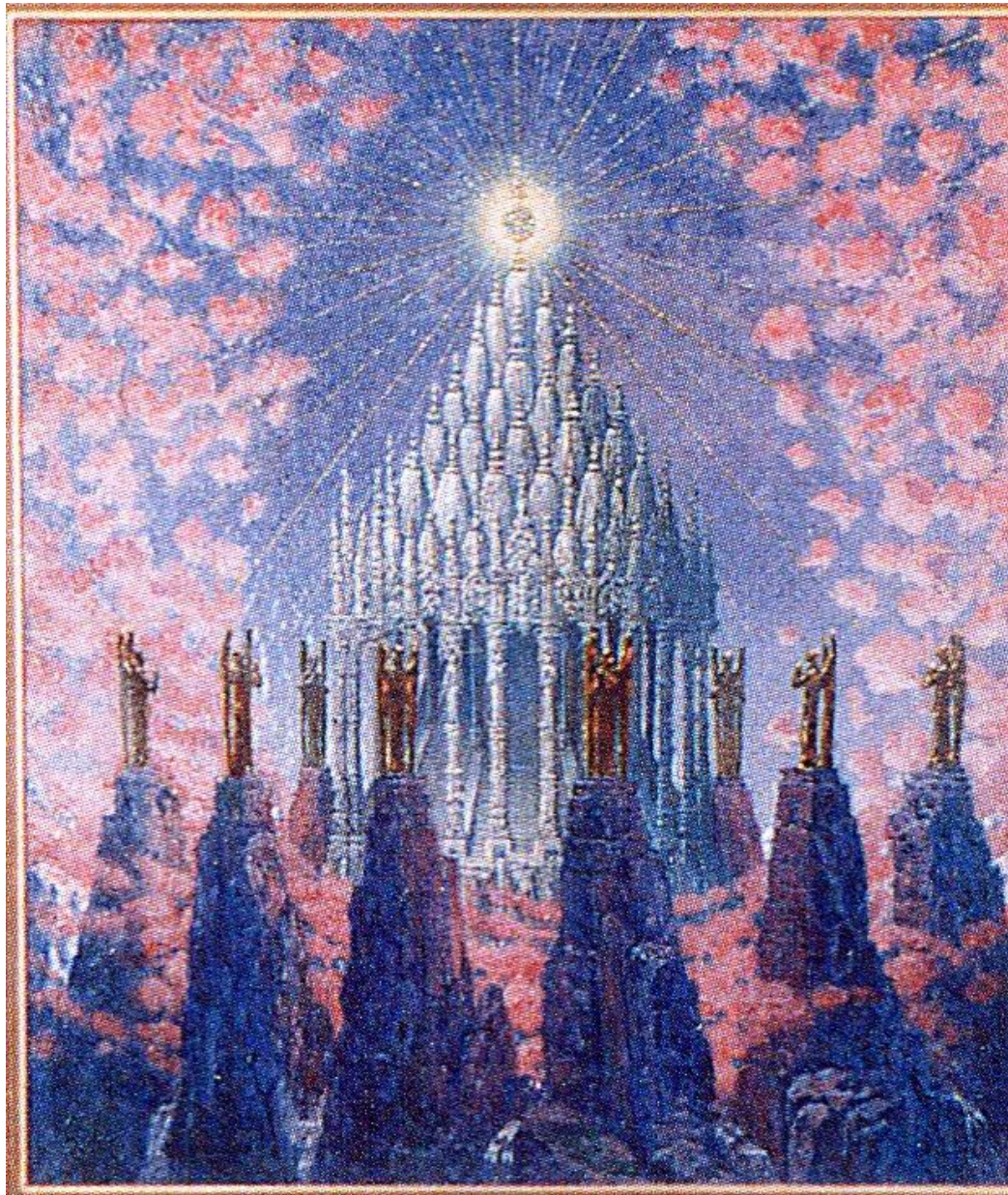


Occult socialism?

*Dutch theosophists' perspectives on social reform and social engagement
between 1897 and 1930*



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Master's thesis, History of Society
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Chapter 1. Introduction

To many people, ‘the occult’ is a term often associated with mystery, magic, and mysticism, sometimes with darkness, anxiety, or fear. Others associate the occult with irrationalism and escapism, and the idea that whatever is labeled occult should be treated with a grain of salt. But who, when hearing the term ‘occult’, thinks of industrialization, of modern science, of modernization, or even of social engagement and the idealistic striving for a better world? Occultism has in recent decades been reappreciated as a subject of serious inquiry. Although the term and the historical phenomena related to it have, for some time, been ‘neglected’ by scholars, from at least the 1990s onward much has been published within the historical discipline about occultism and the historical phenomena related to it.¹

The term occultism – which is derived from the Latin word *occultus*, meaning ‘hidden’ – refers to the idea of secret teachings about inner dimensions of the world, a hidden truth regarding the nature of reality and mysterious powers associated with it, which has throughout the ages of humanity’s history have been preserved by a spiritual elite of initiates.² One of the most influential propagators of occultism was an occult organization founded in 1875, called the Theosophical Society (henceforth abbreviated TS). The emergence of the TS as a historical phenomenon was part of a wider flourishing of movements and societies with an occult-religious orientation, which is often referred to as ‘The Occult Revival’.³ From the second half of the nineteenth until the 1920’s and 1930’s of the twentieth century, all over the West (particularly in France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States) movements emerged that in one way or another tried to find new ways of spirituality. Spiritism – based on the idea that through séances, people could communicate with the deceased – was one of the first widespread and popular ‘new religions’. But earlier already, Freemasonry, Druidism, and various other movements that challenged the religious orthodoxy of Protestantism and Catholicism emerged in Europe. The modern theosophy that was created by members of the Theosophical Society was a diverse mixture of modern science (for example Darwinist evolution), philosophy, Eastern religion (particularly Buddhism and

¹ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism. A Guide for the Perplexed* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 2.

² Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 10-11.

³ *Ibidem*, 7.

Hinduism), Western religion, and various esoteric traditions (such as Hermetic Alchemy, Kabbala, Gnosticism, and Sufism).

The most commonly accepted explanation for the emergence of these new, occult religions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is that the rational materialism of the scientific culture that emerged as a more dominant public discourse did not provide satisfiable answers to people who needed a meaningful interpretation of the rapidly changing and modernizing world around them. While science as a more dominant public discourse left people devoid of a sense of meaning, it also undermined the epistemological authority of organized Western religion (Christianity) and as a result, the regular frameworks of meaningful, religious, interpretations of the world were insufficient to many Westerners. It was this rise of rational materialism, this combination of modernization and the loss of epistemological authority of orthodox religion that motivated many people to find alternative ways for a meaningful interpretation of life. And many drew inspiration from religious alternatives from both past (embracing various Western esoteric traditions) and present (embracing Eastern religions that became more publicly known in the West through colonial and imperial contacts, as well as through the improved communication technology – such as the telegraph).⁴

The history of the TS has been called one of the most pivotal chapters in the history of religions, and the Society itself ‘the most influential occultist organization at least up to the 1930s’.⁵ The Society has been primarily responsible for the popularization of concepts such as ‘karma’, ‘reincarnation’, ‘human aura’, or ‘chakra’, all concepts that were fundamental to the theosophical worldview.⁶ In recent years, however, scholars have also begun to explore other aspects of the influence that the TS has had on Western society. It has been argued, for example, that the TS has played an important role in empowering women in Great Britain and has had a certain appeal towards socialists in both Great Britain and France. The TS was also an influential agent in the politics of British-India and the Dutch Indies.⁷

⁴ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 8, 35-37, 91, 135; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology*, (Northamptonshire: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1985), 18-25.

⁵ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 41; Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, “Introduction”, in: Hammer, Olav, en Mikael Rothstein, red. *Handbook of the theosophical current* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2013), 2.

⁶ Hammer, Rothstein, “Introduction”, 2.

⁷ Joy Dixon, *Divine feminine: theosophy and feminism in England* (Baltimore, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 3; Julian Strube, “Occultist Identity Formations Between Theosophy and Socialism in

1.1 Research question

The role of theosophists – members of the Theosophical Society – as social reformers has been explored with regards to Great Britain, India, the Dutch Indies, and France, but so far, no research has been done with regards to the role of theosophists as social reformers in the Netherlands. This thesis is a contribution to bridging that gap in historiography. In this thesis, the ideas of Dutch theosophists about their role in society, and social engagement and responsibility will be explored. Central to this thesis is the following question: ‘to what extent did Dutch theosophists, between 1897 and 1930, view social engagement as an earthly means to actualize their occult beliefs?’.

The central question of this thesis will be answered stepwise throughout three empirical chapters. First, however, an overview of the existing scholarly literature regarding occultism in general, occultism in the Netherlands, theosophy in the Netherlands, and the relationship between theosophy and social engagement will be provided to contextualize this research. The second chapter of this thesis, ‘Rediscovering’ the occult’, focusses on the initial orientations of Dutch theosophists on their role as theosophists, their perspectives on modern society, and their ideas about social engagement during the early years of the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands. Central in chapter two is the following question: ‘how did Dutch theosophists envision their role in society during their initial orientations on identity between 1897 and 1910?’

The third chapter of this thesis, ‘Theosophy and socialism?’, focusses on the ways in which the discourse regarding social engagement was influenced by the influx of new members and the emergence of a new generation of Dutch theosophists. In chapter three, the central question is: ‘how did the influx of new members affect Dutch theosophists’ perspectives on social engagement between 1908 and 1914?’

Chapter four, ‘Time for utopia’, focusses on the period during and after World War I and the ways in which Dutch theosophists’ perspectives on social engagement changed after the war. In addition, chapter four explores the ways in which Dutch theosophists envisioned a

fin-de-siècle France”, *Numen* 64, nr. 5–6 (2017), 571, 582; Keith Gildart, “Séance Sitters, Ghost Hunters, Spiritualists, and Theosophists: Esoteric Belief and Practice in the British Parliamentary Labour Party, c1929–51”, *Twentieth Century British History* (2017), 7, 21; Herman A.O. de Tollenaere, *The Politics of Divine Wisdom. Theosophy and labour, national, and women’s movements in Indonesia and South Asia, 1875-1947* (Nijmegen: Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen (dissertation), 1996), 393-394.

better future by analyzing two utopian books. Central to chapter four is the following question: ‘how did Dutch theosophists, between 1914 and 1930, envision a better society, and what roles did they envision for themselves in the process of constructing that better society?’

After having explored the answers to these questions, the main question of this thesis (‘to what extent did Dutch theosophists, between 1897 and 1930, view social engagement as an earthly means to actualize their occult beliefs?’) will be answered in a concluding chapter.

1.2 Theoretical concepts

The theoretical frameworks used in this thesis as explanatory tools for the emergence of and developments in the Dutch Theosophical Society are derived from the academic debate regarding the concepts ‘modernity’, ‘disenchantment’ and ‘re-enchantment’. These theoretical concepts are fundamental to the historical debate regarding the emergence of occultism. ‘Modern Occultism’ itself, however, is also a theoretical concept which needs some explanation. In the following section, a short list of definitions of the main concepts used in this thesis is provided, as well as an outline of the historical debate regarding occultism.

1.2.1 Definitions

Modernity: the term modernity bears in it a belief in progress – i.e. from a traditional society to a modern society. Modernity emerged as an abstract consequence of the Industrial Revolution and the rise to societal dominance of ‘modern science’ – epistemology based on the scientific method. Essential to modernity is ‘rationalization’, rationality as the highest form of ontological, epistemological and methodological authority. This process of rationalization causes ‘secularization’, ‘commodification’ and ‘differentiation’ of society.⁸

Disenchantment: the term ‘disenchantment’ signifies the view that “wonders and marvels have been demystified by science, spirituality has been supplanted by secularism, spontaneity has been replaced by bureaucratization, and the imagination has been subordinated to instrumental reason.”⁹ The term ‘disenchantment’ was first coined by Max

⁸ Jacques van Hoof, Joris van Ruysseveldt (ed.), *Sociologie en de moderne samenleving. Maatschappelijke veranderingen van de industriële omwenteling tot in de 21^{ste} eeuw* (Heerlen: BoomOnderwijs, 1996), 25-28.

⁹ M. Saler, “Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review”, *The American Historical Review* 111, nr. 3 (1 juni 2006), 692.

Weber in a 1917 lecture to signify both the loss of transcendent meaning and purpose, as well as wonder and surprise, who were extirpated by the modern processes of rationalization, secularization, and bureaucratization.¹⁰

Re-enchantment: the term ‘re-enchantment’ usually signifies the reactionary and oppositional process connected to ‘disenchantment’ (i.e. in reaction to the rationalistic materialism of modern society, the imagination is used to find new ways of metaphysical meaning for existence).¹¹ Attempts to re-enchant human existence arguably begun with early romantics during the late eighteenth century as a reaction to Enlightenment rationality.¹² With the emergence of modern society during the nineteenth and twentieth century, attempts to re-enchant existence resulted in a wide variety of movements and organizations. Many of these groups were inspired by what is now defined as ‘occultism’.

Occultism: ‘occultism’ (derived from the Latin word *occultus* – denoting ‘hidden, ‘secret’) is sometimes used interchangeably with the term ‘esotericism’ (derived from the Ancient Greek word *esôterikós* – ‘belonging to an inner circle’).¹³ Both terms signify ideas and practices revolving around a hidden, ultimate truth which forms the true nature of reality (in a Platonic sense).¹⁴ In this thesis, I will use terminology as defined by Wouter J. Hanegraaff -professor of History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam, who uses the term ‘esotericism’ to denote the plurality of alternative (to orthodox religion, in the West Catholic and later Protestant Christianity) religious movements, and uses the term ‘occultism’ to refer to ‘new religious movements’ that emerged during the end of the nineteenth century and exhibited ‘modern characteristics’ (to both concepts, the preposition ‘Western’ could be added to exclude ‘Eastern’ esotericism).¹⁵ Defined like this, ‘occultism’ is part of the broader demarcation-category ‘esotericism’. Occultism, in the words of Hanegraaff, “came into existence when the esoteric cosmology ... increasingly came to be understood in term of the new scientific cosmologies (based on

¹⁰ Saler, ‘Modernity and Enchantment’, 695; see also: Max Weber, ‘Wissenschaft als Beruf’, in Max Weber (Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Wolfgang Schluchter, eds), *Wissenschaft als Beruf 1917/1919, Politik als Beruf 1919* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1994).

¹¹ Saler, ‘Modernity and Enchantment’, 694.

¹² *Ibidem*, 695.

¹³ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism. A Guide for the Perplexed* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 3, 22; Laqueur, “Why the Margins Matter”, 111.

¹⁴ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Textbooks and Introductions to Western Esotericism”, *Religion* 43, nr. 2 (april 2013), 184.

¹⁵ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 2-3, 36-38.

instrumental causality) ... broadly put: the secularization of esotericism.”¹⁶ Occultism, to Hanegraaff, is ‘secularized esotericism’, it represents attempts to reformulate traditional beliefs in modern terms (rather than condemning scientific progress or modernity, occultists attempt to integrate it within a global vision that complements materialist views of the dominant modern worldview).¹⁷

1.2.2 *Interpreting occultism*

Although many authors writing about occultism seem to habitually state that the theme has been the subject of academic negligence, occultism, as a historical phenomenon has in the past decades, gained increasing scholarly attention.¹⁸ The discipline of religious studies has paid serious attention to Western occultism from the 1970’s onward to explore the historical backgrounds of New Religious Movements that emerged during the 1960’s and 1970’s.¹⁹ In the decades following the 1970’s, Western occultism slowly became more accepted as a serious subject of academic study and since the 1990’s has increasingly been on the research agenda of academic humanities – especially in sociology and history.²⁰ Anno 2017, Western occultism has become more prominent in historiography, particularly in relation to history of science – due to the entanglement of science and esotericism up until the Enlightenment, the

¹⁶ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture. Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden, New York, Koln: Brill, 1996), 407.

¹⁷ Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 408, 409; The emergence of occultism at the end of the nineteenth century is sometimes referred to as the ‘Western Occult Revival’. However, since I intend on using Hanegraaff’s definition of occultism (as a modern form of esotericism) I will not use this term in my master’s thesis – because for something to be revived it first needs to have declined, and since occultism in the aforementioned definition is a modern phenomenon which first emerged during the nineteenth century it would be incorrect to interpret this phenomenon as a revival. A more correct formulation of the Western Occult Revival would therefore be the ‘Wester Esoteric Revival’ – the manifestation of occultism as a revival of esotericism.

¹⁸ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, “Textbooks and Introductions”, 2; this can be referred to as the ‘Rejected Knowledge-narrative’.

¹⁹ Hammer, Rothstein, *Handbook of the theosophical current*, 3.

²⁰ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 2.

history of art – because of the influence Western occultism had on various art-movements, the history of religion, gender studies, and more generally in cultural historiography.²¹

Perhaps the first notable name to mention in relation to the historiography of Western occultism is Francis Yates. Yates mainly focused her scholarly work on esotericism from the Renaissance until the Enlightenment and is mentioned by most authors as a pioneer in the study of Western esotericism. Some even speak of a ‘Yates paradigm’.²² Essential to Yates’ work is the notion of “the Hermetic Tradition”, the idea that from the Renaissance until the Enlightenment a tradition of esoteric thought existed, which had a profound influence on Western scientific culture.²³ According to Yates, this tradition emerged when during the Italian Renaissance a collection of texts from late antiquity about alchemy and other esoteric themes was rediscovered and translated.²⁴ Yates claimed that this Hermetic Tradition is inextricably linked to modernist narratives of progress by means of science, and has been the driving force behind the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century.²⁵ To Yates, the Hermetic tradition was a forgotten source of inspiration for most of the major agents of the Scientific Revolution (Giordano Bruno and Isaac Newton, for example). The Hermetic Tradition “reflected a confident, optimistic, forward-looking perspective that emphasized humanity’s potential to operate in the world by using the new sciences, and thus create a better, more harmonious, more beautiful society”.²⁶ However, argued Yates, the rise of modern science and philosophy caused by the Hermetic Tradition paradoxically caused the end of tradition: the enchanted mysticism of the Hermetic Tradition proved to be incompatible with the rationalist positivism that gained prominence during and after the Scientific Revolution and was steadily replaced by it between the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment.²⁷ Yates’ work inspired many scholars during the 1960s and 1970s to interpret the Hermetic Tradition and its offshoots (fin-de-siècle occultism, the new religious

²¹ See for example: Martine Theodora Bax, *Het Web der Schepping. Theosofie en kunst in Nederland van Lauweriks tot Mondriaan* (Amsterdam: Sun Uitgeverij, 2006); B.J.T. Dobbs, *The Janus faces of genius. The role of alchemy in Newton’s thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); W.J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*; Joy Dixon, *Divine feminine*.

²² Henrik Bogdan, *Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 9.

²³ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 8.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 8.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 6; Bogdan, *Western Esotericism*, 10-11.

²⁷ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 6-7.

movements of the 1960s and 1970s) as manifestations of an enchanted worldview that was at odds with modern culture and a secularizing world. These scholars argued that in a post-Enlightenment, secularized world, this enchanted worldview could only survive as an “anti-modernist ‘counterculture’ engaged in an ultimately hopeless ‘flight from reason’”.²⁸ It is this interpretation of esotericism as a ‘quasi-autonomous countertradition pitted against the mainstream traditions of Christianity and rationality’ which is nowadays referred to as the Yates paradigm.²⁹

Later scholarly work on Western esotericism has been critical of the Yates Paradigm, stating that the claim that Western esotericism was only one of multiple factors contributing to the emergence of modern science and that Yates’s description of the Hermetic Tradition as a single, autonomous and continuous tradition was too simplistic.³⁰ Rather than a single tradition, the Hermetic Tradition is now depicted as ‘a number of traditions’, separated by time, but loosely connected by the use of the same literary works.³¹ Yates’ work, though not directly focused on Modern Western occultism, is nonetheless relevant in this historiographical overview for two reasons. Firstly: the works of Francis Yates sparked the interest of a broad public during the 1960s and 1970s into Western esotericism and indirectly contributed to a broader acceptance of esotericism as a subject worthy of serious scholarly attention.³² Secondly – and perhaps more important: the ‘Yates Paradigm’ has led many scholars during the 1970s and 1980s to perceive Western occultism as an ‘anti-rational’ phenomenon and should “... be dismissed as a manifestation of irrationalism and futile longing for a romanticized past.”³³

Another influential author in the historiography regarding Western esotericism is Antione Faivre. According to Hanegraaff, Faivre’s *L’ésotérisme* (1992) marked the beginning of the study of Western esotericism as an academic field of research: “Faivre’s 1992 textbook stood at the origin of a better, more professional, and academically more satisfactory upgrade...” of studies on esotericism.³⁴ Faivre’s definition of esotericism as a “form of thought” (with six clearly demarked characteristics) resulted in the first and perhaps the most

²⁸ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 7.

²⁹ Bogdan, *Western Esotericism*, 10.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 7.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ Hanegraaff, “Textbooks and Introductions”, 179.

influential research paradigm of Western esotericism.³⁵ Faivre convincingly argued for the recognition of Western esotericism as a pervasive – though dynamic – phenomenon that endured from the Renaissance to the twentieth century in differing currents who nonetheless shared some common traits, therewith legitimizing ‘Western esotericism’ as a categorical concept.³⁶ Faivre’s work is regarded as highly constructive because of the methodological tool his definition of Western esotericism represented.³⁷ His interpretation of Western esotericism, however, were much in line with Yates’s; Western esotericism could be explained as a radical, enchanted alternative to the disenchanted worldviews that rose to dominance in Western culture following the Scientific Revolution, Enlightenment rationalism and positivist scientism.³⁸ Occultism, in this interpretation, represents an anti-rational, anti-modernist counterculture engaged in a ‘flight from reason’.³⁹

An alternative interpretation to the ‘anti-rational escapist’ interpretation of occultism is to see the occult as a significant manifestation of modernity which is intrinsically intertwined with the emergence of modern society.⁴⁰ Occultism, according to this interpretation, is an evidential manifestation of religious dynamism, proof of the notion that religion is continuously being reinvented under new historical and social circumstances.⁴¹ Two notable authors with regards to this interpretation are Alex Owen and Corine Treitel. In her book *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (2007), Treitel interprets occultism as inherently modern.⁴² The ‘Modern Occult’ was a revolt against disenchanting rationality, an ‘act of resistance against what seemed like an ascendant materialism’, but nonetheless a ‘modern phenomenon’.⁴³ Occultism inspired various avant-garde artists, was for a short period strongly intertwined with modern science – most notably with the emerging field psychological research, was widely available to a wide public (due to innovations in communication-technology), and appealed to a wide variety of men and

³⁵ Hanegraaff, “Textbooks and Introductions”, 179.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 5.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 9.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² Thomas Laqueur, “Why the Margins Matter: Occultism and the Making of Modernity”, *Modern Intellectual History* 3, nr. 01 (april 2006.), 112

⁴³ Laqueur, “Why the Margins Matter”, 112.

woman from all societal classes.⁴⁴ Despite the wide availability of occult thought and appeal to a broad public, occultism was nonetheless not easily, if at all, accepted as a serious alternative to institutionalized religion and science by ‘mainstream moderns’.⁴⁵ According to Treitel, this has partly to do with widely spread – and often proven – allegations of fraud by individuals associated with occultism, debunking initiatives by professionalizing scientific discourses and strong anti-occult polemics coming from institutionalized religion.⁴⁶

In her book *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (2004), Alex Owen identifies occultism as a ‘newly configured enchantment’, which had a profound influence on the development of modern conceptions regarding the ‘self’.⁴⁷ Owen’s *The Place of Enchantment* presents a perspective on occultism not yet mentioned in this historiography: the reciprocal, often overlapping relations that many occult organizations had with social reform movements.⁴⁸ An important notion in Owen’s work is that occult societies provided a hospitable environment for women where they could partake in more active and empowering social roles than in more conventional social circles.⁴⁹

In short, the debate regarding occultism can be summarized as consisting of two camps: the ‘escapist-paradigm’, which interprets occultism as an anti-rational, anti-modern phenomenon and the ‘alto-modern paradigm’, which interprets occultism as a collection of attempts to form an alternative to the dominant direction of modernization processes; a synthesis between rational materialism and spiritual imagining. This thesis will place the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands primarily in the alto-modern paradigm: the T.S.N. was an inherently modern phenomenon and the members of the T.S.N. were actively engaged in attempts to formulate alternatives to the dominant direction of the modernization of Dutch society. It was characterized by a strong anti-materialist orientation and can be interpreted as a revolt against positivist materialism. The T.S.N. can be interpreted as anti-rational in the sense that its members generally condemned materialist rationality. Nevertheless, rationality was used by (early) theosophists as an epistemological fundament for their theosophical worldview, and the interpretation of the T.S.N. as anti-rational, therefore, entails that it was

⁴⁴ Laqueur, “Why the Margins Matter”, 117.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 118, 120.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 112.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 122; Hans Crombag en Frank van Dun, *De Utopische Verleiding* (Maastricht: Olympus, 1997), 250-251.

⁴⁹ Laqueur, “Why the Margins Matter”, 122; Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 5.

mainly opposed to materialist rationality, not rationality on itself. Whether or not the attempts by theosophists to expand the horizons of rational science to the realm of spirituality was an irrational endeavor, however, seems to normative to be discussed in this thesis. As will be argued in this thesis, there are some theosophists who fit more into the escapist paradigm and used engagement in the T.S.N. as a welcome escape from the seemingly confusing modernizing world around them. In general, however, this thesis will follow the interpretation of the modern occult as an alto-modern current.

1.3 Historiography

Like the broader academic debate about occultism internationally, the relatively specific academic debate about occultism in the Netherlands has in recent decades gained more attention from various scholars. The academic debate about occultism in the Netherlands is part of a broader debate about a plurality of ‘reform movements’ that emerged during the *fin-de-siècle* and Interbellum – such as anti-vivisectionists, promoters of vegetarianism, Spiritualists, Christian-Anarchists, theosophists and more. Just like the historiography regarding international occultism, two ‘camps’ can be distinguished within the historical debate regarding occultism in the Netherlands.

1.3.1 *Small faiths, or humanitarian reform movements?*

In his *Op het breukvlak van twee eeuwen* (1967, published posthumously), Jan Romein presented his interpretation of occult and similar organizations as ‘small faiths’. In Romein’s analysis, the various occultist and reformist movements that emerged during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century are interpreted as naïve idealistic movements consisting of members of the bourgeois class that could not cope with the fundamental uncertainty caused by the emergence of modern society.⁵⁰ Romein portrayed a bourgeoisie desperate to find new forms of order in a rapidly changing world that increasingly threatened the legitimacy of traditional authority, and saw the emergence of the working class as a

⁵⁰ I. de Haan e.a. (eds.), *Het eenzame gelijk. Hervormers tussen droom en daad, 1850-1950* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2009), 30.

political competitor for societal dominance.⁵¹ Romein wrote about “spoiled Europeans” that were attracted to the “hundred and one prophets... One-eyed who were king in the land of the blind” and who appealed to the fundamental insecurity and dissatisfaction of a troubled bourgeoisie class.⁵² These notions might give the impression that Romein viewed these ‘small faiths’ solely as an odd, irrational byproduct of bourgeoisie confusion, but a closer look at his analysis provides a more layered image. He stated for example that phenomena like spiritism and theosophy were attempts to expand the reach of reason to the realm of spirituality, rather than the anti-rational revolution they appeared to be at first sight.⁵³ In addition, Romein noted that fin-de-siecle occult movements were connected to and overlapped with other manifestations of social reformism, and did in fact also have a certain appeal to the upcoming middle classes and even proletarians.⁵⁴ Contradictory to these nuances in his own analysis, however, Romein retained his interpretation of the small faiths as symptoms of escapism by those members of the bourgeoisie that could not cope with the epistemological and ontological uncertainties caused by modernity.⁵⁵ They were, to Romein, “pseudo-ideologies”, marginal opinions of naïve bourgeois members that were temporarily popular due to the fundamental uncertainty of the early twentieth century and, after a closer look, indeed deserved to be labeled as “irrational”.⁵⁶ In Romein’s analysis, the First World War marked the end for this naïve bourgeoisie idealism, that crushed the faith of most, if not all, of those odd prophets and their movements.⁵⁷

Romein’s analysis has been criticized by many historians since. In his article *Een hevig gewarrel. Humanitair idealisme en socialisme in Nederland rond de eeuwwisseling* (1991), Piet de Rooy discussed some of the ambiguities of Romein’s analysis. To De Rooy, it seemed odd that Romein retained his claim that the small faiths were mainly a bourgeoisie phenomenon, even though Romein himself pointed out that these movements appealed to all layers of society.⁵⁸ Another problem De Rooy recognized in Romein’s analysis was the

⁵¹ Piet de Rooy, “Een hevig gewarrel. Humanitair idealisme en socialisme in Nederland rond de Eeuwwisseling”, *BMGN, CVI (1991) afl. 4*, 625.

⁵² Jan Romein, *Op het breukvlak van twee eeuwen* (Em. Querido’s Uitgeverij, Amsterdam, 1976 (tweede druk). 2007; dbnl / erven Jan Romein en Annie Romein-Verschoor), 643, 648, 650.

⁵³ Romein, *Breukvlak*, 632.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 634, 650.

⁵⁵ De Rooy, “Een hevig gewarrel”, 625-626.

⁵⁶ Romein, *Breukvlak*, 632, 857.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 651.

⁵⁸ De Rooy, “Een hevig gewarrel”, 625.

overlap between many of the more metaphysically orientated small faiths and other, more or less radical social reform movements (as Romein had also pointed out himself as well). De Rooy argues that there are many examples of individuals who combined striving for social reform with active involvement with for example spiritism or theosophy.⁵⁹ A third point De Rooy made in *Een hevig gewarrel* was that Romein didn't seem to have any criteria to categorize the movements he considered to be 'small faiths'. To De Rooy, it seems that Romein, as a Marxist, perhaps tried too much to distance the early pioneers of social democracy from the odd and strange elements of fin-de-siècle history, in an attempt to cleanse the history of political socialism from undesirable elements that might compromise the reputation of the socialist ideal.⁶⁰ By naming the various occult and reformist movements of the fin-de-siècle 'small faiths', De Rooy argued, Romein conveniently distanced them from what he believed to be the two major ideologies (or 'big faiths') that really mattered to him: liberal-capitalism and Marxist-socialism. De Rooy argued that in the Netherlands, the boundaries between socialism and what Romein called 'small faiths' were not clearly demarcated and in fact often overlapped.⁶¹

To De Rooy, the various occult movements that Romein marked as small faiths were partly just contemporary manifestations of the timeless tendency of some humans to use mysticism to find meaningful interpretations of their lives; these sorts of mystic movements were at best more numerous during the fin-de-siècle due to the erosion of epistemological authority of Christian churches during the course of the nineteenth century.⁶² But more importantly, argued De Rooy, the majority of these movements were better interpreted as parts of a broader humanitarian movement that sought a more humane society and believed that the improvement of society could only be accomplished by changing human nature, something that was believed to be achievable only through individual change.⁶³ De Rooy argued in his article that despite initially condemning these 'humanitarian reform movements' as naïve bourgeoisie anarchism, many Dutch socialists during the early Twentieth century, for example, eventually realized that these social reformers were part of a broad humanitarian movement that was indeed an important social phenomenon and an important source of support for their socialist cause. Though initially juxtaposing these humanitarian reform

⁵⁹ De Rooy, "Een hevig gewarrel", 625.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 626.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 639-640.

⁶² *Ibidem*, 626.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

movements with their ‘scientific socialism’, the social-democrats of the SDAP (Social Democratic Labor Party) eventually opened their ranks to these odd folks that believed that, rather than changes in material circumstances, individual change and moral elevation were the keys to an improved society.⁶⁴

De Rooy’s *Een hevig gewarrel* marked a shift in the historical debate regarding movements such as the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands. Rather than odd and irrational escapism from a bourgeoisie class that was losing its grip on a fast-changing world, movements such as the Theosophical Society are nowadays interpreted by most current historians as humanitarian reform movements.⁶⁵ The advocates of these movements generally wished to fundamentally change human nature, rather than the material conditions of human society. Characteristic of the ideas and practices of these social reformers was their emphasis on personal development as a means of social change: a better world requires a better humanity, and a better humanity requires better individuals.⁶⁶ In her dissertation ‘*Het Humanitaire moment. Nederlandse intellectuelen, de Eerste Wereldoorlog en de crisis van de Europese beschaving (1914-1930)*’, Marjet Brolsma emphasized the importance of understanding these humanitarian movements as a broad, anti-rational social current.⁶⁷ Though the followers of the plurality of movements categorized as humanitarian movements often displayed strongly diverging worldviews and opinions, a common element of all these reformists was an “intense, optimistic desire for a regeneration of culture and a better, more ‘humane’ society”, as well as a strong aversion of the positivist materialism that dominated the contemporary intellectual climate.⁶⁸ Characteristic for these humanitarian reform movements, argued Brolsma, was a strong anti-materialist orientation and the belief that a spiritual revitalization of Western civilization was the only way out of the ‘perverse

⁶⁴ De Rooy, “Een hevig gewarrel”, 640.

⁶⁵ Some examples are: Leonieke Vermeer, “‘Als de tafel danst, dan wankelt de wetenschap’. De relatie tussen spiritisme en wetenschap in Nederland rond 1900.”, *Gerwina* 30 (2007), p.26-43; Amanda Kluvelde, *Reis door de hel der onschuldigen. De expressieve politiek van de Nederlandse anti-vivisectionisten, 1890-1940* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000); Ate Dirk Jan Verdonk, *Het Dierloze Gerecht. Een vegetarische geschiedenis*. (Amsterdam: Boom, 2009); Robbert-Jan Adriaansen, “Voorvechters van regeneratie. Geschiedenisbeeld en toekomstverwachtingen in de Praktische Idealisten Associatie (1919-1931)”, *Low Countries Historical Review*, Vol. 130-1 (2015), pp. 25-56; I. de Haan e.a., *Het eenzame gelijk*.

⁶⁶ I, de Haan e.a., *Het eenzame gelijk*, 12, 16.

⁶⁷ Marjet Brolsma, ‘*Het humanitaire moment*’. *Nederlandse intellectuelen, de Eerste Wereldoorlog en de crisis van de Europese beschaving (1914-1930)* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, (dissertation), 2015), 6.

⁶⁸ Brolsma, *Het humanitaire moment*, 6.

materialism' of the rationalized, disenchanted West.⁶⁹ And, rather than consisting of isolated, marginal groups that operated in a societal vacuum, humanitarian reformists were part of a wider interconnected network of cultural critics.⁷⁰ The humanitarian current consisted of individuals with highly eclectic worldviews, who were often part of multiple humanitarian reform movements – for example, spiritists that were also vegetarians, or religious-socialists who were also active advocates of abstinence.

Brolsma refuted Romein's notion that the First World War marked the end of the humanitarian reform movements. In her dissertation, she argues the opposite: World War I had a catalyzing effect and resulted in a growing popularity of the humanitarian faith in the moral improvement of humanity.⁷¹ Brolsma argued that two periods in the popularity of humanitarian reformism can be distinguished: the first 'humanitarian moment' around the fin-de-siecle of the nineteenth century, which was characterized by practical ideals (such as abstinence, vegetarianism, and anti-vivisectionism) and utopian experiments, and the second humanitarian moment during the 1920's, during which the ideal of a spiritual revival surpassed the practical orientation of the first humanitarian moment.⁷² This shift towards spirituality in the 1920's, argued Brolsma, was paradoxically accompanied by a politicization of many humanitarian movements. Besides increased engagement in anti-militarism, internationalism, and against political extremism, Brolsma recognized an increasing interrelationship between humanitarian reformists and social-democracy.⁷³ According to Brolsma, the post-war revival of humanitarian reformism ended around 1930. The increasingly polarized political climate, international tensions, threats of totalitarianism, and economic crisis disrupted the hopeful idealism and the 'neoromantic visions' of a new humanity and new civilization.⁷⁴ In this thesis, Brolsma's *Het Humanitaire Moment* will be a major source of inspiration for interpreting the T.S.N. Nevertheless, some aspects of the T.S.N. might give reason to, at least in part, reappraise Romein's 'small faiths'.

1.3.2 Theosophy in the Netherlands

⁶⁹ Brolsma, *Het humanitaire moment*, 7.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, 12.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, 11.

⁷² *Ibidem*, 8.

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, 9.

Although theosophy is often mentioned by historians listing examples of humanitarian reform movements, the amount of publications that focus specifically on theosophy in the Netherlands is limited. Nonetheless, there are some publications regarding the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands worth mentioning.

In 1988, Mario Gibbels wrote *De Theosofische Vereniging in Nederland 1880-1930*, a thesis which focused on the general history of the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands. Gibbels used Jan Romein's *Breukvlak* for explanations of the emergence of the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands, which, Gibbels argues, emerged during 'a period of oversaturation and decadence' of bourgeoisie culture, but also of neo-romanticism and naïve optimism that caused increasing attention for the subjective, the imagination, and the speculative – things he argued had been suppressed by the dominant discourse of positivist rationalism. Gibbels, in other words, interpreted the emergence of theosophy in the Netherlands as a rebellion against rationalism and bourgeoisie liberalism.⁷⁵ At the same time, Gibbels placed the emergence of theosophy in the Nineteenth century in a broader context of the Western Occult Revival, which he described as the reemergence of an occult tradition that had its origins in ancient Alexandria (during the first century CE) and since then had been a "constantly present" - though often hidden – cultural current in the West.⁷⁶ Clearly, Gibbels's thesis is an example of the earlier described Yates paradigm that dominated the historical debate regarding occultism at the time of Gibbels's writing (the 1980s), a discourse that, as illustrated in section 5 of this chapter, has been largely refuted since.

According to Gibbels, although the T.S.N. was a "small, marginal movement", it nonetheless enjoyed broad public attention and played an important role in the popularization of eastern religions and western esoteric ideas in the Netherlands.⁷⁷ Gibbels argued that the T.S.N. also played a role in the shift of Western religious life from orthodox dogmatism towards increased individualism and eclecticism and was an important agent in the process that caused the religious pluralism of the late Twentieth century.⁷⁸

The real value of Gibbels's thesis lies not in what he believed caused the emergence of the Theosophical Society, nor in his Yatesian interpretation of the T.S.N. as the revival of an

⁷⁵ M. Gibbels, *De Theosofische Vereniging in Nederland 1880-1930* (Nijmegen: Katholieke Universiteit Nijmegen, (unpublished thesis), 1988), 15.

⁷⁶ Gibbels, *De Theosofische Vereniging in Nederland* 4-5.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, 92.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, 94.

ancient occult tradition. Rather, *De Theosofische Vereniging in Nederland 1880-1930* is valuable because of his illustration of the history of the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands based on source material from the Society's archives. Initial doubt about the usefulness of Gibbels's history of the T.S.N. – due to his now questionable positioning in the historical debate – can be dispelled when taking into account later publications on the history of the T.S.N. by authors based on the same archival material.

One of these later publications is *Het Web der Schepping. Theosofie en Kunst in Nederland van Lauweriks tot Mondriaan* (2006) by M.T. Bax. In this interdisciplinary study (Although her main disciplinary focus is on Art History, her study contains elements of Social-Economic History, History of Ideas, and Sociology as well), Bax focused on the close relationship between modern theosophy and avant-garde artists in the Netherlands between 1880 and 1920. Although Bax's *Web der Schepping* mainly on how these 'theosophical' ideas were incorporated in the works of artists that in some way were connected to the T.S.N. (by personal membership, or through social acquaintances), Bax's extensive research into the history of the T.S.N. – as well as being the only recent academic publication regarding the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands, make *Web der Schepping* a significant publication with regards to this thesis.

Drawing inspiration from authors such as Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Bax argued that theosophy was part of a 'tradition of ideas' that have circulated in Western societies since at least the first century CE, connected to each other by the use of the same sources and ideas derived from them.⁷⁹ The modern theosophy of the Theosophical Society, Bax argued, is best interpreted as an eclectic paradigm that had its roots in various Western and non-Western esoteric, religious, and philosophical traditions.⁸⁰

Bax interpreted the T.S.N. as a 'tiny esoteric pillar' (existing next to the four major confessional/political pillars – Protestant, Catholic, Socialist, and Liberal - that arguably emerged during the modernization of the Netherlands during the Twentieth century). This tiny esoteric pillar formed a religiously liberal community characterized by a strong eclecticism, which prevented the Society from constructing a coherent outward identity (this

⁷⁹ Bax, *Het Web der Schepping*, 20.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, 44; It seems that, to Bax, any author whose ideas contained some mystic notion of humanity's divine nature could be categorized as a theosophical author, and could be considered a part of this "theosophical tradition". Bax for example connected Neoplatonian philosophers like Porphyrius with Isaac Newton, Spinoza, Swedenborg, Bolland and Blavatsky. Whether this labelling is arbitrarily anachronistic or not might be an interesting topic of debate, but is outside the scope of this thesis.

strong eclectic orientation of the T.S.N. was not only accepted but actively promoted by the theosophical leadership).⁸¹ Bax stated that the T.S.N. is best understood as a counter-cultural movement that sought to improve society through individual change and personal development.⁸² While Bax states that this focus on personal development was used by some Dutch theosophists to justify an ‘otherworldly’ worldview that was out of touch with societal reality, others used it as inspiration for an attitude of societal engagement and responsibility (for example theosophical factory managers of the Gist & Spiritusfabriek in Delft, the Van Nellefabriek in Rotterdam, and the factory Stork in Hengelo).⁸³ Bax argued that the T.S.N. can, mostly, be characterized as a bourgeoisie civilizing project that (out of dissatisfaction with the lack of (spiritual) fulfillment in bourgeoisie circles and the belief that only the upper levels of society had the social authority to initiate societal change), aimed to elevate society through a top-down promotion of spiritual revitalization and religious tolerance.⁸⁴

1.3.3 Theosophy and social engagement

A less often mentioned publication by Joy Dixon – *Divine Feminine: theosophy and feminism in England* (Baltimore, 2001) – focussed specifically on the reciprocal relationship between the Theosophical Society and feminist movements in Nineteenth and Twentieth century England. In this work, Dixon posited the claim that a “...feminist spirituality was a crucial component of much feminist politics, and it was one of the sites at which feminist politics... was constituted and transformed.”⁸⁵ While carefully noting that suggesting that religious concerns were the main motivating force behind progressive social movements like feminism and socialism would be preposterous, she does emphasize that the political and social engagement of ‘alternative spirituality’ –occultism – should not be overlooked.⁸⁶ According to Dixon, the development of emphasizing the ‘spiritual self’ which became a dominant trait of most alternative religions during the second half of the twentieth century was largely inspired by the Theosophical Society, who shifted to this ‘self-spirituality’ during the decade

⁸¹ Bax, *Het Web der Schepping*, 33-34.

⁸² *Ibidem*, 34.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, 34.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 128.

⁸⁵ Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 3.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, 232.

before World War II.⁸⁷ This individualized notion of the spiritual self could not only coexist with expansive social and political projects but could, according to Dixon, indirectly have played a significant role in individual, subjective perceptions of empowerment among historical subjects who were both members of occult societies and progressive social movements such as feminist or socialist organizations.⁸⁸

Two recently (2017) published articles further explore the empowering role of occult spirituality in identity-formation in fin-de-siècle France and early twentieth century Britain respectively – both in relation to socialists. In his article *Occultist Identity Formations Between Theosophy and Socialism in fin-de-siècle France* (2017), Julian Strube focusses on the entanglement of socialism and occultism in France. He stated that *fin-de-siècle* occultists were ‘deeply involved’ in socialist movements and that certain strands of socialism were characterized by “...outspokenly religious and “spiritualist” identities.”⁸⁹

Strube recognizes a shift of interest in socialist movements in France: after the failed revolutions of 1848, many socialists turned to occultism.⁹⁰ According to Strube, the failed revolutions inspired a revitalized interest in ‘old-school’ socialist criticism of materialism, atheism or egoism, which explained why they were drawn to occultism.⁹¹ Vice versa, many French occultists used socialism to demark their identity. According to these occultists, the original doctrine of Jesus Christ represented the essence of socialism which was lost “...by the degenerated Churches, it had only survived in esoteric form and would now have to be rediscovered in order to create the ideal social order...”⁹² Nevertheless, Strube stresses the notion that this reciprocal relation between occultism and socialism was not shared by all socialist or occult movements in France.⁹³ His article speaks of strong and enduring polemics regarding this ‘spiritualization’ of socialism, which did not find widely accepted consensus.⁹⁴ This enduring polemics notwithstanding, Strube concludes that occultism did have a profound influence on certain socialist groups in fin-de-siècle France.

⁸⁷ Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 232-233.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, 233.

⁸⁹ Strube, “Occultist Identity Formations”, 571.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 582.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, 583.

⁹² *Ibidem*.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, 584.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, 585.

The second article focusing on the relation between occultism and socialism is Keith Gildart's *Séance Sitters, Ghost Hunters, Spiritualists, and Theosophists: Esoteric Belief and Practice in the British Parliamentary Labour Party, c1929—51*. In this article, Gildart states that occultism empowered particular strands of British socialism and underpinned the political activism of Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) members.⁹⁵ Occult movements like Spiritualism (a variant of Spiritism) and Theosophy "informed a socialism which was critical of the limitations of the materialism that had become dominant on the British left."⁹⁶ To spiritual socialists, spiritualism had the moral power to effect revolutionary changes, as opposed to materialist socialism, which was viewed as lacking the power to inspire people to achieve fundamental societal change.⁹⁷

Gildart explores the political lives of several British MP's to illustrate the significant influence Spiritualism had on their political decisions. Interestingly, Gildart states that while Spiritualism was an important factor for the popularity of certain MP's among the working class, theosophy had a less populist, more elitist and exclusive image. Socialist theosophist had a more hierarchical view of brotherhood and took "a paternalistic attitude" towards the masses, who remained ignorant and lacked spiritual enlightenment.⁹⁸ Still, theosophical critiques of materialist worldviews and messages of spiritual development for humanity resonated with growing disappointment of mainstream socialism and growing critiques of materialism among many socialists. The theosophical idea of a 'universal brotherhood' on a spiritual level strongly resonated with the more 'earthly' socialist idea of universal brotherhood.⁹⁹ British socialists that sought to construct a non-materialistic socialism turned partially to theosophy for answers: "socialists saw in theosophy a form of spiritual unity that was needed to underpin the economic basis of a more just society."¹⁰⁰ However, the emphasize of theosophists on abstract subjects like astral projection, Atlantis or hidden Masters of wisdom gave it less appeal to the working class than spiritualists, who were focused on more 'concrete' phenomena like ghosts and seances.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Gildart, "Séance Sitters, Ghost Hunters", 7.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, 12.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 21.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, 23.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, 21, 23.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, 10, 27.

1.3.4 Innovative aspects

There are several aspects of this thesis's focus that can contribute to the historical debate regarding humanitarian reform movements in general, and the historiography regarding the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands specifically.

In *Het Humanitaire Moment*, Marjet Brolsma stated that in the Netherlands theosophists have been the most influential of all the occult movements during the fin-de-siècle and the 1920s.¹⁰² A research into the ideas regarding the role that Dutch theosophists envisioned for themselves might shed light on the motivations behind this influence. In addition, Brolsma argued that the humanitarian idealists of the humanitarian reform movements have had significant contributions to the cultural and anti-modernity discourse in the Netherlands. The Dutch theosophists that between around 1900 and 1930 debated ideas regarding the relationship between occultism, social engagement, social responsibility, and the role of occult spirituality in society were also 'forgotten spokespersons of the humanitarian movement' (as Brolsma called humanitarian idealists) that, as a whole, significantly influenced the counter-cultural discourse of the Netherlands both before and after WWII.¹⁰³ This research will contribute to the historiography regarding humanitarian reform movements and the modernization of the Netherlands by exploring a yet unexplored theme: theosophy and social engagement.

As pointed out in section 1.2.2 of this chapter, the only two academic publications focusing on the T.S.N. are Mario Gibbels's thesis *De Theosofische Vereniging in Nederland 1880-1930* (1988) and Martine Bax's *Het Web der Schepping. Theosofie en Kunst in Nederland van Lauweriks tot Mondriaan* (2006). *Het Web der Schepping* provides a detailed history of the early T.S.N., but Bax's detailed account of this history ends around 1910 and provides only a brief sketch of the general developments within the Society after 1910. Although Gibbels's *De Theosofische Vereniging* focused on the general history of the T.S.N. between 1880 and 1930, he too provided only a brief history of the T.S.N. and mainly focused on the most well-known aspects of the history of theosophy – the early years of the Society and the history regarding Jidda Krishnamurti and the propagated coming of a World Teacher. In other words: there seems to be a gap in the historiography of the T.S.N. Although both *Het*

¹⁰² Brolsma, *Het humanitaire moment*, 129.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*, 12; Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 42-43.

Web der Schepping and *De Theosofische Vereniging* provide only brief sketches of the history of the T.S.N. between 1910 and 1930, their findings are further indication for the notion of a gap in the historiography about the T.S.N. Bax stated, for example, that there are strong indications (based on, amongst others, her analysis of theosophical art and artists) that the demarcation-lines between the Theosophical Society and other idealistic movements were increasingly blurred in the decades before the Second World War.¹⁰⁴ She expected that during these decades there was increased cross-pollination between for example theosophists and socialist groups, but no empirical research has been done yet to explore this expectation.

Gibbels's *De Theosofische Vereniging* provides further indication that there is a gap in historiography regarding the T.S.N. Without going into detail, he stated, for example, that there were indications that from around 1908 onwards, an increasing amount of Dutch theosophists articulated their wishes for more practical implications of theosophy and more emphasis on social engagement, which led to heated debates amongst Dutch theosophists.¹⁰⁵ Both Gibbels's and Bax's publications suggest that there is indeed a gap in the historiography regarding the T.S.N.: the relationship between theosophy and social engagement as discussed by Dutch theosophists between 1908 and 1930. The debates regarding this relationship seem to have been overshadowed by the developments surrounding Krishnamurti, the 'Order of the Star in the East' (an organization, closely related to the Theosophical Society, that focused on propagating the coming of a World Teacher), and the resulting decline of the T.S.N.¹⁰⁶ An important contribution of this thesis to the historiography of the T.S.N. in particular, and the historiography of humanitarian reform movements in general is to fill the historiographical gap regarding the relationship between theosophy and social engagement. The discussed articles by Julian Strube and Keith Gildart, as well as Joy Dixon's *Divine Feminine*, further illustrate the relevance of this thesis's focus on theosophist's perspectives on social engagement.

1.4 Methodology

¹⁰⁴ Bax, *Web der Schepping*, 17.

¹⁰⁵ Gibbels, *De Theosofische Vereniging*, 58.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, 60-64; Catherine Wessinger, "The Second Generation Leaders of the Theosophical Society (Adyar), in: *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 38-40.

This thesis will focus on the ideas of Dutch theosophists about social engagement and social responsibility as parts of the role of a theosophist in society, and on how these ideas changed over the course of time. The research presented in this thesis will be a qualitative research: qualitative research methods are used to analyze ideas regarding social engagement and responsibility as expressed by Dutch theosophists, which entails exploring and analyzing the discourse of Dutch theosophists. A discourse can be defined as ‘a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world’.¹⁰⁷ This research, in other words, will analyze the particular way in which Dutch theosophists expressed their ideas about a specific part of their understanding of the world: their perceptions of the relationship between social engagement, social responsibility, and being a theosophist. To analyze the discourse of Dutch theosophists regarding social engagement and responsibility, this research will make use of a selection of source material. This source material can be divided into two main categories: material from the International Institute for Social History, and articles from *Theosophia*, the official monthly magazine of the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands. Since this research focuses on the views Dutch theosophists, it is primarily concerned with the writings of Dutch theosophists and will only use writings by international theosophists by exception (for example speeches held by international theosophists in the Netherlands).

The first category of source material used in this research consists of material from the International Institute for Social History (IISG). The majority of sources from the IISG used in this thesis are books written by Dutch theosophists for both a theosophical and broader public. In addition to the material from the IISG, some material from the database *Delpher* will be used as well.

The second category of primary source material used for this research consists of articles published in *Theosophia*, the monthly magazine of the T.S.N. Besides verbal contact during meetings, *Theosophia* was the primary medium to exchange ideas for members of the Society which makes it a valuable source of information for my research.¹⁰⁸ It is likely that the period between 1897 and 1930 encompassed multiple generations of theosophists. On top of that, the T.S.N. was characterized by a constant coming and going of people. *Theosophia*, as the official medium for theosophists to discuss their ideas, was the platform where all these theosophists, whether long-term or short-term members, old generation or new, expressed their views on issues related to theosophy. In this research, *Theosophia* will, therefore, be the

¹⁰⁷ Marianne Jørgensen and Louise Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 1.

¹⁰⁸ Bax, *Het Web der Schepping*, 30.

guiding principle in analyzing the theosophical discourse and detecting developments and changes in that discourse over time.

Due to the sizable amount of material from the magazine, sample years have been used to select specific volumes as preliminary guidelines, to gain a general overview of developments within the discourse of Dutch theosophists. The sample years function as a guideline to explore and analyze the discourse of Dutch theosophists, but articles from other volumes will be used as well. The selected sample years have been chosen based on developments that are expected to have sparked debate amongst Dutch theosophists regarding social developments and engagement (although, as mentioned, these sample years will function as guidelines and additional volumes will be used when necessary).

- 1897: the founding year of the Dutch Theosophical Society. The founding year of the T.S.A. was selected to explore to what extent Dutch theosophists wrote about social reform and engagement during the foundational period of the Society.

- 1906: the year Annie Besant became president of the international Theosophical Society Adyar. Before becoming a theosophist, Besant was a well-known socialist and actively involved in the labor movement, the suffrage movement, and other social reform movements. Her appointment as the head of the international theosophical body marks the shift in emphasis the Theosophical Society took towards a more progressive millennialism; theosophy became relatively more rooted in contemporary society, as opposed to the more abstract theosophy of H.P. Blavatsky.¹⁰⁹

- 1909: the founding year of the Sociaal-Democratische Arbeidspartij (SDAP). Since theosophical authors in the magazine *Theosophia* wrote about a wide variety of subjects including contemporary political, it can be expected that the founding of the SDAP drew the attention of said authors.

- 1913: during the general elections of 1913, the SDAP made universal suffrage a key issue in their electoral campaign. Even though the SDAP suffered an electoral defeat (by the hands of the liberals), the intensified public promotion of universal suffrage was likely a subject of debate in *Theosophia*.¹¹⁰

- 1917: the Bolshevik October-revolution in Russia. The 1917 revolutions in Russia had a profound influence on international socialism specifically, and social reform movements in

¹⁰⁹ Hammer, Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 33-34.

¹¹⁰ Erik Hansen en Peter A. Prosper, "Transformation and Accommodation in Dutch Socialism: PJ Troelstra and Social Democratic Political Theory, 1894-1914", *European History Quarterly* 27, nr. 4 (1997), 496.

general. For some socialists, the revolutions inspired to strive for revolution within the borders of their own nations. For other socialists, however, the radical aspects of Bolshevik-socialism were alarming and for them, the revolutions inspired reorientation towards non-materialism.¹¹¹

- 1918: the failed 'Troelstra-revolution' in the Netherlands. The Troelstra-revolution can be expected to have inspired Dutch theosophists to devote articles to their respective perspectives on various forms of social reform. Additionally, the communist revolutions in Germany will most likely have sparked debates in *Theosophia* about socialism and social reform in general.

- 1923: during this year, the SDAP organized widely supported protests against the 'Vlootwet', a government initiative to modernize the Dutch Marine during a time in which budgets for social services were cut.¹¹² The anti-militaristic protests were massively supported, and it is expected that these protests inspired authors in *Theosophia* to discuss subjects such as anti-militarism, as well as the influence of the SDAP and socialism on Dutch society in general.

- 1929: the founding of the International Committee for Religious-Socialism. The International Committee for Religious-Socialism was an international body for the promotion of international contact between groups which combined religious worldviews with forms of socialist ideology.¹¹³ This might have been a matter of specific interest to authors in *Theosophia*, particularly regarding the debates about the relationship between religion and social engagement.

¹¹¹ Brolsma, *Het humanitaire moment*, 136.

¹¹² *Ibidem*, 24.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*, 68.

Chapter 2. ‘Rediscovering’ the occult.

“Members of the Theosophical Society present here: if we wish to speak of gratitude, of devotion, of love, of reverence, let then our work be a witness in the future; let those who come after us reap the fruits of our clarifying findings and unified work. So be it!”¹

With these words, W.B. Fricke ended his speech at the commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Theosophical Society Adyar – an occult international Society with national branches all over the Western world. One of these national branches was the ‘Theosophical Society in the Netherlands’, whose members Fricke was addressing in his commemoration speech on the 17th of November 1900. Fricke, the secretary of the T.S.N. and chairman of the theosophical lodge of Amsterdam, opened the commemoration ceremony at the headquarters of the Society with an apparently uplifting spirit, with “great gratitude.... and confidence in the future.”² What is it, one might wonder, that Fricke was thankful for? To what did the members of his Society owe gratitude, love, and reverence? Also, what did Fricke mean with the ‘work’ and ‘findings’ with which the theosophists ought to show their gratitude and devotion? In one way or another, these questions are all related to a more general question: what does it mean to be a theosophist? Most members, around the time of Fricke’s speech, would be unable to give an unambiguous answer to this question. It had been only three years since the official founding of the Dutch branch of the international Theosophical Society, and most of the people present had joined only recently.³ In their efforts to formulate what it is to be a theosophist, members of the T.S.N. looked both to the past and to their present day for answers. Could Rembrandt be seen as a theosophist? Was Lao Tzu one? What about Plato? What role did the theosophical ideology play in historical developments? And which role should it play in their current societies? Was being a theosophist about the pursuit of knowledge, or was it about the active improvement of the societies around them? These kinds of questions seemed to have been important to the members of the T.S.N. in the early years of their Society’s existence. The following chapter will explore the kind of answers that Dutch

¹ Redactie, “Enkele grepen uit de geschiedenis der Theosofische Beweging in Nederland. Toespraak gehouden op den gedenkdag van het 25 jarig bestaan der Theosofische Vereeniging, in de feestelijke bijeenkomst, daarvoor te Amsterdam gehouden op 17 November 1900”, *Theosophia* 9 (sept 1900 – Oktober 1900), No.5, 436.

² Redactie, “Enkele grepen uit”, 429.

³ Bax, *Web der Schepping*, 16.

theosophists formulated in relation to these questions and pay particular attention to the way the role of theosophy in society was imagined.

Central to this chapter is the following question: ‘how did Dutch theosophists envision their role in society, during their initial orientations on identity between 1897 and 1910?’ This chapter will begin with exploring the role(s) Dutch theosophists imagined for themselves in society during the early years after the founding of the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands. Secondly, this chapter will explore how Dutch theosophists viewed the modern society in which they lived. Thirdly, this chapter will consider to what extent the initial formulations of theosophical identity changed due to growing popularity and an increase of membership of the Theosophical Society. After having explored said themes, this chapter will conclude by answering the central question of this chapter.

2.1 The Theosophical Society Adyar

The Theosophical Society in the Netherlands was, as mentioned, a national branch of the international Theosophical Society Adyar (T.S.A.). This Society was founded in 1875 by an informal New York-based study group focused on practical occultism, supernatural phenomena, and other esoteric topics, on the initiative of the Russian medium Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) and the former US-army colonel and lawyer Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907). The main objective of the early Theosophical Society (T.S.) was the promotion of occult research through the scientific study of supernatural phenomena and esoteric religion, ‘to collect and diffuse a knowledge of the laws which govern the universe’ (something Olcott referred to as ‘Divine Science’).⁴ While Olcott was appointed as the Society’s president, Blavatsky functioned as the charismatic figurehead and, thanks to Blavatsky, the Society soon enjoyed substantial publicity. Under the influence of Blavatsky, the T.S. began to focus on ‘occult training’, particularly in astral travel (supposedly the ability to travel outside the physical body with the ‘astral body’, or consciousness, and traverse around the universe unbound by physical limitations), and adopted a quasi-masonic organizational model of initiation degrees and secrecy.⁵ In 1877, Blavatsky formulated the early theoretical foundations of what came to be known as modern theosophy in her first

⁴ Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Editor). *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*. Vol.2 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2005), 1115.

⁵ Hammer, Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 19-20; Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 100.

book, *Isis Unveiled*, whose over 1300 pages argued - based on a highly eclectic mix of mythology, esoteric ideas, Oriental religion, and modern scientific theories (particularly Darwinism and the infant psychological discipline) - that most problems of the world were caused by the divergence between science and religion, and that occultism was the ultimate synthesis that would reconcile the two.⁶

In 1878, Blavatsky and Olcott departed on a propaganda tour throughout the Western world to promote their theosophical ideas and expand the influence of the Society, which soon led to the installation of national branches of the Society in multiple Western countries (such as Great Britain, France, and Germany). The propaganda tour brought Blavatsky and Olcott to Chennai (Adyar) in India, where they settled on an estate that would become the international headquarters for the T.S. The T.S. was renamed the Theosophical Society Adyar and was reorganized as the international umbrella organization for the various national theosophical societies that had been inaugurated. While the ideas of the early T.S. were mainly based on Western and Oriental esotericism (e.g. Kabbalah, Egyptian mythology, Gnosticism, Hermetic philosophy, and Alchemy), the move to India was paired with a shift towards Eastern esotericism, particularly esoteric Hinduism and Buddhism. This discourse shift was amplified in Blavatsky's second work, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), which contained a strong anti-Christian tone and emphasized an idealized image of India as the cradle of all religion⁷. In *The Secret Doctrine*, Blavatsky provided an outline of what would become the main dogma's of the T.S.A., most notably the notion of a process of spiritual evolution through a complex series of Root Races and Sub-races - through which souls, under the influence of karma and reincarnation, evolved from 'lower' beings to 'higher beings' - and the idea of the 'White Lodge of Adepts' - beings of higher spiritual development that guided the spiritual evolution of humanity.⁸

While the early T.S. was strongly orientated on spiritism (which was to be studied scientifically), the Society eventually ceased this orientation after the publication of a report on the T.S.A. in 1885 by the Society for Physical Research, that marked Blavatsky as a fraud. Although the T.S.A. officially denounced its orientation on occult practices, Blavatsky established a new organization in 1888 called the 'Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society' (ES), which would supposedly form a secret theosophical elite whose primary

⁶ Hammer, Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 20.

⁷ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 41.

⁸ Hammer, Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 26.

purpose was to provide esoteric training to a selection of Blavatsky disciples.⁹ The public turn away from practical occultism was paired by the altering of the objectives of the Society, most notably the raising of the goal to form “a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity” to first place. In the years after the move to India, the increased focus on Eastern religion, as well as the growing anti-Spiritism, caused growing tensions in the T.S.A. which resulted in a series of separations from the T.S.A. and the inauguration of alternative theosophical organizations.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the T.S.A. continued to expand its activities throughout the Western world and eventually inspired the establishment of a national branch in the Netherlands in 1897 by a small group of enthusiasts.

2.2 The task of the theosophist

In the short history leading up to the commemoration of the twenty-fifth anniversary, the Theosophical Society Adyar steadily grew from a small New York-based group of enthusiasts into an international Society with steadily growing membership numbers. It was, according to the earlier mentioned W.B. Fricke, through “hard work and efforts” that the ideas of theosophy steadily spread throughout countries such as the Netherlands.¹¹ What did Fricke mean by this “work”? And to what end was this work endeavored? Bearing in mind that the T.S.N. officially welcomed people from all backgrounds and was a highly eclectic Society with wide diversity amongst its members, did other theosophists share Fricke’s view on what it meant to be a theosophist? Or did they ascribe different means and ends to their role as members of the T.S.N.? In other words: what, according to different members of the T.S.N., did it mean to be a theosophist? The next section will explore the various ways in which members of the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands formulated their views on the role of a theosophist and the goals a theosophist should work towards. Was there unanimity? Or did the views differ? And what should happen, might the goals be *reached*?

2.2.1 Pioneering propaganda

⁹ Hanegraaff, *Dictionary*, 1117-1119.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 1114.

¹¹ Redactie, “Enkele grepen uit”, 437.

W.B. Fricke describes the work that members of the Theosophical Society undertake as two-sided: on the one hand, there is the outward promotion of theosophical thought in society, and on the other, there is the “introspective labor through study and work”.¹² This, according to Fricke, was the role of the theosophist in society: to study theosophy and to spread awareness about the results of the studies. And the small group of Dutch theosophists seemed to have embraced these tasks with enthusiasm and diligence. In May 1892, the group founded the magazine *Theosophia*, dedicated to the study of theosophical ideas and the promotion of theosophical knowledge in the Dutch public sphere.¹³ The first issues of the magazine were sent to members of Dutch society that were expected to be interested in new ideas about religion – protestant preachers, Catholic pastors, intellectuals and others with an open-minded reputation.¹⁴

Initially, the content of the magazine consisted mainly of Dutch translations of important theosophical works such as Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), A.P. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), translations from *The Theosophist* – the magazine of the international Theosophical Society Adyar which saw its first edition in 1879, and other works by international theosophists.¹⁵ The magazine *Theosophia* was published by the theosophical publishing house that had been established a year before in 1891 – ‘De Theosofische Uitgeverij’ (‘The Theosophical Publishing Agency’). The main goals of this publishing house were to gather, translate and distribute all sorts of theosophical literature, as well as genres with links to theosophy (such as spiritism, astrology, yoga, and other forms of ‘occult knowledge’).¹⁶ The Society also actively propagandized their ideas and activities in local and national newspapers.¹⁷ While some articles provided brief introductions to theosophical thought or promoted newly published literature, most of the messages published in newspapers were notifications and invitations for public lectures organized by members of the Society.¹⁸ Topics of discussion during the lectures varied from general introductions to theosophy to discussions about reincarnation, karma and other spiritual ideas,

¹² Redactie, “Enkele grepen uit”, 434.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 433.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*; Bax, *Web der Schepping*, 123-124.

¹⁵ Bax, *Web der Schepping*, 122; Hammer, Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 20, 22, 24.

¹⁶ Redactie, “De Theosofische Beweging. Nederlandsche Afdeeling. De vierde samenkomst.”, *Theosophia* 8 (Mei 1900- Augustus 1900), 53.

¹⁷ Bax, *Web der Schepping*, 123.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*; See for example: ‘Wat is theosofie?’, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 29 november 1891.

as well as the potential role of theosophy in society.¹⁹ The public lectures - which were organized once every month - seemed to have been well-visited occasions: attendance at meetings in 1894 was around a hundred, the next year already it was several hundred, and this number kept increasing.²⁰ The public lectures organized by the T.S.N. were initially held at the theosophical lodge in Amsterdam but were soon moved to bigger buildings such as the Frascati and the Odeon theaters, and the buildings of the 'Society for the Common Good' and the 'Free Congregation', because of the growing attendance.²¹ Though renting a theater by private organizations was and is common practice, it is interesting to note that the buildings of the 'Society for the Common Good' and the 'Free Congregation' were also central locations for activities and propaganda by anarchist and socialist groups.²²

In only a few years after the founding of the first official Dutch theosophical lodge in 1891, the small group (initially consisting of six) theosophists in the Netherlands succeeded in establishing a publishing house for theosophical literature, founded and successfully maintained a magazine dedicated to the promotion and study of theosophy, translated many works from French and English to Dutch, organized well-attended monthly public lectures, and regularly published articles and advertisements in national newspapers. All these efforts to promote theosophy in Dutch society must have demanded significant amounts of time and attention, as well as notable financial investments. Members of the T.S.N. seemed to have had easy access to the number of resources (in both time and money) necessary to successfully initiate and maintain such an array of activities with an initially small group of individuals. It is not surprising, then, that most of the early members of the T.S.N. were members of bourgeois class families with notable access to wealth and influence.²³ Sophie Obreen-toe Laer, one of the first people to join the lodge in Amsterdam, was sister-in-law to the chief editor of the national newspaper *De Telegraaf*, a useful family connection for the public promotion of theosophy.²⁴ Other early members of the T.S.N. had similar social positions, for example, the marquises Catharina van Immerzeel, and Hermance de Neufville - who was married to Abraham Cornelis de Neufville, financial director of the Royal Dutch Bayern

¹⁹ 'Advertentie', *De Telegraaf*, 11 april 1899.

²⁰ Bax, *Web der Schepping*, 124.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*, 123.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

Brewery.²⁵ Most of the early members of the T.S.N. were members of the emerging Dutch middle class, the higher bourgeois class, and the nobility.²⁶

2.2.2 Introspective labor and work

While the early members of the T.S.N. seemed to have dedicated significant amounts of time, attention and financial resources to the ‘outwards’ work of propagandizing theosophical thought in contemporary Dutch society, Fricke also mentions the other aspect of the role of a theosophist: the “introspective labor through study and work”.²⁷ This ‘introspective labor’ can be divided into two categories: the study of religions, philosophy and other ideas that were thought to be manifestations of divine wisdom, and introspective spiritual practices to facilitate ‘spiritual growth’ and personal virtuous development, such as meditation.²⁸

Underlying the ‘introspective work’ of a theosophist was the idea that all religions of humanity were initially based on revelations of theosophy, which were disclosed to ‘Great Teachers’ by the mysterious ‘White Lodge of Adepts’.²⁹ These great teachers supposedly were the founders of the major religions of the world (Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus).³⁰ According to theosophists such as J.W. Boissevain, this ‘White Lodge of Adepts’ had, over the millennia of human history, chosen representatives who unveiled parts of divine wisdom to a certain people in a certain time.³¹ Most theosophists believed that the same, hidden truth formed the basis of all the great religions. With the passing of time, the initial revelations might have been distorted due to institutionalization and dogmatization, but the

²⁵ Bax, *Web der Schepping*, 121.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 128.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 434.

²⁸ J.W. Boissevain, “Tets over de mystiek der Middeleeuwen. Voordracht gehouden in de Amsterdamsche loge der Nederlandsche Afdeeling T.V. op 6 Februari 1900.”, *Theosophia* 9 (mei 1900 – augustus 1900), 230; M. Reepmaker, “Eenzaamheid, Plicht, Liefde. Toespraak gehouden ter gelegenheid der opening van het lokaal van de Rotterdamsche Loge der Theosofische Vereeniging op 24 September 1900.”, *Theosophia* 9, No.5, 358.

²⁹ Boissevain, “Tets over de Mystiek der Middeleeuwen”, 230.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 231; Notably absent in the list of great religious teachers is Mohammed, the founder of Islam. Although some theosophists did include Mohammed in their list of ‘Great Teachers’, most theosophists generally did not mention Mohammed as part of these prophets of divine wisdom [See: P. de Heer, “Islam als Volksgeloof”, *Theosophia* 9 (deel 3, september 1900 – december 1900), 343-355.].

³¹ Boissevain, “Tets over de Mystiek der Middeleeuwen”, 230.

‘revealed truth’ was thought to still have been embedded in the religions, especially in the mystic and esoteric traditions of the world.³² By engaging in the comparative study of the religions and finding elements shared by all religions, theosophists hoped to uncover this hidden truth.³³ This, it was believed, would result in a greater understanding of theosophy and therefore of reality. The theosophical work of studying religions and other assumed manifestations of theosophy was deemed one of the essential tasks of the theosophist. In what became the final version of the official goals of the T.S.N., it was incorporated as the second goal: “to promote the comparative study of religion, philosophy, and science”.³⁴

The way theosophists executed this studying labor differed strongly. The earlier mentioned dr. J.W. Boissevain worked as a teacher of literature, history, and geography at a gymnasium and was likely an academically schooled man.³⁵ Boissevain generally used footnotes and clear references to works of other theosophists, but also to non-theosophical authors. Many of the authors Boissevain referred to had academic titles, an indication of both Boissevain’s schooling, as well as his approach towards the study of theosophy as a serious scholarly endeavor.³⁶ Other Dutch authors in *Theosophia* seem to have had a similar approach to the study of theosophy as being an intellectual endeavor – the study of written texts.

Some theosophists, however, also relied on other forms of epistemology, such as ‘channeling’ (i.e. receiving knowledge mentally through spiritual revelation). During a speech held at the theosophical lodge in Amsterdam in 1900, Charles Webster Leadbeater spoke about the knowledge he acquired in one his previous lives.³⁷ Leadbeater was one of the leading figures of the international Theosophical Society Adyar and claimed to be an accomplished clairvoyant who had telepathic contact with the White Lodge of Adepts.³⁸ In a review of Leadbeater’s *White and Black magic*, S. van West – a co-editor of *Theosophia*.

³² Boissevain, “Iets over de Mystiek der Middeleeuwen”, 230.

³³ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 14.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ <https://www.genealogieonline.nl/stamboom-boissevain/I421.php>. 31-3-2017.; Ruud Jansen, ‘Een kern van broederschap...’ *100 jaar Theosofische Vereniging in Nederland* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij der Theosofische Vereniging in Nederland, 1991), 81.

³⁶ In “Iets over de Mystiek der Middeleeuwen.”, Boissevain refers for example to dr. A. Pierson, dr. A.A. van Otterloo, dr. J. te Winkel and dr. G. Kalff, which were in one way or another affiliated with Dutch academic life (e.g. dr. G. Kalff was professor of Dutch literature and history at the Universiteit Leiden).

³⁷ C.W. Leadbeater (translated by J.J. Hallo jr.), *De Oude Mysterien. Voordracht gehouden in de Amsterdamsche Loge der Theosofische Vereeniging, op 17 April 1900.*, *Theosophia* 9 (mei 1900 – augustus 1900), 29.

³⁸ Hammer, Rothstein, *Handbook of the theosophical current*, 26, 29.

writes that the author “undoubtedly” illustrates with proficiency how a “Mage with well-controlled mindpower can master the forces of nature for visually noticeable practices... something known by us ‘theoretically’ [quotation marks part of the citation]”.³⁹ With this somewhat hesitant language use, Van West seems to create some distance between the practical ‘magic’ Leadbeater wrote about and his own experience.

This seemingly ‘reserved’ attitude regarding ‘occult practices’ seems to have been shared by other Dutch theosophists, at least among those involved with publishing articles in *Theosophia* between 1900 and 1906. The volumes used for the analysis of this chapter do contain articles about clairvoyance, past lives, and other occult practices, but these articles are translations from works written by foreign theosophists such as Leadbeater. Most of the articles in *Theosophia* written by Dutch theosophists seem to make use of more ‘regular’ epistemology, which seems to indicate that Dutch theosophists were generally more occupied with the theosophy that was ‘hidden’ in written sources, rather than that which was transmitted through revelation.⁴⁰ When writing about occult practices, most Dutch theosophists - at least in *Theosophia* - seem willing to believe in the reality of the practices but restrain from writing about their personal experiences with the occult.

There is, however, another possible explanation for the apparent ‘lack’ of occult revelation as an epistemological foundation for publications in *Theosophia* between 1900 and 1914. As mentioned earlier, the ‘Esoteric Section’ of the Theosophical Society Adyar was founded as an inner circle of theosophists who were deemed to be more developed spiritually.⁴¹ This elite group of occultists was supposed to be the ‘esoteric’ core of the Society, while the Theosophical Society Adyar and its national offshoots were meant to be the ‘exoteric’, or publicly visible, body of the Society.⁴² The members of the Esoteric Section of the Society supposedly were an elite selection of theosophists who proved to be worthy of

³⁹ S.v.W. “Boekbespreking. Witte en Zwarte Tooverij, door C.W. Leadbeater.”, *Theosophia* 15 deel A (mei 1906 – oktober 1906), 311; http://www.iapsop.com/archive/materials/theosophist/theosophist_v30_n11_aug_1909.pdf [*The Theosophist* Vol. XXX, No.11, 646.

⁴⁰ An example of this search for theosophy through study – which bears resemblances with efforts of Jewish Kabbalists to search for the ‘true, hidden meaning’ of the religious texts of Judaism – is Johan van Manen’s “Tao Te King door Lao Tsze. Een Nederlandsche benadering.”, *Theosophia* 9 ((mei 1900 – April 1901), 24. In a series of articles, van Manen provides a ‘theosophical’ reading of the Taoist text. Through this close reading of the Tao Te King, van Manen illustrates how, according to him, the text contains a hidden meaning that reveals itself to those initiated into the mystical traditions of theosophists throughout the millennia.

⁴¹ Hammer, Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 27.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

initiation into the true body of the Society. The Dutch theosophists involved with this ‘secret’ inner circle (such as De Neufville) would have probably restrained from writing about subjects they deemed unworthy for fellow theosophists in a magazine that was accessible those theosophists, and even to non-theosophists.⁴³

Though Dutch theosophists generally seemed to have had their reservations regarding some of the ‘introspective’ roles a theosophist could fulfill, most Dutch theosophists seemed to agree that the role of a theosophist entailed more than just intellectual endeavors. P. Pieters jr. – a novelist and writer of children’s books, for example, noted that it was a very ‘Western tendency’ to subject every encountered phenomenon to critical scientific inquiry.⁴⁴ Westerners, in Pieters’s eyes, were mainly focused on the development of reason and memory, whilst peoples in the East prioritized developing intuition.⁴⁵ In his speech, Pieters used (a very stereotypical) dichotomic image of the rational materialistic West, where reason is used to provide in material power and short-term gain versus the spiritual East, where intuition and mental practices are used for spiritual development and wisdom.⁴⁶ Though the West is materially developed, its materialistic idolatry had resulted in nihilistic hedonism. It was, according to Pieters, up to theosophists to gather and promote understanding of the spiritual wisdom of the East, to use Western reason and scientific proficiency to unveil the secrets of the hidden spiritual wisdom of esotericism.⁴⁷ It was up to theosophists to not only study the spiritual traditions of the East but also to use it for the spiritual revitalization of the West. This entailed not only studying the spirituality of the East but practicing it as well – and with that stimulate ‘spiritual growth’.⁴⁸

In addition to the development of knowledge about spirituality, a common assumption amongst theosophists seems to have been that a theosophist was ought to be focused on the development of personal moral development.⁴⁹ This development of personal virtue entailed, for example, to ‘think positive thoughts’ and to restrain from feeding negative thoughts (such

⁴³ Bax, *Web der Schepping*, 123.

⁴⁴ P. Pieters jr, “Karma. Voordracht gehouden in de Amsterdamsche Loge van de Nederlandsche Afdeeling der T.V., op Dinsdag 27 Maart 1900.”, *Theosophia* 9 (Mei 1900 – Augustus 1900), 86; http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_tij008191301_01/_tij008191301_01_0043.php. 7-6-2018.

⁴⁵ P. Pieters jr., “Karma”, 87.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 86-87.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 93.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 87.

⁴⁹ Reepmaker, “Eenzaamheid”, 356.

as anger and jealousy).⁵⁰ As well as striving towards mental purity, theosophists ought to restrain from other ‘bad tendencies’ such as the satisfaction of physical desires.⁵¹ The consumption of alcohol, for example, seems to have been regarded as a vice, a “demoralizing” practice, by most Dutch theosophists.⁵² Many members of the international Theosophical Society Adyar were advocates of celibacy for both men and woman, but this seems to have not been a widely discussed topic amongst Dutch theosophists.

With their behavior – both in thought and in action, theosophists ought to be walking examples of a higher, more virtuous stage of human development.⁵³ Because all the work and efforts put forth by theosophists was not merely for their individual wellbeing: “Surely, the striving for one’s own development is good, but the goal must not simply be this [personal] development alone; personal development must have the development of all as its goal.”⁵⁴ With personal willpower, M. Reepmaker argued, theosophists ought to strive to be as virtuous as possible, and with “compassion and willingness to help”, they ought to aid their fellow human beings in their respective spiritual development.⁵⁵ In a speech held at the opening of a new lodge of the T.S.N. in Rotterdam, Reepmaker (a novelist, who for example wrote a novel called *Le Gouffre de la Liberté*, a fictional history warning for the dangers of a premature socialist revolution, and arguing for social pedagogy to prevent those dangers) addressed his fellow theosophists and appealed to their love for humanity to not give up in the strive for a better world, despite how “ungrateful” and farfetched working on the realization of a better world might seem.⁵⁶ It might seem easier to just withdraw from society and focus on spiritual development in solitude, said Reepmaker, but “a soldier can not leave the ranks to go his own way just because the camp is unpleasant.”⁵⁷ According to Reepmaker, it is “Man’s duty to

⁵⁰ Reepmaker, “Eenzaamheid”, 356; Emphasizing the importance of virtuous thoughts was derived from the theosophical understanding of ‘karma’ as a cosmic law of consequence: every action, including thinking, assumedly had their inevitable consequences, be it direct or in another life (see for example: J.W. Boissevain, “Een opmerking over karma”, *Theosophia* 19 (1910-1911), 638-641.

⁵¹ Reepmaker, “Eenzaamheid”, 356.

⁵² *Ibidem*; for another example, see: V., “Het Alcohol-Vraagstuk”, *Theosophia* 15 – deel A (mei 1906 – October 1906), 125;

⁵³ Reepmaker, “Eenzaamheid”, 356-357.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 357.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 356; http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_tij008189301_01/_tij008189301_01_0028.php. 7-6-2018; http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_onz001190701_01/_onz001190701_01_0031.php. 7-6-2018.

⁵⁷ Reepmaker, “Eenzaamheid”, 357.

devote as much as possible himself to the community.”⁵⁸ He called for compassion towards the less fortunate of their fellow humans, and for resilience in the strive for the improvement of the human condition. For it was the goal of the theosophist to elevate humanity to a higher stage of evolution. “We must, therefore, fight all that is impure and vicious”, for that was why - according to Reepmaker – the Theosophical Society was founded: to strive for the perfection of humanity’s evolutionary journey.⁵⁹

Reepmaker’s speech indicates that, at least to some members of the T.S.N., theosophists ought to actively work towards the improvement of the human condition. This, most Dutch theosophists seemed to have believed, could be done by acquiring and spreading knowledge about theosophy, as well as improving their personal karma by battling viciousness and developing virtuousness. It appears that many Dutch theosophists genuinely believed the spreading of their theosophical ideas throughout the Western world– most importantly the ideas of reincarnation and karma as the governing principles of the universe – would result in a revitalization of spiritual life in the West. Many of early articles written by Dutch theosophists seem to contain a ‘youthful’ enthusiasm in relation to what was thought to be accomplishable once the West incorporated theosophical ideas into its culture. And it seems that many Dutch theosophists were certain that their own mental or spiritual purification efforts would have collateral positive effects on the general human condition. Amongst theosophists, it was widely believed that individuals might seem separate and unconnected, but in fact are deeply interconnected in ‘higher planes of existence’, in ‘astral’, ‘mental’, and ‘spiritual’ dimensions.⁶⁰ Because theosophists believed that all things - including all humans with all their actions and thoughts - were indivertibly interconnected in these abstract dimensions and that every single thought or action would have effects, whether direct or indirect.⁶¹

In *Divine Feminine*, Joy Dixon states that theosophists “challenged the liberal vision of the state as an association of autonomous individuals” with an “organic vision that eroded

⁵⁸ Reepmaker, “Eenzaamheid”, 358.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 123; Jan L. de Jong, *Wijzen uit het Oosten. ‘Universeel Broederschap’ in het tijdschrift Theosophia tussen 1907 en 1929* (Rotterdam: Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam (unpublished bachelor’s thesis), 2016), 28.

⁶¹ Redactie, “De Theosofische Beweging. Nederlandsche Afdeeling. Het winterwerk.”, *Theosophia* 9 No5 (september 1900), 309.

the boundaries between the individual and the community.⁶² This erosion of boundaries also involved a different understanding of the human body.”⁶³ Rather than being separated by physical boundaries of different bodies, humans were, according to theosophists, in reality, indivertibly connected to each other metaphysically. Inspired by the idea that separated individuality was an illusion, theosophists believed that the improvement of one part of the cosmic whole would benefit others as well. Amongst theosophists, a widely shared belief was that every physical occurrence was the result of thought, that thoughts were ‘more real’ than physical actions. For many members of the T.S.N. in the early years of the Society, this was believed to be a realistic, genuine way to help other humans. It might be tempting to interpret the early writings of Dutch theosophists as ‘naïve idealism’, perhaps even escapism, but this interpretation allows little space for the genuine motivations many Dutch theosophists seemed to have regarding the improvement of society. The early writings of Dutch theosophists illustrate that, for many, their theosophical endeavors were genuine attempts to search for alternatives to contemporary “meaningless” and “hedonistic” modernity.⁶⁴ Whether in the abstract astral dimensions or in the concrete physical planes of existence, all theosophists ought to have been committed to the brotherhood of humanity. This was deemed so important that of the three official goals of the Society, the first one – “To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or color” – was the only item to which members were required to subscribe.⁶⁵

2.2.3 *Modern society through a theosophical lens*

As indicated by the words of M. Reepmaker, some theosophists seemed keen on expressing their intentions to work towards a better world. But what, in their eyes, was there to improve? What was their perspective on their contemporary society?

In his speech on the 24th of September 1900, Reepmaker stated his thoughts on modern society unambiguously: “Pleasure is the keyword of the 19th century, and will be the keyword of the beginning of the 20th century.”⁶⁶ Wherever there were many people gathered,

⁶² Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 123.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ Reepmaker, “Eenzaamheid”, 356.

⁶⁵ Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 3.

⁶⁶ Reepmaker, “Eenzaamheid”, 356.

“hate, jealousy, all bad impulses” seemed to float around in the air.⁶⁷ In the cities, the search for life’s pleasures, for example through alcohol, “demoralizes rich and poor alike”.⁶⁸ The earlier mentioned P. Pieters jr. recognized a mentality of short-term thinking in most people in modern society. The lack of fresh air, healthy exercise, the consumption of bad food and intoxicants, as well as a general lack of hygiene (all caused by this short-term mentality) made people susceptible to disease, which was then solved with medicinal “powders and pills” – with the same short-term thinking that caused the problem.⁶⁹ The physical perils of modern man and his general unhealthiness were, in Pieters’s eyes, caused by being disconnected from human nature.⁷⁰ Though directly linked to unhealthy habits and living conditions, these were merely symptoms of the true cause of man’s misery, which lied primarily in the spiritual realm. The West was in the grip of material idolatry, and the hedonism, selfishness and nihilism of modern Western society were the true causes of modern misère.⁷¹ Most theosophists seemed to have agreed with Pieters’ analysis: modern society had many problems, which were all in one way or another caused by materialism. Many Dutch theosophists placed the rise of materialism and modernity in the Nineteenth century – “The age of materialism”.⁷² According to most Dutch theosophists, this rise of materialism in Western society was caused by ‘spiritual immaturity’.⁷³ Ages of being “locked up in the prison of dogma” caused “a weakening of spiritual spine”, leaving Western humans too irresponsible to handle the “liberation from dogma”.⁷⁴ The liberation from the “moral despotism” of the church that started with the Enlightenment led to “moral anarchism” and nihilism.⁷⁵ The loss of dogmatic security seemed to have left modern Western humanity devoid of guidelines to lead a meaningful life.⁷⁶ However, theosophists also recognized that the liberation from the ‘prison of dogma’ created the space for the rise of mysticism. And the

⁶⁷ Reepmaker, “Eenzaamheid”, 356.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁹ Pieters Jr., “Karma”, 146.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, 147.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, 86-87.

⁷² A.E. Thierens, “Karaktervorming en opvoeding.”, *Theosophia* 17 (Mei 1908 – April 1909), 398.

⁷³ See for example: Thierens, “Karaktervorming”, 398-399; M. Mook, “Iets over innerlijke en uiterlijke moraal.”, *Theosophia* 15Deel A - ((Mei 1906 – October 1906)), 345; Pieters jr., “Karma”, 90.

⁷⁴ Thierens, “Karaktervorming”, 399; Mook, “Innerlijke en uiterlijke moraal”, 344.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 345.

disclosure of the mystical secrets of old in their contemporary age was the only true remedy against the problems of the nihilistic, materialistic modern world of the West.⁷⁷

It seems clear that most Dutch theosophists between 1897 and 1909 perceived their contemporary society as generally immoral and devoid of meaning. A consensus amongst authors in *Theosophia* seems to have been that the problems of modern society were all symptoms of the rise of materialism, which in turn was caused by spiritual immaturity of Western humanity. The ideas expressed by Dutch theosophists regarding modern society seem to confirm for example Thomas Laqueur's analysis of the emergence of occultism, which, as he stated, was clearly an 'act of resistance' against contemporary perceptions of an ascendant materialism.⁷⁸

Simultaneously, argued Laqueur, the resurgence of the occult was part of a 'revolt against rationality'.⁷⁹ Although a final conclusion regarding this analysis is premature, it seems that most Dutch theosophists did not seem to consciously argue against rationalism, at least not between 1897 and 1909. Rather than being the result of the emergence of rationalist positivism, the rise of materialistic culture in the West was perceived as being caused by spiritual immaturity. It seems that positivism itself was regarded as a symptom of the bigger problem – the lack of spiritual development, rather than the cause of it. During this period, which could be characterized as the initial phase of the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands, 'science' as a denominator was generally regarded as a positive, rather than a problematic aspect of modern society. Many Dutch theosophists during this period seemed to have believed that the emergence of occultism would supplement, rather than replace rationality. On example is W.J. van Vlaardingen, who argued that the Theosophical Society could trigger the reconciliation of modern science and spirituality – which were divided by a schism caused by the materialistic rationality of the Enlightenment – by scientifically proving the truth of their theosophical beliefs.⁸⁰ Van Vlaardingen's belief that the scientific study of the occult would result in scientific proof for their occult beliefs was characteristic of the early T.S.N. and T.S.A. where many theosophists believed that the 'discovery' of theosophy would correct the errors of traditional dogmatic religion and mainstream science.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Thierens, "Karaktervorming", 398; Dr. J.W. Boissevain, "Gesprekken over Theosofie", *Theosophia* 15 – deel A (mei 1906-oktober 1906), 291.

⁷⁸ Laqueur, "Why the Margins Matter", 112.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰ W.J. van Vlaardingen, "Levensopvatting en Levensrichting", *Theosophia* 16 (Mei 1907-April 1908), 156

⁸¹ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 91.

This notion of the reconciliation of rationalism and spirituality seems to be in line with Jan Romein's notion that phenomena like theosophy were attempts to expand the reach of reason to the realm of spirituality (rather than manifestations of anti-rationalism) and Hanegraaff's interpretation of occultism as secularized, rationalized esotericism.⁸² However, as Laqueur points out, there is a fundamental problem with these attempts: "the more explicitly the occult embraced science the less enchanting... it became".⁸³ In other words, the unsatisfying disenchantment of modernity that motivated many to join the T.S.N. could be expanded to the occult, rather than being resolved by the occult. During the early period of the T.S.N.'s history, however, it seems that this was not a recognized problem amongst Dutch theosophists.

2.2.4 Motivations

Initially, most of the members of the Dutch Theosophical Society were drawn from the social elite of the Netherlands. These individuals possessed the financial capacity, the social influence and the time to initiate and facilitate extensive propaganda and activities, as well as the means to build a well-structured national organization with regional bodies in several parts of the Netherlands within a relatively small timespan (1891-1897).⁸⁴ The diligence with which these individuals devoted their efforts and resources to the promotion of theosophy might make one wonder about the motivations that lied at the base for these efforts. What caused this initial enthusiasm for the theosophical cause? The following quote might give a basic illustration of a general sentiment that seemed to be shared by some members:

"When it was requested that tonight I would speak some words on the commemoration of the passing away of Miss Blavatsky my first emotion was one of great joy. Finally I would have the opportunity to, in the midst of kindred spirits, testify of my great admiration, of my great reverence, for she who was a second Messiah... I, faintly educated as I was, knew little of the "Secret Doctrine"; but what I did know was this;

⁸² Romein, *Breukvlak*, 632; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 408, 409.

⁸³ Laquer, "Why the margins matter", 128.

⁸⁴ Redactie, "Enkele grepen uit", 434-435; Bax, *Web der Schepping*, 128.

from this I learned, how close the highest is connected with the lowest... I knew one had to be divinely inspired to write something like this...”.⁸⁵

This quote is a segment of a speech given by J.C.H. Wilhelmi on ‘White Lotus Day’, the day that members of theosophical societies around the world commemorated the passing of Blavatsky.⁸⁶ Wilhelmi clearly illustrates Blavatsky as a messiah, a divinely inspired messenger whose revelations strongly resonated with Wilhelmi. The message that Blavatsky revealed to the world was one given to her by ‘the Masters’, in whose service Blavatsky assumedly seemed to have operated.⁸⁷ Wilhelmi ended this speech with a clear message, namely that to truly honor the legacy of Blavatsky, members of the T.S.N. should strive every day, with “sacred and serious intent”, to become better persons and therewith steward Blavatsky’s heritage.⁸⁸ The formulation of Blavatsky’s role in Wilhelmi’s life seems to signify a need for concrete purpose, which resonates with the explanatory interpretation scholars like W.J. Hanegraaff formulated with regards to why people were attracted to modern theosophy. In a time where a growing number of people experienced the ‘dogmatic rigidity’ of dominant organized religion in the West (Catholicism, Protestantism) as alienating, devoid of any use regarding the allocation of meaning to their individual lives, Blavatsky’s works presented ‘something new’, something different.⁸⁹ Theosophy seemed to have resonated with a common sentiment in the modernizing societies of the West: the desire for spiritual revival and meaningful purpose in life.⁹⁰ The exotic and mysterious reputation of Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society might have been very appealing to people who found their lives lacking a form of purpose.⁹¹

Though not all members of the T.S.N. placed Blavatsky on an idolizing pedestal, many early Dutch theosophists seem to have referred to Blavatsky with devotion and sacralizing jargon. Secretary Fricke called Blavatsky the “Master’s messenger, Lightbringer, and channel of our teachings”, Olcott was the “builder and guardian of the structure, loyal

⁸⁵ J.C.H. Wilhelmi, “H.P.B.’s Nalatenschap. Een Woord op den Witte Lotus Dag 1900”, *Theosophia* 9 (mei 1900 – augustus 1900), No.4, 44.

⁸⁶ It is not clear who J.C.H. Wilhelmi was.

⁸⁷ Hammer, Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 1.

⁸⁸ Wilhelmi, “H.P.B.’s Nalatenschap”, 45.

⁸⁹ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 36-37.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 36-37.

⁹¹ Jocelyn Godwin, “Blavatsky and the First Generation of Theosophists”, in: *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 16.

servant of the Greats”, and Annie Besant “keeper of the bond, chain between ourselves and Those who are on the other side”.⁹² Petronella (Piet) Meuleman-van Ginkel, the president of the T.S.N. (and a well-known Dutch medium), was slightly less lyric in her description of Blavatsky, and called her a “hero who faced the whole world”.⁹³

Interestingly, Meuleman-van Ginkel mentioned that some of the members might have found the extensive reverence for Blavatsky to be “fanaticism, the [over]glorification of a human”.⁹⁴ She stated that this should not be a reason for shame, because the honoring of heroes is nothing to be ashamed of. However, if the president of the Society found it necessary to defend the practice of Blavatsky-glorification amongst members of her own Society, it must have been something she felt necessary to address. And indeed, there were members of the Society who disagreed or felt uneasy with the worship of Blavatsky. Bearing in mind that a significant number of the people who joined the Society between 1890 and 1900 came from Protestant milieus (often maintaining affiliations with the religions they grew up with), it might come to no surprise that the idolizing worship of a mysterious Russian medium did not meet with strong agreement amongst all members of the T.S.N.⁹⁵ Despite indications of differing views, however, it seems that a significant degree of reverence for the founding members of the ‘original’ Theosophical Society Adyar seemed to have been common practice among prominent members of the T.S.N.

The apparent dichotomy that is implied in Meuleman-van Ginkel’s speech points to a contrast that seems to resurface in *Theosophia* time and again. It is a dichotomy which seems to be between members who were devotees focused on ‘the magical, mysterious’ appeal of the Theosophical Society, the occult wizardry, versus members who were more orientated on the ‘intellectual’, the academic study of religion, philosophy and other more ‘secular’ phenomena. The early years of modern theosophy were characterized by a strong emphasis on scholarly efforts as a means to promote theosophy.⁹⁶ It seems that, while this scholarly image appealed to some members of the early T.S.N., for many others who joined the Society during

⁹² Redactie, “Enkele grepen uit”, 429.

⁹³ Bax, *Web der Schepping*, 120; P.C. Meuleman-van Ginkel, “Hulde aan H.P.B. Een Woord op den Witte Lotus Dag, 1900.”, *Theosophia* 9 (mei 1900 – augustus 1900), No.4, 43.

⁹⁴ She calls it “Dweeperij”.

⁹⁵ For quantitative data of the T.S.N., see: Bax, *Web der Schepping*, 501; Protestantism generally condemns the worship of idols, and it can be assumed that theosophists with a protestant orientation must have felt uneasy with the idolization of Blavatsky.

⁹⁶ Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 52.

the early years the Society provided a way out of the void of spiritual crisis. Or, in the words of Thomas Laqueur: “the occult is at the same time a reaction against the modern, against the view that the universe is devoid of meaning, without a guiding principle...”⁹⁷

2.3 *The changing role of theosophists?*

“More than once during the last years, this question was posed to me. What must we do? ... In the beginning, it was clear, the goal of the T.S. was to make known some teachings, to explain the laws of Karma and Reincarnation. But now that is done – the intellectual world has heard of it.”⁹⁸

With these words, Esther Windust (editor of *Theosophia* and a longtime member of the T.S.N. who was sent to the Netherlands in 1891 to aid the early enthusiasts for theosophy to organize themselves) began her article “What must we do?” in 1908.⁹⁹ To the old members of the Society, according to Windust, the propaganda of theosophical thought was the primary priority.¹⁰⁰ But now that this goal had been reached – Windust stated that most people in Dutch society had heard at least something about theosophy, what was to be done?¹⁰¹ With her article, Windust wanted to explain to younger members of the Society that the propaganda of theosophical thought was “never the *goal* of the T.S., but merely a necessary step in the direction of the goal we had in mind and still have.”¹⁰² In her opinion, the propaganda was necessary to ‘put theosophy on the map’, but it was never the “life goal” of early theosophists. In her appeal towards both new and old members of the T.S.N., Windust argued “the true goal of the T.S. is to help the world by the propagation of spiritual knowledge.”¹⁰³ And this entailed more than just reading and talking, in Windust’s view. In Windust’s article, she expressed her annoyance with some theosophists, even older members, because of their uncaring, lazy attitude, stating “It is not reading little books that makes once a

⁹⁷ Laqueur, “Why the Margins Matter”, 135.

⁹⁸ E. Windust, “Wat moeten wij doen?”, *Theosophia* 17 (mei 1908- april 1909), 267.

⁹⁹ Gibbels, *De Theosofische Vereniging*, 46.

¹⁰⁰ Windust, “Wat moeten wij doen?”, 267.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*, 272.

theosophist!”¹⁰⁴ It appeared to her that some theosophists seemed more interested in theosophy as a subject of shallow chitchat rather than a serious endeavor. Surely, she stated, some people come to the T.S.N., read a few books, visit a few lectures, think they got the message and leave again. But her appeal was addressed to those who stuck around, the young, enthusiastic members of the Society who were willing to put theosophy into practice.¹⁰⁵ Windust called upon these young members to “offer themselves, - not with words alone but through their lives, to become workers... who are willing to give anything to become living channels through which the spiritual knowledge can flow.”¹⁰⁶

Windust was not the only member of the T.S.N. who recognized that the Society was entering a new phase. Several authors between 1906 and 1910 referred explicitly or implicitly to changes that are occurring regarding the course of the Theosophical Society Adyar and its national offshoots.¹⁰⁷ The editors of *Theosophia* recognized this transition as well. In a preface to the seventeenth volume (May 1908 – April 1909), they noted the difference between older members who were more familiar with theosophy and younger members, who were still in an earlier stage of their search for theosophical insights.¹⁰⁸ In an earlier volume (1906) the redaction already incorporated a translation of H.S. Olcott’s *Old Diary Leaves*, to provide an illustration of the “true history” of the Society.¹⁰⁹ It seems as if the older members of the Society tried to preserve what they perceived as the ‘original call’ of the Society now that a new generation of theosophists was emerging. In the eighteenth volume (1909), they once again incorporated what they perceived as the ‘official history’ of the Society in the magazine, for it is of the “highest importance” that everyone knows the real background of the Society.¹¹⁰ In his history of the T.S.A., Olcott stated that the current form of the Society had developed over the years, it was “an evolution, not ... a creation with a fixed outline.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁴ Windust, “Wat moeten wij doen?”, 270.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, 272.

¹⁰⁷ See for example: Dr. Hubbe-Schleiden, “Het komende tijdperk der Theosofische Beweging.”, *Theosophia* 15 – deel A (Mei 1906 – October 1906), 27; Redactie, “Van de redactie”, *Theosophia* 17 (Mei 1908 – April 1909), 15.

¹⁰⁸ Redactie, “Van de redactie”, 15.

¹⁰⁹ Redactie, “Voorwoord voor den vijftienden jaargang.”, *Theosophia* 15 – deel A (Mei 1906 – October 1906), 1.

¹¹⁰ J.W. Boissevain, “Lessenaarrede van de redactie.”, *Theosophia* 18 (Mei 1909 – April 1910), 2.

¹¹¹ H.S. Olcott (translated by C.S.), “Old Diary Leaves. The True history of the Theosophical Society.”, *Theosophia* 15 – deel B (November 1906 – April 1907), 462.

Originally (in 1875), the Society was meant to be focused on the study of occult knowledge and phenomena, something the founders felt was a neglected field of research.¹¹² The notion of ‘brotherhood’ was incorporated into the goals of the Society later (during the 1880s) when the small group of occult ‘researchers’ recognized the growing influence of their Society.¹¹³ It was only then decided by Olcott and Blavatsky that the society ought to become a ‘movement’, rather than just a study Society.

In the volumes 1908-1910, theosophists writing in *Theosophia* seemed to have been engaged in an emerging process of renegotiating the identity associated with membership of the Society. Compared to earlier volumes, the notion of mystic or occult epistemology appears more often. This renegotiation is illustrated for example with an explanation provided by the editing board of volume seventeen (1908), where it is stated that “Theosophical teachings rest on occult research and the number of people capable of this, is much smaller than the number of academic scholars.”¹¹⁴ People who were deemed capable of such occult research were “H.P. Blavatsky, Annie Besant, C.W. Leadbeater, and some others...”.¹¹⁵ Theosophists who were not equipped with the skills to engage in this occult research should occupy themselves with “reflections *about* parts of Theosophy or her employment in [daily] life.”¹¹⁶

Rather than indicating a shift of interpretation, it seems as if the older members wanted to reemphasize the occult aspects of theosophical life, to make clear to the newer members of the Society what exactly was entailed with being an active theosophist. It was not only reading and talking about theosophy, and neither was the knowledge of theosophy to be acquired with intellectual study alone. The mystic, occult practices seemed to lie at the basis of the Society after all. Those theosophists that were devoid of occult powers should focus on the more ‘mundane’ tasks that have been discussed earlier in this chapter.¹¹⁷ Although most older members seemed pleased with the growing popularity of the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands, they nonetheless expressed concerns that what they considered the true calling of theosophists would be lost to younger members. In the eyes of theosophists such as

¹¹² Olcott, “Old Diary Leaves”, 462.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*; J.W. Boissevain, “Boekbespreking *De Nieuwere Theosofie*”, *Theosophia* 15 – deel B (November 1906 – April 1907), 445.

¹¹⁴ De Redactie, “Van de redactie”, *Theosophia* 17 (Mei 1908 – April 1909), 15-16.

¹¹⁵ Redactie, “Van de redactie”, 16.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

Windust, younger members still had to develop stable and calm minds who would prevent them from being from going astray from the theosophical path:

“The Theosophical Society needs people, who can consider and contemplate on something calmly and quietly, not children who are hurled hence and forth by every current, a plaything of every occurrence”.¹¹⁸

To aid this reorientation on occult mysticism, the editors of *Theosophia* started a new column in the magazine called *Phenomena*.¹¹⁹ Some members greeted this initiative with enthusiasm, for example, H.J. van Ginkel (a nephew of E. Windust), who stated that “The Dutchman is generally not very fond of publishing about such things [occult phenomena]”, which made it seem like they did not occur at all.¹²⁰ But van Ginkel personally knew reliable members of the T.S.N. who were acquainted with occult practices. And he was glad that the editorial board finally offered the opportunity to prove to “the many people of the T.S.N. that did not believe such things occurred in the Netherlands” that there nonetheless were members of the T.S.N. who possessed occult powers similar to theosophists such as Besant and Leadbeater.¹²¹

This orientation on mysticism – ‘occult research’ – had its downsides as well, recognized Boissevain.¹²² The possession of occult powers could result in arrogance of those who deemed themselves to be more spiritually developed. It was up to theosophists to help each other, as well as their fellow humans, in their moral development. Spiritual arrogance had no place in the Society, seems to be his message. The Society was, after all, there for the benefit of humanity as a whole.¹²³ Another danger recognized by Boissevain was laziness caused by the assumption that the reality of reincarnation implied that one could postpone taking action for personal or collective development “to another life”.¹²⁴ This was exactly why, argued Boissevain, it was very important that theosophists concentrated on the study of theosophy alongside with occult research, to reach a true understanding of theosophical ideas

¹¹⁸ E. Windust, “Het Kruispunt”, *Theosophia* 17 (Mei 1908 – April 1909), 339.

¹¹⁹ H.J. van Ginkel, “Verschijnselen.”, *Theosophia* 17 (Mei 1908 – April 1909), 58.

¹²⁰ Van Ginkel, “Verschijnselen”, 58.

¹²¹ *Ibidem*; examples of these ‘occult occurrences’ were experiencing the powers of crystals, prophetic dreams and magical influences of objects such as amulet; Another example is C., “Verschijnselen. Wat ik zag.”, *Theosophia* 18 (Mei 1909 – April 1910), 244, where “C.” describes an experience of clairvoyance.

¹²² J.W. Boissevain, “Gevaren van de studie der Theosofie”, *Theosophia* 18 (Mei 1909 – April 1910), 96.

¹²³ Boissevain, “Gevaren van de studie der Theosofie.”, 98-99.

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*, 97.

such as reincarnation and karma. The teachings of theosophy should not be taken as an opportunity for “welcome escape” from day to day life, as some seem to assume. Rather, it ought to have practical implications, including but not limited to the aiding of fellow humans.¹²⁵

2.3.1 New leadership and occult reorientations

The apparent ambiguity between the reserved attitude with which some early Dutch theosophists wrote about occult research methods versus the emphasis of this occult research as the real basis of theosophical practices (the “true acquiring of divine knowledge” which could only truly be known through direct experience), emerged at a time of change for the Society.¹²⁶ The international T.S.A. was in need of new leadership after H.S. Olcott, founder-president of the Society, passed away in 1907.

The primary candidate for the presidency of the T.S.A. was the former atheist, Fabian socialist, feminist and advocate of the labor movement Annie Besant. Before she joined the T.S.A, Besant was already well-known as a speaker, writer, and activist who vigorously advocated issues such as contraception, women’s rights and the improvement of the working class.¹²⁷ After reading Blavatsky’s works, however, Besant came to believe that the true solution to resolving human suffering was through spiritual revitalization and in 1889 joined the T.S.A. She soon became close friends with H.P. Blavatsky and, after being initiated into the Esoteric Section, became Blavatsky’s favorite pupil.¹²⁸ Within a matter of a few years, Besant became one of the leading figures of the T.S.A. and was favored by many to take over the leadership of the Society after Olcott’s death.

The main issue standing in the way of her appointment as president, however, was her loyal affiliation with the earlier mentioned C.W. Leadbeater, who had resigned from the T.S.A. just a year before Olcott’s death over allegations of ‘inappropriate contact’ with boys

¹²⁵ Boissevain, “Gevaren van de studie der Theosofie.”, 97-98.

¹²⁶ De Redactie, “Van de redactie”, *Theosophia* 17 (Mei 1908 – April 1909), 15.

¹²⁷ Hammer, Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 35.

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*.

in the U.S.¹²⁹ Despite said concerns, Besant was elected president in 1907 (as was the will of Olcott who appointed Besant as his successor) and soon after appealed for the reinstatement of Leadbeater as a member of the T.S.A. Leadbeater - who had already been highly important to Besant because of his alleged proficiency in occult practices - reemerged as one of the leading figures of the T.S.A. Together, Besant and Leadbeater revitalized the Society's orientation towards occult research that had lost some of its importance after the death of its primary agent Blavatsky.¹³⁰ Besides showing new members of the Society in the Netherlands what being a theosophist ought to entail, the emphasis of the importance of occult researches by the editors of *Theosophia* seemed to have been inspired by the newly instated leadership of Besant and Leadbeater and their efforts to the revitalization of and reorientation on occult research and mysticism.¹³¹

2.3.2 Practical orientations

As discussed in the previous sections, both the international Theosophical Society Adyar and its national offshoots – including the Dutch branch – experienced a period of profound changes. Simultaneously with the reorientation on the initial occult research of its founders, the volumes of *Theosophia* between 1906 and 1914 show a slow but steady increase in notifications of theosophists involved in societal engagements. It seems that, while some members were increasingly drawn to the revitalized mysticism (the ‘occult practices’), a growing number of theosophists focused their attention towards practical ways to implement theosophical ideas in their personal lives, as well as in the societies they lived in.

British theosophists, for example, started to be “vigorously” involved with The Order of Service that was founded by Besant in 1908.¹³² This theosophical order was meant for

¹²⁹ Hammer, Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 37; The inappropriate contact with boys referred to allegations that Leadbeater had taught young boys how to use masturbation for rituals of sexual magic, which sparked fierce outrage amongst both theosophists and non-theosophists.

¹³⁰ Hammer, Rothstein, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 33, 38; an example of this occult research is Besant and Leadbeater's *Occult Chemistry* (1908), an inquiry into the esoteric structure of molecules and atoms as perceived through clairvoyance observation.

¹³¹ *Ibidem*, 34.

¹³² H.J. van Ginkel, “Theosofie als Wereldbeweging”, *Theosophia* 17 (Mei 1908 – April 1909), 316-317; The Theosophical Order of Service initially consisted of: the Bond for Social Brotherhood; the Bond for National Pedagogy; the Bond for the abolition of Vivisection, vaccination and Inoculation; the Bond for Sociology and

those theosophists who wanted to be more actively engaged in the improvement of the lives of their fellow beings.¹³³ In Italy, “many of the prominent leaders of the suffrage movement are theosophists”.¹³⁴ In India, theosophists founded the Sons and Daughters of India, which had the revitalization of Hinduism in India as its primary goal, but used education of the poor (both boys and girls) as its primary means and eventually resulted in the founding of an important regional university.¹³⁵ Theosophists were active in activities such as aiding prisoners, joined in public demonstrations against for example vivisections and animal abuse and showed strong support for organizations such as “The League of Progressive Thought and Social Service”. (an organization aiming to revitalize Christian aid work and the improvement of the economic situation of the working class).¹³⁶ Theosophists in the Netherlands, though generally writing with approval about these concrete implementations of theosophy around the world, seemed not so eager to follow the example of their international brothers and sisters. “Here in Holland we stand at another extreme and are too afraid of what others might come to think of us if we would express our beliefs só openly.”¹³⁷ Although in the years leading up to 1914 and the beginning of the First World War, Dutch theosophists seemed to view the more practical implication of theosophical ideas that their theosophical brothers and sisters internationally pursued positively, Dutch theosophists themselves remained more focused on the intellectual side of theosophical life.

2.4 Conclusion

Central to this chapter was the following question: ‘how did Dutch theosophists, during their initial orientations on identity between 1897 and 1910, envision their role in society?’ The period between 1897 and 1909 can be characterized as the ‘early years’ of the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands, a period during which members of the newly established Society

Societal Work; the Bond for Eastern and Occult Science; the Bond for the Issue of Children and the Bond for literature and presswork.

¹³³ De Jong, *Wijzen uit het Oosten*, 34.

¹³⁴ Van Ginkel, “Theosofie als Wereldbeweging”, 315.

¹³⁵ *Ibidem*, 311; *Theosophical Current*, 37.

¹³⁶ Janet B. Mc.Govern, “Theosofie in de gevangenissen.”, *Theosophia* 17 (Mei 1908 – April 1909), 635; Van Ginkel, “Theosofie als Wereldbeweging”, 317.

¹³⁷ *Ibidem*, 333.

engaged in initial orientations on their identity as theosophists. Early members of the T.S.N. generally believed that an important part of their role as a theosophist was to actively promote theosophical ideas in the Dutch public sphere. Alongside these outward activities, Dutch theosophists believed that the role of a theosophist also involved ‘introspective work’. This introspective work consisted of the intellectual study of religion and philosophy, spiritual practices (such as meditation) to facilitate personal spiritual growth and moral development, and ‘occult practices’ (mysticism, or practical magic, that supposedly involved direct, personal experience of the supernatural and spiritual revelations). Based on the volumes of *Theosophia* used for this chapter, it seems that Dutch theosophists, at least between 1897 and 1908, had a reserved attitude regarding these occult practices and preferred to focus on intellectual endeavors and personal moral development.

Between 1908 and 1910, however, the T.S.N. was entering a new phase. The initial propaganda efforts were deemed complete, and the growing popularity of the Society entailed an increase in membership and the emergence of a new generation of Dutch theosophists. The older members of the Society attempted to preserve what they perceived as the original calling of the Society and began to put more emphasis on mysticism and occult practices. Besides the emergence of a new generation of Dutch theosophists, another factor that motivated this reorientation on occult practices by the older members of the T.S.N. was the inauguration of Annie Besant as the new president of the T.S.A. in 1907. The start of Besant’s presidency marked the beginning of a reorientation on practical occultism and occult research, and also a shift towards a more socially engaged course for the Society. On the initiative of Besant, the Theosophical Order of Service was established for theosophists that wished to practically apply their theosophical beliefs for the improvement of society. Although Besant’s initiatives inspired theosophists throughout the world to take up a more practically orientated role in society, not all theosophists in the Netherlands seemed eager to heed Besant’s call in the years leading up to 1914.

The role theosophists envisioned for themselves between 1897 and 1910 fits the description of De Rooy’s humanitarian reform movements: Dutch theosophists emphasized personal development as the most important tool to improve society. The spiritual revitalization that Dutch theosophists wished to accomplish through personal spiritual development and the promotion of religious knowledge in society would, they believed, drastically alter human nature and lead to a brighter future. The lack of spiritual development and the strong orientation on materialism were believed to be the true causes of the problems

of modern society, and many Dutch theosophists believed that only their occultism could provide the necessary spiritual revival to save the West.

Dutch theosophists, in short, envisioned a role for themselves as workers for the improvement of society by means of personal spiritual development and the promotion of religious knowledge, which would, they believed, have a catalyzing effect on the spiritual revival of the West – which was necessary to save the world from the choke of materialism that would otherwise cause the demise of humanity.

Chapter 3. Theosophy and socialism?

Compared to neighboring countries, the Netherlands industrialized relatively late. The late industrial development, as well as the specific economic organization of the Netherlands, resulted in a similarly late, but also fragmented labor movement.¹ Although the historical context in which socialist movements arose in the Netherlands were not favorable (late industrialization, strong confessional political parties with loyal working-class supporters as competition, and early divisions amongst the various socialist movements), the emergence of socialism was nevertheless a hotly debated issue in contemporary Dutch society.² Paired with the industrialization of the Netherlands was the emergence of the ‘social issue’ – the miserable living conditions of the lower classes – and how to solve it.³

As discussed in chapter two of this thesis, the T.S.N. was entering a new phase in its existence around the year 1906. The initial period of promoting theosophy in the Netherlands was over, and both older and newer members of the Society seemed to have been engaged in renegotiating their theosophical identity. After a period of active and successful propaganda, various members of the Society were debating the direction the Society ought to take. Because of the propaganda efforts of early Dutch theosophists, membership of the Society increased from around 350 in 1899 to 1040 in 1909.⁴ The influx of new members from a wide variety of backgrounds (including socialists) was paired with greater internal diversity and stronger divergence regarding the suggested course for the Society. While certain older members – like Boissevain and Windust, attempted to preserve what they viewed as the original calling of the Society (occult research and religious study), some other members – both new and old – began to argue for a more practically orientated course for the Society, for example a more politically active T.S.N.⁵

How did this affect Dutch theosophists? Did the influx of new members change the way that Dutch theosophists viewed their role in society? The following chapter will explore these questions, and focus on the ways that social engagement was embedded in the theosophical discourse regarding the theosophist’s role in society. Central in this chapter is

¹ J.C.H, Blom, E. Lamberts, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlanden* (Amesfoort: Bert Bakker, 2017, vierde druk), 317, 327-328

² Blom, Lamberts, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlanden*, 330-331.

³ *Ibidem*, 330.

⁴ Bax, *Web der Schepping*, 499.

⁵ See: Gibbels, *De Theosofische Vereniging*, 59.

the following question: ‘how did the influx of new members affect Dutch theosophists’ perspectives on social engagement between 1908 and 1914?’

This chapter first explores debates amongst Dutch theosophists regarding the relationship between socialism and theosophy. Secondly, this chapter explores the ways in which Dutch theosophists envisioned the relationship between ‘the social issue’ and being a theosophist. Thirdly, this chapter explores the ways in which theosophical dogmas were related to social phenomena such as class struggle and income inequality. Finally, the central question of this chapter is answered in a concluding paragraph.

3.1 Theosophy as a social remedy

One of the members of the T.S.N. that argued for a more politically active role for the Society was dr. Albertus Johan Resink, a biologist, painter, for a time active member of the S.D.A.P. (the Social-Democratic Labor Party) and leader of the “Society of Theosophical Social-Democrats”, a small group of theosophical socialists.⁶

In 1908, Resink published two pamphlets regarding the relation between theosophy and socialism: *The Theosophical Society and the class struggle*, and *Social Pedagogy. Contribution to the study of the relation between theosophy and socialism* (1908). The publication of these paperbacks, Resink claimed, were the follow-up of a decision by the T.S.N. to “seriously investigate” the social issue – the perils of the working class.⁷ In these philosophical treatises, Resink formulated some concrete ideas for a more politically orientated T.S.N. In his view, “Future society” ought to be based on a synthesis between Marxist historical materialism and theosophical spirituality.⁸ Resink argued that the proletariat that “awoke to arm itself against the terrible inhumanities of capitalism” also started to realize that the revolutionizing of economic redistributive systems alone was not sufficient.⁹ A common spirituality was needed to create a truly harmonious society.¹⁰ Resink argued that this move of the proletariat towards the realization of spiritual unity already started, for

⁶ Brolsma, *Het humanitaire moment*, 60.

⁷ Dr. A.J. Resink, *Sociale Paedagogie. Bijdrage tot de studie naar de verhouding van Theosophie en Socialisme*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdamsche Boekhandel, 1908), 5.

⁸ Resink, *Sociale Paedagogie*, 26-27.

⁹ *Ibidem*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 22.

example with “indolent first experiments” such as De Blijde Wereld, an organization for Christian-Socialists.¹¹

Therein, according to Resink, the true political calling of theosophists revealed itself: theosophists ought to provide the spiritual ideology that would empower the rise of the proletariat and the emergence of a new, higher form of human society.¹² Using the Marxist Base/Superstructure model, Resink argues that the political socialism of the S.D.A.P. would need to focus on revolutionizing the economic base and the legal superstructure of society, whilst theosophy ought to be the overarching “spiritual superstructure”. Without the empowerment of a spiritual sense of unity - as provided by theosophy – the socialist projects to create a cooperative socialist economy would be doomed to fail.¹³ The S.D.A.P., Resink claimed, ought to accept that spirituality was not a private, but a collective endeavor, that the spiritual superstructure of society was of a higher importance than the political structure.¹⁴ Resink claimed that it was up to theosophical Marxists to create the “Culture state”, the spiritual superstructure, whilst the S.D.A.P. should focus itself on political structure. In *Social Pedagogy*, Resink argues for the submission of “state” to “church”, a theocracy of sorts, were the means of economic production were in the hands of the proletariat, were the constitutional-political realm was socialist, and were theosophical Marxism formed the overarching ideological and spiritual structure.¹⁵ It was likely, in Resink’s eyes, that the socialization of the means of production would only be possible after “years of revolutionary civil war”.¹⁶ Resink presented his recommendations for a new socialist-theosophical theocracy as the most viable option for the restoration of humanity after the conflicts that would occur with revolutionizing the economic means of production.¹⁷

Resink’s works sparked fierce criticism amongst some Dutch theosophists. In a response to Resink, A.E. Thierens expressed his fear that Resink wanted to direct theosophy towards social-democracy and to drag the Society into the world of practical party-politics.¹⁸ This was not the case, replied Resink, stating that he was creating a “special vehicle... a new-

¹¹ Resink, *Sociale Paedagogie*, 25.

¹² *Ibidem*, 25-26.

¹³ *Ibidem*, 24.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 25.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 22-25.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 26.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 27.

¹⁸ A.E. Thierens, “Theosofie en Socialisme.”, *Theosophia* 18 (Mei 1909 – April 1910), 47.

Marxist group that would be the carrier of an ideal socialism”.¹⁹ During a meeting of the T.S.N. on the 11th of October 1908, Resink pleaded for a more practical course to the political sphere. His plead, however, met with great resistance from most of the gathered theosophists, who “almost unanimously ... spoke out *against* such party-involvement”.²⁰ In line with this decision by the Society, Thierens hoped that Resink would finally let go of the idea of a socialist party based on theosophy.²¹

Based on Thierens report of Resink’s behavior, the quarrel seemed to have been a passionate occasion. Resink seemed “highly hostile regarding the Theosophical Society and her members”, despite having been a member himself for almost ten years.²² While Resink argued that the Theosophical Society needed to “pick a side” between capitalism and communism, Thierens stated that theosophists should study both, “and who studies something does not pick sides”.²³ While Resink stated that “one social-democrat is sufficient to force the Society to dissolve itself, or support the class-struggle”, Thierens called upon Resink to realize that the true solution lied in spiritual enlightenment.²⁴ Throughout Thierens reply to Resink, a strong individualist outlook becomes apparent: “the times of the “enlightened despot” are over and humanity must learn how to govern itself, with his own thoughts”.²⁵ Even if “a Master would appear tomorrow to organize our state with an “occult sociology”, who would support him?”, argued Thierens.²⁶ He pleaded for the founding of a “Humanist Bond”, an organization that would “construct the thoughts and ideas out of which the future society would emerge”.²⁷ A better world starts with a better human, argued Thierens, and the development of a better human could only be achieved by the victory of virtuous thoughts over vicious thoughts.

The better world that both Resink and Thierens wished to realize could only become reality when the time was ripe, argued Thierens. He opposed communism, and Resink’s

¹⁹ Thierens, “Theosofie en Socialisme”, 47.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*, 46.

²³ *Ibidem*, 49.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 50.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 51.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 50.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

proposals, because they seemed to want to force people into a better world, which was not a durable solution to the problem, “not even when thousands die of poverty and scarcity”.²⁸

To Resink, Thierens’ reply “proved once again the almost hopeless impotence of the bourgeois consciousness to find the door to the new world of socialism”.²⁹ With a seemingly fierce tone, Resink claimed that this spirit of bourgeois closed-mindedness was apparent in almost all theosophical literature: “they are the shells of the dying humanity and not the young life of the new that speak for now”.³⁰ Thierens must agree, Resink argues, that a “sad, smug dullness” had taken hold of the T.S.N., upheld by a “false clergy” who opposed the vigor of their socialist members.³¹ And Resink did not want to force people into socialism, he believed that “out of the democratic tradition, socialism will grow ‘spontaneously’”.³² Resink fiercely opposed Annie Besant with her “political utopism... who searches an aristocratic socialism that is ‘constructed’”.³³ In Resink’s eyes, Thierens and he both agreed that true socialism could only be realized with true individuals, and true individuals could only come in existence through the manifestation of the “divine nature of man... and the masses”.³⁴ But to Resink, the only way for the T.S.N. to revitalize itself was by merging with socialism, which was the only way out of their dull bourgeois bubble.³⁵

Regardless of his resentful descriptions of the bourgeois milieu, Resink himself (as a philosopher and painter with an academic degree in biology in the 1900’s) was likely a member of this bourgeoisie class he seemed to despise. Despite having described the proletariat as the only social force that can realize a better world, Resink does not seem to identify as a proletarian himself. Rather, he seemed to present himself as a ‘true socialist’, as someone who has a deeper understanding of the dynamics of class struggle than most other socialists.³⁶ It seemed that Resink believed that his position as someone who, because of his deeper understanding of the workings of the cosmos - which he gained through the study of theosophy, could speak for the proletariat he sympathized with.³⁷ Once ‘the Marxists’ would

²⁸ Thierens, “Theosofie en Socialisme”, 52.

²⁹ A.J. Resink, “Occulte Soziologie.”, *Theosophia* 18 (Mei 1909 – April 1910), 107.

³⁰ Resink, “Occulte Soziologie”, 107.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 110.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 108,

³⁶ Resink, *Sociale Paedagogie*, 26.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 24.

begin to understand socialism in the way that he explained, they would, Resink claimed, also realize that “their political responsibility lies in the ideological sphere and not in the economic or constitutional”.³⁸ And, once his fellow theosophists would get out of their bourgeois bubble, Resink argued, they would realize that politics is the sphere of existence where the Theosophical Society was destined to operate.³⁹

The dispute between Resink and his fellow theosophists was not the first confrontation between socialist theosophists and more conservative theosophists. In 1906, only two years before Resink’s dispute, most general meetings of the T.S.N. were dominated by conflicts between socialist members and the more conservative leadership of the T.S.N.⁴⁰ Eventually, the entire theosophical lodge of Haarlem – (which was known for its strong socialist sympathies) separated from the T.S.N. because the leadership of the Society continued to reject their appeals for a more socially orientated course for the Society.⁴¹ In his *De Theosophische Vereniging in Nederland*, Mario Gibbels argued that the ‘leftist faction’ of the T.S.N., which was already a minority within the Society, lost most of its influence after the separation of the Haarlem lodge.⁴² This proved to Gibbels that “the combination between theosophy and socialism proved to be difficult”, but that the ‘social issue’ nevertheless continued to be a disputed topic within the T.S.N.⁴³ It remains to be seen, however, to what extent Gibbels’s claim that the leftist faction of the T.S.N. lost most of its influence after the lodge of the Haarlem lodge in 1906 is in line with the findings of this research. The dispute between Resink and Thierens proves that, indeed, the social issue remained a disputed topic within the T.S.N. Whether or not the influence of the leftist faction of the T.S.N. really

³⁸ Resink, *Sociale Paedagogie*, 26; Resink’s *Sociale Paedagogie* was written for anyone interested in societal issues, but the preferred reading Resink constructed in this segment seemed to have specifically addressed his fellow SDAP members. The SDAP was in constant competition with other socialist parties (such as the Social-Democratic Bond), and around the time of Resink’s writing, the party was characterized by ongoing internal polemics [Hansen, Prosper, “Transformation and Accommodation” 480]. Within the SDAP, several Marxist factions developed between 1894 and 1914, one of them being Resink’s “Society of Theosophical Social-Democrats” [Hansen, Prosper, “Transformation”, 480; Broolsma, *Het Humanitaire moment*, 57]. With his plea for the ‘true role’ of Marxists in the revolutionary rise of the proletariat, Resink seemed to have made an attempt to promote his perspective on the course of the party and convince his fellow party-members to join his side.

³⁹ Resink, “Occulte Soziologie”, 110.

⁴⁰ Gibbels, *De Theosophische Vereniging*, 56.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 55-56.

diminished after 1906, however, remains up for debate and will be explored later in this thesis.

3.1.1 (A) *political theosophists?*

While some Dutch theosophists seemed to wish for a more practical orientation of theosophy, the responses to Resink's plea for a transition to political activism clearly indicate that most of the prominent theosophists in the Netherlands strongly opposed the political involvement of the Theosophical Society. How can this anti-political sentiment be explained?

J.W. Boissevain noted in 1906 that members of the Society always kept politics out of "Theosophical matters".⁴⁴ And even though the number of Dutch theosophists that believed that the time had come for practical application of theosophical ideas through social engagement, most theosophists seemed convinced that the social work of the T.S.N. ought to be in the spiritual, rather than the political realm.⁴⁵ The general objection against political activities for the Theosophical Society was based on the idea that political engagement implied party-involvement, and party-involvement entailed 'picking a side'. Many prominent Dutch theosophists - such as Windust, Boissevain, and Thierens – believed that party-involvement would distort the neutrality that to them was a fundamental characteristic of the Theosophical Society. Theosophists – as already illustrated by Thierens – ought to study every phenomenon from multiple sides without the prejudices they feared would enter their Society if it were to engage in political activities.⁴⁶

This unprejudiced perspective on society, however, needed to be applied to everything, argued S. van West (the former co-editor of *Theosophia*), including political socialism.⁴⁷ It seemed to him that some people (insinuating that this included some of his fellow theosophists) were triggered to object and obstruct at the very notion of socialism,

⁴⁴ Dr. J.W. Boissevain, "Een Fransch Neo-Catholicisme in aantocht?", *Theosophia* 15 – deel B (November 1906 – April 1907), 574.

⁴⁵ P.P.jr., "Boekbeoordeling. *Denkbeelden van een Christen-Anarchist*, door Felix Ortt.", *Theosophia* 9 (Mei 1900 – Augustus 1900), 180.

⁴⁶ Thierens, "Theosofie en Socialisme", 49.

⁴⁷ S.v.W., "Boekbespreking. *Wat Dunkt u van den Christus?* Preken van een revolutionair door N.J.C. Schermerhorn.", *Theosophia* 15 – deel B (November 1906 – April 1907), 570.

charging to the color red blindly “like a bull”.⁴⁸ Rather than opposing a message just because the speaker is a socialist, a theosophist – of all people – ought to consider: “not: is it *my* ideal? Is it *your* ideal? But: is it a *noble* ideal?”⁴⁹ Just as theosophy transcended the prejudices of humans, theosophists should transcend thinking in political camps.

While Van West’s insinuating notion indicates that at least some theosophists felt some antipathy towards political socialism, a growing number of Dutch theosophists began to view the idea of socialism itself in an increasingly positive and approving manner. ‘C.M.’ (who did not write much in *Theosophia* and seems to have been involved with the T.S.N. only for a short period of time), for example, regarded the socialist notion of the liberation of the working class as desirable from a theosophical point of view.⁵⁰ The history of Western peoples, in C.M.’s eyes, was a constant struggle for more freedom: “struggle for spiritual, for societal, for economic liberation, of which the Reformation, the French Revolution, and the struggle of the working class are the highlights of these times”.⁵¹ C.M. believed that it was clearly divine guidance that initiated the Reformation and the beginning of the liberation from religious dogma. Similarly, C.M. believed that theosophists could recognize divine guidance of humanity’s evolution in the socialist liberation of the working class.⁵² Every struggle for a more righteous social order ought to be the struggle of a theosophist, including the struggle for the improvement of the working class.⁵³ In a response to C.M., M. Mook stated that, indeed, “someone who is not able to see the magnificence, the selflessness, the beauty in Socialism or Anarchism should not call himself a Theosophist...” But Mook also respectfully pointed out that theosophy in his opinion was the “highest truth”, of which socialism was but one manifestation.⁵⁴ “Therefore, let to the Socialists and Anarchists their struggle for freedom, their fight against the causes of societal misery, but let us theosophists use our power to fight ‘the cause of causes’”.⁵⁵ Recognizing the merits of socialist thought, so it seemed to Mook, should not result in getting trapped in politics.

⁴⁸ S.v.W., “Boekbespreking”, 570.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ Many authors in *Theosophia* used their initials, rather than full name, to sign their articles. In some cases – such as ‘C.M.’s – this makes it difficult to find out who the author was.

⁵¹ C.M., “Dood Geloof en Levend Geloof. Rede, gehouden in eenige loges der T.V.”, *Theosophia* 15 – Deel A (Mei 1906 – October 1906), 271.

⁵² C.M., “Dood Geloof”, 272.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, 282.

⁵⁴ Mook, “Iets over innerlijke en uiterlijke moraal”, 346.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

Rather than picking sides, occupying themselves with giving the people “bread and games”, theosophists ought to engage in solving the “real problem”, argued A.E. Thierens.⁵⁶ In this view, the work of a theosophist transcended that of party-politics socialism. The idea was that the suffering of the worker class, and of humanity in general, could not be solved simply by implementing some new policies, by “swift actions and one-time-acts”.⁵⁷ It was this recognition, that a better world needed to be preceded by spiritual revitalization that had brought many to join the T.S.N.: “many of us came to theosophy *through* socialism”, said Thierens, “who of us did not start his Theosophical career with Bellamy’s *The Year 2000* and with William Morris’ *News from Nowhere?*”⁵⁸ It appears that Thierens shared the conviction with other Dutch theosophists that political socialism only dealt with battling symptoms (hence “bread and games”, providing the illusion of solving problems), and that the true battle lied beyond the material.⁵⁹ The socialist paradise promised by politicians and the socialist utopias described in utopian literature such as *The Year 2000* could only be realized by ‘changing human nature’.⁶⁰ Political socialism used materialist means to battle a spiritual problem. Theosophy, on the other hand, dealt with the real solution to society’s problems: the revitalization of spirituality in the West and with it, altering human nature.⁶¹ Getting involved in politics was perceived as a distraction from this theosophical task, and it was because of this reason that most Dutch theosophists followed the strong advice of Blavatsky, who was said to have had an “unyielding repugnance against practical party politics”.⁶²

It seems clear that most Dutch theosophists viewed party politics as a trivial battling of symptoms, rather than truly dealing with the causes of human misery. Some socialist groups, particularly radical revolutionary socialists (or anarcho-syndicalists), used the same argument (party politics will not solve the underlying problems causing the perils of the working class) to justify their plea for a socialist revolution.⁶³ Most theosophists, however, strongly condemned the idea of revolution – socialist or otherwise. The calling of theosophy, in

⁵⁶ Thierens, “Theosofie en Socialisme.”, 47.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 48.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 49.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 48-49.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 48.

⁶² *Ibidem*, 47.

⁶³ Blom, Lamberts, *Geschiedenis van de Nederlanden*, 329.

Mook's eyes, was "to prevent *revolution* by accelerating *evolution* [italics part of citation]".⁶⁴ Revolution, so it seemed to Mook, would most likely cause unforeseen destruction and was believed to limit, rather than aid, the progress of humanity.⁶⁵ This anti-revolutionary position of Mook was shared by many other theosophists. G. Heuvelman, for example, who stated: "we must, filled with the light of our grand ideal of a common brotherhood, employ all our forces to promote peace amongst people and to temper the class struggle".⁶⁶ It seemed a consensus amongst Dutch theosophists that revolution is an undesirable occurrence that would only lead to turmoil and terror. While party-politics would distort the neutrality of the Theosophical Society and obstruct their unprejudiced spiritual work, most theosophists believed that revolution would be a disaster, causing chaos that would be a dramatic setback for the long-term evolution of mankind.⁶⁷

Although the new generation of Dutch theosophists came from diverse social backgrounds, the early theosophists of the T.S.N. were mostly members of the bourgeoisie class. It seems likely that the idea that revolution was undesirable from a theosophical point of view appealed to the bourgeoisie members of the T.S.N. In his *The Politics of Divine Wisdom*, H.A.O. de Tollenaere argued that, in fact, it was the other way around: theosophy was used by theosophists with an upper-class background as ideological support of the privileged position of social elites.⁶⁸ De Tollenaere illustrated how members of the Theosophical Society in the Dutch Indies did, indeed, use theosophical dogmas to justify their own social position and their strong opposition to the growing communist movements in the Dutch Indies. Opposition to revolution, argued De Tollenaere, was consistent in theosophists' writings.⁶⁹ Could it be that Dutch theosophists, similar to the theosophists in the Dutch Indies, used theosophy as an ideological foundation for their own social privileges?

Although most Dutch theosophists seemed to have been strongly opposed to revolution, this anti-revolutionary sentiment of Dutch theosophists in the years before WWI is not evidential enough to argue that, indeed, Dutch theosophists used theosophy as an

⁶⁴ Mook, "Iets over innerlijke en uiterlijke moraal", 347.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ G. Heuvelman, "Strijd.", *Theosophia* 15 – deel B (November 1906 – April 1907), 662; It is likely that 'G. Heuvelman' was the writer Gerhard Heuvelman (1864-1926), author of some children's books like *De Oostersche prins*, *Een klaverblad*, *De Valsche Prins*, *Het Kabouterboek: nieuwe sprookjes*.

⁶⁷ Mook, "Iets over innerlijke en uiterlijke moraal", 347.

⁶⁸ De Tollenaere, *Politics of Divine Wisdom*, 394.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, 394-395.

ideological foundation for their social privileges. Many of the parliamentary socialists of the SDAP throughout its early history, for example, showed a similar combination of a bourgeoisie background and an anti-revolutionary standpoint but are not interpreted as bourgeoisie apologists (although more radical SDAP-members argued otherwise).⁷⁰

Bearing in mind, for example, Keith Gildart's *Esoteric Belief and Practice in the British Parliamentary Labour Party* (where Gildart argued that socialist theosophists generally had a very elitist and exclusive public image and viewed the masses as ignorant and in need of paternalistic guidance), it seems less likely that the anti-revolutionary sentiment of Dutch theosophists was motivated – primarily – by an upper-class fear of losing its privileges.⁷¹ Rather, it seems likely that – in line with Martine Bax's interpretation of the T.S.N. as a bourgeoisie civilizing project – the anti-revolutionary sentiment of Dutch theosophists before 1914 was motivated by the belief that it was up to the more developed, upper classes of society to initiate social change because only they had the social authority, as well as the moral and intellectual development, to bring about lasting changes in society.⁷² Most Dutch theosophists seemed to genuinely believe that revolution was too chaotic and abrupt and could therefore not be a constructive step towards a better, more just society – which was what most authors seemed to long for. Opposition to revolution, so it seems, was motivated by theosophists' elitist perspective on social progress, rather than by conservative attempts to preserve privileges.

3.2 Theosophy and the social issue

As discussed earlier in this thesis, in the years after around 1906 an increasing number of Dutch theosophists inclined towards practically applying their theosophical knowledge to concrete issues in their contemporary society. Influenced by the influx of new members, as well as their own wish for the broadening of the scope of the Theosophical Society's activities, a general assembly of the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands made the decision to, as Resink described it, “seriously investigate” the social issue.⁷³ To aid theosophical inquiry into the social issue, the Theosophical Publishing House invited a

⁷⁰ Hansen, Prosper, “Transformation and Accommodation”, 476-477.

⁷¹ Gildart, “Séance Sitters, Ghost Hunters”, 21.

⁷² Bax, *Web der Schepping*, 128.

⁷³ Resink, *Sociale Paedagogie*, 5.

selection of Dutch theosophists – some of them prominent members, others selected because of their social activities outside the Theosophical Society – to write a series of essays on the social issue, which then was bundled into a book and published under the name *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk* ('Theosophy and the Social Issue', 1908).⁷⁴ Knowledge about theosophy (with regards to what it was, e.g. how theosophical dogmas such as karma, reincarnation, and spiritual evolution worked) was "more than adequately chronicled", now it was time to search for societal applications of that knowledge.⁷⁵ The theosophists invited by the publishing house were: Jan de Jager (a high school teacher, socialist theosophist, and the former secretary of P.J. Troelstra (the leader of the S.D.A.P.)); Dr. Charlotte Aleida van Manen (an economist, a woman's rights activist, and board member of the National Women's Council); A.E. Thierens (a former naval officer, colonial administrator, prominent Dutch theosophist who founded the Dutch Society for Astronomy and Astrology, was editor for *Urania* (an astrology magazine), receiver of an honorary doctorate in philosophy from the University of Lausanne in Switzerland, and author of the *General Book of the Tarot* – which is still considered an internationally acclaimed classic regarding tarot), M.W. Mook (an engineer and active theosophist; H.R. Th. Nijland ("commander of the Workers-Army", an organization focused on the improvement of the working class); and Mr. Dr. D. Albers (of whom not much is known).⁷⁶

With their contributions, the six Dutch theosophists hoped to aid theosophists in their efforts to actualize theosophy through societal engagement, to help make the acquired theosophical knowledge benefit the "masses", and to reach a wider audience of non-

⁷⁴ H.R. Th. Nijland, "Vrijheid, Gelijkheid, Broederschap", in: A. Besant, Mr.Dr. D. Albers e.a., *Theosofie en het maatschappelijk vraagstuk* (Theosofische Uitgeversmaatschappij, Amsterdam, 1908), 105.

⁷⁵ Gibbels, *De Theosophische Vereniging*, 65; A. Besant, Mr.Dr. D. Albers e.a., *Theosofie en het maatschappelijk vraagstuk* (Theosofische Uitgeversmaatschappij, Amsterdam, 1908), i.

⁷⁶ For information on the authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk vraagstuk*, see: Jansen, 'Een kern van broederschap...', 42 for Jan de Jager. For Ch. A. van Manen: http://www.dbnl.org/auteurs/auteur.php?id=mane008_-23-7-2018, <http://historisch.groene.nl/nummer/1916-06-03/pagina/5#4/44.78/-124.54,-23-7-2018>; W.H. Posthumus-van der Goot, *Van moeder op dochter* (Amsterdam: Brill, 1969), 396. For A.E. Thierens: <http://www.dbnl.org/auteurs/auteur.php?id=thie076>, 24-7-2018; *De Telegraaf* 20-03-1926; http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_nie002191001_01/_nie002191001_01_0082.php, 24-7-2018. For M.W. Mook, see: <http://www.theosofie.nl/bibliotheek/collectie/theosofie/the-2-t-1-diverse-auteurs-t/>, 24-7-2018; De Tollenaere, *Politics of Divine Wisdom*, 112. For H.R. Th. Nijland, see: *The Theosophist*, Vol. 30, No.6, 419; *Het nieuws van den dag voor Nederlandsch Indie*, 8-3-1913; *Leidsch Dagblad*, 19-8-1907.

theosophists searching for answers to questions related to the social issue.⁷⁷ How did the authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk* view the role of the T.S.N. in society?⁷⁸ What role might the T.S.N. have, according to said authors, in relation to the social issue? And how, according to the authors, would their theosophical knowledge benefit the masses?

3.2.1 Social engagement and the Theosophical Society?

“There have been people in the Theosophical Society, who have doubted the usefulness of direct labor in the social realm, as part of the specifically theosophical work. Does, and ought there, to be a relation between the both, and if so, which?”⁷⁹

With this question, A.E. Thierens started his contribution to *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*. Thierens began his essay with definitions, defining theosophy as “a term expressing a certain imagination of the Universe... and an imagination of humanity’s evolution”, and the social issue as “a concept regarding the conditions and relations of human society”.⁸⁰ Concretely, theosophy referred to the divine wisdom that taught the laws of karma, reincarnation, and spiritual evolution, while the social issue referred to the miserable condition of the lower classes and the tensions between the rich and the poor.⁸¹ Defined like this, Thierens argued, there was a “very direct” relation between theosophy and the social issue. Since divine wisdom could provide answers and solutions for “all social issues”, Thierens argued that theosophy had a solution to the current social crisis too – like a mathematical law provides the solution to a mathematical problem.⁸²

⁷⁷ A. Besant, Mr.Dr. D. Albers e.a., *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*, ii.

⁷⁸ Though some of the authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk* (M.W. Mook and A.E. Thierens) have already been discussed in this chapter, the discussed articles were mainly responses to others. In *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*, these authors presented their personal outlook specifically on the ‘social issue’, not on the arguments of others.

⁷⁹ A.E. Thierens, ‘Inleiding tot de vraag: “Hoe verhoudt zich de theosofie tot het maatschappelijk vraagstuk?”’, in: *Theosofie en het maatschappelijk vraagstuk*, 127.

⁸⁰ Thierens, ‘Inleiding tot de vraag.’, 127-128.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

⁸² *Ibidem*, 128.

The other authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk* began their contributions with similar – rhetorical – questions, and came to the same conclusion as Thierens: naturally, theosophy is related to the current social issues. And naturally, theosophy can provide proper solutions to solve the problems surrounding this issue. “A society, which places itself on the foundation of universal brotherhood, can hardly have peace with a societal environment as ours”, wrote Jan de Jager.⁸³ Since the Theosophical Society, De Jager argued, deemed itself as one of the builders of a new civilization, it was its obvious task to wonder what can be done to “transform this society of reciprocal competition, struggle, and envy, to one founded on universal brotherhood”.⁸⁴ To the authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*, the Theosophical Society initially had the responsibility to gather and study the divine wisdom that had manifested itself in all the religious and esoteric traditions of the world, but now had to embark on fulfilling its task to apply their profound knowledge of the spiritual foundations of life to improve the societies they lived in.⁸⁵ Although, as seen in chapter two of this thesis, there was still a significant number of Dutch theosophists that seemed hesitant to follow in the footsteps of international theosophists and their social engagement projects, the authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk* seemed part of the new generation of theosophists that argued for a more socially engaged course for the Society.

3.2.2 Marx's mistake

To the authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*, it was clear that the Theosophical Society had an important role to play in solving the social issues of their time. The wisdom they had acquired through years of studying theosophy could be of great use to whoever tried to solve the issues at hand – both theosophists and non-theosophists.⁸⁶ And to the authors, it seemed that the world was in dire need of their theosophical aid. Throughout *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*, it becomes apparent that the authors all believed it were mainly ‘socialists’ who were engaged in the issues that they as theosophists were now

⁸³ J. de Jager, ‘Hebben de T.V. en de theosofie een maatschappelijke taak?’, in: *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*, 48.

⁸⁴ De Jager, ‘Hebben de T.V. en de theosofie’, 48.

⁸⁵ For example: *Ibidem*, 48-50.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, 49.

discussing (the authors seemed to use ‘socialism’ as an umbrella term for the wide variety of movements and organizations calling themselves socialist, as well as other groups that were, in the eyes of the authors, clear manifestations of the socialist ideal of cooperative brotherhood).⁸⁷ Even though these socialists and their efforts – through labor-unions, utopian communes, social-democratic parliamentary projects, and, despite theosophical resentment against revolution, even the efforts of radical Marxists and anarchist syndicalists – deserved admiration for their idealistically motivated attempts to improve society, most of these groups, it was argued, were nonetheless occupying themselves with combatting symptoms, rather than truly solving the issues.⁸⁸ Despite recognizing that many socialists had the best intentions, their efforts to improve society were deemed futile by most authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*. The truth is, argued Mook, that “the great majority of the contemporary ambodexter Western world ...is absolutely not ready for altruistic struggle or helping in an issue where one has no personal interest”.⁸⁹

To illustrate this argument, Mook uses the example of the “many attempts to realize the anarchistic theories in communes and the like”, which all showed that the altruistic virtues of idealistic individuals were wasted in the attempts to build radically equal societal formations.⁹⁰ The radical equality of Christian-anarchist communes, for example, though based on highly admirable virtues of “noble altruism”, resulted in the futile spending of time and energy of people whose individual moral strength was not enough to compensate for the selfishness of the majority of people that joined their communes.⁹¹ To Mook, selfishness was embedded in the personalities of the majority of Western people through the workings of karma, and most of the selfish people were not equipped with the proper spiritual knowledge to overcome their negative karma.⁹² Organizing a non-hierarchical commune with equal rights for all that joined would therefore inevitably result in failure:

“while the world waits for help, which she so urgently needs, some of the most altruistic and therefore most suited to provide that help spend their time on all kinds of

⁸⁷ See for example: M.W. Mook, “De Maatschappelijke beteekenis der Theosofische Vereeniging”, in: *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*, 95.

⁸⁸ Mook, “De Maatschappelijke beteekenis”, 96.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, 97.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 95.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*.

⁹² *Ibidem*, 97.

well-intended, but actually *unwise* attempts to reform society based on foundations that not at all take into account the enormous differences in mental- and spiritual development of the different people of which society exists...”.⁹³

This argument – most humans are morally not developed enough yet for cooperative equality – is also used by other authors in *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*. Van Manen, for example, seems rather pessimistic when he stated that throughout the history of “the model-structures of Robert Owen, of the countless production-cooperatives, the countless communistic communes, even that of Van Eeden – one finds failure everywhere”.⁹⁴ Van Manen also attributed the failure of the communes to “dependency on the lower nature” of most humans, on characteristics of human nature – such as passions and lower urges – that were developed during the millennia of human evolution.⁹⁵ These elements of the human condition would take “ages” to be changed, and until then would continue to obstruct the prospects of true equality amongst humans.⁹⁶ The idea that a spiritual revolution had to precede practical idealism was, as Marjet Brolsma argued in her *Het humanitaire moment*, characteristic of what she called the ‘second humanitarian moment’. While the first period of humanitarian idealism (around the *fin-de-siècle*) was characterized by practical idealism such as experimental utopian communes, the second period of flourishing humanitarian idealism (which Brolsma placed in the years between 1914 and 1930) was characterized by a shift in focus towards emphasizing the importance of spiritual revitalization.⁹⁷ Authors like Van Manen can be best interpreted as part of this shift, as preludes to the broader revival of humanitarian idealism that agents in the shift in emphasis from (failed) practical idealism towards more abstract spiritually orientated idealism.⁹⁸

To Van Manen, the big mistake of socialists – social-democrats, radical Marxists and Christian-Anarchists alike – was their belief that improving economic circumstances would

⁹³ Mook, “De Maatschappelijke beteekenis”, 95.

⁹⁴ CH. A. van Manen, “Economische Nood”, in: *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*, 78; Van Manen referred here to Frederik van Eeden’s Walden colony.

⁹⁵ Van Manen, “Economische Nood”, 78.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁷ Brolsma, *Het humanitaire moment*, 7-8.

⁹⁸ Shifts in discourse like the one outlined by Brolsma happen over a period of time, and Van Manen is an example of what in hindsight could be interpreted as an ‘early advocate’ of the new discourse.

have a direct and lasting positive effect on the mental and moral development of individuals.⁹⁹ As long as a morally developed individual led a collective, the collective would thrive. But as soon as the collective would get more responsibility, and the moral leadership would take a step back, “all the work would turn out to be futile”. Even though – under moral leadership – improved economic circumstances could temporarily neutralize the selfishness of the masses, the manifold practical examples of failed socialist communes proved to Van Manen that “it was not the economic circumstances that commanded the mental and moral, but the other way around”.¹⁰⁰ As soon as people were free to be their own person, it would become apparent that economic circumstances are in fact subjugated to the moral and mental condition of humanity, and the “low level” of moral development would ensure that the collective would rapidly fall back into economic competition and exploitation.¹⁰¹

This idea formed the basis of the central critique that the authors of *Theosophy and the Social Issue* expressed towards the “majority of socialists, that is used to regard themselves, life, and everything around them from a *material* point of view”.¹⁰² The improvement of economic conditions is not a goal in itself, and neither is economic improvement on itself sufficient as a tool for the improvement of the human condition: “improve its [humanity] material circumstances as much as you like, it will not benefit if it doesn’t improve itself [humanity]”.¹⁰³ The idea was that material improvement – e.g. better living conditions – would indeed lead to less immoral behavior, because people that had enough materially would resort less to immoral acts like stealing and murder. But if the spiritual development lacked behind, the decline in immoral behavior caused by material improvements would be temporal, and immoral behavior would rapidly rise again as soon as material conditions worsened (something that was believed to be likely to happen, e.g. due to economic crises or natural disaster). And on top of that, argued Mr. Dr. D. Albers, did not exorbitant wealth more often than not lead to indolence and sloth? In his contribution to the book, Albers focused on “the father of modern socialism”, Karl Marx, whom he appraisingly called a “titan” with magnificent intelligence and a rare work ethic who “devoted his entire life... to the cause of the working class”.¹⁰⁴ Besides his enormous contributions to the socialist cause, Albers

⁹⁹ Van Manen, “Economische Nood”, 78.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰² H.R. Th. Nijland, ‘Vrijheid, Gelijkheid, Broederschap’, 105.

¹⁰³ Mr. Dr. D. Albers, “De fout van Marx”, in: *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*, 23.

¹⁰⁴ Albers, “De fout van Marx”, 28.

argued that Marx's most important contribution to humanity was that his work triggered the attention of society towards the social issue.¹⁰⁵

However, notwithstanding the great admiration Albers expressed, he argued that Marx's theories contain fundamental flaws which greatly diminish their value with regards to solving the social issue. After briefly outlining the fundamental elements of *Das Kapital*, Albers began breaking down Marx's 'labor theory of value', the 'theory of class struggle', and Marxist historical materialism, to show that the theoretical background of most socialists was in reality based on flawed theories.¹⁰⁶ Regarding the labor theory of value, for example, Albers pointed out that Marx wrongly and unconvincingly dismisses the economic laws of supply and demand in the process of determining value, which is not only determined by rational factors but to an even larger extent by irrational factors such as "human desire".¹⁰⁷ Additionally, Albers argued that Marx's theory of class struggle was far too simplistic and not in accordance with historical records. "Statistics prove", argued Albers, that the living conditions of the working class – though still largely abysmal – significantly improved over the ages, and besides the time just after the Black Death (with its unprecedented demand for labor and the resulting increase in wages) there has probably never been a better time for workers than their contemporary time.¹⁰⁸ But to Albers, Marx's most important mistake was to assume that historical materialism alone was the driving force behind historical developments.¹⁰⁹ Not only was historical materialism an inaccurate perspective on the world argued Albers – for example with regards to the abolishment of slavery, or the prohibition of child labor (which proved to Albers that not all historical developments have material origins, that ideas can also change the material world), but besides the "many flaws that can be demonstrated regarding Marx's arguments", more important was that "it has the mistake, that it reduces a human's feeling of responsibility".¹¹⁰ To Albers, the essence of Marx's mistake was that he left no room for human agency in his theoretical analysis of the workings of the world.

Albers's criticism of Marxism bears strong resemblance to the criticism of Marx as articulated by M.W.F. Treub, who, as shortly discussed by Piet de Rooy in his *Een hevig*

¹⁰⁵ Albers, "De fout van Marx", 28.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, 34.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, 35.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, 41.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, 38.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 41.

gewarrel, already in 1891 argued that it was paradoxical to accept Marx's historical materialism while simultaneously claiming that the only step towards a better society was through the ideologically based initiatives of Marxists.¹¹¹ Albers's critique of Marxism can be placed in the broader context of humanitarian idealism as interpreted by Broolsma in her *Humanitaire moment*, where she argued that most humanitarian idealists shared a criticism of historical materialism as the philosophical basis for Marxism similar to that of Albers.¹¹²

Like Van Manen, Albers argued that improving the material living conditions of people would not result in lasting societal improvement, because the "spiritual development is primary, without her no sustainable material progress is possible".¹¹³ But to Albers, that did not mean that improving material conditions was unimportant. According to Albers, many people who stressed the importance of spiritual progress had a "certain disdain" for the material side of life which resulted in a lack of attention to aiding in the improvement of material living conditions.¹¹⁴ But that, to Albers, was a mistake: theosophists should "vigorously work for the material progress of society... because it is not naïve dreamers, but decisive workers that humanity needs".¹¹⁵ And even though the theoretical fundamentals of Marxist socialism – class-struggle, historical materialism, and the labor theory of value – were flawed in Albers's eyes, he argued that the idea of socialist brotherhood and the practical ways in which many socialists aided the material progress of the less fortunate part of humanity were nonetheless admirable and deserved the support of theosophists.¹¹⁶ Even though "class struggle is not the lever bringing us to a better future", a better future was achievable nevertheless.¹¹⁷

3.2.3 Freedom, equality, brotherhood?

¹¹¹ De Rooy, *Een hevig gewarrel*, 627-628; this is paradoxical because according to Marx's historical materialism, ideologies are the result of material circumstances, which are in turn reinforced by ideologies. Arguing that the proletariat should unite and revolt, inspired by the Marxist promise of a socialist utopia, would entail using ideology to alter material circumstances – which, according to Marx, was impossible.

¹¹² Broolsma, *Het humanitaire moment*, 7.

¹¹³ Albers, "De fout van Marx", 26.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 27, 42-43.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 43.

The socialists who were working towards a better future, H.R. Th. Nijland argued, needed the help of theosophists: “Economic improvements would be realized better and sooner if socialists would take into account the Theosophical conceptions; especially the laws of karma and reincarnation”.¹¹⁸ Because according to Nijland, the “creed of *freedom, equality, brotherhood*” cannot be realized in the sense that most socialists believed it could: “The law of *Reincarnation* and *Karma* teaches, that humans are not completely *free*, nor can they be *equal*, but nonetheless *brotherhood* can exist”.¹¹⁹ Nijland argued that it was nonsensical to claim that humans are born equal, because, in practice, humans are born with “enormous differences in personality, talents, and traits”, even among individuals who are born under the same material circumstances.¹²⁰ To Nijland, the theosophical conceptions of karma and reincarnation were the most obvious and reasonable explanation for the moral and mental differences between humans, which are caused by “heredity, education, and karma”.¹²¹ Since humans are not of equal capacity, Nijland argued, they are not equal. And even if, as social-democrats argued, everybody would have the same quality of education, development options, and general living conditions, Nijland believed that people would still have differing karma which would prevent complete equality.¹²² Nijland claimed that, since people have different lessons to learn in their lives based on the different forms of karma they inherited from their previous lives, humanity is characterized by inequality rather than equality.¹²³

This inequality that to Nijland was inherent to the human condition also implied that there is no real freedom. Nijland argued that, just as a newborn baby is dependent on its mother and only develops freedom over time through education and personal growth, eventually enjoying a relative sense of freedom and independence as an adult, a human soul begins its existence completely dependent and unfree, and can only free itself slowly through spiritual growth and after many reincarnations.¹²⁴ “Many socialists speak so much about freedom!”, wrote Nijland, but he questioned the ability of most people to endure “total freedom”.¹²⁵ In Nijland’s eyes, most people were like birds that grew up in a cage, preferring

¹¹⁸ Nijland, “Vrijheid, Gelijkheid, Broederschap”, 106.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 107.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*, 109.

¹²¹ *Ibidem*, 110.

¹²² *Ibidem*.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, 112.

¹²⁴ *Ibidem*, 115.

¹²⁵ *Ibidem*, 114.

the familiarity of the cage over the uncertainties of the freedom outside it. And on top of that, Nijland asked his readers, was some hierarchy not necessary for the proper functioning of any group, whether a factory, a family, or a society?

To Nijland, both the inequality and the bondages that obstruct human freedom were inherently part of the notion of brotherhood. In line with most other theosophists, Nijland argued that the brotherhood of humanity could best be imagined as a family, with clear differences in experience, wisdom, and thus authority between older family members and younger family members. And to Nijland, the difference in capacity – through experience – clearly entailed a natural hierarchy, for it “cannot be true, that the vote of the youngest and inexperienced have the same value as the vote of the eldest and wisest”.¹²⁶ According to Nijland, that is how a proper socialist society ought to function as well: the “older brothers and sisters the leaders and guides”, watching over the “young children” who still needed guidance, help, and support.¹²⁷

Nijland’s reasoning that humans are not equal, that humans are not born free, and that the notion of brotherhood entails hierarchy rather than equality is illustrative for the way that most of the authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk* viewed the Enlightenment ideal of liberty, equality, and brotherhood for all humans. And to a large extent, the ideas of inequality and a hierarchical view of humanity as being divided by different levels of development were fundamental to theosophical beliefs as the inevitable consequences of the process of spiritual evolution governed by the ‘cosmic laws of karma and reincarnation’.¹²⁸ To many theosophists, the idea that souls were not all the same, but rather that there are more advanced souls and less advanced ones, was considered a fact of life rather than merely an idea.¹²⁹ As seen in chapter two of this thesis, the idea of spiritual evolution was first introduced by H.P. Blavatsky, who developed a complex evolutionary cosmology that described a universe that was governed by the laws of karma and reincarnation.¹³⁰ According to this idea each individual separately, and humanity as a whole is embarked on a path of

¹²⁶ Nijland, “Vrijheid, Gelijkheid, Broederschap”, 114.

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁸ Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge. Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004), 467, 469.

¹²⁹ De Jong, *Wijzen uit het Oosten*, 23; Combined with the theosophical notions of physical races as incarnations of ‘root-races’ or soul-races consequentially led many theosophists to view humanity in racially defined categories of increasing development (in line with the dominant Western discourse regarding race during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century).

¹³⁰ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 134.

spiritual evolution, guided by karmic development.¹³¹ This evolutionary journey of a soul could last for thousands, even hundreds of thousands of years and involve countless lives. It was a general consensus amongst theosophists that ‘older souls’ had more experience and were, therefore, wiser than ‘younger souls’.¹³² Similar to how the Darwinist theory of biological evolution was interpreted as a theoretical fundament for racial inequality and eugenics, the theosophical adaptation of Darwinist evolution – Blavatsky’s spiritual evolution- was interpreted by theosophists such as Nijland as a theoretical fundament for unequal social rights¹³³.

The question, to the authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*, was how to apply this hierarchical view of humanity to society. The answers they formulated, however, differed. Some authors, like De Jager, Thierens, and Van Manen, preferred a democratic state system, based on the idea that every soul should not be held back by authoritarian limitations, but rather have the freedom and thus the chance to further its spiritual development. The idea behind this interpretation was that it was a soul’s individual responsibility to develop (which was done, for example, by helping others in their spiritual development).¹³⁴ Other authors, like Mook, but Nijland in particular, advocated a differing view. Nijland argued that “the wise” have a reincarnated right to rule and to guide the many ignorant young souls in their process of spiritual development.¹³⁵ While Nijland strongly advocated a hierarchical socialism, Mook seemed a bit more modest, but nevertheless, Mook also recognized a relationship between karma and social position.¹³⁶ Perhaps De Tollenaere’s notion of theosophy as bourgeoisie apologetics for social elitism was on point after all?

3.2.4 Responsibilities and the karmic hierarchy of society

¹³¹ Katharina Brandt, Olav Hammer, “Rudolf Steiner and Theosophy”, in: *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 118.

¹³² Brandt, Hammer, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 118; De Jong, *Wijzen uit het Oosten*, 29.

¹³³ See for example: Brandt, Hammer, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 8; Peter Broks, *Understanding Popular Science* (New York: Open University Press, 2006), 1-2.

¹³⁴ See for example: Van Manen, “Economische Nood”, 73; De Jager, “Hebben de T.V. en de Theosofie”, 59-62; Thierens, “Inleiding tot de vraag”, 130.

¹³⁵ Nijland, “Vrijheid, Gelijkheid, Broederschap”, 109.

¹³⁶ Mook, “De Maatschappelijke beteekenis”, 91.

Most authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk* seemed to have believed that they, as theosophists, were better equipped than other social reformers to ‘see the bigger picture’ with regards to the social issues of their time. Thierens, for example, stated that theosophists and their occult knowledge about the nature of reality were more than others capable of distinguishing between the best solutions to social issues and “false, misguided ways”.¹³⁷ And, in line with the other authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*, Thierens argued that most of the socialist movements of their time propagated misguided solutions. The “hate for the rich” and the social juxtaposition that was actively propagated by most socialists was condemned by the authors, who argued that juxtaposing the rich with the poor would only polarize society and, with this polarization, obstruct the atmosphere of brotherhood that the authors believed was necessary for solving the social issues of their time.¹³⁸ Solving class struggle would not solve the social issue, argued Van Manen, because class struggle was not the real issue. It was just the contemporary manifestation of the real issue: the struggle between the altruism of ‘higher consciousness’ and the selfishness of ‘lower consciousness’.¹³⁹

The authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk* all seemed to agree that, since theosophists were better capable than others to understand the deeper, underlying processes of the universe and of human history, they had an important role to play in society. Mook summarized the social responsibility of the T.S.N. as threefold: firstly, the T.S.N. ought to actively propagate the idea of brotherhood in society, because only a mental atmosphere dominated by ‘the spirit of true brotherhood’ could enable a better society; secondly, the T.S.N. was to prepare and nurture everyone within its sphere of influence to become better, morally developed humans; thirdly, to propagate the theosophical understanding of the fundamental laws of human evolution “without which no social reformer can accomplish lasting results”.¹⁴⁰

Mook argued that the theosophical teachings regarding karma and reincarnation would provide all social workers with the necessary motivation and mental support to not give up, because these teachings implied that a social reformer would have many lives, rather than just one, to accomplish their desire for a better world. The T.S.N., Mook argued, had the social responsibility to be a “nursery” of brotherhood, of humans capable of brotherly acts of

¹³⁷ Thierens, “Inleiding tot de vraag”, 131; see also: Mook, “De Maatschappelijke beteekenis”, 93.

¹³⁸ Thierens, “Inleiding tot de vraag”, 132, Van Manen, “Economische Nood”, 69;

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*, 67.

¹⁴⁰ Mook, “De Maatschappelijke beteekenis”, 85.

altruism.¹⁴¹ As for the theosophical understanding of human evolution: Mook stated that not all humans are at the same level of spiritual development, and social reformers ought to bear this in mind with regards to their plans for social reform – it would be foolish, Mook stated for example, to expect the same behavior from more altruistically orientated people and from selfish, less developed people.¹⁴²

Most of the authors in *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk* argued that the theosophical teachings would significantly benefit all social reformers, not only theosophists. At the basis of this claim seemed to be the belief that they, as theosophists, had a deeper understanding of reality that would be a strong motivational factor for social improvement. The idea seemed to be as follows: if the universe is governed by the laws of karma, all actions and thoughts have consequences and therefore matter – even if, for example, a social reformer might want to give up working towards a better future because his or her actions seem not to result in improvement, the social reformer should not give up because somewhere along the way – even if it is many lives later - his or her actions will have result.¹⁴³ Similarly, if, as theosophists believed, every soul reincarnates until it is transcended enough, there would be no escape from the consequences of one's actions or from one's duty's, and one might as well do the things that will result in better karma and the eventual escape from the prison of karma and reincarnation in this life and moment, rather than in the next.¹⁴⁴ The theosophical idea of spiritual evolution was also applied to humanity as a whole: an often used analogy amongst theosophists was humanity as a developing child who would reach maturity over the course of millennia. Most authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk* believed that in their time, humanity was entering puberty, which could explain the hedonism, short-mindedness, and focus on material needs,¹⁴⁵ It was up to theosophists to aid humanity in her process of spiritual evolution, which could be accomplished by helping their fellow beings to become better versions of themselves.¹⁴⁶

Of all the authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*, Jan de Jager seemed to have had the most concrete idea about the way the T.S.N. could fulfill its social responsibility. De Jager argued that personal development is indeed an important step in the

¹⁴¹ Mook, “De Maatschappelijke beteekenis”, 87.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*.

¹⁴³ See for example: *Ibidem*; Thierens, “Inleiding tot de vraag”, 130.

¹⁴⁴ See for example: Nijland, “Vrijheid, Gelijkheid, Broederschap”, 122.

¹⁴⁵ See for example: Mook, “De Maatschappelijke beteekenis”, 89.

¹⁴⁶ Thierens, “Inleiding tot de vraag”, 130.

process of improving society but that, when it came to practical issues, “the theosophist is just as wise as the non-theosophist, doesn’t get far [in solving practical issues] with his reincarnation and karma, and has to rely on ordinary history and ordinary economics”.¹⁴⁷ However, argued De Jager, that could change. Although De Jager argued that most members of the T.S.N. “barely [had] any personal occult knowledge” and were mere “advertisement” for the esoteric wisdom of the ancients, he believed that if more theosophists would become proficient in occult research – like Besant and Leadbeater were – and have the proper mystical skills to acquire occult knowledge, theosophists could truly guide the social evolution of humanity to a higher stage.¹⁴⁸ This occult research, De Jager argued, would enable theosophists to “survey thousands of centuries of economic history”, something that would give theosophists the proper means to be the social force that he believed they should be.¹⁴⁹

De Jager believed that whoever was capable of such occult research (for example by means of astral travel) would have an enormous advantage over ordinary politicians because such an occultist could mentally transcend limitations like time and space to access the infinite knowledge of the cosmos. Two problems standing in the way of such occult rulership, argued De Jager, were that there only a few true occultists, and that their contemporary society was not ready to take their research seriously (De Jager referred to Besant and Leadbeater who in 1908 published the results of their experimental research into chemistry by means of clairvoyant observation – observing the compounds of matter through their mind, rather than through a microscope – in a book called *Occult Chemistry*. Although it met with enthusiasm in theosophical circles, *Occult Chemistry* was dismissed as pseudo-science by most members of the scientific establishment).¹⁵⁰

According to De Jager, the true social responsibility of theosophists was to propagate the epistemological authority of occult research such as *Occult Science*, as well as train more people to become true occultists capable of such research. Only then will “Theosophy become a social force and ‘lead’ the social evolution and the movement started by Socialism [the creation of a civilization based on brotherhood]”.¹⁵¹ De Jager ended his article with the notion that theosophists, as humans, had the social responsibility to actively aid their fellow beings,

¹⁴⁷ De Jager, “Hebben de T.V. en de Theosofie”, 60.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 60-61.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 61.

¹⁵⁰ Egil Asprem, *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 411-412; De Jager, “Hebben de T.V. en de Theosofie”, 61.

¹⁵¹ *Ibidem*, 59, 61.

but had a responsibility as theosophists to promote the practice and social acceptance of occult research. This, he believed, was the only way to help society evolve from its current modern structure to a “Socialist Community”.¹⁵²

3.3 Theosophy, karma, and class

As seen in chapter two of this thesis, Dutch theosophists between 1897 and 1910 seemed not too eager to actively follow in the footsteps of the international theosophists that around 1908 began to be more practically engaged in society. Nevertheless, an increasing number of authors in *Theosophia* seemed to get involved in discussions regarding the social responsibility of the Society. Part of the discussion regarding social engagement and responsibility of theosophists were questions regarding the natural order of the universe which, as the theosophical dogmas stated, were governed by the causal laws of karma and reincarnation. As seen in section 3.2 of this chapter, most of the authors of *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk* believed that all social reform movements could significantly benefit from understanding the theosophical dogmas about karma and reincarnation. Other Dutch theosophists, however, recognized some difficulties regarding the relation between theosophical dogmas and social engagement. Was it for example because of bad karma that poor people were poor? If so, wouldn't that mean that those poor people were suffering the consequences of mistakes from their previous lives and that helping them was interference with the natural (theosophical) order of the universe? Paired with the emergence of a new generation of Dutch theosophists who advocated social engagement were debates about the ways in which theosophical dogmas such as karma, reincarnation, and spiritual evolution related to social engagement and responsibility. These debates will be explored in this section.

3.3.1 The necessity of struggle?

The novelist Gerhard Heuvelman, who wrote several contributions in *Theosophia* about the relationship between free will and mysticism, joined the debate about social engagement and

¹⁵² De Jager, "Hebben de T.V. en de Theosofie", 62.

theosophy with his article *Strijd* (“struggle”).¹⁵³ Throughout Heuvelman’s article, an ambiguity emerges that seems to be what Heuvelman himself was struggling with. On the one hand, “wealth for all” and “peace amongst peoples” are desirable concepts, fitting in relation to the theosophical ideal of a brotherhood of humanity. But on the other hand, Heuvelman believed that struggle is the inevitable outcome of the cosmic laws that govern the universe.¹⁵⁴

Inspired by the idea of a ‘brotherhood of man’, theosophists like Heuvelman expressed a desire to help fellow beings in suffering. But by accepting that ‘Karmic law’ governed the events of existence, they also accepted the necessity of this suffering.¹⁵⁵ War, poverty and other suffering were necessary elements in the spiritual development of individual souls.¹⁵⁶ This ambiguity between the belief in the necessity of human suffering and the desire to help humans in need sparked a debate amongst Dutch theosophists in *Theosophia* between 1906 and 1914. As illustrated in chapter two of this thesis it seemed that many Dutch theosophists were attracted to the theosophy of the T.S.N. because it provided a meaningful framework for interpreting the ongoing issues in contemporary modern society.¹⁵⁷ But accepting the theosophical view on society also caused problems, like the ambiguity between the idea of ‘karmic consequentialism’ and the humanitarian desire to help.

Heuvelman’s article is an illustrative example of how Dutch theosophists attempted to find a synthesis between different religious and philosophical traditions and modern science to interpret the changes that were going on in their society. Drawing inspiration from the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Aristotle, Gnosticism, and Christianity, Heuvelman argued that “struggle is the foundation of development”.¹⁵⁸ Heuvelman used a gnostic interpretation of Aristotle’s ‘invisible mover’ to describe the nature of reality, which is that every being and thing is a segment of the cosmic “All”, a timeless being who split itself into separate beings.¹⁵⁹ Based on this assumption, Heuvelman stated that the goal of this universe was “the liberation of the voluntarily [in physical matter] imprisoned God”, the reunification of all things with the

¹⁵³ <http://www.theosofie.nl/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Thematische-Artikelen-Theosofia.pdf>. 13-7-2018.

¹⁵⁴ Heuvelman, “Strijd.”, 661.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, 662.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 662.

¹⁵⁷ See also: Wessinger, “The Second Generation”, 36.

¹⁵⁸ Heuvelman, “Strijd.”, 662

¹⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 661; Crombag, Van Dun, *De Utopische Verleiding*, 203-204; Heuvelman was not exactly clear why this happened. Most gnostic traditions claimed the cosmic all created the universe to gain better understanding of its own nature, but Heuvelman does not mention this (see: Crombag, Van Dun, *De Utopische Verleiding*, 203-207.).

cosmic all.¹⁶⁰ This is done by the development of individual beings, the “displacement of weaker things by stronger things”, as was clearly shown by modern science through the work of Charles Darwin.¹⁶¹ Struggle was the foundation of development, and development was the only way out of the struggle of existence, Heuvelman seemed to argue: “struggle is the root of the tree of peace”.¹⁶² And the development or evolution of beings was guided by the laws of karma. However, despite stating that “war and poverty will not disappear until the Karmic law deems them obsolete as tools for the spiritual development of individual ego’s”, Heuvelman argued that this should not mean that theosophists could not ‘soften’ the hardships of their fellow beings.¹⁶³ The struggle for spiritual development, in Heuvelman’s view, ought to be achievable with ‘a little humanity’.¹⁶⁴ Class struggle, however, was not the solution for Heuvelman. His only argument for the undesirability of class struggle is “that would not limit the struggle, which is a law of nature, but merely lift it to a higher realm, the spiritual realm.”¹⁶⁵ Despite contradicting his own arguing earlier in his article and without further explanation, Heuvelman condemns the idea of class struggle. Heuvelman’s contradictory attitude towards class struggle is an indication that De Tollenaere’s assessment of the theosophical perspectives on revolution as bourgeoisie apologetics was, at least with regards to some Dutch theosophists, justified.¹⁶⁶

As illustrated with the contradiction in Heuvelman’s article, the ambiguity between struggle as the foundation for evolution and spiritual liberation, and the desire for humanitarianism, remained a hard puzzle to solve for most theosophists. The goal of the universe was to be spiritually liberated, and the way to achieve this was through struggle. For Heuvelman, however, class struggle did not fit well in this framework. Heuvelman did not find a clear solution to this contradiction but stated that “love”, “compassion”, and “self-sacrifice” would provide the solution to the suffering of the world.¹⁶⁷ And maybe, one day, someone who had reached the pinnacle of spiritual evolution would return “as a Buddha of

¹⁶⁰ Heuvelman, “Strijd.”, 662.

¹⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 660.

¹⁶² *Ibidem*.

¹⁶³ *Ibidem*, 662.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶⁶ De Tollenaere, *Politics of Divine Wisdom*, 212.

¹⁶⁷ Heuvelman, “Strijd.”, 663.

Compassion, back to the struggle and suffering, to be a World Savior.”¹⁶⁸ With expressing the hope for a savior, a new messiah of sorts, the article of Heuvelman concludes with another contradiction in the developments of theosophical ideas: the idea of spiritual individuality – internal spiritual enlightenment - versus millennialist expectations of a ‘soon to come savior’ –external spiritual enlightenment ¹⁶⁹. Between 1906 and 1914 this ‘millennialist discourse’ was but one of the many ideas that were discussed in *Theosophia*. In hindsight, however, the emerging millennialist expectations was one of the most important developments in the Society with regards to the rest of its history.¹⁷⁰

3.3.2 *Wealth and poverty, karma and reincarnation*

While Heuvelman struggled to combine the idea of evolution through struggle with humanitarian desire whilst still condemning class struggle, other Dutch theosophists attempted to solve the issue of karma and wealth. Was wealth an opportunity for the rich to help others? Or was poverty the consequence of bad karma from a previous life? Could the rich enjoy their wealth, since it was a reward for good karma? Or was it their karmic challenge to overcome material desire?

The Hinduist concept of karma was essential to theosophical beliefs. Together with the Gnostic idea of pantheism and a spiritual interpretation of Darwinist evolution, the concepts of reincarnation and karma formed the core of theosophical dogma.¹⁷¹ To many who joined the T.S.N., the idea of karma as a cosmic law of consequence governing the universe seemed to have had a strong appeal. Rather than punishment by God, bad things could be interpreted as necessary consequences in a process of personal development.¹⁷² The concept of karma allowed theosophists to combine modern rationality with spirituality - by presenting the spiritual dimensions of existence as governed by the same laws of rational causality that

¹⁶⁸ Heuvelman, “Strijd.”, 664.

¹⁶⁹ De Jong, *Wijzen uit het Oosten*, 23.

¹⁷⁰ Wessinger, “The Second Generation”, 33.

¹⁷¹ Most theosophists would argue that they did not have any dogma’s, but already in the period 1906-1914 some members complained that some theosophists were hypocrites, preaching liberation from dogma but in fact merely replacing Christian dogma with their own theosophical ones – see for example: C.M., “Dood geloof”, 275.

¹⁷² Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 135.

governed the material world. This seemed to have been appealing to many people who felt a need for a spiritual sense of meaning while at the same time embraced modern rationality.¹⁷³

Despite its appeal, the idea of karma as a ‘law of nature’ also posed problems to Dutch theosophists who attempted to find ways to fit contemporary social issues into a theosophical framework. Betsy Themans (who seemed to have been new to the T.S.N.), for example, found it problematic to combine what she saw as the theosophical conception of karma with the reality of unequal distribution of wealth.¹⁷⁴ According to her, most theosophists seemed to have believed that “those, who are now rich, deserved this by their charitable good deeds in a previous life”.¹⁷⁵ To Themans, this was “impossible” to accept: was Jesus not the “son of a simple, poor carpenter?”¹⁷⁶ Having wealth was not a reward for good deeds in previous lives, Themans argued. Being rich was an opportunity for an individual soul to learn to transcend the desire for material well-being, “to learn that money cannot buy everything, that moral ideals still exist”.¹⁷⁷ The rich faced the karmic challenge to learn that there are more important needs than material pleasure. The poor, said Themans, had to learn the lesson of overcoming jealousy and envy of better-off people.¹⁷⁸

Just as Themans intended, her article sparked a debate in *Theosophia*. Theman’s interpretation of the relationship between karma and wealth was “one-sided”, argued H.J. van Ginkel – who at the time of his writing was also still fairly new (he had joined the Society two years earlier) to the T.S.N.¹⁷⁹ According to Van Ginkel, theosophy taught that it could take several incarnations before the consequences of a specific action manifested.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, being rich was a responsibility, argued Van Ginkel. But theosophy did not teach that material wealth was a reward for good karma.¹⁸¹ Rather, “Riches bring with them heavy responsibilities and ... a difficult *Dharma* [destiny]”.¹⁸² Did Jesus not say that it was harder for rich people to

¹⁷³ Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 135.

¹⁷⁴ Betsy Themans, “Rijkdom.”, *Theosophia* 15 – deel A (Mei 1906 -October 1906), 25.

¹⁷⁵ Themans, “Rijkdom”, 26.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, 27.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, 26-27.

¹⁷⁹ H.J. van Ginkel, “Naar aanleiding van “Rijkdom”.”, *Theosophia* 15 – deel A (Mei 1906 -October 1906), 111; <https://gemengde-vrijmetselarij.3-5-7.nl/2016/08/30/wie-was-h-j-van-ginkel/>. 13-7-2018.

¹⁸⁰ Van Ginkel, “Naar aanleiding van “Rijkdom””, 111.

¹⁸¹ *Ibidem*, 112.

¹⁸² *Ibidem*.

enter the kingdom of heaven?¹⁸³ Being rich, in Van Ginkel's view, was a karmic challenge. Nonetheless, Van Ginkel agreed that to get to a higher stage of spiritual evolution, one should overcome material desire. Like president Annie Besant, who Van Ginkel stated gave up all her possessions "in the name of the Masters."¹⁸⁴ Those who did not yet arrive at that stage of spiritual development should be "good stewards" and use their wealth for the benefit of others. This reference to the biblical command to be good stewards of one's possessions appears to be a way for Van Ginkel to argue that not everyone needed to follow Besant's example and execute Jesus' command to "go, sell everything you have, and give it to the poor."¹⁸⁵ The idea that individuals could be at different stages of spiritual development implied, Van Ginkel seems to suggest, that good stewardship could be sufficient to gain good karma as well. With this, Van Ginkel seems to provide a convenient way out of the idea of a radical abandoning of wealth. This did, however, imply a responsible use of material possessions, because "the Lords of Karma will "from the disloyal steward take away the possessions and transfer them to the management of a more suitable and loyal servant."¹⁸⁶ But did this imply that the poor were in poverty because the 'Lords of Karma' deemed them incapable of managing wealth? And what did this imply regarding aiding the poor? Van Ginkel seems to dodge drawing further conclusions from his claims and merely states that the poor have the karmic duty to share "what little they have", to learn the lesson that their karmic faith had in mind for them.¹⁸⁷

The solution to the contradictory conclusions drawn from discussing wealth and karma lied in more study, wrote Marie C. Terwiel – the chairwoman of the theosophical study group in Rotterdam.¹⁸⁸ "It often happens that things seem contradictory when they are studied shallowly".¹⁸⁹ With deeper study, the solution that was not accessible to "lower cognition" would present itself.¹⁹⁰ In line with Van Ginkel and Themans, Terwiel argued that the karmic challenge of the rich was to overcome material desire. However, spiritual needs remained more important than physical needs. "Someone taking control of his development will pay

¹⁸³ Van Ginkel, "Naar aanleiding van "Rijkdom", 113.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, 113-114.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, 114.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸⁸ Marie C. Terwiel, "Nog een beschouwing naar aanleiding van "Rijkdom".", *Theosophia* 15 – deel A (Mei 1906 -October 1906), 169; <http://www.theosofie.nl/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/DTB-1905-12.pdf>. 13-7-2018.

¹⁸⁹ Terwiel, "Nog een beschouwing", 169.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 170.

more attention to the spiritual needs of his fellow man than their physical needs, because... serving the laws of nature will result in material wealth".¹⁹¹ Whatever the contradictories implied by debating the relation between wealth and karma, the message seems to have been to trust that both poverty and wealth were necessary challenges to overcome on the path of spiritual enlightenment. None of the discussed theosophists drew clear conclusions about what, in line with the 'laws of karma', ought to be done regarding poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth. Rich people ought to share their wealth, enlightened people should discard material wealth completely, but the poor also might have deserved their poverty, and as long as people steward their wealth properly, they could keep their possessions. The authors discussed in this paragraph all used what seems like conveniently abstract arguments. Rather than personalizing the debate and incorporating their own responsibility with regards to the redistribution of wealth according to 'karmic law', the authors abstractly wrote about 'the rich' and 'the poor'. They seem to semantically distance themselves from the possible concrete implications of the discussion they engaged in. A clear-cut answer to the question of what the conception of karmic law had on the unequal distribution of wealth, so it seems, was hard to find.

3.4. Conclusion

Central to this chapter was the following question: 'how did the influx of new members affect Dutch theosophists' perspectives on social engagement between 1908 and 1914?' Throughout this chapter, it has become apparent that, indeed, the influx of new members was paired with an orientation on social engagement. The influx of members with socialist backgrounds also caused increased attention to the relationship between theosophy and the social issue. The direction this socially engaged orientation ought to take, however, was subject of - at times heated - debate within the T.S.N. As illustrated with the debate regarding A.J. Resink's efforts to steer the Society in the direction of social-democracy, most Dutch theosophists strongly opposed any involvement in party politics for the Society. The belief that the T.S.N. ought to be an apolitical organization was strongly based on the idea that politics dealt mainly with battling symptoms, while the T.S.N. dealt with solving the underlying problem that caused those symptoms: the lack of spirituality in the West.

¹⁹¹ Terwiel, "Nog een beschouwing", 171.

The same criticism was expressed with regards to most other forms of socialism: the pivotal mistake of almost all socialists was their belief that improving material conditions (i.e. economic circumstances) would result in a lasting better society. The Dutch theosophists discussed in this chapter believed that humanity was not yet morally developed enough to sustain an improved society, so even if better material circumstances would temporarily lead to a decline in immoral behavior, immoral behavior would rapidly increase again when the material circumstances worsened (because the reason for less immoral behavior was the lack of triggers, not the intrinsic motivation to be moral; in other words, the lack of immoral behavior was not interpreted as an increase in morality). The true solution, most theosophists believed, lied in the spiritual revitalization of individuals and of society. The debates illustrated in this chapter fit well within the historical contextualization provided by Marjet Brolsma. The members of the T.S.N. that were involved in discussions regarding social engagement showed traits that were characteristic to what Brolsma called ‘humanitarian idealists’ – e.g. their criticism of historical Marxism and the belief that spiritual revitalization had to precede practical ideals.

Dutch theosophists generally condemned revolution as a means for social change. However, rather than being motivated by a sense of bourgeoisie apologetics (using theosophy as ideological foundation for social conservatism, an interpretation of H.A.O. de Tollenaere), it seems that theosophist’s opposition to revolution was, in most cases, motivated by an elitist perspective on social progress, as well as the idea that revolution was too abrupt and chaotic and therefore could not be a constructive step in the social evolution towards a better society. However, as illustrated with G. Heuvelman’s contradictory attitude towards class struggle, De Tollenaere’s notion of theosophy as an ideological foundation for social conservatism seems to be a correct assessment with regards to at least some Dutch theosophists.

As illustrated with the discussions regarding struggle as a means of evolution and interpretations of the relationship between karma and wealth, some authors struggled with combining theosophical dogmas with perspectives on society and social engagement. As illustrated with Heuvelman, struggle had a pivotal place in the theosophical dogma of spiritual evolution (just like it had in the Darwinist theory of evolution), which resulted in a theoretical dilemma: to what extent was it necessary to interfere when struggle resulted in suffering? A similar dilemma was posed by Betsy Themans, who wondered how the theosophical conception of karma could be used to interpret poverty and if people should actively get involved with aiding others (to get good karma), or if that would entail interfering with

karmic consequentialism. Some, like Hr. T. Nijland, used theosophical dogmas to argue for unequal social rights and hierarchical socialism based on levels of spiritual development.

It proved to be difficult, however, to find consensus regarding the answers to these questions.

While amongst international theosophists – as discussed in chapter two of this thesis – an increasing emphasis on and engagement in practical idealism emerged, it seems that Dutch theosophists in the years between 1908 and 1914, although increasingly emphasizing the importance of social engagement, restrained from the practical idealism that was gaining importance in other national branches of the Theosophical Society. Besides the influx of new members in the T.S.N., the practical orientations of international theosophists as discussed in chapter two are another important factor in the shift towards social engagement of the theosophical discourse in the Netherlands between 1908 and 1914. It was mainly an orientation on, rather than involvement with, social engagement that seemed to have characterized Dutch theosophists during this period.

Chapter four. Time for utopia

The horrors of World War I had profound effects on Dutch theosophists and their views of themselves and the future of the world. But rather than resulting in a turn to pessimism and cynicism, the aftermath of the war gave theosophists and many of their contemporaries hope that a new and truly improved world could be built on the ruins of the shattered Western civilization.¹ The war inspired Dutch theosophists to embrace their previous orientation towards the concrete implementation of their theosophical beliefs through societal activities with more vigor than ever before. To theosophists, as well as many other humanitarian reformists, World War I was experienced as undeniable proof that pre-war society with its rationalism, materialism, and liberal-capitalistic had failed miserably.² The immense destruction brought upon Western civilization by Western civilization itself caused a cultural and spiritual crisis amongst Europeans whose belief in the unlimited progress of science and the superiority of the West was shattered alongside the other manifold casualties of the ‘Great War’.³

As seen in the previous chapter, in the years before World War I a new generation of Dutch theosophists began to advocate the idea that the Theosophical Society should become more actively engaged in society. This chapter will explore the growing belief amongst Dutch theosophists that a better world was imminent. The central question of this chapter is: ‘how did Dutch theosophists, between 1914 and 1930, envision a better society, and what roles did they envision for themselves in the process of constructing that better society?’

This chapter will begin with exploring the ways in which Dutch theosophists interpreted the First World War, and what role they envisioned for themselves during the aftermath of the war. Secondly, this chapter will explore two utopian publications written by theosophists: *Politeia* (1917) by J.C.P. Alberts, and *De Nieuwe Mens* (1922) by J.H. Bolt. Thirdly, this chapter will explore to what extent some of the ideas expressed in these utopian publications were shared by other Dutch theosophists.

4.1 Theosophical activists in a world after war

¹ De Jong, *Wijzen uit het Oosten*, 57.

² Brolsma, *Het humanitaire moment*, 4.

³ *Ibidem*, 7.

The First World War, rather than causing cynicism and the end of the belief in a better world, caused the opposite: the war strengthened the desire for a more ‘humane society’ and caused the resurgence of humanitarian idealism.⁴ How did Dutch theosophists interpret the horrors of the War? And what role did they envision for themselves in the process of rebuilding Western society on its own ashes?

4.1.1 A call to action

The war sparked severe debate amongst Dutch theosophists about the historical necessity of the great conflict: was it the inevitable outcome of the selfish scramble for material gains resulting from unchecked materialistic greed? Was it the necessary dark hour before the dawn of a new era in humanity’s history? Perhaps it was a much-needed eruption of a global build-up of negative karma?⁵ President Annie Besant reassured her fellow theosophists that the war, terrible as it was, might have highly constructive effects on the progression of humanity. The war, in her eyes, was a necessary event to clear the way for a new era of human development, destroying the old ways of human coexistence – “the empires of Might”, referring to the autocratic German empire – and stimulating the further ascendance of the “Republics” – the democratic U.S. and Great Britain.⁶ It was a struggle between two forms of societal organization, autocratic aristocracy versus free democracy, and the ideal of the republic, argued Besant, was a better vessel for the spiritual evolution of mankind since man was in the process of evolving beyond the necessity of autocratic aristocracy.⁷

Although she used abstract arguments (placing her preference of an Allied victory in a teleological framework of human historical development that stereotyped the Entente forces as representatives of the old world and characterized her own Anglo-sphere as the birthplace of the new world) Besant nevertheless clearly and outspokenly favored an allied victory.⁸ This caused strong dissatisfaction amongst some national branches of the international Theosophical Society Adyar, particularly the national branch of the Netherlands. Since the

⁴ Brolsma, *Het humanitaire moment*, 23.

⁵ De Jong, *Wijzen uit het Oosten*, 41-47.

⁶ *Ibidem*, 43.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 44.

⁸ Annie Besant, “De Ruimere Blik.”, *Theosophia* 24 (April 1916 – Mei 1917), 439.

Theosophical Society Adyar had national branches in most developed countries – including the countries that were on opposing sides in the war, it was a general rule to uphold a neutral standpoint regarding international politics in the Theosophical societies. Though most Dutch theosophists generally seemed to be very compliant to and supportive of Besant’s leadership, her decision to break with the official neutrality of the Theosophical Society and publicly support the Allied forces met with outspoken protest from the Dutch.⁹ Dutch theosophists were outraged that their president, of all people, publicly picked sides in the war and on top of that intermingled with politics.¹⁰

Besides the Dutch opposition to Besant’s break with neutrality, there was also some dismay regarding Besant’s explanation of the causes of the war. To F. Lieftinck for example, it was nonsense to interpret the war as part of some sort of cosmic plan.¹¹ He argued that the war “was a disaster, that humanity has only itself to blame for... because she could have prevented it but did not accept the change”.¹² Lieftinck was arguing as much against Besant as against Dutch theosophists such as Jan de Jager, who believed – like Besant – that the war was an “unmissable stone in the divine structure” that was the future world.¹³ De Jager did not, however, believe that the war was “some sort of Holy War between Black and White, Good and Evil” – those kind of subjective statements were “useless” for his efforts to gain understanding into the causes of the war.¹⁴ Nevertheless, De Jager found some teleological goal in the horrors of the war: it was the necessary opposite of the peaceful world that would emerge out of the ashes of the West.¹⁵ Responding to De Jager, Lieftinck stated that if there was any higher plan at work in causing the war, it was the rules of causality that governed the universe. It was humanity’s greed and focus on material satisfaction that ultimately caused the war, and with “better redistribution” of wealth and international arbitrage the horrors could

⁹ Besant, “De Ruimere Blik”, 439.

¹⁰ The issue of the dissatisfaction of Dutch theosophists regarding Besant’s side-picking during the war seemed to have eventually been swept under the rug, like – so it seems – the Dutch Theosophical Society dealt with a lot of disagreement (for example the problems with leadbeater, the separation of Dutch theosophists from the society during that crisis, or the separation of Dutch theosophists from the society during the crisis with Rudolf Steiner and his conflict with Besant – which caused some Dutch members to leave the society in protest).

¹¹ Whether F. Lieftinck is the Dutch politician and preacher Franciscus Lieftinck remains unsure.

¹² F. Lieftinck, “Nogmaals: “Over de doelmatigheid van het kwaad”.”, *Theosophia* 24 (April 1916 – Mei 1917), 408.

¹³ J. de Jager, “Over de doelmatigheid van het kwaad”, *Theosophia* 24 (April 1916 – Mei 1917), 306-308.

¹⁴ De Jager, “Over de doelmatigheid”, 302.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 304.

have been prevented.¹⁶ Though not every Dutch theosophist shared Lieftinck's pragmatic perspective (as being 'humanity's own fault'), Dutch theosophists writing in *Theosophia* mostly expressed similar views on the causes of the war: it was largely caused by the one-sided materialism of Western civilization.¹⁷

In defense to the dissatisfaction of the Dutch, Besant wrote that she "claimed [her] freedom as an individual" to do what she thought best.¹⁸ To Besant, theosophists "have been somewhat hypnotized by that 'cursed word' neutrality", which resulted in a passive sidelining and "selfish isolation", and sometimes obstructed the freedom of conscience and action that should be of the utmost importance for individual members.¹⁹ Besant argued that theosophists have had long enough to study and gather knowledge, that the time had come to put their understanding of the world into practice. She called upon all theosophists around the world to engage in the active construction of a new world, to "prepare the world for a civilization, based on Brotherhood".²⁰ Studying national and political issues would be part of this shift to the active participation in the realization of a new world. Party politics ought to be a personal matter, but were no longer the taboo it was before the war (at least to Besant). Besant argued that theosophists now had a concrete goal: to solve the immense problems that stood in the way of a new civilization and lasting peace – poverty and the misery of the lower classes, dysfunctional education, and other problems believed to be related to a lack of spiritual life. To Besant, all this work would be part of a bigger plan of cosmic origin: the return of the "World-Teacher" to earth. The coming reincarnation of this world-teacher – which was referred to mostly as "the Christ", "the Bodhisattva", or "Lord Maitreya", depending on individual preferences, would provide a struggling humanity with the necessary support to break with the bad of the past. Though Besant realized that not everyone believed in the coming prophet – as was their individual right, she herself actively promoted the coming of this divine savior.²¹

¹⁶ Lieftinck, "Nogmaals", 408.

¹⁷ Simultaneously, however, a lot of Dutch theosophists emphasized that the war was the inevitable outcome of karma: the international karma that had piled up in the world finally erupted and caused the intense disruption of peace. However, said buildup of negative karma was in turn caused by humanity's obsessive focus on the satisfaction of material desires and lack of spiritual life, which in turn were caused by a purely materialistic worldview.

¹⁸ Besant, "De Ruimere Blik.", 439.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 441.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, 442.

²¹ *Ibidem*, 442-444.

Besant's activist stance, both regarding the nature of the World War and regarding the more active involvement in politics, met with some disagreement both in the international Theosophical Society Adyar and in the Theosophical Society of the Netherlands. A.P. Sinnett, a prominent international theosophist and important theosophical ideologue who wrote the theosophical classic *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), stated for example that the popularity of new interpretations of 'Brotherhood' by "those who are engaged in secular politics or social reform in the material sphere... were an insult to the theosophical teachings".²² To Sinnett, it was preposterous to suggest that those with a less evolved consciousness – animals, as well as "the lower classes of civilized countries" and "the Australian savage" – would deserve the same social status as more evolved beings.

Sinnett clearly propagated the idea that it was a theosophist's task to study the mysteries of the occult and promote knowledge of the metaphysical, not to engage in the trivialities of everyday life – such as social reform or improving the material situation of fellow beings. As seen in chapter two of this thesis, however, in the Netherlands, this view on the theosophist's role was slowly but steadily surpassed by a more socially engaged view. A theosophist ought to not only pursue knowledge of the occult but also actively work on the improvement of existence on earth. Views such as Sinnett's (who seemed to argue that 'less evolved' beings – whether by race or by class – were not worthy of a theosophist's attention) did not fit well in the discourse of the socially active theosophist, and although the magazine was a platform for 'open discussion', the editors of *Theosophia* seemed to have subtly taken a stance against Sinnett's notions of theosophical radicalism by placing a counter-article written by C. Jinarajadasa ("Theosophy in practice") next to Sinnett's article, "to make sure readers get the whole picture".²³ Jinarajadasa was an Indian theosophist who in the years after WWI was gaining influence and prominence in the international T.S.A.²⁴ Jinarajadasa's article presents a view completely opposite to Sinnett's view, arguing that it is the theosophist's task to actively engage in the improvement of living conditions of their fellow beings, both in the spiritual and in the physical sphere.²⁵ Jinarajadasa's perspective on the actualization of theosophical ideas of brotherhood and unity through actively helping those in

²² Godwin, "Blavatsky and the First Generation", 23-34; A.P. Sinnett (translated by M.W.), "De Doeleinden der Vereeniging", *Theosophia* 25 (april 1917 – maart), 384.

²³ Sinnett, "De Doeleinden der Vereeniging", 383, 385.

²⁴ W. Michael Ashcraft, "The Third Generation of Theosophy and Beyond", in: *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 82.

²⁵ C. Jinarajadasa (vertaald door M.W.), "Theosofie in praktijk", *Theosophia* 25 (april 1917 – maart), 401.

need seems much more in line with the general perspective of most Dutch theosophists during and after World War I. Even though there was some disagreement in the international T.S.A. – as Sinnett’s article illustrates, most Dutch theosophists seemed to have felt a strong desire to put their theosophical worldview into practice. Especially in these times of peril and confrontation with the horrors of a soulless materialism left unchecked by spirituality, “the world has a great need for idealists”.²⁶

4.1.2 Theosophical humanitarianism

Already before the war, editors of *Theosophia* placed short notifications and reports about organizations that in their eyes were working on a better world and deserved the attention of their readers. At the end of each edition of the magazine, the editors would provide an overview of the activities of other ‘humanitarian movements’ and provide information regarding newly found organizations with humanitarian goals (for example the Bond for Vegetarianism, the Bond for the promotion of the needs of the Children; Anti-vivisectionist organizations; the Bond for Demilitarization; the Bond for New Philosophy; The Bond for Brotherhood; The Society for the promotion of Esperanto; Suffrage organizations, etc.).²⁷ Many of the organizations promoted by the editorial board of *Theosophia* were in one way or another engaged in the improvement of social issues – such as the Anti-Prostitution Bond, or the Bond for the care of Orphans, or with other forms of idealistic improvement of society – such as the promotion of Esperanto as the universal human language, the revival of idealistic philosophy (to counter philosophical materialism), the promotion of progressive Christianity (to counter dogmatic suffocation of spiritual life), or animal rights organizations (to promote respect and reverence for all living beings).

More than before the war, however, the editors of *Theosophia* actively called upon their fellow theosophists to support these organizations and their activities. After a short explanation of the goals of a newly established magazine aimed at the education of worker-class girls, for example, the editors hoped that “many of our members will provide their help!”.²⁸ And throughout the volumes of *Theosophia* after 1914, it appears that Dutch theosophists were indeed actively engaged in the practical improvement of the lives of their

²⁶ M.S. v.d. Willigen, “Idealen”, *Theosophia* 24 (April 1916 – Mei 1917), 169.

²⁷ Redactie, “Van Verre en van nabij”, *Theosophia* 24 (April 1916 – mei 1917), 572.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 469

fellow beings and society as a whole (for example in Leiden, were local theosophists founded a shelter-home to help former prostitutes).²⁹ Even though for the Theosophical Society as an organizational body, it was off limits to participate in politics (“because she is truly international and has members from all backgrounds, both religiously and politically”), members of the Society were strongly motivated to actively participate in the rebuilding of society, shaping in to better fit the theosophical view on the world.³⁰ And the times, so it seemed to for example W.A.L. Ros-Vrijman, favored the theosophists, who recognized that “unconsciously, Theosophy lives in the hearts of the social workers in our country”.³¹ Many Dutch theosophists recognized the spirit of theosophical ideals all around them, for example in the work of Henry Ford, whose humanitarian support of handicapped workers was a clear manifestation of theosophical ideals.³²

To many theosophists, all these initiatives, reinvigorated by the confronting reality of the war and the belief that humanity was finally ready to enter a new age of prosperity and peace, were clear steps “in the direction of the Rebuilding of Society in a theosophical way”.³³ And the theosophists themselves seemed to have had grand ambitions: a “great responsibility rested on the Theosophical Society” to lay the foundations – based on theosophical principles – for a “United States of Europe”.³⁴ The Theosophical Society

“must: penetrate “churches, schools, universities, prisons, laws, governments, political orientations, commerce, transportation, professions, labor. Nothing is outside the work field of the Divine Wisdom, nothing is beyond the work field of the Theosophical Society, and all of this is needed for the construction of the New Civilization”.³⁵

These ambitious words of the editorial board of *Theosophia*, addressed at their fellow theosophists, are a clear indication of an intensification of the shift towards the practical implementation of theosophical beliefs that was already developing before World War I. The

²⁹ Redactie, “Van verre en van nabij”, *Theosophia* 25 (April 1917 – Maart 1918), 118.

³⁰ Redactie, “In Vogelvlucht”, *Theosophia* 31 (april 1923 – maart 1924), 342.

³¹ W.A.L. Ros-Vrijman, “Van verre en van nabij”, *Theosophia* 30 (april 1922 – maart 1923), 96.

³² David Lanier Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford: An American Folk Hero and His Company* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 546; Redactie, “Van verre en van nabij”, *Theosophia* 31 (april 1923 – maart 1924), 318; Professor E. Wood, “Nieuwe Theosofie”, *Theosophia* 37 (april 1929 – maart 1930), 393.

³³ Redactie, “In vogelvlucht”, *Theosophia* 30 (april 1922 – maart 1923), 147.

³⁴ Redactie, “In vogelvlucht”, 258.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 354.

aftermath of the war, with all the invigorated activities focused on the betterment of humanity and the world at large, convinced many Dutch theosophists that the age of materialism was about to be succeeded by “the now introduced age, the idealistic age”.³⁶

The strong desire of Dutch theosophists to get more actively involved in the improvement of society can be placed in a broader historical context of humanitarian idealism as discussed in Broolsma’s *Het Humanitaire Moment*. Broolsma argued that the second period of flourishing humanitarian idealism after World War I was characterized by increasing ‘spiritualization’, or the emphasis of spiritual revitalization, rather than practical idealism.³⁷ Predominant during the second wave of humanitarian idealism was ‘pacifistic, antirationalistic and undogmatic religious humanism’.³⁸ It seems that, paradoxically, the increased focus of humanitarian idealists after the War on spiritual means to improve society contributed to an increased focus on ‘practical’ expressions of theosophy by Dutch theosophists: it seems that theosophists recognized their own beliefs in the emerging emphasis on spirituality amongst other humanitarian idealists after WWI, which inspired them to believe that this was the ideal momentum for them to bring theosophy to the masses.

4.2 Alberts’s ideal society

What would a new world, based on the teachings of theosophists, look like? To answer this question, Johannes Casper Paul Alberts wrote *Politeia: een “omlijning” in 70 regels* (1917).³⁹ J.C.P. Albers (1893-1967) was a relatively unknown Dutch writer, poet, and journalist whose life was characterized by others as adventurous and rebellious. As a journalist, he wrote for several newspapers and magazines (including the *Java-Bode*, *Het Vaderland*, and *De Telegraaf*) and during World War I Alberts worked as a war journalist in the Dutch Indies next to his job as a colonial administrator. As a writer, Alberts published all his works on his own account and at his own expense, which is one of the reasons why he is a relatively unknown author.⁴⁰

³⁶ M.W. Mook, “Over traagheid en reactie”, *Theosophia* 26 (april 1918 – maart 1919), 353.

³⁷ Broolsma, *Het humanitaire moment*, 40.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 39-40.

³⁹ J.C.P. Albers, *Politeia: een “omlijning” in 70 regels* (by J.C.P. Albers, 1917), 1.

⁴⁰ Jan de Hartog, *Feestelijke ondergang. Leven en werk van Johan C.P. Albers* (Elsevier, Amsterdam, 1950), 2-9; <http://www.schrijversinfo.nl/albertsjohcp.html>, 12-7-2018;

In his *Politeia* (an obvious reference to Plato's *Politeia*), Alberts provided an outline of seventy rules of a future state that "approached the ideal a little more" than his contemporary society which, he believed, kept humanity 'chained in indolence' to lives of convention and containment.⁴¹ With his manuscript, Alberts wanted to provide an illustration of how a better world would look like, as well as suggest some ideas about how to accomplish such a better world.

4.2.1 Outline of an ideal society.

In Alberts's ideal state, private possession was as good as obsolete. All the land would be owned by the state, all trade would be through mediation of the state (and would consist of direct exchange of goods, since no money or currency would exist in the society), all production would be under the governance of the state, and the state would be the only party allowed to stockpile goods.⁴² Tutoring and educating children would also be a state-monopoly. If parents of a child were "deemed worthy", a child could stay with its parents until the age of six, after which it would break all ties of kinship and attachment to family to learn how to love every human equally under the guidance of the state.⁴³ In the case of an orphan, or "inferior" parents, the child would be under state guidance directly from birth.⁴⁴ At the age of eighteen, a child would be considered an adult and receive a piece of land from the state, materials to build a "simple private-house", and seeds to sow on the land.

Alberts's foundation for this state monopoly was the idea that private possession was the greatest obstacle to human growth because to him, the desire for private material possessions was the biggest drive behind human selfishness. All the selfish striving for material possessions drained the energy and life force of humans and distracted from the true spiritual foundations of existence.⁴⁵ In his ideal society, this selfish materialism would have been overcome, enabling humans to focus on devotion to spiritual growth and conscious

<http://www.dbnl.org/auteurs/auteur.php?id=albe011>, 12-7-2018; https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johan_Alberts, 12-7-2018.

⁴¹ Alberts, *Politeia*, 5-6.

⁴² *Ibidem*, 42-48.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 21.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, 20.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 45-47.

existence. Alberts found a practical example of such absence of possessions in a Buddhist order of Tibetan monks, who lived in complete devotion of altruistic aid to their surroundings, receiving only simple meals in return. The monastic life of Buddhism, so it seemed to Alberts, was an outstanding example of how human society ought to be.⁴⁶ The radical anti-materialism of Alberts's society manifested itself in other forms of abstinence as well. The truly enlightened human would refrain from any form of material desire, including sexual and other forms of material lust.⁴⁷ Regardless of human nature, humans ought to completely abstain from material desire, argued Alberts. Pacifism and asceticism were the only keys to unlock a truly humanitarian society based on love and spiritual unity.⁴⁸

It seems hardly worth noting to Alberts that in an ideal society, everybody is vegetarian: "in my state of healthy and truly civilized people, something like livestock farming [is] obviously eliminated".⁴⁹ And just as obvious, it seemed, was that before and after each daily task, everybody meditated.⁵⁰ Alberts seems to have considered both vegetarianism and daily meditation such obvious practices for what he believed were better humans that he regarded his statement as self-evident. Within theosophical circles, vegetarianism was common practice, and other humanitarian idealists also often restrained from eating animals.⁵¹ Many individuals associated with humanitarian idealism during the *fin-de-siecle* and Interbellum were vegetarians (Frederik van Eeden, Domela Nieuwehuis, and Felix Ortt, for example), because of moral reasons (pity for animals, or reverence for life in general) or, more often, motivated by health considerations. During the heyday of humanitarian idealism, it was a popular belief amongst, for example, theosophists, that eating animals was bad for one's physical health.⁵² Alberts was apparently so convinced of this idea that he thought it to be self-explanatory that in a better society, everybody abstained from eating meat.

In Alberts's ideal society, governance would be as decentralized as necessary (contrary to his elaborate notions of the state as the sole landowner, organizer of production

⁴⁶ Alberts, *Politeia*, 47.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 16, 17.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 16.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 30-31; sheep, however, could be held for wool.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 32.

⁵¹ Siv Ellen Kraft, "Theosophy, Gender, and the "New Woman"", in: *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 359; Brotsma, *Het humanitaire moment*, 8; Dirk-Jan Verdonk, *Het dierloze gerecht. Een vegetarische geschiedenis van Nederland* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2009), 10-11.

⁵² Kraft, "Theosophy, Gender", 359; Verdonk, *Het dierloze gerecht*, 45.

and trade, and redistributor of wealth).⁵³ The government of the society would be headed by three inviolable “Sages”, who would be elected by parliament and for the rest of their lives function as the “Oracle” of society and connection between the “Divine All-Wisdom” and society, which provided them an impeccable judgment for the nation.⁵⁴ The wisdom of the sages would be translated into practical policy by the president, who would be elected by the people every four years. Parliament would consist of five-hundred men and women, who would also be elected every four years. Every month, parliamentarians would elect ten members who would be responsible for daily governance.⁵⁵

This parliamentary instated government would govern over one nation (consisting of a united “people, race”), by appointing the necessary commissions for proper societal functioning – “ministries for art, pedagogy, heating and light, food supply, international exchange of products, justice, medical research and hygiene, etc”.⁵⁶ Notably absent ministries (compared to most 20th century Western states) are a ministry of war and a ministry of foreign affairs. Both seemed to have been deemed obsolete by Alberts. Since “the territory of every nation is, immutable set in international treaty”, territorial expansion was no longer an option. An international police-guard, to which all nations contribute manpower and weaponry, would ensure that violent acts between nations would be ruled out.⁵⁷ Instead of national ministries of foreign affairs, appointed representatives from all national commissions would meet in an international center to deal with issues of international nature – “issues of product-exchange and the international guard”.⁵⁸ The international center would be the seat of the “High-government”, which would have the same structure as national parliament (together with its ‘Chief-president’ and ‘chief-sages’), and consist of members elected by national parliaments from their midst. Just as the absence of international conflict made a ministry of foreign affairs unnecessary, the absence of money made a ministry of finance obsolete.

Highly regarded persons would be the “members of governments, “sages”, theologians, artists, agriculture”. Despite all abstinence, asceticism and theocratic guidance by the “Sages”, Alberts assumed that crime would still exist in his future society (it was, after all,

⁵³ Alberts, *Politeia*, 50.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, 44.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, 45.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, 50.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, 48.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 50.

an outline of a “more ideal”, not perfect, society).⁵⁹ Criminals would be charged with executing the lowly regarded labor – working in the mines, the steel industries, cleaning-jobs and technical maintenance.⁶⁰ It was Alberts’s hope, however, that a combination of “exploiting as of yet unknown forces of nature” together with lowered material needs, these sorts of occupations would largely disappear.⁶¹

The exploitation of these unknown forces of nature would, so it seems, be enabled by ‘supernatural’ help, which could come in the form of “Devas” (Hindu deities) or their Western equivalent, angels. In *Politeia*, Alberts uses an extensive fragment of Besant and Leadbeater’s *Man, Whence, How and Whither. A record of clairvoyant investigation* (1913) to illustrate what the spiritual rituals and practices of his ideal society would look like.⁶² In the visions of a future society as perceived by the two prominent theosophists, supernatural beings walked freely among humans, just as it was in a “Golden Age in the past”.⁶³ Through elaborate and colorful descriptions of their clairvoyant observations, Besant and Leadbeater provided an illustration of collective magic rituals involving meditation, magical colors and sounds, collective enlightenment, healing, and other fantastical occurrences.⁶⁴ Humanity, in Alberts’s world, stood in close contact with the divine powers and, with the help of supernatural beings, engaged in daily spiritual practices that “bombarded the surrounding country with thoughts of love”.⁶⁵ It seems that this daily stimulus of spiritual love would provide the necessary altruistic motivations needed for humans to live in harmony with each other in the ideal society that Alberts envisioned in *Politeia*. In this ideal state, everything was based on the “inner dimensions of life”.⁶⁶ And theosophy would form the core of the religion that would be melted to all aspects of living in that ideal world.⁶⁷

⁵⁹ Alberts, *Politeia*, 55.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 32.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 38.

⁶² *Ibidem*, 73.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, 75; The notion of a mythical ‘Golden Age’ of the past was a characteristic element of theosophical historiography, for example in the writings of Blavatsky. Myths of an ancient, pre-historical civilization that was more developed than the contemporary Western civilization of theosophists like Blavatsky and Besant were presented as scientific truth (proved by clairvoyant observations) and commonplace in theosophical literature. [see: Garry W. Trompf, “Theosophical Macrohistory.”, in: *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 388.].

⁶⁴ Alberts, *Politeia*, 73-92.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, 88.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 14-15.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, 34.

Alberts's blending of theosophical religiousness with other forms of idealism in *Politeia* resulted in a totalitarian theocracy where citizens spend most of their time working the small pieces of land (provided to them by the state) to grow food for the community, making artifacts for the communal buildings (such as temples, theatres, and government ministries), engaging in or enjoying art performances, and get together after work for the daily religious ceremonies.⁶⁸ Besides the modern theosophy of theosophists like Annie Besant, Alberts claimed to have been inspired by the communism of the Russian Bolsheviks who began their quest for a Soviet utopia in the same year as the publication of *Politeia* (1917).⁶⁹ In his eclectic blend of different ideas regarding social reform, however, it seems that the only aspects of his ideal society that could be regarded as communistic were the abolishment of private property and the state monopolies on economic decisions and education. The strong focus on autarky, abstinence, and spiritual living in Alberts' outline of his ideal society seems to have been inspired more by the monastic life of Buddhist monks and Leadbeater and Besant's spiritually orientated utopia as outlined in their *Man, Whence, How and Whither*.⁷⁰

Alberts envisioned his ideal society as being inhabited by truly enlightened, vegetarian, meditating humans that refrained from any form of material desire. Although this image could be recognized as in line with what earlier discussed authors (like Boissevain, Van Manen, and Thierens) believed would be the long-term result of a process of spiritual revitalization, the characteristically theosophical elements of Alberts's ideal society are not evidential. Like most theosophists, the people in *Politeia* were all vegetarian, but so were the people in, for example, Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Equality* (1897); vegetarianism cannot be considered typically theosophical.⁷¹ Although Alberts's description of a society where everything was based on the "inner dimensions of life" was in line with theosophical ideals as discussed in chapter two, this notion on itself cannot be considered typically theosophical either since this notion is characteristic of a wide variety of religiously inspired utopias (for example the Cathars of the eleventh and twelfth century, or the Amish of the eighteenth century onwards).⁷²

⁶⁸ Alberts, *Politeia*, 32, 34, 42.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*, 43-44.

⁷⁰ See: Annie Besant, Charles W. Leadbeater, *Man: Whence, How and Wither: A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation*. (1913; reprint, Wheaton, Illinois: Theosophical Press, 1947).

⁷¹ Verdonk, *Het dierloze gerecht*, 10.

⁷² Crombag, Van Dun, *De Utopische Verleiding*, 215-217, 226.

Alberts's idea that society should be led by people who reached the highest levels of spiritual development bears strong resemblances to for example Plato's idea of the philosopher-kings in his *Politeia*, or B.F. Skinner's scientific overlords in his *Walden Two* (1948), and doesn't seem to be very theosophical at first.⁷³ However, although the idea that society should be led by its 'wisest' members is a reoccurring theme in utopian literature, Alberts's idea of a society headed by the 'sages' could nevertheless be considered to be characteristically theosophical. As seen in chapter three of this thesis, the idea that spiritually developed people were destined to rule over the less developed masses was also explored by other Dutch theosophists (most notably H.R. Th. Nijland). Since her ascendancy to prominence within theosophical circles, Annie Besant became an active propagator of the idea of social hierarchy based on caste and class, which to her were different categories of spiritual development with varying evolutionary duties.⁷⁴ Albert's idea of 'sages' is largely in line with Besant's and other's conception of a 'karmic right to rule' and could, therefore, be best interpreted as a theosophical adaptation of Plato's philosopher kings: the theosophical element was that the right to rule was based on the level of spiritual development and connection to divine powers, rather than the more mundane love of wisdom and intellectual proficiency that, for example, gave Plato's philosopher kings their right to rule.⁷⁵

Another characteristically theosophical element of Alberts's *Politeia* is the idea that, in his ideal society, humanity stood in direct contact with supernatural beings that walked amongst humans. This idea seems closely related to the theosophical notion of the 'White Lodge of Adepts' or 'Masters', which, as seen in chapter two of this thesis, theosophists believed to be enlightened beings that guided humanity's evolutionary path.⁷⁶ Inspired by *Man, Whence, How, and Whither*, Alberts believed that these Masters would be physically present in his ideal society and have direct contact with humans, rather than have the indirect, telepathic contact theosophists believed these Masters had with contemporary theosophists such as Besant and Leadbeater.⁷⁷

⁷³ Crombag, Van Dun, *De Utopische Verleiding*, 30, 109.

⁷⁴ Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 147; Besant's idea of social hierarchy was based on 'karmic and evolutionary inheritance', or the consequences of actions in previous lives: people born as teachers or traders would teach or trade, people born as rulers would rule, and those born to serve would serve [Dixon, *Divine Feminine*, 147-148.].

⁷⁵ Crombag, Van Dun, *Utopische Verleiding*, 30-31.

⁷⁶ See also: Hammer, Rothstein, "Introduction, 1-3.

⁷⁷ Trompf, "Theosophical Macrohistory", 391.

4.2.2 *The way to the future*

In its entirety, Alberts's imagined society of the future was devoted to the human community. Production of goods was limited to "necessary" goods such as artificial light, weapons for the international police force, food, and heating. The inhabitants of Alberts's ideal society would have lives focused on spiritual enlightenment in accordance with divine wisdom, producing only what was necessary for their minimalistic material needs. Spiritually motivated altruism would ensure that this ideal world would function properly. How could this ideal society, with all its autarky and asceticism, according to Alberts, be realized?

A first step towards his utopia, argued Alberts, was the reorganization of the legal structures of society.⁷⁸ He believed the norms of decency and indecency of his contemporary society to be completely counter-intuitive – for example the idea that excessive possessions of the rich, despite the tens of thousands of people perishing in poverty around them, were deemed 'proper' nevertheless.⁷⁹ To Alberts, the "sacredness" of private property as a foundation of society, as well as the lack of legal recognition and protection of common property was one of the biggest problems of his time.⁸⁰ Alberts believed the legal structures of his contemporary society to be a 'fossilized' inheritance from the past, which were not up to date with the wishes of the masses.⁸¹ The legal frameworks of the future, he argued, ought to be based on ideals of collectivism like those of Tibetan Buddhists and Bolshevik communists (who to Alberts apparently had comparable legal frameworks, characterized by a focus on collectivism).⁸² The legal protection of communal property from the interests of the greedy elements of society would be a first step in the necessary evolution towards a society that had abolished private property completely.⁸³ Inspired by what he had heard of revolutionary Russia under the Bolsheviks, Alberts argued that the profession of lawyer would have to be abolished. Alberts believed that lawyers were servants of capital that protected and upheld the

⁷⁸ Alberts, *Politeia*, 100.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, 96.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, 98.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, 100; Somehow, Alberts apparently believed the masses of the past were content with the legal structures facilitating the gap between rich and poor. Like many utopist writers, Alberts seems to have little actual concern for historical accurateness.

⁸² *Ibidem*, 101.

⁸³ *Ibidem*, 45.

interests of the rich and their private property against the interest of the masses in a “comical game of justice-perversion”.⁸⁴

To Alberts, the economic policies during the First World War (with for example its state-led production, rationing of consumption and tight control of financial markets) proved that a state-led economy could really work and was not just an imaginary ideal. Alberts argued that this state-led economic policy should be continued after the war, rather than return to liberal economic policy again under the pressure of the “depraved ‘private initiatives’” of big business.⁸⁵

Alberts believed that the *raison d'état* of modern states was the accumulation of the interests of big business and the industrial typhoons, that state-debt was a tool of capitalists to imprison peoples and states alike in a cage of financial debt, and that the entire financial system, based on borrowing, was “immoral and anti-democratic”.⁸⁶ Rumors of an initiative in Bolshevik Russia to annul all state-debt, however, gave Alberts the hope that the financial system could be reformed and was not just a naïve dream.⁸⁷ Although Alberts doesn't provide concrete solutions, it seems that he wanted to suggest the abolishment of debt for Western countries as well.

The legal and economic steps towards his ideal society, however, had to be accompanied by the creation of ‘future humans’ for that new society.⁸⁸ Alberts believed that contemporary education focused on teaching children to strive for their own interest and to compete with others, and he believed that this socially constructed self-interest and competitiveness were a major cause for the misery in his contemporary society.⁸⁹ Rather than promoting the pursuit of self-interest, the focus of education ought to be on the “elevation of humanity” to its essence: the divine nature of humans, as taught by modern theosophy.⁹⁰ Education of children ought to be focused on nurturing the capacity to live in harmony with one's surroundings and the schooling of children ought to take into account the individuality

⁸⁴ Alberts, *Politeia*, 45.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, 42.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, 43-44.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 44.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, 43.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, 23.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 21-22.

and different qualities of every child, rather than a forceful attempt to fit all in a single, societally demanded mold.⁹¹

This approach to pedagogy was already implemented in the theosophical commune in Point-Loma, California (US), which to Alberts was an outstanding example of how education ought to be organized. The theosophical commune in Point Loma was built by Katherine Tingley (1847-1929), the leader of an American branch of the Theosophical Society that had separated from the Theosophical Society Adyar in 1891 and under Tingley's leadership shifted its focus away from the occult aspects of theosophy towards a more communal and utopian approach.⁹² For a time, Tingley's theosophical commune in Point Loma was the epicenter of practical social experiments based on theosophical ideas, for example, a Greek theater, a temple, a theosophical university, and a school for children – the school Alberts referred to.⁹³ The emphasis in this “Raja Yoga” school of the Point Loma commune was on the spiritual and moral development of children, as well as artistic and intuitive skills.⁹⁴

Most of Alberts's suggestions for the establishment of a new world were very similar to those of other idealist reformists longing for a better society. The development of morality and intuition as focal points of education were, for example, broadly shared ideas amongst educational reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth century as responses to positivist materialism that, in the eyes of contemporary critics, treated children as mere parts of the machine of society.⁹⁵ Like most humanitarian idealists, Alberts recognized the need to reform the education of children to create new humans for the new societies of the future. And like most humanitarian idealists, Alberts's solutions to the problems of his contemporary world were a combination of educational reform and personal reform.⁹⁶ But while many members of humanitarian movements saw pedagogy as the most important tool for the betterment of society (since children were still easily ‘moldable’ in comparison with adults), to Alberts, asceticism was the key to unlock a better future.

⁹¹ Alberts, *Politeia*, 23-26.

⁹² Hammer, Rothstein, “Introduction”, 5.

⁹³ Tim Rudbøg, “Point Loma, Theosophy, and Katherine Tingley”, in: *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 51.

⁹⁴ Rudbøg, “Point Loma”, 62.

⁹⁵ De Haan e.a., *Het eenzame gelijk*, 16.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

The “capital question”, Alberts wrote, “is marriage (the relation between the sexes) and its organization”.⁹⁷ To Alberts, the relation between the sexes was the cornerstone of life (both in a physical sense as the ingredients for offspring and the continuation of life, and in an abstract sense as opposing energetical elements – male and female, a common notion within Gnosticism, alchemy, and other sources of theosophical inspiration).⁹⁸ Therefore, to reform and purify humanity, the relation between the male and female elements ought to be “made pure again”.⁹⁹ Paraphrasing Tolstoy, Alberts stated that one can easily call “three-quarters of our women” prostitutes, with their lust-stimulating outfits, offering themselves “all dolled up” as objects at the “marriage market”, something in Alberts view was highly problematic.¹⁰⁰ Alberts argued (in accordance with ideas about lust present in most Buddhist traditions, as well as many Gnostic traditions – such as the Cathars), that the sexual lust of humans was the pivotal obstacle to overcome in order to transcend the material world.¹⁰¹ In his *Politeia*, Alberts argued that the only true way towards personal, and therefore in extent societal, liberation, was the total abstinence “from any physical pleasure”.¹⁰² Although, argued Alberts, the ultimate goal was to free humanity completely from the dependency on “carnal fornication” for the continuation of its existence, and while some might be able to abandon material desire, the “mass”, argued Alberts, had to be allowed the practice of procreation.¹⁰³ He considered the masses incapable of overcoming material desires in a short-term and therefore had to be allowed their earthly satisfactions, but only on the condition that it was taught the duty of “ennoblement” of the species.¹⁰⁴

Alberts’s *Politeia* can be placed in a broader context of utopian literature as discussed by for example Hans Crombag and Frank van Dun in their *De Utopische Verleiding* (1997). Characteristic to all utopian works and the idealistic worlds described in them, argued Crombag and Van Dun, is that they all underestimate or even ignore the agency of the individual human.¹⁰⁵ Strategies to reach utopia as outlined in utopian literature, they argued, can be divided into socio-economic strategies (which are based on the assumption that as long

⁹⁷ Alberts, *Politeia*, 7-8.

⁹⁸ Dixon, *The Divine Feminine*, 154.

⁹⁹ Alberts, *Politeia*, 7.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, 11.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, 13; see for example: Crombag, Van Dun, *De Utopische Verleiding*, 215-217.

¹⁰² Alberts, *Politeia*, 13.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*, 15.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, 15-17.

¹⁰⁵ Crombag, Van Dun, *De Utopische Verleiding*, 12.

as the socio-economic structures of society are well-designed people will live in harmony – examples are Edward Bellamy and Karl Marx) and psychological-pedagogical strategies (which based on the idea that if people are properly educated in moral conduct immoral behavior can be eradicated – examples are Francis Bacon and B.F. Skinner).¹⁰⁶ Alberts’s *Politeia* appears to be a mix of the two, both emphasizing the necessity of the radical reformation of modern socio-economic structures – a totalitarian state – and the implementation of new pedagogical ideas in education. Fundamental to Alberts’s *Politeia*, however, is the idea of unity: in his ideal society, rivalry, competition, and diverging opinions have all disappeared due to the spiritual connection between all humans, as well as humanity’s connection to higher, supernatural beings. This sense of unity is essential to the functioning of Alberts’s ideal society and is also the underlying reason for the radical socio-economic reforms that Alberts suggests (e.g. private property disrupts human unity). Alberts’s utopia can, therefore, best be categorized as a psychological-pedagogical utopia.

In *De Utopische Verleiding*, Crombag and Van Dun pointed out characteristically ‘utopian mistakes’ and several of those typical utopian misconceptions can be recognized in Alberts’s *Politeia*. Typical for many utopists, for example, is the assumption that if only everybody would practice some form of asceticism material scarcity (which is arguably a fundamental aspect of life on earth) would not be a problem.¹⁰⁷ To Crombag and Van Dun, another typical utopian mistake is the assumption that competition and rivalry are caused by property rights (while, as they argue, property rights are actually established as a way of coping with the reality of rivalry and competition amongst humans).¹⁰⁸ Both these utopian mistakes are clearly present in Alberts’s *Politeia*. Two other typically utopian misconceptions are the disregard of checks and balances (‘who watches the watchers?’) and of individuality, which can also clearly be identified in *Politeia*. To Alberts, the solution to all these utopian mistakes was found in spiritually motivated altruism derived from the divine nature of humanity – yet another typically utopian idea.¹⁰⁹ As Crombag and Van Dun argue, the “utopian syndrome” often leans heavily on the idea of the divinity of humanity, and that many utopists perceive every experienced problem and limitation as solvable once this divine nature would somehow manifest itself.¹¹⁰ It seems that Alberts, although he genuinely seems to have

¹⁰⁶ Crombag, Van Dun, *De Utopische Verleiding*, 37-40.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, 32.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, 68.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, 258.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, 258-259.

believed his ideal society was achievable, made the same mistake as many utopian authors before him: he failed to account for the unpredictability of human agency.

4.3 J.H. Bolt's De Nieuwe Mens

The exploration of *Politeia* made apparent that, at least to the young Alberts, a better society would be based on what he believed to be socialist ideas of economic collectivism and cooperation. Alberts's utopian outline of a better, futuristic society drew inspiration from the radical collectivism of Russian Bolsheviks who took power only shortly before Alberts's writing of *Politeia* in 1917. With his apparent enthusiasm for the revolutionary developments in Russia, Alberts expressed views on societal change, which were in part contrary to earlier perspectives on societal reformation (as explored in chapter three of this thesis). Although Dutch theosophists generally expressed positive views regarding the not always clearly defined denominator 'socialism', most theosophists before World War I regarded revolution as an undesirable occurrence. Are Alberts's views (as expressed in his utopian manuscript) and the inspiration he drew from the Bolshevik revolution, an indication then, for a shift in perspective of Dutch theosophists?

The belief that a new, better world would emerge out of the shattered, war-torn societies of the old world (as expressed in Alberts's utopian *Politeia*) was widely shared amongst humanitarian idealists such as the Dutch theosophists in the aftermath of World War I.¹¹¹ Just like Alberts, this belief in an emerging better world also motivated other Dutch theosophists to write down their ideas about the characteristics of such a world. One of these theosophists was J.H. Bolt, a teacher and educational reformer who combined his activities for the Dutch Theosophical Society with active involvement in the *Brotherhood-federation* (an umbrella organization for humanitarian movements that in one way or another promoted the growth of brotherhood amongst humans) and the *Bond for vegetarianism*. Most of Bolt's published works concern education and pedagogy, but in 1922, Bolt wrote *De Nieuwe Mens* ('The New Human'), a book concerning the characteristics of a new humanity. The following section will explore the "theosophical contemplation" that was outlined by Bolt in his 1922 work to give his perspective on the new humanity and society that would eventually emerge

¹¹¹ Brolsma, *Het humanitaire moment*, 6.

out of his own.¹¹² How did Bolt envision a new world? And how similar – or different – was this envisioned world from Alberts’s utopia?

4.3.1 *The dawn of a new humanity*

“It is undoubtedly undeniable”, wrote Bolt, “that during the – say last fifty years – important changes in the psyche of numerous contemporaries can be detected”.¹¹³ In the fast-changing world around him, Bolt recognized the signs of significant changes in the human soul, “which opened the eyes for one’s own and other inner condition”.¹¹⁴ Bolt began his book with ten examples of such changes: the many occultist spiritual movements of their contemporary time; the revival of practical philosophy; the “totally changed” approaches to education (Montessori and others); evolutions in artistic disciplines through the emergence of expressionism; the rising importance of psychology in the scientific world; the final “recognition by science” of the truths of metaphysics; changes in societal and political dynamics (more political participation of all citizens in politics, the “awakening of the woman”, the League of Nations, and the labor-unions); the founding of communal colonies and the rise of communist political parties; Einstein’s relativity-theory (which, in Bolt’s eyes, proved the “limitations of human rationality”); and finally, the turbulent development of technology.¹¹⁵

To Bolt, “these and much more” were significant examples of changes in the human mindset.¹¹⁶ They were signs of a growing striving for emancipation, of liberation from the

¹¹² J.H. Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens* (Amsterdam: De Theos. Vereenigings uitgevers-maatschappij, 1922), 3.

¹¹³ Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens*, 3.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*, 3-5; as examples of the “numerous spiritual currents”, Bolt mentioned Spiritism, Christian Science, New Thought, Common Wealth, Co-Freemasonry, Anthroposophy, Theosophy, Astrology, the Order of the Star in the East, the Bahai-movement, and all other sorts of occult societies “etc.”); as examples of educational innovation, Bolt mentioned Foerster, Montessori, Ragaz, Kerschensteiner, Theosophical educational institutions, and the Pallas Athena-movement); Bolt’s remark regarding the final recognition of metaphysics by modern science regarded the incorporation of Mesmerism into the modern scientific paradigm as ‘hypnosis’, and, apparently, the incorporation of Spiritism into the modern scientific discourse under the term ‘*meta-physics*’ [Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens*, 4-5].

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 5.

illusion of separateness, and of a move to the inner realm of human existence.¹¹⁷ Clearly demarcating his view from positivist materialism, he stated that for every perceivable change in the material world, changes in the mental world of thoughts and feelings had occurred precedingly. It was apparent to Bolt that the mental characteristics responsible for the contemporary orientations on liberation and the interconnectedness of humanity “throughout the entire history could be recognized in geniuses, great leaders, pioneers, reformers”.¹¹⁸ To Bolt, the most important shared characteristic of all these great humans was an independent mindset that enabled these individuals to liberate themselves from habitual thought, to think for themselves regardless of nominal opinion.¹¹⁹ Remarkable about contemporary times, stated Bolt, was that this process of liberating individuality manifested itself in greater numbers of people than ever before: “Not yet did they reached the mass in its totality... but one can observe a strong expansion [of this individual mindset]”.¹²⁰ To Bolt, it was clear: a new human was emerging. And just as clear, to Bolt, was that this new human was an individualist.

But was it not individualism (as part of the capitalistic discourse that Resink criticized in his *Social Paedagogy*) that facilitated the state of separateness and dividedness of humanity?¹²¹ Bolt elucidated that he did not mean “the individualism, where to so many in our days ended up in egocentric... and selfish striving, with lack of a true sense of community and will to sacrifice.”¹²² To Bolt, true individualism was characterized by “pure self-consciousness” and the realization of the true self that both juxtaposed an individual from everything else, while simultaneously realizing the true unity that connected all things.¹²³ Bolt’s true individual was in touch with its inner divinity (which created a distance from all

¹¹⁷ Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens*, 8.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 5.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 6; Bolt’s description of the mental characteristic of great pioneers of human mentality in this fragment bears great resemblance with for example Kantian notions of the enlightened individual, or Nietzsche’s *übermensch*, rising above the nominally accepted views and opinions to develop an independent perception on the world.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹²¹ Resink, *Sociale Paedagogie*, 23.

¹²² Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens*, 7-8.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, 8; This seemingly paradoxical notion of juxtaposing the self to everything else whilst simultaneously facilitating a deeper realization of interconnectedness was based on the theosophical idea – as borrowed from Gnosticism – that all souls are actually part of the same all-encompassing cosmic being [see: Crombag, Van Dun, *De Utopische Verleiding*, 250.].

other things in the material world) and therefore found itself living in the realization of the divinity that was encapsulated and present in all material things existing outside its own material manifestation.¹²⁴ To Bolt, it was this individualism, the truest form of individualism that had provided the greats of the past with the inspiration for their grand deeds.

Bolt also argued that the selfish, egocentric conceptions of individualism which led to hedonistic and nihilist behavior were not necessarily a straightforward bad thing.¹²⁵ The new human, who sought above all else to be liberated from both physical and mental oppression, wanted to live life in its totality, to “search for the elusive”, to seize life’s gifts, both the Bacchantic joy and the suffering.¹²⁶

“First, there is “living life to the fullest”, whereof also the Renaissance spoke and which manifests itself in the yearning for pleasure, dance, opium, alcohol and tobacco, for sensation in all sorts of forms, including the wave of sexual lust that spreads all over the world amongst all classes and ages. But with the tiredness, the disgust and disease comes the suffering, that pushes inwards, where the eternal lamp is always burning, far behind the crypts of the soul, where is the holiest of holies, where the rest is and the surrender, the completeness and emptiness and where further onwards blazes the devouring fire of God itself.”¹²⁷

To Bolt, it was understandable that the liberated human would first engulf in the hedonist longing for external pleasure and joy. But eventually, this search for external expressions of liberation would result in sorrow. And this sorrow would guide an individual’s way to the inward path and eventually lead an individual to the true liberation from both pleasure and sorrow in the realization of its own divinity, enabling the transcendence of both externalities and internalities.

The same process that led an individual from hedonism, through suffering, towards enlightenment, had also captivated humanity, claimed Bolt. It was in the startlingly intense suffering of “the war, in the horrors of revolution, in the black specter of famine, genocide, in loss of ideals, family, friends, and property” where a foundation was laid out for a new

¹²⁴ Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens*, 8.

¹²⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*, 8-9.

humanity to be born¹²⁸. The loss of everything that bound humans to the material life and the realization that the accepted beliefs were lies guided humanity inwards, and explained, in Bolt's view, the growing interest in mysticism during their time. In their contemporary days, the "long forgotten" works of Western mystics, as well as Eastern mystic manuscripts, "returned to the modern seeker, who also [like the mystics of the past] wishes to find solid ground in himself and not externally".¹²⁹ And to Bolt, it is modern theosophy that showed modern humanity the 'Path of Liberation'. This was not just a theory, as some said, or a "fantastical imagining", as many said.¹³⁰ To Bolt, it was an irrefutable truth that the modern theosophy he upheld was guiding the way towards the salvation of the modern human. A "new humanism" would rise, inspired by the message of the rediscovered mystics (as promoted by theosophists).¹³¹ This new humanism would entail the belief in the universality of humans through the realization that all humans share a common, divine origin which ultimately makes them one.¹³² This pantheistic notion of the divinity that was lingering in all humans, together with Bolt's recognition of the rise of a new human, led him to believe that he and his contemporaries were experiencing the emergence of a new world. But it would take true individuals to further the currents that were leading humanity to this new world.

Although Bolt explained the surge of self-centered hedonism of his time as a side-effect of the emancipation of modern humans, he nevertheless believed that this pleasure-seeking was an obstacle to the emergence of a new world. Just like Alberts's new man, Bolt's true individual would lead an ascetic lifestyle, abolishing all desire for pleasure and earthly satisfaction.¹³³ Bolt understood that to many modern individuals, it would be hard to grasp the utility of asceticism. For those who sought external pleasure, the ascetic lifestyle of Bolt's true individual might come across as inevitably "leading to a vegetative idleness like that of an Indian fakir".¹³⁴ However, in Bolt's understanding of enlightenment and the ascetic lifestyle that resulted from it, the true individual would be the opposite of idle and passive. The realization of brotherhood would motivate the individual to feel an overpowering desire for the altruistic aid of fellow beings. The asceticism of Bolt's true individual entailed the

¹²⁸ Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens*, 10.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*, 11.

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*, 13.

¹³¹ *Ibidem*, 20.

¹³² *Ibidem*, 19.

¹³³ *Ibidem*, 21.

¹³⁴ *Ibidem*.

overcoming of personal desires to become enlightened, which would result in an overwhelming motivation to become actively involved in the betterment of the world.¹³⁵ Enlightenment would motivate an individual to expand the focus on individual well-being to include social, communal, national, humanitarian and eventually even the wellbeing of all of humanity.¹³⁶

4.3.2 *The currents of true communism*

And, to Bolt, there was reasonable hope that this enlightened altruism had a good chance of emerging in their contemporary society. Bolt recognized a growing realization of human unity in the world around him. There was a “propelling force” that slowly elevated the minds of the masses towards ideas of human universality (although it was not yet clear to Bolt if the ideas would settle permanently in the minds of the masses).¹³⁷ It was this growing realization of human unity in the world, Bolt stated, that explained the growing presence of the many “communistic endeavors” in their time.¹³⁸ To Bolt, these communist endeavors and the rise of communist parties around the world were clear manifestations of the growing realization of human universality and unity (which, as Bolt had argued, was a crucial element for the emergence of his new humanism with its true individuals, and the path to a better world).¹³⁹ But what exactly did Bolt’s perception of ‘communism’ entail? How does it relate to his conception of individualism? And did Bolt’s positive perception of communism mean that he shared Alberts’s positive perception of the Bolsheviks in Revolutionary Russia – which tried to further the realization of a communist world with their experimental Soviet utopia?

To Bolt, it was clear: “Communism is the pure consequence of the brotherhood-experience. Everyone calling himself a Theosophist and every new human certainly carries this ideal in the heart”.¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Bolt argued, there are different forms and manifestations of communism. And not all of them could count on Bolt’s support. Bolt argued that the communism of most communists of his time was “an expression of a one-sided

¹³⁵ Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens*, 22.

¹³⁶ *Ibidem*, 23.

¹³⁷ *Ibidem*, 25.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*, 5, 25.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 26.

individualistic attitude”.¹⁴¹ Many of those who were drawn to communism were motivated by hateful sentiments against a “slowly disintegrating capitalistic system, that is nonetheless strong enough to be the dominant one in the economy of peoples”.¹⁴² In Bolt’s eyes, these sorts of communists engaged in resistance against oppression from institutions such as the church and the state, against priests and “money-lords” that prevented the individual from the freedom it desired.¹⁴³ But there was a strong risk, argued Bolt, that their growing resistance against the oppressive powers of capitalist state-systems and the civil wars and revolutions it could cause would result in new societal bonds that were even more oppressive and restrictive than the current ones.¹⁴⁴ If the communist struggle was focused on ‘outer freedom’ – the material, rather than the inner freedom of Bolt’s transcended, enlightened individual, the struggle would likely result in more oppression. For Bolt, then, it was clear:

“as long as the human is still full of personal desires and passions; if the yearning for pleasure and comfort still dominates; so long as he did not learn to see itself in others and others in itself, so long must all so-called communist endeavors result in anarchy or demagoguery, in oppression in one or another form.”¹⁴⁵

This is why, to Bolt, “the Lenin’s and Trotsky’s” were troublemakers, anarchistic creatures “with an urge to disrupt, whose particular task seems to be the demolition.”¹⁴⁶ Like many Dutch theosophists before him, Bolt argued that the theosophist should not be supportive of revolution. To Bolt, the theosophist ought to support the stable evolution towards a better world, and not the disruptive forces of revolution and the revolutionaries who assumed that out of the “volcanic” disruption of society and its structures a better society would somehow emerge.¹⁴⁷ A theosophist, in Bolt’s view, was a supporter of what he called ‘true communism’, not of the revolutionary communism that, Bolt feared, would only cause chaos, disruption, and new forms of oppression. This did not mean, Bolt argued, that there was no merit in the communist endeavors of his time. Bolt recognized that attempts to establish

¹⁴¹ Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens*, 25.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*.

¹⁴³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 26.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 15.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

communistic communes, for example, despite usually being focused on the ‘outer freedom’ that would not result in true societal reform, were steps in a good direction nonetheless. And no step in the right direction was futile, because perfection could only be accomplished through the countless imperfect steps on the path of improvement.¹⁴⁸

But what then, according to Bolt, was the true communism whose construction a theosophist ought to support? It fell outside the scope of his manuscript to provide a detailed account of the organization of a truly communistic society. But nonetheless, Bolt provided his reader with what, to him, were the essential characteristics of his true communism. The true communism, for Bolt, did not struggle for material liberation. The real struggle for communism was the individual struggle for inner liberation from the bonds of the material world. The truly communistic world, Bolt argued, was what in Christian theological tradition was called the ‘Communion of Saints’ and that theosophists called the ‘White Lodge of the Masters of Wisdom and Compassion’.¹⁴⁹ It was a community of humans that found true enlightenment in the divine essence of their nature, which enabled them to live together in love and genuine altruism. The main difference between the “earthly communists” and the true communists, for Bolt, was that the former was about “*having*”, the later about “*being*”.¹⁵⁰ To Bolt, communism was not about the equal distribution of property but about the state of mind that would enable the altruistic motivation necessary for any sustainable system of equal distribution of goods.¹⁵¹ True communism required “perfect human beings”, earthly communism “perfect distribution of wealth”. And this was the core of Bolt’s reasoning: the only way towards establishing a lasting communist society based on sharing and cooperation was by creating the new humans, the true individuals, that would carry out the ideal. Because without radical altruism, how else would an ideal community, with perfect distribution of wealth, on earth ever last long?

The first step towards this divine commune of true communists, argued Bolt, was to aid humanity in overcoming the current state of individualism (with its hedonistic search for material pleasure) and promote the emergence of true individualism. Following the line of most Dutch theosophists discussed in chapter two of this thesis, this emergence of true individualism began with ongoing personal improvement and development.¹⁵² A better world

¹⁴⁸ Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens*, 26.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, 27.

¹⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵² *Ibidem*.

begins with a better self, argued Bolt. However, simultaneously with working towards personal enlightenment, Bolt argued that humans, and theosophists particularly, ought to try and reform contemporary society by the establishment of small living communities where, in a more harmonious atmosphere and under more appropriate living conditions (far away from the corrupting influence of capitalist modernity), young people could be raised as examples for the rest of humanity. Such communities, with “spiritual communal living” as their foremost priority, had already been established in “America, Swiss, Belgium and the Netherlands”.¹⁵³ Everybody was expected to provide in their own material needs, which would eliminate the influence of materialist yearnings as much as possible.¹⁵⁴ This made apparent, argued Bolt, that “members of the Theosophical Society also simultaneously wish to aid the reconstruction of the dismayed society”.¹⁵⁵

Bolt’s mention of a theosophical living community in the Netherlands is the only reference to such a community in the Netherlands (both in primary and secondary literature). A recent edition of *Het Witte Lotusblad* (the magazine of the Belgium Theosophical Society), however, mentioned the theosophical community in Belgium.¹⁵⁶ This community, named *Monada*, was a small living community (with around thirty members) which existed between 1921 and 1939 and was meant as an experimental example of how the contemporary Belgian theosophists believed human community ought to be structured. The community appears to have had a strong focus on collectivism – instead of celebrating individual birthdays, for example, all birthdays were celebrated on the same, single day simultaneously (to downplay the effect of individualizing children that birthdays apparently have).¹⁵⁷ The community was eventually shut down after the Nazi occupiers prohibited all theosophical activities in 1940.¹⁵⁸

For Bolt, these communities were ground for hope that a new world could be established. However, it was far from certain that the changes he noticed in the world around him and the attempts that were made to further the improvement of society would work out as hoped. Bolt argued that progression did not unfold in a linear fashion (linearly progressing from lower to higher levels of development, for example). Even though a social development

¹⁵³ Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens*, 28.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁶ Christian Vandekerkhove, “De Theosofische leefgemeenschap MONADA”, *Het Witte Lotusblad*, Vol.3, No.7-8, 6-7.

¹⁵⁷ Vandekerkhove, “De Theosofische”, 6-7.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 6.

might be going in a good direction, unexpected events might take place that would steer the development in another, less desirable direction.¹⁵⁹ As with everything else, the changes in humanity's mindset, including what Bolt saw as steps towards a communist direction, were susceptible to the ups and downs that characterized the progression of all elements of existence.¹⁶⁰ Bolt noticed the ups and downs of enthusiasm amongst contemporary idealists: "What was revolutionary will consent... and once again, the citizen sits with its beer and newspaper, not caring about the misery of the world".¹⁶¹ All an idealistic individual could do was believe in the possibility of improvement and act on that belief, in the hope of influencing the conjectural currents of the cosmos.¹⁶²

Bolt's *De Nieuwe Mens* dealt more with the path to a better future than with detailed descriptions of how the society of that better future would look like (as was done by Alberts in his *Politeia*). However, *De Nieuwe Mens* can still be regarded as a utopian work. Just like Alberts, Bolt believed that if more humans would practice asceticism and overcome material desire, a better world would definitely get closer to realization. And just like Alberts's *Politeia*, Bolt's *De Nieuwe Mens* leaned heavily on the idea of the divinity of human nature – which, Crombag and Van Dun argue, is a characteristic trait of what they called the 'utopian syndrome'.¹⁶³ However, is it only this 'utopian mistake' (as long as humanity will realize its divine potential a better world will arise) that made Bolt's *De Nieuwe Mens* utopian? Rather than believing that implementing his psychological-pedagogical strategy towards the better world of his new humanity would inevitably work, Bolt seems more cautious and argued that idealistic plans do not always play out as hoped.¹⁶⁴ His idea that idealistic endeavors, as all things, are susceptible to conjectural ups and downs, seems to make him more realistic and less utopist than Alberts.

However, although Bolt seems to allow for some role of human agency in his prescription of a better future, this role of human agency is compromised again by Bolt's notion that it is primarily the conjectures of the cosmos, rather than human choices, that largely determine the ups and downs of idealistic movements.¹⁶⁵ Additionally, Bolt concluded

¹⁵⁹ Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens*, 38.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 38-39.

¹⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 38.

¹⁶² *Ibidem*, 7-8.

¹⁶³ Crombag, Van Dun, *Utopische Verleiding*, 258.

¹⁶⁴ Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens*, 38.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, 39.

De Nieuwe Mens with the notion that, to a theosophist, these ups and downs and the suffering that comes along with them, were easier to accept because theosophists had the hope of a coming Messiah, someone that will provide the necessary spiritual support for humanity to overcome its peril.¹⁶⁶ Ironically, Bolt ended his plea for ‘true individualism’ with the notion that humanity’s only hope is outside help in the form of the coming ‘World Teacher. Despite his seemingly ‘realistic’ incorporation of the possibility that idealistic projects might fail, Bolt’s way out of this disillusionment is the very utopian idea of a heavenly savior that would help humanity to overcome its misery.¹⁶⁷

Bolt’s idea of the dawn of a new humanity that would begin to realize the pantheistic nature of reality and, as a result, start to live in brotherly harmony is exemplary for the theosophical adaptation of the ‘utopian telos’ or the unfolding of history as it supposedly was meant to be.¹⁶⁸ During the early years of the T.S.A. and under the influence of Blavatsky, most theosophists believed that a better world might take ages to become reality, even millennia, because the process of spiritual evolution was lengthy and major changes – like the ascendance of divine humans – took a lot of time to accomplish.¹⁶⁹ Annie Besant, however, around 1909 began to actively propagate the idea that a new civilization was imminent, and under the influence of Besant’s progressive millennialism many theosophists, including in the Netherlands, began to believe that a better world could perhaps be realized within their own lifespan.¹⁷⁰

Besant preached the idea that spiritual teacher was about to come – the World Teacher, ‘Lord Maitreya’, who some believed was a new Jesus (or even Jesus himself) – and guide humanity towards a new civilization and to salvation.¹⁷¹ Around the time when Bolt wrote his *De Nieuwe Mens* (1922), Besant’s progressive millennialism and the idea of a coming World Teacher was accepted by a growing number of theosophists and had led to the appointment of an Indian boy – Jidda Krishnamurti – as the reincarnation of this savior (nevertheless, the coming World Teacher and Krishnamurti’s appointment as the new Jesus also met with great resistance from many theosophists, most notably Rudolf Steiner, who in protest of Besant’s progressive millennialism separated from the T.S.A. together with the majority of German

¹⁶⁶ Bolt, *De Nieuwe Mens*, 39-40.

¹⁶⁷ Crombag, Van Dun, *De Utopische Verleiding*, 219-220.

¹⁶⁸ Trompf, “Theosophical Macrohistory”, 377; Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge*, 166.

¹⁶⁹ Wessinger, “The Second Generation”, 39; Trompf, “Theosophical Macrohistory”, 380.

¹⁷⁰ Wessinger, “The Second Generation”, 38-40.

¹⁷¹ *Ibidem*, 38.

theosophists).¹⁷² It seems that Bolt, despite arguing throughout his *De Nieuwe Mens* that true individualism was the path to the future, was nonetheless susceptible to the promise of imminent improvement brought about by an external source. Just as many utopists before him, the idea of a divine power who would instantly improve society seems to have been too appealing to resist for Bolt.¹⁷³

4.4 Revolutionary developments

As illustrated with the previous sections of this chapter, some Dutch theosophists – such as J.C.P. Alberts and J.H. Bolt – took it up themselves to provide outlines of the future societies they envisioned and explain what role their theosophy would play in the actualization of those improved societies of the future. While both Alberts and Bolt envisioned a society based on theosophical ideals, Alberts was strongly inspired by the radical collectivism of Bolshevik Russia and Bolt drew strong inspiration from Renaissance notions of individualism. To Alberts, the initial societal experiments of the newly born Soviet utopia provided hope that true social change towards the divine utopia he envisioned was possible. Only a few years later, however, Bolt perceived radical communists like Lenin and Trotsky as anarchistic troublemakers whose cosmic role seemed to be the disturbance and demolition of societal structures, rather than being constructive pioneers of a coming utopia Alberts perceived them to be. How did other Dutch theosophists perceive the revolutionary developments in Russia? Did they see it as an inspiration, like Alberts? Or did they condemn the reality of revolution as much as they condemned the idea itself (as seen in chapter three of this thesis)?

4.4.1 Revolution: the fast-track to liberation?

Initially, the news of the revolution in Russia seemed to have been interpreted as a positive development by Dutch theosophists writing in *Theosophia*. In August 1917 for example, the editors of the magazine briefly mentioned the Russian Revolution, paraphrasing Annie Besant and her defense of revolutionary means for Suffragettes and stating that in some cases, the

¹⁷² Wessinger, “The Second Generation”, 39.

¹⁷³ Crombag, Van Dun, *De Utopische Verleiding*, 219.

fight for truth and justice can benefit from more radical means.¹⁷⁴ This could be recognized for example in the case of the suffrage movement, as well as in “the liberation of Russia”.¹⁷⁵ In fact, every fighter’s true sacrifice “brings the issue of Europe’s salvation from the slavery of the brute force of militarism and capital faster to its end”.¹⁷⁶ Perhaps the confrontation with the brutality of war changed the theosophical discourse regarding revolution, no longer condemning it as too radical and disruptive to really bring about constructive change in society? Despite the initially positive notions of revolution in Russia, authors in *Theosophia* soon reverted their view, writing about the chaos of the Russian civil war between the Soviet Bolsheviks and tsarist royalists that this violent chaos was what “revolution and tyranny” result in.¹⁷⁷

The initial admiration of at least some Dutch theosophists soon changed into a consensual condemnation of the violence and oppression that began to be associated with the Soviet experiment. In 1922, the women’s right advocate W.A.L. Ros-Vrijman and active promoter of theosophy in the Netherlands wrote a short report about the situation in Bolshevik Russia based on the experiences of English theosophist Haden Guest, who was part of an official delegation of the British Labor Party in 1920 to investigate the situation in Russia.¹⁷⁸ Throughout Ros-Vrijman’s report, it becomes apparent that, in her eyes, the revolution had clearly failed. Entire regions were still engulfed in chaotic civil war and out of the chaos of revolution a “military brotherhood with a certain set of dogma’s emerged”, enforcing their will through the ruthless exercise of power and the associated terror.¹⁷⁹ The dogmas of Russia’s revolutionary rulers were a “raw Marxism”, subordinating all spiritual life to the economic doctrine of material class struggle. The focus on revolutionizing the material relations between the classes while neglecting the spiritual basis of life, to Ros-Vrijman, caused the revolutionary Russian state to deteriorate into totalitarian tyranny. And the newly established ruling class, consisting of “zealots, tortured souls” who suffered under the previous regime, had abolished not only the errors of Western civilization, but its

¹⁷⁴ Redactie, “Van verre en van nabij”, 239.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁷ Redactie, “Van verre en van nabij”, *Theosophia* 26 (april 1918 – maart 1919), 127.

¹⁷⁸ Ros-Vrijman, “Van verre en van nabij”, 31; Redactie, “In Vogelvlucht”, *Theosophia* 30 (april 1922 – maart 1923), 3-5; <http://www.hvv-vlaardingen.nl/upload/Jaarboeken/JB%201980%20Kroniek%20van%20Vlaardingen%201929%20-%20Huug%20de%20Koning.pdf>. 13-6-2018.

¹⁷⁹ Ros-Vrijman, “Van verre en van nabij”, 30.

accomplishments – the constitutional freedoms of an individual – as well. To Ros-Vrijman, the situation in revolutionary Russia clearly showed that a steady societal evolution towards a better world – through humanitarian aid, for example improving the lives of suffering classes – was the best path towards a more just society. Though requiring more patience and endurance, the costs of the direct approach of revolution, in Ros-Vrijman’s view, far outweighed the benefits.

The view that Ros-Vrijman expressed seemed to have been shared by most authors who mentioned revolutionary Russia in *Theosophia*, referring to Bolshevik rule for example as “the red tyranny” and the “negative forces” that Russia is suffering under.¹⁸⁰ But some theosophists believed that the totalitarian rule of communist Russia was somehow part of a cosmic dynamic that might somehow pave the way to a new world. J.H. Bolt, for example, argued that the emerging power of the communists might be a necessary antithesis to the capitalism of the West, functioning as cosmic forces of demolition that would demolish what stood in the way of the rise of a new world.¹⁸¹ Although – as seen earlier this chapter – Bolt viewed Bolsheviks as anarchistic troublemakers, he believed that their appearance might be a necessary occurrence, in the long run, and that they would shake up the rigid structures of the capitalistic world and enable the reformation of a world dominated by materialistic greed.

4.4.2 Brotherhood

“In our society, the Theosophy has become a factor of significance... Our public lectures are attended by hordes of interested individuals, the Theosophical teachings are discussed in magazines, we receive appreciation from great men of science such as Edison, Sir William Crookes, and many others.”¹⁸²

Seventeen years after writing his contribution to *Theosofie en het Maatschappelijk Vraagstuk*, Dr. D. Albers had become interim secretary for the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands and had the honor of addressing his fellow theosophists during the celebration of the fiftieth

¹⁸⁰ Redactie, “In Vogelvlucht”, 101; G.S. Arundale (translated by G.S.), “Internationalisme. Rede gehouden in Amsterdam, 5 juli 1925.”, *Theosophia* 33 (april 1925 – maart 1926), 181.

¹⁸¹ J.H. Bolt, “Hij die komt”, *Theosophia* 33 (april 1925 – maart 1926), 22.

¹⁸² Dr. D. Albers, *50 Jaar Theosofie* (Theosofische Uitgeversmaatschappij, Amsterdam, 1925), 6-7.

anniversary of the Theosophical Society Adyar.¹⁸³ And, as Albers believed, there was much to celebrate. The small group of enthusiasts managed to build a society that in 1925 counted over forty-one thousand members and thirty-eight national branches of the international T.S.A.¹⁸⁴ Thanks to the work of theosophists and other idealists, stated Albers, the dominant discourse of society was becoming “less materialistic by the day” and peoples, races, and advocates of the different religions were increasingly tolerant towards each other.¹⁸⁵ The task of theosophists, however, was far from over, argued Albers. Materialism, prejudices, and bigotry were still major factors in modern society and, Albers told his fellow theosophists, “it will still demand hard work before the spiritual will have won from the material in humanity”.¹⁸⁶ Albers argued that the theosophist’s task would not be over as long as there are people living in ignorance of the spiritual aspects of life. It was up to theosophists, argued Albers, to show “by living example that Theosophy is not a dream of foolish zealots, but practical wisdom”.¹⁸⁷ The best way to do that according to Albers was to uphold, as theosophists, what was most essential to them: “Brotherhood”.¹⁸⁸ Although Albers believed that it was not his – or anyone’s place – to tell others what to do, it was this fundamental perspective on life as the pantheistic brotherhood of souls that should guide theosophists in all their actions.¹⁸⁹

In 1928, a group of Dutch theosophists under the leadership of the earlier mentioned W.A.L. Ros-Vrijman wrote a series of pamphlets bundled under the name: *Broederschap. Essentieel voor het voortbestaan onder beschaving* (‘Brotherhood. Essential for the continuation of our civilization’).¹⁹⁰ The bundle of pamphlets started with a grim statement: “Our current society is at risk of perishing under the selfishness of individuals and the masses”.¹⁹¹ The authors expressed their fear for the increased influence of mass-movements in society and the polarization and “hyper-individualism” (extreme self-centeredness) that came

¹⁸³ Albers, *50 Jaar Theosofie*, 1.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 6; The membership of the T.S.A. would reach its peak in 1928 with 45.098 members. [see: Wessinger, *The Second Generation*”, 46.].

¹⁸⁵ Albers, *50 Jaar Theosofie*, 7.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, 8.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, 16.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, 17.

¹⁹⁰ W.A.L. Ros-Vrijman e.a., *Broederschap. Essentieel voor het voortbestaan onzer beschaving* (Theosofische Uitgeversmaatschappij, Amsterdam, 1928), 1.

¹⁹¹ Ros-Vrijman e.a., *Broederschap*, 1.

along with it.¹⁹² The emergence of “scientific management” in the industrial process, argued M.L. Fredderus (an economist and vice-president of the International Industrial Relations Association), increasingly dehumanized factory workers and made them even more merely extensions of machines than even during the Industrial Revolution.¹⁹³ These and other aspects of their contemporary society (for example, the cartels and trusts of big business, the national and international political polarization, prostitution, and narcotics) were signs to the authors that the world strongly needed the ideal of brotherhood.¹⁹⁴

The authors provided a list of practical ideas to promote the idea of brotherhood in society. Besides stressing the importance of personal moral development, the authors emphasized, for example, the importance of good social and familial relations, of social engagement (regarding animal protection, abstinence, trafficking of woman, narcotics), to become informed regarding economic issues (such as unemployment, trusts, cartels, cooperative management structures), and to promote “ennobling and constructive influences in politics”.¹⁹⁵ To the authors, pacifism, respect for nature, tolerance for cultural and racial differences, less income inequality, and humanitarian aid of others were all clear examples of the spirit of brotherhood that they believed their contemporary world needed.¹⁹⁶ Although most authors ended their pamphlets with hopeful notions of a better future, W.A.L. Ros-Vrijman ended hers with a warning: if the leaders of the world did not realize soon that society should become based on brotherhood, “the long and grievous road of the destruction of the old civilization will have to be entered, to, having lost all the valuable aspects of that old civilization, be forced to start all over again. An enormous loss of time, therefore.”¹⁹⁷ It would not be the end of the world if modern man did not heed the call of the theosophists, argued Ros-Vrijman. From a theosophical point of view, it would just mean a big setback in the process of the spiritual evolution of humanity, whose current stage of development had taken over thousands of millennia to be reached.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² P. van Stam, “Kunst”, in: *Broederschap*, 3.

¹⁹³ M.L. Fledderus, “Nieuwe Arbeidsmethoden”, in: *Broederschap*, 2-3; Guy Fiti Sinclair, *To Reform the World: International Organizations and the Making of Modern States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 457.

¹⁹⁴ W.A.L. Ros-Vrijman e.a., *Broederschap*, 3-4.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, 2-5.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, 2.

¹⁹⁷ W.A.L. Ros-Vrijman, “Politiek”, in: *Broederschap*, 5.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 5; Trompf, “Theosophical Macrohistory”, in: *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, 380.

4.5 Conclusion

Central in this chapter was the following question: ‘how did Dutch theosophists, between 1914 and 1930, envision a better society, and what roles did they envision for themselves in the process of constructing that better society?’ Throughout this chapter, it has become apparent that the idea that theosophists should become more actively engaged in society was embraced by more Dutch theosophists than before the war. Like other humanitarian idealists, theosophists saw the war as a call to action and believed that they could build a new civilization out of the war-torn West. Rather than sharing Besant’s teleological explanation of the war as a cosmic battle between Light and Dark, the outbreak of the First World War was explained by most Dutch theosophists as caused by the one-sided materialism of Western civilization and the lack of spirituality. It was humanity’s greed and focus on material satisfaction, most believed, that caused the war.

During the aftermath of the war, other humanitarian movements were characterized by an increasing emphasis on the need for spiritual revitalization. It seems that theosophists recognized their own beliefs in the emerging emphasis on spirituality amongst other humanitarian idealists, which inspired them to believe that this period was the ideal momentum for them to bring theosophy to the masses. It also inspired the publication of two utopian works with theosophical influences, J.C.P. Alberts’s *Politeia*, and J.H. Bolt’s *De Nieuwe Mens*.

Alberts’s ideal society as outlined in *Politeia* could be described as a totalitarian theocracy with a strong focus on autarky, asceticism, and spiritual living. Albert’s idea of a society headed by ‘sages’ can be interpreted as a theosophical adaptation of Plato’s ideal society as led by philosopher kings. Characteristically theosophical about Alberts’s sages was the idea that their right to rule was based on their level of spiritual development and connection to divine power. Another typically theosophical aspect of Alberts’s *Politeia* was the idea that, in his ideal society, supernatural beings – the ‘Masters’ from the ‘White Lodge of Adepts’ were physically present in the society and stood in close contact with humanity as spiritual aides and guides. To Alberts, critical to the realization of his better world were asceticism and the ability for humans to overcome material desire. His *Politeia* can be regarded as a typically utopian work, whose detailed descriptions of a better society contained a pivotal mistake: the failure to account for human agency.

In Bolt's *Een Nieuwe Mens*, the notion of human agency seemed to be more articulated at first sight. Bolt believed that the pantheistic perception of a brotherhood of humanity as taught by theosophists was finally emerging in their time, and he argued that only true individuals could aid in the process of forging a better world out of this growing perception of brotherhood. Just like the inhabitants of Alberts's ideal society, Bolt's true individuals would lead an ascetic lifestyle, abolishing all desire for pleasure and earthly satisfaction. Just like Bolt distinguished between regular conceptions of individualism and his 'true individualism', he also distinguished between regular communism and 'true communism'. The true communism, for Bolt, did not focus on the struggle for material equality. The real struggle for communism was the individual struggle for inner liberation from the bonds of the material world. The truly communistic world of Bolt was a community of humans that found true enlightenment in the divine essence of their nature, which enabled them to live together in love and genuine altruism.

Throughout both Alberts's outline of a theosophical utopia and Bolt's description of communist brotherhood, as well as the ways in which both authors envisioned the realization of their respective future worlds, a dilemmatic ambiguity became apparent that both authors nevertheless left unaddressed. In Alberts's ideal society, inner enlightenment formed the basis of his democratically ruled spiritual utopia. However, Alberts's description of democracy as headed by theocratic 'sages' whose insights are impeccable and a state whose power of society is absolute bear strong resemblances to a theocratically inspired totalitarianism without any checks on the power of the state. Additionally, Alberts's notion of inner enlightenment as the basis of this 'democratic' society seems contradictory with his envisioning of the way supernatural beings like the divine Devas would aid humanity in spiritual development. In Alberts's description, inner enlightenment – although an individual's own responsibility – could only be accomplished with the external aid from higher evolved divine forces. This ambiguity between the emphasis of individual responsibility to become enlightened on the one hand, and external spiritual support as a prerequisite for successful enlightenment on the other, was also present in Bolt's *De Nieuwe Mens*. While Bolt argued throughout his book that personal enlightenment would lead to his 'true individualism', he ended his book with a contradictory notion of outside aid by means of a soon to come messiah that would show humanity the way to enlightenment and to a better world.

Near the end of the 1920s, the inspired vigor with which Dutch theosophists argued for the construction of a better world seems to have been tempered. They recognized

increasing need for the world to understand their theosophical insights regarding the brotherhood of humanity, because, for example, increasing tensions in international relations seemed to direct humanity back into the abyss of competition and conflict. The theosophist's role in society, they believed, was far from over.

Chapter five. Conclusion

This thesis has explored the ways in which Dutch theosophists envisioned a role for themselves as theosophists in society in an attempt to answer the following research question: ‘to what extent did Dutch theosophists, between 1897 and 1930, view social engagement as an earthly means to actualize their occult beliefs?’

A short answer to this question would be that Dutch theosophists did not view social engagement as an earthly means, but, rather, that they viewed social engagement as a spiritual means to a spiritual end. Dutch theosophists believed that the most important aspect of the role of a theosophist was an introspective role: to engage in spiritual practices to facilitate moral and spiritual development and engage in occult practices to expand the knowledge of the hidden, dormant wisdom that lied beyond the material world. This view of spiritual development as a primary concern make Dutch theosophists a typical example of what Piet de Rooy called humanitarian reform movements, movements that were characterized by the belief that improving society could only be accomplished by changing human nature, which in turn was sought primarily in individual improvement.

At the same time, however, Dutch theosophists did, indeed, view various forms of social engagement as an earthly means to actualize their occult beliefs. With regards to the early years of the Society and the initial orientations on identity by the theosophists on their role as theosophists, a pivotal aspect of the role of a theosophist was believed to be the active promotion of theosophical ideas in Dutch society – a rather ‘earthly’ activity. The inwardly orientated role of a theosophist and the outward activities of propagating theosophy found a synthesis in scholarly work and the intellectual study of subjects related to theosophy (all forms of religion, philosophy, and science). Dutch theosophists believed that these forms of social engagement – the propagation of theosophy specifically and the intellectual study and promotion of spiritual knowledge in society in general – would aid in the process of revitalizing the spiritual life of the West, which they believed was essential not only for the construction of a better future but also to ensure that the West would not succumb under the hedonism and nihilism of the modern Western world. Most Dutch theosophists seem to have perceived contemporary society as immoral and devoid of meaning, which they believed were symptoms of the ascendance of materialism. The rise of materialistic culture in the West, in turn, they believed had been caused by the spiritual immaturity that was the result of ages of

dogmatic imprisonment by orthodox religion. Dutch theosophists believed that a spiritual revitalization would drastically alter human nature and believed that only their occult theosophy could provide the necessary spiritual knowledge to save the West.

By actively propagating a new, mysterious, and exotic alternative to traditional orthodox religion in the public sphere, the T.S.N. gained in popularity and attracted many new members from a wide variety of backgrounds. In the years around 1908, a new generation of Dutch theosophists emerged. At the same time, a new generation of leaders emerged in the international T.S.A., most notably Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater. Besant's inauguration as president of the Society marked the beginning of a reorientation on practical occultism and occult research, which had characterized the early years of the T.S.A. but had lost importance in the period after the death of its most important advocate Blavatsky. The presidency of Besant also marked the beginning of a shift towards a more socially engaged course for the Society (in a more practical sense). Although Besant's initiatives to stimulate the practical application of theosophy met with appreciation in the Netherlands, not all theosophists in the Netherlands seemed eager, initially, to answer Besant's call for a more mundane form of social engagement. The older members of the T.S.N. did, however, follow Besant's example regarding the reemphasis of practical occultism and research. The old generation of Dutch theosophists attempted to preserve what they believed was the original calling of the Society and began to put more emphasis on occult practices and mysticism to show the new generation of Dutch theosophists what theosophy, according to them, ought to be about.

Although the old generation of Dutch theosophists seemed hesitant to follow in the footsteps of international theosophists and their social engagement projects, the years around 1908 also saw the emergence of an increasing number of Dutch theosophists from the emerging new generation that argued – with vigor – for a more socially engaged course for the Society. The influx of new members from a wide variety of backgrounds was paired with a more socially engaged orientation for the T.S.N. between 1908 and 1914, particularly on what the relationship between theosophy and the social issue was or ought to be. Although there were Dutch theosophists that argued for a political course for the Society, most Dutch theosophists, between 1908 and 1914, strongly opposed any involvement in party politics for the T.S.N. They generally believed that party politics mainly dealt with battling symptoms, rather than causes of societal problems and that the T.S.N. ought to be an apolitical organization that dealt with solving the underlying cause of society's problems: the lack of spirituality. The orientation on social engagement for the T.S.N. caused much debate about

the nature of social engagement, about the way theosophical dogmas related to social issues, and which direction a socially engaging T.S.N. ought to take.

Most Dutch theosophists believed that, as social reformers, the majority of socialists focused on the wrong issue: to most Dutch theosophists, the idea that improving material conditions would result in lasting social improvements was a pivotal mistake in most forms of socialist ideology. It was their belief that humanity was not yet morally developed enough to sustain an improved society, even if better material circumstances would temporarily lead to a decline in immoral behavior. Many Dutch theosophists believed that a better society and morality based on material welfare was far too fragile to be sustainable: if increased material welfare would cause a decrease in immoral behavior, this decrease would be caused by a lack of triggers for immorality, not the intrinsic motivation to be moral, and a likely to happen disastrous event that would compromise material welfare would result in a rapid increase again of immoral behavior. This reasoning was used to argue that the true solution to immorality and society's problems was a spiritual revival. Theosophists' general solution to society's problems – spiritual revitalization – did not change. Nevertheless, the actualization of this spiritual revitalization was discussed more extensively and in more detail than during the early years of the T.S.N.'s history, and by an increasing number of Dutch theosophists.

A general consensus amongst Dutch theosophists before 1914 was that revolution was an undesirable tool for social change and should be condemned. It was a chaotic and disruptive process that was the opposite of the ways that theosophists believed humanity could best develop when bearing in mind the broader context of spiritual evolution as taught by theosophy. It seems that, in addition to the idea that steady evolution was more constructive than abrupt revolution, this antipathy towards revolution as a tool for social change was also motivated by theosophists' elitist perspective on social change: many Dutch theosophists seem to have believed that social change was the responsibility of the high classes of society, not of the low classes (and they believed revolution was usually initiated by the lower classes). There are also indications that some Dutch theosophists used theosophy as an ideological foundation for social conservatism and condemned revolution because it threatened their social position. In general, however, Dutch theosophists were inclined to advocate social progression and condemned revolution based on the belief that steady evolution was the best way to progress for societies.

Theosophical dogmas such as that the universe was governed by the laws of karma and reincarnation proved to be dilemmatic to Dutch theosophists who upheld their theosophical beliefs but also wished to engage more actively in humanitarian aid towards their

fellow beings. Questions such as to what extent struggle was a necessity for spiritual evolution, or whether poverty was the result of bad karma and helping the poor would mean interfering with the karmic consequentialism that supposedly governed the universe were discussed by Dutch theosophists, but definitive answers proved difficult to construct. Nevertheless, many Dutch theosophists seem to have believed that the laws of karma and reincarnation were too incomprehensible to make concrete conclusions such as that the poor deservedly perished and argued that personal morality and development should be more important than judging the situation of others. The idea of brotherhood, they believed, ought to be the guiding principle in a moral individual's behavior. Some theosophists, however, found inspiration in theosophy to argue for unequal social rights and a social hierarchy that would be based on different levels of spiritual development.

Dutch theosophists increasingly engaged in debates regarding the relationship between theosophy and practical social engagement and began to put more emphasis on the importance of practically implementing theosophical ideas in society. However, they did not seem to have embraced practical idealism with the same vigor as international theosophists did. It was, between 1908 and 1914, mostly an orientation on, rather than practical involvement with social engagement that seems to have characterized Dutch theosophists.

The horrors and destruction of the First World War profoundly affected Dutch theosophists and their views of their roles in society. Rather than turning to cynicism and pessimism, however, Dutch theosophists and many of their contemporaries were reassured in their belief that Western civilization could only be saved and be improved by a spiritual revitalization. The War was interpreted as undeniable proof that the rationalist materialism of the pre-war society had failed. This inspired Dutch theosophists to embrace their previous orientation towards the concrete implementation of their theosophical beliefs through societal activities with more vigor than before the war. More than before the war, the editors of *Theosophia* actively called upon their fellow theosophists to support and engage in humanitarian movements. They believed that the time had come to rebuild society in a theosophical way, a new civilization that would be based on spirituality, rather than materialism. The increased focus of other humanitarian idealists on spiritual revitalization seems to have made Dutch theosophists believe that the period after WWI was the ideal momentum for them to bring theosophy to the masses and resulted in an increased emphasis on the practical implementation of theosophical beliefs.

While before the War, many theosophists believed that it could take ages, even millennia before a better civilization would be realized, the invigorated belief in the necessity

of a better world after the War inspired Dutch theosophists to embrace expectations of the short-term realization of a better future. It inspired some Dutch theosophists to provide outlines of how they believed a better society, based on theosophy, would look like. The ideal society as outlined in J.C.P. Alberts's *Politeia* could be described as a totalitarian theocracy with a strong focus on autarky, asceticism, and spiritual living. Alberts's ideal society was headed by 'sages', a theosophical adaptation of Plato's philosopher kings, that had a right to rule based on their level of spiritual development and connection to the divine. Typically theosophical about Alberts's outline of a better future was the idea that supernatural beings – the 'Masters from the White Lodge of Adepts' – were physically present in the society and stood in close contact with humanity as spiritual aides and guides. To realize the transformation from contemporary society to this ideal society, a radical reformation of the socio-economic structures of society was necessary. In addition, the necessary changes in human nature could be realized by changes in pedagogical approaches and to focus the education of children on the development of morality and intuition. The most critical aspect of Alberts's plan to realize his vision of a better future was asceticism: he believed that humanity as a whole ought to become able to overcome and transcend material desire. This, Alberts believed, was the most pivotal element in the realization of a better world.

The importance of asceticism in the process of constructing a better future was also present in another theosophical utopian work: *De Nieuwe Mens*, by J.H. Bolt. Just like Alberts, Bolt believed that an ascetic lifestyle and the abolishment of all desire for pleasure and material satisfaction was highly important for the realization of a better society. Using terms such as 'communism', 'individualism', and 'humanism', Bolt argued that the most essential element in the process of realizing a better world was the theosophical idea of brotherhood, which could be best described as a pantheistic perception of humanity as a brotherhood of souls that shared a common origin and were thus deep down actually the same being. Like most theosophists, Bolt distinguished between materialism and idealism, or the spiritual dimensions of life. Bolt believed that most forms of communism were manifestations of this 'spirit of brotherhood', but that they – for example, the communism of Soviet Russia – were immature, materialistically orientated versions of what he called true communism. True communism, to Bolt, was a radical collectivism based on spiritual enlightenment and the manifested divine essence of human nature, which enabled them to live together in genuine altruism and unselective love.

Throughout both Alberts's outline of a theosophical utopia and Bolt's description of communist brotherhood, as well as the ways in which both authors envisioned the realization

of their respective future worlds, a dilemmatic ambiguity became apparent that both authors left unaddressed. In Alberts's ideal society, inner enlightenment formed the basis of his democratically ruled spiritual utopia. However, Alberts's description of democracy as headed by theocratic 'sages' whose insights are impeccable and a state whose power of society is absolute bear strong resemblances to a religiously inspired totalitarianism without any checks on the power of the state. Additionally, Alberts's notion of inner enlightenment as the basis of this 'democratic' society seems contradictory with his envisioning of the way supernatural beings like the divine Devas would aid humanity in spiritual development. In Alberts's description, inner enlightenment – although an individual's own responsibility – could only be accomplished with the external aid from higher evolved divine forces. This ambiguity between the emphasis of individual responsibility to become enlightened on the one hand, and external spiritual support as a prerequisite for successful enlightenment on the other, was also present in Bolt's *De Nieuwe Mens*. While Bolt argued throughout his book that personal enlightenment would lead to his 'true individualism' (which focused on inner dimensions of existence and personal responsibility for one's spiritual development), he ended his book with a contradictory notion of outside aid by means of a soon to come messiah that would show humanity the way to enlightenment and to a better world.

Near the end of the 1920s, the vigorous inspiration to work towards the construction of a better world seems to have been tempered. The enthusiasm, which seems to have characterized Dutch theosophists in the aftermath of the First World War slowly made way for grim realizations that the world was not changing as fast as was hoped. Dutch theosophists recognized, for example, increasing tensions in international political relations and believed that, if the Western world did not embrace the theosophical ideas such as the brotherhood of humanity, humanity would soon slip back into the dangers of materialism – competition, conflict, and suffering.

The T.S.N. saw a strong increase in membership during the 1910s and 1920s, which was for a major part caused by Annie Besant's propagation of progressive millennialism and the idea that a World Prophet would soon come to show humanity the way to a better future. It was believed that Jidda Krishnamurti would be this World Prophet. After years of being nurtured as the soon to be savior, Krishnamurti began his public career as the new Messiah, which resulted in a rapid increase in membership for many theosophical societies, including the T.S.N. In 1929, however, Krishnamurti suddenly resigned from his appointment as the new Jesus, based on the argument that spirituality and enlightenment were an individual's personal responsibility, that one is responsible for one's own destiny, and that personal

development should not be dependent on external factors such as religious dogmas, supernatural beings, or a messiah.

It is this tension between individual responsibility and interconnectedness, the tension between active personal initiatives and relying on external help that seems to have been the fundamental tension in the discourse of Dutch theosophists regarding the relationship between theosophy and social engagement. This tension has manifested itself in debates by theosophists, for example about the relationship between karma and humanitarian aid, or reincarnation and poverty. This tension can also be recognized in the general discourse of theosophy, where the emphasis on personal responsibility for enlightenment was interwoven with the notion of a 'White Lodge of Adepts' or the 'Masters', whose benevolent aid of spiritual seekers supposedly was pivotal in the process of successfully becoming enlightened. Although the Theosophical Society in the Netherlands was initially characterized by careful notions of spiritual evolution and the idea that it would take ages before humanity was spiritually mature enough for a better world, the promise of an instant solution in the form of a divine savior or messiah had too strong an appeal to be resisted. When the Messiah, Krishnamurti, resigned from his destined role as prophet, membership soon began to drop, and the Theosophical Society was forced to reinvent itself once again, but this time not in an historical context of increasing humanitarian idealism, but in a world increasingly dominated by economic disaster, growing international tensions, and the emergence of very 'anti-brotherly' regimes throughout Europe.

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