

THEOS BERNARD, THE WHITE LAMA

Tibet, Yoga, and American Religious Life



PAUL G. HACKETT

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... and all those whose religious vision exceeded their grasp

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PREFACE

How few ever think that there will be one around to check up on them.

—Theos Bernard¹

BEFORE HE HAD EVEN SET FOOT on his home soil in the fall of 1937, Theos Bernard declared to a reporter for London's *Daily Mail*, "I am the first White Lama—the first Westerner ever to live as priest in a Tibetan monastery, the first man from the outside world to be initiated into Buddhists' mysterious hidden even from many native lamas themselves."²

Over the weeks and months that followed, Theos's account of his life and the events that befell him in Tibet would grow greater and greater in proportion, coming to nearly obliterate any trace of his actual activities. By March of the following year, having called in a few favors back home, he arranged an alumnus lecture at the University of Arizona, and arriving in Tucson, he pulled out all the stops.

When the curtains parted before a packed house, all in attendance saw Theos Bernard, religious scholar, explorer, and mystic, seated in a chair on a dais in the middle of the stage, next to a movie projector and surrounded by ritual artifacts and Tibetan robes. "Come with me," he invited the audience, "in a flight in the Clipper Ship of the imagination from San Francisco across the vast Pacific . . . into the heart of Asia, the Land of the Lama—Tibet!" and with a carefully practiced grandiose style Theos Bernard, "the White Lama," unfolded his story, explaining how he had fulfilled an ancient Tibetan prophecy and become "the first white man ever to live in the lamaseries and cities of Tibet . . . initiated into the age-old religious rites of Tibetan Buddhism [and] . . . accepted by the Tibetans as one of them"—or so he claimed.

As the evening progressed, Theos provided even more details of his "recognition" by the Tibetans as a reincarnation of the eighth-century master Padmasambhava. He told of his dark retreat "in the dungeons of the Potala Palace" where midway through his internment, Buddhist monks descending into the black depths of those catacombs were astonished to find him bathed in a "white light" where none could possibly exist, thereby confirming his fulfillment of the prophecy of the coming of the "white lama," a man who would herald and bring about the spread of the truths of Buddhism to the Western world.

With each of Theos's descriptions, the assembled audience was held rapt with attention to every detail. His old grade school principal, Mary Price—who had made the journey from Tombstone to Tucson to hear him speak—recounted that throughout his lecture, Theos walked in his robes through the aisles of the auditorium that was "absolutely quiet except for Theos talking and the sound of your neighbor breathing." It was "the most emotionally packed thing and best talk" she had ever heard in her life—so emotional, she recalled, that Theos was a long time coming down from the stage.

surrounded by many people, including four or five of his old law school professors.

After the evening had wound to a close, Theos joined his mother, brothers, and Mary Price for the long drive back to his old home of Tombstone. As the car traveled along the dusty road south toward the Mexican border, Mary asked Theos, privately, if what he had said on stage was actually true. “Evening word,” was his response.

While Theos Bernard *had* gone to Tibet, *had* met various lamas, and *had* participated in rituals there beyond those simple facts, little more of what he said on that spring evening, or afterward, had the slightest ring of truth to it. Nonetheless, from the practical standpoint of what he was attempting to accomplish, that lecture in Arizona was a success. Theos received endorsements sufficient enough to secure a contract for a major lecture tour from a public relations firm in New York, and while the details were being arranged, returned to California to spend time with his father, Glen. There, with Glen’s help, he began to refine a public persona that would capitalize on the prevailing moods and interests in 1930s America and to no small degree, establish a personal mythology that would serve as a foundation for his life in the years to come.

What actually happened to Theos Bernard over his forty years can only be pieced together from the fragments left in his wake when he disappeared in the fall of 1947. Over the months and years that followed, his friends and family would struggle to make sense of his life as well as their own role in it, some with greater or lesser success—even passing on this obligation to others. The end result would be a scattering of primary and secondary source documents across North America, from Arizona to New York and California to Florida, as well as in parts of India and Tibet, each locale holding different pieces of a puzzle offering glimpses into his life. This book is the result of my attempts to collect those pieces and put together that puzzle. This is the story of Theos Bernard.

In talking about Theos Bernard, there are a number of different ways of approaching him. It is possible to speak of Bernard in terms of his accomplishments in his role as a pioneer. As a first-generation American explorer in Tibet, he was only the third American to successfully reach Lhasa, the capital, and the first “Westerner” (American or European) to do so as a religious pilgrim. While there, Bernard amassed what would be the largest collection of Tibetan texts, art, and artifacts in the Western Hemisphere for more than thirty years⁴ and documented, in both still photography and 16 mm film, an age-old civilization on the eve of its destruction. Bernard presented the first dissertation on religion at Columbia University in 1943 and in doing so was the catalyst for the founding of the religious studies department there. Bernard was the first Westerner to recognize the uniqueness of the scholar Gedun Chöpel (*dge ’dun chos phel*, 1903–51) when they met in 1936, and attempted to bring him to America in 1941. Bernard was also the first American student of Geshe Ngawang Wangyal (*ngag dbang dbang rgyal*, 1901–83), who would later teach at Columbia University before establishing himself as a teacher in New Jersey and, like Dezhung Rinpoche in Seattle,⁵ would become the *guru* and *paramguru* to a large contingent of today’s American scholars of Tibet. Bernard’s list of “firsts” could be continued.⁶

Alternately, it is possible to speak about his role in and influence on subsequent academic and popular interest in Indo-Tibetan religion and culture. Guided by his father over his last two decades, Bernard was groomed as both a scholar and a new religious leader for America in the traditions of Indian yoga and Buddhist tantra. In the late 1930s, he embarked upon a journey to India and Tibet that would set the tone for a whole generation of religious seekers from Europe and America in the 1960s. Within only a few years of his death, Bernard's book on haṭha yoga would be translated into French, German, and Spanish. Slightly more than a decade later, his semiautobiographical works would also become standard reading for a whole generation interested in "Eastern" religions and traveling to India.

Much as 1960s American culture cast its shadow over the latter part of the twentieth century, so too the early twentieth century inhabited a world strongly defined by the nineteenth. The cultural landscape of late nineteenth-century America—which, in many ways, set the stage for Bernard's life—was host to an explosion of alternative religious movements that ran the gamut from modification and innovation to complete repudiation, from Spiritualism and Universalism to Mormonism, Christian Science, and Theosophy. While key figures were producing or revealing new scriptures and pseudepigrapha, others, dubiously credentialed, were importing ideas from India and China wholesale and utilizing them to reformulate normative Protestant Christian ideals.⁷ So vibrant were the enterprises that the twentieth-century alternative religious movements that would directly result from them seem little more than their cultural stepchildren by comparison. More significant, however, the subsequent manifestations of these traditions in American society would retain the marks of that first generation of religious innovators, instantiating the nineteenth-century Protestant ideals of pietism and affective religiosity, anticlericalism, personal unmediated access to knowledge of the divine, and populist and egalitarian notions of participatory religion—all of which were effectively missing in the source traditions of Asia that were being drawn upon. With these movements taking on a life of their own, their putative origin seems to have been less a source of new ideas than a source of new symbols, words, and images divorced from their actual meaning—a *tabula rasa* for the projection of religious fantasies. It was a realm whose pinnacle was Tibet.

Indeed, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there remained, occasionally peeking above the surface, this mythic image of Tibet—a physically esoteric land concealing an even more esoteric body of mystical knowledge. Reports of "high lamas" and ornate temples filled with a variety of gods and golden riches were standard in newspapers of the day, from references to the "Deliah Lama" to the adventures of Marmaduke M. Mizzle in the "lamasery" of Shigatse.⁸ A land "bounded on the south by the highest mountains in the world . . . Tibet could be imagined as a domain of lost wisdom,"⁹ and by the 1930s this myth was being projected across America with full force.

James Hilton, in his wildly popular¹⁰ novel *Lost Horizon*—and later the film by the same name—gave these ideas a palatable expression in American mainstream culture. Although the literary trope

“hidden kingdoms” and “lost worlds” was standard for many a writer, from Jules Verne to Arthur Conan Doyle, with the exploration and mapping of most of the known world by the early twentieth century, such tales were the expression, and eventually the last gasp, of nineteenth-century adventurism. By well into the early twentieth century, few spots in the world remained “unexplored and suitable as a home for “the unknown.” While Merian C. Cooper and Edgar Wallace set their “home” on a mist-shrouded island in unnavigable waters in the South Seas, Hilton set his in Tibet, and in 1933, as the icon of just such a lost world, King Kong, was scaling the heights of the Empire State Building before the eyes of moviegoers across the nation, Hilton’s *Lost Horizon* was beginning to climb the sales charts in William Morrow’s New York publishing offices only a dozen blocks away.

What both visions offered the American public was the hope that another world existed somewhere—a world not ravaged by economic depression, threatened with war, or simply beaten down by the oppressiveness of the mundane. Without even the solace of a cold beer,¹¹ many Americans found comfort instead in the myth of such “other” worlds, outside of their own and untouched by time. What differentiated Hilton’s book from the many that had gone before, however, was its theme. While other authors penned tales filled with pulse-pounding dangers or titillated their readers with descriptions of exotic princesses, Hilton’s narrative instead capitalized on the public’s enthusiasm for mystical truths, offering the promise of a hidden sanctuary where the knowledge and values of mankind were being preserved and sheltered from the chaos of the everyday world. It was a sanctuary that could only exist in the last such unconquered refuge: Tibet.

Like the otherwise run-of-the-mill conspiracy novel of recent years, *The Da Vinci Code*, Hilton’s otherwise run-of-the-mill “lost world” adventure story was distinctive for its religious—specifically Christian—overtones. Despite the fact that Tibet was and remained the greatest Buddhist kingdom the world had seen in over two thousand years,¹² the sacred “truths” being preserved in Hilton’s “hidden valley” of Shangri-La were European truths guarded by a Capuchin friar who had discovered the secret of eternal life. To the “High Lama” of Shangri-La, it was clear that there would be “a time when men exultant in the technique of homicide, would rage so hotly over the world that every precious thing would be in danger, every book and picture and harmony, every treasure garnered through two millenniums, the small, the delicate, the defenseless—all would be lost.” More than just physical artifacts, it was also the “universal truths,” endangered and forgotten in the world outside of Shangri-La, that concerned the monks of that “lamasery.” As one lama in Hilton’s novel asked, “Must we hold that because one religion is true, all others are bound to be false?” implying a deeper truth that they had found underlying the various religious “truths.”

Tibet was—for Hilton and so many other writers who tried to capitalize on the book’s success (Bernard included)—the natural sanctuary for all knowledge and the place to which those who sought it would have to journey. It was a destination that only a few—privileged by wealth, power, or mysterious good fortune—could reach. In an era when a well-funded explorer could circulate among

the highest echelons of society, Bernard did precisely that. In his brief lifetime, Bernard met, associated, and corresponded with the social, political, and cultural icons of his day, from the Regent and leading politicians of Tibet to saints, scholars, and diplomats in British India, and such notables as Sir Francis Younghusband, Charles Lindbergh, Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Bernard himself first came into the public eye in 1937, when his exploits in Tibet landed him on the front page of *The New York Times*. It was the same year that Frank Capra released his film version of *Lost Horizon*. When Theos Bernard returned to New York that fall, he brought with him precisely the images and stories he needed to play into the popular mythic identity of Tibet as Shangri-La. Of Shangri-La itself, the film concluded with the declaration, “I believe it because I want to believe it.” Of the many who flocked to see and hear Bernard regale audiences with his adventures, they too believed him because they wanted to believe. Although not so imaginative (though at times almost as fictitious) as Hilton’s story, Bernard’s own account was just as romantic, for unlike those who had gone before, he was seeking something different. Alexandra David-Neel, William McGovern, and others had all told what there was to find, he declared, “but no one has revealed what lies behind that which exists, and here is my task.” For Bernard as well, it was a foregone conclusion that there was special knowledge to be found in Tibet. Indeed, by the 1930s, this fascination with Tibet as a locus of esoteric knowledge was by no means novel. If anything, it was merely the latest round in a series of ongoing exercises in the countercultural circles that he was participating in. It was yet another episode in the search for a new, undiscovered level of reality within the realm of human grasping—knowledge of which the right person could bring back to the West.

Thus, in telling the story of Theos Bernard, this book also recounts the story of one “America”—counterculture America that was irresistibly drawn eastward toward the spiritual landscape of India and Tibet. From the earliest murmurings of vague and ill-conceived fascinations in the late nineteenth century down to the cottage industries of the present, this mythic image of the East—and of Tibet in particular—has been and remains a compelling icon in the American psyche. What inspired such journeys of both mind and body for many, and where it led for one, is what this book hopes to tell.

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Theos Bernard, the White Lama

ONE

Life in the Desert

The vibrations . . . of many spiritually seeking souls come floodlike to me [and] I perceive potential saints in America and Europe, waiting to be awakened.

—ŚRĪ YUKTEŚWAR¹

TO BE BORN IN AMERICA just after the turn of the twentieth century meant coming of age in a land on the verge of a new cross-cultural renaissance. For several decades, many religious figures, like the more famous Swami Vivekananda and others, toured the cities of America, introducing people to “the wisdom of the East.” When examined in detail, many of the themes that resonate throughout the American religious subcultures of today had their roots in this first generation of Indian mystics and their Anglo disciples and religious seekers.

“I am not a believer in miracles,” Vivekananda declared to a *Washington Post* reporter in 1894, “they are repugnant to me in matters of religion.” “Mr. Kananda,” the correspondent went on to report, presented “the, to orthodox sects, rather original proposition that there is good in the foundation of every religion, that all religions, like languages, are descended from a common stock, and that each is good in its corporal and spiritual aspects so long as it is kept free from dogma and fossilism.” Nonetheless, Vivekananda reaffirmed the basic tenets of his Indian religious roots while couching them in modern terms:

I claim no affiliation with any religious sect, but occupy the position of an observer, and so far as I may, of a teacher to mankind. All religion to me is good. About the higher mysteries of life and existence I can do no more than speculate, as others do. Reincarnation seems to me to be the nearest to a logical explanation for many things with which we are confronted in the realm of religion. But I do not advance it as a doctrine. It is no more than a theory at best, and is not susceptible of proof except by personal experience, and that proof is good only for the man who has it. Your experience is nothing to me, nor mine to you. I am not a believer in miracles—they are repugnant to me in matters of religion. You might bring the world tumbling down about my ears, but that would be no proof to me that there was a God, or that you worked by his agency, if there was one.²

Vivekananda’s statements easily could have been issued fifty or a hundred years later by an American adopting a decidedly Protestant Christian form of Indian spirituality. Yet it is hard to tell whether Vivekananda simply expressed Vedic ideas in a manner palatable to American audiences or was promoting a now commonplace, nascent Indian worldview—the result of British colonialism.³ Either way, such comments were common in the alternative religious circles of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America as Indian religious culture began to make its mark on the cultural landscape. Indeed, not long after the arrival of such figures as Vivekananda, Paramahansa Yogananda, and others, someone remarked,

In the imagination of the great majority of Americans, foreign missions has been an altogether one-sided affair. Taking for granted the superiority of Christianity, they have pictured the Christian movement as going out to over spread the world.

To thoughtful minds, it has long been obvious that there would soon come a time when the great Eastern religions, sure of the superiority of their spiritual life over the mechanized living of the Western world, would come to us with the deep conviction that they were the heralds of the world's true gospel. . . .

Christianity is at work in India and Hinduism is at work in the United States . . . and there is no possibility of American religion escaping the influence of the great Indian faiths.⁴

It was in the midst of just such a fervor arising from that intermingling of cultures that Theos Bernard was born, on Thursday, December 10, 1908, to two “students of the East,” Glen Agassiz Bernard and Aura Georgina Crable.⁵

Although born in Pasadena, California, Theos was raised by his mother in Tombstone, Arizona, having been abandoned by his father before the age of two. Returning to her childhood home, Aura Crable was very discreet about the father of her child and the circumstances of their meeting. When asked, she would only say that he had been a fellow student at a divinity school in New York City, and that he had left her to follow his religious calling.

Although some of the details of Aura's story may have raised the eyebrows of her neighbors—such as her son's rather un-Christian name, Theos Casimir Hamati Bernard, or the volumes of books on Indian philosophy crowding the shelves of her home—the polite discretion of the times afforded her a cushion of safety and anonymity. Working as a postmistress in the town and filling in as pastor in the local Episcopal church, Aura formally divorced Glen and seven years later (according to strict Episcopalian rule) remarried, to a local mining engineer from Scotland. With Jon Gordon, Aura had three more sons: Ian, Dugald, and Marvene, and together they raised the four boys in the deserts of southern Arizona.

Although it may not have been the wide Mississippi of Tom Sawyer or Jim Hawkins's pirate-infested islands of the Caribbean, the hills and canyons of southern Arizona were a fit adventure land for teenage boys. Where a scant fifty years earlier, Cochise and his Apache warriors had fought the U.S. cavalry, by the 1920s the Dragoon Mountains were dotted with makeshift mining camps and filled with families of prospectors. The Gordons' own camp lay a short distance from Tombstone, just over the hills from their house behind Sheephead Mountain.

Growing up in that small town, the Gordon boys spent their summers in the hills, playing poker with the miners, swimming in riverbeds filled by the summer monsoons, chasing each other through the desert scrub nestled between granite cliffs, and occasionally blowing up parts of that landscape with sticks of dynamite stolen from local mines. Theos and his brothers joined the newly founded Boy Scouts, Theos and Dugald both becoming Eagle Scouts. Theos also participated in the “Lone Scout” program, a regimen of studies designed for boys living in isolated parts of the country. As a Lone Scout, he learned skills outside mainstream scouting in a program that stressed independent activities and self-reliance, as well as proficiency in written and radio correspondence and survival skills.

In addition to these influences, his stepfather tried to instill in Theos and his brothers a

appreciation for a scientific, though not a rigid, approach to life. Dugald recalled an incident when his father was hired by a local property owner to assay his land for its mining potential. When Jon Gordon and Dugald arrived to perform the task at hand, they found a second man, a dowser, had been hired for the same purpose. Gordon was given a map to the mine and a compass and instructed to go underground to map the locations where he thought the ore would be, while the man with a dowsing rod was set up above ground to do the same. When both had finished, the property owner compared their results and showed the two men that their assessments agreed. “Do you believe this?” Dug asked his father. “Well, son,” Gordon replied, “these are the kinds of things you will be having to make decisions about in your life . . . don’t reject something that you don’t understand until you have a basis for doing so.” It was this sort of attitude on the part of his stepfather, combined with his mother’s strong religious influence, that Theos later acknowledged as having shaped many of his preconceptions about the world.

Among the Gordon boys, Theos, being the oldest, was the leader his younger brothers looked up to. He played football in high school as captain of the team, together with his two close friends, Billy Fowler and Dan Hughes. He was the favored son everyone thought would make the family proud, and he was receiving a good education as well. Despite its remoteness, the Tombstone school system was good for its day. When high school graduation came, there was no doubt in the minds of all three friends that they would go to college. Billy chose to study engineering, while Dan and Theos chose law.

The decision to pursue a legal career was not difficult for Theos. His grandfather, William Harwood, had been the first mayor of Tombstone, had played an instrumental role in the Arizona Territorial Assembly’s bid for statehood, and was involved in the founding of the University of Arizona, while his uncle Francis was a lawyer in Prescott to the north. Times were changing for Tombstone, and even though Theos, Dan, and Billy would be the only graduating students from Tombstone High School in 1926 to go on to college, he and Dan wouldn’t even be the first local kids to go to law school.⁶

While Dan’s father had made some money early on as a cattle buyer in northern Mexico⁷ and Billy’s family had seen good fortune in the mines, the Gordon household was not well off, and the costs of college education were not small. Although Jon Gordon had been educated as a geologist and had a good grasp of geological theory, he had poor practical mining skills and an even poorer business sense. As a result, while many of the families around them grew wealthy from the mines, the Gordons failed to prosper. Nonetheless, with a bright future in front of him, Theos got a paper delivery route in Tombstone, while the rest of the family contributed what they could to his college fund. Jon Gordon didn’t show Theos any special favors, though. Even when he would stay out late—at a high school dance one town over in Saint David, or just carousing with his friends—Gordon would roust him out of bed at 5 a.m. to do chores, hoping to instill in him a sense of duty and the value of hard work.



Figure 1.1 The Gordon brothers in the Dragoon Mountains: Theos, Ian, Dugald, and Marvene (AZHS)

Entering college in Tucson at the newly founded University of Arizona, Dan and Theos were accepted to the College of Arts and Sciences, and Billy to the College of Engineering; they all lived together in the college dormitories and spent their time like typical college boys, drinking and chasing girls. Unlike Billy and Dan, however, Theos was more reckless and worse yet, couldn't hold his alcohol. "A couple of drinks," Dan remarked, "and Theos would start raising Cain." On one occasion after coming home from a movie, the boys had gotten a bottle of liquor and carried on drinking in the parking lot behind Cochise Hall dormitory. After a few drinks, Theos was once again out of control. Deciding to go to his room, he jumped up and started climbing the fire escape up the back wall of the building. Convinced he would fall to his death, Billy and Dan started yelling at him to come down. "You think I'll fall?" he said, and laughing, let go of the fourth-floor railing and leaned backward, dangling by his knees for several minutes.

As a young man, Theos was both athletically fit and academically well grounded, and entered college well prepared for the experience on all fronts. A rugged, yet handsome football player, he attracted the young women of Tucson with ease, and—as his friend Dan observed—when it came to such things Theos was "a red-blooded American boy"; on more than one occasion, his boss noted, Theos would be seen standing on the street, saying good-bye to a girl in the morning before coming in to work at the

part-time job he'd taken to support himself in school.

Near the close of his first year of college, Theos underwent the same ritual hazing all freshmen traditionally experienced at U of A—being thrown in the fountain in front of the first building on campus, “Old Main.” On a cold, rainy spring day, however, the chill from a simple prank developed into first a chest cold, and then rheumatoid pneumonia. Getting worse day by day, Theos was hospitalized and eventually withdrew from school early, a scant two weeks from the end of the academic year. A victim of medical incompetence on the part of the school’s resident doctor, Theos probably would have died had his mother not intervened, insisting on taking him home to Tombstone and the doctor of her choice.

Theos was now under the care of a family friend and osteopathic doctor who believed in the mind’s ability to influence and heal the body, but Aura still had reasons for concern. By the time Dr. Agnew saw him, Theos was so stiff and weak from his illness that he was completely unable to move and had to drink fluids through a tube. Put on a special regimen with constant medical supervision and spending the summer as an invalid, he only gradually recovered.⁸

Regaining his strength enough to return to school in Tucson a few months later, Theos spent the next year completing his core curriculum classes and by the spring of 1928 was ready to progress in his studies. When he returned to Tucson for his third year of college in the fall, he officially switched from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences to the College of Law. With the stock market crash of 1929 however, life became much more difficult for everyone in Tucson, especially Theos. Struggling under increased hardship, he continued his studies and with the help of a scholarship in his final year managed to graduate in June 1931 with his Bachelor of Law (L.L.B.) degree.

Theos stayed on in Tucson while his friends Billy and Dan left to look for work. It was a difficult year for Theos. His childhood friends had gone, and he was “on the streets” looking for work as America sank deeper into economic depression. As the weeks passed, the life he had chosen for himself was looking less and less appealing. Just after graduation he was lucky enough to find a summer job clerking for a local judge and working parttime in a law office, but it didn’t provide much of a life. His friend Dan, however, had gotten a job as a court interpreter for a judge back in Tombstone, Judge Sames. Through his new contacts, Dan managed to get Theos a job with the *Tucson Daily Citizen*, a newspaper owned and operated by a friend of Judge Sames, General Frank Hitchcock. As the months passed while he worked at his different part-time jobs, Theos became more and more convinced that a law career was not for him.

By January 1932 he had decided to return to school, and began taking classes at the university again while he tried to sort out his life.¹⁰ Working his professional connections in Tucson, he managed to get a job for the summer as a court clerk in Los Angeles, where two fellow alumni from the Arizona law school were then living. Determined to make a career move, Theos took the opportunity to attend summer classes at USC as well. It was then and there, in Los Angeles, that he reconnected with his

estranged father, Glen, after a twenty-year separation.

In the course of his studies and travels over the years, Glen Bernard had been a student of several different teachers. Born in 1884 in Humeston, Iowa, he was the second oldest in a family of all boys. Before Glen had turned ten, however, his father began to have severe mental difficulties; eventually he was institutionalized. Taxed with the strain of raising five boys under these circumstances, the mother, Kittie, sent the oldest, Perry, to Lincoln, Nebraska, to an uncle who could offer a stable environment and provide a strong male role model.

Before the Golden Spike was struck in 1869 completing the transcontinental railway, Nebraska had been marked “the end of the line”—the farthest destination easily attained of an ever westward-moving “gateway” to untamed lands. By the time Perry Bernard arrived twenty-five years later, the cities of Nebraska had grown much more cosmopolitan, so much so that in his new home of Lincoln, Perry had chanced to meet a strange resident, a Hindu yogi who went by the name of Sylvais Hamati.¹¹

With or without anyone’s consent—no one is sure—Perry became a student of Hamati, learning yoga and the fundamentals of Indian philosophy, eventually becoming the titular head of Hamati’s organization, The Tāntrik Order in America, for which he adopted the name of (Dr.) Pierre Arno Bernard—some say, to capitalize on the notoriety of a famous French physician—and to which he would eventually (and unilaterally) append a long list of credentials.¹² Over the next twenty years Pierre, with the occasional assistance of Glen¹³ and their brothers and friends, established and ran a series of sanitariums and “clinics” in the Pacific Northwest, from San Francisco to Seattle, St. Louis, and Chicago, before eventually moving to New York.¹⁴

By 1907, the Tāntrik Order seemed to be on solid footing, so much so that Hamati decided to return to India, turning over the operation and direct oversight of the organization to the Bernard brothers and their inner circle of followers. Within three years, however, the organization was in trouble. Pierre—then branded in the tabloid newspapers as “The Omnipotent Oom”—found himself on the wrong side of the law, facing multiple charges of fraud and morals violations for his dalliances with young students at his yoga studio after being unfairly tied in with the “white slave trade” scare. Meanwhile, Glen had run off with a young orphaned girl who had come to New York to study for the lay ministry, Aura Crable—whom Glen affectionately, if somewhat pretentiously, referred to as “L’Aura.”

Although Pierre recovered from these setbacks—though without losing his tabloid moniker—Glen disavowed his brother for what he considered a debasement of the teachings through capitalization of yoga for material and personal gain. By 1910, within a few years of being married, Glen, maintaining his sincerity in the study and practice of yoga, told Aura that he could not live the life of an ordinary man—a “householder,” in Indian religious parlance—but had to follow the religious life. The “Yogic Sciences” to which Glen claimed to be devoted required careful study and commitment; “spurious occultists”—he later came to characterize his brother—were merely “prostituting a science of which they know n

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