy that will become central to much of the channeled doctrines of the New Age. We are made up of two distinctly different components: the ego and the inner self. One must learn to listen to the inner self and work with it. Therefore, if we wish to improve the world we live in, we must start by transforming ourselves. Indeed, reality as we know it is an imperfect projection of that inner self.[154] The basic doctrines of the Seth books thus suggest the influence of the idealist metaphysics of the American harmonial religions.

As the term projection suggests, the Seth material is also trend-setting in the way it expresses such essentially religious or metaphysical concepts in a language that combines religious, psychologizing and scientistic terms. Thus, the texts discuss mechanisms of defense and repression, while physical reality is described in terms of energy and dimensions. Quite similar claims have been presented in numerous channeled texts since the publication of the first Seth material. However, the specific terminology of this material and of several later sets of channeled texts mark them off as separate sub-cultures within the community of channelers.

The Michael material originated with the channeled messages transmitted by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro and set out in written form in her book, *Messages from Michael*, published in 1979.[155] Yarbro continued to publish several more volumes of Michael Teachings, but was soon followed by others such as Emily Baumbach,[156] Jose Stevens[157] and Joya Pope.[158] At the time of writing, there must be several dozen channels for Michael material, mainly in the USA. Despite the collective nature of these channelings, Michael Teachings have evolved over the years into a fairly well-structured set of doctrines, expressed in a distinct vocabulary. Michael is considered to be a group soul, a collective consciousness of 1,050 essences which have finished all

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[153] Roberts *The Nature of Personal Reality*, pp. xviii f.

[154] Roberts *Seth Speaks*, p. 324.

[155] The collective entity called Michael that numerous channelers have regarded as their source since the late 1970s is not to be confused with the archangel Michael.

[156] Baumbach presents herself at shell10.ba.best.com/~emilyb/about.htm.

[157] Stevens is the author of several Michael books, e.g. *The Michael Handbook*.

[158] Pope is the author of Michael books, including *The World According to Michael*.

their lifetimes on Earth, left the physical plane, and recombined into an Entity which now resides and teaches from what is presented as the mid-causal plane. A minimalist description of the Michael Teachings would include a view of macro-history closely resembling the typically U-shaped overall plan found in many Western esoteric systems, in which we descend from a unitary ground of being called the Tao by splitting off and vibrating in an ever denser mode, until we gradually awaken spiritually in our present existence and ascend towards the Tao again, merging with other fragments on the way up. The path of ascent consists of seven planes, with names partly borrowed from theosophy: physical, causal, astral, akashic, messianic, buddhaic and Tao. The Michael Teachings also provide a complex and detailed description of our roles in life as we incarnate in human bodies. These details of each incarnation are expressed in a Michael-specific terminology, including concepts such as soul ages,[159] essence roles[160] and overleaves.[161] In fact, the conceptual structure and language of the Michael teachings is so distinct that it can require tuition to master it. Thus, Emily Baumbach's web site explains how she "in 1986 underwent an intensive six-month internship studying the Michael system of roles, soul ages, and overleaves".[162] What may emically appear as a process of understanding an existing system of teaching can etically also be analyzed as an extensive process of cueing, with a concomitant process of weeding out "false" ideas and messages.

Whereas the Seth material contains and, in a way, defines the basics of subsequent New Age channeling, and the Michael material is a doctrinally and terminologically distinct group of materials, the material allegedly received from extraterrestrials is more disparate. Some messages are neo-theosophical in character, others are prophetic and either darkly apocalyptic or more utopian, others again

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[159] Each of us is said to incarnate as a soul of a different age, which is said to partly explain our personality traits as incarnated beings; thus, the baby soul needs a simple and caring environment, whereas the young soul craves success in the material world.

[160] A spark of consciousness requires some sort of "vehicle" in order to make the journey through human incarnations. To accomplish this, the incarnated entity can take on one of seven "essence roles", i.e. very basic and abstract sets of tendencies, instincts, urges, etc., retained throughout an entire set of incarnations before returning to the Tao.

[161] The essence roles can be acted out differently in each incarnation according to guiding principles that the Michael material calls "overleaves".

[162] See web site http://shell10.ba.best.com/~emilyb/about.htm.

seem to whimsically rewrite the present state of knowledge of the solar system. Over the last decades, extraterrestrial channelings variously ascribed to the Ashtar Command, to a collective of entities residing in the Pleiades or to beings near Sirius have formed the nucleus of a stylistically distinctive subset of such texts.

The language is often highly scientistic, with numerous references to frequencies, dimensions, photons, quanta and vibrations. The contents, however, are clearly recognizable elements of the New Age worldview: we have fallen into the trap of materialism; at some level within ourselves, we are aware of our own true nature; we are at the threshold of a major awakening, when we will have the choice between continuing to live in our plastic culture or realizing who we really are. Thus, in the first message introducing Ashtar, dated July 18, 1952, this being presents himself with words that could have been taken from a science fiction movie: "Hail to you beings of Shan. I greet you in love and peace. My identity is Ashtar, commandant quadra sector, patrol station Schare, all projections, all waves. Greetings". After this start, however, Ashtar continued to transmit messages in a much more conventional moralistic vein throughout the fall of that year, reprimanding humanity on its use of uranium to construct bombs and promising to assist us in following a better path.

Collectively, various space beings are seen as vital partners in a millennialist process of some kind, such as the Ascension, the entry of the Earth into a photon belt,[163] or the end of time according to the Mayan calendar.[164] Behind the scientistic references to e.g. an ascension to higher and higher "dimensions", one finds a cosmology similar to the belief in a coming evolutionary leap for mankind that is typical of many texts of the New Age *sensu stricto*, but with a more apocalyptic tone than many other channeled texts. It can be hinted that only a minority of people will be spiritually advanced enough

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[163] This story, a hoax apparently perpetrated by an anonymous Australian astronomy student and originally published in the February 1991 issue of the New Age publication *Nexus Magazine*, became a topic of intense but short-lived attention due to a book published by Sheldon Nidle and Virginia Essene (Nidle & Essene 1994). The photon belt was first predicted to arrive by the end of 1996. Once this date had come and gone, the interest within the cultic milieu for the photon belt legend receded.

[164] The interest in the Mayan calendar is due to José Argüelles and his book *The Mayan Factor*. See the section "Calculations and the Rhetoric of Rationality" in chapter 5.

to participate in the Ascension, whereas the rest of the world is doomed to cataclysmic changes. There are claims that the less spiritually evolved majority is duped by a conspiracy instigated by the government, the media and major organizations.

As noted in the preceding section, channeled material is prone to present highly unorthodox cosmologies. This is especially the case with texts purported to come from extra-terrestrial intelligences, which give the impression of a more blatant disregard for the commonsense or majority view of how the world works than the Seth material, the Michael teachings or other comparable sub-sets within the channeling genre. Besides the millennialism and the moral exhortations typical of the entire genre, such texts can embrace bits and pieces of Atlantis lore, the fringe archaeology of von Däniken, belief in angels and elementals, pyramidology and many other topics that are extreme even in the eyes of many readers steeped in the cultic milieu. The books of this type that have been consulted for this study amply testify to this "extremist" worldview. A few examples: Barbara Hand Clow incorporates the cult astronomy of Zecharia Sitchin, claiming that materialistic people are controlled by beings from the (imaginary) planet Nibiru.[165] In *Bringers of the Dawn*, Barbara Marciniak affirms that the crucifixion of Christ was a holographic show orchestrated by extraterrestrials.[166] Her sequel, *Earth—Pleiadian Keys to the Living Library*, tells her readers that cosmic rays are presently restructuring our two-stranded DNA into twelve-stranded molecules, in order to transform us into spiritually more advanced beings.[167] Such rather spectacular details mask the fundamental culture criticism that these books share with mainstream New Age literature.

The Recipient of Wisdom

The gift of prophecy would seem to be the prerogative of a spiritual elite. How does one qualify to become one of these select few? Each religious position has its own standards according to which the recipient of revealed teachings will be judged. The character traits attributed to these individuals appear to follow prevalent cultural standards. The veracity of the revealed teachings has partly been

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[165] Sitchin is one of the three most successful creators of fringe astronomy, the other two being von Däniken and Velikovsky.

[166] Marciniak *Bringers of the Dawn*, ch. 9.

[167] Marciniak *Pleiadian Keys to the Living Library*, ch. 1.

judged according to how well the human channel has conformed to these norms.

The Modern Esoteric Tradition has been the arena of a considerable drift towards democratization. Earlier positions elaborate on the concept of spiritual initiations. Not uncommonly, there is a distinct ladder of spiritual evolution, according to which ancient wisdom has been brought to the world due to the efforts of a handful of great initiates. Gradually, these openly elitist claims have given way to a half-hearted egalitarianism. On the one hand, it is claimed that revelation is a mode of knowledge potentially open to all. On the other, those who successfully claim the ability to channel information from transcendent sources become unquestioned authorities within their respective positions. J.Z. Knight, channel for the Atlantean spirit Ramtha and founder of a new religious movement centered on Ramtha's messages, is a case in point.[168]

The legends that arise around the recipient of revealed knowledge are signs of this ambivalence. Entities such as "Raphael" or "Lazaris" have chosen a particular human being as their conduit. Despite the influence of the most celebrated channeled messages, the human channels are often depicted in humble terms. Ambres is channeled by a carpenter, Lazaris by an insurance salesman, Seth by a housewife, *A Course in Miracles* by a psychologist with no overt religious inclinations. We are far from the hagiographies found in other new religious movements, e.g. those of L. Ron Hubbard or Sun Myung Moon.

Interestingly, the purported sources of wisdom have also gone through the same process. The theosophical Masters were organized in a formal hierarchy; this applied especially to the pantheon of Masters described by Leadbeater, who at times seemed obsessed with rank and title. Modern channeled entities are rarely conceived of in this manner.[169] Channeler Lyssa Royal says the following regarding the diversity of entities:

> The most common labels for the different types of entities channeled in America would be the following: Extraterrestrials, Angels, Ascended Masters, Spirit Guides who have lived lives on Earth and who have passed on, Collective Group Consciousness, Light Beings, Nature Spirits, etc. I have found that channels who are very good and clear do not channel about the concept of hierarchy. Some channels who are not

[168] Melton 1998.

[169] A possible exception would be space beings that some channels ascribe a quasi-military structure, with titles such as "commander".

> as clear or developed might tend to focus on the idea of a hierarchy or on forms of separation. Each entity has their area of expertise that is reflected in the type of information that they bring through.[170]

The remainder of this section will briefly survey the more modest hagiographic claims surrounding present-day recipients of revelation. What does it take to become a New Age prophet?

The Importance of Biography

The *Confessions* of Saint Augustine is one of the first autobiographies of a religious spokesperson. Augustine recounts the chronological details of his life. However, he also uses these details ideologically. From the vast mass of personal recollections, certain events are singled out as being of special importance. These are then edited and structured in order to form a carefully staged presentation of God's plan for salvation as exemplified in one single person. Since the days of Augustine, there have been countless biographies and autobiographies of religious spokespersons. As a genre, they obey similar constraints. Events simply take place, whereas any narrative which recounts them and gives them meaning is a reconstruction motivated by a number of concerns: the need to protect or display certain details of personal life, the exigencies of the autobiographical genre, the ideological purpose served by telling the story. The Esoteric Tradition is certainly no exception. The purpose of this section is to examine certain characteristics of these life histories, in order to elucidate some of the hagiographic and biographical givens of the genre in the Modern Esoteric Tradition.[171]

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[170] Interview with Lyssa Royal in November 1998, at www.royalpriest.com/channel5.htm.

[171] The number of published life histories is so small that an initial attempt to differentiate characteristics of biographies from autobiographies proved to be unrewarding. Even the common sense intuition that autobiographies might be more modestly phrased than hagiographies by believers turned out to be unverifiable. Among the varyingly succinct life histories found in modern Esoteric movement texts, one might mention full-scale autobiographies such as Alice Bailey *Unfinished Autobiography*, Rudolf Steiner *Mein Lebensgang*, Betty Shine *Mind Magic* and Vicky Wall's autobiographic *Miracle of Colour Healing*; the biographies of Edgar Cayce written by Thomas Sugrue and Jess Stearn as well as Kenneth Wapnick's description of Helen Schucman in *Absence From Felicity*; autobiographical notes by Carol Adrienne in *The Purpose of Your Life*, Shakti Gawain in *Return to the Garden*, Louise Hay in *You Can Heal Your Life* and Olga Kharitidi in *Entering the Circle*, Caroline Myss' autobiographical introduction to *The Anatomy of Spirit* and the numerous founding legends surrounding the creator of Reiki healing, Mikao Usui, found in the considerable literature on Reiki.

The limited volume of written texts of a biographical character indicates that hagiographies are a less developed genre in the Esoteric Tradition than, for instance, in certain forms of traditional Christianity. Nevertheless, hagiography still retains a role. Biographies of Blavatsky or Steiner written by members of the Theosophical or Anthroposophical Society are engaged in a strong defense of controversial figures. Unauthorized, skeptical accounts are met with considerable efforts to defend the reputation of the founding figures. After the publication of Peter Washington's popular and rather witty description of Madame Blavatsky, several theosophists have attacked his rendering of her life. The more scholarly efforts of K. Paul Johnson to demonstrate that the Masters were mythologizations of real people have also met with considerable opposition from theosophical writers.[172]

Lesser figures of the Esoteric Tradition are sometimes also presented through admiring autobiographical accounts. At the time of writing (May 2000), the Aura-Soma healing method has been introduced in over fifty countries. An important element in spreading the method has been to introduce Vicky Wall's autobiography, *The Miracle of Colour Healing*. Besides being a chronological account of the development of her healing system, the book is a founding legend. It purports to describe the spiritual development of Vicky Wall herself, and does so from a perspective in which her creation of Aura-Soma is depicted as a logical outcome of her life story.

Why this preoccupation with the personal traits of the prophet?[173] Perhaps the answer lies in one of the mechanisms by which narratives are communicated. When relayed through second- and third-hand accounts, certain details of an event tend to be sharpened if the narrator finds them important, whereas other details are leveled. A characteristic form of sharpening involves focusing on the characters of the narrative rather than on the circumstances.[174] What

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[172] This argument was set forth in Johnson 1994. A lengthy theosophical response by David Pratt can be found on the web site ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/dp5/johnson.htm and another, by Daniel Caldwell, at www.blavatsky.net/gen/refute/caldwell/johnson.htm.

[173] To counteract any feeling that it is "natural" to be interested in the personal background of prophetic figures, it may be instructive to consider the contrast with founding fathers of various scientific disciplines. Although there are numerous biographies of famous scientists, these seem to be rarely invoked when it comes to assessing their scholarly achievements. Newton's physics is not considered in the light of Newton's moral qualities.

[174] Gilovich 1991: 92 f.

Vicky Wall and others accomplish is to present their doctrines and practices as the obvious outcome of a long spiritual quest, rather than e.g. the more or less haphazard result of muddling through one's life, or of happening to be in the right place at the right time.

The Construction of Biography

Developmental psychology tends to see adulthood as multiform and malleable.[175] It is the mythologizing effect of the autobiographical narrative to give the complexity of one's life a simple story-line. From the mass of raw data available to introspection, salient events are selected in order to support a specific view of oneself. These events are reformulated to fit with the presentation of oneself that one wishes to achieve. Causal attributions are added at crucial turns in the story. More or less dubious memories are added to these "real" events. These memories portray events that may resemble actual occurrences in one's life history but have been massively reinterpreted to serve the present purposes, or may even be entirely spurious.[176] The constructive nature of such narratives is masked behind a host of misleading metaphoric verbs: memories are "retrieved", facts are "dug out" and "presented", the turns in ones life "understood". There are ample grounds for interpreting autobiographical narratives as a kind of private folklore. This applies a fortiori to biographies written by others. Hagiographies can be found in many religious traditions, many of these bearing more or less tenuous relations to biographical sketches provided by non-believers.

On reading the autobiographical and biographical data of the spokespersons listed above, a pattern emerges. The shorter the biography, the more one gains the impression of a bare-bones narrative of initiation that bears resemblances to e.g. stories of shamanic initiation or prophetic calling, while also betraying the characteristics of modernity. Biographies and autobiographies are narratives of experience in at least two senses: They set forth the characteristics of those individuals privileged enough to gain access to revealed knowledge. At the same time, they intimate which experiences are valuable in the construction of an identity as an Esoteric spokesperson or spiritual seeker. Rather than reading them from an objectivist

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[175] Freeman 1993: 99.

[176] On the growing literature on false memories, see e.g. Loftus 1979, Spanos 1996 and Schacter 1997 ch. 4.

stance by attempting to see behind the ideological screen what the persons presented are "really" like, these narratives can be read as specific examples modeled on a culturally predefined plot structure.

Childhood

Childhood recollections typically center on salient events that confirm the path taken later in life. Steiner, the creator of a spiritual science complete with an Esoteric epistemology, is presented as a highly precocious child. A paranormal experience at the age of seven is singled out for its significance. Cayce is presented as a pious young boy who read the Bible from cover to cover once every year, but also began having paranormal experiences at an early age. David Spangler affirms having been aware of a super-sensory reality since childhood.[177] Carol Adrienne, writer of books on themes such as numerology and synchronicity, relates having had childhood fantasies of writing and of becoming a gypsy fortune-teller.[178]

Childhood reminiscences form a particularly important narrative element in Vicky Wall's autobiography. Her description allows the mythic elements to appear with particular saliency. Vicky Wall serves as the prime rhetorical *exemplum* of her text—the specific case that, through its distinctness, can serve to edify and persuade the reader. Vicky Wall might have remained an unknown English lady. The fact that she was destined to become a healer and a recipient of revealed wisdom is accentuated by references to the unique circumstances of her childhood. The text notes that she was the seventh child of a seventh child—an important numerological detail.[179] Vicky Wall herself notes that "the mystical, magical number seven frequently occurs in prophecies and is said to be the number for the Rainbow Age, the 'Re-new-all' Age".[180]

Her father was a master of the mysteries of the kabbala. From her early childhood, her father helped her to become acquainted with herbal remedies. This was not done through regular instruction, however, but rather by awakening her intuition to finding the right plants. As a child, she also had the gift of seeing auras.[181] Vicky

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[177] Spangler *Revelation*, p. 17.

[178] Adrienne *The Purpose of Your Life*, ch. 1.

[179] Both Christian and Jewish speculations on the significance of specific numbers see the number seven as particularly significant. Theosophy also builds much of its cosmology on the number seven.

[180] Wall *Miracle of Colour Healing*, p. 192.

[181] Wall *Miracle of Colour Healing*, p. 21.

Wall later showed proof of her clairvoyant abilities and performed seemingly miraculous cures. Vicky Wall summarizes her life as not only *comprising* a spiritual element, but as *embodying* the theme of spiritual development: "My life has always been a silent prayer, communicating through absolute faith, with a Higher Consciousness".[182]

There appear to be ambiguous feelings about the religious backgrounds of some spokespersons. Cayce and Wall are described in what could be called the "classical hagiographic" mode. Several recipients of privileged experiences are portrayed in the converse, "confessional" mode. They are seen as having started from a religiously naive position. One possible reason for this could be to support the contention that the messages received are not the products of upbringing or cultural background, but constitute a true transmission from God, angels or the higher Self. Another could be to bring out the importance of the revelatory experience: by meeting the transcendent, one becomes transformed. Thus, Alice Bailey presented herself as an unhappy and rather insufferable upper-class girl with a distinct leaning toward fundamentalist Christianity.[183] Helen Schucman has been portrayed as an ex-atheist, despite claims to the effect that she was thoroughly immersed in unchurched religiosity from her earliest childhood.[184] Others have been depicted as uneducated, probably for similar reasons. Cayce has been described as utterly unlettered, a claim which is hardly convincing considering the fact that he worked in several book stores. In the confessional account, one recognizes the basic structure of conversion narratives as recorded by scores of sociologists of religion, from Lofland and Stark up to the present.[185] The religious spokesperson goes through the culturally recognized stages of a spiritual quest, but on a grander scale than the average seeker.

Spiritual Awakening

For those who do not have the spiritual gift from the start, the biographical narrative will record a more or less radical change. Change can be described as a gradual process, or as an initiatory experience.

Initiation is a major theme of esotericism, and certainly retains a place in the Modern Esoteric Tradition. It is most heavily stressed

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[182] Wall *Miracle of Colour Healing*, p. 42.
[183] Bailey *Unfinished Autobiography*, ch. 1.
[184] Schultz 1989: 62.
[185] Cf. especially Lofland & Stark 1965, Rambo 1993.

in earlier texts. Leadbeater devotes considerable space to the concept of initiation, as does Alice Bailey. Steiner uses the term initiation to designate his method of learning to attain esoteric knowledge.[186] Edgar Cayce also refers to the initiation of spiritual masters. Because of his particular religious background, the initiation of Jesus is a recurrent topic.[187] Initiation is particularly connected with Egypt, where the Sphinx and pyramids at Gizeh are described as Halls of initiation used by the Great White Brotherhood.[188] Perhaps due to the democratic ideals of much of the New Age, initiation is no longer such a central topic. An exception would be Reiki healing, into which new practitioners are initiated through a process called attunement.

One particular form of the story of spiritual change that can be singled out as quite distinctive is the theme of the wounded healer. Similar narrative motifs are well-known from pre-modern and non-esoteric biographies, e.g. as the "dark night of the soul". Several of the modern Esoteric biographies stress analogous themes; their narrative dwells on the many problems and misfortunes that have befallen the writer, and the role that these experiences have played in shaping that person. Among the older accounts, that of Edgar Cayce has attained a semi-mythic status by being retold in the available hagiographies. Contemporary authors continue on the same theme. Caroline Myss introduces her book, *Anatomy of the Spirit*, by recalling a deep depression that resulted from her realization that her career plans were unrealistic. Vicky Wall was afflicted with a serious eye disease that left her blind.[189]

A common theme in several of the New Age versions of the motif of suffering is the specific use made of these narratives: whereas older versions might have been concerned with demonstrating the need for constant struggle against evil, modern biographies may stress the transition to a new form of consciousness in which radical evil has been transcended. Thus, one particularly grueling account of being a "wounded healer" is found in Louise Hay's life story as summa-

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[186] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 282.
[187] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 219.
[188] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 413.
[189] This theme is found in the biographies of other spokespersons as well, i.e. also those who do not claim to be the recipients and transmitters of revealed wisdom. An example is the story of Jean Houston, a prominent spokesperson of the Human Potential Movement, who understands her suffering as a child to be one of the reasons for experiencing a religious revelation; cf. Melton et al. 1991: 408.

rized in *You Can Heal Your Life*. After living for years in abject conditions, Louise Hay now affirms that positive thinking can ultimately transcend any suffering. Far more mundane levels of psychological discomfort are fitted into this pattern of spiritual awakening and transition from wounded healer to recipient of wisdom. Carol Adrienne recounts her life story as that of a mildly depressed adolescent, a narrative in which the typical combination of psychologizing and New Age idealism shines through. Childhood experiences "should" have alerted her to her unique gifts, but due to the "programming" caused by negative thoughts she did not dare to believe in her abilities. Only incidentally does her narrative reveal social causes, such as her parents' opinion that college education was wasted on a girl.[190]

Inner change is the fulcrum of the spiritual biography. In the broadest sense, this element of the biography works as a simple theodicy: it interprets the suffering in the spokesperson's life in terms that give it meaning and resolution. Change, however, can only be predicated retrospectively. The Augustinian narrative of leaving the negative or unspiritual self behind only works when viewed from the perspective of the narrative present. *Mutatis mutandis*, more or less the same applies to many recipients of privileged experience in the New Age. Louise Hay's narrative would not have the same strength if she were still a highly troubled individual. Nor would it, arguably, have the same ethos if she had always been a happy, positive thinker. Without such clearly demarcated, structuring events, her development would only appear to be years of aimless meandering.

The Reception of Wisdom

In many narratives from traditional societies, after this initiation the adept is ready for tutelage under human masters. Esoteric narratives are somewhat ambivalent at this point. In some, learning from other people is acknowledged. More often than not, the Esoteric spokesperson is seen as mainly (or even exclusively) attuned to suprahuman forces. By means of this mechanism, the Modern Esoteric Tradition has become a singularly antihistorical tradition.

This downplay of human tutelage can take several forms. In the strongest version, revelation or insight is granted entirely through the agency of superhuman entities, and no mundane influences are

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[190] Adrienne *The Purpose of Your Life*.

acknowledged. Thus, Jane Roberts speaks of the mysterious entity Seth whose messages came through after a psychic experience and experiments with the ouija board, but neglects to comment on the similarities between the doctrines she transmitted and other forms of contemporary alternative religiosity, notably those of the harmonial religions and of previous Esoteric positions.[191] In a somewhat weaker version, the spiritual spark, or its equivalents, is passed on through initiation, and the concrete factual knowledge required after the initiation is very limited. A case in point is Reiki healing. Initiation ("attunement") by a certified Reiki master is a *sine qua non* for the neophyte practitioner. At the same time, Reiki manuals stress that Reiki is a highly intuitive skill in which the hands of the healer will learn to find the right positions on the patient's body.[192]

In yet another version, the neophyte attains ever greater proficiency in her esoteric skills through personal effort and receptivity to the appropriate energies, and human tutelage is restricted to guidance, or to a kind of check-up or corrective function. Thus, David Spangler presents his abilities to channel as a spontaneous gift, an ability that was merely enhanced and given a specific direction through cooperation with a more experienced partner, human relations counselor Myrtle Glines.[193] Pat Rodegast, channel for the entity Emmanuel, spontaneously received his gift after practicing Transcendental Meditation. That these effects were integrated into a pre-existing understanding by reading, attending lectures and participating in metaphysical groups is mentioned only in passing.[194] The short autobiographical details of Caroline Myss also illustrate this tendency to underrate cultural influences mediated by one's friends and acquaintances. At an early stage in her career as an intuitive healer, she met a more experienced colleague, Norman Shealy.[195] Note how passive Shealy's role appears to be:

> In 1984, however, I met C. Norman Shealy, M.D., Ph.D. I began intensive training with him in the physical anatomy of the human

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[191] See Jane Roberts' preface to *Seth Speaks*.

[192] Cf. Stein *Essential Reiki*, p. 34: "While I give [the hand positions] below in an organized manner, always allow intuition free play. If you are guided in a healing to put you hands somewhere not designated as a Reiki position, do so".

[193] Spangler *Revelation*, pp. 39 f.

[194] Rodegast *Emmanuel's Book*; a few lines on the first page of the introduction mention these mundane influencing factors.

[195] Myss *Anatomy of the Spirit*, pp. 9 ff. It is hardly coincidental that Shealy also endorses Myss' book in the preface to *Anatomy of the Spirit*.

> body. By speaking to and through Norm to patients about their lives and illness, I was able to refine my understanding of the impressions I received. This gave me the comfort zone I needed to permit my skill to mature [. . .] I learned that my skill is of most value in the stages before a physical illness actually develops [. . .] Frequently, however, medical tests indicate that nothing is wrong because they cannot yet identify anything happening at the physical level.[196]

Shealy was not much more than the support needed during the time the healing ability developed by itself. Indeed, as the end of the quote indicates, a conventional medical doctor would have very little to teach Myss, since she treats people who, by the standards of the medical profession, are perfectly healthy and need no treatment.

Biography as a Discursive Strategy

The founding legends reviewed here thus share a number of characteristics, which, *mutatis mutandis*, are not unlike the stories of creative illness, initiatory experience, tutelage and triumphant emergence as a spiritual leader and healer that we are familiar with from other cultures. These similarities can perhaps be accounted for by the strictures on the founding legend as a genre, with its inherent rhetorical needs to justify one's authority. There are simply not that many ways available for those who wish to present themselves as particularly appropriate recipients of suprahuman wisdom. The narrative and cognitive constraints imposed on biographical sketches become even clearer when one contrasts the retrospectively distinct stages of the narrative with the rather different picture gained by examining attempts at prospective understanding of a person's life history. The retrospective narrative displays a good fit; the events singled out bring the narrative forward to the expected culmination, i.e. the author's present status as a religious authority. Any false starts, seemingly irrelevant episodes and meanderings are edited out. Life appears as a whole, in which every part serves its purpose. Contrast this with the following findings in the meta-analysis of psychological experts in their attempts at prospectively evaluating diverse aspects of a client's life:

> In a majority of situations, a person's past life is the best predictor of future behavior. That doesn't mean that people are incapable of changing. Certainly many of us do, often profoundly. What it does mean is

[196] Myss *Anatomy of the Spirit*, p. 10.

> that no one has yet devised a method for determining who will change, or how or when.[197]

It seems that life can only be interpreted as a narrative in hindsight. The staples of the biographical narrative indicate what the emplotment of such a narrative "should" be like. In such narratives, the spokesperson is presented as an appropriate vessel for the reception of suprahuman wisdom. The message itself acquires more credibility by being transmitted via someone whose childhood, spiritual awakening and spiritual development single them out from among their peers. Thus, biography is not only a highly selective picture of a person's life, but primarily a discursive strategy deployed in the interest of legitimizing specific culturally constituted human predilections as if they were part and parcel of a transcendent order.

Handling Contradiction

One topic crucial to revealed teachings has been kept until last. In her article on channeling, Susanne Riordan aptly described the 1980s scene in the following terms:

> A bewildering cacophony of cosmic voices babble, gossip, and prophecy on every aspect of human and nonhuman life, offering a myriad ingenious revisionist (and often mutually contradictory) versions of history, theology and science and a profusion of clashing—but equally unorthodox—commentaries on current events.[198]

Of course, such internal contradictions have been common throughout the period examined. While the skeptic's agenda might be to point at such internal inconsistencies in an effort to debunk the messages, the present purpose of focusing on discrepancies is a different one. If the appeal to revelation is a discursive strategy employed to support truth claims, any inconsistencies that are detected by the movement spokespersons themselves or by their adepts need be handled in one way or another.

Of all the Esoteric positions discussed in the present study, the New Age is sociologically different from the rest. No hierarchy and no priesthood ensures internal coherence. Whereas contradictions in centrally formulated positions such as theosophy or anthroposophy are arguably the side-effect of oversight or of a change of mind on

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[197] Dawes 1994: 105.
[198] Riordan 1992: 107.

the part of the spokesperson, contradictions are an inevitable outcome of the pluralism of opinions within the New Age. However, the existence of mutually incompatible claims often appears to go undetected, or is at least left uncommented. Thus, there are three beliefs inherent in common versions of New Age religion that are, if not contradictory, at least very hard to reconcile. Firstly, the individual soul is said to choose its future rebirth, guided by the principle that each living entity needs certain experiences in life. Secondly, New Age writers generally accept the concept of an overarching plan, according to which a law of supernature integrates seemingly disparate events into a meaningful whole. Thirdly, the strong influence of American positive thinking has fostered the belief that we actually create our own realities in the here-and-now. The tension between personal will, the self-created nature of the universe and the existence of a cosmic plan is seldom if ever discussed.[199] When New Age writers address the question of inconsistency, one is generally presented with a subjective (or pragmatic) conception of truth. The general rule is "believe it if it rings true". If there are two or more mutually incompatible statements, accept the one that feels subjectively true.

How are discrepancies perceived emically? New Age spokespersons can note that all channeled messages are received through a human medium. The messages are, in a sense, the result of a cooperation between the source and the human channel, and are invariably colored by the vocabulary and concepts of that channel. Lyssa Royal, who works as a channel and also teaches channeling, expresses a common opinion within the cultic milieu:

> Personal Growth [. . .] is important because it is what allows a channel to be clear. If a channel processes his/her own fears, issues, and blockages, then they become clear as a person and thus will become clear as a channel. (A channel who is not clear, loving, and nonjudgmental in life will not be a clear, loving, and nonjudgmental channel.) [. . .] Whatever belief systems or discriminations that we as humans have, they are encoded in our very cells. If a human leaves his/her body and lets the entity fully merge into this reality, the entity still has to use

[199] An example of a text in which these conflicting claims are presented, without any attempt to harmonize them, is Taylor *The Angel Experience*. In chapter 31, Taylor claims that we create our own destiny through our choices and our will, and are nevertheless born into this world in order to gain experiences that we need. She never explains how these two claims might be integrated.

> the channel's brain and use the coding that is in the channel's cells in order to speak and express [. . .] If you wear glasses that are coated red, then everything you see will be tinted red. The coding within us always "tints" or distorts the energy coming from a spiritual source.[200]

Positions formulated and led by a person or persons who claim a unique prophetic status—in whatever terms such a claim can be made—face a different problem. Accusations of presenting incoherent messages undermine the claims to authority. If and when inconsistencies are detected, there are several ways to deal with them. One perhaps surprisingly nonchalant solution is employed by "Koot Hoomi" in the *Mahatma Letters*. In letter 24A, he admits to certain incoherences in the doctrine of evolution of races, but dismisses them as "not much worth worrying about". They are simply due to the less than optimal circumstances in which his letters are written. However, movement spokespersons, including Blavatsky, often do employ somewhat more sophisticated strategies to harmonize contradictions.

One strategy is to claim the existence of a higher synthesis that subsumes the seemingly contradictory elements. A related apologetic claim is to present one doctrine as more adequate to the understanding of a spiritually less evolved audience, while the contradicting view is the one available to a more enlightened readership. A case in point is the doctrine of reincarnation, rejected by Blavatsky in *Isis Unveiled* but adopted in the *Mahatma Letters* and *The Secret Doctrine*. The *Mahatma Letters* contain a detailed explanation of how each person actually consists of seven entities—a physical body and six non-physical components—and that the apparent contradiction between earlier and later versions of theosophy is resolved when one realizes that some of these components reincarnate while others do not. This apparent contradiction is said to be due to the fact that the doctrine of the septenary constitution of man had not yet been revealed when *Isis Unveiled* was written.[201]

A third strategy is to note that the recipient (or, more rarely, the source) of the message transmits bona fide spiritual messages only at certain times. A person is sometimes able to fulfill the role of prophet, but is an ordinary person on other occasions. Mistakes made by

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[200] From interview with Lyssa Royal, November 1998, on web site www.royalpriest.com/channel5.htm.

[201] ML 24B discusses at great length (but with perhaps only limited clarity) which of these seven components reincarnate and which do not; the details are not relevant to the present discussion, and are omitted.

Koot Hoomi and the other spiritual masters of the hierarchy are due to the fact that they are ordinary mortals at all other times apart from when they are purposefully using their occult powers.[202]

To summarize, revealed doctrines, i.e. channeled messages, are ascribed to a variety of suprasensible sources, from a vaguely defined reservoir of wisdom such as the Akashic record of theosophists and anthroposophists, to extraterrestrial beings from the Pleiades, to various beings and entities such as the collective entity Michael, Merlin, Saint Germain and the Ascended Masters, to Jesus. Even dolphins are occasionally cited as the source of revealed knowledge. Nevertheless, despite the variety of beings from whom such doctrines are received, there are considerable similarities between them, and wide divergences compared to revelations produced by prophets of earlier times. Modern revelations have the characteristic qualities of a discourse in the Foucaultean sense: a set of somewhat divergent doctrines based on commonly held doctrines and defended through appeals to authority, in this case specifically by pointing to the privileged status and experience of the channel.

Second Person Narratives: The Democratization of Privileged Experience

This section addresses one of the most glaring tensions within the Modern Esoteric Tradition. My exposé begins with one of the most totalizing of modern myths: theosophy. Privileged spokespersons present themselves as the sole legitimate conduits of ancient wisdom. Contenders are ruthlessly fought with an array of verbal arguments as well as practical measures. To use Bourdieu's terminology, this is a field where a fierce struggle between actors involves the massive mobilization of symbolic capital. The best-known controversies are those that surrounded the Theosophical Society. These have been amply documented in specialized literature: Blavatsky's and Olcott's disagreements over the way the TS should be run;[203] the conflicts over the leadership issue after Blavatsky's death and the concomitant split of the TS into several factions;[204] the split between the

[202] ML 24B, p. 177.
[203] Campbell 1980: 96 ff.
[204] Campbell 1980: 103 ff.

German branch that followed Rudolf Steiner into a new organization, the Anthroposophical Society;[205] and the controversies that led to the expulsion of Alice Bailey from the TS.[206]

The modern New Age literature presents a rather different picture. In theory at least, everybody is ultimately their own guru. A ritual is adopted, a doctrine followed only if it feels true. Revelations are imparted to a great number of people. David Spangler, one of the most influential psychic mediums of the early 1970s, modestly downplayed his own role by reminding his readers that at some level, all of us are aware of a supersensory world.[207] A recent doctrinal statement to this effect is found in the introduction to Neale Donald Walsch's *Conversations with God*. God speaks not only to Walsch, but to everybody. He does so in feelings rather than in words. We all have feelings telling us what is true. Communicating with God entails trusting these emotions. Thoughts and experiences can also transmit communication from God. If we are all in touch with God, why do we not realize that this is the case? The answer, according to Walsch, is that we often don't listen. If we opened up to this constant conversation with the divine, we would realize that we need no religious authorities. Not even the Bible has a special place as a canonical scripture. Whenever your own feelings contradict the message of the priest or the written text, trust your feelings. Walsch's message appears to be one of extreme religious individualism. Nevertheless, behind the rhetoric of religious anarchy, the New Age does have its authoritative voices and its ways of maintaining or shifting boundaries. Walsch presents his absolute rejection of authoritative texts in a best-selling text. The message he has transmitted from God, eschewing all authorities, bears a strong resemblance to scores of other New Age texts.[208] Walsch also authoritatively presents his readers with directives on how to distinguish "real" communication with the divine from "false" feelings and impulses.

Some methods are transmitted from master to disciple through a process of initiation. Reiki healing is a case in point. The literature

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[205] Campbell 1980: 156.
[206] Campbell 1980: 151.
[207] Spangler *Revelation*, p. 17.
[208] Thus, in similarity with many other channeled theologies, Walsch claims that God has created us, but that we create our own reality. In what may be a direct loan from *A Course In Miracles*, he also explains that there are only two basic conditions, love and fear.

on Reiki tells of the—partly spurious—line of transmission from founder Mikao Usui to Chujiro Hayashi to Hawayo Takata and further to the twenty-two Reiki masters that Takata initiated during her life-time. Certain details of the initiation ritual are, at least in theory, not disclosed to the public, which makes it literally impossible for the would-be practitioner to obtain a "genuine" status of Reiki healer through self-study.

Other methods are protected by trademarks. Channels face the prospect of having "their" source of wisdom transmitted by psychics other than themselves. A spirit entity named White Eagle transmits his teachings through an entire network of channels. The spiritual collective Michael is channeled by a large number of people. In a small number of cases, attempts have been made to stop this process. Insurance executive Jach Pursel, channel of the entity Lazaris, has, in fact, trademarked the name Lazaris. Similarly, as noted above, Kathleen Milner has trademarked her version of Reiki healing as Tera-Mai™ Reiki. And grand master Phyllis Furumoto has attempted to trademark the word *Reiki*—unsuccessfully, since the word, according to the Patent and Trademark Office of the U.S. Department of Commerce, has by now passed into the public domain.[209]

However imperfectly, the fact still remains that there has, at least in certain positions within the Esoteric Tradition, been a shift from an exclusive privileged, prophetic experience to a democratic ideal.[210] A first, cautious step is taken by Alice Bailey, who held a less exclusive position than that outlined in the classical theosophical texts. Revelation is no longer the prerogative of one person or of a handful of exclusive recipients. Nevertheless, the process of receiving esoteric information is presented as a highly hierarchical effort. Wisdom is brought down from a Master to one of the few highly spiritually evolved adepts, who spreads the new concept to those who are less

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[209] Details of these legal wrangles can be found at www.Reiki.org/CurrentTopics/rtattempt.html and www.awarinst.com/trader.htm.

[210] The development from exclusive to democratic revelation is only one such movement in a larger to-and-fro between guarded and open access to religious experience. Within the Esoteric Tradition, mesmerism presented a similar struggle between the exclusivism of Mesmer and the more open attitude of several of Mesmer's disciples within the Société de l'Harmonie, most notably perhaps Nicolas Bergasse who, to Mesmer's dissatisfaction, wrote beginners' instruction manuals in mesmeric techniques. The Christian traditions display a similar struggle. The question of who should be allowed the interpretation of Scripture goes back at least to the earliest documented persecution of heretics.

evolved, from whom the idea is finally diffused into the culture as a whole. The process is described in detail in *Telepathy and the Etheric Vehicle*. Bailey gives an esoteric explanation of a contemporary mundane event:

> Before He took up special work, the Master Serapis sought to bring through some constructive idea for the helping of humanity. He conceived of a world unity in the realm of politics which would work out as an intelligent banding of the nations for the preservation of international peace. He presented it to the adepts in conclave and it was felt that something could be done. The Master Jesus undertook to present it to His group of disciples as He was working in the occident. One of these disciples on the inner planes, seized upon the suggestion and passed it on (or rather stepped it down) until it registered in the brain of Colonel House. He, not recording the source (of which he was totally unaware), passed it on in turn to that sixth ray aspirant, called Woodrow Wilson. Then, fed by the wealth of analogous ideas in the minds of many, it was presented to the world.[211]

Bailey presents revelatory experience as an essentially passive process. The nearly two hundred pages of *Telepathy and the Etheric Vehicle* offer barely a clue to the would-be adept as to how telepathy could be achieved: "I am giving no rules for individual development, and would not, if I could".[212]

Rudolf Steiner took a decisive step toward democratization of the revelatory experience. In his texts, the process is presented as an activity initiated by the adept himself. Not only did Steiner access the Akashic record, he also gave detailed instructions for would-be followers on the path of anthroposophical knowledge. The Steinerian view of revelation, not as a divine gift but as the fruit of correct technical procedure, has remained within the New Age up to the present day. Modern psychics do not merely transmit teachings purportedly revealed by extraterrestrials or discarnated spirits. Several well-known channels also teach channeling techniques, thus enabling others to follow in their footsteps. Nevertheless, democratization is half-hearted at best: the spokespersons within each position retain a status that their disciples rarely match. The implicit goal of the anthroposophical path to knowledge is to reproduce the doctrinal statements already presented by Steiner. More subtly, new channels

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[211] Bailey *Telepathy and the Etheric Vehicle*, pp. 4 f.
[212] Bailey *Telepathy and the Etheric Vehicle*, p. 77.

within the New Age movement tend to reproduce the basic tenets already current within the New Age.

The sociocognitive model is once again applicable. Movement texts that explicitly offer the reader the possibility of accessing privileged experience—a model *of* cognition—implicitly serve as templates for constructing and interpreting experience—a model *for* cognition. They present a set of cues with which the reader can restructure and reinterpret important episodes from his or her own life history and experience. This section will examine precisely how privileged experience is democratized and (again, at least in theory) made available to the average seeker. The empirical material will be drawn from four subsets of Esoteric sources, texts that explicitly address this question. The first are texts by Rudolf Steiner that purport to introduce the neophyte to the path toward spiritual insight. The second consists of tutorial material of New Age channeling. Thirdly, there are books that discuss the phenomenon of synchronicity, i.e. the occurrence of causally unrelated events that, from the perspective of the experiencer, form a significant whole. Fourthly, and finally, there are do-it-yourself manuals that attempt to teach paranormal skills such as psychometry or telepathy.

The Explicit Epistemology of Rudolf Steiner

Rudolf Steiner spent some three decades developing a vast christocentric synthesis of Christianity, Western esoteric traditions and theosophical doctrines—a grand view of cosmic history as revolving around one particular focal event: the Mystery at Golgotha. From an analytical (etic) perspective, many of the details of anthroposophical doctrine are directly borrowed from second-generation theosophy. In Steiner's own view, the details of this system were revealed to him through a meditative, visionary process. By training himself in the use of so-called spiritual sense organs, he believed himself able to gain access to "knowledge of the higher worlds".[213] Given sufficient training, this knowledge would be as accurate and as intersubjectively testable as ordinary knowledge gained through the use of more mundane sense organs. Steiner formulated his system during the apogee of positivism. It seems reasonable to suppose that Steiner,

[213] The title of one of Steiner's main works, published in 1904–5, is *Wie erlangt man Erkentnisse der höheren Welten?*

widely read and highly educated, was influenced by this dominant current in Western philosophy. A recurrent theme throughout his voluminous writings is fully consonant with the positivistic trend, namely the claim to scientific status for his own philosophy.

Steiner recalls in his autobiography how, as a fifteen year old boy, he saw a copy of Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* in the window of a book store.[214] The precocious youngster purchased and studied the work. Steiner read Kant and was, like so many of his predecessors and contemporaries, deeply troubled by his epistemology. Steiner's first works were concerned with the problem of knowledge. In *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*, published in 1894, he attempted to formulate a solution to the Kantian stricture. As we shall see, Steiner believed that he had found a way of escaping the boundaries that the philosopher of Königsberg had set to human knowledge, and that he had effectively overcome what he considered "the unhealthy faith in Kant".[215]

Steiner's epistemology centers on the concept of *thinking*. Thinking is the archimedean point of *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*, since the process of thinking is all that is immediately available to us. Thinking unites the subject and the object; indeed, through thinking we define ourselves as subjects standing over against a world of things. Thinking links together the fleeting manifestations of an object at various moments in time, and produces the insight that the tree moving in the wind is the same as the tree whose branches stand still. Thinking is also an intersubjective process, at a level of abstraction required to understand how single sense impressions can be subsumed under certain concepts. A favorite example of Steiner's is the concept of triangles, which is an abstraction formed by thinking as opposed to the variety of actual, concrete triangles. As Steiner himself succinctly puts it, "thinking is beyond subjective and objective".[216]

At this point, Steiner could anachronistically be read as a cognitivist: "what weaves through [. . .] spatially and temporally separate percepts as the unifying medium—is thinking".[217] However, for Steiner, thinking is not just a mental habit, a way of structuring percepts. We are part of the world, not a bounded self set apart from it and reached

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[214] Steiner *Mein Lebensgang*, pp. 22 f.
[215] Steiner *Intuitive Thinking—Truth and Science*, p. 1.
[216] Steiner *Intuitive Thinking*, ch. 4.
[217] Steiner *Intuitive Thinking*, p. 90.

only indirectly by sense perceptions of the world. The same "stream of the universal world process"[218] runs through me and the world I experience. Thinking is therefore the only area of human experience in which naive realism is warranted; thinking gives us a true picture of how the world is made up. Steiner's final verdict on the then prevalent neo-Kantian epistemology was thus correspondingly harsh: "It would be hard to find another edifice of thought in the history of human culture that has been constructed with more ingenuity and that nevertheless, on closer scrutiny, collapses into nothing".[219]

The transition from "thinking" in the everyday sense to thinking as the process that engenders the highly specific esoteric claims in much of Steiner's later works seems partly to stem from a linguistic confusion. When Steiner revised *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* for the second edition of 1918, he introduced a telling distinction between thinking and "real" thinking. Steiner also occasionally distinguishes between *abstract thinking* and *living thinking*.[220] The former is closer to thought in the non-anthroposophical sense of the word. The adjectives placed first in each phrase serve to make a rhetorical point. It is these distinctions that essentially distinguish his own clairvoyant insight from that of other esotericists.

Steiner later also based this belief, viz. that true knowledge of transcendent realities can be obtained, in terms of his overarching historical myth. The anthroposophical path to higher knowledge, the attainment of "thinking", is thus an integrated part of Steiner's conception of the (spiritual) history of mankind. Every concrete entity in the solar system is the result of a descent of spirit into matter. The coming of Christ represented a turning point, and the world is gradually entering a respiritualized epoch. The entire solar system is evolving, and mankind with it. The individual is part of this spiritual ascension, and has the option of respiritualizing himself through a threefold path of knowledge. Thus, Steiner recapitulates a recurrent theme of Christian historiography: the spiritual path of the individual follows the template of history.[221] Together, the epistemological as well as the mythic-historical understanding of thinking indicate the significant departure from the theosophical model: Blavatsky's

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[218] Steiner *Intuitive Thinking*, p. 97.
[219] Steiner *Intuitive Thinking*, p. 66.
[220] E.g. Steiner *Theosophy*, p. 175.
[221] Abrams 1971: 46 ff.

professed clairvoyance was a unique gift; Steiner's insights are potentially available to all, since they depend on a fundamental cognitive process for which the time is ripe.

Steiner's Method

Having established to his own satisfaction that there is such an intersubjective process as "true" or "living" thinking, Steiner's later books will outline a step-by-step method of perceiving the transcendent realities that lie beyond the stricture. Finally, a large part of Steiner's writings and speeches is concerned with revealing the details of this transcendent dimension.[222]

Steiner termed his achievement *Geisteswissenschaft*, which was to be taken not in the dictionary sense of the word as *humanities*, but literally, as *spiritual science*. Innumerable quotes attest to Steiner's firm opinion that his visionary capabilities revealed a scientific picture of hidden truths. Thus: "all people who go far enough come to the same insight about these [esoteric] things rather than to different insights. Differences exist only when people try to approach the highest truths through an arbitrary personal whim rather than by a scientifically guaranteed path".[223] And again: "understanding the spiritual world is not an artistic, feeling process like understanding a work of art, but a thinking process like that of science".[224] The word *thinking* should once again be understood as a technical term of anthroposophy.

How can one know that visionary experiences reveal true knowledge? Might they not rather, for instance, be the idiosyncratic hallucinations of the seer? Steiner was aware of this objection. The later (seventh through fifteenth) editions of his *Outline of Esoteric Science* note that he reworked parts of his book precisely in order to counter such critical attacks.[225] Again and again, Steiner draws up a rhetorical contrast between the unreliable, subjective experience of others and the unbiased consideration of higher worlds that his own method affords. Steiner claimed that intersubjectivity and verifiability were granted by following a carefully outlined process by which the adept could gain such higher knowledge. This process consists of a num-

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[222] Adherents and detractors disagree on the issue of whether the specific descriptions of "higher worlds" is truly linked to the "path of knowledge" Steiner had outlined, or if references to the path were basically a post hoc justification of visionary experiences.

[223] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, pp. 22 f.

[224] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 4.

[225] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 432.

ber of fairly elaborate steps, which are presented in considerable detail in several of his works.[226] From an anthroposophical perspective, they afford the adept a reliable discovery procedure. From a sociocognitive perspective, Steiner's method primes the adept to generate experiences matching the pre-established anthroposophical norm.

Before entering the path, the adept must cultivate certain inner, moral qualities. One needs to empty oneself of all prejudices and of criticism as to the contents of the spiritual worlds. Steiner likens this to becoming an empty vessel, which allows itself to be filled by the foreign world.[227] This attitude of emptiness can be fostered by certain exercises. One can, by sheer force of will, abstain from judging people in one's surroundings. Events should also be observed non-judgmentally, as not causing the observer either suffering or joy. From being emotions provoked in the adept, suffering or joy rise to becoming occasions to learn from.

From this point, the adept ascends to the visionary state through a meditative process. Perhaps for reasons of number symbolism, this process is at times divided into three stages, and at times into seven.[228] The process is in its entirety reminiscent of certain meditative techniques of Indian provenience based on visualization. In the outline below, the three-step process will be described. A final summary will place these three steps in the larger, seven-tiered scheme outlined in certain passages of Steiner's works.[229]

The first of the three steps is called *imagination* or *imaginative cognition*. In order to reach this stage, the adept should train his faculties of concentration by visualizing symbolic forms. The actual content of these symbols is not crucial to the process; the point is "to free the soul from dependence on anything physical".[230] In practice, however, certain symbols are suggested. The adept mentally e.g. visualizes the growth cycle of a plant from seed to mature flower, and actively imagines the same growth processes at work in himself. Other mental symbols bring to mind earlier forms of Western esotericism:

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[226] The following description is taken from three of Steiner's texts that deal particularly with the question of method, and that have achieved near-canonical status within the anthroposophic community: *Theosophy*, *Outline of Esoteric Science*, and *How to Know Higher Worlds*.

[227] Steiner *Theosophy*, p. 179.

[228] This ambiguity resembles that of Steiner's discussion of subtle bodies; at times he distinguishes three, at times seven such entities.

[229] Cf. Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 373.

[230] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 290.

Steiner recommends meditating on the shape of a black cross surrounded by a circle of seven red roses.[231] Steiner also suggests focusing on certain sounds or mantras, as well as on the inner vision of auras around the physical bodies of people one meets.[232]

On an esoteric level, Steiner holds that the state of awareness reached through patient and assiduous application of this technique is thought freed from any links to the brain and the physical senses. This seemingly absurd statement should be understood in the context of Steiner's theories of the human subtle bodies. Besides ordinary (mundane) thinking, which has its center in the physical brain, man has latent organs of perception located in the astral body, organs that Steiner calls *lotus flowers*. Just as the meditative praxis itself appears to be inspired by tantric counterparts, the theory of the lotus flowers has a direct parallel in the originally tantric system of chakras, particularly as interpreted by Charles Leadbeater.[233]

The second step is *inspiration*. This level of meditative praxis is achieved when the process of imagination reaches such depth and intensity that the object of imagination looses the characteristics of being a subjective creation, and to all intents and purposes behaves as an objectively existing entity appearing before the adept. At this stage, the inner visions have acquired such a stability that the adept can orient himself in this new world. Steiner explains that he will encounter a multitude of spiritual beings and realize his relationship with them. Since this is knowledge hidden from ordinary sense perception, Steiner likens this faculty to reading a hidden script.

The third step, *intuition*, is described in obscure and paradoxical terms. The subjective boundaries of the adept become gradually more tenuous. The adept feels that he has become one with the highest world-creating forces (*die höchsten welterschaffenden Wesenheiten*), yet firmly remains a separate person. The adept will learn to meet his own karma and to recognize his previous incarnations. At the end of this process, the adept gains insight into the Akashic record.

Steiner is not fully consistent in his description of the process. One of the most systematic statements recapitulates the path towards clairvoyant knowledge in the following seven steps:

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[231] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 293.

[232] Detailed descriptions of these meditative exercises can be found in Steiner *How to Know Higher Worlds*.

[233] A detailed discussion of the chakra system can be found in the case study at the end of chapter 4.

> 1. Studying spiritual science [. . .]
> 2. Acquiring imaginative cognition.
> 3. Reading the hidden script (this corresponds to *inspiration*).
> 4. Living one's way into the spiritual surroundings (this corresponds to *intuition*).
> 5. Recognizing the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm.
> 6. Becoming one with the macrocosm.
> 7. Experiencing all of these previous experiences as a totality, as a fundamental mood of soul.[234]

If they follow these three (or seven) steps, Steiner claims, different clairvoyants will report the same results. The basic prerequisite for this, however, is that the adept is adequately prepared by a thorough theoretical understanding of the results of the visionary experiences of previous spiritual initiates. For the adept, it is important to accept the information that he senses during the visionary state at face value. Steiner believes that it is a sign of spiritual maturity when one no longer lets one's previous knowledge of how the world is constituted interfere with one's spiritual insights.[235] Conversely, if we cannot come to the conclusion that the results of others' clairvoyant investigations are true by simply thinking about them, it is because our own thinking has not yet become sufficiently unbiased, comprehensive and thorough.[236] Consequently, Steiner's advice is to begin the path by studying the results of other spiritual researchers, and to let one's mind be filled with these results.[237] This is partly due to the nature of thought itself. When imparted to others, thought acts as a seed from which knowledge itself may grow, provided that one does not let prejudices against spiritual matters rule. Steiner addresses the reader to explain:

> Readers must first absorb a fairly large number of supersensible experiences recounted by others without experiencing them personally. This cannot be otherwise, and will also be true of this book. [. . .] It could seem that a certain amount of alleged knowledge is being presented like dogma, as if belief based on authority were called for. However, this is not the case. In fact, what can be known about the world's supersensible content is present in the author as a living soul content, and immersing yourself in this content kindles impulses in your own

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[234] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 373.
[235] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, pp. 315 f.
[236] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 321.
[237] Steiner *Theosophy*, pp. 176 ff.

> soul which then lead to the corresponding supersensible facts. In reading about spiritual scientific knowledge, you are active in a different way than you are in reading accounts of sense-perceptible facts. If you read accounts of the sense-perceptible world, you read *about* them, but if you read accounts of supersensible facts in the right way, you immerse yourself in the stream of spiritual existence.[238]

This is why *An Outline of Esoteric Science* is organized in a counter-intuitive order: First the detailed results of clairvoyant experience are given, and only then is the method revealed by which these results may become accessible to the adept. "To anyone who simply does exercises in order to enter the supersensible world without paying any soul-attention to specific facts about it, this world will remain an indistinct and confused chaos".[239] What analytically (etically) appears to be a process of mental conditioning of the adept to ensure attaining the doctrinally prescribed results, is (emically) for Steiner a safeguard against false visions.

Apologists and Detractors

Steiner's methods and the epistemological claims connected with them have been a focus of discussion ever since Steiner's lifetime. The first point of controversy centers on the truth claims of anthroposophy. Steiner's insistence that he presented an objective spiritual science renders anthroposophy wide open to critique. A religious tradition can eliminate untenable propositions and still remain a living faith. Thus, only a minority of post-Enlightenment Christian theologians believe in the inerrancy of the Bible. Such an option seems less available to a revealed teaching that purports to be a path to objective knowledge. If Steiner's epistemological foundations are weak, his insights are reduced to the subjective speculations of one single individual. And conversely, if too much of the concrete information transmitted by Steiner from the higher worlds should be falsified, his epistemology must be shaky.

In the 1920s, the theologian and indologist J.W. Hauer challenged Steiner on this account. If his readings of the Akashic record were as accurate as he claimed, why not attempt to decipher the Minoan Linear B inscriptions? Steiner never responded. One of his closest

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[238] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 26 f. Emphasis in the original.
[239] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, p. 28.

associates, Rittelmeyer, did.[240] In defense of Steiner, Rittelmeyer claimed that Minoan culture simply lacked the historical importance of, for instance, the Atlantean civilization.

The accuracy of Steiner's visions was questioned once again when Colin Wilson published his popular account of Steiner's life and philosophy.[241] In August 1924, Steiner visited Tintagel in Cornwall. During a public speech at Torquay five days later, Steiner described his inner vision of king Arthur and the knights of the round table.[242] At Arthur's castle, which was located in Tintagel, the knights had drawn down immense spiritual power from the Sun, in order to fight the demonic powers that still ruled over most of Europe. Colin Wilson, although highly sympathetic to Steiner, informs his readers that the castle ruins at Tintagel could be dated to circa 1140 CE, and that king Arthur, who supposedly lived six centuries earlier, was a legendary figure.

The truth claims of anthroposophy remain controversial to this day. Thus, on the Internet, there are discussions on the empirical evidence for and against Waldorf pedagogy, anthroposophical medicine or biodynamic farming.[243]

Do-it-yourself Channeling

Seth, Michael, Lazaris and quite a few other sources of channeled material present complex, structured doctrines. It obviously requires a lot of an Esoteric spokesperson to produce and publish books that occasionally run into a thousand pages or more, and it demands some effort from the presumptive adepts to really immerse themselves into these doctrines and live according to them. It is perhaps not surprising that organizations have formed around some of the most complex revealed doctrines, from anthroposophy to Ramtha's School of Enlightenment.

As we have seen, Rudolf Steiner set out the details of a spiritual do-it-yourself project, but in reality, only Steiner's own "spiritual

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[240] Hauer 1922: 93 ff.

[241] Wilson 1985.

[242] Steiner's vision is recapitulated in Steiner *Esoterische Betrachtungen Karmischer Zusammenhänge*, vol. IV lect. 4.

[243] Thus cf. websites www.watchman.org/waldorfcontroversy.htm and www.dandugan.com/waldorf/WCA%20Archive/WCA.Archive.index.html.

science" is truly valid within anthroposophical circles. Several New Age positions have taken the next step: the writer gives detailed instructions on how to open up for channeled messages, but there is no organization with the authority to silence and exclude those who channel the "wrong" messages.

In a highly individualistic religious milieu such as the New Age, it is not uncommon to encounter the proposition that everybody has the ability to channel. Perhaps the reason why channeling is not more common is simply that the flow of information is blocked. Thus, there are courses in channeling, Internet sites devoted to the art and instruction manuals. In this section, we will focus on one of the latter, *Opening to Channel* by Sanaya Roman and Duane Packer. This is said by the authors themselves to have been the first manual of its kind. From the publicity for Roman & Packer's book the reader is informed:

> Throughout recorded history it has been thought that only those with a special gift could connect with a spirit guide, their higher self or the universal mind. Now, bestselling author and channel for Orin, Sanaya Roman has collaborated with Duane Packer, Ph.D., channel for DaBen, to produce the first step-by-step guide to the art of channeling. Their methods can be used by anyone who wishes to open to higher dimensions.
>
> Channeling is a skill which can be learned. Sanaya and Duane have successfully trained hundreds of channels using these safe, simple and effective processes. Included are chapters by Orin and DaBen, on how to tell if you are ready, who the guides are, how to attract a high level guide, how to go into trance and much more.

Narratives describing contact with an inner voice are by no means new. The belief that it is possible to have personal relations with the divine developed in Hittite religion and spread throughout the Middle East in the late Mesopotamian era.[244] This has been a recurrent theme in Christian spirituality. Secular and religious interpretations of the phenomenon have competed in the modern age. A secularized—but in some sense spiritualized—version is psychosynthesis, one of the methods that could be broadly subsumed under the heading of Humanistic Psychology. In psychosynthesis, a set of graded exercises leads adepts to gaining contact with a source of

[244] Jacobsen 1976: 145 ff.

inspiration and wisdom within their own psyche. Characteristic of channeling in our own time is the renewed interest in religious interpretations of the flow of thoughts.

Channeling, an offshoot of the mediumship of the spiritualist age, is suddenly made available to almost everybody. Whereas a researcher might choose to adduce sociological reasons for this massive democratization of a previously rather arcane skill, Roman & Packer explain the phenomenon in terms that belong to a melioristic and religious worldview.[245] The spiritual side of mankind is beginning to awaken; something new in the human aura is being activated. Roman & Packer's spiritual guides realized that people would need guidance to understand these evolutionary processes, and therefore initiated the development of freely available information on how to channel.

The constructivist perspective that views channeling instructions as a template through which experience can be interpreted is supported by the details of Roman & Packer. Channeling is said to be similar to relaxation, but a large variety of subjective experiences are interpreted as part of the "correct" process. Channeling may involve reduced consciousness of one's surroundings, or may occur while maintaining complete awareness of the outside word. The first experience of contact with the source of channeled messages varies greatly from person to person. Furthermore, the words and images that arise may initially be difficult to distinguish from one's own thoughts. With time, the difference becomes more distinct. With increasing practice, the inner images and words become more focused. One's flitting thoughts become centered around certain topics suggested by Roman and Packer. Some topics have a "spiritual" feel and cover generalities: How can one live in true joy; what is the higher self; how can one bring more light into one's life? Other questions are more personal: what lesson can I learn from my relationship with NN; what is the purpose of my life? Of course, the very fact that one is encouraged to ask one's invisible guides about the properties of the higher self or the presumably pre-established purpose of one's life implies that a specific spiritual or New Age perspective is tacitly taken for granted, even before any channeled answer is forthcoming.

This gradual development from a variety of diffuse and idiosyncratic inner states to a more distinct and homogeneous perception

[245] See the introduction to Roman & Packer *Open to Channel.*

of what channeling is supposed to be suggests a process not unlike learning a role. In learning to act the role of "channel", one's spontaneous stream of consciousness is firstly identified as belonging to an external source, is secondly made to conform to a ready-made understanding of what "spiritual" subjects a channel might appropriately ask for guidance on, and is thirdly cued, with varying degrees of subtlety, to discuss these questions in a setting that is predefined by the worldview and terminology presented in Roman and Packer's book.

Discovering Synchronicity

A set of experiences of an entirely different nature are synchronous events. Jung presented this concept in an essay entitled *Synchronicity—An Acausal Connecting Principle*, published in 1952.[246] Jung describes synchronicity as a meaningful but causally unconnected co-occurrence of two events, either two events in the empirical world, or one inner and one outer event. It should be noted that Jung's discussion of synchronicity essentially rests on one single case.[247] It therefore seems reasonable to infer that Jung considered "true" synchronous events to be exceedingly rare. Quite a few Esoteric positions have adopted the concept of synchronicity,[248] but appear to give the concept a far wider application. Once one opens up to the existence of guiding coincidences, synchronicities become more and more commonplace. There are, in fact, texts whose explicit purpose it is to attune the reader to the existence and meaning of synchronicities.[249]

From an emic point of view, synchronicities are part of the way in which the world is organized. The role of the Esoteric texts is merely to draw the readers' attention to their existence and mean-

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[246] Jung 1960: 417 ff.

[247] Jung 1960, § 982 f. As mentioned in chapter 5, note 331, Jung writes about a therapy session where a patient was relating a dream in which she had received a piece of jewelry in the shape of a golden scarab. At that very moment, a golden-green scarabaeid beetle, the common rose-chafer, flew against Jung's window. The experience, says Jung, punctured the patient's rationalism.

[248] Cf. Bailey *Telepathy and the Etheric Vehicle*, p. 19; In the New Age, the term is ubiquitous: see next note.

[249] Of the movement texts consulted, Adrienne *The Purpose of Your Life*, Jaworsky *Synchronicity* and Hopcke *There are no Accidents* are explicitly concerned with this theme. Manuals of divination, i.e. astrology and the tarot, may also be concerned with attuning the reader to the purported synchronicities in their lives. Redfield *Celestine Prophecy* and *Tenth Insight* also presents the frequent occurrence of synchronicities as a sign of spiritual advancement.

ing. There is good reason to suppose that there are more mundane explanations behind the concept.[250] The sociocognitive model points at the following explanation: in situations where subjects are under greater demand than usual to be attentive to their experiences and memories—therapeutic, forensic as well as experimental situations spring to mind—there is considerable evidence of the subjects reordering their narratives to conform with these expectations. Witnesses misreport what they have seen,[251] subjects in clinical experiments with hypnosis describe their experiences inaccurately,[252] patients in therapy represent their experiences in order to conform with the therapist's wishes.[253] *Mutatis mutandis*, in the absence of a reference group or role model, a text can serve as a set of cues through which the reader is able to reorganize his or her experiences, as well as narratives of past events, to conform with the Jungian template. The reader is gradually cued to "discover" synchronicities where previously only a sequence of events exited.

Carol Adrienne incorporates the concept of synchronicity into a broadly religious framework. Where Jung saw synchronicity as a quasi-physical principle linking events, Adrienne claims that in reality, synchronicity serves as a means of making us aware of the fact that the world is wisely organized in accordance with a greater, and perhaps divine, Plan.[254] Her text cues readers to understand coincidences as the result of such a meaningful arrangement. If we ask ourselves the "right" questions, the inherent meaning of the synchronous events will reveal themselves: what did we feel when we experienced the events in question, what were we thinking of just as they were about to happen, do we feel that these events have given us new energy, a signal to undertake some activity? These questions are sufficiently vague that just about any answer may potentially fit. Nonetheless, coincidences that might be attributed with a meaning in a sociocognitive analysis are essentialized here, and are said to carry an absolute significance that we can open up to or remain unaware of.

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[250] Marks & Kamman 1980 esp. ch. 11.

[251] Yant 1992.

[252] Current research on hypnosis is summarized in Wagstaff 1999.

[253] Critical literature on psychoanalysis and other forms of psychotherapy stresses the therapist's role in shaping the symptoms of the client. See e.g. Ofshe & Watters 1996 as well as the articles in Crews 1998.

[254] For Carol Adrienne's discussion of synchronicity, see Adrienne *The Purpose of Your Life*, esp. ch. 6.

Gaining Paranormal Powers

Esoteric literature abounds in tales of paranormal events. Most of these narratives are anecdotes of the experiences of others. Is it also possible to awaken normally latent paranormal powers? Such claims are supported by a number of do-it-yourself texts, instruction manuals in a vast range of subjects from telepathy to psychometry, from accessing past-life memories to learning to see auras. From the perspective of the Esoteric text, these manuals are meant to teach skills not previously available to the reader. From the sociocognitive perspective, they may be read from a different angle. These texts, like those on synchronicity, act as cues that allow the readers' experiences to be reinterpreted as "paranormal". When New Age writer Ted Andrews teaches his readers to practice psychometry, i.e. the alleged ability to pick up information from objects through clairvoyant perception, the present perspective sees them as providing a context within which considerably more mundane experiences can be understood within a framework that the text labels as "psychometry". Such a reframing of experience typically occurs in several steps.[255]

At the outset of his book *How to See and Read the Aura*, Ted Andrews lists a set of eleven questions. If the reader is able to answer at least one of them affirmatively, he or she supposedly has the ability to read auras. Among them: have you ever felt drained of energy when you are with other people? Have you ever felt an instinctive like or dislike for somebody you actually do not know? Do you feel nervous or irritable during thunderstorms? Have you ever felt that your first impression of a situation was more correct than your more "rational" deliberations afterwards? It would be difficult to find even a single individual who cannot answer yes to one or more of these questions.

Once the text has implicitly made the connection between such mundane feelings and clairvoyant abilities, it establishes a new esoteric framework within which these familiar experiences can be reframed. If you find it hard to get along with certain people, this is reframed as the effect of the interaction between your own aura and that of the other person. If you feel drained at the end of the

[255] Andrews' discussion also involves elaborate scientistic references as well as an invented tradition, but for the sake of the present argument, only the cueing of experience will be considered.

day, this is "actually" caused by an excess of energy picked up from the auras of people you have met.

The next step is to consciously stimulate such experiences (or interpretations of experience). Among Andrews' suggested steps for developing the ability to see auras are exercises that have the adept imagine an invisible force between his or her hands; a force surrounding his or her body that can be felt when passing a hand a few inches above the skin; and an invisible force emanating from another person present in the same room. Perhaps most strikingly, as one progresses to the more advanced step of "seeing" the aura, Andrews notes that some people do not so much *see* auras in the ordinary sense of the verb, but perceive them intuitively, i.e. see auras "in the mind's eye". Andrews notes that all these exercises feel different to each individual, and that one should not be concerned if one finds the perception of the aura impossible to distinguish from imagination.

As with the purported ability to channel presented by Roman & Packer, success along the Esoteric path comes from allowing oneself to hover in a make-believe frame of perception, and gradually learn a new role in which one's diffuse experiences are perceived as paranormal. Even those who never actually learn to perceive auras as typically described in the literature, i.e. as colors surrounding the physical body, are coaxed to adopt a reframing of experience in which an inner fantasy image is redefined as "seeing auras". *Mutatis mutandis*, these steps apply to other purported abilities. To help readers develop psychometric powers, speak to angels, work with spiritual guides or receive telepathic messages from animals, the text invites them to discover that they have always held these powers in latent form, that everyday experiences are best understood in terms of this new ability, and that there are exercises which can enhance the skill.[256]

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[256] New Age literature comprises quite a few texts with similar exercises and instructions that cue the reader to perceive a variety of subjective impressions and ambiguous stimuli as signs of developing psychometry (Andrews *How to Develop and Use Psychometry*), getting in touch with spiritual guides (Andrews *How to Meet and Work with Spirit Guides*) or angels (Daniel et al. *Ask Your Angels*, Terry Lynn Taylor *Angel Experience*). Taylor adds an interesting twist by encouraging her readers to actively resist any attempt to explain even the most everyday events such as our appreciation of beauty or our inner perception of fantasy images in other terms than angelic. Her basic advice is to let everything remain mysterious; Taylor *Angel Experience*, ch. 6. See also www.awarenessmag.com/nd7_cont.htm, *Contacting Your Personal Angels with Hypnotherapy* by Susan K. Stevenson.

Experiencing What We Already Know

Thus, various New Age positions have opened up the possibilities of accessing prophetic revelation, gaining paranormal powers and experiencing a host of other phenomena. Whereas Steiner's moral and spiritual prerequisites place demands on the adept that only a minority can live up to, channeling is widely accessible; the experience of synchronous meaningful events and the awakening of paranormal powers is potentially available to us all. One of the originators of the modern Esoteric concept of the human aura, Karl von Reichenbach, spent some twenty years investigating the phenomenon he believed himself to have discovered.[257] A modern New Age instruction manual promises that we can learn the skill in sixty seconds.[258] Nevertheless, this democratic ideal has its limitations. As Hanegraaff has noted, no induced channeling seems to have produced messages that have commanded the same kind of devoted following that spontaneous channels have had.[259]

The drift of experience from being the exclusive domain of the highest-ranking members of a hierarchy to becoming the prerogative of every spiritual seeker matches the process described at the end of the chapter on scientism: the shift from charismatic miracle performances to the discovery of universally available spiritual resources or of the application of putative laws of supernature. The two aspects of modern religious creativity go together. A secularization of the religious sphere transforms a mysterious capacity unique to spiritual virtuosi into a natural skill available to all. Whereas Blavatsky and Leadbeater were singled out as the privileged collaborators of the Himalayan Masters, more recent spokespersons have, at least in part, willed their transformation from mundane self to spokesperson for spiritual truths. A number of New Age texts explain how such a process can be possible. Religious (i.e. spiritual) experience is no longer primarily used to cue the readers to view the writer of the text or the originator of the doctrine as a distinctive prophetic figure, but to make the readers' own experiences conform with the doctrinal template.

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[257] Gauld 1992: 228 ff. Reichenbach's magnum opus on the subject is Reichenbach 1849.

[258] Smith *Auras: See them in Only 60 Seconds*.

[259] Hanegraaff 1996: 30 ff.

The section on divination narratives earlier in this chapter showed how central modern perceptions of personhood are expressed in third-person narratives. The explanations offered as to why we have the capacity to access purported spiritual wisdom go a significant step beyond such commonplaces of modern selfhood, by presenting the individual as endowed with faculties not recognized generally by mainstream culture. The explanatory language used to achieve this cueing of experiences is sometimes taken from sources other than the Esoteric Tradition itself, e.g. other esoteric lineages than the post-theosophical. Such is the case with Jungian archetypes. As with the language of science, the mechanism by which the Jungian terminology is appropriated is one of massive disembedding. A term with a vague yet functionally grounded use in analytic psychology is subtly transformed and put to new uses, especially in various New Age texts.

The above sections have outlined one position within the discourse of the democratization of experience. Privileged experience is—at least in theory—available to us all through a learning process. At times, this process is conceived of as long and arduous: anthroposophy would be the foremost case in point. At times, it is described as easy and natural. Courses in channeling present this alternative. The other position within the discourse presents us with the view that esoteric knowledge need not strictly be channeled or accessed from a cosmic archive, since it already lies latent within us. Channeled wisdom arrives from a purported exterior source, whether it is the Akashic record of Steiner or the guides of certain New Age psychics. Latently available wisdom comes from some stratum within the Self; insight consists in awakening what already is there. In an epistemological model that has long since left mainstream culture, but which has roots at least as far back as Plato, knowledge comes to us when we remember what we already know.

Within this position, there is still the problem of understanding how the highly specific doctrines of any one branch of the Esoteric Tradition could possibly be compatible with the claim that we already possess knowledge. An example of this dilemma is Aura-Soma. This method of healing and divination is based on a theosophical worldview and presents a large number of specific interpretations of the main ritual objects employed in Aura-Soma: bottles filled with colored and scented liquids. To master all the details of this intricate and steadily expanding system is quite a feat. Nevertheless, texts on

Aura-Soma claim that this knowledge comes naturally to us. "The greatest teacher is in yourself" is the motto that introduces Irene Dalichow's and Mike Booth's book *Aura-Soma: Healing Through Color, Plant and Crystal Energy*. Dalichow and Booth even claim that Aura-Soma is based on archetypal knowledge encoded in the human genes. All that Vicky Wall did when she transmitted this knowledge from her spirit guides was to awaken what had always been there.[260]

Aura-Soma, as well as a number of other Esoteric positions based on the claim that we possess knowledge within us, offer different interpretations of how this higher knowledge can be awakened. The two most common are these: the claim that knowledge is to be gained from getting in touch with archetypal psychic material; or that knowledge resides in a part of us referred to as our higher selves. The higher Self is a staple of the gnosticizing Esoteric Tradition; in the present selection of positions, the dichotomy between ego and self has roots in theosophy. Blavatsky referred to the Hindu doctrine of atman to support her concept of a dual self: a destructible, material element and a true, indestructible Self.[261] This distinction recurs in later positions. Thus, it plays a minor part in the corpus of Steiner's texts,[262] whereas Cayce occasionally refers to the inner self or real self.[263] As is often the case, Alice Bailey is a closer precursor of New Age beliefs concerning a tiered personality. In her writings, one finds a tripartite conception of the self:

> 1. [The] lower concrete mind, the reasoning principle. It is with this aspect of the man that our educational processes profess to deal.
> 2. That Son of Mind, which we call the Ego or Soul. This is the intelligence principle, and is called by many names in the esoteric literature, such as the Solar Angel, the Agnishvattas, the Christ principle, etc. With this, religion in the past has professed to deal.
> 3. The higher abstract mind, the custodian of ideas, and that which is the conveyor of illumination to the lower mind, once that lower mind is en rapport with the soul. With this world of ideas philosophy has professed to deal.[264]

The concept of the Higher Self as employed within a New Age context has been explored in detail by Hanegraaff.[265] The following sec-

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[260] Dalichow & Booth *Aura-Soma*, pp. 12 f.; 228.
[261] Cf. SD I:534.
[262] Cf. Steiner *Vor dem Tore der Theosophie*, pp. 78 ff.
[263] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, pp. 105 ff.
[264] Bailey *Education in the New Age*, p. 5.
[265] Hanegraaff 1996: 211 ff.

tion will focus on the concept of Jungian archetypes and their Esoteric interpretation.

Archetypes: Jung and the Jungians

The concept of archetypes is, of course, closely connected with the analytic psychology of Carl Gustav Jung. The idea had gradually developed during the nineteenth century, and has been variously traced to Goethe, to Johann Friedrich Herbart or to Adolf Bastian.[266] Jung referred to these historical predecessors but claimed that his own adoption of the term had its roots in clinical experience rather than philosophical speculation. Jung conceived of the archetypes as dominant factors within the collective unconscious. Archetypes are in themselves unknowable, but structure symbolic thinking, dreams and myths around certain themes. They can only be observed through these mediate symbols,[267] and are thus not directly open to observation or to empirical validation or disconfirmation.

Jung leaves significant gaps in his theory of the archetypes, which will be exploited in New Age literature. Firstly, Jung gives many examples of individual archetypes throughout his writings, but only very few are systematically explored. There is no exhaustive list, which means that the set of archetypes remains open and can be expanded on indefinitely by Jungians. Secondly, Jung gives the readers no procedure of either discovery or validation through which to determine which specific symbols, dreams or myths are manifestations of any given archetype. This is probably a direct outcome of the particular use of the term *symbol* in Jung's writings. Common uses of the concept of *symbol* see it as a symbol *of* some specified referendum; for instance, a lion is seen in a number of cultural contexts as a symbol of valor. In contrast with these interpretations, the overt manifestations of the archetypes are symbols of something ineffable. It would be a distinct departure from everyday usage to claim that a lion is a symbol, but not a symbol of something else.

Thirdly, although less problematic for the present purpose, Jung purports to present his concept of the archetypes as an empirical fact that still lacks an explanation.[268] Are archetypes quasi-biological?

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[266] However, the word *archetype* itself is much older, and was ultimately borrowed from St. Augustine.

[267] Jung 1968c, §267.

[268] Jung's explanation of the nature of the archetypes changed as he developed his theories, but these reformulations can only be hinted at here. See Humbert

Or are they part of a spiritual realm? Jung's own statements are contradictory. A quasi-biological explanation can be seen in a statement to the effect that archetypes are patterns of instinctive behavior.[269] As a species, we appear to inherit archetypes by a Lamarckian process: Jung claims that they are the inner manifestations of certain experiences that human beings have had again and again throughout the history of our species.[270] However, in one of his last writings, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, his massive magnum opus on alchemy published in 1955, Jung's presents a radically different theory of the archetypes that resembles a hermetic concept of correspondences rather than a psychological theory in the usual sense of the word. Jung explains: "it may be a prejudice to restrict the psyche to being 'inside the body'; In so far as the psyche has a non-spatial aspect, there may well be a psychic 'outside-the-body', a region so utterly different from 'my' psychic space that one has to get outside oneself or make use of some auxiliary technique in order to get there".[271]

In short, Jungian archetypes function as a language game in Wittgenstein's sense, but do not constitute a falsifiable theory in the Popperian sense of the term. To those who adopt the Jungian language game, archetypes can serve as a way to emplot the narrative of one's life. Jung and his followers exploit the vagueness of the concept and the open nature of the set of archetypes to the full. Jung contended that the mother archetype can manifest itself symbolically as goddesses, the Virgin, or wisdom personified as Sophia, but also as paradise, church, university, city or country, heaven, earth, the woods, the sea, the underworld, the moon, ploughed fields, gardens,

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1988, ch. 2 for a brief survey. By 1910, Jung had abandoned the then prevalent view of the psyche of the new-born infant as a tabula rasa. Instead, he posited the existence of unconscious predispositions that had evolved over the history of the human race. The belief that these predispositions mirror each other in individual life and in the products of the collective (myths, symbols) appears in *Symbols of Transformation*, published in 1911–12. The term "archetype" was adopted in 1919 as a means of labeling this concept. How, precisely, should archetypes be understood? Jung formulated several partly conflicting theories over the next decades. In some texts he claimed that they were biologically inherited, while in others he denied the possibility of innate representations. By 1946 he had arrived at a solution to this dilemma, in which he posited a difference between the *archetype* per se, which he understood as an inherited disposition, and the variety of ensuing culture-specific *archetypal images*. He referred to them throughout in metaphorical, often vague terms, that seem to call for exegesis rather than empirical research.

[269] Jung 1968b, §91.

[270] Jung 1966, § 109.

[271] Jung 1970, § 410.

a rock, a cave, a tree, a spring or deep well, the baptismal font, roses and lotus flowers, magic circles, ovens and cooking vessels, the uterus, cows, hares and helpful animals generally.[272] Erich Neumann, who published *The Great Mother*, one of the classics of Jungian psychology, in 1955, added dragons and death to the list. The consequences of the lack of validating principles already found in Jung's own writings give Jungian archetypes a distinctly mythopoetic flavor. Although they overstated their cases, writers such as Lévy-Bruhl and Ernst Cassirer, who each attempted, in his own way, to claim that thinking could be categorized as belonging to two distinct forms, might have found the discussion of archetypes to be a prime example of "primitive" or "mythical" thinking. Even a reader prepared to accept the existence of archetypes is at a loss to understand how it is possible to ascertain that cows, cities and caves are three manifestations of one single archetype rather than three different archetypes.

New Age movement texts typically use the term archetypes in an even vaguer sense. Some texts retain a Jungian flavor, and simply substitute their own list of archetypes for that found in more orthodox Jungian literature. One example culled from an entire subgenre of movement texts is Carol S. Pearson's *The Hero Within*, a best-selling New Age Jungian book. The text on the cover identifies the immediate source of Pearson's concept of archetypes as Joseph Campbell rather than Jung's own writings. Pearson implicitly acknowledges this by labeling the writings of those who influenced her most, i.e. Joseph Campbell as well as James Hillman, post-Jungian. Her definition of archetypes is recognizably inspired by Jung, although unorthodox by Jungian standards:

> The archetypes identified here are not the typical ones usually included by Jungians as critical to the individuation process. Most works of Jungian psychology use dreams and rather exotic mythic texts to get at the unconscious psychological formulations. Our purpose here is to explore the archetypes active in our *conscious* lives [—] we do not always have to move to dreams and other forms of uncensored expression to find out what is true for us. We simply have more access now to unconscious material, more skills for dealing with it, and more cultural permission to experiment with different feelings and ways of being and acting in the world than Jung's patients.[273]

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[272] Jung 1968a, §156.
[273] Pearson *Hero Within*, p. xxvii. Emphasis in the original.

Other texts gloss archetypes as any purportedly innate information. Ultimately, one finds texts in which the link to Jungian psychology is tenuous indeed. In statements such as the following, a quote from an astrology text, "archetypal" could perhaps be translated as "underlying, meaningful":

> The true purpose of philosophy [. . .] was once held to be the search for essences and for the underlying nature of manifested things, all based upon a love of wisdom. In modern terms, this could be called the search for the archetypal level of reality.[274]

Stephen Arroyo, the author of this text, does go on to discuss Jung, but the term archetypal in the quote seems to apply not so much to a formative level of the psyche as to a hidden reality of the manifest world itself.

Texts thus employ the term archetype in a variety of senses, and move between different meanings. Archetypes as structuring concepts and archetypes as elements of the core or deep self are conflated. Thus, the symbols of astrology or the tarot are decontextualized and presented as part of our heritage as human beings. The tarot is a system of divination that requires skill to be successfully employed. The diviner becomes an expert in the use and interpretation of arcane symbols. Nevertheless, the cards of the tarot are said to depict archetypes and thus "naturally" correspond to facets of our innermost selves.

Elements of the Self as Experience Cues

The metaphors may be diametrically contradictary. Some texts will claim that wisdom comes to us by being attentive to the *deepest* regions of our psyches; others that we must heed the wisdom of a *higher* component of our selves. Still others borrow the language of psychosynthesis, claiming that we are composed of several sub-personalities. These psychologizing metaphors share a similar function in the construction of experience. Whether the author of an Esoteric text structures the narrative of inner knowledge around archetypes in the Jungian sense or around a divine component within a subdivided self, the effect is one of cueing experience. By being coached to understand their experiences in a new language, readers are supposed to adopt a view of themselves in which the self actually embod-

[274] Arroyo *Astrology, Psychology and the Four Elements*, p. 27.

ies distinct components. Carol Adrienne presents this restructuring of experience particularly well in the autobiographical material that introduces her book *The Purpose of Your Life*. Adrienne recounts how after a semester of studying archetypal psychology[275] and being assigned the task of writing a paper, she suddenly "realized" that she was constituted of several different personalities. She began to follow up each of these inner voices through dreams, intuitions, emotions and concrete events, finally learning to recognize the distinctive traits of each sub-personality and even giving each of them a name.

The parallels with another culturally constructed theory of the self, Multiple Personality Disorder or Dissociative Identity Disorder[276] are obvious. In Adrienne's retelling of her sudden "realization" that she was composed of four subpersonalities, one sees traces of an iatrogenic phenomenon. The difference, of course, is that MPD therapists portray multiple personalities as a pathological state, whereas Adrienne's Jungian teacher stressed the importance and the benefits of learning to contact one's inner (archetypal) voices. Whether one decides to present oneself and phrase one's experiences in terms of sub-personalities, archetypes or dissociative states is the result of a role-learning process.

Case Study: a Course in Miracles

This section proposes to subject a specific revealed doctrine, *A Course in Miracles* (ACIM), to a symptomatic reading.[277] The following analysis will attempt to point out some of the uses of narratives of experience in presenting the message of the Course. ACIM and the texts

[275] Archetypal psychology is the creation of James Hillman, one of Jung's closest associates.

[276] An official change of name was carried out in the 1994 edition of the American *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

[277] *A Course in Miracles*, the Course or ACIM for short is perhaps the most influential channeled message. Over 1.2 million English language copies have been sold. Rights have been granted Penguin to publish a mass-market paperback issue of the Course. At the time of writing (May 2000), there are translations into German, Hebrew, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Dutch, Russian and Chinese. Other translations are being planned. There are dozens of volumes purporting to explain the message of ACIM, some of them best-sellers. There are a couple of thousand study groups that use the book, several Internet discussion groups devoted to it and innumerable websites that mention it. ACIM has been described as a grassroots spiritual movement (Miller *The Complete Story of the Course*, p. 1).

that have been written in its wake present all the basic forms of narratives of experience. Since the Course is a channeled text, both the recipient and the source of the doctrines have been subjected to the mechanisms of legend formation that were described above in connection with first-person narratives. The purpose of the doctrines is to alter the consciousness of the reader; the Course presents elaborate second-person narratives which function as cueing systems to accomplish this aim. Books filled with third-person testimonials to the power of the Course to transform its readers have contributed to creating a minor genre of emic exegetical texts.

Presenting A Course in Miracles

According to the founding legend, the message of *A Course In Miracles* was received from an inner voice speaking to a research psychologist at Columbia University named Helen Schucman (1909–1981). The revelation was sparked by a series of conflicts that, in the mid-1960s, had beset the Department of Psychology where she worked. Schucman and Bill Thetford, the director of the Psychology Department at the Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, vowed to find a way to heal the troubled relationships at the department. In response to this pledge, on October 21st, 1965, a voice in Schucman's head announced, "This is a course in miracles. Please take notes".

Schucman considered herself an agnostic, but claimed to have felt compelled to continue taking dictations from the inner voice over the next seven years, with Thetford as an editorial help. The founding legend stresses that Schucman continued throughout the process to be "unbelieving, suspicious and afraid".[278] However, Kenneth Wapnick's *Absence from Felicity*, the most detailed hagiographic account of Schucman and the process of channeling, also notes that Schucman and Thetford were in little doubt as to the source of the inner voice: it was Jesus.[279]

By September 1972, the dictation was nearly completed.[280] The result, the printed Course, is a hefty work of nearly 1,200 pages. The finished text consists of three parts: the *Text*, comprising 622

[278] Miller *The Complete Story of the Course*, p. 15.
[279] Wapnick *Absence From Felicity*, pp. 198 ff.
[280] A few additional pages, now included in the Preface to the Course, were channeled in 1977.

pages, contains the basic metaphysical worldview of the Course. The 478-page *Workbook for Students* consists of 365 lessons to be worked through at a rate of one per day. The third part, a mere 88 pages, comes under the heading *Manual for Teachers*. The Course underwent editing between 1973 and 1975. By then, Kenneth Wapnick had become involved in the work. Wapnick, who had converted from Judaism to Christianity and was vividly interested in mysticism and psychology, was introduced to the Course manuscript through a mutual friend of Schucman's. Wapnick became prominent as a Course teacher, a capable administrator and an exegete with a Christianizing hermeneutic framework. In 1975, Judith Skutch, a figure on the New Age scene, entered the picture and brought the course material to the attention of a larger network of people in the cultic milieu. In 1976, Schucman, Thetford, Wapnick and Skutch jointly decided to have the Course published. The copyright was transferred to the Foundation for Inner Peace, an organization originally founded in 1972 by Judith and Robert Skutch as *Foundation for ParaSensory Investigation* to promote parapsychological investigation, but now renamed and given a different purpose.

In 1983, Kenneth and Gloria Wapnick founded the *Foundation for A Course in Miracles* to disseminate the teachings. This organization and the *Foundation for Inner Peace* are formally separate, but share directors and make joint decisions. Together, they have come to be seen by some Course enthusiasts as the beginnings of a new orthodoxy. The copyright and earlier translation rights policy might support this view. In the first twenty years following the publication of the material, only four translations had been authorized, and only in the late 1990s did the Foundation carry out translation projects into a number of new languages. The reason given for this restrictive policy was the fear that the message of the Course could be misrepresented.

The Cosmology and Anthropology of ACIM

Despite its length, the Course is organized around a small number of central ideas. The introduction to the Course presents its twin aims: to explicate a cosmology of monist idealism and to introduce a practical psychology aimed at changing the perception of reality along the lines of that metaphysical view:

> [The course aims at] removing the blocks to the awareness of love's presence, which is your natural inheritance. The opposite of love is fear,

> but what is all-encompassing can have no opposite. This course can therefore be summed up very simply in this way: Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists. Herein lies the peace of God.[281]

ACIM proclaims that the cosmos appears to be made of two basic forces, of which one, however, is illusory. Our everyday consciousness, which does not present us with this picture of reality, is therefore an illusion. We believe that we live in a world in which people are separate from each other and in which suffering, sorrow and enmity abound. In reality, none of this truly exists; the entire world as we perceive it is a gigantic projection of our fear-ridden egos. We are thus responsible for the world, since we have created it:

> I am responsible for what I see.
> I choose the feelings I experience, and decide upon the goal I would achieve.
> And everything that seems to happen to me
> I ask for, and receive as I have asked.[282]

Thus, all the evil and suffering that we believe ourselves to be witnessing is, in fact, the projection of our own fear and guilt. When we seem to fall ill and suffer the effects of age, this is the effect the mind has by projecting its attacks on the body. More surprisingly, perhaps, even seemingly positive features of the everyday world of perception such as many close personal relationships, friendships and loves, can prevent us from arriving at the state in which we realize that God and love are all there is. Personal relationships are yet another way of projecting onto others what we believe is lacking in ourselves. Such relationships, just like sin and suffering, are therefore part of the illusion that the ego makes us live in. ACIM is thus a firmly world-rejecting doctrine. The way out of this illusion is a path that combines religious and therapeutic themes. By forgiving unconditionally, we can begin to draw back our projections.

A Course in Miracles bears a distinct resemblance to Christian Science. Like the Course, *Science and Health With a Key to Scriptures* constructs a monist cosmology with a distinctly Christian terminology. According to both belief systems, reality is divine, since God is infinite and there is no other power or source.[283] By contrast, the world as we

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[281] Unpaginated introduction to ACIM.
[282] ACIM Text, p. 418.
[283] S&H 471:18.

perceive it is, in a sense, illusory. There is no sin.[284] Evil and good are not real.[285] Matter, sin, and sickness are not real, but only illusions.[286] The Christ in both Christian Science and ACIM does not defeat evil, but demonstrates its lack of any reality beyond our belief in it. The crucifixion was Jesus' ultimate demonstration of his insight into the illusory nature of the material world.[287] Christian Scientists believe in what they term the "allness of God" and, conversely, the "unreality of disease, sin and death".[288] ACIM exegete Kenneth Wapnick speaks of seeing the world with the vision of Christ, "God's alternative to the illusion of separation and to the belief in the reality of sin, guilt and death".[289]

Cueing Experience

From the sociocognitive perspective, the Text presents the metaphysical template according to which the readers' experience will be cued, the Workbook for Students is the set of step-by step instructions that allows this cueing to take place, and the Manual for Teachers is a didactic aid in this process. Having briefly examined the metaphysical presuppositions of the course, this section will take a quick look at the way in which the Workbook and Manual propose that the cueing be carried out in practice. The Course states that praxis is more important than doctrine: "a universal theology is impossible, but a universal experience is not only possible but necessary".[290] There is every reason to take the stated aims of ACIM seriously, and see it as a colossal effort at reframing the readers' experiences.

The belief espoused in ACIM that we create our world is a staple of the New Age, and recurs in quite a few channeled texts. What distinguishes the Course from many other channeled books is its practical aspect. The lessons in the Workbook for Students constitute detailed steps in the process of dismantling the illusory nature of perception that the ego has built up, and then reassembling one's view of the world according to the idealist monism of the Course.

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[284] S&H 447:24.
[285] S&H, 330:25–27; 470:9–14.
[286] S&H 335:7–15; 447:27–28.
[287] For the Course perspective on the crucifixion, see ACIM pp. 84 ff.
[288] From the ISAR web site on Christian Science at www.americanreligion.org/cultwtch/chrstsc.html.
[289] Wapnick *Absence From Felicity*, p. 510.
[290] ACIM Manual, p. 77.

Each lesson is structured in the same way. The lesson is introduced with a brief statement of what is to be learnt. This is followed by a lengthier practical exercise, through which this insight can be internalized. This section is usually built around everyday experiences that can be reinterpreted along the lines presented in the Course. Some lessons are capped off with a statement summarizing the insights gained, which one should repeat to oneself. The Workbook (supplemented with brief instructions in other parts of the Course) also contains detailed, practical instructions on how the individual exercises should be carried out.[291] All 365 exercises must be performed, in the order indicated. No more than one exercise should be done each day, but if necessary, several days may be spent on the same instructions. The student is not required to believe in the doctrines of the Course. The exercises thus begin as an elaborate "as if" act.

The first lessons inculcate a feeling of unreality, a sense that by interpreting our sensory data, we are the creators of everything around us: "this table does not mean anything", "that lamp does not mean anything", "this hand does not mean anything".[292] "I have given everything I see in this room all the meaning that it has for me".[293] Even one's own thoughts are declared to lack meaning. All one's impressions are to be seen as merely the residue of past conditioning.

There is a rhetoric of progression to these first exercises. Once one gets the point, it is probably not difficult to assent to the statement that we do indeed orient ourselves in the world by applying what we have learned in the past. Step by step, the reader is led from these not so radical ideas to apply a way of thinking about the world that is increasingly removed from the naive realism of everyday life. Seen as a doctrinal system, these propositions form an enthymatic whole. Seen as cues for structuring appearance, they seem to gently shove the reader from one frame of reference to a radically different one. Here are some lessons, in order:

> I am upset because I see a meaningless world (Lesson 12)
> A meaningless world engenders fear (13)
> God did not create a meaningless world (14)

This last step is crucial. The previous lessons merely revolve around the readers' inner world, the carefully engendered feeling that the

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[291] ACIM Workbook, pp. 1 f.
[292] ACIM Workbook, p. 3.
[293] ACIM Workbook, p. 4.

world of everyday perception carries no other meaning than the one arbitrarily ascribed to it. Now "meaningless" in this first sense is conflated with "meaningless" in a moral or existential sense. God can per definition not have created an existentially meaningless world. This lesson can therefore exemplify its doctrinal position with apparently absurd examples. After all, the Workbook does not ask the reader believe in these propositions, but only to entertain them as possibilities, to hover in the "as if" for a minute or so:

> God did not create that war, so it is not real (Lesson 14)
> God did not create that airplane crash, so it is not real (14)

In place of such shared illusions, the Workbook soon attempts to inculcate a determined effort to structure one's perception differently: "I am determined to see things differently" (21).

What, then, is the different perception that the Workbook promotes? Many lessons are geared at seeing everyday things in a "divine" light: "God is in everything I see" (29), including everyday objects such as coat-hangers and waste-baskets. Others are important in restructuring the readers' perceptions of themselves as in some sense divine. Thus, "I am as God created me" (162) and "my part is essential to God's plan for salvation" (100).

The Course finally provides its readers with a new vocabulary within which to express their new perceptions. Large sections of the workbook are devoted to explaining and illustrating terms such as forgiveness, salvation, world, sin, body, Christ, Holy Spirit, real world, second coming, last judgment, creation, ego and miracle. All of these words have everyday meanings as well as meanings assigned them within various Christian traditions. However, ACIM, with its blend of psychology and religion, uses these terms in specific new ways. By adopting them, the readers learn to express their experiences in a way that marks them as belonging to the Course framework. Thus the word "sin" is defined as illusion, and is claimed to be the same as insanity.[294] Since illusion is, among other things, the commonsensical belief in the existence of the empirical world, we are all implicitly declared to be both sinful and mad. No wonder that those who accept Course teachings really can become determined to see things differently.

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[294] ACIM Workbook, p. 409.

Schucman as Prophet and Exemplum

Applying the five criteria of Sheppard and Herbrechtsmeier introduced earlier in this chapter, Schucman, as the recipient of privileged experience, would certainly qualify as a prophetic figure. Her role is ambiguous in that her name does not appear on the title of the printed version of ACIM, yet is the object of hagiographic accounts. There are networks of people who consider ACIM to be a truly divine revelation. The message of the Course is seen as one way of expressing a universal truth. It imparts a strong form of cultural criticism through the world-rejecting nature of its doctrines. Finally, the Christian language and the allusions to God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit impart upon the Course the impression of a profound reformation of Christianity rather than of a radically new faith. This impression is further strengthened by the exegetical efforts of Kenneth Wapnick.

The founding legend that supports Helen Schucman's prophetic claims rests on two seemingly contradictory tropes. The most detailed hagiography quotes her as writing in a graduate school paper "This is the story of my search for God. It began when I was a very little girl".[295] In one of the most adulatory passages in Wapnick's hagiography, Jesus is supposed to have praised Schucman in terms that would have her ranking second only to God himself. Schucman was more than just a divine instrument:

> Before your loveliness the stars stand transfixed and bow to the power of your will. What do children know of their creation, except what their Creator tells them? You were created above the angels because your role involves creation as well as protection. You who are in the image of the Father need bow only to Him, before Whom I kneel with you.[296]

At other times, it stresses Schucman's later agnosticism, her unwillingness to be the channel of the course, her skepticism towards the entire project. This may be read not only as biographical "fact" but (also) as a modern version of a recurrent legend theme, that has the prophet resist his or her mission.

The biographies are typically ambivalent in this respect, since they note Thetford's intense interest in various forms of related world-

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[295] Wapnick *Absence From Felicity*, p. 17.
[296] Wapnick *Absence From Felicity*, p. 19.

views, including Christian Science,[297] the readings of Edgar Cayce,[298] and the client-centered psychotherapy of Carl Rogers.[299] It is as if the apologetic biographies record the personal preoccupations of all the people involved in the Course, but resist drawing the conclusions that an outside observer would do. This is the case when Wapnick's massive biography only mentions Christian Science in passing and New Thought not at all, despite the fact that the doctrines espoused by ACIM would appear to be fundamentally indebted to the tradition of American harmonial religions within which both Schucman and Thetford were raised. This is also evinced by Patrick Miller's efforts in refuting the suggestion that Schucman and Thetford had more than a fleeting previous acquaintance with alternative religious doctrines, despite admitting that she was profoundly familiar with the Bible and had had at least one visionary experience earlier in life.[300]

Why should Schucman be depicted as such an unwilling and unlikely prophet? There are two potential answers to this question. On one level, this biographical element written in the confessional mode might actually lend increased plausibility to the authenticity of the channeling. The Course, it is implied, could certainly not be the result of autosuggestion or wishful thinking, since the scribe never wanted to be a scribe. On a more profound level, the story of Schucman and the others involved in the early days of *A Course in Miracles* can in itself be made to serve as an illustration of the basic principles of the Course. On this view, Schucman was not only a prophet for a highly specific view of the human predicament, but an exemplum embodying that view. Interestingly, Wapnick's hagiography covers Schucman's life in terms that are consonant with the schema presented in the Course, and does so explicitly. An outside perspective on the Course might be that it resonates with the split between the concept of a suffering ego and that of a loving self living in the presence of God, because Schucman conceived of her own life in this way: struggling with a childhood faith that she had lost but always longed for. Her metaphysics could then be read as

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[297] Miller *The Complete Story of the Course*, p. 45.
[298] Wapnick *Absence From Felicity*, pp. 115 f., Miller *The Complete Story of the Course*, pp. 22 f.
[299] Miller *The Complete Story of the Course*, p. 46.
[300] Miller *The Complete Story of the Course*, pp. 32 ff. and 36 ff., respectively.

a projection of her personal dilemma. Wapnick's interpretation reverses the link. Helen Schucman's life was, on his reading, a paradigmatic example of the constant struggle between the ego and the spiritual self that according to ACIM is objectively part of the human condition.

Testimonies and Commentaries

A sizeable devotional literature has been published, disseminating the doctrines of ACIM in an easier-to-digest format. A fair number of books purport to elucidate the "real" meaning of the Course.[301] Probably unique among twentieth century channeled books, there is even a concordance to the Course, a 1,108 page volume that was ten years in the making. These are distinct signs that ACIM has entered the process that leads to the creation of a canonical scripture.

A Course in Miracles is a massive volume, one that is not particularly easy to penetrate. It is also meant to be read actively and to be portioned out over the course of at least a year. A simpler method of getting acquainted with the Course is to read one of the devotional texts that have been written with the doctrines of ACIM at their core. Books by Gerald Jampolsky, Marianne Williamson and others have reached large audiences. Just as certain devotional literature within other traditions, these books popularize the message of the central scripture, make it explicit by means of concrete examples, and anchor it by choosing examples that the ordinary reader can identify with. The rather austere world-rejecting message of the Course becomes the matter of hopeful and inspiring third-person narratives.

Jampolsky, who was introduced to the Course in 1975, has been particularly effective in spreading its doctrines. His first book, *Love is Letting Go of Fear*, published in 1979, was endorsed on the Johnny Carson Show, and sales sky-rocketed. By the late 1990s, sales figures had passed three million copies. In this as well as subsequent texts, Jampolsky presents the basic doctrines of ACIM in a self-help format. Anecdotes from everyday life illustrate each principle. The message is that unconditional love and forgiveness solve every problem. Our inner attitudes determine the way the world looks. By trusting life completely, we will succeed. *Love is Letting Go of Fear* consists of twelve simple lessons in applying some basic principles based on the

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[301] The essentialist perspective on the nature of texts can be seen from a title such as Kenneth Wapnick's videotape production *Seek Not to Change the Course*.

Course. The structure of the text is reminiscent of much American self-help literature. Each chapter is summarized in a short Course-related statement, such as "All that I give is given to myself", "Forgiveness is the key to happiness" or "I could see peace in stead of this". Concrete narratives show how these statements should be applied, and illustrate the beneficial effects that come from trusting them. The heritage from the American harmonial religions is even more apparent in this popularized version than in the original Course. Thus, the third chapter, "I am never upset for the reasons I think", is an echo of the belief system of Mary Baker Eddy. Jampolsky claims that we live under the false impression that the world that we see is the reason why we feel upset, depressed, anxious or afraid. Instead, the opposite is the case. Our minds project our own fears onto the world. If we experience pain and suffering, this is ultimately due to ourselves and our own thoughts.

These beliefs are supported by third-person narratives of people who have managed to create a positive life situation for themselves by applying the principles of the book. In *Goodbye to Guilt*, Jampolsky recalls the case of Mildred, who suffered intensely from attacks of biliary colic. Through relaxation, positive thinking and prayer, Mildred managed to overcome her pain. He tells the story of Laura, who managed to create a lasting relationship by giving up what the Course calls attack thoughts. He narrates the spiritual breakthrough of Marion, who realized that she was not the limited ego she had previously thought, and by means of this insight managed in her fifties to combine a full-time professional career with an active leisure as a marathon runner.[302]

Importantly, Jampolsky includes a first-person narrative that places him within a religious context. One part of his first-person narrative is a classical conversion theme. As in Schucman's biography, Jampolsky tells of the struggle between the ego and the true identity ("sinner" and "born-again", to draw a Christian parallel). The other major element of his narrative conveys the effects of living with the principles of the Course. In an episode that fully brings out the fundamental similarity between the harmonial religions and ACIM, Jampolsky tells how he managed to get rid of his own chronic back pains by letting go of his negative emotions towards other people.

[302] Anecdotes culled from Jampolsky *Goodbye to guilt*, part II ch. 1 and 4.

He concludes that most people with back ache could be free of their pains if they decided to forgive themselves as well as others, and thereby allow themselves to be healed.[303]

Marianne Williamson has been called "the foremost popularizer of the Course".[304] Her first book, *A Return to Love*, was published in 1992. After Williamson made an appearance on the Oprah Winfrey Show, the book almost instantly became a major best-seller. Her book also boosted sales for ACIM itself. Like Jampolsky, Williamson includes a conversion narrative. Religious doubts led to a period of destructive behavior and depression. Once she had hit rock bottom, Williamson was ready for the Course. As soon as she began to adopt the principles of the Course, her life began to have a meaning again.[305]

To a far greater extent than Jampolsky's books, *Return to Love* is a long conversion narrative. Every chapter is a testimony to the miraculous effects that the Course has had on Williamson herself. Theoretical passages explaining the Course are interspersed with concrete events from the author's life. To an extent rarely seen elsewhere in the New Age literature, Williamson's book is one long illustration of the values of adopting a new belief system. It is, however, also a lengthy testimony to the ability to reframe one's experiences in terms of such a belief system. Many of the situations in the author's life are such that the reader can readily identify with them. Like so many others, the author had doubts and troubles during her adolescence. Actually, this was part of her refusal to let God into her life.[306] The author had problems getting along with her parents. In reality, this was because she had neglected the Course's injunction to be forgiving rather than judgmental.[307] Like so many of her readers, she broke off a relationship that didn't work. What really happened was that she surrendered to the Holy Spirit.[308]

On each of these occasions, the Course had a decisive influence in solving the problem. What Williamson does for us is, firstly, to explain that common situations which most of us face on our journey through life are in fact part of a moral and existential struggle

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[303] Jampolsky *Love is Letting Go of Fear*, ch. 3.
[304] Miller *The Complete Story of the Course*, p. 90.
[305] Preface to Williamson *Return to Love*.
[306] Williamson *Goodbye to guilt*, ch. 1.
[307] Williamson *Goodbye to guilt*, ch. 6:2.
[308] Williamson *Goodbye to guilt*, ch. 6:14.

of the grandest proportions between our egos and God. Secondly, she introduces the ultimate pragmatic evidence for the Course: every time she applied its teachings, opened the text at random or remembered a passage from it, her life took a new direction. Seen from this perspective as well, ACIM has become a canonical scripture.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

A CASE STUDY: REINCARNATION

Introduction

Several polls carried out in North America and Europe show that the professed belief in reincarnation is widespread. Roughly twenty percent of the interviewees both in America and several European countries state that they have wholly or partly adopted adopted a belief in reincarnation.[1] Although the exact nature of the beliefs covered by a term such as "reincarnation" remains uncertain as long as these polls are not followed up with interviews, such statistics still suggest a change in religious beliefs in the modern West. A mere century ago, reincarnation belief was marginal. The two main bastions of this creed were the spiritist subculture in France and the membership of the Theosophical Society. If one goes back another century, to the turn of the nineteenth century, belief in reincarnation was almost unknown in the West. It has thus taken a remarkably short time to transform a truly exotic and esoteric doctrine into a widely accepted religious belief, adopted—if the statistics are at all representative—by millions of people in the West.

Two questions are of particular interest for the purposes of the present case study. How have reincarnation doctrines adapted to the sweeping cultural changes in the West, particularly secularization and globalization? What persuasive mechanisms have contributed to making reincarnation belief credible to a modern audience? As this chapter will show, each phase in the production and reproduction of modern Western reincarnation doctrines has introduced innovations that are largely due to changes in the cultural context.

Reincarnation comes in many varieties. This chapter, like the rest of the present study, is not concerned with the actual belief systems

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[1] For Britain, the figure in 1993 was 26 percent, see Heelas 1996: 108; In the Bay Area, a 1990 poll indicated 25 percent (ibid. p. 111). A Gallup poll carried out in the USA in 1996 gave the rate of reincarnation belief as 22 percent; see Saliba 1999.

of those who answer poll questions affirmatively, but with the movement texts of various spokespersons of the Esoteric Tradition. Furthermore, most of these texts link the concept of reincarnation with that of karma. The two are not logically connected; it is simply a fact of the history of religions that these concepts have become almost inseparable in the literature.[2] Thus, although the primary focus here is reincarnation, the discursive mechanisms underlying the concept of karma will also occasionally be touched upon.

Reincarnation beliefs of one kind or another are found all over the world. One survey of such beliefs in traditional cultures records concepts of rebirth among more than 250 ethnic groups.[3] However, reincarnation is not a single, well defined doctrine, but a diffuse group of beliefs that hold the rebirth of some spiritual component within us, perhaps a "soul" (whatever this expression may mean), to be our destiny after death. Beyond this minimum core of common doctrine, there are vast differences of opinion. Do we always reincarnate as humans, or can we return as other sentient beings? Do ancestral spirits reincarnate within their family groups? Is reincarnation linked to any concept of moral retribution? What is the precise nature of the reincarnating entity? The fact that reincarnation in the Esoteric Tradition is designated by the same label as reincarnation doctrines of Oriental or other provenance should not obscure the fact that the various beliefs display considerable differences. Even within the Esoteric Tradition, there are divergences of opinion between e.g. Leadbeater and Steiner.

The Rise of a Modern Myth

Western Reincarnationism Before Blavatsky

Although this is not the place to present an extensive history of reincarnationist doctrines in the Christian West, some background is in order. The belief in reincarnation prevalent in certain Greek and Hellenistic schools, especially in Neoplatonism, was largely eclipsed during centuries of Christian hegemony. Reincarnation reentered the Western history of ideas with the revival of interest in the kabbala,

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[2] For a philosophical review of the status of the concept of karma, see Edwards 1996.

[3] Bergunder 1994.

and spread through a small network of writers with esoteric interests. The kabbalistic tradition appears in several strains. Although not unknown in previous kabbalistic texts, the transmigration of souls or *gilgul* became a major doctrinal element with the sixteenth century school of Isaac Luria (1534–1572).[4] Luria's own doctrines were basically an esoteric teaching reserved for the initiated, and were set down in writing by his disciples. Lurianic texts were translated from Hebrew into Latin by Christian Knorr von Rosenroth as part of his *Kabbala denudata*, published in three volumes, the first two in 1677–78 and the last in 1684. Knorr von Rosenroth's friend and esotericist colleague, François Mercure van Helmont (1614–1699), believed that the doctrine of transmigration of souls could be made the cornerstone of a universal Christianity: by this means, the souls of individuals who had lived in the wrong time and place to have heard of the Gospel would have a chance of salvation. Van Helmont in turn influenced two other late seventeenth century writers, Anne Conway (who openly defended transmigration) and George Keith (who vacillated on this point).[5]

These Lurianic reincarnationists had by all accounts left the bounds of religious orthodoxy, and remained part of a rather marginal coterie. Thus, the editors of Conway's text remark that her system of philosophy "remained somewhat strange or eccentric to her contemporaries".[6] The first documents that discuss reincarnation in the modern age, and that in turn are referred to in the movement texts of the present corpus, date from the end of the Enlightenment. This revival of interest is at times grounded in new insights into various Asian religions, and at times in metaphysical speculation perhaps based on the earlier Christian kabbalists.

One of the writers to show the most positive interest in Indian versions of reincarnation was Immanuel Kant. As a lecturer in geography at the Albertus University in Königsberg, he held numerous lectures on India. The few and fragmentary pieces of information

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[4] Scholem 1991; more generally on the Christian kabbalah, see also Blau 1944, Benz 1958, Hutin 1979, Goodman-Thau et al. 1994 and Merkur 1998.

[5] On van Helmont's belief in the ecumenical role of reincarnation beliefs, see Coudert 1999: 124; Coudert also argues that the pre-existence doctrines of Origen, an object of lively discussion in English theological circles during the mid-seventeenth century, prepared the way for the considerably bolder reincarnation beliefs of Helmont, Conway and Keith; see Coudert 1999: 192 ff.

[6] Conway 1982: 2.

on Indian religion that were available to him also formed part of his lectures. Reincarnation seems to have fascinated Kant, who felt this belief to be the foundation of Indian religion:

> Die Metempsychosis war ein artiger Begriff der Orientalen, den die Schwärmerei der Indianer zugrunde gelegt; es ist ihr Purgatorium, so wie bei den Katholiken das Fegefeuer. Man sieht hier gleich, wie hier unsere Kenntnis von dem Zustande der Seele nach dem Tode eingeschränkt ist.[7]

Some fragments of the material on Indian religions were included in a compilation of Kant's lectures on geography by one of his disciples, F.Th. Rink, and were published in 1802 under the title *Immanuel Kants physische Geographie*.[8] The belief in reincarnation seems to have entered into Kant's own way of thinking. In the third and last part of *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*, first published in 1755, Kant speculates on the existence of several inhabited planets in the solar system. Might it even be possible that our souls, after the death of our physical bodies, might live again on these planets? Toward the very end of his book, Kant allows himself the following flight of fancy:

> Sollte die unsterbliche Seele wohl in der ganzen Unendlichkeit ihrer künftigen Dauer, die das Grab selber nicht unterbricht, sondern nur verändert, an diesen Punkt des Weltraumes, an unsere Erde jederzeit geheftet bleiben? Sollte sie niemals von den übrigen Wundern der Schöpfung eines näheren Anschauens theilhaftig werden? Wer weiß, ist es ihr nicht zugedacht, daß sie dereinst jene entfernten Kugeln des Weltgebäudes, und die Trefflichkeit ihrer Anstalten, die schon von weitem ihre Neugierde so reizen, von nahem soll kennen lernen? Vielleicht bilden sich darum noch einigen Kugeln des Planetensystems aus, um nach vollendetem Ablaufe der Zeit, die unserem Aufenthalte allhier vorgeschrieben ist, uns in andern Himmeln neue Wohnplätze zu bereiten. Wer weiß, laufen nicht jene Trabanten um den Jupiter, um uns dereinst zu leuchten.[9]

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[7] Quoted in Glasenapp 1954: 40. "The transmigration of souls was a nice concept of the Orientals, the basis of the beliefs of the Indians; it is their purgatory, just like the Catholics have theirs. One immediately senses how limited our own knowledge is of the state of the soul after death".

[8] Glasenapp 1960: 5.

[9] Kant 1885: 166 f. "Could the immortal soul stay for the eternity of its future existence on this spot in space, on our Earth, when not even the grave interrupts its life but only changes it? Could it never see the other splendors of creation? Who knows if it is not part of its destiny to know those distant worlds of the cosmos that from far away have piqued its curiosity, to get to know the excellence of its

The quote is written in a subjunctive mode, marked by "perhaps" and "who knows", emphasizing the doubt and uncertainty of the author. Furthermore, Kant's *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte* remained practically unknown to his contemporaries.[10] Kant himself, however, is said to have gone further in his beliefs than his cautious written remarks might have suggested.[11] It is claimed that on his death bed, Kant once again referred to his ideas of the perfection of the soul through new lives. His texts, however, are speculative and therefore make little use of any of the discursive strategies reviewed here, with the possible exception of the appeal to an Indian tradition.

A second and far more influential attempt to formulate a melioristic view of reincarnation was undertaken by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) toward the end of his theological and philosophical essay *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechtes*, published in 1780.[12] In the spirit of the Enlightenment, Lessing sees the history of mankind as a story of ever greater insight and perfection. Earlier religions had merely been didactic instruments, preludes to a truly humanitarian faith. Historically, Judaism and Christianity have been the two great educating influences on mankind. However, the next step in the spiritual evolution of humanity would soon take place. This tripartite scheme of history resembles that of Joachim of Fiore and the Joachimites, and Lessing implicitly credits them with the theory of three ages:

> Sie wird gewiss kommen, die Zeit eines neuen ewigen Evangeliums, die uns selbst in den Elementarbüchern des neuen Bundes versprochen wird. Vielleicht, daß selbst gewisse Schwärmer des dreizehnten und vierzehnten

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institutions. Perhaps that is why some new spheres are still being created in the planetary system, so that we can find new places to live in the skies when the duration of our time here has reached its end. Who knows, perhaps the satellites of Jupiter circle around that planet in order to give us light one day."

[10] Kant's publisher, Petersen, went bankrupt as the manuscript of *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte* was being printed. The work was never reviewed in the contemporary press, nor did it reach Emperor Friedrich II of Prussia, to whom it was dedicated. Although a second edition appeared 1799, this facet of Kant's work only became more generally known when Alexander von Humboldt gave it a laudatory review in 1845. See Karl Kehrbach's introduction to Kant 1885: iv.

[11] Glasenapp 1954.

[12] The doctrine of reincarnation was known from written sources. The Platonic dialogues discussing the transmigration of souls were naturally familiar to an educated eighteenth century reader, as were popularized accounts of Indian theories. Even more exotic sources such as kabbalistic texts and van Helmont's work were available. The exact origins of Lessing's reincarnationist theories, however, remain somewhat obscure. For some conjectures, cf. Kofink 1911: 174 ff. and Pons 1964: 409 f.

> Jahrhunderts einen Strahl dieses neuen, ewigen Evangeliums aufgefangen hatten und nur darin irrten, daß sie den Ausbruch desselben so nahe verkündigten.[13]

Lessing's way of consistently letting the redemptive history of mankind parallel the spiritual journey of the individual leads to a conclusion that earns him a place in the history of Western afterlife beliefs. Why should humanity as a whole be allowed a new, third revelation, if the individual person is not part of this history? Where would be the justice, if generations of people in the past were not allowed to participate in the dawn of a new age? Lessing sketches a solution toward the end of his essay. Each individual soul could return again and again; all the inherent possibilities within us might have time to blossom if we were all to participate in the development of history.

> Aber warum könnte jeder einzelne Mensch auch nicht mehr als einmal auf dieser Welt vorhanden gewesen sein?
>
> Ist diese Hypothese darum so lächerlich, weil sie die älteste ist? Weil der menschliche Verstand, ehe ihn die Sophisterei der Schule zerstreut und geschwächt hatte, sogleich darauf verfiel?
>
> Warum könnte auch ich nicht hier bereits einmal alle die Schritte zu meiner Vervollkommung getan haben, welche bloß zeitliche Strafen und Belohnungen den Menschen bringen können?
>
> Und warum nicht ein andermal alle die, welche zu tun uns die Aussichten in ewige Belohnungen so mächtig helfen?
>
> Warum sollte ich nicht so oft wiederkommen, als ich neue Kentnisse, neue Fertigkeiten zu erlangen geschickt bin? Bringe ich auf einmal so viel weg, daß es der Mühe wiederzukommen etwa nicht lohnet?[14]

In the final paragraphs of *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, Lessing liberally uses the subjunctive, phrases his statements as questions, and employs words such as "Hypothese". The author goes out of his way to present his ideas on reincarnation as a speculative the-

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[13] Lessing 1780, §§ 86–87. "The time for a new gospel will certainly come, as promised to us even in the basic texts of the new covenant. Perhaps a few visionaries of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries already glimpsed this new gospel, and were only mistaken in believing that the dispensation would come so soon."

[14] Lessing 1780, §§ 94–98; "Why couldn't the individual person have lived more than once in this world? Is this hypothesis so ridiculous because it is the oldest? Because human understanding embraced it before the sophisms of school weakened it? Why couldn't I already have taken steps toward the perfection that only punishments and rewards in this world could bring about? Why not also all those who hold out the prospect of eternal rewards? Why shouldn't I come back as often as I am able to achieve new knowledge and new abilities? Can I really achieve so much at once that it wouldn't be worth returning?"

ory. Just as with Kant, one finds few attempts to legitimize the belief in reincarnation as fact rather than wishful thinking.

Reincarnation in Pre-Theosophical Esotericism

Belief in reincarnation soon took the leap from the pages of Enlightenment philosophers to the séance rooms. Thus by 1790, a small proto-spiritualist circle in Copenhagen led by the brother-in-law of the Danish king Christian VII, prince Karl of Hessen-Kassel, had been instructed in a reincarnationist doctrine resembling that of Kant and Lessing by a voice speaking from a white cloud. The wife of the Danish minister of foreign affairs, Auguste von Bernstorff, who was one of the five members, was proclaimed to be an incarnation of Mary Magdalene.[15] It would take another six decades before the belief in reincarnation spread from such small groups of occultists and freethinkers to a somewhat larger audience of religious seekers. The basic mechanism of belief—the intervention of spiritual entities—would remain remarkably unchanged for another century.

The early history of French spiritism is less well documented than its Anglo-American counterpart.[16] Spiritist phenomena were frequent in the salons of the mesmerists. The mediums, sometimes known by the specific term *somnambules magnétiques* and occasionally lumped together with other experts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century cultic milieu under names such as *voyante* or *sorcière*, manifested an array of purportedly paranormal phenomena, including claims of multiple identities, clairvoyance and the reception of revealed messages from the spirit world. These messages attracted the attention of leading martinists such as Jean-Baptiste Willermoz.[17] Willermoz conducted sessions with a talented somnambule, asking her questions to which, with the aid of the spirit world, she was able to give authoritative answers which were recorded in detail. The first documented afterlife beliefs of the mesmerist milieu are notes dating from 1785, which are infused with Christian mythology: the dead go to heaven, hell or purgatory; or alternatively, their destiny will be decided on the day of judgment.[18]

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[15] Weigelt 1991: 58 ff.

[16] My main source for the discussion of early French spiritism is Edelman 1995.

[17] Martinism is a form of Christian theosophy created by Louis Claude de Saint Martin (1743–1803).

[18] Edelman 1995: 23 ff.

Most somnambules adopted a view of afterlife that corresponded to a popular and perhaps somewhat saccharine picture of heaven. However, by the first half of the nineteenth century, belief in reincarnation appears to have been adopted by a few of them and, one presumes, by some members of their audiences. Thus in 1847, a certain Joseph Olivier dictated the contents of a book in which he explained that people live successive lives of ever shorter duration, until they are finally able to shed their physical body once and for all.[19] The transmigration of souls in its melioristic version also became a minor part of the philosophy of certain French utopian socialists.[20] In both camps, reincarnation tended to be linked with the belief in many inhabited planets, a doctrine of the existence of many worlds that combined Swedenborgian doctrines and a contemporary popular interest in astronomy. As the soul became progressively more perfected, it would move from one planet to the next.

Although the theory of reincarnation had undoubtedly been adopted by some mesmerist and utopian circles by the 1840s, the doctrine had still to become a mainstay of unchurched faith. The upsurge of interest in spiritualism after the American Hydesville rappings spread to France in 1853.[21] A mere four years later, French spiritism had gained its canonical scripture, its spokesperson *par excellence* and its institutional setting. All of this was due to the efforts of Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail (1804–1869), a teacher and author of school books who wrote spiritist literature under the pseudonym of Allan Kardec. Among his works, one finds the main text of French reincarnationist doctrine, *Le livre des esprits*. Kardec adopted the method introduced by Willermoz: he asked the spirits various questions, they answered through the agency of the mediums, and Kardec collected and edited the result in dialogue form.

Reincarnation is a central element of Kardec's system. *Le livre des esprits* was reprinted in numerous editions, other spiritists adopted his beliefs, and reincarnation became part of the canonical doctrines of the French spiritist movement. Two discursive strategies are central to Kardec's work. The first is the reliance on revealed truth. Kardec's book of more than 470 pages does not refer to a single contemporary printed source or spokesperson. At most, Kardec vaguely reminds

[19] Edelman 1995: 69.
[20] Edelman 1995: 71 f.
[21] Ellenberger 1980: 84.

the reader that belief in reincarnation has existed since times immemorial among the Pythagoreans, Hindus and Egyptians.[22] The rhetorical strength behind this strategy is hardly in doubt: every last detail recorded in *Le livre des esprits* is directly taken from the dictation of the spirits. The form of the book reflects this method: it is basically a pastiche of Christian catechisms, with Kardec's questions followed by the spirits' answers in quotation marks. Thus, the spirits have the following to say on the transmigration of souls:

> – Comment l'âme, qui n'a point atteint la perfection pendant la vie corporelle, peut-elle achever de s'épurer?
> "En subissant l'épreuve d'une nouvelle existence." [. . .]
> – L'âme a donc plusieurs existences corporelles?
> "Oui, tous nous avons plusieurs existences" [. . .]
> – Quel est le but de la réincarnation?
> "Expiation, amélioration progressive de l'humanité, sans cela, où serait la justice?" [. . .]
> Le nombre des existences corporelles, est-il limité, ou bien l'Esprit se réincarne-t-il a perpétuité?
> "A chaque existence nouvelle, l'Esprit fait un pas dans la voie du progrès; quand il s'est dépouillé de toutes ses impuretés, il n'a plus besoin des épreuves de la vie corporelle."[23]

Thus, reincarnation is founded on moral grounds: if we were not reborn, life would seem unjust. Kardec's position is an innovation compared with earlier speculations: deceased spirits can never regress; at worst, their progress towards God is merely halted temporarily. In short, Kardec lets the spirits elevate a morally justified hope to the status of revealed truth.

To strengthen his case, Kardec resorts to a second strategy, scientism. Already, the first mesmerist or somnambulist sessions were conceived of as methods of empirically exploring invisible dimensions of the cosmos. Spiritism uses the same rhetorical move to gain legitimacy. Thus, Kardec repeatedly and explicitly refers to his method

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[22] Kardec 1857: 96.

[23] Kardec 1857: 74 f.; "—How can the soul, which has in no way achieved perfection during its bodily existence, manage to purify itself? By undergoing the test of a new existence. /—So the soul has several existences? Yes, we all have several lives. /—What is the purpose of reincarnation? A gradual betterment of humanity; how could there otherwise be any justice? [. . .] /—Is the number of bodily existences limited or does the Spirit reincarnate for ever? In each new life, the Spirit takes yet another step in its progress; when it has rid itself of all its impurities, it no longer needs the test of bodily life."

of questioning the spirit world as a new science. In particular, the introduction to *Le livre des esprits* devotes considerable space to affirming the fundamentally scientific nature of the spiritist séance. Electricity, once a mysterious force that was by now viewed as quite mundane, may well be the cause of the physical manifestations.[24] More conventional scientists, and skeptics in general, were declared to be simply prejudiced.[25]

The Road to Theosophy

Several elements of what would become theosophical reincarnation doctrine were already in place. The human soul reincarnates in order to progress spiritually. Incarnations take place not only on earth, but also on other planets. However, the English channel was a formidable barrier to the spread of Kardecist theories of reincarnation, which did not gain much influence in the Anglo-American world until around 1880.[26]

The most important links across the two spiritualist cultures were provided by two cosmopolitan spokespersons. The first was Maria de Mariategui, who later married into the British nobility and became better known as lady Caithness. Multilingual and widely traveled, lady Caithness became profoundly familiar with French esoteric and spiritist currents during her several stays in Nice and Paris. Beginning in or around 1872, she became the recipient of a series of mediumistic revelations from sources as diverse as Mary Stuart and the archangel Gabriel. These messages were set down in writing and, over a period of twenty years, grew into a series of books, some written in French and others in English. Thanks to the latter, lady Caithness had become a prominent spokesperson for reincarnationist doctrines by the mid-1870s.[27] The second link, Anna Kingsford, made the acquaintance of lady Caithness while studying medicine in Paris, and was probably introduced to the idea of reincarnation by her.[28] Kingsford, who was also proficient in both French and

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[24] Kardec 1857, introduction section III, pp. vii ff.

[25] Kardec 1857, introduction section VII, pp. xix ff.

[26] The relative lack of interest in French spiritism can to some extent be judged from the English language literature. A detailed contemporary source on the history of spiritualism, Podmore 1902, refers to Kardec only in three places: volume II, pages 161, 168 and 169.

[27] Godwin 1994: 305.

[28] Godwin 1994: 338; Edward Maitland's biography of Kingsford, which in other

English, was the creator of a religious worldview clearly based on Kardec's and the other French spiritists' melioristic beliefs. In her main work, *The Perfect Way or the Finding of Christ*, published in 1882, she explains in typically evolutionist language how the soul aspires to progress from plant to animal to human, and finally to leave the physical body behind. Anna Kingsford herself claimed to have once lived as Mary Magdalene. In Kingsford's view, physical existence is an evil to be overcome. The goal of the human being is to leave behind this mortal form and become pure Spirit. However, in a somewhat elitist fashion, she believed that only a few souls in this materialistic age have the ability to elevate themselves to this stage.

During her stay in Paris, Kingsford learned of the existence of the Theosophical Society and read Helena Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*. Upon her return to London, Kingsford joined the British section of the Society. A few British spiritualists had already adopted the doctrine of reincarnation.[29] However, it appears that the publication of *The Perfect Way*, which attracted a great deal of attention, was crucial in achieving a critical mass for the controversial doctrine. One of the most influential spiritualist magazines, *Light*, edited by the nestor of British spiritualism William Stainton Moses, devoted considerable space to the controversy.[30] Coincidentally or not, theosophical writings began to mention reincarnation as a spiritual truth for the first time around 1882.

A Discourse is Born

The reincarnationists of the 1850s to 1880s relied heavily on the strategy of pointing to the existence of revealed teachings. Kardec and Caithness had their spirit sources; Kingsford's book claimed to be the result of divine revelation; Blavatsky relied on the wisdom of

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respects records the minutest details of her life, is strangely vague on this point. Maitland 1896: 348, explains that he and Kingsford are said to have "only gradually assimilated" certain details of reincarnationist doctrines, without, however, describing in detail how these details came to their attention. Kingsford soon seems to have accepted the doctrine whole-heartedly, and now began to have visions in which her own past life as Mary Magdalene had a prominent role, cf. Maitland 1896: 349 f.

[29] Godwin 1994: 340 mentions Anna Blackwell, Francesca Arundale and Isabel de Steiger as main exponents of the pro-reincarnationist minority.

[30] Godwin 1994: 339 f.

the Mahatmas. This dependence on superhuman sources proved to be quite problematic.

One passage of *Isis Unveiled* later became the subject of considerable controversy. Blavatsky had claimed that the transmigration of souls was "an exception, a phenomenon as abnormal as a fetus with two heads".[31] As noted above, around 1882, Blavatsky had changed her mind. Since both the earlier and the later teachings were allegedly received from the same group of ascended Masters, the discrepancy became quite embarrassing and called for an explanation. One of the Mahatma Letters, entitled *The Famous "Contradictions"*, attempts to clarify the change.[32] The channel of information between the Master and the disciple may be partially blocked. The Master does not always speak in his quality of Master; at times he abstains from using his occult powers and is then fallible.[33] Being Masters from the Himalayas, they can at times misspell the English language, e.g. by using an erroneous punctuation that alters the meaning of the sentences. Furthermore, the contradiction is not even a contradiction but a mere omission, and a minor one at that.[34] The masters "had not yet decided upon teaching the public indiscriminately".[35]

Exegetical treatises followed Blavatsky's lead in adopting reincarnation. In chapter 5 of Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*, the author explains the destiny of man after death. Of the seven components that make up our persons, the three lower pass away at the moment of physical death.[36] The four superior elements escape into the astral plane or Karma Loka and from there proceed to Devachan, a kind of theosophical version of heaven.[37] These four components then divide, the principle of karma deciding what exactly will happen to them—different souls have different Devachanic experiences. Only at the end of a long stay in this state does the essence of the personality reincarnate. New existences on the earthly plane are in fact quite rare, "re-birth in less than fifteen hundred years is spoken of as nearly impossible".[38] Sinnett does not overtly address the problems

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[31] IU I:351.
[32] ML 24A and 24B.
[33] ML p. 178.
[34] ML pp. 178 f.
[35] ML p. 179.
[36] Sinnett *Esoteric Buddhism*, pp. 121 ff.
[37] The analogy should not be carried too far; Sinnett notes that Devachan is a state, not a place. Sinnett *Esoteric Buddhism*, pp. 140 f.
[38] Sinnett *Esoteric Buddhism*, p. 149.

caused by the abrupt change of opinion from *Isis Unveiled*. The new doctrines are simply expressed as an integrated part of "esoteric Buddhism", while the older teachings are passed over in silence.

If earlier theories on life after death were largely based on privileged knowledge, in the *Mahatma Letters*, and even more in Sinnett's book, the discursive strategies of science and tradition were mobilized. The description of life after death increasingly rested on a number of Sanskrit terms, which, just like the title of his book, define the positive Others. In a style that will later be typical of other major theosophical movement texts, these Orientalist references are interspersed with appeals to contemporary science, including nineteenth century pseudo-sciences such as mesmerism. Thus, from their existence in Devachan, souls can appear to spiritualist mediums and magnetic somnambules because

> the spirit of the sensitive getting odylized, so to say, by the aura of the spirit in the Devachan, *becomes* for a few minutes that departed personality, and writes in the handwriting of the latter, in his language and in his thoughts as they were during his lifetime [—] Thus [. . .] what is called *rapport*, is, in plain fact, an identity of molecular vibration between the astral part of the incarnate medium and the astral part of the discarnate personality.[39]

Theosophy gained its canonical form in *The Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888. Soon thereafter, popularizations began to explain its basic tenets in a more readily accessible form. The belief in reincarnation advanced from being a minority view to becoming one of the core elements of the arguably most influential esoteric movement of the late nineteenth century.

A fundamental discursive strategy, legitimizing not only the belief in reincarnation but also the theosophical myth as a whole, is the construction of tradition. *The Secret Doctrine* is allegedly based on an ancient manuscript, the *Book of Dzyan*. Blavatsky claimed that this palm leaf manuscript contained the true core of all the great religions. Implicitly, reincarnation had passed in six years from being a controversial innovation to becoming a central tenet of all the religious traditions of the world—or at least of the esoteric aspect of each of these traditions.

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[39] Sinnett *Esoteric Buddhism*, pp. 146 f.; the term odylized refers to the theories of Karl von Reichenbach (1786–1869), who believed that mesmeric phenomena were due to a vital force that he called *od* or *odyle*.

Perhaps for the first time, melioristic reincarnation became embedded in a vast cosmology and anthropology. *The Secret Doctrine* is an elaborate myth in which a rich tapestry of details fills out the bare-bones account of reincarnation that Blavatsky had inherited from Kardec via Kingsford, lady Caithness and others. By liberally applying a strategy of pattern recognition, Blavatsky's reincarnation doctrine builds on elements deriving from several different sources. Due to the inherent difficulties in harmonizing historically distinct traditions, her reincarnation doctrine is not free from contradictions. At times, she seems to draw on the purported roots of the "ancient wisdom religion" in a generalized Buddhism. Thus, Blavatsky can refer to "the great truth that reincarnation is to be dreaded, as existence in this world only entails upon man suffering, misery and pain".[40] Nevertheless, following a view that could be either Hindu or Platonic, but certainly not Buddhist in any orthodox sense, she claims that there is a unique individuality that incarnates again and again. In a reminiscence of an earlier Western esoteric tradition, the individual is said to reincarnate after a stay in the astral plane.[41] Another echo of the frequent esoteric preoccupation with the number seven, the individual is said to be composed of an aggregate of seven entities that part ways at physical death.[42] A quote such as the following is closer to a Lurianic kabbalistic view than to the "Esoteric Buddhism" that Sinnett wrote of:

> The Monad emerges from its state of spiritual and intellectual unconsciousness; and [. . .] gets directly into the plane of Mentality. But there is no place in the whole universe with a wider margin, or a wider field of action in its almost endless gradations of perceptive and apperceptive qualities, than this plane, which has in its turn an appropriate smaller plane for every "form", from the "mineral" monad up to the time when that monad blossoms forth by evolution into the DIVINE MONAD. But all the time it is still one and the same Monad, differing only in its incarnations, throughout its ever succeeding cycles of partial or total obscuration of spirit, or the partial or total obscuration of matter—two polar antitheses—as it ascends into the realms of mental spirituality, or descends into the depths of materiality.[43]

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[40] SD I:39.
[41] Ellwood 1996: 193 f.
[42] SD I:122.
[43] SD I:175.

The construction of tradition, the *bricolage* from bits and pieces of such originally distinct historical sources, masks the novelty of Blavatsky's overall conception. Essentially, the theosophical view of the transmigration of souls is not so much Oriental or Platonic, as a typically nineteenth century construction. Three key ideas run through Blavatsky's description of the chain of rebirth. The first is the fact of Orientalism itself. The frequent references to India and the East rather than to e.g. Plotinus or Paracelsus are in themselves a phenomenon of the post-Enlightenment era. The second is the placement of reincarnation within the arguably most overarching meta-narrative of the nineteenth century: evolutionism. Despite Blavatsky's reference to the Buddhist doctrine of suffering, theosophical reincarnation is the optimistic story of the progress of the human soul. The third element is the synthesis of these ideas with another meta-narrative of the nineteenth century: the view that humanity is divided into races and peoples with clearly definable properties. A closer look at the purported ancient wisdom religion shows it to be a mythologization of ideas characteristic of late nineteenth century Europe.

Blavatsky's grand narrative as set out in *The Secret Doctrine* explains everything from the origins of the cosmos to the evolution of mankind and our common destiny. In a sense, it is a peak of modern myth-making. However, it is also a very abstract narrative, the tale of humanity rather than of individual people. It is also implicitly elitist, since it rests on the privileged and unreproducible experience of one single person: Helena Blavatsky herself. *The Secret Doctrine* establishes the boundary of a discourse. Dozens of creative spokespersons will position their own doctrines in relation to the Blavatskian framework. The fundamentals are common to most if not all of them: the theory of melioristic evolution, the existence of spiritually evolved beings, the fundamentals of esoteric historiography and, not least, the doctrine of reincarnation. The individual positions within the discourse are created by adjusting, adding or replacing details which may seem trivial to outsiders but are of central concern to the spokespersons who accept the rules of the discourse.

Reincarnation and Christianity

The Secret Doctrine is built on the belief in a *philosophia perennis*. Not only do Hindus and Buddhists believe in reincarnation, but other traditions such as the Essenes and Druids are said to have done so as well.[44] Proponents of the universality of all creeds face the problem of explaining why some traditions do not seem to embrace the purportedly universal. In the particular case of reincarnation, the lack of similar beliefs in most varieties of the three Abrahamitic faiths, and especially Christianity, needed explaining. The discursive strategy employed by the theosophists to legitimize Blavatsky's particular view of reincarnation gave rise to a modern legend.

Briefly speaking, the legend claims that Christianity once did include the belief in reincarnation, but that the powerful dignitaries of the church have hidden this fact from ordinary believers. The earliest movement texts of the corpus—e.g. *The Mahatma Letters, Esoteric Buddhism* or *The Secret Doctrine*—say nothing on the matter.[45] Neither does lady Caithness in texts devoted specifically to the theosophical interpretation of Christianity and the Bible.[46] As for Sinnett, he merely notes his own utter disbelief in the "dreary blank" to which departed souls are said to go in Christian Protestant theology, while awaiting the day of judgment.[47] The earliest textual occurrence of the legend that links Christianity with reincarnationist beliefs appears to be in a book published in 1888 by theosophist E.D. Walker, *Reincarnation: A Study of Forgotten Truth*.[48] The earliest mention in the sources analyzed here is only a few years younger, in a popularization of the mythology of *The Secret Doctrine*, William Q. Judge's *The Ocean of Theosophy*, published in 1893:

> So we find, first, that Jesus never denied the doctrine [of reincarnation] and on various occasions assented to it, as when he said that John the Baptist was actually Elias of old whom the people were expecting. [. . .] And following Jesus we find St. Paul, in Romans ix, speaking of Esau

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[44] Blavatsky on the essenes, cf. SD II:111n.; on druids, see SD II:760.

[45] Interestingly, earlier Lurianic Christian kabbalists also attempted to harmonize the Bible with reincarnation, but details differ as to what is harmonized and how it is done. Thus, Anne Conway quotes scripture to "prove" the Lurianic idea that seemingly inanimate objects will progress into sentient beings. Conway 1982: 219.

[46] Caithness 1887, ch. 10 and 11.

[47] Sinnett *Esoteric Buddhism*, pp. 132 f.

[48] Walker 1888.

> and Jacob being actually in existence before they were born, and later such great Christian fathers as Origen, Synesius and others believing and teaching the theory. [. . .] For five hundred years after Jesus the doctrine was taught in the church until the council of Constantinople.[49]

This legend proved to be quite robust and was adopted by several other Esoteric positions. At the minimal end of the spectrum, Alice Bailey and Rudolf Steiner make comparatively little overt use of the legend. Basically, both appeal rhetorically to a well-known passage in the Gospel of John. Thus Bailey remarks:

> The doctrine or theory of reincarnation strikes the orthodox Christian with horror; yet if one asks him the question which the disciples asked Christ about the blind man, "Master, did this man sin or his fathers that he was born blind?" (John IX.2), they refuse the implications; or they express amusement or dismay as the case may be.[50]

Despite the fact that this is her only overt reference to the legend, Bailey nevertheless ascribes reincarnation an important role in a future, "true" Christianity. The true teachings of the Christ will be revealed at the return of the Messiah. *The Reappearance of the Christ* contains an entire section devoted to the theme of reincarnation. In a reflex of the utopian time-line, Bailey claims that this teaching will restore to their fullness the doctrines that Jesus taught, but which were misunderstood by his followers. Steiner presents a somewhat similar argument, claiming that the influence of Kali Yuga had made it practically unfeasible to openly teach reincarnation: people were simply not spiritually ready for this doctrine.[51]

A more detailed reference to the legend is found in the readings of Edgar Cayce. Somehow, Cayce had to reconcile his view of himself as a devout Christian with his increasingly unorthodox faith. This is perhaps the main reason why Cayce, who came to believe in reincarnation, adopted the theosophical legend. The following readings present a short summary of the legend of the reincarnationist Christ as Cayce understood it:

> Question: What action of the early church, or council, can be mentioned as that which ruled (out) reincarnation from Christian theology?

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[49] Judge *Ocean of Theosophy*, pp. 71 f.

[50] For Bailey, see *Reappearance of the Christ*, p. 116; Steiner's use of the same passage can be found in *Das Johannesevangelium*, lect. 14 p. 14.

[51] Steiner *Von Jesus zu Christus*, pp. 280 f.

> Cayce: Just as indicated,—the attempts of individuals to accept or take advantage of, because of this knowledge, see?
>
> Question: What part of the New Testament definitely teaches reincarnation?
> Cayce: John, six to eight; third to fifth. Then the rest as a whole.
>
> Did not John come as the voice of one crying in the wilderness and in the spirit of Elijah? Yet he was Elijah![52]

Cayce and the circle of adepts around him elaborated on the theosophical explanation and transmitted it to a larger audience. In 1967, an anthology of commented readings on reincarnation was published by the Association for Research and Enlightenment.[53] This book anchors the legend in Scriptural passages and quotes from the church fathers, fleshing out the bare-bones theosophical version of the story with numerous details. Nevertheless, this elaborate form of the legend still rests on the same three pillars as Judge's original argument: passages in the Bible that equate John the Baptist with Elijah, references to Origen and to the second church council at Constantinople in the year 553.[54]

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[52] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 123. The three quotes belong to separate readings.

[53] Langley *Edgar Cayce on Reincarnation*.

[54] Although the present study is not primarily concerned with the truth claims of the Esoteric doctrines quoted, it may be of interest to briefly note how mainstream Christian writers have attempted to refute the theosophical legend. Reincarnationist pattern recognition builds on passages such as Matthew 11:14, where Jesus is reported to say, "And if ye will receive it, this [i.e. John the Baptist] is Elias, which was for to come." Likewise, in John 3:3 Jesus is quoted as saying, "I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." These passages are interpreted in a very different way by non-esotericist Christian commentators. The quote from Matthew receives a metaphorical interpretation that can be supported by referring to Luke 1:17, which explains that the ministry of John the Baptist was carried out "in the spirit and power of Elias." Moreover, reincarnationist interpretations are contradicted by John 1:21, "And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not!". Regarding Jesus's words about being "born again" in John 3:3, the context allows for a more mainstream interpretation according to which a spiritual rebirth is intended. There are other scriptural quotes used to contradict the notion of reincarnation. Thus Hebrews 9:27 reads "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." Second Corinthians 5:8 claims that at death the Christian immediately goes into the presence of God, not into another body, while Luke 16:19–31 explains that unbelievers at death go to a place of suffering. Another scriptural passage employed to a similar end is Matthew 25:46 in which Jesus teaches that people decide their eternal destiny in a single lifetime, some "shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal."

Although the Church Universal and Triumphant belongs to an esoteric lineage that largely falls outside the scope of the present study, it is worth briefly mentioning that the CUT is arguably the contemporary position which rests its case most heavily on the constructed tradition that Christ taught reincarnation. An entire 300 page volume is devoted to the purported missing teachings.[55] Another 400 page volume details how the missing years were allegedly documented.[56]

Finally, the legend is found in numerous New Age books even today. Hanegraaff has followed the legend as far as the writings of Shirley MacLaine, who added a new twist to it by confusing the council at Constantinople with the council in Nicaea.[57] Books more recent than those in Hanegraaff's corpus continue to reproduce the legend. Thus, hypnotherapist Brian L. Weiss claims that his research into the origins of reincarnation beliefs have shown how the doctrine was considered destabilizing by the worldly authorities under the emperor Constantine and was therefore banned in the sixth century.[58]

From Abstract Myth to Personalized Legends

Several post-theosophical spokespersons were to contribute with a distinct change in the basic model of reincarnation. They participated in a shift from the abstract to the concrete. They claimed privileged access to knowledge of the karmic connections between lifetimes, and pronounced judgments on the precise nature of the previous existences of specific individuals. Charles Leadbeater, the main ideologist of the Theosophical Society after the death of Blavatsky, was instrumental in the move toward personalized reincarnation legends. His claims to precise knowledge of past lives resulted in the elaboration of long lists in which members of the Society were traced back, sometimes hundreds of thousands of years. The psychic method and its results have been described in decidedly unflattering terms in scholarly as well as critical literature.[59]

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[55] Prophet 1986.

[56] Prophet 1984.

[57] Hanegraaff 1996: 321 f. briefly surveys the occurrences of this legend in New Age literature.

[58] Weiss *Through Time into Healing*, ch. 3; Weiss's own quoted source is a book by two authors with roots in the theosophical movement, Cranston & Head 1967.

[59] For an entertaining popular account, see Washington 1995: 128 f.

The persuasive strategy behind Leadbeater's claims is rather underdeveloped: a flatly stated claim to clairvoyance. Once that claim is accepted, everything else follows. Leadbeater bolstered his claims by using a vocabulary that implied that his clairvoyance was a serious investigative undertaking, an objective quest for truth. The rhetoric of passages such as these is not untypical:

> When, in writing on the subject of clairvoyance, I referred to the magnificent possibilities which the examination of the records of the past opened up before the student of history, several readers suggested to me [. . .] that deep interest would be felt by our Theosophical public [. . . However,] investigations are not undertaken for the pleasure of the thing, nor for the gratification of mere curiosity, but only when they happen to be necessary for the due performance of some piece of work, or for the elucidation of some obscure point in our study. Most of the scenes from the past history of the world [. . .] have come before us in the [. . .] endeavour to gather information on the working of the great laws of karma and reincarnation.[60]

How can Leadbeater's readers know that his clairvoyant results really are "records" and "information", rather than delusions or deliberate fabrications? His response is feeble, "there is no assurance. The investigators themselves are certain [. . .] of the difference between observation and imagination."[61]

The lists of past lives were published in such works as *Rents in the Veil of Time*, in the appendix to *Man: Whence, How and Whither*, and in *Lives of Alcyone*. Many individual theosophists' identities were masked behind code names such as Mars, Ulysses, Herakles, Beatrix, Erato and Gemini. Only the inner circle surrounding Leadbeater knew who was who. More prominent members are identified in a list. Thus, Krishnamurti's code name was Alcyone, Annie Besant was known as Herakles and Leadbeater gave himself the designation Sirius. Given Leadbeater's central role, these claims were increasingly used to buttress power struggles. Those who supported the controversial Leadbeater were recorded as having had important roles in the past, while his opponents were depicted as villains.[62]

Leadbeater's clairvoyant abilities were also invoked to support a more general theory of reincarnation. Thus, in *The Inner Life*, Leadbeater presents the mechanisms of reincarnation and karma, describes the

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[60] Leadbeater *Man: whence, how and whither*, p. 483.
[61] Leadbeater *Man: whence, how and whither*, p. 485.
[62] Washington 1995: 129.

minutest details of our afterlife existence, and discusses the possibility of past-life recall.[63] The reader is struck by the absence of any discussion of how such claims can be arrived at, much less verified. Again, Leadbeater relies entirely on his status as clairvoyant investigator.

The contrast between Leadbeater and Steiner is instructive. Sections of Steiner's anthroposophy seem directly taken from the pages of Leadbeater's writings. There are distinct similarities between the detailed discussion in *The Inner Life* and the slightly scholastic tone in Steiner's fine-grained picture of the interval between death and rebirth.[64] However, the discursive mechanisms of anthroposophy are considerably more elaborate and subtle. Steiner, a doctor of philosophy, constructed his own epistemology. Where Leadbeater merely assured his readers that he knew the difference between observation and imagination, Steiner presents extremely detailed arguments as to why we should believe him. Everything he writes of, from the climate on Atlantis to the role of the archangel Michael in history to the mechanisms of reincarnation, builds on the foundations of an alternative science, objective visions achieved through the use of spiritual sense organs. The topics of reincarnation and karma are of central concern to Steiner, and recur periodically throughout his written output.[65]

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[63] Leadbeater *The Inner Life*, vol. II sections 1 (on the afterlife), 7 (on reincarnation) and 8 (on karma).

[64] Although the similarities are striking, it is also tempting to interpret the differences between Leadbeater's and Steiner's descriptions in terms of their personal predilections. Steiner, a doctor of philosophy, writes extensively on the precise mechanisms that rule rebirth. Leadbeater, who enjoyed titles, pomp and ceremony, waxes eloquent on the various classes of individuals who reincarnate according to a meticulously detailed hierarchical plan.

[65] The list of quotes in Arenson 1975: 409 ff. and 943 ff. shows that reincarnation and karma were major concerns throughout Steiner's career. However, several influential texts on the subject stem from three periods in his life. Firstly, there are three texts from 1903–1904, the beginning of Steiner's career in the Theosophical Society. Two are recorded speeches: *Reinkarnation und Karma, vom Standpunkte der Naturwissenschaft notwendige Vorstellungen* (1903) and *Wie Karma wirkt* (dec. 1903). The third and by far the most detailed is the second chapter of *Theosophy* (1904), entitled *Destiny and Reincarnation* in a recent authorized English translation. Secondly, a middle period from 1910 to 1913 saw the appearance of two somewhat shorter works on the subject, *Die Offenbarungen des Karma* (1910) and *Das Leben zwischen dem Tode und der neuen Geburt in Verhältnis zu den kosmischen Tatsachen* (1912/1913). Toward the end of his life, Steiner returned to the subject in his massive *Esoterische Betrachtungen Karmischer Zusammenhänge*, a series of eighty speeches collected in six volumes and published in 1924. Especially speeches 1–6 are concerned with the mechanisms of karma and reincarnation; in Leadbeater-like fashion, many of the others give the details of the previous incarnations of individual persons.

The basics of Steiner's belief in karma and reincarnation stem from an enthymatic or quasi-logical argumentation. Steiner asks himself: why does my body have the properties it has? This does not depend on me as an individual, but on the traits that I have inherited (Steiner expressly refers to Mendel). How, then, can I explain my characteristics as a spiritual individual? My spiritual interests and abilities can be extremely different from those of my parents and grandparents. These characteristics are not inherited from my ancestors, but from a different line of descent: my own previous incarnations. In fact, taken as the sum of all my lives, I am a unique, autonomous individual.

> The forces that have made my human form possible came from my ancestors. But the human spirit also assumes a definite form or *Gestalt* (the words are of course being used here in a spiritual sense). And human spiritual forms are as different as they can possibly be [—] We cannot maintain that the spiritual differences in people result only from differences in their environment, their upbringing and so on. That is not true at all, because two people from similar environments and of similar educational backgrounds can still develop in very different ways.[66]
> [—]
> Just as genus and species can be understood in a physical sense only once we grasp that they are determined by heredity, the individual spiritual being can be understood only by means of a similar *spiritual heredity*.[67]
> [—]
> Schiller carried a physical form that he inherited from his ancestors; this physical form could not possibly have grown out of the earth. The same is true of Schiller as a spiritual individuality; he must have been the repetition of another spiritual being whose biography accounts for his, just as human reproduction accounts for his physical form.[68]

In Steiner's early work, some kind of reincarnation mechanism is seen as an almost logical necessity in explaining the facts of one's individuality. However, Steiner's *Geisteswissenschaft* or "spiritual science" goes considerably further. As in *The Secret Doctrine*, every individual participates in a cosmic history. After eons of descent during which spirit became increasingly embodied in matter, we have passed the turning point, thanks to the death of Christ on the cross. We are on our way to a more spiritual mode of existence, an ascending curve that reincarnation allows us all to participate in. One hears

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[66] Steiner *Theosophy*, pp. 70 f. Emphasis in the original.
[67] Steiner *Theosophy*, pp. 73 f. Emphasis in the original.
[68] Steiner *Theosophy*, p. 75.

distinct echoes of both Lessing and Blavatsky in Steiner's melioristic historiography.

Steiner also attempts to elucidate the exact mechanism of reincarnation. His description is extremely detailed, but basically follows the theosophical doctrine according to which the various components of the person, *Wesensglieder* in Steiner's terminology, split up after the death of the physical body. After centuries in a discarnate state, the essence of the individual is reborn in a new physical sheath. The highest hierarchies of spiritual beings choose a hereditary stream in which the being's karmic potentials can be fulfilled. The reason why e.g. the Bach family produced so many musicians was neither nature or nurture, but the conscious decision of certain spiritual entities to send those beings whose karmic destiny it was to bring music into the world to new incarnations as sons in precisely that family.[69] The return to physical existence occurs when the spiritual influence of one's actions has subsided. One is often reincarnated twice in every astrological age, once as a man and once as a woman.[70]

Steiner is not merely the interpreter of theosophical doctrines. He goes beyond the theosophical myth on at least three accounts. Firstly, unlike Blavatsky and Leadbeater, Steiner does not in theory restrict knowledge of reincarnation and karma to a privileged elite. Steiner supplies his readers with practical instructions as to the appropriate means of accessing this information. Several of his books are devoted to the process of gaining knowledge of the spiritual world, see chapter 6. There are even portions of his published works devoted specifically to the question of uncovering one's past life history.[71]

Secondly, Steiner confronted a problem that Blavatsky, being anti-clerical and anti-Christian, probably did not experience as troublesome. How does one reconcile reincarnation and Christian doctrines? Specifically, how can the doctrine that reincarnation is governed by the law of karma be harmonized with the belief that our collective guilt was erased by the death of Jesus on the cross?[72] As described in chapter 4, Steiner claims that Christianity must be understood from the point of view of spiritual science in order to be correctly understood at all. The result is a syncretism that differs from that

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[69] Cf. Veltman 1996: 104.

[70] Steiner *Outline of Esoteric Science*, pp. 403 ff.

[71] See especially Steiner *Wiederverkörperung und Karma* as well as lectures of the 4/5 and 9/5 1924 in *Esoterische Betrachtungen*, vol. 2.

[72] See especially Steiner *Christus und die menschliche Seele*, lecture 15.

of e.g. Cayce. Steiner is not as obviously interested in constructing a tradition by reinterpreting scriptural passages in an attempt to show that the essence of the Christian doctrines actually have been grossly misrepresented. His primary aim is rather to harmonize two overtly conflicting doctrines, karma and atonement, both of which he claims to be correct.

Steiner writes extensively on karma, often in terms that make it less than obvious how he wishes to be understood. Although anthroposophists claim that his work is free from contradictions, it is hard to see how to reconcile claims that karma stemming from a given action always has its effects (*zurückschlagende Wirkung*) on the individual himself[73] with claims that other individuals or groups can take over karmic effects.[74] As for the relation between karma and Christian doctrines, the attempts at harmonization appear in Steiner's claim that Jesus had clairvoyant access to the karmic burden of those he met, and only healed those whose karma it was to be healed.[75] Indeed, Christ is even called "the lord of karma".[76] Perhaps the clearest explanation is the one found in *Christus und die Menschliche Seele*.[77] Through Christ, our collective karma has been erased. Our individual karma, however, remains for us to deal with. Without it, there would be little incentive for spiritual growth.

Thirdly, like his near-contemporary Leadbeater, Steiner claimed that the Akashic record could give him and other clairvoyants access to the minutest details of the previous lives of individual people. In *Esoterische Betrachtungen karmischer Zusammenhänge*, Steiner follows such links over time and space. Charles Darwin was once the Muslim commander Tariq. Ernst Haeckel was a new embodiment of pope Gregory VII. The caliph Muawiya had been reborn in modern times as Woodrow Wilson.[78]

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[73] Steiner *Die Offenbarungen des Karma*, lecture 1, pp. 3–7.

[74] Steiner *Das Matthäusevangelium*, lecture 11, p. 12; here, although Steiner does state that the two are not contradictory, his explanation is essentially a flat statement that the two ideas can be reconciled: "ebensowenig wiederspricht es der Karma-Idee, wenn einem Menschen dasjenige, was er als sein Einzelkarma hat, von einer Gemeinde abgenommen wird. Die Gemeinde kan mittragen das Los des Einzelnen" (The idea of karma is not contradicted by the fact that a community can take over the individual karmic burden of a person. The community can carry the burden of the individual together with him.)

[75] Steiner *Das Markusevangelium*, lecture 3, p. 18.

[76] Steiner *Von Jesus zu Christus*, several passages.

[77] Steiner *Christus und die Menschliche Seele*, lectures 3 and 4.

[78] Steiner *Esoterische Betrachtungen karmischer Zusammenhänge*, pp. 138 ff.

Steiner does not only construct his claims on the discursive strategy of appealing to first-hand privileged experience. There is a streak of pseudo-rationality in these accounts that does not come across on a cursory reading, a form of rule-bound belief not unlike the concept of embodied rationality as defined by anthropologist Paul Stoller.[79] Thus, abstract or sublimated characteristics in a specific life are often interpreted in terms of an analogy with more concrete events in the past lives of the same entity. The necessary interval of time and the oscillation between male and female incarnations were noted above. Furthermore, great souls did not follow the latter rule, but were reincarnated at historically crucial moments in order to further a given task. Thus, the same soul gave impulses to the formation of Christianity and heralded changes in direction of the Christian tradition by reincarnating as Elijah, John the Baptist, Rafael and Novalis.[80] Whereas Leadbeater's reconstructions of past lives seem partly arbitrary, partly motivated by the pragmatic concerns of *Realpolitik*, Steiner's precise information on the previous existences of famous people is typically constructed on such self-imposed emically rational premises.

Client-Centered Legends

Leadbeater's and Steiner's karmic insights created person-centered legends out of the abstract mythology of theosophy. From the 1920s onwards, these personalized legends became available to ordinary people in their attempts to cast their personal histories in narrative form. Leadbeater and Steiner restricted their occult investigations to a small set of carefully chosen exemplars. They retained the essentials of the myth, but created a large set of personalized legends concerning the past lives of prominent people, based on their own positions as recipients of privileged experience. Cayce had similar claims to revelatory insight, but democratized this status yet another step by making esoteric knowledge available to anybody who enlisted his services. By projecting the lives of his clients back through the eons, Cayce gave them material for an imaginary autobiography in which details of the here-and-now could be explained. Cayce decisively transformed privileged experience into personal experience. The fact that Cayce's work consisted in sessions with individual clients

[79] Stoller 1998.
[80] Steiner *Der irdische und der kosmische Mensch*, lect 4.

gave his reincarnationist beliefs a very concrete form. A few recorded readings give a taste of this genre and of the peculiar language used in transmitting this information:

> Question: Why was I so fearful in childhood, especially of animals, spiders and sharp knives—and still dislike to use or to see used a sharp knife? Cayce: Because of those experiences when thou wert bound about, in those periods in France, when thine associates bound thee for thine virtue, and those activities in the knives, the racks of torture.[81]

> Cayce: In another experience we find that the entity was a chemist, and she used many of those various things for the producing of itching in others. She finds it (allergies) in herself in the present![82]

Half a century on, of course, it is impossible to know precisely how these psychic messages were received and how they were incorporated into the life histories of the individual clients. However, it is not unlikely that Cayce's readings were used to reconstruct life histories in the direction of the cues given in the readings. Ordinary careers as a housewife or employee were enriched with new dimensions of meaning by being linked with Atlantis or ancient Egypt. Problems in the present could be explained by referring to unpropitious destinies hundreds of years earlier.

The Bridey Murphy Case

Belief in reincarnation probably had many occasions to become part of popular culture: when Kardec published a canonical scripture for spiritualists, when theosophy was popularized, or when Steiner accepted the doctrine as an integral part of anthroposophy. However, the history of religions seems to have its own dynamics. Half a century ago, the doctrine of reincarnation was barely known outside a subculture of esotericists. Today it is a widespread component of unchurched belief in the West. Few single events can have been as important for the successful propagation of reincarnation as the publication of *The Search for Bridey Murphy*.[83] The book about Bridey Murphy is not only a convincing third-person narrative; it was also

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[81] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 135.
[82] Frejer *Edgar Cayce Companion*, p. 134.
[83] Perhaps the closest contender is Joan Grant, who wrote occult fiction throughout the 1940s purporting to describe her past life in ancient Egypt. Grant's books, however, were published as novels, whereas the story of Bridey Murphy was promoted as a work of non-fiction.

written and marketed in a way that made it accessible to a large audience. Whereas books such as *Le livre des esprits* and *The Secret Doctrine* are doctrinal statements with little literary merit, *The Search for Bridey Murphy* has a plot, protagonists and narrative development. For the first time, ordinary readers were presented with a reasonably well crafted presentation of reincarnationist doctrine.

Morey Bernstein, a self-taught hypnotist from Denver, experimented with age regression and was fortunate enough to come across a highly suggestible subject, Virginia Tighe. The first sessions attempted to bring her back to childhood. Encouraged by the success of these exploratory attempts, the hypnotist and subject decided to attempt a regression to an even earlier age. The breakthrough came on an evening in November 1952. Bernstein gave Tighe the suggestion to go further and further back in memory, until she reached scenes other than those she had experienced herself. Tighe duly reported that her name was Friday Murphy[84] and that she lived in Cork, Ireland. Over the course of six sessions, Tighe revealed what seemed to be memories of a previous life in Ireland. The Colorado housewife spoke with an Irish brogue, told Bernstein what her home on the periphery of Cork looked like and revealed details of her family. Bernstein wrote three articles in the *Denver Post*, recounting the details of the strange case. Agents for Doubleday, a major American publisher, read the story. A contract was signed and the book reached booksellers all over the USA in January 1956. Within months, translations into several European languages had been prepared.

The story of Bridey Murphy lends itself particularly well to a sociocognitive perspective.[85] In this model, hypnotic suggestion is seen as the cooperation between one person who takes the role of "hypnotist" and dictates the rules of the session, and another person who adopts the role of "hypnotized" and carries out the suggestions of the hypnotist. A good hypnotic subject is a person who is particularly willing to adapt to the demands defined by the hypnotist. The belief system that the hypnotist carries with him into the session will

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[84] Bernstein notes that he had misunderstood the name during the first session. Later, Tighe gave her hypnotic alter ego the name Bridey.

[85] There is every reason to treat Tighe's memories as a constructed narrative. When checked against verifiable details of life in eighteenth century Ireland, serious anachronisms and factual errors were found in her story. The sociocognitive perspective is a way of understanding why she should have chosen to fabricate a past life narrative.

therefore largely define the behavior of the hypnotized party, and will cue the interpretation that both the hypnotist and the hypnotized will give to the fantasies and inner monologue of the latter. This interpretation leads to a parsimonious analysis of the interaction between Bernstein and Tighe. Morey Bernstein was deeply fascinated with esoteric beliefs in general and Cayce's readings in particular.[86] The same model sheds some light on the particular impact of Bernstein's book. By presenting a readable account of Tighe's past life "memories", *The Search for Bridey Murphy* cued other hypnotists and writers on how to construct similar narratives. A small sub-genre of similar books has been produced since then. Brian L. Weiss' *Only Love is Real*, published in 1996, is one of the most recent examples. In this book, two of Weiss' patients, identified as "Elizabeth" and "Pedro", discover that they share past life reminiscences and are thus twin souls. The story of the two protagonists is built on a familiar narrative structure, including a happy ending. Underlying the concrete events, Weiss tells his readers that death is no end, that everything that happens has a meaning, and that love can overcome suffering. Weiss' text is not only well-written and emotionally appealing, but is also explicitly intended to be read as a factual account.

The Democratization of Experience

Past Life Therapy

From the perspective of clinical hypnotists, the practice of past life therapy or past life regression[87] is highly controversial or marginal. Alan Gauld's standard work on the history of hypnotism mentions past life regressions only once in over seven hundred pages of text.[88] The practice has gained some prominence within the New Age cultic milieu, not least due to a number of books on the subject, some of them reaching the best-seller lists.[89] Past life regression offers a strategy that appears to "prove" the veracity of reincarnation.

The post-theosophical reincarnationist teachings establish two fundamental doctrines. Firstly, we all are said to have a prehistory that

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[86] Langley 1967: 218; Bernstein 1956 devotes considerable space to discussing Cayce.
[87] Here the terms will be used interchangeably.
[88] Gauld 1992: 467.
[89] This is the case with e.g. Weiss *Many Lives, Many Masters* and Redfield *Celestine Vision*.

is normally hidden to us, but which can be unveiled by psychically gifted individuals. Secondly, this hidden prehistory gives coherence and meaning to facts about our present life histories. A third, latent element can be traced back to the days of the mesmerists and somnambules, and becomes an overt part of reincarnation doctrines, probably due to the strong influence of the Bridey Murphy case: knowledge of our past lives is not reserved for an elite of psychics, but can potentially be accessed by us all.

From Leadbeater to the purportedly clairvoyant psychics of our own times, there have been individuals who have claimed the ability to reveal the details of the past lives of individual subjects. Their claims rest on a considerable trust in experts. On what grounds could one possibly tell the difference between a "true" visionary with the ability to investigate karmic causes, and the "fake" psychic who invents spurious stories for a fee? Although reincarnation doctrines certainly continue throughout the New Age period to be spread through publications that present it *ex cathedra* or as knowledge gained through privileged insight,[90] a successful solution to the problem of trust arose in the late 1960s. Rather than merely telling the clients about their past existences, the expert could let them actually experience scenes from these lives. Authentic, personal experience could give the certitude that no second hand information could possibly impart.

The cultic milieu is highly sensitive to trends. The 1970s saw a surge of interest in alternative religions. The therapeutic and pop psychological components of the nascent New Age were highly visible components of the spiritual landscape. Several of the most popular alternative therapies were born or gained in popularity. Past life

[90] It is interesting to note that the ways of the experience-based reincarnationists and the revelation-based reincarnationists parted at this point. The former continue to elaborate on the basic assumption of Leadbeater, Steiner and Cayce, namely that some identifiable part or parts of us reincarnates, and that the successive lives of these parts thus constitute a continuity of identity across time. The latter are more prone to involve themselves in abstruse metaphysical arguments. A not untypical example of the latter is Roberts *The Nature of Personal Reality*, in which an individual's past lives are "really" simultaneous rather than sequential (pp. 370 f.) and are rather obscurely said to be "not you but of you" (p. 155). By the 1990s, the metaphysically complex versions seem to have largely faded from the New Age milieu, while the experience-based versions have fared quite well. Thus, James Redfield's and Brian L. Weiss's best-selling books assume a chain of existences that are somehow incarnations of the same individual entity. For a detailed review of the differences, even incompatibility, between the two competing theories, see Hanegraaff 1996: 265 ff.

therapy, a hitherto marginal interest involving a mere handful of hypnotists with unusual interests, became a niche of its own within the New Age community. A number of trendsetting books were published.[91] Therapists opened consulting-rooms. A few spokespersons gained prominence within the circle of practitioners.

Since the 1970s, past life therapy has passed through several characteristic phases. The early, experimental stage was replaced by a period of establishment, centered around the doctrines and practices of the leading spokespersons. This was gradually followed by a phase of professionalization. Organizations were formed,[92] magazines published, catalogues of practitioners appeared, and consumers' information became available. What was initially seen as a rather exotic practice went through a process of considerable normalization. Finally, and most importantly for the present purposes, within a few years, personal experience had become one of the most important discursive strategies buttressing reincarnationist claims.

The practitioners of the cultic milieu are anxious to preserve their independence. One is free to experiment with whatever methods one finds appropriate in order to induce purported past life experiences. Movement texts thus list a variety of means: relaxation, guided imagery, hypnosis, even a form of foot massage are described.[93] The theoretical framework within which the ensuing inner scenes are interpreted may also vary. The theosophically inspired therapist and the committed Jungian need not understand the imagery in the same way, nor do they necessarily use the same vocabulary to express their beliefs.[94]

In the movement texts, past life regressions are presented in the form of third-person narratives. In successful hypnotic sessions, the clients' present problems are revealed to be the result of traumatic experiences in previous lives. In a sense, these unorthodox claims are extrapolations of the more common psychotherapeutic claim that present problems are rooted in repressed or subconscious childhood

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[91] Some examples of these are Moore 1976; Dethlefsen 1977, Fiore 1978, Netherton & Shiffrin 1978, Wambach 1979, Moss & Keeton 1979, and, to add a later book in the same genre, Woolger 1987.

[92] The first of these organizations seems to have been the *Association for Past Life Research and Therapy*, founded in 1980.

[93] Hall *Past Life Therapy*, pp. 24 ff.

[94] An obvious case in point would be Jungian analyst and reincarnationist Roger Woolger, who expands Jungian terminology to encompass concepts such as *past life complex*; Woolger 1987, p. xix.

traumas. Some movement texts explicitly make that progression: a therapist who begins by embracing the more orthodox theory expands her practice to encompass purported past life memories.[95]

Rather than seeing narratives of experience set out in movement texts as *descriptions* of experience, they can be understood as *prescriptions*. A common but erroneous metaphor for memory treats it as an archive. According to this view, events that have been experienced are stored away, each in their discrete memory location. Some events are easily retrievable, such as what I did on my last birthday or how I spent yesterday evening. In the metaphor, these would correspond to data that have been filed away at an easily accessible location in the archive. Other events may have disappeared from conscious memory, such as what I had for lunch on a particular Saturday twenty years ago. However, once again according to a not uncommon (mis)conception, these data remain stored in the archive but are not accessible through conscious effort. In the archive metaphor, such events would be retrievable through therapeutic intervention, hypnotic suggestion[96] or even neurological stimulation.[97] Past life memories represent an extreme case of the construction and reinterpretation of memories.

Two models of human memory collide. According to a widely accepted psychological theory, memory does not function as an archive but consists of an active reconstruction of the past that at times can be rather free. At the same time, these free reconstructions are interpreted according to the archive model, and are thus believed to be retrieved reminiscences of actual events. The result is an overconfidence in what might be partly spurious recollections. For readers predisposed to believe in the accuracy of hypnotic or therapeutic interventions and in the veracity of reincarnation, narratives of past lives, whether transmitted from person to person or via the printed page, can provide past life regressees with cues to understand and structure their experiences. Thus, whereas an author such as Fiore believes that the problems of a chronic over-eater were the result of having experienced starvation in a previous life,[98] the

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[95] Fiore *You Have Been Here Before*, pp. 2 ff.

[96] For a critical assessment of this claim, see Spanos 1996: 139 ff.

[97] Cf. the experiments of Wilder Penfield, as presented in Penfield & Roberts 1959 and Penfield & Perot 1963. For a summary of the widespread criticism of Penfield's experiments, see Horowitz 1970.

[98] Fiore *You Have Been Here Before*, pp. 86 ff.

sociocognitive perspective reverses the chain of cause and effect. The fact that the subject is obese can, with some cueing from the hypnotist and an appropriate frame of interpretation, give rise to fantasy images of a past existence lived under dire circumstances. These fantasies can then be integrated into a partially imaginary life history as an "explanation" of (and perhaps an excuse for) one's present over-eating.

Most writers within the Esoteric Tradition seem to accept reincarnation narratives as unproblematic documents of past lives. Alice Bailey is the main dissenting voice. In her book *The Reappearance of the Christ*, she summarily dismisses the veracity of reincarnation memories and the doctrines of her colleagues. Leadbeater and Steiner are not mentioned by name, but one senses their teachings in quotes such as this:

> [P]ractically all the occult groups and writings have foolishly laid the emphasis upon past incarnations and upon their recovery; this recovery is incapable of any reasonable checking—anyone can say and claim anything they like; the teaching has been laid upon imaginary rules, supposed to govern the time equation and the interval between lives [—] Only one factor remains of value: the existence of a Law of Rebirth is now discussed by many and accepted by thousands.[99]

Bailey thus firmly believed in reincarnation but rejected several of the persuasive strategies and doctrinal details proposed by other reincarnationist writers. However, such half-hearted signs of critical assessment are part of a minority view.

Do-it-yourself Methods

The ultimate step in democratizing past life experiences is to teach techniques whereby readers can conjure up the appropriate imagery themselves. Ted Andrews is a prolific writer of do-it-yourself manuals on the paranormal. From a sociocognitive perspective, his books (and other similar texts) can be seen as frameworks within which mundane experiences can be reformulated in order to meet certain given expectations. Andrews has written a do-it-yourself manual on past life experiences, describing means of gaining access to past life memories without needing to resort to the services of a regression therapist or hypnotist.[100]

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[99] Bailey *Reappearance of the Christ*, pp. 117 f.
[100] Andrews *How to Uncover Your Past Lives*.

The cueing effect found in third-person narratives is even more conspicuous in Andrews's step-by-step instructions. From the outset, the reader is encouraged to interpret the answer to certain questions in terms of hidden memories from previous lives. These questions are so general that one would be hard pressed to find anybody who would answer them all in the negative: Are there places to which you have had the urge to travel? Are there any particular historical epochs that interest you more than others? Are there any groups of people, e.g. ethnic groups, that you find particularly fascinating? Practically any idiosyncratic predilection becomes a clue to one's previous lives.

The next step is to encourage the development of increasingly concrete "memories" from these past lives. Andrews lists a number of competing theories as to the precise nature of past life memories, but admonishes the reader to treat them as authentic reminiscences from previous incarnations.[101] Readers are encouraged to fantasize freely, to immerse themselves in visualized imagery, to meditate on symbols such as the tarot or the kabbalistic Tree of Life. They are reassured that their ability to generate fantasy images will improve through practice. Andrew assists the reader by suggesting a ritual framework within which such images can be produced. By setting apart a special place and time for the ritual, by demarcating this space and time as distinct by means of incense, flower essences, gems and stones and by beginning the ritual with a set of pre-established instructions for guided imagery, the reader will learn to regard precisely these inner images as different in quality, as deeper and more significant than the everyday flow of consciousness.[102]

Fantasy images are fluid and come with no ready explanations as to how they "should" be interpreted. Andrews provides such explanations. The inner images are said to be the key to perceiving energies, a method of enhancing our intuition, a way of accessing a different reality than the everyday world. Any discussion of visualization as spurious or interpretable within an intrapsychic framework is thus effectively precluded. Furthermore, at every point on the way the reader is encouraged to record the details of these practices in what Andrews calls a reincarnation diary. This record will presumably place every image within the pre-established framework of "past life memories".

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[101] Andrews *How to Uncover Your Past Lives*, ch. 2.

[102] A number of such ritual practices are prescribed in Andrews *How to Uncover Your Past Lives*, ch. 5 and 6.

Therapies and do-it-yourself projects display one of the key characteristics of a discourse in the Foucaultean sense of the word: to protect the boundaries of a given set of doctrines and, by defining who has acceptable opinions, to limit the authority to speak to those who accept the fundamental tenets of the discourse. Past life therapy is one of a set of similar, non-mainstream methods aimed at enhancing faded memories. However, a considerable body of scholarship has demonstrated the fundamental flaw of these methods. Contrary to a widespread contemporary legend, hypnotic techniques do not enhance memory. Their main effect is to increase the hypnotic subjects' propensity to confabulate, their willingness to accept the hypnotist's suggestions, and their conviction that the essentially spurious memories created in the therapeutic setting are real.[103] Dissenting voices that present such experimental research are, for obvious reasons, never allowed to speak out in the Esoteric texts.

Third-person and second-person narratives affect the experience of past life memories in a manner analogous to that discussed by Steven Katz in connection with the loftier mystical experiences: "Images, beliefs, symbolism, and rituals define, in advance, what the experience he wants to have and which he then does have, will be like."[104] However, by masking prescriptive leads behind a descriptive language, this state of affairs is effectively hidden from the reader.

Reincarnation as Rational Belief

The main discursive strategies surveyed so far have been the construction of tradition and the appeal to experience. The effect of modernity on reincarnationist belief can be discerned in many ways. Perhaps the most obvious effect of Enlightenment thought is the risk one takes as the spokesperson for an Esoteric position, or indeed for any other new religious movement with controversial doctrinal contents. As the belief in reincarnation has become more widespread, a naturalistic critique has also been formulated. Thus, alleged past life experiences are explained in terms that differ sharply from those invoked by the believers, perhaps in terms of socio-psychological factors or cognitive illusions. The theories of the believers, however, are

[103] E.g. Spanos 1996, Loftus 1979 and 1997.
[104] Katz 1978: 33.

also infused with Enlightenment ideas, e.g. of progress and of the ambition to distill a common doctrinal core from the vast variety of concrete religious systems. Some spokespersons embrace Enlightenment rationality, claiming that reincarnation is part and parcel of a rational worldview. Such claims typically come in two varieties. In the weak form, reincarnation is claimed, on general and varyingly vague grounds, to be part of a spiritual science. The strong form of rationality accepts, to a lesser or greater extent, the need to find specific rational arguments for reincarnation.

An early explicit formulation of the weak form of rationalism can be found in a small volume by Rudolf Steiner entitled *Reïnkarnation und Karma, vom Standpunkt der modernen Naturwissenschaft notwendige Vorstellungen*, published in 1909. In accordance with the characteristic dichotomy between a materialistic and a true form of science, Steiner draws parallels between contemporary supporters of the doctrine of reincarnation and scientific heretics of the past, who were pursued by their opponents but later vindicated by posterity. Here, conventional scientists of the early twentieth century are cast in the role of blinkered conservatives whose dogmatism will soon be overcome since "zwischen echter Naturforschung und Theosophie kann kein Widerspruch bestehen".[105]

Similar broad claims to being scientific are also found in recent texts. One example is Tad Mann, the author of an apologetic book on the subject entitled *The Elements of Reincarnation*. Mann attempts to link belief in reincarnation with Jung's theories of the collective unconscious, with the discovery of the DNA molecule, and with Rupert Sheldrake's controversial—and in Mann's view revolutionary—vitalistic theories. If the evidence is as powerful as Mann would have us believe, why are more conventional scientists so unimpressed? Mann has a ready answer. With the exception of a few radical scientists, it is still common to deny the reality of the psyche and of the spiritual worlds. Materialistic science requires measurement and quantification as proof. Only the bravest and most adventurous thinkers have attempted to integrate these concepts into their theories. Here, mainstream science is depicted as overly conservative, whereas controversial minority positions are described as bold and progressive.

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[105] Steiner *Reïnkarnation und Karma*, p. 7; "There can be no contradiction between a genuine investigation of nature and theosophy".

Some spokespersons for reincarnation also accept the strong view of rationality and attempt to give specific arguments for their beliefs. The roots of the strong rationalist position are to be found in attempts made by Frederic Myers and others in the early days of psychic research, i.e. the late nineteenth century, to find evidence of life after death. The best known present-day rationalist apologist for reincarnation is Ian Stevenson. Stevenson has spent over forty years of his professional career amassing a mountain of evidence to prove not only the general thesis that there is a post-death existence, but the considerably more specific belief that we are reborn in a human body.[106]

Stevenson has recorded hundreds of narratives in which small children are said to remember past lives. In some cases, children as young as two to four years old tell their parents that they live somewhere else, that they have a different set of relatives. His latest publications record even more striking cases.[107] A child born with deformed fingers is claimed to be the new incarnation of a man who had his fingers damaged in an accident. A boy with a rare genetic defect that has atrophied his outer ears is claimed to be the incarnation of a man who died after being shot in the side of the head.

Stevenson clearly attempts to treat the question of reincarnation as a question that can be subjected to empirical investigation. He thereby places himself at least in part in the same field as skeptics who attempt to find less controversial and more parsimonious explanations than reincarnation.[108] Stevenson's work is a distinct product of the modern age. What is normally seen as a religious question

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[106] See e.g. Stevenson 1966.

[107] See e.g. Stevenson 1997.

[108] Cf. Wilson 1971 and Edwards 1996. Among the arguments invoked by skeptical commentators, one finds the following: Firstly, the transfer of distinctive bodily features from one person to another presupposes a mechanism that has no counterparts in any other known area. Neither science nor common sense offers any clue as to how characteristics that are similar seen from the perspective of a human subject, but have entirely distinct underlying causes, could possibly be transmitted from one individual to another. Secondly, the material is statistically odd. Subjects from India usually remember past lives in near-by villages. Westerners seem to be considerably more prone to change location drastically in time and space. Thirdly, ethnic groups unknown to the average Westerner are seldom mentioned in reincarnation narratives. Few if any subjects claim to have been Illyrians, Sogdians, Tocharians or Urarteans. Fourthly, interviewing small children is a problematic undertaking. The boundaries between reporting, inventing or following the cues given by adults (parents, relatives, interviewers, interpreters, etc.) are fluid. Finally, critics have also noted that Stevenson has conducted some interviews through interpreters with documented reincarnationist beliefs.

has been incorporated into the rationalist framework of modern society. The progress of secularization has made it possible to combine questions of faith with the rhetoric of science. Within this rhetorical framework, there are certain given elements. The academic credentials of the author are important—Stevenson is a psychiatrist with a Ph.D. His illustrations are matter-of-fact. The language is more typical of academic publications than of Esoteric movement texts. Taxonomies are established. There are references to earlier studies. Stevenson's work reminds the reader—and is probably intended to remind the reader—of the style of normal science. It is the subject rather than the methodology that may strike one as unusual. Even the price of some of his books contributes to strengthening the rhetorical appearance of science. Whereas the run-of-the-mill New Age book on reincarnation might cost, say, a rough fifteen to twenty dollars, Stevenson's *Reincarnation and Biology* was, at the time of writing (May 2000), sold by a major on-line bookstore at a hefty 195 US dollars. Clearly, the book is aimed at research libraries, not at the New Age market.

Whereas previous generations could construct entities such as "science" and "faith" as opposites, the rhetoric of scientism gradually effaces such contrasts, at least in the eyes of the believers. "Spirituality" is said to point at the same truths that can be discerned with a higher and better form of science. Any conflicts are due to the negative attitude of conventional, mechanistic scientists unwilling to open their minds enough to accept the truth.

The hypnotically induced memories of Virginia Tighe or other subjects who have figured prominently in New Age texts tell dramatic stories of their previous lives—stories that in the eyes of skeptics have seemed remarkably close to the plot structure of historical fiction.[109] In a rationalist age, writers who use such narratives often appear concerned to give independent evidence that such stories are consistent with known historical facts. Skeptics and believers have fought over the reliability of the details in those narratives that offer enough verifiable claims to enable such checking. Believers, however, always appear to be one step ahead. Once one narrative has been debunked, interest in the cultic milieu gravitates towards new narratives. Some of the most successful reincarnation stories in recent years have been

[109] A sampling of such narratives can be found in Wilson 1987.

written in a generalizing style. No names or dates are given, purportedly in the interest of protecting the privacy of the protagonists, but also effectively precluding confirmation or disconfirmation.[110] One suspects that belief is more important than evidence.

Reincarnation as a Modern Doctrine

An important component in the rise of modernity is the ambivalence vis-à-vis rationality. Rationality was a central part of the Enlightenment project. However, the Enlightenment ended with a flood of non-rational alternatives: mesmerism, rosicrucianism and spiritism, among others. Since then, non-rationalist projects have coexisted alongside the main, rationalist current. By choosing some examples of criteria of rationality as a roster through which Esoteric doctrines can be observed, one can see how Esoteric positions, especially later ones such as anthroposophy as well as various versions of New Age thought, lean on both rationalist and non-rationalist persuasive strategies.

Rationalism	*Non-rationalism*
The main source of legitimacy is the possibility to critically assess a given doctrine.	There are external authorities that carry such weight that the possibility to critically assess a given doctrine only has secondary importance.
Sense data as well as personal experience must be critically judged, since our senses and experiences can be deceptive.	Sense data as well as personal experience give unproblematic and direct clues as to the nature of reality.
It is usually better to base collective as well as individual behavior on explicit, intellectually constructed guidelines rather than on tradition.	It is often better to base collective as well as individual behavior on tradition than on explicit, intellectually constructed guide-lines.
Intuition may be valuable in the context of generating innovative hypotheses, but only critical rationality can validate these innovations.	Intuition is (at least) as valid as intellect, the distinction between the context of discovery and the context of validation is blurred.

[110] E.g. Weiss *Only Love is Real.*

Rational argumentation is occasionally invoked to support reincarnationist doctrines. One can choose to refer to Ian Stevenson's studies and base one's claims on a syncretism between faith and science that is characteristic of the modern era. Within the Esoteric literature on reincarnation, one also finds the opposite: a trust in revealed information, in the wisdom of authorities. Believers can rely on the veracity of claims found in dozens of texts received through psychic means, i.e. channeled texts in which reincarnation is taken for granted. Regardless of which entities are said to be the source of revealed wisdom—archangels, Egyptian priests, ascended Masters, dolphins or extraterrestrial beings from the Pleiades—they all seem to have adopted turn-of-the century theosophical doctrines of the steady progress of the soul through successive lives.

Nineteenth century belief in reincarnation generally rested on classical religious motifs: the belief in messages revealed from suprahuman sources. Knowledge of the afterlife state was imparted to prophetic figures, to mesmerist and spiritist mediums, or to religious virtuosi such as Helena Blavatsky. The details of reincarnation were presented in abstract myths or through the imaginary lives of significant individuals. With time, both the doctrines and their legitimizing strategies have changed. Tradition has gained considerable weight in texts that discuss reincarnation. The theosophical legend that the earliest Christian communities believed in the transmigration of souls would hardly have been so resilient in the face of contrary evidence if it did not serve an important purpose. As outlined in chapter 4, part of the process of secularization consists in the realization that there are many religious faiths. As long as one is only aware of a single tradition, its doctrines and rituals may seem self-evident. Once one gets to know several conflicting stories, one's own set of beliefs risks being demoted to the status of one option among many. If one becomes aware of the fact that modern reincarnation belief is largely the product of a nineteenth century French author of schoolbooks, this knowledge might contribute to fostering a hermeneutic of suspicion. Universalism becomes an effective remedy against doubt. If in the ultimate analysis, all religions are merely variations of a *philosophia perennis*, the differences between Hindu, Christian or Spiritist beliefs are simply details. The question whether present-day reincarnation beliefs, as set out in the latest texts, were actually created (or discovered) by Allan Kardec, Helena Blavatsky or some nameless Oriental sage becomes a matter of no great concern.

The doctrine of reincarnation has, at least overtly, also become democratized. The believer does not need to rely on blind faith alone. There are supposedly rational reasons for accepting reincarnation. For those who wish to take the next step in their interest in the afterlife, past life experiences are a "proof" freely available to anybody. The therapeutic practices that have sprung from past life beliefs are widespread today; those interested in investigating purported past life memories can do so with little practical difficulty. Rationalists may find it obvious that experiences are ambiguous and can sometimes even be directly misleading. For large segments of the cultic milieu, it seems equally obvious that personal experiences are faithful maps of underlying reality. Herein lies a deep contradiction within New Age religiosity. Overtly, its texts commonly invoke a democratic ideal, according to which nothing needs to be taken on faith, and which insists that the readers' spiritual experiences are by far more important than any opinions that the author might entertain. These experiences, however, are molded by the expectations of the most influential spokespersons of the movement. It might even be argued that earlier forms of authority, depending on claims to clairvoyance or contact with spiritual masters from Tibet, were easier to see through than the subtler strategies of the last few decades.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CODA

On Belief and Evidence

Like the literature of most other religious traditions, Esoteric movement texts are filled with detailed claims that are part and parcel of a highly distinct frame of reference and probably appear reasonable only from within that setting. The particulars of reincarnation as documented in chapter 7 are a case in point. Of the many examples found in the literature reviewed there, the following two, which regard two famous thinkers of the nineteenth century, are taken from the writings of Rudolf Steiner. According to Steiner, the American writer and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson received his poetic gifts in a rather remarkable way: Emerson's talents were, in a sense, inherited, since he had already lived a previous life as a writer. Emerson's considerable interest in exotic cultures was also an echo from this previous existence. Two thousand years earlier, the soul that was now incarnated in Emerson had lived as Tacitus. Similarly, other famous people's life stories are not primarily the result of genes, upbringing or biographical vicissitudes. Steiner relates that a large estate in north-eastern France was held during the early Middle Ages by a martial feudal lord. During a military campaign, this estate was captured by a rival. The previous owner had no means of retaliating, and was forced to see his property lost to an enemy. He was filled with a smoldering resentment towards the propertied classes, not only for the remainder of his life in the Middle Ages, but also in a much later incarnation—as Karl Marx. His rival was reborn as Friedrich Engels.

As seen in the last chapter, Steiner claims to have uncovered the precise mechanisms of reincarnation. Among the many emically rational rules governing the succession of lives on earth are astrological influences. As in truly pre-modern belief systems, correspondences are thus established between what is seen as separate domains by the secularized worldview: celestial mechanisms and the character and fate of the human being. Steiner's Esoteric religion partakes of

what philosopher Charles Taylor calls *ontic logos*: a view of the cosmos as a meaningful order, in which a natural one-to-one correspondence exists between the actual structure of the world, the knowledge we can have of it and the moral law we are to follow.[1]

Considering the strongly pre-modern flavor of many of Steiner's claims, it should be remembered that anthroposophy is not merely an isolated "survival" in an otherwise disenchanted world. One of the main connecting threads of the present study is the contention that in their claims of possessing valid knowledge, the major spokespersons of the Modern Esoteric Tradition have adapted to many of the default assumptions of a Western post-Enlightenment context. Thus, Steiner repeatedly insists that information of this kind is the result of scientific investigation. One of the foremost present-day anthroposophists remarks that anthroposophy "contains no dogmas or other doctrines that cannot be reached by rational means. Nor is it a philosophical system that somebody has thought out. Anthroposophy is a path to knowledge".[2] Other Esoteric spokespersons may not go quite as far as Steiner did. Writers that could be classified as espousing a New Age worldview are, with a significant difference in nuance, apt to claim that their message is based on, compatible with, or explainable by means of modern science. Few spokespersons resist the temptation of appealing to the ethos of science.

For the anthroposophist, spiritual science is as inexorably logical as the natural sciences. The path towards attaining knowledge of the higher worlds, including insights into the exact mechanisms of reincarnation, lie open to those who practice the methods of *Geisteswissenschaft* to the full. It is not only part of Steiner's experience, but also potentially part of the experience of every individual. A carefully outlined series of meditative exercises describes how one can attain knowledge of the spiritual truths.

All of these details regarding the reincarnation of individual souls can be found in a massive work entitled *Esoterische Betrachtungen karmischer Zusammenhänge*.[3] Since the title of the book explicitly men-

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[1] Taylor 1989: 161 and 186 ff.

[2] Carlgren 1985: 11; my translation of the Swedish original text "[antroposofin] innehåller inga dogmer eller andra för förnuftet oåtkomliga trossatser. Den är inte heller ett filosofiskt system som någon har suttit och tänkt ut. Antroposofin är en väg till kunskap."

[3] The stories of Emerson's previous incarnation as Tacitus and Marx's life as a feudal lord ares taken from volume II of this work.

tions the concept of karma, one could infer that Steiner sees at least an indirect link between his own method of spiritual insight and an Indian tradition. A perusal of Steiner's writings will indeed reveal a host of references to what are originally Indian concepts. Other Esoteric positions, especially theosophy, are even more apt to borrow terminology from Sanskrit. Thus, India plays a central role for many of Steiner's colleagues. For anthroposophy, however, the links to the East are of secondary importance as parts of a discursive strategy. Steiner's admirers might claim that he did not actually borrow ideas from Oriental sources. To the extent that there are similarities between these worldviews, a more likely reason, according to anthroposophists, is that Hindu sages glimpsed the same reality that Steiner saw. Since these insights were purportedly gained by means of a systematic process of investigation, the invention of tradition is of secondary importance compared to the appeal to logic and science.

Thus, the founders of modern Esoteric movements are embedded in a modern context. The prophets of an earlier age could perhaps have relied on their charisma, on having been chosen by their god, or on their inner certainty. If one presumes to speak in the name of a god who is believed in by all the members of a society, this may be enough of an argument to present one's claims as self-evident fact. Spokespersons of the Modern Esoteric Tradition, however, live in an epoch permeated with Enlightenment values. How would they make their claims of possessing true knowledge sound plausible? As the present study has illustrated, theosophists, anthroposophists and New Age spokespersons have attempted the paradoxical task of combining seemingly rational arguments with claims of possessing ancient, revealed wisdom.

Tradition

One factor that has been indicated to explain the increasing secularization of many countries in the West is the contact with an ever larger number of competing religious belief systems.[4] How should one handle the insight that other people worship other gods—or no gods at all?

[4] Cf. Bruce 1996: 43 ff.

During the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the educated elite in the Christian West seems to have had a fair knowledge of existence and particulars of the faiths of nearby lands. However, with few exceptions, this was combined with a very limited tolerance towards these religions. Thus, the medieval text *Confutatio alcorani* dismissed the prophet Muhammad as merely an epileptic tribal chief.[5] As for cultures that were more distant in time and space, the level of ignorance seems to have been considerably higher. Hermeticist interest in an imagined Egypt was matched by a profound ignorance of actual Egyptian culture. The map of the world expanded with the rise of the modern age. Jesuit missionaries, travelers, explorers, merchants and diplomats were among the increasing number of writers to convey something of the richness and diversity of the world's cultures and faiths. A greater familiarity gave rise to a mild relativism. The contrast between the two views of the Other can be seen by juxtaposing a sixteenth century chronicler with a precursor of the Enlightenment.

One of the earliest texts to describe a native American people is Jean de Léry's *Récit d'un voyage en la terre du Brésil*, published in 1578.[6] De Léry visited large and well-organized villages of five to six hundred inhabitants, and was struck by how well life in these villages and the relations between their inhabitants worked in the absence of a judiciary system. There can be little doubt that his chronicle contributed to the appreciation of "savages" so evident in Montaigne's essay *On Cannibals*. However, de Léry's tolerance abruptly ended when he described the faith of the Tupinamba Indians. The sixteenth chapter of his book is the only one that has a directly deprecating content. The poor natives live in spiritual darkness; they venerate no gods, have no places of worship, no scripture or sacred days in their calendar. They do not pray, nor do they have any theories regarding the origins of the world.

A vast gulf exists between the religious exclusivism of de Léry and the budding relativism of a pre-Enlightenment thinker such as Descartes. In his *Discours de la méthode*, he writes:

> [—] On ne saurait rien imaginer de si étrange et si peu croyable, qu'il n'ait été dit par quelqu'un des philosophes; et depuis, en voyageant, ayant reconnu que tous ceux qui ont des sentiments fort contraires

[5] Sharpe 1986: 12.
[6] de Léry 1972.

> aux nôtres, ne sont pas, pour cela, barbares ni sauvages, mais que plusieurs usent, autant ou plus que nous, de raison; [—] en sorte que c'est bien plus la coutume et l'exemple qui nous persuadent qu'aucune connaissance certaine.[7]

Once one dares to entertain such thoughts, the position of Christianity as the exclusive truth begins to erode. Certainty is transformed into belief, into one opinion among many. By the end of the Enlightenment, this relativism was accompanied by the first steps toward a freedom *of* religion as well as *from* religion: legislation in countries such as the newly founded United States of America made it possible for spiritual entrepreneurs to experiment with non-Christian doctrines and rituals and incorporate elements from various exotic creeds.

However, a profoundly biased mental map of these exotic Others emerged. By the early nineteenth century, leading spokespersons had developed a pool of resources from which to pick images of non-Christian wisdom. The present study has briefly surveyed the ways in which e.g. a generic Orient, the belief in the noble savage and the veneration of ancient civilizations arose at different times and were supported by different spokespersons, yet were amalgamated into a common vision of the positive Other.

Total relativism is devastating to any religious claim. If there is no consensus between faiths, on what grounds does one make one's choice? The canonical texts and the spokespersons for various faiths muster arguments that seem to endorse mutually incompatible claims with more or less the same degree of credibility. David Hume expressed the problem succinctly.[8] Numerous religions of the world have established themselves on the basis of their miracles. If so, they cancel each other out; each religion establishes itself as firmly as the next, thereby overthrowing and destroying its rivals. A commonly adopted counteracting strategy is to claim that there is an underlying unity beneath the apparent diversity. Part of chapter 4 was devoted to the proposed solutions to the fundamental problem of

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[7] Descartes *Discours de la méthode* II:4; "No opinion, however absurd and incredible, can be imagined, which has not been maintained by some one of the philosophers; and afterwards in the course of my travels I remarked that all those whose opinions are decidedly repugnant to ours are not in that account barbarians and savages, but on the contrary that many of these nations make an equally good, if not better, use of their reason than we do. [—] I was thus led to infer that the ground of our opinions is far more custom and example than any certain knowledge".

[8] In section X of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

this strategy, namely the difficulty in stating what such a common spiritual core would consist of, since the overt characteristics of the various religions (and thus their differences) are readily observable. Chapter 4 also elaborated on the strategies used by Esoteric spokespersons in their attempts to transform what is basically heterogeneous into something more homogenous, to somehow make plausible the maxim *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

Among the strategies selected for review are those that convert a pre-existing religious material into something new. These include selectivity, i.e. the tacit eschewing of any religious traditions that contradict one's totalizing vision; pattern recognition, i.e. the argument that doctrines and practices from various peoples are "in fact" reflexes of the same underlying wisdom; synonymization, the related claim that terms taken from the religious vocabulary of various faiths designate the same reality; and the universalizing exegesis that undertakes to find common elements in myths from various traditions. To these can be added strategies that fabricate religious "traditions" more or less *ex nihilo*. Entire civilizations can be created in the pages of a movement text. *The Secret Doctrine* is a major source of fantasy images of Atlantis and Lemuria. A somewhat less extreme form creates new legend elements and grafts them onto a historically plausible scenario or person. Examples of this would include the claims that Jesus was a member of an order of Essenes, or that he had learned yogic techniques in a monastery in Ladakh.

Through such processes, spokespersons for various positions of the Esoteric Tradition radically reinterpret history, at times to the point of inventing traditions. American and Western European spokespersons express values and beliefs that belong in a post-Christian, psychologizing and Esoteric culture by means of a terminology and doctrinal elements culled from other traditions. In practice, the freedom to be eclectic that a globalized religious ecology could have produced actually results in attempts to subvert the differences between belief systems. Spokespersons for Esoteric positions have created a new tradition of their own using the myths, symbols, rituals and doctrinal statements of various other traditions, as found in religious texts or second-hand reports.

The final case study in chapter 4 shows just how distant an Esoteric interpretation can be from the significant Other from which it attempts to draw legitimacy. Texts describing the tantric concept of chakras became available to an educated Western audience in the 1910s,

notably with the publication of Arthur Avalon's *The Serpent Power*. In the eighty years that have passed since then, the concept of chakras has become a staple of New Age literature. At the same time, the chakras have been not-so-subtly transformed from being elements in a pre-modern belief system and a meditative praxis, to a set of terms with which to express American middle class values such as autonomy, individualism and expressiveness. Tantric terminology has been adapted to the characteristically late modern concerns of identity formation.

The theoretical concept of position is linked to that of discourse, which in the classical, Foucaultean sense is inextricably connected with issues of power and authority. Although this aspect of the Esoteric Tradition is only marginally addressed in the present study, it may be appropriate to briefly note that the construction of tradition is indeed a question of taking the right to speak authoritatively. All presumptive spokespersons are free to make their own choices from the pool of culturally given resources, to use pattern recognition and other strategies at will, and to present their own interpretations as being particularly legitimate. When a spokesperson uses a discursive strategy rather than a more formal demonstration to support the claim that his or her interpretations should be a valid grid through which others could or should interpret reality, this is an ideological maneuver. Modern movement texts, e.g. Caroline Myss' two books on the chakra system, are ambivalent on this point, since the author encourages readers more or less in passing to accept only what feels right. Yet Myss devotes several hundred pages to constructing a system of correspondences that is backed by only rhetorical evidence; in this case, whatever "feels right" can hardly be subject to independent confirmation, and must therefore be accepted or rejected at face value.

Science

By the end of the eighteenth century, Christianity was not only challenged by other faiths. Arguably the most serious competitor were the materialistic and—more or less implicitly—secular natural sciences. A God who actively manifested his power and majesty in the workings of the world and in the history of mankind was gradually replaced by the far more distant creator of the deists. Reliance on scripture, miracles or revelation was criticized by Enlightenment

philosophers on rational grounds. In this cultural climate, the first attempts were made to construct religious (or quasi-religious) systems on seemingly scientific grounds.

The history of scientistic religiosity was briefly reviewed in chapter 5. By the mid-1770s, Franz Mesmer had created a form of alternative medicine. According to his theories, all diseases had a common cause: an imbalance in the magnetic fluid that flowed through the patient's body. Mesmer created a number of healing rituals aimed at restoring the flow of animal magnetism. Mesmer soon began to attract pupils, some of whom would experiment with his methods and modify them. In 1784, one of Mesmer's disciples, Armand Marie Jacques de Chastenet, the marquis de Puységur, created the perhaps most significant innovation in the early history of mesmerism. One of Puységur's servants, Victor Race, had been afflicted with a respiratory ailment accompanied by fever, and the marquis attempted to cure him by mesmeric means. However, Race did not experience any of the common symptoms of crisis, but merely appeared to fall asleep. Nevertheless, Puységur noted that Race seemed to hear everything that was said and slavishly followed every command. After the treatment, Race claimed not to remember anything that had happened during the session. Puységur named the new mesmeric symptom magnetic sleep or somnambulism.

The radical innovation consisted in the focus of Puységur's and his followers' investigations. Whereas Mesmer was entirely committed to his view of mesmerism as a method of curing patients, the reformed mesmerists under Puységur paid attention to the exotic symptoms manifested by many of their clients when subjected to magnetic sleep: they appeared to read thoughts, gave proof of X-ray vision, heard voices or foretold the future. Puységur and his colleagues lived in a pre-psychological age. Many of them appear to have understood the experiences of their mesmerized patients as an empirically valid path to access a religious (or, to borrow an anachronism, paranormal) world. The mesmerists seemed to gather experimental evidence in support of what had previously been religious or folk beliefs. By being empiricists of sorts and thus "scientific", the spokespersons for various versions of the mesmerist worldview created a syncretism between faith and rationality.

The present study has shown how each generation of Esoteric spokespersons since the days of Puységur has attempted to incorporate the scientific advances of their epoch into a religious *bricolage*.

As magnetism became an everyday phenomenon, electricity partially replaced it as a powerful metaphor for vital forces. Then electricity also lost its nimbus, and atomic theory, relativity theory and quantum physics became new sources of inspiration. Since then, scientism has come to permeate many aspects of the Esoteric movement texts that form part of the present corpus. Paratextual markers, such as the author's academic titles and the scholarly credentials of those who endorse the books, give these texts legitimacy. The structure of certain texts is modeled on that of scientific treatises. The vocabulary is infused with terms taken (i.e. disembedded) from their origins within the scientific community. Movement texts may claim scientific status for an array of doctrinal elements ranging from auras and astrology to various forms of healing. Religious activities are expressed by means of a rationalistic vocabulary that makes these activities acceptable to a largely secularized audience.

What, besides rhetorical legitimacy, does one accomplish by incorporating contemporary science? On the one hand, it becomes possible to attempt a seamless synthesis à la Fritjof Capra or Gary Zukav. On the other, as shown by the final case study in chapter 5, it also becomes feasible to attempt to employ single elements of scientific theories or terminology as strategies to legitimize concepts that an earlier age might have seen as typically religious. In the case study, the type of events that may have been interpreted as miracles by an earlier age are explained as belonging to the domain of science—but of a science that is vastly more encompassing than the purportedly narrow and materialistic science practiced in research laboratories around the world.

Experience

The claim that the third discursive strategy, the appeal to experience, is part of a late modern religious creativity may have surprised the reader. References to ancient wisdom or quantum physics are relatively obvious products of the religious creativity of a modern age. How could religious experience be a modern phenomenon?

Of course, it would be odd to claim that the concept of religious experience *per se* is part of the modern age. The earliest religious texts report visions, feelings of fear or trust in the transcendent, prophetic calling and a host of other phenomena that could readily

be labeled religious. However, not all Western religious traditions have valued experience in the way many people appear to do today. Contemporary interest in e.g. mysticism can be seen as characteristic of our own epoch. As long as the religious tradition was guarded by a hierarchically organized priesthood, personal experience could even be viewed with suspicion. What could be a more efficient method of short-circuiting the hierarchy than to claim to have direct experience of the divine?[9] The first section of chapter 6 briefly discussed this historical background of the modern re-evaluation of personal experience.

As the doctrinal positions of Christianity came under increased attack, one apologetic strategy was to defend experience over e.g. faith, ritualism or ethics. Building on a Kantian legacy, Friedrich Schleiermacher is the perhaps most influential representative of this view of religious experience as the "true essence" of religion. In his *Reden ueber die Religion*, published in 1799, Schleiermacher introduces the notion that true religion is neither belief in specific doctrines, as it is for the religious orthodoxy, nor moral conduct as it was for certain Enlightenment philosophers, but rather feeling, intuition and contemplation. A few of the post-Kantian and post-Enlightenment views of religion founded on an epistemology of experience were briefly reviewed in chapter 6. However, the largest part of that chapter reviewed some fundamental ways in which narratives of religion have been used in Esoteric movement texts. For heuristic purposes, narratives of experience in the Modern Esoteric Tradition have been divided here into three groups, according to the relationship between the protagonist of the narrative and the narrator.

Third person narratives are reports of what people have experienced, e.g. as the result of having recourse to complementary medicine, carrying out meditative exercises or consulting diviners. These are narratives of vicarious experience, spiritual insights and practices that somebody else has profited from. The present study has argued that such narratives serve a double purpose. Firstly, they are rhetorical *exempla* that support the doctrinal claims expounded in the text. By telling the story of a successfully healed client, spokespersons for a specific form of healing point to the validity of their preferred method. Secondly, they potentially cue the experiences of the reader.

[9] Jantzen 1995, especially chapter 7.

Those who read the text on healing will be presented with a framework into which the symptoms of illness, processes of treatment and ensuing recovery or lack of recovery fit. Potentially, such narratives make use of practical examples to support the same discourse on illness, treatment and recovery that is theoretically explained through the doctrinal framework constructed in the text.

Almost by definition, first person narratives are narratives of privileged experience. The narrator, who claims, after all, to have something important to impart to his readership, is also the protagonist of biographical sections of his movement text. The narrative is at least partly aimed at impressing on his readers the fact that this claim is legitimate. Thus, the corresponding section of chapter 6 reviewed biographical data found in Esoteric texts, with the aim of exploring the way in which recipients of privileged experience are described. The experiences themselves are also claimed to have a variety of origins, which were also briefly reviewed. The latter topic again illustrates the fundamentally modern nature of these narratives of experience: the sources of privileged experience are variously claimed to be discarnate entities from other civilizations, space beings or metaphysical concepts such as the Higher Self.

Finally, second person narratives are directly addressed to the reader. The writer attempts to present experiences that the reader may have had, or may be able to have, thanks to the instructions given in the movement text. In the perspective adopted here, such textual passages fundamentally misconstrue what they actually accomplish. Whereas the overt goal of the text is to reveal the meaning of experience or to help the reader attain a spiritual state where certain experiences are possible, on a covert level, the narrative of experience can cue readers into reinterpreting considerably more mundane experiences in a new light. Thus, one's ordinary stream of consciousness becomes an object of attention by being provided with a label such as "channeled message".

If, as I have argued, second person narratives of experience embedded in Esoteric movement texts offer readers a structure through which to interpret their life histories, their everyday experiences and their patterns of inference, this, along with the discursive strategies of invented tradition and scientism, points to one reason for the success of many Esoteric doctrines: the cognitively grounded and socially reinforced predilections of the readers are elevated to the status of ancient wisdom and scientific truth.

Returning briefly to the reincarnation claims that headed this chapter, it is clear that Steiner, like his Esotericist colleagues, relies on all three strategies. The case study in chapter 7 illustrates how one single doctrinal claim, that we are born again in a new human embodiment after the death of our physical body, can be legitimized through a variety of means. Experience, science and tradition are all said to point in the same direction.

The Construction of a Modern Worldview

Without wishing to construct too heavy a case on the basis of a metaphor, religious systems could be said to exist in a kind of Darwinism of ideas. Hundreds of religious entrepreneurs are busy launching new doctrines and rituals in an untold number of movement texts. Only a few reach out beyond a small circle of enthusiasts. For those who do, half-life may be surprisingly short. In order to make more than an ephemeral impression on the cultic milieu, one of the necessary (but not sufficient) requirements is an ability to construct one's innovations on structural properties already familiar within that milieu.[10]

Many of these structural properties were defined by the end of the Enlightenment. Most exact datings of cultural innovations should be taken with a pinch of salt. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to consider the last two decades of the eighteenth century as a period of major religious innovation in Europe. Science and faith were syncretized by the Marquis de Puységur and his followers from the mid-1780s. A non-Christian form of religiosity had become an increasingly available option by the end of the same decade. Finally, the rhetorical position of experience had been considerably strengthened after the appearance of Schleiermacher's essays in 1799. The preconditions of successful religious innovation had changed within just a few years. Since then, dozens of successful prophets have explained that their message is logical and accords with the latest findings of science; that their doctrines are not their own innovations but the fruits of ancient tradition; and that they can be experienced in the life of every person.

Esoteric literature provides its readers with a means of structuring their worlds; tells them that these structures are as ancient as

[10] Cf. Boyer 1994 on the "naturalness" of religious ideas.

the spiritual life of humanity itself; and explains in scientistic terms why this perennial philosophy is valid in a modern age. Nevertheless, a study of the substantive doctrines of the Esoteric Tradition reveals wide gaps between its central tenets and the oriental, scientific and other sources from which it culls its ideas, and with which it competes. How is it possible to construct a worldview that claims to be based on the wisdom of the East without adhering to those basic tenets that Eastern thinkers themselves follow? How can one claim to be in tune with the latest developments in quantum physics while receiving only scathing commentaries from the mainstream of academic physicists? Two main modes stand out in the construction of an Esoteric tradition from the most diverse sources.

The first is a massive disembedding of elements from their previous contexts. This mechanism clearly applies to the most diverse facets of modern Esoteric thought. Purportedly traditional elements such as shamanism or the chakra system are thoroughly detraditionalized and used for purposes far removed from those that prevailed in their pre-modern settings. Scientific terms such as *energy*, *vibration* or *quantum* are deployed in ways that bear little or no resemblance to usage in texts dealing with natural science. Even elements that originate from other positions of Western esotericism, e.g. the concept of archetypes, are used in ways that diverge, with varying degrees of subtlety, from the use intended by their founding figures.

The second is the adoption of a pragmatic emic epistemology, the proposition that "if it works, it is true". Descriptions of mental states are understood as direct reflections of underlying reality, a position commonly characterized in philosophical literature by the unflattering term "naive realism". Narratives are taken at face value. The step from professed belief to established fact is a small one. Although the epistemological roots of the Modern Esoteric Tradition lie squarely in the Enlightenment view of the world, the core values of the Enlightenment, especially critical rationalism, are eschewed. In a sense, the positions of the Esoteric Tradition studied here are the results of the Enlightenment gone astray.

If the New Age, as Wouter Hanegraaff persuasively argues, is a cultural critique, it is a critique of modernity phrased in terms that are in themselves the products of modernity.[11] Indeed, the Modern Esoteric Tradition as portrayed here, from the first writings of Helena

[11] Hanegraaff 1996: 515 ff.

Blavatsky in the mid-1870s, can be read as such an ambivalent critique of the modern condition. During the 120 years portrayed in this study, spokespersons have sought a form of gnosis inherent in the remote past as well as in the imminent future.

All three discursive strategies reviewed here—scientism, traditionalism and reliance on experience—are both a result of and a reaction against the broader Enlightenment project, just as the Romantic period was a result of and reaction against the Enlightenment proper. It is hardly surprising, then, that the views of Esoteric spokespersons on history, science and experience bear profound structural similarities to Romantic views on the same subjects. Like their Romantic predecessors, Esoteric spokespersons reject materialistic science in favor of a holistic vision of the nature of science, a kind of scientistic *Naturphilosophie*. Like them, Esoteric spokespersons decry the supposed shallowness and rootlessness of modern life and look back at a nostalgic past and its lost values. Like the Romantics, esotericists see personal experience as a privileged means of tapping the inner resources that will bring back the spiritual vision of that past epoch. The core insights of the spiritual past and the dawning holistic science can be experienced here and now by a vanguard of spiritually evolved individuals. Those who have progressed furthest along the path toward gnosis are the counterparts of the poet-prophets of Romanticism. If the term were not pre-empted by political discourse, it would be tempting to characterize this view as profoundly reactionary.

However, whereas the Romantic conception was capable of producing works of the greatest beauty, the literary, musical and artistic products of the New Age are sometimes indistinguishable from religious kitsch. A discussion of why this is so would entail deep engagement with the history of ideas of the post-Romantic age, and would require yet another volume.

LIST OF SOURCES

The Selection of the Sources

The sources listed here consist of the consulted texts belonging to the five positions in focus here: theosophy, anthroposophy, the "ageless wisdom" of Alice Bailey, the readings of Edgar Cayce and the various manifestations of the New Age. Bibliographic references to all other texts referred to in this study, especially those of a scholarly nature, can be found in the References section.

Theosophy

For first generation theosophy, the collected works of Helena Blavatsky have been consulted. These are referred to in the present study as BCW, a roman numeral identifying the volume in the series. The two main doctrinal statements, *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, are however referred to as IU and SD respectively. Roman numerals indicate the volume of each respective work. Besides these, four other founding texts have been chosen:[1] the Mahatma letters as well as books by William Q. Judge and Alfred Sinnett.

Charles Leadbeater, the chief ideologist of second-generation theosophy, was a highly productive writer. In his biography of Leadbeater, Gregory Tillett enumerates 85 works, not including journal articles. To these, another 13 can be added, which were written in collaboration with other writers. Annie Besant is also the author of numerous volumes. For the present study a subset, presented in the list of sources, has been chosen as particularly relevant to the discursive strategies in focus.

Anthroposophy

Rudolf Steiner's *Gesamtausgabe* consists of well over 300 titles. Of these, two basic categories have been chose to illustrate his discursive strategies. The first category consist of books recommended by anthroposophists as introductions to his works. These are *Die Philosophie der Freiheit, Theosophie, Wie erlangt man Erkentnisse der höheren Welten?, Umriss der Geheimwissenschaft* and *Mein Lebensgang*. These have English translations, sometimes under several different titles, authorized by the Anthroposophical Society, and it is from these translations that quotes are taken.

The second consists of various cycles of Steiner's speeches. Of these, fifty cycles were surveyed in a monumental study carried out by Adolf Arenson.[2] From these categories, I have sought out passages where Steiner reads texts and traditions belonging to other religions, e.g. some of his numerous commentaries on the gospel texts; Steiner's comments on contemporary science; and his thoughts on reincarnation and karma, used in the concluding case study. Most of these lectures have not been translated; here, the German editions are used as source texts.

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[1] The present list gives the authors of respective work (or the title, in the case of anonymous works). Full bibliographic data can be found in the Sources at the end of this appendix.

[2] Arenson (1961). Arenson's invaluable *Leitfaden* has been liberally consulted to orient myself in the vast corpus of Steiner's work.

Alice Bailey

Compared to other Esoteric writers whose output tends to be truly staggering, whose texts appeared in a bewildering number of versions, or both, the work of Alice Bailey is relatively easy to survey. The entire corpus of Alice Bailey's published writings has been consulted and most of her works are quoted here. Of her twenty-four books, nineteen are written as a channel for Djwal Khul, while five are presented as her own works. Many were circulated among students of the Arcane School before appearing in book format, whence the posthumous year of publication of several volumes listed in the bibliography.

Edgar Cayce

The Edgar Cayce material represents a somewhat different case than the other positions. Cayce never published any books explaining his doctrines. His views can be found in three kinds of source material. Firstly, there is large collection of readings on various subjects edited as *The Edgar Cayce Companion*. Secondly, there are books of commented readings compiled by other writers, on a variety of topics from Atlantis to crystals. Thirdly, there are biographies with more or less extensive discussions of the doctrinal contents of Cayce's readings. Books by Ernest Frejer, Glen Kittler, Noel Langley, Jess Stern, Thomas Sugrue and Gina Cerminara have been consulted.

New Age

The first generation of the New Age, i.e. doctrines advanced in books from the 1970's and early 1980's, has been extensively studied by Wouter Hanegraaff and will occupy a correspondingly smaller place here. Among the movement texts of this group, "New Age classics" by Marilyn Ferguson, David Spangler and Shirley MacLaine have been used as sources. A second generation of New Age movement texts, particulary those written in the 1990's, includes books by James Redfield, Gary Zukav and Maguire Thompson.

Beside such ideological texts, the present study has made liberal use of books describing particular doctrines, rituals and techniques relevant to the New Age world view, not least because these books have received only little attention in Hanegraaff's survey. Most of the books surveyed here can be roughly divided into the categories of healing (in the broadest sense, i.e. including personal, spiritual development), divination, channeling, the paranormal and New Age science.

Books dealing with various techniques for healing and personal development can be further subdivided into categories. Best-selling authors on healing, personal and spiritual development represented here are Deepak Chopra, Wayne Dyer, Shakti Gawain and Louise Hay. Among books dealing with esoteric anatomy and the chakras, texts by Caroline Myss and Naomi Ozaniec have been chosen. Six particular methods of ritual healing with a large following in the New Age milieu have been included: aromatherapy (Lawless), Aura-Soma (Wall and Dalichow & Booth), Bach flower remedies (Bach, Scheffer), crystal healing (Bravo, Rafaell, Simpson and Stein), Reiki healing (Stein, Horan, Honervogt, Milner and Petter), and past-life therapy (Fiore, Wambach, Weiss and Woolger). A few books represent other methods or describe the life and activity of individual healers (Kilham, Shine).

Three systems of divination are particularly prominent in the New Age milieu: astrology, the tarot and numerology. Books on astrology chosen for reading include titles by Arroyo, Greene, Merlin, Reinhart and Sasportas. The tarot is represented with titles by Giles, Gray, Greer, Hamaker-Zondag, Mann, Pollack and Ziegler. The texts on numerology included here are titles by Barrat and Ducie as well as an anonymous booklet entitled *Ancient Wisdom for the New Age: Numerology*.

Books that involve channeling or reproduce channeled messages include titles by Roman & Packer, Carey, Marciniak, Hand Clow, Klein, Roberts, Solara, Walsh

and Yarbro. Since they are the object of a case study, *A Course in Miracles* and ACIM-related material can be singled out from among the bulk of channeled material. Besides *A Course in Miracles* itself, the commenting literature on the course included here consists of titles by Jampolsky, Miller, Wapnick and Williamson.

Books that purport to explain paranormal phenomena and/or attempt to teach how to produce such phenomena include titles by Andrews, Meyer, Anderton and McCoy. During the mid 1990's, the New Age cultic milieu saw a flowering of interest in angels. Among the books on this topic, texts by Daniel, Freeman and Taylor have been consulted.

A few books on neo-shamanism and primitivistic lore have been included, namely volumes by Harner, Kharitidi and Meadows.

A few books of New Age science have become central movement texts and are discussed in the present study, namely titles by Capra, Zukav, Talbot, Zohar and Goswami. A quasi-scientific concept discussed here, synchronicity, is the subject of books by Adrienne, Hopcke and Jaworski.

List of Esoteric Movement Texts

Esoteric movement texts tend to present problems for the bibliographer. Since works by the major spokespersons of older, established movements such as Blavatsky, Steiner and Bailey remain central texts for their respective adherents, they tend to appear in numerous editions and have in some cases been reprinted a dozen times or more. Popular New Age books also tend to be printed in several editions, with numerous reprints. In each case, the edition available to me has been cited.

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The claims of each movement have been buttressed by drawing on various structural characteristics of late modernity. The advance of science has resulted in attempts to claim scientific status for religious beliefs. Globalization has given rise to massive loans from other cultures, but also to various strategies to radically reinterpret foreign elements. Individualism has led to an increasing reliance on experience as a source of legitimacy.

The analytical tools applied to understanding religious modernization shed light on changes that are fundamentally reshaping many religious traditions.

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