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RESEARCH ARTICLE

De Theosophismo: The Vatican's Response to the Theosophical Society in the Documents of the Holy Office (1915–1919)

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Abstract

On July 16, 1919, the Holy Office issued a decree declaring the teachings of the Theosophical Society incompatible with Catholic doctrine and forbidding the faithful from participating in its activities. Drawing on previously unexamined Vatican archival materials, this article reconstructs the five-year investigation that led to the decree and situates it within a longer institutional experience through which the Church confronted and regulated emerging spiritualities in an era of intense secularization. By analyzing the reports produced by different consultors, the article shows how Theosophy was interpreted through inherited classificatory frameworks shaped by earlier encounters with animal magnetism, Spiritualism, and occultism, and then refracted through the anti-modernist polemics of the early twentieth century. More broadly, the case sheds light on how the Vatican attempted to govern new forms of transnational religiosity that challenged established modes of ecclesiastical authority.

Keywords: theosophy; Holy Office; anti-modernism; catholicism; esotericism

I. Introduction

On July 16, 1919, the Holy Office issued a decree declaring the teachings of the Theosophical Society – by then the most extensive esoteric movement worldwide – incompatible with Catholic doctrine and forbidding the faithful from joining its groups, attending its meetings, or reading its publications.[1] The decision marked the culmination of a five-year inquiry conducted by the Congregation, which gathered extensive reports from ecclesiastical authorities across Europe and overseas. While the final pronouncement was unequivocal, the internal documentation reveals a more intricate process, in which theological evaluations, pastoral anxieties, and demonological speculations coexisted within the same institutional apparatus.

[1]For a general overview of the theological implications of the decree, see Jérôme Rousse-Lacordaire, *Ésotérisme et christianisme: Histoire et enjeux théologiques d'une expatriation* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2007), 203–211.

Drawing on previously unexamined archival materials, this article argues that the inquiry did not arise as an isolated or unprecedented reaction, but should be situated within a longer institutional experience through which the Church had already confronted, interpreted, and sought to regulate a series of modern alternative spiritualities. From animal magnetism to Spiritism and occultism, these movements progressively challenged established forms of ecclesiastical mediation by claiming direct access to invisible forces and by proposing reinterpretations of religious history centered on the notion of an "ancient wisdom." In recent scholarship, such currents are approached through the analytical category of "esotericism," referring to forms of religious knowledge and practice that developed at the margins of normative religion in modern Europe and that, in the period under review, both shaped and were shaped by broader processes of secularization, individualization, and the pluralization of religious experience.[2]

Against this backdrop, the Holy Office also mobilized the category of "modernism" as a polemical and classificatory framework, through which such challenges were rendered intelligible within the conceptual horizons of early twentieth-century Catholic theology. Crucially, as the archival evidence demonstrates, the investigation unfolded on a genuinely global scale, reflecting the Vatican's attempt to govern forms of spiritual pluralism extending far beyond European settings.[3]

II. The Theosophical Society and Christianity

Founded in New York in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), and William Quan Judge (1851–1896), the Theosophical Society emerged as one of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' most influential esoteric movements. By the mid-1910s, it had developed into a global organization, counting nearly 26,000 members and around 1,000 lodges across five continents.[4] From the outset, the Society presented itself as a spiritual association devoted to the comparative study of religions, philosophy, and science, and to the recovery of a perennial wisdom underlying all historical traditions.[5] Central to this project was the conviction that such wisdom could be accessed not only through textual comparison or esoteric modes of

[2]See Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism in Western Culture: Counter-Normativity and Rejected Knowledge* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2025).

[3]On the reconfiguration of Roman authority in this period and the Holy See's efforts to assert itself as a global moral and political actor in the aftermath of the First World War, see Giuliana Chamedes, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade: The Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019). On the Vatican's increasing need, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to govern religious phenomena across imperial, colonial, and transnational spaces, see John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis* (New York: Norton, 2022).

[4]*General Report of the Fortieth Anniversary and Convention of the Theosophical Society 1915* (Adyar, Madras: Theosophical Society, 1916), 7.

[5]On the Theosophical Society and its history, see at least Bruce F. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon: Theosophy and the Emergence of the Western Guru* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993); Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); K. Paul Johnson, *The Masters Revealed: Madame Blavatsky and the Myth of the Great White Lodge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, eds., *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013); Hans Martin Krämer and Julian Strube, eds., *Theosophy Across Boundaries: Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Modern Esoteric Movement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020).

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transmission, but via direct individual experience of invisible spiritual realities. In doing so, it aligned itself with a broader fin-de-siècle occult milieu that, as Alex Owen has emphasized, often presented occultism as a "science," governed by the expectation that specific procedures would yield predictable effects.[6]

Doctrinally, Theosophy combined elements drawn from Hinduism and Buddhism – most notably reincarnation and karma – with Western esoteric notions rooted in Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, and post-Enlightenment occultism. Within this framework, Christianity occupied an ambiguous position. On the one hand, Blavatsky and her followers consistently rejected traditional ecclesiastical authority, portraying the Church as an institution that had distorted Jesus's original message through dogma, particularly a theology of fear based on the ideas of hell and eternal damnation. On the other hand, Christian teachings, symbols, and figures were often reinterpreted esoterically as partial and culturally conditioned expressions of universal spiritual truths. Christ, in particular, was frequently recast not as a unique incarnation of God, but as one among many "initiates" or exemplars of higher stages of spiritual evolution.

This dynamic became particularly visible under the leadership of Annie Besant (1847–1933). Whereas earlier Theosophists had generally limited themselves to positing the existence of a symbolic or inner dimension of Christianity, in *Esoteric Christianity* (1901) Besant historicized this esoteric core by situating it within the life of the early Church itself. Drawing on biblical exegesis and patristic sources, she argued that primitive Christianity had preserved teachings, including doctrines such as reincarnation, reserved for an initiated elite and later obscured by processes of dogmatic and institutional consolidation.[7] Central Christian doctrines were accordingly reinterpreted within a Theosophical framework: Christ was no longer understood as the unique incarnate Son of God, but as a manifestation of a universal Logos, comparable to other salvific figures across religious traditions. Dogma, in turn, appeared as the provisional residue of earlier stages of religious consciousness.

This ambivalent stance helps explain why Theosophy did not present itself, nor was it always perceived, as a clearly demarcated rival religion. The Theosophical Society did not function as a church and did not require formal conversion or the renunciation of existing confessional ties. The circulation of Theosophical concepts thus took place within intellectual, cultural (and sometimes clerical) milieus that remained formally Christian, fostering hybrid forms of belief that escaped ecclesiastical oversight, and at times intersected with broader attempts to rethink Christianity from within.

III. From Animal Magnetism to Modernism: A Genealogy of Vigilance

As noted above, the Vatican's intervention against Theosophy did not emerge in isolation, but developed in continuity with earlier forms of institutional vigilance toward emerging esoteric spiritualities. During the turbulent decades of the Risorgimento,[8] the Roman

[6]Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[7]Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity, or The Lesser Mysteries* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1901). For a general biographical account of Annie Besant, see Anne Taylor, *Annie Besant: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[8]The Risorgimento refers to the nineteenth-century movement that led to the political unification of the Italian peninsula. For the Catholic Church, it coincided with a period of institutional crisis and escalating conflict with the emerging liberal state, culminating in the loss of the Papal States and the capture of Rome

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Curia had already begun to monitor animal magnetism – a medico-philosophical set of practices originating with Franz Anton Mesmer, centered on the manipulation of an invisible magnetic fluid believed to pervade all bodies, and associated with striking somatic and trance-like phenomena – suspected of producing spiritual effects and allowing forms of access to invisible forces that bypassed established modes of ecclesiastical mediation.[9] Similar concerns soon extended to Spiritism, whose doctrine of reincarnation directly conflicted with Catholic eschatology and whose practices of communication with the dead challenged the Church's authority to regulate contact with the preternatural. These anxieties crystallized in the Holy Office's formal condemnation of the works of Allan Kardec, the founder of French Spiritism, in 1864. They resurfaced during the First Vatican Council (1869–1870), when the Council Fathers discussed anti-spiritist measures alongside the broader struggle against "modern errors" and in defense of papal authority.[10]

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, amid the institutional vulnerability that followed the fall of the Papal States, ecclesiastical attention turned toward the emerging occult revival within an atmosphere shaped by anti-Masonic polemics and codified in Leo XIII's *Humanum genus* (1884), which framed Freemasonry and other "secret societies" as expressions of an inherently subversive logic. A particularly revealing episode in this regard was the case of the Société des Sciences Psychiques (SSP), founded in Paris in 1895 by the Catholic priest Ferdinand Brettes as an attempt to reclaim investigative ground increasingly occupied by spiritualist and occult societies.[11] Conceived as an orthodox framework for examining phenomena such as mediumship, hypnotism, and telepathy, the SSP quickly attracted suspicion because of the presence of figures associated with occult currents. When the case reached Rome in 1898, the Holy Office's consultors exposed divergent assessments. Some dismissed occult doctrines as negligible errors, while others warned of the spiritual dangers posed by practices operating at the intersection of obscure natural forces, divine action, and potential demonic intervention. The decision to dissolve the SSP ultimately reflected a shared concern that such initiatives risked legitimizing and disseminating the very practices the Society claimed to combat.[12]

At this stage, Theosophy still occupied an uncertain and marginal place within the Vatican's conceptual map. In the Italian context, however, this situation was rapidly

in 1870. This context contributed to a heightened climate of vigilance toward perceived spiritual and ideological threats.

[9]On the Roman surveillance of animal magnetism and its framing as a religiously problematic practice, see David Armando, "The 19th-Century Debate on Animal Magnetism Viewed from Rome: The Holy Office's Decrees," *Laboratorio dell'ISPF* 19 (2022). https://doi.org/10.12862/Lab22RMD.

[10]See Francesco Baroni, "The Vatican and Spiritualism (1853–1870): New Perspectives Based on Archival Sources," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 46, no. 2 (2025): 477–512; "The First Vatican Council and Spiritualism: Reinventing Demonology in a Secular Age," in *Beyond the Sabbath: Witchcraft and Its Stereotypes in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Daniele Santarelli and Domizia Weber (Turnhout: Brepols, 2026, forthcoming).

[11]Paul Airiau, "Mgr Méric contre le chanoine Brettes: le conflit de 1898 à la Société des Sciences Psychiques," *Politica Hermetica* 12 (1998): 171–204.

[12]"Suprema Sacra Congregatio Sancti Officii. Parisiensis seu 'De Occultismo' ac De Societate 'des Sciences Psychiques' a Rev. D. Canonico Brettes fundata. Relatio et votum Fr. David Fleming O.F.M. Consultoris" (Archive of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, hereafter ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1898, 123); "Suprema Sacra Congregazione del S. Offizio. Sopra la 'Société des Sciences Psychiques' del Canonico Brettes della diocesi di Parigi, come mezzo di combattere l'occultismo. Relazione del P. Giacinto Maria Cormier O.P. Consultore" (ibid.).

shifting. Between the 1890s and the early twentieth century, Theosophy gained increasing visibility in cities such as Milan and Rome, attracting intellectuals, artists, and segments of the liberal Catholic elite.[13] At the time, the Catholic world itself was undergoing internal transformations. In Rome, growing anxieties over doctrinal instability led to the consolidation of an antimodernist program, which took shape during the final years of Leo XIII's pontificate and became more systematic under Pius X. What initially emerged as an attempt to regulate the spread of historical-critical methods in biblical scholarship soon expanded into a broader strategy for policing theological discourse, particularly with regard to the relationship between revelation and faith and the legitimacy of religious experience. Within this framework, the Roman Curia came to rely increasingly on the category of "modernism" as a pivotal classificatory and disciplinary instrument. Codified in the encyclical *Pascendi Dominici gregis* (1907), whose principal author was the French theologian Joseph Lemius (1860–1923), modernism functioned less as a neutral analytical concept than as a polemical marker. This label served to unify disparate forms of perceived religious deviance around a common doctrinal core, defined by *subjectivism* – the primacy of individual religious experience – and the *historicization of dogma*, that is, the interpretation of doctrinal formulations as historically conditioned rather than as immutable expressions of revealed truth. Although recent scholarship has shown that "modernism" scarcely existed as a coherent intellectual movement outside this magisterial construction, the category proved effective in providing a conceptual framework through which new spiritual formations could be interpreted and contained.[14]

From this perspective, Theosophy – already associated with the occult revival from which it had emerged – could also be assimilated to modernism, not because of strict doctrinal identity, but on the basis of perceived "affinities."[15] Such affinities, however, were anything but superficial. They derived not only from Theosophy's emphasis on individual experience and direct access to spiritual realms, but above all from the fact that, since Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled* (1877), many Theosophical authors had explicitly relativized Christian dogma by reinterpreting it through a comparative and evolutionist framework. Religious traditions (including Christianity) were thus presented as historically contingent expressions of a perennial wisdom, while ecclesiastical doctrines were recast as later institutional accretions.[16] From a Roman perspective, this amounted, evidently, to an esoteric version of the concept of "historicizing dogma" condemned in

[13]Marco Pasi, "Theosophy and Anthroposophy in Italy during the First Half of the Twentieth Century," *Theosophical History* 16, no. 2 (2012): 81–119.

[14]On the construction of the category of "modernism," see the fundamental studies by Émile Poulat, *Histoire, dogme et critique dans la crise moderniste* (Paris: Casterman, 1962) and Lorenzo Bedeschi, *Il modernismo italiano: voci e volti* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 1995), as well as Gabriel Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence: A Study in Catholic Modernism and Integralism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), Darrell Jodock, ed., *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Claus Arnold, *Kleine Geschichte des Modernismus* (Freiburg: Herder, 2007). In recent years, Italian historiography on the subject has become particularly rich and influential. See at least Giovanni Sale, *La Civiltà Cattolica nella crisi modernista 1900–1907* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2001); Guido Verucci, *L'eresia del Novecento: La Chiesa e la repressione del modernismo in Italia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2010); Claus Arnold and Giovanni Vian, eds., *La condanna del modernismo: Documenti, interpretazioni, conseguenze* (Rome: Viella, 2010); Annibale Zambarbieri, *Modernismo e modernisti*, 2 vols. (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2013–2014).

[15]See Pasi, "Theosophy and Anthroposophy in Italy," 96.

[16]Helena P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, vol. 2, Theology (New York: J. W. Bouton, 1877), 1–54. See Charles M. Stang and Jason Ā.

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Pascendi. While distinct in origin and intent, Theosophy could therefore be discursively aligned with modernism as part of a broader institutional effort to reaffirm dogmatic boundaries and reassert control over the field of religious legitimacy.[17]

IV. Theosophy Under Scrutiny: A Colonial Prelude

It is certainly a significant fact that Joseph Lemius, the principal author of *Pascendi*, also played a central role in the Holy Office's investigation of Theosophy. The French theologian was joined by the Irish Franciscan David Fleming (1851–1915), a consultor of the Holy Office already deeply involved in earlier anti-modernist inquiries and repeatedly entrusted with assessments of occultist movements. Yet the Theosophical investigation did not initially arise from concerns about esoteric speculation or modernist theology as such. Rather, it emerged from a much broader inquiry conducted by the Holy Office at the turn of the century into "secret societies" active within the British Empire.[18] This inquiry formed part of a wider Vatican effort to monitor lay associations, mutual aid societies, and transnational organizations suspected of maintaining links with Freemasonry or of fostering religious indifferentism, particularly in colonial and postcolonial contexts.[19]

By 1909, after nearly a decade of gathering responses and reviewing the statutes of numerous associations, Fleming had to recognize that most such societies appeared, in fact, harmless: they were primarily philanthropic in nature and lacked any explicitly heretical content. More troubling assessments, however, emerged from the colonial peripheries of the Empire. In a letter dated September 7, 1900, Apostolic Delegate Władysław Michał Zaleski described the Indian government as an "absolute slave" to English Freemasonry and raised concerns about the Independent Order of Good Templars.[20] Zaleski insisted on the "purely Masonic" nature of the Order's meetings, which

Josephson Storm, eds., *Theosophy and the Study of Religion* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2024), on the relationship between Theosophy and the history of religions of the time.

[17]In the Italian context, moreover, such connections were reinforced by concrete social and cultural overlaps between liberal Catholic milieus, intellectual circles, and Theosophical networks. A notable case was Antonio Fogazzaro's novel *Il Santo* (1905), considered by many the very manifesto of modernism. Placed on the Index in 1906, the novel drew heavily from Theosophy, while also reflecting broader interests in Spiritualism and parapsychology. During the height of the anti-modernist campaign (1905–1911), the Jesuit periodical *La Civiltà Cattolica*, closely aligned with the Vatican, dedicated sustained attention to Theosophy. Between 1908 and 1911, Giovanni Busnelli alone published twenty-eight articles on the topic, later repurposed into a *Manuale di Teosofia* (Rome: Civiltà Cattolica, 1909–1915). These contributions, along with those of Giorgio Bartoli and Enrico Rosa, analyzed Theosophy's doctrines, focusing in particular on its esoteric reinterpretation of Christianity and its alleged moral and theological deviations. The intensity of this output shows that, in Church circles close to central authority, Theosophy had become more than an intellectual curiosity. See Pasi, "Theosophy and Anthroposophy in Italy."

[18]"Suprema Sacra Congregatio Sancti Officii (Maii 1909). Imperium Britannicum. De Nonnullis Societatibus Secretis ibi existentibus. Relatio et votum P. David Fleming, O.F.M. Consultoris" (ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1915, 2, doc. 158).

[19]See Matteo Sanfilippo, "I complicati rapporti fra la Chiesa cattolica statunitense e la Santa Sede, 1880–1918," in *Gli Stati Uniti e l'Italia alla fine del XIX secolo*, ed. Daniele Fiorentino (Rome: Gangemi, 2010), 59–74.

[20]The Independent Order of Good Templars is an organization founded in 1852, part of the temperance movement, which promotes abstinence from alcohol and other drugs. See David M. Fahey, *Temperance and Racism: John Bull, Johnny Reb, and the Good Templars* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

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included Methodist prayers, and stressed that its "nefarious influence" lay in alienating Catholic soldiers from priests and fellow Catholics, thereby accustoming them to a secret society under Protestant and Masonic direction.[21] On the basis of these materials, Fleming recommended extending an earlier prohibition issued against the Order to colonial territories. This proposal was discussed and approved by the Holy Office in December 1914.[22]

During the same session, however, the Congregation unexpectedly broadened the inquiry. The consultors proposed that the investigation be extended beyond secret societies in the narrow sense to include "today's Theosophical associations," alongside other lay organizations – such as temperance and anti-alcohol societies, athletic and sporting clubs, scouting movements, and similar groups – thought to promote religious indifferentism, especially among the young.[23] Theosophy thus entered the Holy Office's field of scrutiny not as an autonomous doctrinal problem, but as an appendage to an already existing dossier, shaped by concerns over opaque organizational structures, transnational networks, and alternative forms of moral and spiritual authority.[24]

While this procedural pathway helps explain the initially indirect and exploratory character of the Roman engagement with Theosophy, a broader perspective suggests that this decision may in fact have been influenced by Cardinal Rafael Merry del Val (1865–1930), who was appointed Secretary of the Holy Office in October 1914, following Pius X's death. Born in London to a Spanish diplomat and educated in Belgium, Merry del Val was a polyglot with extensive knowledge of international affairs.[25] Under the pontificate of Pius X, while serving as Secretary of State, he vigorously opposed reformist theological currents, making strategic use of the Sodalitium Pianum, an integralist, semi-clandestine Catholic society founded in 1909 by Umberto Benigni and endorsed by the pope, whose mission was to combat modernism by various means, including surveillance and covert operations.[26] Interestingly, the Sodalitium's program also targeted "false mysticism with individualistic and illuministic tendencies," while promoting a spiritually "sound life" grounded in doctrines approved by the Church.[27] After Pius X's death, Merry del Val

[21]ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1915, 2, ff. 33r–33v.

[22]"Suprema S. Congregatio Sancti Officii (Mense Novembri 1914). Imperium Britannicum. Praecipue Indiae Orientales. De Societate Secreta 'Ordo Independens Bonorum Templariorum.' Brevis relatio et votum P. David Fleming, O.F.M. Consultoris" (ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1915, 2, doc. 161).

[23]ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Acta congregationum 24 (1914–1915), feria II, December 14, 1914, Annex A.

[24]See the doubts expressed in the document (not dated or signed) "Remarque à propos des demandes d'incorporation adressées à la Législature de la Province de Québec par plusieurs sociétés en 1896" (ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1915, 2, ff. 43–56).

[25]See Roberto de Mattei, *Merry del Val: Il cardinale che servì quattro papi* (Milan: Sugarco, 2024).

[26]Giovanni Vian, "El cardenal Merry del Val y la crisis modernista," *Investigaciones Históricas, época moderna y contemporánea* 41 (2021): 815–844; see also de Mattei, *Merry del Val*, 216–228. The Sodalitium Pianum, whose existence was revealed by historian Émile Poulat (*Intégrisme et catholicisme intégral: Un réseau secret international antimoderniste, la "Sapinière" 1909–1921*, Paris: Casterman, 1969, and *Catholicisme, démocratie et socialisme: Le mouvement catholique et Mgr Benigni de la naissance du socialisme à la victoire du fascisme*, Paris: Casterman, 1977), functioned as a veritable intelligence and counter-information organ against modernist networks. See also Sergio Pagano, "Documenti sul modernismo romano dal Fondo Benigni," *Ricerche per la storia religiosa di Roma* 8 (1990): 223–300, and "Il Fondo di mons. Umberto Benigni dell'Archivio Segreto Vaticano. Inventario," *Ricerche per la storia religiosa di Roma* 8 (1990): 347–402; see also Alejandro M. Dieguez, "Una specie di massoneria nella Chiesa: Lo scioglimento del Sodalitium Pianum," in *Benedetto XV: Papa Giacomo Della Chiesa nel mondo dell'inutile strage*, ed. Alberto Melloni, Giovanni Cavagnini, and Giulia Grossi, vol. 1 (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017), 437–449.

[27]Vatican Apostolic Archives (hereafter AAV), Spoglio Pio X, box 4, folder 17, "Programma delle Conferenze di S. Pietro e del Sodalitium Pianum."

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transferred his expertise to the Holy Office, where he focused on "maintaining the anti-modernist apparatus and ensuring the rigorous application of the disciplinary measures established under Pius X."[28]

On January 13, 1915, the cardinals accepted the proposal to address Theosophy but determined that the matter should be handled independently of other investigations.[29] They then decided to solicit the opinions of a select group of experts. Between February 12 and 13, letters were dispatched requesting reports on "Theosophism" (*theosophismus*) from the following prelates: Hector-Irénée Sévin (1852–1916), archbishop of Lyon and a cardinal closely associated with the Sodalitium Pianum; Andreas Frühwirth (1845–1933), consultor of the Holy Office, former Master of the Dominican Order and Apostolic Nuncio to Bavaria, who had been tasked by Merry del Val several years earlier with investigating German modernists; Joseph Lemius, principal author of *Pascendi* and Merry del Val's trusted theologian; David Fleming, consultor of the Holy Office; and Giovanni Bonzano (1867–1927), Apostolic Delegate to the United States.[30] Most of these figures were closely aligned with Merry del Val and embedded, to varying degrees, in the same anti-modernist networks orbiting the Sodalitium Pianum. This configuration would decisively shape the interpretive frameworks mobilized in the subsequent doctrinal assessments.

V. The Holy Office's reports

The first report received by the Holy Office, dated May 30, 1915, was a forty-page typescript in French on onionskin paper.[31] Somewhat unexpectedly, the author of this unsigned document – likely a Jesuit – does not appear to belong to the group of experts appointed by the cardinals.[32] The report traces the historical origins of Theosophy to "more or less secret societies whose mysteries are revealed only to the initiated"; from the report's perspective, Theosophists drew on the Rosicrucians, Manicheans, and Gnostics, as well as on an alleged "primitive tradition of Christ" accessible only to a select few.[33] The author also criticized Theosophists for manipulating history in a "childish and fanciful" way, indulging in arbitrary symbolism and disregarding historical chronology. By contrast, the report itself adopts a sober and factual tone in its account of the Theosophical Society and its principal figures.[34] Amid the "bewildering confusion" of Theosophical doctrine, the report singled out several core elements: esotericism (Theosophists considered themselves the bearers of a hidden and ancient doctrine known only to an elite); the laws of evolution and causality (or karma); the spiritual unity of beings; and a vision of

[28]Vian, "El cardenal Merry del Val," 836.

[29]ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1915, 2, f. 133^{v}.

[30]ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1919, 1 (dossier titled *De theosophismo*), rear of folder 1.

[31]Anonymous, "La théosophie. La Société théosophique. Les doctrines théosophiques" (ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1919, 1, doc. 1).

[32]The Jesuit authorship is suggested by the presence of the Society's motto, A.M.D.G., at the end of the document. The most likely author is Léonce de Grandmaison (1868–1927), the leading French Jesuit authority on Theosophy at the time. De Grandmaison, who had studied in England (specifically in Jersey), had written on Theosophy in the Jesuit journal *Études*, which he edited. His essays were later collected in a booklet (*Théosophes et théosophie: Le Lotus bleu*, Paris: Librairie Bloud et Cie, 1905).

[33]Anonymous, "La théosophie," 3.

[34]While the author of the report acknowledges Schuré as a gifted writer, he considers his theories particularly dangerous because they are "less ridiculous and incomprehensible" than those of Besant and Leadbeater (ibid., 8).

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man as composed of physical and subtle bodies. To the author, all this was clearly incompatible with Catholicism, lacking the cornerstones of Christian doctrine, especially concerning the creation of man and his destiny. At the same time, the report noted that Theosophists frequently appropriated – and misused – evangelical language, while in reality professing a form of pantheism akin to the monistic theories of Spinoza and Hegel.[35] As to the fate of Theosophy, the author emphasized that its ideas seemed to be in tune with the times, blending occultism with the "fashionable theories" of the modernists about evolution. For these reasons, the author judged its doctrines to be not only false but also insidious, exploiting the appeal of the miraculous and resting on occult practices that "usually openly, but always at least implicitly, involve communication with the Devil and his invocation."[36] Therefore, they deserved a firm condemnation.

The following month, on June 19, 1915, the Holy Office received a second report on the matter, this time authored by David Fleming. Born in Ballycasheen, Killarney, Ireland, in 1851, Fleming was trained in the Franciscan province of Belgium (Ghent), where he was ordained in 1875 and later appointed reader in philosophy, specializing in Franciscan scholasticism.[37] He rose steadily through the ranks of the order, becoming Provincial for England in 1891 and, eventually, Vicar General (1901–1903). While his authoritarian leadership style increasingly alienated reformist currents within the Franciscan family, prompting at least one formal correction, his standing in the Roman Curia continued to grow.[38] Appointed consultor to the Holy Office in 1896, he was named secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission by Leo XIII in 1903. Intellectually, Fleming combined a firmly neo-scholastic formation, a strong loyalty to the Church's anti-modernist framework, and a marked epistemological skepticism toward occult knowledge, a stance that decisively shaped his assessment of Theosophy.[39]

Over time, Fleming had acquired a working familiarity with occult movements and secret societies. Yet in this report he engaged only briefly with the Theosophical Society's doctrinal specifics. Rather than offering a systematic theological assessment, the Irish consultor adopted a genealogical approach, situating Theosophy within a broader heterodox lineage.[40] In its broadest sense, he explained, the term "*Theosophia*" denoted both contemplative illumination and occult "operations" aimed at hidden knowledge.[41] Fleming traced these impulses primarily within a Western trajectory, moving through

[35]Ibid., 27–28.

[36]Ibid., 39–40.

[37]The Franciscan friary in Killarney "belonged to the Belgian province from 1860 to 1887, and then to the English province until 1902, when the Irish took it over" (Ignatius Fennessy, "A Memoir of Peter Begley OFM on Observance in the Irish Province (1928–34)," *Archivium Hibernicum* 63 [2010]: 324–345, 339). On Fleming, see Hubert Wolf, ed., *Prosopographie von Römischer Inquisition und Indexkongregation 1814–1917*, vol. 1 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005), 587–591.

[38]Maurizio Gronchi, "Introduzione," in *La figura e l'opera di Agostino da Montefeltro OFM a cento anni dalla morte*, ed. Maurizio Gronchi (Florence: Edizioni Studi Francescani, 2023), 3–16.

[39]See David Fleming, "Ruggero Bacone e la Scolastica," *Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica* 6, no. 6 (1914): 529–571, where Fleming defends Bacon's engagement with astrology and magic against ill-informed ecclesiastical censorship, while ultimately dismissing such pursuits as epistemologically inconclusive.

[40]"De Theosophia: Prout variis in regionibus hisce ultimis temporibus spargitur ac propugnatur. Relatio et votum P. David Fleming, O.F.M. Consultoris" (ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1919, 1, doc. 4). Although this latter claim may surprise contemporary readers, at the time it was supported by eminent scholarly authorities, such as the Sanskritist Émile Burnouf. See Michael Gomes, "Max Müller, Blavatsky and the Esoteric Buddhism Debate," in *Theosophy and the Study of Religion*, ed. Stang and Storm, 247–263.

[41]Fleming, "De Theosophia," 2.

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Platonists, the Therapeutae and Essenes, Alexandrian Neoplatonists, and Gnostics, before identifying a modern tradition in Eckhart, Böhme, Nicholas of Cusa, Paracelsus, Cardano, and especially Swedenborg, whom he cast as the immediate precursor of the Theosophical Society. To clarify the nature of the latter, however, Fleming turned to Buddhism, comparing established historical accounts with what he termed the Theosophists' "fabulous ravings" (*fabulosa deliramenta*). After outlining the origins and principal doctrines of Buddhism, he contrasted them with their Theosophical reinterpretation. While it was impossible, Fleming conceded, to determine precisely what Olcott and Blavatsky may have learned in secret from their Eastern teachers, he insisted that two facts were beyond doubt: the unmistakable connection between Theosophy and American Spiritualism – which indeed bore little resemblance to Buddhism – and the movement's systematic reliance on deception and fabrication, epitomized by the so-called "precipitated" letters attributed to the Mahatmas.[42]

Fleming's genealogical construction thus operated on two levels. On one side, he presented Theosophy as an heir to earlier Western heterodoxies grounded in occult practice and subjective illumination; on the other, he argued that its pseudo-Buddhist synthesis rendered it even more deviant than its antecedents, precisely because it rested on an idiosyncratic and distorted reading of Asian religions. Although highly compressed, this counter-narrative displays a certain internal coherence and even anticipates aspects of current scholarship, which views Theosophy as primarily Western and its engagement with Asia as mediated through selective reinterpretation.

Against this backdrop, Fleming's doctrinal evaluation was strikingly terse. Reincarnation and the denial of eternal damnation rendered Theosophy, in his words, a "false eclecticism, confused and full of contradictions."[43] Although he considered its errors "immense" and condemnable "ten and a hundred times," he nevertheless questioned the prudence of issuing a formal condemnation at that moment, given the limited Catholic engagement with the movement and the active opposition already expressed in publications and public forums.[44]

By the end of 1915, among the experts consulted, only Fleming – along with the anonymous author of the first study – had submitted a report. However, in November 1915, a letter was also sent to Rome by the Apostolic Delegate to the United States, the future Cardinal Giovanni Bonzano.[45] After studying at the Pontifical Urban University, Bonzano had been ordained a priest for the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions and engaged in missionary work in China (1890–1897). In 1912, he was appointed Apostolic Delegate to the United States and consecrated bishop by Cardinal Rafael Merry del Val.

Since Bonzano had been tasked with carrying out "diligent investigations about Theosophism in the United States," the content of his letter differed markedly from the previous contributions. Determined to fulfil his mandate, Bonzano reported consulting several acquaintances, although these inquiries yielded only scant information about American Theosophists.[46] The most revealing element of his communication, however,

[42]"They boast of receiving letters *precipitated* from the ceiling in Europe and America without delay from Tibetan Mahatmas. In the ceiling, a small cloud forms which gradually condenses into a letter that falls at the feet of the recipient" (ibid., 7).

[43]Ibid., 7–9.

[44]Ibid., 10.

[45]ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1919, 1, ff. 56–57.

[46]To compile his report, Bonzano relied on a correspondence network involving several intermediaries. See the material preserved in AAV, Archivio della Delegazione Apostolica negli USA, 2, Stati Uniti, pos. 175, ff. 1–63, 1915, "Circa il teosofismo in America."

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lay in the document attached to the letter. In this text, an unidentified "professor" underscored the importance of the so-called "wonders of Theosophy." It was upon these ostensibly paranormal occurrences, the author argued, that Theosophists grounded their promise of "superhuman power" and, by extension, their appeal to the modern world. To explain the origin of such phenomena, the anonymous professor invoked the views of the Jesuit Richard Frederick Clarke, author of *Theosophy: Its Teachings, Marvels and True Character* (1892).[47] In contrast to Fleming's skepticism, Clarke acknowledged that he had begun his inquiry "with every wish to find [Theosophy's] wonders explicable by some natural laws already known to us […], or else by a skillful system of mingled deception and self-deception." Yet, he continued, "the combined testimony of intelligent and reliable men and women compelled me to give a rather grudging assent to the facts narrated as true." On this basis, the anonymous expert concluded as follows:

> As to the marvels of Theosophy, it must be admitted that some appear to be well authenticated, which can be explained by no natural law. Their causes must be preternatural. These marvels are the exact counterpart to those of Spiritualism […]. They are worked by devils, with devilish intent and evidently with the end […] of leading man from God to error and into all kinds of gross moral evil. Theosophy therefore is nothing else than a system of devilry […] hiding its true character behind the veil of a universal Brotherhood and the pretense of a superior knowledge of nature's secret laws. It deserves the hatred and abhorrence of every believer in the unity of a Personal, Holy and Just God.[48]

This framing of Theosophy as a demonic deception clearly echoed the interpretive models previously developed in response to Spiritualism. The connection between spirit phenomena and diabolical agency had gained a degree of institutional legitimacy in the Roman Curia through the work of Giovanni Perrone (1794–1876), one of the leading theologians of the First Vatican Council. At the council, Perrone had argued for the necessity of interpreting mediumistic manifestations within the framework of classical demonology, a stance that would influence the Church's response to Spiritualism well into the twentieth century.[49]

Whereas Fleming had approached Theosophy through a genealogical (and skeptical) lens, the reports from America instead emphasized the preternatural nature of its "prodigious facts." What was still lacking at this stage, however, was a comprehensive re-coding of Theosophy within the categories of Catholic dogmatic theology. This is precisely what emerges in the third and most extensive study in the dossier: a 200-page printed report in French, recorded on July 14, 1916. The attribution is unambiguous, as the final page of one of the folders bears a handwritten note reading "Continuation of the report by Rev. Father Lemius."[50] At the time, Joseph Lemius had not yet been formally appointed as a qualifier of the Holy Office. He was, however, one of Merry del Val's closest advisors.

[47]Richard Frederick Clarke (1839–1900), educated at Oxford, was ordained in the Anglican Church before converting to Catholicism in 1869 and entering the Society of Jesus in 1871. See Campion Hall, Oxford, "History of Campion Hall," Accessed May 7, 2025. https://www.campion.ox.ac.uk/history-campion-hall.

[48]ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1919, 1, doc. 58, 8.

[49]See Baroni, "The First Vatican Council and Spiritualism."

[50]ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1919, 1, doc. 35.

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Born in Montfort-en-Chalosse, in southwestern France, in 1860, Lemius was a member of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. After earning doctorates in philosophy from the Gregorian University in Rome and in theology from the Academy of St. Thomas, along with a licentiate in canon law, he was ordained in 1884. Formed within the neo-scholastic revival promoted by Leo XIII, Lemius was appointed consultor to the Congregation for Studies in 1894 and, over the years, advised various Roman congregations until his appointment as qualificator of the Holy Office in 1917. Gabriel Daly has described his temperament as typical of the neo-scholastic milieu: animated by a clear anti-modernist zeal, yet capable of expressing it in a calm and technical register.[51] Yet behind this composure, as Arnold has noted, stood a deeply integralist vision. Intellectually, this orientation translated into a persistent preoccupation with doctrines of vital immanence and subjectivized religious experience, which Lemius regarded as the core theological threat of modernism and as fundamentally incompatible with Catholic dogma and with the Church's mediating role between divine transcendence and the faithful.[52]

This core theological concern likewise guided Lemius's work on Theosophy, the scope and detail of which suggest that the French theologian approached the assignment with the utmost seriousness.[53] From the very outset, his doctrinal framing of Theosophy was unambiguous: Lemius identified it with pantheism and thus as fundamentally irreconcilable with the core tenets of Christian theology:

> Theosophy is nothing other than Spiritualist Pantheism. God is Spirit, and there is no other reality than God. Creatures are nothing other than God himself, finite, limited to this or that degree according to the position occupied by this or that creature on the scale of beings. It is true that, besides the spirit, there is, in the universe, Matter. However, matter is illusory; it is a pure idea. Such is, it seems to us, the quintessence of the Theosophical doctrine.[54]

Historically, the charge of pantheism had long functioned as a standard polemical device in Christian theological discourse. Since the early modern period, the term had been used to discredit philosophical currents influenced by Platonic, Hermetic, or otherwise "pagan" metaphysics, accused of collapsing the biblical distinction between Creator and creation and of divinizing the world itself. By the nineteenth century, particularly in the German-speaking world and even more so within Neo-Scholastic circles, pantheism had become a principal target of Catholic philosophical attacks. For these critics, the impersonal Absolute

[51]Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence*, 179–187; Claus Arnold, "Antimodernismo e magistero romano: la redazione della *Pascendi*," *Rivista di storia del Cristianesimo* 5, no. 2 (2008): 345–364.

[52]On the broader theological-political horizon of this position, including his defense of *Action française* as an authentically Catholic counterrevolutionary movement grounded in order, authority, and the subordination of the State to the Church, see Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence*, 179–187; Arnold, "Antimodernismo e magistero romano."

[53]A letter to his brother Jean-Baptiste, dated July 2, 1915, attests to the intensity of his involvement: "I have been working on a major project of general interest that has absorbed me for weeks. It has suspended another task of equal importance. I will be able to speak to you about the first when we meet in person, but not the second." (Archives of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Rome, hereafter AOMI, Lemius Collection, box 6PF, 1153A, folder A). Given the chronology, it is highly likely that one of these two projects was the report on Theosophy requested by the Holy Office. The last box of the Lemius Collection (1153H) contains a substantial amount of material on Theosophy, organized into six folders.

[54][Joseph Lemius], "Théosophie," ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1919, 1, doc. 35, 1.

proposed by idealist metaphysics – especially in Hegel's case – effectively displaced the personal God of biblical revelation.[55]

Before turning to Lemius's analysis, it is worth noting that this accusation, when applied to Theosophical teachings, was not wholly misplaced or farfetched, since it drew directly on Blavatsky's own explicit statements. Kardec's doctrine, like Blavatsky's, had also been labeled pantheist. Yet whereas Kardec, seeking to avoid open conflict with the Church, emphatically rejected pantheism in the second edition of *Le Livre des Esprits* (1860)[56] – a precaution that did little to dispel Catholic suspicions – Blavatsky openly rejected the notion of a personal God and, drawing on a romanticized interpretation of Asian traditions, described herself as a "Buddhist pantheist," affirming belief in "one eternal, indestructible substance."[57] In her magnum opus *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), she openly turned the charge of pantheism on its head, presenting it not as an accusation to be rebutted but as a metaphysical truth to be embraced, one grounded in notions such as the "Universal Soul," the "omnipresent, eternal Deity in Nature," and the "Supreme ALL."[58]

Blavatsky's self-professed "pantheism" undoubtedly facilitated Lemius's work, providing a ready-to-hand heresiological template. This, however, does not detract from the originality of the consultor's analysis. Lamenting the "strange complication" of Theosophical doctrine, Lemius briefly described the "bizarre constructions" of its cosmology and anthropology, before turning to what he identified as its metaphysical core: the idea of an "unmanifested divinity" (*Parabrahman*), an infinite, absolute, transcendent, impersonal, and unknowable unity, which voluntarily limits itself by descending into matter as the "manifested divinity" (*Brahman*).[59] This process of involution is followed by an ascending movement, whereby divinity rediscovers itself through evolution.

To make sense of this worldview, Lemius mobilized scholastic categories. In his view, Theosophy collapsed the distinction between *Ens universale in causando* (universal being as the cause of all things) and *Ens universale in essendo et in praedicando* (universal being as what is predicated of all that exists). It is this latter category, he argued, that informs the Theosophical depiction of God as a homogeneous, indeterminate, impersonal, and paradoxically *unconscious* principle. Since absolute unity cannot admit internal differentiation, the divine principle lacks personality; and since awareness presupposes distinction, its so-called 'absolute consciousness' amounts to unconsciousness. God becomes self-aware only by manifesting the universe and knowing himself as a creative agent – that is, by becoming *Brahman*.[60] By conflating these two metaphysical orders, Lemius concluded, Theosophy rendered God and creation ontologically indistinct, while the world itself is reduced to an illusory projection, a mere thought of the divine. In this way, Lemius argued, Theosophy – while outwardly echoing Eastern religions – ultimately reproduced the metaphysical structure of German transcendental idealism, particularly that of Hegel and Schelling.[61]

[55]See Gerald A. McCool, *Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism: The Search for a Unitary Method* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), 88 ff.

[56]See Allan Kardec, *Le Livre des Esprits*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Didier et Cie, 1860), 5–6.

[57]Quoted in Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*, 322.

[58]See e.g. Helena P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy*, vol. 1 (London: The Theosophical Publishing Company, 1888), 79–80.

[59]Lemius, "Théosophie," 1–4.

[60]Ibid., 16–17.

[61]Ibid., 24.

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While counterintuitive at first glance, this conceptual alignment with German idealism is not incidental: it marks what, for Lemius, constituted the essence of Theosophy's threat. Through idealism, Theosophy was relocated from its Eastern façade to the core of modernist heterodoxy, where subjectivism and the loss of transcendence converge. Here again, Lemius hardly needed to force the analogy: Blavatsky herself left clear markers, explicitly drawing a parallel between her worldview and "the doctrine of Fichte and the German Pantheists."[62] In doing so, she effectively traced an auto-heresiological path that Lemius could follow without inventing it.

When these premises are considered, it is understandable that Theosophy appeared to Lemius as an improbable hybrid: a form of "Buddhism clothed in German philosophy."[63] Yet precisely for that reason, Theosophy in turn revealed its deep affinity with modernism:

> Modernism is an attempt to reconcile Catholic doctrine and German philosophy. Theosophy is an attempt to reconcile Buddhism and the same philosophy. And as we will see, Theosophy has many points of contact with Modernism. And it will be true to say that all those who in modern times have wanted to strike the Church have gone to seek weapons in Germany.[64]

Lemius therefore identified Theosophical "pantheism" – despite its ostensibly Eastern garb – as the first point of contact with modernist deviation. Beyond this metaphysical level, however, Lemius discerned a further consequence: Theosophy's radical monism, he argued, dissolves any stable moral framework. Good and evil are no longer opposites, but merely two aspects of the same cosmic process. Thus, although Theosophical doctrine may appear "*pétrie de contradictions et incompréhensible*" (full of contradictions and incomprehensible), Lemius insisted that it was nonetheless "constructed with diabolical art. And to say it outright, we believe – given the coherence it has shown over the centuries and across various nations – that it is largely the work of the devil."[65] His study then turned to the intricate architecture of subtle bodies and principles outlined in Theosophical literature, discussing the Theosophists' conception of the self and its evolution through yoga practices, occult sciences, and willpower, and examining Besant's and Blavatsky's doctrines of the afterlife, reincarnation, and karma.[66]

Where the first part of the report dismantles Theosophy's metaphysical foundations, the second turns to definition: what, exactly, is Theosophy? For Lemius, it was less a religion than a "divine and universal science," a purported path to knowledge of the Deity and of invisible realities. Its appeal, he argued, lay in the promise of empirical access to spiritual dimensions through occult methods. "Personal experience," Lemius wrote, "is the great criterion of truth for the Theosophists, in the name of which they strive to ridicule the Christian and Catholic Faith: 'The Catholic Church proposes that you believe;

[62]Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, vol. 1, 80.

[63]"If one adds that the Theosophists, with regard to man as man, have adopted Kant's sensitive subjectivism and intellectual idealism; that, on the other hand, the foundation of their doctrine is Buddhist; one will conclude that Theosophy is nothing other than Buddhism clothed in German philosophy, with the full range of its errors, from Kant's human subjectivism to the divine subjectivism of Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, and from the latter to Hartmann's unconscious: the whole gamut" (Lemius, "Théosophie," 5).

[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid., 26.

[66]Ibid., 112–142.

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we propose that you see.'"[67] Yet this claim, he argued, is fundamentally inconsistent: Theosophists insist that their teachings – such as those concerning planes of existence and subtle bodies – are empirically verifiable, while simultaneously conceding that most people, including adepts, are unable to access these realities directly.

If Theosophy's "pantheistic" cosmology already recalled modernist thinking, its elevation of individual spiritual experience only intensified Lemius's concerns. Once personal experience becomes the ultimate criterion of truth, the consultor argued, doctrinal boundaries inevitably dissolve, fostering a relativistic view of Christianity as merely one expression of a universal esoteric wisdom. Within this framework, Lemius turned to the Theosophical account of esoteric Christianity. To prove its existence, he noted, Theosophists resort to "modernist procedures": "Declaring interpolations, additions over time, and questioning the authenticity of any text that does not fit into their doctrine and that bothers them, is a method they use extensively, like modernists."[68] For example, they treated Jesus's command to preach the Gospel universally (Mark 16:15) and his references to hell as later additions, arguing instead that the original message included doctrines such as reincarnation, later suppressed. Lemius quoted extensively from Besant's *Esoteric Christianity* (1901), whose reconstruction of Jesus's life – drawn from "occult annals" – he dismissed as "the most bizarre, the most absurd, and above all the most impious that can be conceived."[69]

Lemius never completed his study. Drafts of the projected third section, written a few years later, are preserved in the archives of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Rome. Some pages address Theosophical paranormal phenomena, which Lemius interpreted in explicitly demonological terms. From these few lines, Lemius's stark conviction about Theosophy emerged: "Hence it must be concluded that the true founder of the Theosophical Society is Satan."[70]

By the summer of 1916, apart from Sévin's report, which would never be written, Frühwirth's opinion was still pending; it would not be sent to Rome until December. An Austrian Dominican who served as Master General of the Order (1891–1904), Frühwirth had played an active role in promoting the Leonine edition of Thomas Aquinas's works (1888–1906), a cornerstone of the Thomistic revival. In 1907 he was appointed Apostolic Nuncio to Bavaria, and on December 6, 1915, Benedict XV elevated him to the cardinalate.[71] Frühwirth's report, though systematic, largely reiterated themes already developed by Lemius, focusing on Theosophy's pantheistic cosmology, its doctrine of reincarnation, and its heretical reading of Christian dogma.[72] More original, however, was his attention

[67]Ibid., 171.

[68]Ibid., 174.

[69]Ibid., 177.

[70]AOMI, Lemius Collection, box 6PF, 1153H, folder 4, document titled "II^{e} partie. Histoire de la Société Théosophique," 207.

[71]Frühwirth's report, written in Italian and recorded by the Holy Office on December 19, 1916, is in ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1919, 1, ff. 72–75. On Frühwirth, see Angelus Walz, *Andreas Kardinal Frühwirth (1845–1933): Ein Zeit- und Lebensbild* (Vienna: Herder, 1950), and Jean LeBlanc, *D'Agagianian à Wyszynski: Dictionnaire biographique des cardinaux de la première moitié du XX^{e} siècle (1903–1958)* (Montreal: Wilson & Lafleur, 2017), 256–259.

[72]In keeping with Lemius's approach, Frühwirth denounced Theosophy as a pseudo-mystical system that promised access to higher worlds, and even to divinization, through latent human powers, thus bypassing grace and the beatific vision. He further criticized its pantheistic cosmology and its anthropology, which described the human being as composed of seven principles, contrary to the Church's affirmation of the unity of the rational soul. Reincarnation and karma were likewise condemned, both for their doctrinal incompatibility and for their popular appeal, as they offered answers to the problem of evil that seemed attuned to the

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to the German context. He noted the 1913 schism within the German-speaking Theosophical world, which saw some followers align with Katherine Tingley's community at Point Loma, while others joined Rudolf Steiner's newly emerging Anthroposophy. Of Steiner himself, Frühwirth offered a somewhat condescending portrait, emphasizing the peculiar charisma he exercised over his largely female audience – many of whom he dismissed, in the language of the time, as "hysterical."[73]

VI. The End of the Inquiry

After Frühwirth's communication, the inquiry stalled for nearly a year and a half, most likely due to World War I.[74] The file was reactivated only in May 1918, when Lemius returned to the matter and proposed concrete measures against Theosophy. His judgment was exceedingly harsh. Theosophy, he asserted, was "a set of doctrines and practices suggested by the devil, and of which the Theosophical Societies, certainly in direct relations with him, are the propagators – doctrines and practices whose aim is to ruin man and the Christian from top to bottom."[75] Yet Lemius – in agreement with Fleming on this point – advised against a condemnation, so as to prevent "immense publicity" for Theosophical propaganda, "especially since curiosity, an unbridled curiosity, leads towards the occult sciences."[76]

In a subsequent report dated July 1918, Lemius returned to the topic, reiterating Theosophy's ties to Buddhism, German idealism, and modernism, and interpreting its appeal as a reaction to materialism and a fascination with occult powers. He also warned, with demure reticence, of the psychological and moral risks posed by Theosophical practices, not only because of their demonic associations, but also due to the erotic energies potentially stirred by yoga and the threat they posed to chastity.[77] To address these dangers, he proposed a discreet, two-step strategy: bishops were to be instructed to conduct inquiries into the presence and influence of Theosophical groups within their dioceses, and to intervene when necessary – without, however, immediately alerting the Holy See or making the matter public. Lemius appended a draft instruction that summarized these guidelines to his report.[78]

Lemius's instruction, however, was never sent. When the dossier was reopened in early 1919, responsibility for steering the file toward a decision fell to consultor Alfonso Maria Andrioli (1864–1922).[79] Now that the war was over, Andrioli was charged with guiding the cardinals to a formal decree:

spirit of the age. But above all, Frühwirth saw in Theosophy a heretical reading of Christian dogma, which undermined its truth claims and portrayed Christ as a Theosophical adept, thereby dissolving his unique salvific role.

[73]ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1919, 1, ff. 74^{v}–75^{r}.

[74]An anonymous entry in a loose sheet of the folder concerning the Independent Order of Good Templars, dated August 1916, may well apply also to Theosophy: "Regarding the Good Templars, we will have to talk about them after the war, said Rmo Andrioli when he returned these papers to the Holy Office" (ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1915, 2, f. 140).

[75]ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1919, 1, ff. 30–35, 1.

[76]Ibid.

[77]Ibid., 2–3.

[78]Ibid., 9–11.

[79]Alfonso Maria Andrioli, "Suprema S. Congregazione del S. Offizio. Sulla teosofia" (ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Rerum variarum 1919, 1, doc. 44). Andrioli had a less extensive theological background than Lemius. A native

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> This Supreme Congregation of the Holy Office, after condemning Modernism in the 65 Propositions that summarized its doctrine, and after dealing a mortal blow to Spiritualism with the decree of April 24, 1917, by wise disposition of Your Eminences must now turn its vigilant attention to the search for and condemnation of another enemy of faith and morals, no less dangerous than those mentioned above, with which it has in fact close affinities, namely Theosophy, which is becoming alarmingly widespread among the intellectual class, including women.[80]

At the time of writing, probably due to the disruption caused by the war, Andrioli seemed unaware of the extensive work undertaken by his predecessors, and focused mainly on the diffusion of Theosophical ideas in Italy, particularly through periodicals such as *Ultra*, *Luce e Ombra*, and *Coenobium*, which showed that these magazines – as well as the activities of the Roman Theosophists – were under close observation. Andrioli, however, was aware of Lemius's recent proposal, which he criticized for being too dilatory, and suggested instead issuing a warning to "make the faithful understand that Theosophy is condemnable and that it is therefore not lawful to belong to its societies or even to attend its meetings."[81] On June 23, 1919, his proposal was discussed – fueling a complex debate about the best measures to be adopted[82] – and on July 16, it was accepted.

Through a balanced work of mediation, thus, the Holy Office arrived at the final version of the decree, approved by the Holy Father the next day:

> In the plenary session held by Their Eminences the Cardinals, Inquisitors General for matters of faith and morals, the following question was proposed: "Whether the doctrines today known as Theosophical can be reconciled with Catholic doctrine; and consequently, whether it is permissible to enroll in Theosophical societies, to participate in their meetings, or to read their books, journals, periodicals, or writings."

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of Verona, he served as a regular cleric of the Ministers of the Infirm (Camillians), an order in which he held the position of Superior for the provinces of Lombardy and Veneto from 1904 to 1907. In January 1908, he was appointed consultor to the Holy Office, where he was primarily responsible for book censorship. See Wolf, *Prosopographie*, vol. 1, 42–43. Andrioli's report is dated January 11, 1919.

[80]Andrioli, "Sulla teosofia," 1.

[81]Ibid., 30. This did not exclude, according to Andrioli, the possibility that at a later date "a more explicit condemnation could be reached, if the need were felt," and that the "most pernicious Theosophical publications" should also be condemned, "not in a general way, but by specifying them" (including, of course, *Ultra*).

[82]ADDF, Sant'Uffizio, Acta C.P., Acta congregationum 1918–1919, feria II, June 23, 1919. Eight consultors endorsed Andrioli's proposal. Two others, the Benedictine Isidoro Donzella and Henri Le Floch, of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, proposed an "enriched" formulation of the same decree making the incompatibility of Theosophy with Catholic doctrine more explicit. For others, however, even this solution did not seem strict enough. The Dominican Léonard Lehu, for instance, proposed that the Holy Office issue a decree formally condemning eight to ten propositions "common to the various forms of Theosophy" taken from Frühwirth's study, followed by an instruction to be sent to the bishops, and stating that Catholics could not join Theosophical societies or read Theosophical books. Even more radical was the position of the Jesuit Guillaume Arendt, who proposed that a dogmatic decree be issued as soon as possible condemning Theosophy as pantheistic. Dominican Alberto Lepidi proposed to condemn Theosophy "*propter periculum errandi in quaestioni[bu]s maximis.*"

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> The same Most Eminent and Reverend Lords, having first heard the opinion of the consultors, decreed the following response: Negative in all respects.[83]

From a Theosophical standpoint, the condemnation was hardly unexpected, and in hindsight the 1919 decree reads almost like the enactment of a self-fulfilling prophecy. As early as *Isis Unveiled* (1877), Blavatsky had denounced the Inquisition as a timeless instrument of religious repression: "Another detail not redounding very particularly to the honor of the Christian clergy might be recalled in the word Inquisition. The torrents of human blood shed by this *Christian* institution, and the number of its human sacrifices, are unparalleled in the annals of Paganism."[84] Then, referring to Spiritists as the new target of the Holy Office, she added with grim foreboding: "Recent events have shown that the meek spouse of Christ never disdains to retaliate on helpless victims."[85]

VII. Conclusion: Theosophy and the Forgotten Genealogy of Heresy

What the consultors of the Holy Office ultimately did, when confronted with the doctrines of the Theosophical Society, was to classify: to determine which categories best captured the movement's doctrinal errors and to situate it within a recognizable map of heterodoxy. As shown by this study, they reached this judgment through three complementary lines of analysis. Fleming developed a *genealogical* reconstruction that linked Theosophy to a venerable catalog of heterodox currents – from Gnosticism and Neoplatonism to Böhme and Swedenborg. This he coupled with a marked skepticism toward Blavatsky's alleged Buddhist lineage, arguing that its Eastern claims could not withstand doctrinal or textual scrutiny. The American reports, for their part, interpreted Theosophy through the *demonological* framework previously refined in the encounter with Spiritualism, treating its "prodigious facts" as preternatural. Lemius, finally, offered a systematic *theological* critique grounded in scholastic distinctions. He did so from within the same anti-modernist polemical universe that structured the Church's doctrinal vigilance in those years; as a result, his reading of Theosophy was absorbed into the larger conceptual apparatus already deployed against modernism, oriented toward the denunciation of the subjectivization of religious experience and the historicization of dogma. Although methodologically distinct, these approaches served a shared purpose: by inserting Theosophy into established taxonomies of error, they identified real points of doctrinal incompatibility with Catholic doctrine and articulated them with conceptual precision. Clearly, these three strategies were not mutually exclusive and often overlapped. The *reductio ad diabolum*, for example, recurs across all the texts examined, revealing the remarkable consistency of the demonological pattern utilized by the Church in dealing with nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century heterodoxies.

This classificatory emphasis, however, inevitably narrowed the field of vision, leaving crucial aspects of the Theosophical movement outside the frame. Two such omissions are particularly significant. The first concerns Theosophy's eclectic engagement with Asian traditions. As recent scholarship has shown, mature Theosophy emerged through processes of "cultural entanglement" and "intercultural transfer," whereby elements drawn from *Theravāda* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, along with Hindu notions, were selectively

[83] *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 11 (1919), 317.
[84] Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, vol. 2, 5–6.
[85] Ibid., 6.

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adopted and recomposed.[86] Blavatsky's understanding of Asian religions, moreover, was shaped by a profoundly ethnocentric orientalist imagination, indebted to nineteenth-century Romantic and occultist idealizations of the "mystical East."[87] The result was a doctrinal hybrid in which Buddhist themes coexisted with strong Vedantic influences – especially the idea of a monist, non-theistic absolute and a specific theory of reincarnation – precisely the elements that most troubled Lemius.[88] By taking Theosophy's self-representations at face value and equating it simplistically with "Buddhism," the French theologian could easily mobilize established dogmatic categories ("pantheism," impersonality of the divine, denial of creation *ex nihilo*) yet at the cost of obscuring the conceptual filters through which those elements had been appropriated, as well as the movement's fundamentally hybrid character.

If this first omission concerned Theosophy's reworked Asian vocabularies, a second lay in the robust Western esoteric strata on which the movement depended. Indeed, with the partial exception of Fleming, the Holy Office's consultors offered little reflection on the movement's rootedness in Hermetic, Rosicrucian, mesmeric, Masonic, Neoplatonic, and spiritualist currents.[89] That this dimension remained largely invisible to the Holy Office is, in itself, revealing. It reflects not only the limits of a classificatory mandate, but a broader modern epistemic regime in which Western esotericism functioned as what Hanegraaff has termed "rejected knowledge": a field constituted through polemical exclusion and boundary-work, defined through its systematic framing as the negative counterpart of legitimate culture.[90] Within such a context, the Western esoteric sources on which the Theosophists drew could be registered, at best, as scattered aberrations on the borders of theology, philosophy, and science, but not as elements of a recognizable genealogy.

Seen from this perspective, the Holy Office's response to Theosophy appears not simply as an answer to doctrinal novelty, but as the reactivation of a long process of epistemic exclusion that had rendered earlier esoteric lineages illegible as such. What ultimately rendered Theosophy intolerable was not its eclectic synthesis, nor its often

[86]Karl Baier, "Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer: Annotations on the Appropriation of the *Cakras* in Early Theosophy," in *Theosophical Appropriations: Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Traditions*, ed. Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016), 309–354.

[87]Christopher Partridge, "Lost Horizon: H. P. Blavatsky and Theosophical Orientalism," in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Hammer and Rothstein, 309–333. On this point, see also Urs App's recent volume, *The Mother of All Religions: The Genesis of Blavatsky's Theosophy: Ancient Theology, Orientalism, and Buddhism* (Wil and Paris: UniversityMedia, 2025).

[88]"The reincarnation theory Blavatsky would eventually embrace was framed in the terminology of *Vedanta*" (Julie Chajes, *Recycled Lives: A History of Reincarnation in Blavatsky's Theosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 162).

[89]Modern scholarship has shown that these traditions supplied not merely vocabulary but a shared conceptual architecture for Blavatsky's synthesis. See Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment*; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, "Western Esoteric Traditions and Theosophy," in *Handbook of the Theosophical Current*, ed. Hammer and Rothstein, 261–307. Particularly significant, according to Goodrick-Clarke, is the legacy of seventeenth-century Christian theosophy, whose "Hermetic-Kabbalistic notion of a self-consciously developing God reflecting Himself in his Creation" anticipates the dialectical vision later taken up by Hegel (Goodrick-Clarke, "Western Esoteric Traditions and Theosophy," 303). On this point, see Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), which traces the influence of early modern Christian theosophy on German idealism.

[90]Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

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confused appeal to Asian traditions, nor even its appropriation of Christian notions and symbols, but its capacity to reactivate – under a "modernist," and indeed global, guise – two principles long identified by Catholic theology as existential threats: the idea of an immanent divine principle pervading nature, and a model of religious knowledge grounded in individual experience rather than ecclesiastical mediation. These elements, repeatedly rejected in earlier engagements with gnostic, Neoplatonic and Hermetic currents, illuminism, and various forms of "occult sciences," re-emerged in the era of the anti-modernist controversy, as a renewed challenge to the Church's authority over the invisible.

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