

A | B R I E F | G U I D E | T O

# ∞ SECRET ∞ RELIGIONS

A COMPLETE GUIDE TO HERMETIC,  
PAGAN AND ESOTERIC BELIEFS



DAVID V. BARRETT

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A BRIEF GUIDE TO

# SECRET RELIGIONS

DAVID V. BARRETT



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This book is dedicated  
to those who question  
to those who seek  
to those who choose

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Most sociologists and anthropologists see participant observation as an invaluable research tool. By spending time with members of movements one can gain not just knowledge but understanding, not just facts but insight. Over the last decade or more the London esoteric scene has made me welcome and has included me in many of its activities, knowing that I am a researcher and writer and not a member of any esoteric movement myself. Over the same period I have benefited greatly from listening to and questioning other researchers and speakers, and also from questions, comments and criticisms from the audience when I have been the speaker, both at academic seminars and conferences and in meetings in upstairs rooms in pubs. All of these have been immensely valuable; I owe a lot to them.

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# INTRODUCTION

For anyone who writes about the variety of religious movements it is dispiriting that a decade into the new millennium it is still necessary to point out that Wiccans are not Satanists.

Journalists writing an attention-grabbing story equating witches with black magic with Satanism either haven't done their homework, or don't care – why let the facts get in the way of a good story?

Fundamentalist Christians who do the same have a different reason: any belief which is not of Christ must necessarily be of the Devil – 'He that is not with me is against me' (Matthew 12:30) – so all Neo-Pagans are by definition Satanists, whether they think they are or not. The fact that the same 'logic' would also apply to Buddhists and followers of every other religion is usually ignored.

Christians in particular shy away from the word 'occult' as though it must have devilish connotations. In fact, the word simply means 'hidden' or 'secret' (see p. 13), and since many of the traditional occult teachings are now widely available – indeed, many of the esoteric or occult schools now have websites explaining their purpose – the term no longer really applies.

This book is in many ways a companion volume to my *A Brief History of Secret Societies*,<sup>1</sup> hence the similar title, *A Brief Guide to Secret Religions* – though most of the movements in it would say that they are not secret at all; they publish books, magazines and leaflets, they have websites and many openly publicise their meetings.<sup>2</sup> But they are all 'alternative religions', outside the mainstream, and many of them keep their beliefs and practices to themselves.

One of the book's main aims is to dispel many of the popular misconceptions about New Age, Hermetic and Neo-Pagan beliefs and their believers.

I entitled an earlier book on new religious movements *The New Believers*<sup>3</sup> because, wherever possible, I sought to understand these religions by talking to their believers, not just by listing their beliefs. I take the same approach with this book, which is in part based on one chapter of that one, updated and very much expanded.<sup>4</sup> In addition to presenting the objective facts about the origins, history, beliefs and practices of the movements I try to give an indication of what their members, followers, believers or practitioners think about their own religion – or, as many would call it, the path. This is a form of the phenomenological approach to religious studies that I first encountered many years ago when studying for my first degree: in essence, in terms taken from cultural anthropology, a well-rounded description of a religious movement depends both on *emic* accounts based on what the members themselves say about their own beliefs, and on *etic* accounts, the scholar's own observation and analysis.<sup>5</sup>

As with all my books I aim to bring a scholarly approach to the content, while avoiding the dryness of far too many scholarly books; this book is written for anyone with an interest in these religions whatever their academic background.

The monotheistic religions in general have problems with religious pluralism; they believe that there is not only one god but one truth, and that each one of them alone has it. In contrast, esoteric religions, again in general, tend to think in terms of paths; someone may choose one path for himself, but will not only respect the right of other people to choose their own paths, but also accept the validity of those other paths. Many occultists and Neo-Pagans are polytheists, but even those who focus on one



god are most likely to be henotheists, following one god but happily accepting the existence of others.

Esoteric religions do not enjoy the same respect from others that mainstream religions usually do. In religiously conservative America a Republican Senate candidate in the 2010 mid-term elections felt that she had to begin a political advertisement with the words ‘I’m not a witch’ because in 1999 she had said in a TV chat show, ‘I dabbled into witchcraft.’<sup>6</sup> One suspects that she would not have felt the need to say, ‘I’m not a Methodist.’ Even in Britain’s largely secular society today there is still a great deal of prejudice against all forms of esoteric religion. As this book was being completed two British newspaper columnists attacked Neo-Pagans in the same month. One, a tabloid journalist, called Druidry ‘a cult’ and described the granting of basic social rights to Pagans as ‘totally barking mumbo-jumbo’<sup>7</sup> (see p. 323). The other, writing a blog for a broadsheet newspaper, spoke without an explanation of ‘the overlap between paganism and various forms of Satanism’<sup>8</sup> (see p. 248, p. 280).

It is partly to counter such inflammatory remarks that this book has been written. It covers a large number of movements and a large number of beliefs. It does not assume that any one of them is right and all the others are wrong; that is the antithesis of most esoteric thinking, particularly in Britain and Europe. It does not judge the spiritual truth of any of the movements – though it may sometimes question their histories.

The book does not set out to be an encyclopedic directory of all esoteric movements; that would be impractical and unwieldy, if not impossible to do. Neither is it an apologia for the groups included, though some might have wished it to be so.

It is instead an overview of a wide range of esoteric movements, describing their origins and history, their beliefs and practices, and sometimes their controversies. One of the themes running throughout the book, for example, is the uncertain provenance of many groups and the uncertain backgrounds of some of their founders (see p. 183–4, p. 197, p. 300–1). The book aims to help readers to distinguish between factual history and mythic history in a number of cases.

Although the song ‘The Age of Aquarius’, from the 1967 musical *Hair!*, promised the Sixties ideal of peace and love, with harmony and trust,<sup>9</sup> the reality of New Age, Hermetic and Neo-Pagan movements has often been anything but, with schisms, accusations, recriminations, lawsuits and sometimes outright deceptions. These are all part of the colourful tapestry woven by esoteric movements not just in the last few decades but over more than a century – though they are, of course, not unique to esoteric religions.

Schisms and offshoots are frequent, perhaps partly because of the nature of both the beliefs and the believers, challenging the orthodox, the mainstream in religion.

The originators of these movements were often highly individual and highly unorthodox in both their spiritual thinking and their personalities. Indeed, amongst the founders and leaders there were some remarkable people – warts and all – such as Helena P. Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Samuel Liddell ‘MacGregor’ Mathers, Aleister Crowley, Elizabeth Clare Prophet, Sir George Trevelyan, Gerald Gardner and many more, not to mention those still living. They were women as often as men; nobility and Nobel laureates; artists and educators; social rebels and social reformers. Many were mavericks. It is perhaps not too surprising that a number of them had somewhat inflated egos, and attracted strong feelings both for and against themselves. They were innovators; they stood out against the conventional, the accepted and acceptable.

In the root sense of the term they could be called heretics: they *chose* their beliefs (see p. 12).

The same applies to the leaders of schismatic offshoots or variants – and also to the vast majority of esoteric adherents today; compared to mainstream religions, very few people grow up within a

esoteric movement. Esoteric believers tend to be 'seekers'; they have often tried several other paths before settling on the one they currently espouse. Partly because of this element of individual personal choice of path, of belief and practice and of level of commitment, and partly because of the decentralised nature of much esoteric religion, it often falls into what sociologists call 'privatised religion', in contrast to the communal religious activity of much of mainstream religion. Many practise their spiritual activity on their own. When it is communal, in most cases esoteric religion is 'small group religion'.

The book covers a variety of aspects of what might loosely be called alternative spirituality; it includes entries on significant people (G. I. Gurdjieff) and historical movements (Theosophy); it includes many individual organisations, some of which are religions (Church Universal and Triumphant), some philosophies (Template Network), some esoteric schools (Servants of the Light) and some more open communities (Findhorn); it includes movements (Druidry) which themselves include individual groups (Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids), in a way like denominations within religion. It also includes some specific topics, both in the text (Kabbalah, Tarot) and as panels of quotations (Magic, Initiation, Ritual).

The quotation panels throughout the book titled 'What I Believe', are an opportunity for people to speak out from the page about their personal beliefs; but they also illustrate the diversity of beliefs in the esoteric world. As Church of All Worlds founder Oberon Zell once said: 'Ask two Pagans a question and get three different answers.'<sup>10</sup>

For these panels I approached a dozen or so people and asked each of them for the impossible: 'In one sentence, what do *you* mean by "magic", "initiation", "ritual", "gods and spirits" ...' Many of them are friends or acquaintances; some are, or have been, academics; some are authors; some are leaders of groups; some are long-term believers; but all are practitioners, followers of their chosen paths, and between them they cover a wide range of esoteric and Neo-Pagan beliefs. Their views are certainly not definitive, and quite possibly not representative; that was not the intention. They are personal individual comments, and as such they epitomise the ethos of alternative spirituality: the individual personal quest for the divine, for empowerment, for self-realisation, for meaning.

In two places I touch on aspects of Christianity which are relevant to the book. First, the entry on Independent Episcopal Churches and the Apostolic Succession in Part One explores the connection between traditional Christianity and Theosophy and related groups and ideas (see p. 56); second, there is a brief discussion on millennial expectations and their disconfirmation, which draws parallels between prophecies of the return of Christ on specific dates and prophecies of other returning messiahs, saviours or alien beings (see p. 114–7).

A more general connection, unfortunately outside the scope of this book, is the growing acceptance of a variety of esoteric beliefs by some of the more theologically and socially liberal Christian Churches, particularly perhaps Unitarianism, and even by some individual churches within the Anglican/Episcopalian denominations.

## Structure of the Book

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For convenience the book is divided into three parts: New Age Movements; Hermetic, Occult or High Magic Groups; and Neo-Paganism.

This division is largely for convenience; it should not be taken to suggest that these are three completely separate areas of esoteric religion with clear-cut boundaries between them. They are not. Wicca, for example, draws on many of the same roots as several Hermetic movements; its influences include the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism. New Age movements and Neo-Pagan movements both have a focus on spiritual healing, particularly perhaps reiki. Some leaders in both Neo-Paganism and schools of occult science are qualified neuro-linguistic programming practitioners. Movements and members in all three parts of the book may have an active interest in astrology and in Tarot.

Another example is a small group, the Rosicrucian Order Crotona Fellowship, which was influential on Peter Caddy, one of the founders of the Findhorn Community (see p. 92 in Part One) and also on Gerald Gardner, the founder of Wicca (see p. 289–90 in Part Three). The Rosicrucian themselves are examined in Part Two.

Throughout the book cross-references show the many connections between movements – including between the two late nineteenth-century organisations which typify Parts One and Two, the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (see p. 23 and p. 195).

The grouping into three parts is useful but to some extent arbitrary. Other authors might equally validly place certain movements in a different part, or have more categories, or fewer, or none at all.

Part One is to some extent dominated by groups influenced to a greater or lesser degree by Theosophy, broadly speaking a synthesis of Western (Judaean-Christian) and Eastern (Hindu, Buddhist or Sufi) thought. But in addition to the specific groups considered in this part there are millions of individual people who do not belong to any movement, but who have some interest in what are loosely called New Age ideas. The Mind, Body, Spirit shelves in many bookshops will contain books on healing, spiritual environmentalism, crystals, channelling, Tarot, astrology, mythology, the Goddess, reincarnation and esoteric Christianity, to name but a few subjects, stacked side by side – in addition to Rosicrucianism, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Wicca, Druidry and other areas covered in Parts Two and Three of this book. Some book-buyers may only be interested in one particular subject, but most will probably have an interest in several, which will overlap in different ways for different people.

There are also many today who use reiki, aromatherapy, reflexology, acupuncture, homeopathy, herbal remedies, yoga, meditation and a host of other alternative medical or psychological methods. The New Age (or Aquarian) ideology that encompasses all of these interests, ideas and therapies, and that has now almost entered the mainstream, overlaps strongly with the development of Neo-Pagan religious movements over the past three or four decades.

Part Two covers the wide range of Hermetic or occult groups which have developed over the last century or so. They have many differences, but also have a number of things in common. Some could be described as mystical, magical Judaean-Christianity; others may have their roots in that, but are now something quite different. Many are, in one way or another, Gnostic, in that they emphasise secret spiritual knowledge, restricted to a select few – their own members.

Their beliefs and practices can be described as occult (hidden), esoteric (within, i.e. only for the initiated) or Hermetic (after the ancient Greek/Egyptian god Hermes Trismegistus, but also implying 'sealed', as in an hermetic seal); they also usually include both magic and mysticism. They are high

complex, and progressive, in that the teachings build upon each other in steps.

This part also includes examinations of Satanism, both what it isn't and what it is, and of the 'Satanic Ritual Abuse' phenomenon of the 1980s and 1990s, and what we can learn from it.

Part Three examines a variety of Neo-Pagan religions in Britain and the United States. Few Neo-Pagan movements today claim to be continuations of historically early nature-based religions. With few exceptions they accept that very little of actual substance is known of pre-Christian beliefs in the West, and that scholarly books in the first half of the twentieth century that described a hidden tradition of Pagan beliefs, preserved through the centuries and reappearing today, were badly flawed. Today's Neo-Pagans, particularly Wiccans and Druids, have consciously created new religions drawing on mythology, with a strong focus on nature, the turning of the year and the cycle of birth, reproduction, maturity and death. Many emphasise the polarity between female and male divinities; principles; many are pantheist, polytheist or henotheist.

Heathenry is included in the Neo-Pagan part of the book despite several major differences. Unlike Wicca and Druidry, Heathenry, or the Northern Tradition, is a resurgence in the present day of Norse/Germanic religious beliefs that were supplanted by Christianity over a millennium ago. But like Neo-Paganism it is a religion of the people and of the land.

A short Coda explores whether the Church of Scientology could be considered as an esoteric movement on a number of criteria. It is specifically *not* suggesting that the Church of Scientology in any way occult; this is an exercise in comparative religion.

## **Magic**

One term which Neo-Pagan, Hermetic and to some extent New Age movements have in common is 'magic', a word which immediately summons up Dennis Wheatley-type images, giving opponents an easy rod with which to beat such movements.

Magic in the sense of casting spells to harm people, or to make people do things against their will, is not part of any esoteric religion. For a Neo-Pagan magic might mean healing someone of a headache by drawing power into them; or it might mean encouraging plants to grow healthily. Blessing a new child, or a home, or any positive activity, perhaps by dedicating it to a goddess and/or a god, might also be called magic. But in all esoteric religion magic is more a reworking of the inner person than of the outer world. The alchemical transformation of base metals to gold was always an analogy for the transformation of the soul.

All magic involves the will and the imagination, or controlled visualisation; a person pictures what she desires to occur, realistically or symbolically, and wills it to be. Part of the work of many esoteric schools is training in visualisation techniques and in concentration of the will.

Does magic actually work? The short answer has to be 'Yes', so far as those who use it are concerned. Whether a sceptical observer could be persuaded is another matter, and is perhaps irrelevant. If someone believes that magic works, then magic does work, at least for that person. Magic has been beautifully described as 'a creative and potentially valuable self-delusion'.<sup>11</sup>

Looking at the examples of magic just mentioned, there can be little doubt that healing sometimes appears to work, and whether it is through a Christian's prayers and the Holy Spirit's action, or through a Neo-Pagan asking her goddess, or through a channelling of natural power, or through psychosomatic means, the headache is still gone – or not. So far as encouraging plants to grow healthily is concerned, some people naturally have 'green fingers', which could be seen as a form of magic – certainly by those people who are unable to keep a plant alive for more than a week. And blessing a child, a home or a new enterprise is as common in Christian circles as it is in esoteric ones.

The most common greeting between Neo-Pagans is 'Blessed be'.

As for the transformation of the soul, so that someone becomes more spiritual and a better person and so has a positive effect on the world around them: prayer, devotion, contemplation, meditation, mysticism, miracles and magic could all be seen as different names for much the same interrelated causes, processes and effects.

## Definitions

In religion, and perhaps especially in esoteric religion, definitions can be a minefield. In a previous book I devoted a whole chapter to the question often asked of specialists in new religious movements (NRMs): 'Is it a cult or a real religion?'<sup>12</sup> Obviously that depends on what you mean by 'a religion' or 'a cult' and even, if you are a philosopher or a physicist, 'real'. For anyone new to the subject this might seem like the medieval question of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but it is a question with far more practical, real-world implications.

Every now and then someone will suggest legislating to make 'cults' illegal. Some years ago I recorded a discussion for the BBC with a Member of Parliament who wanted to do just that, or at least, to draw up a register of them so they could be regulated.<sup>13</sup> In order to do that, of course someone has to decide which religious movements are 'cults' and which are acceptable religions. But who decides? And on what criteria? Are they to be judged on their beliefs as well as their practices? Just within Christianity there are books denouncing the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, the Christadelphians and others because their beliefs are not conventional Christian beliefs; do we label these religions 'cults' because of that? If so, what about the Evangelical church down the road that features dancing in the aisles, spiritual healing and, more controversially, the casting out of demons?

If this is problematic with Christian movements, it is far more so with New Age, Hermetic and Neo-Pagan movements, the subject of this book. Neo-Pagans still have the problem of being lumped together with Satanists, and when they ask for the same rights as members of other religions – to be able to celebrate their sacred days, for example, or to have the same charitable status enjoyed by other religions – they are ridiculed in the press, as seen above.

This book deliberately avoids the word 'cult'. The word has a wide variety of meanings, from the pre-Christian mystery cults of the Middle East to the Catholic usage of the cult of a saint or a place, such as the cult of Mary or the cult of Medjugorje, as well as a century's worth of assorted academic definitions by anthropologists and sociologists of religion. But in popular usage the word is always pejorative, and often preceded, in tabloid newspaper headlines, by adjectives such as 'sex', 'dangerous' or 'evil'. In that sense we all know what a cult is: 'A cult is a religion I don't like.' It is a word that often says more about its user than about the movements being discussed.<sup>14</sup>

The following terms are defined in the sense that they are used in this book.

**Alchemy** was popularly believed to be about the transmutation of base metals into gold; this was symbolic of the transmutation of the base nature of man to the godly nature of the transformed man.

**Arcane**, meaning mysterious, comes from the Latin for something that is shut up, or locked in a chest. 'As above, so below' refers to the mirroring of the macrocosm (the world, the cosmos, the God without) and the microcosm (the individual man, the soul, the God within).

**Christ spark** is a term sometimes used to refer to the spark of the divine flame, or the fragment of God, within each human being.

**Esoteric** comes from the Greek for 'inner' or 'within', and applies to something taught to

understood by the initiated only.

**Exoteric**, from the Greek for ‘outside’ or ‘the outward form’, applies to knowledge available to the uninitiated.

**Frater** and **Soror**, the Latin for Brother and Sister, are used in some esoteric societies to refer to initiated members.

**Gnostic**, **Gnosis**, from the Greek, refer to spiritual knowledge and understanding, often within an initiatory religious movement, and to a personal relationship with the divine, not mediated through a priest.

**Heresy and Heretical beliefs** are always defined as such by the establishment Church (of whatever religion), usually as a means of identifying and enforcing their control over spiritual dissidents. The word actually comes from the Greek *hairesis* meaning ‘choice’; heretics choose what they wish to believe rather than being told by others what they must believe.

**Hermetic** comes from the name Hermes Trismegistus, Hermes the thrice-greatest, the mythic author of the fourth or fifth century CE occult Greek and Egyptian texts which lay behind fifteenth and seventeenth century alchemists and Hermetic Philosophers; he was named after the Greek messenger of the gods, equivalent to the Roman Mercury. It has also come to mean ‘closed’ or ‘sealed’, as in a hermetic seal.

**Immanent**, **Immanence** (from the Latin *manere*, ‘remain’) refer to the indwelling nature of God; **Transcendent/Transcendence**.

**Initiate**, as a noun or a verb, comes from the Latin for ‘beginning’, and in religion refers to the admission of someone into secret knowledge or into a level within a movement: initiation.

**Magic**, **Mage**, **Magus**, **Magician** come from the Greek for ‘art’ as in ‘skill’ – artful rather than artistic.

**Matter of Britain** refers mainly to the Arthurian cycle of stories and the quest for the Grail, but more loosely includes folk tales, folk history and folk customs of Britain.

**Myth**, used in this book in its technical sense rather than its everyday sense, means a story where the importance rests on the message it carries, rather than on whether or not it is historically factual. Use of the word does *not* imply that a story never actually happened; in its scholarly usage the masonic tale of Hiram the Architect, the stories about King Arthur and incidents in the life of Jesus are all myths. The phrase ‘the Jesus myth’ includes not just the New Testament account, but also the centuries of popular accretions, such as the three wise men, not numbered in the Bible.

**Mythic history**, **Ritual history** and **Foundation myths** are stories told about the origins of movements or about the early lives of their founders in order to grant authority; sometimes they are claimed as factual truth despite their folkloric or hagiographic nature.

**Occult** comes from the Latin for ‘hidden’; it is used in that sense in both astrology and astronomy today, without any devilish connotations.

**Rite**, **Ritual**, from the Latin, mean a solemn or religious ceremony or observance.

**Transcendent**, **Transcendence** (from the Latin *trans*, ‘beyond’, and *scandere*, ‘climb’) refer to God being ‘out there somewhere’, beyond human apprehension; see also Immanent/Immanence.

**Western Mystery Tradition** usually includes study of the Kabbalah and Tarot, and the spiritual and alchemical teachings of the Hermetic Philosophers. Depending on the particular emphasis of a school it can include the study of the Arthurian cycle, or Greek, Roman and Egyptian mythology.

The capitalised word ‘Church’ refers to an organisation, not to a church building. The abbreviations CE and BCE (Common Era and Before the Common Era) are the now standard scholarly replacements.

for AD (*Anno Domini*, in the Year of our Lord), and BC (Before Christ).

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## What I Believe ...

### Why I Follow My Particular Path

I follow this path because it is one of the very few paths that I've ever found that embraces both the enchantment of the mystery that one encounters in childhood in the imaginative realm, and carries that on into adulthood, and simultaneously doesn't weigh it down with a dogmatic overload and ask a great deal of belief in specific articles of faith about the nature of the universe; it leaves that open.

**Dr Christina Oakley Harrington, Wiccan priestess Owner of Treadwells esoteric bookshop, London, former university lecturer in History and Religious History**

Mainstream religions are clogged with historical dogma and people-managing machinations, and tend to keep and see the humans as separate from the deities. The Pagan path not only portrays nature as divine so that I can go anywhere and be with the divine, but also takes me deeper within where the gods and goddess already are a part of me – which in itself is highly empowering!

**Mani Navasothy, Wiccan High Priest and founder of Hern's Tribe Physicist**

This path is a challenge, because mainstream religion is often dogmatic, it tells me what I need to do, or not. It gives priests the power to say to me if I am condemned or not, and that is taking my personal responsibility away. This path makes me responsible for myself, and when I can take responsibility then I can also help other people to go through the same process.

**Ina Custers-van Bergen, Magister, Hermetic Order of the Temple of Starlight**

It works. It makes sense to me.

**Steve Wilson, Thelemite Civil Servant**

I follow it because I choose to. It's very much a personal involvement with the Powers That Be ... It's an attempt to be in tune with nature, to be aware of the value of the seasons of the year, to be a part of something that is ineffably ancient and hopefully will go on for many, many long times, and it's a religion that allows me to make mistakes, to be lonely, it's not going to throw hellfire and brimstone at me, my mistakes are my mistakes, they were there all the time, but the more you put in the more you get out of it. You constantly have fresh chances with it.

**Geraldine Beskin, third-generation esoteric witch and eclectic occultist Co-owner of the Atlantis Bookshop, London**

Paganism is the religious path that makes the most sense to me, as it doesn't require dismissal/rejection of rational thinking/reasoning, empirical evidence/'Truth', objective or subjective reality, scientific discoveries, personal understanding and insights, etc. 'Religion' literally means 're-linking', and Paganism as a religious path is one that acknowledges, integrates, and reconciles all perspectives, eschewing only the erroneous and invidious notion of there being only 'One True Right and Only Way'.

**Oberon Zell-Ravenheart, Co-founder, Church of All Worlds**

All emphases in quotations are as in the original unless otherwise stated. Words in [square brackets] are my interpolations. American quotations have been anglicised in spelling and punctuation for consistency.

I have tried wherever possible to give citations to published works, but at times it has been



necessary to cite webpages. Like all researchers and writers I am well aware of both the transient nature of webpages, and also the complete lack of quality control over what appears on the internet. On the subject of religions, especially new religions, and esoteric religions even more so, the amount of unmitigated rubbish online far outweighs well-researched and scholarly material. 'It must be true, read it on a website' does *not* score any scholarly points.

In a number of places I have cited the websites of movements or organisations on the grounds that what they say about themselves online is likely to be just as accurate or inaccurate as what they might say about themselves in their own booklets and leaflets – which can in any case be just as transient as websites. In other cases I have cited online sources where, having some knowledge of the source, I would have been quite content to cite them if their words had appeared in print. This, of course, is a judgement call, but one which, on occasion, has been unavoidable. I can only ask readers to accept that every website I have cited has been carefully considered.

Most of the notes are simply citations, but a few add further comments to the text.

## NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

[1](#) Barrett 2007a.

[2](#) An alternative title for this book was *Mystical and Magical Religions: A Brief Guide to New Age, Hermetic and Neo-Pagan Movements*.

[3](#) Barrett 2001.

[4](#) Some of the entries in this book are based in part on entries in my previous books on new religious movements, Barrett 2001 and Barrett 1996. In all cases they have been updated with fresh information from the movements concerned and other sources, but where ten- or fifteen-year-old quotations about origins, history, beliefs or practices are still valid some have been retained.

[5](#) The terms *emic* and *etic* were coined by linguist Kenneth L. Pike in 1954 and have been used in a variety of different ways in different disciplines over the past half-century.

[6](#) Christine O'Donnell, Republican Senate candidate for Delaware; see <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2010/10/06/tea-party-candidate-says-im-not-a-witch/>.

[7](#) Melanie Phillips, 'Druids as an official religion? Stones of Praise here we come', *Daily Mail*, 4 October 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-1317490/Druids-official-religion-Stones-Praise-come.html>.

[8](#) Damian Thompson, 'The BBC sucks up to Pagans', *Daily Telegraph* website, 31 October 2010, <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/damianthompson/100061559/the-bbc-sucks-up-to-pagans/>.

[9](#) James Rado, Gerome Ragni and Galt MacDermot, 'The Age of Aquarius' from *Hair!*

[10](#) Oberon Zell in correspondence with the author, 14 June 1995.

[11](#) Ronald Hutton commenting on Tanya Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (1989) in Hutton 1999: 375.

[12](#) Barrett 2001: 19–27.

[13](#) 4 November 1995 for the *Sunday* programme on BBC Radio 4. So far as I know this was never broadcast; I returned from the studio to learn that Yitzhak Rabin, Prime Minister of Israel, had been assassinated; understandably this filled the news programmes the following day.

[14](#) A cult cannot be defined as a religion that abuses; abuses can and do occur in all religions, including the most historic and mainstream.

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# Part One:

## New Age Movements

The term 'New Age' is sometimes used pejoratively, even with derision, to suggest airy-fairy, lightweight mystical spirituality. New Age books and New Age music are casually dismissed as bland and inoffensive; critics speak of 'New Age psychobabble'. To avoid this less than flattering image may be one reason for the increasing use of alternative terms such as 'holistic'.

It is a mistake to associate New Age ideas just with the Age of Aquarius, 1960s hippies and channelling, crystals and pyramids. Today's New Age movements have a long tradition, going back just as far as the modern occult movement and much further than any Neo-Pagan movements, and overlapping with both in history, people and ideas. Spiritual healing, Tarot, astrology, meditation and visualisation, for just a few examples, may all be found in both New Age and the other two types of esoteric religion and philosophy covered in this book.

American scholar of new religions J. Gordon Melton says that the New Age movement: 'can be defined by its primal experience of transformation. New Agers have either experienced or are diligently seeking a profound personal transformation from an old, unacceptable life to a new, exciting future.'<sup>1</sup> Melton identifies healing and the holistic health movement as 'possibly the largest identifiable segment of the movement'.

New Age writer Eileen Campbell accepts this but takes a broader view: 'Usually "New Age" is used to denote a whole range of interests including health and well-being, the many forms of therapy or self-help, the practice of an esoteric or spiritual tradition, concern for the rest of humanity and the environment, and respect for Nature and feminine wisdom.'<sup>2</sup>

Paul Heelas of Lancaster University speaks of 'an eclectic hotch-potch of beliefs' stemming from esoteric or mystical Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism and assorted Pagan teachings with practices including: 'Zen meditations, Wiccan rituals, enlightenment intensive seminars, management trainings, shamanic activities, wilderness events, spiritual therapies, forms of positive thinking'<sup>3</sup>.

William Bloom, one of the most respected New Age teachers and writers, explains it this way:

I see the New Age phenomenon as the visible tip of the iceberg of a mass movement in which humanity is reasserting its right to explore spirituality in total freedom. The constraints of religious and intellectual ideology are falling away.

The New Age movement represents several very different dynamics, but they thread together to communicate the same message: *there is an invisible and inner dimension to all life – cellular, human and cosmic. The most exciting work in the world is to explore this inner reality.*<sup>4</sup>

More than the other two strands of esoteric spirituality in this book, New Age may be seen as a movement in itself, both spiritually and socially. Within this movement there are numerous religions and even more groups, small and large, exploring aspects of spirituality; but encompassing all of them the New Age is a spiritual social trend, even a paradigm shift in social consciousness. This is not just an individual, personal quest; when Heelas calls it 'Self-spirituality' he does not mean that it is

selfish or self-centred path, but that ‘the Self itself is sacred’<sup>5</sup> – that New Age spirituality often assumes the immanence of divinity. As with the ideal stated in the Rosicrucian manifestos (see p. 179–80), one’s own personal spiritual development should affect the world around one. To quote Melton again: ‘As ever-greater numbers of individuals were transformed, the larger goal, the transformation of society, would follow. The emergence of this new social and cultural situation was the real New Age.’<sup>6</sup>

Speaking of his own realisation in the early 1970s Bloom writes: ‘There, in my meditation alongside my own path of change, I became increasingly certain that the sense of a global transformation, a shift in the mass consciousness of humanity, was neither romantic nor naïve.’<sup>7</sup>

The decade of the 1980s, which for many, particularly in Thatcher’s Britain and Reagan’s America epitomised the self-first greed culture and, perhaps not coincidentally, an increase in both cynicism and world-weariness, may have dented the optimism in a coming New Age to some extent; but by the decade into the new millennium New Age movements seem as strong as ever.

Although many date the modern beginnings of New Age religion to the 1960s and 1970s – Melton pinpoints it as ‘circa 1971’ – several movements happy to be identified as New Age go back long before that; Sir George Trevelyan (see p. 96) was teaching New Age courses in the 1950s, and Gu Ballard’s I AM Movement (see p. 65) and the Emissaries (see p. 82) both date to the 1930s. But the roots of many of today’s New Age religions, philosophies and groups can be traced back over a hundred years, to the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

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# THEOSOPHY

The Theosophical Society is associated with a number of names, in particular its first two leaders, Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant. Important in its own right in its day, it is more significant now for the many other movements that owe it a massive debt, and for two of the most important esoteric teachers of the twentieth century, Rudolf Steiner (see p. 34) and Jiddu Krishnamurti (see p. 31), both of whom had connections with Theosophy.

## **Madame Blavatsky**

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–91, often known as HPB) claimed psychic abilities even as a small child in her native Russia. The surname Blavatsky came from her husband, whom she married at the age of seventeen; he was forty. The marriage was never consummated, and she left her husband after a few months, though they never divorced and she kept his name.

Like several other modern founders of movements, such as G. I. Gurdjieff, L. Ron Hubbard, Raymond Armin (Leo) and others, HPB travelled to the Far East, and claimed to have studied with the Secret Masters in Tibet for a while. The years 1848–58, when she was travelling and studying, she later called ‘the veiled time’ of her life; it is difficult to verify her various accounts of this period, but it is part of the ‘foundation myth’ of the movement. She went to Cairo, and founded the Société Spirite. She was well practised in the late nineteenth-century arts of table-tapping, clairvoyance and levitation; both then and later in her life she was accused of fraudulent mediumship.

In 1873 she emigrated to New York, and the following year met Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), who had similar esoteric interests. In 1875 they founded the Theosophical Society, along with William Q. Judge (1851–96). Olcott was its first president, but it was Blavatsky who would provide its teachings, initially in her first book *Isis Unveiled* (1877) which told of the Masters and their secret. Originally the Theosophical Society was based on areas of the Western Mystery Tradition, and HPB’s Hidden Masters or Secret Chiefs came from an Egyptian Order.

By 1878 the Society was faltering, and HPB and Olcott travelled to India in the hope that the sources of Hinduism and Buddhism might revive it. The Society’s headquarters were moved to Adyar, near Madras, where HPB continued to receive communications from the Masters on the spirit level. (The main branch of the Theosophy Society today is sometimes known as the Adyar group.)

In 1885 she moved to Germany where she wrote her second book, *The Secret Doctrine*. This set out the Theosophical beliefs on the evolution of the universe and mankind, and on reincarnation; it also attempted to build bridges between religion and science, and between the occult traditions of the East and the West. She wrote two more books, *The Key to Theosophy* and *The Voice of the Silence*, before her death in 1891; *The Theosophical Glossary* was published posthumously in 1892. She claimed that parts of her books were ‘dictated’ by the Masters Koot Hoomi (sometimes spelt Kuthumi) and Morya, though critics have accused her of plagiarising other people’s books.

The purpose of the Theosophical Society was originally ‘to collect and diffuse a knowledge of the laws which govern the universe’, but its aims are most commonly stated as:

To form a nucleus of the universal brotherhood of humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or colour.

To encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science.

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To investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.<sup>8</sup>

The word Theosophy comes from the Greek *theos*, god, and *sophia*, wisdom, and hence means Divine Wisdom.<sup>9</sup> Some of its concepts have been around for over 2,000 years, going back as far as Pythagoras. In its general sense the word is used to describe mystical philosophies that seek to explore the relationship between mankind and the Universe or God.

To understand the strong appeal that the Theosophical Society had to intellectuals in its heyday it is necessary to see it in its historical setting. In 1859 Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* had introduced Western society to the theory of evolution, and had driven an apparently immovable wedge between science and religion (the reverberations are still echoing through American courts, where in some states Fundamentalist Christians have successfully fought for rulings that evolution cannot be taught in schools unless Creationism be taught alongside). Science had stripped God of his role as Creator; intellectuals were torn between being godless scientists or irrational believers.

With Darwin's ideas exciting Western intelligentsia, Theosophy neatly took the concept of evolution and projected it forwards instead of backwards. Not only was the human race still evolving but each individual person, progressing from life to life through reincarnation, was evolving to a far higher state. The Masters had long held secret knowledge, which was now available to all, to help us progress more rapidly until we too could become Masters.

In its essence the Theosophical Society teaches that there is some truth in all religions, as man attempts to find ways to approach the absolute; it draws together spiritual teachings from the East, including reincarnation, with elements of the Western Mystery Tradition, including Neo-Platonism, Kabbalah and Hermeticism, and presents them in a Western context. There is no creed, no single belief statement, but members, through their study, grow in spiritual wisdom.

Add to this the allure of the mysterious East, the thrill of HPB's spiritualist manifestations and the ideas of social reform, and the whole package became a powerful and very attractive mixture at the end of the nineteenth century. The Theosophical Society was a child of its time – and some of its teachings have provoked controversy.

Speaking through HPB the Masters provided a body of teachings that have led to accusations of racism. There are seven root races of which the Aryans, the European peoples who originated in India, are the fifth; but the pure Aryans (the word means 'noble'), in the words of one commentator, 'lost their original purity through miscegenation with less pure races'.<sup>10</sup> There is little doubt that racial interpretations of Blavatsky's teachings take them into areas that she did not intend, but on the other hand she did make specific statements such as, 'The Semites, especially the Arabs, are later Aryans who degenerate in spirituality and perfected in materiality'.<sup>11</sup>

However HPB may be criticised today for expressing some of the social attitudes of her time, and whatever the allegations of fraud and plagiarism levelled against her in her lifetime, she holds a vital place in the history of esoteric religion in the West. Eastern religions scholar Andrew Rawlinson sums up Madame Blavatsky:

An extremely unusual woman, who lived most of her life outside the normal confines of 19th-century society, and who had the courage and capacity to explore what was new and 'difficult' ...

Someone who genuinely held Eastern spirituality in high esteem at a time when hardly any Westerners did ...

The Theosophical Society not only opened up esoteric Eastern spiritual teachings to the West, but in so doing it provided the basis for much of esoteric and New Age spirituality of the next century and more.

### **Dr Anna Kingsford**

There was a small but important split in the Theosophical Society in 1884. Dr Anna Kingsford (1846–1935) was one of the first women to train as a doctor, an ardent feminist (she edited *The Lady's Own Paper: a Journal of Taste, Progress and Thought* in 1872–3) and a fervent anti-vivisectionist and vegetarian. She was a writer on astrology and mystical Christianity, who had a close spiritual relationship for many years with fellow writer Edward Maitland; they called their teachings Christian Pantheism. In 1882 they published a series of lectures entitled *The Perfect Way, or the Finding of Christ*.

In May 1883 Kingsford was recruited to be president of the Theosophical Society's London branch, even though she was not a member of the Society; Maitland became vice-president. With their esoteric Christian beliefs Kingsford and Maitland were not in sympathy with the Eastern emphasis of Madame Blavatsky's teachings, including the Mahatmas, or Hidden Masters. Before even meeting her, Blavatsky disliked Kingsford intensely, calling her 'the divine Whistle-breeches', though they later became more friendly.<sup>13</sup>

To avoid doctrinal conflict, instead of Kingsford being re-elected as London president, the following year Henry Steel Olcott, Blavatsky's co-founder of the Theosophical Society, suggested that she should form a subsidiary group, the Hermetic Lodge of the Theosophical Society. As soon as this had been founded, in April 1884, the Hermetic Society became a separate organisation. The same year Kingsford and Maitland translated the writings of Hermes Trismegistus under the title *The Virgin of the World*.

The Hermetic Society is a little known but important link between the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (see p. 199–200), which was founded the month of Kingsford's death; two of the Golden Dawn's founders, William Wynn Westcott and 'MacGregor Mathers, regularly attended and were speakers at Hermetic Society meetings. They took into the Golden Dawn Kingsford's emphasis on men and women working together in their esoteric studies.<sup>14</sup> It has also been suggested that her writings influenced the Golden Dawn's Hermetic interpretation of the Tarot.<sup>15</sup> The esoteric historian A. E. Waite, co-creator of the Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot, was also a member of the Hermetic Society.

A further link with the Golden Dawn was the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society, formed in 1888 ostensibly in response to a demand for 'the deeper study of esoteric philosophy',<sup>16</sup> though as A. Gilbert comments: 'Aware now of both the existence and growing appeal of the Golden Dawn, Madame Blavatsky responded to its perceived threat by announcing the formation of a new body: the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society.'<sup>17</sup> The Irish poet W. B. Yeats, already a member of the Theosophical Society, joined, but perhaps because of the Esoteric Section's prohibition on any form of practical magic – its 'preliminary memorandum' states that the student 'will not be taught how to produce physical phenomena, nor will any magical powers be allowed to develop in him'<sup>18</sup> – he left two years later, joining the Golden Dawn. The Esoteric Section, which had a strictly abstemious and



ascetic membership code, did not survive much longer.

Golden Dawn founder William Wynn Westcott also joined the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society. He wrote: 'I was selected as the Hermetist who should endeavour to cast oil on troubled waters and to be a bond of union and peace between the two societies, and the Soc. Ros. in Anglia' (see p. 196). This quotation probably says more about Westcott than about what his role actually was.

## **Annie Besant**

Another major name associated with Theosophy is Annie Wood Besant (1847–1933). She was a great intellect; a freethinker and a radical, she was a colleague of the political activist and atheist Charles Bradlaugh, a member of the Fabian Society and a supporter of both workers' rights and Home Rule for Ireland. She was a feminist campaigner, and was once unsuccessfully prosecuted for selling a leaflet on birth control. She was very prominent in Co-Masonry which, unlike United Grand Lodge of Freemasonry, is open to women; and she took the Boy Scout movement, founded by Robert Baden-Powell in 1907, to India.

Her lasting legacies in India were in education and politics. She founded several schools, one of which is now the University of Benares. She also founded the Indian Home Rule League, and became president of the Indian National Congress. More than most spiritual leaders she took the ideals of her beliefs and applied them in the real world – so exemplifying a stated aim of Freemasonry, and before that of the Rosicrucian manifestos, that the outcome of personal spiritual development should be to bring good to the world.

Besant was introduced to Theosophy when she wrote a review of *The Secret Doctrine*; she met HPB in 1889 and became a supporter of Theosophy, turning her London home into the UK headquarters.

After HPB's death in 1891 Besant and William Q. Judge took joint control of the Theosophical Society, until they fell out in 1894. By this time, even though Judge had been there since the beginning, Besant had established a power base in just five years, and took over the British, Indian and some of the American organisations. In 1895 Judge split away to found the Theosophical Society in America; elected president for life, he died the following year, and was succeeded by Katherine Tingley (1847–1929). Confusingly, the American Section of the Theosophical Society (Adyar), the smaller American group loyal to Besant, renamed itself the Theosophical Society in America (Adyar) in 1934.

Judge's group renamed itself several times, eventually becoming simply the Theosophical Society (headquarters, Pasadena, California). It also suffered from a number of schisms resulting in, for example, the Theosophical Society of New York (1899), the Temple of the People (1899), the United Lodge of Theosophists (1909), the Blavatsky Association (1923) and others. Of these, the Temple of the People is a small community at Halcyon, California, which lives by Theosophical principles though most of the hundred residents work outside the community;<sup>20</sup> the United Lodge of Theosophists spreads the original writings of Blavatsky and Judge rather than later revised versions without dogma or organisation.<sup>21</sup>

HPB had been a mystic, at times a flamboyant show-woman and possibly on occasion a fraud though most esotericists believe she had genuine psychic powers. Besant had no great psychic abilities, at least at first, but as well as being a great intellect she was an excellent administrator; she was responsible both for the continued growth and influence of the Theosophical Society and for something of an improvement in the respect given to it. But the changes that she brought to Theosophy did not meet with the approval of all members.<sup>22</sup>

Besant became closely associated with a former Anglican clergyman, the Rev Charles V Leadbeater (1854–1934); together they changed the emphasis of the Theosophical Society more towards esoteric Christianity than esoteric Buddhism. She wrote a number of influential books including *Esoteric Christianity*, *Introduction to Yoga* and a translation of the Buddhist scripture the *Bhagavad Gita*; she also co-wrote several books with Leadbeater. They conducted investigations into the astral and mental planes, life after death and past lives, and performed occult experiments into the nature of matter.

Leadbeater wrote a number of significant books of his own, and in 1916 became one of the earliest members and a bishop of the Liberal Catholic Church (see p. 58). This was a successful offshoot from the tiny Old Catholic Church which had been founded in Britain by Bishop Arnold Harris Mathew in 1908; today a number of esoteric leaders, many with a Theosophical background, are clergy of the Liberal Catholic Church.

### **Jiddu Krishnamurti**

It was Leadbeater who in 1908 first discovered the fourteen-year-old Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1987, Jiddu is the surname). The boy apparently had a remarkable aura; Leadbeater announced that he would become the Maitreya, the long-prophesied fifth Buddha (Gautama was the fourth), the living incarnation of a Master and the new World Teacher. Besant and Leadbeater promoted Krishnamurti, initiating him into the Great White Brotherhood in 1910, and founding a separate organisation for him to head, the Order of the Star in the East, in 1911. Krishnamurti wrote of his acceptance by the other Masters of the Great White Brotherhood in his book *At the Feet of the Master*, written when he was still just fourteen, though many believe the book was actually ‘ghosted’ by Leadbeater.

Krishnamurti became increasingly uncomfortable with the role that had been thrust upon him, and in 1929 he disbanded the Order of the Star in the East, resigning from the Theosophical Society the following year. He continued teaching throughout his long life, but insisted that the Truth could not be apprehended through any religion or organisation; it must always be an individual, personal discovery through complete self-knowledge. Despite this, and the fact that he never wanted any followers, there are now several schools around the world presenting his teachings.

The diversity of ideas that the Theosophical Society encompassed was both its strength and its weakness. There were many who disliked Madame Blavatsky’s showmanship, though her demonstration of psychic or spiritualist abilities, genuine or not, undoubtedly attracted many others. Later there were some, including Rudolf Steiner, who were put off by Annie Besant’s championing of the young Krishnamurti as the coming World Teacher – but again, the publicity brought Theosophy to a wider audience. There were many, including Colonel Olcott, who thought the most important parts of Theosophy were its social and educational aspects, and its scholarly work in bringing Eastern texts to the attention of the West.

With the exit of Krishnamurti the Theosophical Society lost much of its impetus. There are still Theosophical Societies in Britain, the United States and around the world, with groups or lodges in many major cities; in 2009 they claimed about 1,000 members in Britain, nearly 4,000 in the United States, 12,700 in India and over 28,000 worldwide.<sup>23</sup> But the fire of a century ago has largely gone out of the movement, at least in the West; it appears to consist of little more than study groups, custodians of interesting libraries, whose impressive buildings now host meetings of a variety of other spiritual groups. The occultist Gerald Suster wrote, perhaps unkindly, that ‘although the Theosophical Society is still in being, these days it is the preserve of those who prefer tepid tea to tough thought’.<sup>24</sup>



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sample content of A Brief Guide to Secret Religions: A Complete Guide to Hermetic, Pagan and Esoteric Beliefs (Brief Histories) by David V. Barrett (26-May-2011) Paperback

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