

7 Masters and Disciples, or: How to Transfer Knowledge

In Religious Studies, master/disciple relations have often been discussed in strict opposition to teacher-student relations, following the definitions of Joachim Wach and Max Weber, both of whom based their ideas on observations about the George-Kreis, albeit drawing very different conclusions from it.¹³⁵ Teacher-student relationships were understood as being less hierarchical and the disciple was held to be much more devoted to the master than the student is to the teacher.¹³⁶ The “master” is identified as one who has already perfected him- (or her-) self, and the “disciple” is one who wants to submit him- (or her-) self to this path of perfection. This submission to the path of perfection includes the idea of the possibility of an “improved” life.¹³⁷ This view fits well with the Theosophical master narrative and is also a well-known narrative in the wider field of “esotericism.” It is no coincidence that Faivre identifies “mediation” as one of the characteristics of what he termed “Western esotericism.” Faivre explains that the idea of “correspondences” implies that there are analogies between the human body and the cosmos and that analogous parts “correspond” with, and thus are connected to, each other. In his view, “esoteric” groups often claim to be “transmitters” between these spheres. The training of “imagination,” which is understood by Faivre as the tool by which the higher spheres of being are accessed, is often the purpose of the “esoteric” groups, on his view. Although his essentialist definition of “esotericism” must be dismissed (see also Chapter 2), Faivre identifies an important feature of what is discussed here as the master/disciple relationship. He also points towards a discrepancy between the path of mediation and gnosis. In his view, gnosis is usually not sought after by “esotericists” but “prefers to sojourn on Jacob’s ladder where angels (and doubtless other entities as well) climb up and down, rather than to climb to the top and beyond.”¹³⁸ This view is only partly applicable to Annie

135 Almut-Barbara Renger, „Der „Meister“: Begriff, Akteur, Narrativ,“ in Renger, *Meister und Schüler in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 39–44.

136 Renger identifies Wach as the first to popularize this dichotomy between master/disciple and teacher/student relations. In his work, so Renger explains, Wach connected the “master” to the early Christian communities (Stifterreligionen) and to charismatic personalities. This was received and unquestioningly repeated by Mensching and Goldhammer and became the master narrative in Religious Studies. Renger, „Der „Meister“,“ 20.

137 Renger, „Der „Meister“,“ 22.

138 Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 12–13.

Besant's concept of the "Quickening of Evolution," the aim of which is to "climb to the top" but renounce the beyond for the common good. However, this is only a temporary renunciation since once all humans have evolved "enough" they will collectively move "beyond." The position is even more complex in the wider Theosophical context because there are numerous additional cycles yet to come in which "new" evolutions will take place. It is not the scope of this book to discuss the Theosophical debates about "evolution," although some subtleties of these ideas will be discussed below. As Baier notes, the Theosophical Society presented itself as an institution in which a path is provided by which one will become an accepted chela and eventually be initiated and achieve higher knowledge. As he maintains, the major problem was that suitable teachers for this program were lacking.¹³⁹ The point is that the Theosophical Society can be understood as a mediator, and the master narrative and the Theosophical educational endeavors as integral parts of the mediating function claimed by the Society. Against this background, Besant's "Quickening of Evolution" can be understood as an attempt to provide an actual path towards this goal. It is for this reason that I argue, like Renger, for both a conceptual and a practical continuity between master/disciple relations and teacher/student relations. The Theosophical school system can be understood as an institutionalized reflection of the Mahatma/chela relation that manifests it in the form of teacher/student relationships.

A fundamental question is whether, and if so how, master/disciple and teacher/student relationships can be understood as structurally similar and in what way they differ from each other. The same question is of great importance if one considers whether Guru-śiṣya relationships are comparable to master/disciple, teacher/student, and Mahatma/chela relationships. This is one of the fundamental questions with which this book is concerned and is closely linked to its theoretical foundations. In line with the theoretical considerations set out in Chapter 4, I argue that in the case of the Theosophical Society we encounter a hybrid idea of master/disciple relations in which we can identify several modes of hybridization by looking for traces which point towards the results of these processes.

This chapter provides an important background against which such "traces" can be identified in the broader field of master/disciple relationships as they appear in a wide range of non-Theosophical contexts. Renger holds that similar characteristics can be identified in the "Western" idea of the "master" and in that of other "specialists" found in almost any other (religious) tradition around

139 Baier, *Meditation und Moderne*, 305.

the globe. Likewise, she claims that the roles and functions of these specialists varied widely.¹⁴⁰ A major difficulty with this claim is that the word “master” is adapted to various traditions. In addition, the exchange processes between “Western” and “Eastern” “esotericists” are complex and multifaceted, as should become clear to even a casual reader of this book (see especially the example of Shastree’s article, in which he propounds the idea in connection to Advaita Vedānta; Chapter 10.6). It is, however, striking both that and how the idea of the “masters” was translated into the “Hinduism” and “Buddhism” employed in the Theosophical Society. Simultaneously, the term “Mahatma,” with its altered relation to the idea of the “masters,” was retranslated into Theosophy. The Theosophical narrative about masters emerges, in part at least, from encounters with several specific traditions. In the following, freemasonry will be discussed as one such tradition. These examples will point to possible traces of hybridization processes and the contexts in which they took place. At the current stage of research, these hybridization processes cannot be described in more depth, but it seems plausible that they developed along structurally analogous lines to those as those that are described for the stages of initiation in Chapters 9–13.

7.1 The Master Narrative in the Theosophical Society: From Exclusiveness to the “Quickening of Evolution”

The narrative of the masters played a crucial role in the Theosophical Society.¹⁴¹ Most recently, Harlass has discussed the role of the Theosophical masters in the writings of A. P. Sinnett. He convincingly shows that the shift from “Western” adepts to “Eastern” Mahatmas took place in the period between Sinnett’s two main works, *The Occult World* and *Esoteric Buddhism*. One central argument is that the opposition between “Hindu spirituality” and “Western materialism,” and the knowledge of Sanskrit as a tool for accessing the occult knowledge in the Indian scriptures was key to that shift. Harlass further shows that the evolutionary argumentation about the adepts was also developed in this period and found its focalization in *Esoteric Buddhism*. Harlass’ argument is highly relevant and

¹⁴⁰ Renger, „Der „Meister“,“ 19.

¹⁴¹ See, e.g., Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 277–351; James B. French, “The Theosophical Masters: An Investigation into the Conceptual Domains of H.P. Blavatsky and C.W. Leadbeater” (A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Department of Religion Studies, University of Sydney, August 2000); K. Paul Johnson, *Initiates of Theosophical Masters*, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

plausible, as is his claim that the actual historical situations in the “West” and in India played crucial roles in the shaping of the discourse on the Mahatmas.¹⁴²

However, what is absent here is any research on the actual relationship of masters to their disciples in the Theosophical Society. In the case of the adepts of the “Great White Brotherhood,”¹⁴³ the relationship came about via several techniques. Best known are the “Mahatma letters.”¹⁴⁴ Several leading Theosophists received such letters in which the Mahatmas taught their teachings and gave advice or orders.¹⁴⁵ Whereas in the early days of the Theosophical Society the adepts seem to have been in some cases actual historical persons, it gradually became more common to see them as inaccessible mythological figures, a status that was finally fixed in the post-Blavatskyan era.¹⁴⁶ This development was reinforced by the fact that no further Mahatma letters were received after Blavatsky’s death, other than the disputed examples that Quan Judge used to try to secure his leadership of the Society. Judge’s claim to have received these letters was contested by Besant, who argued that they were forgeries made by Judge himself.¹⁴⁷ The movement towards seeing the Mahatmas as inaccessible went hand in hand with a

142 Harlass, “Die orientalische Wende der Theosophischen Gesellschaft,” 113–57.

143 The term “Great White Brotherhood” is sometimes used by Besant (Annie Besant, *Evolution of Life and Form: Four Lectures Delivered at the Twenty-Third Anniversary Meeting of the Theosophical Society at Adyar, Madras, 1898*, 2nd ed. (London, Benares: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1900), 35–36), although usually she and most other Theosophists simply refer to “the brotherhood” or the “adepts/Mahatmas.” The idea and the usage of the term “brotherhood” is, of course, not exclusive to the Theosophical Society and had several forerunners. See Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 280–350; Goodrick-Clarke, “Western Esoteric Traditions and Theosophy,” 278.

144 The question of what these are and how they were “materialized” was often discussed. In the Theosophical narrative, the letters were messages from the masters of the brotherhood which contained their authentic teachings (see, e.g., Blavatsky, *The Key to Theosophy*, 295–96). In the scholarship, the question often remains unanswered (Godwin, “Blavatsky and the First Generation of Theosophy,” 23). In my opinion, it is more important to understand what their function and their content was. What is most widely known about the letters is that they were the basis for Sinnett’s most famous writings, but they also encompassed most of Blavatsky’s early teachings. Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 329.

145 Several series of letters were received which expressed different aspects of the Theosophical, mostly Blavatskyan, doctrine. In some cases, they are even in opposition to each other and refer to ideas from different cultures, especially the 19th century imagination of Egyptian culture in the first series of letters (see Goodrick-Clarke, “Western Esoteric Traditions and Theosophy,” 275) although the later series included Buddhist and Hindu ideas as well. Goodrick-Clarke, “Western Esoteric Traditions and Theosophy,” 289–90.

146 Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 366.

147 Wessinger Lowman, “The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar),” 45.

redefinition of what it was to be a Mahatma. These figures became increasingly understood as highly evolved and advanced humans whose knowledge and status as teachers was attached to the stage of evolution they were thought to have reached.¹⁴⁸ Their evolutionary position likewise points towards what I call the “Master Paradox.” This is the apparently irreconcilable difference between achieving higher knowledge through evolution and the educational approach, which involves the gradual discovery of truth. The two epistemologies that emerge from these approaches are both included in the notion of the “Quickening of Evolution,” corresponding, respectively, to the preliminary preparations and the stages of initiation (see Chapter 8, below). Claims of the first type are based on education, practical advice, and morality, while those belonging to the second type are based on an understanding of the cosmic principles as they are grasped by the individual’s higher faculties. One could argue that there is a qualitative difference between chelas and adepts, but that this difference can be bridged by initiation. Such a view is structurally analogous to that discussed above concerning the competing positions regarding the general drift of evolution and the possibility of bridging the qualitative difference between animals and men (see Chapter 6.7). Using the terminology developed in Chapter 4 can help us identify the Theosophical Society as the structure which connects these spaces. Or, to put it another way, the Theosophical Society is the mediator between the worldly realms and the spiritual realms.

The idea of the Mahatmas as evolutionarily highly advanced “Orientals” first appears in Sinnett’s writings¹⁴⁹ and develops into a standardized narrative through Besant’s writings.¹⁵⁰ In opposition to what Harlass identifies as the monopoly of the teaching of the Mahatmas¹⁵¹ in Sinnett’s writings, which is closely linked to the de facto impossibility of ever reaching the evolutionary status of a Mahatma, Besant provides practical advice connected to a program of self-improvement, the “Quickening of Evolution,” which reevaluates the teaching monopoly of the Mahatmas. Although the asymmetry remains between the claim that the Mahatmas are highly developed human beings who went through numerous, almost innumerable, reincarnations, and the possibility of reach that stage of evolution, the “Quickening of Evolution” provides a way of becoming a *jīvanmukta*. This is illustrated in *In the Outer Court* with the metaphor of the mountain and the idea of “the directer pathway.”¹⁵² I argue that Besant positions herself in these writings as the

148 Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, 54.

149 Harlass, “Die orientalische Wende der Theosophischen Gesellschaft,” 114.

150 See, e.g., Besant, *Reincarnation*, 44; Besant, *The Ancient Wisdom*, 220.

151 “Lehrmonopol” Harlass, “Die orientalische Wende der Theosophischen Gesellschaft,” 117.

152 Annie Besant, *In the Outer Court*, 2nd ed. (Theosophical Publishing Society: London, 1898), 13–14.

teacher of this practical way and the provider of guidance on that “directer way.” By doing so, she bypasses the monopoly of the Mahatmas on teaching and ultimately institutionalizes that practical guidance in her school system. This will be illustrated by a close examination of the *Sanâtana Dharma Text Books* in Chapter 13, below. The narrative of the Mahatmas is kept intact in Besant’s writings, allowing her to claim to represent an unbroken chain of tradition.

Hagiographic self-descriptions of key Theosophical figures often included the narrative of the masters. Blavatsky, for instance, claimed that she met several masters while she was traveling the world. Her first encounter with a master – at least on her account – took place as early as 1851, in Hyde Park, London.¹⁵³ As French argues, the idea of the masters was formed in close relation to Spiritism, with “spirit guides”¹⁵⁴ playing an important role in transmitting communications from the dead. Blavatsky, who had already been in close contact with spiritists in Paris, went to New York in 1873 to investigate the flourishing American spiritualist scene.¹⁵⁵ John King was one of the most famous “spirit guides” of the time and was often reported to appear at séances, usually accompanied by his daughter Katie. Blavatsky claimed from about 1874 on that she was in close contact with John King, who she identified as one of the masters.¹⁵⁶ As French argues, Blavatsky retrospectively presented spiritism as a prerequisite for the revitalizing of the ancient wisdom that took place in the Theosophical Society.¹⁵⁷ What is important for our purposes is that Blavatsky claimed to have been initiated by the masters, who advised her to teach this ancient wisdom. Similarly, Besant claimed in 1893 that she was a “student” and had seen “elementals, astral pictures, astral bodies, and so on.”¹⁵⁸ In 1895 she claimed in an article in *The Westminster Gazette* that she was first introduced to a Theosophical master in 1889 (see Chapter 8). In her later Theosophical career, she placed increasingly importance on the possession of the *siddhis*. This can be seen in the occult investigations she pursues with Charles Leadbeater in *Occult Chemistry* and *Thought-Forms*, and in their descriptions of their evolutionary development through remembrance of their past lives in *The Lives of*

153 French, “The Theosophical Masters,” 83–84.

154 French, “The Theosophical Masters,” 86.

155 Godwin, “Blavatsky and the First Generation of Theosophy,” 16–17.

156 Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, 22–23.

157 French, “The Theosophical Masters,” 87–91.

158 Annie Besant, *An Exposition of Theosophy: Reprint from “The World,”* N. Y. February 26, 1893 (Boston: The Boston Theosophical Publishing Co., 1893), 16.

Alcyone and Man: Whence, How and Whither.¹⁵⁹ The *siddhis* and other occult powers marked out the Theosophical leader in Besant’s era. In the following, these ideas are put into a historical context against which background it can be seen that several topoi in Besant’s writings on the teacher/student relationship were common to ideas on master/disciple relationships in other traditions.

7.2 Masters and Disciples Between Freemasonry, “Hinduism,” and Theosophy

The idea of passing (secret) knowledge from one who knows to one who receives knowledge is a common feature in several (religious) traditions and is far from exclusive to the Theosophical Society. The master/disciple relationship can be understood as a specific form of knowledge transfer, in the sense that it is a strictly hierarchical relation which aims not only at knowledge transfer but also at changes in the disciple’s consciousness and their personality. This conceptualization of the relationship is at times accompanied by an idea of initiation into secret knowledge. This idea corresponds closely to the Theosophical idea of how the Mahatmas would transfer their knowledge with the goal of initiating their disciples (see below). The term “master” derives from the Latin *magister* and variants are found in most “Western” languages. In the Greek version of the bible, two terms are used to refer to concepts relating to the position of the “master.” The first is *kathegetēs* and the other is *didaskalos*, both of which denote a “teacher.” It was Martin Luther who translated both terms as “Meister” and in doing so gave the term an integral place within the (Protestant) Christian tradition. In the New Testament and the subsequent tradition, master/disciple relationships and the dialogue between the two are important methodological topoi. The same writing style became constitutive for Christian theosophy, for example in Jacob Böhme’s *Der Weg zu Cristo*, 1631. The didactic structure of the dialogue between master and disciple is also typical of Blavatsky’s *The Voice of the Silence* and *The Key to Theosophy*. Renger claims that the master narrative was transferred, through Böhme and its uptake in freemasonry and Rosicrucianism, into

¹⁵⁹ For a discussion of the stories contained in *The Lives of Alcyone*, with special regard to evolution and the role of male concepts of female sexuality, see Siv E. Kraft, “Theosophy, Gender, and the ‘New Woman,’” in Hammer; Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 366–68. For a discussion of the karmic stories of the past lives of Theosophists as biographical works, see Angelika Malinar, “Karmic Histories and Synthesis of ‘East’ and ‘West’: Annie Besant as Interpreter of Hinduism,” in *Asia and Europa – Interconnected: Agents, Concepts, and Things*, ed. Angelika Malinar and Simone Müller (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2018).

the later “esoteric” context, and especially to Blavatsky.¹⁶⁰ It is plausible to suppose that Blavatsky borrowed from these traditions, which would support my argument that *The Voice of the Silence* is a book of initiation.

This didactic form of writing is specific to *The Voice of the Silence* and cannot be found in the other Theosophical texts analyzed for this book. Besant’s writings in particular tend to be more structured, and the form of a dialogue would not fit well with this more linear style. There are numerous other contexts in which master/disciple relations played crucial roles, not least that of Christianity, in which the relationship between Jesus and his followers can be seen as a prototype. This is also true for the desert hermits and the later monastic orders.¹⁶¹ Blavatsky, who was socialized in Christian Orthodoxy,¹⁶² was as familiar with such Christian models as Besant.¹⁶³ More research will be needed to highlight the possible influences here.

The masonic orders are understood by many scholars to be the prototypes of secret societies.¹⁶⁴ Master/disciple relationships in freemasonry are usually connected to a series of rituals of initiation.¹⁶⁵ Similar ritual series are documented for the Theosophical Society as taking place in the Esoteric Section, Co-Masonry, and as rituals for initiation into the Society itself. However, how these rituals were performed and what practices they included is not known. This is mostly due to the lack of available information about the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society. It is likely that already in the early days of the Esoteric Section (ES), which was founded by Blavatsky in 1888,¹⁶⁶ ritual

160 Renger, „Der „Meister“,“ 19–31.

161 For a discussion of these Christian master/disciple relations, see Karl Baier, “Modelle der Meister-Schüler-Beziehung im Christentum,” in *Meister und Schüler: Tradition, Transfer, Transformation*, ed. Jeong-hee Lee-Kalisch and Almut-Barbara Renger, Studien für Ostasiatische Kunstgeschichte 3 (Weimar: VDG, 2016).

162 See Goodrick-Clarke, “The Theosophical Society, Orientalism, and the ‘Mystic East’”; Goodrick-Clarke, “Western Esoteric Traditions and Theosophy”.

163 Besant was widely read in Christian scripture and engaged critically with what she read during her “atheist” phase. See First and Second Life in Nethercot, *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant*. See also Besant’s own accounts in Annie Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1885); Besant, *My Path to Atheism*.

164 Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 44.

165 On the role of rituals of initiation in freemasonry and as prototypes for rituals of initiation in other “closed societies,” see Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation*.

166 Wessinger Lowman, “The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar),” 44–45. Owing to the secrecy in the Esoteric Section, there are no records of its activity, but, as Godwin explains, the third volume of the Secret Doctrine, which was published

practices were performed.¹⁶⁷ Dixon notes, drawing from an article in *The Link* from 1909, that the purpose of the ES was to grant "access to the masters" and that it engaged in "carefully structured ritual activities."¹⁶⁸ The actual practices involved are not specified, however. The ES soon also acquired an "Inner Group," to which both Annie Besant and Quan Judge belonged,¹⁶⁹ with Besant going on to become the "Chief Secretary of the Inner Group of the Esoteric Section"¹⁷⁰ after Blavatsky's death in 1891.

As for the rituals of initiation into the Theosophical Society, Nehru reported that Besant performed a ritual when he joined the Society (see Chapter 8, below). Dixon also notes that "Besant restored the ceremony of initiation for new members that had fallen into disuse in England, though it had been preserved at Adyar."¹⁷¹ Quoting articles from *The Vahan* from 1911 and 1912, respectively, Dixon maintains that there was a ritual which involved meditation, incense, music and the reading of scriptures and Theosophical texts. The ceremony was meant to be "a symbol and a reminder of those grater initiations."¹⁷² Co-Masonry, a form of masonry which admits women, was another of Annie Besant's interests. Although institutionally distinct from the Theosophical Society, Co-Masonry was personally interconnected at the level of both members and leaders. In Co-Masonry, as in all masonic groups, rituals play a crucial role. Francesca Arundale joined Le Droit Humain first and then encouraged Besant to also become a member. In 1902, the first Lodge of the French Co-Masonic order was opened in London with Besant serving as its first master.¹⁷³

after Blavatsky's death and possibly owes much to Annie Besant, contains some of the teachings to members of the ES. Godwin, "Blavatsky and the First Generation of Theosophy," 27.

167 Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 361–62; John L. Crow, "Taming the Astral Body: The Theosophical Society's Ongoing Problem of Emotion and Control," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (2012): 704. The little information there is on the practices of the Esoteric Section, and on the Teachings of the inner group, from which Besant surely drew when she wrote about the rules for meditation and her ideas on regulating food and sexuality, are well documented by Baier. What becomes clear is that Blavatsky elaborated a wide range of teachings on occult correspondences but did not provide much in the way of practices, with the exception of some basic raja-yogic meditations. Baier, *Meditation und Moderne*, 385–95. To my knowledge, there is no information available on how the Esoteric Section developed under Besant's leadership.

168 Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore, London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 73.

169 Baier, *Meditation und Moderne*, 385.

170 Taylor, *Annie Besant*, 258.

171 Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 74.

172 Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 74.

173 Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 74–82.

As Dixon clarifies, “much of the inspiration for ceremonial activity within the TS came from the influence of James Ingall Wedgwood, who joined the society in 1904.”¹⁷⁴ Consequently, “much of the ceremonial activity” of the Society is of only peripheral interest for this book due to its chronology. Very little research has been carried out on the masonic activities of Annie Besant, and this is especially true for the practical side of that engagement.¹⁷⁵ This is unfortunate because freemasonry provides an important background for the general conceptualization of master/disciple relations.

Masonry employs a strictly hierarchical system of master/disciple relationships based on the ideas of compatibility and self-perfection. Simonis explains that masonic orders can be characterized as groups that one can join freely but within which advancement is dependent on proving oneself worthy. Doing so involves two connected steps: first, a series of trials, and, secondly, initiation according to certain rituals. Initiation in this context means above all passing over the border from general society into the secret society. It is believed that the aspirant can only succeed in the trials and be initiated with the aid of a guide, a master, a topos that is also present in the Theosophical Society.¹⁷⁶ The Theosophical masters become aware of the aspirant as soon as he or she is ready, and they aid him or her in their progress. They might also provide assistance before this point, but this is done without the knowledge of the aspirant.¹⁷⁷

Freemasonic ideas about master/disciple relationships were adapted for broad public consumption in a range of literary productions. Simonis discusses Abbé Terrasson's work, *Sethos*, published in 1731, the story of which was popularized by Mozart's adaptation in his *Zauberflöte*.¹⁷⁸ The story is set in ancient

¹⁷⁴ Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 82.

¹⁷⁵ For Besant's engagement in freemasonry, see Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, and Andrew Prescott, “‘Builders of the Temple of the New Civilisation’: Annie Besant and Freemasonry,” in *Women's Agency and Rituals in Mixed and Female Masonic Orders*, ed. Alexandra Heidle and Joannes A. M. Snoek, Aries Book Series v. 8 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008).

¹⁷⁶ Linda Simonis, “Esoterische Bildung: Suchende Schüler und ihre Lehrmeister bei den Freimaurern, esoterischen Bünden und Geheimbundroman des 18. Jahrhunderts,” in Renger, *Meister und Schüler in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 285–86.

¹⁷⁷ The highest helper or teacher is the one who in bodhisattvic compassion remains on earth when liberated. See, e.g., Besant, *The Path of Discipleship*, 44, 71; Besant, *In the Outer Court*, 10, 127.

¹⁷⁸ Paul Nettl, “‘sethos’ und die freimaurerische Grundlage der ‘Zauberflöte’,” in *Bericht über die musikwissenschaftliche Tagung der Internationalen Stiftung Mozarteum in Salzburg vom 2. bis 5. August 1931*, ed. Erich Schenk (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1932). For a detailed discussion of the reception of masonic elements in *Zauberflöte*, with special regard to *Sethos*, see Florian Ebling, “Mozarts Zauberflöte: Der Schrecken des Todes und die Macht der Musik,” in *Theater um Mozart: Begleitbuch zur Ausstellung Theater um Mozart in Heidelberg und*

Egypt, where the protagonist Sethos is initiated into a circle of priests by a member of that group named Amedès. His training takes in a range of subjects extending from science to the fine arts. It also involves the development of a virtuous character – with virtue being understood in terms of the virtues of leaders set out in the German *Fürstenspiegel* and their French pendants – as well as an inner psychological development. In Terrasson's story, the relationship between master and disciple is dissolved into a relationship with the whole secret society by way of initiation. Sethos passes several trials that were associated with the ancient Egyptian Isis cult as imagined in the 18th century, and then receives a thorough explanation of the “esoteric” ethics of the circle.¹⁷⁹

Several motifs in this tale resonate with topics that were discussed in the Theosophical Society. First of all, the reference to the Isis cult resonates strongly with Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*. But more importantly for this book, the Theosophical ideas about the “Quickening of Evolution,” which are described in Chapter 8 and will be discussed further below, can be read as an attempt to have an actual impact on the lives of the disciples and to lead them to live virtuously. At the end of this process of development stands initiation into the occult knowledge. However, this initiation is considerably less ritualistic in the Theosophical Society. It is, rather, as Baier shows, connected to a cognitive process that leads from knowledge to action.¹⁸⁰ As will be seen below for Annie Besant – at least in her early Theosophy – initiation meant the expansion of consciousness that corresponds with the Master Paradox. It seems likely that several of the Theosophical ideas about such relationships were influenced by freemasonry, either through Co-Masonry or via the popular reception of such motifs as they appear in *Zauberflöte* or Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Zanoni*. It is also likely – as mentioned previously – that masonic rituals were performed as rituals of initiation, especially in the Esoteric Section, in Co-Masonry, and as rituals of initiation into the Theosophical Society. Further exploration of this area remains an important research desideratum.

7.3 Succession, Charisma, and Office

Krech discusses the relation between charisma and religious succession. His key argument is that, from a sociological perspective, religious succession is always

Schwetzingen vom 19. September bis 19. November 2006, ed. Bärbel Pelker (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006).

¹⁷⁹ Simonis, “Esoterische Bildung,” 290–94.

¹⁸⁰ Baier, *Meditation und Moderne*, 356.

self-referential because it produces those semantics of transcendence to which it refers for evidence. He argues that, because of this self-referentiality, when staking a claim to authority, the only resource on which succession can draw is reference to its “origin.” By doing so, succession manages conflicting synchronic claims to authority by creating diachronic references.¹⁸¹ This constant re-establishing of new diachronic references links succession to the broader problem of a “tradition” that needs to invent itself ad hoc in a procedural act. Krech explains that “religious semantics”¹⁸² refer to a transcendence which must be explained using immanent means. Discussing two aspects of charisma, “the paradox of claims of truth and innovation,”¹⁸³ Krech makes intelligible how the creating of myths and occult language may help religious communication and shows that charisma is the focalization point for innovation. Firstly, charisma – which according to Weber is rooted in “Ausseralltäglichkeit,”¹⁸⁴ something which is out of the ordinary – is often connected to claims to possess supernatural powers. These claims were advanced by both Blavatsky and Besant.¹⁸⁵ What Krech identifies is a paradox between these claims and the need to communicate them while at the same time maintaining their extraordinary nature. In his view, this tension can be resolved by communicating religious experience in opaque language, since such a representation maintains the extraordinary nature of the experience and makes it worth pursuing and investigating. In Krech’s view, this implies self-referentiality because the opaque language refers to the extraordinary, which in turn refers to the transcendent, and vice versa. This is the paradox inherent in explaining the transcendent using immanent means. In Krech’s view, this paradox can be focalized in the charismatic person because she or he can serve as the immanent

181 “Sukzession wird thematisch und verläuft von der jeweiligen Gegenwart zurück zu den in der Objektsprache behaupteten Ursprüngen. Sukzession ist ein Produkt von jeweils *gegenwärtiger, synchroner* Umstrittenheit, regelt sie und evoziert sie zugleich durch Erzeugung von Diachronie.” Volkhard Krech, “Wie wird in Sukzessionen die Evidenz religiöser Semantiken hergestellt? Wissenssoziologische Beobachtungen,” in *Sukzession in Religionen: Autorisierung, Legitimierung, Wissenstransfer*, ed. Almut-Barbara Renger and Markus Witte (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), 15.

182 “Religiöse Semantiken,” Krech, “Wie wird in Sukzessionen die Evidenz religiöser Semantiken hergestellt?,” 4.

183 “Erstens die Paradoxie von Wahrheitsanspruch und Akzeptanz charismatischer religiöser Kommunikation sowie zweitens das Moment der Innovation.” Krech, “Wie wird in Sukzessionen die Evidenz religiöser Semantiken hergestellt?,” 7.

184 Weber, Max and 1864–1920, *Grundriss der Sozialökonomie III. Abteilung: Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1922), 140.

185 This dimension is discussed repeatedly in this book in relation to the *siddhis*. See Mühlematter, “Philology as an Epistemological Strategy to Claim Higher Knowledge”. See also Chapter 12.7.

mediator between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Likewise, he or she acts as a mediator to guarantee the succession and the correct transmission of the “original” message, which is then taken up by his or her followers. For the second point, innovation, Krech claims that charisma has to refer to established structures of communication while reformulating and reinventing them. Both elements are combined in the Theosophical Society. The Mahatmas are charismatic and guarantee succession via their connection to higher knowledge. This is then transferred first of all to Blavatsky, who likewise claims to have supernatural powers and can therefore be described as a charismatic leader. Besant later relies on the same structures while also including innovative elements of her own in her notion of the “Quickening of Evolution.”

Another form of succession takes place in the passing of an established office, initially created, according to Weber, through the institutionalization of charisma. According to Krech, what these forms of succession have in common is that they rely on self-referentiality for the legitimization of their claims. In sum, different types of succession often overlap with or refer to each other. What should be noted here is that succession is understood by Krech as a form of shared “connection” to a common origin. In other words, succession tries to provide evidence by referring to the common (often transcendent) origin of all those in the lineage¹⁸⁶ in the Theosophical Society via the master narrative. Simultaneously, it must mediate between several synchronic claims of authority and it therefore includes a range of different positions. I argue that this mediation is a form of “relationizing” and, thus, of hybridization. Following Krech, it can be argued that a change of types of succession can be identified when comparing Blavatsky to Besant. As Blavatsky was a charismatic leader, Besant claimed her authority by office. This is, however, too simplistic an interpretation, since Besant combined several types of succession and authority claims. Her writings, which are more structured than those of Blavatsky, can be understood as an institutionalization of authority. On the other hand, in her leadership of the Esoteric Section and Co-Masonry, she claimed authority by “charisma,” supported by her clairvoyant investigations in partnership with Leadbeater. Krech’s viewpoint provides an insight into the function of the master narrative in the Theosophical Society, where it serves as a legitimation practice.¹⁸⁷ It is no coincidence that Besant claimed that her election as president of the

186 Krech, “Wie wird in Sukzessionen die Evidenz religiöser Semantiken hergestellt?,” 10–15.

187 For a discussion of the different modes of authority claim in the Theosophical Society, see Mühlematter, “Philology as an Epistemological Strategy to Claim Higher Knowledge” and Viswanathan, “Theosophical Society”.

Theosophical Society was sanctioned by the masters, who supposedly appeared to Olcott shortly before his death while Besant was nursing him.¹⁸⁸

7.4 Preliminary Conclusion: Transfer of Knowledge, Forms of Succession, and Claims of Charismatic Leadership

To summarize, teacher/student relationships are prototypes of knowledge transfer. These relationships become closer when they aim at actual changes in a person's behavior and also include the passing on of secret knowledge and/or an initiation into a closed/secret society. In the Theosophical Society, master/disciple relationships were first and foremost embedded in the Mahatma narrative, which sought to legitimize authority and succession in the organization. This narrative was closely connected to what I have called the Master Paradox, the seemingly unbridgeable epistemological difference between the evolutionary position of the master (higher knowledge) and their educational approach. In addition, teacher/student relationships were institutionalized in several institutions of the Esoteric Section, Co-Masonry, and, above all, the Theosophical schools. These actual relationships had to refer to the Mahatma narrative and were usually structured in terms of a "charismatic" succession and/or an "official" succession. Theosophists such as Blavatsky and Besant claimed supernatural powers while at the same time – especially in the case of Besant – relying on institutionalized forms of succession and authority. The master narrative provides the link to the perennial wisdom here. Identifying the masters as highly evolved *human* beings implies that everyone is able to attain this higher stage of evolution. However, the idea that this evolution takes an almost uncountable number of life cycles moves that possibility into a far distant future. Besant's "Quickening of Evolution" provides a swifter path towards that future evolution. In her self-representation, this has a double-sided effect. On the one hand, she can claim to be the mediator between the masters and the chelas while promoting herself as the teacher of the Theosophical Society, which imbued her with an unquestionable authority based on the master narrative. On the other hand, she could claim that she was an accepted chela on her way to a higher stage of evolution. Her demonstration in *Thought-Forms*, *Occult Chemistry* that she possessed supernatural powers proved, according to that narrative, that she was rapidly advancing towards becoming a master herself. And at the same time, her rapid advancement was a demonstration of the

¹⁸⁸ Nethercot, *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant*, 434; Wessinger Lowman, "The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar)," 45.

effectiveness of her program aimed at the “Quickening of Evolution.” Master/disciple relations thus played a crucial role in the Theosophical Society. Initiation marked the start of the master/disciple relationship in its strict sense, whereas the Theosophical educational system served as a preparatory institution for those making their way towards this initiation.

