Community Without Borders: Symbolism, Theosophy, and Anti-Colonialism in France, c. 1890

Marco Deyasi

University of Idaho

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IN 1889, AT THE UNIVERSAL EXPOSITION IN PARIS, the occultist and writer Gérard Encausse, better-known by his pseudonym Papus, was thrilled to meet actual Buddhist monks. He considered himself an expert on Buddhism and eagerly sought out the Vietnamese monks brought to France as part of the French imperial section (figure 1). France had only just completed conquering Northern Vietnam and promoted its colony to Europeans with a variety of pavilions including a Buddhist shrine made in Vietnam, shipped across the ocean in pieces, and reassembled in Paris as the "Pagoda of Great Tranquility." Papus was one of only a few Europeans invited to a ceremony therein and enthusiastically wrote about his experience in his esoteric and occultist monthly, L’Initiation (Initiation). Over the next three months, Papus would write a series of articles for his readers entitled "The Orient at the Universal Exposition," highlighting his occultist interpretation of what he saw. In contrast to the nationalistic and propagandistic purposes of the exposition, Papus dissented from the imperial messages that the exposition was meant to convey. In one article, he contrasted a French pavilion with an Indian pavilion facing it: "The Palace of War, bristling with machine guns, cannons, and cannon-balls, the only church that the self-proclaimed civilized West, could erect to face the Hindu pagoda." He asserted that Eastern civilizations had dedicated themselves to spiritual matters while the West was only interested in material things and that his goal was to bring the two civilizations and their complementary forms of knowledge closer together. One way that he did this was by promoting in the pages of L’Initiation a new occultist theory called Esoteric Buddhism, which claimed that Christ and the Buddha were actually manifestations of the same divinity and thus Europeans needed to humbly learn from Asian culture because
neither the East nor the West had a monopoly on truth or wisdom. As a result, Papus and his circle attempted to undermine the racist underpinnings that made colonialism possible.

At about the same time, the painter Paul Ranson, an avid occultist and member of a youthful group of Symbolist artists who called themselves the Nabis, painted an odd picture, *Christ and Buddha* (figure 2). The painting borrows the abstracted figure of the crucified Christ from Gauguin's earlier work, *The Yellow Christ* (1889) and puts it together with a seated Buddha and a Buddha head of a Cambodian or Thai type in the foreground, rendered in grey tones as though they are sculptures. Two lotus flowers appear between the Buddhas. The relatively unmodulated colors and dark outlines emphasize the abstraction of the image and subvert any possible perspectival space. The forms hover in front of a flattened red and orange background. What appear to be clouds around Christ take on the forms of praying figures. As Robert Welsh has indicated, these Buddhas are of a Thai or Cambodian type and Ranson must have seen statues like them at either the Universal Exposition or the newly-opened Indochinese Museum in the Trocadéro palace opposite the Eiffel Tower and the exposition grounds. Welsh has identified the source of Ranson's imagery in Alfred Percy Sinnett's text, *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883), noting that the painting is effectively an illustration of the book.

While other scholars have noted the esoteric imagery of the painting and discussed the role of occultist beliefs in Symbolist art, no-one has explored the cultural politics that *Christ and Buddha* represents and embodies. This paper will argue that esoteric and occultist ideas dovetailed with Symbolist Idealism and anti-naturalism and thus add a layer of egalitarian and anti-colonial cultural
politics to Symbolist interest in non-Western art, for example in Ranson’s painting. Far from being a condescending and derogatory primitivism or a colonial appropriation of subaltern culture, esoterically-inspired Symbolist art in France was inflected by the egalitarian and utopian politics of Esoteric Buddhism and related occultisms, including Theosophy and Martinism. Occultist writers like Papus demonstrated a pattern of appropriating scholarly, nationalist, and imperial sources and ideas for their own purposes. Central to these efforts was the importance of esotericism as an epistemology: like the Theosophists, occultists held firmly to the conviction that mainstream knowledge and religion obscured the real truths of nature, the world, and the divine. Only initiates could understand the secret knowledge and wisdom hidden behind the superficial appearances and overt doctrines of such religions as Christianity. In precisely the same way as they read mainstream doctrine against the grain, occultists appropriated the most advanced knowledge of Asia at the time from scholarly journals and public museums like the Guimet. Most significantly for this paper, they also “read” colonial propaganda like the Universal Exposition in ways that subverted its political messages, instead absorbing it into their own radically-egalitarian, anti-racist, and overtly anti-colonial cultural politics.

The roots of this anti-colonial and anti-racist orientation lay in the religious syncretism of Theosophy, in particular the belief that the secret wisdom could only be decoded by combining elements from Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, as well as Christianity. This syncretism led Theosophists and occultists to both celebrate Asian culture and to directly and unambiguously condemn racism and colonial oppression, as I will demonstrate. This paper will conclude with the argument that Ranson’s *Christ and Buddha* is emblematic of the Symbolist art
influenced by then current Theosophist and anti-colonialist understandings of Asia.

In the scholarly literature on Symbolism in France, conservative politics loom large. This may be the result of a focus on Maurice Denis and Joséphin Péladan as key Symbolists. Denis, a founding member of the Nabis, was not only a participant in the art movement but also one of its first chroniclers, writing both its first manifesto and its first history collected in *Theories, 1890-1900: From Gauguin and Symbolism to Classicism*. Péladan is an important figure since his group, the Order of the Rose and Cross, organized some of the earliest exhibitions of Symbolist art and the records of those exhibitions are vital documents. A number of studies have established the importance of Denis and Péladan’s politically conservative neo-Catholic (or Catholic Revival) ideas for Symbolist art and discourse. For instance, both Michael Marlais and Michael P. Driskel have correctly identified these ideas as contributing to Symbolist Idealism and anti-naturalism.

However, an understanding of Symbolism’s cultural politics that proceeds primarily from an examination of Denis and Péladan is misleading for an understanding of Symbolism as a whole, because it ignores the role of Esoteric Buddhism and Theosophy which also gripped Symbolists, including Denis and Péladan’s friends in the 1880s and 1890s. Denis and Péladan became more reactionary over time and therefore less likely to acknowledge or discuss the importance of occultism for Symbolist art and ideas. And thus their writings on Symbolism would have been affected by their politics. For instance, by the turn of the century Denis was a member of Adrien Mithouard’s extreme-right, antisemitic, and monarchist intellectual circle and published his essays in
Mithouard’s journal *L’Occident*. He later joined the extremist Action Française. Indeed, *Theories, 1890-1900* was first published by Mithouard’s press.

Similarly, there was a brief time in 1889 when Péladan was fully engaged in occultism before turning to the extreme right. He was listed as an "initiate" in *L’Initiation’s* exclusive masthead. Péladan formed his Order of the Rose and Cross after he acrimoniously broke with the influential occultist Stanislas de Guaïta over the issue of the role of Christianity in occultism. Péladan's neo-Catholic politics are indicated by the full name of his group: the Catholic Order of the Rose and Cross in contrast to Papus and de Guaïta's *Kabbalistic* Order of the Rose and Cross.

The evidence that this paper presents has implications that affect the art-historical understanding of primitivism and exoticism in Symbolist art, if not further afield. Inspired by Edward Said’s pioneering *Orientalism*, many studies have examined primitivism in modern art as complicit with colonial discourse. Most have pointed out the myriad ways in which primitivist and exoticist artists like Picasso and Gauguin demonstrated a profound ignorance of the non-Western art and culture which fascinated them. Other studies have argued that because these artists drew on colonial discourse and propagandistic presentations of colonized cultures like the Universal Expositions, their art necessarily reinscribed—rather than resisted—the racism inherent in the colonial culture of France around the turn of the century.

Rather than look to Said’s earlier work as a model, we can look to the insights that emerge from his later work, *Culture and Imperialism*, especially the insight that the imperial project and the national culture of the metropole are mutually-constitutive. This idea has been famously amplified by theorists like Homi
Bhabha and taken up productively by historians, anthropologists, and others.\textsuperscript{16} For instance, the anthropologist Nicholas Thomas argues in \textit{Colonialism’s Culture} that scholarship on the culture of colonialism is best done "from the inside," to rediscover how colonial actors imagined themselves despite how we in the twenty-first century might assess their motives.\textsuperscript{17}

This paper presents an alternative mode of understanding the exoticism or primitivism of Symbolist artists—and possibly other modernist artists as well—inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism. Bakhtin developed the idea as a way to theorize how multiple "voices" function in literature, but applied to art history the concept allows us to understand each utterance made by a historical actor as a response to previous utterances by others.\textsuperscript{18} In this way, it helps us understand the utterance in its context as well as the cultural politics embedded within it.

Although there have been a number of new studies of Theosophy and occultism by historians, very few art historians have addressed the subject. One of the few is Robert Welsh’s 1986 essay, a pioneering look at how artists like Gauguin and his followers in the Nabis were influenced by Theosophical doctrine, as well as inspired by its cultural politics. Most of the recent historical reconsiderations of spiritualism, occultism, and Theosophy by historians have sought to demonstrate that these varied occultisms were efforts to mediate the rapid pace of technological change and the accompanying social disruption that it caused. Occultism was a way to reconnect the spiritual and religious with science—especially through those new sciences that dramatically changed our understanding of the universe, like radioactivity and x-rays. In this way, many
historians now interpret occultism as an important part of modern culture, sometimes a formative influence within particular forms of modernism.\textsuperscript{19} 

More recently, the literary historian Leela Gandhi has reframed Theosophy by incorporating it into her study of the politics of friendship, \textit{Affective Communities}.\textsuperscript{20} Gandhi situates Theosophy as one of a range of cultural politics that was based on a sense of empathy for others, and thus had the potential to radically reconfigure the existing order of identities and hierarchies. As she points out Annie Besant, the second head of the Theosophical Society, is today revered as one of the mothers of Indian independence. It was Besant’s Theosophy that led her to fight against British colonialism and racism. Despite being detained by the colonial government, she was elected president of the Indian National Congress in 1917.\textsuperscript{21}

David Allen Harvey in his study of Occultism in France, \textit{Beyond Enlightenment}, argues that the particularly French tradition of Martinism, which mingled with Theosophy in the 1890s, was fundamentally conservative and promoted a vision of society as necessarily hierarchical. His interpretation centers on the occultist social theory called Synarchism, originally developed by Saint-Yves d’Alveydres and taken up by some French occultists. It did indeed promote a social organization that had a mystical and enlightened elite in control of the masses. In \textit{L’Initiation}, F.C. Barlet described synarchism as the “harmonious liberty of individuals organized hierarchically by science.”\textsuperscript{22} Caillé described synarchism as a harmonious social order that reflected the divine hierarchy of the heavens.\textsuperscript{23} He called for the establishment of universal solidarity and peace amongst all peoples, and a government divided into three levels: at the top, the central esoteric religious authorities; in the middle, the secular initiates and experts; and
at the bottom, the Republic and its authorities. Harvey is correct about these political ideas within the Martinist tradition. But in the 1880s and 1890s, the period that is the subject of this paper, Synarchism was a minor discourse within the larger occultist context. Even for Martinists like Papus, in the 1880s and 1890s, the left-wing politics of Theosophy were the dominant position.

Theosophy and Esoteric Buddhism’s precursor, Spiritualism, had a significant influence on them. Spiritualism was the mania that gripped many, especially in the United States, for communicating with the dead, via Ouija boards, séances, mediums, and the like. In France, Republican politics were often allied to spiritualism. At times, left-wing ideologies like Fourierist socialism were prominent and spiritualists looked to the afterlife for confirmation of their political beliefs. As several scholars have demonstrated, Spiritualism offered a place for women to rise to prominence and leadership positions. Indeed, as Alex Owen notes, all of the prominent women in Spiritualism espoused progressive sexual politics. This interest in women’s equality would be an important element of Theosophy.

In the context of late-nineteenth century France, Theosophy’s utopian and egalitarian vision for the union of East and West was a minority position generally affiliated with the radical left, especially anarchism. One of the most prominent ideas characteristic of esotericism was the notion that all peoples around the world and all individuals are equal, without regard to gender, race, class, or faith. This point was affirmed as fundamental to Theosophy in every issue of Blavatsky’s official journal in France, *Le Lotus bleu*: each month, there appeared a list of goals to which the Theosophical Society was working. Under
the heading "goals pursued by the Theosophical Society," the two "exoteric" goals are:

1. To form the basis for a universal fraternity of humanity, without distinction of sex, race, rank, or belief.
2. To study religions and philosophies, especially those of Antiquity and the Orient, in order to demonstrate that a same Truth is hidden under their differences.27

Mme Blavatsky claimed that she had been contacted from the afterlife by two ancient Asian sages who revealed their wisdom to her. She maintained that the world's religions were fundamentally the same and that universal precepts could be revealed through wide-ranging study. Among the religious traditions from which she and others drew were Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism—but especially the mystical traditions therein: neoplatonism, Sufism, and the Kabbala.

Discussing the relationship of Theosophy and politics, Le Lotus bleu affirmed that because Theosophy shared so many political ideas with socialism, "...our conviction is that Socialism and Theosophy cannot be antagonists. On the contrary, those who would identify themselves with esoteric philosophy must work in the same direction as the socialists, even though their doctrines seem the most materialistic..."28 Similarly, Revue des hautes études was committed to human equality and stood against bigotry from the very first issue in 1886. René Caillé, the director of the journal, published an article condemning Edouard Drumont, author of the infamous anti-Semitic text, La France juive. "To unite all the Religions into one based on science [i.e. esotericism] and the highest aspirations of Humanity, to bring together every heart and all people under the same flag—such is our mission."29
Esotericism’s left-wing politics are also demonstrated by interventions in the debate between Celtism and Latinism in the late-nineteenth century. As Mark Antliff has demonstrated, from the 1890s onwards there was an essentializing political debate that sought to locate the sources of French culture in the racialized qualities of a "national character." Political conservatives asserted that the culture of France was descended from the Roman Empire, and thus France’s culture was thus fundamentally "Latin" and based in the Southern regions of the country. Some political leftists, on the other hand, argued that the true culture of France lay in the North, with the "Celtic" peoples of the nation. Occultists came down firmly on the Celtic side of the debate. In 1891, L’Initiation reprinted a pamphlet that argued directly against the idea that France was a "neo-Latin" country with a Latin racial character, writing, "We are CELTS, at least for nineteen of the twenty centuries of our era." This notion of Celtism was directly linked to occultism, as revealed by Paul Sédir, a regular author in Papus’ journal, when he highlighted how Schuré’s book, Les Grandes légendes de France, revealed the Celtic character of the country.

From the earliest beginnings of the Symbolist movement, Idealism was central to its definition. As Michelle Facos describes, this meant a rejection of the naturalism and realism characteristic of Impression and earlier art movements and a turn towards aesthetic and intellectual abstraction. Although there was considerable diversity in artists’ understanding of the "Ideal," it tended to mean a turn away from representing the world as it was in everyday experience, both in literature and the visual arts. As Emile Verhaeren put it, "In Symbolism fact and world become mere pretexts for ideas: they are handled as appearances, ceaselessly variable, and ultimately manifest themselves as the dreams of our
brains.”\textsuperscript{34} Some Symbolists interpreted this imperative as a call to focus on their own inner states and emotions. Others looked to the divine. Notably, Maurice Denis identified neoplatonism as the source of his art, an identification reiterated by more recent scholars.\textsuperscript{35} In either case, Symbolist discourse consistently referred to the trope of looking behind the appearances of the natural world to find a deeper and more meaningful truth. For instance, Téodor de Wyzéwa, in what appears to be the first Symbolist text, wrote, "Everything is a symbol, every molecule contains the handwriting of the universe ... and art, the expression of all symbols, ought to be an idealized drama, summarizing and annulling the naturalistic representations whose deeper meanings are found in the should of the poet.”\textsuperscript{36} Further, Symbolist writers and theorists often celebrated the notion of correspondences as a way to abstract from the natural world into a world of intellect and spirit. Facos traces this back to Baudelaire's influential poem of the same name, highlighting how the poem also introduced the idea of "the coded symbol of an idea that the artist-genius could decipher and interpret for others."\textsuperscript{37} This formulation of hidden knowledge and insight paralleled occultist theory. In the 1890s, occultists made a distinction between "esoteric" and "exoteric" knowledge, the former being the secret knowledge available only to themselves and the latter being ordinary knowledge available to all.\textsuperscript{38} Therefore, it should not be surprising that some Symbolists would be drawn to occultist and Theosophical ideas, since these esoteric ideas also described the nature of truth and the worth in the same way: as symbols to be decoded by advanced or élite individuals.

Contemporary sources indicate that occultists clearly thought that Symbolism was consistent with their own ideas. In 1891, \textit{Le Voile d’Isis} published an article
on "esoteric painters." The author simply assumed that every prominent Symbolist was an esotericist. He quoted a friend whose description reveals that Symbolist was occultist art, at least as occultists interpreted it: "Painters adept in spiritual art, immaterial. Consider the imitation of nature to be the negation of art...Look at nature until they perceive the intimate esoteric meaning. Art essentially decorative, synthetist and abstract." Like Symbolist writers and theorists, the author expressed pity for people captivated by the "vulgar stupidities" of "realistic" art, and asserted that the new art revealed the laws of the universe and of the Divine: "By contrast, with the spirit of the aesthete ..., Nature pleases to reveal the eternal laws behind her changing forms." This article, published in Papus' prominent weekly journal, demonstrates that as soon as Symbolist art emerged it was received by occultists as a visual parallel to their own beliefs.

Articles in Symbolist journals indicate that the fascination ran in both directions. In the mid-1890s, the most important Symbolist literary and artistic journals *La Plume* and *La Revue Blanche* ran a series of articles written by major esotericists that introduced their audience to mystical ideas; this was in addition to other articles on spiritualism and religious revival. *La Plume* began in 1892 with a special issue on magic, the introduction written by Papus. That same year and the next, *La Plume* published a long series of articles on "Ecritures bouddhiques" by Victor Barrucand, an anarchist activist. This series was soon matched by *La Revue blanche*, which printed a regular column by Paul Sédir, a major contributor to Papus' *L'Initiation*. The series would cover many different esoteric topics including Buddhism, Hinduism, and various forms of magic. For *La Plume*, this interest in esotericism would continue through the end of the
decade. The journal’s regular column, "Chroniques idéalistes," on occultist topics would promote such events as a Congress of Universal Peace as well as Papus' *L’Initiation*. Many other articles also promoted Papus' ideas.

Edouard Schuré and Sinnett caused a mania for Buddhism among occultists. As early as 1885, Schuré was writing essays that promoted the idea that Christ and the Buddha were incarnations of the same divinity with the claim that Eastern and Western cultures shared access to ancient wisdom. He later expanded these ideas in *Les Grands initiés*. Sinnet argued that Buddhism was the source of ancient and secret knowledge, even as he drew from Hinduism and Christianity in formulating his ideas. Sinnett’s book was published in a French translation in 1890, but his ideas circulated as early as February 1889 when the first issue of *Revue théosophique* summarized his book. Sinnett was a competitor of Blavatsky’s, arguing for a slightly different interpretation of Theosophy than she. They disagreed about the role of Christianity, Blavatsky insisting that it was central to Theosophical doctrine while Sinnett asserted the importance of Buddhism instead. For a brief time, Sinnett was more successful at promoting his ideas. A number of Parisian occultist journals took Sinnett as the main representative of Theosophy, so much so that Blavatsky felt the need to remind her readership that they were, in fact, quite separate.

Asian Buddhism was the subject of dozens of articles in occultist journals from 1888 through the 1890s, but the height of the mania was around 1890. Many of the articles that appeared in occultist journals took great care to introduce the specific doctrines and sects of Buddhism, as they were understood in Asia, country by country. The authors often showed sophisticated knowledge of
Buddhist doctrine, which they gleaned from a variety of sources including mainstream and scholarly ones.

Just as Papus visited the 1889 exposition for information on Vietnamese Buddhism, other occultists appropriated and reinterpreted academic and museum sources in their quest to learn about Asian religion and culture. Their use of scholarly and official sources paralleled their pattern of selectively reading "exoteric" doctrines to find secret "esoteric" knowledge. For example, *La Revue théosophique* recommended that its readers attend an international congress of ethnography, specifically so that they could learn about Buddhism from important scholars of Asia such as Georges Maspéro and Léon de Rosny. De Rosny, the first president of an early Asianist scholarly society, was quoted in the pages of *L’Initiation*. Another of Papus' journals, the weekly *Le Voile d’Isis* even advertised his book on Buddhism. Similarly, the opening of the Guimet Museum in Paris was eagerly anticipated by esotericists, who saw its collection of Asian art as an opportunity to engage directly with Buddhist culture, much as they saw the 1889 exposition. The Guimet Museum's scholarly publications were also regularly read by occultists. Two years after the Universal Exposition, the Guimet museum succeeded in arranging for a Buddhist ceremony to be performed by a visiting Japanese monk. Although the occasion was attended by government ministers and other representatives of the colonial state, esotericists were keenly interested. *Le Voile d’Isis* noted the ceremony and its appeal for what they called "serious Buddhists," just as they did with the Guimet Museum's collection and publications.

Because of their reliance on scholarly sources, many esoteric articles on Buddhism evinced detailed knowledge of Vietnamese and Cambodian religious
traditions. Books on Indochinese Buddhism were discussed and advertised in the pages of *L’Initiation* along with books on Indian, Chinese, and Japanese versions of the faith.\textsuperscript{54} Not only did established Indochinese faiths interest esotericists, but they also paid attention to contemporary religious practices in Asia as part of their program of spreading their ideas. In 1895, Papus noted how pleased he was that Theosophical doctrine had spread as far as Indochina.\textsuperscript{55}

When the 1889 exposition opened, esotericists were already immersed in Buddhism and thus primed to seek out the Asian culture on display. The same selectivity and willingness to appropriate religious ideas encouraged them to use this overtly colonial government propaganda despite ironically maintaining an anti-colonial political stance. Despite the contradictions inherent in this gesture, the occultists attempted to reinterpret the exposition for their own purposes while dissenting from the dominant imperial message.

Yet the esotericists seemed to have already demonstrated that it was possible to use colonial resources in order to create an oppositional and anti-colonial vision replete with direct condemnations of government policies and ideology. In 1890, there was an existing example of an esotericist who used the colonial government to travel to Vietnam and develop his occultist studies of Asian culture. This was Albert de Pouvourville who joined the Foreign Legion in order to go to Tonkin and find spiritual renewal (figure 3).\textsuperscript{56} He was an avid esotericist and senior editor of the élite *partie initiatique* of *L’Initiation*; a lifelong friend of de Guaïta, he also published a biography of his friend as a tribute.\textsuperscript{57} Once in Vietnam, he studied Taoism with a Vietnamese teacher and adopted the Vietnamese name Matgioi (or Mat Gioi), under which he would publish for the rest of his life.\textsuperscript{58} He continued publishing in *L’Initiation* in 1894-95.\textsuperscript{59} In 1894, he
published a remarkable book on Indochinese art. His book was unparalleled for decades in its comprehensiveness and sensitivity to the art of all regions of the colony. Most studies of Indochinese art through the 1930s and beyond focused solely on Cambodia; Laotian art, for instance, was nearly always ignored because it was seen as too primitive. Not only did Pouvourville include Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese art, but he also combined the fine arts with architecture and the decorative arts, creating in effect the first study of the visual and material culture of Indochina. I suggest that it was his immersion in the antiracist values of occultism that led to him to appreciate a wider range of Indochinese art than nearly all of his contemporaries. Without the sensitivity to Asian culture encouraged by Theosophy, it is hard to imagine how Pouvourville could have written this unique text. The book was received enthusiastically by esotericists in France who continued to see Pouvourville’s texts as representing their world view. However, Pouvourville would later rise in the colonial service and leave behind the radical politics of Paris, becoming an officially celebrated "exotic" poet of Indochina. Ultimately, he would become a powerful agent supporting colonial policy and a voice reiterating colonial ideology. However in 1890, he had yet to make those choices, and Papus' circle enthusiastically supported him as one of their own.

Esotericists not only dissented from the colonial politics of the 1899 exposition, they also directly opposed the larger imperial messages of the exposition in the pages of their journals. Through the influence of Theosophy, occultists affirmed the equality of all people and promoted respect for Asian religion, traditions, and culture. Esotericists took many opportunities to criticize specific colonial policies. Numerous articles in the journals L’Initiation, Le Voile
d’Isis, *La Revue des hautes études*, and *Le Lotus bleu* expressed strong criticism of both colonial ideology in general and policies and events in particular.

The anti-colonial positions taken by esotericists were a natural development from both their eclectically leftist politics and Theosophical utopianism. As early as 1888, *Le Lotus*, a Theosophical journal inspired by Blavatsky but not affiliated with her, criticized French missionaries in Asia as poor representatives of French civilization due to their racism and ignorant dismissal of Asian culture. A decade later, *L’Initiation* published a regular series of articles on colonial and international issues by an author using the pseudonym Triplex. These articles were highly critical of imperialism and the results they caused for colonized peoples around the world. For instance, in May 1896, Triplex denounced the political games, including war, that nations played on the world stage as they attempted to maximize their own power. “Each nation tends to identify itself with its people, that is, to bring together into a powerful unit all the natural ethnographic diversity, but this can only be achieved through the gross and dangerous fiction of military dictatorship.” In his next column, he powerfully condemned France’s role in causing the current famine in Tonkin through trade policies with China. Starvation, he wrote sarcastically, “is how we colonize, how we export free trade to ’barbarian’ countries, the great principles of European civilization!” He called the arguments of colonial authorities specious because the colonizers neither understood nor appreciated the differences between the Chinese and French civilizations. In the 1890s, Tonkin was still being forcibly "pacified" by French troops, and Triplex continued to monitor the situation there for the readers of *L’Initiation*. 
The artistic journal *Le Coeur* demonstrates that mystical and occultist ideas were symbiotic with Symbolist art. After Péladan became a neo-Catholic and broke with esotericism in June 1890, the influential esotericist Jules Bois and the Symbolist artist Antoine de la Rochefoucauld founded the journal as a voice for the renewal of religious art. *Le Coeur* was distinct among Symbolist journals because of its commitment to esotericism and mysticism, no doubt due to Bois' guidance as editor-in-chief. Bois was the influential author of esoteric books like *Satanisme et la magie*; he rivaled Stanislas de Guaita in terms of his influence among occultists, often publishing in other venues like *La Plume*, *L’Initiation*, and *Le Voile d’Isis*. De la Rochefoucauld was an artist who began his career with Péladan and continued to adhere to occultism after founding the journal. The politics of the journal were radically left-wing, consistent with Theosophy and anarchism. For instance, when reviewing the anarchist Jean Grave's *La Société mourante et l’anarchie* in 1893, they gave it a glowing review and expressed agreement with its arguments.

Theosophical ideas of the 1890s were prominent in *Le Coeur*’s pages from the very first issue, which contained an advertisement for Bois' esoteric and Kabalistic course, "Occultism, Esotericism, and Magic: History, Philosophy, The Orthodox Ritual." The list of lecture titles indicates that esoteric Buddhism was prominent in Bois’ lectures; one lecture centered on the similarities of Jesus to Buddha, probably taken from the works of Schuré and Sinnet. Bois’ final lecture in the series discussed de la Rochefoucauld’s art in conjunction with Blavatsky and Schuré’s Theosophical interpretations of Buddhism. *Le Coeur* even published excerpts of Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*, an important source for esoteric interpretations of Asian religions. Esoteric Buddhism continued to appear in the
journal’s pages, as did evidence that the authors appropriated mainstream interpretations of Asian culture in the same manner as Papus and his circle. An article of 1893 on the fundamental similarities between Christ and the Buddha cites the Guimet Museum as a source of information on Buddhist doctrine.73

Gauguin’s friend, the prominent occultist artist Claude-Emile Schuffenecker, extolled the importance of the ”Oriental” Buddha for the renewal of religious art in the pages of the journal:

The flame must be lit again. Christ had lit it in the West. His work is dead, or at least moribund;... who will lift the fallen torch, the flame needed for Spirituality? Will it be the Oriental Buddha? Whoever he is, he should hurry, otherwise there will be no art.74

Similarly, Le Coeur positively reviewed one of the Nabis’ first exhibitions, emphasizing points that demonstrate that the journal's readership saw Symbolist art and esoteric doctrine as synonymous: ”Mr. Maurice Denis is a mystic par excellence. To him goes the admiration of Le Coeur. He does not want to see the material side of form; he abstracts so as to create only geometric lines, wisely arabesque, and does not present himself except through the Decorative.”75

The Nabis were a secretive group of Symbolist artists active in France from 1888 to the late 1890s; individually, they continued their careers well into the twentieth century. The group was formed in October of 1888 from the direct inspiration of Gauguin’s abstraction and primitivism.76 A painting that Sérisier made under Gauguin’s tutelage was called The Talisman due to the transformative effects it had on the group of young art students who then rejected their academic training, took the name ”Nabis,” and became Symbolists. The group had several core members: Denis, Edouard Vuillard, Ker-Xavier Roussel, Sérisier, Bonnard, Ranson, and Henri-Gabriel Ibels.77 Other artists who
joined later include Félix Vallotton, József Rippl-Rónai, Jan Verkade, Georges Lacombe, and Aristide Maillol. Symbolist art in France in the early 1890s, such as that of the Nabis, encapsulated both the Catholic mysticism of Denis and Verkade as well as the Theosophical ideas of Ranson, Sérusier, and Lacombe.

The Nabis combined mysticism with aesthetic modernism. Esotericism was a profound influence on their early years together. The word "nabi" (plural nabis) was based on the Hebrew and Arabic words for "prophet" and was suggested by their friend Auguste Cazalis, a scholar of Hebrew.78 Because Jewish mysticism from the Kabbalistic tradition was a prominent part of esotericism in those years, Cazalis' suggestion would thus have held occultist connotations. Further, the word "nabi" was being used by Blavatsky and Schuré at the same time79. Most of the Nabis were personally immersed in Theosophy and esotericism, with Ranson and Sérusier being the most avid devotees.80

According to Janine Méry, Blavatsky's Revue Théosophique was an important source for the Nabis, most of whom read it avidly.81 They also frequented esoteric bookstores, in particular, Edmond Bailly's Librairie de l'Art Indépendant, which opened by 1885. Bailly was an occultist, member of the Theosophical Society, and magician.82 As she discusses, his store was a nexus for occultism and Symbolism, since not only did Bois and Schuré frequent it, but so did Symbolist artists and writers like Schuffenecker, Emile Bernard, Gustave Moreau, and Stéphane Mallarmé. The Nabis also regularly went to Papus and Chamuel's La Librairie du Merveilleux. That store was the meeting place of the Groupe Indépendant d'Etudes Esotériques run by Papus.

As part of the Symbolist and occultist milieu of Paris, the Nabis were also influenced by radical politics. They also were engaged with anarchism. In the
1890s, their closest friends and patrons were anarchists, especially the Natanson brothers, owners of *La Revue blanche*. Other patrons were also anarchists, such as the theater director Auralien Lugné-Poë, who employed them to produce programs, posters, and set designs. His *Théâtre de l’Oeuvre* was a Symbolist theater that dramatized the plays of radical playwrights like Henrik Ibsen.\(^3\)

Lugné-Poë’s theater was described by a police informant as an “anarchist literary society.”\(^4\) The Nabis’ politics also inflected their relations with the Symbolist arts community. For instance, the group refused to join Péladan’s new religious Salon de la Rose+Croix, founded after he become a neo-Catholic.\(^5\)

By 1889, Ranson was one of the Nabis most enthusiastically interested in spiritualism.\(^6\) He owned copies of several major Theosophical and esoteric works: Schuré’s, *Les Grand initiés*, Papus’ *Traité élémentaire de science occulte*, Eliphas Lévi’s *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, Pol de Saint Léonard’s *Les Fils de dieu*, and Bois’ *Les Petites religions de Paris* and *Satanisme et la magie*.\(^7\) By 1893, Ranson was close friends with Jules Bois, and submitted a drawing that was published with one of Bois’ poems in *Le Coeur*.\(^8\) For most of his life, Ranson remained good friends with the sculptor Lacombe, who was also one of the most avid occultists of the Nabis group.\(^9\) In 1890, Sérusier painted a fanciful portrait of Ranson that highlighted his fascination with mysticism. The work shows his friend dressed as a priest or initiate, consulting an ancient book, and surrounded by esoteric symbols, *Portrait of Paul Ranson in Nabi Attire* (figure 4). Sérusier has depicted Ranson in an indeterminate space, holding a prominent staff in in his right hand and pointing to a mystical text. A large halo appears in the background behind his head. Stylistically indebted to Gauguin’s cloissonism, the figure is delineated with a black outline with little shading and relatively flat areas of color,
suggesting a figure who exists outside of space and time. However, Sérusier has balanced the abstraction of the image with clearly readable representational elements; the work resembles an icon or other didactic religious image, where visual legibility would have important for communicating specific symbolism to the audience. Welsh and Méry have catalogued many symbols that appear in this portrait. Welsh identifies a Greek cross on Ranson’s neckband and zodiacal signs for the planets Jupiter and Venus; his right hand rests on a pentagram or hexagram inscribed in the book. Méry argues that the bright green jewel at Ranson’s neck is the Tablula Smaragdina or ”tablette d’émeraude” attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, as interpreted by Papus; the undulating serpent on the cross may be a symbol of power and knowledge, both good and evil. The five-pointed star may represent humanity or intelligence and the large orange disk might be the Lumière de la Parole, as explained by Schuré.

Ranson made a number of works with themes and subjects that combine mysticism with Symbolist abstraction and primitivism. For example, Paysage nabique (or Le Nabi, 1890, figure 5) shows a bearded ”nabi” in an imaginary landscape rendered with flat planes of brilliant, unmodulated color. The central figure squats on the lower left, surrounded by a kind of irregular mandorla; the other two main figures are the bird in the center of the canvas and the nude woman riding an imaginary bird in the upper left. Each figurative element is rendered with little shading, surrounded by a black outline, and seems to float over the background. The man seems to sit on a ground line that also delineates a separate visual register below filled with abstract floral decoration; the color of the sky visually echoes this device and evokes the kind of hieratic representation within registers characteristic of ancient Mesopotamian and Babylonian art. Yet
there is a tension between this abstraction and perspectival devices: Ranson has suggested recession into space through the varied size of the trees in the center; further, the man and the woman undermine the division of the canvas into registers by intruding in the top and bottom spaces (she flies into the sky and he picks a naturalistic flower from among the abstract ones below). Méry and Bitker identify the imagery as drawn directly from Schuré's texts. They indicate that the main figure is the Hindu god Rama, rather than a "nabi," who wears an ouroboros bracelet on his wrist; the female figure in the upper right is Sita, wife of Rama, returning to Earth. On the back of the painting are Arabic letters that spell out "nabi." Overall, Ranson has synthesized Western modes of perspectival representation with the visual forms of a Gauguinesque modernist style combined with overt references to obscure occultist symbols.

In *Hippogriffe* (1891, figure 6), Ranson painted the mythical beast of the title in an imaginary landscape like that of *Paysage nabique*. As before, there is little shading on the outlined figures who appear to hover over an imaginary landscape rendered with brilliant, non-naturalistic colors. The symbolism is again overtly esoteric: the title figure is the beast on the left with the three heads of Brahma, the Hindu god of creation; it is accompanied by a female figure whose lower body is that of a snake and might be the goddess Mélusine. If these identifications are correct, the painting combines references to multiple "Oriental" cultures: the headdress on the Hindu head is decorated with Mesopotamian cuneiform characters, while the general form of the head and conical headdress recalls the ancient Khmer towers of the Bayon of Ankor Thom, part of France's Asian colony.
Ranson's *Christ and Buddha* combines Symbolist abstraction with the overt influence of esotericism and clear references to Southeast Asian art. In this painting, Ranson's sources for his esoteric imagery and subject are clearest, and thus I contend that he was attempting to encode the universalizing and utopian esoteric interpretation of Asia into the work, especially the belief in the cultural and religious equality of Asia and Europe so firmly held by occultists like Papus. He combined this spirituality with the arabesque and abstracted style characteristic of Symbolism art. He gave it the name "Confrérie nabie" or "Nabi Brotherhood" (written in Arabic letters on the back), which may refer to the universal brotherhood of all people articulated by Theosophy. I suggest that because the painting overtly quotes esoteric symbolism and spirituality it is therefore inflected with the the oppositional and anti-colonial discourse of esotericism circa 1889-1892, which viewed all religions and peoples as equal.

This paper has laid out the cultural politics of Theosophical and occultist Symbolism in Paris, a significant strand in Symbolist art and ideas more generally. As I have demonstrated, the evidence from contemporary Symbolist journals indicates that their readers were interested in Theosophy and related forms of occultism such as Esoteric Buddhism. All of these forms of occultism, like Spiritualism before them, promoted ideas of cultural, racial, and gender equality that were extremely left-wing for the time. Although these cultural politics can sometimes be ambiguous, the historical record is clear: occultist discourse was both anti-colonial in terms of opposing specific policies of the colonial governments, and because it undercut the racist chauvinism that was at the heart of colonial propaganda. Instead, Theosophy and occultism imagined an equality of East and West and promoted a utopian vision of global racial and
cultural harmony, because they believed that the deeper truths of both knowledge and faith can only be grasped by humbly learning from one another across national and cultural boundaries. These antiracist and anti-colonial ideas inflected the art of Ranson just as ultramontane conservatism influenced the art and ideas of Maurice Denis and remain a topic to be further explored.
Notes


3 The first article was simply an announcement of the upcoming series. See "L’Orient à l’Exposition Universelle," *L’Initiation* 4, no. 10 (July 1889), 94-95.

4 "C’est le Palais de la Guerre, hérissé de mitrailleuses, de canons et de boulets, seule église que l’Occident, soi-disant civilisé, ait pu élever en face de la Pagode indoue." Papus, "L’Orient à l’Exposition Universelle," *L’Initiation* 4, no. 11 (Aug. 1889), 188.


6 The work may represent Thai sculptures, but the figures closely resemble the Cambodian sculptures in Parisian collections around the turn of the century. One of the earliest available catalogues of Indochinese art in French collections shows figures that strongly resemble the Buddha in the Ranson painting. Georges Coèdes, *Catalogues des pièces de sculpture khmère conservées au Musée inochinois du Trocadéro et au Musée Guimet* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, Ernest Leroux, Editeur, 1910). For example, figure 22. Welsh also argued that Ranson was influenced by the Cambodian art available in Paris in 1889 at the exposition or in the Trocadéro museum. Welsh, 66. Genty agrees that Ranson would have had access to Cambodian sculpture at either the exposition or the new Musée Indochinois du Trocadéro, which opened simultaneously. See Genty in Bitker and Genty, cat. no. 6, 52.


15 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993). This reading of Said’s later work has been highlighted by Maren Möhring, Mark Stein, and Silke Stroh, in their introduction to *Hybrid Cultures - Nervous States: Britain and Germany in a (Post) Colonial World* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010), xix.


22 F. Ch. Barlet, "Cours méthodique de Science occulte," *L’Initiation* 3, no. 8 (May 1889), 111.


27 "1. Former le noyau d’une fraternité universelle de l’humanité, sans distinction de sexe, de race, de rang ou de croyance.
   2. Étudier les religions et les philosophies, spécialement celles de l’Antiquité et de l’Orient, afin de démontrer qu’une même Vérité est cachée sous leur divergences." *Le Lotus bleu* 3 (May 7, 1890), inside cover.

28 "Pour en arriver à l’objet de cet article, notre conviction est donc que Socialisme et Théosophie ne peuvent être en antagonisme. Au contraire, ceux qui veulent s’identifier aux destinées de la philosophie ésotérique doivent travailler dans la même direction que les socialistes, même dont les doctrines semblent les plus matérialistes, mais sur des plans différents." Bright, "Théosophie et Socialisme moderne (suite)," *Le Lotus bleu* 10 (Dec. 7, 1890): 137. The second part of the article appeared in no. 10 (Dec 7, 1890): 126-141.


34 Verhaeren, quoted in Facos, 16.


36 De Wyzéwa, quoted in Facos, 9.

37 Facos, 46.

De Lacroze, 4:


"Peintres adeptes de l’art spiritualisé, immaterial. Considérant l’imitation de la nature comme la négation de l’art, cette imitation est le but de l’enseignement officiel: Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Salon, etc.

Donner la sensation de l’âme des choses et des êtres est leur but. Regarder la nature jusqu’à en percevoir le sens intime ésotérique. Art essentiellement décoratif, synthétiste et abstrait."

"Par contre, à l’esprit de l’esthète, austère amant de Tiphereth, la Nature se plaît à reveler les lois éternelles de ses formes changeantes." De Lacroze, 5.

La Plume 78 (July 15, 1892). The introduction by Papus was pp. 317-38.


The series started with: Sédir, "Occultisme," La Revue blanche 11, no 74 (July 1, 1896). The series continued as: "Chronique de l'occultisme," vol. 11, no. 75 (July 15, 1896); "Maisons Hantée", vol. 11, no. 76 (Aug. 1, 1896); "La Danse des Tables," vol. 11, no. 77 (Aug. 15, 1896); "Un Mystique Hindou," vol. 11, no. 83 (Nov. 15, 1896).

The promotion of the Congress appeared in La Plume (1897): 218. See also Jacques Brieu, "Chronique Idealiste: comment on devient occultiste," no. 171 (June 1, 1896): 363-65 which is about Papus and quotes his idea that the Christian trinity parallels the Hindu Trimurtri (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva).


A long article on Theosophy in L’Initiation was primarily a discussion of Sinnett’s ideas, rather than Blavatsky’s. See Eugène Nus, "Le Système Théosophique," L’Initiation (July 1889): 9-54. Later, in Le Lotus, a journal inspired by Blavatsky’s Theosophy and with a similar title as own official French journal would use, she published an article where she took care to distinguish Theosophy from Buddhism. See "Théosophie et Bouddhisme," Le Lotus 18 (Sept. 1888): 321-31. In a later article, she asserted that mainstream Buddhism should be spelled "bouddhisme" and Sinnett’s esoteric Buddhism as "boudhisme". See "La
clef du Théosophie” *Le Lotus bleu* 1, no. 3 (May 7, 1890): 170-71. Blavatsky also dissociated her ideas from those of Sinnett in The Key to Theososphy (1889). See Owen, 32.

49 *La Revue théosophique* 8 (Sept. 1889): 96.


51 *Revue théosophique* 2, no. 10 (Dec. 1889): 188-90. Shortly after the museum opened, *La Revue spirite* ran a series of articles discussing its collection and displays. See *La Revue spirite*’s series by Augustin Chaboseau, which ran from no. 3 (March 1, 1890) to no. 6 (June 1, 1890), See also Chaboseau’s "Offices bouddhiques à l’Exposition," *La Revue spirite* 24 (Dec. 15, 1889): 737.

52 Jules Doinel, a regular contributor to *L’Initiation* indicated that he followed the Guimet Museum’s scholarly journal in "La Gnose Çivaïte," *L’Initiation* (June 1891): 222.

53 *Le Voile d’Isis* 17 (March 11, 1891). The first ceremony was on Feb. 21, 1891 and was attended by Jules Ferry and Edgar Degas, among others. A second was held on Nov. 13, 1893.


56 Théophane [Champrenaud], 21.


59 Laurent, 55.

60 Matgioi [Albert de Pouvoirville], L’*Art indochinois* (Paris: Librairies-Imprimeries réunis, 1894).

Théophane [Champrenaud], 29, 45-48.

CAOM, Fonds Ministériels, Agence France Outre Mer (F.O.M.) box 248, dossier 361, "Vie culturelle-littérature du XVI siècle à 1954."


"Chaque nation tend à s’identifier à son people, c’est-à-dire à rassembler en une unité puissant tous les éléments ethnographiques naturels, mais elle ne l’essaye ou n’y arrive guère que par l’artifice grossier et dangereux de la dictature militaire." Triplex, "Bulletin politique," (May 1896), 85.

"Voilà comment on colonise, comment on importe dans les pays barbares (!) la liberté du commerce, les grands principes de la civilisation européenne!!" (italics and extra punctuation in original). In *L’Initiation* 31, no. 8 (June 1896): 283.


*Le Coeur* 10 (June 1895): 2. Schuffenecker wrote:

"Il faut rallumer le flambeau. Christ l’avait allumé en notre Occident. Son œuvre est morte, ou du moins agonisé; elle ne ressuscitera probablement pas. Comme aux fêtes antiques, qui relèvera la torche tombée à terre, la flamme nécessaire de la Spiritualité? Sera-ce le Bouddha oriental? Quel qu’il soit, qu’il se hâte, sinon point d’art."


"M. Maurice Denis est par excellence un mystique. A lui donc l’admiration du Coeur. Il ne veut pas percevoir le côté matériel d’une forme; il s’abstrait pour ne créer que des lignes géométriques, savamment arabesques, et ne s’offrant que sous un aspect décoratif. L’art décoratif de M. Maurice Denis est absolument spontané; certes il doit admirer, nous n’en saurions trop le féliciter, l’art délicat
des maîtres japonais, si étroitement lié à celui de Botticelli; mais il a su inventer de toutes pièces une forme d’art, fait entièrement de symbole."


79 An article by Blavatsky in December 1889 used "nabi" to describe the "holy people of Israel." See Helena Blavatsky, "Le Phare de l’Inconnu," Revue Théosophique 3 (1889): 8. Schuré’s book also used the word in a chapter on Moses and Guicheteau suggests it was his use that made it respectable. See Marcel Guicheteau, Paul Sérusier (Paris: Editions Side, 1976), 47, note 63.

80 Chassé, 13. Welsh corroborates the interest of the Nabis in Theosophy, finding evidence of its influence on their compositions and symbolism. Welsh, 63.


84 Hyman, 30.


86 Despite Ranson and the Nabis’ involvement with esotericism, Brigitte Ranson-Bitker maintains that her grandfather’s interest in spiritualism and Theosophy was never serious, only in fun (personal communication, February 25, 2004). However, Méry disputes this, noting that it was true only for some members of the Nabis. Méry, "Le Mysticism chez quelques peintres Nabis," 35. Ranson-Bitker even goes further and incorrectly asserts that research on the spiritualism of the Nabis only began in 2000. See Méry and Bitker. I agree with Chassé, Guicheteau, and other scholars of an earlier generation who established that Ranson, Sérusier, and others were profoundly involved with and influenced by esoteric ideas. Ranson-Bitker may be recalling a later period in Ranson’s life where he amused his children with an unserious spiritualism. Further, she is a retired medical doctor and it is easy to imagine that she might have little patience for pseudo-science. However, I am convinced that evidence from the early 1890s indicates that he was serious about it earlier in his life.
87 Patrick Waldberg, Paul Ranson, ex. cat. Galleria del Levante (Milan, 1967); also Welsh, 68; and Boyle-Turner, 76.


90 Welsh, 71.

91 Méry, "Le Mysticisme chez quelques peintres Nabis," 79.

92 Méry and Bitker, "Un Nabi ésotérique?"

Without any opportunities of redress or restitution, communities' existing system of justice and sense of fairness, including the traditional respect for private, were rendered irrelevant: the power of the gun was a new form of administering ‘justice’. In such a way, the dictatorial regime was cultivated, imposed and in time, increasingly tolerated. Any Herero found within the German borders with or without a gun, with or without cattle, will be shot. I shall no longer receive any women or children; I will drive them back to their people or have them fired upon. This is my decision for the Herero people. Colonialism in any case was doomed to die a natural death, but not without resistance. It would be wrong to say that war in itself is an answer to all human problems. But sometimes it is a necessary evil.