Extravagant Practices: Experiencing Religious Pluralism in the Victorian Fantastic

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores how Victorian fantastic fiction reimagined an experience central to its era: the full range of affective responses to religious pluralization, from devotion to disillusionment. Indeed, I argue that authors of the fantastic gave voice to late Victorian Britain’s dawning awareness of creeds outside the Judeo-Christian tradition. Toward the close of the nineteenth century, three interrelated developments fueled this awareness: unprecedented proximity to Asian traditions, made possible by imperial circuits of knowledge; comparativist accounts of world religions, which stressed their hidden unity; and the array of esoteric spiritual movements, such as Theosophy and occultism, in which “Christian Britain” took increasing interest. These developments exerted powerful but conflicting pressures on believers and freethinkers alike. In yoking supernatural events to naturalistic detail, authors such as Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling and Bram Stoker found a way to capture the sometimes exhilarating, often disorienting experience of exploring religious difference at the fin de siecle. Far from offering mere escapes from disenchanted modernity, then, the fantastic fictions surveyed in this dissertation illumine the complex religious lives of the late Victorians.
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Thanks to the Mercy.
For Naomi, unexpectedly
Introduction

At the conclusion of his 1912 autobiography, H. Rider Haggard appended a “Note on Religion,” intended to explain his recent return to Christianity. As a preface to his defense of Christianity, Haggard delineates three kinds of experience that, for him, cover the spectrum from piety to atheism. He quickly dispenses with “the unquestioning faith which many profess because it is there, because they inherited or were taught it in childhood” (*The Days of My Life Vol. II*). Far more interesting to him are those who “find no satisfactory answer” to their doubts, These, Haggard divides into two camps. Of these, some “[reject] what they conclude to be a fable,” and “set themselves sadly to make the best of things as they are, awaiting the end with resignation, with terror, or with the callous indifference of despair.” Others, however,

start out on wild searches of their own. They examine the remaining religions, they try spiritualism, they bring themselves, or so imagine, into some faint and uncertain touch with the dead, the Unseen and the Powers that dwell therein, only after all to return unsatisfied, unsettled, hungry — frightened also at times — and doubtful of the true source of their vision. For in all these far seas they can find no sure, anchored rock on which to stand and defy the storms of Fate.

The distinction Haggard draws between his two camps of doubters is not merely one of religious interest (or lack thereof), but of genre. Those who reject religion as a “fable,” determined to “make the best of things as they are,” could be protagonists in a realist novel, albeit a realist novel as imagined by a devout Christian. Replace “terror” and “despair” with “confidence” and “maturity,” and one has the makings of a classic novel of education, about coming to grips with disillusionment and discovering in the secular order a basis for happiness. It is the wild searchers, though, whom Haggard’s imagination clearly favors. In what kind of
story, what variety of narrative, do they cast about for ultimate truth? Certainly, at a first glance, these wild searchers seem to inhabit one of his New Romances: an odyssey to far-flung shores, replete with visions of the marvellous and the mysterious, from which the hero returns hungry for another trek into the unknown. Yet the affective note that Haggard stresses, the mood and spirit that defines his wild searchers, is not primarily the thrill of adventure. Rather, Haggard foregrounds dissatisfaction, fear, hunger--troubled emotions that ultimately stem from an inability to process the phenomena with which they have come in contact. Returning to The World As They Know It, having sojourned through a spectrum of spiritual experiences, the wild searchers remain “doubtful of the true source of their vision.”

I want to suggest that this last phrase tells us everything we need to know about the exact genre of these wild searchers, the type of narrative that Haggard contrasts with the drama of atheistic realism. To simply label his wild searchers as protagonists of romance would obscure the degree to which the problem of perception dominates this mini-epic. Such perceptual flux indicates the activity of a narrative mode more primal than romance, one that both defines genres outside the borders of Victorian realism--the sensation novel, the Gothic tale, the scientifiction--and, occasionally, makes fugitive raids into the most realistic of “baggy monsters.” For, if we have here neither the complacency of inherited faith, nor the stoic resignation of the secular protagonist, still less do we have the unreflective adventurism of a knight in Faerie Land, for whom slaying dragons and demons are all in a day’s work. Instead, we have the astonishment of Jonathan Harker watching Dracula crawl face-down a castle wall, the befuddlement of Horace Holly encountering the corpse of his friend Leo Vincey, who also happens to be standing next to him. In short, Haggard’s wild searchers display the “hesitation” that Tzvetan Todorov identifies as germane to the fantastic, that vacillation between conflicting interpretations of reality.
Implicit in Haggard’s defense of Christianity, then, is a literary theory of its alternatives: if atheism is a realist novel, exploring Other religious worlds is a fantastic fiction. In examining the literary forms that emerged from the Victorians’ negotiations with religious pluralism, I take Haggard at his word. This dissertation investigates the ways that late Victorian authors of the fantastic articulated the contemporaneous exploration of non-Christian religions. In doing so, I want to present the association that Haggard draws between fantastic fiction and the exploration of religious pluralism as no mere rhetorical idiosyncrasy. To the contrary, such an association emblematizes the efforts of fin de siecle British authors to literally re-present an experience central to their era: the Victorians’ dawning awareness of global religious diversity, and the full range of affective responses, from devotion to disillusionment, provoked by that awareness. In exhibitions of sacred relics, Theosophical lectures, and multi-religious assemblies, Victorians throughout the Empire began to consider non-Western religions as not merely anthropological curiosities, but possible models of reality. It is one of the primary claims of this dissertation that, in the period from 1850 through 1900, imperial Britain’s experience of global religious pluralism fundamentally transformed. Put another way, world religions became a source of legitimate experience during this period: transforming from arcane belief systems available for rational comprehension or Christian dismissal, to ways of life available for existential allegiance, or catalysts to syncretic epiphany.

Yet this newfound openness to global religious diversity was by no means occasion for uncritical celebration. To the Catholic priest and Orientalist scholar Charles de Harlez, writing in an 1890 article for The Dublin Review, the very existence of such wild searchers, to say nothing of the theologies they contemplated, was itself a source of incredulity: “Who could believe that in this century…there could be found among Christians, men, and these in no small
numbers, who are again bringing into honor the most extravagant practices of magic, and are working openly for the conversion of Christians to Buddhism and to Kabbalistic doctrines?” (73). Two qualifications are in order. First, although de Harlez writes of “magic,” his words are not easily reduced to anxiety about divination: in the ensuing article, the chief objects of his interest turn out to be Buddhism and Theosophy, an Asian religion and a new movement that straddled the line between religion and science. Second, although de Harlez writes of “Christians” across Europe, his question speaks especially to the population of nineteenth century Britain, center of a Christian Empire, home to a form of religiosity that thoroughly pervaded every dimension of private and public life. To citizens of such a nation—indeed, of such an empire—the encounter with religious diversity called forth a full spectrum of responses: suspicion of idolatry; curiosity about the beliefs of colonial populations; the haunting suspicion that such beliefs amounted to more than mere heathen superstition; and, eventually, theories of world religions, master narratives that sought to impose order on the bewildering range of creeds that had newly come into view. As de Harlez’s query suggests, these conflicting responses were not merely intellectual, but displayed the deep psychological and emotional conflict provoked by religious pluralism. Indeed, the consideration of non-Christian religiosities—and, for some, the mere fact of said consideration’s cultural pervasiveness—amounted to nothing less than a dare to believe the unbelievable, to enter an Other reality. In the remainder of this introduction, I want to trace just how Victorian authors channeled this dawning awareness of global religious diversity into the clash of the quotidian and the extraordinary, the real and unreal, that lies at the heart of the fantastic.

I. Religious Pluralism Defined: Expanding the Range of Victorian Religiosities
To write about religious pluralism, of course, is to take on something of a fantastical creature in its own right, a chimera whose dimensions are forever shifting: from descriptive fact to prescriptive ideal, from legal principle to local practice, from interreligious dialogue to intrareligious factionalism. Something of a *via negativa*, a definition by negation, may thus be necessary to pin down the nature of the beast in question, the *kind* of religious pluralism that found expression in the Victorian fantastic.

To be sure, religious life in Britain had long characterized by the interplay amongst Catholicism, Judaism and varieties of Protestantism. To speak of Victorian “religious pluralism” would, in the politico-legal sense of the word, entail recognizing the increase in political agency afforded to Catholics, Jews and Nonconformists: witness such milestones as the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829, Disraeli’s election to the office of prime minister in 1868, and the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1871. So, too, do the complex relationships amongst High, Low and Broad Church factions form part of the story of religious pluralism in the Victorian period. In contrast to these longstanding modes of religious pluralism, however, the Victorians also negotiated amongst varieties of religion that were not indigenous to England, so to speak, before the nineteenth century. Put another way, the “religious pluralism” to which the Victorian fantastic bears witness covers a range of non-Western creeds that historically had not played a role, be it theological or cultural, in the construction of British Christianity, as Judaism and Catholicism did. It was these religious novelties, not the familiar Western monotheisms, that gave rise to the kind of sentiment expressed by one “A.J.M.M.”, contemplating the recent ascendance of Theosophy in an 1890 article for the *Women’s Penny Paper*: “With the approach of each new London season comes a new fashion in dress, new books, new theories, and new religious beliefs...We feel that we ought to belong to some
community, but cannot decide which, for every sect loudly declares that through its narrow wicket alone lies the Way of Life.” Over the course of her article, A.J.M.M. refers both to sectarian differences within Christianity as well as new religious movements, such as Theosophy and Spiritualism. Nonetheless, in speaking of “new religious beliefs” and “evolutionary religions,” A.J.M.M. clearly stresses those Ways of Life that lie beyond the well-known triumvirate of Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism. Such an emphasis, unthinkable at the outset of the Victorian period, precipitates the climate of unlimited religious choice that would come to dominate 20th and 21st century Britain. In her sense of navigating a religiously pluralistic landscape, having the opportunity to explore a variety of beliefs while withholding commitment to any one tradition, A.J.M.M.’s sentiments seem more fit for 1990 than 1890.

Yet, despite her explicit reference to “new religious beliefs,” A.J.M.M.’s language does not simply suggest a strict exploration of belief. The metaphor she chooses, that of being stranded in a kind of religious marketplace, beset by vendors beckoning passersby to enter through the “wicket” of their chosen Way, belies a mere consideration of doctrine, a cognitive assessment of each theological system’s merits and demerits. To the contrary, such an embodied metaphor resonates with Haggard’s description of wild searchers adrift on the “far seas” of alien religions, stranded in heretofore unknown metaphysical territory. Both A.J.M.M. and Haggard, in short, evoke the holistic experience of vacillating amongst multiple Ways of Life, an experience that involves experimentation with not only new beliefs, but also new affective modes, forms of ritual, venues of worship, ways of being-in-the-world. To sum up such a total conception of religious commitment--encompassing, at the very least, belief, affect, and behavior--I have favored the sociological term religiosities. Stripped of its pejorative sense, religiosity simply denotes the complete way in which a person experiences religion. Insofar as
such a mode of being involves feeling and sensing, as well as thinking and believing, it includes the affective dimension (while remaining irreducible to mere mood or sensibility); religiosity can include singularly emotional experiences, but also includes habitual affects, modes of sensing and feeling that don’t end when one steps out the door of one’s church/temple/secret society. In short, while religiosity encompasses conventionally defined forms of “religious experience” (mystical/transcendent states of being), “religious experience” does not exhaust the definition of religiosity.

Simply put, the cultural phenomenon identified by A.J.M.M. and Rider Haggard can be best described as a felt expansion, towards the end of the nineteenth century, in the range of religiosities available to “Christian Britain.” Here, a detour through two major recent accounts of Victorian religion, Callum Brown’s The Death of Christian Britain (2001) and Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age (2008), may be useful in unpacking the repercussions of such a phenomenon. By now, the fundamental premise of both of these works—namely, that the traditional secularization thesis fails, that nineteenth century Britain did not see an inexorable and culturally uniform movement from faith to doubt—comes across as a sine qua non of contemporary Victorian studies. What is striking about these works, however, is the way in which they dispute the secularization thesis, approaching religion as neither institution nor doctrine, but as lived experience. To measure the Victorians’ religiosity or secularity, Brown and Taylor suggest, requires examining what Pierre Bourdieu would have called their habitus: the “matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions [that] make possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” in a specific group, the intuitively sensed everyday context that

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1 For a comprehensive definition of religiosity, see Cornwall et al, whose 1986 study “The Dimensions of Religiosity” identified three components to religiosity: the cognitive (“religious belief or orthodoxy” (227), the affective (“feelings towards religious beings, objects, or institutions”), and the behavioral (“church attendance, financial contributions, frequency of personal prayer and scripture study, and religious and ethical behaviors”). This dissertation stresses the import of the affective component, although, insofar as the components inevitably interlock, the cognitive and behavioral components also surface in the texts surveyed below.
members of any given society hold in common. In terms perhaps more comprehensible to their objects of study, Brown and Taylor assess the world in which the Victorians lived and moved and had their being. For Brown, such a focus on precognitive experience begets recognition of what he calls “discursive Christianity”: the “protocols of personal identity...collectively promulgated as necessary for Christian identity” and “prescribed or implied in discourses on Christian behavior” (12). Analyzing institutional voices, print media, and oral testimony, Brown offers a portrait of a Victorian society whose members, for the most part independently of ecclesiastical pressure, disseminated and internalized standards of Christian dress, speech, and economic activity. It was the average Briton’s internalization of discursive Christianity, from music hall to magazine stand, that ultimately qualified him as Christian, not the orthodoxy of his doctrine.

Similarly, Taylor’s treatment of the Victorians--indeed his account of secularization’s entire 500-year history--rely on his concept of the “social imaginary,” the “common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (“On Social Imaginaries,” 30). In contrast to the “intellectual schemes people may entertain...in a disengaged mode,” the social imaginary is intuitive, the “largely unstructured and inarticulate understanding of our whole situation” (ibid, 31). Through it, for example, one recognizes her ballot in a presidential election as one among millions without consciously thinking about it. Yet where Brown’s attention to habitus leads him to stress piety’s persistence amidst the majority of Victorians, Taylor bring into focus the social imaginary of the secular minority, who developed

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2 Alternately, one finds useful Marcel Mauss’ definition of habitus, upon which Bourdieu drew heavily: “the totality of learned habits, bodily skills, styles, tastes, and other non-discursive knowledges that might be said to “go without saying” for a specific group” (63).
3 It is one index of our distance from the Victorian experience that one has to annotate Biblical references: cf. Acts 17:28.
4 For more on Brown’s influence on contemporary debates surrounding the Victorians and secularization, see Nash and LaPorte.
“deeper, more anchored forms of unbelief” than their Enlightenment predecessors. Carlyle’s faith in “the everlasting Yea,” Arnold’s veneration of culture, and Mill’s pseudo-Evangelical “unbelieving philosophy of self control” (*A Secular Age*, 369; 395) may have been marginal in their era, but they comprise the clear antecedents of secular humanism as we know it today, marking them as “our contemporaries in a way which we cannot easily extend to the men of the Enlightenment” (369). At the margins of the Christian habitus, then, Taylor identifies the seeds of today’s secular social imaginary, characterized by the implicit distinction between immanence and transcendence (13), a sense of oneself as an autonomous moral agent, and a feel for society as a “‘horizontal’ reality...created and sustained by common action in secular time” (392).

In synthesizing Brown’s and Taylor’s insights, then, we can discern in the Victorian period a spectrum of experience defined by Christian and materialist-atheist polarities. If the habitus of Victorian Britain was, indeed, heavily tilted toward the Christian end of the spectrum—Christianity being a matter of not mere church attendance, but reading “improving” fiction at the train station, stopping to appreciate a Salvation Army brass band on the street corner, nervously taking care not to enjoy the theater too much—a distinct minority developed an unbelief of “solidity and depth” (*A Secular Age*, 374) catalyzing the ascendancy of modern secularity. Such a Christian-atheist axis, however, precisely occludes the plurality of religiosities identified by A.J.M.M. and Rider Haggard, their sense of a society rife with “wild searchers” exploring a bewildering parade of new Ways of Life. Given the influence of both Brown and Taylor on contemporary understandings of Victorian religion, I want to suggest the importance of recognizing this expansion in the range of available religiosities, which, even if it did little to de-Christianize Britain as a whole, significantly altered the way that many Britons experienced their (ir)religion—more significantly, arguably, than the challenges of Arnold et al. Moreover, I
want to suggest that we can best understand this expansion, and its phenomenological ramifications, as the product of three interrelated cultural developments, developments that the fantastic fictions in this dissertation make unnervingly visible.

Firstly, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the major non-Western religions became accessible to the Victorians as never before, through diverse media that transformed them from distant curiosities to living traditions, available for serious commitment, within Britain. As described in my first chapter, the Great Exhibition of 1851 constituted something like the Ground Zero of the Victorian encounter with the world’s religions, placing before the public gaze not only the cultural artifacts of Other religions, but also their living adherents, in the form of the foreign ambassadors who flocked to the Exhibition. In subsequent decades, numerous publications further introduced foreign religiosities to a wider reading public. *Sketches of Sixteen Years’ Work Among Orientals* (1873), an account of missionary Joseph Salter’s interactions with lascars throughout England, Scotland and Wales, offered relatively humane portraits of Asian religionists, balancing “polemical...references to religious beliefs” with “[acknowledgement] of the devotion to their faiths displayed by individuals in the uncongenial...setting of Britain” (Beckerlegge 227). In the same decade, Max Muller’s groundbreaking work on Sanskrit sacred texts not only catalyzed the field of comparative religion, but also portrayed Hinduism as a religion worthy of belief. Moreover, as Alex Owen writes, Muller’s *Sacred Books of the East*, a monumental series of translations of Islamic, Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Hindu, and assorted other Asian sacred texts, “[made] the major religious texts of Asia available for the first time to an English speaking public” (30).

The publication of *Sacred Books in the East* began with Muller’s translation of the Hindu Upanishads in 1879; the same year, Edwin Arnold published his narrative poem *Light of Asia,* an
immediately successful retelling of the life of the Buddha. As detailed in Jeffrey Franklin’s *The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and the British Empire*, Buddhism would exercise a particular kind of power in the Victorian cultural imagination, “[invading] the British imagination through scholarly, journalistic, and literary discourses” (21). Works such as Arnold’s poem presented Buddha as a kind of counterpart to Christ, forcing many Victorians to decide what to embrace and what to reject from this great Asian tradition. Margaret Noble, an Irish education reformer who eventually became a disciple of the Hindu guru Swami Vivekenanda, offers a paradigmatic example of the dilemma such spiritual seekers experienced. In the midst of a crisis of faith, sometime in the late 1880’s or early 1890’s, Noble “happened to get a life of Buddha and...found that here, alas, also there was a child who lived ever so many centuries before the child Christ, but whose sacrifices were no less self-abnegating than those of the other. This dear child Gautama took a strong hold on me and for three more years I plunged myself into the study of the religion of Buddha” (“How and Why I Adopted the Hindu Religion”).

Nor were books the only means through which foreign religiosities came to the attention of Victorian Britain. Towards the end of the century, practitioners of non-Western traditions gained an increased (though still modest) presence in Britain, supplementing the knowledge heretofore mediated through Orientalist scholars. Gwilym Beckerlegge notes that, by 1861, there was a large enough Parsi community in London to found the Religious Society of Zoroastrians, which claimed a section of the cemetery at Brookwood the following year (231). As mentioned above, a sizeable contingent of lascars regularly moved through British soil, leading missionary Joseph Salter to write his *Sketches*. Higher up on the socioeconomic ladder, Indians in middle-class professions—“academics, doctors, barristers, entrepreneurs, and

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5 I am indebted to Beckerlegge’s essay, as well as the primary sources that accompany it in Volume V of the *Religion in Victorian Britain* series, for the information on these figures offered here. The essay offers an excellent guide to the presence and practice of Islam and other South Asian religions in Victorian England.
entertainers”--travelled to Britain in increasing numbers from the 1870’s onward, many of whom made permanent homes and married local women (Beckerlegge 227-228). Performing their rituals and hewing to their codes of worship, such non-Christian religionists would have had to endure racial prejudice as well as suspicions of heathenism. Nonetheless, their presence in Britain, however slight, would have signaled the influx of religiosities hitherto not practiced on British soil. As detailed in my fourth chapter, this influx accelerated in the 1890’s, with the public emergence of British converts to Eastern (not merely Eastern-influenced) religions.

Those Eastern-influenced movements constituted a second axis along which religious pluralization took place: the proliferation of new alternative spiritual movements, of the kind that occasioned A.J.M.M.’s comment about novel Ways of Life. Such groups would include Spiritualism, dominant from the 1850’s through the 1870’s, as well as later groups such as Theosophy and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, societies that mixed Christian with Hindu and Buddhist forms of esotericism (thereby contributing to increased awareness of Asian religions). Such groups not only transmitted knowledge about non-Christian religions, but offered their own syncretic interpretation of them, selectively incorporating into their belief structure such doctrines as reincarnation or the cyclical nature of time. Significantly, even as such groups displayed the characteristics of religious movements, their status as religions was hotly contested, both within and outside their own ranks. Spiritualism, for example, encompassed Christians who saw seances as compatible with their faith, devotees who conceived of the movement as a creed in its own right, and still others who viewed the movement as something closer to a scientific pursuit of paranormal study, akin to the Society for Psychical
Research. Similarly, leaders of Theosophy and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn disavowed the term religion, construing their societies as organizations dedicated to esoteric philosophy and higher magic: in her book *The Key to Theosophy*, Madame Blavatsky replies to the question “Is Theosophy a Religion” with the flat reply, “It is not. Theosophy is Divine Knowledge or Science” (1). Nonetheless, their rituals, systematic beliefs, and sites of assembly (e.g., the Golden Dawn’s Isis-Urania Temple, founded in London in 1888) encouraged a disciplined commitment that looked more like religiosity than not, especially to a Christian sensibility attuned to such markers. Indeed, what is important here is that the emergence of these movements would have been perceived as an efflorescence of new religions, protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. In this subcategory of religious pluralization, we might even include those cultural phenomena, arising in quarters that bore no apparent relationship to religion or spirituality, that took on the characteristics of a religion: one could include here the cult of angelic female literary characters, like Dickens’ Little Nell, described in Chapter Two; or, indeed, the cult of Empire itself, about which more below.

As a *third* axis along which religious pluralization unfolded, closely bound up with the first two, the Victorians developed an increased fascination with interreligious unity. Such fascination manifested in the proliferation of what philosophers of religion call *perennialist* theories: “a way to see how adepts of all religious traditions hold certain ideas in common” (Wildman 142), usually centered around a “perennial philosophy” that has been “transmitted from the very origin of humanity and partially restored by each genuine founder of a new

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6 As Alex Owen writes in *The Place of Enchantment*, “[Many Spiritualists]...regarded the seance as a religious gathering in the tradition of the early primitive church, with its prophesying and speaking in tongues” (18). For more on Spiritualism as a religion, see Owen’s *The Darkened Room*.

7 Indeed, for all its resistance to what we might call “organized religion,” Henrik Bogdan notes that the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was itself a highly organized system of belief and practice: “There were no tendencies toward a muddled or chaotic system of initiation afforded by the Golden Dawn. On the contrary, every degree and all the teachings transmitted were part of a coherent whole, a precise yet simple structure, namely that of the kabbalistic Tree of Life” (122).
religion” (Fabbri). While the notion of an ancient “primordial tradition” had existed since at least the Renaissance, it enjoyed new life through such scholars of comparative religion as Andrew Lang, who, in David Chidester’s words, “insisted upon a global unity, a vast narrative uniformity, in the vast history of religions” (131). As Marjorie Wheeler-Barclay recounts in *The Science of Religion*, Lang was preceded in this insistence by the comparativist Edward Tylor, and succeeded by such scholars as James Frazer and Robertson Smith, each of whom offered their own variants on a master theory that unlocked the hidden unity behind the world’s religions. Many of the new religious movements took such a theory a step further: some Spiritualists, Theosophists, Freemasons, and members of the Golden Dawn variously touted their organizations as the standard-bearers of a unified esoteric Truth, from which the world’s diverse religions, long since corrupted by institutionalization, intolerance, and the slippage between allegorical and literalist hermeneutics, had derived their core doctrines. These perennialist narratives captured the imagination of those who yearned for a solution to the problem of the One and Many in the context of world religions, the multiplicity of creeds that, but for a common essence, would amount to little more than A.J.M.M.’s babbling marketplace. Because of their aspiration to achieve a vantage point beyond the particularisms of existing religions, I refer to ideologies defined by this *philosophia perennis* as “meta-religions” in this dissertation.

Crucially, however, I want to preserve this third category of religious pluralization as distinct from the second. As mentioned above, dreams of interreligious unity surfaced amongst comparativists not identified the new religious movements; moreover, one should note that not all members of these movements may have embraced perennialism to the same degree, some

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8 For a compact history of perennialist philosophy, see Jeffrey Kripal’s entries on “Hermetism” and “New Perennialism” in his textbook *Comparing Religion*.

9 Certainly, this is not to paint a homogenizing picture of these movements, many of whose members may well have had little interests in perennialist metanarratives: those for whom Spiritualism was more science than religion, for example.
being motivated more by scientific considerations than by desires for interreligious harmony. Furthermore, even those those who held to no particular comparativist theory, or adhered to no particular perennialist narrative, had to negotiate with the fact that, by century’s end, global religious unity had transformed from an unthinkable concept to a widespread object of desire. Upon returning to Britain from the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago, Protap Chunder Moozomdar, leader in the Hindu reform movement Brahmo Samaj, summed up this transformation well in a newspaper interview: “Fifty years ago it would have been out of the question to hold such a Congress, but it is a mark of modern progress that systems of religion which were then regarded as gross heathenism are today received with goodwill by the other religions of the world (“The World’s Parliament of Religions”). Whether or not Moozomdar’s assertion matches reality or not--and, to be sure, one could dispute the actual universality of such “goodwill” during this period--the point is that interreligious harmony as a “mark of modern progress” became an increasingly important part of the Victorian cultural imagination, alternately inspiring fear and fascination, and shaping religiosities accordingly.

Indeed, when assessing the range of experience generated by these three facets of religious pluralization, it is important to recognize that perception matters at least as much as proof. As stated above, Victorian Britain largely remained Christian, a state of affairs that belies A.J.M.M.’s unease (or, conversely, the optimism of someone for whom religious pluralization would be a positive good). Yet I want to suggest that the unease and optimism provoked by the “wild searches” of the fin de siecle as much constitute “experiences” of religious pluralism as the wild searches themselves. Here, I find useful Charles Taylor’s concept of “cross pressures,” the frequently conflictual psychological and affective currents generated by the pluralization of belief positions, from orthodox religion to immanent atheism. Such cross-pressures prove
germane to his account of secularization, which he defines not as the fading of religious belief but as its fragilization, its vulnerability to doubt in the face of other Ways of Life. Elaborating on the process by which cross-pressures come about, Taylor writes, “[A] multiplicity of faiths has little effect as long as it is neutralized by the sense that being like them is not really an option for me. As long as the alternative is strange and other...so that becoming that isn’t really conceivable for me, so long will their difference not undermine my embedding in my own faith. This changes when through increased contact...the issue posed by the difference becomes more insistent: why my way, and not theirs?” (A Secular Age 304). Though Taylor immediately refers to life in 20th and 21st century North Atlantic societies, his description of the increased urgency of religious plurality, of the loss of comfortable distance between Our way and Theirs, deftly characterizes the cross-pressures of Victorian religious pluralism, arising from proximity to non-Christian traditions, the emergence of alternative spiritual movements, and accounts of meta-religious unity. Even if such developments ultimately made little difference to the overwhelmingly Christian character of Victorian Britain, the perception of them as powerful phenomena was itself productive of cross-pressures: faced with such a range, one begins to feel one’s own position as contingent, subject to dispute, haunted by the ghosts of its doubles and Others.

Hence, the process of religious pluralization I have identified in the mid-to-late Victorian period, this felt expansion in the range of available religiosities, had repercussions beyond the coterie of citizens who experimented with new Ways of Life. Experiencing religious pluralism during this period--especially when conceived of along the three developments outlined above--meant more than giving oneself over to Buddha’s eightfold path, or being possessed by spirits during seances, or having an epiphany of the single Truth binding all religions together. It also
entailed the dawning awareness, amidst the general population, that one’s neighbor or relative

could be having any one of those experiences. As each chapter of my dissertation elucidates,
such an awareness could itself entail a range of cross-pressured experiences, not easily reducible
to conversion, epiphany, or apostasy: enjoying the freedom to choose amongst this newfound
range of religiosities; finding oneself troubled by such a range, insofar as it threatens Christian
dominance; longing to find a meta-religious Truth at the heart of all creeds; or simply re-
committing to Christianity, with a determination to assert the superiority of the faith against and
above all other options. So, too, was the phenomenology of religious pluralism inflected by the
matrix of race, nation and gender: for men shaped by a culture that tied Christian orthodoxy with
sexual propriety, Spiritualism’s female mediums might imbue seances with an illicit erotic
charge; for those deeply attached to the notion of Christian Britain, Buddhism might alternately
appear as an Orientalist escape or a betrayal of national identity. The “cross pressures” of

Victorian religious pluralization constituted the aggregate effect of being pulled toward, or away
from, any one of these affective modes.

Yet one pressure loomed above the others, one gravitational force that shaped the very
terms through which religious pluralism, in any of the three aforementioned senses, could even
be articulated. That force was Empire, in whose light (or shadow) new religions, and new
theories of world religions, came into view. As David Chidester argues in his book Empire of
Religion, the field of comparative religion began as an “imperial enterprise,” depending on the
expansion of the British Empire to provide the data from which to construct a systematic study of
the world’s religious beliefs and practices. Focusing on South Africa between the 1870’s and the
1920’s, Chidester posits a chain of mediations through which the Victorians accessed knowledge
about world religions: “imperial theorists,” such as Lang et al, depended on “colonial
middlemen” to provide the raw details of local religious life; such details, in turn, were provided by “indigenous informants and collaborators” undergoing colonization (xi). Through such mediations, comparative religion emerged as the quintessential “imperial science,” addressing the “essential difficulties entailed in the imperial encounter with the exotic East and savage Africa” (4). To consider the religions of such regions, then, was inevitably to consider the imperium through which such religions had become legible.

Moreover, the new religious movements were closely bound up with imperial power structures, even as they attracted political radicals committed to progressive ideals. Theosophy and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn both boasted members of the imperial establishment amongst their ranks; Freemasonry, as elaborated in Chapter 3, particularly aspired to the position of an imperial civil religion. So, too, did the new movements constitute sites through which members could wrestle with the legacy of Empire. Spiritualist seances, as Marlene Tromp has shown, “provid[ed] a direct and fairly public vision of some of the tensions embodied in imperialism,” as “the ghosts of [Britain’s] colonized peoples [Indian, Middle Eastern, African] materialized at the seance, haunting the nation builders” (93). Moreover, Eleanor Robinson argues that the Spiritualist imagination depended on a “topographical and geographical discourse associated with imperial expansion” (7). Meanwhile, Joy Dixon in The Divine Feminine demonstrates that Theosophy simultaneously “permitted a critique of imperialism” and offered a distinctively colonial brand of syncretism, purporting to “rescue a form of [esoteric] knowledge that had fallen into degraded form in India” (11).10

10 Writing about the ambi-valent status of major Theosophists with respect to imperial politics, Gauri Viswanathan notes that “Anglo-Indians like [A.P.] Sinnett and [Allan Octavian] Hume [were] part of the governing culture of British rule, albeit dissidenting members of the imperial administration” (“The Ordinary Business of Occultism” 12-13).
Finally, the period’s grand narratives of interreligious unity, variations on the trope of an originary Truth that provided the *arche* and *telos* of all world religions, inevitably tended to take on an imperial cast, perhaps most literally in the cult of Queen Victoria (as elaborated in Chapter 2), but also in Freemasonry (Chapter 3) and strains of Christian apologetics (Chapter 4). Indeed, we might conceive of devotion to Empire as a meta-religion in its own right during this period, given the intensity with which New Imperialism cast “Greater Britain” as the ultimate principle to which people of all cultures and creeds owed their loyalty. However, Empire’s effects on the experience of religious pluralism were as unpredictable as they were powerful: for Christian apologists, a commitment to imperialism might pressure a reaffirmation of Christianity as the standard-bearer of Western civilization; for more syncretically minded Britons, though, it might pressure a turn away from Christianity, perhaps toward Freemasonry’s vision of an imperial Brotherhood, in whose common commitment to global order all religious differences dissolve.

All of which returns us to Rider Haggard’s “Note on Religion,” and the question of the narrative mode best suited to his wild searchers’ quest for Truth. For, in light of Haggard’s reputation as a foremost purveyor of the “New Romance,” one would expect that narrativizing the Victorian experience of religious pluralism would ultimately entail a straightforward glorification of this cross pressure among cross pressures, a celebration of imperial ideals--in other words, the kind of triumphalistic adventure identified with romance, particularly the “romance revival” of the 1880’s and 1890’s. Definitions of romance are famously difficult to pin down, but, as various Victorian scholars have pointed out, the late Victorian “romance” offered an escape from the everyday, an “adventure into the unknown” (Brantlinger 202) that, in Robert Louis Stevenson’s terms, calls the reader to “plunge into the tale in our own person and battle in fresh experience” (quoted in Daly 18). The primacy of happening, of sheer *plot*, to
romance is perhaps evident in the generic labels synonymous with “romance” during this period, “the novel of incident” or “the novel of adventure” (Daly, 17). According to the “generic propaganda” of such enthusiasts as Rider Haggard and Robert Louis Stevenson, romance thus functioned as the antithesis of realism, offering an “action-oriented” genre to counter realism’s “introspective, unmanly, and morbid” qualities (Vaninskaya 64). Identifying New Romance by the term “Imperial Gothic,” Patrick Brantlinger argues that the adventures depicted in these novels inevitably occasion colonial fantasies of territorial annexation, reactions to the “diminishing chances for adventure” that issue from “the exploration and mapping of the last mysterious places on the planet” (Brantlinger 204-205). So, too, does Brantlinger characterize Imperial Gothic as imaging forth “the lure of alternative religions, including Spiritualism, occultism and Buddhism, and Theosophy” (205). In light of such generic definitions, it would be exceedingly tempting to read Haggard as describing a romance of religious pluralism: a brush with new religiosities that inducts White explorers into the mysteries of mystic East and darkest Africa, furnishing them with occult insights that distinguish them from their rationalistic European competitors, reconcile them to indigenous culture, and offers a spiritual technology to supplement the material technologies of colonial conquest.

Such a narrative, however, would depend on drastically minimizing the radical instability, the sense of affective and epistemological flux, that characterizes Haggard’s wild searchers, even beyond the end their journey. It is perhaps not coincidental that Andrew Lang, purveyor of a theoretical “narrative uniformity” in the history of religions, was also one of the New Romance’s most vocal champions, insisting upon an analogous “narrative uniformity” in his account of its superiority to realism. Anna Vaninskaya highlights the absolutism of the “antimonies” with which Lang distinguishes romance from realism: “barbaric and savage vs. barbaric and savage vs.

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11 For another comprehensive account of the late Victorian romance revival, see also Vaninskaya.
civilised and cultured; boy's own vs. female...engagingly plotted vs. boringly introspective” (65). Such antimonies, taken for granted by Lang’s ideological allies, attribute to romance a unity of vision, a certain generic purity, that brooks no compromise with the hallmarks of realist narrative. Yet, as elaborated above, the experience of Haggard’s searchers is too fractured, too cross-pressured, to constitute a univocal affirmation of any one vision, be it a dream of interreligious unity, the dreams of the New Romance, or the dream of Empire itself. Indeed, his wild searchers bear scant resemblance to heroes of imperialist fantasy: in a world of doubtful visions, what prevents that fantasy from disappearing into thin air?

Haggard’s description thus signals that romance alone cannot bear the burden of giving voice to the Victorian experience of religious pluralism. As this dissertation argues, romance prove secondary, and the fantastic primary, to the era’s narrativizations of religious pluralism; authors steeped in the quest for new religiosities translated their experience not simply into romance's generic protocols, but into the fantastic's fracturing of the boundaries between mundane and marvellous, everyday and extraordinary. In other words, incident was itself incidental to literary re-presentation of religious pluralization: the plot conventions of romance, where they appear, serve mainly to impel the prototypical wild searcher toward the fantastic fissure between theory and experience, One and Many, natural and supernatural. In the next part of this introduction, I want to examine why the fantastic proved to be such a powerful mode for re-presenting the cross pressured experiences of religious pluralism, in a manner that defies the ideology of imperial romance. Indeed, such an examination will help demonstrate that the authors in my dissertation, qua authors of the fantastic rather than of mere romance, depict religious pluralism's varied affects as ultimately subversive of the creed of Empire. To explore
Other religiosities, in these texts, is to approach the limits of the imperial frame, a frame whose solidity begins to take on the shimmer of unreality.

II. The Fantastic as Mode: Practicing the Unreality Effect

Unreality, of course, is the primary business of the fantastic: neither a straightforward depiction of “reality,” nor a totalizing escape from it, but a kind of suspension between the alterities that Lang et al take for granted. That such a liminal realm defies articulation for Lang, or even for his realism-touting foil Henry James, testifies to the asymmetry of the fantastic and romance as categories of analysis. For if romance refers to a set of texts explicitly presented and received as such at the time of their publication, “the fantastic” is best understood as a transhistorical narrative practice, instinctively recognized from at least the 18th century onward, but seriously developed as a nameable concept in twentieth century literary criticism. Whereas “romance” functioned as a recognizable commercial genre in the period under examination, then, “the fantastic” tends to retrospectively illuminate a range of Victorian texts, whose contemporary readers, if they invoked the fantastic at all in their critical responses, did so as a loose heuristic wanting in theoretical sophistication. George MacDonald’s “The Fantastic Imagination” (1890), for example, only invokes the term in its title, going on to attach the fantastic exclusively to the genre of fairy tales, “little world[s]...with [their] own laws,” that need not bear any relationship with the world inhabited by the reader. In short, MacDonald collapses the fantastic into

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12 I recognize that such a definition inevitably chafes against one of the countless theorists of the fantastic, and certainly, the case can be made that narratives that revolve around wholly imaginary worlds (e.g. Tolkien’s Middle Earth) are reducible to subsets of the fantastic. However, this dissertation follows the school of thought, inaugurated by Todorov, that insists on the fantastic as distinct from pure fantasy.

13 In Critical Discourses of the Fantastic, 1712-1831, David Sandner argues that the fantastic “aris[es] out of vital arguments about aesthetics in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries”; as a “discourse of the sublime,” the fantastic evolves out of Joseph Addison’s criticism to eventually characterize “Romantic expression and thought” (3). Sandner clarifies, however, that his account does not amount to anything like a new “narrative of genre formation,” but merely identifies “an objective precondition for the fantastic in the eighteenth century” (14). Once again, such preconditions become recognizable only in the light of twentieth century criticism.
Faerieland, naming an absolute rapture, a complete flight from reality akin to that which Lang credits to the romance. Conversely, while 18th and 19th century commenters on genres we now recognize as fantastic frequently invoked the familiar hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations, such hesitation was usually identified with either that genre or its narrowly conceived antecedents.\textsuperscript{14} Isolated examples notwithstanding, it was left to twentieth century critics to parse the whole territory between the realms of Fact and Faerieland, the entire province of the unreal.\textsuperscript{15} It is to these critics that we must turn, for an understanding of how late Victorian authors of the fantastic articulated the pluralistic experiences of their time.

As mentioned above, Tzvetan Todorov’s theory of the fantastic remains a useful point of departure for further definition. In \textit{On the Fantastic}, Todorov elaborates on Solvyov’s definition, by distinguishing “the pure fantastic” from “marvellous” narratives, in which a supernatural interpretation of events carries the day, and “uncanny” narratives, in which a naturalist explanation ultimately prevails. In contrast to these generic categories, Todorov characterizes “the pure fantastic” as a kind of narrative in which “our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides or vampires, [witnesses] an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world...The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (Todorov 25). Todorov insists that the fantastic can only “occupy the duration of this uncertainty,” such that a

\textsuperscript{14} For example, in “On the Supernatural in Poetry” (1802), Anne Radcliffe refers to the virtue of “obscurity” in a narrative involving the supernatural, contrasting obscurity with unambiguous depictions of horror, which tend to desensitize the reader: “They must be men of very cold imaginations...with whom certainty is more terrible than surmise” (47). Critically, though, Radcliffe restricts her focus to works of “horror” and “terror,” the latter of which surpasses the former precisely by incorporating this interpretive indeterminacy. Only via twentieth century criticism does Radcliffe’s discussion become recognizable as a cousin of Macdonald’s treatment of the fairy tale.

\textsuperscript{15} As Rosemary Jackson notes, the clearest antecedent for contemporary understandings of the fantastic comes via the nineteenth century Russian critic Vladimir Solvyov: “In the genuine fantastic, there is always the external and formal possibility of a simple explanation of phenomena, but at the same time this explanation is completely stripped of all internal probability” (quoted in Jackson 27).
narrative transforms into either an example of the marvellous or the uncanny once an explanation emerges.

While taking his essential distinctions for granted, later theorists sought to identify the fantastic with something more than simply the duration of a text in which uncertainty reigns. As Rosemary Jackson writes, Jean Bellemin-Noel responded to Todorov by naming “a lack of meaningful signification [as] the major defining feature of the fantastic” (38): in other words, Bellemin-Noel claims as fantastic even those texts that eventually register some naturalistic explanation, if said explanation continues to be haunted by a sense of “signs [remaining] vulnerable to multiple and contradictory interpretation” (ibid). For her part, Jackson argues that classifying the fantastic as a genre, as Todorov does, is perhaps too restrictive a claim: better to think of it as a “mode…[placed] between the opposite modes of the marvellous [the world of fairy story, romance, magic, supernaturalism] and the mimetic [narratives which claim...equivalence between the represented fictional world and the ‘real’ world outside the text” (32, 33, 34). Defining the fantastic as a mode highlights its presence within a range of generic forms, including novels usually classified as essentially mimetic: one thinks of Jane Eyre’s psychic communique with Rochester, Krook’s spontaneous combustion in Bleak House, even the “second sight” that George Eliot, realist among realists, attributes to Mordecai in Daniel Deronda.16

I recognize that, in embracing such a definition, I am laying claim to a term that has been mobilized in countless directions, a term almost as fiercely contested as “religion” itself. Treating “the fantastic” and “fantasy” as synonymous, defining “the fantastic” as a subset of fantasy, or vice versa, all comprise legitimate positions in contemporary discussions of the

fantastic. Recently, Farah Mendlesohn has further qualified the concept of a mode suspended between the marvellous and the mimetic, calling for a distinction between “intrusion fantasies” (the fantastic intrudes into mimetic reality) and “liminal fantasies” (no elements are recognized as fantastic by the characters, and yet the narrative nonetheless “feels” fantastical to the reader) (xxi-xxiv). Respecting this distinction (which comes into play in Chapter 1’s discussion of The Moonstone) I have chosen to stick with Jackson’s definition of an in-between zone bordered by mimesis and marvels. Call it the unreality effect: the simultaneous conjuring and destabilizing of the quotidian details germane to literary realism, which, as Roland Barthes has shown us, signal nothing other than the fact of sheer factuality.17 Such a definition takes cues from Jackson, by highlighting a mode, not a genre, that links Wilkie Collins’ detective novel, Rider Haggard’s “history of adventure,” Rudyard Kipling’s weird tales, and Bram Stoker’s neo-Gothic horror. If one visualizes all of these texts as interlocking circles, then the area at the very center of the Venn diagram, the narrative strategy shared by these exemplars of disparate genres, turns out to be “the endeavor to visualize and verbalize the unseen and unsayable” (Jackson, 39). Such an endeavor, then, also bears resemblance to Mendlesohn’s “intrusion fantasy,” for far from envisioning a self-enclosed imaginary world, the fantastic enacts the unsayable’s incursion into the fabric of “sayable” reality, an incursion of referents for which no signifiers presently exist.

III. Fantastic Improvisations on the Affects of Religious Pluralization

But to what ends do authors of the fantastic stage such incursions, particularly when set against the backdrop of religion? Critics have tended to fall into three camps on this subject,

17 Barthes writes of those quotidian details, “Flaubert’s barometer, Michelet’s little door finally say nothing but this: we are the real...The very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the reality effect is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity” (148). While I wish the originality of this dissertation extended to coining the phrase “unreality effect,” a quick Google Search reveals a whole host of critics who have gotten there first. Alack, alas.
which might be called the substitutional, the sacralizing, and the psycho-biographical. Michael Saler’s *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* offers a cogent recent example of the former approach. Saler, like numerous scholars before him, sees the fantastic as a substitute for religious belief, in a secularized topos that simply has no more room for faith.\(^{18}\) In response to the inexorable disappearance of belief, Saler argues, the Victorian fantastic offered a “rational enchantment” that accommodated secular modernity where the “vogue for non-Western religions” only (unsuccessfully) “revolted” against it (139). The “sacralizing” approach takes the opposing argument: the fantastic images forth not religion’s disappearance, but its persistence, its power to absorb (sacralize) even the most vulgar discourses of modernity into itself. Christopher Herbert’s essay on *Dracula*, “Vampire Religion,” exemplifies this perspective, arguing that the novel comprises “an allegory of the suppression of...superstition in the name of...Christian religion,” even as it displays “a strain of vampiric sadism at the heart of Christian [specifically, Evangelical] piety” (Abstract). Finally, whereas both these approaches treat the text principally as a cultural artifact, psycho-biographical approaches treat the work as an articulation of the author’s experiences and/or personal ideology. In particular, recent studies of Rider Haggard’s fiction tend to this perspective: John Senior’s dissertation on “Spirituality in the Fiction of Rider Haggard,” for example, aims to chart “the influence of Haggard’s spiritualism within his writing” (3), stressing the importance of understanding his religious views.

While drawing on each of these approaches, I want to suggest that the fantastic fictions in this dissertation are best understood not as symptoms of religion’s cultural decline, nor as

\(^{18}\) See also Victoria Nelson’s *The Secret Life Of Puppets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Rosemary Jackson’s discussion of Sartre’s and George Battaille’s theories of the fantastic in *The Literature of Subversion* (17-18); and the work of religion scholar Marco Frenschkowski, who, as Laura Feldt writes, treats “the fantastic as a narrative form [that] can only arise where a religious worldview has collapsed” (14).
testaments to its cultural strength, nor (merely) as expressions of personal ideology or philosophy. Instead, I mobilize cultural and biographical sources to demonstrate that the fantastic re-presents the kinds of individual and collective experience that religious pluralization made possible, culturally conditioned experiences with which the authors in question were likely familiar, but need not have literally undergone themselves. Forever toying with the unreality effect, these texts unfold the literary equivalent of Charles De Harlez’s “extravagant practices”: the fantastic here produces something like a phenomenological experiment, an improvisation on the bewildering affective spectrum generated by religious pluralization, in which the reader is invited to participate.

To read the fantastic in this manner is, perhaps not coincidentally, to prioritize the kind of reading technique that Nicholas Dames, in *Physiology of the Novel*, identifies with a distinctively Victorian brand of “physiological novel theory.” By Dames’ account, such a theory offered a “processual, affective, reader-centered methodology whose notion of form was thoroughly temporal” (10), in contrast to the “pictorial [analogies]...(‘point of view,’ ‘perspective,’ ‘showing over telling’)” (48) common to 20th century novel theory. While not discounting the importance of visuo-pictorial approaches to the fantastic, this dissertation demonstrates how a temporal approach, with its attention to “reading in time” and “buildups and discharges of affect” (Dames, 11), can focalize the succession of affective modes that the fantastic, so enamored of sensation and mood, works to induce in the reader. With reference to religious pluralism, sequential/temporal reading specifically allows us to see cross-pressures in action on the page, variously impelling characters (and readers) towards the claims of Empire, Christ, the Divine Feminine, the Key to All Mythologies. Authors of the fantastic invite the reader to experience religious pluralism less as principle than as process, an emphatically temporal phenomenon: their
texts expose the degree to which Victorian religious pluralism generated a perpetual coming-to-terms with new religiosities, not the static ideal that liberal democracies take for granted today. In the texts analyzed below, the eroticized thrill of encountering new religiosities can quickly give way to fear of malevolent spiritual forces, which, given the right circumstances, can themselves morph into a mystical encounter with pan-religious Truth. The affective instability at the heart of the fantastic, which unfolds over the course of a narrative, prevents any one definition of religious pluralism--as political mode of governance, as theological ideal, as sociological fact--from enjoying dominance for very long.

Indeed, as mentioned above, the fantastic re-presentation of pluralistic experience necessarily interrogates the imperial prisms through which late Victorian categories of religious sameness and difference took shape. As I have tried to show through my use of historical and biographical material, that interrogation appears all the more remarkable in light of the collusion with Empire that cultural forces tended to encourage, and that most of these authors, in other discursive modes, might have embraced unproblematically elsewhere. For whatever the reputation of a Haggard or a Kipling, their fictions, qua fantastic texts, do not reduce to mere reproductions of ideology, do not recapitulate imperial views of religion championed elsewhere. To the contrary, operating in the lands of the Unreal seems, over and over, to provoke these authors to affective modes that “official” narratives of religious pluralism, so frequently and intimately bound up with dreams of imperial order, would otherwise obscure. Far from highlighting literature’s status as a mere extension or reinscription of ideological fixities, then, I use culture and biography to underscore the way that the fantastic takes on a life of its own.

In Ugly Feelings, a study of “sites of emotional negativity in literature, film, and theoretical writing” (1), Sianne Ngai offers a potent resource with which to unpack the political
ramifications of the fantastic’s call to feel religious pluralism, to sample its euphorias, dysphorias, and intervening affective states. Elaborating the “critical productivity” of attending to affects such as envy and paranoia, Ngai cites theorist Paolo Virno’s reflections on opportunism and the structures of feeling that condition it: “insecurity about one’s place during periodic innovation, fear of losing recently gained privileges, and anxiety over being ‘left behind’ translate into flexibility, adaptability, and a readiness to reconfigure oneself” (quoted in Ngai 17). Yet precisely in attending to those feelings, which Virno also characterizes as “an experience fundamentally structured by...possibilities and fleeting opportunities” (25), one may also discover that they also produce “radical and transformative behavior” that, in fact, sharply counteracts opportunism’s complicity with the wage labor system (4). Ngai takes this to mean that even petty feelings “call attention to a real social experience and a certain kind of historical truth” (5), the contemplation of which can engender actions or beliefs that do not simply reproduce the status quo. Similarly, the feelings depicted in these fantastic fictions call attention to the historical truth of negotiating with multiple religiosities, a truth that subverts the claims Empire makes on behalf of notions of religious sameness and difference. Even if pluralistic experiences lead to affirmations of imperial values elsewhere, the fantastic thus images forth the way that such states of being can also undermine those values, serving as the seed of a radical response to the status quo. Speaking of the affective state that produces both complicity and resistance to the wage system, Virno writes, “This modality of experience, even if it nourishes opportunism, does not necessarily result in it.” Similarly, modes of pluralistic experience, even if they might nourish attachment to imperialism, need not necessarily result in it. It is the conceit of the fantastic fictions analyzed below, what we might call their own extravagant practice, that
they cast precisely this radical ambivalence, this vacillation between the promise and the price of Empire, as an ultimate consequence of experiencing religious pluralism.

In Chapter One, I examine how, in his novel *The Moonstone* (1868), Wilkie Collins reimagines a watershed moment in the Victorian encounter with global religious diversity, the Great Exhibition of 1851. As foreign visitors literally displayed unfamiliar religiosities through their habits and dress, curious patrons also encountered Other religions through the Exhibit’s material displays--chief among which loomed the famous Koh-i-Noor diamond, variously coveted by Muslim, Hindu, and Christian rulers, and rumored locus of supernatural power. As in subsequent chapters, archival material informs my reading of the text: I show how the fantastic’s subliminal presence in *The Moonstone*, whose eponymous diamond explicitly recalls the Koh-i-Noor, subtly undermines a view of religious pluralism that pervaded the Exhibition’s museum guides, governmental reports, and reviews. Such a view cast foreign persons and sacred objects--and the Koh-i-Noor especially--as material signs of religion’s development or degeneration. As a prototypical example of the mid-century “sensation novel,” Collins’ novel enjoys the reputation of deriving extraordinary effects from “ordinary” materials, excluding the supernatural in accordance with that genre’s conventions. I argue, however, that closer inspection reveals the operation of a kind of “subtextual fantastic,” introduced by the invocation of Hindu legend in the prologue. The lingering possibility that the gods exist subsequently haunts perceptions of the Moonstone as “carbon, mere carbon” (), as well as perceptions of the novel’s Hindu characters as mere foils to its Christian protagonists. The unease that issues from this intimation of divine activity diverges sharply from the triumphalism generated by the Koh-i-Noor display, the arrangement of which insisted upon the Empire’s power to “convert” sacred objects into merely cultural artifacts. I then juxtapose *The Moonstone* with Richard Marsh’s *The
Joss (1900), whose central uncanny idol invites parallels to Collins’ novel. Where *The Moonstone* interrogates the disenchancing ambitions of colonial exhibitions, *The Joss* calls into question their exoticizing impulses, stoking a voyeuristic interest in foreign religiosities that, ultimately, culminates in a climax of brutal disillusionment.

Collins’ novel captures an era when both the fantastic and global religious diversity had yet to command the attention of Victorian popular culture: at midcentury, the former surfaced mainly as a series of irruptions within the realist novel, while the latter remained an object of principally academic interest. Thus, if *The Moonstone*’s flirtations with the unreality effect presaged the marvels (and monsters) of *fin de siecle* popular fiction, then its fascination with Hinduism anticipated the late Victorian enthusiasm for new religiosities, which, by century’s close, had transcended the confines of the museum space. In my second chapter, I examine H. Rider Haggard’s *She* (1887), a milestone in fantastic fiction that channels its author’s highly gendered encounters with religious pluralism. Haggard’s Evangelical upbringing instilled in him a close association between womanhood and spiritual power, an association reinforced not only by his personal acquaintance with a plethora of religious practices, but also by his immersion in scholarship on comparative religion. Indeed, his personal journey through a range of religiosities—Christianity, Spiritualism, Islam, Zulu animism—led to a fascination with contemporaneous meta-religious theories, which often cast the divine essence of all faiths as feminine in nature. Readers such as Jung and Freud interpreted *She* as an uncritical celebration of this Eternal Feminine archetype, insofar as it seems to find embodiment in the novel’s eponymous demigoddess. However, my chapter highlights the epistemological uncertainty surrounding Ayesha’s “true nature,” an uncertainty that inspires rapidly shifting feeling-states in She’s male admirers. Such oscillations amongst sexual attraction, fear, veneration and
incredulity ultimately undermine the Victorian tendency to conflate pan-religious ideals with idealized femininity, implicit in theologian Ludwig Feuerbach’s assertion that “the highest and deepest love is the mother’s love.”

If Victorians in Britain considered non-Christian religions to be alternately fascinating and disturbing, their colonial counterparts found such theologies to be doubly vexing. Not only did British subjects in the colonies encounter religious difference as a minority ruling class, but they also did so against the backdrop of policies that determined how such religions could be practiced. In India, “Crown Jewel” of the colonies, Freemasonry emerged as a civil religion devoted to regulating religious difference, proclaiming a meta-religious theology that collapsed Hinduism into the ancient Masonic mystery religion. The tension between Freemasonry’s syncretic ideology and the lived experience of Indian religion(s) finds expression in the Anglo-Indian fantastic tales of Rudyard Kipling, a Freemason himself, and the subject of my third chapter. The success that Kipling enjoyed in England testifies, in part, to his weird tales’ representation of Indian religiousities: Kipling contributes to the Victorian awareness of religious diversity by displaying it in a colonial setting, juxtaposed with the ambitions of the Masonic meta-religion. In “The Man Who Would Be King,” two Freemasons conquer an animist population, apparently realizing the Masonic vision of ecumenical harmony; yet the natives’ retaliatory insistence on their religion’s unassimilability into Freemasonry, coupled with the narrator’s descent into mysticism, doom that vision. Elsewhere, “The Bridge Builders” begins as an encomium to the value of Labor, a keyword in Freemasonry, as a source of interreligious brotherhood; yet the fraternal feeling of this secular brotherhood is ruptured, mid-story, by a hallucination (revelation?) of the Hindu pantheon. The vision not only diminishes the value of Labor in the face of eternity, but marks the point at which the Hindu “sidekick” character, Peroo,
becomes the story’s tragic hero, its center of consciousness. In such fictions, Kipling subverts imperialist views of Indian religion, particularly as mediated through Freemasonry, that he championed elsewhere.

While the recognition of religious pluralism prompted some to discover new forms of belief, it prompted others to rediscover Christianity. My final chapter addresses Dracula’s ambivalent engagement with what I call the apologetics of progress: seeking to maintain Christianity’s uniqueness in the marketplace of religions, such an apologetics vaunted the faith as the *telos* of religion’s evolutionary development, an engine of improvement that absorbed both the truths of other religions and the empirical methods of modernity. In short, the apologetics of progress arguably sought to frame Christianity as a kind of meta-religion in its own right. Initially, Christianity in *Dracula* does not conquer foreign religions so much as beat them at their own game, producing, via a combination of scientific and occult technologies, the sort of spectacular mysticism that other authors associate with Hinduism or Theosophy. However, the novel also poses a mirror to contemporaneous apologetics in Dracula himself, originally a progressive Christian hero. The emergent equivalence of Dracula and the modern “Christian knights” who oppose him complicates the novel’s affective structure, which would otherwise involve shuttling between horror at invading religiosities and triumphalist attachment to a re-enchanted imperial Christianity, a partnership between Catholic magic and Protestant reason that marches ever eastward. Indeed, I argue that this equivalence between hunters and hunted eventually replaces triumphalism with a kind of melancholic theodicy: in the end, Stoker suggests, the deity presiding over the novel’s universe has little interest in the apologetics of progress, its strategy for recuperating Christian superiority amidst the spectrum of global religiosities.
In its constant crises of perception and sensation, the fantastic provokes readers to interrogate fixed definitions of reality. This dissertation shows how Victorian authors of the fantastic harnessed this capacity for provocation, thereby illuminating a key stage in the development of Western religious pluralism. And yet these texts remain irreducible to their moment, partially because, in some sense, their moment lingers on. As Tomoko Masuzawa argues in *The Invention of World Religions*, the ideological frames that mediated access to Other religiosities would survive the end of Empire, coming to underpin contemporary understandings of “world religions.” Masuzawa makes the persuasive claim that nineteenth century investigations of global religious diversity produced the “moral [and] ideological grounds” of contemporary “discourse of world religions and the concomitant ideology of religious pluralism,” i.e., the familiar ethos of “diversity, plurality, and affinity among ‘traditions,’” each of which displays a “unique genius” while simultaneously speaking to a “universal yearning for spirituality and something like world peace” (13, 12, 320). This ethos deeply shapes any attempt to understand, or even participate in, the ever-constant, ever-changing phenomenon called religion in 21st century liberal democracies. Indeed, the genesis of this project lies not in my pursuit of questions particular to the Victorian era, but in my personal experience of contemporary religious pluralisms, my interest in limning the genealogy of such an experience. Thus, at the risk of stranding the reader in a fantastic-like liminal space, somewhere between academic and confessional discourse, my conclusion expands on the personal motives behind this project. There, I offer some thoughts on how the Victorian fantastic might illumine the experiences of those for whom religious pluralism today, construed as empirical fact or ideological aspiration, requires an ongoing confrontation with the deepest questions of nationhood, ethnicity, theology, and, inevitably, Empire. If such a confrontation lacks anything
like a definitive resolution, it may at least be better understood with reference to the things that fiction knows, the truths it harbors, the extravagances it invites us to practice.
1. Materializing Foreign Religiosities in *The Moonstone* and *The Joss*: Escaping the Cage

I want to begin with two iron cages—although, as is so often the case with the fantastic, my eyes may deceive me, and they may be neither iron nor two.

Be that as it may, appearances are as good a place to start as any. The first cage stood six feet tall, replete with a golden crown, at the 1851 Great Exhibition. Jets of gas spurted from its floor, misting the diamond that sat, at its center, on a velvet cloth. The diamond did not sparkle, exactly, but its unassuming appearance belied its identity: the Koh-i-Noor, “Mountain of Light,” a gem that had recently travelled from Britain’s most prized colony to the very center of its empire. Its history, rumored to begin in “the lifetime of Krishna” some five thousand years past, had culminated in its station, behind gilded bars, at this international display of commerce, technology, and religion (“Document 44” 80). Despite its dullness, the diamond attracted scores of onlookers, eager to glimpse the diamond that—according to rumor—harbored an ancient curse, dooming any male who tried to possess it. For those inclined to believe the tale, the cage
communicated both the danger of the object it housed and the constraining power of the crown it wore: the scourge of sultans was now royal property. Moreover, insofar as the Great Exhibition’s international visitors comprised an unprecedented display of religious diversity on British soil, this performance of imperial authority also literalized the hopes of Evangelicals anxious to win souls. After all, the Koh-i-Noor, emblem of Hindu heathenism, had been converted into the treasure of the Queen, head of the Church of England.

The second cage is somewhat harder to visualize, but a little close reading brings it into full view. It appears in an 1862 review of Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*, where Margaret Oliphant offers a characterization of Collins’ literary accomplishments by way of contrast. Noting that “Mr. Wilkie Collins is not the first man who has produced a sensation novel,” Oliphant goes on to describe Collins’ predecessors as revolting against “a social system which has paralysed all the wholesome wonders and nobler mysteries of human existence” (111). The literary form of this rebellion, Oliphant notes wryly, entails “frantic attempts by any kind of black art or mad psychology to get some grandeur or sacredness restored to life”; with their haunted houses and preternatural savants, such fictions are “as fantastic as they are contradictory to real life” (ibid). *The Woman in White*, Oliphant argues, is remarkable precisely insofar as it retains the power of previous sensation novels while abandoning their supernatural machinery. “Not so much as a single occult agency is employed in the telling of the tale,” Oliphant writes, further praising Collins for the way that “his effects are produced by common human acts, performed by recognizable human agents.” For Oliphant, Collins’ ability to produce extraordinary effects by ordinary means elevates him above the competition. “A writer who boldly takes in hand the common mechanism of life, and...thrills us into wonder, terror, and
breathless interest...has accomplished a far greater success than he who achieves the same result through supernatural agencies” (112).

Oliphant praises Collins for not resorting to “occult” or “supernatural” explanations, for generating the uncanny frisson entirely from within a web of “common human acts.” At the risk of reading anachronistically, I want to suggest that Oliphant’s praise betrays the faint outlines of my second cage—Max Weber’s iron cage, his metaphor for the rationalizing processes that disenchanted Western society, leaving a mode of collectivity in which “there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play” (139). Weber’s iron cage specifically referred to the bureaucratic institutions that systematically enforce rationalization; nonetheless, the image aptly summarizes the “social system” within which Collins, according to Oliphant, works his quotidian magic. By circumscribing his sensational fictions within the iron cage of reason, a world composed of forces wholly amenable to the protocols of Victorian rationalism, Collins doubles the accomplishments of authors who know no such boundaries.

Common mechanisms, uncommon thrills. If, for Oliphant, such a combination fueled The Woman in White’s success, it has continued to define critical reactions to The Moonstone, a reception history punctuated by T.S. Eliot’s declaration that the novel was “the first detective novel” in English literature. Right or wrong, Eliot’s statement takes its premises from Margaret Oliphant’s review: Collins invents the detective novel to the degree that his investigator, the indefatigable Sergeant Cuff, finally traces the Moonstone’s sensational theft to a chain of “common human acts, performed by recognizable human agents.” Subsequent scholars may dispute Eliot’s claim, but few challenge the perception that Collins cut The Moonstone from the same ontological cloth as Woman in White, locating the novel in a materialist universe wholly available for empirical analysis. In such a universe, the unreality effect can only exist as a
temporary misjudgment, to be resolved inevitably, in the manner of eighteenth century Gothic, by reason’s patient administration.

Yet by the time of The Woman in White’s publication, Collins’s oeuvre also included stories in which the unreality effect remains stubbornly impervious to rational demystification. “The Ghost in the Cupboard Room,” an account of a demonic candlestick, and “The Dead Hand,” in which a doctor recounts his resuscitation of a corpse, who turns out to possess preternatural knowledge of the future. In the latter story, the narrator acknowledges the operation of occult agencies that do not reduce to the common mechanisms of life. Pressed to explain the miracle, the doctor admits, “in this case, cause and effect could not be satisfactorily joined together by any theory whatever. There are mysteries in life and the conditions of it which human science has not fathomed yet; and I candidly confess to you that, in bringing that man back to existence, I was, morally speaking, groping haphazard in the dark” (254). The sentence exemplifies Todorov’s concept of fantastic hesitation, the interpretive uncertainty exhibited by a character struggling to make sense of weird or uncanny phenomena. Perhaps because such a struggle never overtly characterizes any one of The Moonstone’s myriad narrators, the novel’s status as fantastic literature becomes even more contestable if we juxtapose it with Collins’ unequivocally weird tales.

In a way, then, the cage Margaret Oliphant placed around Wilkie Collins has proven far more durable than the one that guarded the Koh-i-Noor. For, insofar as the former continues to limit readings of The Moonstone, it confines our understanding of the novel to a narrow definition of the “sensation” genre, one whose stress on the “common mechanisms of life” categorically excludes uncommon mechanisms, inhuman agents.19 This limited understanding of

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19 Collins’ ghost stories have only reinforced the terms of this imprisonment, offering a handy means of drawing the same contrast that Oliphant draws between Collins and his ghoul-crazed competitors: Collins, so the argument goes,
*The Moonstone* is compounded by the fact that the novel does not, strictly speaking, bear the conventional marks of fantastic literature: where characters experience fantastic hesitation, they do so as afterthought or fleeting sensation, not urgent crisis; the central conceit of the novel, the Moonstone’s theft, never really raises the possibility of ghosts or demons, however baffling it may appear. However, in this chapter, I want to suggest that *The Moonstone* (the novel) does escape Weber’s iron cage, to the exact degree that the Moonstone (the diamond) “escapes” the cage that housed the Koh-i-Noor. In his tale of a cursed Indian diamond that finds its way to an English country manor, Collins not only rewrites the story of the Koh-i-Noor’s importation to British soil, but also effectively liberates it from the museum space of the Great Exhibition. In doing so, Collins subverts the implicit narrative of religious pluralism that structured the Koh-i-Noor’s display — indeed, that structured the Great Exhibition itself.

In later chapters, I will investigate other channels through which Victorians encountered religious diversity, and upon which authors of the fantastic drew for inspiration: Theosophical lectures, Spiritualist seances, Freemason meetings, Indian temples under colonial administration. Before these diverse fora, however, the Great Exhibition was the original “contact zone,” to borrow Mary Louise Pratt’s phrase, through which Other religiosities — not mere doctrines, Ways of Life — first gripped the cultural imagination of Victorian Britain. Insofar as the exhibitors construed religion in ethnographic and anthropological terms, their exhibits firmly situated both spectator and artifact in a history bereft of supernatural activity, save perhaps for the beneficial guidance of distant Providence. Indeed, organizers of the Great Exhibition displayed sacred objects in accordance with the premises of the nascent science of comparative religion. Museum guides and exhibit captions framed religious relics as material signs of

does in his ghost stories precisely what he does not do in his sensation novels, reaching beyond the realm of rational human experience to produce his thrills and chills.
cultural development or degeneration, implicitly measured against the standard of British Christian civilization. In such a context, the representation of world religions doubled as a representation of Christian superiority. The Koh-i-Noor, in particular, displayed the power of missionary Protestantism to strip objects of their sacred value and recast them as material artifacts, whose true meaning became available only in the light of Christian knowledge.

Set against the backdrop of the Koh-i-Noor’s exhibition, *The Moonstone* can be read as both engaging and subverting this mode of curating non-Western religions. Collins arranges his novel as a series of eyewitness documents, positioning his reader as witness to a kind of virtual museum display. Yet Collins rewrites the rules governing such exhibitions, not only removing the Koh-i-Noor from its display case, but also haunting its would-be owners with the spectre of its sacred past. This “haunting” begins with the Prologue’s brief summation of the Moonstone’s mythological history, which the narrator only half-heartedly rejects as “mere fancy.” The unresolved sense of the myth’s veracity casts a shadow on the remainder of the novel, especially on the contrast between Evangelical hypocrisy and the devotion of the Brahmins who follow the Moonstone to England. Through this contrast, Collins insinuates that the Hindu myth, unlike the pretensions of Christian theology, may carry explanatory power after all. The Moonstone, standing for the Great Exhibition’s crowning jewel, thus emerges as the center of a living faith, a form of collective religiosity that supersedes Christianity as a legitimate source of revelation.

In its formal and thematic features, *The Moonstone* thus reproduces one mode of the pluralization of Victorian religious experience: an interruption in the colonial exhibition’s demythologizing processes, through which foreign religiosities suddenly appear as something more than anthropological curiosity. Yet a reversal of this process was also possible, as exhibitions promising virtual enchantment always invited the possibility of disillusionment,
disappointment. In that light, I conclude the chapter with a reading of Richard Marsh’s *The Joss* (1900). Arranged as a series of eyewitness testimonies, *The Joss* takes its formal and thematic cues from *The Moonstone*, relating the tale of how acolytes of an Eastern religion (this time “Taoist” instead of Hindu) pursue a foreign religious object to the heart of England. Unlike *The Moonstone*, however, *The Joss* wears its affiliation with fantastic literature on its sleeve, as the eponymous Chinese idol literally pulsates with an uncanny life of its own. Yet *The Joss*’s fantastic narrative culminates in a shocking parody of the colonial exhibit, which features not an enchanted dancing object, but a decaying corpse. Unlike colonial exhibits of religious artifacts, this climactic scene does not simply explain away, in ratio-scientific terms, the miraculous properties associated with the idol; nonetheless, the scene portends an end to supernatural activity in the world of the novel. I argue that, in capping his fantastic tale with a tableau of grotesque disenchantment, Marsh imagines the aforementioned reversal of the experience captured in *The Moonstone*, interrupting the pleasures of enchantment by visualizing the symbolic violence that exhibitions performed on sacred artifacts. On one hand, this visualization forces the reader to see the way that colonial exploitation conditioned the material representation of Asian religions; on the other hand, it fails to erase entirely the sense that such religions, in their unmediated essences, could offer novel ways of accessing the gods.

I. Religiosities as Material Culture at the Great Exhibition

In reimagining the Crystal Palace’s premier exhibit, Wilkie Collins returned to the originary site of global religious plurality in mid-Victorian England. For many a visitor, the Great Exhibition’s primary attraction lay in the Other religious worlds portended by its foreign attendees, an unprecedented display of ethnic and theological diversity. Collins’ recasting of the
Koh-i-Noor, then, remains illegible apart from an understanding of the way that the colonial exhibition construed foreign religiosities as markers of cultural development or degeneration, particularly with reference to Catholicism as the ultimate form of corrupt religion. Before focusing on the Koh-i-Noor display, I want to examine how the Great Exhibition gave material form to that master narrative. Such an examination will help shed light on the way the Koh-i-Noor display encouraged visitors to view the diamond as more than a symbol of Britain’s relationship to India—indeed, as the emblem of Imperial Christianity’s relationship to the foreign religiosities under its authority. By extension, the ensuing examination also sheds light on the ramifications of Collins’ choice to remove the diamond from its iron cage.

A tract published by the English Tract Society, “The World’s Great Assembly,” voices the fascination that foreign religiosities, personified in visitors from a variety of nations, inspired in English patrons of the Exhibition. The author’s objective is to highlight the evangelistic opportunity that the Exhibition affords, insofar as its foreign visitors, “many of [whom] never studied religion as a matter of personal salvation, are now studying it as an engine of improvement” (138:2). However, if the Exhibition’s material displays prompt foreign visitors to taste the benefits of Christian civilization, those visitors prompt Shaw, in turn, to imagine the varieties of non-Christian experience that they embody. In order to make his case for the Exhibition’s missionary potential, the author invites the reader to consider how the event might appear to the “Mussulmans,” “Romanists,” and “disciples of the Veda” visiting from distant shores. Even as the author insists on their common need for salvation, the thought experiment

Commenting on this passage, Jonathan Cohn observes that, through designating religion as an “engine of improvement,” “piety becomes a machine or a tool for the creation of national character and advancement” (35). This offers a neat way of articulating the value of examining different religions, through their material productions, at the Assembly: to assess the national character, and prospects for improvement, of the people group that produced the object.
moves him to an unexpected expression of fraternity with a hypothetical “child of Islam.” Indeed, the author singles out the “Mohammedan” as the devotee with whom he has most in common, insofar as he is “a man of the passions, an heir of the fall, a sinner like me. We both expect the resurrection trump, and the righteous judgment” (138:5). The author goes on to narrate the Mohammedan’s experience of the Exhibition in light of this common awareness of sin. Such awareness “is enough to make us, even amid the hurry of the Great Exhibition, turn away from its crowds and its wonders, and, lifting our hearts to the great God who has seen all our sins, cry to him.” The pamphlet of course reasserts the Christian character of this great God, who, in the author’s imaginary scenario, answers that “God, in Christ, is reconciling the world to himself.” Nonetheless, the moment is striking as an illustration of the Exhibition’s potential to spark speculation about the religious worlds of non-Christian visitors. In this regard, the pamphlet’s author is by no means idiosyncratic; for many, the Exhibition’s international attendees were almost as compelling an attraction as the exhibits themselves. As one letter writer to the Illustrated Exhibitor declared, “The visitors from all the countries of the world are...not the least curious articles at the exhibition” (231).

To be sure, the English Tract Society pamphlet occupies the more liberal end of a spectrum of responses to those “curious articles.” At the other end, one finds Reverend George Biber’s warning, in the pages of the staunchly Protestant publication John Bull, that the Exhibition had invited “a torrent of ungodliness” onto British soil (quoted in Cantor, 25), an undifferentiated morass of heathen worship. Juxtaposed with such cant, Shaw’s pamphlet exhibits a genuine desire to not simply understand what “Mahommedans” believe, but to know what they experience, in consequence of their specific creed. Even this more sympathetic response to foreign religiosities, however, finds its limit in fears of idolatry. Shaw’s portrait of
the Mahommedan immediately follows a description of Indian visitors, whose relationship to the Christian worldview is characterized by contrast rather than similarity. If Christians enjoy “the lights of religion and science, binding bonds of brotherhood with all mankind,” the Hindus worship “a pantheon of disgusting gods,” and remain “shut off from one another by partitions of caste” (“The World’s Great Assembly” 138:4). Where the Mahommedan’s religious experience exhibits comforting familiarity, the Hindu’s stands apart as alien and semibarbaric; where the Mahommedan could access the Christian deity in private prayer, the “idolatrous Hindu” requires the British Christian to proffer the Gospel’s “unspeakable boon” (ibid).

This contrast between this depiction of Muslim and Hindu experience resurfaces in the pamphlet *A World Embracing Faith*, by the Unitarian minister Richard Higginson. Like Shaw, Higginson casts the Exhibition as an opportunity to contemplate the inner life of international visitors, particularly as regards their “religious ideas, feelings, modes of worship and observance” (336). Higginson’s “Mahometans” appear as noble devotees of a theology “noble and sublime in itself,” a faith that “largely...participates in the revealed blessings of the Gospel,” (338) particularly insofar as it “compares advantageously with [the faith of] the idolater” (ibid). Immediately after this depiction of Islam, however, Higginson’s catalogue of religious specimens culminates in a description of those from “the Far East — from China, India and Japan — strange men, bodily and mentally” (ibid). For Higginson, the “strangeness” of these visitors ultimately consists in their inability to maintain boundaries between materiality and divinity, boundaries respected by Jew, Christian and Muslim alike. Because such men either “ascribe to the Physical Universe itself the attributes of Godhead,” or worship “graven images,” Higginson cannot enter into their experience as he has into the Mahometan’s; instead, he concludes “It is under the Providence of the Great Father of all that they have erred and we been
guided into truth.” 21

The structure of Shaw’s and Higginson’s forays into religious diversity, in which Muslim and Hindu respectively represent proximity and distance from Christian truth, reproduces the hierarchy of world religions that undergirded the Exhibition’s organization. John Burris argues that the Great Exhibition inaugurated a host of international expositions where the field of comparative religion emerged as a popular activity. Taking comparativist analysis beyond the province of the academic elite, such exhibitions “provided ideal settings in which religion, as a unique new field of intellectual inquiry, and religions, as the most basic source matter for that field, could come into clearer focus than ever before” (xiv). To be sure, the Great Exhibition’s organizers did not explicitly frame the event as an opportunity for comparative analysis: not only was the study of “comparative religion” still in the earliest stages of disciplinary formation, but also, as Geoffrey Cantor acknowledges, the utilitarian and industrial considerations of the event tended to ensure a secularized presentation of exotic cultural objects. (Cantor cites the *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue*, which, in its descriptions of the West African exhibit, draws attention to local craftsmanship but ignores the social and religious function of the objects on display (124)). Nonetheless, we might heed Burris’ observation that, during this period, “religious understanding was always central rather than peripheral to the developing art of cultural comparison” (24). In this light, the design of the Crystal Palace, and the arrangement of the material displays within it, implicitly encouraged a view of religious diversity that favored Christianity as a source of economic development. Such a view pervaded the bulk of discourse about the Exhibition, according to which a clear hierarchy of nations emerged in light of “the

21 Higginson does go on to concede that God has “spiritual blessings” even for these theological aliens (338); nonetheless, the limits of his sympathy are telling.
perceived influence of religion on the...march of progress” (Cohn 31).\textsuperscript{22} At the top of this hierarchy was, of course, Protestant Britain, whose “industrial success indicated the existence of God’s favor” (32). Fittingly, then, the Crystal Palace served as an emblem of that special favor: in The Economist’s words, a “splendid temple,” a “shrine of peaceful industry” that attracted “the pilgrimage of all nations” (“The Great Exhibition — The Crystal Palace,” qtd in Cohn 33). Within that temple, Britain’s displays of technological and cultural achievement were arranged so favorably that the contributions of other countries suffered by comparison, making clear their lower ranking on the hierarchy of nations (Burris 33).

It would be tempting, at this juncture, to read the Great Exhibition as a sign of creeping secularization, in which the impulse to venerate Christian faith competed with the impulse to venerate human reason. However, the predominant response to the Great Exhibition could be encapsulated in the Bishop of Oxford’s insistence on welcoming the Exhibition’s display of science and progress, “not in spite of my Christianity, but because of my Christianity” (quoted in Cantor 46). From such a point of view, the Exhibition materialized the Christian call “to reign over the elements” with the tools of reason and industry (ibid). The narrative that reigned at the Crystal Palace, then, was one in which British displays of ingenuity, including the Palace itself, magnified Christianity rather than undermining it. As a necessary corollary, the displays of other nations communicated the relative standing of the religions that produced them, the degree to which they approximate the Christian ideal. Insofar as the Exhibition inspired reflection on a diverse spectrum of religious experience, then, it did so within a context that privileged Christianity as the preeminent “engine of development.”

\textsuperscript{22} John Burris affirms that press coverage of the Exhibition showed remarkable “uniformity of judgment” in their assessment of the cultures and nations represented at such an event (37). Such an assessment lauded the Exhibition as displaying the hierarchy of “civilization,” and by extension religious sophistication, that Christian Britain presided over.
Of course, even this formulation requires narrowing: it was a specifically Protestant mode of Christianity that enjoyed privilege at the Great Exhibition. Only a brand of faith that had escaped idolatry’s snares could win the respect of Shaw’s and Higginson’s hypothetical Mahommedans; only a Christianity that maintained a proper relationship to the material world, that treated objects as means rather than ends, could generate the kind of material prosperity on display in the Crystal Palace. As the emblem of a faith fatally compromised by idolatry, then, Catholicism fared poorly at the Great Exhibition. This was evident from the controversy surrounding the Medieval Court, which featured crucifixes, altars, and other ecclesiastical items that many commentators interpreted as a valorization of Catholicism. Whether patrons praised the Medieval Court’s items as “graceful in form” (quoted in Cantor 111) or denounced them as “Babylonish garments and Tractarian toys” (quoted in Cantor 112), the display provoked consideration of the difference between Catholic and Protestant, a difference defined by their respective valuations of material objects.

The controversy over the Medieval Court underscores the degree to which “idolatry” and Catholicism, in the popular imagination, practically functioned as synonymous terms. It therefore provides a useful lens through which to view the representations of “indigenous” religion in India’s section of the Exhibition, emblems of that Eastern religiosity that even liberal Christians like Higginson found so alien. Though commentators tend to agree that Exhibition largely avoided explicit representation of non-Christian religions, the Indian pavilion included a striking number of displays elaborating on ritual, mythology and sacred architecture.23 In particular, one diorama of a puja, or Hindu purification ritual, conjured Gothic tropes of medieval sadomasochism; an article entitled “India and Indian contributions,” featured in The

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23 Cantor argues that the Exhibition “tended to render invisible religions other than Christianity,” since “the religious significance of artefacts from other countries was lost when extracted from...local context” (123-124).
Illustrated Exhibitor, writes of “the native religious festival in which the penitents, in redemption of voluntary vows, inflict upon themselves awful voluntary tortures” (321). Especially in light of the Medieval Court controversy, the diorama would have appeared as emblematizing kinship between Catholic excesses and the “Hindoo” religion. Such kinship found further concrete expression in the Indian Pavilion’s selection of (literally) graven images: the Catalogue’s description of contributions from the “East Indies” includes a “stone intaglio,” featuring depictions of such deities as Ganesh, Krishna and Hanuman (927). Alongside the intaglio and diorama, the Indian pavilion also featured other models of temples, as well as several images of “Godamah” (i.e., Gautama Buddha) depicting scenes from his life (927). All of these displays would reinscribed the sense that Indian religion, insofar as it compounded the excesses of Rome, existed beyond the pale of even a sympathetic Protestant imagination: to the considerable contingent of visitors unsettled by the Medieval Court, the Romish practices exhibited at the Indian Pavilion truly were only fit, in the words of Reverend Higginson, for “idolatrous Hindus” and “strange men.”

II. The Koh-i-Noor’s “Retributive Consignment” and the Performance of Disenchantment

It is in this context that scores of Exhibition patrons would have encountered the Koh-i-Noor diamond: at an event that was as much an “international exposition of theology” as an exhibition of industry and craftsmanship; where foreign visitors and images of foreign deities seemed to embody, in the most literal sense, new religious horizons; where those religious horizons were framed, by the press and by the event’s organizers, as implicitly inferior to Britain’s Christianity, worthy of respect only inasmuch as they transcended Rome’s idolatries. The Koh-i-Noor’s location within the Exhibition further served to prompt religious considerations: as Louise Tythacott has pointed out, the display was immediately adjacent to
several bronze sculptures of Chinese deities, described, in the official catalogue, as taken “from the sacred island of Pato” and featuring “the Buddhist deity Quon Yam (or Queen of Heaven)” (quoted in Tythacott 68). Furthermore, the crowds who gathered to see the diamond were driven there by a publicity blitz that highlighted the diamond’s mythological origins, as well as its centrality to Indian religious practices. The “traditional” account of the Koh-i-Noor, widely circulated in the press, highlighted the diamond’s origins “during the lifetime of Krishna,” five thousand years in the past (“Document 44” 80). Meanwhile, the press also circulated a “historical” version that elaborated on the Mughal owners of the diamond, including a story in which physicians pressured the emperor Baba Shah, unsuccessfully, to render the Koh-i-Noor as a sacred offering to secure the health of his son. In a similar story, other accounts reported that the diamond’s recent owner, Ranjit Singh, had died with the intention of offering the Koh-i-Noor in “the temple of Juggurnath, as an offering to Krishna (the God)” (quoted in Kinsey 399).

Indeed, it is fair to say that, at the time, the Koh-i-Noor was the most famous material representation of Indian religion known in Britain. The consequent aura of enchantment attached to the Diamond even fueled speculation that “the ‘Mountain of Light’ could emit light of its own accord” (Kinsey 403) - a detail Collins deploys in *The Moonstone*, as we shall see.

The Koh-i-Noor, damaged by a clumsy attempt to recut the diamond, inevitably disappointed anyone primed by such spectacular rumors. Yet the crowds flocked nonetheless, an index of how completely the diamond’s reputation, in the public eye, superseded the paltry details of its actual appearance. That reputation was further elevated by rumors of the curse that followed the diamond, ensuring the doom of any would-be owner. Indeed, the Queen herself expressed anxiety about the curse to Dalhousie (quoted in Kinsey 401). Yet the Queen also provided the means of assuaging such anxieties, since subsequent reports from India specified
that the curse only applied to “Oriental male despots” (ibid). As Kinsey writes, such reports “set
the diamond in the same context as the feminine body of the British monarch and made this
proximal relationship a necessity for counteracting the effects of the ‘Indian’ curse” (401).
Furthermore, the golden crown atop the cage housing the diamond served to remind nervous
onlookers who owned it (404). For some, the Queen’s ownership of the Koh-i-noor did not
merely nullify the supernatural effects recorded in that history; rather, it struck a blow against
that history’s very claims to reality, dispelling native belief with the monarchical representative
of progress and civilization. One writer for the Illustrated London News declared, “The
mischievous superstition attaching to the possession of this unique and invaluable diamond
might be utterly crushed by this retributive consignment” (quoted in Kinsey 401).

In this celebration of the diamond’s “retributive consignment,” the two iron cages with
which I began this chapter seem, indeed, to resolve into one another, like a trick of the light.
Insofar as the Koh-i-Noor’s cage signifies royal sovereignty, it also signifies the triumph of
Christian reason over the “mischievous superstition” that followed the diamond, a superstition
that, in context, merely extended the corrupt religiosity in evidence elsewhere at the Indian
Pavilion. In an Exhibition replete with representations of foreign faiths, the Koh-i-Noor display
encapsulated the power of British Christendom (read: Protestantism) to taxonomize the world’s
religious expressions, to systematically acknowledge their virtues and exorcise their vices. In the
display, a heathen overestimation of materiality--i.e., the basis for the idol worship and self-
inflicted bodily harm displayed in the Pavilion’s stone etchings and dioramas--was “converted”
into a properly Christian appreciation of the material object. Foregrounding aesthetic quality and
historical significance over rumors of enchantment, the Koh-i-Noor’s presentation implicitly
refuted the impulse to invest the object with more-than-material value. That the Diamond
manifestly did not emit its own light—that, in fact, its appearance could not even be mended by illuminating it and setting it on a black velvet cushion—poignantly testified to the exhibition’s disenchanting effect.

Even for those who paid no mind to the curse, the Koh-i-Noor displayed the Exhibition’s capacity to rescue sacred objects from their place in heathen worship, effectively christening them as purely material artifacts. Such an interpretation surfaces in Samuel Warren’s The Lily and the Bee, a poem described, in the preface to its second edition, as an attempt to interpret “the true spiritual significance” of the Great Exhibition. Warren sets about this task by replicating the experience of touring the Exhibition, immersing the reader, by his own account, in the Crystal Palace’s “sense of lustrous confusion.” In the section devoted to the Koh-i-Noor, the poet eschews mention of the curse; nonetheless, his experience begins with horror of pagan idolatry, before progressing to satisfaction at its status as royal property, a satisfaction inextricable from the certainties of Christian conviction. Eschewing mention of the curse, Warren reflects on the fate of two other diamonds, “glistening eyes of hideous Juggernaut!” (77). Undoubtedly referring to Ranjit Singh’s intentions to consecrate the Koh-i-Noor, Warren shudders at how the gem was “doomed to bear them dismal company...besmeared with the blood of human sacrifice.” After ruminating on this alternate reality, Warren dispels the counterfactual, to laud the “happier state” that comprises the Koh-i-Noor’s actual telos: not adorning a “grim idol,” but serving the “royal Mistress” Victoria, who has summoned the Koh-i-Noor to “teach, and to delight the eyes of those she loves” (77-78). The lessons “taught” by the Koh-i-Noor are valuable to

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24 Kinsey reports that these adjustments were made after both diamond experts and laypeople voiced suspicions that the Koh-i-Noor was a mere imitation. She quotes John Tallis’ acerbic reaction to the way that the display’s accoutrements only cast the Diamond’s dull appearance into starker relief: “On Friday and Saturday [the Diamond] puts on its best dress; it is arrayed in a tent of red cloth, and the interior is supplied with a dozen little jets of gas, which throw their light on the god of the temple. Unhappily, the Koh-i-Noor does not sparkle even then” (quoted in Kinsey 406).
“philosopher” and “chemist” alike, prompting the former to contemplate its “false value,” and the latter to ponder the means by which he can either dissolve or duplicate the diamond. Yet the Koh-i-Noor’s greatest lesson, it seems, is to cast into relief the greater brilliance of Christ, beside whom the “Mountain of Light” is reduced to “ineffectual fire...a dull, faint spark before the lustrous gem He bears” (82). The emotional journey taken by the poet thus climbs the hierarchy of enlightenment that informed the Exhibit’s patrons and organizers, moving as it does from idolatry’s degradations, to the blessings of reason, to the still greater blessings of Christian faith.

For many, of course, the blessings of reason were enough. Where the Koh-i-Noor’s display might have occasioned an explicit reaffirmation of Christ’s supremacy for Samuel Warren, it provoked others to the inchoate science of comparative religion, which, as John Burris argues, began to emerge within the Crystal Palace’s walls. Such an intellectual pursuit undoubtedly fell within the purview of Christian vocation, but did not require Warren’s ecstatic invocation of Christ; the expulsion of myth, and its replacement with history proper, constituted a sufficiently Christian witness in itself. In other words, the exhibit afforded the opportunity to practice the sort of distinctions performed by Nevil Maskelyne, the British Museum’s “Keeper of the Mineral Department,” in an 1860 address to the Royal Institution of Great Britain. Maskelyne begins by noting that some dismiss the diamond as a “bauble,” while “the Indian, looking back to the past centuries of the history of his fathers,” regards it as “the talisman of oriental empire.” In contrast, Maskelyne argues, “We must see in it a great historical document. Its history is, indeed, almost the history of India...told in part by authentic history, in part by tradition, and partly also in yet older days by that sort of history which is legend, and in which we lose sight of historical characters in the shadowy forms of gods or demigods” (212). This transformation of the diamond from “talisman of oriental empire” to a “document” containing
the entire history of India, in which shadowy gods necessarily give way to the clear light of “authentic” history, constitutes a less pious version of Warren’s reaction to the Koh-i-Noor. It almost certainly summarizes the experience of those patrons, given neither to superstitious fear nor effusive reverence, who were nonetheless anxious to make sense of the alien religions the Exhibition had brought to their attention. Even as exhibition guides alluded to the Koh-i-Noor’s fabulous history, they did so in a context that dismissed Hindu belief as antiquated fancy, an aspect of India’s pre-colonial past. As the surrounding displays of vegetable, mineral and animal produce made clear, that past had given way to its present status, as a testament to the material prosperity of a Christian empire.

III. Indian Religiosities as Virtual Enchantment at the Baker Street Bazaar

A curse broken, a destiny fulfilled, a history revealed: the Koh-i-Noor display thus filled all three roles, an island of certainty amidst what, for many, amounted to an often bewildering display of religious difference. Forty-two years before the Parliament of World’s Religions in Chicago, such an island would have felt especially necessary to devout Britons contemplating, perhaps for the first time, the alternate universes inhabited by Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus. Still others, however, might have chafed at the disenchanting overtones of the display, its simultaneous summoning and banishment of foreign belief. To be sure, such ambivalence toward the enchantments of the East was built into the arrangement of the Indian display itself. As pithily expressed in the Illustrated Exhibitor, “Look into the glittering Pavilion; you will fancy yourself in fairyland. Look outside — examine the model population ranged all around that gorgeous marquee, and you will dream of a horde of squalid barbarians” (219). The sordid dioramas of rural life surely did more to demystify India than the Koh-i-Noor itself. Nonetheless, for museumgoers interested in vicariously experiencing the “Hindoo” worldview,
the Koh-i-Noor display, with its implicitly Christian frame, cannot have offered real satisfaction.

Such a museumgoer might have been pleased with the Baker Street Bazaar’s diorama of the Ganges River, which ran for almost two years after opening in the Bazaar’s Asiatic Museum in October 1851, the very month the Great Exhibition closed. Juxtaposed with the Koh-i-Noor display, the Baker Street diorama comprises a contrasting example of how exhibitions framed foreign religiosities; if the Crystal Palace mainly subordinated Hindu faith to Christianity, the diorama offered a space in which patrons could venture outside conventional pieties, and try on another worldview without reminders of its theological inferiority. Commissioned by Fanny Parks, a wealthy Englishwoman whose memoir *Wanderings of a Pilgrim during Four-and-Twenty Years in the East* recounted her experiences in India, the Baker Street exhibit was intended to convey scenes of local religious life captured in *Wanderings*. As if to counter the suggestion that the exhibit merely presented imaginative speculations about Indian life, its theatrics were supplemented by ample evidence of ethnographic and historiographic rigor. In the section of the museum that preceded the diorama, patrons could browse a collection of authentic Indian objects, including idols depicting aspects of Hindu mythology. Inside the diorama, a succession of scenes depicted rituals and tableaux emblematizing the varieties of Indian religion, from a motionless “Muhammadan Fakir” to a widow being burned with her husband in the act of Sati. The pamphlet accompanying the diorama carefully documents the physical features and symbolic significance of idols, temples and forms of dress. These descriptions are accompanied by a close attention to the dates and biographical details of tableaux represented: we learn that the sati scene is no abstract representation, but actually “took place on the 7th November, 1828,

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25 The October 18th, 1851 edition of the Morning Chronicle lists the diorama of Hindostan as “to be opened, in the course of a few days” (“Advertisements and Notices”), while the September 20, 1853 edition lists it as closing on the 24th of that month (“Multiple Advertisements and Notices”).
near Raj Ghat, under the Mahratta bund”; the pamphlet goes on to narrate the story of a corn-chandler’s widow, “25 years of age,” who insisted on being burned with her husband’s body, and changed her mind literally at the last possible minute (Grand Moving Diorama 59). The reportorial register of the narration reinforces the diorama’s indexical credentials, its claim to represent a comprehensive survey of indigenous religious practice.

Reviewers praised the exhibit as a cost-effective alternative to an actual pilgrimage, especially for those interested in “mak[ing]...an acquaintance with ‘ye manners and customs’ of the Hindoos” (“Holiday Amusements, ‘Boxing Day’”). Indeed, religion, which provided only one category of analysis at the Great Exhibition, comprises the primary lens through which the Baker Street diorama depicted Indian life. As one critic commented, “The peculiarity in the exhibition is not so much the variety of scenery, though this is very great, as the constant aspect which is afforded of Hindoo life and religion under its most imposing forms” (“Drury Lane Theatre”). Here, the author casts Hinduism as a present day phenomenon, rather than the province of archaic legends whose time has passed. Furthermore, imaginative immersion constitutes the primary mode in which patrons are expected to encounter these representations of Hinduism: in the words of one reviewer, patrons could imagine themselves as travellers either “impelled by scientific enterprise or - as with the disciples of Bramah - by devotional zeal”; both find their desires satisfied by the climactic scene of the diorama, the mountainous region of Gangoutri where the Ganges begins. The Bell’s Life in London’s reviewer seems to have moved from distant observation to intense identification as the diorama progressed: though the spectator is, for most of the exhibition, “startled and amused by the several episodes of a fanciful idolatry,” this ironic distance gives way to a “sense of the sublime when he is introduced into the sanctum of the Hindoo faith, with its wild desolation and snowy mountains in the background.”
Meanwhile, a writer for *The Morning Chronicle* held that “the spectator is supposed to have become a devout Hindoo” from the outset of the diorama (“Holiday Amusements”). Thus, the entire exhibit - even features of it that lack a religious dimension, such as the painstaking representations of nautical vessels and native vegetation - images the perspective of a pilgrim paying homage to the gods.

The ease with which (likely Christian) spectators can temporarily imagine themselves as “devout Hindoos” stems from the fact that Hinduism, at this exhibit, is primarily construed not as a matter of shadowy gods and demigods, but as a matter of the behavioral and physical characteristics on display. Wearing ceremonial garb, standing motionless as a fakir, surrendering to (and then escaping from) the flames of the *sati* pyre, and journeying towards the sacred source of the Ganges all constitute actions in which the patron is invited to participate. In terms familiar to contemporary sociologists, the exhibit initiates patrons into the “behavioral” component of Indian religiosity. While the pamphlet does mention the specifics of various mythical narratives, these descriptions are primarily deployed to contextualize the behavior being depicted. The Ganges diorama, in other words, subjects religion to even greater objectification than the India Pavilion did; no mere collection of objects and models, some of which contain religious meaning, the diorama promises a virtual simulation of “Hindoo” religious experience. At the same time, however, the diorama’s climactic vision of Eastern sublimity is free from the imperial pageantry that surrounded the Koh-i-Noor’s display: patrons could contemplate the spiritual profundity of Hindu devotion without intervening reminders of the Empire’s civilizing and Christianizing mission. The “sense of the sublime” that accompanied the diorama’s climax, then, takes on radically different meaning than the sublimity experienced by Samuel Warren’s narrator, for whom the Koh-i-Noor cannot inspire any form of religiosity other than a
reaffirmation of Christian piety.

The above exhibits thus offer a window into the different affective states that representations of foreign religiosities — and, given its importance to the Empire, India’s religiosities in particular — could induce in curious observers. Put another way, these different re-presentations of Indian religiosity define the parameters within which exhibition patrons experienced religious Otherness. To be sure, designers of the Great Exhibition and the Baker Street Bazaar adopted different strategies for reconciling the desire for enchantment with the museum space’s commitment to disenchanted historiography: at the former, the Koh-i-Noor’s display and accompanying text downplayed enchantment, foregrounding the power of Christian empire to assimilate heathen objects into proper history; at the Baker Street Bazaar, ethnography serves as a frame for a virtual experience of Indian religious behavior. However, in both cases, the exhibit produces its desired effect, precisely because the exhibit frames Indian religion in strictly anthropological terms. Whether the strategy is taxonomical distance or virtual immersion, each exhibit frames “Hindoo” faith as a matter of dress, sculpture, architecture, geography. Arguably, the average patron at the Baker Street Bazaar could achieve a sense of sublimity precisely because of this implicit understanding: one can indulge such feelings only if they do not constitute a real threat to one’s belief system, if they are unreal.

In subsequent decades, of course, the Victorians’ dawning awareness of global religious diversity would make this anthropological distance exceedingly difficult to maintain. In the next part of this chapter, I want to examine the ways that such an awareness manifests in The Moonstone’s flirtations with the unreal. The Moonstone’s “subtextual fantastic,” I argue, offers a preview of the intimate relationship between the late Victorian period’s literary and religious sensibilities, between its fantastic excursions and its interreligious experiments.
IV. A “Fanciful Story”: Spectral Divinities and *The Moonstone’s* Subtextual Fantastic

From the novel’s opening pages, the Koh-i-Noor exhibit shadows *The Moonstone*, both overtly and subliminally. In the preface, Collins states that the Moonstone’s origin story echoes both the Orlov diamond (“the magnificent stone which adorns the top of the Russian Imperial Sceptre”) and “the famous Koh-i-Noor...one of the...sacred gems of India...[and] the subject of a prediction, which prophesied certain misfortune to the persons who should divert it from its ancient uses” (48). With this explicit reference to the Koh-i-Noor, Collins introduces a narrative whose structure implicitly recalls the diamond’s 1851 display. Indeed, the reader can only approach the Moonstone within a curated archive of documents— an exhibition, of sorts, arranged by Franklin Blake, the novel’s principal protagonist. Seeking an organized account of the Moonstone’s theft from Rachel Verinder, his cousin and love interest, Blake interpolates the reader as a kind of jury in a court case: as Melissa Free observes, the text gathers in “letters, reports, notes, newspaper clippings, journal entries, wills, and even a receipt... [all of which] serve as testimony for the reader’s consideration” (341). As Betteredge, the Verinders’ butler and one of the primary narrators, observes, the compilation is intended as a repository of legal evidence; he imagines a future member of the family reading the collection of narratives and feeling it a compliment “to be treated in all respects like a Judge on a bench” (254).

*The Moonstone’s* resemblance to the Crystal Palace comes into sharper focus when we recall Eric Hobsbawm’s thesis that legal archives are also histories, that “the procedures of the law court...insist on the supremacy of evidence much the same as historical researchers” (272). For both the Great Exhibition’s spectators and organizers, “the supremacy of evidence” allowed the Crystal Palace to offer an empirically verifiable history of world civilization, gathering in the spectrum of epochs between primitive idolatry and Christian modernity. Similarly, Blake’s
history of the Moonstone rests on evidence that stands up to juridical examination. Moreover, Hobsbawm’s equation between legal archive and history signals a yet-deeper resemblance between the two exhibitions, of which Collins may not have necessarily been conscious. Insofar as Blake seeks to exonerate his family from the charge of theft, his motives recall those of the Great Exhibition’s organizers: the directors of both archives aim to justify, or construe as morally legitimate, their relationship to colonial objects. If Blake desires to establish his family’s innocent relationship to the Moonstone, the Crystal Palace re-presented the Empire’s power to Christianize objects, converting them from locii of sacred power to properly historical artifacts.

Writing proper history however, requires the expulsion of that which is improper, i.e., myth.\footnote{Dipesh Chakrabarty has elaborated on myth’s inassimilability into the modern discipline of history. Analyzing Ranajit Guha’s study of the Santal, a Bengalese tribe who rebelled, in the name of their god, against British forces in 1855. Commenting on the caution with which Guha approaches the Santals’ claims of supernatural intervention, Chakrabarty observes that Guha has to adhere to the protocols of professional history. According to such protocols, “the idea of historical evidence, like evidence allowed in the court of law, cannot ascribe to the supernatural any kind of agential force except as part of...someone else’s belief system” (20-21). The result thus recalls the “official history” of the Koh-i-Noor, as “the Santals’ statement that God was the main instigator of the rebellion has to be anthropologised (i.e. converted into someone else’s belief or made into an object of anthropological analysis) before it finds a place in the historian’s narrative” (21). In underlining Guha’s need to “discipline” the Santal’s God-haunted historiography, Chakrabarty effectively shows the contemporary inheritance of the Great Exhibition’s own “anthropologising” approach to foreign religiousities. Moreover, his article casts into relief the way that such discipline eludes Franklin Blake’s own historical project.} In what follows, I want to suggest that The Moonstone’s fantastic undertones derive from its narrators’ collective failure to expel the Hindu gods from the archive. This failure, this lingering openness to the divinities traditionally responsible for the Moonstone’s origins, allows the fantastic to percolate beneath the surface of a plot putatively driven by materialist causality, and within an archive whose authority rests on the sufficiency of empirical data. In other words, an archive characterized by mimesis, “equivalence between the represented fictional world and the ‘real’ world outside the text” (Jackson 34), harbors fugitive marvels. With this subtextual unreality effect, Collins conducts his improvisation on the affective spectrum generated by
religious plurality, which emerged at the Koh-i-Noor’s display specifically, and in the colonial exhibition space generally. In his persistent insinuations of the supernatural, Collins re-presents the conflict of desires that entangled patrons to such exhibitions, the uneasy combination of superstitious fear, Christian conviction, and fascination with foreign religiosities. However, Collins forecloses a simplistic reassertion of Christian superiority; instead, his subtextual fantastic sharply contrasts Evangelical Christianity’s all-too-quotidian preoccupations with the extraordinary habitus of the Moonstone’s Brahmin guardians, who, in the book’s epilogue, ultimately portend a genuine escape from Weber’s iron cage.

The Moonstone’s attempted exorcism of Hindu belief begins in the Prologue. Its nameless narrator, Blake’s grand-uncle, reports his own exculpatory motives, declaring that he offers “the motive which has induced me to refuse the right hand of friendship to my cousin, John Herncastle” (52). (Herncastle, we will learn, steals the diamond at the siege of Seringapatam, bequeathing it to his niece Rachel.) The occasion for rendering such an account is the misinterpretation with which his family has greeted this refusal; as such, the narrator “declare[s], on my word of honour, that what I am now about to write is, strictly and literally, the truth.” We have, then, a microcosmic representation of the relationship between exoneration and indexicality in The Moonstone as a whole: like Blake, the nameless narrator must insist on absolute accuracy, an evidentiary standard worthy of the court, if he is to sufficiently establish his innocence. In order to mollify family members who think him unduly harsh towards Herncastle, the narrator aims to provide as comprehensive an account of the siege as possible; in order to offer adequate background to the siege, he writes, “I must revert for a moment to the period before the assault, and to the stories current in our camp of the treasure in jewels and gold stored up in the Palace of Seringapatam” (53).
In reverting to such stories, however, the narrator must shift from the register of history to that of myth. Initially, the narrator practices good history, noting that the Moonstone’s name owes to a “superstition which represented it as feeling the influence of the deity whom it adorned” (ibid). Here, Collins provides an account evocative of the Koh-i-Noor’s mythical history, yet as the narrator recounts how Hindu priests rescued the statue of the moon god from the Muslim armies at Somnauth, the distancing protocols of the secular historian appear to give way to the fascination of an enchanted storyteller. Once the Hindu priests reinstall the god in a new temple, the narrator writes, “Vishnu the Preserver appeared to the three Brahmins in a dream”:

The deity breathed the breath of his divinity on the Diamond in the forehead of the god. And the Brahmins knelt and hid their faces in their robes. The deity commanded that the Moonstone should be watched, from that time forth, by three priests in turn...And the Brahmins heard, and bowed before his will. The deity predicted certain disaster to the presumptuous mortal who laid hands on the sacred gem, and to all of his house and name who received it after him. And the Brahmins caused the prophecy to be written over the gates of the shrine in letters of gold. (54)

Here, the narrator appears to fall under the sway of Hindu legend. The threefold alternation between the deity and the Brahmins takes on the quality of a call-and-response, bearing closer resemblance to a liturgical incantation or lyric poem than a document of legal evidence. Moreover, the degree of agency afforded the breathing, commanding, and prophesying deity is presented without qualification, as if we were to take Vishnu’s power at face value. For a moment, the enchanted mode of narration threatens to override the narrator’s claim, at the outset of the letter, that “what I am now about to write is, strictly and literally, the
truth.”

Of course, the narrator is quick to undermine the tale’s credentials: in the next paragraph, he reassures us that the account amounts only to a “fanciful story” that made “no serious impression” on any soldiers except Herncastle, “whose love of the marvellous induced him to believe it” (54). Thus, whereas the Hindu legend was originally intended to induce belief in Vishnu’s vengeful power, here it serves to underscore Herncastle’s moral failings, his credulity as well as his rapacity. This is, of course, necessary to establish the relative moral rectitude of the narrator, whose treatment of Herncastle now appears righteous rather than heartless. Blake’s objective of exonerating himself and his relatives relegates the Moonstone’s sacred origins to an even more peripheral status: it becomes background to the background, part of the circumstances surrounding the action that precedes the main events. In other words, a story about the devotion of Hindu priests is marshaled, twice over, to tell a story about the moral character of British subjects, in the same way that the systematic presentation of foreign religious objects and architectural monuments narrates a story about colonial governance.

Yet the narrator’s properly rational history falters once more at the end of his letter. After insisting that he “attach[es] no sort of credit to the fantastic Indian legend of the gem,” he admits to being “influenced by a certain superstition...It is my conviction, or delusion, no matter which, that crime brings its own fatality with it...I am...fanciful enough that [Herncastle] will live to regret it, if he keeps the Diamond; and that others will live to regret taking it from him, if he gives the Diamond away” (58). In describing his own belief as “fanciful,” the narrator poses an ironic sort of equity between himself and Hindu believers in the Moonstone’s “fanciful story.” Hence, from the outset, the Moonstone intimates a dilemma for its British readers: how can the enlightened Western subject maintain proper distance from “fanciful legends” when he seems
perpetually on the verge to subscribing to superstition himself?

This problem of anthropological distance, of how to negotiate between a sacred past and the requirements of good history, finds concrete expression in the Moonstone itself. Like the material displays of international expositions, the Diamond serves as a synecdochal representation of Indian religion, literally importing with it a whole history of worship. “Here was our quiet English house suddenly invaded by a devilish Indian Diamond — bringing after it a conspiracy of living rogues, set loose on us by the vengeance of a dead man,” exclaims Betteredge; in his subsequent question, “Who ever heard the like of it - in the nineteenth century, never mind; in an age of progress...?” (88), one hears echoes of the civilizational hierarchy that cast those “living rogues” as extant acolytes of a primitive religion. Murthwaite, the Orientalist expert whose ability to “penetrate in disguise where no European had ever set foot before” clearly alludes to famed ethnographer Richard Burton, reinforces the sense that the diamond’s sacred origins are literally readable from its surface: after “looking at [the diamond] silently for so long a time that Miss Rachel began to get confused,” Murthwaite remarks that “a Hindoo diamond is sometimes part of a Hindoo religion. I know a certain city, and a certain temple in that city, where, dressed as you are now, your life would not be worth five minutes' purchase” (123). For their part, Murthwaite’s listeners receive these reports of Hindu fanaticism with a relish familiar to enchanted diorama patrons who, demurring the risk of an actual trip to India, nonetheless desired a virtual encounter with colonial subjects. Rachel, “safe in England,” is “delighted to hear of her danger in India,” while her cousins “were more delighted still...burst[ing] out together vehemently, ‘O! How interesting!’” (ibid)

Murthwaite, of course, conducts his inspection not in a museum space, but at Rachel’s birthday party, where she has fixed the diamond to her dress. The Moonstone, having found its
way into the Verinder household, has escaped the fate not only of its real-life counterpart, but also of many other treasures confiscated during the Siege of Seringapatam. (The most famous of these, an automated mechanical toy called Tipu’s Tiger, was displayed at the East India Company Museum during the Great Exhibition, and was installed in the British government’s India Office in 1868, the year of *The Moonstone*’s publication.) Nonetheless, the Moonstone’s association with Rachel’s sexuality, which Collins underlines by noting Murthwaite’s intense attention to her bosom, recalls the relationship between the Queen’s body and the Koh-i-noor, the former’s power to tame the latter. In this light, the scene of Rachel’s dinner party is the scene of the literary crime, the moment at which Collins begins to breach the Koh-i-Noor’s gilded cage: evoking the spectacle of 1851, Collins gives us a diamond removed from the display case, an object whose enchanted properties defy the neutralizing powers of British womanhood. “Looking back at the birthday now...I am half inclined to say that the cursed Diamond must have cast a blight on the whole company,” Betteredge writes; after recounting the various misunderstandings and arguments that transpired at the party, he concludes, “The Devil (or the Diamond) possessed that dinner-party” (127). As a coded rewriting of the Queen’s acquisition of the Koh-i-Noor, Collin’s novel comes perilously close here to undermining Victoria’s power over the charmed diamond.

Betteredge’s allusion to supernatural agency also implicitly deconstructs the division between “safe” England and “dangerous” India undergirding Murthwaite’s and Rachel’s exchange. Progressing from his “half inclined” assessment to his unqualified declaration of possession, Betteredge seems to build on the tentative admission of superstition enacted by the Prologue’s narrator. Moreover, his hesitation over whether to name supernatural agency as an efficient cause of disorder (the Devil or the Diamond?) stands out in an archive whose very

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raison d’être is linking consequences to agents (i.e., establishing which characters abetted and/or impeded the Moonstone’s multiple thefts). This is, perhaps, indicative of the ways that the Moonstone’s sacred past scrambles the procedures of secular historiography. Though translated into the Christian theology of demonic influence, the curse of Vishnu resists the Orientalist’s anthropologizing move here; not simply something the colonial Other believes, the curse has the capacity to command “our” belief as well. As a result, the distance between the Verinders’ household and Murthwaite’s “certain temple in a certain city” threatens to collapse, a prospect held in abeyance only by remaining vague about who or what is doing the possessing.

Put another way, the disenchanting gaze of the international exhibition, the mode of vision that experienced the Koh-i-Noor as a desacralized object subject to a Christian Queen, falters before the Moonstone. Betteredge signals this in the scene prior to the party, where he describes the Moonstone’s physical properties in the language of inscrutability and indeterminacy. Encountering the Diamond for the first time, Betteredge writes, “It seemed unfathomable; this jewel, that you could hold between your finger and thumb, seemed unfathomable as the heavens themselves” (118). If a culture’s material display reifies its religious life, then the religiosity linked to the Moonstone, the Way of Life signified in its very form, harbors depths for which a Murthwaite cannot hope to account. This is particularly apparent due to the mysterious physical property at the heart (literally) of the Diamond: whereas the Koh-i-Noor could not actually generate its own light, Betteredge goes on to recount that the Moonstone “shone awfully out of the depths of its own brightness, with a moony gleam, in the dark” (ibid). The association between material artifacts and religious practice returns us to the generations of Hindu devotion described in the Prologue, a devotion whose indefatigability, whose impossible capacity for endurance, seems literally reflected in the Moonstone’s self-
generated light.

V. Brahminical Devotion, Evangelical Hypocrisy and the Problem of History

What makes the Moonstone unfathomable to Western eyes, then, is the way it figures a religious devotion, stretching from Vishnu’s dream visitation into the present day, that troubles the border between myth and respectable history. The Moonstone’s unbroken link to sacred time finds literal manifestation in the Brahmin priests who violate the geographical and temporal separation between England, land of progress, and India, coded by Orientalist scholarship as the site of Europe’s religious and linguistic past: this violation is underscored by Murthwaite’s hypothesis that the Brahmins have “sacrificed their caste...in crossing the sea” (129). Murthwaite keys this sacrifice to the ruthlessness and implacability of the Hindu subject, who, “if a thousand lives stood between them and the getting back of their Diamond... would take them all” (130). In following the Moonstone to England’s shores, then, the priests recall the representatives of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism at the Crystal Palace, alien subjects whom, Evangelicals hoped, would convert after encountering Christianity’s material legacy.

Yet the sort of comparative analysis elicited by the priest’s spectral presence does not culminate in a celebration of Christianity as the engine of historical progress. Rather, the Hindu devotion that operates at the text’s margins, and the unreal powers that inspire that devotion, casts into relief Evangelical Christianity’s status as a mere byproduct of material history: in The Moonstone, Christian piety constitutes an effect, rather than a cause, of material processes, meaning that its hypocrisies can be exposed by the rigors of historico-legal procedure. Conversely, especially through the lingering possibilities of the Prologue’s “fanciful story,” Collins casts Brahminical Hinduism as a hidden force animating material processes, an occult power of which empiricist procedures can, finally, only deliver a vanishing trace.
The contingent nature of Christian piety, its vulnerability to psychological flux and material circumstances, is signaled throughout Betteredge’s account. Finding himself exasperated with Sergeant Cuff, Betteredge muses, “I am an average good Christian, when you don’t push my Christianity too far. And all the rest of you - which is a great comfort - are, in this respect, the same as I am” (228). Later, indignant at Cuff’s implication that the butler has been complicit in the investigation (and corollary incrimination) of Rachel Verinder, Cuff signals the degree to which his physical frailty determines the constancy of his Christianity: “To be held up before my mistress, in my old age, as a sort of deputy-policeman, was, once again, more than my Christianity was strong enough to bear” (230). Betteredge returns to this theme when confronted with a maid who, believing Franklin Blake to have caused her friend Rosanna’s death, wishes for Franklin’s own destruction. “Here was another of your average good Christians,” Betteredge observes, “and here was the usual breakdown, consequent on the same average Christianity being pushed too far!” (248) Christianity constitutes, at best, a fragile code of etiquette, not a source of persevering faith; if the faith only functions when “not pushed too far,” it can hardly generate the same kind of zeal exhibited by a lineage of watchful priests.

Christian piety’s status as an epiphenomenon of material preoccupations manifests most visibly in Godfrey Ablewhite, Rachel’s cousin and suitor, as well as the ultimate culprit in the Moonstone’s theft. Far from being enamored with the Moonstone’s transcendent quality, Ablewhite sniffs, “Carbon, Betteredge! mere carbon, my good friend, after all!” (119) Ablewhite’s comment not only foreshadows the role he plays in the Moonstone’s theft--he conspires to sell the Diamond to pay off his debts--but also signals the earthbound imagination that pervades his theology. Betteredge gets a taste of Ablewhite’s religious views while overhearing a conversation between himself and Miss Clack, Ablewhite’s cousin and starstruck
admirer, at Rachel’s birthday party. The intimacy of their theological *tete-a-tete* (“Why the mischief did Mr. Godfrey keep it all to his lady and himself?” Betteredge innocently asks (125) signals that Godfrey’s designs in this particular conversation may be more amorous than angelic. Indeed, Ablewhite proceeds to conflate earthly and heavenly desire, thereby effecting not earth’s divinization, but Heaven’s materialization, its transformation into an ideal society meeting. “Heaven was earth, done up again to look like new. Earth had some very objectionable people in it; but, to make amends for that, all the women in heaven would be members of a prodigious committee that never quarrelled, with all the men in attendance on them as ministering angels.” For Ablewhite, not only is the Moonstone bereft of the unfathomable heavens, but so is Heaven itself.

Similarly, Miss Clack signals the pervasive influence of material considerations on her theology in the introduction to her account. By a tortured logic, she suggests that writing the account allows her to achieve a kind of Christlike martyrdom, since she must not only “re-open wounds that Time has barely closed,” but submit to “a new laceration, in the shape of Mr. Blake’s cheque” (256). Christian self-abnegation bizarrely takes the form of accepting financial remuneration. This basic incoherence is echoed in the pamphlet Clack offers her ailing aunt Lady Verinder. Entitled “The Serpent at Home,” the pamphlet “[shows] how the Evil One lies in wait for us in all the most apparently innocent actions of our daily lives. The chapters best adapted to female perusal are "Satan in the Hair Brush;" "Satan behind the Looking Glass;" "Satan under the Tea Table;" "Satan out of the Window" — and many others” (288). The irony, of course, is that the pamphlet’s theology draws obsessive attention to the very sources of temptation that good Christians girls must putatively flee.

The contrast between Christian hypocrisy and Hindu piety culminates in the book’s
closing pages, when the exposure of Godfrey Ablewhite’s secret misdeeds is closely followed by the permanently unavailable mysteries intimated in Murthwaite’s concluding dispatch. At the murder scene, Franklin and Inspector Cuff find a corpse disguised with painted complexion, wig and beard, which they must remove to reveal Ablewhite’s identity. In removing the disguise, of course, they also remove the illusion of Ablewhite’s Christian rectitude, exposing it literally as a mask for material realities. Upon further investigation, Cuff delivers Franklin a “complete report” of Ablewhite’s philandering and financial embezzlement, one that, in his estimation, “[answers] the greater part, if not all, of the questions, concerning the late Mr. Ablewhite, which occurred to your mind when I last had the honour of seeing you” (522). (Ablewhite’s lone champion is, of course, Miss Clack, who clings steadfastly to her admiration for her “Christian Hero” long after his secrets come to light). Ablewhite’s piety is, in the end, legible as an attempted evasion of history, a cover for unethical behavior now enshrined in the archive of evidence.

Where Christianity fails to prevent Ablewhite’s exposure to the historical record, however, Hindu devotion, in Murthwaite’s final dispatch, results in both the Moonstone’s and the brahmins’ escape from that record. In that closing scene, the fantastic rises from the level of subtext, threatens to bubble over...and then disappears. As such, the final scene’s evocation of pluralistic experience defies readings that cast it as a reaffirmation of Orientalist ideology. Krishna Manavalli articulates this point of view, by describing the tableau, in which thousands of worshippers bear witness to both the Moonstone’s restoration and the brahmins’ ritual exile, as a locus of what she calls “the Brahmin Sublime”: a “Gothic vision of a prehistoric exotic Hindu-Brahminical India from which terror...emanate[s] right back into the...metropolitan centre” (78). Manavalli suggests that the passage underwrites Orientalist historiography’s simultaneous
marginalization of Indo-Islamic tradition and romanticization of Brahminical Hinduism: in Kathiawar, the region where the ceremony takes place, Muslims “do not dare tasting meat of any kind” for fear of reprisals from Hindus (463), while the caste system is so powerful that even the custodians of the Moonstone must be exiled for violating its rules (in Collins’ version of Brahminical tradition, “crossing the sea” constitutes a sacrifice of caste). Manivalli goes on to argue that the Gothicized “doom” visited upon the priests epitomizes the Brahmin Sublime, a construct that menaces “the illusions of stability underpinning the nineteenth century English middle-class world” (80) Simultaneously, however, the Brahmin Sublime depends on an Orientalist reading of Hinduism that, by privileging caste as the “primary subject of social classification and knowledge,” underwrote strategies of colonial control (Dirks, qtd in Manivalli 68).

Manivalli is right to point out The Moonstone’s marginalization of Indo-Islamic tradition; as she observes, the contrast between pristine Brahminical Hinduism and a violently invasive Islam is foreshadowed in the prologue, in which the Muslim conquerors exclusively operate as agents of desacralization. In what follows, however, I want to suggest that the ambiguities of the final scene, the way it returns the reader to the prologue’s intimations of divine power, belie her conclusion that Collins’s depiction of Hinduism “remains consonant with and supportive of [the imperialist interests] he was trying to critique” (82). As though in compensation for the Moonstone’s escape from the British gaze, Murthwaite’s narration stages a dioramic representation of secret ceremony. Yet the sheer unrepresentability of both the Moonstone’s and the brahmins’ destinies sharply contrasts with the visual pageantry on display; even as the passage participates in Orientalist tropes about Brahminical tradition, it also implicitly challenges religion’s subjection to taxonomic systems of classification and control, with reference to
mysteries that remain uncontrollable. In that light, the key affective response engendered by the conclusion may be melancholy rather than terror, as Murthwaite’s narration emphasizes domestic Britain’s inability to access the enchanted sanctum imaged in its dioramas and exhibitions. We can best understand the conclusion’s affective dynamics by contrast with the writings of Richard Burton, the main inspiration for Murthwaite’s section of the narrative. If Burton’s descriptions of Muslim culture foregrounds Islam’s availability for re-presentation and reappropriation, his approach to exoticized religiosities casts into relief the conclusion’s preoccupation with unrepresentability, and its corollary hints at a fantastical Beyond irreducible to the novel’s empirical “reality.”

VI. “You have lost sight of it forever”: Richard Burton and The Moonstone’s Unruly Epilogue

In his Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah, Burton recounts how he made the pilgrimage to Mecca disguised as a Muslim from northern India, a region foreign to his fellow pilgrims. Burton’s account, which includes detailed descriptions of Muslim rituals, ceremonial fashion, social stratification, and holy sites, recalls the ethos behind the Baker Street Bazaar, purporting as it does to capture the primal essence of a foreign religion: as in those exhibits, religion in the Personal Narrative is reducible to an interplay amongst geographic locations, sacred objects, and bodily behavior, all of which are subject to the operations of taxonomic classification. Indeed, for Burton, the very body of the Muslim is an object to be read: in an early passage, he enjoins his audience to “look...at an Indian Moslem drinking a glass of water,” staging the hypothetical Muslim, with his ritualized behavior, as an exhibit on display for the invisible white observer (21).

Yet Burton’s project goes beyond the ambitions of most colonial exhibitions. Not content with merely effacing himself and recording observations about his fellow pilgrims,
Burton feels compelled to “[enact] a more embellished and legitimate Muslim identity than those ‘real’ Muslims around him (Roy, 29).” Burton disguised himself as a “Darvaysh,” a figure in Islam whose liminal status exempted him from strict attention to orthodoxy, and participates in Muslim ceremony throughout: as Parama Roy notes, Burton “stages his identity in the most flamboyant of ways” (ibid) correcting other Muslims on points of doctrine and even pretending to work “miracle” when he invokes the name of a Sufi mystic to loosen a ship mired in mud (ibid). Dane Kennedy argues that Burton's “cross-cultural role playing” was a canny commercial move, insofar as it appealed to the Victorian “affinity for the theater and its world of fictive identities” (58); whereas converting to Islam would have been seen as “an act of abasement to an inferior faith,” his decision to construe his journey to Mecca as a theatrical performance won over a public “culturally conditioned to draw the distinction between the person and the performance, and to applaud the latter when carried off with aplomb” (67). But Burton’s theatricality - his makeup, his memorization of important facets of Islamic doctrine, his ostentatious prayers - does not merely testify to his acting abilities; it also signals the extent to which the Other’s religious identity can be reduced to a set of behavioral and physical characteristics, available for mastery. Burton’s expert performance thus rehearses the familiar Orientalist trope of the Western expert providing a more authentic interpretation of native culture than the natives themselves.

As both consummate Orientalist and consummate Muslim, then, Burton constitutes a spectacular counterpart to the patron of the Baker Street Bazaar’s Ganges diorama: he simultaneously poses himself as the enchanted object of study, and the omniscient Western observer. As such, the moment at which Burton seems on the verge of authentic conversion quickly gives way to a reassertion of his Orientalist credentials. Upon finally reaching Mecca,
Burton counts himself amongst the pilgrims, noting that, “of all the worshippers who clung weeping to the curtain, or who pressed their beating hearts to the stone, none felt for the moment a deeper emotion” than he did. Faced with the Kaaba, Burton finds himself tempted by the lyricism of Islamic belief: “It was as if the poetical legends of the Arab spoke truth, and that the waving wings of angels, not the sweet breeze of morning, were agitating and swelling the black covering of the shrine” (390). Nonetheless, Burton is quick to qualify, “Theirs was the high feeling of religious enthusiasm, mine was the ecstasy of gratified pride” (390). Enchantment, in other words, can only be experienced as a temporary apprehension of Muslim devotion, before giving way to the triumphalism of the Orientalist scholar.

As mentioned above, Murthwaite’s resemblance to Burton is evident from his first appearance in the novel. In the Epilogue, Murthwaite takes cues from Burton’s strategic disguise by relating how he passed himself off as a “Hindoo-Buddhist, from a distant province...not as one of themselves, but as a stranger from a distant part of their own country” (540). Murthwaite’s self-congratulation is limited to the assertion that he “passed muster with the people readily” due to his dress, linguistic fluency and complexion; nonetheless, the ensuing account of secret religious practice thus also signals the prowess by which its author secured that witness. His narration, too, takes its cues from Burton’s theatricality. Like a stage manager, he instructs his audience to build the scene: “People this lovely scene with tens of thousands of human creatures, all dressed in white, stretching down the sides of the hill, overflowing into the plain, and fringing the nearer banks of the winding rivers. Light this halt of the pilgrims by the wild red flames of cressets and torches, streaming up at intervals from every part of the innumerable throng. Imagine the moonlight of the East, pouring in unclouded glory over all” (541). “A strain of plaintive music” provides the soundtrack to the spectacle; in the foreground
is a “natural platform” on which the Brahmins are presented to the crowd, and above them a
“curtain hung between two trees” hides the shrine from view. Finally, Murthwaite’s rapturous
description of the moon god “soar[ing] above us, dark and awful in the mystic light of heaven”
(542), echoes Burton’s encounter with the Kaaba, and the mis en scene that tempted him to
embrace the “Arab legends” as truth. Here, too, the line between fascinated observer and
participating acolyte threatens to disappear, and the scene seems to usher readers into the same
simulated encounter with the Sublime, the “sanctum of the Hindoo faith,” that climaxed the
Baker Street diorama.

However, unlike either the diorama or Burton’s triumphalist depiction of his arrival at
Meccah, Murthwaite’s narration is keyed to pathos and loss. Conjuring a virtual representation
of secret Hindu ceremony, Murthwaite abruptly erases the key players at its center: in quick
succession, both the priests and the Moonstone vanish from our sight. “The track of the doomed
men through the ranks of their fellow mortals was obliterated,” Murthwaite writes, “We saw
them no more.” Murthwaite then stages the disappearance of the Moonstone as well, a
recapitulation of the priests’ escape from the annals of oral and recorded history. “You have lost
sight of it in England,” he writes, “you have lost sight of it forever” (466). Manivalli reads this
moment as an instance of “colonial terror,” imaging the Brahmin Sublime’s monstrous cruelty
towards even the most devoted followers of Vishnu. However, do not these disappearances
testify, with even greater intensity, to the agency exhibited by both the stone and its devotees —
an agency that bests the reach of imperial authority, and eludes the domestic contact zones that
such authority governs? After all, the Moonstone has been lost because Sergeant Cuff’s man
failed to apprehend the three absconding priests, and the site of its final restoration, Kattiawar,
was a region Collins specifically chose because it was not yet subject to colonial regulation
Religious ceremony here is no mere locus of despair, but an engine of occlusion and migration, processes that the static tableaux of colonial exhibitions cannot really represent. To read the scene only as an occasion for terror elides the degree to which these disappearances frustrate the imperative to catalogue, enumerate, and therefore control local forms of knowledge.

Indeed, if Blake’s archive participates in the colonial exhibition’s taxonomic ambitions, then this ending also works against the narrative’s various modes of disciplinary organization. The title of the section containing Murthwaite’s letter, “The Finding of the Diamond,” bears witness to the demands of emplotment: since the first section of the novel is titled “The Loss of the Diamond,” followed by “The Discovery of the Truth,” the movement from crisis to resolution requires this final section to proclaim the diamond’s recovery. Yet the section’s title might as well repeat “The Loss of the Diamond,” since the Moonstone has once more escaped the reach of the clan that includes Herncastle, Ablewhite, and Blake. Murthwaite’s concluding invocation of cyclical time, widely perceived as a fixture of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, underscores this fact: in a move that radically demotes the singularity of the preceding archive, Murthwaite writes, “So the years pass, and repeat each other; so the same events revolve in the cycles of time. What will be the next adventures of the Moonstone? Who can tell?” (466) (We can amend Murthwaite’s question to include the next adventures of the Moonstone’s custodians as well, since they are never far behind.) Such an ending suggests that Blake’s obsessive attention to a particular sequence of events - one that begins with Herncastle’s theft, and ends with the Moonstone’s restoration - might amount to little more than an inflated sense of his family history’s uniqueness. So, too, does it reassert the limits of the Orientalist gaze, since not even Murthwaite, celebrated traveller of India, can reasonably answer his own question. Finally, the emphasis on cyclical repetition links this scene of restoration to the sacred ceremony in the
novel’s prologue - the Moonstone’s installation at Benares. Whereas that narrative was reframed as a “fanciful legend” by colonial agents, however, the future adventures intimated in the closing lines remain unavailable for Western reappropriation.

But does that unavailability necessarily confirm the “fanciful legend”’s truth — i.e., that the Moonstone has escaped to the realm of the gods, a realm outside of the secular time-space in which Collins’ detective plot, so bound up with empirically verifiable processes of cause and effect, has taken place? In the end, it may be helpful to view The Moonstone through the lens of Farah Mendlesohn’s category of “liminal fantasy.” The liminal fantasy, Mendlesohn argues, is “that form of fantasy that estranges the reader from the fantastic as seen and described by the protagonist” (4). This category itself can take two forms: in the first, a narrative has clearly supernatural elements, the protagonist takes them for granted, but the reader never ceases to experience them as supernatural; in the second, the kind that bears strong resemblance to The Moonstone no overtly supernatural elements emerge, and yet the reader somehow understands that the narrative is fantastical nonetheless. While Mendlesohn’s definition turns on the notion that liminal fantasy “estranges the reader” by “casualiz(ing) the fantastic within the experience of the protagonist” (xxiv), one can conceive of a liminal fantasy in which the protagonist’s narration does not casualize the fantastic per se, but nonetheless intuits a lesser degree of fantastical activity than the reader does, as the latter possesses knowledge to which the protagonist may not have access. This, I suggest, aptly characterizes The Moonstone, particularly in light of the lingering effect of the Prologue’s “fanciful story,” its never-quite-dispelled hint at divine agency. That is, Murthwaite may merely experience the scene as an enchanting view of Hindoo believers enraptured in their own habitus, and invoke the “cycles of time” as a romantic gesture towards beliefs he does not share himself. However, the novel’s
constant intimations that there may be some truth to Hindu beliefs after all (certainly more than Collins ascribes to Christian belief) invites us to hear in the line something more than a Burton-esque romanticization of a worldview that the speaker does not, in fact, hold. If the gods do exist, presiding over unimaginable “cycles of time” and playing a hidden role in the flux of history, then this might account for the coincidence of Murthwaite happening to come across the ceremony (a coincidence Murthwaite himself describes as “incredible” (539). Moreover, the possibility of cosmic time cycles turns the question that concludes the novel into something of a dare, a tease to the reader: Who can tell the next adventures of the Moonstone? The reader, if she chooses to believe.

Heard in this manner, the final question does not, as Manavalli argues, merely reinscribe an Orientalist view of Hindu religion, “[firmly fixing] the Brahmin subjects...in a timeless Indian past” (71). Certainly, this may be Murthwaite’s intent, but the frame narrative is not so easily reduced to ideology. If anything, the conclusion fixes the entire narrative within a time scale that precedes and continues long after it, a scale unnavigable by deductive reasoning or linear historiography. Juxtaposed with that time scale, even empirical reasoning as airtight as Sargeant Cuff’s begin to look, at best, like incomplete resolutions to a cosmic mystery. In other words, although one might acknowledge Collins’ use of Orientalist tropes here, we should also recognize the ending’s subversive implications for the imperial drive to taxonomize colonial populations, the very drive that made Orientalist scholarship possible. For, after depicting Christianity as epiphenomenal to historical processes, Collins floats the possibility of an authentic mode of religion that opens up to a space truly beyond history, a habitus whose intimacy with transcendence renders impotent the operations of ethnography, dioramic simulation, or investigative reportage. An unruly item in The Moonstone’s textual archive,
Murthwaite’s dispatch constitutes a final betrayal of authorial intent, recording a loss where Blake would report a finding, occluding what the archive purports to disclose.

Fitting that, for many of The Moonstone’s readers, the epilogue eclipsed the Sensation novel machinery that preceded it. As Geraldine Jewsbury’s review in the Atheneum declares, “The ‘epilogue’ of the Moonstone is beautiful. It redeems the somewhat sordid detective element, by a strain of solemn and pathetic human interest. Few will read of the final destiny of the Moonstone without feeling the tears rise in their eyes as they catch the last glimpse of the three men...The deepest emotion is certainly reserved to the last” (106). Jewsbury’s description of the epilogue suggests that the final scene does not merely confound Blake’s narrative intent, but Collins’ as well. His “Preface to the New Edition,” after all, characterizes his novel chiefly as an attempt to “trace the influence of character on circumstances,” and specifically the ramifications of “right or wrong” conduct on the outcome of the plot. Yet the Epilogue instead leaves readers brooding over circumstances for which no realist character study, with its focus on empirically demonstrable facts, could ever account. As I have argued, the “deepest emotion” Jewsbury ascribes to the reader may therefore not be reducible to sympathy for the three Brahmins, but a deep yearning to experience the kind of religiosity that appears and disappears before the reader’s eyes. With respect to the Moonstone’s ongoing sacred history, the novel can only pose a question — “Who can tell?” — and wait for someone to answer it.

VII. Dis-Illusioning Religious Exhibits in Richard Marsh’s The Joss

I have read The Moonstone against the mid-Victorian exhibition’s emergent attention to the material artifacts of foreign religious life. While The Moonstone’s closing rhetorical question registers the limitations of this objectification, its unease with the taxonomic operations of the dioramic and museological space would, by the end of the century, transforms into The Joss’
intensities of violence and disintegration. Indeed, if *The Moonstone* rewrites the story of the Koh-i-Noor, *The Joss* rewrites *The Moonstone*, borrowing formal and thematic elements liberally from its predecessor. Yet in *The Joss*, the re-presentation of foreign religiosities in the metropole sparks a yearning for exotic spectacle that, in the end, meets only disenchantment and psychological disintegration. While this pessimistic outlook is partially attributable to racist sentiments about the barbarous origins of those religions, it also indicates dissatisfaction with the cultural practices that facilitated that re-presentation.

The late Victorian period in which *The Joss* was written witnessed an increased emphasis on religious subjectivity at international exhibitions. At the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition, material artifacts continued to afford a window into the Ways of Life that colonial subjects took for granted. Hence, in the publication *The Children’s Friend*, a pigeon-house in the Indian Gallery occasions the explanation that “the people of that province [believe] that it is a sin to take the life of animals, and an act of charity to feed them” (“A Day at the Colonial Exhibition” 117). Elsewhere, the association between relics and religion served an explicitly traditionalist form of politics: as Hoffenberg notes, art experts designated the Exhibition’s architectural relics as “illustrations of religious life which, if strengthened, might prevent...modern social transformations,” the latter of which were inevitably construed as a source of colonial disorder (154). Still other patrons continued to judge the ultimate worth of an explicitly religious object in terms of the degree of progress to which it testified. Observing the “complex Hindoo mythology” illustrated in the paintings and sculptures of India and Ceylon, one critic commented, “[These] conspicuous objects...do not illustrate progress, we therefore leave them to be studied by the anthropologist and archaeologist” (“Art. III,” 37). For patrons more concerned with wonder than progress, the exhibition afforded the opportunity to take the part of
a pre-industrial Indian subject as they wandered through the models of shrines and temples found in the Indian Court, or as they silently observed the artisans in the Palace who applied themselves to traditionalist craft. Hence, a writer for *The Times* in London rhapsodized, "At a single step, the visitor is carried from the wild, mad whirl of the individual competitive struggle for existence to which civilization has been reduced in the ever changing West, into that stately splendor of antique life of the East, the tradition of which has been preserved in pristine purity only in India" (qtd. in Mathur 496). Such tradition implicitly included those charming forms of religious devotion in which patrons could imagine themselves participating.

The most important exhibition of non-Western religion during this period, however, occurred not in Britain, but in Chicago, at the 1893 Columbian Exposition. At the Exposition, exhibits of material culture were assigned one of two locations: the White City, a central complex of white buildings housing the pavilions of “civilized” European and Asian nations and colonies; and the Midway Plaisance, an outdoor assemblage that grouped commercial amusements with the “ethnic villages” of “peoples from less-industrialized foreign cultures” (Burris, 99). The Exposition also housed the World’s Parliament of Religions, in which representatives of various Eastern and Western religious traditions delivered papers on their respective faiths. The restriction of congress to “the ten great world religions,” and the corollary elision of religious traditions considered too primitive for inclusion, emblematized the way that the Exposition’s organizers situated world cultures on a scale from refinement to barbarism. As Bank, Burris, and other scholars have noted, the organization of “White City” and “Midway Plaisance” ethnic displays further intensified the role that cultural and racial hierarchies played at this particular exhibition. While religions represented in the elaborate White City were afforded prestige, the displays on the Midway - the Chinese “joss house” featuring unidentified religious
objects, the “cultural villages,” even the relatively sophisticated Islamic “Street in Cairo” -
connoted commercialized amusement. The hierarchical organization of world religions thus
became an even more pronounced feature at the Columbian Exposition.28

The exhibit also reinforced the sense that people as well as objects were equally viable
media for displaying the inner workings of foreign religious life. At the Indian pavilion in the
White City, patrons could interact with eloquent Brahmins who clarified misconceptions about
their religious heritage; on the Midway, Native American groups performed dances and
ceremonies that were analyzed for their religious significance (Burris 106). These ceremonies
were not always simulated: a village of Inuits, who were invited to live on fairgrounds for up to a
year, performed a funeral rite in public view when a boy drowned near the camp (“Weird
Funeral Rite,” qtd. in Burris 107). The Daily Inter-Ocean’s summary of the event, offered under
the title “Weird Funeral Rite,” exemplifies the way that the Midway’s designation as an
“entertainment space” trivialized the religions represented therein: after describing how “the
entire village population” organized into a “grotesque procession,” and how “Reverend Mr.
Atchison offered a simple but earnest prayer,” the author concludes, “The rest at once resumed
their games for the entertainment of visitors in the village.”

The Chicago Exposition attracted a host of visitors from England, and its influence was
visible in Britain the following year, when the British Museum opened its own collection of
religious objects. A writer for the Bow Bells described this “religious object.lesson” as
emblematic of an age “priding itself on its scientific tendency and logical acumen...[when] the

28 Rosemarie Bank observes, “It is not difficult to locate the White City and, particularly, the Midway Plaisance, as
sites for the expression of racism” (597); she points out that the displays depicting man’s development on the
American continent “created a hierarchy of races detrimental to non-whites” (ibid). Meanwhile, John Burris notes
that the arrangement of displays along the Midway reflected this hierarchy, with replicas of European villages
occupying “the most prestigious part of the midway...nearest to [the] White City,” and Asiatic and Islamic countries
located further away. A mile from the White City, Burris writes, “the peoples resided who were thought to have
been least desirable as carnival displays” (113).
highest and holiest aspirations of the human animal are, so to speak, vivisected - placed beneath the scientific agnostic’s microscope and torn asunder by his ruthless scalpel” (“A Religious Object Lesson,” 346). While the writer undoubtedly strikes an elegiac tone, lamenting how a pre-scientific understanding of religion that has fallen to microscope and scalpel, he nonetheless takes for granted the conclusions of that science. Acknowledging the Columbian Exposition’s influence on the British Museum exhibit, the author goes on to describe how the exhibit’s arrangement reflects the hierarchy of civilizations: whereas exhibits “illustrating Buddhism and the idolatries of India are...numerous,” “the idols of the inferior and less important families of man do not find a place here.” Indeed, the “rude and frequently grotesque idols of...savage tribes” are cordoned off from this exhibit, relegated to the Anthropological Gallery. Misgivings about scientific method aside, then, the writer ultimately draws from the exhibit an indubitable correlation between religiosity and civilizational development. “If anywhere on the earth’s surface there has existed a race without religious beliefs,” he writes, “it has been, as it were, a kind of backwater; it has not had any part or lot with the races that have made history” (ibid). The British Museum’s exhibit thus not only exemplifies the trend towards making religion a category of display, but also demonstrates how these displays were arranged to maximize the sense that religious enlightenment indexed cultural progress.

At first glance, The Joss seems primarily invested in reinforcing a hierarchical assessment of world religion, not in subverting the ways that such assessments shaped material displays. As did Marsh’s 1897 sensation The Beetle, The Joss traffics in racist depictions of Eastern invaders preying on virginal white womanhood: the three priests who stalk the novel’s pages menace the two heroines and eventually attempt to sacrifice one as an offering to the gods (but not before tearing her blouse open). Such features would appear to cast both texts as agents
of Orientalist ideology, particularly when contrasted with *The Moonstone*’s sympathetic treatment of Hinduism and implicit indictment of colonial violence. To be sure, a responsible treatment of this text requires us to acknowledge the dehumanizing tropes in effect. However, I want to suggest that the text’s racist overtones should not deafen us to its undertones, which call into question Victorian Britain’s fascination with its religious Others. Raising expectations of a climactic encounter with Eastern magic, Marsh’s text abruptly punishes those expectations, in a grotesque dioramic display that substitutes brutal disillusionment for wonder. Indeed, the display unveiled at *The Joss*’s climax not only pathologizes the colonial exhibition’s virtual representations, but exports the disenchantment generated by this display back to the East.

As in *The Moonstone*, *The Joss* unfolds as an assemblage of first person narratives, provided by the principal cast: Pollie Blyth, the working class heroine and sole heiress of her uncle Benjamin’s estate, 84 Camford Street; Emily Purvis, who is obliged, under the terms of Benjamin’s will, to take up residence in the estate as Polly’s companion; Mr. Paine, the solicitor responsible for executing Benjamin’s will; and Max Lander, a sea captain who emerges as the novel’s male protagonist. Moreover, like *The Moonstone*, *The Joss* features the aforementioned acolytes of an unnamed cult, who repeatedly appear in connection with a sacred object called the God of Fortune, possessed by several of the main characters throughout the novel.29 Paine learns from his colleague that the object is a representation of a joss, one of an innumerable host of deities worshipped in “the thirteen thousand Taoist sects.” Indeed, the idol appears to be animated by supernatural force, moving of its own volition and emitting “a sound like a little cry of pain” when Polly drops it. “I believed the thing had shrieked, and was haunted by a horrible doubt that it was alive” (25).

29 Readers of Marsh’s more famous *The Beetle* will note that these formal elements — the arrangement of disparate eyewitness accounts, the presence in London of Eastern religious devotees — are preceded in that novel.
Yet if the doll’s ontological status produces horrible doubts, it also reinforces the possibility that enchantment may be at work. That possibility colors Paine’s reaction to a religious ritual he secretly observes: as the three acolytes prostrate themselves before the “penny doll” and recite some kind of prayer, Paine reports, “I was getting interested. It seemed that I was surreptitiously assisting at some sort of religious service in which the doll played a conspicuous part...I was momentarily expecting something to happen, something in the Arabian Nights way” (147). Paine’s excitement at “surreptitiously assisting” returns us to the Athanaeum’s review of The Moonstone, with its description of readers who imagine themselves amidst the crowd of worshippers in that novel’s final scene. Here, however, the sympathetic response engendered by Murthwaite’s narration gives way to the sort of lurid fascination to which exhibitions like the Columbian Exposition hoped to appeal, with high religiosity replaced by a desire for novelty and spectacle.

Indeed, The Joss consistently entices its readers with the prospect of slaking that desire, of bearing witness to “something in the Arabian Nights way.” After Polly and Emily move into the house, it becomes clear that their new residence harbors the secrets that fuel the acolytes’ devotion. To be sure, 84 Camford Street, which “smells like a vault,” contains secret rooms, and shelters an impressive supply of vermin, marks The Joss’s generic affiliation with the mid-century sensation novel and late century urban Gothic, both of which locate danger and grotesquerie within domestic settings. But the house is also figured as a locus of Oriental wonders: a note Benjamin leaves Polly declares of the residence, “There is That within these walls which holds you in the hollow of Its hand” (63). The nameless guardian’s connection to Taoist mysteries becomes evident when Emily receives a midnight visitation from a woman who identifies herself as “she who inhabits the inner sanctuary of the temple,” a servant of “The Most
High Joss” (109). “(The face) had a more wonderful pair of eyes than any I had supposed a woman could have had,” Emily narrates. “They were wild eyes; such as no Englishwoman ever could have had. This face was brown” (105). Emily’s description of the woman proceeds in a classic Orientalist register: the woman’s erotic allure, in excess of standards of white femininity, serves as a metonymic figuration of the inner sanctuary’s mystique. At first glance, the priestess would seem to recycle the clichéd trope of the foreigner-as-vessel of enchanted knowledge, a magical affront to the city’s routinizations. Yet the woman’s credentials as an agent of enchantment falter when she discloses that her name is Susie. (Although she merely asks Emily whether “one is known to one’s friends” by this name, the chapter, wholly comprised by Emily’s encounter with this mysterious woman, is simply titled “Susie.”) The diminutive English name disrupts the interplay between her alluring sexuality and the promise of Eastern mystery; she can hardly embody a radically Other form of knowledge if she has already been contaminated with pedestrian Englishness.

Indeed, closer inspection of the God of Fortune also marks it as troublingly ordinary, emblematic not of the exotic East, but of the cultural and economic practices by which the West homogenizes the East, converting it into an assemblage of interchangeable artifacts. As Polly describes it, the object has none of the Moonstone’s ineffable charm: “A little painted thing, tricked out in ridiculously contrasting shades of green, and pink, and yellow...I had seen things not unlike it in the shop, among the Japanese and Chinese curiosities” (26). The distance between The Moonstone’s inimitable Diamond and The Joss’s painted toy (one of many “things in the shop”) maps onto the ways, as Geoffrey Baker has shown us, that the narratological importance of the antique collection shifts in the nineteenth century novel. Baker observes that “the museum/cabinet becomes the department store, the collector the consumer,” attributing this
development to a shift in how collectors characterized their wares; where they once emphasized rarity, they came to emphasize “representativeness (now mass-producedness)” by the end of the century (46). Here, the emphasis on mass-producedness undercuts the God of Fortune’s status as a locus of supernatural mystery: the Moonstone’s radiance evoked the unfathomable heavens, but the God of Fortune’s gaudy appearance evokes the marketplace, where enchantment has become an inexpensive diversion. The exotic religious object no longer occasions wonder because it could be any number of items available in the New Imperialism’s economy.

Of course, Mary’s commodifying description of the God of Fortune also recalls the placement of the “Chinese Joss House” on the Midway Plaisance at the Columbian exposition, and the way that its juxtaposition with the Plaisance’s Ferris wheels and children’s games indexed the relatively low position of Chinese “idol worship” on the scale of world religions: whereas Islam and Buddhism connote the prestige incarnated in the White Palace, Chinese religion (reduced, in The Joss, to a multitude of Taoist subtraditions) connotes cheap novelty, curiosity ultimately lacking in profundity. Hence, if the God of Fortune is available for commercial reproduction in a way that the Moonstone is not, this is partially attributable to the cultural value associated with their respective religions. The dearth of prestige associated with Chinese religion may also explain why, at the height of Britain’s mystical revival, The Joss betrays little to no interest in “the wisdom of the East.” However, I want to suggest that Taoism’s association with disposable novelty and base idolatry does not alone account for The Joss’s indifference to the mystical revival. Rather, I want to suggest that, particularly in the last third of the novel, The Joss parodies, even punishes, the contemporaneous vogue for immersing oneself in exotic religiosities, by associating that immersion with colonial exploitation and pathological obsession.
Put another way, by drawing attention to the ways that Western subjects do physical and symbolic violence to the “enchanted” Eastern figures they encounter, *The Joss* imagines a form of experiencing religious Otherness starkly different from that found in *The Moonstone*’s final pages, its dream of a mystical object that eludes the disenchancing effects of taxonomical display. Indeed, late in *The Joss*’ third act, the deity betokened by the God of Fortune turns out to be a mere man: the Joss is Benjamin Batters himself, who has faked his own death and has been lurking in 84 Camford Street’s attic throughout the novel. As Landers’s narration reveals, Batters, in the course of his adventures, was fashioned into a living temple idol by the population of an unidentified island in the Gulf of Tonkin. Skinned, boiled, and possessing stumps-on-wheels in lieu of legs, Batters absconds with his daughter Susie on Lander’s ship; in exchange for safe passage, they offer Lander half of the “offerings of the faithful,” the treasury of precious stones that have been devoted to Batters. Once Lander secures their escape, Batters and Susie escape from his ship with the treasures, and make their way to England, where Batters writes his own will and purchases the house he bequeaths to Pollie.

When Landers first encounters Batters in his temple, the latter claims that he seeks not merely escape from confinement, but a reinstatement of the identity that the island cult has stripped from him. “I’m sick of being a god--sick of it--dead sick!” Batters exclaims. “I’m an Englishman, that’s what I am--an Englishman, British born and British bred” (215). The spectacle of his brutalized flesh ironizes both Richard Burton’s aspiration to bear witness to mysteries without intruding upon them, as well as his determination to preserve his identity as an Englishman: if Batters mediates the protagonists’ access to secret religious practices, he does so not by blending in as a worshipper, but by occupying the center of that religion, as its tortured god. The grotesque plot twist at the heart of *The Joss* ensures that the colonial adventurer, the
exotic religious acolyte, and the vaunted object of devotion all collapse into one another. Moreover, the reader already knows that Batters’ project of national reclamation, of disentangling his status as colonial adventurer from his status as misshapen deity, is doomed. Paine, in his earlier section of the narrative, reports defending a “freak” from physical and verbal abuse on Commercial Road, obviously Batters in disguise. Revisiting that episode in light of the climax’s revelation, one must invert Paine’s declaration that the freak is “as God made him”: Batters is not as God made him, but he has been made a god, at the cost of the rights and privileges afforded to the normative British body.

To be sure, Batters differs from Burton, insofar as a cruel twist of fate, rather than a calculated quest for glory, motivates his involvement in the cult of the Joss. If he serves as the protagonists’ point of entry into the mysteries of Eastern animism, he does so involuntarily. But while his forced conscription reinforces the dehumanizing depiction of the island’s inhabitants as bloodthirsty savages, it also occasions a parody of living ethnological displays and the colonial exhibitions that arranged them. Indeed, at the scene of Batters’ and Landers’ initial encounter, Batters is only the most highly treasured religious object in a room full of them. Landers initially calls the idols in Batters’ temple “fascinating representations,” likening them to “a raving madman’s ideal freak museum.” When the idols emanate a “variety of discordant sounds” to announce the presence of the Joss, he concedes that, “to an untaught savage, such an exhibition might have appeared impressive”; to Landers, however, the display “reminded me too much of the penny-in-the-slot figures whose limbs are set in motion by the insertion of a coin. The slight awe which I had felt for the figures vanished for good and all” (213). Similarly, any awe generated by Batters’ appearance vanishes once Luke, the emissary who seeks out Landers’ assistance, greets his master in quintessentially English terms: “Hallo Ben, my cockalorum bird,
how goes it with you, my old son?” (212) The juxtaposition of English street slang and the museological *mise en scene* disenchants by sending up the colonial exhibitions’ aspiration to authenticity, their claim to proffer an exact representation of Eastern glories. Ironically, in this scene, defamiliarization operates not by making the known unknown, but by making the unknown known, by domesticating the intimations of foreign mystery that patrons of colonial exhibitions took for granted. At the site of the Other’s religion in its purest form, the encounter with exotic enchantment reduces to a confrontation with an irate “cockalorum bird” named Ben.

If authenticity and enchantment are absent from the exhibition in the South Pacific, still less are they to be found when it goes on tour. *The Joss*’ deconstruction of the colonial exhibit culminates in the discovery of Batters’ body in 84 Camford Street’s attic. Landers narrates, “He had had a sort of throne rigged up. Intending, maybe, to have an imitation of the one which he had occupied when I had first come upon him in the temple. If that was so, the imitation was a precious poor one. But he was on it” (261). Having failed to reclaim his English identity, Batters attempts a final *volte face*, reinstalling himself as deity. Nonetheless, the resulting tableau only comprises a deformed simulation of his temple, itself already marked by a distinct lack of enchanting *frisson*. The chapter’s title, “In the Presence,” punctuates the blow to the reader’s expectations: it promises the long awaited entrance into an innermost *sanctum*, but delivers instead a mutilated corpse, a “precious poor” imitation of the Presence.

30 *The Joss*’s ending also owes a debt to Rudyard Kipling’s “The Man Who Would Be King,” discussed in Chapter 3. Both Kipling’s Dravot and Marsh’s Batters end their careers as gods in gruesome fashion, and both leave behind corpses that are converted into artifacts of their former glories: Dravot’s co-conspirator, Peachey Carnehan, shows the story’s narrator “the dried, withered head of Daniel Dravot,” to commemorate “the Emperor in his habit, as he lived” (278). In *The Joss*, however, the would-be god seeks to memorialize himself, in an act of narcissism that underscores the extent of his pathology.
exotic mysteries ends in a scene that only reaffirms the impossibility of importing the enchantments of the East without doing violence to them.

To be sure, the impossibility of reproducing his godhood wholesale is lost on Batters. In the Author’s Postscript, the narrator notes the pathology behind Batters’ final actions: “No doubt the man’s brain was in disorder” (264). Batter’s mental deterioration, combined with his elaborate re-presentation of his status in the Far East, emblematizes Edward Said’s observation that “psychologically, Orientalism is a form of paranoia, knowledge of another kind, say, from ordinary historical knowledge” (72). Expanding on Said’s assertion, S.N. Balaganghadara observes that, like the paranoiac, the Orientalist “stubbornly refuses to believe that he is talking about his [own] experiences; instead, he maintains that he is reporting about other people as they are in the world” (42). Batter’s self-exhibition aspires to report an objective claim about the world: Batters was and is the Great Joss. Yet it succeeds only in emblematizing Batters’ experience of the world, i.e., his deluded belief that he can maintain his divinity in a country that does not even respect him as a man. Insofar as his carefully arranged remains echo the colonial exhibition, then, it lays bare the exhibition’s obscene secret: it is always already pathological, since its assiduous recreations of Eastern glories issue from the madman’s failure to disentangle cultural experience and epistemological certainty.

This, then, is how religious pluralization feels in The Joss: a cynical attitude toward sacred-object-as-commodity, cross-pressuring the desire to observe exotic forms of ritual and devotion, to perhaps even participate in that foreign habitus. Such desire, premised on the possibility of authentic enchantment, leads to an obscenely inauthentic display of foreign religion, one that exposes the mediating role of the white colonial adventurer. This unexpectedly postcolonial insight probably does not stem from any particularly radical consciousness on
Richard Marsh’s part; instead, we can attribute it to the logic of the unreality effect, the way that the fantastic pushes its practitioners to constantly make and unmake the Real. Neither characters nor readers can easily sweep aside this exposure of colonial exploitation, filing it away in an archive, like Murthwaite’s final dispatch in The Moonstone. Indeed, the revelation devastates the priests who, having accompanied the protagonists to the final scene, discover the simultaneous destruction of both the Joss and the God of Fortune. Landers observes, “I never saw men so scared. Or so surprised. I had a sort of notion that they had supposed him to be immortal, and that he couldn’t die” (261). In the postscript, the author reports that “the native attendants of the temple vanished almost as soon as they appeared. No one knew where they went to. Nothing has been seen or heard of them since” (263). Presumably, the men have returned to their island nation, bearing the knowledge of their god’s mortality. Here, then, is the final reversal of The Moonstone’s romanticization of foreign religion: if the Hindu priests return to India with their diamond restored, The Joss’s priests return with their faith irrevocably shattered by its visitation to England’s shores. The importation of foreign mysteries to the metropole only produces disenchantment at their point of origin.

In the end, what disappears from view here is not the sanctum itself (as in The Moonstone) but the Western subject’s involvement in that sanctum, an involvement whose pathological and exploitative undercurrents must literally be buried. In the final scene, the narrator observes that the inscription on Benjamin’s grave offers no “hint...that below are but the mangled fragments of what was once a human body; no reference to the fact that he ever posed as a joss; or a god; or was ever believed, even by savages, to have put on immortality before his time.” Instead, the “handsome monument,” “surrounded by dignitaries and respectabilies,” merely notes that Batters rests “after a life of varied adventure in different parts of the world”
(266). No one, it seems, will tell the story of the Joss—not because it belongs to an ineffable sacred chronotope, but because that story, having already been grotesquely represented in 84 Camford Street’s attic, would violate the gravesite’s bourgeois protocols. In other words, this closing scene suggests the felt inadequacy of the exhibition display, its palpable reductionism in an era when the Victorians began to yearn for a more complete story, so to speak, about religion as lived and experienced elsewhere.

If Benjamin Batters’ grave functions as a metonym for a god, it ultimately relegates his godhood to the status of a secret. The grave thus returns us to the colonial exhibition’s calculated elisions, the limits of its capacity to represent the gods — not the unfathomable heavens in which they reside, nor the unspeakable fragments of their remains.
2. Gendered Pluralisms and the Meta-Religion of Love in *She*

We came to find new things. - Horace Holly

The distance between *The Moonstone* and *She* spans a gap in form. In *The Moonstone*, the fantastic lurks just beneath the surface of the plot, bubbling up in the Prologue and Epilogue to raise the possibility of unknown gods. In *She*, however, implication has become insistence: the unreality effect takes center stage from the novel’s very subtitle, “A History of Adventure.” By choosing “history” over “romance” as a descriptor of his novel, Haggard playfully urges the reader to identify the ensuing marvels with the world of fact, not fantasy. And, indeed, from *She*’s first publication in 1887, the novel was heralded for its combination of outlandish plot and verisimilitude. “A marvellously realistic tale of fantastic adventures,” declared a reviewer for *Murray’s Magazine* (“Our Library List” 287); meanwhile, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* called Haggard “the avatar of the old-storyteller, with a flavour of the nineteenth century and scientific explanation” (qtd. in Saler, “Modernity,” 143). Indeed, in keeping with other practitioners of the “New Romance,” Haggard not only employs eyewitness narration, but also accoutrements such as maps, photographs and realistic illustrations (Saler, “Modernity,” 142).
These techniques enable Haggard to play up the fantastic’s signature unreality effect, manoeuvring between the rational and irrational, as potsherds and eyewitness accounts unfold a tale of immortal queens and reincarnated lovers. While Saler names Edgar Allan Poe’s and Jules Verne’s tales as formal antecedents to She, the novel also clearly develops The Moonstone’s marriage of assiduous documentation and (seemingly) uncanny events; like Collins, Haggard also presents his novel as an archive, collated by an Editor whose periodic interjections serve to reinforce the sense of historicity.

Yet in moving from The Moonstone to She, one marks more than a merely formal difference, a disparity in the way the fantastic enters the narrative. For, in ratcheting up Collins’ coy flirtations with alternate realities, Haggard also channels his period’s increased appetite for exploring a variety of religious worlds: in a universe that harbors an immortal demigoddess, all bets are off as far as theology is concerned. In other words, the distance between Collins’ and Haggard’s novel, between 1868 and 1887, also spans the gap between mid- and late Victorian experiences of global religious diversity. The dawning post-Exhibition awareness of foreign religiosities, the vague consciousness of different Ways of Life that exhibit an integrity and purity to which Christians might aspire, became the full-blown exploration of Haggard’s wild searchers, described at the outset of this dissertation. English translations of Asian sacred texts; poems such Edwin Arnold’s Light of Asia and Song Celestial, which respectively made the story of the Buddha and the Bhagavad Gita accessible to a wider audience; Theosophy and occult movements smitten by Eastern religions; comparative religion and its myriad theories of the unifying thread behind all the world’s faiths — these developments enraptured scores of Victorians, for whom non-Christian religiosities suddenly became available for experimentation, even as Christianity maintained its cultural strength. In explicitly re-presenting these discoveries
via the unreality effect, Haggard embraces the extravagant practices of this dissertation’s title without qualification.

Indeed, Haggard was no impartial observer of the period’s “wild search.” As I shall elaborate below, Haggard counted himself amongst its participants in the 1870’s and 1880’s, drawn as he was into all three facets of religious pluralization outlined in this dissertation’s Introduction: exploring foreign traditions, dabbling in alternative spiritual movements, and, above all, seeking a *philosophia perennis* that could impose unity on religious diversity. With his interest in non-Christian religions as sources of revelation, and not merely anthropological objects of study, Haggard serves as a paradigmatic case for the kinds of experience that issued from the Victorian recognition of new religiosities. If *The Moonstone*’s subtextual fantastic presages the collision of fact and fancy that fired Haggard’s imagination, its final question — “Who can tell?” — anticipates the preoccupation with religious difference that gripped Haggard’s soul. This chapter explores how Haggard’s youthful attempts to come to grips with global religious diversity, informed by the cultural developments outlined above, profoundly shaped his most famous novel of the fantastic, *She*. I will argue that the novel, forever toying with the reader’s perception of (un)reality, both summons and interrogates the Victorian impulse to envision a universal, pan-religious Truth — to envision it, specifically, in feminine form.

In making such an argument, this chapter diverges from prevalent readings of *She*, which tends to identify Ayesha exclusively as an example of a female archetype: either an ahistorical feminine principle or the sexually and intellectually independent New Woman of the *fin de siecle*. Such readings date back to two of the novel’s more famous admirers. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud mentions recommending the book as “a strange book, full of hidden meaning...the eternal feminine, the immortality of our emotions” (305). Haggard’s
immortal queen was even more important to Jung, who interpreted her as the personification of
the Anima, the feminine “inner personality” who, in Jungian theory, occupies the recesses of the
male unconscious. “For Rider Haggard the significant motif of the Anima unfolds in the purest
and most naive fashion,” Jung wrote, adding that “anyone who wants to gain insight into his own
anima will find food for thought in She” (545). Since then, a host of contemporary scholars have
taken a similar line in arguing that, in the figure of Ayesha, Haggard presents the reader with a
pure distillation of the feminine essence. In treating She as a stand-in for the New Woman,
Stephen Arata rehearses this reading, calling Ayesha “the veiled woman, that ubiquitous
nineteenth century figure of male desire and anxiety, whose body is Truth but a Truth that blasts”
(97). Whether approvingly or not, then, a wide swath of scholarship has taken for granted the
idea that Haggard creates a mystical feminine ideal in his titular character. Such readings are
 premised on an allegorical reading of She: per Freud and Jung, the novel functions principally as
a metaphor extended into narrative, with Ayesha as the ultimate symbol of femininity.

This story about She is not entirely wrong, but it is incomplete. This becomes especially
apparent in light of the subject of this dissertation, the way that authors of the fantastic used the
mode to articulate the late Victorian negotiation with religious plurality. Unlike Wilkie Collins’
revisitation of the Koh-i-Noor, which did not necessarily issue from a personal interest in
Hinduism, Rider Haggard’s fantastic depictions of religious difference issued from a lifelong

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31 For example, in Woman and the Demon, Nina Auerbach’s study of “Victorian woman worship,” she takes
Ayesha to be “Haggard’s version of a national myth” (37), a sexualized Victoria who is equal parts monarch, mother
and mistress. In reading Ayesha as a straightforward archetype, Auerbach ignores the possibility, which I elaborate
below, that She might actually be a character in the process of remaking herself into that archetype. Similarly,
Gilbert and Gubar see Ayesha as “primordial female otherness” (No Man’s 7), i.e., as essentialism rather than the
protagonist of a narrative about essentialization. See also Patricia Murphy’s “The Gendering of History in She,”
which names Ayesha as the incarnation of the New Woman who “displays unnerving traits associated with
womanhood throughout the ages” (749). Absent from these readings is any recognition of the fantastic’s capacity
for ironic reversal, and, by extension, for subverting the divinizing-demonizing of Woman that critics normally
attribute to Haggard’s misogyny.
involvement in his generation’s recognition of religious Otherness. As mentioned in the introduction, such a recognition inevitably came under a range of cross-pressures, cultural currents that determined the way in which the Victorians experienced this expansion in the range of available religiosities. For Haggard, experiencing religious pluralism was profoundly shaped by Victorian piety’s gendered nature: from his instruction in Bible verses at his mother’s knee, through his experiments with Spiritualism and immersion in comparative mythology, Haggard’s trek through myriad religiosities tracked the evolution of Victorian myths of womanhood, which venerated Woman as a source of spiritual power. Rather than merely signifying personal experience, then, the biographical material in this chapter testifies to the power of cultural phenomena — specifically, the power of an idealized vision of womanhood, which structured the ways that Victorians experienced religious pluralization.\footnote{32 Here, I am indebted to Gauri Viswanathan’s analysis of Annie Besant’s conversion to Theosophy in her book \textit{Outside the Fold}: arguing that critics have too narrowly viewed Besant’s conversion as the product of an unstable personality, Viswanathan suggests that “individual conversions are an index of cultural change without themselves being subject to a crude form of historical determinism” (185). So, too, do Haggard’s spiritual pursuits index cultural changes while remaining irreducible to them.}

Forged in the Evangelical cult of the domestic angel, the trope of spiritualized womanhood would pervade Spiritualism and Theosophy; rejecting Evangelicalism’s sexual conservatism, both movements granted women positions of institutional authority and encouraged celebrations of female divinity. Moreover, even as Victorians gravitated towards such an ideal, the perverse attractions of its corollary also exerted pressure: a sense of illicit female sexuality functioning as a kind of synecdoche for a radical break from orthodox religiosity (or, conversely, a sense of heterodox religiosity synecdochally standing in for illicit sexuality). While these developments have been studied elsewhere, what interests me is the way that the Divine Feminine, in both its sybillic and seductive iterations, deeply informed Haggard’s negotiations with religious difference. In that
light, She can be read as Haggard’s interpretation of his religious experiences, routing his interest in religious pluralism through the Victorian myth of Woman.

Rather than conflating Ayesha with this static symbol of Woman, however, Haggard refuses a simplistic celebration of essentialisms. He does this precisely insofar as he prioritizes the fantastic over allegory, a distinction made eloquently by Tzvetan Todorov. For Todorov, to read a fantastic text allegorically is to betray it, since such a reading reduces to metaphor the marvelous events that the text depicts as literally real. “If what we read describes a supernatural event, yet we take the words not in their literal meaning but in another sense which refers to nothing supernatural, there is no longer any space in which the fantastic can exist” (Todorov 64). Taking up this line of argument, Farah Mendlesohn insists that, “however metaphoric a text may be, the fantastical must also contain a metonymic meaning, *must be itself as much as it may be an enhancement*” (273, italics added). In what follows, then, I want to allow She to be Herself, to read Her in the terms that the fantastic offers us: not simply as a metaphor for the Divine Feminine or the New Woman, but as a metonymic representative of forces literally at work within the narrative. Specifically, Ayesha becomes visible as a mortal obsessed with fashioning herself into a superhuman icon of the *philosophia perennis*, the ultimate principle that supersedes (and contains) mankind’s profound religious differences. Such a reading, I want to suggest, brings into view a more complicated character than allegorical readings would indicate.

Given the sheer amount of incident that Haggard packs into his novel, a brief summary of *She*’s plot may be useful, before my own wild search proceeds any further. Haggard frames *She* as a non-fictional manuscript, presented to the public by an unnamed Editor, and authored by one Horace Holly, formerly a professor at Cambridge University. Holly relates how he raised the son of his deceased colleague Vincey, who left behind a locked box to be opened on the boy’s
25th birthday. As it turns out, the box contains a document apparently penned by an ancient ancestor of the Vinceys, the Egyptian princess Amenartas. (Holly scrupulously provides a transcript of the inscription in both its original form and in “cursive character” Greek, a detail that emblematizes Haggard’s determination to suffuse the novel with an air of historical veracity.) Amenartas claims that her lover Kallikrates, a Greek priest of the goddess Isis, broke his religious vows and fled with her to a region “off the coast of Libya” (22). There, they encountered a magic-wielding queen who fell in love with Kallikrates and killed him when he refused her. Calling on her offspring to take revenge against this queen, Amenartas includes instructions for finding the queen, which Holly and his charge, Leo, follow to an uncharted province of eastern Africa.

Taken captive by the local Amahagger people, Holly and Leo find their way to the ruined city of Kor, seat of a once-mighty civilization that predated the Egyptians. There they come face to face with the queen, “She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed,” who uses her occult knowledge to rule the Amahagger from her lair in Kor’s catacombs. She (also known as Ayesha) recognizes Leo as the reincarnation of her lost Kallikrates, whose return She has awaited for two thousand years. In a recapitulation of previous events, Leo finds himself caught between She and an Amahagger woman, Ustane, whom Ayesha kills in a jealous rage. Hoping to secure her lover’s immortality, Ayesha takes Leo and Holly to the Fire of Life, the source of her seemingly infinite lifespan and uncanny beauty, which exists beneath a nearby dormant volcano. When Ayesha passes through the fire a second time, however, She loses her marvellous properties and disintegrates. Fleeing the scene, Leo and Holly find passage back to England, where Holly writes his account of the events. Having finished recounting this “wild and seemingly ridiculous quest,” Holly indicates
that he and Leo will set out for Central Asia, where they hope to find the reincarnated Ayesha, and, undoubtedly, embark on an even wilder and even more (seemingly) ridiculous adventure.

In the allegorical readings outlined above, Haggard’s starry-eyed protagonists, unwavering in their fixation on the Eternal Feminine ideal, become mere proxies for Haggard himself. In what follows, however, I want to suggest that Haggard’s investment in the fantastic destabilizes this apparent celebration of idealized womanhood, distanc ing him from the romantic devotion of his lead male characters. Far from embodying the ahistorical archetype identified by Jung and Freud, Ayesha instead comes to represent that archetype’s failure, its essential unreality. In other words, where critics and admirers alike have been all too willing to cast Haggard as an oblivious devotee of Woman, I suggest that the moral ambiguities of such devotion, its questionable motives and disastrous consequences, are precisely what She is about.

I. Religious Difference, the Divine Feminine, and Rider Haggard’s “Wild Search”

From the outset of the novel, Haggard casts the quest for Ayesha as a foray into unknown religious territory, a search for truth that inevitably entails a search for Truth. In the introduction, the nameless “Editor” to whom Holly and Leo have entrusted their account relays the cover letter that accompanied the manuscript. Stating that “everything is described in the accompanying manuscript exactly as it happened,” Holly goes on to concede that the document will only prompt further questions about “that marvellous woman”: “Who was she? How did she first come to the caves of Kor, and what was her real religion?” (5). By both insisting on the manuscript’s fidelity to reality (“exactly as it happened”) and hinting at mysteries that may seem unreal (how “marvellous” is this woman, precisely?), Holly places the reader squarely in the realm of the fantastic. As such, the question of Ayesha’s “real religion” arises as a kind of synecdoche for the questions that the fantastic provokes. To interrogate the facticity of this real-
yet-unreal woman is, in part, to investigate her beliefs about the divine. The centrality of religion to this quest for She thus mirrors the pivotal role that women played in Haggard’s exploration of religious plurality, beginning with his mother, Ella. In what follows, I want to trace Haggard’s “wild search,” with a view to his spiritual quest not simply as a function of idiosyncratic personality, but as a window into the way that gender shaped the Victorians’ approach to religion—and, by extension, to the exploration of religious diversity.

Ella Haggard’s piety dominates Haggard’s portraits of his mother in his autobiography, The Days of My Life, and his preface to an edition of her poetry. His introduction to Ella’s poem Life and Its Author lauds her “earnest religion...all charity, as her life was all love and self-sacrifice” (5); similarly, in The Days of My Life, Haggard stresses the “very earnest faith” that Ella took to her grave, and her efforts “to teach her numerous children the truths of religion, and to lead them into the ways of righteousness and peace” (Vol. 1). Such tributes to maternal piety, of course, were hardly unique to Haggard, and it is telling that he likens her presence in the Haggards’ boisterous household to “an angel who had lost her way” (Vol. 1). This was, after all, the era of the domestic angel, the mother-wife whose essential femininity found highest expression in her Christian piety—and vice versa. In The Death of Christian Britain, Callum Brown offers a sweeping portrait of the Victorian pietisation of womanhood, via analysis of oral histories, the “improving” fiction of religious women’s magazines, and biographical obituaries published by tract societies. The period’s popular narratives of virtuous women and reprobate men, Brown argues, are part and parcel of “an enduring and extremely important discourse change which established the place of religiosity in popular culture on a new foundation,” i.e., womanly virtue. Brown characterizes the conflation of piety and femininity as a “mutual
 enslavement in which each was the discursive ‘space of exteriority’ for the other” (59).33

Women became the mediators of divine grace, tempering masculine vice with the ministrations of earnest faith. James Adams clarifies the political implications of this sexually demure exemplar: examining representations of chastity in In Tennyson’s Memoriam and Idylls of the King, Adams argues that Tennyson articulates the Victorian attention on “the proper ordering of sexual desire” as “a foundation of national well-being, political, moral, and religious” (10). Reversing the formulation, one could say that the religious well-being of the nation finds embodiment in the faithful, sexually demure wife.

Yet many men went beyond merely venerating their wives as Christian exempla. Indeed, amidst the various new religiosities that gained traction in the Victorian period, one would be remiss not to acknowledge the cult of womanhood as a religion in its own right; far from merely extending Christian piety, Woman worshippers developed their own observances, relics, and half-articulated doctrines. As Leslie Stephen wrote to his first wife, Julia, “You see I have not got any Saints and you must not be angry if I put you in the place where my saints ought to be” (53). No mere messenger of divine truth, Julia Stephens here becomes a kind of secular divinity, a fixed source of transcendence that Christianity no longer seemed able to provide. Such divinization of wives and mothers lurked beneath the surface of the domestic angel, a heretical impulse only partially constrained by the frame of Christian orthodoxy. In Nina Auerbach’s words, the domestic angel constituted “an implicit revolt against the patriarchal imagery of Christianity, suggesting less a passive withdrawal from life than an active displacement by

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33 Seen in the long scope of Christianity’s history in Britain, such a conflation constituted something of a surprising reversal. The Victorian understanding of woman as the spiritually superior sex represented a radical departure from longstanding emphases on the sin of Eve. As Knight points out, Bishop Thomas Ken’s 1682 pronouncement that “women are...less able to control their passions” (qtd. in Knight 32) emblematized a view that flourished from the Church Fathers to the Victorian period. Beginning in the 19th century, however, “the general tenor of Ken’s remarks would have been more likely to have been applied to men than women” (32).
female of male religious icons” (73). Such a displacement became visible in the goddess tropes that permeated Victorian arts and letters, what Linda Lewis calls the “iconography of Woman as divinity” (137).  

Indeed, pre-Christian female divinities shadow even the most vigorous exhortations to pious womanhood. Witness John Ruskin’s *Of Queen’s Gardens*, in which Ruskin calls for the evangelization of rural children by appealing to Britain’s “Christian Minerva,” and prefaces his ode to the domestic angel by praising the Egyptians and Greeks for venerating goddesses of wisdom. In context, of course, it is clear that Ruskin is hardly advocating a revival of goddess worship; the Athena/Sophia figure in Victorian culture primarily symbolized the moral purity that was supposed to unite the nation, reinforcing the metonymic relationship between disciplined female sexuality and national well-being. Nonetheless, the line between metaphor and metaphysics, between symbol and Spirit, was not so easily maintained in practice. Thus, as Auerbach argues, the ethereal female archetypes of Victorian literature, emblematized in Dickens’ Little Nell, metamorphosed in the public imagination from mere characters to proper divinities, “emanation[s] of [an] intensely felt and thoroughly non-Christian religion” (ibid). The public mourning inspired by Little Nell’s death scene in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, then, may be best understood not merely as a readership’s expression of emotional investment, but as an implicitly religious observance.

Such quasi-deification of Woman shadows Haggard’s description of his mother in the introduction to *Life and Its Author*, an encomium that approaches, though never quite reaches, Stephen’s open worship of his wife. “Of [Ella’s] deeper qualities it is difficult for a son to speak further than to say that they brought her near the standard of perfect womanhood” (5). Crucially,

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however, those “deeper qualities” Haggard mentions did not neatly map onto orthodox Christian standards of “perfect womanhood.” The same woman who would have taught Bible verses to the young Haggard displayed, throughout her poetry, a fascination with the limits of theological certainty, and an interest in the truths that might lie beyond the fixities of dogma. In the preface to the Second Edition of Life and Its Author, Ella declares the object of the poem to be “the vindication of God’s Majesty as the Originator and Upholder of all the Wonders of Creation” (16). Yet Ella’s poem shies away from naming that God as Christianity’s Trinitarian deity; musing on the origins of life, Ella simply exclaims, “Dark web involved! Oh mystery profound!” (18). Lines from Canto IV of Myra, which Haggard chose as the epigraph for a tribute to his mother, reinforce this sentiment, and seem the antecedent of Holly’s ruminations: “We think, ‘That orb’s bright course is sped,/Our haven may be nigh’;/And hush our souls in silent awe/And muse on thy mysterious law,/Unknown Eternity” (qtd. in Life and Its Author, 2). The contrast between Ella’s stress on “Unknown Eternity” and the untroubled Angel of simple faith is striking; the juxtaposition casts into relief the relative complexity of Ella’s religiosity, its divergence from the standards of the prototypical Angel of the House.

Ella’s reverence in the face of “Unknown Eternity” may have stemmed from her upbringing in India, which would have instilled an awareness of, and perhaps sympathy for, Hindu beliefs that coexisted uneasily with her Protestant convictions. Ella instilled in Rider not only a basic attachment to Protestantism, but also an abiding fascination with the various ways that different religions approached “unknown Eternity.” Where Ella was content merely to remain sympathetic to non-Christian views, however, her son dove headfirst into religious pluralism. Nonetheless, as far afield as Haggard may have wandered from Ella’s “earnest faith,”

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35 Indeed, as Janet McIntire observes, “the mysteries almost seem more important to (Ella Haggard) than the answers” (11).
his wild search continually returned him to female mediators of revelation. Beginning with his involvement in Spiritualism, Haggard’s search for faith brought him in contact with charismatic female authority figures and theories that privileged an ultimate feminine principle, whether goddess or impersonal spirit, as the reconciling agent of religious unity.

As mentioned above, Haggard attended seances regularly upon moving to London in 1874, reporting in his autobiography how two girls, “one dark and the other fair,” materialized at one memorable seance (Days of My Life Vol. 1). His encounter with these literal icons of spiritual womanhood came at a time when mediumship, and the spiritual acumen associated with it, was overwhelmingly considered the gift of women. As Alex Owen has pointed out in The Darkened Room, female mediums would come to outshine their male counterparts during Spiritualism’s heyday in the 1870’s. Owen argues that this development signified women’s importance to the Spiritualist movement, which, after all, began with the Fox sisters of Hydesville, NY, who publicized their communications with the dead in 1848. Owen points out that, from the outset of the movement, Spiritualists absorbed and refracted the Evangelical feminine ideal, so that the “renunciation of self,” integral to a woman’s nature, “came to assume pride of place within spiritualist practice” (9): it was precisely through cultivating passivity that mediums became effective channels for the spirits. Although both men and women garnered reputations as successful mediums, Owen nonetheless observes that men were successful only when they showed that they could suppress the “masculine” bent towards self-assertion (10). In stressing feminine virtues, Spiritualism not only elevated female mediums, but also attracted feminists, who saw spirit-channeling as only one expression of woman’s spiritual authority.36

36 In the decades since Owen’s influential publication, scholars have debated the degree to which spiritualism and feminism were bound up with one another. Christine Ferguson cautions against projecting a cohesive politics of gender onto “the chaotic morass of spiritualist political identifications, ranging from the progressive to the highly reactionary” (432). Elsewhere, Diana Barsham has drawn attention to Arthur Conan Doyle’s co-optation of
For men, Spiritualism’s elevation of femininity only compounded the notion of Woman as a surrogate religion, angelic compensation for Christianity’s failure to sustain belief in the spiritual realm: after all, such compensation was precisely what Spiritualism, with appeals to scientific method, purported to offer. No surprise that the female medium, emblem of the movement, should appear strikingly similar to Leslie Stephen’s personal saint.

Moreover, it was through Spiritualism that Haggard likely first encountered the meta-religious theories that would command his interests in subsequent decades. The Spiritualist circle that Haggard attended included one Lady Caithness, whom Haggard remembered fondly in his autobiography, and who formulated her own meta-religious theory of history, one that elevated women even beyond the exalted status that Spiritualism afforded them. In her book *Old Truths in a New Light* (1876), Caithness attempted a Spiritualist history of world religions, which posited Spiritualism as the clearest revelation of truths variously adumbrated by Confucius, Socrates, “Brahminism,” and Christianity itself. In an 1881 edition of *The Medium and Daybreak*, a Spiritualist journal, Caithness insisted that this ultimate truth was itself feminine in essence: “The advent of the Feminine or Wisdom principle to animal humanity, will in due time bring about the birth of the Divine Humanity” (820). Caithness’ vision of a Messianic feminine principle develops a theme that had been latent in the Spiritualist movement, evident in the rhetoric of mid-century feminist Emma Hardinge Britten. Britten’s 1859 publication, *The Place and Mission of Women*, names Spiritualism as “the light of heaven, which alone can vitalize and reform”; yet Spiritualist women constitute a kind of light within light, “the finger which shall point [humanity] upward” (4). Caithness’ version of Spiritualist eschatology revises Britten’s

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Spiritualism: in contrast to the power that the movement offered women, Barsham claims, Spiritualism provided a means for Doyle to “re-imagine masculinity” (242), a belief system that had the power to shape manly heroes of Empire in a way that conventional Christianity could not. Acknowledging the unpredictable ways that Spiritualism affected gender politics, we can still recognize the sizeable contingent of Spiritualists for whom women loomed large, both as highly effective mediums in this age and as mediators of divinity in the age to come.
apocalyptic dream, specifically characterizing her upward movement as a movement from creedal division to interreligious harmony.

Haggard’s own interest in comparative religion, particularly the role afforded to women across traditions, intensified once he set out for South Africa. There, he became acquainted with Zulu religion, particularly as related to him by translator and amateur anthropologist Fred B. Fynney (Chidester, 129). Haggard became acutely sensitive to the way that attitudes toward gender roles marked Christianity as incompatible with South African culture. Observing that most Zulu women were “as devotedly attached” to polygamy as men, Haggard thought it an error on the part of Christian missionaries to stigmatize the practice. As far as Haggard was concerned, Christian arguments that equated polygamy with degradation of women were mistaken. To him, the practice actually empowered Zulu women, since it precluded the prostitution and female poverty that were “the scandal of civilised [i.e., Christian] nations” (*The Days of My Life Vol. 1*). Polygamy, in Haggard’s thinking, thus rendered visible the profound alterity of Christianity to Zulu culture; contrasted with Zulu pragmatism, Christian theology at once overprotects women and exposes them to risk of destitution. In *Days of My Life*, he makes this point by comparison with Muslim tolerance of polygamy, which, in his opinion, secured the success of Islam amongst the Zulu: “Christianity can scarcely hope to compete with Islam as far as the bulk of the natives are concerned” (ibid). In the triangular relationship amongst the three religious traditions, Haggard casts Christianity as the outlier.

Yet Haggard’s exposure to the Zulu did not simply confirm the irreconcilability of religious differences, presenting him with a way of life wholly Other to that of Victorian Britain. Elsewhere, the Zulu’s visions of spiritualised womanhood echoed key figures in Haggard’s “wild search.” Amidst the plethora of beliefs and rituals that Haggard encountered in South
Africa, the white-skinned goddess Inkosana-y-Zulu, “Queen of Heaven,” made a particularly deep impression on him. While the Queen of Heaven explicitly appears in a dream sequence in *Nada the Lily* (1892), she obviously serves as an important precedent for the fair Ayesha. (Indeed, as we shall see, Ayesha’s white skin plays a critical role in her claims to divine status.) Furthermore, Haggard’s daughter Lilia astutely notes that her father used the white-goddess trope “in many tales,” from famous works like *She* and *Nada the Lily* to more obscure novels like *The People of the Mist* (1894) and *The Ghost Kings* (1908).\(^{37}\) In an 1887 lecture on Zulu belief, Haggard give some clue as to the Queen of Heaven’s appeal: “in the form of a young and lovely woman,” Haggard says, the Queen of Heaven appears “at moments of national importance and makes a communication to some chosen person” (quoted in Chidester 134). One of many “guardian spirits who watch over the individual,” the Queen contrasts starkly with the non-interventionist male deity, who remains “vague” and “immeasurable.” Certainly, the emphasis on a “young and lovely” apparition recalls the “two young women of great beauty” who materialized at one of Haggard’s seance experiences (*Days of My Life*). Moreover, in characterizing her as a “guardian angel” who offers help in moments of crisis, Haggard depicts the Queen of Heaven in a manner similar to his description of his mother, guide of the Haggard household.

However, the reference to “moments of national importance” also indicates the Queen of Heaven’s resemblance to the political theology of Victorian Britain, her affinity with yet another woman of profound spiritual importance. A white-skinned goddess who rallies the nation would have resonated deeply, in David Chidester’s words, with the “imperial fiction and politics in the

\(^{37}\) For the connection between the latter two novels and the white-goddess trope, I am indebted to R.D. Mullen’s “The Books of H. Rider Haggard: A Chronological Survey,” which describes these two works in a survey of Rider Haggard’s career.
empire of Queen Victoria” (135).\textsuperscript{38} As Duncan Bell argues, this would have been especially true from the 1870’s onward, when a host of British political thinkers began to champion the concept of “Greater Britain”: a “closely integrated global polity,” comprised of an intimate relationship between mother country and the colonies (4). Such a relationship, premised on “the moral power of kinship and sentiment,” required Victoria to serve as a unifying symbol, from whom colony and imperial center could find a common identity. Always popular, Victoria thus attained even greater symbolic importance in the latter half of her reign. By the time of Haggard’s move to South Africa, she constituted a full-fledged object of imperial faith, whom “musical and visual rituals of national identification [linked] to the idea of freedom itself” (10). One such ritual, in which Haggard participated, occurred upon the annexation of the Boer Republic in 1877; on May 21st, the Queen’s birthday, Haggard helped hoist the Union Jack at Pretoria, to the strains of “God Save the Queen.”\textsuperscript{39} Once again, rather than a mere variant on Christian piety, it is perhaps more accurate to conceive of such devotion to Victoria as the cult of Woman in an imperial key, vaguely Christian but hardly Christocentric.

Nor did this imperial faith simply reconcile Boer to Briton, subject to master race. The Queen bridged religious differences, no less than ethnic, racial and national ones. If the Crown specifically stood for Christianization at the Great Exhibition of 1851, by the 1870’s, it had begun to embody an increasingly universalist ideology, perhaps culturally Christian, but

\textsuperscript{38} Chapter 5 of Chidester’s 	extit{Empire of Religion}, “Myth and Fiction,” explores the debt that Haggard owed to Andrew Lang, framing the former’s use of the white goddess trope as a manifestation of their shared interest in “supreme beings” worshipped across all the world’s religions. Chidester’s research provides a valuable way to think about She as specifically re-presenting African religions, not simply the process of Victorian religious pluralization I describe in this dissertation. However, Chidester’s view of Haggard as an author of “romance” (not the fantastic) leads him to cast Haggard as a straightforward purveyor of ideology. To wit, this summary of 	extit{King Solomon’s Mines} (1885): “Haggard’s imaginary literature performed ideological work in the way it mediated imperial interests through the defeat of [an] evil [indigenous] diviner...by the agents of Queen Victoria’s empire, making the characters’ acquisition of wealth also an imperial religious victory over African indigenous religious beliefs, practices, and polity” (150).

\textsuperscript{39} Haggard describes the event in 	extit{Days of My Life (Vol I)}. In a letter to his mother dated June 21, 1877, he wrote, “Twenty years hence it will be a great thing to have hoisted the Union Jack over the Transvaal for the first time” (ibid).
theologically nondenominational. This was, perhaps, in keeping with the ethos of her 1858 Indian Proclamation, in which she declared, “It [is] Our Royal will that none be in any wise favoured, none molested or disquieted, by reason of their religious faith or observances” (East India (Proclamations) 2). Certainly, Queen Victoria’s capacity to unite British subjects of all faiths is visible in the fate of state-sponsored acts of national worship: days of fasting, humiliation, thanksgiving, and prayer. As Philip Williamson notes, such acts of national worship declined after 1860, except for those related to the royal family. These royal occasions accommodated a considerable degree of religious pluralism: witness the 1872 Thanksgiving Service for the recovery of Prince Philip from typhoid, at which “government prompting” ensured the attendance of Jewish, Catholic and Hindu representatives (Williamson 169). Victoria’s pan-religious appeal became an important part of her late-century mythos, finding ultimate expression in an encomium, written upon her death, in 1901. A “Tribute to Queen Victoria,” published in the Sydney Morning Herald, declares that “the universal sorrow caused throughout the civilized world” had vanquished “the bitterest of all antagonism...that founded on religious differences” (4). The author goes on to name “Protestant and Roman Catholic, Jews and Greeks, Hindus and Mahommedans” as equally stricken by the loss of “a ruler who believed in religious equality, and who sought...to do even justice amongst her subjects, regardless of the temple in which they prayed for her long life and happiness.” The final clause, downplaying the religious specificity of “temples” to stress the universality of prayers for the Queen, arguably epitomizes Victoria’s apotheosis, her ascent to the status of the Empire’s own Queen of Heaven.

Haggard’s time in South Africa was thus religiously transformative on multiple levels; although it highlighted the divide between Christianity and Zulu religion, it also acquainted him with the Zulu counterpart to Victorian models of divine womanhood, and immersed him further
in the cult of Empire, hope of all cultures and creeds. As John Senior argues, such events prompted Haggard to abandon his childhood’s “romanticized vision of English missionary altruism” (48). Haggard records this change in one of his memoirs, declaring, “It is terrific to think that all these hordes were deluded by a faith which we know to be false...I for one do not believe it to be true” (quoted in Senior 49). After returning to England in late 1881, he continued to nurse longstanding theological questions. A private journal entry from 1882 voices the meta-religious vision that he was coming to adopt. “God’s truth is like the light from a many sided gem in varied flashes upon men’s hearts, the colors change but the gem remains the same - God is one but religions are many - in a way they are all true” (quoted in Senior 39). Such a viewpoint would inflect his subsequent religious explorations, coloring his interest in Egyptian mythology even after his return, in midlife, to the Christian faith.

Haggard’s 1882 statement of belief coincides with his discovery of A.P. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism*, a primer in the doctrines of Theosophy. In his Preface, Sinnett describes the “secret doctrine” of Theosophy in language reminiscent of Haggard’s meta-religious gem, a “mine of entirely trustworthy knowledge from which all religions and philosophies have derived whatever they possess of truth” (26). Indeed, Sinnett here simply reiterates the Introduction of Madame Blavatsky’s *Isis Unveiled* (1877), in which the founder of Theosophy makes a “plea for the recognition of the Hermetic philosophy, the anciently universal Wisdom Religion,” from whence originates humanity’s diverse theologies (viii). *Esoteric Buddhism* elicited high praise from Haggard, who wrote in a letter to his mother, “[*Esoteric Buddhism*]...unfolds, I confess, the most reasonable explanation of the mystery of life I have yet come in contact with...I do not think, as I understand it, that Esoteric Buddhism necessarily comes into antagonistic conflict to our religion” (quoted in Senior 80). Here, Haggard not only displays his characteristic desire to
harmonize religious differences, but also shows his receptiveness to Theosophy, a movement that
would dominate the alternative spirituality scene of late Victorian England. While Haggard
never actually joined the Theosophical Society, his return to England in the early 1880’s
coincided with the rise of Theosophy’s profile amongst members of his social circle. The
Athenaeum Club, which counted Haggard among its members from 1885 onward, hosted dinners
where members of the Theosophical Society and the Society for Psychical Research could
exchange ideas on the nature of the soul (Dixon 33). Henry Olcott, co-founder with Helena
Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society, was the honored guest at a Club dinner in April 1884
(Zirkoff). Indeed, the Club’s membership included numerous Theosophists, most notably
Charles Carleton Massey, president of the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society from 1878
to 1883 (Lavoie 74). (Whenever Haggard entered the Athenaeum Club, it should be noted, he
would have seen the Club’s patron goddess, towering above the main entrance: a gold statue of
Athena extending an outstretched arm to the club’s all-male clientele, an obvious model for the
similarly fashioned statue of “Truth standing on the World” in She. About this scene, more anon.)

Seen in the gendered context of Victorian religious discourse, Theosophy heralded the
necessary corollary to the chaste woman who synecdochally figures Britain’s religious health.
Once again, James Adams helps bring into focus this corollary vision of sexual liberation as a
break from Christian orthodoxy: citing Swinburne’s lament for the triumph of the “pale
Galilean” as exemplary, Adams observes, “From the 1850’s a growing body of literature took
Christianity to be inimical to human desire, and declared allegiance instead to varieties of pagan
thought” (18). All too naturally, then, the prophetesses who guided their disciples into “pagan”
or even anti-Christian religiosities became icons of erotic charisma. Blavatsky may have
claimed that her revelations came to her via the Mahatmas, a pantheon of invisible, all-powerful male “adepts” who guided humanity; but for all intents and purposes, she was the movement’s true guru, inspiring in her followers both religious and erotic fascination. Annie Besant would describe the climax of her first encounter with Blavatsky as a moment when “the veil lifted,” and Blavatsky’s “piercing eyes” met hers; inviting Besant to join the Theosophists, Blavatsky sounded a “yearning throb in the voice” that inspired in Besant “a well-nigh uncontrollable desire to bend down and kiss her” (341). Judith Walkowitz argues that such recollections testify to Blavatsky’s “decidedly sexually ambiguous power over men and women” (70). Nor was Blavatsky the only Theosophist who held this power. Walkowitz notes that Anna Kingsford’s friends designated her (half-jestingly) to be the incarnation of Isis (70); as Kingsford’s friend exclaimed, “She seemed to me to be the living type of what a goddess should and does look like!” (quoted in Walkowitz 70). As ever for the Victorians, Theosophy promised a revelation mediated through Woman, albeit less the angel of Christian virtue than the enigmatic mistress of occult mysteries.

With such living emblems of paganism-as-sexual-liberation, Theosophy was known for attracting women disillusioned with Christianity (and perhaps Spiritualism) but looking for a religious movement that recognized their agency. Indeed, as Joy Dixon argues in Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England, Theosophy evolved into yet another alternative religious movement that specifically appealed to women, albeit for different reasons than Spiritualism.40 As unpalatable as the latter movement’s spirit channeling may have been to rigorous Evangelicals, its aforementioned elevation of conventionally feminine virtues reinscribed the outlines of the domestic angel. In contrast, Madame Blavatsky blatantly rejected

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40 It is worth noting that Theosophy’s openness to female leadership attracted Lady Caithness, who became the founder of the Paris Theosophical chapter in 1883.
that demure ideal; instead, as Dixon writes, her movement attracted feminists with its “uncompromising denunciation of Christianity as a key site of women’s oppression...directly derived from phallic worship and pagan ritual” (Dixon, 13). Such a bold stance went hand in hand with an elevation of the goddesses whom Christian theology had elided, and whom the charismatic Kingsford appeared to incarnate. The Mahatmas may have spoken to Blavatsky, but it was Isis, the ancient Egyptian goddess, whom she preferred to unveil. In the introduction of her book, Blavatsky claims to reveal the essence of “Isis, the symbol of nature,” of which “present-day philosophers” can only see the “physical forms”; as she puts it, “The Divine Mother has no answer for them” (16). For her, of course, the Divine Mother was readily forthcoming.

In a private letter written during Isis’s composition, Blavatsky eschews mention of the Mahatmas, heralding the direct inspiration of Isis herself: “I am writing Isis; not writing, rather copying out and drawing that which she personally is showing me. Really, it seems to me as if the ancient Goddess of Beauty in person leads me through all the lands of bygone centuries which I have to describe” (“Letter 62,” 215). Something of a Divine Mother herself, Blavatsky seems to have aspired to the very role she ascribes to Isis here, a guide who helps her disciples navigate the occult history of the world’s religions and philosophies. In context of Theosophical thought, then, Kingsford’s reputation as a type of Isis marks her as a goddess beyond the particularities of historical religions.

Scholars widely agree that She bears the influence of Theosophy’s preoccupation with reincarnation and mastery of Nature’s secrets, and indeed, such concepts recur throughout Haggard’s work. The title of Blavatsky’s book may have been the inspiration for Haggard’s semi-facetious comment in his autobiography, “I venerate Isis, and I always feel inclined to bow
to the moon!” (*Days of My Life*, Vol. 1).\(^{41}\) However, Theosophy’s most profound impact on the author of *She* arguably lies precisely in its celebration of a goddess who somehow stands apart from religion, yet commands undeniably religious devotion. Moreover, such a goddess figure, in Theosophical thinking, symbolizes the “secret doctrine” behind all faiths, returning us to the feminized meta-religious theories of Lady Caithness and Emma Britten (not to mention the implicit meta-religion of Queen Victoria). In *The Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888, Blavatsky further elaborated on her esoteric theory of goddess worship. “No exoteric religious system has ever adopted a female Creator, and thus woman was regarded and treated, from the first dawn of popular religions, as inferior to man” (136). In the same book, Blavatsky would also stress the hidden female face of the world’s male deities: the Moon, “Queen of the Night” exhibits “triadic” qualities that mark her as the antecedent of the Hindu “Brahma-Visnu-Siva,” not to mention “the prototype of our Trinity, which has not always been entirely male” (387). Where Lady Caithness and Emma Britten heralded the Divine Feminine as the end of man’s religious development, Blavatsky names it as the source. This concept of an originary female divinity takes fleshly form in Ayesha, who, as we shall see, embodies a feminine Wisdom superseding the claims of specific religious traditions.\(^{42}\) Such a message represented the logical culmination of the Victorians’ propensity for goddess worship, variously manifest in their Angels, mediums, Queen, and host of visuo-literary idols.

Whether or not Haggard read *The Secret Doctrine*, he encountered a variation on Blavatsky’s theories in Andrew Lang, a close friend with whom Haggard co-wrote *The World’s

\(^{41}\) Haggard’s lifelong interest in Egyptian mythology, of course, is an equally likely contender for the inspiration of this quote. At the very least, the common appeal to Isis emblematizes the degree to which Haggard and Blavatsky were fellow travellers, spiritually speaking.

\(^{42}\) Whether or not Haggard was familiar with Blavatsky at the time of *She*’s composition, its publication certainly made her familiar with Haggard. In an 1887 article for her magazine *Lucifer*, Blavatsky praises the “thrice-famous *She*” as an example of the “mystic and Theosophic literature” that to her was gaining prominence (“The Signs of the Times,” 103).
Desire in 1890. Like many other practitioners of comparative religion during this period, Lang conceived of “a global unity, a vast narrative uniformity, in the entire history of religions” (Chidester 131). In particular, Lang pointed out in various essays what he took to be parallels between Zulu and Greek mythology and custom, comparing the story of Cupid and Psyche with the analogous tale of Umtombinde, as well as juxtaposing the cult of Demeter with a Zulu cult of the rain goddess. Hilton suggests that Lang’s particular attention to likenesses amongst female divinities likely influenced Haggard’s fascination with “a universal female goddess,” visible in his constant depiction of women possessed of uncommon spiritual power (115). Lang thus joins Lady Caithness and Madame Blavatsky as another influence on Haggard’s vision of a single female divinity, known to the religions of the world by a plenitude of names. That Haggard and Lang shared an ongoing preoccupation with Woman as universal divinity is most evident in a letter Haggard wrote to Lang in 1907, sketching ideas for another literary collaboration; musing that the story should conform to the pattern of “old world legends,” Haggard proposes (yet another) “quest for the divine which must (for the purpose of story) be symbolised by woman” (Days of My Life).

When Haggard began writing She in February 1886, then, he did so with a spectrum of models for his eponymous goddess-queen. From his mother’s earnest faith, through the mediums of the 1870’s, to the universal goddesses he variously encountered in Theosophy and comparative religion, Haggard’s path intersected with increasingly powerful models of hyper-spiritual womanhood, shorn of the Christian trappings that legitimized the cult of the domestic angel. To be sure, such an elevation of womanhood, from angel to deity, was not unprecedented.

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For more on the ways that Lang’s work in comparative anthropology influenced Haggard, see Hilton’s "Andrew Lang, Comparative Anthropology and the Classics in the African Romances of Rider Haggard." Hilton cites Lang’s Myth, Ritual and Religion (1887) and his essay “Cupid, Psyche and the ‘Sun-Frog’” (1885) as key examples of Lang’s interest in comparing Zulu and ancient Greek myth.
in British religious history; nor was the association of the divine feminine with pan-religious truth entirely original to the nineteenth century. Late Victorian visions of the Eternal Feminine, however, appeared in an era characterized by three distinct factors: a deep cultural affinity for idealised feminine figures; the zeal of New Imperialism, with its vision of Greater Britain; comparativist attention to global religious diversity, itself facilitated by imperial circuits of knowledge. These factors converged in the recurring figure of a female persona beyond all creedal divisions, mediatrices of an ultimate Divine Principle that dissolves all difference (religious, ethnic, racial, regional). Such a figure could fall anywhere on the spectrum between the ethereal and the erotic, between Haggard’s mother-angel and Madame Blavatsky’s sexually charismatic figure.

In its various forms, such a mythos consistently meets the demands of imperial thought, of a universal interconnected order routed through a central node (most literally, of course, in the cult of queen Victoria). So, too, did the Victorian cultural imagination demand a recurrence of distinctly feminine woman-icons, whose spirituality, whether etherealised or eroticized, could not admit a blurring of gender lines. Madame Blavatsky, anticolonial in her politics and androgynous in her sexuality, perhaps offers the exception that proves the ruling power of both demands. As Gauri Viswanathan argues, Blavatsky’s “syncretic ambition of seeking oneness in diversity” (*Outside the Fold* 199) laid the ideological foundation for Annie Besant, second

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44 Those Victorians interested in alternative spirituality might have been familiar with Ann Lee and Joanna Southcott, leaders of popular sects in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, who respectively designated themselves “Ann the Word” and “The Woman Clothed With the Sun,” an enigmatic symbol from Revelation 12:1. In turn, Lee and Southcott extended a tradition of female-centric eschatology that dates back to seventeenth century mystic Jane Lead, whose Philadelphian Society sought to unite various Christian sects under the worship of the Divine Sophia. As described by Sylvia Bowerbank, Lead’s apocalyptic vision anticipates the feminist eschatology of Lady Caithness and Emma Britten, insofar as she organized “an ecumenical and millenarian movement...receptive to the coming of Virgin Wisdom” (quoted in Hunt 227). In a study of female mystics in 18th century Europe, Margaret Hunt observes that Lead was characteristic of seventeenth century prophetesses and female mystics, insofar as she strongly believed in universal salvation (Hunt 247). This emphasis on the common truth of all creeds also anticipates the universalism that pervades late Victorian myths of Woman.
International President of the Theosophical Society, to embrace “the Imperial Family” as a guarantor of universal brotherhood.\textsuperscript{45} Meanwhile, Blavatsky’s androgyny, evident in her self-given nickname “Jack,” all but disappears in Annie Besant’s portrayal of a veiled “woman of the world” (Besant 341), not to mention contemporaneous references to her as the “high priestess” of Theosophy and as the “Great Female Mahdi of the Mahatmas” (“Rival Pythonesses” 230).

The spectrum of goddesses and demigoddesses, then, should have pressured Haggard into writing precisely the kind of Eternal Feminine narrative that critics have identified with \textit{She}, depicting Ayesha as the imperialist, hyper-feminine incarnation of the “many sided gem” of his private theological speculations. And, indeed, I want to suggest that Ayesha does approach the ideal of Woman-as-Truth, in all her various Victorian iterations. Simultaneously, however, \textit{She} remains haunted by the legacy of Ella Haggard, who for Haggard embodied the lifelong search for Truth rather than its final destination. The simultaneity of these visions comes into focus in a scene early in the novel. After Holly and Leo are welcomed by a tribe of Ayesha’s subjects, Holly enjoys a respite under the stars, prompting him to contemplate the mysteries that have drawn him hence. Contemplating humanity’s yearning to “soar to that superior point, whence...we might gaze with spiritual eyes deep into Infinity” (80), Holly sounds echoes of Ella Haggard’s yearning to “muse upon...Unknown Eternity.” Holly, then, reflects traces of Ella’s humility before a Truth beyond human understanding. Yet that Truth is specifically gendered in this passage; as Holly muses, “we could no more look upon her glory than we can upon the sun” (ibid). Indeed, such glory eventually seems to find embodiment in \textit{Elle-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed}, Feminine Principle made flesh, fulfillment of the divinized woman who reappeared throughout Haggard’s religious explorations. In other words, Ella surfaces both in Holly’s quest for the Infinite, and in the face of the Infinite’s (un)earthly avatar.

\textsuperscript{45} See \textit{Outside the Fold} 177-208.
Ella’s ambi-valent presence in this scene thus focalizes the conflicted view of Woman that Haggard absorbed throughout his own “wild search”: in his varied encounters with non-Christian religiosities, women could either appear as both immortal Key to All Mythologies or as all-too-mortal fellow pilgrims. In the remainder of this chapter, I want to explore how, through the affective instabilities of the fantastic, Haggard sets this conflict at the very center of his novel. For Haggard in She, experiencing religious pluralism does not merely involve alternating between fascination with, and fear of, Other religiosities; that experience also entails oscillating amongst competing visions of the Woman identified with pan-religious unity, who alternately appears as sybilic ideal, sexualized object of desire, or—perhaps most transgressively—a specific person, irreducible to archetype, and incapable of bearing the burden of meta-religion. Rather than simply exhorting readers to bow in the presence of Ayesha, Haggard prompts his audience to take their cues from her male worshippers, and ask themselves whether they can believe their eyes.

II. “We Came to Find New Things”: Gradually Problematizing Religious Difference in She

Ayesha’s appearance midway through the novel, of course, would be illegible apart from an understanding of the narrative that precedes it. To truly experience the way that Ayesha provokes the affective cross-pressures of Victorian religious pluralization, one needs a firm grasp of the narrative from the protagonists’ setting sail up to their first encounter with Ayesha. In this first section of the book, Haggard slowly unveils the centrality of religion to his vision of the fantastic, the degree to which this voyage beyond known reality constitutes a voyage out of Christian certainties. To be sure, in the early part of the novel, religious convictions constitute an almost comically unshakeable source of division, an immutable feature of known reality.

46 Apologies to George Eliot.
However, such a setup gradually gives way to the unreal promise of interreligious reconciliation embodied in Ayesha, before whom these features of reality threaten to dissolve.

As the crew approaches the African coast, Leo alludes to religious difference as a way of urging his uncle to keep faith in their mission. When Holly expresses skepticism about the correspondence of a giant rock, “shaped like a negro’s head and face,” to a description purportedly written by the Leo’s Egyptian ancestor, Leo responds, “You are an unbelieving Jew, Uncle Horace” (43), to which Holly offers no reply. On one hand, Leo’s remark intimates the degree to which the search for She will occasion manifestations of religious difference, metaphorizing hesitation about whether to believe the fabulous tale as skepticism towards Christ.

On the other hand, the comment reaffirms Leo’s and Holly’s shared religious identity: Leo’s jibe is comprehensible only because “unbelieving Jew” constitutes a commonly understood cultural trope, the negation of steadfast Christian piety. Though minor, the moment thus nicely encapsulates the place of religious difference in the first half of the novel, a means of preserving familiar identities in unfamiliar territory.

Indeed, Haggard continues to flag his protagonists’ Christian identity by contrast with a Muslim sailor, Mohamed, who accompanies them along the Eastern African shore. Mohamed’s spontaneous prayers to Allah, which comprise the bulk of his dialogue, alternately signal his likeness and unlikeness from his Christian companions. When the four are forced to travel up a river of unknown destination, the devout Job, servant of Holly and Leo, “turned up the whites of his eyes and groaned, and the Arab murmured ‘Allah,’ and groaned also” (46). Later on, however, a similar moment at the cusp of a shallow canal prompts from Mohamed “an

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47 As we shall see, in She, Haggard repeatedly invokes the “unbelieving Jew” as the personification of religious doubt. Such repetition reflects his anti-Semitic streak, a prejudice that remained undiminished even by his own mother’s Jewish ancestry. For more on constructions of Jewishness in Haggard’s King Solomon’s Mines, see Chapter 4 of Heidi Kaufman’s English Origins, Jewish Discourse and the Nineteenth Century British Novel: Reflections on a Nested Nation, University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 2009.
invocation to the Prophet, and a comprehensive curse upon all unbelievers and their ways of thought and travel" (52). The subtle irony with which Haggard treats Mohamed’s putative difference from his Christian counterparts crystallizes in a dream Holly has, just before their introduction to the Amahagger. Contemplating their likely demise as he falls asleep, Holly imagines “the appearance of the boat and her unhappy crew...in two or three month’s time,” the boat “half filled with foetid water...wash[ing] backwards and forwards through our mouldering bones” (52). Holly then sees his skull and Mohamed’s rattling against each other, “till at last Mohamed’s stood straight up upon its vertebrae...and cursed me...because I, a dog of a Christian, disturbed the last sleep of a true believer” (52-53). On one hand, Holly’s reverie trivializes religious difference in the face of a common destiny, casting Mohamed’s piety as mere petulance. On the other hand, the dream may also point to the persistence of such differences, emphasizing their strength no less than their stupidity: even in death, Muslim and Christian remain intractably opposed.

It would be tempting to attribute Mohamed’s dogmatism to a dim view of Islam on Haggard’s part, and to some degree the character constitutes a gentler version of the fanatical Muslim stereotype. Yet Mohamed’s rigidity finds a comic double in Job, the constant voice of unreflective Christian piety. When Holly first reads aloud Amenartas’ account of her escape from Ayesha, Job’s reaction expresses not incredulity but dismay at the unchristian vengefulness of this ancient pagan: “The Lord forgive her for that” (23). The contrast between Job’s exclamation and Holly’s internal response — “my first reaction [was] that my poor friend, being demented, had composed the whole thing” — indicates the near absurdity of Job’s concern with Christian behavior, insofar as it supplants the much more obvious question of the document’s authenticity. Upon their introduction to the Amahagger, Job’s moralism surfaces again when
confronted with the courtship practices of their new hosts, provoking comparison between Christian and Amahagger views of sexual behavior. A matrilineal people, the Amahagger forgo marriage in favor of an arrangement whereby women make public advances towards the men, who become their de facto husbands should they reciprocate. When Ustane makes such an advance toward Leo, Job’s reaction again contrasts with Holly’s, highlighting the comical nature of Job’s preoccupations; while Holly gasps, “expecting Leo to be instantly speared,” Job merely ejaculates, “The hussy — well, I never!” (57) For his part, Leo reciprocates, cheekily speculating that “we had got into a country where they followed the customs of the early Christians.”

Leo’s jest hardly betrays an interest in comparative religion, but it does reiterate the problem of religious sameness and otherness, particularly when juxtaposed with Job’s implicitly Christian reaction. For his part, Holly subsequently remarks sardonically that “the interchange of the embrace answers to our ceremony of marriage, which, as we know, justifies most things” (58). Holly’s barb at the sanctity of Christian marriage renders explicit the subtext of an earlier exchange with Billali, the sage “Father” of this particular Amahagger company, in which Holly bluntly describes the motives behind their journey: “We came to find new things...we are tired of the old things” (55). Haggard might well have been thinking of this quote when, years later in his autobiography, he described those who “embark on wild searches” in lieu of Christian faith or steady atheism, travelling to the “far seas” of “alien religion” (*Days of My Life*, Vol. 2). In light of the “Christian ceremony” initiated by Ustane, the “old things” left behind include not only the conceptions of reality threatened by Amenartas’ outlandish (though apparently authentic) tale, but also the dogmatism represented by Job and mirrored in Mohamed.

Comparisons between British and Amahagger practice may occasion smirking commentary from both Leo and Holly, but they do not merely serve as comic reminders of immutable
religious difference. To the contrary, the “Christian ceremony” indicates Haggard’s interest in provoking protagonists (and readership) to consider, with increasing urgency, the frailty of the boundaries separating Christianity from other creeds, the continuum of likeness and unlikeness that binds religions together. Seen in this light, the prefatory question of She’s “real religion” begins to appear as something other than a throwaway line, taking on real dramatic import.

In the build-up to Ayesha’s appearance, then, Haggard emplots the gradual process by which Other religiosities become legible as coherent alternatives, parallel universes, to the worldview generated by one’s own beliefs. Holly’s narration encourages increasing attention to religions not as self-enclosed markers of cultural identity, but as traditions that echo and mirror one another. In drawing the reader into Holly’s perspective, then, Haggard absorbs his audience into an unfolding experience of religious alterity, gradually complicated by the successive introduction of Muslim and Amahagger. Once again, a strictly allegorical reading will not suffice: the Victorian negotiation with religious difference is not merely given symbolic treatment here, dressed up in metaphor, but literally constitutes a major feature of the plot.

Moreover, as Holly et al draw near to Ayesha, the novel’s deconstruction of religious differences becomes increasingly bound up with its fantastic deconstruction of the Real. In a mystical vision Holly has after Mohamed dies, the possibility of a universal truth, underpinning the accidents of religious particularities, begins to take (feminine) shape. A sequel to his dream of their skeletons in the boat, Holly’s dream involves “the awful vision of Mohamed struggling to escape,” shadowed “in the background [by] a veiled form...which, from time to time, seemed to draw the covering from its body, revealing now the perfect shape of a lovely blooming woman, and now again the white bones of a grinning skeleton” (75). The juxtaposition of Mohamed and the “white bones of a grinning skeleton” returns us to the dream of the boat,
underscoring its partial fulfillment. Yet the veiled form expresses a rather different sentiment from Mohamed’s: “In the Circle of Spirit life is naught and death is naught. Yet all things live forever, though at times they sleep and are forgotten” (ibid). In the earlier dream, death occasioned Mohamed’s insistence on Muslim-Christian difference, even in eternal repose. Here, however, it prompts the veiled figure to articulate the law governing all mortals, Muslim and Christian alike. Here, Haggard condenses the process by which considering non-Christian religiosities gives rise to an interest in interreligious unity.

Importantly, however, Haggard invites the reader to experience that interest in highly ambivalent terms, as a vision that may or may not be real. Floating behind the tableaux of Mohamed’s mortality, the koan-spouting figure provokes the signature perceptual flux of the fantastic, imaging forth the spiritual meaning that inheres in his physical demise. Given the implied contrast between her words and Mohamed’s in the earlier dream, she seems to embody the final revelation that the devout Mohamed, in life and death, partially reveals and partially obscures. Moreover, insofar as the dream woman clearly serves to foreshadow Ayesha, the dream hints at She’s status as the universal object of worship yoking Christian and Amahagger, Amahagger and the ancient people of Kor. Indeed, after Holly awakes from his dream, Haggard frames Amahagger gender relations as a kind of extension of the Victorians’ myriad theologies of womanhood: as Billali explains the following morning, “In this country the women do as they please. We worship them, and give them their way, because without them the world could not go on; they are the source of life” (78). The Christian Holly finds this a new idea, noting that “the matter never [had] struck me in that way before.” Yet this exchange with Billali is immediately followed by Holly’s aforementioned meditation under the stars, where his vision of feminine Truth interweaves Amahagger belief and Christian theology. On one hand, the close
sequence of scenes suggests that the Amahagger’s worship of women as Woman intuits the Infinite’s essential femininity. On the other, Holly’s thoughts about the limitations of mortal knowledge, transcended only when man “cast[s] off this earthly robe” and “gaze[s] with spiritual eyes deep into Infinity,” echo the language of 1 Corinthians 13:12: “Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known” (KJV). By way of successive juxtaposition, then, Haggard suggests that Ayesha, far from a mere acolyte of unknown religion, may incarnate nothing less than the “secret doctrine” linking the various religions on display.

Yet the memory of that grinning skeleton remains. Per the fantastic’s oscillations, this pan-religious dream may also dissolve, at any moment, into the ghastly double of Holly’s dream woman. Indeed, although Haggard introduces the trope of Eternal Feminine as universalist savior, he simultaneously hints at the intimate link between deifying women and destroying them. Thus, Billali continues his elaboration of Amahagger custom by describing how their men kill off every second generation of women, when “at last they become unbearable,” as a reaffirmation of male dominance. If Woman constitutes the telos of man’s religious impulses, Amahagger custom suggests that the destruction of that ideal may also be an ultimate Truth. Furthermore, Ayesha’s rule further circumscribes the high place of Amahagger women, a point reinforced as Billali relates Ustane’s predicament, in the event that, as inevitably happens, She lays claim to Leo. “If the hurricane bids the tree to bend, and it will not; what happens?” (78) Billali’s question exposes the power differential between Ustane and She, obscured by worship of a monolithic feminine abstraction. While building up She as the earthly embodiment of hypostatized Woman, then, Haggard also lays bare the matrix of conflicts (men versus women, women versus women) that simmers beneath the surface of such idealization. By the time
Ayesha finally makes her entrance, hidden behind a curtain, Haggard has primed his reader to both expect an ideal and suspect it, to see the “perfect shape” and remember the bones.

III. She Who Reflects Many Things: Ayesha as Medium, Theosophical Master, Queen Mother, and Divine Unity

The tension between ideal and reality, between Woman and women, saturates Holly’s first encounter with She, hidden behind a curtain at the outset of the scene. At this initial meeting with Ayesha, Holly’s narration exhibits a plethora of what Todorov calls “modalization phrases,” by which speakers express lack of conviction about their perceptions and therefore induce interpretive hesitation in the reader (Todorov 38). In this passage, Holly’s insecurity about the reliability of his senses practically reaches fever pitch. Approaching She’s throne, he sees “no sign of life,” yet “[feels] the gaze of the unknown being sinking through me” (96); he constantly qualifies his descriptions, as when he notes that the body “seemed to undulate” at the slight movement of hand or foot (ibid) So, too, does Holly’s syntax obscure the identity of the human actor (“The curtain agitated itself”) and employ indefinite pronouns (“I was in the presence of something that was not canny”), both of which Claire Whitehead identifies as techniques common to the fantastic (Critical Insights: The Fantastic 11-12). Holly’s difficulty interpreting the experience culminates in his reaction when Ayesha, having invited him behind the curtain, finally deigns to remove the veil from her face. Holly’s rapturous description makes full use of the fantastic’s narrative and syntactical strategies. “How am I to describe it! I cannot — simply I cannot!” he exclaims, before hazarding the impossible. Grasping for the words to describe what he beholds, he resorts to indefinite phrasing when he locates her loveliness, “if it
can be said to have any fixed abiding place, in a visible majesty, in an imperial grace, in a godlike stamp of softened power, which shone upon that radiant countenance like a halo” (105).

The eminently spiritual nature of Ayesha’s beauty reinforces the suggestion that She may embody the answer to man’s religious yearning, not merely his sexual desire (though she incarnates that, too). Moreover, “imperial grace” and “softened power” introduce the sly suggestion that She represents a kind of savage Victoria, a suggestion eventually culminating in her plot to travel to England and overthrow the queen. “My empire is of the imagination,” Ayesha later declares, after publicly sentencing to death several would-be murderers of Holly’s party. While, in context, the statement refers to her rule by “terror,” it also calls to mind the imperial imaginary of Greater Britain, its vision of a Queen whose subjects worship her out of faith, not fear. Here, Ayesha’s halo intimates a rule premised on similar affective forces, eliciting devotion rather than dread.

Ayesha-as-Victoria, of course, is by now a standard feature of readings of She, from Nina Auerbach’s Woman and the Demon to Arata’s Fictions of Loss. From Ayesha’s moment of entrance, however, the phenomenological uncertainty in play prevents Holly (and the reader) from reducing Ayesha to a mere stand-in for Queen Victoria. Ayesha only appears “semi-divine” to Holly’s eyes, bearing an all-too-earthly “look of unutterable experience” that coexists with her unearthly glow. Her “deep acquaintance with grief and passion,” somehow immediately apparent “even in the light of her glorious eyes,” finds confirmation in her subsequent reaction to the scarab around Holly’s neck, which reminds her of her dead lover Kallikrates (105). “‘It is very strange,’ she said with a sudden access of womanlike trembling and agitation which seemed out of place in this awful woman...she gave a little sob, and I saw that after all she was only a woman, although she might be a very old one” (106). Though the
“only a woman” comment would seem to undermine the picture of a marvellous being, the near tautological repetition of the word “woman” in this sentence suggests that her frailty only contributes to the idealizing portrait. In other words, if Ayesha’s “imperial grace” underscores her resemblance to Victoria, then her “womanlike trembling and agitation” highlights her affiliation with Evangelical ideology’s longsuffering wife.\footnote{I don’t mean to suggest that these are entirely discrete archetypes: Victoria’s appeal can be partially attributed to the way that she embodied a spirit of royal domesticity. As we shall see, Ayesha’s aspiration to globalize her empire ultimately depends on a similar embrace of this domestic archetype.} This becomes particularly apparent once she discovers Leo’s existence and, taking him to be the reincarnation of Kallikrates, identifies herself as his “handmaiden” as while he recovers from a near-fatal wound. Remarking with surprise on her humble demeanor, Holly reports, “All she did was to attend to his wants quietly, and with a humility which was in striking contrast to her former imperious bearing, addressing him always in a tone of something very much like respect” (141). Though the reader at this juncture cannot be absolutely sure of her motives, Ayesha’s earlier display of “womanlike” emotion signals that her disposition towards Leo is no calculated ploy. Indeed, as becomes evident later in the novel, Ayesha’s imitation of the angelic Victorian housewife here stands for a vital component of her variable personality, one that only consolidates her status, in Holly’s phrasing, as “the incarnation of lovely tempting womanhood” (127).

For all her psychic powers and fearsome intelligence, then, She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed’s most fantastical property may be her capacity to gather within herself virtually every model of spiritualised womanhood that haunted the Victorians, embodying nature goddess, majestic queen, and Angel-of-the-House in rapid succession. Ayesha’s necromantic activities, combined with her knowledge of ancient history and nature, also peg her as a variation simultaneously on the Spiritualist medium and the Theosophical mystic-scholar. In their initial dialogue, Ayesha sounds a refrain familiar to any student of Theosophy when she attributes her powers to natural,
as opposed to supernatural, causes: “There is no such thing as magic, though there is such as
ing a knowledge of the Secrets of Nature” (102). Yet she makes this distinction in reference
to her ability to summon, in a water-vessel, images of past events, a power analogous to the
clairvoyance of the medium. On the evening immediately following their first exchange, Holly
secretly spies on Ayesha performing an imprecatory ritual against her dead rival Amenartas, far
surpassing in outlandishness any seance Haggard might have attended. In a kind of liturgy,
Ayesha casts her words into the far reaches of the underworld, chanting, “Let my curses reach
her where she is and disturb her rest. Curse her through the starry spaces. Let her shadow be
accursed” (111). Crucially, the scene reveals the limits of Ayesha’s power, insofar as she cannot
actually summon the spirits of the dead: poised to animate the corpse of Kallikrates, she relents,
since she can only “recall the semblance of life [without] recall[ing] the spirit” (112). In
withholding from She absolute power over life and death, Haggard foreshadows the limits of her
capabilities (which, at the novel’s climax, become fully manifest). Regardless, Holly is more apt
to pay attention to what She can accomplish than what She cannot, transfixed as he is by the
sight of an “awe-inspiring woman letting loose her passion on the dead” (112).

Elsewhere, Ayesha takes on the Blavatskyesque role of a philosopher-cum-theologian,
whose idiosyncratic doctrines are founded on an esoteric knowledge of ancient history. In the
initial exchange between Ayesha and Holly, the latter’s incredulity at her age is provoked when
she indicates her ignorance of Christianity and relates a failed attempt to teach the Jews her
“philosophy” before the time of Christ.49 In response to Holly’s description of Jesus, Ayesha
avers that he must have been “a Son of the Living Spirit,” careful phrasing that reflects
Theosophical understandings of Christ as one manifestation of the divine unity (albeit a most

49 In other words, Holly expresses disbelief in her age as a result of her relating the ancient Jews’ unbelief in her
philosophy: the metonymic relationship between fantastic hesitation and the confrontation with new religious ideas
resurfaces.
important manifestation, evident in Blavatsky’s naming Christ as “the divine principle in every human being” (*The Esoteric Character of the Gospels*, 231)). Later on, Ayesha takes Holly on a tour of Kor’s underground tombs, elaborating on the history and beliefs of its people in a manner that takes its cues from Blavatsky’s grand tour of esoteric history in *Isis Unveiled*. Claiming that the civilization of Kor long predated the Egyptians, Ayesha notes that, “like the Egyptians, they thought more of the dead than the living” (119); her spontaneous translation of an ancient inscription offers further insight into Kor beliefs, making clear belief in a final “day of awakening” which, as the Editor implies in a footnote, corresponds to the Christian belief in resurrection (120). Ayesha ends her tour with reflections that expound on the message in Holly’s earlier dream: “Certainly…we shall sleep… [but] [w]e shall wake and live again, and again shall sleep, and so on and so on, through periods, spaces, and times, from aeon to aeon” (125). Just as the dream-woman’s incantation unfolds behind the scene of Mohamed’s death, this statement of eternal recurrence is offered as the hidden truth of man’s destiny, the secret doctrine shadowing the incomplete revelations of Christian and Kor eschatology.

Throughout this section of the novel, Haggard displays acute sensitivity to the vacillation between *eros* and *agape* that Ayesha, in her myriad roles, provokes in her acolytes. After the tour of the tombs, Ayesha again invites Holly to her inner chambers. There, he shortly collapses in a fit of erotic desperation, declaring that “I worshipped her as never woman was worshipped, and that I would give my immortal soul to marry her, which at the time I certainly would have done, and so, indeed, would any other man, or all the races of men rolled into one” (128). Ayesha later slyly refers back to recalls this lapse in self-restraint when she later casts Holly not as her would-be suitor, but as her disciple. Warning him of her power to coerce him into belief in her “philosophy,” Ayesha boasts that, with him as her disciple, they could “found a faith that
shall swallow up all the others”; noting his understandable reluctance at this, Ayesha continues, “Faithless man! And but half an hour since thou wast on thy knees...swearing that thou didst love me” (130). Once again juxtaposing erotic and spiritual yearnings, Haggard highlights Holly’s simultaneous arousal and agnosticism in the presence of this demi-goddess. The fantastic’s crisis of (un)reality only compounds Holly’s rapid shuttling between effusive desire and silent doubt: the stakes of submitting to Ayesha’s power, be it sexual or spiritual, are amplified by the seeming impossibility of knowing who/what She “really” is in the first place.

In one sense, by having spiritual and sexual desire converge in Ayesha’s body, Haggard crystallizes the range of feeling-states that the era’s new religious teachers, virtually all women, exerted on male and female students alike. Numerous scholars (Auerbach 1982; Arata 1996; Burdett 2004; Caputo 2011) have pointed out Ayesha’s resemblance to Blavatsky, who exerted ambiguous power over Frederick Myers and Annie Besant; one could add Anna Kingsford, the tall and beautiful “living type” of Isis, as another model. Moreover, Ayesha’s complex effect on Holly also bears witness to the specificity of Haggard’s personal interest in women, as he demonstrated, throughout his life, a tendency to collapse spiritual and erotic yearning into one another.50 However, Ayesha’s multifaceted personality may most poignantly conjure the meta-religious vision of the One-in-Many that Haggard upheld in the early 1880’s. Commenting on

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50 The impossible embodiment of the varied Sybil-goddesses who defined Haggard’s religious journey, Ayesha also seems to incarnate the varied objects of Haggard’s erotic interest, whom, in his autobiography, Haggard consistently describes in spiritual terms. Straddling the two categories (feminine mediators of divine revelation and spiritualised objects of romantic interest) are the young women “of great beauty” who appeared at one of Haggard’s seances: Haggard reports touching their “firm but cold” flesh and asking, unsuccessfully, for a kiss from “the prettier of the two” (Days of My Life Vol. 1). Immediately after discussing his Spiritualist escapades, however, Haggard describes falling “truly and earnestly in love,” at a ball, with “one of the three lovely women I have seen in my life,” a lady whom he follows through an arch at the end of the evening. At her funeral thirty-five years later, he reports following her coffin through a similar arch, a “curious coincidence” that, for Haggard, imbued the lady with cosmic importance. Similarly, Haggard later describes glimpsing a “semi-divine” woman in church, “singularly beautiful and pure faced,” who inspired him to write his first novel, Dawn (Days of My Life Vol. 1). Juxtaposed with such incidents, Ayesha’s eroticized spirituality marks her as an icon of individual, as well as collective, experience: She seems to embody the full range of Victorian cultural myths about womanhood, but as they specifically would have appeared to a man for whom religious and erotic experience were yoked with particular intimacy.
her changeability to Holly, Ayesha observes, “I am of many moods...I reflect many things; but they pass” (128). Though she explicitly refers to her emotional volatility, Ayesha could equally be describing her capacity to reflect the plurality of Victorian female archetypes. Elsewhere, however, her multiplicity of being takes on the added significance of Haggard’s “many-sided gem” of pan-religious truth, so that she embodies the very syncretism that she espouses. Likening her “moods and changes” to “little clouds” that “fitfully...seem to turn,” she nonetheless insists that “behind them ever blows the great wind of my purpose” (118). Ayesha thus personifies her own earlier observation that “the religions come and the religions pass...and naught endures but the world and human nature” (129); in that passage, she even goes on to define this constant “human nature” as “the breath of life,” counterpart to the “great wind” of her purpose. In turn, these figures of speech echo Haggard’s thesis that “God is one but religions are many.” The contiguity between Holly’s and Haggard’s “wild search” thus becomes audible in these linguistic reverberations, as does the contiguity between Ayesha and the final revelation that he pursued. As a stand-in for the sexually and spiritually restless young men of the 1880’s, Holly finds himself in the company of a woman who is by turns goddess, priestess, angel, master, and medium: varied as the religions that come and pass, yet, to the naked eye at least, as monolithic and unchanging as the breath of life, the truth of God.

IV. Ustane’s corpse, the whiteness of Woman, and the erasure of women

To end here, of course, would be to forget the warning of Holly’s dream, the grinning skeleton beneath the veil. And indeed, Ayesha’s ever-shifting appearance, mediated through Holly’s awestruck narration, reminds us that there is no objective standpoint from which to

51 To some degree, Ayesha’s changeability evokes well-worn stereotypes about female inconstancy, but such a reading is tempered by Holly’s editorial comment that “[Ayesha] had some virtues developed to a degree very uncommon in either sex--constancy, for instance” (161).
witness the impossible, no disinterested standpoint from which to write this history of adventure. Lest the reader be seduced into identifying too closely with Holly’s point of view, then, it is instructive to recall his soliloquy under the stars, the form of which speaks volumes about how to read the ensuing narration. Holly’s extensive musings on (un)veiled Truth, which segue into the subject of She’s hypothetical existence, vacillate between positions in pursuit of hard conclusions: can man know the unknowable? Could a person really attain earthly immortality? After two dense paragraphs recounting his moment-by-moment deliberation, Holly abruptly ends the proceedings: “I at last managed to get to sleep, a fact for which anybody who reads this narrative, if anybody ever does, may very probably be thankful” (82). This sharp shift in register, from grandiose to sardonic, re-establishes not only the gap between past and present Holly, but also that between Holly and his reader. We are, after all, not the narrator, nor is he us.

This ironic distancing, so characteristic of the novel, constitutes more than a source of periodic levity. Indeed, by perpetually dis-identifying the reader’s perspective from Holly’s, Haggard undermines any straightforward sense of Haggard inviting the reader to join the cult of Woman. Yet Haggard’s use of irony, and its implications for She’s gender politics, disappears from view in criticism that treats She as an unreflective expression of chauvinism. Stephen Arata’s reading epitomizes this point of view, premised as it is on treating Ayesha as straightforward embodiment of the “truth that blasts.” Arguing that Ayesha embodies “the very image of the New Woman enthroned in Africa,” Arata concludes that Haggard, represented by “unregenerate misogynist” Holly, must ultimately visit punishment upon her (98). In other words (to paraphrase Arata’s logic), because She is exactly as she appears to Holly, i.e., the image of the New Woman, She must be destroyed for the sake of the patriarchy.
Such a reading, I want to suggest, ignores the interpretive chaos that the fantastic generates, i.e., the fact that *She is not what She appears to be*. To be sure, as I have noted, Haggard’s depiction of Ayesha does align her with circulating tropes of spiritually empowered womanhood. Yet she appears as such *principally from Holly’s point of view*, that is, from a perspective whose limitations are all-too-evident. To draw from this affinity an absolute conflation of individual and category, a reduction of character to “very image,” is precisely the kind of perceptual error for which Ayesha chides the worshipful Holly: “Pay no heed to what I seem, seeing that thou canst not know what I am” (128). So, too, do such ironic moments as Holly’s metafictional aside prevent us from too readily taking Holly’s perspective for granted.

With this in mind, perhaps we should take Ayesha at her word, and remain skeptical of how she might seem to Holly’s adoring gaze. Indeed, as *She* approaches its climax, the novel moves not towards the destruction of the New Woman, but towards the destruction of Woman, the overdetermined ideal that Ayesha can only asymptotically approach, and the worship of Whom depends on the erasure of mortal women, in all their individuality and specificity. As such, the novel ultimately undermines the profoundly Victorian impulse to cast Unveiled Truth, the divine unity linking men of all creeds and cultures, in feminine form.

The degree to which one overlooks such subversion, I suggest, equals the degree to which one underrates the importance of the second lead female character in *She*, Ustane-Amenartas. Haggard obliquely alludes to the identity of the two characters only once, when Ayesha first glimpses Ustane in her water-mirror and absently comments, “It is very strange...so like--but it is not possible!” (104) Yet the contiguity between the two characters is significant, not only because it mirrors Leo’s identification with Kallikrates, but also because it underscores the way that Ustane’s arc puts the lie to totalizing myths of womanhood. As mentioned above, Ustane’s
pursuit of Leo brings into focus the limits of female deification in Amahagger culture: even though the men’s worship of women as “the source of life” putatively allows her free rein, the tribe’s higher allegiance to Ayesha, Woman among women, requires Ustane to relinquish Leo. In pitting herself against the Amahagger’s goddess-queen, Ustane thus retraces the arc of Amenartas, whose dalliance with Kallikrates required him to break his vows as a priest of Isis. In other words, Ustane’s previous incarnation similarly defied the Egyptian apotheosis of womanhood, precisely by asserting desires contrary to the will of the goddess.

Moreover, Ustane represents the inverse corollary to Ayesha’s all-encompassing personification of Victorian femininities. If the latter embodies a slew of ideals in succession, Ustane seems simultaneously to exhibit qualities common to several of them, while falling short of the “very image” of any one of them. Witness the scene in which she sings a kind of prophecy to Leo, early in the novel’s proceedings. Striking a “proud, imperial form,” Ustane delivers her song in a semi-trance; shaken by what she sees of the future, she breaks off in mid-sentence, and embraces the distraught Leo “with the most utter tenderness that I ever saw on the face of a woman, civilised or savage” (65). Ustane variously displays some of the regality, visionary mysticism, and maternal tenderness that Ayesha exhibits in full measure; yet the latter cycles through the roles of queen, medium and helpmeet, doing so with a hyperbolic extremity absent in her mortal rival. In contrast, while Ustane partially evokes a range of archetypes in this scene, she nonetheless remains too assertive to be an angel, too impotent to be a goddess, too simple to be a Theosophical mystic-master.

Above all, Ustane is simply too dark to represent any of the Victorian feminine ideals, too dark to be Woman. To quote Richard Dyer, Ustane’s dark skin disqualifies her from the “unmarked, unspecific, [and] universal” qualities that Western culture historically assigns to
whiteness (45). Indeed, Ustane implicitly singles out skin tone as the ultimate cause of her defeat, singing, “She who is stronger did take thee; ay, she who is fairer than Ustane” (64).

Ayesha’s superior strength thus becomes visible in her fantastically white skin, which, for all her moods and changes, ever remains the same. Indeed, in contrast with the universal vantage point that the white Ayesha can claim as her own, Ustane here underscores the incompleteness of her vision and the limits of her power: “To-night the hours are our own, how know we to whom they shall belong tomorrow?” (65) Ironically, Ustane’s clairvoyance culminates in a this-worldly affirmation of the present, a refusal of secret knowledge. Her declaration of agnosticism not only contrasts sharply with Ayesha’s intimations of esoteric truth, but also defies associations, be they of the Evangelical, Spiritualist or Theosophical variety, between womanhood and divine wisdom. Women, Ustane implies, are no less mortal than the men who worship them.

Ustane’s pursuit of Leo, particularly in the face of an unknown future, thus epitomizes a kind of female agency that exceeds official myths of womanhood. It is telling, then, that Leo must literally step over her dead body to worship at Ayesha’s feet. When Ustane tries (and fails) to abscond with Leo, Ayesha summons her and the company to her boudoir. There, she blasts Ustane to death “by some mysterious electric agency...whereof the dread She had command” (151). Though the enraged Leo initially vows to kill Ayesha for murdering his lover (and, it seems, his ancient ancestor), Ayesha cows him by unveiling her identity to him for the first time. As Holly narrates it, Leo submits to She “with the corpse of his dead love for an altar” (153), stepping over mortal woman to embrace, as Ayesha describes herself here, “a woman in truth—in very truth” (152). The swiftness with which Leo transfers his affections undermines Ayesha’s subsequent “epithalamium,” in which She sings the praises of unchanging Love. A mirror of
Ustane’s earlier song-prophecy, Ayesha’s paean describes Love in familiar terms, i.e., as the divine unity that manifests as apparent diversity. “There is only one fixed star in the midsts of our wandering./That star is Love!...Many are its shapes, but all are beautiful” (154). Haggard’s metaphor for religious pluralism, the one gem of varied flashes, is refashioned here, with Love taking the place of God as the constant absolute. Nonetheless, this particular invocation of meta-religion, of the One Truth that unites the Many, rings hollow: the “fixed star,” the unchanging Truth behind the accidents of circumstance, seems rather less than fixed, as Leo steps over the corpse of the woman he “loved” moments before.

Simultaneously articulating and troubling Ayesha’s meta-religion of Love, Ustane’s death scene thus primes the attentive reader to resist succumbing to the allure of her *philosophia perennis*, which She begins to describe more explicitly thereafter. Indeed, two chapters later, Ayesha makes clear that she envisions Love--and, by extension, her unflinching pursuit of it--as compensation for the inadequacies of otherworldly faith, identifying her “fixed star” with the “breath of life” that, per her earlier disquisition, survives the ebb and flow of religious change. Having convinced Leo of his identity as the reincarnated Kallikrates, she announces her plan to take Holly and Leo to the Fire of Life that imbued her with power; there, she promises to grant both her lover and her new philosopher-disciple earthly immortality, and with them take control of the British Empire. In the exchange with Holly that follows, Holly refuses to take Ayesha up on her offer, premising his refusal on his Christian convictions. The exchange thus reintroduces the problem of religious difference, the unassimilability of particular traditions into a divine unity. When Holly refuses wealth, wisdom and pleasure as sufficient justifications for cheating death, Ayesha offers Love, “which...doth breathe divinity into the very dust we tread” (167). Love, then, is the aforementioned “breath of life,” the purest distillation of which allows “life
[to] roll gloriously on from year to year.” Ayesha further compares love to “some great music that…hold[s] the hearer’s heart...above the sordid shame and folly of earth.” Such language also casts Love as Ayesha’s answer to the “Infinity” of Holly’s stargazing meditations, described in that passage as “that high level of the heart to which at times we momentarily attain...[above] the foul and thorny places of the world” (81).

Revisiting this earlier passage, Holly’s rebuttal reminds us that his vision of the Absolute is specifically Christian. “The immortality to which I look, and which my faith doth promise me, shall be free from the bonds that here must tie my spirit down” (167). This insistence on religious difference, even at the cost of agelessness, provokes Ayesha to name religion as the enemy of man’s earthly happiness, the source of his constant perceptual confusion. Ayesha scorns “the pictures of the future that mankind can thus draw with this brush of faith and this many-coloured pigment of imagination...Strange...that no one of them doth agree with one another!” Comparing her offer of secular immortality, and the Love that motivates it, to “a lamp… [with which] to light [Holly] through the darkness,” Ayesha mocks Holly for refusing it “because it is no star,” i.e., the greater happiness that transfixes the eyes of Faith. “Thou dreamest that thou shalt pluck the star. I believe it not, and I think thee a fool,” Ayesha declares. However high Love may rise above the follies of earth, Ayesha’s divinity remains expressly a truth of this world, a “lamp” as material and available to the senses as her ageless figure.

Viewed in isolation, this scene dramatically contrasts the fragility of Holly’s faith with the seductive power of Ayesha’s meta-religion. After all, Holly’s rejection of Ayesha’s philosophy hardly makes him a paragon of Christian virtue: he privately admits that his refusal issues less from religious conviction than from his dread of an existence “which must always be haunted and tortured by her memory, and by the last bitterness of unsatisfied love” (168). Seen
retrospectively, however, the scene also serves as an ironic counterpoint to the subsequent revelation that Ayesha’s meta-religion, no less than Holly’s Christian piety, masks its own inconsistencies. When the company arrives in the city of Kor, Ayesha takes the men to see the city’s central temple, and the “God whom men once worshipped therein” (174). The God, as mentioned above, turns out to be a goddess, a “winged woman of...marvellous loveliness and delicacy,” standing on a stone ball (175). Ayesha’s translation of the accompanying inscription reveals her to be “Truth standing on the World, and calling to its children to unveil her face” (ibid); yet the inscription warns, “No man is there born of woman who may draw thy veil and live, nor shall be. By Death only can thy veil be drawn, O Truth!” (176)

Here, then, is apparent confirmation of Ayesha’s earlier attack on religion as the pursuit of the unattainable. As She puts it, “To [Truth] [the people of Kor] built their shrines, and her they sought; knowing that they should never find, still sought they” (ibid). Yet Ayesha’s undeniable resemblance to the statue underlines the contiguity between Her meta-religious aspirations and those of the old Kor creed: no less than those ancient worshippers, She remains doggedly devoted to the ideal, not merely to behold it, but to incarnate it. Nonetheless, this ideal, like those borne of particular religious traditions, eludes Her total apprehension. Indeed, the latent discrepancy between She and the Eternal Feminine becomes clear the morning after their visit to the temple. Approaching Ayesha, Holly notes that her face is veiled “like the marble Truth,” and speculates whether “she originally got the idea of covering up her beauty from that Statue” (177). Yet Ayesha, troubled by nightmares, cannot muster the dignity to play the part. Holly observes that “she seemed very depressed, and had none of that proud and buoyant bearing which would have betrayed her among a thousand women of the same stature.” The facade slips only briefly, and by breakfast time the rejuvenated She “laughingly set[s] down her
previous depression to the associations of the spot where she had slept.” Yet the moment is telling: for all her artifice, Ayesha is no goddess, but only an assiduous approximation, to whom the Fire has granted a prolonged mortal existence. Like the men of Kor she implicitly derides, Ayesha “long[s] for that which is beyond the veil”; unlike them, however, She refuses to admit the impossibility of satisfying such longing before death. Indeed, She refuses to admit the longing itself.

The answer to Holly’s initial question about Ayesha — “what was her religion?” — thus lies hidden in plain sight. To borrow her figures of speech, Ayesha’s faith is a star masquerading as a lamp, a religion that refuses to recognize itself as such, insofar as it assumes a vantage point beyond all religions. Like all the period’s purveyors of meta-religion, Ayesha disavows the label of “religion” in the name of theological impartiality. Yet even as Ayesha insists on difference from the faiths she would supplant, while simultaneously betraying more than a passing likeness to them. On one hand, Ayesha’s inability to recognize her frailty (“How can evil touch me?” she asks incredulously) highlights the difference between her creed and that of Kor, not to mention of Christianity (as articulated by the less-than-pious Holly): both Kor and Christian religion, insofar as they respect the fact of death, embrace human imperfection, and thus agree on a point that Ayesha’s philosophy will not acknowledge. On the other hand, however, Ayesha is no less stubbornly particularist than the religions from which she holds herself apart, as dedicated as Mohamed or Job to a specific construal of the Ultimate: Her body, and no one else’s, is the locus of Truth. Moreover, this construal is thoroughly enmeshed in the religions it would supersede. To borrow a phrase from Charles Taylor, Ayesha’s ambition is to import the old faiths into a purely “immanent frame,” rendering in material terms the imagery and vocabulary of the old Kor religion. Her two thousand year old project of self-fashioning, of remolding her body and spirit
into “Truth standing on the world,” emblematizes her unflinching devotion to this process of immanentization. In converting the dreams of faith into flesh-and-blood fact, in materializing the marvellous, Ayesha is perhaps the supreme practitioner of the fantastic.

Ayesha’s universalist ambition ultimately requires her to choose one specific form of womanhood, however—the purest form. Ludwig Feuerbach’s characterization of the Real behind all religion, cut from the same cloth as Leslie Stephen’s canonization of his first wife, might help illuminate this choice. In his celebrated *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), the liberal theologian conflates woman worship and universalist theology, venerating maternal compassion as the true object of all religious yearning: “The highest and deepest love is the mother’s love” (72). In personifying man’s divine ideals, then, Ayesha must ultimately align herself with the cult of domesticity. Thus, as the company approaches the Fire of Life, Ayesha’s formal submission to Leo suggests that her meta-religion of Love requires her to abandon aspirations of incarnating the ideal Queen, Medium, or Theosophical Master. Instead, she must strike the familiar pose of the Victorian wife-mother-angel, archetype among archetypes, if she is to complete the *telos* of her meta-religion. At the cusp of bathing in the Fire, Ayesha begs Leo’s forgiveness for Ustane’s murder, lamenting that her life has exhibited “more of evil than of good” (186). In insisting that she “yet…[knows] the good from the evil,” She implicitly overturns an earlier statement to Holly about the equal value of “good and evil, love and hate, night and day” (136). This late moralism prompts her wedding vow, “even in this most holy hour of completed Womanhood,” to “abandon Evil and cherish Good…[to] be ever guided by [Leo’s] voice in the straightest path of Duty” (187). In doing so, Ayesha promises to make Leo ruler over a veritable empire of love, uniting all men and women before their secular divinity. In this fulfillment of Ayesha’s eschatology, “the great ones of the earth shall creep about thy feet,
and its fair women shall cover up their eyes because of the shining glory of thy countenance” (188); with Ayesha by his side, Leo shall become the new avatar of the divine unity, linking in worship “the peasant in his hovel...the monarch in his palace halls” (188). Together, god and goddess will serve as living testimonies to the uncanny “power of love” (188). Here, Ayesha seems poised to become the imperial counterpart to John Ruskin’s “Christian Minerva,” a divine handmaiden who will not only bring middle class values to the lower classes of England, but unite people of all cultures, classes and creeds.

Indeed, Ayesha displays total commitment in her determination to realize this archetype. When Leo expresses reluctance to enter the fire himself, Ayesha offers to enter again, to prove its safety and to further extend her lifespan. Yet she quickly voices a third motive, arguably the most important. Lamenting that she first bathed in the Fire when she was still full of rage at Amenartas, so that “passion and hatred [have] been stamped upon my soul from that sad hour to this,” Ayesha hopes now to impress on her soul “the purest part of thought” (191), i.e., the newfound docility that presently occupies her. In this ultimate act of self-fashioning, Ayesha aspires to incarnate the very image, not of the New Woman, but of the angel as hailed by Leslie Stephens. This, then, is the state of “completed Womanhood” to which Ayesha’s mighty purpose has brought her, the fulfillment of her religion of immanence. And, if Ayesha is to eternally embody the meta-religious Real, the final fulfillment of man’s limited revelations, it makes sense that the flux of her “moods and changes” should give way to the static apotheosis of feminine purity. As Gilbert and Gubar argue in The Madwoman in the Attic, such purity is coextensive with “the Victorian iconography of whiteness,” in which woman’s “dutiful chastity [is] manifested by her virginal pallor, her marble forehead...ideally, even her hair...[which] is celestially golden, as if to relate her further to the whiteness of heaven” (615). In
metamorphosing into the Angel, whitest of feminine types, Ayesha reproduces in her body the racist logic by which pure whiteness functions as a sign of total freedom from particularity, be it cultural, racial or religious. And yet, as we have seen earlier, Ustane’s presence in the novel—indeed, her dramatic exit from it—has highlighted the way that Haggard’s novel might be commenting on such logic rather than merely reflecting it: the universalist overtones of Woman worship are belied by the fact that it must take place over the corpse of woman. Here, at the novel’s climax, the troubling implications of that earlier tableau come to full fruition. Furthermore, the rapid succession of feeling-states Holly’s narration evokes during this scene—religious fervor, imperialist pride, sexual attraction, confusion, horror, dejection—casts this final disintegration of ideal womanhood as the climax to Haggard’s re-presentation of pluralistic experience.

Once Ayesha steps into the Fire, Holly is struck by how perfectly She appears to embody the domestic angel, for “no angel out of heaven could have worn a greater loveliness” (193). In short, Holly reports, “she seemed the very spirit of the Flame” (193). This is the same Flame that Ayesha describes earlier as the source of Life, the unity behind biological diversity, “brought forth in man and beast—ay, in every tree and flower” (189). To Holly’s eyes, the hidden principle behind the diverse manifestations of Being finds ideal form, not in the ferocious Queen or the entranced medium, but in this dazzling Angel. Holly’s narration incorporates virtually all the features observed by Gilbert and Gubar: “completed Womanhood” is made visible in Ayesha’s “ivory breast,” “delicate features,” and the “golden locks” of fire that temporarily brighten her dark hair. Ayesha seems “the very spirit of the Flame” only insofar as She seems somehow whiter than ever, a living portrait of the impossibly unblemished goddess of Kor.
Thus, when the inevitable destruction of the angelic portrait occurs, Holly notes that “her skin changed colour, and in place of the perfect whiteness of its lustre it turned dirty brown and yellow” (194). Much scholarly attention has been devoted to Ayesha’s death, as her rapid aging, culminating in her final appearance as a “hideous big monkey,” seems to crystallize Victorian anxieties about degeneration and the reversal of the evolutionary process. Arata reads this “spectacle of devolution” as a further extension of Ayesha’s “submission to patriarchy’s ‘eternal law’” (103), thus rendering her death a conservative management of male anxiety. This is, of course, Holly’s dazed reading of the situation, for in the immediate aftermath of She’s death he surmises that “she opposed herself against the eternal law, and, strong though she was, was swept back into nothingness” (195). Once again, however, the logic of the fantastic forces us to bear in mind the limits of narratorial perception. Indeed, the stark transformation of “perfect whiteness” into “dirty brown and yellow,” the violence with which it punctures the portrait of feminine purity, strongly suggests a deconstruction of the patriarchy’s “eternal law.” In the cleansing light of Fire, the essentialisms of race and gender are exposed as not-so-essential after all, mere contingencies that have, all along, masked who She “really” is: a mortal whose expiration is long overdue. Ayesha’s death brutally refutes not only the very notion of an Eternal Feminine, but also the concept of whiteness that undergirds it. The unreality of both concepts, their sheer fictionality, finally becomes clear in the shadow of Ayesha’s corpse.

Indeed, for all of Holly’s apparent confidence in his interpretation of events — “It requires no great imagination to see the finger of Providence in the matter” (195) — such an assertion uneasily coexists with the question that immediately precedes it: “But who can tell what had happened?” (195) The juxtaposition of question and answer recapitulates the recurring tension between the Unknown and man’s stubborn belief in its knowability. To borrow
theological terms, Holly’s answer to his own question indicates She’s ultimate investment in apophatic thought, the study of divinity by way of negation. The one truth that emerges in Ayesha’s sudden and unexpected death is precisely that none can really know Who or What governs the Fire of Life, not the men who pursue it, not the woman who claims knowledge of its secrets. Thus, the “wild search” on which Holly has embarked, his exploration of the varied theologies that flourish beyond the boundaries of Christian Britain, seems to culminate in a confirmation of the via negativa, the method by which one seeks to know God by knowing what God is not. Yet while the via negativa historically serves as a foil to the narrow dogmatism of religious orthodoxy, here it casts into relief the hubris of a Victorian universalism that locates the all-embracing Real in white femininity. If Ayesha’s perfectly pure body crumbles into dust, so, too, does the ambition to assume an omniscient vantage point beyond the local doxai of human creeds.

For a moment, it seems that Holly has taken the lesson to heart. In a footnote, Holly pauses to reflect on what the death of She has taught him:

What a terrifying reflection it is, by the way, that nearly all our deep love for women who are not our kindred depends--at any rate, in the first instance--on their personal appearance. If we lost them, and found them again dreadful to look on, though otherwise they were the very same, should we still love them? (197)

Holly’s question betrays a glimmer of self-awareness, the beginnings of understanding the gap between appearance and reality. Were he to follow this train of thought, it would perhaps mature into a recognition of the Eternal Feminine as, in the end, only a trick of perspective: the Truth, however one parses it, cannot reside in the fleeting circumstances of the
body. Yet he and Leo have already been inducted into Ayesha’s ambition to collapse tangible beauty and spiritual Infinity into one another, the lamp into the star. Having watched Her meta-religion of Love dissolve before his eyes, Holly’s only desire is to see its resurrection. Hence, setting his sights on a “far undreamed future” when he will be reunited with the reincarnated Ayesha, Holly looks forward to nothing more than “a sweet smile of recognition, a little gentle friendship, and a little show of thanks for my devotion to her” (198). That She in this “undreamed future” looks more like the Spirit of the Flame than like her final form goes without saying. So it is that Holly and Leo, having escaped death and made safe passage back to England, prepare to set out for Central Asia after completing the manuscript. (The sequel, *The Return of She*, specifies the location as Tibet.) Holly’s introductory description of this final destination—“where, if anywhere on this earth, wisdom is to be found” (4)—takes on new meaning by the novel’s close. In defiance of the Fire of Life, wisdom for Holly and Leo still takes the shape of Woman.

Nonetheless, the very last line of the novel, one final question, takes the reader’s eyes off their object of devotion. Pondering with “the eyes of the mind” the “final development” of their entanglement with She, “in obedience to a fate that never swerves and a purpose that cannot be altered,” Holly yearns to perceive not his goddess but Her earthly rival. “What will be the part played therein by that beautiful Egyptian Amenartas, the Princess of the royal race of the Pharaohs, for the love of whom the Priest Kallikrates broke his vows to Isis, and, pursued by the inexorable vengeance of the Goddess, fled down the coast of Libya to meet his doom at Kor?” (209). The constant foil to the Eternal Feminine, Ustane-Amenartas, virtually emerges as the secret heroine of “the great drama” in which Holly finds himself. For all his devotion to She, Holly finds his vision taking in more than meets the eye, perceiving the Other to his universal
white goddess: mortal, dark, irreducibly particular in her lineage and desire. As long as the *doxa* of Woman endures, Haggard suggests, so will the heresy of women.
3. Ruptured Masonic Pluralisms in Kipling’s Anglo-Indian Fantastic: Visions and Vanishings

If the name “Rudyard Kipling” continues to conjure, for many, a false ideal — the impossible dream of Empire, dominion over palm and pine — we must recognize how foreign such an association would have sounded to his first generation of readers. Not, to be sure, simply because those readers were imperialists and we are not; I merely want to observe that “idealistic,” i.e. ungrounded in reality, is the last attribute that anyone, fan or critic, would have ascribed to the boy wonder from the Punjab. “Mr. Kipling achieves the feat of making Anglo-Indian society flirt and intrigue visibly before our eyes,” writes Sir William Hunter in an 1888 review of *Departmental Ditties*, noting that, “if Mr. Kipling makes his little Simla folk rather silly, he also makes them very real” (38). Indeed, the charge most often leveled against Kipling was an overzealousness for his own brand of realism, prizing journalistic immediacy over style. “What concerns one chiefly is the fact that the man’s style has commonly so rich and curious a savour of newspaperese and is...unworthy of the matter it conveys,” writes W.E. Henley, before going on to clarify that the “matter” in question indicates “the gift...of so creating and so realising character that the emotion it expresses appears the living and unalterable truth” (57).

In other words, the spell Kipling cast on an adoring English public was not that of romantic idealism, but that of hard reality, imported from India and distilled for the written page. To appreciate this requires us to look past the Orientalist language of enchantment that peppers
nove1ist S.R. Crockett’s reflections on first encountering Kipling. “The East, the skirts of which I had trod, spoke to me for the first time with authentic voice,” Crockett writes gushingly of his first encounter with Kipling’s work; yet the land to which “the Revealer of the East” transports Crockett is not one of misty-eyed myth, but of “the acrid whiff of wood smoke...the true Himalaya smell...the pinewoods of Simla...[the] ill-favoured and treacherous men with long hair from the hills of the horse thieves on the North-Western frontier” (182). To read Kipling, by Crockett’s account, is to enter a world so exactingly rendered that, as far as authenticity is concerned, one can literally take his word for it.

Except, of course, that the question of Kipling’s attachment to “reality” is almost as complicated as the question of his attachment to Empire. As regards the first topic, Kipling’s Anglo-Indian fiction is rife with the collision of mimesis and marvels, fact and fancy, that I have taken as the signature mark of the fantastic. Kipling’s commitment to journalistic realism (about which more below) only heightens the unreality effect when it inevitably occurs. As regards the second question, critics have lately dissented from the conventional portrait of a staunch imperialist — which, as the editors of the 2010 essay collection *Kipling and Beyond* affirm, continues to pervade “popular culture and journalism,” particularly during the most intense period of the second Iraq War. In contrast to the ongoing popular view of Kipling-as-jingoist, postcolonial studies has recast Kipling as something of a proto-postcolonial writer, uniquely positioned to comment on the costs that imperialism extracts from colonizer and colonial subject alike. Noting this recent scholarly amenability to Kipling, *Kipling and Beyond*’s editors go on to write, “We might ask whether something in our ‘postcolonial’ ease with Kipling implies [a] knowingness and complacency” that parallels the intellectual complacency with which an earlier generation dismissed him as a mere jingoist (2). If our perception of Kipling’s ideological
attachments is forever shifting—from naming him poet of Empire, to recognizing his writing as “[a site] of colonial ambivalence and hybridity” (ibid), and back again — then to what degree is such perceptual flux mirrored, even activated, in his experiments with the fantastic, the phantom rickshaws, revenants, and gods who periodically invade his fact-checked (fact-checkered?) universe?

As I have argued throughout this dissertation, such fantastic irruptions have everything to do with disrupting the smooth surfaces of ideology, in particular, ideologies mobilized to impose order on the array of new religiosities that became imaginable to the Victorians. In this chapter, I want to explore specifically the way that Kipling’s fantastic fictions, articulating his experience of living amongst India’s myriad religiosities, upend the vision of religious pluralism he imbibed from imperial Freemasonry. The Masonic Lodge’s status as a microcosm of Empire, in which men of disparate races, ranks, and religions united under a single ideal, held obvious appeal for Kipling, who became a member in 1885. However, the ecumenical underpinnings of this fellowship, its call for men of all creeds to recognize the “Grand Architect of the Universe,” seem to have particularly fascinated Kipling. As described below, Masons in the nineteenth century buttressed this interreligious emphasis by elaborating their own perennialist theory of global religious history; “The Craft,” as Masons frequently referred to their organization, safeguarded an ancient universal religion that had (d)evolved into the world’s myriad creeds. In light of this history, Masons heralded the Craft as a variation on the imperial meta-religion, a Brotherhood of Man that suited a multicultural Empire better than Christianity’s dogged conversionism. In India especially, Masons replaced conversionism with restorationism, arguing that Masonry held the power to return Indians to the original practice of Hinduism, recovering its origins in the ancient mysteries, while expelling its “merely” idolatrous elements.
Freemasonry’s vision of religious pluralism seemed to satisfy a primal need of Kipling’s, a need to make sense of the religious diversity that, since childhood, had stamped his experience of India. Particularly when coupled with imperial ambition and a stress on masculine fellowship, the Masonic theory of world religions produces something like the ultimate Kiplingian faith, one of strong men from East and West, whose commitment to the Law dissolves differences in creed and culture. However, in the short fictions studied below, one finds Kipling testing the Masonic grand narrative against the disparate religious worlds inhabited by his characters, staging what can only be described as a clash of incommensurable realities. Such a clash, I want to suggest, necessarily raises the stakes of Rider Haggard’s fantastic depictions of religious alterity. In *She*, Haggard deployed the unreality effect to literalize the experience of exploring new religiosities, different universes that were all haunted by the Feminine Real. Such an experience was not particular to his time in South Africa, but characterized his life in colony and metropole alike. Accordingly, Haggard in *She* hardly comes across as a “Revealer of Africa,” inviting readers into a verisimilar picture of religious experience specific to the African colonies. It is perhaps more accurate to say that, in *She*, Africa constitutes the landscape on which Haggard functions as a “Revealer of Britain”: his “History of Adventure” enacts a drama familiar to late Victorian England, the “wild search” for new religiosities and new accounts of global religious difference, which again and again featured the Divine Feminine at its center.52

In contrast to *She* (whose author, it must be said, became a close confidante of Kipling’s), the fictions I examine in this chapter do betray their author’s interest in religious pluralism as a specifically colonial experience, a phenomenology shaped by the geography, politics, and cultural hybridity of the Raj. Indeed, Kipling’s fantastic transports the reader to the interstices of

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52 Once again, I refer to David Chidester’s *Empire of Religion*, for an account of Haggard’s novels, particularly *King Solomon’s Mines* and *Allan Quatermain*, in the specific context of South African religion and colonial politics.
India’s religious cross-pressures, its panoply of gods and gurus, over which Freemasonry looms as an agent of theological order. In short, Kipling immerses the reader in an Other kind of religious pluralism, a colonial mode of encountering religious difference that qualitatively differs from the mode prevalent in Victorian Britain. Yet this colonial mode of religious pluralism recurrently could entail conflict between the particularities of religious experience in India and the Masonic ideology that Kipling cherished. Indeed, in the stories “The Man Who Would Be King” and “The Bridge Builders,” Kipling interprets that conflict as a solvent of the fragile boundaries separating real and unreal, natural and supernatural.

The two stories I have chosen elaborate slightly different versions of the Masonic Brotherhood, and, consequently, different versions of the threat that the religious difference poses to that fraternity. In “The Man Who Would Be King,” redefining local religion is colonial Freemasonry’s primary objective; in “The Bridge Builders,” such redefinition constitutes a secondary consequence of the cult of Labor, whose all-consuming demands transform Hindu and Christian, Indian and Briton alike. Put another way, the explicitly Masonic civil religion in “The Man Who Would Be King” is cast, in “The Bridge Builders,” as an implicit form of devotion: Labor, one of Freemasonry’s core ideals, requires an ultimate allegiance that diminishes the old gods, even as it continues their task of unifying humanity in common worship. Both stories draw on preoccupations that Kipling displays elsewhere: a fascination with the interchangeability of religious archetypes, and colonial administrators who skillfully regulate indigenous religious practices. However, through juxtaposition with Kipling’s use of these motifs elsewhere, I argue that his commitment to the unreality effect, in these two stories, pushes him far beyond the ideological zone in which he would otherwise remain. As these stories become fantastic--as suspension between the mimetic and the marvellous gradually ruptures the protagonists’
understanding of reality—they register the disintegration of the Masonic pluralist dream, in the face of unassimilable Ways of Life. In doing so, they invite the reader into the psychological solitude of characters quietly traumatized by Other visions of the sacred.

Furthermore, the stories’ improvisations on the spectrum of pluralistic experiences available in colonial India, what I have called the “phenomenological experiment” in which they are engaged, prove doubly disorienting due to the compressed affective rhythm of these stories. Their extravagant practices unfold over a brief period of time: whereas The Moonstone or She feature feeling-states layered over the course of several hundred pages (e.g., uneasy intuition of supernatural activity, dissatisfaction with Christianity, eroticized thrill at the female embodiment of the One-in-Many), these short fictions whipsaw from affect to affect, triumph-dread-shock-despair, in the space of thirty-or-so pages. Put in musical terms, if the novels were symphonies, these stories are songs. As such, they provide perhaps the purest distillation of how the fantastic could push writers to exhaust the possibilities of what it meant to truly experience religious plurality. Ultimately, I want to suggest that committing to the fantastic impels Kipling to break from the Masonic dream of a “grand primeval and fundamental religion,” and, by extension, the forms of colonial governance it underwrites.

I. Colonial Freemasonry, Syncretism, and “Changing Pickets” in Kipling’s Fiction

Then ‘ere’s to the Lodge o’ the Widow,
From the Pole to the Tropics it runs-
To the Lodge that we tile with the rank an’ the file
An’ open in form with the guns.
“The Widow at Windsor” (40)

53 Maybe more psychedelic jams than two minute pop tunes, but songs nonetheless.

54 The quote comes from an 1868 speech by William Mason Scharlieb, “deputy district grand master” of Madras, who hails Freemasonry as “that grand primeval and fundamental religion by which we are inviolably attached to each other, and in which the whole family of man may harmoniously unite” (quoted in Fozdar 497).
Was Kipling a Freemason because he was an imperialist, or an imperialist because he was a Freemason? Regardless of how one answers the question, Kipling’s inclination to express one passion in terms of the other, to present imperialism and Freemasonry as coextensive ideologies, is undeniable. In the above lines, taken from his poem “The Widow at Windsor,” Kipling envisions the Empire as a macrocosm of the Lodge, Freemasonry’s basic unit of assembly. In her study of Kipling’s lifelong relationship to “The Craft,” Marie Roberts observes that such a vision of Empire-as-Lodge reappears throughout Kipling’s poetry and non-fiction prose. As Roberts points out, the stanza’s third line particularly illustrates the “aptness” of this vision: there, Kipling redirects Masonry’s historic emphasis on craftsmanship towards “building” the imperial world-order, an ultimate Lodge composed of the British military’s “rank an’ file.” Moreover, if Kipling here depicts the Empire-as-Lodge, elsewhere he presents a corollary vision of the Lodge-as-Empire, microcosm of the “rank an’ file” who comprise the Widow’s global order. In the poem “The Mother-Lodge,” Kipling’s working-class narrator fondly recalls the Masonic meetinghouse of his youth. While the first two stanzas’ roll-call names members from a spectrum of ranks, cultures and creeds — “’Ackman, Commissariat,” “Blake, Conductor-Sergeant,” “Din Mohammed, draughtsman/Of the Survey Office,” “Bola Nath, Accountant” — the refrain celebrates Masonry’s power to diminish such differences, redefining all as brothers: “Outside — ‘Sergeant! Sir! Salute! Salaam!’/Inside — ‘Brother,’ an’ it doesn’t do no ’arm” (196).

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55 Roberts observes that the Empire-as-Lodge reappears in Kipling’s “The Song of the Dead,” where he presents Francis Drake’s circumnavigation of the globe as the dawn of the imperial Lodge: “When Drake went down to the Horn..../Our Lodge — Our Lodge was born/(And England crowned thereby!)”. Likewise, Roberts writes, a 1907 address on “Imperial Relations” saw Kipling “express[ing] colonial problems in Masonic language,” naming five issues with colonial administration in terms of Masonry’s “five points of fellowship,” i.e., the five points of bodily contact required in Masonic ritual.
In championing Lodge and Empire as metonyms for one another, Kipling was by no means unusual. Since its initial spread throughout England, Ireland and Scotland in the 18th century, Freemasonry had played a critical role in imperial expansion. On a practical level, the infrastructures of the Masonic lodge system and of colonial expansion neatly supplemented each other. In her study of Freemasons and British imperialism from the 18th century onward, Jessica Harland-Jacobs demonstrates that the spread of Freemasonry closely tracked the movements of the British army: in the early nineteenth century, each imperial regiment was accompanied by at least one lodge. This meant that the British Army’s establishment around the globe effectively ensured Freemasonry’s expansion into the colonies. There, Freemasonry provided a “variety of needs--ranging from homosocial association to easing men’s transition from one colonial society to another--belonging to the fraternity made life easier for Britons who ran, defended, and lived in the empire” (4). In India especially, Masonry consolidated the relationship between the local authorities, both British and Indian, and the monarchy: when Prince Edward, Grand Master of English Freemasonry, visited Bombay in 1877, he oversaw a Masonic ceremony to found a new Prince’s dock, at which he greeted the “governor, several ‘Native Chiefs,’ and local officials” (Harland-Jacobs 257).

That Kipling especially embraced Freemasonry’s capacity to cement ties between subjects and masters, between subordinates and superiors in the colonial chain of command, becomes evident in the refrain of “The Mother Lodge,” with its celebration of British commissariat, Muslim draughtsman, and Hindu accountant “meeting on the level.” Yet, if the rest of “The Mother Lodge” is any indication, Kipling’s attraction to Masonry’s all-embracing

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56 As an example of how the Masonic lodge could serve as a node for frontier community-building, Harland-Jacobs specifically cites the Freemasons’ Hall in Niagara, Upper Canada, which functioned as a center for the town’s dances, agricultural society meetings, and religious gatherings (53).
fellowship was, itself, symptomatic of a still-more-fundamental fascination with Masonry’s pan-religious ideology. Indeed, the poem’s latter stanzas find Kipling implicitly attributing the Lodge’s tight-knit fraternity to its spirit of religious pluralism, naming this as the ultimate ground of the Craft. “There ain’t such thing as infidels/Excep’, per’aps, it’s us,” the narrator muses, before launching into a fond recollection of said infidelity: once a month, after official Lodge proceedings were concluded, the brothers would linger to hear “man on man [talk]...of the God he knew the best” (197). Spellbound by each man’s description of their own religion, the brothers arrive at a dim awareness of their doctrines’ interchangeability, departing at daybreak “With Mo’Ammed, God and Shiva/Changing pickets in our ’ead.” If the Lodge comprises a microcosm of the imperial order, its members derive solidarity here not from allegiance to the Widow at Windsor, but from a common indifference to dogma.

“The Mother Lodge” thus emblematizes Freemasonry’s aspiration, particularly in India, to seize the power that the cult of Victoria ascribed to its Queen (of Heaven): the power to diminish religious difference, promote ecumenical exchange, and unite the Empire’s diverse citizens in a kind of universal worship. In short, Freemasonry in India offered a variation on the imperial meta-religion, a form of collectivity, replete with its own rituals and beliefs, that insisted on its separateness from the dogmatic world of religion. To be sure, Freemasons in Britain had always conceived of themselves as supportive of the monarchy and the imperial state (Fozdar 494). Yet the colonial context placed particular pressure on Freemasonry to prove its capacity, as a beacon of universal brotherhood, to overcome religious difference. In their

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57 Fozdar expounds on the link between these lines and Masonic syncretism: “Here, Kipling presents Freemasonry as a “bridging religion,” where the religions of the empire can be viewed synoptically and as operating on a level playing field. As in the Hellenistic world, where a deity in one culture could be compounded with a functionally similar one from another to form the basis of religious syncretism (for example, Venus-Isis-Ishtar), now, in the Indian Empire, the ambivalence and ambiguity in Masonic circles toward Christianity permitted an acceptance of the truth claims of other religions and even fostered a syncretic tendency” (516).
respective studies of Freemasonry as a “civil religion” of colonial India, Wahid Fozdar and Preeti Chopra show how this led to a departure from the tendency, on the part of Masons in Britain and America, to eschew identifying themselves as a religious organization (Fozdar 496). In abandoning this policy, colonial Freemasons successfully promulgated the Craft as a source of “civil religion,” performing rituals at government-sponsored stone-laying ceremonies that “encouraged loyalty to the British monarch and to the empire” (Chopra 120). Such a civil religion was premised on the Masonic version of the philosophia perennis, heralding a syncretic wisdom tradition that reserved a special place for Hinduism. It was this meta-religious theology to which Kipling found himself attracted, and which resurfaces in the fantastic narratives analyzed below.

Insofar as their global influence was closely bound up with imperial expansion, Freemasons had always aspired to a special place in the imperial order. The India of the late nineteenth century proved particularly fertile ground on which Masons could demonstrate their superiority, as a handmaiden of colonial policy, to Christian missionaries. The Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 had produced disaffection and enthusiasm for Christian missions in almost equal measure, since the majority consensus attributed the uprising to an eruption of local religious passions. For every minister who saw the event as divine punishment for the as-yet-incomplete conversion of India, a host of colonial administrators saw it as proof that stability in British India depended on strict non-interference with local religious practice. So it was that Queen Victoria threw her official support behind religious noninterference, in the form of the 1858 Indian

58 As Gauri Viswanathan notes, the East India Trading Company had pursued a policy of religious neutrality since at least 1806, “refrain[ing] from interfering with indigenous religions” in order to “protect the Company’s commercial interests” (“Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism” 34). Nonetheless, the Mutiny seems to have marked a turning point in the Raj’s official support of religious noninterference, emblematized in the Queen’s 1858 proclamation of the neutrality doctrine.
Proclamation (described in the last chapter). In 1863, the Religious Endowments Act officially divested all government officers from the responsibility of superintending religious and charitable endowments (Divanji 1).

Freemasons, perhaps sensing that their time had come, took the opportunity to argue that The Craft had been divinely ordained as a meta-religious remedy for the conflicts at the heart of the Sepoy Rebellion. As Fozdar points out, such arguments crystallize in an 1869 article titled “Masonry is a Divine Institution,” originally published in London-based periodical The Freemason, and republished in Bombay’s Masonic Record for Western India. “We do not find all men of one faith, nor do we find in any dogma that magnetic-like gravitation which draws all men together,” the article’s author declares; nonetheless, Freemasonry offered a means by which "the representatives of all sects, all beliefs, and all dogmas may gravitate towards the common centre of all religions, God" (quoted in Fozdar 503). 59 As Fozdar notes, such an argument makes Freemasonry “more religious and inclusive than Christianity could ever be...an ‘imperial’ religion that could support the political and social integration of the British Indian Empire by fostering bonds of sentiment between rulers and ruled.”

Freemasonry thus purported to reveal the common religious history of colonizer and colonized, naming them as fellow acolytes of a creed anterior to all existing traditions, a perennial philosophy that illuminated the essential equality of all religious beliefs, and, therefore, of the people who believed them. The essence of this belief manifested in such rituals as the stone-laying ceremony for Bombay’s Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy Hospital in 1843, where an

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59 Fozdar also points out that Freemasonry’s emphasis on egalitarianism eventually laid the seeds for the nationalist movement by giving Indians a chance at positions of power. Yet he nonetheless argues that, for the bulk of imperial history, Freemasonry served the Empire’s interests by functioning as something akin to Robert Bellah’s concept of a civil religion, a form of nonsectarian devotion that serves the interests of the State. He goes on to concede that Masonry’s highly institutionalized nature does not quite match Bellah’s diffuse and amorphous aggregation of beliefs and practices (Fozdar, 498). I am indebted to Fozdar for his research on Freemasonry as a civil religion in India, especially his treatment of Wilford and Burnes as instrumental in the construction of a “Masonic love story.”
inscription, read aloud by local philanthropist and Freemason Jeejeebhoy, commended the hospital to “the Father in Heaven of the Christian — the Hindoo — the Mahommedan — the Parsee” (“Ceremony” 47). However, simply proclaiming the divine unity was not enough. To prove their version of the perennialist master narrative, Freemasons produced a body of literature that parsed the structural similarities of various ancient religious myths, presaging the development of comparative religion as an academic discipline in the late 19th century. Such similarities, Freemasons argued, demonstrated their common origin in the Craft’s ancient mystery religion, which had given birth to the world’s faiths and survived, uncorrupted, in the rituals and symbols of the Brotherhood. Masons around the globe espoused this syncretic theory of history, but in India, Masonic comparativists specifically stressed ancient Hinduism’s intimate relationship to the ancient ur-religion.

By the mid-19th century, Lodge Master James Burnes was employing the structuralist approach to explicitly link Hinduism to Freemasonry’s ur-narrative, the sacrificial death of mason Hiram Abif during the time of Solomon, and by extension to Hiram Abif’s later counterpart, Christ himself. Burnes, who founded the Bombay Lodge in 1840, argued that the story of Abif, a servant of King Solomon murdered by jealous rivals, typifies “an allegory...practiced in the religious mysteries of almost every early nation,” involving a “great and noble being...subjected to the most grievous trials...but finally raised from [death] to bliss and Glory” (qtd. in Fozdar 506). Burnes cites “the Hindoo Fable of the Murder of Ramdeo, the God of Love,” as a cognate to this ur-myth, before making an even bolder claim about the link between Hinduism and Freemasonry: “no one who has studied history can doubt

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60 As Fozdar observes, Masons began capitalizing on the discoveries made available by such organizations as the Asiatic Society of Bengal in the early 18th century, “ransack[ing] this new knowledge...[to establish] genealogical connections between Freemasonry and these cultures and religions” (505).
Freemasonry’s connection, or rather identity, with the ancient mysteries of the Hindoos” (ibid). In claiming privileged access to the antecedent of both Christianity and ancient Hinduism, then, Freemasons thus strengthened their claim as the bridge between West and East, a “Masonic love story” (Fozdar, 508) in which Indian and British discover their shared religious heritage. Indeed, Burnes practiced what he preached: as head of Bombay’s Lodge, Burnes made it a primary goal to “enroll natives, particularly those enrolled by the government” (94). The upshot of this evangelism program, Chopra observes, was “an additional expansion of Masons in the Bombay government” (94). No mere arcane theory, Freemasonry’s meta-religion resulted in quantifiable benefits.

Freemasonry’s aspiration to transcend India’s religious diversity — indeed, at illuminating the essential interchangeability of all religions — seems to have stirred in Kipling a syncretic impulse dating back to childhood, long before his attachment to the glories of Empire. In his autobiography Something of Myself, published posthumously in 1936, Kipling records “first impressions” of childhood intimately bound up with his first impressions of India, which are themselves shot through with an awareness of the religious plurality that marks the landscape. His ayah, or wet-nurse, was a “Portuguese Roman Catholic who would pray — I beside her — at a wayside Cross”; Meeta, his Hindu “bearer,” sometimes took young Rudyard to temples where “I held [Meeta’s] hand and looked at the dimly seen, friendly Gods” (3).

Kipling’s childhood recollections was also marked by the sight of “Parsees wading out [in the ocean] to worship the sunset,” though he notes, “Of their creed I knew nothing” (4). Kipling’s semi-autobiographical story “Baa Baa Black Sheep” may offer insight into the effect these experiences had on the young Kipling’s grasp of his family’s Christianity; in the story, Punch,

61 This “love story” was by no means unique to Freemasonry; Madame Blavatsky also pitched Theosophy as the missing link between Western religion and philosophy and the wisdom of the Orient.
Kipling’s fictional alter ego, is chastised for “weld[ing] the story of the Creation onto what he could recollect of his Indian fairy tales” (38). As James Whitlark points out, Kipling’s interest in comparative religion further developed during his boarding school days at Westward Ho!; there, one of his favorite books was Edwin Arnold’s *Light of Asia*, (1879), a biography of the Buddha that compared the Bible with the Buddhist sutras (Whitlark 28).

As “The Mother Lodge” indicates, Masonry offered a natural channel for this fascination with questions of religious difference and similarity. Indeed, Kipling was so taken with its interreligious vision that he later recalled his Masonic experiences almost exclusively on its terms. When asked to by a correspondent about his history with the Masons in 1925, Kipling stressed the ecumenical aspect of his experiences, marveling at how the Masons allowed Hindus, Muslims and Christians to sit at table as equals, “the only difference [being] that...some of the Brethren, who were debarred by caste rules from eating food not ceremonially prepared, sat over empty plates” (“Letter to Unidentified Recipient,” 201). Kipling went on to note his “good fortune” at being able to arrange a “series of informal lectures by Brethren of various faiths, on the baptismal ceremonies of their religions” (ibid). In his autobiography, Kipling describes his 1885 initiation into the “Lodge Hope and Perseverance 782 E.C.,” the Masonic Lodge in Lahore, highlighting the religious diversity to which Masonry exposed him: “Here I met Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, members of the Arya and Brahma Samaj [contemporaneous Hindu reform movements], and a Jew tyler...So another world opened to me, which I needed.” (32). That Kipling may have remembered the Lodge as being more diverse than it actually was — and, indeed, Marie Roberts offers proof that he did — only confirms the degree to which Kipling was
enamored of Masonry’s universalist aspirations, its vision of itself as a syncretic meta-religion that accommodated all faiths, while privileging none.62

To be sure, Kipling’s preoccupation with gods “changing pickets” did not necessarily amount to a consistent belief in the equality of all faiths. Through most of his career, he praised Islam for the simplicity of its creed and its correlation with “comprehensible civilization”; at the same time, as Charles Allen observes, he could be markedly contemptuous of Hinduism, as evidenced by his 1888 characterization of Benares as a “city of monstrous creeds,” in which the Hindu pantheon is reduced to an endless succession of “lewd gods [that] grinned and mouthed [at every turn]” (quoted in Allen 29).63 (As we shall see, this treatment of Hinduism undergoes significant revision in “The Bridge Builders.”) Nevertheless, even if Kipling did not subscribe to the absolute equality of all religious traditions, the syncretic strains of “The Mother Lodge,” thoroughly infused with the Masonic philosophia perennis, reverberate throughout Kipling’s writings. Themes of overlap and exchange between religious traditions emerge in the early story “The Sending of Dana Da” (1888), a thinly veiled send-up of Theosophy featuring a “Teacup Creed” that incorporates Rosicrucianism, Egyptian philosophy, the Vedas, and “pieces of everything that medicine men of all ages have manufactured” (271). However, while “The Sending of Dana Da” finds Kipling satirizing what he calls a “most accommodating arrangement,” in The Jungle Book (1894), he quietly engages in an accommodating arrangement of his own. James Whitlark observes that Kipling borrows from both Masonic and Christian

62 Roberts notes that Kipling’s 1925 correspondence, which lists a Hindu, “member of the Brahma Samaj,” and “Mohammedan” as participants in his initiation ritual (Kipling 1925), is belied by the fact that no non-Europeans in the Lahore Lodge had attained a high enough rank, during that period, to initiate him. Indeed, contra his recollections in Something of Myself, only four non-European Masons are listed on the Lahore Lodge’s register during the period of his initiation.

63 Allen goes on to note that Kipling’s disdain for Hindu religion abated somewhat later in life, “long after he had left India and, crucially, after he had come to know the joys of fatherhood.” As noted in my reading of “Mark of the Beast,” Kipling’s contempt for Hinduism is by no means consistent either.
symbolism in his Mowgli stories, using “Christly parallels” to describe the boy hero, while depicting “his abilities as builder (or Mason)” as the envy of the monkeys (26-27). Both Messiah and Master Mason, capable of “mak[ing] little huts of fallen branches without thinking how he came to do it” (The Jungle Book, 56), Mowgli exemplifies one manifestation of the universal allegory identified by Masonic comparativists.

Indeed, The Jungle Book emblematizes the specifically Masonic cast in which Kipling consistently portrayed the interchangeability of myths and religious archetypes. This becomes clear, not only in light of Mowgli’s dual status as Messiah and Master Mason, but also in light of the Law of the Jungle, “as old and true as the sky” (The Second Jungle Book, 29). Whitlark points out that the jungle Law’s status as a coherent-if-flawed ethical system, one that antedates and seems more humane than Man’s Law, is consistent with the perspective of a “Masonic theist who sees all laws, consciences and creeds as imperfect refractions of Divine Justice” (26). One could go further than drawing a mere parallel: the ancient Law of the Jungle, prizing brotherhood and submission to one’s superior, might well be the Masonic code itself. As Marie Roberts points, such interchangeability surfaces in the poem “The Widow of Windsor”: the poem’s reference to British soldiers as “sons of the Widow,” i.e., Queen Victoria, recalls Hiram Abif’s Masonic designation as “The Widow’s Son.” While the parallel between the selfless British soldiers and Hiram Abif may serve merely to assert that “the lodge is dedicated to Victoria and hence to the interests of the British Empire” (Roberts), it also makes sense in light of Burnes’ comments on the universal allegory, suggesting a kind of Masonic typology: the ur-myth of the sacrificial hero, epitomized for the Masons in the Widow’s Son, is now recapitulated in the Sons of the Widow. Kipling’s Puck of Pook’s Hill (1906), a series of fantastical anecdotes from ancient and medieval periods in English history, similarly features a Roman soldier named
Parnesius who, while a Mithraist himself, accepts the equivalence Puck draws between the Mithraic temple and the Christian church. At the same time, Parnesius’ Mithraism recalls Kipling’s Freemasonry, insofar as he holds a “sacralized” view of friendship and describes himself as “raised to the degree of Gryphon” (qtd. in Burton 44), a Masonic sounding distinction if there ever was one. Phillip Burton argues that Parnesius is “a Mithraist — of [a Masonic-sounding order] — who is morally at least the equivalent of the best sort of Christian” (48). Alternately, one might describe him as a proto-Freemason who recognizes and accepts the equivalence between Mithraism, his chosen religion, and Christianity, with which he respectfully disagrees.

II. Masonic Paternalism and Kipling’s Religious Expert-As-Colonial Administrator

The Masonic syncretism that Kipling embraced, of course, offered more than a clever way to construct a chain of theological referents, Mithra-as-Christ-as-Mowgli-as-Hiram-Abif. For, as Freemasons in India claimed to reveal the interchangeability of the world’s major religious archetypes, they positioned themselves as the unique custodians of the Key to all Mythologies, upon whose shoulders the hope of purified local religion ultimately rested. As Fozdar writes, “[Masons] arrogated to themselves the authority to correctly interpret the religious symbols and myths that the practitioners of these other religions had either forgotten or imperfectly understood” (512). Such an idea, of course, surfaces in James Burnes’ dissection of the universal allegory “practiced in almost every nation,” insofar as he names Freemasons as the originators of this allegory. However, as Fozdar writes, the prescriptive agenda of imperial Masonry, its vocation of theological restoration, becomes explicit in the influential writings of Alexander Greenlaw: in Lodge lectures and Masonic publications, fellow Masons reiterated Greenlaw’s conviction that Masonry could restore “the original pure worship” of the world’s
primitive populations, whose religions presently amounted to an idolatrous shadow of their former selves (Fozdar 513-514). Of course, in India — especially in light of the aforementioned stress on Hinduism’s latent Masonic identity — this meant a reformation of Hinduism in particular. Along with such figures as W. Burroughs, editor of the Masonic Journal of Calcutta, Greenlaw aspired to “uncover Hinduism’s ancient ‘Masonic’ wisdom so as to restore it to its pristine state” (ibid). By this logic, the theological speculation of “The Mother Lodge” amounted, at best, to a necessary-but-insufficient condition of interreligious harmony: the “primeval and fundamental religion” could only prevail when such speculation was guided by the sure hand of Masonry, which alone provided the key to restoring the original meaning of all faiths, Hinduism especially.

The degree to which members of the British Raj embraced this ideology wholesale remains unclear, though Freemasonry’s pervasive influence on the colonial administration doubtlessly helped. Masonic account of Hinduism’s degeneration certainly echoed widespread narratives about Indian cultural decline, which implicitly celebrated British rule as the way for India to regain the “correct” understanding of its own tradition (Viswanathan 2003, Yelle 2013). Moreover, the notion of restoring a “pure” Hinduism, unblemished by idolatry, would have attracted Indian intellectuals who, during this period, themselves embraced an intellectualist “Hinduism of the mind,” epitomized in the Vedantic school of Hinduism (Viswanathan 2003: 36). In the context of Kipling’s life, what is clear is that Freemasonry’s paternalistic approach to Hindu religion, predicated on Masonry’s unique authority in correctly interpreting local creeds, would have especially resonated in the Punjab, site of Kipling’s formative years as a both a prose stylist and a political thinker. As Andrew St. John has argued, administrators in the Punjab took pride in the legacy of Sir John Lawrence, whose “non-regulation” system of rule was, among
other things, credited with the region’s loyalty to the Crown during the 1857 uprising. Though not a Freemason himself, Lawrence’s stern ethos strongly recalls the Craft’s commitment to manly governance. The non-regulation system valued “direct experience and influence more highly than elaborate theorizing and protocol” (St. John 69), thereby eschewing centralization and systemic regulation in favor of “the importance of abridgement and simplification...flexibility and personal responsibility” (St. John 64). Ostensibly, such a stress on minimalism entailed a commitment to religious non-interference: articulating his distaste for mandatory Bible instruction in Government schools for indigenous students, Lawrence wrote in an 1858 dispatch to the Governor General, “When Christian things are done in an unchristian way...mischief and danger are occasioned” (Qtd. in “Despatches from John Lawrence” 877).

Lawrence’s position led to the declaration, expressed by an admirer of Lawrence in the Christian journal Good Words, that Lawrence embraced religious non-interference “long before the Queen was led, in the Proclamation of 1858, to tell her Indian subjects that, even as she relied on the Christian religion herself, she had no design to impose it on others” (Smith, 672).

However, in practice, Lawrence effectively arrogated to himself the authority to interpret local belief, even as he maintained an aura of absolute indifference to the charms of superstition. After all, non-regulation rule’s valorization of “radically summarized accounts of local custom” meant that the local administrator was personally responsible for deciding which aspects of religious practice were relevant to the maintenance of law and order, which incidental. Thus, in the same dispatch to the Governor General, Lawrence advises that, while “Government officers should not be called upon to take the smallest part, official or otherwise, in any

\[\text{\textsuperscript{64}}\text{ For the political necessity of familiarity with local belief in the Punjab, see Washbrook’s comment that “local custom [in the Punjab] trumped scriptural law when it came to setting precedent” (653). Rather than extrapolating principles from sacred texts, administrators in the Punjab relied on direct apprehension of customs and practices in order to build a legal framework of religious neutrality.}\]
Idolatrous or Mohammedan ceremony,” the administration should nonetheless continue to provide land grants “for the purpose of carrying on idolatrous worship,” since to do otherwise would be “impracticable as well as unjust” (“Despatches” 876). On the subject of local religious festivals, Lawrence both refused to disallow native holidays and prohibited religious processions in public (ibid). In placing private observance above public piety as the “better” form of religiosity, such a policy puts into practice the logic of Masonry’s call to restore the “correct” meaning of Hinduism, albeit on different ideological grounds. In both cases, ultimate authority of interpretation remains with the colonial master.

Kipling’s fascination with this form of mastering indigenous religiosities, of decoding their nuances and opacities in the name of good governance, matched his abiding preoccupation with syncretism. Throughout his fiction, Kipling shows himself besotted with a kind of idealized Lawrentian administrator, the professional expert in local religious affairs, whose strategic interventions ensure stability amongst the populace. Kimball O’Hara, the intrepid spy at the center of Kipling’s novel *Kim*, perhaps remains the most famous embodiment of this character type. Yet *Kim*, published in 1901, is best understood as the culmination of a motif with which Kipling experimented throughout his Anglo-Indian short fiction. In “The Tomb of His Ancestors,” the grandson of a legendary military leader, deified in his lifetime by a tribe of central India, finds himself subject to the same treatment when he enters his grandfather’s regiment. Chinn, the reluctant object of adulation, is treated as “a demi-god twice born—tutelary deity of their land and people” (147). Initially reluctant to proffer pronouncement on matters of local custom — “I am a soldier. I do not know the law” — Chinn embraces his godhood when the tribe imprisons an official vaccinator sent to immunize them against smallpox. Proclaiming
that the vaccine functions as a “charm” against the disease, Chinn saves the tribe (and vaccinator), ultimately accepting his “hereditary influence” as a mode of local governance.

To be sure, Chinn’s “expertise” derives not from footwork or research, but from his lineage. Elsewhere, however, Kipling further developed the figure of the colonial religious expert in Strickland, “of the Police,” who first appears in Kipling’s 1887 story “Miss Younghal’s Sais.” Holding “the extraordinary theory that a Policeman in India should try to know as much about the natives as the natives themselves,” Strickland garners a reputation in the Civil Service for his expertise in a variety of indigenous religious practices. Strickland’s achievements — which include mastering a ceremonial dance known as the Halli-Hukk, presiding over a mosque in the guise of a Sunni mullah, and, in his “crowning achievement,” posing as a fakir to solve a murder (32) — accentuate the relative ineffectuality of Regulation bureaucracy, an implied contrast that emerges in the story’s rueful ending: after marrying and settling down, the narrator observes, “[Strickland] is forgetting the slang,...and the marks, and the signs...But he fills in his departmental returns beautifully” (39). Strickland’s transformation from daring adventurer to obedient paper pusher can be read, in part, as an allegory for the Punjab’s transition from the glory days of Lawrence to the bloodless niceties of Regulation rule. Indeed, at the peak of his powers, Strickland embodies the political ideals underpinning Kipling’s skeptical assessment, at the tender age of nineteen, of the Raj’s centralized bureaucracy: “Underneath our excellent administrative system; under the piles of reports and statistics; the thousands of troops; the doctors; and the civilian runs wholly untouched and unaffected the life of the peoples of the land” (“Letter to Margaret Burne Jones,” 99).
wonders as the Arabian Nights” (ibid), Kipling casts Strickland as his intrepid fictional proxy, a fictive mirror of himself.

Kipling’s intrepid religious expert, in some ways, constitutes the ideal agent to carry out Alexander Greenlaw’s mandate, his vision of a paternalistic Masonry that restores India’s originary religion. And indeed, Kipling effectively stages a version of Greenlaw’s vision in “The Man Who Would Be King,” precisely by weaving his archetypal religious expert/colonial administrator into one of his variations on Masonic syncretism. The story features the triumph of two such “experts,” who secure their kingdom precisely through the Masonic reinterpretation of local religious practices, restored via The Craft to their original meaning. In what follows, I want to examine how Kipling draws the reader into Freemasonry’s comparativist ideology, only to fracture it with a reassertion of religious difference. By the end of the story, Dravot and Carnehan’s universalist aspirations give way to fractured evocations of the stern Evangelicalism that shaped Kipling’s childhood, a theology whose emphasis on private revelation and the exclusivity of salvation through Christ runs totally counter to the dream of a universal meta-religion. Such a theology, as we shall see, sunders the Masonic brotherhood, not only dividing British masters from native subjects, but effectively isolating the story’s narrator from his putative fellow Mason.

III. Making and Unmaking Meta-Religious Brotherhood in “The Man Who Would Be King”

Kipling signals the importance of Masonic fraternity to his story in its opening epigraph: “Brother to a Prince and fellow to a beggar if he be found worthy.” Here, Kipling paraphrases his own Masonic-themed poem “Banquet Night,” which relates King Solomon’s call for his “fellow Craftsmen,” whether they be “beggars” or “princes,” to “banquet together beneath [his] throne” (776). That poem ends with a refrain exhorting the craftsmen to “forget these things” —
not only the duties that they must abandon to dine with Solomon, but also the rank and class
distinctions that cease to matter within the confines of the Lodge. In the paragraph that follows
this epigraph, however, the Masonic fraternity of beggars and princes occasions ambivalence
rather than celebration. Noting that the Masonic “Law,” with its exhortation to forget rank, is
“not easy to follow,” the story’s narrator states that he has been “brother to a beggar again and
again under circumstances which prevented either of us finding out whether the other was
worthy” (244), thereby casting the Law’s sole condition for fraternity as inaccessible. As for the
first part of the epigraph, the narrator laments that he “has still to be brother to a prince,”
foreshadowing the following account by noting how he “once came near to kinship with what
might have been a veritable King...[though] to-day, I greatly fear my King is dead” (ibid). The
succession of qualifications contrasts sharply with the epigraph’s relative pithiness, indicating
how the following tale will itself serve to qualify and complicate Masonic principles.

Indeed, the ensuing narrative, which recounts how vagabonds Peachey Carnehan and
Daniel Dravot conquer (and lose) the uncolonized territory of Kafiristan, has been described
alternately as a sincere and satirical take on Masonic ideals. The protagonists’ Masonic
membership is signaled early on, when Dravot, having met the unnamed narrator on a train ride,
asks him to relay a message to Peachey, “for the sake of your Mother as well as mine.” A veiled
allusion to their respective Mother Lodges, the line prompts the narrator to comply; as if to hint
at a non-literal reading of the exhortation, the narrator dryly observes that “Englishmen are not
usually softened by appeals to the memory of their mothers” (246). Yet the story’s Masonic

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65 Nagai argues that Masonic knowledge here ultimately serves to connect men from disparate ethnic and national
backgrounds, in a realization of its universalist aspirations (“God and His Doubles” 97). Alternately, Fussell argues
that the story offers a burlesque sendup of Masonic history (“Irony, Freemasonry and Humane Ethics”). For their
part, Masons tend merely to play up Kipling’s allusions to the Craft without sorting out the ideological implications
of those allusions: a prototypical article on a website called Pietre Stones Review of Freemasonry notes that the
characters are Masons that become undone by “human frailty” (“Rudyard Kipling and His Masonic Career”).
underpinnings remain in the background in this early part of the story, as Kipling prioritizes
immersing the reader in the mundane machinery — both metaphorical and literal — of the
narrator’s professional existence. After the chance encounter with the two men, the narrator
returns to his newspaper office in the city of Ajmir, where an endless habitual present tense sums
up the interval between his initial encounter with the adventurers and the second:

Zenana-mission ladies arrive, and beg that the Editor will instantly abandon all his duties
to describe a Christian prize-giving in a back-slum of a perfectly inaccessible village; Colonels
who have been overpassed for commands sit down and sketch the outline of a series of ten,
twelve, or twenty-four leading articles on Seniority versus Selection; missionaries wish to know
why they have not been permitted to escape from their regular vehicles of abuse and swear at a
brother-missionary under special patronage of the editorial We; stranded theatrical companies
troop up to explain that they cannot pay for their advertisements, but on their return from New
Zealand or Tahiti will do so with interest… (248-249)

Here, Kipling harnesses his fluency in “newspaperese” to fine effect: offering not merely
journalistic reportage, but a cynical condensation of that reportage, the “real story” behind the
real stories that find their way into the paper. The reality effect is established through the
narrator’s evocation of a relentlessly quotidian cycle of events. Even death (at least, at this point
in the story) means little more than another predictable news item, as the narrator’s litany
culminates in the summer months, rife with outbreaks of disease, when “the telephone becomes a
tinkling terror…[telling] you of the sudden deaths of men and women you knew intimately”
(249). Painted with weary credibility, this world of journalistic routine forms the verisimilar
frame against which Dravot’s and Carnehan’s larger-than-life personae reappear.

At this juncture, however, “larger-than-life” does not quite entail the fantastic’s break
from reality, so much as an expansion of the possibilities contained within it. As if to highlight
the disparity between the unpredictable adventurers and the all-too-predictable rituals of the
narrator’s office, Kipling has them resurface in the midst of the narrator’s late night printing
session, as “the type clicked and clacked…the clock hands crept up to three o’clock, and the
machines spun their fly-wheels two and three times to see that all was in order” (250-251).

Bursting into this automated setting, the pair accost the narrator to enlist him as witness to their contractual agreement to set out for Kafiristan and become kings. Dissatisfied with India’s bureaucratic government, Dravot and Carnehan voice a familiar nostalgia for the adventurism of non-regulation rule: “you can’t lift a spade, nor chip a rock, nor look for oil, nor anything like that without all the Government saying — ‘Leave it alone and let us govern,’” Carnehan complains (252). Responding to Carnehan’s declaration that “India isn’t big enough for such as us,” the narrator strikes the first surreal note in the tale, observing how his visitors literally become outsized as they talk: “They certainly were too big for the office. Dravot’s beard seemed to fill half the room and Carnehan’s shoulders the other half as they sat on the big table” (252).

What begins as a play on words seems to morph, however momentarily, into a perspectival fluctuation, a harbinger of the problem of perspective that comes to dominate the tale.

Indeed, Peachey and Dravot’s strategy for journeying to Kafiristan relies on exploiting the vagaries of perception, particularly vis-a-vis material signifiers of religion. In a gambit that Strickland or Kim might have applauded, Dravot dons the guise of a mad priest, and casts Peachey as his servant, in order to gain safe passage through the Khaiber. “’Tisn’t for nothing that I’ve been knocking about the country for fourteen years. Didn’t I do that talk neat?” Dravot privately boasts to the narrator (256), referring to the religious patter he adopts to convince bemused traders of his spiritual authority (e.g., “Who will take the Protected of God to the North

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66 Louis L. Cornell avers that the story “looks back to an earlier generation” of colonial rule, “a generation less troubled by boredom, isolation, and responsibility” (27).

67 In a particularly ambiguous Scriptural allusion, Dravot here promises the narrator, “Half my Kingdom you shall have, as the saying is” (51). As John McGivering notes, the quote recalls King Herod’s promise to give Salome “unto the half of my kingdom” in Mark 6:23 (KJV) (“Notes on the Text”). As Herod was responsible for reconstructing King Solomon’s temple, the remark would seem to place Dravot in the lineage of master Masons. Yet insofar as Herod’s promise precipitates the beheading of John the Baptist, a patron saint of Freemasonry, the allusion strikes a more ominous note.
to sell charms that are never still to the Amir?”). Dravot’s disguise may constitute a whimsical break in the narrator’s bland routine, but it issues from the same view of religion that marks the narrator’s references to “Zenana-mission ladies” and venal brother missionaries: in both cases, the religious of India are figured in terms of predictable practices and habits, which either occasion cynicism or serve as fodder for a confidence trick. Once again, Peachey and Dravot come off as less fantastic than fanciful—in this scene, precisely because they embody the Kiplingian expert in local religious practice, who exploits that knowledge without actually trafficking in enchantment.

Such expertise comes in handy once the two reach their fated destination, and undergo the adventure that a withered Peachey recounts to the narrator over two years after their departure for Kafiristan. On a night virtually identical to his last visit (“A hot night, a night-issue, and a strained waiting for something to be telegraphed from the other side of the world, exactly as had happened before” (258)), Peachey staggers into the narrator’s office. His entrance seems to mark the point at which the mere fancy of the story’s initial proceedings gives way to a decidedly more outré atmosphere: not only does the evening’s strong resemblance to the night of the first visit give the impression of eternal recurrence, but Peachey’s formerly ruddy appearance has been replaced by a subhuman form, not man but “what was left of a man” (258), with feet that shuffle “like a bear[‘s]” and a hand “twisted like a bird’s claw…[bearing] upon the back…a red, diamond-shaped scar” (ibid). That scar, and Peachey’s fragmented allusions to a sinister end to his and Dravot’s reign in Kafiristan, compel the narrator (and the reader) to anticipate still-more outlandish developments in the tale.

Indeed, the reader is thus primed to expect the fantastic’s characteristic crisis of perception, which finally rears its head in Peachey and Dravot’s discovery of the Kafiristan
natives’ Masonic roots. Peachey recounts to the narrator how, upon arriving in Kafiristan, Dravot extends his strategy of exploiting local religion, using firepower to demonstrate divine status in a kind of colonial wish-fulfillment. Moreover, Dravot consolidates his authority by identifying himself as a confidante of Imbra, the locals’ chief idol, sitting beside the statue “every morning...[while] the people came and worshipped” (262). Deigning himself an ambassador of the god, Dravot visits each of Kafiristan’s villages, commanding the priests to follow his example and administer justice in the temple of Imbra. Dravot’s plan to subdue Kafiristan by military force is cut short, however, by the realization that the chiefs and priests all know the Masonic secret handshakes, though not up to the vaunted “Third Degree.” Peachey stresses his and Dravot’s disbelief at this discovery, the first time that either display incredulity in the story: Peachey “nearly drop[s]” his hand in shock when the native “Billy Fish” gives him the “Craft Grip,” while Dravot repeatedly declares the discovery to be a “miracle” (265). In Peachey’s words, however, “the most amazing miracle” occurs once he and Dravot accordingly convert the temple of Imbra into a “Lodge-room,” replete with a “square stone for the master’s chair” and “little stones for the officer’s chairs” (266), that cleverly emblematizes Freemasonry’s ambition to convert all religions into extensions of itself. This ambition becomes vividly realized once a priest suddenly overturns the “stone of Imbra” doubling as the “Grand-master’s [i.e., Dravot’s] chair,” thereby uncovering the “amazing miracle”: the Masonic “Master’s mark” emblazoned on Dravot’s apron, fashioned, at his behest, by his servant girls, is identical to a sign carved into the bottom of the stone, a “missing Mark no one could understand the why of” (267).

Here, then, is eyewitness proof of Masonry’s syncretic master narrative, visual evidence that indigenous religions amount to dilapidated vestiges of Masonry’s ancient perennial philosophy. Peachey’s emphasis on the Mark as a miraculous object of vision, one that must be
seen to be believed, signals the scene’s status as the culmination of the story’s numerous portents of the fantastic. In other words, the structure of the story prompts the reader to experience as fantastic the revelation that Masonry really does constitute an ancient meta-religion, both origin and telos of indigenous creeds everywhere. Correspondingly, Dravot’s expertise in immersing himself in local religiosities, formerly a merely preposterous source of amusement, takes on a truly unreal character as he declares himself “Grand Master of all Freemasonry in Kafiristan...and King of Kafiristan equally with Peachey!” (ibid). The ease and speed with which Masonry infiltrates the local religion, thereby serving as the basis for the exercise of colonial power, also chafes at the bounds of believability: as Peachey tells it, “the priests [learned Masonic ritual] almost without telling, as if the memory was coming back to them” (ibid), only to yearn for more instruction from their masters. Dravot exploits this desire by limiting access to the higher degrees of Masonry, so that “they [i.e., the priests] was clamoring to be raised” (ibid). In Dravot, then, Kipling’s chameleonic religious expert thus becomes the ideal agent of Masonry’s syncretic gospel, an all-too-perfect colonial master in whom Peachey — and, by extension, the narrator — dares us to place our faith.

Moreover, as this dreamlike takeover of Kafiristan restores the region’s ancient Masonic religion, it also restores the racial bond linking master and subject. Such a bond, redolent of contemporaneous theories that posited a single “Indo-European race” linking Briton and Indian, is literally visible in the white skin of the Kafiristan natives. As Peachey observes, the natives are “fair men...with yellow hair and remarkable well built.” Dravot takes this observation a step further, declaring, “They’re English! Look at their eyes — look at their mouths...They’re the Lost Tribes, or something like it, and they’ve grown to be English” (269). Significantly, despite this visible sign of racial resemblance, the natives do not instinctually recognize Dravot as one of
them, only submitting to his authority once he establishes his (meta)religious credentials. The people of Kafiristan thus come across as the ideal subjects of an Empire founded on Masonic ideals, in which the overcoming of religious difference serves as the basis for a universal Brotherhood otherwise threatened by divisions in race, rank, and culture. There ain’t such things as infidels, indeed.

Or maybe there are. Dravot’s imagined Empire, after all, is predicated on uniting against a common enemy, the Muslims who periodically conduct raids on the Kafiristani borders. While it would be easy to read Dravot’s fulminations against “common, black Mohammedans” as straightforwardly symptomatic of Kipling’s own prejudices, the respect that Kipling elsewhere expresses for Islam — frequently, to the detriment of Christianity and Hinduism — may prompt us to resist such a reading. Indeed, in context, the reference to Islam serves instead to foreshadow the re-emergence of religious difference within Dravot and Peachey’s Kingdom, which sends this fantasy of Masonic brotherhood into a more sinister kind of remove from “reality.” The seeds of this re-emergence lie in a twist on the logic of syncretic interchangeability: exceeding even the most grandiose aspirations of Masons like Burnes and Wilford, Dravot and Peachey allow the mark of Imbra to identify them as gods themselves. Not even the speaker of “The Mother Lodge,” envisioning Mohammed and Shiva swapping pickets, imagined the interchangeability of the gods with his own Grand Master. In short, rather than Masons absorbing local religion into their universalist ideology, Kafiristan’s religionists have, in fact, assimilated the Masons into their own pantheon of deities.

To be sure, Peachey recognizes that their identification with divinity deviates, rather sharply, from the standard Masonic metanarrative. When the priest dubbed “Billy Fish” protests Dravot’s desire for a wife, on the grounds that “daughters of men [cannot] marry gods or devils,”
he specifies how the two protagonists’ deification came about: “You two know the Mark cut in the stone. Only the gods know that. We thought you were men till you showed the sign of the Master” (272). Peachey reports wishing “that we had explained about the loss of the genuine secrets of a Master-Mason at the first go-off,” thereby ensuring the “correct” interpretation of the Master’s Mark. His silence on the matter indicates a desire to let a policy of religious non-interference rule the day, since, “if, after seeing us as long as they had, they still believed we were gods it wasn’t for me to undeceive them” (ibid). Peachey’s reluctance to tamper with local belief is of a piece with the Masonic live-and-let-live philosophy of religious pluralism. That philosophy, of course, was premised on the concept of fungible mythological structures, to which the Craft offers the hermeneutical key; here, however, tolerance of religious difference specifically permits continued ignorance of that selfsame concept. By extension, it also permits a continued obstruction to the fraternity Masonic universalism purports to uphold: Peachey’s reluctance to “undeceive” means that they must go on being gods or devils, rather than human co-descendants of a common ancient faith.

For his part, Dravot remains oblivious to the ramifications of this gap in understanding, up until the moment when his bride-to-be bites him on the neck and exposes him as a flesh-and-blood mortal. The assembled villagers, outraged at the deception, turn immediately on their kings; only the troops of Billy the Fish, to whom Peachey has privately revealed the truth, remain loyal. Peachey remarks that “this business is our Fifty Seven,” alluding to the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion, and, by extension, the religious passions that also sparked that revolt (275). As in the Rebellion, religious difference proves a thorn in the side of imperial ambitions; here, however, those differences are only exacerbated by the introduction of Masonic syncretism, literalized in the equivalence of the Master’s Mark and the cut on Imbra’s stone. Indeed, insofar as the
“missing mark” constitutes the sign of Peachey and Dravot’s godhood, it ultimately also proves to be the sign of their downfall.

In the hands of a different author, this dissolution of the Masonic brotherhood might mark the replacement of romance with realism, a return to the mundane habitual present of the narrator’s news cycle, with Peachey and Dravot reduced to two more bit players in the cast of characters who regularly flit through the paper’s offices and pages. Far from reinstating journalistic realism as the story’s dominant discourse, however, Kipling uses the destruction of the Masonic imperial religion to catapult the tale into a different kind of fantastic topos, occasioning less incredulous delight than ineffable dread. This shift, I want to suggest, problematizes readings, such as Paul Fussell’s, that treat the story as a mere “burlesque” or humorous send-up of Masonic mythology. To be sure, such a reading aptly characterizes the plot’s absurdities to this point; yet the ensuing violence, and its aftermath, introduces a decidedly darker brand of unreality. That this unreality abruptly intrudes upon what has been an amusingly far-fetched tale, told in Dravot’s charming patter, only renders the return of religious difference all the more disturbing.

Indeed, the fate of the two kings constitutes a kind of nightmarish parody of the Masonic ur-myth, simultaneously a still-more-incredible confirmation of Masonic comparativism and the ultimate sign of its demise. In punishment for his transgression, the natives send Dravot to his death from a rope bridge; as for Peachey, they crucify him for a day and then banish him from their midst. The ongoing debate about whether Peachey’s crucifixion constitutes a Christian or Masonic allusion is perhaps a red herring, particularly in light of Burnes’ aforementioned

\[68\] See Paul Fussell’s essay “Irony, Freemasonry and Humane Ethics in Kipling’s ‘The Man Who Would be King’,” and Kreitzer’s “‘The Son Of Man Goes Forth to War: Biblical Imagery in Rudyard Kipling’s ‘The Man Who Would Be King,” both of which engage the question of whether to interpret Peachey’s crucifixion as a Christian or Masonic allusion.
comments about the allegory “practiced in every nation,” involving a “noble being” subjected to “grievous trials.” Peachey’s crucifixion thus comes across as a tacit nod to that Masonic proto-allegory, rehearsing both the passion of Christ and the *ur*-myth from which Christ’s passion is derived. However, whereas Freemasons marshaled such theories to designate themselves as the unique custodians of universal myth, here, Peachey’s crucifixion instead signifies the folly of overestimating Masonry’s capacity to unite disparate religious traditions. Precisely insofar as the people of Kafiristan prioritize their own beliefs over the Masonic brotherhood, they must punish their would-be brothers in the Craft. In a kind of counterpoint to the episode of Imbra’s Mark, Kipling’s language impels the reader to experience this reassertion of religious difference as a fantastic event: insisting that his crucifixion really did take place (“as Peachey’s hands will show” (277)), Peachey nonetheless acknowledges that his surviving such a trial beggars belief, mentioning that the Kafiristani natives “said it was a miracle [I] wasn’t dead” after taking him down (ibid). Indeed, he further intimates that his survival has sown the seed for a new local myth, superseding the “amazing miracle” of Imbra’s Mark, since “they said [I] was more of a god than old Daniel that was a man” (277). Peachey’s scarred hands thus offer ironic proof that the universal allegory is, indeed, “practiced” in every nation.

However, whereas the allegory cited by Burnes culminates with the noble being’s ascent into glory, Peachey’s journey ends with a descent into existential isolation, one whose Evangelical overtones constitute a further affront to the Masonic imperial gospel. As numerous commentators have observed, Peachey displays a persistent tendency to mistake Dravot’s fate for his own: early in the story, he speaks of himself in the third person, “a party named Peachey Taliaferro Carnehan...[who] died out there in the cold. Slap from the bridge fell old Peachey” (260). Later in the account, Peachey again refers proleptically to the bridge incident, only this
time saying that “we tumbled from the bridge.” Critics have interpreted Peachey’s identification with Dravot as an indication of both his mental instability and of his supreme affection for Dravot, even, in Larry Kreitzer’s estimation, the ultimate realization of “the article within [their] ‘Contrack’ that the two will stand by each other, come thick or thin” (110). Yet, in light of his subsequent journey home, Peachey’s apparent confusion begins to go beyond mere platonic attachment, taking on theological trappings. “Peachey came home in about a year, begging along the roads quite safe; for Daniel Dravot he walked before and said: — ‘Come along, Peachey. It’s a big thing we’re doing.’ The mountains they danced at night, and the mountains they tried to fall on Peachey’s head, but Dan he held up his hand, and Peachey came along bent double” (325). In other words, Peachey claims as his private mystical guide and protector the man whose death he has taken for his own. The resemblance to Evangelical theology, with its emphasis on a private relationship with Jesus and full identification with his atoning sacrifice, is unmistakable. In short, Peachey embraces the ideological inverse of Freemasonry’s all-embracing brotherhood: what could be more exclusive than a religion of one master, one disciple?

Peachey’s veneration of Dravot makes sense as an ironic variant on the Evangelicalism that dominated Kipling’s childhood. In *Something of Myself*, Kipling recounts how, at the age of six, he was sent away from India to live in Southsea with the Evangelical Mrs. Holloway. Referred to only as “The Woman” in Kipling’s account, Mrs. Holloway ruled her household with “the full vigour of the Evangelical,” beating Kipling for presumed disobedience and teaching him the doctrine of Hell “in all its terrors” (6). Moreover, in “Baa Baa Black Sheep,” Kipling reveals that he was specifically punished for his aforementioned “grievous sin” of mingling Christianity and Hindu myth. His proxy Punch remembers this as the moment at which
he began to see God as “the only thing in the world more awful” than his aunt (39). Kipling’s rejection of Evangelicalism thus can be seen as coextensive with his interest in syncretism: it was his aunt’s intense hostility toward the intermingling of religious traditions, manifest in her abuse, that provoked Kipling’s reciprocal distaste for the God she worshipped. Moreover, in “The Mother Lodge,” Kipling valorizes Masonic syncretism by implicitly contrasting it with the drive to separate goats from sheep, faithful from infidel. What binds the Lodge members together is, after all, precisely their disinterest in exclusivist doctrines of salvation or damnation, their openness to Shiva and God swapping pickets in their heads. Here, however, Peachey’s reversion to a form of Evangelical mysticism constitutes, from a Masonic viewpoint, what could be called blasphemy. Naming Dravot as “Right Worshipful Brother” while effectively treating him as personal Savior, Peachey displays the degree to which Masonic solidarity, in this story, has survived only by morphing into the very Evangelical zeal that Kipling detested. Moreover, just as intense assertions of personal religiosity would doom the ecumenical fellowship of Kipling’s “Mother Lodge,” Peachey’s devotion to his Christlike Brother-Master marks his private experience of the world—and, perhaps, whatever lies beyond the world—as totally Other than the narrator’s. In the end, such experience proves as impenetrable to his fellow Mason as the Kafiristan natives’ religiosity proved, ultimately, to Dravot and Peachey.

If Peachey is mad, then, he is not merely mad; nor will it do to call his religious attachment to Dravot a mere symptom of that madness. The centrality of religion to the story discourages such an epiphenomenal reading. It may be more accurate to call his madness a byproduct of his irreducibly alien religious experience, one neither Christian nor Masonic, but a

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69 This Evangelical lack of charity towards other religious traditions indexes closemindedness elsewhere in Kipling, most memorably in *Kim’s* description of the Anglican priest Father Bennett. While perhaps too High Church for Kipling’s aunt and her ilk, he nonetheless recalls “The Woman” and “Aunt Rosa” in his attitude towards the unconverted, assessing the Buddhist lama with the “triple-ringed uninterest of the creed that lumps nine-tenths of the world under the title of ’heathen’” (135).
kind of unholy hybrid of both. As if to underscore this fact — and, by extension, the absolute isolation that Peachey’s experience entails — Kipling has the narrator encounter Peachey in the streets one last time, where Dravot’s disciple has turned evangelist. Though “there was not a soul in sight, and he was out of all possible earshot of the houses,” Peachey sings the first verse of Reginald Heber’s popular hymn “The Son of God Goes Forth To War,” holding out his hat in supplication. His version, though, is calculated to unnerve Evangelicals and Freemasons alike:

“The Son of Man goes forth to war,

A golden crown to gain;

His blood-red banner streams afar —

Who follows in his train?”

Peachey’s makes two alterations to Heber’s original lyrics: “Son of God” has become “Son of Man,” and “kingly crown” has become “golden crown.” Why the changes? As regards “Son of Man,” Larry Kreitzer argues that the alteration is meant to emphasize “the humanity of Carnehan and Dravot, at the expense of any false claims to divinity, claims which, as the story relates, result ultimately in death and crucifixion” (115). While Kreitzer is certainly right to point out the replacement of divinity with humanity, he passes rather too quickly over the unnerving quality of the change, apparent to anyone used to singing the hymn in Sunday service. To be sure, “Son of Man” and “Son of God” are both titles for Christ in the New Testament; nonetheless, quietly but disturbingly like and unlike that which it mirrors, the altered line also suggests Peachey’s status as the devotee of an un-Christianity, bondservant of his lord and savior Dravot. So, too, does the change from “kingly” to “golden” constitute a subtle but sinister demotion of the Christian story, as Christ’s assumption of lordship over the world gives way to the “Son of Man”’s quest for expressly material treasure.
However, if Peachey’s hymn proclaims an un-Christianity, so, too, does it proclaim a kind of un-Masonry, audible to attentive Masons who have followed the rise and fall of Masonic ideals in the tale. Insofar as the alteration underscores parallels between Dravot and Christ—insofar as it invites *comparisons* between them—it also recalls the Masonic comparativist theory of mythography: “Son of Man,” more plausibly than “Son of God,” links Christ with Hiram Abif, Mithra, or any of the other saviors claimed as variations on the universal allegory. Most immediately, of course, that list includes Dravot and Carnehan themselves, would-be Messiahs of Kafiristan. Yet in light of Dravot’s and Carnehan’s grisly end, the more widely applicable title intimates a darker allegory than the one cited by Burnes and other Masonic comparativists. As Zohreh T. Sullivan writes, “the bare outline [of the story] suggests a cautionary, colonialist allegory…[in which] Dravot’s and Carnehan’s conquest of Kafiristan...sounds remarkably like a seedy version of the British Raj” (“Zohreh T. Sullivan,” 39). By extension, Peachey’s hymn draws attention to the way the “colonialist allegory” on display turns on the appropriation of theological language for the purposes of conquest and control. In this story, however, the language in question belongs not to Christianity, but to Freemasonry.

Read as a hymn of un-Masonry, then, Peachey’s song subverts the Masonic grand narrative no less than it does the Christian one. The alteration from “kingly” to “golden,” in particular, focalizes the way that the story undermines the Masonic preoccupation with kingship, evident in a founding myth of the Masons: King Solomon and King Hiram of Tyre were considered the respective Grand Masters of Jerusalem and Tyre, with Hiram being the King who sent Hiram Abif to construct the Temple. Paul Fussell further notes that Kipling would have been familiar with Mason James Anderson’s *The Constitutions of the Freemasons*, a copy of which was given to each new initiate, and which especially “attribut[es] Masonic knowledge and
virtues to the Hebraic kings” (24). If the whole story thus subverts the Masonic veneration of kingship as a noble calling, the emphasis on “golden crown” suggests that materialist motives are foundational to Dravot’s quest for a Masonic kingdom. Likewise, where the “blood-red banner” originally denotes the blood of Christ and the martyrs of the Church, the line here suggests the violence on display in the story, a violence unleashed by Freemasonry: both Dravot’s militant attempts to lead his Lost Tribe to glory, and the natives’ brutal rejection of that ambition, issue directly from his institution of Masonic practice. Finally, the question “who follows in his train?” suggests not the martyrs who emulate Christ’s sacrifice, but all those who may follow in Dravot’s footsteps, pursuing kingship — that quintessentially Masonic ambition — through ideological dissemination and military force. Rather than serving as the repository of a universal creed, then, Masonic ideology in this story underwrites the kind of zealotry and violence that characterized the conjunction of Christian missions and the spread of the Empire. Put another way, Peachey’s hymn indirectly names The Craft as structurally interchangeable with the Cross, no less potentially hostile to indigenous peoples than Christian missions, thereby undermining Masonic claims of a universal appeal that superseded Christianity.

Peachey’s religion of one, demonic inverse of both imperial Christianity and the Masonry that would replace it, thus divorces him from the colonial world around him, in the same way that the Kafiristani religion divorces subjects from masters, and masters Peachey and Dravot from each other. Initially appearing as a mere set of material practices, religion emerges in the story as an alienating source of private revelation, one that perpetually undercuts Freemasonry’s ecumenical brotherhood. Specifically, Kipling repeatedly casts religion as a quintessentially fantastic experience, one that requires crossing and recrossing the borderlands between the mundane and the marvellous, successively generating profound (and deadly) differences in the
realities inhabited by the story’s main characters. The Kafiristani natives deify their masters, defying Masonic ideology by interpreting the Master’s Mark as a sign of godhood; their revolt, inspired by indignation at the exploitation of their religion, literally separates Peachey from Dravot, and ends with the former considered “more of a god” than the latter; and Peachey’s private ecstasy not only further undermines what precious narratorial reliability he possesses, but also makes it impossible for the narrator to judge Peachey’s “worthiness” as a Brother. Religion, in short, sunders the Masonic Brotherhood at every turn, ultimately placing such distance between Peachey and the narrator that, when the latter delivers Peachey into the hands of a missionary, he notes that Peachey “did not in the least recognize” him (279). When comparativist parallels between Dravot and Christ do emerge in Peachey’s hymn, they produce a kind of photonegative of James Burnes’ “universal allegory,” implicating Masonry in the imperial violence that all kings must, in the name of their golden crowns, be willing to perpetrate.

The final lines of the story only amplify the lack of common understanding amongst reader, narrator, and Peachey. Learning that Peachey has died of sunstroke, the narrator asks the missionary relaying the news whether he “had anything on him when he died” (279); when the missionary replies, “Not to my knowledge,” the narrator accepts this as the final word of the story, simply concluding, “And there the matter rests” (ibid). The confidence of this final line belies the fact that the matter does not rest at all: not only do we not know how much of Peachey’s account to attribute to his madness, neither do we know what the narrator himself makes of the tale, nor even whether, in the absence of Peachey’s evidence, we can believe the narrator at all. The gap in understanding between narrator and audience echoes the gaps separating the narrator from Peachey, Peachey from Dravot, Dravot from his once-loyal subjects;
one is left with the sense of narrator, reader, and Peachey totally isolated from one another, hewing to their own private and unreachable interpretations of what has transpired. Moreover, when one returns to the opening paragraph of the story, one suspects that the narrator has absorbed both Dravot’s thirst for glory and Peachey’s mystical devotion to his master. The latter emerges in the narrator’s fear that “my King is dead” (italics added), while an ominous sense of history repeating itself underlies the narrator’s speculation that “if I want a crown I must go and hunt it for myself” (1). In this gesture towards a recapitulation of Dravot and Peachey’s adventures, one can only hear Peachey’s hymn reverberating, the Son of Man going forth to war once more, masters of empire swapping pickets in our heads. Indeed, even if we treat the paragraph as an exercise in irony, rather than sincere expression, our sense of the narrator’s isolation from the Brotherhood only compounds: his allegiance to Masonic ideals seems to appear and then fade from view, like a mirage in the desert.

IV. “Each Bridge Leads Surely to Us”: Brahm’s Dream, Theological Atheism, and the Fractured Cult of Labor in “The Bridge Builders”

For the first half of “The Bridge Builders,” a tale of engineers racing to secure an unfinished bridge from a flood on the Ganges, Kipling offers as pure a celebration of India-as-Lodge as he ever did. In keeping with Masonic values, “The Bridge Builders” begins as an encomium to Labor, to the power of austere workmanship to unite men, colonial master and colonial subject alike, in a Empire-building effort that imposes order, stone by stone. Until its detour into the realm of myth, this effort explicitly serves as a solvent of religious difference, weakening the force of ancient superstition with the superiority of modern machinery. Pitting his protagonists against the power of “Mother Gunga,” Kipling seems to emblematize Freemasonry’s ability to transcend local mythologies with an overriding commitment to techne,
a commitment that supersedes particular religious commitments in the name of Craft. Halfway through, however, that mythology returns with a vengeance, as the main characters enjoy (endure?) a vision of the gods. With that vision, Kipling transforms a testament to colonial heroism into a tragedy of postcolonial religion, as Peroo, putative sidekick of the white protagonists, paradoxically arrives at a kind of “theological atheism” that alienates him from British and Indian alike.

The absence of explicitly Masonic terms in “The Bridge Builders” should not distract the attentive reader from Freemasonry’s centrality to the story. Indeed, the very title of the story may constitute something of a dog-whistle to fellow Brothers: as recorded in Albert G. Mackey’s *An Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry*, first published in 1874, “The Fraternity of Bridge Builders,” or *Pontifices*, was the name of a medieval Masonic association, “entitled to a place in all Masonic histories” (130). While it is unclear if Kipling ever read Mackey’s work, his story’s valorization of civil engineers, toiling to construct a lasting work of architecture, echoes Mackey’s comment, “From [the *Pontifices*] alone could be derived workmen capable of constructing safe and enduring bridges” (129). Mackey’s admiration of this technical accomplishment expresses the high importance of Labor to Freemasonry, perhaps the most important clue to Freemasonry’s importance in the story. Indeed, in Masonic parlance, a lodge meeting in session was said to be “at Labor”; as Marie Roberts writes, such terminology served to remind Masons of “the operative roots of the Craft.” Indeed, Mackey goes on to write in his *Encyclopaedia*, “As the Operative Masons were engaged in the building of material edifices, so Free and Accepted Masons are supposed to be employed in the erection of a superstructure of virtue and morality upon the foundation of the Masonic principles which they were taught at their admission into the Order” (437). No less than the syncretic master narrative, then, this task
of building a universal “superstructure of virtue and morality” offered a basis for Freemasonry’s pan-religious fellowship, common goal rather than common origin.

The protagonists of “The Bridge Builders,” head engineer Findlayson and his loyal assistant Hitchcock, are nothing if not spiritual descendants of the Pontifices, displaying a commitment to Labor that epitomizes the Masonic ideal. In their ambition to build a bridge that spans the length of time itself, Findlayson and Hitchcock endure a common history of setbacks, from bureaucratic delays to the contingencies of disease and weather that besiege the men under their command. The depth of their consequent fraternal bond, which Findlayson expresses in his hope that “we’ll go up the service together,” recalls Freemasonry’s idealisation of a brotherhood forged in unstinting dedication to Labor, the effort that makes a man a Mason. As in Masonry, of course, this fraternity does not preclude rank: Kipling specifically casts Findlayson as the Lodge-Master of his domain, Hitchcock as his loyal appointed officer. This bond becomes literally visible as Findlayson gazes on the almost-completed bridge, musing, “Each pier of it recalled Hitchcock...who had stood by his chief without failing from the very first to this last” (7-8).

If the bridge serves as the material emblem of imperial Masonry, a bond cemented in toil for the sake of the Widow, one should not be surprised to find a third, non-white addition to Findlayson’s and Hitchcock’s fellowship — a colonial apprentice in the fraternity of Labor. Hence, immediately after Findlayson’s meditation on the bridge, Kipling clarifies, “So the bridge was two men’s work — three, if one counted Peroo, as Peroo certainly counted himself” (8). Peroo is a Lascar seaman, risen to the commanding rank of serang (boatswain), whom Kipling introduces as nearly the equal of his two superiors. “[Peroo] was worth almost any price he might have chosen to put upon his services,” Kipling writes, citing his bravery, technical skill,
and knowledge of “how to hold authority” (ibid). Above all, Peroo matches Hitchcock and Findlayson in his zeal for the project at hand: describing Peroo’s refusal to keep “weak hands” onboard, Kipling writes, “‘My honor is for the honor of this bridge,’ he would say to the about-to-be-dismissed. ‘What do I care for your honor?’” (9). As self-proclaimed third member of Findlayson’s and Hitchcock’s fraternity, Peroo falls short only in his command of English, “interrupt[ing] the field-councils of Findlayson and Hitchcock without fear, till his wonderful English, or his still more wonderful linguafranca, half Portuguese and half Malay, ran out” (9). Kipling sketches Peroo as a sidekick to his affectionate colonial masters, whose imitation of “the long-drawn wail of the fo'c'sle lookout” offers Findlayson comic relief from his internal deliberations. Initiate into Hitchcock’s and Findlayson’s private brotherhood, Peroo affords an opportunity for paternalistic benevolence: a colonial subject in the process of raising himself to parity with his masters, one whose grasp of English marks him as less-than-equal.

Moreover, Peroo’s induction into the Craft explicitly comes at the cost of religious commitment. Introduced by Kipling as a Hindu of the Kharva caste, Peroo takes a distinctly pragmatic view of religion, particularly when compared with the quasi-religious zeal with which he defends “the honor of this bridge.” Peroo praises the “sea-priest” of his tribe, a “holy man” whose duties amount to eating, sleeping and smoking, in strictly instrumentalist terms: “He never cares what you eat so long as you do not eat beef, and that is good, because on land we worship Shiva, we Kharvas; but at sea on the Kumpani’s boats we attend strictly to the orders of the Burra Malum [the first mate], and on this bridge we observe what Finlinson Sahib says” (10). Peroo’s evaluation stresses the priest’s role in preserving the Kharva’s cultural identity, a role that cannot, in the end, encroach upon the jurisdiction of the “Kumpani” (the British India Steam Navigation Company). Indeed, Peroo’s estimation of his priest represents, in miniature, his
liminal attitude towards religion, a quasi-secular perspective that, rather like his “wonderful English,” remains at a distance from the standard of his masters. After hearing Peroo express qualms about the bridge’s affront to “Mother Gunga,” goddess of the Ganges, Findlayson privately remarks to Hitchcock, “You’d think that ten years in the British India boats would have knocked most of his religion out of him” (13). Hitchcock and Findlayson proceed to assess the relative religiosity of their apprentice: Hitchcock points to a “most atheistical talk” overheard between Peroo and his guru, in which the former “denied the efficacy of prayer,” while Findlayson counters with the observation that Peroo prayed “to the dome of St. Paul’s while he was in London” (ibid). Admission to this inner circle seems to require abandoning the gods entirely, a feat to which Peroo seems not quite able to bring himself.

Insofar as “The Bridge Builders” offers a variation on Kipling’s imperial Masonry, then, its presentation of belief and Brotherhood as mutually exclusive deserves our attention. In “The Man Who Would Be King,” belief in the gods serves as a precondition of Kafiristan’s induction into the Craft, since Dravot can only claim authority as Lodge Master by identifying with the local god Imbra; in “The Bridge Builders,” however, the fraternity of work is one in which all gods are equally unwelcome, St. Paul’s no less than the Ganges’. This inversion of Freemasonry’s all-encompassing syncretism indicates a vision of colonial governance different from that found in “The Man Who Would Be King.” Where Dravot and Peachey manage local religious beliefs by subsuming them into Masonic ideology, the Brotherhood of Labor in “The Bridge Builders” maintains indifference to all deities, supplanting rather than reinterpreting them. If the gods of St. Paul’s and the Ganges are interchangeable here, they are interchangeably irrelevant. The only god that holds purchase is the god of technology: when Hitchcock mentions
that Peroo recounted “pray[ing] to the low-pressure cylinder” of a steamer’s engine-room as a boy, Findlayson half-jokingly replies, “Not a half bad thing to pray to, either” (ibid).

Indeed, as Findlayson’s crew works to secure their handiwork against the incoming flood, religion figures into the proceedings as a kind of ineffectual technology, a failed counterpart to the nautical and civil engineering vocabulary in which Kipling immerses his reader. The contrast is particularly striking, given the importance of that immersion to achieving the verisimilar effects that, in “The Man Who Would Be King,” Kipling executed via frame narratives, eyewitness accounts, and psychological interiority. In contrast, lifeliness in “The Bridge Builders” is a matter of snapping hawsers and racing stone-boats, of “a hundred crowbars strain[ing] at the sleepers of the temporary line that fed the unfinished piers” (16), of Peroo “leaping from gunnel to gunnel” while Hitchcock shouts commands like “T’other overhead crane on the mended pontoon, with the cart-road rivets from Twenty to Twenty-three piers — two construction lines, and a turning-spur” (14). For uninitiated readers, the near-unintelligibility of such passages only shores up the narrative’s authenticity. Thus, a review of The Day’s Work, the 1898 collection of Kipling stories that opens with “The Bridge Builders,” singles out the story as emblematic of Kipling’s “master[y of] the technical jargon of many walks of life…[his] marvellous power of turning it to artistic use…In ‘The Bridge-Builders’ he is a civil engineer, in [‘The Ship that Found Herself’] he is a Naval architect” (“Books of the Day” 590). Similarly, another reviewer of The Day’s Work exclaims, “Nearly half of the dozen stories plunge into the details of engineering science, and give one the feeling of being led bewildered, but interested, through a maze of whirring, crashing machinery by a guide who knows every inch of the way, and has his finger upon the throbbing pulse of the whole mighty mechanism” (“Mr. Kipling’s New Book” 1337). Juxtaposed with this “mighty mechanism,” Peroo’s exchange with his guru
seems to confirm religion’s comic obsolescence, its uselessness to the fraternity of Labor.

Dismayed by the flood’s relentless advance, Peroo drags his guru to the riverbank and demands that he put his own expertise to use: “What good are offerings and little kerosene lamps and dry grain...if squatting in the mud is all that thou canst do?...Is there no return for salt fish and curry powder and dried onions? Call aloud! Tell Mother Gunga we have had enough” (22). The guru’s ineffectuality prompts Peroo to call for a more up-to-date religious techne, as he declares, “When the flood is down I will see to it that we get a new guru” (ibid).

At this point in the narrative, then, India’s religious pluralism matters primarily as sideshow, an ever-changing parade of gods and gurus, whose sheer contingency serves to cast Labor’s reliability into sharp relief. Peroo, as inconstant in his choice of holy man as he is in his devotion to Shiva, approaches parity with his masters only by yoking his pluralistic inclinations to the logic of supply and demand, input and output. At best, such a religion accommodates modernity’s ethos of calculation; at worst, it constitutes an anachronistic distraction from true techne, particularly insofar as it breeds a fickleness unbecoming of Hitchcock’s and Findlay’s hard-earned fellowship. Immersed in the “mighty mechanism” of secular Labor, the reader thus experiences religion from Findlayson’s and Hitchcock’s bemused (and amused) vantage point.

Fittingly, when the gods finally make their appearance, they initially do so as a mere medicinal side-effect, an epiphenomenon of therapeutic technology far more potent than they are. As a safeguard against “weariness” and “the fever that follows the rain,” Peroo furnishes Findlayson with “clean Malwa opium” that he has ingested himself (23). Riding out the flood in a “reeling, pegged and stitched craft,” the two narrowly escape their sinking vessel and climb aground on an island (25). There, in a drug-fueled haze, Findlayson imagines himself and Peroo as post-apocalyptic survivors, a scenario Kipling narrates in the language of quasi-Biblical myth:
“Somewhere in the night of time he had built a bridge - a bridge that spanned illimitable levels of shining seas; but the Deluge had swept it away, leaving this one island under heaven for Findlayson and his companion, sole survivors of the breed of Man” (27).

In this escape from the world of Labor, Findlayson and Peroo glimpse the gods. The beginning of the vision marks the point at which Kipling’s third-person narration shifts focus from Findlayson to Peroo — and, by extension, the point at which Kipling’s solidly realist frame gives way to something stranger. As Findlayson watches Shiva emerging from the forest, Kipling narrates in free indirect discourse: “Peroo was eminently right. After the Flood, who should be alive in the land except the Gods that made it — the Gods to whom his village prayed nightly - the Gods who were in all men's mouths and about all men's ways” (28). While the passage begins as Findlayson’s stream of thought, it seems to express Peroo’s interiority as it unfolds, especially via the unclear antecedent of “his village” and the reverent description of the Gods as “about all men’s ways.” Ostensibly, such expressions could simply indicate Findlayson’s altered state of consciousness, but Kipling completes the perspectival shift with Peroo’s exclamation, “This is in truth a Punchayet of the Gods. Now we know that all the world is dead, save you and I, Sahib” (29). The ensuing divine “punchayet” (literally, village council) takes place with exclusive reference to Peroo’s point of view, with Findlayson entirely disappearing from view until the vision ends. Moreover, as Peroo’s interiority comes to the foreground, what begins as a mere hallucination takes on the aspect of genuine revelation, the vindication of religion that Peroo has sought, vainly, through his guru. Kipling has little use here for the narrative techniques that conventionally characterize fantastic narrative — e.g., syntax that obscures agency, appeals to the limits of description — but the gods’ matter-of-fact appearance in what has been an emphatically secular narrative, the perspectival shift, and the
consequent interpretive ambiguity (epiphenomenon or epiphany?) provoke the unreality effect nonetheless.

This irruption of fantastic hesitation compounds the reader’s sensitivity to the gods’ own hesitation: their ambivalence about the world of Labor, which, in the end, amounts to uncertainty about India’s ever-expanding spectrum of religiosities. As the gods arrive to the punchayet in animal form—Shiva the bull, Hanuman the monkey, Kali the tigress, Mother Gunga the crocodile—they debate how to respond to the bridge-builders. The occasion for the council is, after all, Gunga’s charge that the bridge-builders have “polluted my waters…[and] trapped my river…between the walls” (30). In retribution, she demands “the justice of the Gods,” a demand echoed by Kali. On the other hand, Hanuman remarks that the bridge reminds him that he “[built] no small bridge in the world’s youth,” alluding to a well-known myth in which Hanuman builds a bridge for Lord Rama, incarnation of Vishnu (31). In drawing a parallel between himself and the bridge-builders, Hanuman serves as the most eloquent exponent of Masonic ideology in the ensuing debate. “They toil as my armies toiled in Lanka,” Hanuman says, referring to the location at which the mythical bridge was built (32). Amidst Gunga’s and Kali’s protests, Hanuman inspires a chorus of affirmation from other gods, who declare that the technology of the bridge builders has served them well. Ganesh, god of good luck, notes that the “fire carriages” mean increased profits for his worshippers; Bhairon “of the common people” concurs that “there were never so many altars as there are today, and the fire carriages serve them well”; Shiv, chief among the gods, delights in the increased traffic of foreigners to his shrines, men who “mak[e] words and [tell] talk of strange gods” (33).

Shiv’s mention of “strange gods” segues into Hanuman’s observation that the trains, by bringing new religions into India, foster interconnectivity amongst the old gods and the new.
Such interconnectivity only renders visible the contiguity that already exists between old and new deities, a kind of syncretic technology that Hanuman celebrates:

"I creep from temple to temple in the North, where they worship one God and His Prophet; and presently my image is alone within their shrines."
"Small thanks," said the Buck, turning his head slowly. "I am that One and His Prophet also."
"Even so, father," said Hanuman. "And to the South I go who am the oldest of the Gods as men know the Gods, and presently I touch the shrines of the New Faith and the Woman whom we know is hewn twelve-armed, and still they call her Mary."
"Small thanks, brother," said the Tigress. "I am that Woman."
"Even so, sister; and I go West among the fire-carriages, and stand before the bridge-builders in many shapes, and because of me they change their faiths and are very wise. Ho! ho! I am the builder of bridges, indeed — bridges between this and that, and each bridge leads surely to Us in the end...." (34-35)

While it remains unclear if Kipling ever absorbed the theories identifying ancient Hinduism with Freemasonry, the gods’ friendliness to imperial techne — a world, as I have argued, that Kipling implicitly casts as a Masonic brotherhood of labor — offers a kind of fantastic corollary to those theories. In proclaiming himself to be the original “builder of bridges,” and in asserting that “each bridge leads surely to Us in the end,” Hanuman conversely designates the bridge-builders’ latently Masonic labor as a continuation of his own syncretic work, supplementing it in two ways. Firstly, the British “fire carriages” facilitate worship, in the same way that Hanuman facilitates worship of the One by building “bridges” linking Islam and Christianity with Hinduism. Secondly, British toil simply is worship, itself a religion, Hanuman’s creed by a new name. As the monkey god says gleefully, “the fire carriages bring me new worshippers...men who believe their god is toil” (35-36). As a means of fostering devotion to established traditions, a spur to syncretism, and a latent religion in its own right, the Labor of the bridge builders exceeds the highest aspirations of those who proclaimed the Craft as a “divine institution,” suited to the march of Empire. This theological construal of Labor may gently mock Findlayson’s and Hitchcock’s staunch secularism, but it also affirms the
compatibility of their endeavors with the religiosities of the land: each bridge, after all, leads surely to Us.

Hanuman’s declaration of kinship with the Bridge Builders parallels the discovery of Imbra’s Mark in “The Man Who Would Be King,” an unreal affirmation of the occult connections between the Masonic project and religion. What is fantastic here is the revelation that secular *techne*, the expressly material world of engineering and naval expertise, both recapitulates the old myths and serves the purposes of the old gods. Such a revelation effectively reverses the story’s margin and center: if, in the first half of the tale, the immanent world of the story’s first half seems central, with India’s religions existing on the periphery, here, it is the world of gods and visions that takes center stage. Conversely, the world of Labor is reduced to a temporal manifestation of the Eternal. Far from invalidating the world of *techne*, this reversal reinterprets that world, by imbuing it with spiritual significance: honoring both Masonry’s valuation of Labor and its emphasis on ecumenical exchange, Hanuman’s remarks cast the latter as an expression of the former, as humanity’s ultimate theological unity directly follows from the “bridge building,” both literal and metaphorical, that connects one faith to another. Erecting their own “superstructure of virtue and morality,” the gods themselves (not their devotees) turn out to be the original Masonic brotherhood.

However, this epiphanic validation of Masonic ideology — of syncretism, of Masonry’s special connection to Hinduism, and especially of Labor’s cosmological importance — precipitates yet another reversal of perspective, coincident with the late arrival of Krishna. While, on one hand, Krishna dismisses Gunga’s desire for vengeance, he also brings news to dampen the other gods’ enthusiasm for the fire carriages. In his sojourn throughout the land, Krishna declares, he has discovered “a new word...a little lazy word among the common folk,
saying...that they weary of ye, Heavenly Ones” (39). Though Krishna concedes that “none know who set that word afoot” (ibid), he effectively lays blame at “the fire carriages and the other things the bridge builders have done,” accomplishments that distract the people from holier thoughts (40). While the people will “bring...at first greater offerings and a louder noise of worship” to compensate for their loss of piety, the end is sure: the diminution of the gods’ stature, till they are but “little Gods... pot-Godlings...as ye were at the beginning” (40).

Krishna’s pronouncement dissolves the concordat between the bridge-builders and Hanuman the Bridge-Builder. In response, Hanuman redoubles his insistence that the fire carriages herald only a shift in the external identity of the gods, who shall continue to receive worship under different names: “I have made a man worship the fire-carriage as it stood still breathing smoke, and he knew not that he worshipped me...They will only change a little the names of the Gods...and that we have seen a thousand times” (41). Krishna, however, has little time for Hanuman’s easy syncretism, insisting, “They will do more than change the names...the fire carriages shout the names of new Gods that are not the old under new names” (41). Into this dispute steps Indra the Judge, who, in another reference to a well-known myth, asserts the ultimate contingency of gods and fire carriages alike: “Ye know the Riddle of the Gods. When Brahm ceases to dream, the Heavens and the Hells and Earth disappear...[but] Brahm dreams still” (42). Indra refers to the legend that Brahm, the supreme deity, dreamed the universe into being. His warning implicitly undercuts Krishna’s warnings, reminding the gods that their fate lies in Brahm’s consciousness rather than human effort, it also trivializes the Labor, celebrated by Hanuman et al, that supposedly facilitates the worship of the One-in-the-Many. When Brahm’s dream is over, no bridge survives.
In historical context, this invocation of Brahma’s dream would have resonated with the Indian intellectuals enamored of a “Hinduism of the mind,” insofar as it derives from the Vedantic tradition. However, if the Vedantic tradition gave those intellectuals a way to “build bridges” with colonial modernity, Peroo’s revelation only portends ill for the interreligious unity those bridges would secure. What are the bridges between Mary and Kali, between Allah and Indra, in the light of that inevitable cessation? And in the interim, how much confidence are we to place in Hanuman’s syncretic bridges—if, in fact, they are not so effective as they first appear, failing to assimilate the fire carriages and the invading deities they herald? The proclamation that “Brahm dreams still” concludes the dream on a somewhat optimistic note, and the punchayet vanishes with Krishna’s affirmation—“till [Brahm] wakes the Gods die not”—ringing in Peroo’s ears (43). Yet one is left with the overwhelming impression of irresolution, of the impossibility of holding fast to any firm consensus about either human or divine nature. This uncertainty is nicely mirrored in Peroo’s and Findlayson’s lack of agreement as to the nature of the experience they have just undergone. Where Peroo assumes the vision’s veracity, Findlayson is unwilling to even grant the memory of a hallucination: “It seemed that the island was full of men and beasts talking, but I do not remember” (44).

Indeed, the epistemological and phenomenological gaps between Peroo and Findlayson only widen in the story’s denouement, belying interpretations of the the story as a celebration of

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As the Vedantic teacher Sivananda Saraswati would later write, the myth of Brahma’s dream means that the illusory nature of reality will be unveiled at the end of mortal existence: “It will be realised that this life on earth is only a fantastic dream of the mind when the Supreme Absolute or Para-Brahman is realised” (“Vedanta for Beginners”).

Here, I am indebted to Alan Johnson for pointing out that Findlayson’s uneasy non-recollection is a sign of “fractured consciousness,” and that “the moment [Findlayson] recalls the talking beasts, he expels them from his conscious thoughts” (89). I depart from Johnson, however, in his conclusion that Findlayson’s simultaneous acknowledgement and disavowal of the dream impels Peroo to conflate Findlayson with Brahm, so that, “so long as Findlayson/Brahm continues to conjure his form of reality — bridges, roads, canals — the indigenous gods can continue their hold over the villagers” (87). If he does, such an identification is momentary, morphing quickly into his identification of his own disillusionment with the end of Brahm’s dream.
“the day’s work” over the night of superstition. Janet Montefiore articulates this position in her reading of “The Bridge Builders,” arguing that “the gap of belief between Englishman and Indian has been bridged by English technology” at the story’s conclusion, with Peroo “shed[ding] his superstition to enter Findlayson’s own realm of materialism and technological mastery” (62). Montefiore’s reading does not acknowledge the degree to which the dream haunts the remainder of the story, nor the way in which it lays bare fundamental differences in Peroo’s and Findlayson’s ways of knowing the world. Such differences are most obviously visible in the broken verbal and non-spoken forms of communication that the two characters exhibit in this final section of the story. Kipling highlights Findlayson’s inability to make eye contact with Peroo as they discuss the dream, noting that the former looks “uneasily across the water” and speaks “across his shoulder” (44); for his part, Peroo elaborates on his interpretation of the dream “as if he were talking to himself” (ibid); finally, Peroo’s extended interpretation is met with Findlayson’s non sequitur, “Look up-stream. The light blinds. Is there smoke yonder?” (45). These details, in and of themselves, should make us suspicious of any interpretation that would see Peroo fully inducted into Findlayson’s and Hitchcock’s this-worldly brotherhood of Labor; if anything, his relationship with Findlayson, their capacity for rapport, is worse off at story’s conclusion than at its beginning.

The distance between Findlayson and Peroo, audible in their broken communication, is further exacerbated by Peroo’s enigmatic interpretation of the dream, an interpretation that paradoxically banishes the gods only by taking their existence for granted. This interpretation emerges from Peroo’s comparing the dream with a near-death experience he had on a “Kumpani boat,” in the midst of a monsoon, several years prior. Facing his impending demise, Peroo was

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72 One should note that Montefiore’s reading currently enjoys prominence on the Kipling Society’s page devoted to the “Bridge Builders” (http://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/rg_bridgebuilders1.htm).
struck by the thought, “How can I be sure...that the gods to whom I pray will abide at all?” (45). Peroo reflects that the dream has affirmed this intuition of the gods’ contingency, concluding, “When Brahm ceases to dream, the gods go” (45). While it would be tempting to read the monologue as an affirmation of secular materialism, it seems rather to suggest the opposite, an affirmation of a theologically motivated atheism. For Peroo, the experience on the “Kumpani boat” foreshadowed the message of the dream, a message that can only be accepted by taking the dream’s authenticity, qua revelation, at face value. Ironically, if Peroo had dismissed the reverie as mere hallucination, he would have also dismissed the thought of the gods’ contingency, and perhaps preserved his piety. As it is, the question provoked by his brush with death seems, retrospectively, to take on the quality of mystical intuition, adumbrating a mystery now fully disclosed in his vision. Moreover, if Peroo’s newfound unbelief motivates him to “beat the guru for talking riddles which are no riddles,” it simultaneously serves as confirmation of the guru’s wisdom, since the guru himself once spoke of the gods’ demise, the end of Brahm’s dream: “Once, too, the guru said as much to me; but then I did not understand; now I am wise” (44). To beat the guru, then, is paradoxically to pay him the high honor of believing him.

Peroo’s theological atheism, his believing unbelief, thus defies any straightforward movement from the nocturnal ephemera of religion to the daytime solidity of secular Labor. Rather, the reader is left with the sense of Peroo brooding over his gods, Findlayson over his: with his first sober thought being “how his work stood” (43) and his “first demand [being] for his bridge” when Hitchcock arrives to rescue them (46), Findlayson proves himself an unflinching devotee of the god of toil. Yet Peroo’s paradoxical state of (ir)religiosity does not merely alienate him from his colonial masters, but also distances him from other colonial subjects who, like him, have endured the loss of an uncomplicated piety. Hitchcock arrives in a boat owned by
the “Rao of Baraon,” a local landowner whose property lies within “ten miles of the bridge,” and with whom “Findlayson and Hitchcock had spent a fair portion of their scanty leisure in playing billiards and shooting blackbuck” (46). The Rao, then, offers a kind of double to Peroo, another non-white initiate into the colonial brotherhood. Like Peroo, too, the Rao must toggle between his obligations to Findlayson et al and his obligations to religious authority: noting that “my head-priest...is very angry right now,” he urges the party to hurry, since “I am due to attend at twelve forty-five in the state temple, where we sanctify some new idol” (47). Unlike Peroo, however, the Rao performs his indifference to religion as a way of underscoring kinship with the colonizers, lamenting, “If not [for the ceremony] I would have asked you to spend the day with me. They are dam-bore, these religious ceremonies, Finlinson, eh?” (ibid). Peroo’s existential angst could not be further removed from the Rao’s blithe irreverence, even as it contrasts with Findlayson’s dogged devotion to immanence.

These are distances no bridge can cross. The ending of “The Bridge Builders” merits obvious comparison with that of “The Man Who Would Be King,” repeating as it does the incursion of fantastic elements, which, in their differing effects on the story’s main protagonists, replace fraternity with psycho-spiritual solitude. Once again, the Masonic brotherhood, premised on a vision of Muhammad, God, and Shiva swapping pickets, undergoes deep rupture in the wake of the Unreal; having begun the story as comic sidekick, Peroo emerges from the dream as a kind of tragic protagonist. And once again, the ultimate sign of rupture lies in the fact that the ordinary plane of Kipling’s India, the verisimilar reality that won him so much acclaim, no longer appears as convincing, as self-explanatory. “There the matter rests” is, of course, a newspaperman’s attempt to conclude what is unconclude-able: to convince the reader (or himself) that a terse recitation of facts (Peachey is dead; Dravot’s head is missing) constitutes all
the explanation one needs. The obvious inadequacy of this explanation, then, signals the inadequacy of journalistic realism to the tale that has been told. “The Bridge Builders” concludes with a similarly uneasy return to the mundane present, one that exposes the limits of *techne* in the light of revelation. In the story’s penultimate sentence, Kipling writes, “Peroo, well known to the crew, had possessed himself of the inlaid wheel, and was taking the launch craftily up-stream” (ibid). The causal connection between appositive phrase and main clause is implicit: Peroo is well known to the crew *because* of his craft, evident in his effortless commandeering of the vessel. However, the phrase is also pregnant with irony, since the secret knowledge Peroo carries with him, his fantastic vision of the end of visions, has rendered him barely knowable to himself. Peroo’s *techne*, then, facilitates only the facade of camaraderie, an illusion whose contrast with psychological reality becomes, in the final sentence, painfully clear: “But while he steered he was, in his mind, handling two feet of partially untwisted wire-rope; and the back upon which he beat was the back of his guru” (ibid).

This final reverie, shrinking as it does from the approaching world of fact, of matters resting and resting matter, displays the clearest difference between the conclusions of the two stories in question. It may be obvious to say that “The Bridge Builders” goes beyond “The Man Who Would Be King” in its efforts to limn the interiority of the colonized, an effort at which the latter tale makes no attempt. A true range of religiosities has emerged by the story’s end: the Rao’s strictly performative form of devotion, as pure an expression as any of civil religion; Findlayson’s secular devotion to Labor, which the gods reveal to be piety by another name; the guru’s ineffectual traditionalism; and, finally, Peroo’s theological atheism, a believing unbelief that bears limited resemblance to aspects of the previous three positions, while remaining stubbornly irreducible to any one of them. Yet it is this last form of experience, deeply cross-
pressed, newly emergent, barely nameable, on which Kipling finally focuses our attention, and to which he directs our sympathy. Moreover, it is precisely through the fantastic interruption that Peroo’s theological atheism takes on the quality of tragedy. Religious pluralism is here cast not as benevolent ideology, nor as carnivalesque sideshow, but as an unsolvable problem for the subject of the Raj, suspended between the unreal truth he knows and the untrue “reality” of the colonizer. In the final sentence of “The Bridge Builders,” one hears the anguish of a believer who can only pay homage to his guru by beating him, and for whom bridges, be they between places or between gods, fail in the purposes ascribed to them by imperial meta-religion. Neither tradition nor trains offer any real solace — only a dream of power, in which beating the bridge builders themselves, human or divine, remains unimaginable.
4. Imperial Piety, Melancholic Theodicy, and Dracula’s Apologetics of Progress

Religion in Dracula studies has often looked a little like the Un-Dead Lucy, a ghastly simulacrum of living faith. Indeed, readings of the novel frequently depend on a suspicious approach to the novel’s professions of piety, one that regards them as a mask for more fundamental concerns: the heroes profess religious concern, but what they really want is to neutralize the New Woman, or racial degeneration, or sexual perversion. Under these conditions, Christianity provides, at best, a potent discourse through which the characters can manage these coded crises. When religion does enter the conversation, critics tend to read the text for clues to Stoker’s personal position on the theological controversies of his day: the Catholic-Protestant divide in Ireland, the place of High Church ritualism in Anglican worship, the merit of the doctrine of transubstantiation. 73 As a result, we are still left with a Dracula that functions as an elaborate code book, encrypting what Stoker secretly (or not-so-secretly) believed.

In what follows, I want to suggest that theology in *Dracula* is no mere sign of hegemonic social forces or pathological complexes, but a sophisticated and integrated system of belief and ritual, enmeshed in the pressures of its historical moment but irreducible to materialist demystification. Moreover, I want to eschew the temptation to read *Dracula* as an allegory for Stoker’s doctrinal positions, as if the sole point of its supernatural elements was to encrypt meaning that originates outside the text. Instead, my argument takes its cues from Tzvetan Todorov’s aforementioned distinction between allegory and the fantastic: the fantastic cannot reduce to metaphor; the vampire must remain itself, not simply a signifier for extratextual meaning. In this light, it seems important to honor the non-allegorical ambitions of *Dracula*, a novel arranged as a series of legal, journalistic, medical, and personal sources that painstakingly testify to the existence of vampires — and, by extension, the operation of forces divine and demonic.

So: what in God’s name is going on in *Dracula*? This chapter argues that, rather than deploying the supernatural to metaphorize an ideological position, *Dracula* purports to document how the supernatural’s incursion into modern time-space tests the faith of a group of late Victorian Christians. As I will show, these true believers ground their response to this incursion in the premises of contemporaneous apologetics, the branch of theology devoted to defenses of the faith. In response to the surge of interest in global religious diversity, clergymen and social commentators elucidated what I call the apologetics of progress: arguments that depicted Christianity as the *telos* of religion’s evolutionary development, an engine of civilizational improvement that accommodated both the truths of other religions and the demands of modernity. In short, such arguments transform Christianity into something like a meta-religion in its own right, the ultimate *philosophia perennis* whose universality had been lost on its own
followers. This vision of Christianity surfaces in the strategy of Dracula’s band of holy vampire hunters, who forge an ecumenical alliance that sacralizes scientific methods and esoteric beliefs. Indeed, Dracula’s Christian heroes do not conquer foreign religions so much as beat them at their own game, embodying a brand of spectacular (and technologically precise) wonderworking elsewhere identified with Buddhism, Hinduism and Theosophy. In a sense, Christianity in Dracula approaches the apologists’ vision of the faith as an imperial meta-religion. In translating pluralistic experience into the language of the fantastic, Stoker incites dread at the fantastic religiosities infiltrating Britain, but also evokes the triumphalistic ardor of a still-more-fantastic imperial Christianity, an ecumenical dream yoking Catholic magic to Protestant reason.

In musical terms, it would be tempting to “hear” the threat posed by Dracula and the promise of Christian triumph as call and response, a statement of theme that requires an answering melodic line. However, it may be more accurate to hear these affective states as melody and countermelody, simultaneous bass and treble themes that intertwine for most of the novel. For this reason, the structure of this chapter eschews the temporal/sequential approach I have taken in previous chapters — until the climax, that is. There, Stoker’s obsession with the spectre of history, a product of his indebtedness to the Gothic genre, undoes Dracula’s triumphalist tribute to a religion of progress. As it turns out, such a tribute finds its negative image in Dracula, who precedes the hunters as a medieval example of rational Christian heroism. The novel’s properly fantastic character, I suggest, means that this subversion of apologetics does not amount to a mere allegorization of Christianity’s inherent inconsistency. Rather, I attribute it to the conflict that Stoker poses between Christian apologetics and the providential power that intervenes, marvellously and mysteriously, in the world of the novel. Ultimately, I this conflict culminates in a kind of melancholic theodicy. In Stoker’s fantastic variations on
pluralistic experience, dread, jingoistic fervor, and Christian piety lead inexorably to the unreal possibility that, even if the Christian God exists, He may not be much of an apologist.

I. Abraham Van Helsing, Theologian of Progress

Nicholas Daly has characterized the aforementioned studies of Dracula as variations on “anxiety theory,” identifying the Count with racialized and gendered threats to Victorian norms. I want to risk one further congruence: if Dracula menaces masculinity and racial purity, he surely threatens Christian orthodoxy as well, incarnating the non- and (sometimes) anti-Christian religiosities that vexed the faithful and attracted freethinkers towards the end of the century. As quoted in the introduction, A.J.M.M.’s 1891 opinion article for the Women’s Penny Paper emblematizes the ambivalent reaction that religious diversity sparked in the late Victorians: “With the approach of each new London season comes a new fashion in dress, new books, new theories, and new religious beliefs...We feel that we ought to belong to some community, but cannot decide which, for every sect loudly declares that through its narrow wicket alone lies the Way of Life” (115).

In the decade following A.J.M.M.’s troubled observations, such sects included meta-religious groups such as Freemasonry, Theosophy, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn—not to mention the diehard Spiritualist movement, which had weathered a host of debunked mediums and seances. Meanwhile, outside those circles, curiosity about foreign religions continued unabated, as books and organizations disseminated the insights of comparative

74 Christopher Craft argues that the novel’s “originary anxiety” stems from Dracula’s sexual attraction to Harker (74). Meanwhile, Judith Halberstam links the novel to the anti-Semitic discourse of its era, arguing that such a link manifests in “[Dracula’s] appearance, his relation to money and gold, his parasitism, his degeneracy, his impermanency or lack of allegiance to a fatherland, and his femininity” (337). Finally, Carol Senf coined a phrase that has recurred throughout Dracula studies when, in her 1979 essay “The Unseen Face in the Mirror,” she argued that Jonathan Harker sees in Dracula “a kind of reverse imperialism,” representing “the primitive trying to colonize the civilized world” (164).
religion beyond elite intellectual circles. However, the 1890’s also saw the increased presence of older Asian traditions finding a home on English soil, gaining converts in the process. With respect to Hinduism, Swami Vivekenanda’s visit to London in 1896 introduced Hindu philosophy and theology to such spiritual seekers as Margaret Noble (rechristened Sister Nivedita under his tutelage). “To not a few of us, the words of Swami Vivekananda came as living water to men perishing of thirst,” declared Sister Nivedita in 1897 (“On Vedanta Missionary Work”). Using Biblical language to effectively describe her turn away from a Biblical worldview, Nivedita’s words emblematize the distinctive form that Victorian conversions to Other religiosities took, renunciations of Christianity nonetheless haunted by Christian piety. So, too, did Britons increasingly learn of Buddhism through practicing Buddhists, some of whom may have been their own kin. Recently, scholars in contemporary Buddhist studies have challenged histories of Victorian era encounters with Buddhism that focus on gentlemen scholars, uncovering a transnational underclass of migrant workers and “beachcombers” who, in their travels throughout Asia, frequently converted and sometimes even became ordained as monks. It is not hard to imagine their stories and religious insights traveling from the margins of Empire back to relatives and friends in England, who received these accounts in a milieux more aware of the world’s religious traditions than ever before.

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75 See Andrew Skilton and Kate Crosby, eds., U Dhammaloka, “The Irish Buddhist”: rewriting the history of early Western Buddhist monastics, spec. issue of Contemporary Buddhism 11.2 (2010): 121-291. The issue presents a collaborative research project, amongst myriad scholars of Buddhist Studies, on the case of the Irish Buddhist monk Dhammaloka, ordained in Burma sometime in the 1880’s or 1890’s. The issue’s editors offer evidence that Dhammaloka emblematizes a class of sailors and beachcombers throughout late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Southeast Asia, who “sought accommodation in monastaries…[and frequently] chose to stay on and eventually ordain” (Turner 150).

76 As an example of the kind of accounts that could have circulated during this time, witness the testimony of an “unnamed sailor,” in a 1927 edition of The British Buddhist, recounting his conversion to Buddhism some years hence. The sailor recounts arriving in Columbo and, encountering some Buddhist monks, feeling a “strange sort of thrill of pleasure” as he watched them pass along the road with their bowls in their hands in front of them, and their eyes bent on the ground” (“How I Became A Buddhist” 7). After subsequent meetings with an English speaking monk in Rangoon, the sailor decides to convert himself. Significantly, the account does not prioritize stressing the
Even Islam, emblem of Christian Britain’s political enemies, gained a foothold in Britain during this time. Just across the sea from the Dublin of Stoker’s childhood, William Henry Quilliam, a Liverpool-born solicitor who converted to Islam in 1887, founded the Liverpool Muslim Institute in 1889. (As with Margaret Noble, Quilliam’s conversion required a name change, and he henceforth referred to himself as Abdullah Quilliam.) Quilliam’s attempts to garner converts at home included publishing a weekly paper, *The Crescent*, holding Sunday services, and — in an echo of Sister Nivedita’s reliance on Scriptural rhetoric — adapting Christian hymns to sing the praises of Allah and his prophet. Quilliam’s remarkably prescient desire to naturalize Islam, to render it palatable to a nation still deeply shaped by Evangelical values, also led his Institute to form alliances with orphanages and temperance societies. As Diane Robinson-Dunne writes, through the involvement with temperance in particular, “English Muslims associated themselves with the Victorian impulse to improve, and presented their faith as the solution to England’s problems and societal ills” (“Lascar Sailors and English Converts”). The success of such efforts is indicated not only by the Institute’s converts, but also by the local respect Quilliam garnered on behalf of his movement, a respect that anticipates today’s pluralistic politics of tolerance.77

Such respect, of course, was far from universal. For those Victorian Christians concerned about the flood of new religious beliefs gaining currency in England, Renfield, the servant of content of Buddhist belief, but rather emphasizes the experiential dimension of being a Buddhist: not only recounting his “thrill of pleasure,” the sailor comments that his affective state now depends on his proximity or distance from Buddhist regions. “I feel so happy just to see their golden robes, and the golden spires of the pagodas, and everything about a Buddhist country. And when away in the West with my ship, I feel as if I am away from home; and begin to feel bright and cheered again, as soon as I have passed Aden, and know I am getting nearer again to the home of Buddhism” (8). Though the account was published in 1927, it gives a sense of the way that non-Christian religiousities became legible as modalities of experience during the late nineteenth century. 77 Robinson-Dunne’s article, along with Beckerlegge’s essay, provides the information cited in this paragraph about Quilliam’s efforts. Robinson-Dunne goes on to comment that “at least four Liverpool publications [*Liverpool Mercury, Liverpool Review, The Porcupine, and The Liverpool Freeman*] presented Quilliam’s religious activities in a neutral or positive light,” indicating the degree to which his Institute was taken seriously.
Dracula whom Dr. Seward diagnoses as a victim of “religious mania,” is at least as unnerving as Dracula himself. Referring to Dracula as “Lord and Master” and declaring that he has “worshipped [Dracula] long and afar off” (170, ch. 8), Renfield inaugurates the novel’s ongoing insinuation that Dracula is a kind of Antichrist, a perverse messiah who offers immortality by drinking blood rather than shedding his own. Dracula himself seems to relish his blasphemous associations; in an allusion to Satan’s temptation of Christ, Dracula later offers Renfield “lives...through countless ages, if you will fall down and worship me” (387, ch. 21). As Paul Murray notes, his skill as a “worker of wonders and a seducer” confirms his association with the false prophet of Revelation, imbued with those same characteristics (193). However, Dracula’s Scripture-quoting “false prophet,” and the devotee who worships him, also reads as a kind of paranoid Christian reaction to the acolytes of foreign religions, such as Sister Nivedita and the members of the Liverpool Muslim Institute, who communicated their new Ways of Life through the language of Christianity. Furthermore, Dracula’s links to the Antichrist also resonate within the context of the new meta-religious movements, since orthodox theologians frequently identified teachers of new religious systems with the “false Christs” warned of in the Bible. (Madame Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy who hailed Christ as a master of yogic arts, jokingly referred to herself as “Antichrist in petticoats” (259).) Even as he recalls tropes of the invading Saracenic warrior, Dracula also incarnates the enervating Eastern mysticism,

1. In his book Earth’s Earliest Ages, which went through five editions after its initial publication in 1872, the popular theologian G.H. Pember expresses the Evangelical attitude towards Blavatsky and other would-be masters of foreign religions: he names her as one of the "false Christs" who will proliferate on Earth immediately prior to the Second Coming. "At the time of the end, false Christs and false prophets are to show great signs and wonders; it may be that they are even now arising among us." Pember has in mind not merely non-Christian teaching, but specifically teaching that utilizes the Bible and elements of Christian theology to "[obscure] the true nature, gospel and mission of THE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON OF GOD, and gradually, but surely, [change] the characteristics of Christ into those of the Antichrist." (xxiii, preface to the Third Edition). Making the case for the Third Edition's relevance, Pember cites as evidence of such blasphemous enthusiasms "the latest spiritualistic and Theosophic publications - specifically those...of Madame Blavatski" (xxiv).
legitimated for curious British audiences by novel readings of Scripture, that provoked defenders of the faith. When he appears as mist in Mina Harker’s bedroom, Mina perceives him as a type of the spiritual guidance provided by Yahweh in Exodus, “a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night” (cf. Exodus 13:21). Entranced by the false promise of such guidance, Mina succumbs to precisely the kind of vacuous meditative practice that Christian apologists associated with Buddhism and Hinduism: not even thoughts, but mere “things began to whirl through my brain, just as the cloudy column was now whirling through the room” (362, ch. 19). The scene reads like an Evangelical’s nightmare of becoming caught up in dangerous religious practices, which ensnare the unsuspecting via their vague evocations of Scripture. In his momentary mastery of Mina and practical ownership of Renfield, Dracula exerts the kind of influence that such masters as Blavatsky were feared to exert upon their disciples.

Clearly, then, Dracula channels the new Ways of Life as imagined by orthodox Christians fearful of theological contamination. However, I want to avoid producing one more reading that focuses on the King Vampire as the embodiment of cultural anxieties. As Dejan Kuzmanovic observes, Dracula does not merely “stand for transgression, [but] also stands for — or, paradoxically, enables — a recuperation of stability and order” (413, italics added). In this regard, the text does not simply voice Christian fears of novel religiosities’ contaminating effects; rather, even as Dracula embodies those fears, Stoker sets in motion a recuperation of Christianity, evoking the logic of contemporaneous theologians who responded not only to popular interest in other belief systems, but also to the foundational claims of the new science of religion. Pioneered in the 1860’s and 1870’s by such figures as Max Müller and Egyptologist Cornelius Tiele, the discipline of comparative religion incorporated the Darwinian theory of evolution into its examination of the world’s religious systems. Müller’s contention that we must
"see in the ancient religions...the Divine education of the human race" (226) implicitly affirmed that each religion had contributed something important to humanity's development, and that religions were best compared through gradation rather than sharp distinction. Meanwhile, the anthropologist E.B. Tylor proposed a scheme of development within which belief in the supernatural constituted a “survival” of religion’s evolution, from primitive animism, through totemism, polytheism, and finally monotheism. Concluding that belief in the supernatural constituted a residue from lower stages of religious development, Tylor laid the groundwork for more radical scholars to name Christianity itself as the ultimate vestigial belief, to be swept away in the name of progress. Indeed, the comparativist James Frazer premised his deconstruction of Christianity on this variety of cultural evolutionism. In *The Golden Bough* (1890), Frazer earned notoriety for his insinuation that Christianity ultimately owes its central narrative to Oriental vegetation cults, which venerated a priest-king who suffers a sacrificial death and then undergoes resurrection.

Frazer’s and Tylor’s thought exemplifies what historian Theodore Koditschek calls “the progress narrative” that dominated Victorian intellectual life, in varying iterations. Koditschek contends that, whereas the progress narrative structured the early nineteenth century’s grand histories of Europe and Britain, in the latter half of the century that narrative disappeared from traditional historiography, only to resurface in the “new kind of bio-social evolutionary theory” (211) that shaped comparative religion. In this context, progress entailed a slow shedding of vestigial beliefs and practices, which might one day culminate in Christianity’s obsolescence. To counter this argument, many believers constructed their own evolutionary progress narrative.

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2. Here I am once again indebted to Marjorie Wheeler-Barclay’s *The Science of Religion in Britain, 1860-1915*, which elucidates the history of comparative religion during this period. Wheeler-Barclay notes that the science of religion ultimately became an “alternate locus of discourse about religious issues” (14), in contradistinction to discourse within the Church.
in which Christianity’s superiority to other religions rested on its unique status within the longue durée of evolutionary history, not on its absolute separation from that history. Such thinkers as F.B. Jevons, Edward Caird and W.B. Carpenter effectively appropriated Frazer’s methods for their own ends: Christianity superseded other religions, precisely because it represented their teleological endpoint. In An Introduction to the History of Religion, Jevon, an Anglican divine and scholar in comparative religion, calls it “fallacious” to assume that “the application of the theory of evolution to religion would reduce the higher forms of it to mere survivals of barbarism, animism, and so on.” Instead, those lower forms intimate the religious ideal’s consummation in Christianity — just as, in the case of Greece, the “barbaric stage of ancient carving” constituted a necessary phase en route to “the art of Phidias” (9). The apotheosis of humanity’s native monotheism, Christianity represented the final stage in religion’s progress, even if not the final stage in its evolution.

For his part, the philosopher Edward Caird identified Christianity with the impetus of evolutionary progress, in order to maximize the portrait of its universality. In The Evolution of Religion, originally delivered as part of the University of St. Andrew’s Gifford Lectures from 1890 to 1892, Caird argued that an evolutionary framework was essential to apprehending the full range of religious and philosophical traditions that found their culmination in Christianity: not only Greek philosophy and Judaism, but also “the primitive civilizations of Babylon and Mexico and Peru” (Volume 1, 26). These lower forms of religion expressed, in gradually less obscure terms, the theological concept that Christianity finally offered to the world, a “deepening and widening of the idea of God…[particularly] as compared with Greek polytheism and Jewish monotheism” (Volume 1, 137). In particular, Caird argued, Christianity represents a maturation of Judaism, insofar as it preserves the latter’s monotheism while jettisoning its notion that
humans could only undergo moral regeneration via “a sudden divine interference with the course of nature.” In contrast, Christ “maintained that “victory [over evil] is to be attained as one not of catastrophic change, but of continuous growth” (Volume 2, 235). In a reassuring convergence between Christianity’s teaching and its status in world history, Caird argues that Christ represented a progression beyond Judaism, precisely by becoming the prophet of progress: “It is not too much to say that in some of his words the idea that true progress is possible only by development, is more clearly expressed than it ever was by anyone down to the present century” (ibid).

With this argument, Caird adds a variation on the apologetics of progress: Christianity not only represents the telos of religion’s development through evolutionary time, it also enshrined progress in its core doctrines, to a degree not seen in other faiths. In adopting this strategy, Caird joined other apologists who sought to prove Christianity’s singular amenability, not simply to the evolutionary framework of the science of religion, but to the advance of technology and scientific insight. They did so by emphasizing Christianity’s groundings in historical rather than philosophical claims, thereby making it a religion that welcomed empirical verification. “We have no horror of Biblical criticism; we have no jealousy of geology, or biology, or archaeology, or any other science,” declared Vincent Tymms, council member of the Christian Evidence Society, in its 1889 annual report. “We have convinced ourselves that the Gospels are narratives of facts, that Christ is the central fact of history…[If] these are facts, nothing in the universe...can be at variance with them” (41, qtd. in Johnson 569). Tymms implies that Christianity is suited to the march of history, because its central claims are uniquely available to modern tools of analysis. Dale Johnson observes that this emphasis on Christ’s historicity naturally led to a focus on the history of the Church itself: “With history rather than
logic becoming the most important dogmatic tool in the ‘evidence’ armoury, the evidences of Christianity’s own history — its growth, universality, contributions to progress and civilization, and adaptations to human needs — took on greater force than they had for an earlier generation of apologists” (574). Caird’s celebration of Christ as the prophet of progress is thus reinforced by the empirical verifiability of the Church’s track record, of the Resurrection itself. The Congregationalist minister R.A. Redford in The Christian’s Plea Against Modern Unbelief, published by the Christian Evidence Society, used this argument to highlight the shortcomings of other religions. Confucianism, Islam and Buddhism, he wrote, offer “no evidence of universal adaptation to the wants of men...We can conceive their remaining long, under the gloom of ignorance and a semi-barbaric state; but we cannot conceive their, in any way, being adapted to harmonize with the intellectual, social, and moral progress of the modern world” (462). In speaking of the faith’s unique harmony with “intellectual progress,” Redford answers his booklet’s principal objective: to demonstrate that Christianity “[has] stood the severest examination of the modern Criticism,” as he writes in his defense of the Pauline epistles (380).

In embracing evolutionary progress and modern empirical methods, these progress-minded defenders of faith differentiated themselves from other Victorian Christians: from more conservative contemporaries, still hostile to Darwinian theory and wary of arguments that conceded Christianity’s similarity to other religions; from earlier apologists, whose arguments had rested on stressing the miraculous nature of events in Scripture, rather than construing them

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80 The combined research of religious historians Dale Johnson and James Livingston provides an insightful portrait of late Victorian apologetics. Johnson argues that the Christian Evidence Society, one of the largest apologetic organizations at the time, emblematizes how Christians of the period displayed an “emphasis on the empirical and...insistence on objective certainties in matters of religious truth” (575). Livingston attends to the way that apologists in this period was specifically concerned with the fact of religious diversity; he also concurs that apologists who addressed this issue embraced modern scientific objectivity, “[finding] in the rational developmentalism of Tylor and Frazer... support for their own understanding of a progressive revelation and Christianity as the fulfillment of the developmental process” (271).
as verifiable historical facts; and from midcentury comparative theologians such as Hardwick and Maurice, who had posited Christianity as the telos of world religions, but without the framework of evolutionary progress, which gained steam in the 1860’s. Indeed, as Livingston notes, many of the late Victorian Christians who addressed the subject of religious plurality were not only well versed in the science of religion, but were trained comparativists themselves (268). Perhaps most significantly, in light of Dracula, the apologists of progress also distinguished themselves by the degree of their ecumenicism. Beyond minimizing differences amongst Protestant sects, such defenders of the faith even welcomed Catholics as fellow believers; defining the faith in its most basic terms not only ensured clear distinctions between Christianity and other faiths, but also maximized their portrait of the faith’s world-transforming power.

This becomes clear in an 1899 sermon, published in The Bristol Mercury and delivered at Argyle Hall, an interdenominational group comprised of such “earnest Christian laymen” as the speaker, Walter Bailey. Beginning by assessing Buddha, Confucius and Muhammad, Bailey dismisses all three as spiritually impotent. In particular, Confucius “had no sympathy for progress,” while Islam “has depraved and barbarised civilised nations.” Christianity, in contrast,

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81 Whereas an earlier generation had founded the case for Christianity on the Biblical miracles as signs of Christ’s authority, the newer generation saw this appeal to miracles as a hindrance rather than an aid to belief: Baden Powell, a liberal theologian whose career spanned the first half of the nineteenth century, anticipated this change in thinking when he wrote in 1860, “If miracles were in the estimation of a former age among the chief supports of Christianity, they are at present among the main difficulties, and hindrances to its acceptance” (140, qtd. in Johnson, 571).

82 F.D. Maurice’s work responded to early Victorian research on Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, available through such sources as the Royal Asiatic society and Masonic journals. Maurice’s The Religions of the World and Their Relation to Christianity (1847) posed a contrast between the ethnic and regional particularities that beset other religions, and the transcendent universality of the Christian message. Maurice argues that the “accidents of...life, the climate, (and) the soil of the lands in which they dwell” incorrigibly prevent other religions from accessing the transcendent truths available in Christianity (129).

83 To be sure, the heyday of Victorian anti-Catholicism had passed by the century’s close; nonetheless, amongst the Evangelicals who would have affirmed Bailey’s apologetics, anxieties about Rome continued unabated. Witness an 1895 article in the missions-minded magazine Friendly Companion, “Romanism in Board Schools: A Warning.” (292)
has had triumphant effects in world history, equally attributable to Catholics and Evangelicals. The “spiritual triumphs of Christianity are the most cogent witnesses on its behalf,” Bailey declares, ranging from “the mighty thunderings of Savonarola,” “the soft, silent pictures of Fra Angelica” and the lyrics of “all our best hymns, whether written by Romanists like Faber or Dissenters like Watts,” and then to social reform, where “the love of Christ” not only “broke the fetters of the slave with Clarkson and Wilberforce,” but also “toiled for temperance with Father Matthew.” Christianity, in sum, is “the source of all the heroism and all the saintliness of nineteen centuries.” Tellingly, this celebration gathers in a broad spectrum of Christian belief, from Romanist to Dissenter.  

It is not difficult to see how such grandiose defenses of the faith, replete with sharply drawn battle lines and appeals to heroism and saintliness, might have appealed to Stoker. The product of a strict Protestant upbringing, overseen by his mother Charlotte in Dublin, the epicenter of the Irish Evangelical revival, Stoker carried his convictions into his literary career.  

In a 1908 essay titled “The Censorship of Fiction,” Stoker castigates Britain’s literary world for

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84 Nor is Walter Bailey’s embrace of Catholics an anomaly amongst apologists of this time. W.B. Carpenter, clergyman and theologian best known for being court chaplain to Queen Victoria, was an influential apologist who asserted that Christianity made “resistance to progress…impossible” (120). In *The Permanent Elements of Religion* (1887), Carpenter argues that Christianity, the religion of the future, could advance only at the expense of anti-Catholic prejudices, which obscure focus on Christ with fights over doctrinal purity. “No modern practice is more calculated to promote division in the Church, than the pernicious habit of those sectarian minds, who persistently call every novel custom or medieval revival by the name of Catholic usage” (279).

85 Biographer Paul Murray points out the existence of a document titled “Rules for Domestic Happiness” in the family papers, which “relies heavily on the Bible as a recipe for success in life” (13). Murray also cites Stoker’s childhood Bible, presented to him for his ninth birthday in 1858: “the underlining shows he read it with great care” (27). G.M. The piety of Stoker’s mother was compounded by the fact that an Evangelical revival had swept Ireland’s Protestant community, and Dublin in particular, in the decades prior to Stoker’s birth. Ditchfield notes that the Revival’s heyday lasted from 1770 to 1830, with Ulster undergoing revival in 1859 (94). Moreover, Alan Acheson notes the key role of the Dublin’s Bethesda Chapel, a stronghold of Evangelical teaching, which received the official affirmation of William Magee, Archbishop of Dublin (1822-1831). Acheson also cites yearly “April Meetings in Dublin,” which occurred through the 1830’s; these meetings “brought together Evangelicals throughout Ireland, saw to the business of [Bible literacy and missionary] societies, and inspired the clergy through their Annual Address” (144). The middle-class Protestant milieu of Stoker’s upbringing would have had a particularly close attachment to the Revival and its attendant enthusiasms for the spread of true faith.
forsaking its true spiritual calling. Pointing out that the fiction writer follows in the footsteps of Christ himself, whose parables indicate an embrace of “[fiction] as as method or opportunity of carrying great truth," Stoker goes on to lament how far commercially successful British novelists have fallen from Christ’s example. "They in their selfish greed tried to deprave where others had striven to elevate. In the language of the pulpit, 'they have crucified Christ afresh." (485). For Stoker, nothing less than the future of British letters depended on a revival of truly Christian storytelling. Stoker’s upbringing as a specifically middle-class Protestant, surrounded by Catholicism and shielded from the most vituperative of Ascendancy anti-Papism, also would have primed him for ecumenical appeals to pan-Christian solidarity: as Murray points out, Stoker shared a similar background as his friend, collaborator and employer Henry Irving, whose Methodist convictions did not deter him from keeping a crucifix at his bedside (20). As we shall see, however, upbringing alone does not account for the theological catholicity (but not, strictly speaking, Catholicism) of the beliefs and practices sanctified by Dracula’s holy warriors; nor does it account for the way that such sanctification echoes the rhetoric of Christians waging their own battle against the seductions of Eastern mysticism.

*Dracula*’s emphasis on Christianity’s palpable efficacy, as well as its demotion of sectarian differences, surface early in the novel, even prior to the introduction of the vampiric threat itself. In Jonathan Harker’s reaction to the crucifix that a Transylvanian peasant gifts to

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86 One might also cite the influence of Lady Jane Wilde, Oscar Wilde’s mother, Stoker’s close friend, and author of the popular *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland* (1887). Murray notes that, in the 1880’s, Wilde gave public lectures on parallels between Irish and Transylvanian legends (195). Born into a wealthy Irish Protestant family, Wilde nonetheless wrote sympathetically of the role Catholic objects played in popular ritual, not only recounting the power that locals ascribed to them, but depicting them as poetic features of rural devotional life. “Scenes of holy faith, tender love, and human pity are...frequent amongst the devotees at the holy wells of Ireland...At these sacred places may be seen [women] going the rounds on their bare knees, with the crucifix in their clasped hands and their eyes raised to heaven in silent prayer...who can say but that the fervor of the supplication has often brought down the blessing of healing for the sick, or comfort for the sorrowing?” (252)
him. Harker writes, “I did not know what to do, for, as an English Churchman, I have been taught to regard such things as in some measure idolatrous” (24, ch.1). Yet his unease shortly gives way to relief: when the object seems to hold the Count in check — “it made an instant change in him, for the fury passed so quickly that I could hardly believe that it was ever there” (61, ch. 2) — his opinion begins to change. Though he speculates that the crucifix works because it conjures “memories of sympathy and comfort,” he feels no immediate need to explain its influence: “Some time, if it may be, I must examine this matter and try to make up my mind about it” (ibid). Ultimately what matters is simply that the crucifix works; the question of why it works can wait for another day.

Later in the novel, the crucifix’s anti-vampiric properties prove so effective that even Dr. Seward, self proclaimed skeptic, admits to feeling “a mighty power fly along (his) arm” when he wields it against the Count (418, ch. 23). Noelle Cowles has persuasively argued that the hunters’ gradual acceptance of the crucifix may signal Stoker’s sympathy to High Church ritualists within the Church of England, who advocated the use of crucifixes in worship over the objections of Low and Broad Church factions (248). Eventually, however, the hunters must accommodate beliefs and practices even less palatable to Protestant sensibilities than Van Helsing’s crucifix. After Dracula establishes a psychic link with Mina late in the novel, the good Christian soldiers resort to methods evocative of both spiritualist and occultist technique. Hypnotizing Mina, Van Helsing periodically sends her soul to Dracula in a kind of astral projection, gaining information about his whereabouts via Mina’s medium-like transmissions. Yet Van Helsing quickly defuses potential charges of divination by reminding us of his holy

87 The Tractarian Edward Pusey made just such an argument in an 1881 letter to the Anglican Bishop of London; arguing for the crucifix’s amenability to Protestant sensibilities, he compares it to “the picture of one loved but absent” (Notes and Questions, 240)).
purpose; unlike Dracula, “we...are not selfish, and we believe that God is with us through all this blackness, and these many dark hours” (459, ch. 25). Similarly, the “holy circle” that Van Helsing draws around Mina to protect her from the seductions of Dracula’s brides, though drawn with the Eucharistic Host, seems more like something from a medieval *grimoire* than from a book of Catholic ritual, demarcating a magic space of protection. In these episodes, the “spiritual triumph” of Christianity appears indebted to practices antithetical to the foundations of the faith.

While some may view the hunters’ simultaneous affirmation of Christian piety and pagan superstition as a sign of ideological incoherence, it would be improbable if Stoker had not reflected, at some point, on how to reconcile the new occult meta-religions with the devout orthodoxy of his upbringing. In addition to harboring a fascination with Catholicism, Stoker was a rumored member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and evidenced interest in occult and spiritualist circles throughout his career. Such interests doubtlessly influenced Van Helsing’s heterodox practices. Yet Van Helsing’s strategy also offers much for the apologists of the period to admire: Christianity’s supremacy is proven not by its absolute difference from esoteric belief and practice, but by its capacity to gather in their worthier contributions and realize their purpose in Christ. Van Helsing underscores this rapprochement when he explains to Seward his openness to superstition and science alike: “We shall have an open mind, and not let

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88 Indeed, various critics have commented on the ways that even Van Helsing’s “scientific” strategies for defeating the Count assume the tinge of pagan enchantment. Kelly Hurley points out that “both Seward and the reader are trained into an understanding of the permeable boundaries between science and occultism” (19); responding to Hurley’s analysis, Phillip Holden argues that “science and occultism [in *Dracula*] are not so much two territories but two congruent shapes, laid on top of each other, sharing a perimeter and many common points of contact” (472). Meanwhile, Elisabeth Wadge draws our attention to Van Helsing’s commonalities with psychical researchers, “spiritualism’s legitimate sibling, born on the right side of the intellectual blankets” (38).

89 Whether or not Stoker was an actual member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn has never been completely verified. At the very least, we know that Stoker was close friends with such members of the Order as J. W. Brodie-Innes, who dedicated his occult novel *The Devil’s Mistress* to him, and Constance Wilde, Oscar Wilde’s wife, who joined the Order after leaving Madame Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society (Belford 213, 216).
a little bit of truth check the rush of a big truth, like a small rock does a railway truck. We get the small truth first. Good! We keep him, and we value him; but all the same we must not let him think himself all the truth in the universe” (281, ch. 14). Van Helsing’s hallowing of hypnotism, astral projection, and superstition would, in these terms, seem to posit Christian orthodoxy as a “small truth” that must make way for the “big truth” of other epistemes, insinuating the former’s displacement by the latter. But have a little faith: the scene in which Van Helsing secures the sacred pledge of his colleagues assures the pious reader which truth remains biggest. If they fail to subdue Dracula, Van Helsing warns, “We [will] go on for all time abhorred by all, a blot on the face of God's sunshine, an arrow in the side of Him who died for man. But we are face to face with duty, and in such case must we shrink?” (337, ch. 18). Van Helsing reminds his listeners that Christianity rests on the Crucifixion, that historical fact championed by Papist and Dissenter alike; they accordingly pledge their allegiance by laying hands on the crucifix, an object, having proven its usefulness to the cause, that emblematizes the Christian stress on practical action. Rather than suggesting a covert defense of Catholicism, as some critics have suggested, the scene thus seems closer to Walter Bailey’s ode to “the source of all the heroism and all the saintliness of nineteen centuries.” Armed with crucifixes symbolic of pan-Christian heroism rather than Romish idolatry, Dracula’s heroes can now attach sacred import to both the scientific and pagan methods on which Van Helsing stakes his ground (not to mention his prey).⁹⁰ Hence, immediately after the pledge, Van Helsing declares, “We have on our side power of combination...we have sources of science; we are free to act and think” (337, ch. 18); later, Van Helsing clarifies that the “power of combination” also requires embracing the superstitions that account for the vampire’s strengths and weaknesses. “To superstition we must trust at first; it was man’s faith in the early, and it have its root in faith still” (441, ch. 24). In this

⁹⁰ One must forgive me: there had to be a “staking” pun somewhere in this chapter.
familiar evolutionary view, superstition finds its telos under the banner of the cross. Christianity in Dracula begins to look rather like the religion touted by theologian Stewart Salmond, in an 1899 article titled “Non-Christian Religions and Christianity”: a religion that “does embrace within itself all that the soul of man, through the long years of its history, has yearned for. And what it embraces it clarifies, illumines, and redirects anew” (6).

Van Helsing’s open mind, his conjunction of basic Christian faith in “Him who died for man” and those strategic powers of combination, thus maps precisely onto the apologetics of progress, reproducing its emphasis on ecumenicism, tangible action, and Christianity’s perfection of its superstitious antecedents. Van Helsing’s model of belief also intimates the singular compatibility between Christianity and modernity — in R.A. Redford’s terms, its suitability to the “progress of the modern world.” Indeed, as Patricia McKee has argued, Van Helsing’s coordination between “big” and “small” truths can be read in light of late nineteenth century economic developments. Occupying what McKee calls “the position of the modern citizen under capitalism,” Van Helsing proposes a strategic investment and withdrawal of belief, typical of an age when the rise of financial speculation depended on the mobility of capital (46-48). Writes McKee, “In their detachment and mobility, [Dracula’s] characters personify the movements and uses of capital as they enter speculatively into representations of different cultures” (47). To borrow a phrase from Jonathan Harker, the speculative logic of Van Helsing’s instrumentalist theology is “nineteenth century up-to-date with a vengeance,” befitting a religion uniquely suited to history’s flux. This mode of faith generates a return on investment: a positive result as empirically verifiable as the mighty power of the crucifix, beating back the advance of Eastern spirituality and turning modern skeptics into modern believers.

II. Beyond Apologetics: Dracula as Christian Hero and the Gothic Cusp
We have seen how the vampire hunters’ privileging of practical results and adaptable methods, visible in the catholic (though not Catholic) use of crucifixes, occult procedures, and empiricist investigation, consolidates the allegiance between Christianity and modernity foundational to late Victorian apologetics. If, as Stoker once declared, “nothing is eternal but Truth and Progress,” it is unsurprising that Dracula should reproduce arguments that venerate Christianity as the consummation of religion’s long evolution, the one religion best adapted to civilizational development.91 As Christopher Herbert notes, this makes Dracula an anomaly in an age of novels that usually counterpose the two (Herbert, 102); for him, the allegiance between Christianity and modernity faces off against “Dracula…[who] is superstition itself, come fantastically to life” (101). Herbert thus pitches Dracula as the incarnation of the “totemic protoreligion” that comparativist scholars Robertson Smith named as predecessor to Judaism’s religion of ethical consciousness (103). As I have argued above, the strain of religious devotion that Dracula brings to London may be at least as evocative of the Eastern-inflected creeds that captured the public’s interest.

Yet Dracula represents still another form of menace to Victorian believers, one that prevents us from reading the text as a work of Christian apologetics. Significantly, Stoker withholds this new information until late in the novel, after the critical scene, in chapter 21, when Dracula assaults Mina, bites her, and catalyzes her slow transformation into a vampire, a transformation that can only be halted by finding Dracula and annihilating him. As he theorizes about Dracula’s next move, Van Helsing contrasts the hunters’ “power of combination” with the

91 In an 1872 address to the College Historical Society of Trinity College Dublin, Stoker expressed the conviction that “nothing is eternal but Truth and Progress. These are abiding principles which no force can stem or stay” (“Address,” 32). Chris Morash notes that Stoker’s preoccupation with Progress would subsequently pervade both his fictional and journalistic prose, surfacing as a “complex and fraught dialectic...between a frantic endorsement of progress as a natural law of social development, and its dark alternative, atavism, barbarism, chaos” (100).
limitations of their nemesis, he does so not by associating Dracula with totemism or Eastern mysticism, but by acknowledging Dracula’s past as a medieval Christian warrior. Stressing that Dracula lacks precisely the lateral mode of thinking that can accommodate multiple options, due to his primitive “child brain,” Van Helsing points to the fact that Dracula’s only strategy to protect his homeland was to cross over into Turkish territory “again and again,” at tremendous cost of life (433, ch. 24). This recalls Dracula’s veiled boast to Harker that he singlehandedly defended the Eastern borders of Christian Europe: “When was redeemed that great shame of my nation, the shame of Cassova, when the flags of the Wallach and the Magyar went down beneath the Crescent? Who was it but one of my own race who...beat the Turk on his own ground?” (67, ch. 3). Seen in this light, Van Helsing’s vaunted “power of combination,” visible in the arrangement between Christianity’s big truth and superstition’s small truth, takes on added significance: it marks the distance between modern Christianity and its past, when the defense of Christendom depended on primitive single-mindedness.

Despite Van Helsing’s diagnosis, Dracula defies easy categorization as a medieval soldier left behind in Christianity’s march to the future. While scholars have debated Dracula’s resemblance to Vlad the Impaler, the fifteenth century Wallachian ruler who did cross the Danube to fight Turkish armies, it seems clear that Stoker embellished the legend, particularly by playing up Dracula’s erudition. As Van Helsing himself concedes in the aftermath of the attack on Mina, Dracula was also an “alchemist...the highest development of the science-knowledge of his time” (413, ch. 23, italics added), and possessed “a mighty brain, a learning beyond compare” (ibid). It was precisely this thirst for knowledge that led him to the Scholomance, a school in the mountains where initiates learned the mysteries of nature from the Devil himself, “[who] claims the tenth scholar as his due” (342, ch. 18). Presumably Satan’s tenth scholar, Dracula thus
proved “there was no branch of knowledge of his time that he did not essay” (413, ch. 23). His quest for knowledge, which began during his career as a Christian soldier, culminates in a Faustian pact with the Devil.

Dracula’s conjoint status as Eastern Antichrist and erudite Christian warrior means that the text cannot perform a reassuring exorcism of Britain’s religious Others. Nor can it simply offer another example of Stoker’s tendency to cast Christianity as a beleaguered standard of purity in a universe beset by Satanic evil. For, as Phyllis Roth argues, Stoker’s fiction continually offers variations on a “preternatural Pilgrim’s Progress,” in which “the rational Christian hero exorcises vampires, a centuries’ old white worm, and an Egyptian queen, destroying lustful Turkish heathens, malevolent usurers and Spaniards, and dissolute hypnotists, while reclaiming the truly penitent” (128). Dracula both recapitulates and resists this narrative structure: the enemy of the rational Christian heroes was himself once a rational Christian hero, who used his combination of cunning and military prowess to beat back the Turk. Such ironic mirroring also revises the Gothic quarrel with history, defined by Robert Miles, in his study of Ann Radcliffe, as the “Gothic cusp”: a moment defined by the “supercession of the feudal by the modern” (167), in which tradition and enlightenment, respectively incarnated by older and younger generations, must contend with each other. Though Dracula retains the conflict between modernity and history, it eschews the conflation of the past with reactionary ignorance. Instead, it offers us an enlightened Christianity that struggles to define itself against both its Eastern competitors, visible in Dracula, and its past medieval incarnation, also visible in Dracula.

92 Robert Mighall argues that this struggle between past and present usually preserves a distinctively theological dimension, since the Gothic keeps alive a Whiggish mode of historiography that casts Protestantism as forward-looking, Catholicism as reactionary. “That the virtuous [modern-minded] characters in Gothic romances are also honorary Protestants is also an important part of Gothic convention” (Mighall, 12). The Catholic-Protestant divide, then, is another aspect of the Gothic cusp that Dracula revises.
Put another way, the terror that confronts our heroes proceeds, in part, from the implications of the history that confronts them in Dracula: the prospect that Christian faith might eventually “progress” backwards into its putative evolutionary antecedent, the seductions of Eastern mysticism. And indeed, as the hunters race to prevent Mina from falling prey to vampirism in the novel’s final section, the protagonists’ religion of progress comes to function not as the sign of their difference from their nemesis, but the sign of their resemblance to him. To be sure, on one level, this section neatly marries apologetic arguments to the ideological premises of New Imperialism, illustrating the colonial vocation of a Christianity adapted to modernity. As Phillip Curtin has pointed out, by the late nineteenth century enthusiasm for conversion declined as racist theories enjoyed increased intellectual legitimacy. For many missionaries, believing in Christianity as a religion of progress meant accepting science’s implications for conversion amongst the heathen: unequal evolutionary development had produced races possibly incapable of attaining salvation. Stewardship of these races, not conversion, thus became the task of a church keeping up with the latest in scientific theory. With perdition literally flowing in her veins, the infected Mina thus occupies the position of Kipling’s “sullen peoples/Half-devil and half-child,” whose spiritual depravity, legible in their very biological makeup, require the paternalism of a modern Christian nation. When Van Helsing

93 “Few [now] believed that any ‘lower race’ could reach the heights of Western achievement. Their salvation would have to be reached in some other way; but meanwhile they were entitled, in their inferiority, to the paternal protection of a Western power” (Curtin 415).

protectively touches a Sacred Wafer to Mina’s forehead, the resulting burn functions as a sign
that “the Almighty shuns (her) polluted flesh” (406, ch. 22). All of Mina’s virtue cannot return
her into God’s favor, for as Seward observes, “so far as symbols went, she with all her goodness
and purity and faith, was outcast from God” (420, ch 23). In spite of Mina’s virtues, her spiritual
inferiority is thus embedded in her flesh. For her part, Mina enthusiastically embraces the
subordinate position in which the Hunters consequently place her, pleading that Jonathan refrain
from informing her of their plans and, ultimately, requiring the hunters to kill her, should her
vampirism become irremediable. An outcast whose body bears evidence of her damnation, and
who charges her unblemished male superiors to keep her in ignorance, steward her soul and, if
necessary, destroy her polluted body: Kipling himself could not have asked for a more compliant
personification of the white man’s burden.  

Yet even as Mina’s plot thread offers a fantasy of colonial stewardship, one whose
theological underpinnings implicitly reaffirm Christianity’s hospitality to scientific advance, it
also underscores the parallel between the hunters’ mission and the designs of their enemy.
Suddenly aware that she may share Dracula’s fate, Mina insists, “That poor soul who has
wrought all this misery is the saddest case of all. Just think what will his joy be when he, too, is
destroyed in his worser part that his better part may have spiritual immortality” (421, ch. 23).
Pity for one’s enemies, however redolent of the Beatitudes, hardly serves as a compelling
motivation for the task at hand; vengeance is a more suitable emotion. Not satisfied with

95 Mina’s subjection rehearses what has been recognized as a persistent trope in Victorian discourse, the
metaphorical yoke between white women and people of other races. As Susan Meyer argues in Imperialism at
Home, novelists such as Emily Bronte and George Eliot use race as a metaphor to focalize the white woman’s sense
of oppression at the hands of men; however, “the yoking of the two terms of this recurrent metaphor, ‘white woman
and ‘dark race,’ produces some suggestion in the text of the exploited or vulnerable situation of the people invoked”
(23). Hence, if race metaphorizes female subjectivity, so too can white women metaphorize the colonial subject (as
Meyer suggests takes place in Wuthering Heights, when Catherine Earnshaw collapses her dark-skinned lover into
herself with the declaration, “I am Heathcliff”). The doomed Lucy Westenra, whose infected body calls for outright
interventionist violence in the name of Christian duty, arguably also occupies a position similar to Mina’s.
destroying Dracula’s “worser part,” Jonathan declares, “If...I could send his soul forever and ever
to burning hell I would do it!” (ibid). Here, Harker reminds us of Dracula, who, under the
banner of Christian imagery, carries out his own mission of vengeance, at the expense of his own
soul and that of his foes: “My revenge is just begun! I spread it over centuries, and time is on my
side” (418, ch. 23).

Indeed, as the novel barrels toward the final confrontation on Transylvanian soil, the
quest to defeat this spectre of medieval Christianity only enmeshes our heroes ever more deeply
in his history. Witness Van Helsing’s speech, late in the novel, in which he explains why the
hunters must follow their quarry to his native land: “That the world, and men for whom His Son
die, will not be given over to monsters, whose very existence would defame Him. He have
allowed us to redeem one soul already, and we go out as the old knights of the Cross to redeem
more. Like them we shall travel towards the sunrise" (433, ch. 24). Once more, Van Helsing
frames the mission in the language of Christian duty, defending and reproducing Christ’s
sacrifice. Yet here, he explicitly ties vampire hunting to the valor of the “old Knights of the
Cross,” an allusion that recalls Dracula’s own campaign across the Danube.

Seven years later, the hunters are compelled to retrace this eastward journey. The
epilogue finds them returning to Transylvania, traversing what Harker calls “the old ground
which was, and is, so full of terrible memories” (499, ch. 27). The equivocation expressed by
‘was and is’ makes sense, as a sign of resistance to closure: since a faith defined by empirically
verifiable displays of power threatens to dissolve when such displays become obsolete,
journeying to the old ground becomes a necessary pilgrimage, for in keeping the terrible
memories alive, the hunters also keep the faith. Yet this pilgrimage also provides the final sign
of contiguity between the hunters and their quarry. Compare the scene with Dracula’s account of
his victory over the Turks, which closes with this lament: “The warlike days are over. Blood is too precious a thing in these days of dishonourable peace, and the glories of the great races are as a tale that is told” (67, ch. 3). In elevating tangible action as the ultimate show of piety, the hunters join Dracula in yearning for the glory of warlike days, when the heroism and saintliness of nineteen centuries finds opportunity to bear witness. History is not so easily escaped.

III. Toward Theodicy: Fantastic Hesitation and Two Readings of Providence

I have suggested that Dracula both powerfully aestheticizes the arguments of fin de siecle apologetics and subjects them to profound inversion. Even as Stoker rallies scientific method, Catholic iconography, occult belief and tangible action in the name of Christ, he also plagues that vision with the spectre of history: Dracula depicts the religion of progress as a victim of its own success, as the elevation of empiricism and efficacy at once signals Christianity’s contemporaneity and underscores its contiguity with its enemy. Indeed, in their quest to steward Mina’s unholy body, the hunters both fulfill the duty of a modern Christian empire and follow in the footsteps of Dracula, that Knight of the Old Cross, journeying towards the sunrise.

All of which leads us to ask whether Dracula ends up on the side of James Frazer after all: initially appearing as an illustration of Christianity’s triumph, it would then offer an allegory of its incoherence, its indistinguishability from the religions it seeks to demote. Christopher Herbert has articulated a version of this argument, suggesting that Dracula tacitly locates Christianity’s “ferocious essence” (114) — explicitly embodied in Dracula and his disciple Renfield, unconsciously exhibited by the hunters — in an eroticized fixation with blood-drinking, intimating its affiliation with the atavistic mystery cults Frazer named as its direct predecessors (and, in Freudian terms, its status as a symptom of repressed psychic energies).

While Herbert’s argument adeptly draws connections between Dracula and the blood-drenched
imagery of Methodist hymns about the crucifixion, his skepticism about the difference between the Count who drinks blood and the Christ who offers it leads him to discount the intellectual coherence of Christian theology: “In complexes of supremely charged cultural imagery like the one surrounding blood-drinking in Western spirituality, logical consistency has not much of a role to play” (119). Herbert thus reduces theology to an unsuccessful alibi for pathology, a metaphysical cover for what is, at heart, a purely material phenomenon. Per Todorov, such a reading runs contrary to the spirit of the fantastic, which is premised precisely on destabilizing a materialist episteme by broaching the possibility of the marvelous. While some of Dracula’s uncanny elements invite an allegorical interpretation — Dracula as false Messiah, vampiric Mina as subject race — its status as fantastic text requires us, in the end, to avoid reducing those elements to mere metaphor.

How, then, to account for Dracula’s subversion of apologetics? Here, I want to appropriate Todorov’s concept of fantastic hesitation, which he identifies with any text that “[obliges] the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events described” (33).

Certainly, Dracula begins replete with fantastic hesitation — think of Jonathan Harker, mulling the source of his crucifix’s power — and ends on a note that resists totalizing explanations of the events related. In between, though, its conjoining of empiricism and Christian faith muddies Todorov’s distinction between natural and supernatural explanations, since the hunters must draw on both in order to defeat their foe. Moreover, Dracula’s persistent affirmations of Providence eventually render the natural-supernatural conflict irrelevant, as the existence and sovereignty of a supernatural deity, once his effects in the material world have been established, are never truly placed in doubt. I suggest that Dracula performs a twist on the fantastic
hesitation: though it begins by provoking uncertainty about the relative salience of natural and supernatural explanations, that hesitation gradually morphs into vacillation between conflicting readings of the metaphysics undergirding its marvelous universe. To use another musical analogy — albeit one particular to the twentieth century — tracking this twist requires us to rewind the tape, back to the events surrounding Dracula’s assault on Mina on October 3.

Three days prior to the attack, Mina’s fatalistic October 1 entry belies her steady personality. “It all seems like a horrible tragedy, with fate pressing on relentlessly to some destined end. Everything that one does seems, no matter how right it may be, to bring on the very thing which is most to be deplored” (360, ch. 19). Here, Mina echoes not so much the piety of contemporaneous theologians as the pessimism of Thomas Hardy’s contemporaneous Jude the Obscure (1895). There, Sue Bridehead voices the notion of an inhuman universal principle that surfaces in Mina’s speculations: “There is something external to us which says, 'You shan't!'
First it said, 'You shan't learn!' Then it said, 'You shan't labour!' Now it says, 'You shan't love!'” (255, Part 6, ch. 2). Echoing Sue’s despair, Mina thus raises the suggestion that God may not be setting the hunters up for victory, so much as leading them into a resounding “You shan’t!”, an expression of that anti-human “something” that reduces Sue to defeat. We might dismiss Mina’s evocation of Hardy as a momentary lapse of faith, were it not for the fact that her musings are immediately followed by Dracula’s aforementioned apparition as mist, which, in its evocation of Exodus 13:21, images forth the false guidance Christians attributed to the foreign religious masters. Juxtaposed with Mina’s reference to “horrible tragedy,” however, a still darker interpretation of the dream emerges: in appearing as an illusive source of spiritual hope, Dracula embodies the indifferent deity of Mina’s speculation, whose guidance only brings about that which is to be most deplored. Moreover, when Dracula infects Mina shortly thereafter, he seems
to echo her speculations, gloating, “You would help these men to hunt me and frustrate me in my
designs…[yet] whilst they played wits against me…I was countermining them” (396, ch. 21).

Mina’s pessimism is temporarily drowned out in the scenes immediately following the
assault. Van Helsing constantly declares that God has ordained their cause and assured them of
victory, a point that Mina is quick to reaffirm. Jonathan Harker comments upon reading his
journals, “There is something of a guiding purpose manifest throughout, which is comforting.
Mina says that perhaps we are instruments of ultimate good. It may be! I shall try to think as she
does” (428, ch. 24). Such phrasing is at once generic and apropos, insofar as it harmonizes with
the instrumentalist undertones of Van Helsing’s model of belief: just as superstition, occult
practices, and empirical method are useful technologies that find their telos in Christianity, so do
the vampire hunters find their telos in a deity who, given the weight of available evidence, seems
to employ them as instruments of his will.

Nonetheless, Mina’s incipient pessimism resurfaces in Jonathan’s insinuation, on October
30, that God is directly responsible for their misfortunes. When Van Helsing raises the
possibility of fighting Dracula on his native ground, Jonathan exclaims, “‘Oh, my God, what
have we done to have this terror cast upon us!’ and he sank down on the sofa in a collapse of
misery” (473, ch. 26). Epitomizing interpretive vacillation, Harker quickly affirms, “We are in
the hands of God.” Later that night, though, Jonathan writes, “My only comfort is that we are in
the hands of God. Only for that faith it would be easier to die than live, and so be quit of all the
trouble” (476, ch. 26). Jonathan’s ambiguous qualification of his “comfort” suggests that, in fact,
death may be more of a comfort than living with faith in such a God. Amidst the buoyant
invocations of divine protection throughout the novel, Jonathan’s dim faith, combined with a
conspicuous lack of its renewal, is noticeable; it also makes sense of the gloom that underlies his
aforementioned final narration, which recalls Mina’s dread of “horrible tragedy” by hinting at a future resurrection of evil. As mentioned above, Harker’s preoccupation with the “old ground which was, and is...so full of vivid and terrible memories” signifies his complicity in the Count’s yearning for warlike days, but it also brings to mind Van Helsing’s description of Transylvanian soil as a hotbed of “strangeness of the geological and chemical world,” occult physical properties which “found their utmost” in Dracula’s person (432, ch. 24). In light of the fact that Stoker removed the spectacular destruction of Dracula’s castle that concluded the novel’s first draft — not to mention that the hunters breach protocol in dispatching Dracula with Kukri knives, rather than a stake — one cannot help but discern intimations of a threat to come, either in a resurgent Dracula or in some other avatar of the land’s magnetic forces.

*Dracula*’s final epistemological conflict, its ultimate source of affective cross pressures, thus issues not from the hesitation between natural and supernatural, but in the hesitation between two readings of the force that presides over the novel’s world, the ultimate principle that asserts itself in Seward’s mighty crucifix. As the narrative reaches its conclusion, assurances of divinely sponsored victory brush up against suggestions of fate’s complicity with Dracula and God’s direct responsibility for the terrors that befall humanity. Does the latter reading trump the former, or vice versa? The text’s reluctance to offer an answer, its conjuring of past horrors even after Mina receives her salvation, may suggest its kinship not with skeptics such as Frazer, but with a branch of theology rather different from apologetics: theodicy, the attempt to reconcile God’s benevolence with the persistence of evil. Rather than reinscribing the answers of apologetics, *Dracula* broaches the questions of theodicy, by vacillating between affirming its heroes’ faith and haunting them with that faith’s limitations.  

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96 Charlotte Stoker’s written account of the 1832 cholera plague that struck her hometown of Sligo, which Bram procured in 1875, has often been cited as a major influence on *Dracula*. In it, Stoker’s mother recounts how the
vacillation, the “ultimate good” of which Mina considers them instruments might not preclude the “horrible tragedy” she ascribes to fate; as a necessary corollary, the tragedy of Christianity’s inability to escape its history does not, according to the logic of the text, preclude the possibility of providential design. If Dracula harbors an incipient critique of Christian apologetics, that critique thus issues from within a theological framework, not from outside it. Moreover, within the context of this dissertation, that critique highlights the degree to which the dissemination of Other religiosities, even as it provokes retrenchment of Christian conviction, could also provoke a melancholic return to the most primal questions of faith in a suffering world. In other words, Dracula’s extravagant practices suggest that religious pluralization provokes a pluralization within Christianity itself, different ways to maintain faith in a God who shows little interest in lending support to his foremost defenders — who, in fact, governs a historical record showing more sameness than difference between Christianity and its putative Others.

In this light, we would do well to rewind one more time, to Van Helsing’s speech to Seward in Chapter 14. As described above, the speech culminates in his aforementioned distinction between big and small truth, implicitly Christianizing the use of esoteric beliefs and empiricist methods. This affirmation of the apologetics of progress follows a litany of “things which you cannot understand, and yet which are” (276, ch. 14): giant spiders, vampire bats, the vampire itself. Framing this litany as a series of questions beginning with the demand “Do you know all the mystery of life and death?”, Van Helsing clearly appropriates the structure and tone

town “became a place of the dead” (26), in which living victims looked so much like corpses that a local Catholic priest had to stand watch to prevent nurses from “dragging patients down the stairs by their legs...before they were dead” (27). Certainly, the accounts’ description of victims who were neither dead or alive sets a clear precedent for Dracula, originally titled The Un-Dead; as regards Dracula’s theodical undercurrent, however, Charlotte’s account is also striking for its blunt juxtaposition of divine sovereignty and human misery. The account concludes with two sentences whose juxtaposition practically begs the theodical question: returning to Sligo after a temporary escape, Charlotte and her family “found the streets grass-grown and five-eighths of the population dead. We had great reason to thank God who had spared us” (31). Given that Charlotte likely told such stories to Bram as a child, his religious convictions thus developed in tandem with reflections on the problem of suffering.
of God’s monologue at the end of the Book of Job, where God similarly interrogates the titular protagonist with a litany of questions about nature’s mysteries. With this allusion to the book of the Bible most famously concerned with the problem of evil, Stoker both signals theodicy’s pertinence and provokes reflection on Van Helsing’s divergence from Scripture. Unlike Van Helsing’s speech, God’s monologue culminates with the fearsome leviathan, traditionally interpreted as an emblem of chaotic forces that still, somehow, submit to divine authority — an emblem, in other words, of the theodical dilemma. In one sense, Van Helsing may be implying that Dracula is the unnamed leviathan of his litany, the avatar of chaos that “beholdeth all high things…a king over all the children of pride” (Job 41:34, KJV). If so, however, Van Helsing may be saying more than he intends: in the Scripture, the leviathan represents precisely the kind of knowledge unavailable for the empirical analysis or instrumental belief Van Helsing would apply to defeat Dracula. Insofar as Christian typology also specifically identifies the leviathan with Satan, headmaster of the Scholomance, Van Helsing’s allusion casts a further pall over Dracula’s ending, the simultaneous presence and absence of Harker’s “vivid and terrible memories.” Dracula may be dust, but the leviathan persists.
Postscript

To what vantage point has this study of the Victorian fantastic’s extravagant practices brought us? One could begin with history. The texts in this dissertation capture a particular moment in the transformation of Britain’s religious landscape, the moment at which Other Ways of Life became legible to the population of a Christian nation (and, for most, a Christian Empire). Before the foundation of the Buddhist Society of Great Britain and Ireland in 1907 (Beckerlegge 237); before T.S. Eliot’s *shantih, shantih, shantih* installed the Hindu sacred texts alongside Shakespeare and the Bible as voices in a Great Tradition; long before the post-World War II influx of religious minorities, from the former colonies, to Britain (Parsons 1993, Brown 2006) — the Victorians’ dawning recognition of global religiosities impelled many to explore the very edges of the Empire that mediated access to them, and provoked others to bear witness, sometimes with incredulity, to those explorations. Negotiating the claims of old traditions, exploring new formations, formulating meta-religious theories: these processes set the parameters within which the Victorians experienced religious pluralism. Chafing at the borders of what was believable, such experiences called for a literary form that prized sensation and
affect, that prioritized the destabilization of perspective over its careful construction — called for the unreality effect, in short. In the fantastic’s blurring of the boundaries between natural and supernatural, real and unreal, the authors studied in this dissertation found a way to dramatize the tension between hewing to the Christian habitus and venturing beyond it. Itself an “extravagant practice,” the Victorian fantastic captured the embryonic development of a distinctively pluralistic worldview, well before the forms of religious diversity we know today.

On that note, perhaps we might turn from history to form as the lens through which to view the preceding study. It has been my consistent argument that the fantastic cannot be reduced to a reproduction of ideology, a curated fantasy that banishes those disquieting features of reality that trouble its authors (e.g., the disappearance of unknown territory; the humanity of colonial populations). To the contrary, I have argued for the importance of recognizing that the fantastic, quite simply, takes on a life of its own. David Sandner reflects on this quality when recounting the geneses of Lewis Carroll’s The Hunting of the Snark (1876) and J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Hobbit (1937). As Sandner observes, both Carroll and Tolkien claimed that their fantastical works unfolded out of a single sentence that struck them unawares: “For the Snark was a Boojum, you see” (the final line of Carroll’s poem) and “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit” (the first line of Tolkien’s novel). Thus, Sandner writes, “Neither [Carroll nor Tolkien] claims to understand what their sentence means at the moment of arrival...Through the sudden nonsense of these sentences in all their opaqueness and suggestiveness, each author apprehends (without comprehending) another world of meaning — one that includes snarks or hobbits” (Fantastic Literature 2). The authors in this dissertation do not exhibit so neatly uniform a creative process: Rider Haggard wrote She in a “white heat,” over the course of six weeks, guided only by the “vaguest notion” of “an immortal woman inspired by an immortal love”;
Bram Stoker assiduously compiled notes for *Dracula* over the course of seven years (though even Stoker seems to have his flash of inspiration, in the form of a “nightmarish dream after eating too much dressed crab”). Yet what binds all of them together is their commitment to a form *that commands them* as much as it remains subject to their command. As practitioners of the fantastic, then, these authors followed the unreality effect where it guided them, capturing experiences of religious plurality that defied the master narratives — of religion, of nation, of Empire — that would otherwise prevail. Their phenomenological experiments, their improvisations on religious pluralization, emblematize the fantastic’s power to limn the contours of a world in which all convictions, all beliefs, dissolve into contestable points of view.

As such, this dissertation raises the possibility that the fantastic may do for religious pluralization what the realist novel, in George Levine’s estimation, does for modern secular unbelief. Acknowledging the possibility that “Victorian realism…[capitulated] to the dominant ideologies of its time”; bearing in mind “the broad, almost culture wide burst of religious activity” that encomiums to the realist novel have historically obscured; indeed, conceding that many realist authors were themselves “overtly religious and… [attempting] to affirm religion” — with all these qualifiers in mind, Levine nonetheless insists on Victorian realism’s capacity to transcend its historical moment and speak to the way we live now. “Because realist literature puts to the test of narrative the possible cultural responses to [Victorian] ethical and epistemological problems, it pushes…willy-nilly towards a secular, naturalistic understanding of the world” (viii). It may not be too much to say that the fantastic fictions studied here push, willy-nilly, towards a pluralistic understanding of the world: a profound awareness that other humans may inhabit Other universes, submit to Other forces, which could at any point reveal themselves as part of one’s own universe. Such awareness does more than provoke a mere
retrenchment in one’s own Way; it affects, sometimes permanently, the parameters within which one holds to that Way, and raises the question of how to keep the truths one knows while living with the possibility that things could be otherwise.
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