

## THE “WORLD RELIGION” THAT WASN’T: An Ignominious Episode in the History of the Theosophical Society

... I believe that the men of every religion will see in the World-Religion the soul of their own faith; that it will not be a question of this faith and the other, this prophet and the other, but that in every faith the noblest, the most liberal spirits, those who have most of the divine consciousness, and therefore most love for their fellow men—that such in every faith will recognize in the world-religion all that is noblest and dearest in their own, and that each will feel that it is their own faith carried to the highest, and will recognize in it the glory and splendour of their own.<sup>1</sup>

Annie Besant (1847-1933), President of the Theosophical Society (TS) from 1907 until her death, was one of the most popular professional lecturers of her generation. The above quotation is an extract from one of several talks she gave at London’s Queen’s Hall in the summer of 1911. The description she gave of the World Religion is impressive, and was no doubt eloquently expressed.

The 1911 lecture series “. . . dealt with impending physical changes which foreshadowed the forthcoming of a World Teacher; who would set in motion the growth of a World Religion. . .”<sup>2</sup> Fourteen years later Mrs Besant and others attempted not only to formalize their conception of this World Religion but also to make the Theosophical Society (Adyar) an integral part of it. The Theosophical Society in Canada wanted to have nothing do with this association, and did everything in its power to ensure it never happened. The following is a historical survey of the rise and fall of the World Religion from the Canadian point of view.

From 1908 the idea of a World Teacher had been rapidly developed and elaborated on after Mrs Besant and her colleague Charles W. Leadbeater (1847-1934) identified a 13-year old Indian youth, Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895-1986) as the perfect vehicle for the incarnation of the World Teacher. This exalted being would be a messiah-like entity who, Mrs Besant predicted, would inaugurate a new spiritual uplifting of humanity through the World Religion. A third Theosophist heavily involved in the preparations for his “Coming” was George Arundale (1878-1945).

In anticipation of this event a new organization was created: the Order of the Star in the East (OSE) came into being in 1911 with the teenager Krishnamurti as its Head. The first of the Order’s declared principles was “Expectation of the

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1 Annie Besant, lecture :“The Growth of a World Religion” in *The Immediate Future* [U.S. edition, 1911], 28. This book also contains another lecture, “The Emergence of a World Religion.”

2 Josephine Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society* (1938 ed.), 392.

Coming of a Great Teacher.”<sup>3</sup> This was the subject of many a lecture by Annie Besant from then until the closing years of her life. The Star Order was technically separate from the TS, but Mrs Besant’s *de facto* leadership of both organizations would inevitably mean a very close relationship between the two. By the summer of 1925, the “Coming” was thought by the OSE faithful to be imminent.

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Of all the thousands of talks Annie Besant gave in her long life the one she delivered to a gathering of Star members at a Congress in Ommen, Holland, on August 11, 1925, was surely the most extraordinary. Today one can only imagine how persuasive was her oratory. Numerous observers attested she could at any time when on a podium, “carry the crowd” with ease; and undoubtedly this was exactly what happened that day at Ommen. She began by stating the meeting was “of a very special character, which was not anticipated . . . when the programme [of the Congress] was drawn up.”<sup>4</sup> Krishnamurti was not present on this occasion: he was in California at the side of his seriously ill brother Nitya<sup>5</sup> and indeed had earlier decided to cancel the 1925 Congress altogether.<sup>6</sup> However, George Arundale had other plans for the gathering, and made sure it would go ahead as planned. Krishnaji most likely had no advance knowledge of what Mrs. Besant was going to announce, and in view of his later statements, his displeasure on hearing it can be assumed.

Much had happened in the days immediately preceding the talk. In preparation for the “Lord of Love<sup>7</sup> . . . taking possession of his chosen vehicle [i.e., Krishnamurti],” twelve apostles had already been selected, Mrs. Besant reported. At the time she spoke, however, she had “only the command to mention seven who have reached the stage of Arhatship”<sup>8</sup> First, she let it be known that she herself

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3 *Ibid.*, 391.

4 Annie Besant, “Address by Dr. Besant: Ommen Star Camp 11<sup>th</sup> August, 1925.” *The Herald of the Star* 14: 9 (Sep 1925), 304. [Hereafter, “Besant Ommen Address 11 Aug 1925.”] The talk was reprinted in its entirety in her magazine *The Theosophist* 47: 2 (Nov 1925), 143ff.

5 Jean Overton Fuller, *Krishnamurti and the Wind*, 111.

6 See Roland Vernon, *Krishnamurti: The Invention of a Messiah*, 148.

7 Other names dropped in this talk that were seemingly synonymous with “Lord of Love” : “Lord Maitreya”; “Lord of Compassion”; “Shri Krishna-Christ”; “King of the World”.

8 Besant Address 11 Aug 1925, 307. In Theosophical terminology, an Arhat is one who has reached the highest degree of spirituality. Sceptics question

together with Charles W. Leadbeater had already passed the necessary “initiation” at the time she had assumed the Presidency of the Theosophical Society eighteen years earlier. She went on to identify five other “Arhats”: George Arundale, C. Jinarajadasa (1875-1953), James Wedgwood (1883-1951) and Oscar Köllerström. Rukmini Arundale (1904-1986) was included in the announcement, but she needed a few more days before passing her initiation. Lady Emily Lutyens (1875-1964) understood herself to be one of the unnamed.<sup>9</sup> Except for Köllerström these individuals were all prominent in the Society’s affairs.

Although the hasty appointment of twelve disciples may seem to have been a late development, evidently something similar had been planned from the beginning of the World Teacher move-ment. Hindu scholar [Bhagavan Das](#), one of the founders of the [Central Hindu College](#) (CHC), and a former colleague of Mrs Besant’s, was aware of the scheme since at least 1913, for as he stated in a [letter to the Editor of \*The Christian Commonwealth\*](#):

It seems that within or without the O.S.E., there is yet another core-Order called the “O.S.L.”, about which Mrs. Besant and other friends evaded giving information when asked, but which, it seems, was formed in 1911, and consists of the *creme de la creme* from amongst the [then] C.H.C. students and others who are being specially trained for acting the part of Apostles when Alcyone [i.e., Krishnamurti] receives the **afflatus** and takes up the role of the “Coming Christ.”!<sup>10</sup>

The Central Hindu College involvement must subsequently have been abandoned, although in the year mentioned in the above quotation Arundale was Principal.

The names of the seven apostles would have been very familiar in TS circles. Among them were no fewer than three Bishops and one priest in the Liberal Catholic Church (LCC).<sup>11</sup> The Church affiliation must have been deemed very important because Arundale’s consecration as Bishop had taken place only as late as the previous week, even though his ordination as a priest had been a mere nine days earlier than that! (Leadbeater is said to have expressed disapproval over the consecration.) Wedgwood was an alleged cocaine addict and pedophile. With the exception of Rukmini, a Hindu, and Jinarajadasa, a Buddhist, the selection of apostles evidently favoured Christians of the Liberal Catholic persuasion. Even

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whether the term was used accurately in the case of these so-called Apostles.

9 Lady Emily Lutyens, *Candles in the Sun*, 133. Her diary entry for August 10, 1925 also recorded “Last night George [Arundale] ‘brought through’ the names of ten of the Twelve Apostles. . .”

10 Bhagavan Das, “[The Central Hindu College and Mrs. Besant](#)” dated July 17, 1913, *rept* in booklet form by the Divine Life Press, p. 11.

11 The Liberal Catholic Church is an offshoot of the Old Catholic Church. The “Liberal” appellation came about c. 1918.

Lady Emily Lutyens was a prominent lay member of that church.

Mrs. Besant's lengthy and rambling address also included another significant declaration:

There is to be a world religion . . . not in the sense that people are to be converted from one religion to another, but that all religions should recognize that the Teacher of Angels and men is fundamentally alike in each religion, and that the different forms are suited to the different temperaments of races, sub-races and nations.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, a World University would be established with centres in Adyar, India; Sydney, Australia; and Huizen in Holland.<sup>13</sup> There was also mention of including Masonry, which in her concluding address Mrs. Besant linked with the Ancient Mysteries.<sup>14</sup> These undertakings bear a striking resemblance to "The Three Activities" (religion, education and co-masonry) said to have been ordered by none other than the Lord Maitreya several years earlier and revealed to ES members.<sup>15</sup>

After reporting Mrs Besant's announcement, Josephine Ransom's *Short History of the Theosophical Society* has this to say:

Naturally much interest was aroused by these statements, also much opposition to them and disbelief in authenticity.<sup>16</sup>

Although outsiders may need to suspend credulity in order to swallow Mrs. Besant's startling revelations, the members of the Order of the Star in the East evidently took them in stride. These announcements were in keeping with the objects of their Order and over the years they had been told repeatedly that the coming World Teacher would disseminate his teaching through a World Religion. Presumably most would also accept that to assist him there would be twelve pre-selected apostles awaiting his Coming. If there were any sceptics in the audience that day, they did not make their doubts public; and even later, when Mrs Besant attempted to integrate her Theosophical Society into the World Religion, the voices of disapproval must have been so few in number they were hardly heard in the excitement generated in anticipation of the Coming.

Surprisingly, two of those named in Mrs Besant's pronouncements were sceptical of their authenticity. One, C.W. Leadbeater in Australia seemed unaware of the plans revealed on that August day in 1925, and in this instance was probably

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12 "Besant Ommen Address 11 Aug 1925", 310.

13 *Ibid.*, 311.

14 "Dr Besant's Concluding Address" *The Herald of the Star* 14: 9 (Sep 1925), 337-40.

15 *The Disciple* IV: 1 (May 1917), 2-6.

16 Josephine Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society* 1938 edition, 469.

out-manoeuvred by Arundale and Jinarajadasa.. He would not make statements regarding this matter but told a reliable colleague, “I hope she [Besant] will not wreck the Society.”<sup>17</sup> Even more significant were the doubts Krishnamurti tried hard to conceal.<sup>18</sup>

Theosophical observers outside the TS were astounded and were not backward in expressing their criticism. After quoting extensively from the Ommen talk, Ernest Hargrove, leader of another Theosophical organization, was concerned with the effect its content might have on the Theosophical Movement generally:

. . . I fear a terrible explosion from the midst of all that hocus-pocus—an explosion that will make the name, Theosophy, a scandal and a byword; and because all of our members would suffer unjustly from the repercussion, I want them to know what is going on, and to remind them that the purity and nobility of their own lives will be their best protection, as well as the best defence they can afford Theosophy and the Theosophical Society.<sup>19</sup>

The publication of Lady Emily Lutyens’ *Candles in the Sun* in 1957 awakened Theosophists’ memories of the bizarre events of 1925. A reviewer of her book who was one of the thousands who had been taken in by Mrs Besant’s revelations had this to say:

The climax came in 1925. Some members who had developed psychic faculties, but as yet possessed inadequate self-control over their enthusiasms, influenced the then President of the Society, Annie Besant, to make some dramatic and astonishing announcements that furnished headlines for the world press at the time. The coming Teacher was to have twelve disciples as had Jesus in Palestine. Seven of them she named. In this Annie Besant blundered. Many of us accepted what she said for a while, because we trusted her and did not know she was only acting as a sounding board for the reports of others to whom we would not so willingly have given our confidence. I did, for one, until it gradually became apparent that something was wrong.<sup>20</sup>

In view of Mrs Besant’s unceasing promotion of the coming Teacher over the previous fifteen or more years, she probably cannot be so easily exonerated as implied above. That said, she was obviously badly advised that summer by those

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17 Ernest Wood, *Is This Theosophy . . .?*, 294.

18 Mary Lutyens, *Krishnamurti: The Years of Awakening*, 215.

19 [Ernest T. Hargrove], “On the Screen of Time” *Theosophical Quarterly* 23: 3 (Jan 1926), 273-74. The *Quarterly* was the publication of the New York based Theosophical Society which had no connection with the Adyar Theosophical Society .

20 T.H. Redfern, “Candles in the Sun.” A review article. *Peace Lodge Studies* No. 3. n.d. (1957?), p. 14.

around her, particularly by Arundale, Jinarajadasa and Wedgwood.

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So far, so good—at least as far as the Star members were concerned. It ought to have gone no farther than them, but in September, 1925—*less than a month* after the startling revelations at the Star Congress in Ommen—a declaration of the formal establishment of the so-called World Religion was presented to members of the General Council of the Theosophical Society.<sup>21</sup> It was spelled out in a document entitled “The Basic Truths of Religion” together with “Business Details”.<sup>22</sup> Accompanying these papers was a Circular signed by Annie Besant and C. Jinarajadasa, President and Vice-President respectively of the TS. There are indications both the Circular, and the “Business Details” were hastily written: corrections to these documents were sent soon after to the recipients.

The publication of this statement opened an incredible chapter in the history of the Theosophical Society, for had the World Religion been established as envisaged by its proponents, sooner or later it surely would have overshadowed the Society. From this point on, the story of the World Religion provides a window into the leaders’ disregard if not mockery of the Society’s principles as it celebrated and passed its first half-century of existence.

After a rambling preamble, mostly concerned with the historical formation of the Esoteric Section (ES), the Circular went on with the following declaration:

The time has arrived in consequence of the approaching Coming of the World Teacher, when a special effort to prepare His way should be made, and the Statement [i.e., “The Basic Truths of Religion ”] which follows has been approved by “the real Head of the E.S.” for future publication by the Theosophical Society, if endorsed by a majority of the members of the General Council or by my brother Jinarajadasa and myself if that majority do not endorse its issue by the T.S. itself. It interferes in no way with the organization of the National Societies, which remain as autonomous as before. In the former case, *the Theosophical Society will become an integral part of the World Religion*, while preserving its own identity as an incorporated Society. In the latter case, only the National Societies which apply for affiliation through their General Secretaries will become parts of the World Religion.<sup>23</sup> [Italics added.]

Surprisingly, the subsequent corrections were not to clarify the awkward

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21 The General Council consists of the President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary and all the national General Secretaries. In addition, several individuals, are nominated by the President for a 3-year term on the Council.

22 *CT* 6: 9 (Nov 1925), 143-146. See also *The Theosophist* 47: 2 (Dec 1925), 410-11; *Theosophical History* 9: 1 (Jan 2003), 6-8.

23 Annie Besant, P.T.S., C. Jinarajadasa, V-P.T.S., “Circular Regarding the World Religion” *rept* in *The Canadian Theosophist* 6: 9 (Nov 1925), 143.

wording in the above paragraph, which hardly reads as if it were written by either Besant or Jinarajadasa, both of whom enjoyed an enviable facility with the English language.<sup>24</sup> One of the amendments was to replace “affiliation” in the last sentence above with “admission to its fellowship.” At least one recipient thought the change “emphasizes the subordination of the Theosophical Society to the new Organization.”<sup>25</sup> The Circular anyway made it obvious that the TS would become “an integral part of the World Religion”. From the wording it was clear that the leaders intended to make this happen *whether or not they had the full support of the General Council*. No one would claim that the TS after 1896 was a model democratic institution, but the quoted paragraph suggests the President could and would do as she wished, regardless of opposition.

The Circular concluded :

A splendid opportunity is offered to the Theosophical Society to take its place as the corner-stone of the religions of the future, as a Master once predicted. We, the President and Vice-President of the Theosophical Society earnestly beg you, the members of its General Council, not to reject it, but to take your rightful place in this movement towards the Unity of Religions. Do not repeat the blunder of the earlier days, but return to “the original lines, devised by the real Founders of the Theosophical Society.” Societies, like individuals, have opportunities offered to them, but not forced upon them. Consider well; choose wisely; for great is your responsibility.<sup>26</sup>

*Which* particular blunder of earlier days is referred to above is left for others to identify.

“The Basic Truths of Religion” is a curious document. A more correct title would have been “The Basic Truths of the World Religion,” a phrase actually used in the body of the text. The whole reads as a dogmatic statement: indeed, its substance is introduced with the words “The World Religion . . . declares,” implying an authority which should have put rational readers on guard. One wonders how *any* TS member could have accepted the declaration without reservations. A few months after the “Basic Truths” had been circulated, even one of its proponents, the International Vice-President C. Jinarajadasa confessed:

But orthodox Christians will object to Clause 4, which teaches the growth of the soul through Reincarnation, just as orthodox Buddhists will object to Clause 2, which presents the conception of a Creator.

Paradoxically he considered the Basic Truths of Religion were “what the

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24 In her speech at Ommen, Mrs Besant described Jinarajadasa as “that disciple of beautiful character and beautiful language.”

25 [Albert E.S. Smythe] “Corrections in Foregoing.” *CT* 6: 9 (Nov 1925), 146.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 144

Theosophist sees.”<sup>27</sup>

The Circular signed by Besant and Jinarajadasa was dated September 10, 1925, and all replies from the national General Secretaries were expected to be received in Adyar in December. Considering the relative slowness of international surface mail in those years, this was rather short notice, especially for the General Secretaries of national Sections who would at least need to confer with their Boards of Directors or equivalent—if not with their members—before responding. Apparently not many even bothered to advise their Executives, let alone the general membership. An exception was the General Secretary of the TS in Canada, Albert E.S. Smythe (1861-1947), who also edited the Section magazine, *The Canadian Theosophist*. In the October 15, 1925 number of this journal he included a brief report on the situation. In the following issue were reprinted the Circular, “The Basic Truths of Religion” and “Business Details” in full. Members in most other countries would have to wait until they received the December 1925 issue of *The Theosophist*, to read the “Basic Truths of Religion” statement which was reprinted therein; however, the readers were not then informed of the intended absorption of the Theosophical Society into the World Religion.

The overwhelming majority of the Council members would also have been members of the Esoteric Section/School of the Theosophical Society, and as such absolutely loyal and obedient to President Annie Besant, who was also the “Outer Head” of that organization. It is no surprise, therefore, that a majority of the Councillors immediately declared they were in favour of her recommendation to support the World Religion proposal. Typical, perhaps, was the reaction of the English General Secretary, Edward L. Gardner (1869-1969), who allowed only seven days for his national Council members to consider and vote on the issue. He even ignored his own Section’s rule that the Council’s agenda be published in the English T.S. magazine, *News and Notes*, prior to a meeting. Not having been consulted, the majority of the English members were unaware as to what they were being committed. Nevertheless, following a meeting with his Council *as early as October 3*, Gardner noted: “My vote in cordial favour, has been despatched.”<sup>28</sup>

In the event, only a few General Council members were *not* in favour. One, J. Bedrnicek, President of the Czechoslovak TS, called a meeting of members in early November, 1925 to discuss the “amazing statements at Ommen.” Soon after, a large majority of Czech members voted to sever their Section’s connection with

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27 C. Jinarajadasa, “Quarterly Letter from the Vice-President” *CT* 7: 2 (Apr 1926), 34.

28 William Loftus Hare, “The British Protest”. Reprinted in *The Canadian Theosophist* 6: 10 (Dec 1925), 167.

the Theosophical Society (Adyar).<sup>29</sup> The TS in Egypt likewise felt obliged to separate. Elsewhere, small groups of members were determined to fight regardless of their General Secretary's attitude. Typical was this member in Glasgow:

Well, we had our meeting on Monday—but I'm afraid I was not able to carry my point of forming an independent lodge straight away. Four of the people present were quite plain in their determination to leave the Society if nothing is done about this matter of affiliation to the World Religion.<sup>30</sup>

The most significant and persistent opposition, however, came especially from the TS in Canada. On receiving the Circular and its enclosures, Canada's representative on the General Council, the General Secretary, Albert E.S. Smythe, immediately rang alarm bells. He straightaway consulted the seven members of the Canadian General Executive (equivalent to a Board of Directors) whose collective reaction was to unanimously pass a resolution to the effect that they did not feel that the General Secretary would be justified in committing the National Society to the affiliation proposed in the Circular.<sup>31</sup> In conveying this decision to President Annie Besant, Smythe mentioned that some members of the Executive wished to make a stronger expression of their views on the subject, but that "they did not desire to arouse argument, or to say anything that might give offence."<sup>32</sup> He added:

Personally, I feel that the action proposed will seriously compromise the neutrality of the Theosophical Society, which we have always taken such pains to protect, particularly in the matter of creeds and dogmas. "The Basic Truths of Religion," which occupy page 6 of your circular, constitute an undoubted creed, to which certainly in a general way I take no exception, but which would unquestionably be regarded by members of many existing religions as impossible of their acceptance . . .

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As for "a stronger expression of views," that of a prominent member of the Canadian Executive appeared in the local press. When asked to comment on a wire report of Mrs Besant's announcement, Roy Mitchell told the reporter:

The whole idea is rubbish. . . We in Canada have put ourselves

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29 Letter from J. Bedrnicek, General Secretary Czech Section to Annie Besant, President T.S., dated Nov 10, 1925. Reprinted in *The Canadian Theosophist* 6: 12 (Feb 1926), 216. At the time, the Czech Section was the eighth largest national section in the TS.

30 Hilda Henderson, Letter to J.H. Hamilton-Jones [a prominent TS member in England], Jan 25, 1926.

31 *CT* 6: 8 (Oct 1925), 133.

32 *CT* 6: 9 (Nov 1925), 146.

33 *Ibid.*

emphatically on record as considering that Mrs Besant has made a foolish and untheosophical move in anticipating such an appearance [of a “modern Messiah”]. It is tragic from our point of view that she should have pledged the Theosophical Society to any belief of this sort. When I say that we are deeply stirred by the actual news I mean we are stirred to laughter. The whole thing is so absurd and such nonsense.<sup>34</sup>

In his editorial notes in the November 1925 issue of *The Canadian Theosophist*, Smythe reminded the Canadian members and other readers that

Every one of them has the right to accept the claims and teachings of the World Religion, which is another name for the Liberal Catholic Church, and every one of them has the right to reject them. There should be no feeling about this religion any more than about any other religion.<sup>35</sup>

His explicit identification of the LCC with the World Religion would not have surprised any who had read the announcement of the formation of twelve apostles.

That the “Basic Truths” threatened Theosophic principles was well expressed by another member of the Canadian Executive:

It is utterly specious to stress the reasonableness of the proposed “Basic Truths.” The real crux is not the reasonableness but the opening of the door to the adoption of a creed which H.P.B. declares has been the ruin of all previous attempts to do what the T.S. was created for.

If this door is not kept firmly closed “the result can only be that the Society will drift off on to some sandbank of thought or another and there remain a stranded carcass to moulder and die,” as H.P.B. prophesied.<sup>36</sup>

In England, growing opposition had a strong voice in W. Loftus Hare, a member of the TS in England Council. At the Council meeting when, at very short notice, the World Religion proposal was discussed, the General Secretary, E.L. Gardner, presented a motion that the TS apply for admission to the World Religion. Hare moved a simple amendment, requiring the proposed affiliation to be approved by a national referendum.<sup>37</sup> His proposal was accompanied by a long letter presenting arguments against the “Basic Truths” and raising legal objections to the affiliation. The amendment was defeated. Undeterred, Hare continued his battle with the English General Secretary and those who supported him. Hare circulated his views to his fellow English Council members with a historical survey of the persistent trend over an eight-year span to associate the TS with the Liberal

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34 “Seven Disciples as a Beginning: Modern ‘Messiah’ Will Eventually Increase Number to Twelve.” *The Mail and Empire*, Dec 16, 1925.

35 [Smythe] “Official Notes” *CT* 6: 9 (Nov 1925), 156-57.

36 Felix A. Belcher, commenting on the Vice-President’s Quarterly Letter. *CT* 7: 2 (Apr 1926), 35.

37 William Loftus Hare, “The British Protest” *CT* 6: 10 (Dec 1925), 167.

Catholic Church. In this document he resorted to sarcasm to make his point by submitting a motion to reword Rule 2 of the English TS Constitution to state that the Theosophical Society's Objects would be pursued ". . . with special reference to the World Religion and the Liberal Catholic Church."<sup>38</sup> He explained this amendment would merely confirm the change that had already been "irrevocably effected." The objecting English members were unable to get their General Secretary to reverse his commitment to Mrs Besant, although it was reported that the London Lodge had withdrawn from the English Section in protest.<sup>39</sup>

Gardner was but one of a majority of General Councillors obedient to Mrs Besant.<sup>40</sup> It was no surprise, therefore, when at its meeting on December 23, 1925, the General Council agreed to a statement which was essentially a repetition of "The Basic Truths of Religion" statement.<sup>41</sup> This slightly edited version of the "Basic Truths" thus became the Theosophical Society's first dogma. Serious students of Theosophy would see this as shameful, made worse because the majority of the world-wide membership had no idea as to what they were being committed.

From this point on the status of the World Religion is somewhat confusing. In the following months, as its existence became more widely known among the general membership, it emerged that the grassroots far from shared the leaders' enthusiasm for it. For example, the World Religion proposal was debated at the TS in Australia Convention in 1926. Despite the presence of heavyweight proponents present including Dr. van der Leeuw, Josephine Ransom (1879-1960), and the "Arhats" George Arundale and Oscar Köllerström, the members voted to postpone discussion until the next Convention a year later.<sup>42</sup> Also, when she attended the Dutch Section Convention that summer, it was necessary for Mrs. Besant to address

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38 William Loftus Hare, "Mr. Hare's Discussion" *CT* 6: 12 (Feb 1926), 218.

39 [H.N. Stokes, Ed.] *OE Library Critic*, 15: 22 (July 1926), [13].

40 Ironically, it was Gardner who 38 years later initiated a motion for the TS General Council to vote on, which read "That the Sections and Lodges of the Society be advised to dissociate themselves from the Liberal Catholic Church. . ." (Cited in his letter dated October 1964 to members of the General Council of the Theosophical Society.)

41 J.R. Aria, Recording Secretary, T.S., "Statement Passed by the General Council of the Theosophical Society." *The Theosophist* 47:5 (Mar 1926), 754-55.

42 Convention Report, *Theosophy in Australia*, June 1926, summarized in *The Canadian Theosophist* 7: 5 (July 1926), 98.

. . . the objections which some were beginning to feel with regard to the general course of the Theosophical Society, especially in relation to the allied Movements, and the “World Religion in particular.”<sup>43</sup>

Then a new twist was added to this strange story. As part of a lecture tour in North America, Mrs. Besant visited Toronto in November, 1926.<sup>44</sup> As well as lecturing and engaging in other activities locally, she attended a private meeting of the local members of the TS in Canada General Executive. In view of the strong Canadian opposition to the World Religion she would not have been surprised that this topic was the first to be raised. Her response astonished those present:

“. . . what do you mean by World Religion? There is no such thing. We realize that that has been an unfortunate choice of words and have changed them to The Fellowship of Faiths.”<sup>45</sup>

It was the first time her listeners had heard of the new title. Indeed, within the TS hierarchy it must be assumed that only Mrs Besant and her lieutenants knew anything about it at this date. The choice of the new wording was puzzling in itself: “Fellowship of Faiths” is a term similar to one that might be adopted by any inter-faith group; indeed, it was put to this very use around about the same time. In any case, there is a vast difference in what is implied by this title in comparison with “World Religion”. Since the Society was now committed to the Basic Truths, the change in terminology would have to be approved by the General Council—but the Council had not met in the previous eleven months. In November, 1926 the amendment could therefore only have been at most in a draft stage. Presumably Mrs Besant took it for granted that Council would approve the change at its meeting the following month. However, such an item was not even on the agenda of that meeting.

Mrs Besant’s attention was then drawn to a statement in *The Theosophist* to the effect that George Arundale was the only outer head of the World Religion. This surprised her, but said it does not mean anything. An Executive member, tongue in cheek, said if it does not mean anything it was satisfactory to him!<sup>46</sup>

Another of the Canadian Executive members who attended the meeting added an important detail from Mrs Besant’s reply, namely that the change “was intended to bring about a practical way of applying the principles contained in the first object of the Society. . .”<sup>47</sup> The first object of the Theosophical Society reads: “To form

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43 Josephine Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*, 1938 ed., 474. (Citing the *General Report*, 1926, 62.)

44 See chapter headed “Annie Besant in Toronto.”

45 George I. Kinman, “Mr. Kinman’s Summary.” *CT* 7: 9 (Nov 1926), 188.

46 *Ibid.*

47 George C. McIntyre, “Mr. McIntyre’s Recollections.” *Ibid.*, 189.

a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of Race, Creed, Sex, Caste or Colour.” Why such a lofty ideal of a long established organization required a brand new organization having different objects to implement it is something known only to those who invented the World Religion/Fellowship of Faiths.

There appears to have been no official statement on the World Religion subsequent to that circulated by the Recording Secretary in early 1926 (Note 41). However, there must have been one, evidenced by the Canadian General Secretary’s reply to a letter he had received from the President in which she advised that Krishnamurti now being the World Teacher he could not be expected to act on the General Council. Mrs Besant’s letter (probably in the form of a circular to General Secretaries) was dated September 1, 1927. That letter being unavailable to the writer, it is necessary to cite most of Smythe’s reply, with apologies for its length. It seems the Adyar leaders were determined to continue pushing their original agenda regarding the World Religion.

Before dealing with the actual details I regret that I feel compelled to protest against the introduction of matters which, if allowed to pass without comment or protest, would seriously imperil, if not entirely vitiate the claim of The Theosophical Society to neutrality and non-dogmatism. The General Executive of The Theosophical Society in Canada found it necessary to protest two years ago against the imposition of the Society as a whole on the theory of a World Religion with a set of beliefs and an Official purported to represent heavenly powers upon earth. Your present letter, if accepted as it stands, would imply the tacit assent of the National Society in Canada to a series of propositions which are totally contrary to the Constitution of The Theosophical Society and would create a break with the policy which the Society faced the world with until at least the death of Colonel Olcott. I cannot but feel that you have not been as jealous of the reputation of the Society for neutrality and independence as he always tried to be. He erred, as I believe, in adopting a centralizing policy with regard to the Headquarters, but you remedied that in declaring once more the autonomy of every Lodge and Section. We would be false to our principles did we fail to note the danger that lies in the implications of your present letter. We cannot as a Society either admit nor deny the assertions that you make regarding Mr. Krishnamurti, any more than we can admit nor deny the existence of the Masters, a point upon which the Society took action upon one important occasion. It is incumbent upon us to protect the Society in its neutrality upon all such issues. Our members are free to make up their minds either way upon the question, but we cannot allow any claims to be forced upon the Society by any Official, however worthy of respect, without a determined protest.

You speak of the confusion that has arisen regarding “The expression ‘The Fellowship of the World Religion’ (used in the resolutions passed in the General Council meeting of the T.S. during the Jubilee Convention . . .)” The General Secretary of England repudiated in his “News and Notes” the statement that [in December, 1926] the General Council had adopted the title of a “Fellowship of Faiths” instead of a “World Religion,” and I have seen no contradiction of this since. When I wrote to you on the subject you accused me of making trouble. In any case, if the series of “beliefs” that were appended to the statement regarding the “World Religion” are to be perpetuated in connection with a “Fellowship of Faiths,” we must

continue our protest against the acceptance as an Official Statement of any such document. It has been admitted by prominent members of the T.S., and recognized by still more prominent people outside the Society and representing the various religions involved, that it is not representative of their faiths, and could not be accepted by them. It would, in short, only add another barrier to those which now keep the religions of the world separate and non-cooperative. "The Basic Truths of Religion" are unfortunate in their failure to embody the real points of agreement among the Religions of the world, and this failure makes it evident that the plan was ill-advised in going outside the well-known platform of the Society, to which no exception can reasonably be taken.<sup>48</sup>

Exactly when the World Religion was *officially* renamed the Fellowship of Faiths is difficult to determine. Whenever it was, it seems to have been a matter of retroactive expediency because the TS in England General Secretary reported that the General Council at its meeting held at Adyar in December 1927 "accepted the President's proposal that the phrase 'Fellowship of Faiths' be substituted for the words 'World Religion' in the Minutes of the General Council for December, 1925."<sup>49</sup> More than a year had passed since Mrs Besant first used the new term in Toronto before the change was authorized by the Council, (*and* back dated two years). In any case, the new name failed to assure those who were still concerned with its close association with the TS. Perhaps the Adyar leaders failed to understand that the opposition was not just regarding the World Religion title, but also to the wording of the "Basic Truths." Nevertheless, these leaders still held tight reins on the Society. Those who disagreed with them were virtually powerless to do anything.

The unchanging position of the TS in Canada was again stressed in the 1927 Annual Report to the President. There, Smythe observed ". . . it has been felt necessary to renew the protest already officially made against the imposition of a World Religion with a set of dogmas presented for acceptance to the General Secretaries." Never one to mince words, he added "The Theosophical Society appear[s] in recent years to have abandoned its democratic tendencies."<sup>50</sup>

Another year passed without the TS being freed of the burden of "The Basic Truths of Religion", although it is inferred that an increasing number of General Council members wanted nothing to do with the World Religion under any name. It was not mentioned by Mrs Besant in her Presidential Report for 1928, even though the greater part of it was devoted to a eulogy of the World Teacher. Nor was it on the agenda of the relatively brief Council meeting at the end of that year at

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48 Albert E.S. Smythe, "Neutrality of the T.S." *CT* 8: 10 (Dec 1927), 234-35. "News and Notes" was the official journal of the TS in England.

49 *CT* 9: 2 (Apr 1928), 49. (Citing *Theosophical News and Notes*).

50 Albert E.S. Smythe, Annual Report of T.S. in Canada in *52<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report of the Theosophical Society for 1927*, 135.

which she was not present.

The final assault on the World Religion began in 1929. Realizing that changing the name to Fellowship of Faiths was not going to be successful, Mrs. Besant appeared to be preparing for the inevitable when, in the August issue of *The Theosophist* she began to distance herself from the Liberal Catholic Church. She thought that in the eyes of the public the TS was too mixed up with the Church, and stated:

Because of the danger of the identification of Theosophy with the L.C.C., I am not attending its services at present.<sup>51</sup>

This sentence would have sent a clear signal to the readers. It also brought her in line with Krishnamurti, who was increasingly pronouncing against rituals and creeds.

As she probably knew intuitively, or even perhaps told by him in advance, Krishnamurti was ready to renounce the whole elaborate plan involving the World Teacher which had originally been invented by herself and others. So perhaps she was not as shocked as were the members of the Society and its accretions when, on August 2, 1929 at the annual Star Camp at Ommen, Krishnaji announced the dissolution of the Order of the Star. That action alone effectively killed any possibility that the World Religion had any future whatsoever. Of all the talks he ever gave, this was the most memorable. One of the phrases he used in it, "Truth is a pathless land" soon became and still is well known and frequently quoted throughout the Theosophical Movement. The words that followed are mostly forgotten, but are relevant to this study. He said:

I maintain that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect.<sup>52</sup>

Other references to religion in that talk are in the same philosophical frame. It raises the question whether Krishnamurti himself ever had anything to do with planning and promoting the World Religion/Fellowship of Faiths concept. It is extremely doubtful if he had. Certainly not in the planning, and only reluctantly in the promotion because of his close ties to Mrs Besant and Arundale. (As early as 1926 Jinarajadasa reported that K. disbelieved what Mrs Besant had said at Ommen a year earlier.)<sup>53</sup>

Krishnaji's "Truth is a pathless land" speech at Ommen in 1929 was surely enough to collapse the house of cards that Besant/Arundale/Jinarajadasa had

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51 Annie Besant, "On the Watch-Tower." *The Theosophist* 50: 11 (August 1929), 401.

52 J. Krishnamurti, *The Dissolution of the Order of the Star*, A Statement, August 3, 1929, 3.

53 According to Jinarajadasa, and mentioned by Mrs. Besant in a letter to Charles W. Leadbeater, June 17, 1926. (Cited in Joseph E. Ross, *Krotona in the Ojai Valley*, 344. This is Vol III in his History of Krotona.)

painstakingly built over a nearly thirty-year period. Without a World Teacher there was no call for the twelve Arhat-Apostles and the very reason for the World Religion, whose roots went back to at least 1911, no longer existed. Even so, at this point in the tragedy, it remained associated with the Theosophical Society, nominally if in no other way.

Fortuitously an opportunity for the TS to be formally rid of the burden of association with the World Religion/ Fellowship of Faiths arose only two weeks after Krishnamurti's famous talk. The occasion was the World Theosophical Congress held at Chicago, August 24-29, 1929, during which time the General Council met.<sup>54</sup> Albert E.S. Smythe, the Canadian Section's General Secretary was determined not to let the opportunity pass, and went to Chicago prepared for what might have been strong opposition to the Canadian position had it not been for Krishnamurti's decree three weeks earlier.

Smythe attended the Congress in his dual capacity as a member of the General Council and as General Secretary of the Canadian Section, and he let his presence be known at the Council's second meeting. On behalf of the Executive of the Theosophical Society in Canada he presented three resolutions. Only the second is relevant to the present study:

“Resolved: That the resolution affirming the existence of a World Religion, and stating ‘The Basic Truths of Religion’ as declared by ‘The Fellowship of Faiths’ be expunged from the records of the Theosophical Society, such a statement, apart from any question of its correctness or authority, being inconsistent with the non-dogmatic character and professions of the Theosophical Society.”

It was explained that the General Executive of the T.S. in Canada had supported this resolution and desired to have it carried as it [the World Religion] represented the principles of no existing religion, and did not harmonize with the non-dogmatic character of the Society.<sup>55</sup>

Along with several other resolutions presented at this meeting, this one was referred to the General Council at Adyar for discussion at its meeting the following December (1929). At that time it was decided to circulate the resolutions to all the

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54 World Theosophical Congresses are held roughly every seven years. They provide an opportunity for the President to meet with a broad section of members in the host and neighbouring countries; and for a General Council meeting to be held elsewhere than in India.

55 [Smythe], “The Theosophical World Congress” *CT* 10 : 7 (Sep 1929), 205. The final resolution drawn up by the Canadian General Executive, *CT* 10: 8 (Oct 1929), 242, replaced the word “expunged” with “withdrawn.” In the version of the resolution published in the Minutes of this meeting, recorded in the *54<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of the Theosophical Society for 1929*, 213, the phrase “from the records of the Theosophical Society” was deleted. However, it was the unedited version of the Canadian resolution on which the General Council members were required to vote.

Council members.

It therefore required yet another whole year before the Canadian resolution re the World Religion/Fellowship of Faiths came to a vote. Finally, at the 1930 meeting of the Council it was reported that the voting (including the mail-in vote) was For 27; Against 13.<sup>56</sup> The association of the World Religion with the Theosophical Society was finally at an end. Significantly, the Minutes went on to record:

Dr. Annie Besant and Mr. C. Jinarajadasa, the mover and seconder of the original motion of 1925, that the Society enter the "Fellowship of Faiths," voted for the present motion to annul the Resolution passed by the General Council on December 23, 1925.<sup>57</sup>

There is ironic justice in the fact that two of the leaders who from the beginning tried so hard to force the TS to be part of the World Religion should be among those who put the seal on its demise. That it ever happened at all was a travesty of Theosophical ideals; that it lasted five years shows how powerful were the President and her cohorts, and how undemocratic was the administration of the Society.

There is another irony associated with the World Religion. Two years before the attempt to bring the Theosophical Society under its wing, there was published a book which is one of the most important documents in the history of the Theosophical movement: *The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett*. The letters, written by H.P. Blavatsky's teachers (considered by many including Mrs Besant to have been the real founders of the Society) left no doubt as to how *they* would have reacted to this redirection of the TS. One wrote:

. . . I will point out the greatest, the chief cause of nearly two thirds of the evils that pursue humanity . . . It is religion under whatever form and in whatsoever nation. It is the sacerdotal caste, the priesthood and the churches; it is in those illusions that man looks upon as sacred, that he has to search out the source of that multitude of evils, which is the greatest curse of humanity and that almost overwhelms mankind.<sup>58</sup>

Obviously this Master was not one of those exalted beings who were claimed to be the originators of the World Religion concept.

Of the schemes in support of the expected World Teacher, first announced by Mrs Besant at the Star Congress in 1925, one actually became a reality. This was the World University which had a promising beginning. The TS President's Report

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56 There were then 57 members of the General Council, so there were 17 abstentions.

57 Minutes of a meeting of the General Council, T.S., held at "Shanti Kunja," Benares, on December 25, 1930. (Published in the 55<sup>th</sup> *Annual General Report of the Theosophical Society for 1930*, 190, 191.)

58 *The Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett*, Letter X. In 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> eds., 57-58.

in 1928 mentioned centres existing in Adyar, France, Holland, Java and London.<sup>59</sup> A forerunner of the branch in Adyar actually started as early as 1922 when the Brahmavidyashrama was founded. Under the leadership of Prof. J. Emile Marcault, the Theosophical World University in England attracted several scholars who were also TS members. It survived for a few years. However, by 1932 its Vice-Rector, George S. Arundale had to admit:

For the moment our Theosophical World University is neither a University nor world-wide. Is it yet truly Theosophical? And because as it is it belies its name there are not a few who decry its value, and who would consign it to oblivion.<sup>60</sup>

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The World Religion forms a sorry chapter in the history of the Theosophical Society (Adyar). The connection lasted over five years, and exemplifies how far, after only half a century of existence, the TS had fallen so deeply from the lofty ideals that inspired its foundation. This painful subject has been recounted here only because the involvement of the TS in Canada makes it part of the history of Theosophy in Canada..

A World Religion to be imposed on the Order of the Star is one thing; to bring the Theosophical Society under the aegis of the said World Religion is entirely another. The ultimate responsibility for this shameful fiasco clearly lies at the feet of Annie Besant. She had been the first to promote the idea of a World Religion in 1911; she continued to speak about it for the next quarter century; and finally tried to use her considerable influence to make it a reality in 1925 *and* to incorporate the Society into it. However, that she was willingly abetted by C. Jinarajadasa and George Arundale should not be overlooked when apportioning blame. (Interestingly, C.W. Leadbeater's role, strong at the beginning, seems to have been relatively muted, at least after the "Basic Truths of Religion" was published.) But the guilt must also be shared among the irresponsible majority of the TS General Council who were obedient to Mrs Besant's wishes.

From the evidence, the World Religion's ultimate demise was due in no small part to the persistent efforts of the TS in Canada backed by Canadian Theosophists who adhered to the ideals of the founders and refused to countenance the Society compromising its principles by adopting a creed. In retrospect they were fortunate in having Albert E.S. Smythe as their spokesman. Those who criticize the TS in Canada for having what they judge was an "anti-Adyar" policy in the 1920s should at least acknowledge its part in preventing the Theosophical Society from becoming a satellite of another organization whose goals were not as lofty as those of the

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59 Annie Besant, "The Presidential Address" *The General Report of the 53<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary and Convention of the Theosophical Society*, Dec 1928, 6.

60 George S. Arundale, *Theosophical World University Quarterly Bulletin*, 1932, No. 1, p. 1.

original Society.

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The World Religion/Fellowship of Faiths was no longer, but the dream was never forgotten by one of its promoters. A few months before his death in 1945, the seriously ill George Arundale, at that time President of the Theosophical Society, published an article in *The Theosophist* entitled “The World Teacher”. Appended to it was a statement, “The World Religion” which, with only minor editing was a copy of “The Basic Truths of Religion” without any reference to the “Fellowship of Faiths”.<sup>61</sup> He mentioned that this statement had been agreed upon by the General Council on December 23, 1925, but failed to add that it had been annulled five years later. It seems he refused to believe his dream was dead.

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61 George S. Arundale, “The World Teacher”; “The World Religion” *The Theosophist*, Vol 66, (Apr 1945), 8-11.