



# A PILGRIM'S PATH

A Historical Overview of the Development of the  
Theosophical Concept of Evolution





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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Introduction

The nineteenth century was a turbulent time for religion throughout the Western world. Europe and the United States were confronted with the scientific advancements from the Enlightenment onwards, which often created a dichotomy between religion and science. One of the most controversial and influential scientific advancements of that time, was specifically centered around the evolution theory as posited by Charles Darwin (1809-1882) in his *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). Not only was the rise of empirical science breaking down the authority of the religious *status quo*, but slow and steady religious pluralism began to rise. Imperialism and colonialism led to the discovery of, from a Western viewpoint, new religions. Thanks to the new studies of Comparative Religion and Orientalism, with prominent figures such as Max Müller (1829-1900) and Sir William Jones (1746-1794), the West became known with the Eastern, Oriental traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism.<sup>1</sup> As Church authority declined, religious pluralism dawned in the West. Eastern influences slowly started spreading, and even more so, there was a sudden rise of spiritualism and esoteric and occult movements out in the open.<sup>2</sup>

In reaction to Darwin's evolution theory and the rise of science since the Enlightenment onwards, the Catholic Church started to feel that it might endanger its position as the religious and social *status quo*.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, the Vatican was afraid of Darwin's ideas since the evolution theory always had strong connotations to atheism and materialism,<sup>4</sup> on the other hand the antagonism was fueled by the subversion of some of the core dogmas of the Catholic belief, namely mankind's supposedly unique creation and its divine origins.<sup>5</sup> The evolution theory directly challenged the fundamental belief that god created mankind directly, and that mankind did thus stem from Adam and Eve and thus from god himself. The Catholic Church feared that the undermining of such core dogmas would result in the loss of authority and power, and therefore denied any claim of evolution up until the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> While some Catholic adherents took a more liberal stance towards science and evolution, for example by positing the idea of a guided evolution, the Vatican remained hostile and strict in their opinions.<sup>7</sup> This strictness only fueled the internal struggles in the Christian world, adding up to more schisms and the rise of even more denominations. Consequently, the gradual loss of authority of the Catholic Church didn't only contribute to the rise of Christian pluralism, but it also made room for religions that came from faraway places, to take on a more prominent role in the religious milieu of the West.

This religious pluralism came to a zenith on the eleventh of September 1893, during the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. This conference, which had the aim to start a dialogue between a diversity of religious traditions, created a whole new framework for religion, a place where East and West could come together. During this conference, there was a multitude of representatives for a variety of religions. The greater part of the attendees was representing various forms of Christianity, ranging from Eastern Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism. However, for the first time in history, there was an assemblage of Eastern delegates representing for example Jainism, Taoism, Zen, Shintoism, Confucianism and

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1 Lubelsky, Isaac, "Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy", in Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden, 2013) 338-339.

2 Hanegraaff, Wouter, *Western Esotericism. A Guide for the Perplexed* (2013) 36.

3 Turner, Frank M., "The late Victorian conflict of science and religion as an event in nineteenth-century intellectual and cultural history", *Science and Religion. New Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge, 2010) 90.

4 Blancke, Stefaan, "Catholic Responses to Evolution, 1859–2009: Local Influences and Mid-Scale Patterns", *Journal of Religious History*, 37/3 (2013), 356.

5 *Ibidem*, 356.

6 *Ibid*, 356.

7 *Ibid*, 356.

Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the Eastern and Western religious beliefs, there were also representatives of new religious movements, such as spiritualism and Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science. However, from the struggle with scientific advancements, the encounter of East and West and the ever internationalization of the world, grew a new tradition, also present at this conference: the Theosophical Society.<sup>9</sup> With the motto: "There is no Religion Higher than Truth", the Theosophical Society strived towards a synthesis of religion and science, combining the Eastern traditions, such as Yoga, Advaita Vedanta and Tibetan Buddhism, with Western Gnosticism, Christianity and even more important, with Western scientific advancements.<sup>10</sup>

## 1.2. The Theosophical Society

Since the Theosophical Society was still in development during this aforementioned conference, it had yet to calcify its teachings and organization. Nevertheless, while the Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), William Quan Judge (1851-1896) and various others, with the goal to research the occult and esoteric, most of the ideas and philosophies were already written down by Blavatsky in her almost encyclopedia-like *Isis Unveiled* (1877).<sup>11</sup> By the comparative study of various religions and philosophies, Blavatsky managed to write a two-volume set of books focused on the 'mysteries of the old and modern science and religion'.<sup>12</sup> The first volume being on modern day science with its shortcomings and the 'theosophical' history of science, the second being on religion as seen from an esoteric point of view. Due to the newness of the religion, while claiming to be part of a larger teaching taught throughout the history of mankind, the Theosophical Society was more competent to adapt to the new changes in science and culture than various other religious movements. During the nineteenth century ideas such as Herbert Spencer's (1820-1903) cosmic evolution, John Tyndall's (1820-1893) materialism and even more so Darwin's theory of evolution, were causing friction in the established religions, Theosophists however took it upon themselves to implement these new ideas into their own religious framework.<sup>13</sup> Thus, while most religious currents had to accept or deny the new ideas on the origins of mankind, the Theosophical Society made it part of their core teachings. By combining science, the new influx of Oriental philosophies and popular fiction, Blavatsky managed to blend various concepts into something new, namely the Theosophical Society.<sup>14</sup>

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8 Seager, Richard, *Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices From the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893* (Open Court Publishing, 1999).

9 In this research I'll deliberately try to avoid using the term 'Theosophy', instead I'll be using the term 'the Theosophical Society'. I've chosen this term since Theosophy can also refer to older 'Theosophical' currents, which are mainly Christian in origin.

10 Goodrick-Clarke, Nicholas, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (Oxford, 2008) 212.

11 Godwin, Joscelyn, "Blavatsky and the First Generations of Theosophy", in Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden, 2013) 19.

12 The subtitle for the book *Isis Unveiled*.

13 Turner, "The late Victorian conflict of science and religion as an event in nineteenth-century intellectual and cultural history", 88.

14 For more information on the Theosophical Society and their relationship to science see: Aspren, Egil, "Theosophical Attitude towards Science: Past and Present", in Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden, 2013) 410. For the relationship between the Theosophical Society and fiction see: Gilhus, Ingvild Sælid and Lisbeth Mikaelsson, "Theosophy and Popular Fiction", in Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden, 2013) 453-472. For more information on the Oriental influences in the Theosophical Society see: Partridge, Christopher, "Lost Horizon. H.P. Blavatsky and Theosophical Orientalism", in Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden, 2013) 309-334.

### 1.3. Theosophical Evolution

Within the macrohistorical worldview of the Theosophical Society, the evolution theory played a major role. While building her religious ideas around the idea of the evolution of mankind, Blavatsky explicitly stated that she believed Darwin's theories to be incomplete by stating that "Darwinism only meets Evolution at its midway point."<sup>15</sup> While Darwin's theory claimed mankind to be descending from apes, Blavatsky mentioned that the common features between mankind and 'gorillas' are simply the result of breeding between astral beings and monkeys. Mankind did thus not stem from ape, but rather from astral beings.<sup>16</sup> Blavatsky thus rewrites the hypotheses on evolution and blends it with her own religious ideas and goals, thus creating a new theosophical evolution. This *theosophical evolution*, as I will call it in this research, consisted out of various concepts such as social Darwinist ideas on race superiority and inferiority, lost civilizations and continents, and the Oriental idea of reincarnation and spiritual evolution. Blavatsky thus created, very pragmatically, a new sort of evolution that tried to fill in the void between religion and science. However, the first chapter will show in a more precise way how Blavatsky's idea of evolution was created and influenced.

### 1.4. Shifts in the Theosophical Society

But, as most religious currents, the Theosophical Society changed as time went by. The ideas on the evolution of mankind didn't only change after the passing of long time spans, but also in the life of Blavatsky herself there were various adaptations. In her first work *Isis Unveiled* the focus is mainly on magic, which was a much-debated topic as the result of the revival of Hermeticism, the mysteries surrounding Rosicrucianism and of course thanks the dawn of spiritualism and Mesmerism. In this early stage of the Theosophical Society, the root of all religious and esoteric knowledge was believed to be found in ancient Egypt. With the 'land of mysteries' as its base, Egyptian 'magic' supposedly influenced the great philosophies of the Greeks, Gnostics, Neo-Platonists and Hermeticism. In her second work *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) one can notice a shift in the origins of arcane knowledge, namely a shift towards the East. To be specific to India. Influenced by new and popular ideas of Indo-Europeans and Aryans, books such as *The Light of Asia* by Sir Edward Arnold (1832-1904) and the focus on India by Orientalists such as Max Müller, the Theosophical Society moved towards India, not only in their ideas but also physically.<sup>17</sup> Here Blavatsky and her companions were introduced to Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism and Indian literature such as the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.<sup>18</sup> After the formal conversion of Blavatsky and Olcott to Buddhism, the Theosophical Society moved to Adyar in Madras India in 1882, where the new headquarters were established.<sup>19</sup> It was also within this period that Blavatsky started writing her 1600-page *magnum opus*, *The Secret Doctrine*, which was published in 1888. After the death of Blavatsky in 1891, Olcott remained president of the Theosophical Society until 1907.

The period thereafter, the Theosophical Society started to split up due to leadership conflicts. In Adyar, Olcott shared his leadership with the new Annie Besant (1847-1933), who was then the president of the practical and elitist inner-circle, the Esoteric Section, and who would become president of the Theosophical Society in 1907 after the death of Olcott. Besant however, had a different look upon the theosophical story of origin and its evolution. Together with Charles Webster Leadbeater (1853-1934) she started focusing on the idea of the new messiah, the new 'world teacher' embodied in the young Indian boy Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986). Besant's ideas and goals differed from other Theosophists, who still clung to Blavatsky's

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15 cf. Aspren, "Theosophical Attitude towards Science: Past and Present", 410.

16 Lubelsky, "Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy", 346.

17 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 218.

18 *Ibidem*, 219.

19 *Ibid*, 219.



ideas, which led to more schisms within the Society. One of these schisms was by the former secretary of the German chapter of the Theosophical Society, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). Steiner, who did not agree with Besant's idea of the new world leader Krishnamurti, thus created his own movement. This movement, the Anthroposophical Society, was created in 1913 and focused on a more Western view on philosophy and the application thereof as portrayed by Steiner himself.<sup>20</sup>

As most religions tend to do, their ideas change as time goes by. The same goes for the Theosophical Society. Their core ideas, such as their views on evolution, changes with it. As different leaders tend to take different roads and hold different ideas, so do ideas change with them. In this essay, the focus will thus be on the change of one of these ideas, namely the idea of the evolution of mankind within the Theosophical Society. The research question will thus be: How did the ideas on the evolution of mankind change from the first generation, as seen by Blavatsky, in relationship to the second generation, as seen by Annie Besant and Rudolf Steiner? This process will be studied historically and will thus start with the views of Blavatsky and look at the two most prominent Theosophists after her death. Both Besant and Steiner are to be considered the second generation, yet are historically successive and can thus give us a better understanding of the development of philosophical ideas, such as, in this case, the theosophical evolution of mankind.

## **1.5. Analysis and Chapter Overview**

### *1.5.1. Analysis and Methodology*

To answer the question: "How did the ideas on the evolution of mankind change from the first generation, as seen by Blavatsky, in relationship to the second generation, as seen by Annie Besant and Rudolf Steiner?", I'll be making use of four key concepts within the theosophical evolution. Throughout this essay these four core concepts will show how the three Theosophists differed in their view on theosophical evolution.

These four concepts are:

1. The notion of race; What role does race play within the theosophical evolution?
2. The role of a messiah; What role does the messiah play within the theosophical evolution?
3. The role of Christianity; What role does Christ and Christianity play within the theosophical evolution?
4. Soteriology; What is the supposed end goal of theosophical evolution, is it linear or circular and is it guided or mechanical?

Every chapter will revolve around these four features, yet in some chapters some features are more present than in others. For example, the role of a messiah is not necessarily of importance during Blavatsky's period, nevertheless it plays an enormous role during the second generation theories of Steiner and Besant. By making use of these four core concepts I'll conclude by showing the deviation in theories on the theosophical evolution.

### *1.5.2. Blavatsky's Theosophical Evolution*

In the first chapter the focus will be on Blavatsky's ideas on theosophical evolution. As previously mentioned, these ideas and the Theosophical Society itself were created in a period of time in which there were various strong influences. To understand the ideas of Blavatsky, it is thus necessary to slightly expound on the influences that helped create these ideas. Influences such as the social Darwinism, popular fiction and the influx of Oriental ideas will be discussed in short. In this chapter we will also see that Blavatsky's own ideas changed throughout her lifetime. So, while her ideas on evolution took shape in her first book *Isis Unveiled*, her

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<sup>20</sup> Jansen, R.D.C., *Theosofie* (Kampen, 2000), 47.

cosmological scheme was only completed in her second work, namely in *The Secret Doctrine*. This calcification and the change of ideas will be discussed as well. Following this, there will be a small summary of the cosmological macrohistory of the Theosophical Society as portrayed by Blavatsky. This is done to create a better understanding of the theory itself and the place evolution took in it, but also to make it easier to show the differences between Blavatsky's theories and those of Besant and Steiner later on. In this part core concepts such as cycles, the origin of mankind, Root and Sub-Races and the future of mankind will be explained.

To conduct this research, I'll be making use of various sources, of which Isaac Lubelsky's essay "Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy" and James Santucci's "Race Issues in Theosophy" will be used most.<sup>21</sup> Next to these two essays, Garry W. Trompf's essay "Theosophical Macrohistory" will be used since it gives a global overview of the whole cosmological scheme of the Theosophical Society.<sup>22</sup> Since this period of the Theosophical Society and Blavatsky's cosmological scheme have been studied quite well, I won't be adding any extra information or primary sources, but I rather summarize the fundamentals of the theosophical evolution. This with the purpose to simplify the comparison with Besant and Steiner later on.

### 1.5.3. *The Coming of The World Teacher*

The second chapter discusses Annie Besant's ideas on evolution after the death of Blavatsky. While her former ideas were in line with the ideas of Blavatsky, they changed after some time, just like Blavatsky's own ideas. Due to the vagueness of Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*, *The Secret Doctrine* and other works such as *The Key to Theosophy* (1889) and *The Voice of the Silence* (1889), the second generation of the Theosophical Society started filling in the gaps left by Blavatsky, thus creating new ideas and new information. Also due to authority struggles, Besant and her companion Charles Leadbeater, who thanks to his supposed clairvoyant abilities could access information from the *akashic records*,<sup>23</sup> had to legitimize their position by claiming contact with the *masters* Koot Hoomi and Morya.<sup>24</sup> Leadbeater and Besant thus started to expand the theories laid out by Blavatsky herself and after some while, claimed there to be the imminent arrival of the world teacher. This new messiah or *Maitreya*, personified in the young Hindu boy Jiddu Krishnamurti, was where Annie Besant split with Blavatsky's ideas. This change of ideas will thus be discussed in this chapter.

Annie Besant's take on evolution hasn't been discussed much. There are various texts, books and essays on Besant's life, yet none of them looks at her specific ideas on evolution and the change the theosophical evolution makes from the first to the second generation. One of the text that discusses the change from the first to the second generation best, and the one that I'll be making use of is, the essay by Catherine Wessinger named "The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar)".<sup>25</sup> Wessinger, who wrote various texts on millennialism, looks at power struggles within the Second Generation and at the shift of what she calls 'progressive evolution' (evolution as a mechanical upwards movement) towards 'progressive millennialism', which she describes as: "The expectation of an imminent transition to a collective salvation accomplished by humans working according to the plan of superhuman

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21 Lubelsky, "Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy", 37-63.

22 Garry W., "Theosophical Macrohistory", in Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden, 2013) 375-404.

23 The *akashic records* is the theosophical concept of an all-encompassing and ethereal 'archive' of all that has happened, is happening or will happen in the future. These archives are supposedly accessible by the use of occult powers, such as clairvoyance.

24 These 'masters' are believed to be people who transcended the human state of evolution and devote themselves to the guidance of mankind.

25 Wessinger, Catherine, "The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar)", in Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden, 2013) 33-50.

agents.’<sup>26</sup> Wessinger however places this within a limited historical frame, namely that of the comparison of Blavatsky and Besant. Yet, she doesn’t add views from other Theosophists, limiting her own theory.

In this research, I’ll not only add new information on Besant’s ideas on evolution by making use of various unused primary sources, but also by comparing Besant’s ideas not only to Blavatsky’s, but also to Steiner’s ideas, something which Wessinger lacks. To do so, I’ll be making use of four primary texts. The first three are used to portray the pre-world teacher-phase, namely ‘An Address at the Parliament of Religions’ (1893), ‘The Birth and Evolution of the Soul’ (1895) and ‘Evolution of Life and Form’ (1898) which consist out of four lectures delivered at the twenty-third anniversary meeting of the Theosophical Society at Adyar in 1898.<sup>27</sup> The fourth text is the *magnum opus* and collaborative work of Leadbeater and Besant in which they expound on their ideas and theories with a focus on the coming of the new world teacher, who would reincarnate in Jiddu Krishnamurti which started the world teacher-phase of the Theosophical Society. This book is *Man: Whence, How and Whither* (1913), which will be used to compare the ideas of Blavatsky and Steiner with Besant’s.<sup>28</sup>

#### 1.5.4. Steiner’s Occidental Theosophy

The third and last chapter will be on Rudolf Steiner, his ideas, his break with the Theosophical Society, his Anthroposophical Society and of course his views on theosophical evolution. While Steiner was considered one of the most prominent Theosophists of the second generation, whilst being the secretary of the German section of the Theosophical Society and being part of the Esoteric Section, his ideas were not always in line with Blavatsky’s, or Besant’s. Steiner’s philosophical background and his passion for Occidental esotericism led him to break bonds with his former associations with the Theosophical Society. While his disagreements with the Oriental focus of Blavatsky and Besant were the cause of his first dissatisfactions, it was after Besant’s focus on Krishnamurti as the world teacher, that Steiner broke away permanently from the Theosophical Society for good in 1912. By establishing his own Anthroposophical Society, with a focus on Christian and Occidental esotericism, such as Rosicrucianism, Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism, Steiner reformulated his ideas on his cosmology, and thus also his views on evolution. These changes, and the context thereof, will be discussed in this chapter.

Unfortunately, a lot of work that has been done on Rudolf Steiner and the Anthroposophical Society is written in German, instead of English. While Garry Trompf, Katherina Brandt, Olav Hammer and Peter Staudenmaier have written on Steiner and his ideas, Steiner’s views on evolution have been little exposed. To shine more light upon this subject I’ll be making use of various primary sources, in particular *The Evolution of the Earth and Man and The Influence of the Stars*. In these lectures Steiner discusses his cosmology as well as the part that humanity plays in it. Also, he discusses, as the title of the book states, the evolution of mankind.<sup>29</sup> Besides this, various sources will be used to show Steiner’s shift from the Theosophical Society to the Anthroposophical Society. These sources will help us compare Steiner’s theories on evolution with those of Blavatsky and Besant.

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26 Wessinger, ‘The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar)’, 33.

27 Besant, Annie, ‘An Address at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago’, 1893, available online at: [http://www.anandgholap.net/Evolution\\_And\\_Occultism-AB.htm](http://www.anandgholap.net/Evolution_And_Occultism-AB.htm), last accessed at 13-03-2018.

And Besant, Annie, ‘Evolution of Life and Form’, Four Lectures delivered at the Twenty-third Anniversary Meeting of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, Madras, 1898, available online at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/40224/40224-h/40224-h.htm>, last accessed at 12-03-2018. And Besant, Annie, ‘The Birth and Evolution of the Soul’, Part I, Two Lectures given at 19, Avenue Road, London, 1895, available online at: <https://archive.org/details/birthandevoluti00besagoog>, last accessed at 08-05-2018, 16.

28 Besant, Annie and William Leadbeater, *Man: Whence, How and Whither. A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation* (1913).

29 Steiner, Rudolf, *The Evolution of the Earth and Man and The Influence of the Stars*, available online at: [http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA354/English/RSP1987/EvoMan\\_index.html](http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA354/English/RSP1987/EvoMan_index.html), last accessed at 13-03-2018.

### 1.5.5. Analysis and Conclusion

Concluding I'll take a look at the previous chapters and see how the ideas on evolution of mankind has changed from Blavatsky to Besant and Steiner. To simplify the differences between the three Theosophists I'll be making use of the four key concepts to indicate where and how ideas were adapted. These four core concepts will be put into a schematic overview to show in a simple way the deviation of ideas. I'll also slightly expound on the role of authority. Lastly will be discussed if my research answered all my questions and if not, why not? Did it create room for new studies and if so, what studies should be done?

## 1.6. Relevance

Hopefully this research will help us better understand the development of the Theosophical Society as a whole. The reason for the schisms, the loss of momentum and the creation of new groups such as Anthroposophy. Besides that, while Blavatsky's theories on evolution are well known and understood, the way these ideas changed after her death are not. The only essay that slightly expounds on this is the article of Lubelsky, in which he gives a short introduction to Annie Besant's and Leadbeater's ideas on race, yet he makes no comparison, nor explains why this has happened. So, this essay will hopefully grant us the opportunity to better understand the development of the concept of theosophical evolution within the Theosophical Society.

Next to that, it will hopefully contribute to the field of Western Esotericism. While the field of Western Esotericism has grown exponentially in the last few decades, the field has yet to recover from the idea that it was formerly considered to be a no-go zone for any scholar of religion or theologian who considered him or herself to be a serious scholar. While prominent scholars such as Antione Faivre, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke and of course Wouter Hanegraaff, have stimulated the research of Western Esoteric traditions, the literature on it is still quite scarce. The same is therefore true for the study of the Theosophical Society. While scholars such as R.D.C. Jensen, Robert Ellwood and Joscelyn Godwin have written quite comprehensive historical and theoretical overviews on the Theosophical current, many other questions and specifics remain unstudied. Recently *The Handbook of the Theosophical Current* has been published, which discusses various subjects relating to the Theosophical Society. While spanning various concepts, such as fiction, science and Oriental influences, there is still a lack of information of the concept of theosophical evolution as seen from a larger perspective.

With the rise of various new religious movements and the New Age movement, it is important to understand the origins of various of these movements. It is therefore that any study related to the Theosophical Society is relevant for the understanding of these new religions or currents. As Wessinger addresses in her essay, Theosophy and in specific Annie Besant can be regarded as the main inspiration for the New Age movement.<sup>30</sup> By influencing the Theosophist Alice Bailey (1880-1949), who popularized the word New Age and The Age of Aquarius, Besant influenced various other new religions.<sup>31</sup> Other esoteric currents such as The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, The Hermetic Order of The Golden Dawn, Ordo Templi Orientis and Gurdjieff and Ouspensky's Fourth Way, were also heavily inspired by theosophical ideas.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the study of the Theosophical Society can help us gain a better understanding of various other religious movements as well.

Lastly, this study can help us understand religion as a syncretic entity.<sup>33</sup> As Blavatsky made use of various concepts and theories to shape her own theory of evolution, so did Besant put her own ideas into the picture. So, the study can help us understand that religious ideas are

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30 Wessinger, "The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar)", 34.

31 *Ibidem*, 376.

32 Godwin, "Blavatsky and the First Generations of Theosophy", 29.

33 For more information of syncretism in the Theosophical Society see: Kraft, Siv Ellen, "“To Mix or Not to Mix”: Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism in the History of Theosophy", *Numen*, 49(2), (2002) 142-177.

often shaped by their contemptuous contexts and that ideas change when they come in contact with different influences. It shows that religious ideas change throughout the ages, and changes with new leaders who all have new ideas and goals. Besides this idea of development, it also fits within the debate of religion and science, showing that religion and science don't necessarily have to be enemy's or allies, but that a synthesis of the two can create whole new paradigms.

## 2. Blavatsky's Theosophical Evolution

### 2.1. History of the Theosophical Society

#### 2.1.1. *The Life of Blavatsky*

New York, November 17th, 1875. Henry Steel Olcott, William Quan Judge and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky officially founded the Theosophical Society. A society with the goal of studying the spiritual and the occult. This formation would in the next few decades, and even a century later, influence many new religious movements, which were mainly inspired by the texts wrote by Blavatsky herself.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was born in Ekaterinoslav, Russia on 31 July 1831. As the daughter of intellectuals and aristocrats, Helena had access to all the perks that came with coming from a well off family. At a young age Helena was influenced and inspired by the large library of her great-grandfather, Prince Paul Dondoukov-Korsakov, who was in possession of a library which consisted out of various books on the occult and the spiritual, since he himself was initiated in Rosicrucian Freemasonry.<sup>34</sup> At a later age of eighteen Helena married Nikifor Vassilyevich Blavatsky, but she eventually ran away after her honeymoon.<sup>35</sup> The period thereafter, in the 50's and 60's of the nineteenth century, Helena, now equipped with the name Blavatsky, started travelling the world with the financial support she got from her family.<sup>36</sup> During these years, various long trips were supposedly made, for example to Tibet, where she traveled together with Buddhist monks. Other journeys included the Ottoman Empire, Greece, Egypt, Canada, Burma, Siam, Japan and of course, India.<sup>37</sup>

Blavatsky's calling came however, when she was in Egypt, where she allegedly met the Coptic magician Paulos Metamon. When she met Metamon for the second time, after she shipwrecked in Egypt, she started her first society, namely the 'Spiritualist Society'.<sup>38</sup> At that time the spiritualist movement was gaining popularity throughout the world, especially in the United States, and it was thus for this reason, that Blavatsky moved to America. It was here where she met Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, while they were both investigating spiritualist phenomena in Vermont. After spending some time together, Olcott together with Blavatsky, founded a society for the study of paranormal and occult research, namely the Theosophical Society.

#### 2.1.2. Isis Unveiled

In 1877 Blavatsky wrote her first major work, *Isis Unveiled*, the 1300-page counting work consisting out of two volumes.<sup>39</sup> With the subtitle being: 'A Master Key to the Mysteries of Ancient Modern Science and Theology', the books discussed the relationship of the esoteric mysteries in the light of modern day materialist science and the dogmatic theology of the Catholic Church.<sup>40</sup> The first volume, which was named *Science*, focused on materialist science and it is within this first volume that Blavatsky attacks various scholars and their theories. One of the theories that was attacked was the evolution theory of Darwin, for failing to see that he leaves no room for the divine plan in his theory of evolution. In this first volume, Blavatsky also attacks spiritualism, while earlier being friendly towards it. In the second volume, named *Theology*, Blavatsky criticized the Catholic Church and its teachings. She critiques the way Christianity strayed from its original teachings, and compares it with Gnosticism, Freemasonry,

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34 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 213.

35 Godwin, "Blavatsky and the First Generations of Theosophy", 15.

36 It remains unclear if any of these travels were actually made.

37 Godwin, "Blavatsky and the First Generations of Theosophy", 16.

38 *Ibidem*, 16-17.

39 While Blavatsky wrote the book, she is often seen as the channel through which *Isis Unveiled* was written. She often appeared to have written it in a trance-like state, and Blavatsky herself made the remark that the book was written through her, rather than by her, see Godwin, "Blavatsky and the First Generations of Theosophy", 20-21.

40 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 215-216.

Buddhism and Hinduism.<sup>41</sup> It is in *Isis Unveiled* that Blavatsky posits the idea of ‘a secret doctrine’, a wisdom religion that has been present throughout the history of mankind. These teachings were to be found in the religion of the Gnostics and Neo-Platonists, but foremost in the Hermetic and Egyptian mystery teachings. Influenced by the ideas by the latter two, Blavatsky talks about the involution of mankind, which is seen as the descent of the divine spark (soul) into matter, something which will be discussed later on. The goal of the wisdom religions, and the Theosophical Society, is thus to free this divine spark from its prison of flesh.<sup>42</sup>

### 2.1.3. *Orientalizing of the Theosophical Society*

Due to Western imperialism and colonialism, many Europeans and Americans were getting familiar with Eastern beliefs, ideas and philosophy. This insight into Oriental ideas were made easier by the study of Orientalism and prominent Orientalists such as Friedrich Max Müller. With the 50-volume *Sacred Books of the East*, Müller and various others made translations for a diversity of Oriental religious texts. Texts such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Upanishads*, the *Quran*, the *Avesta*, *The Lawbook of Manu* and the *Dhammapada* were translated and now more accessible to the public. Together with popular books such as *The Light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold, Oriental religions gained fast popularity.<sup>43</sup> The scientific popularity of Indic and Oriental studies came to its zenith with the discovery of Sir William Jones’s Aryan theory. After his linguistic studies in Greek, Latin, Persian and Sanskrit, he came to the conclusion that there was a common origin for these languages. As the result thereof, he posited the theory that these cultures had a direct relationship, and even went as far as claiming that all these cultures originated from a common Indo-European ancestor.<sup>44</sup> The name that was giving to these Indo-Europeans was the *Aryans*, the noble ones. This theory made it possible for Westerners to comprehend why some Oriental groups were so highly developed, instead of them being simple barbarians, as the inhabitants of colonies were often viewed as. By promoting the idea of a common ancestor, namely the *Aryans*, scholars such as Max Müller tried to fight the prejudices Western people held against India and its inhabitants.<sup>45</sup>

In May 1877 the Theosophical Society renamed their organization to ‘the Theosophical Society of the Arya Samaj of Aryavart’, after the Hindu-Vedic revivalist movement of the *sanyasin* Dayananda Sarasvati (1824-1882).<sup>46</sup> Soon after this Olcott and Blavatsky travelled to India and Sri Lanka, where they officially converted to Buddhism.<sup>47</sup> During these travels in India, Sri Lanka and Tibet, Blavatsky and Olcott became more familiar with Hindu and Buddhist texts and more importantly, to Advaita Vedanta.<sup>48</sup> Eventually Blavatsky and Olcott established the theosophical headquarters in Adyar, India, where it remains up until this day. During these years in India, Olcott and Blavatsky met with Alfred Percy Sinnett (1840-1921) and Allan Octavian Hume (1829-1912), and together the four came into contact with two so-called Tibetan initiates, the *mahatmas* (great soul) Koot Hoomi and Morya.<sup>49</sup> From thereon onwards Blavatsky would be informed and guided by these *mahatmas* or ‘her masters’. And it was from this moment on that the focus was no longer on Egyptian and Hermetic magic, but rather on the Vedic and Tibetan origins of arcane knowledge.

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41 Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 216.

42 *Ibidem*, 216.

43 *Ibid*, 218.

44 Lubelsky, “Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy”, 338-339.

45 *Ibidem*, 341.

46 Godwin, “Blavatsky and the First Generations of Theosophy”, 22.

47 *Ibidem*, 22-23.

48 One of the philosophical schools of Hinduism. The school was created by Adi Shankara in the 8th century and focussed on the unity of the *atma* and *brahma*.

49 Godwin, “Blavatsky and the First Generations of Theosophy”, 23.

Allegedly directed by K.H. (Koot Hoomi) and M. (Morya) Blavatsky started writing down her cosmology. In 1883 she started writing *The Secret Doctrine* in which she expounded on her former ideas and implemented various Oriental concepts such as *dharma*, *yugas*, *nirvana*, the connection between *brahma* and *atma*, and more importantly the cycle of *samsara* (reincarnation) and *karma*. In 1888 her *magnum opus*, her commentary on the mysterious Tibetan ‘Book of Dzyan’ *The Secret Doctrine* was completed.<sup>50</sup> It was within this work that Blavatsky laid the foundation of the theosophical cosmology, and thus theosophical evolution.

## 2.2. Contemporary Influences

### 2.2.1. Synthesis

Blavatsky’s complex system didn’t only come from her own imagination, and probably not purely from her masters as well. The Theosophical Society could be considered a synthesis of various concepts. Created in a period of time in which science and religion were in a power struggle, the Theosophical Society tried to fill the void left by the both of them. Trying to get away from the sheer materialism and positivism of Western science, while also being recalcitrant against the harsh and un-spiritual dogmas of the Catholic Church. At the same time, the West was confronted by the influx of Eastern literature and ideas, which was made possible by the new ways of mass communication. This also made it easier to find occult and esoteric literature and gave a boost to the spread of fiction, of which Blavatsky and other Theosophists fervently made use of. However, three influences can be regarded as the base of the Theosophical Society. The first is the influence that science had on the theosophical concept of evolution, the second was the influence of Oriental ideas, as discussed above, and lastly there was the influence of popular fiction.

### 2.2.2. Science

The theosophical relationship to science has been quite tumultuous. On the one hand Blavatsky devoted the first volume of her *Isis Unveiled* to the attack on materialistic and positivistic science of her age, commenting and arguing on theories from prominent scientists such as the physicist John Tyndall, the biologist Thomas H. Huxley (1825-1895), and of course on Charles Darwin, while on the other hand using the same language as her contemporaries did.<sup>51</sup> While remaining very critical on modern day science, Blavatsky did not simply refuse it, she rather thought of it as it being incomplete. As can be seen from the following quote, Blavatsky did not refuse Darwin’s theory, but rather thought of it as being partially correct, as she did with other theories as well:

Darwinism only meets Evolution at its midway point- that is to say when astral evolution has given place to the play of ordinary physical forces with which our present senses acquaint us.<sup>52</sup>

Blavatsky did thus not simply deny the scientific theories of her age, but rather tried to fill in the void between the spiritual monopoly of the Catholic Church and the scientific monopoly held by science, with her own esoteric truth, or ‘occult science’, accompanied by the Theosophical motto: ‘There is no religion higher than truth’.<sup>53</sup> By “the appropriation of the nomenclature of science and the rhetoric of rationality” as Egil Asprem calls it in his article

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50 The Book of Dzyan was supposedly handed down to Blavatsky by Tibetan initiates and was written in an esoteric, secret language named ‘Sanzar’. However, there are no records of other books that can confirm the existence of such a book nor such a language.

51 Asprem, “Theosophical Attitude towards Science: Past and Present”, 410.

52 Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna, *The Secret Doctrine* (Theosophical University Press, 1888) 649.

53 The Theosophical motto as presented in for example, *The Secret Doctrine*.



‘Theosophical Attitudes towards Science: Past and Present’, Blavatsky tried to pragmatically give her own ideas more power, by restructuring and augmenting the original scientific theories.<sup>54</sup> While various scientific topics, such as magnetism, electricity and atomism, are discussed by Blavatsky, it is Darwin’s evolution theory that had the most influence in Blavatsky’s ideas, as can be seen by the sheer number of references to ‘evolution’ in *The Secret Doctrine*, as Olav Hammer has stated.<sup>55</sup>

The scientific field of evolution however, was not simply centered around mankind’s development from primate ancestors, but a big part of the field also consisted out of social Darwinist aspects. Influenced by scientists and philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) and his theories on the *Übermensch* in *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1891), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s (1770-1831) ideas on the supremacy of the white European, and literature such as Joseph Arthur de Gobineau’s (1816-1882) *Essai sur l’Inegalite des Races Humaines* (1853), the racial debate of the nineteenth century came together in the theories of social Darwinism.<sup>56</sup> Soon the idea followed that some races and cultures were superior, while others were inferior. Due to the rise of imperialism and colonialism, the white European had the idea that due to their ‘technological and intellectual superiority’ they were more advanced than any other race, and that they were the apex of evolution, while others remained closer to their primate ancestors. While challenged by theories such as the Aryan theory, the idea of superiority and inferiority, and the idea of separate races, remained in control of the scientific field of the nineteenth century. It is thus also within this light, that the theosophical theories on evolution have to be seen. By using the term race, due to the scientific connotations it held, Blavatsky pragmatically uses terms such as these, to strengthen her own theories on the division of races, spiritual progression and therefore on evolution.

### 2.2.3. Orientalism

As discussed above, the Theosophical Society was heavily influenced by the influx of Oriental ideas. Not only did books such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Upanishads* influence Blavatsky’s ideas on reincarnation, *karma* and the relationship between the divine and the human soul, but theories like the Aryan theory made it possible for Blavatsky to complete her cosmological system. The idea of reincarnation made it possible for people to come back to earth as something more evolved and could thus partake in something which the Theosophists call ‘the pilgrim’s path of evolution’. It also fortified her ideas on race and the common origin of mankind, namely that of the *Aryans* or Indo-Europeans.

### 2.2.4. Popular Fiction

Another part of Blavatsky’s ideas was quite controversial, namely the part lost civilizations and lost continents played within her cosmology. The appearance of Lemuria and Atlantis plays a great role within the theosophical macrohistory as well as in the theosophical evolution, as will be seen in the next part. Due to the rise of mass media, the development of communication technologies and the rise of new media sources, the postmodern occult started blending the real with fiction, as Wouter Hanegraaff states in *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.<sup>57</sup> Together with the decline of Church authority, and therefore the decline of censorship by the Church, various sorts of literature became widely available, making it easier to blend religious texts with fiction and other sorts of literature.<sup>58</sup> The Theosophical Society, and Blavatsky, made great use of this.

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54 Aspren, ‘Theosophical Attitude towards Science: Past and Present’, 405.

55 *Ibidem*, 409.

56 Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 132-135.

57 *Ibidem*, 9.

58 *Ibid*, 9.

Since Blavatsky now had the evolution part and the reincarnation part of her cosmology complete, there wasn't the necessary evidence for the ancestors that used to live before us. Blavatsky however made use of a popular idea, namely that of Atlantis and other lost civilizations. As described in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*, Atlantis was a highly developed state that was submerged after the Atlanteans committed too many sins. This idea of Atlantis being real was popularized after Ignatius Donnelly's (1839-1901) best-seller *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* (1882), but also by Sir Francis Bacon's (1561-1626) Utopian novel *The New Atlantis* (1624).<sup>59</sup>

One author of fiction who inspired Blavatsky was Edward Bulwer-Lytton, his books *Zanoni* (1842) and *The Coming Race* (1871) played a big part in Blavatsky's beliefs. While *Zanoni* contributed to Blavatsky's ideas on the masters Koot Hoomi and Morya,<sup>60</sup> and *A Strange Story* influenced her ideas on the powers of these masters,<sup>61</sup> *The Coming Race* influenced her ideas on lost civilizations, race and the concept of 'Vril'.<sup>62</sup> In *The Coming Race* a traveler finds a highly sophisticated underground civilization inhabited by the technologically and spiritually developed 'Vril-ya'. This lost race of 'Vril-ya' was in possession of technology much more advanced than that of his own age and the civilization pre-dated the flood.<sup>63</sup> All these ideas of lost civilizations came together in the idea of them being the forefathers of the current mankind. Blended together with the idea of progressive reincarnation and the evolutionary development of races, Blavatsky created her theosophical evolution.

## 2.3. Theosophical Cosmology

### 2.3.1. The Esoteric U-Curve

To understand the changes from Blavatskian theosophical evolution to Besant's and Steiner's, one has to understand the whole cosmological system of the Theosophical Society and the place evolution takes within it. Since evolution is heavily integrated within the macrohistory of the Theosophical Society, I will hereby give a short summary of the vast and complex cosmology as portrayed by Blavatsky. I'll also add various figures to better explain the processes present. The cosmological system of Blavatskian Theosophy begins at 'the Divine', this incomprehensible entity is the root of 'All', or as stated in *The Secret Doctrine* itself:

An Omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable PRINCIPLE on which all speculation is impossible ... beyond the range and reach of thought- in the words of Mandukya, man "unthinkable and unspeakable."<sup>64</sup>

It is from this principle that everything originates. However, while it is an interesting topic, due to the limits of this essay, I won't go into further detail of this Principle, since it is not necessary for the understanding of the evolution of mankind. However, what is important is the relationship between mankind, the soul and the divine. In Blavatsky's scheme, the 'divine spark' in mankind has descended into matter and is, just like in Hermetic and Gnostic philosophies, trapped in materiality. While stuck in this prison of flesh, the divine spark is aching to return to its origins, namely the reunification with the divine. This esoteric 'U-curve'

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<sup>59</sup> Lubelsky, "Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy", 339.

<sup>60</sup> Crow, John, "Musings on Bulwer-Lytton, Zanoni and Fiction as a Source for Theosophical Beliefs", blog post, 11 November 2012, available online at: [https://www.johnlcrow.com/blog/blog\\_post\\_11\\_11\\_2012.html](https://www.johnlcrow.com/blog/blog_post_11_11_2012.html), last accessed on 11-05-2018.

<sup>61</sup> Crow, John, "Taming the Astral Body: The Theosophical Society's Ongoing Problem of Emotion and Control", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80(3) 694.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Markus Altena Davidsen, *The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu: A Study of Fiction-based Religion* (Leiden, 2014) 90-95.

<sup>63</sup> Crow, John, "Blavatsky's Coming Race: Nationalism, Racism and Fiction in Theosophical Doctrine", presentation at the University of California-Davis, Association for the Study of Esotericism, Fourth International Conference, July 19-22, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Blavatsky, (1974, 1:14), *The Secret Doctrine*, quoted in Santucci, James A., "The Notion of Race in Theosophy", *Nova Religio*, vol. 11, No. 3 (February 2008) 42.

as Garry W. Trompf calls it in his essay ‘Theosophical Macrohistory’, is a circle from which the ‘spirit’ descends into ‘matter’ and follows a ‘pilgrim’s road’ towards the reunification with the divine (See Figure 1).<sup>65</sup> This process of involution and evolution is one of the most important principles within the theosophical evolution. Evolution is thus not to be regarded as simply an earthly process of developing the physical, but rather the path the soul takes towards the spiritual completion of itself, and to finally unify itself with the womb of the universe.

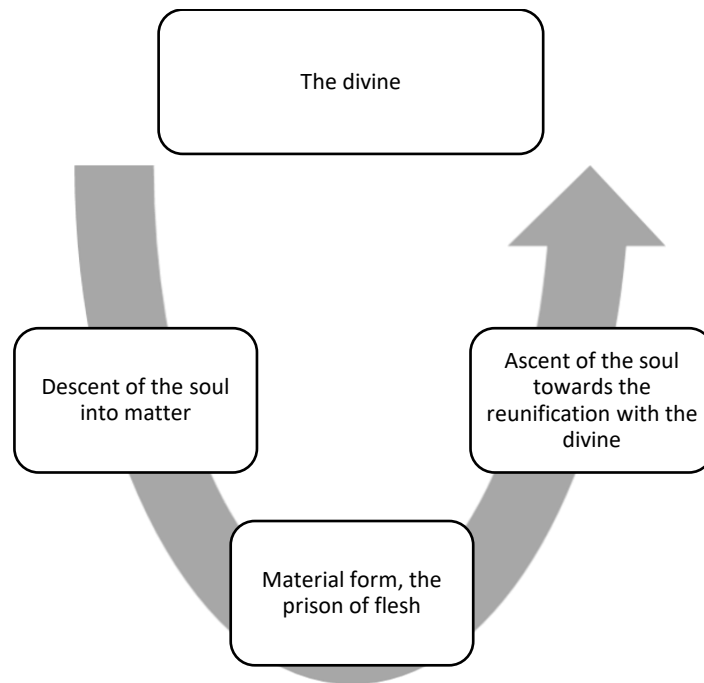


Figure 1: Esoteric U-curve

### 2.3.2. Ebb and Flow

This process of involution and evolution is part of something which can be regarded as the law of periodicity, as it is called in *The Secret Doctrine*. This cyclic process of ebb and flow, is the second principle that controls the universe according to Blavatsky.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, the process of evolution can be divided into various cycles, or as often called *yugas*.<sup>67</sup> Inspired by the Hindu *Puranas* and the *Manavadharmasastra*, Blavatsky divides her cosmological system into various ‘rounds’. The biggest and longest round is the *mahakalpa*, ‘the age of the cosmos’ or ‘the age of brahma’. This kalpa, or round, is separated in periods of rest (*pralaya*) and periods of activity (*manvatara*). This period of time, or this cycle, is subdivided by smaller *kalpas* of which the *maha-yuga* is an example, and for this research the most important one. These *maha-yugas* are planetary cycles and are important for the understanding of the role of mankind within a larger cosmological scheme. These planetary cycles consist out of seven round, of which we are currently in the period of the seventh Manu, namely *Manu Vaivasvata*. These planetary evolution cycles, go from planet A to planet G, and together make one planetary round.<sup>68</sup>

Within this cyclic evolution of the planet, mankind comes into play. On these planets the subsequent evolution from the ethereal towards the angelic takes places. The soul has already gone through the evolution of the elemental, mineral, plant and animal kingdom and

65 Trompf, “Theosophical Macrohistory”, 375-376.

66 Santucci, “The Notion of Race in Theosophy”, 43.

67 These *yugas* are based on the Hindu concept of circular time. One great cycle, or *kalpa*, consists out of 4,320,000,000 years and is subdivided in the *satya yug*, *treta yug*, *dvapa yug* and the current *kali yug*. In: Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled* (Theosophical University Press, 1877) 32.

68 Santucci, “The Notion of Race in Theosophy”, 41-44.

has thus arrived at its current state, the human kingdom; where it now inhabits a human body and strives to evolve into the *dhyani chohanic*, or angelic kingdom (See Figure 2). The soul, or the ‘pilgrim’, thus takes an upwards spiraling route from materiality to spirituality, only to eventually be reunited with the divine.<sup>69</sup>

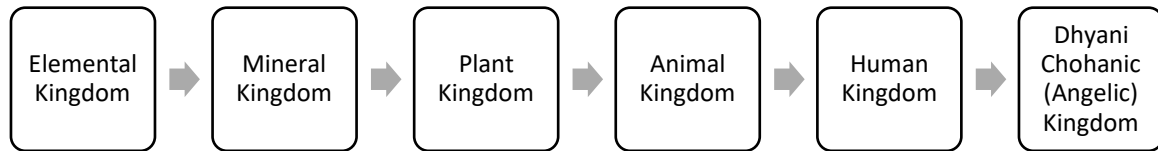


Figure 2: Theosophical planetary evolution

For this research, the following part of the cosmological scheme is the most important, namely the evolution of mankind. As the ‘pilgrim’ has thus arrived at the human kingdom, and starts his planetary round, the ‘pilgrim’ also has to go through a process of evolution. This process of evolution can be divided into seven parts, namely by the division of seven Root Races (more on which below or see Figure 4.), of which we are currently in the fifth. These Root Races are the division of the seven distinct races of mankind, going through an upwards and cyclical evolution. These seven Root Races are subdivided in seven Sub-races, and sometimes even further divided by seven Branch or Family-races (See Figure 3). The Root Races are thus divided by seven Sub-Races, which each create their own cycle. After the evolution of six Sub-races, the seventh Sub-Race introduces the new Root Race, while slowly going extinct itself.<sup>70</sup>

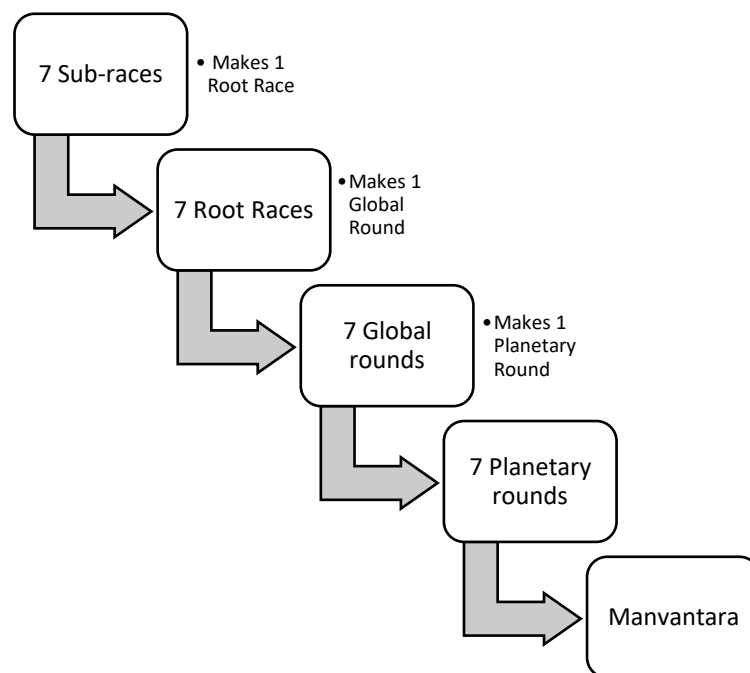


Figure 3: Blavatsky's division of the evolutionary process

69 Santucci, “The Notion of Race in Theosophy”, 45.

70 *Ibid*, 44-50.

### 2.3.3. *The Theosophical History of Mankind*

While Charles Darwin and various of his contemporary scientists saw primates as the ancestors of mankind, Blavatsky claimed that mankind was millions of years older than what Darwin and others claimed. According to Blavatsky, mankind did not stem from primates, or ‘gorillas’ but had its origin in something ethereal, namely from astral beings.<sup>71</sup> Blavatsky thus saw the evolution of mankind not from the common belief that mankind stems from primates, but she believed that mankind was older than any mammalian species, and was first created from the astral, and only later took on a physical form.<sup>72</sup> The first of the species of mankind were the ‘Fathers’, or the *pitris*, who were the first Root Race. These *pitris* (as borrowed from Hindu *Puranas*) or moon spirits, were ethereal beings who were sexless shadow beings living in the North Pole region.<sup>73</sup>

The second Root Race followed the first, and were called the Hyperboreans, after the place where they resided, namely Hyperborea. This land which consisted out of the Northern Polar region and North Asia, was thus inhabited by these beings, who are said to be asexual and born out of sweat.<sup>74</sup> Succeeding the second Root Race was the third Root Race of the Lemurians with their fluid bodies. Just like the Hyperboreans, they were named after the region they inhabited, namely Lemuria or Mu. This region which supposedly spanned from Madagascar all the way to Sri Lanka and Sumatra, is now allegedly submerged by the Indian Ocean. The Lemurians were hermaphroditic and as their Sub-races evolved, finally split into two separate male and female beings.

After the split of the Lemurians into two separate sexes, the ‘first humankind’ came into being. While the continent of Lemuria sank, Atlantis rose from the depths of the sea. Inhabiting this new continent were the Atlanteans, the fourth Root Race. During this time, mankind took its current physical form, as well as its way to communicate, namely by the use of language.<sup>75</sup> However, while the Atlanteans were becoming more and more physical, their spiritual abilities declined. As portrayed in Plato’s *Timaeus and Critias*, Donnelly’s *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* and Bacon’s *The New Atlantis*, this continent was once a highly developed nation, of which *The Secret Doctrine* tells that they were technologically very advanced as well, claiming them to be responsible for structures such as the pyramids.<sup>76</sup> This was probably influenced by ideas as can be found in the books of Edward Bulwer-Lytton, in specific his book *The Coming Race*. Yet, while the fourth Root Race died out nearly 850,000 years ago, it supposedly managed to hand down knowledge to the first Sub-race of the Asiatic Aryans.

### 2.3.4. *The Fifth Root Race and Races Yet to Come*

Since the dawn of the fifth Root Race nearly a million years ago, various Sub-races came and went. Since Sub-races exist for around 210.000 years, and Branch-races 30.000 years, we’re currently living in the fifth Sub-race of the fifth Root Race. The latest, and thus spiritually considered to be superior Sub-race is the European Sub-race. While various cultural groups are currently part of this Sub-race, many are not, and are thus regarded by Blavatsky as spiritually inferior. Remarks on the inferiority of Oceanic, African and Polar tribes, who she considers to be part of the fourth Sub-race, are the cause of the debate of racism within the Theosophical Society, as discussed by Lubelsky and Santucci.<sup>77</sup> While statements like that can be regarded

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71 Lubelsky, “Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy”, 346.

72 Santucci, “The Notion of Race in Theosophy”, 45.

73 *Ibidem*, 47-48.

74 *Ibid*, 48.

75 Santucci, “The Notion of Race in Theosophy”, 48-49.

76 *Ibidem*, 48.

77 In “Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy” by Lubelsky and “The Notion of Race in Theosophy” by Santucci, both scholars argue that while some statements from the Theosophical Society can be regarded as anti-Semitic or racist, the use of these terms (race) however, was used for the scientific connotations it held, rather than to enable them to make a classification of inferiority and superiority.

as racist, Lubelsky and Santucci agree on the fact that this is not meant to be racist, but that the common origin of the Aryan race is the key.<sup>78</sup> The people that were still in the fourth Sub-race would simply reincarnate in a higher Sub-race in their next life, as part of the spiritual road every human being supposedly takes.<sup>79</sup>

So, while the current state of mankind is that of a European fifth Sub-race within the fifth Root Race, there are two Sub-races and two Root Races left before mankind will reach the *dhyani chohan*ic state, in which mankind will become spiritual once again. Let's start with the completion of the Sub-races. In the sixth and seventh Sub-races of a Root Race, the new Root Race is introduced. This, therefore means that in the next Sub-race the new Root Race will evolve. As seen before, the rise of a new Root Race is often followed by a new continent and the disappearance of another, as can be seen by the submerge of Atlantis and Lemuria. The shift of power to a new continent is in this case fulfilled by the rise of America. Blavatsky thus states, that the new Root Race will rise in America, to be specific in the United States, which will, as will be seen in the following chapter, heavily influence Annie Besant's ideas.<sup>80</sup> This new Sub-race of Americans will be spiritually superior to the former Sub-race of Europeans, and will eventually introduce the new sixth Root race. This switch from the fifth to the sixth Sub-race would however, according to Blavatsky, take nothing less than a few more hundred years.<sup>81</sup>

After the sixth and seventh Sub-race from the fifth Root Race, the sixth and seventh Root Races, consisting out of seven Sub-races each, have yet to take place. As evolution can also be seen as circular, the characteristics of the various races are circular as well. Since the first and second Root Race were closer to the spiritual, and slowly became more physical, so will the sixth and seventh Root Race will become more spiritual and less physical. The spiritual abilities, such as clairvoyance and clairaudience, which were lost during the third and fourth Root Races, will once again manifest itself within mankind.<sup>82</sup> Together with their spiritual abilities, the human body will also become less physical and more ethereal, which also means that it will lose its sexes and become androgynous.<sup>83</sup> After the seventh Root Race humanity will finally loose its physical form and become angelic, getting closer to the unification with the divine, or the state or *nirvana*.

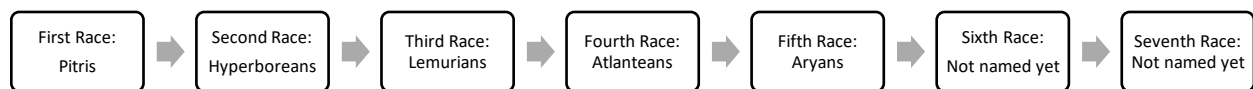


Figure 4: Theosophical concept of consequent races

## 2.4. In Short

Thus, while Darwin claimed mankind to descend from primates, Blavatsky blended together popular fiction, Oriental philosophy, Western Esotericism and scientific ideas to come up with a counter-narrative. The theosophical evolution as portrayed by Blavatsky is therefore not the simple evolution of the worldly transformation of primate into mankind, but it is rather part of a vast and cosmological system. A mechanical and circular system in which the evolution of mankind contributes to the development of the whole universe and where the position of mankind is in the middle of it all. By dividing cosmological septenary cycles into sub-cycles,

78 Since the scientific milieu of Blavatsky's period was full of 'racist' ideas, I believe we should not view the theosophical racial teachings anachronistically. While some theories might be considered racist in this day and age, during the time of writing of most of these works these ideas were dominant in scientific circles and were therefore adopted by the Theosophists to strengthen their authority.

79 Santucci, "The Notion of Race in Theosophy", 51.

80 *Ibidem*, 46-49.

81 *Ibid*, 46.

82 Santucci, "The Notion of Race in Theosophy", 49-50.

83 *Ibidem*, 49.

everything remains connected, as portrayed by the Hermetic axiom “As above, so below”.<sup>84</sup> Blavatsky thus created a theosophical evolution, in which the soul of mankind has gone through various stages, of which the animal stage is millions of years ago. The current stage of mankind is that it is part of a sevenfold cycle of Root Races and Sub-races. While mankind has gradually become less spiritual and more material, as portrayed by the U-curve, slowly, as humanity goes through the various Sub and Root Races, it becomes spiritual once again. However, before this happens mankind has yet to witness the rise of the sixth Sub-race of the fifth Root Race, which will, according to Blavatsky, happen in America and which will give rise to the new Root Race.

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<sup>84</sup> This hermetic axiom is often used to describe the connection between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Blavatsky also refers to it in *The Secret Doctrine* as follows: “As it is above so it is below” is the fundamental axiom of occult philosophy. As the logos is seven-fold, i.e., throughout Kosmos it appears as seven logoi under seven different forms, or, as taught by learned Brahmins, “each of these is the central figure of one of the seven main branches of the ancient wisdom religion;” and, as the seven principles which correspond to the seven distinct states of Pragna, or consciousness, are allied to seven states of matter and the seven forms of force, the division must be the same in all that concerns the earth.” In: Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 29.

### 3. The Coming of The World Teacher

#### 3.1. Transition to the Second Generation

After the death of Blavatsky, the Theosophical Society was left with many questions and uncertainties about her cosmology and beliefs. While Olcott took over the position of president of the Theosophical Society in Adyar, various uncertainties remained on the ‘theosophical future’, due to the gaps left by Blavatsky in her theories. Olcott, who was one of the founders of the Theosophical Society in 1875, took upon himself the role of leader of the community, but after his death in 1907, the Theosophical Society was left with a struggle for successorship and authority. Luckily, the president of the Esoteric Section Annie Besant was appointed as Blavatsky’s successor in a letter Blavatsky wrote to Judge, stating: “she is the most wonderful woman, my right hand, my successor when I will be forced to leave you”.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, while Blavatsky named Besant her successor, Judge was one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, and thus had a valid claim to the presidency. This authority was however nullified after Besant outed Judge for writing letters himself, while claiming them to be from the masters. All Judge’s writings were now suspicious, and Judge had to face the Theosophical Judicial Committee in London. He was however found not guilty, since the Society never directly claimed the existence of the masters to be factual.<sup>86</sup> It was in reaction to this that Judge parted ways with the Society, claiming Besant to be manipulated by dark forces in the person of the Brahmin Chakravarti, resulting in the Theosophical Society splitting in two sections, namely the Theosophical Society run by Besant and George Robert Stow Mead (1863-1933)<sup>87</sup>, Blavatsky’s former secretary, and The Theosophical Society in America run by Judge.<sup>88</sup>

These power struggles, or struggles for successorship, could also be viewed from the point of authority. On the one hand Annie Besant was appointed by Blavatsky as well as by Olcott to be the next president of the Theosophical Society, on the other hand Judge claimed to have had direct contact with the masters and was one of the founders of the Society. So while the former had the legal-rational authority, as Wessinger calls it in her essay “The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society”, the latter had the spiritual authority.<sup>89</sup> To gain the full authority necessary to guide the quickly expanding Theosophical Society, Besant would need to establish a spiritual authority as well as legal-rational authority, namely by establishing a direct connection to the masters K.H. and M. It was now up to Besant to guide the Theosophical Society and fill in the gaps that Blavatsky left in her theories and books and find a way to communicate with these so-called masters.

#### 3.2. Annie Besant

To understand how the theosophical ideas on evolution changed during the presidency of Annie Besant, it is necessary to look at who she was as a person. Besant was a remarkable person, who was known not only for her involvement in the Theosophical Society. In her earlier days Besant was known in her home country, England, for being an orator for the National Secular Society (NSS), but she was also known for her involvement in the socialist Fabian Society, The Marxist Social Democratic Federation and the Feminist movement.<sup>90</sup> While she parted ways with her strict atheism, the socialist ideology still seeped through her theosophical beliefs, as we will see later on in this chapter. Her passion for helping the less fortunate citizens of

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85 Godwin, “Blavatsky and the First Generations of Theosophy”, 27.

86 *Ibidem*, 28.

87 G.R.S. Mead was not only the personal secretary of Blavatsky, but is also known for his works on Hermeticism, Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism.

88 Godwin, “Blavatsky and the First Generations of Theosophy”, 28.

89 Wessinger, “The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar)”, 44-47.

90 Not only was Besant known for being a socialist, she even had a relationship with the famous Dutch socialist Domela Nieuwenhuis, who even named his daughter after her, see: Unknown Author, ‘Theosofie als loot van het Socialisme’, *Trouw* (31-12-1996).



England, and later on those of India and Sri Lanka, was part of Besant personal philosophical struggle, namely her questions on human suffering and pain.<sup>91</sup> While this was in first instance the catalyst of her becoming an atheist, it was this same philosophical question which led her to become a Theosophist.

While working as a journalist for the Pall Mall Gazette, Besant had to review Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* in 1889, which sparked her interest in the Theosophical Society and eventually led her to join to the Society. By introducing Hindu and Buddhist concepts of reincarnation and karma, the Theosophical Society was able to provide the long sought-after answers on Besant's questions on human suffering.<sup>92</sup> By introducing the theory of karma, suffering was now simply the cause of one's own actions, may it have been in this life or a former, and not the action of a sadistic Christian god.<sup>93</sup> After Besant's introduction to the theosophical ideas as found in *The Secret Doctrine*, she went to London, where at that time Blavatsky was residing. In a short span of time, Besant and Blavatsky grew fond of each other and Besant was admitted to the Esoteric Section. As Blavatsky's health kept declining, Besant took her in her own home and together they established the Blavatsky Lodge in England, of which Besant became the president.<sup>94</sup> As the result of this position, Besant was able to attain even more prominent positions within the Theosophical Society. First as the president of the Esoteric Section and later on as president of the whole Theosophical Society in 1907.

### 3.3. Early ideas on Evolution

Since this research is not on Besant's theories as a whole, but rather on her ideas on evolution, it is necessary to divide her ideas and her involvement in the Theosophical Society in two periods. Both periods are characterized by her encounters with Leadbeater and the world teacher, or the absence thereof. These periods will be referred to as the pre-world teacher-phase (1889-1911) and the world teacher-phase (1912-1929).

While Besant is mostly known for the world teacher-phase in the beginning of the twentieth century, Besant's ideas originally were no different from those of Blavatsky. As can be seen from some of her lectures and books, in this case her address to the Parliament of Religions in 1893, 'The Birth and Evolution of the Soul' from 1895 and 'The Evolution of Life and Form', her ideas on evolution were nearly the same as Blavatsky's. Most of Besant's ideas before her introduction to the idea of a *Maitreya*, can be seen as reinforcing or complementing Blavatsky's theories. Since Blavatsky left many gaps in her theories, Besant took it upon herself to fill in the gaps where she deemed it necessary.

As can be seen from sentences such as: "They have been said lately by Mr. Coleman to be purely modern productions [talking about the Stanzas of Dzyan from *The Secret Doctrine*]; but they were never found out in modern writings until Madame Blavatsky found them.", Besant vehemently tries to defend Blavatsky's theories.<sup>95</sup> She did this the same way that Blavatsky herself did this, by discrediting modern science, for example by stating that "Such an evolution, were it true, would be the dreariest theory of life that human mind could conceive-unintelligible to the brain, unsatisfactory to the heart."<sup>96</sup> and by constantly reinforcing the idea of a "differentiation between two forms of science, that of the ancients and that of the modern."<sup>97</sup> But Besant also reinforced the idea of the formerly mentioned esoteric U-curve by saying: "Man's soul comes from above, not from below, not climbing upwards from the brute,

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91 Wessinger, "The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar)", 35.

92 *Ibidem*, 35-36.

93 *Ibid*, 36.

94 *Ibid*, 35.

95 Besant, 'The Birth and Evolution of the Soul', 16.

96 Besant, 'An Address at the Parliament of Religions', 83.

97 Besant, 'Evolution of Life and Form', 92.

but the focalized reflection of the Spirit.’’<sup>98</sup> and completing the cycle by “Spirit involving itself in matter that it may become the mainspring of Evolution, and may gradually mold matter into a perfect expression of itself.’’<sup>99</sup>

In these lectures Besant did not deviate from the ideas formerly laid out by Blavatsky but filled in the gaps where she deemed it necessary, for example by expounding on the evolution of the soul and the difference between the soul of a human and that of an animal in ‘Birth and Evolution of the Soul.’<sup>100</sup> The most remarkable thing however, is the lack of focus on the coming world teacher. He is not named even once, and the only reference made to the coming of the New Age is: “The next stage of evolution of life is the seeking for union amid the individualized units; that the next divine aspect that man has to develop in the self within him is the aspect of union and not the aspect of diversity.’’<sup>101</sup> in which a mention to, the later so important, world teacher is completely absent.

The reason for this this absence can be found in Blavatsky’s own books. In her *magnum opus The Secret Doctrine* there are only five references to the *Maitreya* and only one to the messiah.<sup>102</sup> From the five references to the *Maitreya* only two are really on the coming of a new world teacher, namely:

He will appear as Maitreya Buddha, the last of the Avatars and Buddhas, in the seventh Race. This belief and expectation are universal throughout the East. Only it is not in the Kali yug, our present terrifically materialistic age of Darkness, the “Black Age,” that a new Savior of Humanity can ever appear.<sup>103</sup>

and

Maitreya is the secret name of the Fifth Buddha, and the Kalki Avatar of the Brahmins — the last messiah who will come at the culmination of the Great Cycle.<sup>104</sup>

Both references only mention the *Maitreya* as a yet to come savior of which the first sentence places his coming only at the end of the Seventh Race and the second sentence also tells us that the *Maitreya* will only come at the end of this *manvantara*. Since Besant did not deviate from Blavatsky’s teachings during the pre-world teacher-phase, it is only logical that the idea of a world teacher is absent in Besant’s ideas, since it is almost absent in Blavatsky’s teachings as well.

### 3.4. Leadbeater and Millennialism

#### 3.4.1. Leadbeater

Around the turn of the century, Besant’s ideas started to shift from a strictly Blavatskian theosophical evolution towards a more salvation-type of theosophical evolution. It started in May 1889 when Besant met Charles Webster Leadbeater in India. Leadbeater who used to be an Anglican priest in England, was on the one hand a Theosophist, but on the other hand he was still very much inspired by his Christian background and was invested in the Liberal

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98 Besant, ‘An Address at the Parliament of Religions’, 82.

99 *Ibidem*, 83.

100 Besant, ‘The Birth and Evolution of the Soul’.

101 Besant, ‘Evolution of Life and Form’, 91-92.

102 See the index of: Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 649.

103 Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 1, 470.

104 *Ibidem*, 1, 420.

Catholic Church.<sup>105</sup> Influenced by *The Book of Revelation* and *The Book of Daniel*, Leadbeater believed in the coming of a new messiah, the second coming of Christ.<sup>106</sup>

While Besant was very close to Blavatsky and Olcott, and therefore had gained the position of president of the Esoteric Section, she did not claim a direct communication with the masters herself, neither did she claim to be possession of occult powers, such as clairaudience or clairvoyance. Leadbeater however, was said to have been in possession of psychic abilities, such as being able to see people's past lives, see auras and he supposedly was able to communicate directly to the masters, something which would prove very useful to Besant during her presidency. It is also due to Leadbeater's Christian background, that Christianity would take a more prominent role within the Theosophical Society, this while Blavatsky often spoke derogatory of it. The role of Christ and of his religion was reinforced by Besant's famous book *Esoteric Christianity* from 1901.<sup>107</sup> In this book Besant reinstated Christ as one of the earlier world teachers by giving him the position of the world teacher of the fifth Sub-race which originated in Judea, and thereby placed him in the same category as Buddha, Orpheus, Hermes and Zoroaster.<sup>108</sup>

### 3.4.2. *The World Teacher and Krishnamurti*

The role of Christ soon became more prominent after the death of Blavatsky, and even more so after the death of Olcott, which left Besant with the presidency of the Theosophical Society. Inspired by a vision by Leadbeater, Besant and Leadbeater started working together closely to the propagate the coming of the new messiah, which was officially announced in 1912 in Besant's book *Initiation: The Perfecting of Man*, stating in the Appendix:

At first when this was spoken about some years ago, it received but little attention; but, gradually, more and more notice has been taken of it, until now it cannot be said to be confined at all to Theosophical utterances, but a widespread expectation is seen that some great Teacher is likely soon to appear in our world.<sup>109</sup>

Such an idea did not only resonate well with Theosophists with a Western and Christian background, but also with native Buddhists and Hindus, since their teachings also encompassed the idea of a *Maitreya*, the second coming of Buddha.<sup>110</sup> This vision by Leadbeater was believed to be originating from the masters, and therefore it helped strengthening Besant's authoritative position. While she herself had no contact with the masters, Leadbeater supposedly had.

According to Besant, Blavatsky left various clues that there would be a New Age introduced by the *Maitreya*, the world teacher.<sup>111</sup> Responding to Blavatsky's statements in *The Secret Doctrine*, namely her saying:

Thus the Americans have become in only three centuries a "primary race," pro tem., before becoming a race apart, and strongly separated from all other now existing races. They are, in short, the germs of the Sixth sub-race, and in some few hundred years more, will become most decidedly the pioneers of that race which must succeed to the present European or fifth sub-race, in all its new characteristics [...] After this, in about 25,000 years, they will launch into preparations for the seventh sub-race; until, in consequence

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105 Wessinger, "The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar)", 36.

106 Trompf, "Theosophical Macrohistory", 391.

107 *Esoteric Christianity* refers to mystical and spiritual forms of Christianity, where Christianity is seen as a mystery religion and where only a select few are in possession of the supposed truth behind Christianity.

108 Lubelsky, "Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy", 349.

109 Besant, Annie, *Initiation: The Perfecting of Man* (Chicago, 1923) 123.

110 Lubelsky, "Mythological and Real Race Issues in Theosophy", 349.

111 Trompf, "Theosophical Macrohistory", 391.

of cataclysms — the first series of those which must one day destroy Europe, and still later the whole Aryan race (and thus affect both Americas), as also most of the lands directly connected with the confines of our continent and isles — the Sixth Root-Race will have appeared on the stage of our Round. When shall this be? Who knows save the great Masters of Wisdom, perchance, and they are as silent upon the subject as the snow-capped peaks that tower above them. All we know is, that it will silently come into existence; so silently, indeed, that for long millenniums shall its pioneers — the peculiar children who will grow into peculiar men and women — be regarded as anomalous *lusus naturae*, abnormal oddities physically and mentally.<sup>112</sup>

As Santucci pointed out, Besant saw the supposed rise of occult powers in American children and the sudden dawn of cataclysms, earthquakes and wars around the world as a nothing less than a sign of the coming of the new world teacher.<sup>113</sup> This new messiah would, just like Jesus did in Judea, spread new beliefs and introduce the sixth American Sub-race, from which the sixth paranormally gifted (in possession of *buddhi*) Root Race would sprout.<sup>114</sup> This new race was “found to be, on the great continent of North America, where even already steps are being taken towards the development of the sixth sub-race. Equally natural is it that which in scenery and climate approaches most nearly to our ideal of Paradise, that is to say, Lower California.”<sup>115</sup>

In their collaborative work *Man: Whence, How and Whither* Besant and Leadbeater expound on the coming of this new race and what will happen to the world in accordance to the coming of the world teacher. In this work, which was supposedly created by clairvoyant sessions by Besant and Leadbeater, and written down by Mrs. Van Hook and Don Fabrizio Ruspoli in 1910, the ‘New Age’ is described in every aspect, from the new forms of education to the food that will be eaten after the transition to the new Root Race and even how the buildings will look.<sup>116</sup> These details are shown to them as they make use of the *akashic records*, which showed them not only the former lives of people such as Olcott, who was believed to be the Buddhist king Ashoka,<sup>117</sup> but also the lives of the future. These lives of the future supposedly showed them how the world will look when the new world teacher introduces mankind to the new age.<sup>118</sup> An age, during which the sixth Sub-race can be known for their blue eyes and blond hair, where English is the main language and where Theosophy is the main religion.<sup>119</sup> This new age can also be seen as some sort of socialist utopia, reflecting some of Besant’s socialist influences, which can be seen from statements about the new world, like: “There is but little idea of private property in anything”<sup>120</sup> and “Poverty also has practically disappeared from civilized lands.”, while describing the new age.<sup>121</sup>

While both of these texts, *Initiation: The Perfecting of Man* as well as *Man: Whence, How and Whither*, do not name a specific individual as the new world teacher, in 1909 Leadbeater found a young Brahmin boy who was seen as the perfect vehicle for the world

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112 Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, 1, 445.

113 Santucci, “The Notion of Race in Theosophy”, 43.

114 In the Theosophical context *buddhi* refers to that principle which supposedly enables mankind to have alleged occult powers, something which was supposedly lost during the first Root Races, but will come back during the last two Root Races.

115 Besant and Leadbeater, *Man: Whence, How and Whither*, 329-330.

116 *Ibidem*, 3.

117 Ashoka (?-232) was an Indian emperor who is often considered to be the biggest contributor to the spread of Buddhism. Since Olcott could be seen from a Theosophical point of view, as an important contributor to the spread of the true Buddhist (Theosophical) doctrine, he is equated with the Buddhist emperor Ashoka by Besant and Leadbeater, possibly because of this.

118 This idea of a New Age and the Age of Aquarius has been popularized by one of Besant’s students, namely by Alice Bailey, who is often considered the mother of the New Age movement, therefore making Besant the grandmother of the New Age movement, see: Wessinger, “The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar)”, 34.

119 Besant and Leadbeater, *Man: Whence, How and Whither*, 430.

120 *Ibidem*, 420.

121 *Ibid*, 429.

teacher to incarnate into.<sup>122</sup> This Indian boy was Jiddu Krishnamurti, who together with his brother Nitya was adopted by Besant in 1909, was believed to be the perfect body for the world teacher. In reaction to the discovery of Krishnamurti, Besant founded the Order of the Star in the East, to propagate Krishnamurti as the new world teacher. Schooled, trained and prepared by Leadbeater, Krishnamurti would become a world renown philosopher, yet as Krishnamurti got older, he started rejecting his appropriated role as the messiah and in 1929 in Ommen, in the Netherlands, he personally dissolved the Order of the Star in the East.<sup>123</sup> As the result thereof, the Theosophical Society saw numerous splits, such as Alice Bailey's Arcane School and Guy Ballard's I AM movement, and lost a large part of their following, going from 45,098 members in 1928 to 18,216 members in 1943.<sup>124</sup>

### 3.5. In Short

What can thus be noted is that before the death of Blavatsky Besant's ideas on evolution were completely in line with those of Blavatsky herself, with Besant often defending her or strengthening and supplementing her theories. However, after the death of Blavatsky, and due to the influence of Leadbeater, Besant started to stray from these ideas. Slowly Christian influences seeped through and the idea that a world teacher would arise started to gain its core position. It was however after she became president that this idea of the *Maitreya* would become the center of her theosophical ideas and the core of her ideas on theosophical evolution. No longer was evolution seen as a mechanical law or as 'progressive evolution', as Wessinger calls Blavatsky's theory, but it had become a form of 'progressive millennialism', a form of evolution where people work together, guided by divine beings, to a collective salvation.<sup>125</sup> This progressive millennialism was centered around the guided evolution, in the form of a world teacher, in this case Krishnamurti who would apparently introduce the new age.

Since Besant was democratically elected and chosen as her successor by Blavatsky herself, Besant already had a very strong authoritative position within the Society. However, by discrediting Judge and proclaiming his connection to the masters to be false, Besant managed to draw most of the authority to herself, with the help of Leadbeater's supposed psychic abilities. Thanks to Leadbeater, Besant could now declare that she had direct contact with the masters, and therefore was in possession of the wishes, ideas and guidance of the masters as well. Nevertheless, this sole access to spiritual knowledge maintained by Leadbeater, led them to the reconstruction of the original Blavatskian ideas, risking the loss of members if their predictions about the world teacher and the coming of the New Age were false. Something which eventually happened which can be noted from the sharp decline in membership when Krishnamurti decided to denounce his role as world teacher and the coming of the sixth Sub-races didn't happen. While the Theosophical Society went back to Blavatsky's original mechanical and circular law of evolution after the death of Besant, membership would never again reach its former amounts of adherents.<sup>126</sup>

So in short, what differences can be noted from Besant's ideas in relationship with Blavatsky's ideas? While the cosmological scheme of stages and *yugas* stayed the same, as well as the idea of evolving races, the process in which races evolve was sped up by Besant and Leadbeater. While Blavatsky noted that it would take another couple of centuries before the sixth Root Race would come into being, Besant announced it to happen in her own lifetime. Also, Blavatsky clearly stated that the *Maitreya* would only appear in the seventh Root Race, while Besant already announced the *Maitreya* to incarnate into Jiddu Krishnamurti. Besant and

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122 Wessinger, "The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar)", 38.

123 *Ibidem*, 42.

124 *Ibid*, 46-47.

125 *Ibid*, 33-34.

126 *Ibid*, 46-47.

Leadbeater however try to maintain close to Blavatsky's ideas on earlier races and even compliment her theories, for example by naming the formerly nameless races.<sup>127</sup> The biggest change however occurs from the integration of Christ and Christianity. The idea of the second coming of Christ as the messiah changed the whole theosophical evolution. From Blavatsky's universal and circular law of evolution, Besant changed theosophical evolution towards a messiah-based theory. A theory in which Krishnamurti would become the world teacher and who would through his revolutionary teachings shape the New Age of mankind, introducing the sixth Sub-race and therefore give rise to the sixth Root Race.

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127 Besant and Leadbeater gave names to the previous Sub-Races, namely the Aryan, Arabian, Iranian, Keltic and Teutonic races. In: Besant and Leadbeater, *Man: Whence, How and Whither*.

## 4. Steiner's Occidental Theosophy

### 4.1. Anthroposophical Schism

Slow but steady Besant and Leadbeater reintroduced Christianity into the teachings of the Theosophical Society, giving Christ a new and more prominent position by reinstating Christ as one of the earlier world teachers. Nevertheless, many Western Theosophists, of whom Rudolf Steiner was one of the most prominent, were still not satisfied. Just like many other Theosophists, Steiner who was the leader of the German section of the Theosophical Society, had more affiliation with Western Esotericism and Esoteric Christianity, than with the Oriental traditions so beloved by the first generation leaders of the Theosophical Society.<sup>128</sup> Rather than the Buddhist and Hindu focus, various Theosophists preferred the focus to be more on the Rosicrucian, Hermetic, Neo-Platonic and Gnostic traditions and heritages that they deemed so imperative for European intellectual life.

While Besant and Leadbeater introduced Krishnamurti as the new messiah, which was highly motivated by Leadbeater's Christian background, Steiner saw this as an opportunity and together with his wife Marie von Sivers (1867-1948) officially split with the Theosophical Society in 1912, making his own Anthroposophical Society an independent movement. This movement, which remains popular up until today due to their Waldorf pedagogy, their movement art named eurhythmy and biodynamic farming,<sup>129</sup> would reinforce a more Occidental and Christ-focused form of Theosophy, while still maintaining Blavatsky's theosophical foundations. Therefore, Steiner's ideas remained largely identical to Blavatsky's, but had, as we will see in the following chapter, various adaptations.

### 4.2. Steiner's Life

Just as it was the case with Blavatsky and Besant, it is important to look at Steiner himself and how his life has possibly influenced his ideas on evolution. Rudolf Steiner, who was born on February 25<sup>th</sup>, in the then Austrian town of Kraljevec, was fascinated by science and technology from a young age onwards, and as the result thereof he pursued an education at the University of Technology in Vienna in 1879.<sup>130</sup> While the focus of his study was on the natural sciences, he had a passion for literature and history as well. Nevertheless, the subject that would eventually influence him and his ideas the most, was philosophy. His fascination for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) would become of utmost importance to his future theosophical and anthroposophical ideas. During the years from 1882 until 1897, Steiner would study the works of Goethe and it was during this same period that he published his own books, namely *Grundlinien einer Erkenntnistheorie der Goetheschen Weltanschauung* (1886) and *Die Philosophie der Freiheit* (1894).<sup>131</sup>

Steiner's affiliation with the Theosophical Society dawned in reaction to the publication of his last book *Die Philosophie der Freiheit*, which Steiner believed would grant him the position of professor at the University in Vienna. His academic works were however criticized by his academic peers, which led Steiner to have an existential crisis.<sup>132</sup> In 1897 however, Steiner moved to Berlin where he came in contact with the philosophical works of Nietzsche and the scientific works of Ernst Haeckel, but also with the theosophical ideas that would hold such importance during his lifetime.<sup>133</sup>

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128 In the first generation there was already some criticism on the Oriental focus of Blavatsky and Olcott. Anna Kingsford (1846-1888) was in favour of a more Occidental (Hermetic and Christian to be precise) form of Theosophy and therefore created the Hermetic Society, which was part of the Theosophical Society at first, but which split later on. See: Godwin, "Blavatsky and the First Generations of Theosophy", 24-26.

129 Brandt and Hammer, "Rudolf Steiner and Theosophy", 113.

130 *Ibidem*, 114.

131 *Ibid*, 115.

132 *Ibid*, 116.

133 *Ibid*, 115-117.

It was for various reasons that Steiner, who made arrogant and pejorative statements about Theosophists at first, joined the Theosophical Society in 1902.<sup>134</sup> After the harsh criticisms in academic circles on his philosophical works, Steiner found the Theosophical Society to be an acceptable and open audience for his own philosophical ideas.<sup>135</sup> While working for *Magazin für Literatur* Steiner was invited to speak on the esoteric nature of Goethe's work *The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily* and was expected to give a lecture on Nietzsche who had recently deceased.<sup>136</sup> The second impetus for Steiner to join the Theosophical Society, was the vision he had about Christ's crucifixion and his resurrection on Golgotha. This vision would give him the deeply ingrained goal of finding a new form of Christianity.<sup>137</sup> The third reason Steiner had to join the Theosophical Society, was the request made by his wife Marie von Sivers. Von Sivers asked Steiner to join the Theosophical Society and to help the Theosophical Society find a way to provide wisdom that was more in line with European intellectual life.<sup>138</sup>

What can thus be noted is that Steiner was not only critical on the Theosophical Society from the beginning onwards, but also that one of the causes for him to join the Theosophical Society laid in his goal of making the theosophical ideas more suitable for a Western oriented public. Besides that, the vision that left such a great impact on his life, made him believe that it was his calling to find or create a new form of Christianity. These latter two aspects of his personal life lay at the core of his split with the Theosophical Society in 1912, and were also at the base of his critique during his membership of the Theosophical Society.

### 4.3. Steiner and the Theosophical Society

Steiner quickly climbed ranks within the Theosophical Society. In 1902 he was already admitted to the Esoteric Section and he was even appointed by Besant herself to become the national manager of the German and Austrian Esoteric Section in 1904.<sup>139</sup> While these are prominent positions within the Theosophical Society, it was his role as secretary of the German section of the Theosophical Society that made him gain his popularity. Yet, while Steiner held high positions within the Society, he always remained critical of it. His earlier beliefs that the Theosophical Society had to focus less on the Oriental and more on the Occidental, were kept during his membership. It was after the death of Blavatsky that Steiner became more focal in his criticism, and his polemics gained extra momentum in 1907 when Besant became president. During a theosophical conference in 1907 in Germany, Steiner proclaimed himself to be more in favor of a Christian-European Theosophical Society and referred to it as being part of a larger Rosicrucian tradition.<sup>140</sup> As time went by and as Besant focused more on the world teacher, the more Steiner moved away from the Society. The definitive split however came when Besant proclaimed Krishnamurti to be the messiah, the new incarnation of Christ, and founded the Order of the Star in the East. In reaction to this Steiner said:

But after 1906 there began in the Society, upon whose general direction I had not the least influence, practices reminiscent of the growth of spiritualism, which made it necessary for me to warn members again and again that the part of the Society which was under my direction should have absolutely nothing to do with these things. The climax in these practices was reached when it was asserted of a Hindu boy that he was the person in who Christ would appear in a new earthly life. For the propagation of this

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134 Brandt and Hammer, "Rudolf Steiner and Theosophy", 116.

135 *Ibidem*, 116-117.

136 Ahern, Geoffrey, *Sun at Midnight: The Rudolf Steiner Movement and Gnosis in the West* (2009) 36.

137 Brandt and Hammer, "Rudolf Steiner and Theosophy", 116.

138 *Ibidem*, 117. Cf. Wiesberger, Hella, *Marie Steiner-von Sivers. Ein Leben für die Anthroposophie* (Dornach, 1989) 65-67.

139 *Ibid*, 117-119.

140 *Ibid*, 120.



absurdity there was formed in the Theosophical Society a special society, that of " The Star of the East." It was utterly impossible for my friend and me to include the membership of this " Star of the East " as a branch of the German section, as they desired and as Annie Besant, president of the Theosophical Society, especially intended. We were forced to found the Anthroposophical Society independently.<sup>141</sup>

It was in reaction to this that Steiner, together with most of the German section of the Theosophical Society, split with Besant's Theosophical Society and founded the Anthroposophical Society, challenging Besant's and Leadbeater's authority, by claiming his own access to the *akashic records*. Later on, Steiner was not only critical on Besant but started to attack Blavatsky's ideas as well, for example by stating about *The Secret Doctrine*:

This was interspersed with unbelievable passages which never ceased to amaze, because the book is a sloppy and dilettantish piece of work as regards any sort of methodology, and includes superstitious nonsense and much more. In short, Blavatsky's Secret Doctrine is a peculiar book: great truths side by side with terrible rubbish.<sup>142</sup>

While Steiner attacked Besant's, and even more remarkably Blavatsky's ideas, he still used their theosophical ideas on cosmology to create his own theosophical or more correctly, 'Anthroposophical Evolution'.

#### **4.4. Steiner's 'Theosophical/Anthroposophical Evolution'**

##### *4.4.1. Human Evolution*

While Steiner clearly disagreed with the Oriental teachings of Blavatsky and Besant, he nevertheless used their theories to build his own cosmology. With just a few adaptations, translations and distortions, the theosophical evolution was changed into an 'anthroposophical evolution'. Steiner's cosmological scheme initially looks very much like Blavatsky's. While greater cycles, such as the *manvantaras* are not mentioned, planetary cycles play a big role in Steiner's theories.<sup>143</sup> In his lectures 'The Evolution of the Earth and Man and The Influence of the Stars' Steiner, at the request of some 'Herr Dollinger', expounds on his own theories on cosmology and the evolution of mankind.<sup>144</sup> During these lectures he doesn't only talk about the evolution of mankind, but also tells his audience about the planetary cycles of the old Saturn, the old Sun and the old Moon, something which is also present in various theosophical ideas. After this, Steiner teaches his listeners about the various conditions of the earth itself, during which he proclaims the earth to be a corpse. And it is because of that reason, that material life is possible on this planet, according to Steiner.<sup>145</sup>

In Steiner's theory the material body has only evolved after the spiritual descent into matter, therefore making use of the same esoteric U-curve that Blavatsky and Besant made use of.<sup>146</sup> Due to this descent of spirit, the human soul had to go through various stages before gaining its current material form. For example, before our current corporeal stage, mankind supposedly had a fluid body, just the case was with Blavatsky's Lemurians.<sup>147</sup> Just like

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141 Steiner, Rudolf, *The Story of my Life* (London, 1928) 300.

142 Steiner, Rudolf, 'The Homeless Souls', Lecture one, The Anthroposophic Movement, Dornach, June 10 1923, available online at: <https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA258/English/RSP1993/19230610p01.html>, last accessed at 11-05-2018.

143 Trompf, "Theosophical Macrohistory", 395.

144 Steiner, Rudolf, 'The Evolution of the Earth and Man and the Influence of the Stars', Lecture I, June 30 1924, available online at: <https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA354/English/RSP1987/19240630a01.html>, last accessed on 11-05-2018.

145 Steiner, Rudolf, 'The Evolution of the Earth and Man and the Influence of the Stars', Lecture I.

146 Trompf, "Theosophical Macrohistory", 396.

147 Steiner, Rudolf, 'The Evolution of the Earth and Man and the Influence of the Stars', Lecture IV, July 9 1924, available online at: <https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA354/English/RSP1987/19240709p01.html>, last accessed at 11-05-2018.

Blavatsky and Besant, Steiner also made use of the lost civilizations of Atlantis and Lemuria and by the use of them he shows that the material form of mankind has changed throughout its evolution, as Trompf has stated as well.<sup>148</sup>

Steiner claims that after millions of years of evolution, mankind arrived at the current race, in which we gained our corporeal body. This body however did not stem from primates, but:

All that lives out in the world as animal is descended from the primeval being that was neither animal nor man but something between. The one remained imperfect, the other became more perfect, became man.<sup>149</sup>

Just like Blavatsky and Besant, Steiner sees mankind as the combination of the material and the spiritual soul. The soul, which sustains the ‘mannequin’ by holding it together and giving it life, is explained by Steiner by the use of Theseus paradox, where the soul stays the same, while the body constantly changes.<sup>150</sup> Steiner also explicitly states that Darwin was not correct in stating that mankind derived from apes, but rather that animals are degenerate forms of mankind:

Men have not descended, therefore, from apes. On the contrary! Just as the present savages have fallen from the level of the human beings of primeval times, so the apes are beings who have fallen still lower.<sup>151</sup>

Steiner even goes as far as stating:

Since people today on the whole can no longer think properly, they misunderstand what exists on earth as plant, animal and man. Then materialistic Darwinism arose, which proved that the animals were there first and that man simply developed out of animals. It is true that his external form man is related to the animals, but he existed earlier, and the animals really developed later after the world had gone through its transformations.<sup>152</sup>

So, while Steiner makes use of the planetary cycles, the multiple kingdoms,<sup>153</sup> the involution of the soul and the evolution of mankind through progressive races and Sub-races, he also adapted various theories to fit his own agenda.

#### 4.4.2. Christology

As can be seen in the previous paragraph, Steiner’s preference for Occidental esotericism and his quest for a new form of Christianity, led him to revise various theosophical teachings into something which Katharina Brandt and Olav Hammer call ‘Christology’.<sup>154</sup> Steiner believed Blavatsky to have been misled by eastern initiates about the role of Christ and the part he plays in the salvation of mankind.<sup>155</sup> According to Steiner, Christ only appeared once, during the

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148 Trompf, “Theosophical Macrohistory”, 395.

149 Steiner, Rudolf, ‘The Evolution of the Earth and Man and the Influence of the Stars’, Lecture IV.

150 The Theseus paradox looks at the ever-changing nature of form, and what constitutes and holds together a specific form or being while it is constantly changing, see: Steiner, Rudolf, ‘The Evolution of the Earth and Man and the Influence of the Stars’, Lecture I.

151 Steiner, Rudolf, ‘The Evolution of the Earth and Man and the Influence of the Stars’, Lecture VIII, August 6 1924, available online at: <https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA354/English/RSP1987/19240806p01.html>, last accessed at 11-05-2018.

152 Steiner, Rudolf, ‘The Evolution of the Earth and Man and the Influence of the Stars’, Lecture I.

153 The elemental, plant, animal and human kingdoms are also used by Blavatsky and Besant, see: Trompf, “Theosophical Macrohistory”, 395.

154 Brandt and Hammer, “Rudolf Steiner and Theosophy”, 116.

155 Trompf, “Theosophical Macrohistory”, 394.

absolute low of materiality of mankind, and it was only at this historical time that Christ would incarnate in the flesh.<sup>156</sup> This belief made him turn away from the idea that Krishnamurti could be the reincarnation of Christ or Buddha, since it would be Christ who would save mankind in the ethereal form, and not in the corporeal form. Steiner believed that Christ was one of the teachers of mankind, and that he gave mankind the 'Intellectual Soul' during the Greco-Roman period.<sup>157</sup> It is therefore that Steiner's soteriology was to be completed by Christ's action and by the human intellect given to mankind by him. According to Steiner: "Only intellect enables man to become free."<sup>158</sup> Thanks to this intellect, mankind should be able to gain 'higher spiritual knowledge', which was the direct goal of the Anthroposophical Society, making it more practical than the intellectual and theoretical Theosophical Society.<sup>159</sup> Steiner stated that, just like in Besant's theories, mankind had to gain spiritual powers (the *buddhi* which Besant believed to be present in every person of the sixth Root Race) and that mankind had to shed its material form:

Humanity has risen by throwing out the lower forms in order to purify itself and it will rise still higher by separating another kingdom of nature, the kingdom of the evil race. Thus mankind rises upward.<sup>160</sup>

While various theosophical ideas and theories are compatible with Steiner's ideology, it is Steiner's role of Christ that distinguishes his ideas from his precursors. His evolution is not the cyclical, mechanical law of Blavatsky, neither is it the salvation guided by the world teacher and the masters, but rather a Christian inspired linear salvation, where Christ will redeem mankind through the progress of involution and evolution of the soul. Eventually Christ will come and save mankind through the 'Christ Impulse', or as Steiner states:

Thus we may say: The 20th century will produce the preliminary conditions for a real understanding of the Christ impulse, in that it will reveal how truly the Christ Impulse becomes the spiritual Sun, awakening in the souls of men the inner experience referred to by Goethe in the words: "The man who overcomes himself is freed from the power that binds all beings." [...] Through the idea of inner redemption man will learn to know the meaning of redemption in historical evolution and thus in the 20th century he will come to understand the Christ Event in the light of an extension of the Goethean utterance: "The man who overcomes himself is freed from the power that binds all beings; in this self-conquest he first finds his own true being, as all humanity can indeed find itself in Christ."<sup>161</sup>

#### 4.5. In Short

As can be seen from the former chapter, Steiner's ideas deviated from his predecessors. This can be explained mainly due to the difference in their personal backgrounds. In the case of Steiner, he was very much influenced by his former academic studies in the work of Goethe, Nietzsche and various philosophers. His preference for Occidental esotericism and Christianity, which were shaped by his personal interests and his vision, led him to his personal goal of making the Theosophical Society get more in touch with European intellectual traditions. From

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156 Trompf, "Theosophical Macrohistory", 395.

157 *Ibidem*, 395.

158 Steiner, Rudolf, 'The Evolution of the Earth and Man and the Influence of the Stars', Lecture VIII.

159 Trompf, "Theosophical Macrohistory", 395.

160 Steiner, Rudolf, *Apocalypse of St. John* (London, 1958) 84. Quoted in: Staudenmaier, Peter, 'Race and Redemption: Racial and Ethnic Evolution in Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy', *Nova Religio*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2008) 21.

161 Steiner, Rudolf, 'Christ and the Twentieth Century', Lecture in Berlin, January 25, 1912, available online at: <https://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/Dates/19120125p01.html>, last accessed at 11-05-2018.

the beginning Steiner was critical of the Theosophical Society and its Oriental focus, something which would later become the breaking point.

Steiner's dissatisfaction came to a zenith when Besant introduced Krishnamurti as the new messiah. This was the moment Steiner and most of the German Section parted ways with Besant's Theosophical Society and therefore they created the Anthroposophical Society. In this new esoteric current, the focus was moved to Occidental esotericism, such as Rosicrucianism and Gnosticism, and the position of Christ was moved to the center and core of the movement. By reinstating Christ as the messiah, Steiner moved away from Blavatsky's universal, mechanical and circular cosmology and Besant's linear and guided salvation, and thereby created a teleological form of evolution. An evolution where the soul allegedly descended into matter, and through the evolution of the various kingdoms comes closer to regaining Spiritual Knowledge, which will eventually free them by the intellectual power given to mankind by Christ. While this part of course, deviates from Blavatsky's and Besant's original ideas, various other theosophical concepts are kept, for example Root Races and Sub-races, lost civilizations, the kingdoms of evolution and of course the descend of the soul into matter.

## 5. Analysis

In the last three chapters I've researched the historical progression of the theosophical concept of evolution, through three succeeding Theosophical leaders, namely Blavatsky, Besant and Steiner. During this research I've looked at the changing nature of the theosophical evolution, and how this happened. To do so, I've looked at the personal context of these prominent Theosophists, similarities and differences in their theories and even the internal authority and power struggles. In this last concluding chapter, I'll summarize the last three chapters and answer the research question: How did the ideas on the evolution of mankind change from the first generation, as seen by Blavatsky, in relationship to the second generation, as seen by Annie Besant and Rudolf Steiner?

### 5.1. Overview

In the late nineteenth century the polemics between the Church and modern science came to a highlight. The void left between the two was used by Blavatsky *et al.* to create the Theosophical Society. This society had the goal to study the occult and esoteric and made use of esotericism, Oriental religions, science and popular fiction to come to a syncretic entity. During the years following the foundation of the Theosophical Society, Blavatsky came up with a complex cosmology/macrohistory. This cosmology was heavily influenced by Hindu and Buddhist concepts and was divided in various *kalpas* and *yugas*. These often septenary cycles were part of a larger mechanical scheme of evolution encompassing the whole of the universe. Mankind itself was just a small part of this larger system of evolution, but nevertheless contributed to it. During various septenary evolutionary cycles such as Root Races, Sub-races and Branch races, the human soul evolved through the mechanical law of evolution with the goal to once again reunite with the divine. The current state of mankind was supposedly that of the fifth Sub-race of the fifth Root Race, and was believed to evolve into the sixth Sub-race in just a few hundred years.

This expectation of the arrival of the sixth Sub-race would heavily influence the third president of the Theosophical Society, Annie Besant. Besant, initially used Blavatsky's theories to guide her own theosophical ideas, yet after her acquaintance with Leadbeater this changed. Inspired by Leadbeater's Christian background and claimed occult powers, Besant introduced the arrival of the new world teacher, the Christian messiah or the Eastern *Maitreya*, giving the theosophical evolution a new millennial format. To fulfill the role of the new world teacher, a recipient body was needed, and this body was found in Krishnamurti. In accordance to his discovery, Besant established the Order of the Star in the East, and expected the new age to come any time. This world teacher would guide the world towards a new age in America, and mankind would once again become spiritual. This salvational and linear aspect of Besant's theory was quite different from the ever-circular and mechanical law of evolution that can be seen in Blavatsky's theories.

Rudolf Steiner, who was the secretary of the German Section of the Theosophical Society, was ever since his acquaintance with the Theosophical Society dissatisfied with it. His scientific background and his preference for Western and Occidental intellectual heritage, such as Christianity, Gnosticism and Rosicrucianism, but also for philosophers as Nietzsche and of course Goethe, led him to have different ideas on the direction of the Theosophical Society. After the death of Blavatsky, and the appointment of Besant as the new president, Steiner grew ever so critical of the Oriental focus of the Theosophical Society. The lack of Christian ideas and the disposition of Christ in the Theosophical Society was the main critique of Steiner, which came to a culmination when Besant introduced Krishnamurti as the new messiah, the second coming of Christ. This was the turning-point for Steiner, who together with various German Theosophists, founded the Anthroposophical Society, which was focused more on the practical application of esotericism and had the goal of gaining spiritual knowledge, which was only

possible by the intellect given to mankind by Christ. Just like Besant, Steiner focused more on the salvational character of evolution, but while Besant's evolution was guided by the world teachers and the masters, Steiner's evolution remained mechanical, just like Blavatsky's theories.

## 5.2. Conclusion

Concluding, we can see that the theosophical concept of the evolution of mankind has changed various times, not only by succession, but also during the lives of these successors. While some aspects remained the same due to their importance in the greater scheme of universal evolution, for example features such as planetary cycles and races, other concepts were adapted. Changes can be seen for example in the role of the messiah, but also the role that Christ plays in the Theosophical Society. These changes, as can be seen from the previous chapters, were mainly influenced by personal interests, goals and personal context, but can also be viewed from a pure pragmatic perspective, helping these Theosophists establishing their authority. The changes that occurred during the leadership of these three Theosophists can be seen from *Figure 5*. In this figure various core concepts of the theosophical evolution are shown, and the way Blavatsky, Besant and Steiner related to them.

Figure 5 displays the four core concepts discussed throughout this essay, namely the role of race, the role of a messiah, the role of Christ and Christianity, but also the differences in soteriology. Starting with the concept of race, no real differences can be noted in the theories of the three Theosophists. While Blavatsky's theory on Root and Sub-races remained, Besant and Steiner took it upon themselves to provide more information on them, for example by naming the previously un-named Sub-races. So, it might be safe to say that this is the core feature of the theosophical evolution. The second key concept is that of the role of the Messiah. While Blavatsky names the coming of the *Maitreya* in her *Secret Doctrine*, it plays no trivial role in her own theories, something which can be seen by the lack of presence of a messiah in her literature. The role of the *Maitreya* or the messiah is however of utmost importance in the theories of Besant, as well as in Steiner's. While Besant, and Leadbeater, expect the world teacher to come forth during their lifetime and introduce a new form of mankind in the new age, Steiner believes in the reincarnation of Christ in the ethereal form to redeem mankind by giving us 'intellect'. The importance of Christ does not only play a major role in Steiner's theories, but also in Besant's and Leadbeater's. The role of Christ in the Theosophical Society is strengthened when Besant turned president. Blavatsky's negative views on Christianity were not preserved, and by giving Jesus the position of world teacher, Christianity slowly gained a more respected position in theosophical circles.

The biggest change however occurs in the soteriological views of the three. While Blavatsky's cosmological evolution was centered around the principle of periodicity, the ebb and flow of the universe, creating a circular and mechanical world view, Steiner and Besant strayed from this. The mechanical and circular was not adopted by Besant in her world teacher-phase. Besant, with her focus on the coming of the world teacher, turned the theosophical concept of evolution into a salvation-type concept. Evolution was no longer a mechanical and circular process, but it rather was a linear evolution guided by the world teacher and the masters, which would end when mankind was evolved enough, serving the goal of ultimate salvation after the seventh Root Race. While Steiner also used this linear soteriology, and thereby differing from Blavatsky's circular 'periodical' evolution, he did not hint at a guided evolution. Nevertheless, Steiner claims that mankind evolved with the help of the Christ given intellect, but evolution is not seen as the direct result of divine interference. Steiner's soteriological views are also linear, just like Besant, and the end goal is acquirement of spiritual knowledge and the reunification with Christ and god.

In light of this, I would like to posit that Wessinger’s terminology of ‘progressive evolution’ and ‘progressive millennialism’ is no longer sufficient when looked at from a larger perspective. If we introduce Steiner’s evolution as well, Blavatsky’s ‘progressive evolution’ is incomplete.. Since Steiner’s evolution is as progressive as Blavatsky’s, but still very much differs from it, the term progressive evolution is obsolete, therefore I would like to posit the terminology of ‘circular progressive evolution’ in the case of Blavatsky, due to the everlasting circle of evolution, this in comparison with Steiner’s more worldly and linear form of salvation and evolution. Therefore, I would like to differentiate between Blavatsky’s ‘circular progressive evolution’ and Steiner’s ‘linear progressive evolution’, while maintaining Wessinger’s term for Besant’s evolution, namely that of ‘progressive millennialism’. Therefore concluding, the theosophical concept of evolution has changed from Blavatsky’s ‘circular progressive evolution’, to Besant’s ‘progressive millennialism’ and eventually to Steiner’s anthroposophical/theosophical ‘linear progressive evolution’.

<b>Core concepts of theosophical evolution</b>	<b>Blavatsky</b>	<b>Besant</b>	<b>Steiner</b>
<b>Role of race</b>	Present	Present and expounded upon	Present and expounded upon
<b>Role of messiah</b>	Not name worthy	Krishnamurti is seen as the world teacher, the new messiah	Denial of Krishnamurti as the messiah, rather Christ in the ethereal form as messiah
<b>Role of Christianity</b>	Christianity is seen as something degenerate, focus lies on the Oriental	Christianity is seen as esoteric teaching from the initiate Jesus Christ	Christianity is the true form of religion, and Christ is the only messiah
<b>Soteriology</b>	Present, but as part of a circular and mechanical law of the universe	Present, but attained by mankind, guided by the world teacher and the masters. It is part of a linear and guided evolution	Present, but attained by spiritual knowledge given by Christ. It is part of a mechanical but linear evolution

*Figure 5: The development of the theosophical concept of evolution*

### **5.3. Authority**

As pointed at before, authority struggles seemed to have had some influence in the development and change of the theosophical evolution. In the beginning of the Theosophical Society Blavatsky struggled for recognition, by on the hand critiquing modern science and on the other side criticizing the Catholic church. By combining religion and science, by embedding the scientific nomenclature and by making use of religious history and concepts, she started to move in-between the two, often seen by those two as spreading half-truths. However, by making use of science, as well as theology, Blavatsky managed to come to a synthesis that would hold authority in various circles.

In the case of Besant, it was necessary to guide and help the Theosophical Society gain new members and to keep the old adherents. To do so, Besant would not only need the legal-rational authority given to her by Blavatsky, but also the spiritual authority, which was only attainable by getting in contact with the masters. Since Besant did not claim any occult powers, she would need to get in contact with the masters in another way. This is where Leadbeater

comes into play. His proclaimed occult powers, made it possible for Besant to show that she was guided, inspired and in contact with the masters, just like Blavatsky and Ollcot were. Since Blavatsky already laid out the whole cosmology of the Theosophical Society, Besant had nothing to add but minor details. To show however that she was guided by the masters, Besant and Leadbeater introduced new ideas to the Theosophical Society, namely that of a world teacher. By introducing him, Besant could lead the Theosophical Society to two ways, that of a rise in adherents due to the salvation that is imminent, or that of decrease when the world teacher and their prophecies were false.

Steiner already had some legal-rational authority as the secretary of the German Section, but his authority grew as discontent with Besant's presidency grew bigger. Besant's introduction of Krishnamurti was the impetus for Steiner to legitimately part ways with the Theosophical Society and found his own Anthroposophical Society, without losing much authority in the European theosophical circles. He kept his authority in theosophical circles by maintaining various of Blavatsky's original concepts. His spiritual authority however grew after he claimed to have access to the *akashic records* and due to his proclaimed spiritual abilities. By strengthening the position of Christ and shifting the focus to the Occidental, Steiner gained a large following in the Western world. Nevertheless, to see if these authority struggles were of any real importance, it is necessary to conduct further research in this subject of power struggle. This current research however hints that this might be the case. However, this topic of authority struggle and the possible result of deviation in theosophical ideas needs a research *an sich*.

#### **5.4. Relevance**

Hopefully this research will contribute to various other field and questions as well. The first field I personally think it will contribute to is to the study of the Theosophical Society itself. Since the evolution of mankind plays such a big role within the macrohistory of the Theosophical Society it can help us understand how the Theosophical Society has changed throughout its existence. It shows how various concepts changed in such a short span of time, and how this was influenced by different goals, different ideas and authority struggles. It shows us how the Theosophical Society tried to adapt to an ever-changing world, were they had to keep up with various intellectual trends, scientific discoveries and religious ideas. The main question that can and should be asked however is: Did the Theosophical Society lose its momentum due to the introduction of Krishnamurti? If Besant and Leadbeater didn't introduce the concept of the messiah, if they didn't split with Judge and the American section, and if they didn't part ways with a large part of the European section, in what position would the Theosophical Society be in this day and age? Why did the Theosophical Society lose its momentum, was it because of this, or rather because of the difficulty of synthesizing ideas, or was there another reason?

On the other hand, hopefully this research will contribute to the study of Western Esotericism. As already shown during the previous chapters, the Theosophical Society motivated and influenced various esoteric currents. On an indirect and lower level we can find people and movements such as Theodor Reuss (1855-1923) and his Ordo Templi Orientis (O.T.O.), William Wynn Westcott's (1848-1925) Order of the Golden Dawn and Anna Kingsford's (1846-1888) Hermetic Brotherhood, but also other prominent occultists such as A.E. Waite (1857-1942) and Dion Fortune (1890-1946) being inspired by theosophical concepts, ideas and theories. The more direct influences can be noted in for example Steiner's Anthroposophical Society or Bailey's influence in the New Age movement, but in various other movements as well. For instance, Guy Ballard's (1878-1939) I AM movement or the influence it had on the classic New Age book *The Kybalion* (1908). While the theosophical ideas on race, cyclical evolution and lost civilizations may have inspired some of these movements, one of the movements in which the theosophical ideas are most present is in Gurdjieff's (1866-1949)



and Ouspensky's (1878-1947) Fourth Way movement. The presence of theosophical theories in this current, such as the septenary cycles, circular evolution and the supposed latency of psychic powers, but even more so the hidden Tibetan initiates, hints at some kind of common origin. Not only is there a resemblance in these ideas and those of the Theosophical Society, the movements could also be considered historically consecutive, the Fourth Way following the Theosophical Society's first generation. While the Fourth Way might be considered to be more practical oriented than the Theosophical Society, there seems to be a strong resemblance. Therefore, I would suggest researching if the theosophical ideas of evolution have seeped through any of these movements and currents, and in specific Gurdjieff's Fourth Way, with the goal to help us understand some of these movements better. By searching for some of the core concepts of theosophical evolution such as race, lost civilizations, cosmological evolution in combination with planetary evolution, we can possibly find new and useful information about these other esoteric currents, which would expand our understanding of them.

Lastly, this case of theosophical evolution shows us that when science and religion come together, it can make an interesting syncretic mix. As often is the case with such a system, we can notice that by doing so, frequently theories are stripped from some of their core features. By distorting or adding aspects to religious or scientific theories, these two can be blended together to make a popular mix and a new paradigm. However, while this might prove popular in esoteric and occult movements, in the scientific and religious milieu it is looked down upon. Therefore, currents like the Theosophical Society are doomed to wander in between the two 'truths', creating and living in its own reality.

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