Title of Paper: **Towards a Golden Dawn: Esoteric Christianity and the Development of Nineteenth-Century British Occultism**

Author: James Machin  
Affiliation: Birkbeck, University of London  
Section: Articles  
Date of Publication: August, 2013  
Issue: Volume 1, Number 1

Abstract:

The emphasis often given to the 'turning East' aspect of the *fin-de-siècle* 'occult revival' overlooks the importance of the occidental occult tradition. There was an occidental esoteric tradition operating throughout the nineteenth century which fed directly into the activity of groups like the Golden Dawn, and I argue that this hierarchical and often politically reactionary stream was as influential at the time as the propagation of Buddhist and other Eastern mystical traditions. The 'occult revival' should perhaps therefore be seen, at least in part, as another expression of the wider nineteenth-century project of the reinvigoration of Christianity, rather than of its rejection.

Keywords: Bulwer-Lytton, Occult, Golden Dawn, Crowley, Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, Christianity, Boehme, Eastern mystical traditions, Buddhism

Author Bio:

James Machin is affiliated with Birkbeck, University of London and has research interests in the Fin de Siècle, weird fiction and the occult.

Author email: jmachi01@mail.bbk.ac.uk
The British occult revival of the Fin de Siècle is often regarded as a harbinger of modernism and a conscious attempt at alterity; a co-ordinated rejection of the “exceptionalism of the Christian doctrine” (Burdett 220) and, especially as regards to Madame Blavatsky’s Theosophical movement, a turning towards the “wisdom of the East” for spiritual and philosophical enlightenment otherwise inaccessible to the West (A.N. Wilson 552). Although there is plenty of evidence to support this view – a well-documented example being Annie Besant’s journey from Anglican clergyman’s wife, to atheist, to Buddhist activist in Ceylon - this narrative falls far short of comprehensively accounting for the development of esotericism in the nineteenth century up to and including the appearance in the 1880s of both the Golden Dawn and Blavatsky’s Theosophy. In this essay, I argue that, contrary to the assumed alterity of occult activity in the period, there were firmly entrenched reactionary and orthodox streams in Victorian mysticism. From the publication of Bulwer-Lytton’s Zanoni (1842) to Aleister Crowley’s induction into the Golden Dawn at the tail end of the 1890s, the fin-de-siècle “occult underground” was as much involved in the broader nineteenth-century project of reinvigorating Christianity as it was in “embracing esoteric ideas antithetical to the Christian faith” (Knight and Mason 208). Although the project of Blavatsky’s Theosophy was one of synthesis of the major world religions and of being a “final arbiter of religious difference”, there was a significant core of occult activity, including that of the Golden Dawn, that continued an uninterrupted occidental tradition that was Christian, conservative and – to varying degrees - politically reactionary (208). After examining the lore surrounding the Rosicrucian Brotherhood in the mid-century, I will investigate its considerable influence on fringe Masonry and Christian theosophy (as opposed to Blavatsky’s Theosophy) and finally attempt to show how these traditions manifested themselves in the conversion narrative of a figure often held to be beyond the pale in terms of his rejection of Christian values and morality: Aleister Crowley. I will begin by examining the role of Zanoni in popularizing the idea of Rosicrucianism, and the subsequent involvement of Alphonse Louis Constant in the synthesis and cross-pollination of the bewilderingly complicated strands of esoteric thought that contributed to late Victorian occultism. However, these streams of ‘reactionary’ esoteric thought have two foundational concepts which persisted from the 1840s to the 1890s. Firstly, they operated within and embraced a Christian paradigm. Secondly, they shared an emphasis on the central importance of hierarchy - organizational, social and celestial - to human spiritual progress.

The notion of the existence of a ‘Rosicrucian Brotherhood’ is generally held to have started with the circulation of several anonymous pamphlets in the early seventeenth century (Butler 71). Framed in a language heavy with alchemical symbolism, this literature posited the existence of a secret society of initiates, possessing hidden spiritual knowledge and travelling the world anonymously, doing good works and healing the sick. Although it was claimed that the order had acquired its name from its alleged founder, a Christian Rosenkreuz, the Rose and the Cross as symbols had occult resonances that would have been clear to anyone familiar with hermetic tradition (Silberer 173-208). Regardless of the authentic historical existence of such an organization, the potency of the narrative ensured its survival as such. By the 1840s, the Rosicrucians had become so obscured in a fog of rumour and wilful
mythologizing that it was acknowledged by one writer that nobody “now-a-days
pretends to [understand] the mystery of the Rosicrucian Order” (“The Literary
Examiner” 132).

As someone whose “study of occult subjects was serious and discriminating”,
it is hardly surprising that Lord Bulwer-Lytton should have been attracted to the idea
of the existence of such a secret society as a fecund subject matter for a novel of
supernatural romance (Victor Bulwer-Lytton 40). Aside from being a high-profile and
active politician, Bulwer-Lytton was by the 1840s a “hugely popular” and successful
author (Tomalin xxvii). Upon its publication, Zanoni was reviewed positively and
sold well, indicating that the notion of a secret occult society operating under the
name ‘Rosicrucian’ would perhaps have been widely discussed by the reading public
during that decade at least; Zanoni includes mention of the Rosicrucians both in its
introduction (a fiction disguised as non-fiction in order to enhance the esoteric
suggestiveness of the whole) and several times throughout the text. It is suggested that
the eponymous Zanoni, as well as his master (the even more mysterious Mejnour), are
both initiates in the ageless sect which gave rise to the Brotherhood of the Rosy
Cross. This sect is sometimes alluded to as Chaldean, evoking the historical Chaldean
oracles and theurgist practices discussed by the Neoplatonists. The 1790s-set novel is
essentially a Bildungsroman of the young Englishman, Glyndon, relating his occult
education at the hands of first the powerfully charismatic and vigorous Zanoni, and
then the inscrutable and passionless Mejnour, and his subsequent efforts to escape a
doom he brings upon himself through spiritual failure: his haunting by the terrible
Dweller of the Threshold.

Bulwer-Lytton uses this narrative to repeatedly espouse a range of his own
ideas and prejudices, and regularly interrupts the diegesis to make such expositions in
a clearly authorial voice. The novel’s historical setting of Europe on the cusp of the
French Revolution allows Bulwer-Lytton to use the excesses of the Terror as a stark
warning to those who would seek to undermine one of these hierarchical precepts of a
Neoplatonist-influenced Christianity, and perhaps by implication, also to those who
would steer Britain further down the path of reform. When a group of aristocratic
idealists discuss the forthcoming emancipation of mankind in a Paris salon, they are
sternly cautioned that, “It is in the names of Liberty and Brotherhood that the prisons
will reek, and the headsman be glutted” (Edward Bulwer-Lytton 46). It is explicitly
indicated that the precipitation of this imminent disaster will be caused by
enlightenment philosophy: “All the while, oh great philosophers, your murderers will
have no word but philosophy on their lips!” (46-47). This notion of the Terror as a
 perversion of philosophy and a direct result of the atheist humanism, and specifically
egalitarianism, of the Philosophes, is one returned to by Bulwer-Lytton throughout the
novel. At one point Zanoni rages, “Level all conditions to-day, and you only smooth
away all obstacles to tyranny to-morrow. A nation that aspires to equality is unfit for
freedom” (102). Although the shadow of the Reform Act looms heavy over sentences
such as these, Bulwer-Lytton looks to celestial ‘truths’ to support his political agenda
(102):

Throughout all creation, from the archangel to the worm, from Olympus to the
pebble, from the radiant and completed planet to the nebula that hardens
Social equality is critiqued by Bulwer-Lytton as being not only a threat to society, but a crime against the laws of nature itself. Such sentiments clearly had resonances for at least one contemporary reviewer, who praised Zanoni for its exposure of “the absurdity that is found in all notions of equality” (“The Literary Examiner” 132).

Bulwer-Lytton positions Zanoni and Mejnour as guardians of this neoplatonist hierarchical view of the universe and therefore caretakers of humanity’s future. From the outset he also places this philosophy in a firmly Christian paradigm. In the introduction, Glyndon says of the Rosicrucian fraternity to which Zanoni and Mejnour belong that “no monastic order is more severe in the practice of moral precepts, or more ardent in Christian faith” (Edward Bulwer-Lytton 11). Bulwer-Lytton repeatedly attempts to distance the spiritual practices of Zanoni and Mejnour from accusations of witchcraft or diabolism (103):

Magic! And what is magic? When the traveller beholds in Peria the ruins of palaces and temples, the ignorant inhabitants inform him they were the work of magicians! What is beyond their own power, the vulgar cannot comprehend to be lawfully in the power of others.

In Zanoni, ‘magic’ is repositioned as frontier science: “The microscope shows you the creatures on the leaf; no mechanical tube is yet invented to discover the nobler and more gifted things that hover in the illimitable air” (226). For Bulwer-Lytton, the ‘supernatural’ is the unexplained natural: “Man cannot contradict the Laws of Nature. But are all the Laws of Nature yet discovered?” (93). Bulwer-Lytton positions the Neoplatonist Christianity practiced by the Rosicrucian brotherhood as both irreducible to contemporary scientific materialism, but potentially explainable given adequate advances are made in scientific knowledge. The sylphs of the air that Mejnour suggests inhabit all space, just as micro-organisms inhabit even the smallest drop of water, wouldn’t be classed as supernatural entities given the equivalent of a microscope to view them. The astonishing feats of healing produced by Zanoni are perfectly explicable given sufficient knowledge of the herbal medicine he practices. In explicitly rejecting supernaturalism and superstition, Bulwer-Lytton argues for Rosicrucian esotericism as a sacred science rather than diabolism.

It is hardly surprising that a ‘Rosicrucian’ novel from such a prominent literary and political figure of the period should attract the attention of seekers after occult wisdom, and subsequent to Zanoni’s publication, Bulwer-Lytton indeed became a figurehead, voluntary or otherwise, for occult interests in both Britain and the Continent. There are therefore at least two direct threads one can trace between Bulwer-Lytton’s brand of neoplatonist Christianity and the Golden Dawn. The first is through what is sometimes called ‘fringe’ Masonry - the attempt by some Masons to steer Freemasonry away from its ostensibly secular orthodoxy into areas thick with occult significance and ritual. The second is through the career and influence of French occultist Alphonse Louis Constant, hereafter referred to under his pen name Eliphas Lévi.
In his 1856 work *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, Lévi makes the claim that he visited Bulwer-Lytton in London in 1853 and performed, at Bulwer-Lytton’s request, a ritual to evoke the spirit of Apollonius of Tyana (McIntosh, *Eliphas* 102-104). Although there doesn’t seem to be any evidence from Bulwer-Lytton himself corroborating this story, there is little doubt that the two were acquainted and presumably discussed and exchanged ideas on hermetic philosophy. At least two recent writers on Victorian occultism have suggested that the assumption that it was the Zanoni-like figure of Lévi initiating Bulwer-Lytton into occult mystery is an incorrect one, and that it was more likely that the Frenchman was influenced and inspired by the considerable erudition of Bulwer-Lytton in these areas (Butler 176; Godwin 196). The similarities between Lévi’s account of the Apollonius of Tyana episode, and Bulwer-Lytton’s introduction to *Zanoni*, where he also mentions Apollonius of Tyana, provide some evidence (admittedly circumstantial) to support this position. Writing in the late 1850s, Lévi claims that in 1854, while in London, he was approached by “a lady in black, whose bonnet was covered with a very thick veil”, who reveals that she is ‘a friend of Sir Bulwer Lytton, who has seen you, and knows that experiments have been requested of you’ (McIntosh 102). Lévi is furnished with the magical ‘cabinet’ and ritual equipment necessary for him to perform an evocation of “the phantom of the Divine Apollonius and interrogate him as to two secrets, of which one concerned [himself] and the other interested this lady. She had at first intended to assist at the evocation, with an intimate friend”. This ‘intimate friend’ is usually taken to mean Bulwer-Lytton himself (102). In the introduction to *Zanoni*, the protagonist meets the Rosicrucian “stranger” (later revealed to be Glyndon himself, but presented as the author of the text) on Highgate Hill “mounted on a black pony […and before him trotting…] his dog, which was black also” (Bulwer Lytton 9). In their subsequent conversation, they discuss Apollonius of Tyana and quarrel over whether or not he was an “imposter” (11). *Zanoni* was published in a French edition at least as early as 1858, so despite the fact that Lévi apparently spoke no English and considering the subject matter and his acquaintance with its author, it seems unlikely that Lévi wouldn’t have read the novel. It therefore seems that the parallels between the two narratives cast not only doubt on the sincerity of Lévi’s claim, but perhaps reveal the level of influence that Bulwer-Lytton’s *Zanoni* had on Lévi. Regardless of the intended authenticity of Lévi’s account of his occult adventures with Bulwer-Lytton, the later influence of Lévi on British esotericism was considerable, and his association with Bulwer-Lytton was soon co-opted into a mythology that considerably enhanced the occult mystique of both men, whether sought after or otherwise.

In his *Modern Ritual Magic*, Francis King quotes at length from an account written by Kenneth R. H. Mackenzie of his audience with Eliphas Lévi in 1873. Mackenzie was a precocious man of letters, keen Mason and an energetic player in the development of the Golden Dawn (King 28). Mackenzie’s description of his encounter with Lévi reveals a striking similarity between Lévi’s (as interpreted by McKenzie) and Bulwer-Lytton’s (as expressed in *Zanoni*) understanding of the hermetic endeavour (qtd. in King 29):
Magic is not necromanteia – a raising of the dead material substances endowed with an imagined life – but a psychological branch of science, dealing with the sympathetic effects of stones, drugs, herbs, and living substances upon the imaginative and reflective faculties – and leading to ever new glimpses of the world around us, ranking in due order of phenomena, and illustrating the beneficence of The Great Architect of the Universe.

This description of the magical arts includes Zanoni and Meijour’s herbalism, ‘magic as science’, a benevolent Christian deity and the ‘ranking’ of phenomena; the celestial hierarchy. According to McKenzie’s account, Lévi is specific in his non-belief in spirits: “I conceive that the soul, upon quitting the body […] ascends to the sphere for which it is destined […] and returns not to earth” (qtd. in McIntosh 120). Discussion of the considerable sophistication of Lévi’s approach to the phenomenology of magic is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay, but the suggestion is clear that his account of the raising of the spirit of Appollonius should be parsed as a knowingly subjective experience rather than an objective one, and that by implication, the entire hermetic endeavour should be treated as such. Similarly, King argues that Golden Dawn members “would not have believed in the world of spirits as an objective reality” and therefore could resist charges of necromancy or ‘black magic’ that might jeopardize the position of the order as the heirs to the Rosicrucian Brotherhood (Butler 51).

Kenneth McKenzie was extremely active in fringe masonry in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and was instrumental in establishing a pseudo-masonic order called the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia (S.R.I.A.). Bulwer-Lytton’s involvement in this British Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross has sometimes been misconstrued, even by his own grandson in his biography of Bulwer-Lytton, where he claims that his grandfather ‘was himself a member of the Society of Rosicrucians and Grand Patron of the Order. As this was a secret Society it is not surprising that among Bulwer’s papers there should be no documents which throw any light on his connection with it nor any mention of it in his correspondence’ (Victor Bulwer-Lytton 41). However, the claim that Bulwer-Lytton was a ‘Grand Patron of the Order’ is possibly based on what could charitably be described as over-enthusiasm on the part of the S.R.I.A., who announced Bulwer-Lytton’s patronage seemingly without his knowledge, and printed an apology upon receiving a letter in December 1872 from Bulwer-Lytton explicitly indicating his lack of consultation on the matter and requesting his name be removed from further association with the group (qtd. in Godwin 228). The matter of both Bulwer-Lytton’s membership and the S.R.I.A.’s authenticity as a ‘genuine’ Rosicrucian order is further obfuscated by the remark made by Bulwer-Lytton in a letter of 1870, where he writes (228):

Some time ago a sect pretending to style itself ‘Rosicrucians’ and arrogating full knowledge of the mysteries of the craft, communicated with me, and in reply I sent them the cipher sign of the ‘Initiate’ – not one of them could construe it.
The date of this letter suggests that he was referring to a different approach than that made by the S.R.I.A. and that there was, therefore, at least one other organization claiming lineage to the Rosicrucians at that time. It also contains the hint that Bulwer-Lytton, knowing the ‘cipher sign of the initiate’, was himself a member of the ‘genuine’ organization. Regardless of the S.R.I.A.’s authenticity, by its very name this fringe masonic group was claiming either a direct or symbolic lineage from Christian Rosenkreuz’s fraternity, and they were therefore by implication a specifically Christian group, emulating Bulwer-Lytton’s description of the Rosicrucians in Zanoni as the paragon of Christian virtue. Writing in 1900, Wyn Westcott, both a member of the S.R.I.A. and a co-founder of the Golden Dawn, described the S.R.I.A. as “essentially a Christian Order” (Godwin 218).

Fringe masonry aside, Christian mysticism was firmly entrenched in other streams of occult activity that also fed into the fin-de-siècle occult ‘revival’. One prominent example of this is Christian theosophy, or Behmenist theosophy. Based on the writing of the German Jacob Boehme, Behmenism was a movement consisting of “respectable, well-educated, relatively prosperous members of an international, middle-class community” (Gibbons 16). Boehme’s allegorical approach to the Bible freed “his followers from obedience to the literal text that had become so vexatious to a scientific era” (Godwin 228). According to Mackenzie’s Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia, Boehme was (Mackenzie 77):

- a famous mystic, and a self-educated and enlightened philosopher, the founder of a school of theosophy since imported into the higher degrees [of Freemasonry]. Probably no man exercised so great an influence in speculative philosophy in comparatively modern times. (See Theosophy.)

Joselyn Godwin positions a circle that met in Kent initiated by James Pierrepont Greaves in the 1840s as the crucible of the British movement in the nineteenth century (Godwin 232). Once again, Eliphas Lévi serves as something of a hub for these spokes of British occult activity. The Reverend Edward Penny, a member of Greaves’s circle, leaves an account of his meeting with Lévi in Paris that, as Godwin suggests, can usefully be compared with the McKenzie account previously discussed (241-243). Penny advocates, among other things, a Behemenist explanation for scriptural miracles that explain them ‘more satisfactorily’ than Lévi’s “purely figurative” approach, and claims that Lévi professed to be “ready to learn” despite not reading either English or German. Penny criticizes Lévi’s “dogma” that “a thing is not just because God wills it, but God wills it because it is just” (qtd. in Godwin 232). They go on to discuss the parallels between the Kabala and Boehme’s theosophy, and Penny ends his account by praising Lévi’s claim “not to be above being taught”, despite his interest in “disgusting works of witchcraft and sorcery”, and that Lévi’s “Grand Oeuvre” of “Magical Science […] approaches very nearly to Boehme’s teaching” (243). Several members of Greaves’s Kent circle went on to become influential figures in fin-de-siècle occultism. Penny’s wife, Anne, wrote for several of the late nineteenth-century spiritualist journals, including Light, continuing to advocate Boehme and Christian theosophy. Mary Anne Atwood, nee South, became a mentor to several prominent theosophists and occultists including women’s rights and
anti-vivisection campaigner Anna Kingsford and Golden Dawn member Isabelle de Steiger.

In 1850, Atwood published her extraordinarily comprehensive exposition of spiritual alchemy, *A Suggestive Inquiry Into Hermetic Mystery*. It was withdrawn from circulation within a year due to both Atwood and her father, Thomas South, getting cold feet about the wisdom of permitting such an explicit exposition of the hermetic mystery to become so easily accessible and presumably open to abuse (Godwin 235). It has been suggested that anyone who “makes a thorough study of the alchemistic literature must be struck with the religious seriousness that prevails in the writings of the more important authors” (Silberer 146). Atwood’s *Suggestive Inquiry* is certainly no exception, emphasizing as it does the centrality of moral regeneration to the alchemical project; indeed, arguing that spiritual refinement *is* the alchemical project (Atwood 59):

>[Far from alchemy] having its origin in the application of a mystical doctrine to physical things, physical Alchemy has been the result and by-product of the original doctrine; an after-growth and to some extent a perversion of it, an adaptation [...] to inorganic material of a principle originally applied exclusively to the spiritual nature of man.’

This ‘hidden’ secret of alchemy has clear parallels in Boehme’s Neoplatonist thesis of study and meditation as the path to spiritual regeneration, elimination of the original sin and mystical unity with God. Thomas South described the *Hermetic Inquiry* as being written in response to times when “the light of Christian Truth is so intirely [sic] eclipsed amongst us, the natural magic ought to be again developed and must be, before we can hope for a restitution of the Divine” (qtd. in Godwin 235). Again, the aim of the hermetic project is pitched by South as a reinvigoration of Christianity rather than as a rejection of it.

As previously suggested, Atwood played a prominent role in the fin-de-siècle occult ‘revival’. In his preface to the German Catholic mystic Karl von Eckartshausen’s *The Cloud Upon the Sanctuary*, Edward Dunning writes (xv):

> Mrs. Atwood’s theories had a profound influence, not only on Isabelle de Steiger, but also upon the entire group of Christian esotericists who gathered round Anna Kingsford and who provided a focus for ‘Theosophists’ of the Boehmenist kind who had become disenchanted with the neo-Buddhist theosophy of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky.

His argument is supported by the dedication by Isabelle de Steiger of her translation of *The Cloud Upon the Sanctuary* to her mentor, ‘M.A.A.’ - Mary Anne Atwood. Dunning goes on to say that “these esotericists saw themselves as mystics rather than occultists and placed an emphasis on their Christian faith” (xv). In *The Perfect Way*, Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland’s influential 1886 thesis on Christian theosophy, the same themes explored by Bulwer-Lytton are again iterated in interchangeably similar language, half a century later, discussing spiritual progress using terms such as ‘the Man Regenerate’ and ‘the recovered Gnosis’, and even
referring to the “Rosicrucian knowledge of the sylphs of the air” in a passage that could have been lifted straight from *Zanoni* (256). Kingsford and Maitland’s central thesis is that “Christian doctrine represents with scientific exactitude the facts of man’s spiritual history” (iv). Politically, Kingsford could hardly be described as reactionary, but her argument here is an example of a recurring reactionary trend in *fin-de-siècle* occultism; that of broadly accepting the argument that universal truths are evident in all religions but *contra* Besant and Blavatsky - insisting that Christianity is the most sophisticated and (at least according to Kingsford and Maitland) *scientifically accurate* method of seeking spiritual gnosis. The Golden Dawn adopted this approach in the tradition of one of its ‘Inner Temples’, the Cromlech Temple, which also took the view that the Christian path to spiritual progress was the superior one. The content of their ritual workings, guided by the ‘Master Jesus’ was a “high, Mystical and authentically Gnostic interpretation of Christianity” (King 134). When not explicitly Rosicrucian and Christian, the Golden Dawn’s rituals were drawn from the Kabala – a mystical tradition long adopted in Europe precisely due to its Judaic origins and subsequent commensurability with Christianity – or ‘Egyptian magic’, which arguably owed far more to the Golden Dawn’s roots in fringe masonry (specifically the ‘Mizraim’ – Hebrew for ‘Egyptian’ - Rite) than MacGregor Mathers’s latest researches amongst the papyri of the British Museum.

One prominent Golden Dawn member whose name is rarely associated with Christianity except by way of contrast is the self-styled ‘Great Beast’ Aleister Crowley. Despite his continuing notoriety, the story of Crowley’s spiritual awakening and induction into the Golden Dawn is arguably one of a Christian struggling with different approaches to Christianity. His early life was shaped by the influence of the Plymouth Brethren, an evangelical sect whose beliefs and practices Crowley regarded as “bigotry” (Crowley 58). According to Crowley, he was raised in a domestic atmosphere “of severe disapproval of the universe in general, and the utter absence of the spirit of life”, and it soured his childhood (58). Despite railing against this regime through general bad beha

*Crowley’s introduction to *fin-de-siècle* occult activity didn’t involve a rejection of the Christian paradigm, but was rather the result of a desire to redefine Christianity in a way more commensurate with his intellectual ambitions and that worked towards spiritual emancipation rather than the repression he had experienced at the hands of the Plymouth Brethren.

Despite the relentless self-mythologizing of Crowley’s autobiography, it is clear that he still regarded himself a Christian while a Cambridge student and aspiring poet: “My reactionary conservatism came into conflict with my anti-Catholicism. A reconciliation was effected by means of what they called the Celtic Church [where] there was no fear of God, but a communion with Him” (121). Influenced by Milton and Huysmans, Crowley also became interested in the nature of evil, and upon reading A.E. Waite’s *The Book of Black Magic and of Pacts*, wrote to its author, who suggested Crowley read *The Cloud Upon the Sanctuary*, then recently translated into English by Isabelle de Steiger, and – as previously mentioned – dedicated to Mary
Anne Atwood. Crowley described his encounter with *The Cloud Upon the Sanctuary* – an exposition of mystical Christian attainment reached through initiation into a ‘Hidden Church’ - as “the most critical moment” of his early life, claiming that he read it “again and again”: “I appealed with the whole of my will to the adepts of the Hidden Church to prepare me as a postulant for their august company” (148). Soon after, while on an Alpine expedition, Crowley discussed with a fellow mountaineer his desire to make contact with the ‘Secret Sanctuary of the Saints’. His colleague offered to introduce Crowley to the occultist George Cecil Jones, who promptly inducted Crowley into the Golden Dawn. As previously suggested, far from an escape from repressive evangelicalism into the decadence of occult diabolism, it is possible to read Crowley’s narrative as one of Christian esoteric discovery. Rather than this journey ending with his initiation into the Golden Dawn, his membership of the group was a seamless continuation of his Christian education. In his biography of Crowley, Colin Wilson writes (165):

> It is interesting to note that when Crowley began to study magic and mysticism, he still found himself haunted by the Christian God; the name can be found on every page of *The Cloud Upon the Sanctuary*, as well as in the *Book of Abra-Melin the Mage* and in the rituals of the Golden Dawn. Crowley must have felt he had escaped from one insidious form of Christianity only to fall victim to another.

However, as I have attempted to illustrate, another possibility is that, contrary to being “haunted” by and “falling victim” to Christianity, Crowley’s adventures in mysticism occurred entirely within a Christian paradigm, and I would suggest that this is a reading more in keeping with Crowley’s own account, as discussed above. At the end of the 1890s, at least, Crowley had found his spiritual emancipation in the form of the Christian theosophical traditions propagated by Greaves’s Kentish circle and shaped by Bulwer-Lytton’s *Zanoni*.

I have attempted to show that by focussing on Blavatsky’s Theosophy, and Besant and others’ undeniably significant exploration and promotion of Eastern mysticism, there is a danger of overlooking the contribution of the occidental esoteric tradition, as represented by Rosicrucianism and Behmenism and manifest in the Golden Dawn’s Christian bias and focus on hierarchy. The Golden Dawn’s accessibility to both men and women, and Theosophy’s project of progress through a synthesis of world religions, can undoubtedly be cited as evidence of a late nineteenth-century movement towards ‘universal brotherhood’, progressive social politics and modernism (A. N. Wilson 550). However, this view fails to take into account the significant part played by an existing occult tradition that was reactionary, explicitly hierarchical and fundamentally Christian. The Golden Dawn, like the fringe masonic groups from which it originated, claimed a lineage to Lévi and Bulwer-Lytton, who were venerated as initiates in a European hermetic tradition.

Bulwer-Lytton, Lévi, Mackenzie, Atwood and Kingsford were unified by their belief in the power of symbolism and imagination in facilitating a Christian gnosis that reveals truths about the universe in a way that is beyond the scope of both scientific materialism and other religions. Despite Crowley’s subsequent career, he at
least began his occult adventure as part of this tradition. It was a spiritual approach that only considered itself supernatural in terms of the limited capacity of contemporary science to penetrate the deeper mysteries of nature. Far from claiming contact with hidden Tibetan masters or seeking satori in India, they all operated within a Christian paradigm, and shared a belief in spiritual development through the operation of an occidental tradition based on a teleological celestial hierarchy.

Notes

1: Neoplatonism is a school of philosophy which “prospered from the third century well into the sixth century CE” and is distinct from Platonism itself (Remes viii). It placed heavy emphasis on “revealing the order of the universe” and postulating strongly hierarchical “levels of being on which different entities and different characteristics appear” (viii). Although in this essay I attempt to demonstrate the influence of this hierarchical aspect of Neoplatonism on nineteenth-century ‘reactionary’ occultism, it should also be readily acknowledged that an interest in Neoplatonism does not in itself indicate a right-leaning, reactionary political persuasion and that “Neoplatonic influences have been found in, among others, the paintings of William Blake and the poetry of Coleridge, Shelley and Yeats” (202).

2: Bulwer-Lytton also argues in this vein against the possibility of the ‘supernatural’ in his ghost story The Haunted and the Haunters: or The House and the Brain (1859).

3: Despite this, Bulwer-Lytton managed to secure a copy for his library at Knebworth (McIntosh, Rosicrucians 125).

Works Cited


Atwood, Mary Anne. A suggestive inquiry into the Hermetic Mystery with a dissertation on the more celebrated of the alchemical philosophers being an attempt towards the recovery of the ancient experiment of Nature. London: Trelawney Saunders, 1850. Print.


