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Masters and Servants

A study concerning the Theosophical Society and Orientalism

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ABSTRACT

During the nineteenth century, an impressive number of occult organizations blossomed both in Europe and the United States. The most influential of these groups was arguably the Theosophical Society. One feature that set it apart from other groups was the assertion that its teachings came from highly advanced beings often referred to in Theosophical literature as the "Masters." Various authors claim that two of them, Koot Hoomi and Morya, have their roots in the East. However, the descriptions provided include many aspects that might be more readily associated with the West.

The aim of this study is to critically examine a selection of Theosophical writings composed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which concern the Masters in the light of the notion of Orientalism. Textual analysis is the method applied. The question I seek to answer is: In what ways do these descriptions exemplify Orientalism? The results indicate that examples can be found in discussions concerning their names and titles, how they are defined, the brotherhood to which they belong, characteristics they possess, their functions, their homes, and what they look like. This is also the case in regard to writings describing how one becomes a Master and those debating whether or not they exist. The matters addressed are relevant because they provide insight into how conceptualizations of other cultures are constructed and because the notion of ascended masters is still a common one in new age religion.

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CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION AND AIM

It's a lot like life, and that's what's appealing.
Depeche Mode, "Master and Servant" (1984)

In the realm of what could be termed for the sake of convenience "New Age religion," one encounters very little that does not have roots which were already in existence before the *fin de siècle*. While certain features such as Wicca are more recent additions, "seeking" is far from being a newly established spiritual *modus operandi*. In the decades preceding the outbreak of the First World War, for example, spiritual groups and occult organizations popped up like mushrooms on both sides of the Atlantic. Urban centers such as London and New York quickly became seedbeds for brave travelers, often assisted by thick wallets, wishing to reach largely uncharted realms (Segal 74). Observers and participants alike, well aware of the trend, were already by the 1890s using the term "mystical revival" to capture it (Owen 4).

This movement, however, did not materialize out of thin air before the eyes of startled spectators like ectoplasm at a séance. Firstly, the Victorians, ever fascinated by the mysterious, had long harbored an interest in phenomena such as clairvoyance, palmistry, astrology, and crystal gazing, just as the previous generation had been fascinated by mesmerism and phrenology (Owen 17 – 18). Secondly, it was also shaped by some of the significant intellectual trends and fashionable interests from the latter part of the nineteenth century including philosophical idealism, an enthusiasm for science, and a dislike of materialism (7). Furthermore, it was also heavily influenced by contemporary scholarship in budding fields of study such as folklore, Egyptology, philology, anthropology, and comparative religion. Although attention was directed both to the East and to the West, the version of the East promoted by the teachings of various groups was often a romanticized construction shaped by European and American interests.

One of the key movements of the mystical revival, and arguably the most important of them, was the Theosophical Society. It was founded in New York City in 1875 by Helena Petronva Blavatsky (1831 - 1891), Henry Steel Olcott (1832 - 1907), and William Quan Judge (1851 - 1896). After enjoying a number of decades during which the worldwide membership reached impressive heights, the organization splintered. This event was largely brought on by incessant in-fighting between various and varying alliances of influential Society members concerning, e.g., administrative matters and the authenticity of some of the organization's

teachings, a number of which, while still being surrounded by controversy, have proved to be highly influential, informing a great deal of modern New Age religion.

One feature which made Theosophy especially attractive in a sea of other spiritual offerings was that its teachings were said to have been transmitted to the Society's leaders by a number of beings often referred to in various writings as the “Masters” or the “Mahatmas.” According to available accounts, contact with the Masters could be established in several ways. For example, some members claimed to have met them. Such events could occur while experiencing an altered state of consciousness or under more concrete circumstances. Others allegedly received written letters from them. A select few, according to their own reports, were even granted the privilege of being their houseguests. While a number of recent studies have aimed to uncover the identities of individuals Blavatsky and others may have attempted to protect by constructing the notion of the Masters, that particular subject is beyond the realm of this study. In the pages that follow, they will be presented as instruments used to lend authority to one particular set of teachings peddled in bustling marketplace which catered to the needs and desires of those interested in finding, e.g., an alternative to Christianity or some way in which they could re-enchant the world.

A great deal of literature concerning the Masters has been produced through the years. The material is, however, riddled with inconsistencies. Discrepancies abound in regard to such points as what they are called and the degree to which they are subject to the laws which, taken from a Theosophical standpoint, govern our existence on the physical plane. A further issue concerns Blavatsky’s initial claim of being in touch with exalted beings from Egypt which she made during the early years of the Society’s history. Like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, they were shuffled to the periphery once India became the spiritual home of Theosophy and, one may presume, they no longer proved to be useful. Master Koot Hoomi, allegedly from Kashmir, and a host of others soon overshadowed their predecessors and became more and more developed as individuals with ever-increasing responsibilities as they passed through the hands of some of the Society's leading members and most prolific writers.

The two Masters that were arguably most central to the Society’s teachings for a number of Theosophists during the organization’s early years, Morya and the above-mentioned Koot Hoomi, are described as being of "Eastern" descent. However, certain passages composed about them which concern, e.g., their way of life and their stately homes in the Himalayas, such as those written by prominent Society member C.W. Leadbeater (1854 - 1934), have undertones that would perhaps be more often associated with the West. The same could also be said about the portraits German artist and Theosophist Hermann Schmiechen (1855 - date

of death unknown) painted of them in 1884.The painting of Koot Hoomi, for example, highlights his pale skin and blue eyes.

1.1 Aim

The aim of this study is to critically examine a selection of Theosophical writings composed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which concern the Masters in the light of the notion of Orientalism, an important concept in postcolonial theory. The works I analyze were written between the years 1888 and 1939 by six prominent members of the Society. The question I seek to answer by conducting this investigation is as follows: In what ways do these descriptions exemplify Orientalism? A study such as this is of interest because it sheds light on some of the complexities involved when conceptualizations of other cultures are constructed. Furthermore, at the present time the shelves of New Age bookstores in various parts of the United States and Europe are lined with books containing teachings imparted by disembodied intelligences and their more corporeal counterparts hailing from the earth's four corners and beyond. Thus, the matter is still current.

This paper consists of the following parts. Firstly, I present the method I use and the literature I examine. In the following chapter, I provide a summary of the theories upon which I base the study and background information concerning such topics as the history of the Theosophical Society and the notion of the Masters; this chapter serves to locate the subject within its historical and theoretical contexts. Afterwards, I present the results of my analysis. Lastly, I offer some conclusions that I believe can be drawn based on the information set forth in the preceding chapters.

2 METHOD

This is a hermeneutic study which has as its focus the Theosophical notion of ascended Masters. Having roots which extend back to antiquity, traditional hermeneutics most often concerns the interpretation of texts. The writings examined in the case of this paper are articles and books composed during a period spanning roughly fifty years by a number of the Society's most influential members. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the method I employ, the material I examine, and the theories upon which I base the investigation.

2.1 Method

This study is text-based, and the method I use is textual analysis. While using this particular term is problematic, as researchers involved in a number of fields have differing and often contradictory ways of defining it, one could say that, in general, textual analysis, through interpreting a "text," allows one to get a glimpse into the way others make sense of the world and their place in it. In regard to the present investigation, I, after locating the texts examined in their appropriate historical context, a necessary step for gaining an understanding of the Theosophical worldview, interpret them in the light of the notion of Orientalism, as set forth in the following section of this paper. While the reliability of such a method can be called into question because of its subjective nature, I maintain that others who examine the same selection of texts using the same theoretical tools may arrive at similar conclusions. What follows is a presentation of the theories upon which this study is based. More information about textual analysis can be found in Alan McKee's book *Textual Analysis*.

2.1.1 Postcolonial Theory

The theories I use in this study originated largely in the field of postcolonial studies, a discipline which began to take form in the 1980s. Those engaged in postcolonial studies have, over the course of the past few decades, developed a body of writing which, according to postcolonial theorist Robert J. C. Young, aims to "shift the dominant ways in which the relations between Western and non-Western people and their worlds are viewed"(2). However, as is also the case with other terms such as *feminism* and *socialism*, it must be acknowledged that *postcolonial* may be used to refer to a wide variety of ideas and practices. Generally speaking, from a postcolonial point of view, the situation that exists in the world today is one in which inequality reigns supreme. Furthermore, much of the difference falls

across the division between the West and the rest. This distinction was made more or less absolute in the nineteenth century by the expansion of various European empires (7).

During the period that historian Eric Hobsbawm demarcates as the *Age of Empire*, 1875 - 1914, about one-quarter of the world's surface was dealt up as colonies among a half dozen states (59). Once established, colonial and imperial rule was legitimized by anthropological theories, based on the concept of race, which cast the colonized as inferior, feminine, childlike, and utterly incapable of taking care of or governing themselves. For the latter named reason, it was deemed to be in their best interests to be ruled over by the West (Young 2). Western culture, in contrast, was regarded (as is often still the case) as the basis of legitimate law, government, economics, science, language, music, literature, and art. While the colonized contested this domination through forms of both active and passive resistance, it was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that coherent political movements began to take form. The twentieth century, for many peoples, involved long struggles which eventually resulted in triumph, but often at an enormous cost both in terms of lives and resources. The move to autonomy is not often an easy one, and although the balance of power is slowly changing, the cases of Afghanistan, Cuba, Iran, and Iraq, as Young points out, illustrate that those countries which dare to resist former imperial masters do so at their own risk (3).

An acknowledgement of the fact that most of the world has in one way or another been affected by nineteenth century European imperialism has not necessarily, however, led to an understanding of the continuing affects of colonial and neocolonial power (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1). Postcolonial analysis is making both the nature and impact of such inherited power relations, as well as their continuing effects, increasingly clear (Young 3). Young states that, from the point of view of those involved in postcolonial studies, the nations of the three non-Western continents (Africa, Asia, and Latin America) are largely in a situation of subordination to Europe and North America, as well as in a position of economic inequality (4). Postcolonial studies stand at the intersection of current debates about race, colonialism, politics, gender, and language (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin i). Theorists work with such questions as how the colonial encounter restructures ideologies of cultural, class and sexual difference, the relationship between colonialism and capitalism, and the agency of the colonized subject (Loomba xvii). By contesting the disparity described above, postcolonial studies, according to Young, continue the anti-colonial struggles of the past in a new way (4).

2.1.2 Orientalism

One of the key concepts in postcolonial studies is the notion of Orientalism, most notably associated with the work of literary theorist Edward W. Said. While the term *Orientalism* first appeared in France in the 1830s, it has through the years been used in a number or ways (Clarke 7). For example, one earlier meaning pertained to the scholarly study of the Orient and its religions by Western scholar. It has also been employed to describe certain genres of literature and painting. In more recent times, it has been used to refer to a particular sort of "ideological purview of the East which was a product of Western imperialism" (Sharma 225). It is this latter usage which is of primary interest for the purposes of this study.

Over the course of the past few decades, the extent to which Western discourses about the East reflect the power relations between Eastern and Western societies has become increasingly apparent (King 82). In his highly influential and groundbreaking study *Orientalism* (1978), Said states that the Orient occupies a special place in European Western experience (1). This is partially a geographical matter, as it is adjacent to Europe, but it is also dependent upon the fact that it contains Europe's greatest, most wealthy, and oldest colonies. Furthermore, it is the source of Europe's civilizations and languages and figures as its "cultural contestant." In addition, the Orient has helped to define both Europe and the West in general as its contrasting image (1 – 2). While the Orient is, for Said, an integral part of European material civilization and culture, Orientalism "expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary and colonial styles" (2).

The term, as Said uses it, has three meanings which he perceives as being interdependent. In the first case, one he refers to as academic, an Orientalist is an individual who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient, and what he or she does is Orientalism. In this category, he puts anthropologists, sociologists, philologists, and historians. In the second case, one which according to Said is a more general one, Orientalism is a way of thinking that is based on an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Occident and the Orient. This distinction has, he states, been accepted by a great number of writers including poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators and has been used as a point of departure for constructing theories, literary works, social descriptions, and political accounts about various aspects of the Orient (2 – 3). Lastly, Said writes that, taking the late eighteenth century as a rough starting point, Orientalism

> can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient -- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (3)

Without examining Orientalism as a discourse, he maintains, it is impossible for one to reach an understanding of the "enormously systematic discipline" which allowed European culture to manage and produce the Orient during the post - Enlightenment period -- ideologically, imaginatively, militarily, politically, scientifically, and sociologically (3). However, it should be borne in mind that Orientalism is not a "nefarious 'Western' imperialist plot to hold down the 'Oriental' world" (12). Instead, according to his view, it is

> a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into...texts; it is an *elaboration* not only of a basic geographical distinction...but also of a whole series of 'interests' which...it not only creates but also maintains; it *is*, rather than expresses, a certain *will* or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even incorporate, what is a manifestly different world;...it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relation with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power...Indeed, my real argument is that Orientalism is -- and does not simply represent -- a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world. (12)

While the East does exist as something tangible, Said and a number of those who make use of his ideas are interested in the Orient as a phenomenon – the cumulative effort of generations of intellectuals, writers, politicians, and commentators, constructed by the naturalizing of a broad range of Orientalist assumptions and stereotypes (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 168; Said 4 – 5). Orientalism provides an example of ways in which the ghosts of colonial powers still haunt the regions they once dominated through overt shows of power. It is also a phenomenon which influences self-construction. The notion of, for example, "Asian" values is promoted by the institutions and governments of peoples who were initially lumped together into different Orientalist categories such as "the East." Such self-ascriptively employed generic terms pose a threat just as dangerous as the one found in Orientalist discourse as they do not reflect the immense variety of cultural, religious, and linguistic differences in these countries (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 169).

2.1.3 Orientalism and the Study of Religion

While the instances in Said's *Orientalism* (1978) are for the most part taken from the Middle Eastern context, a number of recent studies have focused on this phenomenon and how it relates to the study of Eastern philosophies and religions. For example, scholar of the study of religion Richard King maintains in *Orientalism and Religion* (1999) that the notion of a Hindu religion was originally the invention of Western Orientalists who based their observations on their own Judaeo-Christian perspective (90). In a similar vein, historian and postcolonial theorist Ronald Inden states in *Imagining India* (2000) that Christian Europeans criticized Hinduism as a religion because it is not historic according to their point of view since it does not have a linear view of history, historic founder, church, creed, or foundational text (xiii).

Another instance of the application of the notion of Orientalism in the study of religion can be found in Inden's assertion that Indological discourse transforms Indians into the subjugated objects of the Western expert's knowledge (1). He argues that this is the case because Indological works, in addition to providing descriptive accounts of what they study, offer commentaries which purport to represent the actions and thoughts of the subject for the Western reader, thereby communicating their *essence*, or inherent determinate nature. One of the major purposes of Indological discourses, according to Inden, has been to give the impression that the world was ordered in a natural and stable manner (2). One way in which this was achieved in scholarly writing was by building essences into the metaphors it devised to describe India. Examples of these metaphors include conceptualizing India as a female, Indian thought as a dream, and Hinduism as a jungle (1 – 2). For Inden, they are not merely figures of speech but are also models of how people ought to or must act. Such essences are, he maintains, fundamental in the long-existing quest to write a science of the human world as a self-regulating system, exemplified by the West, because without them, both predicting and controlling nature would be impossible (2).

According to Inden, the essences scholars presumed that Indians and their institutions possessed included less desirable qualities such as extremity, disorder, and wildness (2). Although European discourse on India appears, for example, to make a distinction between their Self and the Indian Other, the consequence of this process, Inden writes, has been a redefinition of the European Self:

> We have externalized exaggerated parts of ourselves so that the equally exaggerated parts we retain can act out the triumph of the one over the other on the Indian subcontinent. We will be

> unhampered by an otherworldly imagination and unhindered by a traditional, rural social structure because we have magically translated them to India. (3)

Several generations of academics have worked with these essences in a number of ways, but most often they are considered to be inferior and are used to explain, in some sense, why India "lost out" to the West (5). As this line of thinking follows the assumption that India has been governed by such essences since the beginning, its place in the world was of course predetermined (6). Furthermore, those who constructed "knowledge" about India subsequently displaced the agency of the Indians on to one or more essences such as caste and a particular Indian way of thinking as well as on to themselves (5). As Indians were perceived as not having those essences considered to be characteristic of the West, e.g., political freedom and science, it was thought that they lacked the capacity to become acquainted with them on their own and thus could not act with rationality. European scholars, colonial administrators, and traders subsequently assumed for themselves the power to know the essences of the Other and act upon them, the result being that they acted for both themselves and for the Indians (6).

As an alternative to essentialism, Inden proposes a theory of human agency in which the agents are complex and shifting. Through a dialectic process in changing situations, they make and remake one another (2). By shifting major presuppositions and assumptions of Indological discourse, it is possible, Inden argues, to construct a picture of Hindu India that is very different than the ones we have inherited. In the alternative he offers, European and American Selves and Indian Others rather than merely interacting as entities that remain the same, have dialectically constituted one another. If one follows this line of thinking, he or she will then, according to Inden, begin to realize that India "has played a part in the making of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe (and America) much greater than the 'we' of scholarship, journalism, and officialdom would normally wish to allow"(3).

An additional example of Said's influence can be seen in the work of scholar of the study of religion Arvind Sharma. In "Orientalism and the Comparison of Religion" (2006), he states that the extent to which the traditions we today refer to as Hinduism or Buddhism are the work of European scholarship is not often realized (225 – 226). For example, the Orientalist reconstruction of Hinduism, he maintains, emphasized its passive and tolerant character, which ultimately led to a belief concerning the importance of the principle of non-violence within the religion. According to Sharma, it is arguable that the discourse took the shape that it did because believing such a thing was in the best interests of the British as they were trying

to control an enormous, heavily populated region. Furthermore, in addition to descriptive practices, procedures of an evaluative nature were also operating. The colonization of India, for example, could be interpreted as proof that its major religion had failed the evolutionary test and therefore had to be low down on the scale of religions (230).

Buddhism, on the other hand, was cast as a rational religion. This was partially due to that fact that it was perceived as being non-theistic, despite the existence of numerous tales detailing miraculous events which allegedly occurred within the Buddhist community, as belief in God was in many cases likened with superstition (Sharma 230). The subject of discourse on Buddhism is also addressed by historian Judith Snodgrass in *Presenting Japanese Buddhism to the West* (2003). She writes that the academic study of Buddhism began in Ceylon in the early decades of the nineteenth century, initiated in part as "the missionary imperative to 'know the enemy'" and in part by the colonial administration's documentation of its subjects (4). Eventually, Buddhism moved from being a matter of local interest to a subject of academic discourse:

> Buddhism became a resource not only for the comparative study of religion and the racial, imperial, and evolutionary themes encompassed by this new field of academic endeavor, but for the crucial debates of the period over the conflict between religion and science, the search for a nontheistic system of morality, a humanistic religion. Once introduced to the academic arena, Buddhism was defined, the object of discourse formed, through the concatenation of its deployment in these contests of essentially Western concern. As a result it was thoroughly imbued with Western preoccupations and presuppositions. (5)

She also maintains that Buddhism, more than any other non-Christian religion, was Christianity's Other. While being superficially similar, thus allowing for comparison, it was fundamentally different, which invited questions concerning such notions as an immortal soul and an interventionist God. For missionaries, this provided inspiration to try harder. For others, it put the spotlight on aspects of Christian doctrine that were inconsistent with scientific knowledge (5).

As can be seen from the above, Said's theories are useful in the study of religion for a number of reasons, one of which, however, is particularly close to home. Although many scholars are currently engaged in studying aspects of Indian religious traditions that are not easily classifiable as “mystical,” the image of the mystic East and its function as the mirror image of the rational West still haunt the field (King 2, 5). Furthermore, historian J. J. Clarke states in *Oriental Enlightenment* (1997) that there is still some reluctance to take traditional

Asian thought seriously within the academic world in general. Even in times characterized by the globalization of culture, Eurocentrism, he maintains, is a still force to be reckoned with as there seems to be a widespread difficulty in accepting that the West could ever have borrowed anything of value from the East (3).

In addition to the above, it must be said in regard to Said and the use of his ideas in this area that contemporary scholars see limitations in his work; this is also the case in a number of other disciplines as well. For example, Richard King is of the opinion that Orientalism as presented by Said places too much emphasis on the passivity of the indigenous peoples of the East and does not allow for the ways they (the colonially educated intelligentsia) have been active in the process by using and manipulating such discourses in order to, for example, undermine the colonialist agenda (86). King, in contrast, sees Hinduism as "the product of an interaction between the Western Orientalist and the brahmanical pundit" (90). As an example, he points out the ways in which reformers such as Rammohun Roy and Mohandas Ghandi made use of Orientalist notions about the spirituality of India in the interests of developing Hindu nationalism. These instances indicate that discourses do not always proceed in a straightforward manner (86).

2.1.4 Affirmative Orientalism

In the work of Clarke as well as that of Inden and a number of others involved in the study of India's religions and philosophies, one encounters descriptions of a more affirmative sort or Orientalism which Inden labels *Romantic* due to its indebtedness to European Romanticism. Clarke, also critical of Said's work, states that the picture of Orientalism he offers in his seminal study was painted in "sombre hues" and was used as "the basis for a powerful ideological critique of Western liberalism" (8). Furthermore, he maintains that Said's association of Orientalism with colonizing power can only represent one part of the story (26 – 27). As an example, he points out that German scholars, a number of whom Inden counts as the first full-fledged Romantics in the budding field of Indology, played a central and sometimes leading role in translating and producing commentary on ancient Indian texts at a time when Germany had no colonial interests in India (Clarke 26 – 27; Inden 67).

The way in which Clarke aims to use the term *Orientalism* in his own study, *Oriental Enlightenment* (1997), is one that reflects a broader range of attitudes which he claims were often of a more affirmative nature and which tried to integrate Eastern thought into their own intellectual concerns in such a way that cannot be fully understood in terms of domination and

power (8). He maintains that even though it is true that power has been wielded over the East by those having superior weapons and the capability to flex "commercial muscle," what is peculiar in the case of Orientalism is the degree to which the ideas of the colonized have been elevated above those of the colonizing powers (9). For example, Clarke states that one of the pervasive features of Orientalism, as he sees the notion, is the way in which Eastern ideas, though perceived as Other, have been used in the West as "an agency for self-criticism and self-renewal, whether in the political, moral, or religious spheres." The elevated status that the East has been granted at times has served as the source of creative tension between the East and the West and has been utilized as a position from which to reappraise and reform the systems of thought and institutions that are indigenous to the West (27). Therefore, according to Clarke,

> [t]he perceived otherness of the Orient is not exclusively one of mutual antipathy, nor just a means of affirming Europe's triumphant superiority, but also provides a conceptual framework that allows much fertile cross-referencing, the discovery of similarities, analogies, and models; in other words, the underpinning of a productive hermeneutical relationship. (27)

In such a way, Orientalism, as presented by Clarke, has represented, in a Western context, a countermovement, though not a unified or consciously organized one, that "has often tended to subvert rather than to confirm the discursive structures of imperial power" (9). Although enthusiasm for Eastern ideas and practices is generally associated with various counterculture movements of the 1960s, he maintains that Orientalism has assumed a counterhegemonic role for the past three hundred years, serving to undermine Europe's established role and identity rather than to reinforce it (27).

In *Oriental Enlightenment* (1997), Clarke states that the West has long had an ambivalent attitude towards the East. He summarizes the matter as follows:

> On the one hand it has been a source of inspiration, fount of an ancient wisdom, a culturally rich civilisation which is far superior to, and can be used to reflect on the inadequacies of, our own. On the other, it is an alien region of looming threat and impenetrable mystery, long locked in its stagnant past until rudely awakened by the modernising impact of the West. (3)

Furthermore, this ambivalence can be seen in a range of stereotypes and myths which serve to position East and West in a variety of opposing or complementary relationships with each other. While a number of these are connected to popular attitudes and prejudices and others to

religious and political propaganda, some, as was discussed in the previous section, have their origins in more scholarly sources. Reflecting a wide array of attitudes, the East has been perceived as colorful and exotic as well as sinister and threatening (4).

The essentializing of the East and West into two contrastive categories that are in conflict with one another has, according to Clarke, a long history that can be traced back to the time of Herodotus and still continues to appear in various forms. It has also manifested in less overtly conflictual ways such as that which Clarke terms "the archetypal myth of East and West as mutually complementary views" (4). This duality has encouraged, e.g., the Romantic notion of the quest for a unity of the human spirit through supplementing the naturally introspective and intuitive Eastern mind with the rationalistic and ethical Western mind (5). On the other hand, it has also, as we have seen, encouraged views of the East as the negative complement of the West, e.g., as "a passive inferior consort to the controlling masculine West" (3).

In *Oriental Enlightenment*, Clarke states that one of the most common explanations for the West's persistent fascination with the East can be summed up in the word *romanticisation* (19). The Romantic view of India is also discussed by Inden in his study *Imagining India* (2000). He argues that such a way of perceiving India has been present since the creation of Indology and portrays its culture as being profoundly mystical, spiritual, and idealistic. It is generally motivated by an admiration for Eastern cultures and at times by a belief in their superiority. These motivations are also addressed by King in *Orientalism and Religion* (1999). He states that

> [o]nce the term 'mystical' became detached from the specificity of its originally Christian context and became applied to the 'strange and mysterious Orient', the association of the East with 'mysticism' became well and truly entrenched in the collective cultural imagination of the West. (97)

However, he points out, this association was not always intended to be negative. As is also the case with Inden, he perceives the Romantic Movement as an example of an attempt to "valorize 'the mystical East'" (97).

In *Imaging India*, Inden states that while Romantics also see India as Europe's opposite, what differs is their evaluation of the characteristics of Indian civilization that others find to be wasteful, deluded, and repulsive such as ascetic practices, philosophies, cosmologies, customs, and different forms of visual art. The Romantic, as one who takes the stance of a critic of Western values and institutions, sees these features as worthy of praise and closer

study. However, Romantics do not necessarily, according to Inden's view, take the alternatives offered by the East to be ready-made substitutes. Instead, they take the position of being outside or between them and consider both as somehow embodying the extremes to which men have gone (67). According to their view, no society could embody the whole of human nature unless its members had first "become transformed by understanding of the Eastern or Western Other" (68).

Clarke addresses in *Oriental Enlightenment* (1997) a number of theories which aim to explain this enthrallment with the East, but which, when looked at individually, fail to account for the complexities involved. For example, it has been contended that the West's interest in this region lies in its ability to provide those longing for escape with a trapdoor allowing access to a remote and fantastic place, preferably with lost wisdom and golden ages to investigate, that is free from the specter of the current ills haunting his or her own society. Although Clarke refers to it as "Europe's collective day-dream," there were as will be seen in later sections of this paper plenty of individuals in the United States as well who longed for such a place of enchantment (19).

Clarke states that the above hypothesis does contain some truth. This is detectable in literature from both years past and more recent times which depicts the East as a place of magic and mystery, one offering the curious something more exciting, wise, and exotic than the banalities of everyday life (19). The result of this particular romanticizing tendency has unfortunately often been an oversimplification and misrepresentation of the East in regard to its ideas and philosophies, as well as its social and political realities. It does, on the other hand, shed light on some of the West's problems (20). This point is also addressed in *Orientalism and Religion* (1999). King asserts that the characterization that is created carries with it criticism of elements of the Orientalist's own culture (97). For example, the image of the mystical East represented for many of the Romantics the spirituality that seemed to be lacking in contemporary Christian religion.

The escape theory on its own is problematic, according to Clarke, because it neglects to take into consideration a number of historical factors, addressed below (20). Another theory discussed in *Oriental Enlightenment* (1999) which concerns the West's fascination with the East holds that it represents a retreat from the modern world into irrationalism. However, Clarke points out that this explanation also has its share of problems. For example, much of the interest that was generated in Buddhism in the nineteenth century was motivated by the belief that it represented, in contrast to "superstitious Christianity," a religion that was compatible with science (20 - 21). A third speculation addressed by Clarke posits Orientalism

as being driven by a desire to know (21). He also refutes this one as being too simplistic to account for the phenomenon. Rather than being motivated by mere curiosity, he maintains that the West's fascination with the East was instead the result of a variety of different motivational factors which were linked with the West's growing commercial and political interests in that area (25).

For Clarke, the rise and development of Orientalism was intimately connected to conditions that were unique to Europe in the modern period, namely cultural revolution and global expansion. These conditions helped to create a painful void in the spiritual and intellectual heart of Europe and, furthermore, helped to bring about geopolitical conditions which facilitated the passage of alternative world views from the East (34). Clarke does stress, however, that even when the East is respected and perhaps even elevated to a position above the West, it is still the otherness and strangeness of the region that are emphasized (4).

2.2 Material

The material I analyze in this study is interpreted in the light of the theories presented in the previous sections of this chapter. Members of the Theosophical Society who felt moved to record their experiences or the teachings they received have, through the decades, managed to produce a massive body of literature. In order to make this project manageable, I focus on a selection of works composed between 1888 and 1939 by six prominent Society members. A period of roughly fifty years provides a sample that reflects the variety of ways in which the Masters and their way of life have been envisioned or understood by Society members. The authors were selected based on their involvement in the Society and their interest in the subject of the Masters. C.W. Leadbeater, for example, left behind an impressive body of work concerning these beings. For this reason, his writings are a suitable choice for the purposes of this study. The following is a brief presentation of the individuals and the material I examine and discuss.

2.2.1 William Quan Judge

William Quan Judge (1851 - 1896) co-founded the Theosophical Society in 1875 with H.P. Blavatsky and Henry S. Olcott. Judge served as General Secretary of its American Section and Vice President of the international Society. Active in the organization until his death, he also wrote and lectured extensively on Theosophical subjects. In this study, I make use of the book *The Ocean of Theosophy* (1893), described by the Theosophical University Press as "a

concise yet comprehensive survey of the basic tenets of theosophy" and the following articles: "Are We Deserted?" (1891), "The Adepts" (1893), "The Masters as Ideals and Facts" (1893), "Authorship of Secret Doctrine" (1893), "A Word on the 'Secret Doctrine'" (1893), all of which appeared in the Theosophical periodical *The Path*, and "The Adepts in America in 1776" (1883) and "Adepts and Politics" (1884), which appeared in the Theosophical periodical *The Theosophist* (1879 - present). A number of the articles listed above were published pseudonymously. Information concerning this is included in the footnotes pertaining to these writings.

2.2.2 H. P. Blavatsky

As stated above, H.P Blavatsky (1831 – 1891) founded the Theosophical Society together with William Quan Judge and Henry S. Olcott. Information concerning her life and role within the Society is given in a later chapter. I examine and discuss some of the teachings presented in her works *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) and *The Key to Theosophy* (1889) in this study.

2.2.3 Annie Besant

Annie Besant (1847 – 1933) served as president of the Theosophical Society from 1908 until her death nearly three decades later. A writer and orator, she was engaged in a wide array of movements and causes including women's rights, and Indian self-rule. In this study, I examine and discuss transcripts of the lectures "The Masters as Facts and Ideas," originally delivered on the April 27, 1895 at St. James Hall in London and "India, her Past and her Future," delivered onboard the *Kaisar-i-Hind* on November 6, 1893.

2.2.4 C. W. Leadbeater

The Masters and the Path (1925) and *Masters of Wisdom* (1918), both the work of C. W. Leadbeater (1854 – 1934), figure prominently in this study. After joining the Society in 1883, Leadbeater wrote and lectured extensively about subjects related to Theosophy, including his own meetings with the Masters.

2.2.5 Gottfried de Purucker

One time leader of the Theosophical Society (Pasadena), a successor organization to the original Society founded by Blavatsky et al., de Purucker (1874 – 1942) wrote prolifically on

a wide range of Theosophical topics. In this paper, I examine his book *The Masters and the Path of Occultism* (1939).

2.2.6 Ernest Wood

Ernest Wood (1883 – 1965) became interested in Theosophy as a young adult after having listened to Annie Besant lecture (*Is this Theosophy?* 68). He then followed Besant to India, serving as one of her assistants. After her death in 1933, Wood campaigned for election to the office of president of the Society but was defeated by George Arundale (1878 - 1945) (314). In the interest of spreading Theosophical ideas, he went on lecturing tours and published a number of articles, books, and essays (175). I analyze relevant parts of Wood's book *Natural Theosophy* (1930) in this study.

In this chapter, I have provided information about the method I use in this study, namely textual analysis. I have also presented the theories upon which it is based and the field in which they originated – postcolonial studies. Furthermore, I introduced the materials I examine and their respective authors. In the chapter that follows, I will touch upon a number of areas, largely of a historical nature. This serves to locate the subject matter in a greater context.

3 BACKGROUND

The purpose of this chapter is to provide additional information relevant in terms of understanding the study as a whole. Subjects I discuss in this part of the paper include British and American imperialism and the notion of race, the mystical revival, the history of the Theosophical Society, and the notion of the Masters.

3.1 Imperialism and the Notion of Race

In *Oriental Enlightenment* (1997), Clarke writes that the nineteenth century witnessed a substantial increase in the study of Eastern religious and philosophical ideas in Europe, both among scholars and the educated public in general. This was an age during which many of the disciplines and divisions one currently finds in the academic world were created, including Orientalism. Pioneers in the field were greatly aided in their labors by imperial expansion. The colonization of the East not only facilitated the growth of European political power and commerce, it made investigating areas of interest significantly easier for scholars (71).

It is quite paradoxical, Clarke states, that European global ascendancy during this period not only encouraged racist and condescending attitudes towards India, it also increased the popularity of and veneration for Eastern ideals. In earlier times, the entry of Eastern ideas into the European consciousness had largely been confined to a small segment of the population. However, political developments in the nineteenth century and the rapid growth in both literacy and education led to what Clarke refers to as "a boom in orientomania" (73). This was facilitated by a pervading spirit of doubt concerning the validity of traditional Christian belief that permeated the Victorian period (80). In regard to the United States, one finds a virtual absence of interest in Eastern thought until the opening years of the nineteenth century. Several decades later, there was a remarkable flowering of interest that is associated with New England Transcendentalism, particularly in connection with the names Thoreau and Emerson (84). While abandoning organized religion in favor of personal experience, the Transcendentalists found inspiration in ideas originating in the East (85).

One group which claimed to offer interested individuals access to this exciting new realm of ideas was the Theosophical Society. In *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (2001), Joy Dixon writes that the history of Theosophy needs to be set in the context of the history of imperialism (21). This section aims to give the reader a glimpse into a number of events and attitudes concerning imperialism and related phenomena which shaped

British and American thinking during the period with which this study is concerned. While it is arguable that the Theosophical Society was truly an international organization from its inception, originating in the United States and then setting up shop in countries throughout the world, I have chosen to briefly address imperialism only in regard to the United States and Britain because the writers that produced the texts I examine spent a significant part of their lives in either one or the other of these two contexts. It is to the British Empire that we will first turn our attention.

3.1.1 The British Empire

In the preface to *Strangers in the Land* (2002), historian Roderick Cavaliero writes that it is difficult to remember that Britain, "now shrunken, solipsistic, offshore,…once ruled the sea and a quarter of the population of the globe" (xv). To provide a concise history of the development of the British Empire is an impossible task because it unfolded haphazardly, without the guidance of any sort of a conscious plan, over a period of several hundred years. It is, however, possible to provide a broad sketch of the major developments (Kutzer xviii).

The idea of creating new colonies after having lost those in America in 1783 was not initially a popular one. In its earliest days, the new wave of imperial expansion was commercial in nature, not military or governmental. The British East India Company and Hudson's Bay Company are examples of enterprises that exercised a good deal of control over foreign territory. The colonial outposts established were important sources providing the raw materials that played such an important role in the industrialization of England. As time went on, they also became important markets for goods manufactured in Britain. Various agreements were established with the Crown concerning how much power a company could wield over indigenous peoples. Subjects covered included taxes that could be collected and military forces that could be deployed (Kutzer xviii).

British expansion was, however, not just fueled by the powers of capitalism and political strategy. Combing evangelism and exploration, missionaries such as David Livingstone contributed in a significant way. Those embarking upon such enterprises could face many difficulties and dangers. Literary theorist Daphne Kutzer states in *Empire's Children* (2000) that

> …the combination of tsetse flies and mosquitoes, sleeping sickness and malaria, not to mention daunting geography and antagonistic natives, made a nineteenth-century journey to the interior of

> Africa as dangerous as the first manned flight to the moon. Nonetheless, the chance of saving souls for Christ and the need for raw material proved irresistible to Europeans. (xix)

In addition to the troubles mentioned above, the expansion of the Empire was accompanied by a host of other problems such as colonial governors having their own private agendas, uprisings by indigenous peoples, and conflicts involving other European powers that also had an interest in controlling the same territories. Another fear which grew through the years was that of being contaminated (Loomba 115). While Europeans were, according to literary theorist Ania Loomba, "bent on the supposedly impossible task of washing black people white," there was also a belief that whiteness was vulnerable to pollution (114).

In the early stages of colonial expansion, there was no specific government office which had the duty of overseeing the outposts. The British government did not always act as an "enthusiastic partner" due to fears concerning the draining of domestic capital as a result of armed conflict with competing powers (Kutzer xviii). This changed in 1801 when the Colonial Office was created. During the 1850s, it became a separate department of the government, having the means to administer discipline and pressure to colonial governments when deemed necessary. By this time, Britain's empire had expanded to the point where it was increasingly in need of centralized control and governance because it was becoming more and more difficult to manage.

In terms of attitudes back home, Hobsbawm maintains that imperialism encouraged the masses to identify themselves with the imperial state and nation, which, though done unconsciously, served to justify and legitimize the social and political system which the state represented (70). Attempts were made, such as the establishment of Empire Day in Britain, to institutionalize a sense of pride in imperialism. This created a cultural climate in which Empire permeated everything from Christmas pantomimes to music hall entertainment to children's periodicals (Kutzer xiv). Furthermore, Hobsbawm adds, "it is impossible to deny that the idea of superiority to, and domination over, a world of dark skins in remote places was genuinely popular, and thus benefited the politics of imperialism" (70).

Loomba states in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) that racial stereotyping, rather than being the product of modern colonialism, can be traced back to the Greek and Roman periods. The templates that were produced then served to shape European images of outsiders and "barbarians," images which have appeared in reworked and expanded versions at different points in time, such as the one being discussed in this section (105 – 106). Loomba maintains that various European nations, despite the substantial differences between their colonial

enterprises, generated similar stereotypes of "outsiders" (106 – 107). Qualities such as aggression, laziness, greed, violence, sexual promiscuity, bestiality, primitivism, innocence, and irrationality were attributed by colonists from different countries to Africans, Turks, Indians, Native Americans, Jews, the Irish, and other groups. Loomba states, however, that the real difficulty in unraveling the histories of race lies in "walking the tightrope between highlighting the specificity of various images and recognising the flexibility of colonial ideologies" (107).

While color was in some cases the most important signifier of racial and cultural difference, this was not always so, as is exemplified by the case of the Irish (Loomba 109). Racial identity, Loomba maintains, is shaped by perceptions of religious, ethnic, linguistic, national, sexual, and class difference (121). According to Loomba, the construction of racial differences had to do with the nature of the societies being visited, the class of people who were being observed, and whether the objective of the visitors was settlement or trade (109 – 110). Loomba emphasizes that the crucial point in regard to these constructions is that they were based on "certain observed features, the imperatives of the colonists, and preconceptions about the natives" (100). Furthermore, they were filtered through the dynamics of encounters, which means that the process of construction is not one which totally excludes the reactions of those being represented (110).

Ideologies of racial difference were subsequently intensified by their incorporation into the discourse of science, which claimed to demonstrate that psychological and social attributes were determined by biological features (Loomba 115). Rather than challenging negative stereotypes such as savagery and excessive sexuality, scientific discussions developed and extended them (117). Science also, Loomba maintains, extended the association of *race* with *nation*. She states that both races and nations are imagined as communities "that bind fellow human beings and demarcate them from others." It is possible, she states, to trace, from the sixteenth century on, the connections between the formation of the English nation and the articulation of the superiorities of the Anglo-Saxon race (118). Although the constructedness of race has been widely discussed in recent years, Loomba reminds the reader of *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) that these perceived racial differences were "transformed into very real inequalities by colonialist and/or racist regimes and ideologies" (123).

Although one could detect signs of trouble for the British Empire in the preceding decades, World War I signaled the beginning of the end. Britain did manage to wind up on the winning side, but at the enormous cost of over one million lives. The end of the war brought a shift in national boundaries as well as national priorities. By the time of the Paris Peace Conference

(1919), the dominion colonies, which had supplied both soldiers and raw materials during the war years, had gained independent international recognition by becoming charter members in the League of Nations. In 1931, the Statute of Westminster ensured them full equality with Britain. As the empire began to shrink, however, the language of nationalism and patriotism became more pronounced. One can see this exhibited, for example, in the race for the South Pole, an area which offered no indigenous peoples to exploit and nothing in terms of land to be developed. The only prize to be won was the reputation of being the strongest nation on earth (Kutzer xx).

3.1.2 The United States and Manifest Destiny

In *Race over Empire* (2004), historian Eric T. Love states that it is undeniable that the United States was originally conceived as a white nation. Equally undeniable, he holds, is that the purposeful and systematic exclusion of non-whites was a vital part of American nation building throughout the whole of the nineteenth century (xii). Free African Americans, for example, were plagued by disenfranchisement and segregation no matter where they settled during the early national and antebellum periods. Legislatures of slave states passed laws forcing emancipated slaves to leave, and politicians of free states prohibited or taxed those wishing to migrate, fearing they would take opportunities from white residents. During the mid 1800s, waves of anti-Irish and anti-Catholic paranoia swept through areas such as Philadelphia (xiii). One need not dig deep to find other such instances where white predominance, often based on a very narrow definition of whiteness, was the order of the day. Love states that

> [t]he impenetrable and largely (though never completely) unquestioned conviction that the United States was a white nation and that every advance, domestic and foreign, should be pursued for the exclusive benefit of white citizens insinuated itself into and shaped every important expansionist project of the nineteenth century, and all constituted formations of a racial— and racist— social order. (xiii)

It should be remembered that notions concerning superior and inferior races that permeated American thinking during the nineteenth century were also, in general, features of Western European thinking as well. However, as historian Reginald Horsman, states, the United States had a history that gave the arguments of racial destiny a unique quality which also helped such notions about race to spread amongst its population (2).

One deep-rooted belief that was central to the period with which this study is concerned is encapsulated in the phrase *Manifest Destiny*. It refers to the notion that it was America's God-given right and duty to expand its borders across the North American continent, bringing democracy and Christianity to more people in the process (Moriarty 1). While the United States at the present time stretches from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean and includes the states of Hawaii and Alaska as well as other territories, when the Constitution was signed in 1787, it only covered an area of roughly 890,000 square miles (2.3 million square kilometers) (1 – 2). By the end of the project, the United States had grown immensely in terms of size and prosperity, thus paving the way for it to become a global superpower. Native Americans and other peoples, however, suffered incalculable losses as a result of it.

The expression was popularized in 1845 by newspaper editor John O'Sullivan, but the idea it conveys is significantly older (Bevin 43). The image of the Americans as a chosen people had its roots in the seventeenth century, and as a notion it seemed to be validated by a number of signs. For example, the survival and prosperity of the first colonies could be interpreted as proof of God's intentions. The successful revolution against Great Britain provided initial evidence, but the amazing growth of the United States six decades later seemed to confirm that God indeed did have a special plan for the young country (Horsman 3).

During the nineteenth century, the question of race factored into discussions concerning American progress, and emphasis was put on American Anglo-Saxons as a separate and inherently superior people destined to bring good government, commercial prosperity, and Christianity to the surrounding areas and even beyond (Horsman 1 – 2). Either subordinate status or extinction were the fates awaiting races perceived as being inferior. The fact that the segment of the population considered to be white in the United States was obviously heterogeneous and other logical inconsistencies were, according to Horsman, matters left unexplored (2). Another important ingredient in how race was perceived in America in the nineteenth century was a general anxiousness to justify the enslavement, expulsion, and extermination of other peoples (3).

In regard to the Theosophical Society, the teachings set forth in the writings of various members are quite noticeably shaped by notions about race such as those described above. This is a matter which might take an unsuspecting modern reader by surprise. However, one also finds similar ideas woven into other systems of thought that came into existence around the same time. One notable example is Anthroposophy. This fact also serves to remind us that Theosophy came into existence as part of a larger movement, the mystical revival, the topic of the next section of this paper.

3.2 The Mystical Revival

The closing years of the nineteenth century had much to offer those wishing to come into contact with some form of spiritual truth. The slightly less adventurous who were not entirely willing to forsake the familiar trappings of Christianity could turn to Rudolf Steiner, who offered a new interpretation of something at least superficially recognizable. Others could take part of the teachings offered by mysterious Masters to H.P. Blavatsky and bask in glorious visions of ancient wisdom from the East which the Society claimed to be saving from degeneration among civilizations perceived to be in their decline. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn could cater to Egyptophiles, and those who were enthralled by tales of the enigmatic Christian Rosenkreuz could investigate Max Heindel's brand of Rosicrucianism, which, under closer inspection, might remind the seeker more than just a little of Theosophy. Aleister Crowley could offer eager initiates alternatives that were perhaps at the time in question best discussed behind closed doors.

The above represents just a few of the choices that were open to men and, in many cases, women that had at their disposal the time and money necessary for such enterprises. Groups borrowed liberally from one another in terms of teachings, and it was often the case that members switched loyalties from one organization to another – some disillusioned by the petty squabbles which periodically swept through the hierarchical ranks while others were motivated by an insatiable appetite for more excitement – with the apparent ease of a skillful dancer changing partners. In *The Place of Enchantment* (2004), historian Alex Owen remarks upon how curious it is that this phenomenon has received such little scholarly attention, especially when one considers the fact that historians are certainly aware of its existence (6). The staggering number of such organizations that appeared in Europe and North America during the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War left, for example, an impressive paper trail. Furthermore, the term *mystical revival* was in use in the 1890s which indicates that there was a general awareness of the movement.

Influenced by then current intellectual trends and fashionable interests and shaped by contemporary scholarship, the movement arose amid Victorian enthusiasm for such phenomena as clairvoyance, materialization, and astrology (Owen 17 – 18). Participants belonged largely to the educated middle-classes. As Dixon maintains in *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (2001), at least in the mundane realms, access to the mysteries was regulated by social class and "cultural capital" (8). In certain respects, therefore, it is possible to view some of the groups mentioned above as constituting a

"somewhat elitist counterpoint," as Owen phrases it, to the hugely popular spiritualist movement. In this context, both the hard work and discipline which the studying of ancient wisdom required of those engaged in various aspects of the mystical revival were privileged over mediumistic gifts (5). It was within this larger movement that the Theosophical Society, the subject to which we now turn, came into existence.

3.3 The Theosophical Society: A Short History

It often happens that the facts of the earthly existences of religious and spiritual leaders tend to become shrouded by myth and rumor (Owen 29). This is most certainly the case with the primary founder of the Theosophical Society, H. P. Blavatsky. The details of her life, though always colorful, vary greatly depending upon the source consulted. Born Helena Petrovna von Hahn in Ekaterinoslav in what is now Ukraine, her early years were passed in the company of Russian nobility, as she was largely raised by her aristocratic grandparents. Her father, Baron von Hahn, was a soldier and spent much of his time on the move. The relationship she had with her mother, a novelist also descended from nobility, was a short one, as she died when Helena was just eleven years old (Washington 28). After a brief and unhappy marriage, she abandoned her significantly older husband and embarked upon a new and decidedly more "bohemian" chapter in her life (Owen 29). She made her way across the globe and took part in a bewildering array of adventures which involved, depending upon the particular version of her life one consults, engaging in an equally mind-boggling variety of occupations such as circus performer and importer of ostrich feathers.

Much of the mystery that surrounds her existence can be attributed to Blavatsky's deliberate use of creative obfuscation in what one could interpret as an attempt to mythologize her existence. The events of her life, when one examines accounts pieced together by various relatives and others, include traveling across the American mid-west in a covered wagon, being shipwrecked off the Greek coast at Spetsai, and having dealings with secret agents in Central Asia and magicians in New Orleans. While it may be tempting to dismiss all such claims as so much sensational self-promotion (or something perhaps worse), Professor of English Peter Washington reminds us in *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* (1993) that the nineteenth century is "prodigal in extraordinary lives and remarkable travels" (32). In a similar vein, scholar of the study of religion Kocku von Stuckrad states the following in *Western Esotericism* (2005):

> Even if HPB had undertaken only half of these journeys, it would have been a clear indication of her extraordinary character and her driving ambition to abandon bourgeois mores and to achieve an education and self-emancipation denied to most women of her generation. Her whole life was a provocation to the guardians of Victorian etiquette. (124)

It is, after all, not *impossible* that she did in fact live such an eventful life, but, as Washington points out, the most important thing is that she got people to believe her version (32).

Run-ins with bandits in Mexico and cabbalists in Egypt aside, what is clear is that in 1874 she surfaced in New York City and soon afterwards met ex-army officer turned journalist Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832 – 1907). At that time, he was publishing a series of newspapers articles concerning Spiritualist events occurring at a Vermont farm. The two developed a close association, initially grounded on a mutual disdain for Spiritualism's preoccupation with producing phenomena, which would span many years. In 1875 they inaugurated the Theosophical Society together, along with Irish lawyer William Quan Judge (1851 – 1896) and a number of other seekers who had for some time been meeting in Blavatsky's rooms to discuss spiritual topics. The term *theosophy*, which had already been in use to designate several schools of thought that predate Blavatsky's, was appropriated to signify that the group had access to the "Wisdom of the Gods" (Owen 29).

Blavatsky's gifts as a psychic were reputedly recognized in her early years, and prior to her arrival in the United States, she had been working as a medium in Spiritualist circles for some time (Owen 29). She had also apparently acquired an interest in the study of Occultism and Eastern religious lore somewhere along the way (Hammar 81). Whether or not she ever truly accepted Spiritualist teachings is a highly contested matter and a difficult one to sort out. On the one hand, much of her success at various points in her career was dependent upon the production of phenomena, but, especially later in life, she strongly emphasized the differences between "true" Occultism and Spiritualism (Hanegraaf 449). Theosophist Willamay Pym writes in the article "Theosophy: Changeless Yet Always Changing" (2004) that

> [b]y producing phenomena to demonstrate the existence of nonphysical realities, HPB and her colleagues hoped to convince materialists that such realities needed consideration for their hidden implications and fundamental importance. Later in her life, however, she questioned the wisdom of her early procedure and regretted the practices she had employed. (220)

While the seed of the Theosophical Society had been planted with the hope that the resulting organization would reform American Spiritualism, it soon became associated with "Oriental"

mysticism as Blavatsky wove together a tremendous amount of nebulous Occult minutiae from the Western Esoteric tradition with her own special brand of "eastern-oriented metaphysics" into what would be for some a highly palatable synthesis. While the Society did for a period spanning roughly nine years beginning in 1901 become more accommodating to Esoteric Christianity, it offered interested parties during its early years what appeared to be a new and exciting form of spirituality to explore that resonated with late-Victorian Orientalism. (Owen 29). A seeming hodge-podge of ideas and symbols from "mystical" hotspots such as Egypt, India, and Tibet were fervently embraced and utilized as legitimations for the Society's criticism of contemporary life in both Europe and America, which was becoming increasingly materialistic (38).

Appearing in 1877, the mammoth *Isis Unveiled* was the first installment of the Theosophical Society's teachings. Scholar of the study of religion Olav Hammer states in *Claiming Knowledge* (2001) that the contents of the two volumes reveal the enormity of the project at hand:

> 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. (83)

Although Blavatsky is credited as being the author, she claimed that all of the information presented had been transmitted to her by the true founders of the Society, a group of exalted beings alternately and seemingly indiscriminately referred to in Theosophical literature as the Mahatmas, the Masters, and a legion of other names. Through the years, the focus of the Theosophical teachings would change. For example, the spiritual center of Theosophy eventually strayed away from its original homeland of Egypt (an area also of interest to other groups that were part of the nineteenth century mystical revival) and began gradually to migrate to India. This move became concrete in 1879 when Blavatsky and Olcott relocated to Bombay with the aim of learning more about "Oriental" religion (Owen 31). In *Oriental Enlightenment* (1997), Clarke states that they were greeted in Ceylon as champions of Buddhism, embracing it publically shortly after their arrival – perhaps the first Europeans to do so (89). They eventually established the Theosophical Society's world headquarters at Adyar, near Madras (now Chennai), in south India (Dixon 3).

The relocation had initially been aided by the Society's newly formed relationship with the Indian reform movement the Arya Samaj (Jones 168). The honeymoon, however, did not last. Irreconcilable difficulties arose in regard to certain teachings concerning the Theosophical concept of God, as well as the Society's criticism of contemporary Hinduism, and the two organizations parted ways in 1882. Once in India, however, Olcott and Blavatsky met Alfred Percy Sinnett, an influential newspaper editor with an interest in Spiritualism. Already familiar with Blavatsky's reputation as a medium, she impressed him with "demonstrations of phenomena" which she attributed to the Masters. Soon afterwards, Sinnett himself began to receive letters allegedly written by these mysterious beings that had by this point been enveloped by a background story portraying them as members of a timeless brotherhood of highly evolved Adepts. Blavatsky had been chosen as their instrument and was thus entrusted with the enormous responsibility of revealing the secret teachings which lay at the root of the world's religions (Owen 31).

Sinnet continued to receive written correspondence from the Masters for a period of four years, spanning from 1880 to 1884. The letters, totaling 145, were later edited and published by the Theosophical University Press in 1923. Sinnet eventually returned to England and became a central figure within the London Theosophical circles during the 1880s. When accusations began to fly concerning the authorship of the letters, Sinnet came forward and defended the authenticity of the Masters (von Stuckrad 126). He also played a key role in the strong association of the Society with the East, as he maintained the superiority of the "Indian" teachings amidst the protests of those who preferred a version of Theosophy with a more Christian flavor (Owen 31).

Once established in India, the Theosophical Society drew both Europeans and Indians as members. Branches were subsequently established in different cities by a number of "educated" Hindus and Parsis. Although the Society was largely successful in the early years after the move, controversy followed and a fresh crop of problems needed to be handled. For example, arguments ensued concerning the concept of a Universal Brotherhood in relation to caste distinction. Some found it troubling that all correspondence from the Masters was sent solely through Europeans (Jones 170). Many, however, responded positively to the Society's anti-Christian and anti-Western polemic. The group's presence in turn helped to strengthen Hindu conservatives and attempts to revive orthodox Hinduism (179).

The further development of the movement after this period became increasingly complex. This was partially due to the fact that the relationship between Blavatsky and Olcott, who she had called her "Theosophical Twin," deteriorated as the years went by. In 1887, Blavatsky

returned to London. The following year witnessed the publication of the second installment of the Society's teachings, *The Secret Doctrine.* In one respect, the two weighty volumes that make up this most fascinating journey through the cosmos can be regarded as a response to Sinnet's publication of his own interpretation of what came to be known the "Mahatma letters" in the form of two books. Blavatsky, not to be outdone (if one assumes that she, whatever the motive might have been, was the one who authored the letters in the first place) compiled her own statement in the form of nearly 1,500 pages of text which elaborate upon, in at times nearly excruciating detail, Theosophical theories concerning the structure of the universe, the creation of mankind, and the ancient truth behind the world's religions which, the teachings held, had all come from a common source (von Stuckrad 128).

Conflict within the Society had been a recurrent theme since the group's inception, and the same tempestuous conditions prevailed during the last years of Blavatsky's life. After her death in 1891, the infighting which plagued the organization she had worked so hard to establish took a new direction and focused on the matter of succession. Admittedly, the seeds for many of the squabbles were already sown while Blavatsky was still alive. She and Olcott had entered into an unpleasant power struggle which was initially settled by the establishment of a new Esoteric Section in London; Blavatsky reigned over this division, and Olcott was left in charge of the Indian Section in Adyar. Parallels to the tension between the two can be found in the correspondence from the Masters that appeared during this period. For example, they trouble themselves with and complain about such mundane things as a lack of paper. They even lash out verbally at other Masters (von Stuckrad 128).

Once started, this process of deterioration continued, and many players such as Katherine Tingley (1849 - 1927), Annie Besant (1847 - 1933), and Rudolf Steiner (1861 - 1925) were sucked into the vortex of the ensuing discord and drama (von Stuckrad 129). Steiner, at one time the first General Secretary of the Theosophical Society in Germany, would eventually break with the group because he felt that its emphasis on teachings from the East did not mesh well with his own Christian worldview (130). After the death of Olcott, Besant, a controversial figure in her own right, took over as president of the Society in India. A social reformer interested in a seemingly ever-shifting bundle of causes such as the rights of women and Indian Home Rule, she traveled around India lecturing impassionedly on the many glories of the region's ancient and noble past. When she was lambasted for her virtually uncritical praise of Hindu society, she answered the accusations by organizing the Theosophical Order of Service which worked to, among other things, promote education and end child marriage (Jones 175). Becoming increasingly engaged in politics, she joined the Indian National

Congress in 1914 and was elected its president in 1917. With the rise of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 – 1948) in 1921, she stepped out of the center, as the two had fundamental differences of opinion in regard to India's future, and she found that she could not accept his leadership. Further static in their relationship was created by Gandhi's rejection of various Theosophical notions including the Masters and Besant's opposition to Gandhi's concept of non-violent resistance (Coward 6).

During Besant's first years as president, the Theosophical Society's membership flourished. It increased by fifty percent and reached 45,000 during the 1920s (Jones 176). However, this number declined sharply after 1930, dropping down to about 35,000 or less (126). This occurrence can partially be interpreted as a response to actions taken by certain of the group's members, including Besant and her longtime associate fellow Theosophist C.W. Leadbeater (1854 -1934), in regard to the "discovery" of Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895 - 1986), a young Indian boy believed to be the vehicle of the next World Teacher (Owen 228). Leadbeater would also contribute his own special brand of controversy to the long-suffering Society by becoming embroiled in a number of sex scandals involving prepubescent boys (106). Besant eventually obtained guardianship of Krishnamurti, as well as his brother, and formed the Order of the Star in the East, an organization which while being technically separate from the Society was largely comprised of Society members. He was promptly whisked away and given a "European" upbringing and education deemed suitable for such an exalted presence – an act which was eventually legally opposed, but to no avail, by the boys' father. In 1929, Krishnamurti dissolved the Order and by 1930 he had resigned from the Theosophical Society though he continued for the remainder of his life to submit his own offerings to spiritually hungry individuals (Williams 36). Three years later, Besant passed away. The history of the Society after this point, while still fascinating, is beyond the scope of the paper. However, it can be said that branches of the organization are still present and operative in many countries throughout the world.

The Theosophical Society has, through the years, received much criticism. Blavatsky was, for instance, no stranger to accusations of fraud in regard to the production of phenomena that she alleged to be the work of the Masters. A further issue which has repeatedly been called into question, both in recent times as well as during the years when the founders of the Society were still alive, is the authenticity of the "Eastern" teachings. On the other hand, one can find a great deal of praise for the organization and some of its members in recent studies. For example, in *Oriental Enlightenment* (1997), Clarke states that the Theosophical Society, through its various activities and publications, helped in a significant way to both popularize

Eastern religions and encourage a dialogue between the East and the West (90). This is also a view expressed by Dixon. In *Divine Feminism: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (2001), she writes that the Theosophical Society provided a service in that it was a crucial source of information, though of an unofficial variety, about India and Sri Lanka (26 – 31). Furthermore, she continues, members of the Society were among the few in Europe who went so far as to suggest that Hinduism and Buddhism might contain truths that Christianity had lost or forgotten (31).

Clarke offers additional words in the Society's favor, maintaining that it also lent a great deal of assistance to the revival of Buddhist and Hindu self-awareness and self-respect in Asia. He states, for example, that Olcott's name is still associated in Sri Lanka with the late nineteenth century revival of Buddhism at a time when it was "all but obliterated by the Christianising policies of the colonial government." Another praiseworthy gesture pointed out by Clarke is that Society members played a role in founding the Hindu University of Benares in 1916, a center of learning that has, he states, the chief aim of preserving the cultural heritage of India. Clarke even credits the Society with helping redirect a young Mohandas Gandhi's thoughts towards his Hindu roots (91). Addressing the extreme popularity of the organization among educated Westerners and Indians, he states that it generated such wide appeal because Theosophists were open to a number of paths to truth, they emphasized the underlying congruence of the world religions, and they, through attempting to construct a philosophy which reconciled recent scientific advances with ancient wisdom traditions, represented a challenge to orthodox religious attitudes (90).

The above indeed appears to be impressive, but what needs to be added to give a better-rounded picture is, as Dixon states, the fact that Theosophists claimed to be uncovering the esoteric truth of traditions from beneath their outer trappings. They thus saw themselves as being engaged in an attempt to rescue knowledge which they believed had fallen into degraded forms in modern-day India (11). A sense of this can be detected in the following extract from a speech entitled "India, her Past and her Future" which was originally delivered by Annie Besant on board a ship in the Indian Ocean on November 6, 1883. She compares the Vedas and Upanishads that are available today to what they once were:

> Noble as they are, they are but the fragments left for the Indian people when they were entering on their dark age as being as much of spiritual truth as they were able to understand, while the others were withdrawn, to be kept for better times, for a more spiritual race. (13)

The India that is elevated to such heights in a great deal of Theosophical literature was one which was crafted by the nineteenth century European and American imagination, very often bearing the imprint of imperialistic notions. Examples abound in texts ranging from the transcripts of Besant's verbal assaults to Blavatsky's ornate theories concerning a spectacularly complex evolutionary scheme to Leadbeater's intimate writings about what the Masters, the topic of the following section, eat for breakfast.

3.4 The Masters

Owen maintains in *The Place of Enchantment* (2004) that part of the allure of the occult was "its close association with secret traditions and claims to spiritual authority that rested on the transmission of ancient wisdom from mysterious and hidden high Adepts" (32). As stated above, Theosophical tradition maintains that the true founders of the Society, and those who provided Blavatsky with her inspiration and authority, were members of a brotherhood of exalted beings. Details concerning this group and those purported to make up its ranks vary greatly depending upon the source consulted. Blavatsky, for example, offered at one time the following version:

> There is beyond the Himalayas a nucleus of Adepts, of various nationalities, and the Teshu Lama knows them, and they act together, and some of them are with him and yet remain unknown in their true character even to the average lamas—who are ignorant fools mostly. My Master and KH and several others I know personally are there, coming and going, and they all are in communication with Adepts in Egypt and Syria, and even Europe. (qtd. in von Stuckard 123)

Having led an extraordinary life, one of Blavatsky's favorite boasts was that she had travelled alone to Tibet and spent seven years living there (Washington 32). She claimed to have received spiritual instruction from the beings mentioned above during this period. The teaching occurred at least in part in their mountain home, which is interesting both in terms of the intimacy involved as well as the banality of the setting. While this particular sojourn seems unlikely, especially when one takes into consideration the fact that Tibet at the time (and for a significant period afterwards) was closed to all but a handful of travelers, her stories, Washington asserts in *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* (1993), were to take on a symbolic significance as the romantic and religious symbolism of Tibet increased in the late nineteenth century (33). However, Blavatsky's initial meeting with one of the beings with which she claimed to have continuous contact occurred, according to her own account, in a

much more cosmopolitan setting. Although she states that she had seen him in visions for years, her first physical encounter with Master Morya occurred in July of 1851, at London's Great Exhibition (Owen 34). He was, she maintains, born in the Punjab. The other Master that receives the majority of attention in the literature I examine for the purposes of this study is Koot Hoomi, originally, according to Blavatsky's assertions, from Kashmir (von Stuckrad 123).

Long before these highly evolved beings found a home at the core of several versions of Theosophical teachings, speculations concerning the existence of a brotherhood of sages had already wedged their way into the European imagination, taking such forms as the Renaissance notion of a succession of world teachers in possession of the *prisca theologia* and the Rosicrucian secret society (von Stuckrad 123). By the end of the nineteenth century, European fantasies concerning the "mysterious East" became discernibly superimposed upon it. This is apparent in Theosophical literature in which one sometimes finds this group being referred to by the curious term *Great White Brotherhood*, although other Occult organizations made use of it as well. Whether or not such beings exist is a matter that is, as I stated in the introduction, beyond the scope of this study. However, their usefulness in the hands of a clever authority figure should not be underestimated. An example of such a display can be seen in Leadbeater's *The Masters and the Path* (1925) where he writes the following:

> THERE has always been a Brotherhood of Adepts, the Great White Brotherhood; there have always been Those who knew, those who possessed this inner wisdom, and our Masters are among the present representatives of that mighty line of Seers and Sages. Part of the knowledge which They have garnered during countless aeons is available to every one on the physical plane under the name of Theosophy. (57)

With the above words, he breathes new life into a well-worn concept in order to use it as a legitimizing tool, an exercise that was repeated again and again for a number of different purposes by various key figures in the Society during the period with which this study is concerned (Owen 32).

Communication with the Masters originally occurred, in typical Spiritualist fashion, during séances. Furthermore, Blavatsky maintained that the impressive, both in terms of size and range of topics covered, *Isis Unveiled* (1887) was dictated to her by one of them, adding that she had little awareness of the material she transcribed. This process, remarkably similar to automatic writing, was also one that was familiar to those possessing knowledge of the

Spiritualist world. After its publication, however, public attention was drawn to the fact that much of what fills the two volumes could be found in other nineteenth century works on Occultism (Owen 33). Various explanations concerning the Masters were devised to account for this. Eventually, contact took on a sturdier form, that of written correspondence. A number of apparently privileged individuals received letters that seemed to appear out of thin air. Precisely who or what these mysterious Masters were supposed to be is no easy matter to sort out. As stated above, accounts existing within the labyrinthine written history of the Theosophical Society and the educational material produced by members vary. Sometimes they are described as beings that have the ability to materialize and incarnate at various places, while other sources hold that they are subtle forces of energy that need to assume some sort of corporeal form in order to render themselves visible to humans (von Stuckrad 123).

This chapter introduced a number of topics which are relevant in terms of understanding the study as a whole such as British and American imperialism, the mystical revival, and the history of the Theosophical Society. In the following part of this paper, I set forth the results of my analysis of the literature presented in the "Method" chapter, interpreted in light of the notion of Orientalism. The information I present is roughly categorized into different themes, put forward individually, which I found to be recurring in the texts. Such a format also eases the presentation of the findings, as well as a discussion based upon them; conclusions one may reach based on these results are given in a later chapter.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I present the results of my analysis, categorized into different themes I found to be recurring in the literature I examined. These are names and titles by which the Masters are called, how they are defined by different authors, descriptions of the brotherhood to which they are said to belong, various characteristics they are believed to possess, where they are alleged to live, descriptions of what they look like, their various functions, information about how one becomes a Master, and debates about whether or not they exist. As the divisions between these categories are not absolute, a certain degree of overlap does occur. However, each one is treated separately, with a brief discussion following directly afterwards.

4.1 Names and Titles

While wading through often heavily jargon-laced Theosophical writings, one may encounter a variety of different terms used to designate the beings referred to as *Masters* in this paper. In the case of the material I examined for the present study, C.W. Leadbeater, for example, uses *Adepts*, *Supermen*, and *Perfected Men* in a seemingly arbitrary manner. In *The Masters and the Path of Occultism* (1939), Gottfried de Purucker refers to them as *Great Men*, *Great Ones*, and *Mahatmans*. William Quan Judge occasionally uses *Brothers*.

The term *Mahatma*, spelled in a number of ways, appears frequently in literature composed by Society members. One English translation offered by several authors including Besant and Blavatsky is *Great Soul*. In the article "The Mahatmas as Ideals and Facts" (1893), Judge explains the term as follows:

> The whole sweep, meaning, and possibility of evolution are contained in the word *Mahatma. Maha* is “great,” *Atma* is “soul,” and both compounded into one mean those great souls who have triumphed before us not because they are made of different stuff and are of some strange family, but just because they are of the human race.

In *The Key to Theosophy* (1889), Blavatsky states that such a soul attains greatness through intellectual development and moral elevation. In the same chapter, she explains that they are referred to as *Masters* because of the role they play as teachers which impart knowledge of spiritual truths to the Society. Additional information concerning the use of *Master* is found in Besant's lecture "The Masters as Facts and Ideals," originally delivered on April 27, 1895 at St. James Hall in London. She mentions that this particular word is used by Theosophists because the English language does not offer an equivalent term. In India, she maintains, such

designations do exist because these functions have been known since antiquity. It would, however, according to her point of view, be difficult to popularize them in English (49).

The issue of a multiplicity of designations is taken up in Judge's *The Ocean of Theosophy* (1893) when he writes that each age brings with it new names for these beings (Chapter 1). They have, for example, been known at different times as *Initiates*, *Adepts*, *Magi*, *Hierophants*, *Kings of the East*, *Wise Men*, and *Brothers*. In his account, Judge describes how such a change in what they are called can occur. According to his version of events, when these beings first became known in Theosophical circles as the true source of the Theosophical teachings which they in turn imparted to Blavatsky, they were known as the Brothers. However, when the Society began to attract a large Hindu membership, the term *Mahatma* was added since it, according to Judge, occupies such a rich place in Indian tradition and literature. He states that

> all through Hindu literature Mahatmas are often spoken of, and in parts of the north of that country the term is common. In the very old poem the *Bhagavad-Gita*, revered by all Hindu sects and admitted by the western critics to be noble as well as beautiful, there is a verse reading, "Such a Mahatma is difficult to find." (Chapter 1)

4.1.1 Discussion

In regard to the different names for these beings and how it relates to the notion of Orientalism, one can say that both the affirmative and more negative sides are represented. For example, the types of words used, e.g., *great* and *super* are ones that bestow honor upon the referent. Furthermore, they reflect a sense of respect and may imply an acknowledgement of superiority. Plus, the earnest use of the term *Master* makes the power relations clear – at least on an overt level – and automatically puts one in a submissive position. In the context of this study, it is a significant matter when such complimentary and elevating terms are applied to members of a group perceived to be Other and one to which the predominate discourses of the time allotted a largely disadvantageous position. This sends a relatively clear message concerning at least on a superficial level how the two cultures are valued from a Theosophical standpoint, as expressed in the works examined.

Another item of interest is the fact that such exalted beings, ones which play a role of great importance in the workings of our world, were by certain authors given a name which was taken from another language. One could interpret this as implying that the English language is

inadequate: it is too poor to offer a suitable equivalent. It could also indicate an underlying belief in the superiority of Eastern culture over Western culture. An additional implication found in Besant's words suggests that the refusal to use the indigenous term *Mahatma* among those who have English as a native language is a direct consequence of an inability to appreciate the magnitude of the matter at hand, i.e., the life of the spirit. This also points to a privileging of East over West. However, on a less positive note, a sort of crystallization occurs when she, attempting to project the authoritative tone of an expert, states that the functions of the Masters have been known in India since antiquity. In one sense, such a sweeping generalization serves to position the region's inhabitants as her hostages, and the resulting image that is conjured up in the mind of the reader is of a place where time stands still, much like a permanent exhibit in a museum.

4.2 Defintions

Descriptions of the Masters vary a great deal in how these beings are depicted. Sometimes they are described in very concrete terms while in other reports they mysteriously appear and disappear like specters in a gothic tale. One might wonder precisely *what* they are supposed to be: are they human or are something more? The literature I examined provides a number of answers in the form of definitions. Most often, they are described as being either human or human-like. In *The Masters and the Path* (1925), for example, Leadbeater writes that the Masters respond to enquiries that concern how they attained their present level in the evolutionary scheme with the comforting assertion that at one time, they were as we are, and that one day, we shall be as they are (12). In *The Masters and the Path of Occultism* (1939), Gottfried de Purucker writes that they have attained such a position due to spiritual striving and an aspiration to be, as he phrases it, "better, nobler and higher." Further information concerning how one becomes a Master is addressed in a later section of this chapter.

In Ernest Wood's *Natural Theosophy* (1930), one finds much emphasis placed on the difference between the notion of the Masters as humans and what could be termed ordinary humanity. For example, he draws a clear distinction between the ways in which both groups experience their respective existences. Wood defines Masters as men who have succeeded in realizing the goal of life, and, as a result of this achievement, they are no longer in bondage to the world of things. They have learned to see the dazzling parade of temporary forms as a mere "shadow-world" (129). At times they may enter our plane of existence, making use of

physical bodies, but their interest in doing so lies in calling mankind to enter their world, "the world of life" (129).

A further example concerning the humanity of the Masters appears in Blavatsky's *The Key to Theosophy* (1889). This particular book is comprised of a number of dialogues between an imagined "enquirer" and a "theosophist." In one exchange, the two discuss the matter of the Masters. Blavatsky, as the "theosophist," states that the Masters are living men "born as we are born, and doomed to die like every other mortal." Thus far, the matter is clear. However, when the subject of miraculous powers surfaces and the enquirer poses a question pertaining to certain reports of Masters living unnaturally long lives, the issue is thwarted with the following statement: "there is nothing miraculous in it." According to Blavatsky, that which appears to outsiders, i.e., non-Theosophists, as "supernatural" does so as the direct result of faulty perception, as there is nothing that is beyond the laws of Nature (Section 14). The powers the Masters allegedly have at their disposal will be discussed at greater length in a later section of this chapter.

In the lecture "The Masters as Facts and Ideals" (1895), Besant offers the following:

> We may take, then, as a definition of a Master: a human being who has perfected himself and has nothing more to learn on earth, who lives in a physical body on earth for the helping of man, who takes pupils that desire to evolve more rapidly in order to serve it, and are willing to forsake all for this purpose. (49)

The concept of the Masters, she states, is based on an evolutionary scheme in which consciousness gradually expands and is embodied in ever-improving material forms. Besant maintains that while the state of perfection the Masters have attained will eventually be reached by every human being, it is not a goal one may achieve in the course of a single lifetime (48). A further definition of the Masters, one showing heavy Masonic influence, is offered by Judge. In *The Ocean of Theosophy* (1893), he explains that they are "the highest product of evolution through whom alone, in cooperation with the whole human family, the further regular and workmanlike prosecution of the plans of the Great Architect of the Universe could be carried on" (Chapter 1).

4.2.1 Discussion

Although the definitions presented above vary, it is possible to construct a general picture based on similarities: The Masters, then, are beings that have evolved to a point which

transcends the level of ordinary humanity. However, they have chosen (e.g., Wood uses the term *may* when he states that they at times enter our plane of existence, and Besant uses *willing* when she describes their activities) to keep participating in the evolutionary process as helpers. Furthermore, while they are not subject to the same laws as ordinary humanity, it is apparent that there are levels higher than theirs and that there is at least one being in existence to which they are subordinate (e.g., the Great Architect of the Universe mentioned by Judge).

When envisioned as the pinnacle of human achievement, the Masters may serve as role models and ideals that help to shape our aspirations. Weathering the strains of experience, they have acquired knowledge which has liberated them from the lowly position we occupy. Having the capability to see beyond the world of forms, they wish to show us what it truly means to be alive. Although it at times is depicted in vague or contradictory terms in the definitions, there is something comforting about their humanity. Firstly, it is perhaps easier to imagine cosmic helpers in a form with which we are familiar. Secondly, it supplies us with a glimmer of hope: If they could do it, so can we. I will address the theme of the Masters as role models again in later sections of this chapter, as it surfaces repeatedly in the literature I examined.

In regard to Orientalism, these definitions are interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, they, as was also the case with the names assigned to these beings, indicate a privileging of East over West and a belief in the East's superiority (in so far as the Masters are believed or purported to have Eastern origins) which is exemplified by the functions that have been attributed to them. As role models, they possess qualities that we should strive to cultivate within ourselves, from a Theosophical perspective. Also, they can be interpreted as being the saviors of humanity. Like visitors from the distant future, they offer a glimpse of the possibilities that await us, and they mercifully extend their hands to show the path that is necessary to travel if we do not wish to continue an existence of stumbling blindly in spiritual darkness. The examples described above are ones which illustrate Orientalism motivated by admiration. On the other hand, another important aspect to consider, and one which is representative of the other side of Orientalism, is that their power is not absolute. Although they have made a choice to serve as helpers, a theme which I will discuss in greater detail below, they are subject to a higher law.

4.3 The Brotherhood

Another recurring theme I encountered in the literature casts the Masters as members of a spiritual brotherhood. The introduction to de Purucker's *The Masters and the Path of Occultism* (1939), for example, contains one account of this brotherhood, its history, and its illustrious members. Firstly, he introduces the topic of the "Great Men" the human race has produced through the millennia. He lists, among others, Jesus and the Buddha as examples. Although the two mentioned above are showstoppers in their own right, men even greater than these, he maintains, have lived, taught, and guided their contemporaries in other times. What is more, these illustrious beings still exist in the world at present and are part of a spiritual brotherhood.

The brotherhood to which they belong, he states, has existed "throughout the ages." Each generation transmits to the next the wisdom and knowledge accumulated "from time immemorial." According to de Purucker, certain human beings can be trained to transmit this information. These teachers are, he states, linked by a chain of succession which he terms the Hermetic chain. A great deal of focus in his account of the brotherhood is on the ancient Greek world. He claims, for example, that the Mystery traditions were handed down in such a manner and that the spiritually inclined of the period believed the chain to extend back to the god Zeus. Unfortunately, the idea of such a chain was subsequently appropriated and reproduced in a distorted manner by a number of sects. Such an assertion could have been inspired by the fact that rival organizations claiming to have contact with beings of a higher level were beginning to encroach upon the territory that the Theosophical Society's founders had managed to carve into the spiritual landscape for the group.

In Leadbeater's *The Masters and the Path* (1925), the author presents these beings as representatives of a self-perpetuating brotherhood which has roots that in some mysterious way extend back even further than the dawn of historic time. Relying on the authority of "history" for support, as de Purucker does as well, Leadbeater states that one finds the records of each nation filled with the doings of men of genius in every aspect of human activity:

> It has been said that the history of every nation could be written in the biography of a few individuals, and that it is always the few, towering above the rest, who initiate the great forward steps in art, music, literature, science, philosophy, philanthropy, statecraft, and religion. (2)

According to Leadbeater, the individuals referred to above are the Masters (2). Although at times their ideals have been beyond the comprehension of their contemporaries and a number

of their deeds and names have long been forgotten, they have stood far above those that make up the sea of ordinary humanity.

The world religions, Leadbeater claims, offer ample evidence of the existence of such Supermen (*The Masters and the Path* 2). The examples he lists include the ones mentioned by de Purucker, as well as a diverse body of other seers, saints, prophets, and teachers (4). On the following page, the discussion is extended to include what he refers to as "older religions," which are, according to his point of view, presently in their decline, and "primitive tribes of men." If one examines these, he argues, evidence of Supermen that have acted as helpers to the "childlike people among whom They dwelt" can also be found (5).

In "The Masters as Facts and Ideals" (1895), Besant also takes up the subject of the Brotherhood. Based on the information she gives in this speech, it has a hierarchical structure. The Masters, according to her view, occupy what she terms the fifth grade in this organization, and the four lower grades are made up of initiated disciples that are still part of the everyday world, but have been given various assignments by their superiors in this particular evolutionary scheme (50). At times of great crisis, Masters and other even more highly evolved beings, enter our sphere of experience to tend to diverse matters. For the most part, however, they remain secluded from many aspects of human life and instead engage in work that would be impossible to carry out if they were more integrated in the world of men (51).

An additional account, and an especially rich one in terms of detail and development, can be found in Judge's writings. For this particular author, the Masters are men who attained perfection in earlier periods of evolution. These periods were known, he claims, to Hindus in times past and to those who instituted the Mysteries of Greece. In a process which mirrors respiration, they commence when the visible universes emerge from what he terms the "Great Unknown" and are alternated with periods of equal duration during which everything rests once again in the Unknown. According to Judge, the object of these waves is the production of perfect men, the number of which increases with the passing of each one (*The Ocean of Theosophy* Chapter 1).

Certain passages in Judge's writings become a *Who's-Who* of the world's spiritual traditions which, he claims, constantly referred to these beings. In an ancient Egypt setting, for example, he has them figure as the king-Initiates, all members of one great lodge. Abraham and Moses appear in Judge's account and are offered as examples of two Jewish Initiates. Moses, he claims, was educated by the Egyptians and obtained a great amount of occult knowledge which he later set forth in his books. Noah and Solomon also are included in the whirlwind of

names. In terms of more recent figures acting as agents in the Western world for the Brotherhood, Judge lists St. Germain, Jacob Boehme, Cagliostro, Paracelsus, Mesmer, Count St. Martin, and Blavatsky. Such individuals as those mentioned above, he adds, are generally classed as imposters during the time they spend on earth (*The Ocean of Theosophy* Chapter 1). This was a matter that had been very close to home for the Theosophical Society and its earthly representatives virtually since the group's inception.

The focus of *The Ocean of Theosophy* (1893) soon turns to India, a country he portrays as nearly bursting at the seams with lore about the Masters, which, according to his assessment, had long been forgotten and ignored by the "lusty and egotistical, the fighting and the trading West." While the notion of individuals having power over the laws of nature is alien to the Western mind, he claims, it is perfectly acceptable in Eastern countries. Indian literature is, according to Judge, filled with the names of such great men that, firstly, are all well-known, and, secondly, taught what essentially amounts to the same story, namely the "great epic of the human soul." Furthermore, he adds, one can still find at the present in the "quiet unmoveable East" hundreds of people willing to testify to the existence of the Masters and the Brotherhood. Although the material civilization of these lands is according to his point of view in a "backward state" at present, he writes that those living there have never lost their belief in the spiritual life of man or the power he has at his disposal should he wish to exercise it (Chapter 1).

The picture Judge paints of the West, on the other hand, is that of a wholly materialistic civilization which has "arisen through a denial of the soul life and nature consequent upon a reaction from illogical dogmatism." In contrast, Judge depicts the inhabitants of India as being perfectly fitted by both temperament and climate to play the role of custodians preserving a philosophical and ethical heritage that would have been lost forever had they fallen prey to the ravages of various groups of "barbarians" galumphing over from the Western world. He then expresses his relief over the fact (as he sees it) that this is no longer a possibility that lurks threateningly just around the corner, thanks to the "protecting shield of England" having lent its services (*The Ocean of Theosophy* Chapter 1).

The members of the brotherhood Judge describes are, he maintains, united by a single doctrine. In regard to the code of ethics they work to promote, he offers for consideration the notion of a triad formed by Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus. The order in which they are listed does not appear to be coincidental when one reads the following:

> The first, a Hindoo, founds a religion which today embraces many more people than Christianity, teaching centuries before Jesus the ethics which he taught and which had been given out even centuries before Buddha. Jesus coming to reform his people repeats these ancient ethics, and Confucius does the same thing for ancient and honorable China. (Chapter 1)

From time to time, during what he refers to as "darker" periods of history, the organization disappears from the world of men. It will, however, reappear after these intervals, when conditions are suitable. While the Masters are the preservers of truth and those who bear it across the ages, it is their "companions," as Judge calls them, who rediscover it and peddle it to their contemporaries. In our present age, Judge claims, the Masters have indicated where the truth, now referred to as Theosophy, is to be found, and individuals around the world, i.e., Society members, are currently engaged in spreading the message (*The Ocean of Theosophy* Chapter 1).

4.3.1 Discussion

In the material reviewed above, one finds a number of aspects to discuss that have relevance in regard to Orientalism, both in its more positive and less positive manifestations. Perhaps the most striking element is one that is most noticeable when sifting through the lists of individuals purported to be members of the brotherhood to which the Masters belong: like the Theosophical Society itself, it is an international organization. It may come as a surprise to discover that there is a wider range of cultures represented in their ranks, as so much of the space in the literature I examined is occupied by Masters Koot Hoomi and Morya.

The image of different peoples working together in various capacities for the good of mankind and the evolutionary scheme in general is an interesting one to consider because it offers a vantage point different from one that is solely anchored in seeing the world in terms of binary oppositions. However, an additional matter needs to be considered at the same time. While the point being discussed here is, compared to many nineteenth century notions concerning race, a relatively progressive one, it should be remembered that members of the Brotherhood are ultimately subordinate to even higher beings. They busy themselves with assignments that have been delegated to them. This is especially apparent in Besant's *The Masters as Facts and Ideals* (1895). Although they are entrusted with great responsibility, the one that ultimately holds the reigns is, like the Wizard of Oz, an unseen power working behind the scenes.

Another aspect of the results presented above that pertains to Orientalism is, as was also detected in the previous sections of this chapter, the elevated status afforded to India, especially discernable in this case in the work of Judge. India is, with a handful of rapturous words, transformed into a magical place with a fantastically glorious history, oozing with all the artificiality of a theme park. A suspicious and scornful eye is cast towards the West, the home of pillaging barbarians unworthy of the riches the East has to offer. One notable exception, however, is England, which is assigned the noble role of protector in the drama which unfolds in the pages of Judge's *The Ocean of Theosophy* (1893). In a more negative light, however, this can be interpreted as criticism of the East's capabilities in terms of being able to manage its own affairs, thus implying weakness and impotence.

One way in which the religious traditions of India are portrayed as being superior to those from the West is through the exaggerated emphasis placed on the antiquity of its cultures. This is exemplified when Judge describes the code of ethics the Brotherhood works to promote. In the course of two sentences, Jesus receives a demotion and becomes nothing more than the bearer of second-hand news. An additional factor in determining the superiority of one religion over another would seem to be, based upon this same passage, number of adherents. One could interpret Judge's remarks as suggesting that Buddhism is greater than Christianity merely because there are more Buddhists than Christians.

4.4 Characteristics

The texts I examined give the reader at times an extremely intimate view of the Master's lives. In the descriptions provided, they smile, cringe, show concern, ride horses, have dinner guests, and play musical instruments. Other subjects touched upon include what they look like, where they live, the floor plans of their homes, and the sorts of leisure activities they find relaxing. In such a way, the literature addresses questions concerning not only *what* the Masters are, but also *how* the Masters are as living entities. What sorts of characteristics do they possess? How are they different from ordinary humanity? Although partially addressed in the section entitled "Definitions," I now aim to answer these questions more fully by presenting relevant information from the material I reviewed.

A good starting point is Leadbeater, as he offers portrayals that at times seem to encourage the reader to enter into an almost uncomfortably voyeuristic relationship with the Masters. In *The Masters and the Path* (1925), for example, he discusses what he perceives to be the most significant difference between these advanced beings and so-called ordinary men. His answer

is quite simple: point of view. He states that the Masters regard everything from a completely different perspective (19). However, this is a matter upon which he unfortunately does not shed much light, although one could surmise that it is connected to their understanding of the laws of nature; in *Masters of Wisdom* (1918), for example, he mentions that they comprehend them perfectly (3). In regard to this matter of perspective and the Masters, Wood writes in *Natural Theosophy* (1930) that they do not judge outward forms. Instead, they see the good that exists within. In a paragraph that includes defenses for both foot-binding and tight-lacing, Wood artfully presents a comparison, claiming that these practices which at the present are widely regarded as questionable were at least well-intentioned (135). One who has ascended to the level of Master possesses the ability to see the good in mankind as it shines through the obscuring clouds of folly. If a man earnestly does his best, Wood maintains, he is living in accordance with the Masters' wishes (138).

In *The Masters and the Path of Occultism* (1939), de Purucker intriguingly sums up the matter with the following statement: "There is naught that is weird about these Great Men." In the same work, he writes in a gushing and nearly breathless flurry of enthusiasm that the Masters are "the sanest men on earth, the gentlest, the kindliest, the most pitiful, the most passionate, the most brotherly, and the most peaceful and the wisest, the strongest and the purest, the noblest and the greatest." It would also seem that they are tireless, as they are always active in the world in one capacity or another. Another characteristic mentioned by de Purucker is their great efficiency. This quality is also touched upon in Leadbeater's writings. He states, for example, in *Masters of Wisdom* (1918) that they are single-minded in their efforts to help accelerate the process of evolution (2). The Master is also free from the cycle of death and birth. If he returns to human life, it is because he has made such a choice. Besant states that it is necessary for the Master to inhabit a physical body if he is to be active in our world. There are those, however, that, according to Besant, choose only to use a spiritual body and stay in the higher realms once they have reached that level of development (Besant, "The Masters as Facts and Ideals" 48).

Another word which frequently appears in the passages describing the Masters is "development." For example, Leadbeater states that as Perfect Men, all sides of their nature and all of their capacities are fully developed (*The Masters and the Path* 20). A similar notion is also expressed by Besant in "The Masters as Facts and Ideals." She states that one finds embodied in the Masters the highest results a human may achieve in regard to the cultivation of the intellect as well as moral and spiritual development (48). In *Masters of Wisdom*, Leadbeater desribes them as being well-rounded. The Master would give one the impression

of being a "very wonderful person" because he is able to meet anyone on any level as the result of having developed perfect understanding. After posing a rhetorical question concerning whether or not the individual would be recognized as being a Master, he states that this would not be the case. However, he would strike those fortunate enough to meet his acquaintance as being impressive, noble, and dignified. Furthermore, qualities such as calmness, benevolence, certainty, wisdom, kindness, humor, and a dislike for idle conversation would be discernable. The latter mentioned quality reflects the efficiency mentioned by de Purucker. There is also a great deal of information provided by Leadbeater concerning the day-to-day activities enjoyed by the Masters. In the glimpse he gives of life in their mountain sanctuary in Tibet, we find Masters going on walks together, playing music on a custom-made organ, eating curry, snacking on cookies, and keeping up to date with developments in the world of science (*The Masters and the Path* 29 – 32).

A further characteristic of the Masters is that they have at their disposal certain "powers" which at this time are not within the grasp of ordinary men. Leadbeater refers to them in *The Masters and the Path* (1925) as being "many and wonderful," but he does not in this particular passage supply the reader with further information concerning what these might be (19). In *Masters of Wisdom* (1918), however, he fleshes out the picture slightly by stating that although their power seems godlike to us, it is indeed limited (5). This serves as a reminder that beings higher than the Masters do exist and that the tasks they carry out are delegated to them. Judge also discusses the powers the Masters are purported to have. Such abilities as telepathy, mind-reading, and hypnotism, which Judge maintains are all familiar to Theosophists, indicate the existence of functions and faculties as of yet scarcely imagined. They are, however, not immediately revealed to ordinary humanity because selfishness and ignorance lead individuals to live only for the present and focus on what is transitory. Judge maintains that the capabilities mentioned above prove the existence of a sort of mind that is not dependent upon a physical brain as well as that of a medium through which thoughts may be sent. This, he claims, is precisely how the Masters communicate with one another. When two minds operate on the same level, they will automatically think alike (*The Ocean of Theosophy* Chapter 1).

An additional quality possessed by the Masters, and one which is of particular interest to this study, is briefly touched upon by Blavatsky in *The Key to Theosophy* (1889). In this work, the Masters are depicted as being “men of great learning” that harbor a disdain for the Western World. One sees this exemplified in a passage which states that, while they are not ascetics, they deliberately choose to live apart from the “turmoil and strife” so prevalent in

that part of the world. That these negative feelings do not extend to the whole of the planet is made clear in the text when Blavatsky writes the following: "they isolate themselves only from the West. In their own country they go about as publicly as other people do." A similar passage is to be found in *The Masters and the Path* (1925). Leadbeater states that one possible reason why the Masters prefer to live in the East is that those living there both understand and respect the form of mediation they practice (29).

4.4.1 Discussion

Based on the information presented in the works I examined, one could argue that the Masters, as perfect beings, possess all the traits that we ought to strive to cultivate within ourselves. Encapsulated in a familiar human-like packaging which encourages identification, they are, as was stated in a previous section, offered as role models. In regard to Orientalism, what can be said here is that it is significant that such desirable qualities are projected onto individuals at least in some way belonging to groups which often figure less favorably in nineteenth century discourses on race. However, the above is only attractive until one recalls the references to “primitive” peoples which litter the pages of some Theosophical writings. Furthermore, under closer examination, it becomes apparent that only a handful of groups are represented in the Great Brotherhood. Many others are conspicuously absent.

The contrasting themes of liberation and subordination also appear in descriptions of their characteristics. For example, the fact that the Masters are not free to exercise their own judgment might seem peculiar when one takes into consideration Leadbeater's statements concerning their perfect understanding of the laws of nature. If such is the case, it seems reasonable to assume that their decisions would be quite sound. A further item that is relevant to this study is the antagonism to the West which Blavatsky attributes to the Masters in *The Key to Theosophy* (1889). That they, according to her, choose to participate in what could be considered a relatively normal existence in the East carries with it a message concerning their preference for this region. Moreover, it also implies that this is the part of the world that accepts them. In *The Masters and the Path* (1925), Leadbeater spells the matter out in no uncertain terms. While their choice in regard to place of residence illustrates a more affirmative sort of Orientalism, it is based on a static picture of the East which stereotypes the responses of the entire population.

4.5 Homes

After learning that the Masters occasionally take up residence on our plane of existence, one might wonder where they would choose to live. In regard to this matter as well as others concerning their day-to-day lives, Leadbeater provides valuable information. In *The Masters and the Path* (1925), he prefaces his discussion of where the Masters live by stating that Theosophical students tend to make a lot of mistakes about these beings (21). This accusation is not, however, tempered by an acknowledgement of the fact that such confusion might actually be due to inconsistencies existing in the reports offered by various authors. One common misconception, he writes, is that they live as part of a sizeable monastic community in some secret location. Another is that they are all Indians residing in the Himalayas. Others, he claims, believe that they are angels (18). In an attempt to set the record straight, he explains that there is indeed a brotherhood, but they do not live together. There is no need for them to remain in such close quarters because their communication takes place on a higher level (19).

Annie Besant also addresses the matter of where the Masters reside. For example, we learn from reading the transcript of her speech "The Masters as Facts and Ideals" (1895) that the Master Jesus spends most of his time in the mountains of Lebanon and that the Master Hilarion resides in Egypt, although he has presently chosen to make use of a Cretan body. Masters Morya and Koot Hoomi live in Tibet, near Shigaste, and have chosen to inhabit Indian bodies. Hungary is the home of Master Rakoczi, but he travels a great deal. For Besant, the matter of where the Masters choose to live is not an important one. It loses its significance, she maintains, when one realizes that they come and go at will. The physical body is merely a tool they use in order to carry out their tasks, and it can be put to the side at any moment (51).

Even more specific information about the living situations of the Masters is to be found in Leadbeater's *The Masters and the Path* (1925). Perhaps the most striking feature of the book is the inclusion of floor plans illustrating part of Master Koot Hoomi's house. Even though he emphasizes how misguided it is to believe that all of these beings live in the Himalayas, it is to this region he turns when painting his portrait of the idyllic setting in which we may find some of them holding court on their verandas or sitting in their gardens (28, 32). For example, he describes a valley in Tibet where the Masters Koot Hoomi, Morya, and Djwal Kul have their homes. According to Leadbeater's report, Koot Hoomi and Morya occupy houses on opposite sides of a picturesque pine tree laden ravine. Located nearby is an intricate network

of subterranean halls that house a great occult museum containing specimens from every stage of evolution and a small temple that is visited by villagers wishing to leave an offering to the exalted beings that have chosen to take up residence in their midst (23 – 25).

Leadbeater continues the tour by describing Koot Hoomi's home, which he claims to have visited (*The Masters and the Path* 25). The dwelling, made of stone and cared for by servants, is equipped with a library, a veranda, a bedroom, plus a number of offices and other rooms. There is also a large living room where the Master spends much of this time (26). The description Leadbeater provides of this room is very detailed, and he sings the praises of its magnificent fireplace, the Master's armchair, and the organ which he enjoys using for the purpose of playing Western music (29). The library is well-stocked with modern European works, which is fitting in this particular case as the Master is described by Leadbeater as being "a fine English scholar" also having a "thorough knowledge of French and German" (27).

4.5.1 Discussion

In the information presented above, one sees a number of examples of hybridity, another important concept in postcolonial studies, which concerns, as Loomba states, "the mobility and cross-overs of ideas and identities generated by colonialism" (173). While the Masters which feature prominently in Leadbeater's *The Masters and the Path* (1925) are described as being of Eastern descent and have taken up residence in Tibet, one could argue that their homes are crowded with features taken from a more Western context. For example, Leadbeater, as we have seen, states that Master Koot Hoomi is fond of Western organ music and has a keen interest in reading books written in English and other modern European languages. If the parts concerning meditation and villagers leaving offerings were to be removed from the description of Koot Hoomi's home life, the result might remind one of a scene from a Victorian or Edwardian novel, with the Master in the role of the armchair-lounging household patriarch. The above is an interesting matter to contemplate because one possible implication of this example of hybridity is that the ideal being, from a Theosophical point of view, is one that possesses both Eastern and Western qualities. While one might interpret a deliberate choice to live in the East as revealing a preference, the possibility of the West having anything of value to offer is not entirely denied.

A further aspect to consider in the light of Orientalism is found in the information Besant provides. While listing various places where the Masters have established their homes, she

draws attention to instances where the physical bodies they have chosen to use have their origins elsewhere. Furthermore, she remarks upon the general irrelevance of location. In one sense, this foreshadows a phenomenon that was already beginning to take shape during her lifetime, i.e., a state of affairs brought on by increasing globalization in which foreign travel was becoming an option for a larger segment of the population. As Dixon states in *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (2001), the closing years of the nineteenth century witnessed improvements in transportation and communication which made areas that had once seemed so remote appear to be significantly closer. While travel between these regions, for the most part, was still the privilege of a relatively small group largely based on factors such as gender and class, tourists, pilgrims, and professionals crossed the globe with increasing frequency (22). On the other hand, the message Besant sends is ultimately a contradictory one, as the fact that she apparently felt a need to include information about the sorts of bodies occupied indicates that it is still a matter of importance.

4.6 Appearance

When one starts wondering about issues as mundane as where the Masters live, questions concerning what they look like might not be far behind. Those who do wonder such a thing will not be disappointed, as a remarkable number of Theosophists claimed to have seen them and took up the pen to record their experiences. In *The Masters and the Path* (1925), Leadbeater details several of his own encounters with them. He describes, for example, having physical encounters with Masters Morya and Koot Hoomi (8). Based on his testimony, the latter seemed to be fond of appearing on the roof of the Theosophical Society's headquarters in Adyar (9, 10). He also mentions having had the privilege of being a dinner guest at one of the Master’s homes in India. On this occasion, he even stayed the night (*Masters of Wisdom* 5). Another instance took place in Italy where he claims to have had a chance encounter on the street with the Comte de St. Germain, sometimes referred to in Theosophical literature as Prince Rakoczy. The two took a walk to a nearby garden and discussed the Society's work (*The Masters and the Path* 8). These early meetings were followed by a significant development in his spiritual abilities which allowed him, he states, to visit the Masters using vehicles other than his physical body. In *Masters of Wisdom* (1918), he claims to have had contact with sixteen of these beings (3).

In the literature I studied, all of the Masters are, as the title implies, men. This is not particularly surprising when one takes into consideration the context in which these writings

were produced. In *Masters of Wisdom,* for example, Leadbeater states that they are "a small body of men only." Furthermore, according to Leadbeater, they come from all of the "developed nations of the world." As they no longer need a physical body unless they choose to adopt one for the purpose of helping humanity, they have free range to make decisions in regard to details such as appearance. Therefore, he argues, it is not of any particular importance to discuss the issue of "in what race they choose to present themselves." Despite having made such an assertion, he busies himself on the same page with making a list of the races to which they belong, i.e., most of the, as he sees it, "leading" ones:

> Four of these are at present wearing Indian bodies; two of them are at present in English bodies. One of the very greatest of all is in an Irish body, two are Greek, and three others have bodies in Aryan races, but I do not know what was the place of their birth. There are some others still greater who come from another evolution altogether. So that you see there is no foundation for the common idea that all such teachers belong to the one race. (3)

In *The Masters and the Path* (1925), more specific information is given about the physical features of the Masters. Leadbeater begins by explaining that each one belongs to a certain type, or Ray. Their appearance is determined by their type. For example, Master Morya belongs to the First Ray. As this particular Ray has power as its primary characteristic, typical First Ray men are kings, world leaders, and those who to an unusually high degree possess qualities that allow them to easily dominate others. Physical traits he associates with this type are great height, dark hair and eyes, a flowing beard, and an aquiline nose (33). Master Morya exhibits the features listed above and is described by Leadbeater in the following terms:

> He is a Rajput King by birth, and has a dark beard divided into two parts, dark, almost black, hair falling to His shoulders, and dark and piercing eyes, full or power. He is six feet six inches in height, and bears Himself like a soldier, speaking in short terse sentences as if He were accustomed to being instantly obeyed. In his presence there is a sense of dignity that compels the deepest reverence. (34)

Other Masters are also portrayed in equally vivid passages. Koot Hoomi is presented as a blue-eyed Kashmiri Brahman "as fair in complexion as the average Englishman." At times the phrases used have a tone similar to what one might expect to find when the main characters in a romance novel are being introduced. For example, Koot Hoomi's hair and beard are, according to Leadbeater, "brown, which, as the sunlight catches it becomes ruddy with glints of gold." In regard to his face, "it is hard to describe, for His expression is ever changing as

He smiles; the nose is finely chiseled, and the eyes are large and of a wonderful liquid blue" (*The Masters and the Path* 38). The Comte de St. Germain has brown eyes "filled with tenderness and humor," and the Master Hilarion is "wonderfully handsome, and looks rather younger than most of the Adepts" (39). In general, he states that the majority of them are "distinctly fine-looking men" with "practically perfect" physical bodies (21 – 22).

4.6.1 Discussion

The information presented above contains several items of interest that could be taken up in a discussion concerning Orientalism. For example, as has been discussed in previous sections, the brotherhood to which the Masters belong, a spiritual League of Nations of sorts, is comprised of a number of different peoples. This is also reflected in the descriptions of the Masters provided by Leadbeater. However, although it is repeatedly emphasized in the literature I examined that not all of the Masters are of Eastern descent, the bulk of the focus is, once again, placed on those who are. This is a matter of significance as it indicates that while the Brotherhood in general enjoys a privileged position in the evolutionary scheme set forth in the material examined, the Eastern members occupy a privileged position. It is an example of Orientalism motivated by admiration.

On a less flattering note, when the vibrancy of some of the adjectives used to describe the Masters starts to fade, that which remains can be interpreted as little more than a caricature, pieced together like a quilt from stock items pulled from someone's notion of what an individual from the East might look like. From a different perspective, on the other hand, one could argue that some of the descriptions are of hybrids and as such may suggest that an ideal being would possess traits associated with the East as well as traits associated with the West. An example would be Koot Hoomi, with his blue eyes and a complexion as fair as that of an "average Englishman" (*The Masters and the Path* 38). Furthermore, it also reflects the standpoint of the Romantic Orientalist as described in the "Method" chapter: while he or she is of the opinion that the East holds treasures not to be found in the West, completely replacing the ways of one with the other in not a desirable aim.

4.7 Functions

In the literature I reviewed, a great deal of evasion in terms of providing specific information obfuscates the matter of what the Masters actually do. For example, in *Masters of Wisdom* (1918), Leadbeater dodges the difficulties that might accompany discussing this topic by

writing that he cannot at that moment address it at any length, but the reader may if so inclined imagine their responsibilities to be very much like that which is usually assigned to the angels (3). However, a pattern does emerge if one leafs through enough material. After such an exercise, one could summarize the main task of the Masters as follows: They aid the progress of humanity. Leadbeater states in *The Masters and the Path* (1925) that the world, to a large extent, is guided and directed by the brotherhood to which the Masters belong (18). A desire to help the evolutionary process unfold in alignment with the will of the Logos is the primary motivation behind all of their actions (19).

In *The Masters and the Path* (1925), he maintains that they have chosen to remain in touch with humanity, as a labor of love, in order to "assist its evolution in beauty and love and truth, to help, as it were, to cultivate the Perfect Man--just as here and there we find a botanist who has special love for plants, and glories in the production of a perfect orange or a perfect rose" (4). A similar notion of a deep connection between the Masters and humanity can be found in Wood's *Natural Theosophy* (1930). He writes that they are never out of touch with any aspect of life (133). One intriguing explanation for the great deal of interest they devote to mankind's development is offered by Judge in *The Ocean of Theosophy* (1893). He states that although more progressed and glorious entities live on Venus, man is the most intelligent being in the universe. For this reason, he is aided by his elder brothers in a number of different capacities (Chapter 1).

One function that is regularly attributed to the Masters in the writings I examined concerns the preservation of knowledge gained, as Judge phrases it, through "aeons of trial and experience." Judge, when addressing this particular role, portrays them as those who carry truth through the ages. On a more personal level, examples of information to which they are privy include an individual's innermost nature, his or her powers, and destiny. They also possess knowledge of the states one finds oneself in before birth and after death. Furthermore, they, as the witnesses of the rises and falls of civilizations throughout the evolutionary process, preserve the memories of bygone glories. However, rather than being mere sponges or receptacles of wisdom, Judge gives them a more active role as the investigators of all beings and things (*The Ocean of Theosophy* Chapter 1).

As was discussed in an earlier section of this chapter, the Masters also serve as the revealers of knowledge. From time to time, they make themselves known to the wider world in order to inspire mankind with their teachings to consider "the great truths concerning the destiny of the soul" (Judge, *The Ocean of Theosophy* Chapter 1). In *The Masters and the Path*

of Occultism (1939), de Purucker writes that the appearance of the Masters coincides with certain stages in our evolution:

> The evolution of the race is like a rising along an arc for a time, until it reaches a culmination of power and faculty; and then slowly there is a sinking as the faculties wane, until the historic trough of the curve is reached. Then a new Great One appears and directs men on another upward round subsequent to the one down which they had come. Each such upward round is a little higher in its culmination than the one last passed.

The theme of the Masters preserving, revealing, and withdrawing so-called truths in such a way that corresponds to stages of evolution also appears in the introduction to *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). Blavatsky makes a safe and useful prediction when she writes that the teachings set forth in those volumes would be rejected during the century in which she revealed them (xxxvii).

Further functions attributed to the Masters include helping the dead in the intermediate world, watching over those who have progressed a little less than others, and working in the physical world to neutralize, as far as it is permitted, evil currents while simultaneously keeping the forces that work for and against evolution in balance. Another task described in the literature concerns those Masters connected with specific religions. They use these systems as a mean by which they can pour spiritual energy onto devotees through the appropriate means of grace (Besant, "The Masters as Facts and Ideals" 52). Furthermore, it is also stated that they work in conjunction with angels that have ties to specific nations. Besant states in regard to this particular function that they guide the "spiritual forces as the others [the Angels of Nations] guide the material, choosing and rejecting actors in the great Drama, supplying needful impulses in the right direction" (53).

Other good deeds done in order to aid the evolution of humanity include, according to de Purucker's *The Masters and the Path of Occultism* (1939), awakening those who have fallen into spiritual stagnation, giving encouragement, consoling those in need, and providing warnings. Much of what they do appears to be carried out behind the scenes. For example, Judge states in "The Adepts" (1893) that they influence the minds of men and women by sending out thought-forms as a means of preparing them for service to humanity in their next incarnation. A further means by which the Masters work backstage is through the spreading via

> impulses given in many places which must not be mentioned, a philosophy of life which will gradually affect the race mind, and in particular the active, conquering Western peoples, thus preparing the whole people to change and evolve yet further and further until evils disappear and better days and people reappear. ("The Adepts")

As can be seen from the above, the Masters have no shortage of activities to keep them busy. However, the bulk of the space concerning this particular topic in the writings I studied is devoted to the role they play as teachers. It is not the case, however, that every Master works in this capacity. Besant states, for example, that there are those who are instead engaged in other sorts of service to the world ("The Masters as Facts and Ideals" 49). Leadbeater also makes such a division. Some, he claims, remain in touch with the world to fill certain offices which are necessary for the progress of evolution (*Masters of Wisdom* 3). In *The Masters and the Path* (1925), he refers to those who serve as teachers as a sub-group within the larger brotherhood. He calls them the "Masters of Wisdom" and adds that part of their work includes taking on apprentices, which implies that they also have other duties (19). These are in the minority. Others, he writes in *Masters of Wisdom* (1918), have nothing more to do with humanity (3).

The Master as teacher, Besant maintains, helps those he chooses to have as pupils take a short-cut on the path of evolution ("The Masters as Facts and Ideals" 48). According to the view offered by de Purucker, he shows the student the path to becoming "more at one with the god with him" and helps to awaken latent faculties (*The Masters and the Path of Occultism*). In *The Masters and the Path of Occultism* (1939), he asserts that humankind needs to be in touch with these teachers. According to his point of view, life is a school and human beings are students:

> We are all little children, when you think of it, by comparison with the surrounding great mystery of the Universe; and even the greatest god cannot fully plumb the mystery; for were he able to plumb it to the deepest deep, to the uttermost end, then he would find a frontier at that uttermost end and no farther advancement would be possible. But there is no such uttermost end, no such frontier. There is always a grander and a greater world to explore, always something nobler beyond, something higher and more beautiful still, deeper, and more lofty.

In *Natural Theosophy* (1930), Wood compares the Masters to gardeners in their role as teachers. His view on their relationship with humanity is one which emphasizes the independence and strength of the latter. He states that men are like seeds which grow in

accordance with their own particular pattern and that the power which facilitates this process ultimately comes from the seed itself. It is for this reason that the Masters cannot make people evolve. Instead, according to the information he provides, they aid mankind in giving thought-forms and, curiously, money (129).

In "The Masters as Facts and Ideals" (1895), Besant asserts that they take both male and female pupils (49). While this version of events had to be the case in order to explain and justify her exalted position in the Society as well as Blavatsky's, it may seem startling to read such a statement amidst the near constant use of male pronouns in other Theosophical writings. On the other hand, it does appear that the Masters are quite selective in regard to the pupils they select. For instance, in *The Key to Theosophy* (1889), Blavatsky writes that their teachings are transmitted to very few individuals (Section 14). According to Judge, those who receive some sort of contact from the Masters have earned that privilege ("Are We Deserted?). In *Masters of Wisdom* (1918), Leadbeater states that apprentices are chosen based on qualities such as selflessness and usefulness. According to his view, it is not worthwhile to try and educate a pupil if he or she cannot serve as an instrument (*Masters of Wisdom* 6). In Wood's *Natural Theosophy*, one encounters a further instance of the emphasis this particular author puts on mankind's integrity. He maintains that if one entertains the notion of needing a Master, they have subsequently undermined their own power, a move which then delays their progress (132). As the Masters are also subject to the laws of attraction and repulsion, those who most deserve their "companionship" – the term used by Wood – are the ones who get it. Spending thirty minutes each morning upon wakening willing oneself to become wiser, more illuminated, and more powerful are suggested means by which one can cultivate worthiness (134).

In terms of practical matters, Blavatsky writes in *The Key to Theosophy* (1889) that communication between the Masters and ordinary humanity cannot occur unless a psychic relationship has been established (Section 14). Such a link is assisted by faith and devotion (Section 14). One of the means by which the Masters impart instruction to pupils is through the use of thought-forms. Wood states that if we are able to raise our understanding to the particular "mind-plane" upon which they operate, this will bring about a sort of unity. Their ideas subsequently become our ideas, and we will thus think their thoughts. Put another way, the teaching comes as a kind of intuition, and the result is that we will start to operate in harmony with them and their spirit and law, which will also have become our spirit and law. The relationship is then, Wood maintains, not one built on dominance or interference (*Natural Theosophy* 138).

In addition to the tasks and responsibilities described above, Judge in his writings casts the Masters in a fascinating new role in which they become intertwined with major events in the history of the United States. For example, Judge has them taking part in the founding of the relatively young country by influencing the minds of Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin with thought-forms. We can read, for example, in "The Adepts in America in 1776" (1883) the following:

> They hovered over Washington, Jefferson, and all the other brave freemasons who dared to found a free Government in the West, which could be pure from the dross of dogmatism, they cleared their minds, inspired their pens and left upon the great seal of this mighty nation the memorial of their presence.

As time went by, the story became richer and various other historical personages became enveloped in the plotline. This can be seen in another piece which appeared in the periodical "The Theosophist" in 1884 which describes the relationship between Friedrich von Steuben, a prominent general who fought in George Washington's army, and French general Count Claude Louis de Saint-Germain, who, according to the author of the letter, "everybody knows...was an Adept" ("Adepts and Politics"). Reflecting the desire to make a potpourri of Eastern and Western traditions that was widespread among a number of Theosophists, the letter closes with a quote from the *Bhagavad Gita* in which Krishna states that he appears in every age to restore duty and destroy evil doing.

4.7.1 Discussion

According to the material I analyzed for this study, the Masters shoulder a great deal of responsibility in terms of ensuring that the workings of our world continue to function in an orderly fashion. They are entrusted with many sorts of tasks and, in general, carry out what could be seen in some ways as a thankless job, especially when the teachings they wish to share with mankind, so fastidiously protected through the ages, are time and time again ridiculed and rejected. In regard to the notion of Orientalism, the fact that a role of such importance is assigned to individuals from the Eastern part of the world might indicate that this region is at least to a certain degree held in high esteem. On the other hand, however, the matter is not quite so simple. One aspect that casts a shadow on what might otherwise be construed as a wholly complimentary gesture is the fact that their duties are, as we have seen, delegated to them. Furthermore, it is interesting to contemplate their role as servants in

general. While possessing capabilities that at this point in time greatly exceed what is attainable in the space of one lifetime for the majority of men and women, they spend their time ceaselessly toiling for the good of mankind and the entire evolutionary scheme in general.

Another item worthy of attention in regard to the purpose of this study is the notion of angels that are specifically associated with different races. That such a feature is part of the cosmology described in the writings I examined appears to indicate that, from a Theosophical perspective, race is an inseparable ingredient in efforts to make sense of how the universe is organized. Even when considering a level so high in terms of development, the perceived divisions that allow for a handy yet often inconsistent means of classifying humanity are still an integral part of thinking. A further aspect of the various tasks carried out by the Masters that can be discussed in the light of Orientalism is the role they are assigned by Judge in the events leading up to the founding of the United States. Like many other instances that have been discussed in previous sections, this is one which may leave the reader with very different impression once the issue receives closer scrutiny. At first glance, especially with the notion of Manifest Destiny and its relation to the concept of race kept in mind, it might seem like a move motivated by admiration when a part of great significance at such a crucial and cherished point in the unfolding of American history is assigned to a group that is comprised of beings representing a number of different peoples. However, attention ought to be drawn to the conspicuous absence in these passages of the otherwise seemingly omnipresent Masters Koot Hoomi and Morya and their subsequent replacement by some of their European brothers.

4.8 How One Becomes a Master

When reading Theosophical literature which concerns the Masters, one might wonder how such an illustrious position is secured. The subject is addressed with a comforting optimism in Leadbeater's *Masters of Wisdom* (1918). He claims, for example, that the attainment of perfection is a possibility for every man, and that each moment is an opportunity to accelerate the process (3). An important word in this case is *opportunity*. One way in which this statement could be interpreted is as an implication of the necessity of action: if one wishes to reach such a level, it will more than likely not be accomplished by merely longing for it to occur. This is also a message that is present in Besant's speech "The Masters as Facts and Ideals" (1895). According to her view, becoming a Master requires a great deal of effort. The

early stages of the path one must take require the cultivation of qualities such as selflessness and carefulness (36). Furthermore, one should attempt to live nobly, and purely, always striving to leave the world a better place. This, she states, can be accomplished by leading a useful life and upholding one's duties no matter the circumstances (36 – 37).

Eventually, if a suitable degree of devotion has been demonstrated through, e.g., serving others, the Masters in charge of teaching step in, according to Besant, and begin training the evolving soul. However, if one is to keep advancing, further effort is required through meeting a whole host of demands such as realizing that all living things are fundamentally one, cultivating self-discipline, and ceasing to lament over personal sorrows and pains. Achieving the above is a tall order, and the qualities that are marketed as being particularly desirable by Besant continue to develop lifetime after lifetime. Eventually the human characteristics that are considered to be weaknesses fall away and are replaced with compassion, knowledge, purity, and spirituality. Liberation is finally attained, she states, when the last remaining limitations of the human condition have been conquered. While standing on the threshold to Nirvana, however, the newly unshackled individual's ears will, according to Besant, detect the cries of those left behind (42). The Master, then, is the one that can go on, but chooses instead to turn back in order to help those in need, continuing with this mission until all of humanity is free (43).

4.8.1 Discussion

What is significant about the rigid path one must tread to become a Master when seen in the light of Orientalism is that it is arguably one of slavish obedience. It requires sublimating the will in order to achieve a goal that puts one in the position of carrying out assigned chores which further the unfolding of a plan designed by a seemingly remote and inscrutable higher power. Liberation ultimately comes as a result of hard labor and squelching any hopes of enjoying personal gain in terms of worldly affairs. One underlying message of this particular aspect of Theosophical teaching could be that success in life depends on being submissive to those who purport to have a greater knowledge and understanding of the workings of the world. Furthermore, one could argue that the situation to a certain degree mirrors the relationship between the peoples of India and the Raj. In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998), Loomba states while discussing modes of interaction between colonizers and local populations that British colonialism did not allow for easy contact. This reflected the nature of colonial administration which to a great extent functioned through existing power structures

and local authorities. However, even though millions of Indians never saw an English person throughout the term of the Raj, this does not mean, according to Loomba, that their lives were not affected by empire (111).

4.9 Existence

The issue of whether or not the Masters exist caused much strife in the Theosophical Society during its early years.

> A VISITOR from one of the other planets of the solar system who might learn the term *Mahatma* after arriving here would certainly suppose that the etymology of the word undoubtedly inspired the believers in *Mahatmas* with the devotion, fearlessness, hope, and energy which such an ideal should arouse in those who have the welfare of the human race at heart. (Judge, "The Mahatmas as Ideals and Facts")

Thus begins Judge's article "The Mahatmas as Ideals and Facts" (1893). This visitor, he continues, would subsequently be disappointed after learning that so few Society members were vocal about their belief in such beings. The article has the feel of a passive-aggressive reprimand, complete with the hint of a threat: If belief in the Masters is not openly professed, their ability to help mankind is hindered.

Through the years, various arguments were constructed to defend the existence of the Masters. For example, Judge offers the following: One does not question the existence of a historical personage such as Napoleon. Should not the same courtesy be extended to the Masters ("The Adepts")? This argument is also found in Besant's lecture "The Masters as Facts and Ideals" (1895). She states that it is foolish to deny the existence of a person just because one has never met him or her (26). Furthermore, she states that all "great" religions believe in the existence of men who have brought knowledge of spiritual truth to the world such as Zoroaster and Buddha (17). Historical evidence of such men is to be found, she claims, in the literature of these religions (20). If these illustrious beings graced the earth with their presence in earlier times, it seems reasonable, according to her estimation, to at the present speculate about if it is possible to contact them (26).

Another argument provided by Besant appeals to the scientific-minded. Offering for consideration what might be termed a standard Theosophical view which posits that the human race continually progresses and that cycle after cycle nations reach ever higher pinnacles of knowledge and development, she states that few people would refute the notion

of evolution. The existence of the Masters, she claims, makes sense within such a context. If one takes into consideration all the changes that have occurred through the ages and the differences that exist between "primitive and highly developed man," it is not irrational, she maintains, to believe in the existence of beings far above the evolutionary level of modern man ("The Masters as Facts and Ideals" 18).

In response to jibes insisting that the Masters would reveal themselves if they did in fact exist, Judge states in *The Ocean of Theosophy* (1893) that such a display cannot occur as it is not in accordance with the unfolding of the evolutionary plan. As our present society is based on such things as fame, glory, and personality, it would be counterproductive for the Masters to reveal themselves. The average human mind is quite simply not yet at a level that would make conditions suitable for the Masters to reveal themselves (Chapter 1). In a further move to spare the Masters the trouble of having to demonstrate their powers, Judge states that they have ceased for the time being to be as active in the world as they once had been ("Will Masters Help Be Withdrawn in 1898 until 1975?"). When the matter of their existence became too heated, the Masters themselves would conveniently enter the scene and, e.g., write a chastising letter (Judge, "A Words on the 'Secret Doctrine'"). Why it was believed that such an act would convince someone who was already of the opinion that the existing letters were fraudulent is a bit of a mystery.

In *The Key to Theosophy*, when the question of why the Masters do not settle the matter by demonstrating their existence in some grand spectacle is introduced, Blavatsky boils the issue down to a single point and poses a different question: Does it really matter if the Masters truly exist? As the teachings of the Society are, in her words, "one of the grandest and most beneficent philosophies," it seems absurd that such a fuss was made over the whole matter in the first place (Section 14). Besant uses a similar argument in "The Masters as Facts and Ideals" (1895). Suggesting that whether or not the Masters exist is actually an irrelevant matter, she defends the *ideal* of the Master. The notion that one can become divine, she maintains, is one that inspires, spreads cheer, and gives hope. She states that even if one does not believe in the Masters, it is undeniable that the ideal is a noble one which elevates and provides direction for one's development (44 – 47).

In *The Masters and the Path* (1925), Leadbeater also discusses the question of belief. He states that ample testimony regarding their existence can be found in his writings as well as those of other Society members who claimed to have seen them (5). One explanation he offers for the looming shadow of doubt that continually haunted the Society concerns the issue with either the Masters or those who claimed to see them not occupying a physical body at the time

(6). Depending upon the individual's level of development, encounters may occur when the individual is experiencing altered states of consciousness. As a defense of reports concerning such meetings, he writes that

> [p]eople have suggested that I and others who have the same experience may be but dreaming, since these visits take place during the sleep of the body; I can only reply that it is a remarkably consistent dream, extending in my own case over forty years, and that it has been dreamt simultaneously by a large number of people. (11)

In regard to the testimony offered by prominent Society members in support of the existence of the Masters, Besant heaps a goodly portion of scorn in "The Masters as Facts and Ideals" (1895) on those who would dare to doubt the claims of such respectable individuals:

> Are you going to say that they are all fools? But they are men and women living the ordinary life, men and women who amongst those who know them stand as persons of education, of intelligence, showing the ordinary powers of discrimination and of knowledge that others possess. Are you going to say that we are all mad? That is rather a rash assertion to make against constantly growing numbers of apparently reasonable men and women. What other sort of evidence can you demand for the existence of anyone save the evidence of those who know him, of persons of integrity and of honour who are living amongst yourselves? (33)

Leadbeater in *The Masters and the Path* (1925) also hints at the existence of a "vast amount of Indian testimony." He states, however, that it has never been collected because the Masters were an integral part of reality for those who had the experiences and therefore did not seem worthy of record (7). A similar view concerning a common frame of reference for all of India's inhabitants is found in Besant's "The Masters as Facts and Ideals" when she sets forth the following for consideration:

> Ask any Indian of today what is his belief on this question, and he will tell you, if he has not been Westernized, and you can gain his confidence, that always in his land there has remained the belief that these Men have existed in the past and have not passed out of existence in the present; that they have more and more withdrawn from the ordinary haunts of men, that they have become more and more difficult to discover as materiality has made its way and spirituality has diminished; but that still they can occasionally be found... (23)

As a further defense of their existence, Besant reminds the audience that it is absurd to deny the existence of something that one personally has not endeavored to investigate, just as it would be

> for some simple Indian, who has never had the slightest experience of Western experiments, say in the Royal Institution, to sit down and declare that those are absolutely impossible and ludicrous, because he himself has not travelled here and has not had the opportunity of seeing them performed. (25)

Her phrasing might catch one off guard after all the praise she lavished on India in the earlier portions of the speech referred to in various sections of this chapter.

4.9.1 Discussion

Several items presented in this section are of interest for this study. Firstly, the notion of India as a land stuck in a time warp with homogenous population sharing an identical frame of reference and a monolithic culture emerges once again. This is especially noticeable when Leadbeater mentions the Indian testimony that exists concerning encounters with the Masters Furthermore, the divide that separates East and West appears to be a wide one, based on the points of view represented in the material analyzed in this study, and although the image of India that is offered seems to receive a privileged position, one finds what may be interpreted as some very definite ideas about the sorts of activities that belong on the respective sides. For example, reading Besant's words may leave one with the impression that those from the Western world are better suited for scientific thinking.

An additional factor that deserves notice is that the Masters, during the course of debates concerning whether or not they exist in the first place, receive the worst blow of all from the very individuals purporting to defend them. By asking if it truly matters if such beings really do grace the earth with their presence, as is done by both Blavatsky and Besant, the worth of the Masters as independent agents is effectively undermined. From this point of view, their existence as individuals does not matter. Instead, it is their usefulness as tools that serve to benefit the agendas of others that is important. One could argue that this attitude is also one which mirrors relations between colonizers and the colonized.

5 CONCLUSIONS

As stated in the first chapter, the aim of this study is to critically examine Theosophical literature composed in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century which concerns the Masters, highly evolved beings alleged to be the true sources of the teachings expounded by H. P. Blavatsky and various other members of the Theosophical Society, in the light of Orientalism, an important concept in postcolonial studies. Using textual analysis as a method, I analyzed a selection of writings composed by six influential Society members between the years 1888 and 1939 in order to achieve this. The question I sought to answer is as follows: In what ways do these descriptions exemplify the postcolonial notion of Orientalism? The results of my analysis were presented in the previous chapter, divided into a number of categories based on themes I found to be recurring in the texts. In this chapter, I summarize and discuss several conclusions that I believe can be drawn based on these findings.

As I set forth in the "Method" chapter, Orientalism is understood and utilized differently by different theorists. Over three decades have gone by since Said's groundbreaking work first appeared, and his ideas have through the years received a great deal of criticism from theorists and scholars active in a number of fields for not properly reflecting the complexity of the phenomenon. For example, as was stated in the section of this paper entitled "Affirmative Orientalism," J.J. Clarke maintains that Said's association of Orientalism with colonizing power only represents part of the story. Absent from this way of seeing things are, according to Clarke, the ways in which scholars and the general public, motivated by admiration, have for several centuries attempted to understand and integrate aspects of Eastern cultures into their own concerns. They have, for example, served as a platform from which individuals could launch a critique of their own societies. Furthermore, influences from regions perceived as being exotic could provide inspiration for those who felt the dull ache of emptiness or world-weariness. Therefore, as Clarke asserts, Orientalism cannot be fully understood in terms of power and domination (8). Though perhaps expressed in an overly simplistic way, one could say, as I have suggested at various points in this paper, that Orientalism can be seen as having both positive and negative sides. However, it is arguable that even the more affirmative manifestations of Orientalism have a shadow side. Although the versions of the East that are constructed in the process enjoy a high status, they emphasize the otherness of the region in question.

As backdrop for what follows in this chapter, I offer the following: if one looks to the material analyzed in this study as the basis for such an argument, it appears that the East is

afforded a privileged position over the West in Theosophical thought. On the other hand, the heaps of fanciful and adjective-laden praise come at a price. While some of the Society members that have featured prominently in this study, e.g., Blavatsky, Besant, Olcott, Wood, and Leadbeater, as well as others, did indeed have a relationship with the East that exists "out there" in the world of things, the one that is glorified in the writings analyzed in this study is the product of Orientalism. It is thus a construct shaped by a number of influences. For example, the India that emerges is a place where time has stood still for countless ages. The inhabitants, like butterflies pinned down and arranged in a display case by a collector, are robbed of their ability to think and act independently. Instead, they are transformed into a faceless crowd which experiences life in an identical way as the result of sharing the monolithic common frame of reference allotted to them by those professing to have knowledge of their essence. The admiration for certain features perceived to be inherently Eastern was at least partially inspired by their alleged antiquity, and certain authors such as Besant were not shy about voicing disapproving opinions concerning contemporary situations in the country which they viewed as being in need of rehabilitation. Others, such as Judge, painted the East as a vulnerable treasure trove of priceless spiritual jewels which requires the protection of outside parties.

Contemplating the notion of the Masters in the light of Orientalism yields a number of interesting results. The writings I analyzed exemplify the notion in a number of ways. Firstly, one can detect it in connection with the various names and titles heaped upon them by various authors. For example, while the title *Master* suggests that they are entrusted with some kind of authority, it is often undermined or severely limited. In the accounts I analyzed, for example, these beings spend much of their time contending with a never-ending series of chores delegated to them by an anonymous higher power that runs the show from behind the scenes while all the hard work necessary to keeping the production running smoothly is carried out by various cosmic helpers. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, their situation bears a striking resemblance to the relationship that exists between colonizers and the colonized. Secondly, examples of Orientalism can be seen in the ways the Masters are defined in the texts. One such instance is the inclusion of sweeping claims asserting that inhabitants of India have been aware of the existence of such beings for countless ages. Moreover, it is also noticeable when they are offered as role models to the reader. On the one hand, they have managed to cultivate a number of qualities that are seen as being desirable from the points of view of the authors with which this study has been concerned. However, time and time again,

their authority is subverted by these same individuals whom in other circumstances use them as tools in order to validate their own teachings.

Discussions about the brotherhood to which the Masters are said to belong also exemplify Orientalism. Although this elite group is comprised of many impressive members such as Jesus and Moses, the ones that receive the majority of attention in the pages I analyzed are Koot Hoomi and Morya, both depicted as having Eastern roots. This is an example of Orientalism motivated by admiration. This admiration, however, is extended to very little of the Eastern world. It needs to be remembered that while the Brotherhood is a multi-cultural organization, the range of peoples represented is extremely narrow. Another area of interest in regard to the purposes of this study is characteristics the Masters are said to possess. For example, having reached an advanced stage in the evolutionary process, the Masters are said to have accumulated a store of wisdom which they strive to preserve and transmit to others. This is a recurring theme appearing in a number of the books and articles I reviewed. Their aim is frustrated, however, by the fact that those supposedly in a subordinate position, e.g., ordinary humanity, most often do not heed their words.

The matter of where the Masters live is also significant when viewed in the light of Orientalism. While it seems that they could choose to live in any part of the world, they have decided to settle down in the East. This gesture is of course a reflection of the high status afforded to this region by the authors with which this study has been concerned. However, it must be remembered that their versions of the East can be interpreted as a grotesquely exaggerated caricatures at least partially crafted of the same filmy gauze that makes up escapist dreams. Furthermore, the visitor to Koot Hoomi's mountain retreat in the Himalayas as it is described by Leadbeater would find it to be cluttered with accents borrowed from the home of a middle class protagonist in a late Victorian or Edwardian era novel. In addition to the above, descriptions of what the Masters look like include many instances of Orientalism. For example, Koot Hoomi’s pale skin and light blue eyes, described in the writings of Leadbeater and depicted visually in the portrait painted by Schmiechen, may reveal a hesitancy to fully commit to the object seemingly held in such high esteem. The descriptions of their homes also reflect this reluctance. It must be noted, however, that an unwillingness to completely embrace all aspects associated with the East need not be interpreted as being wholly negative. One could argue that the Theosophical ideal, as it is embodied in the writings of a number of the authors included in this study, lies in a carefully selected combination of the qualities deemed most admirable from both the East and the West.

Examining passages that discuss the various functions attributed to the Masters also gives results that are relevant for this study. One issue concerns the fact that the Masters occupy a submissive position in this context. Although they allegedly have a perfect understanding of the laws of nature, their tasks are ultimately delegated to them. Furthermore, a disinclination to value the East over the West in all instances is also discernable in the way in which Judge replaces Koot Hoomi and Morya with their European counterparts, when he incorporates the Masters into pivotal moments in early American history. Moreover, information concerning how one becomes a Master exemplifies Orientalism, especially when the focus of the texts is on Koot Hoomi and Morya. Based on the accounts I examined, it is largely a path of slavish obedience which does not allow room for personal gain. Lastly, debates about whether or not these beings exist are also worthy of being examined. By positing that whether or not they truly exist is actually an irrelevant matter, Besant and Blavatsky deliver a hefty wallop to their overall worth which arguably places them more or less on the same level as characters constructed for the purposes of furthering the action in a cautionary tale.

In general, the love affair a number of the early members of the Theosophical Society discussed in this paper had with the versions of the East they constructed and subsequently peddled to others through their writings was a very complex one. As I have demonstrated above, it simultaneously elevates and denigrates. For those seeking to understand the implications of such a relationship for both parties, the descriptions of the Masters analyzed in the previous chapter, especially those of Koot Hoomi and Morya, add a further dimension to the picture. They are alternately praised, exploited, undermined, and made the object of worship. When treated as a specific example of Orientalism, an exploration of these beings and the place in Theosophy that was carved out for them by various individuals sheds light on the way in which conceptualizations of groups perceived as being distinctly other are constructed, a phenomenon which arguably is just as widespread today as it was when H. P. Blavatsky penned the opening words of *The Secret Doctrine* (1888).

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