Chapter 3
Worldview Structures and Historical Considerations

3.1 Religions, Philosophy and Science - the Theosophical Need for a Synthesis

Recognising that a prime motivational objective (even if indirect or deduced from other aspirations) was to try and refashion or replace the way the primary Western worldview was constructed or presented, it is necessary to examine more closely what worldviews do, and why the approach taken by Blavatsky in constructing a formal system drew upon particular fields of knowledge and information to sustain credibility. In her magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, Madame Blavatsky intentionally subtitled the work "*The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*." In so choosing those terms, she implies that those three forms of systematic speculative inquiry (and their respective representative institutions) comprehensively cover the spectrum of accessible knowledge pertaining to the nature of man and the universe. Even if her subsequent analysis and interpretation of the data from those fields was uniquely idiosyncratic and selected to support unconventional a priori presumptions about what in fact entailed authentic knowledge. Her choice of those categories apparently was just a convenient and obvious one, seemingly a self-evident observation based on the way all varieties of speculative knowledge and articulated worldviews were intellectually partitioned. And although she drew from other diverse resources, those three forms, in their nineteenth century configurations, carried the most social prestige and credibility as authoritative and trustworthy ways of discerning comprehensive universal meaning.

The presumption that a definitive and encompassing esoteric worldview could be constructed or synthesised with support from those three channels of knowledge also suggested an unconventional reading of its materials. For instance, beginning with Blavatsky, most theosophical overviews of religion, philosophy, and science assume that there is a higher informing source of knowledge of which those three are but partial manifestations. Religion was considered as both exoteric and esoteric, the latter embedding special occult and mystical truths for those equipped with the proper interpretative apparatus. Philosophy was considered both as an intellectual method of speculation as well as a way of life dedicated to pursuit of wisdom. Science also was

considered to have dual aspects. The prosaic and familiar side utilised the empirical method of categorising and organising the observations of sense data, and constructing hypotheses based on logical deduction. However, from the esoteric side, it was believed that science had an extensive pedigree dealing with more subtle and multidimensional facets of the concealed side of nature, involving psychic and occult arts and practices.

Thus, each of the three main categories of knowledge was acknowledged as having public conventional exoteric meaning as well as the more specialised esoteric meaning, discernible through the expertise of elite technicians and theoreticians of the sacred. Madame Blavatsky's efforts were largely directed to trying to shift consensual opinion from habitual trust in the mainstream institutions of knowledge to acceptance of the alternative esoteric perspective. To do so meant having to challenge leading authorities and refute popular contemporary theories and methods in all fields of knowledge as well as present justifiable arguments for acceptance of the theosophical perspective. Thus, the premises of the esoteric orientation had to be rehabilitated from centuries of disrepute and shown to be feasible in a modern context. The theme Blavatsky often followed was to try and show that the exoteric view was restrictive and confining, failing to provide adequate knowledge of reality. In contrast, she presented the esoteric position as an expansive and enhanced, revealing additional dimensions and connections underlying all forms of knowledge, which were in fact were simply different facets of the same spiritual Truth. This attempt to legitimise occult and mystical data through a broadening of the categories of knowledge became a constant theme of theosophical writers. For example, in the following quote, written many decades after *The Secret Doctrine*, the assumption is that the esoteric interpretation of religion, philosophy, and science reveals complementary methods of demonstrating a more expansive, persistent, and underlying supersensory or occult approach to comprehensive knowledge.

> Any one who is spiritually awake and inclined to understand and if possible to unravel the great mystery of life can look for knowledge on this subject in three directions. He can try to find out what religion, philosophy and science have to say about it and how they try in their own respective ways to unravel it. It will be shown later how the Occult method of approach to this fundamental problem, based as it is on its systematic and direct investigation through the combined methods of religion, philosophy and science, can alone provide a satisfactory theoretical explanation as well as an effective technique for the solution to this

problem. [1]

And in this quote, these three "departments of human thought" are said to be the way of understanding the "great problems of life," but only when the inner meaning "behind the outward veil" is adopted.

> And in larger spheres if our thinking we must realize that if we are to understand the great problems of life, the great problems of the various departments of thought—religion, philosophy and science—we must go behind this outward veil, we must penetrate more deeply into the heart of things. [2]

This orientation was a constant in theosophical speculation, where conventional interpretations of religion, philosophy, and science were persistently shown as limited and incomplete, requiring occult and mystical supplementation and correction.

However, what is important to examine right now is why those three particular approaches to knowledge were felt to be so important. The theosophical efforts at synthesis were not only meant to describe a different worldview, but to support it on arguments addressed to the three most credible and consensually respected sources of mainstream legitimation. Because attempting to gain endorsement and acclaim for any alternative system of knowledge meant confronting and grappling with those authoritative institutions, even when disputing content We will discuss those issues in this chapter.

Since those particular forms of knowledge were deemed so critical in the construction of a socially acceptable and intellectually plausible worldview, it seems feasible to surmise that there must be an important reason why such a belief was held. By inferring that those compendiums of established knowledge were sources that must be dealt with to gain and sustain the sense of public trust, any proposed new or different worldview would therefore by necessity be required to challenge the views of reality authoritatively expounded in the most current version of those systems. And by extension, it would seem a logical deduction to conclude that religious, philosophical and scientific traditions, in their speculative capacities, must be the most significant sources of knowledge for any worldview claiming comprehensive trustworthiness.

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[1] I.K. Taimni, *Man, God and the Universe*, Wheaton/Madras/London: Quest Books, 1974, pp. v-vi.
[2] G. de Purucker, *Fundamentals of the Esoteric Philosophy*, Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1979, p. 474.

Of course, the portion of data selected, treatment of the ideational materials, organisation of major points of emphasis, and doctrinal or official presentment of these individual forms of knowledge will vary in any worldview. Focus may be exclusively or predominately on a particular type of knowledge or it may, as in the case of Blavatsky's work, be an attempt to incorporate as much as possible. Not all worldviews necessarily attempt to be all-inclusive and utilise all available resources. In fact, in many instances, much of the content of a worldview will be based upon uncritical and unexamined residual notions and habitual patterns of culturally inherited material. However, in our discussion, we have in mind the more grandiose and all-inclusive formally constructed worldviews, of which Blavatsky laboured in the making of her theosophical synthesis. It is important to recognise how the contents of religion, philosophy and science seamlessly factor into the architecture of those kinds of ostensibly comprehensive worldviews. Blavatsky essentially treats the ideational materials of religion, philosophy, science, and other resources as supportive elements in her construction of a worldview she felt synthesised a more fundamental though unacknowledged or recognised underlying common datum which she called "Truth." We shall examine the theosophical perspective on the synthesis of these three categories of knowledge in the next chapter. First, a more general discussion of the issue of worldviews is in order, as well as a look at the mainstream and alternative currents of thought that were of interest to Blavatsky as she commenced upon her theosophical endeavour.

3.2.1 Worldview construction: General Considerations of Social Dynamics

If we look at one representative interpretation of a generic worldview, we can gain a general understanding of the concept before looking at more specific elements of its composition. This perspective of Dilthey is a typical one.

> World views develop under different conditions, climate, races, nationalities, determined by history and through political organizations, the time-bound confines of epochs and eras. All of them combine into the special conditions which mark from the outset a multiple growth of world views...Those world views which promote a deeper understanding of life and lead onto more useful goals of life are conserved and eliminate the minor ones. A selection takes place among the competitors. And in the course of generations the viable ones evolve into more perfect structures… There is a permanent renewal of combinations of life experience, sentiments and ideas in a given world view

> prevailing in a certain period of history and in its context. When we subject these structures to a comparative treatment, we discover that they coalesce into groups among which there exists a certain affinity. [3]

The universality, variety, variability of encompassing worldviews is apparent, as they are historically, geographically, and culturally conditioned. Each specific configuration is somewhat unique to some degree because of the variables of their environment and the "special conditions" of their genesis. A worldview is legitimising, providing a context of definition and interpretation of experience, and an ongoing rationale for the meaning and purpose of life. Within the larger social sphere, the plurality of options eventually narrows down to a choice, and in time, as a result of the effects of continuing social, institutional, ideational dynamics, the most adequately functional or comfortable "fit" takes hold. And if remaining relatively intact and unchallenged, will proceed to develop its own form and characteristics. The hypothetical worldview in question, while dominant and efficacious, is somewhat flexible and malleable, allowing for "a permanent renewal of combinations." However, as such it is still limited and ultimately vulnerable to radical change or being discarded as no longer relevant. It is vital, energising, attuned to majority values, beliefs and ideals only while resonant within the specific cultural and historical milieu. Future worldviews of course may maintain certain traditional traits, but they will still be different than previous configurations because of the new combinations that will occur. Now let us look at the concept a little more analytically.

The term "worldview" is derived from the German term "weltanschauung," and is usually defined like this.

> General conception of the nature of the world, particularly as containing or implying a system of value-principles. [4]

This connotes both an explicit and implicit interpretative orientation towards what is considered essentially true about reality, as experienced under particular historical and geographical conditions. An orientation both cognitive and normative, that derives from the reciprocal interaction between individuals, social groups, and cultural stock of knowledge within specific spatial and temporal environments. Worldviews are both

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[3] Wilhelm Dithey, *Culture and the Production of World Views*, in *Man and Culture*, ed. D. P. Verne, New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1970, p. 110.
[4] *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*. op. cit. p. 905.

societal and personal, with the individual located within the encompassing larger cultural environment, but yet capable of reacting to, and reflecting upon, the premises which define the way reality is presented. However, as such, primary societal worldviews are usually taken-for-granted as self-evident in fundamental principles, simply perceived as "reality." Berger expresses this attitude in the following words.

> Society predefines for us that fundamental symbolic apparatus with which we grasp the world, order our experience, and interpret our own existence. In the same way, society supplies our values, our logic, and the store of information (and for that matter, misinformation) that constitutes our "knowledge." Very few people, and even they only in regard to fragments of this world view, are in position to re-evaluate what has thus been imposed on them. They actually feel no need for reappraisal because the world view into which they have been socialized appears self-evident to them. Since it is also so regarded by almost everyone they are likely to deal with in their own society, the world view is self-validating. Its "proof" lies in the reiterated experience of other men who take it for granted also. [5]

3.2.2 Ascendant and Alternative Configurations

Individuals and smaller groups may thus possibly come to feel dissatisfaction with particular implicit or explicit tenets or presumptions that are part of the dominant worldview fabric when they "feel need for appraisal." However for that condition to become widespread or organised into a dissenting movement, the self-validating reiteration of its apparent self-evident status must be brought to consciousness and questioned.

Thus selected elements of "our values, our logic, and the store of information" become issues of contention for those disputing their truth, efficacy or relevancy. Although the numbers of potentially dramatic and incongruous divergences between a primary collective and secondary dissenting minority position is a variable which may fluctuate greatly according to time, place, type of society. Historically for example, the emergence of a disproportionately widespread pluralism of potentially incongruous worldviews appears to be a phenomenon specifically related to conditions of modern Western society since the industrial revolution. [6]

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[5] Peter L. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1963, p. 117.
[6] See for example, Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, New York: Vintage Books, 1964. Georges Gurvitch, *The Social Framework of Knowledge,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971. Raymond Barglow, *The*

Human societies reflect particular shared beliefs and values that are expressed, transmitted and legitimated through cultural institutions.

> ... institutions being defined ... as sets of interrelated practices whose rules, which may or may not be either explicitly formulated or universally acknowledged, apply to specific groups or categories of persons irrespective of those persons' choice or consent. [7]

And within particular societies and civilizations, a dominant worldview will often shape and configure the way reality is represented. The use of the term "dominant worldview" serves the same purpose as Mannhein's phrase

> ... ascendant form of orientation to the world... [8]

And with an "ascendant" or dominant "orientation to the world," or worldview, the assumption is that a multiplicity of worldviews is possible, with the less dominant based on principles that dissent or diverge from those of the larger traditional societal consensus, and are endorsed and supported by smaller or less influential segments of the society. We may designate those not in the ascendancy as "secondary" or "alternative," The analysis of Peter Berger is useful in helping characterise what a secondary or alternative worldview is. Berger uses the terms "cognitive minority," and "deviant knowledge" to describe the status of such minority ideational orientations.

> By a cognitive minority I mean a group of people whose view of the world differs significantly from the one generally taken for granted in their society. Put differently, a cognitive minority is a group formed around a body of deviant "knowledge." ... The term "knowledge" ... always refers to what is *taken to be* or *believed* as "knowledge." In other words, the use of the term is strictly neutral on whether or not the socially held "knowledge" is finally true or false…
> The status of a cognitive minority is thus invariably an uncomfortable one—not necessarily because the majority is repressive or intolerant, but simply because it refuses to accept the minority's definition of reality *as* "knowledge." At best, a minority's viewpoint is forced to be defensive. At worst, it ceases to be plausible to anyone. [9]

So, if this analysis is used, the theosophical position can be called that of a "cognitive minority" as well as an alternative or secondary worldview. And the theosophical

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Crisis of the Self in the Age of Information, London and New York: Routlege, 1994.
[7] W. G. Runciman. *A Treatise on Social Theory,* Volume 2*,* Cambridge/New York/New Rochelle/Melbourne/Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 2.
[8] Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia,* New York: Harvest Books, 1936. p. 275.
[9] Peter L. Berger. *A Rumor of Angels*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1970, pp. 6–7.

ideational system would be interpreted as "deviant knowledge" in comparison to the majority perspective. The theosophists' confidence and assuredness in the accuracy and credibility of their own compendium of knowledge may therefore reasonably confirm the definition of reality they hold for themselves and for others supporting their premises. However, to those who do not accept those principles or share the same orientation, what appears logical and self-evident becomes problematical and an issue of dispute. This accounts for much of the strident style and terse rhetoric in Blavatsky's argumentation and public discussion.

Worldviews are not intrinsically or uniformly inflexible and closed, although the capacity for revision and reassessment greatly varies. As does the willingness to amend or reject portions of the familiar, which may be in conflict with newer perceptions and preferences. As events unfold and new knowledge, opinion, insights, priorities, choice of values factor into consensual consciousness, the challenge of selecting, interpreting and incorporating relevant elements into the existing worldview becomes a matter of both unconscious assimilation and preferential choice.

3.2.3 Sophisticated and Pre-Theoretical Forms of Knowledge, and the Basis of Authority

Worldviews consist of different levels of meaning and types of knowledge. Berger and Luckmann distinguish between "theoretically sophisticated knowledge" and "knowledge on a pre-theoretical level." [10] Sophisticated knowledge is the formally constructed and logically organised expression of conceptual ideas. Pre-theoretical knowledge consists of what is taken-for-granted in societies, the variety of common sense knowledge and unquestioned normative precedents. Another view expressing the same belief in dual levels of worldview composition and can be found in these words.

> Cultures vary greatly in their degree of integration. Synthesis is achieved partly through the overt statement of the dominant conceptions, assumptions and aspirations of the group in its religious lore, secular thought, and ethical code; partly through habitual but unconscious ways of looking at the stream of events, ways of begging certain questions. To the naïve participant in the culture these modes of categorizing, of dissecting experience along these planes and not others, are as much "givens" as the regular sequence of daylight and darkness or

[10] Berger and Luckmann, op. cit., pp. 65–67.

the necessity of air, water and food for life. [11]

Here, sophisticated theoretical knowledge can be found in the "overt statements of the dominant conceptions, assumptions and aspirations of the group." The institutional representations of those forms of knowledge appear in the "religious lore, secular thought, ethical code." As we shall see, these distinctive forms of knowledge may be generally considered to represent respectively religion, science and philosophy as dominant institutions of legitimation. And the other worldview component, pre-theoretical knowledge, is here suggested as the "habitual but unconscious way of looking at the stream of events." And, for those "naive participants" immersed uncritically in perceiving reality through the unconscious filter of a worldview, its self-evident "giveness" appears to be a matter of obvious facticity. A useful depiction of this kind of normal scenario is aptly indicated in these words by C. Wright Mills.

> …men lives in second hand worlds. They are aware of much more than they have personally experienced; and their own experience is always indirect. The quality of their lives is determined by meanings they have received from others. Everyone lives in a world of such meanings … Their image of the world and of themselves are given to them by crowds of witnesses they have never met and never shall meet. Yet for every man these images – provided by strangers and dead men – are the very basis of his life as a human being. [12]

The "image of the world and of themselves" provided by these "strangers and dead men" is the worldview which defines the "second hand world" for that group or society. A worldview will subsume both types of knowledge, though its institutional expression will appear more structured and consistent because of the intentionality motivating its delineation. What may be known, believed, assumed or implied on the pre-theoretical level might appear disconnected or discontinuous when considered separately. However, when the same materials are drawn from to contribute to a sophisticated theoretical model or systematic exposition, further comprehensive and definitive meanings, patterns, and implications are enunciated. A more useful understanding of "sophisticated knowledge" in reference to worldview functionality is the provided with the term "symbolic universe," as defined by Berger and Luckmann.

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[11] Clyde Kluckholm, *Mirror for Man,* New York: Premier Books, 1965, p. 38.
[12] C. Wright Mills, *Power, Politics, and People,* New York: Ballantine Books, 1963, p. 405.

> Symbolic universe ... are bodies of theoretical tradition that integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality ... To reiterate, symbolic processes are processes of signification that refer to realities other than those of everyday experience. It may be readily seen how the symbolic sphere relates to the most comprehensive level of legitimation. The sphere of pragmatic application is transcended once and for all. Legitimation now takes place by means of symbolic totalities that cannot be experienced in everyday life at all—except, of course, insofar as one might speak of "theoretical experience" ... Now, however, *all* the sectors of the institutional order are integrated in an all-embracing frame of reference, which now constitutes a universe in the literal sense of the word, because *all* human experience can be conceived as taking place *within* it.
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> The symbolic universe is conceived of as the matrix of all socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings; the entire historic society and the entire biography of the individual are seen as events taking place *within* this universe. What is particularly important, the marginal situations of the life of the individual ... are also encompassed by the symbolic universe. Such situations are experienced in dreams and fantasies as provinces of meaning detached from everyday life, and endowed with a peculiar reality of their own. Within the symbolic universe these detached realms of reality are integrated within a meaningful totality that "explains," perhaps also justifies them ... The symbolic universe is, of course, constructed by means of social objectifications. Yet its meaning-bestowing capacity far exceeds the domain of social life, so that the individual may "locate" himself within it even in his most solitary experiences."
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> On this level of legitimation, the reflective integration of discrete institutional processes reaches its ultimate fulfilment. A whole world is created. All the lesser legitimating theories are viewed as special perspectives on phenomena that are aspects of this world. Institutional roles become modes of participation in a universe that transcends *and* includes the institutional order. [13]

Essentially, worldviews are self-contained symbolic wholes which describe and ascribe meaning to reality as perceived from within a particular "symbolic universe". Everyday pre-theoretical experience and the "sphere of pragmatic application" are subsumed within the more comprehensive and inclusive frame of reference. The "bodies of theoretical tradition" provide the worldview content, which collectively will "integrate different provinces of meaning and encompass the institutional order in a symbolic totality." The functional utility of a worldview is in the application of significance for understanding the nature of the perceived world and the experiences of the inner self, respectively "socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings." In fact, because of its "meaning-

[13] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality,* Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1967, pp. 95–96.

bestowing capacity," a comprehensive apparatus of particularly articulated conceptual and symbolic ideational materials is available to supply the means for achieving insight and understanding, so that "the individual may "locate" himself within it even in his most solitary experiences." The comprehensive whole of a symbolic universe provides explanation and justification for individual experience but is yet "constructed by means of social objectifications," and serves a larger social purpose. The encompassing worldview provides a dominant picture of reality, subsuming "all lesser legitimating theories" that yet maintain their own specialised and limited functions. Thus a plurality of individual traditions and disciplines may co-exist in their delineation of particular aspects of knowledge and experience. However, insofar as they deviate from the mainstream worldview, their authoritative credibility may become compromised. The "institutional order" is part of, but yet is transcended by, the symbolic universe, therefore becoming susceptible to change and revision. And modes of participation via "institutional roles" are implied to function efficaciously as long as the integrity of the symbolic universe is maintained. Since "the entire historic society and the entire biography of the individual are seen as events taking place *within* this universe," any radical change or deviation from its basic premises would suggest severe feelings of uneasiness, dissatisfaction, incompleteness, doubt, alienation, anomie, discomfort, inadequacy.

Worldviews, especially if based mostly on pre-theoretical knowledge, may be largely implicit and taken for granted below the threshold of reflection for many within a society. However, for the long established traditional institutions of legitimation responsible for maintaining and reconstructing sophisticated theoretical worldviews (such as religious, philosophic, scientific, scholarly and other bodies of specialised expertise), the reflective and critical process is ongoing. The "very few people, ... in position to re-evaluate what has thus been imposed on them" come primarily from such ideational domains, or claim to have similar expertise and information. Often elite experts and specialists of a particular field of sophisticated knowledge, such as priests, philosophers, scientists, scholars, and so forth will shape and articulate a specific form of response, fashioning a particular variation or novel conceptualisation for their time and place. However, the degree of consensual sway is variable. The presence of competing or differing institutions and systems of knowledge and belief may offer alternative

interpretations that temper and relativise each other. And the social pervasiveness of any worldview will thus become a matter of presentment, preference, power, or popularity.

As well, the emergence of alternative or revised worldview content may be part of an internal process, appearing inexorably within a traditional institution of knowledge. Or it may appear from an unaffiliated, independent, competing or dissenting source, whether expounded by individuals or groups. When coming from within an established religious, philosophical, scientific, or other institution or school of thought, the process of worldview revision can be viewed as simply part of the ongoing internal evolution of the discipline or tradition. When appearing from a non-traditional secondary source, the proffered transformed or amended worldview may on the one hand be closely related or empathetic to the prevailing system, and therefore easier to evaluate and integrate.

But on the other, if founded upon discordant or socially unacceptable premises and sources of authority, it may be perceived as incongruous with what is familiar and known, hence lacking the same legitimating criteria of trustworthiness and reliability. Thus the appearance of a dissenting unprecedented or unusual non-traditional worldview will provoke more stringent and sceptical analysis and evaluation from the proponents of the status quo. So the emergence of explicitly contrary or conflicting alternative worldviews is itself a phenomenon that seems to reflect a certain degree of urgency and sense of commitment on the part of those who envisaged, articulated, and propagated it. Dissatisfaction with the familiar coupled with sincere belief in the correctness and legitimacy of the new orientation seem to be the most obvious motivational factors. And if the feelings of inadequacy about the status quo position are strong, " voluntary destructuration" may ensue.

> Voluntary 'destructuration' … is the deliberate process of abandoning old forms and procedures… thus beliefs, rituals, even moral precepts are abandoned. [14]

The individuals who feel the urges, convictions, and certitude of belief must work with the prevalent "pre-given stock of knowledge" of the specific symbolic universe as they embark upon their quest to change or transform existing views. So the formation of a new or revised worldview must to some extent be based upon a selection and utilisation

[14] Bryan Wilson, *Contemporary Transformations of Religion*, London/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1976, pp. 85–86.

of "the elements required" from the acknowledged ideational materials of a culture, embedded in the different forms of knowledge, and transmitted by specific institutions. The "degree of the clarity of the insight" depends on how this alternative worldview is articulated and presented in relation to that which is already established and familiar. A plausible and workable presentment may eventuate with integration or absorption of ideas. A worldview that has emotional appeal may attract commitment and sympathetic curiosity. Needless to say, the spectrum of possible responses is wide. And the basis of authority upon which rests the credibility of an alternative worldview is also significant in establishing its legitimacy.

> Authority is measured by the probability that people will accept given values for the sole reason that someone else—the person or organization endowed with authority—practices or preaches such values. A person or organization may carry authority for certain people inasmuch as the fact that they vouch for the values in question will be seen by these people as a sufficient reason for acceptance and compliance. The authority a person or an organization wields therefore boils down to the likelihood that other people will follow their example or advice. That obedience may be justified in all sorts of terms, such as wisdom, truthfulness, experience, the moral integrity of the source of guidance which has been followed. In each case, however, what is justified is the *trust* of the followers in the basic soundness of the guidance that comes from such a source.
> The values we cherish are ultimately a matter of our choice. In the end it is we who bestow authority upon the examples we decide to follow and refuse authority to examples we do not like… To become an authority for us, a person or an organization must produce a *legitimation* or an argument which demonstrates why their advice for their hierarchy of values ought to be followed in preference to another…
> The alternative would be to defend new values as a revelation of sorts – either a result of an epoch-making discovery, a particularly profound insight into the truth of the matter, or a strong vision that pierced through the unknown and hence threatening future. This kind of argument is associated with *charismatic* legitimation… We can speak of charisma whenever the acceptance of certain values is motivated by conviction that the preacher or preachers of such values have superhuman qualities (unusual wisdom, foresight, access to sources of knowledge closed to ordinary men and women) that guarantee the trust of their vision and the propriety of their choice. [15]

Madame Blavatsky certainly qualifies as a charismatic leader, and the legitimation here spoken of applies to the initial impetus of the theosophical movement, when her "unusual wisdom, foresight, access to sources of knowledge closed to ordinary

[15] Zygmunt Bauman, *Thinking Sociologically,* Oxford: Basic Blackwell Ltd., 1990, pp. 118–121.

men and women" provided the authoritative foundation of the worldview espoused. First as described personally by Blavatsky, then as embedded organisationally in the system of ideas and beliefs. The theosophical option then became a matter of preference as a secondary minority cognitive system. And making a persuasive case for its adoption was what much of the work by Blavatsaky and others within the theosophical movement was about. The effort to convincingly make an "argument that demonstrates why their advice for their hierarchy of values ought to be followed in preference to another" was particularly directed against the three established traditional sources of knowledge and the respective religious, philosophical, and scientific worldviews prevalent in mainstream nineteenth century Western society. We will discuss the question of charisma in chapter eight, but now will examine the specific role of those three forms of knowledge as they pertain to the function of worldviews.

3.2.4 The Rationale for Blavatsky's Choice of Types of Knowledge

What distinguish worldviews from each other primarily are the uniqueness of ideational content and the concomitant associations of plausibility built into each system. In discussing such contents, it would be useful to look at analytical models that may be helpful in providing a convenient way of categorising the most common types of theoretical knowledge. As mentioned, the presence of religious, philosophical and scientific content seems to be a significant characteristic of the structure of explicitly intended comprehensive worldviews. It was a major assumption for Blavatsky when she chose to construct an alternative, and therefore must be accounted for in any analysis of worldviews. And though obviously other sources of cultural data, including aesthetic, political, technical, social, and other influences. are potentially part of the worldview mix, they are less comprehensively speculative and all encompassing. Religion, philosophy, and science in their exploratory forms attempt to create explicitly formulated symbolic universes, worldviews locating and explaining the status of man in the cosmos, and provide a totality of meaning to the nature of reality. That appears to be the line of thought behind Blavatsky's choice of those particular sources of knowledge for supportive use in shaping her synthesis. Thus any analysis of theosophical material must be based on recognition that those three forms of knowledge were considered especially

significant, and represented the most socially familiar and authoritative ways of describing reality at the time the alternative worldview was being conceived.

Two distinct yet complementary approaches to the roles of religion, philosophy and science in forming worldviews may help broaden our perspective. Madame Blavatsky seemed to feel that a synthesis of those types of knowledge would serve as a fully adequate and accurate means of presenting a novel worldview to the public. Although she consistently qualified the perception that there in fact were different means of obtaining truth, claiming that ultimately there was a supreme and transcendent "Truth" which subsumed all partial manifestations. However, is there any intrinsic basis for assuming that religion, philosophy, and science have special significance as cognitive components in worldviews, and justify Blavatsky's synthetic objective? Was she simply grasping for conceptual support randomly, or were the choice of religion, philosophy and science either a conscious or instinctive attempt to transmit the most credibility and legitimacy to her doctrinal system? We shall examine this subject first with a look at how those three forms of knowledge may be sociologically and historically considered, both as types of ideational content as well as specific modes of experience. Then in the next chapter we will look at Madame Blavatsky's treatment of religion, philosophy and science as sources in her synthetic systematic objective.

One analysis is from the sociologist Pitirim Sorokin, and the other from philosopher E. A. Burtt. A number of sociologists, anthropologists, and philosophers have categorised the different fields and forms of knowledge, but to extensively compare and analyse them would take us far beyond the scope of our inquiry. For instance, Georges Gurvitch in *The Social Framework of Knowledge* lists seven types of knowledge and five dichotomies of the forms of knowledge. Religion, philosophy, and science are classified and incorporated according to the different interpretative criteria of his schema. Philosophical and scientific knowledge comprise two of his seven types. He sees religious data (particularly mystical knowledge) as a form, specifically polarised with rational knowledge as one of the five dichotomies. Talcott Parsons in *The Social System* differentiates between empirical and non-empirical, cognitive and evaluative categories, placing religion, philosophy, and science (along with ideology) as the major divisions. However, the two examples we have chosen to discuss come from separate disciplines

and reveal complementary perspectives that help illuminate the historical dynamics at work in worldview creation.

3.3.1 Sorokin's Differentiation of the Truths of Faith, Reason, Sense

We begin with Sorokin, and his analysis of dominant cultural categories of truth. His division of three major systems of truth and six main epistemological currents is one approach to the interpretation of pertinent cultural phenomena. And though by no means exhaustive or methodologically indisputable, it does provide a useful outline for historically and typologically interpreting important characteristics of such worldviews. Right now, a brief examination of Sorokin's characterisations of the three components of the cultural truth systems will be useful. In his classification, the "Truth of Faith" corresponds in essence with the substance of religious experience and thought. Its subject matter is seen in this way.

> Mainly the supersensory, and superrational "subjects" and "realities." God, devil, angels. spirits; soul, immortality, salvation; sin; redemption; resurrection; paradise, purgatory, inferno; and so on, with an enormous number of other subproblems of the same kind...
> The sensory and empirical phenomena are studied only incidentally and even then not for their own sake but merely "visible signs of the invisible world," as symbols of the supersensory reality. The supreme discipline in such a system of truth is always theology as a science of the supersensory realities. The exposition of the truth is apodictic and symbolic. [16]
> .

And his "method of validation," or, from our perspective, legitimation, is based upon appeal to a sacred source, such as a revealed Scripture, demonstrated by divine inspiration. Logical reasoning and empirical criteria are only applied as secondary support apparatus and retain any degree of credibility if they are not seen as contradictory to the claims of revealed Scripture.

In his classification, the "Truth of Reason" corresponds basically to the parameters of philosophical thought. As such, this is how it is described.

> Partly supersensory, partly sensory-empirical. Each for its own sake, but the value of the knowledge about the sensory phenomena is subordinated to that of the supersensory "realities." The total system of knowledge here incorporates usually in the form of idealistically rationalistic philosophy... reasoning and empirical knowledge in the sense of the contemporary science. The ultimate

[16] Potirim Sorokin, *Social & Cultural Dynamics*, Boston: Extending Horizon Books, 1957, p 226.

> reality is thought of as knowable. The exposition of the truth is dialectic and deductive. [17]

And the method of validation requires the use of logical reasoning in conjunction with the testimony of the senses. As well, supplementary support drawn from sacred texts may be used to amplify or illustrate principles deduced or arrived at through the dialectical process.

In the "Truth of Sense" we see correspondence with the materials of scientific thought. This is how it is characterised.

> Mainly the world of the sensory perception, like the phenomena studied in the natural sciences. When ... the phenomena seem to have an aspect not easily reducible to the sensory material forms, science concentrates mainly at their sensory aspect and either disregards the "nonmaterial" aspect or treats it as subsidiary and tries to "measure them" through the measurement of the sensory-external phenomenal forms. Hence the tendency to "objectivism," "behaviourism," "quantivism," "mechanisticism." The supersensory realities are declared either non-existent, or irrelevant or "unknowable" (criticism, agnosticism, positivism). The natural sciences become the leaders as the most perfect, exact sciences, and are copied... Exposition of the truth is "inductive" and especially "experimental." [18]

And the method of validation for this type of truth is through the sense organs and their instrumental extensions, aided by the process of logical reasoning, especially mathematics. Hypotheses must be confirmed by accord with verifiable sensory facts, while the criteria of religious truth are of only superficial relevance.

And further clarification comes from distinguishing six epistemological currents. These are: 1 - Empiricism; 2A - Religious or ideational rationalism; 2B - Idealistic rationalism; 3 – Mysticism; 4 – Scepticism; 5 – Fideism; and 6 - Criticism. When connected to the three systems of truth, ideational or religious rationalism, mysticism and fideism primarily incorporate the truth of faith. Idealistic rationalism incorporates the truth of reason. And empiricism incorporates the truth of the senses. Scepticism is a purely negative, cynical and passive system. Criticism is a specific combination of scepticism, empiricism, and rationalism.

Rather than an extensive explication of each stated detail for each of the systems

[17] Ibid., p. 228.
[18] Ibid., p. 228.

of truth and their validations, let us now simply make a few general observations that have a bearing on our study. Firstly, the classification obviously is phrased in such terms to clearly indicate a reference to Western civilisation, although a wider application is possible with use of more expansive analogies. As well, terms like "Scripture" and "revealed truth" have obvious historical connotations, though, again, may be conceived in a broader sense. Especially when used in discussing "Truth of Reason" and "Truth of Sense." For instance, when mentioning the validation of Reason, one of the characteristics is use of quotations taken from the Scripture or deriving from a source equivalent to it. In some historical contexts, the literal reference is accurate. However in others, more emphasis should be put on the "source equivalent to it" interpretation. For instance, in many philosophical and scientific schools of thought, particular bodies of knowledge, texts, teachings, and so forth serve as similar authoritative criteria of legitimacy. While not imbued with the same purported transcendental validation, they yet provide a similar sort of evaluative functionality. What falls outside their parameters often immediately acquires the label of "falsehood", "error," "mistake" "misconception" because of non-conformity to the prevailing representations of the equivalent of "revealed truth."

Though just one very general differentiation of types of social knowledge, this schema can be utilised where applicable as a referential framework for evaluating and interpreting particular cultural phenomena. As well, when applied as a model for interpreting historical changes in patterns of thought, there is a basic continuity with a number of theories in which a movement from religious to philosophical to scientific worldviews is postulated. Although these modes of thought may simultaneously co-exist within a given society, the relative dominance and esteem of a particular form will be reflected in the legitimating authority of its institutions. For instance, in a worldview in which religion is the dominant source of legitimation, prioritisation of the validity of faith will overshadow the edifices of reason. And where philosophy or science dominates, the premises of the religious worldview will be modified or minimised. And even where science and philosophy are the dominating competing sources of primary legitimation, the relative preferences of rational or empirical ways of envisioning reality will become an issue of contention.

3.3.2 Burtt's Distinction of the Modes of Intuitionalism, Rationalism, Empiricism

The threefold division by Sorokin of truths of faith, reason and sense has an interesting correspondence in the outline of the evolution of thought presented by E. A. Burtt. in his book *In Search of Philosophic Understanding.* Although his assumptions are presented in the form of broad generalities, without extensive support or analysis, it supplements Sorokin's division of three systems of truth. However, Sorokin sees these systems of knowledge as part of more extensive integrated cultural wholes while Burtt differentiates between the types of knowledge in a general linear way.

He begins by recognising that the "common sense" world of everyday experience is a conditioned and imperfect representation of reality, and that common sense knowledge is inadequate in providing more comprehensive understanding of the "larger universe." He sees common sense knowledge as ambiguous, contradictory, lacking universal applicability, and conditioned by its social and historical environment. Burtt recognizes that three ways of "correcting common-sense" have historically evolved in Western civilization.

> Thus far, Western thought has hit upon three methods in the quest for a trustworthy way of correcting common-sense. They have appeared in a definite order. Surveying them in that order we may call them the ways of intuitionalism, rationalism and empiricism. [19]

These three methods fairly accurately correspond to Sorokin's systems of truth. Looking at Burtt's classifications, he sees "intuitionalism" as the first of a unique way of "correcting common sense."

> Taking intuitionism then as a distinctive way of revising common-sense beliefs, let us imagine ourselves in the age of the Hebrew prophets and the early Greek poets and tragedians who vividly illustrate it. During the same age farmers and artisans were slowly accumulating scraps of what now would be called technical lore... the intellectual elite—the shamans, seers, and prophets—did notice something else: the crucial and mysterious moment when a new idea, conveying a persuasive answer to some urgent perplexity, is born. Interpreted by the religious concepts which as yet were the only ones available for the purpose, these intuitions were naturally taken as revelations of the divine—oracles, inspired seizures—each carrying its voucher of authenticity on its face. Knowledge, thus interpreted, is an aggregate of such intuitions, bound together by no rational

[19] E.A. Burtt, *In Search of Philosophic Understanding*, New York and Toronto: Mentor Books, 1967, p. 29.

> order; any two of them might contradict each other. The criterion for determining their truth was in effect just the potent "compellingness" of each idea as it came.[20]

Historical over-simplification aside, this isolation of a "distinctive way of revising common-sense beliefs" illustrates some important points. For one, that articulation and cultural institutionalisation was instigated by an intellectual elite. When the "persuasive answer to some urgent perplexity" was intuited at the "crucial and mysterious moment," the new idea took on the representational form of the prevailing ideational legitimating institution. And, according to this interpretation, religious concepts were the only clearly articulated and accessible means of dealing with the crisis. As non-rational kinds of numinous experience, these intuitions were presumed to have a divine basis. And the referential context of legitimacy was implicit, with "each carrying its voucher of authenticity on its face." This kind of knowledge thus interpreted becomes the means of response to such existentially vexing situations. Thus, as a distinctive way of enhancing the common-sense interpretation of reality, the knowledge derived from the intuitional mode of experience is somewhat chaotic and ambivalent. Credibility and authenticity do not depend on rational or intellectual standards, but are determined by an indefinable and allusive emotionally powerful "compellingness" extrapolated from the dynamics of the encounter. What is inferred by compellingness and intuitional knowledge reverts finally to the domain of religion for derivation of explicit meaning.

In Burtt's account, the intuitional method of augmenting common sense knowledge was incapable of providing a logically connected and rationally grounded non-contradictory synthesis. Lack of coherence and conflicting intuitions without a means of resolution in his opinion illustrated the limitations of this form of knowledge. However, as history unfolded and other configurations of articulated experience emerged and matured, "intuitionalism," was joined by "rationalism" as a distinct means of knowledge. And it was one key factor that enabled this other approach to effectively work. This was the discovery of mathematics, and with it, the process of deductive inference.

This second essential phase of the acquisition of knowledge was concurrently evolving, but not yet ascendant as the primary legitimating methodology. Only when it

[20] Ibid.

became pervasively recognised as a valuable and viable approach capable of providing new coherence and meaning were the conceptual tools of mathematics and rational deduction accorded preferred legitimating status. The application of mathematical reasoning provided continuity between the diverse intuitions, creating a systematic compendium of knowledge based on abstract axioms of truth. And shared confirmation and understanding was possible for those who could apply the principles of logical reasoning, while the adequacy and credibility of any assumption could be tested publicly. By being able to predictably depend on the accuracy of such a mode of thought, all quantitative relations were capable of management and mastery, establishing a foundation of rational knowledge. And this eventually became ensconced as a dominant Western orientation for interpreting the nature of reality.

> The ideal of knowledge, as coherently organizable and demonstratively certain came to dominate Western thought, especially when the basic lesson of mathematics was confirmed by the logical syllogism of Aristotle. This formal pattern revealed the way in which the mind must proceed from any subject-predicate premises to a conclusion if the inference is to be valid. ...We may best refer to this revolutionary orientation... by the word "rationalism."
> ... Knowledge was now viewed as a system of truths bound together by strands of logic. No longer to be taken or left on the authority of a seer or the compulsion
>
> of some vivid idea, every piece of it was capable of demonstration. One could trace its necessary relations to a set of ultimate principles, which, when clearly grasped, appeared self-evidently true. [21]

Clearly, distinctive approaches to comprehending reality exist between intuitionalism and rationalism. The legitimising apparatus shifts from "the authority of a seer or the compulsion of some vivid idea" to a logically coherent and consistent system of truths. The pre-eminence of the rational form of knowledge extended from the practical domain to the speculative sphere. Being able to "trace its necessary relations to a set of ultimate principles" allowed for purely rational analytical criteria. And the recognition that by exercise of reason truth could be clearly comprehended and appear "self-evidently true" allowed for pure philosophical speculation. However, historically, in the social world, there are rarely occasions when only one type of knowledge or mode of experience exclusively dominates.

[21] Ibid., p. 31.

In fact, even as rationalism was acquiring more credibility, intuitionalism yet retained status as an entrenched way of comprehending reality. But one form did not totally replace the other, with each co-existing by prioritising experience somewhat differently, and extrapolating novel forms of signification. Thus, a certain amount of cross-fertilisation and revision existed between reason and special forms of intuition. Where empathy and connectivity could be found, a more comprehensive structure of knowledge could be established. However, much of the substance of intuitionism was simply intrinsically incompatible with the treatments of reason, deriving from a different modality of experience.

> Mere "inspired visions" unable to find a place in such a logical order, were no longer quite respectable—save in such fields as religion and art, where rationalism was long impotent to gain a sure foothold. Yet even there the intuitionism of the earlier vintage, at least, was forced into a losing struggle. The way of systematic demonstration, once successful everywhere, seemed clearly the way that ought to be successful everywhere. Reason, in its power to apprehend deductive form and self-evident axioms, is a single faculty, and once it has found itself it claims universal authority. [22]

The discontinuity with the emerging criteria of reason marginalized the claims of intuitionism somewhat. Any truth quotient must be sought for in the domains of religion and art, and recedes from the forefront of rationalist values. As the progressively dominant mode of representing reality, "the way of systematic demonstration" becomes accepted as the most viable and credible because it seems to be most satisfactory and sensible. The ideas, ideals, and the values of the rationalistic approach become the authoritative criteria and are used to judge and evaluate all facets of life. Reason is recognised as the most trustworthy and defensible orientation. Thus established as the most credible and esteemed form of knowledge, it becomes a defining component of the legitimation process. So that "once it has found itself it claims universal authority," leading to the pre-eminence of philosophers as specially qualified authorities about the nature of the real.

The rationalistic approach became institutionalised in the enterprise of philosophy, represented at first by the appearance of philosophers who engage in discursive speculation. The ideal of an inclusive, comprehensive worldview of reality

[22] Ibid.

construed through the apparatus of the rationalist method meant that all areas of human experience were susceptible to analysis and evaluation according to the criteria of logic. All dimensions of experience and all kinds of knowledge became the materials of particular conceptual and analytical treatments. And from each perspective, all significant categories of experience and knowledge were defined and woven into the specific all encompassing system promoted by the particular philosopher or school of thought. As a legitimising institution, philosophy emerged with a significant degree of authority, primarily amongst the intellectual elite. Other perspectives may have existed, but if incapable of displacing the entrenched approach they were accorded secondary eminence.

Despite the rise of philosophy as an authoritative institution of legitimisation, in continual contact or conflict with the institution of religion, both the intuitional and the rationalistic orientations were constrained in their modes of operation. And the philosophical application of reason itself was reconfigured to allow for a different prioritisation. The application of reason in the purely rationalistic way could produce self-consistent and systematically encompassing representations of reality, but even with those self-contained systems and their rigorous logic and axiomatic foundations, occasions presented themselves when what was observed in nature defied a single certain explanation. And again, a concurrent though historically more peripheral approach to envisioning reality rose to prominence as more adequate and applicable. This was the empirical approach, which was defined by a careful and thorough focus on the data of sense observation.

The change is one of orientation, based on a different set of criteria. The empirical, or scientific institution gradually acquired the defining characteristics that set it apart as a separate framework of legitimation. Through continued experimentation new parameters were established, so guidance and evaluation could be determined by reference to how those paradigms functioned over time. The cumulative result was an improved methodology by which alternative hypotheses could be tested and evaluated according to their conformity to known facts and logical plausibility. The supporting rationalist logical framework was employed where seemingly needed, and retained if it appeared to be feasible. However, the new orientation presupposed an ideal of continued refinement and adaptability to account for any new facts of evident knowledge.

> The success of the way of empiricism has likewise proved definitive. Once established, its drastic reconstruction of the principles of rationalism has been retained. A system of propositions unable to square itself with the relevant observable facts is no longer quite respectable. [23]

The transition in prominence of legitimating institutions resulted in rationalism, as expressed in philosophical systemisation, to inevitably recede as the most esteemed method of envisioning reality. The scope and focus of philosophical inquiry was compelled to change as science, or "the way of empiricism," grew in stature and credibility. With the expectation that new facts would stimulate the formation of new hypotheses, the prioritisation of the emerging methodology eventuated in a revised set of criteria and ideals. The valuation of the ideals of reason was not totally abandoned, but a different orientation evolved founded upon that "drastic reconstruction of the principles of rationalism."

So, tracing the various ways of worldview adaptation, we see that each has its own unique configuration and institutional representation. In Western history, there have been shifts of stature and importance for each, although they have existed simultaneously in various stages of maturation and influence. And Western civilisation has thus passed through a historical process with a distinctive mix of orientations by which to interpret the world.

> In the era of intuitionism his world was what custom and habit had traditionally taken for granted, modified slowly by novel ideas that appealed to this or that keen mind and were gradually accepted by others. In the era of rationalistic confidence his world was a system of principles generally regarded as self-evident along with inferences about the cosmos that could logically be drawn from them. Now in the era of empiricism, his world is the manifold of facts of observation, organized in more or less comprehensive theories and continually expanding through new discoveries. It is in that world that you and I live today, and it is slowly becoming accepted by all living men. [24]

Burtt's sequence of events is instructive more for its identification of distinguishing types of knowledge by which common sense could be "corrected" than for the presumption of a straightforward linear and inexorable progression. The historical identification of "the era of intuitionism," "the era of rationalism," "the era of

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., p. 34.

empiricism" does however generally indicate the conditions in which the respective distinctively articulated representations of reality were dominant, and fairly well correspond to the eras which Sorokin thought each system of truth dominated.

3.3.3 Comparison of the Two Approaches to Knowledge

It need be stressed that analytical classifications are never absolutely precise for each and every occasion. Sorokin's division of the three systems of truth within a culture is a generally useful way of organising historical data, but not the only way. And Burtt's enunciation of intuitional, rationalistic, and empirical types of knowledge and corresponding eras likewise is a constructive speculative outline, that isolates and concentrates on certain tendencies.

The correspondence in thought in these two outlooks is as follows. Religion is the institution representing and legitimising the "Truth of Faith" or "intuitionism." Philosophy is the institution embodying the "Truth of Reason," or "rationalism." And science is the institution defining and articulating the "Truth of Sense," or, "empiricism." Collectively they represent the three main western historical sources of knowledge, providing the formal "stock of ideas" which are utilised in constructing worldviews.

The focus on these three forms, of course, does not presume other significant interpretative channels do not exist or provide important functions. For instance, the arts, and the entire aesthetic domain have always served as a significant cultural repository for embodying value and meaning. Sometimes serving to enhance and amplify strains of already articulated belief systems, sometimes suggesting more intangible personal and imponderable allusions of significance. The forms, imagery, resonant themes may more easily conform to a prevailing ideational framework or else may appear in any degree of flux towards new or less prevalent directions.[25]

Although all such classifications of knowledge are inevitably selected from a broader cultural mix , they do reveal distinctive characteristics and have co-existed in different configurations of influence and eminence. In bringing down the theoretical and

[25] See Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of the Humanities,* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966, and Susan K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key,* New York: Mentor Books, 1948, for analyses of the connection between knowledge and aesthetics.

formal to the domain of the everyday world, and extending the inquiries of common sense into a more abstract sphere, assimilation becomes a fusion of personal and cultural concerns. The individual grapples with the culturally available representations of reality while trying to accommodate subjective feelings and thoughts. Although the elite theoreticians hone and shape the minutiae of definition and implication, it usually requires a more direct emotional and intuitive connection before the "self-evident" nature of any framework takes hold.

When we look at the way these three forms of knowledge contribute to the contents of worldviews, what is important to note is that historically in Western society they collectively were the acknowledged primary sources of credible facts, speculative theories, trustworthy insights about the nature of reality. From the historical and ideational setting Blavatsky was located in, the only way to present an alternative worldview was by challenging the premises and conclusions drawn from these fields of knowledge and embedded in the then dominant worldviews. Whether religion, philosophy and science were viewed simply as repositories of particular kinds of traditional knowledge; or the "Truth of Religion," the "Truth of Reason," and "the "Truth of the Senses" were considered as integral components of a cultural whole; or "intuitionalism," "rationalism," and "empiricism" were seen as distinctive modes of human perception; dealing with the data pertaining to these three sources was critical for the formation of any encompassing worldview. And it was by recognising the necessity of both utilising selective materials and confronting and challenging existing assumptions that Blavatsky was able to make the claim of an alternative and preferable synthesis. Despite radically unorthodox interpretations of traditional material, the only way to gain credibility was by acknowledging the need to critique the existing dominant religious, philosophic and scientific worldviews and by reconstructing and reinterpreting them in a way which still respected their traditional status and effectiveness even while disputing many of their premises and conclusions. This leads us to a discussion of the religious, philosophical and scientific interpretations of knowledge that prevailed during this time frame, and an overview of the major elements of the esoteric alternative cognitive perspective.

3.4.1 An Overview of Traditional Christianity in the Nineteenth Century – Conflict Between Religion and Science

Let us begin by looking at the status of mainstream traditional Western religion during the period the theosophical initiative was being contemplated and constructed. Christianity, both in its Catholic and Protestant forms, was the dominant religious framework for interpreting and representing the nature of reality during the nineteenth century. Despite a plethora of variations in doctrine, belief, and themes of emphasis pertaining to individual Christian movements and churches (particularly Protestant), a disputable generic Christian worldview was felt to be undeservedly dominant by Madame Blavatsky. Key elements sustaining the legitimacy of that worldview were trust in faith as a criterion of truth, belief in the supernatural as a primary operative force, the eschatological impetus of history, and the unique and special divinity of Jesus Christ. The last half of the nineteenth century in particular saw major elements of the Christian worldview come into direct conflict with the representation of reality emerging from the domain of the sciences and from rational critique in general. The "conflict between religion and science" was a phrase repeatedly used at both sophisticated and popular levels of discourse, and reflected in general the movement towards secularity in Western societies. Essentially, it indicated a transition from the religious worldview orientation to the philosophic or more prominently, the scientific.

> The word secularisation began as an emotive word, not far in its origins from the word anticlericism. Sometimes it meant a freeing of the sciences, of learning, of the arts, from their theological origins or theological bias. Sometimes it meant the declining influence of churches, or of religion, in modern society. … A word to describe a process, whatever that process was, in the changing relationship between religion and modern society, a process arising in part out of the industrial revolution and the new conditions of urban and mechanical life, in part out of the vast growth in new knowledge of various kinds. [26]

Two issues in particular characterised the nature of this dispute from the point of view of the defenders of the religious status quo. One was the crisis of credibility engendered through rationally grounded scholarly and critical treatments of the Bible. The work of

[26] Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge/London/New York/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1975, p.264.

many, including David Strauss, F.C. Baur, Bishop Colenso, Ernest Renan, and Bruno Bauer brought many of the basic assumptions under scrutiny.

> The nineteenth century… brought Christianity to face the biggest intellectual crisis of its history. The Bible, though not always regarded as absolute literal truth, had been regarded for many centuries as the inspired word of God. People might differ as to the mechanism whereby the writers of the scriptures received inspiration from God, but it was generally agreed that here was a body of writing that showed forth in detail God's revelation. The authority of the Bible was supposedly guaranteed by the miracles that verified the teachings of Christ and of the prophets. Protestantism had even stronger reasons for the veneration of the Bible. The Bible was the rock of authority upon which Protestant Reformation rested. It was particularly important to those of Evangelical persuasion. … Nor was the Catholic position altogether different. … [27]

The other was the implication of fallibility deriving from the theory of evolution.

> Darwin's account … devastated the myth of the past upon which religious faith rested. The Origin of Species delivered the coup de grace to whatever lingering hopes there were that the historicity of the Bible and the Judaeo-Christian view of man springing from it would somehow be substantiated by science. The long-cherished providential theory, that God had created man, in all his pristine perfection, as a special favour, and tailored the universe to his special needs, was finished. Man was merely the most highly developed (for the moment) form of animal life and subject to the same laws of development that governed the rest; he was even given a museum label, Homo sapiens. [28]

3.4.2 An Overview of Traditional Christianity in the Nineteenth Century – Protestant and Catholic Stances

These two areas of dispute, along with various historical and doctrinal stances brought the Christian worldview(s) under attack when the standards of evaluation were based on purely rational and empirical criteria. From within the Protestant tradition, a number of specific reactions emerged. Here we see two different stances.

> Certain Protestant sects, particularly evangelical groups, rejected both evolution and the higher criticism root and branch. They clung to the literal word of the Bible and defended the inspiration theory and special-creation doctrine. These thoroughly devout and orthodox religionists came to be known, at the close of the century, as Fundamentalists. Some liberal Protestants were inclined to accept evolution and the findings of biblical scholarship. They made a real effort to

[27] Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, London and Glasgow: The Fontana Library, 1973, p. 623.
[28] Richard D. Altick, *Victorian People and Ideas,* New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973, pp. 227–228.

> reconcile the essentials of Christianity with modern science and criticism. This school of Protestant thought came to be known as devout modernists. They resembled the Christian deists of the preceding century. While accepting the idea that the universe, the earth, and its inhabitants were produced by evolutionary processes, and conceding that the Bible was written without direct supernatural inspiration, the devout modernists vigorously maintained their belief in God and the divinity of Jesus Christ. [29]

And the position of the Roman Catholic Church also maintained a strict adherence to traditional lines. During the papacy of Pius IX (1846–1878) a hardening of entrenched positions was fostered by the reaffirmation of a number of controversial doctrines. These included the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854, the issuance of the papal encyclical, *Quantra cura,* and the *Syllabus of Errors* in 1864, which denounced the tendency to pursue naturalistic intellectual inquiries. As well, the announcement of the dogma of papal infallibility in 1870 provoked controversy and cynicism from critics. And this outlook was sustained when the succeeding pope, Leo XIII (1878–1903) maintained the critique of modern intellectual tendencies by reaffirmation of the encyclical and syllabus of 1864 and the reassertion of the theology of Thomas Aquinas in his encyclical, *Aeterni patris*. The official and authoritative position of the Roman Catholic Church thus left little room for adaptability, or deviation from its traditional worldview.

> From the beginning to the end of the century, the Catholic church stood firmly against evolution, biblical scholarship, and all other phases of the new learning which directly challenged Catholic dogmas … But the Catholic church opposed promptly and vigorously those scientific discoveries which cut at the roots of Catholic doctrines. Works which were deemed in any way dangerous were placed upon the index of forbidden books. [30]

The crisis in intellectual credibility of institutional Christianity was not necessarily something that filtered down through all spheres of religious interest, as popular pietism, focus on social reforms, proliferation of new sects and the spread of foreign missions served to sustain the legitimacy of Christianity. However its status as an unassailable and taken-for-granted ideational edifice was now brought under more scrutiny. And it was on that larger encompassing theoretical and conceptual level where critique was directed. It was under those circumstances that Blavatsky and other

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[29] Harry Elmer Barnes, *An Intellectual and Cultural History of the Western World,* Volume Three, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1965, pp. 983–984.
[30] Ibid., p. 986.

expounders of mid and late nineteenth century minority cognitive orientations confronted the established religious institutions.

3.5.1 An Overview of Traditional Philosophical Schools and Trends in the Nineteenth Century – the Idealist Orientation

When we turn to the philosophical milieu of this period, we find that two major trends are evident. On the one hand, primarily the influences of Kant and Hegel in various forms of idealism, romanticism, and more critical reactions in other directions. On the other, philosophies that prioritised the input of scientific (particularly, evolutionary) materials. The interaction of both orientations resulted in a number of distinctive outlooks.

> It is clear, then, that the development of European thought in the course of the nineteenth century proceeded according to three dialectical stages—idealism, scientific evolutionism, and a simultaneous operation of both tendencies. Despite their antagonism both tendencies had certain essential features in common: the tendency towards system, a markedly rationalistic attitude toward the world of experience; a disinclination to penetrate into the area of reality behind appearances—or even to admit its existence; and lastly, the monistic tendency which allows human personality to be merged into the Absolute or into the evolution of the universe. Rationalism, phenomenalism, evolutionism, monistic antipersonalism, and the development of great systems largely determined the pattern of the nineteenth century. [31]

The pre-eminent philosopher during the early part of the nineteenth century was Hegel, who constructed an elaborate and comprehensive philosophy based on the belief that the universe was entirely rational, and comprehensible as such through philosophical speculation. This premise was rejected in some circles and precipitated a "back-to-Kant" movement, in which only what was cognisable in the phenomenal world was considered valid knowledge, and the "things-in-themselves" of the noumenal domain were considered outside the sphere of proper speculation. Karl and Ernst Reinhold, Jacob Friedrich Fries, Ernst Kuno Fischer, F.A. Lange, Friedrich Paulsen, Charles Bernard Renouvier amongst others exemplify this position. Reaction to Hegel extended in another direction as well, where the social implications of his system were considered inadequate

[31] I.M. Bochenski, *Contemporary European Philosophy*, Berekey and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966, p. 8.

or not fully extrapolated. Most notable exponents of the "Hegelians of the left" movement were Ludwig Feurbach and Karl Marx. In moving from the idealism of Hegel to an explicitly materialistic philosophy, Marx reflected one of the philosophical trends by which the claims and assumptions of nineteenth century science were taken as unquestioned givens, and utilised to devise newer and more socially and historically focussed speculative theories.

> Perhaps among the materialisms begun in the nineteenth century it was Marxism that became the leading exponent of such views, because it, more so than the others, took over the impressive Hegelian synthesis of modern thought and presented itself as an outgrowth and improvement upon it. But it no doubt also achieved a position of eminence because of the relevance of its special content to an agonizing social problem which the European industrial development had left wallowing in its wake. [32]

Feurbach's materialist inclinations were further explored and extended by Buchner and Haeckel. As we shall see in looking at nineteenth century scientific thought, materialism as a philosophy more properly expresses a valuation of the empirical orientation.

A number of more personalised eclectic combinations of varying portions of romanticism, idealism, and science attained popularity in the second half of the nineteenth century. Arthur Schopenhauer construed a philosophical system drawing upon Kant and newly accessible translations of Eastern religious texts. Rudolf Hermann Lotze combined romanticism, idealism, and mechanistic theories. Eduard von Hartmann sought to synthesise Hegel and Schopenhauer, and popularised the idea of the unconscious. Victor Cousin attempted to mix Germanic and Cartesian sources. Sir William Hamilton stimulated interest in Kantian ethics and metaphysics. F.H. Bradley utilised materials of German idealism and empiricism. Bernard Bousenquet reaffirmed Hegel's belief in the power of philosophical speculation. Josiah Royce explored the idea that universal consciousness is differentiated into individual selves through the action of the will. These and other explicit or quasi-idealist philosophical positions provided a number of variations on the Kantian and Hegelian schools, and served as feasible intellectual options for those trying to maintain a position in which "spirit" under one guise or another was pre-eminent or superior to "matter."

[32] Harry Prosch, *The Genesis of Twentieth Century Philosophy*, Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1966, p. 340.

> The Idealists were committed to a faith in the cosmic significance of man, to a substantial God, to a future immortality, to a cosmic moral order. During the nineteenth century, the scientific spirit was steadily undermining such a faith. The Idealists were committed to a "transcendent" or supernaturalistic philosophy. But such philosophies were steadily giving way to philosophies based on scientific methods. The Idealists still insisted on escaping into a realm inaccessible to scientific inquiry, despite the fact that enlarged and broadened scientific methods and concepts were making such escape impossible… [33]

As well, an empathetic source of support for the broad idealistic and romantic philosophies came from literary personages who attempted to add explicitly presented philosophical substance to their beliefs. These included Coleridge, Carlyle, Wordsworth, Goethe, Alcott, Emerson and Thoreau amongst others. And a more extreme variation on the theme of the primacy of the subjective, minus the idealistic framework of support, came from proto-existentialist thinkers Fredrich Nietzche and Soren Kierkgaard. Nietzche in fact comes at the end of a line of critics of Hegel, and signifies the dramatic change of orientation that accrued from the earlier to the later part of the nineteenth century.

> Whatever abyss separates Nietzsche's anti-Christian philosophy from Hegel's philosophical theology and his "hammer" from Hegel's "speculation" is bridged by Hegel's pupils through a consequent series of revolts against Christian tradition and bourgeois culture. At the beginning and end of this bridge stand Hegel and Nietzche. [34]

3.5.2 An Overview of Traditional Philosophical Schools and Trends in the Nineteenth Century – Non-Idealist Perspectives

Another philosophical direction was more amicable to the hypothesis that scientific ideas and knowledge could provide a more valid direction to speculative inquiry. The utilitarianism and theory of logic of John Stuart Mill, the pragmatic orientation of William Peirce, F.C.S. Schiller, William James, the early stage of John Dewey's career, the positivist philosophy of Auguste Compte, the evolutionary speculation of Thomas Huxley, Herbert Spencer and John Fiske, and other perspectives represented this non-idealistic outlook. The influence of science on philosophy during the latter half of the nineteenth century in fact changed the very way philosophy was

[33] John Herman Randall Jr., *Philosophy After Darwin,* New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, p. 8.

conducted for many.

> But by 1860 the scientific faith had been established and no longer stood in need of philosophical support and defense. It was now, many came to feel, religious and moral values that needed defense against the "encroachments" of science. The problem of earlier modern philosophy had been to make a mechanistic science "intelligible" in a human and social world—originally in the Aristotelian universe. But the prestige of "science" grew, until by 1860 the problem had become rather to make man and his society and culture intelligible in a mechanistic and scientific universe. [35]

No longer was it a self-sufficient enterprise guided by purely rational and conceptual criteria, but for those abandoning purely idealistic models, philosophy was only legitimised as a technique for articulation of the implications and meaning of scientific knowledge. And as such, it essentially lost status as the more credible and independent source of authoritative knowledge

> Toward the end of the nineteenth century philosophy declined under the heavy hand of positivism. Most philosophers were frightened, perhaps to expound their own thought, with the result that most universities were dominated by a certain historicism, confining themselves to the sheer cataloguing of past doctrines. [36]

3.6.1 An Overview of Science in the Nineteenth Century – Permeation of Materialism

The scientific representation of reality emerged as the dominant worldview by the latter quarter of the nineteenth century. And it was not necessarily only through the theories and statements of scientific innovators and theoreticians themselves that science attained primary legitimacy, but through the efforts of philosophers who articulated, shaped, extrapolated the broadest meaning from the raw material of scientific investigation and hypotheses. For instance, Huxley and Spencer were responsible for popularising and refining the evolutionary theory suggested by Darwin to encompass a broader sphere of historical and social applications. Comte essentially substituted a contrived secular scientism for traditional religious forms. Haeckel, Draper, Vogt, Moleschott, Buchner popularised and expounded variations of the materialist philosophy that emerged as the most publicly identifiable of purely scientific worldviews. The

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[34] Karl Lowith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1967, p. 174.
[35] Randall, op. cit., p. 14.
[36] Bochinski, op. cit., p.22.

opportunity of promulgating the new vision was often treated as a special cause, with full emotional intensity and commitment on the part of those attempting to win converts to the emerging new scientific orthodoxy. And this emerging authoritarian stance was predisposed to treat the entrenched religious position with disdain, acting sanctimoniously towards those unwilling to accept the new gospel of evolutionism as the self-evidently most credible orientation towards reality.

> It is part of Huxley's importance that, together with Haeckel, he brought the man of science as a cultural type into the broader arena of European civilization. The warfare between evolution and orthodoxy created a splendid dramatic opportunity, and with the quick instinct of a man of action Huxley seized it. To the cleric as the benighted and prejudiced defender of a fading superstition, he opposed the scientist, the impersonal investigator who, though somewhat satanically godless and inhumanly detached, is by virtue of his dedication and disciplined devotion to truth in the field of thought, to rectitude in the field of action, and – because truth is power, and in its nineteenth century form rectitude is sympathy – to humanitarian progress in both fields. [37]

Materialism essentially was the logical extreme of an exclusive and narrowly defined empiricism, eventuating in the polar opposite worldview that was represented in traditional Christian expressions. The indestructibility of matter and the conservation of energy were the primary scientific principles that supported a mechanistic view of the cosmos, while evolution by natural selection allowed a mechanistic interpretation of life to be integrated into the scientific worldview.

Naturalism replaced supernaturalism, mechanism replaced divine purpose, matter was absolute, not requiring the hypothesis of soul, and evolution replaced special creation. As a self-sufficient and inclusive worldview, materialism became synonymous with science in its most speculative and authoritative nineteenth century form.

> Science was advancing, filling in the details of the Cartesian and Newtonian program: the results were so impressive that by 1860 they could no longer be disregarded. The fundamental dogmas of the scientific faith now served to organize a vast body of facts that could scarcely be gainsaid. In the nineteenth century they took the form of sweeping generalizations: the conservation of energy, the law of thermodynamics, the method of natural selection in biological evolution, the mechanical theory of life. Above all, there was the dogma of an unyielding mechanistic determinism… The most speculative generalizations …

[37] William Irvine, *Apes, Angels, and Victorians: Darwin, Huxley, and Evolution*, Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1962, p. 117.

> were seized upon after the middle of the century to complete the picture of what was called the "scientific world." Nineteenth century science … still clung to the same fundamental assumptions of a closed mechanical and material order of Nature … With this framework and with these assumptions and dogmas, the backbone of the scientific faith, shaken believers in the older traditions felt that they had to come to terms. [38]

The materialist worldview drew upon the discoveries and theories of the different branches of the sciences, and collectively presented a picture of reality that was speculative and hypothetical, but carried the prestige and legitimacy that religion and philosophy no longer embodied. To critics, it was perceived as demeaning and selective, based upon assumptions and premises that were not necessarily as absolute and sacrosanct as proclaimed by its proponents.

3.6.2 An Overview of Science in the Nineteenth Century – Two Emerging Themes

The kind of pessimistic and accusatory attitude towards materialism shown by detractors was based not only on disagreement with its claims and contents, but with the diminishment and elimination of what were considered spiritual or transcendent realities, pertaining both to the universe and to the subjective self. And in attempting to confront and repudiate the dominant and authoritative materialistic worldview, it was necessary to provide more feasible alternatives while showing justification for rejection of the scientific status quo. The spectrum of dispute for those opposed to the scientific mainstream position encompassed a variety of positions. From militant denials of the basic claims of science, to those aspiring to reach a compromise that incorporated at least some religious values and premises, the intellectual climate of the second half of the nineteenth century was often characterised by polarised tensions

And the rejection of the mainstream status quo applied not only to those ensconced within traditional religious or philosophical circles. Many of those who were dissatisfied with contemporary intellectual currents in general felt opposition to the narrow and restrictive doctrinaire posture of materialism. A variety of alternative cognitive orientations appeared, covering a spectrum of ideas ranging from close association with the prevailing trends to more radical dissociation and reprioritised

[38] Randall, op. cit., p. 12.

options. Two influential trends can be discerned emerging from the post-Darwinian climate, affecting subsequent schools of thought. On the one hand, the idea of progress as an independent belief or sustaining principle. Such movements as social Darwinism, Marxist socialism, and the emerging new liberal theology can be seen to have their roots in the idea of evolutionary progress. This hypothesis was transposed from the biological domain and reassigned to account for a variety of historical and social phenomena. And on the other hand, the valuation of the non-rational spheres of consciousness was a revolt against the dominant scientism and rationalism. In the artistic domain for example, the neo-romantic valuation of intuition, emotion, and the non-rational can be seen as a reaction against what was felt to be dehumanising and reductive in the materialistic worldview. [39] These two themes informed a variety of other alternative cognitive positions to some degree. Perhaps none more so than the initial theosophical stance.

3.7.1 An Overview of Alternative Esoteric Sources of the Nineteenth Century – The Ideas of Progress and the Non-Rational Accessible to Blavatsky

In her efforts at construing a comprehensive alternative worldview, Madame Blavatsky was clearly affected by both streams of ideational influence. She aggressively promoted the legitimacy and importance of non-rational modes of experience while determinedly sticking to a rationally expounded but unorthodox theory of evolutionary progress. The non-rational was primarily evaluated as a domain of supersensory and mystical experience while evolutionary progress was considered to have a spiritual objective as its underlying impetus. However, before discussion of theosophical issues proper, it is important to note that this initiative was not the only minority cognitive position that was grounded upon promotion of unorthodox spiritual and occult beliefs. Other nineteenth century trends and movements also emerged in protest to the religious, philosophical, and scientific worldviews of the nineteenth century. The gravitation towards other directions for quasi-idealist and religious interests took many unconventional alternative forms, in part stimulated by new sources of knowledge as well

[39] See Tim M. Berra, *Evolution and the Myth of Creation,* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990. Christopher Kaiser, *Creation and the History of Science,* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1991. Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe,* Harmondsworth and Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1968.

as by a renewed interest in past minority positions.

> New trends in scholarship were pressed into support of religion; on the one hand, the techniques of the new experimental psychology; on the other hand, the opening to Asian philology and history, such as the translations of Hindu texts (beginning in 1875) by the Oxford professor Max Mueller, an import from German philology seminars. This was the heyday of séances and spirit-callings, of Madame Blavatsky (who founded the Theosophical Society in 1875) and Annie Besant (the Theosophical leader in the 1890s). In 1882 Sedgwick and F.W.H. Meyers, a psychologist and fellow Trinity man, founded the Society for Psychic Research, seeking scientific evidence of the survival of bodily death… [40]

Madame Blavatsky did not work in an intellectual vacuum. In fact, a consistent theme of hers was that she was merely articulating and synthesising selected elements from this larger and enduring "wisdom tradition." Her particular ideational construction however, was not the only attempt to claim this pedigree and use it for legitimating authority. Many of the nineteenth century occult, mystical, mythological, conceptual, historical, speculative ideas, themes, and materials were part of a minority cognitive perspective. Many proponents of specific belief systems claimed continuity with traditions dating back to ancient Egyptian, Neoplatonic, Gnostic, and "mystery schools of antiquity," passed on through Medieval and Renaissance mystical, alchemical, hermetic, cabbalistic, magical, astrological, and other similar positions into their more contemporary forms. This has more recently been termed the "esoteric worldview" by Faivre, Hanegraaff, and others. Faivre for instance, though noting the roots of Western esotericism in antiquity, considers the Renaissance as the defining historical starting point because of the separation of the sciences of nature from theology.

> From then until the present, a vast field is constituted, comprised of fundamental characteristics (or components) selected from a multiform historical corpus… On the one hand, are presented three rivers, the three "traditional sciences," which do not seem to belong to any epoch in particular: alchemy, astrology, magic (in the Renaissance sense of *magia*), generally linked to some kind of arithmosophy … On the other hand, there are a certain number of streams that have hollowed out their bed at relatively determinable moments (often starting with a founder's text). These are in no way alien to the three large rivers because all this is intermingled. From the end of the fifteenth century on these streams are the Christian Kabbalah (an adaptation of the Jewish Kabbalah), neo-Alexandrian Hermetism, discourses inspired by the idea of *philosophia perennis* and of the "primordial Tradition," the

[40] Randall Collins, *The Sociology of Philosophies*, Cambridge, MA. And London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 669.

> philosophy of nature of the Paracelsian variety, then the Romantic (partly German) *Naturphilosophic*; from the seventeenth century on, theosophy and Rosicrucianism (both Germanic at first), as well as the later associations (initiatory societies more or less inscribed in the wake of the former).
> We might have believed that these rivers and streams would disappear after the Renaissance. But when the great epistemological break of the seventeenth century occurred, they survived, and the scientism of the nineteenth century did not cause them to dry up. [41]

Not all movements, philosophies, theoretical constructs, necessarily expressed absolute conformity or consistency, or covered the exact same ground, but enough common principles and values have been discerned to consider them representative of a distinctive minority mindset. Hanegraaff expands upon Faivre's delineation by noting that the post-Enlightenment intellectual atmosphere of the nineteenth century, dominated by secularisation, further shaped and determined the forms of esotericism.

> The impact of Western processes of rationalization and secularisation … is of an importance which can scarcely be overestimated… it represents *the* decisive watershed in the history of western esotericism. The survival of esotericism under the conditions of post-Enlightenment processes of secularisation produced new and unprecedented phenomena… in spite of their diversity, they have emerged essentially from two broad movements, both of which are rooted in the late 18th century and have flourished in the 19th. The first of these is *Romanticism*: a movement with deep roots in the esoteric tradition, but shaped decisively by the Enlightenment and, especially, the Counter-Enlightenment. The second is most properly referred to as *occultism* … Both movements … can be defined as the products of a clash of worldviews. Romanticism emerged from a momentous event: The reinterpretation of esoteric cosmology under the impact of the new evolutionism. This changed the nature of esotericism forever, but left the internal consistency of its worldview essentially intact. Occultism, in contrast, came into existence when the esoteric cosmology (based on universal correspondences) increasingly came to be understood in terms of the new scientific cosmologies (based on instrumental causality). As a result, the internally consistent worldview of traditional esotericism gave way to an unstable mixture of logically incompatible elements. In both streams (and in the various hybrid combinations that emerged) traditional esoteric ideas and concepts continued to be used under the new conditions but, since meaning and function depend on context, they inevitably underwent subtle but important changes. [42]

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[41] Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, Albany, New York: State University Press of New York, 1994, p. 8.
[42] Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998, pp. 406–407.

It was these new conditions of a secularised and scientifically dominated worldview that shaped the hybrid appearance of theosophy as expounded by Madame Blavatsky. Yet her construction was not the only esoteric manifestation. *In The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Joscelyn Godwin traces the emergence of various esoteric movements and innovators from the period of the Enlightenment through the nineteenth century, of both the romantic and the occult persuasions, emphasising that the intellectual climate was ripe for the fermentation of alternative minority cognitive positions that prioritised spiritual and occult values above the dominant traditional religious, philosophical, and scientific outlooks.

3.7.2 An Overview of Alternative Esoteric Sources of the Nineteenth Century – Western Influences

He begins by noting that one of the new minor streams of non-conventional thought was directed towards a radical reinterpretation of religious and mythological materials. Two specific themes are identified by which all such data was believed to be capable of reduction to a single cause. These were phallic and solar worship. Leading proponents of the idea that world myths, legends, religious symbols derive from worship of the generative powers included Richard Payne Knight (1751–1824), Sir William Hamilton (1730–1803), Pierre Francois Hughes, known as "Baron d'Hancarville" (1719 or 1729–1805), Charles Townley (1737–1805), Antoine Court de Gebelin, Charles Dupuis, Sir William Jones (1746–1794), Henry O'Brien (1808–1835), John Davenport (1789–1877), Captain Edward Sellon (1817 or 1818–1866), Thomas Inman, Hargrave Jennings (1817?– 1890). As well as expounding a controversial and unorthodox theory, a common anti-traditionalism and cynicism towards Christianity was a prevailing sentiment.

The other main reductive theory was the belief that all religious and mythological materials derive from a worship of nature, with the sun considered the primary symbolic object of worship. Leading theoreticians of this school included Francois Dupuis (1742–1809), Constantin Francois de Volney (1757–1820), and Sir William Drummond (1770?–1828). As well, besides proposing a disputable and controversial theory, the prevailing attitude was also anti-Christian and non-traditional.

In addition to as these two lines of alternative speculation, many other distinctive approaches to an esoteric worldview can be discerned. Samson Arnold Mackey (1765–1843), influenced by Hindu mythology devised an elaborate mythical cosmology based on the changing conditions of the earths shifting axis. Godfrey Higgins (1772 – 1833), most explicitly in his *Anacalypsis* constructed a complex worldview called "*the Mythos*," that prefigured a number of theosophical theories. Most notably, it proposed the belief in cosmic cycles with their own subsequent emanations of gods, races, civilizations, individuals, and spiritual avatars. Catastrophic natural disasters were thought to be the cause of the destruction of past civilizations, and new cycles were believed to commence every 6,007 years. The early nineteenth century was considered to be the ending of the Piscean era and the start of the Aquarian cycle.

Another stream of minority cognitive influence came from the input of diverse magicians, seers, and secret organizations. Samuel Falk (1710–1782), Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), Cagliostro (1743–1795), Philip James de Loutherbourg (1740–1812), Manoah Sibly (1757–1840), Ebenezer Sibly (1751–1799), General Charles R. Rainsford (1728–1809), and Francis Barrett amongst others contributed to the valuation of the non-rational, the magical, and the occult. Barrett's main work, *The Magus or Celestial Intelligencer* (1801) was a popular literary production. Though largely drawn from seventeenth century writings of Henry Cornelius Agrippa, J.B.van Helmont, Peter of Abano, and Giambattista Porta, it present to the public a compendium of occult ideas and techniques.

> For all that Barrett misrepresented his material, *The Magus* did offer the public a fairly complete occult manual, which taught the principles of arithmology and correspondences, planetary and Kabbalistic magic, and scrying technique. A series of potted biographies of great magicians complete the work. There was stuff aplenty there for aspiring magi, as well as for the gothic novelists who were part of the same reaction against classicism and pure reason. [43]

As well, Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875), a gifted spiritualist medium, healer, orator, made a notable impact through his travelling lectures, teachings, books, and remedies. And the afore mentioned Hargrave Jennings, interpreter of Buddhist thought, enthusiast of Gnostic teachings, theorist of sexual symbolism, and later expounder of

[43] Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, Albany, New York: State University of New York

Christian pietism, also was a charismatic and influential figure.

In addition to the transmission by charismatic individuals, a number of secret societies maintained continuity of portions of esoteric teachings. Those mostly were forms of, or derived from, different variants of Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry. "Fellows of the Rosy Cross," "The Golden and Rosy Cross," "The Asiatic Brethren," "The S.R.I.A." (or, "Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia"), "The "Orphic Circle," (the predecessor to "The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn"), "The Sat B'hai", "The Rite of Swedenborg", "The Brotherhood of the Mystic Cross", "The Brotherhood of Light", "The Society of Eight", "The Hermetic Order of Egypt," and a variety of other orders and organisations helped perpetuate esoteric and occult themes and information. An immediate precursor of the Theosophical Society was "The Brotherhood of Luxor," from which its rival, "The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor" originated. The underlying worldview common to this orientation was alluded to in the popular novel *Zanoni* (1842) by Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1873). Lytton was thought to have been familiar with a number of these organisations and to have drawn his knowledge from such acquaintance. The worldview itself can be seen to reflect the general kind of perspective common to Western esoteric thought.

> The novel is an encyclopedia of ideas about the occult sciences … Herbalism is mentioned reverently, along with the general value of research into the mysteries of nature. The doctrines of universal sympathy, of secret affinities in nature, and of hierarchal planes of being permeated by an omnipresent Mind are essential to *Zanoni,* as to any Hermetically influenced work. The multiple planes include those that can only be explored out of the physical body. Therefore ascesis is necessary to the aspirant, refusing the demands of the flesh in order to live in the soul and work with the imagination. The artist can do this as well as the mystic; a Platonic subtheme of *Zanoni* is the sacred nature of art, if only inspired by the Ideal. [44]

Another common theme of many of these organisations too, was belief in the presence of "unknown Superiors" of supreme spiritual status, usually located in exotic or inaccessible locales, who were the inspiring and directing forces of the movements from behind-the-scenes. The influence on Blavatsky and other similarly focussed empathisers in later nineteenth century was significant.

Press, 1994, p. 119.
[44] Ibid., p. 126.

It was Bulwer-Lytton who made the idea of occultism fashionable in England. [45]

As Hanegraaf noted, one of the streams of esoteric interest came from the romantic artistic tradition. William Blake, as well as Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), John Flaxman, (1755-1826), Richard Cosway (1740-1821), Samuel Palmer, and John Varley (1788-1842) were painters who shared interests in occult, astrological and mystical subjects.

Another set of influences came from more practically applicable phases of the occult arts. On the one hand, the influence of John Smith, John Cornfield, Henry Andrews, James Wilson, Robert Cross Smith (known as "Raphael"), and John Palmer was felt through a mixture of discussion on practical astrology, divination, magical practices, alchemy, and other occult topics. Magazines such as *The Straggling Astrologer, Urania, The Astrologer of the Nineteenth Century* helped disseminate interest in these areas to a wider public.

And the revival and advancement of the theory animal magnetism through the works of Franz Mesmer (1734-1815) led to the methods of hypnosis and the idea of the subconscious mind. The interest in "magnetic healing" spread belief in the subtle powers of nature and the theory of correspondences. As well, the experiments in 1784 of the Marquis de Puysegur and his brother Count Maxime with somnambulism brought awareness that lucid states of consciousness, some pertaining to supersensory knowledge, could be induced. Medical success in many instances of the healing use of mesmerism brought a degree of public respectability. As well, recognition that unusual states of consciousness could be induced on mesmerised patients led to further metaphysical speculation. J.C. Colquhoun published *Isis Revelata: An Inquiry into the origin, progress, and present state of animal magnetism* in 1836, the same year that Higgins's *Anacalypsis* appeared. Both use the analogy of revealing secret truth from Isis, the Egyptian goddess of nature. Obviously these were precedents for Blavatsky's title and themes in *Isis Unveiled,* still over forty years away. Colquhoun noted six distinct stages of consciousness. These included the waking state; half sleep; magnetic sleep; somnambulism; clairvoyance; and lucid vision. Other proponents included Chauncey Hare Townshend, Baron Jules Dupotet de Sennevoy (1798-1881), John Elliotsen (1791-

[45] Colin Wilson, *The Occult*, New York: Vintage Books, 1973, p. 328.

1868), Alexis Didier, Heinrich Jung-Stilling (1740-1817), Friederike Hauffe (1801-1829), Philip Henry, Fourth Earl of Stanhope (1781-1855). Though leaving a legitimate medical and esoteric legacy, a certain quotient of political intrigue surrounded a number of mesmerist figures.

Another occult based practice was scrying, or divination through the use of crystal. This practice was incorporated into the routines of many of the aforementioned individuals, as well as some more specialised exponents. Frederick Hockley (1808-1885), Richard James Morrison (1795-1874), writing under the name of "Zadkiel," William Gregory (1803-1858), Kenneth R.H. Mackenzie (1833-1886) were the most notable. The importance of this technique was that it provided another means of engaging in visionary and dissociated states of consciousness.

A major component of the alternative cognitive nexus of viewpoints and beliefs was the emergence of spiritualism. [46] Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott, the two founders of the Theosophical Society met in Vermont in 1874 while investigating the alleged psychic phenomena surrounding the Eddy Brothers, who were representative mediumistic figures within the spiritualist environment. The spiritualist movement itself has been traced to March 1848 in Hydesville New York, where the Fox sisters were believed to be mediums for presumed post-mortem communication via mysterious "raps." As well, a variety of other inexplicable phenomena, such as apparitions, spontaneous acts of levitation, phantom voices and sounds, "ectoplasmic" materialisations and so on characterised such scenarios. The implications of the spiritualist phenomena were explicated in quasi-religious and philosophical terminology, most closely resembling traditional Christian frames of reference. The dominant message was that the death does not destroy the individual personality, and that a more ethereal though familiar mode of subsistence endures after death, including the potential to communicate with chosen members of the living.

> The new religion could have been designed on Madison Avenue. It offered evidence of immortality, direct contact with the departed—even pets—and required nothing in the way of intelligence or moral effort…For hundreds of thousands who had hitherto doubted the immortality of the soul, the new religion

[46] For a succinct account of the early Spiritualist movement, see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth Century America*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001, pp. 10–31.

> offered a grand vista of eternal progress, combined with loving care for those left on earth. "Modern" Christians far preferred this to the prospect of resting in unconscious limbo until the last Judgment dispatched them to eternal Heaven or Hell. In this respect it was an exoteric revelation of attitudes long held among Christian esotericism. Moreover, it was not just a doctrine, but a path to the most moving experience that most people ever had: the apparent communication with their departed loved ones. [47]

The proliferation of mediums and alleged proofs of authentic psychic communication grew enormously after the first public disclosures on such unfolding phenomena. And though a large percentage of the claims were discovered to be fraudulent, suspicious, or ambiguous, enough conviction remained for many that authentic experiences had in fact occurred. Amongst the more credible mediums were Mrs. Hayden, Allan Kardec, David Dunglas Home (1833-1886), Emma Hardinge Britten (1823-1899), Stainton Moses (1839-1892). Amongst exponents of spiritualist worldviews, Britten provided a thorough and comprehensive system.

> In Emma's synthesis, spiritualism becomes a complete religion, with a cosmology and an eschatology, a version of world history able to explain all myths and religions, a devotional practice in the form of a sort of Unitarian prayer and a social or socialist program for this world. [48]

Britten and Moses as well as Lady Caithness in fact expounded beliefs quite compatible with those of Blavatsky. And all were acquainted with her, with both periods of solidarity and episodes of recrimination and hostility. Some of the common ideas included belief that all religions emerged from the same ancient source, most likely India; the Bible and the life of Christ must be interpreted symbolically; the human soul descends from a divine source; the universe is multi-dimensional with a hierarchy of intelligences and beings; spiritual progress can be achieved through dedication and proper actions towards that end; a new age or cycle was immanent. A major difference was that Blavatsky vehemently rejected a primarily Christian frame of reference while many other spiritualists tried to emphasise compatibility to Christian ideas, conceived more in spiritualistic terms. [49]

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[47] Godwin, op. cit., p.188.
[48] Ibid., pp. 203–204.
[49] See Godwin, op. cit., for more extensive historical and biographical discussion of these and other significant personae of the Spiritualist, Eastern and occult traditions prior to, and contemporaneous with,

A number of other esoteric Christian systems appeared as well, within which a variety of occult and mystical themes were represented primarily in the language and symbolism of Christianity. One such trend was the school of thought based upon a revival of the ideas of Jacob Boehme. James Pierrepont Greaves (1777-1842) founded a circle based on Boehme's beliefs, with a prioritisation of attending to the "inner voice," and rediscovering the inner divine nature of man. His influence fell to Thomas South (1785-1855) and his daughter Mary Ann South (1817-1910), who later became Mrs. Atwood after marriage to a Reverend Atwood, and expressed an initial interest in theosophy, and then recanted that decision. Other members of this movement included Ann Judith Brown (1825-1893), Christopher Walton (1809-1877), and Robert Alfred Vaughan (1823-1857). Others who combined a priority of Christian esotericism and mysticism in addition to an active participation in the early Theosophical Society included C.C. Massey (1838-1905), Isabel de Steiger (1836-1927), and notably, Anna Kingsford (1846-1888), and her close associate Edward Maitland (1824-1897). Kingsford was a visionary who believed she was revealing the doctrines appropriate for ushering in the new age. Her beliefs were primarily expressed in esoteric Christian terms, but included many common occult beliefs, such as the symbolic meaning of religious and mythological data, the immortality of the human soul, a universe with a plurality of planes and beings, the approaching end of a cosmological cycle, and so on. A major priority in her thinking was the elevation of moral behaviour, especially in the treatment accorded animals. And upon discovering that Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* covered similar ground, she subsequently became an acquaintance of Blavatsky and an influence on a number of Theosophical Society members.

Kingsford and Maitland, after finding the Theosophical Society less amicable to their own esoteric perspective, founded the Hermetic Society in 1884, an explicit effort to organisationally differentiate between a primarily Western esotericism and the Eastern influenced Theosophical Society. The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor, founded by Max Theon, Peter Davidson and Thomas Burgoyne and the Hermetic Order of the Golden

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the foundation and establishment of the theosophical movement. In addition, historical and philosophical analyses of many of these groups and their teachings can be found in Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman ed. *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, New York: Crossroad, 1992.

Dawn, founded by William Wynn Westcott, William R. Woodman and Samuel L. McGregor Mathers also appeared as alternatives to the Theosophical Society, emphasising Western occult ideas and a focus on practical instructions. In response, the Theosophical Society created an "Esoteric Section" in 1888 (at first led by Blavatsky herself) to combat defections and provide more practical advice and knowledge. The desertion from theosophical ranks (at least in part) because of the perceived shift to a more Eastern flavoured form of doctrine also included Dr. Franz Hartmann (1838-1912), Rudolph Steiner (1816-1925), Papus (Gerard Encause, 1865-1916), and A.E. Waite, amongst other previous members or sympathisers.

3.7.3 An Overview of Alternative Esoteric Sources of the Nineteenth Century – Eastern Influences

The influence of Eastern religious and philosophical ideas and traditions was at least an equally significant component of the theosophical worldview as the streams of Western esoteric, occult, fringe-scientific, and mystical materials. During the nineteenth century, much that had been previously unknown or inaccessible about Hindu and Buddhist thought gradually became open to Western inquiries, providing a rich source of alternative ideational content for those unhappy with conventional Western perspectives. The publication of an essay entitled *on the gods of Greece, Italy and India* in 1778 by Sir William Jones (1746-1794) in the first volume of the *Asiatic Researches* showed comparative similarities between the gods of the different cultures. The beginning of a more systematic and scholarly understanding of Indian thought began to build upon the seventeenth century fascination with Chinese culture and the Romantic interest in Persia. The first translation into English of the *Bhagavad-Gita* in 1785 by Charles Wilkins of the East India Company and the first Governor General of India, Warren Hastings, revealed Indian literary and theological qualities previously unanticipated by the West. Soon a stream of French and German philologists and scholars continued the work of translation of Hindu religious texts, and explication of the complexities of beliefs and practices. Max Mueller's translations of *The Sacred Books of the East* became a popular source of Western information later in the nineteenth century.

And from the other side, some significant Hindus acclimatised themselves with

Western thought and traditions and attempted to present Indian thought in terms more accessible to Westerners. Rammohun Roy (1772-1833), primarily interested in social and political causes, translated texts from the Vedanta and Upanishads, showing that similarities existed in all religions. In 1828 he founded the Brahmo Samaj, to promote broad religious solidarity and common social virtues. He in particular was a figure praised by Blavatsky. In 1868 Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884) continued in this tradition, founding the Brahmo Samaj of India in 1868. He though was a "bhakta," a practitioner of devotion based religious belief and practice, and was less concerned with social reform. From his perspective, he found points of empathy with Christianity, particularly with the person of Jesus. In 1875 he met another bhakta, Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836-1886), who was more charismatic, and attracted more followers. One of the supporters was the even more religiously eclectic Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), who founded the Ramakrishna Mission and Order, and was their representative at the 1893 Chicago Parliament of Religions, where he attracted much attention.[50] More specifically of importance to the theosophical movement was Damodar Thackersey, who put Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott in contact with Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1882), the founder of a powerful and influential Hindu reform movement in 1875, the Arya Samaj. His belief system was based on a strict monotheism derived from the authority of the Vedas as the sole revealed scripture, and engendered a consequent distrust of other religions. As well, his lasting influence as a social reformer and defender of Indian culture extended into the twentieth century in the form of the Indian National Congress and the movement towards Indian independence. Blavatsky and Olcott had anticipated a working arrangement between the Theosophical Society and the Arya Samaj on relocating to India in 1879. However, disillusionment on both sides quickly set in and the connection was dropped.

The transmission of Buddhist thought and tradition in the nineteenth century also was significant in providing another alternative source of unfamiliar ideas to the West. Blavatsky, Olcott, and other theosophists took the five vows of Buddhism (Pansil) and considered themselves Buddhists. The permeation of information in the West about

[50] See Richard Hughes Seager, ed. *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices From the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893*, La Salle: Open Court, 1993.

Buddhism was more problematic than it was with Hindu thought, largely because of the divisions in Buddhist tradition and the different interpretations of many key beliefs. Early information appeared in 1799 in the *Asiatic Researches* when a physician, Francis Buchanan, published information he had obtained from treatises supplied to him from a priest on Rangoon. The dilemma of incorporating the Buddhist pantheon of gods into the framework of other mythologies proved problematic, as did the explanation of the meaning of the term "nirvana." In 1801a story by Mr. Joinville, Surveyor General entitled *On the Religion and Manners of the People of Ceylon* appeared, which also was ambivalent about the nature of Buddhism. In 1810 Edward Moor wrote *The Hindu Pantheon*, and admitted he had trouble distinguishing between Hindu and Buddhist tenets. And more confusion was sown in 1828 when a civil servant, B.H. Hodgson wrote *Notice of the languages, literature and religion of the Bauddhas of Nepal and Bhot*. The introduction of Mahayana Buddhist materials to go along with previously discovered Theravada themes brought confusion to Westerners attempting to gain full understanding of Buddhist theories of nirvana, God, the soul, reincarnation, and so forth. Scholars like Barthelemy, Saint Hillaire and Mueller followed the logic of assuming that the ultimate goal of Buddhist strivings was for "annihilation." And yet the contrast between the apparently atheistic Theravada school, and the multidimensional hierarchy of gods of Mahayana Buddhism engendered Western uncertainty.

In 1871, the publication of *The Wheel of the Law* by Henry Alabaster, interpreter to the Siamese Consul General, of the thoughts of Siamese nobleman Chao Phya Thipakon, had helped clarify and correct the most disturbing issues and present an account more comprehensible in Western terms. And when Edwin Arnold's poem *The Light of Asia* appeared in 1875, a more easily assimilated overview was provided to the Western public. The influence of the "Pure Land" form of Buddhism popular in China and Japan was also felt in California, where visiting priests to small Buddhist centres helped stimulate interest. Apparently Madame Blavatsky entertained one such priest in 1877, who presented a view of nirvana as a reunion of the spirit with God, diametrically different than the presumption of personal annihilation. As well, despite publicly stating that she had spent time in Tibet, there was nothing in *Isis Unveiled* that revealed profound insight or unique knowledge about Buddhism itself. However, Blavatsky and Olcott

became acquainted with Peary Chand Mitra (1814-1883), a spiritualist and medium who presented Buddhism as a mystic endeavour. Blavatsky's most notable early connection to Buddhist tradition was through the Theravada school, in the person of H. Sumangala Unnanse (1827-1911), a high priest of a temple on Ceylon, who encouraged them to formally take Buddhist vows. Olcott later spent much of his career encouraging Buddhists in Ceylon to assert their own religion against the efforts of colonisers and missionaries. The influence of Buddhism on early theosophical thought was to emphasise that the idea of a personal god was misleading and counterproductive. Later Mahayana influence provided belief in the option of Bodhisattva compassion as the preferred ethical consequence of the realisation of nirvana. And fundamental Eastern concepts of both Hinduism and Buddhism, like reincarnation, karma, cosmic cycles, avatars, multiple planes of existence, etc. provided crucial ideational material that was incorporated into the total system of belief and thought.

The nineteenth century was a time when the dominant religious, philosophical, and scientific worldviews were confronted by new contents of knowledge, a changing social and political climate, increasing secularisation and mechanisation. With the ascendancy of the empirical and scientific framework in its most seemingly menacing materialistic form, the realm of values and spiritual concerns that had been most familiarly represented by religious and philosophical traditions became less secure and workable for those threatened or troubled by this process.

The theosophical enterprise drew from these sources when formulating and articulating its own unique synthesis. However, to attempt to attain widespread public acknowledgment as a preferable option, the three dominant majority frameworks of knowledge had to be challenged and measured by the criteria of the esoteric tradition, and proven less efficacious, legitimate, and satisfying. The theosophical equivalents of what commonly was considered the authentic truth of religion, philosophy, and science had to be publicly proposed and argumentatively justified. We now will examine representative examples of how Madame Blavatsky compared her versions of these categories of knowledge to those commonly held and socially prevalent in her era.