

MIKAEL ROTHSTEIN

Rituals and Religious Innovation

The Meaning of Rituals in Shan the Rising Light

Introduction

The new religions, each in their own way, present a belief system unknown to the surroundings, thereby dissociating themselves from the familiar, while developing their own identity. Religious innovations, however, can also be studied via the development or change that takes place in the rituals. Now and then a new ritual orientation or ritual structure is a very significant expression of the new religious identity that is gradually developing, and at the same time informative with regards to the underlying belief system. In this paper it is my intention to present an example of how rituals may play an important role in the birth of a new religion, and how this religious innovation can be interpreted through the rituals. This example concerns a religious group — Shan the Rising Light — that has managed to introduce a comprehensive body of rituals into a belief system otherwise characterized by its general lack of rituals and ceremonies (namely the theosophy of Madame Blavatsky), thereby setting the standards for a virtually new religion (another example of the new religions, focusing on the rituals and their function during the formation of the religion, is given in Rothstein 1991).

Theoretical and Methodological Notes

The studies of new religious groups in the Western world has primarily been sociological. Of course this approach is absolutely necessary, but any sociological (and that very often means comparative) analysis needs monographical descriptions of the groups in order to do them justice. This contribution concerns one aspect of such a monographical outlining and stresses historical and phenomenological themes rather than sociology.

This exposition is based on a minor fieldwork conducted during 1990 and 1991 in Shan the Rising Light and related groups: Interviews, less

formal conversations, participant observations and literature of various kinds, all form part of the source material. It is important to observe, though, that my research to this point is rather limited. I have not had the opportunity to study the group more intensively and therefore I have restricted my interest to the rituals and their use. As the rapid process of change and construction in Shan the Rising Light seems to go on and on, one can understand that the results presented here are nothing but *status quo* in the autumn of 1991¹.

However relevant a monographical study may be, another aspect of the analysis may prove no less interesting: It is my suggestion that the study of contemporary developments in minor religions and religious sects may cast some light on the formation of previous religious innovations. In principle I find it possible to use the vast modern material as a comparison in our efforts to understand similar phenomena in ancient sects or new religions, of which only a little is known. This, of course, is not the intention here, but one should not ignore the possibility of such an undertaking.

Shan the Rising Light — Background and Belief

Shan the Rising Light was founded by the Danish woman Jeanne Morashti (b. Jeanne Ruben in 1946) in 1987. In the esoteric context her name is Ananda Tara Shan; "The Blissful Mother of the Earth". In fact the group has existed since 1982, but with other names and other spiritual functions according to the divine instructions that are followed. A less formalized group around Jeanne Morashti is likely to have existed even earlier, especially because her spiritual work, according to her present followers, started as early as 1977. Thus the name Shan the Rising Light indicates the current phase in the life of the group and indeed in the spiritual career of its charismatic leader Jeanne Morashti. The names The Society for Maitreya Theosophy, Rosenhaven (The Rose Garden), The Church of the Sacred Heart of Maitreya and Right Human Relations are those (of which some may cover special sections of the organization) used during the last ten years. It is predicted that a new name will be introduced in 1992 (when new, epoch-making revelations in the shape of books are expected to be received from the divine beings), and another during the final spiritual revolts expected to happen in 1997. This development, with its significant

¹ I wish to thank my informants for their willingness to cooperate.

millennial perspectives, can easily be traced through the bulky writings of Ananda Tara Shan's closest associate and disciple Asger Lorentsen, and in the magazine "Shan" until recently published by the group.

Shan the Rising Light in Denmark has around 60 inner-members while another 60 are more loosely connected. Many people from the broader non-institutionalized New Age-milieu may visit the group, but such persons can hardly be considered actual adepts. Together with Ananda Tara Shan, seven individuals lead the group² (Beckford 1985 provides a good model for analyzing such internal differentiation, although the Shan movement is not mentioned). The group runs a "spiritual community", a semi-monastic commune called Ananda Ashram in Gundsøllille near Roskilde, but Ananda Tara Shan herself has lived in Australia since 1982. At that time she established what was then called The Church of the Sacred Heart of Maitreya in Melbourne³. This Australian group today has around 200 inner-members, according to my Danish informants. Contact between Denmark and Australia is constantly maintained, especially by telex, which provides an excellent possibility for Ananda Tara Shan to communicate her message to the believers and various practical orders to her second-in-command Asger Lorentsen. As a matter of fact Ananda Tara Shan seems very present in Gundsøllille, even though she lives on the other side of the globe. The use of audio- and video-tapes has certainly found its place in the religious communities of the modern world. Normally Ananda Tara Shan only visits her Danish followers once a year during the recurring "Summer Ashrams"⁴.

Until 1981, when Jeanne Morashti was excommunicated, she was an active member of the Theosophical Society in Denmark, although she was never elected to the actual leadership. Since the early 1970's she had become known as "The Clairvoyant One" in the occult milieus of Copenhagen and was "gradually maturing to her present position as one of the leading figures of the New Age", as one of her disciples explained to me.

² During the past year there has been some re-arrangement of the leading group, and it may have as few as four individuals at the moment (1991).

³ Shan the Rising Light is represented in Norway, Holland, Germany and Israel, but only through very few individuals. Only in Denmark and Australia do actual congregations exist.

⁴ It caused some disturbance in Denmark when she did not arrive at all during the summer of 1991. Christian apologetics, following the development of the group carefully, claimed that severe problems had arisen in Australia and that Ananda Tara Shan stayed home to fight for her "spiritual survival". This was never confirmed by the group itself.

No doubt Jeanne Morashti's strong feeling of spiritual competence, and a number of concrete spiritual experiences, led her to challenge the leadership of the Theosophical Society in Denmark. According to her teachings, the Theosophical Society has deserted the obligations imposed on it by the Mahatmas of the Great White Lodge (the brotherhood of enlightened souls, guiding humanity towards perfection from secret sites around the world [Barborka 1973]), and consequently her endeavours must be understood as a project of reconstruction and fulfilment. The intention is to: "Lift up Theosophy so that it may contain the vibration from the Hierarchy's Inner Ring" (The Hierarchy is synonymous with The Brotherhood of the Mahatmas) (AA 1), and to "bring about new developments within the theosophy, so that it may truly serve humanity". Her Jewish background does not show in her theology. As a matter of fact Judaism (and Islam) are considered rather primitive or even "dark" religions with little or no value to the spiritually developed persons⁵. Individuals in the Jewish milieu of Copenhagen remember Jeanne Morashti as an odd person: "only eating vegetables, and practising all sorts of exotic humbug. I felt so sorry for her mother" (AA 2). To her followers, however, Jeanne Morashti is unique. The soul now incarnating as her originally came from Venus 16 million years ago where it lived in close association with (other) celestial and divine beings.

This perspective of split and internal antagonisms is by no means unusual in the history of the Theosophical Society. Since it was established by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott in 1875, the Society has faced numerous discords, and a multitude of theosophically inspired factions still exist. The more prominent include such occult personalities as Alice A. Bailey, William Q. Judge, Francia LaDue, Gue Ballard, Robert Crosbie and more recently Elisabeth Clare Prophet, among others (Melton 1986: 45-52, 87-92; Melton, Clark and Kelly 1991: 1-37). Some of these have been restored to favour by Ananda Tara Shan, whereas others have to face severe accusation. Thus Alice A. Bailey and her writings (believed to be transmissions from the Mahatma Djwhul Khul) are considered authentic and most valuable ("the highest wisdom given on this planet until Ananda Tara Shan came", according to one informant), while Elisabeth Clare Prophet and her organization Summit Lighthouse (operating in close association with another organization set up by Elisabeth Clare Prophet; The Church Universal and Triumphant) is more or less outright

⁵ This idea is not uncommon in theosophical thinking. As an example see Bailey 1976: 81.

rejected⁶. This dissociation from the last seems very understandable as Shan the Rising Light and Summit Lighthouse resemble each other in so many ways that a mutual rejection is needed as an element in the ongoing missionary work of the two organizations. In this connection it should be observed that Shan the Rising Light officially claims that no competition or hostility exists between the two organizations (Lorentsen 1990: 51). In Denmark, where the first theosophical lodge was established in 1908, these internal controversies culminated a few years ago when the Theosophical Union (Teosofisk Forening) split from the traditional Theosophical Society (Teosofisk Samfund). To the rather few members of the strongly reduced Theosophical Society (about 30 individuals) this rupture is fatal. They believe themselves to support the true theosophical organization, but they recognize that their influence is now very weak (even if the international leadership of the Theosophical Society in Adyar, India — so they say — supports the group). Ananda Tara Shan, although not representing the new Theosophical Union (counting about 300 individuals), is partly to blame, they say. To my informants it seems likely that the discords only became possible because Ananda Tara Shan started to undermine the organization more than ten years ago. I cannot judge in this matter, but it seems likely that the upheavals caused by her made a general insurrection possible. After all her excommunication is still remembered as the “necessary purging of a person associated with the dark forces of Evil” (AA 3). It also became known among the theosophists that she had practised black magic at Atlantis, and that her task was to destroy humanity. She proudly confirms that she previously incarnated on Atlantis (not to forget Lemuria), but rejects their harsh attack. Not less profoundly Ananda Tara Shan (at that time still Jeanne Morashti) exclaimed in an “open letter”:

This letter I especially address to you that hate, condemn, slander, manipulate, envy, “throw stones”, pull wires, are jealous, call yourself spiritual without being it, are hypocrites . . . , lie . . . i.e. all you that knowingly or not work for the Lord of Darkness — the negative powers. I thank you for having led me to this, my Great Day, the 8. of May 1982, when I — because of the adversity and hatred you have shown me — have had the strength and courage back, which was mine in former incarnations on Earth. With this strength, that courage and that power God today has bestowed on me, I am able to say the words:

⁶ Understandably Shan the Rising Light (as all of us) could rejoice when the end of the world, contrary to the prediction of Elisabeth Clare Prophet, failed to come in 1990. According to one of my informants from Shan the Rising Light, the failed prophecy was taken as proof of Elisabeth Clare Prophet’s lack of spiritual authority.

I swear that I will defeat all negative on Earth with the power you have given me today, Oh God. (AA 4:1)⁷

One thing in particular gave rise to the conflict. In 1980 in New York, during a meal with her husband, Jeanne Morashti received a revelation from the Mahatma Morya who told her that she was the “direct incarnation” of the founder of the Theosophical Society Madame Blavatsky. At the same time Jeanne Morashti’s husband realized through revelation that he himself was a corresponding incarnation of Madame Blavatsky’s close companion and co-founder of the Society Henry Steel Olcott. They experienced what is termed a “soul recall”, and Jeanne Morashti now remembered everything from her previous incarnations. The personality of Madame Blavatsky started to develop and grow within her, and she had to go through what is described as an immense spiritual battle in order to prepare herself for her final mission: “The ignorant can destroy the body, but the soul will always return to complete the task imposed on it by God” (AA 4:4). In trying to legitimize her alternative ideas through Madame Blavatsky (understanding herself to be her direct incarnation), Jeanne Morashti violated one of the major theosophical doctrines; that of Madame Blavatsky’s spiritual sovereignty, and could not expect anything but excommunication. The fact that Jeanne Morashti gradually came to physically resemble Madame Blavatsky was taken as a proof of the postulated “direct incarnation” by her supporters, while one member of the remaining Theosophical Society interpreted the change as an “element in her vulgar plans”.

To her disciples, Ananda Tara Shan is considered an avatar, and her mere existence is interpreted as an ongoing epiphany. She is a prominent member of a group of twenty avatars especially chosen by the Mahatmas to prepare the basis for the “new World Religion and the new spiritually clean society” (AA 5). Through her the Mahatmas speak, and through her the healing light and energies and the enlightening gnosis flows into Earth (*Shan* being the esoteric or occult name of the planet, according to Ananda Tara Shan). In short, one can say that Ananda Tara Shan is the physical precondition for the divine powers’ work on planet Earth. In turn, so it is believed, her disciples will gain the same competence, and the rituals, introduced by Ananda Tara Shan herself, are the means in every respect.

⁷ Translated from the Danish by the author (The following quotations are likewise translated by the author from the Danish).

Put bluntly, the situation is this: Ananda Tara Shan appears as the direct incarnation of Madame Blavatsky, and her task in this life is to complete the process inaugurated by Madame Blavatsky (i.e. herself) in 1875. As the Theosophical Society has disregarded its divinely sanctioned mission, a new organization has been set up (namely Shan the Rising Light), and by introducing a comprehensive set of rituals, unknown to traditional theosophy, world-wide success is expected.

In the following this process of innovation through the introduction of new rituals will be analyzed, but for the purpose of comparison, I shall first give a short account of the traditional theosophical idea of rituals and ritualism — or rather the theosophical lack of rituals.

The Theosophical Society and Rituals⁶

The theosophical belief system is syncretistic and eclectic indeed. Based on a conglomerate of traditions including Western occultism, spiritualism, parapsychology, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and even elements from the sciences⁹, it is one of the first modern alternatives to the traditional religious belief systems (Ahlbäck 1990: 49–60; Ahlbäck 1989: 36–44). The basic assumption is that there is “no religion higher than Truth”, and it is believed that this “Truth” is the core of every religion. Access to the “Core of Truth” is given through the esoteric schools of the religions, and this is what theosophy is all about.

One of the theses in Madame Blavatsky’s comprehensive *Collected Writings* is that every ritual and ceremony, regardless of its complexity, symbols and structure, can be traced to a common origin: “the actual occult rituals and ceremonies” (Blavatsky 1950–1969). Some of these archetypical rituals, she claims, were meant to manage the positive and benevolent “White Magic”, while others served the negative forces of “Black Magic”. In this way she recognizes the efficacy of the rituals, and relates the ritual

⁶ It is impossible to give a full account of either the traditional theosophical belief system or that of Shan the Rising Light here. The latter covers, among other things, astrology, kiromanty, penduling, aura-counselling, crystal-magic, special diets, the legends of King Arthur and the Grail, various forms of healing, color-magic, UFOs and extraterrestrial beings, etc. In other words any feature of the broad New Age movement brought into an institutionalized form (see Melton 1986: 107–124). Only the basic features are presented here. The bibliography will provide further readings.

⁹ Among other things an elaboration of Charles Darwin’s biological theory of evolution (presented about six years before the foundation of the Theosophical Society), rendered a spiritual structure concerning the development of higher spiritual awareness.

practices to the powers ruling the Universe and our lives. As Madame Blavatsky claims the historical sources to be more or less useless, her precise knowledge of the ancient rituals seems to be derived from her spiritual contact with the entities of the "Great White Lodge".

It is obvious, then, that a clear awareness of rituals and ceremonies in principle forms a part of the theosophical belief system. Nevertheless it is a fact that almost no rituals are seen within the frames of the Theosophical Society. On the contrary, the religious awareness constantly concentrates on the internal transformations, the development of higher levels of consciousness and the non- or meta-physical through speculations, intellectual studies, education and instructions. The theosophical writings rarely comment on rituals, but when this does happen, the perspective is usually (if not always) negative. The classical Danish theosophical dictionary does not include any entry on ritual, ceremony, etc. (Kapel 1925). Answering the rhetoric question why people in the West have until now (i.e. 1889) been unaware of the perennial theosophical teachings, Madame Blavatsky says that "their long-lasting slavery under dogmatic belief in words and ritualism" is an important reason (Blavatsky s. a.: 6). The only common practice is meditation, and even this is not strongly emphasized¹⁰. At this point we may ask where the rituals are in relation to the Theosophical Society. Within the frames of the Society as an institution we cannot see them.

A leading person in the Theosophical Society in Denmark gave us the answer:

The Theosophical Society does not make use of any rituals or ceremonies whatsoever, but supports two great sections that use rituals and ceremonies indeed. (AA 6)

The two organizations he refers to are The Liberal Catholic Church and the Co-Masonic Order [Co-Frimurer-Ordenen], both of which are independent organizations, although fundamentally inspired by theosophy and theosophists.

¹⁰ Not all scholars agree as to whether meditation is a ritual practice or not. To my mind, however, meditation is a ritual indeed, but in the case of the Theosophical Society, where even the meditation ranks relatively low, it cannot change the impression of an almost ritual-free religion.

The Liberal Catholic Church and the Co-Masonic Order

Both organizations were founded in the beginning of the 19th century on the initiative of prominent theosophists. The theosophists had originally sought collaboration with the traditional freemason-milieu and the Christian churches, but with no success. On the contrary, they met rejection or even hostility everywhere. The masonic orders refused to accept women, a fact the theosophists (with its female founder) could not accept, and the traditional Christian congregations considered the theosophist's esoteric understanding of Christ (as one of the Mahatmas) and the Gospel absurd or heretic. According to my informants, however, Madame Blavatsky declared that the rituals of the masonic orders were in the service of the "Good Forces", and the activities of the freemasons were therefore designated "White Magic". What was needed was an even better management of the rituals, and therefore the Co-Masonic-Order was set up, but with nothing formal or institutional in common with the Theosophical Society: Here the rituals could be conducted by qualified theosophists for the benefit of all. In addition (in Denmark somewhat later) the theosophists established a special freemason order for children, the Order of the Round Table, an institution equally important to the analysis of Shan the Rising Light.

In sum, we may conclude that the Masonic orders refused to co-operate with the theosophists and therefore the theosophists took over the freemasons' rituals. As an element in the soteriological endeavours of the theosophists this was simply necessary¹¹. Unfortunately only very little information has been obtainable regarding the rituals of the Co-Masonic Order. This, of course, is due to its esoteric and secret nature. Later, in the comparison with Shan the Rising Light, the little I know will be mentioned.

The same idea regarding the proper conduct of the ritual practice underlies the Liberal Catholic Church and its bulk of rituals, founded by James Ingall Wedgwood and C. W. Leadbeater, one of the leading theosophists in the generation after Blavatsky and Olcott. He (Leadbeater) presided as Bishop of the Liberal Catholic Church for many years, and his influence on the occult interpretations and practices is still evident. The belief system of the Liberal Catholic Church is — like the theosophy itself — syncretistic indeed with ancient Catholic and Buddhist ideas being the

¹¹ This information is derived from my conversations with representatives from the Theosophical Society and the Co-Masonic Order in Denmark. Of course, literary sources would be most welcome, but I have not found any so far.

most prominent. The cult however, carefully follows a Catholic ideal of form and structure, although the interpretation of the rites is very different (Frick 1978: 314).

A hitherto much too narrow understanding of the conventional Churches' rituals led to the foundation of the Liberal Catholic Church, theosophists say — a statement echoed in the preface to one of the most striking sources to the Liberal Catholic liturgy, "The Science of the Sacraments" by Leadbeater (Leadbeater 1957: xiii-xiv). Contrary to the Co-Masonic rituals, the rites of the Liberal Catholic Church are described in minute detail. Again the idea of actual functioning rituals is in front. Under the heading "A New Idea of Church Worship" Leadbeater writes:

The sacrament of the Eucharist benefits not only the individual, as do the other Sacraments, but the entire congregation; it is of use not once only, like Baptism or Confirmation, but is intended for the helping of every churchman all his life long: and in addition to that, it affects the whole neighborhood surrounding the church in which it is celebrated. (Leadbeater 1957: 1)

And later in the text:

The temple or church is meant to be not only a place of worship, but also a center of magnetic radiation through which spiritual force can be poured out upon a whole district. (Leadbeater 1957: 3)

But the rituals are not considered absolutely necessary to everybody:

The rituals and ceremonies [of the Liberal Catholic Church and the Co-Masonic Order] are put at our disposal because some people need it to develop spiritually. Very often such people are not in the habit of studying, and their ability to understand esoteric instructions is bad. Through the rituals they get their chance. I myself also used to participate in some ceremonies from time to time, but it was never my main activity. But I am still a member of the Church. [The Liberal Catholic Church i.e.] (AA 7)

The last information expresses the exception, not what is common. In Denmark only very few organized theosophists (maybe as few as four or five) are initiate members of the Liberal Catholic Church or the Co-Masonic Order. This is quite contrary to the situation when these organizations were established. At that time the founders placed persons from the elite in the Theosophical Society (members of the so called Esoteric Training School (E.S.) within the Theosophical Society) in the new organizations to secure a genuine theosophical influence. Today the 100 Danish members of the Liberal Catholic Church and the (at most)

150 members of the Co-Masonic Order are — with very few exceptions — not members of the Theosophical Society¹².

If we keep to the Danish context, and so we must in order to analyze Shan the Rising Light, it seems obvious that the total theosophical milieu is split into a number of inharmonious groups. There are severe theological and personal antagonisms between the Theosophical Society and the Theosophical Union, and neither of the two have formalized collaboration with the strongly ritualised groups described above, the way they used to in the first third of this century. The only organization in Denmark that seems to cover every aspect is the relatively new-born Shan the Rising Light. In the following I shall describe how the various aspects form a whole in this organization and in the teachings of Ananda Tara Shan, thus focusing on some of the premises for the development of this new religion.

Comparisons with Shan the Rising Light

The rituals of Shan the Rising Light may be described in three categories: 1) The transmissions of messages from the Mahatmas through Ananda Tara Shan, 2) The collective healing rites designated “Cosmic Peace Services” or “Healing Services” and 3) Individual meditation and contemplation of various kinds. The first category obviously requires the presence of Ananda Tara Shan herself. Consequently these very important rituals are only performed in Denmark occasionally, as Ananda Tara Shan lives in Australia. The rituals classified under category 2. are in Denmark led by the more prominent members of the group. The last category may imply group performance, but very often the meditations and therapeutic techniques are conducted in private. This elaboration is sufficient for our purpose, although a more detailed systematism could be developed.

Only the third category is identifiable within the context of the Theosophical Society. It is true that Madame Blavatsky (and a few others) during the early days of the Theosophical Society received revelations from the Mahatmas, but the structure of this communication was different from that of Ananda Tara Shan and her Masters. Usually the Mahatmas would by supernatural means communicate their message to Madame Blavatsky in writing (Ahlbäck 1990: 57). Ananda Tara Shan is rather a medium that speaks out the divine messages. She is believed to form a unity with the

¹² The figures are given by representatives from the various organizations during the summer of 1991.

Mahatma that “transmits”, and it is explained that she herself formulates what is told her “in a spiritual language” during the “Hierarchical Transmissions”. Very often Ananda Tara Shan’s followers are present when the Mahatmas speak. They can see and hear the actual communication, and to many of the believers this experience is a proof of the truth in Ananda Tara Shan’s teachings. When the Mahatmas “transmit”, Ananda Tara Shan, wearing white or coloured robes, experiences some kind of altered state of consciousness, and to the sound of specifically chosen music, she will lift up her “Magic Wand” with its crystal knob and exclaim the message. In other words, the “transmissions” only occur during carefully planned ritual sessions, quite contrary to the precipitated correspondences in the days of Madame Blavatsky (Ahlbäck 1990: 57). Very often the theme of an approaching “transmission” is known in due time:

During Ananda Tara Shan’s next visit to Denmark the Hierarchical Transmissions will [last for] two evenings (. . .). During these evenings the Lord Maitreya and other cosmic entities, together with the Hierarchy, will address the Danish people and carry on the preparation of the Danish national mind, in order to make it ready for the task it is meant to carry out during the next centuries. (Ærkeenglen Michael 1988–89: 17)

All “transmissions” are taped, and when a session is completed, the tape is transcribed. Consequently Shan the Rising Light produces a lot of religious texts on the basis of Ananda Tara Shan’s “transmissions”. These texts form the core of the sacred writings, and together with Ananda Tara Shan’s personal commentaries and those of Asger Lorentsen, they represent the actual canon of the group. This material can of course be compared to the “Mahatma Letters” of the Theosophical Society and the inspired writings of Alice A. Bailey, and it is true that their content and their structure resemble the older material in many ways (see as an example Humphreys and Benjamin 1979; Barborka 1973). It is interesting then, that the followers of Ananda Tara Shan can participate in the “transmissions”, contrary to the members of the Theosophical Society in Madame Blavatsky’s days. In Shan the Rising Light the congregation is meant to support Ananda Tara Shan while she prepares herself for the communication. The group will form “energy circles”, conduct “spiritual purification” of the location, meditate and pray. In this way the leader and the group work together, and every participant knows that the divine interference is partly due to his or her efforts.

As far as I can see, the rituals introduced in close connection with the theosophical belief system are derived from the traditions of the Co-

Masonic Orders and The Order of the Round Table. Two informants that are initiated members of the Co-Masonic Order in Copenhagen have confirmed that the ritual garments, the "Magic Wand", a sword that is used during the "transmissions" and the geometrical formations formed by the congregation during these rituals in Shan the Rising Light are copied from the rituals of the Co-Masons. My only informant with contact to the Order of the Round Table likewise certifies that the round piece of marble and various round tables used by Ananda Tara Shan are taken from *their* rituals. Referring to the beliefs of the Shan movement, I told a former leader of the Order of the Round Table in Copenhagen about the function of the marble piece: It is believed to possess a "magnetic force of energy" that is carried from ritual to ritual, constantly accumulating "energy" derived from the rituals (Lorentsen 1983: 239). His reaction was the following: "Yes. It ought to. But it does not work in the hands of Morashti". He also declared that the interpretation of the round marble piece as a symbol of the earth, which is the case in Shan the Rising Light, is quite unknown to his Order. To my knowledge Ananda Tara Shan was never a member of the Co-Masonic Order, but she was indeed involved with the Order of The Round Table. As a matter of fact she was expelled from the Order by its leader. At that time the accusation was that she tried to inflict the children of the Order with her "dark powers by reversing the rituals"¹³. Today the same person declared:

People in the Shan movement play with low-astral phenomena, something Blavatsky always warned against. It can be fatal. You become unresisting and unable to act and you may risk obsessions. It is straightforward psychism. She [Ananda Tara Shan] is harmless to those who know. Only weak persons are in danger. Some of the worst experiences in my life were the psychic battles I fought against her. The tension can be witnessed by many people who were there. (AA 8)

Asger Lorentsen of the Shan movement in Denmark explains such accusations as misunderstandings:

Two prominent theosophists have seen Ananda's "Plutonic Aura", and they have interpreted it as an expression of black magic. It is not. It is an expression of God's Will, a force that gives her tremendous ability to act and perform. (AA 9)

The members of the Liberal Catholic Church are less worried. "The rituals of the Shan movement do not work at all," they say. The problem

¹³ It is interesting to observe that the distortion of rituals is very often central to apologetic argumentation. This reaction is fundamentally the same as that of the Church Fathers in relation to the mystery-cults of the Hellenistic period.

according to my informants is that Jeanne Morashti (always called by her original name by her opponents) has not received the proper initiation, and therefore does not have the authority to conduct the rituals. The Liberal Catholics see themselves as representatives of the "Old Catholic Union of Utrecht", and they claim to pass on the only true succession, which has never been offered to Jeanne Morashti. Nevertheless she was indeed an initiated (baptized) member of the Liberal Catholic Church in Copenhagen for some years, and I see no reason to doubt that she has used her knowledge from there in her own religious organization.

In their critique of the rituals of Shan the Rising Light, the Liberal Catholics mainly point to the rituals classified under category 2. above. These rites of healing and "energy channelling" truly resemble the rites of the Liberal Catholic Church. Not all of them, but those concerned with just that.

Shan the Rising Light is very concerned with "Earth-healing". Through the "injection of divine light that purifies and renews creation" they seek to prepare the Earth for the coming of Maitreya, the redeemer of this age (the Age of Aquarius):

The Cosmic Earth-Healing Service is the divine service, where the associates of the Hierarchy consciously put themselves at the disposal of a higher rhythm. In this way the energies from the World of God are canalized to the surrounding astral and mental atmosphere so that the vibrations are lifted. In this way the stronger energies of the New Age can meet a better response. (Lorentsen 1983: 238)

During the Liberal Catholic celebration of the Mass, a "wave of peace and strength goes into the Earth", very similar to what is described above. This function Leadbeater calls "the primary object of the service" (Leadbeater 1957: 3), an interpretation identical with the Shan understanding of *their* service. It is also possible to identify the Liberal Catholic self-esteem in Shan the Rising Light. Leadbeater writes: "If we be truly religious [we] must be unselfish; we must be working together with Him, our Lord" (Leadbeater 1957: 10). In an internal note from Shan the Rising Light it says:

The servants of the World constitute a divine, non-selfish relief squad. It is our task to calm the roaring waters through our services, for the benefit of all and on behalf of our Lord. (AA 10)

In both cases it is emphasized that Man is obliged to provide the facilities necessary for the transmission of divine energy. These facilities are the

rituals. It is further stated that the congregations should know the liturgy and the rituals very well. For that reason the Liberal Catholics present their rituals in minute detail in books and lectures. Shan the Rising Light distributes ritual manuals to the participants so that the ritual structure and the wording will become known. An example is given in the following:

Cosmic Service for the Earth

All the participants (sitting on chairs) form a circle.

Music according to the purpose of the service.

Invocation of the Archangels (the leader):

We call upon the Archangels: Michael, Jophiel, Chamuel, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel and Zadkiel. And the female Archangels: Faith, Constance, Charity, Hope, Maria, Donna Grace and Amethyst.

The Leader continues: *Ruler of the Universe. We ask you to abolish the negative aspects today, and strengthen the good aspects so that we may co-operate for the good of the Light.*

Invocations

The Leader: *Shining circle, thou art the beginning and the end.*

Flaming sword, thou art the pioneer and the path.

Protect us and help us in this service.

The ceremony of the circle and the sword is performed [by the leader]. (AA 11)¹⁴

This section is followed by further invocations stressing the role of the adepts and the quest for unity with the divine. The invocations are always made by the leader, but from this point the congregation joins by adding "Lets us work for the Light", "Let us work for the Earth and Humanity" and "Let us work for all that lives". So far all join hands and "seek God within themselves". The leader then says:

The heart of the universe pulsates and glows.

We are that heart.

In the following the participants are asked "to visualize the power and energy that is sent into the Earth and everything that lives on Earth", and to follow the energy as it returns to the cosmos. Finally the leader exclaims: "The Earth is shining" which everybody repeats. Then the circle is opened and the ritual (that all in all has lasted for about 30 minutes) ends (AA 12).

It is believed that this (and similar) rituals are the preconditions for any further spiritual development.

¹⁴ Unfortunately the circle and sword ceremony is closed to outsiders.

Of course this kind of ritual guide is less elaborated than those of the Liberal Catholics as produced by Leadbeater. Shan the Rising Light, however, refers to the writings of Leadbeater concerning the interpretation of rituals and ceremonies (Lorentsen 1989: 334).

Another striking feature that combines Shan the Rising Light and the Liberal Catholic Church is the idea of “Thought-Forms”; spiritual constructions that are gradually built up during the rituals. This kind of “spiritual architecture” can only be seen by especially initiated persons and individuals with psychic abilities. The structures — depicted in Leadbeater’s book — are magnificent “buildings” with spires, domes, geometrical patterns etc. developing in the same place where the ritual is in progress. The physical church building is understood to be a symbol of the “actual church” appearing as the “Thought-Form”.

In Shan the Rising Light the Ananda Ashram of Gundsolille functions in much the same way as the cult-room of the Liberal Catholics. On the 7. of July 1990, the Mahatma Count of Saint Germain initiated the place by constructing an ideal “Thought-Form” (although this term, to my knowledge, is never used in Shan the Rising Light):

I place an angel of Violet fire here. I already have placed one over the main building, but I shall place one over the whole area (...) A new castle of the Grail has been formed around his Church. It is up to you to make it physical. It is up to you to enliven the Grail once more. (AA 13)¹⁵

It is a well known phenomenon in Shan the Rising Light that people may vision these spiritual buildings:

When a group conducts this service of peace, you can see a lot of light-beings and beautiful thought-forms arise between the participants. It is a mighty ocean of light that is being established. It may look like an aura of flames and light, not only covering the house in which the service is celebrated, but also pouring out over the landscape. (Healing 1984: 7)

The church of the Liberal Catholics is considered a “retreat from the confusing world”, and exactly the same formulation is used to describe Ananda Ashram.

Further, it is possible to link Ananda Tara Shan’s use of music during the rituals to that of the Liberal Catholic Church. Leadbeater urged his followers to develop a special Liberal Catholic musical liturgy (Leadbeater

¹⁵ This was considered an official announcement.

1957: 23), and in Shan the Rising Light such a thing has existed for years. The arguments given by Leadbeater seem to be fulfilled by Ananda Tara Shan, even if she does not refer to him personally (Musik 1983: 10–14). It is also possible that the important “Magic Wand” of Ananda Tara Shan, or rather the way it works, is partly inspired by the crozier of the Bishop in the Liberal Catholic Church. I have been told that the Liberal Catholics can feel the divine energies by touching their spiritual leader’s (the Bishop’s) crozier, and a similar account was given in a talk-show on the “spiritual local radio” of Copenhagen:

Whenever you approach a person with spiritual power, you can feel it! When I approach Ananda, I can virtually see the magnetic radiation of her stick. The crystal seems to glow. It is very beautiful. (AA 14)

Conclusion

Jeanne Morashti was excommunicated from the organization she felt obliged to save, and started her own religious group. During her religious career, she had encountered numerous groups within the broader limits of the theosophical milieu, and when establishing her own group, she formed a synthesis of the various elements. The rituals of the Co-Masonic Orders and the Order of the Round Table, along with the comprehensive ceremonial of the Liberal Catholic Church, were related to the otherwise non-ritualistic theology of Madame Blavatsky. In the words of Ananda Tara Shan, her contribution (the setting up of Shan the Rising Light) “was the final precondition to the Age of Aquarius, when Maitreya is to arrive” (AA 15). As she is believed to be a direct incarnation of Madame Blavatsky, it is only natural that she is trusted to finish her assignment in this incarnation. What interests us, however, is that this fulfilment is explicitly carried out by introducing the rituals:

The philosophy has been known for a long time. Now we eventually have the means to realize it. It is the destiny of us, the Healers of the Earth, to enliven the will of the Masters, to let the Light of The Hierarchy shine on every man and woman on Earth. It is our destiny to create this Great Focus of Light and Love. It is for us to see the Castle of the Grail grow. Everybody that participates in our circles shall be blessed in all future incarnations. (AA 16)

It is through the rituals that the preconditions for these goals are created and it is through the rituals that the contact with the divine beings

is maintained. It is also through the rituals that the new elements in the belief system are given, and it is through the rituals that Ananda Tara Shan confirms her religious authority. Further, the rituals provide the believers with the experience of contact with a higher reality. This is why I consider the introduction of rituals into a traditionally non-ritualistic belief system an important element in the establishment of a (this) new religion. The introduction of rituals affects the beliefs and the sociological conditions alike. Ananda Tara Shan has managed to form a synthesis of institutions and structures otherwise separated.

While a sectarian split from the traditional theosophical body is nothing unique, the case of Shan the Rising Light seems to present something new in the history of theosophical offshoots. As pointed out by Melton, the various reformers of the theosophical ideas have each claimed their competence through their own selected Mahatma: Bailey and Mahatma Djwul Khul, Ballard and Mahatma St. Germain, LaDue and Mahatma Hilarion, etc. (Melton 1986: 90). Ananda Tara Shan communicates with *all* of them, including Jesus, although the Archangel Michael seems to be especially fond of her¹⁶. Her ability to "canalize energies" from all members of the White Brotherhood was explained to me as the result of her "formidable ability to open the gates so that the energies may flow". This ability, one informant told me (just after the presentation of a video-tape showing Ananda Tara Shan transmitting a message from the Archangel Michael), has been developed "thanks to the rituals rediscovered by Ananda Tara Shan herself". After a while my informant corrected herself: "It may be that she actually did not discover them herself. Maybe they were given her by the Masters," she said.

For the purpose of our analysis this changes nothing. The fact that rituals are introduced in a certain way to obtain certain results is what interests because it seems that *this* is something new to the theosophical sects. The old process of syncretism and eclecticism, in the case of Shan the Rising Light, have managed to include the rituals too.

I think this conclusion is supported by Bruce F. Campbell when he states the following:

¹⁶ The Mahatmas of Shan the Rising Light are more or less the same as those known to traditional theosophy: Hilarion (Paulus), Count of Saint Germain (Rakoczy), Sanat Kumara, Mahatma D. K., Chohan, Serapis Bay, Koot Hoomi, Mahatma R., Paul of Venice, etc. and a line of female, maybe less known Mahatmas; Surya, Quan Yin, Rowena, Celeste and Rochell. Many other divine beings occur occasionally.

Ritual is a central element in the religious life. The symbolism and activity of group worship are powerful means both for making religious experience real and for creating a feeling of fellowship and community. Theosophy is therefore weakened as a vital movement by its lack of official ritual. (Campbell 1980: 196)

Finally, as a curiosity, it is interesting to observe that the Mahatma Koot Hoomi, in February 1882, in a letter to the medium A. P. Sinnett commented on the young Theosophical Society and its internal problems, and said:

How will you do it? How can you do it? Think of it well, if you care for further intercourse. They want something new. A ritual to amuse them. (Humphreys and Benjamin 1979: 262)

And this was what they got through the Shan movement, exactly one hundred years later.

Final comment

During the symposium on rituals in Åbo when this paper was originally presented, Dr. Tore Ahlbäck, being my co-referent, gave some very interesting pieces of information, especially regarding the history of the Theosophical Society. One thing in particular was of interest in relation to my analysis. Dr. Ahlbäck revealed that C. W. Leadbeater actually was the occult genius among the first theosophists, and he indicated that the influence of Leadbeater upon the occult traditions may very well be more important than that of Madame Blavatsky. This observation led Dr. Ahlbäck to suggest that Shan the Rising Light is primarily in tune with the occultism, and thus the tradition of ritualism, of Leadbeater. Only secondly, he suggested, the movement is in tune with the teachings of Madame Blavatsky¹⁷.

As the resemblances between the ritualized occult traditions and Shan the Rising Light are obvious, this may very well be so. On the other hand, I find it hard to ignore the fact that the belief system of Ananda Tara Shan to a very high degree resembles that of Madame Blavatsky and other theosophical thinkers. As far as I can see, the judgement depends on where the emphasis is laid. By focusing on the belief system the theosophical heritage dominates, but concentrating on the rituals the

¹⁷ I wish to thank Tore Ahlbäck for his valuable comments, of which only one central aspect is taken into consideration here.

other occult traditions or disciplines show themselves. One way or the other: the systematized mixing of strongly ritualized traditions with a non-ritualized belief system has led to a religious innovation.

References Cited

Unpublished sources

Copenhagen

Archive of the author

- AA 1–16. Documents, interviews, tape-recordings in connection to Shan the Rising Light.
- AA 1 Maitreya Theosophy. Booklet distributed by Shan the Rising Light for internal use, 1987.
- AA 2 Private conversation with an elderly woman who had known Jeanne Morashti before her occult career began, July 1990.
- AA 3 Interview with a dominant figure in the Theosophical Society in Denmark, May 1991.
- AA 4 Copy of internally distributed letter by Jeanne Morashti under the heading "Jeg anklager det Teosofiske Samfund af idag og de pseudo åndelige". No date.
- AA 5 Mailout issued during spring 1990. No date.
- AA 6 Tape-recording made by the author with a leading person in the Theosophical Society in Denmark, 27.6.1991.
- AA 7 Tape-recording made by the author with a Danish theosophist with contact to the Liberal Catholic Church, July 1991.
- AA 8 Interview by the author with the former leader of the Order of the Round Table, 4.7.1991.
- AA 9 Interview by the author with Asger Lorentsen, February 1991.
- AA 10 Internal note from Shan the Rising Light under the heading Fremtiden er her allerede. No date.
- AA 11 Ritual-manual distributed by Shan the Rising Light for internal use. No date.
- AA 12 Cosmic Service for the Earth. Ritual-manual distributed by Shan the Rising Light for internal use. No date.
- AA 13 Speech transmitted through Ananda Tara Shan, issued under the heading The Count Speaks, 7.7.1991.
- AA 14 Conversation between representatives of four new religions in Denmark. Radio Lotus, spring 1991.
- AA 15 Quotation from a video-tape, shown to visitors at Ananda Ashram, spring 1991.
- AA 16 "Hvad er en fredstjeneste?" Leaflet distributed by Shan the Rising Light for internal use, 1987.

Literature

Ærkeenglen Michael

1988–89 *Ærkeenglen Michael. Shan. Tidsskrift for Forståelse af Åndelig Visdom* 6.

Ahlbäck, Tore

- 1989 Osynlig religion och den första New Religious Movement. *Chaos* 12: 34-44.
 1990 The Theosophical Society, A New Religious Movement Based on a Conglomerate of Traditions. In Nils G. Holm (ed.), *Encounter with India. Studies in Neohinduism*; pp. 49-60. (Religionsvetenskapliga skrifter, 20)

Bailey, Alice. A.

- 1976 *Kristi Tilsyneskomst*. København: Borgen Forlag.

Humphreys, Christmas, and Elise Benjamin (eds.)

- 1979 The Mahatma Letters to P. Sinnett from the Mahatmas M. and K. T. Transcribed and compiled by A. T. Barker. Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House.

Barborka, Geoffrey A.

- 1973 *The Mahatmas and their Letters*: Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House.

Beckford, James A.

- 1985 *Cult Controversies. The Societal Response to the New Religious Movements*. London: Tavistock Publications.

Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna

- 1950-69 *Collected Writings*; 9 vols. Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House.
 s. a. *Nøgle til teosofien*. Forkortet udg. ved Joy Mills. *Tau*.

Campbell, Bruce F.

- 1980 *Ancient Wisdom Revived*. Berkely: University of California Press.

Frick, Karl R. H.

- 1978 *Licht und Finsternis. Gnostisch-teosophische und freimaurerisch-ockkulte Geheimgesellschaften bis an die Wende zum 20. Jahrhundert. Wege in die Gegenwart. Teil 2: Geschichte ihrer Lehren, Rituale und Organisationen*. Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt. (Die Erleuchteten, II/2)

Healing

- 1984 *Healing. Shan. Tidsskrift for Forståelse af Åndelig Visdom* 3.

Humphreys, Christmas, and Elise Benjamin (eds.)

- 1979 The Mahatma Letters to P. Sinnett from the Mahatmas M. and K. T. Transcribed and compiled by A. T. Barker. Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House.

Kapel, A. T.

- 1925 *Theosofisk Ordbog*. S. 1.: Theosofisk Samfunds Forlag.

Leadbeater, C. W.

- 1957 *The Science of the Scaraments*. Adyar: The Theosophical Publishing House.

Lorentsen, Asger

- 1983 *Åndelig udvikling i den nye Tid*. København: Rosenhavens Forlag.
 1989 *Det kosmiske menneske. Håndbog i et åndeligt livssyn*. København: Borgens Forlag.
 1990 *Hjertets vej. En åbning til Kristi hjerte*. København: Borgens Forlag.

Melton, J. Gordon

- 1986 *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc.

Melton, J. Gordon, Jerome Clark, and Aidan A. Kelly

- 1991 *New Age Almanac*. New York: Visible Ink Press.

Musik

1983 Musik. *Shan. Tidsskrift for Forståelse af Åndelig Visdom* 6.

Rothstein, Mikael

1991 Rites of Passage in Unification Church. *Temenos* 27: 61–81.